

North Korea's ICBMs, China's rise and the future of United States leadership in Asia



A paper based on an address to the Institute on 28 August 2018 by

Sam Roggeveen

Director, International Security Programme, Lowy Institute¹

Given North Korea's development of intercontinental ballistic missiles coupled with the rise of China, Mr Roggeveen argues that the United States has a strategic choice: either to have North Korea give up its capability to threaten American cities with nuclear weapons; or to maintain an American military presence in South Korea. It cannot have both, and, unless it negotiates with Pyongyang, it may end up with neither, because the credibility of America's presence in South Korea is gradually eroding anyway.

Key words: Asia; Australia; China; North Korea; United States; geopolitics; geostrategy; intercontinental ballistic missiles.

To understand why the North Korea problem is so significant for Australia and the United States, and why America's position in Asia is so perilous, we need to tie together two stories about Asian geopolitics: a big one and a small one.

The small one is North Korea, and the big one is the rise of China. I will talk about both of those in a moment, but I want to zoom out first, very briefly, to look at America's place in the world, and its place in Asia, since the end of the Cold War.

The Big Picture

During the Cold War (1947-1991), competition between global powers defined international politics, and the role of the United States in the world was established as being the leader of the anti-communist forces. This spirit animated United States foreign policy throughout the Cold War.

In the decade following the end of the Cold War, United States leadership globally was unchallenged and unprecedented in scale, so the period is often referred to as the 'unipolar moment'. America became a hyperpower, bestriding the global stage like a colossus. As a result, America had the luxury of addressing problems it could not afford to address before. The focus shifted to dealing with transnational issues – removing trade barriers, responding to state failure, climate change *etc.* International 'norms' began to shift towards foreign intervention for humanitarian purposes, leading to a huge surge in United Nations peace-keeping operations after 1989. For example, we had the Gulf War in Kuwait and Iraq in 1990-91; the Somalia intervention in 1992; no-fly-zones to protect Kurds in northern Iraq; the Kosovo War and NATO² bombing of

Yugoslavia in 1999; and Australia's intervention in East Timor's independence process in 1999-2000.

Then, of course, came '9/11' (the al Qaeda attack on New York and Washington on 11 September 2001) and the United States focus moved to another transnational issue, terrorism. But the emphasis on rebuilding broken nations abroad remained. The United States did not just try to defeat al Qaeda, it tried to rebuild Afghanistan and Iraq from the ground up as democratic societies. Ultimately, of course, the nation-building efforts failed.

But, unlike in the Middle East, in Asia, terrorism never became an animating purpose for the role of the United States as the regional leader – although Southeast Asia is a partial exception. American leadership in Asia continued after the Cold War because its allies wanted it, and the United States did not have to bear much of a burden to meet their needs. After all, there was nothing to challenge the United States-led order that Washington had built. Everybody benefitted from it, including China.

Now, we feel that ground starting to shift, and I would argue that four things have brought us to the present moment, in which American power in our region is eroding:

- the end of the Cold War, which robbed the United States of an animating purpose in Asia;
- the failure of the global war on terror, exposing the limits of American arms and global power, and imposing huge material and reputational costs on the United States;
- the rise of China, which has had a massive impact – more of this later; and
- more recently, North Korea, particularly its development of intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Please note that I did not mention the global financial crisis. That definitely hurt the United States, and China analysts will sometimes say that it was the moment China decided it could make a pitch for global leadership because it saw the United States as being in

¹This paper drew substantially on Roggeveen (2018). E-mail:

sroggeveen@lowyinstitute.com

²North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

decline. But, overall, this is not a story of the United States in decline – America has bounced back economically, and we should assume it will continue to grow. The real story here is the growth of China.

North Korea and its ICBMs

So, how does North Korea fit into this big picture? As I said, we need to tie together two parts of the story of modern Asia, one big and one small. I have just explained the big one: the rise of China.

The smaller one is North Korea and its development of nuclear weapons – in particular, the fact that Pyongyang is on the cusp of deploying an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), if it has not already done so. North Korea's ICBM is a devilishly difficult problem for America, because it has the potential to split the United States from its allies.

As I said, the other part of this story is China and its rise to regional superpower status. China is the leviathan in this story, and the core reason behind America's increasingly perilous place in Asia. North Korea's ICBM merely exacerbates this change, and threatens to initiate a collapse in America's position.

Experts still disagree about whether Pyongyang can now reliably fire a nuclear-tipped missile with the range to hit cities in the continental United States. North Korea has staged just three ICBM tests, and we cannot be sure it is capable of miniaturising a nuclear warhead to fit in the nose-cone of such a missile, or that the warhead could survive re-entry into earth's atmosphere from space. But North Korea is close enough so that may not matter. All that matters is that the possibility of a North Korean ICBM is now so great that America must behave as if it is a known fact. And America is responding. The ICBM is the weapon that led President Trump to threaten North Korea with force, and has now led him to an unprecedented level of summitry in Singapore on 12 June 2018.

