

Cobweb with Pivot: An Updated Model of Asia-Pacific Alliances

Yaning Su

Zhou Enlai government administration School, Nankai University

**Corresponding author. Email: NanalySu@163.com*

ABSTRACT

The US-led alliance system in Asia-Pacific was depicted as a "hub-and-spokes" architecture. Given the collapse of the Soviet Union and globalization, this preserved heritage should undergo a gradual metamorphosis as the resurgence of nations. As long as the supremacy status of the US sustains staunch, this model wouldn't be recast essentially. Accordingly, the new model-"cobweb with pivot"-is constructed on the substratum of "hub-and-spokes" and makes adjustments to accord with the contemporary epoch. Not only does this new architecture admit Washington's irrefutable existence, but also embodies the shift in allies and the momentum inducing this change. The impetus of this change doesn't get across the fringe delineated by alliance formation studies. Cobweb with pivot resonates with the power-balance bandwagon in the Asia-Pacific region. Through illustrating empirical instances, and unearthing theoretical rationales, this paper elaborates on the compatibility between this updated model and the postwar power resurgence in the Asia-Pacific region. Compared with the assembled nations in Europe, Asian nations are relatively more independent. The cobweb weaved by Asia-Pacific powers endows this region with a strengthening ductility.

Keywords: *Alliance, Hub and Spoke, Asia-Pacific, US*

1. INTRODUCTION

With the death knell of the Cold War sounding in every nook and cranny of the world, the global alliance system of the US didn't disintegrate after the demise of the Soviet Union but was preserved as an emblem of US unipolar superiority and the scion of postwar order arrangement. Exerting clout through alliances and proxies is a crucial sleight in American foreign policies to impact global politics. Except Trump, few Washington officials would disparage the value of the alliance system in the international stage so boldly and blankly. Given it's inevitable for each international member to be affected, and attendant interactions between states are essential for international relations, it's expedient to unearth the developing trend of this Asia-Pacific bloc and what that shift means. What we should heed is that the preservation doesn't amount to that we can gauge this system has entered into a static state. This paper narrows its focus down on US partners in the Asia-Pacific region as a case study to testify whether the traditional "hub and spokes" analogy is still precise enough when we comprehend this bloc system. Given the significance of alliances, this paper perhaps can provide inspiration for future analyses

of the Asian power chessboard and the liberal international order.

2. THE PREVIOUS MODEL OF THE ASIA-PACIFIC ALLIANCE SYSTEM - "HUB-AND-SPOKES"

The "hub and spokes" model explicates a bilateral or trilateral interaction mode between the US and her Asia-Pacific alliances and, to some extent, is security-oriented. As a "hub", American commitments play the role of a centripetal force with fewer interactions between allies. From Jae's perspective, this model was contrived to deter communist-related threats during the Cold War [1]. Victoria judged that these bilateral arrangements constitute the most enduring security architecture [2]. As a security device, "hub-and-spokes" brings reciprocal benefits for both Washington and allies. Following World War II, to manage threats abroad is expedient for Washington, so that attendant formal treaty alliances were established to contain Communists [3]. The Cold War cast a deep shadow over global politics and the tit for tat between great powers provoked states into acts of counterbalance. Without a centralised global government, the ghost of a potential security threat and wariness

haunts like the natural state of all against all as Hobbes envisioned. Since international anarchy resembles what Hobbes predicated, it's primary for nations to aggregate power on their own or with others for survival. During the Cold War, the US was the only one that can shelter partners in her bloc through military predominance, while the co-operations between her allies were finite.

Given that this nip and tuck rivalry ended in an inact Berlin and a reshuffled international chessboard, attendant shifts in this bloc should emerge as well. For

instance, Thomas noticed that the bilateral alliances of the "hub and spoke" system in the Asia-Pacific were undergoing a evolution in composition and purpose terms [4]. The US security commitments to allies are the footstone of this "hub-and-spokes" system, which is self-evident in the international anarchic state. As long as the state won't be subverted, the demand for a trusted shelter will exist and is manifested in the US's overwhelming defense spending. The power asymmetry between Washington and allies remains, and it's the US that established the international system where allies interact.

