

Alliances on Balance of Power in International Peace and Security in the East Asian Hub and Spokes

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Abstract

This study sought to evaluate the workings of alliances in the exercise of Balance of Power (BOP) in international relations, importantly whether BOP undermines or enhances international peace and security in reference to East Asian ‘Hub and Spokes’. The discourse on international peace is a very delicate area of inquiry among scholars of global studies and practitioners. Available new thinking experts know peace as a situation that represents an occurrence when human people are endowed with real human dignity that depicts their life and they are able to carry out their daily transactions without regard to who they are, where they are, and what they do. This study used three objectives as a guide to answer whether BOP undermines or enhances desired peace and security. The objectives of this study are 1) examining nature of security alliance in the global dispensation and why they have existed, 2) establishing whether alliances on balance of power undermine or enhance international peace and security, and 3) evaluation of alliances in relation to East Asian ‘Hub and Spokes’. The study employed a desktop research, using available relevant literature to the research surrounding the objective themes. Conclusions indicate; these states seem to forget what they should do in anarchic international system; balancing the most powerful states or balancing the most threatening ones, no country claims to form military alliances to contain China in Asia as had happened to the Soviet Union, and other realists suggest soft balancing under unipolarity.

Keywords: Balance of Power, Global Security, Hub and Spokes, International Peace, International Relations, International Security, Military Alliances, Non-Military Alliance, Unipolarity

1. Introduction

The concept of Balance of Power (BOP) has been central to international relations theory, particularly in understanding the dynamics of conflict and cooperation between states. BOP refers to a situation in which power is distributed among states

in such a way that no single state becomes dominant, thereby preventing the outbreak of major conflicts (Mearsheimer, 2014). In the context of East Asia, the "Hub and Spokes" alliance system, largely shaped by the United States, plays a critical role in the region's security framework. The U.S. serves as the central "hub," with its bilateral security arrangements with countries such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan forming the "spokes" that collectively maintain regional stability (Ikenberry, 2011). However, the evolving dynamics of these alliances and their relationship to regional power shifts, particularly the rise of China, have prompted debates about the effectiveness of BOP in maintaining peace and security in East Asia.

The theoretical foundation of BOP and its application to international security is well established in global literature. Scholars argue that BOP prevents unilateral dominance and reduces the likelihood of large-scale wars (Waltz, 2010). In this view, alliances based on BOP principles help preserve stability by deterring aggressive actions from emerging powers. However, others contend that such systems may not always guarantee peace, especially when they lead to misperceptions or provoke regional arms races (Gilpin, 2011). The application of BOP in East Asia, where the U.S. is the dominant external power, is particularly contentious due to the region's complex security environment, characterized by competing interests and historical tensions.

Focusing on East Asia, the "Hub and Spokes" alliance system has been both praised and criticized. On the one hand, the U.S.-led alliances are viewed as critical to containing potential threats from North Korea and China (Cha, 2018). These alliances are believed to offer deterrence and foster cooperation among regional powers, thus contributing to regional security. On the other hand, these alliances may exacerbate tensions by framing the U.S. as an external force in the region, potentially intensifying Sino-U.S. competition and fostering insecurity (Callahan, 2017). The rise of China as a global power has raised questions about the sustainability of the current alliance structure and whether it may lead to a new Cold War-like environment in East Asia (Zhao, 2019).

At the local level, scholars have highlighted how individual states perceive the "Hub and Spokes" system in terms of their own security interests. In Japan and South Korea, these alliances are seen as essential for countering threats from North Korea and maintaining a balance against China's growing influence (Svärd, 2023). However, regional actors like China and Russia view the U.S.-led alliances with skepticism, often framing them as a tool for encircling China and undermining its rise (Zhang, 2021). Local analyses have suggested that these alliances, while beneficial

in providing security guarantees, might also limit the autonomy of the countries involved, pushing them into a security dilemma where they must align with the U.S. even if it conflicts with their own regional interests (Burgess, 2020).

In sum, the above through our observation suggests that, literature suggests while the "Hub and Spokes" system plays a significant role in maintaining regional stability in East Asia, it also generates complexities that challenge the traditional BOP theory. These dynamics necessitate further exploration to assess whether such alliances enhance or undermine international peace and security in a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape.

In setting off to discuss the above question, it is important to understand meaningful definitions of relevant concepts used herein as the study underscores the nature of security alliance in the global dispensation and why they have existed. This discussion will then move to ascertain whether alliances on balance of power undermine or enhance international peace and security; and finally, this discourse will survey these alliances in relation to East Asian 'Hub and Spokes'.

