TRANSCRIPT

The Asia Chessboard Podcast

“All Team Play: The U.S. Alliance System and the Chessboard (Pt. 2)”

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Andrew Schwartz: Welcome to the Asia Chessboard the podcast that examines geopolitical

dynamics in Asia and takes an inside look at the making of grand strategy. I'm

Andrew Schwartz at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Benjamin Rimland In part two of Mike Green's discussion with Abe Denmark and Mira Rapp-

Hooper, the three take a look at the importance of alliance coordination in the

Indo-Pacific, the challenge US Alliances currently face and how the US Alliance

network factors into competition with China.

Mike Green: You both quoted Victor, who of course has been on this program and Victor's

book Power Game looks at the formation of alliances. And as Mira pointed out,

it says, look, the Americans wanted power discrepancies. But the other thing is

we didn't. At the end of the day, we really didn't want a collective security

organization because there were concerns that Syngman Rhee or pretty much

any of the allies, other than Japanese, Australians, that they would try to pull us

into a war with China to unify their countries that we didn't want. So the US,

and the Japanese were behind this too, cause they didn't want to be pulled into

collective security after the war put together what we see today, which is

bilateral alliances.

Mike Green: But now to deal with the China and Russia problems, we need all of our

alliances, NATO and our Asian alliances, but especially our bilateral alliances in

Asia to be more, if not NATO-like collective security, more networked. And both

you talk about this, Abe in particular has a lot on networking alliances. And

that's one of those things that people who work on strategy in Asia now, pretty

much all agree on, but it isn't easy. I've worked on Japan, Korea for decades, and

it's barely moved forward.

Mike Green: So let me start with Abe and Mira. How, you know, we've got the Quad with the

US, Japan, India and Australia. We have the trilateral US, Japan, Australia. We

should have more US, Japan, Korea, but the Japan-Korea thing is so fraught.

Abe, how would you make the networking work, given a lot of the historical

pathologies in the region?

Abe Denmark: I think networking is an increasingly important piece to US strategy in the

region. I think in part, because we need these countries to all work together as

you described, but also because these countries bring unique capabilities to the

table that the United States can't always replicate.

Abe Denmark: So, for example, we're talking about development assistance in parts of

Southeast Asia, South Asia, some countries like Australia, New Zealand, Japan

carry less baggage with them than the United States does. So being able to

coordinate those efforts can be a piece to it, but broadly speaking, the most

obvious piece in terms of networking is the relationship between Japan and

Korea and anybody who's worked in the US government on Asia policy can

attribute several gray hairs to this relationship.
Abe Denmark: It’s never easy, but it is important. And it is an area where we can have an effect. If the United States is able to demonstrate to both Tokyo and Seoul, that this is a relationship that is important to the United States, and therefore that they have a stake in it that it does at times help them avoid some of the more extreme pressures that they get in their domestic politics and does allow for more even approach to some of these issues.

Abe Denmark: And that to me is an incredibly important relationship for China, but also for North Korea, from a military perspective, but also diplomatic and economic purposes as well. Beyond that, the collective power of these relationships with these countries is far beyond anything that China could operate, could put together. So to me, that’s the most high level geopolitical reason for that. We’re never going to get to NATO levels of coordination. I don’t think that’s what we want, but building on things, putting some meat on the bone, to the Quad, to other arrangements, encouraging other countries to do it, even if we’re not involved, we’ve seen this happen during the Trump administration where if the United States has pulled back, other countries have tried to take a leadership role, Japan being a good example of that.

Abe Denmark: The other only other piece I mentioned in this in terms of networking is trade and economic policy, that the loss of the TPP, and being able to replace it with something that ties American economic policy and trade policy to the region broadly and helps us set liberal rules of the road, I think would go a long way to facilitate broader geopolitical strategic ties between these countries.

Abe Denmark: A lot of it’s happening without us now, but ensuring that we’re at the head of the table means that we need to be involved with the ground floor and understand the domestic politics of this. It’s going to be tricky for any future administration, but from a strategic and geopolitical point of view, if we want to bring these countries closer together, and we want to maintain our leadership, that’s going to be an important piece of it.

Mike Green: I remember Ash Carter said, he’d rather have TPP than another carrier battle group, which didn’t make the Navy happy. Did you write that for him when you were there?

