

From Overlapping Interests to Behavior Alignment: U.S.-Japan-Philippines Minilateralism and the Balance of Threat During the Biden Administration

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Abstract

During the Joe Biden administration, the Philippines, Japan, and the U.S. engaged in more frequent and strengthened exchanges from 2023 amid the intensified Sino-U.S. rivalry in the Indo-Pacific. In any strategic competition, the ability to form alliances is a valuable asset, and the emerging U.S.-Japan-Philippines alliance was seen as a reflection of these power dynamics. But why do some states form alliances against particular states in this region? This paper explores this strategic development in the Indo-Pacific political landscape and employs the perspective of the balance of threats in the discipline of International Relations to investigate the following questions. Firstly, given that China has been perceived as an economic powerhouse in Asia, why have Japan and the Philippines shifted away from a hedging posture of maintaining a neutral position, which the small and middle powers in Asia have traditionally welcomed? In addition, while talk of creating a major collective security alliance — a so-called Indo-Pacific NATO — has always been prevalent in Asia, the decision to

form, instead, a small-group alliance among the U.S., Japan, and the Philippines, known as minilateralism, also puzzles security observers. Finally, this paper offers some implications and suggestions to security policy-makers relevant to the region. By analytically dissecting the process of the U.S.-Japan-Philippines minilateralism during the Biden administration, this paper hopes to conceptualize possible trends and reflect the developing geopolitical tendencies in the Indo-Pacific.

Keywords: Minilateralism, Choice of Alliance, Balance of Power, Balance of Threats, Indo-Pacific

I. Introduction

On July 8, 2024, Japan and the Philippines conducted the second Japan-Philippines Foreign and Defense Ministerial Meeting (“2+2”) in Manila and established a new defense cooperation agreement, the *Reciprocal Access Agreement* (RAA). The RAA is meant to facilitate joint military exercises and enhance defense collaboration between the two countries. It also signifies the deepening of the strategic partnership between Japan and the Philippines in the security domain. In addition, the joint statement of the meeting highlighted the need to “build multilayered cooperation with allies and like-minded countries, including Japan-Philippines-U.S. and Japan-U.S.-Australia-Philippines” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2024: 168-170). The agreement seems to reflect remarks made by President Biden’s Secretary of Defense, Lloyd Austin, at the 21st Shangri-La Dialogue held from May 31 to June 2, 2024, in Singapore, where he claimed that the U.S. and its allies are transforming the traditional hub-and-spoke

security governance (as will be explained later) in the Indo-Pacific into “a set of overlapping and complementary initiatives and institutions, propelled by a shared vision and a shared sense of mutual obligation” (U.S. Department of War, 2024a). Security analysts often refer to this new type of cooperation as minilateralism (Wuthnow, 2019: 133-150). Stephen Walt observes that alliances can represent a formal or informal relationship of security cooperation between small groups of states (Walt, 2013: 1). Likewise, minilateralism, as a kind of alliance, is a formal or informal platform in which membership is voluntary, regional, and limited instead of legally binding, global, and universal (Patrick, 2015: 116).

By 2024, very few doubted the dire state of relations between the U.S. and China when President Biden said in his State of the Union address on March 14 that the U.S. “want[s] competition with China, not conflict. And we’re in a stronger position to win the conflict of the 21st century against China” (The White House, 2024a). In the context of China and global security, developments between Japan and the Philippines have also brought attention to the following questions. First, Japan and the Philippines highlighted in their joint communiqué of the RAA that they “shared serious concerns over actions which increase tensions in the region, particularly the recent dangerous activities at Second Thomas Shoal.” While China is still the biggest trading destination for Japan and the Philippines (Japan External Trade Organization, n.d.; Mapa, 2024), instead of bandwagoning by allying with the source of the threat (Jervis & Snyder, 1991: 3) or a hedging posture of maintaining a neutral position (Kuik, 2008: 159-185) toward disputes, why did Japan and the Philippines risk being criticized as a U.S. “proxy” (Ding, 2024) and decide to take a more vocal and counter-balancing posture, damaging their relations with China in the process?

Secondly, with hindsight, Biden's Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, had already laid out the U.S. strategy for confronting China's growing competition in his speech at George Washington University on May 26, 2022. He argued that the U.S. approach to China could be summarized as "invest, align, compete" (U.S. Department of State, 2022). Hence, Japan and the Philippines' security collaboration is certainly a kind of effort, intended by the U.S., to align its allies and partners, acting with common purpose and with overlapping interests. However, why did the U.S. government, during the Biden administration, endeavor to create multiple groups of security partnerships — minilateralism — with a small scale of collaboration distinct from the traditional multilateral and cohesive institution for collective security in the Indo-Pacific? And how, if at all, did Donald Trump's return to the White House in January 2025 affect, and propose to deal with, intensifying geopolitical dynamics in the region?

Amid this new geopolitical context, there is a need for renewed efforts to understand alliance formation in the Indo-Pacific region. Existing research, such as Hemmer and Katzenstein's 2002 article, uses theory to explain why there is no NATO in Asia, but without explaining potential alternative security designs other than NATO (Hemmer & Katzenstein, 2002: 575-607). Other work, such as that by He and Feng in 2012, argue that the level of threats in a region would lead to regional security governance being either multilateral or bilateral (He & Feng, 2012: 227-250), without conceptualizing the possibility of an option in between.

Both of these works were published at the end of the Cold War, and even at the height of globalization, when great power rivalries like the East-West confrontation were regarded as less likely. There are, however, clear geostrategic differences between that period and the

present. Today in Asia, China's territorial disputes with neighboring countries have become increasingly visible on the international stage. China engages in active military operations in the East China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and the South China Sea, while the U.S. appears to be retreating from the region. The "China threat" has become more than rhetorical or potential, and is actual and assertive for some. By 2019, Mearsheimer (2019: 7-50) bluntly claimed that "the liberal international order was a failed enterprise with no future." By 2024, various alliance platforms, including AUKUS, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), and closer cooperation among Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and the United States (often informally known as the Squad) had emerged in the Indo-Pacific. In October of that year, Japanese Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru publicly talked about his vision for an Asian NATO (Chen, 2024). As the above works investigating why there is no Asian NATO were published more than 10 years ago, without connecting to the current global context, this article attempts to provide new answers relevant to the current context. The Russo-Ukrainian War that began in 2022 shows that regional crises can have global repercussions in our interconnected world. Hence, this paper aims to learn from the regional dynamics of the U.S.-Japan-Philippines minilateralism during the Biden administration and understand what it means for the world.

