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Coalition-building and the politics of hegemonic ordering in the Indo-Pacific

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ABSTRACT

US–China great power competition in the Indo-Pacific is intensifying, with important consequences for the conceptualisation of regional order. However, many debates remain largely wedded to binary analysis, failing to capture the complexity and fluidity of an evolving Indo-Pacific order. This Special Issue posits instead that the US and China are seeking to establish coalitional hegemonies through the competition for power, position and influence across multiple and often overlapping legitimating constituencies in the Indo-Pacific. It is driven by four research questions: (1) How are the US and China engaging in coalition-building in the Indo-Pacific; (2) What is the scale and evolution of these coalition-building projects; (3) How have regional middle powers responded to American and Chinese coalition-building efforts; and (4) What are the implications for regional alignments in the Indo-Pacific? By investigating the nature, extent and effects of US and China’s coalition-building in the Indo-Pacific, this Special Issue yields important conceptual and empirical insights into the politics, processes and practices of regional hegemonic (re)ordering in the Indo-Pacific.

KEYWORDS

Coalitional hegemony; United States; China; middle powers; coalition building

Introduction

The Indo-Pacific regional order is evolving in complex ways. China is increasingly confident and proactive in challenging US hegemony and reshaping the regional order in line with Chinese values, preferences and interests. Recognising its flawed engagement strategy to fully socialise Beijing into the US-led regional order, Washington has in recent years pursued foreign policy measures explicitly aimed at countering China’s growing power and influence. Strategic competition now characterises what is arguably the world’s most consequentialist dyad, even as both countries largely recognise the need to responsibly manage their great power relationship. Amidst this, regional states continue to hedge, growingly vocal about not wanting to choose or be tied to exclusive American or Chinese spheres of influence. The evolving regional landscape is thus characterised by dynamism and complexity.

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Recent works have examined these evolving strategic dynamics and key regional powers' perspectives on order transition in the Indo-Pacific (*International Affairs* 2020 Special Issue; *The Pacific Review* 2023 Special Issue). This Special Issue seeks to engage and extend these important works by foregrounding the politics of hegemonic (re)ordering in the Indo-Pacific and focusing on two key concepts: coalition-building and coalitional hegemony. Coalition-building is conceptualised in this Special Issue as an overarching concept encompassing the wide range of, and interaction between, bilateral, minilateral and multilateral arrangements and is viewed as the means through which competing great powers seek to establish coalitional hegemonies. Drawing on Clark's (2011) seminal work, a coalitional hegemony can be conceived as a partial hegemony endorsed by a select legitimating constituency. Importantly, this Special Issue seeks to draw out the fluid nature of these legitimating audiences and examine how this is playing out across different domains. We argue that the US and China are seeking to establish coalitional hegemonies through the competition for power, position and influence across multiple and often overlapping legitimating constituencies in the Indo-Pacific. We posit that this captures the varying degrees of regional receptivity to Washington and Beijing's great power aspirations and the intensifying politics of regional hegemonic (re)ordering.

US coalition-building efforts have included the signing of a series of bilateral strategic partnerships with Singapore, Vietnam and other Indo-Pacific countries as well as the formation of US-led minilaterals that have emerged in direct response to China's growing power and assertiveness in the region. For example, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) summit, with Australia, India, Japan and the US, and AUKUS, a trilateral security partnership between the US, the United Kingdom, and Australia announced in September 2021, are exclusive in their membership and results-driven in their approach, arguably openly targeting China in an attempt to constrain its rising regional influence especially in the maritime domain. Beyond the security sphere, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) is a US-led initiative to enhance regional economic cooperation that covers 14 countries but excludes China.

While China has also been engaging in coalition-building over the years, arguably far less systematic attention has been paid to these efforts. Although Beijing does not have – nor does it necessarily want to have – the type of longstanding alliances that underpin US hegemony, it is increasingly confident in its statecraft, demonstrating greater assertiveness in its foreign policy and pursuit for centrality in regional affairs. Under Xi Jinping, China has focused on enlarging its 'circle of friends' and is actively seeking to extend and enhance its influence and legitimacy through various partnerships and initiatives (Liu and Feng 2017; Liu and Feng 2017; Ng 2023).

