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The stadial model of alignment formation (SMAF): Conceptualising strategic alignments between states

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Abstract
Despite being ubiquitously used, the concept of alignment remains inchoate. Existing literature offers more than 30 interpretations of the term and very few attempts to develop an objective indicators-based metric of alignment. This state of the field makes assessments of the degree to which states are aligned problematic. This article systematises the theoretical knowledge about alliances, alignments, strategic partnerships, and other forms of cooperation and draws on some empirical observations to develop a 'stadial model of alignment formation' (SMAF). The model conceptualises, operationalises, measures, and explains interstate alignment with greater precision and consistency. It also includes the explanatory factors in the form of the three balances – the balance of power, the balance of threat, and the balance of interest – and connections between them located along the stages of alignment formation. As such, the SMAF framework gauges the relative scale and depth of strategic alignments and can facilitate comparative analysis.

Introduction

How to define, measure, and explain strategic alignments between states? International Relations (IR) literature does not offer a universal alignment framework or systematically define 'alignment', which remains an inchoate term. It also reveals conceptual problems hindering assessments of interstate alignments. Scholars identified the problem of the terms alliance, alignment, and coalition being used as identical in much written work as early as the 1980s[1] and later argued for a more careful distinction,[2] but the problem continues to beset the field today. Walt uses 'alignment' interchangeably with formal 'alliance' and does not provide indicators for either.[3] Alignment has been used as a synonym for alliance.[4] At the same time, existing datasets that collect information on alliances for quantitative studies pool military alliances together with coalitions, non-aggression pacts, and ententes.[5] All these have also been called 'strategic partnerships' that highlight common security interests to various degrees[6] but are so broad and imprecise that any security-related communication between states would fit into them.[7] The broader notion of 'cooperation' in IR has

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[1] Michael D. Ward, *Research Gaps in Alliance Dynamics* (Denver, CO: University of Denver Press, 1982), p. 14.

[2] James D. Morrow, 'Alliances, credibility, and peacetime costs', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 38:2 (1994), pp. 270–97.

[3] Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), p. 1.

[4] Colleen Chidley, 'Towards a framework of alignment in International Relations', *Politikon*, 41:1 (2014), pp. 141–57 (p. 147).

[5] Alexander Lanoszka, *Military Alliances in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022), p. 17.

[6] Bruno Tertrais, 'The changing nature of military alliances', *Washington Quarterly*, 27:2 (2004), pp. 133–50 (p. 100).

[7] Thomas S. Wilkins, '"Alignment", not "alliance": The shifting paradigm of international security cooperation. Toward a conceptual taxonomy of alignment', *Review of International Studies*, 38:1 (2012), pp. 53–76 (p. 60).

also been employed with various understandings and forms, indicating stagnation in conceptual development.[8]

Even the definitions of the seemingly more unequivocal 'alliance' vary significantly in comprehensiveness and precision, with the same case fitting into some definitions but not others. Tertrais refers to the 'laxity' with which experts and officials use the term.[9] Indeed, there are more than 30 different definitions of 'alliance' in the literature, and only two attempts to develop an objective indicators-based taxonomy, both dated.[10]

Conceptual problems around alliances and alignments in IR are perennial ones. An important early work on alliances by George Liska acknowledges the difficulty of studying alliances due to the impossibility of separating them from international politics in general: 'it is impossible to speak of international relations without referring to alliances; the two often merge in all but name'.[11] A decade later, Holsti, Hopmann, and Sullivan similarly stated that alliances are 'a universal component of relations between political units, irrespective of time or place'.[12] Later, Snyder echoed these concerns, arguing that while alliances and alignments are the most central phenomena in international politics, isolating them as objects of analysis is difficult due to their ubiquity and variety of formal and informal manifestations.[13] Lanoszka recently highlighted that 'scholars have counted alliances in all sorts of ways, creating confusion as to the true count, and running the risk of comparing apples to oranges'.[14] The assessment by Wilkins remains accurate: despite multiple publications, there is still little understanding of 'alliances' and other 'alignments' between states, and there is no dedicated effort at a conceptual taxonomy.[15] Such various definitions and the lack of a universal framework complicate the empirical assessment of alignments, making understanding international politics more challenging.

This article attempts to bring clarity to the discussion of alignments by developing a stadial model of alignment formation (SMAF) framework that provides metrics for strategic alignments and can facilitate cross-case comparisons. It synthesises the literature on various forms of interstate cooperation to construct an objective, comprehensive, and empirically operationalisable model of interstate alignments with ex-ante deductive justification for its indicators. SMAF captures the stages of alignment formation – the 'what' of the strategic alignment – and alignment incentives – the 'why' of strategic alignments, focusing on what causal forces drive alignment formation and how. Thus, it consists of two connected clusters: the first consists of three stages of the early, moderate, and advanced alignment and the associated seven indicators, and the second deals with alignment incentives gauged by the three balances – the balance of power, the balance of threat, and the balance of interest – and the relationship between them in generating different alignment stages. As such, the SMAF framework allows measuring and explaining the changes in interstate alignment relationships over time while also providing a rough point estimate of the absolute degree of cooperation, which can help analysts generate more accurate empirical assessments of alignments and global power dynamics more broadly.

In developing the SMAF framework, this research subscribes to the term 'alignment', recognising that there are no perfect concepts in IR. 'Alignment' is preferred because, first, unlike 'alliance', it removes the formal treaty cut-off point and leaves room for more indicators and, hence, conceptual development. Second, 'alignment' emphasises military cooperation, which constitutes

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[8]Moritz S. Graefrath and Marcel Jahn, 'Conceptualising interstate cooperation', *International Theory*, 15:1 (2023), pp. 24–52.

[9]Tertrais, 'The changing nature of military alliances', p. 149.

[10]These two are Edwin H. Fedder, 'The concept of alliance', *International Studies Quarterly*, 12:1 (1968), pp. 65–86 and Bruce M. Russett, 'An empirical typology of international military alliances', *Midwest Journal of Political Science*, 15:2 (1971), pp. 262–89.

[11]George Liska, *Nations in Alliance: The Limits of Interdependence* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1962), p. 3.

[12]Ole R. Holsti, P. Terrence Hopmann, and John D. Sullivan, *Unity and Disintegration in International Alliances* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1973), p. 2.

[13]Glenn H. Snyder, 'Alliances, balance, and stability', *International Organization*, 45:1 (1991), pp. 121–42 (p. 121).

[14]Lanoszka, *Military Alliances*, p. 13.

[15]Wilkins, '"Alignment", not "alliance"', p. 54.

the cornerstone of an alignment but which other terms, such as just 'cooperation' or various 'partnerships', tend to underemphasise. In this respect, SMAF is informed by Korolev's earlier attempt to develop multifactor measures of China–Russia military cooperation,[16] but it moves forward by differentiating between early and advanced alignment and associating alignment stages with explicit causal factors. Third, it reflects cooperation that is not ad hoc, as in the case of coalitions, but grounded in long-term strategic factors. Thus, there are structural reasons for an alignment, and once alignment is formed, it is unlikely to unravel overnight.[17]

The article proceeds as follows. The next section takes a deeper dive into conceptual ambiguity associated with alliances, alignments, and other terms denoting cooperation between states, highlights its implications for empirical research, and clarifies the analytical utility of the SMAF framework. The third section explicates the analytical approach to developing the SMAF framework. The fourth section presents the framework itself: it defines and operationalises the indicators that measure alignment and identifies the causal factors and their conditions along the alignment stages. The fifth section concludes by discussing the model's limitations and application variations.

The definitions of alignment: Conceptual ambiguity and empirical implications

Extant literature is beset with conceptual ambiguity regarding both the forms and the causes of alliances and alignments. Existing definitions have a minimal common denominator by presenting alliances as specific relationships between states to achieve certain goals. However, they differ vastly in the type and goals of an alliance. The range sweeps from some form of loose cooperation over general goals to strict commitments solidified by a formal alliance treaty.

The alliance-as-a-loose-cooperation approach is represented by scholars who see alliances as formal or informal interstate relationships that may imply closer association and concerted actions. For Walt, both 'formal' and 'informal' relationships of security cooperation between sovereign states qualify as an alliance.[18] Weitsman provides an even broader definition of alliances as agreements that simply provide 'some element of security' to the participants.[19] Barnett and Levy prefer the term 'alliance' but talk about both 'alliances and alignments' and, like Walt and Weitsman, understand 'alliance' in its broadest sense as a 'formal or informal relationship of security cooperation between states and involving mutual expectations of some degree of policy coordination on security issues under certain conditions in the future'.[20] They do not specify the degree or the form of alignment commitment or consider a formal alliance treaty a condition for mutual security support. Liska also uses 'alignment' and 'alliance' interchangeably, viewing the latter as merely formalising the former.[21]

A significant number of works define alliance as a form of a written agreement or formal treaty.[22] Snyder, for example, defines alliances as 'formal associations of states for the use (or non-use)

[16]Alexander Korolev, 'On the verge of an alliance: Contemporary China–Russia military cooperation', *Asian Security*, 15:3 (2019), pp. 233–52.

[17]Elaboration on how these assumptions inform the analysis follows in the third section.

[18]Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, p. 1.

[19]Patricia A. Weitsman, *Dangerous Alliances: Proponents of Peace, Weapons of War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 27.

[20]Michael N. Barnett and Jack S. Levy, 'Domestic sources of alliances and alignments: The case of Egypt, 1962–1973', *International Organization*, 45:3 (1991), pp. 369–95 (pp. 370–1).

[21]Liska, *Nations in Alliance*, p. 3.