Abe Denmark: I did not.

Mike Green: Okay. But your point on TPP is right. It’s going to be politically a long road back to something like TPP, but there’s some near term things I can imagine happening in the next year or two. There’s a chapter in the US Japan bilateral trade agreement on digital trade, which could be the beginning of what you’re talking about, focused on high-tech 5G, AI and stuff, data reciprocity. And so there’s some to work with there. Mira, what’s your thinking on networking US bilateral Alliances in Asia and also US and Europe, because you did NATO in your book as well?
Mira Rapp-Hooper: Yeah. So I take Abe’s point, absolutely. That both, this is particularly with Korea and Japan, this is something really important that we want to pursue. But also that it’s really hard. We have to be modest and we sort of have to understand the limits. In Asia, I would say the sort of best way that I thought about it, or I think the best way I thought about is to look at what allies themselves seem inclined to do and try to follow those trend lines. That is rather than trying to force something artificially, build new alliance structures, where they don’t make sense or where countries might be resistant to them.

Mira Rapp-Hooper: Look at what some of our highest performing closest allies in Asia are doing organically and figure out how we can try to amplify that. So there, I mean, things like the ongoing pretty organic defense cooperation between Japan and Australia. Or the fact that Japan has long been a high flyer when it comes to development aid in the region, Japan and Australia increasingly inclined to work with the United States on quiet, careful alternatives to China’s Belt and Road Initiative. By virtue of sort of following the signals of where our allies are willing to take on a little bit more initiative, take some more lead, maybe take a slight more risk with respect to their relationship with China.

Mira Rapp-Hooper: We can sort of follow the track marks for where more networking is possible in these relationships and try to make the most of what allies seem willing to do. And I would say that we also need to be really modest about what is going to be possible in terms of networking between alliances in Europe and Asia, but that a similar principle holds true there. First I'll start by noting that NATO just for the first time last year, identified China as a major challenge to the Alliance. So this is obviously a sort of watch this geopolitical space going forward. The Atlantic Alliance clearly sees interest as increasingly in the Pacific too. And that is really important, although we shouldn’t expect them to do all that much, given how much European disunity is consuming the continent right now. And of course the fact that all of these allies will be wrestling with the effects of the pandemic for a long time to come.

Mira Rapp-Hooper: But similarly, if we look for areas where we see concerns in both Asia and Europe, I think we can see places where networking might be possible. Again, one obvious one to my mind is responses to BRI. European allies increasingly are concerned about what China is doing because a lot of it has already landed in Europe and they’re making quick moves to try to put up more investment restrictions, bring closer scrutiny to BRI projects and understand more of the implications outside of Europe as well. That’s a place where they might very well be more inclined to work with Japan and Australia if the mechanisms existed.

Mira Rapp-Hooper: Likewise, we saw our allies in Europe pretty quickly decide to get on board with working with China on 5G technology through Huawei, even though the United States pushed them really hard, not to do it, but in Asia, we had our allies in Australia and Japan who made different decisions. Now to my mind, part of the reason why our European allies went in a different direction was because the United States asked them to choose.
Mira Rapp-Hooper: And every good Asia hand knows that you're never supposed to ask an ally to choose between the United States and China. But if European allies had had the chance to work with the Australians and the Japanese, understand where they were coming from an intelligence perspective, a little bit more fully, those decisions might have looked a little bit different. And in just the last couple of weeks, we've heard the British increasingly interested in standing up an alliance to provide a 5G alternative to Huawei. That is a set of techno democracies who could combine forces to that fact. So to my mind, to get, if we follow the trend lines and see where European and Asian allies look like, they have shared concerns and look like they're kind of rowing in the same direction, we could build standing, working groups, information sharing structures, and other new vehicles. Which while they wouldn't be full alliances themselves, would help to pool capabilities to shared ends.

Mike Green: I think we're seeing more convergence than divergence about China, between NATO and our Asian allies. I think that convergence, although it's far from seamless, there are huge differences within Europe among our Asian allies. But I think that general convergence on the China problem, it was accelerated by Coronavirus and Hong Kong. You can see in the debates about 5G, you mentioned the Brits have really shifted the place in the state department. State department's a pretty boring building on the outside, but on the inside, there are a few interesting places. And my favorite meeting room on the secretary suite is the one with the table they used at the Williamsburg summit. When Reagan brought together an amazing constellation of world leaders, Nakasone, Thatcher, Helmut, Kohl, Mulroney, and they put forward a vision that linked Asia and Europe, but they did it after making mistakes because in the SS-20 INF negotiations, NATO said, we'll move the SS-20 to Asia, get them out of our area of responsibility.

