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US ALLIANCES AND PARTNERSHIPS IN A TIME OF TRANSITION
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READING NOTES

Since the end of the Second World War, the United States has maintained a permanent military presence in two major centers of international power: Europe and East Asia. America's network of alliances is sometimes praised as a power multiplier in potential conflicts with revisionist powers and sometimes derided as an expensive drag on American resources. These readings tackle the questions of what American interests in these regions are; what goals U.S. allies themselves are pursuing; and how both the United States and U.S. allies should chart a path forward amidst shifting geopolitical dynamics on the international stage and political instability on domestic fronts.

Europe

Barry Posen argues that European security planners should prepare for the possibility of American withdrawal and Russian resurgence by preparing a "mass of manoeuvre." In other words, Europe needs a large reserve force, which can be managed through the NATO architecture, that can be quickly deployed to take advantage of weaknesses in an enemy's line. Posen recommends the European mass of manouevre, composed of ground and air forces, be based in Poland, due to that country's size, location, and transportation connections. For force structure, Posen takes Mattis's targets in the NATO readiness initiative of 30 air squadrons and ten brigades. Posen reasons that alongside Poland's 14 brigades, a ten-brigade NATO force, which can easily be supplied by France, UK, and Germany alone, should make Poland "an exceptionally hard target" for Russia. For the air component, Posen reasons that with more than 100 non-US NATO fighter squadrons, but only 34 among the big three (UK, Germany, and France), contributions from many European NATO allies would be necessary.

Defending the Baltics will be a challenge, since achieving similar front density to the ongoing war in Ukraine would require NATO to deploy 30 brigades. However, Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO opens new avenues for using airpower if Russia invades the Baltics, making invasion more costly and time-consuming for Russia. Europe is also better equipped to manage operational intelligence than many analysts believe, with 49 military satellites. However, at present, it does not fuse tactical and operational intelligence for strategic advantage, with barriers to sharing intelligence between states. Although Europe has financial and manpower limitations, Posen argues, it has the power to prepare to provide for its own defense.

Liana Fix condemns NATO's current approach towards Ukrainian membership as inadequate and warns that political developments in the alliance's strongest countries might soon render Ukrainian accession impossible. She argues that NATO cannot allow fear of Russian retaliation to prevent Ukrainian accession, nor can the alliance put Ukrainian membership on the bargaining table. Instead, Fix advocates following the West German model to NATO membership. Like West Germany, Ukraine would be given membership in NATO conditional on its indefinite acceptance of the current territorial division of its country. Ukrainian accession need not wait for a ceasefire but could instead take place "once the frontlines in the war are substantially stabilized." Fix situates her suggestion within the argument that lasting peace in Ukraine can only come about through the security guarantee of NATO membership.

Writing in fall 2024, **Sophia Besch and Liana Fix** argue that key European actors need to immediately establish coordination mechanisms, in order to present a united front, (in light of then still open question of whether Trump would win the 2024 US presidential election). They argue that Trump's preference for bilateral engagements and sowing discord among European states was already clear from his first term. Therefore, a strong "Group of Seven"—consisting of representatives from NATO, the European Commission, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, and the UK—must be prepared to fight for shared European priorities. These seven ("The Sept") could organize to ensure military deliveries to Ukraine and coordinate joint policy regarding the U.S.-China contest.

In their November 2023 *Foreign Affairs* piece, **Liana Fix and Michael Kimmage** acknowledge that Ukraine is unlikely to secure an overwhelming and unambiguous victory in its war against Russia, but nevertheless also reject calls for a negotiated settlement. They argue that Russia cannot be trusted to negotiate in good faith, so the only solution is a commitment to long-term military resistance.

Fix and Kimmage posit that a problem with Western policy discourse around Ukraine is that it is beholden to short-term expectation disconfirmation. They argue that many Western leaders were overly optimistic after Ukraine's unexpected early successes and then became overly pessimistic after the failure of the 2023 spring and summer counteroffensive. Moreover, attention was quickly diverted to the Middle East after the October 7, 2023 attacks by Hamas. Instead, the authors point to the fact that Ukraine's ability to push the war toward a rough stalemate is a noteworthy accomplishment in and of itself.

