

The Asianization of Regional Security in the Indo-Pacific

Felix Heiduk

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (German Institute for International and Security Affairs)

Abstract

This article seeks to analyze the changes within the US-led regional security architecture as a result of Chinese contestation. It finds that a number of changes are detectable and point to an Asianization of the regional architecture. Asianization is the result of a confluence of a set of empirical phenomena that is producing an incremental shift in power and agency in regional security from the US to Asian powers. These phenomena include, for example, a shift in strategic importance from the hub (the US) to the Asian spokes inside the US alliance system, increasing security cooperation between the spokes, and the growing strategic importance of Asian states outside the formal US alliance system. However, these phenomena bear little resemblance to China's stated aim of forming a regional security architecture "by Asians and for Asians." Quite to the contrary, alignment with the US is actually incrementally increasing as part of the Asianization of the regional security architecture. This is taking place despite divergent views of key stakeholders on the future of the US-led hub-and-spoke system and more generally on US pre-eminence in the region. It can be preliminarily inferred that it is Chinese assertiveness and contestation of the regional status quo, rather than a desire to upend or maintain US primacy, that at least in part drives the Asianization of regional security in the Indo-Pacific.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, regional security, Asianization, hub-and-spoke system, minilateral

Introduction

Since the Korean War, the security architecture of the Indo-Pacific region¹ has been based on a US-led system of bilateral alliances—the so-called hub-and-spoke system. The US maintains these with Australia, the Philippines, Thailand, Japan, and South Korea. While not without its discontents, this particular security architecture with the US at the helm remained largely uncontested for decades (Bisley 2019). Throughout the last decade, however, the People's Republic of China (PRC) under Xi Jinping has further developed its own ideas for reorganizing the regional security system. Xi Jinping described the US-led military alliance system as an outdated relic of the Cold War and called for a regional security architecture by Asians and for Asians (Xi 2014). Such a call, on the one hand, suggests Beijing's negative attitudes towards Washington's long-standing strategic presence in the region, specifically the continuation of its alliance network. On the other hand, it also reflects an aspiration to shape a new regional security architecture with China, rather than the US, at the center (Yang, 2021). To this end, the PRC has increased militarization of the South China Sea and further augmented the comprehensive armament of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). It has also expanded bilateral security partnerships with countries such as Russia, Iran, and Pakistan among others, and established its own multilateral security forums such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). If Beijing succeeds in substantially shifting the weight away from the US it would amount to what is referred to here as an "Asianization" of the regional security architecture. Heiduk (2022)

The open challenge, for the first time in decades, to the US-led regional security architecture prompts the question: How is the US-led

¹ The term "Indo-Pacific" or "Indo-Pacific region" is increasingly used as the new geographical and strategic nomenclature. As such, it has at least partially come to substitute for the previously widely used term "Asia-Pacific."

security architecture changing in the face of contestation by China? This article seeks to explore key aspects of the changing regional security architecture at three analytical levels. First, the strategic level: How is regional security conceived in the Indo-Pacific, and what are the strategic goals behind it? Which norms and rules dominate, and who sets them? Second, the institutional level: What are the key institutions and structures? And third, the practical or operational level: What state practices and interactions in the field of regional security can be observed?

Following an actor-centric approach, four key regional actors are examined, all of which have developed their own Indo-Pacific strategies: the US as the central security actor in the region; Australia as one of the five US regional allies; India as a rising regional power with corresponding regional leadership claims, which, however, is traditionally quite critical of bilateral alliance systems; and Indonesia, *primus inter pares* of ASEAN and co-founder of the Non-Aligned Movement. While the US and Australia are both crucial actors in and of the hub-and-spokes system based on alliance treaties, India and Indonesia have traditionally been rather critical of formal alliance treaties and also traditionally distant towards American leadership as well as US propositions of closer alignment.

The article finds, firstly, that at first glance the US essentially has doubled down on the preservation of hegemony (“US primacy”) in the face of what it perceives as growing Chinese assertiveness. The “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) can be seen as the main counter-strategy to a Chinese-dominated reorganization of the region. Beijing’s ideas regarding an Asian order by and for Asians are predominantly interpreted as an assault on what Washington perceives as a US-led rules-based regional order. However, upon closer examination, there is ample evidence that, in the context of the emergence of two competing visions for a future regional security order, a number of changes are detectable that indeed point to an Asianization of the regional architecture. Asianization is thus the result of a confluence of empirical phenomena that are producing an

incremental shift in power and agency in regional security from the US to Asian powers. These phenomena, for example, include a shift in strategic importance from the hub (the US) to the Asian spokes inside the US alliance system, increasing security cooperation between the spokes, as well as the growing strategic importance of Asian states outside the formal US alliance system. This is happening bilaterally as well as through the establishment of “minilaterals” like the Quad.

Secondly, this particular form of Asianization bears little resemblance to Xi Jinping’s idea of a regional security architecture “by Asians and for Asians.” Quite the contrary, the article finds that while Asian states, both within and outside of the US alliance system, play an increasingly important role in regional security affairs, this does not equate to regional states siding with China. Alignment with the US on security in the region, albeit often below the threshold of formal alliances, is actually incrementally increasing. Incremental alignment is even observable for traditional hedging states like Indonesia with long-standing foreign policy traditions of non-alignment.

Thirdly, the article finds that alignment with the US on regional security is not necessarily tantamount to a shared ideological affinity to “US primacy” and a “liberal, rules-based regional order.” Actually, it often takes place despite strong divergences in worldviews, norms, or policy preferences, including divergent views on the future of the US-led hub-and-spoke system and, more generally, on the concept of US primacy. Furthermore, it can be preliminarily inferred that it is Chinese assertiveness and its contestation of the status quo, rather than a desire to upend or maintain US primacy, that drives the empirically observable Asianization of regional security.

Beyond the US-led Hub-and-Spoke System?

