

A New Strategic Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific

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The emergence of “strategic minilateralism” has been a trend in the Indo-Pacific since the second half of the 2010s. Although minilateral cooperation between the United States and its allies and partners started in the early 2000s, the late 2010s saw more institutionalized and strategically oriented forms of minilateral security collaboration begin to emerge from two main drivers: the rise of China and the lack of effective regional security mechanisms for responding to that rise.¹

China’s rejection of the South China Sea Arbitral Tribunal ruling in July 2016 served as a particular catalyst for this new “strategic minilateralism” in the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, Beijing’s growing regional influence, including through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has become more visible, drawing diplomatic support for China’s presence from its neighbors. In response to China’s rise and the threat it poses to U.S. regional primacy, Washington has attempted to link its bilateral alliances and partnerships together since the early 2000s, as shown in the establishment of the Australia-Japan-U.S. Trilateral Strategic Dialogue in 2002. Nevertheless, this effort has not yet proved to be sufficiently effective in pushing back against China. In this context, new strategic minilaterals, such as the Quad (comprising Australia, Japan, India, and the United States) and AUKUS (comprising Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States), have been constructed.

Examining the institutional development and key characteristics of the Indo-Pacific’s new strategic minilateralism, particularly the Quad and AUKUS, this essay argues that such frameworks are largely a Western construct that attempt to fill the expectation and capability gaps in regional security systems for underwriting the existing regional order. There are basically two types of minilateralism: one aims to shape the regional order through rule- and norm-making, while the other focuses on military cooperation to check rising powers’ behavior. Both share the same strategic

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¹ Here, “institutionalization” refers to the regularization or routinization of cooperative activities among member states, whereas “formalization” refers to the creation of an organization with a defined set of principles, rules, and norms.

objective—to defend the existing international order from challenges posed by states that provide alternatives to it, particularly China. While these institution-building efforts are creating a new regional institutional architecture in the Indo-Pacific, its development remains an ongoing process. The success of minilateralism depends on how the United States and other members of these groupings formulate a grand design for minilateral frameworks and develop an optimal division of labor among themselves.

Defining Indo-Pacific Minilateralism

The term “minilateralism” is often used without a clear definition. This essay defines minilateralism as an informal or formal grouping of three to five states that aim to coordinate their strategic agendas and facilitate functional cooperation in particular issue areas.² To be sure, the number of states required for any grouping to be considered a minilateral is relative, depending on what types of multilateralism exist and are dominant in the region at any given time. For example, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which has been considered a multilateral framework ever since its 1967 inception, grew from its original five members to ten in 1999. In Central Asia, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, established in 2001, consists of six states and is considered a multilateral framework. By contrast, the Five Power Defence Arrangements has a mixed record: while it was traditionally considered to be multilateral, some now regard it as a minilateral grouping.³ According to the definition adopted in this essay, however, in the contemporary Indo-Pacific context, any interstate groupings comprising only three to five members should be considered minilateral rather than multilateral.

Even according to this definition, minilateralism remains a fluid and flexible concept. It encompasses both informal and formal arrangements, with minilateral groupings sometimes transitioning between these two categories. For example, the China-Japan-Korea Trilateral Summit was originally an informal gathering held back to

² This largely resonates with the definition provided by Bhubhinder Singh and Sarah Teo of “cooperative relations that usually involve between three and nine countries, and are relatively exclusive, flexible and functional in nature.” However, my definition differs from their emphasis on informality and exclusivity. See Bhubhinder Singh and Sarah Teo, “Introduction: Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific,” in *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific*, ed. Bhubhinder Singh and Sarah Teo (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 2.