Mike Green: And then the Japanese said, "Whoa, well, that's our backyard." So it was kind of mismanagement of alliances initially that led to a convergence and a recognition we all have the same problem. And I think that may not quite to the same gear, but maybe happening a bit when I, you probably have the same experience, both of you. But when, when I talked to the Europeans about Asia, until recently, it was as if the rest of Asia didn't exist, it was all China. And I'm finding much more interest in Japan, in Australia and India.

Mike Green: The Alliance advantage, we have the multipolarity of views. That's not all about China. There's something of a convergence there for the next administration, whoever it is to really work. If they're thoughtful as you guys have been. Can I ask about, you mentioned intelligence briefly Mira. The Western Alliance system had multiple concentric rings, but the core has always really been the Five Eyes and the lifeblood of that as, as Abe would know very well has been intelligence. We share things with people we trust the most, our alliances are now moving in a place where people are saying Japan ought to be kind of in Five Eyes, or maybe you got to bring the French back in, I'll start with you Mira. What do you think about intelligence? It's the lifeblood of alliances. It's a time to rethink Five Eyes and broaden a bit.
Mira Rapp-Hooper: So I certainly agree with you that if the lifeblood of alliances and it's important in a way that I will actually link back to something we were discussing earlier, that is the fact that if we're thinking about upgrading and renovating our alliances to apply to non-military domains, I think intelligence may actually become even more important. I know we all wish, all of us on this podcast, wish that the United States and its allies had been able to muster somewhat of a more muscular response to China's island building in the South China Sea. But if we were to have done that, we would have had to be able to share intelligence very quickly about what was going on, be able to accurately assess what was happening and respond immediately. That is to say that intelligence, when you're trying to respond and counter a gray zone type of activities or other forms of coercion and non-military domains is even more important than the value we might have placed on it before.

Mira Rapp-Hooper: So I think there's no question that we have to figure out ways to share intelligence more broadly within and across our alliances. Japan, as you suggested Mike, have been given a sort of observer role in Five Eyes, and I think that's probably the appropriate place for now. There are known concerns about the extent to which there are leaks in the Japanese intelligence community, same holds true for France. So I think that observer role is probably a good testing ground for now.

Mira Rapp-Hooper: But even if Five Eyes itself doesn't get expanded, I could see a role both in NATO and in our Asian alliances, but across them for information sharing on sensitive issues that may not even need to occur just through Five Eyes. I think when it comes to issues like election interference or other state backed information and disinformation campaigns, we're increasingly putting together pictures in real time, that would be much clearer if we were doing it with allies and across alliances. So I'll look forward to Abe's views on the Five Eyes question in particular, but to my mind, there's no question that there is a charge for a new role for intelligence here.

Mike Green: Abe?

Abe Denmark: Yeah. I definitely think that we need to expand information sharing. Mira talked about the importance of that. Think about the South China Sea, the East China Sea, Taiwan. The ability to rapidly share information with allies and partners, I think will be increasingly important. Add to that, space, cyberspace, all these issues that could drive towards more information sharing. I'll describe myself as a bit more skeptical than some on bringing Japan, especially into Five Eyes. That's because of leaks here and there, there are leaks from Japan, but there also leaks from the United States. There's no perfect system. My concern more was the reaction I saw when Japan passed the State Secrets Law in 2013 and the tremendous amount of political pushback that came then that there needs to be a degree of information security and rigidity about maintaining secrets. That seems to be difficult for parts of Japan's politics.
Abe Denmark: So keeping them at sort of an observer status as Mira described it, I think is, is good. But to me the question is less about who do we bring into the inner, inner circle, but more, how do we lower the bar for the outer circles so that if we need to be able to share information, not with countries that are really advanced, like Japan or Korea, but worth talking about countries that are less further along in terms of their development, especially in South and Southeast Asia. If we're looking to share information with them, is there a way that we can lower the threshold to share that information? Can we create a community of countries that maybe they're not Five Eyes, maybe they're Twenty Eyes, but it's just a degraded or a less sensitive version of information that we could share. A great recent example of this is the Trump administration's decision to end the Open Skies' Treaty.