Without definition, peace is attached to why it is required and its effects thus knowing peace is related to precondition of any curiosity about finding 'good peace' and distinguishing it from a 'bad peace'. International peace is a very delicate subject among scholars of international relations and likewise to practitioners in the field. It does not have one meaning hence defining it creates a divide. On the one hand therefore there exists traditional thinking to peace which was directed only to avoid the war and because of being unaware of the peace removing ongoing process based on social and economic inequalities, it was never successful. The concern being the status quo, but counts on the same goal such as preservation of unequal conditions, which doesn't make peace universal and not all inclusive. It rarely calms down inflamed conditions. New thinking experts know peace as a representing situation in which all human beings are endowed with real human dignity and human life whoever they are. This means they can carry out their dailies; education, health, employment, equality before the law, free elections among others and are safe with freedoms pertaining to human existence. In this context, any agent or biological factors expose these components to damage, and are threatening to peace (Vankovska & Wiberg, 2002).

On the contrary, peace is attached to why it is required and its effects thus knowing peace is related to precondition of any curiosity about finding good peace and distinguishing it from a bad peace. It is thought the most important thing is whether peace should simply be defined as the absence of war and direct violence (negative

peace), or whether it involves both the means of absence of war and direct violence in the presence of social justice (positive peace) (Kurtz, 1999). Peace is a political condition that guarantees social justice and stability through institutions, procedures and the formal and non-formal norms (Miller, 2005).

Peace is also used synonymously with international security. The crux of security for our purposes is captured by Hedley Bull: ‘Security in international politics (Bull, 1995) means no more than safety: either objective safety, meaning safety which actually exists, or subjective safety, meaning safety which is felt or experienced.’ While understanding the term international security, it is also good to ask security in (or of) what? The answer to this (Bull, 1995) recognizes the vulnerability of humans who live in social circumstances. An isolated individual is inviolable from attack by other people: Robinson Crusoe knew no fear of this kind until Man Friday arrived on the island. The idea of security is directed at the problem of harmful acts by other people, either fellow citizens or foreigners and not the forces of nature.

Jackson-Preece (2011) however, suggests knowing ‘security from what?’ which he uses Hobbes’ ‘state of nature’ every human being as a potential threat because of the struggle for survival limited resources and ‘war of all against all’ as an explanation. He continues to point, one human being may be stronger and cunning, but each is capable of inflicting harm. It implies there can never be complete trust and mutual security among human beings whose condition is precarious even in the most hospitable of circumstances. International security, therefore, is what we often refer to as pluralists or rationalists, in a world characterized by a mixture of conflict and cooperation. The international security paradigm operates somewhat differently to either the national or human security paradigms. Whereas both national and human security imagines insecurity as an external threat, there is no similar external dynamic within international security.

The current security challenges and risks in a global security environment are of a military and non-military nature; however, the majority in close evaluation is of a non-military nature. Alliances are formed between two or more countries to counter a common adversary or to deter a likely aggressive state or inter-alliances. Nature of security is determined further by states conception of their safety in the international environment which is indeed a theoretical issue. Speaking international relations is about talking alliances and their role in world politics and international relations has covered it in many articles and analyses. In reference to East Asian military alliances, the understanding of spoke is an explanation of a center of a wheel in which wire rods connect within the military alliance formation.

2. Methodology

This study applied a desktop research approach making it appropriate to use qualitative research methods and document-based research design. A desktop study, also known as secondary data analysis, allows for the exploration of existing literature, official documents, and policy reports, offering a comprehensive understanding for this case, the U.S.-led "Hub and Spokes" alliance system in East Asia within the Balance of Power (BOP) framework. This design is particularly suitable given the availability of extensive academic, governmental, and think-tank literature on the subject (Hart, 2018).

This study used secondary data, selecting documents that provide in-depth analysis of the U.S. alliances with Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, as well as the regional dynamics involving China. These sources include academic journal articles, policy briefs, government documents, international relations reports, and historical treaties, all focusing on East Asian security, BOP theory, and alliance politics.

