

Contesting the Hub-and-Spokes Model in Southeast Asia

Charmaine Misalucha-Willoughby*

The debate surrounding the United States' hub-and-spokes alliance model in the Asia-Pacific, that is, whether its endurance is a testament to its durability or whether its inability to face up to contemporary challenges reflects its failure—is best captured by recent norm research in International Relations. It can be argued that the U.S. hub-and-spokes model in Southeast Asia is not failing but is simply showing signs of contestation. The evolution of this network of regional security arrangements from U.S. alliances in Southeast Asia (with the Philippines and Thailand) to American security partnerships in that subregion (strategic partnership with Singapore and comprehensive partnership with Vietnam) reflects applicatory contestation. At the same time, the China factor and Washington's evolving Asia strategy, which competes with the Middle East and with the "America First" instincts of the Trump administration, challenge the core of the San Francisco System's validity. Hence, while the hub-and-spokes model is merely showing signs of contestation, the fact that it is undergoing validity contestation serves as a cautionary tale. Those U.S. policymakers supporting it will need to implement steps to avoid its complete erosion.

Key words: hub-and-spokes, norm contestation, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, United States, Vietnam

对东南亚的轴辐模式发起挑战

围绕美国在亚太地区的轴辐联盟模式的辩论，即这一模式的忍耐能力是否是其持久性的见证，又或者其面对当代挑战时的无能为力是否反映了它的失败，这是近期国际关系中的准则研究所最为关注的。可以认为，美国在东南亚的轴辐模式并没有减弱，而是出现了遭遇竞争的现象。该地区安全安排网络的发展，从美国在东南亚的联盟（菲律宾和泰国）到美国在亚地区的安全伙伴关系（即与新加坡的战略伙伴关系及与越南的全面伙伴关系），都反映了竞争。同时，中国因素加上不仅与中东竞争，还与特朗普政府的“美国第一”本能相竞争的华盛顿方面不断演变的亚洲战略，对旧金山体制合法性的核心发起挑战。因此，尽管轴辐模式仅仅展示了遭遇竞争的现象，但该模式遭遇有关合法性的竞争这一事实却充当了一个警告的作用。那些支持该模式的美国决策者将需要实施一系列步骤来避免该模式被完全侵蚀。

关键词: 轴辐, 美国, 菲律宾, 泰国, 新加坡, 越南, 准则竞争

*Charmaine Misalucha-Willoughby is Associate Professor in the International Studies Department of De La Salle University and Research Fellow at the Asia-Pacific Pathways to Progress in Manila, Philippines. Her areas of specialization are ASEAN's external relations, security cooperation, and critical international relations theory.

Concurriendo el Modelo de Hub-and-Spokes en Asia Sudoriental

El debate en torno al modelo de alianza de hub-and-spokes de los Estados Unidos en Asia-Pacífico, es decir, si su resistencia es un testimonio de su durabilidad o si su incapacidad para enfrentar los desafíos contemporáneos refleja su fracaso, es mejor captarlo en los recientes normas de investigación en relaciones internacionales. Se puede argumentar que el modelo de centro y radios de EE. UU. En el sudeste asiático no está fallando, sino que simplemente está mostrando signos de contestación. La evolución de esta red de acuerdos de seguridad regional desde las alianzas de los EE. UU. En el sudeste asiático (con Filipinas y Tailandia) hasta las asociaciones de seguridad estadounidenses en esa subregión (asociación estratégica con Singapur y asociación integral con Vietnam) refleja la contestación de la aplicación. Al mismo tiempo, el factor de China y la estrategia de Asia en evolución de Washington, que compite con el Medio Oriente y con los instintos “América Primero” de la administración Trump, desafían el núcleo de la validez del Sistema de San Francisco. Por lo tanto, mientras que el modelo de hub-and-spokes simplemente muestra signos de contestación, el hecho de que está experimentando una validación de validez sirve como una advertencia. Los encargados de formular políticas estadounidenses que lo apoyen deberán implementar medidas para evitar su erosión completa.

