

This chapter will appear in:

Sustainable Security: Rethinking American National Security Strategy, edited by Jeremi Suri and Benjamin Valentino.

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Keep, Toss, or Fix? Assessing US Alliances in East Asia

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Changing strategic and economic conditions have prompted a debate about the future of US national security strategy and American alliances. Since the George W. Bush administration, the United States has run budget deficits that ballooned in the wake of the financial crisis, recession, and wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. As a result of these deficits, the United States accumulated a national debt that today exceeds \$18 trillion. At the same time, as Cindy Williams has argued in this volume, the United States is entering a period (for demographic reasons) in which government expenditures for entitlements will soar (Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid). Combined with interest on the debt, these expenditures will vastly outpace revenues. To deal with this problem, the 2011 Budget Control Act or sequestration capped discretionary spending, and imposed cuts on defense spending. Unless other legislation is passed, the US defense budget will be cut by about \$500 billion over the 2012–21 period, relative to where it would have been had it kept pace with inflation. Defense spending in the United States, then, will fall.¹

Meanwhile, scholars warn that in East Asia, the United States faces a gathering storm. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States enjoyed uncontested regional dominance in East Asia; but this has changed with the growth of Chinese power in the region.² China's economy has grown rapidly for three decades, unseating Japan to rank second only to the United States in terms of aggregate GDP. China has also engaged in significant military modernization, pursuing an asymmetric strategy that is challenging US access to the Western Pacific.³ To be sure, China's economy may falter, or political turmoil may derail Chinese growth, thus allowing the United States to retain its dominant position.⁴ But Asia's transformation from a region of uncontested US dominance to a region in which two great powers compete for space warrants a debate about the future of American national security policy there.

Given the profound transformation in the US budgetary and strategic environment, is it possible, as Jeremi Suri and Benjamin Valentino query in the introduction to this volume, that “the same basic policies, allies, and budgets that protected us from the Soviet Union in 1988” are “the optimal ones for defending American interests” in East Asia? Or do changed budgetary and strategic conditions warrant changes in US national security policy as well?

This chapter joins an ongoing debate about US grand strategy about maintaining, or retrenching from, the current American grand strategy. Many scholars have argued that global peace and prosperity depend on the United States maintaining dominant military capabilities, deploying American military personnel overseas, and continuing to offer security guarantees to US allies.⁵ Critics, however, argue that the expansive US grand strategy—known variously as “deep engagement,” “primacy,” or “hegemony”—encourages “free riding” among US allies; it threatens to undermine US economic prosperity, provoke counterbalancing, and drag the United States into unnecessary wars.⁶ Such critics argue for adopting a strategy (“offshore balancing” or “restraint”) that ends security guarantees and brings many or all US military forces home.

This article contributes to this debate in two ways. First, it focuses attention on US alliances in East Asia. This region is the world’s most consequential for US national security policy: it is home to a rising great power that could end unipolarity and upend the liberal order that the United States and its partners created after the Second World War.⁷ In this region, do American alliances continue to advance the US national security interest? Are they in need of reform—or outright termination—because they are outdated, dangerous, or too costly? If so, what kind of reform? Second, as I examine these questions, I draw upon international relations theory to establish counterfactuals for what the region would look like in the absence of US security guarantees, and how it might look in the future.

In this chapter, I argue that, assuming the United States plans to abandon its grand strategy of deep engagement (which indeed it shows no signs of doing), it makes little sense to “toss” American alliances in East Asia. The alliances advance several key national security goals: most compellingly, they enhance regional deterrence, reduce the spread of nuclear weapons, and

dampen regional spirals of insecurity. Without US alliances, the costs to China of pursuing military action or applying pressure on its neighbors would be far lower, so Beijing might feel emboldened to increase its assertiveness in its regional disputes over Taiwan or contested islands. Without US security guarantees, South Korea would almost certainly, and Japan would possibly, acquire nuclear weapons. Furthermore, a US withdrawal from its alliance commitments increases the danger of regional arms racing among in particular China, Japan, and South Korea.

Second, though keeping American alliances makes sense under the current grand strategy, Washington should “fix” them in a few key ways, to maximize the utility of those alliances, and to reduce their costs and risks. Toward this end, US military bases in allied countries should, to the greatest extent possible, be maintained or reformed into “hubs,” which are useful in both the regional and global US military network. Furthermore, Washington should adapt its diplomacy so as to reduce growing entanglement risks and to reduce strategic mistrust with China.

In the rest of this chapter, I first describe current US alliance commitments in East Asia. In sections three and four, I describe American foreign policy goals there and assess how these alliances do (and do not) serve these goals. Section five describes the costs and risks that America’s Asian alliances bring. I conclude by describing how the United States might change its alliance policies in order to minimize these costs and risks.

US ALLIANCES AND MILITARY PRESENCE IN EAST ASIA

After World War II, the United States established formal alliances with several East Asian countries. To support the US-Japan Security Treaty, signed in 1951, the United States currently stations 35,000 forces in Japan, the vast majority of which are air force, Marines, and navy.⁸ Though there are a few US military installations on the main islands, the majority of the US forces in Japan are stationed the small island Okinawa to the far south. Okinawa is proximate to the East Asian sea lanes in the South China Sea, and to Taiwan. It hosts several US military facilities, notably US Marine Corps bases (among them Camp Schwab and Camp Hansen) and

the large Kadena Air Base.

The presence of US military forces in Okinawa is a sore spot for many residents, who live with the noise, accidents, and crime associated with the bases.⁹ In response to such complaints, and in an effort to create a more sustainable US-Japan alliance, Washington plans to relocate 8,000 Marines off of the island to Guam, has negotiated with Tokyo to relocate Futenma Air Station elsewhere on the island, and is consolidating other forces. The Futenma relocation has stalled in the face of significant local resistance; the problem—and more generally the future of the US Marines on Okinawa—remains unresolved.¹⁰

The Mutual Defense Treaty with the Republic of Korea (ROK) obligates the United States to come to the defense of South Korea in the event that it is attacked. The original purpose of the alliance was to deter an attack from hostile North Korea, which in 1950 invaded South Korea to attempt to unify the divided peninsula. To deter an attack, the United States has stationed ground and air force personnel in the ROK. For many years, substantial numbers of American troops were stationed near the DMZ as a “tripwire” force, and the United States also had a large military footprint within Seoul.

US forces in Korea have shrunk in recent years.¹¹ Particularly since the 1990s, North Korea’s economic and military power has waned, and the threat of invasion has fallen. Fighting two wars in the Persian Gulf since 1991, the United States withdrew (and sent to Iraq) forces from the Korean peninsula. Remaining there are 28,500 troops consisting of two brigades of the Army’s Second Infantry Division (2ID), and several Air Force tactical squadrons. Washington and Seoul have negotiated a phased reduction and reorganization of American forces that will move and consolidate troops and facilities southward.¹² The US also agreed to transfer wartime operational control (“OPCON”) to the South Korean military, although Seoul has delayed this move multiple times.¹³

In Southeast Asia, the United States guarantees the security of the Philippines, Australia, and New Zealand. With the latter two, the United States in 1951 concluded the ANZUS security pact. Australia previously hosted only a handful of US military personnel, but after 2012,

as part of the Obama Administration's "pivot" or "rebalancing" effort, agreed to host 2,500 US Marines. The US–Philippine alliance was signed in 1952, and US bases there (Clark Air Force Base and US Naval Base Subic Bay) served as important Cold War hubs. Physical damage to the bases caused by the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo, and Philippine domestic political dissatisfaction with the US presence, led Manila to eject the US military from these bases in 1991–92. The United States, however, has continued to guarantee the security of the Philippines; military cooperation since end of the Cold War primarily continued in the realm of counterterrorism. But more recently, the increasing salience of territorial disputes in the South China Sea (in which Manila is a claimant) has led to a reinvigorated US–Philippine alliance.¹⁴

As for Taiwan, in 1952 the United States and the Republic of China (ROC) signed a Mutual Defense Treaty. They cooperated within the framework of this alliance in military crises in the Taiwan Strait in the 1950s. Under the leadership of the Nixon Administration, Washington normalized diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1979—agreeing that there was one China, ending its security treaty with the ROC, and withdrawing diplomatic recognition from Taipei. The United States currently has no formal security alliance (nor diplomatic relations) with Taiwan, but in 1979 the US Congress passed the "Taiwan Relations Act," declaring its support for maintaining a military balance in the strait, and saying it would view any use of force to resolve the Taiwan dispute with "grave concern." Despite the lack of formal defense commitment, many American foreign policy elites argue that the relationship constitutes a "functional equivalent of a defense pact."¹⁵

Finally, American territories in East Asia also provide forward military presence. Long-range aircraft access the region from Alaska, and the United States has significant naval and Marine forces in Hawaii. Even more proximate, the United States maintains a naval base and Anderson Air Force Base on Guam, which is home to attack submarines and B-2 bombers. Over the next several years, the United States plans to redeploy to Guam 8,000 US Marines and their 9,000 dependents from Okinawa, as well as Trident submarines, a ballistic missile task force, and F-22 fighter jets.¹⁶ Preparations are also being made in Guam to accommodate aircraft carriers.

