



**Statement before the U.S.-China
Economic and Security Review Commission**

***“China's Evolving Counter Intervention
Capabilities and Implications for the
United States and
Indo-Pacific Allies and Partners.”***

**Countering China's Military Strategy: The Role of
U.S. Allies and Partners**

A Testimony by:

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Vice Chair Price, Commissioner Schriver, and distinguished Members of the Commission, I am honored to share my views with you on this important topic. It is a privilege to testify on this panel with such a distinguished group of experts. During the course of my career, I have had the good fortune to contribute directly to our enduring effort to build and strengthen U.S. alliances in the Indo-Pacific, including our partnerships with Japan, Australia, the Republic of Korea, and the Philippines. America's treaty alliances remain the backbone of U.S. strategy in the region. My testimony today will focus on the increasingly vital role these allies play, along with other important partners, in deterring and responding to aggression by the People's Republic of China (PRC). The Center for Strategic and International Studies does not take policy positions, so the views in my testimony are my own and not those of my employer.

In my testimony I will focus on three issues in particular: the significance of U.S. allies and partners for U.S. military objectives in the region, and the benefits these relationships provide to the United States; the role of "minilateralism"—to include the Quad, AUKUS and trilateral forums like the U.S.-South Korea-Japan grouping—in supporting U.S. objectives, and the military advantages these groups could provide in a region where there is no multilateral alliance structure like NATO; and the additional actions our allies and partners could and should take to strengthen deterrence and response capabilities in the Indo-Pacific region.

The Critical Role of U.S. Allies and Partners in the Indo-Pacific

U.S. alliances in the Indo-Pacific represent a foundational strength for the United States, and a strategic advantage that China lacks. The United States has five bilateral treaty alliances in the region, with Japan, Australia, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Thailand. All of these relationships involve formal mutual security commitments that provide access for U.S. military forces, either through permanent basing (in the case of Japan and the ROK) or rotational/episodic presence. With the exception of Thailand, where U.S. military access rests on longstanding informal understandings, the terms of U.S. military activities in these countries are codified through legally binding status of forces (or visiting forces) agreements. [Singapore](#) is not a treaty ally, but has allowed important rotational naval and air presence for the United States through legal agreements in place since 1990.

These alliances and partnerships are critical to our collective ability to deter PRC aggression and respond to regional contingencies. They enable routine military presence and operations near regional flashpoints, including Taiwan; this presence ensures that the United States can be postured to respond quickly in a crisis, and does not have to fight its way into a conflict zone from afar. U.S. alliances, and the presence of U.S. forces in multiple locations around the region, also complicates PRC targeting and decisionmaking, by increasing the resources Beijing would have to expend in a conflict and the likelihood that any conflict would involve more than just the United States. In deciding whether to strike U.S. bases in the theater, for example, Beijing has to consider how host countries would respond to an attack on their soil. Further expanding the diversity of locations from which U.S. forces can operate would amplify this dilemma for Beijing, and is a high priority for the Department of Defense.

Finally, U.S. allies in the region possess critical, and increasing, military capabilities in their own right—especially Japan, Australia, and the ROK—that serve to reinforce the deterrence provided by forward-deployed U.S. forces. Indeed, strengthening the capabilities of allies is an increasingly central element to U.S. strategy for the region, as China’s military modernization has begun to shift the regional military balance in its favor.

U.S. allies share a common and deepening concern about China’s strategic ambitions in the region, and partly as a result these partnerships, with the possible exception of Thailand, are getting stronger simultaneously—arguably for the first time since the end of the Cold War. All U.S. allies in the region are increasing spending on defense and seeking closer security ties with the United States. Australia and the ROK spend more than [2 percent of GDP](#) on defense, and Japan will approach this level when the initial phase of its defense buildup concludes in 2027. All three are global partners, including in supporting Ukraine in the war against Russia. South Korea has been one of largest suppliers of ammunition to Ukraine outside of NATO—albeit indirectly, by backfilling U.S. stocks.

The alliance with **Japan** is particularly important in deterring PRC aggression against Taiwan, and represents the foundation of American power projection in the region. It hosts the most important U.S. capabilities in the Indo-Pacific, including the *USS Ronald Reagan* Carrier Strike Group at Yokosuka, the Third Marine Expeditionary Force in Okinawa, and fighter squadrons and other enablers in Okinawa and northern Japan. This presence is vital to the defense of Taiwan, and to responding to a contingency on the Korean Peninsula. The unique nature of the security treaty with Japan gives the United States operational flexibility it lacks in other alliances. Article VI of the treaty gives U.S. forces in Japan a role in the “[maintenance of peace and security in the Far East](#),” enabling the United States to deploy forces from Japan across the region and beyond.

