Vestnik RUDN. International Relations. ISSN 2313-0660 (Print), ISSN 2313-0679 (Online) 2026 Vol. 26 No. 1 7–19
Вестник РУДН. Серия: МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫЕ ОТНОШЕНИЯ http://journals.rudn.ru/international-relations

THEMATIC DOSSIER: STRATEGIC STABILITY, GLOBAL AND REGIONAL SECURITY

ТЕМАТИЧЕСКОЕ ДОСЬЕ: СТРАТЕГИЧЕСКАЯ СТАБИЛЬНОСТЬ, ГЛОБАЛЬНАЯ И РЕГИОНАЛЬНАЯ БЕЗОПАСНОСТЬ

DOI: 10.22363/2313-0660-2026-26-1-7-19
EDN: TEOIXN

Research article / Научная статья

The U.S. Short- to Medium-Range Missiles and Regional Security in Europe and the Western Pacific

Oleg O. Krivolapov

Arbatov U.S. and Canada Institute, Moscow, Russian Federation

✉ o.krivolapov@iskran.ru

Abstract. One of the defining characteristics of the emerging polycentric international order is the persistence of military rivalry. The United States remains engaged in political and military competition with both the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Russian Federation. The demise of Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty) has provided Washington with the possibility of adding another instrument of power projection to its arsenal: land-based missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometers. This category of weapons has both advantages and disadvantages. In the author's view, the central problem regarding post-INF missiles today lies less in the stabilizing or destabilizing effects of their deployment in Europe and the western Pacific than in how the U.S. leadership will interpret events once these missiles are actually fielded. This study aims to identify the possible consequences of deploying U.S. intermediate-range missiles in Europe and the western part of the Pacific Ocean. The theoretical framework of the research is the deterrence theory. The originality of the proposed approach to the INF issue is that it makes it possible to examine the widest possible range of potential scenarios in the event of deployment, and to clarify how this ensemble of scenarios may be perceived by the U.S. administration. The primary research method employed is modelling. The analysis focuses on the possible actions of both sides during a crisis between the United States and Russia, as well as between the United States and China. The comparative method is used to juxtapose the doctrinal provisions of these states regarding the employment of non-nuclear weapons. The modelling of likely crisis situations demonstrates that, at each stage of escalation, there are both real risks of further deterioration and opportunities for de-escalation and settlement. It is plausible that non-nuclear intermediate-range missiles may become, for the United States, an important instrument for waging a limited armed conflict with a nuclear-armed state at the pre-nuclear level. By operating on the brink of major war, such missiles could compel adversaries to make political concessions.

Key words: non-nuclear missiles, politico-military crisis, deterrence theory, non-nuclear deterrence, left-of-launch, active defense, brinkmanship

Conflicts of interest. The author declares no conflicts of interest.

For citation: Krivolapov, O.O. (2026). The U.S. short- to medium-range missiles and regional security in Europe and the Western Pacific. *Vestnik RUDN. International Relations*, 26(1), 7–19. https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-0660-2026-26-1-7-19; EDN: TEOIXN

Американские ракеты средней и меньшей дальности и региональная безопасность в Европе и западной части Тихого океана

О.О. Криволапов

Институт США и Канады им. Г.А. Арбатова, Москва, Российская Федерация

✉ o.krivolapov@iskran.ru

Аннотация. Одной из черт формирующегося полицентричного мира является продолжение соперничества в военной сфере. Соединенные Штаты Америки продолжают политическое и военное соперничество с Китайской Народной Республикой (КНР) и Российской Федерацией. Роспуск Договора о ликвидации ракет средней и меньшей дальности (РСМД) открыл для США возможность добавить в свой арсенал еще один инструмент проецирования силы — ракеты наземного базирования с дальностью 500–5500 км. Этот вид вооружений имеет свои преимущества и недостатки. Основная проблема темы РСМД в настоящее время, по мнению автора, не столько в стабилизирующем или дестабилизирующем характере развертывания этих ракет в Европе и в западной части Тихого океана, сколько в том, как руководство США будет интерпретировать события после фактического развертывания. Цель исследования — выявление основных вероятных последствий развертывания американских РСМД в Европе и западной части Тихого океана. Методологическую основу исследования составила теория сдерживания. Новизна изложенного подхода к теме РСМД заключается в том, что он позволяет рассмотреть максимально широкий спектр возможных вариантов развития событий в случае развертывания, а также прояснить, как эта совокупность вариантов может восприниматься администрацией США. В качестве основного метода в данном исследовании применено моделирование. В фокусе внимания — вероятные действия обеих сторон во время кризиса между США и РФ, а также между США и КНР. Сравнительный метод позволил сопоставить доктринальные положения указанных стран в сфере применения неядерных вооружений. Моделирование вероятных кризисных ситуаций показало, что на каждом этапе развития кризиса существуют реальные риски дальнейшего обострения ситуации, а также возможности для урегулирования. Как представляется, неядерные РСМД могут стать для США важным инструментом ведения ограниченного вооруженного конфликта с ядерной державой на доядерном уровне, чтобы, балансируя на грани большой войны, вынуждать этих оппонентов на политические уступки.