The remaining part of this paper explains the distinction between the balance of power and the balance of threats as analytical foundations. It then reviews the latest geopolitical context in the Indo-Pacific region, and explains U.S. behavior within this context and the reason why the balance of power has its limits to explain the independent actions of small and middle powers. The article uses the balance of threats to explain the strategic choices of both Japan and the Philippines and

shows why the Biden administration has encouraged minilateralism as a means to attain regional security, which crystallized the overlapped interests for behavior alignment. The paper concludes with a reflection on the implications drawn from this investigation and provides an initial assessment of future trends.

II. Theoretical Grounding: Balance of Power and Balance of Threats

Great powers, such as the U.S. and China, are sensitive to the power dynamics on a global scale and tend to respond to contextual development with a balance of power (Waltz, 1979: 170-173). Mearsheimer argues that “Great powers are rarely content with the current distribution of power; on the contrary, they face a constant incentive to change it in their favor. They almost always have revisionist intentions, and they will use force to alter the balance of power if they think it can be done at a reasonable price” (Mearsheimer, 2001: 2). Scholars have not reached a conclusive agreement about the cause of the Sino-U.S. strategic competition, in terms of whether it is a result of a Thucydides Trap (Allison, 2017: viii), where the U.S. is working to maintain its leadership, or a Power Transition (Degterev et al., 2021: 210-231), where an unsatisfied China is challenging the U.S.; but either way people could agree that the process of the “New Cold War” is already upon us (Brands & Gaddis, 2021). In general, the balance of power theory sees power distributions as independent variables, but state behaviors as dependent variables.

However, the logic of the balance of power works for great powers, as these states actors are inherently resource-rich and politically significant, but this perspective is questionable in explaining Japan’s and the Philippines’ strategic behavior when existing literature

often identified Japan as a middle power and the Philippines as a small power (Jung et al., 2021: 53-68; Misalucha-Willoughby & Medillo, 2020: 3-23). In particular, by 2024, empirical evidence suggesting that Japan and the Philippines are seeking to increase their national prestige and become regional hegemonies is yet to be discovered. Hence, power alone could not sufficiently explain relatively resource-strained small and middle powers' choice of alliance.

Traditionally, a state's security policy is about national survival; whether they are power maximizers or security maximizers, the policy is based on a power logic. According to such a power logic, big states form alliances to balance power. Nevertheless, this theoretical perspective also suggests a very questionable picture where there are only great power policies and no social agency for smaller actors in the international system. In fact, while these small and medium powers may have no strong aspiration to obtain great power status, they are still very interested in their own survival issues. Hence, Indo-Pacific countries may actively decide to balance (balancing against China by cooperating with the U.S.) or sometimes to bandwagon (living under China's dominating power influence) to protect their interests. As such, the balance of power is a line of thought that predetermines small and middle powers' decisions, and it often ignores the possibility of context-sensitive choices. This was when Stephen Walt argued in 1985 that states respond to perceived threats, not just raw power, and the shift to a threat-centered analysis via four key factors (discussed later) is particularly significant for small and medium powers as they are more concerned about regional dynamics, not global competition (Walt, 2013: vi). This distinction suggests that small and middle powers may superficially decide to balance or bandwagon, but underneath their choices, in essence, they may not only behave in a passive role,

acting as proxies for the choices of great powers, as is simplified by the balance of power theory. As such, it is crucial to start by understanding the changing geopolitical dynamics in the Indo-Pacific.

III. Security Context: Changing Dynamics in the Indo-Pacific and Beyond

A short review of the security context around Japan and the Philippines will facilitate a better foundation for the follow-on investigation. The Indo-Pacific's power dynamics have dramatically changed since Xi Jinping came to power in 2013. Traditionally, China was considered an economic powerhouse in the first decade of the 21st century, even during the global financial recession from 2008 to 2009 (Mu & Seng, 2009: 5-19). However, when Xi became General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party in late 2012, China's foreign policy shifted from Deng Xiaoping's guideline of "keeping a low profile" to his more assertive stance of "striving for achievement" (Yan, 2014: 153-184). Under Xi's leadership, in 2013, China created the East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone to counter Japan's claim of sovereignty over the disputed territory of the Diaoyu/Senkaku islets (Osawa, 2013). Tension and instability in the Indo-Pacific continued with China's military buildup and construction of facilities increased in the Paracels and Spratly islands in the South China Sea in 2015 (McDevitt, 2015: 253-263). Instead of confronting China on the issue of territorial ownership, the Philippines skillfully elevated its South China Sea dispute with China as a maritime delimitation/entitlement case, and they submitted the case to arbitration to the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in the Hague. In 2016, the PCA ruled in favor of the Philippines and decided that China's claim of exploitation rights

within the established *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea* (UNCLOS) framework was excessive (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016). China has unilaterally increased the number of air and maritime intrusions around Taiwan since 2016 to pressure the Taiwan-centric governing party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) administration, in Taiwan (Liu et al., 2021: 25). Finally, China also had multi-border disputes with India, including the conflicts at Doklam in 2017 and the Galwan River valley in 2020 (Banerjee, 2022: 158-177).

By 2024, China's influence was no longer regional but global. It presents itself as an alternative to the existing Western-led international order involving various political, military, and economic elements. Examples include the creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2014 and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) from 2013 (Yu, 2020: 3-18). These institutions have allowed China to create a global footprint for its economic activities. China has also established a set of new international institutions, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and promoted the expansion of BRICS to advance its national prestige and challenge the old international structure (Ching, 2023). In 2021, China proposed the Global Development Initiative (GDI) at the United Nations (UN) to promote its vision of global development. Unlike the BRI, an infrastructure-focused project backed by China's National Development and Reform Commission, the GDI is led by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It aims to shape a better global environment for China's development, such as a digital economy, green development, and property reduction.

Furthermore, in 2022, Xi released the Global Security Initiative (GSI) at the Boao Forum for Asia as his new addition to promoting a global security order dominated by states. Finally, China created the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) in 2023 as its integrated effort to

orchestrate an international order that emphasizes the principle of non-interference and state dominance in international affairs. With the GDI, GSI, and GCI, China presents an alternative international order distinct from the West and intends to prioritize development ahead of individual liberality and facilitate a global order governed by states, of states, and for states (Garcia, 2023).

