

Improving Conflict-Phase Access

Identifying U.S. Policy Levers

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Ensuring access to the territory of allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific in the event of a future conflict with China is a critical concern for U.S. policymakers. The physical and political geography of the region sharply limits U.S. options for access to such an extent that some allied and partner decisions regarding providing access could determine the outcome of a conflict. A clearer understanding of how and why U.S. allies and partners are likely to make conflict-phase access decisions, and what U.S. policymakers can do to affect the decisions ahead of time, is therefore essential.



APPROACH

This report addresses the questions of how U.S. allies and partners are likely to make conflict-phase access decisions and what the United States and the U.S. Air Force (USAF) may be able to do to affect these decisions ahead of time through a detailed investigation of the decisionmaking processes of U.S. allies and partners. It begins with a review of prior literature on these questions and a survey of relevant historical case studies of conflict-phase access decisions to develop a framework that summarizes how states consider conflict-phase access requests. The authors then adapt this general framework to five specific U.S. allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region—Japan, the Philippines, Singapore, Indonesia, and India—through a deep-dive investigation of their strategic outlooks, internal politics, and economic incentives. Next, the authors develop a typology of the full range of potential policy levers that the United States might use to shift allied and partner decisionmaking, then consider the levers in this typology in light of the key factors identified in the country-specific deep-dive analyses to identify those that would be most promising for affecting allied and partner decisionmaking.



CONCLUSIONS

- U.S. policymakers and planners should limit their expectations for how much U.S. peacetime policies, and USAF policies in particular, may be able to shift the conflict-phase access decisionmaking of U.S. allies and partners. The specific characteristics of the future conflict, as well as the broader geopolitical alignment decisions of states that are difficult to influence absent large shifts in U.S. policy, are likely to affect these decisions more.
- For some allies or partners, there is potential for lower-level access, such as overflight and logistics, granted during peacetime to increase the likelihood that similar requests will be granted during conflict.

However, the ally's or partner's leadership will carefully scrutinize higher-level access requests, most notably including the ability to conduct combat operations from ally or partner territory, according to the specific characteristics of the future contingency. These likely cannot be routinized in advance.

- All the U.S. allies and partners we investigated viewed the United States as having a critically important role in the region to balance against Chinese power and potential aggression. This desire to see the United States retain its strong role in the region and avoid a military defeat at the hands of China was one of the main factors that could motivate allies and partners to approve U.S. conflict-phase access requests.
- Several U.S. allies and partners continue to be concerned about whether the United States is firmly committed to their defense, and addressing these concerns is likely to be essential for increasing the likelihood of conflict-phase access in these countries.
- The degree of regional and international consensus on the importance of opposing aggression from the People's Republic of China and the potential for a collective response to that aggression are likely to have a large influence on U.S. ally and partner conflict-phase access decisions.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- For the U.S. government
 - Consider clarifying or expanding security guarantees for allies and partners uncertain of U.S. defense commitments.
 - Expand U.S. economic engagement in the Indo-Pacific to provide a credible regional economic counterweight to China.
 - Expand efforts to build regional consensus against Chinese aggression.
- For the U.S. Department of Defense
 - Expand high-level discussions with allies and partners about likely U.S. access requests in a future contingency.
 - Regularize requests to allies and partners for lower-level access anticipated to be relied on in a future contingency.
 - Increase intelligence-sharing, information resilience, and cyber cooperation with allies and partners to underline the U.S. commitment and enhance awareness of aggression from the People's Republic of China.
- For the USAF
 - Increase the frequency and regularity of USAF requests for lower-level but operationally essential allied and partner access.
 - Focus USAF activities in the Indo-Pacific on demonstrating U.S. commitment and enhancing capabilities for combined operations with allies and partners rather than building independent allied or partner capabilities.
 - Prepare to cooperate with allies and partners on their defense against a wider range of contingencies.



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