

# POLICY BRIEF

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## The U.S.-Japan Alliance: Challenges and Prospects in the 2020s

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With Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the continued growth of Chinese military power, and the escalation of maritime disputes between China and many of its neighbors, the first half of the 2020s witnessed substantial changes in the U.S.-Japan alliance’s strategic environment. The United States has attempted to grapple with immediate crises in Europe and the Middle East while simultaneously preparing for a potential conflict over Taiwan and long-term strategic competition with China. In recognition of the deterioration in its security environment, Japan released a new National Defense Strategy and National Security Strategy in 2022, which included plans for substantial increases in defense spending and the acquisition of long-range “counterstrike” capabilities.<sup>2</sup>

With the decade half over and Donald Trump returning to the White House in 2025, it is an opportune moment to consider what challenges, trends, and opportunities are likely to shape the U.S.-Japan alliance over the next five years. The goal of this paper is not to discuss the implications of the election for the alliance. Rather, it explores the deeper forces that are likely to shape the alliance.

Moving forward through the remainder of this decade, the alliance faces three key issues. The first are very real constraints on American power, which are in no small part the result of its attempts to balance commitments in three regions with its intent to prioritize the Indo-Pacific. The second are Chinese maritime claims in the South and East China Seas, exacerbated by growing Chinese military power. The third are domestic politics in the United States and Japan.

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<sup>2</sup> Takuya Matsuda, “Japan’s Emerging Security Strategy,” *The Washington Quarterly* 46, no. 1 (January 2, 2023): 85–102; Adam P. Liff, “Kishida the Accelerator: Japan’s Defense Evolution After Abe,” *The Washington Quarterly* 46, no. 1 (January 2, 2023): 63–83.

This paper begins by describing all three, and then proceeds to evaluate their implications for the alliance.

### ***Constraints on U.S. Capabilities***

Since President Barack Obama proclaimed the advent of a U.S. “pivot to Asia,” successive American presidents have indicated their desire to focus more attention and resources on East Asia and the Indo-Pacific more broadly, and especially to counter the influence and ambitions of China. President Donald Trump openly cast China as a more serious threat to American interests than Russia, while the Biden Administration considered China the United States’ “pacing threat.”<sup>3</sup>

By and large, however, the pivot has proven far more difficult in practice, in part because of events in Europe and the Middle East. Most notably, Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 led the United States to maintain and even increase its military footprint in Europe. Moreover, Washington’s continued efforts to deter and combat the Islamic State, Iran, and Iranian proxies in the Persian Gulf, Red Sea, and Levant—exacerbated by the October 7 terror attacks committed by Hamas and subsequent Israeli war in Gaza—likewise continue to tie down substantial amounts of U.S. air and naval power.<sup>4</sup>

As a result, even though U.S. military planning revolves around a “one war standard,” wherein the United States is prepared to fight a single major war at a time, in practice, the U.S. military is widely distributed across three main regions.<sup>5</sup> This poses serious tradeoffs around the procurement and deployment of U.S. military capabilities and complicates the United States’ ability to prioritize the Indo-Pacific.

However, some argue that there are at least two reasons why these tradeoffs might not be absolute. The first is that the military capabilities needed in each region are not entirely overlapping. In particular, land power is far more important in Europe than in the Indo-Pacific, and thus U.S. Army deployments in Europe do not necessarily constrain Navy and Air Force deployments needed in Asia.<sup>6</sup> However, while this is true in the short-term, over the longer-term, the resources needed to procure these capabilities are fungible, and thus investments in land power today impinge upon the United States’ ability to deploy air and naval power in the future.

The second reason is that some observers argue that Europe, the Indo-Pacific, and perhaps even the Middle East are increasingly connected. In this telling, close relationships and extensive military and economic support between Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea make neatly distinguishing between defending

3 Brian D. Blankenship and Benjamin Denison, “Is America Prepared for Great-Power Competition?,” *Survival* 61, no. 5 (2019): 43–64; Jim Garamone, “Official Talks DOD Policy Role in Chinese Pacing Threat, Integrated Deterrence,” *U.S. Department of Defense* (blog), June 2, 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2641068/official-talks-dod-policy-role-in-chinese-pacing-threat-integrated-deterrence/>; Brian Blankenship, “Managing the Dilemmas of Alliance Burden Sharing,” *The Washington Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (2024): 41–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2024.2323898>.