Content analysis is normally employed to systematically evaluate the selected documents. This method helps identify key themes, patterns, and relationships between the "Hub and Spokes" system and regional security outcomes. The analysis in such focuses on understanding of how these alliances are perceived by involved states, the role of external powers, and the implications of these alliances on regional stability. By organizing the data into thematic categories, this approach provides a clear understanding of the impact of these alliances on East Asian peace and security (Krippendorff, 2018). This methodology allows the study to efficiently utilize existing materials while ensuring rigorous analysis of complex geopolitical issues.

3. Analysis and Discussion

To address the objectives of the study, data will be presented narratively.

3.1. Nature of security alliance in the global dispensation and why they have existed

Security alliances have been triggered by numerous factors globally over many decades; the sympathy of other powers concerned and interests too, starting from Westphalia peace of 1648 to WWI, WWII, and Cold War among a few major unprecedented altercations. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) a total of twenty-three countries doubled their military spending in real terms during this century. They all differ in terms of size, development, geographical location, economic output and access to resources (Carbonnier & Wagner, 2015).

Most of the countries from the former two regions are members of NATO (Clowes & Choros-Mrozowska, 2015). In contrast defense spending increased in non-NATO countries such as China, Russia and India, but also in Saudi Arabia reflecting the instability and ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. Global military expenditure (Shah, 2013) stands at over \$1.7 trillion in annual expenditure at current prices for 2012. It fell by around half a percent compared to 2011 — the first fall since 1998. Summarizing some key details from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)'s Yearbook 2013 summary on military expenditure; World military expenditure in 2012 is estimated to have reached \$1.756 trillion, which is a 0.4 per cent decrease in real terms than in 2011. The USA, with its massive spending budget, has long been the principal determinant of the current world trend, often accounting for close to half of all the world's military expenditure. The effects of global financial crisis and the post-Iraq/Afghanistan military operations have seen a decline in its spending, now accounting for 39% of spending in 2012.

It is confirmed that from 2011 global defense spending fell with most of the reductions occurring in North America, Western and Central Europe and Oceania and this was partially due to the effects of the global recession (Perlo-Freeman et al., 2014).

The current security challenges and risks (Ivancik et al., 2014) in global security environment are of a military and non-military nature; however, the majority in close evaluation are of a non-military nature. These security challenges and risks are closely interconnected; consequently, the situation in one area can seriously affect the situation in other areas. Simultaneously, most of the current challenges and risks in one region of the world are also common to the adjacent regions, or we could even say, also in many outlying areas. This merely underlines the complexity of the contemporary international security environment.

Alliances play a central role (Dwivedi, 2012) in international relations because they are seen to be an integral part of statecraft. Alliances are formed between two or more countries to counter a common adversary or to deter a likely aggressive state or inter-alliances. Their focus in the theory of international relations is understandable because one of the central foreign policy debates in every country centers on the issue of, which nation to ally with and for how long, among strong and weak nations. Weak states enter into alliance when they need protection against strong states (mechanism for self-defense). Alternately, strong states enter into alliances as a counter to other strong states (through maintaining balance of power). In all, states expect their allies to help militarily and diplomatically in war and conflict situations. Moreover, alliances are best explained theoretically according to Stephen Walt (1987), who

asserts balance of power theory of alliances as the main tool used in the discipline of international relations to explain the formation and duration of alliances which on the contrary is explained by a concept 'balance of threat' (BoT), which in the end turns out to be a theory.

Nature of security is determined further by a state's conception of its safety in the international environment, which are indeed theoretical issues. According to the realist theory, states are the central political actors and their actions are governed by perceptions of sovereignty, national interest, and security and how to yield survival of the state as a discrete actor. This pushes states to understand threat (a perceptual concept) and security (free from threats and dangers). The scenario altogether necessitates some options; alliance - promise of mutual military assistance (Snyder, 1990), coalition - set of members acting concertedly (Fedder, 1968), ententes - partnership with no firm commitments (Snyder, 1990), alignments - policy cooperation (Snyder, 1990), balancing - seeking for states that share in fear (Waltz, 1979), and bandwagoning - joining the stronger side (Schroeder, 1994). Many theories have been advanced to explain alliance formation. Liska (1962) affirms it is impossible to speak of international relations without referring to alliances. Fox and Fox (1967) again posits theoretically that alliances are military compacts for scholars of international politics.

