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FROM MULTILATERALISM TO MINILATERALISM: EMERGING REGIONAL ARCHITECTURE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

Abstract

This article examines the growing significance of minilateralism in shaping the emerging regional architecture of the Indo-Pacific. While multilateralism has traditionally served as the main platform for managing interstate relations, its consensus-driven approach and institutional limitations have encouraged states to experiment with smaller, issue-specific groupings. The article argues that minilaterals provide flexibility, adaptability, and targeted problem-solving capacity, particularly in addressing security and economic issues where multilateralism falls short. Case studies of initiatives such as the Quad, AUKUS, and various trilaterals highlight their roles in balancing great-power competition, empowering middle powers, and advancing cooperation across maritime security, technology governance, and supply chain resilience. At the same time, the analysis underscores the risks minilaterals pose, including challenges to ASEAN centrality, questions of inclusivity and legitimacy, and the potential for fragmentation of the regional order. The paper further contends that the Indo-Pacific's future architecture will be neither wholly multilateral nor minilateral but layered, with overlapping and sometimes competing institutions. This institutional mosaic reflects the complexities of Indo-Pacific's geopolitical environment and requires careful management to avoid destabilisation.

Keywords: Minilaterals, Indo-Pacific, Multilateralism, Regional Architecture, AUKUS, QUAD

1. Introduction

Since the turn of the 20th century, states have come together on various occasions to find solutions to problems that transcend their national boundaries or have a global impact. Few of these issues include: managing interstate relations, avoiding global-scale catastrophes resulting from war and conflict, minimising and managing humanitarian crises in the aftermath of war or natural disasters, and creating an economic architecture to regulate global commerce and businesses. The remarkable growth of international organisations and regimes following WWII, and the current multipolar world, are often attributed to “post-hegemonic liberal internationalism”.¹

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¹ Post-hegemonic internationalism describes an international order where no single state or group exercises dominance, leading to a more complex, contested, and multipolar global system. It is a concept originating from Antonio Gramsci's theories and Fred Halliday's work, which posits that traditional, US-led liberal international

This entails that a single power could not establish unchallenged dominance, marking a shift from the hegemonic system in which the Soviet Union and the United States (US) competed for influence and tried to fashion global norms and institutions in their own image. This was consolidated by the expansion of membership to non-Western states that received independence during the decolonisation wave in the 1960s and 1970s. Following the end of the Cold War, multilateralism received renewed attention as demand for it grew exponentially amid unprecedented levels of globalisation within the international system. This demand was crafted within the liberal order in a unipolar setting, where the US facilitated and championed many of these multilateral initiatives, helping Washington police the world. The emergence of a wide variety of non-state actors and NGOs, along with the demand for inclusion within multilateral frameworks, has widened the themes on the international agenda. Therefore, by the end of the 20th century, multilateralism was increasingly conceptualised as based on ‘multi-parties, multi-issues, multi-roles and multi-values’.²

However, at the turn of the 21st century, China’s rise has turned the Indo-Pacific region not only into the epicentre of global geopolitical and geostrategic competition, but has also pushed nations to reassess and, on many occasions, readjust their foreign policy. Although the US has engaged its partners and allies in the Indo-Pacific region since the early 2000s, some argued that potential US-China competition triggered a formation of “institutionalised and strategically oriented” minilateral arrangements by the late 2010s.³ During this period, apart from reinvigorating established mechanisms of cooperation, countries in this region looked beyond traditional multilateral arrangements to form a flurry of minilaterals, turning the region into the “pivot of minilateral activity”, and some have argued that the recent era can be dubbed the “era of minilateralism”.⁴ These minilaterals have been employed by the states of this region as a strategic tool to reshape the regional architecture, with significant influence on regional security and the political and economic order of the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

order is in crisis, replaced by a more fragmented world. This new era features shifting power dynamics between states and blocs, increased regionalism, and a struggle over global norms, making international cooperation more unpredictable and contentious. Fred Halliday, “International Relations in a Post-Hegemonic Age,” *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 85, no. 1 (2009): 37–51, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27694918>.

² Joan Fagot Aviel, “The Evolution of Multilateral Diplomacy”, in *Multilateral Diplomacy and the United Nations Today*, ed. James P. Muldoon, Jr., Earl Sullivan, Joann Fagot Aviel and Richard Reitano (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2005), 8 – 14 .

³ Kei Koga, “A New Strategic Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific,” *Asia Policy* 17 no. 4 (2022): 27-34, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/asp.2022.0063>; H.D.P Envall and I. Hall, “Asian strategic partnerships: New practices and regional security governance,” *Asian Politics and Policy* 8, no.1 (2016): 87–105.

⁴ Husain Haqqani, “The Minilateral Era,” *Foreign Policy*, January 10, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/01/10/minilateral-diplomacy-middle-power-india-israel-uae/>; Aarshi Tirkey, “Minilateralism: Weighing the Prospects for Cooperation and Governance,” *ORF Issue Brief* 489, September 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/minilateralism-weighing-prospects-cooperationgovernance/>

Therefore, this research aims to investigate the reasons behind the recent growth of minilateral arrangements in the Indo-Pacific and to understand the nature of these institutions. Exploring the intersection between minilateralism and emerging regional architecture will be another interesting puzzle to look at. This article argues that minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific is not a uniform institutional trend but a regionally and sectorally differentiated phenomenon, shaped by subregional institutional structures and issue-specific strategic logics. Researching these issues will provide clarity to understand minilaterals' comparative effectiveness vis-à-vis multilateralism in building the regional architecture of the Indo-Pacific. The specific objectives of this research are as follows: a. to understand the reason behind the recent growth of minilateral arrangements in the Indo-Pacific; b. to explore the possible relationship between minilateralism and regional architecture in the Indo-Pacific region. To that end, the paper seeks to answer two research questions: What are the structural/external drivers behind the recent surge in minilaterals in the Indo-Pacific? Are they complementing or competing with the existing multilateral institutions in the region? How is minilateralism related to the emerging regional architecture in the Indo-Pacific? The article is qualitative in nature, and data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data was collected through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with practitioners and researchers. Government-published documents, speeches, newspaper reports, research reports, technical reports, and academic works published in journals, books, and monographs were consulted as secondary sources. The article, including the introduction and conclusion, is structured into five sections. Section two conceptualises the definitions and growth of minilateralism vis-à-vis multilateralism within the framework of the Indo-Pacific region. It contextualises the notion of regional architecture from the existing literature. Following that, section three advanced the discourse by identifying the drivers behind the recent growth of minilaterals and discussing their nature, whether structural or not. In addition, this section discusses the major trends in the growth and work of these minilaterals in the Indo-Pacific. While section four discusses the intersection of minilaterals and emerging regional architecture in the Indo-Pacific. Finally, section five, the conclusion of the paper, provides a summary of the arguments and takeaways from the analytical sections.