GOALS OF AMERICA'S ASIAN ALLIANCES

US alliances in East Asia aim to serve several broad goals. The first is to (1) deter attacks on allied nations. South Korea has the most heightened threat: the alliance seeks to protect South Korea from attack by North Korea. Additionally, in recent years the region has seen an intensification of island disputes between China and its neighbors in the South China Sea, and between China and Japan in the East China Sea.¹⁷ Proponents of US engagement in the region cite the deterrent role played by American alliances, and by the US military presence that they facilitate.¹⁸

Second, US alliances in East Asia further the goal of (2) maintaining regional stability in a region of great economic and political significance. The notion of regional stability encompasses several different ideas:

- *Prevention of nuclear spread.* The United States government takes the position that the spread of nuclear weapons is detrimental to international stability. It pledged under the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation treaty to cooperate to reduce the spread of nuclear weapons, and to reduce the size of its own arsenal over time. In East Asia, US alliance commitments are partly aimed at reducing the likelihood of nuclear spread throughout the region through the provision of a nuclear umbrella to Japan and South Korea.
- *Prevention of conventional arms races.* Due to historical animosities, territorial disputes, and the growth of Chinese power, East Asian countries may feel mistrust and uncertainty that would lead them to build up their conventional military power. Through the logic of the security dilemma (in which one country's effort to increase its own security reduces the security of another), this has the potential to fuel arms racing.¹⁹ Such arms racing would hinder beneficial economic relations in the region, would be inefficient for the global economy, could sour broader political relations, and could raise the risk of conventional conflict. The United States aims to reduce arms races in East Asia by guaranteeing the security of several states in the region, and by maintaining a powerful military presence there.

- *Free and uninterrupted access to sea lanes.* The United States (specifically the US Seventh Fleet, based on Yokosuka, Japan) is the dominant naval power in a region home to some of the busiest trade routes in the world. The prosperity of the United States (as well as China, South Korea, Japan, and so on) relies upon the uninterrupted flow of shipping through regional sea lanes. Analysts argue that the interruption of those trade flows due to war or terrorist attacks would create supply chain problems and other costly economic disruptions. The smooth flow of sea traffic, military as well as commercial, depends on managing threats such as piracy, and on the region's respect for the law of the sea. The UN Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) governs the sovereignty, rights of transit, and economic rights to the millions of miles of coastline and thousands of islands throughout the region.²⁰
- *Generally cooperative relations among US allies and partners.* The United States benefits from friendly relations among like-minded countries in East Asia. Close ties among these countries reduce the likelihood of regional disputes and crises, and facilitate diplomacy in a variety of realms. Good state-level relations among the United States and these countries improves the lives of their very intermingled people, who intermarry, work, and travel in these countries.

Third, (3) the US seeks to keep these countries “on its team”—namely, within the US political orbit (and, by definition, out of a rival political orbit).²¹ A country can be said to be in the US political orbit if it has friendly relations and broadly overlapping national interests with the United States, and if it frequently cooperates with Washington. Many analysts argue that countries in the US orbit are more likely to be receptive to concluding trade and other economic agreements.²² They are more likely to cooperate with US diplomatic goals, and to cooperate militarily (such as training with the US military, providing overflight routes, and even contributing forces for US-led military operations). Countries in the US orbit are more likely to ally with the United States if trouble arises and less likely to succumb to external pressure.

While military alliances (i.e., security guarantees or mutual defense agreements) send a

clear sign that a country lies within the US orbit, “orbit” and “alliance” are not synonymous. Israel, for example, is within the US orbit; it cooperates broadly with the United States in many different realms (including national security) without a formal defense agreement. Many other countries occupy this category: Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, and (previously) Egypt.

In some analysts’ eyes, the United States has a fourth critical goal, as important of any of the above: namely, the goal of maintaining US military power and presence in the region. They argue that the United States has an interest in having substantial power in Asia due to its importance: the region’s economic dynamism and the emergence of China. Such analysts see power projection capabilities and military presence as an end in and of itself.

By contrast, I treat US military presence and power projection in East Asia as a means to an end: to deter, to contain, to assure, to stabilize. The questions, examined in this chapter, are whether US military presence and commitments actually promote these goals, and whether the gains are worth the costs and risks they bring.

A final word about liberalism. After all, a plank of US foreign policy writ large is to encourage the spread of democracy and to promote US values abroad. In Asia, the United States promoted the development of democracy in Japan, and explains continued support for Taiwan in part by noting shared democratic values. Washington today encourages nascent political reform in Myanmar.²³ However, democracy promotion has not been a first-order goal in Asia: for decades, Washington supported anti-communist dictators in the region (notably in South Korea, Taiwan, and South Vietnam). The United States, including the Obama Administration, has also pursued a pragmatic approach toward China that prioritizes stable Sino-American relations over concerns about the Chinese Communist Party’s political repression and human rights violations.²⁴ Though the spread of liberalism remains a broad American goal, it is not a first-order national security goal in East Asia.

DO AMERICA'S ASIAN ALLIANCES ADVANCE ITS NATIONAL SECURITY GOALS?

Deterrence

Deterring war in East Asia is a key goal of American alliances, and the alliance with South Korea aims to deter a second war on the Korean peninsula. North Korea invaded the South in 1950; after the 1953 armistice that ended the Korean War, Pyongyang continued to claim that it was the sole legitimate government of the Korean people, and continued to advocate unification under North Korean rule. For the past half-century, however, North Korea has been deterred from once again attempting to conquer the South.

At the same time, Pyongyang *not* been deterred from initiating lower-level acts of violence. Over the past six decades, North Korea has repeatedly launched egregious attacks on the ROK—e.g., terrorist bombings and assassination attempts of South Korean presidents—albeit below the level of full-scale conventional war.²⁵ The most recent attacks were North Korea's sinking of the South Korean warship *Cheonan* (which killed forty-six sailors) and its shelling of Yongpyeong Island, in March and November 2010.

A debate over whether deterrence should be characterized as “working” or “failing” is merely semantic: major attacks are being deterred; lesser acts of violence are not. The crucial question for US national security policy is: what is deterring major war on the Korean peninsula? Is the US-ROK alliance causing peace, or are South Korean military capabilities independently sufficient to prevent major war?

