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Leaving the INF Treaty Won't Help Trump Counter China

PRANAY VADDI

On October 20, 2018, U.S. President Donald Trump announced his intention to withdraw the United States from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, the landmark 1987 arms control agreement that prohibits cruise and ballistic missiles with range capabilities between 500 and 5,500 kilometers. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's sixty-day deadline for Russia to return to compliance by February 4 has set the stage for the United States to begin the withdrawal process once this ultimatum passes.[1]

U.S. officials say that the major reason for withdrawing is to contest China's growing military power and assertiveness. They argue that the United States needs to deploy conventional ground-based, intermediate-range missile systems (GBIRs) against China[2]—systems that the INF Treaty prohibits the United States from fielding. And because Beijing is not a party to the treaty, officials argue, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has a tremendous advantage.

China presents a real military challenge to the United States. The PLA's advanced integrated defenses against U.S. air, missile, and naval capabilities include substantial numbers of Chinese GBIRs, which create a high-risk environment for U.S. forces that stretches thousands of kilometers from the Chinese coast into the Pacific. In the event of a conflict, such anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities could give China the ability to severely impede U.S. forces surging west to defend allies, as well as U.S. naval and air forces operating in China's periphery. Consequently, China's A2/AD systems may prevent the large-scale operations necessary to attack PLA operations against allied territory or forces in the South or East China Seas, or, if necessary, PLA forces carrying out strikes from the Chinese mainland.

Against this background, analysts have made three arguments in favor of withdrawing from the INF Treaty and deploying GBIRs:

1. U.S. GBIRs will better deter China.
2. GBIRs are far cheaper than U.S. air and sea platforms.
3. Land-based missiles are more survivable than U.S. air- and sea-based assets.

Each of these arguments has some merit. However, their proponents ignore the very real political challenges associated with deploying U.S. GBIRs in the Asia Pacific region. They also ignore specific military challenges, including the potential for a missile race and long-term regional and strategic instability. Further, proponents of U.S. GBIRs have not rationalized the likely budgetary trade-offs required to develop these new missiles given the political fight brewing over defense budgeting in 2019, and whether new GBIRs are more cost effective than utilizing existing or planned military capabilities.

Before withdrawing from the INF Treaty, the United States should consult with its Asian allies on the threat posed by China, the defenses required, and the consequences of introducing U.S. offensive missiles into the region, including potentially on allied territory. Given the surprise and even criticism openly expressed by some U.S. allies following Trump's INF announcement, consultations of this nature are overdue. Unless allies are willing to help the United States manage the consequences of deploying GBIRs to the Asia Pacific—and unless at least one of them is willing to host the missiles—the risks of withdrawing from the INF Treaty would outweigh the potential benefits in countering China.

POLITICAL CHALLENGES TO ALLIED BASING

The apparent lack of adequate consultations with allies in advance of the president's announcement has exacerbated the myriad political obstacles to basing GBIRs in Asia or Europe. These difficulties include domestic support for nuclear disarmament and opposition to the presence of U.S. forces, as well as fears about the security and economic consequences of antagonizing Beijing.

Japan

The Japanese government opposes U.S. withdrawal from the INF Treaty. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe called such a move "undesirable." Major Japanese periodicals panned the U.S. decision less diplomatically, accusing Trump of playing into Russian President Vladimir Putin's hands. Popular opposition to U.S. military deployments (especially in Okinawa, where U.S. forces are already concentrated) and support for nuclear disarmament, including the landmark reductions achieved through the INF Treaty, strongly suggest that U.S. GBIR deployments would meet intense domestic opposition. Moreover, by Japanese custom, local governors would have to give formal consent for U.S. forces to be based in their prefectures. Locally focused opposition would be harder for Washington to overcome. In 2018, Japanese governors unanimously called for a full revision of the U.S.-Japan Status of Forces Agreement to address U.S. forces operating without deference to Japanese domestic laws. Japan must also consider Russian and Chinese reactions to the deployment of U.S. GBIRs, including threats or attempts to further erode Japan's security, such as deploying more missiles to target U.S. and Japanese forces in the region.

