

# ***Balancing Act: The Dual Role of Military Alliances in Contemporary International Relations***

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**Abstract:** This paper critically examines the dual role of military alliances in contemporary international relations, particularly focusing on their impact on global stability and regional cooperation. By analyzing historical and modern examples, including NATO and the interactions among the United States, China, and Russia, the study elucidates how military alliances have transitioned from Cold War security mechanisms to multifaceted entities confronting today's geopolitical complexities. It delves into the security dilemmas alliances face, their strategic contractions, and the unique challenges posed by China's ascendancy and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict. The paper underscores that while these alliances are pivotal in upholding global order, they also generate substantial obstacles to regional cooperation, especially in East Asia. This dichotomy is evident in the alliances' evolution, which reflects a shift from primarily defensive postures to roles that encompass economic and diplomatic dimensions, influencing regional dynamics and power balances. This paper demonstrates the various differences and contradictions between today's military alliances and regional cooperation, including contradictions in mechanisms, differences in concepts, overlaps in functions, and conflicts of practical interests. The findings advocate for a reassessment of military alliances, suggesting that future frameworks should foster trust and inclusivity, accommodating the diverse interests of regional actors to enhance cooperative security and stability.

**Keywords:** Military Alliances, Geopolitical Challenges, Regional Cooperation, Security Dilemma, East Asia

## **1. Introduction**

In the field of international relations, military alliances emerge as pivotal yet complex entities, shaping the geopolitical landscape. Their evolution and significance in today's world underscore a delicate balance between maintaining global stability and fostering regional cooperation. This paper seeks to unravel the intricate fabric of military alliances, beginning with a definition and exploration of their varying forms. The classical realist view, as articulated by Arnold Wolfers, emphasizes alliances as commitments for mutual military aid between sovereign states, contrasting them with looser cooperative agreements [1]. Complementing this view, Warren F. Kimball emphasizes the complexity of alliances beyond mere military cooperation [2]. In addition, written treaties and shared security objectives among alliance members are also important factors to consider [3]. This discussion

extends to contemporary examples, notably North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and probes into the quasi-alliance dynamics between China and Russia.

Further, the paper delves into the historical development and transformation of alliances, with NATO serving as a prime example. This exploration sheds light on the political and social implications of alliances in the international arena, highlighting their evolution from Cold War mechanisms to entities grappling with modern geopolitical challenges. Amidst the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine war and China's rise, the paper analyzes the new challenges faced by U.S.-led NATO. It examines the alliance security dilemma and strategic contraction obstacles, revealing the complexities inherent in alliance involvement in current global affairs.

Lastly, the paper argues that military alliances, particularly those led by the United States in East Asia, pose significant challenges to regional cooperation efforts, primarily those spearheaded by China. This contention opens a critical debate on the geopolitical nature of alliances and their impact on regional dynamics.

This introduction aims to set a comprehensive stage for the ensuing discussion, highlighting the multifaceted nature of military alliances and their pivotal role in the contemporary world's balance of power..

## 2. Historical Development of Military Alliances

The Encyclopedia Britannica defines an alliance as “a formal agreement between two or more states for mutual support in case of war”, such as the alliance of the United States and European countries against Germany and its allies in World War II, or NATO against the Soviet Union and its allies [4]. However, scholars typically equate alliances with military alliances. American scholar Arnold Wolfers contends, “An 'alliance' signifies commitments made between two or more sovereign states regarding mutual military assistance” [1]. This commitment, different from loose cooperative agreements, formally pledges a state to fight alongside other countries against a common enemy once a military agreement containing such a commitment is signed. Warren F. Kimball views an alliance as a formal military agreement between states, demanding a specific response and joint action to a particular political situation [2].

Many scholars also view alliances from a broader political perspective. Glenn H. Snyder posits that an 'alliance' is a political union formed under specific historical conditions by two or more countries to employ force against external threats [5]. Stephen Walt suggests that an 'alliance is a formal or informal arrangement between two or more sovereign states concerning security' [6]. Walter's view is somewhat similar to that of Robert E. Osgood, who defines an alliance as 'a formal agreement that assures states will use their military voluntarily together against a specific nation or nations, often under certain conditions, compelling one or more member states to consider or use force' [7].