2. Conceptualising Minilateralism in Juxtaposition to Multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific

Within the Indo-Pacific discourse, minilateralism is often described as a strategic mechanism grounded in the “magic number”—the smallest grouping

of states capable of generating the greatest possible impact on a specific issue.⁵ Unlike multilateralism, which emphasises broad participation and inclusivity, minilateralism deliberately limits membership to a handful of like-minded actors, thereby allowing for greater efficiency, flexibility, and targeted outcomes.⁶ Scholars often view it as a pragmatic response when large-scale multilateral frameworks falter due to competing interests or institutional inertia. Recent scholarship has moved beyond definitional debates and focused on the strategic logic of minilateralism as an adaptive institutional form. Minilateral arrangements enable middle and smaller powers to pursue collective action through selective coalition-building, particularly in policy domains where multilateral institutions are paralysed by consensus rules.⁷ Similarly, minilateralism can be situated within the US Indo-Pacific strategy, suggesting that Washington increasingly relies on flexible, small-group partnerships to compensate for declining institutional authority and the limits of traditional alliances.⁸ Together, these contributions conceptualise minilateralism not merely as an institutional alternative, but as a strategic instrument embedded within broader patterns of geopolitical competition and institutional transition. The idea that states could resolve their differences through multilateral negotiation and cooperation came under serious question due to the advent of the two Great Wars in the same century.

Nonetheless, the creation of the United Nations in the aftermath of World War II and the subsequent plethora of multilateral initiatives can be translated in two ways. Firstly, despite the failure, the member states believed multilateralism would work. Secondly, as discussed earlier, multilateralism's emergence and ascendancy were not organic. Rather, it was imposed from the top to manage the great power rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union in such a way that the competition could not get out of control. However, the onset of the Cold War divided the world into two blocs and constrained the United Nations' security role. One of the major criticisms during the whole Cold War period was that the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) was largely defunct in preventing wars and conflicts due to the bloc politics that had been played within the UN.⁹

On the other hand, multilateral mechanisms generally encompass four institutional spheres. It can negotiate and create international orders, such as the post-

⁵ Moisés Naím, "Minilateralism: The Magic Number to Get Real International Action," *Foreign Policy*, June 21, 2009.

⁶ Amitav Acharya, *The End of American World Order* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018).

⁷ Bharti Chhibber, "Minilateralism and the New Logic of Regional Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific," *Asian Security* 17, no. 3 (2021): 258–261.

⁸ Stephen R Nagy, "Japan's Emerging Security Strategy and the Indo-Pacific," *Pacific Review* 33, no. 2 (2020): 191–194.

⁹ Saadia Touval, "Why the UN fails," *Foreign Affairs* 73 (1994): 44; Thomas J Jackamo III, "From the Cold War to the New Multilateral World Order: The Evolution of Covert Operations and the Customary International Law of Non-Intervention," *Virginia Journal of International Law* 32 (1991): 929.

WWII bipolar order; international treaty regimes, like the 1951 Refugee Convention; international organisations, notably the UN; and international negotiating processes and forums that deliver institutional outcomes, such as the International Criminal Court. Therefore, “multilateralism” is a concept grounded on a collectively agreed set of rules, norms and principles that regulate and guide interstate relations and behaviour. However, there is disagreement stemming from realists’ understanding that there could be no such “single logic”; neither is there any “fixed set of principles” or “practices” for the liberal international order or the way it operates. Consequently, multilateral forums remain universal/regional in their membership and in scope, global or at least regional.

Table 1: Comparison between Multilateralism and Minilateralism

Aspect	Multilateralism	Minilateralism
Membership	Universal/broad	Small, selective, flexible
Decision-making	Consensus, slow	Flexible, pragmatic
Scope	Broad/global	Issue-specific
Legitimacy	High (inclusive)	Medium (depending on design)
Effectiveness	Norm-setting, low efficiency	Problem-solving, targeted
Examples	UN, WTO, WHO	Quad, AUKUS, trilaterals (US-Japan-Australia Security Partnership; India-France-Australia Dialogue etc.)

Source: Compiled by the author based on existing literature.

Conversely, by reducing the number of participants, minilateralism narrows the scope of divergence while fostering stronger political convergence and collective identity among participants. Although sometimes regarded as a subset of multilateralism, minilateralism departs from it in several ways. As Table 1 suggests, multilateral institutions such as the United Nations or ASEAN-centred processes are comprehensive, global or regional, and sometimes can be legally binding. In contrast, minilateral arrangements are typically informal, voluntary, and disaggregated, emerging from “bottom-up” cooperation rather than “top-down” institutional design.¹⁰ Minilateral arrangements can potentially be more effective in addressing specific issues or challenges due to their agility, focused approach, and ability to bypass the often cumbersome processes of multilateralism. However, their effectiveness must be weighed against several risks, particularly their impact on multilateralism and regionalism, including the centrality and unity of ASEAN. Balancing their effectiveness with these risks requires strategic alignment, inclusivity, and a commitment to supporting broader global and regional governance frameworks.¹¹

¹⁰ Miles Kahler, “Multilateralism with Small and Large Numbers,” *International Organization* 46, no. 3 (1992): 681–708.

¹¹ Interviewee 3 is a researcher based in a think tank from Jakarta, Indonesia.

The debate between minilateralism and multilateralism gains sharper analytical clarity when situated within the broader discourse on regional architecture. Regional architecture, in its most general sense, refers to the constellation of institutions, norms, processes, and relationships that shape collective governance within a defined geographic space. It extends beyond security to encompass economic frameworks, political institutions, cultural linkages, and normative orders.¹² In the Indo-Pacific context, the notion of architecture has become indispensable for scholars and policymakers alike, as it captures the complex institutional mosaic that has emerged amid shifting power balances and globalisation. Regional architecture can be unpacked along three dimensions. First, it is institutional, denoting the formal and informal organisations through which states coordinate, such as ASEAN, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and emerging minilateral like the Quad. Second, it is normative, shaped by ideas of sovereignty, inclusivity, and consensus, especially as embodied in ASEAN's diplomatic practices. Third, it is functional, encompassing diverse domains from trade and investment to climate governance, maritime cooperation, and technological regulation.¹³ This broad conceptualisation underscores that architecture is not synonymous with a single institution, but rather the sum of overlapping and often competing arrangements.

