

Five Years without the INF Treaty: Lessons and Prospects

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Abstract

This article focuses on regional ground-launched missiles in the context of the Russia-U.S.-China strategic triangle. The first section studies controversial aspects of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty): its bilateral nature, limited scope, and asymmetric limits/reductions (including the elimination of the Soviet Oka missiles). The second section considers the military and symbolic significance of regional ground-launched missiles in comparison with their sea- and air-launched counterparts. The third section examines the reasons for the INF Treaty's termination, future U.S. deployments, and Russian and Chinese responses. The conclusion describes two possible U.S. deployment scenarios and analyzes possibilities for minimizing the unfolding arms race.

Keywords: Russia, United States, China, intermediate-range missiles, medium-range missiles, regional missiles, INF Treaty, Oka missile, arms race.

August 2, 2024 marked the fifth anniversary of the INF Treaty termination. Signed in Washington on 8 December 1987, it became the first arms-control treaty of the “second detente” period and one of its main symbols. At the signing ceremony, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev expressed the hope that the day would become “the watershed separating the era of a mounting risk of nuclear war from the era of a demilitarization of human life.” U.S. President Ronald Reagan hailed the treaty as a “history-making agreement,” hoping that it would become “the beginning of a working relationship that will enable us to tackle the other urgent issues before us” (Reagan and Gorbachev, 1987).

We are now reminded of those days mainly by the revision of the results of that “working relationship.” The system of arms control treaties, whose foundation was laid by Gorbachev and Reagan, has been practically dismantled, giving way to escalation.

The Ukraine crisis drew attention away from the consequences of the INF Treaty’s termination, but they are now resurfacing and will be of primary importance not only for Russia and the U.S., but also for China.

AN IMPERFECT TREATY

The INF Treaty cannot be considered a comprehensive solution to the problem of systems that fall between main strategic weapons—intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and heavy bombers—and tactical nuclear weapons. The treaty banned and eliminated only Soviet and U.S. ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges between 500 km and 5,500 km, which, according to its provisions, were defined as intermediate-range (1,000 km to 5,500 km) and shorter-range (500 km to 1,000 km) missiles. These were limited cuts, asymmetrically affecting the USSR. U.S. military analyst Michael Kofman called the INF Treaty “one of America’s best arms control deals,” adding that it “was, and remains, quite favorable to an expeditionary maritime power like the United States, while curtailing the ability of a land power like Russia to deploy similar classes of weapons” (Kofman, 2018).

The USSR destroyed almost twice as many missiles as the U.S.: 1,846 vs. 846. This imbalance was due primarily to the USSR's maintenance of large reserves for deployment only before or during wartime (Golts, 2021). Thus, the USSR and U.S. destroyed 667 and 442¹ deployed missiles, respectively, versus 1,169 and 404 non-deployed missiles (Grinevsky, 2004).

Furthermore, the OTR 23 Oka (SS-23 Spider) operational-tactical missile was included in the INF Treaty even though its range was under 500 km, which should have placed it beyond the treaty's reach.² Some Russian experts believe that the Oka was "functionally swapped" in exchange for the U.S. ceasing to develop the Follow-on-to-Lance (FOTL) ground-launched missile (see: Saveliev, 2018; Bogdanov, 2017; Interview with V.L. Katayev, 2010, p. 308; Interview with N.N. Detinov, 2010, p. 311) and SRAM-II (Short-Range Attack Missile II) air-launched missile (Arbatov, 2008, p. 8).