Drawing eclectically on the works of Taylor and Tow, Bisley, and Yeo, among others, I define regional security architecture² as the overarching structure within a specified region that enables security actors, mostly but not necessarily exclusively states, to manage security issues in ways that prevent or at least limit the outbreak of armed conflict or even war. This rests on a set of worldviews and associated strategic outlooks and norms, a set of institutions, and a set of practices and interactions that make actors' behavior predictable and thus create stability. Hence, in a stable regional security architecture, the aforementioned strategic outlooks, institutions, and practices are widely agreed upon or even shared, or at least acquiesced to. However, especially in instances of regional rivalry and conflict, they tend to become contested, creating instability and uncertainty in return (Yeo 2019; Bisley 2019, 361-376; Tow and Taylor 2010, 95-116).

With regard to the Indo-Pacific region, that regional security architecture has long been described as a hierarchical, hegemonic system with the US at the top. As such, much analytical focus has been on the US and its bilateral alliances. This makes *prima facie* sense because, since the Korean War, the security architecture in the Asia-Pacific region has been based on the so-called hub-and-spoke system (also known as the “San Francisco system”). For decades, Asia's regional security architecture has been depicted as a wheel with the US in the center (as the hub) and its allies Australia, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines as spokes. In contrast to Europe, where a multilateral system of collective defense emerged with NATO under the leadership of the US, the Asian security order has been based for decades on bilateral US-led alliances or security partnerships.

However, the durability of the system does not mean it has been static

² In the relevant literature, the terms security architecture, security order, and security system are often used synonymously. In this study, the term security architecture is used throughout. See Tow and Taylor (2010).

and monolithic. The way allies such as Japan, South Korea, or Thailand interact with it has often been influenced by endogenous factors (e.g., military coup in Thailand in 2014) as well as exogenous developments (e.g., global economic crisis in 2008). Moreover, multilateral fora such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Community (APEC), the East Asia Summit (EAS), or the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) were created after the end of the Cold War (Yeo 2019). The ASEAN-centered security forums ARF and EAS, in particular, subsequently attempted to contribute to confidence-building and thus to regional security through the inclusion of all major regional actors and regular security dialogues (Acharya 2000; Rüländ 2010; Ba 2014). Still, these multilateral organizations were limited in that they tended toward what critics have describe as mere “talk shops” (Beeson 2008; Weber 2013, 19-35; Narine 1997; Jones and Smith 2007; Jones and Jenne 2015). At best, they supplemented the hub-and-spoke system with discussion fora that included China and other regional actors, but at no time did they offer a functional alternative ordering structure.

While not without its discontents, for decades the hub-and-spoke system was never really contested and at least partially enabled a phenomenon often referred to as “Asia’s long peace,” that is, the absence of interstate warfare in the region since 1979 (Kivimäki 2016; Tonnesson 2017). The hub-and-spoke system was only really challenged in the context of the rise of the PRC.

As early as 2014, Xi Jinping presented his vision of an “Asian-led” regional security architecture (Xi 2014). Xi described the US-led military alliances as an outdated relic of the Cold War and questioned the future of the US-led hub-and-spoke system by calling for a regional security order “by Asians for Asians.”³ This suggests that the PRC perceives the security order as not (any longer) compatible with its own interests (Zhang 2019, 395-411). What is more, in recent years China’s lead-

3 In May 2022, Xi Jinping also published ideas for a (Chinese-dominated) reordering of the global security order (“Global Security Initiative”), which at least indirectly contradicts Indo-Pacific concepts of order.

ership has increasingly developed its own ideas for the reorganization of the regional security system and has also partially begun to implement them. In this way, Beijing is increasingly challenging the dominance of the US in the field of security policy (Pongsudhirak 2022).

What has remained unclear so far, however, is how a regional security system “by Asians for Asians” should be structured and what role China would play in it (Jakobson 2016; He and Li 2020). Some observers see the emergence of a second, Chinese-led alliance system in the region as plausible (Mearsheimer 2019) in reaction to the growing threat to Chinese security interests from the US-led hub-and-spoke system (Zhang 2012; Zhang 2018). Some even envision a strategic alliance between China and Russia in the making (Allison 2018). With a view to the observable foreign policy behavior of the PRC under Xi Jinping, it is noticeable, however, that China has not yet entered into any (further) formal alliances, and thus the development of a competing alliance system, if it was ever on the cards, has failed to materialize. However, it is also observable that the PRC has not only maintained its alliance with North Korea but also formed a number of new security partnerships or intensified existing partnerships in recent years. Bilateral partnerships with countries such as Cambodia, Laos, Pakistan, Iran, and Russia all increasingly include security policy elements, such as joint military exercises, dialogues, or arms procurements (Wei 2019). Parallel to the expansion of bilateral partnerships, Beijing has also established multilateral security fora and dialogue formats. These include, for example, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), and the Xiangshan Forum (Kim 2021; Morse and Keohane 2014; He 2020).

Hence, open contestation of the regional security architecture is currently observable in the Indo-Pacific. The region's state of affairs currently resembles an interregnum in the Gramscian sense, in which “the old is dying but the new cannot yet be born” (Heiduk, 2023, 36). The

crisis of authority that is part and parcel of any interregnum according to Gramsci is visible in the Indo-Pacific region by the relative loss of power of the US, the ascendance of China, and the (re-)emergence of regional powers such as India (and potentially others in the future).

The Changing Security Architecture of the Indo-Pacific

China's contestation of the prevailing regional security architecture has been the subject of much research and analysis. What is less clear, however, is how other regional states, US allies, and non-allies have responded to the contestation of US primacy by Beijing. To what extent has this contestation curtailed US primacy, and thus the long-standing US-led regional security architecture, in the eyes of key regional actors? And has open contestation by Beijing resulted in a detectable shift regarding the regional security architecture away from the US and towards Asian powers?