Ключевые слова: неядерные ракеты, политико-военный кризис, теория сдерживания, неядерное сдерживание, меры до пуска, активная оборона, балансирование на грани войны

Заявление о конфликте интересов. Автор заявляет об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

Для цитирования: *Криволапов О.О.* Американские ракеты средней и меньшей дальности и региональная безопасность в Европе и западной части Тихого океана // Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Международные отношения. 2026. Т. 26, № 1. С. 7–19. https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-0660-2026-26-1-7-19; EDN: TEOIXN

Introduction

The emerging polycentric world may turn out to be a highly conflictual environment, as states increasingly focus their policies on ensuring their security. One of the manifestations of rivalry is the arms race, which can be quantitative or qualitative in nature and has been ongoing for quite a long time. The United States is among the active participants in this race. In 2017, the Trump administration began talking about the return of rivalry between the great powers, including China and Russia, in addition to the United States.[1] Among the numerous types of weapons in which the U.S. seeks to compete with these opponents, short- and medium-range land-based missiles stand out.

For a long time, only China has been freely developing such missile systems qualitatively and quantitatively among the three powers mentioned. During the administration of D. Trump, the United States sought to regain the ability to create such missile systems based on an assessment of the threat from the Chinese short- and intermediate-range missiles to the U.S. forces and their allies in the Western Pacific. This factor probably became one of the key reasons for the rupture of the INF Treaty, which was in force in 1987–2019 and prohibited the development and deployment of land-based missiles with a range of 500–5500 km. The formal reason for Washington's withdrawal from the treaty was the development of banned missile systems by Russia.[2] However, since the termination of the treaty, the Russian 9M729 land-based missile, which, according to the U.S., had a range of more than 500 km, has not been mentioned by Washington or Brussels, even in the context of Russia's use of missiles in Ukraine. In 2019–2025, Moscow observed a moratorium on the deployment of such types of missiles in the region.

The advantages of the ground-based mobile short- to intermediate-range missiles were analyzed in the works of American experts, who until 2019 claimed that Russia had been violating the INF Treaty. Some of these experts believe that the U.S. also needs such missiles in a mobile version, which have the following advantages:

1) a greater ability to disguise land-based mobile missile systems compared to ships or planes with such missiles,

2) the ability to use these multipurpose assets (ships, submarines, planes) for other tasks without having to tie them to the same area,

3) high readiness for combat use compared to similar air- and sea-based missiles,

4) greater opportunities for early deployment in the region, which partially reduces the need to overcome the enemy's anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) potential.[3]

These missile systems can perform the following political and military functions: reassuring allies, deterring opponents, and delivering a retaliatory strike in the event of a deterrence failure. Most likely, these weapons will play a significant role in the U.S. arsenal.

In the foreign research literature on short- to intermediate-range missiles, published since the outbreak of the issue in 2014, there are two main approaches to this topic. The first approach

[1] National Security Strategy of the United States of America // The White House. December 2017. P. 27. URL: https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf (accessed: 02.02.2026).

[2] President Donald J. Trump to Withdraw the United States from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty // The White House. February 1, 2019. URL: https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-withdraw-united-states-intermediate-range-nuclear-forces-inf-treaty/ (accessed: 01.02.2026).

[3] См.: McLeary P. The Rest Of The Story: Trump, DoD & Hill Readied INF Pullout For Years // Breaking Defense. October 22, 2018. URL: https://breakingdefense.com/2018/10/the-rest-of-the-story-trump-dod-hill-readied-inf-pullout-for-years/ (accessed: 01.11.2024); Gotkowska J. The End of the INF: The Beginning of Tough Negotiations // The Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW). December 12, 2018. URL: https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2018-12-12/end-inf-beginning-tough-negotiations (accessed: 01.11.2024); Sayers E. The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and the Future of the Indo-Pacific Military Balance // War on the Rocks. February 13, 2018. URL: https://warontherocks.com/2018/02/asia-inf/ (accessed: 31.01.2025). See also: (Krepinevich, 2015).

argues that these missile systems would stabilize the situation in a region, as they create a barrier to the "aggressive" policies of Moscow and Beijing in their respective regions.[4] The second approach sees these weapons as potentially stabilizing for the situation in a region, but also potentially creating risks by provoking potential opponents into retaliation.[5]

The Russian expert community has traditionally been cautious about the deployment of the American short- to intermediate-range missiles (Arbatov, 2021; Rogov, 2021; Esin, 2019; Zolotarev, 2021; Chekov, 2024). Chinese experts on this topic also emphasize the possibility of destabilization in case of the deployment of these weapons by the United States.[6]

The key problem associated with the short- to intermediate-range missiles in the current conditions is not so much the stabilizing or destabilizing potential of their deployment in Europe or the Western Pacific, as how the U.S. leadership will interpret the consequences of such a step. Theoretically, the aggravation of the situation may not necessarily be assessed by Washington as an indisputably undesirable development.

In this regard, the purpose of this study is to identify the main potential consequences of the deployment of the American short- to intermediate-range missiles to regions under consideration. At the same time, the conditions for the nuclear weapons use by the Russian Federation, the People's Republic of China (PRC) or the United States, as well as likely dynamics of a crisis after its transition to a nuclear level, remain outside the subject of the study. Questions about which political events can lead to an acute political-military crisis between Washington, on the one hand, and Moscow or Beijing, on the other, and what concessions, for example, the U.S. can seek from its rivals, also deserve separate research and remain outside the scope of this article.

The methodological framework of the research is deterrence theory (T. Schelling, R. Jervis, and others). According to Robert Jervis' logic, this "theory is about the ways in which an actor manipulates threats to harm others (or to slide into a major and/or nuclear war. — *O.K.*) in order to coerce them into doing what he desires" (Jervis, 1979, p. 292).