In contrast to the European Union's relatively hierarchical and centralised structure, the Indo-Pacific's regional architecture is best described as layered and networked.¹⁴ The region hosts a proliferation of organisations, ranging from global institutions (WTO, IMF, UN) to regional frameworks (ASEAN, SAARC, IORA), subregional compacts (Mekong initiatives, Pacific Islands Forum), and functional coalitions (Supply Chain Resilience Initiative, Quad). These layers coexist, often without a clear hierarchy, and their interactions produce both opportunities and frictions. On the one hand, this pluralism allows states to pursue cooperation tailored to specific interests. On the other hand, it creates risks of duplication, fragmentation, and contested legitimacy. The role of ASEAN in shaping regional architecture deserves special emphasis. Since the 1990s, ASEAN has sought to place itself at the "driver's seat" of Asia's institutional order, convening great and middle powers through the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit, and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus.¹⁵ ASEAN centrality has conferred

¹² Amitav Acharya, *Constructing Global Order: Agency and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

¹³ Kei Koga, *Managing Great Power Politics: ASEAN, Institutional Strategy, and the South China Sea* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

¹⁴ Rory Medcalf, "The Indo-Pacific's Institutional Order: Networked, Not Hierarchical," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 75, no. 4 (2021): 389–406.

¹⁵ Mely Caballero-Anthony, "ASEAN Centrality and Regional Governance: Still Relevant?" *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 43, no. 3 (2021): 345–370.

legitimacy and inclusivity on regional dialogues; however, its reliance on consensus and non-interference has limited its ability to address contentious issues, such as the South China Sea disputes or Myanmar's political crisis. These limitations have fueled experimentation with alternative institutional designs, particularly minilateral and issue-based formats. Nevertheless, ASEAN's convening power remains vital, ensuring that the Indo-Pacific's architecture does not devolve entirely into exclusive great-power blocs. A defining feature of the Indo-Pacific's regional architecture is its economic dimension. The conclusion of the RCEP in 2020 signalled the persistence of trade-driven regionalism, despite the US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership.¹⁶ RCEP's entry into force in 2022 created the world's largest trade bloc, covering nearly one-third of global GDP, and demonstrated ASEAN's ability to shepherd broad, inclusive economic frameworks.

At the same time, alternative economic architectures have emerged, such as the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), launched in 2022. Unlike RCEP, IPEF is not a traditional trade agreement but rather a standards-setting initiative on digital trade, clean energy, and supply chains.¹⁷ The coexistence of RCEP and IPEF reflects the competitive layering of economic architectures, with China and the US offering distinct visions for regional order. Political and normative dimensions of architecture are equally contested. China has championed institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as vehicles for reshaping connectivity and governance.¹⁸ These initiatives reflect Beijing's preference for flexible, project-based cooperation over rigid legal frameworks, but they also raise concerns about transparency, debt sustainability, and geopolitical leverage. By contrast, democratic coalitions in the Indo-Pacific emphasise rules-based governance, transparency, and sustainability, as reflected in Quad statements on infrastructure and digital governance. The clash between these visions highlights how regional architecture is not a neutral design, but rather a site of normative contestation.

Another important trend is the rise of functional and cross-regional coalitions. Issues such as climate change, pandemic response, and digital governance transcend geographical boundaries and require coalitions that cut across traditional regional divisions. For example, the Quad's COVID-19 vaccine partnership linked manufacturing in India with financing from Japan, logistics from the US, and distribution support from Australia.¹⁹ Similarly, climate partnerships such as the Just

¹⁶ Shujiro Urata, "The RCEP Agreement and Its Implications for the Indo-Pacific Economy," *Asia Pacific Business Review* 28, no. 2 (2022): 153–169.

¹⁷ Mireya Solis, "The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework: Ambition and Ambiguity," Brookings Policy Brief, 2022.

¹⁸ Bates Gill, "China's Institutional Statecraft in Asia," *Survival* 64, no. 1 (2022): 55–74.

¹⁹ Tanvi Madan, "The Quad and Global Health Governance," Brookings Institution Report, 2021.

Energy Transition Partnerships (JETPs) with Indonesia and Vietnam illustrate how new forms of cooperation embed Indo-Pacific states into wider global governance structures. These developments underscore the permeability of regional architecture, as Indo-Pacific institutions increasingly overlap with global frameworks, blurring the distinction between regional and international governance.

The role of middle powers in shaping architecture is particularly noteworthy. States such as India, Japan, Australia, South Korea, and Indonesia lack the hegemonic power to impose order but possess sufficient capacity and legitimacy to shape outcomes. By initiating or championing institutions like the Quad, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), or the IORA, they function as “architects of architecture,” filling gaps left by great-power rivalry. Their activism ensures that regional order is not simply a binary contest between the US and China but rather a plural negotiation in which diverse actors exercise agency.

From a conceptual standpoint, the Indo-Pacific’s regional architecture can be understood as an ecosystem characterised by three features: adaptability, hybridity, and contestation.²⁰ Adaptability refers to its capacity to evolve, as seen in ASEAN’s gradual expansion of its mandate or the Quad’s shift from a loose dialogue to a more structured platform. Hybridity captures the coexistence of formal treaties, informal dialogues, and ad hoc coalitions. Contestation points to the ongoing struggle among great powers, middle powers, and smaller states to shape the rules and norms of interaction. This ecosystem metaphor underscores that architecture is not static but constantly negotiated, revised, and contested. The future trajectory of regional architecture in the Indo-Pacific is likely to remain layered and fragmented, rather than unified under a single framework. Policymakers increasingly emphasise the need for connectivity—linking minilateral and multilateral initiatives, aligning economic and political forums, and ensuring inclusivity to prevent marginalisation of smaller states.²¹ Without such connective tissue, institutional proliferation may lead to incoherence and rivalry. Yet, if connectivity is achieved, pluralism may become a source of resilience, allowing states to experiment with different institutional forms while preserving overall stability. In sum, conceptualising regional architecture helps explain why minilaterals have gained prominence: they represent one adaptive layer within a broader institutional ecosystem. Far from displacing multilateralism, they coexist alongside global, regional, and sub-regional frameworks, collectively shaping the Indo-Pacific’s evolving order. Regional architecture is thus best seen not as a blueprint imposed from above but as a negotiated, layered, and dynamic order reflecting the region’s diversity, complexity, and contestation.

