

Examining America's Treaty and Alliance Structure in the Indo-Pacific

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Abstract

This article examines the political, military, and economic dynamics of the great-power competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China in the Indo-Pacific and how it has impacted the American alliance structure since the beginning of the Cold War. The author reviews the rise of ASEAN (the Association of South East Asian Nations) following the demise of the American-sponsored Southeast Asian Treaty Organization, and the challenges facing the United States in establishing a new multilateral defense treaty organization to confront growing Chinese military assertiveness in the region. The author then compares three potential alliances structures to advance American interests in the region with an eye toward current and emerging strategic landscapes.

Introduction

The *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* issued in December 2017 stated that America is entering a period of great-power competition and calls for seeking, “areas of cooperation with competitors from a position of strength, foremost by ensuring our military power is second to none and fully integrated with our allies and all of our instruments of power.”¹ That same year, the National Security Council through its *U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific* sought to create a whole-of-government approach to “advance American influence” in the region while “advancing American prosperity” and protecting American citizens at home and abroad, “preserving peace through strength.”²

Nearly three years later in its analysis of the “China Challenge,” the State Department's Policy Planning Staff asserted, “The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) aims not merely at preeminence within the established world order...but to fundamentally revise world order, placing the People's Republic of China (PRC) at the center and serving Beijing's authoritarian goals and hegemonic ambitions.”³

US President Biden's *Interim National Security Strategy* unveiled in March claims that China, “is the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system,” and calls the United States to, “reinvigorate and modernize our alliances and partnerships around the world,”

to “hold countries like China to account.”⁴ As the United States reenergizes quadrilateral discussions with Australia, India, and Japan and maintains a close engagement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) to balance China’s growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region, it is critical to evaluate what alliance structure best serves American interests. Is America’s current system of bilateral treaties coupled with cooperation with ASEAN sufficient to further its national security interests in the Indo-Pacific? If not, what adjustments to the current treaty and alliance structure will best secure those interests? Reviewing the progression of American alliances from World War II to the present and the interests of the major powers in the Indo-Pacific provide a firm foundation for weighing the relative pros and cons for different alliance structures to maximize America’s ability to protect its interests in the region.

Of the courses of action the United States could pursue, this article will compare three: maintaining current bilateral defense treaties while continuing to increase military engagements under the auspices of ASEAN; working with existing treaty partners to establish a multilateral defense treaty organization open to broader regional membership; and working with the major powers of the Indo-Pacific to establish a “Concert of Asia” to maintain regional stability in a time of growing great-power competition. Increasing the quantity and quality of military exercises with existing treaty allies while simultaneously expanding military cooperation with other Indo-Pacific nations under the auspices of ASEAN currently provides the best option to protect American interests and to expand its regional influence without dramatically escalating regional tensions. However, continued PRC military overreach may change the calculus of regional partners, providing greater support for the United States to establish a flexible multilateral military alliance structure centered on the nations with which America already enjoys bilateral defense treaties.

American Treaty and Alliance Structures in the Indo-Pacific—Key Context

US–Sino Relations

Though the United States and the CCP cooperated to drive Imperial Japanese forces from mainland China during World War II, leaders from both nations began to view each other as rival competitors after Mao Zedong’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) drove Chiang Kai-shek’s Kuomintang (KMT) Nationalist forces from mainland China to the island of Formosa and established the PRC in 1949.⁵ The United States enjoyed the world’s largest economy, technologically

advanced forces, and posed a clear threat to the PRC's grip on power as General Douglas MacArthur's forces began to push communist Korean forces north of the 38th parallel. As United Nations forces advanced toward the Yalu River that divided the Korean Peninsula from the Chinese mainland, Mao Zedong deployed the PLA to the Peninsula to halt the advance.⁶

Relations between the United States and China did not thaw significantly until President Nixon sought rapprochement by approving the Shanghai Communique, culminating in President Carter signing the Taiwan Relations Act in 1979, and two more joint communiqués between the two nations; these actions transferred formal diplomatic relations from the Republic of China (ROC or commonly known as Taiwan) to the PRC, resting, "upon the expectation that the future of Taiwan will be determined by peaceful means."⁷ American and Chinese relations warmed until the PRC cracked down on pro-democracy protests in Tiananmen Square in 1989. Following the Cold War, the United States sought to encourage the CCP-led government to resume liberalization through economic investment, and to influence the regime to become a responsible stakeholder in regional and international affairs; however, CCP leaders sought to avoid the Soviet Union's mistakes in opening too swiftly to outside influence to preserve the party's power in mainland China. Beijing continues to view the United States as a rival intent on regime change and supportive of transforming the government on Chinese mainland into the image of the democratic government on Taiwan.⁸

