



The Emergence of Military Alliances in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

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This paper examines the possibilities and conditions for the formation of military alliances in the future, providing strategic analysts with a template to analyze key and relevant trends. It provides an operational definition of alliances, before examining the drivers of alliance formation and of alliance cohesion. These discussions help establish a set of criteria required to analyze the future of alliance formation. The fourth section builds a set of guiding questions for strategic analysts and discusses several likely challenges for NATO. In terms of potential adversaries, the key challenge for NATO is to gauge the growing relationship between Russia, China, Iran and North Korea. Another issue to monitor is the

potential evolution of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which could serve as the springboard for bilateral or minilateral alliances in the future, depending on the evolution of the relations between Russia and China. A third challenge will be to identify the proper cooperation format with the evolving alliance formats in the Pacific. A good case can be made that NATO should be “with” the Pacific instead of “in” the Pacific, but there is a real risk to trigger security dilemmas in the Indo-Pacific if NATO becomes too visibly and explicitly present. NATO leaders should then carefully consider the nature and the extent of NATO’s relationship with like-minded alliances in the Indo-Pacific region.

Keywords: Alliances, NATO, Foresight, Russia, China, Security dilemma

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper examines the possibilities and conditions for the formation of military alliances in the future, providing strategic analysts with a template to analyze key and relevant trends. It provides an operational definition of alliances, before examining the drivers of alliance formation and of alliance cohesion.

For the purpose of this paper, alliances are defined as *“a formal or informal association of states for the (threat of) use of military force, in specified circumstances, against actors external to the alliance”*. The definition emphasizes the centrality of the role of military power, the outward-looking dimension of alliances and is flexible regarding the number of participants to the alliance, its duration, and the specific conditions of the use of military force. Hence, this definition has the advantage of capturing some core features of alliances, without necessarily mirror-imaging and assuming that all future alliances will be looking like NATO.

The core drivers of alliance formation are balancing, bandwagoning and tethering. In all cases, alliances are a way to mitigate a security competition. Alliances are more likely to deter when they can signal credibility through the existence of reputation issues for states and institutionalized mechanisms, creating sunk costs in the case of alliance abandonment. Alliances are less likely to deter when their institutional design no longer reflects political realities, when alliance management exacerbates (instead of tames) the moral hazard problem and when they trigger a security dilemma.

The reliability of alliances is an important issue of alliance management. States with a reputation for

low reliability might find it more difficult to establish, or to join, an alliance. Alliance management needs to navigate the tension between the alliance security dilemma (fear of abandonment versus fear of entanglement) and the alliance strategic dilemma (military integration versus political autonomy). Overall, economic entanglement complicates the politics of alliances.

Based on these core concepts, the analysis of emerging alliances can be conducted through a set of guiding questions, mechanisms and key indicators. The key challenge for NATO is the evolving, multi-faceted relationship between Russia, China, North Korea and Iran. Simultaneously, NATO should be wary of triggering security dilemmas in the Indo-Pacific region.

In that context, NATO should:

- Devise strategies to prevent or weaken future hostile alliances. Specifically, a coordinated economic security policy incentivizing potential adversaries to trade with NATO countries can be an irritant and jeopardize the formation of hostile alliances.
- More generally, better coordinate between economic policy (Article 2 of the founding treaty) and security policy, since it is a potent tool of statecraft.
- Consider what formalized interactions with other alliances could look like, either to facilitate coordination or to defuse potential tensions. This could be a subset of the Partnership for Peace program.

INTRODUCTION

It is now a cliché to describe the international order as “in flux”, but it is certainly true that a major transformation is ongoing. An international system can be thought of as being composed of an architecture, and an infrastructure¹. The architecture describes the prevailing norms, rules and values present in the international system, and the degree to which they are congruent or conflictual. The infrastructure designates the material foundations of states’ actions, and the degree to which they shape policymaking: physical and human networks, currencies, military bases, etc. In that sense, alliances are part of the infrastructure of the international system, but their shape and importance are determined by the architecture.

The configuration of the emerging international system is still unclear. Some argue that a new Cold-War type bipolar configuration with the United States and China as superpowers is emerging; others describe a “1+1+X” world in which the United States is the sole superpower, China is the sole major power, and there is an unspecified number of major powers with vast regional influence; and a last group foresees a “Global West” and a “Global East” (China, Russia, Iran, etc.) competing for the definition of international norms and for the favours of a “Global South”².

A lot of those debates hang on the definition and measurement of state power, which is a notoriously challenging exercise³. But there is no

doubt that the post-Cold War period of American hegemony is over. This historically exceptional moment was characterized by several key features. First, not only was the United States the only superpower, but all the other great powers were US allies or close partners. Second, the US and their allies were instrumental in shaping the architecture of the system around the norms of liberal democracy and free-market globalization: no other country was able to realistically challenge those norms. Finally, the US and their allies had control over key infrastructures: the dollar was the main international reserve currency, US military power relied on unmatched military forces and a worldwide network of alliances, the US could drastically shape the organization of digital communications, etc. This unmatched domination over the architecture and the infrastructure of the global system is over: some countries are now mounting a direct challenge to this post-Cold War order by challenging the architecture (promoting new norms) and establishing more control over the infrastructure. Thus, as a feature of this changing international system, it is likely that new alliances will form.