[22]See Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Dan Reiter, 'Learning, realism, and alliances: The weight of the shadow of the past', *World Politics*, 46:4 (1994), pp. 490–526; Brett Ashley Leeds, 'Do alliances deter aggression? The influence of military alliances on the initiation of militarised interstate disputes', *American Journal of Political Science*, 47:3 (2003), pp. 427–39; Brian Lai and Dan Reiter, 'Democracy, political similarity, and international alliances, 1816–1992', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 44:2 (2000), pp. 203–27; Alastair Smith, 'Alliance formation and war', *International Studies Quarterly*, 39:4 (1995), pp. 405–25; D. Scott Bennett, 'Testing alternative models of alliance duration, 1816–1984', *American Journal of Political Science*, 41:3 (1997), pp. 846–78; Liska, *Nations in Alliance*; Holsti, Hopmann, and Sullivan, *Unity and Disintegration*; J. David Singer and Melvin Small, 'Formal alliances, 1815–1939: A quantitative description', *Journal of Peace Research*, 3:1 (1966), pp. 1–31; Russett, 'An empirical typology'; James D. Morrow, 'Alliances: Why write them down?', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 3:1 (2000), pp. 63–83.

of military force, in specified circumstances, against states outside their own membership'.[23] The emphasis on formality helps narrow down the definition significantly, even though at the cost of excluding a range of strategically consequential informal alignments. However, as Leeds demonstrates, even formal alliances represent a 'heterogeneous category of cooperative security agreements'.[24] A broader perspective on a formal military alliance includes alliances that do not imply a security guarantee or do not specify what form the 'support' will take or the exact conditions under which it is provided.[25]

There are also narrower definitions that refer to very concrete agreements specifying the goals and parameters of the alliance. Reiter defines alliances strictly as formal mutual defence pacts that states enter to deter aggressors or contribute and receive military assistance in the event of war.[26] Russett also defines alliances as formal agreements concerning the conditions of employing military force.[27] Singer and Small offer an even narrower perspective by discussing only alliances formed more than six months before the outbreak of war and representing mutual agreements while excluding unilateral guarantees.[28] Herz focuses on implementation clauses of alliances and standardisation of equipment, unified commands, the network of military bases, and other alliance infrastructure.[29] Sorokin defines alliances as formal agreements regarding the 'putative purpose of coordinating behaviour in the event of specified contingencies of a military nature', thus excluding non-formalised agreements and focusing only on purely offensive alliances.[30] Lanoszka also excludes informal partnerships or alignments and 'alliances of convenience' between adversaries formed to tackle urgent security challenges.[31]

A similarly broad conceptual variety is found concerning the goals of alliances. Some authors emphasise dealing with threats or more powerful states as alliances' goals. Others emphasise political goals and profits rather than threats. Some speak of some general policy as the common goal, while others limit this policy to the area of national security. Still, some refer to specific goals related to jointly fighting a war.[32] The emphasis on war makes alliances overlap with coalitions, understood as 'war-fighting alignments'[33] or 'war-fighting collectives'[34] – groups of states that coordinate their military activity during a war and regarding specific military objectives.[35] Salmon demonstrates that in the absence of a single definition, the meaning of alliance has varied 'from agreements on values, ideology, mutual benefits to agreements for fighting and, indeed, attacking third parties'.[36]

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[23]Snyder, *Alliance Politics*, p. 4.

[24]Leeds, 'Do alliances deter aggression?', p. 427.

[25]Tertrais, 'The changing nature of military alliances', p. 136.

[26]Reiter, 'Learning, realism, and alliances', p. 495.

[27]Russett, 'An empirical typology', p. 262–3.

[28]Singer and Small, 'Formal alliances'.

[29]John H. Herz, *International Politics in The Atomic Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), p. 124.

[30]Gerald L. Sorokin, 'Arms, alliances, and security tradeoffs in enduring rivalries', *International Studies Quarterly*, 38:3 (1994), pp. 421–46 (p. 423).

[31]Lanoszka, *Military Alliances*, p. 15.

[32]To appreciate the variety of alliance incentives ranging from some loose general goals to strictly defined purposes of providing deterrence or fighting wars, as well as the ways of fighting wars, see Singer and Small, 'Formal alliances'; Fedder, 'The concept of alliance'; Holsti, Hopmann, and Sullivan, *Unity and Disintegration*; Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*; Barnett and Levy, 'Domestic sources of alliances and alignments'; Snyder, *Alliance Politics*; Randall L. Schweller, 'Bandwagoning for profit: Bringing the revisionist state back in', *International Security*, 19:1 (1994), pp. 72–107; Stefan Bergsmann, 'The concept of military alliance', in Erich Reiter and Heinz Gärtner (eds), *Small States and Alliances* (New York: Physica-Verlag Heidelberg, 2001), pp. 25–37; Trevor Salmon, 'The European Union: Just an alliance or a military alliance?', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 29:5 (2006), pp. 813–42.

[33]Wilkins, '"Alignment", not "alliance"', p. 65.

[34]Rosella Cappella Zielinski and Ryan Grauer, 'Understanding battlefield coalitions', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 45:2 (2022), pp. 177–85.

[35]Daniel S. Morey, 'Military coalitions and the outcome of interstate wars', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 12:4 (2016), pp. 533–51 (p. 535); Patricia A. Weitsman, 'Wartime alliances versus coalition warfare: How institutional structure matters in the multilateral prosecution of wars', *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, 4:2 (2010), pp. 113–38.

[36]Salmon, 'The European Union', p. 839.

The term 'strategic partnership' has been surrounded by even greater ambiguity. There are so many interstate relations called 'partnerships' and so little conceptual work defining the term that its analytical value is questionable. As documented by Kay, partnerships appear with various adjectives, and numerous other terms with parallel meanings are adopted by various states.[37] These include the most popular 'strategic partnership', but also 'strategic dialogue', 'special relationship', 'enhanced relationship', 'constructive strategic partnership', 'comprehensive partnership', 'long-term comprehensive partnership', 'long-term stable constructive partnership', and 'good-neighbourly mutual-trust partnership' and many other partnerships.[38] These terms may signal diplomatic posturing in different real-world situations but remain imprecise and open to interpretation. Often, 'partnerships' play the role of not more than 'simply a rhetorical device used by diplomats to help them around the rough edges of shifting global politics'.[39] There have been very scarce scholarly treatments of the term in connection to alliances and alignments and, hence, limited understanding of the nature and functions of partnerships.[40] On top of it all, some scholars have talked about alignments under the partnership framework[41] and partnerships as falling under the concept of alignment.[42]

The above review of concepts is unavoidably incomplete, yet its broader point is that the theoretical and conceptual apparatus available to scholars exploring interstate alignments is somewhat ambiguous and lacks agreed-upon objective metrics. Definitions of different forms of strategic cooperation overlap and are used interchangeably and imprecisely. Since 'alignment' is a core dependent variable that pervades the IR field, the scarcity of attempts to objectively measure it has implications for empirical research. It has retarded the development of theories about alignments and created problems for accurate empirical assessment of real-world interstate strategic cooperation, creating a situation when some of the 'puzzles' of increasing or decreasing cooperation that scholars have sought to explain may not actually exist by objective measures, while others might have gone unrecognised.

Consider, for example, the existing studies of China–Russia relations. Explaining contemporary China–Russia strategic cooperation is difficult because the very dependent variable – the degree and trajectory of cooperation – cannot be defined. In the lack of an accepted alignment framework, China–Russia cooperation has been called by numerous under-specified terms, such as 'partnership', 'limited partnership', 'strategic partnership', 'limited defensive strategic partnership', 'axis of convenience', 'axis of necessity', 'axis of insecurity', 'axis of authoritarians', 'entente', 'strategic parallelism', a 'romance', and an 'ambivalent embrace'. The term 'alliance' has also been used, at times with adjectives such as 'emerging alliance', 'ominous anti-American alliance', 'incipient alliance', or something that 'will fall short of a formal alliance but will be closer than the strategic partnership'.[43] However, the discussion has been missing a conceptual framework that would allow determining how China and Russia fare in terms of alignment formation. None of the applied terms have been defined in a manner that is sufficient for making them subject to systematic empirical examination. Scholars appear to talk past each other, basing their arguments on unstated assumptions and unspecified causal mechanisms. The conflicting depictions reveal the problem of answering a seemingly simple question of whether China is aligned with Russia or not.

[37] Sean Kay, 'What is a strategic partnership?', *Problems of Post-Communism*, 47:3 (2000), pp. 15–24.

[38] Kay, 'What is a strategic partnership', p. 15.

[39] Ibid., p. 17.

[40] Thomas S. Wilkins, 'From strategic partnership to strategic alliance? Australia–Japan security ties and the Asia-Pacific', *Asia Policy*, 20 (2015), pp. 81–112 (p. 81).

[41] Georg Strüver, 'International alignment between interests and ideology: The case of China's partnership diplomacy', German Institute of Global and Area Studies Working Paper 283 (2016).

[42] Chaka Ferguson, 'The strategic use of soft balancing: The normative dimensions of the Chinese–Russian "strategic partnership"', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 35:2 (2012), pp. 197–222 (p. 205).

[43] For an extensive review of these and other terms associated with terminological ambiguity around China–Russia relations, see Alexander Korolev, *China–Russia Strategic Alignment in International Politics* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022), pp. 16–19.

