Coalition-Building and the Politics of Hegemonic Ordering in the Indo-Pacific

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Opening Remarks

In his opening speech, **Professor Kumar Ramakrishna** noted the global reverberations following the inauguration of Donald Trump as the 47th American president. Many countries, including those from Asia, are understandably anxious about the trajectory of US foreign policy and what the next four years might bring under Trump 2.0. A key related issue is the ongoing US-China strategic competition and how it might unfold in the coming years. The US has already hiked tariffs on Chinese imports, and a reactive measure from China is expected. As the US pursues a more coordinated foreign policy approach to counter China's multidomain aggression, China too is engaging in influence-building measures against perceived US-led encirclement. US-China competition for power and influence in the Indo-Pacific is taking place in a complex and dynamic regional landscape, with regional states not wanting to choose sides or be tied to exclusive spheres of influence. This is particularly so for countries in Southeast Asia, many of whom possess a long history of navigating the complexities of great power competition.

In light of these developments, Prof Ramarkrishna shared that the roundtable comes at a timely moment to examine how US and China's coalition-building endeavours are reshaping regional hegemonic order in the Indo-Pacific. The 2024 State of the Region survey by the ISEAS - Yusof-Ishak Institute revealed that a marginal majority of respondents indicated a preference for China over the US in a hypothetical forced-alignment scenario. The same survey also showed that 42.4 per cent of those surveyed were confident or very confident that the US would do the right thing to contribute to global peace, security, prosperity, and governance. The figure for China was only 24.8 per cent. These findings suggest heightened contestation ahead as both countries compete for influence in the Indo-Pacific region.

Session 1: Great Power Coalition-Building in the Indo-Pacific (Part 1)

Moderator: Dr Sarah Teo

Dr Beverley Loke and **Dr Xiaoli Guo** presented on the topic of China's coalition-building. They argued that scholars often underestimate China's coalition-building efforts, and that China has actively pursued the expansion of its circle of friends through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the concept of "A Community with a Shared Future for Mankind." Much of the focus in existing literature has been on US-led coalition-building, leaving China's strategies in the Indo-Pacific relatively underexplored. Their research sought address this gap by examining how China engages in coalition-building in the region, a concept that encompasses various forms of partnerships, minilateral and multilateral engagements aimed at enhancing influence, cultivating legitimacy, and drawing states into a coalitional hegemony. China's approach is multifaceted and adaptive, reflecting its strategic use of connectivity and association to expand its influence.

Unlike existing studies that primarily focus on China's bilateral engagements, their research highlights the complexity and hybridity of China's hegemonic ordering. It identifies key characteristics, objectives, and strategies of Chinese coalition-building, offering both conceptual and empirical contributions. The study introduces an ideal-type framework for understanding China's coalitional hegemony strategies, categorising them into three primary logics: connectivity, transactional-binding, and association. The connectivity strategy operates through relational linkages, establishing networks and infrastructure – such as roads, railways, and ports – to enhance China's great power influence. The transactional-binding strategy, while facilitating regional integration, has raised sovereignty concerns, prompting nations such as Malaysia and Nepal to renegotiate or cancel projects. Lastly, the association strategy functions through a dual mechanism of bonding and othering: China fosters like-mindedness among states through narratives of win-win cooperation, South-South solidarity, and shared historical experiences, while contrasting itself with Western institutions like the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, which it alleges as self-serving and hypocritical.

They argue that China's coalition-building in the Indo-Pacific has evolved into a multilayered and nested approach, accelerating and enlarging under President Xi Jinping. It leverages both formal and informal arrangements, combining economic power with an ideational appeal centred on inclusiveness and cooperative engagement. By examining these dynamics, their study contributes to a deeper understanding of China's strategic positioning and its implications for regional order.

Dr Jae Jeok Park's presentation focused on the evolution of US-led security networks, He argued that the traditional hub-and-spoke system in the Indo-Pacific is giving way to a less less hierarchical structure, marked by more divergent threat perceptions and increased interactions among the spokes. While the US remains a dominant security provider, its established centrality is being contested by new regional dynamics challenging its traditional leadership.

