



**THE INTERMEDIATE-RANGE NUCLEAR FORCES TREATY
AND THE FUTURE OF THE INDO-PACIFIC MILITARY BALANCE**

BY ERIC SAYERS

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In 1987, the United States and Soviet Union concluded the [Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces \(INF\) Treaty](#). Despite calls from the Soviet Union during the negotiation that the treaty only limit ground-based intermediate-range cruise and ballistic missiles in Europe, US negotiators insisted that it be global in scope because their Japanese allies worried that Europe's missile dilemma would shift to Asia. The final treaty prohibited the United States and Russia from the possession, production, and flight-testing of ground-launched ballistic (GLBM) and cruise missiles (GLCM) with ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometers, and their associated launchers and support infrastructure. The treaty ushered in a [new level of strategic stability](#) in Europe. It is still in force today.

Despite the treaty's benefits in Europe, its debilitating impact on US policy elsewhere can no longer be ignored. China, which is not a party to the treaty, has for two decades [invested in a conventional missile-based](#) anti-access/area-denial strategy. According to Adm. Harry Harris, 95 percent of People's Liberation Army (PLA) Rocket Force missiles fall in the 500 to 5,500-kilometer range. This provides Beijing an inexpensive means

to hold US bases and ships at risk across the Pacific from the bastion of the Chinese mainland, straining US military superiority in the region.

If, [as the Trump administration holds](#), competition with Russia and China is the organizing principle for US foreign policy, the strategic and operational limitations the treaty levies on US deterrence planning in the Indo-Pacific must be addressed.

To be clear, I am not advocating the US introduce intermediate-range nuclear missiles in the Indo-Pacific. The treaty, however, imposes limits on *all* intermediate-missiles, even conventional missiles. This comes at too high a cost. A conversation needs to begin about what the treaty means for America's interests in Asia and what the options are to fix it. Absent a reassessment, the growing conventional military imbalance could mean that the United States will not be able to uphold its security commitments to Asian allies or partners.

Consider the benefits if the United States could deploy conventional ground-launched intermediate-range missiles in the Western Pacific. First, Washington would have an affordable option to bolster already insufficient offensive conventional fires in the Pacific Command Theater. Today the United States can only project power at long-range by fighter, bomber, or sea-based platforms, relegating its military to the highest end of the cost curve for this mission. For instance, an [Arleigh Burke-class \(DDG-51\) destroyer](#) costs approximately \$1.8 billion, but it only has 96 Vertical Launching System cells of which only a portion are loaded to contain *Tomahawk* cruise missiles to leave room for defensive weapons like

the *Standard Missile*. Ground-launched systems with an intermediate-range in, for example, Guam, Japan, and Northern Australia, would enable planners to augment air and maritime strike platforms with new capabilities at a fraction of the cost. It would also free high-demand air and maritime forces to prioritize other missions such as anti-surface, anti-submarine, and anti-air. This is essential as the Pentagon continues to feel the pressure of sequestration and China doubles down on its military advantages.

Second, other than expensive penetrating platforms like the B-2 bomber, the treaty limits the US military's ability to hold China's interior geography at risk, giving Beijing a pass on investing in costly defensive systems. If the United States deployed conventional ground-launched systems that hold China's interior at risk it would force greater Chinese investment in missile defense to protect this military infrastructure. Every dollar spent on a defensive system is a dollar Beijing cannot devote to offensive systems along its coast or in its maritime and aerospace forces. That is the [competitive strategy](#) US planners should exploit.

Third, deploying these systems would complicate China's military planning by presenting an offensive capability that can be deployed at locations across the [first-island chain](#) (including in Japan or the Philippines) and beyond (a ballistic missile could be deployed to [Guam](#) or [Northern Australia](#) and still hold most of mainland China at risk, just as bombers deployed to those locations do today). Instead of accounting for US and allied facilities in single locations like Kadena, Yokosuka, and Guam, this capability would ensure China's military planners have to devote limited reconnaissance-strike resources and worry about the deployment of these systems.

Finally, this capability would offer new opportunities for cooperation with allies and partners. Whether through the joint development of systems, foreign military sales, or bilateral exercises, there are opportunities the United States could exploit to work with like-minded allies and partners.

US officials have insisted that the INF Treaty does not restrict the Pentagon's ability to project power in Asia in ways that threaten US interests. In [testimony](#) to the Senate Armed Services Committee last year, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Paul Selva argued that because under the treaty "we are not restricted from fielding ballistic missile or cruise missile systems that can be launched from ships or airplanes" the US military can hold targets in China at risk. These air and maritime platforms are in the US arsenal, but Pacific Command has competing missions, limited magazine depth, and must project power over vast distances. A mobile, ground-launched missile capability would augment these forces and create options for enhancing deterrence and warfighting.

Some argue that deploying such missiles would make the United States appear like the aggressor, further contributing to militarization and potential arms racing in Asia. Yet given [China's huge investment in cruise and ballistic missile systems](#), such a criticism does not carry weight. Furthermore, while the deployment of these systems would be a new development, there is no valid military distinction between a fighter squadron or long-range cruise missile battery deployed to Kadena Air Base or a B-52 bomber squadron or conventional ballistic missile battery positioned in Guam.

How should Washington proceed? While still a party to the treaty, the Pentagon can increase the firing rates, capacity, and INF-compliant range of existing missiles. It can also commence research and development into non-compliant systems. Examples include modification of existing and emerging air and sea-launched cruise missiles to ground-launched configuration; extension of the range of existing ground-launch systems or develop new systems; and modification of defensive interceptors to function in offensive mode, similar to efforts to allow the sea-launched SM-6 to function in an offensive mode. There are also innovative, treaty-compliant ways that the Pentagon could develop and deploy systems that have a boost range compliant with INF restrictions but a glide range that can increase the weapons range. This is

the most promising method to remain INF-compliant while deploying longer-range systems.

Other options exist. They range from the [far-fetched](#) – seeking China’s accession to the treaty – to the [less likely](#) – negotiating a new treaty with a geographic limitation in Europe allowing limited or unlimited INF system deployments outside of Europe or just in East Asia.

If the Trump administration is serious about military competition with both Russia and China, it must consider the uncomfortable questions related to INF restrictions and Asia. Soon, the US may have to choose between addressing the treaty’s impact on the military balance in Asia or, absent a major buildup of conventional forces, allowing the credibility of US security commitments to erode.

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