However, the Americans interpreted the Oka's inclusion in the Treaty as Moscow's admission that the missile's range exceeded 500 km. In this regard Washington did not consider itself obligated to any additional restrictions. This stance became evident during a meeting between U.S. Secretary of State James Baker and Mikhail Gorbachev on May 11, 1989, 17 months after the INF Treaty's signing. Gorbachev complained about the U.S.'s continued efforts, notwithstanding the USSR's destruction of the Oka, to deploy FOTLs (whose planned range was 450 km) in Europe (Larsen, 1991, p. 145). Baker, who had not been involved in the INF talks, asked his assistant—career diplomat Rosanne Ridgeway, who had participated in the Oka discussion in April 1987—to clarify things. She explained that "in the course of the [INF] negotiations, we agreed to count SS-23 [Oka] missiles"—which she claimed have "a range of more than 500 km"—as being subject to

¹ These included West Germany's 72 Pershing-1a missiles whose warheads were under the control of the U.S. military personnel stationed in the country. In August 1987, Chancellor Helmut Kohl said that if the U.S. and USSR agreed to eliminate regional ground-launched missiles, Germany's Pershing-1a missiles would also be destroyed, which they were (Sherr, 1988; Armus, 1989, p. 10).

² The Oka's declared maximum range was 400 km. However, it could be increased through upgrades.

the Treaty. And the U.S. accordingly “agreed not to have a system of that range.” But “we were not talking” then “about a missile to replace the Lance [i.e., the FOTL]” (Wilson Center, 1989).

In response, Gorbachev informed the Americans: “Incidentally, as it turns out, we have not cut them [the Okas] completely” (Wilson Center, 1989). Two days later, Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze publicly warned that if NATO decided to upgrade its nuclear arsenal, the Soviet Union would be “forced to suspend the destruction of SS-23 missiles or create other systems” (Pravda, 1989, p. 4). At a Brussels summit two weeks later, NATO decided to postpone the FOTL’s deployment until 1992 (NATO, 1989). This sequence of events probably created the impression that, having agreed to eliminate the Oka, the Soviets had blocked the deployment of new American nuclear weapons in Europe.

But the Bush administration considered Moscow’s pressure to be a “hollow threat” (Smith, 1989).³ The decision to postpone the FOTL’s deployment was actually prompted by Gorbachev’s massive cuts to the Soviet armed forces, announced on 7 December 1988. This allowed the German government to take a tougher stance on NATO’s nuclear weapon modernization and push Washington to the Brussels compromise.⁴ The Bush administration finally curtailed the FOTL program in May 1990, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact.⁵ The SRAM-II project was canceled even later—in September 1991.

The appropriateness of the Soviet consent to the Oka’s elimination requires separate study. However, the U.S. abandoned the development and deployment of new nuclear systems in Europe due to far more

³ For the U.S. administration’s reaction to the Soviet statements, see: McCartney, 1989; Schemann, 1989; Larsen, 1991, p. 305.

⁴ West Germany announced its new position on 13 February 1989 during Baker’s talks with German leaders. Chancellor Helmut Kohl and Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher stated that “the momentum which now has been achieved in the disarmament process in Europe, in particular by the unilateral steps taken by Gorbachev, should not be stopped by a false signal (to modernize the Lance) that could be interpreted as rearmament instead of disarmament” (Washington Post, 1989). For the development of the FOTL situation after Gorbachev’s December speech and until May 1989, see: Larsen, 1991, pp. 289-314; Asmus, 1989, pp. 28-32.

⁵ For the development of the FOTL situation from the fall of 1989 to the spring of 1990, see: Larsen, 1991, pp. 349-371.

radical changes in the regional security environment,⁶ which, incidentally, were capable of preventing such developments on their own, even if the Oka had been retained. The Oka's destruction, and whether it was really necessary, requires separate study. The U.S. dropped its plans, for the development and deployment of new nuclear weapons to Europe, in response to radical changes in the region that rendered the Oka's elimination superfluous. But it was that elimination that provided fuel for Soviet and then Russian criticism of the INF Treaty, particularly by the military and military-industrial complex. It was also condemned by top military officers who generally supported the agreement, including Chief of the General Staff Marshal Sergey Akhromeyev (Akhromeyev and Kornienko, 1992) and the Head of the Defense Ministry's Treaty and Legal Directorate, Colonel-General Nikolai Chervov (Chervov, 2001, pp. 179-180).

