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Improving U.S. Cooperation with Allies and Partners

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A Report of the
CSIS Warfare, Irregular Threats, and Terrorism Program
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Soldiers of the Lithuanian Land Force and U.S. Army soldiers participate in a joint military exercise alongside troops from other NATO member countries.

Sean Gallup/Getty Images

The national security of the United States has long benefited from the vast and unrivaled global network of U.S. allies and partners. As strategic competition with China in the Indo-Pacific emerges as the primary driver of U.S. policy, this network will become even more important.

Yet, for all the benefits the United States and its friends receive from cooperation, these relationships are often fraught and do not achieve their full potential. Problems with allies and partners are nothing new, even when both the United States and its potential partners face a common threat and share common interests. Both the Cold War and post-Cold War periods are replete with examples of friction and, at times, failures of coordination and cooperation. Common problems include the following:

- **Divergent interests.** Allies often share broad goals but differ on priorities, threat perceptions, and acceptable costs, which leads to mismatched force development and doctrine. U.S. global interests further complicate coordination with regionally focused allies, creating misalignments in planning and execution.
- **Credibility and trust.** Allies question whether the United States will uphold its commitments, especially after perceived betrayals and abrupt policy reversals. Mistrust is intensified by fears of exploitation, lack of historical awareness by the United States, and interallied rivalries.

- **Chain gangs and entrapment.** States fear being dragged into unwanted conflicts by reckless allies emboldened by security guarantees. Fears of entrapment, while rarely realized, shape alliance behavior, especially in sensitive flash points like Taiwan, where assurance must be balanced with restraint.
- **Free riding and buck-passing.** Smaller or less threatened states may contribute less to collective defense, relying on dominant powers like the United States to bear the burden. This imbalance undermines deterrence, generates resentment, and limits alliance readiness in crises.
- **Poor communication.** The United States often fails to clearly convey its objectives, plans, and expectations, leaving allies unprepared or marginalized in decisionmaking. Reliance on bureaucratic channels and limited joint strategic dialogue further inhibit effective coordination.
- **Security.** Allies' weaker counterintelligence and susceptibility to espionage—especially by China and Russia—make the United States cautious about intelligence and technology sharing. Simultaneously, overclassification within the United States hinders the nation's ability to share appropriately.
- **Contentious domestic politics.** Nationalism, anti-U.S. sentiment, and internal political sensitivities in allied states complicate cooperation and can limit alliance institutionalization. U.S. domestic debates that criticize allies as freeloaders and shifting foreign policies also undermine consistent external engagement.
- **Bias toward Europe.** U.S. alliance structures are more deeply institutionalized in Europe than in Asia, where multilateral frameworks remain weak. New initiatives like the Australia, United Kingdom, and United States (AUKUS) security partnership and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) help but lack the depth and permanence of NATO.
- **Adversary countercoercion.** Allies face real economic and security retaliation—especially from China—when they engage in deeper coop-

eration with the United States, including arms purchases and intelligence sharing. These costs make many allies wary of openly aligning with Washington, especially in Asia.

Washington, not allied capitals, is often the source of the problem. It is vital that the United States recognize the problems it has, or is likely to have, with allies and partners when they plan jointly, share intelligence, purchase weapons, or otherwise work together. Put simply, the United States is a difficult ally even when it is well meaning.

These problems show up in different ways in three key areas: intelligence sharing, coalition planning, and arms sales—the focus of much of this paper. U.S. intelligence sharing with allies suffers from five core obstacles: trust concerns, autonomy anxieties, security barriers, technical and bureaucratic incompatibilities, and internal U.S. bureaucratic dysfunction. Allies often fear manipulation or espionage, citing selective intelligence sharing and past U.S. surveillance of partners, while also worrying about dependence on U.S. intelligence or exploitation by U.S. interests. Sharing is further constrained by legitimate security concerns—especially around leaks, espionage risks, and sensitive collection methods—which are exacerbated by both partner weaknesses and U.S. overclassification. Even when there is political will to share, mismatched technical systems, different intelligence structures and legal authorities, and a lack of secure networks hinder real-time cooperation, with personal relationships often substituting for institutional fixes. Finally, U.S. bureaucratic inertia—driven by excessive NOFORN (not releasable to foreign nationals) classification, risk-averse culture, and a convoluted system of foreign disclosure rules—often delays or denies intelligence release, even when strategic directives support it. These failures limit both strategic alignment and tactical readiness, undercut deterrence, and leave allies blind to shared threats, ultimately weakening U.S. influence and credibility.

Structural and behavioral issues hinder multinational strategic planning with the United States. Three key problems dominate: The United States often has different interests and threat perceptions from its allies; sometimes does not account for differences; tends

to act unilaterally and dominate planning processes, often keeping partners in the dark or engaging them only after decisions are made; and relies heavily on ad hoc mechanisms and foreign liaison networks, especially military-to-military ties, which lack institutional support and can isolate embedded officers from both their home governments and the U.S. system. These shortcomings reduce strategic coherence and undermine effective collaboration, which is particularly problematic in the context of long-term competition with China.

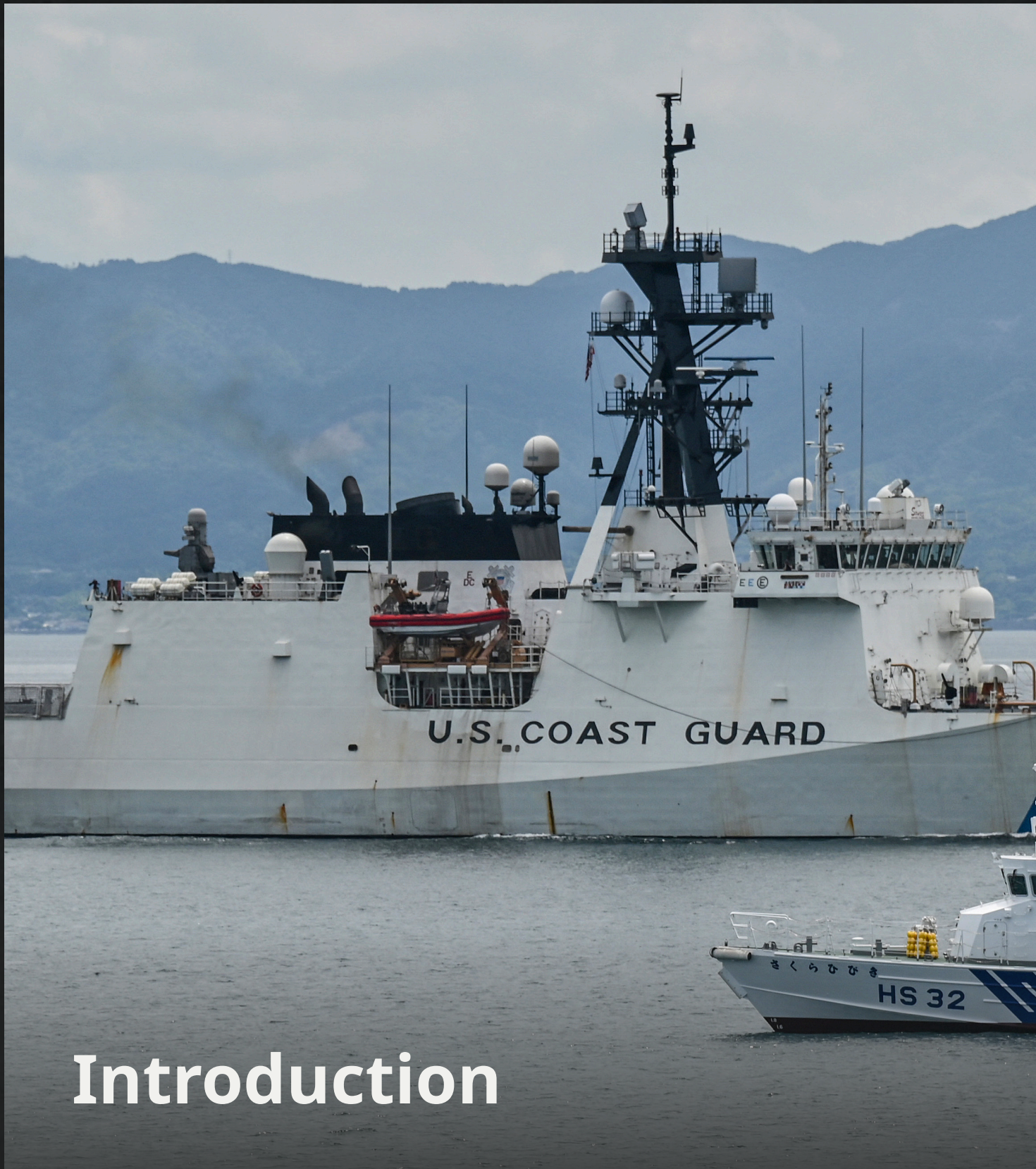
A range of systemic, bureaucratic, and operational challenges undercut the ability of the United States to use arms sales to increase interoperability and strategic alignment with allies and partners. Complex and opaque regulatory frameworks—especially the International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR) and Foreign Military Sales (FMS) procedures—create long delays, inconsistent guidance, and rigid barriers to codevelopment, coproduction, technology transfer, and timely delivery. Many allies, despite high demand, lack the necessary industrial capacity, training, or doctrinal alignment to effectively absorb advanced U.S. systems, limiting the utility of the sales. Even close allies face challenges due to overclassification, NOFORN restrictions, and preference for domestic suppliers, which obstruct collaboration and foster resentment. The U.S. system also lacks accountability, transparency, and efficiency, with multiple agencies involved and no central authority responsible for strategic outcomes. These complications are further exacerbated by workforce shortages, fragmented interagency coordination, and outdated congressional review thresholds, ultimately weakening alliance readiness, delaying procurement, and reducing the deterrent value of collective defense efforts.

To improve cooperation with allies and partners, the United States should prioritize faster arms sales, broader intelligence sharing, and more coherent multinational strategic planning, especially in the Indo-Pacific. The United States can ease arms transfers to its partners by streamlining the FMS process and conducting periodic reviews of export controls, such as ITAR, to ensure they are not creating undue delays. Efforts to bring allies into supply chains can strengthen ties while offering a source of surge capacity. The United

States can reduce overclassification, relax NOFORN restrictions to enable more intelligence sharing with trusted allies, and better balance the risks of sharing with the costs of undersharing. The United States should create more formal systems for multinational strategic planning, especially at the political level, by expanding frameworks like AUKUS and adapting the newly created Military Framework to include more Indo-Pacific partners.

As the United States increases its focus on its Indo-Pacific partnerships, it must also recognize the political and security limitations of countries like as India and Taiwan, which will likely have to remain informal partners rather than formal members of U.S.-led security organizations. At the same time, the United States must avoid alienating others by creating exclusive “clubs” and instead must offer incentives for improved security and interoperability to a wider variety of partners. Recognizing allied political constraints, offering economic benefits, and building long-term personal relationships—particularly through exchanges, training, and language skills—are also vital to building enduring, effective partnerships.

If the United States fails to make these changes, China will find it much easier to dominate East Asia. Frustration with the United States is unlikely to drive countries that fear China into its arms, although that cannot be ruled out completely. But coalition warfighting, and therefore deterrence, depends on the interoperability that shared weapons systems, intelligence, and planning makes possible. At best, the United States risks undermining the deterrence on which its national security strategy depends. At worst, it risks defeat in a war between an increasingly assertive and powerful China and a disjointed coalition of strong but poorly coordinated allies and partners.



Introduction

U.S. and Japanese ships sail past one another during joint exercises with the Philippine Coast Guard.

Richard A. Brooks/AFP/Getty Images

*There is only one thing worse than fighting with allies,
and that is fighting without them.*

—Winston Churchill¹

In the competition to shape the twenty-first century, the United States has one large advantage over its authoritarian rivals: its friends. Since 1945, the United States has nurtured an unprecedented and unrivaled global network of allies and partners. It has formal defense obligations with over 50 countries—to say nothing of its quasi-allies, which the United States is not committed to defend but to which it provides a substantial degree of military and political support.² As of August 2025, the second administration of President Donald J. Trump had yet to publish a defense strategy, but the importance of U.S. allies and partners will remain high, even if relations are more contentious.³ As the 2017 National Security Strategy from the first Trump administration states, “Sustaining favorable balances of power will require a strong commitment and close cooperation with allies and partners because allies and partners magnify U.S. power and extend U.S. influence.”⁴ Current Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Elbridge Colby wrote in 2021 that the top U.S. priority should be to maintain “a coalition designed to frustrate Chinese pretensions to hegemony in Asia.”⁵ President Trump’s national security strategy is therefore likely to emphasize U.S. alliances and partnerships, especially in Asia.



The United States relies heavily on allies and partners to ensure its national security.⁶ U.S. allies and partners provide basing and access for U.S. forces, help deter aggressors, and ensure U.S. economic pressure can be leveraged more effectively in response to aggression. Should war break out, U.S. allies and partners would do much of the fighting—and therefore much of the dying.⁷ Close ties to allies are a notable U.S. competitive advantage over potential adversaries like Russia, China, and Iran.

U.S. allies and partners have played varied but critical roles in supporting U.S. efforts against Russia, Iran, and the Houthis in the past few years. In the war against Russia, allies in NATO—particularly in Eastern Europe—and in the Indo-Pacific have provided military aid, forward deployments, and logistical support to Ukraine, while broader allied coordination with the United States has sustained economic sanctions and intelligence sharing against Moscow. In confronting Iran and deterring further escalation, Israel has relied on quiet support from Arab partners such as Jordan and the United Arab Emirates, while the United States has worked with European allies and regional actors to coordinate sanctions, missile defense, and diplomatic pressure.⁸ In the Red Sea, the U.S.-led naval coalition to counter Houthi attacks on shipping has included European and regional partners like the United Kingdom and Bahrain, though some allies have shown hesitation or limited operational engagement due to political constraints.⁹ Across these theaters, coordination with allies has amplified U.S. power projection but has also revealed tensions over burden sharing, risk tolerance, and divergent regional priorities.

Nowhere is the necessity of allies truer—or more important—than in the Indo-Pacific region, where China’s rise and increasingly aggressive behavior demand a concerted multinational response led by the United States. As Jude Blanchette and Ryan Hass point out, “China cannot yet match the United States’ greatest force multiplier: its global alliance system.”¹⁰ China, aided by Russia, Iran, and North Korea, seeks to dominate Asia and reshape the world order. If the United States can marshal the economic power of democratic states and others that oppose China in Asia, and if these countries can work together militarily, challenges such as defending Taiwan and ensuring freedom of navigation in the South and East China Seas will be far easier.

Nowhere is the necessity of allies truer—or more important—than in the Indo-Pacific region, where China’s rise and increasingly aggressive behavior demand a concerted multinational response led by the United States.

Historically, allies have been a competitive U.S. advantage over various adversaries. The relative strength of the United States grew tremendously when allied economies and military forces were included in the confrontation with the Soviet Union. Allies around the world have provided a global network for basing and access for U.S. conventional and nuclear forces. The United States increasingly depends on its allies and their defense firms’ U.S. subsidiaries for defense industrial support like ship design, repair, or even construction. The United States depends heavily on its bases in Japan and possibly the support of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces to prevent a Chinese takeover or counter a blockade of Taiwan.¹¹ Maintaining the U.S. network of partners in the Indo-Pacific will be vital for containing China and preventing it from undermining U.S. security and prosperity in the long term.¹²

Despite these benefits, the role of allies today is in doubt. President Trump has criticized NATO allies for not paying their share, declaring, “If they don’t pay, I’m not going to defend them.”¹³ The Trump administration’s tariff policies and criticisms of U.S. allies and partners in Asia have also led to doubts about these countries’ relationships with the United States.¹⁴

Even when the United States embraces its allies, as it did under the administration of President Joe Biden, it often treats them as afterthoughts. Allies often do not receive timely and detailed intelligence against shared threats because of security concerns and cumbersome procedures. They are excluded from strategic planning, even though their roles are often central to U.S. plans. Allies are often encouraged to buy U.S. arms, but they face barriers to receiving advanced technologies and military equipment because of cumbersome

policies and regulations around FMS and ITAR. Too often they receive training and other forms of security assistance that are limited in scope and scale.¹⁵

The Biden administration, despite its ally-friendly rhetoric, often revealed tensions between U.S. strategic priorities and its allies' interests and capabilities, particularly in its approach to Russia and China. U.S. policy toward China was sometimes seen as oscillating between containment and engagement, making it hard for allies to calibrate their positions. European allies, especially in NATO's eastern flank (e.g., Poland and the Baltic countries), were concerned that Washington's growing strategic focus on the Indo-Pacific could mean less attention and fewer resources for deterring Russia. This fear was heightened by U.S. messaging around a "pivot to Asia," which some European leaders interpreted as carrying a risk of abandonment.¹⁶

Some partners, including those in Asia, expressed frustration that the United States delayed sharing intelligence or operational plans, especially in crises involving China (e.g., over Taiwan or the South China Sea). At times, allies felt that the United States tried to dictate strategic priorities without sufficient consultation. For example, pressing partners to take stronger stances in support of Taiwan's security or curtailing trade with China created friction, especially with countries like Germany, France, and South Korea.¹⁷ Some allies, especially in Europe, continued to perceive the United States as pushing for increased defense spending without offering enough support for regional defense industrial collaboration.¹⁸ Some Asian nations complained that AUKUS and other initiatives privileged a few countries while leaving others behind or excluded from decisionmaking.¹⁹ More broadly, many allies remained uneasy about U.S. long-term commitment given domestic polarization and growing isolationist instincts, especially with Donald Trump's sustained political influence throughout Biden's term and his eventual election in 2024. These concerns influenced how far they were willing to align with U.S. strategy toward either Russia or China.²⁰

At the same time, allies often have interests that are at odds with U.S. goals, and their strategic cultures and bureaucratic politics hinder effective cooperation. These challenges affect the closest U.S. allies, such as

the United Kingdom and Australia, as well as countries like Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea, which are necessary to contain China.

