

Military Alliances of the Great Powers

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For centuries, military alliances have remained the fundamental factor of statecraft and international relations (Bergsmann, 2001). The rise of collective security in the face of the larger powers in ancient Greece formed the bedrock of military alliances and security pacts. The earliest documented examples of formal military alliances are those of Sparta against Athenian military might during the Peloponnesian Wars (Wassermann, 1947). However, the majority of historical military alliances were defensive in nature: they were formed to deter a common enemy with greater military might in order to ensure one's own survival.

In the post-Westphalian era, kingdoms evolved into independent nation-states. Consequently, the new security architecture became state-centric, and the formation of well-structured, treaty-based military alliances became the norm (Bell and Nehrbass, 2022). The 19th- and 20th-century alliances, such as the Triple Alliances, Axis Powers, and Allied Powers paved the way for more powerful and effective post-World War II military alliances, like NATO and the Warsaw Pact. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), comprising 42 countries, was established

to invade Afghanistan after 9/11. Later, multiple smaller alliances were crafted to invade Iraq, Syria, etc. The ongoing Hamas-Israel conflict in Palestine also has multiple countries supporting one of the sides. Economic, military, and technological sanctions are also seen as a collective punitive approach and a means to attain strategic ends through coercion.

The study of military alliances has remained a fundamental part of IR scholarship. Scholars debate the nature, importance, and geopolitical and geoeconomic impact of formal military alliances on great-power contestation.

SIGNIFICANCE, ROLE, COSTS AND BENEFITS OF MILITARY ALLIANCES

Alliances have remained central to power politics; they play a crucial part in maintaining peace and security (Johnson, 2015). They act as a deterrence and disincentivize war. However, alliances were and are also forged to meet shared military-political ends by waging war against adversarial powers. States join military alliances for diverse objectives. Stronger states, like the United States, often make military alliances part of their strategy of “forward defense” (Pilster, 2023). Smaller states often join military alliances to augment their defensive capabilities and gain economic benefits.

Notwithstanding their advantages for collective security and deterrence against potential aggressors, military alliances also come with attendant consequences. Free riding, entrapment, and abandonment are three major costs that the alliances often entail. Free riding remained a central theme during Trump’s presidency. He often blamed allies for falling short with regards to the expected burden sharing. As Trump is campaigning for a second term in the White House, debates are high about NATO’s survivability (Pifer, 2024).

THE IMPACT OF NATO AND THE WARSAW PACT

Two geostrategic events vividly mark a decrease and increase in military alliances’ efficacy. The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 was seen as

reducing the utility of military alliance among nations, as the threat spectrum shifted from inter-state wars to intra-state conflicts. However, the Russia-Ukraine conflict has revitalized the debate about the costs and benefits of military alliances. The echoes of Cold War 2.0 have made military alliances in vogue again. However, these alliances are and shall be visibly buttressed by economic alliances.

Military alliances significantly shape geopolitics and bring increased tensions between rival blocs or states in their wake. The most aptly documented military alliances were those effective during the two world wars: the Triple Entente, Allied Powers, and Axis Powers. The Cold War also resulted in the formation of two opposing military alliances: NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Both exemplified the division of the world into two opposing camps fighting for global supremacy. The positive aspect of the Cold War was the continuous engagement between Moscow and Washington to control escalation, especially with respect to nuclear weapons.

The end of the Cold War witnessed the end of the Warsaw Pact. Prominent IR scholars like John Mearsheimer envisaged the end of NATO as well. But fast-forward to 2024, NATO not only continues to exist but is expanding beyond its original scope. This engenders a security dilemma for non-NATO states (Chotiner, 2022). Such a provocative scenario induces a strategic imbalance that could lead to an arms race. It could also result in pre-emptive military maneuvers by states that may apprehend offensive activity, like the Russian attack on Ukraine.

CONTEMPORARY ENVIRONMENT AND MILITARY ALLIANCES

The conflict in Ukraine has ushered in a return of power politics. IR scholarship remains divided over the causes of this conflict. Russia may claim it was an act of proactive and pre-emptive self-defense against NATO's expansion to its borders. Ukraine, the U.S., and allies portray it as an aggressive move to occupy the Ukrainian territory. However, John Mearsheimer has debunked this myth, calling NATO's expansion the root cause of the Russo-Ukraine conflict (Chotiner, 2022). The most important consequence of this confrontation has been the multiple

default advantages for the U.S. and allies. NATO and the EU have been rejuvenated. The conflict has provided new life to NATO after it hit a low during Trump's presidency. It has resulted in added intra-alliance cohesion and renewed commitments under Article 5 of NATO's collective defense architecture (Jenkins, 2022). This commitment has been accompanied by increased defense budgets among the NATO partners. The U.S. has urged NATO members to spend 2 percent of their GDP on defense (NATO, 2024).