While the Treaty did end up covering the Oka, even though it arguably should not have, it did not cover the sea- and air-launched regional systems in which the U.S. surpassed the USSR. As of January 1991, the U.S. nuclear arsenal included 244 B-52 and B1-B heavy bombers with 1700 AGM-86 air-launched nuclear cruise missiles, while the USSR had 106 Tu-95 and Tu-160 heavy bombers with 800 Kh-55 (AS-15) air-launched nuclear cruise missiles. The U.S. also had 350 Tomahawk sea-launched nuclear cruise missiles (BGM-109A TLAM-N) on 86 carriers, while the USSR had 146 S-10 Granat (SS-N-21 Sampson) sea-launched nuclear cruise missiles on 30 carriers (SIPRI, 1991, p. 16-20, 30, 33, 54).

The Treaty's another important characteristic was its bilateral nature, which benefited a number of third parties, mainly China. Beijing was not an outside observer to negotiations but took a rather active position. It opposed including France and the UK in the Treaty (which the USSR had initially insisted on), fearing that this might end up extending to China's arsenal, too. China pressured Washington and Moscow to give the Treaty global, not only European, application,

⁶ This view was shared by Chief of the General Staff Marshal Sergey Akhromeyev and First Deputy Foreign Minister Georgy Kornienko, who were directly involved in the INF talks (Akhromeyev and Kornienko, 1992; Kornienko, 2001).

preventing the USSR from retaining ground-launched missile capabilities in Asia. Beijing also linked the cuts to the normalization of Sino-Soviet relations (Malik, 1989, pp. 235-274; Charap, 2019, p. 2-4).

China's interests were ultimately taken into account, and its long-term benefits from the Treaty proved to be even greater: Beijing has made regional ground-launched systems the backbone of its missile arsenal while they remained banned for the U.S. and Russia. However, at the time that the Treaty was concluded, the Chinese factor was still secondary; the agreement primarily concerned Europe.

Moscow's consent to asymmetric cuts in ground-launched missiles was largely dictated by political rather than military considerations. Gorbachev's New Political Thinking sought security through "political means" (Gorbachev, 1986, p. 354). "A fundamentally new understanding between East and West," attained by solving the "problem of intermediate-range missiles in Europe" (Gorbachev, 1987a, p. 281), was justified as an important step towards "a new world order" based on "cooperation that could be more accurately called 'co-creation' and 'co-development'" (Gorbachev, 1988).

There were expectations that the issue of sea- and air-launched missiles could be resolved during further negotiations. However, subsequent arms control measures affected these systems only tangentially. The counting rules of the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I) allowed for a number of air-launched cruise missiles to be counted as much fewer than the actual number that could be deployed on heavy bombers, which was quite favorable for the U.S. (Trends in Nuclear Disarmament, 1998). A similar principle was adopted in the New Start Treaty of 2010, which counts one heavy bomber—capable of carrying up to two dozen cruise missiles—as a single nuclear warhead.

As for sea-launched cruise missiles, during the signing of START I, the American and Soviet sides declared unilateral commitments to have a maximum of 880 units with ranges over 600 km (Declaration, 1991a; Declaration, 1991b). It should be acknowledged that the U.S. then unilaterally removed such systems from service altogether, in favor of more general-purpose conventional cruise missiles.

However, that decision is now being revised. Unlike ground-launched conventional cruise missiles, which were also banned by the INF Treaty, no limitations have ever been imposed on sea- and air-launched conventional cruise missiles.

