

USALI Perspectives

The Pacific Alliance Treaty Organization: A Proposal

PATO would aim to do in Asia what NATO has done in Europe

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For an avowed multilateralist, ex-chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and former “point person for diplomacy” while vice president in the Obama Administration, President Biden’s track record on foreign policy has been rather modest. True, his administration has had to repair significant damage after the Trump era. It has also helped Ukraine counter Russian aggression, rejoined the Paris Climate Accord, and

donated half a billion Covid vaccines to developing states. But these efforts are reactive, restorative, remedial. As the pandemic subsides and public confidence in his presidency grows, Biden should consider how his administration might advance peace, prosperity, and stability in the world. Establishing a Pacific Alliance Treaty Organization (PATO) would advance all three.

PATO would aim to do in Asia what NATO has done in Europe. In the early winter of the Cold War, Britain and France pleaded with the United States to provide for European defense. But the United States—then as now a reluctant multilateralist—joined only when it saw a way to contain Soviet expansion. In the ensuing decades, NATO laid the groundwork for European peace, prosperity, and security. The Asia-Pacific is, of course, far more diffuse—geographically, culturally, ethnically, politically, and otherwise—than Europe. But the basic deterrent principle at the heart of NATO can certainly take root in the Asia-Pacific.

The war in Ukraine not only demonstrates Russia's dangerousness, but also highlights NATO's *raison d'être*. Many in the Trump Camp questioned NATO: Should the U.S. shoulder the burden of European peace? President Biden has answered that question with a resounding yes and spent tens of billions of dollars to arm, train, and fund Ukraine. One year into a hot war, Russia has yet to attack a single NATO member, although Ukraine borders four of them. A similar spirit of deterrence would animate PATO.

For the foreseeable future, the biggest challenge facing the United States comes not from Putin, but from Xi Jinping. With Chinese economic might firmly established, Xi has sought to increase China's military, geopolitical,

and diplomatic heft. During his first decade of leadership (2012-22), Xi's actions raised tensions with neighbors on several sides. In his first year as chairman of the Central Military Commission, Xi established an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) over Taiwan, deployed PLA naval vessels near islands claimed by Japan, and rejected a Philippine request to arbitrate a maritime dispute under international law. China has since reclaimed land and heavily militarized islands in the South China Sea, placed an oil rig within Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone, and practiced an invasion of Taiwan. To China's west, border skirmishes have turned fatal, killing dozens of soldiers, most of them Indian.

PATO would provide for collective security and also embed key governance principles in a contested region. The war in Ukraine, coupled with China's regional aggression, calls for a coordinated, collected, and calibrated response. PATO would knit the United States together with its Asia-Pacific allies into a common military, economic, and political framework that addresses China's challenges to the rules-based order of regional security, economic prosperity, and democratic governance.

Accordingly, PATO would incorporate a mutual defense agreement, an economic framework, and standards for democratic governance. The last of

these is critical, given the rise of authoritarianism—including within America’s own borders. With liberal democracy on the retreat around the world, the United States and its allies should realize that the formula of human rights, democratic elections, and the rule of law is too precious to squander, and commit to the hard work of institutionalizing these values into a multilateral organization.

I acknowledge a couple of possible objections. First, since the United States already has mutual defense agreements with several Asia-Pacific states, why is a new treaty needed? Because the United States should not be the sole guarantor of military stability in the region, even if it is the predominant power. Japan and Australia, for instance, have mutual defense treaties with the United States, but neither is committed to assist the other in the event of attack. PATO, like NATO, would ensure that regional stability is a regional priority and a regional commitment.

At the same time, the region is likely to become more dangerous in the near future. Many viewed China’s military exercises in August 2022 as the dry-run of an invasion of Taiwan that could occur at any time. While President Biden has repeatedly announced his support for Taiwan against such an attack, he will not occupy the White House indefinitely. Moreover, a future

occupant—whether Trump or a Republican in the Trump mold—is unlikely to defend Taiwan against a Chinese invasion. The support that administrations from both parties have extended to Taiwan over the past seven decades would disintegrate.

As for economic regulation, the United States has all but abandoned its traditional role of using treaties to guide the world economy. America’s abandonment of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, to take a notable example, did not spell the end of the treaty. Instead, the eleven members forged ahead, rebranded the treaty (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partners, or CPTPP), and ratified it. China applied to join the group in 2021, though its membership is unlikely in the foreseeable future. The US now appears unlikely to join the CPTPP, but it should not abandon multilateral rule-setting altogether. PATO’s economic chapters could protect human rights, environment, labor, foreign investment, and intellectual property, in addition to the typical content of a free trade agreement.

Second, PATO might seem to duplicate the Biden administration’s efforts to create an Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). IPEF offers a nice assembly of aspirations, but it is unlikely to bind the region in any meaningful sense. The countries

include monarchies, dictatorships, and politically unstable democracies. PATO would not preclude such multilateralism, but it would certainly go a lot further. It would seek to unite like-minded democracies around a shared set of military and economic goals. NATO, of course, did not prevent a host of other regional institutions from developing in Europe.

The United States, Japan, and Australia should take advantage of their broad consensus on military, economic, and political regulation by laying the foundations for PATO. They should

signal to like-minded states in the region—Canada, South Korea, Taiwan, New Zealand, and perhaps, one day, the Philippines—that liberal democracy is worth preserving. A smaller organization would avoid problems of unwieldy multilateral institutions like the World Trade Organization, whose vast membership has precluded an update for over two decades. While genuine commitment to democracy will likely limit membership, it will also ensure that the organization preserves democratic values, pursues prosperity, and prevents conflict in a region where tensions are rising.



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