

Abstract

This article comparatively examines the South Korean-US and Filipino-US alliances amid the rise of China. It pays attention to analysing how and why Washington's smaller allies distinctly recalibrate the breadth and depth of defence relations without abrogation since the 'Asia Pivot' policy. Adopting the qualitative method and process tracing technique, the author utilizes neoclassical realism in a comparative case-study to unpack the nuances of domestic pushes and systemic pulls driving weaker allies' recalibration behaviour. Contrary to classical realist approaches that assume smaller actors have limited choices and/or bigger powers dictate alliance relations, this study shows that such assumptions are oversimplified and often misleading. The perceived calculations of the subsequent ruling elite in Seoul and Manila have distinctly contributed to weakening and/or upgrading the alliances. Recently cautious between Washington and Beijing, albeit exhibited to different degrees, Korean and Filipino leaderships factor three reoccurring themes in their alliance relations with the US: 1) the degree of perceived threat(s); 2) the (un)predictability/(un)reliability of US security commitment to honour alliance obligations, from cost-sharing to physical defence; and 3) China's hybrid strategy, including Chinese economic carrots.