

# Challenges for US Alliance Management in the Western Pacific<sup>1</sup>

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## General Challenges for Regional Alliances

Three general challenges confront alliance managers in the Asia-Pacific region during the first decade of the twenty-first century: America's new focus on the Greater Middle East; the United States' shift from alliances to coalitions of the willing; and the accelerated rise of Asian powers.

First, since September 11, 2001, the locus of strategic attention from the world's superpower, the United States, has been on the Middle East and South and Central Asia. Although not intended to reduce the priority devoted to the Asia-Pacific, the inevitable consequence of a global campaign against terrorism has been a fundamental diversion of attention from the region. One cost of ousting the Taliban, overthrowing Saddam Hussein, and hunting al-Qaeda has been the tacit reduction in priority of managing traditional flashpoints in the Asia-Pacific, including the Korean Peninsula and Cross-Strait relations. When US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld addressed the 5<sup>th</sup> IISS Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore on 2 June 2006, he felt it necessary to proclaim that the United States is and will always be a Pacific power. What he did not specify, however, was the degree to which the United States may have to devolve and share power with others. Nor did he say to what extent regional allies would be asked to shift their focus further afield, to become de facto global alliances, in order to accommodate the threat of international terrorism. Not only have regional alliances spread their geographical reach, but they also have widened in scope to address the panoply of issues associated with the changing security landscape: from counterinsurgency, counterterrorism and counter-proliferation, to maritime security, stability operations, post-conflict reconstruction and state building, and humanitarian relief. Thus did the terror strikes masterminded by Osama bin Laden from Afghanistan on the United States on 9/11 indirectly complicate alliance management in the Asia-Pacific.

A second basic challenge to regional alliances flows from this first issue: to adjust to the need for more agility to deal with diverse, transnational threats,

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the United States under the George W. Bush Administration has moved from fixed alliances to flexible coalitions of the willing. As Secretary Rumsfeld puts it, the mission or objective should determine the alliance or coalition, not vice versa. 'Old Europe' and post-World War II institutions were devalued in favour of any and all countries and partners willing to support specific goals related to the struggle against global terror. Unfortunately and unintentionally, one effect of reducing the value of allies who may demur at participating in any particular mission, is to sow uncertainty among long-time allies about the fidelity of America's commitment to their security. Another effect of minimizing the importance of traditional allies is that even democratic allies who opt out of a particular mission may be abruptly accorded a lesser status than semi-authoritarian regimes (for instance, Uzbekistan over France and Germany, or at least until the Uzbeks tried to extort too many concessions from Washington as a quid pro quo for military bases). This approach is in tension with the Bush Administration's espoused support for building a community of democracies as the surest bulwark against terrorism and conflict. In contrast, an advantage of emphasizing coalitions of the willing over more rigid alliances is that it realistically recognizes that even close allies will not always agree on all objectives and all contingencies—including perhaps the Cross-Strait flashpoint—and it theoretically builds stronger coalitions by letting states decide when it is in their interest to enlist in a cause.

A third general challenge facing regional alliance management pivots around the seemingly inexorable shift in global wealth and power to a rising India, normalizing Japan, and above all re-emerging China. India has been the major power in South Asia since achieving independence; in the past few years, however, it has begun to think about its wider regional and even future global roles and responsibilities. In mid-2006 a single company, IBM, announced that it would invest US \$6 billion in India over the next three years. India may not have the ability of China to do everything 'better, cheaper and faster,' as one business expression has it, but it does have a more entrenched rule of law and a better micro economic environment than does China. In East Asia, the region is unsettled by increasing concerns over a period of history in which both Japan and China are major powers. Japan is increasingly discarding the largely self-imposed shackles in place since the Second World War, which led Japan to focus on economic power and eschew the right to a military and collective self defence. Japan's new Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, plans to pursue a new constitution that could relegate the existing, American-drafted constitution on the scrap heap of history and put it its place a legal framework justifying Japan's 'normal' role in the world—despite the fact that Japan has a long way to go in repairing its relations to dealing with the legacy of history with key neighbours China and the Republic of Korea. Finally, China is increasingly flexing its muscle in Southeast Asia, Central Asia and Eurasia, in Africa, and, indeed, even in Europe and the Americas. Greater China is now America's and Taiwan's

leading trading partner. Europe, meanwhile, tends to see China in economic terms, because security concerns seem to lie just beyond the sphere of interest created by a fixation on the European Community. In reality, no country today wants a bad relationship with a re-emerging and dynamic China.

The shifting tectonic plates of international security have created a new locus of attention, placed a premium on fluid coalitions, and bolstered the steady progress of Asian powers—all of which have had a profound effect on regional alliances.