In the deterrence theory, special attention is paid to the nature of the political-military crisis. The objective, rational, and universal perception of a situation is always hampered by a number of natural constraints, including subjective ones (Jervis, 1982, pp. 21–30). During a crisis, due to the need to respond quickly to a changing situation, the countries' leaderships are even more limited in their ability to fully weigh all options and make decisions that can actually stop the slide into a full-scale war.

The novelty of the study lies in the fact that the proposed approach to the short- to intermediate-range missiles topic allows us to consider the maximum possible scenarios in case of their deployment, as well as to clarify

[4] See: Callender T. The Way Forward for the United States in a Post-INF World // The Heritage Foundation Report. February 2019. URL: https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2019-02/BG3383.pdf (accessed: 14.06.2025); Cohn J., Walton T.A., Lemon A., Yoshihara T. Leveling the Playing Field: Reintroducing U.S. Theater-Range Missiles in a Post-INF World. Washington, DC : CSBA, 2019. See also: (Simón & Lanoszka, 2020).

[5] See: Nouwens V., Wright T., Graham E., Herzinger B. Long-Range Strike Capabilities in the Asia-Pacific: Implications for Regional Stability. London : The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2024. URL: https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/research-papers/2024/01/long-range-strike/long-range-strike-capabilities-in-the-asia-pacific--implications-for-regional-stability.pdf (accessed: 31.01.2025); Missile Proliferation in the Indo-Pacific Drivers and Consequences: Interview with Ankit Panda // NBR. June 18, 2022. URL: https://www.nbr.org/publication/missile-proliferation-in-the-indo-pacific-drivers-and-consequences/ (accessed: 01.11.2024). See also: (Kühn, 2019).

[6] See, e.g.: Van S. The Hidden Logic of the United States That Determined the Withdrawal from the INF Treaty // Russian International Affairs Council. April 1, 2020. (In Russian). URL: https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/skrytaya-logika-ssha-obuslovivshaya-vykhod-iz-drsmd/ (accessed: 06.09.2021). See also: (Zhao, 2020).

how this set of options can be perceived by the U.S. administration.

In this study, a "political-military crisis" is a situation of increased risk of armed conflict due to the extremely low level of trust between the opponents. An inadvertent clash may arise, among other things, due to a misunderstanding of each other's intentions by both sides due to a lack of information and reduced communication between them. We are talking about a situation in which at least one of the parties has a fear of a surprise attack from the opponent, prompting her to act preemptively (Schelling, 2008, pp. 95–101). It is in a crisis situation that the parties can attribute aggressive intentions to each other, even in the absence of such intentions, and use this as a starting point in their decision-making processes about war and peace. As a result, actions taken to deter an opponent may, on the contrary, provoke an attack from his side. The enemy may consider such measures as targeted pressure, and his own position as desperate (Jervis, 1982, p. 13; Schelling, 2008, p. 225). Thus, in the context of a political-military crisis, he may have an incentive for launching a missile attack, which did not exist initially.

The main method used in this study is modeling. The main focus is on the likely actions of both sides during the crisis between the U.S. and Russia in the European region, as well as between the U.S. and China in the Western Pacific. The comparative method was used to compare the doctrinal provisions of these countries' regarding non-nuclear weapons use.

European Region

Environment

In 2015, there were discussions in the Western expert community about Russia's alleged violation of the INF Treaty. Some experts argued that the deployment of intermediate-range missiles in Europe would strengthen deterrence against Russia. After 2022, the Western expert community did not reject the idea that such missiles could help deter Russia's alleged aggression against North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). In 2019 and 2020, officials and experts in the US discussed the possibility of deploying non-nuclear versions of these missiles in Europe.[7] They believed that the deployment of non-nuclear missiles would be less destabilizing than the deployment of nuclear ones. In addition, it is believed that subsonic cruise missiles have a lesser effect on stability compared to ballistic or hypersonic ones, since the flight time of subsonic cruise missiles is much longer.[8]

The U.S. *Typhon* mobile system uses non-nuclear missiles: SM-6 with a maximum range of 460 km and the *Tomahawk* with a maximum range of about 1600 km (according to the classification of NATO, the "medium range" is 1,000–3,000 km). The exact range of the *Tomahawk Block IV* and VB is classified. The *Dark Eagle* system, with an LRHW hypersonic missile of an approximate range of 2,800 km, is awaiting full operational readiness and is considered non-nuclear. In 2023, launchers with SM-6 missiles capable of launching *Tomahawk* missiles have already been temporarily deployed on Bornholm Island (Denmark) during the NATO exercises.[9] Perhaps, the development of nuclear variants

[7] See: Tucker P. Expect a Missile Race After the INF Demise // Defense One. January 31, 2019. URL: https://www.defenseone.com/technology/2019/01/expect-missile-race-after-inf-demise/154577/ (accessed: 25.09.2024); Griffith L. Biden Should Continue Building Intermediate-Range Missiles // Defense News. December 23, 2020. URL: https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2020/12/23/biden-should-continue-building-intermediate-range-missiles/ (accessed: 26.09.2024). See also: (Simón & Lanoszka, 2020).

[8] Aarten S. R. The Impact of Hypersonic Missiles on Strategic Stability // Militaire Spectator. April 21, 2020. URL: https://militairespectator.nl/artikelen/impact-hypersonic-missiles-strategic-stability (accessed: 22.08.2024).

