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# Major Non-NATO Ally Status: The Politics of Security Norms

Eldad Ben Aharon

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**Eldad Ben Aharon, Frankfurt**

## Abstract

This working paper examines the United States (U.S.) Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA) designation as a normative global security framework. MNNA status provides access to U.S. military assistance and surplus defence technologies and arms. However, it lacks the defence guarantees of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and therefore functions as an intermediate, incentive-based arrangement situated between formal alliances and more flexible partnerships. Despite its rapid expansion between 1987 and 2026 to 21 designated states and its growing global reach, MNNA remains strikingly under-researched, both empirically and theoretically, with little systematic analysis of its strategic and normative implications. This working paper offers the first in-depth historical and analytical study of the MNNA designation, establishing it as a foundation for ongoing scholarly investigation. It asks: how does MNNA status enable the U.S. and designated countries to balance their normative expectations in security cooperation, alliance formation, strategic restraint, and broader regional commitments amid growing systemic fragmentation in international politics? The main empirical section analyses the global and regional distribution of MNNA status, focusing on South America, the Middle East and the Levant, Africa, the Gulf region, and the Indo-Pacific. This overview maps the different uses of the MNNA designation across regions and the distribution of the varying needs of both the United States and the designated countries. The regional analysis reveals that the MNNA designation is applied unevenly across global security environments and tailored to specific regional normative and strategic contexts. Rather than serving a single fixed function, MNNA encompasses multiple security roles, with different dimensions emphasised across different regions.

## Zusammenfassung

Dieses Arbeitspapier untersucht das Konzept „Major Non-NATO Ally“ (MNNA) der USA als normativen Rahmen globaler Sicherheit. Der MNNA-Status gewährt Zugang zu militärischer Unterstützung und überschüssiger US-Verteidigungsausrüstung. Allerdings fehlen ihm die Verteidigungsgarantien gemäß Artikel 5 des Nordatlantikvertrags, wodurch er als anreizbasierte Vereinbarung zwischen formellen Bündnissen und flexibleren Partnerschaften fungiert. Trotz seiner raschen Ausweitung von 1987 bis 2026 auf 21 Staaten und wachsender globaler Reichweite ist der MNNA-Status empirisch und theoretisch auffallend wenig erforscht; systematische Analysen seiner strategischen und normativen Implikationen fehlen weitgehend. Dieses Arbeitspapier liefert den ersten umfassenden historischen und analytischen Überblick über die MNNA-Einstufung als Grundlage für weitere Forschung. Es fragt: Inwiefern ermöglicht der MNNA-Status den USA und eingestuften Ländern, angesichts der zunehmenden systemischen Fragmentierung in der internationalen Politik ein Gleichgewicht zwischen materieller Zusammenarbeit, Bündnisbildung, normativen Erwartungen und strategischer Zurückhaltung herzustellen? Der empirische Hauptteil analysiert die globale und regionale Verteilung des MNNA-Status mit Fokus auf Südamerika, den Nahen Osten und die Levante, Afrika, die Golfregion sowie den indopazifischen Raum. Er zeigt die unterschiedlichen Verwendungszwecke des MNNA-Konzepts in den verschiedenen Regionen und die unterschiedlichen Bedürfnisse der USA und der ausgewiesenen Länder auf. Die regionale Analyse legt dar, dass MNNA in globalen Sicherheitsumfeldern ungleichmäßig eingesetzt und an regionale strategische Kontexte angepasst wird. Statt einer einzigen festen Funktion umfasst MNNA vielfältige Sicherheitsrollen, mit unterschiedlichen Schwerpunkten in verschiedenen Regionen.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION: MAJOR NON-NATO ALLY STATUS (MNNA)

The MNNA designation has become increasingly prominent in contemporary international politics and security. In recent decades, the U.S. has expanded and intensified its use of MNNA designations across the Middle East, the Asia Pacific, and Latin America (US.U.S. Department of State, 2025).<sup>1</sup> More specifically, this working paper examines this security arrangement as a non-binary configuration. Rather than conceptualising security relations solely in terms of institutionalised alliances such as NATO or the European Union (EU) on the one hand, and bilateral partnerships on the other, this paper foregrounds the existence of intermediate categories or, as recent literature has noted, strategic partnerships (Butcher, 2024). Here, “intermediate” does not refer to an institutional model in its own right, such as NATO, the EU, or the United Nations (UN). Rather, it denotes a flexible positioning that can steer both the designee state and the U.S. toward either deeper institutionalisation or looser strategic alignment, as this paper will demonstrate. The MNNA designation represents such a category: it is meaningful for participating states yet operates according to logics that differ from both formal alliances and looser partnerships.

The significance of the MNNA framework lies in its ability to position the U.S. and designated partner states in favourable roles through American normative thresholds in conflict management, arms transfers, intelligence sharing, and peace negotiations. This dynamic becomes particularly visible during major regional crises. The Israeli–Gaza war of 2023 to 2025 and the subsequent twelve-day confrontation between Israel and Iran in June 2025 illustrate this dynamic (Nierenberg and Regalado, 2025).<sup>2</sup> Israel, one of the earliest MNNA designees, granted this status in December 1987, received extensive U.S. military, technological, and intelligence support during these conflicts. In practice, the level of backing often resembled that provided to formal NATO allies, even though MNNA status does not entail collective defense guarantees. At the same time, other MNNA states, most notably Qatar and Egypt (Amin, 2025), played central roles in ceasefire negotiations and mediation efforts between Israel and Hamas during the war. These interactions demonstrate that MNNA status can facilitate communication and cooperation among third states even without the U.S. acting as a direct intermediary. In this sense, the “intermediate” character of the framework does not refer to a fixed institutional model but rather to a flexible configuration that enables coordination across multiple actors. At the time of finalising the writing of this paper (February–March 2026), a major armed confrontation involving the United States, Israel and Iran is ongoing.<sup>3</sup> Its implications for the MNNA framework, particularly for Israel and several

1 MNNA is based on the Code of Federal Regulations, specifically 22 U.S.C. § 2321k: “Designation of Major Non-NATO Allies.” U.S. Government Publishing Office. See: <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-22/chapter-I/subchapter-M/part-120/subpart-B/section-120.23> (accessed: 27 March 2026).

