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# Understanding the Institutional Challenge of Indo-Pacific Minilaterals to ASEAN

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*The intensity of minilateral coalition-building among the United States and its Indo-Pacific partners, especially the consolidation of the Quad and the formation of AUKUS in 2021, has rekindled concerns over the relevance of ASEAN multilateralism and ASEAN's claim to centrality in the regional architecture. Although the challenge to ASEAN-led mechanisms from competing and parallel institutions initiated by other powers is not a new phenomenon, this article argues that the intensity of today's geopolitical tensions, primarily but not exclusively between the United States and China, has driven America and its Indo-Pacific partners to invest more in minilateral coalitions than in ASEAN institutions to advance their strategic goals. The institutional challenge that these minilaterals present to ASEAN is three-fold. First, they signify the entrenchment of hard balancing by the United States and its Indo-Pacific partners and their reduced reliance on ASEAN's normative influence. Second, their small, nimble membership holds out better prospects than ASEAN institutions in delivering tangible results and effective responses to regional security challenges. Third, they accentuate the pre-existing strategic incoherence within ASEAN in the face of Great Power competition.*

**Keywords**: ASEAN centrality, minilateralism, Indo-Pacific, Quad, AUKUS.

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Over the past decade, minilateralism—a targeted approach to multilateralism with narrower membership—has proliferated and gained prominence in the global governance system and in the Indo-Pacific.[1] Loosely defined as informal and flexible coalitions of aligned interests and coordinated action among a small group of states in certain functional areas,[2] minilateralism is a natural response to the existing deficiencies and imbalances in the global governance system, especially the dysfunction of broad-based multilateral institutions due to their heterogeneous membership and atrophied bureaucratic processes. As noted by Alice Ba:

> Multilateralism, or at least late-20th century multilateralism, has been premised on the principle and practice of pluralism and broad inclusion, and minilateralism today is a reaction in no small part to the difficulties of dealing with that pluralism in existing institutions. These include ASEAN and ASEAN-associated frameworks operated on the principles of broad engagement and consensus.[3]

As a broad trend in global governance, minilateralism can take on many variations, subject to regional and thematic contexts. In Asia, minilateral coalition-building led by the United States has become more intense under the rubric of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy of the Trump administration, starting with the revitalization of the Quadrilateral Dialogue Partnership (Quad) between the United States, Japan, India and Australia in 2017.[4] US investment in minilateralism is an important strategic continuity between the Trump and Biden administrations. President Joe Biden took bold steps to strengthen the Quad, upgrading it to the leaders level with the first virtual Quad summit in March 2021 and the first physical Quad summit in Washington D.C. in September 2021, and expanding the Quad's remit beyond a singular focus on maritime security. Besides the Quad's consolidation, the "minilateral moment" of 2021 was the 15 September announcement of the establishment of the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) defence partnership.[5] In this article, the term "Indo-Pacific minilaterals" is used to describe these major power-centric, mostly US-led, minilateral groupings.

The intensity of minilateral coalition-building among the United States and its allies and partners has rekindled concerns over the relevance of ASEAN-plus mechanisms[6] and ASEAN's claim to its central role in the regional architecture. The term "ASEAN centrality" is under-defined, perhaps deliberately so by ASEAN, and is thus the subject of much debate and many interpretations.[7] For the purpose of this article, an interpretation by Amitav Acharya is utilized. His definition places ASEAN as "the institutional anchor" of Asia-Pacific's regional architecture:

> ASEAN centrality means that ASEAN lies, and must remain, at the core of Asia (or Asia-Pacific) regional institutions, especially the ASEAN Plus Three (APT), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asian Summit (EAS). ASEAN provides the institutional "platform" within which the wider Asia Pacific and East Asian regional institutions are anchored. To put it another way, without ASEAN, it would not have been possible to construct these wider regional bodies.[8]

For decades, the notion of "ASEAN centrality" has been as much asserted by ASEAN members as it has been contested by competing and parallel institution-building efforts by other countries. This article argues that the proliferation of major power-centric minilaterals such as the Quad and AUKUS is the extension and accentuation of these longstanding contestations. What sets them apart from past experiences, however, is the acute sense of urgency and immediacy for action by their proponent countries to invest more in minilateral coalitions than in ASEAN institutions so as to advance their strategic goals, especially to compete with China and to arrest the accelerating momentum towards a China-centric order in Asia.

This article aims to contribute to the empirical literature regarding the relevance of ASEAN-led multilateralism in the regional architecture in the face of intensifying minilateralism among its external partners. It focuses on the ground-breaking minilateral developments in 2021—namely the consolidation of the Quad and the formation of AUKUS—as well as policy statements, published articles and interviews with high-level members of the Biden administration that demonstrate America's greater emphasis on minilateralism in its Indo-Pacific strategy.

The article is structured as follows. The first section reviews the complex post-Cold War regional architecture in which multiple institutions, including ASEAN-plus mechanisms, have been co-existing and competing with each other as they embody different visions of regionalism and different layers of region cooperation. The second section answers why major power-centric minilateral coalitions in the Indo-Pacific today pose an acute challenge to the relevance of ASEAN-led multilateralism due to the increasing intensity of Sino-US strategic rivalry. The final section examines why the proponent countries of these minilaterals continue to proclaim their support for ASEAN centrality and what this means for Southeast Asia and ASEAN.

## Contesting and Complementing ASEAN Multilateralism: A Beaten Track

In Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific, the post-Cold War regional architecture is often characterized as having two key underpinnings, namely ASEAN-led multilateral institutions and US-led bilateral alliances. This characterization, however, does not fully capture the inherent complexity of the regional order, given the multiplicity of players involved and the layers of governance built up over time in a largely improvised manner. This geometry of bilateral, trilateral and other multilateral configurations have been described by Victor Cha as “complex patchworks”.[9] Andrew Yeo saw this as “overlapping regionalism” driven by “the informal nature of Asian institutions coupled with competing visions of regionalism among Asian actors”.[10] Meanwhile, See Seng Tan has observed that the “multi-multilateral” regional order has “no semblance of grand architectural or of strategic coherence”, and is “far from the finished article”.[11]

In this “multi-multilateral architecture”, Ba argues that the value of “ASEAN centrality” does not lie in having a certain position in a hierarchy of institutions, but in its ability to connect otherwise divergent and different forces, a good example being the Regional Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (RCEP).[12] In the same vein, Malcolm Cook and Hoang Thi Ha note that “it is more useful to understand ASEAN and ASEAN-plus groupings as a flexible, responsive ecosystem in the wider regional environment than a formal purposive institution in isolation”.[13] Seen in this light, ASEAN’s cooperative ecosystem even facilitates the convening of minilateral platforms. For example, the first Quad meeting at the deputy foreign minister level was held on the sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in Manila in 2007, and several Quad consultations since its renaissance in 2017 were held on the sidelines of the East Asia Summit (EAS). This convening power of ASEAN, however, is fading as the Quad members have reached sufficient strategic and political comfort to meet separately since mid-2020 (the COVID-19 pandemic that forced all ASEAN meetings to go virtual might have been a factor, but perhaps not a critical one).

