

# QUAD-PLUS Dialogue



**Managing the Asia–Pacific’s Second Missile Age**  
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In the past decade, missiles have emerged as an increasingly salient aspect of security dynamics in the Asia–Pacific. Recent years have witnessed a substantial increase in the quantity and sophistication of ballistic and cruise missiles across the Indo–Pacific. China, India, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, and the United States have all developed or acquired cruise and ballistic missiles with ranges of hundreds, and in some cases thousands, of kilometers. While this has primarily involved weapons that are conventionally armed, some have also acquired advanced missiles that can carry nuclear weapons.

As the quantity and sophistication of ballistic and cruise missiles have proliferated across the region, the balance of power increasingly hinges on the relative distribution of missiles and systems to defend against them. Major Asian powers (and North Korea) continue to invest in increasingly numerous and capable missile systems, and the United States has abrogated the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty. With these significant events in mind, and competition between China and the United States intensifying, the time has arrived for the United States to reconsider the role such systems may play in regional security dynamics, and consider fresh opportunities for U.S. allies and partners in the Asia–Pacific to enhance cooperation on missiles and missile defenses as an aspect of a broader strategic effort to enhance deterrence and stability in the Asia–Pacific.

## **The Second Missile Age**

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<sup>1</sup>The views expressed are those of the author alone, and are not those of the Wilson Center, the U.S. government, or any of its departments or agencies.

Missile and missile defense capabilities across the Asia–Pacific have expanded exponentially in recent years. In fact, these capabilities are arguably more prevalent today, and their dynamics are certainly more complex, in the Asia–Pacific than in Europe. The vast majority of missiles in the Asia–Pacific are armed with conventional, not nuclear, warheads. Conventionally armed ballistic missiles especially represent a unique capability that is part very-long-range artillery, and part long-range conventional bomber on the cheap. This represents a significant difference from the missile and missile defense dynamic that was seen during the Cold War—this is a Second Missile Age, which involves an entirely different set of challenges and opportunities.

American views of missiles and missile defenses were fundamentally shaped through the experience of the Cold War. In the late 1950s, American strategist Bernard Brodie sought to help the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) understand the implication of new technologies for foundational concepts of air power and military strategy. In his seminal work *Strategy in the Missile Age*, Brodie urged his readers to learn the lesson of Auguste Comte: “*C'est l'ancien qui nous empêche de connaître le nouveau*” (It is the old that prevents us from recognizing the new).<sup>2</sup> Brodie argued that the advent of nuclear weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles had completely revolutionized the concept of total war, and that these capabilities had forced the United States to abandon preventive war and rely on a strategy of deterrence. He then argued for the need for a survivable retaliatory nuclear capability, and for the United States to be prepared to fight limited wars under the shadow of potential nuclear escalation.

This was the logic that served as the foundation for American thinking about ballistic missiles and missile defenses.<sup>3</sup> Broadly speaking, ballistic missiles were inextricably linked with the destructive power of nuclear weapons. A “missile gap” was threatening (even if it turned out to not exist), as a numerical asymmetry could be destabilizing. Further, some feared that missile defenses could provoke an arms race or provoke a first strike. As a result, the United States and the Soviet Union enacted a series of arms control agreements seeking to maintain strategic stability by limiting the number of missiles and missile defenses each side could field.

Throughout this drama, Asian geopolitical dynamics as they related to missiles and missile defenses largely existed in the background. Unlike the European experience, arms control and nuclear deterrence have not been a significant feature of the Indo–Pacific’s geopolitics. For decades after World War II, few countries in the region had the ability to acquire or develop advanced missiles, and those that did were of relatively little concern for American strategists seeking to deter the Soviet Union and reassure Europe.

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<sup>2</sup>Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, January 15, 1959), pp. 391–392.

<sup>3</sup>One could also point to the writings of Henry Kissinger, Thomas C. Schelling, Morton H. Halperin, and Herman Kahn as fundamental to understanding the American mindset and debates surrounding nuclear weapons. This paper highlights Brodie because of his focus on missiles as a unique aspect of nuclear deterrence.

As the Asia–Pacific emerges as a locus for the second missile age, strategists should reconsider the role and significance of these systems. Efforts to simply bring China into a multi-lateralized INF treaty, as President Trump has proposed,<sup>4</sup> are unrealistic and reflective of traditional thinking. Instead, the United States and its allies and partners must innovate—both conceptually and technically—to ensure that they are ready for the second missile age in the Indo–Pacific. This paper poses three dynamics that must be understood about the second missile age.

