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A Restraint Recipe for America's Asian Alliances and Security Partnerships

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Executive Summary

As Sino–American relations deteriorate, risks of conflict between Washington and Beijing are growing. A major war would be terrible for both the United States and the region while setting back critical goals, like the fight to stop climate change. Avoiding a war while safeguarding vital U.S. interests ought to be a priority. But while many in the United States want to strengthen alliance structures as a means of deterring China and to make Taiwan a de facto security ally, those who espouse a strategy of Restraint believe this approach endangers Americans and undermines their prosperity. A policy of Restraint is predicated on the view that alliances are not ends in themselves, but a means of bolstering U.S. security.

As Sino–American relations deteriorate, risks of conflict between Washington and Beijing are growing.

This brief analyzes the utility of America’s Asian alliances and security partnerships from a Restraint perspective under two scenarios. The first and preferred scenario is that of the United States and China walking back from their current march toward confrontation to achieve a stable, if still significantly competitive, relationship. The second and more likely scenario is a much sharper and sustained rivalry with China becoming a regionally strong, possibly in many ways dominant, power. We suggest the following policies toward key Asian allies and security partners:

- The U.S.–Japan alliance is core to American security and should be maintained or bolstered under the two scenarios, albeit with a defensive focus. The U.S.–Australia alliance should be maintained under both scenarios.
- While the alliance with South Korea, especially its extended deterrence component, should be maintained in the medium term, U.S. ground troops stationed on the peninsula should be drawn down and eventually withdrawn. The long–term (admittedly aspirational) goal ought to be a denuclearized, unified, and

formally non-aligned Korea. South Korea should not be pressured to join an anti-China containment coalition.

- A future stable competitive/cooperative relationship with China will permit a continuation of strategic ambiguity and a more credible One China policy regarding Taiwan. The United States should also implement a more financially feasible, less provocative active denial force posture. However, under the scenario of a sharper rivalry with a militarily much stronger Beijing, the United States should enhance its deterrence capabilities across the board while avoiding intervening militarily in a China-Taiwan conflict, should deterrence fail.
- U.S. alliances with the Philippines and Thailand should be gradually transformed into preferred partnerships involving major U.S. economic support and some military assistance to build up their internal balancing capacities, but with no mutual defense treaties. A ceiling should be put on U.S. attempts to rope in India as a quasi ally.
- The AUKUS military pact involving the United States, Australia, and the U.K. is more provocative and destabilizing than beneficial and should be rolled back. The four-nation Quad grouping can be beneficial to furthering U.S. influence if its public goods deliveries are much more robust and its de facto military dimension eliminated.
- Under both scenarios, positive-sum engagements with China in arenas such as climate change, global health, and global financial stability should be a core U.S. priority.

Introduction

Sino-American tensions are escalating. Most voices in the United States are calling for increased deterrence against China and a greater U.S. military role in defending Taiwan.¹

¹ Colby, Elbridge. *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict*, Yale University Press, 2021; Mastro, Oriana Skylar. "The Taiwan Temptation." *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2021. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-06-03/china-taiwan-war-temptation>.

Other voices, however, principally in the heterodox Restraint camp, are calling for an approach that safeguards American interests while reducing chances of a U.S.–China war. In general, Restraint critiques the U.S. penchant for maintaining or regaining global military primacy as wasteful, unnecessary for the defense of America’s vital national interests, and risking a great power war, which would be the greatest threat to its national security.²

America’s global alliances are often viewed as indispensable to its security. Restrainers believe that U.S. alliances should not be seen as ends in themselves but rather as essential and reliable means for the defense of the country’s vital interests. America’s alliances are only vital to the extent that they protect the lives, well-being, and security of its people and territory.