The dramatic power asymmetry in the South's favor suggests that North Korea would be deterred from attacking South Korea even without a US-ROK alliance. South Korea is an advanced, OECD country (the fourteenth largest economy in the world), whose GDP dwarfs North Korea's (\$1.8 trillion compared to \$40 billion).²⁶ South Korea also has a large and well-trained military, with advanced technology that outclasses its antiquated North Korean counterpart. For example, North Korea's most modern tank was built in 1962; North Korea's army would be beset by problems related to lack of fuel, ammunition, and spare parts. Military analysts thus long ago concluded that South Korea would dominate in any conventional war with

North Korea.²⁷ North Korean soldiers are also likely to be hamstrung by hunger, low morale, and leadership ineptitude because the Kim regime's policies of "coup-proofing" reduce military effectiveness.²⁸ In sum, borrowing from John Mueller, if North Korea were to attack South Korea absent a US alliance, it would be like jumping off the 5th floor of a building. If North Korea attacked South Korea *and* the United States, it would be like jumping off the 50th floor. If Pyongyang is rational enough to fear for its own existence, it is unclear how much practical difference those additional stories make.²⁹

Taiwan. Despite the absence of a formal alliance with Taiwan, US policy deters conflict in the Taiwan Strait. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has consistently stated that Taiwan is part of China, that "national unification" is a core interest of the CCP, and that a Taiwanese declaration of independence would lead Beijing to use military force. Although the United States ended its 1954 security treaty with Taiwan more than three decades ago, the Taiwan Relations Act passed by Congress in 1979 has been interpreted as an expression of American interest and potential involvement in a crisis in the strait. Many American officials and foreign policy analysts still express frequent support for Taiwan, and argue that Washington would experience a serious loss of credibility if it did not respond to a Chinese use of force against Taipei.³⁰ The fact that the United States *might* come to Taiwan's aid helps deter China from using force; the fact that it *might not* come to Taiwan's aid helps deter Taiwan from declaring independence.³¹

Japan and the Philippines. Second, US alliances with Japan and the Philippines likely deter the use of force in regional territorial disputes. In recent years Beijing has changed the territorial status quo and has adopted more assertive military and diplomatic policies. China has pursued extensive island reclamation in the South China Sea, creating nearly 3,000 acres of land, what PACOM Commander Admiral Harry Harris has dubbed a "Great Wall of Sand."³² Analysts argue that through island reclamation and the construction of military runways and other facilities, China is expanding its ability to project power across the area, and to intimidate neighbors who dispute Chinese territorial claims.³³

Beijing's policies have also grown increasingly assertive in disputed areas. Chinese ships and submarines more frequently enter disputed territorial waters around the Spratly and Paracel islands in the South China Sea, and have harassed other countries' fishing ships, coast guards, and naval vessels.³⁴ In 2012, China negotiated an agreement with the Philippines to demilitarize the disputed Scarborough Shoal—but after the Philippines withdrew its military forces, China left its own forces there and has since cut off Philippine access. James Kraska writes, "China's control of access to the feature is dependent upon coercive law enforcement and militia fishing vessel operations, including ramming and shouldering Philippine ships, and harassment of Philippine fishermen."³⁵ In 2014 in the Paracel Islands (disputed with Vietnam), the Chinese national oil company CNOOC installed an oil rig in disputed waters and drilled for oil, sparking diplomatic protests and anti-Chinese rallies in Hanoi. Vietnam has also protested China's construction of a two kilometer runway on one of the disputed islands, which enhances its local power projection capabilities.³⁶ In the East China Sea, a growing number of Chinese ships and jets enter waters around the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands disputed with Japan. In 2013, Beijing declared an Air Defense Identification Zone or ADIZ over the islands.³⁷ Observers attribute China's assertive policies to a long, patient strategy of "salami tactics" in which China increasingly seeks to dominate the region by changing the "facts on the ground" one step at a time.³⁸

US alliances with the Philippines and Japan, by linking these countries to the region's military superpower, help deter Chinese aggression in these regional territorial disputes. In the absence of the US commitments, Philippine military weakness, and the anticipation of a weak response from Japan,³⁹ might convince the Chinese government that it might successfully advance its interests through *faits accomplis*. The Chinese Communist Party, facing challenges to its domestic legitimacy and an increasingly nationalistic and noisy populace, has political incentives for diversionary efforts.⁴⁰ Such pressures may grow increasingly intense at a time of declining Chinese economic growth.⁴¹ In a climate of increasing Chinese assertiveness in its territorial claims (an assertiveness that is only likely to grow),⁴² America's Asian alliances help

deter Beijing from using force.

Nuclear Non-Proliferation

US alliances unquestionably reduce the spread of nuclear weapons in East Asia. Japan and South Korea's acquisition of nuclear weapons is still possible even within the context of their relationship with the United States, but nuclear and conventional US security guarantees make this outcome much less likely.

Out of the various factors that affect countries' decisions to acquire nuclear weapons, the security motivation is among the most powerful.⁴³ According to this explanation, countries will acquire nuclear weapons if they are facing a potentially hostile actor that acquires nuclear weapons, or that outmatches them conventionally. Scholars have also found, however, that proliferation can be reduced through security guarantees—that sometimes threatened actors will not acquire nuclear weapons if they can rely on an ally's protection.⁴⁴ According to this logic, the loss of a security guarantee would encourage the abandoned and threatened ally to decide to acquire nuclear weapons.

American security guarantees have kept, and may yet keep, South Korea from acquiring nuclear weapons of its own. When Seoul signed the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1968, it stated that its membership “would only be contingent on robust US security commitments.”⁴⁵ Indeed, in the past when the United States has contemplated significant changes in its policy or force posture in Korea, Seoul began a nuclear program (as seen in 1969 under the Guam Doctrine, or in 1977 when the Carter Administration planned a troop withdrawal).⁴⁶ And that was *before* North Korea acquired nuclear weapons. Today, because South Korea faces a nuclear-armed North Korea, the security model would predict that, if Washington ended its security guarantee, South Korea would acquire nuclear weapons.

In fact, even a robust US alliance may no longer be sufficient to prevent Seoul from acquiring an independent nuclear capability. (During the Cold War, after all, American allies France and the United Kingdom both acquired nuclear weapons despite US and NATO protection.) In the past several years, Pyongyang has conducted nuclear and missile tests, and has

engaged in acts of violence toward the South such as the 2010 sinking of the naval vessel *Cheonan* and the shelling of Yongpyeong Island. After North Korea's 2013 nuclear test, poll data showed that over two-thirds of South Koreans favored going nuclear.⁴⁷ Short of that, Seoul might negotiate for the reintroduction of US tactical nuclear weapons to the peninsula (removed in 1991), or might seek a nuclear sharing agreement such as the one in effect among the United States and several NATO countries (Germany, Belgium, and Italy: all states, like South Korea, that are non-nuclear states and NPT signatories).

As for Japan, the end of the US-Japan alliance could indeed lead Tokyo to acquire nuclear weapons. Given that during the Cold War the Soviets were bristling with nuclear weapons, and that the Chinese and North Koreans also acquired them, Japan probably would have acquired nuclear weapons by now absent the US nuclear umbrella. As Prime Minister Sato Eisaku told the US ambassador in 1964, "it is common sense that we should possess nuclear weapons if everyone else does."⁴⁸ Japanese leaders for decades have declared that acquiring nuclear weapons would not violate Japan's constitution.⁴⁹ Today, Japan lives next to an avowedly hostile North Korea—which not only has nuclear weapons, but threatens to turn Japanese cities into a "sea of fire." Japan lives among nuclear-armed Russia, and a nuclear-armed China that is modernizing its maritime forces, and increasingly sending them into what Tokyo believes to be Japanese territorial waters. Given this strategic environment, it is very possible that absent the US security guarantee, Japan would feel compelled to acquire an independent nuclear weapons capability.

But Japan's nuclear acquisition in this situation should not be seen as a foregone conclusion.⁵⁰ Japan's people are highly anti-nuclear since suffering two nuclear strikes by the United States in World War II, as well as a 1954 domestic crisis over the "Lucky Dragon" fishing boat, whose crew and catch was irradiated by US nuclear testing. Antinuclear sentiment was reinvigorated after the 2011 tsunami and nuclear disaster at Fukushima. A decision to acquire nuclear weapons would thus be politically fraught and costly.⁵¹ Externally, Japan's acquisition of nuclear weapons could have undesirable effects because Japan's neighbors are

sensitive to increases in Japan's military power. Finally, Japan is an NPT member and (as the sole country to have suffered nuclear attacks) has taken a leadership role in the global non-proliferation effort. A turnabout of this magnitude would be a dramatic move decried by many Japanese, and by many other countries.

Given domestic, regional, and global sensitivities, given Japan's more secure status as an island nation, and given its strong maritime military capabilities, Tokyo might therefore decide against acquiring nuclear weapons, at least in the short or medium term. It might quietly take steps that moved Japan closer to a nuclear-weapons capability—an approach designed to shorten the time it would take to deploy a full nuclear deterrent while avoiding the costs associated with nuclear acquisition. Japan's large stockpile of plutonium would greatly facilitate development of such a “virtual” nuclear deterrent.⁵²

In sum, absent US security guarantees, nuclear weapons would likely spread to South Korea and possibly to Japan. Some scholars would not be troubled by this prospect: some view the spread of nuclear weapons as stabilizing in world politics, arguing that (because nuclear weapons raise the costs of war) nuclear weapons deter wars among states that possess them. Furthermore, such scholars would view the countries in question (Japan and the ROK) as responsible stewards of nuclear technology—being democratic, technologically advanced, wealthy, and politically stable.⁵³ But the bottom line is that the end of US security guarantees in East Asia would almost certainly lead to the spread of nuclear weapons to Korea and might lead to nuclear spread to Japan.

