

Changing Alliance Structures

Executive summary

Alliance structures in the world's key strategic regions are changing. One feature notable in many regions is a shift towards *minilateralism*: small international groups assembled to achieve limited if significant strategic objectives, as opposed to broader, larger or more formal bilateral or multilateral alliances or institutions.

A major driver of this trend is the increasing assertiveness of 'challenger states' such as China, Iran, Russia and Turkey, whose strategic behaviour is insufficiently deterred or contained by existing larger alliance or security relationships, prompting the perception that increased strategic agility is required, perhaps through 'special purpose strategic vehicles'.

This IISS report seeks to provide an overview of the history of and current outlook for the US-led order and alliance system; to explore Chinese and Russian perspectives on strategic partnerships and alliances; to examine key trendlines, both globally and especially in three vital strategic regions – the Asia-Pacific, Middle East and Europe; and to consider possible implications of these developments for the security policies of leading European states.

Under the administration of President Joe Biden, the US is consciously engaged in an exercise to reconfigure, adapt and augment the security architecture it constructed following the Second World War, and which helped it triumph during the Cold War, in order to prepare for a new competition – and potentially confrontation or conflict – with another emerging superpower. While China has historically largely disdained formal alliances, and its president Xi Jinping, has warned the US against its current efforts to 'form small circles', Beijing has created a significant number of strategic partnerships and is perhaps also in the process of creating its own international 'Community of Common Destiny', which it presents as an alternative to the US-led order and is intended to protect Chinese interests as a 'non-aligned alliance'. While Russia cannot construct a plausible alternative order to that led by the US, it maintains a notable ability to act as a 'spoiler' and to disrupt Western ambitions. Moreover, a nascent partnership between Beijing and Moscow could develop into a relationship of significant strategic consequence.

Some states in the Asia-Pacific, and occasionally in Europe, share Washington's strategic concerns about China, or wish to demonstrate their continued usefulness to the US, and have either already joined or are likely to join new coalitions with the US – or with other 'like-minded' partners – to safeguard their interests and balance Beijing. Others, seeking strategic autonomy but aware of their limited resources and possibly concerned by regional 'challenger states', may form other small groupings, which do not include the US, to advance their own interests. This has been especially notable in the Middle East, but may become more so in Europe and perhaps elsewhere as well. When large institutions are too hard to manage, and strategic autonomy too difficult to achieve, minilateralism becomes, for some, a new default option. Although minilaterals entail some obvious diplomatic disadvantages, in the current international environment they can hit a strategic sweet spot. While formal alliances persist, are in many dimensions irreplaceable and will remain of vital importance, the geo-economic and security partnerships that are currently being formed at an extraordinary diplomatic tempo are likely to continue to make the 'strategic weather' for some time to come.

NATO will remain Europe's core alliance and an indispensable component of leading European states' security, but neither it nor the European Union can fulfil all their needs in the approaching world order. The current trend towards security minilateralism presents France, Germany and the United Kingdom with both challenges and opportunities. If the three leading European capitals

were able to cooperate more in minilateral formats, both with each other as well as in combination with other European partners eager to fill existing security gaps, or those which may soon emerge either in Europe or elsewhere due to US rebalancing towards Asia, it could go some way towards preserving European (and national) interests in the face of larger global trends. With minilateralism increasingly legitimised as a strategic option, Germany's new government may wish to develop minilateral approaches to advance its own specific interests.

Managed carefully, minilateralism can enhance the security of European states. It will not, however, serve as a panacea for an ongoing deficit of serious strategic thought in Berlin, London and Paris. In a world dominated by larger, more capable and generally more ruthless powers, prolonged European strategic delusions are likely to produce strategic calamity.

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