To be sure, various scholars have discussed US security cooperation with states outside the formal alliance system—both bilaterally (i.e., US security cooperation with states like Singapore, Malaysia, or Indonesia) (Laksmana, 2021) as well as with regard to cooperation with states like India in minilateral settings such as the Quad (Rajagopalan, 2021). However, much of the focus has been on the US perspective and approach herein, particularly in response to the expansion of Chinese regional ambition and power (Richey 2019), with considerably less analytical focus given to the role and agency of US allies and partners (Dian and Meijer 2020). Paying closer attention to their role and agency, as well as their relationship to the US, however, is crucial for understanding change and continuity in regional security architectures because even in hegemonic orders, so-called secondary powers do not always respond to the hegemon by demonstrating incessant allegiance. They can, at least theoretically, exhibit a range of responses, ranging from endorsement to acquiescence

to contestation (Loke 2021, 1212; Crabtree 2022, 23-30). The following sub-sections seek to analyze the early contours of the currently evolving regional security architecture. To do so, the article examines the prevailing strategic concepts and norms related to regional security, its key structures and institutions, and observable security practices.

Security outlook and norms

To be sure, successive US administrations have declared the preservation of US hegemony (“US primacy”) and a corresponding balance of power vis-a-vis China to be a central strategic goal of US foreign policy. In this context, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific is regarded as the primary strategic response to a Chinese-led transformation of the region as well as a possible starting point for a new or reformed security architecture (Harold 2021; Tankel et al. 2012). Consecutive US administrations have identified the PRC as the main threat to regional security. Beijing is widely regarded as using military, political, and, above all, economic means of power with the aim of weakening US pre-eminence in the region. Interlinked with the strategic objective of maintaining US pre-eminence is a set of norms emphasized by US policymakers, including “respect for sovereignty,” “fair and reciprocal trade,” and “transparency and the rule of law” (US Department of Defense 2019), as well as free access to global public goods, above all the “freedom of navigation” (US Department of State 2019, 6). Under the Biden administration, this set of norms has been extended to “democratic governance” and “respect for human rights”—they are to form the normative foundation of a liberal, “rules-based” order and help push back the growing influence of authoritarian powers (Biden 2021). Against the backdrop of global rivalry between “free” and “repressive” concepts of international order, these values are in competition with those of “revisionist” powers such as China, which question the “free and open” Indo-Pacific in order to assert their particular interests at the expense of others, primarily the US (US Department of State 2019, 5).

Almost all traits of Washington's security outlook and threat perception are mirrored by Canberra. From Australia's perspective, the region is increasingly becoming a focal point for the great power rivalry between China and the US. It is primarily China's ambition to curtail US primacy which undermines regional stability and thus increasingly threatens Australia's strategic interests in the region. Regional security in the Indo-Pacific according to Canberra primarily rests on the (military) presence of the US in the region. Thus, it can be inferred that for Canberra the regional security order is essentially conceived as a hegemonic order with the US at the pinnacle (Australian Financial Review 2021). The overarching strategic objective, according to the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, is to maintain a power balance in the Indo-Pacific favorable to the US and its allies with the US as the main guarantor of Australia's strategic interests (Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2017). Australia's role in the regional security order is defined primarily as an ally of the USA; the bilateral alliance with Washington is the "past, present and future" of Australia's foreign and security policy (Morrison 2019). The regional security architecture is to be based on a set of liberal norms, including "political, economic and religious freedom, liberal democracy, the rule of law and equality" (Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2017, 11). And these normative principles are being systematically undermined by some neighboring states, first and foremost China (Australian Department of Defence 2023, 23).

In debates on regional security, Delhi has a slightly different outlook. Foreign policymakers view the evolving regional security architecture as essentially multipolar, with India being one of the poles (The Hindu 2023). In Delhi's view, a multipolar regional order would reject great power politics, lack ideological rivalries, and hinge on inclusive cooperation. Alliances would make way for equal partnerships and multi-alignment, and the voices of the Global South, represented specifically by India, would be amplified vis-à-vis Western powers. In line with this, India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) envisages

an “open, inclusive” security architecture in which regional security is maintained through “dialogue, a rules-based order and the resolution of disputes based on international law” (Jaishankar 2021). According to Modi, “these rules and norms shall be based on the consent of all and not the power of a few states,” on which in turn “India’s belief in multilateralism and regionalism and our firm commitment to rule of law principles are based” (Modi 2018). There are also repeated positive normative references to ASEAN and its norms, such as territorial sovereignty, peaceful resolution of conflicts, and non-interference in the internal affairs of states.

Yet at the same time, in recent years India’s threat perception has markedly moved in the direction of that of the US and Australia. Increasingly, China is viewed as India’s primary security challenge and a permanent security threat. Sino-India border tensions following the Galwan Valley attack in 2020, in which 20 Indian soldiers were killed, have further worsened since the Tawang skirmish in December 2022. Delhi also views China’s infrastructure development in the Indian Ocean region—a maritime domain where it sees itself as the traditional security provider—as a threat to its national interests (Panda 2023). Limiting the growing Chinese influence in India’s neighborhood and the Indian Ocean is therefore now a clear strategic objective in India’s approach to the Indo-Pacific. Hence, observers increasingly describe India’s role in regional security as a “counterweight” to China, even if officially it continues to signal a willingness to cooperate with China and India continues to be a member of regional organizations such as the SCO or the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), in which China plays a key role (Heiduk and Wacker 2021, 24; Jaishankar 2021).

Indonesia’s outlook on regional security is rather different again. In the context of increasingly emerging Sino-American competition, Jakarta sees a need to prevent one of the two great powers from dominating the region. Stability, security, and prosperity in the region as well as finding “regional solutions to regional problems” are, from Indonesia’s perspective, closely linked to the promotion of multilateral

cooperation with ASEAN as the central cooperation mechanism (Weatherbee 2014). By calling for “ASEAN centrality” in a regional security order, Jakarta also wants to avert the perceived danger of the Indo-Pacific region slipping into zones of influence of competing great powers at the structural level. Regarding the normative foundations of an Indo-Pacific security order, Indonesian officials emphasize that a peaceful, secure Indo-Pacific cannot be guaranteed without respect for international law and the United Nations Charter (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia 2021; Natalegawa 2013). Principles of multilateral cooperation such as “peaceful cooperation” and “dialogue” are also mentioned in this context (Marsudi 2020). In addition, Indonesia’s post-colonial identity is also relevant in this normative context—especially the country’s leadership role within the Non-Aligned Movement. Norms related to non-alignment are of great importance from Jakarta’s point of view, such as the “Bandung Principles” of equality of all nations; preservation of territorial integrity and sovereignty; peaceful cooperation; prohibition of interference in the internal affairs of other states; and prohibition of joining collective defense alliances that serve great powers’ special interests (Marsudi 2021). Indonesian officials also repeatedly refer positively to the ASEAN norms (often referred to as the “ASEAN Way”), namely the renunciation of the threat and use of force and the imperatives of peaceful conflict resolution, regional cooperation, and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states (Natalegawa 2013).

