
SECURITY PROBLEMS
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POTENTIAL SOURCES OF ARMS RACE
IN THE CONTEXT OF U.S.-CHINA CONFRONTATION
IN ASIA-PACIFIC REGION

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Abstract. The evolving great power rivalry has serious military implications for the Asia-Pacific region. The growing U.S.-China tensions, which started out as economic and technological, are increasingly taking on a military and technical dimension. The guidelines of the U.S. strategic planning documents for a number of years have emphasized the central idea of strengthening deterrence against China, whose growing military power is perceived in the United States as a direct threat against the background of intense competition in economic and technological spheres. The complicated “hub-and-spokes” system of American alliances and extended deterrence in the Asia-Pacific region is fueling a sense of threat in the U.S. due to the perception of danger from China’s active steps. The PRC, in turn, is engaged in a large-scale build-up of its nuclear and conventional missile capabilities, which may be exaggerated in Washington, but are nevertheless used in setting American military development priorities and funding relevant programs. The United States is increasingly expanding military-technical cooperation with its allies, including the transfer of sensitive military technologies. The allies themselves are starting comprehensive re-militarization, especially in the field of long-range strike weapons, as well as increasing U.S. military presence, including advanced American long-range strike weapons and missile defense systems. All this together forms the conditions for the launch of an arms race spiral in the region due to lack of predictability, transparency and confidence-building measures, and might lead to dangerous security dilemmas, regarding Russia in particular. The paper shows the mechanism of possible development of the arms race, which, in the authors’ opinion, is associated with the predominant role of medium and intermediate-range missile systems and missile defense systems as well, which is explained by the peculiarities of the extensive theater of operations and sparse basing system. This mechanism has been in place in the region for at least two decades, which allows us to stress its stability as a leading destabilizing factor in U.S.-China strategic relations.

Keywords: Asia-Pacific Region, arms race, missile defense, medium-range missiles, deterrence of China, U.S. strategy.

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ПОТЕНЦИАЛЬНЫЕ ИСТОЧНИКИ ГОНКИ ВООРУЖЕНИЙ В КОНТЕКСТЕ АМЕРИКАНО-КИТАЙСКОГО ПРОТИВОСТОЯНИЯ В АТР

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Аннотация. Развивающееся соперничество великих держав отражается на обстановке в Азиатско-Тихоокеанском регионе (АТР). Установки руководящих документов стратегического планирования США уже целый ряд лет подчеркивают центральную идею об укреплении силового сдерживания Китая, чья растущая военная мощь воспринимается в Вашингтоне как непосредственная угроза на фоне интенсивного соревнования в экономических и технологических сферах. КНР, в свою очередь, ведет масштабное укрепление ракетных потенциалов в ядерном и обычном оснащении. Соединенные Штаты все активнее расширяют военно-техническое сотрудничество со своими союзниками, в том числе передавая им чувствительные военные технологии. Все вместе это формирует условия для запуска спирали гонки вооружений в регионе. В работе показан механизм ее возможного развития, связанный, по мнению авторов, с превалирующей ролью ракетных систем средней дальности (РСД) и систем ПРО, что объясняется особенностями театра военных действий (ТВД).

Ключевые слова: АТР, гонка вооружений, противоракетная оборона, ракеты средней дальности, сдерживание Китая, стратегия США.

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INTRODUCTION

The rapidly changing military and political situation in the world is putting stress on the main tangles of regional and global contradictions. The multidimensional relations between the United States and China currently represent a complex combination of regional and global confrontation. Given the growing military component in comprehensive containment strategies, relations between Beijing and Washington should be regularly analysed in terms of destabilising factors and processes, particularly those leading to an arms race in the Asia-Pacific region (APR). Special attention in such studies should be paid not only to the emergent instability in U.S.-China relations but also to the impact of ongoing militarisation processes on the involved players. In this context, the allies of

the USA and Russia appear to be the most interesting subjects for analysis.

The wording of U.S. strategic planning documents in recent years leaves no room for ambiguity: there has been a fundamental shift towards a policy of comprehensive containment of the PRC by the United States, with a significant military dimension.

