



# AMERICA'S ALLIANCES

AFTER TRUMP:

LESSONS FROM

THE SUMMER OF '69

LINDSEY FORD

ZACK COOPER



Richard Nixon's 1969 Guam doctrine led America's allies in Asia to pursue a variety of strategies based on perceptions of America's reliability. If the Biden administration wants to strengthen the country's alliances moving forward, and avoid repeating Nixon's alliance errors, its first priority should be to restore confidence in U.S. reliability.

Shortly after media reports declared Joe Biden the winner of the 2020 U.S. presidential election, the congratulations from U.S. allies began rolling in. Though such notes are expected diplomatic niceties, some leaders made clear their desire to turn the page on four years of tempestuous alliance relations. The election, declared German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, provided an opportunity for “a new trans-Atlantic beginning, a New Deal.”<sup>1</sup> Such reactions are hardly surprising. President Donald Trump repeatedly depicted U.S. alliances as “unfair” and “obsolete” arrangements.<sup>2</sup> Biden, in contrast, promised that closer coordination with allies would be a hallmark of his foreign policy.<sup>3</sup> Yet, a major question remains: Will America's alliances simply bounce back to the status quo ante after four years of U.S. ultimatums or has a more fundamental transformation begun?

While it is too soon to offer definitive statements about Trump's long-term impact on American alliances, the debate bears hallmarks of an earlier attempt to recalibrate U.S. alliances: President Richard Nixon's 1969 Guam doctrine. The allied responses to the Guam doctrine hold important lessons for the Biden administration as it works to strengthen America's alliances. We argue that the same concerns about strategic overreach that have driven U.S. demands for greater “burden sharing” also tend to shake allied confidence in the United

States. Instead of anchoring to the United States, many regional states are therefore pursuing alternatives — augmenting, autonomizing, and accommodating — often adopting a combination of these four strategies. Allies choose which of these approaches to pursue based both on their perception of American reliability and the level of adversary threat they face.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, if the Biden administration wants America's allies to do more within an alliance context, its first priority should be to restore confidence in U.S. reliability.<sup>5</sup>

### Echoes of Nixon's Guam Doctrine

On July 25, 1969, Nixon gave informal remarks on “America's role in Asia” while on a stopover in Guam.<sup>6</sup> At the time, financial constraints and anti-war sentiment were triggering a reassessment of long and costly overseas commitments.<sup>7</sup> As a result, Nixon warned, “The United States is going to be facing, we hope before too long—no one can say how long, but before too long—a major decision: What will be its role in Asia?”<sup>8</sup> Nixon then laid out what became the core of the Guam doctrine:

[T]he time has come when the United States, in our relations with all of our Asian friends, [must] be quite emphatic on two points: One, that we will keep our treaty

1 David Biller and John Leicester, “Many World Leaders Express Hope, Relief After Biden Win,” *AP News*, Nov. 8, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/election-2020-joe-biden-donald-trump-elections-anne-hidalgo-a4f71db8bab46c4dbc00bf02fe5ef3c1>.

2 “Trump Worries Nato with ‘Obsolete’ Comment,” *BBC News*, Jan. 16, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38635181>.

3 Joseph R. Biden Jr., “Why America Must Lead Again: Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy After Trump,” *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 2 (March/April 2020), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>.

4 On assessments of individual leaders, see Michaela Mattes, “Reputation, Symmetry, and Alliance Design,” *International Organization* 66, no. 4 (October 2012): 153–72, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002081831200029X>; and Keren Yarhi-Milo, Joshua D. Kertzer, and Jonathan Renshon, “Tying Hands, Sinking Costs, and Leader Attributes,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62, no. 10 (2018): 2150–79, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0022002718785693>.

5 Danielle L. Lupton, “Biden Has a Narrow Window to Restore U.S. Credibility,” *Foreign Affairs*, Feb. 8, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-02-08/biden-has-narrow-window-restore-us-credibility>.

6 Richard Nixon, “Informal Remarks in Guam with Newsmen,” July 25, 1969, The American Presidency Project, accessed Dec. 17, 2020, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/239667>.

7 Johannes Kadura, *The War After the War: The Struggle for Credibility During America's Exit from Vietnam* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press: 2016).

8 Nixon, “Informal Remarks in Guam with Newsmen.”

commitments ... but, two, that as far as the problems of internal security are concerned ... the United States is going to encourage and has a right to expect that this problem will be increasingly handled by, and the responsibility for it taken by, the Asian nations themselves.<sup>9</sup>

In asking Asian allies to do more for their own defense, Nixon noted that “[a]ll of them now, or virtually all, are on their own feet, at least from an economic standpoint, and are very good customers of ours.”<sup>10</sup> Months later, Nixon delivered a formal address to the American public in which he argued, “The defense of freedom is everybody’s business — not just America’s business. And it is particularly the responsibility of the people whose freedom is threatened.”<sup>11</sup> These remarks echoed sentiments he had made in a 1967 *Foreign Affairs* article suggesting the United States could no longer afford to serve as the primary bulwark against Asian instability. Instead, he argued that Asian counterparts ought to “attempt to contain aggression in their own areas” and “establish an indigenous Asian framework for their own future security.”<sup>12</sup>

At the heart of Nixon’s strategy was the belief that the United States had hit a point of overreach in which its strategy was no longer guided by a realistic assessment of U.S. interests. Overseas commitments had been allowed to drain valuable American resources. Nixon felt that the United States had developed a fixation on peripheral issues, such as the war in Vietnam, that had crowded out more vital priorities. He argued that America’s preoccupation with Vietnam had “distorted our picture of Asia. A small country on the rim of the continent has filled the screen of our minds; but it does not fill the map.”<sup>13</sup> Nixon was determined to rectify this distortion and reset the terms of American engagement.

Although Nixon promised the United States would remain a Pacific power and uphold its treaty commitments, it was clear that American engagement would change. Nixon’s Guam speech

sparked anxiety among Asian allies, but it was the execution of this strategy — in particular, the unexpected rapprochement with China and eventual fall of Saigon — that accelerated rethinking among Asian leaders about relying on the United States. Meanwhile, the administration prepared to draw down its presence in Asia, removing 20,000 service members from South Korea, 17,000 from Japan, and 16,000 from Thailand.<sup>14</sup> U.S. leaders also sought détente with Russia while scaling back their commitments to Taiwan and Southeast Asia. These decisions suggested to regional states that Washington would jettison commitments that U.S. leaders viewed as inconsequential or obsolete.

The regional response to the Guam doctrine marked the beginning of a profound realignment. Asian allies and partners complained that Nixon’s new approach reflected a “weakening of the American will to uphold the international order,” suggesting “the inevitable American movement to devolution.”<sup>15</sup> Through the 1970s, Asia became more multipolar and regional alignments more amorphous. Smaller powers were forced to adapt to a more uncertain regional power balance in which the U.S. role as security guarantor was no longer assured. Although Nixon left office in 1974, his theory of “dynamic stability” shaped the region for the next half century.<sup>16</sup> Regional responses to the Guam doctrine therefore present useful historical analogies for today’s alliance debates.

## The Logic of Alignment Decisions

Before examining specific responses to the Guam doctrine, it is necessary to describe the range of decisions open to states with existing asymmetric alliances. Such states have four basic alignment options, each of which is outlined below. These four options are best thought of as ideal types that can be combined to fit a state’s unique security situation:

---

9 Nixon, “Informal Remarks in Guam with Newsmen.”

10 Nixon, “Informal Remarks in Guam with Newsmen.”

11 Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam,” Nov. 3, 1969, Richard Nixon Museum and Library, accessed Dec. 17, 2020, <https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/index.php/media/33421>.

12 Richard M. Nixon, “Asia After Viet Nam,” *Foreign Affairs* 46, no. 1 (October 1967), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/1967-10-01/asia-after-viet-nam>.

13 Richard M. Nixon, “Asia After Viet Nam.”

14 Michael J. Green, *By More than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific Since 1783* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2017).

15 Osamu Miyoshi, “The Nixon Doctrine in Asia,” *The Adelphi Papers* 12, no. 91 (1972): 13–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/05679327208448263>.

16 Nixon, “Asia After Viet Nam.”

- *Anchoring*: States can commit (or recommit) to a formal alliance, working more closely with that ally. States can signal closer alignment to an ally through a variety of actions, including formal treaties, military basing, rotational troop deployments, access agreements, joint training and exercises, joint combat operations, arms sales, military aid, statements of support for an ally, or criticism of a shared rival.<sup>17</sup> These efforts seek to tighten an alliance commitment and increase shared capabilities to better deter or defend against a shared threat.
- *Augmenting*: Rather than relying on a single formal alliance, states can deepen informal relationships to create a stronger regional security network. John Ikenberry and Jitsuo Tsuchiyama describe a “community-based security order” in which power is restrained “through the operation of co-operative institutions and agreed-upon rules that limit how power and the use of violence can be employed.”<sup>18</sup> The objective of such a system is to better sustain the status quo by enmeshing great powers in security multilateralism in order to dilute their power.
- *Autonomizing*: Alternatively, states can invest more in defense and pursue independent capabilities — such as nuclear weapons — to maintain freedom of action. James Morrow explains that “a rough trade-off between autonomy and security exists in the logic of military alliances. ... Purchasing arms raises a nation’s security at the cost of some wealth; forming alliances can raise a nation’s security at the cost of some autonomy.”<sup>19</sup> As

a result, pursuit of autonomy is effectively a choice of internal balancing through increased military spending over external balancing through greater reliance on an ally.

