The United States faces a dilemma in Asia. It wishes to preserve a balance of power, reinforce the rules-based regional order, avoid conflict, and maintain stable economic relations with China—all at the same time, and all at acceptable cost. While carrying off such a balancing act would be a challenge even in a region of strategic stability, today numerous drivers complicate the effort. Beijing couples rising assertiveness with a military modernization effort that directly affects U.S. and allied defense capabilities. North Korea is ever-erratic, routinely testing missiles and nuclear weapons, and terrorism is an ever-present challenge across the region. When the trafficking of narcotics is added to this mix, along with piracy in the maritime domain, the rising proliferation of cyberattacks, and the need to respond to large-scale natural disasters, it becomes clear that the demand for U.S. attention and resources is increasing at precisely the time defense expenditures in the United States have been falling.¹ The result is an ends-means mismatch in which U.S. objectives increasingly outstrip available resources. Managed security networking in Asia can help to counteract this problem.

Already, the previously privileged position of the United States in the region is under new pressure. A congressionally-mandated review of U.S. defense strategy in the Pacific concluded: “Actions by countries in the region routinely challenge the credibility of U.S. security commitments, and U.S. capability development is not keeping pace with challenges by potential competitors, resulting in the regional balance of military power shifting against the United States.”²

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The challenge posed by Beijing is foremost in this array. China’s investment in long-range, precision strike forces and a blue water navy hold at risk U.S. forces operating in the Western Pacific; Beijing’s land reclamation and militarization activities in the South China Sea challenge regional rules and project power far from Chinese shores; the region’s increasing economic dependence on China, and Beijing’s coercive employment of economic tools for foreign policy ends threaten the independence of key U.S. partners; and China’s acquisition and employment of high-end cyber, anti-satellite and other capabilities challenge traditional U.S. military advantages. In the long run, China appears to seek a regional order less dominated by the United States and more favorable to Beijing’s interests and leadership ambitions.

Yet from the perspective of the United States, other regional developments are more encouraging. Driven by a desire to hedge against critical uncertainties associated with China’s rise and the future American role, many Asian countries are increasing their own defense budgets, modernizing their forces, and engaging with regional institutions in new ways.

These countries are also developing new intra-Asian security ties. In recent years, the region has seen a significant increase in high-level defense visits, bilateral security agreements, joint operations and military exercises, arms sales, and military education programs. In particular, Australia, India, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and Vietnam have deepened their bilateral security engagements throughout Asia in recent years, and other nations are making more modest moves. While most of the new or strengthened security ties remain bilateral in nature, interest in “minilateral” configurations of three or more countries (such as India-Australia-Japan) is rising.

Herein lies opportunity, as these countries are also seeking to boost security ties with the United States. Strategists often note that America must overcome the “tyranny of distance” to uphold its place in Asia, and yet the geographic locations of its allies and partners confer significant advantage as China expands its reach. Thus, the next phase of U.S. strategy toward Asia should focus on embedding America’s alliances and nascent security relationships into a broader network of security partnerships. Building out a regional security network is a cost-effective way for the United States to advance its interests and uphold the rules-based order—not as a substitute for the alliance system, but as a necessary supplement to it. This approach is also fully consistent with one that encourages allies and partners to bear more of the burden for their own security, which has increasing political resonance in the United States.

**Historical Context**

Twenty-first century geopolitics calls for networked security in Asia—linking the United States with new, non-allied Asian partners and encouraging existing regional allies to forge security ties with each other and with non-allied partners.
But the argument on its behalf naturally begs two questions: First, what circumstances led to the establishment of U.S. Asian alliances in a bilateral, hub-and-spokes structure in the first place, while Washington chose a multilateral structure for Europe? And second, after seventy years, do those circumstances still hold—or does the region’s shifting power dynamics call for a new approach to shared security?

The most obvious driver behind the U.S. preference for individual, bilateral pacts in Asia, as opposed to one multilateral organization, pertains to geography and threat perception. Unlike in twentieth-century Europe, where numerous partners worried about Soviet tanks rolling across a shared border, Asian allies were geographically dispersed across thousands of miles and lacked a single shared adversary. Second, immediately following World War II, many U.S. partners in Asia embraced some form of authoritarianism—a type of government Washington was simply less inclined to trust than its more democratic European allies. Third, immediate postwar rivalries made a multilateral alliance structure in Asia politically untenable. At the end of World War II, numerous Asian countries remained deeply suspicious of Japan, and Tokyo was distrusted in countries where it had been a colonizer. Lastly, the hub-and-spokes system of bilateral pacts in Asia was in part the product of historical contingency. While domestic ratification debates over NATO and Europe were viewed as contentious yet urgent, the United States often thought of Asia as a theater of secondary importance to Europe throughout the Cold War. The United States considered Asian security guarantees as the demand arose from individual partners, but did not proactively seek to craft that structure or to take on another burdensome multilateral negotiation.

