

The Prospects of the US Alliance System in Asia: Managing from the Hub

PING-KUEI CHEN

This paper examines the implications of the United States' "hub-and-spoke" alliance system in Asia. It argues that the US enjoys a bargaining advantage in the current bilateral security relations with its Asian allies. In contrast to a multilateral alliance, the US can better prevent free riders and joint resistance in its bilateral relations. It can effectively restrain the behavior of its allies and compel them to accommodate American interests. The hub-and-spoke system helps the US consolidate its policy influence over the Asian allies, supervise inter-alliance cooperation, and increase defense cooperation between allies and non-allies. This paper uses episodes of defense cooperation between the US, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and India to illustrate the American alliance management techniques since 2016. During this time, the US allies have increasingly participated in regional security affairs due to US demands and guidance rather than autonomous decisions. Facing strong US pressure, allies have found it hard to challenge the US under the hub-and-spoke system despite common grievances. This leads to two implications for the future: First, the US allies may have less autonomy in their foreign policies, restraining their ability to pursue neutral positions and policies in regional affairs such as the South China Sea dispute. Second, the US may discourage or even undermine the emergence of multilateral security institutions in Asia. The US is likely to maintain the "hub-and-spoke" system to safeguard its strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific.

KEYWORDS: Hub-and-spoke; US–Japan alliance; US–Australia alliance; US–ROK alliance; the Quad.

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Since the end of World War II, American alliance policies in East Asia have been characterized by a "hub-and-spoke" system that consists of bilateral alliances organized by the United States, a system which was originally

PING-KUEI CHEN (陳秉達) is an Associate Professor at the Department of Diplomacy, College of International Affairs, National Chengchi University, Taiwan. His research interests include conflict studies, security institutions, alliance cohesion, East Asian affairs, Cross-Strait relations, and global governance. He can be reached at <pkchen@nccu.edu.tw>.

designed to serve its strategic interests. This system also coped with historic conflicts between Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan during the early days of the Cold War (Cha, 2016; Hemmer & Katzenstein, 2002). Over time, Japan, South Korea, and Australia have become the key allies of the United States under this “hub-and-spoke” system and the main vehicles for the projection of its power. They provide forward bases for US armed forces, share intelligence and weapon systems, offer logistics should the US use force in the Pacific, and even send combat forces to join the US in armed conflicts. Each alliance serves a different purpose and targets a different security threat. Since the end of the Cold War, these allies have each remained loyal to their respective US alliances while building and consolidating military cooperation with the US.

Recently, the US has faced heightened security challenges in East Asia. The rise of China’s military strength and its foreign policy choices have been of utmost concern. As China has fortified the occupied South China Sea land features to defend its territorial and maritime claims, the US and other regional actors have been worried about the country’s intentions. Across the Taiwan Strait, China has intensified its diplomatic and military pressure since the election of President Tsai Ing-wen. The territorial dispute between Japan and China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands has cooled down over the last few years, but China has continued to employ non-militarized measures to challenge Japan’s ownership. Similarly, the North Korea regime under Kim Jong-un has remained a genuine security threat to South Korea, Japan, and American military personnel stationed in Far East. To cope with these security challenges, the US began to refocus on East Asia during the Obama administration. Obama’s “pivot to Asia” or “rebalancing” increased the American military presence and economic engagement in the region. The Trump administration continued this policy posture and later declared a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIPS).” Under these mandates, both administrations increased the US military presence in East Asia and strengthened defense cooperation with allies.

In addition to diverting military assets to the Indo-Pacific, the US has adjusted its alliance policies and requested that its Asian allies take more responsibility in regional security affairs. These allies were asked to increase defense spending and to join overseas operations. Japan, in particular, has adopted many new initiatives. The Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) participated in joint exercises with South Korea, India, the Philippines, and Australia. Japanese vessels joined naval drills with the United States Navy and other allies in the South China Sea. South Korea agreed to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system amidst a nuclear threat from Pyongyang. South Korea, Japan, and the US held multiple joint military exercises to deter North Korea. Asian allies also cooperated with non-allies. India has

now become a key strategic partner of the United States and deepened its relations with other US allies. These events show that inter-alliance defense cooperation has become much more common, and the spokes have established tight connections with each other. Interactions between US allies and non-allies have also significantly increased. These activities have brought solid interoperability between the US, its allies, and its non-allied “strategic partners” during military operations.

Increased inter-alliance cooperation raises the question of whether allies of the United States in Asia will continue to strengthen their ties and eventually develop into a multilateral and institutionalized military cooperation. Possible forms of cooperation range from a treaty alliance to a defense agreement that coordinates defense strategies. The US is likely to take the lead in coordinating defense strategies among them, and even if such cooperation is organized by other allies, it is likely to take a key role due to its influence in regional security. Either way, the US is set to transform the current “hub-and-spoke system” into a multilateral institution. Even if a formal alliance were lacking, this institution would still coordinate ally-defensive strategies as they prepare for joint military operations in the future. Such a multilateral institution could also expand to include partners who have no alliance treaties with the US.

The revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (hereafter the Quad) points out the optimism for broader multilateral defense cooperation that includes both US allies and non-ally partners. The Quad was originally a multilateral disaster response initiative established by Australia, India, Japan and the US after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. In November 2017, the four states met again and pledged to cooperate in defense and economic development. This meeting is usually referred as the Quad 2.0. Consisting of two allies and a strategic partner of the United States, this quadrilateral dialogue could lay the foundation for a multilateral alliance or a tighter mechanism of military cooperation. Former United States Pacific Command Admiral Harry Harris once stressed the importance of building regional security through quadruple defense cooperation (Harris, 2016). Some scholars and foreign policy analysts also hold an optimistic view about the role the Quad can play (Liu, 2018; Singh, 2018; Smith, 2018). Some anticipate that international structure would lead to closer security ties between East Asian countries. Chanlett-Avery and Vaughn (2008) paid attention to the emerging Asian trilateral ties in their report to Congress. Burgess and Beilstein (2018) argue that a multilateral defense pact is possible if China and North Korea become more aggressive. Lee-Brown (2018) also argues that a minilateral security community has already emerged over the past decade as regional countries have built an array of overlapping “security triangles.” To be sure, these authors maintain that there are significant barriers to forming a multilateral

defense alliance, but they tend to agree that maritime security and the North Korea threat will at least incentivize the US, its allies, and its partners to establish closer defense cooperation if not a defense alliance.

This paper evaluates the prospects of a closer multilateral security partnership in Asia. In particular, it examines whether the US or its allies would support a multilateral institution in the Indo-Pacific region. Even if a treaty alliance seems far-fetched, how would the US and its allies alter the current hub-and-spoke system? Starting from the theory of alliance management, the following analysis examines alliance relations in East Asia since 2016. Evidence suggests that despite the increase of inter-spoke cooperation, a multilateral defense mechanism is unlikely to develop. The United States would remain a key player in regional security, and Asian allies welcome its involvement in regional affairs. However, Asian allies will find it difficult to resist the demands from the US when they disagree with the US over burden-sharing and overseas operations. This is due to the United States' bargaining advantages in the hub-and-spoke system and its desire to maintain oversight over its Asian allies and partners. The current hub-and-spoke system allows the US to prevent its allies from initiating collective bargaining while providing it with an advantage in burden-sharing negotiations.

This discussion begins with a review of alliance theory and its implications for the hub-and-spoke system by explaining why a stronger power is expected to enjoy more bargaining advantages in a bilateral alliance than a multilateral one. Next, it examines cases of burden-sharing disputes between the US and its allies. The issues discussed cover THAAD and US deployment costs, allied operations in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean, and arms sales to US allies. These cases show that allies sometimes have common grievances with respect to US demands, and such grievances are particularly salient under the Trump administration. US allies cannot jointly raise a complaint with the US but must instead negotiate separately. The US has made it clear that such problems are to be handled individually with each ally. Asymmetric power relations in a bilateral alliance also undermine the bargaining leverage of US allies. Allies find it difficult to resist US demands, and they are sometimes compelled to accommodate its strategic interests.