Indonesia’s idea of regional security therefore focuses on building a security community. The understanding of regional security is a cooperative and inclusive one, which does not exclude any regional actor. China is thus decidedly described as a “partner” and “participant” in a regional security community (Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia 2018). Indonesian officials repeatedly emphasize that regional security is indivisible, based on common interests and norms, and is decidedly not a zero-sum game (Ryacudu 2019). In particular, President Joko Widodo (known as “Jokowi”) cites growing economic

interdependence as a common interest that unites all regional stakeholders in attempts to preserve security and stability in the Indo-Pacific (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2021). At the same time, however, there is growing distrust towards China in Jakarta amid the country's maritime disputes with Beijing. Chinese claims over the vast majority of the South China Sea have brought it into conflict with Jakarta over the North Natuna Sea. Incursions by Chinese ships into Indonesian waters have led to frequent incidents, mainly involving fishing vessels, but have recently also taken place around Indonesian oil and gas fields north of Indonesia's Natuna islands. These incidents have sparked fears over China actively threatening Indonesian territory in the near future (Fitriani 2022, 39).

Security structures and institutions

For Washington, the core structural element of the regional security architecture is the hub-and-spokes system of bilateral alliances. From the US official point of view, the challenge is not to establish a new regional security structure, but rather to modernize and strengthen central structural elements of the existing one (Campbell and Doshi 2021). Three core elements are named in this context. First, the preservation of US military bases in the region while simultaneously expanding the asymmetric military capacities stationed there, such as combat drones, submarines, or long-range ballistic missiles. Second, the strengthening of US allies in the region. Together with its allies, the US wants to build a system of "integrated deterrence" in the Indo-Pacific, in which the allies are an integral part of the military deterrence of opponents of the US in areas of conventional, nuclear, cyber, and information warfare (The White House 2022, 12). Behind this is the realization in Washington that the US no longer has the military capabilities to dominate every region and operational space in the world, partly due to the massive armament of China and Russia. Strengthening or upgrading the capabilities of US allies is thus also becoming more important, since in Washington's view the system of integrated deterrence can only work if

Table 1

MINILATERAL SECURITY INSTITUTIONS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC WITH US PARTICIPATION.

Name	Members	Year	Areas of security cooperation	Institutions
Trilateral security partnership between Australia, the UK, and the US (AUKUS)	Australia, UK, US	2021	Maritime security, Technology transfer, Arms transfer	Exchange of Naval Nuclear Propulsion Information Agreement (ENNPPIA), Senior officials' meetings, Joint steering groups, Working groups
Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) / Mekong-US Partnership (MUP)	Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, US, Vietnam	2009 / 2020	Water and energy security, Countering transnational crime	Annual foreign ministers' meetings, Track 1.5 dialogue
North Pacific Coast Guard Forum (NPCGF)	Canada, China, Japan, Russia, South Korea, US	2000	Combating illegal trafficking, Fishery enforcement, Combined operations, Emergency response, Maritime security, Information exchange	Bi-annual meetings of technical experts and principles
Pacific Security Cooperation Dialogue	Australia, New Zealand, US	2018	Security, prosperity and stability of the Pacific Island region	Annual meetings of civilian and military representatives
Quadrilateral Defense Coordination Group	Australia, France, New Zealand, US	1998	Fighting of IUU fishing in the Pacific Islands region, Assistance to Pacific Island nations	Joint patrols, Annual and bi-annual senior officials' meetings
Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)	Australia, India, Japan, US	2007-2009, 2017	Economic and health security, Combat climate change, Cybersecurity, Critical technologies, Space, Counterterrorism, Quality infrastructure investment, HA/DR, Maritime security	Leaders' summit, Foreign ministers' meetings, Senior officials' meetings, Joint working groups
Six-Party Talks	China, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, Russia, US	2003-2009	Nuclear non-proliferation	Senior officials' meetings
Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG)	Japan, South Korea, US	1999-2004	Nuclear non-proliferation	Deputy ministers' meetings
US-Japan-Australia Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD)	Australia, Japan, US	2005	Anti-terrorism, Non-proliferation (WMD), Defense, Maritime security, HA/DR, Peacekeeping, Cybersecurity	Foreign ministers' meetings
US-Japan-India Trilateral Dialogue	India, Japan, US	2011	Maritime security, Promotion of regional connectivity, Maritime capacity-building	Meetings on the director general level, Elevation to ministerial level in 2015
US-Japan-Korea Trilateral	Japan, South Korea, US	2010	Nuclear non-proliferation	Ministerial consultations
US-Japan-Philippines Trilateral Cooperation	Japan, Philippines, US	2022	Maritime security	Defense policy dialogue, Senior officials' meetings

Source: Author's own compilation.

the military capacities of the allies are expanded to reduce dependence on the large US military bases, which are seen as tactically vulnerable. Only in conjunction with allies and partners in the region will China's deterrence be possible in the future. The third element is the strengthening of security cooperation among US allies and partners. The "spokes" are to cooperate more closely with each other in the areas of intelligence and defense, instead of primarily with the hub (the US) as has been the case up to now (Campbell and Doshi 2021). The third element also includes the strengthening of minilateral institutions, predominantly but not exclusively (see Tables 1 and 2 below) the Quad and AUKUS. While Table 2 clearly shows that not all security minilaterals with US participation in the region have been formed as part of Washington's FOIP strategy, quite a few of them actually have been established, or, as has been the case with the Quad, revived in the context of the FOIP (Table 1). This includes, for example, the US-Japan-Philippines Trilateral Cooperation (2022) and also the Pacific Security Cooperation Dialogue (2018). Interestingly, the Quad is currently viewed less as a security institution than as a forum to coordinate the provision of public goods, be it vaccines, infrastructure, or combating climate change (Smith 2022). The bilateral US alliances thus remain the central structural instrument of a US-led security architecture in the region. Above all, they continue to play a central role in balancing China and maintaining a regional balance of power in favor of the US (US Department of Defense 2019).

