

Brig. Gen. Kyle B. Ellison, deputy commanding general of III Marine Expeditionary Brigade, and Japanese Ground Self-Defense Force (JGSDF) Col. Misashi Hiraki, commanding officer of the 1st Amphibious Rapid Deployment Regiment, greet one another on Camp Takigahara, Shizuoka Prefecture, Japan, 15 March 2022. The JGSDF hosted a bilateral press conference to answer questions about Maritime Defense Exercise Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade (MDX-ARDB). MDX-ARDB is a bilateral exercise meant to increase interoperability and strengthen ties between U.S. and Japanese forces for the defense of Japan. (Photo by Lance Cpl. Cesar Ronaldo Alarcon, U.S. Marine Corps)

# Concerted Alliance Building The Solution to Ensuring "A Free and Open Indo-Pacific" in a Multipolar World

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

-Winston Churchill

fter practically a century of global dominance following victory in the Napoleonic Wars, a new century dawned for the British Empire. Despite success quelling the Boer insurgency in Great Britain's South African colony in 1902, new challenges confronted the supremacy of the British Empire, with many in the British public beginning to fear an end to the era of Pax Britannica. The U.S. toppling of the remnants of Spain's Empire in the Americas during the Spanish-American War potentially endangered British control of its American holdings. A change in the regional hegemon of Asia as Qing China was replaced by the more dangerous Japanese Empire in the First Sino-Japanese War challenged British power and influence in Asia. Perhaps most dangerous to the British was the rise of the German Empire led by the much more ambitious and bellicose Kaiser Wilhelm II upon the dismissal of Otto von Bismarck, who threatened the very strength of the empire itself: the dominance of the seas. German shipbuilding skyrocketed at the end of the previous century with the secretary of state of the Imperial Navy Office Alfred von Tirpitz sharing the Kaiser's ambition. From 1898 to 1900, Tirpitz doubled his plans for strengthening the might of the German fleet from nineteen to thirty-eight battleships.<sup>1</sup> With both the U.S. and Japanese navies following a similar rapid growth plan to Germany, the idea of Great Britain ruling the waves alone seemed fleeting; it seemed that the policy of "splendid isolationism" would be forced to come to a close.

America today sees itself in a familiar position to the British Empire at the beginning of the twentieth century. The era of Pax Americana, beginning with the fall of the Soviet Union, enabled the United States to act as the solitary superpower of the world. This status quo is now challenged by new and old rivals across the globe. Similar to the British at the turn of the twentieth century, America has begun to withdraw from insurgency operations and has shifted its attention to growing near-peer threats that dispute American influence throughout the globe. An increasingly confrontational Putin aims to push Russia back to greatness using soft power through concerted cyberattacks and propaganda as well as through hard-power actions like the seizure of Crimea from Ukraine.<sup>2</sup> Iran's strength has only grown as regional powers in the Middle East, specifically Iraq, have had rocky starts to the twenty-first century. Aggression through missile strikes on American allies like Saudi Arabia is of rising concern to America and its friends throughout the region.<sup>3</sup> The Kim regime of North Korea continues to utilize its traditional strategy of threatening nuclear missile strikes to achieve what political goals it can.<sup>4</sup> Most importantly, the growth of China—in terms of economic, diplomatic, and military might—poses a serious threat to U.S. influence in the Indo-Pacific, accelerated by the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) increasing willingness to use their strengths to bully U.S. allies in the region.<sup>5</sup> Like the British Empire, the United States is seeing a shift from a hegemonic world order to a multipolar world, where rising powers can now threaten the dominance of a previously hegemonic power.

The British Empire quickly realized the change in world order necessitated a shift in international strategy, whereas the United States thus far has yet to demonstrate a drastic turn in foreign policy. Shifting away from its policy of "splendid isolationism," the British began to understand their place in the new world order. Realizing the need for allies as the idea of ruling the waves alone against so many potential threats throughout the world, the British turned toward the French and the Japanese. The Anglo-Japanese Alliance, signed in 1902, allowed the British to concentrate their naval strength away from their bases in Asia and toward their interests elsewhere. *L'entente cordiale*, struck with the French in 1904, enabled a diversion away from the Mediterranean by the Royal Navy

and toward the North Sea. The French would help protect British and French interests in the Mediterranean with their fleet while providing a capable land ally to check German aggression on the continent. Through concerted alliance building, the British were able to mass their resources against their main threat,

