

Strengthening America's Troubled Asian Alliances: An Opinion from Australia

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THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION HAS A SERIOUS TASK AHEAD OF IT TO REASSURE AMERICA'S FIVE TREATY ALLIES in Asia that Washington remains fully committed to the security of the region. This won't be easy. Strategic competition in Asia is becoming sharper as China's increasingly assertive behavior gives rise to worries about military miscalculation or conflict over disputed areas in the East and South China Seas.

The new Trump administration faces three challenges. **First, it needs to reassure jittery allies of the U.S. commitment to Asia by increasing its diplomatic and military presence.** New secretaries of state and defense should expect to log many air miles to the region, overcoming local worries that the United States underestimates the region's big strategic challenges and is too focused on the intractable Middle East.

Second, the new administration must craft new language expressing U.S. priorities and purpose in Asia. This must replace the Obama's administration's rather haphazard use of "pivot" and "rebalance" to describe its Asia policy. In practice, neither term was credibly enacted. The Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal languishes and several promised military enhancements have been delayed.

Finally, the administration should raise its expectations of its partners. U.S. resentment of allies' free riding on the coat tails of U.S. defense spending is justified. If allies want the confidence of America's steady hand shaping Asian security, Washington should be clear about what it wants in return. The alliances will work better if all parties raise their expectations of the resources and defense cooperation needed.

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If Washington is to offer more effective alliance leadership in Asia, **the new administration must sort out its own strategic plans and priorities. That should start with a decision to take firmer positions against unilateral Chinese moves to build and militarize artificial islands in the South China Sea.** The Obama administration fundamentally misread this issue as a second-order sovereignty dispute over rocks and shoals.

As Beijing puts the finishing touches to three military-grade runways and air bases in the South China Sea, it is clear that what is really at stake is year-round Chinese air space control over one of the world's busiest trade routes and a vital artery for energy supplies to North Asia. The Chinese threat to freedom of navigation through the South China Sea is close to being an existential threat to Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK) because of their dependence on Middle East oil and, increasingly, liquified natural gas. The same access is critical to Australia's economic viability as a principal energy supplier to North Asia.

The Obama administration's first response to this emerging crisis was to ignore it; then to allow lengthy interagency bickering on how to respond; and, finally, to mount a handful of military overflights and naval transits. Efforts to promote a more coordinated response among allies—for example to press for multiple countries to undertake so-called freedom of navigation maneuvers—were uncoordinated and half-hearted at best.

The result was that Japan, the ROK, and Australia, America's most effective alliance partners in Asia, have thus far not undertaken naval freedom of navigation operations and remain reluctant to do so in the absence of consistent U.S. leadership on the issue.

President-elect Trump should put a high priority on leading a more concerted alliance response against China's attempt, without any accepted basis in international law, to control vast swathes of ocean around its borders. More broadly, the allies need to be part of a sustained discussion around how to align responses to a raft of strategic challenges. Many of the region's security problems have China at their core—for example, strengthening cyber security against Chinese intellectual property theft, aligning policy on foreign direct investment to protect critical infrastructure, and developing a shared approach to controlling dual-use and sensitive technology exports to China.

President-elect Trump should take the opportunity to ditch the Obama administration's inconsistent use of the terms “pivot” or “rebalance” to headline the U.S. Asia-Pacific policy. The new administration needs to define a new policy basis for engaging its friends and allies in the Asia-Pacific region.

With Japan and the ROK, the key policy challenge is to strengthen regional confidence about the durability of U.S. engagement. A key way to do that would be to strengthen U.S. interoperability with the military forces of both countries. It's a rather surprising fact that the level of military-to-military engagement between these otherwise close allies is not as close as might be thought.

These relationships need to be redesigned to strengthen the joint and interoperable war-fighting capabilities of the allies. Washington increasingly needs to plan to operate *with* Tokyo and Seoul as much as it thinks about operating *from* bases on their soil. Key priorities will be to strengthen capabilities for anti-submarine warfare and develop plans for operating the Joint Strike Fighter, which all three countries and Australia are acquiring. Ballistic missile defense, cyber security, and the resilience of satellite communications and other space-based systems will all need higher priority for closer cooperation in a reinvigorated alliance framework.

