

CHAPTER 3

U.S. Allied Burden-sharing and Supplementary Security in Southeast Asia

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Introduction

How can the United States' most capable allies in the Indo-Pacific region—Australia, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and Japan—constructively shape U.S. foreign and defense policy towards Southeast Asia during the second Trump administration? The United States has encouraged these countries to increase their security contributions to Southeast Asia since the 2000s as part of the expansion of bilateral alliance burden-sharing agendas. In recent years, both the first Trump and Biden administrations have also tried to better coordinate and, where possible, combine U.S. and allied efforts towards Southeast Asia through minilateral channels. However, these collective efforts to support Southeast Asia's security resilience against Chinese coercion risk fracturing during the second Trump administration as the objectives of the United States and its allies diverge.

The Trump administration has so far prioritized trade over security in its approach towards Southeast Asia, such as imposing tariffs, demanding concessions on critical sectors, terminating development assistance programs, defunding governance initiatives, and monetizing its security role. Meanwhile, its security agenda has primarily targeted allies themselves in the context of increasing defense burden-sharing. This presents a dilemma for Australia, the ROK, and Japan. Should they persist with their previous Southeast Asia policies that in key respects were designed to complement U.S. efforts? Or should they instead try to supplement the deficiencies in the Trump administration's Southeast Asia strategy, even if this is not duly credited as regional burden-sharing?

This article argues that U.S. allies should coordinate amongst themselves on how they can support the security capacity needs of Southeast Asian partners in areas that continue to be a U.S. priority. They should also rethink whether they have the resources to continue funding those lines of effort that have been downgraded by the Trump administration. Put simply, they will have to prioritize how their limited budgets can make the largest possible impact without relying on U.S. commitments and resources. They should instead review lines of effort and resources based on a hierarchy of needs that plays to their own niche strengths.

The article proceeds as follows. First, it discusses how the United States has expanded burden-sharing demands on allies beyond bilateral issues to encompass regional security. Second, it reviews how the first Trump administration (2017–2020) began minilateral efforts through the Quad but mostly continued with deconfliction in the case of the ROK. Third, it reviews the Biden administration's

more successful efforts to forge a coalition of allies to work together in Southeast Asia. Fourth, it examines the second Trump administration's sharper focus on military deterrence in Southeast Asia while abandoning many of the regional governance tools for winning influence funded during President Trump's first term in office. It analyzes the dilemmas facing allies in responding to U.S. signals and how they need to balance between complementing, supplementing, or unilateralizing their provision of public goods to Southeast Asia. Fifth, it briefly discusses a case where there is strongest alignment between the Trump administration and allies on the need to increase maritime security capacity building in Southeast Asia. By choosing a hard case for the trade-off argument presented, it seeks to show that, even where there is clear alignment in priorities, potential gaps in cooperation can still emerge. The case of the Philippines' maritime security agenda is a most likely case for cooperation that nonetheless will require calibrating the trade-offs. Finally, it concludes by highlighting how the time has come for Australia, the ROK, and Japan to expand consultations among themselves without the United States present to better coordinate their regional engagement strategies, not to mention their respective alliance management strategies.

Alliance Burden-sharing Beyond the Alliance

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has wanted its most economically and militarily capable allies in the Indo-Pacific region—particularly Australia, Japan, and more recently the ROK—to help shoulder the burden of upholding regional public goods.¹ This has in many ways been a natural outgrowth of these countries' bilateral alliance cooperation and the greater role they have come to play as their alliances with the United States have evolved from historically asymmetrical relationships into more equal partnerships. Periods of U.S. military drawdowns, economic crises, and global distraction, such as during the War on Terror, have particularly amplified these calls by the United States for its allies to do more to supplement its leadership role throughout key subregions such as Southeast Asia, the Pacific Islands, South Asia, and Central Asia.

Part of this shift has been a change in U.S. thinking about the alliance architecture in the Indo-Pacific. Since the 2000s, the United States has sought to complement the existing hub-and-spokes alliance model with a growing patchwork of 'spoke-to-spoke' minilateral and multilateral partnerships among its allies. For example, the United States has been conducting a Trilateral Strategic Dialogue with Australia and Japan since 2002,² and more recently formalized trilateral cooperation with the ROK

¹ Tomohiko Satake, "From 'Collective Defence' to 'International Security': Security Burden-sharing in the US-Japan and the US-Australia Alliances During the Post-Cold War Era," Australian National University (2010).