In the end, the ‘new world order’ turned out to be completely different from what Mikhail Gorbachev had imagined. In Russia, this fuels current criticism of the INF Treaty⁷ and more generally of the entire legacy of Soviet-U.S. disarmament of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

A STRATEGIC BALANCING ACT

At the October 1983 Warsaw Treaty Organization defense ministers’ meeting in Berlin, Soviet Defense Minister Marshall Dmitry Ustinov told his colleagues that he viewed American Pershing-2 and Gryphon missiles, which were set to be deployed in Europe, as “a means for a first strike, a ‘decapitation strike’” (Statement by Soviet Minister of Defense, 1983).⁸ Gorbachev shared this view and called the American missiles in Europe “a gun to the temple,” noting that “their range allows them to hit critical targets and decision-making centers in the USSR” (Gorbachev, 2021).

Priority attention was given to the Pershing-2 ground-launched ballistic missiles. At a meeting on 4 October 1986 to prepare for the upcoming talks in Reykjavik, Gorbachev described them specifically as “a gun to our temple” (At the Meeting..., 1986, p. 168). The Soviet military estimated the Pershing-2’s range at 2,500 km (Pravda, 1981; Pravda, 1982; *Where the Threat to Peace Comes From*, p. 66), emphasizing its ability to hit almost any target in the European part of the USSR (Grinevsky, 2004). It was after the deployment of the Pershing-2 missiles in Europe that the Soviet delegation walked out of the nuclear talks in Geneva, held in the early 1980s. On 23 November 1983, Soviet chief negotiator Ambassador Yuly Kvitsinsky interrupted the talks after the Bundestag voted the day before for the Pershing-2’s deployment in West Germany (Kvitsinsky, 1999; Grinevsky, 2004). The Pershing-2 missiles, which began arriving on the day of the voting, were

⁷ See e.g., Interfax, 2018.

⁸ See also: Grinevsky, 2004; Kokoshin, 2011, p. 17.

to be deployed only in West Germany. Deployment of Gryphon ground-launched cruise missile in Europe had begun a week before that.

The Pershing-2's short flight time was Moscow's main concern. Ustinov and Gorbachev spoke of "five to six minutes" (Pravda, 1981; Gorbachev, 1987b, p. 192; Gorbachev, 1995, p. 73). Colonel-General Yuri Votintsev, commander of the Air and Missile Defense Forces, estimated the flight time to Moscow at "10-12 minutes" (Votintsev, 1993, p. 34). Nikolai Chervov cited the same numbers, emphasizing the accuracy of the missiles, which, according to his account, could strike "not only the Kremlin, but every building within the Kremlin" (Chervov, 2001, p. 148). Kvitsinsky recalls the alleged ability of the Pershing-2 missiles to hit "not simply the Kremlin, but the window of its master's bathroom" (Kvitsinsky, 1999). Given all this, it is not surprising that Gorbachev valued the INF Treaty mainly as a means of turning the gun "from the country's temple" (Gorbachev, 1995, p. 71).

However, this alarmism was excessive.

First, the Pershing-2's range was actually 1,800 km, not 2,500 km. This initially-classified information was disclosed by the U.S. in the early 1980s (Annual Report, 1983, p. 232; Bundy, 1984),⁹ probably to calm the Soviets, and was later confirmed by declassified documents of the Reagan (Soviet Leadership Views of the Pershing Threat, 1983, p. 2) and Bush (The Soviet "War Scare," 1990, p. 39) administrations.¹⁰ With this lesser range, Pershing-2s, which were stationed in the south of West Germany, could not reach Moscow (Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, 1981) and, therefore, could not serve as a "nuclear guillotine."

Second, in his memoirs, Gorbachev wrote that the USSR did not have protection against the Pershing-2 (Gorbachev, 1995, p. 71). However, he did not mention the countermeasures that had been taken by Moscow in the early 1980s. During this period, the Kazbek

⁹ Apparently, the Soviet Union did not take these statements at face value; according to a Washington Post journalist, diplomats at the Soviet Embassy in Washington "never believed [that the U.S.] would build a missile that lacked the range to reach Moscow from its firing sites in Germany" (Hughes, 2009, p. 12).

