

SECURITY DILEMMAS AND ALLIANCES IN A SHIFTING GLOBAL ORDER: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF GREAT POWER RESPONSES TO RISING MILITARY CAPABILITIES

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Abstract

This article is a systematic literature review guided by PRISMA on the reaction of the traditional great powers on growing military power in a changing international system, focusing specifically on the security issues and alliances as a consequence. In the case of peer-reviewed articles published in 1990-2024, databases Scopus, Web of Science, and JSTOR were viewed as exhaustively as possible. Strict inclusion and exclusion criteria were then applied to documents and an inductive-deductive approach of coding was implemented. The synthesis produced is grouped into seven thematic clusters these consist RussiaNATO dynamics, chinas expansion in IndoPacific, the structure of alliances that existed in the Cold War, post millennium alliances, historical myths, nuclear deterrent, and emerging technologies. The three strategic patterns; balancing, bandwagoning, and hedging patterns exist throughout and regularly within the data; however, more widespread in the current responses can be observed to be a combination of these practice into hybrid responses that integrate moral signalling, deterrence, and institutional participation. The position of realist explanations is not vanishing yet, but rather liberal institutionalist and constructivist approaches are remaining ever more popular, especially in explaining the persistence of alliances and identity responses. The cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, and hypersonic technologies provide more intricate conventional deterrence logic and alliance guarantees because of the clarity of decisions and the reduced decision-making timelines. The contribution that the review makes is a hybrid framework which is integrative but explicitly shows how technological innovation transforms every connection between the perceived threats, strategic tools and results. There is a research agenda that is a priority and which covers technology, middle-power hedging and institutional fragmentation which is presented in the conclusion together with policy implications of crisis management.

Keywords: Security Dilemma, Military, Rising Powers, Global Power shift, Great Power Strategy.

1. INTRODUCTION

The world balance of power has changed significantly with a dramatic shift the most attributable to the rapid rise of the power of some states like China, Russia, and India. This development exposes traditional great powers to further danger hence rekindling academic and policy debate on equal measures of strategic competition. This has in turn led to realigning of military meshes and an increase in the perception of threat across critical areas- such as the Indo-Pacific, Central Europe and the Global South. With the conversion of the world into a more multipolar format, the major

cobwebs are still existent with regard to the impact of changes in defensive capabilities and power balances on strategic stability.

One of the points of departure in understanding these phenomena is the security dilemma. This theoretical notion can explain why the attempts of a state to increase its security by enhancing the defence power, e.g., can be viewed as a source of danger by other participants. These perceptions have the ability to create a sequence of conflict, which can produce negative and even defensive reactions (Booth and Wheeler 2008, Jervis 2011). Although it is a mainstay of the realist theory, the current popularity of the security dilemma is also an indicator of a more pronounced concern regarding the motives of newly-formed countries and the fabrication of old international standards. These processes are inherently associated with the military alliances institution that serves as explicit or tacit tools of managing security orientations and defence obligations (Walt, 1987; Snyder, 2007). The traditional alliances like NATO are being traditionally reorganized to meet new security challenges, and new alliances are emerging, such as AUKUS and the Quad, suggesting a larger change in favor of more adaptable, issue-driven collaboration. All these developments are driven by practical necessities and hidden insecurities about the international structure, institutional effectiveness and images of a crumbling international system. Mid-power actors are actively changing the alliances based on the rise of China, with the example of India becoming increasingly influential in the Indo-Pacific with the involvement in the Quad and a balanced diplomatic stance toward the United States and Russia. Growing powers which enhance their military, economic as well as diplomatic abilities without replacing existing hegemonies are increasingly shaping of regional and international security structures (Hurrell, 2006; Stephen, 2012). The increased ability to test norms, undermine alliances, and display such a military strength forces incumbent states to adopt complex adaptive mechanisms, such as diplomatic containment, long-range deterrence and hedging.

Recent literature has dedicated attention to various aspects of this change in strategy, including how the United States reacted to the ascent of China (Mysika, 2021), how Russia had begun using hybrid and asymmetric campaigns (Pynnoniemi, 2019; Sprud et al., 2022), or mid-powers were adapting to great-power competition (Pynnoniemi, 2019; Sprud et al., 2022). The example of hedging activities undertaken by India, such as enhancing defence relationships with the United States, maintaining historic relations with Russia, is a good example of how regional players influence the direction of great-power politics. Discussions about theoretical issues have become more heated, with some supporting neorealism to explain balancing behaviour (Mearsheimer, 2014) and some other scholars supporting integrative models that include the institutionalist and constructivist approaches (Ambrosio et al., 2019; Zangl and Kruck, 2021).

Though these efforts have been made, empirical and theoretical fragmentation is still conspicuous even in the available literature. The bulk of the scholarship is limited to case studies, or to studies on a regional basis, and or a single-theory application and there is no synthesis study that attempts to unify these different conclusions into a unified story about the manner in which the military capabilities of rising states influence the strategic behavior of great powers and the creation of international alliances. A general focus on the ways the United States, China, Russia and India

interface and determine new formation of alliance systems as well as security challenges needed in a multipolar order is thus justified. Despite the abundance of studies on the topics of rising powers, deterrence, and alliances, there is still no systematic review that would integrate these discussions into one comprehensive framework that cuts across historical foundations (Cold War deterrence), current great-power rivalry and disruptive potential of new technologies. As a result, policy makers and scholars have no comprehensive picture as to how changes of material potentials, institutional change, and ideological change in a multipolar world would together lead to security dilemmas and alliances realignments. The present study attempts to fill this gap by a systematic literature review that includes theoretical, historical, and regional views.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) in order to evaluate the effects of the military ascendancy of emerging states to the strategic behaviour and coalition structure of the established great powers. The SLR approach has also been used in international relations in which the empirical synthesis process has sometimes been at ten years lag as compared to theoretical innovation, thereby providing a rigorous and reproducible format of synthesizing conflicting results across different theoretical frameworks, case studies as well as regional studies (Tranfield, Denyer, and Smart, 2003). The systematic nature of the review with regard to the study identification, selection, and synthesis gives the review transparency, methodological rigor, and reproducibility which is aligned with the expectation of scholarly contributions. This was done in accordance with PRISMA 2020 protocol (Page et al., 2021).