This paper examines the possibilities and conditions for the formation of such alliances in the future and provides strategic analysts with a template to analyze such trends. However, two caveats are in order. First, this paper is not a foresight exercise employing a specific foresight method (such as scenario generation or horizon scanning) to identify specific instances of future

¹Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon, *Exit from Hegemony. The Unraveling of the American Global Order*, Oxford University Press, 2020.

²G. John Ikenberry, “Three Worlds: The West, East and South and the Competition to Shape Global Order”, *International Affairs*, 100/1, 2024, pp. 121-138.

³Nicholas Kitchen, “Making Net Assessment Work: Evaluating Great-Power Competition”, *Survival*, 66/4, 2024, pp. 51-70.



alliance formation. Instead, it is an exercise in clarification designed to help strategic analysts (including foresight specialists) focusing on the key mechanisms and trends guiding alliance formation. Second, the paper takes as a key assumption that NATO will remain in its present state in terms of membership (meaning that no member would leave the Alliance, and that no new member will join it). This is a strong assumption which is likely to be proven false at some point, but this is only to provide a baseline of continuity from which to assess developments in other alliances worldwide.

Examining the development of future alliances matters to NATO because the changing international system is likely to lead to new forms of security partnerships that can be threatening to the Alliance and its members. Understanding

the nature and dynamics of such adversarial security partnerships is thus important for strategic planning and policy implementation. But such reconfigurations also lead to the emergence of potential new partners that NATO could engage with. As such, NATO strategists can benefit from an analytical template to assess the development of alliances and security partnerships worldwide, and thus devise relevant NATO policies.

This paper starts by providing an operationalizable definition of alliances, before examining the drivers of alliance formation and of alliance cohesion. These discussions help establish a set of criteria required to analyze the future of alliance formation. The fourth section thus builds a set of guiding questions for strategic analysts and discusses several likely challenges for NATO.

WHAT COUNTS AS AN ALLIANCE? KEY DEFINITIONS

Lawrence Freedman argues in his magnum opus on strategy⁴ that three fundamental characteristics of the exercise of strategy are systematically found in human history, regardless of place or time. These are the instrumental use of violence, the capacity for deception, and the formation of alliances and coalitions to increase one's power. The search for allies and partners in the instrumental exercise of violence is not limited to the human species; similar behaviour can be observed in the great apes, for example. Consequently, security cooperation is part of a form of universal grammar of strategy, whose modes of expression vary in place and time but remain fundamentally similar.

Because security cooperation is so frequent, multiple terms have been used over time to describe the shape and content of such cooperations. One can then encounter the terms of alliance, coalition, entente, tacit alliance, privileged partnership, strategic partnership, etc. Often, the terms reflect the language of their time, or the linguistic creativity of diplomats who attempt to label a partnership without jeopardizing other existing political relations, thus making sure that all their counterparts feel sufficiently acknowledged.

Conceptually, a core difference is usually established between alliances and coalitions. While the alliance is established as a permanent security agreement among states, the coalition is

created as an ad hoc arrangement to counter a specific threat, and its lifespan in principle does not exceed the time required to deal with that threat⁵. However, while the distinction makes intuitive sense, there are several examples of overlap between these two types of arrangement in the post-Cold War era. For example, while the 1991 Gulf War is hailed as a paradigmatic example of a coalition, military planning certainly benefited from decades of cooperation between the United States, the United Kingdom (and to a lesser degree France and Italy) within a NATO framework. More recently, the military interventions in Afghanistan or Libya relied on NATO's planning and command structures, but also plugged in external partners to effectively form coalitions relying on the permanent structures of an alliance⁶.

Stephen Walt defines an alliance as "a formal or informal relationship of security cooperation between two or more sovereign states"⁷, while Patricia Weitsman defines them as "bilateral or multilateral agreements to provide some element of security to the signatories"⁸. Yet, there are problems with these broad definitions. First, they risk covering all forms of security cooperations among states: defensive alliances, non-aggression pacts, neutrality pacts are then lumped together, as well as collective security organizations and arms control agreements. In short, those broad definitions overlook the distinction between the outward-looking dimension of alliances (which

⁴Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy. A History*, Oxford University Press, 2013.

⁵Patricia Weitsman, *Waging War. Alliances, Coalitions, and Institutions of Interstate Violence*, Stanford University Press, 2013.

⁶Sten Rynning, "Coalitions, Institutions and Big Tents. The New Strategic Reality of Armed Intervention", *International Affairs*, 89/1, 2013, pp. 53-68.

⁷Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, Cornell University Press, 1987, p. 1.

⁸Patricia Weitsman, *Dangerous Alliances. Proponents of Peace, Weapons of War*, Stanford University Press, 2004, p. 27.

aim at protecting their members from external threats) on the one hand, and the inward-looking dimension of collective security agreements (which aim at managing security competition and disputes among their members) on the other. Moreover, those broad definitions encompass all forms of security cooperation, while alliances are fundamentally about military power.