Arms Racing

The withdrawal of US security guarantees in East Asia could lead elevated threat perception and arms racing dynamics.⁵⁴ US security guarantees reduce the amount of military capabilities that these countries need to build in order to protect themselves, and thus reduce how threatening they appear to their neighbors. An end to the security guarantees means that countries would perceive the need to acquire the capabilities to conduct the missions that the United States has largely performed, which could have the effect of increasing a sense of

insecurity and fueling arms racing. The effects of arms racing are uncertain; international relations scholarship has had trouble demonstrating that arms races lead to war.⁵⁵ Arms races do, however, significantly sour political relations. As countries begin to observe each other's improvements in military capabilities, and as they increasingly see them as aimed at undermining their own security, competition in the military realm spills over into the political and societal realms, poisoning formerly amicable relations.

For example, under the US-ROK alliance, the South Koreans have focused on ground forces, with the United States carrying the heaviest burden of air and naval forces for Korea contingencies. The result is that Seoul has not built as much capability that could reach and worry Japan. As for Japan, alliance with the United States has enabled it to acquire less military capability than it otherwise would, particularly in the area of air and naval forces.⁵⁶ In the absence of a US security guarantee, Japan would likely increase its military spending, the pace of its training, and (given the North Korean missile threat) its offensive and preemptive strike capabilities. It would also likely pursue legal reforms, such as revision of Article 9 of Japan's "Peace Constitution," that would provide the institutional framework for a more assertive foreign policy.⁵⁷ Thus in the absence of US security guarantees, both Japan and the ROK would likely increase their conventional military spending, and would do so in ways that might alarm the other. This would be taking place in a climate of chilly relations between Seoul and Tokyo, in a region in which the Chinese have been engaged in a vigorous program of military modernization.⁵⁸

International relations scholarship highlights several factors that affect the severity of the security dilemma, and the likelihood of arms racing, in East Asia. Scholars have pointed out that maritime geography has a palliative effect on threat perception: "the stopping power of water" (in John Mearsheimer's words) complicates offensive military operations, deterring would-be aggressors, and reassuring would-be targets.⁵⁹ Arms racing dynamics in maritime East Asia should thus be less severe relative to continental regions.⁶⁰

Other factors beyond geography raise concerns about East Asian arms racing. Asia's

maritime geography does dampen the security dilemma by reducing fears of homeland invasion. But countries worry about more than the threat of homeland invasion; one of the most relevant threats in East Asia are territorial disputes. In these disputes, aspects of maritime warfare—including first-mover advantage—exert a destabilizing influence.⁶¹ Furthermore, identity politics in East Asia—rooted in resentment over historical issues, and animated through nationalistic politics in the region—increase threat perception and make the security dilemma more severe. In other words, in China and South Korea, Japanese moves to increase its power projection capability would be viewed through the lens of Japan’s failure to acknowledge or repudiate past aggression.⁶² All of these factors elevate the risk of regional arms racing in the absence of American security guarantees.

Freedom in the Sea Lanes

US alliances in East Asia support the US maritime presence in the region, which is said to provide a public good of ensuring freedom of passage through the vital East Asian sea lanes. Writes Barry Posen, “US military power underwrites world trade, travel, global telecommunications, and commercial remote sensing, which all depend on peace and order in the commons.”⁶³ Would the absence of the US military presence in East Asia threaten this peace and order in the commons? And would an end to US military dominance in the sea lanes undermine US national security goals in other ways?

When answering these questions, it’s important to distinguish between peacetime and wartime conditions. In peacetime, the US Seventh Fleet patrols the sea lanes, provides maritime assistance, and engages in counter-piracy activity in cooperation with other East Asian countries. It trains and learns regional waters. The US Navy is on location in the event that disaster strikes, so can provide rapid humanitarian assistance, as it did following the Indian Ocean tsunami (2004), Japanese tsunami (2011), and the Haiyan typhoon in the Philippines (2013). The US peacetime naval presence promotes the flow of commerce in the sea lanes and helps save lives after natural disasters. It also overlaps with and enhances other US national security goals—as many commentators have argued, US leadership in providing humanitarian relief enhances

American soft power, and patrol and presence reinforces the deterrence/assurance missions.⁶⁴

In peacetime, countries with tense relations routinely use their navies to interfere with one another's trade. Countries obstruct trade by demanding inspections, or playing by chicken with another country's vessels, forcing them to change course. Such behavior has been increasing in East Asia. Washington and Tokyo on the one hand, and Beijing on the other, all point to each other as culpable of such harassment, as in incidents involving the *USS Cowpens* in 2013, and the *USS Impeccable* in 2009.⁶⁵ Although such incidents have occurred in a region with a strong US military presence, the end of US dominance in the sea lanes would likely make such low-intensity harassment more common among regional navies.

US naval dominance in East Asia would also confer advantages on the United States during wartime. Its powerful regional base network and naval presence enhances the US ability to destroy the naval forces of rivals, or to create or break a blockade. Relative to performing such missions from Hawaii or other distant locations, the United States could do the same missions with a smaller force due to the efficiencies gained from a local base structure. Furthermore, as Michele Flournoy and Janine Davidson argue, not only do regional bases cut response times, "moving troops from the United States to a conflict zone just as tensions begin to rise can exacerbate or escalate a crisis."⁶⁶

One might challenge these arguments for several reasons. First, one might doubt that a major war will erupt in East Asian waters, and might discount the peacetime benefits of US sea-lane dominance. After all, US alliances in East Asia are not necessary for the US Navy to engage in such activities; it would be possible to deliver humanitarian relief, train with regional navies, and participate in counter-piracy missions in the absence of security pacts with regional nations. While this is true, a regional base presence provides efficiency due to shorter distances. Transit from Hawaii to Manila requires eleven days steaming time; the United States can respond much more quickly to East Asian crises from bases at (for example) Yokosuka, Japan.

Secondly, one might argue that, as export-dependent, globalized countries, East Asia's naval powers have no interest in disrupting regional sea lanes. Japan and China—needing to

bring home oil and other essential inputs, and needing to export their goods abroad, have every incentive to keep the sea lanes open.⁶⁷ Chinese economic growth (and the legitimacy of the CCP) depends on the free transit of a vast and growing amount of natural resources to its shores, and of exports from its shores to global markets. Therefore the United States need not worry about regional navies challenging freedom of commerce or navigation: no one has an incentive to do so.

While countries have a general interest in keeping the sea lanes open, even highly economically interdependent countries use naval forces to disrupt other countries' trade for coercive purposes. The United States, a leading globalized country, has long engaged in coercive diplomacy, such as its embargo of Iranian oil.⁶⁸ Such activities are the modern manifestations of “gunboat diplomacy” and “demonstrations” by the Royal Navy during Pax Britannica—another country that benefited from the global trading system, and indeed generally used its navy to keep the sea lanes open.⁶⁹

In sum, US naval predominance in East Asia is not necessary but is useful for the US to engage in the kinds of activities (both supportive and coercive) that Washington might want to engage in. Allies provide the United States with a regional base network that increases efficiencies and reduces force requirements. The US naval presence enhances the missions of assurance and deterrence, and contributes to US soft power.

Good Relations Among Partners

Although some American partners in East Asia have warm relations, American alliances do not necessarily translate to good relations among partners (and in some cases may do the opposite). The remarkable turnaround in relations between the United States and Japan after World War II was echoed in relations between Australia and Japan; today their relations are excellent, as are relations between Japan and the Philippines (another country Japan victimized in World War II).⁷⁰ But relations between Japan and South Korea show that alliances with the United States do not necessarily forge bonds among allies. In over sixty years of sharing an ally, Japan and South Korea have cultivated strong economic ties, but their political and military

relations have ranged from civil to frosty. Many analysts argue that, given China's growing power and assertiveness, and given that Japan and South Korea are both liberal democracies, the two countries should increase their security cooperation. However Seoul has resisted greater cooperation with Tokyo.⁷¹ Within the ROK, Japan remains a useful target that politicians can attack for domestic political gain—on the issues of history textbook coverage, demands for apologies for wartime misdeeds, and the Tokdo/Takeshima islands disputed by the two countries.⁷² In Japan, conservative leaders, catering to influential constituencies, assert sovereignty over disputed islands and favor history telling that omits Japan's historic aggression.⁷³ All of this ill will has festered despite sixty-plus years of longstanding American alliances with both countries.

