US Military Primacy and Alliance Resilience

[00:00:00] Introduction and Guest Welcome

Ryan Vest: Welcome to *Horns of A Dilemma*, the podcast of the *Texas National Security Review*. I'm Ryan Vest, executive editor of *TNSR*, and I'm here with our editor in chief, Dr. Sheena Chestnut Greitens. We're pleased to have Bence Nemeth from King's College London joining us today. Bence is the author of the article, "How a US 'Suez Moment' Could Hollow the US Alliance System," which is featured in Volume 9, Issue 1 of the Journal. Bence is a co-founder, and executive director, of the King's Center for Defense Economics and Management, and a senior lecturer in the Defense Studies Department at King's College London, where he teaches military officers at the UK Defense Academy in Shrivenham, UK.

Before joining Kings, he served as a defense planner for eight years in the Hungarian Ministry of Defense. Dr. Nemeth holds a PhD in Defense Studies from Kings College London, and an MBA in Defense Systems Management from the US Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. Bence, welcome to *Horns of a Dilemma*. It's great to have you on the show.

Bence Nemeth: Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here.

[00:00:59] Motivation Behind the Article

Sheena Chestnut Greitens: Well, let me start off by asking you about your motivation to write the article. You start the article with an anecdote that led you to write the piece. And so I wondered for listeners who haven't had a chance to read the article yet, can you tell us about this conversation, and why then that led you into this particular article, that's now published with *TNSR?*

Bence Nemeth: Sure. So in April, 2025, I had a very fascinating chat with a senior Royal Air Force officer at the Defense Academy in Shrivenham, and we were talking about lots of things, including, about, what might the second Trump presidency mean for NATO and alliance systems in general. And he told me a very interesting thing.

He said, look, this is mostly politics–what is happening in DC–and political direction and politics might change every four to, or eight years, but what really matters is the infrastructure below the politics. The alliance infrastructure in terms of data links, that the US Aircraft and Allies share, the bases that the US uses in Europe, or the Indo-Pacific intelligence sharing logistical networks.

So actually there are lots of dependencies in both ways, and it's very difficult to unwind easily. So he was much more positive about the endurance of the alliance system, than many political commentators [were] at that time. And then after we talked about the changing military balance in the Indo-Pacific, and we discussed that now, the Chinese Navy, the PLE Navy, has a hundred more battle force ships, than the US Navy. The Chinese Air Force, the PLE Air Force might be the largest Air Force very soon, looking at the production trends. And also, for instance, the Chinese defense industry can produce missiles five, seven times faster than the US defense industry.

And, at this moment, the Royal Air Force officer told me that, now this is different, something different. Because if the allies realize that the US primacy is over at some point, basically everyone will reprice its risk. And basically this conversation was the spark to write the article.

[00:03:18] The Concept of a 'Suez Moment'

Ryan Vest: In your article, kind of the crux of your point is that, there could be these visible material shifts that happen within the alliances, that may exert more durable effects than a single administration's policy orientation. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about this idea of what you mean there, and why this is at the core of your argument.

Bence Nemeth: Yes, sure. So, the issue is that, at the moment, US allies, although [they] see that there are some problems with the United States armed forces that are diminished, defense industries are based in many aspects. The supply chains have problems. For instance, the US depends, not only US, but everyone, on Chinese rare earth materials that are depleted–stockpiles, in terms of ammunition.

So these weaknesses are quite clear, and it's openly discussed in US policy circles. But US allies do not connect the dots. They don't see two things. One of them is that the US, although has huge military power, much greater military power than any other allies, but it also has lots of security commitments that it accumulated for the last 80 years. And it's, this US military power, is not necessarily enough to meet all of these demands.

And the other thing is that it doesn't seem to register in many US allies, that the US military primacy, in its principle theater in the Indo-Pacific, may soon be, or maybe already is, over. And all of the allies still see the US through supercarriers, or GPS dominance, and enduring logistical supremacy.

And they think that the US military power will always be there, because it has been there for 80 years. So it is the issue that, in an event, or a series of events, that might show to allies that the US doesn't have the primacy anymore, will reverberate throughout the alliance system and many allies will change, might change its policy towards the US. And it might have much more fundamental impact on how US allies see the US, than any US administration policy because the difference is, that even though some of the, or one of the US administration doesn't have the willingness to support, but is a very different situation than, if it becomes clear, that the US doesn't have the capability to help out its allies.