RAND Corporation in its analysis of "what competition between the United States and China might entail out to 2050," lays out three broad enduring core interests the PRC uses to guide its grand strategy: preserving the political system and CCP rule; "protecting national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and national unification"; and maintaining conditions for China's continued economic growth and development. PRC public strategy documents and statements clearly view the independence movements in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Tibet, and Xinjiang as threats to their core interests. Whereas, the PRC maintains ambiguity over whether the East China Sea, Senkaku Islands, and South China Sea (SCS) meet the core interest red line. CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping's "China Dream" vision to achieve "national rejuvenation" and overcome two centuries of perceived Western exploitation and interference, prioritizes securing social stability to preserve CCP political control, maintaining and increasing PRC economic development, particularly in science and technology sectors, and modernizing the national defense apparatus to deter and repulse Western interference in core interests.⁹

The seven distinguished authors of the RAND study claim the PRC views its security periphery through four concentric circles and applies different instruments of power to influence the different rings. The inner ring extends from Bei-

ing and encompasses all the territory controlled or claimed by the PRC. Domestic instability is the greatest concern within this ring, but independence movements in Hong Kong and Taiwan would also fall into this ring. The second circle includes the 14 adjacent countries and waterways, including the East China Sea, the Yellow Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and the SCS. The third ring includes the Asia-Pacific region, and the fourth ring encompasses the world beyond the Asia-Pacific. From the PRC perspective, the United States is the nation with the most power to influence its interests across all four rings.¹⁰

The authors of the RAND study also claim the PRC focuses most of its security resources on the inner circle creating a “Stability Management System,” where the government uses its growing technological capabilities to, “supervise and coordinate a bewildering and overlapping range of agencies—including police, surveillance, and propaganda organizations—dedicated to preserving social stability.”¹¹ Within the second ring, the PRC focuses on coercive diplomacy, applying economic and military instruments to change conditions on the ground to legitimize its territorial claims. The PRC pursues “friendly neighbor” diplomacy within the third ring through favorable trade agreements and infrastructure investments. Finally, within the fourth ring, the PRC pursues a “win-win” posture, extending economic opportunities and fostering cultural exchanges to build governmental and popular goodwill to convince the global community that the PRC is a responsible stakeholder while simultaneously expanding the PRC’s economic influence and internal development.¹²

While these various approaches to different rings initially succeeded in the post-Cold War era, increased international scrutiny of human rights abuses within the first ring and the increased use of coercive diplomacy outside the second ring undermines the PRC’s previous friendly neighbor and win-win postures, creating backlash in the international community and providing opportunities for the United States to contest the PRC’s expanding influence.

US Bilateral Treaty Alliances in the Indo-Pacific

Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, two of the United States’ leading international relations scholars, claim that the United States has pursued a grand strategy of “Deep Engagement” since the end of World War II.¹³ They claim Deep Engagement is based on three overlapping objectives: reducing national security threats by promoting security in key regions, particularly Asia, Europe, and the Middle East; increasing prosperity at home by upholding a liberal economic order to expand the global economy; and building and maintaining international institutions to coordinate interstate cooperation in ways that protect US interests. While the United States added to this strategy at times to also promote

democracy abroad, expand human rights protections, and conduct humanitarian interventions, for the most part, Brooks and Wohlforth claim the US Grand Strategy has been consistent for the past 75 years.¹⁴

Guided by this Deep Engagement strategy, the United States helped to establish international institutions such as the United Nations, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (now World Trade Organization), World Bank, and International Monetary Fund to stabilize war-torn nations and rehabilitate the global economy. As a Cold War emerged between the Soviet Union and the United States following World War II, the Truman and Eisenhower Administrations established a set of mutual defense treaties with 45 nations, starting with the Organization of American States to secure the Western Hemisphere in 1947 and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to bolster Europe in 1949. The United States sought to secure the Indo-Pacific region through separate mutual defense treaties with Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and the Philippines in 1951; the Republic of Korea in 1953; Thailand and Pakistan through the South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1955; and with Taiwan in 1955.¹⁵ Though the SEATO and Taiwan Defense Treaties were abrogated in the 1970s, Thailand and Pakistan remained Major Non-NATO Allies (MNNA), and the United States still supports defense commitments with more than 60 nations with the inclusion of MNNA's.¹⁶

