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LESSONS FROM THE COLD WAR AND MIDDLE EAST

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The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as arguably the top U.S. national security priority. Prominent analysts have expressed worry that, left unchecked, China could eventually achieve regional hegemony in the area—a development that would have major implications for U.S. security. For most writers, the fate of Taiwan is of particular concern, and the most likely cause of conflict between China and the United States. Given the key role that alliances have traditionally played in U.S. strategy in the Indo-Pacific theater, it is of fundamental importance to examine their characteristics to generate core policy insights.

American Alliances in the Indo-Pacific Region: An Historical Perspective

The strategic partnership that the United States and China struck in the early 1970s was never terribly deep, with some analysts referring to the alignment that grew out of President Richard Nixon's 1972 visit to China as a "quasi-alliance." The relationship, in other words, approximated how many realist scholars characterize alliances: a "temporary marriage of convenience." For Beijing, the main motivation behind the convergence with Washington was its security concerns about the Soviet Union, particularly as the Sino-Soviet split intensified in the late 1960s. The United States, likewise, saw an opportunity to capitalize on Sino-Soviet tensions and force Moscow to worry about its interests in the East at a time when top U.S. officials—and especially Nixon and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger—were worried about the U.S. ability to defend its interests elsewhere. But there was relatively little holding the U.S.-Chinese strategic partnership together beyond the two countries' shared perception of the Soviet threat, such that the decline in U.S.-Chinese relations since the end of the Cold War is not terribly surprising.

Washington's alliances with Japan and South Korea are of a somewhat different character. The U.S. Cold War partnership with Beijing was never elevated to the level of a formalized mutual security pact, whereas the United States has had such treaties in place with Japan and South Korea since 1951 and 1953, respectively. More fundamentally, Washington's alliances with Tokyo and Seoul have traditionally aimed at securing goals beyond simply maintaining an equilibrium of power. These alignments are asymmetric in character, a feature which oftentimes suggests there are factors at play beyond merely balancing against mutual threats. In this respect, American nonproliferation policy

looms large, for the United States has historically sought to use extended deterrence to convince Tokyo and Seoul, respectively, to abjure independent nuclear capabilities.

The Ties That Bind (and Fray)

The main factors sustaining Washington's alliances with Tokyo and Seoul are the same ones that led to their establishment in the first place. For Japan and South Korea, their U.S. connection helps ensure their security against regional threats, especially China and North Korea. Likewise, the basic power political calculation on the American side remains largely the same—maintaining stability and preventing the rise of a single power that could dominate the Indo-Pacific. Or, as Secretary of Defense James Mattis reportedly explained to President Donald Trump in 2018, when the president asked why the United States needed to have troops on the Korean Peninsula, the American aim is still to "prevent World War III."

In some ways, the forces sustaining the U.S. alliance network in the Indo-Pacific have grown stronger in recent years. In this respect, the rising geopolitical importance of Taiwan is likely the most noteworthy development of the post-Cold War period. The island's strategic significance has grown in recent decades primarily for three reasons. First, as the global distribution of power has shifted against the United States, the longstanding U.S. commitment to Taiwan, though always deliberately ambiguous, has engaged American credibility, making it somewhat analogous to West Berlin during the Cold War. Second, the island has become a critical chokepoint in the global semiconductor supply chain, with Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company producing a majority of the world's semiconductors, including roughly 90 percent of its most advanced chips. Finally, some analysts believe that a Chinese takeover of Taiwan would seriously compromise the First Island Chain, with the result that China might gain the ability to project power far more capably throughout the whole of the Indo-Pacific.

It is unlikely that South Korea and Japan would want to revise fundamentally the nature of their respective alliances with the United States. After all, their vital interests would be directly implicated if Beijing were able to dominate the Indo-Pacific. Indeed, Japan's prime minister, Sanae Takaichi, declared in November 2025 that a Chinese effort to blockade or seize Taiwan "could constitute an existential threat."

Matters appear more unsettled on the U.S. side. Although certain American policymakers consider Taiwan a vital interest, not all strategists share that assessment. Trump himself has questioned the value of U.S. alliances and suggested that it would not be such a bad thing if Japan and South Korea acquired nuclear weapons of their own. To be sure, the administration approved an $11 billion arms sale to Taiwan in December 2025, the largest package between Washington and Taipei ever negotiated. But such a move could signal that Trump has decided to try to turn Taiwan into a strategic

“porcupine,” rather than have the United States be responsible for its defense, especially since the White House subsequently delayed the delivery of the weapons to avoid jeopardizing the success of Trump’s scheduled visit to China. The president, unlike his predecessor, President Joe Biden, has, after all, been far from clear about how he would respond if China attempted to capture the island. Also significant is the American public’s potentially declining appetite for taking on foreign commitments, which accounts for the popularity of Trump’s “America First” rhetoric with certain segments of the U.S. body politic.

