

# THE EVOLUTION OF THE U.S. ALLIANCE SYSTEM IN THE INDO-PACIFIC SINCE THE COLD WAR'S END

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The development of the U.S. alliance system at the tail end of the 20th century in the post-Cold War era has significance as compared to the era that came before it. From the inception of the system in the 1950s, it was characterized by its “hub-and-spokes” relationship between each U.S. ally and Washington. However, from 1994 with the first inter-alliance trilateral between the United States, Japan, and the Republic of Korea (ROK), this began to change and the rigidity of U.S. alliance managers gave way to an informal and incremental evolution towards unilateralism or multilateralism. Although the bilaterals between the “hub” and the “spokes” are arguably the mainstay of this system, the development of the trilaterals and quadrilateral have been the chief harbingers of change in the system.

At the end of the Cold War, the architecture of what was then called the “Asia-Pacific” was characterized by three features: the U.S.-led alliance system, regional integration in the form of the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the rise of China. Over the last three

decades, we have seen those three structural features interact, play off of each other, and react to changes in the others in ways that were unforeseen in the middle of that decade. We have seen a resurgence in the utility of U.S. alliances, but with some loosening ties, as regional states have chosen to balance against

**Balance:** when one state—perceiving another to be a potential threat—does things to counter that threat, such as build alliances or develop its defense capabilities.

**Bandwagon:** when one state—perceiving another to be a potential threat—attempts to appease that threat by aligning itself with it.

or bandwagon with an increasingly powerful and increasingly authoritarian China. In the case of the Philippines and Thailand, there has been a gradual loosening of ties as the perception of shared interests have fallen by the wayside due to changes in domestic politics in each of those countries. However, for the alliances with Japan, Australia, and to a lesser extent, South Korea, there has been an extraordinary evolution in the way the traditionally-bilateral alliances interact and what they consider their remit. This chapter seeks to examine those changes since the end of the Cold War and highlights the growing minilateralism both within the alliance system and with non-allies, such as India.

When the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (DKI APCSS) was originally established—in September of 1995, only five years after the end of the Cold War—there was a debate about whether certain regions were “ripe for rivalry”<sup>1</sup> or “primed for peace.”<sup>2</sup> In 1991, the U.S. alliance system in the Pacific—also known as the “San Francisco System”—was characterized by

- a network of bilateral alliances between Washington and regional states, including Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, and, to an ambiguous extent, Taiwan;
- an absence of multilateral institutions;<sup>3</sup>
- a deep asymmetry in alliance relations;
- a special place for Japan in the system; and
- liberal access for allies to the U.S. market, as well as economic and military assistance.<sup>4</sup>

U.S. historian John Downer has stated that the *Pax Americana* that sprung from this system also had a further two features: an emphasis on maritime power and sea lanes and the forward-deployment of U.S. forces on the territory of regional states, in exchange for defense of allied sovereignty against communism.<sup>5</sup>

So what has changed in the system in the last 25 years between the Clinton administration and the Trump administration? Some would argue not much, and that to all extents and purposes, the San Francisco System continues to emphasize maritime security, offshore-balancing, and forward-deployment.

**Offshore balancing:** when an extra-regional state—perceiving a regional state to be a threat—uses a third in-region state as a favored ally to check the hostility of the second.

But if one looks at the system in 1995 and the system in 2020, it is clear that the nature of the alliances has shifted considerably, in membership, in scope, in remit, and in capabilities. In order to understand the changes, it is important to also pinpoint and understand the drivers of change. Why did alliance managers in Washington, Seoul, Tokyo, Canberra, and Manila direct policy in the direction that they did? And what compelled them to do so? We must also track changes in the wider region and in threat perceptions and how those impacted the perceptions of alliance managers across the system. For it is only by walking in their shoes can we understand why they made the policy choices they ultimately made.