Palabras clave: hub-and-spokes, Estados Unidos, Filipinas, Tailandia, Singapur, Vietnam, contestación a la norma

Introduction

The United States’ network of bilateral security arrangements in Asia is caught in a bind. On the one hand, the hub-and-spokes model, which was created in the aftermath of the Second World War, has strong foundations that enable it to endure to this day. On the other hand, unfolding regional dynamics impose limits on the clout of the United States’ Asia security policy. This leads to the claim that the “San Francisco System,” as it is otherwise called, is failing and that unless it adapts to current realities, it will be unable to sustain its utility and respond to the challenges confronting it today.

At the heart of the hub-and-spokes model is the norm of alliance making. In the post-1945 era, bilateral alliances served to complement—and thereby strengthen—the multilateral framework that the United States created. Thus, Asian countries in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War formed alliances with the United States to hasten postwar reconstruction efforts and to guarantee an American strategic presence in the region. In this context, alliance formation meets the classic definition of norms: that states engage in such a practice “as a rule,” thereby making it the standard mode of interaction at the time (Axelrod, 1986; Thomson, 1993). This definition carries with it a normative claim, an “oughtness” to the idea that—at least at the time—forming alliances was a critical preventative measure to the outbreak of war and that it was necessary to engender cooperation (Florini, 1996).

Arguably, recognizing a norm can be challenging, not least because one can only find indirect evidence of its existence. Nevertheless, it is possible to trace norm-induced patterns of behavior and to extrapolate the rhetoric behind them (Björkdahl, 2002). The Mutual Defense Treaties that the United States signed

with the Philippines and Japan, the founding treaty language of the now defunct Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) and the explicit phrasing found in the Thanat-Rusk communiqué that became the basis of American commitments to Thailand following SEATO's de facto demise in 1962, illustrate this point clearly. In these arrangements, emphasis was placed on commonalities, mutual ideals, and collective self-defense. Hence, historical evidence suggests that alliance making, which eventually took the form of the hub-and-spokes model, was the norm in the post-1945 era.

Today, however, a lively debate surrounds this model, which is best captured by the burgeoning field of norm research in International Relations (IR). In this context, the hub-and-spokes model can be seen as a measure of interaction for the United States and its allies and partners in Asia. Norms, after all, are defined as standards of appropriate behavior and thus have corresponding behavioral expectations (Katzenstein, 1996). Norms constitute and at the same time regulate relationships by imposing obligations on actors (Sandholtz & Stiles, 2009). In IR, norm research has traditionally focused on a norm's life cycle, which traces its emergence, diffusion, and eventual internalization by actors (Deitelhoff, 2009; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Kelley, 2008; Price, 1995). Norm emergence is often presumed to be a conflict-filled and highly contested process because this stage is where norm entrepreneurs compete and lobby for certain norms instead of alternative ones. Once a norm reaches the diffusion stage, all traces of contestation wither away and the norm is considered stable. When a norm becomes habitual and its presence unquestioned, actors are seen to have internalized it. This last stage is what confirms a norm's validity. The hub-and-spokes model can arguably be seen to have undergone the classic norm life cycle, especially considering how embedded it is in Asia's regional security architecture.

Recent calls for revamping this structure have become stronger and louder, which is something for which the norm life cycle cannot account. The issue of whether norms can lose their validity despite being previously internalized and undergoing contestation under a new and different set of circumstances is practically inconceivable because generally, contested norms are ineffective norms (Heller, Kahl, & Pisiou, 2012; McKeown, 2009; Panke & Petersohn, 2012, 2016). This is where the explanatory power of norms diminishes. To argue that contested norms are a sign of decay, it is also to imply that norms are static. Recent norm research tests this assumption and instead emphasizes the role that contestation plays in the weakening or strengthening of a norm, and more importantly, in establishing the robustness of a norm (Deitelhoff & Zimmermann, 2019; Krook & True, 2012; Wiener, 2008; Zimmermann, 2017). Here, the *type* of contestation matters (Deitelhoff & Zimmermann, 2018). Contestation on the application of a norm questions its appropriateness for a given situation and what behavior or action is required. As such, "applicatory contestation" can engender new understandings and behavioral expectations. "Validity contestation," meanwhile, questions the very core of a norm and the basis of its normative obligation. In this sense, validity contestation questions a norm's "rightness" (Deitelhoff & Zimmermann, 2018). Hence, validity contestation can eventually weaken the robustness of a norm, while applicatory contestation can strengthen it.