In rhetoric, Beijing opposes cliques and club politics. Hua (2021), China's foreign ministry spokesperson, has remarked that China opposes 'the practice of ideologizing multilateralism to form value-based allies targeting specific countries.' In reality, however, Beijing is expanding its influence and shoring up its legitimacy to provide diplomatic cover against perceived US-led encirclement. China's non-alliance strategy is now actively debated in the Chinese academic and policy communities in favour of coalitional influence-building arrangements (Han and Papa 2020; Liu and Feng 2017). These include Beijing's numerous strategic partnerships, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and other economic enticements grounded in discourses of justice, inclusiveness, mutual respect and win-win cooperation.

These developments warrant a more critical investigation into how the US and China's coalition-building endeavours are reshaping regional hegemonic ordering in the Indo-Pacific. This Special Issue therefore seeks to examine the *nature, extent and effects* of American and Chinese coalitional hegemonies in the Indo-Pacific by analysing their coalition-building endeavours and assessing the implications for regional ordering processes. To that end, the Special Issue is driven by the following four research questions:

- How are the US and China engaging in coalition-building in the Indo-Pacific?
- What is the scale and evolution of these coalition-building projects?
- How have regional middle powers responded to US and China's coalition-building efforts?
- What are the implications for regional alignments in the Indo-Pacific?

These four questions correspond to three key objectives of the Special Issue. The first objective is to systematically unpack the nature of American and Chinese coalition-building in the Indo-Pacific. Linked to the first research question, this Special Issue therefore seeks to investigate US-led and Chinese-led coalition-building across various domains that include security, economics, development infrastructure and technology.

The second objective is to uncover the extent of American and Chinese coalitional hegemonies. Tied to the second research question, the Special Issue charts the scale and evolution of coalition-building in the Indo-Pacific by examining how these efforts have been established and sustained over time. This will reveal the areas of overlap or competition across US-led and Chinese-led coalitions, as well as regional states' alignments vis-à-vis Washington and Beijing.

Associated with the third and fourth research questions, the third objective is to examine the effects of coalition-building. The Special Issue assesses the successes and failures of Washington and Beijing's coalitional hegemonies, and the effects this has had on power, legitimacy and trust. It examines the extent to which regional middle powers buy into such US-led and Chinese-led efforts and therefore the amount of regional endorsement or resistance that both great powers receive. This holds important implications for how regional (re)ordering will unfold in the future. Middle powers are traditionally classified quantitatively (ranking of material resources) as well as qualitatively (identity and state behaviour). This Special Issue focuses on the foreign policy behaviour of Australia, Indonesia, South Korea and Vietnam and their responses to rising US-China rivalry and their positioning within US-led and Chinese-led coalitions. Special attention is given to their respective level of agency and room for manoeuvre within such coalitions.

As mentioned above, both the US and China are seeking to establish coalitional hegemonies and to integrate regional middle powers within their initiatives. We should not, however, assume that Washington and Beijing are drawing on an identical toolkit to cultivate their coalitional base. We follow Mastanduno's (2019, 482) distinction of 'hegemonic orders – patterns of relations among states that reflect the interests and values of the dominant states that create and maintain them – from hegemonic strategies, which are essentially foreign policies crafted to create, sustain, and possibly enlarge hegemonic

orders regionally or globally.’ The Special Issue therefore seeks to investigate the key features of their coalitional hegemonic orders and the strategies employed.

By investigating the nature, extent and effects of US and China’s coalition-building in the Indo-Pacific, this Special Issue yields important conceptual and empirical insights into the politics, processes and practices of regional hegemonic (re)ordering in the Indo-Pacific. The contributions are broadly twofold:

At a conceptual level, the Special Issue advances understandings of hierarchy and hegemony as relational, multidimensional and dynamic. This allows us to better comprehend how power and influence are projected, received and negotiated. It shifts the attention from a sole focus on the great powers to also recognise the level of agency and room for manoeuvre of middle powers, offering a more complex reading of legitimating audiences as well as the variation in state responses across different issue areas. It demonstrates how coalition-building and coalitional hegemony are useful concepts to better interpret ongoing regional dynamics beyond binary conceptualisations of ‘US vs. Chinese spheres of influence’. By bringing together bodies of work on alignments, networks and hierarchies, the Special Issue engages with and contributes to broader debates on great power influence and the reshaping of hegemonic orders (MacDonald 2017; Nicholls 2019).