4 Robert D. Blackwill and Richard Fontaine, *Lost Decade: The US Pivot to Asia and the Rise of Chinese Power* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2024).

5 Hal Brands and Evan B. Montgomery, “One War Is Not Enough: Strategy and Force Planning for Great-Power Competition,” *Texas National Security Review* 3, no. 2 (March 11, 2020): 80–92; Jane Harman et al., “Commission on the National Defense Strategy” (RAND Corporation, July 2024), viii, 37–38, <https://www.rand.org/nsrd/projects/NDS-commission.html>.

6 Zack Cooper and Luis Simón, “Rethinking Tradeoffs Between Europe and the Indo-Pacific,” *War on the Rocks* (blog), May 9, 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/05/rethinking-tradeoffs-between-europe-and-the-indo-pacific/>.

NATO and defending U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific more difficult.<sup>7</sup>

But even if one accepts the premise that Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran pose a collective threat to pose regions, it does not necessarily follow that U.S. attention and resources in one region do not detract from those in the others. NATO members can provide diplomatic and economic support for U.S. partners in the Indo-Pacific—and vice-versa.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, partners in both regions can impose economic punishment on shared adversaries, as Japan, South Korea, and Australia have done to Russia. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that U.S. partners in either region will provide much in the way of direct military support to those in the other. The United States is ultimately the only country that can deploy military power to either or both regions. To the extent that the United States expends scarce resources in one region because partners in that region are unwilling or unable to balance regional adversaries alone, then, its ability to do so in other regions is less.

Making matters even more challenging are limitations on the United States' capacity to build and procure military hardware. U.S. stockpiles are limited, and according to some estimates, for some kinds of munitions, the United States would run out within a week of a conflict over Taiwan.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, there is considerable lag time in production, leading to substantial delays.<sup>10</sup> The U.S. Navy, in particular, expects years of delays for its major shipbuilding programs, and by some estimates the capacity of a single Chinese shipyard for repairs and maintenance exceeds that of all U.S. shipyards put together.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, military aid to Ukraine and U.S. partners in the Middle East have put additional stresses on an already strained U.S. defense industrial base and munitions stockpiles. Many recipients, including Taiwan, face a long backlog of U.S. weapons deliveries, and Taiwan and Middle Eastern recipients compete most directly for the same weapons systems.<sup>12</sup> Thus, in the absence of substantial

7 Cooper and Simón; Luis Simón, "NATO Should Think Big About the Indo-Pacific," *War on the Rocks*, July 1, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/07/nato-should-think-big-about-the-indo-pacific/>.

8 Simón, "NATO Should Think Big About the Indo-Pacific."

9 Seth G. Jones, "Empty Bins in a Wartime Environment: The Challenge to the U.S. Defense Industrial Base" (Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 23, 2023), 1, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/empty-bins-wartime-environment-challenge-us-defense-industrial-base>.

10 Jones, "Empty Bins in a Wartime Environment"; Kathryn Levantovskaia, "Overstretched and Undersupplied: Can the US Afford Its Global Security Blanket?," *Atlantic Council* (blog), January 5, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/overstretched-and-undersupplied-can-the-us-afford-its-global-security-blanket/>.

11 Steve Cohen, "Almost All Navy Shipbuilding Is Hopelessly behind Schedule," *The Hill*, May 2, 2024, <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/4624326-almost-all-navy-shipbuilding-is-hopelessly-behind-schedule-as-war-looms/>; Megan Eckstein, "US Navy Ship Programs Face Years-Long Delays amid Labor, Supply Woes," *Defense News*, April 2, 2024, sec. Naval, <https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2024/04/02/us-navy-ship-programs-face-years-long-delays-amid-labor-supply-woes/>; Harman et al., "Commission on the National Defense Strategy," 39–40, 54.