Some evidence suggests that, rather than encourage amity among allies, US commitments may actually do the reverse—allowing allies to nurse grievances. James Schoff and Dunyeon Kim note that US alliance commitments can “foster Seoul-Tokyo estrangement, ironically, if such relations lead Japanese and South Korean policymakers to believe that they have a sturdy bulwark against any truly damaging implications of their row.”⁷⁴ Victor Cha, in his study of the trilateral relationship, writes that when the United States reduced its level of military presence and involvement in East Asia, Japan and South Korea made efforts to reconcile their historical and other disputes, in order to pursue the closer diplomatic and military relations necessitated by the more dangerous security environment.⁷⁵ By contrast, as Robert Kelly notes, US alliances “encourage maximalists and zealots on both sides not to compromise.”⁷⁶ According to this logic, the end of US alliances with Japan and South Korea would incentivize Seoul and Tokyo to improve their relations. That said, the two countries have different interests and diverging perceptions of the threat posed by China, making it unclear whether an end to their alliances would push the two countries closer together.⁷⁷ One thing is very clear, however: US alliances have not produced that outcome.

Political Orbit

Do US security guarantees in East Asia keep Japan, the ROK, and other countries within

the “US orbit,” and would a withdrawal from those alliances push those countries into Beijing’s arms? Although a Chinese economic orbit is already emerging, uncertainties exist about a) the extent to which this will translate to regional political leadership, and b) even if it does, whether countries in the region would tilt toward Beijing.

China’s stunning economic rise has already transformed regional (and global) trade and financial flows, giving rise to a Chinese economic orbit.⁷⁸ China has become the number-one trading partner for Australia, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, and Vietnam, among others. China’s currency has joined the ranks of the world’s most influential currencies, as represented by the International Monetary Fund’s decision to include the renminbi (along with the dollar, euro, pound, and yen) in the basket of “special drawing rights.”⁷⁹ Beijing is increasing its influence through policies of economic integration and international lending such as the “New Silk Road” and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.⁸⁰

Beijing’s orbit would have a different character than the current liberal order. Rebecca Liao notes, “Western aid and development efforts are geared toward spreading liberal democracy and their own institutional frameworks. China, on the other hand, has stuck to its policy of distancing itself from the domestic affairs of other nations.”⁸¹ Chinese institutions, in other words, will eschew the Bretton Woods agenda of spreading liberalism; they will direct business toward Chinese state-owned enterprises that enrich and sustain the CCP. China’s orbit is not a liberal one.

The extent to which China’s economic influence will translate to the creation of a powerful Chinese political orbit—to which countries in a “post-American Asia” would be attracted and deferential—is uncertain. First, China has risen in the context of a half-century old political and economic system created by the United States and its liberal partners after World War II. China’s ability to displace this system is very much in question. As John Ikenberry writes, “The capitalist democratic world is a powerful constituency for the preservation—and, indeed, extension—of the existing international order. If China intends to rise up and challenge the existing order, it has a much more daunting task than simply confronting the United

States.”⁸²

Not only does China confront a regional and international system that, in Ikenberry’s words, is “hard to overturn,” Beijing arguably has a strong interest in not overturning it. China has profited immensely from the current order, and its future prosperity (and thus the resilience of the CCP) depends on its access to trading partners within this nondiscriminatory trading system. More likely, rather than seek to create a different system that challenges the current regional order, Beijing will seek greater influence *within* it. Such behavior is already evident in China’s efforts to reform existing institutions (such as the greater influence it has sought and received at the IMF and World Bank), and to create new institutions (such as the AIIB) that allow Beijing to exercise greater influence.⁸³

Observers are divided on how receptive Asian countries would be to the pull of a Chinese orbit. In the early years of China’s rise, neighbors responded positively to its growing power; at that time, Chinese diplomacy emphasized multinational coordination within regional institutions and compromise in territorial disputes.⁸⁴ Some scholars argue that China’s neighbors will not resist and will defer to growing Chinese power—in part due to regional norms of hierarchy (the regional dominance of the “Middle Kingdom” during the 17th and early 18th centuries).⁸⁵ According to this view, countries in a “post-American Asia” would embrace Beijing’s orbit.

By contrast, another view holds that even in the absence of American alliances, countries (though they may be economically close to China) would not necessarily defer to Chinese political leadership. This position is supported by evidence of regional dismay at China’s growing assertiveness in its territorial disputes, and by broader unease about Chinese intentions.⁸⁶ Beijing’s diplomacy aside, scholars who believe in a powerful balancing tendency in international politics would argue that power and geography alone would make it likely that Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and the ROK would balance against a rising China.⁸⁷

The extent to which countries in a “post-American Asia” would fall into China’s orbit would vary by country. Southeast Asian countries—even diplomatically unified (which they are

not)—are too weak (economically and militarily) and too economically dependent on China to offer a counterweight to Chinese power. In the absence of its alliance with the United States, the Philippines (despite its disputes with Beijing) would have no choice but to accept Chinese regional leadership.

South Korea has already moved toward Beijing. Seoul is hedging between the two great powers: it maintains its alliance with the United States but diplomatically has moved close to China, its most important economic partner, and the country that holds the greatest sway over North Korea.⁸⁸ Hugh White argues, “China simply has too many cards to play on issues that matter to Seoul for it to be willing to break with China in any but the most extreme circumstances.”⁸⁹ Indeed, South Korea has demonstrated acceptance of Chinese regional leadership and has distanced itself from anything that might resemble an anti-China coalition.⁹⁰ It has done so chiefly by distancing itself from Tokyo: rejecting closer security cooperation,⁹¹ stoking domestic rancor over history disputes,⁹² and crafting with China a shared anti-Japanese identity.⁹³ Seoul’s drift toward Beijing should not be exaggerated: Korea has a longstanding strategic tradition (“shrimp among whales”) of navigating among great powers.⁹⁴ This tradition suggests that South Korea’s approach in a China-led Asia would resemble its current approach in US-led Asia: Seoul would seek to cultivate friendly ties with both great powers, but would create distance when doing so advanced its interests.

Japan would be (and already is) most resistant to a Chinese orbit in East Asia. With its large economy and capable military (and its water buffer between itself and China), Japan enjoys the greatest freedom of action. Japan has a territorial dispute and tense political relations with China, making it more inclined to resist attempts at Chinese encroachment. Japan—quite unlike its neighbors—has already resisted China’s attempt to enlarge its regional orbit through the creation of the AIIB; Tokyo and Washington conspicuously refused to sign on.⁹⁵ The extent to which Japan would be willing to balance against China is debatable; Japan faces a serious demographic crisis that will reduce future economic growth,⁹⁶ and the Japanese people evince strong opposition to raising defense spending or increasing the country’s military activism.⁹⁷ But

in the absence of the US-Japan alliance, relative to any other country in the region, Japan is the least likely to fall into a Chinese orbit.

COSTS AND RISKS OF US ALLIANCES IN EAST ASIA

The above assessment of US alliances suggests that they advance many, though not all, US security goals. Most importantly, the alliances strengthen deterrence, prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, and prevent regional arms racing. The next important issue to consider is whether these alliances promote these US national security goals at an acceptable level of cost and risk.

Financial Cost

The United States spends more on defense than any country in the world: more, indeed, than the next seven countries combined. American defense budget for 2014 was \$610 billion.⁹⁸ This large sum supports a vast infrastructure of alliances and overseas bases. To what extent would ending America's Asian alliances create budgetary savings?

Supporters of America's Asian alliances frequently downplay their financial costs because the United States receives host nation support from allies. For example, in 2011 the United States and Japan signed an agreement for \$2.02 billion per year for the next five years.⁹⁹ South Korea pays about \$700 million per year toward the expense of stationing US military forces there.¹⁰⁰ Were the United States to end its alliance relationships with those countries and simply reassign those forces elsewhere (to the United States or to another foreign base), this move would yield no savings (and may indeed cost more unless sent to another country paying host nation support). Thus the relevant comparison is to compare the cost of those troops stationed in East Asia against the prospect of both bringing those troops home and decommissioning them. If the troops were both brought home and decommissioned, this would result in savings for the United States.

