

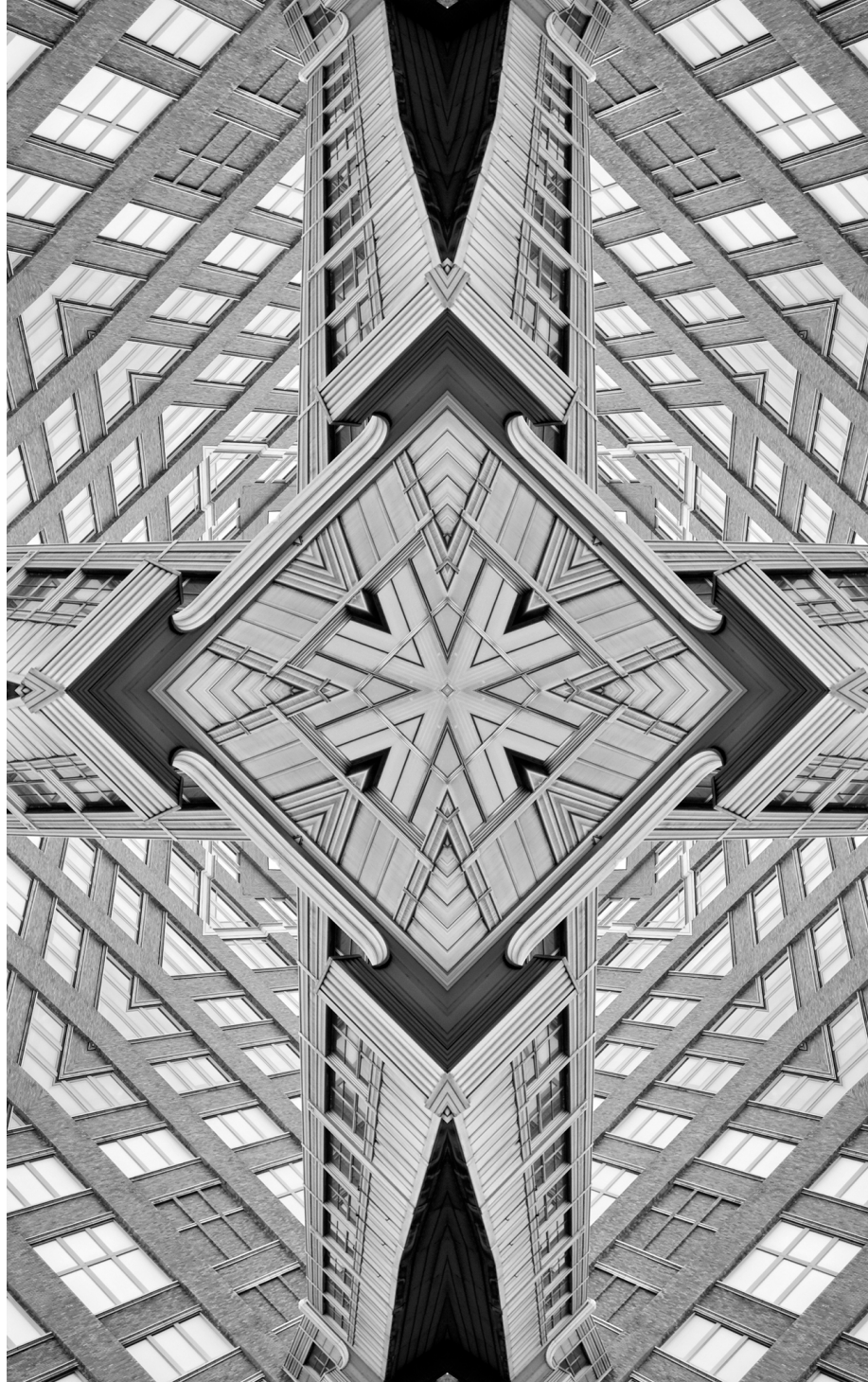
# Issue

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# Brief

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# Explaining the Rise of Minilaterals in the Indo-Pacific

Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan

## Abstract

Heightening great-power rivalry has impeded consensus-making in multilateral institutions. This has given rise, in recent years, to minilaterals especially in the Indo-Pacific. Even as there are criticisms that minilaterals are too informal and lacking in structures that are required for focused debates, China's belligerence has galvanised support for, and focus within minilateral groupings in the region. Over the past year, the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic has also revealed the vulnerabilities of existing multilateral institutions, further driving the emergence of both strategic minilaterals and more targeted ones focused on various issues, including supply chain resilience. This brief weighs the potential of minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific, and argues that in the foreseeable future, it will endure.