For all of ASEAN's proclamations centring itself as the driving force in the regional architecture, regional institution-building has typically been a crowded field in Asia. In fact, the so-called "ASEAN centrality" has continually been challenged and complemented by both competing and supplementary institutions, whether initiated by ASEAN member states themselves or major external powers.

### *Subregional Cooperation and Intra-regional Minilateral Initiatives beyond ASEAN*

Historically, intra-regional minilateral cooperation has co-existed with ASEAN since its inception (though it may not have been described in those terms). In its formative years, while ASEAN kept its distance from any pretension of a military alliance, it did not discourage intra-regional security relationships at the bilateral, trilateral or subregional levels. The Bali Concord Declaration in 1976—one of ASEAN's founding documents—provided for the "continuation of cooperation on a non-ASEAN basis between the member states in security matters in accordance with their mutual needs and interests".[14]

Geographically, ASEAN member states in the maritime and mainland domains have different security priorities and development needs, hence the need for different forms and layers of security and economic relationships. The variety of traditional and non-traditional challenges confronting different member states has led to the establishment of various subregional minilaterals involving only certain Southeast Asian states who may share certain security or development concerns. They include, among others, the Malacca Straits Patrols (MSP) involving Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand, the Sulu-Celebes Seas Trilateral Maritime Patrols (TMP) conducted by Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, and the development-focused Cambodia-Laos-Myanmar-Vietnam (CLMV) cooperation in the mainland.

These subregional mechanisms exist independently of the ASEAN process,[15] but do not necessarily challenge ASEAN's convening role. For one, ASEAN serves as a diplomatic ecosystem that coexists with, and where applicable, facilitates these minilateral arrangements. For example, it was on the sidelines of the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) in Laos in 2016 that Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines agreed to establish the TMP.[16] Moreover, these subregional initiatives can potentially contribute to ASEAN-wide security cooperation. First, they inculcate a sense of shared responsibility, mutual confidence as well as the practice of information sharing and operational coordination among the participating states, which can serve as building blocks for scaling up to ASEAN-level cooperation. A case in point is the counter-terrorism information-sharing Our Eyes Initiative (OEI) among Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Singapore, which was started in 2018 and has been embedded under the ADMM framework as the ASEAN Our Eyes (AOE) Strategic Information Exchange System since 2020.[17] Second, these subregional arrangements provide insights into and lessons on the intricacies of multilateral cooperation, such as the issue of sovereignty in coordinated naval patrols, the technicalities involved in burden-sharing and information exchange, and the proper application of international law and the relevant ASEAN agreements.

In recent years, the lack of ASEAN unity on the South China Sea disputes has incentivized the search for minilateral solutions among Southeast Asian claimant states so as to overcome the veto power of some ASEAN members that have tried to block any assertive ASEAN position on the South China Sea.[18] If Southeast Asian claimant states can collectively present a more unified position on the South China Sea, their minilateral approach can be pursued without having to be linked to ASEAN's institutional reforms, whether through the ASEAN-minus-X formula or the introduction of qualified majority voting. However, all attempts to forge minilateral coalitions among Southeast Asian claimant and littoral states in the South China Sea thus far have gained little currency due to intra-mural disputes among these countries as well as their prioritized bilateral relations with China. In 2014, the Philippines proposed a meeting among the four Southeast Asian claimant states to discuss a common position in dealings with China ahead of the annual ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting, but this proposal did not materialize.[19] The latest move to resurrect minilateral options in the South China Sea is the reported invitation by the head of Indonesia's maritime security agency (BAKAMLA) to his counterparts from Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam to a meeting of coast guard chiefs to discuss the South China Sea dispute.[20]

Meanwhile, minilateralism appears to be the default configuration of regional governance to deal with development and environmental/water issues in the Mekong basin. There are 14 subregional platforms concerned with Mekong issues, including six founded by external powers (the United States, Japan, India and South

Korea), six involving some or all of the six riparian states (China, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam) and two led by ASEAN—the ASEAN-Mekong Basin Development Cooperation (AMBDC) and the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI).[21] The AMBDC has been in hiatus since 2014 as it lost its own momentum and traction among ASEAN member states, while the IAI has been on life support for decades due to the lack of funding. In adopting a subregional approach to Mekong-related issues, ASEAN has basically relinquished its direct involvement in the Mekong.[22] While development-centric and inclusive subregional cooperation characterized Mekong governance structures in the 1990s and 2000s, the situation has changed as the basin has become a new arena of Sino-US strategic competition, with more mutually-exclusive minilateral groupings gaining ground, most notably, the China-led Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) and the Mekong-US Partnership (MUSP), which was upgraded from the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) in 2020.[23]

The demand for minilateral mechanisms points to the inherent diversity of circumstances and challenges facing Southeast Asian countries. Despite affirming the need to uphold ASEAN centrality, ASEAN member states are acutely aware of the grouping's structural constraints and its limited resources and strategic bandwidth to deal with the multitude of regional challenges, including the South China Sea dispute and Mekong water security issues. The minilateral path thus offers the possibility for ASEAN member states—while remaining engaged with the grouping when necessary—to pursue optimized solutions when one at the ASEAN-level is neither viable nor practical.

### *Institution-Building Initiatives by External Powers*

The notion of ASEAN's centrality in the regional architecture has been as much challenged and contested by external powers as it has been asserted and advocated by ASEAN member states. Despite their participation in ASEAN-led mechanisms and expressions of support for ASEAN centrality, some Dialogue Partners—especially the United States and its Western allies—have continually exhibited ambivalence towards ASEAN regionalism. Their utilitarian and legalistic approach does not sit comfortably with the grouping's weak institutionalism, characterized by consensual decision-making, the lack of enforcement for compliance, and the absence of effective dispute resolution mechanisms.[24] In the heyday of the post-Cold

War neoliberalism in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the main approach of these particular Dialogue Partners was to urge ASEAN to implement institutional reforms in order to increase their ownership and influence in ASEAN processes. As this approach has proven to be ineffective, and combined with the rise of China that heralded a changing regional order in the subsequent decade, these countries have thus adopted a more forward-leaning approach towards non-ASEAN minilateral options.