As early as 2017, the National Security Strategy of Donald Trump’s first administration voiced the return of competition between great powers in the context of attempts by “revisionist states” (Russia and China) to expand their influence both regionally and globally [source 1, p. 25, 27]. It also claimed that China was trying to oust the USA from the Indo-Pacific region, promote its own state-oriented economic model, and reshape the regional order in its favour [source 1, p. 25],

and that the PRC was also intensively modernising its armed forces with the aim of limiting the American capacity to intervene in that region [source 1, p. 46]. The next version of the National Security Strategy, compiled by the Biden administration in 2022, stated directly that China was “the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it” [source 2, p. 23].

In the autumn of 2023, the bipartisan report by the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States pointed out that the main strategic challenge for America was to simultaneously counter “Russian and Chinese aggression in Europe and Asia” [source 3, p. 31]. Thus, the classic “central deterrence” was recognised as a thing of the past: the USA, according to its strategic community, found itself in a situation requiring “dual deterrence.”

GEOGRAPHY AND GEOMETRY OF THE PACIFIC WAR

During the Cold War, Western and Central Europe would have been the main potential “hot spot” of conflict between the USSR and the USA. In the current configuration, where U.S.-China contradictions have come to the fore, the Asia-Pacific Region (APR) has become the primary area of focus. Both of these combat theatres¹ have significant, irreconcilable differences that shape the nature of a hypothetical military confrontation between the two countries.

The overall size of the two theatres appears to be similar. Measuring Europe from the North Cape to the Mediterranean Sea and from Iceland to the western regions of the USSR yields distances of about 3,500–4,000 km. Approximately the same can be observed in the APR when considering the distance between southern China and Guam or between the southern Japanese islands and Indonesia. The operational zone around Taiwan is roughly 500 by 500 km in size – comparable to the territory of both Germanys during the Cold War. The geometry of the opponents’ locations is

¹ In this case, the term “theatre” (combat theatre, CT) is used to define the potential area of military operations in the region.

also similar: both Europe and the APR represent overseas theatres for the USA, while being immediate border neighbours for their opponents (the USSR then, China today). However, the structural content of these theatres is fundamentally different.

Europe is primarily an inland region, densely populated and packed with communication lines and deployment infrastructure, including reserve and potentially mobilisable facilities. The APR, by contrast, is an “operational void”: nominally high communication connectivity within the combat theatre (by sea) is combined with an extremely sparse network of support bases, sometimes located hundreds or even thousands of kilometres apart. It would be problematic to identify a battlefront line here, even by the eclectic standards of late-Cold War thinking, with its enthusiasm for fragmented battle formations and deep operations without flanks.

By 1982, AirLand Battle was defined by the United States as the primary type of full-scale combat operation in Europe. This was a cross-branch operational scheme combining the capabilities of the Army and Air Force to deter potential incursions by Warsaw Pact forces into Western Europe by cutting off the enemy’s first echelons from follow-on forces through the active use of high-precision weapons in an “extended battlefield” – tactical depth (150–300 km) [1].

When this logic was transferred to the APR’s geometry, against the backdrop of rapid advances in information and control systems (network-centric combat control), the AirSea Battle concept logically emerged by 2009, combining two types of armed forces in accordance with the theatre’s characteristics. It was later reformulated into the Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons (JAM-GC, 2015).

The Asia-Pacific theatre has once again, as during the war of 1941–1945, highlighted the importance of infrequent bases and deployed fleet groupings. The operational vacuity of the theatre and the concentration of infrastructure in a small number of isolated positions have dramatically increased the significance of these locations: for the possessor, in terms of maintaining uninterrupted functioning and enabling manoeuvre of

forces and resources; for the attacker, in terms of prioritising their destruction to undermine the enemy's position. Combat in such a sparse space will inevitably reduce to a contest over who can first neutralise the opponent's potential by depriving them of key nodes supporting aviation, naval forces, ground-based strike assets, and surface-to-air missile systems.

This clearly reflects China's long-standing focus on long-range weapons since the late 1990s, albeit in non-nuclear form. Until a certain point, the United States relied on the capabilities of ship-based aircraft carrier strike forces, combined with precision missile strikes from sea-launched cruise missiles (SLCMs). The third Taiwan Strait crisis (1995–1996) validated this approach but also catalysed Chinese military thinking, particularly in light of Iraq's defeat during Operation Desert Storm (1991). As a result, the PRC developed a system of forces and capabilities interpreted by American planners as an implementation of the so-called Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) concept, based on air and sea "bubbles". The aim was to prevent the U.S. Navy and Air Force from entering these zones during the main scenario of a hypothetical armed conflict in the APR – a Chinese operation to capture Taiwan.