2.1. Data Bases and Search Strategy

It has been in three databases JSTOR (in order to collect classic theoretical debates and regionally-oriented journals often under-represented in citation indexes, such as early stages of the Cold War literature, Jervis-style debates, and historical IR pieces); Web of Science; and Scopus (comprehensive, high-impact journal coverage in International Relations and Security studies). Overlapping literature was screened by hand and removed in a programmable way before the export to Zotero where the literature could be managed.

The Search Query was the Following One:

- TITLE-ABS- KEY(((great power OR rising power) and (secured order OR securit) AND (international order OR world order) OR (global order))).
- Peer-reviewed journal articles dating back to 1990 to 2024 were taken into account to make sure that it is current and yet it includes the reorganisation of post-Cold War alliances.

2.2. Screening

The main question that informed the review- the impact of military capabilities in the emerging countries on the alliance relationship, strategic realignment, and the security dilemma- was operationalised through screening of titles and abstracts. At this point, 65 records were filtered out as irrelevant, mostly because they were centered on domestic political events and economic growth, or policy issues that were not all relevant to the global strategic activity. Two-step inductive-deductive protocol was used where open coding was used to identify new themes whilst deductive coding was used to classify items in four categories specified beforehand (technology,

alliances, emerging powers and security dilemmas). By cross-checking a sample, consistency of the coding was checked.

2.3. Results and Screening

The search was conducted together resulting in 448 records (Scopus 228; Web of Science 124; JSTOR 96). JSTOR was added in order to include the disciplinarily grounded as well as regionally oriented IR scholarship that might be under-represented in Web of Science and Scopus. Duplicates were checked manually and removed programmatically then exported to Zotero. Ongoing with the language (English) and peer-review status (published) filtration, 251 records were left. Duplication in Zotero was eliminated and 114 items were left to screen title/abstract. Sixty-five records were excluded from having any full-text review since 72 were found irrelevant, 6 are unavailable, and 44 are unqualified based on the lack of theoretical or empirical activity. Synthesis The last dataset consisted of 22 publications that were analysed. Figure 1 (PRISMA Flow Diagram) shows the systematic reduction of the literature and factual representation of the literature that actively undertakes the engagement of the international relations theory in a manner that leads to substantive discourse with the vast majority of the current literature being descriptive in nature.

The inclusion and exclusion criterion are summarised in the following table

Table 1: Exclusion and Inclusion Criteria

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion	Rationale
Publication type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Books, book chapters, dissertations, reports, grey literature	Ensures quality and comparability across scholarly studies
Language	English	Non-English	Language constraint for accessibility and consistency
Publication years	1990–2024	Before 1990; after October 2024	Captures the post-Cold War security environment up to current debates
Focus	Great powers’ military rise, alliance behavior, security dilemmas, strategic adaptation	Domestic politics without IR linkage; economic development without security dimension; social policy	Keeps dataset aligned with the research question
Geographic scope	Global (U.S., China, Russia, India, NATO, Indo-Pacific, Europe)	Purely domestic case studies with no great-power relevance	Ensures relevance to international order
Theoretical relevance	Engagement with IR theory (realism, liberalism,	Descriptive works without theoretical or strategic framing	Ensures analytical rather than purely descriptive contribution

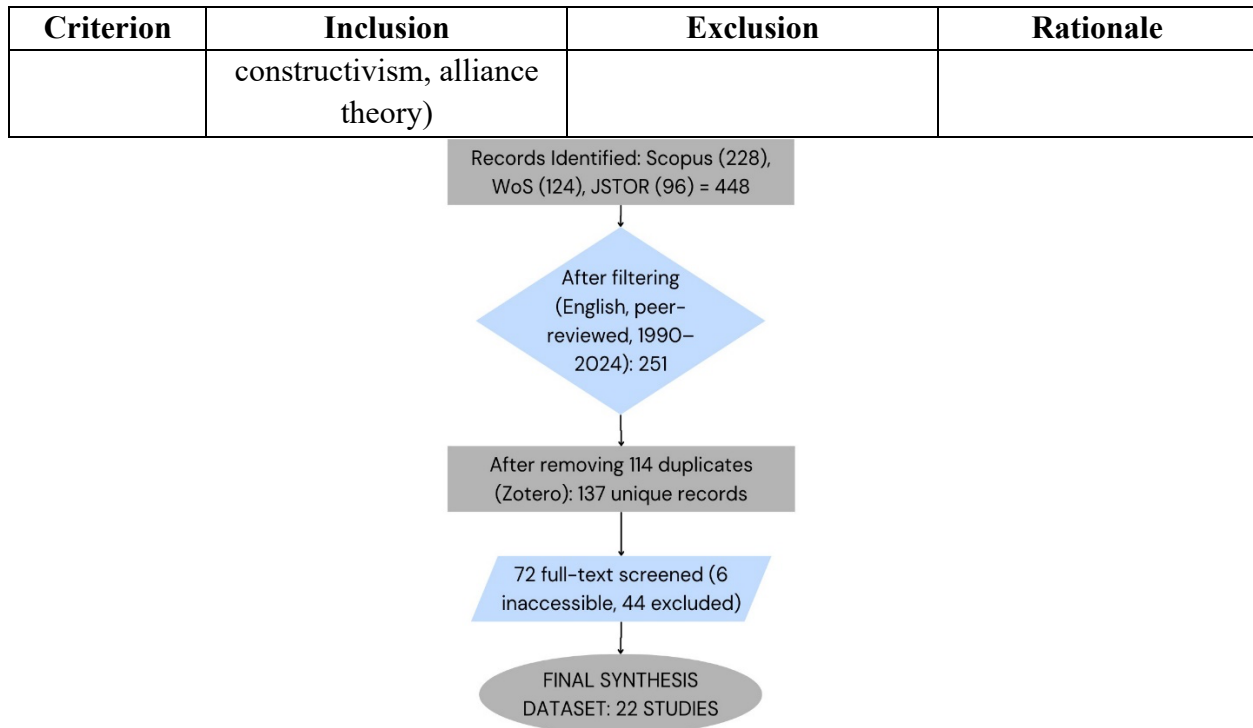


Figure 1: Prisma Flow Diagram of Study Selection Process (Final Dataset = 22 articles)

Transparent attrition Transparent attrition can be exemplified by the PRISMA funnel diagram: the initial corpus was significantly narrowed by the application of rigorous inclusion criteria and post-hoc placed access restrictions, thus making sure that the synthesis that follows is rather strictly theory relevant and supported only by peer-reviewed work.