For Australia, the structural cornerstone of the regional security architecture is the bilateral alliance with the US. It is the US-led hub-and-spoke system of bilateral alliances that, in Australia's view, has lent stability to the regional security order since the Korean War. Canberra sees regional security primarily secured through its ANZUS military alliance with the US (Australia, New Zealand and United States Security Treaty) and treaties such as the Five Eyes Alliance for intelligence cooperation. At the same time, however, it is widely assumed that there are medium-term risks to the US being strong enough and (domestically) stable and reliable enough to permanently and effectively counter growing Chinese power claims

in the region. Therefore, a “network of partnerships” beyond the bilateral alliance with the US should be further consolidated. Priority is to be given to cooperation with Southeast Asian neighbors like Indonesia, the Philippines, and Singapore, as well as other regional powers like India, Japan, and South Korea (Dutton 2021a; Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2017, 26; Morrison 2021; Australian Department of Defence 2020, 24). The EU and its member states such as Germany and France, as well as NATO, are also mentioned in this context (Dutton 2021b). In addition, minilateral institutions, especially the Quad and AUKUS, are viewed as increasingly important as they bring together like-minded states in pragmatic, flexible, issue-centric institutional settings to respond to pressing regional security challenges. At the same time, they provide avenues to further institutionalize engagement with the US. However, Canberra has also begun to engage in various minilaterals that exist without participation or leadership by Washington. Examples include the Australia-France-India Trilateral Dialogue (2020) and the Australia-India-Indonesia Trilateral Dialogue (2017) (see Table 2). This shows that while some of the new security arrangements are becoming increasingly integrated into the hub-and-spoke system, others exist outside of it or are layered over it.

Regardless of its heightened China threat perception, in Indonesia’s official foreign policy discourse the central “cornerstone” (sokuguru) of regional security is ASEAN and ASEAN-led inclusive multilateral organizations such as the ARF, EAS, and ADMM+. The latter are considered especially central due to the involvement of the US and China (and a number of other external actors).⁴ Jakarta is thus trying to offer an inclusive, ASEAN-centered security architecture as an alternative to what it perceives as a deepening Sino-American bipolarity (Abbondanza 2022, 403-421).

⁴ These include, above all, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM-Plus).

However, the lack of effectiveness of the regional organization in developing a coherent position and policy with regard to the conflict over the South China Sea, among other things, has led to controversial debates about the effectiveness of multilateral institutions (Sukma 2019). Therefore in recent years minilateral cooperation formats have become part of Jakarta's regional security policy alongside ASEAN (although hardly mentioned in the official rhetoric regarding the Indo-Pacific).

These minilaterals include, for example, the trilateral Australia-India-Indonesia format, the Indomalphi (Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines Trilateral Maritime Patrol) joint patrols in the Sulu Sea, or the Malacca Straits Patrol (MSP) agreement between Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, which conducts joint anti-piracy patrols in the Strait of Malacca (see Table 2). In Jakarta's view, the aforementioned minilateral formats function complementarily and not contrary to an ASEAN-centered security architecture. First, this is because they always refer to the "ASEAN Way" and "ASEAN Centrality" at the normative level. Secondly, it is because in Jakarta's view they bring together like-minded small and middle powers and thus correspond to traditional ASEAN foreign policy principles such as "strategic autonomy" and "equidistance" between the major powers. Indonesia's minilateral turn has recently even included the possibility of ASEAN partnering with the Quad and AUKUS (Connors 2023). Indonesia has also sought to intensify its bilateral relations with the US in recent years. For example, November 2023 saw both governments commit themselves to the elevation of the US-Indonesia relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. The joint statement notably also included the signing of a bilateral Work Plan on Maritime Security Cooperation with the stated aim of enhancing Indonesia's maritime security capabilities (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia and The White House 2023).

Table 2

MINILATERAL SECURITY INSTITUTIONS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC WITHOUT US PARTICIPATION.

Name	Members	Year	Areas of security cooperation	Institutions
Australia-France-India Trilateral Dialogue	Australia, France, India	2020	Maritime safety and security, Marine and environmental cooperation	Ministerial dialogue, Senior officials, Working group, Track 1.5 dialogue
Australia-India-Indonesia Trilateral Dialogue	Australia, India, Indonesia	2017	Fighting IUU fishing, Anti-piracy	Ministerial level meetings
Australia-Japan-India Trilateral	Australia, India, Japan	2015	Maritime security, Anti-terrorism, Nuclear non-proliferation, Territorial disputes	Senior officials' meetings
India-Italy-Japan Trilateral	India, Italy, Japan	2021	Stability in the Indo-Pacific region	Senior officials' meetings
Malacca Strait Patrol (MSP)	Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand	2004	Maritime security, Anti-piracy	Regular working level Consultations, Information Fusion Centre, Coordinated patrols
Sulu-Sulawesi Trilateral Cooperation / Indomalphi	Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines	2016	Maritime security	Ministerial level meetings, Trilateral Cooperation Agreement (TCA), Coordinated patrols

Source: Author's own compilation

For India, the regional security architecture is to be based on multipolar structures, as according to PM Modi a “strong, multipolar order” is an important prerequisite for managing Sino-American rivalry, preventing bipolarity, and ensuring stability and security in the Indo-Pacific (Ministry of External Affairs of India /Modi 2019). Alongside the US and China, Russia and India are central poles of this multipolar order. In India's view, all are subject to Delhi's multi-alignment. Multipolarity as the structural framework of the Modi government's Indo-Pacific is primarily based on bilateral relations between the region's great and middle powers. This includes close relations with China (Modi 2018). Recently, this has also included strengthening bilateral security cooperation with the US and

Indonesia. Additionally, at the institutional level, India has recently invested much time and energy in bi-, tri-, and mini-lateral formats involving the US and its allies and partners. This includes, for example, Indian engagement in the Quad, in the India-Japan-Australia trilateral, and closer bilateral cooperation in the field of defense policy with states like France, Vietnam, and South Korea. The focus on minilaterals is due to the Modi government's pessimistic view of regional multilateral organizations, which are seen as cumbersome and inefficient. Minilaterals as "coalitions of the willing," on the other hand, appear to be a more flexible and goal-oriented alternative in terms of content and membership (see Tables 1 and 2).