The continuing evolution of the U.S.-China confrontation triggered the development of mobile (shipborne) anti-ballistic missile defense systems in the U.S., intended to counter Chinese ballistic missiles targeting sparse American bases and even, according to some interpretations, large ships such as aircraft carriers². Beijing's response included the active development of medium-range missiles with manoeuvrable re-entry vehicles and, later, hypersonic boost-glide glide vehicles. In turn, Washington began to seriously address the challenge of countering hypersonic missile threats. This reciprocal "engagement" mechanism, as previously shown [2], was largely unintentional and contributed to the arms race in the region through the natural reactive behaviours of both parties.

² The effectiveness of the innovative concept of anti-ship ballistic missiles in non-nuclear armaments cannot be accurately assessed at this stage. However, it has made a significant contribution to the adoption of military/technical countermeasures by the United States, which can already be considered as a sufficient measure in terms of the rated perception and reality of this threat.

SCOPE

The authors attempted to rank the types of armaments and military activities of the USA and China in the region in terms of their potential impact on the further intensification of the arms race.

The categories of weaponry considered in aggregate included:

- naval forces;
- air force and naval aviation;
- anti-submarine forces and armaments were considered separately;
- medium- and intermediate-range missile systems³ (ballistic, cruise, hypersonic);
- combat theatre antiballistic missile defense systems;
- anti-satellite capabilities.

The operational and technical assessment was conducted by seeking answers to three key questions: 1) To what extent is this type of weaponry suited to the characteristics of the combat theatre in the APR? 2) Are the parties actively investing in the development and deployment of the relevant capabilities, including those of their closest regional allies? 3) And is there positive feedback in the arms race, in terms of identifying and responding to the opponent's natural moves and countermeasures?

The analysis confirmed the validity of the 2021 conclusions [2], which stated that the combination of medium- (intermediate-) range missile systems and anti-ballistic missile defense systems plays a decisive role in intensifying the U.S.-China confrontation. At this stage, the parties have not only failed to slow this flywheel, but, on the contrary, have continued to accelerate it through both vertical and horizontal arms races in the APR.

³ The Russian classification distinguishes only medium-range weapons, meaning missiles with a maximum range of 1,000 to 5,500 km, as defined in the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (IRNFT). The Western approach divides this range into two sub-ranges, where "medium" is considered to be a range of 1,000 to 3,000 km, and "intermediate" is a range between 3,000 and 5,500 km. In China, a range of 1,000–3,000 km is defined as "medium", 3,000–8,000 km as "long", while the range of 3,000–4,800 km is considered "intermediate".

THE MEDIUM-RANGE LOGIC

Beijing's interest in intermediate- and shorter-range missiles historically stems from the objective of creating a deterrent counterweight to American bases in the region, but also, primarily, from the long-standing confrontation with the USSR. After that period ended, China entered a phase of rapid military modernisation, alongside significant scientific, technological, and economic advancement. Unlike the USA and Russia, China was not constrained by the INF Treaty, and it treated medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs) as a logical step toward gaining experience before developing new intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), as well as an important tool for ensuring regional security, being both the simplest and, at the same time, an effective means of targeting airfields and naval bases of potential adversaries near its borders.

The PRC now possesses the world's largest arsenal of technically advanced medium-range missiles. According to American estimates, which are most relevant to the subject of this article, this arsenal includes up to 1,800 MRBMs (including 500 intermediate-range missiles), up to 900 short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) with ranges of 300 to 1,000 km, and up to 400 medium-range cruise missiles on ground-based launchers. In addition, China maintains sea- and air-based cruise missiles, though in significantly smaller numbers than the United States [source 4, pp. 64–66]. Some of these missiles may be equipped with nuclear warheads, but a significant share is deployed with conventional warheads.