2.4. Limitation

Due to the search through the peer-reviewed articles in English languages published since 1990 and 2024, non-English literature and grey literature were excluded, thus the articles related the policy reports and the area-based discourses that can be discussed in the analysis were omitted.

2.5. Landing Dataset

The basic set of academic literature about the alliance tactics and security dilemmas in a multipolar system is represented in the last set of 22 articles. To reach the regional and international representativeness, the chosen articles include the cases related not only to the U.S. and the NATO reactions but China, India, and Russia as well.

2.6. Thematic Findings

It is appropriate to specify the position of the dataset, both regional focus and thematic allocation before getting down to thematic clusters on which the paper is based.

2.7. Publication Trends

The 22 peer-reviewed articles indicate a constant growth of scholarly interest in security dilemma and alliances since 1990. There was a modest growth in the near-post-Cold War, but it had been accelerated since 9/11 terrorist attacks and the rise of post-2010 China in the Indo-Pacific. Another wave was associated with the complete invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022 and the occupation of Crimea in 2014. These turning points assert that the remarkable periods give fresh academic

interest in the alliances, up-and-coming forces and adjusting to strategies. The line graph accompanying this picture depicts this trend, where research activity has spiked following major geopolitical events like 9/11, the rise of China and invasion of Ukraine by Russia. This trend indicates that scholarly focus is responsive to, but not anticipatory of, crises in reality, possibly the reason why theoretical creation tends to be behind the curve and why research is extremely receptive to shocks.

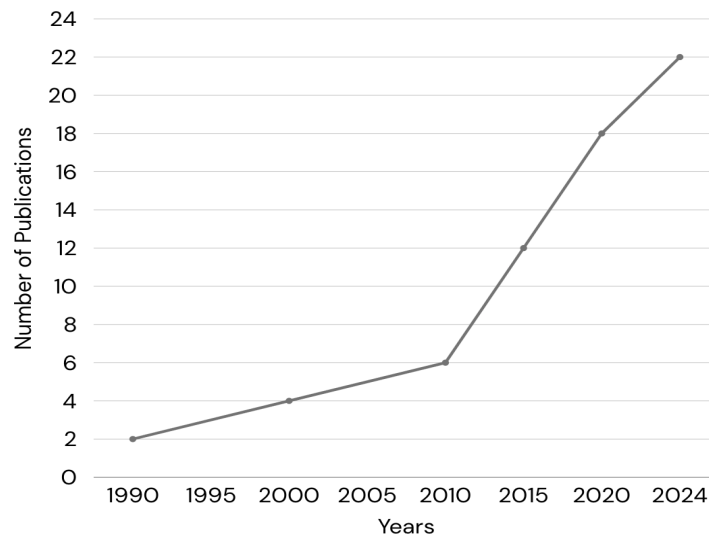


Figure 2: Publication Trends (1990-2024). The annual number of publications (n 22) and essential event signs (9/11, China rise, Crimea, Ukraine)

Research is highly dynamic and responsive to the changes in the competition among the great powers as demonstrated by the temporal dynamics of the peaks of the publications that outline the response of the academic scholarship to the crisis and the surges in the current of the empirical attention that occurs after the major geopolitical events.

2.8. The Cold War is the Historical Base

The balancing behaviour was relatively predictable by now through rigidly bipolar alliances and the policy of mutually assured destruction (MAD) as well as providing specific escalation thresholds. Since 2010, though, the ambiguity of deterrent signaling was washed away by cyber activities, the incorporation of artificial intelligence (AI) and hypersonics as well as an escalation of geoeconomic rivalry. These emerging technologies spawned deniability and cloudy decision-making periods as well as brevity in decision-making. In consequence of this, despite the fact that Cold War models still contribute to the explainability of the behavior of the states, it now requires them to be interpreted by the institutional and technological intermediaries.

2.9. Thematic Distribution

The papers have been grouped in four general themes as shown in the figure below.

- Theory of security dilemma (historical ground and nuclear deterrence).
- Alliances (Cold War alliances vs. post-cold war alliances).
- Emerging superpowers (China, India, Russia).
- Technologies and structures (cybers, AI, hypersonic, and multi-lateral systems).

This classification covers both continuity and change. Despite the fact that the idea of alliances and deterrence remains to be in the limelight of debates, the area has been diversified by institutional changes and an enhanced attention to the technological aspects. This evolution can be seen in figures 3 and 4. Change: Since 2010, one observes the beginning of intense academic interest in technology and emerging powers. This trend displays the current ways in which previous theories are now facing extensive investigation with the disruptive ability of innovative weaponry, digital technology, and new models of industrial rivalry.

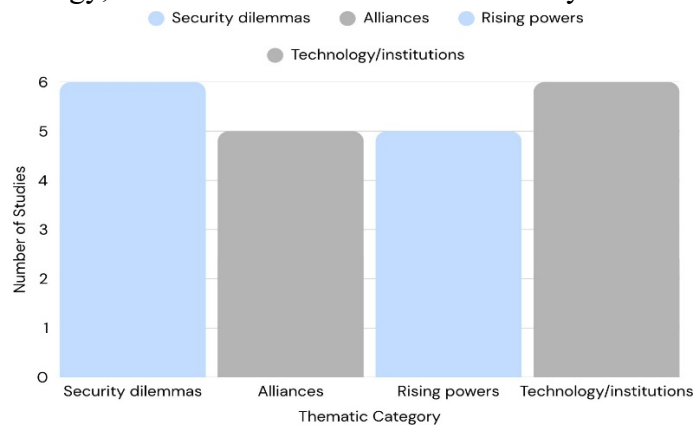


Figure 3: Thematic Distribution of Release across Reviewed Studies (percent): Security dilemmas; Alliances; Rising powers; Technology Nonetheless institutions

A thematic tendency toward the standard dilemma problems indicates the enduring essence of realism, whereas the growing frontier of research is indicated by the growing share of technology and institutions.