Allies also have more immediate concerns, even when they trust U.S. intentions. A 2023 Government Accountability Office study showed that the Department of Defense (DOD) did not deliver 75 percent of equipment, construction, and training programs to allies as scheduled; that the State Department's input into the process was insufficient; and that evaluations of partners' ability to absorb and sustain training was "not high quality" and led to the transfer of unsuitable or unreliable equipment.²¹

The results are potentially catastrophic. Allies may be less convinced about U.S. threat projections, may doubt U.S. commitments to their security, or may face delays acquiring vital weapons systems and integrating U.S. technologies into their armed forces. They may question U.S. willingness to support them in a crisis and thus be more receptive to overtures from China and Russia. Problems may lead to redundancies and, even worse, gaps as allies pursue their capabilities separately from those of the United States. These problems may weaken deterrence and undermine warfighting, leading some to question whether they should risk standing up to aggression by China, Iran, Russia, or other adversaries. Poor cooperation may lead allies to be surprised by or unprepared for a conflict, resulting in greater casualties or even being quickly overwhelmed because the United States did not help them prepare properly for various contingencies. Worse yet, a United States that neglects to proactively manage its alliances may wake up to a "world in which traditional American allies and more neutral countries also start working together—but against the United States."²² The United States may need to deploy more of its forces in response or otherwise step up its direct involvement when allies would otherwise be willing and able to play a greater role. An increasingly dangerous and competitive world gives U.S. political and military leaders an urgent imperative to address these issues head-on.

This analysis seeks to help U.S. policymakers more effectively work with the allies and partners that will be central to U.S. strategy in Europe and especially

the Indo-Pacific in the coming decades by addressing several related questions: How can the United States improve cooperation with its allies to strengthen deterrence, improve warfighting, and increase burden sharing? What explains why U.S. support for allies falls short or is at best uneven? How do allies view U.S. support, and what problems do they see as paramount? How do these problems manifest in U.S. efforts (or lack thereof) to share intelligence, conduct multinational strategic planning, and improve allied capabilities through arms sales, technology transfers, and training? What might be done at all levels in the U.S. government to reduce these problems?

This project was designed to combine empirical insights from practitioners and historical case studies with theories of multinational strategic planning and defense cooperation. It is built on three pillars of evidence gathering: (1) interviews, discussions, and workshops with officials and experts; (2) a literature review on the practice and theory of alliances; and (3) various historical case studies. The authors also conducted a survey of defense officials from nations with reciprocal defense procurement agreements (RDP-As) with the United States. Thirteen of the twenty-eight nations that have RDP-As provided responses to the survey, including one RDP-A observer nation. Academic and media reporting complemented these interviews and the case studies.

Interviews, discussions, and workshops were held between June 2024 and March 2025 with more than 100 officials and experts from several European and Indo-Pacific nations, including Australia, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Poland, Singapore, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Taiwan, and the United Kingdom. Project team members also interviewed U.S. officials involved in alliance management. Discussions ranged from formal interviews and workshops to informal meetings and conversations. These engagements were conducted off the record or on background, and all discussants remain anonymous (unless they gave permission to be named).

This paper brings together insights from four other publications in the CSIS Allies and Partners project: *Improving U.S. Intelligence Sharing with Allies and Partners*; *Fighting with Allies: Transforming Multinational*

Strategic Planning in the Department of Defense; *Improving Arms Sales, Technology Transfer, and Defense Industrial Cooperation with Allies and Partners*; and “Improving Cooperation with Allies and Partners in Asia.”²³

The remainder of this report has seven sections. Part 1 reviews the different kinds of alliance relationships, defines key terms, and briefly notes their benefits. Part 2 details common problems in alliances in general, drawing on academic theory and historical work. Part 3 discusses common allied problems, in particular with the United States. Parts 4–6 offer deep dives into intelligence sharing, strategic planning, and arms sales—three different but vital ways in which the United States works with allies. Part 7 offers recommendations for improving cooperation with U.S. allies and partners.



The Variety of Security Relationships



Flags of NATO member countries are displayed during the 76th NATO summit.
NurPhoto/Getty Images

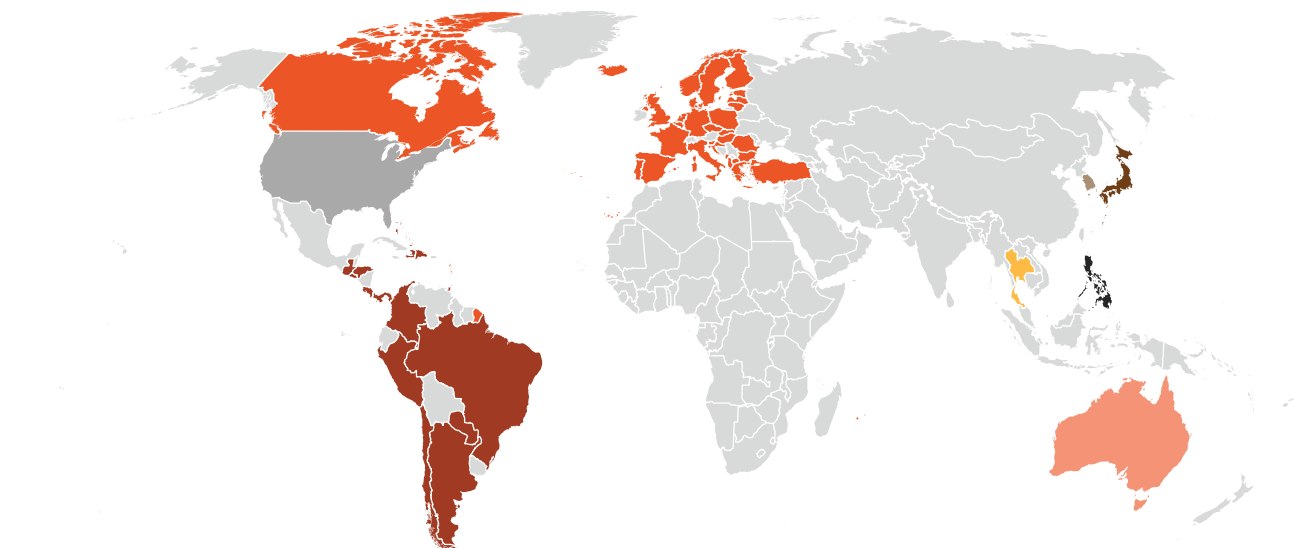
The U.S. government uses the terms “ally” and “partner” to mean different things.²⁴ The main distinction is whether the United States has signed and ratified a formal treaty of alliance with the nation in question. Being in an alliance with another nation or group of nations involves a mutual obligation of assistance in war.²⁵ Examples of U.S. allies include Australia, Japan, and members of NATO. Partners, in contrast, are states with which the United States collaborates on shared security interests without formal mutual defense commitments. Partnerships cover a wide variety of relationships, including ad hoc coalitions, security communities, and strategic relationships.²⁶ Examples of partnerships include U.S. relations with countries as diverse as India, Israel, Georgia, and Saudi Arabia.²⁷ This study uses the term “partners” and “partnerships” to include allies and alliances.

U.S. partnerships exist along a spectrum. Long-standing partnerships with institutionalized command and planning structures, accompanied by formal mutual defense treaties, such as U.S. relations with NATO members, are at one end. Brief ad hoc relationships with countries that at times act as adversaries, such as counterterrorism cooperation with China and Russia, are at the other end.

An allied/nonallied binary oversimplifies the question of how states work with the United States. Some partners, such as Israel, have extremely close security cooperation relationships with the United States,

TREATY

■ ANZUS ■ NATO ■ Rio ■ Manila ■ U.S.-Japan ■ U.S.-Korea ■ U.S.-Philippines



▲ FIGURE 1

U.S. Treaty Allies

Source: U.S. Department of State. See, for example, “U.S. Collective Defense Arrangements,” U.S. Department of State, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/s/l/s/t/sreaty/collectivedefense/>.

whereas the relationships with some allies, such as minor NATO members like Portugal, are less important day-to-day.²⁸

In theory, partnerships are less formal and more adaptable than alliances. They do not require treaty obligations, allowing the United States to adjust its level of engagement as needed, and there is no legally binding promise of mutual defense. In practice, however, the United States may choose to assist NATO in only minimal ways, and promises to countries like the Philippines under the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty, when the text is examined closely, require only mutual consultation and mutual aid, though direct military support is implicit.²⁹ Even NATO’s much-vaunted Article 5, which declares, “*an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all*,” is vague in practice.³⁰ A NATO explainer notes that in practice, “Each Ally is responsible for determining what it deems necessary in the particular circumstances,” which could mean a nuclear response or minimal, rhetorical support.³¹

The United States currently has 51 formal treaty allies (Figure 1).³² Of these, 31 are NATO allies and 5 are allied to the United States through minilateral or bilateral treaties. The United States is formally allied with Australia through the 1951 Australia, New Zealand, and United States Security (ANZUS) Treaty, which covered New Zealand until the United States formally suspended its treaty obligations in 1986.³³ The United States is formally allied with the Philippines, South Korea, and Japan through three separate bilateral treaties and to Thailand through the Manila Pact, which created the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954 and remains in effect for Thailand despite SEATO’s dissolution in 1977. The United States is also committed in theory to defend 17 Central and South American countries through the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (the Rio Treaty), but most observers question the value of the treaty given repeated breaches.³⁴

But formal alliances are hardly the only type of security partnership the United States maintains with other countries. Some of these partnerships are informal.

Defense Priorities researchers Natalie Armbruster and Benjamin Friedman, for example, describe a class of U.S. partners to which the United States provides significant political or military support but which the United States is not committed by a formal treaty to defend.³⁵ They observe that this category of quasi-allies potentially creates confusion about U.S. defense commitments. The United States, for example, has clearly acted to defend Israel but lacks a formal commitment to do so.³⁶

Other partnerships are highly formalized. The United States has designated 19 countries as major non-NATO allies (MNNAs) and has granted Taiwan similar status through unique legislation.³⁷ Despite the name, however, MNNA status does not entail an alliance. Rather, it grants the partner country military and economic privileges. It is best understood as a security cooperation relationship rather than an alliance.

Still other partnerships sit somewhere in the middle. The Quad consists of a series of high-level defense dialogues and military exercises, formal activities that do not confer special legal status or obligations on participants. The United States also engages in a variety of security cooperation activities like arms sales, military education and training, and joint military exercises—many of which are highly institutionalized—with almost every country on earth.

A group of soldiers in camouflage gear and helmets are looking up at a helicopter in a cloudy sky. The scene is set in a snowy or high-altitude environment. The soldiers are wearing winter gear, including fur-lined hoods. The helicopter is a large, dark-colored transport or assault helicopter with its rotors spinning. The overall tone is blue and somewhat somber.

2.

Benefits of Alliances and Partnerships

A Brief Review



U.S. Army Special Forces and Danish special operators participate in a training exercise in North Pole, Alaska.
The Washington Post/Getty Images

In virtually any conceivable war in any theater—in the Indo-Pacific against China, in Europe against Russia, in the Middle East against Iran, or on the Korean Peninsula against North Korea—the United States would work closely with a range of partners. Interviews indicated that almost every U.S. operational plan includes a major role for partners, including basing, access, prepositioning, logistics, and, of course, coalition operations. Protecting allied territory and populations would also be an important U.S. mission in many scenarios.

Alliances and partnerships provide the United States with numerous strategic, economic, and political benefits, particularly if the alliances are institutionalized.³⁸ Although the focus of this paper is not the advantages—indeed, the necessity—of security partnerships, it is important to recognize the many advantages of alliances and partnerships:

- Alliances aggregate military, economic, and political power, and in so doing make the members collectively stronger.
- Alliances can contribute to a more stable international order by deterring aggression and reducing the likelihood of war. Defense pacts such as NATO make member states less likely to be attacked. Allies and partners can provide critical manpower in wartime and in peacetime. By deterring wars that could disrupt global trade routes or markets, alliances protect U.S. economic interests.

- Alliances and partnerships solidify the U.S. position as a global leader by ensuring Washington has a prominent role in decisionmaking and negotiations. Partners often provide political backing for U.S. initiatives, amplifying U.S. influence on global issues.
- Alliances provide basing, access, and other critical logistical infrastructure for U.S. military operations worldwide. Indeed, it would be almost impossible for the United States to conduct sustained operations against Iran without support from Middle East partners or to defend Taiwan or operate in the South China Sea without support from Australia, South Korea, and Japan, among other states.
- Security partnerships enhance U.S. influence in economic negotiations with allied countries, providing diplomatic and financial benefits.³⁹
- Allied support can also influence domestic political support for U.S. activity overseas, with allied participation increasing Americans' willingness to engage abroad.⁴⁰
- The United States benefits from the advice of allies, which often have insights the United States lacks. John Lewis Gaddis, a preeminent Cold War historian, notes, "Influence, in democratic alliances, flows in multiple directions."⁴¹

Militarily, alliances are stronger when they achieve a high degree of interoperability. A RAND study concluded that the benefits of interoperability "include enabling access, leveraging partner capabilities, filling gaps, increasing legitimacy, increasing safety, deterring adversaries, meeting treaty obligations, reassuring partners, reducing costs, shaping partner purchases, sharing burdens, and supporting partner-led missions."⁴² With common or compatible systems, procedures, and communication protocols, allied forces can coordinate actions more efficiently, respond faster to emerging threats, and achieve objectives with greater precision.⁴³ Integrated command-and-control systems enable allied forces to deploy and operate together effectively on short notice. This cooperation may include shared logistics; intelligence, surveillance, and

Security partnerships, especially alliances, are vital to advancing U.S. strategic interests, maintaining global stability, boosting economic welfare, and enhancing geopolitical influence.

reconnaissance (ISR) assets; and combined training programs. Demonstrating military interoperability is a powerful symbol of unity and shared values among allies. It sends a clear message about the solidity of alliances and the collective commitment to maintaining international security and order.⁴⁴

As interoperability develops, it makes strong partnerships even stronger. Regular interaction and collaboration in achieving interoperability strengthen trust and cohesion among allies, reinforcing mutual commitments and enhancing the overall strategic relationship. Collaborations also can drive technological innovation, though more in theory than in practice. Allies are incentivized to develop new systems and technologies that are compatible and offer enhanced shared capabilities. Joint development programs and shared procurement initiatives for interoperable systems can lead to significant cost savings through economies of scale and shared financial burdens, reducing individual nations' defense expenditures.

Alliances also have significant intelligence benefits. U.S. and former Australian officials noted that Australia was often ahead of the United States in recognizing China's growing threat.⁴⁵ A Polish official recalled that during Barack Obama's presidency, Poland warned that Russia had aggressive intentions, while the United States thought Russian President Vladimir Putin could be reconciled to the existing order. During the first Trump administration, the United States regularly emphasized the hybrid threat from Russia even as Poland urged more focus on the conventional military threat.⁴⁶ Regional allies' intelligence penetration of U.S. adversaries is often more extensive than U.S. intelligence penetration, or at least it complements U.S. efforts, especially when it comes to human sources.

The deep penetration of Israel into Iran and of Ukraine into Russia was on display in their intelligence-led unmanned aerial system attacks in those countries in June 2025.⁴⁷

In summary, security partnerships, especially alliances, are vital to advancing U.S. strategic interests, maintaining global stability, boosting economic welfare, and enhancing geopolitical influence. Although these partnerships entail costs and risks, their overall benefits significantly outweigh these challenges.



3.

Cracks in U.S. Alliances



The U.S. flag in a meeting room at the 2025 NATO summit.

Omar Havana/Getty Images

Despite their utility, alliances are difficult to forge and maintain. In addition, many alliances are stronger on paper than in reality, where they fail to achieve institutionalization and interoperability. Many problems contribute to the fragility and weakness of alliances: (1) divergent interests, (2) credibility doubts and fears of exploitation, (3) chain gangs and entrapment, (4) free riding and buck-passing, (5) poor communication, (6) counterintelligence shortfalls, (7) domestic political concerns, (8) bias toward Europe, and (9) adversary countercoercion. Some of these problems have been closely theorized and examined by scholars of alliances, whereas others have been more closely observed by diplomats and other practitioners. These problems have plagued many alliances and partnerships, and they hinder U.S. attempts to work with allies and partners today.

Divergent Interests

Allies have their own interests, and even when they align with those of the United States, they are rarely identical. Divergent interests are a significant source of dysfunction in alliances, undermining their stability, effectiveness, and value creation. Some allies may focus on different threats or insufficiently commit to combating them if they do not feel the threat is pressing. Even when overall goals are aligned, allies may disagree over priorities and resource allocation. Such diversion shapes what forces allies build, their doctrine, how they are deployed, and whether they will

use their forces during a crisis—all of which affect the allies' value to the United States.

In planning and other forms of cooperation, the United States and its allies often fail to consider their different interests and policy orientations.⁴⁸ Important regional actors like India are focused on historic adversaries like Pakistan rather than on rising threats like China. A South Korean official pointed out that North Korea, not China, is usually Seoul's top concern, despite U.S. efforts to shift the country's perceptions.⁴⁹

Even when allies share a broad goal, they may disagree on the specifics of prioritization or implementation. For example, the United States, India, Japan, and NATO allies may generally agree on the need to contain China, but they prioritize defending Taiwan and containing China's ambitions in the South China Sea differently. At times, these goals present significant dilemmas for allied strategy. The Philippines, which seeks U.S. support in its maritime disputes with China, hesitates to back Taiwan in a crisis.⁵⁰ These dilemmas are often sharpened by China's use of economic statecraft: Countries differ in the economic costs they are willing to pay by acting against the world's second-largest economy. The result is that China can try to weaken the U.S.-led coalition one partner at a time through inducements that take advantage of the different levels of interest each partner has in various issues.⁵¹

Interest divergence is particularly important when attempting multinational strategic planning. Failing to integrate allied concerns into planning can lead to unrealistic expectations of allied force development and unpleasant surprises in a crisis.⁵² However, fully integrating allied concerns may lead to less productive or even wasteful use of resources, especially if allies' preferences are overly shaped by domestic politics, bureaucratic interests, or misguided threat perceptions.