At the empirical level, the Special Issue maps out what the US and China as well as a series of middle powers are doing, how they are doing it, and with what effects. It therefore provides a systematic analysis on the nature and evolution of US and Chinese coalition-building practices and how regional states are responding to these arrangements. This will allow for broader comparisons across US-led and Chinese-led coalitions, as well as analyses on shifting regional alignments in the Indo-Pacific. This holds particular importance for conceptualising hybridity as a central element of the Indo-Pacific regional order (Clark 2011; Foot and Goh 2019).

Coalitional hegemonies in the Indo-Pacific

The on-going academic debates about hegemony and the types of power and influence in foreign policy have been translated into a vast body of works. Theoretical perspectives on hegemony that prioritise the role of material power demonstrate how a hegemon uses its power to directly and sometimes aggressively dominate weaker states. It prevails over others as a result of its superior capability, its willingness to exercise its predominant power, and the relative military weakness of other states (Shambaugh 1997). In contrast, other theoretical perspectives focus on the normative and social aspects of hegemony. They assume that hegemons can offer international public goods and help resolve collective action problems (Keohane and Martin 1995). Such perspectives on what a hegemon is supposed to do and how it is expected to behave are associated with legitimacy, persuasion, accommodation and responsibility. The provision of public goods can include a stable strategic environment, the freedom of navigation and sustainable economic development. A hegemon is also expected to help resolve collective action problems and promote institution building. Finally, the recognition of hegemony by others also depends on that particular state possessing the necessary material (economy, population, territory) and normative attributes (legitimacy, confidence, reputation).

Hegemony is understood in this Special Issue as underpinned by material, social and normative forces. It is ‘a condition of preponderance and leadership where a state

(or states) with order-generating capabilities receives social endorsement of its leading role' (Loke 2021, 1212). Clark's (2011, 60) work has been useful in delineating the concept of hegemony. While hegemony has typically been associated with a single preponderant power, Clark offers a more complex understanding of hegemonic composition to include collective and hybrid configurations. He also highlights that legitimating audiences can range from inclusive to exclusive constituencies. This opens up the notion of a coalitional hegemony that can be understood, in terms of its composition, as a coalition of powers acting for or on behalf of international society, or with respect to its constituency, comprising a more limited support base for the hegemon(s) (Clark 2011, 62). The Special Issue builds on this conception, defining coalitional hegemony as a partial hegemony characterised by a more restricted, albeit fluid, legitimating constituency.

How has the concept of coalitional hegemony been applied in International Relations (IR)? The classic historical example has centred around US hegemony during the Cold War, as a single hegemon operating within a coalitional legitimating base: Pax Americana 1945–1971 (Clark 2011). Writing over a decade ago, Clark also explored the feasibility of a US-led coalitional hegemony in East Asia along the lines of a Concert of Democracies or the Quad but highlighted its destabilising effect. He argued that 'The major problem with such a coalitional variant of hegemony in Asia is immediately that it would be seen to exclude China. Any alliance of democracies would split East Asia and damage the prospects for the inclusion of China on which depend all other models of regional order' (Clark 2011, 203). At the time, regional priorities were focused on integrating and socialising China into the existing US-led order rather than constraining China's growing power and countering Chinese-led coalitions.

More recent works have also explored how an increasingly proactive China engaged in order-building processes is finding traction among some regional states (Foot 2020; Goh 2019; Loke 2021). As Foot (2020, 159) writes:

'A more powerful China has emerged into a world that Beijing believes to be less resistant to its approach and political-economic model, containing a more obvious proliferation of values within which Chinese ideas can find greater purchase. This enabling environment should allow China to form at least what Clark refers to as a "coalitional hegemony" – that is, acceptance or legitimization of its role as a reshaper or creator of regional order but perhaps only among a subset of potential members and what he refers to as a "restricted constituency of support".'

