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The U.S. Alliance Network Today:

ALLIANCES IN ASIA TODAY

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America's alliances in Asia have proved remarkably resilient over the last seven decades, and because of this they are usually viewed as permanent features of the region's strategic landscape. For example, the U.S. and Australia have described their relationship as "an unbreakable alliance," and Canberra has called the related AUKUS technology-sharing agreement a "forever partnership." It is unsurprising that national leaders emphasize—even exaggerate—the strength of their alliances. But there are very real risks in doing so: Stephen Walt cautioned against using the "ritual incantation of unifying rhetoric" to judge the strength of an alliance. Instead, he warns that the real "litmus test" comes "when member-states are called upon to do something for each other." This makes it difficult, both methodologically and in practice, to judge the strength of any alliance during peacetime.

In this brief, I argue against two common strategic assumptions/beliefs: that the U.S. alliance system is a permanent feature of Asia's security landscape, and that U.S. allies support and will continue to support confrontational policies towards China. I am not calling a "time of death" for these alliances, but it is folly to assume they will persist without major disruption.

The U.S. Alliance System in a Comparative Perspective

Each of America's alliances in Asia has evolved significantly since its creation in the 1950s. Alliances with Tokyo, Seoul and Manila have changed depending on the risk appetite, domestic politics and regime type of the local ally. Each ally has sought U.S. protection (from China, Russia, and/or North Korea), but has also worked to limit the risks posed by the presence of U.S. forces on their soil. Importantly, these alliances are not an unequivocal 'good' for the Asian ally: they do provide benefits but also impose costs. These alliances have persisted because they were carefully evolved to ensure that the advantages for both parties outweighed the disadvantages.

The U.S.-Japan alliance is the best example of this evolution. From 1951-1960, the remarkably unequal U.S.-Japan Mutual Security Treaty gave Washington the legal right to use bases in Japan—without consulting Tokyo—for any purpose connected to "security in the Far East." But Washington's confrontational approach to China during the First Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1954 created a fear of entrapment in Japan, motivating Tokyo to work towards treaty revision in the mid-1950s. The new alliance treaty, signed in 1960, gave Tokyo the ability to prevent bases on Japan's main islands being used in any war against China. Later, in 1969, the two allies agreed that administrative control of

Okinawa would also revert to the government in Tokyo and thus afford Japan complete control over how its territory could be used by U.S. forces.

These outcomes were not preordained: many in the U.S. government, over several decades, thought that Washington could coerce or even control Japan. In 1958 a senior State Department official contemplated the scenario of a "one-shot air strike," presumably against China, "without Japanese approval." In 1968 the U.S. Ambassador in Tokyo over-estimated Washington's bargaining leverage due to his belief that the Japanese "well know that they have no one else to whom to turn." But Tokyo's hard and determined bargaining forced American officials to revise these assessments, and developed the U.S.-Japan alliance into a more equal relationship.

Though some alliances in Asia evolved, three regional alliances—also signed in the 1950s—did not survive the Cold War intact. The Australia-New Zealand-United States (ANZUS) alliance fractured in the 1980s, when Washington "suspended" its commitment to New Zealand after persistent disagreements over port visits by the U.S. Navy. (The Australia-U.S. and Australia-New Zealand commitments under ANZUS persist today). The Southeast Asian Treaty Organization—which included Thailand, the Philippines, the U.S., the UK, France, Australia, New Zealand, and Pakistan—was the least united post-war alliance in Asia and was obviously ineffective by 1961; it dissolved in 1977. And perhaps most significantly, the U.S.-Republic of China (Taiwan) alliance was abrogated by the U.S. in 1979 as part of the price paid for the normalization of relations between Washington and Beijing.

The Taiwan example is perhaps the clearest evidence that supportive rhetoric cannot be used to judge the strength of an alliance. In 1973 Henry Kissinger vowed that the U.S. was "absolutely firm on our defense commitment to Taiwan." But six years later, President Jimmy Carter would unilaterally abrogate the alliance treaty. Taiwan's Ambassador to the U.S. lamented that "All along, U.S. officials had been telling me they would consult first. What they did was to give our President seven hours' notice." Though Congress later passed the Taiwan Relations Act, this was no substitute for the actual alliance with Taiwan and contains no mutual defense commitment.

