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After the INF: What Will US Indo-Pacific Allies Do?

On August 2, 2019, the United States formally left the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty—which prohibited the United States and the Russian Federation from deploying ground-based ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500 km—after the Trump administration suspended US obligations in February 2019. The administration cited Russian treaty violations and China’s continued deployments of missile systems as reasons for the departure.¹ Immediately after the treaty ended, the Trump administration made clear its intention to, in the words of Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, “fully pursue” the development and deployment of ground-launched conventional missiles to broaden America’s military options and to seek allied cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.²

Less than three weeks later, the US Army conducted its first test of a new ground-based cruise missile, a variant of the Tomahawk land-attack cruise missile, with a reported range of up to 500 km. In December 2019, the US Air Force also tested a conventionally configured ground-based ballistic missile with a range beyond 500 km.³ Given political support in Washington, near-term (3–5 years) technological options for new land-based conventional missiles include a range-extended Precision Strike Ballistic Missile (PrSM) launched from the US Army’s and US Marines’ existing High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS), an adapted Long-Range Anti-Ship Missile (LRASM), and new ground-launched Tomahawk cruise missile. More

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ambitious and expensive options (beyond 5 years) would involve medium- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs).⁴

Despite this array of new technological weapon options, many analysts have questioned whether the United States will indeed be able to capitalize on the end of the INF treaty. In particular, they have expressed doubts that its key Indo-Pacific allies such as Australia, Japan, and the Republic of Korea (ROK) would agree to a future US request to deploy land-based theater-range conventional missiles on their territory to counter China's missile threat.⁵

Japan's archipelagic defense strategy requires greater investment in cruise and ballistic missiles.

Recent statements from Australian and South Korean government officials appear to vindicate this view.⁶

However, it is premature to conclude that these Indo-Pacific allies will categorically refuse to cooperate with Washington to minimize the "missile gap" with Beijing. Key allies instead face a difficult assessment of the likely benefits and risks associated with the potential introduction of land-based, long-

range US conventional missiles into the region. While the present US government cannot take allied support for granted, it is also not impossible to conceive of a scenario wherein Australia and Japan, in particular, would be open to a future deployment, provided certain conditions are met.

The China Factor

China's military build-up was a major factor for both Moscow and Washington to ultimately suspend their treaty obligations in 2019 (and, in Russia's case, to violate the treaty from the 2000s onward). Not a party to the INF Treaty, China has, over decades, invested in a large inventory of road-mobile, ground-based cruise and ballistic missiles including the dual-capable DF-26 and DF-21 IRBM. As the US Defense Intelligence Ballistic Missile Analysis Committee noted in 2017, China has "the most active and diverse ballistic missile development program in the world."⁷ In fact, Admiral Harry Harris, then-Commander of the US Pacific Command, testified in 2017 that about 95 percent of China's ground-based missiles possess ranges prohibited under the INF Treaty.⁸

These weapons provide China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) with a growing precision-strike capability against forward-deployed US forces and allied territory throughout the Western Pacific, reaching as far as Guam and Australia.⁹ Japan, the ROK, Taiwan, and the Philippines are especially vulnerable given their close proximity to China. The level of difficulty to

defend against such systems and to detect, track, and engage particularly road-mobile Transport Erector Launchers (TELs) compounds the problem. Analysts fear that Beijing could seek to exploit this advantage in a *fait accompli* strategy, forcing Washington and allies to back down during a crisis because of an inability to respond in kind (and thus the need to escalate disproportionately) or an unwillingness to incur major losses.¹⁰

But it was Russia that sounded the alarm bells over Beijing's IRBMs as early as the 2000s, even threatening to leave the INF Treaty.¹¹ Russian defense experts acknowledge that China has been the main reason behind the US withdrawal from the INF Treaty and that the direct implications for Russia's own strategic posture are likely to be limited.¹²

Meanwhile, Washington's belated response to China's missile threat was mostly the result of the previous Obama administration's engagement strategy vis-à-vis Beijing and the president's personal commitment to nuclear arms control. By contrast, the Trump administration has steered the US-China relationship more firmly toward strategic competition, and China is now seen as a "revisionist power" and a "peer competitor" of the US military.¹³