[9] U.S. Navy and Danish Defense Forces Train on SM-6 Missile Launcher Together // Naval News. September 21, 2023. URL: https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2023/09/u-s-navy-and-danish-defense-forces-train-on-sm-6-missile-launcher-together/ (accessed: 27.11.2024).

of medium-range missiles is being discussed in the U.S. This would exacerbate the risk of a nuclear war. However, as will be discussed later, even the abandonment of the nuclear variant for the American short- to intermediate-range missiles will not reduce the escalation risks.

In the context of the current situation in Europe, on the one hand, NATO continues to support Kiev with weapons and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance data, constantly emphasizing that the alliance does not want a direct military clash with Russia.[10] On the other hand, NATO recognizes the reduction in funding and arms supplies to Ukraine. The Biden administration officials periodically said that if the Kiev regime falls, Russia's strike on individual NATO countries is inevitable.[11] In addition, in January 2024, for the first time since 2020, the U.S. National Security Council official stated that Russia still has those 9M729 missiles, because of which Washington allegedly withdrew from the INF Treaty.[12]

In 2024, Germany reminded its decision to accept the U.S. units with non-nuclear cruise and hypersonic medium-range missiles on its territory on a rotational basis.[13] At that moment, the Russia's response could be both a reminder of Moscow's ability to stop observing the moratorium on the intermediate-range missiles deployment, and clarifying the fundamentals of nuclear deterrence policy. In the updated 2024 version of the Russia's nuclear weapons policy, one of the conditions for the nuclear weapon use by Russia is a massive launch of any means of aerospace attack in the direction of the Russian Federation, including cruise and hypersonic missiles (paragraph 19), and not just the ballistic ones mentioned in the previous version of 2020.[14]

With this adjustment of the Russian nuclear doctrine, the situation still seems relatively stable, but it has not been resolved. In particular, the Kaliningrad region, which is an exclave where the headquarters of the Russian Baltic Fleet and an important naval base are located, remains among a vulnerable point of European regional security. If Moscow, during an acute political and military crisis, believes (correctly or mistakenly) that NATO intends to blockade Kaliningrad from all sides, this could lead to serious consequences, including the use of force.[15]

To analyze the situation in Europe, it is necessary to take into account the

[10] See: NATO's Support for Ukraine // NATO. URL: https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/partnerships-and-cooperation/natos-support-for-ukraine (accessed: 03.02.2026): NATO Says Doesn't Want Confrontation with Russia, Ready to Maintain Communication // TASS. July 11, 2024. URL: https://tass.com/world/1815483 (accessed: 01.02.2026).

[11] Hunnicutt T., Holland S., Stone M. Do not let Putin Win, Biden Pleads with Republicans on Ukraine // Reuters. December 7, 2023. URL: https://www.reuters.com/world/us/biden-announce-175-mln-ukraine-press-congress-more-2023-12-06/ (accessed: 12.01.2024).

[12] Arms Control and Nonproliferation: A Catalog of Treaties and Agreements // Congressional Research Service. March 2, 2026. URL: https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/RL/PDF/RL33865/RL33865.65.pdf (accessed: 03.03.2026).

[13] Liang X. U.S. to Deploy Intermediate-Range Missiles in Germany // Arms Control Association. September 2024. URL: https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2024-09/news/us-deploy-intermediate-range-missiles-germany (accessed: 01.11.2024).

[14] Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Nuclear Deterrence. Decree of the President of the Russian Federation "On the Approval of the Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Nuclear Deterrence" // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. November 19, 2024. (In Russian). URL: https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/international_safety/disarmament/1434131/ (accessed: 19.12.2024).

[15] This is indicated among the military dangers that nuclear deterrence is being carried out to neutralize. See paragraph 15: Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Nuclear Deterrence. Decree of the President of the Russian Federation "On the Approval of the Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Nuclear Deterrence" // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. November 19, 2024. (In Russian). URL: https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/international_safety/disarmament/1434131/ (accessed: 19.12.2024).

doctrinal provisions of the U.S. and Russia. The United States has a 'left-of-launch' concept within the framework of an Integrated Air and Missile Defense (IAMD).[16] According to it, if a potential adversary has a large arsenal of missiles and plans to launch a missile strike against the U.S., its troops in various regions of the world, or its allies, a preemptive missile strike against the those launchers or enemy guided missile ships is allowed,[17] both during an ongoing conflict and, if necessary, before the outbreak of an armed conflict.[18]

The current Russian Military Doctrine of 2014 contains a provision on non-nuclear deterrence[19] as part of the prevention of aggression against Russia which, under certain circumstances, implies a preemptive non-nuclear strike (Burenok & Achasov, 2007, p. 12). For example, highly effective selective strikes can be carried out on vital enemy targets that are not associated with losses of the enemy's population and personnel (Burenok & Achasov, 2007, p. 13). The following potential enemy assets may be subject to limited non-nuclear strikes: missile-capable ships and aircrafts, missile defense-capable ships, radars (Ponomarev, Poddubny & Polegaev, 2019, p. 100), electronic reconnaissance systems, communication and battle management centers (Kokoshin, 2014, p. 201). For example, it may be a question of hitting only recently deployed systems.

After the deployment of short- to intermediate-range missiles in Germany, two main scenarios are possible.

