

Power and Perceptions: How Allies View America's Reputation and Prioritisation After Ukraine

Tongfi Kim and Luis Simón | 31 May 2023

Key Issues

- While allies see US resolve to stand by its allies and partners as a good sign – “reputation” –, they weigh that against their interest in having the US putting their own region first – “prioritisation”.
- The past wars in Korea and Vietnam intensified US allies' concerns about Washington's resource allocation, and this is also the case for the current war in Ukraine.
- The duration, outcome and the end of the war in Ukraine will impinge on how US allies in Europe and the Indo-Pacific weigh “reputation vs. prioritisation”. Cross-regional collaboration among US allies can be a way to better manage the reputation vs. prioritisation trade-off.

In this Policy Brief, we argue that the United States (US) continues to reassure its allies successfully, despite the challenges posed by the ongoing war in Ukraine. This assessment draws on exchanges the authors have had with experts and senior policy-makers from Australia, Europe, Japan and South Korea since the beginning of the war. Our analytical lens is a trade-off between allies who depend militarily on Washington: “reputation” and “prioritisation”. In our previous [academic work](#), we have analysed the trade-off between the US' reputation as a military protector and the priority it assigns to different regions, from the viewpoint of its allies. On the one hand, US allies in Europe and the Indo-Pacific have an interest in seeing Washington support all of its allies. Failure to do so would weaken the US' reputation and, consequently, the credibility of US extended deterrence commitments. On that point, US allies in distant regions have a common interest. In fact, many also see reputational links even where the US has no alliance treaty obligations – that is, partners rather than allies: Japanese Prime Minister, Fumio Kishida, has said that [‘Ukraine may be the East Asia of tomorrow’](#), and others have wondered about what America's support of Ukraine may reveal about Washington's commitment to help Taiwan defend itself.

On the other hand, however, allies are aware that US military resources and policy-makers' attention are finite, which causes them to vie for such resources and attention. This competition exists even

amongst allies within the same region, especially if they rank threats differently. For instance, while South Korea primarily faces threats from North Korea, Japan is more concerned about China. This issue becomes more acute when comparing US commitments in Europe and the Indo-Pacific, as resources deployed to a distant region are not readily available for local support. Military investments required in different regions also vary (e.g. land vs. maritime), and the allies of different regions would like Washington to prioritise weapons systems most critical to their own regions. Additionally, they would generally like to see US weapons and troops as physically close to them as possible.

Our [previous research](#) suggests that allies welcome US support for distant allies provided they are confident about America’s relative power against potential threats, such as China and Russia, and their own regional threat environment is benign. But if they perceive US relative power to be on the decline or their regional threat environment worsen, they are likely to worry more about US commitments in distant regions. For instance, since the late 2000s [Japan](#) and [Poland](#) became increasingly concerned about US commitments in Europe and East Asia, respectively. The

notably, its annexation of Crimea in 2014.

However, [our research](#) – conducted before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 –, found that Washington successfully reassured allied concerns about de-prioritisation. Poland’s concerns were alleviated by adaptations in US and NATO strategy from 2014 onwards – including the deployment of multinational battalions alongside the eastern flank – and by the limited extent to which US resources shifted to Asia. Meanwhile, Japanese policy-makers perceived the nature of US re-engagement in European security to be relatively minor. Even though the US was initially criticised for not sufficiently coordinating within NATO on the details of the departure from Afghanistan, the process of retrenchment from Iraq, Afghanistan and the broader Middle East helped reassure European and Indo-Pacific allies about the possibility of additional US bandwidth and resources for their respective regions.

To be sure, US allies in Europe and the Indo-Pacific continue to worry about the possibility that the other region may demand too much of Washington. European allies are aware that China and the Indo-Pacific are the main US strategic priorities and that may lead to pressures to downsize the US’ posture



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combination of the long and resource-draining wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the 2008 global financial crisis and ensuing “sequestration” of the US defence budget triggered concerns in Poland and Japan about Washington’s ability to stand by its global security commitments. Importantly, this happened at a time when allied threat perceptions became more acute. Japan faced an increasingly assertive China, with the 2010 incident over the Senkaku Islands leading to an intensification of maritime territorial disputes. For its part, Poland faced an increasingly assertive Russia, as illustrated by Moscow’s invasion of Georgia in 2008 and, more

in Europe. Conversely, Indo-Pacific allies worry that Russian revisionism may pull the US back into Europe and slow down a much-needed rebalance to Asia. So far, however, allies in both regions appear to have been relatively reassured and have expressed [support for US policies](#), which underpin Washington’s reputation and help [uphold a “rules-based” international order](#). In other words, and despite some [dissenting expert voices](#), the US’ Indo-Pacific allies appear not to be excessively worried about US support for Ukraine undermining the credibility of US extended deterrence commitments in their own region.