Of particular note are the Dongfeng-21 medium-range mobile systems, including an anti-ship version (modification *D*), which is most likely intended primarily to destroy, or “deny access to”, American aircraft carriers in areas of strategic interest during Chinese military operations. There are also the Dongfeng-26 intermediate-range missiles capable of striking targets on Guam, and the Dongfeng-17 version with a hypersonic boost-glide warhead, which is extremely difficult to intercept with current anti-ballistic missile defense systems. The ability of Chinese missile forces, in the event of a conflict over Taiwan, for example, to instantly disable key U.S. military bases in the region, even temporarily, is a constant concern for

Washington. At the same time, such a capability could draw Beijing into a war with a coalition of countries, since key U.S. military targets are located in South Korea and Japan, and could also trigger uncontrolled escalation. Taking such a step is unlikely to be an easy decision for China's military and political leadership, especially given the active deployment of similar weapons by its opponents.

Washington is actively pursuing a policy of deterrence against China in the Asia-Pacific region (APR), one aspect of which is ensuring superiority in conventional weapons systems. This policy is grounded in the Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI), promoted since the early 2020s, and aims to secure American military and technical infrastructure in the APR, from the deployment of firepower in the western Pacific and the construction of anti-ballistic missile defense facilities on Guam to the strengthening of the American satellite constellation⁴.

Among the instruments of American deterrence, medium-range ground-based missiles are of particular importance due to their impact on the military and political situation in the region. As is known, in 2019 the United States withdrew from the INF Treaty in order to rebalance the missile capabilities in this class vis-à-vis the People's Liberation Army Rocket Forces, which, as noted above, possesses the world's largest arsenal of such missiles [3].

Why, given the availability of other types of deterrent weapons, did the United States require medium-range systems? First, as already noted in the discussion of combat theatre characteristics, deterrence in the APR necessitates the use of offensive weapons with specific range capabilities. Second, the need to deploy ground-based medium-range missiles is supported by the logic of the “conventional triad” concept, which, by analogy with the nuclear triad, emphasises the importance of all three components (air, sea, and land) in generating a comprehensive deterrent effect. Third, land-based missiles have particular value from a military and political standpoint: once deployed in a given territory, they can project a sustained threat to specific areas of the adversary.

⁴ The Congress approved the creation of the *PDI* within the framework of the annually adopted National Defence Authorisation Act (*NDAA*) for the 2021 fiscal year.

This last feature has ambivalent consequences. On the one hand, the clarity of the risks thus defined may compel the adversary to act with greater caution. On the other hand, the same condition creates a potential for escalation in the event of rising tensions, potentially provoking pre-emptive actions by the opposing side aimed at neutralising the threat.

It is also recognised that ground-based combat systems can be of particular value to allies. Their deployment on allied territory serves to reinforce security guarantees from the operating power, in this case, the United States. At the same time, however, the presence of such systems automatically designates the host country as a target for the deterred state, in this case, China.

Judging by the fact that the current American approach does not foresee the mass deployment of ground-based medium-range missiles in the region, it appears that Washington and its allies are taking these escalation risks into account. Nevertheless, this has not prevented them from gradually intensifying their deterrence posture.

THE MISSILE CHAIN

Since withdrawing from the INF Treaty, the United States has made significant progress in restoring its capacity for medium-range ground-based systems and has already deployed some of them in the combat theatre. In the spring of 2024, it deployed a missile system on the Philippine island of Luzon capable of striking any target on the east coast of mainland China. This is the *Typhon*⁵ launcher equipped with *Tomahawk* cruise missiles, which have a range of up to 1,800 km⁶. The U.S. Navy is also testing the *Mk. 70* container launcher, similar to *Typhon*, although its purpose and future prospects remain unclear, it may be considered an anti-ship system, using shorter-range *SM-6* missiles. In addition, in December 2024, the United States successfully tested the Long-

⁵ The U.S. Army Pacific Command deployed them on the island as part of the U.S.-Philippine Salaknib-24 exercises. It was assumed that the systems would be removed from the Philippines after the completion of the manoeuvres, but this did not happen [4].

⁶ This system can also launch *SM-6* missiles with a range of up to 500 km and *SM-6 Block IB*, which, if used, will have a range of up to 740 km [5].

Range Hypersonic Weapon (*LRHW*, also known as *Dark Eagle*) missile system, equipped with a hypersonic boost-glide weapon [6]. Although its deployment location has not yet been confirmed⁷, the declared range of the *LRHW* (over 2,775 km, or, according to some estimates, up to 3,400–4,500 km [6]) makes it clear that, even if deployed on Guam, it will be capable of striking targets on Taiwan and in the surrounding waters.

