



WITHER THE HUB AND SPOKES SYSTEM?

BY JOHN HEMMINGS

John Hemmings (john@pacforum.org) is Senior Associate Director at the Pacific Forum and a Professor at the Daniel K. Inouye Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies.

This week's US-Japan alliance bilateral summit between President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Kishida Fumio not only launched more than 70 deliverables that spanned the interagency, across the defense, across space, education, and technology, it also launched a new trilateral with the Philippines (at the summit level, at least), adding one more minilateral partnership to a lexicon that now includes AUKUS (Australia-UK-US), the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (US-Japan-Australia), the US-Japan-UK naval trilateral, and the US-Japan-South Korea trilateral and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ("Quad"). The prospect of Japan's inclusion in Pillar 2 of AUKUS even raises the possibility that a second "quad" may soon be on the cards.

While the US-Japan-Philippines trilateral is particularly welcome at a time when Chinese ships are trying to execute a critical boa-constrictor strategy on Manila's Second Thomas Shoal—the addition of a new grouping to an already-rich group of minilaterals raises a question on the future of the region's security architecture. The current approach is to layer minilaterals across the traditional "hub-and-spokes" San Francisco System, incrementally adding partners, capabilities, and areas of cooperation. Despite the burgeoning success of this approach, there are at least three long term issues that should be a factor of discussion among the three leaders this week. First, this new trilateral is going to add to the burdens of the

diplomats and defense officials of the United States and Japan, who are already heavily committed in other groupings. Yes, the ministries can manage—for now—but how sustainable is this rinse-and-repeat approach. Arguably, we are at the working limit of how many trilaterals we can sustain with the workforce, time, and resources that we have.

Second, the threat profile in the region has changed considerably since these minilaterals were first established in the post-Cold War era. The first trilateral, the US-Japan-ROK trilateral was established in 1994 to deal with the North Korean nuclear crisis (with the convening power of the Pacific Forum as it was then, no less). We now have a China with regional and global ambitions—which has steadily built up the military power projection to enable it to secure those ambitions. The development an overall battle force of 350 ships, alongside a modernization drive in technology and doctrine, has been complemented by military islands across the South China sea, which bolster a strategy of attempting to secure sovereignty over a major global shipping lane—the South China Sea—by the threat of coercive force. It threatens the sovereignty of Brunei, Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines—and this is all before we get to the very real threat it poses to the democracy of Taiwan. Its attitude towards regional security has been criticize the traditional alliance system and sow disinformation and propaganda against the minilaterals as they've emerged.

Third, it must be accepted that while minilateral arrangements enhance multilateral security, they do not provide collective security, as they lack formal and informal defense expectations and guarantees. While the US is often a critical node, acting as ally to two other partners in the minilateral, the credible deterrent factor of the minilaterals is not enhanced by the same force of a multilateral alliance. Yes, there are long-term effects that can enhance deterrence—such as co-development of critical defense technologies, or the enhancement of joint war fighting—but these are slow in the making and occur below the hood, as it were. So for all their bells and whistles, minilaterals do not pack the punch of a single multilateral alliance that has a credible article V. As the US, Japan,

Australia, and the Philippines plan their first joint naval exercises in the South China Sea in defense of “the rule of law that is the foundation for a peaceful and stable Indo-Pacific region,” ship operators must plan around that reality.

There is some contradiction in the fact that it is widely agreed by most regional countries that regional security has deteriorated markedly with 82.6% of Southeast Asians alleging that ASEAN is ineffective in dealing with today’s challenges. In this setting, there is some historical resonance behind the meeting of Biden, Kishida, and Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. After all, these three countries were instrumental in a nascent attempt to establish a Pacific Pact in 1949-1950, which began with a proposal by then-Philippine President Elpidio Quirino, which was promoted around the region by John Foster Dulles, but ultimately found little favor with Japan’s post-war Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru. By February 1950, the idea was dead and with the unremarkable exception of SEATO, multilateralism has been dead in the region.

However, NATO’s historic success in preserving peace on the European continent has meant various smaller approaches towards multilateral security in the Indo-Pacific have blossomed instead, particularly after the end of the Cold War. Following the previously mentioned US-Japan-ROK trilateral of 1994, the model has been tried with increased success by alliance managers across the region. In 2002, a second trilateral between the US, Australia, and Japan was started with Canberra taking the lead—a move that produced the TSD and the Security and Defense Cooperation Forum (SDCF) shortly thereafter. The development of the Core Group in 2005—initially to deal with the Indian Ocean Tsunami—evolved into the current quadrilateral, which brought India into the tent of growing minilaterals. The development of AUKUS in 2021 seemed to overshadow all of these “federated capability” groups in terms of strategic intent, in terms of headlines, and in terms of long-term resourcing. While it is self-evident that these groups do “work,” the three reasons indicate that they might be necessary but not sufficient for maintaining peace and security in the region.

In defense of the current approach, it has clearly allowed Washington and Tokyo to build networked security arrangements in an incremental fashion, overcoming the political hostility and bureaucratic inertia that continues to dog discussions of any collective defense arrangements in the region. It is a testament to China’s superb propaganda machinery that the states most at risk to its territorial predations are the most vocally hostile any “NATO-in-Asia” solution. In that sense, the minilaterals provide a stop-gap solution, a work-around that allow the militaries of those most concerned nations to institutionalize working relations, greater interoperability, and integrated capabilities. The addition of Philippines goes some way to showing others, a potential solution to their common problem.

Despite all of this, those concerned with the possibility of the Chinese use of force to change borders—maritime or otherwise—must begin to open their minds to collective defense arrangements. We may be running out of time to construct a viable and sustainable mechanism for real deterrence in the region. And in all of this, while the United States has remained the primary architect of the San Francisco System, it is also clear that others—Australia, South Korea, the Philippines, and Japan—need to think about what type of collective arrangement would suit their needs in the world over coming decades. In some ways, Japan has been a key enabler for the changes that have occurred thus far. In his remarks to both Houses of Congress, Prime Minister Kishida stated, “our partnership goes beyond the bilateral...from these various endeavors emerges a multilayered regional framework where our alliance serves as a force multiplier.” Japanese security experts might start putting forward conceptions of collective security to their allies in a way that gets the ball rolling. The future of the region might depend on it.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.