

# US could ask Australia to host nuclear missiles

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What would we say if Washington asked to base nuclear-armed missiles, aimed at China, on Australian territory? It's not an entirely hypothetical question. Amid all the talk of a new cold war with China, the strategic logic of America's plans to withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty plainly suggests that such a request is a real possibility.

If the request comes—and it could come quite soon—Australia would face a truly momentous choice. If we agreed, our relations with China would face a crisis far, far worse than the recent chill from which the government has been working so hard to extract us. To refuse would be to abandon our ally in what everyone in Washington now sees as the decisive strategic contest of our time. Either way, Canberra's fragile effort to avoid taking sides in the epic contest over the future of Asia would be smashed.

To see why this possibility looms, we have to go back to the INF Treaty and America's reasons to withdraw. China wasn't a party to the bilateral agreement reached in 1987 between the Soviet Union and America to ban missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometres. But it has been clear that the US decision to withdraw is as much or more about China as about Russia.

Moscow has violated the treaty by building new missiles that contravene its terms, but Beijing has never been constrained from building such weapons, and it now has thousands. Thanks to the treaty, America has none, but now, as the contest with China becomes America's primary strategic focus, Washington wants to be able to match Beijing's intermediate-range missiles with equivalent forces of its own. That's a key reason why it wants to scrap the treaty.

Matching Beijing's intermediate-range missiles with similar forces is seen to be important to Washington because of a fear that China's intermediate-range forces will undermine the credibility of America's nuclear deterrent in the Western Pacific. It's the same fear that drove America to deploy intermediate-range nuclear missiles to Europe in the 1970s and 1980s, to counter the Soviet SS-20 missiles that threatened Western Europe.

The worry then was that the Soviet SS-20s could threaten Western Europe with impunity if Washington didn't have similar systems, and had to rely instead on US-based intercontinental-range missiles to counter them. It was feared that Washington would be deterred from using those forces because that would provoke a massive Soviet counterattack on the US homeland. So, to deter the Soviets and reassure its European allies, America based intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Europe until, as the Cold War wound down, US President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev agreed to ban such forces altogether.

Now that Washington's strategists recognise that the US is in a new cold war with Beijing, they want to base intermediate-range nuclear forces in the Western Pacific for the same reasons. They are starting to take China more seriously as a nuclear adversary, and they worry that the possibility of a Chinese counterattack on America itself might undermine the deterrent credibility of their intercontinental-range forces. They worry both that China will be less convinced than they have long assumed of America's nuclear advantage, and that that will lead Asian allies to doubt America's commitment to defend them from Chinese nuclear threats.

Those worries are not without some foundation. In South Korea, there's an active debate about the need to develop an independent nuclear capability. Japan's doubts about America's reliability as an ally are real and growing. And conversations with US policymakers and analysts suggest that some in Washington have been surprised and somewhat alarmed by the way that doubts about America's reliability have sparked a debate here on *The Strategist* and elsewhere about whether Australia needs to consider nuclear options, suggesting that we too are losing faith in America.

This is bad news for Washington as it gears up to contest China's bid for regional hegemony in Asia. America will need these allies, and that means they need to be convinced that the US is a credible and reliable nuclear ally. And many in Washington seem to have decided that deploying intermediate-range nuclear forces to the territories of its Asian allies is the best way to do that.

It's far from clear that this is true. The whole INF issue deals only with land-based missiles, and America has plenty of options to deploy sea-based nuclear forces to Asia—just as it had in Europe in the 1970s and 1980s. The land-based INF deployment to Europe was a political gesture aimed at reassuring nervous Europeans, and made little real difference to the nuclear balance in Europe—as many Americans recognised at the time.

But more importantly, deploying intermediate-range nuclear forces—whether land or sea based—would not fix the underlying weakness in America’s nuclear posture in Asia. That’s because the problem with that posture is not a lack of intermediate-range weapons but a lack of clear resolve to accept the risks to America itself of using them to attack China.

Those risks are very real. Unlike the old Soviet Union, China has no major military assets beyond its own territory, so the only targets worth hitting with nuclear forces would be in China itself. Any nuclear attack on Chinese territory—whether launched from within Asia or from the US—would carry a serious danger of Chinese nuclear retaliation against American territory.

Some strategists in the US assume that Beijing could be deterred from such retaliation by fear of a full-scale American counterstrike, but that can’t be taken for granted. And no one in Washington seems ready to argue that America’s desire to remain the primary power in Asia is worth the million American lives that might be lost in a Chinese nuclear attack on the US. That is one key difference between the old Cold War and the new one. There was little doubt that America was willing to suffer a nuclear attack to contain the Soviets, but no one has made that case about China.

Even so, the push to build and deploy land-based intermediate-range nuclear forces to Asia is now gaining momentum in Washington, and raises the question of where they would be based. The only US territory in the region is Guam, which is already highly vulnerable. The whole logic on INF deployment suggests that Washington will be looking to locate these forces with its allies in the Western Pacific.

That means before too long we can expect a preliminary approach about whether we would be willing to host some of them here. It would make a kind of military sense. Missiles at the upper end of the intermediate-range band based in northern Australia would be able to reach most of China, and would be much more secure from Chinese preemptive attack than missiles based in South Korea or Japan.

But to many in Washington, the real point of putting this request to Canberra would be political rather than strategic. It would not just be about reassuring Australia of America’s reliability as an ally, but also about testing Australia’s commitment to stand by America in the new cold war with China.

It cannot have gone unnoticed in Washington that Canberra has so far failed to endorse America’s new tough line on China, and is still trying desperately to avoid choosing sides between our major ally and our primary trading partner.

That is not what Washington wants or expects. It wants us to choose sides unambiguously, and what better way to force that choice than to ask us to host nuclear missiles aimed at China?

The risk for the US, of course, is that we might not make the choice it wants. We might say no.

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