

KEY POINTS

1. As China's wealth and military power have increased, the United States has responded with a combination of military deployments in East Asia, regular military exercises in regional waterways, and stronger alliances. These steps have been accompanied by restrictions on the Chinese economy, including sanctions, export controls, and bans on U.S. investments in sectors deemed sensitive from the standpoint of U.S. security.
2. These policies reflect the idea that only through primacy—military preponderance—can the United States protect its key interests in East Asia.
3. These interests are traditionally seen as: (1) avoiding war with China unless it is essential for defending vital U.S. national security interests, (2) preserving access to the region's markets, and (3) ensuring that China cannot dominate the region.
4. Yet the balance of power in Asia is stabler than conventional wisdom suggests. Given Asia's geography, China's internal constraints, and resistance from Asia's middle powers, Beijing cannot easily dominate East Asia.
5. The best way forward is to maintain a favorable regional balance of power that does not rest on U.S. hegemony. This approach would shift defense burdens onto capable allies, especially South Korea and Japan, and better safeguard U.S. interests by ensuring regional stability while lowering the risk of war.

INTRODUCTION

To the extent the United States has a grand strategy in East Asia, it is based almost exclusively on containing China's power. The 2022 U.S. National Defense Strategy described China as the Pentagon's "pacing challenge."¹ Dr. Ely Ratner, the assistant secretary of defense for Indo-Pacific security affairs, identified China as a revisionist power that increasingly resorts to "dangerous, coercive and aggressive actions" in the Indo-Pacific theater.² The Biden administration's 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy makes numerous references to China's violations of the so-called rules-based international order—including its expansive claims in the South China Sea, saber-rattling against Taiwan, and economic coercion of its neighbors. The document stresses that the response by the United States and its allies will determine "whether the PRC succeeds in transforming the rules and norms that have benefited the Indo-Pacific and the world."³

Realists find it unsurprising that China seeks to parlay its growing wealth into hard power and greater influence. As Kenneth Waltz wrote in *The Theory of International Politics*, states are in a constant struggle for power, control, and security because of the "anarchic" nature of the international system: in other words, the lack of a central authority with the capacity to maintain order and prevent or stop aggression.⁴ Consequently, states are insecure—forever unsure about the intentions of other states and driven to maximize their own power.⁵

China is no exception. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, its gross domestic product (GDP) has increased nearly 15-fold, from \$1.21 trillion in 2000 to more than \$17.79 trillion in 2023.⁶ Not coincidentally, China's military spending has increased during this period as well, with the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) budget going up by more than 60 percent since 2013.⁷ A portion of China's increased defense spending has been devoted to building up its nuclear deterrent.⁸ The Defense Department's most recent report on PLA capabilities estimates that China now has approximately 500 operational nuclear warheads and could possess as many as 1,000 by 2030.⁹

These trends, in addition to China's bolder behavior in parts of Asia, including its claims in the East China and South China seas, have led many experts to warn that China is poised to become a hegemon in Asia, meaning it would conquer or otherwise subjugate all rivals. U.S. policy must move aggressively to prevent this new China-led order in East Asia, this thinking goes, lest the U.S. position in the region be irreparably eroded and U.S. interests imperiled.¹⁰

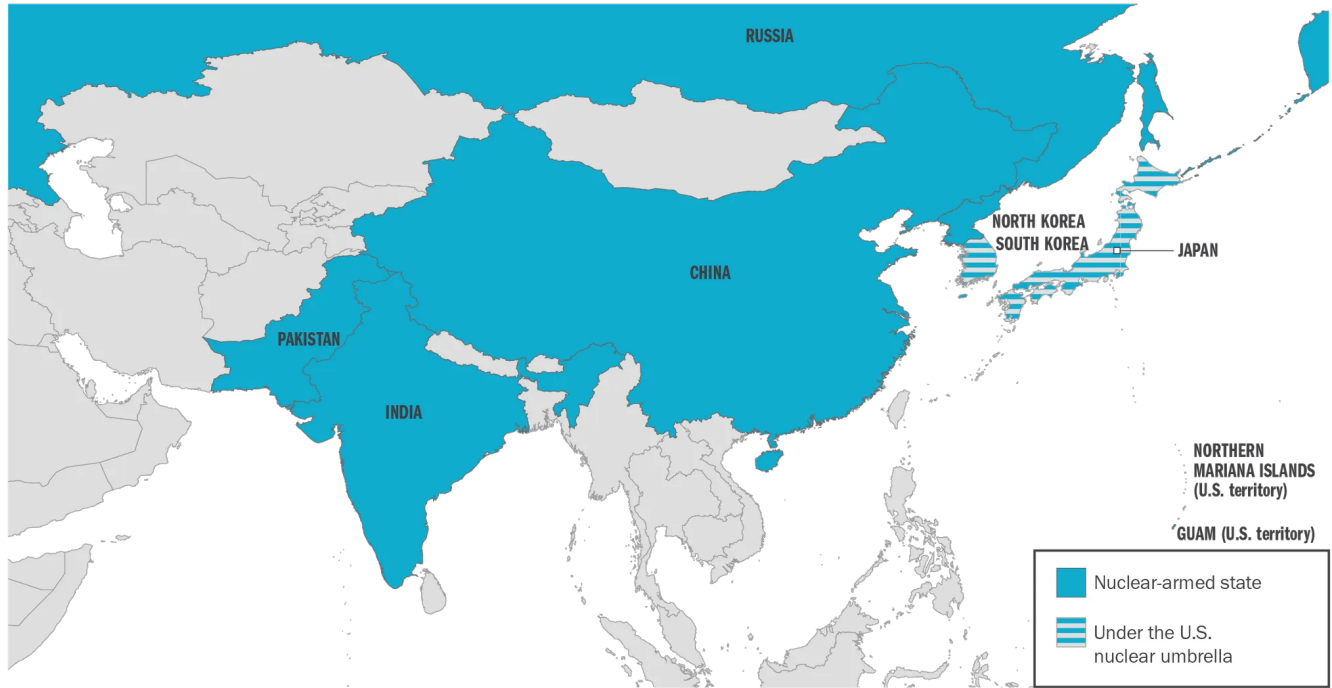
U.S. foreign policy officials have largely accepted this portrayal as fact and coalesced around a strategy of primacy, which aims to preserve U.S. dominance and unrivaled power over friends and adversaries alike.¹¹ Militarily, that starts with maintaining the ability to take the lead in defending U.S. allies with forces stationed in theater even in peacetime and a U.S. Navy that maintains a high tempo of exercises and freedom of navigation operations in East Asian waters.¹² On the economic front, restrictions on technology exports to China, designed to maintain Washington's technological edge and impede the modernization of the PLA, are now a key element in U.S. policy.¹³ Diplomatically, the United States seeks to bring Southeast Asian states onto its side, even though many of them prefer to have beneficial relations with both the United States and China.¹⁴

The assumptions driving these policies, as well as the policies themselves, are dubious. Worse, they could set the United States and China on a collision course, something neither side seeks nor would benefit from given their military might. Even short of war, the intensifying and long-term rivalry between the United States and China that current policy embraces would heighten U.S. costs and risks, including by preventing collaboration and making dialogue on matters of mutual interest more difficult.

The United States' core goals in East Asia are easier pursued than is generally assumed—and without a costly and risky strategy of primacy. Although the growth of China's economic and military power over the last two decades is indisputable, other states have the agency to balance it. Indeed, they already are: Japan, South Korea, Australia, India, and the Philippines are increasing their defense capabilities and striking defense cooperation deals with each other.¹⁵ This trend should accelerate as China's economic and military power grows. It's highly unlikely that China's neighbors—many of which, like Japan and South Korea, have significant military capacity and latent power of their own—would acquiesce to its efforts to dominate the region. Should China decide to wage a war of conquest on the continent, it would face additional obstacles, including Asia's vast land mass, long borders, and nuclear-armed states (six of the world's nine nuclear-armed states are in Asia).¹⁶



STATES WITH NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN ASIA



China has vast borders and is surrounded by nuclear-armed or nuclear-protected states, which would make any war for conquest exceedingly difficult.