This does not mean that Restrainers think U.S. alliances and overseas forces should have no function other than countering clear and direct threats to the American homeland. They can and do serve positive, though secondary, functions in countering threats to the stability and prosperity of regions vital to American well-being, including Asia. But they will be more costly than beneficial if they provoke otherwise avoidable, hostile counter-balancing, and costly arms racing, thereby enhancing the chance of great power war, while yielding little in terms of defending America.³ And they are not performing their proper function if they cause the United States to devote excessive

² Swaine, Michael D., Jessica J. Lee and Rachel Esplin Odell. “Toward an Inclusive & Balanced Regional Order: A New U.S. Strategy in East Asia.” Quincy Institute, January 11, 2021. <https://quincyinst.org/2021/01/11/toward-an-inclusive-balanced-regional-order-a-new-u-s-strategy-in-east-asia/>; Shiffrinson, Joshua. “Neo-Primacy and the Pitfalls of U.S. Strategy Toward China,” *The Washington Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (December 2020); Goldstein, Lyle J. “The Indo-Pacific Strategy Is a Recipe for Disaster.” *Lawfare*, February 18, 2021. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/indo-pacific-strategy-recipe-disaster>; Ashford, Emma. “Strategies of Restraint.” *Foreign Affairs*, August 24, 2021.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-08-24/strategies-restraint>; Bacevich, Andrew. “The Endless Fantasy of American Power.” *Foreign Affairs*, September 18, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-09-18/endless-fantasy-american-power>; Wertheim, Stephen. “The Price of Primacy.” *Foreign Affairs*, February 10, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2020-02-10/price-primacy>.

³ Chen Weiss, Jessica. “The China Trap.” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2022. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/china-trap-us-foreign-policy-zero-sum-competition>; Ashford, Emma. “Great-Power Competition Is a Recipe for Disaster.” *Foreign Policy*, April 1, 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/01/china-usa-great-power-competition-recipe-for-disaster/>; Menon, Rajan. “How U.S.-China ‘Competition’ Could Lead Both Countries to Disaster.” *The Los Angeles Times*, November 22, 2021. <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2021-11-22/china-u-s-competition-war-biden-xi-summit>.

resources to defending other nations that have the capacity to provide for their own security without necessarily provoking conflicts.

This article lays out a Restraint-based vision for U.S. alliances in Asia under two sharply different future scenarios over the next two or three decades.⁴ The first involves our strongly preferred vision of the current tense rivalry giving way to a more cooperative Asian environment (albeit still with significant competitive elements.) This would result in an organic evolution of U.S. alliances as they increasingly embed themselves in a regional security order that includes both the United States and China, along with major Asian powers. This also envisions the removal of Taiwan as a major source of contention between Beijing and Washington. This would by far be the best and wisest outcome for U.S. interests.

This article lays out a Restraint-based vision for U.S. alliances in Asia under two sharply different future scenarios over the next two or three decades.

Unfortunately, however, if current trends continue, such a cooperative scenario is unlikely. The U.S.–China rivalry is in real danger of entering an escalation spiral that could lead to a great power war. Such a war could be catastrophic for the interests of the United States and the region. To avoid this disastrous outcome, yet safeguard core U.S. interests, we propose a second approach under the scenario of a sharper Sino–American rivalry that involves retaining those alliance-based U.S. security commitments that are truly core to this country’s interests in Asia while significantly reducing or eliminating commitments provided to non-vital U.S. allies and Taiwan.

⁴ A middle ground between these two extreme scenarios, largely involving a more balanced level of Sino-American cooperation and competition, is also possible. But this would likely require a reversal of the current trend toward deepening competition and rivalry (and low levels of genuine cooperation), which suggests that many of the features of the cooperation approach would be evident, albeit in some cases to a lesser degree.

Scenario of more cooperation than competition

In order to protect vital U.S. national interests without provoking greater confrontations with China, we believe that Washington's approach to its alliances and security partnerships should take enduring regional concerns about a worsening, zero-sum pattern of Sino-American rivalry more fully into account and also reflect the Restraint goals outlined above. To do this, Washington should restructure its Asian alliances and security partnerships to serve not only essential deterrence functions, but also as a bridge for dialogue with Beijing and other Asian nations on measures that could be taken to develop more meaningful cooperative security interactions.

