

# Transcript of Episode 13, “What Allies Want: A Look at East Asia”

*Originally released on December 10, 2020*

[Note: This is a rough transcript of the audio recording, based on digital transcription and human review.]

[00:00:00] **Music:** One, two, three, go.

**Morgan:** [00:00:18] Hello, and welcome to *International Security Off the Page*. On today's episode, we are talking about alliance politics and alliance relationship management in East Asia. I'm Morgan Kaplan, the executive editor of *International Security*. We'll be speaking with Iain Henry, the author of a recent *IS* article, “What Allies Want: Reconsidering Loyalty, Reliability, and Alliance Interdependence,” and a little later we'll go off the page with Abraham Denmark, who is the director of the Asia Program at the Woodrow Wilson Center and previously served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for East Asia.

**Benn:** [Belfercenter.org/offthepage](https://www.belfercenter.org/offthepage) is where you can find past [00:01:00] episodes as well as supplemental reading materials. It is also where you can subscribe to Off the Page on your favorite podcast platform.

**Morgan:** Iain Henry is a lecturer in the Strategic and Defence Study Centre at the Australian National University. Joining us now we have Ian Henry, who's written a fantastic article for us called, “What Allies Want: Reconsidering Loyalty, Reliability, and Alliance Interdependence.” Iain, welcome to the show.

**Iain:** [00:01:28] Thanks Morgan, it's great to be here.

**Morgan:** So Iain, [00:01:30] tell us a little bit about what the conventional wisdom is about what allies want, about how states perceive the importance of reputation in alliance politics.

**Iain:** [00:01:41] So there are two schools of thought. There is what I would describe as the conventional wisdom, which held sway during the Cold War and was the preserver of early alliance theories and deterrence theories as well, and that is the alliance commitments, are interdependent in the way that a state behaves in one alliance will be [00:02:00] observed by that States other allies. And if those allies see that state be disloyal to one of its other allies, they will in turn worry about the possibility or likelihood of the same thing.

So it's a little bit like the dynamic of, if I see my friend be disloyal to one of their other friends, well, then I'll worry about their character and I'll worry that they might be disloyal to me perhaps at some point in the future. And so this theory and conception of alliance interdependence encourages displays of loyalty in particular, because any display of disloyalty is thought to have a catastrophic consequence on other alliance commitments, even if they're quite legally discrete and separate. So this was, most of us will know, very closely connected with the domino theory, an influential mental schema throughout the

Cold War. And some excellent scholarship came along towards the end of the Cold War, and shortly thereafter, that challenges this and you could call it the reputation skeptic perspective. And some of these authors argue that the United States, in particular, has paid far too much attention to [00:03:00] this idea of interdependence and reputation, and that actually what happens is that states don't get the reward for good behavior. So if they do display loyalty to an ally, the other allies don't then turn and look at it and regard it as being likely to be loyal in the future.

And so there are these two schools of thought. One that says reputation is everything and it is immensely important and it is worth fighting for reputation, and then there is a contrary perspective, which is to say that it is completely useless and even futile to fight for reputation. And it's a waste of blood and treasure. So you have these two really stark, differing positions on the importance of the interdependence of alliance commitment.

**Morgan:** [00:03:43] Right. And so in your article, you take an interesting stand somewhere in the middle here, arguing that allies don't necessarily want to see loyalty, but they also do care about reputations. What you're arguing is that they care about [00:04:00] the reliability of allies. Tell us a little bit about what argument you're putting forward here in light of these conventional wisdoms.

**Iain:** [00:04:07] Yeah, so in some respects, it's a splitting of the difference in saying that everybody else is wrong.

It says that alliance interdependence exists and is very important, but that for a very long time, we've been looking in the right place, but we've been looking for the wrong thing. The heavy lifting that is done by this idea of loyalty is pretty significant. What this idea misses though, is that states in an alliance normally have two fears. And sometimes these oscillate, sometimes they're held simultaneously and the idea of loyalty connects very easily to that first fear, and that's the fear of abandonment. The fear that my ally won't support me in my time of need. But again, this is only one of the two fears; allies also fear entrapment.

They fear that their partner may do something that provokes a reckless conflict that increases the likelihood of an unwanted war. And so previous debates have focused, I think, a bit too much on the idea of loyalty and abandonment and haven't adequately recognized that [00:05:00] states in alliance also fear reckless allies and fear entrapment. And the idea of reliability gets at this in a neat way, because it says what states want from their ally is not a pure unadulterated display of loyalty that can then be used to anticipate behavior in future scenarios; what they want their ally to do is simply share their interests and agree on how to work towards them. And in some cases that may actually involve not being loyal to some other ally. It may, in some cases, actually involve abandoning or being disloyal to some other ally.

