

## **Time for an Alliance Caucus** By Nicole Forrester

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The post-World War II “hub-and-spoke” alliance structure has served the United States and its allies well for the past six decades. Yet the transnational nature of current Asia-Pacific security challenges highlights the limitations of bilateral US-ally relationships to handle regional security threats, traditional or not. Success demands that the US and its allies work with each other in a networked manner. This is not to suggest “NATO for Asia,” but it is time for an informal Alliance Caucus.

A Caucus of the US and its regional allies (Australia, Japan, the Philippines, the ROK, and Thailand) could provide – initially as informal knowledge-sharing gatherings alongside international forums – an opportunity to creatively address concerns relevant not just to the US and its allies, but to the region as a whole.

This proposal is not without precedent. The UN has a multitude of caucuses, informal and formal, where likeminded countries coalesce around shared visions of specific interests. East Asian governments for years have sought a caucus in APEC; they now seek a similar group in the G-20.

An Alliance Caucus is different, however, because it requires a significant cultural shift in the way the US views the region. For the Caucus to work there needs to be a shared vision of regional security in addition to stakeholder ownership, so they feel it’s their idea.

The US would need to engage the allies simultaneously, and as equals, to encourage them to seek solutions to security challenges that may or may not require direct US involvement. This would also require a reconceptualization by the allies of their relationships with the US and with their neighbors, to allow greater cooperative problem-solving. The dividend would be maximizing the potential of these alliances and creating efficiencies within them.

Informal cooperation could cover politics, defense, security, and economics, in parallel to existing, formal regional mechanisms. Cooperation would strengthen the allies’ collective capacity; through thoughtful collaboration the network could be extended to non-ally partners.

The challenge is to identify the real reasons for cooperation among the six countries. It is tempting to say that the mere fact that they are US allies is enough; it is not. Beyond being allies, despite some historical grievances and territorial disputes, these five countries have common interests in maintaining and advancing the peaceful and prosperous

development of the region. For the most part, they share values and vision about how the region can achieve this goal, which does not require (nor desire) a choice between an economically ascendant China and a regionally engaged US.

For the US, the Caucus would allow burden-sharing at a time when sub-regional issues might be better resolved at a regional level. There are operational efficiencies to be gained if the Caucus took a more holistic approach to regional cooperation on security challenges. Broadening stovepipes across bureaucracies would spread alliance perspectives across whole of governments, beyond the usual foreign and defense ministry exchanges. For example, including development at an officials-level Caucus meeting would provide a platform for American, Australian, Korean, and Japanese Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) planners to coordinate approaches to regional development to increase efficiency and effectiveness. Thailand (both an ODA donor and recipient) and the Philippines could both benefit from the coordinated aid systems of the Caucus’ developed economies. The nexus between development and security could then also be better understood and leveraged by the networked allies.

Perception management will be critical because concerns about the optics of the Caucus are sure to arise. It’s not just “the what” (specific issues), but “the who” (must be non-US led), and “the how” (informal yet shared vision) of the approach to regional cooperation among allies that will matter.

While most regional actors, including the allies, are comfortable with trilateral arrangements and large multilateral settings, many shy from smaller plurilateral groupings where the spotlight can hamper intimate dialogue. Allies will need to consider the opportunity-cost of the networked alliance over possible alternative groupings.

Uniquely, the Caucus could explore an agenda that may be too politically sensitive, or beyond the scope, of existing multilateral organizations. It could also provide a new avenue to yield the political will for practical cooperation on pressing regional security issues.

China is certain to oppose such a group. It opposes US alliances as a reflex – dismissing them as a Cold War legacy – and opposes strengthening, much less networking them. China’s emergence makes the allies (including Australia, with its public hand-wringing on the divergence of economic and security interests) hesitant about openly participating in a group that could appear to contain China, even if the arrangement has different objectives. Caucus implementation requires nuance. We want to avoid antagonizing China and jeopardizing the allies’ critical economic relationships, but should not hand Beijing a veto over our expanded relationships.

Practical steps could be taken to manage these concerns; for example, the Caucus should have neither a secretariat nor a budget. At a national level, responsibility should rest within the foreign affairs agency of each Caucus member. This would counter perceptions of attempts by the US to institutionalize the Caucus, which could be seen as a liability by allies for international engagement with neighbors, particularly China.

We've just missed the opportunity to meet at the 2012 Nuclear Security Summit. On an already full international calendar there is little time, and in this fiscally constrained environment, little appetite, for more state-to-state meetings. A meeting of allies could initially take place at the sub-ministerial level, between diplomatic officials. An informal gathering at the next ASEAN Regional Forum Senior Officials Meetings (ARF SOM) is a perfect opportunity to discuss the Caucus proposal.

If done carefully, that is, to avoid the appearance of containing China and to use the ally-led initiatives arising from the Caucus to actively engage ASEAN neighbors rather than exclude them, this networked alliance approach could help get ahead of important issues needing deeper and more effective regional security cooperation.

If President Obama believes his 2010 National Security Strategy declaration that alliances are “the bedrock of security in Asia and a foundation of prosperity” in the region, the US needs to network its allies so that common challenges are evident and potential solutions can appear. To be successful, the US must “lead from behind” a networked alliance structure that promotes partner-initiated pursuit of initiatives which align allies’ distinct national, sub-regional, and regional interests with US objectives – rather than vice versa.

*This PacNet draws on conclusions from Pacific Forum CSIS Young Leaders’ case studies of US alliances in the Asia-Pacific. For the full report see Issues & Insights Vol. 11-No. 16.*

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