Post–Cold War United States (US)–India alignment is another example of how the lack of an explicit, theory-grounded, and operationalisable alignment framework makes objective assessments difficult. Thus, the US and India have been called 'natural allies' and 'global partners' with a 'broad convergence of geostrategic and geoeconomic interests'[44] and the 'potential to shape the future security architecture of the Indo-Pacific'.[45] The US was called India's 'single-most important external partner', with which strategic cooperation exceeded what India ever achieved with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. India was announced as the US's first 'major defence partner' with anticipated military-technological cooperation at the level of the US's most advanced alliances.[46] At the same time, many experts questioned the presence of 'alignment' in US–India relations, suggesting that inflated expectations do not reflect the realities of US–India cooperation.[47] Some even suggested that India is no closer to the US than is Russia or China and that the US–India partnership 'lacks the maturity critical to enabling the cooperation'.[48] As in the case of China–Russia alignment, the studies of US–India alignment have produced a wealth of empirical material but, in the absence of a theory-grounded alignment framework, have so far failed to test the historical record against even a rough benchmark of strategic cooperation.

In summary, the field needs a workable alignment framework that would allow categorising various interstate strategic cooperations according to the scale of alignment, thus achieving greater precision, validity, and reliability of assessments. Such a framework must be flexible enough to capture possible variations of interstate alignments but simultaneously parsimonious and general enough to travel from case to case successfully. For example, when applied to the China–Russia and US–India alignments mentioned above, its empirical value added would be in helping achieve a more rigorous assessment of how the two alignments fare against each other and how technically prepared they are for a formal military alliance should such decisions take place. Knowing the relative 'allianceness' of China–Russia and US–India alignments, in turn, can help understand the contemporary great power rivalry – a deeper China–Russia alignment would mean China's greater access to Russia's energy and military resources, which is a critical asset for China in its growing confrontation with the US. If the US–India alignment is stronger, Washington will be in a better strategic position to tackle China's rise, especially in the Indo-Pacific region.

This article endeavours to develop such a framework. At the same time, the goal here is not to deliver an exhaustive list of alignment indicators or causal factors that drive alignments but to develop a theory-grounded baseline model that can help gauge the relative depth and breadth of interstate alignments, but which will require refinements and revisions through empirical testing. The suggested conceptual framework represents a necessary first step to fill a critical gap in the IR literature. It should not be treated as a fully developed causal theory. While the discussion of alignment sequence and consequences of changes in the balances of power, threat, and interests implies causality (e.g. with the weakening of the alignment incentives, one should expect a weakened alignment), the goal here is to offer a typology that could serve as the basis for a fully specified causal theory. This applies particularly to the second causal cluster of the model. While the first cluster can stand on its own as a descriptive typology of alignments, the explanations of why states move across different levels of alignment developed in the second cluster with reference to the three balances should be treated as more hypothetical and requiring further testing. Such an approach seems

[44]Muhsin Puthan Purayil, 'The rise of China and the question of an Indo-US alliance: A perspective from India', *Asian Affairs*, 52:1 (2021), pp. 62–78 (p. 63).

[45]Walter C. Ladwig III and Anit Mukherjee, 'Sailing together or ships passing in the night? India and the United States in Southeast Asia', *Asia Policy*, 26:1 (2019), pp. 51–76 (p. 52).

[46]Joshua T. White, 'After the foundational agreements: An agenda for US–India defense and security cooperation', Foreign Policy at Brookings (January 2021).

[47]Sameer Lalwani and Heather Byrne, 'Great expectations: Asking too much of the US–India strategic partnership', *The Washington Quarterly*, 42:3 (2019), pp. 41–64.

[48]Cara Abercrombie, 'Realising the potential: Mature defense cooperation and the US–India strategic partnership', *Asia Policy*, 26:1 (2019), pp. 119–44 (p. 120).

justifiable because the issue of definitions precedes explanations, as the social science methodology literature highlights.[49]

The analytical approach

The development of the SMAF framework begins with a few assumptions about alignments. First, as can be gathered from the model's name, alignment formation is a stadial process in that developing a functioning alignment takes time. Alignment must pass an early and a moderate stage before it moves into an advanced stage. Second, although formal alliance treaties are important, relying on them can be misleading, and, therefore, the primary concern here is the actual working of military cooperation that has come to fruition rather than the promises of formal treaties. Third, the backbone of strategic alignment is military cooperation, which constitutes the primary emphasis of the framework. Each of these assumptions requires further unfolding.

According to the first assumption, states are unlikely to become closely aligned over a very short period. While they may rush into a binding alliance treaty in response to an external threat, the actual functioning of such an alliance and the compatibility and interoperability of the allies' military forces will likely be compromised unless the allies already have a history of comprehensive strategic cooperation.

The relevant alignment literature implicitly contains the idea that a strategic alignment has some form of a 'life cycle' and progresses through stages. Some early literature viewed alliances as the outcomes of time-consuming institutional building.[50] Intra-alliance contacts and integration, along with the background of alliance formation, were considered critical criteria of alignment.[51] Later literature established that greater institutionalisation, understood as increased policy coordination, routinisation, and formalisation, has an impact on alignment's reliability, performance in military conflicts, and credibility to deter challenges,[52] which also implies that alignment formation and consolidation are sequential processes unfolding in stages. Some viewed such institutionalisation as able overtime to lead the alliances to function as established cybernetic organisations that act to perpetuate themselves.[53] Wilkins suggests that interstate security cooperation evolves along a 'collaboration continuum', going through the stages of formation, implementation, and evaluation.[54] Institutional structures of alignments can tighten and deepen, evolving towards closer cooperation or a full-fledged alliance.[55] From this perspective, the formation of a formal alliance is just a more advanced stage of alignment formation, which serves to strengthen pre-existing conditions.[56]

The idea of alignment as a sequential process can be further highlighted through its contradistinction to coalitions, which, while overlapping with some definitions of alliance as mentioned above, are presented as ad hoc forms of multinational cooperation with no prior security arrangements. Coalitions are narrowly focused, short-lived wartime collaborations designed to deal with a specific unforeseen problem at a particular time with no commitment to a durable relationship.[57] They form with no prior commitments and regardless of the nature of the pre-war relationship

[49]Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 15.

[50]See Mancur Olson and Richard Zeckhauser, 'An economic theory of alliances', *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, 48:3 (1966), pp. 266–79; William H. Riker, *The Theory of Political Coalitions* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1962).

[51]Russett, 'An empirical typology'.

[52]Morrow, 'Alliances, credibility, and peacetime costs'; Smith, 'Alliance formation and war'; Michael W. Simon and Erik Gartzke, 'Political system similarity and the choice of allies: Do democracies flock together, or do opposites attract?', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 40:4 (1996), pp. 617–35; Brett Ashley Leeds and Sezi Anac, 'Alliance institutionalisation and alliance performance', *International Interactions*, 31:3 (2005), pp. 183–202.

[53]Bennett, 'Testing alternative models of alliance duration', p. 855.

[54]Wilkins, '"Alignment", not "alliance"', p. 69.

[55]Thomas S. Wilkins, 'Russo-Chinese strategic partnership: A new form of security cooperation?', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 29:2 (2008), pp. 358–83 (p. 367).

[56]Snyder, 'Alliances, balance, and stability', p. 124.

[57]Wilkins, '"Alignment", not "alliance"', p. 64.

and dissolve once a specific mission is complete.[58] Meanwhile, pre-war alliance coordination can impact the effectiveness of military coalitions,[59] suggesting that the depth of a strategic alignment, understood as a sequential process, can also matter for coalition wartime performance.

In this light, there are reasons to suggest that some alignment indicators are likely to precede others and that alignment should have an ordinal dimension to it. Therefore, the first cluster of the SMAF framework (the institutionalisation of inter-military relations) deals with the stages of alignment formation and consolidation. It is ordinal in that it consists of three sub-clusters of indicators of early, moderate, and advanced alignments. While this approach is not without problems (e.g. no theoretical guidance for combining the measures or interpreting the resulting scale), it is believed to better reflect the dynamics of alignment formation due to the above-mentioned reasons.

At the same time, presenting alignment as a stadial process introduces a temporal dimension to the framework and suggests that alignment is not an irreversible one-way ratchet. It can move towards greater institutionalisation but can also de-institutionalise over time. Indeed, as emphasised by Snyder, some alignments may, depending on the intensity of alignment incentives, begin to run counter to the prior pattern of tacit alignment and thereby transform the pattern.[60] If this happens, alignment may experience 'de-institutionalisation'[61] – erosion, discontinuity, or replacement of its activities or practices. An example of this process is the US–Philippines alliance during Rodrigo Duterte's presidency in the Philippines (2016–22). Worried about military confrontation with Beijing and unsure about the US's security guarantees, Duterte launched an agenda of 'strategic separation' from the US, under which he scaled down joint military exercises with the US by suspending joint patrols in the South China Sea, barring the US from building arms depots in the Philippines' bases, stopping the development of facilities in the Bautista Airbase in Palawan, and barring the US from using bases in the Philippines for launching the 'freedom of navigation' operations.[62] China–Russia military-technical cooperation (MTC) is another example of how an alignment can move in both directions. In the mid 2000s, China–Russia MTC stagnated, with some regular meetings, which had been consistently taking place since the early 1990s, suspended for a few years due to changing military needs in both countries. However, China–Russia MTC was reactivated in 2008 and progressed after that.[63]

The second assumption – that a formal alliance treaty is not particularly helpful for assessing alliances – does not imply that written agreements are irrelevant. Indeed, many view them as a cornerstone issue for understanding interstate alignments because they can add precision and credibility to the relationship.[64] Notably, the existing quantitative datasets used in empirical studies of alliances, such as the Alliance Treaty Obligations and Provisions (ATOP) and the Correlates of War (COW), are based on formal alliance treaties and other written agreements.[65]

However, the present analysis believes that relying on formal treaties can be misleading because the lack thereof does not necessarily indicate weak strategic cooperation, whereas their presence does not mean strong cooperation. States with common strategic interests can act as allies without treaties, which may show little more than a paper alliance. Morgenthau referred to situations when

[58] Weitsman, 'Wartime alliances', p. 115; Morey, 'Military coalitions', p. 535; Cappella Zielinski, and Grauer, 'Understanding battlefield coalitions', p. 179.