The INF Treaty was, therefore, the product of a specific bipolar configuration between the United States and the Soviet Union—a context that no longer exists. And, arguably, power shifts in Asia have been much more decisive for its demise than Russian treaty violations. China's rise and its absence from effective treaty arrangements that could impose limitations on its missile capabilities have fundamentally changed Indo-Pacific strategic stability. Unfortunately, prospects for a trilateral INF-type US-Sino-Russian arms control agreement as a successor to the old regime were, and are, slim. China immediately dismissed calls by the German and Japanese governments in early 2019 to join a "multilateralized" INF framework.¹⁴ When US and Russian delegations met in mid-July 2019 to discuss the prospects of a three-party arms control arrangement, China also vowed to "never participate" in such negotiations.¹⁵ Given the complex nuclear and conventional dynamics in the Indo-Pacific, "multilateralizing" the INF will remain an illusion.¹⁶

Analysts fear that Beijing could force Washington and allies to back down during a crisis.

No Nuclear Arms Races

Nevertheless, America's Indo-Pacific allies are aware that alarmism about possible nuclear "arms races" in the region post-INF is unwarranted.¹⁷ The end of the INF is not about major US nuclear deployments to the region but about addressing

imbalances in conventional strike systems. The United States has no plans to deploy land-based nuclear missiles in Asia akin to NATO's 1979 "double track" decision and the stationing of nuclear-armed Pershing-2 missiles in Europe during the Cold War.¹⁸

To be sure, the United States is likely to strengthen its nuclear posture in the Indo-Pacific to reassure allies such as Japan and the ROK that had become concerned about the credibility of US extended nuclear deterrence, especially

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after the Obama administration announced in 2010 that it would retire the sea-based nuclear Tomahawk land-attack cruise missiles (TLAM/N). The Trump administration's 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR) thus confirmed the development of a modern nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM) and foreshadowed the reintroduction of these tactical nuclear weapons to the region. In its view, these missiles "for decades had contributed to deterrence and the assurance of allies, particularly in Asia."¹⁹ In February

2019, the United States also concluded the first production unit of a new low-yield nuclear warhead (the W76 mod 2 or W76-2) for its UGM-133A Trident II D5 submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM).²⁰

However, a modernized US nuclear posture in the Indo-Pacific is not equivalent to a major nuclear build-up. It is instead useful for strengthening nuclear extended deterrence guarantees for allies such as Japan and the ROK, reducing pressures on Tokyo and Seoul to consider their own nuclear deterrent.²¹ Tellingly, the Japanese government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe welcomed the 2018 NPR, cognizant of the importance of strengthening US nuclear extended deterrence in East Asia.²² For Seoul, these moves also provide a good opportunity to improve its understanding of the role of US nuclear weapons in deterring the North Korean nuclear threat through the US-ROK Extended Deterrence Strategic Coordination Group (EDSCG).²³ Australia is also likely to welcome the re-deployment of US tactical nuclear weapons, as it is a long-time beneficiary of US nuclear extended deterrence. In the context of the first-ever written US nuclear extended deterrence guarantee for Australia in the 2019 US National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA),²⁴ such systems will add further credibility to its regional nuclear deterrent posture.

Within this strategic context, key US Indo-Pacific allies have expressed understanding for Washington's decision to end the INF treaty. Australia's Foreign Minister Marise Payne stressed that, from Canberra's perspective, Russia's treaty violations were at the heart of the INF's demise.²⁵ Japan's Chief

Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga commented that “the situation under which the Treaty is forced to be terminated is undesirable”—an implicit acknowledgment of the rationale behind the US decision.²⁶ Likewise, when Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kano called for a “multilateralization” of the treaty, he pointed out that “China already possessed missiles (of the range covered in the pact),”²⁷ indicating Tokyo’s perspective that Beijing’s unrestrained investment in long-range cruise and ballistic missiles has been the key strategic challenge contributing to the treaty’s termination.

Opportunities for US Indo-Pacific Allies

The end of the INF Treaty provides US Indo-Pacific allies with several opportunities. First, it offers a way of alliance management by keeping the United States strategically engaged in the Indo-Pacific. China’s growing ability to hold at risk US forward-deployed forces through its missiles raises the risk of a decoupling effect within alliances. To minimize the exposure of its forces to Chinese missiles, the United States could seek to reduce its military footprint within the first island chain and rely to a greater extent on long-range, stand-off strike capabilities. Some US scholars have already called for a strategy of “offshore balancing,” which would dramatically reduce America’s military presence in Asia.²⁸ Such an approach, however, would further add to existing concerns of regional allies that Washington is less committed to their defense because of growing vulnerability to Chinese capabilities.²⁹ Conversely, the deployment of US conventional missiles on allied territory would signal continued commitment to collective defense efforts, acting partly as a tripwire to deter Chinese attack on US and allied forces. US investment in new land-based conventional missiles would also provide opportunities for joint allied development and operational cooperation.