12 Jones, "Empty Bins in a Wartime Environment," 2; Bryant Harris and Noah Robertson, "Soaring US Munitions Demand Strains Support for Israel, Ukraine, Taiwan," *Defense News*, April 30, 2024, sec. Pentagon, <https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2024/04/30/soaring-us-munitions-demand-strains-support-for-israel-ukraine-taiwan/>; Jennifer Kavanagh and Jordan Cohen, "Taiwan Is Competing for Arms With the Middle East, Not Ukraine," *Foreign Policy* (blog), July 24, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/05/11/taiwan-weapons-ukraine-war-middle-east-saudi-arabia/>; Eric Gomez, "To Better Support Taiwan, Push Europe's Defense Industry to Do More for Ukraine," *Breaking Defense*, January 12, 2024, <https://breakingdefense.com/2024/01/to-better-support-taiwan-push-europes-defense-industry-to-do-more-for-ukraine/>.

prioritization in U.S. resources, the U.S.-Japan alliance will run up against the reality of serious constraints on American military power.

### ***Chinese Maritime Claims in the South and East China Seas***

The second major factor likely to shape the U.S.-Japan alliance for the remainder of the 2020s are China's maritime claims. First and most notably are China's continued claims on the Senkaku Islands. China Coast Guard vessels frequently patrol the waters around the island, in 2024 even breaking the record for consecutive days doing so.<sup>13</sup> Second, there is evidence that China's military coercion since the early 2010s has disproportionately target the Philippines.<sup>14</sup> In particular, disputes between China and the Philippines around the Second Thomas Shoal escalated in 2024.<sup>15</sup> This notably included a June 2024 incident in which the China Coast Guard forcibly boarded Philippines vessels, resulting in several injuries to Filipino personnel.<sup>16</sup> Last but

hardly least, Taiwan remains perhaps the single flashpoint with the greatest potential to escalate into a broader regional war. Beijing's claims to the island are routinely bolstered by frequent Chinese military exercises taking place very close to the island.<sup>17</sup> In the event of a Chinese attempt to forcibly seize control of Taiwan, there is some concern that China might even try to take some of Japan's southwest islands to use them as staging grounds for an invasion.<sup>18</sup>

At the same time, China's growing military power makes it more capable of prevailing in a conflict over these disputes. In particular, growth in China's air, naval, and amphibious capabilities have made a Chinese invasion of Taiwan far more plausible than had been the case in previous decades.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, China's anti-access area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities—particularly missiles that could destroy U.S. planes, naval vessels, and base infrastructure—make any U.S. attempt to project air and sea power around China's shores very costly and

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- 13 Brad Lendon, "Chinese Ships Spend Record Amount of Time near Japan-Controlled Islands, Tokyo Says," *CNN*, May 29, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/05/29/asia/chinese-ships-japan-senkaku-islands-intl-hnk-ml/index.html>.
- 14 Simon Weiss and Michael Beckley, "Countering Chinese Aggression in the South China Sea," *War on the Rocks*, July 23, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/07/countering-chinese-aggression-in-the-south-china-sea/>.
- 15 "China Urges U.S. to Stop Supporting the Philippines' 'Provocations,'" *Reuters*, June 28, 2024, sec. Asia Pacific, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/china-urges-us-stop-supporting-philippines-provocations-2024-06-28/>.
- 16 Mikhail Flores and Karen Lema, "Philippines to Be 'relentless' in Protecting Interests in South China Sea, It Says," *Reuters*, July 2, 2024, sec. Asia Pacific, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/philippine-says-be-relentless-protecting-interests-south-china-sea-2024-07-02/>; Jim Gomez, "China and the Philippines Hold Crucial Talks to Ease Tensions after Intense Clash in Disputed Waters," *AP News*, July 2, 2024, sec. World News, <https://apnews.com/article/south-china-sea-philippines-disputes-487b5a066b624f3505df4758f97edd01>.
- 17 Bonnie S. Glaser and Bonny Lin, "The Looming Crisis in the Taiwan Strait," *Foreign Affairs*, July 2, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/taiwan/looming-crisis-taiwan-strait>.
- 18 "China Has Its Eyes on Okinawa," *The Economist*, July 22, 2023, <https://www.economist.com/china/2023/06/22/china-has-its-eyes-on-okinawa>; A. A. Bastian, "Okinawa Is in the Crosshairs of China's Ambitions," *Foreign Policy*, July 24, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/04/07/okinawa-japan-china-us-bases-soft-power/>.
- 19 Jared M. McKinney and Peter Harris, "Understanding the Deterrence Gap in the Taiwan Strait," *War on the Rocks*, February 12, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/02/understanding-the-deterrence-gap-in-the-taiwan-strait/>; Harman et al., "Commission on the National Defense Strategy," 5–7.

