

Jennifer Kavanagh: Why the U.S. Should Pull Back From the First Island Chain

Jennifer Kavanagh is a Senior Fellow and Director of Military Analysis at Defense Priorities and an Adjunct Professor at Georgetown University's Center for Security Studies. Kavanagh discusses her policy paper advocating a US withdrawal from the First Island Chain to avoid war with China, and explains why it sparked such a strong reaction. Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: <https://glenndiesen.substack.com/> X/Twitter: https://x.com/Glenn_Diesen Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/glenndiesen> Support the research by Prof. Glenn Diesen: PayPal: <https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/glenndiesen> Buy me a Coffee: buymeacoffee.com/gdieseng Go Fund Me: <https://gofund.me/09ea012f> Buy Diesen merchandise: <https://diesen-shop.fourthwall.com/en-nok> Books by Prof. Glenn Diesen: <https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B09FPQ4MDL>

#Glenn

Welcome back, everyone. We are joined again by Jennifer Kavanaugh, a senior fellow and director of military analysis at Defense Priorities. Thank you very much for coming back on the program.

#Jennifer Kavanagh

Thanks for having me.

#Glenn

You wrote this policy paper and presented it as an argument for why the U.S. military presence should move further away from China, so from the first island chain to the second, to get some space between these two great powers. And, yes, I suggested this caused an incredible backlash, so I was hoping if you could outline your arguments and perhaps also start with explaining, I guess, what the two island chains in East Asia are for those who are not aware.

#Jennifer Kavanagh

Yeah, sure. So, you know, I think the goal of my paper was to change the debate about U.S. policy in Asia. There is an active debate about what the U.S. should do in terms of its military presence in Europe and in the Middle East. But in Asia, in my view, the debate has been just around the margins, without a real reckoning with what we learned in Iran and how it affects...

#Jennifer Kavanagh

What we can expect from the U.S. military in Asia, and also a really close look at what U.S. interests are in Asia and the risks of a war with China, which would be catastrophic. And so that was sort of the goal of the paper. And I start from the place of saying, what actually are U.S. interests in Asia? And I define only two: protecting against threats to the U.S. homeland and protecting access to markets so the U.S. can maintain its economic position. And then I look carefully at, like, what are the military requirements? Like, what type of presence is actually needed in Asia to secure those interests? And my argument is that it's much less than what we currently have.

My view is that the current U.S. posture, which is heavily based along what's known as the first island chain—and that's Japan, the Philippines, Taiwan; sometimes you could include South Korea there—the U.S. has about 80,000 military forces along this first island chain. My argument is that you don't actually need forces there to protect U.S. interests. And in fact, having your military presence concentrated there has a couple of really negative implications for the United States. Number one, in my view, it increases the risk of war with China. The rationale in the U.S. policy establishment is that U.S. military presence deters.

So if we have these military forces in the Philippines and in Japan, and even we have a couple hundred trainers on Taiwan, that it prevents aggression from China or prevents China from being assertive in its own region. My view is that this assumption, really, there's no evidence behind it. And in fact, if you look carefully at the way China behaves, we see the opposite: that as the United States bolsters its presence, adds new weapons platforms along the first island chain, China increases its military buildup. It becomes more assertive. It increases its own military exercises. So you see this escalation, the security dilemma spiral, which has negative implications.

The other problem, I think, is that if something were to happen, some kind of miscalculation, it would be really hard for the U.S. to stay out of a conflict when you have so many forces in vulnerable locations. A lot of the rationale for this first island chain presence is around defending Taiwan, which many people in the U.S. military establishment have held up as the linchpin of U.S. power in Asia. And if Taiwan and China unify, this is the death knell. This will mean the U.S. is pushed out of the region. And I disagree, and I lay out in the paper why. I don't think the military advantages China would get are that great. China would get some economic advantages. We can maybe go into those in more detail. But this wouldn't necessarily give China regional hegemony.

In fact, it most certainly wouldn't give China regional hegemony or even a platform for regional hegemony. So my argument is the U.S. could manage the consequences of unification between China and Taiwan, but not the costs of a war with China over Taiwan. And so once you say that the U.S. doesn't need to defend Taiwan, and once you recognize the risks of having so many military forces forward, and the fact that those increase the potential for a war with China, then this first island chain presence doesn't make sense. And then the last piece of the puzzle, I think, is looking at what happened in Iran. And we see how vulnerable U.S. military bases are along the first island chain.

I mean, along the Persian Gulf in the Middle East. And then you think, well, what does this tell us about the survivability and defensibility of bases along the first island chain? If Iran can make bases in the Persian Gulf unusable for the U.S. military, do we really think that those bases along the first island chain are going to be useful in a war with China? Because the rationale for putting forces there, or another rationale, is that you would operate out of these bases, that these bases are important for dispersing U.S. military forces. But that argument doesn't hold up if you can't use them in a war because they're being bombed or made unusable.