Sheena Chestnut Greitens: So the article calls these moments, when maybe long building shifts in material capabilities and power becomes starkly visible in a new way, you know, the article calls these events a "Suez moment." And so I wondered for some of our listeners, who may know more or less about the 1956 Suez Crisis, can you tell us a little bit about the core features of that crisis that you see as resonant in the present moment, in the present geopolitical situation?

In other words, what does somebody need to know about what happened in 1956 in Suez, to sort of really understand the import of the analogy for today?

Bence Nemeth: Sure. So in 1956, the Egyptian government basically nationalized the Suez Canal and France, UK and Israel, organized a very quick, and tactically successful invasion to reverse this policy. And it took only 48 hours for these allies to basically militarily be very successful, and operationally made a great result.

But, they didn't coordinate this effort with the US. And the US pressured them, especially the UK, politically and financially, to reverse these operations. So the UK needed basically to give up all of its aims, and basically it felt humiliated. It was felt as a national humiliation.

But more importantly, for my article, is that it was the moment that it became clear to everyone in the world that the UK was not a top tier superpower anymore. It couldn't really meet its security obligations without the United States. And this is when allies, and also adversaries, basically recalibrated their view of British power.

I'm not saying that the US is there at the moment, so this analogy just shows that there might be certain underlying conditions that have been developing for quite a long time, and a single moment, or a series of events, can basically reveal these dynamics, or these trends very clearly.

And we could see that, in terms of the UK Suez moment, the UK basically didn't lose the war. It won tactically, so it doesn't mean that, for instance, the US needs to lose a war, but we are focusing on a situation which basically reveals, or might reveal that, the US is not the most powerful military power at the moment.

And I'm not the only one, or the first one, who is using this analogy. For instance, Neil Ferguson, or Philip Zelikow, already used the "Suez moment" analogy before, and they used it mostly for a situation where, for instance, the US would be involved in a war against China over Taiwan. So this is one of the potential "Suez moments," if the US and China engage in a military conflict over Taiwan, and the US might lose or win, but its losses are just so huge, that basically it reveals that the military primacy of the US, in its main theater, might be ended.

Ryan Vest: So you talk of a gap between material reality and psychological perception among the US' allies in one of these cases where the US is diminished, or may not be able to exert as much power in the Pacific. What do you mean by this–the gap between material reality and psychological perception–and why is this important?

Bence Nemeth: So the psychological perception, as I mentioned, right? So now we see that allies are still seeing the US as the permanent power, but then it changes the calculus of allies as well. I'm not saying that it'll happen, what I'm saying is that basically, this size of US setback in the Indo-Pacific is not necessarily inevitable, but its likelihood has been growing.

And now we have to analyze how it might evolve. And if it happens, we need to be prepared, at least mentally how the allies might react to this kind of situation. And what I see again, that when I'm talking to officials, and military officers, in Europe, or the Middle East, or in Asia, they don't see the US power fading as much as might be happening, because they're focusing on their own single theater. So they don't connect the dots properly.

But what we can see based on the literature, assurance literature, if it becomes clear for allies that a patron, or its most powerful ally, doesn't have the

capability to support them anymore, they are starting to do two things. Either they rely on themselves more, or they start to hedge.

They start to try to find new collaborations, or try to get closer to some of their adversaries. And this might be the main psychological shock, that US allies will start to look to different places, or different solutions, and might see the US in a quite different way.

[00:11:15] Five Factor Theory of Defense Cooperation

Sheena Chestnut Greitens: So when you unpack this concept of the "Suez moment" in your article, you introduce what you call a Five Factor Theory of Defense Cooperation, and that theory has factors that are both structural and situational. And so I wondered if you could just walk us through that framework, and tell us what those factors are, and how they fit together in the framework that your article offers.

Bence Nemeth: Sure. So this theory, or this concept, is not a new one. The original concept I developed in my book before, so I developed it farther. And what I found, based on my research, [is] that this is a very good way to look at defense cooperation, and alliance mechanisms, by dividing factors into situational, and structural factors.