These cooperative structures should be aimed toward not just reducing the chances of war, but also: a) countering climate change (a true "existential threat" recognized by the Biden administration) and pandemics; and b) achieving a more inclusive and integrated, region-wide set of economic and technology relations, as an alternative to polarizing security and economic blocs and excessive technology decoupling.⁵

To support this overall strategy, U.S. and allied forces should adopt a more defensively oriented, active denial military posture in Asia, as opposed to a theater-control orientation.⁶ Such a posture, if combined with appropriate confidence-building measures (CBMs), crisis management, and, eventually perhaps, arms control understandings, would produce a more stable regional military balance. This scenario would allow the United States to conduct its regional foreign policy without relying on costly and provocative increases in defense spending; it would reduce the risk of military crises and inadvertent escalation, dampen arms racing, and enable more positive-sum security interactions.

⁵ White House. "Remarks by President Biden at the COP26 Leaders Statement." November 1, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/11/01/remarks-by-president-biden-at-the-cop26-leaders-statement/>; Swaine, Lee, and Odell. "Toward an Inclusive & Balanced Regional Order: A New U.S. Strategy in East Asia."

⁶ Quincy Institute. "Active Denial: A Roadmap to a More Effective, Stabilizing, and Sustainable U.S. Defense Strategy in Asia." Quincy Institute, June 22, 2022. <https://quincyinst.org/report/active-denial-a-roadmap-to-a-more-effective-stabilizing-and-sustainable-u-s-defense-strategy-in-asia/>.

An essential precondition for a cooperative political, economic, and military strategy is the stabilization of the most dangerous issue in U.S.-China relations: Taiwan. Stabilization requires greatly reducing Chinese incentives to use force by maintaining the high costs to Beijing of any such action while injecting much greater credibility into the U.S. One China policy. Indeed, credibly reassuring China that the United States remains committed to its long-standing policy toward Taiwan would help allay Chinese concerns that Washington intends to use its increased deterrent capabilities to permanently separate the island from mainland China.⁷

To support this overall strategy, U.S. and allied forces should adopt a more defensively oriented, active denial military posture in Asia, as opposed to a theater-control orientation.

To achieve these goals, Washington should explicitly reject the notion, expressed by at least one U.S. defense official, that Taiwan must be kept separate from China because it is essential to America's defense of the entire first island chain.⁸ This dangerous notion would destroy the One China policy entirely and place the United States firmly on the path toward conflict with China.⁹ To the contrary, Washington should state that it will actively oppose any attempt by Taiwan to unilaterally establish de jure independence.

The United States should not attempt to secure prior assurances from Japan and South Korea for their military support in case the United States goes to war with China over Taiwan. Such a commitment would lock both powers into U.S. decisions regarding the use of force beyond the defense of their own territory, a stance that is resisted by many of their citizens; add to this the desire of many to avoid provoking Beijing unduly, and the

⁷ Swaine, Michael D. "Ending the Destructive Sino-U.S. Interaction Over Taiwan: A Call for Mutual Reassurance." Quincy Institute, October 24, 2022. <https://quincyinst.org/report/ending-the-destructive-sino-u-s-interaction-over-taiwan-a-call-for-mutual-reassurance/>.

⁸ Swaine, Michael D. "US official signals stunning shift in the way we interpret 'One China' policy." Responsible Statecraft, December 10, 2021. <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/12/10/us-official-signals-stunning-shift-in-the-way-we-interpret-on-e-china-policy/>.

⁹ Swaine. "Ending the Destructive Sino-U.S. Interaction Over Taiwan: A Call for Mutual Reassurance."

result would be significant domestic upheaval. It would also undoubtedly undermine Sino–Japanese and Sino–South Korean relations and increase the chance of conflict with Beijing.

Third, the United States should place clearer limits on its political and military ties to Taiwan. It should end its public efforts to discourage Taiwan’s remaining diplomatic partners from shifting their recognition to China and it should not send senior U.S. cabinet officials or dispatch military ships or aircraft to Taiwan.

In return, Washington should insist that Beijing reaffirm in unambiguous terms its commitment to a peaceful and uncoerced resolution of the issue. China should agree to significantly reduce – or end entirely – its military activities near the island and assert publicly that it has no timeline for unification. For its part, Taipei should clarify that it remains open to future cross–Strait dialogues on any topic and does not seek de jure independence.