So for all of these reasons, I don't think a first island chain presence makes sense or is necessary to protect U.S. interests. If what you're really defending against is threats to the homeland, there's very little risk of a Chinese, like, bolt-from-the-blue attack on the United States. As long as you stay out of a war over Taiwan, there's really no threat to the U.S. homeland coming from Asia. And protecting access to markets, again, doesn't require a first island chain presence. You can defend access to sea lanes from the second island chain. And also, we have to question whether China would actually try to block the United States from East Asian markets when it itself is so dependent on trade.

So it is neither necessary nor wise to have forces along the first island chain. So I argue in the paper for a retrenchment to the second island chain, which would mean places like Guam, Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, a lot of these spaces. And so you could invest in infrastructure there and have a much smaller rotational presence along that second island chain simply to hedge against risk to commercial access, which I think the risks are low. But I can't say that they're zero. So I think it's worth hedging against. So that was, like, the basic argument. I was part of that. I do recommend ending U.S. mutual defense commitments.

So ending the treaty with Japan and South Korea and the Philippines, and adopting a position of strategic clarity on Taiwan in the opposite direction than most people talk about it. So saying the U. S. would not get involved. That's simply because I don't think that it's credible or wise to keep a mutual defense commitment if you don't keep forces in those locations, and also because I think Japan and South Korea are rich and fully capable of defending themselves against any sort of threat that they face. So that's the basic argument. But I'm happy to go into more detail on specific pieces if you want.

#Glenn

Yeah, no, no, that would be great because, well, essentially what you're arguing, though, shouldn't be controversial. I mean, we always seek a balance between reassurance and deterrence to manage the security dilemma. That is, you want to deter your opponents from, well, for example, shutting down U.S. shipping routes or attacking allies. However, excessive deterrence is also not great because we have the offense-defense lack of clarity. So you want to also reassure the opponent that

intentions are defensive and not hostile. So it just seems like the worst possible situation would be to have this excessive deterrence, or too great forward deployments, which ends up actually inviting conflicts or provoking a war as opposed to preventing it, and then not being in a position to defend.

I mean, this would be really the worst of all worlds. But before I go into details, I want to know: what are the main pushbacks? Because I can see one weakness. That would be if the U.S. cuts its security offerings to, for example, Japan, then in that vacuum, the Japanese might pursue nuclear weapons. You know, we see something similar in Europe. That is, the U.S. is obviously rethinking whether or not it was a good idea to move into Ukraine. We have a war, and now that the U.S. is pulling a bit back, suddenly we have the Germans and French and Poles all starting to talk about nuclear weapons. So I guess, yeah, what fills the vacuum? But again, let me not put words in your mouth. What are the main pushbacks?

#Jennifer Kavanagh

Well, you know, like you, I thought this was sort of common sense. Like, it seems obvious to me that the first island chain presence is both very vulnerable. It becomes a liability for the United States. And if the Trump administration is serious about having a decent peace with China, I don't see how you have a decent peace when you have 80,000 forces a few hundred miles from China's coast. Like, that doesn't work. That doesn't make sense to me. But the response was, like, very overwhelming and controversial. The report was very controversial, and I was very surprised by the amount of attention the report got and sort of the intensity of the emotion that it sort of triggered in a lot of the D.C. policy community. I will be honest. I expected that most people wouldn't read the report and that people who did read the report wouldn't really care about it.

That's, like, definitely not what happened. So I'm happy. I was, like, way more successful than I ever could have been. It just was kind of a different response than I expected because, to me, this was not controversial. And to my, like, people who read the report and gave me feedback, most didn't think it was controversial. So the feedback, I mean, falls into a couple of categories. I mean, some of it was just not good-faith criticism. I think that, like, U.S. policy in Asia has been sort of like the thing that you don't criticize. It's, like, increasingly okay to say things like the U.S. should pull out of NATO or the U.S. should get out of the Middle East. It is much more taboo to say that the U.S. should cut its mutual defense commitments in Asia or pull back.

I think people saw this as, like, surrender, like voluntary retrenchment as surrender and acceptance of American decline. And so I think it kind of hit a third rail. Some people, I think, were kind of afraid because they realized that I was kind of right, even if they didn't want me to be. And so that triggered a lot of emotional responses. But there were some substantive responses. So some people criticized this idea that if the U.S. gives up bases on the first island chain, it becomes less able to operate in the region, that it needs those bases. Now, I've already sort of addressed that criticism. I

don't think it's—I think it's off base. I think it doesn't actually incorporate the lessons we've learned from Iran about how vulnerable those bases are and overestimates our ability to defend those bases in a conflict.