Digressing from the previous security arrangements, the end of the cold war marked the beginning of a new era, characterized by economic liberalization and political freedom under stimulated waves of regional integration around the world. The North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) replaced the Canada-United States Free Trade Agreement of which Mexico became a part in 1994. A number of countries from the former Soviet East bloc signed association agreements and later joined the European Union (EU). The expansion of these two trade blocs together with the Association of South East Nations (ASEAN) connected the world and generated increased economic opportunities. All of them vary in terms of scale, duration, strategic approach and in their outcomes. The projection and/or defense against acts of war and aggression require a range of resources (Clowes & Choros-Mrozowska, 2015). Underlying trading together is an indication of threat and a solution to it.

3.2. Alliances on balance of power in international peace and security

The question as to whether alliances undermine or enhance is about asking why peace and security alliances exist in the first place. Alliances are a central and constant phenomenon in international politics throughout history (Bergsmann, 2001). Whether we look at ancient periods, at the Middle Ages or at the centuries of Bismarck or Napoleon, we find states forming alliances. George Liska said, speaking international

relations is about talking alliances. Prematurely to say, these alliances enhance security and peace in as much as they seem to undermine.

Reflecting this important role of alliances in world politics, the literature in international relations has produced quite an impressive list of interesting studies, articles and analyses in this area of research (Bergsmann, 2001). However, it seems striking that despite this scholarly assiduity not much thought has been given to the question “What is a military alliance?” (Walt, 1993). Now one might argue that there exists such a broad consensus about the concept that no further analysis is needed. But exactly the opposite is the case. The concept of alliance in the literature of international relations is ambiguous and amorphous (Liska, 1968, as cited in Edwin Fedder, 1968). Five years later, Holsti et al. came to the same conclusion by observing “the lack of an accepted definition of alliance” (Holsti et. al., 1973). The lingering discourse by most has been escapist trend skewed towards defining despite alliances having a significant part in global peace.

“No man is an island, entire of itself,” wrote the English poet John Donne in 1624 a statement that best describes why alliances in the midst of mistrust and suspicions. George Washington, in his Farewell Address of 1796, warned his countrymen that they should not “entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition,” an admonition that has come to be viewed as a warning against “foreign entanglements” (Spalding & Garrity, 1996). But while he urged Americans to take advantage of their country’s geographical isolation from the world’s troubles, he was not advancing an argument for political isolationism (Lagon & Lind, 1991). If anything, he was anticipating (and sharing) the sentiment of British Prime Minister Lord Palmerston, who, speaking in the House of Commons on March 1, 1848, avowed that “We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow” (Ratcliffe, 2016).

Alliances have been a fact of international political life since antiquity (Livius, 2016), they perform a number of different functions for states, often at the same time, which makes categorization difficult. The degrees to which alliances are institutionalized also differ. Most alliances throughout history have been loose (Moore, 1999). Alliances exist to advance their members’ collective interests by combining their capabilities which can be industrial and financial as well as military to achieve military and political success. Ad hoc alliances often contain strange bed-fellows. Britain, a constitutional monarchy with laws passed by Parliament, established common cause with autocratic Russia to defeat Napoleon. Similarly, in World War II, the Anglo - American democracies found it necessary, if they were to defeat Nazi

Germany, to join forces with Stalin's totalitarian state, which had been their enemy in fact, as Robert Osgood (1968) argues, "next to accretion, the most prominent function of alliances has been to restrain and control allies."

3.3. Evaluating alliances in relation to East Asian 'Hub and Spokes'

The terminologies used here in reference to East Asian military alliances are applications of how the English meaning of the two work in a military sense. Understanding a spoke as an explanation of a Centre of a wheel in which wire rods connect to the outer edge illustrate spoke relationship, where the hub (the axle) is the USA or rather the Centre from which spokes rotate around. This is very descriptive of geopolitical proxy strategy employed by superpowers.

Shelton (2016) explains these relationships thus; in the wake of World War II and in the earliest moments of a dawning Cold War, the U.S.A sought the opportunity for lasting peace through the diplomatic arrangements, alliances, and partnerships it established to provide regional stability and security. Much debate exists among international relations theorists concerning the type of alliance structure established in the post-war Asian-Pacific region. Whether as individual nations or as a collective body, the Asian-Pacific states lacked the means to deter external threats. The United States, as the new hegemonic leader of the free world, yoked itself with the disproportionate economic and security burdens of regional bilateral alliances in an effort to contain Communism. The burden of these bilateral arrangements "embodied a distinctive bargain: unusual and asymmetrical U.S. economic concessions to the host nation, particularly with respect to trade and investment access, in return for unusual and asymmetrical security concessions from the United States" to guarantee U.S. regional military presence and geopolitical influence in the unstable region. These bilateral treaties and agreements were designed as a network of "hub-and-spokes".