² U.S. Department of State, "Trilateral Strategic Dialogue Joint Statement" (March 20, 2006), <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2006/63411.htm>.

and Japan,³ as well as with Japan and the Philippines.⁴ Given the outsized security role played by the United States in the security requirements of each ally, the nature of their spoke-to-spoke cooperation has naturally focused on economic and diplomatic exchanges, as well as emerging opportunities to coordinate or cooperate in their respective regional strategies.

The nature of U.S. allies' own relations with subregions of importance has also evolved since the Cold War. Strong economic growth, trade liberalization, transnational supply chains, and labor migration have tied the broader region together.⁵ This has created "functional" incentives to cooperate on not just economic issues, but also common security challenges such as nuclear proliferation, civil wars, and transnational piracy and terrorism which threaten regional prosperity.⁶ In recent years, this has led to more frequent references in U.S. joint statements with these allies on issues, threats, and challenges beyond the scope of bilateral security cooperation. For example, in 2023 Australia and the United States announced "climate and clean energy" as the third pillar of their alliance.⁷ In 2021, the ROK-U.S. joint statement for the first time mentioned the importance of "preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait" as a priority for the alliance.⁸

For Australia, the ROK, and Japan, the most important subregion in terms of trade and economic security has become Southeast Asia. The changing relative power between U.S. allies and the rapidly growing economies and militaries of Southeast Asia in the decades since the end of the Cold War has resulted in a more balanced partnership between Australia, the ROK, and Japan with ASEAN as a grouping. For example, in the late 1980s Australia alone had a larger defense budget than all ASEAN states combined, but today it is roughly only two-thirds that of annual ASEAN defense spending.⁹ Similarly, total bilateral trade between the ROK and ASEAN increased from USD 10 billion in 1990 to USD 200 billion in 2022, growing more than 20-fold,¹⁰ and is almost 4.5 times larger than bilateral trade between the ROK and Australia, which was USD 45 billion in 2024.¹¹ Moreover, the ROK

³ The White House, "FACT SHEET: The Trilateral Leaders' Summit at Camp David" (August 18, 2023), <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/08/18/fact-sheet-the-trilateral-leaders-summit-at-camp-david/>.

⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Japan-U.S.-Philippines Summit," press release (April 11, 2024), https://www.mofa.go.jp/sa/sea2/ph/pageite_000001_00267.html.

⁵ Desmond Ball and Chong Guan Kwa, *Assessing Track 2 Diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific Region: A CSCAP Reader* (S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2010).

⁶ Ernst B. Haas, "Why Collaborate? Issue-Linkage and International Regimes," *World Politics* 32, no. 3 (1980): 357–405, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2010109>.

⁷ "Australia-United States Joint Leaders' Statement – An Alliance for Our Times," U.S. Embassy in Canberra (May 22, 2023), <https://au.usembassy.gov/australia-united-states-joint-leaders-statement/>.

⁸ "U.S.-ROK Leaders' Joint Statement," U.S. Mission Korea (May 21, 2021), <https://kr.usembassy.gov/052121-u-s-rok-leaders-joint-statement/>.

⁹ Andrew Mack, "Australian Security in the 1990s," Working Paper 1993/9, Department of International Relations, The Australian National University (December 1993), p.14, <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/server/api/core/bitstreams/f541d6e0-5c2a-4e83-9c5b-5a4d724e01db/content>.

¹⁰ Jaehyon Lee, "South Korea Must Sharpen Its Strategy for Southeast Asia," *Global Asia*, June 2024, https://www.globalasia.org/v19no2/cover/south-korea-must-sharpen-its-strategy-for-southeast-asia_jaehyon-lee.

¹¹ Cho Hyun, "Special Keynote Address by H.E. Cho Hyun, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea at the 4th Korea-Australia Future Forum" (August 28, 2025), https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5689/view.do?seq=319671.

signed a free trade agreement (FTA) with ASEAN in 2005,¹² nine years before concluding one with Australia, while it has never signed one with Japan.

In recent years, alliance cooperation with third parties, and in other subregions, has emerged as a new pillar alongside traditional bilateral military cooperation, economic cooperation, and socio-cultural exchanges. For the United States, increasing allied contributions to key subregions and priority strategic partners has been a useful way to complement its own initiatives and ensure that they do not work at cross-purposes with U.S. interests. This has been implicitly built around sharing the burden of defending regional and global public goods from Chinese influence.