This paper begins with a brief overview of what the U.S. seeks to accomplish in East Asia as a segue to explaining why the current U.S. strategy of primacy is unnecessary to meet those goals and would lead to a greater likelihood of crises. It then outlines why East Asia's geopolitical landscape is more stable than is generally appreciated and why that should allow the United States to devolve greater responsibilities to its allies—relying on balancing behavior rather than U.S. dominance to preserve stability. This is especially true on the Korean Peninsula, where South Korea holds vast economic, technological, and military advantages over North Korea. It also presents a series of recommendations to lower the likelihood of escalation in East Asia, reduce the costs in American blood and treasure, and move South Korea and Japan, two principal U.S. allies, toward assuming greater responsibility for their own defense.¹⁷

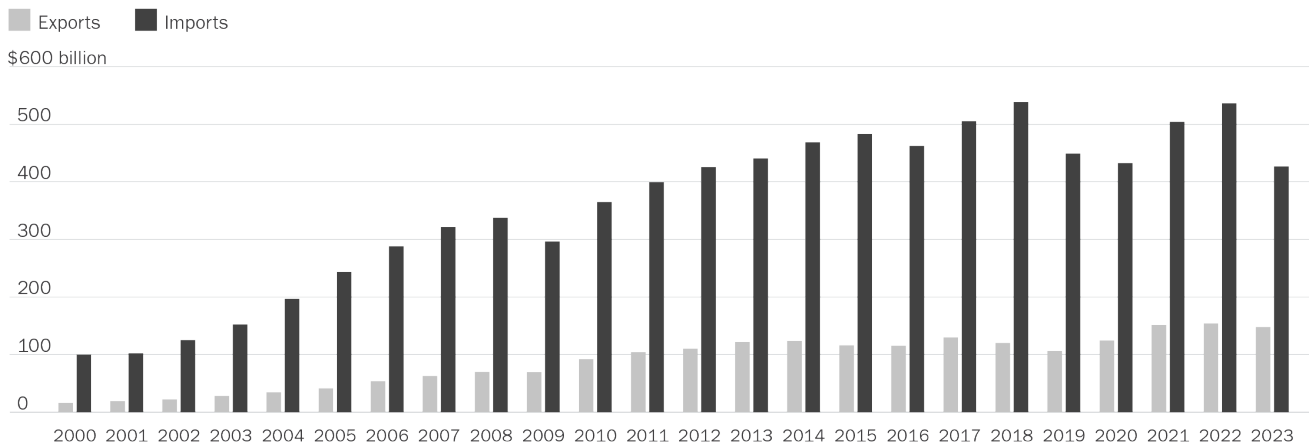
WHAT THE U.S. WANTS IN EAST ASIA

Before delving into a balancing strategy, it is necessary to enumerate what the United States seeks to achieve in the region. At bottom, the United States has three traditional goals in East Asia: (1) averting war with China; (2) preserving access to Asian markets; and (3) ensuring Asia isn't dominated by a single power, principally China. Many proponents of restraint would argue one or both of the latter two goals are sound in principle but in little peril today. But even if we take these three objectives as a starting point, the current U.S. approach toward realizing them—forward deployments of U.S. military power, frequent military exercises with regional allies and partners, the formation of a de facto anti-China bloc—is resource-intensive and carries significant risk. Thankfully the U.S. can also accomplish them through more restrained means that rely more on allies and lower the chances of escalation.

The first perceived interest, avoiding war, is imperative given the massive economic, diplomatic, and humanitarian consequences that would accompany an armed conflict with China. War simulations between U.S. and Chinese forces paint a dire picture. Even if the conflict were to stay conventional—a big if—both sides would suffer tens of thousands of casualties and a degradation of their respective militaries. Other states, including U.S. allies like Japan and even South Korea, could be dragged into the conflagration and targeted by Chinese missiles because of the presence of U.S. bases on their territories. A January 2023 war game conducted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies on the consequences of a conflict in the Taiwan Strait found that the U.S. military would suffer enormous losses even if it were to ultimately prevail.¹⁸

The economic costs of a war with China must also be considered.¹⁹ U.S.-China bilateral trade was valued at \$575 billion in 2023.²⁰ In May 2024, despite extensive U.S. tariffs on Chinese imports, China was the third largest U.S. trading partner, accounting for over 10 percent of total U.S. trade.²¹ A Sino-American war would jeopardize these trade flows and lead China to withhold products and materials that the U.S. economy relies on.²² The ramifications would be global and long-lasting given that about 80 percent of the world's maritime trade passes through Asia, with one-third transiting the South China Sea.²³

U.S. TRADE WITH CHINA OVER TIME



Note: Dollar amounts reported in nominal terms
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, "Trade in Goods with China."

Some analysts contend that U.S. alliances in East Asia and the security benefits Asian states receive from Washington—up to and including extended deterrence, the United States' implied commitment to use its full military power to defend an ally, including with nuclear weapons if necessary—will prevent a war with China and preserve order.²⁴ But such alliances aren't risk-free for the United States, particularly when its treaty allies (like Japan and the Philippines) have unresolved disputes with China over maritime boundaries or, in the case of South Korea, are still technically in a state of war with a hostile, nuclear-armed North Korea, which is closely aligned with Beijing. It is hardly unreasonable to assume that the United States would be drawn into the fray were clashes between China and a U.S. ally to spiral into full-blown war.

The second U.S. goal is to preserve U.S. market access and sustain an open regional economy in East Asia, which accounts for more than 25 percent of global GDP.²⁵ Of the top 10 U.S. trading partners between February 2023 and February 2024, four were in East Asia.²⁶ U.S. foreign direct investment in the Asia-Pacific reached \$951 billion in 2022, a 350 percent increase since 2002.²⁷ With 60 percent of the world's population, U.S. officials believe Asia will be the principal source of global economic growth for the next three



decades.²⁸ War, crises, and widespread protectionism in East Asia would have adverse effects on the U.S. economy by limiting the flow of raw materials, goods, and investments to and from the region. That, in turn, would have global ramifications.

This interest in open trade is often misconstrued as a license to patrol endlessly to protect sea-lanes in order to prevent every perceived threat to trade. But trade can be kept open with economic and diplomatic tools rather than military ones, which are more likely to precipitate crises that could escalate in ways that might prove unpredictable and difficult to control.

Third, the U.S. seeks to prevent any single power—in particular China—from dominating East Asia. According to some U.S. analysts, such a scenario would have geopolitical consequences for the United States, enabling Beijing to control strategic locations and establish primacy of its own.²⁹ Such an outcome could threaten the United States more directly or at least allow China to achieve a stranglehold on trade in Asia. But as will be discussed later, Asia's middle powers are unlikely to sit by as China pursues hegemony in East Asia. That's assuming China could even accomplish such a feat given East Asia's vast geography, the nationalism within its respective countries, and the PLA's deficiencies.³⁰

THE PITFALLS AND PERILS OF PRIMACY

The current U.S. strategy in East Asia is primacy—the theory that the most effective way to preserve U.S. power, markets, and global peace is by keeping allies and partners dependent on the United States and maintaining military superiority over rivals and even friendly countries.³¹ Primacy strives to dampen geopolitical competition, to both deter adversaries and protect allies from costly rivalries.

