



America's Alliances and the Next Administration:
Next Generation Thinking about
U.S. Strategy toward East Asia



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The Alliance: Redefining Relationships Between the U.S. and the Asia-Pacific Region in the 21st Century

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With the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the deterioration of the Warsaw Pact, the United States must protect its interests and safeguard against threats in an international security environment much different than the one that defined the Cold War era. Russia and its nuclear stockpile no longer represent an overarching threat to the United States and its allies. Instead of a monolithic Soviet bloc, the U.S. now confronts a diverse array of challenges that threaten the political, economic, and social stability of international politics.

The Sept. 11, 2001 attacks represent one of the many emerging problems. Indeed, advances in technology have made terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda and Hezbollah more dangerous, but the 2003 Invasion of Iraq and the Global War on Terror have led to an obsession with the Middle East and the Muslim world at large. In fact, both the 2002 and 2006 *National Security Strategy* appear to be more of a framework for confronting terrorism and building democracy in the Middle East than an overall strategy for the United States in a post-Cold War world. While stability in the Middle East is necessary for promoting international security and ensuring access to key resources in the region, emerging threats in other parts of the world will not stand idly by; in fact, they will become worse over time. In many ways, U.S. policymaking operates with blinders, capable of focusing only on one threat at a time. This was the case with the Soviet Union during the Cold War and remains so with our current entanglement in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Current international political conditions dictate a broader outlook to cope with the wide range of security threats now confronting the United States. Since the end of the Cold War, we have seen the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, as well as increases in ethnic conflict, drug trafficking, human rights violations, pandemic disease, climate change, and general instability. Although manifestations of each of these threats can be found in Asia, U.S. foreign policy continues to lack a well-developed Asia security strategy, and the region has remained on the periphery of U.S. policymaking. This is problematic given continually rising tensions in Northeast Asia and the struggle for internal control taking place in many countries. Some of the targeted organizations in the war on terror, such as Jemaah Islamiya, Laskar Jihad, and the Abu Sayyaf Group, train and operate within Southeast Asia, illustrating the increasingly transnational nature of the problems facing the U.S. Furthermore, the region is not free from traditional security threats. Both North Korea and the Taiwan Strait remain potential hot spots in the region. More generally, the rise of the People's Republic of China (PRC) has prompted a great deal of speculation about the long-term intentions of the PRC, which remain ambiguous. This changing balance of power in the region poses difficult questions for the U.S. and for Japan, a key ally in the region.

To effectively confront and mitigate these growing problems, the next U.S. administration must do what many of the previous administrations have failed to do: it must look toward Asia and work with key players in the region to ensure that none of these

security issues becomes unmanageable. The administration that takes office in January 2009 will need to remain steadfast in the Middle East, but this report posits that engagement of East Asia is equally crucial. These two regions are not isolated from one another, but are interconnected in complex and dynamic ways. For example, Al-Qaeda operates in the Middle East but has offshoots in Southeast Asia. The A.Q. Kahn trail originated in Pakistan and found its way to North Korea, Iran, and Libya. Treating any region or problem in isolation in today's increasingly interconnected world will inevitably fail, since such an approach is akin to treating the symptoms and not the root cause of a phenomenon. A more comprehensive and flexible method of engagement is necessary.

The possibility of further instability and conflict in Asia demonstrates the importance of maintaining, building, and redefining alliance structures in the region. However, alliances without a clear regional security strategy are useless and possibly burdensome. The U.S. must define what is expected from its alliances and partnerships, rather than leave such important matters open to the possibility of faulty interpretation(s). In today's interconnected world, alliances are invaluable and inevitable. Despite a shift from the traditional alliance structures that characterized the Cold War security order, these alliances can and should continue; they represent bonds that must be nurtured and utilized in ways that leverage their strengths in the emerging security order. What used to hold alliances together – arguably the shared interests and goals of states – can no longer be considered the foundation of alliances in the 21st century because the U.S. faces security challenges that transcend the concepts of borders and nations. To confront, manage, and eliminate today's security threats, alliance structures must move beyond bilateral negotiations and cooperation and instead seek to integrate state and nonstate actors regionally if not globally. In the future, alliances will be rooted in the notion that regional and sub-regional cooperation of nations and nonstate actors, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and supranational governing bodies, is essential to achieving shared goals and deterring transnational threats. This more inclusive conceptualization of alliances will allow them to facilitate the type of flexible and integrated response necessary to combat modern threats. At the same time, the United States must pay attention to how these different tools fit together as part of a cohesive and effective strategy. For example, joining every regional organization in Asia is not the solution to coping with regional problems. The U.S. should be selective and strategic about its participation in groups, upholding current commitments to allies and partners while branching out in necessary new directions.

