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ABSTRACT: The costs and risks associated with America’s military alliances have always been more visible and easily understood than the benefits. In reality, however, those costs and risks are frequently overstated, whereas the benefits are more numerous and significant than often appreciated. This article offers a more accurate net assessment of America’s alliances in hopes of better informing current policy debates.

President Donald Trump has shaken up the foreign policy debate in the United States, and nowhere more so than in relations with America’s longstanding treaty allies. Since Trump emerged as a presidential candidate in mid-2015, he has often put US alliances squarely in his crosshairs. Trump labeled the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) “obsolete” and suggested leaving its easternmost members to defend themselves. He floated the idea of encouraging nuclear proliferation by Japan and South Korea to enable US geopolitical retrenchment. As president, Trump pointedly refused to explicitly affirm America’s Article 5 commitment at his first NATO summit, and he publicly dressed down the European allies for failing to spend more on defense.¹

In a subsequent trip to Europe, Trump offered a more robust statement of US commitment to NATO, but nonetheless vented his frustration with allies for not, in his view, shouldering sufficient burdens.² Underlying these critiques has been the idea that US alliances are fundamentally sucker bets—one-sided relationships in which a guileless America bears all the costs and parasitic allies derive all the benefits. “We're taken advantage by every nation in the world virtually,” Trump commented in February 2017.³

Not surprisingly, the bipartisan US foreign policy elite has generally reacted with alarm at the administration’s rhetoric and policies. Leading commentators have warned that Trump is threatening to harm the alliances Washington spent decades building, institutions generally considered to be among America’s most precious geopolitical assets.⁴ Likewise, international observers have worried that the United States

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⁴ See, for instance, Dov Zakheim, “Trump’s Position on Treaty Commitments Has Already Hurt America,” Foreign Policy, July 22, 2016.
seems to be turning away from its most important friends. Yet despite the reaction they have provoked, Trump’s critiques have nonetheless revealed a fundamental asymmetry in the cost-benefit assessment of US alliances.

The fact of the matter is that the costs and risks associated with America’s alliances have always been more visible and easily understood than the benefits. Moreover, because US foreign policy elites have long become accustomed to military alliances as facts of geopolitical life, even proalliance observers often struggle to specify, in concrete terms, why those institutions are so valuable. Supporters are thus at a rhetorical disadvantage in these arguments. They often defend alliances by pointing to vague and ill-defined benefits, or simply by invoking tradition, whereas critics can point to specific dangers and burdens, including those more easily reduced to a campaign trail slogan or a pithy tweet. And Trump is not alone in his attacks on US alliances—many leading “realist” academics have long offered similar critiques, which the president has now effectively appropriated as his own. “The U.S. net gain from its alliance relationships is . . . not commensurate with the cost,” Barry Posen writes: “the bargain has become unprofitable to the United States.”

In this essay, we offer a more accurate net assessment of America’s alliances by detailing the purported costs and considerable—if less widely understood—benefits. We first summarize the most common critiques of US alliances and explain why many of those critiques are less persuasive than they initially seem. We then provide a detailed typology of the myriad benefits—military and otherwise—of US alliances. As this analysis shows, the net assessment of US alliances is strongly positive, and the balance is not even particularly close. Today as always, there remain significant challenges associated with alliance management and reasonable debates to be had about addressing them. But those debates need to be informed by a better understanding of what US alliances are good for in the first place.

Costs, Real and Perceived

Trump is not the first prominent observer to critique US alliances. Ever since the country’s founding, permanent military alliances have been a source of controversy. The alliance structure built from the ashes of World War II, and gradually expanded in the decades thereafter, has itself been the subject of heated debate. Leading political figures such as Senator Robert Taft initially opposed an American commitment to NATO; Senator Michael Mansfield sought to force withdrawal of half the US troops deployed to Europe in the early 1970s. The post-Cold War expansion of NATO touched off perhaps the most intense foreign policy debate of the 1990s. And in recent decades, there has been a lively cottage industry among academics who deem US alliances expensive, unrewarding, and dangerous, and who argue for attenuating or simply abandoning those commitments. The standard academic critique—much

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5 Krishnadev Calamur, “Germany’s Merkel Urges ‘Europe to Take Our Fate into Our Own Hands,’” *Atlantic*, May 30, 2017.

of which Trump has adopted or adapted as his own—adduces several key costs and dangers associated with US alliances.

First, America’s military alliances require Washington to defend countries whose security is not vital to the United States. Second, US alliances compel military expenditures far higher than would be necessary simply to defend America itself. Third, maintaining the credibility of US alliances forces America to adopt aggressive, forward-leaning defense strategies. Fourth, having allies raises the risk of the United States being entrapped in unwanted conflicts. Fifth, America’s allies habitually free ride on America’s own exertions. Sixth, alliances limit America’s freedom of action and cause unending diplomatic headaches.

So how accurate are these critiques? We consider each in its turn. In sum, America’s alliance system is hardly costless, and all of these critiques contain at least a kernel of truth. In many cases, however, the costs are significantly exaggerated—or critics simply ignore that the United States would have to pay similar costs even if it had no alliances.

Alliances require defending countries whose security is not vital to the United States. The United States has formal security commitments to over thirty treaty allies in Europe and the Asia-Pacific and informal or ambiguous security commitments to over thirty additional countries. These commitments, particularly the formal treaty commitments, represent something approaching a solemn vow to shed blood to defend non-American lands. And some of the countries protected by US guarantees are not, in and of themselves, critical to the global balance of power or the physical security of the United States. The United States could be called upon to resist a Russian seizure of Estonia, and yet the American people could survive and thrive in a world in which Estonia was occupied by Russian forces.

Yet if this critique is not baseless, it is often overstated, because the United States does have a vital interest in defending many of its current allies. The basic geopolitical lesson of World Wars I and II—a lesson many critics of US alliances endorse—is that Washington should not allow any hostile power to dominate a crucial geopolitical region such as Europe, East Asia, or the Middle East. Accordingly, the United States could still find itself compelled to fight to defend those regions—and

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9 It is important to note that all of America’s defense commitments provide an “out” through clauses allowing Washington to act in accordance with its own constitutional processes. In essence, treaties—although they are ratified by the Senate and carry the force of law—represent more of a moral obligation than a tightly binding legal obligation to other states.

many key countries therein—even if formal alliance relationships did not exist. This was, after all, precisely what happened during both world wars and the Persian Gulf War, when American officials concluded that US security required defending or liberating key countries in these regions, even though Washington had not previously had military alliances there. Alliances do not cause US entanglements overseas; entanglements cause alliances.

US alliances compel military expenditures far higher than would be necessary to defend America itself. To defend allies in the western Pacific or Europe, the United States requires global power-projection capabilities and a military that can win not just in its own backyard but in the backyards of its great-power rivals. America thus needs a larger, more technologically advanced, more sophisticated force than would be necessary strictly for continental defense, along with an accompanying global-basing network.

For these reasons, the US military is indeed more expensive than it would be absent US alliances. Yet this critique is also overblown. After all, if the United States has an interest in preventing any hostile power from dominating a key region of Eurasia, then alliances or no alliances, Washington would still require a military capable of projecting decisive power into these regions in an emergency. Likewise, because America has geopolitical objectives beyond the protection of allies—such as counterterrorism and securing the global commons—the need for advanced power projection capabilities and overseas bases would remain even in a world without alliances.

Such a force might still be smaller than today’s military. If the United States pursued a strategy in which it rolled back or attenuated key alliances, one critic suggests, it could reduce defense spending to 2.5 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), as opposed to 3.5 or 4 percent. Yet America would still have the world’s largest defense budget by a considerable margin under this approach, and such a force—which would consist, for instance, of only four carrier strike groups instead of 10 to 11 today—might not actually be sufficient to command the global commons and fight its way back into key regions in a crisis.

In fact, if the United States pulled back from its alliance commitments and waited for a crisis to develop before surging back into key regions, it might find such a mission more difficult—and more expensive—than simply protecting its allies in the first place. It was precisely this fact—that the United States ended up deploying millions of troops to liberate Western Europe and East Asia during World War II, at financial and human costs that would be almost unimaginable today, that led American policymakers to adopt a different approach featuring formal alliances and forward deployments thereafter. Nor would eliminating parts of the US basing network associated with protecting American

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12 Posen, *Restraint*.


allies save much money absent corresponding force reductions, because host-nation support arrangements often make it roughly as cheap, if not cheaper, to station American forces overseas than to station them in the United States.\textsuperscript{15} American defense expenditures could slightly decrease in a world without US military alliances, at least in the short-term, but the savings would be less dramatic—and perhaps more ephemeral—than one might expect.