In addition to enabling vital U.S. presence, Japan is building an increasingly formidable military. Japan’s 2022 [national security and defense strategies](#) set out unprecedented policy change, including plans to nearly double its defense budget by 2027 and to invest in new capabilities, including long-range precision strike cruise missiles. The war in Ukraine, and Beijing’s strategic alignment with Moscow, have transformed public opinion in Japan on defense spending, and precipitated a comprehensive effort to strengthen the credibility and readiness of the Self Defense Forces. China’s military modernization, along with the near daily PRC maritime pressure around the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, are key drivers of Japan’s new trajectory.

Since the release of these strategies, Japan’s defense budget has [already increased by 50 percent](#). Japan will be the largest F-35 customer in the world after the United States, with plans to acquire 146 aircraft (a mix of F-35A and F-35B variants). It already possesses a highly capable Navy, including Aegis ballistic missile defense destroyers, as well as significant undersea and anti-submarine warfare capabilities. It will begin to deploy Tomahawk cruise missiles—the first time Japan has possessed long-range strike capabilities—on ships in 2025. As Japan brings these capabilities on-line, Beijing will confront for the first time the prospect of a Japan that can shoot back, on its own and at long range, in response to an attack—a significant new variable in the deterrence equation.

Australia is increasingly central to U.S. efforts to counter China's military strategy and deter aggression. Through the bilateral Enhanced Force Posture Cooperation initiative, Australia today hosts rotational U.S. Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps elements for training and exercises—a significant expansion since cooperation on force posture first began in 2011. Australia and the United States are collaborating on infrastructure investments that could support operations in the defense of Taiwan; they are [funding upgrades to two bases](#) in northern Australia, for example, to support rotations of B-52 and B-1 aircraft and long-range bomber operations in a contingency. As one of the first milestones in the AUKUS initiative, Australia will host Submarine Rotational Force-West, with U.S. Navy Virginia-class attack submarines beginning to visit as soon as 2027. And Australia itself is investing in significant new power projection capabilities beyond the AUKUS nuclear powered submarines, with plans for more than 70 F-35 aircraft and long-range precision strike systems; a government review recently recommended that the country [double the size of its surface fleet](#), from 11 hulls to 26, although questions remain about the resourcing for these plans.

The alliance with the **Philippines** has undergone a marked transformation since the election of Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. as President in May 2022. Under former President Duterte the alliance nearly collapsed, with Manila threatening to terminate the Visiting Forces Agreement and end military engagement. Largely as a result of increasing Chinese aggression in the South China Sea, Marcos has reversed course, and embraced a revitalization of security ties. In April 2023, the United States and the Philippines held the largest-ever iteration of the annual BALIKATAN exercise, and that same month the governments announced [four new locations](#) where U.S. forces will have rotational access for activities under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA)—on top of five existing sites—all of which are in northern Luzon (near Taiwan) and Palawan (on the South China Sea). The primary military benefit to the United States of the alliance with the Philippines is its geography; the ability of U.S. forces to operate out of Luzon and Palawan in a Taiwan or South China Sea crisis would significantly complicate PRC military operations, provided the Philippines grants access early in a crisis—although there are likely limits to the kinds of U.S. operations the Philippines would allow in a crisis. In addition, the United States is supporting Manila's efforts to improve the military capabilities needed to monitor and defend its territorial waters and Exclusive Economic Zone.

The alliance with **South Korea** remains principally focused on North Korea, with more than 28,000 U.S. personnel stationed there. The vast majority of the U.S. presence in the ROK consists of ground forces, which would be of limited utility in a responding to a crisis elsewhere in the region; the possible exception are two U.S. Air Force fighter squadrons, which could support a conflict over Taiwan. Nevertheless, the U.S.-ROK alliance serves to limit China's options in a Taiwan contingency, by deterring opportunistic North Korean aggression that could otherwise be designed to distract the United States. South Korea boasts a formidable military, with sophisticated ground forces, an air force that includes the F-35, an increasingly capable navy, and a growing arsenal of ballistic and cruise missiles that can range targets deep inside China. Public opinion polls in South Korea reflect a [sharply negative view](#) of China, in part a result of PRC attempts to use economic levers to punish South Korea for cooperating with the United States on missile defense. The shift in public sentiment may enable deeper alliance cooperation on issues related to Taiwan.