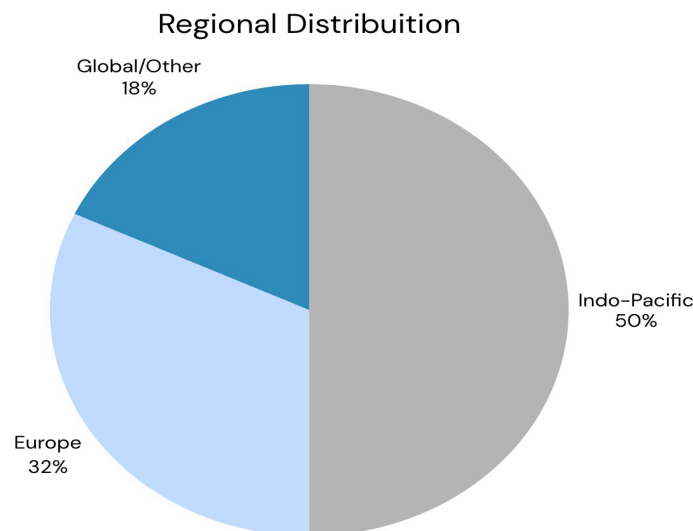


Figure 4: Provides the thematic focus in the successive decades (1990s, 2000s, 2010s, and 2020s), which shows the ratio distribution of thematic focus.

Decadal trends show constructivist and institutional themes that started to emerge after 2010, which imply both the changes in the technical dimension and in the regional one and the theoretical heterogeneity.

2.10. Regional Distribution

This has altered dramatically the localized orientation of scholarship. The European hegemony dominated the literature in the period of the Cold War and expansion of NATO discourse which revealed the concern of bipolar stability. Since 2010, however, the main field of study has moved out of Europe to the Indo-Pacific. Such development is mirrored in military rise of China, rising aggressiveness of India and the U.S. Pivot to Asia. Even though they are still influential, global and cross-regional researches have a dominant use to appraise international frameworks like UN, Quad, SCO, and BRICS.

This change is notable since it demonstrates that, unlike the more rigid alliances of cold war Europe, the security issues in Asia are becoming more shaped by over-lapping institutions, financial interconnectedness and disputed oceanic regions which render more unstable and uncertain.

The prevalent academic interest in the dynamics of power and strategic rivalry, especially in reaction to the rise of China as the leader of the Indo-Pacific, is shown by the fact that realism (60%) had the largest share of publications reviewed). The low representation of constructivism (20) would imputably be due to the fact that the regional analyses did not pay much attention to the ideational framework or normative framework.

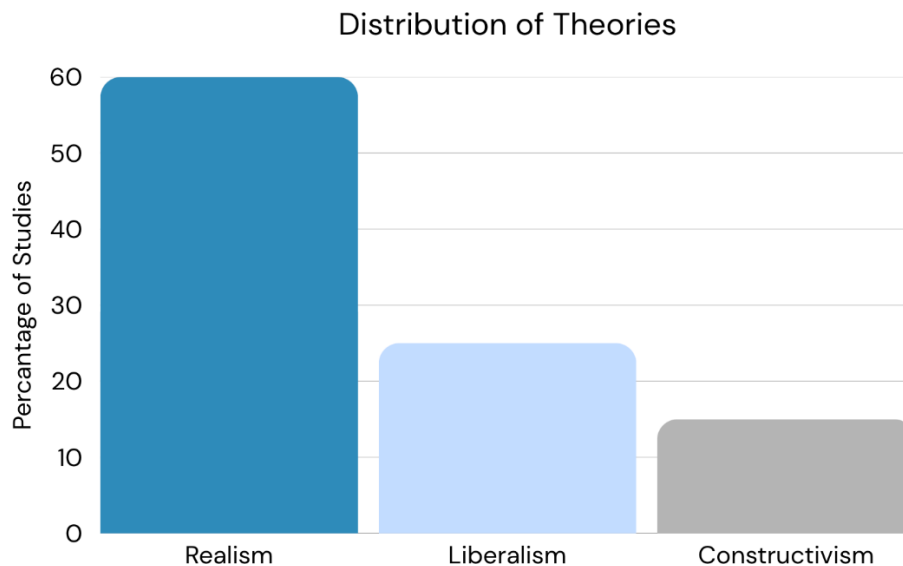


Figure 5: Theoretical Frameworks in Reviewed studies (05) Distribution

The literature of the analyzed scholarly work is rather positioned on the basis of the realist concept, which can be understood as the increased level of academic examination of the aspects of power structure in the Indo-Pacific area following the post-2010 rise of China. The aggregate patterns of publication discussed herein put the overall findings made in the following thematic clusters in perspective.

2.11. Historical Starting Points of the Dilemmas of Security

Great-power competition has been the source of cycles of insecurity long enough. Arms races and power balance shifts have widely been the triggering events of hot or cold confrontations, which in many cases have cost the major powers dearly, both politically and economically (Jervis, 1978; Waltz, 1979). The most vivid example is the nuclear arm race between the United States and the

Soviet Union during the Cold War; despite the systemic strain on the sides of building the armament, nuclear deterrence prevented the open conflict as well. The Anglo German naval race before the World War 1 had illustrated how efforts to build up security have led to the eruption of escalation, mistrust and terror (Bonker, 2001).

These trends in history are still manifested in the rise of China and its relations with the United States nowadays. China is responding with the modernization of its military and ambitions in the region which have generated anxiety in Washington and the whole of Asia. In its turn, the United States creates the effect of action-reaction; it reinforces alliances and extends its military posture (Liff and Ikenberry, 2014). That even defensive measures are a threat of themselves proves that the security conundrum still exists. As a result, an increase in material development, unsettled borders, and the general feeling of distrust in the Asia-Pacific region are the circumstances that increase the likelihood of competition.

2.12. White Deterrence Responses and Nuclear Era

The era of nuclear made a fundamental change in the manner in which governments were dealing with security issues. According to the advocates of nuclear, it is because of the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) in which the break-even point on escalation is so large and so expensive that it is impossible to afford war on a scale (Nkatomba & Jossey, 2024). Although the Cold War was marked by stiff competition, the US and the Soviet Union avoided the direct confrontation with the use of nuclear deterrence; states tried to use the diplomatic routes instead of the direct war because the MAD increased cost of the war to the prohibitive levels.

This stabilising power also influences the regional conflicts. In the case of India-Pakistan standoff, even during the periods of crises, the use of nuclear capabilities can prevent escalation. Similarly, North Korea is using nuclear weapons as a tool to ward off any outside intrusion and regime survival, which it regards as a defence against more dominant countries (Nkatomba & Jossey, 2024). In this regard, nuclear weapons may become a levelling device, which allows weaker states to deter stronger ones.