“Alliances are not only about measures during wartime but also include arrangements in times of peace, characterized by their long-term nature” [2]. Most of the above definitions emphasize that alliances must have a formal written agreement as a main feature, which is recognized and protected by international law. Formal alliances take two forms: bilateral and multilateral. Bilateral alliances, such as the U.S.-Japan and U.S.-South Korea security treaties, and multilateral treaties, like NATO, all strictly adhere to the format of treaties, explicitly specifying the rights and obligations of the participating countries. For instance, Article 5 of NATO stipulates: “The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognized by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in

concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.” [8]

But in the practical world of international relations, there are numerous informal alliances that do not take the form of treaties, such as the relationships between the United States and Israel, and the United States and Taiwan. Although Taiwan is not even recognized as a sovereign country, the United States has sustained a political commitment to Taiwan, under the rubric of the Taiwan Relations Act, which was enacted in 1979 [9]. The United States provides what is referred to as “security guarantees” to these nations. In fact, these informal alliances are no less significant to the United States than formal alliances. Therefore, neorealist scholar Stephen M. Walt argues that an alliance is a formal or informal arrangement between two or more sovereign states in terms of security cooperation [6]. Walt considers informal security arrangements as a form of alliance, suggesting that formal treaties or agreements are not a necessary condition for establishing an alliance.

To illustrate the evolving nature of military alliances, let's consider the case of China and Russia. A common question is: can a partnership between China and Russia, which does not have a formal treaty or security guarantees but actually shares many common strategic interests, be regarded as an alliance? In the military field, "Since 1991, China and Russia have constructed comprehensive mechanisms of inter-military cooperation that have started to move into the initial stages of advanced cooperation" [10]. In the field of diplomatic cooperation, China and Russia are "converging perceptions of threats" [10]. In addition to the UNSC, in the period of 2006–2012, out of a total of 120 voting occasions, China was never on the same side with the USA. However, there was a 99% rate of agreement between China and Russia [11]. Russia and China also enhanced cooperation within multilateral formats, such as the SCO and BRICS. In fact, "it is particularly important to consider economic and diplomatic aspects of cooperation because China–Russia relations are often presented as being military-dominated and lacking other foundations" [10]. Today, as the Russia-Ukraine conflict continues, economically sanctioned Russia finds its economic ties with China growing increasingly tight. Although a formal treaty seems to be a distant prospect, under complex external factors, Russia and China are indeed moving closer to a substantive alliance. Therefore, theoretical and empirical assessments of alignments often move beyond narrowly defined security guarantees [10].

As perhaps the most successful existing military alliance, NATO's establishment originated from the bipolar confrontation of the Cold War era. However, its scale and function have now far exceeded what they were at the time of its initial formation, making it an excellent example for studying the development and transformation of alliances. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the international system transitioned from a bipolar structure to a unipolar one dominated by the United States. This shift led to a significant reevaluation of NATO's role, as the alliance's original purpose—the containment of Soviet aggression—was no longer relevant. Despite predictions by realist theorists like Kenneth Waltz that alliances formed during wartime would disintegrate after achieving victory, NATO not only persisted but expanded both in size and function [12]. The alliance underwent a strategic transformation, adapting to new security challenges in a post-Cold War world.

The rise of global terrorism, marked by events such as the September 11 attacks, redirected Western security strategy towards non-traditional threats, influencing NATO's reform process. On April 23, 1999, NATO adopted "The Alliance's Strategic Concept" at the Washington Summit, redefining its threats and objectives. This new strategy emphasized the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, and "failing states" (states that are unable to perform the two fundamental functions of the sovereign nation-state) as primary security concerns, shifting from traditional defense to a more comprehensive approach to global security [13]. Furthermore, this meeting also clarified NATO's new purpose and mission, highlighting that beyond traditional liberty and security, it aims

to establish a just and lasting peace order based on "shared values, human rights, and the rule of law" [13].

Under its new strategic concept, NATO expanded eastward four times, with North Macedonia joining in 2020, bringing the total number of member states to 30. The "NATO 2030: United for a New Era" report, published on November 25, 2020, aimed to strengthen internal unity, political consultation, and the alliance's political role amidst a resurgence of great power competition, marked by events like Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the US-Russia termination of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty in 2019 [14].

NATO's intervention in Kosovo in 1999 serves as a significant example of its successful operations, despite controversies surrounding the legality and morality of the intervention. NATO's actions successfully ended Serbian control over Kosovo and facilitated the return of many refugees [15]. The alliance's role in humanitarian interventions, such as those in Sierra Leone and East Timor, also demonstrated its ability to adapt to different conflict situations and promote stability [15].

