

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 10 February 2023

The Era of Coalitions: The Shifting Nature of Alignments in Asia

*Zack Cooper**



Japan's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Hayashi Yoshimasa is greeted by Australia's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Marise Payne at a bilateral meeting during the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) in Melbourne, Australia, on 12 February 2022. CON CHRONIS/POOL/AFP.

** Zack Cooper is Senior Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and adjunct faculty member at Georgetown University and Princeton University. He was previously Visiting Senior Fellow at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Three major shifts are underway in the international order today: from unipolarity to multipolarity, from alliances to alignments, and from multilateralism to minilateralism.
- As the world becomes more multipolar, many countries are likely to prefer flexible alignments over fixed alliances, creating a far more complex web of relationships.
- This rise of more flexible alignments will incentivise the creation of smaller, issue-specific minilateral groupings over larger multilateral arrangements with broader remits.
- Together, these shifts are leading to one major change in international relations: the rise of coalitions. This will have profound effects on countries, both large and small.
- This era of coalitions poses a particular challenge for Southeast Asian states, which have heretofore sought to avoid such alignments to maintain ASEAN unity and centrality.

INTRODUCTION

The era of coalitions is upon us. In recent years, the world has witnessed the growing importance of coalitions like the Quad (Australia, India, Japan, and the United States), AUKUS (Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States), BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), Chip 4 (Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and the United States), and many more. The rise of coalitions might seem to be a blip in the historical record, but it is no accident. Instead, coalitions are the natural response to three shifts in the international order: from unipolarity to multipolarity, from alliances to alignments, and from multilateralism to minilateralism.

This essay explains how these three changes incentivise coalition-building and why this new era of coalitions will present opportunities for some countries while confronting others with serious strategic challenges.

UNIPOLARITY TO MULTIPOLARITY

It has been clear for many years that the world is moving away from the age of American unipolarity that has existed since the end of the Cold War.¹ Some reasons are structural and longstanding, such as population growth and economic development, which have raised the importance of India, China, and others. Other reasons have to do with a crisis of confidence in the United States, and international concern about the direction and reliability of the United States has risen substantially in recent years. As a result, the unipolar moment is now ending.

What will replace unipolarity remains less clear. Taken together, the United States and China hold half of the world's total wealth.² Some have therefore predicted that Washington and Beijing will build competing blocs and construct a bipolar system akin to that which existed during the Cold War. But this now seems unlikely. To the extent that American and Chinese leaders are increasingly seen as unpredictable and inward-focused, they are encouraging the creation of a multipolar world with a larger number of poles and competing power centres.

For its part, the United States is viewed by many around the world as an increasingly erratic superpower. Donald Trump detested alliances. Joe Biden embraces them.³ Washington once championed free trade. Now bipartisan majorities support protectionist policies.⁴ Meanwhile, questions about the health of America's democratic institutions undermine U.S. standing abroad.⁵ The result is that few countries—including many longstanding U.S. treaty allies—are willing to bet their future entirely on the United States.⁶

China was in prime position to benefit from the erosion of trust in the United States, but Beijing has undermined its own global standing in recent years. The Chinese Communist Party's mismanagement of its economic situation is leading many to question whether China will continue to be an engine of global growth and whether it will ever surpass the United States economically.⁷ At the same time, Xi Jinping's centralisation of power has created a more brittle

political system. And the rise of “wolf warrior” diplomacy has done damage to China’s diplomatic standing from Australia to Lithuania, and from South Korea to India.⁸

In short, whereas a decade ago many countries looked to the United States for security and China for economic growth, neither appears to be a sure bet today. As a result, countries are looking for new security arrangements and sources of economic growth. While some in Beijing and Washington talk of a “new Cold War,” many reject the simplistic concepts of bandwagoning and balancing.⁹ Instead, they are seeking greater autonomy or looking to tie themselves together with other countries beyond the world’s two largest powers.¹⁰

This emerging multipolar world will be far more complicated than anything that existed in the recent past simply because there are likely to be many more power centres. India is carving out its own unique position. So too is the European Union, and some of its individual member states. All the while, powers like Brazil, Nigeria and Indonesia are growing in importance. The complexity of this world goes far beyond anything from the last century, and it will challenge policymakers in every capital to come up with new approaches and strategies.

ALLIANCES TO ALIGNMENTS

The shift from unipolarity to multipolarity will make fixed alliances less attractive to many countries around the world. After all, multipolar systems tend to be less static, leading to more frequent changes in alignment.¹¹ Alliances tend to be highly formalised, requiring long, laborious, and legalistic negotiation processes.¹² But as leaders seek greater flexibility in their international arrangements, the attractiveness of new alliances is likely to wane.