The past decade has witnessed a geopolitical churning in the Indo-Pacific region: new nomenclature is being created (e.g., from ‘Asia-Pacific’ to ‘Indo-Pacific’); new strategic alignments are being created; and minilateral groupings such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or Quad) have emerged. These forums are a result of the changing geopolitical dynamics in the region, and in turn, they will have strategic implications for the region.<sup>1</sup>

To be sure, the US-led alliance-based partnerships, primarily bilateral, continue to be critical elements of the Asian strategic architecture. However, such alliances have acquired new characteristics, with allies and partners like Australia and Japan shouldering a bigger share of the security burden. Meanwhile, China has been forging close economic engagements that have strategic underpinnings in the Indo-Pacific. The tensions between the parallel diplomacy fielded by the US and China have produced new security arrangements in the form of minilaterals in the region. China’s pursuit of its national interests through aggressive diplomacy and the use—or threat—of force, has compelled states to look for different ways to respond.

In the immediate timeframe, it would appear that China wants to play the role of regional police in shaping security order in the Indo-Pacific—one that is hegemonic and with itself at the apex.<sup>2</sup> This is in contrast to the vision held by key powers in the Indo-Pacific that do not wish to see a hegemonic Asia.<sup>3</sup> This interest itself has pushed like-minded countries to come together in shaping an Indo-Pacific strategic order that is open and inclusive, as against Beijing’s idea of an exclusive one.<sup>4</sup> As William Tow argues, there is a real, urgent need for “traditional security” politics; he quotes Henrick Tsjeng’s definition of ‘traditional security’ thus: “the protection of national security and sovereignty from external state-level threats and the management of the impact of major power competition.”<sup>5</sup> The coming years will continue to witness the growth of interests-based coalitions or “ad-hoc coalitions of the willing”<sup>6</sup> in the Indo-Pacific, which is a reflection of the deep uncertainties that currently prevail.

# The Logic of Minilateralism

Analysts attribute the current trend towards minilateralism to the slow progress—indeed, the failure in many cases—in building consensus within traditional regional and multilateral institutions.<sup>7</sup> The changing balance of power dynamics both at the regional and global levels impact the effective functioning of the larger multilateral institutions. Perceptions of ineffectiveness of more formal multilateral bodies in dealing with regional challenges has pushed countries to look for alternatives.

Moreover, observers argue, regional institutions such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) that work on the principle of consensus “reduce outcomes to the lowest denominator.”<sup>8</sup> ASEAN was once referred to as a model of an economically integrated institution capable of effectively dealing with regional challenges. Over the years, however, ASEAN has only grown increasingly fractured and unable, on occasion, to even produce joint statements.<sup>9</sup> The grouping became a divided house once the issues of territorial integrity and sovereignty involving China were brought into its ambit. China’s belligerence and divisive strategies in its engagements with ASEAN have hurt the group’s core principles of mutual respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations.

This is not to say that states have ceased investing in traditional multilateral and regional institutions such as the ASEAN, the United Nations (UN), and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). Rather, states have also come to recognise the value of engaging in smaller, informal, more targeted, interests-based groupings to work on various contentious issues that are difficult to resolve in larger forums.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, there is a growing realisation that a thicket of such minilateral groupings engaging on a number of economic, security and strategic areas is better than relying on a single fragmented regional organisation that provides little by way of options and solutions in dealing with the regional challenges. Given that the tensions in the region are likely to prolong, more minilaterals will only be created in the region—ones that are based both on broad strategic interests, as well as specific themes such as supply chain resilience. Bhubhinder Singh and Sarah Teo argue that minilateral arrangements occupy the space between bilateralism (both the US- and China-led) and broader regional multilateralism (such as the ASEAN), involving three to nine countries and are rather “exclusive, flexible and functional in nature.”<sup>11</sup>