The Special Issue extends this analysis, demonstrating that the contemporary regional order in the Indo-Pacific is characterised by American and Chinese coalitional hegemonies, with the following defining features:¹

Assertiveness and competition: Both China and the US are trying to carve out greater regional centrality by competing for regional influence and delegitimising the other great power. Yet while they are assertive in articulating their visions of regional order, we are not witnessing exclusive bipolar spheres of influence as both also suffer from legitimacy deficits. Some aspect of collaboration is to be expected across the American and Chinese coalitional hegemonies dependent on specific issue-area and compartmentalisation where interests and priorities converge. Hence, while this Special Issue focuses especially on the competitive elements, it is important to note that collaboration is viewed as possible.

Fluidity and Dynamism: Importantly, the legitimating constituencies are not fixed. Instead, they are fluid, dynamic and shift depending on the particular domain in question. The US and China are seeking hegemonic legitimation from multiple and often overlapping constituencies. This more accurately captures how regional states view US and China's roles, as well as the varied degree of regional endorsement and contestation.

Complexity, hybridity, and an intensifying politics of hegemonic (re)ordering: Resulting from the above, the Indo-Pacific regional order should be conceptualised as complex and hybrid, containing different and multiple visions of regional order and ordering processes. Rather than viewed as singular, regional order is evolving through a combination of changes and continuities, as well as negotiations in hegemonic bargains.

Structure of the special issue

The Special Issue is structured around US-led and Chinese-led coalition-building efforts as well as the responses of regional middle powers to such initiatives. It covers domestic and regional politics and cuts across different domains including security and infrastructure development. The first four papers focus on the first and second research questions, examining how the US and China are engaging in coalition-building endeavours. The final three papers focus on the third and fourth research questions, studying how Australia, Indonesia, South Korea and Vietnam have reacted to US and Chinese coalition-building initiatives.

In 'China's Coalition-Building in the Indo-Pacific: Strategies of Connectivity and Association', Beverley Loke and Xiaoli Guo critically interrogate the key characteristics, objectives and strategies of Chinese coalition-building. Advancing the concept of coalitional hegemony, they develop two strategies that competing great powers employ to strengthen their coalitional base: a strategy of connectivity that fosters relationships and networks to enhance great power influence; and a strategy of association to cultivate a sense of belonging and like-mindedness in the group. Drawing on Chinese academic debates and government documents, Loke and Guo examine Beijing's evolving regional outlook and explore how the strategies of connectivity and association are adopted in the development infrastructure domain. Their analysis reveals that China's coalition-building is multifaceted, nested and adaptive, demonstrating Beijing's growing proficiency in utilising the two strategies to enhance its coalitional base and recalibrate the regional geopolitical landscape.

Jae Jeok Park explores US efforts to establish coalitional hegemony in 'American Coalition Building of the US-led Security Network in the Indo-Pacific: US Influence-Building Measures'. Similar to the 'strategy of connectivity' discussed by Beverley Loke and Xiaoli Guo, Park argues that the US has been working to strengthen its centrality within the US-led security network. This has been achieved by strategically linking with regional hubs and component states. Park notes that this shift is due to the US no longer being the central node in a hierarchical hub-and-spoke system where its dominance was assumed. Moreover, Park observes that the US employs the 'strategy of association', also mentioned by Loke and Guo. According to Park, the US has taken a leading role in regional missile defence, maritime security, and dual-use technology development. These efforts are aimed at fostering a sense of shared purpose and trust among

network members, particularly in contrast to China (and North Korea), viewed as 'others.' In conclusion, Park argues that the US is likely to prioritise the sharing of intelligence, information, and technology within the US-led security network. This strategy aims to sustain coalitional hegemony vis-à-vis China and maintain its influential position within the network.