According to Kai He, the 2008–9 Global Financial Crisis was a "breakthrough moment", following which the Asia-Pacific saw a wave of multilateral institution-building led by the major powers, especially the United States, China, Australia, Japan and South Korea. He called this "multilateralism 2.0" to distinguish it from the ASEAN-centred "multilateralism 1.0" of the 1990s and early 2000s. Using institutional balancing as his analytical framework, He noted that "two systemic variables — the higher strategic uncertainties in the region and deepening economic interdependence — prompted various Asia-Pacific powers to pursue institutional balancing to compete for advantage during what is clearly a time of order transition in the region". He also pointed out that "multilateralism 2.0" "co-exists, competes and interacts with 'multilateralism 1.0' and with other forms of security organizations, such as US-led bilateralism, as well as nascent minilateral arrangements in shaping the Asia-Pacific's future regional order".[25]

ASEAN has co-existed and interacted with many institution-building initiatives by external powers, while exhibiting anxiety about others. For example, as highly open economies, ASEAN member states are natural supporters of economic initiatives of all sorts sponsored by different powers, including free trade agreements such as the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)—which was later transformed into the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) after the Trump administration withdrew America in 2017—and infrastructure financing vehicles such as the China-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). In fact, the TPP/CPTPP has its genesis from the P4 grouping of Singapore, Brunei, New Zealand and Chile. And although the TPP/CPTPP and the ASEAN-led RCEP are often framed by international media as two competing economic tools to respectively serve America's and China's geopolitical agendas, Southeast Asian states have embraced both trade blocs to advance their economic integration with external powers in an inclusive manner.

ASEAN, however, does not support initiatives designed to create an overarching diplomatic community that would rival ASEAN-led institutions directly, most notably Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's suggestion in 2008 for an Asia-Pacific Community (APC). The APC was meant to span the entire Asia-Pacific and "engage in the full spectrum of dialogue, cooperation and action in economic and political matters and future challenges related to security".[26] A similar pitch was made by Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama for an East Asian Community (EAC) in 2009, although the Japanese proposal lacked institutional details.[27] ASEAN's cold response was a main reason why these initiatives were quietly dropped.[28] Regional concerns about the possibility that ASEAN-led mechanisms—especially the then still nascent EAS—could be diluted or bypassed by these proposed rival institutions prompted the grouping to codify the term "ASEAN centrality" into the ASEAN Charter, the 2009–2015 ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) Blueprint, and the Work Plan on Maintaining and Enhancing ASEAN Centrality around the same time.[29]

China also poses an institutional challenge to ASEAN regionalism. As noted by Acharya, "China has shifted from the pursuit of an ASEAN-centric regionalism in the 1990s (excluding the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, created in 2001) to one with multiple and parallel tracks."[30] Beijing has simultaneously initiated parallel institutions—most notably the AIIB and the LMC—while co-opting ASEAN mechanisms and processes to reshape the regional architecture in its own image. According to David M. Lampton, Selina Ho and Cheng-Chwee Kuik, the BRI, a key vehicle of Chinese statecraft to nurture an emergent China-centric order, can be understood as the economic version of the Chinese hub-and-spokes system. They argue that the BRI "holds out the prospect of constructing an economic and strategic system with China as its hub. Its essence is the creation of economic and other power projection platforms at 360 degrees from China itself."[31] The "beauty" of the BRI is that it is economic in nature—notwithstanding its profound strategic implications—and it is mainly pursued through bilateral channels with multiple and fluid institutional forms, which means it is not perceived to have any direct bearing on ASEAN-led institutions.

Unlike the United States and some other Dialogue Partners, China does not seek to change the "ASEAN Way",[32] but to leverage it to its own advantage. A classic example is China exercising its influence over Cambodia to deploy the latter's veto in ASEAN to prevent the grouping from reaching a robust common position on the

South China Sea dispute. This resulted in ASEAN's unprecedented failure to issue a joint communiqué at its foreign ministers meeting in 2012. China has also sought to embed Chinese concepts of international relations—or Chinese discourse power—in ASEAN processes, including, for instance, the proposals to establish an ASEAN-China "community of common destiny or shared future" and ASEAN-China comprehensive strategic partnership.[33] In the first decade of ASEAN-China relations in the 1990s and 2000s, the general expectation was that ASEAN would socialize China into regional norms and frameworks.[34] Over the past decade, however, it is China that is socializing ASEAN—and by extension its member states—into Beijing's normative frameworks and vision of an exclusionary, China-led regional order.

To sum up, the institutional challenge from competing or parallel platforms initiated by external powers is a feature of ASEAN-led multilateralism. As perceptively remarked by Acharya, "Since the [ASEAN] institutions involve other, and in some cases far stronger powers than ASEAN members singly or collectively, the idea of ASEAN centrality is from the start vulnerable to the vagaries of Great Power relations."[35]

## The Institutional Challenge of Indo-Pacific Minilaterals to ASEAN

The proliferation of major power-centric minilaterals such as the Quad and AUKUS is arguably not an anomaly, but the latest extension and accentuation of the above pre-existing tensions. At the same time, these coalitions signify disruptive changes to the regional order, associated as they are with the emergence of "Indo-Pacific" as a strategic construct against the backdrop of US-China rivalry. While other minilaterals at the global and subregional level involve a variety of issue-areas that are functional in nature, these Indo-Pacific minilaterals "appear to have been created with specific geostrategic objectives" in mind.[36]

The primary driving force of minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific is the unfolding power transition in the region with America's diminishing capability to exercise its influence as the sole hegemon in Asia and the rise of China as a rival centre of power that is actively seeking to reshape the region's power structure and normative order. According to the Lowy Institute's annual Asia Power Index, the United States remains the pre-eminent power in Asia with the highest overall score, but China is closing in quickly.[37] For the comparative perceptions of both countries' influence in

Southeast Asia, a 2022 survey by the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute indicated that 76.7 per cent of the respondents viewed China as the most influential economic power in the region, and 54.4 per cent viewed it as the most influential political-strategic power—a track record that China has maintained since the first survey in 2019. The US trailed far behind with only 9.8 per cent and 29.7 per cent of respondents recognizing its economic and political-strategic influence respectively.[38]

A secondary driver of Indo-Pacific minilateralism is the density and weight of other major and middle powers in the region, especially India, Japan, Australia and South Korea, and their growing strategic convergence with the United States—albeit to varying degrees—in responding to the China challenge. The high concentration of these major and middle powers in the Indo-Pacific has contributed to a state of "asymmetric multipolarity", where "neither the United States nor China can establish undisputed primacy in Asia", which means that "the actions, choices and interests of middle powers will become more consequential".[39] The participation of these middle powers makes a material difference to the viability and impact of emergent Indo-Pacific minilateral initiatives. In fact, Washington's embrace of minilateral groupings is a tacit acknowledgment that the effect and extent of its global reach has become much more constrained than in the past, hence resulting in the need to rally its allies and like-minded partners in countering China.