The authors conclude that the only viable path forward is a commitment to a long war that saps the Russian will to fight. By bleeding off Russian strength and striking in unexpected areas, Ukraine and its allies can keep Russia (more-or-less) contained. They write, "Containing Russia should be conceptualized—and celebrated—as a steady continuum of action that started before February 2022 and came into its own with the Ukrainian defense of Kyiv and battlefield advances in the fall of 2022. Containment, by definition, can deliver only a partial victory, and for this reason, ups and downs in public sentiment in countries allied with Ukraine are to be expected. These ups and downs make it all the more worthwhile for Western leaders, who are sensitive to surges of optimism and disappointment, to adopt containment as their unchanging compass."

Ali Wyne and Liana Fix argue for a psychological shift in American (and allied) strategic thinking. They write, "Rather than viewing Russia and China as existential adversaries that must be defeated within a certain timeframe, it should see them as enduring challengers that must be managed over the long haul, perhaps indefinitely." Wyne and Fix base this argument on two assertions. First, neither the Russian nor Chinese regime is likely to collapse anytime soon. Even should Russia lose badly in Ukraine, Putin would still likely remain in power, ruling over a "revanchist and bitter" country still possessing significant military and economic resources. The PRC is even more likely to continue on a stable trajectory. Second, pursuing victory against China and Russia would prove counterproductive and financially ruinous. The authors propose the United States instead follow a strategy that "avoids dramatic highs and lows and sticks instead to a middle course between consternation and complacence." Such a strategy emphasizes deterrence, escalation avoidance, and the renunciation of maximal goals, like regime change.

Liana Fix and Caroline Kapp analyze the defense spending of NATO countries, asking whether the decade-old benchmark of 2% of GDP is enough. They report that, for the first time, the average defense spending of non-American NATO countries has reached the 2% threshold, an achievement spurred by fears of Russia after the invasion of Ukraine. However, given the burdens of arming Ukraine through a long war and domestic instability in the United States, the authors warn that European countries might need to return to the 3% spending level common during the Cold War. Fix and Kapp outline the main obstacles to further

increases in defense spending: public opposition, overstretched budgets, and borrowing capacity limited by EU regulations.

Rebecca Lissner and Mira Rapp-Hooper make the case for a reinvention of American grand strategy from first principles. While the Biden administration could restore the old international order to some degree after the first Trump administration, Trump's capriciousness and protectionist policies have made the old international order irrecoverable. Although this presents new challenges, it also offers an opportunity for the United States to abandon primacy, as well as question long-held grand strategy goals like providing global public goods and maintaining the Eurasian balance of power.

East Asia

Daisuke Kawai offers a primer on Japan's new Prime Minister, Shigeru Ishiba, and his likely approach to foreign policy. Kawai reports that the 67-year-old Liberal Democratic Party leader is seen as "a steady hand in times of uncertainty," who favors a pragmatic approach to international relations. The author predicts that Ishiba will take a more assertive stance with China, improve relations with South Korea, and strengthen the alliance with the United States while also advocating for more Japanese agency. Ishibia has proposed the creation of an "Asian NATO" and has also been open to the idea of stationing U.S. nuclear weapons in Japan.

Despite Kawai's hopes that the new Japanese government would provide stability, the shocking results of Japan's October 2024 snap elections proved otherwise. **Mireya Solís** examines the consequences of the election in which Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), a conservative party that has held power in the country almost continuously since 1955, lost control of the country's Lower House. As in other advanced industrial countries, the electorate was dissatisfied with inflation and the level of economic vitality; however, unlike in other democracies, the LDP was not unseated by populist challengers but rather lost seats to a variety of centrist parties.

Without any one party or existing coalition holding a majority, Solís reports that it is difficult to predict who the next Prime Minister will be or what parties will be able to form a government. She does write, however, that the most likely outcome is for the existing LDP-Komeito coalition to form a minority government. The long-term effects of the recent election are unclear, but the author notes, "The bigger risk is not a rejection of Japan's hefty foreign policy track record. Rather, domestic distraction may hinder Tokyo's ability to address new challenges in the Indo-Pacific at a time when American voters may soon reset their own politics."

Mike Mochizuki assesses conservative firebrand Sanae Takaichi's impact on Japanese foreign policy, especially with respect to Taiwan. The first female Prime Minister of Japan, Takaichi is a protégé of the late former Prime Minister Shinzō Abe. She holds hawkish views on China and seeks to build on Abe's diplomatic achievements through the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) initiative and the Quad, a forum for Australia, India, Japan, and the United States to coordinate their foreign policies. Although Takaichi has recently reiterated Japan's official position that the Taiwan issue should be resolved peacefully, she has distinguished herself from other leading politicians by stating that an attack on Taiwan would pose an "existential threat" to Japan and, under the 2015 revision to the Japanese constitution, would permit military intervention in the name of "collective self-defense."