Calculating the exact expense of stationing US troops in allied countries is difficult.

Rather than calculate the cost of stationing forces in a particular country, analysts have tried to estimate the savings of shifting to a more restrained grand strategy, which would end US security guarantees not only to Asian allies but also to NATO—thus enabling the United States to save in the force structure required to uphold those security guarantees. An estimate by the Cato Institute calculated in this fashion reported cost savings of \$1.2 trillion over the next decade.¹⁰¹ According to their analysis, the end-strength of the army and Marine Corps would be cut by one-third; the United States would field eight rather than 12 carrier battle groups and would cut a commensurate number of ships from the navy; it would cut six fighter wing equivalents from the air force. These cuts would permit further administrative savings.

In sum, budgetary savings could be substantial, but to realize those savings the United States would need to change its policy of providing peacetime presence and preparing for wartime contingencies; it would need to bring its forces home and decommission them. Assuming that the United States intends to keep a strong regional forward presence, basing US forces in Japan or South Korea may even save money because those countries pay host nation support. Force structure can be reduced, and cost savings realized, if and only if the United States reduced its regional forward military presence—which would mean a change in its broader grand strategy.

A US-China Arms Race

While (as described earlier) America's Asian alliances likely reduce the incidence of arms racing among regional countries, US alliances are fueling an arms race between the United States and China.¹⁰² America's alliance commitments obligate it to maintain the ability to project massive force into the region in order to come to the defense of its allies. But, as argued earlier, with its increased military power, and its pursuit of an "anti-access, area denial" (A2/AD) strategy, China is eroding the ability of the US military to introduce force into the region.¹⁰³ This starts to call into question the credibility of US alliances: alliances will be credible only if an ally has the military capabilities to fulfill its obligations.¹⁰⁴

A US-China arms race is already underway. In order to counter China's A2/AD efforts,

the US military has countered with changes in both weaponry and doctrine—notably, the doctrine of Air Sea Battle, later known as Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons, or “JAM-GC.” Under this doctrine, the US military seeks to identify and target the critical nodes of China’s A2/AD strategy. In addition to missile launchers, these nodes include sensing platforms: the sensors, radar sites, satellite control facilities, and the command and control facilities that integrate information from the various sensing platforms and would orchestrate attacks against US vessels. Not surprisingly, given their strategic importance, the Chinese have installed these sites deep within the Chinese hinterlands. JAM-GC thus requires the United States to develop weapons and doctrines for attacking these critical military targets. The doctrine also includes targeting launch facilities, and shooting down or decoying away Chinese missiles that would attack US targets.

The action-reaction pattern that has formed in US-China relations—A2/AD producing a change in US doctrine; Chinese advances in weaponry prompting US responses—is highly destabilizing. According to US doctrine, if China and the United States find themselves in the middle of a military crisis, Washington would be considering military strikes against target sets that are located deep within the Chinese interior. Analysts have noted that this carries with it chilling escalatory risks to the nuclear level. Heinrichs warns, “Such an attack, even if it relied solely on conventional systems, could easily be misconstrued in Beijing as an attempt to preemptively destroying China’s retaliatory nuclear options.”¹⁰⁵

In classic spiral dynamics, the status-quo United States cites the need for JAM-GC, while the Chinese view it as a highly alarming doctrine aimed at containing Chinese power. A *Global Times* editorial argues, “China’s anti-access strategy does not challenge the US hegemony. So the US should not seek to achieve its global strategy by pursuing absolute military superiority in Chinese coastal waters and threatening the country’s security.”¹⁰⁶ In sum, in an era of growing Chinese military power, US alliance commitments in East Asia are leading the United States to take steps that Beijing will view as highly inflammatory—which, in the event of crisis over one of their multiple flashpoints, create serious escalation risks.

Some critics would counter that this vision of East Asia might never become reality. China, like other countries previously expected to unseat the United States, may see its growth falter, making it unable to challenge the United States in the Pacific. Many “China bears” make compelling arguments that predict a Chinese slowdown, and indeed one has already begun.¹⁰⁷ Other critics might argue that China will eschew a grand strategy of driving the United States out of the region.¹⁰⁸ Some analysts persuasively argue that a “revisionist” grand strategy would be costly and detrimental to China’s interests.¹⁰⁹ Perhaps, then, China will not challenge continued US military dominance in the Pacific.

To be sure, China’s growth has already slowed, and China will likely reject a highly confrontational, revisionist grand strategy. But the United States should nonetheless be worried about the future. First, China has already acquired a great deal of wealth; the relative size of its economy is already larger than was the Soviet Union, which for a half-century presented a formidable geopolitical challenge to the United States. As Joshua Itzkowitz Shiffrin points out, Imperial Japan pursued regional domination when its per capita GDP was barely a third of the United States.¹¹⁰ And China need not pursue a revisionist grand strategy to pose serious security challenges to the United States—threatening US access to the region, jeopardizing the credibility of US alliance commitments, and creating friction with Washington.¹¹¹ Concerns about arms racing are not speculation about the future, but about the current state of US-China relations.

Entanglement

US alliances in Asia create risks of entanglement in wars that the United States otherwise need not fight. Scholars note that although alliances can help a country balance against a security threat, they confer entanglement risks. “Entanglement” is when a state “is compelled to aid an ally in a costly and unprofitable enterprise because of the alliance” (“entrapment” is a subset of entanglement caused by an ally’s risky or aggressive actions).¹¹² Kim argues that because of these risks, countries craft alliance agreements carefully to reduce the likelihood of being dragged into war by an aggressive ally over an issue of little strategic import.¹¹³

America's Asian alliances bring serious entanglement risks. First, the US-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) could drag the United States into a serious military conflict or full-blown war. The United States could be involved in conflict on the peninsula if North Korea attacks South Korea. While no one expects North Korea to win this war, it could be very costly to the victors nonetheless. US warfighting plans, by targeting the North Korean government, create major risks of nuclear escalation.¹¹⁴ The US government believes that North Korea has, and would use, large amounts of chemical and biological weapons on the battlefield as an asymmetric instrument. In the wake of Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States does not need another major theater war, yet its alliance with South Korea could draw the United States into war at any time.

Furthermore, in the event of North Korean collapse, the MDT would likely involve the United States in dangerous stabilization missions on the peninsula. North Korea's government might collapse under its own weight, or it could collapse following a war. South Korean forces might intervene in a post-collapse, anarchic North Korea to provide humanitarian relief or to locate North Korea's nuclear weapons.¹¹⁵ The Chinese may also decide to intervene for similar reasons. This could create a perilous situation in which US/ROK and Chinese military forces are inserted in North Korea in an uncoordinated fashion, raising the risk of misperception and escalation.

Risks of US entanglement in a Korea crisis are high given periodic bursts of North Korean violence. In 2010 North Korea shelled South Korean territory (Yongpyeong Island) and sank a South Korean naval vessel, killing 48 sailors. Since then, Seoul has vowed it would retaliate if North Korea uses force again: "If there is any provocation against South Korea and its people," declared South Korea's president Park Geun-hye, "there should be a strong response in initial combat, regardless of the political considerations."¹¹⁶ What both sides hope would be a symbolic or limited use of force thus has the potential, through misperception, to escalate to full-blown war on the peninsula, and to draw in the United States by virtue of the MDT.

Japan and the Philippines. Until recently, the US-Japan alliance was long characterized by

Japan's fears of entanglement; for seventy years the Japanese resisted being dragged into one of America's adventures (in Korea, Vietnam, or the Persian Gulf), and feared finding itself in the middle of a US-Soviet nuclear exchange.¹¹⁷ Today, however, things are different: the growth of Chinese power, and China's increased threat to the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands now mean that Japan risks entangling the United States in a war with a nuclear-armed adversary. US officials (including President Obama) have announced that although Washington does not take a position on the sovereignty of the islands, they do indeed fall under the US-Japan security treaty because they are "administered" by Japan. Thus, the entanglement risk in the US-Japan alliance—for a half-century predominantly borne by Tokyo—today has shifted toward the United States.¹¹⁸

Alliance with the Philippines also brings a growing risk of entanglement. Security ties between the United States and the Philippines waned after the 1990s (when Manila ejected American troops from its bases at Clark and Subic Bay), but the US security commitment remained in place. Today the alliance presents a growing risk of entanglement because of the sovereignty dispute over the Spratly islets in the South China Sea.

