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TRANSCRIPT

The Asia Chessboard Podcast

“Team Play: The U.S. Alliance System and the Chessboard (Pt. 1)”

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- Andrew Schwartz: Welcome to the Asia Chessboard, the podcast that examines geopolitical dynamics in Asia and takes an inside look at the making of grand strategy. I'm Andrew Schwartz at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.
- Benjamin Rimland: Mike is joined by Abe Denmark, Director of the Asia Program at the Wilson Center and Mira Rapp-Hooper, Senior Fellow for Asia Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations to discuss the past, present and future of the U.S. Alliance System in the Indo-Pacific. What are the major strategic decision points facing the U.S. and its allies in the Indo-Pacific? Is present friction within the Alliance network a function of recent disagreements or broader, more systemic issues?
- Michael Green: Welcome back to the Asia Chessboard. I'm delighted to have two of the leading thinkers on strategy in Asia joining us, Mira Rapp-Hooper and Abe Denmark. They have both written books on U.S. alliances. Mira's book, which has come out already from Harvard University Press, is called *Shields of the Republic: The Triumph and Peril of America's Alliances*. It looks at alliances in Asia, but also NATO and more globally. Abe's book is going to come out shortly from Columbia University Press. It's called *U.S. Strategy in the Asian Century*, and it focuses more narrowly on U.S. alliances and opening them up to look at some of the issues we will confront in terms of interoperability, jointness and new domains. Not surprising, because Abe spent time in the Pentagon as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense in charge of Northeast Asia.
- Michael Green: Mira has been on before. She's a two-timer. She and Kurt Campbell are the only people so far to be on twice. It's an honor for us and maybe we ought to start out as we always do by helping our listeners understand how you got into this stuff. I know Mira, of course, PhD at Columbia, worked with me at CSIS and at CNAS and has really made important contributions on our understanding of extended deterrence and alliances, on geopolitical rivalry in Asia. Abe, tell us about how you got into this, because you're a first timer.
- Abe Denmark: So, I started getting interested in China in high school. It was actually the topic of my high school debate sessions in my senior year of high school and that got me started on interest in Asia. But I spent my first several years in Washington working in the intelligence community. It was from there that I got asked to be detailed over into the Office of the Secretary of Defense, working on the China Desk for Dave Helvey, who's now the Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific. He asked me to go over there to be the lead drafter of the Military Power Report that the Pentagon puts out every year.
- Abe Denmark: To be honest, at the time, I didn't know anything about China's military, but I wanted to get a taste of policy, so I learned about it and that got me into it. After a couple of years in OSD, I got a call from this guy who I'd actually never met before named Kurt Campbell, who asked if I'd be interested in going to CNAS and working on Asia while he was planning to go into the Obama Administration. That's what got me into this and from there, different think tanks, into the Pentagon, and now I'm at the Wilson Center running the Asia Program there.