In East Asia, primacy is carried out through the United States' extensive network of large bases and smaller military facilities, many of them byproducts of the post-World War II period. In Japan alone, 54,000 U.S. troops are distributed across 85 facilities.³² The U.S. also has more than 28,000 troops stationed in South Korea on a practically permanent basis.³³ In the Philippines, the U.S. has access to nine bases, including in Luzon, which faces the Taiwan Strait and could conceivably be used during a Taiwan crisis.³⁴ With more than 462,000 active-duty U.S. forces stationed in Hawaii and on the U.S. West Coast, the United States also has the ability to surge forces into the Asian theater in the event of a crisis, although maintaining access amid Chinese attacks would be challenging.³⁵

As U.S. treaty allies in East Asia, Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines receive U.S. defense guarantees. In the cases of Japan and South Korea, those commitments extend, in extremis, to the use of U.S. nuclear weapons against a nuclear-armed adversary like China if it attacks one or more of these countries. But this implied commitment—known as extended deterrence—suffers from credibility problems.³⁶ The United States has enough conventional military power to come to the defense of its allies but may choose not to given China's nuclear arsenal.³⁷

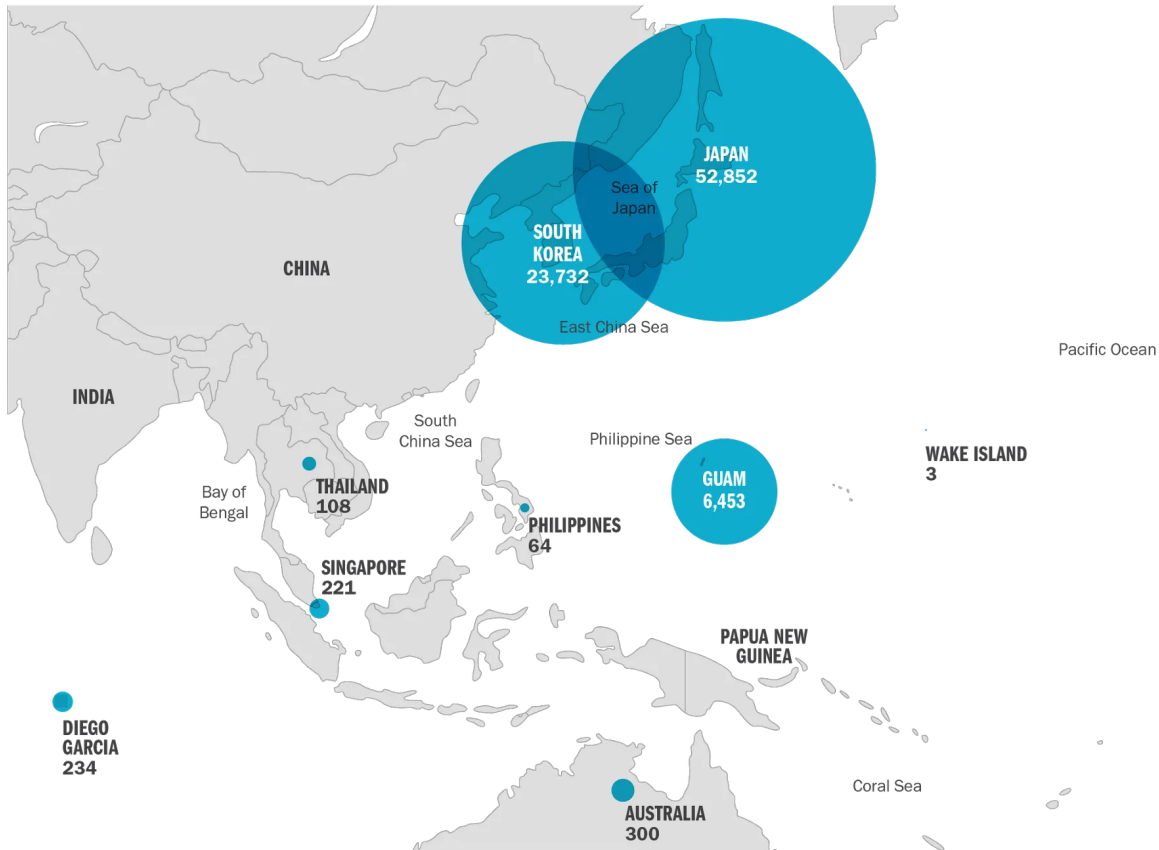
But primacy is a flawed theory for three big reasons: it backfires by alarming rivals and making them more likely to arm, it enfeebles capable allies, and it can nonetheless induce excessive risk-taking by allies.

First, the U.S. effort to maintain primacy in Asia has provoked the problems it tries to prevent. U.S. military capabilities in the region and frequent freedom-of-navigation patrols and large military exercises make Beijing wary and insecure, leading it to strengthen its own military in response. Similarly, on the Korean Peninsula, U.S. deployments of nuclear-capable submarines, large-scale drills with the South Korean



military, periodic B-2 flyovers, and strengthened trilateral military collaboration between the United States, South Korea, and Japan have prompted North Korea to increase its nuclear weapons and to test, develop, and deploy an array of ballistic and cruise missiles.

U.S. FORCES PERMANENTLY STATIONED IN ASIA



Source: Defense Manpower Data Center, June 30, 2024.

Note: This map excludes military personnel suspected to be serving as security attaches and embassy guards.

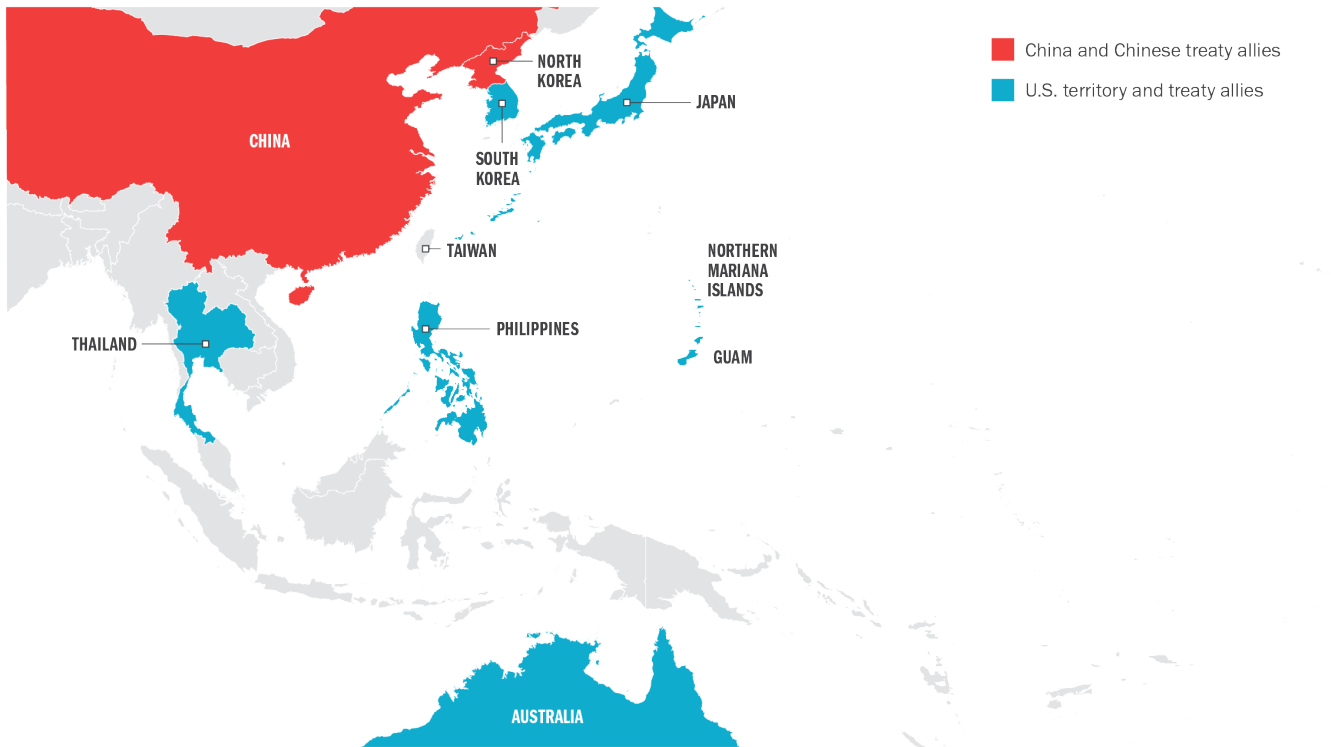
The United States uses its network of bases and tens of thousands of troops to attempt to maintain primacy in East Asia.