Southeast Asian states are not the primary candidates for membership of these minilaterals. First, their default position is not to take sides and continue to hedge in the unfolding US-China contest—arguably with greater degrees of accommodation towards Chinese influence, and even bandwagoning, as in the cases of Cambodia and Laos, compared to the Quad members. Second, the hard power balancing embedded in these minilaterals requires both the economic heft and the military and technological capabilities that most Southeast Asian states cannot or will not provide. These minilaterals will therefore keep to their major power-centric and exclusive nature for the foreseeable future. The so-called Quad-plus configuration—to describe several senior officials' meetings between the Quad members and New Zealand, South Korea and Vietnam in 2020 to discuss the COVID-19 pandemic response—remains at a very initial probing stage, and no serious follow-up took place in 2021.

The ongoing drive of minilateral formations among the United States and its Indo-Pacific partners has increased anxiety among

Southeast Asian states about hardening bipolarization in regional politics and the diminishing relevance of ASEAN-led institutions in mediating the estrangement among the major powers. The following sections argue that it is the intensity of strategic competition with China that has shifted the gravity towards minilateralism as a serious policy option for Washington and its allies and partners, which in turn accentuates the pre-existing tensions between these countries with ASEAN institutions' structural limits and deepens intra-ASEAN strategic incoherence.

### *Balance-of-Power Entrenchment Versus Normative Persuasion*

The Quad and AUKUS signify the entrenchment of the balance-of-power approach by the United States and its Indo-Pacific partners in dealing with China. Washington has stepped up its engagement with its allies and partners to match the scale of the strategic challenge posed by China. Towards this end, the United States is seeking to transform its extensive web of alliances and partnerships into a "networked security architecture capable of deterring aggression, maintaining stability, and ensuring free access to common domains".[40] In this networked architecture, not only will US military-security ties with its allies and partners be deepened but these allies and partners must also increase their own capabilities and regional leadership roles, while enhancing their coordination and interoperability, through "a latticework of strong and mutually reinforcing coalitions", as stated in the latest 2022 US Indo-Pacific Strategy.[41]

Biden's Indo-Pacific Coordinator Kurt Campbell and National Security Council (NSC) Director for China Rush Doshi opined that "real regional balance … requires action in concert with allies and partners" and "new military and intelligence partnerships between regional states, while still deepening those relationships in which the US plays a major role".[42] The Quad and various strategic triangles among its members[43] help reinforce Washington's established hub-and-spokes system in the Asia-Pacific and enable the increasingly important spoke-to-spoke coordination among US allies and partners. Notwithstanding the ongoing efforts to diversify the Quad's positive agenda to address global issues and deliver public goods, i.e. on climate change, COVID-19 vaccines and emerging and critical technologies,[44] the underlying current of these minilaterals is hard balancing against China's growing military and power projection capabilities in the region, especially in the maritime domain. As for AUKUS, its key thrust is to enable Australia to acquire nuclear-powered submarines that will enhance the country's ability to deploy its submarine fleet further afield and for longer periods of time, thereby complicating and deterring China's power projection in the Indo-Pacific.

This re-pivot to hard power balancing is shared by the other Quad members. The variations among them are in degree, not direction. For Japan, its Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy relies on both economic statecraft and intensified security cooperation, especially with Australia, India and other Southeast Asian countries, with the Self-Defense Force (SDF) playing a greater role in its implementation.[45] Japan is steadily upgrading its military capabilities—a trajectory that started in earnest during Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's tenure (2012–20) and which has continued under the current administration of Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. Despite fiscal and economic woes due to the COVID-19 pandemic, in December 2021 Japan's cabinet approved the biggest increase in military spending in decades, amounting to US$51.5 billion, a 6.5 per cent increase on 2020.[46]

As for India, the border clash with China in mid-2020 that killed 20 Indian soldiers was considered a "turning point" that accelerated the hardening of New Delhi's China policy and drew India closer into the Quad's embrace.[47] Delhi has invited Canberra to participate in Exercise Malabar for two consecutive years in 2020 and 2021, and this trend is expected to continue. Similarly, deteriorating Australia-China ties over the past two years have seen Australia emerge as the strongest advocate of hard balancing against China among America's Indo-Pacific partners. Rory Medcalf has noted that Australia's 2016 Defence White Paper had "extensive reference to the rules-based order", while its 2020 Defence Strategic Update "gave greater focus on power and deterrence". He observed that "from Kevin Rudd onwards, Australian leaders were always conscious that the reality was a 'rules-and-power-based order', and we needed to be able to operate in both".[48] Canberra's decision to push for the formation of AUKUS despite its hefty cost financially and diplomatically reflects its strategic move to be materially prepared for a more power-based order in the region.

Major power-centric minilateralism also manifests itself in the increased intensity and frequency of combined naval exercises between the United States and its Indo-Pacific partners. Most notably, the 2020 and 2021 editions of Exercise Malabar involved Australia alongside the established members of India, Japan and the United States; the French-initiated Exercise La Pérouse was joined by ships from Australia, Japan and America in 2019, and its 2021 edition included the participation of the Indian Navy; and between August and November 2021, the Indo-Pacific saw a series of multilateral exercises of six naval task groups from the United States, Australia, Japan, India and the United Kingdom.[49] These power projection operations are meant to send a deterrent signal to China's maritime ambitions in regional waters.

Although balance of power has always been a defining feature of the regional order,[50] the United States and its Indo-Pacific partners' entrenchment on hard balancing through their minilateral groupings, as noted by C. Raja Mohan, "sends some clear signals to the rest of Asia—and beyond—that the business of balancing China has now entered a serious phase".[51] This entrenchment is a response to "the inadequacies of the extant multilateral arrangements in resolving strategic regional challenges".[52] What this trend line demonstrates is these powers' reduced reliance on and investment in ASEAN-led institutions in substantive ways. If "ASEAN centrality" is defined in terms of ASEAN being "an occasionally useful instrument to advance the national interests of the major powers while ensuring that it cannot block their most vital designs",[53] then the value of "ASEAN centrality" to these countries' strategic agenda is fading against the prominence of these minilaterals.

