

## Great-Power Rivalry and the US Hub-and-Spoke Security System in East Asia

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**ABSTRACT:** Since the beginning of the 21st century, China's continuous rise has posed severe challenges to the hegemony and influence of the United States in Asia, and the concept of Great-Power Rivalry has been proposed. When the Trump administration came to power, the first National Security Strategy Report released by the Trump administration in December 2017 shows that the world has fully entered the era of "great power competition". Is Sino-U.S. relation truly trapped in the "Thucydides Trap" and the shackles of a zero sum game? In today's world of multipolarization and economic globalization, peace and development are still the themes of today's world. How the Great-Power Rivalry between China and the United States will develop has become a common concern. However, in East Asia during the Cold War after World War II, there was no such thing as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in east Asia, which is a multilateral alliance system. The United States established a discrete and exclusive "Hub-and-Spoke Security System" with the Republic of Korea, the Republic of China, and Japan, characterized mainly by bilateralism, which had become the dominant security structure in East Asia and continues to this day. The Hub-and-Spoke relationship nowadays has covered countries in East Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Under the current strengthening of relations and cooperation between China and other Asian countries, as well as the "multi node structure" of international power distribution in East Asia after the Cold War, where will the development prospects of the US "Hub-and-Spoke Security System" go is also a key topic what we're going to discuss next.

**KEYWORDS:** Great-Power Rivalry; Sino-U.S. relation; Hub-and-Spoke Security System; East Asia

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## **I.Introduction**

### **1.1 Great-Power Rivalry**

The first National Security Strategy Report released by the Trump administration in December 2017 shows that the world has fully entered the era of "Great-Power Rivalry". China is clearly defined as a "revisionist power", attempting to change the basic order of the post-war international system, with the intention of competing with the United States in various fields and competing for global dominance. China is a "strategic competitor" of the United States and also a "strategic competitor" that questions its national interests, economy, and values. This statement describes a fundamental aspect of the future strategic interaction between China and the United States as "competition", with a strong color of zero sum games. The Asia Pacific region is a key area for the convergence of interests between China and the United States, and also an important stage for the two countries to leverage their respective advantages and influence the region. In fact, the development of the US strategy towards China has long sought a balance between the two trends of "containment of competition" and "engagement and cooperation".

However, the interaction mode between external powers shapes the order of Southeast Asia and affects the strategic choices of small and medium-sized countries in this region. In the East Asian region, the competition between China and Japan is also fierce, and the United States has always been a key presence. The United States builds its regional strategic goal to prevent its own influence from declining and returning to East Asia, as well as to balance China's leading role in integrating the East Asian economy. This coincides with Japan's national strategy, making the United States an external force that Japan can utilize and rely on.

According to historical results, the form of Great-Power Rivalry, whether it is a cold war or a hot war, will suffer both losses. Once the Great-Power Rivalry transitions to comprehensive confrontation or war, the strategic space of most Southeast Asian countries will be significantly compressed, and the pressure of "choosing sides" will greatly increase. Therefore, choosing security competition among major powers is a measure to maintain regional peace. China and the United States, while ensuring their own interests to the greatest extent, in order to win the greatest power in East Asia and take into account the development space and strategic choices of small East Asian countries, should engage in inclusive competition and adopt a strategy of balancing great powers, which can maximize the strategic space of small East Asian countries, and cover a larger geographical range and more topic areas than the original topic. Therefore, countries participating in the competition among great powers can become the objects of competition as well.

### **1.2 US Hub-and-Spoke Security System in East Asia**

As mentioned above, as the major countries with significant influence and a wide distribution of interests in the Asia Pacific region, China and the United States are committed to building a long-term and stable relationship network in the Asia Pacific region, strengthening ties with other countries, and creating a normalized path and

interest protection mechanism to achieve specific strategic goals in the Asia Pacific region for major country competition. In fact, under different historical backgrounds and strategic considerations, China and the United States have established two different types of relationship networks: a "ripple like" partnership network and a "Hub-and-Spoke Security System" with "alliance+partnership" as the basic element, with different properties, structures, and functions. The analysis found that there are structural differences in the development concept and orientation of the relationship networks led by the two countries. In the context of the interwoven "the Belt and Road Initiative" promoted by China and the "Indo Pacific Strategy" promoted by the United States, the game between China and the United States in the process of networking in the Asia Pacific region will have a continuous impact on the overall order and political, economic and security structures of the region. And this article will focus on the US Hub-and-Spoke Security System in East Asia to explore its internal origins and future development.