Maintaining the credibility of American alliances requires adopting forward-leaning defense strategies. This critique comes closer to the mark. Prior to the Cold War, the US strategic posture was essentially one of allowing aggressors to conquer friendly states in Europe and East Asia, and then mobilizing to liberate those areas. Since the late 1940s, however, US policymakers have worried that American allies will be unlikely to risk aligning with Washington—and thereby antagonizing hostile neighbors such as the Soviet Union—if they believe the United States will simply allow them to be overrun in a conflict. If being liberated first requires being conquered, who wants to be liberated?\textsuperscript{16}

Accordingly, since the early Cold War, the United States has focused on defending rather than liberating allies. This strategy required Washington to pledge to defend West Germany at the Rhine despite the enormous difficulty of doing so, to forward-station forces in Europe and East Asia, and even to pledge rapid nuclear escalation to defend vulnerable European allies.\textsuperscript{17} Since the end of the Cold War, the dilemmas associated with forward defense have been far less dangerous and agonizing because the United States has not confronted a rival superpower. But the return of great-power competition in recent years has begun to raise these issues anew, albeit in less dramatic fashion. Part of the rationale for the Pentagon’s much-hyped Air-Sea Battle concept appears to be to cripple China’s power-projection capabilities before it can subdue US allies in the Western Pacific.\textsuperscript{18} The recent stationing of US and NATO battalions in the Baltic states—in some cases, less than 200 miles from major Russian cities such as St. Petersburg—reflects similar imperatives.

Having allies raises the risk of entrapment. Critics of US alliances point to the danger of “reckless driving” and “chain-ganging.” Reckless driving occurs when an ally, protected by a US security guarantee, behaves more provocatively than would otherwise be prudent. Reckless driving, in turn, can trigger chain-ganging. If an ally intentionally or unintentionally triggers conflict with an adversary, a formal security commitment may force the guarantor to enter the conflict whether it desires to or not. There is some irreducible danger of reckless driving and chain-ganging in any credible alliance, of course. Yet historical evidence suggests that this problem is actually less severe in US alliances than one might expect.


\textsuperscript{18} On AirSea Battle (now called the Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons), see Andrew F. Krepinevich, Why AirSea Battle? (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010).
As Michael Beckley and Victor Cha have shown, US policymakers have long been sensitive to this dilemma, and have thus inserted loopholes or escape hatches into security agreements with potentially problematic partners, such as Syngman Rhee’s South Korea or Chiang Kai-Shek’s Taiwan.\(^\text{19}\) Today, for instance, the US security commitment to Taiwan is ambiguous for this very purpose: to prevent Taipei from assuming Washington will automatically rescue Taiwan if its leaders provoke China. NATO forbids new members from having outstanding territorial disputes for the same reason.

In recent decades, moreover, the United States has repeatedly pressured allies and security partners to behave with restraint and warned those allies against provoking stronger neighbors. American officials underscored this point in dealings with Taiwan during the George W. Bush administration, and reportedly, with the Philippines and other allies in their more recent maritime disputes with China.\(^\text{20}\) As a result, scholars have found few, if any, unambiguous cases over the past 70 years in which the United States was dragged into shooting wars solely because of alliance commitments.\(^\text{21}\) Reckless driving and chain-ganging are risks, but US officials have so far proven fairly adept at managing them.

**Allies habitually free ride.** The opposite of reckless driving and chain-ganging is free-riding. Logically, because America is committed to defend its allies, those states can spend less than they would otherwise on their own defense. In 2011, for instance, the United States spent around 4.5 percent of its GDP on defense, compared to 1.6 percent of GDP for European NATO allies and roughly 1 percent for Japan.\(^\text{22}\)

To be fair, these statistics exaggerate the free-riding problem because America’s defense budget includes higher-than-average personnel costs as a way of recruiting and retaining an all-volunteer force in contrast to many allies and partners whose labor markets enable them to recruit personnel at lower wages or who rely primarily on conscription.\(^\text{23}\) Moreover, this gap was subsequently narrowed as US military spending, which had been inflated by the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, fell after 2010. Yet free-riding is nonetheless real enough, as US officials have frankly recognized. As Secretary of Defense Robert Gates told NATO in 2011, “The blunt reality is that there will be dwindling appetite and patience in the U.S. Congress—and in the American body politic writ large—to expend increasingly precious funds on behalf of nations that are apparently unwilling to devote the necessary resources or make the necessary changes to be serious and capable partners in their own defense.”\(^\text{24}\)

\(^\text{21}\) Beckley, “Myth of Entangling Alliances.”
\(^\text{23}\) Lindsay P. Cohn, “How Much is Enough?,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 47–61.
the allies less capable of contributing to either out-of-area interventions or collective defense operations.

If free-riding is indeed a dilemma, however, it is also an implicit goal of US alliances, and it probably costs less—when “cost” is defined holistically—than the likely alternatives. As extensive scholarship demonstrates, a primary reason Washington created its postwar military alliances was to break the cycle of unrestrained geopolitical competition in Europe and East Asia, for fear such competition would give rise to arms races and wars. Moreover, another prominent goal of US alliances has been to restrain nuclear proliferation, for fear the spread of nuclear weapons would make nuclear war more likely and dilute American influence.25

In other words, some degree of free-riding is a feature of America’s alliances, not a glitch. The United States has traditionally preferred for allies to spend less on defense than they otherwise might, because this restraint creates a world in which America itself is safer and more influential. To put it another way, does Washington really want a world in which Germany and Japan both spend 5 percent of GDP on defense and engage in nuclear arms-racing with adversaries? The answer is surely no, even if US officials might still urge these countries to spend moderately more than they do today.

Alliances limit America’s freedom of action and cause unending diplomatic headaches. This is true enough. In international politics, it can be harder to do things multilaterally than unilaterally. In many cases, relying on allies means relying on less capable military forces to perform functions the US military could better perform on its own, as Washington discovered during the intervention in Kosovo in the late 1990s. Allies bring their own idiosyncrasies into the relationship, often with messy and frustrating results. A vivid example of this dynamic was the set of caveats each NATO ally brought to the mission in Afghanistan—restrictions on when, where, and how its forces could fight—ensuring that, in terms of combat punch, the whole was somewhat less than the sum of the parts.26

Making alliances work also requires continual “gardening,” in the phrase of George Shultz—continually massaging difficult relationships and suffering insufferable allies such as Charles de Gaulle. As Jimmy Carter once remarked, a meeting with allies represented “one of the worst days of my diplomatic life.”27 Yet there are obvious counterpoints here: frustrations are inherent in any diplomatic relationship, the United States undoubtedly finds it easier to address those frustrations within the context of deeply institutionalized alliances, and any constraints on US freedom of action have to be weighed against the myriad other ways in which alliances enhance US flexibility and power.

26 Seth Jones, In the Graveyard of Empires: America’s War in Afghanistan (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), 238–55.
Overall, the costs and frustrations of US alliances are not illusory, but many of those costs are actually less severe or salient than they appear. The benefits of US alliances, by contrast, are both more diverse and more significant than often appreciated.

Benefits, Direct and Indirect

Just as critics overstate the costs of alliances, so they dramatically understate the benefits. The most direct and obvious advantages involve the way allies allow the United States to punch above its own weight by augmenting US military strengths across a range of issues and contingencies. Yet alliances also offer additional geostrategic, political-diplomatic, and economic advantages that enhance American power and support a number of critical US national objectives. In other words, America’s alliances are less entangling than empowering. By binding itself to the defense of like-minded nations, the world’s sole superpower makes itself all the more effective and influential.

Military Punching Power

First and foremost, having allies significantly increases the military power the United States can bring to bear on a given battlefield. During the Cold War, European forces were vital to maintaining something approximating a balance of power vis-à-vis Warsaw Pact forces.\(^\text{28}\) NATO countries and other treaty allies also contributed to nearly every major US combat operation of the postwar era, even though nearly all of those operations occurred “out of area.” The United States may have waged the Korean War in part to prove its willingness to defend its treaty allies in Europe, but the NATO allies contributed over 20,000 troops—in addition to other capabilities—to the fight.\(^\text{29}\) Even during the Vietnam War, treaty allies South Korea and Australia contributed substantial fighting elements (and bore substantial casualties); South Korea sent over 300,000 soldiers to Vietnam over the course of the conflict and lost over 4,500 in combat.\(^\text{30}\) Virtually everywhere the United States fought during the Cold War, it did so in the company of allies.

In the post-Cold War era, this benefit has sometimes seemed less important, because of the vast margin of US dominance vis-à-vis its rivals, and because the gap between what Washington could do militarily and what even its most capable allies could do militarily widened markedly. Yet even so, the United States has relied heavily on allied participation in nearly all of its major interventions.

During the Persian Gulf War, key NATO allies such as France and the United Kingdom made large contributions to the coalition effort, with the British providing 43,000 troops along with significant air and naval contingents. The NATO allies provided roughly half of the 60,000 troops who policed Bosnia as part of the Implementation Force mission in that country from 1995 through 1996, and a majority of the 31,000 troops who made up the subsequent Stabilization Force. NATO

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\(^{29}\) The number may well have been higher; 20,000 seems like a rough and conservative estimate. For general information, see Paul M. Edwards, *United Nations Participants in the Korean War: The Contributions of 45 Member Countries* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2013).