A good perspective on NATO's success is: Liberal institutionalists posit that institutional binding helps states overcome the relative gains problem and eschew security competition. This theory suggests that weaker states can ensure their security by engaging stronger states in institutional arrangements rather than resorting to military balancing. Stronger states, in turn, might forgo immediate security gains for the long-term benefits and certainty that such binding offers, viewing it as a strategic investment for future security, particularly as power dynamics evolve [16]. The concept of binding encompasses various mechanisms, such as treaties, interlocking organizations, joint management responsibilities, and established standards and principles for relationships. These mechanisms are designed to increase the cost of withdrawing and provide platforms for dialogue, thereby offering ways to mitigate or resolve conflicts [16].

A prominent example often cited by liberals is precisely NATO: This alliance is seen as a successful case of institutional binding, where members adhere to a comprehensive system of practices influencing their defense policies. This system includes consensus-based political decision-making, joint military command structures, and cooperative military planning and exercises. These institutional ties reduce mistrust and fear among members, allowing them to transcend the traditional state of anarchy and uncertainty that has marked European relations historically [17].

NATO's evolution highlights the importance of military alliances in national and international security. These alliances have the potential to promote regional integration and create multidimensional communities in security, politics, and economics. As global dynamics evolve, alliances like NATO play a pivotal role in maintaining world peace and fostering regional cooperation. However, their future requires transcending traditional military and security roles, incorporating political and societal significance, and adapting to the broader context of international relations. This perspective is crucial in understanding the multifaceted functions of alliances in today's world.

### 3. Contemporary Challenges

Since its inception, NATO has witnessed significant development and progress. However, in the face of escalating international conflicts today, NATO confronts unprecedented challenges. These challenges stem from both direct external factors and internal alliance dilemmas, complicating NATO's role in the current geopolitical landscape.

Externally, NATO's continuous eastward expansion has exacerbated contradictions with Russia, culminating in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. This conflict challenges NATO's capability to respond to large-scale military conflicts, hinders Europe's development, drains resources, and has triggered a series of issues including an energy crisis. The war in Ukraine, initiated by Putin's decision in February 2022, has profoundly impacted not only Ukraine and Russia but Europe at large. Instead of

bolstering security, NATO's expansion has paradoxically made Europe the "world's most dangerous place," with major war returning to the continent [18].

Internally, the rise of China and its challenge to U.S. hegemony has induced an "alliance dilemma" within NATO. The alliance dilemma, a fundamental problem in military alliances, highlights the trade-offs in commitment-making amidst possible war. This dilemma involves balancing the risks of entrapment and abandonment, where a state providing military commitment might fear emboldening the ally's aggressive foreign policy, increasing the risk of undesirable war. Conversely, weakening military commitments could leave the receiving state fearful of abandonment by its allies [19]. Renowned scholars like Michael Mandelbaum and Glenn Snyder have articulated this dilemma, emphasizing the dual fear of entrapment and abandonment that constitutes the alliance security dilemma [5]. The United States faces the need to reallocate its forces from Europe to contain China while simultaneously fearing its entanglement in an escalated Russia-Ukraine conflict. European NATO members, directly facing Russian challenges, worry about the U.S. withdrawing its commitment to Eastern Europe. Furthermore, they need to maintain trade relations with China, hindering the U.S.'s attempts to blockade Chinese trade policies. This situation has led to a decline in trust between the U.S. and its European allies, impacting NATO's short-term military interests and long-term stability.

The Biden administration's National Security Strategy Report of October 12, 2022, reiterates "China is the only competitor with both the intention to reshape the international order and increasingly powerful economic, diplomatic, military, and technological capabilities", accelerating the U.S.'s strategic withdrawal on a global level [20]. This divergence from rational choice expectations, particularly in U.S. policy towards Russia, could potentially solidify Sino-Russian strategic cooperation, making the challenges NATO faces in the future more difficult to predict.

With the escalation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the strategic competition between the U.S. and China, NATO finds itself in a precarious position. The alliance must navigate these multifaceted challenges while maintaining cohesion and effectiveness, a task that remains critical in the ever-evolving landscape of international relations.