"Hub and Spoke" is a central and radiative arrangement, which means a "core" country cooperates with several smaller countries. In fact, the Eisenhower administration seriously considered establishing a multilateral system called the Western Pacific Collective Security Initiative in the 1950s, indicating that the United States had hoped to establish a multilateral security system in East Asia. However, there is a lack of common identity between the United States and its allies to prevent Washington from establishing a multilateral alliance in Asia. When the Cold War demanded that the United States modify its East Asian security strategy, the main focus of American decision-makers was Japan, as it had the ability to contribute to the security of East Asia. Bilateral control of Japan was a long-standing goal of the United States after World War II. In fact, it was Japan that strongly leans towards security bilateralism and strongly resists the United States' efforts to multilateralize the East Asian Union system. Historical evidence suggests that some East Asian countries were willing to accept severe restrictions on their sovereign rights by the United States in exchange for US security guarantees. After the ceasefire in the Korean War, South Korea agreed to allow the United States to retain command of its troops, while Japan remained willing to station some American bases. Therefore, it can be seen that the establishment of the the US Hub-and-Spoke Security System in East Asia is the result of the common will of history, small East Asian countries, and the United States.

## **II.Literature review**

Although the literature covers a wide variety of such theories, this review will still focus on Great-Power Rivalry and the US Hub-and-Spoke Security System in East Asia. According to the former part of Great-Power Rivalry, Michael Beckley (2018) pointed out that If stock is used instead of the previous flow measurement method to measure the strength of China and the United States, that is, military strength, economic strength, technological strength, or net indicators that consider welfare burden and national security costs are used instead of gross indicators that only calculate the total amount of resources, the power gap between China and the United States is still very significant. What's more, Terence (2021) said that the term "new cold war" has been widely discussed in the academic community. However, the so-called "new cold war" is neither possible nor desirable, and needs to be avoided. Besides, as for Lee Heeok (2023), he thought that There may be several different situations in the

future international order in East Asia: firstly, the United States maintains hegemony. Secondly, the emergence of a world order centered around China is taking shape. Thirdly, Sino-US co-governance. Fourthly, the balance of power among major powers in the region, including China, the United States, Russia, and Japan. Fifth, the rise of multilateralism in East Asia. However, in my opinion, it cannot be a situation of single rule, and the reshaping of the East Asian order must be jointly created with major powers and small countries in China and the United States. This is a transitional stage. Previous research also lays out the other possible factor, like Huang Dahui and Sun yi (2017) suggested that in the current trend of strategic contraction in the United States, China and Japan need to go beyond the traditional logic of regional dominance competition and explore new paths of competition and cooperation to promote the future integration and development of East Asia. Nevertheless, there are still ongoing and unresolved specific phenomena and issues, as well as the impact of the US strategic contraction on the future of the Asia Pacific region. Li Kaisheng (2018) concluded that in addressing the fundamental issue of so-called power competition, only the institutional path can effectively promote the transformation of this issue from zero sum to non zero sum, thereby alleviating the fundamental challenge that leads to strategic competition between China and the United States. But I believe that we cannot completely deny the shortcomings of the power path of realism and the conceptual path of constructivism, as they still have reference value.

After discussing the competition among major powers in East Asia, we cannot ignore the form of interest alliance by the United States in East Asia, which is US Hub-and-Spoke Security System. Joel Wuthnow (2019) pointed out that after the end of the Cold War, the systemic pressure of China's rise sparked the drive to strengthen strategic connections between "hubs" and "spokes". However, there is a structural mismatch between the networked adjustment of the "axis and spoke system" and the networked development of the East Asian international order. What's more, Bao Guangjiang (2021) proposed that the "Hub-and-Spokes System" is difficult to effectively address the diverse security threats facing East Asia, and the long-term stability of East Asia still requires the construction of a regional order that matches the "multi node structure" and combines "endogeneity" and "integrity". Meanwhile, Yue Shengsong (2020) also continued to explore the future of two types of competitions: the "ripple like" partnership network and the "Hub-and-Spoke Security System" with "alliance plus partner" as the basic elements.

Therefore, while the literature provides many answers to Great-Power Rivalry and the US Hub-and-Spoke Security System in East Asia, more is needed to give a clear.