Despite these challenges, the US-led security network has continued to develop and expand, evolving into three primary structural forms: the hub-and-spoke network, where actors primarily connect through a central node; the chain network, in which security commitments, intelligence, and resources move through intermediary nodes; and the all-channel network, where actors are interconnected with one another rather than relying solely on a central power. The expansion and adaptation of these structures underscore the importance of network power, which can be understood through the power of the network itself, power within the network, and the network's overall influence. These dynamics are further shaped by key measures of centrality: degree centrality, which reflects the number of direct connections a node holds and highlights the US' strategy of attracting authoritarian states; betweenness centrality, which emphasises the US' role in establishing sub-regional hubs and minilateral arrangements; closeness centrality, which underscores the US' effort to lead various overlapping functional cooperation mechanisms; and eigenvalue centrality, which measures the significance of key regional actors and reflects the US' attempts to enhance the security roles of sub-regional hubs. To maintain its coalitional hegemony, the US has increasingly pursued a strategy of security mutuality, reinforcing shared

security interests and values among allies to foster a collective identity. This involves delegitimising strategic competitors such as China and North Korea while strengthening trust among allies, assuming a leading role in regional maritime security and dual-use technology development, deepening security cooperation with secondary powers through intelligence-sharing and joint military initiatives, and cultivating an in-group identity that solidifies coalition unity.

Looking ahead, he shared the view that a second Trump administration would seek to maintain US dominance in the Indo-Pacific through a dual approach: leveraging connectivity strategies that enhance security linkages via economic and technological ties, while simultaneously employing association strategies to foster ideological cohesion and reinforce US leadership. In this evolving security landscape, the ability of the US to adapt its network strategies will determine the future of its hegemonic influence in the region.

Challenging the conventional view of Australia as a passive actor was **Professor Brendan Taylor**, who illustrated the nation's active role in shaping and responding to strategic initiatives by both the US and China. A key question in the study of hegemonic reordering is how much agency middle powers like Australia retain in shaping regional dynamics. While often perceived as a dependent ally, Australia has, in reality, actively resisted and even shaped both US and Chinese coalition-building initiatives, challenging prevailing assumptions about its strategic autonomy. This can be understood through the lens of Australia's three foreign policy traditions: the dependent ally tradition, which prioritises security through alignment with a great power; the middle-power tradition, which emphasises multilateralism and coalition-building; and pragmatism, which entails a case-by-case evaluation of national interests. These traditions manifest in key moments of US-China strategic competition.

Prof Taylor shared the view that during Obama's pivot to Asia, Australia demonstrated agency by negotiating the scale and terms of US Marine deployments in Northern Australia, resisting larger requests and engaging in protracted cost-sharing negotiations. While maintaining close alignment with the US, Australia carefully balanced security commitments with domestic cost-benefit considerations. Similarly, in its response to China's BRI and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), Australia defied US lobbying efforts by joining AIIB in 2015, yet later grew more resistant to Chinese economic influence. This led to a deterioration in Sino-Australian relations, including diplomatic freezes and sanctions, reflecting how Australia's approach to China has incorporated all three foreign policy traditions—aligning with the US on security while engaging pragmatically with China on economic initiatives. More recently, Australia's role in Quad 2.0 and AUKUS highlights its evolving strategic agency. While broadly supportive of these initiatives, AUKUS represents a clear exercise of Australian agency, with Canberra employing a strategy of "othering" in response to Chinese sanctions. However, AUKUS also increases Australia's security dependence on the US, reinforcing its role as a dependent ally, while its prior coalition-building efforts before the revival of Quad 2.0 illustrate its middle-power instincts. At the same time, the Australian government engaged in a pragmatic assessment of AUKUS's costs and benefits before committing to the agreement.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, Australia has demonstrated significant agency amid US-China hegemonic reordering, resisting and even shaping key coalition-building efforts by both powers. Rather than acting as a purely dependent ally, it has blended its three foreign policy traditions in response to shifting geopolitical realities. This interrelationship between dependence, middle-power coalition-building, and pragmatism presents an area for further research, particularly in comparison to Southeast Asian states, which have predominantly adopted hedging strategies rather than direct engagement in shaping great power alignments.