However, opponents warn of the fact that nuclear deterrence increases risk too. There is increased likelihood of accidents, judging errors or unlawful utilization with proliferation. The Malfunction of the NORAD computer and the Cuban Missile Crisis are close-call scenarios that demonstrate how misunderstandings can be turned into disaster rather fast. It is more probable that such incidents are likely to occur as more states with weaker command and control regimes acquire the nuclear weapons. Nuclear terrorism has remained a major issue as non-state organizations seek fission material. Nuclear deterrence remains one of the most important historical references providing clear boundaries of escalation. But, again, with the new technologies of hypersonics, artificial intelligence, and cyber operations, these boundaries are blurred with MAD. They fasten the decision-making process, blur indicators and widen the chances of erroneousness. Based on this, managing the crises would be more demanding and the efficiency of alliance guarantees would be reduced.

Table 2. Major Nuclear Deterrence and Security Dilemma: 1945-Present.
(Author’s Creation, 2025)

Year / Period	Event / Development	Impact on Security Dilemma & Deterrence Dynamics
1945	U.S. uses atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki	Introduces nuclear weapons into global politics; sparks fears of proliferation
Late 1940s–1950s	U.S.–Soviet nuclear arms race begins	Escalating stockpiles generate an action–reaction cycle; deterrence logic emerges
1962	Cuban Missile Crisis	Demonstrates nuclear brinkmanship; highlights escalation risks and the stabilizing role of crisis management
1968	Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)	Establishes a global framework to limit nuclear spread; creates tension between nuclear “haves” and “have-nots”
1970s–1980s	Cold War Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD)	Superpowers rely on nuclear deterrence to prevent direct war; heightens insecurity in proxy regions
1998	India–Pakistan nuclear tests	Extends deterrence dynamics to South Asia; introduces regional nuclear standoff logic
2000s	U.S. missile defense initiatives	Raises concerns in Russia and China about the survivability of second-strike capabilities
2010s–2020s	North Korea’s nuclear program; China’s nuclear modernization	Expands deterrence dilemmas in a multipolar context; prompts reassessment of extended deterrence commitments

Table 2 shows how the concept of the Cold War with nuclear deterrence led to very specific and limited rivalry. On the other hand, the less established thresholds witnessed in the modern day security issues complicate the management of the escalation.

At the times when first dangers are eliminated, new problems emerge, or the participants come to doubt each other, alliances frequently come to pass. In multipolar systems, cohesion is even more difficult due to the changes in power equilibrium and availability of more potential partners. Home politics also have a role as debates go back to matters relating to commitment (Walt, 1997).

However, with the help of historical evidence, it can be seen that some alliances remain. To illustrate how collaborative norms, organizational malleability, and strategic comfort can be maintained to the postponement of the threat even subsequent to the conclusion of the Cold War, the post-Cold war persistence of NATO can be employed (Walt, 1997). The post-Cold War era has also witnessed transformations in alliances as they have ceased to contend with threats of an existential nature but rather on the object of focused intervention. The United States and its allies have created coalitions in Iraq and Afghanistan by involving a wide range of actors who had different goals such as self-interest, maintenance of alliances and reputation issues (Mario, 2010).

Unlike the rigid blocks of the cold war, these instances highlight the momentary and dynamic character of post cold war alliances.

Alliances are not just balancing mechanisms as seen by the longevity of the NATO and the emergence of interventionist coalitions. They are also relying on institutional legitimacy, adaptability to changes in internal and external forces, and flexibility.

Table 3: Cold War Alliances vs. Post-Cold War Alignments (Authors’ Creation)

Feature	Cold War Alliances (1945–1991)	Post–Cold War Alignments (1991–Present)
Structure	Rigid, hierarchical blocs (NATO vs. Warsaw Pact)	Flexible, issue-specific, overlapping coalitions
Dominant Powers	U.S. and Soviet Union	U.S., China, Russia, and rising powers (e.g., India)
Membership Logic	Ideological and security-driven	Pragmatic, interest-based, often regional
Key Characteristics	Collective defense, nuclear deterrence, bloc discipline	Selective engagement, hedging, hybrid strategies
Examples	NATO; Warsaw Pact	NATO expansion; AUKUS; Quad; “Coalition of the Willing”
Stability / Conflict	Stable bipolarity with frequent proxy wars	Multipolar fluidity, localized conflicts, hybrid competition

Table 3 shows how inflexible blocs have been broken to make flexible coalitions. This means that in a multipolar setting, alliances have been and will continue to be maintained under institutional malleability and not only by the threat of coercion.

2.13. The Rise and Indo-Pacific Security of China

The alliance policy formulated by the United States in response to the intensifying competition with China has been reformed into the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) as a replacement of the Pivot to Asia. Although the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has added geoeconomic strength to key areas of the Chinese economy like micro-electronics, battery production, it can be stated that new technologies, such as the ISR system, A2/AD, and AI-based weaponry, have enhanced the intensity of military rivalry (Rim, 2023).

Washington has strengthened alliances with like-minded states as a measure to maintain the image of the most trusted great power in the region (Rim,neath, & Platte, 2023). Though the National Defense Strategy of 2018 interpreted relations with China as strategic rivalry, the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy of 2022 focused on the establishment of a more connected, thriving, secure, and resilient free and open Indo-Pacific. Beijing does however, view such actions as a tactic of holding down its rise.

The Indo-pacific war between the United States and Chinese is not just a battle of arms, but also a rivalry of commerce, technology and standard competition. Therefore, there is uncertainty among

regional actors; they enjoy the security assured by the U.S., but are also forced by the Chinese economy to hedge as opposed to being unequivocal to any of the two sides.

Table 4: Security Dilemma Dynamics in the Indo-Pacific (Author’s Creation)

Actor	China’s Action	Perceived Threat	Response by Regional / External Powers	Outcome
China	Naval expansion, A2/AD capabilities, Belt and Road investments	Seen by neighbors as hegemonic revisionism	United States advances “Free and Open Indo-Pacific”; Quadrilateral Security Dialogue strengthened	Reinforced mistrust; intensification of strategic competition
India	Border tensions with China; naval buildup in Indian Ocean	Encirclement via BRI and Chinese Indian Ocean presence	Strategic hedging: defense cooperation with U.S./Quad while maintaining economic ties with China	Strategic hedging
Japan	Assertive maritime posture; East China Sea patrols	Threat to territorial sovereignty	Strengthened defense posture; deeper U.S.–Japan security alliance	Balancing against China
Australia	Chinese influence in South Pacific; economic leverage	Loss of sovereignty; coercive diplomacy	Quad participation; AUKUS partnership; trade diversification	Balancing combined with economic diversification

Through influence operation together with conventional military action, Russia has hampered the eastward expansion of NATO. In 2009, President Medvedev asserted that concerted efforts by the Russian security agencies had been used to prevent the fast accession of Georgia and Ukraine hence depicting the interest of Moscow in curbing the western infiltration into its near environment (James 2012). Such assertions, although disputed as true, highlight a policy goal in terms of Ukraine as a comstock in a buffer zone.