IV. Great Power Politics: Balance of Power and the Security Dilemma Between the U.S. and China

The U.S. has been aware of China's growing power on the global stage. By 2011, the Obama administration (2009-2016) had started to recognize the structural shift in global power and was wrestling with the idea of a "Pivot to Asia" to readjust its strategic focus from the Middle East to China (The White House, 2011). However, at the practical level, the actual pivot did not go smoothly due to numerous challenges, such as moving the U.S. military away from Europe and the Middle East, overcoming U.S. domestic opposition to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), investing in arms tailored for a China contingency, and engaging in intense diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific (Kuo, 2024). The idea was later crystalized by the first Trump administration's *National Security Strategy* (2017-2020) when he named China the primary competitor and a "revisionist power" in 2017 and engaged with China on the issue of unbalanced trade. The *2019 U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* further states that China "seeks to reorder the region to its advantage by leveraging military modernization, influence operations, and predatory economics to coerce other nations" (U.S. Department of Defense, 2019). By 2021, the Biden administration (2021-2024) had inherited a much more challenging world than his predecessor. Not

only was COVID-19 still prevalent globally, but deteriorating Sino-U.S. relations had spilled over into multi-domain competition, first becoming tech competition and later encompassing political, economic, and military aspects. During that period, the Biden administration maintained a similar trajectory of competing with China, but adopted an approach involving both external and internal balancing in Waltz's terminologies (Waltz, 1979: 168), which was dissimilar from Trump's unilateralism.

Internationally, the Biden administration put together resources to build its own alliances by collaborating with U.S. friends and enhancing initiatives such as the Quad, which includes Japan, Australia, and India, and AUKUS, a trilateral security partnership created in September 2021 by Australia, the UK, and the U.S. Economically, the Biden administration encouraged a strategy of "decoupling" to diversify the risk of overdependence on China. The Biden government also proposed friend-shoring policies such as creating the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) in May 2022, to enhance economic resilience, and building an international semiconductor alliance, CHIP 4, in September 2022, with Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea, to keep China's growing technological power in check. Domestically, various new U.S. industry policy initiatives were proposed by the Biden administration with the objectives of onshoring (Shih, 2023), such as the *Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act* (IIJA), the *Inflation Reduction Act* (IRA), and the *Creating Helpful Incentives to Produce Semiconductors and Science Act* (CHIPS and Science Act), which have allowed the U.S. to invest in U.S. infrastructure, the medical industry, the semiconductor industry, and Artificial Intelligence.

In such a competitive relationship, a security dilemma can emerge between the U.S. and China as one party cannot make itself more secure

without accumulating more power, which would accidentally make the other less secure. Ken Booth once argued that a security dilemma should be broken down into a two-step process, including a dilemma of interpretations and a dilemma of responses (Booth & Wheeler, 2007: 4-7). The U.S. during the Biden administration interpreted the situation as one where “...the Indo-Pacific faces mounting challenges, particularly from the PRC[China]. The PRC is combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological might as it pursues a sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and seeks to become the world’s most influential power...” (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022: 5). While the Biden administration had no problem interpreting the nature of China’s growing power as harmful to U.S. survival, it was up to the U.S. to decide what, from its available options, to use in terms of *response*. This line of argument explains why the Biden administration eventually moved away from a hub-and-spoke system of bilateral treaties and settled on creating alliances in the region, as manifested in Biden’s *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, which states that the U.S. “will modernize our long-standing alliances, strengthen emerging partnerships, and invest in regional organizations—the collective capacity that will empower the Indo-Pacific to adapt to the 21st century’s challenges” (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022: 19).

V. Social Agency of Small and Middle Powers

The above analysis focuses on great powers’ behavior and suggests that small and medium powers have no active role in international affairs and that they can only act to suit the interests of the great powers. But empirically, this simplified view is challengeable. For example, Taiwan has traditionally been considered a smaller security

partner of the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Taiwan has no capacity to make decisions. In fact, Taiwan's decisions are not passive actions, but rather active negotiation. Evidence can be found in Academia Sinica's annual "American Portrait Survey," which illustrates the general perception of Taiwan's public toward the U.S. and China (Chung, 2023). The survey results unveiled in November 2023 found that only 33.9% of the Taiwanese considered the U.S. a trustworthy country even though many Taiwanese respondents worried about China's increasing military muscle-flexing around Taiwan. However, the same survey also found that only 9.3% of the Taiwanese believed that China is trustworthy. In comparison, 26.4% disagreed, and 57.6% strongly disagreed with the assumption due to China's intensifying military activities around Taiwan in recent years. This survey indicated that Taiwan does not submissively act as a proxy of the U.S. without questioning the credibility of its ally. Instead, the effects of U.S. skepticism have been alleviated by Taiwan's stronger wariness toward China, which resulted in the continued electoral successes of the DPP administration, which maintains a non-accommodative approach toward China, in Taiwan's 2024 presidential election, giving the party an unprecedented third consecutive term since 2016. As such, threat perceptions seem to override the power logic in the case of Taiwan.

Nonetheless, given China's always-present territorial ambitions over Taiwan, this case may differ from most other regional actors due to Taiwan's unique geopolitical status. This distinctiveness may be the main reason there is rarely an alternative option for Taiwan's security policy with China. In fact, while most Southeast Asian countries perceive the U.S. as a potential security guarantor, they also see China as an economic opportunity. In 2016, soon after the PCA issued its

ruling in favor of the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte, when asked about his opinion of China, bluntly stated, “It’s China that has money, not America. America doesn’t have money.” Traditionally, Asian countries may therefore choose neither balancing nor bandwagoning as their policy. Rather, they often implement a hedging strategy *via-à-vis* a rising and powerful China.

Nevertheless, there is a burgeoning body of literature looking into the conception of “hedging,” and scholars have not come to conclusive interpretations regarding its actual operational mechanism (Ciorciari & Haacke, 2019: 367-374). If hedging is “an insurance policy against opportunism” (Lake 1996: 15), then it could be a combination of policies to ensure state survival. However, analyzing foreign policy needs to be “actor-specific,” grounded on empirical evidence, instead of being “actor-general” by overgeneralizing a particular theoretical conception. Hedging is often conducted by state actors without public pronouncements; thus, one set of policies may be seen as hedging by one state while other states may see them as something else. For example, some may see hedging as bifurcated choices about cooperation or conflict between security and economic realms (Chan, 2013: 199; Lim & Cooper, 2015: 696-727), and this view could be seen in some analyses of Southeast Asian states (Chung, 2004: 35-53; Goh, 2005: 2). Other views of hedging may argue that a state actor receiving rising great powers with economic engagement would still not accept these great powers’ political authority by taking various sets of policies, and this is more commonly done for cases in East Asia (Koga, 2018: 633-660; López i Vidal & Pelegrín, 2018: 193-211). As will be explained in the latter part of this paper, there are clear indications that Japan and the Philippines enhanced their military and security modernization due to the growth of China’s relative power. For analytical purposes, this

paper adopts Kuik's 2008 conception of hedging, looking into the cases of Japan and the Philippines (Kuik, 2008: 159-185) in their security behavior, where hedging is understood as a strategic choice among a balancing-bandwagoning spectrum of various options. Eventually, foreign policy is about constant hedging to ensure a state's survival. The question is more about why Japan and the Philippines shifted away from the central position and moved closer to the balancing end of the spectrum and adopted a stronger position against China.