Reputation and prioritisation after Ukraine

Yet, how has the war in Ukraine affected allied perceptions of the balance between the US' reputation vs. prioritisation? Historically, wars have intensified allies' concerns about resource allocation, as seen during the Korean and Vietnam Wars. However, Ukraine's strong performance on

runs the higher the risk of nuclear use or a broader NATO-Russia confrontation; and the more likely it is that the US gets entangled in Europe and distracted from the more important objective of deterring China in the Indo-Pacific. Conversely, however, a long and protracted war could actually help alleviate prioritisation concerns among America's Indo-Pacific allies. By pinning down

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the battlefield has likely mitigated these concerns so far. With European states investing more in their militaries and Washington continuing to view China as the primary security challenge, Indo-Pacific allies may not fear a de-prioritisation of their region. From the perspective of the European allies, Russia's threat has so far been successfully contained, and US support to Ukraine, which is not even a military ally of Washington, has been adequate and not too risky. The future perceptions of the US allies, of course, depends significantly on the duration and outcome of the war in Ukraine.

Aside from the outcome of the war, which will shape the strategic necessities of European allies as well as the US role in the continent, the duration and the cost of the war has implications for how allies perceive the US reputation vs. prioritisation trade-off. Ongoing commitment to Ukraine's assistance has had a positive impact on Washington's reputation. However, the linkage between such support and Ukraine's battlefield performance could also negatively affect the US' reputation in the future. This can happen, for instance, through the rise of “[Ukraine fatigue](#)” in Congress and a possible change of course should a new administration come into office in 2025. Even though Ukraine is not a treaty ally, the US' failure to support it could still trigger allied concerns about the US' reputation.

When it comes to prioritisation, a recent RAND corporation report argues that [the longer the war](#)

Russian forces in eastern Ukraine, a protracted war could lower the conventional military pressure elsewhere alongside NATO's eastern flank, and thus the demand for direct US military engagement in Europe. In this regard, Ukraine's economic and military modernisation acts as an effective – even optimal – geopolitical shield for NATO and Europe more broadly. Secondly, and relatedly, a long and protracted war could stimulate Europe's political, economic and industrial mobilisation, which is required for an increasingly competitive international environment Europeans are currently unprepared for. This could help attain the one thing the US' Indo-Pacific allies cherish most when it comes to Europe: European allies being able to take care of their own security, and freeing up US strategic bandwidth.

At the same time, it is worth noting that the end of a war usually leads to prioritisation concerns because strategic considerations and resource allocation change regardless of the outcome. For instance, East Asian allies were concerned about the future of US commitment to the region once the war in Vietnam ended. Part of this was the fear of communism gaining larger influence, but it was also about the end of the US' temporary prioritisation of Asia in the context of the US-Soviet Cold War, where Europe was the primary theatre. Thus, regardless of the outcome, the end of the war in Ukraine will worry European allies to a significant extent, because the attention of US policy-makers will probably shift away from Europe. Washington

and its Indo-Pacific allies should be cognisant of that.

Bridging European and Indo-Pacific allies

It is important to highlight that European and Indo-Pacific allies can contribute not only to bolstering America's reputation as a military protector, but also to its overall level of global engagement. Despite limited resources, there can be considerable variation in Washington's global security engagement. It is not just material capabilities that matter, but also the domestic political foundations of US global engagement. The Trump era, characterised by anti-alliance rhetoric, was concerning for both European and Indo-Pacific allies, leading them to collaborate with [quasi-allies](#)

future. US allies in both regions can also help free up US strategic bandwidth by contributing to a more efficient division of labour not only in their respective regions, but also [globally](#). For instance, the United States is interested in [maintaining and manufacturing naval vessels in Japan](#), which will not only contribute to US capabilities in the Indo-Pacific but also save financial resources that can then, in turn, be used in Europe. Moreover, both European and Indo-Pacific allies can alleviate each other's prioritisation concerns when they step up their defence spending and reduce over-reliance on the United States.

From defence planning and capability development to supply-chain resilience and other types of economic statecraft, [greater cross-regional](#)



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– countries not directly allied but sharing a common ally. As policy-makers of an Indo-Pacific ally recently told us, the resource prioritisation trade-off does not worry them as much as the uncertainty about what the US presidential election in 2024 might mean for the future of alliance politics.

Because US allies can cooperate to maintain the US alliance network, they are not engaged in a zero-sum game for military protection from Washington. All US allies can contribute to upholding America's reputation, and the credibility of US extended guarantees, for example, by sharing the burden of supporting Ukraine, without which US public opinion can shift against engagement abroad. As we write this Policy Brief, [South Korean ammunition](#) is reportedly headed to Ukraine via the United States, and it is not hard to imagine similar assistance from Europe to the Indo-Pacific in the

[coordination](#) is essential. Such coordination is needed in order to strengthen the foundations of the US-led alliance network. Bridging the gap between European and Indo-Pacific allies may thus be one of the most promising paths for strengthening the trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific alliances of the United States.

This Policy Brief was developed as part of the Bridging Allies initiative, led by the Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy (CSDS), Brussels School of Governance. The Bridging Allies initiative is supported by the Australian Government through a grant by the Australian Department of Defence. The views expressed herein are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the Australian Government or the Australian Department of Defence.



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