ASIAN ALLIANCES
WORKING PAPER
SERIES
PAPER 1 | JULY 2016

ORDER from CHAOS
Foreign Policy in a Troubled World

America's Alliances and Security Partnerships in East Asia: Introduction

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As part of Brookings' "Order From Chaos" project, this series of papers examines U.S. alliances and security partnerships in East Asia. The alliances addressed are those with Japan, Korea, Australia, and the Philippines. The security partnerships with Singapore and Taiwan are also covered. Each essay seeks to answer at least some of the following questions:

- How does the U.S. ally/partner assess its security environment and the role of the alliance/partnership in ameliorating its sense of insecurity?
- How does the United States assess the U.S. ally/partner's security environment and the role of the alliance/partnership in ameliorating its sense of insecurity?
- Specifically, is there a convergence or divergence in how each views China's rise and in its respective policies toward China?
- How does the alliance strengthen the capabilities of both the U.S. ally/partner and of the United States?
- What basing and access agreements does the United States enjoy, if any?
- What security commitments has the United States made to the U.S. ally/partner?
- What is the "operational density" of the alliance/partnership (the extent to which the defense establishments of the two countries are integrated and the U.S. forces and those of the U.S. ally/partner plan and exercise together)?
- What are the politics of the alliance in the U.S. ally/partner's political system?
- To what extent does the U.S. ally/partner subsidize the presence of U.S. forces on its soil (i.e. burden sharing)?
- Are there issues of free riding and "cheap riding"?
- Are there issues of abandonment or entrapment (or fears thereof)?

Alliances have been part of the United States-led security order in East Asia since the early post-World War II period. Three factors led the Truman and Eisenhower administrations to abandon the counsel of early presidents to avoid entanglement in the affairs of distant powers. The first was Japan's surprise attacks on Pearl Harbor and the Philippines, a U.S. possession, on December 7-8, 1941. This demonstrated how the changing technology of warfare had lengthened the distance from which adversaries might project destructive power onto U.S. territory, a trend that the perfection of intercontinental ballistic missiles later confirmed. Second was the emergence of communist regimes on the Asian continent: the People's Republic of China (PRC); the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK); and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV); communist insurgencies in Southeast Asia; and

the existence of the Soviet Union as an Asian power in its own right. The third was North Korea's invasion of the Republic of Korea on June 25, 1950, and the intervention Chinese military forces later that year.

Alliances thus became a key instrument in the containment of Asian communism. Forward deployment of U.S. forces to bases located in allied countries was the preferred way to overcome the "tyranny of distance" (almost 9,900 miles separate San Francisco and Shanghai). Protection of U.S. allies was, it was believed, the optimal way to protect America's own national security. (Neither isolation nor ad hoc wartime collaboration were options anymore.) The United States would become what a later secretary of defense, Robert Gates, would call a "resident power in East Asia."

The number of treaty commitments was impressive:

- Japan (1952, revised in 1960)
- South Korea (1953)
- Philippines (1951)
- Thailand (1951)
- Australia and New Zealand (1951)
- Republic of China on Taiwan (1954)

In 1954, Washington also created a Southeast Asian analogue to NATO, the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO), but it was dissolved in 1997, after the end of the Vietnam War.

The world of the early 1950s has long ago disappeared. China aligned itself with the West in the early 1970s. Around the same time, North Korea began to lag South Korea on most measures of national power. The Soviet Union ceased to exist at the end of 1991. Vietnam, a former adversary, normalized relations with the United States in the 1990s. Yet new perils emerged. North Korea embarked on programs to acquire nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them over long distances. Russia is attempting a geopolitical resurgence and still has a large nuclear arsenal. Most significantly, since the late 1970s, China has gradually but systematically rebuilt national power and ended almost two centuries of relative weakness. It began with the economy and diplomacy but is now developing the maritime, air, and missile capabilities to project military power within the East Asian region.

