ALLIANCES, PARTNERSHIPS AND ARCHITECTURES: 
CONFRONTING A HISTORICAL CROSSROADS

Paper Prepared for the International Studies Association (ISA)-Asia Conference

Hong Kong

16 June 2017

William T. Tow
Department of International Relations
Coral Bell School of Asia-Pacific Affairs
The Australian National University
For more than seventy years since the end of the Second World War, formal US security commitments in Europe and Asia have remained largely unchanged. This remained true notwithstanding substantial efforts initiated in both regions to apply institutionalism as the primary means for regional order-building. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) reaffirmed its postwar collective defence mission at two high-level meetings (the 2014 Wales Summit and the Warsaw Summit in 2016) but did so in conjunction with supporting a ‘rules-based European and global security architecture.’\(^1\) The European Union was the mainstay for pursuing such a vision. The US bilateral alliance network in Asia – known as the ‘San Francisco System’ – evolved from a grouping in which much of Asia’s economic interaction occurred during the Cold War to one much more adaptive to and co-existing with an increasingly complex array of multilateral politico-economic institutions which are exploring diverse order-building approaches for that region.\(^2\) US President Barack Obama’s ‘rebalancing strategy’ introduced in 2011 visualised a symbiotic relationship between US alliances and future Asia-Pacific tranquility and wealth: ‘At a time when the region is building a more mature security and economic architecture to promote stability and prosperity, US [strategic] commitment there is essential.’\(^3\)

The 2016 US presidential campaign, however, resulted in the election of an American chief executive who privileged retail over geopolitics. Donald Trump’s ‘America First’ campaign emphasised the need for the United States to adopt a more self-interested posture towards its alliances and to pressure its security partners to contribute more money and resources toward realising collective defence objectives and capabilities. Accordingly, the new administration began its term of office endorsing a ‘supportive but more transactional’

---


position on allies in Europe and Asia. Trump had already set the context for justifying this approach in a seminal foreign policy speech delivered in late April 2016:

We have spent trillions of dollars over time on planes, missiles, ships, equipment, building up our military to provide a strong defence for Europe and Asia. The countries we are defending must pay for the cost of this defence, and if not, the US must be prepared to let these countries defend themselves. We have no choice.

A year later, he reiterated this message at a NATO summit convened in Brussels. Speaking to a group of mostly stoney-faced European leaders, Trump argued that 23 out of 28 NATO member-nations ‘are still not paying what they should be paying and what they’re supposed to be paying for their defence … This is not fair to the people and taxpayers of the United States’. It remains to be seen what long-term effects his position will have on NATO’s cohesion and viability. Some key European allies such as Germany have speculated that while they will remain trans-Atlantic in orientation, they will explore ways to become more independent from the traditional postwar US-extended deterrence strategy which has buttressed NATO’s collective defence strategy since its inception nearly seven decades ago.7

Alliance politics directed toward Asia by President Trump, however, have varied substantially from what was his thinking as a presidential candidate. Prior to his election,

---

Trump levelled criticism against Japan and South Korea for not paying a fair share towards US defence efforts on their behalf and encouraged both countries to consider developing and deploying their own nuclear deterrents. He also castigated Chinese behaviour in the South China Sea and threatened to retaliate by applying trade sanctions against Beijing. As a newly inaugurated chief executive, however, the gravity of the North Korean nuclear threat has superseded Trump’s previous policy calculations, prompting him to dispatch Vice President Mike Pence, and Secretary of Defense, James Mattis to reassure Asia-Pacific allies and security partners that traditional US security commitments and a sustained American strategic presence in the region remain in place.

Indeed, by early June 2017, Mattis was delivering a major address at the annual Shangri-la Dialogue conference in Singapore, confirming that the US would maintain an ‘enduring commitment’ to the region. While he criticised China for sustaining its intensified military activities in the South China Sea, he praised Beijing’s efforts in working with Washington to exert increasing economic and diplomatic leverage against North Korea’s nuclear weapons and missile developments. The US Defense Secretary indicated that the Pentagon supported ‘in principle’ a US Senate Armed Services Committee ‘Asia Pacific Stability Initiative’ proposal to increase US military funding for operational capabilities in the region by US$7.5 billion over current budgetary allocations. While Mattis was speaking in Singapore, two US naval carrier task forces were simultaneously conducting naval manoeuvres with each other and with Japanese maritime units in waters proximate to the Korean Peninsula and US rotational forces were training and advising their Philippine counterparts to conduct wide-scale counter-terrorism operations in Mindanao. Independent observers could hardly be blamed for concluding that the Trump administration was
resurrecting at least some of the key military components of the Obama administration’s ‘rebalancing’ or ‘pivot’ strategy – a strategic approach which Trump had previously criticised as detrimental to American interests and which prompted him to withdraw US affiliation with the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in the early days of his own presidency.¹¹

