



# Cato Handbook for Policymakers

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## 54. East Asian Security Commitments

### **Policymakers should**

- terminate, within three years, all defense treaties with South Korea and the Philippines, and withdraw all American military units from those countries by that deadline;
- rescind, within three years, the informal commitment to defend Taiwan;
- continue the policy of being willing to sell Taiwan conventional weapon systems;
- withdraw all ground forces from Japan within two years;
- reassess whether to continue stationing any air and naval units in Japan; and
- immediately commence discussions with Japan about replacing the U.S.-Japan security treaty with a more informal cooperative security arrangement.

The United States has formal “mutual” defense treaties with Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines, all established during the initial decade of the cold war. Washington also has an implicit commitment to defend Taiwan. That commitment is contained in the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, which Congress passed at the time the Carter administration recognized the People’s Republic of China as the legitimate government of that country. The TRA pledge to sell Taiwan weapons of a defensive nature and to regard any coercion by Beijing to compel Taiwan to reunify with the mainland as a grave breach of the peace replaced the formal defense treaty that Washington had maintained with Taipei.

All those defense commitments have a musty, obsolete quality. They were established at a time when America’s allies (in reality, security clients) were poor nations that would have been hard-pressed to defend themselves against any capable adversary. Moreover, the United States

undertook defense obligations in East Asia at a time when that region appeared to be a crucial theater in the overall struggle against international communism.

That context has changed beyond recognition in the 21st century. Japan is one of the leading economic powers in the world, and South Korea and Taiwan are among the “Asian Tiger” economic success stories. The Philippines has lagged, but even that country is not as weak and vulnerable as it appeared in the late 1940s or early 1950s. And while South Korea and Taiwan still confront threats to their independence (North Korea and China, respectively), those parochial quarrels do not have the kind of broader strategic significance to the United States that might justify extending security guarantees. To be blunt, with the partial exception of its alliance with Japan, America still incurs major risks for very modest—and largely theoretical—benefits. The defense treaties with South Korea and the Philippines as well as the informal security obligation to Taiwan should be terminated. Even the defense treaty with Japan needs to be reassessed.

## South Korea

The U.S. alliance with the Republic of Korea (South Korea) is a cold war anachronism. Washington should have weaned Seoul from the U.S. security bottle years ago. When the security treaty went into effect in 1954, South Korea was a war-ravaged hulk that confronted not only a heavily armed North Korea, but a North Korea strongly backed by both Moscow and Beijing. Under those circumstances, it would have been virtually impossible for South Korea to provide for its own defense. Washington had just waged a bloody war to prevent a communist conquest of the country, and given the cold war context, U.S. leaders regarded the Korean Peninsula as a crucial theater in the effort to contain the power of the Soviet Union and China. Therefore, they deemed it necessary to keep the ROK as a security client. Most South Koreans were extremely grateful for the U.S. protection.

Those circumstances bear no resemblance to the situation in the 21st century. Today, South Korea has twice the population and an economy *40 times* larger than that of its communist nemesis. The ROK is an economic powerhouse with the world’s 13th-largest economy, and South Korean firms are competitive in a host of high-tech industries. Meanwhile, North Korea is one of the world’s economic basket cases, and there have

even been major episodes of famine in that pathetic country. Moscow and Beijing have major economic ties with the ROK and regard North Korea as an embarrassment. They have no interest whatever in backing another bid by Pyongyang to forcibly reunify the peninsula.

Under those conditions, South Korea should certainly be able to defend itself. Yet instead of building military forces sufficient to protect its security, Seoul remains heavily dependent on the United States for key aspects of its defense. Despite its proximity to North Korea, the ROK spends a paltry 2.77 percent of its gross domestic product on the military—less than does the United States, half a world away and located in a peaceful region. There is simply no justification for continuing that free ride.

Equally unpleasant is the growing lack of gratitude on the part of many South Koreans for the exertions the United States has made over the decades on behalf of their security. Public opinion polls show that younger South Koreans regard the United States as a more serious threat than North Korea. Indeed, many South Koreans now believe that Washington is the principal obstacle to better relations with North Korea and to eventual political reunification. The current government of President Lee Myung-bak may be less overtly anti-American than that of his predecessor, but that sentiment has scarcely diminished among the general population.

The ongoing North Korean nuclear crisis illustrates the drawbacks associated with Washington's insistence on micromanaging the security affairs of East Asia. In a normal international system, the East Asian frontline states would be taking the lead in formulating policies to deal with North Korea instead of expecting the United States to negotiate directly with Pyongyang and produce an agreement acceptable to them all. They would decide what risks they were willing to incur to compel Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear program—or in the alternative, whether they were prepared to live with a nuclear-armed North Korea.

That is not to say that the United States has no interests at stake regarding North Korea's nuclear ambitions. Washington understandably wants to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons—in East Asia and elsewhere. There is also legitimate concern that North Korea might eventually become a nuclear arms peddler, supplying bombs to other anti-American regimes—and perhaps even to terrorist organizations. Pyongyang's apparent assistance to Syria regarding nuclear technology highlighted the proliferation problem.