Regional Burden-sharing Under Trump 1.0

What does the Trump administration want to achieve in Southeast Asia? The past year has suggested his primary focus is on securing favorable trade balances using the threat of tariffs, as well as winning praise as a peacemaker in ending the border skirmishes between Cambodia and Thailand.¹³ Otherwise, President Trump and his cabinet members have made few comments about the major challenges facing Southeast Asian governments, such as the United States' "ironclad commitments"¹⁴ to the Philippines in upholding the rule of law in the South China Sea, ending the ongoing civil war in Myanmar,¹⁵ or supporting ASEAN community-building initiatives.

But history offers clues. The first Trump administration's declassified *United States Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific* from 2018 stated its core national security challenge as seeking to "maintain U.S. primacy" and "preventing China from establishing new, illiberal spheres of influence."¹⁶ Its desired end state was to ensure that "Southeast Asia is bound more tightly together in business, security, and civil society - including through a strengthened ASEAN - and works closely with the United States and our allies and key partners," and that "Southeast Asia is capable of managing terrorist threats with minimal assistance from non-ASEAN states." The three policy objectives that the Trump administration set for itself in Southeast Asia were to encourage ASEAN to "speak with one voice on key issues," "prevent the spread of terrorism," and "promote and support Burma's transition to democracy." Operationally, in Southeast Asia, the United States would try to "preserve and where possible expand foreign development assistance and defense engagement, including access, exercises and training, and interoperability."

¹² ASEAN-Korea Free Trade Area, "Background of AKFTA," <https://akfta.asean.org/index.php?page=background-of-akfta>.

¹³ The White House, "Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Secures Peace and Prosperity in Malaysia" (October 26, 2025), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/10/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-secures-peace-and-prosperity-in-malaysia/>.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of State, "Secretary Rubio's Call with Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs Manalo" (January 22, 2025), <https://www.state.gov/secretary-rubios-call-with-philippine-secretary-of-foreign-affairs-manalo>.

¹⁵ Noland D. McCaskill, "Pence calls on U.N. to take action on humanitarian crisis in Myanmar," *Politico* (September 20, 2017), <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/09/20/mike-pence-united-nations-myanmar-242934>.

¹⁶ The White House, "2018 United States Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific," (2018), <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/IPS-Final-Declass.pdf>.

To achieve these objectives, the first Trump administration's policy was to "strengthen the capabilities and will" of Australia, the ROK, and Japan to contribute to U.S. regional efforts in Southeast Asia and the rest of the region.¹⁷ This was partly framed through a realist balancing lens in which the United States would need to mobilize a coalition to compete against China's growing global influence. But it also stemmed from President Trump's America First agenda, in which economically prosperous U.S. allies that had benefited from security protection would be urged to increase their global security responsibilities from a burden-sharing perspective. Most of the minilateral coordination was centered on the revitalized Quadrilateral Security Dialogue among the United States, Australia, Japan, and India.¹⁸

The first Trump administration's regional cooperation with the progressive Moon Jae-in administration of the ROK was limited to consultations between their respective Indo-Pacific Strategy and the ROK's New Southern Policy. For instance, in 2019, cooperation between the two sides was limited to "[pledging] to pursue harmonious cooperation between the ROK New Southern Policy and the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy under the regional cooperation principles of openness, inclusiveness, and transparency."¹⁹ By 2021, both sides had announced more concrete areas, such as "regional coordination on law enforcement, cybersecurity, public health and promoting a green recovery [as well as] sustainable development, energy security, and responsible water management in the Mekong sub-region."²⁰ But, as Michael Green has noted, "Fearful of offending China, the Moon government kept the NSP unilateral and thus lost opportunities for alignment with other like-minded states beyond explaining what Korea itself was doing."²¹

Regional Burden-sharing Under Biden

During the Biden administration, working with allies to uphold regional public goods became one of the central pillars of the administration's national security strategy, which mentioned 'allies' or 'alliances' 96 times and emphasized, "A free and open Indo-Pacific can only be achieved if we build collective capacity."²² At the same time, the Biden administration made significant efforts to strengthen and empower its treaty alliances, such as the AUKUS partnership with Australia, improving extended

¹⁷ The White House, "2018 United States Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific" (2018), <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/IPS-Final-Declass.pdf>.