Contributions to the US-led war in Afghanistan peaked at around 40,000 troops; this contingent helped sustain the mission at a time of heavy US focus on Iraq and made it possible for Washington to surge 30,000 additional troops into Iraq when its forces were strained to the limit. 31

Other US wars—in Iraq, Libya, and against the Islamic State—have also featured noteworthy contributions from treaty allies in Europe and the Asia-Pacific region. Both critics and defenders of US alliances often speak of the frustrations of unequal burden sharing. But America’s military burdens would be much higher if it did not have allies willing to share them.

Having formal allies as opposed to relying on ad hoc partnerships also yields a second and related military benefit: it eases the process of mobilizing cobelligerents for action in a crisis. It is possible to assemble military coalitions on the fly, of course, and every coalition military venture in which the United States participated prior to 1945 was in some sense improvised. Moreover, even in the post-World War II era, the United States has solicited ad hoc contributions from nonallied partner states. It is even possible, as the United States has repeatedly demonstrated, to make a purely transactional alliance of convenience with a “devil”—a country that otherwise shares very few interests with America, such as the Soviet Union in World War II or Syria in the Persian Gulf War.

The possibility of improvising military cooperation when needed has led some critics to argue the United States can do away with formal, institutionalized alliances altogether. 32 But turning every military operation into the equivalent of pickup basketball greatly increases the difficulty of building an effective combined force. Pushing the analogy further, pickup basketball is very hard to arrange in the absence of long-standing arrangements and customs that increase the predictability of the other actors. Economists refer to these difficulties as transaction costs; the routines and institutionalization of formal alliances make it much easier to bring military power to bear at much lower transaction costs.

In formal alliances, the partners practice together in peacetime, develop interoperability, and may even develop common equipment, thus easing logistics challenges. They also establish diplomatic forums and longstanding, fairly predictable relationships, thereby making it easier to coordinate interests and achieve the political consensus necessary to use force in the first place. 33 To be sure, everything could be negotiated on the fly, but the price America would pay for this flexibility would be the

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significantly greater difficulty—and, most likely, the significantly longer timelines—of piecing together a coalition in a crisis.

A third major military contribution of allies is the specialized capability they can bring to the table. Sometimes this is material capability: British, French, and Australian special operations forces have all made vital contributions to the Global War on Terror. The Japanese have some of the finest antisubmarine warfare capabilities in the world, which would be essential in a US conflict with China.34 More often US allies contribute geographical capability in the form of proximity to the theater of interest. This proximity allows forward staging of the strike and intelligence assets, particularly air assets, on which the American way of war depends. It also allows for specialized technical intelligence collection that would be nearly impossible to conduct without local partners. The counter-ISIS campaign, for instance, would have been vastly more difficult had the United States not had access to key facilities controlled by either treaty allies (Turkey) or long-standing military partners (Qatar or Bahrain).35 Similarly, the United States would face a nearly impossible task in any North Korean contingency without the extensive US basing network in Japan.

And, of course, the United States has also traditionally relied on another allied contribution: intellectual capability. By virtue of their history, US allies have unique networks of relationships, along with the distinctive insights those relationships afford, in many regions of interest. This translates into intelligence—particularly human intelligence—that would be almost impossible for America to generate on its own; consider, for instance, the intelligence advantages possessed by the French in northwest Africa or the Italians in Libya.36

The existence of formal, deeply institutionalized alliances, in turn, facilitates the sharing of such intelligence. Three out of the four countries that make up the Five Eyes intelligence partnership with the United States are longstanding treaty allies; Washington also cooperates extensively with its NATO allies on intelligence matters.37 In this as in other respects, America’s alliances make it far stronger and more capable militarily than it would otherwise be.

**Geostrategic Influence and Global Stability**

If alliances are thus helpful in terms of the conflicts America wages, they are more helpful still in terms of the conflicts they prevent and the broader geostrategic influence they confer. Indeed, although the ultimate test of America’s alliances lies in their efficacy as warfighting

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35 American officials described access to Incirlik, Turkey, as a “game changer” in the counter-ISIS campaign. Ceylan Yeginsu and Helene Cooper “U.S. Jets to Use Turkish Bases in War on ISIS,” New York Times, July 23, 2015.

36 On local and regional advantages, see, for instance, Christopher S. Chivvis, The French War on Al Qaeda in Africa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

coalitions, the most powerful benefits they provide come in the normal course of peacetime geostrategic management and competition.

First, US alliances bind many of the richest and most militarily capable countries in the world to Washington through enduring relationships of deep cooperation. Alliances reflect shared interests rather than creating them, of course, and the United States would presumably have close ties to countries such as the United Kingdom even without formal alliances. But alliances nonetheless serve as “hoops of steel.” They help create a sense of permanence and shared purpose in key relationships; they provide forums for regular interaction and cooperation; they conduce to deeply institutionalized exchanges (of intelligence, personnel, and other assets) that insulate and perpetuate friendly associations even when political leaders clash. And insofar as US alliances serve these purposes with respect to immensely influential countries in Europe and the Asia-Pacific, they help Washington preserve a significant overbalance of power vis-à-vis any competitor.

Second, alliances have a strong deterrent effect on would-be aggressors. American alliances lay down “redlines” regarding areas in which territorial aggression is impermissible; they complicate the calculus of any potential aggressor by raising the strong possibility that an attack on a US ally will mean a fight with the world’s most formidable military. The proposition that “defensive alliances deter the initiation of disputes” is, in fact, supported by empirical evidence, and the forward deployment of troops strengthens this deterrence further still.

NATO clearly had an important deterrent effect on Soviet calculations during the Cold War, for instance; more recently, Russia has behaved most aggressively toward countries lacking US alliance guarantees (Georgia and Ukraine), rather than toward those countries possessing them (the Baltic states or Poland). In other words, alliances make the geostrategic status quo—which is enormously favorable to the United States—for “stickier” than it might otherwise be.

Third, and related to this second benefit, alliances tamp down international instability more broadly. American security guarantees allow US allies to underbuild their own militaries; while always annoying and problematic when taken to extremes, this phenomenon also helps avert the arms races and febrile security competitions that plagued Europe and East Asia in earlier eras. In fact, US alliances are as useful in managing tensions among America’s allies as they are in constraining America’s adversaries.

NATO was always intended to keep the “Americans in” and the “Germans down” as well as the “Russians out”; US presence, along with the creation of a framework in which France and Germany were

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incentivized to cooperate rather than compete with one another, would help stifle any resurgence of tensions between these historical rivals. Similarly, US alliance guarantees in the Asia-Pacific were designed, in part, to create a climate of security in which Japan could be revived economically without threatening its neighbors, just as the expansion of NATO after the Cold War helped prevent incipient rivalries and territorial irredentism among former members of the Warsaw Pact. US alliances keep things quiet in regions Washington cannot ignore, thereby fostering a climate of peace in which America and its partners can flourish.

Fourth, US alliances impede dangerous geostrategic phenomena such as nuclear proliferation. As scholars such as Francis Gavin have emphasized, US security guarantees and forward deployments have played a critical role in convincing historically insecure, technologically advanced countries—Germany, Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, among others—to forgo possession of the world’s absolute weapon. In several of these cases, moreover, the United States has used the security leverage provided by alliance guarantees to dissuade allies from pursuing the bomb after they had given indications of their intent to start down that path. If, as seems likely, a world with more nuclear powers is likely to be a more dangerous world in which crises more frequently take on a nuclear dimension and the risk of nuclear conflict is higher, then the value of American alliances looms large indeed.

In sum, as the framers of the post-World War II order understood, phenomena such as massive instability, arms racing, and violence in key regions would eventually imperil the United States itself. Whatever modest reduction in short-term costs might come from pursuing a “free hand” or isolationist strategy was thus more than lost by the expense of fighting and winning a major war to restore order. Accordingly, America’s peacetime alliance system represents a cheaper, more prudent alternative for maximizing US influence while also preventing the instability by deterring aggression and managing rivalries among friends. The fact that so many observers seem to have forgotten why, precisely, America has alliances in the first place is an ironic testament to just how well the system has succeeded.

**Political Legitimacy and Consultation**

Beyond their military and geostrategic virtues, alliances provide important political benefits that facilitate the use of American power both internationally and with respect to the domestic audience. The chief political advantage of alliances is enhanced international legitimacy.

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43 Leffler, *Preponderance of Power*. 
Formal alliances and the partnership of allies—particularly democratic allies—in cooperative ventures confer the perceived legitimacy of multilateral action. This perception is especially important when an administration is unable to secure the formal legitimacy of a UN Security Council Resolution authorizing the use of force. In the case of the Kosovo conflict, for example, being able to conduct the mission under NATO auspices somewhat mitigated charges of “American unilateralism.” Similarly, the ability of the United States to muster a coalition of the willing involving both NATO and Asia-Pacific allies in the Iraq War provided some rebuttal to critics who decried the invasion as a “unilateral” endeavor.

Allied support also enhances the perceived legitimacy of the actions for domestic audiences, thus strengthening the political foundations for military ventures. The willingness of other states to participate in a military intervention can signal that the resort to force is a wise and necessary move, has reasonable prospects for success, and will enjoy some minimal moral legitimacy. All of these factors can shore up public support and give the intervention greater political resilience should it prove more difficult than expected, and this international cooperation is easier to achieve in the framework of longstanding military alliances.