³ See, for example, Ralf Emmers, “The Role of the Five Power Defence Arrangements in the Southeast Asian Security Architecture,” in *Bilateralism, Multilateralism and Asia-Pacific Security: Contending Cooperation*, ed. William T. Tow and Brendan Taylor (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 88.

back with the ASEAN +3 process. Since 2008, however, it has evolved into a more formal framework after it was convened independently and then formalized through the establishment of the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat in 2010. The Trilateral Summit also gradually expanded its agenda to include economic and diplomatic issues alongside nontraditional security cooperation.⁴ By contrast, the formal U.S.-Japan-Korea Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group, which was created in 1999 to facilitate policy coordination among the three vis-à-vis North Korea, crumbled under the weight of Pyongyang's developing nuclear and missile capabilities and ultimately ceased to exist by 2003. Yet informal consultations between Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo have continued, often on the sidelines of larger gatherings such as the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore.⁵

Membership can also be expanded, both formally and informally. Even when minilateral frameworks have maintained their original membership, the possibility of expansion is not precluded. For example, the China-Japan-Korea framework devised the “trilateral+X” formula in 2019 to extend its functional cooperation with nonmember states.⁶ Similarly, the Quad has informally invited nonmember states such as Vietnam, South Korea, and New Zealand to discuss cooperation in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.⁷

Given its flexibility, contemporary minilateralism is useful in assessing the possibility of coalition building with like-minded states.⁸ Using relatively easy areas of cooperation as a starting point, such as diplomatic consultation and countering Covid-19, a minilateral can potentially expand its role in response to developments in the regional strategic environment.

⁴ See Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), “Kako no Nicchukan shuno kaigi” [Past Japan-China-Korea Trilateral Cooperation Summit] [~ https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/area/jck/syunou_bn.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/area/jck/syunou_bn.html); and “About TCS: Overview,” Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat [~ https://www.tcs-asia.org/en/about/overview.php](https://www.tcs-asia.org/en/about/overview.php).

⁵ “Joint Statement by the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG),” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Republic of Korea), Press Release, June 14, 2003 [~ https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=295727&srchFr=](https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=295727&srchFr=); and William T. Tow, “Minilateral Security’s Relevance to U.S. Strategy in the Indo-Pacific: Challenges and Prospects,” *Pacific Review* 32, no. 2 (2019): 232–44.

⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), “Concept Paper on ‘Trilateral+X’ Cooperation” [~ https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/000508825.pdf](https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/000508825.pdf).

⁷ On the Quad Plus, see Jagannath P. Panda and Ernest Gunasekara-Rockwell, eds., *Quad Plus and Indo-Pacific: The Changing Profile of International Relations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022).

⁸ This purpose is similar to that of tactical hedging, by which states create an ambiguous diplomatic doctrine to draw reactions from allies or partners and seek common ground in creating a coalition. See Kei Koga, “Japan’s ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ Strategy: Tokyo’s Tactical Hedging and the Implications for ASEAN,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41, no. 2 (2019): 286–313; and Kei Koga, “Japan’s ‘Indo-Pacific’ Question: Countering China or Shaping a New Regional Order?” *International Affairs* 96, no. 1 (2020): 49–73.

The Rise of Minilateralism

Two factors in the 2000s instigated the rise of minilateralism: the growing salience of nontraditional security issues and the rise of China. After the attacks of September 11, terrorism became the most prominent international security issue, and its transnational nature made it necessary to enhance international cooperation. In particular, the United States was eager to create international coalitions, as illustrated by the establishment of the Trilateral Security Dialogue. At the same time, the increase of China's economic and strategic weight began to cast a long shadow over the future strategic environment. Washington envisioned the establishment of strategic networks with its regional allies and partners, most notably India, to check China's behavior.⁹

That said, during this period, minilateral frameworks were largely created on the basis of functional cooperation to address nontraditional security issues. This is partly because more formal coalitions could be easily construed and portrayed as representing the encirclement or containment of China, and some governments were unwilling to create these groupings at the cost of Beijing's criticism. For them, China's economic potential was too attractive, and its potential threat exaggerated. This hesitancy was highlighted by the unsuccessful attempts to establish an earlier iteration of the Quad in 2007.¹⁰ Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe initiated the Quad during this period by holding an official meeting between the four states at the assistant secretary level and by promoting their military cooperation through the Malabar military exercises, which had been previously a U.S.-India bilateral exercise. Yet as China openly expressed its concern regarding the strategic motivation behind the grouping, Australia and India became reticent and ultimately withdrew.¹¹

During the 2010s, a new minilateral momentum emerged in response to China's growing assertiveness. By this time, it was becoming increasingly clear that the traditional Asian security architecture, built around the U.S. hub-and-spoke alliance network and ASEAN multilateralism, was not sufficiently effective to maintain the regional status quo. A stronger China was no longer deterred from using diplomatic and military coercion to advance its own version of regional order. Its growing presence in the

⁹ Nina Silove, "The Pivot before the Pivot: U.S. Strategy to Preserve the Power Balance in Asia," *International Security* 40, no. 4 (2016): 45–88.