And so it challenges not only the conventional wisdom, which says that reputation is everything. It also challenges some of the more recent contemporary scholarship, which says that alliance interdependence shouldn't be a huge factor or a huge influence in decision-making.

**Morgan:** [00:05:46] Can you tell us a little bit about the case you talk about in your article, the First Taiwan Strait crisis, which shows these mechanisms and dynamics of what allies want?

**Iain:** [00:05:56] Sure. Before I get into the nitty-gritty, it's important to set a little bit of [00:06:00] context as to the recent events that had occurred just before the First Taiwan Strait Crisis.

Obviously, the Korean War did not go quite the way that America had hoped and communist China's intervention in that, in late 1950 and the subsequent fighting really injected a new venom and level of hostility into the Sino-U.S. relationship. There were other events that had occurred just earlier in Asia, that is the French defeat in Indochina, and the Geneva Conference, which worked towards a new diplomatic solution for the military situation in Indochina and also on the Korean peninsula. And so in mid-1954, or sort of August/September, 1954, the United States felt lucky to just have had a couple of essentially diplomatic and military defeats in that part of the world. And there was a very real reluctance on behalf of U.S. decision makers to do anything that looked like appeasement or negotiation or abandoning an ally. And before the First Taiwan Strait Crisis breaks out, the United States is very concerned about its image in the world. And the First Taiwan Strait Crisis [00:07:00] breaks out in September 1954. And it is over some tiny islands called Quemoy and Matsu. And there were a couple of others, but in the whole they're referred to as the offshore islands.

Now these are an unresolved vestige of the Chinese civil war. They are continuous with the Chinese Communist-held mainland and they are within the range of artillery pieces on the mainland, but they are held very strongly by Chinese Nationalist forces, in some cases 20,000 or 30,000 Nationalist forces on these islands. And when Communist China launches an artillery barrage against these islands, the United States immediately perceives its reputation as a loyal ally as being on the line or perhaps on trial in the court of global public opinion, and senior U.S. decision makers like secretary of state John Foster Dulles sort of, in deliberations in NSC meetings, they acknowledge that these islands may not have very much military value, but they have immense psychological value. And there are a lot of U.S. decision makers who are [00:08:00] willing to commit us forces to the defense of these islands for psychological reasons alone to try and enhance reputation or images of credibility and prestige.

And part of the reasoning for that policy advocacy, which Eisenhower ultimately rejects, is that they believe that U.S. reputation and prestige is on the line. And they believe that other U.S. allies in the region, such as South Korea, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, that if those allies observe an instance of the United States backing down or being disloyal to the Republic of China, that's the Chinese Nationalists, then they will conclude that the U.S. is a disloyal ally, is unreliable, and they will essentially bandwagon or make a neutral terms or make peace with the communist [00:08:45] block.

[00:08:45] The counterintuitive thing though, and the thing that takes senior U.S. leaders some time to figure out and reconcile with their preexisting beliefs, is that the majority of

allies did not want the United States to take a firm [00:09:00] stand over the offshore islands, and did not want the United States to risk a broader conflict over them.

These allies, which included Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Canada as well the United Kingdom, they urged the United States to think about the crisis in different terms. And they did all sorts of things essentially to try and reduce the likelihood of conflict and the risk of war. There were two other allies who would have welcomed a greater U.S. commitment to the islands; these were of course, the Republics of China and the Republic of Korea, which was keen to restart the Korean war.

And so what's really cool about this case is that it shows us that loyalty is not where alliance interdependence is at. It shows us very clearly that although U.S. decision makers felt this burning need to demonstrate loyalty, that other allies actually wanted something else.

**Morgan:** [00:09:49] So what's the big policy takeaway from these findings, especially thinking about contemporary politics today?