### **III. Hub-and-spoke security system in the era of great-power rivalry**

#### **3.1 Connections**

Based on the above analysis, it can be seen that the American Hub-and-spoke security system was a product of the Cold War era. With the rise of China and the strategic contraction of the United States in East Asia, East Asian

countries should seek broader strategic space and development forms, and the trend of multilateralism is becoming increasingly evident in East Asia. Therefore, the III.great-power rivalry between China and the United States directly affects the Hub-and-spoke security system of the United States in East Asia, and the point-to-point bilateral cooperation between the United States as a "core" country and small East Asian countries also affects the relationship between China and various East Asian countries. In addition, the relationship between East Asian countries is also influenced by the competition between major powers China and the United States.

### **3.2 Current situation analysis and Related practices**

#### **3.2.1 Great-Power Rivalry**

##### **(1) General background**

And whether it is the Trump or Biden administration, the competition between China and the United States will continue, as the world hegemony of the United States is threatened by rising powers. The primary task for Washington and Beijing will be to revitalize their own economies. However, Biden will avoid falling into the trap of escalating conflicts similar to the Cold War, as he does not consider China's challenge to be a military challenge. In addition, he will seek cooperation with China on global issues such as climate, nuclear non-proliferation, and epidemics. Trump, the "tariff man," relied on shallow unilateral tariffs to negotiate bilateral agreements with China, essentially to allow Beijing to purchase more American products and services.

##### **(2) Probable direction**

Due to China's rapid rise and strong economic strength, it will be difficult for US allies to bear the cost of balancing China. Therefore, in the long run, the United States' strategy of providing security protection to its allies through the bilateral alliance system will be ineffective. On the other hand, the United States is easily embroiled by allies, which increases the probability of conflicts between China and the United States. Therefore, the United States had to engage in strategic contraction in East Asia. After the Asian financial crisis, Southeast Asian countries as a whole have adopted an increasingly obvious strategy of balancing major powers in terms of security, and the shift towards inclusive competition between China and the United States is currently a reasonable form.

Unlike major countries in confrontational competition, those in inclusive competition do not gain strategic support by directly controlling the territory or government of small and medium-sized countries. Instead, they often seek the support of small and medium-sized countries through military assistance, making compromises on sensitive issues, or providing economic and trade preferential conditions.

#### **3.2.2 Hub-and-Spoke Security System**

##### **(1) Reasons and Shackles**

The United States' national relationship network in the Asia Pacific revolves around the construction of an alliance system, which mainly includes bilateral alliance relationships such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, Singapore,

Thailand, and the Philippines. In terms of operational mode, whether as an alliance or partner, the relationship between the United States and Asia Pacific countries has always been dominated by bilateral relations, with relatively low reliance on trilateral and multilateral relations. The main reason is that, firstly, the United States subjectively intends to obtain key chips for long-term control and influence over its allies by maintaining unequal alliance relationships. Secondly, the United States subjectively tends to regard bilateral exchanges as the core means of managing the alliance system and even the entire Asia Pacific relationship network, hoping to directly prevent or intervene in the irrational behavior of allies in a point-to-point manner, and avoid being embroiled in costly and unnecessary conflicts.

In the current bilateral security relations with Asian allies, the United States enjoys a bargaining advantage. Compared to multilateral alliances, the United States can better prevent free riding and joint resistance in bilateral relations. It can effectively constrain the behavior of allies and force them to take care of the interests of the United States. The hub-and-spoke system helps the United States consolidate its policy influence over its Asian allies, monitor cooperation between alliances, and increase defense cooperation between allies and non allies. Due to the demands and guidance of the United States, rather than independent decision-making, American allies are increasingly involved in regional security affairs.

Faced with strong pressure from the United States, the allies found it difficult to challenge the United States under a central radiation system, despite common dissatisfaction. This has two impacts on the future: firstly, the autonomy of US allies in foreign policy may decrease, limiting their ability to pursue a neutral stance and policy in regional affairs such as the South China Sea dispute. Secondly, the United States may hinder or even undermine the emergence of multilateral security institutions in Asia. The United States may maintain a "central radiation" system to safeguard its strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region. In this situation, East Asian countries whose strategic space and autonomy are constrained may seek more cooperation with China or engage in discussions between countries, inevitably leading East Asia towards multilateralism. The following will discuss the relationship between the United States and its bilateral allies Japan, South Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines in East Asia.