¹⁸ Tanvi Madan, "The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of the 'Quad,'" *War on the Rocks* (November 16, 2017), <https://warontherocks.com/2017/11/rise-fall-rebirth-quad/>.

¹⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, "Public Summary of Future Defense Vision of the Republic of Korea – U.S. Alliance," (November 19, 2019), <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Nov/19/2002213369/-1/-1/1/PUBLIC-SUMMARY-OF-VISION-FOR-THE-FUTURE-OF-THE-ALLIANCE-FINAL.PDF>.

²⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea, "U.S.-ROK Leaders' Joint Statement" (May 21, 2021), https://overseas.mofa.go.kr/us-en/brd/m_4497/view.do?seq=761810.

²¹ Michael Green, "Putting Korea back in the diplomatic game," *JoongAng Ilbo* (March 12, 2023), <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2023/03/12/opinion/columns/Korea-US-China/20230312195632309.html>.

²² The White House, "National Security Strategy" (October 2022), <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>, p.37.

nuclear deterrence assurances with the ROK by establishing the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) as per the Washington Declaration, and changes to command and control of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF).

Of relevance to this article, the Biden administration also sought to connect these two parallel lines of effort—one with Southeast Asia and one with its allies—into a latticework of interweaving security linkages and cooperation. Its 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy expanded on this by declaring, “We will support and empower allies and partners as they take on regional leadership roles themselves, and we will work in flexible groupings that pool our collective strength to face up to the defining issues of our time, particularly through the Quad.”²³ The Biden administration strengthened relations with ASEAN as a grouping, including upgrading ties to a comprehensive strategic partnership,²⁴ hosting all ASEAN leaders at the White House,²⁵ and launching new initiatives on health, climate and environment, energy, transportation, and gender equity and equality.²⁶

U.S. cooperation with Australia and Japan has been more advanced, with a focus on Quad-led efforts. The Biden administration built on the Trump administration’s Quad work during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to the Quad Vaccine Partnership and also funding new maritime domain awareness initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA).²⁷ Notably, the September 2024 Wilmington Declaration reaffirmed the four countries’ “consistent and unwavering support for ASEAN centrality and unity,”²⁸ and would in essence frame their activities as supportive of ASEAN decisions and priorities rather than seeking to impose their own or narrow their resourcing to only a small number of member countries. By contrast, the second Trump administration’s Quad Foreign Ministers’ Meeting led by Secretary of State Marco Rubio was more pointed in its focus on priority issues to the United States in Southeast Asia, especially “maritime law enforcement cooperation with the region, which will support efforts to curtail illicit maritime activity, including piracy, drug trafficking, infringements on border security, and illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing.”²⁹

²³ The White House, “Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States” (February 2022), <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>, p.9.

²⁴ The White House, “FACT SHEET: President Biden and ASEAN Leaders Launch the U.S.-ASEAN Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” (November 12, 2022), <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/11/12/fact-sheet-president-biden-and-asean-leaders-launch-the-u-s-asean-comprehensive-strategic-partnership/>.

²⁵ Michael D. Shear, “Biden Hosts Southeast Asian Leaders as He Tries to Return Focus to China,” *New York Times*, May 12, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/12/us/politics/biden-asian-nations-china.html>.

²⁶ U.S. Department of State, “The United States-ASEAN Relationship” (July 26, 2024), <https://2021-2025.state.gov/the-united-states-asean-relationship-3/>.

²⁷ The White House, “Fact Sheet: 2024 Quad Leaders’ Summit” (September 21, 2024), <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/09/21/fact-sheet-2024-quad-leaders-summit/>.

²⁸ The White House, “The Wilmington Declaration Joint Statement from the Leaders of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States” (September 21, 2024), <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/09/21/the-wilmington-declaration-joint-statement-from-the-leaders-of-australia-india-japan-and-the-united-states/>.

²⁹ U.S. Department of State, “2025 Quad Foreign Ministers’ Meeting” (July 1, 2025), <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/07/2025-quad-foreign-ministers-meeting>.