The US has now arrived at historical crossroads in alliance politics as the Asia-Pacific’s strategic landscape is undergoing an enormous systemic transformation. A growing number of independent analysts argue that Washington is no longer capable or inclined to exercise decisive leadership in the region as it is incapable or unwilling to ‘spend the necessary money, energy and take risks to advance and protect those values’ it has traditionally promoted.¹² Growing divisions in American domestic politics are combining with a gradual re-distribution of global wealth and Washington’s geopolitical fatigue, these observers assert, to force the Trump administration to finish the job that his predecessor started of managing US global decline. Opposing this view, other respected American observers such as former US Secretary of State James Baker and US National Security Advisor Thomas Donilon maintain that US power will remain unparalleled for years to come. They point to such positive developments as US intelligence and military assets playing a decisive role in the imminent demise of the so-called Islamic State-caliphate in the Middle East, substantial increases in US exports (over 40 per cent) during the Obama years and the ‘shale revolution’ which has allowed the United States to surpass Saudi Arabia and Russia to become the country with the world’s largest recoverable oil resources.¹³

In Asia, US military power retains unparalleled technological proficiency and superior defence-in-depth by virtue of its far-flung basing systems in the region. China is strengthening and modernising its missile forces and naval reach but is not yet in a position to realistically contest American strategic capabilities in the region. Nor does it have anything commensurate to America’s regional alliance network. While advocating different means to achieving the same end, both Washington and Beijing appear to share a common interest in limiting North Korea’s ability to change the regional balance of power through its nuclear weapons and missile programs. China is clearly contesting traditional American ‘soft power’ in the region by spearheading or leading its own versions of multilateral cooperation. These include the One Belt One Road initiative, the founding of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership initiative. Such initiatives remain largely untested to date, however, and their future viability will depend on continued Chinese economic viability. China’s growing domestic debt problem, an increasingly rapid decline in fixed asset investments and possible long-term weaknesses in that country’s national productive growth rate due to a reluctance to liquidate sufficient numbers of state-owned enterprises could all combine to undercut Chinese economic growth and regional economic influence over the next decade. Yet the Trump administration’s decision to withdraw US membership from the TTP and its generally protectionist trade orientation could at least partially mitigate whatever strategic losses China might otherwise accrue if it is unable to deliver on its regional economic agendas.

Such developments are impacting our understanding of how ‘strategic architectures’ such as alliances, coalitions and partnerships work as we move further into the twenty-first century. Its status as the world’s arguably most dynamic and potentially most volatile area of the world makes the Asia-Pacific region an ideal test case for exploring how International Relations (IR) theory relating to international security will need to adjust and better facilitate that understanding. Three aspects for both theoretical and policy deliberation will be raised and briefly discussed here. First, the nature of US bilateral alliance politics is adapting as the classical rationales for underpinning the San Francisco System – extended deterrence and power balancing – are coming under greater challenge in the face of structural change taking

hold in the Asia-Pacific. Second, security ‘partnerships’ are emerging in Asia as both complements and alternatives to US alliance politics and as a new feature of other key regional players’ approaches to regional security. This is due to their comparatively greater flexibility in matching policy aims with collective national security resources at a time when consensus on mutual strategic interests is becoming more elusive and fragmented.

Third, the vision of developing successful multilateral security architectures and institutions for governing Asian security politics is coming under ever greater strain. The continued failure of such bodies as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum or the East Asia Summit to become integrally involved in – much less deal effectively with – such security dilemmas as the South China Sea and the Korean Peninsula or to command the loyalty of key regional security actors to any concrete body of rules or norms is becoming increasingly palpable. This factor, combined with President Trump’s clear disdain for multilateralism as a credible means for pursuing US national security interests and China’s traditional preference for negotiating its differences with its neighbours bilaterally, renders multilateral security politics to the backburner of Asia-Pacific security politics. These factors combine to shape this paper’s fundamental argument. Given their inherently transient and flexible character and their applicability to specific issue-areas as opportunistic and short-term instruments for policy management and alignment, strategic partnerships will emerge to be the primary architectures of choice for the shaping of contemporary Asia-Pacific strategic governance.