**Iain:** [00:09:55] In short, it's that the way that most of us instinctively think about [00:10:00] Alliance inter-dependence could be wrong. And there are quite a few scenarios where this belief could exercise a decisive influence, particularly on U.S. decision-making. For example, if the PRC, People's Republic of China, were to attack the Senkaku Islands or attempt to capture them, there are a lot of people who would instinctively believe that America's reputation was on trial and that anything less than a firm stand would dismay other allies. Similar things could be said for, again, still the offshore islands, which are held by forces from the Republic of China. And what this means is that decision-makers, I think, need to be very careful about their reflexive thinking and the sweeping implications that flow from it. It took in the First Taiwan Strait Crisis seven months to figure that out, to figure out that the way senior U.S. leaders thought about the crisis did not accurately reflect the stakes involved. And I don't think if there is a fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis or any scenario involving escalation over the Senkaku Islands, for [00:11:00] example, that there will be those months to take stock and to think very carefully about the stakes involved.

And so I think this means that it would be very good for the parties concerned to have a think about, beforehand, what allied reactions might be, how they might change, and what truly may or may not be at stake in terms of alliance interdependence.

**Morgan:** [00:11:20] Fantastic. Well, Iain, I only have one more question for you and that is, are you ready?

**Iain:** [00:11:25] For what?

**Morgan:** [00:11:26] To go [00:11:26] off the page?

**Iain:** Let's do it.

**Benn:** If you enjoy listening to Off the Page, you'll enjoy reading our quarterly journal [00:11:40], *International Security*, which is edited and sponsored by the Belfer Center at

Harvard Kennedy School [00:11:45] and published by the MIT press. [00:11:47] To learn more about the journal, please check out [Belfercenter.org/is](https://www.belfercenter.org/is).

**Morgan:** [00:11:55] Abraham Denmark is the Director of the Asia Program at the Woodrow Wilson Center [00:12:00] and an Adjunct Associate Professor at the Edmond A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. Denmark previously served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for East Asia from 2015 to 2017. Well joining us now we have Abe Denmark. Abe, [00:12:16] welcome to the show.

**Abe:** [00:12:17] Hey, thanks so much for having me.

**Morgan:** [00:12:18] We thought we'd start off by asking your impressions of Iain's article. Having been in a position to witness alliance politics in East Asia within the policy world, what was your general impression of the argument?

**Abe:** [00:12:32] I thought it was a very helpful argument and congratulations on publishing this article.

I thought it was very helpful in that it talks about some of the nuances of how allies, especially our allies in Asia, look at the United States, how they look at either reliability or loyalty, and that it's a, it's a nuanced question. It's not as direct or binary as some of the older deterrence literature talks about, but rather it's complex, it's observed, it [00:13:00] involves differing perspectives. And I thought in that way it was, it was extremely helpful.

And I was also thrilled that you use the Taiwan Strait Crisis, the First Taiwan Strait Crisis, as a case study, because I think it's a fascinating case study that doesn't get nearly enough attention. So for me, it's very interesting to take a look at it.

**Morgan:** [00:13:17] And so Abe, you've approached this question about alliance politics in East Asia from a number of different perspectives as a scholar, also as a practitioner, and you currently have a new book out called *U.S Strategy in the Asian Century*. Can you tell us a little bit, based on your experiences at the Department of Defense, what are allies actually looking for? What do allies want?

**Abe:** [00:13:37] So I've been working on the ally stuff, and also during the Bush administration, I was in the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the China desk. And I engaged with our allies, our Asian allies, and, and during that time, too, did a lot of reassurance work and engagement work during both of those periods.

And to me, I think one of the things that jumped out at me, about this article that I wanted to comment on, there's a sense in the literature about this sort of [00:14:00] perfect state, this platonic ideal of perfect reliability that observing that our interests are completely aligned. And if they're not, then that will lead to hedging, diplomatic restraint, inter-alliance bargaining, et cetera.

And my first reaction to that from the more policy-oriented perspective is that there is no such thing as perfect alignment of interests between nations, even the closest nations. Even our closest allies, be it Japan, Korea, the UK, our interests often don't align. So to me, there

is always to my mind, there is always a bit of discomfort in an alliance relationship that requires constant engagement and a constant tending, that you never get to the end of the reassurance conversation because the interests don't always align.

And because I think it's fundamentally an uncomfortable proposition to put your security in the hands of somebody else, no matter how close you are, no matter how much you trust them, because ultimately the mind of another person or another state [00:15:00] in an unknown future is unknowable. And that unknowing, I think, drives a certain sense of anxiety and that's normal.

I think you never get to the end of the conversation, but as a policymaker, and I think one of the challenges that we have in scholarship, is understanding how to pick out the signals from the noise. How to pick out a real signal of "this is a problem that we need to deal with" and a more sort of standard, regular anxiety, uncertainty that we've just got to engage with, work through, figure out in the course of normal.