## **4. Impact on Regional Cooperation**

### **4.1. The Impact of Military Alliances on Regional Conflicts and Cooperation**

Military alliances also have the other side: Although they help to strengthen internal cohesion, they often exacerbate conflicts with enemies. This is demonstrated by NATO's friction with Russia and the tensions between the United States and its allies with China. Such alliances can exacerbate contradictions and hinder cooperation, essential for maintaining global peace and order. The direct geopolitical conflict between NATO and Russia, and the U.S. military alliances in East Asia, significantly impede regional integration efforts.

Military alliances and regional cooperation both originate from common interests. However, military alliances often emphasize immediate and practical security benefits, characterized by military cooperation. In contrast, regional cooperation considers both current and future medium-to-long-term interests, characterized by comprehensive cooperation. It is clear that not only the content of common interests differs between the two, but also the nature of these interests. Seeking common security against imminent threats represents a passive common interest, while striving for joint regional development for long-term benefits represents an active common interest.

### **4.2. The Distinct Mechanisms of Military Alliances and Regional Cooperation**

Military alliances and regional cooperation both aim to achieve their objectives and bind interests through specific mechanisms. The operation of military alliances requires a series of mechanisms,

which, given their involvement with significant national interests, exhibit strong rigidity, characterized by exclusivity, and coerciveness, focusing on forcefully setting rules for regions of interest to the alliance members. On the other hand, regional cooperation also requires a series of mechanisms, including the establishment of free trade areas, customs unions, and common markets through treaties and agreements. Since regional cooperation encompasses various fields like economy, society, culture, and security, and mainly occurs in peaceful and stable periods, these treaties, agreements, and organizations are relatively flexible, characterized by cooperativeness, openness, and voluntariness, focusing on setting rules for participant regions based on cooperation, openness, and voluntariness.

Furthermore, both military alliances and regional cooperation provide a public good—security—through their mechanisms. However, the security provided by military alliances is targeted at the member states, whereas regional cooperation offers security benefits to all members within the region, with the latter's security consumers being open to the region. On one hand, military alliances have a significant shaping effect on regional cooperation, facilitating regional integration among alliance members. As demonstrated by NATO and European integration: "Overall, the EU appears as a 'consumer' rather than a 'producer' of national security. Security issues are generally resolved first, followed by economic integration. The emergence and subsequent expansion of the EU were possible only after geopolitical issues, such as Germany's division, NATO's creation, and Germany's recognition, were resolved through 'once-and-for-all' agreements, allowing subsequent waves of economic multilateral integration" [21]. Thus, NATO provided the security product that ensured the smooth progress of European integration.

It is noteworthy that NATO and European regional cooperation are cited as examples of military alliances promoting regional integration. However, when countries within a specific region form alliances with non-regional countries, and the non-regional countries hold a dominant position in the military alliance, the different impacts of the alliance structure on regional cooperation become apparent. The reason is that regional member states in a bilateral-asymmetric structure depend more on the non-local dominant ally, and the stronger this dependence within the alliance framework, the less freedom they have in policy choices. Conversely, member states in a multilateral-asymmetric alliance structure can leverage their number and scale advantages to reduce dependence on the dominant ally, increasing their policy freedom and thereby promoting regional cooperation and community building. From an ideological perspective, military alliances emphasize differences in ideology, while regional cooperation emphasizes inclusiveness. The concept stressed in regional cooperation is a sense of belonging or identity with a specific geographical space, an inclusive process encompassing the region.

### 4.3. Case Study: East Asian Regional Dynamics

When discussing factors hindering East Asian regional cooperation, people often mention the diversity of East Asian cultures and ideologies. However, this diversity is largely due to East Asian countries being historically entangled in different military alliances. For example, the signing of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in 1902 positioned Japan as a pole of the global order under British dominance, which not only demonstrates the success of the national policy of leaving Asia for Europe but also paved the way for Japan's comprehensive aggression against China and Korea [22]. After World War II, East Asia once again became a frontline of ideological confrontation, with Japan and South Korea from the free world and China and North Korea from the socialist camp cutting off interactions, proving that politics and military might once again override the commonalities implied by history and culture. This situation became even more complex after the Sino-Soviet split, continuing to impede East Asian regional cooperation today. Currently, with the operation of the U.S.-led East Asian military alliance system, the emphasis on shared values like freedom, democracy,

human rights, the rule of law, and market economy among alliance members is intensifying. The emphasis on ideology in military alliances leads to a focus on differences, making the alliances more exclusive and significantly undermining the conceptual advantages of East Asian regional cooperation construction.