It is striking how little of this alliance logic remains true in the twenty-first century. Regional allies may view threats with different levels of intensity, but nearly all share concerns about China’s military modernization and assertiveness, and many worry about North Korea’s nuclear and missile threat. Through democratization, economic growth, and seventy years of alliance history, the United States and its allies have developed shared values and identities. Japan is now a regional leader, and has arguably done more than any other country to encourage security networking among U.S. partners. Currently, most U.S. policymakers understand that Asia is not a secondary theater, but rather is the region of greatest strategic and economic importance to the United States—as well as the locus of greatest geopolitical competition.

In light of these changes, the United States over recent years has increasingly embraced a concept of networked security in Asia as a supplement to its five bilateral treaty alliances with Australia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea and Thailand. The fullest explication of Washington’s approach was...
given by then-Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter in 2016. In his and other descriptions, Asian security networking is premised on the notion that U.S. allies themselves are increasingly capable; networking seeks to link Asian allies both with each other and with non-allied partners. The approach aims to create new economies of scale and encourage partners to cooperate on mutual security interests at a time of relatively scarce resources and in an era of potentially increasing threats. While several countries have been the focus of U.S. attention, Japan and Australia have emerged as the most natural nodes in this incipient network.

Networked Security in Theory and Practice

Neither the Obama nor Trump administration has defined in much detail how such a network might be configured, or the benefits of alternative models. In fact, the approach to networked security may vary significantly based on its participants, objectives, and strategic context. Beyond general aspirations to forge more connections, U.S. policymakers should examine the underlying conceptual options as they flesh out their approach to Asia.

In recent decades, an emerging field of research has elucidated options for networking security ties among countries. This work suggests that multilateral security arrangements, despite their potential drawbacks, may offer benefits beyond those provided by a traditional alliance system of atomized, bilateral relationships. The foundational assumption of network analysis as applied to international affairs holds that state power is no longer solely—or even primarily—defined by its individual material attributes. Instead, actors are best thought of as nodes in a web of entities, defined by others to which they are persistently connected, and by the number of such connections they maintain. The power of this connectedness lies in the access to scarce information and resources that are transferred from one actor to another within the networks.

Consequently, the more central a node—that is, the more connections it has to other actors—the more network-derived power that node can be said to possess. Yet, this connectedness constrains as well as empowers. The flow of information and resources in networks carries influence; actors who grow into close proximity with others may find themselves drawn toward conflicts they would prefer to avoid, may become enmeshed in economic ties that prove vulnerable to disruption or sanction, or may be pulled into normative bonds that expose them to public pressure should they deviate from those norms.

Translated into more concrete terms, Japan and Australia, for instance, are each attracted to interconnected security because the approach offers a relatively non-controversial way of enhancing their defensive and deterrent capabilities. Yet,
their approach heretofore has been two-sided. On one side, it is flexible and non-binding, ensuring a relatively low profile and informal way of dealing with rising security challenges in Asia. But at the same time, Japan and Australia’s new partnerships—with each other and with third countries—are a far cry from mutual defense agreements. As a result, Tokyo and Canberra cannot expect their non-allied partners to protect their vital national interests in a crisis. While networks represent a useful overlay on the existing U.S. treaty system in Asia, their appeal also comes with inherent limits.

**Why Network in Asia Now?**

Today, fundamental shifts in the Asian power balance, changes in the relative military capabilities of the United States, its allies, and potential adversaries, the proliferation of new regional security threats, and resource constraints are coinciding to make security networks more attractive than in the past.

China’s rapid rise, military modernization, and foreign policy assertiveness have begun to create regional security challenges that incentivize cooperation and counterbalancing. While in recent years, U.S. officials have been careful to avoid naming China as the motivation for a more robust security network, the effect of its recent behavior is unmistakable. In inviting the United States and regional countries into a tighter security embrace, Asian officials routinely cite their concern about Beijing’s activity in the South China Sea, its imposition of an air defense identification zone in the East China Sea, its employment of economic instruments as a tool of political coercion, and its sense of regional dominance—all backed by an ever more capable military. U.S. national security planners must hedge against an increasingly assertive and capable peer competitor.