- *Accommodating*: Finally, states can realign by embracing the threatening power, thereby avoiding dependence on either independent capabilities or external support. Accommodation is similar to what Stephen Walt calls bandwagoning, in which “the bandwagoner may hope to avoid an attack on himself by diverting it elsewhere.”<sup>20</sup> This type of accommodation is, in many ways, the inverse of anchoring, with states choosing to align with rather than against the source of the threat.

Most states adopt a combination of these four approaches, embracing multiple options simultaneously. But how do states choose the right mix of anchoring, augmenting, autonomizing, and accommodating?<sup>21</sup> We argue that two variables govern these alignment decisions: perception of adversary threat and perception of ally reliability.<sup>22</sup> High threat perception leads to anchoring or autonomizing, because countries facing a high threat desire a robust deterrent, which can only be obtained from a formal treaty alliance or substantial independent capabilities.<sup>23</sup> Low threat perception incentivizes augmenting or accommodating, since those approaches are less costly financially and do not require devolving political control to an ally. Meanwhile, when a state views an ally as highly reliable, it typically adopts an anchoring or augmenting approach, while low ally reliability incentivizes autonomizing or accommodating.<sup>24</sup> These choices are reflected in Table 1.

17 Darren J. Lim and Zack Cooper, “Reassessing Hedging: The Logic of Alignment in East Asia,” *Security Studies* 24, no. 4 (2015): 704, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2015.1103130>.

18 G. John Ikenberry and Jitsuo Tsuchiyama, “Between Balance of Power and Community: The Future of Multilateral Security Co-operation in the Asia-Pacific,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 2, no. 1 (February 2002): 92–93, <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/2.1.69>.

19 James D. Morrow, “Alliances and Asymmetry: An Alternative to the Capability Aggregation Model of Alliances,” *American Journal of Political Science* 35, no. 4 (1991): 911, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2111499>.

20 Stephen M. Walt, “Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power,” *International Security* 9, no. 4 (Spring 1985): 8, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2538540>.

21 On alliance and alignment choices, see Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987); Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Patricia A. Weitsman, *Dangerous Alliances: Proponents of Peace, Weapons of War* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004); Stephen M. Walt, “Alliances in a Unipolar World,” *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (January 2009): 86–120, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887109000045>; and Brett V. Benson, *Constructing International Security: Alliances, Deterrence, and Moral Hazard* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

22 On perception and its impact on alignment choices, see Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder, “Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity,” *International Organization* 44, no. 2 (Spring 1990): 137–68, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300035232>; Douglas M. Gibler, “The Costs of Reneging: Reputation and Alliance Formation,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 52, no. 3 (June 2008): 426–54, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2F0022002707310003>; Mark J. C. Crescenzi et al., “Reliability, Reputation, and Alliance Formation,” *International Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 2 (June 2012): 259–74, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2478.2011.00711.x>; and Keren Yarhi-Milo, *Knowing the Adversary: Leaders, Intelligence, and Assessment of Intentions in International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

23 Stephen M. Walt, “Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power,” *International Security* 9, no. 4 (Spring 1985): 3–43, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538540>.

24 Todd Hall and Keren Yarhi-Milo, “The Personal Touch: Leaders’ Impressions, Costly Signaling, and Assessments of Sincerity in International Affairs,” *International Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (September 2012): 560–73, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2478.2012.00731.x>.

Table 1: Explanation of Alignment Decisions

	High Perception of Ally Reliability	Low Perception of Ally Reliability
High Perception of Adversary Threat	Anchor (Ex: Japan)	Autonomize (Ex: South Korea)
Low Perception of Adversary Threat	Augment (Ex: Australia)	Accommodate (Ex: Thailand)

As Table 1 shows, anchoring typically occurs when a state faces a high threat and has a reliable ally.<sup>25</sup> By doubling down on that alliance, the state can quickly bolster the regional balance of power. This external balancing, however, is not without cost. The weaker ally then becomes more dependent on its stronger ally to uphold its security commitment. In exchange for this commitment, the weaker ally must often allow the stronger ally more say over its foreign and defense policies.<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, if facing a highly threatening adversary, anchoring may be worth the sacrifices.

What if the adversary is highly threatening but there is no strong and reliable ally available? In this case, a state might pursue autonomy by investing in its own military capabilities. Internal balancing efforts of this sort are attractive because they avoid reliance on an external power. Nonetheless, there are serious risks, particularly for weak states that might not be able to match the capabilities of a threatening neighbor. As a result, efforts to pursue autonomy carry high risks and resource costs, particularly for smaller states.<sup>27</sup>

What if the threat from an adversary appears relatively low? In this case, an attractive alternative is to augment a state's position by aligning with a broader coalition of like-minded states. The upside of this type of coalition building is that states need not cede political leverage to each other. The risk, however, is that a loosely aligned group of states might suffer from coordination problems that undercut their

ability to deter a determined adversary.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, efforts to augment a state's position are more attractive when it faces a less threatening adversary.

Finally, if a state does not face a threatening adversary or have a reliable ally, it is often tempting to accommodate. Aligning with a challenger is often unpopular, and scholars have found a "strong tendency for states to balance when making alliance choices."<sup>29</sup> Yet, some states still consider it, particularly if they are politically or economically dependent on that foreign power. Nevertheless, accommodation comes with serious risks, including that bandwagoning might fail to appease an adversary.

### Asian Responses to the Guam Doctrine

Based on this construct, we argue that countries in Asia had four basic options for responding to Nixon's Guam doctrine, which were driven primarily by their perceptions of threats and allies.<sup>30</sup> To determine whether this framework applies to how regional states reacted to the Guam doctrine, we examine the actions of four of the most important U.S. allies during this period: Japan, South Korea, Australia, and Thailand.

#### Japan: An Anchoring Ally

Japan's response to the Guam doctrine was the most favorable from an American perspective.

25 James D. Morrow, "Alliances and Asymmetry: An Alternative to the Capability Aggregation Model of Alliances," *American Journal of Political Science* 35, no. 4 (November 1991): 904–33, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2111499>.

26 Victor D. Cha, "Powerplay: Origins of the U.S. Alliance System in Asia," *International Security* 34, no. 3 (Winter 2009/2010): 158–96, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40389236>.

27 On the limits of autonomy and entrapment concerns within alliances, see Jeremy Pressman, *Warring Friends: Alliance Restraint in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008); Tongfi Kim, "Why Alliances Entangle but Seldom Entrap States," *Security Studies* 20, no. 3 (July 2011): 350–77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2011.599201>; and Michael Beckley, "The Myth of Entangling Alliances: Reassessing the Security Risks of U.S. Defense Pacts," *International Security* 39, no. 4. (Spring 2015): 7–48, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00197](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00197).

28 Songying Fang, Jesse C. Johnson, and Brett Ashley Leeds, "To Concede or to Resist? The Restraining Effect of Military Alliances," *International Organization* 68, no. 4 (September 2014): 775–809, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818314000137>; and Timothy W. Crawford, *Pivotal Deterrence: Third-Party Statecraft and the Pursuit of Peace* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

29 Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," 16.

30 For a deeper discussion about alliance choices in the region during and after Vietnam, see Andrew J. Rotter, *The Path to Vietnam: Origins of the American Commitment to Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).

Although Nixon's announcement generated anxiety among Japanese leaders, close ties between the two governments helped them weather the transition.<sup>31</sup> Bilateral communications from this period emphasized Japan's expectation of a continued American commitment.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, a year after the Guam doctrine was announced, a U.S. official reported that "relations with Japan are in very good shape."<sup>33</sup> Despite Washington rethinking its regional approach, Japanese leaders largely decided to anchor their policies to those of the United States. Tokyo did augment its regional relationships and seriously consider autonomous capabilities, but these hedges against U.S. abandonment ultimately proved unnecessary because of Washington's continued commitment to Japan.

In some ways, the Guam doctrine played into pre-existing Japanese preferences.<sup>34</sup> When Nixon announced his intention to reduce American involvement in Asia, he was signaling a major shift not only across the region but with regard to the U.S.-Japanese relationship in particular. During discussions over a joint communique in 1969, Nixon urged Japanese Prime Minister Eisaku Sato to embrace more regional security responsibilities.<sup>35</sup> This shift was welcomed by many in Japan who were eager to take on a greater security role and regain control of Okinawa. In the final communique, the Sato administration expressly acknowledged Japan's interest in the security of both the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan Strait. This would not only ease the burden on the United States but also help to normalize Japan's postwar security posture.

Sato's decision to anchor to the United States was

made possible by the allies' largely shared concern about the Soviets. Most in Tokyo viewed the Soviets as a direct threat, a view that would gain traction through the 1970s.<sup>36</sup> Japanese leaders had long "identified the Soviet Union as the fundamental threat to the country's security," notes Matteo Dian, but a "resurgence of the Soviet threat was caused by the collapse of détente and by renewed Soviet activism."<sup>37</sup> Japanese leaders worried that they lacked the capabilities to deter the Soviets on their own.<sup>38</sup> National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger noted, "Because Japan was so important, we could not be indifferent to Japan's role ... We were delighted to have the [U.S.-Japan Security] Treaty and certainly would not abrogate it; on the contrary we would strengthen it."<sup>39</sup> The United States thus differentiated its approach to Japan from its approach toward other alliances, making clear that Japan could depend on the United States.