Why does the ICBM *really* matter? The Trump Administration says it is not prepared to accept that North Korea can have the ability to strike Washington, New York or Los Angeles with a nuclear weapon. It claims to fear that North Korea's leader is so unbalanced that he might choose to strike the United States at any moment. But, of course, that would trigger a devastating response from the United States and there is ample evidence that Kim Jong-un is rational enough to avoid doing anything that would lead to his certain demise.

The true significance of the North Korean ICBM is that it leads to a phenomenon among America's Asian allies that strategists call 'decoupling'. When North Korea can credibly threaten to kill hundreds of thousands of Americans in an instant, America's allies start to worry that United States guarantees to defend them in the event of North Korean aggression suddenly appear less credible. It is one thing to put America's armed forces in harm's way by basing them in Japan, South Korea and elsewhere within range of North

Korea's shorter-range weapons. But would the United States really be prepared to risk Los Angeles to save Seoul?

It is true that America has faced the decoupling problem before, and overcome it. In the 1960s, after the Soviet Union had acquired the means to strike American cities, Washington had to convince its NATO allies that it was still committed to Europe's defence. Washington addressed this fear by basing smaller nuclear weapons on European soil and then integrating NATO members into the command structure for these nuclear forces, thus knitting the allies closer together.

Could the United States do the same this time? No. North Korea is not the Soviet Union. North Korea is not a global, existential threat to American interests and values. Far from being the leader of an ideological movement with global ambitions that is hostile to the political ideals of the United States, North Korea is an isolated and insular throwback, a vestige of the Cold War left behind by history. It has an economy roughly the size of that of Laos, and its conventional military capabilities – that is, its non-nuclear air, ground and naval forces – are second-rate even compared to the South, never mind the United States.

In short, without the Cold War to give the North Korea problem a larger context, Pyongyang is by all objective measures not very important, and America's Asian allies – primarily South Korea and Japan, but Australia too – all know it. That is why North Korea's ICBM is such a crucial development: it exposes the fact that America's interests on the Korean Peninsula are not as significant as these allies may have hoped, and it no longer anchors the United States to the region as it used to.

Now, this claim relies on quite a narrow reading of American interests, much narrower than that taken by recent American presidents, and in policy statements which insist that the United States has a vital stake in the Asia-Pacific and that it must maintain its pre-eminent strategic status. American leadership, it is said, makes the region safer and stronger, and thereby makes America safer and stronger. America's network of Asian alliances is a cornerstone of that leadership, so weakening one of those alliances at the hands of North Korea would be a blow to the United States and the rules-based international order it champions. But how big a blow?

The Rise of China

During the Cold War, this question was easier to answer because America was engaged in a global struggle to defeat communism. This was the animating purpose behind America's global network of alliances and military bases, including those in Asia. Then European communism collapsed, and America only found a new animating purpose on the world stage after the 9/11 attacks. But the fight against Islamist terrorism was never a strong motivating force behind America's alliance commitments in Asia. Instead, this alliance

structure persisted after the Cold War largely because there was nothing to challenge it.

But, in China, America now faces a true peer-competitor in Asia. According to Australia's 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper (DFAT 2017) by 2030 China's economy could be worth US\$42.4 trillion versus US\$24 trillion for the American economy. China will no longer accept being second to the United States in its own region. Just as Washington refused to allow foreign powers to dominate its immediate environment when it rose to great-power status, China will want the same in the Asia-Pacific.

So, when America now asks itself how much it values its position in Asia, the issue is no longer abstract. It must now ask: 'If we value this position highly, what costs would we be prepared to pay to defend it?' Unlike the early post-Soviet period, the costs could be very high, because America now needs to defend its status against the largest economy in the world, a nation which is on track to building a navy on a par with the United States fleet by 2030, which has 'home-ground advantage' rather than operating from bases on foreign soil, and which is highly motivated to displace the United States as the leading regional power.

It is far from clear that America is willing to pay the price of that leadership, which would require a sustained, multi-decade effort as least as intensive and wide-ranging as the struggle against Soviet communism. Unlike the Soviet Union, however, China presents no global threat to American interests and values. Yes, it is an economic juggernaut with regional leadership ambitions, but it has no evident motivation to 'bury' the United States, as Khrushchev once threatened. It is also enmeshed in the global economy in a way that makes it impossible to isolate – or at least, not at an acceptable cost. That ambition, however, may yet emerge as China grows – as the saying goes, the appetite comes with the eating.

So, the United States faces two juxtaposed problems:

- on the one hand, without the Cold War to give its military presence on the Korean Peninsula a larger justification, North Korea is really too small to be a core security concern for America; but
- on the other hand, China is too large, too important to the global economy, and too ideologically nebulous for America to challenge it in the same way it faced down Soviet-led communism.