¹⁰ In some documents of the Carter administration, which gave the green light to the development of the Pershing-2 missiles, their range was reported as 1,500 km (Memorandum, 1978a, p. 274; Memorandum, 1978b, p. 376).

and Perimeter systems were put into service, strengthening the resilience of Soviet command-and-control system to a decapitation strike. The west-oriented Dunay-3U radar of the A-35M missile defense system was modernized to cover the entire territory of West Germany and detect Pershing-2 missiles two to three minutes after their launch (Votintsev, 1993, pp. 34-35). Work had begun on a new missile defense system, A-135, around Moscow (Azanov, 2020). Soviet operational-tactical missile systems were deployed in East Germany and Czechoslovakia—a step which, according to U.S. intelligence, increased the Soviets’ “ability to preempt NATO’s Pershing II and ground-launched cruise missiles” (Warsaw Pact Theater Forces, 1985, p. 60). However, for Gorbachev, who sought to “disrupt the new round of the arms race” (At the Meeting..., 1986, p. 168) and abandon the doctrines of “containment and deterrence” (Gorbachev, 1986, p. 354), such a militarized strategy was politically unacceptable.

Lastly, the Pershing-2 was developed hastily. In order to begin deployment in December 1983, mass production was begun before testing had finished—but technical problems were observed during 9 of 18 test launches, including after the start of mass production. There were also serious doubts about the true accuracy of the Pershing-2’s guidance system (ABC News Report, 1984; GAO, 1981). In other words, the missiles’ reliability was unclear.

Thus, the Pershing-2 (just like the Gryphon cruise missile) was less a source of military-strategic advantage, and more a ‘symbolic’ weapon that emphasized U.S. security guarantees to Europe and the U.S.’s escalation management capabilities. Washington also came to see the missile’s deployment as a successful example of coercive diplomacy (Kofman, 2018). In June 1988, U.S. Vice President George H. W. Bush said that the “Pershing missiles [had] forced the Soviets to the bargaining table” (Bush, 1988).¹¹

The European missile crisis and the conclusion of the INF Treaty demonstrated that regional ground-launched missiles have a symbolic

¹¹ In another speech, Bush said: “the Pershing missile system strengthened deterrence and was concrete evidence of United States resolve. If we had not deployed ... [Pershing] there would not be an INF Treaty today” (Harwood, 1993, p. 340).

advantage over their sea- and air-launched counterparts. Their deployment allows for the establishment of a permanent demonstrative military capability in the region, which contributes to achieving political objectives. Less 'visible' sea- and air-launched missiles are not so effective in this respect. However, it would be wrong to conclude, on the basis of the USSR's excessive alarmism in this particular case, that the value of regional ground-launched missiles could be solely symbolic. In reality, the Pershing-2s and Gryphons did increase the real and constant military threat faced by the USSR, simply not to the extent believed and claimed by the USSR's leaders.

Forward-deployed ground-launched missiles can facilitate or even eliminate the need for prior concentration of forces required for executing specific combat scenarios. Alone, this is not necessarily destabilizing, as both parties could place them in the theater of potential hostilities in numbers sufficient to deter one another—but this would be arrived at via an arms race.

Regional ground-based missiles can also qualitatively change the military-strategic situation but are not equally useful to every state. For example, those of China can reach only overseas U.S. territories and Alaska. Russian intermediate-range missiles with a range of 5,500 km can reach the U.S. from southern California to the Great Lakes, but only if they are deployed in remote north-eastern regions such as Chukotka. In the first half of the 1980s, the USSR explored the possibility of deploying RSD-10 Pioneer ground-launched missiles in Chukotka to use them as a pressure tool to force the withdrawal of American missiles from Europe (Grinevsky, 2004).¹² But these plans, obviously inspired by the withdrawal of American missiles from Turkey after the Cuban Missile Crisis, were dropped when Gorbachev came to power.