Finally, allies provide useful input on use of force decisions. Particularly when the deliberations involve long-standing treaty allies, US officials can have more honest discussions about difficult policy choices because the participants are “all in the family.” Put another way, every US president reserves the right to use force unilaterally when American interests demand. Yet as presidents have generally understood, the failure to persuade other partners to approve and to join America in the effort is itself a powerful cautionary warning.

The need to make persuasive arguments to allies and partners is a useful disciplining device to prevent policy from running off the rails.

Diplomatic Leverage and Cooperation

Beyond their military, geostrategic, and political impact, having formal military alliances greatly increases the diplomatic leverage US leaders can bring to bear on thorny international challenges. Formal alliances and long-standing partnerships give US leaders myriad fora in which to raise concerns and advocate favored courses of action. Europeans are obliged to listen to the United States on European issues because Washington’s leading role in NATO makes it the central player in European defense; the same dynamic prevails vis-à-vis US allies in the Asia-Pacific. To give just one concrete example, the United States has repeatedly prevented the European Union from lifting its arms embargo on China because of the security leverage it has through NATO.

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46 For instance, the Bush Administration was stymied on the Sudan by the reluctance of the rest of the international community to intervene. Condoleezza Rice, No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington (New York: Crown Publishers, 2011), 582–85.

Having allies also increases US diplomatic options vis-à-vis adversaries. Here, the danger of entrapment (getting drawn into conflicts America might otherwise have avoided) must be weighed against the benefits of having more options in dealing with the adversaries Washington cannot ignore. One such benefit is the increased range of signaling options available to strategists during an unfolding crisis. Consider US efforts to constrain the North Korean nuclear program. Without military alliances with South Korea and Japan, the United States would have only two baskets of military options short of actual resort to force in order to signal resolve and to shape North Korean calculations: either taking relatively meaningless actions, such as changing the alert levels in the homeland or in other theaters, or taking relatively dramatic escalations, such as moving an aircraft carrier battle group within range of the Korean peninsula or flying sorties close to the North Korean border. With South Korea and Japan as allies, however, Washington has a wider variety of midrange actions—including missile defense capability or readiness in theater, raising local alert levels, and so on. These steps give leaders ways of responding, and thereby influencing diplomatic negotiations, while also better positioning America to respond if diplomacy fails.

Finally, alliances enhance US diplomatic efforts on security issues beyond those directly related to collective defense. The United States has used its alliances as vehicles for cooperation on counterterrorism (both prior to and since September 11, 2001), as well as for countering cybercrime, proliferation, and piracy; addressing climate change; and responding to other challenges. All of these efforts involve substantial intelligence sharing, information pooling, and coordination across law enforcement and other lines of action. And all of this coordination is greatly facilitated when conducted through deeply institutionalized alliances and long-standing cooperative relationships.

The United States has, of course, also been able to achieve tactical cooperation even from long-standing adversaries on issues such as counterterrorism, but such cooperation is frequently less significant, harder to obtain, and comes at a higher price in terms of the reciprocal American “gives” required in transactional relationships. It is thus with good reason that, when an international crisis breaks or a new global challenge emerges, the first phone calls made by US leaders are usually to America’s closest allies.

Economic Benefits

As noted, the economic costs of US alliance commitments are lower than conventionally assumed because the alliances allow Washington to project military power much more cheaply than otherwise would be the case. Alliances also generate numerous indirect economic benefits—so many that they may constitute a net profit center for the United States.

As a recent analysis of the deployment of US troops abroad and of US treaty obligations shows, both of these forms of security commitments

48 See, for example, the US-South Korean incremental tit-for-tat response to recent North Korean military provocations, Dan Lamothe, “U.S. Army and South Korean Military Respond to North Korea’s Launch with Missile Exercise,” Washington Post, July 4, 2017.
49 Art, Grand Strategy, 201–2.
are correlated with several key economic indicators, including US bilateral trade and global bilateral trade.\textsuperscript{50} The more US troops are deployed to a given country, the greater US bilateral trade is with the country in question. Furthermore, the effect extends to non-US global bilateral trade: “Countries with U.S. security commitments conduct more trade with one another than they would otherwise.” Adding all the economic costs and benefits of these treaty commitments together produces the estimate that the alliances offer more than three times as much gain as they cost.

American alliance commitments advance US economic interests in other ways, as well. For decades, US diplomats and trade negotiators have used the security leverage provided by alliance commitments to extract more favorable terms in bilateral financial and commercial arrangements. During the Cold War, West Germany made “offset” payments to the United States—transfers to shore up the sagging US balance of payments—as a means of preserving the American troop presence in Europe.\textsuperscript{51}

More recently, American negotiators obtained more favorable terms in the South Korea-United States trade agreement than the European Union did in a parallel agreement with Seoul. “Failure would look like a setback to the political and security relationship,” one US official noted; this dynamic gave Washington additional negotiating leverage.\textsuperscript{52} Additionally, as other scholars have shown, the US willingness to defend other states and police the global commons reinforces the willingness of other countries to accept a global order which includes favorable economic privileges for the United States, such as the dollar as the primary global reserve currency.\textsuperscript{53} And, of course, by sustaining a climate of overall geopolitical stability in which trade and free enterprise can flourish, alliances bolster American and global prosperity in broader ways, as well.

Conclusion

The balance sheet on America’s alliances, then, is really not much of a balance at all. There are costs and dangers associated with US alliances, and some of these are real enough. But many of those costs and dangers are exaggerated, blown out of proportion, or rest on a simple misunderstanding of what the United States would have to do in the world even if it terminated every one of its alliances. The benefits of US alliances, conversely, are far more diverse and substantial than critics tend to acknowledge. In sum, any grand strategy premised on putting America first should recognize that by creating and sustaining its global alliance network, America has indeed put itself first for generations.


If this is the case, then why have alliances proven to be such lightning rods for both academic and presidential criticism of late? Part of the answer lies in the dynamic noted at the outset of this piece. The dangers and risks inherent in US alliances are mostly obvious and intuitive, whereas the benefits are often subtler, more indirect, or require digging deeper into the underlying logic of American internationalism to understand. Those benefits, moreover, often reside in things that do not happen—and are thus harder to observe, let alone measure. Yet part of the answer also undoubtedly lies in the fact that American alliances, like so much of American foreign policy today, appear to be in danger of becoming a victim of their own success. The fact that US alliances have been so effective, for so long, in maximizing US influence and creating an advantageous international environment has made it all too easy to take their benefits for granted. It would be a sad irony if the United States turned away from its alliances, only then to realize just how much it had squandered.

American alliances do not function perfectly, of course, and today as at virtually every point since the late 1940s, there are challenges on the horizon: the relative decline of many key US allies vis-à-vis US adversaries, the difficulties of prodding partners in Europe and Asia to do more on defense, the threat posed by coercion and intimidation meant to change the geopolitical status quo without triggering alliance redlines. Likewise, reasonable observers can debate what military strategy the United States should pursue for upholding its alliance commitments in the Baltic or the western Pacific. But the vexations of addressing these challenges within the framework of America’s existing alliances are undoubtedly less than the costs and perils to which the United States would be exposed without its alliances. Winston Churchill had it right when he said, “There is only one thing worse than fighting with allies, and that is fighting without them.” The US policy community would do well to heed this admonition today.

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Restoring Strategic Competence
How to Manage Northeast Asian Alliance Dilemmas amid a Nuclear North Korea

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About the Asia-Pacific Security Program

The CNAS Asia-Pacific Security Program addresses opportunities and challenges for the United States in the region, with a growing focus on issues that originate in the Asia-Pacific but have global implications. It draws on a team with deep government and nongovernment expertise in regional studies, U.S. foreign policy, international security, and economic statecraft. The Asia-Pacific Security Program analyzes trends and generates practical and implementable policy solutions around three main research priorities: U.S. strategic competition with China, American alliances and partnerships, and the North Korea threat.
Executive Summary

For the foreseeable future, America’s Northeast Asian allies Japan and South Korea must live in the shadow of a nuclear North Korea, whose capabilities they cannot match. During the Obama and Trump administrations, North Korea dramatically expanded and improved its ability to hold Japanese, South Korean, and even U.S. territory at risk with its nuclear and missile arsenal. Despite high-profile summity and promises to the contrary, there is no sign that this imbalance will be rectified, and its continuation exacerbates regional risks and ally insecurity.

The mounting North Korea threat is compounded by poor timing—U.S. policy has proven exceptionally erratic, unreliable, and risk-prone in recent years. The very existence of Japan and South Korea depends on strategies built around a partnership with the United States that has become shaky, and on faith in the competence of U.S. statecraft—which both countries are starting to perceive as a risk rather than a source of security.

Ally perceptions of U.S. strategic incompetence generate real costs and risks for the United States and Northeast Asian security. If the United States continues to squander its deepest relationships in Asia, the allies could become rivals with each other, increase risks of nuclear instability, play a spoiler role in U.S. regional strategy, withhold basing and access rights to U.S. forces operating in the region, and potentially take independent aggressive actions against North Korea that unintentionally escalate to war.