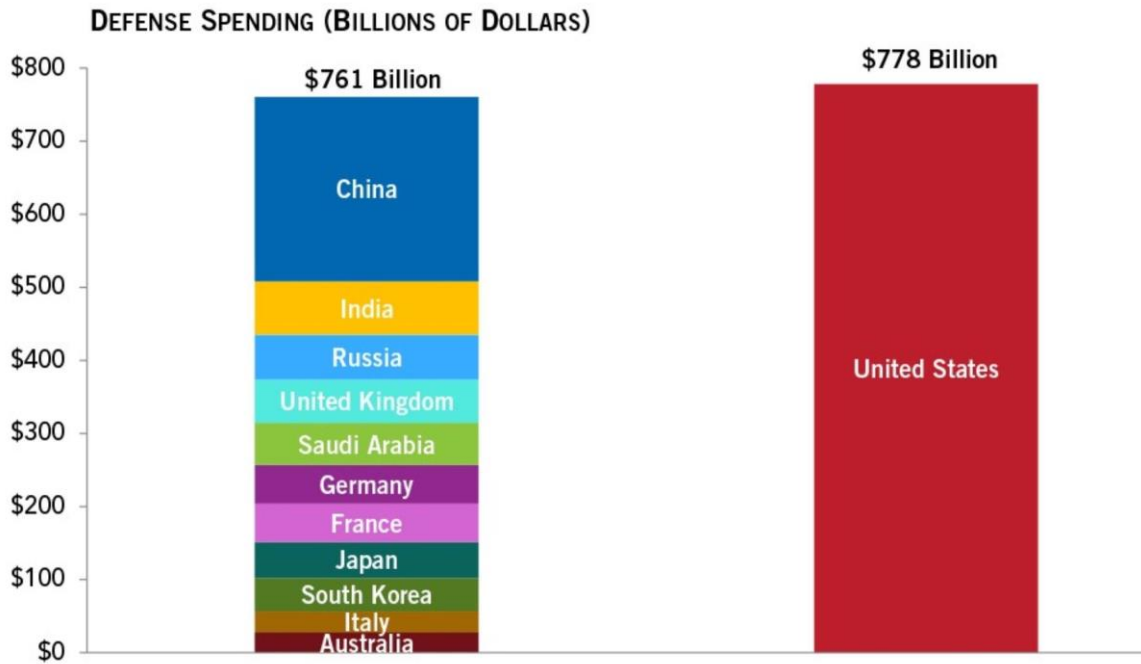


Figure 1. The United States spends more on defense than the next 11 countries combined [5]

As illustrated by the above diagram, the overwhelming military spending and military competence is a steadfast footstone that underpins Washington's alliance system. On the basis of unshaken US status in promoting ally cooperations, a "cobweb with pivot" is contrived to adjust the "hub-and-spokes" to the overlooked nations' resurgence since the end of Cold War.

3. THE NEW MODEL OF THE ASIA-PACIFIC ALLIANCE SYSTEM - COBWEB WITH PIVOT

The "cobweb with pivot" hypothesis can be anatomized into two facets. On the one hand, the pivot denotes the existence of the US in the Asia-Pacific region is still irrefutable and quite influential. On the other hand, the cobweb implicates the incremental contacts between

allies and the ascending puissance of them. What should be distinguished is that the relatively powerful one can weave own sub-web in this cobweb. Even nations that are not incorporated into American alliances, like India, are connected by the olive branch held out by American allies. This cobweb isn't intact and perfect but allows for disconnections, because on the international stage, more power always amounts to more discretion and nations tend to opt for partners they favor, albeit with confines.