Therefore, we define alliances as “a formal or informal association of states for the (threat of) use of military force, in specified circumstances, against actors external to the alliance”⁹. This definition has several advantages. *First*, it emphasizes the centrality of the role of military power in the definition of alliances. Alliances are not any form of security cooperation: ultimately, they are about the (potential) use of force. This raises further questions on alliances’ capabilities to credibly devise deterrence or compellence strategies (which are addressed below), but for now, the important point is that alliances are about military power. *Second*, this definition emphasizes the outward-looking dimension of alliances: an alliance is an institutional tool that states devise to manage external security threats. *Third*, the definition is flexible regarding the number of participants to the alliance, its duration, and the specific conditions of the use of military force. An alliance can have any number of states: we can imagine bilateral (two states), minilateral (3 to 7 states) or multilateral alliances. The alliance is not temporally bounded: some alliances will be short-lived; others will have a longer lifespan. Hence, in practice, the adopted definition collapses the classic distinction between a coalition and an alliance which, as discussed above, lacks analytical relevance.

Finally, the definition is flexible regarding the set of conditions related to the use of force. Some alliances will be highly institutionalized and enshrine the conditions for the use of force in a treaty (such as NATO with the article V). But we can easily imagine alliances that are more informal when it comes to the definition of the conditions for the use of force. For example, the relationship between the US and Taiwan, although not officially sanctioned by a treaty, can be described as an alliance considering the multiple verbal commitments that US decision-makers have issued regarding Taiwan’s security. There are certainly different degrees of commitment (a treaty being the highest one), but it doesn’t mean that, analytically, agreements about the use of force are limited to a legally bounding document. Moreover, while most alliances would be characterized by the notion of collective defense, this definition allows us to also include potential alliances that would not encompass a mutual defense, but still define the scope for the collective use of force. For example, the security relations between France and Djibouti, whereby France contributes to the territorial integrity of Djibouti in exchange for military basing and large operational freedom, does not include a collective defense clause (Djibouti is not bounded to contribute to France’s territorial defense) but still qualifies as an alliance.

Hence, this definition has the advantage of capturing some core features of alliances, without necessarily mirror-imaging and assuming that all future alliances will be looking like NATO.

KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- Alliances are defined as: *a formal or informal association of states for the (threat of) use of military force, in specified circumstances, against actors external to the alliance.*
- Membership of alliances varies (bilateral, minilateral, multilateral).
- The degree of institutionalization of alliances can vary from informal to highly codified.
- While most alliances adopt a collective security clause, this is not a definitional requirement. The conditions and scope for the collective use of force may vary.

⁹Sten Rynning and Olivier Schmitt, “Alliances”, in Alexandra Gheciu and William C. Wohlforth (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of International Security*, Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 653-667.

ALLIANCE FORMATION AND INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

The topic of alliance formation has generated a vast array of academic literature. Essentially, the drivers of alliance formation can be summarized in the following three motivations.

The *first* motivation to form an alliance is the desire of a state to reduce the imbalance of power that would be to its disadvantage (thus seeking the necessary additional power from allies). Thus, an alliance is an institutional mechanism for aggregating the capabilities of participating states to deter a potential enemy or to prevail in a conflict. This mechanism is called ‘balancing’¹⁰.

The *second* motivation for alliance-building is bandwagoning. Instead of joining forces to counter a threat, states join forces with the threatening state to ensure their survival. Bandwagoning behaviour is usually the result of small states seeking to secure strategic gains despite their material impossibility of countering the capabilities of a threatening state. Bandwagoning for survival is typically observed among small states geographically close to the threatening states and willing to secure strategic gains despite their material disadvantage. Bandwagoning seems to occur less frequently than balancing¹¹, but bandwagoning is nonetheless implicit in many foreign policy speeches and decision-making processes. For example, the metaphor of the

“domino theory,” most famously pushed forward to justify the US intervention in Vietnam, is in fact based on an implicit bandwagoning argument.

The *third* motivation is called ‘tethering’. An alliance can be formed to manage the adversarial relationship between two states. In this respect, an alliance functions like other international institutions, increasing transparency between states, increasing the costs of non-compliance with commitments made within the institution, and making cooperation more attractive and therefore more likely¹².

Alliances thus have a multiplicity of functions: they are a mechanism of capability aggregation; they improve the states’ ability to coordinate with each other and plan military operations¹³; they formalize and enact hierarchies in the international system¹⁴; and they deter aggression¹⁵.

The role of alliances in deterring aggression is easy to understand: an alliance should make the expected cost of war higher for a potential challenger that would be faced with the prospect of fighting not only one state, but its allies as well, thus leading most challengers to refrain from conflict initiation. Fearon famously argued that there were three main reasons states could not

¹⁰Patricia Weitsman, ‘Alliances and War’, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*, 2010, online.

¹¹Randall Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances. Tripolarity and Hitler’s Strategy of World Conquest*, Columbia University Press, 1998.

¹²Weitsman, *Dangerous Alliances*, op. cit.

¹³Olivier Schmitt, *Allies that Count. Junior Partners in Coalition Warfare*, Georgetown University Press, 2018.

¹⁴David Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations*, Cornell University Press, 2009.