2 The “Twelve-Day War” refers to the brief but intense direct conflict between Israel and Iran from 13 to 24 June 2025. The conflict marked an unprecedented phase of open interstate warfare between the two countries and also drew in the U.S., which conducted strikes on Iranian nuclear sites before a ceasefire was reached under U.S. mediation. The ceasefire, announced on 24 June 2025, ended the immediate hostilities but left underlying regional tensions unresolved. See: for example: Nierenberg and Regalado, “What to Know About the Cease-Fire Between Israel and Iran.” <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/24/world/middleeast/israel-iran-cease-fire-deal-war-trump.html> (accessed: 27 March 2026).

3 This conflict constitutes a continuation of the June 2025 round noted above. It began on 28 February 2026 and remains ongoing as of 27 March 2026. On its first day, military operations against Iran reportedly assassinated Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, and marked the beginning of a broader regional war. The operations were conducted under the Israeli codename “Roaring Lion” and the U.S. codename “Epic Fury.” The conflict has involved airstrikes and missile attacks across multiple Iranian cities, with regional escalation affecting Israel and several Gulf states, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, and Kuwait. As the situation continues to unfold, its strategic and normative implications for MNNA status require separate analysis. See for example, Yaroslav Trofimov, “U.S. and Iran Predicted a Very Different War Than the One Now Being Waged.” *Wall Street Journal*, March 9, 2026: <https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/us-iran-war-expectations-7f9d9229> (accessed: 27 March 2026)..

Gulf MNNA partners (Peled et al. 2026), will require separate analysis once the conflict concludes. Together with the twelve-day confrontation in June 2025, these events therefore fall outside the scope of the present study.

Beyond these crisis dynamics, MNNA status also shapes broader diplomatic influence, including in peace negotiations such as the 2020 Abraham Accords (U.S. Department of State 2020).<sup>4</sup> Together, these dynamics reinforce Washington's capacity to act simultaneously as a security patron and a central broker of conflict management. These developments also illustrate how MNNA functions as a highly effective, bipartisan instrument of U.S. foreign policy for shaping regional security dynamics in ways that constrain the influence of rival great powers. Despite its rapid expansion and significant influence across different regions globally, MNNA remains an underexplored analytical lens both theoretically and empirically. Although several works have examined it in a fragmented manner (Parker, 2024; Bazhenova, 2022; Ben Aharon, 2025: 164–88; Cobban, 1989: 13), important analytical gaps remain, to which this working paper seeks to contribute. Building on Katzenstein's widely accepted definition of international norms as "collective expectations for the proper behaviour of actors with a given identity" (Katzenstein, 1996b: 5), this working paper frames its central inquiry around MNNA status. Specifically, it asks: how does MNNA status enable the U.S. and designated countries to balance their normative expectations in security cooperation, alliance formation, strategic restraint, and broader regional commitments amid growing systemic fragmentation in international politics?

To answer this question, the paper is structured in four parts. The first part provides a concise historical overview of how the MNNA designation was created and how it evolved through four distinct periods. The second part offers a systematic literature review of work conducted so far on MNNA, with particular attention to the impact of broader normative transformations in contemporary security governance in world politics. The third section, which constitutes the main empirical part of the paper, analyses the global regional distribution of MNNA status, focusing on South America, the Middle East and the Levant, Africa, the Gulf region, and the Indo-Pacific. Lastly, section four discusses the findings of the paper and outlines directions for future research.

## 2. FROM RONALD REAGAN TO THE ABRAHAM ACCORDS (2020): THE CHANGING POLITICS OF THE U.S. MNNA DESIGNATION

The MNNA designation has expanded steadily in recent years and has become a significant security and diplomatic instrument in the Asia-Pacific, Latin America, and the Middle East (U.S. Department of State 2025). Globally there is a growing set of informal U.S.-centred alliance formats in the Indo-Pacific and Latin America, including the Australia–United Kingdom (UK)–United States (AUKUS) (see e.g. Holland and Staunton, 2024: 712–29; Abbondanza, 2022: 403–21) and deepening ties with South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Taiwan, Japan, Argentina, and the Marshall Islands.<sup>5</sup>

The MNNA should first be understood within a longer historical trajectory of regional alignment politics, which evolved across three distinct periods: the late Cold War under bipolar tension, the post–Cold War unipolar moment (Guyatt, 2013: 605–22), and the post-9/11

4 The Abraham Accords refer to a series of normalisation agreements brokered by the U.S. in 2020 that established diplomatic relations between Israel and several Arab states, beginning with the UAE and Bahrain, and later joined by Morocco and Sudan.

5 The AUKUS security partnership is a trilateral agreement announced in 2021 aimed at deepening defence and technology cooperation among the three countries. Its central component is the plan to provide Australia with nuclear-powered submarines, alongside collaboration on advanced military capabilities in the Indo-Pacific.

era of fragmented security orders (Goldgeier, 2025: 639–54; Sperling and Webber, 2025: 9). Firstly, it was in this context that the MNNA designation was created under the administration of President Ronald Reagan in July 1987 (Fisher, 1987). The initiative reflected a late–Cold War effort to institutionalise a middle ground between formal alliances and informal partnerships as a non-binary security configuration. Washington sought to reward strategically important states with enhanced military cooperation, access to defence technologies, and political recognition, while deliberately avoiding the binding defence commitments associated with treaty alliances such as NATO. The alliance’s institutional structure, membership criteria, and collective defence obligations made expansion both politically and procedurally demanding. However, MNNA provided an alternative mechanism for deepening U.S. security ties beyond the Euro-Atlantic alliance framework. It allowed Washington to expand cooperation without triggering the legal and political commitments associated with formal alliance membership (Parker, 2024), particularly in South America, the Indo-Pacific, and the Middle East. This framework thus emerged as a flexible instrument suited to a bipolar environment in which the U.S. aimed to expand its strategic network without overextending formal guarantees.

