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Book Review

LOOKING BEYOND THE 'HUB AND SPOKE MODEL' IN NORTH-EAST ASIA

GAURAV SEN

When the AUKUS came into being, the security experts were surprised by the sudden announcement of this 'Strategic Alliance'.¹ Some raised questions over the exclusion of Japan and India, and others saw it as a perfect example of growing mini-lateralism in the Indo-Pacific. However, AUKUS is a mini-lateral strategic alliance between the USA, UK, and Australia. The *prima facie* objective of the alliance is to work together to build nuclear-propelled submarines for Australia. Although, in a broader context, the alliance is formed to develop dual-use technologies in the Indo-Pacific region.² The rise of China is a threat to countries of the Indo-Pacific region; in a scenario, AUKUS appeared to be the first response from the Indo-Pacific community. Nonetheless, the comprehensive geography of the region and diverse interests demands different types of security

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1. Michael Shoebridge, "What is AUKUS and what is it not?", ASPI, December 2021, at <https://ad-aspi.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/2021-12/What%20is%20AUKUS%20and%20what%20is%20it%20not.pdf?VersionId=uAcnyQeum5lvEdiYxSRW5SubMT2AMIV>. Accessed on July 13, 2022.
2. Ibid.

arrangement. Therefore, a neighbourhood of China would also need a different security arrangement which is absent in the region for so long.

The primary objective of the article is to prescribe a mini-lateral alliance in the region that can enhance the capacities of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, to become an external wheel of balancing against China's military might. The article attempts to analyse the Cold War circumstances when the USA preferred bilateral alliances in East Asia, while at the same time, creating the collective security arrangement (NATO) in Europe. The prime hypotheses of the article propose that the security environment of the region is grim, and the circumstances that dissuaded the USA from creating a collective security framework in East Asia are gone; China represents an unprecedented threat to US hegemony in the region. So, in these unprecedented times, the US would require to amend its course of actions and policies to keep the throne of hegemon intact.

THREAT PERCEPTION IN EAST ASIA

The effects of all the global development may be seen in China's immediate surroundings, including Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, and the adjacent South China Sea. The United States' inability to defend Ukraine in crisis has had a significant negative impact on its credibility.³ Amidst this, US President Joe Biden has stepped forth and pledged to support Taiwan militarily if attacked by China to quell the discontent.⁴ However, strategic thinkers argued that this declaration does not signal the United States' departure from 'Strategic Ambiguity' regarding Taiwan.⁵ Despite the President's pledge to defend Taiwan, the timing of the announcement is poor because China is formulating a plan to keep the USA out of the conflict, if necessary.

3. D.C. Copeland, "Do reputations matter?", *Security Studies*, vol. 7, 1997, pp. 33-71. Accessed on August 22, 2021.

4. Christine Lu, "Biden Vows to Defend Taiwan", 'Morning Brief', *Foreign Policy*, May 24, 2022, at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/05/24/biden-taiwan-china-defense-policy/>. Accessed on June 11, 2022.

5. *Ibid.*

Security officials in the USA have long been concerned about the advent of the Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) system,⁶ sometimes known as the 'System of Systems'.⁷ China's military modernisation has materialised into a real threat, and its declaration that its military would be 'world-class' by 2049 is a manifestation of these ambitions.⁸ According to recent information, the Chinese military has achieved the 'general mechanisation' of its military and is moving towards utilising more advanced technologies suitable for 'informatised and intelligentised' warfare.⁹ Amidst this, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has gained numerical superiority over the USA and become the largest navy in the world with an overall battle force of 355 ships and submarines.¹⁰ On the other hand, the numerical superiority is accompanied by qualitative enhancement by adding anti-submarine capabilities and defence systems to defend its aircraft and submarines against any impending force.

Contrary to recent US rivals, China has been viewed as a separate concern by the US, which for so long denied its rise before ultimately acknowledging the seriousness of China's challenge to US dominance. Technological advancement has enabled the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to compete with US forces. One such development has been marked in the field of 'precision strike weaponry' which is so consequential that it has put the USA's fixed base in North East Asia continually on guard against PLA Rocket forces.¹¹ As a result, these developments have impacted the USA's unhindered ability to project power and eschewed the power balance in China's favour. The US has a special commitment in place in the form of a bilateral agreement to support those countries in the event of a Chinese attack.