At the same time, worries about America’s future role in the region have induced Asian countries to bolster ties not just with Washington but one other. The sense that the regional military balance is shifting away from the United States has combined with concern that Washington remains unduly focused on security in the Middle East, and with managing events at home. While Asian debate over U.S. declinism has a long pedigree, it may be observed without engaging it here that the combination of open-ended conflicts in the greater Middle East, the resurgence of Russia as a geopolitical competitor, domestic political dysfunction, and defense budget uncertainty have together prompted doubts about America’s long-term staying power.
The relative decline question is not focused exclusively on the United States—indeed, America’s partners are inquiring into their own declining power and influence. At the end of the Cold War, for instance, the United States and its allies commanded a combined 71 percent of global gross domestic product (GDP) and some 75 percent of global military spending. By 2015, those numbers had dropped to 61 percent of GDP and 59 percent of military spending. U.S. allies’ global share of economic and military power has eroded as China’s has grown and as Russia has embarked on a major military modernization effort. Unipolarity made for a formidable set of relatively strong alliances and relatively weak adversaries; while the additive effects of U.S. alliances remain considerable, they are not what they once were. Networking can, to some extent, help offset these trends.

Asia’s complex threat environment, in which partners can and do rank their security concerns in different priority order, add additional weight to the networking imperative. Potential security partners fret not just about a rising China, but also about the specters of nuclear conflict, terrorism and political violence, crime, piracy, cyberattacks, illegal migration, pandemic disease, and natural disasters. Flexible security arrangements enable regional states to cooperate in particular threat domains or toward specific goals, making interest-based alignments particularly appropriate.

In addition, the network effect can aid the problem of burden sharing during a time of relative resource scarcity, and it can do so in informal ways that are reasonably flexible and therefore politically viable. For example, Japan need not revise its constitution to work more closely with Australia, India, and the Philippines. Australia does not need to produce one answer to the “China question” in order to build stronger ties with Singapore, Indonesia, and South Korea. And security networking does not fundamentally threaten the five U.S. treaty alliances in the Asia-Pacific. Indeed, embedded in the approach is an acknowledgement that U.S. alliances are resilient—so much so that they have outlasted the geopolitical environment that justified their formation, survived substantial economic changes, and endured to be repurposed for entirely new threat environments—and are now bolstered by new, non-treaty security partnerships.

**The Northern Node: Japan**

No Asian country has internalized the drivers, as well as the pros and cons, of security networking as seriously as Japan. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the leader of America’s cornerstone northeast Asian ally, has pegged his legacy to the “generational challenge” of rewriting his country’s constitution to legitimize its Self-
Defense Force. How successful Japan is in fleshing out an array of security partnerships from what he once dubbed the “democratic diamond” of Japan, the United States, Australia, and India will go a long way toward shaping and realizing a more effective regional security network.

The foundations for Japan’s expanded security network remain greater national capabilities and the maintenance of a strong U.S.-Japan alliance. Abe’s administration has taken more steps more quickly than any other postwar prime minister, including issuing a first national security strategy; relaxing arms-export restrictions; agreeing to a third revision of the U.S.-Japan defense guidelines, which call for tighter integration and pushing into new domains such as cyber and outer space; and passing legislation to allow for the right of collective self-defense. The ruling Liberal Democratic Party’s council on defense policy has also initiated a discussion of new defense capabilities, including strengthening missile defense and even pursuing offensive strike capabilities.

Tokyo has sought direct military interoperability with partners such as South Korea, India, and Singapore. Historical baggage and the vicissitudes of domestic politics continue to hamper closer cooperation between Tokyo and Seoul, but Japan is far better prepared today to work with the ROK and the United States in the event of a contingency on the Korean Peninsula than it was when concerns over Pyongyang’s nuclear program crystallized in the 1990s. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has quickly expanded an already-burgeoning relationship with Japan in more comprehensive and operational directions, perhaps also helped along by recently flourishing security ties between New Delhi and Washington. Singapore, while possessing the most developed military of any Southeast Asian nation and enjoying close naval ties with the United States, has long hewed toward an exclusively economic relationship with Japan. More recently, however, the two countries have begun experimenting with maritime security cooperation—most notably in a recent trilateral partnership with India.