[59] Morey, 'Military coalitions', p. 535.

[60] Snyder, 'Alliances, balance, and stability', p. 125.

[61] Christine Oliver, 'The antecedents of deinstitutionalization', *Organization Studies*, 13:4 (1992), pp. 563–88.

[62] Richard Javad Heydarian, 'Tragedy of small power politics: Duterte and the shifting sands of Philippine foreign policy', *Asian Security*, 13:3 (2017), pp. 220–36 (p. 233).

[63] Korolev, 'On the verge of an alliance', p. 241.

[64] Bennett, 'Testing alternative models of alliance duration', p. 847; Reiter, 'Learning, realism, and alliances', p. 495; Salmon, 'The European Union', p. 819; Lanoszka, *Military Alliances*, p. 14.

[65] Douglas M. Gibler, *International Military Alliances, 1648–2008* (Version 4.1.) [Data set], CQ Press, 2009, available at: {https://correlatesofwar.org/data-sets/formal-alliances}; Brett Ashley Leeds, *The Alliance Treaty Obligation and Provisions Project (ATOP)* (Version 4.01.) [Data set], 2018, available at: {http://www.atopdata.org/}.

state interests 'so obviously call for concerted policies and actions that an explicit formulation of these interests, policies, and actions in the form of a treaty of alliance appears to be redundant'.[66] Snyder mentions the Anglo-French entente before World War I, a non-alliance relationship that generated alignment expectations greater than many formal alliances.[67] Wilkins describes how the 'Grand Alliance' of the US, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union, formed during World War II to defeat Nazi Germany, waged war as an alliance and significantly shifted the international power balance despite lacking an alliance treaty or other de jure alliance attributes.[68] Informal alignments, such as the US–UK, US–Israel, or US–Taiwan alignments, far surpass some formal alliances, such as, for example, the China–DPRK or US–Thailand alliances, in terms of de facto levels of security cooperation.

Empirically, relying on alliance treaties can be analytically misleading because high levels of formalisation can mean that the alignment commitment is questionable and cannot be relied upon.[69] In contrast, less explicit or even vague alignment agreements can mean more confidence of allies in each other's loyalty in the long run and make states feel obliged to stand by the ally in critical situations.[70] Some experts mention 'deliberate ambiguity' in some alignments that conceals the actual degree of cooperation;[71] this applies particularly to alignments between authoritarian states, which may prefer to keep their alignment arrangements opaque to avoid reputational costs if alliance obligations are not kept or not to provoke potential adversaries.

Therefore, the SMAF model's primary concern is the actual materialisation of military cooperation. In essence, it agrees with Ward, for whom alignments are 'not signified by formal treaties but are delineated by a variety of behavioral actions',[72] and Snyder's recommendation that discussions on the subject must not be limited to formal alliances because 'what we really want to understand is the broader phenomenon of "alignment", of which explicit alliance is merely a subset'.[73]

The third assumption concerns the scope of alignment and, hence, the dimensions an alignment framework should include. Some theoretical and empirical assessments of alliances have moved beyond the narrowly defined security guarantee to include multiple non-security dimensions.[74] Even more so in the case of 'alignments', which are viewed by some as 'less military oriented, and less determinative in their mutual defense commitments'[75] but more extensive than alliances since they do 'not focus solely upon the military dimension of international politics'[76] and spread across security, diplomatic, and economic spheres.[77]

However, while the rationale to develop a more multidimensional approach that moves beyond military cooperation may be well justified, the present analysis focuses on military cooperation as the backbone of interstate alignment. Existing literature agrees that most forms of alignment have security-related properties and are based on recognising common security concerns or providing for military cooperation to various degrees.[78] Non-military goals are usually handled through other

[66]Hans J. Morgenthau, 'Alliances in theory and practice', in Arnold Wolfers (ed.), *Alliance Policy in the Cold War* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976), pp. 184–212 (p. 183).

[67]Snyder, 'Alliances, balance, and stability', p. 125.

[68]Wilkins, '"Alignment", not "alliance"', pp. 60–1.

[69]Leeds and Anac, 'Alliance institutionalisation and alliance performance', p. 197.

[70]Glenn H. Snyder, 'The security dilemma in alliance politics', *World Politics*, 36:4 (1984), pp. 461–95 (p. 473).

[71]Wilkins, 'Russo-Chinese strategic partnership', p. 371; Lanoszka, *Military Alliances*, p. 14.

[72]Ward, *Research Gaps in Alliance Dynamics*, p. 7.

[73]Snyder, *Alliance Politics*, p. 123.

[74]Bennett, 'Testing alternative models of alliance duration'; Lai and Reiter, 'Democracy, political similarity, and international alliances'; Simon and Gartzke, 'Political system similarity and the choice of allies'.

[75]William Tow, 'Alliances and alignments in the twenty-first century', in Brendan Taylor (ed.), *Australia as an Asia-Pacific Regional Power: Friendships in Flux?* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 12–29, as cited in Wilkins, 'From strategic partnership to strategic alliance', p. 85.

[76]Ward, *Research Gaps in Alliance Dynamics*, p. 7.

[77]Wilkins, 'From strategic partnership to strategic alliance'.

[78]Fedder, 'The concept of alliance'; Holsti, Hopmann, and Sullivan, *Unity and Disintegration*; Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*; Barnett and Levy, 'Domestic sources of alliances and alignments'; Stephen M. Walt, 'Alliance', in Joel Krieger (ed.), *The Oxford*

modes of cooperation such as, in the case of many NATO members, the European Union (EU), the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), or multiple regional organisations, whereas alliances are geared to achieve common security goals.[79]

It is also tricky methodologically to assign relative weights to other dimensions (either economic or diplomatic) of cooperation, even if they might complement and augment military cooperation. As argued by Benson and Clinton, creating an additive index of alignment based on multiple characteristics is problematic because there is no theoretical guidance for combining different dimensions or interpreting the resulting scale.[80] Specifically, it is challenging to justifiably evaluate the relative magnitude of the differences between dimensions of cooperation: is an alignment that fares strongly on both military and economic cooperation scales twice as strong as an alignment with military cooperation only? Moreover, the existing empirical studies do not fully support the hypothesis about the interconnectedness between military and non-military dimensions of cooperation. Mansfield and Bronson found that trade did not necessarily make alliances more likely,[81] and the evidence on whether alliances enhance trade levels is also mixed.[82] Questions and issues like these make the assumed equivalence between different dimensions problematic and a hypothetical cross-dimensional index of alignment hard to rationalise.

The stadial model of alignment formation (SMAF)

Cluster one: Measuring military cooperation

The SMAF framework comprises seven indicators (stages) of military cooperation (vertical axis of Figure 1) that add up to early, moderate, and advanced cooperation. The early-stage indicators precede those in the moderate and advanced stages. Thus, the presence of an advanced indicator itself, even in its nascent form, indicates a higher overall degree of alignment. The degree of alignment is determined by the highest stage manifested in a case, and higher stages subsume lower stages. For example, stages 3 and 4 (military-technical cooperation/personnel exchange and regular military exercises) require stage 2 (mechanism of regular consultations). Similarly, stages 5, 6, and 7 necessitate stages 2, 3, and 4. The expansion of higher-level indicators (stages) reflects stronger alignment.

It is hypothetically possible to see moderate or even advanced indicators without early indicators, depending on the unique circumstances of a particular case. However, as argued below, there is a strong rationale behind the ordinal arrangement of these indicators. In most cases, we should expect to see lower stages of cooperation before alignment enters the moderate and advance stages.

The framework's first early indicator is *confidence-building measures* (CBMs). It indicates weak alignment because it marks a relatively low starting point of cooperation. By implementing CBMs, states attempt to overcome an initially high degree of mistrust or resolve highly contentious issues, such as border and territorial disputes, and thus remove them from bilateral agendas, which is believed to facilitate a sustained peace between even belligerent states.[83] States with high levels of bilateral trust, such as Canada and the US or Denmark and Sweden, do not actively patrol or make efforts to defend their common borders. They also worry less about the ensuing vulnerabilities because even though it would be easy for either side to initiate encroachment against the other,

Companion to Politics of the World (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 20; Wilkins, '"Alignment", not "alliance"'; Wilkins, 'From strategic partnership to strategic alliance'; Korolev, 'On the verge of an alliance'.

[79]Lanoszka, *Military Alliances*, p. 15.

[80]Brett V. Benson and Joshua D. Clinton, 'Assessing the variation of formal military alliances', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 60:5 (2016), pp. 866–98 (p. 876).

[81]Edward D. Mansfield and Rachel Bronson, 'Alliances, preferential trading arrangements, and international trade', *American Political Science Review*, 91:1 (1997), pp. 94–107.

[82]Harry Bliss and Bruce Russett, 'Democratic trading partners: The liberal connection, 1962–1989', *The Journal of Politics*, 60:4 (1998), pp. 1126–47.