South Korea

The current South Korean administration is extremely leery of hosting U.S. offensive missiles, given China's negative reaction to the 2016 deployment of a U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery to help defend against North Korean missiles. Despite the system's defensive nature, China retaliated with informal economic and diplomatic sanctions that cost the South Korean economy more than $7 billion, according to estimates. This would likely pale in comparison to Beijing's retaliation if South Korea were to host U.S. GBIRs that directly targeted China. Community groups in the vicinity of the THAAD deployment site staged intense protests that created significant logistics hurdles and political headaches for the U.S. and South Korean governments. Local opposition to the deployment of offensive missiles would be even more vigorous. Further, President Moon Jae-in is engaged in an ambitious effort to bring peace to the Korean Peninsula. Unless this effort founders

for reasons other than opposition in Washington, the South Korean president will be reticent to host U.S. GBIRs given their potential capability to target North Korea and upset his diplomatic relationship with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

The Philippines

Hosting U.S. GBIRs would upset the Philippines' delicate attempts to balance its relations with the United States and China. President Rodrigo Duterte has sought Chinese financial support for natural resource development and investment in the Philippine economy. Recently, he stated that China already "possesses" the South China Sea, so U.S. military drills should not be conducted there. He went further and assured the Chinese ambassador that the Philippines would not participate in upcoming U.S. exercises in the area, to avoid tensions during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Manila. The country's population has historically had a dim view of U.S. military presence, and it still protests U.S.-Philippine joint military exercises. Therefore, U.S. GBIR deployments would likely carry a significant political cost, at a time when Duterte's domestic policies have already damaged his popularity.

Australia

For decades, Australia has sought stable relations with China and received economic benefits from free trade and Chinese investments. Recently, increased forays by the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) into the South China Sea, as well as Chinese maritime and island claims, have worsened bilateral relations. China declared a diplomatic "freeze" in early 2018 over then prime minister Malcolm Turnbull's hawkish views, but the relationship has thawed since his departure. Current Prime Minister John Morrison recently advocated that U.S.-Chinese relations should not be defined by confrontation. Australia is unlikely to upset their warming relations with Beijing, but it may be more willing to host U.S. GBIRs than other allies in the region, given the strong U.S.-Australian defense cooperation in the South China Sea.

Taiwan

Deploying U.S. GBIRs on Taiwan would aggravate already high cross-strait military tensions. China vehemently opposes U.S. defense support to Taiwan. Beijing has worked to isolate Taipei diplomatically, especially since Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and pan-Green coalition took power in 2016. President Xi has been focused on Taiwan policy recently, warning the United States and Taiwan not to further exacerbate tensions in the cross-strait relationship. U.S. troops left Taiwan in 1979, and reintroducing a U.S. military presence—as advocated by some U.S. officials—would increase the risk of war. While the merits of a new U.S. military presence are debated domestically, it is unclear whether Taiwan would actually make such a request of the United States—or be willing to base GBIRs. Diplomatic and economic pressure from mainland China and domestic concerns over a potentially severe Chinese response, borne out in the independence-oriented DPP's poor results in recent local elections, make Taiwanese interest in hosting U.S. GBIRs unlikely.

MILITARY CHALLENGES TO BASING

As a U.S. territory, Guam is the most politically feasible option for hosting U.S. GBIRs. Australia may be a distant second option, given its strong partnership with the United States against Chinese aggression in the South China Sea and comparatively minor domestic concerns. There are military challenges, however, to basing U.S. GBIRs on either territory.

Guam is small, about 30 miles long and 10 miles wide. Only a portion of that territory would be suitable for basing GBIRs. Given these space constraints, deploying GBIRs on Guam would lessen the survivability advantage that mobile missile systems usually provide

by being dispersed across a vast geographic expanse (as demonstrated by China's own mobile missile force). Additionally, the already significant U.S. military presence makes Guam an early target in any conflict with China—the PLA already practices aerial bombing runs against Guam in military exercises. Finally, Guam is nearly 3,000 kilometers from China. The existing U.S. cruise missile inventory does not include systems of this range, precluding a simple modification of an existing air- or sea-launched missile for ground deployment (like the U.S. development of the BGM-109G Gryphon ground-launched cruise missile, or GLCM, in the 1980s from a sea-launched Tomahawk land-attack cruise missile, or TLAM). The United States would likely have to develop a new long-range ballistic GBIR from scratch, which would be an expensive and slow process.