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Contrasting with this strategy, the United States has in recent history turned inward under the Trump administration, favoring a policy of unilateralism when pushed to intervene abroad and preferring a policy of isolationism when possible. The policy of "America First" demonstrated a shift away from global affairs and The growth of challenges throughout the globe requires the United States to act in order to maintain the favorable status quo, and the number of potential adversaries around the globe makes it unlikely that the United States alone can face the increasing number of looming threats. This conundrum is not unfamiliar to hegemonic powers entering a great power era. Similar to Japan, the United States also outlined its vision of a

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focused on those of America. Withdrawing troops from overseas commitments demonstrated the diminishment of U.S. influence abroad. Increasingly aggressive rhetoric toward U.S. allies under the Trump administration gave mixed signals on with whom the United States plans to confront the challenges of the increasingly complex world.<sup>7</sup> While the Biden presidency so far has shown an increase in alliance building, policies of isolationism and unilateralism remain in the not so distant past.

One goal of U.S. policy makers, a "free and open Indo-Pacific," remains an elusive objective. This aim, first introduced by the Abe government in Japan, can be briefly described as an ideal in the Indo-Pacific region characterized by the promotion of principles such as freedom of navigation and the rule of law, the advancement of economic prosperity through infrastructure development, and a demonstration of commitment to peace and stability.<sup>8</sup> Although recent history has demonstrated a U.S. shift toward unilateralism and isolationism, both of these doctrines are unsuitable for achieving such a lofty aim. The army's role in ensuring a free and open Indo-Pacific therefore necessitates a shift away from current political strategies and toward multilateralism, primarily through alliance building with partners in the Indo-Pacific characterized by proactive trust and relationship building on the individual level.

The recent strategies practiced by the United States, isolationism and unilateralism, are both unsuitable for achieving the goal of a free and open Indo-Pacific. free and open Indo-Pacific through former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision.* "Free, fair, and reciprocal trade, open investment environments, good governance, and freedom of the seas" are the tenants of this concept as described by Pompeo.<sup>9</sup> Achieving such a lofty goal appears as just a hopeful dream if the United States fails to act or chooses to act alone.

Isolationism will not enable the United States to achieve the goals of a free and open Indo-Pacific. Adversaries in the region currently are and plan to challenge the ideals outlined by the free and open Indo-Pacific vision. The CCP continues to challenge freedom of navigation through the creation of artificial islands in the South China Sea and the harassment of vessels traversing within their self-proclaimed border defined by their nine-dash line.<sup>10</sup> North Korea possesses the fourth largest military force in the world, now backed by potentially over sixty nuclear weapons that provide real weight behind its continued threats to U.S. allies in the region.<sup>11</sup> The U.S. withdrawal back within its borders has done nothing to stop adversaries from exercising their military might to achieve their political objectives, and if anything, such actions have merely encouraged continued aggression.<sup>12</sup> A change in course is therefore required to ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific.

A unilateral approach is also an insufficient strategy in achieving the goals of a free and open Indo-Pacific as military overstretch in a multipolar world threatens U.S. regional supremacy in the Indo-Pacific. The strength of the U.S. military, even before the rise of China, faced serious challenges. These weaknesses were summarized in the work Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American *Empire* by professor Niall Ferguson, in which the author correctly prophesied that a deficiency in manpower, finances, and attention would lead to immense difficulties with the United States achieving its strategic objectives during the conflict in Iraq.<sup>13</sup> These deficiencies in military strength could potentially become even more apparent in a near-peer conflict. In terms of manpower, total U.S. military personnel is estimated at 1.3 million, whereas the CCP and North Korea are estimated at two million and 950,000 respectively.<sup>14</sup> Compounding this numerical deficit problem is the issue of regional concentration; nearly all of Chinese and North Korean forces are located in the Indo-Pacific region, whereas U.S. forces are scattered across the globe.<sup>15</sup> While a financial weakness for the U.S. military may seem absurd given that America has the highest military expenditure in the world, the U.S. public is lacking the desire to continue high military spending with other seemingly more immediate threats intruding into their lives.<sup>16</sup> Already, the U.S. Army is anticipating a \$5 billion budget cut in fiscal year 2022, despite growing threats to the world order.<sup>17</sup> Finally, the attention deficit weakness, described by Ferguson as the U.S. public's inability to remain focused and committed to a foreign policy issue long enough for the military to resolve the problem, could also become apparent as it did during the Iraq conflict. Hopefully, with an adversary as threatening to the United States as China, the U.S. public will be able to remain focused on competition with China longer than it was able to stomach during the conflict in Iraq.