[83]Douglas M. Gibler, 'Alliances that never balance: The territorial settlement treaty', *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, 15:1 (1996), pp. 75–97 (p. 89).
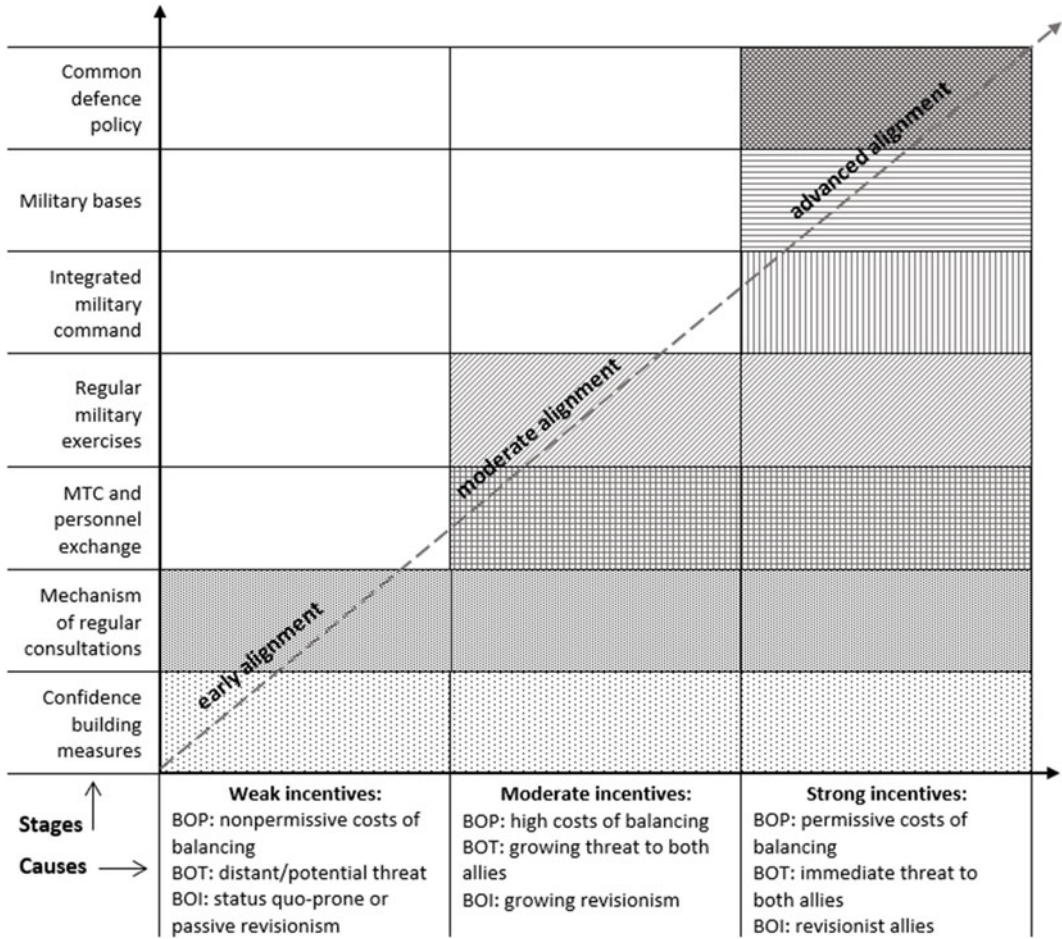
Figure 1. Stadial model of alignment formation.

mutual hostilities are highly unlikely. In contrast, in the context of low trust and concerns about vulnerabilities, as between the Soviet Union and the United States, active oversight and surveillance are employed.

Confidence-building activities are essential for incipient alignments because they can help states create a sense of a peaceful community and lay the foundations for deeper strategic cooperation. CBMs create interactive episodes of reciprocal behaviour, reducing uncertainty in a relationship. As Snyder points out, the overall sense of reciprocity between allies enhances mutual trust and fosters foundations for more advanced forms of cooperation.[84] Early CBMs can be in the form of 'emergency contact', the aim of which is, for example, to prevent dangerous military activities or resolve border disputes. Once these immediate problems are resolved and cooperation can move forward, CBMs can be measures of demilitarisation or desecuritisation of the common border, the routinisation of mechanisms for resolving disputes, or regularly sharing defence-related information, which facilitates predictability between the parties and indicates a higher level of trust.

As such, CBMs, as an early indicator of alignment, are more relevant to states lacking in bilateral trust or starting cooperation from a relatively low level. For example, the China–Russia and US–India alignments mentioned above had both started with CBMs before the relationship moved

[84]Snyder, *Alliance Politics*, p. 359.

to the next stages of cooperation. While China–Russia CBMs predominantly had to do with stabilising and demilitarising the historically disputed common border, and US–India CBMs helped overcome other thorny issues, such as India's nuclear weapons programme and the US's policy of containing it, in both cases, CBMs played a role in enhancing mutual trust. Therefore, assessing alignments between states encumbered by significant cultural differences or 'burdens of history' invites a check of whether the parties involved invested efforts into undertaking measures aimed at enhancing mutual confidence.

The *mechanism of regular inter-military consultations* follows CBMs as an indicator of early alignment. Regular consultations among allies constitute an essential aspect of an alliance,[85] whether an early alignment or an advanced alliance. The formation of a consultation mechanism is crucial for alignment institutionalisation and performance.[86] The evidence of regular official contacts between the military or other relevant ministries of the alignment member-states indicates the degree of strategic cooperation and integration.[87] The formal mechanism of interactions facilitates intra-alliance cooperation by enhancing mutual understanding and increasing the predictability of intra-alignment dynamics, which can be vital assets when joint action is required.[88] As documented by Snyder, in the lead-up to World War I, Russia felt emboldened to stand up to Austria and Germany because of its confidence in French support, which primarily derived from the experience of the bilateral military staff talks.[89] The key difference between CBMs and regular consultation is marked by a shift in the agenda from the existing problems between the consulting parties in the case of the former to broader issues of regional and global politics in the latter.

As alignment progresses, regular consultations may start to include unique platforms aimed at supporting more in-depth communication that the alignment parties do not have with other states outside of the alignment, and the consultations infrastructure become more comprehensive and institutionalised, including multiple government agencies and organisations, from top decision-makers to defence ministries or their equivalents to regional formats at the level of provinces and cities and further to regular contacts between different types of troops and army units. Such mechanisms facilitate effective information exchanges across the whole spectrum of relevant institutions and, hence, smoother functioning of alignment. Also, in a more advanced alignment, consultations have an element of 'thinking together' about external challenges, i.e. they contain holistic strategic assessments of external threats and regional security challenges and are not confined only to technical issues related to the procurement of arms or organisation of joint military exercises.

Military-technical cooperation (MTC), accompanied by regular military personnel exchanges, is the third indicator of alignment institutionalisation. It reflects the beginning of the moderate stage of strategic cooperation. According to Meick, military-technical cooperation can consist of a range of defence industry engagements, such as sales of arms, joint research and development of new weapons, technology transfer, maintenance of weapons systems with sharing of technical knowledge, and various weapons licensing agreements.[90] MTC, in the form of military training or technology transfer, is viewed as a measure of the depth of an alignment.[91] Access to each other's technology is one of the reasons why alliances remain useful for their participants in the 21st century.[92]

[85] Snyder, *Alliance Politics*, pp. 350–63.

[86] Leeds and Anac, 'Alliance institutionalisation and alliance performance'.

[87] Russett, 'An empirical typology', p. 267.

[88] Bennett, 'Testing alternative models of alliance duration', p. 855.

[89] Snyder, *Alliance Politics*, p. 353.

[90] Ethan Meick, 'China–Russia military-to-military relations: Moving toward a higher level of cooperation', US–China Economic and Security Review Commission (20 March 2017), available at: {https://www.uscc.gov/research/china-russia-military-military-relations-moving-toward-higher-level-cooperation}.

[91] Benson and Clinton, 'Assessing the variation of formal military alliances'.

[92] Tertrais, 'The changing nature of military alliances', p. 141.

MTC also increases interdependence and the compatibility of weapons, which may be crucial for allies in times of war when shared supplies of equipment and logistical and technological support may determine the alliance's performance.[93] Sharing technological expertise also requires a considerable amount of trust. Moreover, the proper organisation of MTC requires a high level of coordination across multiple institutions (research centres, manufacturers, and various government agencies), shared procedures, and standardisation of training. These are essential parameters of MTC that take time to develop. In turn, the active exchange of military personnel and opening military educational institutions and curricula to a foreign state that accompany MTC also require significant trust in the partner. MTC is critical for alignments between states transitioning from a strategic partnership to a deeper strategic alignment.[94]

In more advanced alignments, MTC goes beyond providing technical training and assistance related to purchasing arms to actual military technology transfers and long-term projects for joint design and the production of arms and their components. Growing interdependence is an essential aspect of this development. For personnel exchanges, the progress is manifested in the transition from short-term visits for technical training to joint military education programmes. At the same time, MTC as an indication of alignment requires that an ally does not engage in MTC of the same or higher level and quality with a third party that is a strategic rival or in confrontation with the other ally.

The fourth indicator, which closes the moderate cooperation stage, is *regular joint military exercises*. Exercises occur during peacetime and can happen regularly throughout an alignment's existence.[95] Such exercises are essential for an alignment's functioning because they contribute to greater military compatibility and interoperability, increase coordination, and practise joint techniques.[96] They always require some form of strategic and foreign policy calculus, whereas planning and conducting exercises require the commitment of important, often vast, human and material resources, specialised infrastructure, and logistics.[97] If conducted effectively and regularly, they create credible commitments, improve the ability of the allies to fight together, or even forge the allies into a unified fighting force that raises the chance that the alignment will win a war and make allies more likely to come to one another's aid in time of need.[98] According to Heuser and Ruiz Palmer, besides their training aim and benefits, exercises can have strategic implications in expressing preparedness or a foreign policy commitment to another country or group of countries and can be considered a reflection of an alliance's operational capacity.[99] Exercises also open the door to more advanced forms of military cooperation and often send important signals, admonitions, or assurances to specific external actors.