Although Tokyo feared that a rapid U.S. withdrawal might destabilize the region, both governments were committed to decreasing the U.S. military presence in Japan.<sup>40</sup> U.S. officials concluded that Japanese leaders preferred "to see the U.S. bases reduced and amalgamated, or even for the Japanese self-defense forces to take over control or management."<sup>41</sup> This mutual desire for a reduction in U.S. forces stationed in Japan was formalized in the Okinawa Reversion Agreement of 1971, which returned the Ryukyu and Daito Islands to Japanese control and paved the way for a more self-sufficient Japanese defense force.<sup>42</sup> It was also critical that Japan acceded to U.S. demands for increased burden-sharing by spending more on its defense

31 "Memorandum from John Holdridge of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger)," Jan. 29, 1970, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume XIX, Part 2, Japan, 1969–1972, (hereafter FRUS XIX, 2, Japan) Document 38, Department of State, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v19p2/d38> - fn:1.5.4.2.14.11.16.8.

32 "The Nixon-Sato Communique," *New York Times*, Nov. 22, 1969, <https://www.nytimes.com/1969/11/22/archives/the-nixonsato-communique.html>.

33 "Memorandum from Richard B. Finn, Director of Japanese Affairs, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs to the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs (Green)," March 25, 1970, FRUS XIX, 2, Japan, Document 41, Department of State, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v19p2/d41>.

34 "Dr. Kissinger's Discussion with Mr. Nakasone, Director of Japanese Defense Agency," Memorandum of Conversation, Sept. 10, 1970, FRUS XIX, 2, Japan, Document 53, Department of State, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v19p2/d53>.

35 Yukinori Komine, "Whither a 'Resurgent Japan': The Nixon Doctrine and Japan's Defense Build-up, 1969–1976," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 16, no. 3 (Summer 2014): 96, [https://doi.org/10.1162/JCWS\\_a\\_00447](https://doi.org/10.1162/JCWS_a_00447).

36 Eitan Oren and Matthew Brummer, "Reexamining Threat Perception in Early Cold War Japan," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 22, no. 4 (Fall 2020): 91, [https://doi.org/10.1162/jcws\\_a\\_00948](https://doi.org/10.1162/jcws_a_00948).

37 Matteo Dian, *The Evolution of the US-Japan Alliance: The Eagle and the Chrysanthemum* (Oxford: Chandos Publishing, 2014), 79–80.

38 Jennifer M. Lind, "Pacifism or Passing the Buck? Testing Theories of Japanese Security Policy," *International Security* 29, no. 1 (Summer 2004): 107, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4137548>.

39 "Mr. Miki's Remarks on East Asia Developments," Memorandum of Conversation, June 23, 1970, FRUS XIX, 2, Japan, Document 45, Department of State, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v19p2/d45>.

40 "Meeting Between President Nixon and Former Prime Minister Kishi," Memorandum of Conversation, June 23, 1970, FRUS XIX, 2, Japan, Document 56, Department of State, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v19p2/d56>.

41 "Dr. Kissinger's Discussion with Mr. Nakasone," FRUS XIX, 2, Japan, Document 53.

42 "Meeting Between President Nixon and Former Prime Minister Kishi," FRUS XIX, 2, Japan, Document 56.

forces.<sup>43</sup> Thus, throughout the 1970s, the United States and Japan embraced expanded alliance responsibilities and a larger regional role for Tokyo, including in both the renewal of the security treaty in 1970 as well as the Guidelines for Defense Cooperation in 1978.<sup>44</sup> By framing the Nixon doctrine as an opportunity for Japan, U.S. officials avoided some of the tensions that would damage relationships with other allies.<sup>45</sup>

Yet, the Guam doctrine did increase alliance tensions between Washington and Tokyo while also decreasing U.S. leverage with Japan. American intelligence assessed that “Japanese governments will be increasingly eager to demonstrate — to other Asians and to their own electorate — that their policies are independent of Washington’s.”<sup>46</sup> U.S. leaders worried about “indications of increasing strains in the relationship as the Japanese move toward greater independence.”<sup>47</sup> Meanwhile, the transition to a reduced U.S. military presence lessened American influence over Japan’s decision-making. In particular, Washington became more worried about an independent Japanese military buildup and the two allies pursuing diverging approaches to China. That these tensions proved manageable was due, in part, to the fact that Japanese leaders continued to view the United States as relatively committed to the alliance.

Officials in Tokyo could not easily contemplate going it alone against the Soviet Union. Although worried about the risk of a nuclear attack, Japan remained adamantly opposed to developing nuclear weapons of its own.<sup>48</sup> This combined with the country’s limited military spending levels to prevent leaders in Tokyo from seriously considering the possibility of becoming autonomous from the United States. Yet, the government still knew that there

was some increased chance that it might be abandoned by Washington. As a result, Japan’s leaders sought more autonomous capabilities to mitigate against the risk of abandonment and perhaps to also increase leverage over the United States.<sup>49</sup> The U.S. secretary of state recognized this risk, writing that Japan’s security contribution would likely come “in less helpful forms than we would like.”<sup>50</sup>

In the wake of the Guam doctrine, defense officials within the Japan Defense Agency began to suggest the need for a more independent approach for defending Japan. This led Japan to publish its first postwar defense white paper in 1970. The newly appointed director of the Japan Defense Agency, Yasuhiro Nakasone, led the charge to craft this new strategy, arguing that Japan should focus first and foremost on independent self-defense and should double the Japanese defense budget to support this goal.<sup>51</sup> While Nakasone’s proposals ultimately fell prey to domestic constraints, they nonetheless marked the start of a gradual move toward greater Japanese autonomy. Managing this shift became a major fixation for the Nixon administration, which worked to reconcile its desire for greater Japanese burden-sharing with concerns about a stronger, more autonomous Japan.

Thus, Japan continued to anchor its security strategy in the United States, despite questions about America’s commitment in the wake of the Guam doctrine. One critical difference between Japan and other U.S. allies in Asia was that Washington saw Tokyo as a critical bulwark against the Soviet Union. The relatively high perceived threat to Japan helped convince leaders in Tokyo that the United States had no option but to maintain its commitment. Indeed, in 1970, Kissinger reassured Japanese leaders that “Japan was so important that we couldn’t permit it

43 “Mr. Miki’s Remarks on East Asia Developments,” FRUS XIX, 2, Japan, Document 45.

44 “The Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation,” Japanese Ministry of Defense, Nov. 27, 1978, [https://www.mod.go.jp/e/d\\_act/us/ampo/19781127.html](https://www.mod.go.jp/e/d_act/us/ampo/19781127.html).

45 “Memorandum from Richard B. Finn, to the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs (Green),” FRUS XIX, 2, Japan, Document 41.

46 “Japan in the Seventies: The Problem of National Power,” National Intelligence Estimate, June 25, 1970, FRUS XIX, 2, Japan, Document 46, Department of State, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v19p2/d46>.

47 “Proposal for NSC Review of U.S. Policy Toward Japan,” Memorandum from the Director of the U.S. Information Agency (Shakespeare) to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Feb. 16, 1971, FRUS XIX, 2, Japan, Document 67, Department of State, Office of the Historian, <https://1991.history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v19p2/d67>.

48 “Mr. Miki’s Remarks on East Asia Developments,” FRUS XIX, 2, Japan, Document 45.

49 “Proposal for NSC Review of U.S. Policy Toward Japan,” Memorandum from the Director of the U.S. Information Agency (Shakespeare) to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Feb. 16, 1971, FRUS XIX, 2, Japan, Document 67, Department of State, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v19p2/d67>; Chalmers Johnson, “The Patterns of Japanese Relations with China, 1952-1982,” *Pacific Affairs* 59, no. 3 (Autumn 1986): 402-28, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2758327>; and Gerald L. Curtis, “US Policy Toward Japan from Nixon to Clinton: An Assessment,” in *New Perspectives on U.S.-Japan Relations*, ed. Gerald L. Curtis (Tokyo: Japan Center for International Exchange, 2000), 1-38, [https://www.jcie.org/researchpdfs/NewPerspectives/new\\_curtis.pdf](https://www.jcie.org/researchpdfs/NewPerspectives/new_curtis.pdf).

50 “East Asian Chiefs of Mission Conference, July 9-11, 1970,” Memorandum from Secretary of State Rogers to President Nixon, July 20, 1970, FRUS XIX, 2, Japan, Document 49, Department of State, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v19p2/d49>.

51 Komine, “Whither a ‘Resurgent Japan’”; and Michael J. Green, “The U.S.-Japan Alliance: A Brief Strategic History,” *Education About Asia* 12, no. 3 (Winter 2007), <https://www.asianstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/the-us-japan-alliance-a-brief-strategic-history.pdf>.

to be destroyed in a nuclear war. This was not an act of charity; we did it for ourselves.”<sup>52</sup> In this sense, it was the close alignment of American and Japanese security interests that caused Japan to anchor, even as some in Tokyo began to consider the benefits of increased autonomy.