I also think it misinterprets what I was trying to do. Like, I'm not saying the U.S. should keep its same goals. Like, it should think that it can maintain its current set of defense commitments and then also pull back to the second island chain. I'm suggesting it should pull back to the second island chain and accept a different set of commitments that focus not on maximizing U.S. power, but on maximizing U.S. security. Like, those are two different goals. And so that would be my response to that. So some people have a very different perception of China than I do. And they suggested that this would leave the United States very vulnerable. They assert that China would certainly fill any vacuum that the United States left. It would soon have regional hegemony.

Once the U.S. pulled back to the second island chain, China would start pushing the U.S. out of that, and the U.S. would soon be back with, like, a third island chain strategy. And they see that as very undesirable. They see China as seeking sort of global dominance, and they interpret the report as an acceptance of that. I disagree. I think that misinterprets both Chinese intent and Chinese military capabilities, also, like, how other countries in the region would respond. My expectation is that Japan and South Korea would try to balance. They wouldn't necessarily bandwagon with China right away.

And I would argue that the U.S. can counter Chinese economic influence with an economic strategy. When people talk about China pushing the U.S. out of the region, it's usually about Chinese economic power, not Chinese military power. And if you want to counter Chinese economic influence, you need an economic strategy. Military power will never do that. And then there's a set of criticisms that you point out. And these come even from the Chinese, which is interesting, which is that if the U.S. pulls back to the second island chain, Japan will over-militarize. It's mostly about Japan. I agree. South Korea might also want nuclear weapons.

I, you know, I think in the Western, or, like, in the U.S. policy circles, that's a concern. In China, I didn't hear that concern as much. But there's a concern that Japan especially will over-militarize. It will seek nuclear weapons. And then the question is, what does China do? Does that trigger a war because China seeks to preventatively keep Japan from getting a nuclear weapon or keep Japan from over-militarizing? Or does Japan become so aggressive in defending its own security that it triggers a war that way? Yeah. I think—and I acknowledge in the report—that dealing with Japanese insecurity is a really important challenge.

And I argue for phasing out the U.S. commitment to Japan much more slowly than any of the other commitments in the region for that reason. I generally see a global trend toward proliferation. So I would actually expect that countries in Europe and some countries in Asia are going to get nuclear weapons over the next 10 to 15 years. My response to that is that we should be focused now on

how to manage a world in which there are more nuclear powers, rather than trying to prevent proliferation, because I think the Trump administration's policies have made it much more likely that this happens. But it is something to think about.

And so I think one interesting comment that I heard from some Chinese colleagues was that they feel a little bit less penned in by U.S. First Island Chain presence and might be willing to accept some level of continued commitment to Japan by the United States to prevent insecurity that led to Japan over-militarizing or pursuing a nuclear weapon. And so it's possible that you can imagine a future in which the U.S. mostly operates from the Second Island Chain, but maintains some kind of security partnership with Japan that includes some kind of rotational military presence and some kind of continued commitment of support in case of a crisis that would help to prevent this type of proliferation, at least in the near term.

So, you know, I recognize that there are risks with my strategy. Nuclear proliferation, I think, is probably the biggest one and the one worth considering most. But my view is that, from a U.S. interest perspective, it's still better for the United States to have fewer mutual defense commitments. I really dislike security guarantees. I think pulling back and having a smaller military footprint, a smaller overall global military footprint, and fewer commitments is better for the United States, even if it means that some nuclear proliferation follows. I would rather have a concerted effort to think about how we manage the risks of proliferation than to maintain current U.S. defense commitments.

#Glenn

Yeah, no, I also see, as you said, the risks, but one often gets the impression that the criticism comes from, you know, what you're suggesting, or maintaining the status quo. But the whole point, I think, is that the world order is shifting itself. That is, if you have a massively fast distribution of power shifting kind of fast, the old status quo isn't really available. I mean, I know in Europe, at least, they keep talking about, you know, if we just keep doing what they did in the '90s, then everything would be fine. But again, the world has shifted. You have other centers of power which will not put up with this.

And also, the U.S. itself has limited resources and has to begin to prioritize. I often make the example with the interceptor missiles, because the U.S. first sent everything to fight the Russians, and then it was time to fight the Iranians. There weren't enough missiles, so then they needed missiles to fight Iran, so they pull them out of Asia, pull them out of Europe, and then even in the Middle East, they have to hand missiles to Israel. So suddenly, no one trusts America to come to their defense anymore. That's not great. I mean, if you don't prioritize—if you prioritize everything, you end up prioritizing nothing—and I think that's a big vulnerability. So again, it's not the ideal situation.