Australia presents an even more severe range problem. Much of China lies more than 5,500 kilometers from any point in Australia, making it a poor location for basing U.S. GBIRs. Even the PLAN's South Sea Fleet headquarters, a potential target for U.S. strikes, is more than 4,000 kilometers away. A U.S. deployment to Australia would probably require basing intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), with a range greater than 5,500 kilometers, rather than GBIRs. The United States is legally prohibited from doing this under the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START).[3] Beyond the legal prohibition, the United States actually basing such long-range missiles on allied territory could drastically alter the strategic landscape vis-à-vis Russia and China.

Indeed, the United States has never based ICBMs abroad. Historically, the northern orientation of U.S. and Soviet strategic defenses during the Cold War made positioning ICBMs to attack either Russia or China from the south—such as in Australia—destabilizing. Putin took advantage of this fact during his March 1 speech, when he described the developmental Sarmat ICBM as capable of striking the United States "via the North and South Pole." The South Pole ICBM trajectory is to bypass current U.S. missile defenses, negating the relative predictability of traditional ICBM launching trajectories. Basing U.S. ICBMs in Australia would just exacerbate this problem further.

STRATEGIC RISKS

There would also be strategic risks to deploying U.S. GBIRs anywhere in the Asia Pacific region. Specifically, GBIR deployments would introduce uncertain allied operational control dynamics and inadvertent escalation risks, and undermine arms race stability.

First, in return for hosting U.S. GBIRs, allies might insist that they have a say in deciding to use these missiles. Referred to as a dual-key arrangement, the United States and the basing ally would need to both agree on missile employment decisions, like the U.S.-UK deal regarding Thor missiles based in England early in the Cold War. Under such an arrangement, the basing ally might stand down at the start of a U.S.-China conflict if not directly threatened, robbing the systems of deterrence value and operational utility. (Guam, as a U.S. territory, would be exempted from this concern.) China's strong regional presence, ability to strike quickly, and vociferous condemnation of alliance activities—like the South Korean THAAD deployment—suggest that allies could face enormous and potentially effective pressure to block the United States from launching GBIRs against China. The Trump administration has not provided essential information regarding basing arrangements during the public commentary on the INF Treaty, and it is unclear whether allies will request dual-key arrangements.

Second, the deployment of U.S. GBIRs will exacerbate China's fear of a preemptive strike against its nuclear-armed mobile missiles and may force a destabilizing shift in Chinese doctrine. U.S. GBIRs could increase pressure on the Chinese government to abandon its no-first-use policy and create significant escalation pressures in a crisis. For example, GBIR deployments could lead China to mate nuclear warheads to delivery systems earlier in a crisis or conflict, which would increase the chances of accidental or inadvertent use in

a conflict with the United States and its allies. Worse still, if China misidentified incoming GBIRs as nuclear-armed, it might launch its own nuclear forces before the incoming missiles detonated—a competency that China is moving toward because of the perceived vulnerability of its ICBM force.

Finally, U.S. planners must confront the question of how China might respond to U.S. GBIR deployments.

China could respond asymmetrically by enhancing its ability to suppress U.S. command, control, communications, targeting, and intelligence capabilities with anti-space and cyber weapons. Beijing might also accelerate its pursuit of greater missile defense capabilities as another means to undermine the advantage the United States seeks through GBIRs.

Alternatively or additionally, China might respond more symmetrically. Beijing is better placed than Washington to engage in a GBIR arms race. China already has a numerical advantage along with design and production expertise, training and doctrine for operating mobile GBIRs, and suitable territory for basing. U.S. GBIR deployments to the Asia Pacific may result in China expanding its own intermediate-range missile force, creating an even more fraught A2/AD environment for U.S. and allied forces.

Ultimately, the regional security environment will likely deteriorate quickly following the deployment of U.S. GBIRs. It would be prudent for U.S. officials to find other ways to maintain the United States' competitive edge in managing the military threat posed by China.

THE POLITICS, FISCAL TRADE-OFFS, AND MILITARY CAPABILITIES OF GBIRs AND POTENTIAL ALTERNATIVES

Starting a political debate over U.S. GBIRs would be politically costly for the Trump administration—both domestically and with international allies—but acquiring these systems may also not be more cost-effective or provide a greater military capability than available alternatives. Clear battle lines are being drawn between the new Democratic majority in the U.S. House of Representatives, which seeks to trim and reprioritize the defense budget, and the Republican-controlled Senate and White House. With tensions running high, it is unlikely that Congress will support new GBIR funding.