put U.S. base infrastructure at high risk.<sup>20</sup>

### ***Domestic Politics in Japan and the United States***

The third factor likely to shape the U.S.-Japan alliance is domestic politics in both countries. In Japan, the largest source of uncertainty stems from the Japanese public's willingness to sustain elevated defense spending, acquire military capabilities that could be considered offensive, and perhaps most importantly use those military capabilities in a regional conflict outside of Japan's home territory. In the United States, one of the primary challenges to the alliance comes from the country's turn away from free trade.

### ***The Politics of a "Normal" Foreign Policy in Japan***

Since the end of World War II, Japan's willingness and ability to play a proactive security role in East Asia have been constrained both legally by its constitution's Article 9, which prohibits the country from waging war or acquiring the military means needed to wage war, and by a norm of pacifism. As a result, for decades Japan has spent around or below 1% of its GDP on defense and has been reluctant to both acquire offensive military capabilities and

deploy its military forces abroad.<sup>21</sup>

Over time, however, Japan has gradually expanded its willingness to play a security role in both its own defense and in its region.<sup>22</sup> In the early 1980s, for example, Japan pledged to defend its sea lanes up to 1,000 miles under considerable pressure from the United States.<sup>23</sup> In the decades that followed, Japan began participating in United Nations peacekeeping operations, contributed to antipiracy operations as well as refueling operations in the U.S. War on Terror, and even temporarily deployed forces to Iraq.<sup>24</sup> This evolution in deployments was accompanied by a similar evolution in legal interpretations of the Constitution's Article 9, notably include Abe Shinzo's reinterpretation to allow for collective self-defense.<sup>25</sup> Most recently, Japan's 2022 National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy called for dramatic increases in defense spending and the acquisition of long-range strike capabilities that could neutralize an adversary's offensive capabilities. Early indications, moreover, suggest that Japan is following through on these plans.<sup>26</sup>

These changes in Japanese defense policy, in turn, raise questions about its long-term prospects. The first is whether the spending

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- 20 Evan Braden Montgomery, "Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific: China's Rise and the Future of U.S. Power Projection," *International Security* 38, no. 4 (2014): 115–49; Renanah M. Joyce and Brian Blankenship, "Access Denied? The Future of U.S. Basing in a Contested World," *War on the Rocks*, February 1, 2021, <http://warontherocks.com/2021/02/access-denied-the-future-of-u-s-basing-in-a-contested-world/>.
- 21 Thomas Berger, "From Sword to Chrysanthemum: Japan's Culture of Anti-Militarism," *International Security* 17, no. 4 (1993): 119–50; Thomas Berger, *Cultures of Antimilitarism: National Security in Germany and Japan* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).
- 22 Adam P. Liff, "Japan's Defense Policy: Abe the Evolutionary," *The Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (April 3, 2015): 79–99, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2015.1064711>.
- 23 Thomas B. Modly, "The Rhetoric and Realities of Japan's 1,000-Mile Sea-Lane Defense Policy," *Naval War College Review* 38, no. 1 (1985): 25–36.
- 24 Sheila A. Smith, *Japan Rearmed: The Politics of Military Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), chap. 2.
- 25 Smith, chap. 9.
- 26 Matsuda, "Japan's Emerging Security Strategy"; Liff, "Kishida the Accelerator"; Christopher B. Johnstone, "When Actions Match Words: Japan's National Security Strategy at One Year," *The Washington Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (January 2, 2024): 167–83, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2024.2326726>.