Some of the problems the United States encountered with its NATO allies during the Cold War illustrate several of these points. During the Cold War, the United States considered an effective defense in depth necessary given the Soviet Union's large conventional forces, but West Germany found this strategy politically unacceptable because defense in depth implied that Warsaw Pact forces would overrun a large part of the

country before they could be stopped. In addition, European allies, being closer to the potential front lines with the Soviet Union, were often more concerned about escalation risks. As a result, some allies hesitated to fully integrate into a U.S.-led command structure, preferring to maintain a degree of operational autonomy that could hinder unified execution.

Different interests, of course, are not new and can be overcome. The United States and the United Kingdom, for example, have had different views on trade, human rights, and conflicts like the Vietnam War, but the intelligence relationship endured. The Five Eyes partnership, rightly touted as a landmark intelligence-sharing success, involves countries with varied interests. Nevertheless, different interests pose a constant challenge to U.S. relations with allies and partners.

Credibility and Trust

An important question is whether allies will fulfill their alliance obligations in times of crisis or war. One leading study showed that when a circumstance calls for allied action, 74.5 percent of alliance commitments are fulfilled—a high percentage, but not so high as to eliminate doubts.⁵³ U.S. allies, however, have more reason to fear than the United States does: Major powers are more likely to violate agreements because they suffer lower costs from reneging on agreements than smaller ones do.⁵⁴ Because of this fear, allies and partners closely scrutinize U.S. actions, especially regarding their countries and regions, to determine if the United States will live up to its promises.

For allies and partners, part of the concern is due to the global nature of U.S. interests, in contrast to the regional views of most other states. One South Korean official noted, "The United States will be distracted" from its current focus on China because of its interests in Europe and the Middle East.⁵⁵ Conversely, Polish officials worried that the U.S. focus on China would leave Poland vulnerable to Russian aggression, whereas British officials were concerned that an emphasis on China would diminish the United Kingdom's value relative to U.S. allies in Asia.⁵⁶ Middle Eastern governments, for their part, worried that a focus on Russia and China would lead to U.S. neglect of their region.⁵⁷

Allies and partners are also intensely conscious of past U.S. actions. Promises by a new administration are often judged in a longer historical context. As one Asian government official noted wryly, “Few countries are so unmolested by thoughts of history as the United States.”⁵⁸ U.S. dignitaries, the official noted, often say, “That was so long ago,” or “But now we have shared interests.” Yet a shift in rhetoric is not enough to underpin alliances. Radek Sikorski, Poland’s former secretary of defense, wrote in 2007, “Just as the Holocaust is the formative experience even for Jews who are too young to remember it, so Poland is haunted by the memory of fighting Hitler alone in 1939 while our allies stood by.”⁵⁹ The United States can sometimes unwittingly overlook such historical imprints: One Polish official, for example, recalled that the United States canceled its missile defense plans with Poland on September 17, 2009, the 70th anniversary of Russia’s invasion of Poland.⁶⁰

A particular fear for many countries is that dominant members of an alliance or partnership (i.e., the United States) may exploit weaker ones, creating resentment and vulnerabilities for the partners who have distinct security interests. During the Cold War, for example, the United States insisted on maintaining a large airbase in Iceland, making the country a target for a Soviet preemptive or retaliatory attack. In 2003, the United States pushed Turkey to support the U.S. invasion of Iraq even though Ankara feared that it would increase the risk of Iraq-based Kurdish separatism. One former allied official put it succinctly: “Alliance is not allegiance.”⁶¹ At times, this fear is due to U.S. arrogance rather than deliberate U.S. exploitation. One former U.S. official noted that the United States often believes it understands the interests of allies better than they do—even as U.S. policies and priorities regularly flip-flop.⁶²

The diversity of the U.S. alliance system also creates opportunities for mistrust. The United States maintains bilateral alliances and partnerships with a diverse set of states, some of which have histories of conflict. In general, many countries do not see eye to eye with their neighbors and thus are more willing to work with the United States than with each other.⁶³ A South Korean official noted that his country is afraid of “all of the countries in the region.”⁶⁴ In general, Asian countries all

have different views of Japan—views shaped, for example, by geography, interests, and history.⁶⁵ However, the United States hopes or even expects that these former adversaries will work together in support of shared interests despite a long history of animosity.

The U.S. Congress and domestic politics in general also shape views of U.S. commitments to allies. High levels of partisanship in the United States drive allies’ fears that U.S. security commitments will shift dramatically as the White House changes hands every four or eight years. Congressional criticism of a country or its leader can also raise political costs at home and increase doubts about U.S. commitment, even when the U.S. executive branch is highly supportive. This phenomenon is particularly meaningful in the context of arms sales or formal treaty arrangements, where congressional approval is necessary.

Chain Gangs and Entrapment

As alliance members worry about credibility, they also fear too firm a commitment to one another. Both policymakers and scholars have long worried that entering an alliance increases the chance of being dragged into a war.⁶⁶ The United States’ founding fathers sought to avoid any “permanent” or “entangling alliances,” and this policy held until World War II.⁶⁷ The scholar Barry Posen writes, “U.S. security guarantees also encourage plucky allies to challenge more powerful states, confident that Washington will save them in the end.”⁶⁸ This, according to Posen, is a classic case of moral hazard, a phenomenon that, in his view, has caused the United States to “incur political costs, antagonizing powers great and small for no gain and encouraging them to seek opportunities to provoke the United States in return.”⁶⁹ This phenomenon is often referred to in the literature as “entrapment,” which occurs when a state values the preservation of an alliance more than the cost of fighting for the ally’s interests.⁷⁰

A host of scholarship by political scientists suggests that this problem is real, though in practice its extent is disputed. Paul Senese and John Vasquez hold that the formation of military alliances is part of a larger set of policy practices, or “steps to war,” that cause states

to feel more threatened by and hostile toward their opposition and lead them to take action against their adversaries.⁷¹ Alliances are therefore met with counteralliances, and military buildups lead to arms races that heighten insecurity and perpetuate hostile spirals, increasing the risk that conflict will arise. Bruce Bueno de Mesquita adds that the tightening of alliances is substantially associated with the subsequent expansion of war.⁷² Ido Oren concludes that the larger the alliance, the more wars each member is likely to be involved in.⁷³ His findings, he asserts, are consistent with and enhance the credibility of previous research demonstrating that alliance membership affects the expansion of war, though not its outbreak.

Entrapment is a real risk, but it is rarer than theory might predict. Tongfi Kim finds that states fear entrapment, but as his analysis indicates, it rarely occurs.⁷⁴ Rarity of entrapment, however, does not signal that states do not fear it; rather, entrapment is rare precisely because states fear it and take care to avoid it.⁷⁵

Chain-ganging, a form of entrapment, describes the phenomenon where alliances create a situation of overcommitment, forcing states to unconditionally support their allies, including by following them into conflicts that do not align with the state's national interests. No state can restrain a reckless ally by threatening to sit out the conflict, since the downfall of its reckless ally would cripple its own security.⁷⁶ Smaller or weaker allies may act recklessly, knowing they can rely on stronger partners for support. The scholars Thomas Christensen and Jack Snyder argue that chain gangs are more likely if technology, geography, or other factors allow easy conquest, giving states less time and flexibility and, thus, allowing their partners' actions to draw them into war.⁷⁷

Famously, World War I began, in part, because allies felt obliged to follow each other into conflict. If Russia began mobilizing for war, then its ally France would have to do so too, which, in turn, would oblige England to join, thus plunging countries into a devastating conflict for which most had little desire.⁷⁸ Today, U.S. leaders fear that a Taiwanese declaration of formal independence would generate a backlash in China, which would, in turn, lead Beijing to war and force the United States to come to Taiwan's defense.⁷⁹ But if U.S. support

is too heartfelt and unconditional, Taipei may believe it has a shield against Chinese aggression, even in scenarios where it, rather than Beijing, is changing the status quo. U.S. officials are trying to assure Taiwan of U.S. support in a conflict with China while also trying to prevent it from acting unilaterally, claiming that in such a scenario the United States would not back Taiwan.⁸⁰

Just as the United States worries about chain gangs, so too do U.S. allies. NATO leaders have declared that they oppose any Chinese military efforts to control Taiwan, but European states have less concern about a China-Taiwan dispute than the United States, given that they lack the extensive security relationships the United States enjoys in Asia.⁸¹ Even a basic step, such as NATO opening a liaison office in Japan, met with opposition within the alliance after Chinese concerns became clear.⁸² However, through NATO and other relationships, European states are tied to the United States, and it would be difficult for them to remain neutral in a U.S.-China conflict. Nor are these fears limited to European allies: The Philippines fears being pulled into a war with China over Taiwan.⁸³

Much depends on the specifics of an alliance. Brett Ashley Leeds points out that different types of cooperative security agreements may have different effects on the likelihood of conflict.⁸⁴ Alliances provide state leaders with information about the likelihood of intervention by other states in potential conflicts; yet different agreements provide different information.⁸⁵ Leeds finds that alliance commitments that require allies to intervene on behalf of potential target states reduce the probability that a militarized dispute will emerge. However, alliance commitments promising offensive support to a potential challenger and alliances that promise nonintervention by other states increase the likelihood that a challenger will initiate a crisis because the agreement bolsters the challenger's confidence in its ability to succeed through aggression.⁸⁶

Free Riding and Buck-Passing

Buck-passing and free riding are distinct but related behaviors that can undermine the effectiveness of international alliances. Buck-passing occurs when states

avoid taking responsibility for countering a threat, instead relying on other states to bear the costs and risks of balancing against adversaries. Free riding refers to the behavior of alliance members who contribute less than their fair share to collective defense efforts, relying on dominant members (e.g., the United States in NATO) to shoulder the majority of costs. Buck-passing is more likely when states perceive few immediate dangers and when conquest is seen as difficult. In such circumstances, states have time to build up in response to a threat, whereas allies are considered less vulnerable.⁸⁷

Mancur Olson Jr. and Richard Zeckhauser lay much of the foundation for the free-riding problem in their seminal paper on the economic theory of alliances.⁸⁸ They argue that within the context of an alliance agreement, it is impractical to exclude members who do not share fully in the cost of the security an alliance provides, and new members can usually be added without reducing the security available to the other members.⁸⁹ This, in turn, creates a collective action problem that encourages smaller alliance participants to free ride on the contributions of larger members. Therefore, free riding in alliances is reflected by disproportionate or inadequate allocations of resources to defense, where smaller alliance members spend a smaller share of national income on the military than their larger partners do. In practice, much has to do with perceived threat: Thomas Plümper and Eric Neumayer find that the issue for NATO that determined the extent of free riding was not the size of the country but, rather, the geographical position relative to the Warsaw Pact. NATO countries that border Russia spent more on their militaries as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) compared to those farther away.⁹⁰

In situations of free riding and buck-passing, state leaders hope others will assume all or at least part of the financial and political costs of defense, and this has proven a constant irritant in U.S. relations with allies in the post-Cold War era. Many allies have failed to invest in basic capabilities, such as fuel storage and transport, as well as high-end systems, with the assumption of U.S. support.⁹¹ For years President Trump has castigated NATO alliance members for what he considers inadequate spending.⁹² In Asia, observers have expressed concerns about the Philippines and Thailand not doing their share.⁹³

Signaling problems on the U.S. side contribute to the risk of free riding. One former allied official noted it would be easier if the United States said, “Focus on A, B, and C,” meaning that the U.S. fails to provide particulars and then blames allies later for falling short on shared objectives. Some countries take the easy way out, responding to the least-demanding request. Others, such as the United Kingdom, the official noted, have tried to do everything at once, increasing deployments in Asia, planning to backfill the United States in Europe and the Middle East, and otherwise preparing for too many missions for a small military.⁹⁴

Free-riding disparities show up outside the military realm. The U.S. intelligence community commands vast resources in comparison to its partners. A senior UK intelligence official noted that U.S. intelligence has a bigger budget “than the UK Ministry of Defence, armed forces, aid budget, Foreign Office, and intelligence agencies combined.”⁹⁵ A 2017 report on the Five Eyes indicated that the United States provided 90 percent of the intelligence the partnership shared with Australia.⁹⁶ One study from 2016 showed that the United States provided 85 percent of South Korea’s signals intelligence (SIGINT) and imagery intelligence (IMINT) on North Korea.⁹⁷

Adversaries may perceive underinvestment as a lack of commitment to an ally’s security, reducing deterrence. They may also believe that if they strike quickly, they can win a war before their enemies fully mobilize. At the very least, these behaviors strain alliances, as dominant members may perceive some allies as exploiting their contributions, reducing domestic support for an alliance. In an actual war, free riding reduces overall alliance capabilities, as some members have invested insufficiently in defense.⁹⁸

Finally, allies often make their own plans because they are concerned the United States will not show up in a crisis.⁹⁹ During the Cold War, European allies regularly asked themselves whether the United States would risk a nuclear attack on New York to defend Berlin, and even though the United States devoted a massive effort to ensure the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence, this question always loomed.¹⁰⁰ Today, it is difficult to build credibility regarding new actors such as China. This is particularly so as, unlike the

Soviet Union, China has strong economic and trading links with other countries, and it can and does inflict economic punishments on those who oppose it.¹⁰¹ Oscillations in U.S. policy make it even more difficult to assure allies of U.S. commitments.

Poor Communication

The United States has not consistently articulated its objectives or operational plans to allies and partners, particularly regarding activities conducted on their territory. This lack of transparency complicates unilateral planning by partner nations. Information sharing is often delayed or absent, attributed in part to bureaucratic restrictions but also seen as a deliberate strategy to minimize foreign input into U.S. decisions. As a result, allies are denied the chance to consult their capitals or contribute meaningfully. Additionally, the United States frequently fails to mitigate language barriers—especially with Indo-Pacific partners—further hindering effective collaboration.

U.S. coordination efforts rely heavily on military-to-military and other bureaucratic channels, with sufficient investments in higher-level political dialogue lacking. This approach has weakened strategic alignment and has made both unilateral and multilateral planning more difficult, with some partner militaries perceived to be exploiting U.S. ambiguity in internal resource disputes.¹⁰² A key deficiency lies in the lack of joint upstream strategic and policy analysis, distinct from operational or tactical military planning.¹⁰³ Expanding this form of engagement would enhance mutual understanding, align strategic priorities, and foster shared assessments of threats and challenges.

Frequently, the United States behaves as if allied concerns do not matter enough to shape U.S. policy. The United States often acts first and consults later, assuming allies and partners will fall in line. U.S. stances are, or may be perceived as, at times, arrogant and uninformed: a “daddy-knows-best” approach, as a U.S. official described it.¹⁰⁴

Security

Sharing military plans, advanced weapons systems and their designs, and intelligence risks revealing sensitive information to adversary intelligence services that might have penetrated the ally’s information systems and the government as a whole. This can enable an adversary to counter advanced U.S. weapons and get a head start on building their own, understand and better anticipate how the United States might fight a war, and jeopardize collection systems and human assets.¹⁰⁵

China is engaged in a massive espionage campaign seeking to penetrate U.S. and partner militaries and governments around the world and has successfully infiltrated U.S. and partner arms manufacturers, reportedly stealing dozens of weapons systems designs, including for the F-35, the Aegis ballistic-missile defense system, the Patriot PAC-3 missile system, the V-22 Osprey, the Black Hawk helicopter, and the Littoral Combat Ship.¹⁰⁶ In 2023, the director general of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation reported that Australia faced “unprecedented” threats from Chinese intelligence.¹⁰⁷ Russia, too, has long-standing espionage efforts against U.S. allies and the United States.¹⁰⁸

The United States, at times, makes painful blunders. In 2017, President Trump shared highly sensitive Israeli intelligence with Russia, causing outrage among Israeli intelligence officials.¹⁰⁹ Russia, China, and other foes have occasionally had high-level penetrations of U.S. agencies or systems, leading to the revelation of considerable sensitive information, including allied-provided intelligence.

Although the United States has suffered repeated security lapses that have led to large-scale losses of sensitive data and intelligence sources and methods, adversaries often perceive U.S. allies as even more vulnerable.¹¹⁰ Many frontline partner countries have weak counterintelligence, leaving them exposed to adversary intelligence services. Post-Cold War Poland, for example, has had numerous Russian penetrations of its intelligence services and security establishment.¹¹¹ Some allies vital to the struggle against China

also have weak security. One foreign official noted that their intelligence service would be reluctant to share with the Philippines, given Chinese penetration there.¹¹² Questions about sharing sensitive information with Taiwan occasionally produced laughter from interviewees. Within NATO, both Turkey and Hungary have cooperated with Russia, at times on security, making other countries reluctant to share information for fear of it being passed to Russia.

Although U.S. counterintelligence is strong, it is often too restrictive, posing a different set of problems to cooperation. As a former senior U.S. official put it, there is “wild overclassification” in the United States, and the tremendous complexity of rules governing information sharing adds to this problem. The official went on to note that the United States “no longer knows what its intelligence crown jewels are.”¹¹³ This has become increasingly true as the amount of classified information has ballooned, with far more personnel seeking access to it at their jobs, thus increasing the risk of compromise.¹¹⁴

Contentious Domestic Politics

Nationalism and anti-U.S. sentiment at both the elite and popular levels complicate other countries’ relationships with the United States, making open coalition planning and formal alliances more difficult. In general, states do not like to openly rely on other states for their security, as it implies government weakness. In addition, world opinion of the United States varies considerably by country and historical period, often creating pressure on governments to publicly distance themselves from Washington. In some important countries for China contingencies, such as Vietnam, the United States has a history of conflict, generating additional suspicions.