The final factor likely to shape alliance politics in the area is intra-coalition tensions, some of which are particular to the U.S.-Japanese-South Korean triangular relationship, and some of which are common in many strategic partnerships. With respect to the former, perhaps the most obvious problem is the fact that Seoul and Tokyo, owing to the resentment engendered by Japanese atrocities committed during the Second World War, have a relationship that frequently comes under tension. An additional challenge, one that exists to varying degrees in every alliance, is the degree to which American, Japanese, and South Korean interests do not entirely overlap. All three countries must grapple with what Glenn Snyder calls the “security dilemma” of alliance politics, which refers to the varying degrees to which members of a coalition must worry about “entrapment” on the one hand and “abandonment” on the other. Furthermore, the United States, Japan, and South Korea do not necessarily assess threats in the same way. Seoul, for example, probably worries about the danger posed by North Korea more than Washington and Japan do, whereas the latter two countries prioritize to a greater degree the threat that China poses.

U.S. Alliances in the Indo-Pacific and Middle East: A Comparison

U.S. bilateral partnerships—not just with Japan and South Korea, but potentially also with a number of other key players, such as Australia, India, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam—enhance deterrence primarily in two ways. The first has to do with burden-sharing. Washington’s regional allies, and especially Japan and South Korea, are economically powerful and, to varying degrees, possess military-industrial capabilities that can be useful as part of a U.S.-led coalition aimed at counterbalancing Chinese power. The second relates to basing and geographic access to the region. To prosecute a major war in the Indo-Pacific, the United States will require the cooperation of its main allies to have adequate power-projection capabilities.

There are, nevertheless, potential tradeoffs facing the United States as it attempts to formulate an optimal defense posture in conjunction with its allies in the Indo-Pacific. In addition to the possibility that Washington could be dragged into a major war in the region, efforts to strengthen its partners could generate a moral hazard problem. In this respect, perhaps the most troubling scenario would

involve a decision by Taiwan to declare its independence. There is also, of course, an opportunity cost to increased American support of its allies and involvement in the Indo-Pacific.

To illustrate further the value of Washington's alliances in the Indo-Pacific, it is perhaps useful to compare and contrast them with U.S. partnerships in another key geopolitical theater—the Middle East. Like the U.S.-Chinese relationship after 1972, much of American policy in the region during the Cold War was driven by the goal of containing the Soviet Union. Washington's alliances with Turkey, which became a member of NATO in 1952, and with Iran prior to the 1979 revolution, had their origins in U.S. support for Ankara and Tehran, respectively, against Soviet pressure in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. The Nixon administration's "Twin Pillar" policy of supporting Iran and Saudi Arabia was similarly motivated by the White House's desire to delegate responsibility for maintaining a balance of power in the Persian Gulf to regional partners at a time when, due to the Vietnam War, the United States was not well positioned to provide security to the area. Likewise, Washington considered the reversal under President Anwar Sadat of the Cold War orientation of Egypt—which had been aligned with Moscow under Sadat's predecessor, Gamal Abdel Nasser—an important political victory.

But the United States had two other main strategic objectives in the Middle East that went beyond containment. The first of these was maintaining the free flow of oil from the Persian Gulf. In this respect, Washington's most important partners were Iran and Saudi Arabia—indeed, it was arguably the American interest in the latter country's petroleum resources that brought the United States into the Middle East in the first place, with many analysts highlighting the February 1945 meeting between President Franklin Roosevelt and Saudi King Ibn Saud, during which the two countries struck a bargain involving the provision of American security assistance in exchange for access to Saudi oil, as one of the key moments marking U.S. entry into the region. Thus, somewhat in contrast to the Indo-Pacific, a key reason for the establishment of the American alliance network in the Middle East had to do with maintaining access to an important strategic commodity.