In retrospect, why Japan and the Philippines traditionally should choose to hedge between the U.S. and China is perfectly understandable. In fact, China is still Japan's and the Philippines' most significant trading partner as of 2024. Even though Japan has been considered a U.S. ally, Japanese social agency has not been able to change Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, which constrains Japan's ability to use force abroad (The House of Representatives of Japan, 1946). When the PCA ruled in favor of the Philippines in 2016, still, President Duterte nevertheless moved the Philippines' foreign policy closer to China. In 2018, he famously compared having a war with China to committing suicide (Romero, 2018). The following year, Duterte stated that "If we go to war against China, I would lose all my soldiers just as they are leaving for the war. It will be a massacre. We don't have the capacity to fight them" (Romero, 2019). By 2022, when Ferdinand Marcos Jr. was elected president of the Philippines, he also stated, "We can't go to war with China" (Viray, 2022). The above observations suggest that Japan and the Philippines do not act blindly in the U.S. interest, and there are elements beyond the balance of power logic that can explain the social agency and the reluctant balancing by Japan and the Philippines.

VI. Balance of Threat and Security Challenges for Japan and the Philippines

In the international arena, joining the losing side is not always a wise decision, and by the second decade of the 21st century, many security analysts have identified an apparent waning of U.S. power in the Indo-Pacific (Blackwill & Fontaine, 2024: 1; Brattberg, 2021: 223; Stromseth, 2019: 2). However, for Japan and the Philippines, joining the seemingly stronger side by bandwagoning is also very dangerous because it increases the resources available to a threatening China and requires placing trust in China's potential for forbearance (Walt, 2013: 29). In addition, territorial sovereignty is a national security issue that Japan and the Philippines are not ready to give up before China can offer sufficient benefits (Schweller, 1994: 72-107). Hence, the first puzzle here is what eventually made Japan and the Philippines move closer to balancing against China instead of retaining a more neutral position within the hedging spectrum.

In 1952, security scholar Arnold Wolfers deconstructed the concept of security into “objective sense” and “subjective sense” (Wolfers, 1952: 481-502). Objective sense refers to the absence of material threats, and subjective sense refers to the absence of fear (subjective threat). This argument is similar to Walt's argument that the main factors contributing to the choice of an alliance for states are often based on four variables, namely: (1) aggregate power; (2) geographic proximity; (3) offensive power; and (4) aggressive intentions (Walt, 2013: 17-49). In this comparison, aggregate power and geographic proximity are approximately equal to the threat in an objective sense, and offensive power and aggressive intentions are the fear in a subjective sense. China's aggregate power, like its Gross

Domestic Product (GDP), has ranked No. 2 since 2010, and by 2023 China's offensive power, like its military power, has been ranked as the most powerful in Asia and No. 3 after the U.S. and Russia globally (Baker & Spirlet, 2023). In the eyes of Japan and the Philippines, China has a large fleet of coast guard vessels and a maritime militia, and it has the largest navy in the Indo-Pacific (O'Rourke, 2024: 12). While most Southeast Asian countries could decide to maintain a more neutral position in their hedging posture due to the need to maintain domestic political legitimacy via economic performance, what drives the strategic adjustments of both Japan and the Philippines may very well be their closer geographic proximity to China and China's aggressive intentions while the territorial disputes between them remain unresolved (Schweller, 1994: 72-107).

Both Japan and the Philippines are geographically adjacent to China in maritime terms and are under direct military pressure by the People's Liberation Army (PLA). China has behaved aggressively in the East China Sea by imposing sanctions on rare earth mineral exports to Japan in 2010 (Vekasi, 2019: 2-20) and increasing its daily sorties and maritime activities, with intrusions into adjacent air and waters close to the Japanese-controlled Diaoyu/Senkaku islets since 2013 (Lamont, 2014: 187-202). In the South China Sea, in 2023, the Philippines saw China's disruption of their fishing activities around Scarborough Shoal as aggressive and the interruption of their resupply of the BRP Sierra Madre, which was stranded near the Second Thomas Shoal, as illegal (Smith & Olanday, 2023). China was heavily involved in the Philippines' critical infrastructure during Duterte's tenure (Yoakley, 2023), but financial investments by China in the Philippines promised after the inauguration of President Marcos Jr. were subsequently terminated without a clear explanation (Walker, 2023). A similar trend

can be observed in Europe after Russia invaded Ukraine in the name of stopping NATO's eastward expansion, but somehow it created a reversed effect as Finland decided not to Finlandize and Sweden gave up its neutrality. They joined the NATO alliance in 2023 and 2024 respectively in response to the increased Russian threat.

Literature from think tanks in China also identifies the clear shift in Japan's security policy toward a balancing posture (Wang, 2024: 110-129). In 2015, Japan revised its Legislation for Peace and Security and allowed the Japanese Self-Defense Force (SDF) to use its military assets overseas when proper parliamentary approval from the Japanese Diet was received (Soble, 2015). Japan actively participates in the U.S.-led Quad and G7, and the late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe even remarked in December 2021 that "any emergency over Taiwan would mean an emergency for Tokyo as well". In December 2022, Japan took the strategic step of overhauling its *National Security Strategy* (NSS), *National Defense Strategy* (NDS), and *Defense Buildup Program* (DBP), and these three documents vow to enlarge Japan's military investment in response to the growing threat in the Indo-Pacific (Imahashi, 2022). As indicated in the Japanese NSS, Japan understands that "while the basic division of roles between Japan and the United States will remain unchanged ... Japan will now possess counterstrike capabilities..." to respond to the new strategic environment (Prime Minister's Office of Japan, 2022: 20). In response to the Russo-Ukrainian War, in 2023 Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs assessed that "Challenges by force to the existing international order based on the rule of law are no longer a challenge unique to Europe, but one that can arise anywhere in the world, including East Asia. In reality, the security environment surrounding Japan is the most severe since the end of World War II, with North Korea's ongoing rapid progress in its nuclear and missile

development and China's ongoing unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force or coercion in the East China Sea and the South China Sea" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2023a: 5). Japan understands the growing threat posed by China and its support for Russia and North Korea. While also recognizing the waning power of the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific, Japan's security must continue to rely on the U.S. in the new strategic environment.