Domestic politics are often even more contentious when it comes to U.S. efforts to encourage allies to work with one another. South Korea has long harbored hostility toward Japan due to its World War II brutalities and prewar colonialism; this has made security cooperation with Japan a politically sensitive issue, made worse by a sense in South Korea that Japan has

not fully renounced its past imperialism.¹¹⁵ One South Korean expert noted that this concern was “nonsense” but that its impact was nevertheless real.¹¹⁶ Another analyst called these ups and downs a “one-step-forward-two-steps-back situation.”¹¹⁷ While the staying power of the U.S.-backed General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) between Japan and South Korea is uncertain, the fact that the two nations face common threats, including that represented by North Korea, has helped kindle increased interaction, including an August 2025 meeting between the two nations’ leaders and the first joint statement issued in 17 years.¹¹⁸

U.S. actions and the rhetoric of U.S. leaders can worsen these tensions, creating an anti-U.S. backlash. The United States may act without consulting its allies, and fractious U.S. domestic politics raise additional tensions. Similarly, the United States may not understand ally or partner politics. One former allied official noted, “Often we know more about adversaries than allies.”¹¹⁹ Another noted their sense that U.S. officials at times fail to recognize that each NATO member has its own complex politics, and this limited knowledge is worse outside NATO.¹²⁰

Sometimes internal U.S. policy debates over ties to particular countries spill out into the media, publicizing internal criticisms of human rights abuses, perceived free riding, regime corruption, or other sensitive issues. Some important countries concerned about Russian and Chinese aggression are themselves autocracies, whereas others have political systems that, while democratic, are prone to abuse of power and human rights violations that often implicate their intelligence services. Training allied militaries may implicate the United States in their human rights abuses or power grabs, or it may be insufficient for ensuring that the United States and its allies share similar doctrine.¹²¹

Balancing a benign posture toward allies while having a robust domestic debate is a common problem for democracies, where the need to show commitment to foreign allies is difficult given shifting domestic objectives.¹²² In addition, the United States is a global power and shifts priorities among regions and issues, whereas its allies tend to focus more consistently on particular regions of the world. This problem, however,

has grown significantly in recent years, as the United States has ricocheted between significantly different foreign policies under Presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden. President Trump, in particular, is often highly critical of even traditional U.S. allies, creating an anti-U.S. backlash in these countries.¹²³

Historical Bias Toward Europe

Asia does not have a NATO equivalent or other well-institutionalized multilateral alliance body. The closest historical equivalent was SEATO, established in 1954. Lacking the formal institutions of NATO and claiming only two east Asian members, it was disbanded in 1977.¹²⁴ Despite the growing threat from China and efforts in the region to push back against an assertive Beijing, there is little prospect of SEATO being revived or a modern equivalent emerging.¹²⁵

Even relatively new structures focused on competition with China, such as the Military Framework (established in 2016), maintain a bias toward European partnerships. Ten of the fourteen members are Western European nations, although the recent addition of Japan and the proposed addition of South Korea strengthen the group's global (and Indo-Pacific) credentials.¹²⁶

Defense industrial cooperation is the exception to the bias toward Europe, and there are a number of new arrangements supporting the idea of developing industrial partnerships with Indo-Pacific nations. For example, AUKUS is a trilateral agreement between the governments of Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Signed in 2021, the agreement consists of two pillars. Pillar One is an agreement to support Australia in acquiring a conventionally armed nuclear-powered attack submarine fleet, and Pillar Two concerns the development of a wide range of emerging and advanced technologies.¹²⁷ The Partnership for Indo-Pacific Industrial Resilience is a multilateral arrangement involving 14 Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic nations, focused on integrating supply chains and surge capacity across national defense industries. The agreement aims to accelerate Indo-Pacific contributions to global defense industrial base resilience. Further goals include “creating a trusted ecosystem of

information exchange, technical cooperation, supply chain resilience, and co-production and co-sustainment collaboration.”¹²⁸ The Regional Sustainment Framework experiments with logistics co-location and shared capabilities among Indo-Pacific partners. It recognizes the need to support weapon systems in a contested environments, focus on military readiness, and strengthen regional partnerships to expand sustainment strategies and build repair capacity.¹²⁹ The U.S.-Japan Defense Industrial Cooperation Framework is a bilateral agreement between the United States and Japan that aims to enhance joint planning, coproduction, and sustainment coordination.¹³⁰

Countercoercion

Allies may face punishment or even attack if they step up arms purchases, intelligence sharing, and planning with the United States—a problem for U.S. partners in Asia, where China is close and the United States is far. Thus, these allies are highly vulnerable to Chinese conventional military and gray zone pressure, particularly if the United States is not there to back them up. As one foreign official noted, “Allies have less room to say ‘oops.’”¹³¹ Sam Roggeveen, a former Australian intelligence analyst, notes that greater U.S. military ties to Australia “conflates America’s strategic objectives in Asia with ours, and it makes those bases a target.”¹³² Similarly, a South Korean official noted, “Being on the side of the United States is not cost free,” adding that “South Korea cannot wish away geography.”¹³³

China is also an important trading partner for allies in Asia. It weaponizes these economic relations when its political positions are challenged, undertaking selective boycotts on imports from the offending country or otherwise imposing restrictions.¹³⁴ For instance, after 2016, Australia adopted a much more confrontational policy toward China, and China tried to use its trade and other forms of economic influence to punish Canberra.¹³⁵ This threat has shaped the behavior of even close U.S. allies. New Zealand, for example, fears alienating China; thus, New Zealand’s intelligence partners at times are reluctant to cooperate with it because they believe it will not take any risks that are inherent in intelligence collection. As one expert put it, “The Kiwis are reluctant to say ‘boo’ to China.”¹³⁶

South Korea also illustrates some of these risks. The deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) to South Korea led to Chinese economic retaliation, costing South Korea \$25 billion in lost trade.¹³⁷ Greater cooperation with the United States against China may reduce China's restraint of North Korea. Some South Korean officials have expressed concerns that including South Korea in the Five Eyes or a similar arrangement would anger China.¹³⁸

U.S. allies and partners also worry that the United States will not back them in a crisis, making them more sensitive to the risks involved in crossing China. This concern has grown under the Trump administration, as the United States has criticized many of its long-standing allies.¹³⁹ In addition, the U.S. focus on China concerns some European allies. Polish officials, for example, understood the logic of the U.S. focus on China but worried that it would lead to less U.S. support in Europe.¹⁴⁰ China's disinformation campaign in Asia emphasizes the United States' lack of reliability.¹⁴¹

None of these problems guarantees that the United States and its allies and partners in Asia cannot cooperate. However, both alone and in combination, they put pressure on the relationship and make it difficult to deepen and institutionalize cooperation. These problems show up in myriad forms when the United States tries to share intelligence, improve strategic planning, and sell arms.



4.

Intelligence Sharing



German soldiers are pictured sitting in front of monitors during a multinational cyber security exercise.

Picture alliance/Getty Images

Sharing intelligence with the right partners offers many potential benefits.¹⁴² No intelligence service knows everything, and even small nations have valuable human sources or other assets in their neighborhood.¹⁴³ As a former head of the UK Secret Intelligence Service (SIS, better known as MI6) put it, intelligence is “a team sport.”¹⁴⁴ The scholar Jennifer Sims points out that intelligence liaison can lower overall collection costs, improve timeliness, and facilitate effective joint operations; intelligence partners may also have advantages in language skills (a particular U.S. weakness), historical relationships, and access.¹⁴⁵ In addition, access and capabilities may take years to build, so it is often vital to draw on partners with pre-existing assets in a crisis.¹⁴⁶ Some allies have an official presence in places like Iran and North Korea, where direct U.S. access is limited to nonexistent. Allied access is also vital in places like China, where any American—especially a U.S. official—is constantly monitored.¹⁴⁷

The counterterrorism era yielded numerous instances of successful intelligence sharing that made the United States and its partners safer. Allies generated intelligence and often served as the tip of the spear, arresting or otherwise disrupting suspected terrorists. The capture of terrorists such as David Headley and Najibullah Zazi relied heavily on British intelligence, and Saudi Arabia played an important role in preventing terrorist attacks from al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.¹⁴⁸

Intelligence sharing is also vital for effective coalition military operations. U.S. military campaigns against the Islamic State and al Qaeda have demonstrated the value of such sharing for counterterrorism purposes. The U.S.-Poland ballistic missile defense agreement, for example, requires intelligence cooperation to ensure the security of U.S. installations, launchers, and technical data.¹⁴⁹ Similarly, the United States and South Korea share intelligence on space as part of a broader effort that includes training and exercises.¹⁵⁰ Beyond tactical sharing of battlefield information, intelligence exchanges also facilitate joint planning.¹⁵¹ As one European official put it, “All plans depend on intelligence. Bad intelligence means bad plans.”¹⁵²

Intelligence relationships can also bolster overall diplomacy. One former allied official noted that U.S. assessments shaped their own country’s worldview in dozens of small ways that over time brought the two into greater alignment.¹⁵³ Intelligence relationships facilitate trust that can be useful for negotiations on more traditional foreign policy issues such as peace talks between belligerents.¹⁵⁴ Polish officials noted in interviews that intelligence cooperation was an important part of their country’s overall relationship with the United States.¹⁵⁵ Over time, shared intelligence also contributes to a shared worldview and set of threat perceptions. As former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld once noted, “To the extent we are all working off the same set of facts, or roughly the same set of facts, the people from our respective countries tend to come to roughly the same conclusions, and to the extent we’re not working off the same set of facts, we tend not to.”¹⁵⁶

There have been many instances in which intelligence sharing has produced impressive successes. The Five Eyes—a long-standing intelligence-sharing arrangement between Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States—has resulted in improved collection, better analysis, and greater burden sharing for its members. Outside of this long-standing partnership, the United States and its allies successfully expanded intelligence sharing after 9/11 and after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, suggesting that barriers can be overcome in moments of crisis.¹⁵⁷

Despite many joint collection and assessment successes, intelligence sharing sometimes fails to live up to its promise. Significant intelligence sharing can be slow, as well as incomplete in its scope and scale. As Sean Corbett and James Danoy—former senior British and U.S. intelligence officials, respectively—have written, “With few exceptions, and despite the best of intentions, intelligence sharing is uneven, remains the exception rather than the norm, and the prospect of simultaneity at the point of need is remote.”¹⁵⁸ Because of its secretive nature, intelligence sharing generates fewer headlines and open complaints than other forms of cooperation, but in behind-the-scenes discussions with U.S. and allied officials and experts, frustration has been as common as praise. Although intelligence sharing has bolstered overall relations in many cases, systems of sharing frequently lack the bureaucratic foundations needed to enable smooth relationships.

The impact of sharing failures, though hard to measure, can be felt in several pernicious ways. Allies and partners may be slow to realize the dangers posed by revisionist powers such as China, Russia, and Iran. Advanced planning based on varied intelligence assessments can hinder cooperation in a crisis. An ineffective division of labor may cause collection and analysis to suffer from both gaps and overlaps. Intelligence sharing can bolster overall diplomacy between allies; without it, an important pillar of the relationship is weakened, but intelligence sharing problems may prove especially costly in an era of renewed great power competition.¹⁵⁹

The State of U.S. Intelligence Sharing

The 9/11 attacks led to a massive change in intelligence liaison, with terrorism-related intelligence coming to the fore.¹⁶⁰ Attention focused on improving liaison with countries that had a jihadist presence or were otherwise on the front line of the struggle against terrorism.¹⁶¹ In contrast to the Soviet Union in the Cold War era, al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and other jihadist movements had little in the way of sophisticated counterintelligence: Information might be revealed to an adversary through leaks, but the odds of al Qaeda penetrating U.S. or other allied services were low.

Jihadist SIGINT collection was also limited, especially compared to great power adversaries' capabilities.

Great power competition, however, poses a new set of intelligence challenges.¹⁶² Multiple U.S. administrations have tried, not always successfully, to reduce the focus on the greater Middle East. As in the Cold War, Russia has been an area of increased emphasis, with allies in Europe poised to play a critical role in confronting Moscow. Strong bilateral relationships, robust alliance structures like NATO, and other arrangements that involve intelligence—many of which were developed during the Cold War—will serve the United States well.¹⁶³

China, however, is a far greater long-term concern, and one that Cold War structures will not meet. Many European allies and partners have shared intelligence with the United States and each other for decades. East Asian allies and partners, in contrast, have limited collection capabilities; they have not had robust sharing relationships with the United States for long periods and share even less intelligence among themselves.¹⁶⁴

Security risks are also much greater than they were in the post-9/11 era. China and Russia both have effective intelligence and counterintelligence services. They guard their information more effectively than the post-9/11 jihadist movements did, which creates the need for more sophisticated collection efforts. In addition, they are aggressively trying to penetrate U.S. services, as well as those of U.S. allies and partners.¹⁶⁵ As a result, the risk of U.S. information ending up in adversaries' hands is much greater now than in the era when counterterrorism was the priority.

Considerable and usually fruitful sharing already exists with a variety of partners. The United States regularly engages with numerous civilian and military partners abroad, sharing finished human, signals, geospatial data, and other intelligence daily. This sharing often increases in response to crises, such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, or to growing threats, such as Iran's malign adventurism.

Intelligence community members often have a strong understanding of partner needs. Country teams focus on how to manage liaison relationships, a process augmented by liaison visits and analytic exchanges. Senior officials regularly discuss what to share and what not

to share, making decisions based on their impressive backgrounds in the countries and issues in question.

Intelligence scholar H. Bradford Westerfield notes that the particulars of intelligence liaison vary considerably and may include sharing information, working together on operations, and full-fledged joint collection. Liaison may also involve training, financial support, and providing technical or other supplies.¹⁶⁶ Sometimes arrangements are institutionalized via a memorandum of understanding or similar means; sometimes they are informal.¹⁶⁷ At times, agencies exchange finished assessments, but as one former intelligence official stressed, sharing raw intelligence enables agencies to “check each other's homework” and even the knowledge possessed by various sources.¹⁶⁸ In other cases, sharing may involve requests for political support, military equipment, or other nonintelligence benefits.¹⁶⁹

Bilateral cooperation is usually the preferred form of intelligence liaison, primarily for security reasons, though it also proves convenient at times for two countries to unite on a particular issue of mutual concern. The more widely information is disseminated, the more likely it is to be revealed through spying, media leaks, or other unauthorized disclosures.¹⁷⁰ Historically, many U.S. intelligence engagements in Asia have been bilateral. The United States has long had strong relations with Japan and South Korea, but information has largely been shared directly with a single partner service rather than as part of a larger grouping. For example, the United States gives South Korea the critical SIGINT it lacks, while South Korea provides human intelligence on shared foes such as North Korea.

The United States has multilateral exchanges via alliances such as NATO. Similarly, Europe has arrangements like the Berne Group for sharing intelligence. Some U.S. multilateral sharing relations are stunted due to limited trust in allied security systems and procedures, fears of adversary penetration, or concerns that allies' different interests might lead them to disclose information to adversaries. Often these arrangements facilitate the exchange of overly broad reports that do not offer detailed intelligence for fear of information being compromised.¹⁷¹

There are, however, impressive exceptions to the general dominance of the bilateral sharing model.

The Five Eyes alliance, which grew out of the U.S.-UK World War II partnership and has been around for over 70 years, is often held up as the gold standard for intelligence sharing. As scholars have noted, the Five Eyes “is unique in the combination of its longevity, its resilience to changing global circumstances, and its ability to survive periodic tensions as well as maintain an ongoing similarity in the worldviews of its membership.”¹⁷² The countries involved share intelligence related to foreign communications and methods of collection. Australia and New Zealand, for example, collect intelligence in different parts of Asia; the United Kingdom monitors Europe and western Russia; Canada focuses on eastern Russia, Latin America, and the northern Atlantic and Pacific regions; and the United States collects intelligence on the Caribbean, China, Russia, the Middle East, and Africa.¹⁷³ They also share finished intelligence products.¹⁷⁴ Although the historical emphasis on SIGINT remains important today, Five Eyes members also share assessments, as well as procedures and terms for classifying information.¹⁷⁵

The Five Eyes countries share values, interests, and language, and long-standing institutionalization has further strengthened their bonds. The United Kingdom helped establish U.S. and other allied intelligence organizations during and after World War II, often using British models; this shared foundation has made later cooperation easier.¹⁷⁶ The division of labor is meaningful among Five Eyes members, with different countries having responsibility for different parts of the world. The Five Eyes share exchange liaison officers, perform joint operations, have joint communication channels, and jointly staff many important facilities.¹⁷⁷ Over time, the Five Eyes’ shared activities, personnel swaps, and institutionalization have generated personal relationships, which, in turn, have led to greater trust among institutions, understanding of different systems, and opportunities for bureaucratic work-arounds.¹⁷⁸ Five Eyes nations have reportedly agreed not to spy on each other, and they respect one another’s areas of influence.¹⁷⁹ For instance, one U.S. official noted that a decision in Indonesia would never be made without input from Australia.¹⁸⁰

Nevertheless, the Five Eyes relationship has endured many problems over the years. During World War II, the United Kingdom had security concerns about passing analysis to the United States.¹⁸¹ Simultaneously, both

the United States and the United Kingdom had concerns about sharing SIGINT with Australia due to its lax security procedures. As a result, they restricted access, excluding much of Australia’s cabinet.¹⁸² Political differences also shaped the early relationship. London did not circulate Joint Intelligence Committee papers on Palestine during partition “because of perceived Jewish sympathies in Washington.”¹⁸³ Over the years, all five countries have had serious security lapses that have compromised sources. Such lapses include the Cambridge Five in the United Kingdom, Aldrich Ames and Ana Montes in the United States, the Soviet mole Ian George Peacock in Australia, a 2021 Chinese cyberattack that infiltrated New Zealand government systems, and the connections between numerous Canadian politicians and Chinese intelligence officers.

Reports indicate that the United States has other circles of information sharing beyond the Five Eyes. The so-called Nine Eyes partnership includes Denmark, France, the Netherlands, and Norway, in addition to the Five Eyes countries. The Fourteen Eyes adds Belgium, Germany, Italy, Spain, and Sweden.¹⁸⁴ These relationships, however, are not as institutionalized as the Five Eyes. The United States also recently organized the Military Framework to facilitate the release of secret-level information to 14 member states: the Five Eyes, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, and Spain.