The end of the Cold War and the rise of U.S. unipolarity in the 1990s (Sperling and Webber, 2025: 4) reshaped the function and meaning of MNNA. With the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) gone (Pechatnov, 2013: 107–23) the designation lost its original logic of bloc competition and instead became embedded in a U.S.-led security order that appeared more hierarchical and centralised. During this period, the designation served less as a hedging tool and more as a mechanism for consolidating American regional and normative influence. It provided selected partners with preferential access to military assistance while reinforcing asymmetrical security relationships under U.S. predominance. However, the absence of formal defence guarantees meant that MNNA remained distinct from treaty alliances, preserving its role as an intermediate, incentive-based framework rather than a full alliance structure.

Period	International context	Primary function of MNNA	Political significance	MNNA designees in period
Late Cold War (1987–1991)	Bipolar U.S.–Soviet rivalry	Flexible security partnership without treaty obligations	Expanded U.S. ties beyond NATO while avoiding formal alliance commitments	Israel, Egypt, Japan, South Korea, Australia
Post–Cold War unipolar decade (1990s)	U.S. predominance after the Soviet collapse	Consolidated U.S.-led regional order through privileged but non-treaty ties	Signalled hierarchical alignment; supported U.S.-brokered diplomacy (e.g., Israel–Jordan peace)	New Zealand, Jordan, Argentina
Post-9/11 era (2000s–mid 2010s)	War on terror; regional instability and intervention	Selective and conditional security cooperation; capability building	Privileged access to U.S. security networks without defence guarantees	Bahrain, Philippines, Thailand, Kuwait, Morocco, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tunisia
Multipolar competition era (late 2010s–2020s)	Renewed great-power competition; fragmented regional orders	Incentive-based, networked security alignment	Political signal of alignment; linked to new normalisation and partnership patterns	Brazil, Colombia, Qatar, Kenya, Saudi Arabia, Peru

Fig. 1 Historical overview of the MNNA designation divided into periods

In addition, the post–Cold War decade enabled MNNA to evolve beyond a security assistance framework into a diplomatic platform that facilitated U.S.-brokered regional realign-

ments. During the 1990s, the relative stability of the unipolar moment and Washington's central role in regional diplomacy allowed MNNA partners to become key participants in U.S.-sponsored peace initiatives, such as New Zealand (1996) and Argentina (1998). The 1994 Israel-Jordan Peace Treaty (Eisenberg and Caplan, 2003; Beaumont, 1997), for instance, emerged within a broader context of deepening U.S. security partnerships that provided political reassurance and strategic incentives for normalisation.<sup>6</sup> The re-emergence of the rhetoric that 'Jordan is Palestine', (Köprülü, 2021: 458), which frames the country as an alternative homeland for Palestinians (*al-watan al-badil*), constitutes a major security concern for the Hashemite monarchy. However, much like with Egypt, the fact that both states hold MNNA status and maintain strong alignment with the U.S. has helped ease tensions in the years following the peace treaty, sustaining a relatively cold but resilient peace between Israel and Jordan (Köprülü, 2021: 462–64).



PM Yitzhak Rabin and King Hussein shaking hands after the signing of the Israel-Jordan Peace Treaty. Photo: [Government Press Office \(Israel\)](#), CC BY-SA 3.0.

The third period, the Post-9/11 Era (2000s–mid-2010s), introduced a further transformation. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the rise of non-state actors, and the fragmentation of regional orders altered perceptions of alliance reliability and external commitments. U.S. security engagement became more selective, conditional, and at times unpredictable, shaped by shifting domestic priorities and fluctuating regional strategies. In this environment, MNNA status increasingly symbolised both opportunity and uncertainty, with new designees including Bahrain and Thailand (2002) as well as Kuwait (2004). On the one hand, it offered privileged access to American defence networks, training programmes, and advanced technologies. On the other hand, it highlighted the limits of U.S. obligations, underscoring that even close partners could not rely on automatic defence commitments.

<sup>6</sup> The Israel–Jordan Peace Treaty (1994) formally ended the state of war between Israel and Jordan and established diplomatic relations, security cooperation, and agreed arrangements on borders and water sharing. The agreement was brokered with significant U.S. involvement and strong support from the administration of President Bill Clinton, which played a central facilitating role in advancing and hosting the negotiations.

A decade later, during the Multipolar Competition Era (late 2010s–2020s), a similar peace dynamic reappeared. The 2020 Abraham Accords (U.S. Department of State, 2025) saw several states holding MNNA status normalise relations with Israel under U.S. mediation. In both periods, MNNA functioned not merely as a military designation but as a signalling device of political alignment with Washington, helping to create a diplomatic environment in which cross-regional peace agreements became more feasible. This illustrates how MNNA has operated not only as a security instrument, but also as a facilitator of U.S.-led regional order-building.

Across these four periods, the MNNA framework evolved from a late-Cold War innovation designed to manage bipolar competition, into a unipolar instrument of hierarchical partnership, and finally into a post-9/11 mechanism embedded in a more fragmented and contested regional order. Its enduring significance lies precisely in this adaptability: MNNA institutionalises a form of non-binary security alignment that reflects changing global power structures while preserving strategic flexibility for both Washington and its partners. This historical analysis also shows that, although the institutional form of MNNA remained formally consistent, its practical functions varied across regions and periods. Different aspects of the designation were emphasised depending on regional security environments, alliance structures, and local political constraints.

### 3. THE CURRENT STUDY OF MNNA: CONTEXT AND INTERPRETATION

The MNNA should not be understood as an isolated framework; rather, it constitutes a leading component of a broader normative transformation in contemporary security governance. This transformation is characterised by a gradual shift away from rigid, treaty-based alliance structures toward more flexible, modular, and hierarchically differentiated forms of security cooperation. In this evolving architecture, political recognition and strategic coordination increasingly occur without the automatic mutual defence obligations traditionally associated with formal alliances. This shift reflects a pattern identified in IR scholarship as “minilateralism,” in which a small group of states, typically between three and nine, collaborates formally or informally to advance mutual strategic or policy interests. (Heiduk and Wilkins, 2024: 809). Across several regions, security governance has moved toward such intermediate arrangements. In the Asia-Pacific, Australia and Vietnam upgraded their bilateral relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP), while the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Japan, and Australia have made strategic partnerships central to their Indo-Pacific strategies (Butcher, 2024: 498; Heiduk and Wilkins: 2024).