This does not imply that fixed treaty alliances will disappear. Path dependency makes alliance relationships sticky – it is no small thing to tear up a treaty commitment, particularly when the treaty is multinational.¹³ Indeed, some alliances outside Asia, like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), are even expanding with the admission of historically non-aligned Sweden and Finland. This is logical given Russian aggression and the tendency of countries to balance together against clear threats. But in the years ahead, this is likely to be the exception and not the rule.

One major difference between alliances and alignments is their scope. Alliances tend to be broader than many imagine. Although alliances are typically thought of as focused on military cooperation, the truth is that numerous alliances explicitly include economic, technological, and diplomatic components. As a result, alliances often represent a whole-of-government or even whole-of-society commitment by one country to another. Alignments, however, are more likely to shift from issue to issue. The issue-specific nature of alignments implies that countries can align with different sets of countries on different topics. India, for example, is maintaining its close economic alignment with Russia while increasing its security alignment with the United States and continuing its policy of non-alignment in other areas. Similarly, many European countries are maintaining their security alignment with the United States but adopting more independent approaches to economic and technology issues.

One implication of the shift toward alignments is that a subset of existing alliances built on weak foundations may come under serious pressure, and potentially even collapse. The most obvious candidate for collapse in Asia is the U.S. alliance with Thailand.¹⁴ The two sides no longer share a similar set of threat perceptions. Whereas the United States increasingly sees China as the greatest challenge to its interests, Thai leaders are much more comfortable with Beijing.¹⁵ Furthermore, differences in governance present a real risk to the alliance. For example, the U.S. Congress has applied restrictions that prevent foreign assistance funds from being directed to governments in power due to coups, which has hampered U.S.-Thai relations.¹⁶ Similar differences in threat perception and domestic governance exist with several longstanding U.S. partners in the Middle East, which could signal that realignments are just around the corner there as well.

For the most part, new alignments will coexist with alliance networks, complicating regional and global arrangements. For example, China and Russia may not be formal allies, but they are clearly aligned in many areas.¹⁷ So too are Japan and Australia, despite the lack of a formal treaty alliance. As these more flexible alignments materialise, they will often be overinterpreted, since experts too frequently conflate issue-specific alignments with all-encompassing alliances. Despite calls, including from a U.S. Senator, for a “Pacific NATO”, nothing of the sort is in the cards.¹⁸

MULTILATERALISM TO MINILATERALISM

As the world becomes more multipolar and alignments become more flexible, the form of many countries’ international engagement is likely to change. Large multilateral groupings including many states with varied interests and objectives will become more difficult to manage. Smaller, more issue-specific groups will offer more rapid progress toward specific objectives. In short, minilateralism is likely to displace multilateralism, offering more return on investment.

Minilateral groups are likely to be appealing for several reasons. First, minilaterals tend to have a more defined topic or objective, so they are better tailored to make progress on specific issues. Second, since they include fewer countries, minilaterals make it easier to bring together only those countries or leaders with similar agendas and objectives. Third, since minilaterals tend to be more flexible, they can meet and evolve as situations demand, rather than having to wait for predetermined yearly meetings and slow-moving institutions. All these factors make it easier to forge agreements and implement initiatives in minilateral than multilateral settings.

Existing multilateral institutions—like formal treaty alliances—will not disappear. Defunct international organisations are seldom discarded outright but tend to slowly fade into irrelevance.¹⁹ Outdated multilateral institutions will instead find themselves competing for time, attention, and resources with their newer minilateral counterparts. Less frequent meetings and the delegation of attendance to more junior officials will be the first signs of trouble for many multilateral groups. The multilateral groupings that survive will need to demonstrate real value beyond simple “talk shops” on the yearly calendar of senior leaders.

Some experts have described the resulting combination of minilateral and multilateral groupings as hubs and spokes, webs, or latticework. These types of network concepts correctly portray how new minilateral architectures will be layered over existing multilateral groupings. The result will be not one order dominated by a single hegemon, nor a duo of competing blocs, but rather a far more complicated set of interlocking arrangements, with different coalitions working together to further objectives on different issues.

EMERGING COALITIONS

Taken together, the shifts from unipolarity to multipolarity, alliances to alignments, and multilateralism to minilateralism are leading to one major change: the rise of coalitions. Although the exact nature of these groupings will be highly dependent on decisions by individual countries and leaders, coalitions are already forming around four basic issues: security, economics, technology, and governance.²⁰ Each is emerging with a different set of countries and objectives, therefore generating diverse coalitions with unique characteristics.