Changing Alliance Politics?

Early postwar alliance politics in the Asia-Pacific clearly matched classical realist assumptions about alliance politics as it relates to power balancing and security dilemmas in both a global and regional context. Internationally, the United States was locked into a hegemonic and arguably existential struggle with the Soviet Union for global predominance. Its alliance network in Asia was intended by the United States to reinforce its worldwide containment posture directed against Moscow and the communist bloc of states. Regionally, the US bilateral alliance network in Asia was designed to balance against China’s growing power, check North Korea and confront communist insurgency movements active throughout Southeast Asia. From Washington’s and its regional allies’ vantage point, Asian threats were readily perceptible even if a total consensus on how to meet them was sometimes lacking.
Bilateralism was reinforced when the rationales justifying the multilateral Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) failed to outlast the early stages of the Vietnam War. SEATO’s demise along with Britain’s withdrawal ‘East of Suez’ – the only other Western power other than the United States remaining strategically active in East Asia following the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 – led to the ‘Nixon Doctrine’ in 1969. This posture limited future US military intervention in the region to honouring its mostly bilateral extended deterrence commitments to its regional allies if a direct and external military attack were to be launched against them.¹⁵

Successive US presidencies confronted intermittent apprehensions in the region over possible US retrenchment from even this more tailored version of containment and not without reason. During the late 1970s, the Jimmy Carter administration nearly withdrew US ground forces from the Korean Peninsula only to be stymied by an American Congress fearful of newly emergent intelligence reports that concluded North Korean military strength was being underestimated by Washington. President George H. W. Bush authorised the US Defense Department to release two East Asian Strategy Reports in 1990 and 1992 justifying the search for early post-Cold War ‘peace dividends’ and the Bill Clinton administration followed up with its own versions (the East Asia Strategy Report and the United States Security Strategy for the East Asia-Pacific Region) in 1995 and 1998, respectively, that were designed to reassure by now wary Asia-Pacific allies who had witnessed the US prioritisation of Middle East and Kosovo as that decade evolved. By the time he assumed office, President Obama faced a serious confidence of crisis over American resolve in Asia and his ‘rebalancing’ or ‘pivot’ strategy was designed to show that Washington was capable and willing to simultaneously engage and contain a rising China, reassure its regional friends and allies while credibly demanding greater defence spending and burden-sharing from them, and

‘[move] beyond its traditional “hub and spokes” network of bilateral defence arrangements to a more complex and interdependent “web” arrangement in the Asia-Pacific’.

This agenda was arguably just too nuanced to ever be successful. By the time Trump entered the White House, China’s posture in the East and South China Seas had become sufficiently aggressive as to render outdated his predecessor’s ambitions to judiciously calibrate the China relationship. Within just months, moreover, he found himself playing what was arguably a supplicant’s role vis-à-vis Beijing. The US found itself highly dependent on President Xi Jinping’s and the Chinese government’s propensity to leverage North Korea in ways that America could not in an effort to curb Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs – if China deemed it in its own interests to do so. This, in turn, intensified the risks of the US pressuring China to modify its own positions and behaviour in the East and South China Seas.

Even more fundamentally, it exposed the changing nature and credibility of US extended deterrence strategy in both Northeast and Southeast Asia. If North Korea successfully developed a nuclear-armed intercontinental ballistic missile capable of reaching targets in the US homeland to complement its already prodigious stockpile of weapons of mass destruction that could be delivered to South Korean, Japanese and US bases in Northeast Asia via a substantial short and intermediate-range ballistic missile force, the credibility of US security commitments to its Japanese and South Korean allies would be tested in previously unimaginable ways. Trump was forced to quickly dispatch his Vice President, Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense to Tokyo and Seoul on missions of reassurance. South Korea’s May 2017 presidential election, however, produced a left-of-centre successful candidate who has since blocked the deployment of additional Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) missile defence units to those already deployed prior to his inauguration, effectively, if perhaps only temporarily, depriving the US of this specific means to reinforce its deterrence posture on the peninsula. No serious thoughts have been entertained by the key players in this ongoing Korean drama toward pursuing multilateral approaches for crisis resolution beyond intensifying UN sanctions against North Korea (which have had no substantial effect in modifying North Korea’s strategic behaviour).