House Armed Services Committee Chairman Adam Smith has argued that the U.S. defense priority should be meeting the long-term challenges presented by China and Russia. He advocates shifting funds away from what he views as lesser priorities, such as the ground-based missile systems prohibited by the INF Treaty, and seeking ways to save costs elsewhere (including by advancing non-military approaches to national security). He opposes increasing the size of the defense budget. In response to the Trump administration's move to withdraw from the INF Treaty, Smith called for greater diplomatic efforts and sustaining U.S. alliances to enhance military strength while rejecting "adding yet one more exotic weapon."

By contrast, the Republican Senate majority fully supports new funding for GBIRs, previously authorizing $58 million for a program of record for a conventional, road-mobile ground-launched cruise missile. Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman James Inhofe prefers a large increase in the topline defense budget, and will try to provide the Trump administration with its requested defense spending.

This partisan difference on defense priorities and spending makes for an uncertain Pentagon budget outcome next year. It is difficult to imagine funding an expensive new GBIR program as the administration tries to protect existing Defense Department requests. The Pentagon is likely to prioritize elements of its nuclear modernization plan—including modernization of the nuclear triad, lab infrastructure and the nuclear weapons complex, and the additional low-yield nuclear weapons called for in the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review—in addition to increasing overall readiness and existing conventional capabilities.

Analysts claim that GBIRs are more cost-effective than air- or sea-launched missiles. Looking at per missile costs is important, because the inherent value of utilizing GBIRs in the Asia Pacific region is (1) added strikes on Chinese targets, (2) less risk born by expensive air and sea platforms to China's A2/AD, and (3) the ability to procure more missiles over time at lower cost. But based on per missile costs for various ground-, air-, and sea-based missile alternatives, GBIRs don't appear to be inherently cheaper on a missile-to-missile basis.[4] Comparing an old GBIR, the Pershing II, to an air-launched intermediate-range system such as the B-1B Lancer's Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile–Extended Range (JASSM-ER) or a sea-launched TLAM is illustrative. Accounting for inflation, the Pershing II is roughly $10.7 million per missile, while the JASSM-ER and TLAM are both approximately $1.2 million per missile.

However, analysts believe the cost-effective advantage of GBIRs lies with the expensive air and sea platforms required to utilize alternatives. Proponents assume GBIRs are based on, put simply, free land, compared to the launch platforms and associated costs necessary for systems like the JASSM-ER and the TLAM—ultimately making GBIRs a cheaper alternative. It is true that GBIRs and their attendant launchers and/or support vehicles are somewhat cheaper than air and sea platforms. For example, the unit cost of a Pershing II—both the missile and launcher—would be approximately $25 million. By contrast, the unit cost of the B-1B Lancer would be $400 million, with a full load of twenty-four JASSM-ERs costing an additional $30 million. And an Arleigh Burke–class destroyer, which can accommodate ninety cruise missiles, could cost up to $1.8 billion, with each TLAM costing an additional $1–$3 million (depending on the version).

But this analysis is misleading. The platform costs inflate the price of air- and sea-based missile alternatives, but that does not mean that GBIRs are more cost effective. The greater, more flexible capabilities of the air and sea platforms are important to consider, as well. The B-1B Lancer and Arleigh Burke–class destroyer, in addition to other air and sea platforms, can carry substantial numbers of precision strike munitions and fulfill multiple other missions. Both platforms are also equipped with self-defense capabilities, enhanced by the collaborative nature of their operations with other air and sea assets. U.S. and allied militaries are very familiar with the strengths of these platforms and can effectively integrate them into operations.

Rather than investing new money in GBIRs, the United States should look for modern alternatives, which are already funded and under way, that provide a greater range of capabilities. For example, the U.S. Air Force is developing the B-21 Raider heavy bomber for conventional and nuclear operations, with stealth and electronic warfare capabilities intended to overcome enemy air defense—an added suite of competencies to meet the evolving Chinese threat. The United States has also made substantial investments in survivable undersea platforms armed with intermediate-range strike capabilities—an area of significant U.S. advantage vis-à-vis China. The U.S. Navy has four cruise missile submarines (Ohio-class ballistic missile submarines, or SSGNs, converted to carry cruise missiles), each of which can carry 154 TLAMs. The Pentagon is considering replacing the SSGNs with new Large Payload Submarines based on the highly capable, forthcoming Columbia-class ballistic missile submarine. It is also adding the Virginia Payload Module to new Virginia-class attack submarines starting in 2019, enabling future boats to carry up to twenty-eight more Tomahawk missiles than earlier models.

