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## Understanding the Persistence of American Alliances and Partnerships in the Asia-Pacific

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President Barack Obama's recent tour of Asia earlier this year in April underscored the persistence of US security alliances and partnerships in the region. Understanding why many of these relationships have endured beyond the Cold War and what their applicability is to a rapidly changing regional strategic environment is the subject of a new joint research project now underway involving the East-West Center (EWC), Washington D.C. office, collaborating with the Australian National University (ANU). Analysts from the five regional countries maintaining formal alliances with the United States—Australia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea and Thailand—attended the first workshop of this project in May along with representatives from selected “partner states”—India, Indonesia, Malaysia, New Zealand, and Singapore. This research is being supported by the John T. and Catherine D. MacArthur Foundation's Asia Security Initiative.

The project—“America's Asian Allies: Managing Competitive and Cooperative Pressures”—explores several key questions. What are the major ramifications of US allies and partners “maturing” as independent security actors for their overall security relations with the United States? Which traditional alliance rationales are still pertinent to those relationships at a time when regional and international security environments are rapidly transforming? How can the complex mix of cooperation and competition that US regional allies and partners experience in their relations with China be reconciled with sustaining their security ties with the United States?

Obama confronted these types of questions when he visited the region earlier this year. His trip was an effort to strengthen the credibility of the United States' rebalancing or “pivot” strategy directed toward the region. The president reaffirmed his country's commitment to defend Japan if the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, which Japan now controls, were to come under attack. In South Korea, he talked about the “incredible bond” between Seoul and Washington which is “underpinned by the US-ROK alliance.” Just prior to his arrival in Manila, US and Philippines officials signed a ten-year Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement to facilitate an increased rotational presence of US forces in the Philippines. In Malaysia, Obama's host, Prime Minister Najib Razak, praised America's rebalancing strategy and welcomed the upgrading of US-Malaysia security ties via a new “comprehensive partnership.”

All of this was generated within the broader context of America's need to counterbalance a growing Chinese strategic influence in the region without simultaneously alienating Beijing to the point where a new Cold War in Asia would emerge. It is obvious that the Asia-Pacific is undergoing a historic power transition. Less clear is what that transition actually represents. Is China pursuing a classic hegemonic strategy in ways similar to that adopted by past dominant powers such as the United States, the British and Roman Empires, and others that have focused on accumulating resources, markets and bases? Or will it evolve into a more visible advocate of the status quo as it consolidates its power, unravels its “core” sovereign interests—including its declared territorial claims—and confronts its ever widening spectrum of domestic challenges?

**William Tow, Professor at Australian National University, writes that “Understanding why many of these relationships have endured beyond the Cold War and what their applicability is to a rapidly changing regional strategic environment is the subject of a new joint research project now underway involving the East-West Center (EWC), Washington D.C. office, collaborating with the Australian National University (ANU).”**

The East-West Center promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the US Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options.

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Those arguing that Chinese strategy reflects hegemonic aspirations point to Beijing’s frustration over the durability of the US bilateral alliance system in Asia and the growing tendency of China’s other neighbors to reach out to Washington as security “partners” as a hedge against Chinese ambitions and capabilities. Chinese officials and analysts have been cited as arguing that “American forward presence and alliances in the region constrains China’s future growth and goals in the region.” Simultaneously, however, they insist that China will never become a “global hegemon.” Left unsaid is that China lacks both the diplomatic clout and the commensurate security network in the Asia-Pacific that allows the United States to take the strategic lead there during times of regional crisis. Washington’s Asian allies and partners have expanded collaboration with the United States and with each other in key areas of defense technology and intelligence, joint interoperability between military forces and counter-terrorism cooperation.

A key question, therefore, is why American allies and partners remain on side with Washington on any number of key international issues and affiliate with it formally or informally when pursuing their own security interests. In a more specific Asia-Pacific context, one can reasonably ask if there is more than the “China factor” alone that galvanizes such unity or if there are other, more diverse reasons for sustaining security and other forms of collaboration with the Americans.

Both traditional and emerging alliance/partnership issues were considered at the May Canberra workshop. Deterrence and reassurance strategies, for example, may need to be re-assessed as intensifying regional multipolarity renders long-standing alliance commitments and various forms of partnership collaboration more susceptible to misinterpretation. Domestic political factors in shaping alliance and partner collaboration within and outside the broader US regional security network often affect policy-makers’ willingness to sustain that network. Recent examples include US sequestration politics, recent political tensions in Thailand, Prime Minister Abe’s constitutional reinterpretations on Japan’s national security identity and tensions within Vietnam’s political factions over how to relate to China. Yet domestic events by themselves are not invariably decisive in disrupting the momentum of alliance and partnership interaction. The establishment and cultivation of new “trilateral” and “minilateral” security mechanisms were also discussed. These mechanisms are often targeted toward addressing task-oriented or “functional” security issues such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief where policy consensus is more easily obtained.

Several preliminary findings emanated from the Canberra workshop. While experiencing initial failures in explaining the intent of rebalancing, the Obama administration has become more proficient over time. A key aspect to that policy’s continued success, however, will be how well allies and partners rationalize the need for this US policy approach to continue and their own role in making it work. As the pull of Chinese economic growth in the region continues, the US bilateral alliance system will need to adjust to expanding economic expectations of partners. US engagement with multilateral security politics in the Asia-Pacific will always involve a struggle between “substance” and “form.” Current multilateral security structures are unproven. The United States needs to work on adjudicating the bilateral-multilateral dynamic more effectively.

Managing its traditional regional alliances and its emerging security partnerships in the Asia-Pacific looms as a key challenge for the Obama administration’s remaining time in office and for its successors. Prior to the next project meeting slated to convene in Washington D.C. in Spring 2015, project participants will be focusing on how the United States allies and partners can adjudicate their security interests with and behavior towards the United States while still shaping more mature and self-confident national security postures towards China and relative to each other. They will also examine the continued utility of alliances and partnerships in an increasingly complex Asia-Pacific environment where traditional and emerging security challenges vie for innovative policy responses by all parties concerned.

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