The “security dilemma” (states responding to perceived insecurity by strengthening their defenses, rendering others insecure in the process and causing them to react) is a result of the U.S. quest for primacy in Asia.³⁸ This extends to the nuclear realm as well: advances in U.S. conventional strike platforms, anti-missile systems, and the development of low-yield nuclear warheads have likely spurred China to increase its nuclear arsenal and expand its intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) force in order to preserve a second-strike capability.³⁹

By provoking security dilemmas and hastening, rather than tamping down, militarized rivalry in Asia, primacy plants the seeds of its own destruction.⁴⁰ Other powers can’t afford to assume that a hegemon will use its power benevolently, thus spurring them to align with other great powers to protect themselves and defend their interests.⁴¹ This is evident today: shared concerns about U.S. power have led to a growing strategic partnership between China and Russia, and to a lesser extent between Russia and North Korea. Reacting to what both regard as U.S. attempts to contain and undermine their power, China and Russia are now collaborating on military-related research and development projects, conducting bilateral military exercises, and coordinating at the United Nations Security Council to oppose U.S. diplomatic initiatives.⁴² The United

States has in effect reversed its biggest Cold War-era accomplishment: averting an anti-U.S. alignment between Beijing and Moscow.

U.S. AND CHINESE ALLIES IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC



Sources: U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Collective Defense Arrangements."; Charles Parton and James Byrne, "China's Only Ally," Royal United Services Institute, July 2, 2021.

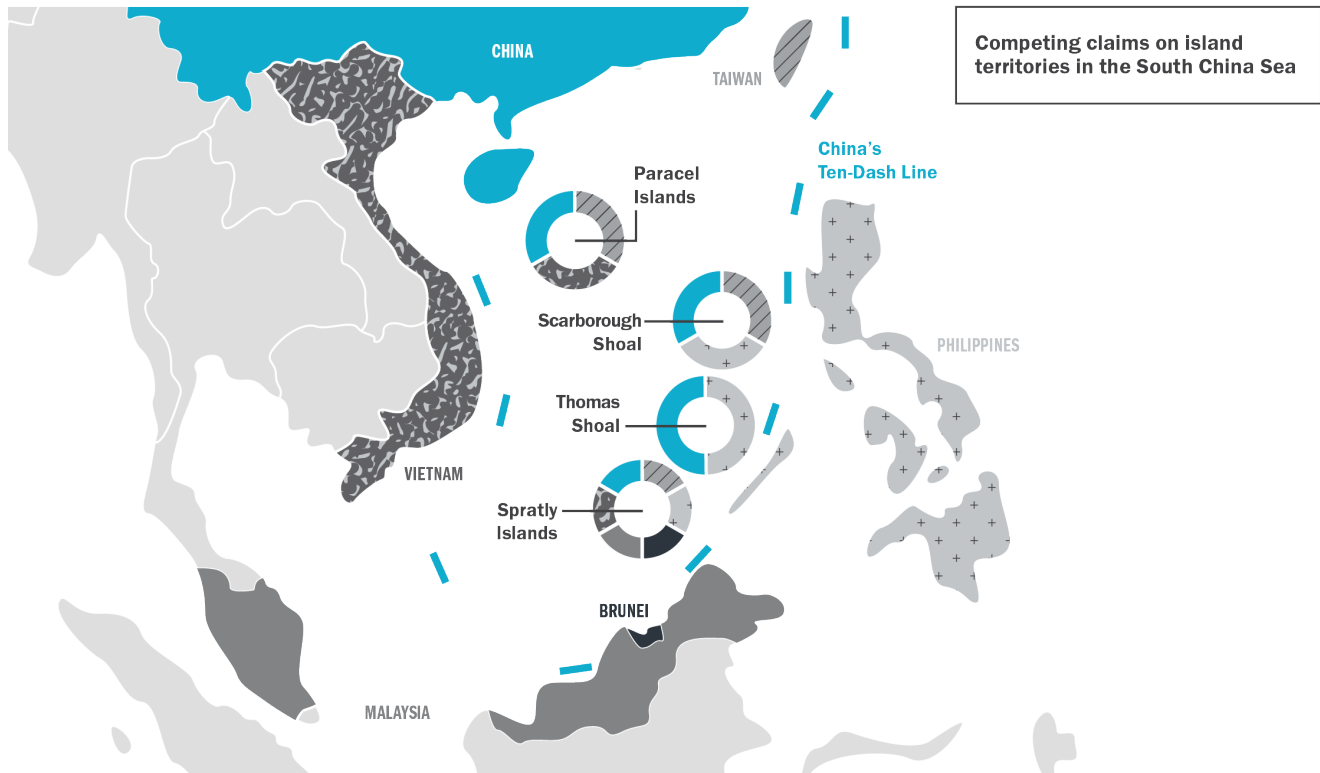
Second, even as it tends to provoke China, primacy encourages allies to under-resource their own armed forces and disincentivizes them from taking primary responsibility for their own security. This applies even to Taiwan, easily the state most endangered by China. Despite a recent boost, Taiwan spends just 2.5 percent of its gross domestic product on its military and has failed to address various deficiencies in its ability to head off a Chinese invasion.⁴³ Its defensive strategy assumes the United States will not only protect it indefinitely but also intervene militarily in the event China seeks to control Taiwan by force.⁴⁴ Similar if less acute dynamics are on display in the other Asian states under the U.S. security umbrella, like Japan and the Philippines. While they are far from inert before the growing Chinese threat, as discussed elsewhere in this paper, they would likely do a great deal more if U.S. assistance were less robust.

Further, the U.S. strategy of primacy and the alliance system underpinning it could encourage reckless behavior from U.S. allies, which may calculate that the United States would automatically come to their defense if they got involved in a crisis. Entrapment or entanglement, where a U.S. ally pursues a risky policy that pulls the United States into a conflict, could result from this kind of moral hazard.⁴⁵ Moreover, the danger of the United States being drawn into a local conflict is high even if the ally in question does not act rashly.

This is especially true in East Asia, where China has a number of territorial and maritime disputes with neighbors that also happen to be U.S. allies.⁴⁶ One of those disputes centers on the Second Thomas Shoal in the South China Sea claimed by both China and the Philippines. The number of incidents between Chinese

and Filipino vessels near the Shoal has increased since 2023 and the United States has warned China that any armed attack on the Philippines' armed forces anywhere in the South China Sea would invoke the 1951 U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty.⁴⁷ By making such a public commitment, the United States increases the chances of the Philippines acting more carelessly near these disputed features.⁴⁸ The United States should act unilaterally to reduce this risk by changing its current policy and stating that Article 4 of the Mutual Defense Treaty does not apply to the Second Thomas Shoal or any other place in the South China Sea where China and the Philippines have conflicting claims.⁴⁹

