EAST ASIAN SECURITY

Policymakers should

- recognize that America's allies in East Asia should do more to provide for their own defense;
- encourage allies and partners to take on greater defense responsibilities by adjusting U.S. defense strategy and gradually reducing America's military presence in the region;
- sell military equipment to friends and allies that enables low-cost, asymmetric responses to Chinese threats;
- abandon the unrealistic goal of North Korea's complete denuclearization and instead focus on arms control; and
- resist pressure to adopt a more explicit defense commitment toward Taiwan.

East Asian security issues are growing increasingly salient and more challenging for the United States and its allies. The U.S.-China relationship is steadily deteriorating, and North Korea remains a nuclear-armed state with an expanding and improving arsenal despite the Trump administration's diplomatic overtures to Kim Jong-un. China's economy was already slowing down before the COVID-19 pandemic due to a mix of factors, including an aging population, a real estate construction bubble, and the general difficulty of maintaining high growth rates as the economy got larger. China's response to the pandemic, especially the zero-COVID policies that completely locked down large cities like Shanghai, is further dimming China's long-term economic prospects. Despite these headwinds, however, China's military spending is steadily increasing.

American policymakers in both the Trump and Biden administrations have repeatedly stated that responding to China's growing military power is the U.S. armed forces' top priority. Although this is a prudent policy given the disastrous consequences of a war in East Asia, U.S. security strategy in East Asia is bedeviled by unrealistic goals and assumptions. Washington wants to

hold on to military dominance in Asia as long as it can, but doing so will be expensive, difficult, and dangerous.

A better way forward would be for the United States to shift a larger share of the burden for regional peace and stability onto its allies and partners while setting more-limited objectives and expectations for U.S. military power. Countries such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, with large, advanced economies, should do more to address the security challenges posed by China and North Korea.

Although America's allies and partners are unable to match the size of China's military, they can field high-quality, defense-oriented forces capable of stymieing Beijing's potential offensive designs. Forward-deployed U.S. forces can contribute to this approach, but victory could be achieved with a much smaller U.S. military presence. This shift in U.S. strategy would move the United States from a position of primacy toward one of balancer-of-last-resort.

Context and Background

Recent developments in both China and North Korea paint a worrying picture for East Asian security. China has shown greater willingness to flex its military muscles against its neighbors. A long-standing border dispute between India and China flared up in 2020, leading to deaths on both sides.

China's air force also increased incursions into Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ) beginning in late 2020. This activity peaked in October 2021, when approximately 150 aircraft entered the ADIZ over the course of four days. Admittedly, Chinese military aircraft tend to spend a short amount of time in Taiwan's ADIZ and do not approach Taiwan's territorial airspace; several of the larger incidents also coincided with nearby U.S. naval activity. Nevertheless, the ADIZ incursions stress Taiwan's air defenses and prompt calls for U.S. countermeasures.

This assertive behavior is backed by a Chinese military that is making rapid improvements to its ability to project power farther from China's territory. Beijing initiated a set of military reforms in the mid-2010s that reduced the size of the People's Liberation Army but put more resources into the navy, air force, and a new service branch specializing in space, cyber, and electronic warfare. China's nuclear arsenal is also growing. In the summer of 2021, commercial satellite imagery revealed three large silo fields under construction that could hold approximately 350 intercontinental ballistic missiles once completed. Other recent improvements to the nuclear arsenal have improved the ability to defeat U.S. missile defense capabilities.

China's domestic behavior has also taken worrying turns. In 2019, mass protests in Hong Kong blocked a proposed extradition law and pressed for

democratic reforms. Local authorities responded with a violent crackdown, leading to a political impasse and restrictions on civil and political liberties in the former British colony. In June 2020, Beijing imposed a national security law on Hong Kong to cement its control. The law established draconian prison sentences, including life in prison, for vaguely defined crimes that covered participating in protests, organizing politically, reporting critically on government, criticizing Chinese rule, and contacting foreigners. Beijing also established a new security agency under its direct control and special judges to handle national security law cases.

Human rights abuses increased in mainland China as well. For instance, virtually every expression of dissent has been suppressed. The mass detention and forced labor of Muslim Uyghurs in China's western Xinjiang province have received significant international attention. President Xi Jinping's political changes have enhanced his role as leader and eroded collective leadership within the Communist Party, reducing potential internal checks to his policies. Xi's zero-COVID policies that combat disease outbreaks through near-total, violently enforced lockdowns of major urban areas underscore his control of both the country and the Communist Party.

Compared with China, North Korea presents a much more bounded challenge to East Asian stability. Pyongyang's conventional military is large, but it does not pose a significant threat to South Korea's much better equipped and sizable forces; an attempt at reunification via large-scale invasion à la 1950 therefore is highly unlikely.

North Korea's steadily advancing nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs, however, are a more serious concern. Japan and South Korea—despite being covered by the U.S. nuclear umbrella—worry about coercive threats backed by nuclear weapons. Repeated failures to denuclearize North Korea at the negotiating table and a surge in recent missile testing have prompted calls for the United States to demonstrate the seriousness of its commitment to allies by deploying more high-end weapons systems. Also likely to increase tensions on the peninsula is the shift in South Korea from the more conciliatory Moon administration to a new conservative government under Yoon Suk-yeol, which is likely to advance a more confrontational policy toward Pyongyang.

An Alternative Approach to East Asian Security

East Asia's security challenges are real and significant, but how should the United States deal with them? China's and North Korea's military capacity and actions represent a serious potential threat to countries in East Asia, but a lesser, and certainly less direct, danger to the United States. The United States has an interest in a stable and peaceful East Asia, but it has traditionally

borne a disproportionate share of the burden for maintaining the current system.