Abe Denmark: It really points to this and that some people pointed out that some of the information that we get from Open Skies can be replaced with satellite based information. But the challenge there is that we can't share information from satellites as readily, or as broadly as we can from planes flying overhead in an open way. And that, to me, shows an example of how, depending on how we collect information, how we set policies about sharing information, we can make ourselves more capable of distributing that information in a way that helps support broader efforts to bring these countries in and help them work together in a concerted way.

Mike Green: Yeah. You're absolutely right about Japan, Abe. I have to actually agree with you. I worked in the Japanese Diet and Japan has really stepped up its security of information protections and legislation and culture in a very significant way. But in a parliamentary system like Japan, you have to have a political culture, not just a bureaucratic culture to protect national intelligence and information. And I can easily imagine a prominent member of the ruling party going drinking with his senpai, his senior, and being pressured to share Intel. And it's going to be a longer process.

Mike Green: But when you both say Japan, we should think about observer status. I know you're not saying Japan would sit in the room and observe the most sensitive sharing of intelligence by the US and its close historic allies. I think what you're describing is more of an ad hoc relationship and also as sharing as Abe points out of not just the most, not national technical means the most sensitive intelligence, but information. We are in as Mira points out, a broad strategic competition with China and with Russia that cuts across propaganda and ideological fronts cuts across commercial and technology fronts.

Mike Green: In those areas, Japan, for example, has enormous assets. If you're talking about commercial technological assessments, Japan has enormous capability in the trade ministry and elsewhere. So maybe the way to think about Five Eyes is not kind of the inner most circle and the inner most sensitive sources and methods, but let's actually broaden how we think about intelligence and information sharing in this broad multi-domain competition we're in, kind of summarizing what you're saying, because there's a lot where Japan brings assets. I mean, part
of what makes Five Eyes work is each ally brings some significant capabilities. If we're talking about commercial and technology issues about development, about views in Southeast Asia towards Belt and Road, that is information where Japan and Korea potentially, and others can plug in and play in a very significant way. And we're going to have to do that. We're going to have to do that, but I'm with you.

Mike Green: We got to what we have with Five Eyes historically is a very, very precious and unique relationship that we don't want to do damage to even as we expand coordination, information and intelligence sharing. Let me end by asking you both. I'll start with Mira. Where do you see our alliances in 5, 10 years? There are a lot of variables, but Blue Sky, where do you think they're heading? Do you think the forces of history, the structural factors are favorable to alliances? Do you think we're going to lose some? Open question, but about the future, starting with you, Mira, where do you think our alliances are going to be in 10 years if we're not incredibly stupid? Maybe that's a big if.

Mira Rapp-Hooper: Well, it might seem sort of reckless to be optimistic in this moment, but count me as an Alliance optimist, at least for now, I actually think we are poised to overhaul this system and keep it running in both Europe and Asia for decades more. Obviously I think having a leader at the helm who not only appreciates alliances, but understands why in this context America can't do without them will be fundamental to this case. But the reason that I believe this to be true is precisely because the structural forces indicate that it's in all of our interests to stick together. China is going to continue to rise. And of course that is not something that the United States can face down on its own. And while Russia is certainly a power on the decline, it's also shown its ability to do quite a lot of damage on the way down.

Mira Rapp-Hooper: And of course now, confronting a global pandemic, we've actually seen our allies’ capabilities thrust into relief far more than ever. Some of the highest pandemic performers have been American allies while the United States founders. So I actually like to think that we are poised to craft a strategy towards China as Abe is laying out in his book that is heavily reliant on allies and takes advantage of all they have to offer, becomes a fulcrum of US strategy as it should be in Asia. And that the United States will also renew its commitment to the transatlantic Alliance.