India's positioning on the Quad, however, illustrates how it still tries to avoid the appearance of engaging in anti-China alliances by insisting that the Quad is not against any state (i.e., China) but rather for something (regional stability). To this end, and despite their aforementioned cumbersome nature, India also maintains active engagement in multilateral institutions. At the multilateral level, India is involved in regional organizations such as IORA, EAS, ARF, ADMM+, the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Co-operation (FIPIC), and BIMSTEC. India is also a member of the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP). Furthermore, India is the only regional major power to have membership in organizations that are generally seen by the US and its allies as rival, if not adversarial, institutions—specifically, India's membership in BRICS and the SCO.

Security practices in the Indo-Pacific

In line with its strategic focus on maintaining regional primacy by modernizing the existing regional security architecture, US security practices in the region have been focused on strengthening existing alliances and other forms of bilateral security cooperation with partners in the region. The main emphasis here has been on the expansion of the security capacities of US allies in order to establish a system of

integrated deterrence (Biden 2021; Austin 2021). This includes, among other things, intensifying cooperation with Australia, where Washington intends to send fighter jets and bombers more frequently for longer periods in the future. Cooperation with partners outside the hub-and-spokes system, such as India and the ASEAN states (above all Singapore), has also gradually intensified. Here, the focus is on upgrading projects such as arms deliveries, joint maneuvers and training, and intelligence cooperation. This also includes providing continued military support to Taiwan (The White House 2022, 13).

Practicing integrated deterrence also includes security and defense cooperation in minilateral settings such as AUKUS and the Quad. With AUKUS, the main focus is on the delivery to Australia of nuclear-powered submarines with US and British technology. The intensification of cooperation with allies thus also includes technology transfers, not only with Australia, as in the framework of AUKUS, but also with Japan (semiconductors), for example. Meanwhile the Quad is increasingly becoming the prime format for coordinating a coalition of “like-minded” partners toward implementing US strategic objectives in the Indo-Pacific. The need to intensify security cooperation with non-allies such as India through the Quad, however, is an indication that Washington is no longer able to achieve its declared strategic goal of maintaining regional hegemony through the hub-and-spoke system alone. Regular Quad summits at the leadership level have taken place since 2021, and the Quad has become more strongly institutionalized at the working level, too. Permanent working groups now cover a wide range of policy areas, from the provision of Covid-19 vaccines to the governance of outer space. In contrast to the existing, predominantly bilateral military formats, the Quad intends to promote common regional interests. This set of broader interests, which is more oriented towards shaping rather than merely preserving the regional order and pertinent institutions and norms, includes securing regional sea lanes, expanding regional free trade and connectivity, promoting democracy, and protecting human rights. Furthermore, the strengthening of the Quad as well as its possible expansion as

an instrument of “military deterrence” remains high on the US agenda (Campbell and Doshi 2021). However, such attempts have largely stalled due to India effectively blocking efforts to develop the Quad into a stronger military-oriented grouping. In June 2023, the defense ministers of Japan, Australia, the Philippines, and the US founded another minilateral grouping with the aim of responding to China’s growing maritime assertiveness in the region. They are currently considering the start of joint maritime patrols to act as a deterrent towards China’s growing military presence in the South and East China Seas (Kyodo News 2023).

Australia has responded to the increasing instability in the Indo-Pacific primarily by expanding its alliance with the US, substantially increasing its defense budget and corresponding arms purchases, strategic partnerships, and minilateral cooperation fora. At the operational level, US Marines have been stationed near Darwin for a few months each year since 2012 to conduct joint training exercises with the Australian Defence Force (ADF). The size of the Marine Rotational Force-Darwin was increased from a few hundred to 2500 in 2021 (Mackay 2021). Joint naval maneuvers, such as the Malabar Exercise, also take place regularly. The US is also Australia’s largest arms supplier. Between 2012 and 2021, more than three-quarters of all Australian arms imports by value came from the US (SIPRI Arms Transfer Database). A combination of external pressure from Washington and the realization that the ADF is poorly trained and equipped for military confrontation led to a massive increase in the defence budget, reaching 2.1% of GDP in 2021, a 15% increase over 2020 (Wilkins 2021, 4). Furthermore, Canberra has expanded its minilateral cooperation, especially via AUKUS, the Five Eyes Alliance, and the Quad, as well as helped to launch the recently established minilateral with the US, Japan, and the Philippines. Since 2020, Australia has also participated in the Malabar naval exercises in the Indian Ocean, which had previously been conducted by the US, India and Japan.

But even Australia as the US’s closest regional ally has recently expanded cooperation to other bilateral partnerships below the threshold of formal alliances. Starting with the strategic partnerships with Japan

(2014) and Singapore (2015), Canberra then grew its privileged partnerships with France (2017), Indonesia (2018), Vietnam (2018), India (2020), Papua New Guinea (2020), Thailand (2020), Malaysia (2021), and Germany (2021). As expected, their form varies greatly. Bilateral cooperation with India, for example, includes joint naval maneuvers (PASSEX, AUSINDEX) and the mutual use of military bases for bunker stops (Singh and Saha 2022). Cooperation with Japan, for example, has so far focused on logistics (Koga 2022). Furthermore, new partnerships with regional organizations were launched, such as the ASEAN-Australian Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and cooperation with NATO. An increase in Australian initiatives in the Indo-Pacific, both quantitatively and qualitatively, can also be observed with regard to trilateral formats, such as the Australia-India-Japan trilateral, Australia-France-India trilateral, and Australia-India-Indonesia trilateral. In terms of content, these minilaterals have so far been focused on closer cooperation on the topics of maritime security and the rules-based international order.