The first option assumes that Russia might respond by deploying similar missiles in the European part of Russia. This could be due to the following reasons:

1. Practical experience in the active use of subsonic cruise missiles in recent years against targets covered by layered air and missile defense shows that, under certain circumstances, subsonic missiles can be no less effective than ballistic or hypersonic ones, for example, in the case of numerical superiority over air and missile defense systems. Consequently, even subsonic medium-range missiles can be perceived by Moscow as destabilizing.

2. Non-nuclear missiles are likely to be perceived by Moscow as potentially nuclear, based on the logic of the worst-case scenario.[20] Nuclear variant of *Tomahawk* missiles existed until 2011. Such a deployment could be seen as a threat of a decapitating strike against Russia, prompting Moscow to adopt a preemptive nuclear strike doctrine instead of the current doctrine resembling launch-on-warning.[21]

Thus, at each stage of the 'action-reaction' cycle in terms of forces buildup in the region, each side theoretically has the opportunity not to respond. In each case, a decision will depend

[16] 2022 Missile Defense Review // U.S. Department of Defense. P. 8. URL: https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.pdf (accessed: 01.11.2024).

[17] 2019 Missile Defense Review // U.S. Department of Defense. P. 60. URL: https://media.defense.gov/2019/jan/17/2002080666/-1/-1/1/2019-missile-defense-review.pdf (accessed: 01.06.2024).

[18] Unclassified Report to Congress, Declaratory Policy, Concept of Operations, and Employment Guidelines for Left-of-Launch Capability. U.S. Department of Defense, Joint Chiefs of Staff. May 10, 2017. P. 1.

[19] Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation (Approved by the President of the Russian Federation on December 25, 2014, No. Pr-2976) // Security Council of the Russian Federation. URL: http://www.scrf.gov.ru/security/military/document129/ (accessed: 10.11.2024).

[20] Commentary by the Information and Press Department of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the anniversary of the termination of the INF Treaty // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. August 3, 2020. (In Russian). URL: https://www.mid.ru/ru/maps/us/1439210/ (accessed: 10.11.2024).

[21] Odnokolenko O. Colonel General Viktor Yesin: "If the Americans Do Start Deploying Their Missiles in Europe, We Will Have No Choice But to Abandon the Launch-on-Warning Doctrine and Adopt A Preemptive Strike Doctrine" // Zvezda. November 8, 2018. (In Russian). URL: https://zvezdaweekly.ru/news/2018117102-0iaAI.html (accessed: 04.10.2024).

on how that party assesses the balance of power dynamics in the region.

The second option assumes that Moscow does not deploy its short- to intermediate-range missile in response. The absence of response is possible if the Russian side is confident in the capabilities of its existing offensive missiles and air and missile defense systems in the region and will not consider that the regional balance of power is severely disrupted.

On the one hand, with this option, continued escalation does not seem inevitable, as NATO would have fewer incentives to deploy new missiles. On the other hand, the conflict in Ukraine continues, and relations between Russia and NATO are strained to the limit. The U.S. and Russia have developed concepts for a limited non-nuclear strike against an enemy that is allegedly prepared to strike. In any aggravation of the situation in Europe (either as a result of the Ukrainian conflict or the aggravation of the situation in the Baltic subregion), if one of the parties feels, correctly or mistakenly, that an opponent for some reason is ready to undertake decisive action, it could lead to a preemptive strike. The threshold for the use of non-nuclear weapons is lower than that for nuclear ones. It is easier to present a limited conventional strike as a limited show of force aimed at dissuading an opponent. The beginning of an 'action-reaction' cycle in terms of limited non-nuclear strikes between nuclear powers could lead to a dangerous escalation towards nuclear war. However, there is no guarantee that during crisis this will be obvious to all politicians involved in decision-making. Raising the stakes might be a deliberate manipulation of risks with full confidence (correct or incorrect) that a full-scale war will be avoided. Such an approach is not impossible, and it may contribute to the crisis escalation.

Western Pacific

Environment

The potential conflict situation between the United States and China in this region is characterized by several territorial disputes involving Beijing, on the one hand, and U.S. allies, on the other. These include Sino-Japanese dispute over the island of Senkaku (Diaoyu), which Japan de-facto controls and the Sino-Philippine dispute over the Spratly Islands and Scarborough Shoal, which China de-facto controls. Taiwan remains a key hotbed of potential conflict, whose independence the United States does not formally recognize, but periodically declares the need for its military involvement if Beijing tries to take control of the island by force.[22]

The doctrinal component can play a significant role in the dynamics of a crisis situation. The U.S. 'left-of-launch' concept of missile defense was mentioned above. China developed the concept of 'active defense', the substantive content of which remains the subject of discussion among experts.[23] Official Chinese publications on military strategy have expressed point both in support of[24] and against preemptive non-nuclear strikes.[25] The problem is precisely that

[22] Liptak K., Judd D., Gan N. Biden Says US Would Respond 'Militarily' if China Attacked Taiwan, But White House Insists There's No Policy Change // CNN. May 23, 2022. URL: https://edition.cnn.com/2022/05/23/politics/biden-taiwan-china-japan-intl-hnk (accessed: 03.02.2026).

[23] On the discussions of Chinese experts about the applicability of non-nuclear missiles to dissuade an enemy from continuing the escalation see: (Cunningham & Fravel, 2019, pp. 98, 103). Regarding preemptive strikes on radars and missile defense systems see: Stepanov A. Main Trends in the Development of China's Missile and Nuclear Forces // Russian International Affairs Council. October 14, 2025. URL: https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/main-trends-in-the-development-of-china-s-missile-and-nuclear-forces/ (accessed: 12.12.2025). See in details: (Fravel, 2019; Stepanov, 2020).

