# Towards a new missile crisis in Europe?

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**The European continent became a major stakeholder of arms control negotiations during the Euromissile crisis. As the Soviet Union and subsequently the United States deployed intermediate-range systems that could transform Europe into a nuclear battlefield, European states were involved in two ways. First of all, they were consulted within the framework of NATO by their American partners to determine where missiles would be hosted (Germany, in particular), and later to define what bilateral agreements about their withdrawal could be acceptable. Second, civil society and political pressure in many European countries played a role in the way arms control discussion unfolded. In the end, the adoption of the intermediate-range nuclear force treaty (INF Treaty) led to the removal of all Soviet and American land-based ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and missile launchers with ranges from 500 to 5500 km.**

The signing and implementation of the INF Treaty were instrumental in reducing the nuclear threat in Europe by prohibiting the deployment of a whole category of weapons. The Treaty also demonstrated an attempt to limit the risk of nuclear conflict in the Euro-Atlantic zone through the adoption of regulations on delivery vehicles and in particular missiles.

The necessity to focus on missiles was strategic since missiles are the delivery vehicles that can carry nuclear warheads to their target in just a few minutes, with few ways to defend against them. Pragmatically speaking, it is easier to count or verify the presence or absence of missiles than nuclear warheads themselves. For that reason, missiles have since the 1970s been a key feature of bilateral arms control agreements, with important implications for Europe. However, recent developments raise questions on the sustainability of this model. On the one hand, the INF Treaty ceased to exist in 2019. On the other, the evolution of missile technology complicates the negotiation of diplomatic agreements regulating missile deployments going forward. In this context, the European theatre may again see the deployment of a flurry of missiles, in a new form of missile crisis.

## THE RETURN OF INTERMEDIATE-RANGE MISSILES?

In 2014, the United States started to formally indicate that it believed that Russia was in violation of the INF Treaty, denouncing in particular the testing in 2008 of a cruise missile with a maximum range of 3000 km from a ground-based launcher. Bilateral discussions did not resolve the dispute on the implementation of the Treaty. In 2018, the United States announced its intention to withdraw from the INF Treaty, which became effective in August 2019. Following the demise of the Treaty, Russia made some political attempts to display its goodwill and proposed to implement a moratorium on the deployment of intermediate-range systems on the European part of its territory. However, it did not agree to modify or destroy the SSC-8, the medium-range cruise missile that was developed in violation of the terms of the Treaty. All subsequent shows of openness on the issue were therefore rejected by the United States and its NATO partners, which noted that no credible agreement could be found as long as Russia refused to assume and to correct its past violations of the Treaty.[1]

In this context, legal constraints to the development and deployment of intermediate-range missiles in Europe, conventional or coupled with nuclear weapons, have been re-

**The signing and implementation of the INF Treaty were instrumental in reducing the nuclear threat in Europe by prohibiting the deployment of a whole category of weapons. Pictured are former U.S. President Ronald Reagan and former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev signing the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty on December 8, 1987 (photo: White House Photographic Office / Public Domain)**

moved. This has not led so far to a flurry of deployments in Europe, but a few important developments indicate that strategic competitors may have ambitions at this level.

First of all, as mentioned, Russia has developed a cruise missile, the SSC-8, with a range estimated between 2500 and 3000 km, apparently coupled with conventional warheads and deployed on mobile launchers. According to US government information, two battalions of SSC-8 reached operational status and were deployed starting from 2017. One hundred missiles may have been produced. While the location of these systems is unconfirmed, their mobile status makes them easily transferable from one theatre (Asia) to the other (Europe), if need be.[2]

In response to Russia's violation of the INF Treaty, the United States announced that it would also work on a ground-launched intermediate-range conventional missile. The Pentagon tested a prototype in December 2019[3] and announced a few months later the development of the Precision Strike Missile (PrSM), a mobile system which is bound to replace the ATACMS short-range missile, and whose range is reportedly going to be above 500 km.[4] The US Army has so far conducted five tests of this system. While no information has been provided so far on the future zones of deployment of the system, a European country, the United Kingdom, has already indicated its interest in procuring the PrSM.[5]