Delhi has so far primarily increased its security and defense policy activities in its immediate neighborhood, in South Asia and the Indian Ocean. On the one hand, this includes the deepening of bilateral military relations with neighboring states such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Mauritius, and Bhutan, including joint military maneuvers, training, and capacity-building programs, as well as regular high-level dialogues. In 2021, for example, the Indian Navy conducted over 50 joint maneuvers with “friendly states” in the Indian Ocean (South China Morning Post 2022). India increasingly sees itself as a provider of security in its immediate neighborhood—be it through the expansion of radar stations in Indian Ocean littoral states or through Indian patrols to secure trade routes. This also includes India’s growing role as an arms exporter. Indian arms exports grew rapidly from \$130 million in 2012-2016 to \$302 million in 2017-2021. Key recipient countries of Indian arms exports in the last decade were Myanmar (\$196 million), Sri Lanka (\$74 million), Mauritius (\$66 million), Armenia (\$32 million), and the Seychelles (\$24 million). With the exception of Armenia, all are

neighboring countries of India (SIPRI Arms Transfer Database). Most recently Delhi made regional headlines with the sale of BrahMos missile systems to the Philippines, a long-standing US ally. Against the background of the territorial disputes between the Philippines and China in the South China Sea, the delivery of supersonic missiles, which could ultimately be used against China, has been interpreted in India itself as a “strategic statement” towards Beijing (Chaudhury and Pubby 2022).

Although Delhi’s central focus remains its neighborhood, it has become more active further afield. This includes the expansion of bilateral cooperation with the US, Japan, Australia, and some ASEAN states (Vietnam, Indonesia, Singapore) as well as France. Accordingly, India has focused on the purchase or sale of military equipment (e.g., from the US or France to India, or from India to Vietnam) and on joint military exercises. Delhi’s security cooperation with the US especially has increased rapidly over the last years in terms of arms sales, military-to-military engagements, and information sharing.

Indonesia’s security policies in the Indo-Pacific have so far largely focused on its immediate Southeast Asian neighborhood, with emphasis on ASEAN-centered multilateral cooperation (Subianto 2021). This includes, for example, negotiations with Beijing on an ASEAN-China “Code of Conduct in the South China Sea,” which have been ongoing for more than 20 years. The code of conduct is intended to establish mechanisms at the diplomatic level to manage conflicts over (artificial) islands, Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), fishing grounds, and natural resources. Indonesia also declared the validity of the 2016 arbitral award in a Note Verbale to the United Nations, setting out its position on the international maritime status of Indonesia’s Natuna Islands and the EEZs surrounding them, located on the southern border of the South China Sea. China disputes parts of these EEZs with Indonesia on the basis of “historical rights.” So far, the Code of Conduct has not been concluded due to divergent interests between China and ASEAN. The “High-Level Dialogue on Indo-Pacific Cooperation” initiated by

Jakarta in 2019 with the aim of strengthening dialogue in the region and thereby promoting confidence building was also centered on ASEAN. This is because the dialogue members corresponded exactly to the group of participants of the EAS (Antara News 2019).

At the operational level, however, much action took place in the form of minilateral, and increasingly also bilateral, security cooperation. For example, Indomalphi (Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines Trilateral Maritime Patrol), consisting of the three littoral states of the Sulu Sea, was established in response to the increased presence of IS-affiliated Islamist militancy and has been conducting joint patrols in the Sulu Sea since 2017, in addition to facilitating the exchange of intelligence information. Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore have been conducting joint anti-piracy patrols in the Strait of Malacca since 2004 under the Malacca Straits Patrol Agreement (MSP). However, in line with the norms mentioned above, these minilaterals are not exclusive in nature. Thailand, for example, joined the MSP in 2006. Vietnam and Myanmar have observer status with the MSP, while Singapore, Brunei, and Thailand have observer status with Indomalphi (Guiang 2017). In addition, Jakarta initiated a first ASEAN meeting of coast guard representatives in 2021 to discuss possibilities for regional cooperation in the event of “disruptions” to regional security (Radio Free Asia 2021).

As of late, especially bilateral security cooperation with states like India, the US, Australia, and Japan has been expanded. For example, annual so-called “2+2” formats between the respective foreign and defense ministers have been established with Australia and Japan. To be sure, Indonesia has experience in bilateral security cooperation, but in the past it was often limited to areas labeled as “non-traditional security,” such as cooperation in disaster management, humanitarian aid, illegal fishing, or environmental protection (Sukma 2012, 3-21). With India, for example, an annual naval maneuver “Samudra Sakti” was established in 2018 to improve interoperability. The exercise involves cross deck landings, air defense serials, practice weapon firings,

replenishment approaches, and tactical maneuvers. Joint military maneuvers with the US under the name “Garuda Shield” have recently greatly expanded in size as well as the number of participants. As of 2022, 5,000 soldiers joined the combat exercises as part of “Super Garuda Shield” as the exercise is now referred to. The maneuver included 15 participating nations, among them Australia, Japan, and Singapore. And a large bilateral amphibious military exercise (Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training - CARAT) took place in Surabaya in December of 2022. Indonesia also ordered five US-manufactured C-130J-30 Super Hercules heavy transport aircraft and plans to buy F15 fighter jets from the US. However, Indonesia is the only one of the four countries examined for this analysis that still maintains defense relations with China. Despite repeated Chinese incursions into Indonesia’s EEZ near the Natuna islands (Siow and Yuniar 2023), the two countries still conduct (albeit infrequently) joint naval drills together, even if these drills are much smaller in terms of their mandate, size, and scope than the ones Indonesia conducts with the US and its allies. and are seen with more skepticism domestically (Grossman 2021; Zhou 2021; Fitriani 2022). This somewhat contradictory observation nonetheless fits with Indonesia’s long-standing tradition of following a foreign policy of non-alignment to avoid choosing sides in great power rivalries (Anwar 2023, 351-77).