## **(2) Japan and the United States**

Japan first expressed its desire to establish a bilateral alliance between the United States and Japan as early as September 1947. At that time, Japanese Foreign Minister Hiroshi Kishida submitted the so-called "Kishida Memorandum" to the United States. Although the Japanese government believed at the beginning of the US occupation that it must accept restrictive and punitive security arrangements, the escalating Cold War encouraged Japan to explore various options for post occupation security.

Since the Trump administration took office, bilateral relations between the United States and Japan have continued to consolidate. Japan intends to restore its status as a political and military power and achieve the so-called goal of "national normalization", and the United States has provided crucial support for it in this regard. The United States has always been Japan's largest importer of weapons. Data shows that from 2016 to 2020, the United States provided 97% of Japan's total imported equipment with weapons and equipment. In January 2022, the "2+2" meeting of defense and foreign ministers between the United States and Japan clearly stated that the two sides will promote cooperation in emerging technologies based on the formal exchange of joint research, development, production, and testing framework documents. In January 2022, Biden and Fumio Kishida agreed to establish an Economic Policy Advisory Committee, known as the Ministerial "Economic 2+2", and pledged Japan's support for Biden's Indian Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) initiative. However, there is uncertainty regarding the prospects for cooperation between the two sides in the Indo-Pacific region. The Biden administration pursues value diplomacy, and its IPEF framework has many geopolitical considerations. However, throughout history, value diplomacy methods have been difficult to gain much diplomatic leverage in the Indo-Pacific region, and Southeast Asian countries are unwilling to be involved in the great-power rivalry.

### **(3) ROK and the United States**

The basic strategy of the Biden administration in adjusting the US alliance is to strengthen the position and role of allies in the alliance system. In the "Indo-Pacific Strategy", the United States prioritizes strengthening its alliance with Japan and South Korea, reshaping its relations with Japan and South Korea, and strengthens multilateral cooperation through the "US UK Australia Trilateral Security Partnership (AUKUS)+" and "US Japan India Australia Quadrilateral Mechanism (QUAD)+". In terms of the alliance between the US and the ROK, after Yin Xiyue came to power in May 2022, he constantly criticized the Moon Jae-in government for seriously destroying the ROK US alliance, and proposed to "rebuild" the alliance. The United States and South Korea are taking advantage of the new international situation and the opportunity of the 70th anniversary of the US South Korean alliance in 2023 to increase their "mutual direction" and strengthen cooperation in all aspects.

However, in the future, the main factors hindering the development of trilateral relations between the United States, Japan, and South Korea are as follows. Firstly, there is no consensus on Yin Xiyue's foreign policy towards Japan in China, and the South Korean government's expectations for Japan's support for joining the G7, QUAD, and other hot topics such as Fukushima nuclear pollution and water discharge may fall short. Secondly, Japan and South Korea will realize that the United States, under the guise of so-called "value diplomacy," will ultimately implement "America first" or even "America only. The third is the rapid strengthening of alliance relations between the United States, Japan, and South Korea in the short term, which to some extent has a component of response to the Ukrainian crisis.

#### **(4) Thailand and the United States**

Thailand has a long-standing tradition of "neutrality", but after Trump took office, he intended to implement the "Indo-Pacific Strategy" to expand the US geopolitical map and integrate the resources of the entire Indo Pacific region to further contain China. At the same time, Thailand is gradually on the path of returning to democratic politics. Therefore, the Trump government quickly took measures to strengthen the US Thailand bilateral relationship, which has been at a low point since 2014 due to sanctions.

Less than a month after taking office, Trump resumed communication with senior officials from Mattel, with the focus on the "Golden Cobra" joint military exercise co hosted by Mattel in early 2017. Another landmark event of the strengthening of military cooperation between the United States and Thailand during the Trump era was on November 17, 2019, during the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting held in Bangkok. US Defense Secretary Esper and Thai Prime Minister and Defense Minister Bayou signed the 2020 US Thailand Defense Alliance Joint Vision Statement, which is an update to the 2012 version of the Joint Vision Statement between the two countries. This statement echoes Trump's "Indo Pacific Strategy" and establishes the basic guidelines for military and security cooperation between the United States and Thailand within the framework of this strategy. In terms of military sales to Thailand, the Trump government has also released positive signals.

