



## **US Alliances in Asia: Doing More with Less**

By Carl Baker and Brad Glosserman

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Amidst all the change in Asia – new leaders in China, Japan, and South Korea, relentless military modernization programs in China and North Korea, territorial frictions that could produce conflict – we like to believe that one verity remains: the US and its five allies remain committed to their military partnerships and rely on them to create the peace and stability that has been the foundation of regional prosperity. Or do they?

The 2010 *US National Security Strategy* is clear: “Our alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, and Thailand are the bedrock of security in Asia and a foundation of prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region. We will continue to deepen and update these alliances to reflect the dynamism of the region and strategic trends of the 21st century.” Despite US efforts to reassure its allies and assert its long-term interest in Asia through its rebalancing initiative, a growing number of skeptics question whether the alliances can still deliver peace and stability for the region. Regional changes demand that we consider whether that assumption is true. Has the US alliance system lived beyond its expiration date? If not, how can the US and its allies leverage the alliances to deal with an expanding array of regional security problems?

In our new report, *Doing More and Expecting Less: The Future of US Alliances in the Asia Pacific*, we examine the alliances and the role they have played in shaping US engagement and relationships among alliance partners. In addition to our analysis, five contributors, one from each alliance partner, give a perspective on the past, present, and future of the alliances. These changes are driven by changing security perceptions, the increased role of multilateral organizations in promoting security cooperation, the broadening of US alliance partnerships, the growing importance of other US security partners in the region, and the rise of Chinese influence in Asia. Several common features emerge from these analyses. First, there is a growing expectation that the alliance partners will take on greater responsibility within each bilateral relationship, a challenge to the asymmetry that has characterized each alliance. Second, there has been more collaboration on broader regional and global security issues. Third, there has been a tentative move away from the hub-and-spoke model to a more networked system, even though there remains a general reluctance to proceed. Fourth, China’s recent aggressiveness in asserting its territorial claims has led some alliance partners to seek

reassurances from the US regarding its commitment to mutual defense.

The US and its partners have an array of options as they contemplate ways to adapt the alliance system to this evolving security environment. The most ambitious version of alliance integration is a system similar to NATO. On the other end of the spectrum, the US could reduce its reliance on the alliances, allowing them to atrophy while reinforcing “coalitions of the willing” and other regional organizations. This would force alliance partners to take a more autonomous security posture. An intermediate approach that could lead to stronger alliance integration is to establish trilateral or quadrilateral coordination mechanisms. Reducing military deployments to the region would likely lead to more reliance on ad hoc functional responses to crises and increase the importance of ASEAN-centered regional organizations as the basis for the regional security architecture.

Our assessment of the alliances offers guidelines for thinking about regional engagement with Asia. As a starting point, and somewhat reluctantly, we conclude that policy makers should lower expectations about what the system of alliances can deliver. The US must recognize that its influence has diminished as Asia has acquired its own economic dynamism. The large gap between Northeast and Southeast Asia security policies reflects divergent priorities and the wherewithal to fund those needs. The US must recognize that its desire to privilege its alliances can diminish the roles for and prospects of other partners, as well as acknowledge the suspicions that sometimes surround its alliances as well as questions about their ultimate goal and purpose. Five important considerations to keep in mind when thinking about the role of the alliances are:

- the US should not oppose efforts to integrate Asia. Attempts to forge Asian institutions respond to a perceived gap between the region’s economic and political influence;
- the US should champion principles, rules, and institutions that its allies, partners, and other regional governments would want to support;
- the US should be building an economy that nations wish to partner with – the days of unquestioned US economic dominance are gone;
- the US should develop boilerplate agreements that it can sign with allies and that they, in turn, can sign with each other and with other regional governments; and
- the US and its partners should always invite China to join security programs, projects, and initiatives. Put the burden on China to decline participation.

Promoting cooperation from within the system of alliances only makes sense if the US and its allies seek collaborative solutions to security issues, avoid alienating those outside the system, encourage responsible behavior by all alliance partners, and the results are compatible with ASEAN-based security institutions. There is an urgent need to ensure the alliances are seen as part of the solution to the security challenges in the region and not an anachronism that holds back progress. We should always remember that the system of alliances is a means to an end, not an end in itself.

*Doing More and Expecting Less: The Future of US Alliances in the Asia Pacific*, is part of a MacArthur Foundation funded project on the US alliances in Asia and is available online at: <http://csis.org/publication/issues-insights-vol-13-no-1-doing-more-and-expecting-less-future-us-alliances-asia-pacif>.

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