

## IRKING THE DRAGON

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: International Treaties & Agreements, and other important organizations

China has predictably criticised the U.S.'s decision to walk out of the landmark Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty, which was signed in 1987 by U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to eradicate conventional and nuclear missiles ranging from 500 to 5,500 km from their arsenals.

Of all countries following the crumbling of the major arms control treaty, China seems to be the most impacted. The Chinese expect that the Americans will now reinforce their tactical missiles, both nuclear and conventional, in Guam, a large military base in Micronesia, at the heart of the U.S. deterrent in the Pacific. It is also expected that the Americans will pack other U.S. bases in the Pacific, especially those in Okinawa — a string of islands in the East China Sea that belong to Japan — with intermediate range missiles. By doing so, the U.S. would be able to virtually box in the movement of Chinese naval ships in the West Pacific, especially by safeguarding strategic gateways to the open sea, such as the Miyako Strait in Japan.

China is aware that the post-INF missile deployments can significantly undermine its own deterrent, especially its mid-range missiles. Currently, the Americans have no answer to China's DF-21D missiles. These weapons have been tailored to destroy U.S. aircraft carriers even at a distance of 1,450 km. China recently flaunted its DF-26 ballistic missiles, which can deliver a strike on Guam.

Chinese media reports reveal Beijing's apprehension that the Americans are at some point likely to propose a fresh arms control dialogue, sharply focusing on China's mid-range missiles. The new treaty targeting China's intermediate range missiles is expected to seek termination of the Chinese challenge to Washington's military dominance in the West Pacific.

But Beijing will not be second-bested by Washington in the tense ongoing tussle for equivalence, and in writing the rules, in the waters of the Pacific. A write-up published in *China Military Online*, a website affiliated with the People's Liberation Army, points out that in view of the anticipated moves by the U.S., China must rapidly reinforce its nuclear arsenal, through qualitative rather than quantitative improvements.

Besides, Beijing would have no choice but to beef up its conventional deterrence by developing hypersonic missiles, which can smash into targets at five times the speed of sound, unharmed by any existing ground-based missile defences. The next generation of strategic bombers as well as long-range air-launched cruise missiles could also be on Beijing's radar.

By taking the miscalculated step of walking out of the INF treaty, the U.S. may have dragged China, as well as Russia, into a new and unpredictable arms race, with the potential of destabilising the Indo-Pacific.

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