

# REFLECTIONS ON THE INDO- PACIFIC AND THE DEMISE OF THE INF: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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In July, I joined a gathering of analysts, researchers and government figures from the United States and allied states within the Indo-Pacific at the Centre for Global Security Research (CGSR) in Livermore, California, to discuss the demise of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. Washington's decision to withdraw from the Treaty, which restricted the deployment of ground-launched missiles with ranges of between 500 and 5500km, was motivated predominantly by Russia's non-compliance. However, the biggest strategic dividends for the US could be reaped in the Indo-Pacific, where the US is seeking to refresh its regional posture and strategy in response to China's growing anti-access/area denial (A2AD) and power projection capabilities, particularly its sizeable arsenal of land-based short-, medium- and intermediate-range ballistic and cruise missiles — [over 90 percent](#) of which are of an INF range. For the US, fielding its own missile systems represents one of several ways to begin correcting the perceived military imbalance with China. Indeed, Washington plans to test and develop [a new ballistic missile with a range of 3000-4000km](#), and also recently [tested a new](#)

[ground-launched cruise missile](#) with a range exceeding 500km, which could be ready for deployment as early as 2021.

Discussions at CGSR raised many issues worthy of consideration and elaboration. While it is impossible to capture all of them within this report, and with recent developments in mind, five key takeaways stand out. Firstly, theatre-range missiles may have great deterrent and operational value, but are perhaps more important in that they may pose problems for China's overall strategy in tandem with other capabilities. Secondly, US allies are reluctant to host American missile systems not because they are unwilling to assume strategic risk, but because of domestic political considerations and the likelihood of Chinese economic and/or political punishment. Thirdly, the end of the INF Treaty offers opportunities for the US and its allies to collaborate on missile research and development (R&D). Doing so could simultaneously fill existing gaps in their force respective structures and contribute to the development of a strategy of collective or federated defense. Fourthly, introducing new missiles into Asia to counter China could conceivably undercut diplomacy with North Korea if these conflicting strategic priorities are not reconciled. Finally, there is the question of how exactly China will respond to missile proliferation in Asia.

## Targeting China's Strategy

Rather than simply quantitatively matching China's missile forces, introducing new missiles into the Indo-Pacific should be done with the aim of qualitatively undermining its overall strategy. Conventionally armed INF-range missiles are not a silver bullet for America's strategic dilemmas in the region, but would nevertheless bolster deterrence and provide alternative credible strike options to existing air- and sea-launched missiles. The INF Treaty constrained the US military's ability to threaten the Chinese interior, allowing Beijing to invest heavily in [power projection rather than defensive systems](#). Now, the growing quality, range and size of China's missile inventory threatens not only US regional

bases and access points, but also its key [surface power projection capabilities](#), and US forces arriving from outside the region would have to “[fight to get to the fight](#)” in the event of conflict. Leading thinkers have highlighted the pressing need to [redefine US power projection capabilities](#) within the Indo-Pacific to respond to the challenges posed by Chinese forces, and to deter Beijing from pursuing a fait accompli in the South China Sea, East China Sea or over Taiwan. The logic goes that systems like INF-range missiles should be employed to try and [produce uncertainties in China’s operational and strategic calculi](#), and shore-up US-led regional deterrence in the process.

Four potential missions for ground-launched IRBMs were canvassed in discussions at CGSR. Firstly, they could be used to suppress Chinese airpower by targeting major airfields and communications facilities in a hypothetical conflict. Secondly, they could serve a counter-value targeting role, putting select People’s Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF) assets and/or locations under pressure, particularly if coupled with credible loitering munitions. Thirdly, the missiles could fulfil a long-range sniping role, disrupting operations or destroying assets at critical moments, creating opportunities for US or allied forces to exploit. Finally, they could be used as a broader suppressant, providing cover for other military assets to operate under — much as PLA forces would rely on their own missile forces to do the same.

Of course, considering missiles in the Indo-Pacific begs the question of ‘how much is enough?’, and the answer will likely depend on the role(s) these capabilities are expected to play. Matching China’s missile inventory one-for-one is neither cost effective nor suited to broader US operational doctrine or regional strategy. Rather, the challenge is to figure out how INF-range systems most effectively complement existing and planned US force structure to maximize their operational and strategic value, in the interests of undermining China’s overall strategy. While unlikely to voluntarily relinquish or restrict its missile forces under present circumstances,

forcing changes in China’s military spending, strategy and even appetite for arms control diplomacy should remain the primary motivator for leveraging new US missile capabilities in the region.