¹⁵Alexander Lanoszka, *Military Alliances in the Twenty-First Century*, Polity, 2022.

bargain, thus leading to militarized conflict: the indivisibility problem (issues over which parties are in conflict cannot be easily divided), the commitment problem (lack of trust between parties to uphold an agreement), and the information problem (where parties disagree about the likely outcome of war because they only have imperfect information about each other's capabilities, skills, and resolve)¹⁶. Alliances can reduce the information problem by helping parties adopt a shared understanding of the likely outcome of conflict: if an alliance is perceived as robust and credible, it helps convey information about capabilities and resolve them, which helps reach a bargain. Thus, the mechanism through which alliances bolster deterrence and international stability is that they are perceived as credible.

What are the conditions under which alliances can be perceived as credible? An important factor of credibility is the way allies signal their commitment to mutual defences. First, writing down a treaty and communicating its terms can increase the reputational costs for states if they renege on their commitments; when states publicly tie their own hands, the credibility of the alliance mechanism is bolstered¹⁷. Moreover, domestic politics also plays a role in credibility: Democratic leaders, who are accountable to the public, may find it politically impossible to abandon allies. Democracies would then make more credible allies because their leaders would bear the political costs of abandoning their allies¹⁸. Second, sunk costs can bolster the credibility and deterrence of alliances. States expand resources not only to negotiate treaties¹⁹, but also to coordinate their defense policies within an alliance framework. Reneging on such heavily institutionalized alliances would involve major sunk costs, which drastically alters the cost-benefit calculus of alliance abandonment. More institutionalized alliances would then be intrinsically more credible, thus having a stronger deterrence effect.

However, other dynamics may undermine the deterring effects of such alliances. The first one is *time*. Arguably, alliance designs reflect the

balance between states' interests and capabilities at the time of their formation. It can be difficult for such institutions to adapt to shifting balances of powers or capabilities or to the emergence of new threats, without even mentioning the fact that new political elites can have a different perception of the alliance than their predecessors. Indeed, it is difficult for leaders to credibly signal commitment mechanisms over distant time horizons and against unknown adversaries²⁰. If alliance systems do not correctly reflect political and military realities, challengers may be tempted to question allies' willingness or ability to abide by their commitments. A major credibility challenge for alliances is thus to adapt their institutional design in such a way that it accurately reflects the evolving political situations.

The second risk is *entrapment*, which results from the moral hazard problem created by alliances. As mentioned, an alliance could incentivize some of its members to be more uncompromising, thus reducing the bargaining range during a crisis. According to its extreme logic, this moral hazard problem could lead to a risk of entrapment, in which some allies, emboldened by the security guarantees granted to them by other states, would decide to initiate a conflict²¹. However, the empirical record of such entrapment mechanisms is limited, notably because states can draft alliance treaties in such a way that specific clauses can free them from their mutual defense responsibilities in the case of reckless behaviour by one of their allies. Moreover, states can often pressure a protégé to make bargaining concessions, while a protégé's aggressive posturing can actually bolster deterrence by signalling resolve in the case of a crisis²². The issue of alliance management is critical to carefully calibrate the protégé's attitude by signalling resolve without escalating to conflict initiation.

The third risk is that alliance formation can trigger or reinforce a *security dilemma*, which is understood as a condition in which two defensive states, unsure of each other's intentions, reinforce their capabilities.

¹⁶James Fearon, 'Rationalist Explanations for War', *International Organization*, 49/3, 1995, pp. 379-414.

¹⁷James D. Morrow, 'Alliances: Why Write Them Down?', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 3, 2000, pp. 63-84.

¹⁸Michael Tomz, and Jessica L.P. Weeks, 'Military Alliances and Public Support for War', *International Studies Quarterly*, 65/3, 2021, pp. 811-824.

¹⁹Paul Poast, *Arguing about Alliances. The Art of Agreement in Military-Pact Negotiations*, Cornell University Press, 2019.

²⁰James Fearon, 'Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands versus Sinking Costs', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 41/1, 1997, pp. 68-90.

²¹Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics*, Cornell University Press, 1997.

²²Alexander Lanoszka, 'Tangled Up in Rose? Theories of Alliance Entrapment and the 2008 Russo-Georgian War', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 39/2, 2018, pp. 234-257.



However, “Because even primarily defensive capability will inevitably contain some offensive capability, many of the measures adopted by one side for its own security can often threaten, or be perceived as threatening, the security of the other side even if both sides merely want to defend their security. Consequently, the other side is likely to take countermeasures against those defensive measures. The interaction of these measures and countermeasures tends to reinforce their fears and uncertainties about each other’s intentions, leading to a vicious cycle in which each accumulates more power without necessarily making itself more secure, through a self-reinforcing or positive feedback mechanism”²³.

Alliance formation could trigger such a negative cycle, with external states feeling that they must either augment their own military capabilities or form a counter-alliance, in a “spiral model” of escalatory interactions resulting from misperceptions and uncertainty, which is often used to explain the onset of World War I. However, uncertainty is not a permanent feature, and learning mechanisms can occur between rivals, which leads Morrow to argue that the early stages of interactions following the formation of a new alliance are much more conflict-prone than later stages when uncertainty is mitigated by mutual learning²⁴.

KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- The core drivers of alliance formation are balancing, bandwagoning and tethering. In all cases, alliances are a way to mitigate a security competition.
- Alliances are more likely to deter when they can signal credibility through the existence of reputation issues for states and institutionalized mechanisms, creating sunk costs in the case of alliance abandonment.
- Alliances are less likely to deter when their institutional design no longer reflects political realities, when alliance management exacerbates (instead of tames) the moral hazard problem and when they trigger a security dilemma.

²³Shiping Tang, ‘The Security Dilemma: A Conceptual Analysis’, *Security Studies*, 18/3, p. 594.

²⁴James D. Morrow, ‘When Do Defensive Alliances Provoke Rather than Deter?’, *Journal of Politics*, 79/1, 2017, pp. 341-345.

PAST AND FUTURE CHALLENGES OF ALLIANCE MANAGEMENT

One of the central questions of alliances is their reliability, understood as the degree to which members are willing to go to war to defend their fellow allies. Reliability differs from credibility in the sense that the latter is in the eye of the beholder, while the former concerns actual commitment in times of war. A credible alliance (from an adversary's perspective) may end up being unreliable, and vice versa; credibility is required for the deterrence effect of alliances, but reliability is what makes alliances stick together during a conflict. Empirical investigations suggest that between 1816 and 1944, allies fulfilled their obligations around 75 percent of the time, but that the number dropped to 22 percent between 1945 and 2003²⁵. However, these numbers should be treated with caution because, by definition, reliability can only be tested after conflict initiation, and adversaries are more likely to challenge alliances they perceive as having low credibility. Thus, the results can be explained by the fact that the alliances being challenged had little credibility and reliability, but this cannot be extrapolated to alliances that were not challenged.

This issue of reliability raises the question of alliance management. Scholarly literature has identified an important political issue in the management of alliances: the alliance security dilemma. At its core, the alliance security dilemma is a tension between fears of entrapment and fears of abandonment. In the case of conflict, allies fear abandonment directly from others,

while non-involved allies fear being entrapped in a conflict that is not in their core interests²⁶. As discussed above, entrapment concerns can be managed through institutional design and alliance relations, but this does not mean that they are non-existent. For example, although a formal ally of Russia, Belarus was careful not to be too closely associated with Russia's wars in the post-Soviet space. Similarly, North Korea's behaviour may entrap China in a conflict that Beijing did not want, depending on the future dynamics in Pyongyang.

On the other hand, fear of abandonment is a regular feature of international politics, which is not unfounded since cases of alliance unreliability abound, as discussed above. The fear of abandonment is endemic to international politics since it is related to the anarchic nature of the international system and the fact that states ultimately protect their own interests. In this regard, alliances reflect a convergence of interests that are not eternal and can be challenged by evolving political conditions. Fears of abandonment can be mitigated in different ways, particularly through military deployments on allies' territories (a military move called "reassurance"), which demonstrate that other states have "skin in the game" when it comes to honouring their commitments²⁷. However, these reassurances must be calibrated so that they do not embolden smaller allies and encourage potentially reckless behaviour, and do not trigger a security dilemma as discussed above: balancing between fears of entrapment and fears

²⁵Molly Berkemeier and Matthew Fuhrmann, 'Reassessing the Fulfillment of Alliance Commitments in War', *Research and Politics*, 5/2, 2018, pp. 1-5.

²⁶Snyder, *Alliance Politics*, op. cit.

²⁷Lanoszka, *Military Alliances*, op. cit.

of abandonment is much more art than science. Allies fearing abandonment will react in different ways, depending on their security environment: they can sometimes pursue stronger integration (through political or military concessions) in order to please the ally they fear abandonment from; hedge by increasing their own security guarantees, maybe developing nuclear weapons as France did out of concerns for the US security guarantees; or even explore alternative security arrangements by entering new alliance relationships.

In addition to the alliance security dilemma, we can identify an alliance strategic dilemma, which relates to the military dimension of alliances²⁸ and can be understood as the tension, in an alliance framework, between states' political preferences for autonomy and the military requirements for integration. The first element of the strategic alliance dilemma is the political requirements for autonomy. Autonomy refers to both political autonomy (the ability to make independent decisions) and strategic autonomy (control over one's military resources). States usually try to secure (but not necessarily maximize) autonomy in international affairs, including multinational military operations. The second constituting element of the strategic alliance dilemma is the military requirement for integration as a condition of military

effectiveness. Integration can be understood as the degree to which different military activities are internally consistent and mutually reinforced. In a military context, it can be understood as achieving unity of command (a single commander directs and coordinates the actions of all forces toward a common objective), unity of effort (coordination and cooperation toward common objectives, even if the participants are not necessarily part of the same command or organization), and interoperability (the ability of military systems to operate with each other). Overall, integration, as a condition of military effectiveness, clashes with autonomy as a political objective. The dilemma is solved in different ways at different times, but it is an everlasting feature of the military dimension of alliances.

