

Revitalizing American Alliances
By: Jordan Ernstsen and Noelle Troutman

Introduction

Navigating an increasingly competitive security environment requires the United States to consider seriously the revitalization of American alliances as a primary security objective. The recent Foreign Policy at Brookings joint event in collaboration with Brookings-Robert Bosch Foundation Trans-Atlantic Initiative and the Bridging the Gap New Voices in National Security Initiative provided a timely evaluation of the Biden administration's approach to allied engagement thus far and discussed key challenges in managing American alliance and coalition partnerships along with possible prescriptions.

Representative Kim: The Value of the American Handshake

The event opened with a conversation between Representative Andy Kim (D-NJ) and Brookings Robert Bosch Senior Visiting Fellow and Bridging the Gap Senior Advisor James Goldgeier on the role of Congress in revitalizing America's alliances and strategic partnerships.

Goldgeier observed a decades-long decline in foreign policy expertise on the Hill and diminished congressional oversight of the executive branch on foreign policy. Presidents now jealously guard their foreign policy and national security prerogatives. Yet, the Biden administration has signaled its support for Congress to play a more active role in American foreign policy. This welcome development emanating from the White House, together with the election of Kim and several other national security professionals to the U.S. House of Representatives, presents an opportunity to build back a needed and overdue congressional role in foreign policy.

Over the past four years, allies and partners increasingly viewed America's reliability and the sustainability of its commitments with some skepticism, as foreign leaders struggled to understand and predict the pendulum swing of American politics. How can Congress reassure wary allies and partners that future U.S. administrations will not unilaterally retreat from these international commitments and partnerships? Kim noted the importance of understanding allied perceptions of American rhetoric and behavior, as well as understanding what allies and partners want from their relationship with the United States. We have to ask, Kim said, what is the value of the American handshake? Improving American credibility abroad requires stability at home and a comprehensive approach to allied engagement, including space for Congress to build relationships through dialogue with legislative counterparts.

In addition, Kim identified three areas for increased congressional participation in foreign policy: (1) structural, or interagency cooperation on organizational issues, (2) systemic or strategic, meaning proactive defense and intelligence investments based on a long-term vision of U.S. foreign policy, and (3) immediate concerns in international politics, or "the news of the day." While all areas are important, Kim emphasized the need for American foreign policy to move beyond reactive approaches to immediate crises, to proactively planning for long-term strategic goals using systemic tools, such as the National Defense Authorization Act, to facilitate these efforts.

Expert Panel: No More Business as Usual

Following the conversation between Kim and Goldgeier, an expert panel expanded on the theme of proactive strategic efforts in managing American partnerships abroad. Brookings Foreign Policy Senior Fellow and Director of the India Project, Tanvi Madan, opened the discussion with Victor Cha, Senior Vice President and Korea Chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Alexandria de Hoop Scheffer, Director of Research for Trans-Atlantic Security at the German Marshall Fund of the United States, Sara Bjerg Moller, Assistant Professor at the School of Diplomacy and International Relations at Seton Hall University, and Zack Cooper, Research Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and Co-director of the Alliance for Democracy.

Noting the recent 2+2 meetings of Secretaries Blinken and Austin with their South Korean and Japanese counterparts, a summit between officials from the Quad (the United States, Australia, Japan, and India), and American conversations with China in Anchorage, Madan asked the panel to evaluate the Biden administration's approach to American strategic partnerships abroad—both within Asia and Europe. Cha emphasized the important signal recent diplomatic activity sent to allies and adversaries alike, emerging as a 'one-two punch' in communicating American commitment to allies and preserving global order. de Hoop Scheffer built on this assessment, noting that the European perspective was particularly amenable toward this shift in American behavior. The challenge, she argued, is turning this renewed alignment into enduring cooperation. Bjerg Moller echoed this concern, stating NATO cannot go back to business as usual, and although the Biden administration's approach to allied engagement is positive, a final evaluation cannot be made until after the leader's summit later this year. However, Cooper states an assessment of American engagement in Asia, especially with the Quad, may be more feasible following its recent, and historic, leader's summit.

Cooper highlighted that the recent Quad Summit was a success for the Biden Administration—both in timing and substance. Namely, the United States met with its Asian partners prior to meeting with China, sending a signal of commitment and solidarity to East Asian allies both within and outside the Quad. Further, the Quad focused its efforts on developing a plan for improving COVID vaccine access and distribution for nearly 1 billion people in the Indo-Pacific. However, Cooper cautioned that a key challenge for the Quad moving forward is minding ASEAN centrality and regional authority. Cha followed Cooper's relative optimism about American partnerships in Asia, noting that if anything, the previous four years indicated that alignment in the face of regional adversity is the best strategy moving forward.

Madan also asked the panelists to reflect on the challenges the United States faces in revitalizing its alliances in Europe and Asia. Although European partners have welcomed the Biden administration's return to diplomacy and consultation, de Hoop Scheffer and Bjerg Moller highlighted the challenges posed by internal cohesion and strategic autonomy within the trans-Atlantic alliance. NATO members, they said, are deeply divided on a variety of issues and do not want to be compelled to choose between the United States on the one hand, and China or Russia on the other. Instead, European allies are interested in balancing these relationships; strictly aligning with U.S. policy on these issues, then, is unlikely. Nonetheless, U.S. and European officials need to recognize that divergent policy preferences do not preclude cooperation.

In Asia, Cha focused on the difficulties for American policy created by strained relations between Japan and South Korea. This relationship, he noted, is important for dealing with China and North Korea, as well as for U.S. efforts at coalitional diplomacy in the region. Cooper expanded on U.S. engagement in the region, arguing that the biggest challenges arise from (1) convincing allies that the United States will remain engaged beyond the Biden administration and will not retreat under a future administration, and (2) encouraging allies to do more.

The panelists concluded by offering several recommendations to the Biden administration and allies alike. For the United States, the panelists suggested:

- Work behind the scenes to coordinate amongst allies on matters of shared defense and strategic issues.
- Develop coherent strategies to prioritize threats and challenges.
- Validate domestic political preferences and concerns of allied countries.
- Engage in diplomacy at home and abroad to convince partners of consistency in American commitments.

For allies and partners:

- Offer concrete proposals of what ‘strategic autonomy’ will look like, including expectations of American commitment.
- Balance expectations of alliance efficacy with current capabilities and contributions.
- To the extent possible, act with greater strategic and operational coherence.

Conclusion: Innovation in the American Alliance System

In sum, while the American alliance system will continue to play an important role in foreign affairs, all speakers pointed to the importance the American adaptability and innovation in approaching allies and coalitional partners to preserve stability in an ever-changing security environment. Below are key points highlighted by the event’s speakers:

- The United States must be proactive in navigating a dynamic security environment, with particular emphasis on the revitalization of its alliances and coalitions.
- Open forums for dialogue between allies and coalitional partners may decrease the likelihood of costly signaling errors.
- The United States has the ‘tools’ to be successful (e.g., military, economic, and diplomatic prowess). The revitalization of American alliances depends critically on the effective implementation of these tools.