At the same time, the US has no incentive or need to establish dominant control over its Asian allies in a manner similar to the Soviet Union and its satellite states. Weaker American allies have room to pursue their foreign policy objectives, but such autonomy does decrease as the US requires more help from them to cope with regional security challenges. As China's military power and foreign policy influence increases, US allies are finding it increasingly difficult to remain neutral or exercise hedging

policies in a climate of US–China competition, and this is particularly pronounced in regional security issues.

Bargaining Power, Burden-Sharing, and Bilateral Alliances

States form security pacts as they face security challenges. They make careful evaluations of the value of alliances and the reliability of potential allies before forming a security alliance (Crescenzi, Kathman, Kleinberg, & Wood, 2012; Walt, 1987; Weitsman, 2004). Alliances are designed to create stability but sometimes impact the balance of power (Waltz, 1979).¹ They deter external rivals from launching attacks and restrain allies from taking risky moves. However, relations between alliance members are not always harmonious. Alliance members constantly worry about entrapment and abandonment (Snyder, 1997). They do not always have consistent perceptions of external threats; neither do they always agree on each other's foreign policies. Due to fear of entrapment, states often pay close attention to their allies' foreign policy moves and intervene when they believe these will violate their interests. States therefore set up institutions before and after alliance formation to prevent betrayal and opportunistic behavior (Leeds & Mattes, 2007; Narang & LeVeck, 2019). Such intervention includes efforts to assist the ally in achieving its foreign policy goals or to prevent the risky provocation of an ally (Benson, Bentley, & Ray, 2013; Kim, 2011).²

Members of an alliance therefore constantly manage their alliance relationships, which helps facilitate the cooperation established by the treaty. Alliance management aims to coordinate the divergent security interests of members, define and clarify treaty obligations, and facilitate substantive defense cooperation. The process of coordination is essentially bargaining between allies (Snyder, 1997, Chap. 6). Stronger members or primary security providers usually enjoy greater bargaining power. Minor states, on the other hand, tend to make more concessions on their autonomy in exchange for security (Morrow, 1991). In general, minor allies rely on the stronger ones for their security. This gives stronger allies an opportunity to create alliance

¹The security alliances discussed in this article are treaty alliances with military obligations, namely offensive and defensive alliances. Treaties that denote neutrality or military consultation rarely require constant cooperation during peacetime. These alliances are beyond the scope of this paper. However, if a multilateral mechanism were to emerge in Asia, it would be likely to start with a formalized consultation mechanism. The Quad represents such a mechanism. The main question of the paper, therefore, is whether such mechanism will deepen or expand.

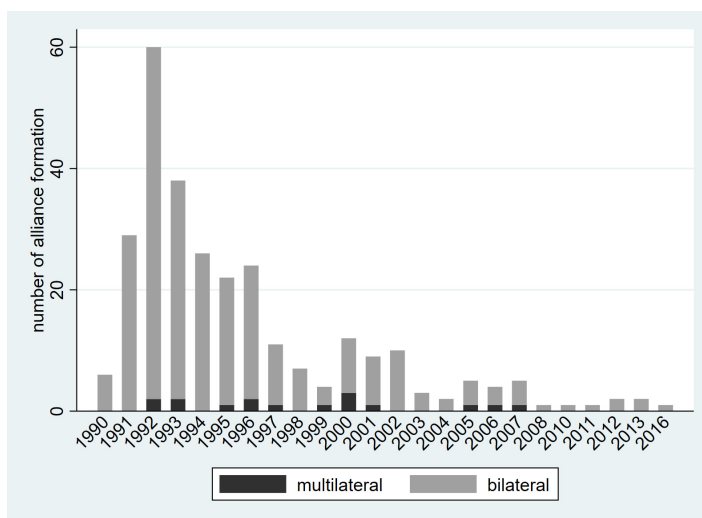
²Institutional design is a common method to manage intra-alliance disagreement, see Leeds (2003) and Morrow (2016).

relationships that are more accommodating to their interests. They can push institutional designs they deem appropriate (Mattes, 2012). They can also compel minor allies with the threat of a change to the nature of their cooperation, including the suspension of alliance obligations (Haftendorn, Koehane, & Wallander, 1999, Chap. 4).

Like any international cooperation, alliance cooperation is plagued with information problems and distributional concerns (Morrow, 1994b). Members of an alliance may disagree over forms of cooperation, and they may have different opinions about the security gains offered by the alliance. They tend to maximize security returns by offering the least resources they can spare. Since an alliance provides club goods shared by all members, free riding is a common concern that might jeopardize an alliance relationship. Stronger allies usually have little choice but to bear a disproportionate burden in an alliance because minor allies have a smaller marginal impact on joint security gains (Morrow, 1994b; Olson & Zeckhauser, 1966). This is especially true in a more institutionalized alliance (Morrow, 1994a). To avoid free riders, stronger allies usually force weaker members to contribute or follow foreign policy directions preferred by the stronger allies. Stronger allies punish disobedient ones by ceasing cooperation or by following a tit-for-tat strategy (Sandler & Hartley, 2001). Therefore, even though the burden-sharing is unlikely to be fair to the stronger allies, they are more likely to fulfill their foreign policy goals through their influence on the minor allies.

The bargaining power of a stronger member is more salient in a bilateral alliance than in a multilateral one. First of all, the number of players affects the efficiency of intra-alliance bargaining. Institutional theory posits that a large number of actors can impede international cooperation. A larger number of members increases the incentive to free-ride, resulting in an insufficient provision of collective efforts (Olson, 1971). As multilateral cooperation involves more divergent interests, it becomes more difficult to negotiate a cooperation arrangement that has been jointly agreed upon, and a group pays more transaction costs as the number of members increases. Great power support is usually key for successful multilateral cooperation because it can sustain cooperation as the great power pays extra costs (Krasner, 1983; Martin, 1992). Therefore, Oye (1985) argues that reducing the number of players produces more robust cooperation. Due to the high cost of alliance formation, multilateral alliances are relatively more difficult to form than bilateral ones. Among the 745 treaty alliances registered in the Alliance Treaty Obligations and Provisions project (ATOP 4.0), only 107 of them are multilateral (14%).

A survey of post-Cold War alliance formation also shows this trend. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the newly independent Soviet Republics and Eastern



Source: Data compiled by the author, based on ATOP 4.0 (Leeds *et al.*, 2002).

Fig. 1. The numbers of alliances formed since 1990.

European communist states re-established their alliance ties. Instead of building multilateral alliances to accommodate their security interests in post-Soviet Europe, these states formed a large number of bilateral alliances in the early 1990s. Figure 1 shows about 95% of new alliance formations after 1990 were bilateral. To be clear, this number does not provide evidence of bargaining power within an alliance, neither does it prove that stronger powers prefer bilateral alliances. It does however indicate that bilateral alliances are easier to establish. States are inclined to create bilateral alliances because multilateral ones are harder to negotiate and harder to manage.

Building multilateral alliances can have several benefits. A multilateral alliance can facilitate the exchange of information, reduce transaction costs, and generate focal points for security cooperation. The multilateral setup in general helps to organize an effective deterrent signal against external threats. However, a multilateral scenario does not necessarily help to manage internal differences between allies. Alliance management in a multilateral alliance is essentially about commencing several bilateral negotiations at the same time in which the response of each member affects the bargaining strategy of the others. If a distributional problem occurs (financial contributions to the alliance, for example), it is likely to be more complicated and more difficult to resolve in a multilateral alliance than a bilateral one. The greater the number of allies in an alliance, the more divergent their interests are. Allies are usually compelled to spend more time and effort to settle their cooperation.