The other key U.S. interest in the region had to do with the security of Israel. Contrary to some accounts, the American relationship with Jerusalem was not primarily a function of geopolitical considerations. To the contrary, top strategists tended to think, in purely power political terms, that Israel, if anything, complicated the U.S. position in the Middle East. The idea that American and Israeli interests were identical, Kissinger believed, was "not exactly so." Aside from the fact that the United States had to remain concerned about a potential confrontation with the Soviet Union erupting as a result of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the American interest in Israel's survival did not negate Washington's "interest in the 130 million Arabs that sit athwart the world's oil supplies." "The strength of Israel," he asserted, "is needed for its own survival but not to prevent the spread of communism in the Arab world. So it doesn't necessarily help U.S. global interests as far as the Middle East is concerned. The

survival of Israel has sentimental importance to the United States, but believe me it is not easy to maintain this.” Instead, Israel was seen as “a special case” because “there is a long-standing national consensus that we have a basic interest in Israel’s survival.” In fact, Washington’s interest in maintaining good relations with certain countries in the Arab world, such as Egypt and Jordan, was to some extent a function of its concern with ensuring Israel’s security for its own sake. The U.S.-Israeli special relationship, in other words, had to do with factors largely unrelated to strategic considerations, which arguably represents a key difference from how the United States has tended to approach its alliances in the Indo-Pacific.

There are likewise similarities and differences between how the United States views the role and value of its alliances in the Indo-Pacific and in the Middle East in the current period. In the Persian Gulf region, Iran in certain respects resembles, from a U.S. national security perspective, China in East Asia: a former strategic partner turned rival with ambitions to become the dominant power in a critically important geopolitical area. Additionally, Tehran’s neighbors might not be capable of balancing Iranian power entirely on their own, just as Beijing’s neighbors would likely be vulnerable if they were not backed by the United States. Particularly since 2003, when the United States overthrew a major Iranian adversary—the regime of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein—the Islamic Republic’s position in the Middle East has been strengthened. And as is the case in the Indo-Pacific, intra-alliance tensions and competing interests among Washington’s partners complicate the task facing the United States, even if the unifying threat of Iran has in recent years facilitated to a certain degree greater cooperation among them.

To be sure, many American officials would love to downgrade the importance of the Middle East in U.S. grand strategy by passing the buck to Washington’s regional allies, in great part to be able to devote more resources to the Indo-Pacific theater. But succeeding administrations have struggled, at least since the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, to identify a method for effectively balancing Iranian power in the region without the direct application of American military force, a task that would presumably become even more difficult if the Islamic Republic were to succeed in acquiring nuclear weapons. Put simply, the United States lacks strong, reliable, and unified partners in the Middle East that can shoulder the burden of balancing Iran: Tehran has emerged as one of the premier outside powers in Iraq, meaning the latter cannot play the same role that it did during the 1980s; Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey are geographically distant from the Persian Gulf and/or not as interested as Washington is in confronting Iran; and the Gulf Arab monarchies, though they see themselves as vulnerable to Iranian threats, are probably not strong enough to provide an effective counterweight in the region, even if countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates possess some military capability of their own. The main similarity between how U.S. officials value allies in the Indo-Pacific and the Middle East, then, largely has to do with fundamental political considerations and the basing access they provide for U.S. forces.

As for Israel—a country roughly the size of New Jersey—it is simply not strong enough to balance Iran on its own, its impressive fighting forces notwithstanding. More importantly, Israel's inability to reach a peace settlement with the Palestinians has put the creation of a region-wide counterbalancing coalition out of reach, which complicates significantly Washington's goal of crafting a stable security system in the Middle East, and is one key reason why Washington has traditionally seen a comprehensive Arab-Israeli agreement as a major strategic interest. Even the Trump administration's decision to attack Iran in February 2026 in close coordination with Israel—a move that represents a significant departure from the longstanding U.S. policy of declining to cooperate directly with Israel militarily—might not result in a closer U.S.-Israeli relationship, given the degree to which it might jeopardize key American interests and shifting attitudes toward Israel within the United States.

Whatever the similarities between how the United States views its partners in the Indo-Pacific and in the Middle East, then, they are arguably outweighed by their differences. With respect to the latter, when it comes to alliance management, the nature of the problem Washington confronts is primarily a political, rather than military, one. While acknowledging that tensions between countries such as Japan and South Korea are by no means an easy matter to address, resolving the main political barrier American policymakers confront in the Middle East—the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—has repeatedly proved both beyond reach and detrimental to the achievement of the U.S. goal of organizing a security framework favorable to U.S. interests in the area, particularly since the horrific Hamas attack of October 7, 2023. Relatedly, even if it turns out to be true, as some outlets have reported, that certain Gulf Arab states were supportive of the Trump administration's decision to go to war with Iran, there might be growing pressure to distance themselves from Washington, due to both the Palestinian issue and because of the conflict's potential consequences for their economic and security interests. Unlike in the Indo-Pacific, in other words, there is a possibility that some American allies in the Middle East, with the exception of Israel, might push for revisions to their respective relationships with Washington.