### **The Challenges of Basing**

To do that, of course, these systems will need to be based appropriately. Such is the geography of the Indo-Pacific, however, that the US there are relatively few locations for the US to field missile systems on its own territory, and it enjoys only minimal strategic depth compared to China. While INF-range missiles could conceivably be deployed to US Pacific territories in order to range the Chinese mainland, that could result in the [putting of too many strategic eggs in too few baskets](#), creating a small number of geographically concentrated high-value targets in a conflict. US military planners fully expect present bases along the first island chain as well as those as far afield as Guam to be primary targets for the PLARF in a future conflict scenario, and are thus seeking alternative wartime operating locations [across allied](#) and [its own Pacific territories](#). Northern Australia, for example, could provide an alternative basing location for ground-launched IRBMs that could range the South China Sea, or even the Chinese mainland with the right payload. Shorter-ranged GLCMs would indeed undoubtedly [need to be deployed to allied territories](#) in order to threaten sea- or land-based PLA targets.

However, securing missile hosting agreements with allies would require a [significant investment of political capital](#), a commodity which the Trump administration has all but expended. In addition, allied governments may be unwilling to squander their own domestic capital in attempting to convince their own publics of the strategic benefits of hosting such assets. The concern is that if mishandled, US missile deployments could become another point of friction between America and its regional allies — and another point of leverage for China. Indeed, for allies to accept such deployments could invite Chinese retaliation. Though they would not necessarily be assuming greater strategic risk by hosting US

missile systems, allied governments are far more concerned about potential short- to mid-term economic or political punishment from Beijing. Chinese officials have stated [in no uncertain terms](#) that allies that agree to host US missiles should be prepared to pay an unspecified 'price' for their actions. Recent history suggests what that 'price' may look like. In 2017, for example, it unofficially sanctioned South Korean companies in response to the deployment of the US Terminal High-Altitude Air Defense (THAAD). Even after Seoul agreed to [limit military cooperation](#) with Japan and the US as well as cap further THAAD deployments, China only lifted these sanctions entirely in [May this year](#).

It is perhaps unsurprising therefore, that when Secretary of Defense Mark Esper and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo recently visited the region to canvas a range of strategic issues with allies, [including potential missile deployments](#), both [South Korea and Australia](#) — which has also suffered the [political](#) and [economic](#) consequences of Beijing's displeasure — stated somewhat preemptively that they would not host US missiles. A policy whereby US missile systems are periodically rotated between allies could provide a compromise of sorts, but China is unlikely to acknowledge the nuance in that sort of deployment, and would likely continue to leverage its economic largesse over smaller US allies. Allies' receptiveness to hosting missiles could certainly change rapidly in the event of a conflict, but by then it could be too late or too difficult to deploy. After all, time is of the essence if the US and its allies are to prevent a Chinese fait accompli.

### **Building Collective Defense**

Considering the above, rather than hosting US missiles, it may well be more [politically and operationally viable](#) for allies to develop field their own. To do so, they could deepen collaborative R&D with the US and other regional partners on relevant technologies such as hypersonic missiles and sensors. That approach would be consistent with recommendations that the US and its allies pursue strategies of ['federated defense'](#) and/or [collective defense](#) in

the Indo-Pacific in the interests of equitable and sustainable burden-sharing. Indeed, a recently released report from the [United States Studies Center](#), on which I worked extensively, detailed not only the scale of China's military challenge to the US, but the equally serious and enduring budgetary, capability and readiness challenges it faces now and in the future. It is therefore in allies' interests not only to help offset these pressures by improving their strategic self-sufficiency, but to simultaneously think more regionally about their strategic futures and to share in the costs of defending regional order.

Rather than simply fulfilling US strategic imperatives by hosting American missile systems, co-developing or sharing missile technology with and between partners could help the US and its allies fulfil their individual strategic needs, enhance burden-sharing efforts, and contribute to long-term collective defense. Both [Australia](#) and [Japan](#), for example, are presently seeking to fill their own long-range strike gaps, and could each benefit from working together and with the US to develop and field these systems. In terms of collective strategic planning, agreeing upon an appropriate operational division of labor between the US and its allies — for example, the targeting of fixed versus stationary targets, or distributing strike versus ISR capabilities — could also benefit the capability-cost equation for all parties. Nonetheless, while it might be tempting for states to see missiles as the silver bullet to countering China's regional strategy, they will not uniformly fulfil the individual strategic needs of different regional partners. The long lead-times and significant costs of developing ground-launched missile systems, the varying appetites between states for political and strategic risk, and simple geography will motivate different states to pursue different capabilities to varying degrees. Partnering with the US to develop and deploy these systems is an appealing way for allies to secure a qualitative edge and the keep the America 'in the region', but allies should attempt to strike a balance between alliance interoperability and independent capability wherever possible.