Compared with the "hub-and-spokes", threads and nation points in this updated architecture embody more cooperation and influence sources. The bilateral power asymmetry is mitigated in the sub-webs, and more powerful ones act more proactively to integrate this region. With the overlapping threads, the ductile strength in the Asia-Pacific region is enhanced and a power-balanced chessboard forms.

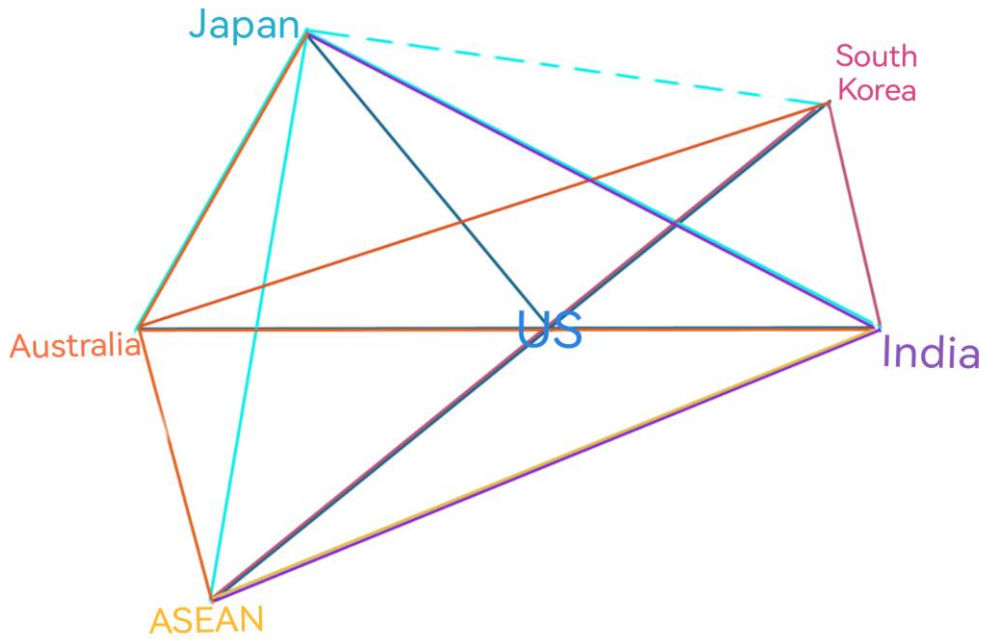


Figure 2. The "cobweb with pivot" of some Asia-Pacific allies on the basis of "hub-and-spokes"

4. EMPIRICAL AND THEORETICAL RATIONALES OF THE "COBWEB WITH PIVOT"

4.1. Incremental cooperations with less Washington dominance

The duality of nations is that they are both restrained by alliance commitments and seek for sovereign discretion. Even during the Cold War, it can be observed in the Non-Aligned-Movement which rebuffed to ally with great powers. In the Asia-Pacific region, weaving their own sub-web reflects this discretion as well.

Although the US has the inclination to construct a US-Japan-ROK triangle, Japan and ROK diverge on the priority issue. What bothers Japan is the looming rejuvenation of China but South Korea persists the historical trauma, such as comfort women, is the primary blockade [6]. The peninsula's reunification, the nuclearization of North Korea, and the deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) are probably listed on the top line of the ROK workbook. In light of the National Defense Program Guidelines for FY2019 and Beyond, which guides the next decade defense efforts, the alliance with Washington remains on the locus of security strategies while Japan underscored own efforts and more cooperation with Australia and India, but less with the ROK [7]. In 2022, Japan signed a defense cooperation treaty with Australia and Morrison said it showed the commitment to work together in the face of shared strategic security challenges for a secure and stable Indo-Pacific. After Trump withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP), the Biden administration hasn't endorsed rejoining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-

Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) despite Japan signaled once and again. It's likely that Japan would share more of the burden in integrating this region. After the 2011 ASEAN-Japan Strategic Partnership ended, the Abe administration had created four new strategic partnerships with Cambodia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Laos until 2015 [8].