Table 3

ASIANIZATION OF REGIONAL SECURITY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC (OVERVIEW).

Country	Ideas and strategic outlook	Institutions (selection)	Practices
Australia	US primacy, Networked security architecture, Increased security cooperation with like- minded partners, Worries over durability of US engagement	AUKUS QUAD Australia-France-India Trilateral Dialogue, Australia-India- Indonesia Trilateral Dialogue, Australia- Japan- India trilateral, Pacific Security Cooperation Dialogue, Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Group, US-Japan-Australia Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD)	Arms transfers Joint military exercises Joint trainings Joint patrols Intelligence sharing Information sharing
India	Multipolarity Inclusive, Cooperative security, Multi-alignment	QUAD Australia-France-India Trilateral Dialogue, Australia-India- Indonesia Trilateral Dialogue, Australia- Japan- India Trilateral India-Italy-Japan Trilateral, US-Japan-India Trilateral Dialogue, Indonesia-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, US-India Comprehensive and Global Strategic Partnership	Joint military exercises Joint military training Arms transfers Information sharing
Indonesia	Multipolarity, Inclusive, cooperative security, Non-alignment ASEAN-centrality	Australia-India- Indonesia Trilateral Dialogue, Indomalphi, Malacca Strait Patrol, US Indonesia strategic partnership, Indonesia-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, China-Indonesia Comprehensive Strategic Cooperation	Joint military exercises Coordinated patrols Arms transfers Joint trainings Information sharing

Country	Ideas and strategic outlook	Institutions (selection)	Practices
US	US primacy, Networked Security Architecture, Increased security cooperation with like- minded partners	AUKUS Pacific Security Cooperation Dialogue, Quad, US-Japan-Australia Trilateral Strategic Dialogue, US-Japan-India Trilateral Dialogue, US-Japan-Korea Trilateral, US-Japan-Philippines Trilateral, US-Japan-Australia Trilateral Strategic Dialogue, US-India Comprehensive and Global Strategic Partnership, US-Indonesia Strategic Partnership, US-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	Technology transfers Arms transfers Joint military exercises Joint trainings Joint patrols Intelligence sharing Information sharing

Source: Author's own compilation.

Conclusion: the Asianization of Regional Security

The findings presented in this article suggest that the regional security architecture is currently undergoing important changes with potential far-reaching implications for regional security and stability. Specifically, they alert us to a set of empirical phenomena indicating a process of Asianization of the regional security architecture. Asianization is detectable at all three analytical levels employed in this article: at the level of strategic outlook and ideas on regional security, at the institutional level, as well as the practical or operational level. These phenomena signal a shift in strategic importance and agency in regional security away from the US and towards Asian powers.

First, Asianization is detectable empirically at the strategic level in

that all states under study allocate growing strategic importance to Asian powers inside and outside the hub-and-spoke system. This might be somewhat obvious with regard to India and Indonesia, which have long-standing ideas of non-alignment and strategic autonomy. However, it also applies to the US, whose new strategic concept of a networked security architecture not only acknowledges the growing strategic importance of regional allies and partners but also actively endorses a greater role of regional allies and partners.

Second, Asianization is detectable empirically in terms of institutional changes through the proliferation of bi- and minilateral security frameworks in the Indo-Pacific that increasingly go beyond the established institutional parameters of the hub-and-spoke system. The Quad is the most prominent example here. Without the inclusion of India, the format would hardly have the same added value, as numerous other institutions to enhance US cooperation with Japan and Australia pre-dated the Quad. Not only that, in many ways India—perhaps more so than even the US—has been able to shape the Quad's institutional development in line with its particular policy preferences over the last years. But there are other developments that point to greater Asianization at the institutional level, too. These include various other minilaterals, some involving the US but others without US participation. There are also numerous bilateral partnerships—touching on various aspects of security cooperation—between Asian powers themselves. Again, some are within the hub-and-spoke system, some outside of it.

Third, Asianization is also detectable empirically at the practical level. Asian powers are increasingly trying to vastly improve indigenous arms manufacturing through technological partnerships with the US and other partners, and Asian powers are also increasingly trading arms with each other. Asian powers are steadily trying to improve the interoperability of their respective armed forces, for example through joint training and maneuvers. Again, all of this is not exclusively tied to the US-led hub-and-spoke system, but even less is it intended to improve security cooperation with China.

To the contrary, this article finds that while Asian states, both within and outside of the US alliance system, play an increasingly important role in regional security affairs, this does not equate to regional states siding more closely with China. Alignment with the US on security in the region, albeit often below the threshold of formal alliances, is actually incrementally increasing. While alignment on regional security affairs with Washington is to be expected from a long-standing US ally like Australia, it is also observable for states with traditions of non-alignment in foreign policy and historically rather rocky bilateral relations with Washington, like India and Indonesia. This is despite the fact that both India and Indonesia still maintain strategic outlooks that emphasize norms and ideas like inclusivity, multilateral cooperation, and cooperative security. Yet in terms of their observable behavior, both states show signs of leaning towards the US and its allies to balance China. These empirical findings suggest that the process of Asianization currently detectable in regional security is far from Xi Jinping's idea of a regional order "by and for Asians."

Finally, a word of caution is in order. There is a risk of over-interpreting the findings in this article to suggest that the incremental alignment with the US on regional security by, for example, India, is the result of a wider strategic convergence regarding Washington's vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific and continuation of US regional primacy. Such strategic convergence is not demonstrated. The incremental alignment described here is happening despite strong divergences in regional strategic outlooks. That is, there is little evidence to suggest that India or Indonesia share the wider strategic objectives of the US in the region, or are converging with the US in this regard, but rather the incremental alignment that is part of the wider Asianization of the regional security architecture is occurring in response to China's perceived assertiveness and aggressive behavior.

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