A Guide to Restoring Alliance Management in Northeast Asia

Former Secretary of State George Schultz famously likened alliances to gardening—do the laborious work of tending to the needs of your garden in hopes that one day it might bear fruit. This report urges U.S. officials to embrace Secretary Schultz’s gardening metaphor for statecraft. It proposes a series of guiding principles for alliance management and a number of specific initiatives. Together, these recommendations offer the best hope of restoring ally perceptions of U.S. strategic competence and avoiding the costs of further alliance deterioration.

PRINCIPLES

- Align Word and Deed—The United States should avoid making threats—toward North Korea, China, or allies—unless it intends to fulfill them, avoid making promises in private that contradict what U.S. officials say in public, and avoid statements from U.S. officials at any level that appear in tension with others from the government.
- Engage in Proportional Risk-Taking—Brinkmanship is for rogues. The National Security Council should enforce a risk aversion bias in U.S. decisionmaking about Northeast Asia. While North Korea or China might present extreme scenarios that require the United States to manipulate risk to stave off war, as a general rule the threat that leaves something to chance is not going to serve alliances well in a context where the risk-taker’s rationality is in question. To the extent the United States decides it needs to leverage rather than reduce risk in the region—whether through military signaling or attempts to change the balance of military power—it should seek ways of doing so that share or distribute the risk with allies, making them stakeholders rather than just clients.
- Consult before Deciding—The United States should commit to consulting with its allies before it makes decisions that impact them. This did not happen during the 2017 nuclear crisis, during the 2018 summit diplomacy processes, or when the United States levied a bill for alliance burden-sharing that quadrupled over night the amount demanded. If alliances are to be the priority that U.S. officials often claim, then it is in the U.S. interest to consult with them accordingly.

INITIATIVES

- Refrain from Alliance Taxation—U.S. burden-sharing negotiators should agree to an in-principle provision that the United States will not seek compensation for new costs associated with troop basing and deployments without first consulting with allies about the pending financial imposition.
- Forge an Alliance Innovation Base—The United States should construct a community of practice focused on advanced technology protection and innovation with Japan and South Korea. Because it represents a costly signal of America’s long-term investment in its allies, this should help strengthen the credibility of the U.S. general commitment to forward presence and alliance defense in Northeast Asia.
- Launch an Alliance Wargaming Group—The Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), in conjunction with Japanese and South Korean counterparts, should establish a full-time, trilateral Track 1.5 office staffed by
think tank experts and civil servants from Japan, South Korea, and the United States. In this trilateral setting, analysts would conduct war games, tabletop exercises, scenario analysis, and simulations that would become inputs for strategic decisions in all three governments.

- **Provide a “No Missile Deployment” Promise**—The United States should commit to Japan and South Korea that it will avoid requesting deployment of Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF)-range missiles to their territory except as a last resort, and that it will investigate both the salience of any potential missile gap with China and alternative ways of potentially remedying it.

- **Establish a Trilateral Strategic Security Dialogue**—The State Department, in partnership with OSD, should propose an official, senior level, trilateral Strategic Security Dialogue with Japan and South Korea focused on not only extended deterrence but also nuclear stability concerns. To avoid biases and blind spots, the scope of extended deterrence conversations within the alliance needs to broaden and encourage discussions about measures that do not just strengthen the nuclear umbrella, but that can enhance stability and ultimately make the umbrella less central to regional security.

- **Modernize Deterrence Posture in South Korea**—The United States should modernize its deterrence posture in South Korea to emphasize rapid-reaction capabilities. U.S. troops need to show, in partnership with South Korean forces, that they are capable of prevailing in limited conflicts with North Korea without follow-on forces from off-Peninsula. Modernization done well has the potential to reinforce the U.S. alliance commitment while lowering overall troop numbers in South Korea, enhance deterrence of North Korean military adventurism, and reduce risks of nuclear war.

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**Introduction**

Through a mix of inaction and imprudent action, the United States is eroding two of its closest alliances. After risking nuclear war in a failed bid to reverse North Korea’s nuclear weapons capability, Washington has allowed North Korea not only to retain its nuclear arsenal in full, but also to make unprecedented advancements in size and quality. The United States has attempted to extract dramatically increased financial payments from Japan and South Korea while depending on both as part of U.S. competition with China. And while the U.S. strategy for a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” is premised on a regime of free and fair trade, the U.S. tariff regime—which has impacted friends and rivals alike—amounts to outright mercantilism. U.S. allies have picked up on a common thread running through these inconsistent and incoherent actions: incompetence in the realm of strategy.

If the United States squanders its deepest relationships in Asia because of strategic incompetence, the allies could become rivals with each other, increase regional risks of nuclear instability, play a spoiler role in U.S. regional strategy, withhold basing and access rights to U.S. forces operating in the region, and potentially take independent aggressive actions against North Korea that unintentionally escalate to war.

Given the stakes, the United States has a substantial interest in ensuring its allies perceive that it understands and helps ameliorate their strategic vulnerabilities. But how might it actually do so? What policies, principles, or processes would help the United States offer the best chance of keeping Northeast Asia stable while preserving the credibility of its extended deterrence commitments to Japan and South Korea?

This report makes the case for a risk management approach to extended deterrence with Japan and South Korea, an approach aimed at restoring both ally confidence and perceptions of U.S. strategic competence. U.S. alliance policy in Northeast Asia must address intersecting problems—the North Korean nuclear and missile challenge, ally fears of abandonment and entrapment, and perceptions of U.S. volatility and poor judgment. Therefore, this report recommends a series of actions and principles for U.S. policy to reduce Japan’s and South Korea’s vulnerability to the North Korean nuclear threat, address their abandonment-entrapment fears, and demonstrate that the United States has not lost the strategic acumen necessary to keep them and the region secure.
The remainder of this report proceeds in three parts. The first describes growing fears and uncertainties—of abandonment and entrapment—that Japan and South Korea have experienced during the Trump era, and how perceptions of U.S. strategic incompetence inflame both fears. The second part explains the geopolitical consequences of failing to attend to ally trepidation, consequences that include arms competition between Japan and South Korea, increased nuclear-related risks in Northeast Asia, and the potential of both allies to play the role of strategic spoiler in U.S. grand strategy as they hedge against the uncertainty created by U.S. words and deeds. Finally, this report recommends a series of principles and actions that aim to improve perceptions of U.S. reliability and restore ally faith in U.S. strategic competence.

Section One: Alliance Security Dilemmas

Ally fears of abandonment and entrapment are born of uncertainty. The fear of abandonment describes an ally’s lack of confidence in U.S. willingness to go to war on its behalf, and entrapment fear describes an ally’s concern that the United States will make decisions that prove costly for the ally. Even in the best of times, allies vacillate between fears of abandonment and entrapment, never fully certain about America’s willingness to defend them in a worst-case scenario, and never wanting to be dragged into a war not of their choosing.

But these are not the best of times. Japanese and South Korean officials have trouble tracking the policies and intentions of a United States on which they depend for extended deterrence against North Korea. They struggle to understand who actually speaks for the Trump administration, and how enduring any U.S. position actually might be. And, for the first time in recent memory, they question America’s strategic judgment. Not only do Japan and South Korea question the reliability of U.S. commitments to their defense; they also doubt whether the United States appreciates the risks and costs involved in its decisionmaking about North Korea and Asia.

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North Korea at the South’s expense.8 Japan, which was to be an early victim of North Korean missiles in a war, shared that sentiment, though in civil society more than in the government.9

In 2018 and 2019, the allies faced the opposite problem as the United States undertook high-wire diplomacy with North Korea in a manner that not only risked leaving them more militarily exposed, but that did not even arrest North Korean missile testing as diplomacy purportedly continued. Trump proceeded with hasty summit meetings and secret letters with Kim Jong Un without meaningful preparations.10 Troublingly for the allies, the Trump administration did not consult with either Japan or South Korea before the U.S. president weighed and made decisions involving their fate.11 Neither ally knew Trump would declare a long-term suspension of military exercises in South Korea after meeting Kim in 2018, nor did they know that Trump would halt regular nuclear-capable bomber deployments aimed primarily at reassuring them that the U.S. extended deterrence commitment was credible.12 It was hardly surprising, then, that Japanese officials and South Korea’s defense establishment worried President Trump would be manipulated into agreements with North Korea that would leave them without the U.S. nuclear umbrella, as well as more exposed than ever before to North Korean missiles.13

The erratic, seemingly cavalier way the Trump administration dealt with North Korea throughout and following the crisis undermined the allies’ confidence in the United States as a security patron. U.S. actions fueled the crisis in a way that forced them to carry the risk of nuclear war as much as Washington—but with virtually no say in the matter. They then fretted about the price they would pay if Trump should be outfoxed by Kim Jong Un in negotiations precisely because no rational process preceded Trump’s diplomatic gambits.