For the Philippines, from mid-2016 through mid-2022, President Duterte tried to maintain a working relationship with China and lower the temperature in the South China Sea dispute. Later, when Marcos Jr. was elected, he seemed to continue the posture and visited Xi in China, securing US\$22.8 billion in investment pledges from China in January 2023 following his inauguration (Venzon, 2023). However, the effort was later voided after a China Coast Guard vessel allegedly turned military-grade lasers on a Philippine vessel in February 2023 (Ratcliffe, 2023). The Philippines later engaged with the U.S. in expanding the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). They reached an agreement granting the U.S. military greater access to four additional military bases, including the Camilo Osias Naval Base and Lal-lo Airport in Cagayan province, Camp Melchor Dela Cruz in Isabela province, and the island of Balabac off Palawan (Lema, 2023c). In August 2023, when China released a new national map that included the disputed area of the South China Sea as Chinese territory, the Philippine Coast Guard made the bold move of removing the floating barriers around the Scarborough Shoal set up by China (Wright, 2023). In November 2023, the Philippine Congress supported a 21.6% increase in the defense budget for 2024, and more maritime clashes involving water cannons and ship collisions between China and the Philippines continued both around Scarborough Shoal, Second Thomas Shoal, and

Sabina Shoal in 2024 (Mistreanu & Gomez, 2024).

All this shows that while the power dynamics between the U.S. and China created a security dilemma, the same two-step process suggests a different result for Japan and the Philippines. Neither Japan nor the Philippines has a problem interpreting the growing military threat of China's assertive and intimidating behavior, and they have both concluded that responding to such a threat with a strategy of balancing is the appropriate course of action because alignment with the source of danger rarely proves beneficial. China's growing power is a security dilemma for the U.S., but for Japan and the Philippines, China is a security challenge. This is to say that great power creates alliances based on the balance of power logic, but the above observations indicate that Japan and the Philippines have chosen alliances based on a balance of threat.

VII. Minilateralism, not Natonization

The second piece of the puzzle is why the U.S., Japan, and the Philippines decided to work toward a minilateral alliance during the Biden administration instead of an Indo-Pacific version of NATO. The contemporary labeling of an "Asian NATO" has been widely discussed by security observers (Taylor, 2020), and it was first used and caused strong Chinese protests after the first online Quad summit between the U.S., India, Japan, and Australia in 2020 (Lendon & Wang, 2021). Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi famously stated that "From strengthening the Five Eyes to peddling the Quad, from piecing together AUKUS to tightening bilateral military alliances, the U.S. is staging a 'five-four-three-two' formation in the Asia-Pacific," and he argued that "The real goal of the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy is

to establish an Indo-Pacific version of NATO” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2022). When news was reported of a potential Tokyo NATO liaison office in 2023, some even criticized NATO for expanding beyond Europe (Moretti, 2023).

Nevertheless, the security governance of the Indo-Pacific was traditionally dominated by a hub-and-spoke approach, which relied on U.S. efforts to connect with its various regional allies. Even though the Biden administration intended to restructure the security governance architecture, forming a strong collective defense institution in Asia, as suggested by Wang’s “Indo-Pacific NATO threat” theory, remains extremely challenging for the following reasons. Firstly, unlike NATO countries, which are all democracies, Indo-Pacific countries do not share common political values based on similar political ideologies, and it is challenging to synchronize their actions (Owen, 2005: 73-100). While some of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) members like Thailand and the Philippines are U.S. treaty allies, others, such as Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos, are closer partners of China. Secondly, China understands that regional actors prioritize economic development instead of traditional security issues and has always promoted the idea of “partnership, not alliance” in the region. Hence, the majority of regional actors would like to maintain a “Don’t make countries choose sides” posture, a neutral position between the U.S. and China as described by former Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (Murray, 2018). Thirdly, China is perceived differently by regional actors, either as a military threat, a security risk, or an economic opportunity. According to *The State of Southeast Asia 2024 Survey Report* by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute (ISEAS) in Singapore (Seah et al., 2024: 48), in a hypothetical hot rivalry between the U.S. and China, only the Philippines and Vietnam would

be very likely (more than 70%) to support the U.S. (Singapore was around 60%, but the majority of ASEAN countries including Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, and even U.S. treaty ally Thailand, stood at less than a 60%).

As such, from the perspective of the balance of threat logic, only the Philippines and Vietnam feel China's immediate aggressive intentions due to the territorial disputes in the South China Sea, but the rest of the ASEAN countries, due to their geographical distance, do not feel the immediate pressure from China. It is obvious that threats, instead of power alone, are more crucial. While the power logic may work for great powers, smaller states, due to their lack of resources, make slightly different judgments. Security and threat are two sides of the same coin. Small and middle powers may have limited resources to charter through the rough terrain of the security environment, and they may often decide whether to balance, bandwagon, or hedge in any form based on the perceived threat levels. This also helps explain why, while small and middle powers may have interests that overlap with the great powers, what enables their decisions regarding the alignment of their behavior with a certain power is the imbalance of threats, not the imbalance of power.

Given that the conditions for facilitating an Asian NATO for the U.S. and its allies are not conducive due to the above challenges and obstacles in a seemingly multipolar context, minilateralism as a smaller-scale form of collaboration based on shared interests offers a more feasible and agile option going forward. Reflecting on the U.S. strategy in the new strategic environment in a speech at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in September 2023, then-U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated, "We're doing this through what I like to call diplomatic variable geometry [emphasis

added]. We start with the problem that we need to solve and we work back from there – assembling the group of partners that’s the right size and the right shape to address it. We’re intentional about determining the combination that’s truly fit for purpose” (U.S. Department of State, 2023b). Such a diplomatic variable geometry is a minilateralism that allows like-minded countries to engage in cooperation within acceptable risks in both selected fields and at specified scales with which they feel comfortable and confident. Unlike bulky institutions like NATO or the European Union, minilateralism allows members to work together more efficiently to deal with challenges they are directly concerned with, without being distracted by bureaucracy or miscellaneous issues. Small powers are more concerned with short-term benefits rather than long-term absolute gain (Misalucha-Willoughby & Medillo, 2020: 4). From the standpoint of this study, minilateralism allows these regional actors to deal with the short-term threat that is imperative for them, instead of thinking about the long-term balance of power.

VIII. From Overlapping Interests to Behavior Alignment

Within the broader context of the Sino-U.S. competition, the symbiosis of the balance of power and the balance of threat has created a shared threat perception among the U.S., Japan and the Philippines, and shaped the strategic options of small and middle powers (Kuik, 2021: 300-315). Both factors have encouraged Japan and the Philippines to move away from an accommodative approach toward China and instead toward deepening their collaborations with the U.S.

