

# Ground-Based Intermediate-Range Missiles in the Indo-Pacific

Assessing the Positions of U.S. Allies

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## ISSUE

This report analyzes the likelihood of U.S. treaty allies in the Indo-Pacific region—Australia, Japan, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and Thailand—hosting U.S. conventionally armed ground-based intermediate-range missiles (GBIRMs). I argue that, across all five U.S. allies, the likely receptivity to hosting such systems is very low as long as current domestic political conditions and regional security trends hold.



## APPROACH

The research for this report draws from a variety of primary and secondary sources, including government documents, public speeches and interviews, subject-matter expert analysis, and media reporting. With the exception of the information related to Japan, for any document or speech in which English was not the primary language, I relied on an English translation. For information related to Japan, I used both Japanese language primary sources and translated English sources. When using Japanese and Korean names in this report, I use the format utilized in these countries; specifically, last name followed by first name. The majority of the research and analysis contained herein is current up to late 2020, with some exceptions.



## CONCLUSIONS

- Finding an ally willing to host GBIRMs is more challenging than finding allies willing to host other types of U.S. military forces, such as air bases.
- Despite Thailand being the oldest U.S. regional partner, the continuing presence of a military-backed government, coupled with the fact that this government shows a propensity to pursue closer ties with China, prevents the United States from strengthening military relations. As long as these factors remain, the United States would not want to have Thailand host GBIRMs—and, were the United States to ask, Thailand would be highly unlikely to accept.
- The U.S. alliance with the Philippines is in a state of flux, although it is improving. While the Philippine public and elites generally support the United States and the alliance, President Rodrigo Duterte has pursued policies that negatively affect ties. Specifically, Duterte has advocated closer ties with Beijing while pursuing policies that weaken core pillars of the U.S.-Philippine alliance. As long as future Philippine leaders continue similar policies, including opposition to a permanent U.S. military presence, the Philippines is extremely unlikely to accept the deployment of U.S. GBIRMs.

- Although the alliance between the United States and the ROK was forged during the Korean War, the ROK also retains a close relationship with China. Chinese opposition to the ROK hosting a U.S. defensive missile system, the ROK government's susceptibility to Chinese pressure, and a general deterioration of U.S.-ROK relations suggest that it is highly unlikely that the ROK would consent to host U.S. GBIRMs.
- The U.S. alliance with Australia is strong. Australia also remains economically close to China, but their bilateral ties have been fraying. Although Australia's strong historical ties with the United States and developments in 2021 that indicate an expansion of U.S. access and presence make it impossible to rule out the possibility of Australia being willing to host U.S. GBIRMs, Australia's historical reluctance to host permanent foreign bases, combined with the geographical distance of Australia from continental Asia, makes this possibility unlikely, even as Australia agrees to an increase in U.S. rotational presence.
- Because of Japan's willingness to strengthen its alliance with the United States and pursue efforts to bolster its own defense capabilities vis-à-vis China, Japan is the regional ally that appears most likely to host U.S. GBIRMs. That possibility, however, remains low, heavily caveated by the challenge of accepting any increase in U.S. presence and deploying weapons that are explicitly offensive in nature.
- A U.S. strategy that relies heavily on an ally agreeing to permanently host GBIRMs during peacetime would face serious risks of failure due to an inability to find a willing partner.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

The report also examines four possible alternatives to permanent basing of these missile systems on the territories of U.S. allies: (1) U.S. co-development of GBIRMs with and/or sales of GBIRMs to an ally for it to command and control as its own, (2) U.S. deployment of GBIRMs to an allied territory in a crisis situation, (3) peacetime rotational deployment, and (4) deployment on Guam or one of the Compact of Free Association states. Because each of these alternatives faces drawbacks, the report recommends a variation of the first alternative—should the United States continue to pursue GBIRMs for this region.

Specifically, instead of a focus on deployment of U.S. GBIRMs, the option most likely to succeed would be to help Japan in its efforts to develop and deploy an arsenal of ground-based, anti-ship standoff missile capabilities. Although this option is not a U.S. GBIRM, it should be seen as a first step in a longer-term U.S. strategy in which, over time, the United States might be able to encourage Japan to procure, either on its own or together with the United States, anti-ship cruise missiles with longer ranges. Although these missiles still would not be capable of deep strikes into China, if they were deployed on Japan's southwestern islands or even Kyūshū, they would be able to cover ship movements in the Taiwan Strait, the East China Sea, and some of China's east coast, thereby extending the range at which Chinese assets could be held at war-planning risk and potentially contributing to a maritime interdiction mission in the Taiwan Strait.



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