At the same time, Tokyo has expanded its efforts to build partner capacity that were formerly focused mainly on supporting Southeast Asian nations’ defenses. Tokyo has turned from supporting coast guards and bolstering maritime domain awareness to other measures designed to provide partners with a credible, even if minimal, defense capability. Maritime capacity has been at the forefront of cooperation with front-line South China Sea claimant states Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia. Japan has also stepped up cooperation with Indonesia, which has major maritime interests at stake around the Natuna Islands and is Southeast Asia’s largest economy and most populous country. Tokyo helped to pick up some of the slack in defense relations with Thailand after U.S. relations cooled after a...
executed a comprehensive civilian and military capacity building program with Myanmar during its political transition, and is exploring new avenues of cooperation with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) following a 2016 declaration of partnership with the organization (Japan’s so-called “Vientiane Vision”).

In combination, Tokyo’s incremental, often tactical, and opportunistic moves to strengthen a network of security partners adds a new pillar of protection for a country that has since the end of World War II been heavily dependent on the United States for defense. While the bilateral alliance remains strong today, there have been periods in the past (especially after the Vietnam War and the breakup of the Soviet Union) when many Japanese have wondered about the reliability of the United States as an ally. President Trump’s apparent skepticism of alliance commitments, desire to remain unpredictable, and search for greater allied contributions have reinforced some of the lingering doubts about U.S. political willingness to defend Japan in the event of local aggression. In this context, security networking represents an attractive way to hedge.

At the same time, there remain constraints on Japan’s ability to do so. Since World War II, the country has not exercised its international right to collective self-defense in light of constitutional restrictions. The Abe administration has sought to build a legal framework that would clearly permit both individual and collective self-defense, not just with the United States, but also with other countries “in a close relationship with Japan” including Australia, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and India. Even so, domestic politics favor loose alignments rather than tight alliances, and pockets of popular opinion remain wary of enmeshing Japan in a broader security web.

The Southern Node: Australia

As with Japan, Australia’s efforts to forge new security relationships are founded on its alliance with the United States and its growing national capabilities. It is often remarked that only Australia has fought alongside the United States in every major U.S. conflict during the past century, and today the two governments enjoy extraordinarily close defense and intelligence ties. Ties with Australia anchor the U.S. presence in the southern Pacific and Indian Ocean, and Australia offers territory for training and prepositioning that is close enough to Asia to be
geographically relevant, but still out of range of most Chinese anti-access and area
denial capabilities. For Australia, the alliance provides a security guarantee from
the world’s most powerful military, and as a result reduces not only the degree
of threat facing Australia but also the defense spending that would otherwise be
required to deal with it.25 It also ensures Canberra’s access to cutting-edge
defense technology and unparalleled intelligence information and assessments.26
Its defense spending is on the rise and increasingly focused on capabilities that
increase its regional power projection, including submarines and the F-35
combat aircraft.27

As set out in its 2016 Defense White Paper, Australia’s alliance with the United
States and enhanced security ties with key powers represent two pillars of its
approach to regional security. Canberra’s express aim is “to mature and deepen
practical engagement with partners across the Indo-Pacific,” singling out Indone-
sia, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, India, and China for special mention.28
The government has pledged to double the amount of training in Australia for
international military students over the next 15 years, to increase the number of
multinational exercises that include the Australian Defense Forces (ADF), and
to boost the number of defense personnel serving overseas in liaison capacities,
as well as the number of liaison personnel from other countries in Australia.
The goal of such efforts is, among others, to enable the ADF quickly to deploy
in the Indo-Pacific region, sustain its operations, and support partners operating
together with Australian forces. Its deepening international security linkages
also aim to support a rules-based order, including a strong regional security archi-
tecture, and to minimize Australia’s risk of coercion or conflict.29

To these ends, Australia has moved in recent years to initiate new security part-
nerships across the Indo-Pacific region and to bolster existing ones. Australia is an
attractive security partner for many Asian countries that have complicated
relations with one another. With the exception of testy diplomatic ties with Indo-
nesia, and in the past with India, Australia has broadly
good relationships with most countries in the Indo-
Pacific. It is free of the historical baggage that Japan
brings to the table, and its lack of hegemonic ambition
ensures that there is little regional worry about an
over-militarized Australia. As a result, Canberra has
emerged as a key partner of choice for many nations
seeking a security hedge in Asia.