Cognizant of the Philippines’ high economic interdependence with China, Ferdinand Marcos Jr. stated in 2022, when still on the campaign trail, that “arbitration is no longer an arbitration if there’s only one

party. So, it's no longer available to us," and when asked whether he intended to invite security assistance from the U.S., he further argued that "If the Americans come in, it's bound to fail because you are putting the two protagonists together" (Esguerra, 2022). As such, even in the first meeting between Biden and Marcos Jr. in September 2022 at the UN, Biden explicitly offered to mention the "importance of the U.S.-Philippines alliance" and "reaffirmed the United States' ironclad commitment to the defense of the Philippines" (The White House, 2022). Still, Marcos Jr. decided to pay a state visit first to China in January 2023 in the hope of continuing the neutral position toward China he inherited from Duterte. As mentioned earlier, Marcos Jr. and Xi signed 14 bilateral cooperation agreements, including more than US\$22.8 billion in new Chinese investment pledges, and agreed to manage maritime differences amicably (Venzon, 2023). While Marcos Jr. hesitated in its relations with China, the Philippines, in fact, received various encouragement and promises of financial incentives from the U.S. during Kamala Harris' visit at the end of 2022. By early February 2023, the clashes between the Philippines and China escalated, and Marcos Jr. had little choice but to seek security support from his democratic allies.

Scholars have already argued that when system-level competition intensifies, the room for small states such as the Philippines to hedge will shrink (Korolev, 2019: 419-452). In addition, when a state faces systemic pressure and increasing external threats, its foreign policy will be more responsive to the systematic security challenge, rather than domestic considerations (Snyder, 1991: 317). Given that Marcos Jr. happened to be on a state visit to Japan from February 8-12, 2023, (Lema, 2023a) when the clash with China happened, the Japan-Philippines Joint Statement was later agreed by both parties to

establish “a new cooperation framework” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2023b). In particular, Japan and the Philippines agreed to establish the *Terms of Reference Concerning the Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Activities of the Japan Self-Defense Forces in the Republic of the Philippines* to open the door for deeper security cooperation (Japan Ministry of Defense, 2023). In addition, the Philippines had standing *Visiting Force Agreements* (VFA) with the U.S. and Australia by 2023, so it was also the first time a new VFA was mentioned as the next step toward deepening the relationship between the Philippines and Japan (Romero, 2023). The domestic discussion argued that Japan and the Philippines were not threatening each other but suffering from the same military pressure from China. Hence, Marcos Jr. believed that “If it will be of help to the Philippines in terms of protecting, for example our fishermen, protecting our maritime territory ... I don’t see why we should not adopt it [VFA]”. On February 13, 2023, while still in Tokyo, the idea was crystallized as a potential trilateral defense cooperation between the U.S. and Japan for the first time (Dominguez, 2023), with Marcos Jr. stating: “It is something that we certainly are going to be studying upon my return to the Philippines” (Parrocha, 2023).

The Philippines further sought U.S. security support. On February 27, 2023, Philippine Ambassador to the United States Jose Manuel Romualdez proposed that Japan, the U.S., and Australia join the Philippines to conduct joint patrols in the South China Sea (Lema, 2023b). On April 11, 2023, the U.S. and the Philippines enabled the U.S.-Philippines 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, seven years after the previous meeting in 2016. The two sides reached an agreement on modernizing and deepening the security alliance and agreed that more new military sites would be included in the U.S.-Philippines EDCA,

which had been in effect with no significant activities since 2014 (U.S. Department of State, 2023a). From April 30 to May 3, 2023, during Marcos Jr.'s state visit to the U.S., President Biden underscored in their joint declaration that "an armed attack on Philippine armed forces, public vessels, or aircraft in the Pacific, including in the South China Sea, would invoke U.S. mutual defense commitments under Article IV of the *1951 U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty*" (The White House, 2023a). On May 1, 2023, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), under Biden's directive, also announced that it would provide US\$135 million to assist the Philippines' development in communication, energy, education, and infrastructure (USAID, n.d.).

As part of continuous efforts toward a potential trilateral defense cooperation initiated in February 2023, the foreign ministers of Japan and the Philippines met in Tokyo on May 16, 2023. They reiterated their commitments to fulfill the multiple domain cooperations as previously specified in the Japan-Philippines Joint Statement (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2023c). In June 2023, the national security advisors from these three countries, Jake Sullivan from the U.S., Takeo Akiba from Japan, and Eduardo Año from the Philippines, met in Tokyo and agreed to enhance their trilateral defense and security capabilities, maintain a free and open maritime order, enhance their trilateral cooperation on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and maintain a free and equitable economic order (The White House, 2023b). Later, foreign ministers from the U.S., Japan, and the Philippines met at the 56th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting and Related Meetings in Indonesia in July 2023, and at the 78th session of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2023 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2023d; Rocamora, 2023). On both occasions, they reiterated the importance of the "multilayered collaboration with allies and like-

mind countries,” and the need to “promote Japan-U.S.-Philippines cooperation,” and confront the maritime security in the region. In October 2023, due to the lack of confirmation from the Chinese side regarding a previously proposed railways project in the Philippines, the Transport Minister of the Philippines, Jaime Bautista, officially announced that the Philippines were pulling out of China’s BRI (Walker, 2023). In November 2023, then-Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida visited the Philippines, and the two countries signed and exchanged Notes for Official Security Assistance (OSA). In the OSA, the Japanese government agreed to “provide coastal radar systems to the Armed Forces of the Philippines, in particular, the Philippine Navy, which is expected to strengthen its coastal surveillance and maritime awareness (MDA) capabilities and to contribute to maintenance and enhancement of maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region” to the value of 600 million Japanese yen (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2023e). On April 11, 2024, the three leaders from the Philippines, Japan, and the U.S. finally met at Camp David for the first-ever trilateral summit. These three countries announced their firm commitment to a “free and open Indo-Pacific” by committing to deeper defense cooperation, such as enhancing their defense capabilities and interoperability via joint maritime exercises and Coast Guard patrolling, as well as economic partnerships, such as the IPEF. Most significantly, the three countries unveiled the newly established project of the Luzon Economic Corridor to connect strategically important areas, such as Subic Bay, Clark, Manila, and Batangas in the Philippines. The joint statement released by the White House explicitly underlined the threat by “the dangerous and aggressive behavior” of China around the South China Sea, Taiwan Strait, and East China Sea (The White House, 2024b).