It's adjusting to the new realities, and as you said, that comes with great risks. But how do you manage this? I'm a bit struck by optimism, though, when you say that your Chinese colleagues kind of understand, yeah, you shouldn't go out too fast. They may make sure that they don't sow too much insecurity in Japan, because then we have to manage this transition, I guess, is the point. But before, you talked about economic interests. That is, we often speak in the language only of security, defense, usually wrapped in some language of altruism. But behind all these military commitments, there's also economic interest. What are those? Or is it primarily shipping, controlling shipping lanes?

#Jennifer Kavanagh

Well, I mean, I would agree that the United States has an interest in protecting its access to East Asian markets. I guess I would put it in a different way, though. I would say that the United States has an interest in making sure that it is never in a situation where another country dictates its terms of trade. And when we think about a Chinese regional hegemony, what are we really worried about? So some people, I think, when they talk about it, they're thinking about China physically interdicting U.S. access to markets, like physically preventing the U.S. from getting to ports. I actually think that's not that likely in East Asia because even if, you know, I think China today could block the U.S. from the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait if it wanted to.

It doesn't want to because it has an interest in having the United States access those markets. But let's say that it did. I don't think it would be catastrophic for the United States. The United States could use other alternative shipping lanes. There are a lot of choke points and options for navigating water in East Asia. So the chance that China could physically interdict all U.S. access to all East Asian markets, to me, it's not possible. I think that overestimates China's military capabilities and underestimates how difficult it is to interdict shipping lanes. I look at the Strait of Hormuz, like the United States has been trying to blockade that waterway for a long time, and it's done okay, but it hasn't done great.

So I think that tells us something about the likelihood of physical interdiction. So I think the bigger risk is that China, if the U.S. pulls back too much, China's economic and political influence is such that it can basically coerce Japan and South Korea into using tariffs or other types of restrictions to prevent the U.S. from trading in these markets. But if that's the concern, then the answer isn't more military power. The answer is a U.S. economic strategy that maintains economic influence in these markets that prevents China from gaining the level of political and economic dominance, especially in Japan and South Korea, that would allow for that outcome. And so that means that when we think about what the U.S. needs to do militarily in the region, yes, it's important to hedge against threats to shipping lanes.

You don't want to end up in a situation where you have no ability to protect shipping, but you don't need this, what the U.S. is typically aimed for, which is like universal protection, uncontested control

of the maritime commons at all times. You need to be able to create windows of control, like the ability to escort convoys or keep specific shipping lanes open for U.S. commercial access. And I would argue that that's like an attainable goal. So the presence that I recommend in the report, keeping along the second island chain, would be like a start of that. So if there were—if a threat emerged, you'd keep enough forces there that they could start that operation to protect the specific key shipping lanes or access points.

And then you could get enough additional rotational assets, ships and aircraft, which are both very mobile. And aircraft, at least, you can move very quickly to supplement that operation. But the bigger, I think, takeaway or recommendation is that the U.S. needs an economic strategy. And since Trump decided not to enter the TPP back when he was in his first term, the U.S. hasn't really had one. You know, Biden had the IPEF, which was a joke, and Asian countries made fun of it. And now that's gone. So now we have nothing. So it's really about an economic strategy. One line of criticism I got in the report was that if you pull back the military presence, then you lose economic power.

And this is based on the assumption that somehow U.S. military presence buys economic access. And there's just no evidence for that argument. I looked at it when I was at RAND, back, like, maybe over 10 years ago, trying to find a connection between U.S. economic outcomes and U.S. military presence. And there was just no relationship in the data. So I don't buy this argument that if you pull back military presence, you lose economic access. Maybe you lose some ability to sell weapons to these countries, but I don't think U.S. foreign policy should be based on the interests of defense contractors.

#Glenn

There has been a huge shift in American military thinking over the decades because of this whole assumption that you need a military presence for economic access. Traditionally, the U.S., much like the British before it, always looked towards imposing a balance of power in which it wouldn't have a prominent role. In other words, you know, this offshore balancer strategy—that is, the U.K. and then the U.S., you know, enter late into wars because the main interest is just to make sure that at the end of the war, there's a new balance of power, so no one is able to assert a dominance such as Chinese dominance in East Asia.

But also then leave, don't have too heavy a presence, because then the other Eurasian powers will begin to balance the United States instead. So the whole logic is, if the U.S. pulls back, it can preserve its strength, and then the Eurasian powers will instead balance each other. I'm just thinking, wouldn't that also work in this instance, if China suddenly begins to threaten the South Koreans, the Japanese? I mean, at the moment, the Indians are getting along with the Chinese. The Russians will look at the Chinese as their most important partner, as well as many other countries in the region.

But if the Chinese would begin to seek dominance over its neighbors, a lot of its closest friends would turn on it. And again, there would be an equilibrium. It would be restoring a natural balance of power, but with the U.S. standing outside and recovering its strength instead of now being the subject of collective balancing by all the Eurasian powers. It just seems, again, one doesn't have to agree with that analysis, but it didn't used to be controversial. That used to be the main strategy, is, I guess, what I'm saying. But what is the future of U.S. alliances in your vision if this retrenchment is what the U.S. should go for?