6. Major Christopher J. McCarthy, "Anti-Access/Area Denial: The Evolution of Modern Warfare", *Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance*, at <https://www.usnwc.edu/Lucent/OpenPdf.aspx?id=95>. Accessed on October 16, 2021.

7. "China's A2/AD 'System of Systems'", *The Diplomat*, September 26, 2012, at <https://thediplomat.com/2012/09/chinas-system-of-systems/>. Accessed on June 10, 2022.

8. Office of the Secretary of Defense (2021), "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China", Annual Report to Congress, at <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF>. Accessed on April 20, 2022.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

However, two prominent changes on regional and world scales jeopardise Washington's plan. First, the rapid economic rise of China and its transformation into a modern military with highly capable joint forces eroded the foundation of the US military dominance.¹² The erosion further stemmed from the implementation of China's A2/AD strategy, which emerged as an asymmetric warfare strategy to limit the US's access to the conflict theatre.¹³ This strategy is targeted towards the US's power projection pattern to thwart US naval forces' entry into the crisis theatre by using long-range precision strike weaponry, and anti-ship ballistic missiles; on the other hand, freezing US manoeuvre capabilities with the help of its fixed bases in the crisis theatre, by applying 'cross-domain synergy'.¹⁴ The system of A2/AD presents a unique challenge to the US's power projection; providing strategies to defend are easier to develop rather than projecting power. Second, the US is unable to promptly respond to China's military advancement due to China's substantially expanded capabilities and the mismatch between US policy and the resources at hand. While the USA has obligations around the world, the PLA takes positions primarily for its Indo-Pacific endeavours, more specifically in the West Pacific. However, the USA can exploit China's irresponsible behaviour with its neighbouring country to ally against it.

The countries residing in North East Asia, particularly Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan have a direct security interest in taking down, or at least checking, the staggering rise of China.¹⁵ The origin of the security dilemma in the North East Asian case has historical and geopolitical roots, but mostly the structure of international relations demands that these countries arrest the already eschewed balance of power in China's favour.¹⁶ Taiwan has become the epicentre of US-China rivalry due to its unique political character. The riddle of Taiwan comes forward to test the resolve of the US

12. Stephen Biddle and Ivan Oelrich, "Future Warfare in the Western Pacific", *International Security*, 41, no. 1 (2016): 7-48. Accessed on March 16, 2021.

13. Ibid.

14. Dr. Peter G. Laky, "Land Force Roles in the Western Pacific: Anti-Access/Area Denial", US Army War College (2014), Philadelphia.

15. J. J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001).

16. Ibid.

and China, which we have witnessed during the 1960s, the 1995-96 Taiwan strait crisis; and again relations were frenzied over the recent visit of Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the US House of Representatives, to the island.¹⁷ Taiwan was an issue of war and peace for China which the Communist Party of China vows to incorporate into the mainland by force if the need arises. While the USA maintains the bilateral strategic treaty with Taiwan to defend it against cross-strait aggression.¹⁸ These commitments have complicated the matter to a different level, and the USA's loss of credibility in Afghanistan, and again in Ukraine, will compel it to defend Taiwan to prevent further erosion of its credibility. Moreover, many experts opined that Taiwan will be ground zero for the upcoming Cold War.

The issue of the Sino-Japan relationship also lies in history and geopolitics. For China, Japan has participated in its 'Century of Humiliation', at the same time a staunch ally of the United States in protecting the liberal world order. Apart from the identity, Japan and China also share territorial disputes over the island named Senkaku and Diaoyu.¹⁹ China, since the pandemic, has several times crossed Japan's 'Air Defense Identification Zone' (ADIZ). Similarly, South Korea feels a security dilemma with the rising power; as a manufacturing hub, South Korea's interest lies in the 'free and open Indo-Pacific' but China's claim over swaths of the South China Sea contradicts this vision.

WHY USA CHOSE THE HUB AND SPOKE MODEL IN NORTH-EAST ASIA?

At the time of the Cold War, the communist threat was gazing over two frontiers, one in Europe and another in East Asia. The United States wanted to save these two theatres against the powerful force

17. Helen Davidson, "A dangerous moment: China warns of consequences if Pelosi visits Taiwan", *The Guardian* (Taiwan), July 27, 2022, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/27/a-dangerous-moment-china-warns-of-consequences-if-nancy-pelosi-visits-taiwan>. Accessed on July 27, 2022.

18. Richard Bush, "The United States Security Partnership with Taiwan", The Brookings Institution, November 2016, at https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/fp_20160713_taiwan_alliance.pdf. Accessed on July 15, 2022.