The U.S. has the most extensive opportunities to leverage the military-strategic advantages of regional ground-launched missiles. NATO's post-Cold War expansion permits threatening Russia through the deployment of shorter-range ground-launched missiles in Northern

¹² Some authors say that the Pioneer missiles were eventually deployed at the Gudym military base in Chukotka (Yegorov, 2017).

and Eastern Europe. The structure of American alliances in the Asia-Pacific permits threatening both China and Russia; regional ground-launched missiles in Japan or South Korea could endanger Chinese strategic forces, including their command-and-control systems, as well as Russia's strategic capabilities in Siberia and the Far East. The ability to "kill two birds with one missile" should look particularly attractive to the U.S. given its plans to deter both Russia and China simultaneously (White House, 2022, p. 21).

The execution of these plans requires forward deployment of ground-launched systems. In many cases, this will require the allies' consent, which might not always be an easy task. At the very least, such consent should not be taken for granted as being applicable to all U.S. allies. However, the large number of such allies always leaves the U.S. enough wiggle room. Additionally, the U.S. can transfer weapons to its allies, while maintaining control over their use. The allies themselves can also develop their own missiles, which are likely to be closely integrated with U.S. surveillance and targeting systems.

The military advantages promised by forward-deployed ground-launched missiles could compel Washington to use them as a tool for altering the strategic balance. For instance, the U.S. could attempt to establish those missiles as a core tool to deter China, thereby relieving its main strategic forces from this task and avoiding the need to increase their numbers beyond existing limits. However, this would prompt China to develop countermeasures and potentially adopt a more offensive nuclear doctrine, abandoning its no-first-use policy and shifting to a launch-on-warning strategic posture.

CRISIS ON THE DOORSTEP

The official reason for the U.S.'s withdrawal from the INF Treaty was that Russia had allegedly been developing and deploying weapons prohibited by the treaty. "For far too long, Russia has violated the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty with impunity, covertly developing and fielding a prohibited missile system that poses a direct threat to our allies and troops abroad," the White House stated (White House, 2019), referring to the 9M729 cruise missile. In reality,

however, the main reason was China's growing missile capabilities. President Donald Trump called Washington's participation in the treaty "unacceptable" at a time when Russia and China were developing their own systems (Trump, 2018). His national security adviser John Bolton said that the decision to withdraw from the INF Treaty could be revised only if Russia and China eliminated all weapons prohibited by the treaty (Kommersant, 2018).

The China factor featured prominently in the attitude of some American high-ranking military officials. In April 2017, the Pacific Fleet's commander, Admiral Harry Harris, described the INF Treaty as "problematic" because it limited the U.S.'s ability to counter the ground-launched missiles of China and other states (Senate Committee on Armed Services, 2017, p. 48). His successor Admiral Philip Davidson, was even more specific during his confirmation, stating that "the INF treaty today unfairly puts the United States at a disadvantage and places our forces at risk because China is not a signatory" (Senate Committee on Armed Services, 2018, p. 10).

Washington's fears are not groundless. In the 2010s, China replenished its missile arsenal, historically consisting mainly of short-range missiles, with new medium- and intermediate-range systems, including the DF-21D (1,550 km), DF-21S (2,150 km), and DF-26 (around 4,000 km),¹³ deployed with the PLA's Second Artillery Corps. Many of those missiles are conventional or dual-capable and have counter-ship capabilities. In 2015, the Second Artillery Corps was reorganized into the PLA Rocket Force and established as a fourth main Chinese military branch.

The deployment of new Chinese systems caused serious concern in the U.S., where the DF-21D and the DF-26 were dubbed the "carrier killer" (Kreisher, 2013) and the "Guam killer" (Gibbons-Neff, 2016), respectively. American military analysts considered China's new missiles an important element of its anti-access/area-denial strategy (A2AD) in the Asia-Pacific region and contemplated responding by strengthening the U.S.'s military presence on the 'First Island Chain'

¹³ For the modernization of the Chinese missile arsenal, see Cordesman, 2016. Missile range data were borrowed from: Missile Threat, 2024a; Missile Threat, 2024b.