In other words, the "Hub and Spokes" security architecture became known as 'The San Francisco System' networking bilateral alliance pursued by the United States in East Asia: The United States as a 'hub', and other dependent states of Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Australia as 'spokes'.

The study examines the implications of the U.S.-led "Hub and Spokes" alliance system in East Asia within the framework of the Balance of Power (BOP) theory. Findings from the literature suggest a complex relationship between such alliances and regional peace and security, highlighting both positive and negative aspects. On the one hand, the "Hub and Spokes" system, where the U.S. plays a central role with allies like Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, has contributed significantly to regional

stability by deterring potential aggressors, particularly North Korea and China (Cha, 2018). The military presence of the U.S. in East Asia provides a credible deterrent against the expansion of regional threats and reinforces the U.S.'s strategic interests in containing Chinese influence (Cha, 2018). This aligns with traditional BOP theory, which argues that balancing against a rising power promotes stability by preventing any one state from achieving dominance (Mearsheimer, 2014).

However, a significant portion of the literature also points to the unintended consequences of these alliances. Critics argue that the “Hub and Spokes” structure may exacerbate tensions rather than alleviate them. Specifically, the U.S.-centric nature of these alliances could provoke China, which perceives the alignment as an attempt to contain its growing power (Zhang, 2021). This perception of encirclement may lead to heightened regional insecurity, as China seeks to counterbalance the U.S.'s influence, often through military and diplomatic means (Zhao, 2019). The alignment of states under U.S. leadership might also foster security dilemmas, particularly for countries like South Korea and Japan, which face the difficult challenge of balancing their relationships with the U.S. while managing complex relations with China (Burgess, 2020). As such, rather than promoting peaceful cooperation, these alliances can contribute to an arms race or escalate regional rivalries.

The findings also highlight the role of local perceptions and regional actors in shaping the impact of these alliances. For instance, in South Korea and Japan, the U.S. alliances are viewed as essential for maintaining national security in the face of North Korean aggression and China’s rising influence (Cha, 2018). Yet, these countries also recognize the limitations of their security dependence on the U.S., particularly as U.S.-China relations become more strained. As a result, there is a growing debate within these states about the need to balance their security obligations with the desire for greater strategic autonomy (Burgess, 2020).

4. Conclusion

Realism, especially balance of power theory, is in crisis after the Cold War (Elman, 2008). States seem to forget what they should do balancing the most powerful states or balancing the most threatening ones in the anarchic international system (Walt, 1987). Under US primacy, the secondary powers fail to balance militarily against the United States with either internal or external efforts (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2008).

Facing a rising China, no country claims to form military alliances to contain China, a potential threat, as had happened to the Soviet Union during the Cold War

(Shambaugh, 2004). The empirical puzzle is why is it that states do not choose traditional balance of power strategies, especially alliance formation, to deal with either US primacy or China's rise? Theoretically, why does traditional balance of power theory lose its explanatory power after the Cold War? (He, 2012).

William Wohlforth and Stephen Brooks claim that a military alliance against the hegemon is "inoperative" under American primacy because the world is "out of balance" under unipolarity (Waltz, 2000). Other realists suggest soft balancing to explain the lack of military balancing under unipolarity. Soft balancing that is countervailing US primacy by nonmilitary means is counted by some as a signal of preparation for future military alignments against US hegemony (He, 2012).

In conclusion, the study suggests that while the "Hub and Spokes" system has contributed to regional stability in some respects, it has also generated tensions that undermine broader regional peace and security. These findings underscore the need for a more nuanced understanding of how alliances shaped by BOP dynamics influence the security environment in East Asia.

Future research related to this study could explore the evolving dynamics of the "Hub and Spokes" alliance system in East Asia as the geopolitical landscape continues to shift, particularly with the growing influence of China and potential changes in U.S. foreign policy. A comparative study could be conducted to assess how other regions with similar alliance structures, such as NATO in Europe or the Middle East, experience the effects of BOP dynamics on regional security. Additionally, future studies could delve deeper into the perspectives of non-aligned states in East Asia, examining how countries like Indonesia or Malaysia perceive the U.S.-led alliances and how they balance relations with both China and the U.S. These studies would help further understand the long-term implications of BOP theory in a multipolar world order and provide more nuanced insights into the impact of foreseeable alliances on international peace and security in the 21st century.

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