19. Willium Choong, "China and Japan's island dispute", *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, June 4, 2020, at <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/china-and-japan-island-dispute>. Accessed on July 27, 2022.

of the Soviet Union. To assure the security of these geopolitically significant regions the USA put security arrangements in place but with different characteristics. While Europe was endowed with a 'Collective Security Framework', East Asia witnessed a series of bilateral defence treaties with the USA. The system that evolves after these bilateral treaties were touted as the 'Hub and Spoke Model' of the alliance system.

The story behind choosing bilateralism in East Asia is of particular interest lying in the respective history of the region. The USA is the only Hub (connection) among the Spokes (allies) which restricts the multilateral security interaction among its allies in the region. When Victor Cha was asked about the causality of the 'Hub and Spoke model' he explained it as a 'power play' rationale of the US.²⁰ However, the collective security agreement, which was implemented in Western Europe during the height of the Cold War, has proven to be effective in preventing the Soviet Union from going too far and crossing the line.

Nonetheless, the absence of regional security arrangements in East Asia is due to numerous reasons. First, the structure of alliances in international politics. Alliance in international politics is a primary source to provide security from a common enemy and bestows the aligning power with some structural responsibilities. Alliances in international politics, out of all things, are instrumental in shaping the behaviour of countries participating, in lieu of providing security.²¹ The United States initially thought of a collective security structure in East Asia but soon realised that it might entangle the United States in regional disputes, and these regional disputes might escalate the threat of the 'domino theory'.²² The North East allies of the United States were dictatorial regimes who hastened to occupy their respective claimed territories. Such as in the case of South Korea,

20. Victor D. Cha, "Powerplay: Origins of the U.S. Alliance System in Asia", *International Security*, 34, no. 3 (2009): 158-96, at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40389236>. Accessed on June 2, 2022.

21. Paul W. Schroeder, "Alliances, 1815-1945: Weapons of Power and Tools of Management", in Klaus Knorr (ed.), *Historical Dimensions of National Security Problems* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1976), pp. 227-62. Accessed on August 20, 2019.

22. John Foster Dulles, "Security in the Pacific", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 30, no. 2 (January 1952), p. 175. Accessed on April 22, 2020.

President Syngman Rhee had the intention to take back communist North Korea while Kuomintang's Chiang Kai-shek had plans to oust the communists from the mainland. With the exception of Japan, which followed a pacifist policy, all the other leaders were considered as 'rogue allies'.²³ This has bothered the US security establishments as, if they make explicit security commitments to its allies in North East Asia, it might lead to full-fledged war in the region. Thus, fearing entrapment, the USA sought to control these rogue allies.²⁴

An alliance is also known to control the behaviour of participant states, but the degree and nature vary from bilateral to multilateral alliance systems. If a small nation seeks to control the bigger nation it prefers the multilateral alliance; while, if a bigger power wants to control the behaviour of small participants, it prefers the bilateral alliance system. This struck the minds of an American security expert who chose the bilateral alliance over the multilateral collective security arrangement in East Asia. The USA's rationale was to exert more control over these allies and this could only be possible in the presence of a bilateral alliance system.²⁵

COLLECTIVE SECURITY IN EAST ASIA?

The anxiety of the domino theory and the communist challenge diminished with the fall of the USSR, and the USSR's balkanisation left the US as the only Superpower on the globe. The start of the unipolar era has given the USA unhindered "freedom to manoeuvre and project power" throughout the globe. Additionally, the stability that the USA has brought to the world, especially to North East Asia, has helped the region, including China, to prosper. The United States' initial hesitation to commit generously to its East Asian allies which were mainly ruled by 'rogue leaders', is no more in play, and Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan have witnessed a powerful rise of their

23. Kurt Taylor Gaubatz, "Democratic States and Commitment in International Relations", *International Organization*, vol. 50, no. 1 (Winter 1996), pp. 109-13, at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2707000?seq=1>. Accessed on January 13, 2021.

24. "United States Policy toward Formosa", *Department of State Bulletin*, July 3, 19. Accessed on January 13, 2021.

25. Christopher Hemmer and Peter J. Katzenstein, "Why Is There No NATO in Asia?", *International Organization*, vol. 56, no. 3 (Summer 2002), p. 588. Accessed on September 3, 2021.

economies, coupled with a long era of peace and stability after the Korean War. These countries are now run by democratically elected leaders whose intentions more or less remain to maintain the stability and the status quo of the region.