Mochizuki observes, according to the US-based China specialist Michael Swaine, Taiwan is not a vital US or Japanese security interest. While Swaine supports providing Taiwan with military aid, he recommends that the US adopt a policy of strategic clarity that promises the United States will not intervene militarily. However, Mochizuki notes that many in the Japanese security community will argue that for Japan, Taiwan

is a vital strategic interest due to the proximity of Taiwan to the Japanese home islands, especially Okinawa. In addition, by eliminating the possibility of US intervention, China may be emboldened.

Mochizuki argues that Japanese policymakers who link Japan's security to Taiwan's are misguided for three reasons. First, Taiwan is a unique problem. Taiwan has been a core interest of China's, since it lost the territory in the 1895 Sino-Japanese war, and is not likely to be a stepping-stone to attacking Okinawa or the Japanese home islands. Mochizuki also believes China is unlikely to seize the uninhabited Senkaku Islands. Rather, it seeks to get Japan to recognize its claim. Second, rather than emboldening China, by distancing itself from Taiwan, the United States can persuade China that Taiwanese independence is unlikely and peaceful unification is possible. Third, Mochizuki argues that Takaichi's efforts to deter China could worsen the security dilemma and create unnecessary risks of inadvertent conflict that threaten the livelihoods of Japanese people.

In a newly published report, **Christopher S. Chivvis et al.** assess Japan's importance to U.S. competition with China. At a top-level, the authors consider Japan very important to seven of the eight categories of competition and somewhat important to one. Japan is evenly split between very likely and somewhat likely to help with all eight identified categories of US-China competition. Although Japan has been reinforcing its defense capabilities and has long viewed the US as an important military ally and trade partner, recent tariffs have prompted a shift in public opinion towards skepticism of the United States as an ally. Although China is also an important trade partner, the *2022 National Security Strategy* singles China out as a strategic challenge. Chivvis et al. conclude that there are few downsides to the alliance. The main one they do identify is the risk of entanglement over the Senkaku Islands, but this risk is assessed to be unlikely due to the islands' strategic insignificance.

On the other hand, the Japanese alliance offers many benefits. Japan is a major player in the semiconductor supply chain, producing many pieces of equipment critical to semiconductor production, and the country is expanding its presence through new investments in next-gen 2nm conductors with Rapidus. Japan is also important to US critical mineral interests due to large nickel deposits within its exclusive economic zone and its share of the critical mineral refinement market. As a leader in science and technology, Japan is a critical partner in preventing the dissemination of advanced technology to China, but is has fewer technology controls than the United States, exporting significant amounts of semiconductor manufacturing technology to China.

Additionally, Japan is a major source of China's inward foreign direct investment, and while the government does little to restrict this, businesses are adjusting their business strategies away from investment in China in response to rising tensions. Moreover, Japan would be central to the defense of Taiwan, both as a base of operations for U.S. forces and a co-combatant. Japan's rapidly growing long-range missile capabilities. Further, shifting public opinion in Japan makes it more likely that Japan will be part of the U.S. effort to defend Taiwan. However, what role Japan would play likely still depends on the exact nature of war initiation. Japan is an increasingly valuable defense-industrial partner thanks to reduced domestic restrictions on foreign cooperation in defense production. Japan also holds sway with ASEAN, other potential Asia-Pacific partners, and the global south, serving as an important extension of US-friendly influence.

In the conclusion of her 2023 book, **Mireya Solís** places Japan's role in the Indo-Pacific in perspective. She is careful to say what Japan is *not*. She writes:

> Japan today is much more than the junior partner hosting U.S. military bases in exchange for shelter under the nuclear umbrella, or the passive actor that downplayed its regional political role and operated in the international trading system as a follower of rules set by others. Japan is no longer described as an unstoppable mercantilist juggernaut and host nation free rider. Nor does the image of a Japan in

inexorable decline, sapped of regional influence and fading in importance to U.S. foreign policy, appear plausible.

Instead, Solís argues that Japan has become an indispensable steadying hand among its democratic peers, many of whom are wracked by populist revolts and dysfunctional political systems. Japan still faces enormous challenges, like its demographic difficulties associated with its rapidly aging population, but Solis asserts that Japan will play a leading role in regional security, trade, and diplomacy as it fashions itself as a defender of the international liberal system.