More importantly, multilateral negotiations allow members to resist demands from other members. This often occurs when the security providers in the alliance who usually are the stronger members have divergent interests from other minor members. Consider a simple scenario where one ally is much stronger than the others and acts as the main security provider in a multilateral alliance. Other minor members offer their military capabilities, raw materials, and key transportation sites to the alliance. When the stronger member requires minor members to perform certain tasks to advance common security interests, some minor members may argue for alternatives.³ Their disagreements are based on common reasons that may occur in any alliance: They may disagree with what the common defensive interests are, believe the distribution of responsibilities is unfair, wish to free-ride while others contribute, or feel concerned that the stronger member will make more demands in the future. In a bilateral setting, it usually comes down to who has more bargaining leverage over the other. The available bargaining leverage in a multilateral setup makes intra-alliance bargaining more complicated.

Since there are more members in a multilateral alliance, minor allies tend to compare their burdens with one another. They are likely to use the terms given to other minor allies as leverage during their bargaining with the stronger ally. They may argue that they bear unequal responsibilities or that other allies are more fitted for such responsibilities. They can also delay their efforts, arguing that it is due to coordination problems with other allies.

Another problem is that a coalition of resistance may emerge within a multilateral alliance. This can be either a coordinated or uncoordinated effort. Minilateral cooperation is an example of the former. An alignment with some members within a larger organization reduces transaction costs and minimizes the divergent opinions within that small group (Kahler, 1992; Snidal, 1985). At the same time, it also provides an opportunity for members to coordinate a common position during negotiations. Depending on the institutional design, a group of minor members may have better bargaining leverage in multilateral settings. The Group of 77, for example, successfully pushed for their economic development agenda in the United Nations. In security alliances, minor members may coordinate their bargaining strategies against

³Minor members do not necessarily resist the stronger member's request. If all members agree with the stronger power, there will be no intra-alliance bargaining and members can easily cooperate. There is no difference between multilateral and bilateral alliances in this case. However, when one or more minor members disagree with the stronger ally, they will bargain with each other.

the stronger ally.⁴ A coalition of minor allies can engage in collective bargaining with the stronger members. As a group, they will enjoy better bargaining leverage than when responding to the stronger ally alone, as they have more opportunities to make issue-linkages based on their various security interests.

An uncoordinated response is an unintended consequence of minor members. A minor member may choose not to cooperate with the stronger ally, and its resistance prompts other minor allies to follow. A minor member may claim that it will cooperate only if another member agrees to. It may also withhold its contribution when it observes that other members do not cooperate. Although each member makes its own decision, these decisions are implicitly linked to form a joint response. The stronger member finds it more difficult to negotiate with such a coalition because a common position is lacking among minor allies. The strong member may have to tailor its demands to each minor member and persuade them individually.

Whether or not their responses are coordinated, minor members can form a coalition against the stronger ally that makes it difficult for the ally to punish minor allies. Sanctioning an uncooperative minor member may cause a collective response from other members. Sometimes sanctions only push minor members to cooperate more closely because they are aware that they cannot resist the stronger member separately. The resistance of minor members may paralyze the alliance and force stronger members to concede. The problem is more acute in multilateral alliance because minor members have an opportunity to form such coalitions. In bilateral alliances, the minor ally already has poorer bargaining leverage due to its weaker capabilities. It also lacks the opportunity to link its security benefits with a third country. Even if a minor ally controls strategically important territories or resources, its policy autonomy concerning the sharing of these assets can be hampered by its dependence on the stronger ally.

NATO's burden-sharing dispute provides an example. Minor members resisted a dominant ally by delaying their actions, and the dominant ally could not effectively compel the minor members. Burden-sharing has always been a struggle between Atlantic allies and has dominated NATO's agenda in recent years. At the 2017 NATO

⁴It is true that some members may form another alliance to advance their own security interests. This is rarely a negotiation tactic to compel or threaten the stronger power in the existing alliance but rather a careful decision to fulfill their security needs. A new alliance does not necessarily compete with the existing one. If there is competition, the newer alliance usually better represents the updated security interests of the members, and the function of the existing alliance is likely to be replaced by the newer one. For example, the Western Union was established to deter German aggression immediately after WWII. Its function was soon replaced by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which provided much better security for its members. For how bilateral cooperation can enhance multilateral cooperation, see [Verdier \(2008\)](#).

summit, President Trump publicly urged NATO members to increase their defense expenditures by 2% of their gross domestic product (GDP), setting a guideline for the individual responsibility of members for defense investment. He warned NATO allies rather bluntly: “This is not fair to the people and taxpayers of the United States.”⁵ Yet, after several rounds of minister and leader meetings, only six European allies met the 2% threshold in 2019, including Britain.⁶ As Figure 2 shows, the sharpest increase of defense expenditures occurred among Baltic and former communist countries, who faced threats from Russia due to their geographic proximity. Similarly, three countries hit the target because they already had laws requiring their respective governments to spend at least 2% of GDP on defense.⁷ Major NATO powers such as France and Germany, however, barely increased their defense expenditure. This example shows that the stronger member does not always get what it wants. The United States enjoys a dominant role in NATO due to its being the primary security provider, its bargaining power should be the strongest among the allies, and the Trump administration has repeatedly made clear and coercive demands in public. Yet, in spite of these factors, the US was still unable to compel major NATO allies to reach this threshold.

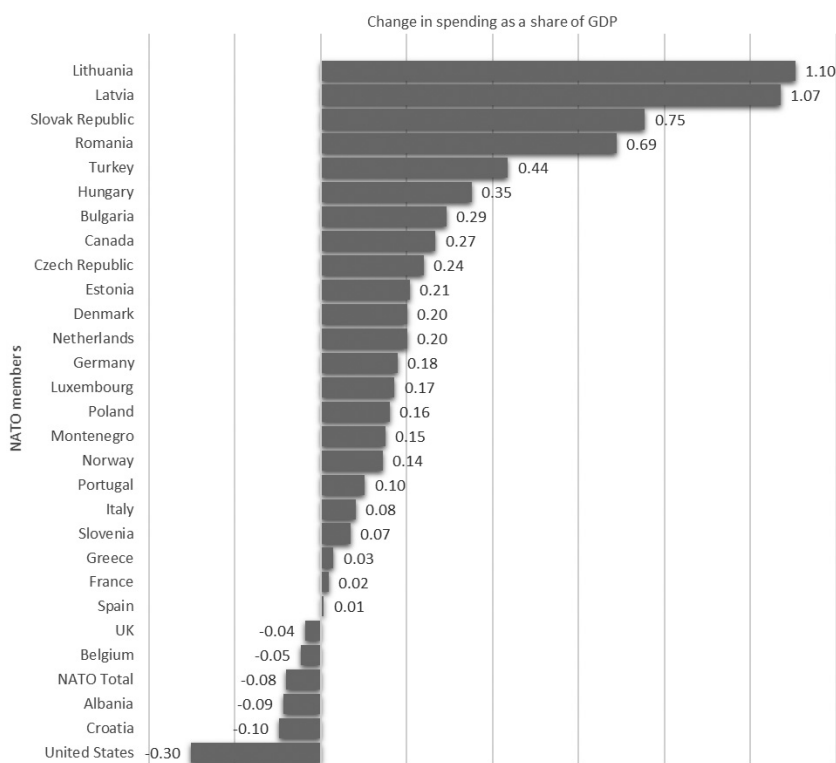
Despite Trump’s strong words to pressure his NATO allies, they still chose to delay their actions or simply ignore American demands. Figure 3 shows estimated number of 2019 defense spending of NATO members. Germany, for example, significantly increased its defense expenses in 2019 by 11%, but it still fell behind the 2% target (1.36%). The US warned Germany that it would relocate American troops to Poland if Germany would not increase its defense spending. Instead, the German government insisted on cutting spending for the following years (Bennhold, 2019; Kitschbaum, 2019). The German government later formally pledged to reach the 2% goal by 2031, which is still far behind the 2024 deadline set by NATO allies (Emmott, 2019). Similarly, the French Minister of the Armed Forces said that European countries would make autonomous decisions on increasing their burden share. This echoed French President Macron’s earlier proposal which urged European countries to establish a more autonomous security institution (Macron, 2019; Noack & McAuley, 2018). To be sure, NATO’s European members did not collaborate on this matter. Germany and France did not join hands; neither did they call upon other NATO European allies to join in a boycott. They simply shared the position that the 2%

⁵See the remarks by President Trump at NATO (The White House, 2017). The 2% guideline was proposed in 2006 and reaffirmed in 2014.