# The Logic of Minilateralism

Minilateralism has found favour amongst several major powers in the Indo-Pacific primarily due to the question of credibility of the US alliance system in managing security challenges in the region. The credibility question has become a strong imperative for the US alliance partners to forge closer strategic ties with other key powers in the region. Even as the US security alliance is a critical component of their security management, Australia and Japan, for instance, have pursued closer strategic partnerships with India—an illustration of the evolving strategic minilaterals in the Indo-Pacific. But within a few years, the strengthened partnership amongst Australia, India and Japan grew into the quadrilateral format with the inclusion of the US. Experts have in the past argued that “creative minilateralism” could change the texture and format of this strategic partnership to bring back the Quad for a second time.<sup>12</sup> The uncertainty around the US, especially in the years under Trump, gave rise to a number of loose coalitions. An example is the Australia-France-India trilateral ministerial dialogue, the first edition of which happened in May 2021, but whose origins go back to the track 1.5 dialogues coordinated by three think tanks from the three countries.<sup>13</sup> The Australia, India and Indonesia trilateral meeting also originated in track-2 formats held in September 2013, some years before the first senior officials from the three countries met in November 2017.<sup>14</sup>

There are also arguments that in order for minilaterals to flourish, it may be better to test the convergence of interests, threat perceptions and practical feasibilities in track 2 and track 1.5 formats before formally launching them as a grouping. These are not significant impediments, however, since these are informal networks that are yet to be institutionalised. Analysts making this argument often cite the example of Quad in its first avatar and how it withered due to changes in leadership in Australia and Japan. China’s protests against the Quad did not help, either. That the Quad is being reinvigorated shows that the initial imperatives that first brought together Australia, India, Japan and the United States have only intensified. The concern that these groups will soon dissipate should therefore not be a concern.

A related imperative for minilateralism to work in the Indo-Pacific is a return of balance in power politics. Historically, countries like India have shied away from playing a role in shaping the balance of power dynamics in the region; however, a disputatious China has driven India, and many other countries in the Indo-Pacific to adopt a power-centric and pragmatic approach to moulding the regional order.<sup>15</sup> Other countries such as New Zealand and South Korea have paid less heed to the evolving strategic dynamics in their desire to avoid

# The Logic of Minilateralism

taking a stand against China due to economic compulsions. That might soon change, however, as Wellington and Seoul have recently begun engaging in groupings like the Quad-Plus.<sup>16</sup>

Capacity constraints are another set of issues that have pushed minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific. China has active territorial disputes with most of its neighbours and Beijing has only heightened tensions through its unilateral pursuit of measures like the establishment and extension of air defence identification zone (ADIZ), or the control over South China Sea by setting up new administrative regions headquartered in Sansha City, Woody Island.<sup>17</sup> All countries that are engaged in minilateralism have had to deal with aggressive Chinese behaviour in their backyard, while lacking in military and economic capacity.<sup>18</sup> Even if one were to combine the capacities of some of the bigger maritime powers, they still will not be able to match up to China. This also highlights the US's essential role in the Indo-Pacific strategic dynamics.

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India is not new to minilateralism. Six years ago, India endorsed and became party to trilateral security arrangements with the US and Japan.<sup>19</sup> In October 2015, the Malabar naval exercises—a series of bilateral naval exercises between the US and India—saw the participation of Japan. The Malabar series has been conducted since 1992, and other countries have on occasion joined them. While the 2015 Malabar exercises were particularly highlighted, it came in the backdrop of a significant development with India, Japan, and the US elevating their trilateral dialogue to the level of foreign ministers. Since then, Japan has become a permanent partner in the Malabar exercises, thus making it a US-India-Japan trilateral naval exercise. What drove this trilateral partnership was that they were all keen to uphold freedom of navigation and open seas, unimpeded lawful commerce in international waters, and respect for international law. Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) has also gained greater traction in the minilaterals in the Indo-Pacific, including the US-India-Japan trilateral partnership. These objectives have become particularly important in the face of increasing incidence of land border, air and naval intrusions by Chinese armed forces in the neighbouring countries.

The trend towards minilateralism is unlikely to slow down given the contemporary security environment in the Indo-Pacific. For one, even amidst the manifold crises brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, China's behaviour with its neighbours has only become more belligerent, in turn accelerating the pace of informal security arrangements. Unlike multilateral platforms that are aimed at nurturing "inclusivity and non-discrimination," minilateral initiatives are created amongst small groups of countries that have shared threat perceptions as well as a common understanding of ways and means to mitigate those challenges. Not every country, however, will be on board with all the proposals even within a smaller coalition. This may best be illustrated by India's approach: it has become comfortable with a number of minilateral arrangements, even if it is the slowest moving partner in many of them. Many countries in the region, including India, have had difficulties taking sides between the US and China even though minilaterals like the Quad and other trilaterals are taking shape, with many clearly indicating their strategic choices.