### South Korea: An Autonomizing Ally

Rather than anchoring to the United States, South Korea sought substantially greater autonomy in response to the Guam doctrine. Seoul threatened to pursue independent military capabilities in large part because South Korean leaders were more skeptical about America's commitment than were their Japanese counterparts. As Adm. John S. McCain Jr. warned after meeting South Korean officials in Hawaii in 1970, “The posture of the Korean delegation today had a strong flavor of an aggrieved party who was being deprived of his rights by a faithless friend.”<sup>53</sup>

America's alliance with South Korea was born out of a shared fear about the spread of communism. This concern motivated U.S. involvement in the Korean War and led to the postwar stationing of U.S. forces on the Korean Peninsula, as well as the formalization of the two countries' security relationship.<sup>54</sup> During the Vietnam War, South Korea returned the favor by supplying the second-largest number of foreign military forces.<sup>55</sup> It hoped this effort would result in economic benefits and closer military ties with the United States. Seoul's participation in Vietnam was thus a strategic calculation intended to secure American support in a future contingency on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>56</sup>

Against this backdrop, the Guam doctrine dealt

a double blow to South Korea. Nixon's largely unilateral decisions to transfer more responsibility to Asian allies, reach out to China, and withdraw from Vietnam called into question both South Korea's sacrifices abroad and its prospects closer to home.<sup>57</sup> Nixon initially told South Korean President Park Chung-hee, “I can assure you that we will not retreat from the Pacific area and we will not reduce our commitments, but I think we need intelligent policy, by giving aid to the countries who attempt to help themselves.”<sup>58</sup> Yet, Park disregarded the possibility that the United States would use the Guam doctrine as cover to withdraw forces from the Korean Peninsula. A U.S. State Department cable in 1970 noted, “Park had chosen to ignore these reports and ... had been confident that there would be no such approach at this time.”<sup>59</sup>

It soon became clear, however, that Nixon was determined to realign U.S. forces in the region. Many in Washington believed that American forces in South Korea had more symbolic than military value. U.S. assessments concluded that South Korea could handle an attack from North Korea. In 1970, the National Security Council asserted that “there is little or no military need for U.S. ground forces in Korea, with even the current unimproved ROK [Republic of Korea] force structure.”<sup>60</sup> Some in Washington also thought force reductions in South Korea were necessary to avoid American overextension. Neither argument was particularly persuasive in Seoul, where American troops were still “a symbol of the US commitments to the defense of the Republic of Korea, and in fact to all of Northeast Asia.”<sup>61</sup> As a U.S. intelligence document noted, “A critical element in both North and South Korean thinking during any crisis would be the US

52 “Mr. Miki's Remarks on East Asia Developments,” FRUS XIX, 2, Japan, Document 45.

53 “Telegram from the Commander in Chief, Pacific (McCain) to the Department of State,” July 23, 1970, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume XIX, Part 1, Korea, 1969–1972 (hereafter FRUS XIX, 1, Korea), Document 67, Department of State, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v19p1/d67>.

54 Jimmy H. Koo, “The Uncomfortable SOFA: Anti-American Sentiments in South Korea and The U.S.-South Korea Status of Forces Agreement,” *American University National Security Law Brief* 1, no. 1 (2011), <https://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/nsbl/vol1/iss1/5>.

55 Glenn Baek, “A Perspective on Korea's Participation in the Vietnam War,” The Asian Institute for Policy Studies, April 9, 2013, <http://en.asainst.org/contents/issue-brief-no-53-a-perspective-on-koreas-participation-in-the-vietnam-war/>.

56 Leon Whyte, “Evolution of the US-ROK Alliance: Abandonment Fears,” *The Diplomat*, June 22, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/06/evolution-of-the-u-s-rok-alliance-abandonment-fears/>.

57 “Telegram from the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State,” May 29, 1970, FRUS XIX, 1, Korea, Document 59, Department of State, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v19p1/d59>.

58 “Talks Between President Nixon and President Pak,” Memorandum of Conversation, Aug. 21, 1969, FRUS XIX, 1, Korea, Document 35, Department of State, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v19p1/d35>.

59 “Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Korea,” Aug. 23, 1970, FRUS XIX, 1, Korea, Document 57, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v19p1/d57>.

60 “ROK Force Capabilities,” Memorandum from Laurence E. Lynn, Jr., of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Feb. 26, 1970, FRUS XIX, 1, Korea, Document 53, Department of State, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v19p1/d53>.

61 “NSSM–27, US Policy for Korea,” Memorandum from the Joint Chiefs of Staff Representative to the National Security Council Review Group (Unger) to the Chairman of the Review Group (Kissinger), Feb. 17, 1970, FRUS XIX, 1, Korea, Document 52, Department of State, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v19p1/d52>.





posture, or what they believe it to be.”<sup>62</sup>

Washington was thus aware that “significant or rapid reduction in the US presence could cause anxiety to the Koreans and be regarded (by both allies and enemies) as evidence that the United States had lost interest in meeting its defense commitments in Korea.”<sup>63</sup> But Nixon went ahead anyway and removed the 7th Infantry Division in 1971. This came as a “profound shock” to Park, who immediately threatened to resign, stating, “If GIs go, I go.”<sup>64</sup> But Park stayed and instead sought to consolidate his hold on power, undermining democratic institutions through the Yushin Constitution. The resulting criticism from Washington accelerated alliance tensions. During this period, South Korean leaders reached out directly to North Korea, culminating in

the North-South Joint Communiqué signed on July 4, 1972. Seoul tried to shift from a “strategy of mutual hostility” to a “strategy of hope” with Pyongyang, aiming to offset “heavy reliance on the big powers in solving basically their internal affairs.”<sup>65</sup> This accommodation effort failed, however, as repeated negotiations proved unable to overcome different visions for a reunified Korea.<sup>66</sup> Meanwhile, South Korean leaders requested military equipment and substantial assistance from America to help establish domestic military industries.<sup>67</sup> Although the United States eventually provided support for a \$1.5 billion military modernization scheme, South Korea was not sufficiently reassured.<sup>68</sup>

Washington’s failure to reassure Seoul prompted the government in Seoul to pursue independent

62 “Confrontation in Korea,” Special National Intelligence Estimate, Jan. 30, 1969, FRUS XIX, 1, Korea, Document 1, Department of State, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v19p1/d1>.

63 “NSSM-27, US Policy for Korea,” FRUS XIX, 1, Korea, Document 52.

64 Doug Bandow, *Tripwire: Korean and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World* (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 1996), 24.

65 Sung Chul Yang, “The Politics of the North-South Dialogue in Korea,” *World Affairs* 137, no. 1 (Summer 1974): 55, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20671543>.

66 Kyung Ae Park and Sung-Chull Lee, “Changes and Prospects in Inter-Korean Relations,” *Asian Survey* 32, no. 5 (May 1992): 432, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2644975>.

67 “Telegram from the Commander in Chief, Pacific (McCain) to the Department of State,” FRUS XIX, 1, Korea, Document 67.

68 “Military Assistance for Korea,” Memorandum from the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Aug. 22, 1970, FRUS XIX, 1, Korea, Document 70, Department of State, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v19p1/d70>.

military capabilities. Park did not share America's conviction that South Korea held a military edge over North Korea. Indeed, in 1974, Park's wife was murdered by a pro-North Korea assassin. Park also knew there were those in Washington who favored removing even more troops from South Korea, among them Jimmy Carter, who later ordered the removal of the 2nd Infantry Division from South Korea. Against this backdrop, Park set South Korea on a path to build nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them. When the United States objected, Park informed American leaders that the price of nonproliferation was a commitment to retain U.S. troops on the peninsula.<sup>69</sup>

By 1974, South Korea already had a robust nuclear power program and was acquiring a reprocessing plant that would allow for production of enough plutonium for roughly one nuclear weapon per year. In 1975, a full-fledged nuclear weapons program — Project 890 — was initiated. This program included teams working on missile designs and nuclear warheads as well as chemical warheads. American leaders grew increasingly concerned about these efforts and worked hard to retard their progress. American pressure was eventually successful, with U.S. intelligence assessments concluding that Park's "willingness to suspend 890 was strongly conditioned by the poor performance [of the Agency for Defense Development] ... and by the lack of any immediate need for nuclear weapons development."<sup>70</sup> That need dissipated after U.S. officials provided clearer security guarantees and demonstrated tougher responses to North Korean provocations than Park and other South Korean leaders had expected. Yet, the United States and South Korea would struggle to manage these intra-alliance dynamics for years, and Seoul would consistently use threats of greater autonomy to shape U.S. policies.

Why did South Korea embrace autonomy after the Guam doctrine? The evidence provided above suggests that leaders in Seoul saw the United States as unreliable in the face of a serious threat from North Korea. Whereas American policymakers had demonstrated a high degree of concern

about the Soviet threat to Japan, they exhibited much less concern about the North Korean threat to South Korea. The United States and South Korea continued to differ in their views of that threat for years, with Washington judging the likelihood of a major attack as unlikely. This disconnect exacerbated South Korean concerns about America's commitment and led Seoul to consider multiple ways to decrease reliance on the United States. Although accommodation was pursued early in the 1970s, South Korea eventually opted to develop its own independent capabilities as a hedge against decreasing American commitment.<sup>71</sup>

### Australia: An Augmenting Ally

Australia's response to Nixon's Guam doctrine was quite different from that of either Japan or South Korea, in large part because Australia did not face the same kind of proximate threat. Australia has long relied on its alliances with "great and powerful friends" to defend against instability elsewhere in Asia.<sup>72</sup> Nixon's declaration called this strategy into question. Australian officials offered public support for Nixon's approach but privately worried about its implications in Southeast Asia, calling the Guam doctrine "potentially self-contradictory" and noting that treaty commitments to the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) "seem to have been unofficially shelved."<sup>73</sup> The result was a significant evolution in Australian strategy over the course of the 1970s. While remaining committed to the U.S. alliance, Australian policymakers moved to augment Canberra's ties to other regional powers. Nixon's Guam doctrine also prompted secondary shifts in Australian strategic thinking, generating both closer ties to China as well as a new debate about the value of self-reliance that continues to reverberate even today.