²⁰ Nick Bisley and Ankit Panda, “The Networked Indo-Pacific Order,” *Asia Policy* 17, no. 3 (2022): 15–34.

²¹ ASEAN Studies Centre, “Connecting Minilateralism and Multilateralism,” ASEAN Focus Special Issue, October 2022.

This smaller scale provides agility in responding to security and economic challenges, particularly in a region where the US-led post–Cold War order has been challenged by China’s rise and by a lack of overarching Indo-Pacific security architecture.²² In practice, minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific has frequently been spearheaded by powerful states, particularly the US and its allies and partners, who have sought to transform bilateral security ties into trilateral or quadrilateral frameworks. A good reference of such a case was the ad hoc tsunami core group of 2004, where the US, India, Japan, and Australia coordinated humanitarian assistance after the Indian Ocean earthquake.²³ This operational success catalysed more enduring dialogues, including the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD) between Australia, Japan, and the US, and eventually the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) in 2007.²⁴ While the Quad initially focused on non-traditional security cooperation, its revival in the late 2010s (often referred to as Quad 2.0) increasingly reflected strategic concerns about balancing China’s assertiveness. Other notable Indo-Pacific minilaterals illustrate the trend’s diversity. The Malacca Straits Patrols (2004) among Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore addressed maritime security challenges, while the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) (2015), led by China and involving five mainland Southeast Asian states, exemplifies Beijing’s own turn to minilateralism as a counterbalance.²⁵ The India–France–Australia Trilateral Dialogue, launched in 2020, highlights the expanding scope of issue-based cooperation beyond traditional security, incorporating maritime governance and climate security.²⁶ Most prominently, the creation of AUKUS in 2021—linking Australia, the United Kingdom (UK), and the US in advanced defence technology cooperation and transfer of technology (ToT), including nuclear-powered submarines—signalled a decisive turn toward minilateral security pacts explicitly framed to balance China’s influence in the Indo-Pacific.²⁷ This proliferation of minilateral initiatives has provoked sharp reactions from Beijing, which often portrays them as evidence of “bloc politics” and a revival of “Cold War mentality.”²⁸ In conversations with regional partners, including Bangladesh, Chinese officials have cautioned against aligning with

²² Rory Medcalf, *Indo-Pacific Empire: China, America and the Contest for the World’s Pivotal Region* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

²³ William Tow, “Minilateral Security’s Relevance to US Strategy in the Indo-Pacific: Challenges and Prospects,” *Asia Policy* 14, no. 2 (2019): 65–92.

²⁴ Tanvi Madan, “The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of the Quad,” *War on the Rocks*, Last modified November 16, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/11/rise-fall-rebirth-quad/>.

²⁵ Zheng Liang, “The Lancang-Mekong Cooperation: China’s New Regional Cooperation Initiative,” *East Asia* 36, no. 2 (2019): 113–32.

²⁶ Darshana Baruah, “India-France-Australia: A Trilateral in the Indo-Pacific,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, January 21, 2020.

²⁷ Zack Cooper and Hal Brands, “AUKUS: America’s New Strategic Partnership in Asia,” *Foreign Affairs*, September 2021.

²⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson’s Remarks on the Quad Leaders’ Summit,” September 2021.

what they perceive as exclusionary blocs, urging instead a rejection of adversarial groupings.²⁹

Despite such scepticism, minilaterals' growth in the Indo-Pacific region can be understood by analysing the structural drivers that spurred a "great transition" in regional architecture for this region. While the proliferation of bilateral and minilateral partnerships does reflect a shift away from traditional multilateralism, it does not necessarily imply a wholesale move towards a less open global economy. These partnerships can deepen economic integration and cooperation among participating countries, leading to regional economic growth and stability. However, they also pose challenges to the inclusivity and effectiveness of global economic governance. The future trajectory will depend on how countries balance their bilateral and regional interests with their commitment to multilateral frameworks. Continued engagement with global institutions and efforts to address global challenges collectively will be essential in shaping a more open and resilient global economy amidst evolving geopolitical dynamics. Therefore, while the Bretton Woods architecture may face challenges, its principles of cooperation and openness remain relevant in navigating today's complex economic landscape.³⁰

3. Trends and Structural Drivers of the Great Transition in the Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific region has undergone profound strategic realignment in the early decades of the twenty-first century, reflecting shifts in global power dynamics and the emergence of new centres of influence. Following the 2008 financial crisis, Asian economies—including China, Japan, and the ASEAN states—rebounded more effectively than many Western powers, accelerating the region's economic and geopolitical centrality.³¹ This economic resurgence coincided with China's growing assertiveness in maritime domains and regional governance, producing a structural challenge for existing security architectures and prompting reassessments of traditional multilateral and alliance-based mechanisms.

At the systemic level, these developments are driven by broader geostrategic imperatives: the intensifying US–China rivalry, the fragmentation of regional economic governance, and the uneven integration of states into global supply chains and trade networks. Minilateralism, in this context, functions not merely as a tactical instrument but as a structural response to the uncertainties of a multipolar Indo-

²⁹ "China Urges Bangladesh to Reject Bloc Politics," *The Daily Star*, May 11, 2021.

³⁰ Interviewee 5 is a researcher from a think tank based in New York.

³¹ Bhubhindar Singh and Sarah Teo, *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific: The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism, and ASEAN* (London: Routledge, 2020), 3–5.

Pacific order, enabling selected states to coordinate policy, signal commitments, and maintain flexibility in navigating contested regional spaces.³²

3.1 *Structural Multipolarity and Institutional Transition*

A key structural driver of minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific is the emergence of a multipolar global order following the 2008 financial crisis. The relative decline of US unipolar dominance, combined with the economic rise of China and the strategic resurgence of Russia, has produced a system characterised by dispersed power and heightened uncertainty.³³ In such a context, no single actor possesses sufficient authority to impose comprehensive multilateral order, prompting states to seek alternative institutional mechanisms.