Finally, although not a treaty ally, **Singapore** hosts the rotational presence of U.S. Littoral Combat Ships and surveillance aircraft, and serves as a logistical hub for U.S. operations across the theater. Though the ability of U.S. forces to operate out of Singapore during a regional crisis is open to question, it provides a vital peacetime anchor for consistent U.S. military presence in Southeast Asia.

In sum, U.S. bilateral alliances and partnerships in the region are a critical element in deterrence against PRC threats, both for the access they provide to the United States and the capabilities our allies bring to the table. And all of these relationships are strengthening at the same time, in response to growing concerns about PRC intentions.

The Growing Contribution of Minilateralism to Deterrence

This network of bilateral U.S. alliances and partnerships in the Indo-Pacific stands in contrast to NATO and the multilateral security architecture in Europe. A mix of complex historical factors—including Japan’s colonial legacy on the Korean Peninsula—divergent threat perceptions, and vast geography has impeded the development of multilateral security institutions in East Asia. In recent years, however, as threat perceptions related to China’s strategic ambitions have intensified, informal “minilateral” cooperation has strengthened at an accelerating pace. Once symbolic gatherings largely devoid substance, cooperation among U.S. allies and partners in the region now features an increasingly robust and concrete agenda. Although these networks fall short of formal treaty arrangements, they make an increasingly important contribution to deterrence, by promoting information sharing, advancing interoperability, and, more broadly, reinforcing for China that the use of force could trigger a regional, if not global, response. Advancing the development of these minilateral partnerships should be a high priority for the United States.

The AUKUS arrangement, first announced in September 2021, is perhaps the most high-profile recent manifestation of this minilateralism, although it has a relatively narrow purpose: providing Australia with nuclear-powered submarines by the mid-2030’s, and in the meantime promoting the development of advanced capabilities in several high technology areas. Although the submarine development project has made considerable progress since the announcement, the partners have struggled to identify concrete projects under so-called Pillar II. The symbolism of linking U.S. alliances in Europe and the Indo-Pacific sends a useful message, but AUKUS’ immediate contribution to regional deterrence is limited.

Of far greater significance is the rapid deepening of trilateral cooperation in two groupings: U.S.-Japan-ROK and U.S.-Japan-Australia. The former has accelerated dramatically after the election of President Yoon Seok-yul in South Korea in March 2022, culminating in a trilateral leaders meeting at Camp David in August 2023. There the three leaders announced a sweeping agenda, from real-time information sharing on missile threats, to a robust trilateral military exercise program, to cooperation on economic security issues and development assistance programs across the Indo-Pacific. Most significant was a stand-alone statement announcing a trilateral “commitment to consult” and coordinate responses to “regional challenges, provocations, and threats”—a symbolic acknowledgement for the first time that the three countries’ security interests are linked. Although the bulk of the trilateral agenda remains centered on confronting the North Korean threat, the three countries have an increasingly broad foundation for cooperation, including

on issues related to China and Taiwan—and President Yoon has departed from past South Korean leaders in his willingness to speak out on these concerns. The trilateral joint statement issued at Camp David notably calls for “peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait as an indispensable element of security and prosperity in the international community.”

The U.S.-Japan-Australia trilateral has also strengthened significantly. Once little more than an annual photo op, the defense agenda now features a robust exercise and training program, and emerging cooperation in the development of advanced capabilities including uncrewed aerial systems. The three governments have announced plans to increase Self Defense Force training in Australia; in August 2023, Japanese F-35 aircraft [deployed to Australia](#) for training for the first time, and Australian F-35 aircraft [visited Japan](#) for the same purpose in September. And the Australia-Japan bilateral relationship has grown alongside trilateral cooperation. In 2023, the two governments concluded a Reciprocal Access Agreement—essentially a status of forces agreement—to facilitate exercises and training. In October 2022 leaders of the two governments issued a [joint declaration](#) on security cooperation, in which they pledged to “consult each other on contingencies that may affect our sovereignty and regional security interests, and consider measures in response”—language that deliberately echoes the ANZUS treaty.

Finally, the Quad grouping of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States has evolved into a key mechanism for regional cooperation after the Biden administration elevated the forum to the leader level in 2021. The [Quad](#) has deliberately avoided developing a security agenda, beyond a new program on maritime domain awareness, focusing instead on economic and development issues in the region, including infrastructure, health, and connectivity. Nevertheless, this forum serves to anchor a role for India in East Asia, and gives the four countries a platform for competition with China’s Belt and Road Initiative.