Japan's World War II military campaign had served as a powerful reminder to Australians of their vulnerability to external threats. Faced with the prospect of communist insurgencies across Southeast Asia, Australian policymakers embraced collective defense arrangements such as

69 William Caplan and Kenneth B. Turner, "Reconsidering the Reversal: South Korea's Nuclear Choices," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Feb. 21, 2017, <https://thebulletin.org/2017/02/reconsidering-the-reversal-south-koreas-nuclear-choices/>.

70 Chung-in Moon, Peter Hayes, and Scott Bruce, "Park Chung Hee, the US-ROK Strategic Relationship, and the Bomb," *Asia-Pacific Journal* 9, no. 44, Oct. 31, 2011, <https://apjif.org/2011/9/44/Peter-Hayes/3630/article.html>.

71 Daniel J. Lawler and Erin R. Mahan, eds. "Preface," *FRUS XIX*, 1, Korea, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v19p1/preface>.

72 This phrase was first used by Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies to describe Australia's relationships with the United Kingdom and the United States. See Coral Bell, "Strategic Thought and Security Preoccupations in Australia," in *A National Asset: Essays Commemorating the 40th Anniversary of the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre (SDSC)*, ed. Meredith Thatcher and Desmond Ball (Canberra: Australian National University, 2006), 1–14.

73 P. H. Bailey, "Memo by First Assistant Secretary P.H. Bailey to the Secretary of the Department of the Cabinet Office," Jan. 12, 1970, no. 178, in "The Guam Doctrine," July 1969–Sept. 1970, National Archives of Australia, <https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRetrieve/Interface/ViewImage.aspx?B=3165068>.

the Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty and SEATO. Australia's strategic concepts and force design were expressly premised on the idea of operating alongside American forces in a forward defense strategy designed to keep Asian threats from reaching Australia's shores. Australian leaders hoped this strategy would keep America committed both to the alliance and to regional stability. Yet, as the United States began to tire of bearing the primary responsibility for beating back communism in Southeast Asia, it increasingly demanded more burden-sharing from Australia, and the Liberal government responded positively. By 1970, over one-third of Australia's combat forces were fighting alongside the United States in Vietnam.<sup>74</sup> As one Australian journalist wrote at the outset of Australia's involvement in Vietnam:

Why is Australia getting involved in the Vietnam War? Partly because we think a Communist victory there would threaten the rest of South-East Asia and jeopardize our security and partly because of the need to convince the Americans that we are more than paper allies. ... It's a sort of life insurance cover we're taking out.<sup>75</sup>

Australia's early engagement with the Nixon administration following the Guam speech was reassuring. During a 1969 visit to the White House, Australian Foreign Minister John Gorton secured assurances that America was still committed to both the Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty and SEATO. Gorton, in turn, promised, "wherever the United States is resisting aggression, ... we will go Waltzing Matilda with you."<sup>76</sup> Two surprising developments shifted Australia's strategy. First, Nixon shocked U.S. allies with an abrupt reversal on China and a chaotic retreat from Vietnam. Second, the Australian Labor Party won Australia's 1972 election, returning to power for the first time in 22 years.

The lingering doubts Australian officials had expressed about American reliability were heightened

in 1971 with Nixon's surprise plans to visit Beijing. Nixon's move humiliated the administration of Prime Minister William McMahon, which was under pressure from the Labor Party to take a more flexible stance toward China. McMahon publicly offered support for the move, but in private cables to Washington complained, "we were placed in a quandary by our lack of any foreknowledge ... the more so because we have attempted under all circumstances to coordinate our policies and support you."<sup>77</sup> Beyond the domestic political mess Nixon's diplomatic engagement created for Canberra, the move further amplified concerns about the credibility of U.S. treaty commitments. A cable from McMahon to Japanese Prime Minister Sato opined, "In these circumstances, the seating of [China] and the expulsion of Taiwan [from the United Nations] seem unavoidable. Without being alarmist, I am obliged to question whether this is not in fact what the Americans intend."<sup>78</sup>

Australia therefore faced two conflicting strategic trends in the early 1970s. On the one hand, Australian leaders believed they faced a relatively benign security environment. Indeed, Prime Minister Gough Whitlam's government thought the country faced "no direct military threat(s) for the next 15 years."<sup>79</sup> On the other, Australia was keenly aware that its longstanding patron was likely to play a diminished role in the future. Although the Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty remained intact and Australian leaders assessed that "the United States would remain the world's most powerful nation in economic and military terms for years to come," they were also increasingly conscious that "U.S. power was not absolute or unconditional."<sup>80</sup>

The Whitlam government therefore began to pursue a new strategy: augmenting ties to leading Asian nations, which Whitlam had long believed would hold increasing sway over Australia's future. In a 1973 speech, Whitlam argued that Asian regionalism would be "one of the keystones of Australia's foreign policy for the 70s," marking a shift away from the country's reliance on a single

74 Malcolm Fraser and Cain Roberts, *Dangerous Allies* (Melbourne, Australia: Melbourne University Press, 2014), 142.

75 Jeff Doyle, Jeffrey Grey, and Peter Pierce, *Australia's Vietnam War* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2002), 46.

76 Peter Edwards, *Australia and the Vietnam War* (Sydney NSW: University of New South Wales Press, 2014), 198.

77 William McMahon, "Outward Cablegram, Prime Minister William McMahon to U.S. President Richard Nixon," July 18, 1971, no. 94, in "China – President Nixon's Initiative (Including World Reaction)," 1971, National Archives of Australia, <https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRRetrieve/Interface/ViewImage.aspx?B=3054113>.

78 William McMahon, "Outward Cablegram, Prime Minister William McMahon to Japan Prime Minister Sato Eisaku," July 18, 1971, no. 83, in "China – President Nixon's initiative (including world reaction)," National Archives of Australia, <https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRRetrieve/Interface/ViewImage.aspx?B=3054113>.

79 Edwards, *Australia and the Vietnam War*, 255.

80 Shannon Tow, *Independent Ally: Australia in an Age of Power Transition*, Kindle Edition (Carlton, Australia: Melbourne University Publishing, 2017), chap. 6, footnote 20.

powerful ally.<sup>81</sup> An early sign of the new direction Australia was taking was Whitlam's decision to reverse nearly two decades of relative estrangement between Australia and India. His 1973 visit to India was the first by an Australian prime minister in over a decade. This was accompanied by other surprising policy moves, such as reversing the controversial "White Australia" immigration policies and taking a more neutral line toward India's relationship with the Soviet Union.

Whitlam also made similar moves to engage more closely with Japan and the newly established Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Whitlam overruled his own bureaucracy to endorse the Japanese government's proposal for a new, wide-ranging bilateral treaty. Arguing that "it would be appropriate for Japan and Australia, in a formal context, to acknowledge the very great interdependence they have on each other," Whitlam pushed his government to begin drafting what eventually became the 1976 Basic Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation.<sup>82</sup> Meanwhile, the Whitlam government reached out to ASEAN, establishing itself as the association's first state-level "dialogue partner" and advocating for a new pan-Asian regional organization that would help integrate Southeast Asia and its neighbors.<sup>83</sup>

Augmenting ties to other regional players was Australia's primary response to the Guam doctrine, but not its only one. Whitlam was also an early advocate of taking a more accommodating approach to China. The mainland government, Whitlam insisted, was "Chinese first, Maoist second, and Communist third."<sup>84</sup> Australia quickly normalized its relationship with China. This reconciliation helped to alleviate Australia's fears about Chinese-backed insurgencies in Southeast Asia. Over time, Australia, like many other Asian allies, encountered a growing tension between its security alliance with the United States and an increasingly

close economic partnership with China.

The years following the Guam doctrine also gave birth to new debates about Australia's defense strategy, with Australian strategists toying for the first time with the idea of self-reliance. As one official would later argue, "seventy years of tradition in defence thinking seemed to have been trashed by the outcome of the Vietnam War."<sup>85</sup> The Australian Defence Committee's 1971 paper, "Strategic Basis of Australian Defence Policy," laid the groundwork for Australia to explore greater autonomy. Forward defense, the paper argued, had become an outdated concept, as it relied on a U.S. "presence, policy and commitment to South East Asia" that was no longer guaranteed.<sup>86</sup> While acknowledging that Australia faced no immediate threats, the paper argued that the country needed new strategic concepts that could address "significant changes ... which will have the potentiality of developing, in a later decade, into a more active threat to Australia's security."<sup>87</sup> The idea of autonomy thus became a more explicit part of Australia's strategy in the 1970s, as codified in its 1972 defense review.<sup>88</sup> When the government published its first public defense white paper in 1976, it outlined the rationale behind the concept more explicitly: "[E]ven though our security may be ultimately dependent upon US support, we owe it to ourselves to be able to mount a national defence effort that would maximise the risks and costs of any aggression."<sup>89</sup>

The Guam doctrine thus caused a strategic reconsideration in Australia. Leaders in Canberra believed Australia enjoyed a relatively secure external environment and maintained confidence that the United States would protect it against direct threats, but they did not rest on their laurels. Instead, the Whitlam government moved quickly to augment Australia's relationships, building ties with Japan, India, Indonesia, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and even, to a degree,

81 Gough Whitlam, "Opening Address by the Prime Minister," Speech at the Australian Institute of Political Science Summer School, Canberra, Australia, Jan. 27, 1973, <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-2803>.

