



DISCUSSION PAPER

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Military Alliances in Northeast Asia

The Asia and Pacific region is no stranger to the horrors brought by wars of aggression, rising conflict, and militaristic ventures. For centuries, it has been the battleground for global superpowers in their conquest for economic and political power at the expense of the people's human rights, sovereignty, and peace.

The Asia Pacific Research Network (APRN), through our members and allies in the region, has been closely monitoring the geopolitical tensions in the Asia Pacific region over the past two decades. During this period, we have seen the evolving dynamics between global orders.

The United States (US) as the leading imperialist power in the world is being challenged by China's rising imperialist state to seek to establish a new multipolar world order and reshape the global economic and military balance of power. These two rival empires are relentlessly racing to expand their spheres of influence and fields of investment by recruiting and consolidating allies through military alliances and economic partnerships. With the US' pursuit of maintaining its longstanding lead in terms of global control, it continues to not only allot billions in its military industry but also further establish its military presence in the Asia Pacific region.

Forging military alliances has been a perennial tactic by the US to legitimize their military intervention in conflicts far from US soil. These are agreements between and among states that create the legal basis for the US to direct its military deployment—from the deployment of US soldiers, missiles, warships, fighter jets, and their overseas bases—in other nations in exchange for the promise of providing “aid” and upholding “peace,” “security,” and “democracy.” Specifically, these alliances give imperialists easy access to foreign territories through overseas military bases, joint military exercises, counter-insurgency training, arms deals, illegal mass surveillance, and intelligence-sharing. It is also important to note that most of these agreements bypass legal structures in the countries they are lodged in, and their scope often extends far beyond the rules of international law.

Military alliances can range from bilateral, to trilateral, to multilateral depending on the number of countries involved, their formality, and their intended functions. Most alliances are founded on the objective of cooperating on regional and/or global security. The most prominent military alliance in the world is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which consists of 32 member countries as of 2024. The NATO 2030 document was presented during the 2022 NATO summit in Madrid, wherein China and Russia were explicitly identified as security threats. While NATO operates mostly in the West, the Asia-Pacific region is also home to some of the most impactful and consolidated US-led agreements in the world today after the mostly Europe-centric NATO. In the Asia Pacific, multilateral security frameworks operate, such as the (1) Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) composed of the US, India, Japan, and Australia, and to a certain degree, the (2) Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) composed of China, Russia, India, Pakistan, and several Central Asian countries.

Looking closely at Northeast Asia, US imperialism has long created a comprehensive alliance and patronage in the subregion to widen and deepen its military positioning surrounding China continuously. The US has made use of mutual defense treaties with Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Mongolia.

In 1951, the US-Japan Security Treaty was signed as a condition to end the post-WWII US occupation in Japan. This was then revised into the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security in 1960, the first of many US military agreements that stipulated either country would “defend” the other if attacked. This treaty allowed for US military bases to maintain their presence in Japan. As of 2020, Japan houses the largest number of US bases globally, with 120 scattered across the country and 53,713 troops stationed. 70% of these bases are located in Okinawa, an island located in Japan’s southernmost prefecture. The US and Japan also hold joint military exercises regularly, such as Keen Sword, Keen Edge, and Orient Shield, to enhance cooperation and coordination between both countries’ military forces. The country also serves as a strategic location for the US to realize its Pivot to Asia and Indo-Pacific strategy, which seeks to contain China’s growing influence. Japan also recently entered into a trilateral agreement with the US and the Philippines in the same vein of strengthening the Indo-Pacific strategy of the US.

In 1953, the US-South Korea Mutual Defense Treaty was signed under the pretext of the conflict between North and South Korea. Since its signing, over 28,000 US troops have been regularly deployed in South Korea annually. There are 73 US military bases in the

country, with Camp Humphreys being the world's largest overseas U.S. military base. South Korea also hosts and organizes joint military exercises with the US, such as Foal Eagle and Ulchi Freedom Guardian. Part of the US agenda in South Korea is to keep a close eye on the military movements of North Korea and its nuclear weapons program. This is ironic, as during the 1950s, it was the US who first brought nuclear weapons, a total of 1000 nukes, into the Korean peninsula without the knowledge of the Korean people—a direct violation of the Korean Armistice Agreement. Just last August, the US and South Korea held their Iron Mace 24 drills, a war game rehearsing the implementation of the Nuclear Consultative Group Guidelines—a joint plan created by the US and South Korea for a nuclear strike against North Korea.

In 1955, the Sino-American Mutual Defense Treaty was signed after the Chinese Civil War between the US and the Republic of China (ROC) in Taiwan. This was signed under the directive of US policy to contain communism after the Cold War. This treaty was a formal show of commitment of the US to defend Taiwan against any potential attack by the People's Republic of China (PRC). The treaty also opened the doors of Taiwan to US intervention in military strategies and cooperation between the countries' forces. This treaty was in effect until 1980 when it was terminated and replaced by an informal defense tie under the Taiwan Relations Act. While this agreement does not explicitly state that the US will extend intervention in the time Taiwan is under attack, it will supply, or rather, sell defensive weapons to the country. Unlike Japan and South Korea, the relationship between the US and Taiwan is more diplomatic and economic, while still maintaining discreet military cooperation. While not as explicit, it is worth noting that the US heavily relies on Taiwan's semiconductor industry for its weapons, arms, and other defense mechanism production.