**Strategic Incompetence**

But Japan and South Korea have not just lost confidence in the reliability of America’s commitments to their defense during the Trump era. They have also begun to doubt U.S. competence—that is, whether the United States is thinking and acting strategically. Even the greatest U.S. foreign policy blunders (Vietnam, Iraq) never led to a belief that the United States was self-sabotaging or had become a danger to the region; this indicates the magnitude of contemporary concern.

Japanese and South Korean officials worry about the incoherence of U.S. decisionmaking less because of any single decision reached than because of the pattern that has emerged. Even while some South Korean officials have supported engagement with Pyongyang, many share a belief with Japanese officials that the Trump administration has mismanaged North Korea policy and permitted the nuclear and missile threat to worsen.14 Both nations think the tariff war with China does not redound to America’s benefit, nor theirs.15 They not only disagree with the U.S. withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, but recognize it as abandoning the economic keystone of U.S. strategy toward Asia and competition with China.16 And they interpret Trump’s demands for financial compensation—in both cases a quadrupling of burden-sharing payments for the privilege of U.S. troops
in their respective countries—as not only unmerited, but also unwise. As a South Korean defense scholar explained, “If we are so important to U.S. strategy, why does the United States make veiled threats against us while squeezing every cent from our pocket?” Extreme rent-seeking from allies indicates either that the United States no longer understands how to evaluate bargaining leverage and is seeking concessions out of proportion to reality, or that it does not understand that North Korea and China ultimately benefit from weakening U.S. alliances and public fights over unreasonable demands. Either interpretation indicates incompetence in the realm of strategy.

In these decisions and others, the allies see uncertainty less in U.S. toughness or resolve to fight threats abroad than in the U.S. ability to reliably match ends and means in policy—a logical antecedent of effective deterrence. They are confused about who speaks for the U.S. government and whether U.S. decisions involving the fate of the region have considered the risks and reactions of others. Multiple South Korean officials who were interviewed in November 2019 conveyed, “Does the U.S. know what it’s doing in Asia or with North Korea? Does the U.S. understand what’s in its best interests? Who is even in charge?” And as an otherwise sympathetic Government of Japan official wrote in April 2020, “The Trump administration’s implementation of its confrontational policy with China . . . has caused considerable confusion . . . [and] raised doubts in many minds across the region. Japan is no exception.”

Japanese officials also became unnerved as North Korea began resuming missile tests—more than 35 from May 2019 to May 2020, nearly all of which were successful—and the United States not only took no action, but Trump himself repeatedly downplayed the threat they posed while touting his personal relationship with Kim Jong Un. Masashi Murano, an expert on Japanese defense policy, argued that this failure to arrest North Korean missile testing actually increased the risk of nuclear attacks on Japan. While speaking of the U.S. nuclear umbrella for Japan, he noted: “Kim would not choose to attack Japan if the U.S. retaliation was predictable . . . [but] the more confident [Kim] is in his deterrent options [which increase through missile testing], the more likely he is to misunderstand the credibility of the U.S. threat to retaliate.”

Although normally taken for granted, the perception of competence matters. The credibility of the U.S. extended deterrence commitment depends on a presumption that the United States not only has its own theory of the case for preventing ally annihilation, but also that it will design and implement policies accordingly. But without rationality, there is no reassurance. Convincing allies of U.S. toughness or willingness to fight is less important than convincing them that the United States is aware of what it takes to make it unnecessary to have to defend them in the first place. When U.S. words and deeds—often outside the narrow bounds of nuclear umbrella considerations—start to cast doubt on the premise that the nation itself is a bastion of regional security, allies naturally experience a greater sense of uncertainty and more acute fears of abandonment and entrapment.

The allies see uncertainty less in U.S. toughness or resolve to fight threats abroad than in the U.S. ability to reliably match ends and means in policy—a logical antecedent of effective deterrence.
Section Two: The Price of Dereliction

One might be forgiven for thinking that ally perceptions should not be much of a concern for U.S. statecraft. After all, allies grappled with doubts about U.S. reliability well before Trump came to office. If Japan and South Korea did not defect from the alliance in the past, they will not do so now. And at any rate, allies have no Plan B for a failure of U.S. leadership. Japan and South Korea lack viable strategic alternatives to U.S. patronage in the foreseeable future.

But ally defection, while unlikely, is only one kind of extreme consequence that could result from a failure of alliance management. Forsaking two of America’s closest and oldest alliances involves numerous other avoidable costs and risks, some of which have already occurred, and some of which are markedly worse than simply the disappearance of an alliance.

Japan–South Korea Rivalry

In response to the mixture of fear and uncertainty stimulated by the intersection of North Korea’s growing nuclear capabilities with high-risk and inconsistent U.S. decisionmaking regarding Asia, the United States is rapidly losing the ability to buffer historical tensions between Japan and South Korea. In prior decades, the United States used its good offices and leverage as patron to buffer the political friction that intermittently arises between Japan and South Korea. But when the same set of historical grievances arose in 2018 and 2019, the United States lacked the political capital to influence either party’s behavior. U.S. calls for restraint were largely ignored as the two sides engaged in a series of diplomatic rebukes, Japan imposed bilateral trade and technology restrictions, and South Korea conducted snap military exercises in defense of the contested Dokdo/Takeshima islands. South Korea also declared a withdrawal from the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) with Japan in 2019, suspending the declaration at the last minute only because holding GSOMIA at risk promised more leverage over Japan and the United States than simply walking away from it. As a South Korean national security official explained in Seoul at the time, “The United States is no longer a factor in our issues with Japan. But maybe if we postpone GSOMIA withdrawal, everyone will understand our perspective better.” For Japan’s part, Sato Masaru, a former Foreign Ministry official, lamented that inconsistent U.S. involvement had “deepened the overall crisis of antagonism between the two neighbors . . . [and] cast a shadow over future bilateral relations.”

On June 28, 2019, at the G20 summit in Osaka, South Korean President Moon Jae-in was welcomed by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. South Korea had declared a withdrawal from the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) with Japan in 2019, suspending the declaration at the last minute only because holding GSOMIA at risk promised more leverage over Japan and the United States than simply walking away from it. (Kim Kyung-Hoon, Pool/Getty Images)

An unreliable patron fuels Japan–South Korea rivalry in other ways as well. The North Korean missile threat and the possibility of the United States going to war against North Korea has helped underwrite Prime Minister Abe’s move toward a more conventional military, including increased defense spending, a new interpretation of Japan’s ability to conduct military operations abroad, and a failed bid to revise Article 9 of Japan’s pacifist constitution. For decades, Japan has slowly shifted from a pacifist to a realist defense posture, generating occasional concerns in Seoul about a resurgent “militarist” Japan. To be sure, part of South Korea’s defense budget is driven by ambient threat perceptions of Japan. But rhetorical worries about Japanese militarism have previously amounted to hyperbole of limited consequence, while the United States has until now acted as a reliable buffer and security guarantor in Northeast Asia. With U.S. influence steadily diminished, concern about Japanese militarism—and the low threshold for applying such a label to Japanese defense reforms—risks an unmitigated security dilemma and arms competition between otherwise liberal democratic neighbors.
New Nuclear Risks
Beyond the risk of an emergent Japan–South Korea rivalry, the allies’ belief that they might need to secure themselves in a world without the United States has sharpened nuclear discourses in both countries and pressured the United States to increase the presence of its nuclear weapons in Northeast Asia. This ultimately heightens risks of crisis instability vis-à-vis North Korea and makes diplomatic solutions harder to pursue.

In South Korea, public and elite opinion about nuclear weapons ebbs and flows, but in recent years fears have spiked. In the midst of the nuclear crisis with North Korea in 2017, a Gallup Korea poll found 60 percent of respondents favoring an independent nuclear capability for South Korea. A year later, when the crisis was over and an inter-Korean peace dominated news coverage, a separate survey of South Korean opinion found that favorability toward nuclear weapons had actually increased to 68 percent. The reasoning was that respondents feared entrapment by the United States—that it was too willing to resort to actions that could compel the use of U.S. nuclear weapons, through miscalculation. Seizing on the recent pro-nuclear zeitgeist, a cross-section of mostly conservative South Korean policy elites—who have long favored nuclear weapons—have urged the United States to deploy low-yield nuclear weapons to South Korea.

In Japan, fear of U.S. abandonment threatens the durability of its decades long “Three Noes” principle foreswearing possession, production, or presence of nuclear weapons on its territory. Foreign policy hawks such as former Defense Minister Shigeru Ishiba have begun advocating for a revision of the Three Noes principle and for Japan’s right to an independent nuclear capability. As another Japanese defense official claimed, “Once Japan is a nuclear power, it won’t need to kowtow to the United States.” Short of its own capability, the idea of “nuclear sharing” has also re-emerged: “In peacetime, the ownership would rest with the USA, but if there were a serious crisis, Japan would have a limited right to use those weapons.” Nuclear sharing presupposes not only a revision of the Three Noes principle, but also an increase in the presence of U.S. nuclear weapons in Northeast Asia. It also has the consequence of deepening ally dependencies on U.S. nuclear weapons, which makes it more likely that allies will pursue their own nuclear weapons when they determine they can no longer rely on the U.S. nuclear umbrella.