Countries with whom Australia has pursued direct
military interoperability include some of Japan’s
higher-capability potential partners, such as Singa-
pore and India, but also more proximate neighbors like Indonesia and Malaysia.
Singapore and Australia enjoy a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and
decades of military training and exercises, in part owing to their shared history in the Five Power Defense Arrangement, which links Australia with Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, and the United Kingdom. While Canberra’s relationship with New Delhi is newer, their shared interest in Indian Ocean security has propelled closer ties, and the two are also exploring a trilateral dialogue with Japan. Australia has pursued closer security ties with Indonesia and Malaysia, focused both on counterterrorism and maritime domain awareness and security.

Australia’s efforts to build partner capacity in the region broadly mesh with those of Japan and the United States. After years of supporting Manila’s South China Sea arbitration efforts and participating in the U.S.-Philippines Balikatan military exercises, for instance, Australia and the Philippines have deepened maritime cooperation, joint training, and efforts to improve military equipment. Vietnam and Australia enjoy a security relationship dating back to 1998, and their Comprehensive Partnership allows for joint training exercises, ship visits, and regular diplomatic and defense dialogues.

More broadly, Australia has become “a venue of choice” for notable instances of multilateral defense collaboration. Australia in 2013 hosted the first naval drills of the 18-nation ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM+), and in 2015 the Bersama Lima maritime security exercise with Malaysia and Singapore. Canberra also co-chairs with Singapore the ADMM+ Counter Terrorism Experts’ Working Group. Some patterns of cooperation build on the Five Power Defense Arrangement. Established in 1971, that agreement provides a framework for defense consultations and an institutionalized platform for annual training exercises, and it continues to attract regularized, close diplomatic collaboration.

By increasing its defense spending, reorienting its geographic focus from the greater Middle East to its own neighborhood, strengthening its alliance with the United States, and establishing new security connections with countries across the Indo-Pacific, Australia endeavors to mitigate its longstanding fear of abandonment—while creating connections that are flexible enough to avoid becoming entrapped in partners’ conflicts. This pattern of activity has created new opportunities for the United States to build on its close alliance with Australia by bringing like-minded countries into a budding security network.

Several factors may constrain Australia’s ability or willingness to take on a greater regional profile. Australia’s close economic ties with China may limit Canberra’s desire to enlist in any effort that may be perceived as anti-Beijing, for fear of retaliation. While recent work suggests that many commentators overstate Australia’s economic dependence on China and that Beijing has less leverage than is widely assumed, many Australian business leaders, media and academics currently
perceive a pattern of asymmetric economic dependence. At the same time, while support for the Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty (ANZUS) remains strong in both the Liberal and Labor parties, the alliance has been tested mostly in places like Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan, rather than in the South China Sea or the Indian Ocean. And while Australia’s fiscal commitments to the security relationship have been robust and are projected to grow, a downturn in its economy would almost certainly wreak havoc on Australia’s carefully thought-out defense buildup, one that emphasizes high-capability but costly technology development and acquisitions.

**Linking the Nodes**

Aside from the United States, Australia and Japan are now each other’s leading security partners. While the United States has been supportive of their growing warmth, Canberra and Tokyo have come to this relationship very much of their own initiative. Australia has welcomed Japan’s efforts to return to a more “normal” defense posture and take on a greater security leadership role in Asia, while acknowledging that Japan’s constitution continues to impose limits on the scope of its activities. Japan, for its part, has sought to cooperate with Australia across a spectrum of military and information-sharing activities.

At the heart of this alignment is a shared interest in continued regional engagement from the United States and a desire to see its security guarantees remain credible. Japan and Australia also share democratic values and are strong advocates for international law, institutions, and other aspects of international order. Policymakers in both countries worry openly about Beijing’s actions in the South and East China Seas as well as its economic inroads in Southeast Asia. As North Korea has continued its pursuit of nuclear weapons and long-range missiles, Australia has grown more concerned and is increasingly expressing interest in supporting Japan’s approach to the quandary. Their deepest shared security interest, however, may lie in managing Asia’s shifting power dynamics. The closer Japan-Australia partnership is a balancing response to China’s growing strength, and it simultaneously reinforces the existing U.S. alliance system while hedging against the prospect of U.S. decline or withdrawal.