Second, here again at the conventional level, the US Army has finalized the development of the Dark Eagle system. This weapon combines a mobile ballistic launcher with the LRHW, a hypersonic glider and may have a range of around 2280 km. While the latest test of the weapon, in June 2022, failed, the Army has announced the upcoming delivery of prototypes of the system to the operation forces for further testing. The 5th battalion of the 3rd Field Artillery Regiment at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, in Washington State is to receive the first batteries of the Dark Eagle. In parallel, the US has launched the development of another boost-glide system currently known as the Op-Fires, which may have a range of around 1600 km.

Given their range, the Dark Eagle and the Op-Fires will probably ultimately be based overseas. Discussion of locations in the Indo-Pacific have been heard in the United States,[6] but Germany may also be a suitable location for these systems. Thus, it was noted that the US Army 56th Artillery

Command and 2nd Multi-Domain Task Force were reactivated in 2021, in Wiesbaden, Hesse. This Command and this Task Force may be used in the future to operate medium- and intermediate-range systems, such as the Dark Eagle, the 56th Artillery Command being known for commanding the Pershing systems back in the 1980s.[7] Of course, such deployments would lead to intense political debates between supporters and opponents within host nations, but it can be assumed that the Pentagon is at least thinking of it as a viable option for the systems being currently developed.

It must be noted that all these systems are designed as conventional weapons. Nonetheless, their development shows that planning for a missile war in Europe is becoming increasingly relevant for NATO militaries. The war in Ukraine may have accentuated this perception. While most missile strikes have been carried out by air-launched or sea-launched missiles, Russia has also used its land forces to conduct some missile attacks. The use of the dual-capable SS-26 Iskander-M has been confirmed by Western sources as well as Russia itself.[8] This mobile system, which can be equipped with quasi-ballistic or cruise missiles, has an official maximum range of 500 km, but it seems that the missiles can fly over 500 km if their payload is reduced, and with the demise of the INF Treaty, Russia might feel encouraged to extend the range of the system.[9] Moreover, the Iskander-M has been recently deployed to Belarus, in violation of the rules of the MTCR, an export-control regime to which Russia officially adheres.[10] According to the MTCR, states must refrain from exporting missile systems that can be used to carry WMD, and especially systems with a range above 300 km and payload of more than 500 kg.

## NEW MISSILES, NEW LOGICS

If land-based missiles are again becoming a feature of the European military landscape, their strategic rationale and impact is completely different from what has been observed in the past.

The first obvious element to point out is that while during the Euromissile crisis, the problem was linked to the introduction of nuclear-tipped missiles, today, the systems involved are mostly conventional. Russia is developing systems that are theoretically dual-capable, and this is notably the case with the Iskander-M, but the ongoing war in Ukraine shows that the Russian military considers the Iskander-M system also as a conventional asset. According to the Russian Ministry of Defense, more than 50 strikes had been conducted with the Iskander by August 2022.[11] Soviet-designed Tochka-U have also been used, both by Russian military and potentially by Ukraine at the beginning of the conflict

**The US Army has finalized the development of the Dark Eagle system. This weapon combines a mobile ballistic launcher with the LRHW, a hypersonic glider and may have a range of around 2280 km. Pictured is the hydraulic launching system of the LRHW during Operation Thunderbolt Strike at Cape Canaveral Space Force Station, Florida, March 3, 2023 (photo: Wikimedia Commons / United States Government Works)**


**Russia is developing systems that are theoretically dual-capable, and this is notably the case with the Iskander-M, but the ongoing war in Ukraine shows that the Russian military considers the Iskander-M system also as a conventional asset. Pictured is the launch of an Iskander-M in the Kapustin Yar proving ground in 2018 (photo: Mil.ru / CC BY 4.0)**

as the country still had, according to Western estimates, around 90 Tochka-U launchers in 2022.[12] The conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 also showed missile strikes in a war on the periphery of Europe, with both Azerbaijan and Armenia resorting to old Soviet technologies (Tochka-U and Scud) but also recently acquired systems (Russian Iskander-M or Iskander-E for Armenia, Israeli LORA for Azerbaijan).[13] Strikes remained limited during that conflict, but displayed the interest that countries are showing in these systems especially when involved in border disputes and regional conflicts.

