



China's Approach to the INF Treaty and the Development of Intermediate-Range Missiles

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China criticised the U.S. decision to withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Elimination Treaty (INF), at the same time rejecting the idea of eliminating or reducing its own enormous missile arsenal. China is concerned that, after demise of the treaty, the U.S. will develop new intermediate-range missiles and deploy them in Asia. Expected changes in U.S. military strategy regarding Chinese and Russian missile arsenals indicate the urgent need for a cohesive NATO policy.

China's status as a non-signatory to the INF was one of the explanations of [U.S. President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw from this treaty](#). After the INF expires this summer, the U.S. will begin testing new ground-launched missiles with range in excess of 500 km. Germany is concerned about the implications of the end of the INF for European security, and suggested this spring that China should be included in efforts to save treaty.

China's Reactions to the End of the INF. China's position is that the INF is a bilateral agreement between the U.S. and Russia. China has thus far rejected all proposals to transform it into trilateral treaty or global ban on missiles with ranges of between 500 and 5,500 km. Neither has it made any move to save the INF, although it has appealed to the U.S. and Russia for continuation of dialogue. China is against unilateral steps by the United States, perceiving them as part of a broader attempt to dismantle key strategic arms control agreements. During the Munich Security Conference in February, Chinese military officials also stated that a multilateral INF-type agreement would be harmful for their country, and any discussion on such a treaty would be possible only after the withdrawal of U.S. naval and air-launched cruise missiles from Asia.

China is concerned that U.S. goals are a continuation of American attempts to expand political domination and a qualitative military edge in Asia, augmented by alliances and a network of bases in China's neighbourhood. From China's perspective, this situation could deteriorate in the presence of new U.S. missiles, so far banned by the INF. China also sees connections between the U.S. approach and [previous attempts to integrate the missile defence systems of Japan, South Korea and Taiwan](#). The United States' future conventional capabilities, together with the [modernisation of the American nuclear triad](#), could pose a threat to China's entire nuclear arsenal. This arsenal has been growing since 2002, but remains limited. It is likely that it consists of 100 warheads on intercontinental missiles, aimed at the U.S. and other nuclear powers. In this context, some Chinese experts are recommending a revision of the "minimal deterrence" approach in their country's nuclear policy. The current approach assumes the maintenance of small strategic forces able to retaliate against the capital city and civilian population of an aggressor. China's lack of intercontinental bombers and the inability of its still-developing submarine fleet to deliver missiles to most continental U.S. targets add to its concerns.

China's Medium and Intermediate-Range Arsenal. The INF has been in place for three decades, during which time China has been developing its own missile capabilities. Chinese strategic nuclear forces are now augmented by the world's biggest arsenal of land-based conventional missiles with ranges in excess of 500 km. The first step in this military build-up was the introduction of ballistic missiles with ranges of up to 1,000 km. China now has 1,200 of these DF-11s, DF-15s and DF-16s, aimed at Taiwan and U.S. bases in South Korea. It also has up to 250 DF-21 missiles with a range of 1,750 km, capable of reaching primarily U.S. bases in Japan as well as aircraft carriers. These are supported by DH-10 cruise missiles (probably up to 300), with a range of 1,500 km. The fourth element of China's INF-type arsenal consists of 30–36 DF-26 ballistic missiles with conventional and nuclear warheads, capable of reaching targets 4,000 km away, and aimed at India and U.S. bases in Guam.

Changes in China's military doctrine also focus on obtaining a quantitative edge and the ability to make precise conventional strikes. Exercises suggest China's readiness to make decisive conventional strikes in the event of war in the region. Should a conflict escalate unfavourably for China, it might switch to "nuclear ladder" moves similar to the Russian doctrine of nuclear "de-escalatory strikes." The crucial role played by missile arsenals in China's overall military strategy is also evident from the 2015 reorganisation of missile units and their elevation to the position of the fourth independent armed branch. Moreover, some missiles are fitted with manoeuvrable re-entering vehicle warheads, to complicate missile defence. China is also making rapid progress in the development of [hypersonic weapons, having tested the DF-ZF vehicle on a medium-range DF-17 missile in 2017](#). China's missile arsenal is well protected by air and missile defence systems such as the licensed S-300 and the soon-expected delivery of Russian S-400s.

Expected Changes in U.S. Strategy. In parallel to the strategy of the "Pivot to Asia," in 2009–2011, the Pentagon prepared the "Air-Land Battle" operational concept for the Pacific region, designed to overcome issues of dispersion and distances between U.S. military bases and forces in this theatre. When this concept was officially adopted, a U.S. debate began on the potential need to develop and deploy new cruise, ballistic and hypersonic missiles. Since 2014 and disclosure of Russian INF violations, U.S. commanders have also raised concerns that this treaty restricts their plans and capabilities in Asia. Pentagon and non-government supporters of withdrawal from the INF have pointed out the need to develop new conventional missiles capable of neutralising the majority of China's offensive and defensive systems. In their opinion, the threat of the end of the INF and tests of new missiles could pressure Russia to honour the treaty, and China to join it. These arguments influenced U.S. Congress, which granted funds for research into new weapons in the 2018 and 2019 Pentagon budgets. As a result, the U.S. might be ready to conduct first tests on a new cruise missile with a range of 1,000 km in August, and on a new 3,000-km ballistic missile in November.

Opponents of changes to the strategy argue that the U.S. already has sufficient air and naval forces capabilities, and stress the financial burden of attempting to mirror China's huge missile arsenal. They also point out the lack of necessary consultations with U.S. allies in Asia, although they do not recommend closer cooperation with Taiwan, as this would be too provocative for China. South Korea and Japan could be both reluctant to host new U.S. offensive missiles, which in any case may be difficult to deploy due to their planned ranges. Japan and the small, already crowded island of Guam would be the most obvious bases for new missiles. There are also very limited options for where to deploy these, taking into account their declared or planned ranges. In the case of the new cruise missiles, the most likely bases would be in Japan, and for the ballistic missiles, Guam. Some critics of new U.S. capabilities recommend a critical review and discussion with regional allies in regard to their arsenals falling within INF-range limits. These applies to the developed and deployed [missile arsenal of South Korea](#), and to Japanese plans to develop air-launched cruise missiles and ground-launched hypersonic weapons.

Conclusion. China's opposition to U.S. withdrawal from the INF, and to China's inclusion in the treaty, were predictable. China is not prepared to abandon systems which make up to 95% of its entire missile arsenal. These missiles have become crucial for China's contingency planning for conflict with the U.S. in Asia. In the short term, it is unlikely that China or the U.S. will change their approach, because both powers perceive themselves as rivals and favour offensive military plans. Without INF limits, the U.S. will speed-up research and development of new cruise and ballistic missiles, although it may take some years before they are ready for deployment in Asia. During this time, China will seek means of neutralising U.S. capabilities. Apart from technological and geographical barriers, the U.S. must start serious dialogue with allies in Asia regarding the possible deployment of new missile systems on their soil. The issue of hosting such missiles might also be included in [the NATO agenda in the context of the Alliance's response to the Russian violation of the INF](#). However, there is likely to be more urgent pressure to deploy new missiles in Asia. With Japan as a formal NATO partner, there is also a need for joint consultation with it about the Alliance's approaches to Russia and China in the post-INF period. Any proposal to redeploy Russia's INF-violating missiles to Asia would be perceived as an additional threat to Japan. However, China might accept such a solution, assuming that Russian missiles are still aimed at European NATO countries. It is clear that any future proposals for arms control in Europe need to consider links between Russian and Chinese missile arsenals and the security of U.S. allies in Europe and Asia.