⁶Lithuania’s defense expenditure was very close to 2%. By another standard of calculation, Lithuania spent more than 2% of its GDP.

⁷These countries are Romania, Poland, and Latvia.

Spending Shifts of NATO members 2014-2019



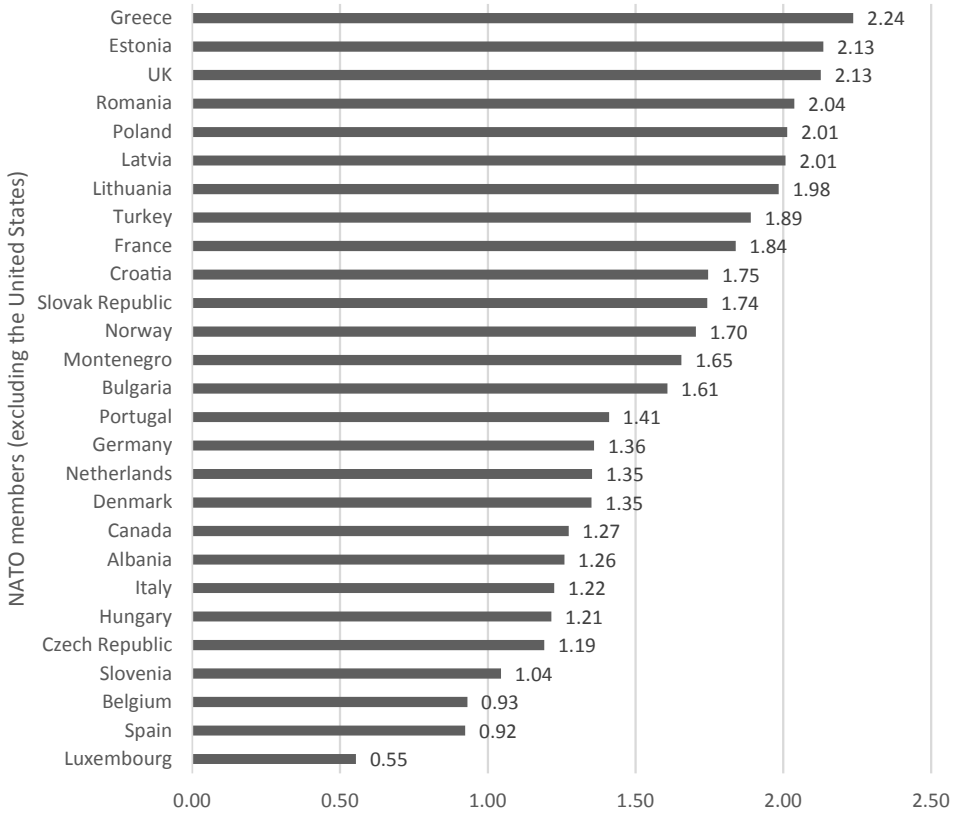
Note: The numbers for 2018 and 2019 are estimated by NATO.

Source: NATO (2019).

Fig. 2. Defense spending shifts of NATO members from 2014 to 2019.

goal was an unreasonable demand and expressed their objections publicly. This uncoordinated resistance proved to be effective when a majority of NATO members failed to provide plans to increase their defense budgets, and have so far suffered no consequences.

The resistance of NATO members presented a dilemma for the US. If the US sanctions NATO allies who do not meet the threshold, all alliance members will suffer the consequences of low cohesion in the alliance. It might also paralyze alliance cooperation and send a weaker deterrence signal to Russia. The countries who directly face Russian aggression would be concerned about discord among major NATO members and might request the US to settle its differences with non-compliant members. In other words, the US could not effectively punish free-riding behavior without harming the interests of other well-behaved members. While the US would



Source: NATO (2019).

Note: The numbers for 2018 and 2019 are estimated by NATO.

Fig. 3. The 2019 NATO members' defense spending as a share of GDP.

certainly not expel these members for failing to reach the 2% threshold, such discord would still hurt the alliance. The US lacks the leverage to coerce these states, especially when they do not feel an imminent security threat as other members do. On the other hand, when the US rewards Baltic and Eastern European allies by bolstering their defenses, all other members benefit from a more robust deterrence against Russia, and non-compliant NATO members still enjoy a more secure Eastern border. This example shows how hard it can be for a strong or even dominant ally to force others to act. Allies can ignore pressure from the dominant power because it is difficult to punish multiple allies who refuse to cooperate.

A stronger ally can employ stringent controls in a multilateral alliance. If this ally is deeply concerned that minor allies might abandon the alliance, its desire to control the minor allies may lead it to create a hierarchical alliance. The satellite states of the

Soviet Union, for example, were tightly subjected to Moscow's informal empire. The same principle applied to US dominance in the Caribbean Sea (Lake, 1996). Hierarchical alliance relations leave very little policy autonomy for minor allies and give them no leverage to advance their own interests. The dominant ally expends significant resources to ensure the allegiance of its protégés. Soviet military intervention in Hungary and Czechoslovakia demonstrated how costly this alliance management method can be. If a stronger ally is determined to pay such costs to dominate its ally, there is little room for intra-alliance bargaining and therefore no significant difference between bilateral and multilateral alliances.

Nevertheless, alliance relations in the post-Cold War era have been much less hierarchical. Alliance members constantly adjust their military cooperation and renegotiate burden-sharing arrangements. The rise of the number of defense cooperation agreements since 1990 shows that alliance members often negotiate their security relations. These agreements deal with military exercises, arms sales, logistical support, defense technology transfers, and intelligence sharing (Kinne, 2018). This trend suggests that intra-alliance bargaining has been much more frequent. Disagreements, persuasion, and inducement have become common in alliance relations. Material capability remains a key indicator of a member's bargaining power. Minor allies who do not make fundamental contributions are subjected to pressure from the stronger ally. Their policy autonomy is constrained, and their security policies usually need to accommodate the strategic interests of the stronger member.

In sum, allies each have their own interests and attempt to convince their members to accommodate them. Sometimes they coerce allies in order to achieve their foreign policy goals. The stronger ally is likely to enjoy a bargaining advantage in intra-alliance bargaining. As they usually take on a greater share of the defense burden, the security they offer becomes their bargaining leverage. Therefore, they are able to interfere with the foreign policies of minor allies. However, this advantage is not as salient in a multilateral alliance as in a bilateral one. A stronger ally suffers several disadvantages within a multilateral institution: divergent interests make it difficult to accommodate every member. Minor allies can also unite to increase their bargaining power. In bilateral bargaining, the stronger ally finds it easier to exert influence over the minor ally, even though the stronger ally must bear a greater burden. The stronger ally thus has few incentives to form a multilateral alliance or combine several bilateral alliances into a multilateral one. Furthermore, the stronger ally will prevent any coalition between minor allies under multilateral cooperation because such a coalition may harm its bargaining power. It will also obstruct coordination between minor allies in different bilateral alliances.