[24] See an unofficial translation: Science of Military Strategy 2013. In Their Own Words: Foreign Military Thought. Montgomery, AL : China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2013. P. 58, 60.

[25] See an unofficial translation: Science of Military Strategy 2020. In Their Own Words: Foreign Military Thought. Montgomery, AL : China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2020. P. 32, 133.

the position of the U.S. military, that the Chinese leadership is inclined to launch a preemptive non-nuclear strike[26] is already destabilizing the situation in itself, since Washington may have an incentive to act preemptively in a political-military crisis.

According to U.S. estimates, the Rocket Forces of the People's Liberation Army of China (PLA) have a total of about 3,100 land-based ballistic and cruise missiles with a range of 300–5,500 km and approximately 1,000 launchers for these missiles.[27] Some of these missiles, if launched from the territory of China, are capable of hitting military installations of the United States and their allies up to the Palau islands and the Mariana Islands (the so-called Second Island Chain).

The deployment of the U.S. medium-range missiles in the Asia-Pacific region does not necessarily imply their presence in stationary positions. Missiles can be periodically moved between several locations, including as part of exercises. Among the possible areas of deployment of these missiles, first of all, there are several territories where U.S. military facilities were located in the past or are still present, namely the Mariana Islands (Guam, Saipan, Tinian), Peleliu islands and Palau, where it is planned to restore the airfield and build an over-the-horizon radar. The *Typhon* systems located on these islands could only implement their anti-ship potential (SM-6 missiles), since the Second Island Chain is located at a greater distance from mainland China than the declared range of *Tomahawk* missiles. However, the permanent presence of mobile missiles on these islands will allow them to be quickly redeployed to more dangerous positions for China — in Japan and the Philippines.

The option of missile deployment in Japan is being contemplated by the U.S. administration,[28] in addition to Tokyo's plans to procure approximately 400 *Tomahawk* missiles.[29] Regardless, Tomahawk missiles from the territory of Japan (including Okinawa) could hit targets within eastern China, where most of the PLA missile units are deployed.[30]

The *Typhon* missile batteries which have been deployed in 2024 in the Philippines as part of exercises of the U.S. and their allies were still in the country at the time of writing this article.[31] *Tomahawk* missiles launched by the *Typhon* system from the Philippines can only hit targets in southern China. This is where are deployed PLA missile units equipped with short- and medium-range missiles, including anti-ship missiles.[32] The SM-6 and PrSM missiles,

[26] Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China // U.S. Department of Defense. 2024. P. 33–34. URL: https://media.defense.gov/2024/Dec/18/2003615520/-1/-1/0/MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA-2024.PDF (accessed: 06.02.2025).

[27] See: Ibid. P. 66, 166.

[28] Moriyasu K.U.S. Wants to Deploy Midrange-Missile Launcher to Japan via Drills // Nikkei Asia. September 6, 2024. URL: https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Indo-Pacific/U.S.-wants-to-deploy-midrange-missile-launcher-to-Japan-via-drills (accessed: 10.09.2024).

[29] Woody C. Philippines, Japan Near Long-Range Missile Milestones as They Arm Up for China // Breaking Defense. March 15, 2024. URL: https://breakingdefense.com/2024/03/philippines-japan-near-long-range-missile-milestones-as-they-arm-up-for-china/ (accessed: 07.10.2024).

[30] Nouwens V., Wright T., Graham E., Herzinger B. Long-Range Strike Capabilities in the Asia-Pacific: Implications for Regional Stability. London : The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2024. P. 13, 23. URL: https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/research-papers/2024/01/long-range-strike/long-range-strike-capabilities-in-the-asia-pacific--implications-for-regional-stability.pdf (accessed: 31.01.2025).

[31] Gomez J. US Missile System Will Remain in Philippines Despite China's Alarm // The Associated Press. September 25, 2024. URL: https://apnews.com/article/us-philippines-china-military-typhon-midrange-missile-system-69242b99335eb55032894fbc83d75135 (accessed: 27.09.2024).

[32] Nouwens V., Wright T., Graham E., Herzinger B. Long-Range Strike Capabilities in the Asia-Pacific: Implications for Regional Stability. London : The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2024. P. 13. URL: https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/research-papers/2024/01/long-range-strike/long-range-strike-capabilities-in-the-asia-pacific--implications-for-regional-stability.pdf (accessed: 31.01.2025).

capable of destroying ships and land targets, if deployed in the Philippines, could hit targets around the disputed Scarborough Shoal and most of the Spratly Islands. If deployed in Guam, the *Dark Eagle* hypersonic missile systems will be able to hit targets only in Taiwan, but not in mainland China. If they are deployed in the southern Philippines or on Palau island, then the entire southern China with the aforementioned missile units will be in range, and if the *Dark Eagle* is deployed on Luzon island (northern Philippines), then it will be able to hit targets all the way to Beijing.[33] Among the potential targets of the American conventional short- and medium-range missiles are not only missiles and their launchers, but also communications nods, command centers, electronic reconnaissance systems, electronic warfare systems, as well as radars.

Modelling

Given the current deployment of Tomahawk missiles in the Philippines, two possible scenarios can be considered.

The first scenario is that China will additionally deploy new offensive missiles and air and missile defense systems. However, as in Europe, at each stage of the "action-reaction" cycle of additional capabilities' deployment to the region, each side theoretically has the opportunity not to respond. The decision would depend on how each side assesses the balance of power dynamics in the region.