As and if U.S.–China relations improve, Washington should consider the modification of its existing policies toward Taiwan, to create an overall environment more conducive to cross–Strait political talks. This could include sustained efforts to encourage Taiwan’s return to a version of the 92 Consensus and Beijing’s modification of the “one country, two systems” formula to make it more attractive to Taiwan.¹⁰

More broadly, as the Taiwan situation stabilizes, U.S. alliances can then serve as instruments for developing broader Asian cooperative regional security arrangements and CBMs, including with China. In this process, the United States should reaffirm its existing security commitments to Japan, South Korea, Australia, Thailand, and the Philippines, but without significantly expanding its military presence in the region.

The United States should also assist those countries (and Taiwan) in strengthening their defense capacities, while simultaneously and partially reducing its own troop presence as relations with Beijing improve. In addition, Washington should encourage its security partners to undertake positive–sum forms of engagement with one another, and with

¹⁰ Grossman, Derek. “Is the ‘1992 Consensus’ Fading Away in the Taiwan Strait?” RAND, June 3, 2020. <https://www.rand.org/blog/2020/06/is-the-1992-consensus-fading-away-in-the-taiwan-strait.html>.

China, that reduce their need to expend large amounts of resources on building up their militaries. The rationale for new military bloc-like structures, such as AUKUS, would also disappear under these conditions, and they should be rolled back.¹¹

As long as progress is made toward reducing regional security competition, stabilizing the Taiwan situation, and increasing cooperative security measures, the United States should not try to push Japan either to move away from its current peace constitution nor to greatly increase its defense spending.

Under this scenario, the U.S.–Japan alliance would likely approximate what Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama had in mind in 2009–10: a more equal alliance, with a reduced U.S. military presence and Tokyo strictly adhering to a defensive military posture even while increasing defense expenditures and pursuing multilateral cooperative security processes.¹²

As long as progress is made toward reducing regional security competition, stabilizing the Taiwan situation, and increasing cooperative security measures, the United States should not try to push Japan either to move away from its current peace constitution nor to greatly increase its defense spending. It should recognize that Tokyo must make its own decisions about these matters, albeit in consultation with Washington.

¹¹ The White House. “Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS.” September 15, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/15/joint-leaders-statement-on-aukus/>; Roggeveen, Sam. “AUKUS, one year on.” *The Interpreter*, September 12, 2022. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/aukus-one-year>; Shidore, Sarang. “AUKUS’ military alliance is another Western attempt to isolate China.” *Responsible Statecraft*, September 17, 2021. <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/09/17/uk-us-australian-nuclear-sub-deal-is-another-western-attempt-to-isolate-china/>.

¹² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. “Cooperation between Japan and China in the East China Sea.” June 18, 2008., <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000091726.pdf>; Hatoyama, Yukio. “Japan’s New Commitment to Asia – Toward the Realization of an East Asian Community” (speech, Singapore, November 15, 2009) The Government of Japan. https://japan.kantei.go.jp/hatoyama/statement/200911/15singapore_e.html; Hatoyama, Yukio. “A New Path for Japan.” *The New York Times*, August 26, 2009. <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/27/opinion/27iht-edhatoyama.html>.

In South Korea the United States should maintain deterrence and movement toward denuclearization while simultaneously working with Seoul to develop a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. The latter should begin with an “end-of-war” declaration and the lifting of certain sanctions in return for formal North Korean pledges to end nuclear weapons testing, ICBM tests, and any further expansion in the number of its nuclear warheads.¹³ Once these conditions have been met, a formal peace treaty should be negotiated, with the United States offering diplomatic recognition to North Korea and each Korean government to the other. With progress on intra-Korean peace, the United States could reduce its ground forces on the peninsula, assuming South Korea’s military is in a position to compensate for those capabilities.

The medium-term objective would be to reduce the importance of military deterrence, build North Korean economic incentives to cooperate, create new pathways for reassurance, and build incentives for greater social interaction.¹⁴ The long-term (admittedly aspirational) goal would be to create a denuclearized, unified, militarily strong but formally non-aligned Korean Peninsula, free from foreign forces, and led by a democratic government.¹⁵

Regarding maritime disputes in the East and South China Seas, the United States should push for agreements with China, Japan, and the other disputants involved to reach understandings on the number and size of military and para-military deployments, exercises, and FONOPs on or around disputed land features.¹⁶ This should also include a clear commitment by all disputants never to use force first against any other territorial claimants, nor to seek through military means to dislodge any rival claimant from held territories. Such agreements should facilitate a reduction in the overall presence of

¹³ Aum, Frank. “Incremental Denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula.” USIP, December 6, 2022. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/12/incremental-denuclearization-korean-peninsula>.