increases are sustainable. Some estimates suggest that by 2027, Japan will be spending around 1.6% of GDP on defense.<sup>27</sup> However, given the country's already-sizable national debt, coupled with increased demands on social welfare spending, Japan's ability to maintain higher defense spending is not a given. Spending increases are all the more difficult given the weak Japanese yen, which cuts the purchasing power of spending increases especially of American imports given the strength of the U.S. dollar.<sup>28</sup> Second, it remains to be seen how and to what extent the acquisition of additional military capabilities, including long-range strike, will translate into a willingness to use those capabilities in conflict—including during a contingency over Taiwan. Such a decision would be a difficult one even in the best of circumstances, given the risk of reprisals that a Japanese use of force would invite. But in Japan's case, that decision would be even more fraught as it would represent a rejection of pacifism—especially if the country gets involved before being struck first—thus truly putting to the test Japan's willingness to conduct a so-called “normal” foreign policy.<sup>29</sup>

### *The Politics of Protectionism in the United States*

In the United States, meanwhile, foreign trade remains one of the largest sore spots in

U.S. efforts to build relationships with partners. Most notably, both the Biden Administration and the Trump Administration have imposed substantial tariffs on Chinese imports into the United States. But the broader shift away from free trade extends beyond China. The United States has not yet joined the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. Moreover, Donald Trump has called for a general 10-20% tariff on imported goods if he is elected President, and even many of the Biden Administration's signature pieces of legislation, most notably the CHIPS and Science Act and the Inflation Reduction Act, include a variety of subsidies for American producers as well as “Buy American” provisions.<sup>30</sup>

This, notably, is despite public opinion polls indicating plurality if not majority support for foreign trade.<sup>31</sup> However, because the costs of foreign trade are highly concentrated while its benefits are diffuse, the politics of trade tend to skew toward interests that are harmed by trade, rather than the large numbers of consumers that benefit from it.<sup>32</sup>

In the case of the U.S.-Japan alliance in particular, the most recent, high-profile indication of the protectionist turn in American politics was the Biden Administration's effort to

27 Johnstone, “When Actions Match Words,” 171.

28 River Akira Davis and Hisako Ueno, “The Yen Is Plunging. So Is Japan's Defense Budget.,” *The New York Times*, July 8, 2024, sec. Business, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/08/business/japan-yen-defense-spending.html>.

29 Liff, “Japan's Defense Policy,” 81.

30 Edward Alden, “Biden's ‘America First’ Policies Threaten Rift With Europe,” *Foreign Policy*, December 5, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/12/05/biden-ira-chips-act-america-first-europe-eu-cars-ev-economic-policy/>; Edward Alden, “Biden's Turn Against Trade Makes It Hard to Win Friends,” *Foreign Policy*, June 22, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/06/22/biden-end-free-trade-ustr-economy-fta-wto-protectionism-geopolitics/>; James C. Capretta and Stan Veuger, “The New Washington Consensus on Trade Is Wrong,” *Foreign Policy*, July 24, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/06/12/free-trade-new-washington-consensus-biden-protectionism-trump/>.

31 Karl Friedhoff and Lama El Baz, “Most Americans See Value in International Trade” (Chicago Council on Global Affairs, October 8, 2023), <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/most-americans-see-value-international-trade>.

32 Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965).

block Nippon Steel's acquisition of U.S. Steel.<sup>33</sup> To the extent the United States is willing to act as a credible economic alternative to China, this will make it more difficult for China's neighbors to reduce their dependence on Chinese economic ties.

### ***Implications***

These issues are likely to have several implications for the U.S.-Japan alliance during the remainder of the 2020s. First, defense burden-sharing is likely to remain a priority issue, and one that is at least occasionally contentious. Second, the United States, Japan, and other regional states are likely to prioritize acquiring military capabilities that can allow them to deny China's ability to impose its will over maritime disputes. Third, mutual threat perception is likely to bind the U.S.-Japan alliance together, though there is potential for trade disputes or Donald Trump's reelection to cause friction. Fourth, mutual concern about China is also likely to drive the United States and Japan into closer security relationships with other states in the region, though the process may prove slow and uneven.

### ***The Promises and Pitfalls of Defense Burden-Sharing***

The U.S.-Japan alliance has long been an unbalanced one when it comes to defense burden-sharing. The Mutual Defense Treaty does not require Japan to come to the United States' defense, and Japanese defense spending has historically remained around or below 1% of GDP. The reasons for this are manifold, but include Japan's postwar culture

of antimilitarism, enshrined in Article 9 of its constitution, as well as U.S. ambivalence about the prospects of a substantially more capable, more independent Japan.<sup>34</sup> Over time, however, Japan has expanded its role not only in its own defense, but also in regional defense. Moreover, the Trump and Biden Administrations have by all indications been less reluctant to encourage Japan to invest more in defense than many of their predecessors had been.

