

Are America's East Asia Allies Willing and Able to Host U.S. Intermediate-Range Missiles?

By Eric Gomez

Washington's withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in early August 2019 frees it to deploy long-range, ground-launched missiles for the first time since 1988, when the now-defunct treaty entered into force. Russian violations prompted the U.S. to withdraw from the INF Treaty, but China's unconstrained development of nuclear and conventional missiles played a supporting role in the U.S. decision. As the United States and China sink deeper into confrontation and competition, debates over U.S. deployment of missiles in East Asia will become more pressing.

The U. S. ability to deploy ground-based, intermediate-range (in the 500 to 5,500 km range) missiles in East Asia is heavily dependent on its allies. The United States can deploy missiles on its own territory in the region without difficulty. However, the long distances from U.S. territories such as Guam or the Aleutians and a shorter list of deployment areas would make the missiles more expensive and counteract major operational benefits of mobility and survivability. If ground-based missiles can only be deployed on U.S. territory, then it will be relatively easier for Beijing to locate and target them than if the missiles could be spread across the region on allies' territory. Moreover, allies might only agree to deploy certain types of missiles while rejecting other types, which could have knock-on effects for U.S.-China nuclear stability and approaches to conventional deterrence. It is therefore imperative for U.S. policymakers and defense planners to seriously consider the political and military positions of East Asian allies when crafting America's intermediate-range missile posture. Initial evidence suggests that the United States has an uphill battle ahead.

Ground-Based Missiles and Allies in Great Power Competition

America's allies in East Asia have not greeted the death of the INF Treaty with much enthusiasm. Both Australia and South Korea were quick to note that there were no plans to discuss U.S. deployments in the wake of the withdrawal announcement. No U.S. treaty allies have categorically refused to consider future deployments, but they have not been pressing Washington to get missiles fielded either.

Allies' muted response to the INF Treaty's demise is markedly different from Washington's enthusiasm for a more robust military posture in East Asia. The lack of strong support from friendly governments stands in sharp contrast to U.S. fears about China's military rise, the need for greater defense investments in the region, and deepening great power competition. Why is there an imbalance between the U.S. enthusiasm for a more robust military posture in East Asia and allies' lukewarm response to supporting ground-based missile deployments?

U.S. allies have not shied away from demanding reassurances when faced with significant threats. A great example of this is NATO's push to get the United States to deploy intermediate-range nuclear missiles in the late 1970s and early 1980s. European NATO countries were acutely worried about the ability of Soviet intermediate-range missiles to reduce the credibility of U.S. security commitments.

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This prompted NATO allies to push hard on the Carter administration to move forward on deploying similar capabilities as a political signal of U.S. security guarantees.

America's allies in modern day East Asia face a very different set of circumstances. Growing acrimony between Washington and Beijing has not yet changed many allies' strategies of trying to have good relations with both countries. It is also much harder for U.S. allies to disentangle their economies from China, which exposes them to greater risk of economic retaliation from Beijing should they wholeheartedly welcome U.S. missile deployments. Moreover, China's military threat in the region is primarily conventional and in the gray zone, which compared to Soviet theater nuclear forces in the Cold War is easier for allies to hedge against even with their limited defense resources.

None of these circumstances are set in stone, and U.S. allies could change their tunes and vociferously demand U.S. missile deployments in the future. However, the initial reaction to the end of the INF Treaty suggests a gap between U.S. calls for a stronger military response to great power competition and allies' perspectives on what is required to deter Chinese aggression.

Constructing Friendly A2/AD in East Asia

U.S. ground-based missiles can still make a positive contribution to conventional deterrence in East Asia, but deployment considerations need to take alliance limitations into account. Adopting a restrained approach to U.S. missile deployments that emphasizes denying the Chinese navy from achieving control over the western Pacific would improve deterrence without causing undue friction with allies. The strategic goal of these deployments would be to help create friendly anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) zones in East Asia that the United States and its allies could use to counteract Chinese naval and air force power projection. Such a strategy would prioritize large numbers of land-based anti-ship missiles deployed widely across allied territory that is relatively close to China.

The United States' East Asia allies already have a head start on implementing friendly A2/AD and are therefore more likely to accept U.S. deployments that mirror their own. Japan's strategy for protecting its southwestern islands, for example, places a heavy emphasis on ground-based anti-ship missiles. Australia's recently released force structure plan and defense strategic update call for adding similar capabilities to improve maritime security. The U.S. Marine Corps' 2030 force posture assessment also speaks highly of land-based missiles that can enable relatively light, mobile units to strike enemy warships at great distance.

The United States should push on this open door. Emulating allies' plans for land-based missile forces should make U.S. deployments of similar capabilities more palatable to friendly administrations. Moreover, a narrowly defined role and target set for U.S. missile capabilities improves conventional deterrence while avoiding the nuclear escalation risks inherent with missiles that target facilities deeper in China's interior. If allies are still hesitant to let the United States deploy missiles on their territory, then joint development—like the U.S.-Japan effort on the SM-3 IIA missile defense interceptor—could be a viable alternative.

Restraint should guide U.S. missile strategy in the post-INF world. East Asian allies have not rolled out the welcome mat for new deployments. Washington should be mindful of this and focus its efforts on emulating allied land-based missile strategy that has thus far emphasized creating friendly A2/AD zones.

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