#### **(5) The Philippines and the United States**

Since 2023, from diplomatic consultations to maritime operations, the United States, the Philippines, Japan, and Australia have all strengthened their small multilateral cooperation with each other. These signs indicate that the United States intends to push the strategy of "small multilateralism" towards the South China Sea region to build a regional security cooperation framework of "US Philippines Plus". The Philippines, Japan, and Australia were the supporting forces of the US bilateral alliance system in the Asia Pacific axis spoke structure after World War II. Since the beginning of the 21st century, with the evolution of regional power distribution structure and regional security situation, the United States has begun to adjust its Asia Pacific strategy and launched "trilateral cooperation between axis and spoke" on the basis of the bilateral alliance system. The so-called "US-Philippines Plus" essentially refers to the further practice of the US "small multilateralism" or more specifically, the "trilateral security mechanism between axis and spoke" strategy in Southeast Asia.

The US Philippines Plus has a high level of mechanization, with a focus on the South China Sea and a "pyramid shaped" structure. The "US Philippines Plus" mechanism has caused the Philippines' involvement in the South China Sea and foreign security decisions to deviate from the ASEAN track and lean towards the United States, thus bringing "fragmentation" challenges to the ASEAN led regional security architecture. In 2023, the Philippines and the United States released new bilateral defense guidelines, which will help achieve the upgrading of the alliance. If the United States continues to promote this "Cold War mentality" and "small circle" concept in the South China Sea region, the military and quasi military competition between China and the United States in the



West Pacific Sea will evolve towards more risky and dangerous directions, and the strategic game between the two countries will be more difficult to control.

#### **IV.Future of East Asian version of NATO**

##### **4.1 Current situation**

The Asia Pacific version of NATO refers to a parallel organization that the United States hopes to establish in the Far East and South Pacific regions, equivalent to NATO. This organization uses China, Russia, and North Korea as hypothetical enemies. Japan is a staunch promoter and defender of this organization. However, in the short term, it is difficult to truly achieve the "Asia Pacific version of NATO".

Firstly, treaty allies are extremely important for military cooperation between the United States, Japan, and South Korea, and the core of treaty allies is to jointly defend against foreign aggression. Against the backdrop of the inability of South Korea and Japan to achieve deep historical reconciliation, it is difficult for South Korea and Japan to become military allies, which means that the United States, Japan, and South Korea cannot form a true "Asia Pacific version of NATO". Secondly, the security alliance established in the Asian region advocated by the United States is essentially an alliance relationship with obvious imaginary enemies, a zero sum mindset, and still a development and continuation of the Cold War mindset. In fact, China is actively advocating a new security concept within the mechanism of Asia Pacific security cooperation, and should handle security relations between countries in a mutually beneficial and coordinated manner. Since 2010, although the United States has invested many strategic resources in the Asia Pacific region, no other Asia Pacific country has explicitly followed the United States in controlling China, except for the Philippines and Japan, which closely follow the United States. Finally, the transformation of the power distribution pattern in East Asia towards a "multi-node structure" has promoted the vigorous development of multilateralism, resulting in a structural mismatch between the bilateral organization model of the "hubs and spokes system" and the evolution direction of multilateralism in the East Asian international order.

##### **4.2 Future of East Asian**

Since the NATO version of East Asia is difficult to achieve, the construction of East Asian multilateralism is a highly optimistic trend in the future. The world order and the East Asian region are in a chaotic period of transition from balance to chaos. It is necessary to restate the principles of multilateralism in the East Asian region, which are inclusivity, substantiality, extensibility, diversity, openness, and future direction, and to continuously strive for peace.

#### **V.Conclusion**

The current relationship between China and the United States is completely different from the Cold War era. Based on this, there may be different opportunities for confrontation, competition, and cooperation in the future. As a responsible major country in maintaining world peace and development, China and the United States have made

progress in their dialogue, even if it is not smooth, surpassing conflicts and divisions, constantly advancing in the competition for security and inclusiveness.

At the same time, the original one-dimensional relationship of the "hubs and spokes system" is gradually being broken, the tension of internal relationships is intensifying, and the pressure of external systems is increasing. It should also be noted that the transformation of the multi-node structure in East Asia and the adaptive adjustment of the "hubs and spokes system" have brought new opportunities for China to promote regional cooperation in East Asia. In this context, how the United States will adjust the "axis and spoke system" to meet new security needs, and how East Asian countries can adapt to this transformation trend and establish an East Asian security order that combines "endogeneity" and "integrity", are still issues worth long-term exploration and in-depth research.

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