Donald Trump’s shock election to the US presidency in November 2016 sent waves of uncertainty throughout capitals around the world about the future direction of US foreign policy. In Asia, leaders are coming to terms with what a Trump presidency could mean for the region, especially for hot spots such as North Korea and lingering tensions among Asia’s major powers.
Taking Stock of US Military Alliances in Asia

WHEN VIEWING the current security landscape in Asia, it is useful to look through a five-sided lens. This lens looks over the military relationships embedded in the five US treaty alliances in the region: Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines and Thailand. Taiwan is a special case and will be considered at the end of this essay. The purpose is to consider operational efficacy: How well does the US military operate with its treaty allies and for what purposes?

Despite President Donald Trump’s confused messaging, the alliance picture in the region is characterized by the underlying quality of relationships that have been forged over time. These long-term military ties provide a bias toward calm. Moreover, while these alliances could improve in the military operational sense, the relationships are not likely to change sharply in the short run and they therefore add a modicum of stability to the US presence in the region.

Measuring operational efficacy
The five-sided lens framework uses military-to-military “synergy” in operations as the metric for ranking the treaty alliances in the region. This synergy is defined as an aggregate assessment of:

- **Command:** The nation’s political desire to support military operations with the US, as expressed in the Rules of Engagement they apply;
- **Control:** The level of shared digital and voice communications interoperability, including the ability to communicate at various levels of classification;

The Trump presidency has not yet changed the essential nature of US military alliances in Asia, but a changing security environment due to the rise of China means care must be taken to nurture ties. Retired US Vice Admiral Robert Thomas ranks the operational effectiveness of US alliances in the region through a “five-sided lens” involving Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines and Thailand, while also considering India and the special — and potentially combustible — case of Taiwan.
**Capability**: The quality and effectiveness of their platforms, weapons, intelligence apparatus and the proficiency of their operators; and

**Capacity**: The quantity of their platforms, weapons, intelligence assets and their ability to sustain them in prolonged operations with logistics and maintenance.

Militaries that operate together can view this synergy as a four-tiered system. The lowest form of combined operations may be seen as “de-conflicted,” meaning the two militaries may have the same objective, but must approach that objective from separate operational perspectives. The de-conflicted approach is used with militaries that are unfamiliar with each other or have a large disparity in capability and capacity. An example might be maritime operations involving Philippine and US forces in the South China Sea.

As militaries gain proficiency in working with each other, they tend to move from “de-conflicted” operations to “co-ordinated” operations. This takes place when militaries have conducted enough exercises to understand each other’s capabilities and limitations. An example of co-ordinated operations occurred between the Japanese Self Defense Force and the US military during the Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response operations following the massive earthquake and tsunami off Northern Honshu in 2011.

“Interoperable” operations emerge when militaries use the same equipment, conduct co-ordinated planning and spend enough time together in exercises and real world operations. At this point, their operational units are somewhat interchangeable. An example of this is the current state of operational proficiency between the Japanese and US forces in the area of ballistic missile defense.

When militaries are seamless in operational transitions and the outside observer cannot tell which allied military is supplying a particular capability, they are operating in a truly “integrated” fashion. This level of combined operational proficiency is rare, and perhaps the only examples in Asia are occasional US-Japan and US-Australian combined military operations and exercises.

**Rating Alliance Relations**

**Japan**: The Japanese Self Defense Force is the most “interoperable” military with which the US works in Asia. With common equipment, multiple exercises that cover the full range of military operations and a society that has the technical expertise to support a robust military industrial complex, Japan is America’s closest military ally. The operational priorities of the Japanese Self Defense Force are clear. First, defense of the Southwest Islands (Senkakus) from encroachment by China. Second, defense support in the case of a conflict on or from the Korean Peninsula. Third, worldwide peacekeeping operations in support of UN mandates.

Because of the changing security picture, and Japan’s potential reinterpretation of its constitution, there are growing opportunities for long-term US-Japan combined military operations that are both regional, in support of Japan’s homeland defense, and global, given both countries common interests in other parts of the world.

**Republic of Korea**

The ROK military is extremely capable, although it is limited in capacity and its operations are focused on defending against a North Korean attack. The South Army, along with the US Eighth Army, defends against a land attack across the demilitarized zone (DMZ). The South Korean Air Force is closely linked to the US Seventh Air Force, which is also based on the Peninsula. The South Korean Navy and Marine Corps are linked to the US Seventh Fleet and the US Third Marine Expeditionary Force, and are focused on the maritime approaches to the Peninsula. These forces have significant operational reach. For example, the South Korean Navy routinely participates in international counterpiracy operations as far away as the Gulf of Aden.

Given the proficiency of South Korea-US combined forces, it is clear that they can operate in a “co-ordinated” fashion when called upon. The continued effort to integrate high-end capability is the next challenge to reach the “interoperable” level, which would include advanced strike capability. Interestingly, with the North Korean acceleration in ballistic missile and nuclear weapons capability, the usual provocation cycles initiated by the North Korean leadership can now bypass South Korea. This puts the South Korea-US military alliance in a new decision space with respect to military response options.