The erosion of hegemonic leadership has weakened the effectiveness of universal institutions, creating governance gaps in both security and economic domains.³⁴ Minilateralism thus emerges not simply from institutional dissatisfaction, but from deeper structural transformations in the global distribution of power. It represents an adaptive response to multipolarity, allowing states to hedge strategic risks, coordinate selectively, and preserve autonomy in an increasingly fragmented international system.

3.2 *Counterweight to China: Rise of Strategic Minilaterals*

The center of gravity of world power has shifted towards Asia following the financial crisis of 2008 and the rise of multiple power constellations across the region. On the one hand, Western countries were reeling from the global economic crisis, and countries such as China, Japan, and many Southeast Asian economies rebounded successfully from this downturn. China's rise was particularly important in this aspect as an increasingly assertive China triggered a typical great power response from the US, which is Washington's rebalancing in a geopolitically constructed region, the Indo-Pacific. Failing to police its interests across the vast expanse of the oceans, the US advanced the idea of revitalising its relationship with its "like-minded" partners and allies in the region to counterbalance Chinese influence and threat through a flurry of minilateral initiatives.

³² Bhubbinder Singh and Sarah Teo, Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific, 6–8.

³³ Joseph S Nye Jr., *The Future of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), 213–219; Charles A Kupchan, *No One's World: The West, the Rising Rest, and the Coming Global Turn* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 25–31.

³⁴ Amitav Acharya, *The End of American World Order* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 78–84; G. John Ikenberry, "The End of Liberal International Order?," *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (2018): 10–14.

Therefore, the concept of minilateralism has gained particular attention in recent years due to what Kei Koga describes as the rise of “strategic minilateralism” in the Indo-Pacific.³⁵ In the latter half of the 2010s, states in the region increasingly pursued structured, purpose-driven minilateral collaborations, largely as a response to China’s rapid rise and the inability of existing regional frameworks to effectively address emerging security challenges.³⁶ Traditional structures, such as the US-led hub-and-spoke alliances and ASEAN, were increasingly seen as inadequate for preserving stability and managing the strategic pressures posed by a more assertive China.³⁷ These strategic minilaterals have been formed in reaction to a highly complex security environment. The revival of the Quad in 2017, the creation of AUKUS, and the development of multiple trilateral dialogues such as US-Australia-Japan, India-Japan-Australia, India-Australia-Indonesia, and US-Japan-South Korea reflect this trend.³⁸ Their primary purpose extends beyond traditional security cooperation; they are designed to operate across multiple arenas, including military, economic, technological, and informational domains.³⁹ By coordinating, these groups aim to both counterbalance China’s growing influence and reinforce the principles of a rules-based order under the vision of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific.”⁴⁰

The incorporation of such initiatives within the broader Indo-Pacific Strategy can be explained by Beijing’s participation in major multilateral mechanisms across the Indo-Pacific region. China is part of the most multilateral initiatives already in place in the Indo-Pacific region, either as an observer or a member. Therefore, curbing Chinese influence through multilateral tools is problematic for Washington. Moreover, the Chinese economic rise was partially enabled by the very liberal order that the US itself consolidated in the aftermath of the end of the Cold War. The popular perception among US policymakers at the time was that robust Chinese economic growth, by plugging into the globalised economy, would bring Beijing closer to democratic and liberal norms. This has not only materialised, but Beijing has partially replaced the need for multilateral donor organisations in the Indo-Pacific region. Multilateral Bretton Woods organisations such as the World Bank and the IMF were gradually being replaced by Chinese initiatives such as the BRI and AIIB as developing countries in the region began to rely on China for infrastructure funding.

³⁵ Kei Koga, *Managing Great Power Politics: ASEAN, Institutional Strategy, and the South China Sea* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 181.

³⁶ Kei Koga, “The Concept of ‘Strategic Minilateralism’ in the Indo-Pacific,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 76, no. 4 (2022): 389–407.

³⁷ Michael J Green, *By More Than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific Since 1783* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 523–30.

³⁸ Rory Medcalf, *Indo-Pacific Empire: China, America and the Contest for the World’s Pivotal Region* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 167–73.

³⁹ C Raja Mohan, “Minilateralism: The New Geometry of Asian Multilateralism,” *Asia Policy* 26, no. 2 (2019): 5–12.

⁴⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy,” Government of Japan, 2019.

3.3 *Middle Powers Agency and Security vs. Economy Disconnect*

Middle powers occupy a unique position in the hierarchy of international politics. They lack the overwhelming power resources of great powers but nevertheless possess sufficient material, strategic, and normative influence to shape outcomes in their regions.⁴¹ In the Indo-Pacific, this influence is amplified by geography: middle powers sit at critical maritime chokepoints and trade routes, giving them leverage in the wider balance of power. By joining forces in minilateral frameworks, they can project collective influence that surpasses what they could achieve individually. The revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) in 2017 exemplifies this logic. Although none of its members (i.e. India, Japan, Australia, and the United States) alone can dictate Indo-Pacific security dynamics, together they form a credible grouping that signals shared commitment to a rules-based order and acts as a counterweight to China's assertiveness.⁴²

In the Indo-Pacific, the growing salience of minilateralism has created new opportunities for middle powers to exercise agency within a fluid and contested regional order. While great powers such as the US and China continue to dominate the strategic landscape, middle powers including India, Japan, Australia, Indonesia, and South Korea have increasingly sought to leverage their positions to influence outcomes that would otherwise be shaped primarily by superpower rivalry. Their active participation in minilateral forums reflects both an assertion of strategic relevance and a pragmatic response to structural constraints. Yet the agency of these states is circumscribed by a persistent disconnect between the imperatives of security alignment and the realities of economic interdependence.

However, this agency is exercised within constraints. The most significant is the structural disconnect between middle powers' security alignments and their economic dependencies. For many states in the region, China represents both the principal economic partner and the primary security concern. This duality produces strategic ambivalence. On the one hand, minilateral security groupings provide avenues to hedge against Chinese assertiveness. On the other hand, deep economic ties with China discourage full alignment against Beijing. Australia, for instance, has been a strong proponent of the Quad and AUKUS, yet its economy remains heavily reliant on Chinese markets, particularly in sectors such as iron ore and agriculture.⁴³ Similarly, India participates actively in minilateral initiatives that balance China, but

⁴¹ Andrew F Cooper, Richard A. Higgott, and Kim Richard Nossal, *Relocating Middle Powers: Australia and Canada in a Changing World Order* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1993), 19–25.