Security coalitions tend to be the smallest and most deeply integrated. After all, countries cannot simply fight alongside one another overnight, they need to have clear roles and missions as well as some degree of combined planning, training, and interoperability to be effective. Security is therefore the area in which fixed alliances remain the most beneficial – NATO and most U.S. alliances in Asia are unlikely to go away anytime soon. But where there is a common security threat, as China is perceived to be by Australia, Japan, India, and the United States, new coalitions are already forming. Although the Quad often describes itself as a non-security grouping, the reality is that it represents Asia’s most important emerging security coalition.²¹

In the economic domain, multiple coalitions are emerging. The G7 is increasingly operating as the organising coalition for some of the world’s advanced industrial economies. It has negotiated and coordinated the new global minimum tax as well as a range of economic penalties on Russia in the wake of its invasion of Ukraine. In Asia, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), and Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) are all in play. Since economic cooperation does not require the same level of political and strategic alignment as military cooperation, the emerging economic coalitions are larger and less formalised than those in the security domain.

In the technology space, there are multiple minilaterals, but no over-arching coalition has yet taken shape. The United States and the European Union have a Trade and Technology Council. The Biden administration is pushing for greater coordination on semiconductor supply chains through the Chip 4 alliance with Japan, South Korea and Taiwan.²² The Quad has its own supply chain working group, which is also focused on technology issues. It is possible that all of these groups—or new concepts like a grouping of leading “techno-democracies (T-12) — will flourish in the years ahead.²³ But it seems more likely that policymakers will look to combine some of these related coalitions to simplify the increasingly complex task of

coordinating technology policy with a large number of countries with varying interests and objectives.

The most diffuse coalitions tend to focus on governance issues, whether they be domestic or international. The Biden administration has attempted to build a democratic coalition, but its early efforts via the Summit for Democracy have largely stalled.²⁴ International issues like climate change have been able to build larger and more stable coalitions, but there too, progress has been slower than many hoped or expected. The larger the coalition gets, the more unwieldy it is, so governance-focused groups that include many countries are by their nature more difficult to organise and to drive toward consensus.

GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS

Many observers think about alignments the same way they did during the Cold War, as fixed and all-encompassing alliances. Yet, for all the reasons described above, coalitions tend to be smaller, more flexible, and more issue-oriented than the blocs that characterised the second half of the 20th century. So how will this new era change the choices and fortunes of countries around the world?

For the United States, the growth of coalitions brings with it a new era of uncertainty. Washington has long benefitted from a host of alliances and multilateral arrangements that have generally been centred around the United States. But as America transitions into one hub of many, it cannot simply dictate its terms; U.S. diplomacy has to invest more in building common ground and forging consensus with allies and partners. Friendly coalitions of like-minded states could reinforce many U.S. aims, but they will also decrease U.S. control. As a result, many American policymakers are likely to regard a coalitions-based construct with some degree of skepticism. In fact, some U.S. experts have to date rejected this development and hoped instead for the emergence of a single, large coalition to balance China across a number of issue sets.²⁵ But this is the way of the past, not the reality of the future (or even the present).

For powers like China and Russia, which do not have large pre-existing alliance networks, the shift toward coalitions also opens up new opportunities to reach out to their like-minded partners. China, Russia, and others are building their own minilateral groups, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Their success will depend, however, on whether they can articulate shared objectives, particularly having to do with the provision of public goods. Much Sino-Russian engagement today, however, is defined less by a positive vision of the future than it is by a rejection of the “Western” model. This will make it hard to work with some of the more capable potential partners, since they may not want to align against American or European approaches. Indeed, America’s existing alliances will not go away overnight, and it is becoming clear that belligerent actions by Beijing or Moscow are likely to accelerate coalition-building and tighten alignments around them.

For powers currently allied to the United States, such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Italy, Canada, and others, the emergence of coalitions provides more options. U.S. allies can maintain alignment with the United States in the areas in which it suits them, but will now have greater space to pursue independent and/or complementary policies in other areas. Consequently, if relationships with the United States worsen, current U.S. allies will have more exit options since they can decrease reliance on Washington without forgoing alignment altogether by pursuing greater autonomy or closer integration with other international players. For example, Japan is working more with Australia, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and others in ways that do not directly undermine its alliance with the United States, but provide ballast against the possibility of worsening U.S.-Japan ties under a future American administration.