As the alignment relationship progresses, the geographic range and the content of joint military exercises change. The geography of exercises expands to distant regions, especially in response to new developments in international politics. Similarly, simple joint manoeuvres can grow to include establishing joint military command centres and introducing command code-sharing systems and other forms of interoperability. As with the previous indicator (MTC), an ally should not engage at a comparable level with the other ally's strategic rivals, which would turn alignment behaviour into something close to hedging behaviour. For example, India having advanced regular military exercises with both China and the US would not indicate a close alignment with either great power. In contrast, India's simultaneous engagement with the US and its other allies does not detract from US–India strategic cooperation.

[93] Korolev, 'On the verge of an alliance', p. 236.

[94] Wilkins, 'From strategic partnership to strategic alliance'.

[95] Bergsmann, 'The concept of military alliance', p. 28.

[96] Korolev, 'On the verge of an alliance', p. 236.

[97] Beatrice Heuser and Diego Ruiz Palmer, 'Introduction', in Beatrice Heuser, Tormod Heier, and Guillaume Lasconjarias (eds), *Military Exercises: Political Messaging and Strategic Impact* (Rome: NATO Defense College, 2018), pp. 1–9 (p. 1).

[98] Morrow, 'Alliances: Why write them down?', p. 71.

[99] Heuser and Ruiz Palmer, 'Introduction', p. 1.

The advanced stage of alignment is captured in the SMAF framework using three indicators – *an integrated military command, joint troop placements or military base exchanges*, and *common defence policy*. Some studies mention these forms of cooperation and their variations as indications of advanced military cooperation but do not suggest a sequence.[100] In the SMAF framework, an integrated military command is the first indicator of advanced alignment, which provides the organisational framework for fulfilling joint military tasks by the aligned parties. Each country's military forces, which generally remain under respective national control, become available for joint operations and are placed under the responsibility of either one side's commanders or a joint command structure on an agreed basis. Examples of integrated military command could include the introduction of a shared system of command codes or adopting an operating language allowing the transmission of orders and communications between the involved militaries; episodes of merging the allies' army units into a single operational grouping to practise joint interoperability; establishing joint command centres staffed with officers from both sides working together. There is also variation in how military commands can be integrated. Integration can occur episodically and without long-term structures, as in joint military exercises, or it can involve permanently operating command structures deployed consistently, which would indicate a more advanced alignment.

Joint deployments and base sharing are a step forward and the second indicator of advanced alignment because these measures include sensitive issues of territorial sovereignty. Establishing military bases abroad enables a country to project power in the recipient country and influence political events there. Also, bases abroad imply rights to military facilities in foreign territories. These are highly sensitive issues. Base sharing can involve small mutual deployments without air force or other sophisticated weapons. In more advanced alignments, base sharing can involve a deployed contingent of large size, accompanied by significant allocation of advanced military hardware.

The issue of basing can be viewed as having the problem of hierarchy, as in the cases of China in Djibouti or the US in many places around the world, where the power preponderance of one actor plays an inordinate role, making the presence of bases less about cooperation effort and more about domination. While this concern is valid, it does not always seem to be the case, as any substantive military cooperation, such as military bases, requires 'mutual cooperation in ideas and actions'.[101] Evidence suggests that even when the power gap is extreme, the unwillingness of the weaker side to cooperate makes sustaining bases difficult, as evidenced by, for example, the eviction of US forces from Manas air base in Kyrgyzstan in February 2009 as a result of the Kyrgyz parliament's decision[102] and Georgia's successful negotiation and Russia's surprising agreement in 2005 to withdraw four Russian military bases from the Georgian territory that Russia was officially allowed to retain according to an agreement signed in 1995.[103] This does not mean that the problem of hierarchy does not exist, but simply that if one side does not want to host a military base, the other side might have to go to great and costly lengths to impose a basing arrangement.

The highest form of military cooperation is a common defence policy at the executive and strategic levels. It requires the most binding commitments between allies with the purpose of joint fulfilment of the most demanding military missions. This also involves pooling resources for defence equipment acquisition and obligations to supply combat units for jointly planned missions within a designated period. Most importantly, this level of cooperation requires synchronised and harmonised actions regarding the allied parties' national security. Common defence policies can differ in terms of the scale and content of cooperation, but they always require extensive investment

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[100]Fedder, 'The concept of alliance'; Leeds and Anac, 'Alliance institutionalisation and alliance performance'; Benson and Clinton, 'Assessing the variation of formal military alliances'.

[101]Weitsman, 'Wartime alliances', p. 114.

[102]BBC News, 'Kyrgyz MPs vote to shut US base' (19 Febuary 2009), available at: {http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7898690.stm}.

[103]Nikolai Sokov, 'The withdrawal of Russian military bases from Georgia: Not solving anything,' PONARS Policy Memo 363 (1 June 2005), available at: {https://www.ponarseurasia.org/wp-content/uploads/attachments/pm_0363.pdf}, pp. 2–4.

in joint action and indicate in-depth military cooperation. The decision to enter this stage requires strong incentives and resolve from policymakers and is unlikely to occur without first achieving cooperation on the more moderate indicators described above.

Cluster two: Alignment incentives

An alignment cannot move through the stages described above without incentives; hence, the understanding of alignment formation and development requires considering causal factors that drive those processes. This part of the SMAF framework suggests an explanation of the alignment progress, hypothesising the evolution of the causal factors and their interrelationship against the stages of alignment formation (horizontal axis of Figure 1).

The 'capability aggregation model' of alignments suggests that states form alignments to aggregate their capabilities into a greater joint capability to improve their international security positions.[104] This perspective and the prevailing view that alignments are formed by security-seeking states *against* other states[105] and to deal with immediate or potential threats[106] suggest two specific theories that can explain alignment formation. One is the balance of power theory, according to which states form alliances to balance against the most powerful states in the system,[107] and the other is the balance of threat theory, which argues that states balance against the most threatening states rather than simply the most powerful ones.[108]

Simultaneously, alignments include not only 'alignments against' but also 'alignments with' – a perspective that, as some argue, may better reflect the realities of the modern world.[109] According to Snyder, the existence of common interests among states is an essential factor that undergirds the idea of 'alignments with' and forms the expectation of support on which alignments are based.[110] Specifically, a state will expect support from states with which it shares interests and a lack of support, or even opposition, from states with which its interests conflict.[111] This discussion leads to the third theory and the related causal factor that explains alignment formation – the balance of interests.[112]

Thus, the incentives for alignment formation used in SMAF are related to the balance of power considerations but span both the systemic and domestic factors that drive alignment. While these three balances are well known, their actual application in the analysis of alignment formation may not be as straightforward as it might seem at first sight. It is even more so regarding the impact of changes in each of the three balances and their interactions on alignment development.

The first cause – *material power balance* – is a place to begin the analysis. Polarity may not be the most proximate cause for alignment formation, but it provides dispositional pressures that structure the horizons of states' probable actions. The ultimate primacy of a hegemon or a dominant state in the global or regional distribution of capabilities under anarchy inevitably incentivises secondary states to try to undermine the hegemon's pre-eminence.[113] This happens even if the dominant player manages to restrain itself or employs strategies based more on benevolence than coercion, because other states are still inclined to worry about their safety in an unbalanced international system and, hence, will attempt to align with other secondary states (external balancing)

[104]Barnett and Levy, 'Domestic sources of alliances and alignments', p. 371.

[105]Liska, *Nations in Alliance*; Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*; Snyder, 'Alliances, balance, and stability'; Bennett, 'Testing alternative models of alliance duration'.

[106]Salmon, 'The European Union', p. 819.

[107]Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1979).

[108]Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*.

[109]Chidley, 'Towards a framework of alignment', p. 142.

[110]Snyder, 'Alliances, balance, and stability', pp. 123–5.

[111]Ibid.

[112]Randall L. Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler's Strategy of World Conquest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

[113]Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Structural realism after the Cold War', *International Security*, 25:1 (2000), pp. 5–41.

as one of the possible ways to enhance their security. Therefore, the systemic push to ally originates from the lack of balance of power, and alignment formation is a way to restore the balance of power condition.

As simple as it may seem, the balance of power logic of alignment formation appears less linear than the balance of power assumption might suggest. According to the theories of the lack of balancing and the unrivalled stance of the US as a global hegemon, which became popular after the end of the Cold War, balancing behaviour by secondary states is highly unlikely because the US was too powerful – to the extent that any alignments between potential challengers, even large powers like China and Russia, will fail to make any difference.[114] In the post–Cold War literature, this power gap was presented as unprecedented and self-reinforcing, and it generated the unsurpassable power threshold that became one of the main explanations for why other secondary states, even if dissatisfied with the unipolar order, did not form alliances to balance against the United States. Thus, the impact of polarity on alliance formation is complex and suggests a Goldilocks logic: while the lack of power balance is conducive to alignment formation, the concentration of too much power in one pole can avert alignment formation. In other words, the degree of systemic imbalance must be 'just right' to effectively trigger the formation and consolidation of alignment. The military capacity of potential alignment must be able to generate at least some degree of a 'deterrence effect'[115] when the summative capacity of alignment can tangibly affect an adversary's foreign policy calculus.[116]

In this light, the empirical assessments of the balance of power as a factor of alignment formation require not only exploring the power distribution within the international system and seeing whether there is a dominant power but also answering the question of whether the military capabilities of a hypothetical alignment *can* restore a relative balance of power and become an effective way of balancing. Therefore, the evolution of the balance of power (BOP) as a causal factor of alignment formation is operationalised in Figure 1 as a transition from non-permissive costs of balancing, in which case the alignment incentives are weak, to what is called high (but not non-permissive) costs of balancing (when alignment incentives become moderate, corresponding with moderate alignment comprised of four stages), to finally permissive costs of balancing, which incentivise advanced alignment. There is no clear theoretical guidance to determine permissive and non-permissive costs of external balancing, and a lot will depend on specific countries' actual military and economic capabilities. The power structure that existed during the Cold War in the 1970s, when the Soviet Union's GNP peaked, reaching 60 per cent of the US's total GNP,[117] and when great power balancing was the defining feature of international politics, can be a rough reference point. Thus, an assumption can be made that if parties to an alignment can add up to more than half of the GNP of the state against which the alignment is formed, balancing can be effective, and hence, its costs are no longer non-permissive, and an alignment can be expected.