---

Debate has intensified within at least some Japanese and South Korean policy circles over the imperative for both Japan and South Korea to develop and deploy independent nuclear deterrents in anticipation that US deterrence strategy could become degraded if American cities were to be held hostage to North Korean nuclear delivery systems and/or ballistic missile defence alternatives proved politically or technically infeasible. A nuclear Japan and South Korea, of course, was publicly contemplated by candidate Trump during the 2016 US presidential campaign.

Until recently, the Philippines and Thailand employed what Evelyn Goh has termed a ‘triangular hedging’ strategy to underwrite their own national security interests. Both countries are formally aligned with the US via bilateral treaties generated within the San Francisco System. Both, however, sought to engage with and ‘socialise’ China through strengthening their bilateral economic relations with that Asian giant and both cultivated quiet but tangible military-to-military ties with Beijing as part of a balancing strategy to avoid complete dependence on the US sustaining its power presence in Southeast Asia.

With Rodrigo Duterte coming to power in the Philippines in May 2016 and Thailand’s military junta solidifying its power following its May 2014 coup against an elected Thai civilian government, the triangular hedging strategy is under challenge in both countries. Duterte visited China in October 2016 and announced the Philippines military and economic ‘separation’ from the US and its alignment with China and Russia. He later

---


backtracked on this inflammatory rhetoric, indicating he was referring to developing greater Philippines independence from Washington rather than actually proclaiming a full divorce. Duterte has quietly shelved his country’s territorial dispute with China in the aftermath of the Permanent Court of Arbitration’s favourable ruling for the Philippines in October 2015. His increasing troubles in implementing an effective counter-terrorism campaign in Mindanao combined with several cordial conversations with President Trump (who is evidently less concerned with Duterte’s human rights record than was Obama) may further limit how independent Manila can actually be relative to its traditional strategic ties with the US.

Thailand has moved quickly to upgrade its strategic relationship with China, including moving ahead with the purchase of three Chinese submarines to patrol the Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Thailand, and ten Chinese tanks and a joint military production facility in Thailand to manufacture and repair weapons parts. At least one respected observer of Southeast Asian security politics has concluded that ‘[by] getting close to China, the junta has potentially increased Thai dependency on Beijing while being perceived as China’s ally by ASEAN states vying for claims over the territories in the south China Sea’. This observation may yet turn out to be premature, however, as President Trump – less focused on the junta’s human rights record and more on the need to resuscitate Thai-US bilateral trade and geopolitical relations – extended an invitation for Thailand’s Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha to visit the White House in early June 2017 (which the latter quickly accepted). Thailand may soon have an opportunity to move back to its historical and preferred status of ‘bending with the wind’ relative to the region’s two paramount powers.

Australia has not hedged on its overarching postwar geopolitical orientation, instead remaining as one of Washington’s most loyal treaty allies. A debate has nevertheless intensified within the broader Australian policy community over how feasible it will be to continue to cultivate simultaneously increasingly extensive politico-economic relations with China and ever more intimate strategic ties with the United States – a policy course followed by all Australian governments since commencing under Prime Minister John Howard in the

---


20 Remarks by Paul Chambers, lecturer of international affairs at Naraesuan University, to Foreign Correspondent’s Club of Thailand and reported by Wasamon Audjarint, ‘Submarine Deal Shows Thailand’s Growing Reliance on China,’ The Nation, 1 June 2017.
late 1990s. Recent disclosures of China’s efforts to penetrated Australian political, financial and educational institutions through financial donations provided by wealthy Chinese expatriates living in Australia and through the Chinese government’s efforts to exercise tight control over the significant number of Chinese students studying at Australian universities has sensitised Malcolm Turnbull’s government to the need to track the scope and intensity of Beijing’s efforts to project ever more substantial ‘soft power’ in Australia. Apart from a minor flare up over his predecessor’s agreement for the United States to accept a small number of refugees from Nauru and Manus, President Trump has expressed constant support for the Australian–American alliance. The 2017 Australia–US Ministerial Meeting (AUSMIN) resulted in both countries’ foreign and defence ministers concurring on the need to monitor and (where appropriate) to criticise China’s continued island-building in the South China Sea and to pressure Beijing to exercise greater leverage against North Korea’s nuclear force and ballistic missile developments. The American participants demonstrated their sensitivity to their Australian counterparts’ sustained efforts to underscore their country’s independent strategic outlooks and postures within the broader alliance framework, however, by declining to request that Australia join the US Navy in future Freedom of Navigation Operations conducted in South China Sea waters.