For powers that are not clearly aligned today—India, Indonesia, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, South Africa, etc.—the rise of coalitions presents many benefits. As these countries grow and multipolarity becomes more apparent, they may emerge as heavyweights in the international order in their own right. Regional networks will centre around many of these countries and the other powers will increasingly look to them as important actors. Few, if any, of these players will want to consider formally allying with other great powers. Instead, creating flexible alignments will present opportunities for winning support and cooperation from other powers without having to sacrifice significant amounts of autonomy.

There is a last set of countries though, which are likely to find this new coalitions-based world more difficult: smaller states, including in Southeast Asia, that face impediments to joining new alignments. Some countries, such as South Korea, have become so dependent on a single ally, e.g., the United States, that building coalitions with third countries does not come naturally.²⁶ Other countries, including the members of ASEAN, are part of existing multilateral organisations that will constrain their ability to organise in smaller and more flexible constructs. Still others, like Switzerland, continue to be attached to strict non-alignment policies for strategic, political, or historical reasons, and could therefore struggle to take advantage of the opportunities provided by more flexible coalitions.

ASEAN'S DILEMMA

What does this mean for Southeast Asia in particular? A shift toward a multipolar world and away from competing alliance blocs would seem to be ideal for many countries in Southeast Asia. But the reality is that Southeast Asian states are likely to find themselves in difficult positions in the years ahead. ASEAN understandably prizes unity and centrality, but the rise of coalitions is placing emphasis on an entirely different set of principles.²⁷ Rather than embracing long-standing institutions with set membership and strict procedures, new coalitions are arising that are able to respond more quickly to changing circumstances. Fixed multilateral groupings (like ASEAN) that cut across multiple issue areas appear to be the way of the past; flexible coalitions focused on specific issues appear the way of the future.

Southeast Asian states will have to ensure that they retain the many benefits of ASEAN membership without being hamstrung by its constraints. Individual ASEAN members,

particularly the larger or more active diplomatic players, will be offered substantial incentives to join some of the emerging coalitions. But since other Southeast Asian countries are likely to be bypassed or forgo membership in coalitions, ASEAN unity could be put at risk (to say nothing of ASEAN centrality).

This will present Southeast Asian leaders with a difficult strategic choice: either adapt to the era of coalitions and put ASEAN unity at risk, or sit by as new alignments undermine ASEAN centrality. Businesses have long operated under the rule that companies “adapt or die” – the same will be true of many international institutions in the years ahead.

ENDNOTES

¹ Christopher Layne, “This Time It’s Real: The End of Unipolarity and the Pax Americana”, *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (2012), <https://academic.oup.com/isq/article/56/1/203/1939830>.

² Credit Suisse, “Global Wealth Report 2022”, *Credit Suisse Research Institute*, 2022, <https://www.credit-suisse.com/about-us/en/reports-research/global-wealth-report.html>.

³ Hans Nichols, “Biden’s China Plan: Bring Allies”, *Axios*, 29 October 2020, <https://www.axios.com/biden-china-confront-allies-3aa289c0-53b6-4bd9-8e20-0a5a1adc90b0.html>.

⁴ Fareed Zakaria, “American protectionism could imperil a golden era of Western unity”, *Washington Post*, 8 December 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/12/08/europe-us-protectionism-foreign-policy-ukraine/>.

⁵ Richard Wike, Janell Fetterolf, Moira Fagan, and Sneha Gubbala, “Most say there is strong partisan conflict in the U.S.”, *Pew Research Center*, 21 June 2022, https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2022/06/22/international-attitudes-toward-the-u-s-nato-and-russia-in-a-time-of-crisis/pg_2022-07-22_u-s-image_1-04/.

⁶ Steven Erlanger, “Europe Wonders If It Can Rely on U.S. Again, Whoever Wins”, *The New York Times*, 22 October 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/22/world/europe/europe-biden-trump-diplomacy.html>.

⁷ “China’s GDP unlikely to surpass U.S. in next few decades: JCER”, *Nikkei Asia*, 14 December 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/China-s-GDP-unlikely-to-surpass-U.S.-in-next-few-decades-JCER#:~:text=TOKYO%20%2D%2D%20China's%20nominal%20gross,would%20switch%20places%20in%202033>.

⁸ Laura Silver, Kat Devlin, and Christine Huang, “Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries”, *Pew Research Center*, 6 October 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/>.

⁹ Chong Ja Ian, “Revisiting Response to Power Preponderance: Going Beyond the Balancing-Bandwagoning Dichotomy”, *Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies*, 2003, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/rsis-pubs/WP54.pdf>.

¹⁰ Zack Cooper and Lindsey Ford, “America’s Alliances After Trump: Lessons from the Summer of ’69”, *Texas National Security Review*, Spring 2021, <http://tnsr.org/2021/03/americas-alliances-after-trump-lessons-from-the-summer-of-69/>.