The Iron Spokes

How do these theoretical propositions apply to the alliances of the United States in Asia? While these bilateral alliances were established in the wake of World War II when the US aimed at deterring the communist threat, their function has changed since the end of the Cold War. The US uses the system to coordinate the actions of its Asian allies while maintaining its influence over each. Keeping the cooperation bilateral strengthens the bargaining leverage of the United States when it makes demands on allies. As the diverging security interests of America's Asian allies also give it an advantage, the US provides different cooperation arrangements to cope with their differing security concerns. It therefore makes different demands on each ally and asks for different contributions in return.

There is no doubt that the US has enjoyed a bargaining advantage in East Asia, and alliance relations have been quite close. However, there are two recent developments in the region that have altered the relations between the US and its allies. First, the US has felt an increasing security challenge from China. US–China competition in the South China Sea is among the most serious disputes faced by either side, and all US allies are affected. North Korea represents another threat that is leading the US to strengthen defense strategies with its allies. Second, as Trump carried out his “America First policy,” the US took initiatives to request significantly more contributions from its Asian allies. These developments created more opportunities for joint operations while also creating more incidents of intra-alliance bargaining.

It should be noted that the US always plays a key role in East Asia. It has a significant impact over regional economic development, political stability, and security. However, a series of new developments in Asia prompted Washington to review its Asia policy, and it subsequently decided to divert more resources to Asia. The catalyst of this heightened security concern began when China made military provocations around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and its later expansion in the South China Sea. To cope with these security issues, the Obama administration proposed a “Pivot to Asia” that has been widely referred to as a “rebalancing” strategy. Under rebalancing, the US devoted more diplomatic effort and resources to the Asia-Pacific region (Lieberthal, 2011).⁸ In the security realm, it reinforced and strengthened its military cooperation through its hub-and-spoke alliances. The US redeployed military assets in

⁸Obama's rebalancing or “Pivot to Asia” is a comprehensive engagement strategy. In addition to security, pushing economic relations, joining disaster relief, and establishing people-to-people contacts were all part of Obama's rebalancing. For the details of its rebalancing strategy, see Manyin et al. (2012) and Tow and Stuart (2014).

Asia that included both land and naval forces in the Pacific. US forces regularly held joint military exercises with its allies. US naval activities in the South China Sea became more active as China toughened its claims in the area. The US also reached out to non-allies, building closer security and economic relations with the Philippines, Vietnam, and India. As a whole, the rebalancing strategy did not seek to resolve imminent security threats but to prepare for challenges that might arise in the future.

The use of multilateral institutions in fact played a key part in Obama's rebalancing. The US accelerated negotiations for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement, strengthened relations with Southeast Asian countries via the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), participated in the East Asia Summit (EAS), and supported dialogues and military exercises coordinated by the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus).⁹ The US gave full support to multilateral diplomacy and sought critical influence in those forums. Although the Obama administration embraced the multilateral mechanism to boost cooperation between allies and non-allies, the rebalancing relied on the existing bilateral alliances when it came to regional security. An overview of Obama's security policies toward allies in Asia shows that the US engaged with each to strengthen its military presence. For instance, it continued to discuss the relocation of the Futenma airbase with Japan. It carried on negotiations with the South Korean government to move American troops to a new base in Pyeongtaek.¹⁰ In 2014, the US signed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) with the Philippines, granting it access to military bases.

These efforts either sustained or expanded America's presence in Asia while remaining strictly bilateral. The Obama administration partnered with specific allies to face each regional security challenge: The US joined hands with South Korea after the sinking of Cheonan and the Yeonpyeong shelling, backed up Japan in a territorial dispute in the East China Sea, and deepened engagement with Vietnam during a dispute with China over the South China Sea. While the US played a major role in each crisis, it did not coordinate multilateral responses to them. It did not propose any multilateral security forum or dialogue between its allies as it had done in advocating the TPP or ARF. In terms of its alliance relationships, the US maintained the hub-and-spoke system while further consolidating its ties with each spoke.

Trump's Asia policy bears a certain resemblance to Obama's rebalancing. The US has continued to increase its presence in the region through military training,

⁹ADMM-Plus is a multilateral security dialogue established under ASEAN. It has hosted several multilateral maritime operations between the Asian countries. The US took an active role in ADMM-Plus. The author thanks the reviewers for their comment on this important development.

¹⁰The new headquarters of the United States Forces Korea at Camp Humphreys opened on June 29, 2018.

exercises, arms sales, and forces stationed in ally territories. Meanwhile, it established dialogues with non-allies such as Vietnam and India. The US has criticized China's fortification efforts in the South China Sea and challenged its territorial claims through naval operations. However, Trump's withdrawal from the TPP shows that he has downplayed the role of multilateral forums that Obama valued. Trump prefers to project American military strength and foreign policy influence by engaging with East Asian countries separately.

While US allies in East Asia have played a significant role in this process, the Trump administration has sometimes adopted unilateral measures. For instance, the change from "U.S. Pacific Command" to "U.S. Indo-Pacific Command" showed the country's intention to include South Asia in its strategic thinking. It opens the possibility of including partners in the Indian Ocean, though its allies were not consulted on this matter. Nor did they know how this might change American military activities in the Indo-Pacific region. Under the FOIPS, the US alliance management policies experienced a shift to echo Trump's catchphrase of "America First." The hub-and-spoke system has served as a portal for the US to accomplish its strategic goals. The US has asked its allies to host its forces, enhancing its ability to intervene in regional security issues. The US asked its Asian allies to contribute to joint operations and demanded that allies share a significant amount of the financial burden of maintaining a US military presence. It has also not been shy about expressing discontent toward free riders, demanding returns that consolidate American interests. The following discussion briefly shows how the US puts pressure on its three main allies of South Korea, Japan, and Australia.¹¹

The US–ROK Alliance

The US demands have usually centered on burden-sharing and countering China in the South China Sea, and South Korea has experienced both pressures from Washington. Under Trump's urging that South Korea should bear more of the expense

¹¹The Philippines is not included despite the fact that it is a treaty ally. The US–Philippines alliance is different from others, and its importance in the hub-and-spoke system is declining. The US has not relied on the Philippines to project military power since the closure of Subic Bay. The military relations maintained during the War on Terror and the 2014 EDCA authorized the US to access military bases. However, their defense cooperation was narrow and often issue-specific. US forces are no longer stationed in the Philippines. In recent years, alliance relations have suffered from the deterioration of relations between the Philippine President Duterte and the US government. Duterte recently terminated the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), which set the legal basis for the US to participate in joint military exercises in the Philippines. The Philippines therefore does not have the same importance as the allies discussed in this paper.

for American troops stationed on the Peninsula, the US and South Korea began strenuous negotiations in March 2018. After 10 rounds of failed negotiations, only a provisional arrangement could be reached, requiring that South Korea be responsible for half of the total cost (Choe, 2019). The US also asked South Korea to share the cost of deploying strategic assets such as aircraft carriers, submarines, and bombers, which the South Korean government firmly rejected (“S. Korea Rejects,” 2018). The US asked South Korea to pay for the deployment of the THAAD system (Macias, 2018), and it is still unclear whether it has paid off the expense.

The US has sought to involve South Korea in defense responsibilities outside the Korean Peninsula and repeatedly asked that it become involved in the South China Sea. Trump’s former defense secretary, James Mattis, publicly called on allies to “join[ing] hands together” against China’s militarization in the South China Sea (Axelrod, 2018). The South Korean government under the progressive President Moon Jae-in was reluctant to answer such a request (Panda, 2019). Facing a direct threat from the North, the South Korean forces have rarely joined military operations outside Northeast Asia, but its navy joined the US-led Pacific Vanguard Exercise along with Japan and Australia in 2019. This was the first joint navy exercise near Guam involving all allied forces. Despite strained relations between South Korea and Japan, South Korea joined the drill after a US request (“S. Korea, Japan,” 2019). The exercise aimed to improve the interoperability of allied forces in the Indo-Pacific region rather than deterring North Korea.