Tellingly, the reckoning that ASEAN's normative ballast alone does not guarantee a rules-based regional order comes from within the region. Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs Teodoro Locsin pointed to this reality in his statement in which he viewed AUKUS as necessary hard balancing:

> ASEAN member states, singly and collectively, do not possess the military wherewithal to maintain peace and security in Southeast Asia, discourage the sudden creation of crises therein, and avoid disproportionate and hasty responses by rival great powers. Preventive diplomacy and the rule of law do not stand alone in the maintenance of peace and security.[54]

An obvious example is the limitations of ASEAN's normative and cooperative approach towards the South China Sea disputes. Its normative strictures, including the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) and the ongoing talks for a Code of Conduct for the South China Sea, have failed to prevent China from trying to enforce its unlawful nine-dash-line claims and stepping up its bullying behaviour towards the Southeast Asian claimants.[55]

### *Results-Oriented versus Process-Oriented*

Two attributes associated with membership of the Quad and AUKUS are "like-minded" and "capable". These membership criteria reflect the "critical mass" approach, which means "bring[ing] to the table the smallest possible number of countries needed to have the largest possible impact on solving a particular problem".[56] Their small membership, with high levels of strategic convergence and commensurate capabilities, allow for swift deployments of resources and fast responses to crises and contingencies. US Vice President Kamala Harris described them as "new, results-oriented groups",[57] reflecting the prevailing assumption that "minilateralism is meant to be more nimble and targeted approach to address specific challenges in ways that existing mechanisms are unable to".[58]

In the same vein, Campbell and Doshi advocated for the formation of "flexible and innovative" partnerships focused on individual problems such as "trade, technology, supply chains and standards", rather than a grand coalition on every issue.[59] In September 2021, the Quad leaders emphasized these priority areas, namely: high-standard infrastructure; critical and emerging technologies such as semiconductor supply chain, 5G deployment and diversification; standards-development in advanced communications and artificial intelligence, space and cybersecurity.[60] Meanwhile, the AUKUS members adopted a much narrower, and deeper, scope of defence cooperation involving high-end sensitive technologies such as cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies and new undersea capabilities.[61]

It is important to note that measuring the results of Indo-Pacific minilaterals is not necessarily a straightforward undertaking. Aarshi Tirkey has pointed out that "fluid frameworks may struggle to achieve concrete outcomes", and that the results of their meetings are also "articulated in statements, press releases and memoranda of understandings", which is not dissimilar to the usual approach of broad-based and formal multilateralism.[62] The "results-oriented" yardstick to differentiate Indo-Pacific minilateral coalitions from broader-based multilateral institutions remains more an assumption than a proven fact.

Yet, the fact that this assumption formed an underlying rationale for the creation of these minilaterals brings into sharp relief ASEAN's perennial structural limitations in delivering tangible results and effective responses to regional security challenges. With their broad and diverse membership and consensus decision-making, ASEAN-led mechanisms often move at a slow pace, measure "progress" mainly through "process", and settle on the lowest common denominator. There is some hard truth in Locsin's reckoning about the vanity of this common denominator. Shorn of diplomatic finesse, he said at a Lowy Institute event in October 2021 that if ASEAN failed to take a strong position on the Myanmar crisis, then "We're a bunch of guys who always agree with each other on the worthless things."[63]

Reforming the "ASEAN Way" has been the oft-prescribed remedy to the grouping's inefficacy in responding to regional challenges. Yet, all formal attempts at ASEAN institutional reforms, including the reviews of the ASEAN Charter in 2016 and the EAS in 2015, failed. They either became bogged-down in drawn-out bureaucratic processes and suffered the usual "death by committee"[64] or did not effect structural changes to ASEAN's consensus-based modus operandi. More critically, ASEAN's process-oriented approach has reached a "saturation point" where creating more processes fails to bring about meaningful progress and desired impact. Richard Heydarian has described this situation as ASEAN's "middle institutional trap".[65] The EAS—hailed as the crowning jewel of the ASEAN-led regional architecture—has for a decade struggled to reconcile the broad, free-flowing and informal nature of its leaders-led dialogue and the need to enhance its institutional capacity to deliver concrete results.[66] The ADMM-Plus has adopted various guidelines, protocols and norms of engagement, but their practical value in crisis situations remains untested.[67] The ARF—once the pioneering platform that projected ASEAN's cooperative security to the broader region after the Cold War—is fading into irrelevance as its perpetual emphasis on confidence-building has done little to address the widening strategic distrust among its members.

The tension between ASEAN-led slow-going multilateralism and the Western-style utilitarian approach of some powers, especially the United States and Australia, is not new. As discussed in the previous section, the Quad and AUKUS represent an accentuation of America and its allies' longstanding ambivalence towards ASEAN regionalism. This ambivalence has manifested itself through alternative formulations of the regional architecture such as the Australian APC initiative. However, while the APC was intended as a superstructure looming over the entire Asia-Pacific, the Quad and AUKUS shy away from the formal institutionalist approach.

Theirs is less, rather than more, institutionalism that would allow for greater operational flexibility and less political sensitivity. It is also because the Indo-Pacific regional concept—the underlying strategic construct for these minilaterals—remains "undefined in form and direction, and contingent", and "there are no plans to establish a new set of Indo-Pacific diplomatic structures that states are invited or excluded from and that may rival the ASEAN-led architecture directly".[68] As such, these minilaterals are neither intended nor designed to replace ASEAN institutions. Yet, since the prevailing perception is that these minilaterals deliver better speed and efficiency in responding to geostrategic shifts and security contingencies in the region, their proponent countries, i.e. the United States and its allies and partners, tend to invest more in minilateral coalitions than in ASEAN institutions so as to advance their strategic goals.

## Withering One Southeast Asia?

The responses by Southeast Asian states to Indo-Pacific minilateral groupings have exposed and accentuated the pre-existing strategic incoherence within ASEAN on how best to respond to shifting power alignments. Southeast Asian states maintain different and even divergent views about the strategic values and attendant risks of the Quad and AUKUS for their national interests and regional security. According to the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute's 2020 *State of Southeast Asia Survey*—a barometer of the region's foreign policy establishments on regional affairs—the Philippines and Vietnam have the highest level of strategic comfort with the Quad, with 70.8 per cent and 65.8 per cent of their respective respondents thinking that the Quad has a positive impact on regional security. Philippine and Vietnamese respondents also registered the strongest support for their countries to participate in the Quad's security initiatives and military exercises, at 84.7 per cent and 65.1 per cent, respectively.

In contrast, Cambodian and Lao respondents were the most sceptical about the Quad with 30.8 per cent and 34.8 per cent respectively viewing the Quad's impact as negative, followed by Malaysia (22.1 per cent) and Indonesia (19.6 per cent). In the same vein, 62.5 per cent and 52.2 per cent of Cambodian and Lao respondents did not support their countries' participation in Quad activities, followed by Indonesia (49.3 per cent) and Malaysia (49.1 per cent). Other ASEAN member states populate the middle of the spectrum, suggesting that they remain undecided about the Quad's net cost-benefit. The encouraging indication for the Quad proponents is that the overall share of Southeast Asian positive views of the Quad's impact (45.8 per cent) is considerably higher than the negative views (16.2 per cent).[69]

Table 1
**What Impact does the Quad Have on Southeast Asian Security?**

| | Negative Impact | No Impact | Positive Impact |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cambodia | **30.8%** | 30.8% | 38.4% |
| Laos | **34.8%** | 30.4% | 34.8% |
| Indonesia | 19.6% | **49.3%** | 31.1% |
| Malaysia | 22.1% | **45.4%** | 32.5% |
| Thailand | 17.7% | **45.8%** | 36.5% |
| Brunei | 14.4% | **42.3%** | 43.3% |
| Singapore | 16.2% | **41.4%** | 42.4% |
| Myanmar | 12.3% | **40.6%** | 47.1% |
| Vietnam | 12.5% | 21.7% | **65.8%** |
| Philippines | 10.2% | 19.0% | **70.8%** |
| **Southeast Asia** | **16.2%** | **38%** | **45.8%** |

*Source*: State of Southeast Asia Survey 2020.