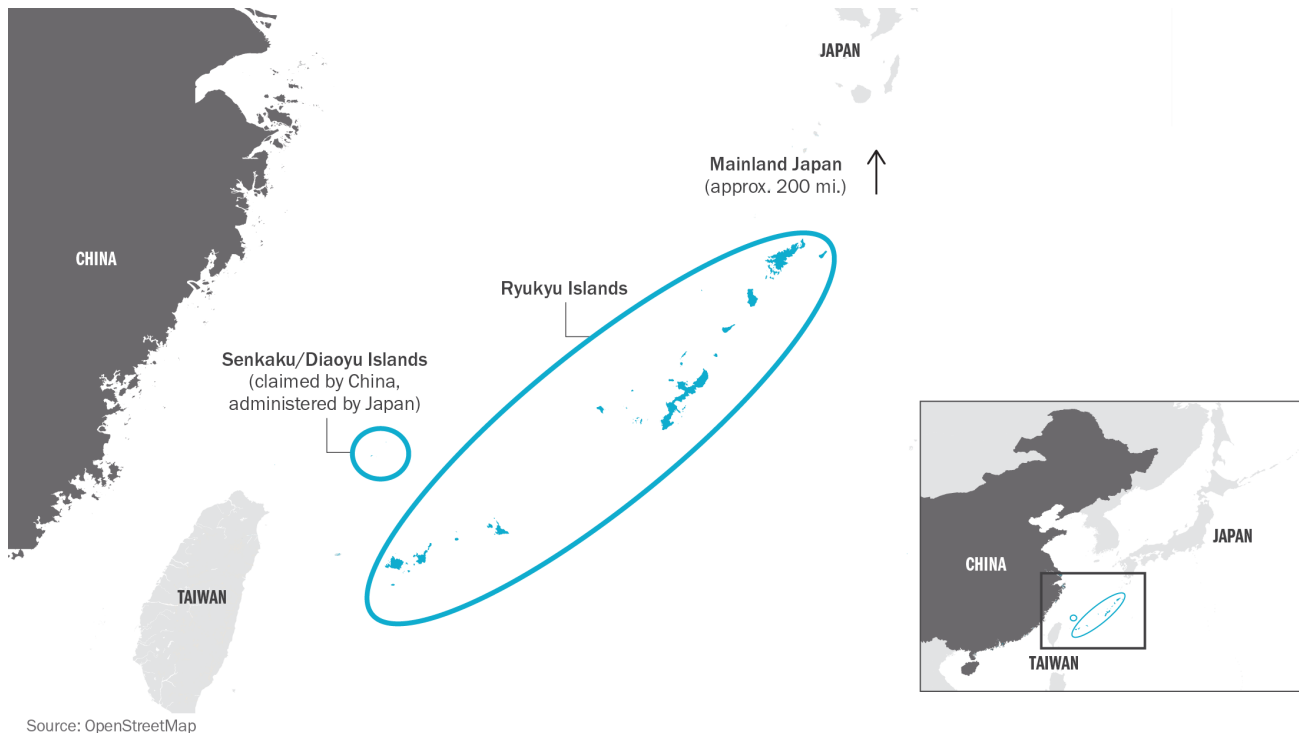
CHINESE TERRITORIAL DISPUTES IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA



Sources: "What is the South China Sea Dispute?" BBC News, July 7, 2023; Colin Clark, "New Chinese 10-Dash Map Sparks Furor Across Indo-Pacific: Vietnam, India, Philippines, Malaysia," *Breaking Defense*, September 1, 2023; Sophie Wushuang Yi "Steadying the Waters: Navigating the Tensions at Second Thomas Shoal," *The Diplomat*, April 4, 2024.

The decades-long dispute over the Japanese-administered Senkaku Islands, which China also claims, provides another example. In October 2023, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin stated that the "ironclad" U.S. treaty-based commitment to defend Japan covered the Senkaku Islands.⁵⁰ Yet the Senkaku Islands remain a point of contention between the PLA and the JSDF. In April 2024 alone, the Japanese and Chinese coast guards mounted patrols in contested waters near the islands and had issued 10 warnings to each other as of mid-2024.⁵¹ In March, Japan claimed that Chinese coast guard ships had entered the waters adjacent to the islands 96 days in a row.⁵² These are not new developments: in 2020, Japan, responding to stepped-up Chinese patrols—1,161 Chinese vessels had entered the islands' contiguous zone by the end of that year—announced that it would increase the number of coast guard ships tasked with patrolling the surrounding waters by nearly 50 percent.⁵³ While China and Japan are wary of escalation, it's unknown whether this restraint will hold in the long term.

JAPANESE ISLANDS IN THE FIRST ISLAND CHAIN



EAST ASIA IS BALANCING ALREADY

Although proponents of primacy fear that any U.S. retrenchment in Asia will compel U.S. allies and partners to appease or align with China, they are more likely to adopt strategies to counterbalance it.⁵⁴ The logic is straightforward: as a state becomes more powerful and ambitious, other states in its region respond by strengthening their own military capabilities and forging partnerships to counter the common threat.⁵⁵

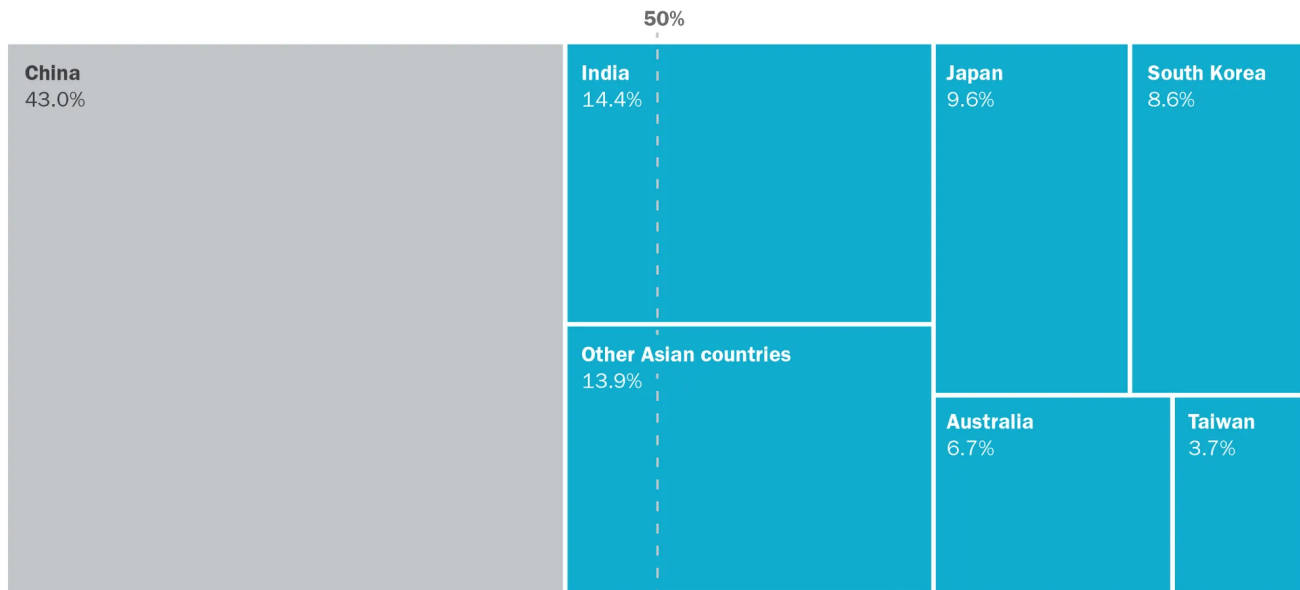
China's neighbors have already begun to adapt to its rise by increasing their defense budgets, acquiring counterstrike capabilities to improve deterrence, deepening military-to-military cooperation through bilateral military access agreements, and conducting routine joint military exercises. This is unsurprising: states tend to join forces when they perceive a common threat.⁵⁶ The greater the perceived threat, the more likely that they will cooperate to counter it.

While the United States has sought to persuade allies and partners in Asia to treat China as a serious, long-term security challenge, the reality is that China's neighbors already recognize that they must act to defend their security interests as China becomes more powerful. A September 2023 survey found that 76 percent of Japanese and 64 percent of South Koreans consider China's power and influence to be a major threat to their security.⁵⁷ Another survey from the same year found that nearly 70 percent of Filipinos have an unfavorable or highly unfavorable view of China, with 64 percent of Filipinos citing China's destabilizing behavior in the region as the primary reason for those feelings.⁵⁸

Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Australia, and Vietnam have all taken measures to address China's rise. Since 2017, the Quad, a four-way partnership between the United States, Japan, India, and Australia, has been an important part of the region's multilateral architecture, albeit one with unclear security relevance so

far.⁵⁹ The Philippines has either signed defense agreements or entered into defense cooperation talks with 18 nations, the most significant of which was its 2023 decision to give the United States expanded access to four additional Filipino military bases, which inevitably drew China's ire.⁶⁰ In January 2024, the Philippines inked a defense deal with Vietnam to improve intelligence links between their respective militaries and strengthen inter-operability between their coast guards.⁶¹

PROPORTIONS OF TOTAL DEFENSE SPENDING IN ASIA



Note: Excludes North Korea, Afghanistan, and Laos for which there is no reliable data

Source: *The Military Balance 2024*, International Institute for Strategic Studies.