As East Asia has changed, so have America's alliances. Washington terminated the mutual defense treaty with Taiwan in 1980 as a condition for establishing diplomatic relations with the PRC, but it still retains significant security relations with the island (see my essay in this series). New Zealand's participation in the trilateral security treaty with Australia and the United States was suspended in the mid-1980s when a new government refused to allow U.S. Navy ships that were nuclear-powered carrying nuclear weapons to enter the country's ports on a "neither confirm nor deny" basis. The alliance with the Philippines atrophied in the early 1990s after the country's nationalistic politics and the eruption of Mount Pinatubo ended U.S. use of Clark Air Base and Subic Naval Base. From time to time, the United States and South Korea have differed on how to address the challenge from North Korea. Issues of basing and the conduct of U.S. armed forces personnel can undermine local political support for security cooperation, with Japan the most prominent example. The pact with Thailand is almost a dead-letter: joint exercises continue, but periodic military coups and Bangkok's tilt to Beijing have diluted relations of strategic value. Meanwhile, Washington has enhanced security partnerships with countries that are not treaty allies, such as Singapore.

Chinese diplomats and scholars regularly complain that U.S. alliances with Asian countries are relics of the Cold War that should be abandoned because they frustrate the desire and effort to create a regional security architecture that is appropriate for the twenty-first century. Such a view ignores the obvious fact that the Cold War still exists on the Korean peninsula, because of the policies of China's nominal ally, North Korea. Chinese complaints also reflect an assumption that by definition alliances exist to counter an enemy, and so now China must be the new, not-so-secret adversary of the United States, now that the Soviet Union no longer exists.

This assumption—that every alliance must have an enemy—ignores the broader purposes and impact of past and present U.S. security policy in East Asia, besides deterring war. First of all, early on they were a way of restricting the leaders of allies and security partners of the United States from undertaking provocative initiatives toward their adversaries that Washington would regard as risking unnecessary and entangling conflicts (for example, Taiwan and Korea). Second, America's status as a resident Asian power sometimes gave it an opportunity to facilitate diplomatic solutions to regional conflicts (e.g. Cambodia in 1991). Third, and most significant, the constant presence of U.S. armed forces, diplomats, business executives, and other private citizens have long had a stabilizing and positive effect. The American regional role has not been perfect by any means. Asian publics sometimes blamed U.S. alliances and American support for authoritarian regimes (as in the Philippines and Korea). On balance, however, the U.S. presence, manifested most significantly by its alliances and the forward deployment of its armed forces, has kept the peace in Asia. From a historical perspective, therefore, the Obama administration's "re-balance" or "pivot" is not a new policy at all but more an adjustment of a decades-old strategy to new circumstances.

Deterrence and defense preparedness aside, the United States and its leading allies, Japan and Korea, have recently used their alliances as vessels for much broader policy cooperation. In both cases, there is growing attention to issues of security outside East Asia (e.g. Iran's nuclear program), and an array of non-security objectives: global economic growth; sustainable development and poverty reduction; global health; climate change, environmental protection; cybersecurity; and science and technology cooperation.[2] Taiwan is also engaged in similar cooperative efforts with the United States.[3]

Chinese officials and scholars are incorrect in assuming that the United States views China as its new enemy, but there is a security dilemma at play between the two countries. Even if rivalry is not inevitable, neither is it impossible. Washington's actions may foster perceptions in Beijing that U.S. intentions are fundamentally hostile and require a robust response. The same may be true of China's actions and America's response.

[1] On the role of naval presence, see Jerry Hendrix and Benjamin Armstrong, "The Presence Problem: Naval Presence and National Strategy, Center for a New American Security, January 2016 (www.cnas.org/sites/default/files/publications-pdf/The_Presence_Problem_FINAL.pdf).

[2] White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Joint Fact Sheet: The United States-Republic of Korea Alliance: Shared Values, New Frontiers," October 16, 2015 (www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/10/16/joint-fact-sheet-united-states-republic-korea-alliance-shared-values-new); White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "U.S.-Japan Joint Vision Statement," April 28, 2015 (www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/04/28/us-japan-joint-vision-statement).

[3] "Taiwan: A Vital Partner in East Asia," remarks by Susan Thornton, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, at the Brookings Institution, May 21, 2015 (www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2015/05/242705.htm).

As Harvard's Joseph Nye famously warned, "If you treat China as an enemy, you are certain to have an enemy." Generally, the direction of U.S. China policy might be summarized as "cooperate where we can but contend only when we must." Washington's hope is that China will pursue a similar approach and that areas of contention can be managed well enough so that they don't exacerbate mutual suspicions.