Given the sensitive issue of nuclear-powered submarines and the shock effect of its abrupt announcement, AUKUS has led to even more disjointed responses among ASEAN states. Indonesia and Malaysia publicly disapproved of the trilateral pact, citing concerns over potential arms racing and erosion of the global nuclear non-proliferation regime.[70] Vietnam and Singapore refrained from criticizing AUKUS, and expressed the hope that the pact would contribute rather than undermine regional peace and stability.[71] The Philippines was the most supportive with outspoken Locsin saying that "The enhancement of a near broad ally's ability to project power [a.k.a. Australia] should restore and keep the balance rather than destabilize it."[72] These disagreements led to the abortion of an ASEAN draft statement that Jakarta initiated with a view to expressing regional concerns about AUKUS.

In the 2022 edition of the *State of Southeast Asia Survey*, responses to the question "How will AUKUS affect regional security" remarkably mirror these disparate and divergent views among Southeast Asian countries about the defence pact.[73] Negative perceptions of AUKUS—a combination of three options (i) AUKUS will undermine ASEAN centrality; (ii) AUKUS will undermine the nuclear weapons non-proliferation regime; (iii) AUKUS will escalate the regional arms race—prevail in Laos (77.3 per cent), followed by Malaysia (62.2 per cent), Indonesia (61.1 per cent) and Brunei, Cambodia and Thailand (approximately 60 per cent). Meanwhile, the expectation that AUKUS will help balance China's growing military power was high among respondents from Myanmar (63.7 per cent),[74] the Philippines (60 per cent), Singapore (50.9 per cent) and Vietnam (46.5 per cent).

The absence of a common ASEAN position regarding AUKUS once again highlighted the strategic incoherence among its member states regarding the imperative for, and the attendant risk of, external power involvement in regional security.[75] This incoherence has existed since ASEAN's inception, and was embedded in its foundational documents, including an ambivalent clause on the presence of foreign bases in the region in the 1967 Bangkok Declaration,[76] and the guarantee that each Southeast Asian state reserves the right to allow port/airfield visits or transit/navigation by foreign ships/aircraft through its own airspace/territory in the 1995 Southeast Asian Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone Treaty (SEANWFZ).[77]

Historically, Indonesia and Malaysia were the two ASEAN states most wary of being entangled in external powers' machinations, as embodied in their advocacy for the 1972 Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality in Southeast Asia (ZOPFAN) which aimed to insulate Southeast Asia from Cold War tensions. Their commitment to ZOPFAN has been rekindled by the return of Great Power rivalry—this time between the United States and China. Meanwhile, given their longstanding security ties with Washington, the Philippines and Singapore share high levels of strategic comfort with America's military presence in the region. Similarly, Vietnam has actively engaged other external powers to dilute and constrain China's maritime ambitions in the South China Sea. This state of fragmentation and polarization within ASEAN, due to the lack of a common strategic vision among its member states, is expected to deepen with rising geopolitical tensions in the region.

## Support for ASEAN Centrality: Lip Service or the Real Deal?

All the Quad members have constantly reaffirmed their support for ASEAN centrality and sought to synergize their respective Indo-Pacific strategies with the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP).[78] The three major policy speeches by US leaders to Southeast Asian audiences in 2021 included statements confirming US support for ASEAN centrality, namely: ASEAN "remains central to the region's architecture" (Vice President Kamala Harris);[79] ASEAN is "a critical body that brings the region closer together, offering everyone a voice, and building deeper habits together" (Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin);[80] and "we're putting ASEAN centrality at the heart of our work with partners" (Secretary of State Antony Blinken).[81] Moreover, the Joint Statement of Quad Leaders in September 2021 read: "We reaffirm our strong support for ASEAN's unity and centrality and for ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, and we underscore our dedication towards working with ASEAN and its member states — the heart of the Indo-Pacific region — in practical and inclusive ways."[82] Similarly, following the announcement of AUKUS which drew strong reactions from Indonesia and Malaysia, a joint statement by the US and Australian foreign and defence ministers confirmed that they were "firmly committed to Southeast Asia, ASEAN centrality, and ASEAN-led architecture" and "expressed their ongoing support for the practical implementation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific".[83]

Many commentators dismiss such expressions as merely "lip service",[84] but this is not helpful in explaining why all these major powers have taken extra care to emphasize their commitment to support ASEAN centrality in their Indo-Pacific strategies. On this, Ba convincingly argued that "ASEAN centrality is an easy conceptual handle and a normative reminder about the need to pay critical attention to Southeast Asian audience as not only potential supporters but also potential detractors of policies and agendas pursued by other major powers."[85] Rhetoric aside, these major powers' reassurance efforts are informed by a pragmatic calculation concerning the strategic value of Southeast Asia in the Indo-Pacific. Kurt Campbell made it clear in July 2021 that "[F]or an effective Asia strategy, for an effective Indo-Pacific approach, you must do more in Southeast Asia."[86] As such, neither Washington nor any of its allies and partners wants to alienate the region by abandoning ASEAN. After all, the grouping remains the primary regional platform for Southeast Asian states to exercise their agency and defend their interests. This is particularly true for Indonesia—the largest Southeast Asian country—which keeps to ASEAN, particularly the AOIP, as the main vehicle for its approach to the Indo-Pacific.[87]

According to Susannah Patton, another pragmatic rationale for the United States—as well as Washington's allies and partners—to emphasize ASEAN centrality is to "prevent China from dominating regional institutions and diplomacy and to amplify Washington's voice on key regional issues and help it shape the regional narrative in its favour".[88] Engagement with ASEAN is not mainly about achieving "concrete outcomes" or seeking "effective solutions" to regional problems, but about maintaining US access to and influence over regional institutions, diplomacy and narratives. Patton's argument draws home the growing importance of discourse power as an arena of Sino-US competition in Southeast Asia.

Investing in ASEAN has become a key front for China to exercise its neighbourhood diplomacy and promote the Chinese narrative and vision of the regional order. Robust relations with ASEAN, most recently through the establishment of the ASEAN-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, help Beijing amplify the positive narrative about its leadership credentials among developing countries, its good international citizenship, and its developmental approach to foreign relations, while subduing other problematic aspects of its behaviour, including in the South China Sea.[89] China also increasingly frames itself together with ASEAN and its member states as *we*—"regional countries"—versus *they*—external powers who want to justify their presence and interference in regional affairs by stirring up problems.[90] According to Ziya Öniş and Mustafa Kutlay, China's "increasingly counter-hegemonic role in shaping a new style of multilateralism" has catalysed "the emergent post-liberal international order as a new age of hybridity, which signifies that no overriding set of paradigms dominate global governance".[91] To put up an effective challenge to China's narrative and promote America's vision of regional order, Washington—and its allies and partners—must make sure that they have a seat at the ASEAN table.