Japan has signed reciprocal access agreements with Australia, India, and the Philippines, permitting the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) to visit and train with their Australian, Indian, and Philippine counterparts.⁶² Japan is in discussions with Australia on an agreement that would set rules of the road between their forces during a regional emergency. Japan and India started bilateral naval exercises in 2012 and have signed an agreement on defense technology transfers. In 2017, the two countries conducted joint anti-submarine exercises in the Indian Ocean.⁶³ Japan has also significantly improved its strategic relationship with South Korea after an extended hiatus, although this is likely to come at the cost of North Korea furthering its own strategic relationships with China and Russia as a counterweight.⁶⁴

In response to the growth of Chinese power, India has stepped up defense cooperation with various states in the region, including Vietnam, which has a long history of conflict with China and territorial disputes in the Paracel and Spratly Islands.⁶⁵ In April 2023, after signing a defense contract with the Philippines, India began delivering anti-ship BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles to Manila, which can target vessels up to 180 miles from the coast.⁶⁶ India has also increased defense-related cooperation with Australia, which included the signing in 2020 of the India-Australia Comprehensive Security Partnership.⁶⁷ These steps fall far short of alliance formation but they have the potential to transition into more robust security cooperation depending on how China's foreign policy evolves.

China's behavior is also driving smaller neighbors and regional powers to increase their own defense budgets and accelerate the purchase of major weapons systems. After years in which conventional platforms were prioritized, Taiwan is beginning to procure more of the anti-access and aerial denial systems

(A2/AD) needed to improve its defenses against a Chinese invasion.⁶⁸ Japan's Defense Buildup Program, finalized in December 2022, projects to add an estimated \$315 billion to Japanese defense spending by 2027. India, which is embroiled in an ongoing border dispute with China, recently completed a successful test of its Agni-5 ICBM, which can strike a target 3,100 miles away—well into Chinese territory.⁶⁹ Australia, meanwhile, will spend \$35 billion over the next decade to build its largest navy since World War II, a development motivated in part by Chinese attempts to solidify relationships in the South Pacific, which Australia considers its backyard.⁷⁰

In sum, Asia's middle powers are already taking actions to counter China. This provides the United States with an opportunity to dispense with the pursuit of primacy in East Asia and prioritize offshore balancing, meaning a strategy that relies on regional powers to check the ambitions of potential threats like China.⁷¹

SHIFTING TO A BALANCING APPROACH

This section proposes ideas that can help reduce U.S. involvement in East Asia. The ideas recommended here require other states in the Asia-Pacific to assume greater responsibility for maintaining the regional balance of power. They rest on three principles: minimizing the risks of war with China, reducing U.S. burdens in East Asia, and promoting a more equitable division of labor between the United States and allies like Japan and South Korea.

The first principle involves managing U.S. relations with China and eschewing counterproductive policies that increase the likelihood of a conflict. The second requires thinning out the U.S. troop presence in the region and challenging the prevailing assumption that U.S. forward deployments must be maintained at their current level, or even increased, to prevent Chinese hegemony.

The third principle involves redistributing defense responsibilities to U.S. allies, which will serve as the first line of defense to safeguard the territorial status-quo and reduce the risks of the United States getting embroiled in regional disputes. The prerequisites for South Korea and Japan to assume a leadership role—ample resources and the willingness to do so—already exist. Japan has the world's third largest economy and is a technological powerhouse. With respect to the Korean Peninsula, the power imbalance between South Korea and North Korea favors the former so substantially that the United States can accelerate the process of burden shifting.⁷² This enables the United States to fulfill two objectives simultaneously: maintaining a favorable balance of power in East Asia and producing capable allies rather than security dependents. To this end, the United States could negotiate multi-year agreements that commit its East Asian allies to strengthen the military capabilities that are especially important for their national defense. Or it could adopt a more coercive approach, threatening a U.S. withdrawal absent a substantially greater allied effort.

The recommendations offered are designed to start a discussion about changes to the current U.S. strategy of primacy that, in time, will lead to more cost-effective U.S. policies in East Asia.

MINIMIZE THE RISKS OF WAR WITH CHINA

While the probability of a direct U.S.-China conflict remains low, it's nevertheless a high-impact scenario. In the event of a war, China's growing military might will lead to a massive loss of life on the U.S. side. U.S. military facilities such as the Kadena Air Base in Japan, where 23,000 personnel are stationed, and Camp Humphreys in South Korea are already within range of Chinese intermediate-range ballistic missiles.⁷³ Even



if China's economic growth slows, its material resources will keep increasing, ensuring that a Sino-American war will become ever more deadly. China may not be able to use anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) to prevent U.S. forces from operating within the Second Island Chain, but its armed forces have the capacity to impose a crippling blockade on Taiwan, which is much closer to the Chinese mainland.

CHINESE BALLISTIC MISSILE RANGES



Note: Ranges are approximate.

Sources: U.S. Department of Defense, "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2023: Annual Report to Congress," 2023; Missile Defense Project, "Missiles of China," Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 12, 2021.

China's extensive ballistic missile ranges guarantee that any U.S.-China war would lead to massive loss of life.

China's growing economic, technological, and military capabilities will require the United States to take more risks and incur increasing costs in blood and treasure to project and sustain its forces in East Asia.⁷⁴ The tyranny of distance and military modernization (the greater speed, accuracy, and survivability of missiles in particular) will give China significant advantages in wartime, even if the U.S. were to prevail in the end.⁷⁵ This alone requires that U.S. grand strategy in Asia be guided by the assumption that a war with China must be fought only when vital U.S. national security interests are at stake.

Even then, the United States must balance the need to defend its core interests with the highly destabilizing impacts a war would have. A conventional war with China could escalate rapidly—and even uncontrollably. Both the United States and China may wish to confine themselves to using conventional weapons, but misperception, worst-case thinking, or a desperation to avoid losing—all of which can loom large during conflicts—could lead to the use of nuclear weapons by either side. While some may discount the possibility of nuclear war, U.S. leaders would be derelict in their duty if they did the same. China is likely to regard a conflict with the United States, particularly over Taiwan, as an existential one that necessitates using the full range of China's military capabilities.⁷⁶

Third, a U.S.-China war in East Asia could also lead to “horizontal escalation.” China might decide that, as a matter of self-defense, it cannot limit itself to striking U.S. naval forces projected off its eastern coastline and choose to target U.S. bases that could sustain U.S. military activity, especially those in Japan and South Korea. This, in turn, would confront Japan and South Korea with an unappealing choice: join the United States in a war with China, or bar the United States from using bases on their soil to attack China in an attempt to wall themselves off from Chinese retaliation.

Fortunately, a Chinese invasion is by no means certain. While the PLA’s military modernization is indisputable, it lacks the overseas basing network, at-sea replenishment ships, and aircraft carrier capacity to project power beyond the First Island Chain over a long period of time.⁷⁷ Moreover, China’s economic growth has been slowing.⁷⁸ A war with the United States would make matters much worse.