Second, the end of INF restrictions provides the United States and its allies with a chance to address problems in US conventional deterrence vis-à-vis China. New mobile ground-based conventional missiles deployed to the Indo-Pacific theater could help offset the PLA’s competitive advantage in land-based theater-range cruise and ballistic missiles.³⁰ This deployment would complicate China’s strategic calculus and force its military planners to divert resources into defenses against an increased number of US and allied theater-range strike systems. These missiles would also provide US and allied commanders with an additional warfighting capability during conflict. As part of an evolving allied anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) or archipelagic defense posture,³¹ land-based conventional missiles deployed in the East Asian littoral could turn the tables against China’s strategy to push US forces beyond the first island chain.³²

Third, some analysts have been concerned that deployment of US theater-range missiles could lead to US-China crisis instability and nuclear escalation during conflict because a long-range missile carrying a conventional warhead is indistinguishable from one carrying a nuclear payload.³³ However, the United States, China, and Russia have for decades operated dual-use weapon systems as one instrument to manage their strategic interaction, meaning that a quick escalation to the nuclear level is far from a foregone conclusion.³⁴ Moreover, it has been China's exploitation of US adherence to the INF Treaty that has widened the missile gap and exacerbated allied concerns about the credibility of America's regional military posture. Its growing arsenal of precision-guided conventional missiles has created more tangible risks for US-China instability and conflict escalation as it has increased mutual vulnerabilities that could "drive both sides toward conventional pre-emption in a crisis."³⁵ The deployment of US conventional strike systems could reduce the vulnerability of US and allied bases by complicating Chinese military planning, thereby enhancing crisis stability.

Fourth, the post-INF era offers potential for increased allied cooperation on long-range strike systems as part of island defense. This potential is specifically true for the US alliances with Australia and Japan. For instance, Australia's 2016 defense white paper and its Integrated Investment Plan (IIP) stressed the importance of acquiring new long-range strike capabilities. The IIP announced that a "series of new weapons will be acquired for the strike and air combat capability including air-to-surface and air-to-air munitions, with specific consideration of high-speed and long range strike and anti-ship weapons."³⁶ The Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) also expressed interest in integrating LRASMs into its fleet of F/A-18E/F Super Hornets and F-35A Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) to enhance stand-off strike capabilities.³⁷

In addition, the Australian Army is planning to invest in land-based, long-range surface-to-surface missiles and land-based ASM systems, aside from a new mobile, short-range surface-to-air missile capability.³⁸ Of note, during the joint Australia-US Exercise *Talisman Sabre* in 2019—which also included elements of Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) and focused on high-intensity amphibious operations—the USMC deployed three HIMARS from Okinawa and left the systems with USMC forces rotating through Australia's north.³⁹ HIMARS could constitute a critical component of Australia's evolving mobile, land-based anti-ship capability for archipelagic defense, including in the South Pacific where Canberra is increasingly concerned about China's growing military activities.

Meanwhile, Japan has fully woken up to China's missile threat against JSDF and US bases. As a result, its military planners have begun to think about how to integrate longer-range strike systems into a new military strategy some

analysts have called “active denial,”⁴⁰ i.e., the JSDF’s contribution to an allied A2/AD framework against China. The JSDF has thus invested in land- and sea-based anti-ship/anti-air missiles with longer ranges. For instance, to strengthen the defense of its Southwestern island chain against China’s growing military reach, Japan announced in April 2019 that it would extend the range of its Type 12 surface-to air and surface-to-ship missiles to 300 km to hold Chinese targets around the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu and the island chain at risk. The range of its new ASM-3 air-to-ship missile will also be doubled to 400 km.⁴¹