Australia and Japan reaffirmed the stance to stand proactively together and with Washington and other partners for a free, open, stable, and prosperous Indo-Pacific in 2018 [9]. The 2017 White Paper articulated that Australia is open to work with Indo-Pacific partners in plurilateral arrangements, and Japan, India, and ROK are of primary significance to Australia [10]. In 2021, the Comprehensive strategic Partnership avowed that Australia and the ROK are natural partners for Southeast Asia and ASEAN and recognize the region's stability and prosperity as indispensable to an open, inclusive and prosperous Indo-Pacific. When India transformed from Look East to Act East, Singapore's bilateral links with India were deepened in economic, cultural, defense and strategic terms [11]. In 2019, Thailand, India and Singapore conducted military exercise in disputed South China Sea region. The 2021 ASEAN-ROK Dialogue aims to further strengthen the ASEAN-ROK cooperation through promoting synergy between the ROK's New Southern Policy and ASEAN's major strategies and initiatives, including the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific [12]. In the ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Cooperation in 2021, two nations enunciated to strengthen strategic partnership in the spectrum of political-security, economy, and social-culture cooperation for peace, stability, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region [8].

4.2. Theoretical columns

As Hobbes said, men deliberate between appetite and aversion, and nations are motivated by reason and passion. Allying acts are provoked by a sense of threat and wariness, and the expected reciprocity and amiability can be momentum as well. What links nations to stand together sustains the bloc to exist. As aforementioned, a permanent demand for security is always essential but what closely unites allies is convergent interests, sufficient credibility, and a proper burden-sharing agreement.

Retrospecting what Trump has done, the damaged credibility should more or less ramp up the allies' wariness of being abandoned. States' reputation and loyalty are assets and have a notable effect on the alliance formation [12]. It's common for allies to diverge on specific issues and offer no support, like the Iraq war. To avoid being embroiled in commotions reluctantly, Washington preserves strategic ambiguity and conditional commitments in case of allies' temerity. Similarly, American allies harbour an identical uneasiness of being dragged into disputes that tend more toward Washington than them. The hedge strategy is to put eggs in more baskets. The pristine cause of alliance formation is that nations sense collective threat no matter whether it's predicated or actual. Intentions, not power, are crucial as states that appear aggressive would trigger others to balance [13]. Surrounding the PRC, territorial and maritime disputes and a growing power asymmetry in this region resonate with allies' and non-allies' independence desires and the prospective Indo-Pacific outlook, which instigates nations to hedge not to follow China.

As the repeated Indo-Pacific prosperity, stability and peace, nations form alliances with an expectation to be the beneficiary [14]. If this region were integrated in versatile terms, the economic prospect would be alluring and universally reciprocal. And the CPTPP is the rudimentary practice of this blueprint. Priorities and standards vary when states gauge a trustworthy partner, even though no attack-threat, economic and trade exchanges, democratic institutions, and sharing membership in international organizations have an eminent role [15]. Through the prism of history, the open international system was forged and led by the unipole, and nations that benefit from this system fulfill own resurgence. More power brings more action discretion and a more proactive role in this Indo-Pacific blueprint. The multilateral interaction is a certain outcome of globalization. The burden-sharing problem between Washington and allies is probably retrained by the power asymmetry and institution inertia. Nevertheless, an alleviated power asymmetry between nations resembles an outlet for their ambitions to flex muscles, and nations are more willing to take on negotiated burdens.

5. CONCLUSION

To comprehend contemporary allies' interactions, it's inappropriate to confine our analytical lens to the "hub-and-spokes" and crucial to integrate them in a systematic way. This multilateralism and a power-balance trend in the Asia-Pacific bloc ensue from nations' resurgence, which benefits from the liberal international order. Accordingly, these nations would be defenders of this order and guardians of the regional peace. They are compelled by potential security threats (China), driven by interests (an open and free Indo-Pacific), disturbed by being forsaken (damaged US credibility), and seeking for a sense of control and own discretion. In the postwar international system constructed and led by the US, these nations knit complicated contact-webs as the globalization process.