The American government and officials have, though lately, come to accept that they are in explicit great power competition with China.²⁶ However, China's rise is no less than the Soviet threat to East Asian countries, whose aggressive behaviour is now a daily affair experienced by these countries. China is preparing for the incorporation of Taiwan into the mainland, and the A2/AD system is a real testimony of it. Regardless of the rhetoric, China's violation of Taiwan's ADIZ is considered as the preparation for war across the Taiwan Strait any time in the decade. Owing to the Chinese A2/AD strategy, US assistance in the war seems in potential danger. The successful A2/AD mission could endanger the independence of Taiwan. Further, it would establish China as the hegemon in the Indo-Pacific, paving the way for China to occupy other territories, including South China Sea and islands in the East China Sea.

To maintain the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific, the USA needs to clarify its preference and postures regarding the Indo-Pacific, and more specifically towards East Asia. Meanwhile, Washington is also required to understand the real potential of its East Asian allies. Many scholars opined that China with its current state of military power could not conquer the tiny developed country of Taiwan.²⁷ Taiwan has the resolve as well as military prowess to thwart PLAN's amphibious invasion. Japan's departure from the 'pacific policy' could be beneficial for the USA as well as for ROK and ROC. Japan harbours a strong air force with highly modern F-35 aircraft and a sophisticated underwater mines system.²⁸ Nonetheless, these countries that reside in the Northeast Asian region have also

26. Terence Wesley-Smith and Graeme Smith, "Introduction: The Return of Great Power Competition", in Terence Wesley-Smith and Graeme Smith, *The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands*, 1st edition (Australian National University Press, 2021), pp. 1-40.

27. Michael Beckley, "The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia: How China's Neighbours Can Check Chinese Naval Expansion", *International Security*, 2017, 42 (2), pp. 78-119.

28. Ibid.

acquired the A2/AD systems to repel China's invasion. The effective military balance in East Asia still favours the collective capacity of island countries. They have developed countries with one of the best early warning systems, great reinforcement operation capability, and war management skills as well as being determined not to bow down to China's illegal claims. The liberal world order dominated by the United States has been the chief reason behind the rapid growth of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, hence these countries do not see themselves as suitable participants in the China-centric world order, which would necessarily be anti-democratic. Ideologies may not have similar value in the great power competition as during the Cold War, but this side of the world has been suffering the wrath of China's hyper-nationalistic aggression for so long.

After all, China's staggering modernisation poses a collective danger to these countries, and its military budget is the highest in the world after the United States. But the fact is that Beijing is fully determined and attentive to its Western Pacific adventure, on the other hand the United States has worldwide commitments and the Indo-Pacific constitutes only one part of its concerns. Considering its limits, the United States could enable an 'Active Denial' strategy by assisting China's neighbours. In that scenario, distribution of labour could be a way out for the United States, which is hindered by the existing bilateralism in East Asia. Pooling resources will have a deterring effect on China's ambition, and the collective security framework will have both the power of coercion and punishment to deter China from going out of its boundaries, which the ongoing arrangement lacks a distance.²⁹ Therefore, the whole issue could be understood in terms that China is not in a feud with easily winnable enemies. These trends in North East Asia indicate the shifting Balance of Power in the region simultaneously warrants the demand for a new security framework.

The residing countries of North East Asia have many historical differences, therefore considering the collective security framework is overly optimistic. Despite historical differences, Japan and South Korea also have a divergent security interest. South Korea is

29. Robert Jervis, "Deterrence Theory Revisited", *World Politics* 31, no. 2 (1979): 289-324.

directed toward containing and managing North Korea while Japan has a primary concern regarding China. But both countries also acknowledge the threat emanating from China. Thus, military mini-lateralism is a possibility in East Asia in view of China's impressive military spending. The US's contracting budget and looming challenge to US power projection owing to the development of A2/AD systems might delay US intervention during the Taiwan crisis, which may have a consequential impact on the region and the world order. However, there are multiple initiatives in the pipeline to check China's rise, specifically Quad and AUKUS,³⁰ but the need of the hour is to defend the Pacific waters by deterrence, possible only through a collective security framework.

30. Patrick Wintour, "What is the Aukus alliance and what are its implications?", *The Guardian*, September 16, 2021, at <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/sep/16/what-is-the-aukus-alliance-and-what-are-its-implications>. Accessed on June 20, 2022.