⁴² Medcalf, *Indo-Pacific Empire*, 167–73.

⁴³ James Laurenceson and Michael Zhou, *COVID-19 and the Australia–China Relationship's Perfect Storm* (Sydney: Australia–China Relations Institute, 2020).

remains deeply entwined with Chinese trade networks, even after clashes along their contested border.⁴⁴

This tension between security and economy manifests in the uneven development of minilateral agendas. While security cooperation such as joint exercises, intelligence sharing, and defence dialogues has advanced relatively smoothly, economic coordination remains far less robust. For example, Quad's initiatives on critical technologies, supply chain resilience, and infrastructure financing have yet to match the ambition or coherence of its security agenda.⁴⁵ This imbalance reflects the difficulty middle powers face in reconciling their desire for strategic autonomy with their economic dependencies. It also underscores the broader reality that security alignment does not automatically translate into economic diversification away from China. The agency of middle powers is also complicated by their participation in overlapping institutional architectures. Many Indo-Pacific states simultaneously engage in US-aligned minilaterals and China-centred groupings such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and BRICS. India's dual participation in the Quad and BRICS is emblematic of this balancing strategy. While New Delhi cooperates with Washington, Tokyo, and Canberra on maritime security, it also aligns with Beijing and Moscow in forums that challenge Western-dominated governance structures. Indonesia similarly pursues inclusive regionalism through ASEAN while also experimenting with trilaterals like India–Australia–Indonesia. This pattern illustrates that middle powers do not exclusively commit to one bloc; rather, they diversify their institutional alignments to hedge against uncertainty and maximise strategic flexibility.

Agency is further exercised through agenda-setting within minilaterals. Middle powers often shape the focus of cooperation to reflect their own priorities. Japan has championed infrastructure connectivity as part of the Quad's work, while India has emphasised supply chain resilience and technology cooperation. Australia has foregrounded maritime domain awareness, particularly in the South Pacific. These issue-specific contributions demonstrate that middle powers are not merely passive followers of great powers but active participants shaping the orientation of minilateralism.⁴⁶

At the same time, divergences in priorities can create frictions that undermine collective action. For example, India's cautious approach toward explicit anti-China

⁴⁴ Tanvi Madan, "India and the Quad: Between Utility and Commitment," Brookings Institution, March 2021.

⁴⁵ C Raja Mohan, "Minilateralism: The New Geometry of Asian Multilateralism," *Asia Policy* 26, no. 2 (2019): 5–12.

⁴⁶ Kai He, "Contested Multilateralism 2.0 and Asian Regional Order: A Reply to Rüländ," *The Pacific Review* 32, no. 6 (2019): 946–55.

rhetoric occasionally contrasts with the more forward-leaning positions of Australia and the US. The disconnect between security imperatives and economic dependencies is not unique to the Indo-Pacific, but it is particularly pronounced in this region due to the scale of China's economic footprint. Beijing has used its economic leverage to exploit divisions among middle powers, employing both coercive measures, such as trade restrictions against Australia and inducements, including infrastructure financing under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).⁴⁷ These tools complicate efforts to build cohesive minilateral responses, as states weigh the costs of antagonising China against the benefits of collective security alignment. In practice, this often leads to cautious signalling rather than binding commitments.

Nevertheless, the growing involvement of middle powers in minilateralism reflects a pragmatic recalibration rather than a contradiction. By participating in flexible, issue-based groupings, they create room for manoeuvre while avoiding the rigid obligations of formal alliances. This flexibility allows them to pursue security cooperation without severing economic ties. The trade-off is that such arrangements sometimes lack clarity and reliability, raising questions about credibility in a crisis. Still, for middle powers navigating the turbulent waters of US–China rivalry, minilateralism provides a mechanism to enhance agency, hedge risks, and preserve strategic autonomy. In sum, middle powers in the Indo-Pacific wield significant but qualified agency. Their growing participation in minilateral frameworks highlights both their desire to shape regional order and the structural constraints they face. The security–economy disconnect remains a central challenge: while middle powers increasingly align on security issues, their economic dependence on China tempers the scope and depth of these alignments. This tension is unlikely to disappear, but it underscores the role of minilateralism as a flexible instrument for balancing great power competition while preserving national autonomy.

4. Minilaterals and the Emerging Indo-Pacific Regional Architecture

The shift from multilateralism to minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific reflects both pragmatic adaptation and structural transformation. Minilaterals provide strategic flexibility, empower middle powers, and exploit the advantages of institutional informality to address pressing challenges. Yet they also reveal the security–economy disconnect confronting regional states and the potential for fragmentation in an already contested landscape. Rather than heralding the demise of multilateralism, the rise of minilaterals signals the emergence of a layered regional architecture characterised by overlapping, complementary, and sometimes contradictory institutions. The Indo-Pacific is unlikely to converge around a single

⁴⁷ Bates Gill, "China's Economic Statecraft in the Indo-Pacific," Asia Society Policy Institute, 2020.

organising principle; instead, its order will be shaped by the dynamic interplay between minilateral innovation, multilateral legitimacy, and great-power rivalry. The challenge for regional states lies in ensuring that minilaterals function as bridges rather than barriers within this evolving architecture. Minilateral alliances or ad hoc mechanisms are likely to remain here to stay due to their potential benefits for regional and global governance. These alliances can indeed offer several advantages, such as flexibility, innovation, compartmentalisation, and speed in addressing specific issues. To help these alliances succeed in achieving their stated aims, several key factors are crucial, such as: clear objectives and scope, commitment of Member States, inclusivity and representation, flexibility and adaptability, innovative approaches, mutual benefit and trust and alignment with multilateral efforts and so forth.⁴⁸

4.1 *Recalibration of Institutional Design*

For decades, ASEAN's convening power anchored the regional order through bodies such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit. These platforms embodied inclusivity and legitimacy but struggled with timeliness and decisiveness. The inability of ASEAN to forge a united stance on the South China Sea disputes illustrates how consensus-based decision-making can paralyse responses to acute security challenges. The limitations of such multilateral forums have created fertile ground for narrower, issue-specific platforms. Minilateralism thus reflects a pragmatic recalibration of institutional design. Instead of seeking to build a universal consensus, states now turn to small clusters that share overlapping strategic priorities. As commentators at the Lowy Institute highlight, this trend has endured because it offers the "magic number" effect—bringing together the smallest number of states needed to produce the largest possible impact on a specific problem.⁴⁹ In this sense, minilaterals are not simply fragments of larger multilateral bodies; they embody a new logic of cooperation tailored to the Indo-Pacific's fractured strategic environment.