The importance of these minilateral mechanisms should not be overstated. The deepening cooperation among U.S. allies and partners still does not approach the level of commitment enshrined in a treaty alliance, and will not guarantee a collective response to a crisis involving China. The United States and its partners should do much more to strengthen cross-alliance connectivity at the operational level, a topic I will address more later in my testimony. But the deepening habits of cooperation and growing interoperability among U.S. allies reflect converging threat perceptions—and signal that, at least among a sub-set of actors, a region-wide security architecture is forming in response to PRC behavior.

Perhaps recognizing this reality, China has sharply criticized these new mechanisms, seeking to portray the United States and its allies as pushing the region into a new cold war—without changing the behavior that precipitated their development in the first place. In August 2023, the *Global Times* described the trilateral leaders meeting at Camp David as an effort to create a “[mini-NATO](#).” After the May 2022 Quad leaders’ meeting in Tokyo, China’s Foreign Ministry spokesman accused the Quad members of “building [small cliques](#) and stoking bloc confrontation.” China has also sought blame the United States for the pushback Beijing receives around the region to its aggressive foreign policy—effectively denying agency to countries around the region it seeks to coerce. In December 2023, Foreign Minister Wang Yi accused Manila of taking provocative actions in the South China Sea, warning that China would respond if Manila “colludes with [ill-intentioned external forces](#).”

China's rhetoric gains some traction in Southeast Asia, where concern about the implications of U.S.-China strategic competition run deep. But it has not impacted support for the Quad or the interest of allies in deepening minilateral engagement. Absent changes in China's external behavior, the trend of deepening minilateral cooperation among close U.S. allies and partners is certain to continue.

Sustaining Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific: Next Steps for Allies and Partners

U.S. alliances and minilateral cooperation in the Indo-Pacific are on increasingly strong footing—but the challenge of sustaining deterrence in the region is growing rapidly as China's capabilities advance. The challenge is to both run faster and expand cooperation into new areas. Some areas to prioritize include:

- *Further diversify U.S. military access in the region.* Expanding the range of locations from which U.S. forces can operate is key to complicating China's operational planning. This is a politically sensitive area for our allies; particular priorities should be to establish periodic presence for exercises and training in Japan's islands southwest of Okinawa, and regularly exercising at the new EDCA locations in the Philippines.
- *Modernize command and control relationships with Japan and Australia.* Washington should take steps to [transform U.S. Forces – Japan](#) into a true joint operational command, subordinate to INDOPACOM, to interface with Japan's new Joint Operations Command. A particular focus should be to build a credible Japanese counterstrike capability, integrated with the U.S. intelligence and targeting architecture. Washington and Canberra should also consider establishing a new alliance coordination mechanism to support the growing number of American personnel operating out of Australian bases.
- *Promote allied investments in resilience.* A particular priority should be to encourage Japanese efforts to strengthen information security and cybersecurity, as well as investments in space capabilities to support redundancy. Japan is considering new legislation to strengthen cyber defenses and create a new security clearance system for issues related to economic security; the United States should encourage expeditious action in these areas.
- *Build deeper connectivity across alliances.* Following the Camp David Summit, the framework for engagement at the strategic level among the United States, Japan, and the ROK is in place. The next step is to build [deeper operational connectivity](#), by establishing a trilateral contingency planning cell, exchanging liaison officers at commands in Japan and South Korea, and allowing observers at each other's exercises.
- *Promote defense industrial cooperation.* Japan's investments in strike capabilities, and Australia's Guided Weapons and Explosive Ordnance program, could serve as a foundation for trilateral cooperation in manufacturing critical munitions and materiel. Counterhypersonics are another capability area of common interest.

The Role of Congress

Congress has an important role to play in supporting the U.S. strategy of defeating China's A2AD capabilities. In particular, Congress should:

- *Consistently resource the Pacific Deterrence Initiative.* Capabilities and infrastructure investment for the Indo-Pacific theater should be a high priority in the budget for the Department of Defense.
- *Increase security cooperation resources for Indo-Pacific partners.* The capability needs of U.S. allies and partners in South and Southeast Asia are vast; support for these partners, through both Foreign Military Finance and Section 333 authorities under the National Defense Authorization Act (building partner capacity), should be a particular priority.
- *Consider streamlining technology release policies Japan.* After passing exemptions under the International Traffic in Arms Regulation for AUKUS partners, Congress should consider exemptions for Japan, as it takes additional steps to strengthen information security protections.