For these pragmatic reasons, engaging ASEAN remains a component of these major powers' Indo-Pacific strategies, even as they continue to invest in their own exclusive minilateral groupings. From their vantage point, these minilaterals and ASEAN-led institutions are all "complementary mechanisms" in their diplomatic toolkit. This, however, also means that ASEAN is valued more as an instrument in the Great Powers' contest for regional influence rather than as a player with its own voice and weight in shaping the regional order.

Going forward, we will likely contend with a new situation where Southeast Asia becomes more focal and ASEAN less central in the major powers' Indo-Pacific strategies. Diplomatic moves by the Biden administration in its first year arguably lends credence to this trend. President Biden has been credited for attending the US-ASEAN Summit and the EAS—a ritual that his predecessor Trump failed to deliver during most of his four years in office. While these summit-level engagements are regarded as the most visible demonstration of US commitment to ASEAN multilateralism, they are low-hanging fruit, given that these events were held virtually throughout 2021. Real investments by the Biden administration in the region have been in some select Southeast Asian countries deemed to be of strategic value to its Indo-Pacific strategy, namely Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam. Except for Indonesia, which is a major country that needs to be engaged regardless, the strategic importance of the other three countries comes from their solid support for America's military presence in the region. Indonesia, Vietnam and the Philippines are among the top five recipients of US vaccine donations in 2021 (Singapore was able to secure its own supplies).[92] Whereas no cabinet member of the Biden government has so far visited Brunei—the 2021 ASEAN Chair—and the 2022 Chair Cambodia—US Vice President and/or US Secretaries of State and Defence have visited Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam. In the unfolding Indo-Pacific chessboard, the strategic value of these Southeast Asian countries will become more prominent while ASEAN institutions will likely retreat into a less central role.

## NOTES

[1] For more on minilateralism and its development in the Indo-Pacific, see Moisés Naím, "Minilateralism", *Foreign Policy*, no. 173 (July/August 2009); William T. Tow, "The Trilateral Strategic Dialogue, Minilateralism and Asia-Pacific Order", in *US-Japan-Australia Security Cooperation: Prospects and Challenges*, edited by Yuki Tatsumi (Washington, D.C.: Stimson, 2015); Bhubhindar Singh and Sarah Teo, eds., *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020).

[2] In *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific* (2020), Bhubhindar Singh and Sarah Teo address both quantitative and qualitative dimensions of minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific, defining it as "cooperative relations that usually involve between

three and nine countries, and are relatively exclusive, flexible and functional in nature" (pp. 1–2). In this article, while agreeing that smaller membership is a defining feature of minilaterals, the author does not ascribe minilateralism to any absolute numbers and uses instead Moisés Naím's "magic number" formula, i.e. "the smallest possible number of countries needed to have the largest possible impact on solving a particular problem, whether trade or aids".

[3] Alice Ba, Presentation at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute's 36th ASEAN Roundtable, 13 October 2021, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/media/event-highlights/webinars-on-the-36th-asean-roundtable-braving-the-storms-asean-in-crisis-mode/.

[4] For more analysis of US-led minilateralism in Asia, see Joel Wuthnow, "U.S. 'Minilateralism' in Asia and China's Responses: A New Security Dilemma?", *Journal of Contemporary China* 28, no. 115 (2019): 133–50.

[5] "Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS", The White House, 15 September 2021, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/15/joint-leaders-statement-on-aukus/.

[6] ASEAN-plus mechanisms refer to those ASEAN-led institutions that involve external partners. They include, but are not limited to, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM), ASEAN Plus Three (APT), the East Asia Summit (EAS), and ASEAN Plus One with each of its 11 Dialogue Partners, namely Australia, Canada, China, the European Union, India, South Korea, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, the United States, and since 2021, the UK.

[7] For both scholarly and practice-based literature on the concept of "ASEAN centrality", see Mely Caballero-Anthony, "Understanding ASEAN's Centrality: Bases and Prospects in an Evolving Regional Architecture", *The Pacific Review* 27, no. 4 (2014): 563–84; See Seng Tan, "ASEAN Centrality", *CSCAP Regional Security Outlook 2013*, http://www.cscap.org/uploads/docs/CRSO/CRSO2013.pdf, pp. 26–29; Richard Stubbs, "ASEAN's Leadership in East Asian Region-Building: Strength in Weakness", *The Pacific Review* 27, no. 4 (2014): 523–41; Amitav Acharya, "The Myth of ASEAN Centrality?", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 39, no. 2 (2017): 273–79; Termsak Chalermpalanupap, "ASEAN Centrality Beyond 2015: Old Challenges, New Questions", paper presented at the regional conference on "Cambodia and ASEAN: Managing Opportunity and Challenges Beyond 2015", Phnom Penh, 28 March 2016, https://cicp.org.kh/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Regional-Conference.pdf; Bilahari Kausikan, "ASEAN's Greatest Challenges Lie within Grouping: Bilahari Kausikan", *Today*, 3 October 2017, https://www.todayonline.com/world/aseans-greatest-challenges-lie-within-grouping-bilahari.

[8] Acharya, "The Myth of ASEAN Centrality?".

[9] Victor D. Cha, "Complex Patchworks: U.S. Alliances as Part of Asia's Regional Architecture", *Asia Policy*, no. 11 (2011): 27–50.

[10] Andrew I. Yeo, "Overlapping Regionalism in East Asia: Determinants and Potential Effects", *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 18, no. 2 (2018): 161–91.

[11] See Seng Tan, *Multilateral Asian Security Architecture: Non-ASEAN Stakeholders* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 5.

[12] Ba, Presentation at the 36th ASEAN Roundtable.

[13] Malcolm Cook and Hoang Thi Ha, "Formal and Flexible: ASEAN and the New Strategic Disorder", *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 2020/86, 17 August 2020, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_86.pdf.

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[15] These intra-regional minilaterals are distinguished from the ASEAN-minus-X which requires ASEAN consensus, is open to all ASEAN members' participation when they are able to do so, and is only applicable in economic areas.

[16] Grace Guiang, "Are Minilaterals the Future of ASEAN Security?", *East Asia Forum*, 30 September 2017, https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/09/30/are-minilaterals-the-future-of-asean-security/.