¹⁴ Chung-in Moon. “President Moon Jae-in and the Korea Peace Initiative.” *Global Asia*, June 2019. https://www.globalasia.org/v14no2/cover/president-moon-jae-in-and-the-korea-peace-initiative_chung-in-moon.

¹⁵ Swaine, Lee, and Odell. “Toward an Inclusive & Balanced Regional Order: A New U.S. Strategy in East Asia.”

¹⁶ Odell, Rachel Esplin. “Promoting Peace and Stability in the Maritime Order Amid China’s Rise.” Quincy Institute, July 30, 2021. <https://quincyinst.org/report/promoting-peace-and-stability-in-the-maritime-order-amid-chinas-rise/>.

military and paramilitary forces and provide a basis for greater progress toward a future overall Code of Conduct in at least the South China Sea.¹⁷

How likely is the above cooperative scenario in Asia? Current trends are clearly heading in the opposite direction. Both sides are increasingly digging in for confrontation and U.S. policies toward China have not changed (at least in terms of their fundamental objectives) with the Biden administration.¹⁸ A major reset seems unlikely, barring more pragmatic and restrained leaderships emerging in both countries, or a highly dangerous crisis erupts that forces leaders to reduce their rivalry and build more incentives for cooperation.

But substantive movement in this direction might occur in the absence of these events if other Asian powers, especially Japan, South Korea, and Southeast Asian nations, were to question more forcefully the zero-sum assumptions and interests driving the deepening Sino–American rivalry and support restraint objectives.

Scenario of sharp rivalry

Our second scenario assumes a mutually reinforcing cycle of deepening, zero–sum competition and a much stronger China within Asia. In such a world, the risk of a major power war increases significantly. Chinese nationalism, already intense, would escalate even more, and Beijing’s military presence and activities near Taiwan, Japan, South China Sea, and India would increase significantly, along with U.S.–led military maneuvers such as sail-throughs, more expansive exercises, and freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs). In the United States, pressure to decouple from China and end

¹⁷ Swaine, Lee, and Odell. “Toward an Inclusive & Balanced Regional Order: A New U.S. Strategy in East Asia.”

¹⁸ Bader, Jeffrey A. “Biden’s China policy needs to be more than just Trump lite.” Brookings Institution, January 25, 2022.

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/01/25/bidens-china-policy-needs-to-be-more-than-just-trump-lite/>; Guyer, Jonathan. “Biden’s promise to defend Taiwan says a lot about America’s view of China.” Vox, September 19, 2022.

<https://www.vox.com/world/2022/9/19/23320328/china-us-relations-policy-biden-trump>; Bateman, Jon. “Biden Is Now All-In on Taking Out China.” Foreign Policy, October 12, 2022.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/12/biden-china-semiconductor-chips-exports-decouple/>.

strategic ambiguity toward Taiwan would increase. Few politicians will be able to resist the demands to “do more” to rein in the Asian giant.

Such a scenario could emerge regardless of whether China’s growth rate continues at high levels or declines considerably. This is because while a low growth scenario might force Beijing to slow the expansion of its military and economic presence outside Asia, it would not significantly affect their expansion in the region.¹⁹ This would certainly be the case if China’s leadership viewed the United States as an increasing regional threat, as this “sharp rivalry” scenario assumes. In this case Beijing would probably work even harder to counter U.S. regional influence, increasing China’s military capabilities along its entire maritime periphery.

In the face of a growing rivalry with an increasingly influential and powerful China, a Restraint view would argue that those U.S. security commitments posing more security risks than benefits should be reduced gradually over the coming decades while preserving essential American political, military, and economic strengths.

This approach would still incorporate many of the Restraint features outlined above, including the continued, overriding need to address climate change, and to engage with China, allies and security partners to create clear guardrails and reach CBMs and understandings about limits on arms racing and militarization regarding contentious issues. This would also still include the creation of a defensive, denial-oriented U.S. force posture in Asia, and support for deeper U.S. economic involvement in Asia.²⁰

¹⁹ Rajah, Roland and Alyssa Leng. “Revising down the rise of China.” Lowy Institute, March 14, 2022. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/revising-down-rise-china>.