- Michael Green: We've had people on the program who have gotten into the business of thinking about and shaping U.S. Strategy as diplomats and as academics, but a lot of the big thinkers on U.S. Strategy in Asia policy come out of the Intel world. Doug Paul, for example, the senior director under George Herbert Walker Bush, was a CIA guy. Carl Ford in the Clinton Administration came out of the CIA, led Asia and the Pentagon. Is it a hard transition? It must be kind of tough to go back to Intel where you're not really supposed to be making policy, but is it hard to transition from Intel to policy?
- Abe Denmark: For me, it was fairly easy to go from understanding an issue to thinking about what to do about it. Part of that was I was working with some really terrific people and they were very patient as I worked to get through that turn. But for me personally, it was actually harder to go back from policy, back into the intelligence community and shutting that part of my brain off. My wife said it was like going back to the Village after seeing Gay Paris. I don't think it does that. I see justice. I loved it there, but for me at least, once that part of my brain got activated, it was tough to [inaudible 00:04:14]
- Michael Green: So these books are both really powerful. I've read Mira's and was honored to contribute a back cover blurb, which, if I do say so myself, is the best part of the book. I've had a chance to read the introductory chapter and some of the notes for Abe, so they're really, really good books. What really occurred to me reading them is so I cut my teeth in the Asia world as an allies guy. When I was doing it, I was doing my dissertation, my first book in the '90s and the Cold War was over. Very few scholars really were thinking about alliances. It was a very small group of nerds and people you know like Sheila Smith and Victor Cha and myself.
- Michael Green: We were like the AV club. We were not the cool kids, but now allies are cool. The Center for American Progress surveys show that among millennials, the support for alliances is skyrocketing. I think it's terrific now that allies are mainstreamed and you make the case why in both your books, but why don't we start with your arguments. Mira, why don't you tell us, your book has a great title from Walter Lippmann's *Shield of the Republic* about diplomacy and you borrow that with *Shields of the Republic* about alliances, which is a brilliant piece of historical appropriation, but give us real quick, your academic and policy argument.
- Mira Rapp-Hooper: Absolutely. I'll start off, Mike, just with my thanks for having me back. As I mentioned at the top of the last episode I joined you on, you, of course, gave me my first job in Washington for which I remain grateful, but you've also been a supporter of this project for a very long time, not just encouraging me to write a book, but to write this book. I interviewed you for the book, you're on the back cover, so I really am grateful. Mike is a supporter, not just of me, but of many scholars who want to do policy-relevant work. So we're very lucky that he is. My book, *Shields of the Republic* is really a story about how the United States adopted a truly novel strategy, a novel use of alliances, used it to great triumph and why that system is nonetheless, in dire straits today.

- Mira Rapp-Hooper: The story goes something like this. In the early Cold War, the United States built an alliance system that was remarkably successful, so successful, that it actually buried its own record, because when alliances are working, we do not see them at all. The system kept the peace during the Cold War and did so at a totally reasonable cost to the United States. But since the Cold Wars end, rivals, namely Russia and China, have increasingly fixed alliances in their sights. In the last three years, Washington has joined them, becoming an alliance antagonist from within. The United States can still save its alliances by renovating them, specifically from non-military threats, but it's running out of time and it needs them more than ever.
- Michael Green: So we'll come back to this. You seem, at least from what I've read from Abe's manuscript so far, you seem a little more alarmed, but you're also looking at NATO. So you're looking at alliances that are not necessarily in as good health as the Asia-Pacific Alliance is. Abe, your focus on Asia and Alliance was obviously our core part of the answer to your title, which is U.S. Strategy in the Asian Century. Give us the core argument that you're putting forward.
- Abe Denmark: Thanks, Mike. I should have mentioned before when I was in the intelligence community, it was when you were in the White House and I remember the knife fights that existed in the intelligence community to have an opportunity to brief you so that the ability to work with you and talk about these issues with you is instrumental.
- Michael Green: Because I'm an easy mark.
- Abe Denmark: I appreciate you. Your support throughout the years has been really tremendous for me. In terms of this book, I actually, I started writing it before the Trump Administration and I think it just took me longer. I'm just not nearly as productive as Mira is. Basically, the basis of the book is less about the United States and more about change in the region itself, that the distribution of power is changing and that historically, in the Indo-Pacific, especially that as the distribution of power has changed, that it's affected regional order. The argument of the book is on the basis of that, that as the distribution of power in Asia is changing and especially with the rise of China, that a liberal order that the United States has helped build since the end of the second World War is increasingly under threat.
- Abe Denmark: The strategy that it defines is to define the strategy in which the United States allows the order to evolve, to reflect changing power balances, but really does that by maintaining its own leadership, but also empowering its allies and its partners in the region to contribute more to a liberal system, both in the military sphere, but also across the breadth of national power. Part of that, reflecting the analysis of how geopolitics in the region is changing and it's not just primarily about military balances, but it's also that geopolitics is being calculated on the basis of how countries line up across different elements of national power.