To evaluate the optimal alliance structure in the Indo-Pacific region, it is useful to first look at the evolution of the regional security commitments in greater depth. America established its first mutual defense treaty in the region with the Republic of the Philippines on 30 August 1951. The Treaty sought to:

declare publicly and formally their sense of unity and their common determination to defend themselves against external armed attack, so that no potential aggressor could be under the illusion that either of them stands alone in the Pacific Area, and to strengthen their present efforts for collective defense for the preservation of peace and security pending the development of a more comprehensive system of regional security in the Pacific Area.¹⁷

The treaty recognized an armed attack on either party in the Pacific Area as an attack on both and called each nation to, "act to meet the common dangers in accordance with its constitutional processes," until such time as the UN Security Council could take action to restore peace and security.¹⁸ The Truman Administration also signed the Security Treaty Between the United States, Australia, and New Zealand (ANZUS) on 1 September 1951 with identical language to publicly declare unity and strengthen collective defense efforts as well as identical language

on how to respond to an armed attack in the Pacific Area on any of the signatories.¹⁹

America signed a security treaty with Japan on 8 September 1951 that authorized US forces to remain on and around the island nation to deter attack as it rebuilt its defenses following disarmament, but acknowledged that it would start to take a larger role in its self-defense over time.²⁰ In January 1960, the United States and Japan replaced the agreement with a treaty of mutual cooperation and security that recognized, “an armed attack against either Party in the territories under the administration of Japan,” as an attack on both, and followed the same language as the previous Philippine and ANZUS mutual defense treaties for meeting the danger in accordance with constitutional measures until the UN Security Council could restore peace.²¹

Following the armistice agreement that halted the Korean War, the Republic of Korea and the United States signed a mutual defense treaty following the same pattern as the Philippine and ANZUS treaties, but like the 1960 mutual security treaty with Japan, authorized the United States to station troops on the Korean Peninsula. However, since the armistice did not end the state of war with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, the United States added a stipulation that it was not obligated to come to the aid of the Republic of Korea, “except in case of an external armed attack,” on territory the United States recognized as, “lawfully brought under the administrative control of the Republic of Korea.”²²

The United States entered its final bilateral mutual defense treaty in the Indo-Pacific region with the Republic of China (ROC or official name for Taiwan) on 2 December 1954. Though including the same language as the Philippine and ANZUS treaties for taking appropriate constitutional means to respond to an armed attack until the UN Security Council could restore peace, Article II of the treaty also calls both parties to lend assistance to resist, “communist subversive activities directed from without against their territorial integrity and political stability.”²³ Though the *U.S. Taiwan Relations Act* (TRA) of 1979 abrogated the treaty in the expectation that Taiwan and the PRC would determine the future of Taiwan peacefully, and removed official recognition of the ROC government, it maintained that the United States would provide sufficient “defense articles and defense services,” for the island to defend itself. Congress provided Taiwan with the same privileges as other MNNA for foreign military sales and reiterated that PRC efforts to resolve the status of Taiwan through nonpeaceful means, including, “boycotts or embargoes” would be a grave concern to the United States and committed America to, “resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or social or economic system, of the people of Taiwan.”²⁴

The Trump Administration declassified President Reagan's 1982 Six Assurances to Taiwan leaders, reducing strategic ambiguity concerning the status of Taiwan and reiterating to international and domestic audiences America's commitment not to: revise the TRA; set an end date on arms sales to Taiwan; consult with the PRC prior to selling arms to Taiwan; pressure Taiwan to negotiate peace with the PRC; take a position on the sovereignty of Taiwan; and act as a mediator between Taiwan and the PRC.^{25, 26} Though the released information did not reinstate a mutual defense pact with Taiwan, or declare that the United States would militarily support a declaration of independence by the Taiwan government, it underscored that the United States acknowledged, but did not recognize the PRC's version of the "One-China" policy. This declaration also raised PRC suspicions that the United States might still support a return of ROC rule over the Chinese mainland.

Multilateral Treaty Alliances in the Indo-Pacific

SEATO: The only multilateral mutual defense treaty the United States concluded in the region was the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty of 1954 that established SEATO and committed Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, the United Kingdom, and the United States to "coordinate their efforts for collective defense for the preservation of peace and security."²⁷ However, as French and British colonies gained their independence in the region and the United States fought a protracted war in Vietnam without securing SEATO support. Ultimately the members of SEATO voted in September 1975 to disband and closed the Secretariat Headquarters in Bangkok in June 1977..²⁸ SEATO succeeded in deterring direct Soviet or PRC military attack against treaty members; however, the collective defense treaty did not prevent covert communist antagonism throughout the region.²⁹ Though the United States concluded separate security agreements with Thailand and Pakistan, establishing them as MNAs for foreign military sales and security cooperation, it did not draft bilateral mutual defense treaties following SEATO's dissolution in 1977.³⁰