### THE CLINTON ADMINISTRATION (1993-2000)

The Clinton administration came into office in 1993, stressing economic growth and a strong desire to reap the “peace dividend,”<sup>76</sup> with a bold campaign slogan, “It’s the Economy Stupid.” In 1992, this new emphasis on prosperity had seen a Democratic presidential campaign promise that “a post-Cold War restructuring of American forces will produce substantial savings beyond those promised by the Bush Administration.”<sup>77</sup> One Bush administration policy that President Clinton adopted with enthusiasm was the East Asia Strategy Initiative (EASI), which outlined a major draw down of U.S. forces from the region, including the unilateral removal of nuclear weapons from South Korea and the closure of U.S. bases in the Philippines. In answer to those nervous about creating a power vacuum, the administration emphasized the new assumptions that were thought more and more to guide the post-Cold War international system, such as multilateral institutions, open markets, loose borders, and global supply chain economics. These new institutions would lay atop the old alliances, functioning “like overlapping plates of armor, individually providing protection and together covering the full body for our common security concerns.”<sup>78</sup> This attempt to marry the new regional economic institutions with security architecture—such as the creation of ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994—was intended to be inclusive of old Cold War-era foes: “we are also prepared to involve China in building this region’s new security and economic architectures. We need an involved and engaged China, not an isolated China.”<sup>79</sup>

However, three incidents during the Clinton administration paused this optimistic project and saw a U.S. pause in the withdrawal of forces and rethink the utility of the alliance system: 1) the 1993-94 North Korean Nuclear Crisis; 2) the 1995-96 Taiwan Strait Crisis; and 3) the 1996 East China Sea crisis. As a result of the first crisis, the United States, Japan, and South Korea began to look at ways to coordinate policy and began meeting in a track 1.5 setting in 1994. Engineered by outgoing senior U.S. Department of Defense official

**The 1994 Agreed Framework** was a US-DPRK agreement that set out a freeze of all North Korean nuclear development at Yongbyun Nuclear Scientific Research Center—the site of North Korea’s nuclear weapons program—in exchange for the building of two light-water civilian-use nuclear reactors.

**KEDO:** an organization founded in 1995 by the United States, South Korea, and Japan which sought to deliver the commitments—including the two light-water nuclear reactors—in North Korea as laid out in the 1994 Agreed Framework. It ceased to exist in 2006 after the agreement had broken down.

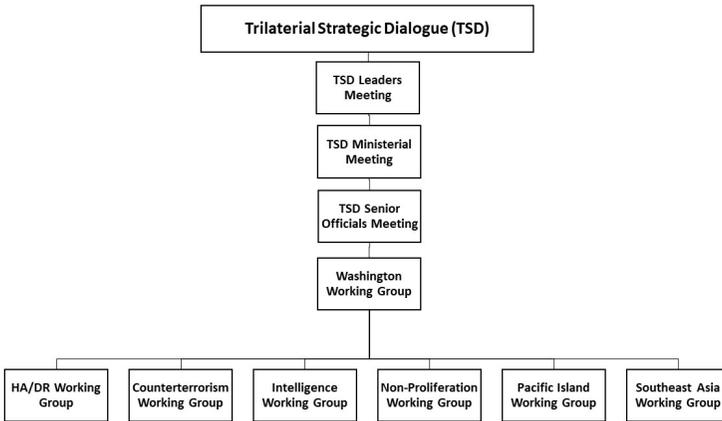
Carl Ford as a means of bringing Japan and South Korea closer together, the new U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral initially flourished under the auspices of the 1994 Agreed Framework agreement and was even institutionalized briefly in the late 1990s by the Perry Process under the name Trilateral Coordination Oversight Group (TCOG).<sup>10</sup> For a short time, the U.S.-Japan-ROK “virtual alliance”<sup>11</sup> took on the role of fulfilling the obligations as laid out in the 1994 United States-Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) Agreed Framework in the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO). The Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1995-96 and the East China Sea crisis led to ripples of uncertainty across the region. They also led to the deployment of two carrier strike groups to the Taiwan Strait and a rethink of traditional alliances. In the year after the crises, Australia and Japan—increasingly “adrift”<sup>12</sup> from the alliance relationships—began to again favor the alliance ties with the United States, with the new John Howard government taking the U.S. side on Taiwan publicly.<sup>13</sup> In 1996, the United States and Japan issued the Joint Declaration of Security, which opened both the remit and the geographical location of the U.S.-Japan alliance, while the United States and Australia jointly issued the Joint Declaration on Security.<sup>14</sup>