**Morgan:** Right [00:15:31], and so how does a country like the United States try to make allies feel safer, to feel less anxiety? And it kind of gets at what this argument is about, right? Do you try to show them that you're loyal? Do you try to show them that you're reliable? I imagine there's a certain amount of empathy. What are the kind of key ways in which you try to make up that gap between overlapping interests and the unknown that leads to anxiety?

**Abe:** [00:15:58] So in normal alliance [00:16:00] management and day-to-day, I think the dynamics are different than in the case studies that, that Iain's looking at, in the way the literature deals with it, which is very stark choices, right? That you go to war, or you don't go to war, right. Whether you're willing to have your people die for an ally, or you're not. Whereas the vast majority of the time in an alliance, you're not dealing with those sorts of questions. You're dealing with confidence about an unknown future that neither side knows what's going to happen. And so in those cases, when I've been in the Pentagon, I kind of think of it as sort of there's a structural piece that any policymaker, the president probably included, has very little ability to actually tackle or influence except in the broadest sense. And then there's the more tactical operational policy arena where you do have tools that you can use. So when I talk about structure, I mean that, I think our allies, when they're looking at American reliability, they tend to look at the broad international situation: the trends of [00:17:00] what's been happening over the last few years and what that means in terms of American power, American resolve, and what it means in terms of American reliability.

So you may recall that in the months and year or two, after the financial crisis, there was a lot of talk about American decline. Allies started getting more nervous about the status of the United States vis-a-vis China. And I'd say it had very little to do with American military behavior or some policy that we had with our allies, but rather it was about broader sense of the slowing American economy, China's economy, rising and growing more important to our Asian allies, and sort of a broader sense of the geopolitical situation and those sort of structural issues are very difficult to, for a country to adjust except in the broadest longest of

terms. But for policy makers, especially somebody in the position I had, DASD, you're really operating in a much more policy-oriented realm.

And there, there are [00:18:00] things that you can do primarily when it comes to capabilities. I tend to think that there's two aspects of reassurance or demonstrating reliability; there's capability and there's will, and capability is the easiest way and the least risky way to demonstrate reliability or to suggest reliability, or to try to reassure an ally by demonstrating that your strategic deterrence still works, with occasional testing by flying bombers or sailing ships in places here and there to show that, you know, are we can still do this deterrence thing that we can still respond to a crisis quickly and effectively. And there's the statements part where you issue statements on where the United States is, how we would respond to certain things. But the other aspect of it in terms of will is much more difficult. And I think you demonstrate that, especially recently, by demonstrating that you're willing to take risks, to accept turbulence and bumpiness in a competitive relationship. But a lot of these things could cut either way.

And I'll finish [00:19:00] on this a little anecdote. I was in the Pentagon after Assad in Syria used chemical weapons against his own people. And the United States did not respond in the way that many had thought President Obama had suggested. And, you know, I did hear that some of our allies in Asia were expressing some concern, not, I don't remember any huge response, but, you know, there was stuff in media. There was commentary saying that this is going to undermine alliance confidence in the U.S. but at the same time, if we had gone in and had some sort of intervention in Syria, then allies in Asia could say, "Oh, you say you're rebalancing, but really you're still engaged in the Middle East," and "when are you going to get out of this? And how can we rely on you?" So a lot of the times, a lot of it depends on perception and how our allies, I think more broadly, see geopolitical trends, and specific events get interpreted through the lens of the broader theme of what's happening in the international system.

**Iain:** [00:19:54] Abe, you've raised some excellent points there. I loved the reference that you, you almost are in your referred to tending [00:20:00] to alliances. And I think it was, Secretary of State George Schultz, who talked about alliances as being gardens that required regular tending, that they were not sort of set and forget features that could be established and then ignored or neglected. And that is something that has in my broader study of Alliance politics really rung true, particularly for Asia in this period.

I also found quite interesting your delineation between how alliances are managed in the day-to-day of a relationship versus the moments that receive perhaps the most scholarly attention of being crises. And these, of course, I think the crises that present the starkest dilemmas and they're probably the moments where alliances are revealed their core to either be quite strong or perhaps more fragile than anticipated, but that's a really key point, I think in terms of this. This dynamic isn't something which I think manifests solely in crisis situations. And because of that sort of nervousness that you mentioned about allies needing some degree of almost constant reassurance or handholding, [00:21:00] to make sure that our interests are still convergent, that's something which comes out very strongly in the broader piece of work, which I'm currently finalizing a book that'll be out next year. And I'll

look at a couple of non-crisis situations where this dynamic manifests in a slightly different way, but with the core tenants of it being very similar.