The second scenario provides that China will not undertake any measures to increase its missiles arsenal with a range of 500–5,500 km and will not strengthen its air and missile defense architecture. This is possible if Beijing is fully confident in the capabilities of its offensive missiles and air and missile defense systems.

Even if China does not respond to such a deployment, the presence of the U.S. missiles in the region will increase the risks of a limited strikes exchange, especially in the event of increased tensions between the United States and China in general and in the aforementioned hotbeds in the Pacific in particular. The prerequisite for this is the previously mentioned concepts of a preemptive non-nuclear strike against an enemy which is prepared to attack. During political-military crisis, the United States might assume that conventional attacks on its key military installations in the region (for example, bases in Japan and on Guam) can lead to Washington's loss of initiative due to a temporary loss of operational control, the loss of some of their forces and assets, and create conditions for PLA actions that will expose Washington and its partners to the fait accompli of China's achievement of its aims in Taiwan or Senkaku. However, if the U.S. military is confident that their forces will withstand this blow, and the losses will not be at a level at which the units would not fulfill their tasks, then the United States will most likely refrain from a preemptive strike.

Assuming that the United States does launch a preemptive strike, then the PLA's well-known practice of having both nuclear and non-nuclear warheads for the same missiles in the same missile unit should be taken into account (Cunningham & Fravel, 2019, p. 94). These missiles may be vulnerable to non-nuclear attacks. It is unknown how China would react to the loss of at least part of its small nuclear arsenal during crisis where these losses are caused by non-nuclear weapons. However, Beijing will not necessarily respond with a nuclear strike, given the doctrine of nuclear no-first-use. This could be a comparable conventional strike on U.S. facilities. The continuation of the "action-reaction" cycle in the form of limited non-nuclear strikes may lead to further escalation, although, strictly speaking, nuclear use is not guaranteed.

[33] Nouwens V., Wright T., Graham E., Herzinger B. Long-Range Strike Capabilities in the Asia-Pacific: Implications for Regional Stability. London : The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2024. P. 23. URL: https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/research-papers/2024/01/long-range-strike/long-range-strike-capabilities-in-the-asia-pacific--implications-for-regional-stability.pdf (accessed: 31.01.2025).

Discussion

Even if none of these parties to the likely confrontation (Russia, China, the United States) are currently interested in direct war with the opponent, the conditions of the political-military crisis may be such that the opposing sides may misinterpret or misperceive the opponent's deterrence measures. Both parties involved may find themselves in a situation where measures taken to deter the opponent's active actions eventually encourage undesirable actions due to miscalculation. Thus, the "action-reaction" cycle of arms buildup will continue, but it will not necessarily end with the use of force.

In case of an acute crisis, if either side believes (correctly or mistakenly) that the use of missiles by the opponent is inevitable, then this side may decide to be the first to carry out a limited non-nuclear strike on one or two military targets of a potential enemy, presenting this as a limited show of force in order to send a clear message to the opposing side. During the crisis, the parties may consider such an attack either as a limited deterrent measure or as the first step towards seizing the initiative in the region. This is how the "action-reaction" cycle can begin and develop in the field of limited non-nuclear strikes, while the transition to a major war is not predetermined.

The threshold for the conventional weapons use is lower than that of nuclear weapons. The use of short- and medium-range non-nuclear missiles of various types based in recent years has shown that they make it possible to inflict limited but politically sensitive damage to a potential enemy with relatively few or even zero human losses for this enemy. Such attacks can threaten to destroy a warship, radar, electronic reconnaissance system, electronic warfare equipment, temporarily disable an airfield, battle management network, energy infrastructure elements, or allow such strikes to be carried out without risking worldwide condemnation, as would probably be the case with the use of nuclear weapons.

The factor of layered air and missile defense deserves special mention. These systems exist and are being developed by Russia, China, and the U.S. and their partners in Europe and East Asia. A regional missile defense could partially raise the threshold for a missile attack, but it would not prevent a massive launch of short- and medium-range missiles in a crisis situation when one of the parties perceives it as hopeless and sees no other option than a preemptive strike in anticipation of an allegedly imminent enemy attack.[34] However, since both sides are thinking in this case not about using nuclear weapon with its enormous destructive power, but about conventional weapons, the parties can postpone the decision on the response until the result of the missile attack from the opponent is clarified, especially if missile defense systems are present.

In general, the crisis situation that has developed before and after the use of non-nuclear weapons will provide the backdrop against which the political contradictions between the parties involved will be resolved. As shown above, at each stage the risks of destabilization can be assessed by the participants as real. Without this circumstance, it is impossible to exert pressure. Unfortunately, the participants in the confrontation, in particular the U.S. administration, might try to balance on the brink of sliding into a bigger war in order to obtain political concessions from their opponents.

Conclusion

To sum up, it should be noted that the worsening of the situation is not the only possible consequence of the deployment of the U.S. short- to medium-range missiles in Europe and the Western Pacific. Various options were considered for how the situation could change after the appearance of these weapons in the regional balance of power between the Russian Federation and the United States and between China and the U.S. A combination of certain

[34] The author has written about it elsewhere. See: (Krivolapov, 2022; 2023).

circumstances could lead to an acute political-military crisis in which both parties involved may inadvertently contribute to the deterioration of situation. On the one hand, escalation to a largescale war remains a real possibility, but, on the other, such a war is not an inevitable outcome. The possibility of a settlement is enabled by the very nature of the risks of either the use of force or a descent into a major war. While a political-military crisis is difficult to manage by definition, this does not mean that none of the participants will try to exploit the situation to achieve their goals.