¹¹ Michael Haas, “International Subsystems: Stability and Polarity”, *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 64, No. 1 (1970), pp. 98-123.

- ¹² Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987); Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).
- ¹³ Stephen M. Walt, “Why Alliances Endure or Collapse”, *Survival*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (1997), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00396339708442901?journalCode=tsur20>.
- ¹⁴ Zachary Abuza, “America Should Be Realistic About Its Alliance with Thailand”, *War on the Rocks*, 2 January 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/01/america-should-be-realistic-about-its-alliance-with-thailand/>.
- ¹⁵ Jack Detsch, “Washington Worries China is Winning Over Thailand”, *Foreign Policy*, 17 June 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/17/china-thailand-submarines-military-influence/>.
- ¹⁶ Alexis Arieff, Marian L. Lawson and Travis A. Ferrell, “Coups-Related Restrictions in U.S. Foreign Aid Appropriations”, Congressional Research Service, 1 September 2022, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IF11267.pdf>.
- ¹⁷ Andrea Kendall-Taylor and David O. Shullman, “Best and Bosom Friends: Why China-Russia Ties Will Deepen after Russia’s War on Ukraine”, *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 22 June 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/best-and-bosom-friends-why-china-russia-ties-will-deepen-after-russias-war-ukraine>.
- ¹⁸ Ken Moriyasu, “Create a NATO for the Pacific, U.S. senator proposes”, *Nikkei Asia*, 7 June 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Indo-Pacific/Create-a-NATO-for-the-Pacific-U.S.-senator-proposes>.
- ¹⁹ Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, “Death of international organization. The organizational ecology of intergovernmental organizations, 1815-2015”, *Review of International Organizations*, Vol. 15 (2020), <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11558-018-9340-5>.
- ²⁰ Hal Brands and Zack Cooper, “The Great Game with China Is 3D Chess”, *Foreign Policy*, 30 December 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/12/30/china-united-states-great-game-cold-war/>.
- ²¹ Dhruva Jaishankar and Tanvi Madan, “The Quad Needs a Harder Edge”, *Foreign Affairs*, 19 May 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2022-05-19/quad-needs-harder-edge>.
- ²² “The Chip 4 alliance will struggle to find cohesion in 2023”, *Economist Intelligence*, 8 December 2022, https://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=1222633905&Country=South+Korea&topic=Politics&ubt_1.
- ²³ Jared Cohen and Richard Fontaine, “Uniting the Techno-Democracies: How to Build Digital Cooperation”, *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-10-13/uniting-techno-democracies>.
- ²⁴ James Goldgeier and Bruce Jentleson, “Biden’s Democracy Summit Was Never a Good Idea. But Here’s How To Make It Work.”, *Politico*, 5 December 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/12/05/bidens-democracy-summit-never-good-idea-523718>.
- ²⁵ Josh Smith, “Cooperation by U.S. and allies a step toward ‘Asian NATO,’ N.Korea media says”, *Reuters*, 29 June 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/world/joint-drills-by-us-allies-are-step-toward-asian-nato-nkorea-media-says-2022-06-28/>.
- ²⁶ Zack Cooper, “Focus versus format: An American view of South Korea’s regional engagement”, *Asian Politics & Policy*, 2023, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/aspp.12677>.
- ²⁷ Mark Beeson, “Decentered? ASEAN’s Struggle to Accommodate Great Power Competition”, *Global Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2022), <https://academic.oup.com/isagsq/article/2/1/ksab044/6513410>.

<p><i>ISEAS Perspective</i> is published electronically by: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute</p> <p>30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace Singapore 119614 Main Tel: (65) 6778 0955 Main Fax: (65) 6778 1735</p> <p>Get Involved with ISEAS. Please click here: https://www.iseas.edu.sg/support/get-involved-with-iseas/</p>	<p>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute accepts no responsibility for facts presented and views expressed.</p> <p>Responsibility rests exclusively with the individual author or authors. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without permission.</p> <p>© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each article.</p>	<p>Editorial Chairman: Choi Shing Kwok</p> <p>Editorial Advisor: Tan Chin Tiong</p> <p>Editorial Committee: Terence Chong, Cassey Lee, Norshahril Saat, and Hoang Thi Ha</p> <p>Managing Editor: Ooi Kee Beng</p> <p>Editors: William Choong, Lee Poh Onn, Lee Sue-Ann, and Ng Kah Meng</p> <p>Comments are welcome and may be sent to the author(s).</p>
---	---	---