And then finally your comment about the Syria situation. I really feel a bit of empathy there for U.S. decision makers, because it, it seemed very damned if you do, damned if you don't kind of scenario; no matter what you do, there will be someone unhappy. And I found that interesting because that will be, I think one of the challenges here in applying this idea or this lens to any contemporary policy problem. I mean, you open up an internet browser and you can always find someone who is urging in very strong emotive terms, a, a firm stand or escalation or refusal to negotiate in some part of the world. And indeed it very well may be the case that in some of the crises that are most likely perhaps to emerge over the next 20 or so years, we could see situations where even allies themselves change their minds as the crisis [00:22:00] unfolds.

**Morgan:** [00:22:00] Looking at the alliance system today in East Asia, it's worth asking, you know, what is the U.S. reputation as an ally, is the United States known as a reliable ally, a loyal ally? And even in times where maybe the U.S. or one of its allies doesn't act in ways that its partners would hope, is it really all that damaging in the long run of the alliance system that exists?

**Abe:** Yeah, [00:22:26] I think there's going to be a terrific PhD dissertation written on alliance management during the, the first term of the Trump administration, because there's a general sense of these relationships as fairly fragile. And they've been put under a lot of pressure, a lot of discomfort over, during the Trump administration, yet at the same time, four years and the relationships are still there. I would say that concerns are about the United States are definitely deeper. I'd say the alliances aren't as strong as they were, but they're still there. We haven't had any major [00:23:00] challenges, although there's symptoms of pretty deep concern across a lot of our allies when it comes to the United States. But I think they've demonstrated themselves to be more resilient than many had thought of before.

Thinking about it in terms of what they're looking for, I think they're looking for suggestions that the United States continues to have the capability, but also the will, to push back against what they see as against Chinese aggression. And so far, I think their concerns are driven by a broader sense not only that American relative advantages, being in terms of economic power and military power, that those advantages are shrinking to the point of being potentially that the Chinese in some areas have caught up to the United States, but I think more broadly concerned that the United States is fairly easily distracted by our own domestic politics, but also by concerns in Europe, in the Middle East. And I, you know, the last 19 years I think there's been fairly robust evidence for some of those [00:24:00] concerns in their minds. But overall, I think they see us as our sort of the only credible power that can push back against the Chinese.

Before the COVID pandemic, I would travel to conferences in Asia on a pretty much a monthly basis. And there was a fascinating series of discussions that we had that ended up with the same conclusion. We'd spend a day, two days, where in pretty much every panel, they would be lamenting the fall of American leadership under the Trump administration



and the rise of China, and China's on the march and the United States is incapable or unwilling to push back all these criticisms. And then at the end, when these allies or partners would talk about, "so what are we going to do about it," the answer is always, "we need the Americans." And it's just a, you know, we're really the only other option they have in terms of a regional hegemon, there's no interest in China. So for them, the choice is not between the United States and China, but rather between the United States and just a region that is more atomized, less stable, less predictable, less prosperous, and a much more [00:25:00] dangerous environment for them. So, for them, the United States still remains the only good option and they just need to make sure and do their best to keep us engaged. And I think that's what a lot of them are trying to do while at the same time, hedging against the possibility that we're not going to be there when they need it.

**Iain:** [00:25:15] Abe has just smashed open the Pandora's box, I think of, of the current health of the U.S., just even Asia, in a rather interesting way.

I am, I'd like to chime in, firstly, is really, it's important to note that as he said, the alliance system has proven to be more resilient and perhaps more sticky than some of its detractors might've argued in the early days of the Trump administration. And fundamentally, I suspect this is because so far, states in Asia that are allied to the United States have been able to manage Washington's new policy directions and it's sort of the, the erratic nature of some of its policy changes and shifts, without too much trouble so far, and without significantly harming other interests that they might be holding. So other relationships, for example, the idea that, that [00:26:00] Asian countries and U.S. allies in Asia sort of have no, no other option than to work with the United States, I agree with it to a point. And there's a great quote. I can't quite remember it. It's from one of the archival documents I've read where one of the East Asian officials and state in the sixties says, you know, I think they're talking about South Korea and they say, you know, "there's no, there's no other lover in to which this country can rush into their embrace." You know, like it's kind of this sense of it's America or bust. And so the idea being that this gives the United States a fair bit of power and influence and ability to shepherd its allies towards a particular policy direction.

