Contesting the Hub-and-Spokes Model in Southeast Asia

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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

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Concursando 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 norma 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, & Pisoiu, 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 "righteousness" (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.