As both unilateralism and isolationism are unsuitable for the United States to achieve its goals in the Indo-Pacific, proactive trust and alliance building marked by relationship building on the individual level with those in like-minded nations in the region is the solution. On a political level, steps have already been taken in 2021 to push the United States toward multilateralism. The 2021 Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, a conference between India, Japan, Australia, and the United States, displayed strong unity among these four nations in terms of aligning their visions for a free and open Indo-Pacific.<sup>18</sup> To bolster these efforts at greater cooperation between like-minded allies in a multipolar world, U.S. military leaders at all echelons can take action to build on preexisting alliance frameworks.

The first aspect of building effective military alliances that leaders of the U.S. military can improve is trust between allies. Trusting others after such a long period of unilateralism may prove to be a difficult task for the United States, but trust between allies remains an essential ingredient for effective alliances. One of the best ways to build confidence between allies is to proactively show trust between partners. Proactively showing trust by sharing valuable information could seem a daunting prospect for the United States, but it is important to remember that such an action is not unprecedented. In 1940, the British Empire stood alone against fascism in mainland Europe after the fall of France. Understanding the gravity of their situation, the British chose to take what some would consider a risk in "The Tizard Mission," carrying a cargo full of prototypes, blueprints, and new technologies to the United States, building trust between the two nations in hopes of a full-fledged alliance.<sup>19</sup> However, an alliance between the two Anglo nations was anything but inevitable. There was considerable friction between the two from differences regarding ideas on the League of Nations, British frustration with the growing U.S. role as an economic superpower that could supplant Great Britain, and reservations by many in the United States due to the lack of selfrule for the various subjects under the British crown. While the attack on Pearl Harbor and the subsequent declaration of war by Germany on the United States ultimately drew the United States into World War II on the side of Britain, early proactive trust building initiated by the United Kingdom during the Tizard Mission helped to develop a strong relationship between the two nations before the U.S. entry into the conflict, despite the high degree of existing tension.

While leaders in the U.S. military may not be able to share all top secret technology with allies around the world, they can take other action to build trust proactively with potential or existing U.S. allies. On this front, the U.S. military has struggled to demonstrate trust in its allies. An editor of the work titled *Grand Strategy and Military Alliances* recounts a 2003 story of America's unwillingness to show trust to even close allies of the United States:

#### **CONCERTED ALLIANCE BUILDING**



Nearly fifty exchange soldiers attended the annual Military Personnel Exchange Program conference in Wiesbaden, Germany, 10–14 September 2018. The program consists of fifty-nine officers and noncommissioned officers situated in five different countries in the U.S. Army Europe and Africa (USAREUR) footprint. Ranks range from staff sergeant to brigadier general, covering nearly all the branches. The USAREUR program, a security cooperation program, is the largest in the U.S. Army, bigger than all other theater security cooperation programs combined. (Photo by Tony Sweeney)

Surprisingly, he discovered that some of the British officers with whom he talked acidly noted that a number of their American colleagues during the invasion of Iraq had questioned what foreign officers were doing in what to them was an almost wholly American operation. Moreover, they commented with some sharpness on the unwillingness of many American officers to share information, much less intelligence, with their allies. In one case, a British officer recounted the refusal of Americans to share intelligence that the British had originally provided because of its new US security classification, which prohibited sharing of that information to foreigners!<sup>20</sup>

Such incidents unquestionably failed to build closer ties between U.S. and UK military leaders working together

on the same mission. This extreme lack of trust demonstrated by the United States is cynically summarized by a question from the editor of the same work: "Why take time and expend mental energy to deal with allies when you are a representative of the world's sole remaining superpower?"<sup>21</sup> In the changing strategic landscape the United States finds itself in today, being the sole superpower will become less likely as time goes on.

Even on a lower level, information sharing remains extremely restricted between the United States and its allies, undoubtedly giving a message of a lack of trust in the allies of America. As a current student at the engineer basic officer leadership course, my U.S. counterparts and I can see the negative messaging this lack of willingness to share information with allies has on the international students in our class. There are days where international students are banned from coming to class due to the secure nature of the

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information taught, despite much of the information being easily "Googled." The message of such a seemingly benign action shown to international students and the young developing U.S. officers in the course is simple: the United States does not trust its own allies with information. Such a message is dangerous and unrealistic as the nature of international relations shifts to a multipolar world where trust between allies is essential form in World War II, the Dual Alliance started with mutual trust: both sides exchanged information on new advances they had developed in mining, torpedoes, and radio technology.<sup>22</sup> Building on this trust, both nations began to work together even more closely, from operations as complex as international fleet demonstrations and joint military interventions like the Boxer Rebellion to more simple work exchanges like stays

Similar to the beginnings of the U.S.-British alliance that would form in World War II, the Dual Alliance started with mutual trust: both sides exchanged information on new advances they had developed in mining, torpedoes, and radio technology.

for productive alliances. Like the British in 1940, the United States needs to proactively give trust to successfully construct productive alliances.