## **North Korea and US Grand Strategy in Asia**

While much of the discussion around theatre-range missiles in Asia centers around China, the US has yet to address the disconnect between strengthening its military posture vis-à-vis China with diplomacy and trust-building efforts with North Korea. It is not entirely clear how or [where North Korea fits into the United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy](#) — in fact, it has arguably been compartmentalized from wider regional policy, seemingly ignoring geographic and geostrategic realities. Under the Trump administration, North Korea policy is conducted in a strategic vacuum quite apart from the wider '[Asia Chessboard](#)'. This could be problematic when it comes to fielding new missiles across the region.

Diplomacy itself is not the issue, but the US President's apparent willingness to consider offering strategic concessions to Pyongyang could become one if these gestures stand to undercut wider regional security objectives. Indeed, it is not difficult to see how the Trump-Kim "bromance" could complicate the introduction of new ground-launched missile systems into the region — [North Korean State Media](#) has already warned against doing so. Supposing that Pyongyang continues to tie incremental denuclearization to so-called 'reciprocal measures', including strategic concessions, the chances that it would allow the US to deploy missiles in Asia, it is difficult to see the US being able to field a missile system in the Indo-Pacific that can range both China and North Korea without some kind of setback in talks on the Peninsula. The other elephant in the room is the US President himself. In fact, new missiles in Asia could be just as unpalatable to Trump as they would be to his "good friend" Kim Jong-un. There is every reason to believe that Trump would side with Kim, criticizing such deployments as another example of allied free-riding and completely overlooking their value vis-à-vis Beijing.

Unlike the Trump administration, analysts and government officials across the wider region are realistic about the limited prospects for North

Korea disarming, and recognize that it will continue to pose a serious threat for the foreseeable future. A [thorough arms control model](#) to "quantitatively and qualitatively limit, rather than eliminate," North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities should be a realistic goal to set in dialogue with Pyongyang. Furthermore, [Commander of US Forces Korea General Abrams](#) has stated that even in the event of denuclearization, North Korea's conventional capabilities would justify an ongoing US presence on the Peninsula. For the US government to accept those assessments would allow it to reconcile and de-conflict its strategic objectives regarding China and North Korea respectively: in other words, INF-range missiles in Asia would be serving as a deterrent to both of those threats. In any case, discussions over new missile systems in the Indo-Pacific cannot occur in a 'China vacuum' that ignores the potential for North Korea or President Trump to complicate regional strategy.

## **China's Possible Reactions**

Finally, there is the question of how China might react to new missile systems in the region. China could double down on its power projection strategy, accelerating the development and production of new and existing missile models. This would reinforce existing operational problems for the US, though would not necessarily offset the vulnerabilities exposed by US theatre-range missiles. China could also pursue new offensive capabilities to augment its current strategy, and attempt to create new problems for US freedom of action in a regional conflict. As the [aforementioned USSC report details](#), China has rapidly modernized its air and naval forces in parallel with the development of its missile forces which, alongside the PLARF, will pose increasingly significant challenges to their US counterparts, perhaps even contesting America's primacy in critical domains in which it has traditionally enjoyed near-complete dominance.

On the other hand, introducing conventional IRBMs into the Indo-Pacific could also put China on the defensive. Beijing may feel compelled to [divert funding to defensive measures](#) in the face

of a new US or allied missile threat, specifically [missile defense and ISR capabilities](#), which it has until now been able to avoid thanks to US compliance with the INF Treaty. Beijing might also feel pressured to pursue a new arms control reduction treaty with the US, Russia and other missile-capable states. This, however, is [highly unlikely](#) given the centrality of missiles to China's power projection strategy and the significant advantage which they presently confer. Beijing is unlikely to see ground-based INF-range missiles as a game-changer in the region, but rather a multiplication and diversification of a preexisting capability (namely, air- and sea-launched missiles). All the same, as a threshold Great Power with few allies in a region fraught with risk, Beijing may not be able to [avoid arms control negotiations forever](#), and it is in the region's collective interest to prevent arms proliferation from spiraling out of control.

For now, however, the prospects for diplomacy look bleak. As the US and its allies adjust to the region's shifting landscape and prepare for an uncertain strategic future, ground-based intermediate-range missiles are likely just the beginning.

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