#Jennifer Kavanagh

Well, I agree that the most likely outcome if the U.S. pulls back is balancing by other East Asian powers. I believe that Japan and South Korea would invest more in their defense and probably work more closely together, also with Australia, to try to balance Chinese power. I think there are those who say that I'm wrong, who say that Japan would instead decide that the best outcome is to sort of find an accommodation with China, or that these Asian countries are too weak to balance China. I just don't agree with that.

I guess I have a more optimistic view of their capabilities, and also interviews that I've done with people in Japan and South Korea suggest that their response would be to balance. But I think, which is another reason why I thought this was sort of non-controversial and why I don't worry that much about this risk of Chinese regional hegemony. You know, Steve Walt makes this argument in IS about the challenges that China would face in trying to gain regional hegemony. And he points to the role of geography and water and how difficult it would be for China to build a military hegemony, and also the nationalism and desire of other countries to balance.

So I agree with that argument. I mean, I believe that the United States can benefit from having security partnerships with countries in the region that include sort of transactional relationships, short-term cooperation around shared interests. But I don't like the alliances as currently configured because they are too expansive, and they commit the U.S. to a level of support that I think is counterproductive for a few reasons. First, I think U.S. security guarantees fundamentally pervert the incentives of these allies. First, it drives them to underspend on defense because they know they have the United States there.

And second, I think it causes them often to adopt foreign policies that they can't actually back up without U.S. military power. I think Japan under Takeuchi is a good example of this. She's taken some very aggressive and provocative positions towards China that I'm not sure she would take if she didn't think she had a U.S. security guarantee backing her. You see the same thing from the Baltic states and Poland and Europe. You see the same thing from Israel. So I think that security guarantees are very counterproductive. And so what I'd like to see is the United States get rid of these security guarantees and renegotiate its relationships with all the countries, not just in Asia, but elsewhere too.

But with South Korea, with Japan, with the Philippines, with Australia, and develop partnerships that don't include security guarantees and that are focused on narrow, commonly shared interests. And that could include defense industrial cooperation. It could include a rotational military presence and basing access. It could include commitments of U.S. military assistance. But these things should be defined based on U.S. interests. We should be sure that the specific treaty is both time-limited and reevaluated frequently, and benefits the United States rather than committing the United States to things that are just not in U.S. interests.

And like two examples of the way in which this works, you know, first, if you think about the U.S. commitment to the Philippines, like, you know, the Obama administration went as far as to say that this treaty absolutely included what are effectively rocks and reefs in the South China Sea. So that means that the United States is going to go to war, a potentially nuclear war with China, over rocks in the South China Sea. Like, that makes no sense. That's not in U.S. interests. What happens to those land formations doesn't matter for U.S. interests. And same thing with some of Japan's outlying islands. Like, is defending these islands really in U.S. interests? Is it really worth a war with China? Like, I would say no. So I think these commitments are just too broad, and they commit the United States to things that are not in U.S. interests.

And you could say that these commitments deter by creating ambiguity, like maybe the U.S. would. Like, yes, these commitments are written in an ambiguous way intentionally. But do we really want to leave the door open to a war with China over something that's not in U.S. interests? Because you never know what political dynamics are going to play out that could force the U.S. president to go to war because of the commitment and the way it's interpreted, when it's absolutely not in U.S. interests. Like, we've seen the United States fight many wars that are not in U.S. interests. So we can't assume that just because something is clearly the wrong choice for the United States, a treaty might not pull the U.S. into doing it.

#Glenn

Well, as a European, I can't help but agree with your assessment about offering the security guarantees and the military support. I mean, in Europe, there's underspending. I don't think that's a controversial thing to say on the military. They don't fund their own military anymore. And while they don't have any military, they have this new militarism without military. So they're very aggressive because they know that the Americans are standing behind them. And especially the Baltic states I find fascinating because they're often beating the war drums the loudest of all. For example, Estonia, with 1.3 million people, calling for war with Russia, essentially, with almost 150 million people, the world's largest nuclear power.

And, you know, the Europeans look at this and decided to give their former prime minister the position as the foreign policy chief. You know, let's hand the car keys over to these people. You wouldn't see this. And I think that's a wider problem, though. That is, once you outsource your

security to the U.S., you also outsource your strategic thinking. And there hasn't been much of it because, well, it's been comfortable to live under the security umbrella of the United States. But I think it was a more feasible structure after World War II, with the bipolar distribution of power. I think in a multipolar environment, we just have to be honest. There's limited capabilities, and also this—yeah, one has to start to introduce more reassurance, given that you have other centers of power such as China, Russia.

