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# U.S. Can't Afford to Abandon East Asian Allies

- [Carolyn Posner](#) 11/18/11

Given the current budget-cutting fever in Washington, it's not surprising to see calls for a decrease in American military spending in East Asia.

The argument for a policy shift – elucidated by Cato scholar Justin Logan in a recent *Foreign Policy* [article](#) – is fairly simple: The “rock solid” American military commitment to allies like Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan has allowed the nations a free ride, enjoying American-guaranteed regional security while skipping the bill. If the security climate were more uncertain, these nations would commit more of their own resources to military and/or security efforts.

Logan is right on the basics – decreased American presence might save the U.S. money and force our allies into tough budgetary choices, but a less stable East Asia wouldn't help anyone, least of all the U.S.

Logan identifies “hedging against Chinese expansionism” as a shared priority for the U.S. and its East Asian allies but fails to consider how decreased American commitment would undermine this goal. Because Logan never specifies how he'd like to see the U.S. “sow doubt” about security commitments, it's difficult to identify specific repercussions. Perhaps he would stop U.S. arms sales to Taiwan or maybe drastically reduce or eliminate the American bases in Japan and Korea. Even publically announcing that our allies can no longer count on a timely U.S. response to regional threats could do the trick, instantly creating new security concerns. But it should be no surprise that any of these decisions would seriously undermine U.S. relations with regional allies.

In particular, it seems highly hypocritical to insist that Japan is free riding on the American security guarantee, given that the constitutional provisions [restricting Japan's military commitments](#) were written by the American-led occupation authority post-WWII. Of course, it's possible for Japan to revise its constitution, and greater insecurity might hasten that process. But in light of Japan's aggressively expansionist history, increased Japanese military spending would certainly alarm many in the region. Given that China has *already* begun [worrying about the Japanese military](#) without any military buildup at all, it's not hard to imagine the massive regional freak-out that an actual Japanese military expansion would produce.

Greater regional instability also threatens to undermine American-led nuclear non-proliferation efforts. Post-nuclear disaster Japan is unlikely to seriously consider building weapons, no matter the perceived threat level. However, according to a 2010 U.S. Joint Forces Environment report, both South Korea and Taiwan are “[threshold nuclear states](#),” able to quickly build a nuclear arsenal if they feel sufficiently threatened. Fears about an

aggressive response from mainland China will likely constrain Taiwanese nuclear ambitions. But in South Korea, an American snub, coming on the heels of a year of escalating North Korean provocations, might well convince many of the need for more aggressive defense capabilities. Even traditional weapons proliferation might threaten regional stability if Seoul decides to flout the 1979 U.S.-ROK accord [limiting](#) the range and power of South Korean missiles.

Perhaps most concerning, a U.S. military withdrawal would undermine the trust between the U.S. and our East Asian allies, making it more difficult for the US to constructively address even non-military issues. Given Chinese efforts to create new regional frameworks excluding the U.S., it is more important than ever that the U.S. demonstrate its vital role in the region.

Given the budget issues facing the U.S. and looming budget cuts if the Super Committee does not produce a compromise soon, we will be forced to make choices about the scope of our military commitments. However, if the U.S. turns its back on East Asia now, it will lose the chance to influence vital regional security issues in the future.