The recent trilateral initiative of India, France and Australia is a case in point. In September 2020, the grouping had its first meeting with the objective of “building on the strong bilateral relations that the three countries share with each other and synergising their respective strengths to ensure a peaceful, secure, prosperous and rules-based Indo-Pacific Region.”<sup>20</sup> A tweet by India’s Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson, Arindam Bagchi said that the initiative is meant to arrive at “convergences in our approach to the Indo-Pacific region and to explore ways to strengthen trilateral cooperation, particularly in the maritime domain.”<sup>21</sup> Each of the three foreign ministries issued a statement but that of France was particularly forthcoming, as it highlighted the significance of international law, peace, and security in the Indo-Pacific. The statement said that the trilateral meeting “helped underscore the goal of guaranteeing peace, security and adherence to international law in the Indo-Pacific by drawing on the excellence of bilateral relations between France, India and Australia.”<sup>22</sup> Taking it further, the three countries elevated the trilateral dialogue to the ministerial level in May this year, with the Indian External Affairs Minister, S Jaishankar, France’s Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Jean-Yves Le Drian, and Australia’s Minister for Foreign Affairs, Marise Payne, meeting in London on the sidelines of the G7 Foreign Ministers’ Meeting. The three ministers reiterated the importance of the rule of law, freedom of navigation and overflight, peaceful resolution of disputes, democratic values, and respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, while working towards an open, inclusive and rules-based Indo-Pacific.<sup>23</sup>

India is also engaged in another important minilateral in the region—the India-Australia-Indonesia trilateral that started with the Senior Officials Meeting in 2017 and has had three interactions since.<sup>24</sup> Similar to the India-Australia-France trilateral, this forum has also focused on various developments in the Indo-Pacific, including development assistance programmes, maritime issues, and HADR efforts. There was also another important meeting amongst the three countries involving their foreign and defence ministers.<sup>25</sup> All three countries have had to deal with China’s use of force, including naval intrusion into Indonesia’s Exclusive Economic Zone at Natuna Islands, the border

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conflict with India in Ladakh and elsewhere on the India-China border, and the use of trade and economic coercion against Australia—problems that have increased over the last year.

In a joint statement issued after their virtual bilateral summit meeting in June 2020, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Australian counterpart, Scott Morrison highlighted the importance of the India-Australia strategic partnership with third countries. The statement also mentioned establishing trilateral arrangements such as India-Australia-Japan and India-Australia-Indonesia groupings, as well as their engagements in broader multilaterals such as the Quad-Plus initiative involving New Zealand, South Korea, and Vietnam.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, the Australia-Japan-India trilateral appears to be climbing greater heights with its action-oriented agenda. In September 2020, the trade ministers from the three countries agreed to set up a supply chain resilience programme for the Indo-Pacific. The decision was taken at a virtual meeting between Australia's Simon Birmingham, Japan's Kajiyama Hiroshi, and India's Piyush Goyal—a move that was prompted by the shared recognition of vulnerabilities from excessive economic dependence on a single source (i.e., China). The proposal is meant to work out ways and means to develop and nurture alternative supply chains.

In April 2021, the trade ministers from the three countries formally launched the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI) in a trilateral virtual meeting. Based on the consultations held in September 2020, the three ministers identified certain policy measures, including “supporting the enhanced utilization of digital technology; and supporting trade and investment diversification.”<sup>27</sup> These two areas are being taken up for initial implementation of the SCRI. The initiative further aims to build on the objectives of “sharing of best practices on supply chain resilience; and (ii) holding investment promotion events and buyer-seller matching events to provide opportunities for stakeholders to explore the possibility of diversification of their supply chains.” Any future decision to expand the SCRI will be based on consensus amongst the three countries.<sup>28</sup>

# Implications of Indo-Pacific Minilateralism

Cooperation in HADR, the promotion of freedom of navigation, and respect for rule of law and the rules-based order are important factors driving minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific. However, the most fundamental push in the formation of these minilaterals is the changing balance of power in the region and beyond. Given the power dynamics at play—which are likely to persist—it can be assumed that more minilaterals will take shape in the coming years.

It is important in this context to understand the possible ramifications of the rise of minilaterals and how they could potentially alter the traditional regional multilateral frameworks. Unless the traditional avenues for diplomacy can be made more effective—starting, at the very least, with productive regional and multilateral discussions—minilateralism will continue to be explored. Minilaterals offer a great deal of scope in terms of focused debates and efficient delivery in pursuing an actionable agenda, as well as informality and a certain amount of flexibility. Given the contentious nature of global-power relations and the difficulties in developing consensus, minilaterals carry a huge advantage of building shared viewpoints, which can gradually be taken to larger, more traditional formal platforms.