(Japan-Taiwan-Philippines) (Tangredi, 2019; Bonds et al., 2017).¹⁴ Known as “archipelagic defense” (Krepinevich, 2015), this strategy was often seen as including the deployment of INF-Treaty-prohibited ground-launched missiles to the First Island Chain (Bonds et al., 2017, pp. 108-123; Sayers, 2018).

However, others saw air- and sea-launched systems as sufficient to deter China (Biddle and Oelrich, 2016, p. 46; O’Hanlon, 2018). Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Paul Selva publicly supported the INF Treaty, stating in March 2017 that “there are no military requirements [that] we cannot currently satisfy due to our compliance with the INF Treaty. While there is a military requirement to prosecute targets at ranges covered by the INF Treaty, those fires do not have to be ground-based.” However, he immediately added that “ground-based systems would increase both the operational flexibility and the scale of our intermediate-range strike capabilities” (House Committee on Armed Services, 2017, p. 94). This reservation clearly reveals the primary motivation behind the U.S. withdrawal from the treaty.

Interestingly, after the collapse of the INF Treaty, the dispute acquired a new, ‘budgetary-bureaucratic’ dimension. The Air Force, which had been striving with all its might to push the Army out of the long-range missile domain since the 1950s,¹⁵ suddenly realized that the Army might make a comeback, along with future budget allocations. In January 2021, the commander of the Air Force’s Global Strike Command, General Timothy Ray, publicly called the Army’s investment in developing long-range ground-launched systems a “stupid idea” (Harper, 2021).¹⁶

The Pentagon decided to defuse tensions by funding long-range strike capabilities for all services. Programs for the development of regional missiles were initiated by the Army, the Air Force, and the Navy. The intention to acquire long-range strike systems was also

¹⁴ A good overview of China’s anti-access/area-denial strategy is given in Yevtodieva, 2022.

¹⁵ At that time, the Air Force even developed its own Thor medium-range missile with characteristics similar to the Army’s Jupiter missile (Armacost, 1969).

¹⁶ The Air Force’s arguments in this dispute can be found in Gunziger, 2021.

declared by the Marines. As a result, today the U.S. is in the midst of a large-scale effort to develop regional missiles of various basing types. Of these, at least three would have been prohibited by the INF Treaty: the ground-based PrSM and Dark Eagle missiles, with respective ranges of 1,000 km and 3,000 km, and a ground-launched version of the Tomahawk missile with a range of over 1,600 km (Schulenburg, 2024). DARPA's Operational Fires project also seeks to develop a ground-launched technology demonstrator missile with a range of 1,600 km (Ong, 2022). Given their planned ranges (whose disclosure, at the development stage, is welcome), only deployment to U.S. allies will allow their use against China and Russia, as even the longest-range of them would barely reach the Chinese coast from U.S. Pacific territories like Guam.

The scale of the U.S. regional missile development effort makes it unlikely that it will abandon its plans for their deployment. Washington has already begun practicing the forward deployment of ground-based regional missile launchers at exercises in Denmark (September 2023, May 2024) and the Philippines (April 2024). At NATO's Washington summit in July 2024, it was announced that "episodic deployments" of American ground-based missiles in Germany would begin in 2026 (White House, 2024).