4.2 *Institutional Informality as a Strength*

A defining trait of Indo-Pacific minilaterals is their preference for institutional informality. The QUAD, AUKUS, and the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative all function without rigid legal treaties or permanent bureaucracies. This design choice serves several purposes: it lowers entry costs for participants, avoids sovereignty-sensitive obligations, and permits rapid adaptation to shifting circumstances. The

⁴⁸ Interviewee 2 is a researcher from a think tank based in Washington, DC

⁴⁹ Rory Medcalf, "The Rise and Endurance of Minilaterals in the Indo-Pacific," Lowy Institute, July 22, 2024, <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpret/rise-endurance-minilaterals-indo-pacific> .

QUAD's trajectory demonstrates how informality can foster resilience. Initially criticised as little more than a "talk shop," it has gradually expanded its agenda—ranging from joint military exercises to public goods such as vaccine distribution and technology cooperation—without requiring treaty-based commitments.⁵⁰ The flexibility of such arrangements allows states to test the waters of cooperation, deepening engagement incrementally while avoiding the political risks associated with more formal institutions. Yet informality also creates ambiguities. Because minilaterals lack enforcement mechanisms, their credibility in crises can be called into question. Furthermore, exclusionary dynamics are difficult to dispel: China, for instance, perceives the QUAD and AUKUS as containment strategies, raising the risk that minilaterals may inadvertently entrench bloc politics rather than foster stability.⁵¹ The challenge, therefore, lies in balancing adaptability with assurance, ensuring that informality does not undermine long-term reliability.

The coherence of a "counter-China" narrative within Indo-Pacific minilateralism has increasingly weakened. India's renewed engagement with China through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, US–China selective cooperation on climate governance, and the symbolic multipolar rhetoric emerging from BRICS and SCO summits all indicate a shift toward strategic pluralism. These developments suggest that minilateralism cannot be reduced to a uniform balancing strategy. Instead, states adopt complex hedging behaviour, simultaneously balancing and engaging China in line with sectoral and domestic constraints.⁵²

4.3 *Small Littoral States and Regional Variation in the Indo-Pacific*

While the Indo-Pacific is often treated as a coherent strategic space, its internal diversity produces distinct patterns of small-state behaviour. In Southeast Asia, small littoral states such as Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines operate within a dense institutional environment dominated by ASEAN, which socialises states into norms of inclusivity, consensus-building, and strategic hedging. These states typically pursue what Acharya terms "institutional balancing", seeking to embed great-power competition within multilateral frameworks that preserve autonomy while avoiding overt alignment.⁵³ Consequently, Southeast Asian states

⁵⁰ C Raja Mohan, "India and Minilateral Cooperation: Chosen Partner or Hard Nut to Crack?" Asia Society Australia, April 2023, <https://asiasociety.org/australia/india-and-minilateral-cooperation-chosen-partner-or-hard-nut-crack>

⁵¹ Darshana Baruah, "How Will Minilateral Proliferation Shape Asia's Regional Architecture?," *The Diplomat*, July 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/07/how-will-minilateral-proliferation-shape-asias-regional-architecture/>

⁵² Evelyn Goh, "Great Powers and Hierarchical Order in Southeast Asia," *International Security* 32, no. 3 (2007): 113–157; Oliver Stuenkel, *The BRICS and the Future of Global Order* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), 87–92.

⁵³ Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia* (London: Routledge, 2014), 56–64.

exhibit a strong preference for inclusive multilateralism supplemented by selective minilateral engagements, such as issue-based cooperation on maritime security or disaster relief.⁵⁴

By contrast, South Asian small states such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, and the Maldives operate in a region characterised by weak institutionalisation and asymmetrical power relations, particularly vis-à-vis India. The absence of a robust regional security community comparable to ASEAN encourages these states to adopt more transactional and bilateral strategies, often engaging in minilateral or bilateral arrangements as instruments of strategic hedging rather than institutional embeddedness.⁵⁵ In this context, minilateralism functions less as a complement to multilateralism and more as a substitute mechanism for compensating institutional deficits.⁵⁶

This contrast suggests that minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific is regionally contingent: in Southeast Asia, it is layered onto existing multilateral norms, whereas in South Asia, it often emerges as a pragmatic response to the absence of effective multilateral governance. Small-state behaviour, therefore, cannot be understood through a uniform Indo-Pacific lens but must be analysed through subregional institutional ecologies.

4.4 *Sectoral Variation: Security versus Economic Minilateralism*

The logic of minilateralism also varies significantly across policy sectors, particularly between security and economic cooperation. In the security domain, minilateral arrangements are typically driven by threat perceptions, strategic alignment, and balance-of-power considerations. Coalitions such as the Quad or AUKUS reflect classical realist dynamics, where limited membership enables rapid coordination, intelligence sharing, and military interoperability in response to perceived strategic risks. Here, minilateralism tends to operate as a substitute for multilateralism, especially when broader institutions are constrained by consensus rules or divergent threat assessments.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Mely Caballero-Anthony, "Regional Security in Southeast Asia: Beyond the ASEAN Way," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 27, no. 2 (2005): 234–239.

⁵⁵ Evelyn Goh, "Meeting the China Challenge: The US in Southeast Asian Regional Security Strategies," *East-West Center Policy Studies* 16 (2005): 7–13; Kuik Cheng-Chwee, "The Essence of Hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's Response to a Rising China," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 30, no. 2 (2008): 159–164.

⁵⁶ Kishore C. Dash, *Regionalism in South Asia: Negotiating Cooperation, Institutional Structures* (London: Routledge, 2018), 39–46; S D Muni and Vivek Chadha, *Asian Strategic Review 2013: China's Military Power* (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2013), 211–215.