Situational factors are those factors that basically provide a window of opportunity to generate new defense cooperation, or deepen existing defense cooperation. While structural factors are those underlying conditions that have been evolving slowly, and they can provide the foundation of defense cooperation.

And in this regard, I mentioned two situational factors, and three structural factors, that are relevant in our case. The two situational factors are conducive political milieu, and leadership and interpersonal chemistry. The political milieu is relevant, because if something happens, internationally or domestically, that generates a situation where different actors think that cooperation is useful, then they will act accordingly.

For instance, the Russian invasion of Ukraine generated positive political milieu in Europe to deepen defense cooperation in many aspects. For instance, Sweden and Finland joined NATO, and they used to be longstanding, non-aligned countries for decades, or in the case of Sweden for almost 200 years.

In terms of leadership and interpersonal chemistry, based on my research, it's clear that those leaders who value alliances and cooperation, they usually push towards this direction. But those ones who are more skeptical about it, they can undermine, or they can weaken an existing cooperation. So leaders are quite important.

If you look at the structural factors, I mentioned three structural factors–security community, previous defense cooperation, and perceived research shortfalls. And in this case, security community is one of the most relevant ones, especially for the US Alliance systems, because it means that the US allies, and the US, at least for the last eight decades, saw security issues more or less, in the same way. And also they felt that they belong to the same community, the Western world, or the first world, depending on the era. And this is, if it is strong, it can create very beneficial dynamics that help defense cooperation alliances in cases when other structural situation factors might be weaker.

The second structural factor is previous defense cooperation, which is very sticky. Basically militaries and national security communities like to work with those countries who they worked before, because they already have existing relationships, and it's just much easier to develop on those ones. And it happens all the time that we just look for cooperation with existing partners, because it's a default option, and feels much easier.

The last structural factor is the perceived resource shortfalls. Basically, in almost every cooperation, the parties are looking for something that they are missing. For instance, in Europe, many European countries are working together because they didn't have enough financial resources for the last 30 years after the World War. And they tried to pool and share their capabilities to maintain existing force structures.

Or for instance, in the case of South Korea, who worked together more and more, for the last few years, with NATO, and other countries. South Korea realized that they didn't have the existing multinational frameworks to cooperate with like-minded nations. So their research shortfall was forums for cooperation.

So these are the elements that are playing together. And if we are looking at how they work together, we can see that there are four stages of defense cooperation. If all of the five factors–the three structural factors and the two situational factors work together–we can see that defense cooperation either starts, or starts deepening, if there are existing frameworks are happening. It means that all of the factors basically are pushing to the right direction, the

structural factors providing the foundation, and the two situational factors are providing the trigger, the kickoff, for going into a deeper cooperation.

If the situational factors are starting to diminish, so there is not as much leadership support for that, or the political situation is not as positive regarding the cooperation, but all of the other structural factors, these three structural factors maintain, then we can see maintenance. It means that the cooperation endures, but the growth stops. Basically we are seeing the activities remain routine.

However, if one of the structural factors starts to break down, and only two structural factors remain, we can see adaptation. Some of the situational factors still can push the cooperation farther, but then the scope narrows, the scope of the cooperation narrows, but it still functions, and partners and allies might begin to hedge.

And if at least two structural factors break down, it means only one structural factor remains present, then we can see a hollowing of the alliances and defense cooperation. It means that commitments survive largely on paper, and partners start to seek alternatives.

Ryan Vest: So as you walked us through this, one of the ideas you introduced here, is this factor of leadership and interpersonal chemistry. There's a sharp contrast between the approach and the tone of the Biden administration and the current Trump administration. And as we go into the future in the United States, there'll probably be more changes coming. How does changing US leadership affect your model?

Bence Nemeth: So it has several implications. It is one of the situational factors, but situational factors might affect structural factors. So, in terms of situational factors, it means during the Biden administration we could see almost an exponential growth in terms of defense cooperation among US allies.

We could see that European and Indo-Pacific allies started to come together in NATO summits, and also the bilateral cooperation between them started to grow quite significantly. So, if a US president is very pro alliance or ally focused, then we can see that a huge amount of integration and deepening can happen in a few years. But we can see the exact opposite from the Trump administration, and we can see that even in one year, these cooperations between the two theaters started to slow down significantly. And even between the US and its allies started to become quite severe.