Again, I agree with that to a limited point, but I think that a really careful look at how certain states are behaving in East Asia does reveal a bit of worry about the direction of U.S. policy and I think Abe's right, you know, no U.S. ally wants to see the U.S. pack up and leave Asia. None of us want to see dramatic atrophy of U.S. military capabilities. But there are points of U.S. policy that I think allies are [00:27:00] concerned about.

A brief example. For instance, there's been a lot said since 2017 in the NSS, the NDS, many, many speeches by secretary of state Mike Pompeo, about how the U.S. sees China, how it sees its allies in the region, working with it on China, the vast majority of those have not ever been publicly endorsed by the Australian government. And indeed there have been a couple of instances where ministers have gone out and said things that appeared to endorse those policy documents, and then the very next day, they sort of went back out and corrected the record and, and adopted a more measured position. So I agree with Abe to a point, but I think that some of the more careful positioning that we're seeing here is an indication of, of

some of the concerns that people have particularly about the direction of U.S. policy towards China.

**Abe:** [00:27:43] Right, I think that I actually, I agree with you, there's been a pretty significant set of indications, I'd say most importantly from Japan and from Australia, of deep concerns about the reliability of the United States, with Australia [00:28:00] investing more in its defense and talking more about taking on a greater role to defend itself, and with Japan undergoing the most significant reevaluation of its defense posture since the end of the second world war. But to my mind, when the Japanese talk about acquiring the ability to have offensive strike, they cast it as necessary to be a good ally. But the other part of it that's less openly stated is that it, to my mind, at least it's a bit of a hedge in case the United States is not there when needed.

And when the president of the United States says that the United States may not defend an ally, if they don't pay up or that the United States should not be in the business of defending allies that have a large trade deficit with the United States, you know, those concerns to my mind are pretty justified.

But I do think among some of the more hawkish circles, to give the Trump administration some credit, there is a sense among some that the Trump administration has been more clear about its, [00:29:00] about competition with China that is more willing to accept friction and turbulence with Beijing, than the Obama administration had been.

And so that, that part has been welcomed in some circles. But overall, yeah, I think that the Trump administration has, a lot of their policies, has made a lot of our allies less confident about the United States – less sure about where we're headed. But at the same time, you know, we're still the only country that has the power and credibility to lead.

And the last point I'll make up right here is, I see it less as sort of like they don't have any other choice. But it reminded me of a story from the early 1980s in a NATO meeting when the NATO countries, the French, the Italians, the Germans were sort of going on about the latest example of American incompetence or incoherence, or just the complaints that we hear a lot about Americans, and after a while, the secretary general of NATO, Lord Carrington at the time, quietly said, "Gentlemen, you know, yes, I understand that these are the Americans, but alas, these are the only Americans we have." And I think that, that [00:30:00] our allies in Asia see it in a similar way, that we have problems, they have concerns, but you know, it's between the Americans and the Chinese and the vast majority of them would much rather I think engage with us than the alternative.

**Morgan:** [00:30:13] Although It's always hard to speculate, I want to ask you both, [00:30:17] what [00:30:18] is potentially the biggest crucible for a reputation crisis in East Asia going forward? Where is the most likely place where you think that considerations of reputation are more likely to lead to dangerous circumstances?

**Abe:** [00:30:32] Yeah, that's a great question.

I think that looking ahead in terms of credibility of the United States, I think a lot's going to depend on our ability to adjust our strategy, to be more relevant and effective for current

geopolitical trends, our ability to modernize our alliances and to sort of rebuild American power at home and reinvest in the roots of American power, and try to address the sort of deeper [00:31:00] structural pieces that I mentioned before.

In terms of crises that are most concerning to me and turn from a position of reputation or perceptions of American reliability. The two that come to mind most are the Philippines and Taiwan; the Philippines, because we have an explicit treaty with them. And there are active challenges and disputes between China and the Philippines that could implicate American alliance commitments that we would be expected to fulfill. That's a pretty stark choice to me, that the Korean peninsula is very clear, the value proposition there that Japan, that's very clear there. But I also wanted to raise Taiwan because it's been a topic of debate. Recently, Richard Haass from the Council on Foreign Relations, published a piece recently in *Foreign Affairs*, saying that the United States should clarify its commitment to defend Taiwan in the case of an attack from the mainland. And just the day before I did a book talk for my book release and we talked a lot about [00:32:00] Taiwan and I was asked, "Should the United States go to war with China to defend Taiwan? Or should we make it clear that we would, should we clarify our position?" And I said, no, that so far to my mind, ambiguity looks like it's still relevant. It's still working, but you know, that may change over time.