²⁰ Quincy Institute. “Active Denial: A Roadmap to a More Effective, Stabilizing, and Sustainable U.S. Defense Strategy in Asia.”

In the face of a growing rivalry with an increasingly influential and powerful China, a Restraint view would argue that those U.S. security commitments posing more security risks than benefits should be reduced gradually over the coming decades while preserving essential American political, military, and economic strengths. The first step is to distinguish core security allies requiring high levels of U.S. commitment from marginal or undefendable ones and refashion policy accordingly.

The U.S. security alliance with Thailand is the most likely candidate for downgrading under this dire scenario, due to its declining importance to U.S. security interests. With no territorial disputes with Beijing, Thailand is already cozying up to China.²¹ Yet its preference is to build close security ties with both great powers. Washington could therefore transition its security relationship with Bangkok from a formal security alliance to a preferred partnership with close economic, political, and diplomatic relations, and some military assistance to build up its internal balancing capabilities.

The U.S. security alliance with Thailand is the most likely candidate for downgrading.

The United States should also gradually terminate its mutual defense treaty with the Philippines, a nation that is already substantially triangulating between Washington and Beijing. Although the Philippines could arguably play an important role in the U.S. defense of Taiwan, that role would become moot if Washington were to decide not to intervene directly in a possible future China–Taiwan conflict (see below).

Ending the mutual security agreement with the Philippines would remove a major reason for the United States to become embroiled in military disputes in the South China Sea. Given China’s regional strength under this scenario, the United States would waste its resources and likely provoke a broader regional conflict in a futile attempt to establish military superiority in the South China Sea.²² Moreover, despite its deepening

²¹ Detsch, Jack. “Washington Worries China Is Winning Over Thailand.” *Foreign Policy*, June 17, 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/17/china-thailand-submarines-military-influence/>.

²² Goldstein, Lyle J. “Duterte’s gambit: Why Americans should thank the hot-headed leader of the Philippines.” *Responsible Statecraft*, February 14, 2020. <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/02/14/dutertes-gambit-why-americans-should-thank-the-hot-head>

rivalry with the United States under this scenario, Beijing has no interest in obstructing commerce that passes through it. Nor would a high level of Chinese influence over the South China Sea degrade the U.S. ability to protect its vital interests in the wider region.

The United States should continue to deepen bilateral ties and aid India's economic rise as a natural counterweight to China. A more prosperous India could generate sufficient internal balancing to help check Chinese power in Asia.

The current push to rope in India as a military quasi-ally (in bloc-like structures such as the Malabar exercise by the Quad states) should also end.²³ It may generate perceptions of deterrence, but is more a provocation. India's strapped military capacity and increased vulnerability to China on its northern border will likely continue to severely limit its ability to join a military coalition in a U.S.–China crisis over Taiwan or other areas in East and Southeast Asia. Despite its antipathy toward Beijing, New Delhi would probably prefer not to join such a coalition to avoid further Chinese escalation on the border.²⁴ However, the United States should continue to deepen bilateral ties and aid

[ed-leader-of-the-philippines/](#); Bandow, Doug. "Is US–Philippines defense pact like being 'shackled to a corpse'?" *Responsible Statecraft*, November 28, 2022. <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/11/28/is-us-philippines-defense-pact-like-being-shackled-to-a-corpse/>.

²³ Shidore, Sarang. "De–Risking the India Relationship: An Action Agenda for the United States." Quincy Institute, March 10, 2021.

<https://quincyinst.org/report/de-risking-the-india-relationship-an-action-agenda-for-the-united-states/>; Shidore, Sarang. "The Quad's perils outweigh its promises." *Responsible Statecraft*, September 27, 2021. <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/09/27/does-the-quads-perils-outweigh-its-promises/>.