You can even put Iran in that category. Yeah. But on the Chinese issue, how do you see Taiwan? Because this has always been based on some strategic ambiguity. Like, you know, is it sovereign? Is it not? I mean, I know in Europe, you often hear journalists say, "Oh, Taiwan, which China believes is a part of China." But our entire security structure, our deals with the Chinese in the '70s—well, between the U.S. and China—everything is based on the One China policy. It seems like we all recognize Taiwan as a part of China. If we didn't, that would unravel the entire agreement. We would have a war. But on the other hand, I don't understand why they still want to have at least a de facto independence of Taiwan. But again, the strategic ambiguity has been the foundation for peace. So how do you see this being preserved?

#Jennifer Kavanagh

Yeah, I mean, I actually think strategic ambiguity is unsustainable. Like, I think the U.S. position on Taiwan is unsustainable and should change. So, in the Second Island Chain paper, one of the things I recommend is shifting to a position of strategic clarity, but in the opposite direction, saying the United States would not defend Taiwan militarily. If there were a conflict, the United States would not get involved. And shifting to that position would require other changes. Like, it would require changes in U.S. military posture. You have to get U.S. forces out of places like Okinawa and Luzon in the Philippines because if you leave them there, they're very vulnerable if a conflict did break out, and you might get dragged in.

And it would require a decision on what to do about arms sales and things like that. And it would require reshoring semiconductor manufacturing and packaging facilities more aggressively. Because you would have to accept the reality that without U.S. support, Taiwan might not be able to defend itself and might actually choose political accommodation over fighting a war. There are those in Taiwan who look at Ukraine and think, "We don't want to be the next Ukraine." Some kind of political solution would be better for that. The reason I don't think that the position on Taiwan is sustainable or in U.S. interests has a few pieces.

The most important, though, is I just disagree with those who say that maintaining the current status quo is in U.S. existential interests. I disagree. I think that the United States could manage unification between China and Taiwan. What China would gain militarily is rather small. You know, as a couple of examples, it would gain the ability to base its submarines on the east coast of Taiwan,

which would allow it to evade some of the U.S. underwater sensors. That would mean that Chinese submarines could get out into the Pacific Ocean more easily. They'd be harder for the U.S. to track. But the reality is that Chinese submarine technology is advancing very quickly.

Pretty soon, Chinese submarines will be quiet enough to evade those sensors anyway. I don't think it makes sense to risk a war with China over an advantage that you're going to lose in five years or something like that. China could potentially base missiles and radars in Taiwan, and it would allow it to project power more easily across the Pacific. But China's already gaining this capability. And in fact, being able to take Taiwan, most likely China would need the ability to project power across the Pacific in this way, which means that this is actually a requirement, like a prerequisite for China seizing Taiwan, not something China would gain from seizing Taiwan.

So military benefits are quite small. I don't think Taiwan makes a good launch pad for invasion of Japan and/or invasion of the Philippines. So the chances that Taiwan radically shifts the military balance in the region are low. We've already talked about this argument that if China takes Taiwan, the rest of the region will bandwagon with China. I don't think that's likely. I think the much more likely outcome is that they invest more in their defense and try to balance against what they see as a more aggressive Chinese threat. So then there's this economic argument. I think those are worth taking seriously.

I don't get the argument that seizing Taiwan allows China to shut the U.S. out of economic markets for the reasons that we've already articulated. Like, if China wanted to shut the South China Sea to the United States, it could do that today. So I don't think that's worth fighting over. But the question of semiconductors is more real. Right now, the United States does depend very heavily on Taiwan as the location of semiconductor manufacturing. So I think that the United States should be investing more in reshoring those capabilities. But we should also acknowledge that, like, the intellectual property that is the foundation for the production of semiconductors on Taiwan is U.S. intellectual property.

So if there were a war over Taiwan, let's say it starts in six months, semiconductor facilities would probably be destroyed. This would hurt China and the United States because both depend on these chips coming from Taiwan. And the U.S. would have the advantage because it has the intellectual property and can build the manufacturing at home. So it would be a short-term disruption, not a long-term disruption. So for all these reasons, I don't see, like, a unification between China and Taiwan as existentially threatening to the United States. But a war with China over Taiwan would be existentially threatening to the United States. We should be realistic about what the costs of that war would be.

I mean, you know, U.S. former Navy commanders, admirals, acknowledge that, like, they would call the price of entry into a war with Taiwan two aircraft carriers on the bottom of the ocean—not the cost of the whole war, the price of entry, like just the starting cost of the war. So you're talking about U.S. casualties in the tens or even hundreds of thousands. You're talking about dozens of

warships sunk. You're talking about loss of hundreds of U.S. aircraft. And that's not to say that the cost to China wouldn't be high. They would be. But for China, this is an existential interest. This is something that they're willing to fight to the end over. And we've seen in the Middle East that the U.S. military is very fragile. So how I see a war playing out is that the two sides would fight.