Russian and Chinese countermeasures will likely resemble the Soviet response to the Pershing-2: enhancements of early-warning, command-and-control, and missile defense systems. Amongst offensive weapons, priority will be given to those that can preempt the launch of the new U.S. missiles. Thus, a new round of the arms race lies ahead. In May 2024, the Russian Foreign Ministry stated that "in reply to U.S. actions, Russia will step up the upgrade and start manufacturing similar missile systems" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). After the announcement of plans to deploy U.S. missiles to Germany, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov did not rule out that Russian missile systems might be nuclear-armed (Vedomosti, 2024). President Vladimir Putin said that the deployment of American missiles to Germany would force Russia to abandon its unilateral moratorium on the deployment of INF-range ground-launched missiles, announced

in 2019 (Kommersant, 2024). If the strategic situation deteriorates dramatically, Russia may revive the Soviet plans to station regional missiles in the north-east of the country.

The payload of the future U.S. ground-launched missiles is a separate important issue. So far, they have all been declared to be conventionally-armed. But sea- and air-launched systems are a different matter. In 2017, the U.S. started developing a new air-launched nuclear cruise missile, AGM-181 LRSO (Trevithick, 2019). For the first time in a long while, the U.S. defense budget for Fiscal Year 2024 funds the development of a new sea-launched nuclear cruise missile, an important step towards reversing such systems' removal from the Navy (Bugos, 2024). This trend may spread to the new ground-launched systems. In October 2023, a commission of influential American experts, convened by Congress, held that "the objectives of U.S. strategy must include effective deterrence and defeat of simultaneous Russian and Chinese aggression in Europe and Asia using conventional forces. If the United States and its Allies and partners do not field sufficient conventional forces to achieve this objective, U.S. strategy would need to be altered to increase reliance on nuclear weapons to deter or counter opportunistic or collaborative aggression in the other theater" (America's Strategic Posture, 2023, p. VIII).

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Further developments concerning regional missiles will depend primarily on U.S. decisions. As in the early 1980s, Washington may pursue ambitious political objectives through symbolic deployments. However, the strategy aimed at achieving major changes in the regional and global strategic balances also promises significant gains. In reality, the symbolic and military components of the new U.S. deployments will be closely intertwined. The U.S. is unlikely to believe that its objectives can be achieved solely using weapons that Russia and China do not view as threats. Whether the symbolic or military component predominates will be indicated by the scale and geography of deployments. If they consist of a limited number of conventional missiles threatening select high-value targets, then they will play

mainly a 'symbolic' role. However, if the U.S. deploys hundreds of nuclear missiles and launchers, creating the possibility of total in-theater escalation dominance and threatening the main Chinese and/or Russian strategic forces, this would represent the 'military' scenario. A key problem is that the U.S. can escalate the pressure by gradually increasing the 'military' component.

However, as Washington ascends this ladder, it should not overlook the wide spectrum of possible Russian and Chinese countermeasures, ranging from counter-deployments to changes of national nuclear doctrines. The threat posed by new American missiles, especially if deployed to the Asia-Pacific region, could stimulate Russian-Chinese military cooperation. Discussions about an emerging military alliance may be preliminary, but new grounds for such developments will emerge.

The new missile confrontation will also impact the security of the host countries of U.S. weapons. Those nations will bear the risks of increased destructiveness of war arising from the intensifying arms race. In this regard, it is useful to recall the West German saying from the 1980s: "The shorter the range, the deader the Germans." Interestingly, these words came from the conservatives,¹⁷ who only a few years earlier had advocated for greater cooperation with the U.S. and NATO (Larsen, 1991, p. 234). Realization of militarization's consequences can prompt such shifts in perception.

All this creates certain conditions for minimizing the unfolding arms race. It is quite possible that moderate behavior will prevail during new deployments, allowing each side to claim success without major shifts in the existing military-strategic balance. The U.S. will be able to claim that it has improved its escalation management capabilities and built closer security ties with its allies. Russia and China, having refrained from exaggerating the threat, can say that they have taken effective countermeasures. Given the risks associated with greater escalation, this outcome may be the best for all parties.

¹⁷ The expression is attributed to the CDU/CSU's leaders in the Bundestag, Alfred Dregger and Volker Rühle (Larsen, 1991, p. 250).

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