With the ROK, the Biden administration actively supported the conservative Yoon Suk Yeol administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy released in December 2022 and its commitment to increase the ROK's regional contributions. This featured as a key third pillar of ROK-U.S.-Japan trilateral cooperation that was also deepening in tandem. For example, the August 2023 Camp David summit, which featured trilateral agreements to cooperate, stated, "They aim to bolster existing regional architecture, such as ASEAN and the Pacific Islands Forum, and enhance our respective capacity-building and humanitarian efforts through greater coordination," including trilateral development finance cooperation, maritime security capacity-building, and humanitarian response dialogues.³⁰ Subsequently, in November 2024, the three countries announced additional efforts, such as regional digital infrastructure, and especially development assistance to the Philippines, including port modernization, energy infrastructure, agribusiness, and large-scale transportation projects.³¹ In May 2025, the ROK, Japan, and the United States made progress on their Trilateral Maritime Security and Law Enforcement Cooperation Framework, which was announced in November 2024, to provide coast guard capacity-building support to ASEAN member states.³²

Regional Burden-sharing Under Trump 2.0

There was significant continuity between the first Trump administration and the Biden administration in pursuing a comprehensive Indo-Pacific strategy to compete with China for influence by working with like-minded allies and partners, including the Quad. During the second Trump administration's first year in 2025, there has been a clear break from this eight-year trend. The second Trump administration has shown limited interest in minilateral cooperation on issues such as health, climate and environment, and gender equity and equality. It has taken a much more mercantilist approach to not just Southeast Asia but the entire world, and has looked to shift the burden for many of the cooperation agendas and policies that constituted U.S. statecraft in Southeast Asia. These shifts have included opening market access and free trade, providing official development assistance, supporting democratic and transparent governance through free media platforms, and being the preferred partner for security cooperation and capacity-building.³³

It is not clear whether the second Trump administration even wants allies to contribute resources to

³⁰ The White House, "FACT SHEET: The Trilateral Leaders' Summit at Camp David" (August 18, 2023), <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/08/18/fact-sheet-the-trilateral-leaders-summit-at-camp-david/>.

³¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea, "Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States" (November 18, 2024), https://overseas.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5674/view.do?seq=321087.

³² U.S. Department of State, "Joint Statement from the Trilateral Meeting of the United States of America, Japan, and the Republic of Korea in New York City" (September 22, 2025), <https://www.state.gov/releases/2025/09/joint-statement-from-the-trilateral-meeting-of-the-united-states-of-america-japan-and-the-republic-of-korea-in-new-york-city>.

³³ United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, "Ranking Member Shaheen and Senate Foreign Relations Committee Democratic Members Publish Major New Report on the Consequences of the Trump Administration's Global Retreat and China's Strategic Gains," press release (July 14, 2025), <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/press/dem/release/ranking-member-shaheen-and-senate-foreign-relations-committee-democratic-members-publish-major-new-report-on-the-consequences-of-the-trump-administrations-global-retreat-and-chinas-strategic-gains>.

U.S. security efforts elsewhere. Under the second Trump administration, Southeast Asia is primarily a focus of trade rebalancing and military deterrence for a Taiwan contingency. As U.S. Secretary of War Pete Hegseth stated in his address at the 2025 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, “Ultimately, a strong, resolute, and capable network of allies and partners is our key strategic advantage [...] But it’s up to all of us to ensure that we live up to that potential by investing. U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific can, and should, quickly upgrade their own defenses.”³⁴ In his view, the most urgent burden-sharing that allies should be undertaking is increasing their own defense spending. This is why, for example, he told European countries to not send their naval and air assets to the Indo-Pacific region for exercises where they symbolically showed solidarity with the United States, stating, “We would much prefer that the overwhelming balance of European investment be on that continent.”³⁵ Likewise, the Trump administration has so far shown little interest in the NATO Indo-Pacific Four partnership to encourage the ROK, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand to increase their military and economic support for Ukraine.

Should allies persist with their previous Southeast Asia policies that in key respects were designed to complement U.S. efforts? The difficulty with this approach is that U.S. strategy in Southeast Asia is increasingly prioritizing military preparedness and maritime security issues over a holistic public goods agenda. Or should allies instead try to supplement the deficiencies in the Trump administration’s Southeast Asia strategy, even if this is not duly credited as regional burden-sharing? For example, they could decide that the vacuum caused by the closure of free media broadcasting services such as Radio Free Asia and Voice of America cannot be allowed to be filled by authoritarian disinformation, and therefore want to fund their own suitable replacement. However, it is doubtful that the Trump administration would view such efforts with gratitude in lieu of redirecting those funds to other U.S.-led regional efforts. A third option that emerges is whether U.S. allies should decouple their Southeast Asia strategies entirely and return to their own individual national strategies towards Southeast Asia, such as the Moon administration’s New Southern Policy.