The importance of maintaining a broad perspective was emphasised by Dr Jaehan Park, who noted that states often seek to justify their diplomatic actions. He raised critical questions about whether current developments in coalition-building represent a fundamental shift in international relations theory or are they simply novel iterations of existing patterns. Additionally, he stressed the need to consider policy implications arising from these changes.

The discussion explored the extent to which China's coalition-building efforts are assessable and whether there is a risk of overstating their multilateral nature. Some argued that regional agency and the complexity of these coalitions matter more than framing them strictly within a bipolar power structure. Others questioned the success of China's strategies, particularly initiatives like the BRI, and whether regional states would continue aligning with US-led coalitions or adopt hedging strategies instead. A key concern was the discrepency between China's rhetoric and actual policy implementation, with some suggesting that variations should be analysed on a case-by-case basis, particularly given the backlash China faced as a result of its confrontational actions during the pandemic.

Dr Loke highlighted the importance of distinguishing between China's stated goals and its actions, arguing for a case-by-case approach. Dr Jae Jeok Park differentiated between multilateral institutions and coalitions, emphasising that coalitions tend to be more exclusive and strategic. Dr David Han inquired about Malaysia's position within this evolving structure, while Dr Sarah Teo raised concerns about the broader implications for US-China relations and Australia's role in Southeast Asia. Dr Jae Jeok Park identified China's maritime assertiveness as the primary threat for Southeast Asian states, while Dr Guo pointed to the role of domestic policies in shaping coalition dynamics. Ultimately, the discussion underscored the need for nuanced policy analysis that accounts for both structural shifts and state-specific responses within the Indo-Pacific region.

Session 2: Great Power Coalition-Building in the Indo-Pacific (Part 2)

Moderator: Dr Sarah Teo

In his presentation, **Mr Ian Seow** raised two pertinent questions: How is China responding to US coalition-building efforts in the Indo-Pacific, and how has China's attitude towards these US initiatives in the region changed? He noted that current studies often focus on China's assertiveness following President Xi's rise to power in 2015, which has resulted in a more confident and assertive foreign policy. However, there has been limited research on the interaction between US coalition efforts and their impact on China's regional security order conception.

Mr Seow analysed China's defence white papers from 2010 to 2019, providing an Asian perspective that challenges the predominantly Western viewpoints. His approach mixed research methodologies, including both qualitative and quantitative analyses, utilising software to conduct frequency analyses on key terms such as "defence," "security," and "cooperation," and performing contextual analyses focusing on security along China's periphery.

He highlighted two key aspects of China's conception of regional security order: the doctrine of "positive defence," which forms part of China's strategy to reassure its neighbors, and the main principles of "active defence." This strategy entails using defensive military operations to blunt an adversary's initial act of aggression if coercion has failed and shows a preference for non-military measures – such as economic incentives and diplomacy – to resolve disputes. These insights underscore the complexity and evolution of China's strategies in response to regional security challenges and US coalition-building activities.

In his presentation titled "Narrating the Other: Technological Competition and Sino-American visions of Political Order", **Assistant Professor Benjamin Ho** highlighted that both the US and China have sought to legitimise their coalition hegemonies in the region by means of portraying their type of leadership and influence as benign and beneficial to others, while simultaneously casting actions of the other as being problematic or even hostile. He argued that political myths provide a plausibility structure to explain why one's preference of political order ought to be accepted by others. In order to convince of the merits of their leadership, there is a need to "sell the value" of follower-ship to their respective or potential coalition partners. As such, the US and China are locked in a state whereby each seeks to discredit the other through ideological appeals. Assistant Prof Ho explained that the US perception of its global primacy as necessary to sustain the current international order is fundamentally at odds with China's need to maintain domestic stability and its belief that the US seeks to suppress and effect regime change. Given all these, he shared that technology, a quintessential domain of 21st century American global power, is now being challenged by China's advancements in high-tech development. While the US seeks technological primacy to project its geopolitical influence, China seeks technological primacy to enforce greater domestic controls. Seen this way, the visions of both countries are

fundamentally incompatible and there exists little room for compromise if a maximalist articulation of these visions are insisted upon.