**The 1996 U.S.-Japan Joint Declaration of Security** led to a new Guidelines for U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation. Superseding the 1978 Guidelines, this inserted the language “in areas around Japan” to the previous “attack on Japan” as areas where the alliance defense commitments would be activated, indicating a desire to make the alliance more regionally focused. It also established the 2+2 Security Consultative Committee, comprising the defense and foreign ministers of both countries to meet regularly to discuss both the regional security environment and U.S. force structure in Japan.

## THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION (2001-2008)

The period during the Bush administration saw the further multilateralization of the San Francisco System and a shift of functionality as the United States pressed its regional allies to contribute to the Global War on Terror and to operations that were a part of Operation Enduring Freedom. There was a surge in extra-regional military cooperation in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Indian Ocean, and a surge in regional counterterrorism training and operations. It also saw a slight breakdown in relations between the United States and Thailand, the oldest U.S. alliance in the region, after the Thai military carried out a coup in 2006 against the caretaker government of Thaksin Shinawatra.

However, for the purposes of this chapter, the most strategically important development was the growth in Australia-Japanese bilateral defense cooperation and the concurrent growth in U.S.-Japan-Australia trilateral cooperation that the uptick afforded. Japan and Australia had developed closer ties in several peacekeeping missions in-region in the late 1990s, and alliance managers on both sides began seeking opportunities for furthering and institutionalizing this cooperation. The two institutions that comprise the trilateral—the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD) and the Security and Defense Cooperation Forum (SDCF)—came about at this time as leaders in Tokyo, Canberra, and Washington began to align over a number of common security concerns, including regional extremism, increasing Chinese military power, and the continued nuclear threat posed by North Korea.



**Figure 9.1: The Structure of the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue**

The initial proposal for a trilateral was actually put by Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer to Japanese colleague Ryozo Kato on a 1997 trip to Tokyo. However, there was little movement on the issue until 2000 when Richard Armitage became Deputy Secretary of State: as a close friend of both Downer and Kato he was more than willing to try the new grouping and in the summer of 2002, the first U.S.-Japan-Australia trilateral took place after a U.S.-Japan security meeting in Washington.<sup>15</sup> This grouping also gave Japan its first taste of real alliance multilateralism, and this laid the groundwork for its strategic alignment with India, a state outside of the U.S. alliance system, but one that would become intrinsic to the wider geopolitical strategies of both the United States and Japan.

India seemed an unlikely candidate to join a U.S.-led grouping, due to its historically acrimonious relationship with Washington over the latter's support for Pakistan and its long tradition of non-alignment. However, 2004-05 saw this change dramatically as India was invited to be a “core group” member,<sup>16</sup> joining Australia, the United States, and Japan in the humanitarian assistance operations after the Indian Ocean Tsunami. The efficacy of cooperation, combined with deft diplomacy on the part of Washington to resolve differences with New Delhi in the U.S.-India Nuclear Deal in late 2005 and the New Framework for U.S.-India Defense,<sup>17</sup> allowed for further Japanese exploration of a four-way grouping,<sup>18</sup> which duly occurred in 2007. Promoted by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe with the other three leaders, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (also known as the Quad) was paralleled by a four-way maritime exercise during Exercise Malabar, the traditionally bilateral U.S.-India exercise. While Chinese pressure saw Australia pull out of the Quadrilateral in 2008—under the

newly-elected Kevin Rudd cabinet—it was revived in 2017 with Japanese encouragement and has continued to meet since, including virtually during the COVID-19 crisis.

### THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION (2009-2016)

The Obama administration was marked by its “pivot” or “rebalance to Asia,” and by continued efforts to manage the increasingly competitive U.S.-China relationship. The U.S. alliance system continued to evolve, with a number of important events taking place—including the increasing sophistication of the U.S.-Japan alliance, an increase in U.S.-Japan-Australia trilateral activity, the breakdown of the U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral, and the election of Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines. The last event has been—similar to the 2006 military coup in Thailand—an event that has raised questions as to the long-term survivability of bilateral security ties, as Manila-Washington relations deteriorated markedly over human rights concerns related to the Philippine president’s “war on drugs.”

This is also when the U.S.-Japan-Australia trilateral began to eclipse the U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral, a trend which had begun in the Bush administration, and which was accelerated during the Obama presidency. Relations between Seoul and Tokyo—always tied to domestic constituents and public opinion over historical grievances—began their downward spiral in 2010 after a Korean non-government organization established the first monument to “comfort women” (sex slaves) outside Korea, in Palisades Park, New Jersey.<sup>19</sup> By contrast, in that same year, Japan and Australia signed an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA), which built on their cooperation in Southern Iraq and created the first institutional military-to-military framework for future cooperation. The close relationship of the United States that Australia—due to the Five Eyes relationship—was both a reassurance to Tokyo and a future model for Japanese strategic thinkers, and it is notable that during humanitarian operations following the 2011 Tohoku Earthquake and Tsunami, only U.S. and Australian military forces were allowed to operate inside Japan,<sup>20</sup> with the latter lacking any formal treaty provisions to do so.<sup>21</sup> The following year, 2012, saw the failure of the ROK government to pass the Japan-ROK General Security of Military Intelligence Agreement (GSOMIA) through the South Korean Diet, another sign that the future dynamism of the San Francisco System’s evolution increasingly moves southwards with Australia and in the Southeast Asian region. In contrast to the hiccups

experienced by the U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral, the dynamism of the U.S.-Japan-Australia Security and Defense Cooperation Forum (SDCF) has been apparent in the sheer number and complexity of combined U.S.-Japan-Australia trilateral, war-fighting exercises, including *Cope Guam North*, *Southern Jackaroo*, and *Pacific Bond*, which have focused on air-superiority, amphibious joint-operations, and anti-submarine warfare, respectively.

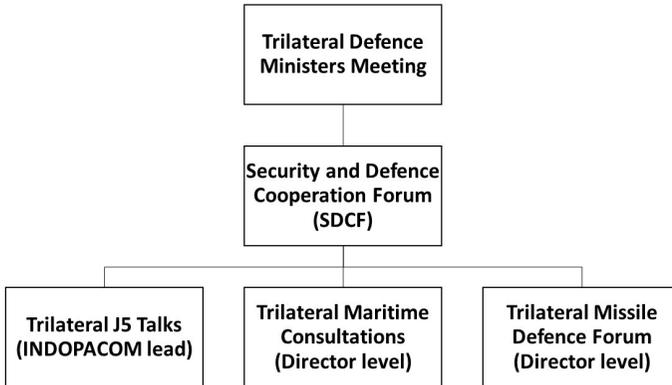


Figure 9.2: The Security and Defense Cooperation Forum

The U.S.-Japan alliance, often called “the cornerstone of regional security,” also evolved with great changes taking place in the 2015 new Defense Guidelines. These new guidelines were put into place in the wake of increased activity by China in the Japanese exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and near the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands group, administered by Japan, but claimed by China and Taiwan. The 2010 incident in which Japan arrested the crew of a Chinese militia vessel<sup>22</sup> that had collided with two Japanese Coast Guard vessels and growing willingness of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) to utilize “gray zone” operations in the sea led to a reassertion<sup>23</sup> by the United States that the islands fell within the remit of the U.S.-Japan alliance and the development of several U.S.-Japanese mechanisms for dealing with gray zone operations.<sup>24</sup> The new 2015 Guidelines institutionalized meetings between various U.S. and Japanese government departments—including the various defense department, coast guard, and other non-military bodies—in a standing working group called the Alliance Coordination Mechanism