Nevertheless, the danger a nuclear-armed North Korea could pose to the United States is more remote and theoretical than the danger to North

Korea's neighbors. Their risk exposure is inherent—imposed by the realities of geography. Even if North Korea acquired only a few nuclear warheads and only modestly increased the range of its current delivery systems, it would pose a plausible threat to the security of South Korea, Japan, China, and Russia.

Conversely, America's risk exposure is largely discretionary. The principal reason Washington is obsessed with the North Korean problem is the presence of more than 27,000 U.S. troops in South Korea. Because of those forces, America has put itself, quite literally, on the frontlines of a potentially explosive crisis.

That approach is precisely the opposite of the course Washington ought to adopt. The new administration should immediately begin to reduce America's risk exposure by ordering a phased withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Korea. Washington should also indicate to the East Asian powers that they bear primary responsibility for dealing with the problem of North Korea's nuclear program, since they have the most at stake.

It is time, indeed it is long past time, to insist that South Korea manage its own security affairs. The United States has drawn down its military forces stationed in that country from approximately 37,000 to 27,000 over the past six years. Washington should implement a complete withdrawal within the next three years and terminate the misnamed mutual security treaty. That commitment was designed for an entirely different era. There is no need and very little benefit today for keeping South Korea as a security client.

## Taiwan

Washington's security commitment to Taiwan is more vague and informal than the mutual defense treaty with South Korea. It is contained in provisions of the Taiwan Relations Act, which Congress passed in 1979 in response to the Carter administration's decision to end diplomatic relations with the Republic of China (which still claimed to be the legitimate government of the mainland as well as Taiwan) and recognize the People's Republic of China. The TRA commits the United States to provide defensive arms to Taiwan and to regard any attempt by Beijing to use military coercion against Taiwan as a "grave breach of the peace." That commitment falls short of a pledge to intervene with U.S. forces, but it implies as much.

Washington has implemented its policy regarding Taiwan with an approach that experts have described as “dual deterrence” or “strategic ambiguity.” The logic of strategic ambiguity is that the Taiwanese will remain uncertain about the extent of U.S. protection—especially if Taipei engages in provocative conduct. Conversely, Beijing will believe that using military force against the island is too risky, because the United States would probably intervene. Supposedly, this mutual uncertainty should lead to caution and restraint on both sides of the Taiwan Strait.

The chief problem with that policy is that it assumes both governments will interpret Washington’s posture in exactly the way U.S. officials desire. Unfortunately, events suggest that Taipei and Beijing may be reading American policy in precisely the opposite way from what U.S. leaders intend. The Taiwanese seem increasingly confident that the United States would never abandon a fellow democracy. China, at the same time, seems ever more skeptical that the United States would disrupt the entire global economy and risk war with a nuclear-armed China just to back a small, upstart secessionist island. Those developments are a warning bell in the night about the danger of miscalculation.

From the standpoint of basic prudence, the defense commitment to Taiwan is unwise. As China’s economic leverage and military capabilities grow, it becomes increasingly problematic and dangerous for the United States to act as Taiwan’s protector. As noted in Chapter 53, Beijing is not likely to tolerate Taiwan’s *de facto* independence indefinitely, even if future governments in Taipei avoid adopting the kinds of assertive, pro-independence policies that the government of President Chen Shui-bian pursued between 2000 and 2008. The best strategy for the United States would be to limit its risk exposure by confining its role to selling arms to Taipei. The implied obligation contained in the Taiwan Relations Act to intervene with U.S. forces in the event of a crisis should be rescinded.

## **The Philippines**

The United States maintains a defense treaty with the Philippines that was established following the end of Manila’s status as a U.S. colony. Until the early 1990s, the United States also maintained a major naval base and a major air base in that country. That direct military presence came to an end when ash from a volcanic eruption rendered the air base unusable and an increasingly nationalistic Philippine government declined to renew the lease to the naval base.

Manila invited Washington to send troops again following the 9/11 terrorist attacks to help combat an Islamic militant organization that had ties to al Qaeda. U.S. forces have continued that mission in a low-key fashion in the intervening years. Public sentiment in the Philippines seems divided about military ties to the United States. Philippine leaders appreciate the assistance against Islamic opponents, but the population does not seem eager to see a new, large-scale U.S. military presence, despite some worries about China's long-term ambitions.

The alliance with the Philippines has even less relevance to genuine American interests in the 21st century than does the alliance with South Korea. Even during the cold war, it was a stretch to argue that the Philippines was central to the struggle against Soviet imperialism. The U.S. bases in the Philippines were "useful" largely to facilitate dubious military ventures in East Asia—especially the war in Vietnam.

Absent the cold war strategic context, there is even less justification for a defense relationship with Manila. It is certainly not in America's best interest to become a party to the murky domestic struggles between the Philippine government and restless Muslim minorities. And although some U.S. Navy and Air Force leaders appear to hunger for the reestablishment of major bases in the Philippines as part of a containment strategy directed against China, that too would be both unnecessary and unwise. The United States should promptly terminate the defense treaty with Manila.