On July 7, 2024, the Philippines allowed the U.S. to use more

military bases under the EDCA and established a new RAA with Japan to allow more defense cooperation. The Philippines had opened five military bases to the U.S. since March 2016, under the Aquino administration. The new EDCA sites added by Marcos Jr. included Naval Base Camilo Osias, Camp Melchor Dela Cruz, Balabac Island, and Lal-lo Airport. Their locations indicate a clear strategic trend toward U.S. involvement in the Indo-Pacific. Both Naval Base Camilo Osias and Camp Melchor Dela Cruz, as well as Lal-lo Airport, are located on Luzon Island in the northern Philippines, enabling direct support for potential emergencies in the Taiwan Strait. The base on Balabac Island is situated in the western Palawan archipelago, allowing quick responses to incidents in the South China Sea. The U.S. also announced the construction of military storage facilities at three of the original five bases opened in the Philippines: Cesar Basa Air Base, Fort Ramon Magsaysay, and Lumbia Airfield, all located more inland, with better strategic depth of defense. These developments reflect ongoing U.S.-Philippines efforts to support the U.S. Indo-Pacific endeavor, with both countries continuing forward deployment and pre-positioning of munitions in the region. The U.S. is deploying more Typhoon missile systems in the Philippines, a move that has been criticized by China for destabilizing regional security (Robles, 2025b). By April 2025, Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines General Romeo Brawner Jr. warned that “If something happens to Taiwan, inevitably we will be involved” (Robles, 2025a), and by August 2025, Marcos Jr. further stated that the Philippines cannot “stay on the sidelines” of a potential conflict in the Taiwan Strait (Chi, 2025).

In addition, Japan is also taking a more active role in shaping the strategic environment of the Indo-Pacific. As of 2024, Japan has an RAA with Australia and the UK. Furthermore, Japan is not

only a member of the Quad but has also improved its alliance with South Korea, Australia, and the U.S. by establishing various *General Security of Military Information Agreements* (GSOMIA) to enhance intelligence collaboration. On July 15, 2024, when the NATO countries celebrated the 75th anniversary of the alliance in Washington, D.C., Japan was invited to participate for the third consecutive year. The joint declaration following the event also openly stated that China “has become a decisive enabler of Russia’s war against Ukraine through its so-called ‘no limits’ partnership and its large-scale support for Russia’s defence industrial base” (NATO, 2024). On July 28, 2024, the U.S. and Japan agreed to upgrade their joint command structure for the U.S. Forces Japan (USFJ) at the U.S.-Japan “2+2” meeting in Tokyo and decided to “reconstitute U.S. Forces Japan (USFJ) as a joint force headquarters (JFHQ) reporting to the Commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM)” in order to enhance their joint deterrence and quick response capabilities toward China’s “intensifying attempts to unilaterally change the status quo by force or coercion” (U.S. Department of War, 2024b). Although for some time Japan has participated in various small-scale military exercises with the Philippines and other Indo-Pacific countries in a multilateral setting to avoid the impression of being against any country, August 2, 2024 was the first time that Japan and the Philippines conducted a bilateral joint naval exercise; moreover, they did so in the controversial area of the South China Sea. Despite their territorial disputes, from August 5-9, 2024, the Philippines and Vietnam conducted their first joint coast guard exercise in the South China Sea (Royandoyan, 2024). By 2025, the scale of these joint exercises and levels of integration varied, but these developments seem to suggest a growing alignment of behavior facilitated by the overlapping interest in countering the growing threats.

IX. Implications

By the end of the Biden administration, tensions between China and claimants of the South China Sea were continuing to increase. China saw any U.S.-related minilateralism as destabilizing the region and claimed that “small circles targeting other countries cannot make our region safer and can only cause more tension,” as Chinese Defense Minister Dong Jun said at the 21st Shangri-La Dialogue on June 1, 2024 (Dong, 2024). Although China was protesting openly, the Philippines and Vietnam both filed claims at the UN for the extended continental shelf on June 15 and 19, 2024. On November 8, 2024, Marcos Jr. signed two new laws to challenge China, including the *Maritime Zones Act* to demarcate the Philippine archipelago’s territory and waters, and the *Archipelagic Sea Lanes Act* to designate sea lanes and air routes where foreign vessels are allowed to transit. This shows that countries in the Indo-Pacific area prioritize those who threaten their interests over those who dominate the region. Such dynamics have the following implications:

Firstly, the case of the minilateralism between the U.S.-Japan-Philippines during the Biden administration suggests that state actors often balance against state actors that pose the most threat to themselves, and the latter need not be the most powerful states in the international system, but need to be more threatening in the geopolitical context (Walt, 2013: 263). While the severity of the U.S.-China rivalry is growing, not all ASEAN countries have decided on a similar policy trajectory toward China. In fact, the U.S. failed to mobilize a countervailing coalition toward China during Duterte’s presidency because, at the time, China’s yet-limited military presence in the South China Sea made the Philippines believe that friendship with China

was more possible and preferable. Likewise, while it has been a long-term academic interest (and beyond the scope of this paper) to detail why Vietnam is not clearly balancing China (Greitens & Kardon, 2025; Ma & Kang, 2023: 363-386), a potential trend could be inferred via the analytical logic of this paper. Like Japan and the Philippines, Vietnam experiences similar strategic challenges from China in its aggregate power, geographic proximity, and offensive power. However, the decisive factor for future China-Vietnam relations will be whether China presents unrestrained aggressive intentions toward Vietnam. In fact, there is already increasing Vietnamese negative public sentiment toward China, as shown by the *State of Southeast Asia 2024 Survey Report*. Hence, while China continues to impose constraints on Vietnamese maritime activity around the South China Sea, it could be argued that Vietnam may only act more forcefully against China's territorial claim in the region when it finally senses more imminent and immediate threats from China and economic incentives lose their appeal. Traditionally, Vietnam adopts a bamboo diplomacy of maintaining a more neutral position when there is still uncertainty and opportunities in the geopolitical context, allowing itself to maneuver strategically. In case the Sino-U.S. competition eventually escalates and becomes a strategic reality and the most pressing security problem in the region, Vietnam may finally see no room and actual need to pursue an insurance-seeking policy. This kind of strategic development could occur when Vietnam shifts toward either clear balancing or bandwagoning when it judges that systematic uncertainty is decreasing. As time goes on, although the U.S. is still powerful, for Japan and the Philippines, China appears to be more dangerous to them and is becoming a shared threat. Marcos Jr. said on February 18, 2023, that the Philippines "will not lose an inch of its territory" when facing

military pressure from China. He also stated on May 31, 2024, at the 21st Shangri-La Dialogue, that “If a Filipino citizen is killed by a willful act [of China], that is I think a very, very close to what we define as an act of war ...”(Cervantes, 2024). Hence, the strategic posture of the Philippines under Marcos Jr. has shifted completely since 2023, not because it acted passively toward the great powers but rather because it has acted actively in response to the changing environment of the Indo-Pacific.