The military industrial complex in the world, and in the United States in particular, is thriving. The confrontation economy has attained strange dimensions. The Nord Stream 1 pipeline has been damaged, and Nord Stream 2 has not been allowed to commence its gas supply, allowing the U.S. to replace Russia as the largest gas supplier to the EU. Despite combat, Russian gas flows through Ukraine and Kiev collects royalties. The food and grain supply from Russia and Ukraine are not much affected. U.S. sanctions on Russia are blatantly abrogated by many countries, indicating receding U.S. coercive power. The U.S. sanctions on Russia, Iran, and North Korea have not been able to facilitate the desired outcomes.

Furthermore, the Russia-Ukraine conflict has provided NATO with the rationale to portray Russia as an aggressor and persuade neutral states like Sweden and Finland to join the alliance. Despite the growing alarm over NATO's expansion and its latent negative consequences for global stability and an amplified security dilemma for Russia, the alliance is broaching the idea of expanding to Asia to counter China (Anchal, 2023). NATO has already enhanced its support to Ukraine by providing military aid, despite the fact that the country is not part of NATO. Additionally, the U.S. maintains security partnerships like QUAD (the U.S, Australia, India, and Japan), Squad, I2U2, and AUKUS to further expand its military footprint in Asia, specifically in the Asia-Pacific region (Zarrar and Gichki, 2022).

Under AUKUS, Australia is getting nuclear submarines to counter China's growing influence in the region. This has sparked fears of direct confrontation. It will also result in disturbing the balance of power in

the Asia-Pacific region. This development was not welcome by France as it had derailed the agreed-upon sale of French nuclear submarines to Australia.

Russia also maintains a security arrangement known as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). CSTO members continue to support Russia, but the arrangement remains weak due to internal challenges. The CSTO's cautious response to Nagorno-Karabakh also highlighted its internal complexities and limitations.

Aside from formal military alliances, Russia is part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS. Although these are economic alliances, they help enhance Russia's diplomatic leverage, augment its stature, and help it attain its geopolitical and geoeconomic interests. Russia can also leverage these to circumvent U.S. sanctions and efforts to isolate it.

The U.S.-China competition has pushed the world back into a Cold War-like situation that revolves around bloc politics. While most of the smaller states are hedging in joining one bloc or the other, the major powers like the U.S. continue to induce them by offering security guarantees through formal military alliances, economic help, diplomatic pressures, coercion through sanctions, etc. Several states like India are accruing unprecedented military and economic advantages by aligning with the U.S. in its bid to counter the rise of China, which is seen as a challenger to the U.S.'s global status as a predominant power. Contrarily, Beijing has opted for economic cooperation as a means to enhance its influence.

CHINA AND FORMAL MILITARY ALLIANCES

China remains on the opposite side of the military alliances' spectrum. It does not maintain any formal military alliances and is not part of any. China's aversion to forging formal military alliances is rooted in the country's historical experience, strategic culture, and aspirations woven around trade, connectivity, and mutually beneficial economic cooperation (Resnick and Sworn, 2023). China sees the Western military

alliances as tools of intervention and an effort to cement strategic control (Chen, 2024).

From a strategic perspective, any formal military alliance with other states would put binding commitments of collective defense/offense on China, thereby limiting its freedom of action. It could also entrap it in unwanted global conflicts, which may not serve China's national interests or aspirations (Resnick and Sworn, 2023).

The recently celebrated 70th Anniversary of China's Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence also delineates China's strategic culture of avoiding military confrontation and engaging through dialogue and diplomacy (CGTN, 2024). Projects like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) testify to the Chinese vision of engagement based on shared socio-economic development, which they commonly refer to as win-win cooperation.

China prefers less stringent partnerships and strategic engagements, which allows it to maneuver in the foreign policy landscape without constraints (Zhou Bo, 2016). This approach also affords China greater flexibility and wider domains to engage with partner countries, adapting to the dynamic global geopolitical environment. By avoiding formal military alliances, China can project itself as a benign great power.

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While global geopolitics has undergone a massive transformation since the end of the Cold War, the importance of formal military alliances remains central to the U.S. and its allies. NATO's expansion and strengthening and the formation of AUKUS, I2U2, QUAD, Squad, etc. manifest unchanged geopolitical thinking and strategy. Contrarily, BRICS, the BRI, and the SCO underscore broader engagement preferences of Russia, China, and 150-plus BRI partner countries.

Russia and China are gradually growing closer due to the commonality of interests. While both are unanimous in their view of the unilateralist and coercive American approach, they have avoided entering into a military alliance.

Engagements based on economic cooperation remain the mainstay of Chinese foreign policy. They portray China as a promoter of willing cooperation knit around socio-economic development. This approach also challenges the logic, efficacy, and benefits of military alliances that have caused devastation through wars.

The fact, however, remains that the world continues to be driven by three famous elements of Realism: “self-help, statism, and survival” (Rosenboim, 2022).

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