¹⁰ Kei Koga, "Quad 3.0: Japan, Indo-Pacific, and Minilateralism," *East Asian Policy* 14, no. 1 (2022): 20–38.

¹¹ Kevin Rudd, "The Convenient Rewriting of the History of the 'Quad,'" *Nikkei Asia*, March 26, 2019
 ~ <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/The-Convenient-Rewriting-of-the-History-of-the-Quad>.

maritime domain, particularly in the South and East China Seas, and rejection of the 2016 South China Sea Arbitral Tribunal ruling subsequently heightened concerns in East Asia. Likewise, China's military and diplomatic pressure on India along the disputed Sino-Indian border became more apparent in the late 2010s. Beijing's new economic heft, particularly in the area of infrastructure development through BRI, challenged existing international development standards. When these developments are taken together, it has become easier to justify the formation and institutionalization of minilateral groupings to counter the China challenge. A new, more strategic Indo-Pacific minilateralism has subsequently emerged.

A New Strategic Minilateralism: The Quad and AUKUS

The new minilateralism of the late 2010s has come in two varieties. One is geared toward maintaining or shaping a regional order in the Indo-Pacific based on the existing, largely U.S.-led regional order. The other seeks to ensure strategic stability within the various subregions of the Indo-Pacific, such as Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia, and South Asia.

The most notable example of the former is the Quad. After the United States and Japan took the initiative to resurrect this grouping in 2017, the Quad has become more institutionalized—formally regularizing its senior official, ministerial, and summit meetings while also creating working groups on such issues as the climate crisis, Covid-19, emerging and critical technologies, and infrastructure. As the failure of the first iteration of the Quad highlights, there remain diverging strategic interests among these four Indo-Pacific partners despite their basically shared security perspective on China. This in turn makes it difficult for the Quad to formally institutionalize an agenda for traditional military cooperation. For example, the India-Japan-U.S. Malabar military exercise has formally remained a separate activity from the Quad, although Australia has been invited to participate since 2020. The Quad summit in May 2022 established the Quad Humanitarian and Disaster Relief Mechanism and the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness, but they aim to enhance the regional capacity for disaster management and maritime domain awareness, respectively, and do not constitute specific traditional military cooperation.

Rather than any immediate realization of military cooperation to counter China, the Quad has focused on regional order building in the Indo-Pacific. For example, the region has yet to establish concrete international rules and norms for emerging issues and challenges, such as

digital connectivity and cybersecurity. Through Quad dialogues, member states coordinate their perspectives and policies to prevent any external power, particularly China, from dominating this norm-building process. This was well illustrated by the second Quad summit in September 2021, where members agreed to enhance and create regional norms, such as “transparent, high-standards infrastructure” and “an open, accessible, and secure technological ecosystem” through the establishment of technical standards.¹² In response, China has attempted to prevent the Quad powers from strengthening their influence in regional order building by enhancing and creating its own exclusive frameworks such as the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation and the ASEAN-China dialogues on the South China Sea Code of Conduct.

The Indo-Pacific’s other new variety of strategic minilateralism is exemplified by AUKUS. Rather than norm building, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States are putting their energies into strengthening military capabilities through cooperation in the fields of nuclear-powered submarines and additional undersea capabilities, cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, and quantum technologies.¹³ AUKUS is a response to the changing distribution of military capabilities in the Indo-Pacific and is geared toward maintaining regional stability. It envisages Australia having access to new military technologies, particularly the aforementioned nuclear-powered submarines, which will enhance Australian power-projection capabilities in Southeast Asia, the South Pacific, and the Indian Ocean. The UK can, in turn, support an “Indo-Pacific tilt” by securing regional port access in Australia for its navy. The United States too can step up cooperation with Australia and the UK in Indo-Pacific operations, potentially reducing the U.S. military burden without undermining its perceived commitment to this region.