Secondly, measuring the effectiveness of power or threats is epistemologically complicated and methodologically difficult, but a detailed net assessment is not necessary for this project. This paper, instead, used a hybrid approach to holistically depict the general power dynamics and respectively illustrate the threat perceptions. As a great power, the U.S. has an interest in counter-balancing against China in their intensifying global rivalry. Japan, as a middle power, has an interest in relieving the direct military pressure of the PLA due to its East China Sea dispute with China, and the Philippines, as a small power, has an immediate interest in seeking more security support to resist China. They all have overlapping interests, and the results indicate that both the balance of power and the balance of threat need to be considered to explain small and middle states’ strategic choices. The case also indicates that when both perspectives are met, only like-minded countries can make any cooperation work, given that the critical ingredient for the collaboration required is trust, not the use of threat or coercion. From August 7-8, 2024, the Philippines teamed up with the U.S., Canada, and Australia for the first time to conduct a joint military exercise in the South China Sea to enhance interoperability (Punongbayan, 2024). In response to what China described as Manila’s act of “inviting wolves into the house,” China’s PLA Southern Theater

Command launched a combat patrol on August 7, 2024, in the area (Liu & Guo, 2024). The lesson learned from this incident is that the U.S. should worry far less about its allies' defecting and put more effort into avoiding provoking unnecessary resentment and antagonization among regional powers, as China has done. This investigation also explains the reason why there is no Indo-Pacific NATO yet; this is due to the varying levels of threat perception among the regional actors with regard to China.

Thirdly, the China-Russia partnership has aggregated huge industrial and economic resources as a tacit coalition, which could substantially challenge U.S. interests. Hence, NATO members at the 2024 NATO Summit in Washington, D.C., accused China of supporting Putin's war (NATO, 2024), but such a balance of power logic alone cannot explain why some Asian countries with democratic political systems still maintain a favorable position toward China. The implication for the Indo-Pacific is that only if China continues with activities that are perceived by others as expansionist and aggressive will regional state actors be forced to respond, even if they intend to maintain a good working relationship with China, while considering the economic benefits. In hindsight, Japan and the Philippines did not join the weaker side to increase their influence within the U.S.-led alliance, given that this could damage their financial interests and economic prospects with China. On the other hand, bandwagoning with China is a form of appeasement to avoid attacks, and weak states are only more likely to bandwagon when they do not feel the threats from the other party (Walt, 2013: 26). Hence, this contrast between the cases of Japan and the Philippines implies that small and middle powers do not bandwagon when they see no possibility at all that a powerful state could be appeased. The development, either in Europe or the Indo-

Pacific, largely confirms this observation of a balance of threat. Just as Finland and Sweden shifted their strategic choice of neutrality due to the increasing threat level in Europe, when China acts threateningly and uncompromisingly due to its growing power on territorial issues, it will result in more regional actors seeking more external support. Likewise, when NATO continues to perceive the threat from China as stated in its *2022 Strategic Concept*, “The People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge our interests, security and values” (NATO, 2022: 5), more collaboration could be established between NATO and the small and medium actors in the Indo-Pacific region unless China can ease its neighbors’ concerns and convey solid security guarantees.

X. Conclusion

This article focused on the development of minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific during the Biden administration. Whether the Trump administration and future Japanese prime ministers after October 2025 will continue Biden’s legacy of minilateralism in Asia will likely be decided not only by whether major actors see the Indo-Pacific region as a geopolitical bargaining chip but more by whether they see it as an indispensable geopolitical trophy when the threat of China persists and is close to them. Certainly, understanding any country’s foreign policy behavior requires considering both the international and domestic context (Rose, 1998: 114-172). But we should also not forget that it was Trump who rejuvenated the Quad dialogue in 2017 (Stacey & Smyth, 2017), named China a revisioning power in his *National Security Strategy* (The White House, 2017: 25), and issued the first *U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* (U.S. Department of Defense,

2019). While Trump repeatedly put tariffs at the center of his political agenda, by 2025, his Secretary of Defense, Pete Hegseth, reiterated at the 22nd Shangri-La Dialogue in May 2025 that “America First certainly does not mean America alone” (U.S. Department of War, 2025), and Secretary of State Marco Rubio, while hosting his first Quad Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in Washington on July 1, 2025, reiterated the importance of the Quad alliance to “leverage our resources to address the region’s most pressing challenges” (U.S. Department of State, 2025). Hence, this paper offers a theoretical guideline to estimate the likely contours of contemporary security developments based on the perceivable threats in the region.

In short, this paper offers a theoretical explanation for the strategic choices of the Philippines and Japan during the Biden presidency. It eschews the conventional wisdom of great power politics and examines the small and middle powers’ agential perspective on U.S.-Japan-Philippines minilateralism. While regional actors may want to keep their options open without making irreversible commitments, they also recognize the need to reconcile with the geopolitical context of an imbalance of power, as well as an imbalance of threat.

Moreover, minilateralism represents an option of alliance during the Biden administration that differs from NATO, focusing on military security only and further fusing economic development with defense cooperation. Unlike the Soviet Union, which was a military threat during the Cold War, China presents systematic challenges spanning political, economic, and military domains in the “New Cold War.” This type of diplomatic variable geometry reflects the daunting challenges that confronted the Biden administration, which sought to focus on collaborating with critical state actors rather than creating a critical mass of state actors.

Furthermore, this paper shows that when power is a liability, it becomes a threat; when power is an asset, it becomes security. The thrust of the argument is that aggression by states does not lead to alliance creation for themselves but for others. Were either China and the U.S. to behave more aggressively for their interests, then the antagonized neighboring countries, perceiving the disputes as irreconcilable, may lean toward the opponent's side.

As stated above, whether the second Trump administration will continue Biden's strategy of building alliances remains in question. Likewise, while Trump is using tariffs as a means of negotiation, the U.S. should also avoid threatening its critical allies. Any U.S. administration should understand that as long as the existing international structure of Sino-U.S. competition continues and there are perceived divergences among Asian countries, the U.S. will not be able to develop a meaningful Indo-Pacific strategy without maintaining key alliances in the region to counterbalance the threat. When there are overlapping interests between the U.S. and regional actors, encouraging more small and middle powers to act on their overlapping interests will continue to be a distinct feature of Indo-Pacific geopolitics.

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從利益重疊到行爲一致： 解釋拜登政府時期美日菲小多邊合作與 威脅平衡及其戰略意涵

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摘 要

隨著中美於印太地區的競爭加劇，自 2023 年起，美日菲三國互動越加頻繁，合作亦日益深化。結盟為戰略競爭中的關鍵能力，故當美日菲小多邊合作逐漸成形，便被視為反映區域權力轉變的表現。然而，值得深究的是，為何某些國家會選擇與特定國家結盟呢？本文採國際關係中的「威脅平衡」理論，探討日本與菲律賓為何調整中立位置的「避險」策略，並轉向與美國深化合作，但卻未採取所謂「印太版北約」的合作倡議，而改選擇較小規模的小多邊合作機制。透過分析此一趨勢，本文期望為印太地區的安全政策制定者提供可能之參考與啟示。

關鍵詞：小多邊主義、結盟選擇、權力平衡、威脅平衡、印太地區