82 Moreen Dee, "Friendship and Co-Operation: The 1976 Basic Treaty Between Australia and Japan," Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia in the World, The Foreign Affairs and Trade Files, no. 3, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/basic-treaty-between-australia-and-japan.pdf>.

83 Graeme Dobell, "Australia in Asia: Echoes of Whitlam," *The Interpreter*, Jan. 6, 2011, <https://archive.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/australia-asia-echoes-whitlam>.

84 Quoted in Tow, *Independent Ally*, chap. 6, footnote 71.

85 Edwards, *Australia and the Vietnam War*, 263.

86 "The Strategic Basis of Australian Defence Policy," Australian Defence Committee, March 1971, accessed at "Australia and the United Kingdom, 1960–1975, Vol. 27," Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, accessed Feb. 16, 2021, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/historical-documents/volume-27/Pages/107-report-by-defence-committee>.

87 Australian Defence Committee, "The Strategic Basis of Australian Defence Policy."

88 "Australian Defence Review" Australian Department of Defence, March 1972, <https://defence.gov.au/SPI/publications/defreview/1972/Australian-Defence-Review-1972.pdf>.

89 "Australian Defence," Australian Department of Defence, November 1976, 10, <https://www.defence.gov.au/Publications/wpaper1976.pdf>.

with China. These efforts sought to link Australia more closely to its immediate region, enhancing its relationship with like-minded partners and finding some amount of accommodation with China in a bid to hedge against future changes in U.S. strategy. This regionalism became a hallmark of Australian strategy that has endured to the present day.<sup>90</sup>

### Thailand: An Accommodating Ally

Perhaps the most concerning type of response to the announcement of the Guam doctrine was the decision to accommodate communist powers. Thailand provides the most striking example of this response. The steady retreat of U.S. forces from Southeast Asia and the slow erosion of SEATO, both of which had provided a bulwark against communist insurgencies, sparked instability in Thailand.<sup>91</sup> These realities and the realization that the United States was unlikely to provide adequate military or economic support led Thai leaders to shift their strategy. Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman would later summarize the lessons of this period in blunt terms: “For Thailand, ... its disappointing experience with SEATO taught it the lesson that it was useless and even dangerous to hitch its destiny to distant powers who may cut loose at any moment.”<sup>92</sup>

Thailand had been one of America’s staunchest allies throughout the early Cold War, enthusiastically joining the fight against communism and signing a U.S.-Thai logistics agreement that facilitated the construction of multiple U.S. air bases throughout the country. Thailand’s centrality to America’s regional military presence, however, revealed the relative weakness of America’s security guarantees in Southeast Asia — a point of longstanding concern for Thai leaders. As Nixon entered office, a cable from the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok warned of “re-

liable intelligence that the Thai leaders are currently in a mood of questioning and doubt with regard to the firmness of the U.S. intentions in Southeast Asia.”<sup>93</sup> Yet, it is possible that the Nixon administration could have weathered these problems. It moved early to address Thailand’s abandonment concerns by providing high-level assurances of America’s commitment, not just to SEATO, but also to the 1962 Thanat-Rusk communique.<sup>94</sup> Although Thai leaders expressed some uncertainty about the potential implications of Nixon’s new plan, they were also open to the proposal, expressing the country’s willingness “to take care of its own defenses.”<sup>95</sup>

The executive branch in Washington, however, was not the only actor shaping Thai perceptions of American credibility. Over the summer and fall of 1969, the U.S. Senate embarked on a series of hearings that were deeply critical of America’s involvement in Vietnam and that singled out the U.S. commitment to Thailand. The hearings damaged the alliance on two fronts. First, they provided a public and highly critical accounting of financial support the United States had provided to Thai forces, a revelation that suggested to Thai leaders the alliance was viewed as little more than a mercenary racket.<sup>96</sup> This narrative also undermined the Nixon administration’s ability to provide the Thai government with enhanced military aid, support the Thai government had made clear was essential to its self-defense.<sup>97</sup>

Second, and perhaps most damaging, was the public fight between the Nixon administration and Sen. J. William Fulbright over a classified U.S.-Thai contingency plan that had been developed under the Johnson administration. In seeking to assuage congressional outrage over this new, supposedly secret military commitment to the Thai government, both the secretary of state and secretary of defense publicly disavowed the plan. Secretary of State William Rogers referred to it as “an appendage that

---

90 Shannon Tow makes the argument that Australia has repeatedly sought greater independence from the United States but has consistently done so from within the confines of the alliance. See Tow, *Independent Ally*, Introduction, 2–5.

91 Ang Cheng Guan and Joseph Chinyong Liow, “The Fall of Saigon: Southeast Asian Perspectives,” Brookings Institution, April 21, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-fall-of-saigon-southeast-asian-perspectives/>.

92 Thanat Khoman “ASEAN Conception and Evolution,” *The ASEAN Reader*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1992, [https://asean.org/?static\\_post=asean-conception-and-evolution-by-thanat-khoman](https://asean.org/?static_post=asean-conception-and-evolution-by-thanat-khoman).

93 “Congratulatory Message to Thai Prime Minister,” Memorandum from Secretary of State Rogers to President Nixon, March 17, 1969, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume XX, Southeast Asia, 1969–1972 (hereafter FRUS XX, Southeast Asia), Document 6, Department of State, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v20/d6>.

94 See *American Foreign Policy, Current Documents, 1962* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State Historical Division, 1962), 1091–1093; and “Secretary Rogers, Prime Minister Thanom Bilateral,” Telegram from the Embassy in Thailand to the Department of State, May 23, 1969, FRUS XX, Southeast Asia, Document 11, Department of State, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v20/d11>.

95 “Secretary’s Meeting with Thai Leaders,” Telegram from the Embassy in Thailand to the Department of State, Jan. 11, 1971, FRUS XX, Southeast Asia, Document 104, Department of State, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v20/d104>.

96 “Symington Subcommittee,” Telegram from the Embassy in Thailand to the Department of State, Nov. 20, 1969, FRUS XX, Southeast Asia, Document 38, Department of State, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v20/d38>.

97 “Secretary’s Meeting with Thai Leaders,” FRUS XX, Southeast Asia, Document 104.

is a hangover from bygone days.”<sup>98</sup> Thailand’s leadership, which saw the plan as a key symbol of alliance credibility, made clear it viewed these statements “not only as a disavowal of a joint contingency plan, but a reneging on a commitment.”<sup>99</sup>

In the face of a U.S. Congress and body politic that were hostile to committing forces overseas and unwilling to provide military aid and support for allies, the Thai government became deeply polarized. Division arose between military leaders, who remained committed to the United States and an anti-communist mission, and civilian leaders, who increasingly doubted American credibility. The problem, as the Thai foreign minister explained in a meeting with U.S. officials, was that “despite [the] expressed intention of President Nixon and his administration,” the Thai government could not be certain “whether American people were really behind the Nixon Doctrine.”<sup>100</sup> By the end of 1969, it was clear the Thai government was considering an “agonizing reappraisal” of its foreign policy and the U.S. alliance.<sup>101</sup> Although the government continued to offer private support for U.S. efforts in Vietnam, it became less vocal in its support for the United States.

The most notable shift in Thai foreign policy was its rapprochement with China. Bangkok’s move toward accommodating Beijing was striking for a government that had been one of the most rabidly anti-communist regimes in Southeast Asia. Throughout the 1970s, the Thai government began to gradually rehabilitate China’s image with the Thai public, and over the course of the next decade, this early accommodation grew into a more substantial strategic partnership.<sup>102</sup> Chinese leaders quietly agreed to steps such as shutting down support for the Communist Party of Thailand, while the Thais, in turn, agreed to give the Khmer Rouge access to Thai territory and stayed neutral following China’s attack on Vietnam.<sup>103</sup>

Thailand’s striking about-face was, in large part, a function of necessity. Further U.S. military and economic disengagement left Thai leaders feeling they had little choice but to seek a powerful new partner. On the economic front, Thailand was dealing with a weakening economy, made worse by the loss of U.S. financial support as the Vietnam War wound down. Bilateral disagreements with the Nixon administration over U.S. rice sales, which undercut the competitiveness of Thailand’s most valuable export, created the impression that America had become not only an undependable military ally, but also an unreliable economic partner as well.<sup>104</sup> When the 1973 oil embargo further damaged Thailand’s weak economy, Chinese leaders took advantage of the opportunity, offering diesel fuel at a “‘friendship’ price” to ameliorate negative public

## Further U.S. military and economic disengagement left Thai leaders feeling they had little choice but to seek a powerful new partner.

perceptions of China among the Thai public.<sup>105</sup> The abrupt fall of Phnom Penh and Saigon in 1975 led Thai leaders to reevaluate their security relationships as well. They ultimately determined that a closer partnership with China might provide a buttress against potential Vietnamese aggression. By the early 1980s, the security relationship between the two countries had blossomed to such a degree that the head of the People’s Liberation Army General Staff pointedly said, “If Vietnam dared to make an armed incursion into Thailand, the Chinese army will not stand idle. We will give support to the Thai people to defend their country.”<sup>106</sup>

Accommodation was the most significant shift in Thai foreign policy in the early 1970s, but it was not the only one. Thai leaders also sought to augment

98 “U.S.-Thai Relations,” Memorandum from the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Aug. 25, 1969, FRUS XX, Southeast Asia, Document 20, Department of State, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v20/d20>.