- Abe Denmark: So infrastructure, political influence, technology standards, all the different pieces that we've been talking about, I think, line up so that we have a much more complex set of issues that we're dealing with. So our alliances and our approach to the region needs to broaden as well and that's the main argument of the book. From the broad framework of how we engage our allies, it goes into a country-by-country study of how we can work with these different countries specifically based on how they see the region, how they see these challenges working with the United States and how will the United States convince its interests?
- Michael Green: So you both make a very compelling case for alliances and in a lot of ways, the logic of alliances now is just pretty hard to miss. At a time of unmistakable geopolitical competition with Russia and with China, in particular, and at a time when American relative power is, I hesitate to use the word decline, but it's not what it was. Alliances are kind of obvious and the public opinion polls clearly show people get that. They get it. I was in a debate, an off-the-record foreign policy association debate, a few years ago, with someone I'll tell you their name later. The argument was whether we need a strategy at all, a grand strategy. This person was saying, "We don't need a grand strategy, and I said, "Well, at least in Asia, you have to admit, we need a grand strategy for the rise of China."
- Michael Green: His response was, "You just do more with your allies. A trained monkey could do strategy in Asia," which I took a little personally. Your books point out that alliances are not easy. They are not easy and a lot of people go into government thinking, "I'm going to be Metternich or Henry Kissinger and cut a grand bargain with China or Russia," but the real hard work, and in many ways, the longer lasting consequential work, is the George Schultz approach. It's like gardening with alliances. You've got to put in the time. They're not easy. You make the case in a very compelling way for the specialist or the general reader why alliances are important.
- Michael Green: What I found myself asking as I read both of your works was, "Why are you worried?" Is it just the current administration? Is it Wedge strategies by the Chinese and the Russians? Is it something about the American body politic? Are our alliances against our political culture? I'm going to start with you, Mira? What are you worried about? You make the case in a compelling way. So what worries you? What [inaudible 00:11:13] made you to write it.
- Mira Rapp-Hooper: So it's a great question, Mike. What I think I'm most worried about is much broader than any one U.S. President or any administration. That is that we're at risk of really being on the brink of unlearning the lessons of history. As I suggested when I laid out the argument of my book, one of the things that makes alliances so vexing to understand in particular, their success, so hard to measure is that when they're working, wars don't break out and crises don't escalate. So all of the great things that they do, that policymakers like you and like Abe know that they're working to do every day, are actually invisible to the public.

- Mira Rapp-Hooper: So for my money, when I saw a Republican nominee for president in 2016 on the campaign trail, lambasting them as expensive and useless, I was most worried that his arguments weren't altogether unreasonable, that is, for many generations of Americans, it wouldn't be clear what they had done. The fact that they were so useful for the United States, that they had served our defensive self-interest for so long and that they would continue to be a cost-effective strategy for us going forward.
- Mira Rapp-Hooper: So I'm not just worried about any one president, I'm worried about the fact that, as you say, public opinion is broadly supportive of alliances, but that even policy makers with the best of intentions could become complacent and think that we can simply keep doing business as usual without renovating the system and it will continue to work just as effectively or that folks who want to play with completely new visions for American foreign policy in this world, folks who favor more of a restrained foreign policy, you might think we can experimentally disengage and that these apparatuses will still be here for us if we decide to come back for them. In short, I'm worried that we're going to give up a really good thing because its effects have been invisible and we're going to find ourselves in some modern day version of Korea when we could have avoided it.
- Michael Green: Well put. Abe, what is you about the alliances that motivated you to write this?
- Abe Denmark: For me, as I mentioned, I started writing this before the Trump Administration and for me, my concern was atrophy or complacency, very much along the lines that Mira described that the region is changing, that the United States is not in the same position that it was, that the challenges that we're facing are not the same as what we faced before and that we can't just be complacent in our approach and just say, "Well, we have these alliances. Let's just keep doing the alliance thing and everything's going to be fine."
- Abe Denmark: My argument was that, and the reason I did this is that is two things, really. One, to explain why our allies are important and our partnerships and to fight against that complacency, but also to describe how they need to change that. To me, it's insufficient to just say, "Well, we need our allies to do more." I wanted to ask some deeper questions about why do we need them to do more? What do we want them to do, to what purpose, and how do we get them to do that? How do they see these issues and how can the United States adjust its strategy to be more attractive to these countries so that we actually do the things that we want them to do?
- Abe Denmark: I think it's interesting to comment on one of the points you made before about in the past, there are these sort of China people, alliance people with different approaches. What's interesting, I think, is in a generational sense, is that both Mira and I have a lot of expertise and we've done a lot of work on China before, but we also see the tremendous value of these alliances. So my hope is what this means is that as we're going ahead, that the bifurcation between alliance people and China people starts to gray and that we're seeing that you can't