The entanglement risks posed by US alliances with the Philippines and Japan are a relatively recent development. Although for years these territorial disputes sat relatively dormant, they have grown more salient in these countries' foreign relations with China. Sino-Japanese relations have nosedived in recent years, in large part due to their territorial dispute. The growth of Chinese maritime power, and increased Chinese incursions into these disputed areas in recent years, have elevated the risk of crises.¹¹⁹ Thus although for decades alliances with Japan and the Philippines did not pose a significant entanglement risk for the United States, today this risk is growing—over islets in which the United States has no clear strategic interest.

Buck-Passing

Critics of the current US grand strategy identify "buck-passing" as one of its costs. Indeed, current US national security policy has encouraged buck-passing among friendly and potentially militarily powerful countries. As Barry Posen writes, America's Cold War alliances

“have provided US partners in Europe and Asia with such a high level of insurance that they have been able to steadily shrink their militaries and outsource their defense to Washington.” Since the end of the Cold War, European countries that previously contributed to balancing against the Soviet Union now collectively spend only 1.6 percent of the GDP on defense—lower than either the United States or the global average in defense spending.¹²⁰

Similarly, Tokyo (during and since the Cold War) has pursued a low level of defense spending for a great power—less than one percent of its GDP. Japan’s high GDP means that this is a nontrivial sum, so even with this low level of effort, Japan developed a capable maritime military force.¹²¹ However Japan’s level of defense effort, and its regional and global leadership, could be far greater. Critics of US grand strategy argue that an important negative effect of the US commitment to Japan is that it has led one of the most potentially powerful countries in the world, a wealthy liberal democracy friendly to the United States, to act as a secondary diplomatic and military power.

Importantly, Japanese buck-passing is not an unfortunate *cost* of the current grand strategy: it is a *goal* of the current grand strategy. Allied buck-passing means that countries are not balancing against the preponderance of American power. Furthermore, allied buck-passing means that countries in key regions are not building up independent capabilities that could trigger security dilemma dynamics. As discussed earlier, the prevention of arms racing is an explicit US national security goal. Therefore, far from being a cost of the current grand strategy, allied buck-passing is the manifestation of its goals being achieved.

Confusion may stem from the fact that proponents of the current US grand strategy sometimes call for greater allied burden sharing. Indeed, American officials have over the years negotiated with Tokyo to increase its host nation support, level of military capability, and activism in different alliance roles. In particular, Congress and US officials in the Nixon and Carter administrations sought greater Japanese burden sharing, and Japan’s inaction (despite its large financial donation) to the first Persian Gulf War triggered criticism in the United States.¹²²

Although Washington would prefer that Japan contribute more to the alliance, this

should not be misconstrued as a desire for a change in the East Asian distribution of power. Under deep engagement, an underperforming Japan, rather than an unfortunate side effect of the current US grand strategy, is a desired outcome. The fact that American blood and American treasure substitute for what could be Japanese balancing—lamented by Posen as “welfare for the rich”¹²³—is a necessary requirement of this grand strategy.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR AMERICA’S ASIAN ALLIANCES

As described earlier, US alliances in East Asia advance some national security goals but not others; they also come with important costs and risks. Given US budgetary realities, and given changes in East Asia’s strategic environment, how should Washington change its national security policies vis-à-vis these alliances to advance US national security goals, while minimizing their costs and risks?

When one considers alternative national security postures in East Asia, an important point should be kept in mind: a US regional military presence does not depend upon the existence of formal alliances. The United States could end one or more of its alliances there in favor of new basing arrangements in the Western Pacific that do not include mutual defense treaties. This would mirror the model the United States currently uses with Bahrain and Singapore. Alternatively, the United States could project military power into the region from Alaska, Guam, and Hawaii (currently major hubs for US Pacific forces). The point is that “alliance” and “military presence” should not be conflated, and the arguments for both must be assessed independently.

Withdrawal from Alliances

With this in mind, one possible course is for the United States to withdraw from some or all of its East Asian alliances.¹²⁴ Advocates of “offshore balancing” or “restraint” argue that if China did emerge as threatening to its neighbors, the rich and capable countries in East Asia could themselves balance against it. If the United States were to itself buck-pass to the countries most proximate and most affected by China’s rise, this would confer significant savings in US

defense if the current US force structure for the ROK and Japanese alliances was decommissioned. American buck-passing would also encourage greater national security efforts by Japan: giving the United States a like-minded, militarily capable foreign-policy actor with which Washington could cooperate in the region. Most importantly, an end to these security guarantees would reduce serious dangers that they bring: the growing spiral of distrust in US-China relations (only exacerbated by the recent “pivot”), and the risks of entanglement in regional military crises or war.

Withdrawal from these alliances would of course undermine other American national security goals. The end of US alliances with South Korea and Japan would likely lead to nuclear spread to the former, and possibly to the latter. In the absence of the US alliances, as Japan adopted a more assertive regional role, and as South Korea developed more maritime capabilities, this could lead to elevated regional tensions and arms racing among Australia, China, Japan, and South Korea. China would likely develop stronger political influence over ASEAN countries, over South Korea (and to a lesser extent possibly Australia). Others argue that these alliances—and more generally the US grand strategy of global leadership—confer significant economic gains on the United States, and that discarding these alliances would thus disadvantage the United States in international institutions and trade.¹²⁵

US withdrawal from its Asian alliances would represent a dramatic departure from current US policy and is therefore unlikely. As Benjamin Valentino shows in Chapter 9 of this volume, American public opinion broadly supports the continuation of these longstanding alliances. And in Washington, America’s post-World War II grand strategy enjoys a broad bipartisan consensus. This is truly striking in an era when every *domestic* public policy issue produces bitter partisan vitriol. To be sure, while liberals and conservatives advocate somewhat different flavors of deep engagement, overall the US foreign-policy establishment supports keeping the postwar US alliance system, maintaining overwhelming US military dominance, intervening across the globe, and frequently using force to advance US foreign policy interests.¹²⁶ As Aaron O’Connell argues, “Today, there are just a select few in public life who are willing to

question the military or its spending, and those who do—from the libertarian Ron Paul to the leftist Dennis Kucinich—are dismissed as unrealistic.”¹²⁷

Reforming US Alliances

Given that the United States is likely to retain its grand strategy of deep engagement, Washington should reform its East Asian alliances so to make them less dangerous, more useful, and more sustainable.

Terminals to Hubs. America’s global alliances can be thought of as having two types: hubs and terminals. “Hubs” provide bases and a flexible legal and regulatory infrastructure that make them useful to the United States across a range of missions across the region, and in conflicts in other regions. Vital American hubs include Ramstein and Aviano Air Force Bases in Europe, and US bases in Okinawa. “Terminals,” on the other hand, provide bases that serve only the purpose of defending a particular ally. The bases and American troops deployed there are not used in regional or global missions, and, in the event of a conflict elsewhere in the region or globe, the United States would be unable to draw upon them. Obviously from the US standpoint, a hub is far more useful than a terminal; for the United States to accept a “terminal” arrangement, that ally should be incapable of independent defense against the threat it faces; its defense should have vital strategic import to the United States; and ideally the alliance should also confer a low risk of entanglement.

The MDT between South Korea and the United States was initially designed as a “terminal,” but because of changing strategic circumstances, it should be reformed into a “hub.” The alliance was created at a time when South Korea was militarily weak, and was outmanned and outgunned by an economically dynamic North Korea. The Korean peninsula was seen as a key “domino” in America’s Cold War strategy of containment of Soviet communism. Given all of this, the United States agreed to defend South Korea under an arrangement in which South Korea refused to allow base usage for other regional operations, and refused to allow military personnel or assets on the peninsula to be used “off-pen.”