In addition to the United States, its regional allies are also strengthening their deterrent capabilities. South Korea stands out for relying on its own developments, particularly the Hyunmoo missile series. South Korea's current arsenal includes Hyunmoo-3 ground-based cruise missiles with a range of at least 1,500 km. It also possesses Hyunmoo-4 and Hyunmoo-5 systems, with ranges of up to 800 km and 3,000 km, respectively [8, p. 31]. A distinctive feature of these missiles is their high payload: 2,000 kg for the Hyunmoo-4 and 8,000 kg for the Hyunmoo-5 (with the 3,000 km range likely achieved using a lightweight warhead). Officially, Seoul's deterrence posture is directed against the DPRK; however, given that a payload of 1.5–2.0 tonnes is typical for light ICBMs, and over 8 tonnes for heavier variants, it is reasonable to assume that, with a "typical" warhead, these missiles have the capability to deter not only Pyongyang, but potentially Beijing as well.

Taiwan has also achieved notable success in indigenous missile development. In the early 2020s, it produced the Ching Tien cruise missile with an estimated range of up to 2,000 km and a hypersonic speed of Mach 5–6, designed for striking ground targets [8]. The development and deployment of this missile, along with the Hsiung Feng 2E cruise missile, underscores how central the issue of deterring Beijing has become for Taipei.

Japan is also actively conducting its own R&D in this area: in 2025, it started the deployment of the Hyper-Velocity Gliding Projectile (*HVGP*) with a range of up to 500 km. In addition, the Hypersonic Cruise Missile (*HCM*), with a ram air-breathing jet engine capable of speeds over Mach 6, is under development, with deploy-

⁷ It should be noted that there have been reports of Japan's willingness to deploy *LRHWs* on its territory on a rotational basis. Australia and South Korea, on the other hand, have stated that they are not interested in their deployment [7].

ment scheduled for after 2030 [8]. It should also be noted that, in addition to their own developments, *Tomahawk* cruise missiles are very popular among American allies. For instance, in 2024, Japan signed a contract for approximately 400 *Tomahawk* IV and V series missiles, with deliveries to begin in 2026. In 2023, Australia announced plans to purchase about 200 similar cruise missiles to be deployed on *Hobart*-class destroyers and *Hunter*-class frigates currently under construction. These missiles can also be used on *Virginia*-class nuclear submarines, which Canberra plans to acquire from the United States in the early 2030s as part of the *AUKUS* partnership⁸.

Thus, the military and technological advancement of the United States and its APR allies is becoming increasingly threatening to Beijing, provoking a response. The analysis of this situation leads to the following conclusions. First, for the reason mentioned above, the perception of land-based missiles as a factor that permanently keeps the restrained side “at gunpoint,” aggravated by the active involvement of U.S. allies in the U.S.-China arms race, will intensify, and tensions in the APR will only increase, undermining crisis stability in the region.

Second, the situation can be exacerbated by Beijing’s fears of a highly probable future loss of its military advantages in the Asia-Pacific combat theatre. If one assumes that the military and political leaders of the PRC are seriously considering a military scenario for the reintegration of Taiwan, these circumstances may urge Beijing to look for a “window of opportunity” and to accelerate preparations for military action against Taipei, without waiting for regional opponents led by Washington to strengthen to a certain level.

Thirdly, the United States already possesses ground-based facilities in the APR that can strike any target on the east coast of mainland China. At the same time, Chinese medium-range ground-based armaments do not pose a similar threat to American territory. Thus, there is a clear trend towards the acquisition of strategic capabilities by certain types of conventional weaponry. In this regard, China will be forced to continue building up its nuclear arsenal.

⁸ A trilateral military/political bloc formed by Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

SHIELD AND SWORD FIGHT

The development of ballistic attack systems inevitably leads opponents not only to deploy their own munitions but also to minimise damage from enemy weapons by creating and constantly improving anti-ballistic missile defense systems. The United States is the most active actor in this area. This reflects a historical tradition, given that the need to develop anti-ballistic missiles capable of intercepting German V-2s was articulated by the U.S. as early as 1945 [9, p. 217].