My concern about clarification, I'm still thinking about it. I still really haven't come to a solid conclusion to it, is that as bad as it would be, I think it would be bad for the United States to maintain an ambiguous policy. And if the Chinese attack and we don't defend them, it would still be damaging for American reputation and for perceptions of American credibility, regardless of what statements we had been issued, but as bad as it would be, it would be far worse if we were to make a clear commitment and then either not follow through with it or fail to achieve it, or fail in our attempt to defend Taiwan.

Now, I still have confidence that we would be able to defend Taiwan and from a military [00:33:00] perspective, I think the cost of that would come at an increasingly high price, but I think ultimately we would still be able to achieve that goal. But one, there's no certainty in any of this and two, I think we need to be careful when we're thinking about clarifying statements that we're actually willing to go through with it. One of my guiding principles is that great powers shouldn't bluff, that the United States shouldn't bluff, especially when it comes to competitive dynamics that involve potentially the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. So those are the most concerning pieces to me. I'm still keeping an open mind about the issue of whether or not the U.S. should clarify I'm still kind of cogitating on it, but for now the issue is to my mind, if we're going to make the commitment, we gotta be sure that we're actually going to make the commitment.

**Iain:** [00:33:42] Yeah, excellent points there from Abe and indeed, a lot that I would agree with.

Before I get started into the substantive issue of Taiwan today, Abe, the point that you make about sort of the damage that might be done if the U.S. doesn't make a commitment and then does nothing. If the U.S. makes a commitment and then doesn't follow through, it's really interesting. This [00:34:00] aspect of the debate does not feature prominently in the "What Allies Want" article, but these were the exact questions that the United States State

Department cabled out to all of its missions in Asia and asked them to reply back and, and I think there were five scenarios and they said, “We want to know what your host nations reaction to one of these five scenarios would be on the issue of where a crisis might involve concerns about reliability or loyalty today.”

I think that there are several, I think, you know, the Taiwan situation, depending on how quickly it escalated and how quickly states would face things like use it or lose it dilemmas, it's entirely possible that concern for reputation would have a decisive role. But the decisions would be made so quickly that we might not recognize it at the time, or even those people involved may not recognize it at the time. I could envisage scenarios in the South China Sea and East China Sea involving the Philippines or Japan where things could play out a little bit more slowly, and there might be time to [00:35:00] actually discuss some of these issues and try and work through them. A lot of that depends on how dangerous you regard the Taiwan Strait as a flashpoint that will escalate perhaps even to the nuclear level very quickly.

On the issue of the South China Sea in particular and of concerns over, I guess, the constancy of U.S. policy, the interesting modern-day recent example, which I think is worth noting, is that of the Scarborough Shoal. And indeed, I don't think anyone was thrilled by U.S. inaction there or a sense that the United States was caught flat footed and didn't know what to do. But again, like I've said before, I'm not sure that anyone would have exactly applauded a spectacularly belligerent response to what China did there.

I'm talking out of sequence a little bit here, but forgive me, but something else has just come into my mind. I also think it's quite important for the next U.S. administration to try as much as it can to talk through the alliance implications of any policy change on Taiwan. At one point in the events of the First Taiwan Strait Crisis, John Foster Dulles [00:36:00] turns, I think he says this to the British ambassador, he says, “we're keeping the communists guessing, partly because we are still guessing ourselves,” and this is, I think, one of the most illuminating and revealing comments throughout the entire crisis. Because it highlights just how hard it is for nation-states and the people who lead them to know, to actually know how they will react in particular circumstances and contingencies. And indeed many of these things are proclamations of how we think we will respond. They are not guarantees of what we will actually do if the moment comes.

