



# The U.S. Alliance Network Today:

## THE ENDURING STRATEGIC VALUE OF U.S. ALLIANCES IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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One of the most distinctive features of U.S. grand strategy in Asia is the “hub-and-spokes” system of bilateral alliances that Washington established in the early 1950s. Unlike the multilateral North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) formed with European partners, the United States pursued in Asia formal bilateral alliances with Japan, Australia (and New Zealand), the Philippines, and South Korea to counter the threat of communism. Over the past seven decades, U.S. bilateral alliances have become embedded in Asia’s institutional security architecture, providing stability and deterrence in the region and offering a mechanism for reassurance to U.S. allies and partners. Today, however, U.S. allies are facing pressure from the Trump administration as the United States adopts an “America-first” foreign policy agenda. U.S. adversaries, meanwhile, such as Beijing, have criticized bilateral alliances as a “Cold War relic” aimed at encircling China.

Still, in an era of intensifying geopolitical competition, Washington’s allies and partners remain among its most valuable strategic assets. Deterring Chinese aggression and safeguarding U.S. security and commercial interests will depend on sustained access to overseas bases, intelligence sharing, joint defense-industrial cooperation, and close diplomatic coordination with allies and partners in the region. Building on the premise that U.S. alliances are essential to preserving America’s competitive edge vis-à-vis peer rivals, this policy brief examines: (1) the nature of U.S. alliances in comparative perspective; (2) the main drivers of U.S. alliance formation, persistence, and adaptation; and (3) the utility and effectiveness of allies for regional deterrence.

### The U.S. Alliance System in a Comparative Perspective

U.S. alliances are not unique in international politics, but the network of alliances established by Washington after World War II, which constitutes and reflects the postwar liberal international order, differs in important respects from past alliance arrangements. First, unlike most alliances prior to the Cold War, U.S. alliances are formalized through mutual defense treaties that legally obligate each party to come to the defense of the other in the event of an armed attack or invasion.

Second, although U.S. alliances (especially bilateral alliances in Asia) were highly asymmetric during the Cold War, in the post-Cold War era they have come to exhibit a remarkable degree of formal equality despite underlying power disparities. To be sure, these alliances remain hierarchical in practice. In principle, however, Washington negotiates with its allies in good faith and takes into account allied preferences, even if allies remain far weaker than the United States. By contrast, late

nineteenth- and early twentieth-century alliances did not operate under equal terms unless they were formed between states with broadly comparable power (e.g., Britain and France; Germany and Austria-Hungary).

Third, U.S. alliances have enabled the United States to station military forces on allied territory on a long-term if not permanent basis. Although the Soviet Union also stationed troops and maintained bases in satellite and other communist states (e.g., in Eastern Europe or Cambodia), these arrangements were imperial in character, or—under post-Cold War Russia—highly transactional. U.S. basing arrangements are hierarchical to some degree and also require negotiating with host governments. But bases located in democratic allied countries enjoy greater domestic legitimacy and are therefore less vulnerable to political backlash.

No other country today has an alliance network comparable to that of the United States. China is perhaps the only country potentially capable of developing a network of alliances, but Beijing has resisted building traditional alliances for both ideological and pragmatic reasons. Chinese leaders have disavowed formal alliances as outdated and promoting a Cold War bloc mentality resulting in regional tension. To date, North Korea remains China's only formal ally.

Rather than replicating the U.S. alliance system, China prefers to develop less formal strategic partnerships that offer diplomatic flexibility. In recent years, however, Beijing has increased its strategic partnerships, particularly with developing nations and other autocracies. It has also enhanced military cooperation with Russia, Pakistan, and Iran. Most notably, Beijing formed a “no-limits” partnership with Moscow just prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. By forging alternative partnerships and using its economic leverage through projects under the Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing is building its own network of partners to expand its influence while weakening that of the United States.

## Alliance Durability and Flexibility

The formation, durability, and flexibility of U.S. alliances are based on shared threat perceptions, mutual interests, long-standing institutional ties, people-to-people networks, and common values. Methodologically, the degree of alliance cohesion can be measured by examining the frequency of bilateral agreements, meetings, and joint exercises annually as well as the quality and content of joint statements. Alliances are initially formed between two actors to balance against common threats.

Over time, they become institutionalized, generating asset specificity through shared investments in military hardware, weapons platforms, and information systems, which help ‘lock-in’ alliance members. Asset specificity, including the transfer or co-production of weapons, provides a more meaningful measure of operational integration than allied statements. Finally, shared norms, values, and ideology, although not necessary conditions for alliance durability, offer alliances greater flexibility amid differences.