Mira Rapp-Hooper: And then in particular, if we expand what our alliances do, we can ask allies to take on more burden and to increasingly work together. I think 10 years from now, our alliances won't look exactly as they do now. They will have found ways to transcend their regions a little bit more. We'll see more networking in Asia. We will still see any amount of angst over burden sharing and the extent to which allies may not be working together as we might like. But these are tales as old as time. In some ways it's remarkable that the system has lasted this long as a set of alliances between sovereign states, but its success is undeniable. And I think the geopolitical picture means that we need it more than ever. So count me as an optimist to believe it's going to survive and find a way to thrive.
Mike Green: Terrific. Abe?

Abe Denmark: I'm an optimistic about it too, for all the reasons that Mira said. The logic is pretty inescapable. Even if you look at the Trump administration's foundational strategic documents, National Security Strategy, the National Defense Strategy, they talk a lot about how important our alliances and partnerships are. The challenge there of course, I don't think that the president agrees with his own strategy, but I think it shows that even in the most skeptical of administrations, the logic of these things is quite inescapable.

Abe Denmark: But I also don't think that they're automatic, that if handled in the wrong way, it could actually cause a lot of damage. And that some of the pieces that the United States is considering doing some of the policy initiatives can actually be quite damaging to our alliances and toward power and access in Asia and Europe more broadly. But lastly, in terms of optimism, I think there's a great PhD dissertation to be written about alliances over the last three, almost four years, which is that we previously thought of these relationships as fairly fragile and that if the United States mishandled these things, that relationships would collapse and these countries would grow on their own.

Abe Denmark: And I think what we've found over the last three years is that the relationships were actually quite resilient, even in the face of tremendous pressure and criticism from the president of the United States, the United States has not lost any treaty allies and even Duterte in the Philippines, most skeptical of these relationships, has gone back on his previous declarations. And even he, I think, recognizes at some level that this relationship is important to his country. Whether that logic holds into a second Trump administration term, I think it's hard to say. I think a lot about the future of these alliances will depend on the next US election and where the United States goes from there. But I think the logic of the United States getting value out of these relationships and our allies and partners getting value out of these relationships means that they're actually quite resilient. And I expect that they'll be stronger and still very relevant in the next 5, 10, 15 years.

Mike Green: Mira Rapp-Hooper’s new book from Harvard University Press on US alliances around the world is Shields of the Republic and Abe Denmark's forthcoming book from Columbia University Press is US Strategy in the Asian century, focused on US alliances in the Pacific and the context of geopolitical challenges we face in the years ahead. I'm really glad you guys wrote these books. They are sympathetic in argument, but highly complimentary in terms of the focus you each take. And I hope you create a whole bunch of new Abe Denmarks and Mira Rapp-Hoopers who want to study alliances in different dimensions. As a scholar, practitioner like yourselves, it's been a little bit lonely in the Alliance field, to be honest, a lot of people in the US government work on alliances a lot, but the Academy just has not produced very many books, small number, me and Victor Cha, Sheila Smith.
Mike Green: And you guys are really taking a big ambitious bite of the apple and setting up, I think a whole lot of more specific looks at different aspects of alliances, which can be really interesting IR theory and good scholarship, but also make us better alliances because as you both pointed out, there's a logic to alliances. I don't buy the argument that Washington's farewell address meant that Americans hate alliances. That was very particular in a certain moment in American history, polls and history show we're actually pretty good at and care a lot about alliances, but you can really mess them up. You can really mess them up the wrong initiative towards an adversary of an ally, an inability to understand that they also face burdens and risks. You can really mess it up. And also people don't appreciate historically how often we open up the hood and retool the engine.

Mike Green: I mean, our alliances with Japan, with NATO, with Korea are so different from where they were a generation or two generations ago. And that takes remarkable amounts of hard negotiation, of course, but also deep strategic thought. We started in the beginning of this discussion saying that this sort of allies versus China debate is over and I think is right. And I hope people appreciate that as George Schultz and others argued, if you're serious about grand strategy, you got to be really serious about alliances and not just saying they matter, but making them work and your books are really going to help people understand how to do that. So thank you both good luck with all the book talks and the book sales. I look forward to the movies. I want a cameo and thanks again for joining us.

Mira Rapp-Hooper: Thanks so much for having us, Mike.

Abe Denmark: Thanks Mike. I hope you play me in my bio pic.

Andrew Schwartz: Thanks for listening. For more on strategy and the Asia program’s work, visit the CSIS’ website at csis.org and click on the Asia program page.