**Abe:** [00:36:34] It's a great point. One of my standard lines in the past has been that when asked, in my opinion, “Would the United States come to defend Taiwan in a crisis,” my standard response has been, “I hope so, but ultimately the decision about whether or not to go to war is up to one person.” And unless you're talking to that one person at that moment, then whatever answer you're hearing is speculative. And this is interesting. I think it feeds exactly into [00:37:00] Iain's point, which was a very good point and the article, and I'm glad that we're able to actually talk about the case study in the article, the First Taiwan Strait Crisis that in January of 1950, Truman publicly said that the United States would not provide military aid or advice to Chinese forces on Formosa, on Taiwan; that they're adequate enough to defend themselves basically. And that three days later, that Dean Acheson gave the more famous speech talking about the U.S. defense perimeter running from the Ryukyus

to the Philippines, not including Taiwan or South Korea, much to the chagrin of John Foster Dulles, who thought that Taiwan should be in the perimeter, but there was not much room for that kind of commitment. But six months later, we're going in to defend Korea and Truman sends in the Seventh Fleet into the Taiwan Strait. And that, I think that goes directly to your point again, that we had this declaratory policy that we weren't going to do this, and then things happened, and we decided to do it.

**Morgan:** [00:37:54] Well, this is fantastic.

You know, Abe, we have a tradition here on the [00:38:00] show when we close out an episode, that we like to ask our special policy guests what advice they'd have for junior practitioners, scholars, service members, those starting their careers in this line of foreign policy.

**Abe:** [00:38:15] I think it's a great tradition that you have, and I'm happy to offer a few thoughts.

My main lessons learned, I'd say, one is to focus on a topic that you're passionate about, that too often I've seen people go to an issue that they think is in vogue or of interest. I went to graduate school right after 9/11, and most of the folks were studying counter-terrorism or learning Arabic or Pashto. And that was very in vogue for a while and then it fell out. So what I'd say is that every topic comes into the scene for a while and then it goes away and you want to be able to have a strong base that you're passionate about for the times when it's less exciting and less in vogue, for an international relations community that's surprisingly trendy.

The second point I'd make is to be [00:39:00] flexible, that the vast majority of opportunities that I've gotten in my career have come from areas that I wasn't prepared for in areas where I didn't have a lot of expertise in, but they were areas where I wanted to learn more. So I took it as a learning opportunity. So my first job in the Pentagon was to go over there and help to be the lead drafter on the annual report to the Congress about China's military. And at the time, I didn't know anything about China's military, but you know, it was an opportunity to work in the Pentagon and it was an opportunity to learn about the PLA. So I took it and I learned a tremendous amount from it and I really enjoyed it. So be flexible.

And the last one I've mentioned is that ultimately the satisfaction in my career has come from the people that I work with, that my colleagues, my bosses, the people on my team, I get the most satisfaction out of trying to lead and run a team and helping people get the best out of themselves and the best out of their work. Having a boss, a good boss, I think is better than having a good job title. So I'm looking for a job [00:40:00] less based on if the title's cool, but rather on whether or not it involves people that you want to work with is important.

And the corollary to that though, is that you need to be somebody that people want to work with. As much as you want to seek out people that you want to work with, you want to be somebody that is interesting and that contributes a lot and helps people and is fun to work with, and you know, that doesn't cause trouble, doesn't become a problem.

And so to my mind, you got to find the right people, but you also got to be with the right person. And when the opportunities come, you got to take them and make the most out of them. I never had a plan. I think it's a very DC thing. Everybody, it seems has a plan. I never had that for me. It was always, "Is this a cool job, will I get to learn something new, will it forced me to expand what I know, what I work on? And will I get to work with people that I respect that I admire that, that I like?" And that to me so far, at least has worked out pretty well. So that that's my three pieces of advice.

**Morgan:** [00:40:54] That's great. Well, thank you so much, Abe, for joining us today and sharing your insights.

Iain, thank you for [00:41:00] joining us as well. This has been a fantastic conversation.

**Iain:** Thanks, Morgan.

**Julie:** [00:41:10] Off the Page is a production of [00:41:11] *International Security*, [00:41:13] a quarterly journal edited and sponsored by the Belfer Center at Harvard Kennedy School and published by the MIT press. Our program is produced and edited by Morgan Kaplan, the executive editor of *International Security*. The associate producer and technical director is Benn Craig, digital communications by me, Julie Balise, production support by Carly Demetre.

Thanks to our intern, Kendrick Foster, for additional assistance and special thanks to Hilan Kaplan for composing our theme music. Upcoming episodes and additional material for Off the Page can be found online at [Belfercenter.org/offthepage](http://Belfercenter.org/offthepage). All articles from the journal can be read at [mitpressjournals.org /is](http://mitpressjournals.org/is).