Given the possibility of avoiding an acute crisis or a major war, even with continued pressure on the opponent, the U.S. administration might continue to implement its initiative to deploy non-nuclear ground-based short- to medium-range precision-guided missiles in Europe and the Western Pacific. It is likely that these weapons would strengthen the U.S. administration's perception of the possibility (or illusion of the possibility) of waging a limited armed conflict with a nuclear power without crossing the nuclear threshold. This would exert pressure on an opponent with nuclear weapons while balancing on the brink of major war (or even nuclear war) and manipulating risks to force the opponent to make political concessions.

Received / Поступила в редакцию: 14.11.2024
Revised / Доработана после рецензирования: 16.12.2025
Accepted / Принята к публикации: 18.12.2025

References

Arbatov, A.G. (2021). Global stability in the nuclear world. *Vestnik Rossijskoj Akademii Nauk,* 91(6), 560–571. (In Russian). https://doi.org/10.31857/S0869587321050030; EDN: OQIXKN

Burenok, V.M., & Achasov, O.B. (2007). Non-nuclear deterrence. *Voennaya Mysl'*, (12), 12–16. (In Russian). EDN: IJAPRF

Chekov, A.D. (2024). Five years without the INF Treaty: Lessons and prospects. *Rossia v Global'noj Politike*, 22(5), 194–215. (In Russian). https://doi.org/10.31278/1810-6439-2024-22-5-194-215; EDN: UOSPPX

Cunningham, F.S., & Fravel, M.T. (2019). Dangerous confidence? Chinese views on nuclear escalation. *International Security*, 44(2), 61–109. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00359

Esin, V.I. (2019). Possible consequences of the INF Treaty termination. *Russia and America in the 21st century*, (S1), 20. (In Russian). https://doi.org/10.18254/S207054760005316-4; EDN: ZFCGYF

Fravel, M.T. (2019). *Active defense: China's military strategy since 1949*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv941tzj

Jervis, R. (1979). Deterrence theory revisited [Review of Deterrence in American foreign policy: Theory and practice, by A. George & R. Smoke]. *World Politics*, 31(2), 289–324. https://doi.org/10.2307/2009945

Jervis, R. (1982). Deterrence and perception. *International Security*, 7(3), 3–30. https://doi.org/10.2307/2538549

Kokoshin, A.A. (2014). Strategic nuclear and non-nuclear deterrence: Modern priorities. *Vestnik Rossijskoj Akademii Nauk*, 84(3), 195–205. (In Russian). https://doi.org/10.7868/S0869587314030086; EDN: RXFQCL

Krepinevich, A.T., Jr. (2015). How to deter China: The case for archipelagic defense. *Foreign Affairs*, 94(2), 78–86. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/24483484

Krivolapov, O.O. (2022). The influence of the NATO regional missile defense on the European security. *Contemporary Europe*, (3), 132–144. (In Russian). EDN: GGOQUV

Krivolapov, O.O. (2023). Regional missile defense architecture of the US and their partners in the Western Pacific: Impact on regional security. *Social Sciences and Contemporary World*, (3), 39–53. (In Russian). https://doi.org/10.31857/S0869049923030036; EDN: GHKWCV

Kühn, U. (2019). Between a rock and a hard place: Europe in a post-INF world. *The Nonproliferation Review*, 26(1–2), 155–166. https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2019.1593677

Ponomarev, S. A, Poddubny, V.V., & Polegaev, V.I. (2019). The criteria and indicators of non-nuclear deterrence: A military aspect. *Voennaya Mysl'*, (11), 97–100. (In Russian). EDN: KNBJBF

Rogov, S.M. (2021). Global and regional stability in the nuclear world. *Vestnik Rossijskoj Akademii Nauk*, 91(6), 571–584. (In Russian). https://doi.org/10.31857/S0869587321050212; EDN: CLUUUI

Schelling, T.C. (2008). *Arms and influence*. New Haven: Yale University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt5vm52s

Simón, L., & Lanoszka, A. (2020). The post-INF European missile balance: Thinking about NATO's deterrence strategy. *Texas National Security Review*, 3(3), 12–30. http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/10224

Stepanov, A.S. (2020). China's concept of military security. *Russia in Global Affairs*, 18(2), 188–216. https://doi.org/10.31278/1810-6374-2020-18-2-188-216; EDN: PBZRYO

Zhao, T. (2020). Conventional long-range strike weapons of US allies and China's concerns of strategic instability. *The Nonproliferation Review*, 27(1–3), 109–122. https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2020.1795368; EDN: AAKCCG

Zolotarev, P.S. (2021). Possible approaches to reducing the risks of nuclear escalation at the regional level. *Rossiya i Amerika v XXI Veke*, (3), 9. (In Russian). https://doi.org/10.18254/S207054760017020-9; EDN: OZZGTH

About the author:

Krivolapov Oleg Olegovich — PhD (Politics), Head, Department of the Military-Political Studies, Arbatov U.S. and Canada Institute; Russian Federation, 121069, Moscow, 2/3 Kblebny per.; eLibrary SPIN-code: 2350-0021; ORCID: 0000-0001-9658-2671; e-mail: o.krivolapov@iskran.ru