The goal of protecting surface ships, primarily aircraft carriers, from Soviet cruise missiles launched from sea and air platforms was one of the key objectives throughout the Cold War. This drove large investments in naval air defense/anti-ballistic missile defense systems and in the combat information and control systems that supported them. The potential of the most renowned of these systems, *Aegis*, proved so significant that by the 21st century, it had become a ready-made foundation for the development of operational anti-ballistic missile defense systems, offering protection against ballistic missiles, including medium-range missiles. Interest in combat anti-ballistic missile defense increased during the 1991 Gulf War, when Iraq made active use of modified Soviet R-17 missiles. The relatively low level of damage was attributed to the poor quality of the semi-artisan modifications made to extend their range. However, the effectiveness of the best Western anti-aircraft missile system (AAMS) at the time, the *MIM-104 Patriot*, as an anti-ballistic missile defense system, also proved to be below acceptable standards. According to official estimates, only half of the missiles that entered the engagement zone of the Patriot system (which itself was limited and did not cover the entire theatre of operations or the territory of Israel) were successfully intercepted [10, p. 37].

These shortcomings, along with the threat, keenly recognised by the American military, of recurring clashes in local wars with operators of various R-17 derivatives (in the Middle East or on the Korean Peninsula), under conditions where politically unacceptable losses must be avoided, led to the *Patriot* AAMS being developed primarily to improve its performance as an anti-ballistic missile defense system designed to protect specific

objects from short-range ballistic missiles. To provide zonal defense across a combat theatre and to intercept medium-range missiles, a programme to develop the *THAAD* system was launched as early as 1992 [11, p. 1]. In 2008, the U.S. Army officially accepted the first battery set of the complex, and in 2013, it was operationally deployed in Guam [11, p. 1]. Since 2016, one battery has also been deployed in the south of the Republic of Korea. In 2025, the U.S. armed forces received their eighth *THAAD* battery set; however, at the time of writing, no further production plans have been specified [source 5].

The second most important American theatre-level anti-ballistic missile defense system is *Aegis BMD*. During the development of the *Aegis* shipborne combat information and control system, it became evident that its capabilities for addressing rapidly emerging threats in semi-automatic mode were well-suited for the complex task of intercepting ballistic missiles. This suitability stems not only from the system's high-performance computing components but also from its powerful shipborne radar sets (SRS), which were originally designed to track a large number of high-speed, small targets at maximum range and to guide multiple surface-to-air missiles simultaneously. Strictly speaking, it is inaccurate to describe *Aegis BMD* as a separate anti-ballistic missile defense system. Rather, it represents a natural stage in the evolution of the *Aegis* system. Since the early 2010s, all newly constructed *Arleigh Burke*-class destroyers in the United States have been equipped to perform anti-ballistic missile defense tasks, with several older ships also being upgraded accordingly [12, pp. 2-3]. There are currently 56 such destroyers, and by 2030, this number is expected to rise to 69 [12, p. 8].

American *Standard* family anti-aircraft missiles have served as a solid foundation for the development of the *SM-3* exoatmospheric interceptor cluster. The latest modifications to the main surface-to-air missile of the complex (*SM-6*) are aimed at intercepting ballistic missiles. The *SM-6* serves two purposes: to destroy targets that have already re-entered the atmosphere but were not intercepted by *SM-3* missiles beyond that zone, and to provide a temporary solution to the problem of engaging manoeuvring hypersonic targets

while a specialised Glide Phase Intercept (*GPI*) system is being developed [12, pp. 5-7]. The *SM-3* has the potential to intercept even low-flying satellites [12, p. 34], and with further refinement and successful positioning of the carrier ship under the trajectory, it could also engage intercontinental ballistic missiles.

In the context of the Pacific theatre, the primary task of naval air defense systems is the protection of carrier strike groups, the most valuable offensive assets, against anti-ship ballistic missiles. In addition, they can and will be deployed in high-threat waters to support land-based interception systems, which were successfully tested during the repulsion of missile strikes on Israel in April and June 2024 [13, 14]. Alongside the U.S. Navy, the Japanese fleet also fully utilises *Aegis BMD* ship-based systems aboard *Kongo*-, *Atago*-, and *Maya*-class destroyers. Japan is a partner in the development and production of the latest versions of *SM-3* anti-ballistic missiles and also plans to build heavier ships, initially designed as specialised anti-ballistic missile defense platforms but now effectively evolving into missile-armed cruisers, replacing plans for ground-based systems [15]. It is likely that South Korea will become a U.S. partner in this area in the future.

