A landmark nuclear arms control treaty expired in August 2019, following an announcement of withdrawal earlier in the year from US President Donald Trump. The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) had been a cornerstone of nuclear arms control since the Cold War, having eliminated thousands of deadly nuclear missiles in Europe. This is a very dangerous moment for the whole world. A new nuclear arms race is beginning and the threat of nuclear war grows by the day.

**What was the INF Treaty?**

The INF Treaty between the United States and Russia bans ground-launch nuclear missiles with ranges from 500km to 5,500km. Signed by US President Ronald Reagan and leader of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev in 1987, the treaty came into effect in 1988. It led to 2,700 short- and medium-range cruise and Pershing missiles being eliminated as well as Soviet SS-20s, significantly reducing the likelihood of Europe being caught in a US-Soviet nuclear war. Crucially for the UK, it meant that US cruise missiles were removed from US bases in Britain at Greenham Common and Molesworth. With the overturning of the treaty, we may now see the return of US nuclear missiles to British soil.

**Arms race**

During the 1970s, the Soviet Union replaced some of its older missiles (SS-4 and SS-5 models) with the newer, more accurate SS-20s which had a range of 5000km. Although this distance was not enough to hit the US, NATO retaliated by planning to base 572 new missiles in western Europe.

108 Pershing IIs would replace the existing 108 Pershing IAs stationed in West Germany, and 464 cruise missiles would be sited across western Europe. The deployment of cruise and Pershing would mark a massive escalation of the arms race because they would greatly reduce the time it took to hit Soviet cities.

**Protest**

During the first years of the 1980s, hundreds of thousands of people mobilised across Europe to try to prevent the siting of the missiles. The driving force for this popular support was straightforward. Since the Cuban Missile Crisis, it had generally been assumed that the ability of the US and Soviet Union to annihilate each other many times over meant that no government would be mad enough to actually start a nuclear war. But the possibility of a ‘limited nuclear war’ in Europe produced genuine alarm.

Peace organisations flourished in this period, with massive anti-nuclear demonstrations taking place in Britain and elsewhere. CND played a vital role in this movement, as did the iconic Greenham Women’s Peace Camp. Pressure mounted on the US from governments in western Europe and slowly, the possibility of a thaw in nuclear relations emerged. The election of Mikhail Gorbachev as general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party represented a policy change from the Soviet side as well.

Throughout the early 1980s, arms-limitation negotiations had repeatedly stalled and nuclear escalation continued. But now there was an opportunity for real progress.

**INF Treaty signed**

Following difficult negotiations, the INF treaty was eventually signed in 1987 and all the missiles were withdrawn from Europe by 1991. This was a historic moment – the first nuclear disarmament treaty, and one which was fully implemented. All shorter-range missile systems were eradicated by the end of 1989, and all long-range INF systems by the middle of 1991.

**Violations**

There had been several issues with the INF since its adoption, with both the US and Russia accusing the other of violating the treaty. The US first raised Russian non-compliance concerns in 2013, accusing Russia of testing a prohibited ground-launched cruise missile. US concerns over non-compliance led to two special meetings of the Special Verification
A formal announcement followed on February 1st, 2019. The US from the INF treaty. Trump announced in 2018 that he intended to withdraw the US on economic and defence grounds. If we needed a clearer sign that this is now a nuclear arms race, Washington is set to trial new nuclear missiles that exceed the INF treaty’s limits and Moscow has similar plans. It’s a game of nuclear the INF treaty, saying: ‘It is therefore Russia’s consistent failure to respect its Treaty obligations that has led to the current situation.’ Standing by and allowing crucial nuclear arms control agreements to be torn up places the whole world in great danger.

We now need a clear statement from the government that we will not accept American nuclear missiles in our country. If the Prime Minister will not guarantee this, the government should expect a major response from civil society like the huge protests we saw in the 1980s. We cannot allow Europe to become a theatre of nuclear war for this increasingly bellicose US President.

There was a dismissive response to an Urgent Question asked in Parliament in February 2019. A government representative said he would not ‘speculate on too many hypotheticals’ and said the ‘issue will obviously be discussed at very senior levels’ when asked whether US nuclear weapons would be relocated to Britain. This is not reassuring and shows the huge challenge we have ahead of us.