



Washington's free-riding East Asian allies

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East Asia's security environment is becoming increasingly unpredictable and confrontational. The two principal causes are North Korea's continuing rogue behavior, accompanied by that country's *de facto* status as a nuclear-weapons state, and China's emergence as a major regional economic and military power. US leaders are deeply concerned about both developments and seek to preserve America's role as East Asia's hegemon - a status the United States has enjoyed since the end of World War II.

To meet the perceived strategic challenges posed by North Korea and China, Washington has sought to strengthen its military ties with long-time allies, especially Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, and (although there is no treaty obligation) Taiwan. The United States is also developing new, informal security partnerships with nations such as Singapore and Vietnam. Although US officials repeatedly deny that these efforts constitute an implicit containment policy against a rising China, that consideration is at least one underlying motive.

There is some logic to Washington's desire to enhance its security partnerships. The United States has important economic and strategic interests in East Asia, and it is understandable that US leaders worry about the potentially disruptive behavior of a totalitarian North Korea. It is also understandable that the United States does not want to see China - especially an authoritarian China - become the new regional hegemon. Strengthening America's security alliances with friendly governments is an appealing strategy to deal with both problems.

It is, however, a flawed strategy. Washington's allies tend to have two features in common. They embrace increasingly assertive nationalistic agendas - often directed against China. That are reflected in several bitter territorial disputes. The other feature is that despite a few modest moves to improve their own military capabilities, the East Asian allies continue to be security free riders - depending heavily on the United States for their defense. America thus confronts a situation in which assorted allies have bold policy agendas but lack the credible military power to achieve their ambitions without substantial US assistance. That creates a dangerous situation in which an overly assertive security partner could drag the United States into a quarrel that has little relevance to America's own legitimate interests.

The evidence of expansive nationalistic goals is not hard to find. A prominent - and worrisome - example is the nasty dispute between Japan and China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea. Tokyo controls those uninhabited rocks over Beijing's increasingly vocal objections. Both countries engage in dangerous posturing, including provocative or harassing maneuvers with military aircraft in the contested airspace. In response to intense Japanese diplomatic pressure, the Obama administration has repeatedly affirmed that the bilateral defense treaty covers those disputed islets, making the United States an implicit party to the dispute on Japan's side.

But Japan's territorial spats are not confined to the Senkaku issue. Tokyo has an increasingly intense quarrel with South Korea over another chain of largely uninhabited islands, called Takeshima in Japan and Dokdo in South Korea. That ugly controversy has the unique feature of pitting two US treaty allies against each other, placing Washington in a most awkward position.

Those bilateral territorial disputes are relatively straightforward, though, compared to the multisided competing claims in the South China Sea. China's "nine dash line" declared oceanic boundary would put the vast majority of that body of water and its various islands under Chinese sovereignty. As the world's leading maritime power, the United States is not about to recognize such an ambitious claim - especially since a large portion of the world's oceanic commerce passes through that area. However, Washington has taken an excessively meddlesome position, implicitly backing rival claims from the Philippines, Vietnam and other countries.

Not only does that "anybody but China" stance anger Beijing, but it encourages Manila, Hanoi, and other capitals to be more assertive than prudence might dictate. The Philippines especially seem to be counting on its defense treaty with the United States to enforce its own territorial claims. Indeed, Manila has ambitious plans to build a new major naval base on its west coast near the Spratly chain to emphasize its claim. It is hard to imagine that a small, weak country like the Philippines would confront China in such a direct fashion without believing that the United States will back its ambitions.

The increasing assertiveness of Washington's East Asian allies would be less worrisome if those countries were more serious about their own military capabilities. But the evidence of that is murky at best. Japan is developing a credible defense industry, including pursuing export markets for such products, but Tokyo's security efforts remain modest. Even as it adopts ever bolder policy positions, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government adheres to the long-standing, self-imposed limit of spending no more than 1% of the country's gross domestic product on defense. That means that Tokyo's defense budget of \$47.6 billion remains less than a third of the estimated military outlays of Japan's principal strategic rival, China. And that gap is likely to grow rather than shrink.

The much-touted new defense guidelines with the United States do not materially change the situation. Those guidelines mean little more than that Japan will be somewhat more involved in helping the United States defend Japan. There is little evidence that Tokyo intends to become more proactive in dealing with East Asian security issues that do not have a direct, immediate bearing on Japan's own security. Thus, Japan's status as a security free rider on the United States will continue.

Matters are not significantly better with regard to such allies as South Korea and Taiwan. South Korea's behavior is especially irresponsible. Not only does it face a rising great power in China, but Seoul confronts an aggressive, unpredictable North Korea. Yet South Korea continues to woefully underinvest in its national defense - spending just \$34.4 billion, which is an anemic 2.6% of GDP, on the military. Even worse, Seoul continues to rely heavily on US capabilities for air and naval power, which are especially crucial components of any modern defense program.

Taiwan's behavior is also troubling. True, President Ma Ying-jeou has backed away from the aggressively pro-independence stance of his predecessor, Chen Shui-bian, which had led to so many tensions with China from 2000 to 2008. Economic ties with the mainland have grown greatly since Ma's election, but resistance by Taiwanese voters to the accommodating, if not appeasement, policies of his Kuomintang Party appears to be on the rise. A victory by Chen's old party, the Democratic Progressive Party, in next year's election could rapidly reignite cross-strait tensions. Moreover, Beijing has never altered its position that Taiwan is rightfully part of China and that reunification must take place at some point. Yet Taipei continues to spend merely \$10.1 billion, some 2.2% of its GDP, on defense. That is utterly insufficient for a credible "porcupine strategy" - making an attempt by China to take over Taiwan by force so costly that rational officials in Beijing would not consider that option.

Military spending levels by other allies, most notably Australia, and informal security partners like Singapore and Vietnam, are more robust, but the overall picture remains worrisome. The ambitions of Washington's allies continue to outstrip their tangible military efforts. Such a gap does not improve the security environment. Indeed, it creates the potential for needless provocations, especially toward China, without the military wherewithal to establish a credible collective regional defense effort. That is not a good situation for the United States.

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