⁵⁷ Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 21–26; Glenn Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 7–13; Kei Koga, "The Concept of Strategic Minilateralism," *Global Affairs* 6, no. 4 (2020): 438–442; Rory Medcalf, *Indo-Pacific Empire* (Manchester:

In contrast, economic and connectivity-related minilateralism is shaped less by immediate security threats and more by functional efficiency, regulatory alignment, and supply-chain resilience. Initiatives such as infrastructure partnerships, digital economy frameworks, or trade facilitation groups tend to complement rather than replace existing multilateral institutions. These economic minilaterals are embedded within global regimes such as the WTO, IMF, or World Bank, and are primarily designed to enhance coordination and reduce transaction costs rather than manage strategic rivalry.⁵⁸

This sectoral divergence suggests that minilateralism does not constitute a singular institutional form but rather a family of governance mechanisms whose political significance varies across issue areas. Security minilaterals are more likely to reflect strategic competition and exclusionary logics, whereas economic minilaterals remain largely inclusive and functionalist in orientation.

4.5 *Erosion of ASEAN Centrality*

The proliferation of minilaterals raises questions about their relationship with ASEAN-led multilateralism. Optimists view these groupings as functional supplements: they address niche security and economic issues that ASEAN, bound by consensus and inclusivity, cannot resolve effectively. In this view, ASEAN retains its legitimacy as the region's convenor while minilaterals act as practical problem-solvers. Others caution that minilaterals threaten to erode ASEAN centrality. As Asia Society's analysis of India notes, key regional actors increasingly prioritise minilaterals over ASEAN forums when pursuing core strategic objectives.⁵⁹ If major decisions about defence technology, maritime security, or supply chain resilience are taken in exclusive settings, ASEAN risks becoming marginal to the evolving architecture. This tension is not merely institutional but normative: ASEAN embodies the ethos of inclusivity and dialogue, whereas minilaterals embody efficiency and strategic alignment. The Indo-Pacific's future architecture may hinge on whether these two logics can coexist symbiotically or drift into open competition.

Manchester University Press, 2020), 128–135.

⁵⁸ Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 67–74; John Ravenhill, *Global Political Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 31–38; Richard Baldwin, *The Great Convergence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 60–66; Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman, “Weaponized Interdependence,” *International Security* 44, no. 1 (2019): 44–50.

⁵⁹ Darshana Baruah, “How Will Minilateral Proliferation Shape Asia's Regional Architecture?” *The Diplomat*, July 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/07/how-will-minilateral-proliferation-shape-asias-regional-architecture/>

4.6 *Broader Implications for Regional Order*

The rise of minilateralism carries three major implications for the Indo-Pacific order. First, governance is becoming increasingly layered and networked. Rather than a single hierarchical structure, the region now hosts a mosaic of overlapping institutions, each serving distinct functions.⁶⁰ Second, middle powers have acquired enhanced agency. By leveraging small-group platforms, they are no longer mere rule-takers but active shapers of the regional agenda. Their ability to balance between economic and security imperatives, however, remains constrained by external shocks and asymmetrical interdependence. Third, the Indo-Pacific faces a heightened risk of fragmentation. Without mechanisms to bridge minilaterals and broader multilateral bodies, institutional competition could exacerbate great-power rivalry and weaken region-wide cohesion.

5. Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific has become the focal point of contemporary geopolitics, and within this evolving landscape, minilateralism has emerged as a critical feature of regional order. This research examined the drivers of minilateralism, its interactions with existing multilateral institutions, and its role in shaping the Indo-Pacific's strategic architecture. The findings, supported by both scholarly analysis and key informant interviews, suggest that minilateralism must be understood not as a replacement for multilateralism but as a flexible, adaptive supplement to it. The first major insight is that minilateralism has grown in response to systemic and structural shifts. The intensification of US–China rivalry, the weakening of trust in universal institutions, and the fragmentation of global supply chains have combined to make smaller, issue-based groupings more appealing. The revival of the Quad, the establishment of AUKUS, and the proliferation of trilaterals reflect this shift. As one interviewee noted, the appeal of minilateralism lies in its ability to bypass the slow pace of multilateral consensus-building, enabling targeted cooperation in a dynamic environment. However, the same informants stressed that these initiatives are sustainable only if they complement, rather than undermine, broader frameworks. A second key finding concerns the role of middle powers. Countries such as India, Japan, and Australia have found minilateralism to be a mechanism to amplify their influence and hedge against strategic uncertainty. By pooling resources and coordinating strategies, these states project greater agency than they could individually. Yet, their participation is constrained by the enduring security–economy disconnect: they rely on China economically even as they align

⁶⁰ See also Rahul Mishra and Tsun Hang Tey, “Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific: Between Formality and Informality,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 79, no. 3 (2025), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10357718.2025.2501968>

with partners to counterbalance its assertiveness. As highlighted in the interviews, this ambivalence is unlikely to disappear, but minilaterals provide a flexible tool for navigating it. Third, the research underscores the dual nature of institutional informality. Minilaterals thrive on the absence of rigid treaties and bureaucracies, which makes them adaptable and innovative. But this very flexibility also raises doubts about credibility and long-term commitment. Critics worry that minilaterals could erode ASEAN's centrality and entrench bloc politics. Several interviewees echoed this concern, emphasising that without deliberate efforts to link minilaterals to broader multilateral institutions, fragmentation could weaken regional cohesion. The challenge, therefore, is to ensure that minilaterals function as connectors, bridging gaps and delivering results rather than as divisive instruments. Finally, the Indo-Pacific is moving toward a layered institutional order rather than a single dominant architecture. Multilaterals and minilaterals will coexist, sometimes complementing and at other times competing with one another. This layered order allows states to pursue cooperation tailored to specific issues, but it also risks incoherence and rivalry. Policymakers must therefore prioritise coordination across levels of governance, ensuring that smaller coalitions reinforce rather than undermine larger frameworks. In sum, the future of Indo-Pacific governance will not be defined by a choice between multilateralism and minilateralism. Instead, it will rest on the careful weaving together of both approaches. Minilateralism is here to stay, driven by structural imperatives and pragmatic needs. Its legitimacy and effectiveness, however, depend on inclusivity, alignment with multilateral frameworks, and the delivery of tangible benefits. For regional states, the task is not to reject or embrace minilateralism wholesale, but to strategically integrate it into a broader architecture that upholds stability, inclusivity, and a rules-based order amid intensifying strategic competition.