**“Gray zone” operations:** when states use deniable, non-military actors to challenge other states in operations below the threshold for war—and thus below the threshold for alliance commitments being utilized.

that regularly met to discuss security in the East China Sea and coordinates shared information on the islands in the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) sector. In a move that predated the “multi-domain” approach of the U.S. Department of Defense, the 2015 Guidelines also brought space and cyberspace discussions under the purview of the alliance.<sup>25</sup>

## THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION (2017-PRESENT)

The Trump administration has been characterized by a similar see-sawing in the system that occurred under President Obama. This has occurred as China has matched its consolidation of its efforts at *de facto* control over the South China Sea with militarizing the islands under its occupation, combined with an adept usage of economic leverage and coercion on regional states. In the Philippines, under President Rodrigo Duterte, this has seen Manila bandwagoning toward China,<sup>26</sup> tacitly accepting Beijing’s claims and coming close<sup>27</sup> to terminating of the 20-plus-year-old U.S.-Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA).<sup>28</sup> The Trump administration’s return to the Nixon-era emphasis on burden-sharing<sup>29</sup> from those allies who have U.S. troops based in their countries has also met a mixed response. In Japan, these shifts in U.S. policy have been accommodated, but in South Korea—under a progressive-minded Moon Jae-In government—there has been some resistance with Moon also seeking to transfer wartime Operational Control Authority (OPCON) from U.S. Forces Korea to the South Korean government.<sup>30</sup> Despite this, the Indo-Pacific framework, adopted by the administration in November 2017 has seen a resurrection of the U.S.-Japan-India-Australia Quadrilateral,<sup>31</sup> which had dissolved in 2008 when Australia had unilaterally withdrawn citing Chinese pressure.<sup>32</sup> Under its new guise, the quasi-alliance has tentatively developed into a forum for strategic dialogue, strengthened by growing US-India ties.<sup>33</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Twenty-five years after the founding of the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, it would appear that the U.S.-led alliance system is in immense flux with a number of significant changes taking place. Certainly, the other two features—the regional architecture associated with ASEAN and the rise of China—have also heavily influenced this evolution. To some extent, the inability of ASEAN to modify or restrain Chi-

nese assertiveness in the South China Sea and the continued issues of Taiwan and North Korea, has reduced the 1990s' optimism over multilateral institutions as lead components of regional stabilization and governance. Instead, the United States and its allies have continued to maintain—and even update—the old Cold War-era alliances, changing them to reflect new realities with the PRC acting as a strong determinant for state behaviors like balancing and bandwagoning. The traditional security logic of the San Francisco System has been complicated by the fact that states in the region suffer a “double security dilemma”<sup>34</sup>—growing threat perceptions around China, mixed with increasing trade dependencies on the one hand, and increasing perceptions of U.S. abandonment of the region on the other—meaning that these new minilaterals are less formal than their antecedents. Some new partners, like Vietnam<sup>35</sup> and India,<sup>36</sup> have long histories of non-alignment or antagonism toward the U.S. system, presenting U.S. planners with interesting challenges and opportunities. As a result of these drivers, the new San Francisco System that we have—as DKI APCSS enters its 25th year—include the following characteristics:

*Evolutionary:* First and foremost, the system is no longer static; it is evolving. Not only is it evolving, but alliance members on all sides anticipate this evolution and link it to incremental assertiveness on the part of the PRC. As China expands its power and influence incrementally—“salami-slicing”—so too does the system react incrementally by adding new hard power tools for deterrence. The system continues to evolve and has a certain responsiveness built into it.