While old systems such as the Tochka-U have been used in European battlefields, they have not brought a substantive advantage, these weapons lacking both reliability and precision. This acquisition of more modern weapons has changed to some extent this equation, even if questions have been raised on the real efficiency of the Iskander, which is described as a game-changer by Russian propaganda but may have less satisfactory performance on the ground, according to US sources.[14]

With that caveat, the technical advances that have been made regarding precision in modern cruise and ballistic missiles are bound to make them more attractive as conventional weapons, even for ranges beyond 300 km. Thus, the intermediate-range systems that may have been conceived as efficient only if coupled with nuclear weapons in the past can now be credible conventional strike options, and this phenomenon will only increase with future developments. The upcoming deployment of hypersonic glide vehicles, potentially in Europe, would accentuate this logic.

The fact that various militaries on the continent may acquire land-based missiles, whose maximum range may be over 500 km, to plan conventional operations, has a strong impact on the way these systems can be regulated through arms control agreements. Indeed, the architecture built during the Cold War focused on missiles inasmuch they could carry nuclear weapons. While conventional or even dual-capable systems may have a destabilizing impact, they may not require the same approach as nuclear-tipped systems, and the logic of arms reduction, quantitative ceilings, range limitation and transparency may not apply to them.

## REMAINING REGULATING INSTRUMENTS

The strategic arms control architecture is collapsing, and in this context, it may appear unrealistic to hope for the re-emergence of a regulatory framework on medium-range and intermediate-range systems, nuclear or otherwise, in Europe. However, most NATO European countries continue to defend the idea that arms control agreements could have a positive effect on their security.[15] In particular, they worry about the fact that Russia's arsenal of short-range nuclear weapons is unregulated and could potentially be used to escalate a crisis in Europe through a variety of delivery vehicles including ballistic, cruise and hypersonic weapons.

In the absence of any prospect for legally binding treaties in the short term, several tracks can be followed in priority

to limit destabilization linked to the deployment of multiple missile systems on the European continent.

First, the escalation potential of dual-capable systems has been clearly established.[16] Russia appears unlikely to change its practice on that matter, but it is important for NATO states to keep being very clear about the type of warhead that is coupled to their systems and to keep rejecting the benefits of any form of ambiguity. More specifically, transparency is needed on doctrine and employment policy regarding new systems, especially hypersonic gliders, deployed in Europe.[17]

Second, in a tense environment, missile tests may be misinterpreted and lead to escalatory manoeuvres. Making sure that appropriate communication is made before tests, especially through the multilateral pre-launch notification mechanism of The Hague Code of Conduct against the proliferation of ballistic missiles (HCoC), is essential. On that matter, states may usefully consider whether their traditional assessment of what needs to be pre-notified and what does not is still adequate, given deployment and technology evolutions. The HCoC covers only ballistic missiles, and therefore cruise missiles and some hypersonic gliders may not be covered despite their ability to fly over thousands of kilometres while carrying WMDs. Reforming the scope of the Code may seem out of reach right now, for political reasons,[18] but it does not prevent some of its subscribing states from adopting a wide interpretation of their reporting requirements.

While other confidence-building measures, for instance related to deployments and targeting, such as showing restraint by refraining from deploying some weapons in some geographical areas, or indicating publicly that some facilities related to the strategic deterrent (command and control, nuclear bases, ...) are not targeted by new deployed systems, may be useful, they appear difficult to promote and implement in the current context, as confidence is absent between Russia and the West.

Preventing the advent of a new missile crisis in Europe will require the improvement of the strategic environment in the short term and a return of the political appetite for negotiated arms control.

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