Russian authorities use these alleged achievements and repeat them several times to support the claims about the active involvement as the way of limiting the expansion of NATO. The political salience of these narratives is found in their formulation of a will to maintain a strategic depth of Moscow against Western influence although, as far as the accuracy of these characterizations is concerned, these accounts have differing levels of accuracy.

The influence and perception dynamics have impacts on the Russia to NATO relationship, which are similar to those created by the military deployments. At its peak, the tension is condensed around Ukraine, which both serves as a center of the great-power conflict and a strategic asset and security cushion. The interplay of the action-reaction processes between the countermeasures taken by Russia and the expansion of the NATO is shown in the figure below. The continuation

of this spiral testifies to the inefficiency of deterrence and reassurance structures since each of the actors sees the other’s defensive displays as escalatory and there is little room in which to apply institutional de-escalation.

NATO Expansion (Eastward, Missile Defense, Finland/Sweden Accession)



Russia’s Perception: Encirclement + Threat to Great-Power Status



Russian Actions: Georgia 2008 → Crimea 2014 → Ukraine Invasion 2022



NATO Response: Eastern flank reinforcement, deployments, sanctions



Further Russian Countermeasures: Hybrid warfare, nuclear signaling



Cycle of confrontation intensifies → Institutional de-escalation blocked

Figure 6: Escalatory Cycle Russia-NATO relations

The NATO-Russia relations through the action-reaction cycle have not ended yet, as Figure 6 demonstrates. The spiral continues despite the inefficiency of institutional de-escalation programs.

2.14. New Technology and New Security Dilemmas

The integration of new digital technologies into the peace building and conflict management have changed the security conundrum fundamentally. Although the digital platforms, data analytics, and artificial intelligence are associated with improved monitoring and decision-making opportunities, evidence of limitations knowledge is limited (Hirblinger et al., 2024). Instead of reducing the level of uncertainty, these technologies can tend to create unintended obscurities by creating biases, blind spots, or misinterpretations. Besides, digitalisation of the peacebuilding processes has made technology a necessity, which has at the same time created weaknesses to the very systems that are meant to promote stability. The reliance on vulnerable digital frameworks increases the predisposition to errors and further growth, as the rationale behind security threats now falls outside the field of military competition to include the political and social realms (Hirblinger et al., 2024).

Table 5: Security Dilemmas and Emerging Technologies (Creation of the Author)

Technology	Potential Advantage	Security Dilemma Effect	Risk / Instability Created
Cyber Operations	Low-cost, deniable intrusions; disruption of adversary systems	Blurs the line between war and peace; constant strategic probing	Escalation due to misattribution; erosion of deterrence

Artificial Intelligence (AI)	Enhanced decision-making; autonomous and semi-autonomous systems	Increased speed and opacity of military decisions	Miscalculation, unintended escalation, algorithmic bias
Hypersonic Weapons	Ability to bypass missile defenses; rapid global strike capability	Compressed decision-making time for adversaries	Crisis instability; heightened first-strike incentives

Table 5 shows that the modern technological advancements unlike the principle of nuclear deterrence are increasing instability by increasing the uncertainty around the intentions and reducing the decision-making time. This gap has not been sufficiently explored within the context of the International Relations theory.

2.13. Change in Multilateral Institutions

The old organizations like NATO, the United Nations now run in parallel with the new, overlapping regional organizations, especially the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), BRICS and the Quad. In terms of seeking arenas that undermine western hegemony and enhance their agency, thereby, the dynamics of a multipolar international system are manifested by developing-state actors (Acharya, 2017; Kumar et al., 2022). With time BRICS has since become an offset against Western control over the financial and security systems, SCO provides China and Russia with a Eurasian security architecture outside the authority of NATO. To achieve cooperation in supply chains, technology, and maritime security, similar-minded states create the Quad, which is a form of issue-based minilateralism (Kumar et al., 2022).

Such trends depict the predilection of states to engage in selective forum-shopping openly, as opposed to converging on globally accepted norms, and, as such, creates fragmentation, with competing institutional logics struggling to be hegemonic. China is one of the key players that have supported this transformation. Another paradigm which is supported by Beijing has a significant distinction to the liberal-democratic values as compared to the relatively effortless process of global leadership transfer between Britain and the United States. The initiatives supported by state-hierarchy mechanisms include the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the Belt and Road Initiative and the leadership of the BRICS by China. In totality, all these actions testify to the growing institutional aspect of the great-power competition, not to mention its military and economic components, thus hastening the process of the destruction of the world order that previously existed in the multipolar world (Kumar et al., 2022).

Table 6: Multilateral Competitor Institutions in a Multipolar World (Authors Creation)

Institution / Framework	Leading Power(s)	Core Focus	Membership	Strategic Orientation
United Nations (UN)	U.S., Western powers (founding leadership)	Global security, peacekeeping, international norms	193 states	Universal, liberal institutionalist

NATO	U.S. and European allies	Collective defense, military deterrence	31 members (2023)	Western-led, security-centric
Quad	U.S., Japan, India, Australia	Maritime security, technology cooperation, supply chains	4	Minilateral, issue-specific balancing against China
SCO	China, Russia	Regional security, counterterrorism, energy cooperation	9 full members (including India and Pakistan)	Eurasian-oriented, multipolar coordination
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa	Geoeconomic cooperation, institutional reform	5 (expanding to 11 in 2024)	Counterbalance to Western-dominated economic order
AIIB	China (founder)	Infrastructure financing, regional connectivity	109 members (2023)	China-led, geoeconomic multilateralism

Table 6 is an example of institutional fragmentation where overlapping structures are made through a process known as forum shopping by states. This trend compromises collective security and makes the process of governance on the global arena even more challenging.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1. Strategic Behaviour Patterns: Balancing, Bandwagoning and Hedging

The main themes that are replicated in the literature are the hedging, bandwagoning, and balancing. The most common response in each of Europe and Asia is balancing. Indo-Pacific countries such as Japan, India and Australia have enhanced security connections with the United States to counter the Chinese naval and technological superiority (Liff and Ikenberry, 2014). As a direct reaction to the invasions of Russia, NATO has fortified its eastern border in Europe (Greene, 2012).