The U.S. would run out of weapons first. And then China would just blockade Taiwan and bleed it out. And the U.S. would be out of the capabilities to actually break that blockade. So the chances of success are also quite low. That doesn't mean the U.S. can't impose costs on China. It can, but it can't actually achieve a political objective that it's looking for. And so I don't see this as either in U.S. interests or sustainable militarily at this point. And I think once you acknowledge that it's not in U.S. interests to fight this war, you have to shut the door. Leaving the door open to a war over Taiwan with strategic ambiguity when you know that a war with China isn't in U.S. interests, that defending Taiwan is not an existential interest of the United States, is just irresponsible foreign policy.

#Glenn

Yeah, no, that's a good point. And, well, people often make the point that, well, the U.S. is the most powerful military, and I would fully agree. I think that's quite clear. But there are other variables at play. That is the proximity. It creates benefits for logistics, which is obvious from the Ukraine war to the Iran war. But also, as you said, existential threat. I think the failure to acknowledge this is a mistake. I mean, this is why the Iranians will fight till the end. This is why the Russians will fight till the end, also the Ukrainians, for that matter. But, you know, it is quite important, the reasoning behind the war. I want to ask a last question about China, because how do you see the possibility of moving from the bloc politics to something, you know, instead of just the U.S. pulling back, instead the U.S. negotiating a collective security architecture.

Because I just got back from China, and, you know, what I thought was interesting, everyone there keeps talking about peaceful development, harmonized interests, you know, break with power politics, peace. You know, it's very, you know, kumbaya. And, you know, as a European, I found it very interesting. I found it as a nice break because in this part of the world, all they're talking about is war, conflict, prepare to die for your country. And behind every corner is an enemy. I mean, the paranoia and panic and fear, you know, are we going to be all alone in the world? Where are the Americans going? I mean, it's exhausting. So I did find that rhetoric interesting, a bit more calming.

But, you know, as a political realist, I would also assume that as the distribution of power shifts, so do intentions. And, you know, if China grows very powerful, one can assume that its intentions might grow as well. So, yeah, for that reason, I thought, wouldn't it make sense, instead of just, you know, reducing bloc politics or handing over dominance to China, to have some kind of a concert of Europe, but for East Asia? That is, all the major powers, including the United States, as an Asian power as well, would then have a seat at the table just to make sure that the great powers manage the security competition and make sure everyone's security concerns are accommodated, again, for collective interest. Do you see any potential in that direction?

#Jennifer Kavanaugh

Yeah, well... I agree that inclusive security architecture should be the goal. I don't think that you have security in Asia if the model is military competition. If Japan and the Philippines and South Korea, as the U.S. pulls back, decide to invest only in military deterrence, that's not a model that leads to anyone's security. It will lead to insecurity across the region. So you have to have both investment in deterrence and investment in diplomatic outreach to China to build some kind of *modus vivendi* in the region. I think the U.S. can play a role in that. I think it can do it in a couple of ways.

I think one is to, as it pulls back, talk to China about what it's doing and its intentions, and make clear that, like, the United States isn't leaving the region, wants to stay an active—be an active player, that the United States is a Pacific power, that it will always be a Pacific power, but that it's adopting this, like, you know, different approach and is willing to accept China as a geopolitical peer and give China, you know, not saying necessarily a sphere of influence, but at least a sphere of interest in its near abroad, just like the United States wants in the Western Hemisphere. And the second way would be to work with—to be intentional with pulling back from allied countries and be transparent. Like, I actually—I'm very supportive of the Trump administration's efforts to do less in Europe, but less supportive of maybe the way they're doing it.

I think that the United States should be open and transparent about its intentions. Say, "We're going to retrench on this timeline. We're going to do it no matter what you do, no matter what you say, no matter how much you spend. But we're willing to work with you on what we want it to be. But here's our plan, so you can also plan accordingly." The United States doesn't need to make enemies out of the countries that it pulls back from. And so, working with Japan and saying, like, you know, you should increase military spending, but we also really want you to have diplomatic outreach to China. And as the U.S. pulls back, it has leverage to do that. It can think about how to time its retrenchment. It can think about what level of access and rotational presence it maintains.

It can encourage Japanese leaders and South Korean leaders and leaders in the Philippines to reach out to China. It can build diplomatic channels, and it can facilitate dialogue between allied countries and China. That does require that the United States have a good working relationship with China if it's going to act in this role of sort of helping to, you know, mediate the development of a more inclusive security architecture. It has to have good relations with both allies and with China. But I do think that that should be the, like, the goal outcome. I think that the Trump administration's approach to the region so far has been not that helpful in this regard, because it has, I would say, sort of like two Asia policies. On the one hand, it has this pursuit of a political-level *détente* where it talks about decent peace and constructive strategic stability.