AUKUS is geostrategically significant. Although the United States has strong allies in Northeast Asia—namely Japan and South Korea—these states’ vital interests largely rest within this subregion, given enduring tensions on the Korean Peninsula and in the Taiwan Strait. In Southeast Asia, uncertainties have been increasing regarding the U.S. alliance commitments to Thailand and the Philippines because of domestic political

¹² White House, “Fact Sheet: Quad Leaders’ Summit,” September 24, 2021 ≈ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/24/fact-sheet-quad-leaders-summit>.

¹³ Scott Morrison and Peter Dutton, “Australia to Pursue Nuclear-Powered Submarines through New Trilateral Enhanced Security Partnership,” Minister for Foreign Affairs (Australia), September 16, 2021 ≈ <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/media-release/australia-pursue-nuclear-powered-submarines-through-new-trilateral-enhanced-security-partnership>.

turbulence in those countries and the preferences of their leaders. Australia is a staunch U.S. ally, but its power-projection capabilities remain limited. Taken together, AUKUS could help compensate for the presently weak linkages between subregions in the Indo-Pacific to check China's behavior.

The Future Trajectory: Challenges and Opportunities

The new strategic minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific remains a work in progress. Members of the Quad and AUKUS do not yet share the common strategic interests required to form a firmer military alignment. Instead, they predominantly pursue the enhancement of military ties bilaterally, as seen most vividly in the case of India-Japan and Australia-Japan relations. As a result, bilateral and minilateral frameworks now coexist in a multilayered security architecture. However, these arrangements could become integrated into a more robust security framework in the future, especially if China intensifies its assertive behavior and generates shared threat perceptions.

That said, strategic minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific faces two main challenges. First, to meaningfully contribute toward regional order building, these groupings will need to gain diplomatic support from regional constituencies, particularly ASEAN. As a regional institution, ASEAN has long maintained its neutral diplomatic position between the great powers. It has also sought to keep ASEAN centrality intact so it can play a driving role in regionalism.¹⁴ If the Quad and AUKUS come to be seen as clear anti-China groupings, regional instability could be triggered and the association would likely distance itself from the Quad and AUKUS. This would delay and potentially undermine the consolidation of regional order in the Indo-Pacific to which these minilateral frameworks aspire.

A second challenge is the proliferation of minilateral groupings in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. Admittedly, the hub of much of this new activity remains the United States. However, compared with bilateral frameworks, policy coordination in minilateral settings is inevitably slower and more burdensome, and there will remain different requirements and demands within the subregions of the diverse Indo-Pacific. If the proliferation of minilateralism continues, the United States could risk a considerable

¹⁴ ASEAN Secretariat, "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific," June 23, 2019 ~ <https://asean.org/speechandstatement/asean-outlook-on-the-indo-pacific>; and Kei Koga, "Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision under Suga: Transition and Future Challenges in Southeast Asia," *East Asian Policy* 13, no. 3 (2021): 93–99.

amount of its valuable diplomatic resources becoming bogged down in long diplomatic discussions that ultimately do not produce a commensurate payoff in terms of delivering meaningful action.

In conclusion, the emergence of a new strategic minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific is driven by geostrategic factors that revolve primarily around China's increasing challenge to the existing regional order. The Quad, AUKUS, and other frameworks have the potential to fill the expectation and capability gaps existing between the United States' hub-and-spoke system and ASEAN multilateralism. In so doing, they could help bolster the military outreach of the United States, as well as that of its allies and partners, while providing a regional order-building mechanism in the Indo-Pacific. That said, the consolidation of these minilateral frameworks has just started, and there is no guarantee that they will ultimately be successful. To avoid an outcome in which they are not, the first step should be for the United States and its partners to create a grand strategic objective for those minilateral frameworks that will better guide their coordination and the division of labor among members. ◆