In 'China's Conception of Regional Security Orders: An Analysis of Defence White Papers from 2010–2019', Ian Seow and Dylan Loh argue that China's resurgence as a military power has generated renewed debates about its security building practices regionally and globally. By analysing China's defence white papers from 2010 to 2019, this paper examines how China's views of regional security order in East and Southeast Asia have evolved following Chinese President Xi Jinping's ascension to power in 2013 and the US' increased military presence in the region since 2010. Seow and Loh define regional security order as sets of geographically bounded institutions and practices that seeks to engender predictable patterns of military and security relations. Here, Seow and Loh suggest that China's concept of regional security order hinges on two main features: (1) adherence to the doctrine of active-defence, and (2) preference for non-military measures such as military diplomacy and economic statecraft to resolve disputes.

In 'Narrating the Other to One's Own: Domestic Legitimation and Politics of Exclusion in US–China Relations', Benjamin Ho highlights the importance of studying how Washington and Beijing narrate their preferred storylines concerning the exclusion of the other to their own domestic audiences, and how these narratives reflect both countries' pursuit and idealisation of order. The paper contends that while the United States seeks order to maintain its hegemonic status in global politics, China seeks order to maintain its authoritarian structure and centralisation of CCP domestically. It is argued that both objectives at their core are fundamentally incompatible as they presuppose two different idealizations of political order. So long as Washington and Beijing insist on a maximalist pursuit of these ideals – to the exclusion of the other – in their global politics there exists very little room for compromise.

The remaining three articles focus on middle power diplomacy and their responses to US-led and Chinese-led coalitions. In 'Australian Agency and the China–US Contest for Supremacy', Brendan Taylor revisits the widely held assumption that small and middle powers lose significant agency during periods of strategic competition and hegemonic re-ordering. Focusing on Australia's foreign policy over the past decade and a half, he challenges the prevailing narrative that Canberra has resigned itself to the role of a 'Dependent Ally' of the US amidst intensifying Sino-American rivalry. Instead, he finds evidence of significant Australian agency, as Canberra has resisted and, in some cases, even shaped major coalition-building initiatives advanced by both powers, including the Obama administration's pivot to Asia, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the US-led Quad 2.0 and AUKUS. By framing the analysis through Australia's three foreign policy traditions – 'Dependent Ally', 'Middle Power', and 'Pragmatic' – Taylor demonstrates that Australia's strategic posture remains multifaceted, offering broader insights into middle power agency during an era of great power competition and hegemonic re-ordering.

In 'How Indonesia and Vietnam Navigate Coalitional Networks in the Indo-Pacific', Sarah Teo and Ralf Emmers examine how both Southeast Asian middle powers have reacted to coalition-building initiatives led by the US and China. Adopting a network

analysis approach, the paper claims that Indonesia and Vietnam have not embedded their responses exclusively to either network but sought instead to enhance their positions in both coalitional networks in an attempt at maximising their respective agency and level of autonomy. Jakarta and Hanoi have also continued to diversify their alternative options by focusing on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its cooperative arrangements in the Indo-Pacific. Yet the two middle powers have been more ambivalent in assuming brokerage roles in the US and China-led networks. Teo and Emmers conclude that this cautious pursuit of greater social access in networks corresponds with their foreign policy traditions and current avoidance of being forced to choose between Washington and Beijing.

In the final paper entitled ‘South Korea’s Alignment Shift under the Competition Between Coalitional Hegemonies: Elite Ideology, Legitimation, and Role Conception’, Kuyoun Chung explores how the differing ideologies of South Korea’s political elites have shaped the country’s strategic alignment amid competing coalitional hegemonies. The progressive Moon Jae-in administration initially sought a balancing role between the US-led and China-led coalitions, focusing on dialogue with North Korea and regional stability but faced limitations due to strained Japan relations and failed US–North Korea summits. In contrast, the conservative Yoon Suk-yeol administration has embraced a facilitative role, strengthening ties within the US-led coalition and prioritising the Indo-Pacific Strategy. This shift reflects a broader realignment in response to intensified US–China competition, marking a strategic move toward deeper engagement with Washington and its allies.

Note

1. This draws on Loke’s (2021) logic of ‘coalitional and collaborative hegemonies in a complex hierarchy’. This Special Issue focuses more explicitly on ‘coalitional hegemonies’ to more fully map out the competitive elements of US and China coalition-building endeavours.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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