U.S. efforts are increasingly characterized by reliance on a military-focused strategy aimed at securing territorial and maritime access, and a transactional approach to economic security issues. That is, the United States is losing the broader competition for influence against China in Southeast Asia while doubling down on its key partners and strengths in defense and security cooperation.³⁶ These competing rationales for Australia, the ROK, and Japan—complementary cooperation, supplementary cooperation, and unilateral cooperation—reflect different conclusions about the need for allies to

³⁴ U.S. Department of War, “Remarks by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth at the 2025 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore” (May 31, 2025), <https://www.war.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/4202494/remarks-by-secretary-of-defense-pete-hegseth-at-the-2025-shangri-la-dialogue-in/>.

³⁵ See, Noah Robertson, “Europeans map out Pacific aims as some in US want them to stay home,” *Defense News* (June 3, 2025), <https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2025/06/03/europeans-map-out-pacific-aims-as-some-in-us-want-them-to-stay-home/>.

³⁶ Susannah Patton, Jack Sato, and Rahman Yaacob, “Southeast Asia Influence Index,” Lowy Institute (September 2025), <https://influence.lowyinstitute.org/>.

harmonize their approaches to issues and countries that are not of direct bilateral relevance in their alliances with the United States.

In this sense, complementary cooperation would seek to persist with policies designed to support and enhance U.S. strategic objectives and efforts, even if those aims are not fully shared by allies themselves. That is, this would be an America First agenda. Examples that fit this category include many of the trade deals that allies have signed in 2025 in which they offered to share with the United States their niche industrial strengths, such as critical minerals or shipbuilding. The second model would be to prioritize supplementary cooperation by looking to fill the gaps and repair the deficiencies in U.S. regional engagement. Most obviously, any retreat from U.S. funding of public goods would therefore be covered by allies to ensure those goods continue to be delivered to regional recipients. For example, in early 2025, the Australian government announced that it would redirect \$100 million in development assistance funding from international organizations to Southeast Asia to fill the void left by the U.S. State Department's freeze and review of aid.³⁷ The third model would be to abandon any need to align or coordinate the regional engagement strategies of the United States with its allies, and for allies to simply push ahead with their own regional engagement separate from the United States.

Case Study: Philippines Maritime Capacity-building

The example of the Philippines helps to illustrate the trade-off problem facing U.S. allies in terms of complementing, supplementing, or unilateralizing their security-provider efforts. As the article has cited thus far, one of the persistent top U.S. priorities over the past decade has been to improve the maritime security capacity of key Southeast Asian partners, as well as ASEAN member states more generally, to defend their maritime sovereignty. This has been due to ongoing transnational issues such as piracy, illegal fishing, and people smuggling. But from a strategic perspective, it is also driven by China's escalating militarization of the South China Sea, its coercion of Southeast Asian governments, and its violations of the right to freedom of navigation in the exclusive economic zones of countries. As such, nearly all of the U.S. bilateral and unilateral agendas for cooperation with allies identify improving maritime security capacity as a priority.

In the case of the Philippines, which has borne the brunt of China's maritime coercion, the United States has high stakes involved as a treaty ally and former colonial power. It has devoted considerable effort and resources to expanding bilateral alliance cooperation, particularly through combined military exercises, rotational force deployments, and recent announcements of joint maritime patrols. The Philippines has maintained a consistent policy of calling for international support to its maritime

³⁷ Stephen Dziedzic, "Federal budget redirects aid spending to Pacific, South-East Asia as region braces for Trump administration cuts," *ABC News Australia* (March 26, 2025), <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-03-26/federal-budget-foreign-aid-spending/105095584>.

sovereignty, which has been reaffirmed through international legal rulings. Australia, the ROK, and Japan all have major commercial and naval maritime interests at stake in the Philippines that incentivize them to support Manila's sovereignty. Australia and the Philippines have been operating joint sea and air patrols for maritime surveillance in the South China Sea.³⁸ The ROK has longstanding shipbuilding and sustainment contracts to deliver frigates, corvettes, and patrol boats to the Philippines.³⁹ Japan provides and gifts coast guard vessels⁴⁰ and offers overseas security assistance financing.⁴¹ In addition, all three countries operate shipyards in the Philippines, with the ROK's presence in Subic Bay under HD Hyundai, Australia in Cebu under Austal, and Japan in Cebu under Tsuneishi Shipbuilding.