Although there is no clear evidence that the US requested South Korea to take part in its Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), the South Korean navy has shown support for its efforts in the South China Sea. Claiming to be dodging a typhoon in September 2018, a South Korean anti-piracy warship sailed within 12 nmi of a land feature occupied by China (Page & Jeong, 2018). China issued a protest and South Korea made no comment on its passage. The US issued a statement signaling its full support for South Korea’s right to freedom of navigation. In July 2019, President Moon publicly endorsed Trump’s Indo-Pacific strategy (Jung, 2019). Although the Blue House did not confirm, it is assumed that Moon might have made this decision under the US pressure (Lee, 2019). The shift of South Korea’s support to operations in the South China Sea and endorsement of FOIPS suggests that US demands were effective, and South Korea has echoed American strategic interests despite its initial reluctance.

The US–Japan Alliance

As the United States’ ironclad ally and home for its forward bases in Asia, the US–Japan alliance plays a crucial role in US power projection there.

Unlike South Korea, the Abe government has been more willing to comply with American requests. Japan has been wary of the rise of China due to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute. China's move to cut the supply of rare-earth minerals in 2010 made Japan concerned about the country's use of economic statecraft (Inoue, 2010).¹² Countering China's territorial claims in the South China Sea may also help Japan in its own territorial dispute with China. Similarly, joint military operations with the US have helped Abe to achieve his political agenda. Since his inauguration, Abe has been striving toward the normalization of Japanese forces through a revision of the country's constitution. Changes to Japan's security laws in 2015 allowed the SDF to participate in overseas missions. Abe needed American support to counter criticism of Japan's remilitarization from its neighbors as well as from opposition parties. The JMSDF subsequently began regular overseas operations after the security law revisions.

Japan has been a regular participant in joint military exercises with the US, and two developments have been notable in recent years. The first is Japan's presence in joint exercises with America's partners. Japanese personnel have participated in the biannual Talisman Sabre exercise involving the US and Australia since 2019. Its newly established marine unit performed an amphibious landing during the first exercise (Gady, 2019). Japan also partnered with India to conduct military exercises in the Indian Ocean. Since 2015, Japan has become a regular participant in the US–India Malabar naval exercise. Since 2013, India and Japan have conducted the bilateral exercise JIMEX, though India is not Japan's only military exercise partner in South Asia. The Japanese Izumo-class helicopter carrier recently conducted an exercise with the British Royal Navy in the Indian Ocean (Kelly, 2018).

The other development is Japan's presence in the South China Sea. Although it did not join the United States in FONOPs, the country's military cooperation with Southeast Asian countries has nevertheless become more frequent (Bao, 2016; "Japan Supports," 2017).¹³ Japan conducted various naval exercises with the US in the South China Sea and the Philippine Sea (The U.S. Navy, 2019). A Japanese submarine participated in one of the exercises, signaling an unprecedented projection of power since the end of the Second World War. Japan's Izumo-class carriers have regularly sailed to the South China Sea to participate in naval drills with the US, Australia, and India. They have also made port calls at claimant countries in the South China Sea.

¹²China did not ban rare-earth exports to Japan but stalled shipments by bureaucratic procedures. The volume of trade was not impacted by this brief halt, but this action certainly alerted Japan.

¹³Since 2016, Japan has declared that it would not join FONOPs. The Japanese government has not changed this position.

In 2019, Japan sent its JS Izumo helicopter carriers (Johnson, 2019) to participate in an exercise with the US, India, and the Philippines. This was the most significant show of force in the South China Sea in recent years. Japan also explored relations with non-allies in the South China Sea. Abe promised to supply patrol boats to Vietnam during his visit in 2017 (Nguyen & Pham, 2017).

Japan procured F-35 stealth fighters and confirmed more purchases of the F-35B in 2019.¹⁴ The purchases were clearly a response to Trump's criticisms of Japan's free-riding behavior. Trump allegedly mused about ending the US–Japan alliance because the relationship was unfair to the US (Jacobs, 2019), and the Abe administration seemed to heed this latent threat. It took a swift action to improve its share of the burden, something that allies in Europe had failed to do. In addition to the overseas operations mentioned above, Japan significantly boosted its defense expense by 1.2% (Kelly, 2019).¹⁵

The US–Australia Alliance

Like Japan, Australia has increased cooperation with the US in order to defend its security interests in the region. Since 2016, the US has requested that Australia join its Freedom of Navigation Operations (Johnson, 2018; Joshi & Graham, 2018). Australia has demurred while still following a policy of protecting its right to freedom of navigation. Since 2016, Australia has been concerned about China's military activities in the South China Sea and has adjusted its defense strategy to cope with this security challenge (Schreer, 2016). The Royal Australian Navy (RAN) often sails through the South China Sea, though it does not cross the 12 nmi line as the US does. More recently, RAN operations have been clearly intended to deter China's military activities in this region. In 2018, three RAN vessels transited through an area in the South China Sea where the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) conducted its largest naval exercise. The Australian vessels received warnings from PLAN, but Chinese vessels did not interrupt their transit (Wen & Paul, 2018). Australia also deepened its strategic partnership with India based on the 2009 Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation. Under this agreement,

¹⁴The F-35B purchase is important because it is a short take-off and vertical landing (STOVL) aircraft. Japan will be able to land F-35Bs on the Izumo-class carrier. With the purchase of 105 F-35A and 42 F-35B models, Japan will establish the largest F-35 squadron outside the US. The country recently expressed an interest in becoming an "official partner" for the F-35 program. The Pentagon rejected Japan's request. See "Japan Formally" (2019), Mehta (2018), and Mehta, Insinna, and Yeo (2019).

¹⁵Note that the surge was largely due to the F-35 purchase.

Australia conducted biannual naval exercises (AUSINDEX) with India since 2015 (“India-Australia Joint,” 2019).

Australia has been willing to support American military operations in the region, but it has refused to join direct confrontations against China. Nevertheless, the country’s alliance ties with the US have drawn China’s attention. In 2019, a Chinese warship tailed RAN vessels during their transit through the South China Sea (Martin, 2019). Australia’s concerns over the rise of Chinese power have made it more willing to facilitate a US military presence in the South Pacific. For instance, Australia has planned a new deep-water port to host more US marines. If completed, this new port is likely to significantly increase the US military presence in the South Pacific when compared to the current US marine rotation in Port Darwin (Greene, 2019).

Do Personal Traits Explain the US Alliance Management in Asia?

The three allies significantly increased defense cooperation with the US at the request of Washington, but frictions over burden-sharing have also arisen. As the US increases its demands on allies, allies have sometimes resisted or tabled the issues. It is often believed that the policies of President Trump were the fundamental cause of friction with Asian allies. It is also argued that a different president would not create such tensions. It is true that Trump and his advisors have not been shy about asking allies to shoulder more responsibility. Trump often laments in public that military deployments in Japan and Korea cost too much, and his advisors shared these views. It was reported that the former National Security Advisor John Bolton asked allies to increase their share fivefold when he visited Asia (Jo, 2019).

However, disagreements with allies may still occur even if Trump had not taken a more coercive position regarding burden-sharing. To be fair, the Trump administration faces a more stringent geopolitical challenge than its predecessors. The rise of China both militarily and economically has alarmed Washington as well as its Asian allies. The heightened North Korean threat and South China Sea disputes require the US to mobilize its allies and build closer defense relations. Such cooperation would require Asian allies to take a greater role in regional defense. The costs of cooperation increase as joint operations become more frequent. The US would have asked allies to bolster their defense capabilities, which would imply greater financial commitments. Although a different president would not focus on the financial contributions of allies as Trump did, the US would still require the allies to make more substantive defense contributions.