In 1994, a Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) between Mongolia and the US was signed. This ushered the military cooperation between both countries through joint military exercises, programs, and exchanges. This is bolstered by the Khaan Quest, started in 2003, which formalizes the relationship between the US and Mongolia in terms of peacekeeping exercises in the country. Apart from these activities, the Mongolian Armed Forces also get their equipment, transportation, and communication devices from the US. Mongolia is strategic to the overall agenda of the US in Asia as it is situated between two of its biggest rivals: China and Russia. Given the geographic location of Mongolia, the US will further capitalize on Mongolia's third neighbor policy.

During the recent NATO summit, one of the key outcomes was the organization's commitment further to extend its reach to the Asia Pacific region. A part of its realization is strengthening and bolstering its dialogue with the Indo-Pacific Four (IP4) grouping composed of Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea. This marks the beginning of NATO's concerted efforts towards establishing its Asian counterpart in the region in line with the US' "first island chain" strategy to contain China and its growing influence. While no concrete agreements have been signed, this development only signifies the escalation of geopolitical rivalry among global superpowers and the extension of the US' hand in countries' defense and military dispositions.

In all of this, it is the people and the planet who endured the impacts of war and militarism in the region. Military expansionist activities such as bilateral military agreements, the

establishment of bases, and the deployment of troops not only deteriorate the state of national sovereignty in countries but also expose their people to human rights and sexual violations, especially among women and children. Militarism is also one of the largest contributors to climate and environmental damage in communities.

Base construction and joint military exercises devastate coastal biomes, eroding beachheads, and shallow reefs that provide livelihood for fishing communities. Meanwhile, chemical runoff from military operations has led to upticks in cancer and other diseases in coastal Asia-Pacific communities. US military activity continues to be reported as the world's largest contributor to pollution and one of the highest emitters of greenhouse gasses emitting approximately 51 million metric tons of carbon dioxide in a year. Through its various military agreements used for unchecked nuclear tests in the region, at least 313 nuclear tests were undertaken by the US, UK, and France. This left behind irradiated waters and soil around mostly small island nations that will remain hazardous for centuries. In Okinawa, the presence of US military bases has been linked to the contamination of water in the area due to fuel spills and chemical leaks from its operations. Besides water pollution, noise pollution from US aircraft has affected residents near the bases. Similar cases are experienced in Pyeongtaek in South Korea, where oil leaks and other toxic waste from military bases have contaminated its soil and water resources. The same problem is experienced in the Philippines, where an alarming increase in birth abnormalities and cancers are observed in communities surrounding Clark and Subic Bay bases.

A relatively more ostensible impact of US military deployment in countries under stipulations of military agreements is the epidemic of violence against women, with countless US soldiers committing rape while off duty in communities surrounding bases. In Okinawa, the most notorious incident occurred in 1995 when a 12-year-old girl was kidnapped and raped by three U.S. servicemen. From the period of 2015 to 2022, there are 69 US troops for sexual crimes against minors, with the youngest victim being nine months old. Another infamous case was in 2014 in the Philippines. US Marine Joseph Scott Pemberton was convicted of murdering transgender Jennifer Laude in 2014. He was granted an "absolute and unconditional pardon" by former Philippine President Duterte. Pemberton is only one of the thousands of US soldiers deployed in the Philippines for regular joint military exercises. In 2022, the Supreme Court of South Korea ordered their government to compensate sex workers of US soldiers. This was after the Court held that these women were victims of state-sponsored prostitution in military camp towns in Paju and Pyeongtaek during the 1960s and 1970s. Women residing in communities near military bases are more vulnerable to physical and sexual violence, with their socioeconomic realities forcing them to take part in prostitution to make ends meet. This phenomenon impacts women's health as they are more susceptible to sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS, and unwanted pregnancies, among others.

Despite making up hardly 1% of the consistent population of South Korea, US military personnel make up 33% of all sexual assault cases in the country.

With the rising tensions and growing threats of war, we must recognize the anti-colonial victories from our region's history and once more strengthen our ranks against imperialist expansion. The just and lasting peace that we need will not be possible while

imperialism, the driving logic of US military agreements, exists. Flashpoints of conflict, the military-industrial complex, proxy wars, fascism, military aid, arms deals, military bases, surveillance and intelligence gathering, and other manifestations of imperialism make our task all the more urgent. Let us draw inspiration from the anti-bases and anti-US struggle activists and peace advocates from Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and other parts of the world that have advanced for many decades. Let us expand our work by raising awareness of the many different maneuvers and tactics imperialists use in our land. As imperialists are building their alliances, the people must also build their own anti-imperialist alliances or join organizations with the same aspirations of fighting against imperialism. Let us support and maximize all forms of struggle—from parliamentary efforts to liberation movements—to contribute to the global movement against imperialism, fascism, and militarism. Together, let us forge a world where the pursuit of peace is not just a pipe dream but a tangible reality, built through our collective efforts toward one common goal.

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