If you are thinking about the Trump administration, [who] mentioned, for instance, Greenland, which belongs to Denmark, should be part of the US, or Canada should become the 51st state. Or if we are thinking about the remarks in the new National Security Strategy, that shows that the Trump administration, and President Trump, doesn't value alliances as much, and it immediately have an impact on how deeply the cooperation can go forward. And also it has a spillover effect, because a situational factor might have an impact on the structural factor of the security community.

These situational elements, that the leadership of the US is not valuing alliances as much, also undermines the security community, the feeling to be in the same community, and undermines a structural factor as well.

Sheena Chestnut Greitens: Really interesting. So in the article, and I know you've touched on a bit of this already, but I want to kind of go back and thread the needle really explicitly for our listeners.

[00:19:47] Scenarios for US Alliance Future

Sheena Chestnut Greitens: You developed two potential scenarios for how an American "Suez moment" might play out in the Indo-Pacific. And both begin with the premise that the moment would reveal a decline in US primacy. But the first scenario suggests that this could hollow out US alliances. And the second scenario, which we'll get to in a second, suggests something a little bit different.

So, going to this, the first scenario, where US Alliances end up being hollowed out in a significant way, can you walk us through how we get to that outcome, and why you think it's realistic for policymakers to need to contemplate it today?

Bence Nemeth: Yes. So first, I would like to mention that, I'm not saying that a "Suez moment" would happen definitely. What I'm saying is that now the chances that a "Suez moment" might happen in the future are growing, and now we have to think seriously about the situation, and what a post primacy world might look like. And I think it's important to think about this, both for the US and also for the allies.

So what I am seeing in both scenarios, that one of the structural factors will definitely remain stable, and this is the previous defense collaborations. And I'm saying this because the previous defense collaboration, for the last 80 years, between US and its allies, has just generated such deep integration, in terms of doctrine, technology, standards, logistics. It is super difficult to unwind.

If we are looking, for instance, to the Warsaw Pact that ended at the early 1990s, and Eastern European countries who joined NATO, it took them more than 30 years to basically get rid of their dependencies on Russian, or Soviet technology, and also mindset. But now they actively wanted to be part of NATO and part of the US Alliance systems. But if a "Suez moment happens", and I'm not saying that it happens, but if a "Suez moment" happens, that is not a new system that anyone, any of the allies can integrate in.

So this is, I think, the strongest kind of structural factor that will give an anchor to any future US alliance system. The other, kind of same thing, that the two scenarios take into consideration is that, there might be a situation where a "Suez moment" happens, and it reveals military power issues or the lack of military power of the US.

If we are looking to the first scenario, the hollowing, then we are really talking about how this translates into, alliance dynamic, right? As I mentioned, the previous defense collaboration is, doesn't change–[it's] sticky. But if the US, for instance, in the "Suez moment" loses much of these capabilities, for instance, loses a war against China over Taiwan, then basically it loses the capability to support its allies. And this is one of the foundations of the US Alliance system, the perceived research gap structural factor, that basically US allies know that they have capability gaps, and expect that the US can fill these capability gaps when it is needed, to ensure the security.

And if this "Suez moment" reveals that there is not enough capability anymore, because the US lost a war, or even won a war, but lost so much capability that the US is not able to reconstitute it quickly, then it means that the US cannot underwrite the security of its allies anymore. And then the structure factor, the resource gap, basically loses its function.

In theory, the other structural factor, the security community could maintain it. But as we discussed at the moment, at least, the Trump administration, through its anti-alliance policies, undermines the security community aspect as well. So if both of these structural factors basically break down, then we are entering the hollowing phase, which means that potentially the frameworks, and negotiations, and discussions will happen on paper, but they lose substance.

One of the examples I use is the OSC, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. That was a very important and relevant coordination mechanism and organization in the 1990s between Russia and other European countries. It generated lots of important measures, but now it's basically become a shell, and no one really takes it seriously. So it might happen, for instance,

with NATO, or the hub and spoke system as well. So this is one of the scenarios–the hollowing one.