Dr Lai-Ha Chan served as the discussant, emphasising the concepts of regional security and the construction of regional orders. She highlighted a primary concern regarding China's focus on methods and approaches, criticising its tendency to overlook the ultimate objectives of these strategies. Dr Chan also explored how narratives within the context of international relations might be conflated with myths, questioning the efficacy and implications of such perspectives.

Other scholars in the session contributed additional insights on narratives and myths. They described myths as deeply embedded stories within societies that narrate their own version of events, stressing that all narratives and myths are shaped based on pre-existing contexts. The discussion also included a mention of how the People's Liberation Army defines 'active defence,' which is characterised by responding with an attack only after being attacked, illustrating a strategic defensive posture that is a significant part of China's military narrative.

The session raised important questions about the potential power to change narratives and myths and explored how misinformation might impact domestic narratives. These inquiries underscored the ongoing need for clarity and accuracy in the construction and interpretation of narratives within international relations.

Session 3: Middle Power Responses to US and Chinese Coalition-Building

Moderator: Assistant Professor Benjamin Ho

The third session highlighted the strategic autonomy and nuanced diplomacy of middle powers in the region. **Dr Sarah Teo and Professor Ralf Emmers** delved into how Indonesia and Vietnam have responded to US and China-led efforts to build coalitional hegemonies in the Indo-Pacific. They pointed out a significant gap in understanding the roles and creation of networks, sharing that both Indonesia and Vietnam have strategically sought to enhance their positions without fully committing to either major power.

As middle powers, Indonesia and Vietnam utilise niche diplomacy, multilateralism, and soft power, which significantly influence their strategic positions within international networks. These countries act as bridges or brokers, where their influence is shaped by how central they are within a particular network, the exclusive ties they hold, and their ability to exit these networks flexibly.

The case studies presented revealed that both countries engage cautiously with these networks, maintaining a balance of economic and security interactions with both the US and China. Indonesia primarily engages economically with China, while balancing its economic and security engagements with the US. Vietnam, facing political

tensions with China, has increased its economic ties and security engagements with the US. Despite their strategic engagements, neither Indonesia nor Vietnam have assumed clear brokerage roles within these networks, instead maintaining alternative options that contribute more to diversification.

This strategic autonomy allows them to commit to an ASEAN-led architecture, which, while not a sufficient alternative to US or China-led networks, provides a regional platform that supports their independent strategies. The session also contrasted their strategic engagements: Indonesia and Vietnam's interactions with the US hold strategic importance, while their growing economic links with China come with limited security cooperation.

Dr Kuyoun Chung further explored this theme by examining South Korea's navigation of US and China-led coalition-building efforts, influenced by the political elites' ideologies. In her insightful presentation at the workshop, Dr Chung posed critical questions regarding the resonance of US and China-led coalitional hegemonies within South Korean political circles and explored the role of these elites' ideologies in shaping the country's foreign policy strategies. She argued that the legitimation strategies of these coalitions, coupled with domestic political ideologies, have led to markedly different regional strategies under consecutive South Korean administrations.

Through a detailed process-oriented analysis, Dr Chung examined the overlapping but incomplete supporting constituencies of these hegemonies and their efforts at legitimation. She highlighted how these efforts align with the broader post-WWII international order, where China promotes a pluralist internationalist order that eschews liberalism in favor of a model that acknowledges sovereign equality and non-interference. In contrast, the US champions a liberal political and economic system emphasising openness and the rule of law.

Dr Chung explained that China seeks legitimation from a broad group including non-democracies and the Global South through President Xi's outward nationalism. Conversely, the US targets a smaller group of liberal democracies with a form of nationalism that looks inward, focusing on agent-based legitimation. In discussing South Korea's role conception under different administrations, Dr Chung detailed how each administration's receptivity to these legitimation efforts varied depending on their ideological orientation. Under the Moon Jae-in administration, South Korea adopted a balancing role, seeking to engage China to facilitate dialogue with North Korea and implementing the New Northern Policy to link the Korean Peninsula with China's BRI, despite occasional conflicts with the US-led Indo-Pacific Strategy. Meanwhile, the Yoon Suk Yeol administration has taken a different path by reinforcing the ROK-US alliance, strengthening trilateral cooperation, and actively participating in US-led security and economic frameworks, thereby enhancing its role within the US-led coalition hegemony.