The alliance security dilemma deals with the political function of alliances, whereas the strategic alliance dilemma deals with military function. It is entirely possible to imagine situations in which the alliance security dilemma is not intense (allies have managed their interactions in such a way that the tension between entrapment and abandonment is not acute), but disagreements persist on, for example in command structures, because the strategic alliance dilemma is unresolved. The two dilemmas have their own dynamics but can



²⁸Schmitt, *Allies that Count*, op. cit.

theoretically reinforce each other. For example, to reduce their fear of abandonment, some states could develop preferences towards military integration, thus triggering reactions in other states that could then fear for their political autonomy, evolving into a fear of entrapment.

The changing international strategic context of the 21st century affects the nature and format of alliances. While the classical mechanisms of alliance formation discussed above still apply, the consequences of economic interdependence complicate the dynamics of alliance politics.

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the United States and its allies attempted to include China and Russia in international economic cooperation channels, hoping that market opening would facilitate their democratization and inclusion in a cooperative international order. This hope was shattered, as economic globalization led to an 'asymmetric opening' that facilitated the economic development of these countries without changing their political system. However, for Western countries, this approach has led to a disconnection between the sources of security and sources of prosperity. During the Cold War, trade and security relations were largely aligned, and allies were also trade partners, although there were regular transatlantic tensions about the degree to which

NATO members should trade with the USSR²⁹. Yet, the post-Cold War era has led to a multiplication of trade between strategic adversaries, which disconnected the sources of prosperity and the sources of security.

This trade between potential strategic adversaries has three consequences. First, competition for these new markets has led defense allies to compete in the economic sphere, complicating their relations, which therefore go well beyond the security framework. This economic competition risks reinforcing the security dilemma of alliances; some states may refuse to defend an ally seen as an economic competitor, while others fear being abandoned for the same reasons. Second, this situation leads policymakers to balance security and commercial interests much more than during the Cold War, in a context where the ministries managing these areas have remained largely separate. This has regularly led some governments to sound different notes on how to deal with China, for example. Finally, this economic dependence on potential adversaries has made Western countries vulnerable to attempts at coercion, resulting in a 'weaponisation of interdependence'³⁰. In any case, this tension between economic and security interests has important consequences for alliances and should be taken into account when assessing issues of both alliance creation and cohesion.

KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- The reliability of alliances is an important issue of alliance management. States with a reputation for low reliability might find it more difficult to establish, or to join, an alliance.
- Alliance management needs to navigate the tension between the alliance security dilemma (fear of abandonment versus fear of entanglement) and the alliance strategic dilemma (military integration versus political autonomy).
- Economic entanglement complicates the politics of alliances.

²⁹Alan P. Dobson, *US Economic Statecraft for Survival, 1933-1991. Of Sanctions, Embargoes and Economic Warfare*, Routledge, 2002.

³⁰Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newmann, "Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion", *International Security*, 44/1, 2019, pp. 42-79.



WHAT ABOUT FUTURE ALLIANCES? AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Based on the sections above, we can establish an analytical framework to analyze the potential future development of alliances, which will be useful to strategic analysts. The framework establishes a set of guiding questions and indicators to monitor to determine the likelihood of future alliance formation, as well as their cohesiveness.

ISSUE	GUIDING QUESTIONS	MECHANISMS	INDICATORS TO MONITOR
<i>Alliance formation</i>	<i>What is the threat perception of the states under consideration?</i>	<i>Balancing Bandwagoning</i>	<i>Public speeches signalling security issues</i> <i>Diplomatic visits/ treaties signalling alignment</i>
	<i>Are states looking to manage an adversarial relationship?</i>	<i>Tethering</i>	<i>Joint military exercises signalling security convergence</i> <i>Economic cooperation signalling shared interests</i>
	<i>What is the credibility of the alliance?</i>	<i>Commitments</i> <i>Management of the moral hazards problem</i>	

ISSUE	GUIDING QUESTIONS	MECHANISMS	INDICATORS TO MONITOR
<p><i>Alliance cohesion</i></p>	<p><i>What is the degree of reliability of the alliance?</i></p>	<p><i>Reputation</i></p>	<p><i>Respect of existing treaty obligations</i></p> <p><i>Reassurance mechanisms between allies</i></p> <p><i>Consultation mechanisms between allies</i></p>
	<p><i>What is the balance between the risks of entrapment and of abandonment?</i></p>	<p><i>Alliance security dilemma</i></p>	<p><i>Integrated institutions of military cooperation</i></p>
	<p><i>What is the balance between political autonomy and military integration?</i></p>	<p><i>Alliance strategic dilemma</i></p>	

SO WHAT? WHAT THE EMERGENCE OF NEW ALLIANCES MEANS FOR NATO

Applying this framework to the current international security environment, the two key issues to consider for NATO are the emergence of potential adversarial alliances, and the management of relations with potential partner alliances. The following analysis cannot be exhaustive because the emergence of future alliances is contingent on political decisions that are by nature impossible to predict with pinpoint accuracy, but the framework helps to make sense of some key underlying trends.