In the Euro-Atlantic space, the Partnership for Peace (PfP) institutionalised partial integration for post-Soviet and neutral European states, thereby normalising a continuum between outsider and full member status (Partnership for Peace Programme 2024). Created in 1994, the PfP provided a flexible institutional framework through which participating states could calibrate their relationship with NATO, selecting their preferred areas of cooperation and determining both the scope and tempo of integration (*ibid.*). Beyond these examples, minilateral frameworks such as the trilateral security partnership between Australia, the UK, and the U.S. (AUKUS), announced in 2021, embed deep technological and defence-industrial integration without constituting a formal collective defence treaty. Although framed in the language of shared values and partnership, such arrangements reflect a broader structural shift toward selectively institutionalised, executive-driven cooperation that bypasses the legal and political constraints characteristic of treaty-based alliances.

Taken together, these developments reveal an emerging ecology of intermediate security configurations, arrangements that generate alignment, coordination, and hierarchy without

full alliance membership. Yet MNNA both participates in and departs from this minilateral logic. Unlike most minilateral frameworks, MNNA encompasses a far larger and expanding set of designated states (currently twenty-two) and operates as a standing legal category embedded in U.S. domestic law. It should therefore be theorised not merely as a minilateral arrangement, but as a distinct modality within a wider transition toward modular and non-binary alliance architectures.

At the same time, MNNA stands out within this ecosystem as the most institutionalised and historically entrenched of these intermediate frameworks. Established during the late Cold War and subsequently routinised across multiple regions and strategic contexts, it has accumulated durability, bureaucratic depth, and symbolic weight that exceed those of newer, geographically bounded initiatives such as AUKUS or the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). Its longevity and adaptability render it the paradigmatic case through which the logic of non-binary alignment can be most systematically analysed. This structural distinctiveness becomes particularly salient in the context of evolving U.S. grand strategy. Against the backdrop of reduced U.S. engagement in multilateral institutions and formal alliances (Schreer, 2019: 7–10; Dijkstra et al., 2022: 182–205), MNNA emerges as a key instrument through which hierarchical security relationships are selectively created, managed, and stabilised. It allows Washington to maintain asymmetric influence and structured dependence without incurring the political and legal commitments of formal alliance expansion.

From a scholarly perspective, the MNNA designation remains underexplored in both academic and practitioner-oriented literature. Despite its significant expansion over the past two decades, it has attracted only limited scholarly attention. Olag Bazhenova's (2022) work examined the MNNA framework and demonstrated how public and media interest has increased regarding which states may receive the status, what benefits it entails, and whether it can function as an alternative to NATO membership. Her article outlines the legal foundations and conditions under which MNNA emerged and analyses its function as an instrument of American foreign policy. Another work of Bazhenova's (2022, 255-64) shows how U.S. have explored granting India MNNA status as a way to streamline military-technical cooperation and advance U.S. goals in the Indo-Pacific region. Although MNNA could remove bureaucratic barriers and complement existing defense agreements, multiple congressional attempts to confer this status on India have failed. Her study concludes that India is unlikely to become an MNNA in the foreseeable future because its strategic orientation does not accommodate U.S. interests to the extent the status would require. While further research is needed, as this paper demonstrates, Bazhenova's findings suggest that there is no straightforward "reverse causality" at play. As demonstrated in the case of India, states do not receive the MNNA designation simply because they already frame their security priorities in alignment with U.S. norms (Katzenstein 1996; Acharya 2004, 2011). Instead, the relationship appears far more complex and contingent, underscoring the need for further systematic, comparative and comprehensive analysis, as it is possible that other cases will demonstrate the reverse pattern of articulation, or even a combination of both.

In this context, Tayler B. Parker's (2024) more recent work explains why some U.S. partners choose to accept the MNNA designation while others decline. Although MNNA signals friendship and facilitates cooperation, it offers no security guarantees. Parker argues (2024: 5) that accepting MNNA is driven less by material benefits and more by reciprocating U.S. "appreciation," a symbolic, relational gesture. Governments accept MNNA only when doing so does not harm their domestic politics, regional relationships, or future strategic options, such as pursuing a full alliance. Eldad Ben Aharon's (2025: 164–88) work highlights the intense lobbying efforts of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in the U.S. Congress in July 1987 to ensure that Israel would be among the first countries designated as an MNNA.

These efforts succeeded in December 1987 (Cobban, 1989: 13) but conflicted with Israel's simultaneous need to support Turkey's MFA in blocking Congressional recognition of the Armenian Genocide that same year. This tension revealed how divisions within Israel's diplomatic corps reflected broader strategic dilemmas over Israel's strategic positioning. Supporting Turkey's denial of the Armenian Genocide in the U.S. Congress could improve relations with Turkey, thereby strengthening Israel's strategic alliance in the Middle East. However, this position could conflict with MNNA-related strategic interests in Washington, which required intensive lobbying efforts. (Ben Aharon, 2025: 179–80). Existing research has provided initial scoping of the legal framework, the normative contestation (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann, 2018; Acharya 2004, 2011; Katzenstein, 1996) between local and American security norms, and the historical and political significance of the MNNA designation. However, it has not yet developed into a consolidated empirical and theoretical body of scholarship, nor has it been fully subjected to critical scrutiny.

#### 4. THE REGIONAL COVERAGE OF MNNA

This section provides an initial empirical overview of the global distribution of MNNA designations and their regional security functions. Rather than offering in-depth case studies of individual countries, it demonstrates how MNNA operates as a globally deployed U.S. security instrument, enabling differentiated, non-binary security relationships through a regional survey. The flexible scope of MNNA status allows Washington to calibrate levels of recognition and appreciation (Parker, 2024) as well as military cooperation, political reassurance, and platforms for peace negotiations without extending formal alliance guarantees under Article 5, (Desmaele, 2024: 440–41) thereby managing both escalation risks and alliance entrapment. Given the geographic scope of MNNA, it is not possible to examine every region in equal depth. Instead, this section maps the designation across key regions and sub-regions, identifies designated states and patterns, and links MNNA status to specific conflict environments, peace agreements, and strategic challenges.

