

Enhancing deterrence in Europe: a return to intermediate-range missiles

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On 10 July, on the sidelines of a NATO summit in Washington, the United States and Germany announced in a joint statement that the US will begin episodic deployments of the long-range fires capabilities of its Multi-Domain Task Force in Germany in 2026, as part of planning for enduring stationing of these capabilities in the future. This effectively involves intermediate-range missile systems with a range between 500 and 5,500 kilometres, including the SM-6 (range of more than 500 km), Tomahawk (around 1,300 km), and hypersonic missiles (more than 3,000 km).

In 2026, the 2nd Multi-Domain Task Force (MDTF), established in 2021 in Wiesbaden, Germany, will most likely receive one battery of the Typhon system (four launchers, each operating four SM-6 or Tomahawk missiles) and one battery of the Dark Eagle system (four launchers, each operating two Long Range Hypersonic Weapons missiles, LRHW).

On 11 July, the defence ministers of Poland, France, Germany, and Italy signed a letter of intent regarding the development of long-range precision strike capabilities as part of the European Long-Range Strike Approach. The document aims to facilitate the joint development, purchase, and operation of intermediate-range missile systems.

Commentary

- The deployment of US intermediate-range systems in Germany will enhance deterrence in Europe by providing NATO with capabilities it currently lacks. This decision marks a step towards reducing the disparity between NATO and Russia in this area. Since the mid-2000s, Moscow has developed missile systems of this type, including the 9M729 Iskander-M1 cruise missiles (range of 2,500 km) and 3M22 Zircon hypersonic missiles (range of up to 1,000 km), in violation of the US-Soviet/Russian INF Treaty signed in 1987. Additionally, it has worked on unifying ground-based and naval missiles and their launchers. The latter missiles were exempt from the restrictions imposed by the INF Treaty and were permitted to have a longer range than their ground-based counterparts. The INF Treaty prohibited developing, testing, and deploying ground-launched cruise and ballistic missiles with a range between 500 and 5,500 km, which were also capable of carrying nuclear warheads. Due to Russia's violations of the Treaty, the United States formally withdrew from it in 2019.
- Although the decision at the Washington summit is significant, the number of intermediate-range missile batteries planned for deployment in Europe and within the US

Army is small compared to Russia's current capabilities (15 missile brigades operating Iskander system launchers, as well as four brigades and two coastal defence missile squadrons with Bastion missiles capable of hitting ground targets). Systems of this type are currently being developed in the United States, with the process initiated during Donald Trump's administration. By 2028, the US Army will receive five Typhon and five Dark Eagle batteries to equip five MDTF brigades (see Appendix). Although this project is complicated and innovative, its implementation is progressing according to plan. These systems will be deployed in Europe no earlier than 2026.

- European allies have recognised the need to develop long-range precision strike capabilities, although much later than the US. In Europe, this involves the development of new cruise missiles and launchers. None of the signatories of the letter of intent currently possess such capabilities. France has equipped its Navy with MdCN missiles (range of around 1,000 km), and the French company MBDA is adjusting these missiles for ground-based launchers, promoting them as the basis for developing such capabilities. European states will also need to develop their own intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, and reconnaissance capabilities for precise long-range strikes, as they currently rely on the US for this.
- The joint US-German statement came as a surprise in Germany because the federal government had not announced any such actions. However, the issue of developing and implementing intermediate-range missile capabilities was mentioned in Germany's 2023 National Security Strategy. Most German media outlets have interpreted this decision as a breakthrough in Chancellor Olaf Scholz's stance on the conflict in Ukraine and the confrontation with Russia, likening it to Chancellor Helmut Schmidt's (SPD) consent to deploy the US-made Pershing II missiles in Germany in the 1980s. The statement received criticism from some SPD MPs, who suggested that the deployment of intermediate-range missile capabilities in Germany could result in "another arms race". This argument, along with concerns about increased exposure to an armed attack, has also been raised by the leaders of extremist parties, the BSW and the AfD. Coalition partners from the Greens criticised the manner in which this unexpected decision was communicated to the public. Scholz can count on support from the opposition Christian Democrats, who view the deployment of US missile systems in Germany as boosting Europe's security.
- The US-German plans have sparked harsh criticism in Russia. Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov declared that Moscow would not leave this "extremely destabilising act unanswered", and Kremlin Press Secretary Dmitri Peskov viewed it as a step towards a new cold war. Peskov later toughened his tone stating that European capitals may fall victim to the ongoing confrontation as Russia could respond by targeting these capitals with its missiles. These threats reflect the Kremlin's frustration with the indication that the US and European allies are ready to abandon their former policy of ignoring Russia's aggressive actions regarding armaments. However, the threats are general and mainly directed at European countries. Consequently, it can be expected that Moscow will 'reveal' that it has already deployed intermediate-range missile systems in the European part of the Russian Federation, aiming to raise concern in Germany and other European states and drive a wedge between Europe and the US. Russia most likely refrains from

directly threatening Washington, anticipating that the announced decisions might be modified following Trump's victory in the US presidential election. Thus, Russia does not intend to antagonise the US too much to avoid undermining its political calculations.

APPENDIX

1. US-made intermediate-range missile systems

The Dark Eagle system uses Long Range Hypersonic Weapons (LRHW). Little information is publicly available regarding this system's characteristics. It was only at the end of June 2024 that the US Army and the US Navy completed an end-to-end flight test of this hypersonic missile for the first time. The first battery of this system is expected to reach initial operational readiness in 2025.

The Typhon system uses SM-6 and Tomahawk missiles launched from modified, truck-mounted Mark 41 Vertical Launching Systems (VLS). The system underwent tests as early as August 2019 and the first battery was certified in June 2024. Due to its ability to use existing and currently produced missiles (SM-6 and Tomahawk), the system can be implemented relatively quickly in the US Army.

- **The SM-6 missiles** were originally designed as long-range air defence missiles for US Navy warships, however, over time they were modified to enable them to strike surface and ground targets. Although they have a small warhead (64 kg), they are high-precision missiles due to their own radar capability.
- **The Tomahawk cruise missiles** have so far been launched from bombers, warships, and submarines. Initially, a ground-based version of the missile was developed, but it was withdrawn from service after the signing of the INF treaty. Tomahawks equipped with tactical nuclear warheads were also phased out in 2013. The missile's warhead weighs 450 kg.

2. Multi-Domain Task Force (MDTF)

MDTF is a brigade-sized formation combining satellite and signal reconnaissance, electronic warfare, cybernetic, air defence, and rocket artillery sub-units. It is a new and innovative unit intended to operate against a modern and peer adversary. MDTF is expected to support the US Armed Forces and allied militaries by detecting, disrupting, and destroying anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) networks, ensuring free access to the theatre of operations, and enabling manoeuvre. These tasks are mainly carried out using non-kinetic methods, such as electronic warfare and offensive cyber operations, supplemented by precision intermediate- and medium-range kinetic strike capabilities to target the adversary's operational-strategic command centres and communication hubs located at his depths, with five MDTFs currently being established in the US Army. Initially, plans were to align one formation to the European theatre of operations, two to the Indo-Pacific region, one to the Arctic, and one for a flexible global response. In 2024, the US Army announced its intention to modify the MDTF alignment plans: three formations to the Indo-Pacific region, one to Europe, and one most likely to the Middle East.