While there is no chance of either Japan or South Korea going nuclear while their alliances with the United States remain intact, there is unquestionably an alternative future in which both Japan and South Korea become nuclear weapons states. While there is no chance of either Japan or South Korea going nuclear while their alliances with the United States remain intact, there is unquestionably an alternative future in which both Japan and South Korea become nuclear weapons states.

Strategic Spoilers
Perhaps the least appreciated risk of permitting alliances with Japan and South Korea to become either impotent or a liability is their potential to spoil America’s larger foreign policy agenda. Even putting aside that weak alliances make it easier for states such as China, North Korea, and Russia to pursue divide-and-conquer strategies, the allies themselves can impose direct geopolitical costs on the United States. Put simply, as the patron...
becomes unreliable or an indirect source of danger for the client, the client’s loyalty wanes in tangible ways. Allies can deny the United States crucial basing and access rights for key weapons systems or personnel, refuse participation or support for U.S. initiatives outside the scope of the alliance, and pursue second-order policy independence that frustrates U.S. goals. Japan and South Korea have engaged in early examples of all three veto powers in response to their Trump-era worries about the United States.

The United States deployed four Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) batteries to South Korea in early 2017. The THAAD system was part of U.S. deterrence and defense designs against the missile capabilities North Korea was rapidly improving during the 2017 nuclear crisis. But the deployment was politically contentious in South Korea, and was not cost-free—Seoul weathered an array of economic retaliation measures from Beijing, which viewed the ballistic missile defense system as a threat. In spite of THAAD’s military value, South Korea’s foreign minister announced commitments on October 30, 2017, that substantially constrained future U.S. policy designs in Northeast Asia: no additional THAAD deployments, no participation in a regional missile defense network, and no trilateral alliance involving Japan. As a Republic of Korea defense official reasoned, “You might say we sold out future U.S. cooperation to fix the pressure from China. [But] President Trump was making big threats without consulting us and not protecting us from the China problem . . . [So] we made a deal to take care of ourselves. What [else] can you expect?”

One of the most significant lines of effort in the U.S. approach to great power competition with China has been the prevention of Chinese telecommunications provider Huawei from establishing a foothold in the global 5G market. U.S. officials have invested substantially in a campaign explaining that Huawei gives the Chinese Communist Party backdoor access to user data and is therefore a national security threat. Even though this is apparently true, the United States has struggled to convince a number of fence-sitters and friends alike to avoid business with Huawei—including South Korea and Japan. South Korea has thus far rebuffed U.S. calls to ban Huawei, instead applying to the company the same standard it applies to Samsung and others operating in their telecommunications market. And while Japan views China as a strategic rival in the long term, in the near term U.S. unreliability has compelled Tokyo to pursue closer diplomatic and economic ties with China as a stabilizing compensatory measure, going as far as proposing a dialogue with China to resolve the longstanding dispute over ownership of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. Though Japanese outreach to China is a positive development, such hedging has prevented Japan from implementing the outright ban of Huawei that the United States has urged of all friendly governments.

If the United States values intimate allies such as Japan
and South Korea adhering to its technology competition strategy, it will need to curry favor with them, which means taking their security concerns seriously. Even if the United States can cajole loyalty on core alliance issues, doing so while allies lack confidence in the United States risks policy defections on issues separate from the alliance but still important to U.S. priorities elsewhere. South Korea, for instance, has expressed misgivings about the U.S. “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” strategy of the Trump administration and withheld support for it even beyond the Huawei saga. For instance, when Secretary of Defense Mark Esper said the Pentagon would be looking to quickly develop and deploy ground-launched cruise missiles that previously had been prohibited by the INF Treaty, South Korea’s Ministry of National Defense immediately rejected the possibility of hosting the new missiles in Korea. The Korean government likewise rejected repeated U.S. requests for some measure of military presence in the South China Sea and declined to backstop the U.S. protest of China’s illegal island-building campaign in contested maritime territory. As a Korean defense official asked rhetorically, “How will the United States protect South Korea from Chinese threats and pressure? We are victims of President Trump’s [burden-sharing] extortion. Should we also be victims of Chinese extortion?” A former South Korean Foreign Ministry official added, “Korea is in double trouble: If we help U.S. strategy in the South China Sea or [accept deployments of] INF missiles, it will make the region more dangerous and we will become targets of Chinese pressure. [Yet] if we refuse this kind of U.S. requests, the U.S. might withdraw troops.”

Similarly, Japan, which in general closely aligns its foreign policy with the United States, also recently bucked U.S. preferences on a high-value issue in U.S. strategy—Russia policy. According to Director Shinji Hyodo of Japan’s National Institute for Defense Studies, “strengthening ties with Russia,” including on security issues, is a necessary salve for a deteriorating security environment in which the U.S. role is at best unclear. As such, Tokyo’s national security thinking evinces no concerns about Russia, contrasting sharply with the common U.S. view that Russia is the greatest national security threat save perhaps China. And while the United States has imposed a punitive sanctions regime on Russia, Japan has doubled down on an eight-point economic cooperation plan with Russia that it started in 2016. Without violating U.S. sanctions, Prime Minister Abe cultivated warm ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin and promised even deeper economic ties with Russia in energy and gas sectors not constrained by sanctions.

The more Japan and South Korea feel exploited or ignored, the greater their ability to spoil U.S. strategic designs and make decisions that render Northeast Asia a more dangerous place.

All these examples highlight the core problem: The more Japan and South Korea feel exploited or ignored, the greater their ability to spoil U.S. strategic designs and make decisions that render Northeast Asia a more dangerous place. Former Secretary of State George Schultz famously compared alliance management to tending a garden—you cultivate relationships over the long term so that one day they might bear fruit. This may have understated their importance. Alliances can be assets if properly tended, but they become substantial liabilities if neglected or forsaken.
Section Three: Restoring Confidence and Competence in Alliance Management

If the United States hopes to preserve its Northeast Asian alliances and avoid the geopolitical costs associated with their hollowing out, its policies will have to convince Japan and South Korea of several things. This means the United States must take their security seriously; understand the threat from North Korea and have a plausible strategy for reducing it; and reliably conceive, talk about, and implement policies that minimize risks of ally abandonment or entrapment. This section of the report recommends specific principles and actions required of an approach that helps manage these entangled risks.

Principles

Everything the United States does concerning Northeast Asia—especially Japan and South Korea—needs to be grounded in guiding principles. Volatility and unpredictability are not virtues for a great power patron. Having a set of principles to which everything from trip planning to talking points must conform improves the consistency—and by extension the reassuring effect—of U.S. policy. It also helps reduce strategic risk by reducing the ambiguity about U.S. interests and U.S. resolve toward North Korea that has historically encouraged it to probe with provocative military actions that have occasionally led to crisis.

Align Word and Deed

Staying on message matters. A prerequisite for restoring perceptions of reliability and competence is aligning the words and deeds of the U.S. government. What U.S. officials and strategy documents say needs to be consistent with what U.S. defense budget decisions, patterns of military signaling, and U.S. Treasury Department designations actually do. The gap between U.S. strategy and its implementation has rendered the former not credible. The Government of Japan, for instance, broadly approved the thinking outlined in U.S. strategy documents but has been vexed by how much U.S. policy often deviates from strategy in practice. South Korean officials have said they will not bear the geopolitical costs of U.S. requests—for example, to host new weapons systems, ban Huawei, or conduct patrols in the South China Sea—when they cannot even understand who reliably speaks for the United States. To remedy this, the United States should avoid making threats—toward North Korea, China, or allies—unless it intends to fulfill them, avoid making promises in private that contradict what U.S. officials say in public, and avoid U.S. officials at any level making statements that appear in tension with the statements of others in the government. Everyone recognizes that positions (and talking points) can change when circumstances change. But everyone similarly recognizes that too often in recent years, the United States has confused all audiences about what its positions and intentions are.

Engage in Proportional Risk-Taking

Brinkmanship is for rogues—it should be rare because effective strategies typically involve risks commensurate with the objective sought, and circumstances rarely require an existential gamble. In trying to recover lost perceptions of competence, the National Security Council should enforce a risk aversion bias in U.S. decisionmaking toward Northeast Asia. While North Korea or China might present extreme scenarios that require the United States to manipulate risk to stave off war, as a general rule the threat that leaves something to chance is not going to serve alliances well in a context where the risk-taker’s rationality is in question. To the extent the United States decides it needs to leverage rather than reduce risk in the region—whether through military signaling or attempts to change the balance of military power—it should seek ways of doing so that share or distribute the risk with allies, making them stakeholders rather than just clients.

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CONSULT BEFORE DECIDING
In keeping with George Schultz’s gardening dictum, the United States should commit to consulting with its allies before it makes decisions that impact them. This did not happen during the 2017 nuclear crisis, during the 2018 summit diplomacy processes, or when the United States levied a bill for alliance burden-sharing that quadrupled overnight the amount demanded. If alliances are to be the priority that U.S. officials often claim, then it is in the U.S. interest to consult with them accordingly. Soliciting pre-decisional input from allies increases the likelihood they become stakeholders in, rather than opponents or victims of, U.S. decisions. When President Richard Nixon declared his Guam Doctrine in 1969, precipitating the reduction of U.S. military presence by 20,000, South Korea’s President Park Chung-hee was floored. Japan and South Korea were consulted about the decision only after Nixon had made it. Predictably upset, President Park promptly began a clandestine nuclear weapons program and bogged down the United States in years of negotiations over how the United States would reduce troops in South Korea.60 The decision to draw down troops had strategic merits, but proved costly because of how it was conducted—without prior consultation with the allies it affected.