Against this backdrop, an argument can therefore be made that the U.S. hub-and-spokes alliance model in Southeast Asia is not failing but is simply showing

signs of contestation. The evolution of this network of regional security arrangements from formal alliances (with the Philippines and Thailand) to security partnerships (a strategic partnership with Singapore and a comprehensive partnership with Vietnam) reflects applicatory contestation. At the same time, the China factor and the ambiguities surrounding the United States' evolving Asia strategy strike at the core of the San Francisco System's validity. Hence, while the hub-and-spokes model is merely showing signs of contestation, the fact that it is undergoing validity contestation serves as a cautionary tale. If this process continues, then this model may indeed erode or even become obsolete over time.

The Norm Core

In 1951, a postwar peace treaty with Japan was signed in San Francisco. Crucial to the negotiations leading to this agreement were associated security arrangements to prevent Japan falling into the Soviet Union's sphere of influence when it recovered economically and to ensure that the United States maintained its hold on the North Asian littoral (Beazley, 2003). This, then became the catalyst for the creation of "a comprehensive structure of interrelated political-military and economic commitments between the United States and its Pacific allies" (Calder, 2004, p. 136). By the late 1950s, this broader hub-and-spokes model included Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Australia and New Zealand (ANZUS) as well as the Southeast Asia states of the Philippines and Thailand.

Several features encompassed the core of the San Francisco System (Calder, 2004). First, at its foundation was several formal bilateral security alliances between the United States and Asian states, forming a hub-and-spokes model with the United States at the center. Second, this model constituted a highly asymmetric structure because while the United States offered military and economic benefits to its partners, it did not impose commensurate collective defense obligations on them. The structure was clearly intended to be asymmetric, as evidenced by the U.S.' employment of paramount economic and strategic postwar capabilities to help rebuild and stabilize parts of Asia that had either been decimated or occupied during the Second World War (Cha, 2009/2010). In this context, special precedence was afforded particularly to Japan in both economic opportunities and security obligations. Third, and relatedly, the system allowed the allies liberal trade access to American markets alongside minimal development assistance.

Hence, the hub-and-spokes model that endures to this day is very much a reflection of the United States' policy continuity: it was "a strategy of a new global hegemon ... putting in place a compromise vision of transparent, stable regional security and economic relationships to underpin a new global order" (Beazley, 2003, p. 325). However, this is as much a function of the so-called "powerplay" rationale that was behind U.S. postwar planning in the region (Cha, 2009/2010). The United States did create a system of bilateral security alliances to contain the Soviet threat. Couched as it was in the dangers of the domino theory, however, it was at the same time to preclude anti-communist leaders in the region from engaging in aggressive behavior and drawing the United States into unwanted wars.

Despite some glitches that included the dissolution of the U.S.-Taiwan Mutual Defense Treaty in 1980 as a result of the U.S.-China rapprochement, the suspension

of New Zealand from the ANZUS alliance in 1985–1986 due to differences on nuclear strategy, and the nonrenewal of the U.S. bases in the Philippines in 1992, the San Francisco System remains in place. Both the United States and its allies show signs of sustained interest in keeping the network alive largely because it affords the United States some partners in enhancing its global security strategy. Meanwhile, such an arrangement is likewise advantageous to the United States' allies in the region because they realize that this network allows them to achieve strategic gains that they likely will not be able to do on their own, such as navigating post-Cold War politics in the region. This notwithstanding, there are factors at play that change the regional security environment and the durability of the hub-and-spokes model (Tow & Acharya, 2007). First, conceptions of alliances are evolving to broader types of arrangements, including strategic and comprehensive partnerships. Second, domestic politics and transnational issues spill over to the regional and global levels and create fissures. These changes can be categorized as contestations facing the San Francisco System.