ASEAN: Following Indo-Pacific anticolonial movements and the formal disbanding of SEATO, ASEAN filled an important regional security vacuum. India and Indonesia, as nonaligned powers during the Cold War, opposed SEATO from its foundation and feared that it would lead to destabilizing brinkmanship between the great powers.³¹ Indonesia led efforts to solidify regional resiliency and autonomy working with the nations of Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines to sign a joint declaration in August 1967 to form ASEAN, committing members to, "strengthening the economic and social stability of the region," and ensuring, "their stability and security from external interfer-

ence in any form or manifestation in order to preserve their national identities.”³² The declaration reiterated that existing foreign military bases in member states were temporary.³³

Since ASEAN’s founding, Brunei, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam have also joined the organization, and affirm its 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), which commits parties to:

1. Mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, and national identity of all nations;
2. The right of every State to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion or coercion;
3. Noninterference in the internal affairs of one another;
4. Settlement of differences or disputes by peaceful manner;
5. Renunciation of the threat or use of force; and
6. Effective cooperation among themselves.³⁴

To date, 28 nations beyond the ten ASEAN members have also committed to abide by the TAC, including the PRC, Russia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, and the United States; additionally, in 2016 signatory states agreed that the TAC was, “a key instrument governing relations between States to maintain regional peace and stability,” and that they would, “explore a legally binding instrument building upon the TAC for the wider region.”³⁵

The ASEAN uses several institutions to coordinate TAC party efforts to promote security in the Indo-Pacific. The ASEAN Foreign Minister Meeting (AMM) convenes annually to coordinate efforts on addressing the challenges outlined in the charter, and in 1994 designated the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) as the venue for ASEAN partners, “to bring about a more predictable and constructive pattern of relations in the Asia Pacific.”³⁶ Additionally, the ASEAN Security Community (ASC) committed to Annual ASEAN Defense Minister Meetings (ADMM) in 2006 and began ADMM–Plus engagements in 2010, which now include the nations of Australia, PRC, India, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Russia and the United States. ASEAN core members view the ADMM–Plus engagements as opportunities to build mutual trust, confidence and transparency between nations, focusing on the seven key transnational security issues of: maritime security; counterterrorism; humanitarian assistance and disaster management; peacekeeping operations; military medicine; humanitarian mine action; and cyber security.³⁷ Outside the ASC and ADMM–Plus, the ASEAN established separate dialogues with Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the PRC which it terms ASEAN Plus Three (APT), and maintains a strategic partnership with the United States.

While ASEAN provides many opportunities to cooperate and collaborate on many transregional security issues, its strong focus on the independence of its core members limits the ability of outside global powers, whether Russia, the PRC, or the United States, from individually exercising outsized influence to drive the organization in any specific direction. However, the PRC's recent reef islands building operations, coupled with its continued refusal to recognize the UN Convention on the Law of the Seas tribunal's authority to rule on its economic exclusion zone disputes with the Philippines and Vietnam, encouraged ASEAN members to cooperate more closely with the United States on maritime security. One example included ASEAN's first ten-member maritime exercise with the United States in September 2019. The ASEAN-US Maritime Exercise (AUMX) was first proposed at the ADMM-Plus meeting in 2017 and approved during the ADMM in 2018.³⁸ This first successful AUMX provides a steppingstone to increase the quantity and quality of US military exercises and engagements to address the seven key transnational security issues under the auspices of ASEAN.

The Quad: Beyond ASEAN, the United States recently reenergized quadrilateral security cooperation discussions with India, Australia, and Japan. The "Quad" originated in 2004 out of continued discussions following their coordinated humanitarian relief for the Indian Ocean tsunami. Though the nations held a joint naval exercise in 2007, increased PRC economic cooperation and changing administrations across the Quad members in 2008 decreased the impetus to expand the scope of collaboration. Following increased PRC aggression in the East and South China Seas, Quad members resumed official meetings in November 2017, and resumed combined naval exercises in 2018.³⁹ In October 2020, all members committed to cooperate on: connectivity; infrastructure development; security including counterterrorism; cyber and maritime security; health cooperation; and the stability and prosperity of the region. The Quad also reiterated the central role ASEAN played in settling regional disputes.⁴⁰ However, each of the Quad nations independently follow their own national interests as evidenced by India's joint naval exercise with Russia in December 2020—a month after the Quad's Malabar naval exercise.⁴¹