**1. Theater missile defenses deployed in the Asia–Pacific are essentially *stabilizing*.**<sup>5</sup> The presence of such systems may convince an adversary that missile strikes—either a “bolt from the blue” conventional salvo or a sustained campaign of coercive missile attacks—may fail. As a tool of conventional deterrence, sufficient missile defenses may be seen as a critical tool of deterrence by denial, in which an adversary is persuaded not to attack due to the possibility that its attack will be defeated.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, however, the current cost of such systems at their current stage of technological development, especially when compared to the missiles they are intended to shoot down, make such systems unrealistic to field at sufficient quantities to counter a massive, localized missile bombardment. The United States, as well as its allies and partners in Asia, should consider deploying these capabilities as needed while also investing in research and development to develop more cost-effective means of conducting missile defense.

**2. Ground-based missiles are not appreciably more stabilizing or destabilizing than air- or sea-based missiles.** Due to the long-missile ranges currently deployed across the region (especially by China), as well as the Asia–Pacific’s unique geography, ground-based missile systems do not put new targets at substantially more risk. Rather, they provide a military with additional options and layers to an existing missile capability. Accordingly, these missiles should not be seen all that differently at the strategic level than any other conventional precision-strike platforms.

**3. Dual-use systems are a new driver of strategic instability.** Such systems can employ both nuclear and conventional warheads, significantly raising the potential for misunderstanding and miscalculation, especially in a crisis. Apart from the U.K., all nuclear-armed states possess dual-

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<sup>4</sup>During his 2019 State of the Union Address, President Trump stated: “Perhaps we can negotiate a different agreement, adding China and others, or perhaps we can’t—in which case, we will outspend and out-innovate all others by far.” Donald J. Trump, “Remarks by President Trump in State of the Union Address,” February 4, 2019, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-state-union-address-2/> (accessed October 8, 2019).

<sup>5</sup>This only applies to theater missile defenses. National missile defenses should continue to be scaled so as to maintain strategic stability with Russia and China.

<sup>6</sup>It should be noted that in January 2002, U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy J. D. Crouch referenced deterrence by denial when he discussed the findings of the Nuclear Posture Review. Crouch suggested that the United States could employ missile “defenses to discourage attack by frustrating enemy attack plans.” Yet this approach did not distinguish between the nuclear and the conventional balance, and was nevertheless not implemented. See David S. Yost, “Debating Security Strategies,” *NATO Review* (Winter 2004), <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/2003/issue4/english/art4.html> (accessed October 8, 2019).

use weapons, and nuclear and conventional command-and-control systems are reportedly growing increasingly intermixed.<sup>7</sup> This problem will only get worse as more countries acquire long-range, real-time intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities that may make them more aware of the movement of such dual-use missiles. If one side detects the other as loading or deploying missiles that may or may not be armed with nuclear weapons, it may be put in a position to choose between preempting the strike or waiting until detonation to see if the warhead was, in fact, armed with a conventional or nuclear warhead.

## **Emerging Challenges and Opportunities**

The Second Missile Age in the Asia–Pacific offers several challenges and opportunities for the United States and its allies.

**First, U.S. planners should consider the development and deployment of mobile, conventional land-based intermediate-range missiles as a potential means to mitigate China’s anti-access/area denial strategy.** The Trump administration’s decision to abrogate the INF Treaty, though executed problematically, does offer the United States more options to deploy capabilities that are distributed, survivable, cost-effective, and operationally advantageous.<sup>8</sup> While doing so should not have a significant strategic effect in terms of U.S.–China nuclear dynamics, such capabilities would present China with a far more complex operational military challenge. Indeed, a 2016 study by RAND found that theater ballistic missiles (not cruise missiles) deployed to East Asia would offer both benefits and risks.<sup>9</sup>

Yet there are several likely challenges for such an initiative. The first would be likely reluctance from U.S. allies and partners in the Asia–Pacific to host these capabilities. American military capabilities are often controversial within the politics of U.S. allies and partners, and a new class of capabilities that is likely to provoke Beijing’s ire would likely be politically difficult for allies to accept.

The U.S. would have several options to try to mitigate this challenge. First, the United States could consider an approach that keeps these systems on U.S. territory while conducting regular exercises to rapidly deploy these capabilities to allied and partner territories during a crisis. As such, the U.S. could look to Guam as an initial location for deployment, while working with its allies and partners in the Asia–Pacific to initiate rapid deployment exercises. At the same time, the U.S. should work with its allies and partners to simulate the potential advantages deployment

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<sup>7</sup>This argument is made convincingly in James Acton, “The Weapons Making Nuclear War More Likely,” BBC, February 8, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-47117349> (accessed October 8, 2019).

<sup>8</sup>The author does not take a position as to the ultimate decision to abrogate the INF Treaty. Rather, this paper explores the implications of that decision for the United States in the Asia–Pacific.