The shortcomings of the Six-Party Talks illustrate some of the advantages of this approach. While the Six-Party Talks are intended to manage the North Korea nuclear problem, they have been conducted as a series of linked bilateral negotiations as opposed to an integrated cooperation and negotiation among participating states. The U.S. failure to lead collaboration within the talks even among traditional allies Japan and South Korea has resulted in the continuation of a bilateral security structure. North Korea's "TongMi BongNam" policy literally translates to "align with the U.S. and contain South Korea," which has resulted in U.S.-DPRK bilateral meetings followed by the isolation of South Korea as well as Japan. Rather than letting traditional allies settle for diminished roles in resolving transnational threats and continuing traditional bilateral negotiations, the U.S. must reaffirm and renew traditional alliances in the context of a cohesive regional security structure to

counter immediate threats such as nuclear proliferation in Asia. Without restructuring key bilateral alliances into a multilateral security structure, there will be a vacuum of regional leadership that China will and has been quick to fill. A disjointed, non-cohesive security structure has created an opportunity for China to step up as a regional leader in the Six-Party Talks. The U.S. must not allow its two most formidable Asian alliances, Japan and South Korea, to be pushed aside; rather the U.S. should support a new alliance structure that facilitates a cooperative security strategy especially between the U.S., Japan and South Korea within the context of the Six-Party Talks to effectively respond to today's nontraditional security threats.

Bilateral alliances will continue to serve a purpose, but linking alliances by focusing solely on military-to-military interaction will not be the best long-term policy. Rather than linking alliances with multiple countries, which may create polarized and competing positions in the region, the U.S. should expend resources on programs and organizations that enable economic growth and good governance to spread, regardless of political boundaries. Nongovernmental organizations and intergovernmental bodies such as the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and others that help less developed countries to invest in infrastructure, healthcare, and industry should be supported both economically and politically. By continuing efforts to create a world in which economic prosperity and freedom are the building blocks, the United States will enable countries in East Asia to care for themselves and not solely rely on the United States to play the role of global law enforcement, banker, and security force.

The idea that military-to-military relationships and alliances between the United States and many Asian countries should exist now and in the future is not new. However, the United States should increase efforts to reassure our alliance partners (and those with which we hope to improve relations) that our intentions are noble. If the U.S. can maintain trust through transparency, our relationships in Asia will be far more fruitful. By using our military to focus on training, education, and humanitarian missions, the U.S. will be able to positively affect the lives of millions, while improving its image around the globe.

By focusing our military on education and threats other than battle-type conflict, the U.S. could spend less money and expend fewer human resources when cooperating with our allies on nontraditional security issues. Nontraditional threats such as climate change, infectious diseases, natural disasters, and transnational crime are a serious concern. For example, new reports are constantly revealing the consequences of climate change and its effects throughout the world. Southeast Asia has already seen the horrible effects of climate change through stronger and more frequent natural disasters, resulting in loss of life and increased strain on many economies. In order to secure Asia from nontraditional threats, it is important that major powers take a more active role; this is an area in which U.S. alliances and partnerships are a logical way to promote stability. The U.S. should look at alliances as partnerships that provide members with a role in future and existing regional projects. For example, Australia is achieving strong influence in Southeast Asia; Japan is an important player in development of environmental technology and in implementing international development initiatives. The U.S. could work together with Australia and Japan and other Asian countries to advance the region's ability to address environmental degradation,

poverty, humanitarian relief initiatives, pandemics, and natural disaster preparedness. It is in the interest of the United States to help develop and foster projects that will improve the quality of life for citizens. If the U.S. acts on this opportunity, it will acquire increased trust in the region. Countries in Asia, and throughout the world, will gradually see the U.S. as a powerful nation concerned with global humanitarian issues and not solely focused on fighting the Muslim world.

Strategic relationships between the United States and countries in East Asia are as diverse as the cultures within the region. There is no “one size fits all” formula for the United States to follow as the geography, history, and security threats for each drastically differ. The U.S. should define each alliance so that the details of each alliance show the strong U.S. commitment to each country. The U.S. must display a willingness to consider its partner’s point of view and their relationships with other countries in the region.

The U.S. military should also concentrate resources on education programs like those at the Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS). The APCSS integrates young leaders from around the Asia Pacific region to learn about each other and the fundamentals of good governance in a comfortable off-the-record atmosphere. By educating up-and-coming leaders from Asian countries, the United States is enabling them to “improve security within their borders, humanely govern their people, administer the rule of law, provide food and shelter to the indigent, and cooperate productively with their neighbors.”¹ By concentrating on integration, joint training/exercises, and mutual support, the United States and countries in the Asia region will enjoy prosperity and stability in the long term.

In order for the United States to play a continued role in Asia, much attention and energy must be focused on nurturing our alliances and improving partnerships across a spectrum of issues. If the United States is either incapable or unwilling to take charge in the region, competing powers like China will. The United States must be willing to change the way in which alliances have traditionally been established in Asia. By strengthening a system in which broad transnational issues (i.e., global warming, poverty, pandemics, and humanitarian relief efforts) are the focus, strong allies and partners, capable of enduring the unforeseen and anticipated power shifts, will flourish. In order to effectively deal with issues in Asia, reassessing the structure of the United States’ alliances is imperative in formulating a comprehensive security strategy.

¹ Myers, Richard B. (Gen) Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff. Improving Lives: Military Humanitarian and Assistance Programs. Electronic Journal of the U.S. Department of State November 2004. Access date 31 July 2008. <http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/itps/1104/ijpe/ijpe1104.htm>