The United States has also tried to foster intelligence relationships among its partners. Historically, Japan and South Korea have each had bilateral intelligence relationships with the United States, with any information relevant to the other shared only via transmission through Washington. In 2016, the two Asian countries agreed to the GSOMIA, allowing them to share intelligence on North Korean military and nuclear activities with each other.¹⁸⁵

Common Intelligence Cooperation Problems

The United States and its allies and partners suffer from numerous problems in intelligence relationships, many of which are variants of the cracks in U.S. alliances discussed in Section 3. Some of these are structural,

involving different interests and cultures, and are difficult or impossible to overcome. Still other problems—notably those regarding security procedures—involve trade-offs because greater sharing increases the risk that valuable human sources and sophisticated and expensive technical methods will be lost. In other cases, however, the problems are self-inflicted, with procedural or bureaucratic issues causing numerous complications. These issues may be grouped into five categories: trust concerns, autonomy concerns, security barriers, incompatible interfaces, and bureaucratic barriers.

Obstacle 1: Manipulation and Fear of Spying

The general credibility and trust concerns that allies have with each other are often manifest in the intelligence realm. Henry Kissinger once remarked, “There is no such thing as friendly intelligence agencies. There are only the intelligence agencies of friendly powers.”¹⁸⁶ Some allies worry that the United States selectively shares only the intelligence that supports preferred U.S. policies. South Korean analysts, for instance, have feared that the United States misrepresents the intelligence it shares to slant Seoul’s policy decisions on North Korea; this concern contributed to South Korea’s decision to develop its own SIGINT capability.¹⁸⁷

U.S. spying on allies raises other complications. In 2013, leaks indicated that the United States was monitoring the phone of German Chancellor Angela Merkel. In 2023, the *Korea Herald*, drawing on Discord leaks, revealed information that indicated Washington was spying on South Korea—a concern that exacerbated South Korean fears.¹⁸⁸ Liaison itself can facilitate spying, worsening the trust problem because liaison services can use their access to another country’s intelligence personnel to try to recruit them as spies.¹⁸⁹ With the Five Eyes, however, the mutual “no spy” pledge helps offset this concern.

Obstacle 2: Autonomy Concerns

In general, the United States collects, analyzes, and disseminates far more intelligence than its allies, which makes it a highly desirable partner. A downside, however, is that allies fear becoming too dependent on U.S. intelligence. Meanwhile, the United States has concerns about allies free riding. In response to

concerns about intelligence autonomy vis-à-vis North Korea and China, South Korea has tried to develop its own ISR capabilities, which overlap with those of the United States.¹⁹⁰ Some Australian analysts fear they are losing autonomy in intelligence and policy, citing their government’s decision to go to war in Iraq based on weak U.S. intelligence.¹⁹¹

Obstacle 3: Security Barriers

When sharing intelligence, U.S. officials rightly worry that partner nations may have security lapses that lead to adversary penetration, leaks to the media, or both. Ultimately, security and intelligence sharing involves a risk-reward trade-off. Even if allies exercise careful information security, counterintelligence concerns remain a harsh reality. By sharing more, the United States risks the lives of sources and the value of a multi-billion-dollar technical system. As such, a security mindset often dominates intelligence sharing. The more sensitive the intelligence platform or method, the greater the concern.

The United States, too, has counterintelligence problems that pose dilemmas for allies: U.S. leaks are a periodic problem, both in the intelligence community and at political levels.¹⁹² The 2010 WikiLeaks publication of massive amounts of U.S. intelligence related to Iraq and Afghanistan and Edward Snowden’s 2013 leak of volumes of highly classified data are among the many examples of information from allies becoming public. In the Snowden case, some of the information allegedly came from Five Eyes sources, and the leaks hurt allies’ intelligence output.¹⁹³ Similarly, the 2017 leaks to U.S. media of sensitive British intelligence and President Trump’s leak of Israeli information related to Syria both angered partners and raised questions about U.S. reliability.¹⁹⁴ Reports that the National Security Agency (NSA) had shared Canadian citizens’ personal information led Canada to put data sharing on hold with Five Eyes partners.¹⁹⁵ In almost all of these cases, however, the impact of the leaks was short term, and cooperation resumed in the long term.¹⁹⁶

The United States also has far more legislative oversight of its intelligence agencies than other allies do. This often raises fears among partners that members of Congress could reveal information they provide or otherwise compromise security—a fear that is mag-

nified by the executive branch's frequent blaming of Congress for leaks, many of which stem from the executive branch itself.¹⁹⁷ In addition, Congress often wants to have it both ways, pushing cooperation while also blaming the intelligence community when such cooperation leads to security lapses.

Obstacle 4: Incompatible Technical and Bureaucratic Interfaces

Even when both sides are committed to sharing information, doing so can be difficult in practice. Common problems include a lack of secure technical systems, incongruence in counterpart organizations, differing political and legal mandates among organizations, and diverging modes of collection, analysis, and information storage.

For intelligence to be shared, computers and other information systems must be able to connect in a sufficiently secure manner. Some allies, such as the United Kingdom and Australia, have special access to the Secret Internet Protocol Router Network (SIPRNet), a secure network for conveying classified material.¹⁹⁸ There is now also a SIPRNet option to quickly label information as releasable to Japan as part of a drop-down menu, an important step that makes it much easier to share with Japan.¹⁹⁹ Taiwan has reportedly upgraded its computer system to exchange real-time intelligence with Five Eyes.²⁰⁰ NATO allies, in contrast, use the Battlefield Information Collection and Exploitation System.²⁰¹

Despite such measures, the incompatibility of different technology systems is a major obstacle to intelligence cooperation, hindering both the speed and scale of information sharing. As one Five Eyes official noted, "Just because we have an intelligence sharing agreement doesn't mean we have intelligence sharing systems."²⁰² Usually, the problem is a "multitude of mini-problems," another official noted.²⁰³ Some information systems have drop-down menus that easily allow sharing with various allies, whereas others do not.²⁰⁴ One U.S. official noted that the systems make sharing difficult, and it is often difficult to identify how to get information. The same official also noted that while the system works half of the time, requests are automatically rejected the other half of the time for unexplained classification reasons.²⁰⁵ Indeed, one Five

Information often cannot go from one country's system to another's, even when both sides want to share.

Eyes official noted that information sharing is often better at the top secret level than at the secret level because of the historical sharing of SIGINT.²⁰⁶ Information often cannot go from one country's system to another's, even when both sides want to share. In some cases, certain forms of sharing function well, such as email, but other forms, such as shared drives, are not present.²⁰⁷ Problems still occur, even with close allies, on time-sensitive issues because systems do not align.²⁰⁸ Japan, for instance, has fewer intelligence-sharing terminals than other allies because many such terminals are allocated through NATO.²⁰⁹

In general, complexity grows when information is shared with more than one national actor. Countries may have sharing agreements with the United States, but they often do not have them with each other. As such, they frequently send information to the United States for transmission to a third country rather than work directly with that country.²¹⁰

In addition to technical barriers that inhibit sharing, bureaucratic congruence varies among U.S. partnerships, often depending on historical levels of cooperation. Cooperation between the NSA and its British counterpart, the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), is excellent. Defense Intelligence Agency and National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency cooperation with their UK counterparts is strong, and CIA cooperation with MI6 is solid. FBI cooperation with the Security Service (MI5) is relatively weak, however, as the two agencies have had fewer reasons to connect over the years. Not surprisingly, the technically oriented collection agencies have the most sophisticated and seamless systems for information sharing.²¹¹

Part of why the Five Eyes works well is that intelligence agencies play similar roles among member governments, in which intelligence is both regularly used and largely depoliticized.²¹² In other partner countries, including many democracies, intelligence services are

more politicized and thus more likely to change course with the political winds. This situation has led to concerns in the United States about sharing information with these partners and, especially, bolstering their capabilities. Many allies also have highly balkanized intelligence services. Although some, like Australia, have the equivalent of the U.S. director of national intelligence (DNI), there is no South Korean administrator who acts as a central coordinating authority between intelligence agencies. Organizational incongruency extends to individual intelligence agencies. The director of the NSA is a four-star general; meanwhile, a two-star general heads the Defense Security Agency (DSA), the South Korean SIGINT body. As of 2025, there had been no public interaction between the respective heads of the NSA and DSA.

Because of this technical and procedural complexity, personal relationships matter tremendously, as they help ensure coordination through bureaucratic work-arounds. As one former senior U.S. official declared, “So much is personality based.”²¹³ In U.S.-Australia collaboration, for example, Pine Gap is a key location for joint collection; it also serves as a space for U.S. and Australian intelligence personnel to form trusting professional relationships. Foreign military and intelligence officials play vital roles in explaining their countries’ perspectives to U.S. personnel. For the host country, their relationship with the local U.S. chiefs of station is often vital, as is the knowledge of other leading defense and intelligence officials.²¹⁴ In many cases, however, U.S. officials deployed to foreign countries do not speak the language, which limits the creation of personal relationships and overall communication. Language facility also demonstrates respect for host cultures.

Obstacle 5: U.S. Bureaucratic Barriers

U.S. information sharing procedures also create additional—and at times unintended—barriers to intelligence cooperation. Problems include strong incentives to classify information as NOFORN, overall system complexities, and the proliferation of veto players in the U.S. system.

The United States has created a labyrinthine set of rules that govern the sharing of information, imposing severe limits within broader policy guidance from senior U.S. officials, who often create or endorse many

of these rules. The United States, as one U.S. official put it, “does not have any info sharing policies at all. It has information security policies and information sharing exceptions to these policies.”²¹⁵ As Corbett and Danoy argue, “The policy as it stands can be interpreted to support a default setting to NOFORN.”²¹⁶ As a result, important information is not regularly shared or, almost as bad, it takes far too long to share it, which greatly reduces its value.

Often, bureaucratic incentives for working-level officials are the problem. One foreign intelligence officer explained, “A Four Star [general or admiral] can say ‘release everything,’ but some guy in tennis shoes [in a different bureaucracy] sees a missing label and kills it.”²¹⁷ Another foreign intelligence officer noted that senior U.S. officials regularly send out directives calling for more sharing with allies, but in practice, little changes: “The bureaucratic reluctance is in stark contrast to the strategic guidance. The people who manage risk emphasize security, not sharing.”²¹⁸ An allied official put it this way: “It’s NOFORN, and it has always been that way.”²¹⁹ The official went on to warn of the difficulty of change, noting that a sentiment of “this is the way we’ve always done it” governs most procedures.

Internally, all U.S. government agencies have significant punishments for sharing information improperly and few rewards for doing so well.²²⁰ Indeed, punishment is often at the individual level: If a well-meaning junior official makes a sharing decision that is later deemed a mistake, the junior official is at risk of punishment and even prosecution (though rare). As one foreign official put it, “The O-4 [Major or Lieutenant Commander] might not get cover.”²²¹ Indeed, the United States has a long history of aggressively prosecuting low-level leakers while being less aggressive toward senior officials when they leak.²²² As journalist Patrick Radden Keefe contends, “For any government officer making a quick decision in the course of a busy workday, the penalties for underclassifying are quite salient, whereas penalties for overclassifying do not exist.”²²³

In addition to NOFORN incentives, a proliferation of veto players in the U.S. system can derail cooperation. Several guidelines govern U.S. intelligence sharing. Most notable is *Intelligence Community Directive 403: Foreign Disclosure and Release of Classified Na-*

tional Intelligence.²²⁴ Other guidelines deal with areas including more general classification and “tearlines” for intelligence sharing.

Although these guidelines offer a degree of consistency, they also illustrate several limits and potential problems. First, although the Office of the Director of National Intelligence provides overall guidance, it does not control or direct sharing with allies. The system is decentralized, and the intelligence community personnel representing the agencies from which the information originates are responsible for approving release to foreign governments, as these personnel are usually best placed to know the cost if the information and associated sources and methods are lost. Second, the DOD, where half of the 18 U.S. intelligence entities reside, has its own policies for releasing classified information to foreign governments. These policies are opaque, leaving decisions up to various agencies or, at times, individual personnel. Often those tasked with foreign disclosure are analysts with minimal training and many other responsibilities. Even sharing with Five Eyes requires additional permissions.²²⁵ As a result, per Corbett and Danoy, “The busy analyst is therefore far more likely to opt for the safe option of defaulting to NOFORN.”²²⁶ Indeed, one foreign intelligence official wryly noted that information their service provided to the Five Eyes later received a NOFORN label.²²⁷

The Cost of the Failure to Share

The cost of these intelligence-sharing problems is high. Measuring their direct impact, however, is difficult, as the counterfactual—what would improve with more sharing—is impossible to gauge. As one former allied intelligence official put it, “It’s hard to know what you don’t know.”²²⁸

A lack of proper intelligence sharing creates problems at both the strategic and tactical levels. Without shared information, allies may not recognize the level of threat and how it is changing, making them less willing to develop the right capabilities, alter their diplomacy, allow U.S. basing and access, or otherwise cooperate. At a tactical level, allies may not develop necessary capabilities to overcome particular weap-

ons systems, may not train for the right contingencies, or may be otherwise unprepared, even if they have a common threat picture.

At the very least, some valuable information fails to reach allies, which, in turn, affects threat perceptions and attitudes toward the United States. Allies may prove slower to recognize aggression from Beijing, Moscow, or other revisionist powers in the absence of salient U.S. intelligence. A lack of intelligence sharing also means that an important tool for building overall relationships is not being fully employed. Although such sharing usually takes place behind the scenes, it can help a relationship endure even as public relations become fraught.

Cooperation is likely to suffer both before and during a crisis, even if more information is eventually shared. Allied military forces may have suboptimal postures, fail to be prepared for a confrontation, or lack effective cooperation during a crisis. As one official put it, key figures may be exchanging business cards when they meet for the first time rather than rolling up their sleeves to work.²²⁹ Because collection is not coordinated, the United States often does not know what information allies—even Five Eyes countries—already have, thus reducing the economy of efforts.²³⁰

Sharing information at the strategic level, though usually less immediate, is vital for long-term alignment and for reducing fears of chain gangs and free riding. A better understanding of allied perspectives, and vice versa, reduces the risk of misperception regarding intentions. As one intelligence officer noted, “For our country to change its policies, we need intelligence at the policy level.”²³¹ The officer went on to note that this was particularly important because great power competition, unlike counterterrorism, involves more diffuse problems and many trade-offs, all of which cause policies to be in flux.

Conclusion

Intelligence sharing, while fraught with challenges, is indispensable to enhancing U.S. security. The imperfections of intelligence sharing demand an aggressive approach to reform. The United States must foster a more agile and inclusive environment for in-

telligence collaboration. This endeavor should be not merely about refining tactics or expanding networks but also about strategically rethinking the foundational aspects of security collaboration to better address the threats of today and tomorrow. By taking on this challenge, the United States and its allies can enhance their strategic foresight, operational efficiency, and collective response capabilities, ultimately ensuring improved security for all participants.



5.

Multinational Strategic Planning

French President Emmanuel Macron, NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, and German Chancellor Friedrich Merz are pictured during a meeting at the NATO summit in The Hague, Netherlands.

Pool/Getty Images



Close cooperation with allies and partners requires multinational strategic planning. In simple terms, multinational strategic planning is coordinating the military lever of government power with other states.²³² Getting this right helps the United States maximize the influence of its network of allies and partners against adversary military threats and address perennial issues such as burden sharing among allies.²³³

Defense cooperation is difficult, even for close allies, because national defense is the primary function of any government and the ultimate expression of sovereignty, creating political, economic, and organizational barriers.²³⁴ Overcoming frictions to multinational strategic planning is important in general and in the Indo-Pacific in particular, as the United States faces long-term strategic competition, especially with China.²³⁵ In a confrontation, allies in the region may be called upon to repair damaged assets, open their bases to U.S. forces, or even provide direct contributions to counter China's large maritime and missile force. Extraregional allies may be called to backfill the United States in Europe and the Middle East to free up U.S. assets for deployment in the Pacific.

Fighting alongside allies has been central to the U.S. way of war since World War I. Although hindsight is often rosy, the Allied victories in the two world wars have much to do with successful coalition management. Yet recent experiences have yielded mixed results. In the twenty-first century, the United States

has formed coalitions for counterterrorism operations against nonstate groups like the Taliban in Afghanistan, Abu Sayyaf Group in the Philippines, and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. While some of these operations resulted in success, others—like the U.S. war in Afghanistan—ended in ignominious failure.²³⁶

Even clear examples of success hide inefficiencies and risks. For example, a U.S.-led coalition decisively defeated Iraq in the first Gulf War, but the failure to plan for multinational operations forced U.S. military personnel to negotiate ad hoc logistics and support agreements after they arrived in-country because the United States had planned to defend Saudi Arabia without involving the Saudis.²³⁷

The State of U.S. Multinational Strategic Planning

Multinational strategic planning begins at the strategic level through alignment on shared priorities and threats. It is then operationalized and institutionalized through shared arrangements (e.g., regular meetings between senior leaders or multinational headquarters) and tactical initiatives (e.g., exercises, operations, and common equipment). In practice, multinational strategic planning stems from varying levels of strategic alignment and manifests in many forms, ranging from formal military planning and operations to joint procurement, security assistance, information sharing, or simply high-level coordination between political leaders on military issues.²³⁸

In a confrontation, allies in the region may be called upon to repair damaged assets, open their bases to U.S. forces, or even provide direct contributions to counter China’s large maritime and missile force.

The United States engages in multinational strategic planning with a range of partners at varying depths. The gold standard for institutionalized multinational defense planning between the United States and its allies is the NATO alliance, which operates two formal multinational planning processes in parallel.²³⁹ Formal multinational planning uses standardized planning processes like the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP), which involve dedicated staff from multiple nations and result (in most cases) in written multinational plans.²⁴⁰ The Indo-Pacific has no equivalent to the NDPP process—not least because there is no equivalent to NATO in the region. Nor is there likely to be one, given the widespread desire within the region to avoid overmilitarizing regional disputes where possible. Instead, the United States has pursued what it calls a “latticework” of bilateral and minilateral agreements in support of a free and open Indo-Pacific.²⁴¹ The closest arrangements are with U.S. treaty allies, including Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the Philippines, and South Korea.