For example, at the [height of anti-American sentiment](#) in South Korea in the early 2000s—and despite differing assessments of the North Korean threat—Seoul and Washington were able to manage differences by framing the alliance as one [grounded](#) in “common values, principles, and strategy.” In a 2003 [joint leaders statement](#), the two governments [pledged](#) to “work together to promote the values of democracy, human rights and market economy shared by the people of both nations and to build a comprehensive and dynamic alliance relationship.” In particular, [democratic states](#) initially united by common threats may develop an [alliance identity](#) over time, which helps to build trust. By subscribing to [norms and principles](#) that permit greater dialogue and more transparent decision-making, alliances are able to overcome internal differences. The transformation of the U.S.-South Korean alliance in the mid-2000s following ten rounds of “[future of the alliance](#)” talks offers one such example. More recently, under the rubric of “[alliance modernization](#),” Seoul and Washington held multiple rounds of bilateral trade negotiations and defense discussions in 2025 which resulted in a joint “[fact sheet](#)” that helped avert an alliance crisis.

At present, the durability of U.S. alliances is being tested more from within the United States than from external threats. The rise of MAGA and the growing influence of foreign policy “[restrainers](#)” have created uncertainty in Asian capitals about U.S. commitments to allies. Trump’s depiction of allies as free-riders and the erosion of the postwar bipartisan consensus on alliances have prompted allies to contemplate a regional order less dependent on the United States. U.S. unpredictability—driven by strategic incoherence between the president and the bureaucracy, intensifying polarization, and democratic backsliding—has further weakened alliances by casting doubt on American reliability. Questions about [alliance credibility](#) and whether the United States would defend South Korea, Japan, or Taiwan existed during the first Trump administration, but they have become markedly more acute in his second term.

For now, allies, such as Japan and South Korea, have satisfied Trump’s demands, pledging to boost defense spending, enhance their own defense capabilities, and invest hundreds of billions of dollars in the United States. Chinese assertiveness and North Korean nuclear threats provide a rationale for keeping U.S. alliances in Asia intact. But U.S. support for allies cannot be taken for granted, as demonstrated by [the rift](#) between the United States and NATO over Greenland, and also the lack of consultation with allies prior to attacking Venezuela and Iran. In the meantime, Asian allies may seek out issue-based coalitions or continue to strengthen existing partnerships that connect the “spokes” to the U.S. alliance system. Positive gestures between Seoul and Tokyo to improve their bilateral relationship offer a recent example of U.S. allies working together.

## U.S. Allies and Regional Deterrence

Alliances enable the United States to maintain significant force presence in East Asia, enhancing regional deterrence and giving Washington a durable strategic advantage over Beijing. Amid U.S.-

China competition, and despite ongoing conflict in the Middle East, it remains in Washington's interest to sustain Indo-Pacific alliances. The [expansion](#) of the PLAN and its aircraft carrier fleet, increased overseas access through [dual-use ports](#), and investments in advanced weapons systems and C4I capabilities will make it more difficult for the United States to [deter China on its own](#). Likewise, in the absence of Washington's support, U.S. allies in Asia will be unable to deter China within the first island chain, even if they increase defense spending and act in concert.

On the Korean Peninsula, U.S. and South Korean forces under the Combined Forces Command have successfully deterred North Korea from launching another invasion. Although the United States provides extended nuclear deterrence over its allies, South Korea and Japan's support remains crucial in deterring North Korea—and China—from taking more coercive actions in the region. Intelligence sharing, joint exercises, and the implementation of real-time ballistic missile warning systems have prepared the United States and its allies for conflict scenarios in the region. In the event of a Taiwan Strait conflict, for instance, should the U.S. deploy U.S. Forces, Korea (USFK) closer to Taiwan, the United States could rely on [South Korean forces](#) to deter North Korea conventionally. South Korea could [provide](#) rear-area support, including intelligence sharing and assistance on non-combat evacuations from Taiwan. It could also provide logistical support by supporting refueling operations for U.S. naval and air assets. Beyond these measures, South Korea might supply precision-guided weapons—including cruise missiles, Stinger missiles, and Javelins—to the United States to help replenish munitions provided to Taiwan. Diplomatically, Seoul might quietly consult with Tokyo over cooperation on Taiwan.

In addition to offering military and logistical support, in the future, allies may increasingly work with the United States to help co-produce weapons and boost the U.S. defense industrial base. Recent [agreements on shipbuilding](#) between Washington and Seoul, as well as maintenance, repair, and overhaul (MRO) [contracts on U.S. Navy vessels](#) with South Korean shipbuilders, illustrate how allies can help fill U.S. gaps in its own defense industrial base.

## Conclusion

U.S. alliances in the Indo-Pacific remain a foundational source of American power, providing deterrence, operational access, and strategic flexibility that neither the United States nor its allies could generate independently. There is merit in [pressing allies](#) to increase defense spending, shoulder a greater share of alliance burdens, and assume more responsibility for regional security. But the United States must remain committed to the defense of its allies and to deterrence in order to safeguard its own regional interests. How Washington manages its alliances will therefore shape not only regional stability but also the future balance of power in Asia.