Less common, yet, is bandwagoning. In spite of such ambivalence over security ambition of China, some states have been supportive of its economic initiatives under the Belt and Road Initiative. The co-existence of initial strategic anxiety and material power-seeking behavior is demonstrated by the concomitant relationships between power and the urge to acquire material power in historical examples, like that of Bonker (2001) during the analysis of the naval competition preceding the World War 1. Hedging is the most unique aspect of the multipolar era. The case of India is an example, in which the country has been seeking economic collaboration with China and at the same time strengthening the relationship within the Quad (Kumar et al., 2022). Hedging allows states to

maintain their multiple options, and avoid legally binding commitments and hence having flexibility to act in uncertain conditions. The strategy is the future and risk in the security landscape of today.

3.2. Theoretical Implications

The fact that balancing persisted highlights the explanatory ability of realism. The security-dilemma model by Jervis explains that states must rival when in structural-insecurity situations, despite their defensive intentions being proclaimed (Glaser, 2011; Liff and Ikenberry, 2014). Realism describes the manner in which the spirals of distrust and height are generated because of the expansion of military ability. However, in its original form, realism does not help explain the survival of some coalitions. Walt (1997) claims that NATO will also continue its existence even after the initial threat has disappeared due to institutional flexibility, common norms, and legitimacy. The observation supports liberal-institutionalist arguments which suggest that limiting uncertainty and facilitating the ability to make credible promises will help build sustainable cooperation (Kumar et al., 2022).

The analysis is further enhanced through constructivist understanding. The perception of threats is a socially constructed phenomenon, influenced by discourse and conventions on the one hand, material power on the other. Russia not only acts in a manner that is perceived to be a military aggression with Ukraine but is also a normative challenge to Europe (Greene, 2012). On the same note, a study examining digital peacebuilding shows that there is an influence of algorithm-bias and informational contexts on trust and legitimacy (Hirblinger et al., 2024). Constructivism therefore focuses on the influence of ideas and identity in influencing state reactions.

Taken together, these views suggest that there is no single theory that can be used. Constructionism illustrates the way in which norms and perceptions change things; liberalism explains the way in which institutions help to alleviate uncertainty; realism describes material pressures. It is through a compound analytical prism comprising institutional, structural and ideational elements that one can get the most exhaustive picture of the modern security dilemmas.

3.3. Realism

The theoretical focus has undergone a change over time. During the Cold War, the politics of nuclear standoffs, the relations between NATO and the Warsaw Pact placed realism in the middle of alliance politics and deterrence research. Since the emergence of the focus on identity, norms, and discourse within the context of the rising powers, the constructivist approaches began gaining momentum since the 2010s. Following 2014, when NATO expansion, BRICS and minilateral institutions like the Quad and AUKUS turned into relevant policy reactions, the liberal institutionalist scholarship underwent a revival. This tendency is observed in the data set where academic inquiry has been made more pluralistic, taking into account structural, institutional, and ideational explanations despite the prevalence of realism as the most commonly used analytical dimension. The realist explanations are still the most popular, and the most logical description of how the increase in the capabilities of the military can lead to insecurity, focusing on power asymmetry, deterring, and alliances. Realists posit that within anarchic systems the states are reasonable in the balance or deterring of each other in order to maximise security. The US-USSR nuclear rivalry is a classic example of how security dilemma generates repeated intensity spiral cycles even after devastating results are identified. Even the current studies of U.S.–China competition e.g. are based on realism and are focused on arms races in the region, building ups of the navies, and balancing dynamics in the Indo-Pacific (Liff and Ikenberry, 2014). The ability of

realism to clarify enduring trends of bandwagoning, balancing, and hedging with regard to geographic and historical contexts succinctly is one of the gifts it possesses.

3.4. Liberalism

After 2014, liberal-institutionalist approaches again came into focus when institutions and alliances became the primary means of dealing with the comeback of great-power conflict. Liberalism was relatively not strong in the close aftermath of the Cold War, but the coming of new entities like the Quad, BRICS, and AIIB, and the realignment of NATO to emerging challenges enhanced its importance. According to the liberal theorists, institutions maximize clarity, lessen vagueness, and produce commitments that are lasting and go beyond the short-term appearance of danger. Cases in point being the resilience of NATO beyond the cold war which is a sign of institutional flexibility, institutional legitimacy as opposed to cold war necessitated engagement through the threat (Walt, 1997). Equally, other frameworks like the Quad and AUKUS indicate how governments codify unilateral cooperation to limit the emergence of China (Kumar et al., 2022).

3.5. Constructivism

Constructivist models became more popular after 2010, though, as security issues were more actively pre-empting discourse, identity and norms. The perception of threat according to this line of questioning is social and not necessarily material. The example of Russia in Ukraine is seen not only as military aggression but also as attacks on the normative order in Europe (Greene, 2012). Similarly, the informational environment with the help of algorithmic bias influences both the perception of security and legitimacy, which are also noted in the literature about digital peacebuilding (Hirblinger et al., 2024). Constructivism goes beyond material capacities by exemplifying how narratives, identity politics, and normative contestation can be effective in developing collaboration or escalation. Its supremacy is an indication of the increasing acknowledgement of the fact that social meaning and legitimacy issues are always mediators of material contest, like arms races.

Region	Realism	Liberalism	Constructivism
Europe	0.6	0.7	0.2
Asia	0.7	0.3	0.6
Global	0.4	0.4	0.3

Figure 07. Theory -Region Interaction (Heatmap): Regional intensity of theoretical approaches (Europe, Asia, Global).

Based on the heat map, the focus of studies that are constructivist-oriented is based on Asia after 2010 and the institutional one is oriented on Europe after 2014.

3.4. Conceptual Framework

A review of the reviewed literature presents a pattern of three-step causation chain. The idea of threat of rising powers causes transpiring strategic reactions of hedging, bandwagoning as well as balancing. It is these responses, in its turn, which generate outcomes that range between the institutional adaptation or escalation to the fortifying of alliances (Mahmood, 2025). Constructivist

theory makes the normative and ideological aspect more prominent, liberalism emphasizes institutional solutions, and realism lays emphasis on the predominance of material issues.