Back in the late 2000s, land-based versions of the *Aegis BMD* system, known as *Aegis Ashore*, were created. These systems are deployed as part of the European anti-ballistic missile defense network in Romania and Poland. While this type of deployment offers certain advantages over ship-based platforms (primarily economic), it also has significant drawbacks, chiefly vulnerability. The core of such a complex, including a large shipborne SRS, cannot be designed in a mobile format. After Japan abandoned plans to construct its own *Aegis Ashore* systems, it is likely that this technology will be implemented on land to a limited extent, for example, in the form of mobile launchers with remote targeting (the *Mk.70* could also serve this role).

As a result, the United States already possesses a partially deployed and expandable layered anti-ballistic missile defense system in the APR, composed of *Aegis*, *THAAD*, and *Patriot* complexes. In the coming years, under the pretext of defending against Chinese and North Korean threats, we can

expect a build-up of the missile defense capabilities of key American bases, primarily in Guam, as well as those of major U.S. allies in the region.

China's interest in anti-ballistic missile defense systems used to counter ballistic missiles has historically been much weaker than that of the United States. This is largely justified, as Chinese defense planners have long viewed aerodynamic offensive weapons, cruise missiles and aircraft armed with high-precision munitions, as the primary threat, given the considerable success of the US and its allies in developing and deploying such systems. To counter them, Russia developed and deployed systems such as the Tor anti-aircraft missile system, the S-300PMU/PMU-2 and S-400 air defense systems, and the Su-27 and Su-35 fighter jets. China, in turn, followed a policy of limiting direct purchases of foreign systems, instead seeking to reverse-engineer them and build its own indigenous platforms. This policy, however, did not apply to the S-300 air defense system and the initial batches of the Su-27, which were purchased in large numbers during the 1990s to rapidly modernise the outdated Chinese armed forces. These acquisitions directly contributed to the development of milestone Chinese systems such as the HQ-9 air defense system (initially a copy and later a refined version of the S-300PMU) and the *J-11* fighter family (derived from the Su-27 design). However, in recent decades, this Chinese practice of reverse engineering has not been a secret to its military-technical cooperation partners, and such "technology transfer" is effectively factored into the cost of cooperation. In some cases, there is no need for a direct purchase of a foreign analogue: for example, the HQ-16 medium-range air defense system was developed with Russian assistance, based on design solutions from the Buk anti-aircraft missile system.

Talking of the above-mentioned anti-ballistic missile defense systems capable of intercepting ballistic missiles with a range of more than 500 km, one can single out only the S-400 and S-300PMU-2 anti-aircraft weapon systems, the later modifications of the HQ-9, and the HQ-18 air defense system, the presumed latest Chinese derivative of the S-300V. So far, it remains unclear whether the HQ-18 has been deployed, and if so, in what quantities.

However, the strategic plans of China's regional adversaries have compelled it to pay greater attention to the development of specialised anti-ballistic missile defense systems. The HQ-19 system, which has been developed, tested, and mass-produced independently, is designed to intercept missiles with a range of up to 3,000 km and represents a functional analogue of the American *THAAD* system [source 4, p. 88]. Ship-based systems installed on China's largest destroyers, the Type-055 class, likely have similar capabilities [source 4, p. 87]. China has also achieved notable success in testing (with at least seven confirmed episodes between 2010 and 2023) and possibly deploying a heavier interceptor, referred to conventionally in U.S. sources as the *SC-19* [source 6]. However, unlike the HQ-19, this system remains highly classified, and its appearance, operational status, and connection to the anti-satellite system with a similar designation leave room for speculation.

It can be stated with confidence that China is actively working on a missile attack warning system, reportedly with Russian assistance [16], as well as on the means to intercept ballistic missiles of all classes. At the same time, tactical anti-ballistic missile defense can no longer be considered an exclusive capability of the United States within the combat theatre.

ASSESSMENT AND CONCLUSIONS

As has been shown, the core content of the current round of the U.S.-China arms race is the development and deployment of medium- and intermediate-range missile systems with ballistic, hypersonic, and cruise capabilities. It is not surprising that the USA previously abandoned the INF Treaty, since that open-ended agreement placed it at a military-strategic disadvantage in a region abundant in key military allies within the extended deterrence framework.