### **Challenges for Specific Allies and Prospective Coalition Partners**

Beyond these three general challenges, each alliance or potential major coalition with the ability to affect the strategic direction of regional security has its own particular and specific challenges. Let us briefly consider America's main alliances and potential coalitions of the willing.

In the past five years, America's alliances in the region have started to diverge along two salients: some have grown tighter and some have shown signs of fraying. Alliances balance threatening power, and they are formed when policy makers deem them to be necessary or prudent in support of their national interests. But threat perceptions change with time and circumstance, and one axiom of alliance politics throughout history is that great powers should not allow smaller and small powers to manoeuvre them into a corner from which there is no way out but to capitulate or to fight. The alliance with the Republic of Korea and the tacit alliance with Taiwan have experienced upheaval in the past decade. In both Seoul and Taipei, opposition parties have replaced traditional ruling parties and shifted approaches to the handling of their biggest security challenge: thus, the Republic of Korea has switched from wanting to deter, contain and even undermine North Korea to wanting to engage it in a sunshine policy; conversely, under the current Democratic Progressive Party leadership, Taiwan has opted for a provocative approach to dealing with Cross-Strait relations, an approach that has been more assertive in the direction of independence, with the predictable consequence that China has reacted sharply to what it sees as a gambit to foreclose the possibility of unification. Despite these tensions, both relationships show mixed signs of durability. In South Korea, the current government has indicated it wants to end the Combined Forces Command and it has gone some way towards de-fanging the military, notwithstanding a pledged commitment to modernizing but downsizing forces by 2020. Yet Korea also has made progress with the United States on transforming the bilateral alliance and redirecting Korea to global security challenges. Taiwan, meanwhile, talks about a goal of spending 3 percent of its Gross Domestic Product on defence, but it is not obvious to outsiders that it is doing all that it ought to be doing to provide for

its own survival and defence. In addition, Taiwan may be considering offensive missiles to help strengthen deterrence. Under some circumstances, in a proliferating world, Taiwan's leaders may one day succumb to the dangerous temptation of finding unconventional weapons a cheap way to deter a rising China; such a step, however, could further isolate Taiwan and stress relations with the United States to the breaking point.

Alliances are at their core latent warfighting communities, and the US-Australia and to a lesser degree the US-Japan alliances have moved further along the path towards genuine operational effectiveness, although each country will have to decide whether to participate in any particular mission and, if so, within which parameters. A dustup over the Taiwan Strait, for instance, at least one at which the Mainland was deemed to be in the wrong, would almost surely bring the United States and very probably Australia to the scene; Japan remains reluctant to commit to such a potentially dangerous act, not least because of its already problematic relationship with China. In the coming years, however, a determined Japanese Prime Minister may well support United States forces in such a contingency. But it would be wrong to dub the prospect of US-Australian and even Japanese military coordination a 'mini-NATO'. NATO was designed to help contain Soviet power on an ongoing basis and provided the prospect of an automatic response. An informal coalition among the US, Australia and Japan, on the other hand, is unlikely to ever approach the level of combined operations built into NATO, and it would only come into being in the event of Chinese aggression with the express and limited purpose of protecting Taiwan from aggression or threats of force. The mere fact that such a coalition could operate, of course, is intended to underscore deterrence in the hope that such a conflict is averted in the first place.

America's partners in Southeast Asia would likely avoid any overt support in the event of a Cross-Strait contingency. Indeed, if anything, an ally like Singapore might try more to mediate and prevent a crisis from erupting. The United States' new partner in South Asia, India, might well be willing to assist with ever-wider maritime security operations; but it would be highly unlikely to get involved in a clash with China unless such tensions flared up with India in the first instance, as in the Bay of Bengal and with respect to future energy competition and contested sea lines of communication. Europe, meanwhile, would probably limit its role to diplomatic support and arms, although not necessarily in support of the United States and Taiwan.

## **Conclusions**

A few general conclusions can be made about alliance management in the Asia-Pacific region. First, allies in the region are likely to suffer from different threat perceptions and therefore varying levels of conflicting interests. Assuming China continues to try to effect a peaceful rise, then it is likely that

there may be a wide variance in the policies for managing relations with China. Thus, an alliance or coalition is 'scenario-specific', driven at least in part of the circumstances and perceptions at the time.

Second, all alliances are likely to suffer from limited operational combined capability. Even the extremely capable Australian alliance fields only 53,000 active forces. Japan has the most military capability but is also the most circumscribed because of history, its constitution, its political constraints, and its interests.

Third and finally, both alliances and coalitions of the willing will have to be put within a regional security framework or architecture that remains to be erected. Yet how to move from the existing system, in which the United States is the paramount power, to a system in which China is the paramount power, to a polarised region in which China and Japan are the leading powers, or to one in which power is more evenly distributed and greater collective security prevails, is a critical question for the future.

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