All of these strategic circumstances have changed; the US-ROK alliance thus cries out for

reform. South Korea no longer meets the criteria to be a “terminal”—it is more than capable of defending itself against a weak adversary, and the alliance brings a high entanglement risk to the United States. If Washington decides to keep this alliance, it should be reformed into serving a broader strategic purpose—namely, by making it into a regional and global hub. The current posture is expensive because the United States has to buy adequate force structure to support its deployment on the peninsula, which then serves no other regional or global role. In keeping with this theme of creating a more flexible hub, the United States should also transition its forces in ROK away from ground forces toward a naval forward presence.

These trends have already begun, and should be continued. In recent years the United States has adopted a posture of “strategic flexibility” in which US forces in Korea will evolve into a high-mobility, expeditionary force.¹²⁸ And as part of this, the United States has negotiated with Seoul to relax its regulations against using US assets (personnel and materiel) on the peninsula elsewhere in the region. Some such assets were thus dispatched to a US-Japan joint exercise in 2012; US forces in Korea were sent to participate in Operation Tomodachi, the disaster relief operation in Japan; and in 2004 the United States dispatched the 2nd Brigade of the 2nd Infantry Division to Iraq. Washington should continue in this direction, transforming this outdated alliance into one that gives the United States a true regional and global hub.¹²⁹

Moving the US presence in the ROK toward a naval mission would confer several advantages. First, instead of being tied to the peninsula, such naval forces would be of broader use to the region and to the Persian Gulf region if the need arose. Second, the United States could shift to the peninsula naval assets that are currently stationed in Hawaii or San Diego. This would bring budgetary savings because the United States currently has to buy additional force structure to account for long transit times to the region. Finally, (anticipating Korean unification) the change would make the US forward presence in Korea less inflammatory to China than would be American ground troops on its border. Although in the case of Korean unification Beijing might indeed object to *any* US military forces left on the Korean peninsula, ground troops would be far more inflammatory (since they would appear to be aimed at China)

than would naval forces envisioned to serve a broader regional purpose.

Second, assuming that the United States remains obligated to guarantee Japanese security, Washington should maintain its “hubs” in Japan against local pressure to downgrade the utility of its bases. As noted earlier, Okinawans have in recent years used the debate about the future of the Futenma air base to express their frustration with the large US military footprint in their prefecture, and have argued for moving the US Marines not within Okinawa, but out of it all together.¹³⁰ Washington should resist this pressure. To be sure, it may be that the US Marines stationed at Futenma are not necessary or are not the right types of forces for likely missions; the specific configuration of which US forces belong in Japan is beyond the scope of this article.

In general, however, Washington should resist a trend in which a more threatened Japan is expecting US military protection while being less willing to host US forces. Of course, the US military must conduct its operations in Okinawa so that its people are safe; it must deal respectfully with Okinawans; and must understand Tokyo’s dilemmas as it negotiates with the prefecture that bears such a high share of the US defense burden. But ultimately, the 70-year old deal between the United States and Japan—that the United States will protect Japan, and Japan will provide the bases—would no longer be much of a deal if (at a time when Japan is more threatened and more of an entanglement risk) Japan wants the United States to protect it offshore and at higher expense. If Washington intends to maintain the alliance, it should thus maintain a “hub” in Okinawa. Similarly, as the evolution of the US-Philippine alliance continues, and as the United States negotiates for renewed access to Philippine bases, these same ideas should also be applied.¹³¹

Dual Deterrence. Changing strategic conditions in East Asia also suggest changes in US alliance diplomacy. China’s growing maritime power, and its increased assertiveness over its island claims, have raised the salience of island disputes in the South China and East China Seas. Inflammatory Japanese policies—such as Tokyo’s 2012 purchase of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands from its private owner, an action that Washington urged against,¹³² risk creating crises and wars into which the United States could be dragged. Washington should thus adopt, in its alliances

with Japan and the Philippines, policies that reduce the risk of entanglement. As Michael Beckley describes, such policies include “dual deterrence” and “loopholes” that reduce the chance of the US military having to fight a war with China over islets in the South or East China Seas.¹³³ For example, though Washington describes its security commitment to defend the Philippines as “ironclad,”¹³⁴ it has reduced its entanglement risk through a loophole. Washington maintains that because sovereignty over the Spratly Islands is disputed, the United States does not have an obligation to defend territory that is not clearly part of the Philippines.

Given increased entanglement risks, Washington should adopt a strategy of “dual” or “pivotal” deterrence in its alliances with Manila and Tokyo.¹³⁵ It has already pursued such a strategy in the Taiwan Strait; this was particularly necessary during the tenure of Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian, who routinely engaged in actions that provoked diplomatic crises with China. According to the logic of dual deterrence, Washington should express its intention to uphold its security obligations, and should warn China of the consequences of using force to resolve its territorial disputes. On the other hand, Washington should warn its allies of the consequences of them engaging in provocative actions. In the case of Taiwan, Logan Wright argued that if Chen Shui-bian “refuses to moderate his rhetoric and shelve his referenda, the United States should make gradual, measured reductions in US-Taiwan military-to-military cooperation, while clearly telling the Taiwanese leadership privately of the reasons for this downgrade.” Wright argued that if private warnings are ignored, “public statements condemning his moves should follow, preferably in advance of the policy initiatives.”¹³⁶ To be sure, Taiwan is not a military ally of the United States, whereas Japan and the Philippines both are. Keeping in mind the need to maintain the credibility of the US commitment, Washington will thus have to carefully weigh what it considers provocative behavior on the part of its ally, and what the consequences to such behavior would be. But the broader point is that because of a greater risk of US entanglement by these allies, the United States needs to move toward a posture of dual deterrence.

Strategic Reassurance. As argued earlier, a serious risk of the US alliance system in East Asia is that the US regional force posture necessary to uphold the credibility of US security guarantees is deeply threatening to China. Because of the cost, instability, and souring of bilateral relations that its East Asian forward presence is causing in US-China relations, Washington should look for ways to reassure Beijing. To be sure, perhaps it is ultimately not possible to square the circle of maintaining a force posture in East Asia that would both reassure American allies and not threaten Beijing. But Washington should only arrive at this conclusion after careful study. US officials and military analysts should discuss: are there aspects of American force structure or operations that could be reformed so to not overly antagonize China? Scholars have already begun a productive discussion about strategic reassurance; James Steinberg and Michael O’Hanlon identify four tools (restraint, reciprocity, transparency, and resilience), arguing “it is crucial to find ways of transcending or minimizing such a classic security dilemma.”¹³⁷ Washington should work with Beijing in non-military areas to build cooperation and trust. Lyle Goldstein advocates a “spiral of cooperation,” noting that, “Since the Sunnylands summit, a string of positive, albeit small-scale joint activities has been undertaken by the US and Chinese armed forces.” Goldstein points to encouraging progress in the areas of “carbon emissions, trade, easing visa requirements, and military confidence-building.”¹³⁸ Although Washington is unlikely to be so fearful of a US-China spiral such that it would end American alliances in the region, American military leaders and foreign policy officials should be looking for ways in which they can adapt US policy so to avoid creating undue fear in Beijing. In sum, in this era of strategic and budgetary change, in which Americans continue to support the country’s Asian alliances, foreign policy leaders should fix these alliances in ways that minimize their costs and risks, and better serve the US strategic interest.

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¹²⁶ Interventionists on the right are dismissive of allies and international institutions; they believe in preventive wars but have less interest in humanitarian ones. Liberal interventionists, on the other hand, pay greater attention to

international public opinion; they often advocate fighting wars of humanitarian intervention; and are more skeptical of preventive wars (though they authorized the war against Iraq). On the bipartisan American grand strategy see Posen, “Pull Back”; Michael A. Cohen, “Can’t We All Just Not Get Along?” *Foreign Policy*, June 22, 2012; Robert Kagan, “Bipartisan Spring,” *Foreign Policy*, March 30, 2010.

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¹³⁰ Tokyo and Washington have made progress toward resolving this dispute (and toward keeping the Marines in Okinawa). However, Okinawans remain opposed to moving the Futenma facility, and have continued to stall it. See Tiezzi, “Beyond Futenma”; Okinawa governor warns Japan-U.S. alliance would face obstacles over Futenma issue,” *Asahi Shimbun*, April 30 2015; Stacie Pettijohn, “The Battle of Futenma Isn’t Over Yet,” *National Interest*, January 3, 2014.

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¹³⁸ Lyle J. Goldstein, *Meeting China Halfway: How to Defuse the Emerging US-China Rivalry* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2015); also see White, *The China Choice*.