Japan’s 2018 National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) announced that the JSDF will invest in long-range, air-launched standoff missiles, including the Joint Strike Missile (JSM), the Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile (JASSM) and the LRASM, with estimated ranges between 500 to 1,000 km. It also set aside research funding for a hypersonic gliding vehicle (HGV) for island defense missions.⁴² Moreover, the Abe government has expressed interest in acquiring Tomahawk cruise missiles, the latest version of which could be launched from a torpedo tube and theoretically fit into Japan’s *Soryu*-class submarine without requiring a VLS.⁴³ While politically, Japan still avoids recognition of a land-attack capability, in practical terms the JSDF is likely to possess such a capability in the future against China and the DPRK. In sum, Japan’s archipelagic defense strategy requires greater investment in cruise and ballistic missiles. As such, the end of the INF Treaty and US investments in new land-based missiles offer substantial opportunities for Tokyo in terms of strengthening JSDF capabilities and the US-Japan alliance, including through joint development, acquisition of US systems, or the deployment of US missiles on its territory.

Risks for US Indo-Pacific Allies

However, allies also need to consider a number of risks and limitations of permitting US deployment of missiles. First, they need to factor in uncertainties regarding long-term political support within the US system for developing and deploying new conventional missiles. Contrary to US Defense Secretary Esper’s ambition, any future deployment is probably years away.⁴⁴ And while its development currently enjoys support in the top ranks of the US military, including the Commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command Admiral Phil Davidson,⁴⁵ it could still fall victim to the political process in Washington. The US House of Representatives, controlled by Democrats, already eliminated the Pentagon’s funding requests for new missiles from its versions of the Fiscal Year (FY) 2020 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) and the related defense appropriations bill. Since the Republican-dominated Senate supports

the development, allies will no doubt be scrutinizing the final bills for indicators of political and funding support.

However, even if the funding will be provided in the FY2020 US defense budget, allies could not be fully assured that the development and an eventual request for deployment on their territory would materialize in the years ahead. Should, for instance, a Democratic candidate win the 2020 presidential election, the development of new land-based conventional missiles could

Until political battles in Washington are decided, allies will avoid any pre-commitment.

well be put on hold. A Democratic president might conclude that the deployment of such systems in Asia would be counterproductive for relations with China. Notwithstanding a new bipartisan consensus about the need to “push back” against China’s assertiveness, a new White House incumbent could determine that conventional missiles targeting the Chinese mainland would just be too confrontational. This perception could be particularly true for new IRBMs—such as a conventional Pershing-3—capable of hitting targets deep

within mainland China. Until the political battles in Washington over new conventional missiles are decided one way or the other, allies will avoid any pre-commitment to allowing the deployment of US missiles on their soil.

Second, caution on the part of allies is all the more likely since they are well aware of the risk of a serious deterioration in their own relationship with China. Beijing has already threatened major consequences for Australia, Japan, and the ROK should they allow the deployment of US missiles.⁴⁶ Presumably, allies recognize that these statements are part of China’s information warfare campaign, designed to stir up domestic opposition and to drive a wedge between the United States and its allies, all while the build-up of Chinese missile arsenals proceeds apace. Still, domestic opposition to hosting US missiles pointing at China in peacetime could be significant. This opposition is particularly apparent in Japan, demonstrated by the strong local opposition to US Marines on Okinawa or the planned site for the Aegis Ashore ballistic missile defense system in Akita prefecture. But it would be politically difficult for all US allies since a missile deployment would signal that China is now perceived as a major military threat—a notion that governments in Canberra, Tokyo, and elsewhere still seek to avoid in public.

Third, determining the best location to deploy land-based conventional missiles in theater could prove challenging. Mobile, land-based missiles require strategic depth to realize their full potential. One option would be to base conventional IRBMs on US bases in Guam. Yet, the advantage of being a US

territory (and thus politically unproblematic) could be negated by the fact that Guam is very small and highly vulnerable to Chinese attack. Similarly, most smaller islands in Japan's Ryukyu Islands chain close to China, such as Miyako or Ishigaki, also lack significant strategic depth, and so does the island of Iwo Jima in the second island chain—leaving Japan's main islands as the most suitable location. However, Hokkaido, the northernmost island, is very close to Russia, inviting major friction between Tokyo and Moscow in case of deployment. The most geographically suitable location could thus be Kyushu prefecture in Southern Japan, where long-range conventional missiles could be rapidly deployed during contingencies to the Southwestern islands by US-Japan ground forces.⁴⁷

Basing land-based conventional missiles in South Korea would theoretically be possible. But it is questionable whether Seoul would agree to host US missiles capable of targeting China over concerns of becoming entrapped in an unwanted conflict with Beijing, unless its threat perception of China changes drastically. Similarly, the Philippines and Taiwan could host such systems. Yet, under the current regime in Manila, support for US deployment looks rather impossible, though a post-Duterte government might be more open to considering future options. And Beijing would surely consider stationing missiles in Taiwan as a declaration of war.