Contestations

Recent scholarship in IR underscores the role that contestations play in the durability of a norm. The hub-and-spokes model, as a normative indicator of interaction, faces contestation on several fronts in the Southeast Asian context. On the one hand, the evolution of relations from alliances (with the Philippines and Thailand) to partnerships (with Singapore and Vietnam) reflect applicatory contestation and demonstrates the system's ability to be nimble and adapt to contemporary regional dynamics. On the other hand, however, China's assertive actions in the South China Sea, which can likely be a result of its domestic politics, prompt a U.S. strategic response that in practice can be interpreted as a China-focused strategy instead of an overarching Asia strategy. This is a cause for concern by hub-and-spokes advocates, not least because validity contestation generally weakens a norm.

Alliances and Partnerships

The United States' alliances and partnerships in Southeast Asia show a generally positive trajectory. If anything, contestations in these relationships are applicatory in nature. This is far from detrimental to the San Francisco system because applicatory contestation can in fact strengthen the hub-and-spokes model. Here, the United States' alliances with the Philippines and Thailand are discussed, as well as the strategic and comprehensive partnerships with Singapore and Vietnam, respectively. America's other allies in this part of the world—Australia and Japan—offer a counter point in this regard: both have deep trading relationships with China, and yet their respective alliances with the United States is not visibly impacted. Meanwhile, China *is* a challenging factor for the four Southeast Asian countries in this analysis (Tow & Limaye, 2016). Additionally, China is a factor in the strategic thinking of these four countries because of the asymmetry of their capabilities vis-à-vis the rising regional power (China). In comparison, Australia and Japan as middle powers are better equipped to diversify their strategic options, while small powers like the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, and Vietnam may have more limited maneuverability.

Recent research highlights the prevalence of new forms of partnerships. Thomas Wilkins (2008) posits that strategic partnerships offer a new mode of state-to-state alignment. Similarly, Vidya Nadkarni (2010) assesses the role that strategic partnerships play in regional and global contexts. Equally important is David Envall and Ian Hall's (2016) work, which advances the argument that strategic partnerships are a new practice to enhance national and regional security and to promote economic objectives. In line with this, the point here is to trace not only the evolution of relationships from the strictest forms of alliances to the broader conceptualizations of partnerships, but also to highlight that this development is symptomatic of the hub-and-spokes model's ability to be nimble and responsive to changing times.

The U.S.-Philippine alliance was founded on the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty and has since been supplemented by the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement. The latter initiative provides for the United States to rotate forward-deployment forces in Philippine territory and for extensive access to Philippine military facilities. The Philippines' traditional pro-U.S. stance, however, has been challenged with the 2016 election of President Rodrigo Duterte whose external relations can be described as a turn to pragmatism, which is in line with the country's pursuit of an "independent foreign policy" (East Asia Forum, 2017). This is evidenced primarily by its downplaying of the Permanent Court of Arbitration's 2016 award in favor of the Philippines at China's expense.¹ Along the same lines, the Philippines announced in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in Laos in September 2016 that its navy would no longer join U.S. Navy patrols in the disputed areas in the South China Sea. Similarly, Duterte called for the withdrawal of U.S. forces supporting the Philippine Army's counter-terrorism missions in Mindanao. Most recently, calls for reviewing the Mutual Defense Treaty have been strong from various political quarters in the Philippines.

Accompanying this emerging trend of at least a partial pivot away from the United States is a pivot toward China. In December 2016 when China was reportedly installing weapons on disputed islands within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone, the Philippines expressed that it would not lodge any protests because, as former Foreign Secretary Perfecto Yasay, Jr put it, the Philippines was helpless to put a stop to China's militarization of the islands. This diplomatic shift away from the United States and toward China, however, was met with some resistance from the Department of National Defense and the Armed Forces of the Philippines. Instead of downgrading the alliance, Duterte decided to continue joint military exercises with the United States, but they were now more focused on nontraditional security contingencies like rapid response to natural calamities, humanitarian issues, and cyber-security (De Castro, 2018).