The justification for selecting these specific case studies and key regions is twofold. (1) certain regions contain a relatively high number of MNNA designee states, such as the Levant (three countries) and the Gulf (four countries); (2) Different regions illustrate how MNNA status is adapted to diverse strategic environments, ranging from counter-narcotics cooperation in South America to post-Arab Spring democratization support in North Africa and deterrence strategy vis-à-vis Iran in the Gulf. This regional differentiation is analytically necessary in order to trace the interaction between the policies of designated states and broader U.S. foreign and defense priorities. Together, these two factors highlight the global reach of MNNA as a foreign policy instrument. Empirically, the global pattern of MNNA designations illustrates how the U.S. employs the status to manage regional orders, counter revisionist powers, and support conflict management and peace processes while preserving strategic flexibility.

##### 4.1 *South America: Democratization and the U.S. "War on Drugs"*

The first region examined here is South America, where MNNA designation has been used selectively to support U.S. security cooperation without transforming the region into a formal alliance space. Argentina was designated an MNNA in 1998 during the Clinton administration (1992–2000), following its cooperation with the U.S. in peacekeeping operations and its alignment with Western security norms after the Cold War. For the U.S., Argentina's MNNA status helped stabilize a region historically resistant to U.S.-led alliance structures while encouraging democratic consolidation and military professionalism. It also support-

ed U.S. interests in non-proliferation and regional crisis management without militarizing hemispheric relations (U.S. Embassy in Argentina 2024). For example, Argentina is a key hub in the U.S. “War on Drugs,” as the Department of State funded a \$1.3 million U.S.-Argentina initiative to counter synthetic drugs and precursor chemicals, which, as noted by U.S. officials in 2024, illustrates strong bilateral cooperation and Argentina’s leadership in addressing this growing regional threat (*ibid.*).

Brazil was designated a MNNA in 2019 (Memorandum for the Secretary of State 2019) with the status formally taking effect in 2022, marking the first such designation in South America since Argentina. Unlike Argentina’s post Cold War alignment moment, Brazil’s MNNA status reflected a strategic recalibration toward selective defense industrial cooperation rather than deep operational integration (U.S. Relations With Brazil 2024). For Washington, Brazil’s designation signaled recognition of its regional leadership and growing defense capabilities, particularly in aerospace, maritime security, and peacekeeping (*ibid.*). At the same time, MNNA did not transform Brazil into a forward operational partner or embed it within U.S. led deterrence architectures. Instead, the designation facilitated access to certain defense technologies, joint exercises, and procurement opportunities while preserving Brazil’s longstanding preference for strategic autonomy and non alignment traditions in South American security affairs (*ibid.*).

Moreover, Peru, despite close bilateral security cooperation with the U.S. in areas such as counter-narcotics and military training, was designated an MNNA only in January 2026 (Presidential Determination 2026). It demonstrates that MNNA status in South America is not automatically extended to cooperative partners but is selectively conferred where Washington seeks to elevate political recognition and defense industrial alignment without institutionalizing treaty commitments. Much like Argentina, U.S.-Peru cooperation centers on counter-narcotics, trafficking in persons, rule of law reform, anti-corruption, and migration management rather than interstate deterrence. U.S. assistance includes significant funding for security sector governance, community policing, anti-money laundering, and military professionalization (Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet 2023).

The regional pattern thus reinforces the argument that MNNA in South America functions primarily as a confidence building and normative recognition mechanism rather than as a deterrence structure aimed at interstate adversaries. Together, Argentina, Brazil and Peru illustrate the low to mid integration end of the non-binary spectrum. MNNA status enhances access, legitimacy, and capacity building while avoiding the militarization of hemispheric politics or the construction of a formal alliance bloc. Unlike NATO’s Article 5 framework, (Desmaele, 2024: 440–41) which codifies collective defence as a binding obligation, MNNA in South America operates as a graduated instrument of alignment, strengthening cooperation while preserving regional sensitivities toward sovereignty and autonomy.

## 4.2 *The Middle East: Peace Accords and Regional Deterrence*

### 4.2.1 *Levant*

The Middle East broadly defined (including the Levant, the Gulf, and Sub-Saharan Africa), constitutes the most strategically dense and politically consequential cluster of MNNA designees, with ten states. This region and its subregions are dominated by authoritarian regimes (Del Sarto, 2021; Little, 2008), as well as monarchies such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar. However, unlike in regions such as South America and parts of Africa, there have been no significant attempts by successive U.S. administrations, across party lines, to instrumentalise MNNA as a means of promoting democratisation. This point,

demonstrated throughout the paper, underscores the broader and context-specific instrumentalization of MNNA as a flexible, non-binary tool. Focusing on the Levant, Israel was designated in 1987 (Ben Aharon, 2025: 164–88), followed by Egypt in 1989 in the wake of the Camp David peace accord, and Jordan in 1996 after the 1994 Israel-Jordan Peace Treaty (Eisenberg and Caplan, 2003; Beaumont, 1997). Collectively, these designations reflect U.S. efforts to stabilise the post-Arab-Israeli conflict order through layered security partnerships embedded in the transition from the late Cold War to the post-Cold War unipolar order. More specifically, the Middle East, given its long history of Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as well as ongoing instability in countries such as Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq, has remained a central arena of terrorism, ethnic and interstate conflict, and the repercussions of the 2011 Arab uprisings (Jägerskog, et al., 2019).