The United States is also modernizing munitions for these systems. For example, the air force is seeking a JASSM extreme range, or XR, variant with a range greater than the JASSM-ER's purported 900 kilometers. And the navy is improving the seeking, networking, retargeting, and loitering capabilities of the TLAM.

Many of the same analysts calling for the deployment of U.S. GBIRs also argue for the importance of a rapid response. Yet effective U.S. air- and sea-based missile

launch platforms are already in the force, rather than awaiting additional approval from Congress like the GBIR. By design, these efforts will increase the near-term effectiveness of existing platforms in China's A2/AD environment. Newly designed and produced U.S. GBIRs, meanwhile, would not be available for many years.

Given the likely cost overruns associated with any major new acquisition program and the benefits of multi-mission platforms, acquiring GBIRs is unlikely to be advantageous from a resource perspective. As such, modernizing existing platforms and precision strike munitions will likely win out in any potential reprioritization of defense spending in the coming years. Finally, any U.S. GBIR research and development program only *might* result in a new U.S. missile system, depending on congressional and White House support year after year. Given the volatile political moment and looming defense budget disputes, in addition to basing concerns, GBIR development does not appear worthwhile.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Trump's decision to withdraw from the INF Treaty without engaging in early and effective consultations with U.S. allies is ill-advised. Asian allies are central to the administration's plans for GBIR deployments. Given the very real political and military challenges, strategic risks, and unanswered fiscal and capability questions, it is not clear that the United States should pursue GBIRs.

Fortunately, it is not too late to cut losses. The United States has not yet submitted its formal notification to withdraw from the INF Treaty, though Pompeo's recent comments suggest this could happen in the next several weeks. Before Washington submits this notification, national and international security interests require it to:

Consult with Asian allies on the impact of U.S. GBIRs to regional stability and their willingness to host U.S. weapons. There may be little point to developing GBIRs if no ally is willing to host them. As part of these consultations, the United States should identify which systems are under consideration, so allies can make an informed decision.

If the United States ultimately decides to pursue GBIR development, these consultations would help Washington select the appropriate system by identifying what basing locations—if any—are potentially available. A lack of viable basing possibilities should strongly dissuade the United States from pursuing GBIRs and reinvigorate U.S. and allied interest in other strike options to counter China—options that would not require withdrawing from the INF Treaty. Anything short of detailed consultations will demonstrate that the United States does not have a plan for a world without the INF Treaty.

Make the case that countering Chinese A2/AD capabilities depends on deploying U.S. GBIRs, and that these missiles would be more cost effective than the available alternatives. A significant source of resistance to hosting U.S. missile systems stems from allies' concerns over domestic opposition. Making a detailed, public case for U.S. GBIRs will help allies build the necessary domestic support, should the United States ultimately decide to pursue deployments. In this way, the Trump administration can explain why it believes that GBIRs are the weapon of choice and more cost effective than the alternatives. Merely stating that the INF Treaty has outlived its usefulness and that the U.S. military wants GBIRs to counter China is not a compelling argument for allies—or the U.S. Congress.

By repairing its damaged relationship with Asian allies, the Trump administration can perhaps make a more informed decision whether to pursue GBIRs in the Asia Pacific region. Absent serious consultations, withdrawing from the INF Treaty and attempting to deploy GBIRs will likely create a rift between allies—reminiscent of when the United States deployed GBIRs in Europe in the late 1970s and early 1980s—would weaken U.S. relationships and play into China's hands.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pranay Vaddi is a fellow in the Nuclear Policy Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

NOTES

1 Per article XV of the INF Treaty, a party seeking withdrawal from the treaty "shall give notice of its decision to withdraw to the other Party six months prior to withdrawal. . . ." Therefore, if the United States provides notice of its intent to withdraw to the other treaty parties on February 4, the withdrawal will take effect on August 4.

2 Based on National Defense Authorization Act language and the Trump administration's description of the research and development under way, these will most likely be conventional missile systems for the United States. Existing Chinese intermediate- and medium-range ballistic missile systems are considered to be dual-capable.

3 Under paragraph 11 of article IV of New START, parties are prohibited from deploying ICBMs outside of national territory. Apart from the treaty, basing U.S. ICBMs in Australia would certainly cause great strategic stability concerns (especially considering the likely northern orientation of anti-ballistic missile assets in Russia and China).

4 All numbers cited are in FY 2016 dollars, unless otherwise stated.

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