Likewise, the nature of the perceived threat that Washington believes Iran poses to American interests and U.S. partners differs somewhat from how it tends to think about the Indo-Pacific. Aside from the obvious geographical differences between the two regions, Tehran, in contrast to Beijing, does not possess particularly powerful conventional forces, relying instead on asymmetric capabilities, including its capacity to inflict harm through its use of ballistic missiles and relatively cheap drones; close the Strait of Hormuz, and thereby threaten key economic interests; and project power via proxies, such as Hizballah, that share its religious and ideological convictions. In other words, even though Iran, contrary to some recent accounts, is unlikely to become, like China, a great power peer, it can still threaten key U.S. interests in the Middle East through unconventional means and by leveraging its strategic geography, even without the benefit of a nuclear arsenal. With that in mind, U.S. allies in the Middle East play a somewhat different role than they do in the Indo-Pacific. Although

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they provide basing access that can help the United States try to balance Iranian power, Washington's regional partners are less important in terms of burden-sharing and aggregating military capabilities. Instead, their main value to the United States is economic and political.

Imperfect Evidence: Methodological Challenges to Studying the American Alliance System

Measuring the balance of power ex ante—that is, prior to the outbreak of conflict—is notoriously difficult, which is why "imperfect information" is considered one of the few "rationalist explanations for war." Assessing the likely outcome of something as complicated as a major power war involving China, the United States, and potentially a variety of other key actors is especially difficult, particularly since experts do not agree on the likely future trajectories of either the United States or China. Gauging alliance cohesion and the credibility of stated commitments is arguably even more challenging, particularly in the nuclear age.

That said, there are indicators—albeit imperfect ones—that can help analysts assess alliance strength, credibility, and cohesion. Arms transfers are one method of signaling commitment, in great part because they engage the supplier's prestige. As Kissinger explained after the October 1973 Middle East war, "If we had allowed a victory of Soviet arms over American arms, the whole balance of power would have shifted." On the other hand, arms transfers might suggest an unwillingness on the supplier's part to risk its direct involvement in a potential military conflict, as might be the case when it comes to U.S. policy toward Taiwan. As for alliance capabilities, perhaps the best one can do is to conduct deep analyses that utilize a variety of classical indices, including relative aggregate economic potential, technological sophistication, military force differentials, and war gaming. It is for precisely that reason that some U.S. officials regard the current balance of power in the Indo-Pacific with some apprehension.

As for the matter of credibility, alliance commitments are more believable when they involve steps that create automaticity, even if—and, indeed, precisely because—those steps involve great risk. Thus, a few years prior to the outbreak of World War I, a high-ranking French military official, when asked by a British counterpart what "the smallest British military force that would be of any practical assistance to you" was, replied: "A single British soldier—and we will see to it that he is killed." The stationing of just a single British soldier in France created a sort of "trip wire," an approach that is perhaps even more necessary in the nuclear age. Relatedly, pre-delegating control over certain weapons systems—such as tactical nuclear weapons—to battlefield commanders helps make these sorts of threats more credible. With that in mind, if the United States wants to enhance the credibility of its alliance pledges in the Indo-Pacific, it can keep U.S. forces deployed to the region, pre-delegate command over some weapons systems to those troops, and continue to conduct freedom of navigation patrols.

Historical evidence, which tends to give a more unvarnished view of how officials approach these sorts of matters, is also helpful when studying alliance cohesion and credibility. The U.S.-Israeli relationship during the Cold War is a good case in point. Many observers believe that the bond between the two countries, particularly after 1967, was exceptionally strong, and many analysts believe that Israel and the United States shared key strategic interests. When one examines the historical evidence, however, the picture that emerges is quite different. The Americans, it turns out, frequently considered, for the purpose of protecting their own interests in the Middle East, precipitating a major political confrontation with Jerusalem, and did not really believe that the relationship benefited the United States geopolitically.

Conclusion

My own view is that the Indo-Pacific's geopolitical importance, along with China's rise, makes the maintenance of an equilibrium of power in the region a key U.S. interest. With that in mind, the United States should seek to strengthen its alliances in the Indo-Pacific through policy coordination, public statements, and joint military planning, while simultaneously continuing to see whether any sort of political accommodation can be reached with China. But there is a case to be made that keeping a major American presence in the region has become risky, and that the United States might be better off retrenching, particularly if Washington is forced to divert substantial resources to the Middle East. On the other hand, that alternative course raises other kinds of dangers, including a potential Chinese effort to fill the power vacuum left by Washington or, to prevent that outcome, the nuclearization of U.S. allies, including Japan and South Korea. These, then, are the grand strategic challenges that American policymakers will confront in the relatively near future.