The United States also increased its combined exercises and operations with treaty allies outside the Quad through 2020–21 to include increased combined US Navy freedom of navigation patrols with the Royal Australian Navy in the SCS.⁴² In January, the US Navy, Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force, Royal Australian Navy, Royal Canadian Navy, and Indian Navy all took part in the "Sea Dragon 2021" antisubmarine maritime exercise at Guam.⁴³ The following month, the US Air Force, Japanese Air Self-Defense Force, and Royal Australia Air Force expanded their annual "Cope North" humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and

large force employment exercise at Guam by integrating F-35 stealth fighters for the first time and expanding the exercise area to include Palau.⁴⁴ The United Kingdom's HMS *Elizabeth* also departed early this year for its first Pacific voyage, deploying F-35 fighter aircraft. The United Kingdom also coordinated joint exercises with Japan in the East China Sea and with the United States in the SCS during this Pacific voyage.⁴⁵ Expanding the quantity and quality of multilateral military exercises and operations with bilateral treaty partners in the Indo-Pacific provides the United States with greater flexibility as it considers strengthening its regional alliance structure.

Economic Dominance

The United States has a range of bilateral defense treaties, security agreements, and multilateral strategic partnerships at its disposal to address the threat posed by an ascendant CCP-ruled China. However, with the collapse of SEATO, and ASEAN efforts to deter great-power competition in the region, the current hub-and-spoke US alliance structure hinders coordinated collective defense in conjunction with all its treaty partners. To determine the optimum alliance structure to maintain security and stability in the region to protect US national interests, it is important to look closer at the interests of the potentially friendly or adversarial nations in the region.

As part of a separate RAND study, Project AIR FORCE researchers in late 2018 and early 2019 interviewed more than one hundred government officials and academic experts from nine Indo-Pacific nations (Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Burma, Vietnam, India, Japan, and Australia) to assess whether the United States or China was winning the competition for influence in the region. Key findings highlight how interviewees from each nation viewed the PRC as having more economic influence and the United States as having more diplomatic and military security influence; however, only Australia particularly prioritized security concerns over economic concerns.⁴⁶

Overall, Southeast Asian nations did not want to be drawn into a bipolar competition between the United States and China, enjoying the economic benefits of association with China, and the security assurances of the liberal-minded United States. However, Southeast Asian nations claimed that Chinese economic influence, through both incentives and coercion, was better able to reduce American diplomatic and military influence rather than the other way around; interviewees from Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, and Vietnam said they were particularly vulnerable to being pulled more closely into the PRC sphere of influence.⁴⁷ Looking more closely at the economic and security postures of these Southeast Asian na-

tions in relation to China and the United States sheds more light on these findings.

In 2019 US Dollars, the United States has the world's largest economy (\$21.3 trillion) followed by China (\$14.3 Trillion) and Japan (\$5.1 trillion). Other large Indo-Pacific economies include India (\$2.9 trillion), Russia (\$1.7 trillion), the Republic of Korea (\$1.6 trillion), Australia (\$1.4 trillion), and Indonesia (\$1.1 trillion).⁴⁸ However, China has the world's largest economy in terms of purchasing power parity (\$25.36 trillion). The PRC is a net exporter (\$2.49 trillion) and the top four nations with which it traded the most in 2019 included the United States (19.2 percent), Hong Kong (12.2 percent), Japan (5.9 percent), and the Republic of Korea (4. percent). The PRC imported \$2.14 trillion of goods in 2018 primarily from the Republic of Korea (9.7 percent), Japan (8.6 percent), the United States (7.3 percent), Germany (5 percent), and Australia (4.9 percent).⁴⁹

As a service economy, the United States is a net importer of manufactured goods with \$1.553 trillion of imports in 2017, primarily from Canada (18.3 percent), Mexico (15.7 percent), China (8.4 percent), and Japan (4.4 percent). By 2019 the balance shifted more dramatically in China's favor, with the United States receiving \$2.361 trillion in imports from China (21.6 percent), Mexico (13.4 percent), Canada (12.8 percent), Japan (5.8 percent), and Germany (5 percent).⁵⁰ This shift provides the PRC with additional leverage over the United States.

In the Indo-Pacific region, the PRC is the top exporter to Burma with 31.4 percent of imports; Singapore 13.9 percent; Thailand 20 percent of imports), Indonesia (23.2 percent of imports), Malaysia (19.9 percent of imports), the Philippines (18.1percent of imports), Vietnam (25.8 percent of imports), India (16.3 percent of imports), Japan (24.5 percent of imports), Australia (22.9 percent of imports), and New Zealand (19 percent of imports). It is also the top market for Burma (36.5 percent of exports), Singapore (14.7 percent of exports), Thailand (12.4 percent of exports), Indonesia (13.6 percent of exports), Australia (33.5 percent of exports), and New Zealand (22.4 percent of exports), and a secondary market for Vietnam (14.5 percent of exports), Malaysia (12.6 percent of exports) and Japan (19 percent of exports).⁵¹

The United States is the top market for Vietnam (20.1 percent of exports), Japan (19.4 percent of exports), and India (15.6 percent of exports) and secondary market for the Philippines (14.6 percent of exports), Thailand (11.2 percent of exports), and Indonesia (10.6 percent of exports).⁵² While the United States also exports to other nations in the region, the volume does not approach China's level of exports to the Indo-Pacific.