Even so, the triggers for escalation—including differing perceptions on the East Asian political and economic order, the U.S. determination to maintain primacy, and China’s aspirations to challenge that primacy—are present and will likely become even more prominent. Although tensions in the U.S.-China relationship are highly unlikely to be fully resolved, several commonsense recommendations can help mitigate them:

- Given the growing animosity between China and the United States as well as the increasing number of close encounters between U.S. and Chinese military aircraft in the vicinity of Taiwan, military-to-military communications between both countries should become routine so as to minimize the chances of misperception and escalation. In parallel, the two countries should implement crisis management and confidence-building measures designed to reduce the likelihood of a collision between their ships and planes in and around the Taiwan Strait and elsewhere. Even better, the United States should reduce its military presence along China’s periphery and limit, if not suspend, patrols in the Taiwan Strait, which needlessly antagonize China for no discernable gain.
- The United States should be more cognizant of how deploying offensive weapons systems, in particular long-range missiles, near China’s periphery could exacerbate the security dilemma, encourage worst-case thinking, and even invite preventive war. Offensive weapons, particularly if they can reach strategic targets deep inside mainland China—command-and-control facilities, ICBM silos, and installations related to China’s nuclear weapons apparatus, just to name a few—ultimately promote instability by encouraging an arms race between the United States and China and increasing the prospects of either country striking first during a crisis.⁷⁹ The United States should therefore minimize the deployment of long-range missiles to East Asia or at the very least ensure existing deployments are temporary.
- The United States should refrain from rhetoric and policies aimed at undermining China’s political system. It is beyond U.S. capacity to achieve successful social engineering in large, complex societies such as China’s, and our record in achieving such transformations in other areas of the world—in particular the Middle East—should make us especially leery. Making democracy promotion or regime change an element of U.S. strategy will only deepen China’s suspicion that the United States seeks to destroy the CCP, decreasing the likelihood that the Sino-American rivalry can be managed.
- The 1979 Taiwan Relations Act obligates the United States to provide Taiwan with the means for its self-defense until such time that Beijing and Taipei agree on a path to peaceful reunification. The United States should stick to the letter of the law and avoid actions—diplomatic and military—that would suggest the U.S. military would assume responsibility for defending Taiwan. Creeping toward a formal defense commitment to Taiwan or transitioning to “strategic clarity” will increase the likelihood of war with China by crossing Beijing’s red line on a matter it deems a vital interest.⁸⁰



- The United States should protect itself from unfair Chinese trade practices and limit Chinese investment in industries with clear military applications. But it should also eschew aggressive protectionist policies that segue into economic warfare. These include blanket bans on Chinese investments, sweeping prohibitions on American companies' investments in China, and open-ended measures that go beyond economic necessity designed to damage the Chinese economy as an end in itself. China's economy has become so large and advanced that the pain resulting from economic warfare would not be a one-way affair. Moreover, without the cooperation of other major economies, a strategy of squeezing the Chinese economy will not work, and Europe, Japan, and South Korea have too much to lose to join such an effort.

REBALANCE THE U.S.-SOUTH KOREAN RELATIONSHIP

The United States has substantially reduced its troop presence in South Korea over time—from a post-Korean War high of 75,000 to around 28,500 today—and removed nuclear weapons after the Cold War.⁸¹ But the top U.S. objective on the Korean Peninsula remains the same as when the alliance was first established: to deter and, if necessary, defeat a North Korean attack. That objective is the basis of the 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty, which states that an armed attack against U.S. or South Korean territories in the Pacific region would warrant collective action in line with each state's constitutional processes.⁸²

Some former U.S. officials aim to enlist South Korea into U.S. containment efforts against China, either by encouraging South Korea to be more vocal in denouncing Chinese intimidation of Taiwan or incorporating the South Korean military into U.S. contingency planning for a possible war in East Asia.⁸³ Yet those efforts are unlikely to bear fruit for a number of reasons—South Korea is wary of rupturing or at least jeopardizing relations with China, its largest trading partner; there is no political consensus in South Korea for a radical shift in China policy that involves containing China; and notwithstanding its alliance with the United States, Seoul wants to avoid choosing between the region's two predominant powers in order to prevent being dragged into a U.S.-China war.⁸⁴

With respect to the Korean Peninsula specifically, South Korea's economic, technological, and military power is now adequate to deter North Korea from launching a war and to ensure that it pays a steep price if it initiates an armed confrontation. Although some argue this task is complicated by North Korea's nuclear weapons program and the greater range of its missile inventory, deterrence has been maintained for decades and will continue to be maintained once South Korea takes the lead. Even with a more peripheral U.S. role, North Korea likely assumes the United States would assist South Korea in some capacity if Pyongyang initiated a conventional or nuclear strike. That a large-scale North Korean conventional attack below the 38th parallel has not come to pass is not a surprise; the Kim dynasty understands that going to war against South Korea could precipitate its own destruction.⁸⁵

During the first three decades of the Cold War, the balance of power on the Korean Peninsula was more favorable to North Korea. In 1970, Pyongyang's economy was roughly comparable to Seoul's, North Korea drew economic and military support from two patrons (China and the Soviet Union), and South Korea was experiencing periodic political turmoil.⁸⁶ This is no longer true. North Korea's economy, which stagnated in the 1970s, shrunk even further after the collapse of the Soviet Union. North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has admitted in official speeches that Pyongyang's economic outlook is grim.⁸⁷ In contrast, South Korea has established itself as a leading economic and technological power, with a gross national income 60 times that of its adversary.⁸⁸ North Korea's roughly \$4 billion defense budget is less than one-tenth of what South Korea spends in any given year.⁸⁹



Although South Korea lacks nuclear weapons, it remains under the U.S. nuclear umbrella. It's equipped with state-of-the-art weaponry, has access to advanced U.S. defense equipment—including F-35 joint strike fighter aircraft—and sustains an impressive defense industrial base.⁹⁰ Unlike North Korean ground forces, which are often called upon to perform menial labor tasks, the South Korean military is combat ready due to constant training and military exercises with both the United States and Japan. The South Korean government is projected to spend \$262 billion on defense in the 2024–2028 timeframe, a sum that will pay for the procurement of reconnaissance satellites, submarines, and surface-to-air missile systems.⁹¹

This is not to say that North Korea doesn't pose a threat to South Korea or the U.S. forces deployed there. In March 2023, North Korea launched two cruise missiles from a submarine that military experts believe could strike U.S. bases in South Korea and Okinawa, Japan.⁹² In December 2023, Pyongyang test-fired a solid-fueled intercontinental ballistic missile, a system that could target the continental United States more expeditiously than a liquid-fueled variant.⁹³ North Korean artillery can easily reach Seoul, a city of nearly 10 million people, putting the South Korean capital city—which is only 35 miles away from the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ)—at risk of destruction if hostilities commenced. Such proximity, however, also contributes to deterrence by restraining South Korea from any preventive military action against North Korea.

North Korea's nuclear and missile programs seek to compensate for its Cold War-era vintage conventional forces. Pyongyang's quantitative superiority in tanks is vastly outweighed by its qualitative inferiority. Most North Korean artillery systems were procured before 1990, which raises the question of how reliable they would be in a wartime scenario.⁹⁴ North Korea's air force is stocked with aircraft from the 1950s and 1960s, hobbled by readiness issues and insufficient training, and plagued by a shortage of spare parts.⁹⁵

Pyongyang's signing in June 2024 of a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement with Russia, which includes defense cooperation between the two powers, will not necessarily change the balance of forces.⁹⁶ Russia gets munitions it needs for its war in Ukraine, and North Korea gets some satellite technology and food supplies. Pyongyang's strategic relationship with China, forged in the early days of the Cold War, is likewise less than meets the eye: the North Korean political and military leadership is suspicious of its much larger neighbor. Notwithstanding the 1961 Treaty of Friendship, China is unlikely to intervene militarily in support of North Korea unless it is necessary to prevent a U.S. military presence along the Chinese border.⁹⁷

In short, although it may have been appropriate for the United States to assume an outsize role in South Korea's defense following the Korean War, the balance of power on the Korean Peninsula has changed dramatically since then. South Korea has a massive advantage even without U.S. help.⁹⁸ U.S. policy needs to catch up with this reality:

- The U.S.-South Korea alliance should be re-oriented so that Seoul takes primary responsibility for its own security. Even though South Korea has the world's eleventh largest economy and eleventh largest defense budget, its armed forces would still be under the command of the United States in the event of a war.⁹⁹ This arrangement was justified in the years after the Korean War, when South Korea was trying to repair its economy and rebuild its military; it is no longer appropriate. Instead, the United States should accelerate the transition of operational control (OPCON) of South Korean forces back to the South Korean military, regardless of political resistance in Seoul. Today, OPCON transfer is conditioned on South Korea meeting several military benchmarks, including the possession of sufficient military capabilities and mastering combat leadership at all levels of the military hierarchy. Concerns about whether South Korea has enough ISR assets have consistently slowed the transition but can be addressed by the United States in future defense sales to Seoul.¹⁰⁰ Waiting for the perfect



strategic environment on the Korean Peninsula to emerge before finalizing OPCON transfer will result in perpetual delay.¹⁰¹

- The current U.S. force posture in South Korea is outdated thanks to rising South Korean military power.¹⁰² The United States should take advantage of this by scaling down its troop presence in South Korea—most of which is confined to large bases that would be targets for North Korean missile attacks.
- The United States should be more realistic about what it expects of North Korea on the issue of nuclear weapons. Multiple U.S. administrations have linked improvement of U.S.-North Korea relations to Pyongyang eliminating its nuclear infrastructure. North Korea will never accept such terms because it depends on nuclear weapons for its survival. The benefits of a U.S. normalization of relations, economic sanctions relief, and a formal end to the Korean War wouldn't sufficiently compensate North Korea for the loss of nuclear weapons. Instead of pressing for denuclearization, the United States should adopt several commonsense reforms to U.S. policy. These include establishing confidence-building and risk-reduction measures with North Korea, reiterating to the Kim dynasty that regime change is not U.S. policy, and exploring a new diplomatic process whereby incremental North Korean concessions—a freeze on intermediate or ICBM tests, the suspension of nuclear tests, re-entering the 2018 Comprehensive Military Agreement, an inter-Korean military de-escalation accord—are met with incremental U.S. concessions like formal diplomatic relations, a phased lifting of sanctions and export controls, and U.S. troop reductions in South Korea.

DEVOLVE MORE RESPONSIBILITY TO JAPAN

Japan's long history of military aggression and its constitutional provision against military operations that go beyond self-defense have long been obstacles to its taking on more of the security burden in East Asia. However, Japan has already changed considerably on this front and laid the groundwork for doing more to provide for its defense. The United States should enable this trend by reducing U.S. defense efforts in the region, encouraging the Japanese to step up.

Since World War II, Japan has adhered to what might be called military minimalism: the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) remained small and lacked the capacity to project power far afield as well as the weapons capable of striking distant targets. Annual defense spending never exceeded 1.1 percent of GDP between 1960 and 2021 and in many years was even lower.¹⁰³

Japan's neighbors, including China, Korea, and the Philippines, which suffered grievously at the hands of Imperial Japan's army, harbored a deep-seated fear of Japanese rearmament. Japan was also able to maintain a small army because it could entrust its security to the United States under the terms of the 1951 defense treaty, which was revised in 1960 to give Japan more agency.¹⁰⁴

Still, as its internal and external circumstances have changed, in particular China's increasing power, so have the capabilities and missions of the JSDF—albeit slowly.¹⁰⁵ Starting in the late 1970s, Japan bolstered its navy and air force. In 1978, under the terms of the revised guidelines for defense cooperation with the United States, the JSDF expanded its mission from defending the homeland with U.S. assistance to helping maintain peace in East Asia. In 1981, Japan, encouraged by the United States, undertook to patrol the sealines out to 1,000 nautical miles from its mainland.¹⁰⁶

In 2014, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, in what amounted to a reinterpretation of the Japanese constitution, decided that collective defense involving assistance to an ally under attack was legal, provided

Japanese lives were at stake, the necessary amount of force was used, and no other defensive means were available.¹⁰⁷ This change expanded the JSDF's mission beyond defending Japan's home islands.¹⁰⁸

Yet these changes pale in comparison to those announced in December 2022 with the publication of three important documents: the National Security Strategy, the National Defense Strategy, and the Defense Buildup Program.¹⁰⁹ Taken together, they commit Japan to making unprecedented changes to its defense policy. Within the confines of its alliance with the United States, Japan now aims to take “primary responsibility” for disrupting and defeating an invasion of its territory.

To this end, Japan's defense budget in 2024 was more than \$56 billion, a 20 percent increase since 2014.¹¹⁰ Japan plans to increase its defense spending to 2 percent of its GDP by 2027, and acquire a range of weapons capable of striking the military assets and territory of attackers. The arms envisaged include air-to-surface, surface-to-surface, and air defense missiles; sixth-generation fighter jets; surface, air, and underwater drones; and hypersonic glide vehicles. These “counterstrike” armaments will be complemented by state-of-the-art capabilities in cyberwarfare, satellite surveillance, missile defense, and electronic countermeasures.¹¹¹ Japan has much more to do if it wants to move toward greater military self-sufficiency, but its recent initiatives represent a break with the past and will likely continue as the threat from China increases and the risks associated with defending Japan increase for the United States.

Given Japan's imperial history in Asia, its neighbors will watch these changes warily. But the bottom line is that Japan can do more on the defense front while avoiding past mistakes. The United States' pursuit of primacy is in some ways an effort against Japan completing this shift, preventing it from more energetically balancing Chinese power. That needs to change, and can through the following steps:

- The United States maintains a vast base infrastructure in Japan that hosts 54,000 military personnel, along with 45,000 dependents and 8,000 Defense Department contractors.¹¹² With China's improved long-range strike capabilities, which will continue to increase and become harder to track and intercept, U.S. military installations in Japan—particularly in Okinawa, where there is a mass concentration of U.S. forces—will make for increasingly vulnerable targets in a war-time scenario.¹¹³ The reduction of bases and other military facilities in Japan should proceed in tandem with mutually agreed upon increases in Japanese military capabilities. But Tokyo should not have a veto over U.S. decisions.
- The United States should encourage Tokyo to focus its procurement decisions on acquiring the weapons systems, counterstrike capabilities, and maritime ISR platforms needed to increase the costs that China will have to bear if it attacks Japan.¹¹⁴
- The United States should make clear to Japan that U.S. defense commitments under the bilateral defense treaty do not cover the Senkaku Islands, which are controlled by Japan but claimed by China.¹¹⁵ The United States ought not to risk a confrontation with China to defend these small, sparsely populated territories.¹¹⁶ Japan, and Japan alone, should deter China from seizing the Senkaku Islands and defend them should deterrence fail.
- The United States should encourage defense cooperation among Japan, Australia, India, the Philippines, and Vietnam to promote equilibrium in response to the increase in China's power. The inclusion of Vietnam and the Philippines—which, like India, are also wary of China—will not only allay their concerns about Japanese militarization but also enable them to strengthen their capabilities by gaining access to Japanese defense technology. However, a formal structure akin to NATO should be avoided, as it will be resisted by most of the included states and could cause China to reevaluate its current objection to establishing a formal trilateral grouping with Russia and North Korea.¹¹⁷



DEFENDING U.S. INTERESTS IN EAST ASIA AT ACCEPTABLE COST AND RISK

The United States can defend its interests in East Asia at considerably less cost and risk, even without reevaluating what those interests are. This paper is a call to rethink the principles that have long underpinned the U.S. approach in the region. Seeking military primacy in Asia has led to self-defeating policies that are overly expensive and increasingly risky, heighten the security dilemma dynamics, and prompt China to increase its military capabilities. Primacy has also encouraged U.S. allies to free-ride and could even tempt to take needless risks assuming that the United States will come to their rescue if things go badly. The upshot is that the U.S. could be dragged into a needless war with China—one that could even prove calamitous.

There is an alternative approach, one that will require less from the United States and more from regional allies that long ago developed into front-rank economic and technological powers. They are already doing more to balance China's power and will do far more should the Chinese threat grow. The United States should have the wisdom to encourage them.



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