The main point is that the modern great-power behavior cannot be described as determined exclusively by equilibrium-seeking or mimetic ones, but it is represented in the form of hybrid strategies, where deterrence, institutional involvement, and normative signalling are intentionally incorporated. States habitually co-orchestrate institutional cooperation aimed through minilaterals and coalition structures and legitimacy endeavors (diplomatic framing and normative campaigns) with strong deterrence (posture of force and prolonged deterrence). The modern threats range, which covers conventional, cyber, and technical threats, the inefficacy of single-axes strategies in the multipolar environment, and the necessity of the strategic flexibility in the environment of uncertainty all supports this hybridization (Mahmood, 2025). Lawmakers should come up with solutions that are cross-domain in building confidence, emergency response institutions, and norms to ensure responsible use of technology and kinetic deterrence capabilities that are credible.

3.5. These Hybrid Techniques are Manifested Regionally Differently

The conceptual framework represented in Figure 8 shows how the perceived warns posed by the emerging powers in general and their rising capacity in particular, leads to strategic reactions, including hedging, bandwagoning, and balancing. The results of such responses include escalation, institutional flexibility, and alliance sustainability. Technology is a factor that is critical and plays an active role in influencing the responses of states and enhancing the perception of the threat. Therefore, in the event of a technological advancements that produce hybrid products that undermine linear or single axis logic, traditional theoretical frameworks can fail.

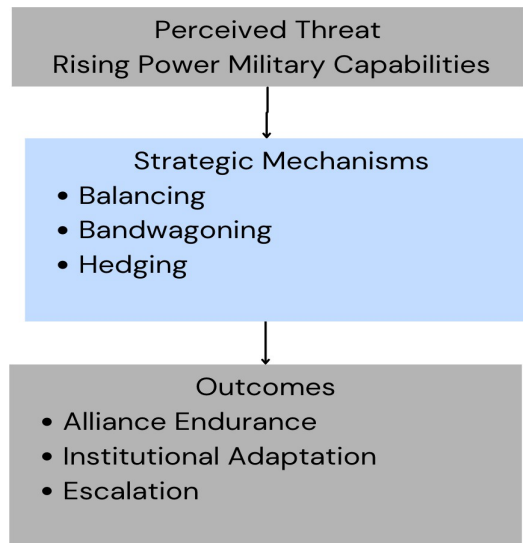


Figure 8. Conceptual Framework- Perceived Threat- Strategic Mechanisms (balancing, bandwagoning, hedging)- Outcomes (alliances, institutions, escalation), where technology is an intervening layer

The framework summarizes the main finding of the review: technology affects the contemplation of threats and the use of strategies and provides hybrid results, which cannot be predicted by a single-axis theoretical model.

3.6. Regional Dividends: Europe and Asia

The case of the European environment is intriguing and instructive in terms of the importance of collective defense and the permanence of traditional institutions of alliances. Though established in the era of the Cold war, NATO has proved to be able to react to the new threats by diversifying its membership and enhancing deterrence as a reaction of the aggressive behavior of the Russian state (Greene, 2012). The strength of NATO proves the validity of Walt (1997) argument that despite the extinction of the one who is presented as the enemy, alliances can still survive in case new threats emerge.

On the contrary, the Asian environment is less certain and holistic. The structures that overlap in the Indo-Pacific include the Quad, AUKUS, bi-lateral security agreements with the United States that exchange with a unified regional security structure in line with NATO. This arrangement indicates the pros and cons of regional diversity by Asian states that have to strike a balance between the U.S security assurance and reliance on China economically (Liff and Ikenberry, 2014; Kumar et al., 2022).

The existence of analogies in history also teaches against complacency to rivalry management. According to Bonker (2001), the naval arms race involving the major powers before World War I only increased uncertainty among people and eventually led to hostilities. Without strong institutional or diplomatic protection, the dangers of the modern Indo-Pacific naval competition can be regarded as similar.

3.7. Gaps in Research

The review provides a specific research agenda: novel technologies present the threat of ambiguity, deniability and shorter periods of time to deterrence logic, thus damaging the credibility of alliances and complicating prolonged deterrence. The result of this dynamic is to prompt middle powers to hedge against the new alignments and selective commitments, and consequently this continues to create institutional fragmentation as the states find alternative partners. Future studies should then investigate the way in which cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, and hypersonic weapons alter the idea that thresholds of escalation and credibility; the way in which strategies that are based on middle-power hedging can be transformed by stresses in multi-domain; how institutional competition changes the way in which crisis is managed, and how signals are interpreted; and how the way in which the concept of credibility can be operationalized in alliance situations with the multi-domain threats.

4. CONCLUSION

This general review summarizes the responses that great powers and their allies have had towards the expanding of military capabilities in relation to global change. The results show three patterns recurrent: states level against the risk increasing, join bandwagons to protect themselves, or gain money, and hedge further to maintain the flexibility. Although the role played by liberal institutionalist and constructivist perspectives in ensuring the total understanding of the behavior of an alliance and the dilemmas regarding security cannot be underestimated, the paper also reiterates the enduring relevance of realism. The proposed research adds some new knowledge to the existing body of knowledge by logically implementing these methodological strategies in a

comparative framework that will connect outcomes of alliance, strategic mechanisms, and perceived threats.

Considerable differences on the geographical location bring forth further insights on these dynamics. NATO has also been flexible and resilient in maintaining collective defense and deterrence in Europe, as a response to Russian aggression. The Indo-Pacific is also characterized by institutional instability with structures like the Quad and the AUKUS taking steps to deal with uncertainties associated with the rise of China by undertaking without developing a strict alliance. The discussion indicates that as a policy, balancing is no longer sufficient in the modern multipolar world. States have to take hybrid response that involves normative signaling, institutional participations, and deterrence. The new technologies artificial intelligence, cyber capabilities and hypersonics make deterrence logic more difficult to achieve, speed decisions and provide new paths to escalation. These effects are supposed to be at the fore throbbing of the policymakers (Powell, 2015).

This review thus suggests a narrow research plan. Technologies change middle-power hedging, weaken alliance, change deterrence and increase institutional fragmentation. The studies to be conducted in the future have to cover how cyber, AI, and hypersonic capabilities impact the escalation threshold; how the middle-power strategy has to be modified to meet the multi-domain pressures; how institutional competition reads within these conditions; and how the trustworthiness of the alliance can be estimated under these circumstances (Powell, 2015).

To sum up, although the aspects of alliance politics and security dilemma continue to be pivotal to great-power rivalry, they are becoming more and more intricate based on the institution, technology, identity, and material potentials. Modern security issues of the multipolar system can only be appropriately explained in the terms of hybrid formations that can incorporate material, institutional, and ideational levels.

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