China has helped the cause. Beijing’s aggressive behaviour has allowed for focused attention and building support at the domestic or regional level, and the Quad-like formats and Indo-Pacific strategies are gaining more takers. Much of Europe stood on the sidelines of the developments in the Indo-Pacific but the fact that more of those regional powers are now coming out with Indo-Pacific policies is an endorsement of the evolving strategies, and in particular, of minilateralism.

India, for one, has shun many of its traditional inhibitions about joining trilateral and other strategic minilateral groupings in the Indo-Pacific given the evolving security condition around its borders, with China at the fulcrum of these changing dynamics. Although India had been hesitant to embrace these smaller and exclusive groupings, China’s aggressive behaviour over the past few years has pushed it to a paradigm shift. These minilateral engagements have opened a menu of strategic options for India.

Along with extended outreach, New Delhi has signed military and logistics agreements with a number of pivotal Indo-Pacific powers, which have expanded India’s maritime footprint beyond its immediate maritime spaces.<sup>29</sup> This has

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also been useful in stepping up military preparedness and interoperability with like-minded strategic partners. India has, so far, signed agreements with all the Indo-Pacific powers, including the US, South Korea, Singapore, Japan, France and Australia. India's signing of four foundational agreements with the US has significantly changed the quality of military engagements. With the signing of the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement with the US, for instance, the Indian military gained access to encrypted communication systems for seamless communication. In March 2019, the Indian Navy and the US Navy signed a loan agreement that saw the installation of two Pacific fleet-provided CENTRIXS (Combined Enterprise Regional Information Exchange System) kits at the Indian Navy headquarters.<sup>30</sup> This is part of the plan to undertake additional deployment of such systems at a number of places and platforms, which will improve interoperability considerably. With India having made considerable investments in these Indo-Pacific relationships in bilateral, trilateral, and other minilateral formulations, it has possibly altered the basic nature of its engagements with a number of countries, including China and Russia. The changes brought about in India's strategic partnerships are difficult to alter even if China were to make amends following the Galwan conflict. This impact will be felt not just in the bilateral context but in the regional and even broader global strategic context.

The second impact may be in terms of how these minilaterals can contradict and diminish the role of regional multilateral institutions such as ASEAN, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and East Asia Summit. While the ASEAN and its associated institutions have remained central to Indo-Pacific security, and ASEAN centrality has been reiterated by a number of Indo-Pacific leaders, the more dominant role exerted by China has been detrimental to that cause. By latching them to Beijing, China has rendered states such as Laos and Cambodia pliable to its whims, thus weakening the neutrality, independence and 'centrality' of these institutions.

# Conclusion

Dr. Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan is Director of ORF's Centre for Security, Strategy and Technology.

The emergence of minilaterals cannot be seen as a means to strengthen existing formal institutional arrangements such as the ASEAN. It may possibly be accelerating the fracturing of an already divided Asia, with parallel diplomacies on track: one led by the US, and the other by China and any number of minilaterals led by regional powers. The competitive politics of the region can further hinder the process of reconciliation and compromise in the Indo-Pacific, to the detriment of peace, prosperity, and stability in the region. Minilateralism could undermine multilateralism if, for instance, these “minilateral initiatives become platforms for major power rivalry.”<sup>31</sup>

In essence, minilateralism is a symptom of the growing power conflict in the region, not its cause. On the other hand, as William Tow argues, the rising phenomenon of minilateralism is not to be approached as “completely replacing existing alliances and institutions but as complementing them.”<sup>32</sup> There is truth to this, because as mentioned earlier, states continue to be invested in regional and multilateral platforms despite their participation in minilateral settings. Successful outcomes within minilateral settings can be gradually taken to regional and multilateral platforms to garner support from the broader community. To do that, some form of consensus and coordination amongst a small group of countries is essential in an era of contested and fragmented international politics. 

*(This paper is an expanded and updated version of an earlier essay on the subject published in the ORF-Global Policy volume, 'Brass Tacks: Unpacking the Indo-Pacific Template,' July 2021.)*

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20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area,  
New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA  
Ph. : +91-11-35332000. Fax : +91-11-35332005  
E-mail: [contactus@orfonline.org](mailto:contactus@orfonline.org)  
Website: [www.orfonline.org](http://www.orfonline.org)