²⁴ Since their June 2020 clash, which led to casualties on both sides in wake of Chinese intrusions, India and China have built up about 100,000 troops on their contested border. There has been limited disengagement by the two sides in recent months. However, technologically superior Chinese troops could potentially attempt further intrusions to put additional pressure on India, including in the thus–far calm eastern part of the border, if India participates in military coalition over a Taiwan or South China Sea crisis. Colonel Balwan Singh Nagial. "India, China troops disengagement at Gogra–Hot Springs (PP-15)." *The Times of India*, September 15, 2022.

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/col-nagial/india-china-troops-disengagement-at-gogra-hot-springs-pp-15/>; Haidar, Suhasini. "Worldview with Suhasini Haidar | Two years after Galwan: How much has changed in India-China ties?" *The Hindu*, June 17, 2022. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/worldview-with-suhasini-haidar-two-years-after-galwan-how-much-has-changed-in-india-china-ties/article65537384.ece>.

India's economic rise as a natural counterweight to China. A more prosperous India could generate sufficient internal balancing to help check Chinese power in Asia.²⁵

The U.S.–Japan alliance, on the other hand, should be intensified under this scenario, albeit in a defensive manner. Japan is the most critical and powerful state positioned on the edge of the western Pacific. Its central geostrategic location close to China, the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan, and Russia, and its history of conflict with these (and other Asian) states place an imperative on preventing Japan from posing a threat to them by developing nuclear weapons or major conventional naval and air capabilities. To avoid this scenario, the United States should strengthen its defensive arrangements with Japan. And the history of close and friendly relations between the United States and Japan since World War II provides a strong basis for policy coordination in dealing with China.

The United States should also maintain its alliance with Australia. It serves a useful function of deterrence at the western edge of the south Pacific, but Australia's remote geographic location also reduces the risk of provoking China. Australia could, if necessary, act as a backstop for some U.S. forces deployed in an offshore role. However, the AUKUS security bloc, possessing an arguably offensive intent, involving an extra–regional ally (the U.K.), and requiring transfers of nuclear technology and equipment that will undermine the non–proliferation regime, may still be too provocative under this scenario and would continue to alienate key Southeast Asian partners. For this reason, AUKUS should be terminated, and the Quad should not be militarized.²⁶

South Korea would be a more complex challenge, given its location, the history of close relations with the United States, the troubled South Korea–Japan relationship, and the likely increased threat from North Korea that would result from a more rivalrous Sino–American relationship. Under these conditions, both Seoul and Tokyo would be alarmed if the United States were to drastically reduce its security relationship with South Korea without undertaking compensatory reassurance measures. The two countries might respond by launching aggressive rearmament programs, possibly to the

²⁵ Shidore. "De-Risking the India Relationship: An Action Agenda for the United States."

²⁶ Shidore, Sarang, "The Quad's Perils Outweigh its Promises."

point of acquiring nuclear weapons. Alternatively, Seoul might tilt toward Beijing, thereby also raising tensions with Tokyo and Washington.

At the same time, over the long term, Seoul will certainly have the capacity to defend itself conventionally against North Korea without relying on U.S. troops based in-country. All this suggests that the United States should maintain its formal alliance with South Korea (including the extended deterrence commitment) while eventually eliminating, over the long term, its force presence on the peninsula, ending the U.N. command structure, and fully handing control of South Korean defense to Seoul. Over time, this could lead to a more independent and confident South Korea able to deter Pyongyang without provoking Beijing. Even under this scenario, the United States should not attempt to rope South Korea into a China-containment strategy. South Korean elites are deeply divided on China, and any pressure from the United States in this direction could result in severe blowback that harms the alliance.²⁷

The United States should maintain its formal alliance with South Korea (including the extended deterrence commitment) while eventually eliminating, over the long term, its force presence on the peninsula, ending the U.N. command structure, and fully handing control of South Korean defense to Seoul.

The relationship with Taiwan under this scenario would be especially challenging. It is extremely difficult to see how any administration could end even the existing, limited American security commitment to Taiwan over at least the medium term (i.e., the next 10–15 years) without creating a huge domestic crisis for the administration and severely damaging Washington’s relations with Tokyo and perhaps Seoul, assuming the two allies would resist such an action in this time frame, as is likely. Moreover, such a

²⁷ Lee, Jessica and Sarang Shidore. “The Folly of Pushing South Korea Toward a China Containment Strategy.” Quincy Institute, May 5, 2022. <https://quincyinst.org/report/the-folly-of-pushing-south-korea-toward-a-china-containment-strategy/>.

move might also encourage China to increase coercive pressure on Taiwan or possibly even launch an attack on the island, especially if Beijing were to fear Taiwan acquiring nuclear weapons as a result of the United States dropping its level of security assurance to the island.