However, as discussed in additional CSIS research for this project, there is an array of important informal mechanisms for U.S. partnerships in Asia.²⁴² Informal multinational exchanges help make national plans work in a multinational context. These activities give the United States insight into the plans and intent of allies and partners—and vice versa. They are not explicitly designed as planning or coordination bodies or exercises but, rather, provide important inputs into formal planning processes and strategic coordination activities. The flow of information from these exchanges into planning activities is more organic than in formal processes.

At the same time, these relationships are not self-sustaining; the United States gets out what it puts in. As former Secretary of the Army Christine Wormuth put it: “Alliances and partnerships are like gardens: They don’t grow overnight, they must be tended carefully to flourish, and they can wither if they are neglected.”²⁴³ Allies and partners can act as a force multiplier for U.S. policy as long as the garden is regularly tended, which first requires updates to existing alliance structures. In 2023 alone, the United States forged new force posture and basing agreements with Australia, Japan, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, and South

Korea.²⁴⁴ New institutions for cooperation alone, however, are insufficient.

A historical review of U.S.-led coalitions suggests that successful multinational strategic planning hinges on four key factors: (1) shared understanding of threats and goals, resulting in strategic alignment; (2) norms and rules to facilitate cooperation; (3) interoperability; and (4) personal trust. Theory, history, and interviews with current and former officials suggest strategic alignment is the foundation of multinational strategic planning. It reflects a mutual understanding of the broad intent and purpose of any security partnership, often, but not necessarily, rooted in a shared worldview and strategic culture. Alignment helps define collective obligations and caveats, such as when and how nations may use force.²⁴⁵ Strategic alignment is often consummated by forming institutions, norms, and rules that inspire and regulate their cooperation.²⁴⁶ These may be formal organizations like NATO or dedicated arrangements like foreign liaison officers.

Informal practices or norms, too, may serve as a shared institution to shape and enable cooperation. Interoperable militaries fight together more effectively because they have shared standards for tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs), matériel, and information systems, reinforced by joint training, exercises, and professional military education.²⁴⁷ Finally, individual leadership often plays an outsize role in fostering strategic alignment or ushering in new institutions. Personal relations further help reduce natural frictions that arise.

The United States has been accused of being a poor partner, maintaining outdated and insular practices that have hindered multinational strategic planning.²⁴⁸ Strengthening alliances by improving multinational strategic planning will require a renewed focus on the fundamentals: strategic alignment from top to bottom, institutions that are multinational by design, enhanced interoperability at all levels, and enduring investment in the personal relationships that underpin U.S. alliances and partnerships.

Common Problems with Multinational Strategic Planning

The overall view among allies and partners in interviews and other interactions was consistent: The United States is a uniquely valuable but often frustrating partner that regularly treats allies and partners as an afterthought rather than a priority. The issues, detailed as follows, may be grouped into five categories: interest misalignment, U.S. unilateralism and dominance, institutional misalignment, insufficient interoperability, and poor communication.

Obstacle 1: Interest Misalignment

The process and outcome of reaching strategic alignment depend, in no small part, on the preexisting threat perceptions and military preferences of the states involved. States that already share a common picture of threat and preferences for offensive or defensive use of force find it easier to reach agreement on a defense relationship.²⁴⁹ For example, the original 12 NATO members formed their alliance in 1949 based on a shared sense of the threat posed by the Soviet Union and the need for a collective security organization to counter it. Decades later, Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm involved an effective division of labor between military contributors despite their diversity, based on a common perception of Saddam Hussein as a threat to Middle Eastern stability.²⁵⁰ In the First Gulf War, the United States did not undertake any multinational planning until it reached strategic alignment with its coalition partners on whether to pursue only the defense of Saudi Arabia (Operation Desert Shield) or also conduct offensive operations to liberate Kuwait (Operation Desert Storm).²⁵¹

When the United States cannot reach strategic alignment with its allies, it cannot count on developed institutions or its economic, military, and diplomatic weight to make multinational strategic planning work. The NATO mission in Afghanistan comprised countries with decades of experience planning together through NATO mechanisms, but multinational planning grew increasingly dysfunctional as strategic alignment

When the United States cannot reach strategic alignment with its allies, it cannot count on developed institutions or its economic, military, and diplomatic weight to make multinational strategic planning work.

decreased.²⁵² In Afghanistan, NATO's consensus on the need to destroy al Qaeda, expel the Taliban, and rebuild Afghanistan, catalyzed by the shock of the 9/11 attacks, obscured important disagreements. Yet even the most integrated and interoperable alliance with decades of strategic alignment struggled to fight together. Strategic alignment proved fleeting over a long and dynamic campaign, as different preferences regarding the use of military force hindered interoperability and fragmented the coalition.

Today, the U.S. alliance system faces significant strategic misalignment. The United States is increasingly focused on the threat the People's Republic of China poses to its interests. NATO, however, is organized around deterring or countering the threat from Russia. Even within NATO, there is significant variation in threat perceptions, often due to geography. Italy, for example, sees instability in the Mediterranean area as the most important security threat facing the country, whereas Poland is hyper-focused on the threat from Russia.

The problem of interest misalignment is hardly limited to Europe. The Philippines' increasing engagement with China under President Rodrigo Duterte resulted in part from his focus on combating internal security threats like criminal organizations over deterring China. China's help with internal security was minimal, but Duterte's focus on combating crime drove a wedge between Manila and Washington and caused the United States to balk at the violence with which the Duterte government pursued its counter-drug campaign. Other countries in East Asia frequently see China as a source of economic gain rather than a simple security threat. The result is that the United States struggles to incorporate them into mul-

tinational plans. Even Thailand, a U.S. treaty ally, cooperates closely with China in the security realm and has repeatedly denied the United States access to its territory for military purposes.

Obstacle 2: Unilateralism and Dominance

Some interviewees contended that the United States tends to plan unilaterally before looping in its allies and partners. The overall impression was that the United States leads, instigates, and dominates multinational planning—a habit established and perpetuated over many years but one that needs to change. As discussed in Section 3, U.S. leadership can be overbearing and dominant in multinational forums. The United States does not make its priorities clear, with mixed signals coming from different parts of the vast U.S. system (e.g., the White House vs. the Joint Staff vs. the combatant commands). This ambiguity leads to indecision and gives reluctant allies an excuse to vacillate.

The United States also tends to conduct its own strategic planning before involving allies and partners, if it involves them at all. Several interviewees mentioned that the United States makes plans before informing partner governments, which then face the decision of whether and how to reconcile U.S. requirements with their own national-level plans. Interviewees were also necessarily unaware of the plans that the United States had not communicated to them but probably exist.

U.S. unilateralism at the strategic level creates two problems. The first is that it increases the likelihood of interest misalignment. If U.S. plans are already set in stone before they are communicated to allies and partners, neither the United States nor the partners have the opportunity to rebuild plans to increase alignment, as coalition command arrangements did during the Gulf War. The second is that it reduces U.S. opportunities to take advantage of partner capabilities, which may be unique combat capabilities like the Nordic countries' Arctic warfare capabilities, Israeli covert operations expertise, or Ukrainian experience in building and fielding unmanned systems. Or they could be support or enabling capabilities. The modern equivalent of the U.S. failure to take advantage of Saudi Arabia's logistics capacity may be U.S. underuti-

lization of Korean or Japanese shipbuilding capacity.

Obstacle 3: Overreliance on Ad Hoc Cooperation

Several interviewees saw the United States as relying too much on makeshift or ad hoc arrangements rather than preexisting frameworks, which might allow a more systematic and routine approach to multinational planning. For example, U.S.-Poland cooperation to deter Russia and defend NATO's eastern flank following the invasion of Ukraine was coordinated through personal relationships formed through Polish officials' time spent in the United States, not a formal NATO or bilateral mechanism. Had those relationships not existed, U.S. deployments to Poland would have been extremely difficult. Frequent use of military-to-military ties, where most informal relationships have been formed through decades of joint exercises, training, and educational exchanges, has at times undermined political decisionmakers' trust. Some suspect that the U.S. message may be selectively conveyed by their own military services in order to advance service goals.

The war in Afghanistan also demonstrates problems with overreliance on ad hoc coordination mechanisms. The initial ad hoc framework created for coalition stability operations produced an inefficient International Security Assistance Force that proved ill-suited for a sustained mission, particularly in force generation. These issues persisted even after NATO—with its long-standing planning structures and relationships—assumed command and became the source of significant friction and mistrust.

In the absence of an existing framework for cooperation, allies must rely on their embedded personnel, such as exchange and liaison officers. Some nations have many more of these than others, with the distribution often influenced by historical inertia rather than national security imperatives. In addition, informal points of contact spread throughout the DOD enterprise, from the Pentagon to the combatant commands. Unfortunately, these personnel are often seen as one of two extremes: either as effectively U.S. personnel or as foreign officers. The former restricts their contact with and utility to their home nation; the latter restricts their

contact with and utility to the DOD. Both are problematic. Interviewees generally implied that the DOD needs to adapt its models—or introduce new ones—for the express purpose of making the most of allies and partners in the strategic competition with China.

Conclusion

At the heart of all instances of successful multinational strategic planning—whether in peace or war, from Operation Overlord to NATO—are four key principles: strategic alignment, shared institutions, interoperability, and personal relationships. Like it or not, the United States will need allies and partners to fight in the Indo-Pacific, contributing ships, planes, and the people to operate them; providing bases for operations; and repairing damaged equipment. Building on efforts to improve multinational strategic planning will allow the Trump administration in its second term not only to foster fair burden sharing among allies but also to deter and, if necessary, fight adversaries more effectively. If U.S. leaders can keep the four principles in mind as they strive to improve multinational planning with their allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific, they will go a long way toward realizing Winston Churchill's wisdom in today's dangerous world.



6.

Arms Sales, Technology Transfer, and Defense Industrial Cooperation



A Philippine Marine Corps commandant tries an M4 rifle while U.S. military representatives look on.
Ted Aljibe/AFP/Getty Images

Arms sales, technology transfer, and defense industrial cooperation enhance collective security by providing benefits to both the United States and its allies. Cooperation and efficient arms sales processes enable the United States to reap the benefits of partner state-developed technologies. A recent Defense Innovation Board report offered that cooperation is increasingly important because “the United States is no longer the leading source of progress across critical areas of defense-related technology innovation, such as 5G, hypersonics, and electronic warfare, while our allies and partners increasingly lead in other areas, including semiconductors, directed energy, and quantum science.”²⁵³ Cooperation is urgently required to ensure U.S. access to best-in-class technology.

Defense industrial cooperation bolsters supply chain resilience by integrating additional suppliers and production lines across allied and partner nations. Supply chain diversification reduces dependency on single-source suppliers, decreases risks associated with domestic supply chain bottlenecks, and ensures continuity of matériel during crises. This is especially important amid U.S. reliance on critical minerals from adversary states like China.²⁵⁴ Effective arms transfers improve the image of the United States in the eyes of allies and partners.

The size and technological advancement of the U.S. defense industry make it a dominant player in the international arms market. As military equipment has

become increasingly complex, technologically advanced, and expensive over time, it has become more challenging for nations with smaller defense budgets and industrial complexes to compete at the high end of defense production. For example, in the aerospace sector, as aircraft complexity increases, fewer nations can produce military planes on their own. The F-35 was designed as an international program, and there are two multinational projects for sixth-generation fighters, including the Franco-German-Spanish Future Combat Air System and the British-Japanese-Italian Global Combat Air Programme.²⁵⁵ Meanwhile, the United States has launched its Next Generation Air Dominance program, which will lead to the development of its new sixth-generation fighter, the F-47.²⁵⁶

Even wealthy Asian and European states, such as Japan, France, and the United Kingdom, may struggle to produce the full spectrum of high-end equipment on their own due to their relatively limited budgets and small defense industrial bases.²⁵⁷ Although the European Union offers the potential for European economies to collaborate and compete effectively with larger economies, European defense industries struggle to collaborate across state borders, delaying the production of ammunition as well as advanced fighter aircraft.²⁵⁸ A lack of defense industrial integration among U.S. allies and partners across Asia, especially compared to those in NATO, means they are generally less able to benefit from cross-national scale.²⁵⁹

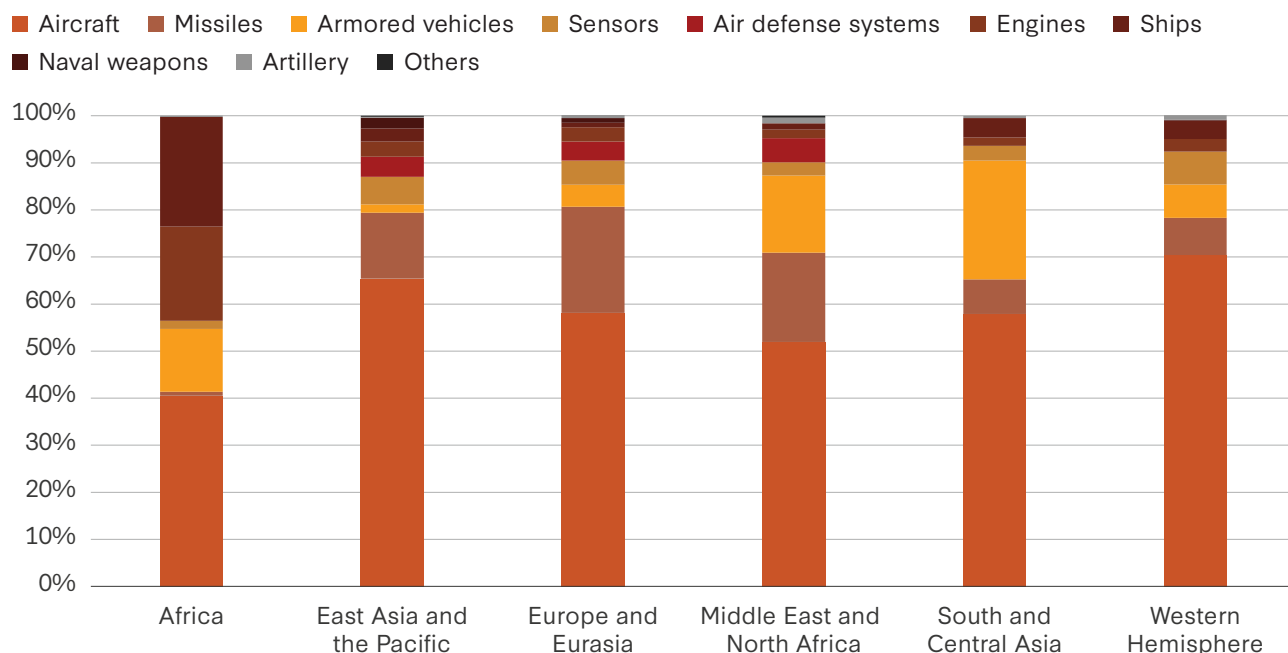
The challenge of effective cooperation has left few alternatives for allies seeking high-end equipment other than buying large numbers of U.S. weapons. While the United States sells arms to many allies and partners worldwide, a substantial portion of its overall arms trade is conducted with a select group of close defense partners. Since 1990, Israel, Japan, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Taiwan, and the United Kingdom have pur-

chased \$87 billion in arms, around 40 percent of total U.S. arms exports.²⁶⁰ The United States, even with its closest defense partners, tends to export far more arms than it imports, with a few notable exceptions in the past decade, such as the United Kingdom. The limited economies of scale available to even the wealthiest U.S. allies mean they struggle to produce highly advanced weapons systems, especially at a cost that would galvanize the United States to purchase their equipment.

U.S. arms exports are concentrated in the highly advanced capabilities that allies would otherwise struggle to produce alone, such as aerospace and ordnance, missiles, and launchers. In 2023, the United States exported \$21 billion worth of arms.²⁶¹ Of these exports, \$13 billion were aerospace-related exports and \$5 billion were ordnance, missile, and launcher exports. Aerospace products have been both an area of U.S. strength and a particular focus of cooperative efforts with allies in the past decade. The F-35 program, for instance, was designed with a focus on allied coproduction and exportability.²⁶² Long-range precision strike capabilities are another area of U.S. excellence. Accordingly, guided missiles and guided missile parts compose \$2.8 billion of the \$5 billion in sales of overall ordnance, missiles, and launchers.

The types of arms the U.S. exports vary by region, as dictated by strategic realities and geography in each theater. As seen in Figure 2, the East Asia and Pacific region aligns with global trends: Since 2000, a majority of its imports from the United States have been aircraft (65 percent vs. a global 59 percent) and missiles (14 percent vs. a global 17 percent), according to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) trade indicator value (TIV) data.²⁶³ However, only 2 percent of this maritime region's imports from the United States are armored vehicles, which is lower than the global average of 9 percent. Conversely, armored vehicles have constituted an average of 25 percent of South and Central Asian imports since 2000. The Middle East and North Africa, another mostly land-based region, has had a similarly high armored vehicle import share of 16 percent. This alignment of arms transfers and geography is expected: Nations seek out what arms they think their strategic realities indicate they will likely need in a conflict.

Defense industrial cooperation bolsters supply chain resilience by integrating additional suppliers and production lines across allied and partner nations.



▲ FIGURE 2
Regional Breakdown of U.S. Arms Transfers by Arms Category, 2000–2024
Source: Arms Transfers Database, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, <https://armstransfers.sipri.org/ArmsTransfer/>; and CSIS analysis.