In this context, MNNA status in the Middle East reflects a U.S. approach that has been global, militarised, and deterrence-oriented (Campbell, 1998; Parker, 2023; Goldgeier and Shiffrin, 2021), consistent with its superpower status (Ben Aharon, 2019) and an increasingly hawkish posture, particularly following the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Parker 2025). Among all MNNA designees globally, Israel occupies the most central and exceptional position. While formally outside NATO, Israel has, in practice, received levels of U.S. military, intelligence, and political support comparable to, and in some domains exceeding, those provided to NATO members. This dynamic became particularly pronounced during the second Trump administration and during the Gaza War (2023–2025), as well as the Twelve-Day Conflict with Iran (June 2025). As a result, military aid, intelligence cooperation, and diplomatic support intensified. This bipartisan pattern has continued under the Biden administration, underscoring Israel's de facto status as a privileged security partner in the days following the 7 October Hamas surprise attack. President Biden stated this explicitly on 10 October 2023, noting: "We will make sure Israel has what it needs to take care of its citizens, defend itself, and respond to this attack," and referring to Israel as "America's most reliable partner in the Middle East." (Burga and Moench, 2023).

From the U.S. perspective, the MNNA designations introduced in the late 1980s in the Middle East have served as a core instrument for countering the influence of Iran's Islamic Revolution (Ben Aharon, 2023) and limiting Iran's regional ambitions. MNNA partnerships underpin U.S. strategies aimed at containing Iranian influence across the Levant, countering Iran-backed non-state actors, and managing escalation risks without committing to direct military confrontation. The MNNA framework allows Washington to strengthen regional partners while preserving flexibility and avoiding automatic defense obligations. For the designees, MNNA status has provided enhanced deterrence, access to advanced military capabilities, and symbolic reassurance of U.S. commitment. In conflict-management terms, MNNA has reinforced peace agreements, embedded former adversaries within a U.S.-led security hierarchy, and helped sustain long-term peace accords by anchoring them to material and political incentives.

#### 4.2.2 *The Gulf*

For the U.S., MNNA status in the Gulf has been closely tied to countering Iran's revolutionary ideology and its regional ambitions following the 1979 Islamic Revolution (Ben Aharon, 2023), to deterring asymmetric threats, and to securing critical maritime routes. For the designees, MNNA status has provided enhanced unofficial deterrence against Iran until the February–March 2026 war with Iran, even though it is limited in capacity and needs to be studied separately once the war is over.<sup>7</sup> This arrangement serves as forward-oper-

<sup>7</sup> For more on this, see footnote 3.

ating platforms, intelligence partners, and hosts to U.S. military infrastructure, enabling Washington to project power and manage crises while avoiding the automatic security guarantees associated with formal alliances. More specifically, MNNA designation reflects long-standing U.S. efforts to manage regional security amid persistent instability, rivalry, and the Iranian threat following the 1979 revolution and Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1991. Kuwait was subsequently designated an MNNA in 2004 in recognition of its role during and after the Gulf War (Bush 2004b). Earlier in George W. Bush's presidency, Bahrain received MNNA status in 2002, reflecting its role as host of the U.S. Fifth Fleet and its centrality to U.S. naval operations (Bush 2002). Qatar was designated an MNNA in 2022, following decades of extensive military cooperation with the U.S, including its role as a key logistical hub and its critical contribution to the U.S.-led evacuation from Afghanistan.

Moreover, the designation of Saudi Arabia as an MNNA in November 2025 (The White House 2025) marks a significant recalibration of U.S.-Gulf security relations. As Trump noted: "Tonight, I'm pleased to announce that we're taking our military cooperation to even greater heights by formally designating Saudi Arabia as a major non-NATO ally" (ibid.). While Trump could have emphasised other aspects of the designation, as has been the case with other MNNA decisions, he chose to emphasise security cooperation, underscoring that security remains the primary focus of the designation in this region. For decades, Saudi Arabia had been among the U.S. most important strategic partners in the Middle East without holding MNNA status, reflecting Washington's deliberate restraint in extending formalized recognition that could imply alliance-like commitments. The 2025 designation therefore signals a shift in U.S. threat perception and strategic priorities, particularly in the context of intensified concerns over Iran's regional activities, evolving Gulf security dynamics, and growing great-power competition in the Middle East. For the U.S., granting MNNA status to Saudi Arabia institutionalized an already deep security partnership while preserving flexibility short of a treaty alliance.



President Donald Trump and Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud of Saudi Arabia observe a flyover during a welcome ceremony, Tuesday, November 18, 2025, at the South Portico of the White House. Photo: [Official White House Photo by Joyce N. Boghosian](#).

For Saudi Arabia, MNNA designation enhanced regime security, international legitimacy, and access to advanced U.S. military technologies, while allowing Riyadh to maintain strategic autonomy in its broader foreign policy, including relations with China and other global powers. Extending MNNA status to Saudi Arabia would effectively treat threats to Saudi security as threats to U.S. strategic interests and would establish a framework for joint deterrence and capability integration (El-Houni 2025). It could also lay the groundwork for joint basing arrangements and expanded intelligence cooperation. It also represented a potential game changer in relation to Israel, Washington's most prominent MNNA: under this designation, Saudi Arabia's purchase of stealth fighter jets would mark the first U.S. sale of such advanced aircraft to Riyadh. The kingdom has reportedly requested to acquire 48 aircraft (Al Jazeera 2025). This move has been seen as a significant policy shift by Washington that could alter the regional military balance, particularly given U.S. legal commitments to maintaining Israel's "qualitative military edge" (ibid.). The designation also reflects Saudi Arabia's growing role in regional diplomacy and conflict management, particularly as Gulf states increasingly position themselves not merely as security consumers but as diplomatic brokers. In terms of the interconnection between conflict management, deterrence, and peace processes, MNNA designation in the Gulf has complemented diplomatic initiatives such as the 2020 Abraham Accords by embedding normalisation and security cooperation within a broader U.S.-led regional architecture. The inclusion of Saudi Arabia in late 2025 further strengthens this framework, signalling continued U.S. commitment to regional stability while relying on graduated forms of strategic recognition rather than binary alliance structures.