really do China without solid alliances and you really can't do alliances unless you understand China and how to approach them in an effective way.

Michael Green: That's a really interesting point. I found that sometimes the most ardent supporters of U.S. Alliances are diplomats who served in Beijing for a long time because they realize we need the help. But I also remember when our friend, Kurt Campbell, went into the Pentagon. I was in the region and I met a diplomat, fairly senior diplomat who asked me if I knew Kurt, wondering what was he going to be like as assistant secretary? I said, "Oh, he'll be great." This person said, "Yeah, he's kind of an allies guy." I think you're right. I think the Zeitgeist has changed. You can see it in the public opinion polls. The Chicago Council asked about eight years ago, "Should the U.S. move closer to China, even if it hurt its allies? And a majority of Americans said, "Yes."

Michael Green: When they asked that question last year, over two-thirds of Americans said, "No, we should move closer to allies, even if it hurts relations with China." I think that consensus has formed. Let me pick up on Mira's concern, in particular, about how the logic of alliances and immediately apparent. Both of you talk about burden sharing and I think in the subsequent chapters, it's going to be a big theme for your book, Abe. I haven't read them all. What do you do? My view is that Donald Trump's reported demand for a 500% increase in Korean funding under the Special Measures Agreement for U.S. bases is kind of an alliance breaker.

Michael Green: Maybe even, who knows, it's designed to be one. On the other hand, there's no way that a Biden Administration or members of Congress can go to the public and say, "Nope, we're good. Don't have to spend more." So Abe, why don't you pick this one up? How do you deal with burden sharing? It is a perennial with alliances. It's not at all new, it's just a little more extreme in the way it's articulated these days sometimes. How would you handle it?

Abe Denmark: As you said, the issue of burden sharing, the issue of wanting our allies and partners to do more is certainly nothing new. I think it's been going on for as long as we've had these relationships, but I think what we have with President Trump is something different. I think there's a fundamentally different understanding of what alliances are and what their value may be, in that I think the standard appreciation of alliances has been that they are a conduit for American power, that they're partners that help us achieve our mutual interests, that they give us presence and access in a region that's far from U.S. shores. As President Trump has been very clear in seeing them as exploited and that they are arrangements in which other countries take advantage of the United States.

Abe Denmark: So burden sharing is a very important issue and something that we need to talk about. But I think what we have with President Trump, especially, is something different. In terms of how we get our allies to do more, to me, the first step is actually to listen and to understand how they appreciate these issues and to understand where their trip wires are, where their allergies reside so that we

can craft a policy in a way that reinforces where they want to work with us and shapes that work in a way that supports our interests as much as it does theirs.

