



## Unintended consequences of US alliances in Asia

by Robert E. Kelly

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The conventional wisdom on US alliances in Asia, at least in the West, Japan, and Taiwan (but not necessarily in South Korea), is that they are broadly a good thing. Those alliances, we are told, provide stability. They keep China from dominating the region. They hem in North Korea and defend the powerfully symbolic South Korean experiment in liberal democracy and capitalism. They prevent the nuclearization of South Korea and Japan and a spiraling regional arms race. In short, they re-assure. They allow the US to project power into the region. They consolidate liberal democratic values in the Pacific. They help keep trade relationships open and act as a restraint on behavior in an important, but potentially volatile region.

This view is not universal. The Chinese disagree quite strongly. For Beijing, US 're-assurance' to allies is a challenge to Chinese freedom of maneuver. Others in Asia see the US using its alliances to draw a new line through Asia, while some in the US believe those alliances encourage irresponsible behavior by allies, either through free- or cheap-riding or being unduly provocative.

It is time to challenge the conventional wisdom. Rather than assuming their benefits – perhaps out of widespread strategic distrust of China – and downplaying negatives, unintended consequences and second order effects, we must better understand the true value of US alliances in Asia. To be blunt, do the costs outweigh the direct benefits?

Assumptions must be questioned. It is widely accepted that the US presence halts a spiraling nuclear arms race in East Asia, even though that has not happened between India and Pakistan after they both went nuclear in the 1990s. Neither India nor Pakistan has a strong US alliance, nor are they governed as competently as most East Asian states, but that has not led to a widely feared nuclear spiral. This suggests, at least, that US reassurance might not be necessary for nuclear responsibility in Asia after all.

Stephen Walt and others have argued, for example, that the closeness of the US-Israel alliance has negative unintended consequences, like Muslim anger at the US in turn feeding sympathy for radicalism, and so on. Similar negatives and false positives could exist in Asia. Post-Iraq, it should no longer be taken as self-evident that a heavy US forward

presence is a good thing. US restraint does not equal 'decline,' appeasement, or the abandonment of allies.

Consider four possible negative consequences that challenge the conventional narrative for US alliances in Asia.

First, US Forces in Korea (USFK) could be perpetuating the division of Korea. This is because they serve as a critical prop in North Korean post-communist ideology and rhetoric, without which the regime would struggle to explain privation to its people. In addition, USFK's presence could keep China from cutting North Korea loose, as Chinese scholars in my experience routinely say, and quite bluntly. The US could agree to leave South Korea permanently in exchange for China cutting North Korea loose, a step that could accelerate unification. A cut-off of Chinese aid would trigger a crisis in the North and might well precipitate collapse and unification. A unified Korea could then 'finlandize' between competing powers of its neighborhood, perhaps even maintaining its nuclear weapons to insure that it becomes the Switzerland or Austria of East Asia. This may be a suboptimal solution from a US perspective, but it is a pretty good outcome for the Koreans, especially long-suffering North Koreans.

Second, the reassurance provided by USFK and USFJ (US Forces in Japan) freezes the Japanese-Korean conflict and encourages maximalists and zealots on both sides not to compromise. A lighter regional US footprint or vaguer alliance commitment would oblige these two governments to deal directly with each other and reach their own *modus vivendi*.

Third, there is a risk that the rebalance, with its emphasis on strengthening the US military presence and its alliances, will push the US and China into a new Cold War or even conflict. There is a contentious historical debate on whether the US hardline position on the Soviet Union in the late 1940s and '50s consolidated the nascent superpower standoff and that the action-reaction cycle hardened the conflict. US alliances operated in a simple conceptual frame – communist or noncommunist – to prevent nuanced understandings of state behavior. America's early Cold War insistence on reading any socialist/communist state as a tool of a Moscow-run 'international communist conspiracy' prevented a basic *modus vivendi* with Mao Zedong for 20 years. The USSR might have collapsed earlier if the US been able to recruit China into anti-Soviet containment earlier. In short, there is a fair amount of evidence/argument that forward, hawkish alliance building by the US helped ignite and/or worsen the Cold War. AirSea Battle, which so obviously directed at China, may make the same mistakes.

Finally, US alliances encourage allied free-riding, in both Asia and NATO, unnecessarily driving up defense costs for US taxpayers. South Korea spends only 2.7 percent of GDP on defense, despite bordering North Korea. Japan spends an

astonishingly low 0.88 percent of GDP on defense despite Abe's tough talk on China. The rebalance will almost certainly encourage Asian allies to continue to underspend on defense at US expense. But US defense spending is already competing with the country's aging population's needs, massive infrastructure underinvestment, and the Tea Party's insistence on smaller government.

Weigh these possible costs and benefits, and it is not axiomatic that US alliances are net positives for the US and the region. Ultimately, the benefits may outweigh the cost, but that must be proven, not assumed.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.*