Regardless, the alliance relations discussed above show that the US was more capable of pressuring its Asian allies than pushing its European ones.¹⁶ The US was not able to push some European allies to contribute as it wished, but it was able to push all three allies to publicly express their support for its position in the South China Sea disputes. The US was also more successful in asking for financial contributions from its Asian allies. It enjoyed better bargaining leverage in each bilateral alliance relationship. Each Asian ally has its specific security needs, and while the US has largely met them, it has also asked allies to accommodate American interests. Even if an ally is dissatisfied with US security provisions such as in the case of South Korea, it cannot simply ignore the country's requests. Korea and Japan both have an interest in pushing the US to counter the threat of North Korea, but they were unable to effectively compel the US on this matter because the US would not discuss with them in a multilateral setup. The US managed the two alliances separately and gave these allies different security guarantees. Both allies made contributions and gave policy support to the US. The US provided specific defense solutions with each of them while accomplishing its strategic goals in the process. Meanwhile, both countries must struggle with greater demands from the Trump administration.

US Oversight of Inter-Spoke Activities

Although the Asian allies of the United States have become more connected in recent years, they do not have the autonomy to choose what they can work on or with whom they can work with. Upon examination, minilateral cooperation between America's allies and partners has entirely been under the close oversight of the US. For example, the engagement between India and its allies in Asia was the result of US coordination. The US declared India a "major defense partner" in 2016 (Gould, 2016). The country has not only deepened cooperation with India in every aspect, but also has encouraged its allies to increase the defense cooperation with India as part of the FOIPS. As a result, the US introduced India to its allies and has pushed for inter-alliance cooperation. India has increased military drills and expanded economic exchanges with America's allies. South Korea's "New Southern Policy" corresponded to a call of the United States for cross-Indo-Pacific cooperation.

¹⁶European allies are in general more capable of resisting the requests of the US than its Asian allies. France and Germany are rich countries with strong armed forces. In addition, Western European countries do not directly face threats from Russia. As mentioned in the previous section, the Baltic and East European countries are more willing to follow the demands of the United States since they face a threat from Russia.

America's allies have responded to US demands to safeguard common security interests in the Indo-Pacific. As mentioned above, Japan has played a more active role in the Indo-Pacific, connecting all US allies and partners with military exercises and arms procurements. To be sure, Japan had already engaged with other regional middle powers such as Australia and India. Its vigorous engagement showed its anxiety about China's rise. When the Trump administration increased the US military presence in Asia, Japan faithfully followed the US to the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. The helicopter carrier JS Izumo has regularly sailed through the South China Sea, making port calls at America's allies and partners. The JMSDF vessels participated in joint exercises held by the US in Southeast Asia. Close cooperation between Japan and the US suggests that the US has played a leading role in Japan's overseas maritime operations.

To be clear, Japan has an incentive to send its navy vessels overseas in order to secure more security partners in its competition with China. However, JMSDF joint operations with the US, Australia, India, and the Philippines were a coordinated effort of the US, and the exercises accommodated US security needs. These operations took place in the Sea of Japan, the East China Sea, the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, and near Guam. Essentially, JMSDF sailed into places where it did not have vital interests. Japan increased its security relations with Australia and India because it was willing to accommodate American strategic interests. The operations contributed less to Japan's core security interests, but significantly helped the US strengthen its defense cooperation with regional allies and partners. For example, without the encouragement of the United States, Japan would not have been interested in selling patrol boats to Vietnam or in holding exercises with the Philippine Navy. Japan's assistance to US partners and joint naval exercises with India helped the US challenge China in the South China Sea, showing its resolve to secure freedom of navigation there. Although the US was not directly involved, Japan's assistance helped it to strengthen its relations with non-allies in the dispute.

Japan was not the only ally who expanded partnerships with non-allies under US encouragement. Australia also stepped up its exchanges with both allies and non-allies. In addition to Japan, Australia has sought military cooperation with India. India and Australia have conducted three AUSINDEX, with each exercise larger than the previous. The US has also played a role in these exercises. American and New Zealand military personnel were onboard an Australian vessel to observe the 2019 AUSINDEX (Ministry of Defence, India, 2019a,b). American participation suggests that the US kept a close watch on its allies. It chose to become involved not because it was concerned that allies might collude against it, but to ensure its allies and partners

could operate together, making them capable of assisting its strategic goals in the region.

There are few, if any, spontaneous instances of military cooperation between America's allies, and almost all military cooperation between allies occurs under the oversight of the US. Allies rarely need to approach each other without US encouragement. For instance, although both South Korea and Japan both face a threat from North Korea, they have rarely proposed joint military actions. This lack of incentives is largely due to historical and ongoing territorial disputes. Nevertheless, North Korea has been a genuine threat to both countries, and it would seem prudent that they at least discuss their strategy toward Pyongyang's missile tests. Yet the two governments have had no such joint actions or policies against a common external threat. Indeed, the presence of American forces in Northeast Asia has allowed the two countries to avoid seeking cooperation over North Korea. The US took the responsibility to defend its allies and prepared contingency plans for the event that any allies were attacked. Japan and South Korea chose to consult the US regarding their defense instead of their neighbors, lacking the incentive to discuss joint defense policies unless requested by the United States.

Australia was also encouraged to strengthen relations with other Asian allies and distribute resources to areas that were not among its core interests. While Australia cares about security in the South China Sea and its influence over Pacific Island nations, it did not seek to collaborate with other US allies over these issues. Australia is more interested in partnering with Pacific Island nations to hold sway in the South Pacific. The country has an interest in peace in the South China Sea as it is a vital trade route, but it is not a claimant in any disputes. Its policy has been to encourage dialogue between disputants and to stop the reclamation of the occupied islands while avoiding direct involvement. Australia has little interest in coordinating defense with other US allies and partners to challenge China in the South China Sea.

However, Australia has started cooperation with India and Japan, and its warships have made frequent trips through disputed waters. Without an introduction from the US, Australia would not have been interested in securing the Indian Ocean by participating in AUSINDEX. Without US participation, it would not have attended the Malabar exercise. Without the American advocacy, Australia and Japan might not have as many joint military exercises as they do today. The US plays an important role in all inter-alliance cooperation, consolidating its inter-alliance security network over the past few years. The country's efforts have been very successful, making the best use of its bargaining advantage in each of its bilateral relations.

Multilateral Cooperation Based on the Quad?

If the US has been active in supervising its allies and partners to create a security network in the Indo-Pacific, it is worth discussing whether the US or its Asian allies are interested in building a multilateral security organization. As mentioned earlier, some analysts expect that the Quad can become a multilateral mechanism that specifically focuses on coordinating defense strategies against regional threats. With the United States, its two significant Asian allies, and a regional great power in South Asia, the Quad is composed of four major powers in Asia. Strengthening the organization may be an opportunity for further defensive cooperation that can deter regional security challenges. More importantly, the Quad has set an example of formal cooperation between the US allies and non-ally partners over security affairs. It may incorporate South Korea, Vietnam, or the Philippines in the future. A multilateral mechanism would set up closer communication channels and military interoperability that paves the way for a security alliance. It also helps project US capabilities across the Indo-Pacific region, giving it access to facilities there.

Japan had been a vigorous proponent of the Quad, seeking to build a “democratic security diamond” in Asia (Abe, 2012). It tried to revive the Quad because the Trump administration had not proposed an Asian policy it desired. The US then responded with a positive gesture of support, pledging to coordinate common objectives and initiatives through this security dialogue (Tillerson, 2017). However, its interest in the Quad quickly faded after the 2017 meeting. The Quad was not a key component of Trump’s Asia policy; neither did the administration support its expansion. Demonstrating how the US perceived the Quad, the then United States Secretary of Defense Mattis did not mention the organization in his speech at the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue. When Mattis was interviewed later by International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), he admitted that the Quad was in his original speech but had been cut to reduce its length (Chipman, 2018). As much as Mattis paid attention to the Indo-Pacific, the Quad was not his priority in the US defense strategy.