In this context and unlike US treaty allies in Southeast Asia, Australia has discounted any prospect of US alliance ‘abandonment’, even under a Trump administration who has served notice that it will pursue an ‘American First’ foreign policy. It has instead opted to engage Washington to the extent that Australian critics continue to warn about the dangers of the country running the risk of becoming ‘entrapped’ in future US-led conflicts on the basis of its historical fears of being abandoned by its ‘great and powerful’ senior ally (previously Britain and, since 1942, the United States). It is unlikely that any Australian politician


23 The various policy challenges and debates in Australia emerging as the Asia-Pacific region’s structural change intensifies is ably summarised and analysed by Brendan Taylor,
residing in ‘The Lodge’ would re-orient her or his country’s foreign policy to truly distance Australia from core US strategic interests – a posture similar to Japan as the Asia-Pacific’s other outlying maritime power.

More Prominent Strategic Partnerships?

As threat perceptions and responses to them transmute more rapidly in the Asia-Pacific’s contemporary security environment, policymakers in the region have sought other instrumentalities to complement or even to supplant traditional alliance politics. ‘Strategic partnerships’ constitute one type of mechanism that has become increasingly acceptable for this purpose.

In their comprehensive discussion of strategic partnerships, Ian Hall and David Envall have noted that defining this concept is complicated by their rapid proliferation and changing nature, especially in the post-Cold War Asia-Pacific milieu.24 One characteristic that shapes most interpretations underlying the partnership syndrome is a combined sense of limited focus and nimbleness in purpose. Some analysts therefore concentrate on the ‘systemic’ properties underpinning the partnership approach which invariably feature low commitment costs and an application to a specifically defined issue-area.25 Others stress the comparative informality and non-binding aspects of strategic partnership compared to their more explicit alliance counterparts. Unlike the latter typology, security partnerships are less ‘threat-centric’ than issue-driven and less committed to share norms or values than to the expediency of achieving a mutually strategic aim with as little cost or resources expended as possible to realise that objective. Accordingly, strategic partnerships are inherently transitory. However,

they are capable of morphing into more permanent arrangements over time if other mutual interests are recognised and pursued.26

Strategic partnerships have been a long-standing feature in Asia-Pacific security politics, stemming as far back as the early to mid-1990s when Russia and China forged informal modes of strategic collaboration in response to what both Moscow and Beijing viewed to be a need to balance the prospect of US hegemony in Eurasia. Ironically, Chinese President Jiang Zimen and US President Clinton employed the same term when proclaiming higher levels of Sino-American economic and political collaboration later in that decade. As could be reasonably intimated from these early cases, the majority of partnerships have been bilateral in nature (again, underscoring the economics of limiting gains or public goods to the fewest number of participants possible). They can be distinguished from more recent ‘minilateral’ security groupings that have appeared in the Asia-Pacific around the same time by lacking the institutional grounding of longer-standing and formal bilateral security treaties as a basis for expanding security collaboration among minilateral actors.

From a US policy perspective, recently established strategic partnerships it has pursued have usefully complemented the San Francisco System. This has been especially true as its more formal bilateral alliance network in Asia has become increasingly tenuous in the aftermath of Washington and its allies realising that the clearly acknowledged original general purpose of this alliance system – containing an all-encompassing and potentially existential threat posed by ‘international communism’ – succeeded in its intended mission.27 No other overriding purpose has yet emerged to replace containment as an alliance network rationale, notwithstanding China’s recent turn toward projecting more aggressive policies in various Asia-Pacific locales. This situation has led to questions about the continued relevance of the ‘hub-and-spokes’ hierarchy of alliance status which has historically underpinned the

27 A term embodied by US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, one of the key architects of US postwar containment strategy.
San Francisco System. As one influential study observed when the Obama administration was being implemented:

As the United States rebalances to Asia, it will confront a rapidly evolving regional security environment that is no longer solely defined by the US ‘hub and spoke’ alliance system. Instead, a more diverse array of bilateral security ties is emerging among Asian countries. Regional actors are integrating with each other in unprecedented ways … [Asia-Pacific] governments have begun hedging against [regional security] uncertainties by deepening engagement with like-minded states to diversify their political, security and economic relationships.28

This trend played brilliantly into the Obama administration’s rebalancing logic: the US could sustain a major regional security presence even if ‘softer’ treaty allies such as the Philippines and Thailand were gravitating away from the US over differences in national values or in the interest of forging more independent national security identities. If a US–India strategic partnership or US–Singapore counterpart could be nurtured on the basis of the clear strategic benefits each of those associations would bring to that cause (greater India–Japan–US strategic coordination providing more genuine power balancing against China, or US access to Singaporean bases delivering more effective American coverage of maritime Southeast Asia’s key straits and littorals), all the better. Even closer security ties with Vietnam were cultivated – a development which was unthinkable for previous US administrations following the US military withdrawal and subsequent Vietnamese reunification in the mid-1970s.

How this process will fare under the Trump administration’s ‘America First’ posture is highly uncertain. The extent to which newly minted US security ‘partners’ in Asia are willing to purchase big ticket weapons systems or to fund the hosting of US forces deployed even temporarily in their vicinities may be as – or more – relevant to the future viability of American security partnerships in the Asia-Pacific than whatever their current strategic purpose or future strategic rationales for such collaboration might be. Complicating this calculation even more is to what extent Trump could be ‘played’ by China over such issues as

North Korean nuclear weapons, mitigating the appeal of other strategic partnerships in the
president’s mind, notwithstanding what his key national security advisors may or may not
think. The evident marriage of theoretical logic ingrained in the Obama administration’s
support with the patient and long-term development of selected strategic partnerships may
ultimately give way to more short-term calculations and adoption of policy options driven by
President Trump’s need to be viewed as solving what past common wisdom predicated was
an intractable strategic challenge of neutralising Pyongyang’s threatening behaviour, eluding
the resolve of both the capacity of traditional alliance politics and strategic partnerships.

**The Demise of Multilateral Security Politics?**

Successive US administrations have oscillated over the relative viability or futility of
embracing multilateral institutions or supporting even more sweeping ‘architectural’
approaches to Asia-Pacific order-building. President Clinton’s Assistant Secretary of State
for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Winston Lord, departed from his predecessors’ scepticism
over multilateral security politics by endorsing meaningful US participation in the ASEAN
Regional Forum as complementary rather than contradictory to the San Francisco System.29
While George W. Bush’s foreign policy became consumed with the ‘global war on terror’
and the US military intervention against Iraq’s Saddam Hussein, independent American and
allied analysts continued to explore and propagate the advantages of Washington pursuing a
‘convergent security’ strategy in Asia – integrating the best of bilateralism and
multilateralism to advance American interests and to provide strategic reassurance to Asia-
Pacific allies and partners by continuing US support for and involvement in regionally
indigenous plans to shape a stable and prosperous regional setting.30 Other analysts writing in
the region of concern went even further than advocating the integration of realist and
neoliberal approaches to Asia-Pacific order-building, insisting that ASEAN and other

---

29 See Statement of Ambassador Winston Lord, Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau of East
Asian and Pacific Affairs, before the US House International Relations Committee, Asia and
Pacific Subcommittee, 11 June 1996,

multilateral groupings could ‘socialise’ great powers and other Asian players into forming a credible regional security community over time.\(^{31}\) There was no shortage of critics of this argument. Emanating mostly from IR theory’s neorealist faction, they insisted that any order-building constructs or alleged norm adherence shaping them was illusionary and would inevitably be subjugated to great power interests and competition over time.\(^{32}\)

