With the end of the Cold War, Asia has replaced Europe as the region most likely to be roiled by prospective U.S. missile defense deployments. While European capitals remain uncomfortable with American impulses to construct a national missile shield, these concerns pale in comparison to the 1980s, when Moscow employed intense coercive diplomacy and military bluster trying to block President Ronald Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative. Back then, hundreds of thousands of street demonstrators rallied across Europe against the “Star Wars” program. In contrast, President George W. Bush’s decisions to abrogate the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and fast-track national missile defenses produced a muted response in Europe. This time around, Moscow’s diplomatic and military options were quite limited, with the Kremlin’s defense budget in 2002 barely one-twelfth that of the United States. If European misgivings rise again, the most likely cause will be overreaching by Washington rather than posturing by Moscow.

Washington’s missile defense decisions matter far more around the periphery of Asia and along its most consequential fault lines. Abstract debates in European capitals over the utility or disutility of missile defenses have concrete meaning for Beijing, Taipei, Tokyo, New Delhi, Islamabad, Seoul, and Pyongyang. Taipei views missile defense deployments as an opportunity to reconnect with the U.S. military establishment and as a symbolic counter to China’s missile buildup. Beijing is the most vocal opponent of ballistic missile defenses and, unlike Moscow, has the capacity to increase its nuclear capabilities in reaction to U.S. programs. New Delhi does not oppose U.S. missile defense plans, hoping to solidify military and diplomatic ties to Washington. Privately, however, Indian officials worry about the wisdom of Washington’s moves and Beijing’s likely reactions to them, including renewed missile or nuclear assistance to Pakistan. Islamabad is plainly concerned about military technology transfers between India and the United States, and has lined up with China in opposition to ballistic missile defenses. Tokyo has mixed emotions, worrying both about U.S. bellicerency and Beijing’s growing arsenal of theater ballistic missiles.
concerns shift seamlessly between not being enmeshed in unwise U.S. policies and not being properly defended by Washington. A thaw between Seoul and Pyongyang depends in good measure on the outcome of U.S. diplomacy and missile defense deployments.

India, Pakistan, and China all have near-term, growing nuclear potential, in contrast to the Russian Federation, whose nuclear capabilities will be trending downwards over the next 10–15 years. In addition, Beijing, New Delhi, and Islamabad all have new and malleable strategic doctrines. Their missile and nuclear interactions could result in shifts from minimal to open-ended requirements for nuclear deterrence. Consequently, U.S. missile defense deployments and transfers could prompt cascading military requirements in China and around the periphery of Asia. Cascade effects could include accelerated growth in nuclear stockpiles, missile inventories, and conventional military capabilities.

In some ways, missile defenses are like nuclear weapons. Their military utility is questionable in times of war. Even so, missile defenses, like nuclear weapons, have very high political salience. And like nuclear weapons, missile defenses could have either political utility or disutility, depending on how others react to them. The political salience and presumed utility of nuclear weapons remain high even though they have not been used on the battlefield in over five decades. This prolonged period of nonuse reflects questionable military utility or the efficacy of nuclear deterrence. Either way, political dimensions dominate. Even in the absence of battlefield use, every nuclear weapon test, every flight-test of a missile designed to carry nuclear weapons, and every nuclear modernization program sends powerful messages to neighbors and potential adversaries. States on the receiving end of these messages can react supinely, seek the shelter of powerful allies, or respond in kind.

These dynamics also apply to missile defenses, albeit with important variations. Theater missile defenses are likely to see repeated use on the battlefield, but they could be overwhelmed by large inventories of short-range ballistic missiles, such as those possessed by China and North Korea. Similarly, national missile defenses cannot be relied upon to stop large numbers of missiles equipped with countermeasures. Nonetheless, the political salience of missile defenses is extremely high in Asia. Washington’s decisions regarding missile defenses could improve some bilateral ties, while causing significant deterioration in others. Missile defense deployments or transfers in Asia could cause serious spikes in regional tensions or help defuse crises. No U.S. defense modernization programs have more up-side potential and downside risk than missile defenses.

**Asian Triangulation**

With the demise of the Soviet Union, nuclear signaling has shifted to Asia, becoming most pronounced in triangular interactions among China, India, and Pakistan. While other nations were signing and ratifying the