These examples illustrate that the alliance system in Asia has never been immutable. It has evolved, expanded and contracted since its creation, and its persistence is due to careful alliance management and diplomacy. The interests, concerns and postures of each ally—including Washington—have varied over time. Understanding how and why alliances change—and to what effect—is essential to understanding the present moment and likely future.

Do U.S. alliances strengthen deterrence?

The strength of an alliance is not merely a simple calculation of combined military might. A strong alliance is one where the members have military power, agree on the goals of the alliance, and agree

on the methods which should be used to achieve those goals. Unfortunately, insufficient attention is given to the goals and methods aspects of alliance strength.

American strategists often fear being seen as 'weak,' or lacking 'resolve,' when dealing with adversaries—a trait that has strong roots in the Cold War. This sometimes transmutes into an assumption that Asian allies share these fears, especially when dealing with China. But no ally—not even those most concerned about China—worries *only* about the risks of American weakness. They also worry about unnecessary American provocation of China. The visit of then-Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan in 2022 is illustrative. Some in the U.S. thought that a cancellation of her trip would have been, as Bret Stephens wrote in the *New York Times*, "catastrophic…it would have hastened a strategic disaster." But in Asia, Pelosi's trip was seen as an unforced error: U.S. allies quietly signaled their disapproval, and even usually hawkish commentators described the visit as an "own goal" and "not a strategic benefit."

During every Cold War confrontation with China, senior American leaders were far too worried about the consequences of appearing weak in front of adversaries and allies. Sometimes, this feeling blinded them to the reality that their allies were predominantly concerned about the risks of American action, not inaction. This creates a dilemma for Washington: it must grapple with the possibility that in a crisis over Taiwan, its closest allies in Asia may withhold support. And as one American official warned, the U.S. "could not go to war with China without Japan."

This is not to say that U.S. allies in Asia *only* fear 'entrapment'—being dragged into a Sino-U.S. war they'd prefer to avoid. They also worry about 'abandonment'—that the U.S. will not support them in a security crisis, or will cut a 'grand bargain' with China that dismisses or ignores allied concerns. Fearing both abandonment and entrapment simultaneously is unusual, and most theorists of military alliances do not consider this possibility. But again, there is historical precedent: when President Lyndon B. Johnson announced he would open negotiations with Communist North Vietnam, Tokyo's longstanding fear about the Vietnam War spreading into a regional conflict was complemented by the worry that Washington might withdraw from Vietnam and subsequently revise its entire Asia policy.

Where are the key friction points for these U.S. alliances?

American strategists have no shortage of ideas about how to craft a new China strategy. The common element is that these ideas rely upon the entire system of U.S. allies in Asia. Kurt Campbell and Rushi Doshi propose the creation of a "coherent and interoperable bloc…[which] would generate aggregate advantages that China cannot match alone." Ely Ratner suggests the signing of a "collective defense pact…[to prevent] a China-led order that relegates the United States to the rank of a diminished continental power."

But there are few indications that U.S. allies in Asia are eager to sign on to such strategies. When allies simultaneously fear abandonment *and* entrapment, the preferred strategy is often patience: to wait until the greater risk, and wisest policy choices, become obvious. The most recent, and perhaps important, piece of data is that Japan and Australia have resisted demands to commit, in advance, to support an American defense of Taiwan.

This environment of strategic uncertainty—exacerbated, but not caused, by the unpredictability of the Trump administration—means that 'everything is on the table' for U.S. alliances in Asia. The extreme options include a coalition war against China, the gradual disintegration of long-standing relationships due to centrifugal cycles of distrust, the striking of a G2 'grand bargain' between Beijing and Washington, or the sudden rupture of alliances as allies decide not to fight China alongside America.

No U.S. ally wants China to dominate Asia, China to seize Taiwan, the U.S. to leave Asia, or the U.S. to strike a deal with China that sacrifices allied interests. But none of these possibilities is the true nightmare scenario, which remains a major Sino-U.S. war with heightened risks of nuclear weapons use.

Such a scenario could influence broader alliance dynamics in the region. If U.S. allies distance themselves from Washington in an effort to reduce the risk of such a conflict, then the external influences prompting greater alignment between Beijing, Moscow, and Pyongyang could decline. It is conceivable that U.S. allies in Asia—if they need to restrain Washington's confrontational impulses to reduce the risk of Sino-U.S. conflict—could undercut any defensive rationale for this authoritarian alignment.