99 “U.S.-Thai Relations,” FRUS XX, Southeast Asia, Document 20.

100 “Secretary’s Meeting with Thai Leaders,” FRUS XX, Southeast Asia, Document 104.

101 “Telegram from the Embassy in Thailand to the Department of State,” Nov. 1, 1969, FRUS XX, Southeast Asia, Document 33, Department of State, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v20/d33>.

102 Pattajit Tangsinmunkong, “Thai Perceptions of China: the 1960s to the 2010s,” Presentation at Beijing University, May 31, 2019, <http://waseda-china.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/学生发表合集（文章PPT）.pdf>.

103 Tangsinmunkong, “Thai Perceptions of China.”

104 “Memorandum from the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to Vice President Agnew,” Dec. 17, 1969, FRUS XX, Southeast Asia, Document 39, Department of State, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v20/d39>.

105 Tangsinmunkong, “Thai Perceptions of China.”

106 Tangsinmunkong, “Thai Perceptions of China.”

their regional ties through the newly established Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Although the association's establishment predated the Nixon administration, America's perceived retreat from the region in the early 1970s played a significant part in encouraging Thai and other Southeast Asian leaders to envision a more meaningful role it. Reflecting Thailand's growing disaffection with the United States, Khoman decided to "rely more on neighborly mutual support than on stronger states."<sup>107</sup> Thai leaders began to explore a more explicitly Asian strategic orientation. They encouraged the idea of a "Southeast Asian Community," considered new border security arrangements with fellow ASEAN member states, and supported Malaysia's push for a neutrality concept aimed at preventing external powers from interfering in Southeast Asian affairs.<sup>108</sup> Though Thailand was not enthusiastic about the idea of ASEAN neutrality, its eventual acceptance of a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality declaration in 1971 was another remarkable policy reversal for a nation with such a staunch anti-communist tradition. The Guam doctrine thus pushed Thailand to rethink how to manage relations with non-Asian powers, resulting in a willingness both to accommodate communist neighbors as well as to insulate Southeast Asia from external influence.

## **Lessons from the Guam Doctrine**

As the experiences of Japan, South Korea, Australia, and Thailand demonstrate, the Guam doctrine affected U.S. allies in different ways. All four countries adopted elements of multiple strategies, but each ally adopted a different mix of approaches. Japan largely doubled down on its alliance with the United States, while South Korea and Australia sought to increase their leverage and hedge against possible U.S. disengagement by building independent military capabilities or investing in regional rela-

tionships. Thailand, on the other hand, saw little option but to accommodate a country it had previously seen as an adversary.<sup>109</sup> Two key factors in determining which pathway a country took were perceptions of external threats and perceptions of alliance reliability. When the threat was seen as high and America viewed as reliable, leaders were more likely to anchor to the United States. When the threat was perceived as relatively low or Washington was seen as unreliable, U.S. allies opted to autonomize, augment, or accommodate.

Flashing forward five decades, Trump's "America First" approach to alliances reads less like a new script and more like a sequel. Shortly after his election victory, Trump insisted that U.S. allies had not been "paying their bills," and questioned the value of keeping forward deployed forces in Japan and South Korea.<sup>110</sup> He also stated that "we have to be unpredictable starting now," invoking Nixon's so-called "madman theory" — an effort to ensure that "you could never put your finger on what he might do next."<sup>111</sup> Trump also announced in his inaugural address that he would reconsider the country's international role, commenting, "From this moment on, it's going to be America First. Every decision on trade, on taxes, on immigration, on foreign affairs, will be made to benefit American workers and American families."<sup>112</sup>

Biden has been clear that he plans to take a different approach with U.S. allies than his predecessor's. Indeed, one foreign policy expert has suggested that Biden will shift from an "America First" stance to an "Allies First" approach.<sup>113</sup> Biden also portends a return to predictability that allies and partners will welcome. But just as the Guam doctrine's impact continued after Nixon resigned, future U.S. policymakers will likely have to contend with the reverberations of America First long after the Trump presidency. As is often the case, history does not repeat itself but it does rhyme. Thus, the Biden administration should keep in mind four

---

107 Thanat Khoman, "ASEAN Conception and Evolution."

108 Kei Koga, "The Process of ASEAN's Institutional Consolidation in 1968-1976: Theoretical Implications for Changes of Third-World Security Oriented Institution," RSIS Working Paper, no. 234, Feb. 24, 2012, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/138882/WP234.pdf>.

109 One difficulty in assessing this period is that many U.S. allies had multiple reasons to increase their ties to communist countries, particularly China. Not only was the United States disengaging from Asia but by 1972, Washington was also engaging Beijing and signaling that it would switch recognition from the Republic of China to the People's Republic of China. The fact that many Asian states followed suit is not necessarily indicative of a propensity toward accommodation. Instead, it could simply be seen as closer alignment with the policies of the United States.

110 Jacob Gardenswartz, "Transcript: President Donald Trump's Rally in Melbourne, Florida," *Vox*, Feb. 18, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/2017/2/18/14659952/trump-transcript-rally-melbourne-florida>.

111 Trump quoted in Nick Wadhams, "Trump's 'Unpredictable Starting Now' Foreign Policy Is Here," *Bloomberg*, Dec. 4, 2016, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-12-05/trump-s-unpredictable-starting-now-foreign-policy-already-here>; and "madman theory" described in Barton Swaim, "Opinion: How Might Nixon's 'Madman Theory' Apply to Trump?" *Washington Post*, Dec. 15, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2016/12/15/how-might-nixons-madman-theory-apply-to-trump/>.

112 "Inaugural Address: Trump's Full Speech," *CNN*, Jan. 20, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/01/20/politics/trump-inaugural-address/index.html>.

113 Leandro Dario, "Anne-Marie Slaughter: 'Climate Is Clearly Biden's Top Priority,'" *Buenos Aires Times*, Dec. 26, 2020, <https://www.batimes.com.ar/news/world/anne-marie-slaughter-climate-is-clearly-bidens-top-priority.phtml>.

lessons from the Guam doctrine that apply today.

### **Lesson 1: Threatening Disengagement Accelerates Hedging**

In 1969, Nixon's statements and actions made crystal clear that the United States would decrease its military presence in some parts of Asia and that America's regional allies would increasingly have to handle their own affairs. Nixon's "Asianization" strategy was, in many ways, the Guam doctrine's greatest success as well as its most glaring weakness. On the one hand, the United States got exactly what it was seeking: Asian states began to explore new options to build autonomous capabilities. Some also sought to strengthen the regional order through strengthening intra-regional ties between the spokes in the "hub and spokes" system. The Guam doctrine thereby accelerated Asian regionalism in a way that ultimately proved more enduring than collective security models centered on the United States, such as the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization.

On the other hand, a major shortcoming of Nixon's approach was that it accelerated an "Asia for Asians" narrative that implicitly defined the United States as an outsider. By fueling the belief that America's exit from Vietnam was simply the precursor to a larger retreat from the region, U.S. leaders reduced their leverage to shape allied decision-making. Allies such as South Korea sought independent capabilities that could have further destabilized the region, while Australia, Thailand, and others built regional ties that distanced them from the United States. Thus, the devolution of regional responsibilities had both positive and negative effects. It tied regional states more closely together, but in doing so it also undermined America's leverage in the years ahead.

This lesson should provide a warning for leaders in Washington. When faced with uncertainty about America's commitment, most regional states are unlikely to double down on their alignment with Washington. As Kori Schake has noted, "when the United States steps back, its allies step back even further."<sup>114</sup> From the push by allies like South Korea to expand their domestic defense industries to the adoption of two new regional trade pacts, the past few years have seen U.S. allies in Asia once again openly advocate strategic autonomy as well

as stronger Asian regionalism.<sup>115</sup> Washington will have to be careful to encourage allies to become more capable but without leaving the United States on the sidelines in a region that is trending more intra-Asian and less trans-Pacific.

### **Lesson 2: Transactional Policies Undermine Alliances**

It was not only the waning American military presence in the Pacific that sparked anxiety among U.S. allies in the 1970s. It was also the more transactional economic approach that Nixon embraced when he jettisoned the Bretton Woods system. The postwar alliance relationships the United States established in Asia were rooted in far more than defense guarantees. American trade and investment helped propel the region's dramatic postwar growth, especially in allied nations like Japan and South Korea. The Vietnam War offered further economic benefits, fueling commercial exports and trade with allies and generating substantial U.S. economic assistance in return for allied contributions to the war effort.<sup>116</sup> The United States upended these economic ties when it hit allies with a 10 percent tariff on imports and unraveled the Bretton Woods financial system while also winding down its wartime assistance.

Through these actions, the Nixon administration signaled that the United States was becoming less predictable and reliable — not only as a military ally, but as an economic partner as well. The end of dollar convertibility into gold, which became known as the "Nixon shock," introduced new friction into U.S. alliance relationships right at the moment when U.S. allies were also beginning to explore new trade relationships with China. Over the next three decades, Asian allies sought increasingly closer economic ties with Beijing, which repeatedly capitalized on the perceived economic absence of the United States during both the Asian financial crisis and the more recent pandemic-induced recession. In short, transactional American economic policies accelerated the adoption of transactional allied security policies.

Looking forward, if the United States hopes to incentivize its allies to anchor rather augment, autonomize, or accommodate, it will need to focus on the economic underpinnings of its alliance rela-

114 Kori Schake, "Back to Basics: How to Make Right What Trump Gets Wrong," *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 3 (May/June 2019), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-04-16/back-basics>.