Even in the most likely case where the strategic interests of all parties, including the Philippines, are in alignment, as in the case described above, there will nevertheless be tensions in prioritization. For example, one of the flagship U.S. initiatives to strengthen Southeast Asia's maritime security resilience was a financing program for Philippine patrols as part of the \$300 million Counter PRC Influence Funds (CPIF). Similarly, in November 2024, the Biden administration launched the Maritime Security (MARSEC) Consortium with \$100 million in annual funds, bringing together public and private sector capital to deliver "low-cost, commercially available solutions to strengthen maritime domain awareness, logistics and sustainment, and maritime defense in Southeast Asia."⁴² However, in March 2025 the CPIF was frozen as part of the State Department review into aid.⁴³ Meanwhile, the Trump administration has made allied contributions to "restoring U.S. maritime dominance" a priority in 2025, demanding huge financial and industrial investments on the part of allies such as the ROK. These costs will inevitably put pressure on allies' budgetary capacity to contribute to other regional maritime security efforts or cooperate with partners such as the Philippines.⁴⁴

In the case of maritime security cooperation with the Philippines, U.S. allies could complement the Trump administration's policy as it evolves. For example, they could focus their own regional maritime security funds more narrowly in the Philippines and only those areas and capabilities deemed a priority by the United States, especially in northern Luzon island. Alternatively, they could supplement any weaknesses or vacuums that appear, such as in training or local community maritime resilience,

³⁸ Australian Associated Press, "Australia and Philippines begin joint patrols in South China Sea as regional tensions rise," *The Guardian* (November 25, 2023), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/nov/25/australia-and-philippines-begin-joint-patrols-in-south-china-sea-as-regional-tensions-rise>.

³⁹ Max Broad and Evan A. Laksmna, "South Korea's defence relations in Southeast Asia," International Institute for Strategic Studies (September 29, 2023), <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2023/09/south-koreas-defence-relations-in-southeast-asia/>.

⁴⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Prime Minister ISHIBA Shigeru's Visit to the Philippines (Visit to the Philippine Coast Guard)," press release (April 30, 2025), https://www.mofa.go.jp/sa/sea2/ph/pageite_000001_00953.html.

⁴¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Signing and Exchange of Notes for Official Security Assistance (OSA) FY2024 project to the Republic of the Philippines," press release (December 5, 2024), https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/pressite_000001_00791.html.

⁴² "DOD Launches Industry-Government Maritime Security (MARSEC) Consortium to Advance Maritime Security Across Southeast Asia," press release, U.S. Department of Defense (November 18, 2024), <https://www.war.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3968018/dod-launches-industry-government-maritime-security-marsec-consortium-to-advance/>.

⁴³ Martin Petty, "House panel presses Rubio to secure Philippines funding to counter China threat," *Reuters* (September 25, 2025), <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/house-panel-presses-rubio-secure-philippines-funding-counter-china-threat-2025-09-23/>.

⁴⁴ Peter K. Lee, "MAASGA: Making American and Allied Shipbuilding Great Again," *Asan Issue Brief* 2025-07, August 29, 2025.

funding for other Southeast Asian countries that might receive less U.S. support, or competing for influence in continental Southeast Asian countries such as Cambodia that also have maritime security needs. Finally, they could push ahead with their own maritime security cooperation.

Allied Burden-sharing Without the Ally?

In addition to U.S.-centered minilateral consultation mechanisms, the Indo-Pacific region will increasingly need minilateral formats without the United States for these countries to calibrate their commitments with alliance management considerations. Most recently, Australia, the ROK, and Japan have also quietly established trilateral dialogue channels to complement their U.S.-led alliance regional cooperation. Compared to Japan, Australia and the ROK have relatively limited national resources, and thus face capacity constraints in engaging with Southeast Asian countries or ASEAN as an institution. This structural condition means that they must make trade-off decisions when it comes to undertaking any substantial cooperation activities or financial investments in the region.