#### 4.3 *Sub-Saharan Africa: Democratization and Counterterrorism*

For the U.S., the MNNA designation in Africa serves multiple objectives. First, it strengthens counterterrorism operations against transnational militant networks operating across the Sahel, North Africa, and the Horn of Africa. Second, it supports regional stabilization by enhancing the capacity of key partners without extending formal alliance commitments in a politically diverse and institutionally uneven continent. In the post-Arab Spring context, MNNA status has functioned as a tool of selective reassurance, signalling U.S. support for regime resilience and reform without endorsing open-ended security guarantees. Morocco was designated an MNNA in 2004, reflecting its long-standing cooperation with the U.S. in counterterrorism, intelligence sharing, and regional security in North and West Africa (Bush 2004a). Tunisia received MNNA status in 2015 following its democratic transition after the Arab Spring (Baker 2015) at a moment when Washington sought to support institutional consolidation and prevent democratic backsliding in a highly volatile regional environment (Obama 2015).

The Arab Spring significantly reshaped U.S. threat perceptions and policy priorities in Africa (Charountaki, 2014; Terrill, 2015; Morey, et al., 2012) and North Africa. The collapse or weakening of state institutions in Libya, Egypt, and parts of the Sahel heightened the Obama administration's main concerns. Against this backdrop, MNNA designation became a means of reinforcing cooperative regimes and rewarding political trajectories aligned with U.S. preferences, most notably Tunisia's democratic experiment (Cohen and Klieman, 2020) while avoiding direct intervention or formal alliance entanglement. In Tunisia's case, MNNA designation signalled external support for democratic governance and security sector reform at a moment of acute vulnerability, while also aiming to prevent spillover from Libya's deteriorating security situation. As Obama noted after granting Tunisia MNNA status, "We discussed the importance of security and the recognition that given the instability in the region, it is important for us to continue to partner effectively in counterterrorism

efforts, but also in our efforts to stabilize Libya and bring the parties together so that we don't have a failed state and a power vacuum that ends up infecting the situation in Tunisia." (The White House, 2015; Al Jazeera, 2015).

Kenya's designation as an MNNA reflects both its longstanding security cooperation with Washington and the broader U.S. effort to recognise African partners within its global security architecture. The designation was made in recognition of Kenya's sustained contributions within the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) area of responsibility and its participation in international peace and security operations beyond the region (Biden 2024). As one of the U.S. leading Counter Terrorism (CT) and security partners in sub-Saharan Africa, Kenya has played a central role in regional stabilisation efforts, particularly in relation to al-Shabaab and wider Horn of Africa security dynamics (ibid.).

In this sense, Africa as an MNNA region reflects a twofold normative logic. On the one hand, the designation is embedded in the articulation of security threats, especially CT within the framework of the U.S. "Global War on Terror." On the other hand, it is linked to broader goals of institutional strengthening and support for democratic governance, particularly in the post-2011 regional environment shaped by the Arab uprisings. This latter dimension is more explicitly associated with African cases, where governance reform and democratic resilience are often articulated as part of the security partnership. By contrast, in the Gulf or the Levant, MNNA designation tends to be framed less in terms of democratisation or regime reform and more in relation to deterrence, stability, and strategic balancing.

#### *4.4 The Indo-Pacific: Strategic Competition and the Rise of China*

As opposed to the other regions studied so far in this paper, in the Indo-Pacific the MNNA designation is deeply embedded in U.S. efforts to respond to China's regional expansion and to the broader strategic challenge it poses to the existing regional order (Chubb 2023, Xiyang 2021; Scobell 2021). This includes the indirect protection of Taiwan's sovereignty through deterrence and balance of power mechanisms rather than formal alliance guarantees. MNNA designees in the region include South Korea in 1987, Japan in 1989, Australia in 1989, Thailand in 2003, the Philippines in 2003, Pakistan in 2004, and New Zealand in 2012 (U.S. Department of State 2025). Australia occupies a distinctive position as both a MNNA and a formal treaty ally, illustrating the flexibility of MNNA as a complementary rather than substitutive security instrument. For the U.S., MNNA status in the Indo Pacific strengthens deterrence against China by enhancing military interoperability, intelligence sharing, and operational readiness among key partners. At the same time, MNNA allows Washington to maintain strategic ambiguity, particularly with regard to Taiwan. Rather than extending explicit defense commitments, MNNA relationships contribute indirectly to Taiwan's security by reinforcing a regional security architecture that raises the political and military costs of coercion or unilateral changes to the status quo.

China's growing military capabilities and advances in Artificial Intelligence (AI) its assertive behavior in the South China Sea (Williams, 2025) and its increasing pressure on Taiwan have heightened the importance of non-binary security arrangements of MNNA. In this context, MNNA status serves as a mechanism of deterrence, signaling U.S. commitment and regional presence without crossing the threshold into formal alliance expansion or invoking binding collective-defense obligations such as NATO's Article 5, (Desmaele, 2024: 440–41) which could provoke escalation. The MNNA designation thus plays a stabilizing role by managing deterrence and reassurance simultaneously. At the same time, it allows these states to retain flexibility in managing economic and diplomatic relations with China, an especially important consideration given China's central role in regional trade and in-

vestment. MNNA therefore supports a hedging strategy that balances security cooperation with economic interdependence. In conflict management terms, MNNA in the Indo Pacific emphasizes deterrence, crisis prevention, and escalation control rather than formal peace treaties. This reflects the region's unresolved sovereignty disputes, particularly those surrounding Taiwan, the Korean Peninsula, and competing maritime claims, as well as the centrality of great-power competition and normative rivalry (Acharya, 2004). As such, MNNA functions as a key instrument for sustaining a fragile regional equilibrium under conditions of intensifying strategic competition.



President of the United States Donald Trump greets General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party Xi Jinping before a bilateral meeting at the Gimhae International Airport terminal, Thursday, October 30, 2025, in Busan, South Korea. Photo: [Official White House Photo by Daniel Torok](#).