115 Evelyn Goh, "ASEAN-Led Multilateralism and Regional Order: The Great Power Bargain Deficit," *International Relations and Asia's Southern Tier*, ed. Gilbert Rozman and Joseph Chinyong Liow (Singapore: Springer, 2018), [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-3171-7\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-3171-7_4).

116 Tae Yang Kwak, "The Nixon Doctrine and the Yusin Reforms: American Foreign Policy, the Vietnam War, and the Rise of Authoritarianism in Korea, 1968–1973," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 12 no. 1–2 (Spring/Summer 2003): 41, <https://doi.org/10.1163/187656103793645315>.



tionships. Transactional relationships based only in shared short-term interests are difficult to maintain. Economic power and influence have given Beijing not just clout, but substantial leverage over U.S. allies and partners. One need look no further than China's use of economic statecraft against Japan in 2010, the Philippines in 2012, Vietnam in 2014, South Korea in 2017, or Australia in 2020 to see the effect Beijing's economic power is having in the region.<sup>117</sup> Equally important, regional assessments of American decline are based largely on perceptions of waning U.S. economic influence and its inward turn on trade.<sup>118</sup> U.S. leaders will need to assure allies that Washington has a plan to restore its economic leadership in the Pacific in addition to restoring its military presence. Better aligning U.S. alliances around shared principles and institutions will therefore be key for the United States going forward.

### Lesson 3: Enduring Policies Require Congressional Support

The disconnect between the Nixon administration and the legislative branch over the country's overseas commitments was a significant obstacle to implementing the Guam doctrine.<sup>119</sup> Although the Nixon administration provided repeated assurances to Asian allies about America's enduring role as a Pacific power and its willingness to offer assistance, U.S. allies became increasingly skeptical that the executive branch could deliver on its promises.<sup>120</sup> Allies such as South Korea and Thailand found themselves repeatedly disappointed by promises of aid and support that failed to materialize, which contributed to their eventual decisions to seek greater autonomy and an accommodation with Beijing.

Today, the combination of perceived American unreliability and Chinese aggressiveness is creating similar alliance management challenges. Foreign leaders are weighing the prospect that Trump's transactional

approach and ambivalence toward overseas commitments may not have been an aberration but could represent a new turn in American foreign policy.<sup>121</sup> A clear alignment between the White House and Capitol Hill will be necessary to convince Asian leaders and Asian publics that the United States will remain trustworthy in the years ahead, regardless of whom the American public elects as president.

U.S. allies need to be convinced that presidential initiatives enjoy support from the legislative branch and that any U.S. commitments have sufficient bipartisan backing to ensure they will endure beyond a single administration. The Obama and Trump administrations were both criticized by regional allies for failing to adequately implement their Asia strategies.<sup>122</sup> As the Biden administration seeks to craft new Indo-Pacific initiatives, it will need to win legislative buy-in to see them through. Fortunately, Congress is placing ever greater attention on the Indo-Pacific. Recent support for the Asia Reassurance Initiative and Pacific Deterrence Initiative has been noticed throughout the region.<sup>123</sup> The executive and legislative branches should build on this momentum.

### Lesson 4: Structural Factors Drive Alignment

At first glance, it might seem that the Nixon doctrine has little to do with regional dynamics now, over half a century later. The Soviet Union has since dissolved, U.S. allies have flourished, China has risen, and many Asian states have democratized. Furthermore, it is hard to think of two more unique leaders or time periods in recent America history than Richard Nixon in the late 1960s or Donald Trump in the second decade of the 21st century. In short, why should observers believe that Asia in 1969 holds any lessons for approaches to the region in 2021?

Although it would indeed be unwise to draw a direct connection between ally decisions in these

117 For more on these cases, see Peter Harrell, Elizabeth Rosenberg, and Edoardo Saravalle, "China's Use of Coercive Economic Measures," Center for a New American Security, June 2018, [https://s3.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/China\\_Use\\_FINAL-1.pdf?mtime=20180604161240](https://s3.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/China_Use_FINAL-1.pdf?mtime=20180604161240); and Natasha Kassam, "Great Expectations: The Unraveling of the Australia-China Relationship," Brookings Institution, July 20, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/great-expectations-the-unraveling-of-the-australia-china-relationship/>.

118 Hugh White, "Without America: Australia in the New Asia," *Quarterly Essay*, no. 68, (November 2017), <https://www.quarterlyessay.com.au/essay/2017/11/without-america>.

119 Earl G. Ravenal, "The Nixon Doctrine and Our Asian Commitments," *Foreign Affairs* 49, no. 2 (January 1971), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/1971-01-01/nixon-doctrine-and-our-asian-commitments>.

120 Jeffrey Kimball, "The Nixon Doctrine: A Saga of Misunderstanding," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (March 2006): 59–74, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5705.2006.00287.x>.

121 For example, see "The Security and Defense Agenda (As Delivered by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, Brussels, Belgium, June 10, 2011)," *Washington Post*, June 10, 2011, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the-security-and-defense-agenda-as-delivered-by-secretary-of-defense-robert-gates-brussels-belgium-june-10-2011/2011/06/10/AGqIzOH\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the-security-and-defense-agenda-as-delivered-by-secretary-of-defense-robert-gates-brussels-belgium-june-10-2011/2011/06/10/AGqIzOH_story.html).

122 Yoichi Funabashi, "Why a New Asia Policy Is Needed Under Biden," *Japan Times*, Jan. 17, 2021, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2021/01/17/commentary/world-commentary/api-biden-asia/>.

123 Lalit K. Jha, "US to Establish Pacific Deterrence Initiative to Counter China," *Outlook India*, Dec. 7, 2020, <https://www.outlookindia.com/newscroll/us-to-establish-pacific-deterrence-initiative-to-counter-china/1989121>.

two different periods, some historical similarities are unmistakable. Of America's allies in Asia, Japan was the most comfortable working with Trump, largely doubling down on the alliance just as it did under Nixon. South Korea struggled with the unpredictability of both American presidents, leading to its pursuit of more independent capabilities. Australia worked in both eras to maintain U.S. engagement while also deepening its ties with other regional security partners as a hedge against American disengagement. And Thailand sought greater outreach to China under both Nixon and Trump, while still maintaining military ties with the United States.

These similarities are not mere coincidences. Alignment decisions in Asia are driven by many of the same structural factors today as they were 50 years ago. The region's geography has not changed: Japan and South Korea are stuck in Northeast Asia, near the most likely zones of regional conflict, while Australia and Thailand are thousands of miles away. Meanwhile, Japan and Australia tend to expect the United States to be committed to their security because U.S. forces are reliant on their territory for basing access and on their forces for coalition operations. South Korean and Thai leaders have been more concerned about the prospects of abandonment by Washington in both periods, in part because they play less direct roles in balancing against the chief great-power threats to the United States. In 1969 and 2016, American leaders sought to refocus on great-power competition by shifting more of the burden on allies and partners. Although Nixon's and Trump's policies differed in many ways, structural similarities drove U.S. allies to adopt similar alignment choices in both eras.

## Conclusion

Polling indicates that many Asians perceived the United States under Trump as weak, unprincipled, disengaged, and unpredictable.<sup>124</sup> In recent years, allies have indicated that they are considering options beyond anchoring to the United States, including augmenting, autonomizing, and accommodating. There is bipartisan support to reverse these trends, but America's experience after Nixon's Guam doctrine suggests that it will take time. And Washington's success will vary substantially depending on the circumstances of the ally or partner in question. Regardless, American leaders will have to convince their Asian counterparts that the

United States remains powerful, principled, present, and predictable.

This is a tall task, but there is reason for optimism about the future of U.S. alliances in Asia. The United States still retains many of its longstanding advantages, especially when compared to China. First, Washington has dozens of treaty allies and a global network of partners. Second, America has a record of fighting on behalf of its friends around the world. Third, U.S. leaders have often championed (albeit imperfectly) shared values and principles that appeal to many of its allies and partners. Finally, despite Trump's embrace of America First rhetoric, foreign publics still trust the United States more than China. These substantial and enduring advantages are the reasons why most countries in Asia would prefer more U.S. engagement, not less. However, if the United States does not deliver on promises to sustain regional engagement, most Asian countries will avoid anchoring and turn toward alternative strategies.<sup>125</sup>

Few American allies in Asia look back at the summer of '69 with any sense of nostalgia. But keeping in mind the lessons of the Guam doctrine can help the United States avoid repeating its alliance errors 50 years later. America's experiences following the introduction of the Guam doctrine suggests that if the country can leverage its advantages, U.S. allies and partners will be more confident in continued U.S. engagement and will share more of the burden. 🇺🇸

***Lindsey Ford** was formerly a David M Rubenstein fellow in foreign policy at the Brookings Institution. She is currently serving as the deputy assistant secretary of defense for South and Southeast Asia. The views expressed in this article are those of the author alone and do not necessarily reflect the official views of the Department of Defense.*

***Zack Cooper** is a research fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and conducted much of this research under a grant from the National Asia Research Program, supported by the National Bureau of Asian Research and Institute for National Strategic Studies.*

***Acknowledgements:** The authors would like to thank Emily Carr, Annie Kowalewski, Harry Lee, and Michael Tan for their excellent research support.*

*Image: U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (photo by Pfc. Karish Mattingly)*

124 Sharon Seah, et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2021* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2021), <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-State-of-SEA-2021-v2.pdf>.

125 Seah, et al., *The State of Southeast Asia*, 50–51.