The Duterte government's desecuritization of the South China Sea issue has the potential for success, albeit relative and perhaps only for the short term (Baviera, 2017). This is because the Philippines' pivot to China differentiates the maritime issues from the broader economic relations of the two countries. Doing so allows the Philippines to achieve several goals, not least of which is that Filipino fisherfolk have been able to return to their normal fishing activities around Scarborough despite being under the watch of the Chinese Coast Guard. Chinese pledges of major fund infusions for Philippine infrastructure

development have appeared to reward the Philippines' strategy of diversifying its relations. As a result, China now sees the Philippines as a welcome partner in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Belt and Road Initiative. In August-September 2019, Duterte's most recent visit to Beijing resulted in several agreements to boost cooperation in areas like education, science and technology, customs and border security, trade, and infrastructure development. Ultimately, it is hoped in Manila that these can make China more open to signing an ASEAN Code of Conduct.

Despite the new orientation of Philippine foreign policy, U.S.-Philippine security relations continue mostly intact. In mid-2018, the two sides set up a new training activity codenamed *Sama-Sama* that continued many of the engagements that both sides carried out in the past, with the addition of air defense, search and rescue at sea, shore phase symposiums, and seminars on explosive ordnance disposal and anti-submarine and surface operations. The two countries have also organized a coordinated patrol in the Sulu Sea. In September 2018, Defense Secretary Lorenzana officially visited Washington for the Annual Mutual Defense Board-Security Engagement Board Meeting. During the meeting, the two countries agreed on 281 security cooperation activities for 2019, including counter-terrorism, maritime security, cyber-security, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief. These engagements indicate that the alliance remains intact at strategic and operational levels. U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's assurance during his Manila visit in March 2019 that any armed attack on the Philippines in the South China Sea will trigger treaty obligations demonstrates that the alliance is still very much alive and well.

Thailand and the United States have a longstanding alliance that spans a diverse range of areas such as public health, trade, science and technology, wildlife trafficking, education, cultural exchange, law enforcement, and security cooperation. However, the military coups in 2006 and 2014 complicated Thai-U.S. relations. At the center of the political crisis in 2006 was former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted by the country's political establishment composed of the military, royalists, senior bureaucrats, and the urban and middle class. While his policies were popular particularly with the rural poor, he was a divisive figure accused of corruption and human rights abuses (Chanlett-Avery, Dolven, & Mackey, 2018). The 2014 coup, meanwhile, installed then-Army Commander Prayuth Chan-o-cha as prime minister and head of the junta. While martial law was lifted in April 2015, the junta remained in power. Nevertheless, a new Thai constitution was approved in 2016, which mandates that political parties' powers are limited. Moreover, the new constitution allows the military to select and appoint members to the upper house, who will, alongside an elected lower house, then select the country's prime minister. Another cause for concern is that the United States is no longer Thailand's primary external economic partner (Parks, 2018). China has now become Thailand's largest trading partner, while Japan has become its largest source of foreign direct investment.

Hence, while it seems business-as-usual on some fronts, a recalibration of U.S.-Thai relations is needed to infuse renewed vigor into the alliance. One way to do this is to deepen existing areas of collaboration and widen their scope. Following the 2014 coup, the United States suspended military aid to Thailand, including U.S.\$3.5 million in foreign military financing and U.S.\$85,000 in international

military education and training (Chanlett-Avery et al., 2018). Despite this, non-military aid, humanitarian assistance, and the annual *Cobra Gold* military exercise continued. Cyber-security and maritime security have seen some progress and opportunities for Thailand to collaborate with Japan and India on security-related issues (Parameswaran, 2018). A second way of injecting new life into the U.S.-Thai alliance is for both allies to manage their respective domestic concerns. Attention needs to be given to the education of elites and populations regarding the significance of the alliance. This pertains not only to the potential role that Thailand can play in the United States' overarching Asia strategy, but also to people's everyday lives. Third, the U.S.-Thai alliance can definitely benefit from them mutually confronting regional and global concerns. Inevitably, both sides diverge in some areas, such as in regard to China. However, these divergences should not preclude the allies from collaborating in areas where they converge. For instance, both sides agree on the importance of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