Recommendations
In conjunction with the principles above, the following recommendations are intended to help manage regional risks and ally perceptions of U.S. reliability and strategic competence.

SIX STEPS FOR SHORING UP AMERICA’S EAST ASIAN ALLIANCES

- Refrain from Alliance Taxation
- Forge an Alliance Innovation Base
- Launch an Alliance Wargaming Group
- Provide a “No Missile Deployment” Promise
- Establish a Trilateral Strategic Security Dialogue
- Modernize Deterrence Posture in South Korea

Refrain from Alliance Taxation
A host nation should never feel hostage to U.S. extortion. The most immediate threat to the health of alliances with both Japan and South Korea is the ongoing burden-sharing talks, in which U.S. negotiators initially presented a demand for $5 billion in compensation from South Korea and $8 billion from Japan—four times the cost that each previously absorbed as part of hosting U.S. forces. This kind of rent-seeking not only treats the U.S. military as a mercenary force, it also raises serious questions about U.S. rationality. It amounts to a very large tax imposed on allies in exchange for a continuation of the status quo. The United States—ideally its president—should pledge to never impose a tax on allies for what is both a shared benefit and liability of hosting U.S. troops on their territory. U.S. negotiators should agree to an in-principle provision that the United States will not seek compensation for new costs associated with troop basing and deployments without first consulting with allies about the pending financial imposition.
Forge an Alliance Innovation Base

The U.S. government should construct a community of practice focused on advanced technology protection and innovation with Japan and South Korea. An Alliance Innovation Base, which involves many lines of effort outlined in a previously published CNAS report, will generate manifold benefits. It promises to increase research and procurement efficiencies by pooling scientific knowledge. It can enhance the security protections of military technologies and underlying intellectual property. It will help keep the United States and its allies at the technological forefront of a long-term competition with China. And, because it represents a costly signal of America’s long-term investment in its allies, it can help strengthen the credibility of the U.S. general commitment to forward presence and alliance defense in Northeast Asia.

Launch an Alliance Wargaming Group

The Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), in conjunction with Japanese and South Korean counterparts, should establish a full-time, trilateral Track 1.5 office staffed by think tank experts and civil servants from Japan, South Korea, and the United States. This group will conduct war games, tabletop exercises, scenario analysis, and simulations based on requirements it receives from both the previously proposed Alliance Innovation Base and the trilateral Strategic Security Dialogues proposed next. The group’s work will help evaluate the analytical merits of pursuing different co-development projects as well as specialized divisions of labor in national force structure development. The group will also give the allies greater access to U.S. strategic thinking and intentions, including how all three countries understand thresholds of retaliation versus restraint during a crisis. And it will generate the added benefit of habitualizing cooperative interactions and information-sharing among officials and security specialists from the three countries.

Provide a “No Missile Deployment” Promise

The United States should commit to Japan and South Korea that it will avoid requesting deployment of INF-range missiles to their territory except as a last resort. When the United States withdrew from the INF Treaty in August 2019, it immediately began floating the idea of deploying ground-launched, long-range missiles to Asia that would have previously violated the restrictions of the INF Treaty. The purported reason was to rectify a perceived missile gap against China, which has a substantial number of INF-range missiles because it was never party to the treaty. Both the Japanese and South Korean governments reacted coldly to the notion of having U.S. INF-range missiles on their soil, viewing them as politically costly and strategically risky. A promise to reevaluate the importance of this missile gap, and to search for other ways of mitigation that do not subject U.S. allies to Chinese coercion, will substantially improve perceptions of U.S. strategic competence.

Establish a Trilateral Strategic Security Dialogue

The State Department, in partnership with OSD, should propose an official, senior level, trilateral Strategic Security Dialogue with Japan and South Korea focused on not only extended deterrence but also nuclear stability. In 2010, following the U.S. Nuclear Posture Review and multiple acts of North Korean militarized violence that year, OSD launched separate extended deterrence consultation mechanisms with Japan and South Korea respectively. Over time, the allies have occasionally come together trilaterally to explore extended deterrence requirements and thinking, but only under the cover of unofficial Track 1.5 dialogues. Creating a Strategic Security Dialogue, as proposed here, makes three major advancements on this sporadic history. First, it symbolically elevates consultations on nuclear strategy that in recent years have been substantially lowered in level of importance and in the rank of participating officials. Second, an official trilateral mechanism makes it possible to adjudicate disagreements between Japan and South Korea regarding the optimal nuclear policies that will reassure them in the face of the North Korea threat. Third and most important, a trilateral Strategic Security Dialogue will create space to engage Japanese and Korean defense thinkers on ways of reducing regional risks. If the point of extended deterrence is to ensure allies are never attacked with nuclear weapons, then they should value U.S. policies that plausibly reduce the danger they face, regardless of whether the policies involve coercion and nuclear weapons or arms control and diplomacy. To avoid biases and blind spots, the scope of alliance extended deterrence conversations needs to broaden, and to encourage discussions about not just strengthening the nuclear umbrella, but also measures that can enhance stability and ultimately make the nuclear umbrella less central to regional security.
Modernize Deterrence Posture in South Korea

The U.S. troop level in South Korea (28,500 as of this writing) is not driven by the requirements of deterrence against a second-tier nuclear-armed adversary with a history of military adventurism. Rather, it is a political legacy of the Obama era. As recommended in a CNAS report published in 2019, the United States should modernize its deterrence posture in South Korea to emphasize rapid-reaction capabilities.67 U.S. troops need to show, in partnership with South Korean forces, that they are capable of prevailing in limited conflicts with North Korea without follow-on forces from off-Peninsula. This can be achieved with fewer ground forces, the introduction of amphibious forces, special forces operators, short-range cruise missiles, and supporting intelligence platforms. The net impact on U.S. force levels will be a reduction in the U.S. footprint in South Korea from 28,500 to as low as 18,000, but will be driven only by strategic requirements. This has the potential to reinforce the U.S. alliance commitment (because lower force levels are more politically sustainable), enhance deterrence of North Korean military adventurism, and reduce risks of nuclear war.

Conclusion

Alliance management is a process. There is no silver bullet, and no outcome from it lasts forever. Enjoying the advantages of alliances and avoiding the costs of their atrophy demands consistency, competency, and long-term investment. It necessitates solidarity—having empathy for allies’ security concerns and showing responsiveness to them. Above all, it means treating them as partners and not customers, or worse. The erosion of America’s alliances with Japan and South Korea cannot be reversed overnight. But over time, ally fears of abandonment, entrapment, and patron incompetence can be restored with astute statecraft.
1. For the history of how this happened, see Van Jackson, On the Brink: Trump, Kim, and the Threat of Nuclear War (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

2. Trump, for instance, tweeted after meeting Kim Jong Un, “There is no longer a Nuclear Threat [sic] from North Korea.” Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump), June 13, 2018, 5:56 a.m., Twitter.


10. Working level U.S. officials had not reached any prior agreements—and indeed had only minimal contact with their counterparts—before the hastily organized Trump-Kim meetings. See Jackson, On the Brink, 184–87.


17. Interview with anonymous South Korean defense scholar, Seoul, November 23, 2019.

18. As quoted in Jackson, “Botched Diplomacy.”


22. In the Obama era, for example, South Korean conservatives arguing for an independent nuclear capability were directly responding to fears of U.S. abandonment in the wake of the 2008 recession followed by unanswered North Korean attacks in 2010. See Jackson, “The Rebalance, Entrapment Fear, and Collapsism”; Van Jackson, “Does Nuclearization Impact Threat Credibility? Insights


25. GSOMIA is a bureaucratic bilateral information sharing agreement that exists between many countries. China has a GSOMIA with both Japan and South Korea. In the Japan–South Korea context, GSOMIA is necessary to allow direct, real-time sharing of sensor-based missile tracking data to coordinate missile responses. Without GSOMIA, information-sharing is delayed because the United States must relay information between the two countries.


37. Edelstein, “Is Japan About to Hit Its Nuclear Tipping Point?”


46. Miller, “Japan’s 5G Challenge.”


56. Y.A., “The View from Japan.”

57. Interview with anonymous South Korean Foreign Ministry official, Seoul, November 21, 2019.


64. South Korea in particular has raised the INF-range missile issue as contributing to its perceptions of U.S. incompetence.

65. Interviews with three anonymous South Korean defense scholars in Seoul in November 2019 confirm that extended deterrence consultation mechanisms have continued since 2010 but been lowerd in stature.

66. Since 2017, Japanese and South Korean officials have expressed starkly contradictory views about the best ways of protecting their nations against the North Korea threat.

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