Darcie Draudt-Véjares analyzes the significance of South Korean President Lee Jae Myung's visit to Japan. It was the first time a South Korean President's first foreign visit was to Japan since the normalization of relations in 1965. As she explains, the obvious reasons to visit a close trading partner and neighbor shrouds how shocking the historical legacy of Japan's imperial rule over Korea makes this choice. While Lee—a progressive in South Korean politics—has mobilized anti-Japanese sentiment for political gain in the past, in recent years, a pragmatic, security-driven approach has grown dominant in South Korean progressive foreign policy. During the visit, both then Prime Minister Ishiba and President Lee emphasized common economic and security challenges. Notably, they did so outside of the trilateral relationship with the United States, suggesting growing bilateral cooperation opportunities. Draudt-Véjares argues that an intensifying US-China competition, growing economic headwinds due to US tariffs, and Japan's favorability in South Korea rising precipitously, from 28.9 to 63.3 percent between 2023 and 2025, enabled and incentivized Lee to pursue warmer relations with Japan. Draudt-Véjares also argues that increased bilateral cooperation is likely to persist with the typically anti-Japan progressives leading the way and the marginalization of conservatives after Yoon Suk Yeol's failed self-coup. The greatest risk, Draudt-Véjares argues, is that a decline in Lee's favorability may cause him to return to the anti-Japanese rhetoric despite the strategic imperative to pursue deeper cooperation.

Clint Work argues that the US-ROK alliance is plagued by misunderstandings about the role of US Forces Korea (USFK). Although US policymakers characterize USFK as critical to deterring and contesting Chinese aggression, South Korean politicians remain deeply opposed to any expansion of missions beyond deterring North Korea. In public statements and published documents top defense officials, including Secretary Hegseth and INDOPACOM Commander Admiral Paparo, have suggested USFK would participate in the fight to defend Taiwan. While Japan has leaned into the linking of East Asian security threats in a "one theater" concept, South Korean leaders have denied any change or expansion in the role of USFK. This issue was last debated during the Roh Moo-Hyun administration (2003-2008), but no lasting agreement was reached on the flexibility of USFK to be used to involve South Korea in a regional conflict with China. The reality is that USFK is not well-suited to intervene in a Taiwan contingency and risk creating a deterrence vacuum on the Korean peninsula. One potential solution is to change from US OPCON to a parallel arrangement that would enable greater flexibility for USFK without creating as much of a deterrence vacuum. Although such a scheme too may face political headwinds in Washington and Seoul, whatever Washington does, it will require careful coordination with Seoul, not just assumptions.

Victora Cha and **Christopher Johnstone** argue that growth in Chinese and North Korean military capabilities as well as increasing Russia-China cooperation mean Japan and South Korea must cooperate on security. They highlight specific areas for collaboration, including revitalizing the Trilateral Consultation and Oversight Group to coordinate policy on North Korea, resuming joint military exercises on missile tracking, maritime surveillance, interdiction, and antisubmarine warfare, and establishing liaison offices within U.S. and allied commands to facilitate intelligence sharing. The authors also call for trilateral defense policy dialogues on deterrence and modernization, economic cooperation to secure supply chains and advanced technologies (such as semiconductors and critical minerals), and joint planning for Taiwan contingencies through tabletop exercises. Although historical disputes over Japan's wartime actions continue to strain ties, Cha and Johnstone insist that reconciliation and security cooperation must proceed

in parallel, as today's strategic environment no longer allows the allies to let history obstruct collective action.

Unlike Cha and Johnstone, **Adam P. Liff** sees differences in Japan and South Korea's policies and priorities regarding Taiwan. He identifies three main differences. First, Japan is more open in its engagement and support for Taiwan's international presence, while South Korea remains cautious and largely avoids public association. Second, Japan's alliance with the United States explicitly envisions regional contingencies, including a Taiwan conflict, whereas Seoul confines its alliance focus to the Korean Peninsula. Third, South Korean policymakers are more preoccupied with the risk of simultaneous crises in the Taiwan Strait and on the peninsula. Liff concludes that although both allies now recognize the importance of Taiwan's stability, their distinct histories, geographies, and threat perceptions necessitate more candid trilateral and Track 2 dialogues to bridge persistent gaps in understanding and coordination.