The US has few incentives to push the development of the Quad, largely because of the already effective alliance management it has imposed on its allies. The US has pushed Japan and Australia to participate in a joint effort against regional threats. Under its guidance, Japan became indirectly involved in the South China Sea, and Australia’s presence in the Indian Ocean has become common. Even South Korea has publicly supported the US position in the South China Sea. To date, the US has strong leverage over its Asian allies who have accommodated its strategic interests by answering its calls. As the US already enjoys the high ground at the hub of its alliance

system, the Quad was only an inconspicuous element of cooperation between America's allies and non-allies and its importance quickly dropped after Washington had formally proposed FOIPS. The US showed more interest in deepening bilateral ties with Asian countries. As the US allies became stable supporters of its policies, the country had no reason to return to the Quad. Instead, the US dedicated itself to building security relations with strategic partners like Vietnam and India. The US encouraged its Asian allies to partner with each other and with its strategic partners, but either bilateral or multilateral, all cooperation was under its oversight.

At the same time, the members of the Quad may be hesitant to form a multilateral organization that targets China. India, for example, has tried to mend its relations with China since the 2017 Doklam standoff, an incident that was the most serious militarized confrontation since the Sino-Indian War. Modi paid a surprise visit to Xi a few months later to warm up bilateral ties (Haidar, 2018), and India remains cautious about partnering with the US allies. It declined Australia's request to join the annual Malabar exercise in 2018, and has been reluctant to portray the Quad as a quasi-security alliance (Grossman, 2019). Japan is another example. The country had advocated the Quad to enhance US–Japan–India and US–Japan–Australia trilateral ties (Tatsumi, 2018). It had particularly wanted to encourage India to get involved in the South China Sea (Jennings, 2017), but this enthusiasm dwindled after the US announced FOIPS. As the US showed less enthusiasm for the Quad, Japan lost interest in expanding it. It also failed to take a leading role in its revival.¹⁷ Japan did not propose another meeting between the four states. Instead, it has focused on strengthening relations with the US, as discussed in the previous section.

Without the leadership of a great power, it is difficult to revitalize the Quad. The minor powers are also hesitant to further institutionalize the Quad. India fears being too antagonistic to China, while Japan and Australia are thus far unwilling to pay the costs of leadership, painting a grim picture for the organization's future. Even if Japan or Australia shows an interest in establishing a multilateral institution, the US is unlikely to show full support. The US does not need a multilateral institution to signal its resolve against Chinese expansion in the East China Sea, Taiwan Strait, or South China Sea when it can convey the same signal via bilateral alliances. Such signals can be even stronger through America's bilateral allies, as the US has been able to force its allies to mobilize resources. A multilateral institution would likely give minor powers more bargaining power over requests for US intervention in the region or make them

¹⁷In addition, India was not invited or consulted when Japan pushed the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). The CPTPP could have been the economic aspect of a multilateral effort led by Japan. Instead, the Quad was absent.

more resistant to contributing. The US does not want to lose its bargaining advantage, preferring to retain the ability to compel its allies to share security burdens in different parts of the Indo-Pacific. As the US has few reasons to organize multilateral cooperation, the current hub-and-spoke system is expected to strengthen and endure.

Conclusion: Tighter Alliances, Less Autonomy

The US and its allies in the Indo-Pacific have been aware of the rise of China and its impact on regional security. Since the Obama administration, the US has recognized the growing challenges in this region, mobilizing its Asian allies and partners in response. US allies have participated in defense cooperation with both the US and non-ally partners at its request. They have frequently engaged in military exercises, military assistance, and consultation with India, Vietnam, and the Philippines. The US has sailed with allies and partners in Northeast Asia, the South China Sea, and the Indian Ocean. Inter-alliance cooperation has increased significantly since 2016.

In light of the increased military cooperation, this paper examines whether multilateral defense cooperation, if not a treaty alliance, can emerge in the Indo-Pacific. The answer is that the US prefers the hub-and-spoke system to a multilateral mechanism. The chance of a more sophisticated multilateral security mechanism in Asia is low, and a NATO-like defense pact is highly unlikely. The argument rests on theories of alliance management and organization politics. The US enjoys a greater bargaining advantage in bilateral relations, and this advantage is particularly salient in Asia since the US is the main security provider. The current hub-and-spoke system in Asia helps the US manage its relationship with each ally, coordinating their defense policies to accommodate American foreign policy interests. President Trump's call for "America First" has caused the US to raise burden-sharing disputes with some allies and resulted in tense relations with them. Due to its significant influence on allies, the US has successfully pushed its Asian allies to invest in financial resources and military assets that accommodate its strategic interests. The allies cannot ignore the demands, nor can they join together to bargain with the US as unified whole. Since the hub-and-spoke system has helped the US fulfill its strategic interests, the US has little incentive to strengthen a multilateral consultation mechanism such as the Quadruple Security Dialogue even if it represents an opportunity to deepen its security partnership with India.

US allies have significantly increased their military relations with the country and with each other. They held joint military exercises, provided support with maritime

security, and coordinated their responses to China's claims in the South China Sea. This, however, does not suggest that they have more autonomy in their military relationships with other allies or non-ally partners. Instead, multilateral cooperation has been under the US supervision. The US has closely tracked joint cooperation between its allies and partners, making sure their cooperation accommodates its interests. For the past few years, US allies have not only faced growing pressure to adjust their bilateral security relations with the country, but also been encouraged to partner with third parties to build a presence in regional hotspots. Increased multilateral cooperation did not erode the hub-and-spoke system, but instead strengthened the US influence over its allies. The US, on the other hand, has strengthened its commitment to allies while directing them to improve military interoperability with strategic partners in the Indo-Pacific region. The US-led alliance system may appear to be a multilateral effort, but the allies have limited autonomy over their defense policies and alignment choices.

The strengthened hub-and-spoke system suggests that the security policies of US allies are constrained. They must accommodate US security interests as they build relations with China, North Korea, and other US strategic partners while showing firm support for the US position in the South China Sea dispute. Although none of the US allies or partners support China's claim in the South China Sea, countries such as South Korea used to be reluctant to get directly involved. As many scholarly works have pointed out, many Asian countries have adopted hedging policies to avoid being ensnared in the US–China competition. They have maintained various degrees of ambiguous positions between the US and China. However, US allies have found it more and more difficult to take a neutral position as the US has become more willing to confront China over both security and economic issues. This is particularly salient in the South China Sea dispute. Recently, South Korea and Australia have publicly pledged their support for the US position in the dispute. This shows that US allies are different from other non-ally partners. Due to alliance obligations and their dependency on US protection, US allies support the country's military strategy and political agenda in public even if they are sometimes reluctant to comply. The autonomy of allies has significantly decreased under the Trump administration, making it more difficult for US allies to carry out a hedging policy.

This does not imply that the autonomy of these allies will always remain so restrained. The current lack of policy autonomy is due to tense US–China relations and American security concerns in the Indo-Pacific. China's behavior in the South China Sea, the South Pacific, and the East China Sea is a key variable affecting the degree of policy autonomy among allies. If the trade dispute between China and the US can be

properly resolved or if China ceases provocations in disputed waters, the US would not require its allies to take as much action to defend their common interests. US allies would be able to pursue hedging policies that seek to maintain relations with both the US and China. On the other hand, the US would continue to enjoy dominance in each alliance dyad while still having no incentive to build a multilateral security institution in East Asia. There would still be no security network, let alone a security alliance. The US will continue to encourage and monitor defense cooperation between allies and partners, and it is expected to prevent any spontaneous efforts of alignment between its allies.

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