The balance of threat theory suggests the second cause of alignment formation in SMAF that relates to *common threats* faced by potential allies. According to Walt, external 'threats' are the main drivers of alliance behaviour.[118] It is specifically the common threats that play a significant role in motivating states to enter an alignment relationship and distinguish alignments from other forms of interstate cooperation.[119] Common threats create a 'clear agreed-upon target', facilitating alliance

[114]G. John Ikenberry (ed.), *America Unrivalled: The Future of the Balance of Power* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).

[115]Benson and Clinton, 'Assessing the variation of formal military alliances'.

[116]Morrow, 'Alliances, credibility, and peacetime costs'; Smith, 'Alliance formation and war'; Leeds, 'Do alliances deter aggression?'; Jesse C. Johnson and Brett Ashley Leeds, 'Defense pacts: A prescription for peace?', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 7:1 (2011), pp. 45–65; Brett V. Benson, Adam Meirowitz, and Kristopher W. Ramsay, 'Inducing deterrence through moral hazard in alliance contracts', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 58:2 (2014), pp. 307–35.

[117]Office of Soviet Analysis, 'A comparison of Soviet and US Gross National Products, 1960–1983', Directorate of Intelligence (1 August 1984), available at: {https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000498181.pdf}.

[118]Stephen M. Walt, 'Alliance formation and the balance of world power', *International Security*, 9:4 (1985), pp. 3–43.

[119]Salmon, 'The European Union', p. 817.

coherence.[120] Lai and Reiter also argued that states that face a common threat are especially prone to alignment: 'Not only does each wish to minimise the possibility that it will be attacked, but each state is more likely to be willing to fight if the other is attacked because the enemy is common.'[121] Consequently, 'fears of entanglement in an unwanted war and of the defection of alliance partners from the alliance agreement are reduced'.[122]

At the same time, in the context of SMAF, it is justifiable not to apply Walt's balance of threat theory in a strict sense but, instead, to emphasise the general statement by Walt and other alliance scholars about the importance of 'common external threats' as a driving force of alignment.[123] As demonstrated elsewhere, such factors as offensive capabilities and offensive intentions, identified in Walt's original balance of threat theory as threat-forming factors, are not based on objective criteria and remain speculative, as do the chances of assessing them accurately.[124] In turn, the geographic proximity that, in Walt's theory, should work against alignment might work in reverse: bordering powers recognise the potentially devastating costs of using force against each other and choose to invest significant efforts to keep the border peaceful and eventually improve the relationship. This qualification, however, does not undermine the importance of external threats perception as a factor of alignment formation.

Empirical analysis of external threats as incentives for alignment formation requires checking whether potential allies have shared views of major external threats or consider the same state as the most threatening adversary and how these perceptions evolved. Also, potential allies should be expected to define threats in similar terms or, in other words, locate them within the same category of threats. For example, if one ally perceives an external threat (the third state) as a threat to global order, whereas the other ally views it as a threat to its border security, there may be a categorical mismatch of threats, even though both types of threat are associated with the same state.

A closer look at, again, US–India alignments, particularly India's reluctance to fully align with the US against China, helps illustrate the point. While the rising and increasingly assertive China is a shared concern driving US–India alignment, the specific 'China threats' faced by each country are categorically different. Washington is concerned about China's economic and military growth, technological advancements, and global ambitions that challenge the US's existing global positions. In contrast, India's top concerns, which concern the US only marginally, are related to geopolitically proximate challenges 'close to home', such as border tensions with China and Beijing's support of Pakistan, which dictates a different behaviour towards China and greater sensitivity to Beijing's reactions.[125] As a result, the modernisation of the Indian armed forces is directed towards the disputed border, whereas allocations for the navy remained the lowest among the three services and even decreased, indicating a threat perception different from that of the US.[126] India's identification of the China threat as primarily terrestrial instead of maritime or related to global order makes India's strategic motivations different from those of the US, which are primarily based on expectations of maritime security coordination and cooperation on global balancing against China.[127] Due to this categorical discrepancy, once the core goals of defence cooperation with the US moved closer towards balancing against China, India has been noted to start backpedalling and proved to be an 'underwhelming partner', which has led experts to question US–India alignment.[128]

[120]Bennett, 'Testing alternative models of alliance duration', p. 852.

[121]Lai and Reiter, 'Democracy, political similarity, and international alliances', p. 211.

[122]Ibid.

[123]Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*; Bennett, 'Testing alternative models of alliance duration'; Lai and Reiter, 'Democracy, political similarity, and international alliances'.

[124]Sebastian Rosato, 'The inscrutable intentions of great powers', *International Security*, 39:3 (2015), pp. 48–88; Stephen Van Evera, 'Offense, defense, and the causes of war', *International Security*, 22:4 (1998), pp. 5–43.

[125]Puthan Purayil, 'The rise of China', pp. 54–65.

[126]Rajesh Rajagopalan, 'Evasive balancing: India's unviable Indo-Pacific strategy', *International Affairs*, 96:1 (2020), pp. 75–93 (p. 98).

[127]Lalwani and Byrne, 'Great expectations', p. 53.

[128]Ibid., p. 45.

Thus, the convergence of external threat perceptions implies that the threat should be associated with the same state *and* be in the same category of threats. An indication of a perceived growing threat would be a change in the language of joint statements or interactions more broadly from expressing a shared understanding of broad issues of international politics to the consolidation of that language around the issue of explicit common threats associated with a specific geopolitical rival. In Figure 1, these changes are reflected in the evolution of the balance of threat (BOT) from a distant or potential threat, which can only incentivise an early alignment, to a growing threat to both allies, coinciding with moderate alignment, to an immediate threat to both allies, which, together with permissive costs of balancing, incentivises an advanced alignment as defined in the framework.

The *balance of interests* theory[129] explains the third cause of alignment formation in the SMAF framework. Schweller argues that whether (and with whom) states ally depends on states' understanding of their mutual interests, specifically that 'the most important determinant of alignment is the compatibility of political goals'.[130] Thus, 'status quo states' align with each other because they share the interests of maintaining the existing order and containing revisionist states. 'Revisionist states' align with each other because they see more benefits in changing the system.[131] The rise of a revisionist great power may also trigger bandwagoning on the part of smaller states.

Some literature on alignments echoes Schweller's emphasis on the compatibility of political goals by mentioning 'normative partnerships', based on a common set of behavioural norms, values, and standards;[132] credible commitments and similarity of interests, when states' interests are not required to be identical but must be complementary or at least parallel;[133] or an 'underlying community of interests'[134] – all as essential characteristics of strategic alignment. Sustainable alignments are based on shared values or ideology and are organised around a general purpose, known as a system principle, such as, for example, the championship of a multi-polar world.[135] Liska argued that while alliances must be subject to a shared external threat, they were also predicated on a sense of community.[136] Alignments have also been seen as a manifestation of the involved actors' willingness to pursue joint interests and mutual goals in common. China, for instance, is more likely to form strategic partnerships with countries that 'have comparable positions on the liberal world order'.[137]

An empirical assessment of this condition would require exploring how alignment parties see the international status quo and whether they want to revise it, in which ways their interests are complementary or parallel, and how deeply they share commitments to challenging or maintaining the contemporary world order. Such an assessment requires looking into bilateral documents and speeches of the top policymakers and reality-checking established assumptions about the states' interests in and benefits from the international status quo. As with threats, interests, in the form of revisionism and status quo orientation, can have different permutations in different contexts and, therefore, cannot be assumed and need to be established empirically. Possible questions that need to be answered would be whether parties to alignment similarly display revisionist inclinations. How has their revisionism changed over time? Has there been more convergence? Besides the language of joint statements and the substance of interactions, the actual participation in international institutions that represent an alternative order is a useful indicator. In SMAF, the change

[129]Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances*.

[130]Schweller, 'Bandwagoning for profit', p. 88.

[131]Randall L. Schweller, 'Tripolarity and the Second World War', *International Studies Quarterly*, 37:1 (1993), pp. 73–103.

[132]Martin Smith, *Russia and NATO since 1991: From Cold War through Cold Peace to Partnership?* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 112.

[133]James D. Morrow, 'Alliances and asymmetry: An alternative to the capability aggregation model of alliances', *American Journal of Political Science*, 35:4 (1991), pp. 904–33 (p. 931).

[134]Salmon, 'The European Union', p. 820.

[135]Wilkins, 'Russo-Chinese strategic partnership'.

[136]Liska, *Nations in Alliance*, p. 12.