In terms of potential adversaries, the key challenge for NATO is to monitor the growing relationship between Russia, China, Iran and North Korea³¹. The unprovoked Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has demonstrated that the bonds between those four countries are steadily tightening, since

they share a somehow common threat perception of being constrained/at risk by Western countries, especially the United States. Both Tehran and Pyongyang have materially contributed to the Russian war effort by delivering weapons systems or ammunitions to Russia, and while China is more publicly cautious, it nevertheless supports the Russian economy through trade and the delivery of critical components and material. While NATO recognizes Russia as “the most significant and direct threat to Allies’ security”³², the support that Moscow received should be taken into account when assessing Russia’s international political room of manoeuvre and material regeneration capacities.

At the moment, only the relationship between Russia and North Korea qualifies as a bona fide



³¹Daniel Byman and Seth G. Jones, “Legions of Doom? China, Russia, Iran and North Korea”, *Survival*, 66/4, 2024, pp. 29-50.

³²NATO, *Washington Summit Declaration*, 10 July 2024.

alliance, since the signing of a comprehensive strategic partnership treaty in June 2024. This treaty contains a mutual defense clause according to which if either country “falls into a state of war,” the other shall “provide military and other assistance with all means . . . without delay”. This has immediate consequences for NATO, since in case of a NATO-Russia conflict, North Korea could be incentivized to attack US troops in South Korea. In short, the two theaters are now much more entangled than before.

The “friendship without limits” between Russia and China has, for the time being, not publicly been extended to scope conditions for the joint use of force (unless a secret clause between the two countries exists). Nevertheless, and despite regular hopes to the contrary and occasional friction between the two countries (notably when it comes to their respective policies in Africa), the partnership between Moscow and Beijing is strong, and only getting stronger. It doesn’t take a massive leap of imagination that the relationship could include an official security dimension in the future.

Finally, Iran’s relationship with Russia is stronger than its relationship with China. Here again, multiple areas of cooperation (especially in the military domain) exist between the two countries, despite their mutual distrust and competition in the energy sector. Nevertheless, the security cooperation between Tehran and Moscow, although it does not yet qualify as a military alliance due to the lack of declared scope conditions for the joint use of force, is a looming threat because of the potential anti-Western front extending from the Baltic Sea to the Persian Gulf.

Another issue to monitor is the potential evolution of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), established in 2001 and regrouping China, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, India and Pakistan. The SCO currently functions like an intergovernmental organization focused on counterterrorism and border control in central Asia. It is unlikely to evolve into a formal multilateral alliance because of the rivalries between New Delhi, Islamabad, and Beijing, but it could serve as the springboard for bilateral or minilateral alliances in the future, depending on the evolution of the relations between Russia and China. Here

again, issues of threat perceptions and economic convergence must be carefully monitored.



These potential developments matter because alliances (and security relationships more generally) serve as important vectors of military diffusion. Weapons systems, doctrines and practices are more likely to be circulated among allies and security partners for a diversity of reasons: interoperability concerns, industrial benefits, etc. For NATO, such diffusion mechanisms can mean that technologies and practices developed in another region of the world can be incorporated by Russia. This has famously been the case with the Shahed drones developed by Iran and used by Russia in Ukraine.

Conversely, NATO members and partners could find themselves encountering threats and tactics developed by Russia but diffused to other regions. Examples include the way Iran has been using missile salvos against Israel (where some knowledge and circulation between Moscow and Tehran almost certainly happened), or how the Yemeni Houthis have allegedly been benefiting from technologies and intelligence provided not only by Iran, but also by Russia in order to target Western ships in the Red Sea. Similarly, the experience that North Korean troops may acquire in Ukraine will be carried to the Korean peninsula,





AUKUS

thus posing new challenges to South Korean and US troops in the region. Russian practices and technologies developed by Russia may be diffused to Africa, and thus pose a challenge to the Western troops operating on the continent.

Hence, emerging alliances can pose direct challenges to NATO, but also to NATO members outside of the NATO area of operation. Thus, monitoring the mechanisms of military diffusion through alliances and security partnerships is important for proper military planning. It also speaks to the importance for NATO to keep engaging with partners worldwide in order to exchange information about adversary military power. In that regard, exchanges with members of the African Union (which is not an alliance per se) can help NATO members monitor patterns of diffusion of military power in the region.

It must be mentioned that even if the security relationships described above evolve into full-fledged alliances, they are unlikely to develop heavily integrated, NATO-like, mechanisms of military cooperation. In short, those alliances are more likely to function as the juxtaposition of military capabilities instead of aiming at their (relative) integration. The Russia-North Korea alliance is a case in point, since no formal mechanism of military integration has yet been announced. NATO is thus likely to remain a uniquely integrated alliance in the military domain.

In Asia, the rise of Chinese ambitions is leading to a transformation of the alliance landscape. Vietnam, a former adversary, normalized its

relations with the US in the 1990s. The US alliance with the Philippines has fluctuated, especially under President Rodrigo Duterte but now seems reaffirmed. And the relationship with Thailand has faded despite the existence of a treaty. Although joint exercises took place on occasion, the succession of military coups and Bangkok's gradually pro-Chinese orientation emptied the treaty of its substance. Washington has also significantly strengthened its security partnership with Singapore without establishing a formal alliance. Amid this recomposition, relations with Tokyo, Taipei and Wellington remained stable or are growing stronger.