But I would say that the adaptation is more probable, because for the hollowing scenario, too many factors need to break down at the same time. And this is much more probable that not everything will break down at the same time.

Basically the previous defense collaboration remains the same, so there is not changing. It is something that the US can rely on, and one of the structural factors remains intact. Either the capability gap is not becoming so big that the US cannot really support its allies. For instance, it can happen if the US and China have some minor series of conflicts, that it becomes clear that the US is not able to maintain its primacy anymore, but also still can keep most of its military capabilities.

Or for instance, the US decides not to intervene in a Taiwan contingency. In this case, the US still will have enough capability to support its allies. But if it doesn't happen, still, the security community aspect can maintain the adaptation kind of dynamics. If we are looking at Europe, right? As I mentioned, in Europe, the security community is quite strong. Countries are working together exactly because they don't have enough capability. So it might happen in the US alliance system as well, if the security community remains strong.

And if we are looking at an example of the UK, the Brexit vote happened in 2016. And in many ways the relationship between the UK and the EU countries breaks down in many policy areas. But when the war in Ukraine happened, the UK supported Ukraine very strongly. It was one of the leaders, and it showed that the UK is still taking European security seriously. We started to build relationships back, and then a more EU friendly government came into power. We can see that now. The relationships are much better than they were a few years ago.

So it is the reason why I am more optimistic, a little bit that in many ways, the situational and structural factors can go to different directions, but it is very likely that in the future, we will have a much more positive, potentially, alliance dynamics again.

Ryan Vest: You've talked a little bit about these two scenarios, the hollowing out and the adaptation, and they're all based on this idea of underlying capability deficits that the US might run into, in the future.

[00:27:01] Recommendations for Strengthening Alliances

Ryan Vest: What steps can the United States take to avoid these kinds of outcomes?

Bence Nemeth: So if we are looking to the two structural factors that really matter here–the capability gap, the resource gap that is relevant for the allies, and the US is filling. It's either the US starts to reconstitute its forces, or also encourages its allies to work for better capabilities, which is happening at the moment.

And the other aspect is the security community. So the security community needs to be strengthened by signals, by situational factors, strengthening alliance dynamics, making sure that if the capability gap cannot be really filled, then at least the community, and the security community structure factor, can underpin the alliance, even if it is not perfect.

Sheena Chestnut Greitens: So let me just add a layer to that, and think about, on the positive side, are there other recommendations that we haven't touched on today that you would have, based on this framework, for how the United States can further strengthen its relationship with its allies, to ensure a more resilient alliance system?

Bence Nemeth: What we can see at the moment with the current administration is, after publishing the National Security Strategy, that this current administration doesn't necessarily see allies as positively as the previous administration saw. So one of the things is that, I think, that US administrations need to think about is, if they think alliances are useful for them or not. Because if the answer is not, then the security community structure factor is undermined, and then the alliance systems become much more transactional.

The US will use, or ask allies to help, and also allies will tell them what's the price for this. And vice versa. In this case maybe we are already in the adaptation phase, without having a "Suez moment," but if we're already in the adaptation phase, the "Suez moment" happens, it means that there is nothing to underpin the alliance systems in terms of the security community aspect.

So what I would say more positively, if the tone of the Trump administration might change slightly, even if the substance doesn't necessarily changes, because I think strategically it makes quite a lot of sense to pressure allies in

Europe to do more for their own security. But also it should be emphasized that we are in the same team, and we are in the same community. That might be helpful in the future for the US as well.

[00:29:44] Conclusion and Farewell

Ryan Vest: Bence, thank you very much for joining us today.

Bence Németh: Thank you.

Ryan Vest: Thanks for joining us on *Horns of a Dilemma* from the *Texas National Security Review*. Our guest today has been Bence Nemeth, author of the article, "How a US 'Suez Moment' Could Hollow the US Alliance System," which as always can be accessed for free on our website, *TNSR*.org.

If you enjoyed this episode, be sure to subscribe and leave a review wherever you listen, and you can always find more of our work at *TNSR*.org. Today's episode was produced by *TNSR* Digital and Technical Manager Jordan Morning, and made possible by The University of Texas System. This is Ryan Vest and Sheena Chestnut Greitens. Thanks for listening.