[137]Strüver, 'International alignment between interests and ideology', pp. 6–8.

from weak to moderate to strong incentives of alignment formation in the case of the balance of interests (BOI) is captured through the transition from status-quo-prone or passive revisionism to growing revisionism to revisionist allies, respectively.

Besides exploring the changes within each of the three balances mentioned above, it is important to consider the interaction between them, given their interrelatedness, in generating interstate alignments. The balance of power is essential to both the balance of threat and the balance of interest theory. As acknowledged by Walt, 'the greater a state's total resources … the greater a potential threat it can pose to others … The overall power that states can wield is thus an important component of the threat they can pose to others.'[138] It is more accurate, therefore, to talk about the most 'threatening power' rather than merely 'threat' and 'power'.[139] There is synergy between the balance of threat and the balance of power arguments. Similarly, Schweller highlights that his concept of state interest (whether status quo or revisionism-oriented interests) occupies a position equally prominent to the distribution of capabilities. The balance of interest theory implies a 'focus on both the power and interests of states … and contains complex unit-structure interactions', according to which 'predictions are co-determined by the power and interests of the units and the structures within which they are embedded'.[140]

In the alliance literature, Snyder also hints at the need to consider the interconnectedness between power, threat, and interest by talking about the dispositional pressures of polarity and strength inequality between states either reinforcing or undermining the expectations of support coming from commonality or conflict of interests. It is the combination of the 'conflict and commonality factor' – whether the interests are common or conflicting – and the 'strength inequality factor' – the polarity of the international systems and power gaps between major states involved in the alignment dynamics – that produces a pattern of interstate alignment.[141] Threats, in turn, can motivate states to increase their military capabilities or realign with others, impacting the balance of power.

At the same time, despite the synergy between the three factors of alignment formation, it is inaccurate to a priori suggest that they always coincide and that for great powers, there is no difference between them, and, for example, that the most powerful is the most threatening and that interests entirely depend on threats. While this scenario is possible, it is not guaranteed a priori. It is possible that only one or two factors incentivise the alignment while other(s) pull in a different direction, in which case alignment incentives may be weakened. For instance, in the post–Cold War US–India relationship, a lack of congruity between the incentives emanating from the consideration of power, threats, and interests hinders closer defence cooperation.

Specifically, from the perspective of the balance of power, US–India alignment is expected because of the rapid rise of China to the position of a great power and India's relative weakness vis-à-vis China – hence the incentive to reach out to the US to mount an effective external balancing against China.[142] However, US–India alignment is affected by the divergences between the condition of the balance of power and those related to threats due to only limited shared perception of threats between the two countries, as demonstrated above. When it comes to the balance of interests, the gap between India and the US widens further, as only their general strategic interests seem to coincide. A closer look reveals significant divergence of interests related to different understandings of the strategic geography and normative foundations of the 'free and open Indo-Pacific', different visions of the US-led international order and the values it propagates, differences in approaches to relations with China and international institutions dom-

[138]Walt, 'Alliance formation', pp. 9–10.

[139]Ibid., pp. 8–9.

[140]Schweller, 'Tripolarity and the Second World War', pp. 76–7.

[141]Snyder, 'Alliances, balance, and stability' p. 124.

[142]Puthan Purayil, 'The rise of China'; Ladwig and Mukherjee, 'Sailing together', p. 67.

inated by it, such as BRICS, AIIB, and SCO, and continuing divergences on the issues of regional security involving Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, and Ukraine.[143] This case shows how the discrepancy between the three causal factors can dampen alignment incentives and result in the partners' reluctance to form a tighter alignment against a seemingly unequivocal challenger.

A way to look at the link between power, threat, and interests is to view the balance of power configurations as a necessary condition for alignment, whereas the balance of threat and balance of interests has to do more with sufficient conditions, that is, a strong state can either be threatening or not, but it is more difficult for a weak state to pose an existential threat to a great power. A mere power gap may not be enough to incentivise an alignment unless threats and interests align with the dispositional pressures emanating from the balance of power. While the situations when BOT and BOI outweigh the BOP-generated structural pressure are not impossible, they can be expected to be short-lived, as the states will learn that a deeper alignment may not be necessary to balance a weaker opponent. This dynamic interaction between the three causes of alignment formation is captured by the combinations of the conditions of the balance of power, threat, and interests that fall into the three categories of weak, moderate, and strong incentives for alignment formation (Figure 1). At the same time, and considering the discussion above, there can be more combinations involving the different conditions of BOP, BOT, and BOI suggested in Figure 1. Thus, an empirical analysis can begin with assessing the changes in the distribution of material capabilities as the first step and then move to assessing threats and interests as more immediate alignment incentives. An important question is whether there is a convergence or divergence between the three balances in terms of pushing alignment parties together or pulling them apart.

Conclusion: Framework limitations, variations, and application

The SMAF framework developed above, as it stands now, is a conceptual-theoretical construct. While empirical knowledge about alignments did inform the framework development, the model is based more on the ex-ante deductive justification for the stages, indicators, and explanations, using existing theoretical knowledge about alignments, than on empirical research of specific country cases. Therefore, the neat geometry of Figure 1 that visualises the model is not identical to the real world. For example, the ascending arrow in the figure approximates a likely correlation between the causal factors and the stages of alignment. The real-world cases of alignments will not neatly fall on the line but will likely group somewhere around the arrow like a loosely clustered scatterplot.

As such, the model might have some limitations that, on the other hand, suggest directions for future research. For instance, one can imagine alignments being 'jump-started' by the formation of coalitions during wartime, with the model's lower stages backfilled after a war's conclusion, which could challenge the model's sequential story. While the existing literature does not systematically support such a hypothesis, this scenario is not impossible. Another consideration concerns the issue of hierarchy between allies. Alignments do not always happen between equal sovereign actors with independent decision-making authority, in which case the underlying relationship may not be as robust. While the suggested indicators/stages can still accurately reflect the alignment relationship, the issue of hierarchy can potentially impact the analytical utility of the model. One can also argue that information needed to verify the advanced levels of military cooperation may not be publicly available, which imposes extra demands on scholars applying the model. Therefore, while this research believes that the model grasps the essence of strategic alignment formation, its verification, falsification, or revision will require further empirical testing using different cases.

Nevertheless, even in its current form, the improved conceptualisation of alignment offered in SMAF can help achieve more rigorous empirical testing and enhance our knowledge of seemingly

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[143]Korolev, *China–Russia Strategic Alignment*.

ambiguous alignments. For instance, even a cursory application of SMAF to the highly debatable cases of the China–Russia and US–India alignments mentioned above allows mapping the two alignments against each other, specifying their relative strengths and weaknesses. Specifically, one would discover that while on some parameters, such as CBMs and regular consultations, the US–India alignment looks similar to the China–Russia alignment, it has not made significant strides into the advanced levels of alignment, such as integrated military command and common defence policy, whereas China–Russia alignment started moving in that direction, especially after implementing plans to develop an integrated missile attack early warning system.[144] One would also determine that the alignment incentives in the US–India case are weaker than in China–Russia relations due to, as mentioned above, discrepancies between the BOP and the other two balances, which affect willingness to align fully, especially on India's part. Structuring and systematising information in a theory-grounded way, SMAF can be applied to various cases of bilateral and multilateral strategic cooperation. The candidate cases include India–Japan, India–Japan–Australia, China–Pakistan, China–Cambodia, Russia–India, Russia–Vietnam, and other important cases across different regions.

In this regard, there might be variations in the model application. Some early stages, such as CBMs, may be necessary and can be observed in some cases but not others, and they can be expected to fall off when no longer necessary. For example, for states with shared sets of normative values and enduring beliefs, shared ideology, or longer shared history of contacts and good relations supported by behavioural norms and standards, or for states with narrow cultural divides, the need for CBMs may be minimal. In contrast, for alignments between states with wide cultural and normative divides, complicated shared history, and a traditionally low level of mutual trust, the role of CBMs and early mechanisms of consultations will be critical for laying the foundations for alignment. The point can also be made that these early alignment indicators are used to create a modicum of confidence among belligerents after a crisis and, therefore, should not count as indicators of an alignment for friendly states. Therefore, the framework can be applied flexibly with some indicators dropped or further elaborated based on the case in focus.

In this regard, the model can also be operationalised further. As follows from the discussion of the stages of alignment formation above, both the stage and the quality of cooperation at each stage matter. While the presence of an indicator per se is important, the depth of cooperation on each indicator cannot be neglected. In this regard, a possible direction for the model operationalisation is through breaking down each stage into 'low' and 'high' levels of cooperation. There can also be cases in which the level of cooperation within each indicator cannot be ranked 'high' but is not 'low' either. These cases might require further breakdown into intermediate or 'developing' levels of cooperation at each stage, indicating an upward trend and progress but a lack of maturity and comprehensiveness. Applying the model to more cases will help to further hone it by introducing a more detailed breakdown of the stages of alignment or, perhaps, changing the order of some stages if more cases reveal a different trajectory of alignment formation. These model refinements would help identify the level of alignment with greater precision.

Furthermore, the model does not have to be applied in its entirety in practical analysis and empirical research. If the goal is to assess the level of military cooperation, which is often the case, the stages along the vertical axis of Figure 1 can be used as a framework for analysis. The causal factors along the horizontal axis can be included if the goal of the analysis is also to explain the alignment. Conversely, if the analytical goal emphasises explanation rather than assessing the level of alignment, then the causal cluster (the horizontal axis) can be used with a somewhat simplified definition of alignment.

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[144]Korolev, *China–Russia Strategic Alignment*, pp. 88–9.

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