Assuming no change in Beijing's basic stance toward Taiwan and continued Japanese (and likely South Korean) concern over the United States ending its commitments to the island, there is no viable alternative to maintaining and revitalizing the One China policy as a reassurance to Beijing, while continuing to expand the military capabilities of both the United States and Taiwan.

Assuming certain preconditions are present, Washington should refrain from committing its military to the defense of Taiwan.

If, however, the United States is unable to credibly revitalize its One China policy due to domestic opposition (and thereby fails to reassure Beijing on this issue), and assuming China continues to increase its military advantages in the areas surrounding Taiwan, the United States will need to reassess its long-term military calculus regarding the island.

Under such long-term conditions, from a purely strategic, cost-benefit perspective, it would make little sense for the United States to risk a major, and possibly nuclear, conflict with Beijing over Taiwan. Direct U.S. military intervention would almost certainly result in a U.S. defeat and prove disastrous for all concerned, and especially for the island. Moreover, undertaking such a hugely risky venture is simply not strategically justified as Taiwan is not vital for the defense of Japan or South Korea, much less U.S. territory. Hence, assuming certain preconditions are present (as below), Washington should refrain from committing its military to the defense of Taiwan.

This would not constitute a U.S. abandonment of the island. Under this scenario, and assuming that a Chinese attack on Taiwan would wreak untold havoc across Asia and beyond, the U.S. should still undertake an array of enhanced military and non-military

deterrent measures against such an eventuality, including greater defense assistance to the island. These measures would still make the accumulated military, political, diplomatic, economic, and reputational costs for China of employing force to seize and hold the island extremely high.

Before dropping the option of directly intervening in a China–Taiwan conflict, Washington should consult fully with Japan and South Korea and do all it can to safeguard their security and sustain their support. More broadly, across the region, the United States ought to focus on building up as many preferred partners as possible through a much better geoeconomics and soft power strategy. If done right, most Southeast Asian states will continue to prefer the United States over China, though in security terms they might wish to remain non–aligned.

Any of the above adjustments in alliances and security policies toward Taiwan would be long–term in nature and should be phased in over two to three decades. At the same time, even in this scenario of a deepening overall rivalry, the United States should continue to seek as much cooperation as possible with China on critical issues such as nuclear stability, arms control (to the extent feasible), military CBMs, climate change, global health, and the global financial system.

Conclusion

A responsible restraint view for Asia would be far from isolationist, as some critics wrongly say. It does not advocate utopian or naive policies and goals. Instead, it envisions a gradual process of regional readjustment in line with shifts in power relative to China and local needs, perspectives, and concerns. And it relies strongly on more active and imaginative U.S. diplomacy to minimize Sino-U.S. competition while preserving American interests. In the military realm, it posits a recalibrated, still supportive, yet strictly defensive military presence to create a more stable regional security environment in which neither the United States nor China dominates.

Such a U.S. approach would encourage Asian states to provide for their own welfare and security as much as possible through positive-sum forms of engagement with one

another. This would reduce the worst–casing of objectives and intentions and hence the need to expend huge amounts of resources to build up their military capabilities.

In implementing such an approach, the United States should never assume that China’s intentions are benign or that understandings can be reached without some significant compromises. Even under the above “best case” scenario of deepening regional cooperation and integration, both the United States and China will need to take initiatives that involve a certain level of risk, and build the good will necessary for more ambitious levels of collaboration in the future.

A responsible restraint view for Asia would be far from isolationist, as some critics wrongly say. It does not advocate utopian or naive policies and goals.

Yet the alternative of a deepening, zero–sum rivalry would pose much greater risks. Asia would almost certainly be wracked by frequent crises, confrontation, and possibly a great power war over Taiwan that would threaten the security and well-being of the United States. Quite simply, if the United States wants a secure and prosperous path forward, the above Restraint approach toward its relationships with its allies and security partners in Asia is the only option.

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