Consequently in the medium term, aside from Japan, Australia's geographic location could provide the United States with critical strategic depth to project military power into a more contested Indo-Pacific theater. Mobile, land-based, long-range conventional US strike systems based in Australia could hold at risk Chinese targets operating in the southern parts of the South China Sea, the eastern Indian Ocean, and the South Pacific. Intermediate-range systems could even reach targets on the Chinese mainland. To be sure, Canberra would be conscious of China's hostile reaction to hosting US long-range conventional missiles. However, given China's growing strategic reach and Australia's intensifying concerns over Beijing's strategic trajectory,⁴⁸ such concerns could well be outweighed by the strategic necessity to strengthen the US-Australia defense posture. In this context, it should be remembered that, during the Cold War, Australia hosted joint signals intelligence collection facilities with the US despite concerns of becoming a potential target of Soviet strikes in the event of a conflict.

Allies after the INF

At present, there is no guarantee that the United States will be able to capitalize on the end of the INF Treaty by developing and deploying new conventional missiles in the Indo-Pacific region to address the missile gap with China. Even

its closest allies, Japan and Australia, will avoid any pre-commitment amid the aforementioned strategic and political uncertainties, particularly with the potential deployment of land-based conventional missiles capable of targeting the Chinese mainland. Allies turning down an official request from Washington would deal a major blow to US plans of minimizing the missile gap with China and to muster an effective allied response to this challenge. Such a scenario could also cause major frictions within these alliances, which China would seek to exploit to its advantage.

Equally though, the widespread assumption that key US allies and partners will never sign up to the deployment of conventional missiles could be disproven in the medium- to long-term. Allies are being forced to confront the realities of China's conventional missile threat to US and its own forces. In doing so, they could well realize that alternatives to dealing with this threat, such as sea- and air-launched ballistic and cruise missiles as well as ballistic missile defense, are insufficient. For instance, China's increasingly sophisticated and longer-range air defenses put US and allied forces at much greater risk. In all likelihood, the United States and its key Pacific allied air forces will have

US allies are likely to keep their options open regarding a future deployment.

too few of these very expensive platforms to suffer major attrition. Likewise, their major surface combatants are likely to be insufficient in numbers and increasingly at risk from Chinese anti-ship missiles and other capabilities. And while US and allied submarines could be expected to survive longer in this environment, they have limited magazine capability and are also unlikely to be available in sufficiently large numbers, not least given their high costs.

In the absence of much larger, survivable US and allied naval and air forces, and similar to the European theater,⁴⁹ long-range, ground-based theater conventional missiles might therefore become more attractive for US allies as an important supplement (not substitute) to sea- and air-launched missiles. They are thus likely to keep their options open regarding a future deployment. For example, during the 2019 annual Australia-US foreign and defense ministers meeting (AUSMIN), the media made much out of Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison's statement that no US request for missile sites in Australia had been made. Yet, the Morrison government deliberately left its options open.⁵⁰ Should the strategic environment deteriorate further, and should China behave more aggressively particularly in Australia's immediate South Pacific neighborhood, Australia could be much more flexible than commentators currently suggest.

Similarly, Tokyo's approach to US missile deployments is likely to be shaped by shifts in the strategic environment. A likely scenario for the US-Japan alliance in a post-INF world is to share roles, with Japan focusing on acquiring and deploying ground- and air-launched short-, medium- and long-range ASM, the deployment of which could be coordinated with the US Army and the USMC to block chokepoints within the first island chain. The United States would provide ground-based, conventional land-attack options. While it could prove politically too difficult to deploy such systems during peacetime, rapid deployment during contingencies is a plausible option. So is the option to deploy these mobile systems to Japan for joint exercises, after which they would be withdrawn again.⁵¹

The end of the INF treaty is forcing America's Indo-Pacific allies to engage in a substantial discussion of how to jointly address China's growing missile threat. To avoid serving Beijing a golden opportunity to undermine these alliances, careful alliance management will be key in a post-INF world.⁵² Fortunately, while by no means a done deal, the time required to develop new US land-based conventional missiles domestically will provide ample opportunity to reach a new allied consensus.

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