The sheer volume of trade China conducts with the United States and its partners provides a powerful tool in influencing how effectively America can apply its diplomatic and military instruments of power to maintain security and stability in the region and protect its national interests. The American alliance structure is an important backstop to achieve both its own Indo-Pacific Vision and the ASEAN Indo-Pacific vision of protecting the territorial sovereignty of individual nations, while maintaining open access to the global trade routes through the region. However, military security is not the only factor influencing US relations in the region. The ten ASEAN nations and 28 additional TAC signatories have interests in prioritizing diplomatic solutions to resolve conflict in the Indo-Pacific region to continue to enjoy the economic benefits of trade with the PRC, deter the PRC from coercing them economically, and deter the United States from escalating to a military conflict with the PRC. These nations have a vested interest in not choosing sides, if they do not have too, but the PRC's economic influence is stronger than US diplomatic and military assurances in their day-to-day calculus.

American Treaty and Alliance Structures for the Indo-Pacific Reimagined

Having reviewed the various interests of key players in the Indo-Pacific region, faculty and professionals with regional and national security strategy expertise from across the Air University Campus gathered to brainstorm different alliance structures along with specific criteria to evaluate the pros and cons of each alliance option.⁵³ Through a moderated discussion, experts generated multiple possible alliance structures ranging from full retrenchment to “Fortress America” and abandoning all overseas commitments, to signing nonaggression pacts with adversarial regional powers, to establishing a comprehensive multilateral defense treaty organization like NATO. Though it is beyond the scope of this article to evaluate each treaty alliance in detail, three courses of action merit greater attention. In the terms of the *Interim National Security Strategy*, each provides the nation with options to:

- protect the security of the American people and expand economic prosperity and opportunity;
- unite the world's democracies to combat threats to free societies; and
- promote a favorable distribution of power to deter and prevent adversaries from directly threatening the United States and our allies, inhibiting access to the global commons, or dominating key regions.⁵⁴

Three Potential Courses of Action

The first course of action is to continue recent efforts to improve upon the status quo which I will define as strengthening existing bilateral mutual defense treaties with Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Japan, and the Republic of Korea, strengthening the MNNA partnerships with Pakistan, Thailand, and Taiwan, and expanding collaboration with ASEAN in general and the Quad nations in particular on the seven key transnational security issues of maritime security, counterterrorism, humanitarian assistance and disaster management, peacekeeping operations, military medicine, humanitarian mine action, and cybersecurity. This course of action will build on the successes of the 2019 ASEAN–US Maritime Exercise, *Malabar 2020*, *Cope North 2021*, and *Sea Dragon 2021* to deliberately improve the quantity and quality of multilateral military exercises and engagements in the Indo-Pacific.

A second course of action would be to seek to combine the existing mutual defense treaties with Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Japan, and the Republic of Korea, to establish a SEATO 2.0 with open membership for MNNA nations (Thailand, Pakistan, and Taiwan), India, and any other interested Indo-Pacific nation to deter PRC aggression. Like the first, this course of action also builds on the success of the 2020 Malabar Exercise and provides options to integrate the Quad nations into other US security agreements. Though historical differences between Pakistan and India, or Japan and the Republic of Korea will prevent the United States from swiftly establishing a comprehensive SEATO 2.0, senior leaders can integrate all the instruments of national power to deliberately expand the alliance with time.

A third, final course of action would be to maintain the current bilateral alliance structure, but to directly engage with the major regional powers, including the PRC and Russia to establish a “Concert of Asia” to solidify norms for regional international behavior and reduce tensions.⁵⁵ While the TAC commits members to respect the sovereignty, and territorial integrity of signatory nations, not to interfere in the internal affairs of other nations and to settle differences peacefully without resorting to force, the treaty is administered under the auspices of ASEAN. A Concert of Asia would provide a recurring forum outside ASEAN’s AMM or the UN Security Council for the major powers, including the PRC and Russia, to resolve territorial disputes and reinforce shared commitments to peace and maintaining the status quo.