Dr Chung concluded that these differing approaches are deeply influenced by domestic ideologies, which have led to distinct strategies in how South Korea navigates the complex interplay between US and Chinese influences. The nuanced interplay of

domestic politics and international pressures in shaping South Korea's national strategy underlines the complex realities that middle powers face in the global geopolitical landscape.

Dr David Han, serving as the discussant, pointed out the need for a conceptual framework that considers public opinion and other external factors in shaping middle power strategies. His insights highlighted the complexities middle powers face in balancing their strategic interests amid domestic and international pressures. The session provided deep insights into how middle powers like Indonesia, Vietnam, and South Korea navigate the intricate web of coalitional networks shaped by the geopolitical strategies of the US and China, reflecting a nuanced understanding of middle power diplomacy in the region.

During the Q&A session, scholars noted that Indonesia, under President Prabowo Subianto, is diversifying its foreign alliances, increasing economic cooperation with China while also engaging more with European nations to avoid over-reliance on any single country. This approach is seen as part of a broader strategy to maintain Indonesia's autonomy and balance in international affairs. Under Prabowo's administration, Indonesia's open stance toward both US and Chinese investments is poised to enhance its strategic role within ASEAN. Analysts predict that this development could position Indonesia to take on a leadership role within the bloc, promoting a more integrated and prosperous regional future.

In discussing the effectiveness of the Global South as an alternative to the dominant US or China-led blocs, experts recognise it as a viable, albeit less cohesive, option for Indonesia to reduce dependencies. However, for Vietnam, the Global South does not provide the same strategic benefits due to different geopolitical constraints and needs. This analysis reflects the dynamic nature of Southeast Asian politics, where national leaders like President Prabowo are navigating complex global pressures to enhance their countries' sovereignty and regional influence.

List of Participants

Name	Affiliations
1. Ang Cheng Guan	Associate Dean, RSIS
2. Alexander Arifianto	Senior Fellow and Coordinator of the Indonesia Programme
3. Benjamin Ho	Assistant Professor, China Programme, RSIS
4. Beverley Loke	Senior Lecturer, ANU
5. Bhubhindar Singh	Associate Professor
6. Brendan Taylor	Professor of Strategic Studies, ANU
7. Cen Jingxian	RSIS Student
8. Chris Hughes	Professor, University of Warwick
9. Daniel Balazs	Research Fellow, China Programme
10. David Han	Research Fellow, Malaysia Programme, RSIS
11. Dylan Loh	Assistant Professor, COHASS
12. Gordon Kang Yu Xuan	Senior Analyst, Regional Security Architecture Programme
13. Ha Chae Kyoun	Visiting PhD Student from Cambridge University
14. Henrick Tsjeng Zhizhao	Associate Research Fellow
15. Hu Xinyue	Senior Analyst, RSIS
16. Ian Seow	MPhil Student, Oxford
17. Jae Jeok Park	Associate Dean and Associate Professor, Yonsei University
18. Jaehan Park	Assistant Professor, RSIS
19. Kumar Ramakrishna	Dean, RSIS
20. Kuyoun Chung	Associate Professor, Kangwon National University
21. Lai-Ha Chan	Senior Lecturer, University of Technology Sydney, Australia
22. Lawrence Anderson	Senior Fellow, RSIS
23. Muhammad Faizal Bin Abdul Rahman	Research Fellow, Regional Security Architecture Programme
24. Josephine Pau	RSIS
25. Ralf Emmers	Professor, SOAS
26. Sarah Soh	Associate Research Fellow, Regional Security Architecture Programme
27. Sarah Teo	Assistant Professor, Regional Security Architecture Programme, Coordinator of PhD Programme, RSIS
28. William James	Assistant Professor
29. Xiaoli Guo	Research Associate, ANU
30. Zeng Jingyi	RSIS Student

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The S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) is a global graduate school and think tank focusing on strategic studies and security affairs. Its five Research Centres and three Research Programmes, led by the Office of the Executive Deputy Chairman, and assisted by the Dean on the academic side, drive the School's research, education and networking activities.

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Mission: To conduct analytically rigorous, cutting-edge research on defence and security-related issues and developments affecting the Asia-Pacific region in the service of the country and the global research community