Asia-Pacific regionalism believes that "alliances are incompatible with regionalism. The continued existence of alliances is perceived by China and North Korea as a threat, and they should be removed. The argument against alliances has been frequently revisited over the past decade. From a theoretical perspective, alliances are based on deterrence, which leads to a tendency for counter-deterrence, thus necessitating the demand for weapons and fueling arms races, perpetuating the very problems alliances seek to solve. From a practical standpoint, alliances have become tools for the U.S. to contain China and escalate regional tensions. However, the conclusion is, 'Ultimately, Asian regionalism can only survive and succeed by accepting external alliances rather than challenging them'" [23]. Despite the notion that military alliances hinder East Asian regional cooperation, in the face of enduring and strong military alliance realities, proponents of military alliances still promote the logic that military alliances provide security products for both the alliance participants and the entire region. In summary, although interdependence affects national preferences and policy choices, and economic interdependence is promoting the ideal of regional integration in East Asia, due to the presence of military alliances, East Asian security interdependence remains at a low level, characterized by fragmented or even antagonistic dependencies. The reality of East Asian regional cooperation encountering military alliance bottlenecks also highlights the question future regional cooperation proponents must answer: How can people living in an environment where regional cooperation and military alliances coexist resolve the contradictions and conflicts brought by these two elements? Perhaps the contradictory and conflicting nature of military alliances and regional cooperation just presents this challenge: how to transition alliances from providing security to fostering trust, as a means to address the dilemmas posed by modern institutional mechanisms.

In sum, the intricate landscape of military alliances, exemplified by NATO and U.S.-led alliances in East Asia, reveals a complex interplay between enhancing internal cohesion and exacerbating external conflicts. While alliances like NATO have evolved to address modern geopolitical challenges, they also present barriers to regional integration, particularly in the face of rising powers like China and Russia. The dichotomy between the security-focused nature of alliances and the broader, long-term goals of regional cooperation underscores a pivotal tension in contemporary international relations. As the global landscape shifts, with increasing strategic competition and conflicts like the Russia-Ukraine war, the role and impact of military alliances become ever more nuanced and consequential.

The future of these alliances lies in balancing their traditional security objectives with the need for fostering trust and cooperative engagement, both within and beyond their regional spheres. The evolution of NATO and the dynamics in East Asia suggest a pressing need to reassess the mechanisms of alliances, aiming for more inclusive and flexible structures that accommodate the diverse interests of all regional actors. This shift is crucial for a more harmonious global order, where military alliances and regional cooperation can coexist, complementing each other in promoting peace, stability, and development.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has meticulously explored the dual role of military alliances in contemporary international relations, elucidating their significant impact on global stability and regional cooperation. Through an in-depth analysis of historical and current examples, particularly NATO and the dynamic interactions involving major powers like the United States, China, and Russia, the research has

demonstrated the evolution of military alliances from Cold War-era constructs to multifaceted entities addressing today's complex geopolitical challenges.

It has been observed that while military alliances are crucial for maintaining global order, they simultaneously pose considerable challenges to regional cooperation, especially in regions like East Asia. The inherent tension between the security imperatives of these alliances and the broader goals of regional cooperation highlights a critical area of contention in international relations.

One notable limitation of this study is the insufficient exploration of the internal dynamics within military alliances, particularly the varied interests and perspectives of member states, which can significantly influence the alliances' policies and actions. Future research should delve deeper into these internal dynamics to provide a more nuanced understanding of how alliances operate and impact global and regional politics.

Further, in addition to the examples of East Asia discussed in this paper, other regions that have been long influenced by military alliances, such as the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, likely have different historical and current factors. These factors could result in the relationship between military alliances and regional cooperation manifesting different dynamics. Some quantitative data, such as the rate of conflict occurrence, the formation of alliances, or statistical analysis of economic impacts, will provide a more comprehensive and objective understanding of the influence of alliances.

In conclusion, as the international landscape continues to evolve, so too must our understanding of military alliances. Their role, while historically rooted in security and defense, must adapt to the changing contours of global politics, where fostering trust and promoting inclusive cooperation become paramount. By reevaluating and potentially redefining the mechanisms of military alliances, the international community can better navigate the intricate interplay between global stability and regional harmony, paving the way for a more peaceful and cooperative world order.

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