In response, U.S. allies have quietly begun to consult with each other in the absence of the United States to calibrate their regional strategies, and perhaps implicitly their alliance management strategies as well. In June 2024, senior diplomats from Australia, the ROK, and Japan met on a trilateral basis for the first time to hold the track-one Indo-Pacific Dialogue in Canberra, Australia.⁴⁵ The official readout, and the subsequent meeting in December 2024, succinctly noted that “the three countries shared their assessments of the situation in the Indo-Pacific region and exchanged views on potential areas of trilateral cooperation, particularly in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, focusing on fields such as maritime security and development cooperation.”⁴⁶ A trilateral track-two policy workshop that was held in Sydney in 2024 pushed the discussions further, bringing together leading researchers and former diplomats to consider how the three countries might coordinate their regional strategies in Southeast Asia and to explore “joint representations to the United States, including in strengthening multilateral regional mechanisms, strengthening US commitments to regional economic development and development assistance, and strengthening US extended deterrence.”⁴⁷

Another allied response has been to build out the nascent NATO Indo-Pacific Four meetings that have taken place on the sidelines of NATO summits, including Australia, the ROK, Japan, and New Zealand.⁴⁸ These dialogue channels, which have recently included defense ministers, likewise offer a

⁴⁵ Republic of Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Outcomes of ROK-Australia Indo-Pacific Dialogue and Second ROK-Japan-Australia Indo-Pacific Dialogue,” press release (December 12, 2024), https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=322725.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Christopher J. Watterson. “Seizing the moment: Outcomes of the inaugural Australia-Japan-South Korea trilateral dialogue,” (September 18, 2024), United States Studies Centre, <https://www.ussc.edu.au/outcomes-of-the-inaugural-australia-japan-south-korea-trilateral-dialogue>, p. 14.

⁴⁸ Kester Abbott, “Beyond Alignment: Moving the NATO-IP4 Partnership Forward,” United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney, December 2025, <https://www.ussc.edu.au/beyond-alignment-moving-the-nato-ip4-partnership-forward>.

potential channel for U.S. allies to consult with each other on how to coordinate their regional efforts. These emerging conversations reflect the uncertainties that now hang over U.S. announcements and commitments to see through particular lines of effort with its allies in Southeast Asia. While some issues, such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, might be relatively easier to commence or wind back at short notice, other issues, such as infrastructure financing and long-term grants and loans, are not.

Canberra, Seoul, and Tokyo should have regularized channels of communication in which they can share relevant developments in their bilateral relations with Washington that could have implications for collective regional public goods provision. For example, how could Australia's decision to undertake the AUKUS partnership have been more effectively messaged in Southeast Asia, where concerns about nuclear proliferation, military escalation, and antagonizing China led to diplomatic criticism throughout much of 2021 and 2022? Could the ROK and Japan have been more effective advocates for AUKUS if they had been briefed? This is particularly significant given President Trump's sudden announcement to share naval nuclear propulsion technology with the ROK during his visit to Gyeongju in the ROK for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in November 2025. While alliance negotiations about sensitive military cooperation are, by necessity, classified and generally not permitted to be shared with foreign nationals, it would be valuable to set up a mutually agreed protocol for how the three allies can notify each other and offer an opportunity to answer questions and coordinate diplomatic messaging before the rest of the world finds out, including adversaries. At least, it would limit the degree of misinformation that the other allies would produce, such as from their politicians and media commentators.

Conclusion

U.S. allies, rather than adversaries, have so far faced the brunt of the second Trump administration's wrath. The extractive demands for niche industrial and economic assets, from Australian critical minerals to ROK shipbuilding expertise, will continue. The demand for all allies to increase defense spending will also not go away. U.S. allies will therefore need to decide which aspects of regional governance they might have to step back from, and which they will need to go all out on. Resources will also have to be targeted for depth rather than disbursed for breadth if U.S. allies are to have a meaningful chance of making a difference compared to other potential partners in Southeast Asia. This will put downward pressure on these countries' aid and development budgets towards Southeast Asia, as shown by the ROK's decision to reduce its 2026 foreign aid budget by 15 percent. Only projects that meet a three-fold strategic triage are likely to survive the coming period of efficiency and streamlining: Is the capability, asset, or knowledge something that Southeast Asian partners would not otherwise be able to eventually acquire through their own means? Is the capability, asset, or knowledge something that Australia, the ROK, and Japan have an asymmetric advantage over China in terms of quantity or superior quality? And, is the capability, asset, or knowledge something that

the United States will not or cannot provide for the foreseeable future? This more demanding period of alliance burden-sharing will force allies to make trade-offs in what they can acceptably contribute to the regional public goods agenda. Adopting a clearer framework for measuring resource allocation would help stretch their finite resources to benefit as many partners as possible.

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