Weighing the Pros and Cons

The *Interim National Security Strategy* and the US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific offer criteria to evaluate the potential for each course of action to maximize America's abilities to safeguard its national interests in the region. These criteria include which course action:

- provides the greatest defense for the American people at home and abroad in the region;
- provides the greatest US access and influence to apply all instruments of national power;
- is most likely to garner sustained domestic support;
- is most likely to advance US prosperity;
- prevents the most Indo-Pacific nations from choosing to align against the US or PRC;
- provides the most coordinated response to PRC coercive actions; and/or
- best deters overt PRC military aggression?⁵⁶

Course of Action 1: Expanding on the status quo by increasing the quantity and quality of military exercises and engagements with existing defense treaty allies and MNNA nations while working more closely with ASEAN nations on key transnational security issues, provides future opportunities to improve American defense of the homeland and its citizens in the region. Eventually this option will also help the United States to expand its access and influence to apply all instruments of national power. This course of action's limited increase in additional defense spending is likely to garner long-term domestic support and not compete with other domestic spending priorities that might encumber American prosperity. As a continuation of the status quo trend to gradually increase military engagement with nations across the region, this course of action is not likely to force nations to choose to align against either the United States or China. Additionally, this approach does not dramatically improve America's ability to broadly coordinate a response to coercive PRC activities. As American interoperability with treaty and regional powers expands, its ability to deter PRC regional military aggression eventually will also expand. While this course of action meets all the criteria, it will take a greater amount of time to build a wide, coordinated response to deter and counteract Chinese military aggression and coercive activities.

Course of Action 2: Seeking to combine the existing mutual defense treaties to establish a SEATO 2.0 with open membership to MNNA nations, India, and

other interested Indo-Pacific nations, will increase America's ability to protect its citizens at home and abroad and increase its access and influence to apply its instruments of national power to support treaty nations. As with American commitments to NATO, domestic support for establishing SEATO 2.0 will have to be nurtured, especially if allies are perceived not to be paying their "fair share" of defense costs. The increased defense spending associated with this course of action will compete with other domestic spending, impacting long-term American prosperity, but would be a smaller burden than unilaterally confronting the PRC militarily in the Indo-Pacific. This necessarily causes nations to choose to align against the United States or China in a way the first course of action does not but provides a greater deterrence against PRC aggression and provides greater opportunities to coordinate responses to other forms of coercion. While this option meets most of the criteria, it forces bipolar alignment. China's outsized economic influence, coupled with baggage from Japan's historical imperial aggression across the region, will make it difficult for America to pursue this option in the short term, barring PRC overreach by dramatically increasing military hostilities within the Indo-Pacific.

Course of Action 3: Maintaining the current bilateral alliance structure, while directly engaging with major regional powers, including China and Russia, to establish a "Concert of Asia," could reduce the likelihood of a major, great-power conflict. This could provide for the defense of American citizens at home and abroad while maintaining a justification for the United States to apply its instruments of national power in the region to maintain stability. The Concert of Asia would discourage the United States from expanding its military presence in the region beyond the status quo, driving it to rely more heavily on other instruments of national power. This course of action may enjoy domestic support by decreasing American commitments abroad but diminishing its confrontation of human rights abuses in China or other Concert Powers may lead to decreased domestic support over time. However, the stability could drive decreased defense expenditures, reducing competition for other domestic spending requirements, thus advancing long-term prosperity. If a Concert of Asia functions like the historical Concert of Europe,⁵⁷ balance of power relationships could drive alignment against the United States or China, but the alliances could be more temporary based on the relative power of each member nation. While a Concert of Asia would provide the United States with greater ability to coordinate responses to PRC coercion with its allies, as the Indo-Pacific transforms into spheres of influence among the great powers, the nations that the United States can effectively coordinate with could be limited. A Concert of Asia would create deterrence among the great

powers as they seek balancing relationships but may still encourage minor conflicts as the major powers test the commitments of the alliances within the region.

Recommendations

Based on these results, the first course of action—expanding its participation and leadership through ASEAN institutions while simultaneously expanding the quantity and quality of its military engagements with existing treaty partners—provides the best option to meet the criteria set forth in the *U.S. Interim National Security Strategy*.⁵⁸ As the United States increases the number of freedom of navigation operations with treaty partners and conducts more frequent large-scale force employment exercises, joint forces will gain greater interoperability and confidence in their abilities to deter PRC military aggression and provide confidence to the wider ASEAN community of America's commitment to its allies. Increased exercises and engagements with ASEAN members on all the key transnational security issues will also increase US military interoperability with non-treaty partners in nonkinetic areas that can build the confidence of regional powers in America's commitment and easily translate to greater integration during future crises.