- Abe Denmark: So for example, with a lot of our allies and partners, Korea being a good example, if you run into a government meeting saying, "You need to cooperate with us to compete with the Chinese and hold the Chinese down," you're not going to get very far in a lot of those conversations. But if you start talking to them about encouraging Korean investment in regional infrastructure and supporting liberal norms and rules in cyberspace, in space and cooperating with them on freedom of navigation, you're going to get a lot of the same kind of cooperation that you want, but it's framed in a much more effective way that avoids some of their allergies.
- Michael Green: Mira, where are you on burden sharing?
- Mira Rapp-Hooper: I think I'm in a similar place to Abe, Mike. I'll actually start by giving us a tiny bit of history to help us understand why we are in this perennial burden sharing angst, at least in the last few decades. That is due in no small part to the fact that when the United States started this alliance system, it actually wanted burden sharing to be asymmetric. One of the original aims of the American Alliance System was that the United States was supposed to be the security patron because that gave it more influence over its allies defense and national security policies.
- Mira Rapp-Hooper: Victor Cha has written the book on allied control, in particular, but this is definitely true in Asia. This was also true in Europe and it was a very purposeful attempt by the United States to be able to sort of shape its global security posture by helping to shape that of its allies. So it shouldn't surprise us that after several decades of the United States actually building asymmetry and spending as a feature of the system, and so it takes a lot more work to undo it. I do think it's rather reasonable to ask questions now about how we can help allies to do more and to try to get them to do it. But my concerns, like Abe's, are that the tactics being used right now are likely to be totally self-defeating.
- Mira Rapp-Hooper: If we ask allies to quintuple their spending towards cost sharing and threaten to withdraw troops, if they don't do it, we are, as Mike said, pretty likely to break the alliance. The demands that we have made on South Korea are so high that they can't fulfill them and they are necessarily now in a position of feeling like their national security is going to be degraded if they don't. That creates a fundamental credibility problem at the heart of the Alliance that won't necessarily heal. So that brings us back to the question of what we can do to help them spend more in ways that are more constructive.
- Mira Rapp-Hooper: As Abe was signaling, I think, listening to them first and foremost, understanding how they might be able to direct the spending that they are doing more effectively, that is, spending perhaps, the same amount, but doing it in ways that actually benefit the Alliance, like contributing to readiness or research and development as opposed to spending too much money on personnel costs is

one way we could try to negotiate these things. Of course, although it's useful to fix targets for NATO allies and try to get them to spend 2% of GDP on defense, a one-size-fits-all approach simply won't fit everybody. But one of the things that I think we're also implying here in this conversation is that increasingly, we need to increase the pie of what allies are spending on.

Mira Rapp-Hooper: That is to say, we see a sort of 21st century threat environment that's not exclusively about military threats at all. So shaking that allies over the spending they do in their defense budgets actually isn't all that useful because we need them to be spending more on intelligence and through technological and scientific cooperation and through their foreign ministries. Those are actually ways that may be easier for them to accomplish. So again, I think by working with allies instead of doing this coercively and taking a much broader approach, we actually may find far more constructive solutions than have been apparent these last few years.

Michael Green: I think that's exactly right. I think that's why alliances are so interesting. So when you think about burden sharing, we often make a mistake in our own history of defining it narrowly. This is not the first administration to look for just a higher price tag from allies or a higher check to our forces. In the Carter Administration, when they were desperately dealing with downsizing the military after Vietnam and Soviet expansion, the Carter Administration pushed for a commitment to increase defense spending as a number. For the Japanese and Koreans and others, it looked like we didn't care about their security, to Abe's point. The Reagan Administration, Rich Armitage, in particular at the time, changed that and said, "We really care more about what you can do, not how much you're spending," and had people within the system under Prime Minister Nakasone who expanded what we call roles, missions and capabilities.

Michael Green: The Japanese spent more, but they took on more risks. They took on more missions. To Mira's point about look for different ways they can do it, they spend a heck of a lot more on development assistance to frontline states. The overall package gave us more capability across the dime spectrum across all the diplomatic and economic toolkits we need, but it also showed the Soviets we're on the same side. The problem with doing a ledger approach to burden sharing is it emphasizes differences and disagreements and that helps the bad guys. It helps the adversaries try to drive wedges and alliances.

Benjamin Rimland: Thank you for joining us for part one of our discussion with Abe Denmark and Mira Rapp-Hooper. Tune in next week for part two of the conversation where Mike, Mira and Abe will continue to discuss the importance of alliance coordination, the challenges U.S. alliances currently face and how U. S. alliance is factored to competition with China.

Andrew Schwartz: Thanks for listening. For more on strategy and the Asia Program's work, visit the CSIS website at [csis.org](https://www.csis.org) and click on the Asia Program page.