The main development was the announcement in September 2021 of the creation of a new tripartite security partnership, dubbed AUKUS, between Australia, the UK and the US. The project included a significant industrial component, notably the purchase by the Australian government of nuclear attack submarines supplied by Washington or London, as well as technology cooperation in critical domains such as artificial intelligence. The new alliance is designed to counter a rising China (well understood as such in Beijing). The same fears about China are driving changes in Japan's military policy, and a tightening of the security relationship between Washington and Tokyo, as illustrated by the gradual integration between American and Japanese forces³³.

Yet, the alliance between the United States and South Korea is showing signs of strains. From Seoul's perspective, the North Korean regime's modernization of its military arsenal, including its acquisition of nuclear weapons, explains the maintenance of an alliance with Washington. However, the terms of this alliance are evolving, particularly command-and-control arrangements in the event of conflict, which now guarantee greater autonomy for South Korean forces. Moreover, Washington is increasingly incentivized to embark its allies on its broader agenda to counter China, which Seoul, considering its economic dependence on Beijing, find unappealing (a good example of fear of entrapment)³⁴. A major question is the degree to which the US system of alliances in Asia, historically based on a 'hub-and-

³³Jeffrey W. Hornung and Zack Cooper, "Shifting the US-Japan Alliance from Coordination to Integration", *War on the Rocks*, 2 August 2024.

³⁴Jennifer Lind and Daryl Press, "Should South Korea Build its Own Nuclear Bomb?", *The Washington Post*, 7 October 2021.

spokes' model of a constellation of bilateral and multilateral agreements, will evolve towards a more multilateral, and perhaps more institutionalized, alliance system³⁵.

For NATO, the challenge will be to identify the proper cooperation format with these evolving alliance formats in the Pacific. A good case can be made that NATO should be “with” the Pacific instead of “in” the Pacific, since the Euro-Atlantic and Pacific set of alliances face a similar challenge of deterring revisionist states while confronting common military threats (such as long-range missile capabilities or sub-threshold hostilities)³⁶. Yet, as discussed above, there is a real risk to trigger security dilemmas in the Indo-Pacific if NATO becomes too visibly and explicitly present. NATO leaders should then carefully consider the nature and the extent of NATO’s relationship with like-minded alliances in the Indo-Pacific region.

Finally, the European Union is an important and natural cooperation partner with NATO, considering the overlap in membership between the two institutions. An important potential area of future cooperation is to explore the ways the EU can help solve NATO’s ability to achieve defence-spending targets. NATO, whose organizing principle is to facilitate the coordination of the member states’ defense apparatus, relies on

these member states’ goodwill to meet the targets set by the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP). This creates a collective action problem since member states have an incentive to simply free-ride. This particular problem has vexed U.S. administrations, with consequences for collective defence planning. During the Cold War, the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) directed NATO countries to maintain sixty-day reserves of spare parts and ammunition, but the instructions were never implemented, and the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) had no authority to enforce them. If properly coordinated with NATO, the EU can help solve the alliance’s collective action problem for



KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- The analysis of emerging alliances can be conducted through a set of guiding questions, mechanisms and key indicators.
- The key challenge for NATO is the evolving, multi-faceted relationship between Russia, China, North Korea and Iran.
- NATO should be wary of triggering security dilemmas in the Indo-Pacific region.

³⁵Thomas Wilkins, ‘A Hub-and-Spokes “Plus” Model of Alliances in the Indo-Pacific: Towards a New “Networked” Design’, *Asian Affairs*, 5/3, 2022, pp. 457-480.

³⁶Luis Simón, ‘NATO Should Think Big About the Indo-Pacific’, *War on the Rocks*, 1 July 2024.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSION

This paper has established a conceptual framework for assessing future developments in military alliances worldwide. In particular, it distinguishes between the issues under consideration (alliance formation or alliance cohesion), the key guiding questions for analysis, the mechanisms to take into account, and the empirical indicators to monitor in order to assess the mechanisms.

Nevertheless, two core observations can be made:

- The changing international system means that new alliances are very likely to emerge.
- None of those alliances will look like NATO, especially when it comes to military integration.

RECOMMENDATIONS

NATO is the result of 75 years of institutional development and trust-building among allies, and it is thus unlikely to be replicated. Nevertheless, new alliances will emerge, and the specifics of their functioning (in terms of scope conditions for the use of joint force and degrees of military integration) will all pose their own set of challenges. In that context, NATO should:

- Refrain from mirror-imaging when analyzing future alliances' creation and development.
- Monitor patterns of diffusion of adversarial military power through alliance mechanisms. This can be done in cooperation with partners.
- Consider alliance cohesion in the analysis, especially the alliance security dilemma.
- Devise strategies to prevent or weaken future hostile alliances. Specifically, a coordinated economic security policy incentivizing potential adversaries to trade with NATO countries can be an irritant and jeopardize the formation of hostile alliances.
- More generally, better coordinate between economic policy (Article 2 of the founding treaty) and security policy, since it is a potent tool of statecraft.
- Consider what formalized interactions with other alliances could look like, either to facilitate coordination or to defuse potential tensions. This could be a subset of the Partnership for Peace program.









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