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[18] See See Seng Tan, "Minilateralism: A Way out of ASEAN's Consensus Conundrum?", *ASEANFocus*, no. 5/2017, October 2017, https://www.think-asia.org/bitstream/handle/11540/7463/WEB-ASEANFocus-0917.pdf?sequence=1, p. 9; Richard Javad Heydarian, "Time for ASEAN Minilateralism", *RSIS Commentary*, 7 November 2017, https://www.think-asia.org/bitstream/handle/11540/7852/CO17210.pdf?sequence=1; Huynh Tam Sang, "Could Minilateralism Work in the South China Sea", *The Interpreter*, 24 January 2022, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/could-minilateralism-work-south-china-sea.

[19] "Manila Urges Unity for South East Asian Nations in China Sea Dispute", Reuters, 18 July 2014, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-southchinasea-idUSKBN0FN0SF20140718.

[20] Ian Storey, "Indonesia's South China Sea Confab: When Chin-wagging Counts", *Fulcrum*, 13 January 2022, https://fulcrum.sg/indonesias-south-china-sea-confab-when-chin-wagging-counts/.

[21] See Benjamin Zawacki, "Implications of a Crowded Field: Sub-Regional Architecture in ACMECS Member States", *The Asia Foundation*, August 2019, https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Implications-of-a-Crowded-Field_whitePaper.pdf. The author adds one new grouping to the list, namely the Japan-US Mekong Power Partnership (JUMPP), which was established in 2019.

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[23] For analyses on the minilateralism discourse in the Mekong region, see Xue Gong, "Lancang-Mekong Cooperation: Minilateralism in Institutional Building and its Implications", in *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific*, edited by Bhubhindar Singh and Sarah Teo (London and New York: Routledge, 2020); Nguyen Vu Tung and Le Trung Kien, "Closer Coordination would Aid Minilateralism in the Mekong Subregion", *Journal of Greater Mekong Studies* 2, no. 1 (2020):

17–22, https://cicp.org.kh/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/JGMS-Second-Edition-Final-Version.pdf.

[24] Hoang Thi Ha, "Evolving Regionalisms in Asia-Pacific", *ASEANFocus*, no. 3/2018, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/category/articles-commentaries/aseanfocus/page/2/, pp. 2–3.

[25] Kai He, "Contested Multilateralism 2.0 and Regional Order Transition: Causes and Implications", *The Pacific Review* 32, no. 2 (2019): 210–20.

[26] Kevin Rudd, "It's Time to Build an Asia Pacific Community", *AustralAsia Centre,* Sydney, 4 June 2008, https://asiasociety.org/kevin-rudd-toward-asia-pacific-union.

[27] Address by Prime Minister of Japan Dr Yukio Hatoyama, "Japan's New Commitment to Asia – Toward the Realisation of an East Asian Community", 15 November 2009, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/hatoyama/statement/200911/15singapore_e.html.

[28] Sheryn Lee and Anthony Milner argued that Rudd's lack of prior consultation with ASEAN partners and the perceived centrality of the United States in contrast with little attention given to ASEAN in his APC proposal were among the reasons why his proposal was deeply unpopular among ASEAN members. See Sheryn Lee and Anthony Milner, "Practical vs. Identity Regionalism: Australia's APC initiative, A Case Study", *Contemporary Politics* 20, no. 2 (2014): 209–28.

[29] See the ASEAN Charter, https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/archive/publications/ASEAN-Charter.pdf, and the 2009–2015 ASEAN Political-Security Community, https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/archive/5187-18.pdf. The Work Plan on Maintaining and Enhancing ASEAN Centrality is an internal document that is not publicly available.

[30] Acharya, "The Myth of ASEAN Centrality?", p. 277.

[31] David M. Lampton, Selina Ho and Cheng-Chwee Kuik, *Rivers of Iron: Railroads and Chinese Power in Southeast Asia* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2020), p. xi.

[32] For more literature on the ASEAN Way, see Rodolfo C. Severino, *Southeast Asia in Search of an ASEAN Community* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006); Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001); Jurgen Haacke, *ASEAN's Diplomatic and Security Culture: Origins, Development and Prospects* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).

[33] See Hoang Thi Ha, "Understanding China's Proposal for an ASEAN-China Community of Common Destiny and ASEAN's Ambivalent Response", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41, no. 2 (2019): 223–54; Hoang Thi Ha, "The ASEAN-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership: What's in a Name?", *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 2021/157, 24 November 2021, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-157-the-asean-china-comprehensive-strategic-partnership-whats-in-a-name-by-hoang-thi-ha/.

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[35] Acharya, "The Myth of ASEAN Centrality?", p. 275.

[36] Aarshi Tirkey, “Minilateralism: Weighing the Prospects for Cooperation and Governance”, *RF Issue Brief*, no. 489, September 2021, https://www.orfonline.org/research/minilateralism-weighing-prospects-cooperation-governance/.

[37] All editions of the Lowy Institute Asia Power Index from 2018 to 2021 are available at https://power.lowyinstitute.org/.

[38] Sharon Seah et al., *The State of Southeast Asia 2022* (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2022), https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/The-State-of-SEA-2022_FA_Digital_FINAL.pdf.

[39] Herve Lemahieu, “Navigating a Three-Pronged Crisis”, *Lowy Institute*, 13 February 2021, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/2020-sir-hermann-black-lecture-year-crisis-climate-coronavirus-and-china.

[40] *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2018), https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf, p. 9.

[41] *The Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, The White House, February 2022, p. 9, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf.

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[44] “Quad Leaders’ Joint Statement: The Spirit of the Quad”, The White House, 12 March 2021, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/12/quad-leaders-joint-statement-the-spirit-of-the-quad/.

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[46] Makiko Inoue and Ben Dooley, “Japan Approves Major Hike in Military Spending, With Taiwan in Mind”, *New York Times*, 23 December 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/23/business/japan-defense-spending.html.

[47] See Kai He, “Three Faces of the Indo-Pacific: Understanding the Indo-Pacific from an IR Theory Perspective”, *East Asia* 35 (2018): 149–61. Kai He argued that “China is far from being a common threat for other states in the region to activate the Indo-Pacific concept’s ‘strategic balancing’ function”, but he also warned that the India-China border dispute and deteriorating Sino-Indian bilateral relations “might push India to change its non-alignment policy and seek further military cooperation and even alliances with the United States”. This is exactly what happened after the Sino-Indian border clash in 2020.

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Bilahari Kausikan said close security and defence ties with external powers, especially the UK and the United States, were so vital that Singapore's first foreign minister, S. Rajaratnam, almost walked out of the 1967 Bangkok meeting discussing the establishment of ASEAN before an eleventh-hour compromise was reached by declaring that foreign bases in Southeast Asia were "temporary". See Bilahari Kausikan, "Dealing with an Ambiguous World, Lecture III: ASEAN & US-China Competition in Southeast Asia", IPS-Nathan Lectures, 30 March 2016, https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/mr-bilahari-kausikan-s-speech7d7b0a7b46bc6210a3aaff0100138661.pdf.

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