

VINCE SCAPPATURA. American Missiles in Darwin?

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Testing the waters

While in Australia last week for the annual Australia-US Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN), U.S. Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, twice hinted at the possibility of Australia becoming host to American missiles pointed at China. The idea was floated after U.S. Secretary of Defence, Mark Esper, announced America’s withdrawal from the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and declared the Pentagon’s intention to deploy conventional ground-launched missiles in Asia.

The INF Treaty was a bi-lateral treaty between the U.S. and the former U.S.S.R. that prohibited conventional and nuclear ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles of shorter and intermediate ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometres. Shortly after the U.S. announced its withdrawal on 2 August, the Russian Foreign Ministry announced that the treaty ceased to have effect for both parties, effectively spelling its demise.

With the fraying of what precious little arms-control architecture that remains in place, many experts fear a new arms race erupting between the US and Russia, but also China, who was never a party to the INF Treaty and has amassed a formidable arsenal of ballistic and cruise missiles that would have otherwise fallen within the prohibited range of the treaty.

The U.S. justified its withdrawal on long-standing allegations of Russian violation. But the allegations went both ways, and instead of pursuing the diplomatic path by seeking reciprocal verifiable inspections, the Trump administration took the highly destabilising decision to withdraw from the agreement.

Beijing reacted angrily, labelling the possibility of US ground-launched missiles in Asia, including potentially Australia, as “very provocative”, promising unspecified “countermeasures” should the U.S. proceed.

At first, it appeared as though the Morrison government was willing to insert Australia into the middle of this great power arms race. Minister for Foreign Affairs, Marise Payne, expressed the government’s support for America’s withdrawal from the treaty, and at least initially appeared to leave open the possibility of hosting American missiles in response to Secretary Pompeo’s intimations.

However, Prime Minister Scott Morrison later clarified that missiles in Northern Australia weren’t being considered, reiterating comments made by Minister for Defence, Linda Reynolds, that no such request from the US had been made or was expected.

Although Prime Minister Morrison attempted to “rule a line” under the controversy, it is unlikely to be the end of the story. When Secretary Esper was later asked if he had sought permission to deploy missiles in Australia when in discussions with his interlocutors, he stated:

“We are — we are quite some ways away from that. It’s going to take, again, a — a few years to actually have some type of initial operational-capable missiles, whether they are ballistic, cruise — you name it, to be able to deploy. And that’s — between now and then there’s going to be a, you know, a lot of dialogue ... with our partners where is the best place to deploy these systems?”

The Australian government may yet find itself under pressure to accept hosting American missiles as they become operational in the years ahead.

Preparing for a different missile role for Australia

In theory, at the far end of the 5,500 kilometre range proscribed by the INF Treaty, American missiles in Darwin could comfortably reach Southern China, as was widely reported in the Australian media. However, while the Pentagon has several non-INF compliant missiles in development, the furthest is reported to be a conventional ballistic missile with a range of roughly 3,000 to 4,000 kilometres. While just out of reach of mainland China, this would be in the range of Chinese military installations in the South China Sea.

Nevertheless, the Pentagon appears to have a different role in mind for missiles in Australia.

The U.S. Army’s new and evolving Multidomain Operations (MDO) concept involves manoeuvring small formations with long-range missile systems from island to island across the Pacific, intercepting enemy missiles, fighter jets and ships to provide cover for US power-projection forces at sea. It is the U.S Army’s answer to China’s Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) strategy of denying American military intervention in its air and maritime approaches in the South China Sea. The U.S. Navy and Marines have their own related concept for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations.

During the recent Talisman Sabre military exercises in Queensland, U.S. forces brought the truck-mounted HIMARS missile launcher for use in a complex manoeuvre with a crucial command and control role for the Australian Defence Force that was a preview, in miniature, of the multidomain operations the U.S. Army envisions in a future war against China.

The three HIMARS launchers brought from U.S. bases in Okinawa were left behind after Talisman Sabre ended for use by the 2,500 strong U.S. Marine Air Ground Task Force that is currently on its eighth rotation through Darwin.

The missiles used by HIMARS have a limited target range and reach of 300 kilometres. However, no longer bound by the INF Treaty, the U.S. Army is now free to proceed with plans to develop a more versatile HIMARS compatible Precision Strike Missile with a range of up to perhaps 700 kilometres, slated to be field ready in 2023.

Truck-borne hypersonic missiles, also in development and with ranges of over 2,200 kilometres, will need new launches, but the tactics and logistics of employing them will build on what U.S. and Australian forces are already doing with HIMARS in Talisman Sabre.

The US alliance and Australian sovereignty

The Australian government characterises Australia-U.S. military exercises as enhancing interoperability, and the Australia-US alliance more broadly as compatible with Australian sovereignty.

At the same time, Australia is now more integrated and dependent on the U.S. than at any other time in its history, bound together by what former ambassador to the U.S., Kim Beazley, has referred to as the “deep state” among the intelligence communities, the military and the arms industry.

Consequently, it is now extremely difficult for Australia to extricate itself from any potential future U.S. wars, including most worrisomely with China, and it makes it near impossible for the Australian Defence Force to conduct its own independent military operations without U.S. approval and support.

That should be of concern to all Australians, whether we end up hosting American missiles or not.

*Dr Vince Scappatura teaches Politics and International Relations at Macquarie University. He has a recently published book by Monash University Publishing titled: **The US Lobby and Australian Defence***