There are, of course, limits to the relationship. Despite shared worry about Chinese intentions, for example, analysts in both Japan and Australia often note a “China gap” between the two countries. Because of their contentious history and contemporary security concerns, Japanese policymakers and strategists view China as their most significant challenger, while their Australian counterparts perceive a far less acute threat. Australia is also more sensitive to maintaining its economic relationship...
with China than is Japan. Among other factors, these differences in perception make it unlikely that the two will conclude a formal bilateral defense treaty.

Short of an alliance, however, Australia and Japan can and do engage in significant security cooperation. Their burgeoning teamwork thus far has taken several different forms. Bilateral ties, directed by regular 2+2 meetings with foreign and defense ministers, are broad and deep, including everything from joint planning and exercises to law enforcement cooperation. Trilateral cooperation with the United States has also grown; though a multilateral alliance has never taken off, the three countries enjoy formidable interoperability honed through joint exercises, disaster response, and information sharing. Broader intra-Asian cooperation has also been a bright spot, with both Tokyo and Canberra playing leading roles in the Rim of the Pacific Exercise, Cobra Gold, and other multilateral exercises and training programs that incorporate numerous Southeast Asian countries. In light of such efforts, it is clear that Australia and Japan have transformed their relationship over the past decade from an alignment by association into a genuine security partnership.

Other countries represent important links in the emerging Asian security network. South Korea, for example, has inked a strategic partnership agreement with India, a defense cooperation agreement with Singapore, and an intelligence-sharing agreement with Australia. Its forces regularly participate in regional naval exercises, and Seoul is collaborating with Indonesia in developing a new fighter jet aircraft. South Korea has modern, capable forces and a relatively large defense budget, but there are real constraints on its willingness to focus its resources and efforts beyond the peninsula; the threat posed by Pyongyang remains Seoul’s overwhelming preoccupation.

After Japan and Australia, India is the logical third node in an Asian security network. Over successive administrations, U.S.-India ties have grown to include joint exercises, logistics sharing, military exchanges, joint military research and development, and more. In the meantime, New Delhi has elevated its bilateral relations with Japan, South Korea, Australia, and Vietnam to the level of strategic partnerships. India has conducted bilateral military exercises with Singapore, South Korea, and others; has hosted the Milan naval exercise with Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand; and participates in the annual Malabar naval exercise with the United States and Japan. India’s further emergence as a node in the Asian security network will turn on its level of continued investment in force projection capabilities, the degree to which it increases activity in waters beyond the Indian Ocean, and the focus and resources absorbed by India’s border dispute with China.
Strengthening and Expanding the Web

The U.S. goal in increasing Asian security connectivity should be to ensure a stable and more prosperous region protective of longstanding rules and norms, consonant with American strategic interests. The five bilateral alliances the United States maintains in the region will and should remain the strategic backbone of American engagement in Asia. Yet they should be supplemented by establishing new security partnerships, enhancing older ones, and encouraging intra-regional ties that do not include the United States.

Security networking can take several forms, ranging from formal alliances through stronger bilateral partnerships to more robust multilateral and minilateral groupings. Washington should pursue an all-of-the-above approach, selecting particular formats based on the specific security objectives and nature of the participating nations.

Where the United States seeks to make formal defense preparations or deter a challenger, formal alliances remain the most appropriate configuration. Washington has made important strides in recent years in strengthening its bilateral alliances with Japan and Australia, and yet there remain areas where the United States should enhance its ties with each country. Tokyo and Washington should leverage the well-established U.S.-Japan Alliance Management Meeting as a venue for coordinating outreach to third countries, inviting them into exercises, military exchanges, and efforts to build partner capacity. Similarly, Washington should establish a formal long-term strategy mechanism with Canberra that augments the annual Australia-United States Ministerial consultations. With both countries, the United States should initiate new efforts, including expanding amphibious, undersea, and anti-submarine warfare exercises.

In cases where missions and objectives can be accomplished in peacetime through layered security agreements or, during crises or conflicts, through coalitions of the willing, bilateral and multilateral partnerships present flexible and more inclusive alternatives. Washington should continue to encourage the slow, quiet enhancement of defense cooperation among Japan, South Korea, and the United States. It should reenergize quadrilateral cooperation together with Australia, Japan, and India, to include a regular ministerial-level dialogue as well as active defense cooperation in areas such as maritime domain awareness. And it should pursue India as a logical third node in an Asian security network by seeking every opportunity to tighten bonds with New Delhi and encouraging its allies and partners to do the same.