President Obama’s rebalancing strategy represented a clear endorsement of what has been termed collectively as ‘bilateral–multilateral’, ‘multilateral–bilateral’, and ‘the bilateral and multilateral’ variants to Asia-Pacific regional security and order-building.\(^{33}\) As Brendan Taylor has described them, such variants embrace the general notion that synergies between bilateral and multilateral modes of security cooperation exist which, if managed successfully, could result in greater regionwide security payoffs. This could be realised in several ways. One is for the US to ‘enrich’ its bilateral alliance system via increasing policy consultation and coordination with regional allies. This, in turn, could ‘spill over’ to generate a minilateralisation or ‘multilateralisation’ of politico-economic security collaboration. The TPP initiative is illustrative, containing geopolitical as well as merely trade dimensions to the type of collaboration that was envisioned (in its absence China has arguably stepped into the void as the unqualified leader of Asian organisational approaches to regional trade and financing initiatives). Some analysts have asserted that the minilateral approach is most effective when involving trilateral modes of cooperation as embodied in the Australia–Japan–US Trilateral Strategic Dialogue.\(^{34}\) Others have centred on the emerging phenomenon of


\(^{34}\) Michael Green, ‘Strategic Asian Triangles’, in Saadia M. Pekkanen, John Ravenhill and Rosemary Foot (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the International Relations of Asia* (Oxford:
proliferating inter-state security associations cited earlier in this paper – which could also be
demed as ‘spiderweb bilateralism’ featuring interlocking bilateral agreements to collaborate
on specific issue-areas. Over time such associations could generate sufficient confidence-
building precedents to morph into more concrete multilateral cooperation. It is most clear
that rebalancing was the embodiment of an American determination to reconstitute its
identity as an Asia-Pacific power integrally engaged in that region’s order-building process at
a time when the Asia-Pacific is undergoing unprecedented structural change.

Equally obvious is the Trump administration’s refutation of this broader agenda and
an American return to a preference for hardline adherence to rigid alliance-based bilateralism.
North Korea’s progress on developing a second strike nuclear capability that credibly targets
major population centres in the US homeland has fundamentally altered the calculus of
extended deterrence for US strategic planning and behaviour in Asia. In the absence of
tangible arms control or nuclear disarmament negotiations directed toward the Korean
Peninsula or toward Northeast Asia at-large, the Trump administration seems to have
identified no other credible option for the US to rationalise how bilateral and multilateral
approaches can be integrated in ways required for preserving what was a postwar status quo
of unquestioned American strategic pre-eminence in the Asia-Pacific. This is particularly true
insofar as multilateralism and community-building that includes a substantial US role appears
largely incompatible with the Jacksonian thinking underlying Trump’s support for an
‘America First’ foreign policy.

Conclusion

Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 758–74. Extensive analysis has also been offered on
previously elusive but logically based US–Japan–South Korea security cooperation. See a
 compilation of articles under the heading ‘Hard to Align’ in Global Asia 12, no. 1 (Spring
2017), pp. 6–56.

35 The ‘spiderweb’ idea is developed in-depth by Amitav Acharya, ‘Regional Institutions and
Alagappa (ed.), Asian Security Order: Instrumental and Normative Features (Stanford, CA:

Foreign Affairs 96, no. 2 (March/April 2017), pp. 2–7.
Given the Trump administration’s strategic orientation to date, strategic partnerships represent the most likely basis on which the United States will conduct its alliance politics over the short-term. Absent greater geopolitical focus or an overarching strategic doctrinal approach, such partnerships are at least able to link immediate security challenges involving the Korean Peninsula and China’s challenge to US maritime supremacy in the Asia-Pacific’s key waterways with American efforts to work with selected allies and partners to preclude crisis escalation to tragic proportions. Even this prospect, however, is clouded by allies’ domestic politics which are beyond the United States’ ability to control (a progressive South Korean president temporarily blocking THAAD deployments in South Korea or an authoritarian president in the Philippines miscalculating the degree and intensity of jihadist threats and activities in the southern part of his country). Even if domestic trends in those countries were to stabilise in ways that favoured US interests, it is questionable if the Trump administration’s learning curve for translating contending alliance and liberal-institutionalist theories into consistent and effective US policy behaviour is up to the task.

To end on a more optimistic note, it is encouraging that President Trump is scheduled to visit Asia in late 2017, providing high-level American presentation at the annual multilateral summits hosted by the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit. It may be that he can translate his propensity for applying the ‘art of the deal’ into genuinely contributing to regional order-building within a multilateral context by lending his support to the purpose and rationales for these two entities. But given that long-term confidence-building is a vital pre-condition for such institutions to succeed, it remains unclear to what extent the America First can really be reconciled with the security community-building processes integral to allowing multilateral security politics to effectively complement the more zero-sum nature of bilateral security approaches.