## Japan

Washington's most significant security relationship in East Asia is the alliance with Japan. That relationship is enshrined in a mutual defense treaty, first signed in 1951 and later updated. The United States also maintains a substantial air, naval, and marine presence in Japan, and American ships make extensive use of port facilities in the country.

Although U.S. leaders gradually came to view Japan as a useful junior partner in the cold war containment strategy against the Soviet Union, the emphasis was always on "junior." Indeed, American officials seemed to regard the alliance as much a means to prevent the emergence of independent Japanese military power as to thwart communist ambitions in East Asia. As late as 1991, the commander of U.S. Marine forces in Japan stated publicly that the U.S. military presence was the "cork in the bottle" when it came to constraining Japan from developing (and possibly using) military power on an independent basis. Experts and pundits, such as *Washington Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer, fretted that without

Washington's restraining influence, the Japanese navy might grow strong enough to one day prowl the Strait of Malacca. With lingering memories of imperial Japan in the 1930s, they wanted to forestall a resurgence of Japanese influence.

For its part, Japan seemed content with being America's very junior security partner. The relationship spared Tokyo from spending more than a paltry 0.8 to 0.9 percent of its gross domestic product on the military, and equally important, it spared Japanese leaders from addressing security issues that would be contentious among domestic political constituencies and would heighten diplomatic tensions with neighboring countries that still seemed obsessed with Imperial Japan's depredations during the 1930s and 1940s.

In the past decade, though, attitudes have shifted among the governing elites in both Japan and the United States. It began to dawn on Japanese political and military leaders that America's interests and policy preferences might not always be the same as Japan's, and that Tokyo could not always count on Washington to adequately protect Japan's vital interests. That point was driven home in 1998 when North Korea conducted a missile test that included overflying Japan. U.S. leaders responded with a casualness that bordered on indifference, much to the annoyance and frustration of their Japanese counterparts. Not long after that episode, Japan decided to develop its own system of spy satellites instead of relying on the United States for the necessary data. More generally, sentiment has gradually grown in Japan for a more assertive security policy.

American attitudes have also become more favorable to the prospect of a more active role for Japan in the security arena. The report of the so-called Armitage Commission (named after future Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage) in the late 1990s proposed that Japan play a more robust security role, albeit still in a supporting capacity to the United States. Not coincidentally, Washington's policy regarding the U.S.-Japan alliance during the Bush administration seemed to adhere rather closely to those recommendations, quite possibly reflecting Secretary Armitage's influence.

Japan is an important security partner of the United States and should play a crucial role in the gradual emergence of a multipolar security environment in East Asia. Tokyo's position is especially pivotal if the United States does not want to be the only power standing in the way of eventual Chinese hegemony in that region. Despite underinvesting in defense, Japan has developed modern, capable naval and air forces, and



it is certainly capable of doing even more. Although Japan is relevant to important American interests in East Asia and beyond, we should not simply let the alliance operate as though it were on autopilot. It is time for a comprehensive review of every aspect of Washington's security relations with Tokyo.

We should especially move to terminate obsolete portions of that relationship. Most notably, that means withdrawing all U.S. ground forces from Japan. Most of those forces consist of Marine Corps units stationed in Okinawa. U.S. military bases occupy approximately 20 percent of the island's land mass, including some prime real estate, and the presence has long been a source of extreme irritation to the inhabitants. Keeping the marines there makes sense only if the United States intends to intervene with ground forces in a new Korean war or to wage a land war somewhere else in East Asia. Neither mission makes sense from the standpoint of genuine American interests. Those forces should be withdrawn immediately, and the bases closed.

The future disposition of U.S. air and naval forces is a more complex and difficult decision. Some forces should certainly be withdrawn, and many of them can be relocated to American possessions in the Central Pacific, especially Guam, without having a significant negative effect on U.S. military capabilities in that part of the world. But given the importance of East Asia, both strategically and economically, it is uncertain whether the United States should withdraw all its air and naval forces from Japan. That topic needs to be a crucial aspect of discussions about the future U.S.-Japan security relationship.

Those discussions also need to focus on whether the defense treaty should be retained in its current form. At the very least, Washington should insist that Tokyo now take the lead in addressing the security problems in East Asia instead of expecting the United States to continue its dominant role. It is possible that a more informal and flexible security relationship would serve both countries better than the formal alliance.

In any case, Washington's security commitments in East Asia need to be drastically pruned. The alliances with the Philippines and South Korea (to say nothing of the even more distant and irrelevant pact with Australia) should be abolished. Even before rescinding those treaties, the United States should withdraw all its military forces from such client states. Finally, the informal defense commitment to Taiwan must be eliminated. The alliance with Japan is in a different category since it has far greater relevance to legitimate American security interests. However, even that alliance should not be considered sacrosanct.

## Suggested Readings

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