Sustaining Deterrence in 2024: The Critical Role of Allies

Charles Edel  
Senior Adviser and Australia Chair

Christopher B. Johnstone  
Senior Adviser and Japan Chair
Key to sustaining deterrence in the Indo-Pacific during a period of potential American distraction—by politics at home and wars in Ukraine and the Middle East—is the role of U.S. allies.

The headlines in early January this year were filled with rumors of corruption and incompetence in the People’s Liberation Army (PLA)—but these reports should not serve as an excuse for complacency.¹ In fact, China’s military modernization continues to accelerate, and Xi’s purge of PLA leaders is an indication of the strength of his determination to pursue it. Around the region, Beijing is increasingly aggressive in seeking to coerce its neighbors through a mix of economic, military, and paramilitary tools. The results of the Taiwan election in mid-January will spur Beijing to pressure the new Taiwan government, at a minimum raising the risk of an incident that could easily spiral into conflict. Moreover, China’s maritime coercion in the South and East China Seas shows no signs of diminishing; indeed, there are indications China is planning a 365-day Coast Guard presence in the waters around the Senkaku Islands in 2024.² Beijing’s cooperation with Moscow, and the deepening linkages between North Korea and Russia pose further challenges.

Key to sustaining deterrence in the Indo-Pacific during a period of potential American distraction—by politics at home and wars in Ukraine and the Middle East—is the role of U.S. allies. As 2024 begins, the picture here is good, but it’s critical to sustain the momentum. The last few years have witnessed a remarkable, and nearly simultaneous, strengthening of U.S. alliances across the region—for the first time in decades. This is a foundation to build upon.

The strengthening is nevertheless fragile, and in some cases easily reversed. Although presidential election years are often resistant to major new alliance initiatives—as allies hedge, seeking to gauge the likelihood of continuity in a new administration—important progress remains possible, and it’s critical to sustain momentum even as November 2024 approaches. Washington should focus on a few concrete steps in its bilateral alliances while sustaining work to build a minilateral security architecture, centered on the U.S.-Japan-Republic of Korea and U.S.-Japan-Australia trilateral groupings. U.S. allies themselves have a key role to play in this consolidation—by demonstrating their own commitment to

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follow-through and investments at home, they can underscore the importance of continuity in U.S. policy and reinforce deterrence against the rapidly growing challenge from China, while at the same time helping to inoculate themselves from criticism in the United States related to burden sharing.

The Cornerstone Bilateral Relationships

The United States and Japan

The U.S.-Japan alliance enters 2024 on exceptionally firm footing, and this year will bring multiple opportunities to showcase its strength—including a state visit to Washington by Japan’s prime minister this spring and a “2+2” meeting later in year. Japan is entering the second year of a historic defense buildup and so far is moving quickly on key elements of implementation—including the acquisition of long-range “counterstrike” capabilities, establishment of a new joint operational headquarters, and major investments in enhanced readiness for the Self-Defense Force. These moves complement U.S. moves to reinforce deterrence in the western Pacific through force posture enhancements, including formally establishing a Marine Littoral Regiment on Okinawa in November 2023.

This year the focus for Washington and Tokyo should be on solidifying these announcements with concrete steps to build a more integrated and operational alliance—steps that will move the relationship in the direction of a more operationally ready alliance and enhance its credibility.

Specifically, Washington and Tokyo should announce plans to modernize the command structure of the alliance. Washington should begin taking steps to transform U.S. Forces Japan into a truly joint operational command, subordinate to the United States Indo-Pacific Command, to serve as the day-to-day counterpart for Japan’s new permanent joint operational headquarters. The two sides should explore opportunities for co-location of command personnel, perhaps by embedding U.S. liaison officers at Japan’s new headquarters. For its part, Tokyo should prioritize new efforts to strengthen information security and to enhance Japan’s cybersecurity, to include authoriz-
Reinforcing Minilateralism

The last few years have witnessed a proliferation of minilateral groupings, but two in particular should be the focus of U.S. policy in 2024: the U.S.-Japan-Republic of Korea and U.S.-Japan-Australia groupings. For the former, locking in the gains of Camp David should be a priority through another stand-alone trilateral leaders’ meeting, an expanded military exercise program, and deepening dialogue on economic security.\(^1\) Japan and South Korea should take steps to fully normalize their own bilateral defense relationship and announce a framework for cooperation moving forward. For the latter, the three governments should build on Japan’s deployment of F-35 aircraft to Australia to expand trilateral training.\(^2\) A particular opportunity could be defense industrial cooperation; the three countries should define concrete cooperation in developing uncrewed systems. Australia’s Guided Weapons and Explosive Ordnance effort could also be a platform for trilateral cooperation in manufacturing critical munitions and matériel.

Sustaining Momentum in 2024

There are other critical steps Washington can take to ensure that deterrence holds in this election year. It should sustain a strong diplomatic calendar in the Indo-Pacific to the degree possible. Presidential travel will be limited, but there should be ample opportunity to host visiting leaders at the White House. Congress should seek opportunities to highlight the increasingly strong bipartisan consensus on China policy and issues in the Indo-Pacific; a joint resolution on the U.S. commitment to allies and partners, and support for a free and open Indo-Pacific, would send a powerful signal of continuity in U.S. policy. A host of other policy efforts related to economic security—including promoting supply chain diversification, strengthening export controls, and advancing cooperation with key allies on advanced and emerging technologies—should remain a major focus.

The U.S. election in November will be an important moment for the Indo-Pacific, but the campaign season need not distract from the focus on sustaining deterrence in this vital part of the world.

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