While the United States has maintained formal alliances with the Philippines and Thailand, it has fostered a different kind of relationship with Singapore. To put this into context, Singapore's relationship with China must first be considered. China-Singapore relations have been stable since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1990. Singapore has always followed the "one China" policy. In 2018, Singaporean investors became the biggest group of asset buyers in China despite the latter's trade war with the U.S.-Singapore's property investments in China were at U.S.\$5 billion in 2018 or 42% of total spending by global capital in China (Ren, 2019). To mark twenty-five years of diplomatic relations, both sides signed the All-Round Cooperative Partnership Progressing with the Times in 2015.

The Sino-Singaporean relationship, however, took a plunge in 2016 (Bos, 2016; Tai, 2016). While Singapore is not a claimant in the South China Sea dispute, it recognizes that the rule of law is key to its survival. It has one of the biggest ports in the region and its prosperity hinges on its role as a free port in the Straits of Malacca. Hence, any dispute over the South China Sea and freedom of navigation translates to operational costs to Singapore. It is in this context that Singapore showed support for the arbitration ruling in favor of the Philippines and called for a more active role for ASEAN. This annoyed China, but even more so when in September, Singapore allegedly attempted to insert the ruling in the final document of the Non-Aligned Movement summit. In addition, Hong Kong customs impounded nine Singapore Armed Forces armored personnel carriers in transit from Taiwan in November (Straits Times, 2016).

Meanwhile, U.S.-Singapore relations have become closer with the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement in 2015, which upgrades the existing strategic partnership between the two (US Department of Defense, 2015). The broad framework for defense cooperation lies in five key areas, which include the military, policy, strategic, and technology spheres, as well as cooperation against nonconventional security challenges. The agreement also identified enhanced cooperation in the areas of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, cyber-defense, biosecurity, and public communications. Aside from these areas, the two sides also introduced new high-level dialogues between their respective defense establishments. These various commitments in different sectors of cooperation

translate to the rotational deployment of the U.S. Navy's P-8A Poseidon aircraft to Singapore, which is alarming for China because these can be used for maritime surveillance patrols over the South China Sea.

Singapore's overall security role in the region is therefore especially complex, and it is not a simple choice between the United States and China (Chong, 2017a, 2017b). Not only is the small city-state geographically located between much bigger neighbors (Malaysia and Indonesia), but Southeast Asia's experience in Indochina in 1975 and Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in 1978 solidified Singapore's inclination toward a more active American role as security guarantor of the region (Tai, 2016). At the same time, Singapore realizes that "it will need to maintain a careful balance to simultaneously develop a closer relationship with China" (Parameswaran, 2016).

While Singapore enjoys a strategic partnership with the United States, Vietnam has a comprehensive partnership with the Americans (July 2013). Vietnam-U.S. relations are equally unique, not least because of the Vietnam War in the 1960s–1970s. From a rather turbulent history, the two have now been able to forge strong trade linkages and security cooperation, thanks to a series of Vietnamese economic reforms called *Doi Moi* and the introduction of a market economy in Vietnam. The result of these reforms was an emphasis on a multi-directional Vietnamese foreign policy and a diversification of Hanoi's foreign relations (Lan, 2016). Another factor that plays a role in Vietnam's foreign policy is China's primacy in the region as articulated in its assertive behavior in the South China Sea (Albert, 2019).