**Australia**: From a military planning perspective, the Australian Armed Forces are completely “interoperable” with their US allies. The only reason that they are prioritized behind Japan and South Korea from a military perspective is their lack of military capacity. The Australian Armed Forces are relatively small in a neighborhood that houses seven of the world’s top ten militaries by size.

There are no other militaries that punch above their weight like the Australians and their close partners from New Zealand. Foreign military sales also continue to link the US and Australia — they operate the same equipment, speak the same language, are educated together at some of the same military colleges and are cross-pollinated within the US and Australian Military Command Structures. Yet the geographic reality of being part of Asia will continue to influence Australians with respect to future partnerships in the region. With a growing economic dependence on China, it will be interesting to see how long the Australians will continue to see the US as their preferred security partner.

**The Philippines**: The Philippine military is consumed with internal security and counterinsurgency in the country’s south. It lacks the capacity and capability for high-end war-fighting, but has world-class proficiency in its special forces. The US military and the Philippine military operate at the “co-ordinated” level across most operations and exercises. The Philippine military is also proficient in humanitarian assistance and disaster response, and it is getting a lot of practice, given the effects of climate change and extreme weather on the east of the country.

The Philippine Navy and Coast Guard are outfitted in the South China Sea by the combined-arms approach of China’s fishing fleet, or maritime milita, with the Coast Guard and the People’s Liberation Army Navy. The Chinese have a free hand in the Spratly Islands from a military perspective and will continue to accumulate advantages over their neighbors in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Given Philippine dependence on maritime protein sources, the implications for its maritime economic sector are significant.

**Thailand**: The Thai military is very capable. It is tuned to operations close to home, especially on its land borders and in the Gulf of Thailand. Despite the latest military coup in 2014, the US military has continued exercises with the Thais. Across the spectrum of military operations, the combined Thai-US military forces operate at the “co-ordinated” level.

Like other nations in Southeast Asia, the Thais must hedge with respect to China, but have good military relationships with Japan, South Korea and the US. The US military will play a key role along with the Thai military in keeping this treaty alliance on life support, but the US government needs to put more effort into maintaining the alliance or risk losing a key strategic partner. Should the US abandon that relationship, the Chinese are ready to fill the void.

**Whither India?** The US has prioritized its treaty alliances in Asia using a five-sided lens tied to ranking the combined military proficiency levels of its allies. Given the strategic tension between India and China, the Eastern Indian Ocean and those countries surrounding the Bay of Bengal are much more relevant for military practitioners today than in
years past. China’s “One Belt, One Road Initiative” — which involves massive infrastructure investments in roads, railways and ports to link China to Southeast Asia, South and Central Asia, and parts of Africa and Europe — stakes out pathways that can challenge the security posture of India, which has traditionally seen itself as the “non-aligned” military power in South Asia.

With the election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Indian military has been aggressive in its outreach with non-traditional partners. India is moving away from dependency on former Soviet-Russian equipment, and is much more willing to carry out exercises with other militaries in the region, including the Japanese. The Indian military is extremely professional. Although hampered by the legacy of Russian equipment, India has embarked on the development of its own military industrial complex. The Indian population also has the technical expertise and academic institutions to support a large military-industrial base.

As President Trump rolls out an Indo-Pacific Strategy, US military co-ordination with the Indian military will be a priority.

And ... Taiwan. The Taiwan Relations Act, signed in 1979, governs US relations with Taiwan and was written with purposeful ambiguity. It does not support a traditional military-to-military relationship between the US and Taiwan, but allows for the sale of modern war-fighting equipment. The US does not carry out exercises with the Taiwanese military in the traditional sense, but there is some interaction between US and Taiwanese forces, largely conducted by retired US officers in a “track two” format. The ambiguity of the Taiwan Relations Act has served as a hedge for decades. One has to ask if that ambiguity is still useful given the military modernization of China over the past two decades.

Now that President Xi Jinping has completed his consolidation of power internally, following the 19th Party Congress in October, he may begin working on both external challenges and his legacy. Taiwan’s next presidential election in 2020 will come about two years before the scheduled end of Xi’s current term. Inciting extended turmoil that justifies military intervention or conquest of Taiwan could give him a convenient excuse for an unprecedented third term and solidify his position as the person who moved China “front and center.” Although Taiwan has been relatively quiet since 1996, it could quickly eclipse the other military hotspots in the region.

The Next Three Years?

With respect to embedded military relationships, US alliances have not changed with the change in administration. It was not lost on US treaty allies that Secretary of Defense James Mattis made his first overseas trip to Asia. He will need to regularly visit with his fellow defense chiefs in the region over the next three years to provide reassurances that the US remains a preferred security partner. Trump’s recent trip did nothing to change the stable nature of these enduring relationships and in some cases showed appropriate concern. However, based on the assessment of allied military operational efficacy, there is more work to be done in improving both capability and capacity in allied militaries to handle an increasingly complex threat environment.

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