This situation is partly due to resource constraints, but also to strategic intentions. The United States desires to be the dominant power in East Asia as elsewhere, so its first impulse is to embrace "forward defense," committing more military resources in response to any challenge to its position. This approach makes for a regional defense strategy that is costly, prone to triggering a spiral of threatening behavior, and militarily difficult to sustain given the challenge of projecting power so far from U.S. territory.

The United States should adjust its approach to East Asian security in ways that force its allies and partners to take on a greater burden for their own defense. China and North Korea have already inadvertently encouraged many U.S. allies to bolster their military capabilities. The best way for Washington to ensure that friendly military balancing continues is to avoid the temptation to increase its own military footprint in the region. The United States is always quick to reassure allies, but this encourages them to rely more on the United States rather than devoting resources to their own defense.

American allies in East Asia have taken steps to improve their self-defense capabilities. According to data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Japan had the ninth-largest defense budget in the world in 2021, spending $54.1 billion in current U.S. dollars. Japan's defense spending has increased every year since 2015, when it spent $42.1 billion. In late April 2022, a panel from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party advised Tokyo to raise defense spending to 2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) over the next five years. Historically, however, Japan has not raised defense spending above 1 percent of GDP, so an increase to 2 percent faces strong domestic political resistance. Japan has the economic capacity to field a much larger and stronger military. The United States should push Japan to reach its potential by reducing its own presence.

South Korea has likewise pumped up its defense budget. According to SIPRI data, although South Korea spends slightly less than Japan ($50.2 billion versus $54.1 billion in 2021), Seoul's military spending has increased at a much faster rate. Between 2012 and 2021, South Korea's defense spending increased by 43 percent compared with an 18 percent increase by Japan over the same period. Seoul also spent more on defense as a percentage of GDP than any other U.S. ally in Asia in 2021, with a total of 2.8 percent. Prominent examples of domestically produced major weapons systems include long-range cruise and ballistic missiles, diesel-electric submarines, and missile defense interceptors.

In comparison, Taiwan is sorely underinvesting in its military despite the very real threat of China's using military force against it. As a percentage of GDP, Taiwan's defense spending has hovered around the 2 percent mark for

the past 10 years, despite China's steadily growing military strength. Taiwan is also fond of pursuing exquisite yet vulnerable weapons systems, such as the U.S.-made Abrams tank, indigenously produced submarines, and fighter aircraft. Its defense would be much better served by investments in asymmetric weapons, especially missiles, that can counter the large numbers of ships and aircraft that China would send its way in an attack. The United States has made efforts to push Taiwan toward acquiring such capabilities, which should continue.

The United States can encourage these positive developments in allied military spending to continue by adjusting its own defense strategy in East Asia toward a concept called denial. Denial prevents an attacker from achieving its military aims quickly and easily. Importantly, a strategy of denial does not require a defender to seize and maintain military superiority to be effective. Instead, the defender needs to prevent the attacker from gaining superiority, which is easier to achieve. Denial's lower bar for success means that it requires a smaller force that is more mobile and focused on fewer operational tasks than the current U.S. force posture in Asia.

The U.S. Marine Corps Force Design 2030 project offers a template for what U.S. forces geared toward denial might look like. That plan calls for the marines to discard tanks and instead focus on a lighter force that can move around the battlefield. Small drones coupled with small vehicles carrying anti-ship missiles would allow these units to deny easy access to islands and nearby ocean.

Other military branches should follow the example of the marines and divest from outdated legacy platforms that are expensive to maintain and tailored for large ground wars. Looking beyond individual branches, U.S. military strategy in East Asia should slowly but consistently reduce both security guarantees and forward deployments. A gradual process would give allies time to improve their capabilities and take on a greater share of the burden for regional peace and stability.

Beyond Defense: Nonmilitary Ways to Improve Regional Security

In addition to encouraging its allies to do more militarily, the United States should adjust nonmilitary aspects of its approach to the region to improve East Asia's security.

First, the United States should develop a positive vision of, and plan for, economic engagement that increases market access and promotes free trade. Washington has paid far too much attention to defense matters and far too little attention to economic issues. East Asia has massively benefited from economic globalization, but this process is threatened by trends toward greater

nationalism and support for economic decoupling in both the United States and China. Developing a strategy for regional economic engagement should reduce Washington's emphasis on its military presence.

Second, the United States should abandon the impossible goal of the denuclearization of North Korea and move toward a combination of arms control and risk reduction. The United States is unlikely to achieve denuclearization without going to war, and war would be an unacceptable gamble. America's military presence in South Korea and its sanctions are not enough to force Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear weapons. However, the United States might be able to trade them for other, more limited North Korean concessions, such as freezing weapons testing and development, dismantling some nuclear facilities, or establishing more consistent diplomatic engagement.

Third, Washington should encourage increased security cooperation among East Asian countries without adding new U.S. defense commitments. The Quad is a good example of such a cooperative mechanism, allowing greater coordination among Australia, India, Japan, and the United States while falling short of a full military alliance. Washington should encourage other countries to adopt similar arrangements that improve regional security cooperation but do not create a formal alliance that would entangle the United States in potential conflict.

Conclusion

Threats to peace and stability in East Asia are growing, but the United States should resist the temptation to double down on its military commitment in the region. East Asian allies have the capacity to shoulder a greater burden for their own defense, and China's rapidly growing military power is a serious threat. American allies are taking some positive steps toward improving their ability to uphold regional stability, but they must accelerate their actions given the immediacy of the problem. The United States should push allies to do more by doing less itself, slowly decreasing its overall military presence and focusing the forces that remain on a shorter, less ambitious list of objectives. American allies have a much stronger interest in regional stability because they live there and have the capacity to do much more militarily on their own behalf.

Suggested Readings

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