Burden-sharing is likely to remain top of the agenda in the alliance for the near future. The reasons for this are threefold. First, the United States' continued efforts to deter Russia and Iran and provide military assistance to Ukraine and Israel constrain its ability to prioritize the Indo-Pacific. Second, the combination of inflation, high interest rates, and ever-growing U.S. government debt will continue to make substantial increases in U.S. defense spending unlikely. Third, continuing and even escalating concerns about China's capabilities and intentions are likely to increase both Japanese and American estimations of the amount of military power needed to discourage China from challenging the territorial status quo. Taken together, this suggests both that the United States is likely to favor Japan's assuming more of the burden for regional security, and that Japan will continue to boost defense spending as a hedge against Chinese ambitions and a constrained United States.

This greater emphasis on burden-sharing in the alliance, however, may be complicated by both Japanese domestic politics and the United States' reluctance to give up control in the relationship. As noted above, it remains to

33 Sarah Bauerle Danzman, "The US Steel Deal Is a Test of Friendshoring—and the US Is Failing," *Atlantic Council* (blog), January 8, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/the-us-steel-deal-is-a-test-of-friendshoring-and-the-us-is-failing/>; Alan Rappoport, "Furor Over U.S. Steel Bid Puts Secretive Government Panel In Spotlight," *The New York Times*, May 3, 2024, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/03/us/politics/us-steel-nippon-steel-biden-cfius.html>.

34 Berger, *Cultures of Antimilitarism: National Security in Germany and Japan*; Brian Blankenship, *The Burden-Sharing Dilemma: Coercive Diplomacy in US Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2023).

be seen how willing the Japanese public will be to sustain elevated levels of defense spending, including procurement of strike capabilities, let alone to get involved in a conflict beyond Japanese territory. Moreover, the United States has historically been ambivalent about Japanese defense burden-sharing, fearing that a more powerful Japan might be less deferential to U.S. preferences and or seek to acquire nuclear weapons.<sup>35</sup> However, there is some reason to expect that this may be changing due to a combination of China's rise and constraints on the United States' ability to counterbalance China alone.

#### *The Need for Maritime Denial Capabilities*

Second, given China's A2/AD capabilities along with its numerous maritime territorial claims, the United States, Japan, and other regional states are likely to prioritize procuring weapons systems that can frustrate China's ability to project power at sea and in the air and nullify its ability to hold its neighbors' vessels and aircraft at risk. The capacity to deny China a swift and decisive victory is likely to be the most potent means of deterring it from trying.<sup>36</sup> This is all the more important given that territorial acquisition in the modern age tends to occur as a result of fait accompli land grabs, rather than extended efforts at coercion.<sup>37</sup>

China's efforts to acquire capabilities that

make U.S. power projection more difficult—including anti-ship and surface-to-air missiles—are ones that can be and are being emulated by its neighbors. Doing so can make a Chinese attempt to seize islands in the South and East China Seas prohibitively costly.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, surface-to-surface capabilities that can neutralize Chinese missiles and aircraft before they leave the ground may make it easier for U.S. and other actors' ships and planes to operate closer to China's shores. Indeed, acquisition of long-range strike capabilities has been a cornerstone of Japan's recent defense policy documents.<sup>39</sup>

#### *A Close Alliance with Some Potential for Turbulence*

Third, a shared perception of the threat posed by China will likely continue to bring the United States and Japan together. Japan's position is geostrategically important to the United States in a contest with China for at least three reasons. First, Japan is the northernmost link in the "First Island Chain," the series of islands stretching from the Japanese Islands to Borneo that constrain China's ability to project naval power beyond its shores. Second, Japan's proximity to China makes it useful as an "unsinkable aircraft carrier," from which U.S. air and sea power can be deployed in the defense of Taiwan or other regional states.<sup>40</sup> Finally, the size of Japan's economy and population make its partnership with the United States and independence from

35 Blankenship, *The Burden-Sharing Dilemma: Coercive Diplomacy in US Alliance Politics*.

36 John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983); Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

37 Dan Altman, "By Fait Accompli, Not Coercion: How States Wrest Territory from Their Adversaries," *International Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (December 1, 2017): 881–91, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqx049>; Dan Altman, "The Evolution of Territorial Conquest After 1945 and the Limits of the Territorial Integrity Norm," *International Organization* 74, no. 3 (ed 2020): 490–522, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000119>.