President-elect Trump will also need to address an increasing worry, particularly among the North Asian allies, about the strength and credibility of America's extended nuclear deterrence. The issue has to be addressed as part of U.S. thinking on how to modernize its nuclear arsenal. The United States also needs to engage allies in a discussion about the Pentagon's evolving thinking on exotic emerging military technologies such as hypersonic vehicles, lasers, unmanned autonomous systems and military applications of artificial intelligence. These areas are broadly grouped under the title “Third Offset.” However, the answers to U.S. security concerns will not be purely technical. The allies can help Washington understand that the most effective offset the United States has against potential rivals is its ability to form substantive partnerships with like-minded countries.

In Southeast Asia, America's two treaty allies, the Philippines and Thailand, present particular problems. The arrival of President Rodrigo Duterte has brought about a rapid and unwelcome deterioration of the U.S. position in Manila. This couldn't have come at a worse time given the—not unconnected—increase in competition for regional influence between China and the United States in Southeast Asia.

Perhaps the best counsel to offer the new administration on the Philippines is, simply, not to react too quickly to Duterte's often inflammatory language. It's clear he is no fan of the United States, but the strong popular support for the U.S. alliance in the Philippines may dampen his interest or capacity to push the relationship to the breaking point.

The Armed Forces of the Philippines remain heavily dependent on U.S. military equipment, training, and support, and they will not see these connections damaged without expressing concern. Senior, quiet, and consistent American diplomacy will be needed to sustain the relationship during President Duterte's tenure.

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Thailand is going through a difficult transition after the death of King Bhumibol Adulyadej after a 70-year reign. How this will shape domestic politics is uncertain, but many fear the possibility of a return to large-scale demonstrations and street violence. Bangkok's alliance with the United States has been constrained because of Thailand's military rule. Much as the United States, and Congress in particular, has reservations about the regime, Washington needs to understand that self-imposed limits

on defense engagement only play into the hands of China and any other country interested in filling the void.

cooperation. Australia's "2016 Defence White Paper", released last February, proposes a step change in military-to-military cooperation, which would see closer levels of interoperability developed in a wide range of areas, including cyber security, ballistic missile defense, maritime security, air combat capability, amphibious forces, and special operations forces.

The Australian-American alliance remains strong but is in need of senior-level attention in both countries to make sure that complacency is avoided and the greatest benefit is extracted from

The agenda for U.S.-Australian defense cooperation is so ambitious that one has to wonder if it can be delivered by an alliance marked by the almost complete absence of policy machinery. The annual Australia-United States Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) dialogue involving the secretaries of state and defense with their Australian counterparts has been cancelled for 2017, hardly a welcome present from the departing Obama administration. **President-elect Trump should make sure that an AUSMIN dialogue happens quickly. An early visit to Australia and a decision to speed up the growth of cooperation involving the U.S. Marines in northern Australia would help to give momentum to an alliance that is increasingly important to U.S. interests in Asia.**

Beyond bilateral alliances, emerging multilateral opportunities involving America's closest friends in Asia are giving rise to new forms of security cooperation. U.S.-Australia-Japan defense cooperation is rapidly evolving. Enhanced training between the Asian countries acquiring the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter could give rise to a powerful vehicle for air-power dominance in maritime Asia. As the alliances take on a more obvious multilateral character, the opportunity arises to bring in non-allies, but close friends, including India, Singapore, and New Zealand.

There is no escaping the view that, as Asia-Pacific security becomes more contested and risky, the United States remains the essential provider of stability and regional confidence. To a president worried about the extent of America's security burdens, that may look unappealing. But the logic of U.S. interests in Asia will continue to push for engagement rather than retreat from the region. In part the answer to these concerns should be to press America's Asian allies to spend more on defense burden-sharing and commit more fully to security cooperation.