To achieve the twin goals of Vietnam's foreign policy, that is, multi-directional and diversified, the country exercises a careful hedging and balancing act between China and the United States (Lan, 2016). This is the most prudent and sensible trajectory to pursue because it affords Vietnam a flexibility in dealing with both great powers. Likewise, Vietnam manages to grow its security contacts with the United States in a low-key manner, thus not unduly provoking China. Some examples of burgeoning security cooperation between the United States and Vietnam include enhanced exchanges between coast guards and the provision of patrol vessels. In 2018, the *USS Carl Vinson*, a U.S. Navy aircraft carrier, made a port call in Vietnam. Likewise, in 2018, Vietnam participated for the first time in the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercises. In short, closer security ties with the United States is a counter-balance against China's assertiveness (Albert, 2019).

The fact that the United States' bilateral relationships with Southeast Asian states evolve from alliances to partnerships is a positive indicator of the San Francisco System's growth and viability. Arguably, the strict definitions of alliances cannot be simply and easily superimposed onto today's geopolitical realities. Hence, the use of the broader conceptualization of "partnerships" indeed makes the United States' bilateral relationships in Southeast Asia better able to face the future. Indeed, applicatory contestation of the hub-and-spokes model strengthened it.

The Overarching Asia Strategy

While the United States' bilateral security relationships in Asia are arguably thriving, the same optimism is tempered in terms of its overall Asian policy approach, which today is encapsulated in the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP).

This posture first gained ground during U.S. President Donald Trump's inaugural five-country Asia tour in 2017 and was given more clarity during the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue. "Free" means freedom from coercion at the international level and the freedom to pursue good governance at the national level in terms of protecting and upholding fundamental rights, transparency, and anti-corruption. "Open" refers to sea lines of communication and airways, on the one hand, and infrastructure, trade, and investment, on the other. In short, the United States approach to the Indo-Pacific has at its core a focus on three areas: security, economics, and governance.

While the U.S. articulation of such an approach or strategy is welcome, several points need careful attention. First, in terms of security, the pursuit of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific rests on championing not only an interdependent and interconnected vision of the world, but also a rules-based international order. While not discounting that Southeast Asian states put a premium on the same goals and values, the FOIP presupposes strategic convergence among all the states in the region vis-à-vis the United States' own regional interests, which are commensurate with Trump's emphasis of an "America First" strategy emphasizing more allied burden-sharing. China's economic dynamism and influence, however, complicates the picture. The U.S. is one of the largest foreign investors in the Philippines, as well as the latter's third-largest trading partner with an estimate U.S.\$27 billion in goods and services traded in 2016 (US Department of State, 2018). The Philippines' pivot to China, however, entailed that bilateral trade reached U.S.\$50 billion in 2017. Exports to the United States are at U.S.\$974.36 million, with a share of 16.2% of the total exports in June 2018. However, China has become the biggest supplier of imported goods at 22.8% of total imports in June 2019 (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2019). Meanwhile, the United States' trade with Thailand totaled an estimated U.S.\$48.9 billion in 2017, while the trade volume of China and Thailand was at U.S.\$80.14 billion in 2018 (US Trade Representative, 2019b; PRC Ministry of Commerce, 2019). Singapore enjoyed around U.S.\$90 billion of trade on goods and services with the United States in 2018, but China is one of its top export destinations at U.S.\$50.3 billion. Goods and services trade between the United States and Vietnam, on the other hand, was an estimated U.S.\$58.2 billion in 2017 and China is likewise one of its top export destinations at U.S.\$39.9 billion (US Trade Representative, 2019a, 2019c).

Second, these deep economic linkages are arguably the impetus for the reframing of the FOIP from its original focus on security to the recalibrated incarnation involving the economic sphere. The updated version emphasizes that enhancing shared prosperity rests on creating partnerships, building momentum in energy, infrastructure, and digital economy, and tapping the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) to grow economic partnerships and strengthen people-to-people connections (US Department of State, 2018). An alternative explanation to the recalibration is that a security-focused initiative is seen as a way of containing China. However, the focus on economics likewise raises a question, specifically on how this component works relative to other initiatives in the region, specifically China's Belt and Road Initiative. Also, how can the strong encouragement for regionalization and the focus on individual sector-specific efforts be sustained in light of the U.S.'s protectionist tendencies? The United

States withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership complicates this problem even more acutely.