This paper only depicts a sketchy and rudimentary blueprint of the Asia-Pacific alliances, omits a comparison analysis with European NATO and how this trend would affect Asia-Pacific flash points. On the premise of incremental interactions between Europe and Asia, whether NATO undergoes a similar metamorphosis or not is worthwhile to explore. As the backbone of American value and interests, American alliances reshuffle the international chessboard. Where the liberal international order is going and the ensuing opportunities or challenges should be heeded more. With respect to the aforementioned CPTPP, whether China will join and the following impact on the Asia-Pacific alliance web deserve to unearth.

REFERENCES

- [1] Park, Jae Jeok, The US-led Alliances in the Asia-Pacific: Hedge Against Potential Threats or an Undesirable Multilateral Security Order? *The Pacific Review*, vol. 24, 2011, pp. 137-158.
- [2] Cha, V. D., *Powerplay: Origins of the U.S. Alliance System in Asia*. *International Security*, vol. 34(3), 2009, pp. 158-196.
- [3] Brookings Institution, Who are America's allies and are they paying their fair share of defense? Online: <https://www.brookings.edu/policy2020/votervital/who-are-americas-allies-and-are-they-paying-their-fair-share-of-defense/>
- [4] WILKINS, T. S., "Alignment", not "alliance" – the shifting paradigm of international security cooperation: toward a conceptual taxonomy of alignment. *Review of International Studies*, vol. 38(1), 2012, pp. 53-76.
- [5] Peter G. Peterson Foundation. US defense spending compared to other countries. Online:

- https://www.pgpf.org/chart-archive/0053_defense-comparison
- [6] Gilbert Rozman, *Asia's Alliance Triangle: US-Japan-South Korea Relations at a Tumultuous Time*, PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, New York, 2015, pp. 10004-1562.
- [7] Prime minister of Australia, "Australia-ROK Comprehensive Strategic Partnership". Online: <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/australia-rok-comprehensive-strategic-partnership>
- [8] Koga, K. (2016). JAPAN'S "STRATEGIC COORDINATION" IN 2015: ASEAN, Southeast Asia, and Abe's Diplomatic Agenda. *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2016, pp. 67–80. Online: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26466919>
- [9] Government of Australia, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Australia-Japan Bilateral Relationship". Online: <https://dfat.gov.au/geo/japan/Pages/australia-japan-bilateral-relationship.aspx>
- [10] Government of Australia, "Indo-Pacific Partnerships", Foreign Policy White Paper, 2017. Online: <https://www.fpwhitepaper.gov.au/foreign-policy-white-paper/chapter-three-stable-and-prosperous-indo-pacific/indo-pacific>.
- [11] Das, S., & Bhattacharya, S., *India and Singapore: Fifty Years of Diplomatic Relations*. *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, vol. 15(1), 2020, pp. 16–32.
- [12] Association of Southeast Asian Nations, "ASEAN, ROK to further strengthen partnership". Online: <https://asean.org/asean-rok-to-further-strengthen-partnership/>
- [13] Association of Southeast Asian Nations, *ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Cooperation on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific for Peace, Stability, and Prosperity in the Region*. Online: <https://asean.org/asean-india-joint-statement-on-cooperation-on-the-asean-outlook-on-the-indo-pacific-for-peace-stability-and-prosperity-in-the-region/>
- [14] Crescenzi, M. J. C., Kathman, J. D., Kleinberg, K. B., & Wood, R. M., *Reliability, Reputation, and Alliance Formation*. *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 56(2), 2012, pp. 259–274.
- [15] Walt, S. M., *Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power*. *International Security*, vol. 9(4), 1985, pp. 3–43.
- [16] Smith, A., *Alliance Formation and War*. *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 39(4), 1995, pp. 405–425.
- [17] Sandler, T., *Alliance Formation, Alliance Expansion, and the Core*. *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 43(6), 1999, pp. 727–747.