In light of the parallel efforts by the United States, Japan, Australia, India, and South Korea to provide partner capacity aid to Southeast Asia, Washington should propose an annual regional dialogue (possibly co-chaired by India
and South Korea) that would deconflict and coordinate partner capacity-building efforts. It should add new partners to standing exercises, pushing for Australian inclusion for instance, in the next Malabar naval exercise and Indian participation in the Talisman Sabre exercises in northern Australia. The United States should also establish an annual cyber forum that would bring together experts from Australia, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore to share threat assessments and policies for network protection. And it should propose an annual Indonesia-U.S.-Australia trilateral meeting, in which common security agendas could be developed. A pilot effort could involve trilateral (or quadrilateral with India) maritime domain awareness cooperation in the Cocos Islands.

**Engaging China**

Any Asia-Pacific security network that excludes China may appear to Beijing as little more than an attempt at encirclement. Network architects must acknowledge that their efforts are likely to raise alarm bells in Beijing—and possibly elicit concrete responses. They must also work to mitigate this perception problem, and to anticipate possible reactions from China and plan for them. Indeed, to the extent that U.S. and regional security considerations allow, Beijing should be included in network activities where possible.

Instead of inviting China to participate in standing exercises, the United States should seek to integrate China with a new effort focused on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Such an exercise—which could involve Japan, the United States, Australia, China, and other countries—would provide opportunities for military-to-military contact and communication while avoiding the security risks that would attend Chinese participation in more higher-end versions.

Managing perceptions of any network activities will be critical. Endorsing the Asian network concept, for example, differs from publicly trumpeting it at every opportunity. Indeed, Washington should avoid the appearance that the phenomenon is U.S.-driven, rather than springing indigenously from a region whose interests compel it. Injecting the United States into every new security relationship in Asia, or too-publicly suggesting the potential for new arrangements to balance China, risks repelling would-be partners in the region and arming Beijing with evidence to charge participants with containment.
Conclusion

Networking Asian security is and should be integral to the next phase of America’s approach to the region. The United States will not be the sole beneficiary of such an arrangement. By forging spoke-to-spoke connections and ties with new partners, American allies will be able to do more in more places, while non-allies will be able to forge security ties that extend their reach and capability. Despite downside risks associated with such an Asian security network—including the possibility that the United States could be drawn into adventurism and regional rivalries—such an effort, backed by an increasing commitment of U.S. defense, diplomatic, and economic resources, is the best insurance against instability and coercion.

Ultimately, the success or failure of a networked security architecture will depend on the degree to which the United States remains committed to Asia. A stable, peaceful Asia-Pacific governed by a rules-based order remains critical to U.S. security and economic interests. Its long-term success will require a self-sustaining security network built on intra-Asian defense ties that can stand apart from the United States—but will still need U.S. commitment and leadership to get there. Those ties have in recent years emerged organically. Now is the time to move from evolution to serious planning and execution.

Notes

1. The Trump administration has proposed a $54 billion increase in the defense budget for fiscal year 2018, though the final number remains uncertain. Even the increased total would represent a significant decline from previous highs and is likely to be accompanied by reductions in diplomacy and foreign aid spending.
9. ANZUS, the treaty that includes the United States and Australia, is trilateral, but since New Zealand’s suspension in 1986, the bilateral Australia-U.S. relationship has been its focus.
23. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Cabinet Decision on Development of Seamless Security Legislation to Ensure Japan’s Survival and Protect Its People,” (July 1, 2014),
The Government has reached a conclusion that not only when an armed attack against Japan occurs but also when an armed attack against a foreign country that is in a close relationship with Japan occurs and as a result threatens Japan’s survival and poses a clear danger to fundamentally overturn people’s right to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness, and when there is no other appropriate means available to repel the attack and ensure Japan’s survival and protect its people, use of force to the minimum extent necessary should be interpreted to be permitted under the Constitution as measures for self-defense in accordance with the basic logic of the Government’s view to date.”


29. Ibid.

30. Ibid, 8–9.


46. For detailed proposals for strengthening trilateral U.S.-Japan-Australia maritime cooperation, including for combined theater antisubmarine warfare operations with India and staging from Cocos Island, see Andrew Shearer, “Australia-Japan-U.S. Maritime Cooperation: Creating Federated Capabilities for the Asia-Pacific,” (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2016), https://www.csis.org/analysis/australia-japan-us-maritime-cooperation.