Finally, the conflation of the FOIP and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or “the Quad”) may only prove to be superficial. This comes on the heels of suggestions of shelving the Quad. U.S. Indo-Pacific Command’s Admiral Phil Davidson reportedly stated that the region’s reception to the Quad was lukewarm and that “there wasn’t an immediate potential” for it (Liang, 2019). While his remarks might well have been taken out of context or blown out of proportion, this is nonetheless symptomatic of the disconnect between the FOIP and its operationalization via the Quad. U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo’s recent statement explicitly linking the Quad to a China containment strategy is yet another indication of this disconnect, not least because this would not be welcome by the United States’ allies and partners in ASEAN (Marlow, 2019). The ambiguities surrounding the security-economic nexus compounded by nebulous intersection of the FOIP and the Quad diminish the potential impact of the U.S.’ current Asia strategy.

Norm Robustness

The argument set forth at the beginning of this article is that the San Francisco System is alive and well, albeit with a few contestations. Contestations *per se* are not detrimental to the sustainability and longevity of a norm. It is then important to differentiate between contestation in terms of how (and when) a norm is applied versus contestation in terms of its validity and acceptability. Current norm scholarship details the idea that applicatory contestation can strengthen a norm, while validity contestation can weaken it. In the case of the San Francisco System, the evolution from strict formulations of alliances to the more fluid arrangements of partnerships reflects applicatory contestation and demonstrates a positive development toward being better able to respond to contemporary challenges. However, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific, as the United States’ overarching Asia strategy, is saddled with some unfortunate ambiguities, thus putting into question the veracity of the U.S. role in Southeast Asia. As a validity contestation, this can potentially kill the hub-and-spokes model’s credibility in the region.

If such is the case, several other factors become apparent. First, if contestation were a scale with applicatory contestation at the lowest end and validity contestation at the highest, there is reason to believe that the “China factor” is the so-called tipping point that pushed the hub-and-spokes model to the brink of validity contestation. After all, the FOIP is a response to China’s growing assertiveness in the region. Second, while the San Francisco System—as a normative measure of interaction between the United States and Asian states—remains robust, neither the United States nor its Southeast Asian allies and partners should be complacent and hope that things will return to a state of equilibrium and bliss. While the norm remains alive, it does not show any indication of immortality either. A cause of concern is that the more that the hub-and-spokes model is challenged, the more that alternatives are needed—and nothing viable seems to be on the horizon, not even unilateralism (Tow, 2019). Third, what can prevent the total erosion of the hub-and-spokes model is the maintenance of the post-Second World War liberal order. This makes sense because “the only way a norm can

truly ‘die’ is if the entire social order of which it is a part vanishes” (Sandholtz, 2019, p. 145). Hence, a heavy burden is placed on the United States. As the proverbial Atlas, the future of the international liberal order depends on the United States holding the sky on its shoulders but the Trump administration’s “America First” approach to U.S. foreign policy would seem to point toward Washington disdaining the responsibility for now. The question thus remains to what extent the United States is willing and able to pick up the gauntlet when this particular administration leaves office.

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Note

¹The unanimous award was issued on July 12, 2016 under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). On the issue of historic rights and the nine-dash line, the Tribunal concluded that China’s historic rights to resources in the South China Sea were incompatible with the exclusive economic zones provided for in UNCLOS. Similarly, while China had historically made use of the islands in the South China Sea, it did not exercise exclusive control of either the waters or the resources therein. As such, the Tribunal found no legal basis for China’s nine-dash line. Other issues emphasized in the award included the status of features in the South China Sea, the lawfulness of Chinese actions, and harm caused to the marine environment. In its entirety, the award was significantly in favor of the Philippines, this despite China’s repeated statements that it would not accept or participate in the arbitration.

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