But at the operational level, it's still investing quite heavily in, like, military deterrence, like business continues as usual. It continues to send weapons platforms to the region and encourage allies to

spend more on defense and to build more offensive capabilities. And so, in that sense, it's doing the opposite of building an inclusive security architecture and actually is pushing us into a position that I think is the worst of both worlds. It's pulled back enough to freak allies out, but it hasn't pulled back enough to accommodate China's security concerns.

It's weakened the credibility of first island chain defense in some ways, but it hasn't pulled back enough to actually make it less aggressive and threatening to China. And so we're in this kind of liminal space, which I think is quite dangerous. And so I would like to see a more intentional approach to retrenchment that acknowledges, like, what the long-term trend of U.S. foreign policy is and encourages allies not only to invest in defense, but also invest in outreach to China. So you could imagine a policy where the U.S. says, "We want you to spend 3% of GDP on defense, and if you do that, we will tie it to X, Y, and Z. But we also want you to reach out to China and build a diplomatic channel."

And if you do that, we will tie it to X, Y, and Z incentives. Like, it should be conditional. Both things should be conditional, not just the military spending. Some people say I'm naive. I think this is attainable. I actually don't read China as wanting to militarily dominate the region. I think that some of the talk about peaceful development is rhetoric, but I actually think they do have a different model and a different goal for the region. And this is why I actually worry more these days about the negative trend in China-Japan relations than I do about the Taiwan issue, because I think that is, like, the long-term risk factor, even if Taiwan is maybe a nearer-term risk factor.

#Glenn

Yeah. No, something could be rhetoric. And of course, intentions change over time, so you want to focus on capabilities. But I think overall, though, for the way the thought is in China these days, if you look at, you know, they had this, you know, century of humiliation. They have all the problems that followed. And after all of this, they didn't come out very vindictive. It seems like it's a good deal. We can work with them, you know. So I think this is, you know, one would be at least a little bit hopeful. What you described in Asia, it seems like you can apply this being between two security systems, like you're picking the worst of two worlds. You know, you could apply this to the Middle East and Europe as well, as you were speaking.

I was thinking, because in Europe, the U.S. is now communicating, you know, we're not really going to defend you. This is your problem. We're going to pull back. But at the same time, if they're not essentially taking NATO off the table, for example, in Ukraine, because if they did, that's the main source of the war. I mean, if you could remove this, then the Russians would be reassured. They can have peace. So you don't pull back from this, but you would, you know, make the Europeans feel insecure, but you won't reassure the Russians. Not you, sorry, but, you know, it's just, it seems like that's the worst of both worlds because now the Russians are still thinking, we have to fight. You know, our security will just have to be achieved through military victory, and the Europeans are panicking because their American backup went away.

And same as in the Middle East, though, you have, you know, if they realize that they can't rebuild all those bases, that old security infrastructure in the Middle East, all those Gulf state bases there, you know, it doesn't necessarily enhance security. We're going to have to change this anyway. I mean, if they would have that discussion with the Iranians, that essentially, you know, maybe we'll reduce the alliance systems to accommodate your security concerns. You know, if they communicated that to the Iranians, the Iranians would be reassured. But instead, they keep the hardline rhetoric on the Iranians and the Russians while their own allies, they're walking it back. So it's almost setting the situation for war. Not suggesting that's deliberate, but it's a very—it's a difficult situation, readjustment is what I'm trying to say, I guess. Anyways, do you have any final thoughts before we finish off?

#Jennifer Kavanaugh

Yeah, I mean, I agree. I think that the period of transition between the U.S.-led security order and U. S. security guarantees and something different, where the United States retrenches and pulls back and focuses more on domestic issues, is a very risky period. Like, my view is that the ultimate outcome, a world with less U.S., is better for everyone, better for the United States and better for the world. Getting there is tricky. Getting there peacefully is difficult. I think the Trump administration hasn't done a good job. Even when I support sort of the direction of some of their moves, like, I think there's a way to do this that's responsible, and I'm not sure that the Trump administration has chosen that. But we should be honest that the U.S. retrenchment, the U.S. pulling back from what has been decades-long security commitments, is going to be messy. It's not going to be pretty or easy or, like, smooth, but it could be done better, I think, than the Trump administration has done it so far.

#Glenn

Well, I thought, yeah, your report was excellent. And yeah, at least it opens up this space for discussing how the world is changing, you know, not how we want it to be, but how it actually is. So thank you very much. And yes, where can people follow your work?

#Jennifer Kavanaugh

Well, you can find my work on our Defense Priorities website. It's www.defensepriorities.org. Or you can find me on X at J. E. Kavanaugh.

#Glenn

Well, thanks again.

#Jennifer Kavanaugh

Thank you for having me.