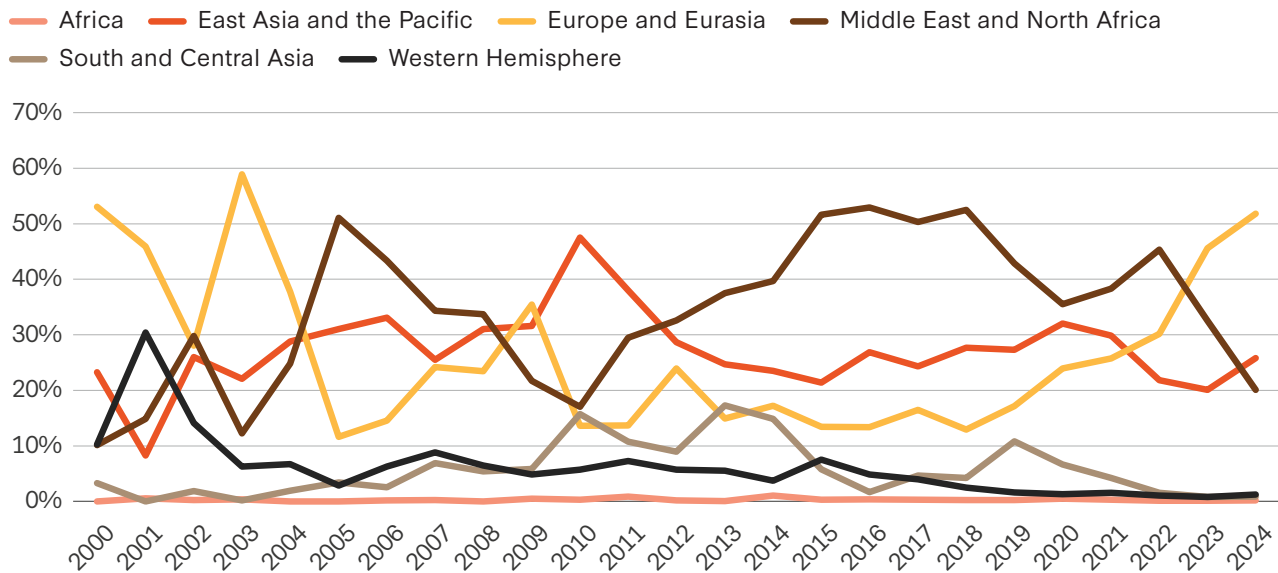
Where the United States sends its arms is influenced not just by demand from its allies and partners but also by its prevailing strategic focus in a given period. Arms sales and transfers are a key tool of U.S. policy and are one way for the United States to respond to shifts in the global threat environment. As shown in Figure 3, transfers to Europe and Eurasia rose from 12 percent in 2018 to over 50 percent in 2024, while transfers to the Middle East fell from 52 percent to 20 percent in the same period. Europe has historically been a large market for the U.S. defense industry, and it has become an even larger recipient of U.S. arms since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The United States has been expanding its domestic industrial capacity to equip not only Ukraine but also other European states that fear they may be the next target of Russia’s expansionist ambitions. The relative stability of East Asia and the Pacific’s share of U.S. arms transfers since 2012 highlights the challenge of pivoting to the Indo-Pacific given the demands of crises in other regions.

The overall state of U.S. arms sales is strong. The United States makes exquisite systems at a scale and cost

that are attractive to its allies and partners. Purchasing nations can acquire the equipment they need to meet the needs of their strategic situation and may view arms purchases and transfers as a way to deepen their relationship with the United States. Despite the many incentives for the United States to sell and transfer its arms and the strong demand from allies and partners for that equipment, challenges nevertheless remain.

Common Arms Sales and Defense Industrial Cooperation Challenges

The United States must overcome numerous obstacles if it wants to transfer arms to an ally or a partner, and its allies and partners face corresponding problems when trying to acquire U.S. arms. A similar set of challenges exists when engaging in codevelopment and coproduction. These challenges include differing threat perceptions, high complexity and cost, legal and regulatory barriers,



▲ **FIGURE 3**
Regional Breakdown of U.S. Arms Transfers by Percentage of Global TIV Delivery, 2000–2024
Source: SIPRI; CSIS analysis.

slow and opaque U.S. processes, information categorization, and the U.S. preference for domestic industry. Others—like barriers to intelligence sharing—are the result of security trade-offs associated with sending sensitive and lethal military hardware overseas.

Obstacle 1: Differing Threat Perceptions

Defense industrial cooperation faces obstacles when allies hold divergent threat perceptions—a dynamic illustrated by European responses to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Poland and the Baltic states, acutely aware of their vulnerability as the potential next targets of Russian territorial ambitions, have prioritized rapid armament through massive arms purchases, exemplified by Poland’s defense deals with South Korea.²⁶⁴ In contrast, the United States, Germany, France, and other European nations view the Russian threat as less proximate.

The strategic U.S. pivot toward the Indo-Pacific region reflects U.S. assessments that China poses the most significant long-term threat to U.S. interests and global stability. The Trump administration’s Interim National Defense Strategic Guidance document outlines a Taiwan contingency as “the exclusive animating scenario that must be prioritized over other po-

tential dangers” and directs the Pentagon to “assume risk” in Europe.²⁶⁵ This approach effectively delegates regional security responsibilities to allied nations, leaving European NATO members to shoulder the primary burden of deterring and defending against a revanchist Russia.

European states assign varying levels of urgency and strategic importance to Russian aggression, even among Europe’s primary defense exporters. For instance, Italy views instability in the Mediterranean region as its most pressing security threat, whereas others, like Germany, have pledged to double their military spending by 2030 in response to new NATO spending targets.²⁶⁶ Similarly, the United Kingdom announced its commitment to spend 2.5 percent of GDP on defense—the largest increase in defense spending since the Cold War.²⁶⁷ These states have opted to invest in long-term defense industrial capacity building, which may not yield operational capabilities for years, creating tension between capability now and production later.²⁶⁸ Without a common understanding of the strategic landscape, allies will struggle to sustainably create a shared defense industrial policy to better facilitate security cooperation.

Obstacle 2: High Complexity and Cost

The DOD spends billions annually to operate and maintain its weapons systems. For instance, depending on the variant, F-35s cost roughly \$80–\$110 million per unit.²⁶⁹ A Patriot air defense battery costs around \$1 billion, with each Patriot missile costing around \$4 million.²⁷⁰ Unguided 155 mm munitions, which skyrocketed in demand after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, are several thousand dollars per shell, whereas extended-range precision projectiles like the Excalibur cost roughly \$100,000, or 50 times the price of an unguided 155 mm munition.²⁷¹ Additionally, production facilities are expensive to create and require a range of regulatory approvals. The U.S. Army struck a \$435 million deal to build a new explosives production facility by 2028 in Kentucky.²⁷² However, the complexity extends beyond initial setup costs, as building defense manufacturing plants requires environmental inspections, specialized workforce training, rigorous safety protocols, and ongoing government oversight.²⁷³

Although the initial cost of weapons systems tends to get the most attention, approximately 70 percent of a weapons system's total life cycle cost is related to sustainment, including repair parts and personnel.²⁷⁴ Maintenance backlogs are also common, considering funding challenges and supply chain constraints.²⁷⁵ Partner nations' industries may have the technical capabilities to perform maintenance, especially component repairs versus system overhauls, but certain conditions must be met to catalyze their participation: multiyear contracts to provide industry with appropriate investment horizons, sufficient industrial capacity to meet demand, harmonized information sharing processes, and subsidies or governmental incentives to ensure economic viability.²⁷⁶ Most of these are lacking at any given time. Joint maintenance is further complicated by fragmented European and Asian defense landscapes. Europe, for instance, operates five times as many weapons systems as the United States.²⁷⁷

Simply selling expensive weapons systems, such as high-performance aircraft or sophisticated main battle tanks, achieves little—and may even backfire—if allies cannot operate or maintain these platforms effectively. In the Arab world, for example, the United States has provided a range of high-end weapons sys-

tems over the years, but allies' abilities to use these effectively are limited at best.²⁷⁸ In addition, if allies have different doctrines or otherwise fight in different ways than the United States, coordination on the battlefield is far more difficult, even if they have complementary weapons systems.²⁷⁹ In places like the Philippines and Taiwan, the ability of partner militaries to ingest large amounts of U.S. equipment is limited.²⁸⁰

Obstacle 3: Legal and Regulatory Barriers

U.S. rules and regulations surrounding arms sales are particularly complex. A notable set of regulations is the International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR), which govern defense items and services to ensure that sophisticated military technology—such as items on the U.S. Munitions List (USML)—does not fall into the hands of U.S. adversaries or hostile actors.²⁸¹ ITAR serves as the implementing framework for the Arms Export Control Act (22 U.S.C. 2778), which is overseen by the State Department's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs.²⁸² ITAR is fundamental to safeguarding U.S. technologies and weapons systems but may also create risks to U.S. and coalition military readiness.²⁸³

ITAR is an export control system marked by complex regulatory requirements, over which U.S. allies and partners continuously express frustration. ITAR processes are often perceived as too stringent and not conducive to the current era of geopolitical competition, especially when there are alternative sources of supply.²⁸⁴ In a CSIS survey of allies with reciprocal defense procurement memoranda of understanding (RDP MOUs) with the United States, respondents recognized the purpose and importance behind ITAR but simultaneously critiqued its rigidity and prolonged lead times.²⁸⁵ Because ITAR is such an expansive bureaucratic process, respondents noted that guidance from various U.S. authorities may be different or even conflicting. These barriers impede the strategic imperatives of building collective industrial readiness and military technology advantages over sophisticated adversaries.²⁸⁶

Foreign Military Sales (FMS), another highly regulated process, is a mechanism through which eligible foreign governments may purchase defense equipment and services from the U.S. government.²⁸⁷ FMS is the

largest U.S. security assistance program aimed at helping protect the economic health and security of allies and partners.²⁸⁸ In the survey of close U.S. industrial partners, respondents cited specific challenges related to FMS, such as a lack of process clarity, lengthy approval times, a multitude of U.S. stakeholders, and a variety of compliance delays and costs.²⁸⁹

Allies and partners have long cited U.S. export control processes as complex, slow moving, and opaque.²⁹⁰ Although safeguarding U.S. technologies and weapons systems is vital, rules like those in ITAR, FMS, and the Export Administration Regulations (EAR) contribute to a risk-averse culture, which has led the United States to be hesitant in sharing technology even with its closest allies and partners.²⁹¹ U.S. allies have noted complicated export control and technology protection policies as challenges when doing business with the United States, such as importing arms, codeveloping or coproducing defense goods, or transferring technologies.²⁹² These regulations often prevent the United States from quickly proliferating advanced technologies and weapons systems to its allies at speed and scale.²⁹³ They can also create uncertainty for foreign buyers, complicate defense cooperation procedures, and, in extreme cases, incentivize partners to seek alternative suppliers.

The complexity of U.S. regulations has even hindered sales to close allies like Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom. While these countries enjoy ITAR and EAR waivers that require no license or other approval for the “export, reexport, retransfer, or temporary import of defense articles, the performance of defense services, or engaging in brokering activities,” they remain limited in scope and difficult to obtain.²⁹⁴ Some argue that these waivers have not meaningfully enhanced codevelopment and coproduction processes.²⁹⁵ As one Australian defense institution study put it, “Yet, within the US system, antiquated legal and regulatory settings and a mindset that discounts the value of allied inputs into collective strategies threaten the realisation of the AUKUS agenda to its fullest potential.”²⁹⁶ Nevertheless, these exemptions have proved useful to streamline defense cooperation with the United States, as AUKUS membership is sometimes referred to as having a “fast pass” or “carpool lane” through ITAR.²⁹⁷

Doing business with the DOD is even harder for countries that lack established defense industrial relationships with the United States.²⁹⁸ India, for instance, has difficulty selling to the U.S. government and accessing U.S. markets because it lacks an RDP MOUs with the United States. RDP MOUs relax provisions of the Buy American Act by allowing foreign vendors to be considered domestic sources. These agreements grant the United States and participating countries greater and easier access to each other’s respective markets. The United States has RDP MOUs with 28 countries and is currently negotiating such agreements with India, Brazil, and South Korea.²⁹⁹

Despite regulatory obstacles, there is an understanding among ally and partner nations that these regulations exist for a reason, despite their complexity. Often the rules are created in response to a security violation or concern in one era, and they persist even after those issues have faded.³⁰⁰ CSIS interviews and survey work reveal a call not to eliminate U.S. processes but rather to create a more transparent, streamlined system with predictable lead times that could enhance cooperation and benefits to both nations.³⁰¹ Allied nations, of course, have their own complex export control regimes that share the same objective of U.S. protection policies: to prevent sensitive technology and information from falling into the hands of unfriendly nations.

Obstacle 4: Slow and Opaque U.S. Processes

In addition to the effect on potential recipients of U.S. arms transfers, regulatory complexity affects the ability of the United States to respond to requests for arms transfers in a timely manner. Delays in the acquisition process, or even reduced purchases of U.S. defense systems, result in the United States exporting fewer defense products and providing fewer services, which reduces industry sales and hampers the ability of the United States to interoperate with its allies and partners. FMS also spreads the cost of arms development and production across a bigger purchase order from many countries, reducing the per-unit cost of expensive military products for the U.S. military.³⁰² Fewer arms sales from the United States to its allies and partners

due to process barriers therefore result in lost cost savings for the DOD, which benefits less from scale.

The nature of the FMS program means that delays are frequent. FMS programs are executed under a U.S. government contract negotiated and awarded by a U.S. military service contracting officer on behalf of the FMS partner. In a CSIS survey of allies and partners, respondents noted a lack of clarity and transparency of the FMS process as the most challenging, closely followed by lengthy approval times and the multitude of U.S. stakeholders involved. Most respondents rated equipment delays, regulatory compliance, and costs involved as moderately challenging. The costs associated with the FMS process were identified as the least challenging factor.

The entire FMS process—from initial discussions to letter of request, letter of offer and acceptance (LOA), production, and modifications—is lengthy and unpredictable. Partner and ally requests for U.S. systems can take years to reach an LOA.³⁰³ It takes an average of 18 months to get FMS cases on contract.³⁰⁴ Long periods are required for case closure despite service completion. FMS case closure occurs when “all material has been delivered, services have been performed, other requirements of the LOA have been satisfied, known financial transactions (including collections) have been completed, and the purchaser receives a final statement of account.”³⁰⁵ Prompt case closure minimizes the amount of administrative effort required for an unnecessary open case, which diverts resources from other priorities. Prolonged case closure, a common frustration among primary FMS customers, delays the release of excess purchaser funds.³⁰⁶

Part of the problem is due to regulatory and legal complexity. A single FMS case may contain hundreds of individual line items and take years or decades to fully deliver. The FMS process also spans multiple U.S. military commands and departments, creating accountability challenges. The Department of State statutorily owns it, but execution largely falls to the DOD and is split among the military services and several DOD agencies. Congress and the defense industry also play a role, but there is no single responsible party that can be held accountable for effective execution.³⁰⁷ FMS utilizes both Title 22 and Title 10 funds, each with its own set of rules. For some complex FMS

programs, congressional review and approval are required, which can significantly delay the FMS process. The threshold amount for a sale to require congressional oversight has not been adjusted in the last two decades, resulting in more cases undergoing congressional review than originally intended by the Arms Export Control Act, established in 1976.³⁰⁸

Workforce constraints can also create delays. The DOD contracting community is perennially understaffed. Contracting officers sometimes give FMS contracts a lower priority than tasks that more directly support U.S. service personnel or contracts to support innovation for next-generation capabilities for service personnel.³⁰⁹ In addition, staffing constraints, technological limitations, and the increasing complexity of systems can slow the rate at which transactions are approved if there is a major increase in FMS.³¹⁰

There has been some progress in improving the FMS process.³¹¹ In 2022, the DOD established a “tiger team” to investigate ways to streamline FMS, which then transitioned into a Continuous Process Improvement Board (CPIB) designed to implement its findings. The CPIB first created the Defense Security Cooperation Service, which places all U.S. security cooperation officers who help partner nations shepherd FMS cases and navigate U.S. procurement pipelines into one service. This way, the DOD can better ensure these personnel are adequately trained and strategically placed in embassies.³¹² The DOD also started the Security Cooperation Execution Focus Forum (SCEFF). The SCEFF is an early warning system that identifies problems early in the FMS process—anything from supply chain bottlenecks to clearance challenges—and elevates them for senior leadership awareness. The CPIB also developed the acquisition and sustainment tool kit, which helps map the best acquisition pathways for the desired capability. Lastly, given the high costs of U.S. weapons systems, paying in full up front is not always an option, especially for democracies that operate on strict fiscal budgets. Thus, the DOD recently established an FMS competitive financing option where buyers can be placed on a payment schedule if eligible.³¹³

Obstacle 5: Information Categorization

The challenge of U.S. categorization of information as NOFORN or controlled unclassified information

(CUI) was consistently mentioned as a barrier throughout the duration of this study in both discussions and survey responses. These markings can create barriers to foreign partners' access to information and can hinder procurement or coproduction processes. These restrictions can lead to delays in equipment delivery and licensing processes and may negatively impact interoperability between allied forces.

CSIS survey respondents noted that NOFORN and CUI limit the ability of foreign contractors to compete for opportunities. In some cases, information marked CUI or NOFORN is not made available to foreign bidders in time for them to properly develop a bid. While this may increase U.S.-made technology, it may also result in the DOD not accessing best-in-class technical solutions. Reforming protectionist policies demands not only regulatory changes but also cultural change to support systematic alteration in the way the DOD approaches document markings. While the use of NOFORN to obstruct competition is illegal, respondents felt that it remained overused and thus impeded cooperative defense industrial efforts.

Obstacle 6: U.S. Preferences for Domestic Industry

The United States, of course, seeks to build its defense industrial base both to ensure its security and to provide jobs for U.S. workers. Some allies and partners see the U.S. system as "predatory," in the words of one expert.³¹⁴ According to the expert, the United States seeks to advantage its defense companies and then complains about the state of European and Asian defense industries, even though it is partly due to U.S. policy.

A bigger problem, which another expert noted, is that legislation and procedures that bar allied and partner participation contradict official statements about the importance of allies and partners.³¹⁵ This inconsistency stems from vested U.S. interest in a fragmented European defense industrial base. A disunited European market prevents the emergence of competitive defense firms that could challenge U.S. market dominance, and it limits technological self-sufficiency that might reduce dependence on U.S. systems.³¹⁶ This approach ensures continued reliance on U.S. solutions for critical capability gaps. The United States histori-

cally has emphasized the importance of having friends more in its rhetoric than in its policy.