*Membership:* Secondly, it would appear that the alliance system's membership is changing, with the Philippines on the verge of leaving while Vietnam and India beginning to become “virtual” or “quasi” allies. This trend can be seen in several ways: First, in the form of the Quad, while India is not a formal ally of any of the other three states, it has signed defense cooperation with all three states, most recently with Australia in June 2020, with two agreements that will enable greater defense interoperability and increasingly complex military engagement.<sup>37</sup> Second, there is the “Quad Plus,” a sort of unofficial opening up of the Quad to like-minded states such as New Zealand, Vietnam, and South Korea, which met in March 2020 to discuss economic recovery in the wake of the coronavirus-linked economic crisis.<sup>38</sup> Finally, there are non-regional states such as the United Kingdom and France, which both have equities in the region and have a traditional Mahanian approach to open sea-lanes as a part of national security. France's mutual basing agreement with India, its burgeoning de-

fense relationships with Australia and Japan, and the United Kingdom's rapidly-growing defense ties with Japan, its stake in the Five Powers Defence Arrangements, and regional bases mean that both European powers are likely to play a growing role in the Indo-Pacific. Given their vested interests in a rules-based trading order, their links to the United States through the NATO alliance, we may see them joining the Quad Plus arrangement.

*Informal:* The chief characteristic of the U.S. alliance system from 1945 to 1995 was that the alliance defense commitments were formally spelled out in treaty documents,<sup>39</sup> and however imperfectly they might have been, U.S. leaders have tended, by and large, to reassure allies of U.S. resolve. However, over the last 20 years, allies such as Japan and Australia have developed “alliance-like” or “quasi-alliance” bilateral relationships, mixing high levels of defense cooperation, military interoperability, and intelligence-sharing, without formalizing their obligations to each other in case of attack. This strategic ambiguity has served both Indian and Japanese defense planners well, allowing them to align strategically with the United States and others on common security concerns, while hedging against abandonment, and maintaining some level of strategic ambiguity. So valuable has this informality been that it is unlikely the U.S.-Japan-India-Australia Quadrilateral (the Quad) would have emerged had Washington insisted on formal defense obligations.

*Capacity:* Fourthly, the growing capacity of the alliance system as a whole to deal with ongoing challenges and issues relating to the rise of Chinese maritime power can be seen through the growing capacity and power of Japanese naval forces and through the sophistication of multilateral war-fighting exercises.

*Remit:* The roles and functions of the alliance system have grown in leaps and bounds, incorporating humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), capacity-building, as well as the traditional remit of deterrence and the defending of its members' sovereignty. Most recently, it has developed a strong commitment to war-fighting exercises, as seen in the electronic warfare exercise Cope North Guam and anti-submarine exercises such as Pacific Bond.<sup>40</sup> However, there have been some calls for the U.S. military to really push its exercises in a more realistic direction so as to act as a deterrent to the PRC or DPRK. Finally, there has been an interesting return to the earliest days of the alliance system with the reemergence of economic issues as the Quad Plus' recent meetings focused on crisis management during the Coronavirus era and on economic revival.<sup>41</sup>

*Multilateral:* Kent Calder famously characterized the alliance system as a mostly-bilateral “hub-and-spokes” system between Washington and its allies.<sup>42</sup> That has gradually developed into what some have termed a “federated set of capabilities,”<sup>43</sup> with U.S. allies developing their own security relationships with other U.S. allies and building up capabilities that can be broadly shared for the common good. The core group that led the way on responding to the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004 and which became the Quadrilateral is one example. The U.S.-Japan-Australia trilateral is another, which as this chapter has argued, is one of the most institutionalized of the quasi-alliances, and the most capable in war-fighting interoperability. The current trend seems to be a loose linking of states to the original alliance system, attaching and aligning as their national interests come into conflict with the rising assertions of the PRC.

While it would be correct to say that the San Francisco System is here with us to stay, it would also be correct to say that it is steadily evolving to meet current-day and future challenges, in a way that continues to meet the needs of many of its members. If asked to predict whether it will be here in another 25 years, the answer is undoubtedly “yes.” It has provided nearly 70 years of peace and prosperity to the region and has endured remarkable regional changes and weathered major economic storms. As with all alliances, it will strive to serve the interests of its members and seek to create peaceful coexistence for one of the world’s most important regions.

## Notes

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