<sup>9</sup>Jacob L. Heim et al., “Missiles for Asia?,” 2016, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR945.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR945.html) (accessed October 8, 2019).

of these systems would have in enhancing the ability of the United States to effectively defend its allies, and work together to eventually arrive at an agreement for the forward deployment of these capabilities.

Additionally, the United States can expect significant push back from Beijing on these capabilities. Indeed, China has already warned the United States against sending these missiles to Asia, declaring that such a move could spark a regional arms race.<sup>10</sup> First, U.S. officials could point out that China has been deploying these exact capabilities for years, that roughly 80 percent of China's land-based missiles are of an intermediate range, and that Chinese missiles already threaten U.S. military bases in Korea, Japan, and Guam. Additionally, the United States could call for dialogue with China on these and other strategic issues—a dialogue that Beijing has long dismissed. Finally, the United States should be prepared to help its allies and partner withstand any economic or political retaliation that China may impose as a result of accepting such missiles. Ultimately, Washington should be clear: the defense of the United States and its allies should not be subject to a veto from Beijing, and the deployment of these missiles would be a reasonable response to China's rapidly expanding military capability.

**Second, the U.S. should continue to deploy theater missile defense systems to the Asia–Pacific.** The missile threat from North Korea and China continues to evolve, and the United States should work with its allies and partners to develop and field increasingly capable and cost-effective theater missile defense systems. At the same time, the United States should be sensitive to legitimate Chinese concerns about the survivability of its retaliatory capability, and take reasonable steps necessary to assuage legitimate Chinese concerns without sacrificing the security of the United States or its allies and partners.<sup>11</sup>

Unfortunately, the Republic of Korea's (ROK's) experience with THAAD may complicate future U.S. efforts to deploy theater missile defenses in the future. Korea paid a significant price as a result of Beijing's dissatisfaction, and other countries may fear provoking Beijing's wrath with another missile defense deployment. Yet the United States can mitigate such concerns, both by working with its allies and partners to arrive at a decision that respects their political concerns while also developing economic mechanisms to help mitigate any economic pain Beijing may choose to inflict.

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<sup>10</sup>Alan Yuhas, "China Warns U.S. Against Sending Missiles to Asia Amid Fears of an Arms Race," *The New York Times*, August 6, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/06/world/asia/china-us-nuclear-missiles.html> (accessed October 8, 2019).

<sup>11</sup>Some in China raised such concerns surrounding the U.S. decision to deploy THAAD to the Korean peninsula. These concerns were disingenuous. See Abraham M. Denmark, "China's Fear of U.S. Missile Defense Is Disingenuous," *Foreign Policy*, March 20, 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/20/chinas-fear-of-u-s-missile-defense-is-disingenuous-north-korea-trump-united-states-tillerson-thaad/> (accessed October 8, 2019).

**Third, the United States and its allies should work with Beijing to develop a diplomatic agreement to clarify the status of dual-use missile systems and nuclear command and control.** With markings and regular inspections, China and the United States could enhance their ability to distinguish between conventional and nuclear systems of the same type.

Such an effort would be new for China, and therefore would take significant diplomatic and political effort to achieve. Moreover, some in the People's Liberation Army may believe that China gains a strategic advantage with the ambiguity provided by dual-use missiles, as it may be seen as a means to conduct nuclear signaling without actually using nuclear assets.

Nevertheless, there is a strong argument to be made that China may see greater benefit in an agreement that enhances strategic stability rather than in the ambiguity provided without an agreement. Beijing may grow to see the appeal of such an agreement if the United States deploys its own dual-use capabilities to the Asia–Pacific in significant numbers, China's ability to detect such capabilities improves, and American declaratory policy puts pressure on Beijing to agree to such a deal by stating the United States will not treat dual-use systems differently than acknowledged nuclear systems in the event of a conflict or crisis.

**Fourth, theater missile defense cooperation should be a driving force in U.S. security relations with its Asia–Pacific allies and partners.** Considering the shared threat posed by North Korean and Chinese ballistic missiles, it is in the mutual interest of its allies and partners to enhance cooperation and information sharing in missile defense. Such cooperation should occur both bilaterally and multilaterally, as politics and threat perceptions may dictate. While trilateral ballistic missile defense cooperation between the United States, the ROK, and Japan is of preeminent importance, the Quad may also be an important venue for dialogue and information sharing as a first-step.

## **Conclusion**

Missiles and missile defenses have, in recent years, emerged as a major force in the Asia–Pacific military balance. For the United States and its allies and partners to adjust to these changing military dynamics, they must both recognize the significance of these developments while also understanding that the challenges and opportunities presented by the Indo–Pacific's security dynamics in the 21st century are vastly different from those posed by Europe in the 20th century.