38 Michael Beckley, "The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia: How China's Neighbors Can Check Chinese Naval Expansion," *International Security* 42, no. 2 (November 1, 2017): 78–119, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00294](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00294); Eugene Gholz, Benjamin Friedman, and Enea Gjoza, "Defensive Defense: A Better Way to Protect US Allies in Asia," *The Washington Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (2019): 171–89.

39 Johnstone, "When Actions Match Words."

40 David A. Lake, *Entangling Relations: American Foreign Policy in Its Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Brian Blankenship, "The Price of Protection: Explaining Success and Failure of US Alliance Burden-Sharing Pressure," *Security Studies* 30, no. 5 (2021): 691–724.



Chinese domination particularly valuable to Washington.

Similarly, partnering with Japan's defense industry may be an opportunity to relieve or circumvent the woes of the American defense industrial base. Revitalizing the defense industrial base is one of the core pillars of Japan's 2022 defense documents, though as of this writing reforms have proceeded at a modest pace.<sup>41</sup> The U.S. Navy is already looking to Japanese and South Korean shipbuilders as sources of investment in American shipyards.<sup>42</sup> These efforts, however, may be hobbled by legal restrictions aimed at supporting American workers, including "Buy American" requirements and limitations on the circumstances under which U.S. vessels can be repaired in foreign shipyards.<sup>43</sup>

Additionally, Japan's perception of the threat posed by China is likely to keep it highly motivated to maintain close relations with Washington. While Japan is large and capable on its own, China's population, economy, and defense spending are several times larger than Japan's. As a result, U.S. support offers Tokyo a means to deter challenges to its territorial integrity and the regional status quo more broadly.

This is not to suggest that the relationship will be frictionless. In particular, trade is likely to remain a point of contention. Moreover, there

is reason to be concerned that Donald Trump's return to the White House could lead to volatile and unpredictable U.S. policies toward Japan and its region. Prior to leaving office in 2021, for example, Trump demanded a quadrupling of Japanese host-nation support for the costs of U.S. bases in Japan.<sup>44</sup>

#### *Prospects for Deeper Regional Security Ties*

Much in the same way that mutual concern about China is likely to continue bringing the United States and Japan together, the same may be true for East Asia as a whole. The academic literature on alliances suggests that, when faced with a powerful, threatening rival, states tend to band together to counterbalance that threat.<sup>45</sup> The logic here is one of mistrust: any rival that becomes powerful enough to dominate its region cannot be trusted to refrain from abusing its position, no matter its assurances. If countries do not work together, then they risk allowing their rival to pick them off one-by-one, and they leave themselves vulnerable to being coerced and attacked.

Developments over the last several years suggest that greater Chinese assertiveness in its maritime claims, coupled with China's growing military power, have contributed to tightening regional security cooperation among many of its neighbors. The most longstanding of these is "the Quad," the grouping of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States. The Quad had its origins in the 2000s but has increased

41 Johnstone, "When Actions Match Words," 177-79; Rena Sasaki, "Japan Needs a Defense Industrial Revolution," *Foreign Policy* (blog), March 9, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/09/japan-defense-industrial-revolution-security/>.

42 Christy Lee, "US Navy Looking to S. Korean, Japanese Shipbuilders to Revive American Shipyards," *Voice of America* (blog), March 7, 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-navy-looking-to-s-korean-japanese-shipbuilders-to-revive-american-shipyards/7518826.html>.

43 Harman et al., "Commission on the National Defense Strategy," 54-57.

44 Lara Seligman and Robbie Gramer, "Trump Asks Tokyo to Quadruple Payments for U.S. Troops in Japan," *Foreign Policy*, November 15, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/15/trump-asks-tokyo-quadruple-payments-us-troops-japan/>.