At the same time, the current American approach can be considered frail. It is based on the idea of deploying a very limited number of cutting-edge missile systems with high operational and technical capabilities, backed "from below" by compensatory solutions such as surface launchers for *Tomahawk*-class missiles. Among other reasons, this is necessary to avoid further provok-

ing China into a missile race in a region where the USA already faces additional commitments in Europe and the Middle East, which drain its limited resources. If China continues to expand its medium- and intermediate-range missile capabilities, the United States will face a difficult choice: either replicate expensive hypersonic systems or create “simplified” versions. In either case, it will be necessary to increase the number of long-range missile systems deployed in the region, an act that will, in itself, fuel further arms build-up on the Chinese side. This could initiate the “mass” deployment of strike missile systems on both sides, creating a dangerous escalation dynamic reminiscent of the Cold War-era confrontation between NATO and the Warsaw Pact in Central Europe.

The conditions are already in place for the onset of an arms race in anti-ballistic missile systems in the region, one where the distinction between “strategic anti-ballistic missile defense” and “combat theatre anti-ballistic missile defense” is rapidly becoming a historical artefact, losing its operational, technical, and legal relevance. The idea of creating a comprehensive, integrated, and distributed air defense/anti-ballistic missile defense system capable of responding to all types of ballistic, hypersonic, and aerodynamic threats is further supported by the recent experience of military operations in Ukraine and the Iranian-Israeli confrontation of 2024–2025, where massed strikes involving a range of attack systems, including various missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles, have become the norm.

The potentially rapid development of anti-ballistic missile defense systems in the region will necessitate further strengthening of strike missile capabilities, which both sides may consider essential to ensure mutual deterrence. This will result in a full arms race cycle: “strike systems – defense systems – new strike systems to overcome the defense.” At the same time, such development could, to a degree, reduce the incentive for the pre-emptive use of missile systems in crisis situations, since it raises the threshold for the charge needed to ensure effective damage in the face of growing defensive countermeasures.

It is evident that at the current stage, the escalation of the U.S. policy of forceful deterrence against China is accompanied by a noticeable

horizontal build-up of potentially destabilising military capabilities by Washington’s key allies in the Asia-Pacific region, particularly Japan and South Korea. The implications of this process go far beyond bilateral U.S.-China relations and directly affect Russia’s strategic interests.

Particular attention should be paid to the ongoing formation of a security dilemma in Northeast Asia, specifically in the relations among Russia, South Korea, and Japan. The U.S. policy of shifting part of the burden of containing China onto its key regional allies, including Australia, in addition to the two mentioned above, has met with broad acceptance among the national elites of these countries, who are increasingly concerned about China’s growing power. Both Tokyo and, especially, Seoul, facing a difficult historical relationship with a heavily militarised DPRK that has consolidated its nuclear status over the past two decades, are prepared to invest in enhancing the strike capabilities of their armed forces, with a view to deterring the potential Chinese threat. (This essay does not explore the difference between the reality and perception of the threat as viewed by Japanese and South Korean elites, as it is irrelevant for the purposes of the current analysis.)

As far as can be determined, such actions are not being considered in Japan and South Korea as potential triggers of new security challenges in their relations with another regional neighbour, Russia. Yet several key Russian infrastructure sites are within the range of current and prospective ballistic strike systems: transport hubs (including the Trans-Siberian Railway) and military installations (such as the Pacific Fleet’s main naval base, the Vilyuchinsk strategic missile submarine base, and the Ukrainka long-range aviation base). A continued and unbalanced pursuit of this policy, particularly by Japan, which maintains unresolved territorial claims against Russia dating back to the end of World War II, could prompt Moscow to reassess its security posture in the region, possibly leading to a tangible military-technical response through the strengthening of its deterrence capabilities there. Given that the policies of Tokyo and Seoul are focused on perceived threats from China and are framed in opposition to it, one can reasonably foresee the risk of *unintended destabilisation* in relations with Moscow. Such

developments could also lead, unintentionally, to a closer alignment among Russia, China, and North Korea in the military-political domain, an outcome that is unlikely to align with the interests of Japan or South Korea. The current situation in the region clearly indicates the need for dialogue in Track 2 and Track 1.5 formats on security issues. However, the complex and unresolved nature of broader US-Russia relations may delay the launch of such processes.

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