If the PRC escalates its military and economic coercion to coopt ASEAN institutions, and a bipolar alignment of Indo-Pacific nations against either the PRC or United States becomes unavoidable, conditions may become favorable for establishing SEATO 2.0 to better coordinate efforts to counter PRC aggression. While the Biden administration recently secured joint statements from Quad members to cooperate more closely to maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific,⁵⁹ and initiated trilateral discussions with South Korean and Japanese leaders to jointly work with the United States to maintain regional security,⁶⁰ establishing a multilateral security organization will still take more effort and investment. The investments in exercises and engagements made up-front will make this transition easier; operating simultaneously under the auspices of ASEAN and existing treaty alliances prior to PRC military overreach will likely increase the number of potential nations that will be willing to align with the United States. However, many hurdles will continue to make this a long-term endeavor for the United States. The PRC's predominant use of economic power to coerce its neighbors, combined with the misgivings many Indo-Pacific nations have with giving up the economic benefits of trading with the PRC to join a formal military alliance with the United States make it very difficult for the United States to move forward with creating a broad multilateral military alliance in the Indo-Pacific in the near-term. India's long history of nonalignment, coupled with its demonstrated willingness to conduct combined exercises with both Russia and the United States,

reveal that it will be difficult to push the Quad forward as the nucleus of a multi-lateral military alliance in the short term, barring PRC military overreach. Additionally, the PRC effectively exploits regional concerns about joining a military alliance with Japan due to its imperial past. Pushing too quickly with the Quad to the exclusion of treaty allies, such as the Republic of Korea and the Philippines, may push these nations closer into the PRC's orbit if it appears that the United States is aligning too closely with Japan. For all its deterrent value, this option will be difficult in the near-term.

The Concert of Asia has many benefits for maintaining stability and reducing long-term defense expenditures, but it conflicts with US cultural commitments to advancing human rights in a free and open global community, and it relinquishes American leadership in the Indo-Pacific to allow spheres of influence to emerge. Years of US deficit spending and a growing PRC economy if combined with a future economic crisis could force America to dramatically scale its overseas security commitments, making this option more tenable in the future. However, as with the SEATO 2.0 alliance option, it will be difficult for the United States to move forward with implementing a Concert of Asia, barring major changes in both the domestic and international environments.

Conclusion

The United States is entering a period of great-power competition requiring it to “revitalize America’s unmatched network of alliances and partnerships” to “meet today’s challenges from a position of strength.”⁶¹ The US State Department’s warning in November provides added urgency to integrate instruments of national power and to work with allies to prevail in a strategic competition with China in-line with our *Interim National Security Strategy*: “The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) aims not merely at preeminence within the established world order...but to fundamentally revise world order, placing the People’s Republic of China (PRC) at the center and serving Beijing’s authoritarian goals and hegemonic ambitions.”⁶²

The progression of US alliances from World War II to the present and the interests of the major powers in the Indo-Pacific provide a useful context for weighing the relative pros and cons for three different alliance structures to maximize America’s ability to protect its own interests in the region:

- maintaining current bilateral defense treaties while continuing to increase military engagements under the auspices of ASEAN;
- leveraging existing treaties to establish a multilateral defense treaty organization open to wider regional membership; and

- working with the major powers of the Indo-Pacific to establish a “Concert of Asia” to maintain regional stability in a time of growing great-power competition.

While continued military cooperation under the auspices of ASEAN provides opportunities to protect American interests and to expand its regional influence without dramatically escalating regional tensions, PRC military overreach may change the calculus of regional partners, providing greater support for the United States to establish a flexible multilateral military alliance structure centered on the nations with which America already enjoys bilateral defense treaties.

The United States’ current system of bilateral treaties and cooperation with ASEAN provides a strong starting point to confront the Chinese threat. However, American interests in the Indo-Pacific region would be best served by pursuing a more active role in bolstering ASEAN, expanding on the success of the 2019 ASEAN–US Maritime Exercise to pull in Quad members and other TAC signatories to more closely collaborate on maritime security and the other key transnational security issues through existing ASEAN institutions. Should this course of action fail to expand American influence in the region or to deter coercive PRC economic and military action, a graduated course of expanding Quad cooperation to coordinate a response to PRC aggression could be more effective, followed by reestablishing a modern Southeast Asian Treaty Organization construct centered on current US bilateral and MNNAs. The dramatic asymmetry between PRC and US economic influence in the region is the most important factor for determining between courses of action going forward in the near-term, making current and potential allies reluctant to have to align directly with either nation in open hostility. As the United States continues its course working through ASEAN institutions, its nations will advance further down the road to self-reliance and become more resilient to PRC coercion, helping America to achieve its national interests of a free and open Indo-Pacific. 🌟

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