To summarize, the MNNA designation demonstrates considerable versatility and scope, operating as a flexible and hierarchical instrument of U.S. security diplomacy and governance. Empirically, this section shows how MNNA enables Washington to counter revisionist regional powers such as Iran and major powers such as China, manage regional conflicts, and support peace processes and agreements, while avoiding the rigidity of formal alliances and binding collective-defense commitments such as NATO's Article 5 (Desmaele, 2024: 440–41). While there are limitations to the framework that need to be acknowledged, such as how the U.S. normative order is localised (Acharya 2004; 2011) and mediated by local elites, issues of sovereignty, and different typologies of regimes, these constraints do not diminish its analytical value. The MNNA status illustrates how contemporary U.S. security policy relies on graduated forms of recognition and cooperation rather than binary alliance structures.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper has examined the MNNA designation through the following central question: how does MNNA status enable the U.S. and designated countries to balance their norma-

tive expectations in security cooperation, alliance formation, strategic restraint, and broader regional commitments amid growing systemic fragmentation in international politics? It has shown that MNNA functions as a distinctive instrument of U.S. security policy operating at the intersection of material cooperation, symbolic recognition, norm articulation in the context of the post-9/11 Global War on Terror, counternarcotics efforts and democratisation, and calibrated strategic restraint. MNNA status does not meet the criteria of the current IR debate on “minilateralism.” To recap, the term is generally associated with Indo-Pacific security dynamics and refers to cooperation among a small group of states, typically between three and nine members, acting formally or informally to advance shared interests (Heiduk and Wilkins, 2024: 809). The empirical analysis in this paper demonstrates that MNNA does not fit within this framework and instead should be assessed on the basis of its own specific institutional logic and strategic capacity. By tracing the historical evolution of MNNA, developing a conceptual reading grounded in an area-studies approach, and mapping its global and regional distribution, this working paper has demonstrated that MNNA is neither a residual category nor a mere technical status. Instead, it constitutes a flexible mechanism through which Washington manages alignment, hierarchy, and uncertainty in an increasingly fragmented international system.

Historically, the evolution of MNNA across four distinct periods reveals its adaptive character. Initially conceived as a Cold War instrument to facilitate military cooperation outside formal alliances such as NATO and its Article 5 commitments (Desmaele, 2024: 440–41), MNNA has gradually been repurposed to address post–Cold War stabilization, CT, regional conflict management, and, more recently, great-power competition. This historical layering helps explain why MNNA today (March 2026) functions less as a pathway to alliance membership and more as a calibrated form of security recognition. While traditional alliance theory struggles to capture MNNA’s ambiguous status, normative perspectives highlight how the designation conveys appreciation without guarantees. MNNA thus operates as a relational signal that both reassures partners and preserves U.S. strategic flexibility.

The regional analysis demonstrates that MNNA is deployed unevenly across global security environments. In South America, it operates as a confidence-building instrument that reinforces cooperative security norms while advancing U.S. counternarcotics strategy, migration control objectives, and democratization agendas. In Africa, it operates selectively primarily as a capacity building and prevention-oriented tool, particularly in the post Arab Spring context. In the Middle East, the Levant, and the Gulf, MNNA plays a more explicit role in conflict management, peace consolidation, and the containment of Iran’s regional ambitions, with Israel occupying a uniquely central position within the MNNA framework. In the Indo Pacific, MNNA contributes to deterrence and crisis prevention amid intensifying competition with China, including indirect support for Taiwan’s security through balance of power dynamics.

Taken together, the findings suggest that MNNA should be understood as a core element of contemporary U.S. security governance, with significant implications for NATO and global politics. It enables the management of alignment through graduated forms of recognition rather than binary alliance commitments. By institutionalizing appreciation without guarantees, MNNA allows Washington to navigate competing demands for reassurance, deterrence, and restraint. At the same time, the expanding scope and geographical reach of MNNA warrant sustained analytical attention to its broader systemic effects, particularly its implications for NATO and EU security configurations and normative expectations (Sperling and Webber, 2025; Schimmelfennig, 2003). As MNNA increasingly provides forms of military access, political reassurance, and strategic coordination traditionally associated with alliance membership, it subtly reshapes the boundaries of transatlantic security,

blurs the distinction between allied and non-allied partners, and raises questions about the future role of formal multilateral institutions in managing security cooperation. Further research should incorporate, among other approaches, in-depth case studies and systematic cross-regional comparison, as well as theoretically informed work that examines the normative language of MNNA designees and the U.S. in different regional contexts. It should also examine the deterrence capacity of MNNA as an increasingly significant instrument in the international security realm, as well as the articulation of security threats in U.S. terms rather than through NATO or EU frameworks. Moreover, the extensive pressure that the current Trump administration (2025–2029) places on the international order, especially on institutions such as NAT, the EU and the World Health Organization (Dijkstra et al., 2022; Schreer, 2019), enhances the relative significance of MNNA as a zero-sum strategic instrument and warrants greater attention from scholars and practitioners.

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#### List of abbreviations

AFRICOM	United States Africa Command
AI	Artificial Intelligence
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AUKUS	Australia–United Kingdom–United States
CSP	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership
CT	Counterterrorism
EU	European Union
IR	International Relations
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MNNA	Major Non-NATO Ally
NATO	The North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PfP	Partnership for Peace
Quad	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue
U.S.	United States
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

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Dr. Eldad Ben Aharon, senior researcher at the Research Department Local Peace Orders, is the principal investigator of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) project “‘Jewish Foreign Policy’ and the Exodus of the Syrian Jews: Zionism, Migration, and the Diaspora (1948–1990)”. (Project number 528814864). His research focuses on the intersection of security, norms, and memory, informed by securitisation theory, foreign policy analysis, and oral history. Dr. Ben Aharon’s first book, *Israeli-Turkish Relations at the End of the Cold War: The Geopolitics of Denying the Armenian Genocide* (Edinburgh University Press, November 2025), pulls back the curtain on the pivotal 1980s, exposing a period of clandestine diplomacy, strategic bargaining, and calculated international memory trade-offs that deepened ties with Ankara behind the scenes

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#### Contact

Eldad Ben Aharon  
Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF)  
Email: [Eldad.BenAharon@prif.org](mailto:Eldad.BenAharon@prif.org)  
ORCID: [0000-0003-0039-9827](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0039-9827)

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Peace Research Institute Frankfurt  
Darmstädter Landstr. 112  
60598 Frankfurt am Main, Germany

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