45 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1979); Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).

the frequency of its military exercises and established regular summits.<sup>46</sup> More recent are improved relations and greater security cooperation between South Korea and Japan, culminating in their trilateral Camp David Summit with the United States in 2023.<sup>47</sup> The second is trilateral defense cooperation between the United States, Japan, and the Philippines. The Philippines have expanded U.S. bases to military facilities for the first time since the end of the Cold War, and Japan and the Philippines signed a reciprocal military access agreement in July 2024.<sup>48</sup>

This is not to say that any attempt to balance China will come easily. Balancing is often slow—sometimes too much so to prevent a rival from achieving regional hegemony.<sup>49</sup> There are three principal reasons for this. First, balancing is costly, as states that openly stand against a

powerful rival at a minimum risk having to go to war, and at a maximum risk their own survival. States may hope to stand on the sidelines while other countries do the costly work of counterbalancing the threat.<sup>50</sup> Second, states may disagree on the intentions of the potential regional threat.<sup>51</sup> Finally, the rival state can attempt to drive a wedge between the balancing coalition, offering inducements to countries that stay on the sidelines and threatening punishment upon those that stand up to it.<sup>52</sup>

In China's case in particular, any effort to counterbalance it faces at least two obstacles. One is geography; states that are more insulated from China are likely to see less need to balance it. Many regional states are separated from China by water, reducing the threat of invasion.<sup>53</sup> The other is trade. Because China is the primary trading partner for virtually

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- 46 Dhruva Jaishankar and Tanvi Madan, "How the Quad Can Match the Hype," *Foreign Affairs*, April 15, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-04-15/how-quad-can-match-hype>.
- 47 Won-June Hwang, "Quasi Alliance Explanation for the Fluctuating ROK-Japan Relationship: Analysing Friction in 2019 and Cohesion in 2023," *Asian Journal of Political Science* 32, no. 1 (January 2, 2024): 17–34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02185377.2024.2345057>.
- 48 Joshua Kurlantzick, "The U.S.-Japan-Philippines Trilateral Was a Success, but Other Southeast Asian States Are Unlikely to Follow | Council on Foreign Relations," *Council on Foreign Relations* (blog), April 12, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/us-japan-philippines-trilateral-was-success-other-southeast-asian-states-are-unlikely-follow>; Shawn D. Harding, "There and Back and There Again: U.S. Military Bases in the Philippines" (U.S. Naval Institute, May 1, 2024), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2024/may/there-and-back-and-there-again-us-military-bases-philippines>; Erin L. Murphy and Gregory B. Poling, "A 'New Trilateral Chapter' for the United States, Japan, and the Philippines," *Center for Strategic and International Studies* (blog), April 15, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/new-trilateral-chapter-united-states-japan-and-philippines>; Sebastian Strangio, "Philippines, Japan Sign Reciprocal Access Agreement Amid China Tensions," *The Diplomat*, July 9, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/07/philippines-japan-sign-reciprocal-access-agreement-amid-china-tensions/>.
- 49 Randall L. Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); William C. Wohlforth et al., "Testing Balance-of-Power Theory in World History," *European Journal of International Relations* 13, no. 2 (2007): 155–85.
- 50 Mancur Olson Jr. and Richard Zeckhauser, "An Economic Theory of Alliances," *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 48, no. 3 (1966): 266–79.
- 51 David C. Kang, "Still Getting Asia Wrong: No 'Contain China' Coalition Exists," *The Washington Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (October 2, 2022): 79–98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2022.2148918>.
- 52 Yasuhiro Izumikawa, "To Coerce or Reward? Theorizing Wedge Strategies in Alliance Politics," *Security Studies* 22, no. 3 (2013): 498–531; Timothy W. Crawford, *The Power to Divide: Wedge Strategies in Great Power Competition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021).
- 53 Blankenship, "The Price of Protection"; Kelly A. Grieco and Jennifer Kavanagh, "The Elusive Indo-Pacific Coalition: Why Geography Matters," *The Washington Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (January 2, 2024): 103–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2024.2326324>.

every country in its neighborhood, Beijing can use the prospect of economic ties as a carrot and a stick to discourage a potential balancing coalition from forming. This, in turn, is made all the more challenging given that Washington's protectionist turn has reduced the United States' viability as an alternative trade partner.