Additionally, U.S. export control processes may limit allies' and partners' ability to gain some of the technological benefits that come from codevelopment and coproduction given the sensitivity of included technologies. For instance, foreign companies may set up production lines in the United States to manage volumes and more easily sell to the DOD.³¹⁷ However, when partnering with U.S. defense contractors, allies often cite "ITAR taint" as a challenge, referring to the incorporation of sensitive U.S. technology or components that then subject the entire system to ITAR.³¹⁸ At the same time, as one partner government official put it, "Every [defense] product will be improved over time, and new functions might be added. In this scenario, the knowledge created in the U.S. subsidiary will not flow back to the mother company due to ITAR. This is not a problem for the company. But [it] reduces interoperability and interchangeability."³¹⁹ ITAR restrictions can thereby prevent new knowledge or technology from flowing back to the foreign company that has partnered with a U.S. contractor, reducing the incentives for and benefits of collaboration.

Moreover, while the intent of RDP MOUs is to facilitate defense trade, many of the survey respondents expressed that U.S. government stakeholders were less supportive of their function. Most respondents did not find the Buy American exemptions to be well recognized within U.S. program offices, and about half of the respondents found U.S. program offices to be cautious of the Buy American exemptions RDP MOUs offer. There may be misconceptions among acquisition contracting officers as to what exactly RDP MOUs are. Respondents also suspected that U.S. program offices find it easier to default to purchasing U.S. goods and services. As one roundtable participant noted, "No one gets fired for buying American."³²⁰

Conclusion

To improve U.S. defense industrial cooperation and strengthen military alliances, the arms sales and technology transfer systems must be reformed to match the speed and demands of today's strategic environment.

The sheer complexity, opacity, and rigidity of mechanisms like FMS, ITAR, and document-marking regimes such as NOFORN and CUI not only frustrate allies but also limit U.S. ability to fully leverage their capabilities and innovations. Despite strong interest from partners in deepening cooperation, these systems impose unpredictable delays and high transaction costs that erode confidence and drive some countries to seek alternatives. A more agile and transparent arms transfer system—one that offers predictable timelines and reduces bureaucratic veto points—would help ensure timely capability delivery, increase interoperability, and facilitate reciprocal access to critical technologies developed outside the United States.

Ultimately, arms sales and defense industrial cooperation must be reframed not simply as transactional exchanges but as foundational pillars of collective security strategy. This requires not only regulatory reforms but also a cultural shift within the U.S. government and defense establishment toward viewing partners as contributors to shared deterrence, not merely as customers or risks to be managed. A more inclusive, forward-leaning approach to defense cooperation, one that minimizes protectionist reflexes and enhances shared resilience, is essential to sustaining U.S. leadership in an era of intensifying great power competition.



7.

Recommendations for Better Cooperation

South Korean soldiers move into position as U.S. Army helicopters fly overhead during a joint drill.
Jung Yoen-je/AFP/Getty Images



Failing to improve intelligence sharing, bolster arms sales, enhance strategic planning, or otherwise improve relations with allies and partners can have disastrous effects. Deterrence suffers when allies and the United States do not cooperate closely. Failure to reassure allies and partners may damage trust and drive them to appease an adversary. Lack of cooperation also leads to inefficient investments in capabilities and uneven burden sharing, which can drive allies and partners apart due to domestic political pressures. Finally, poor coordination before conflict erupts can lead to poor coordination during wartime, which can sound a death knell for a coalition's military efforts.

When adversaries are unsure of U.S. commitments to allies' security, they are more likely to challenge the status quo. They may reason that differing U.S. and allied interests will allow them to find cracks in any alliance, posing challenges in areas where one party in the alliance has less of an interest, such as Iran challenging the United Arab Emirates over a disputed island or China staking a claim to tiny, unpopulated islands in the Pacific. An adversary may believe that poorly armed and trained allies result in an offense-dominant situation, where a fast strike will succeed, whereas a more prolonged conflict will fail, as the United States will then step up its support.³²¹ Similarly, a failure to plan to cooperate in a crisis may lead adversaries to conclude, correctly, that cooperation might fizzle in practice.

A lack of trust may also inhibit allied confidence in U.S. security guarantees. Allies and the United States may see a threat differently, sending confusing signals about how they would respond in a crisis. Allies, for their part, may be more willing to bandwagon with a potential aggressor if they are unsure that the United States will back them or if they believe close ties to the United States will “chain-gang” them into an unwanted war. Limited intelligence cooperation may also give allies a false sense of security if adversaries’ preparations for war are detected only through sensitive intelligence methods and sources that are not shared with allies. A lack of arms sales may lead allies to turn to China or other countries they believe are more reliable suppliers.

Even during peacetime, burden sharing will be weak when cooperation is limited.³²² Without a common threat picture, allies may avoid developing their forces and doctrine or otherwise investing properly for a dynamic threat environment. Without shared planning, they may avoid certain roles and may not develop important capabilities. As a result, they may rely more on U.S. forces, making it harder for the United States to guarantee security in multiple theaters and increasing the need for more U.S. defense spending. The burden sharing issue is particularly concerning given the volatile nature of U.S. politics, where the question of whether NATO allies are doing their “fair share” has become a contested political issue.³²³

Should open conflict break out, allies may prove militarily inept and lack a full intelligence picture due to prewar U.S. limits on weapons sales, training programs, and intelligence sharing. A lack of effective coalition planning may lead the United States to wrongly assume allies will play roles for which they are unprepared or unwilling, while, conversely, allies may wrongly assume the United States will manage the difficult aspects of a conflict, such as air supremacy or strategic lift, without fully understanding U.S. limits. Should

When adversaries are unsure of U.S. commitments to allies’ security, they are more likely to challenge the status quo.

the United States become directly involved, interoperability deficits, weak coalition operations, and other problems may occur, leading to setbacks and even defeat on the battlefield. Allies that are poorly trained and without access to high-end military systems will be less able to counter air supremacy, deny sea-lanes to adversary shipping, prevent cyberattacks, or otherwise act on their own. In many military theaters, the United States has limited forces on hand and plans to surge them in a crisis. A war, however, might be over should an adversary quickly overcome a U.S. ally.

The year 2025 puts the United States at a crossroads with regard to improving cooperation with allies and partners. On the one hand, President Trump and many senior administration leaders have expressed skepticism toward strong relationships with long-standing allies in Europe, pointing to insufficient burden sharing and the risk of the United States being unnecessarily drawn into regional wars. On the other hand, there is interest in change. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, while an impressive moment for NATO cohesion, also highlights many of the deficiencies in both European state and U.S. military capabilities. China’s bellicosity has created a rare bipartisan consensus in the United States on the need for a strong U.S. response. Meanwhile, many hitherto cautious Asian countries such as India and the Philippines are also concerned about China and more willing to work with the United States than before. Successfully seizing this moment, however, will require understanding barriers inhibiting U.S.-allied cooperation and devising ways to overcome them.

Specific recommendations regarding intelligence sharing, multinational strategic planning, and arms sales are given in the respective papers associated with this project. However, there are overarching changes that would make the United States easier to work with. Significant progress can be made if the United States is willing to take action to change its approach to sharing and bureaucratic procedures. The necessary steps are both difficult and painful, and many come with genuine trade-offs. They are essential, however, if the United States is to work more closely with allies and partners.

Prioritizing U.S. Objectives and Expediting U.S. Procedures

Problems related to prioritization are manifest in many of the issues that allies and partners have with the United States. When the U.S. government prioritizes an action, such as cooperating to help Ukraine after the Russian attack in 2022 or improving cooperation with Australia, dramatic improvements in security can occur in multiple areas, enabling joint planning, expedited arms sales, and extensive intelligence sharing, among other forms of cooperation. Too often, however, the United States fails to prioritize, with individual leaders and agencies all pushing allies and partners in different ways.³²⁴ The National Security Council should approach prioritization via an interagency process and enforce it with various agencies, both in situations where more sharing is required and at times when it is not necessary.

Because of the growing threat of China, strengthening alliances and partnerships throughout Asia should be a priority that guides cooperation in multiple areas. For arms sales, this would mean more fast-track arrangements, such as the ITAR exemptions granted to Australia, the United Kingdom, and Canada. On intelligence sharing, this would mean accepting greater risk that intelligence is compromised with countries like South Korea and Japan, being careful with the risk of overclassification, and helping them and other regional partners improve their technical and counterintelligence capabilities.

Prioritization will also lead to clearer guidance for allies and partners. As one non-U.S. expert noted, the United States should “not be polite” when telling allies what to do but also must avoid sending mixed signals.³²⁵ If the United States has a better idea of what it wants from its allies and partners—and, perhaps more important, what it wants from each particular ally or partner—it can avoid sending such mixed messages. The United States should use clear standard operating procedures to ensure that allies and partners hear the same message from U.S. representatives at all levels of government, whether they are civilian or military.

Revamping Security Culture

Revising security protocols and changing internal incentives for cooperation are necessary to increase intelligence sharing, enable smoother procedures for arms sales, and facilitate multilateral planning. Reducing the use of NOFORN, in particular, is necessary. The United States should default to sharing intelligence with key allies, including those beyond the Five Eyes. Similarly, regularly evaluating whether items on the USML, which is governed by the U.S. Department of State, can be moved to the Commerce Control List, which is controlled by the U.S. Department of Commerce and is more permissive, could help streamline arms sales and technology transfer.

The skill of Chinese and Russian intelligence agencies makes this a difficult and evolving challenge. Revising security protocols will entail assuming more risk: The more classified information the United States shares with allies, the more likely adversaries are to gain access to secret information via leaks and security lapses, which can have costly consequences. The current approach involves the opposite form of risk—a form that is harder to observe but likely more costly, as under-sharing results in missed opportunities to improve U.S. and allied security. Personal connections, knowledge of allies’ intelligence and military cultures and political realities, and other intangibles will grow if cooperation grows, further enhancing security.

The United States should consider several steps to improve allies’ security for operations and data retention. Secure communications—a constantly evolving challenge—should be a priority, with the United States providing both technology and training for secure, interoperable networks to facilitate real-time intelligence exchanges. Training many newer partners on internal compartmentation is also vital, and the United States in many cases will need to assist with hardening systems and other active cyber defense measures. The United States should also invest in AI-assisted redaction to quickly sanitize intelligence for release without lengthy bureaucratic processes. When possible, the United States and partners should standardize clearance levels and background checks, reducing asymmetries that limit access.

A culture shift of this magnitude requires allies to make security improvements, and the United States should encourage and, at times, devote resources to supporting these improvements. At the same time, imperfections in allies' security systems should not be excuses for inaction. The United Kingdom was initially (and rightly) skeptical of U.S. security procedures at the onset of Five Eyes cooperation after World War II and worked with the United States to improve its counterintelligence. The United Kingdom took a gamble in sharing information with the United States in the early days of the Cold War, but over time a robust relationship developed, leading to considerable trust. Other countries, too, have upgraded their counterintelligence when offered greater access.³²⁶

Resourcing U.S. Efforts

It takes money and people to increase intelligence sharing, arms sales, planning, and other forms of cooperation. In some cases, more and better training is necessary for U.S. officers to better understand when they can share information and when they can approve arms sales. More foreign disclosure officers and similar personnel are necessary. Improving cooperation also requires helping partner governments improve their security, invest in new technology for information sharing systems, and take on more personnel to manage relationships. More procurement officers will help allies and partners navigate complex U.S. procedures and respond promptly to FMS requests. Buying more communications systems and ensuring compatibility will be expensive and require major investments. However, the rewards usually outweigh the costs, especially over time and during crises.

Expanding the Circle

Agreements like AUKUS are useful for improving arms sales, but other important allies also need greater facilitation. The AUKUS nations have already agreed to consider the addition of at least one partner (Japan) to Pillar Two. The expansion of AUKUS to include new members—such as Canada, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea—under Pillar Two could add significant expertise in the critical domain of emerging technologies and build on existing bilateral cooperation, such as between the United Kingdom and Japan or between the United States and South Korea.³²⁷

However, for other nations seeking privileges comparable to those enjoyed by the United Kingdom and Australia, reform is necessary not only within the U.S. system but also within their own domestic frameworks. Some countries that are ideal partners in efforts against China and Russia have significant security problems, which limits cooperation. India is a useful strategic partner, but it has numerous ties to Russia. Taiwan, while useful, is a place where China has an extensive intelligence presence.³²⁸ For AUKUS to work, efficient procurement strategies among member nations were required. Once their defense information protection systems, such as strengthening cybersecurity measures and harmonizing classification standards, were aligned with those of the United States, information sharing and technology transfer were simplified. These changes are reflected in revisions made in the EAR and ITAR that streamline procedures and reduce requirements for Australia and the United Kingdom.³²⁹

Creating a China-focused group would be an obvious step. The group could consist of existing Five Eyes partners like Australia and New Zealand, with additions like Japan and South Korea. Taiwan and the Philippines could also play roles, albeit lesser ones, given their security weaknesses. Having a “no spy” or similar pledge would further increase trust. There is danger, however, in forming clubs, which creates new haves and have-nots, potentially generating resentment and reducing trust. Nevertheless, alliances can also create incentives for the improvement of security procedures, the forming of common protocols, and so on.³³⁰

The membership of the Military Framework should also match its collective vision and purpose. Most importantly, the membership must reflect an increased focus on the Indo-Pacific. If the unique value offered by the framework is coordinating the military-strategic aspects of strategic competition, the fact that the locus of this competition is in the Indo-Pacific requires a membership that incorporates key Indo-Pacific partners. Expanding the Military Framework would address a gap in the market that NATO, Five Eyes, the Quad, or other groups cannot fill.³³¹

Recognizing Allied and Partner Politics

Allies and partners, too, have politics, and this often inhibits cooperation with the United States. Although

U.S. officials cannot eradicate anti-Americanism or make allied leaders focus exclusively on shared security concerns, they can make it easier for allies and partners to cooperate with Washington.

Avoiding hostile rhetoric and maintaining friendly policies outside the security realm are important steps, both of which lay the groundwork for broader security cooperation. U.S. criticism of partner governments, even when justified, can make foreign leaders less willing to work with the United States. U.S. officials need to balance the country's need to speak its principles against the harm public criticism can do to a relationship. In addition, the United States will enhance its partnerships when it gives allies and partners economic, as well as political, wins. Buying allied weapons systems and otherwise helping them develop their defense industrial bases can encourage allies to expand capacity and spur innovation. For allies, sales to the United States are viewed as important to their national industries, and continued investment helps ensure enduring U.S. partnership.³³² It can also help strengthen domestic political will for cooperation with the United States, especially when arms sales and industrial projects translate into visible job creation and economic growth at home.

Deepening and Expanding Personal Connections

Better institutionalizing personal connections sounds like an oxymoron, but the United States can augment existing programs that create personal connections and make new ones. International military education and training (IMET), for example, has been vital in developing extensive military-to-military connections between U.S., allied, and partner officers. Programs that focus on exchanges with or other engagement of allied and partner military and civilian officials, including mid-level and senior ones, are vital for the long-term sustainment of relationships. The United States should expand programs like IMET and increase the use of comparable exchange programs outside of the military.

Under AUKUS, naval and civilian personnel undergo an extensive program of training and deployment. Each military also increases the number of embedded personnel and naval port visits. This strong founda-

tion of personal relationships among the three AUKUS nations presents further opportunity to build out the partnership as an effective trilateral strategic planning platform beyond its current focus on submarine development and operations.

Improved language skills are also vital for intelligence sharing, planning, and interoperability. U.S. intelligence agencies' problems with foreign languages are well documented, and there is no reason to believe the DOD has fewer such problems.³³³ It is no coincidence that the most successful sharing alliance, the Five Eyes, involves a common language. The United States at times deploys military and intelligence officers to foreign agencies with the expectation that foreign personnel should operate in English.³³⁴ One official commented, "Imagine how much better relations would be" if U.S. officials could operate in allies' languages.³³⁵ U.S. weaknesses are especially acute with Asian languages. The United States should therefore increase the foreign language training available for military and intelligence personnel and raise the language standards required for certain jobs.

Conclusion

Although the purpose of this report is to identify ways to improve cooperation with allies and partners, it is important to recognize the inevitable limits and prepare for them. The United States cannot wish away the issue of divergent strategic interests and priorities, which will inevitably decrease unity in planning, procurement, and threat perception, even if steps are taken to increase alignment and improve procedures.

Even long-standing allies harbor concerns about U.S. reliability, consistency, and motives. These anxieties are exacerbated by oscillating U.S. foreign policies across administrations and by past unilateral decisions—such as the abrupt 2009 missile defense withdrawal from Poland—that have alienated partners. Conversely, the United States often doubts partner security practices or commitment levels, creating a mutual mistrust that discourages full transparency and operational integration.

Reducing bureaucratic and technical barriers will be a constant challenge. New forms of technology and

inevitable bureaucratic reorganizations in the United States and allied countries will lead to new procedures and concerns, and abrupt limits will at times be placed on cooperation. However, the culture of undersharing can be reduced, making it more likely that sharing and cooperation with allies and partners can increase.

Finally, both the United States and its allies face domestic political costs, something China tries to exacerbate. Nations such as South Korea and Australia have faced economic punishment and gray zone pressure for aligning with the United States. Similarly, public sentiment in countries like Vietnam or New Zealand constrains security cooperation. In some cases, allies hedge—simultaneously seeking U.S. support while trying not to antagonize China or Russia—limiting the depth and visibility of their cooperation. This strategy creates fragility in the U.S.-led security architecture, especially in the Indo-Pacific, where unity is essential for credible deterrence.

Together, these limits underscore the need for the United States to recalibrate its policies, reduce bureaucratic friction, and invest more seriously in the institutional foundations and political relationships that underpin effective allied cooperation.

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