The second action the U.S. military can do to build effective military alliances is encourage relationship building on an individual level between U.S. military leaders and allies. Individual interactions between military leaders can have powerful consequences for the strength of an alliance. When one looks at the Dual Alliance of 1879, the partnership of Imperial Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, it may seem obvious that this alliance would materialize; the two nations had the same official language, and both mistrusted Russia's ambitions in Europe. It is important to note that the two nations were rivals for a large portion of their histories, with the largest friction point coming a mere thirteen years before the signing of their alliance in the form of the Austro-Prussian War of 1866. This bitter conflict, won by Prussia, could have easily caused the Habsburg monarchy to harbor a grudge against its longtime Prussian rivals, but instead, a close bond quickly developed between the two nations.

While the shared threat of Russia was the main factor that helped to quickly develop the alliance, cross-military training between the two nations allowed friendships to develop on an individual level among military leaders that would closely bind the two nations together in the First World War. Similar to the beginnings of the U.S.-British alliance that would at shipyards in the partner states and small combined maneuvers and combat exercises, to even seemingly insignificant events like football games. While it is true that the primary factor in creating the alliance between the former rivals was the threat of Russia, the constant interaction between the two militaries at all levels allowed individuals to build bonds that strengthened the alliance as a whole. Expert on German-Austro-Hungarian relations, Rüdiger Schiel, even goes as far to say that a level of mutual inspiration developed between the two countries as "the result of individual reciprocal expert visits to training facilities."<sup>23</sup>

Today, the United States has exchange programs that attempt to replicate the success of German-Austro-Hungarian relationship building; however, the scale of these existing exchange programs is insufficient to build the strong individual bonds necessary to shape the culture of the U.S. military. Some current programs that attempt to develop close ties with allies include International Military Education and Training (IMET), the professional military exchange program, and unit exchange.<sup>24</sup> At the cadet level, the cultural understanding and leadership program also attempts to build relationships with U.S. allies while developing young officers.<sup>25</sup> While these programs have different focuses, all of them attempt to achieve the primary goal outlined in the IMET program: "Establish a rapport between the U.S. military and [another] country's military to build alliances for the future."<sup>26</sup> Although the program's goals

are focused in the right direction, the volume of service members that are sent is insufficient to effectively build relationships as strong as those that developed among Germany and Austria and Hungary. While a good number of cadets are participating in these exchange programs, 959 cadets and 150 cadre in 2018, other programs fail to achieve high levels of participation.<sup>27</sup> For example, the Military Personnel Exchange Program estimates to only hold 120 reciprocal exchanges and forty-six nonreciprocal exchanges at a time.<sup>28</sup> Such low numbers of exchanges fail to catalyze the relationship building that will be necessary in a world where the United States can no longer act alone as the world's sole superpower. Whether the issue is funding (2020 estimates put the IMET's budget at \$108 million), a lack of interest in entering the programs by individuals, or difficulty getting into the programs, leaders in the U.S. military should make a concerted effort to increase the number of exchanges of service members through existing exchange programs in order to enable the United States to build meaningful relationships with like-minded allies on a greater scale.<sup>29</sup>

The formula for successful alliance building is incredibly difficult to master. Trusting other nations with different histories, different forms of government, and different cultures can be strenuous. Winning the trust of other nations can be an even more arduous task. Additionally, alliances can be fragile.

Historically, national partnerships are difficult to manage. Personalities can clash like the famous

spats between British Gen. Bernard Montgomery and American Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower's subordinate generals during World War II, and alliances can weaken when victory draws near, such as was the case when members of the sixth coalition had different visions of a post-Napoleonic Europe as l'empereur's defeat appeared imminent.<sup>30</sup> Some point out that even the most successful alliances come with baggage, such as unequal burden sharing, greater numbers of foreign entanglements, and the increased financial cost that can come with taking a more active role on the global stage.<sup>31</sup> However, in a progressively multipolar world where it is becoming increasingly impossible to act alone in the face of numerous adversaries, alliances become substantially more important. The weaknesses inherent with alliances can be suppressed by partnering with like-minded allies who share the same beliefs of democracy, free trade, and the rule of law that the United States adheres to. Methods for building these alliances with these compatible allies must include a greater display of trust by the U.S. military, and a greater number of connections made by individuals at all echelons in military leadership with allied nations. While such a task may seem laborious or a distraction from other efforts, one of the greatest alliance builders in history would like to remind us of how effective, even essential, alliances can be: "There is only one thing worse than fighting with allies, and that is fighting without them."<sup>32</sup>

## Notes

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US ISSN 0026-4148