

Why U.S. Alliances in East Asia Will Remain Stable as China Rises

BOTTOM LINES

- **UNDERSTANDING THE CHOICES OF MINOR-POWER ALLIES OF DECLINING GREAT POWERS.** Great powers that face rising challengers—such as the United States today confronted with China’s rise—wonder whether minor-power allies will choose to remain loyal, shift to neutrality, or defect to the rising challenger. This decision depends on whether the minor powers stand to gain or lose territory from realignment, and whether the declining power retains the capability and willingness to defend them.
- **ALLIANCE CHOICES OF MINOR POWERS IN INTERWAR EUROPE.** Romania and Poland—minor power allies of a declining France—faced difficult choices as Nazi Germany grew more powerful. Ultimately, Romania defected to the Axis to obtain a German guarantee of its remaining territory, while Poland remained loyal after France and Britain promised to defend the Poles.
- **ALLIANCE CHOICES OF MINOR POWERS DURING THE COLD WAR.** Nuclear weapons provide the option of obtaining the bomb as an alternative or supplement to loyalty or neutrality, but eliminate the incentive for defection since the bomb provides security. As the Soviets closed the nuclear gap in the late 1950s, the Federal Republic of Germany repeatedly sought an independent nuclear arsenal in response to signs of a decreasing U.S. commitment to the continent.
- **CONDITIONS CONDUCTIVE TO ALLIANCE DEFECTION ARE ABSENT IN THE WESTERN PACIFIC.** The United States retains the capability and willingness to defend its allies, and these allies each stand to lose by realigning with China given the territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas. It is also unlikely that Japan and South Korea will go nuclear, but even if they did, this would probably not mean the end of U.S. alliances with these countries.

By Alexander B. Downes and Jasen J. Castillo

Understanding the Choices of Minor-Power Allies of Declining Great Powers

Great powers that face rising challengers wonder whether the alliances they have built with smaller powers will remain cohesive. Minor power allies of declining great powers look at two primary factors when choosing among strategies of loyalty (remaining in the current alliance), neutrality (leaving the current alliance but not joining the rising power, or seeking alliances with both powers), and defection (leaving the current alliance and forming an alliance with the rising power). First, minor powers weigh what they stand to gain or lose materially from remaining in the current alliance. Second, minor powers take into account the capability and willingness of the declining power to fulfill its alliance obligations, which includes defending them from the rising power.

Jointly, these two variables predict when minor powers will choose alliance loyalty, alliance defection, or neutrality. Two combinations make alliance choices straightforward. Minor powers that expect to be better off territorially by remaining allied with the declining power and believe that their ally has the capability and willingness to come to their aid are likely to remain loyal. By contrast, minor powers that expect to

gain territory if the rising challenger prevails in the contest and believe that their declining power ally cannot or will not defend them are most likely to defect.

The other cases are less clear. Minor powers that expect to lose territory by defecting but believe that their current ally cannot and will not protect them are in a particularly difficult position. These states initially retreat into neutrality, and eventually defect if the magnitude of the threat is sufficiently great. This is especially true since they are defenseless in the face of the potential threat posed by the rising power.

The decisions of minor powers that receive an effective security guarantee from their declining ally, but which may gain from switching sides, depends on their attitude toward the status quo. States with revisionist objectives toward neighboring minor powers that can be met by changing alliances will do so, whereas states that do not value expansion will stay loyal. The majority of minor powers in this situation will choose loyalty or neutrality since they usually have status quo motives by virtue of having allied with the declining power.

Before applying our theory to the Asia–Pacific region, we tested it using historical case studies from Europe during the interwar period and the Cold War.

Alliance Choices of Minor Powers in Interwar Europe

Interwar Europe provides a useful test of our theory because France—which was in decline relative to a rising Germany—had several minor power allies in Eastern Europe that had to choose between alliance loyalty, defection, and neutrality in the 1930s.

Romania, for example, began to doubt France's commitment to its defense when Paris did not oppose German rearmament in 1932 and permitted Hitler to remilitarize the Rhineland in 1936. Romania's King Carol responded by adopting a policy of informal neutrality—maintaining the country's formal alliance with France but also developing ties with Germany. Further events in the late 1930s, such as the Munich Agreement, Germany's occupation of rump Czechoslovakia, and its attack on Poland only further convinced the king that Romania's security depended more on Germany than France. After Germany crushed the Western Allies in 1940, Romania joined the Axis even though Germany forced Bucharest to forfeit significant territory to its neighbors.

The story of Poland is similar until the end. Polish doubts about France developed in the 1920s in response to the Locarno pacts, which failed to guarantee Germany's eastern border with Poland. Further diplomatic disappointments led Polish President Piłsudski to sign a neutrality pact with Germany in 1934 and collaborate with Hitler in the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia at Munich. Eventually, however, Hitler threatened Poland, and France and Britain finally promised to fight if Hitler attacked. This led Warsaw to choose loyalty and return to the Western camp, but it unfortunately did not save Poland as neither Paris nor London lifted a finger in its defense.

Alliance Choices of Minor Powers during the Cold War

The invention of nuclear weapons changed the alliance calculus of nuclear-capable minor powers. Minor powers capable of building the bomb no longer needed to defect when faced with a rising threat and a weakening patron. West Germany, for instance, never considered leaving NATO or going neutral during the Cold War. Rather, when West German leaders doubted the U.S. commitment to their defense in the mid-1950s, they responded by seeking their own nuclear arsenal. These efforts failed, but they demonstrate how minor power allies of declining great powers that possess the capability to build the bomb no longer need to defect to ensure their security.

Conditions Conducive to Alliance Defection Are Absent in the Western Pacific

The key takeaway of our theory and historical analysis for the Western Pacific today is that the conditions that cause minor power allies of declining great powers to ponder neutrality, defection, or independent nuclear arsenals are largely absent.

First, the geography of the region is more conducive to defense than Europe: U.S. allies—such as Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines—are not directly contiguous with China, and most are protected by water barriers.

Second, U.S. allies are engaged in territorial disputes with China in the East and South China Seas. Since China would presumably insist on resolving these disputes in its favor, these countries would thus stand to

lose territory from realigning with Beijing. (Taiwan is a more difficult case: it is not formally a U.S. ally, but nevertheless likely stands to lose its sovereignty and substantial political and civil rights by merging with China. Taiwan is thus in no hurry to consummate a merger, and will continue to rely on the United States for support.)

Finally, the United States, despite the growth of Chinese anti-access/area denial capabilities, retains the ability to project power in the region and protect its allies. As long as Washington preserves its military and technological edge, and clearly communicates its intention to stand by its allies, the United States has little reason to fear that its regional allies will hedge toward—or much less defect to—China.

The United States should thus take reasonable steps to maintain its capabilities and signal its commitment to its allies that it intends to remain in the region, such as maintaining or accelerating the “pivot” to Asia, continuing to forward deploy U.S. forces in the area (making it clear to Beijing that the United States will not tolerate forceful resolution of maritime disputes in the East and South China Seas), and asserting freedom of navigation around islands and newly constructed terrain features in these waters. To reassure its allies of the continued credibility of its nuclear deterrent—and hence discourage the possibility that one or more allies might seek its own nuclear arsenal—the United States might institute increased port visits by U.S. nuclear weapons-capable ballistic missile submarines throughout the region. U.S. policymakers could also coordinate U.S. plans for nuclear use with allied military officials, or offer to expand the deployment and sale of theater missile defenses to the minor powers in its alliance network. ♦

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