As distinctive as these two problems are, they point to the same solution: the United States should get out of South Korea.

Could the United States exit gracefully and cleverly from South Korea? I do not want to sugar-coat this pill. Getting out of South Korea and potentially ending its alliance with the Republic of Korea would be a huge strategic reversal for the United States. But, it would have upsides.

- At the present moment, China benefits enormously from North Korea's nuclear programme. Because of 'decoupling', North Korea's ICBM programme erodes America's alliances with South Korea and Japan, which is just what Beijing wants.
- Were America to decide on a more distant relationship with South Korea, North Korea's nuclear weapons would cease to be a first-order national-security priority for Washington, yet they would remain a first-order problem for China.

There is a tendency in the West to view the North Korea problem exclusively through an American prism. But the United States is in Asia by choice, whereas China is North Korea's permanent neighbour. If China became the pre-eminent strategic power in Asia, a nuclear-armed North Korea could be a serious and permanent irritant for Beijing. In fact, had China's rise occurred in a world *without* North Korean nuclear weapons, America's options would now be even less palatable.

The Trump-Kim Summit, Singapore, 12 June 2018

The starkest way I can sum up my argument is this way: does America want North Korea to give up its capability to threaten American cities with nuclear weapons, or does it want to maintain its military presence in South Korea? It cannot have both, and, unless it negotiates with Pyongyang, it may end up with neither, because the deadly combination of 'decoupling' and China's rise is gradually eroding the credibility of America's presence in South Korea anyway.

So before the Singapore summit on 12 June 2018, I argued that Trump should offer a trade: in exchange for North Korea giving up its ICBM ambitions, the United States would permanently withdraw its troops from South Korea. The two sides could even agree to begin negotiations on a permanent peace treaty.

To be clear, the US demand should be for Pyongyang to give up its ICBMs only, not its entire nuclear arsenal. Pyongyang would never agree to complete disarmament because its nuclear programme is directed very much at its neighbours, not just the United States. Total North Korean nuclear disarmament might not even be in American interests: it would remove a thorny problem for Beijing, and, although an American retreat from the Korean Peninsula would be good news for China, there is no need for Washington to do Beijing any additional favours.

Some will say that it would be almost impossible to truly verify an agreement like this. That is true, but there would be little incentive for Pyongyang to cheat. Getting the United States to withdraw from South Korea is probably why North Korea developed an ICBM in the first place. Why jeopardise the attainment of that goal with a clandestine programme? Anyway, having reached a settlement with the United States, Pyongyang would not need a long-range missile. All its remaining enemies would be close to home.

Of course, the summit in Singapore did not turn out that way. We ended up with a fairly routine statement that did not bind either party to anything.

Conclusion

I still think there is room for a substantive deal like the one I have suggested, and that Trump has an appetite for it. He has no affection for alliances. One of his core beliefs is that the United States is being exploited by its allies.

Trump and Kim are nothing if not mercurial, so we should not dismiss the possibility of a grand bargain, whether at this summit or later. In fact, America's allies should encourage one.

Much is at stake. An agreement that leads to the removal of United States troops from South Korea would be historic enough, but it would probably be just the first step in a broader United States retreat from the region. Allies would get a clear signal from such a deal that America believes Asia is not worth fighting for. Regional confidence in the United States would decline, and, over time, the incentive for South Korea, Japan, and, eventually perhaps, even Australia, to develop their own nuclear capability would grow.

But, thanks to China's rise and North Korea's ICBM, America's position is eroding anyway, so the United States needs to find more solid ground. The task, then, is to negotiate the most favourable terms for America's

retreat. America will not disappear from the region entirely, and nor should we want it to, but the leadership of our region is in transition, and it is in the interest of America's friends and allies in Asia that the United States negotiates this shift from a position of strength.

The Author: Sam Roggeveen is Director of the Lowy Institute's International Security Programme, and a visiting fellow at the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University. Before joining the Lowy Institute, Mr Roggeveen was a senior strategic analyst in Australia's peak intelligence agency, the Office of National Assessments, where his work dealt mainly with nuclear strategy and arms control, ballistic-missile defence, North Asian strategic affairs, and weapons of mass destruction terrorism. He also worked on arms control policy in Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs, and as an analyst in the Defence Intelligence Organisation. He writes for newspapers and magazines in Australia and around the world, and is a regular commentator on the Lowy Institute's digital magazine, *The Interpreter*, of which he was the founding editor from 2007 to 2014. [Photo of Mr Roggeveen: Lowy Institute]

References

- DFAT (2017). *Foreign policy in action: 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper* (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade: Canberra).
- Roggeveen, Sam (2018). The other North Korea question: How important is the Korean Peninsula to the US? *Australian Financial Review* 28 March 2018.