The difficulty arises because the opportunities for U.S.-China cooperation exist more on global issues like climate change and regional problems outside of East Asia such as Iran's nuclear program. The prospects for contention, however, are more likely in East Asia. That is because East Asia is where China's revival as a great power will first take place, and it happens that the region already has its share of medium-to-strong powers, including the United States. From China's perspective, creating strategic depth into the East and South China Seas makes sense in terms of its defense strategy, and it has steadily built the military capabilities to create that depth. Yet it is encroaching into areas where other powers' armed forces are already present—first and foremost the United States and secondarily Japan.

To make matters worse for Beijing, the growth of its military and para-military capabilities has not gone unnoticed. The way China has used those assets to establish a presence it never possessed before and to advance its territorial and maritime claims has made most of its East Asian neighbors nervous about China's long-term intentions. Their default response is to align more closely with the United States, at least when it comes to security. On trade and investment, on the other hand, they reap the benefits that stem from the expansion of the large and modernizing Chinese economy. The last thing that China's neighbors want is to have to make a choice between China and the United States.

From an American perspective, U.S. alliances and security partnerships in East Asia remain a force for regional stability and are not an instrument for a Cold War-style containment of China. There will be frictions and contention between China and the United States, and between China and its Asian neighbors. The task will be to manage and contain those problems through a variety of mechanisms: diplomacy, military confidence-building measures, and so on. Yet used properly, alliances can be a positive force for managing the revival of China as a great power – assuming that Beijing exercises restraint as it projects power outwards. Like a policeman patrolling the neighborhood beat, the continuous U.S. presence in the region – military, diplomatic, and economic – can set benign parameters for the actions of others in the region. (An exclusive reliance on coercion will, of course, send very different signals.)

America's alliances do not come without some liabilities:

- Each of our Asian partners has strong antennae to pick up any signal that Washington is about to abandon it (and sometimes fears that alignment with the United States will lead to its entrapment in a conflict it does not desire).
- Washington is periodically afraid that the actions of a U.S. ally or security partner will entangle it in an unnecessary dispute or conflict (that the "tail will wag the dog."

[4] Joseph Nye, "Only China Can Contain China," *Huffington Post*, May 11, 2015 (www.huffingtonpost.com/joseph-nye/china-contain-china_b_6845588.html).

- America's friends in the region may disagree with Washington on the appropriate way to respond to the security challenge of the moment (for example, China's incremental campaign to expand its presence and capabilities in the South China Sea.
- Nationalistic public opinion in some countries of East Asia has sometimes been hostile towards the United States because of its security and political role.

Yet none of these problems are new, and Washington has a wealth of experience on each. There is no reason why it cannot apply that experience to new situations. A more serious looming challenge is China's modernization of its military capabilities that will sooner or later give it the ability to project air and naval power out to at least the first island chain (formed by Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Australia). Simply acquiring the ability to project power in that way does not necessarily mean that Beijing will use that power. Nor does it mean that China will not choose to coexist with its littoral neighbors and the United States. But for China to have this power-projection capability could change the way that the United States would have to fight China if there should ever be a major war. It might require changes in alliance arrangements at the political and operational levels. But it does not in and of itself negate the strategic value of alliances or forward deployment.

Alliances have been a key element of the East Asian security order that the United States fashioned in the 1950s. As the region has transformed itself, the U.S.-led order has evolved, and alliances and security partnerships have evolved accordingly. They will evolve again as the region and the United States respond to China's revival. Yet the alliances are not an end in themselves. Nor are they continued as favors to partner countries. They are the means by which U.S. administrations—Republican and Democratic—have executed carried out a long-standing national security strategy. At the core of the strategy is the principle that the United States should defend itself by defending others as a resident power in East Asia with forward-deployed armed forces. That core will likely remain solid unless and until one or more of our Asian partners decide that their best option is to rely on China for security *and* prosperity (or, less likely, pursue autonomous defense), or that there emerges in the United States a national consensus the country will be safe enough by accepting Chinese dominance and retreating across the Pacific. Until then, alliances will remain a key, useful element of national security.

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