

The Place of Minilateralism in Rebuilding the Indo-Pacific Cooperation

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For decades, the existing order in the Indo-Pacific relied on a two-tier system of regional cooperation, either bilateral relationships with the US's influence very much present, or large multilateral forums, mainly represented by ASEAN. Nevertheless, in the past five years, a new layer between the two aforementioned layers has arisen, which has been termed “minilateralism” (Biba, 2026, p. 1-2). Today, its efficiency in achieving its purposes, as well as its category, is still contested. Therefore, this article aims to examine the origins, meaning and current situation of minilateralism before assessing its effectiveness. Acknowledging the diverse and different existing minilateral alliances, for this article, the analysis centres on the three most relevant ones: the QUAD, AUKUS and the US, Japan and South Korea trilateral alliance.

Contextualization of Contextualisation

Analysing the theoretical work on minilateralism requires a distinction from the fairly standard scope of multilateral and bilateral alliances. The growing significance of the concept of minilateralism, first coined by

Miles Kahler in 1992 (Whitfield, 2025, p. 2), can mainly be linked to the inefficiency of multilateral groupings in confronting rapid crises and political gridlock caused by over-institutionalisation of minilateral alliances in the Indo-Pacific finds a *raison d'être* through its contrast with the aforementioned traditional alliances, with an emphasis on decentralised and pol decentralised mechanisms, and Moisés Naím's "magic number" formula. Naim's formula establishes the basis of minilateralism by using the smallest, optimal number of actors to tackle a policy issue and to target the highest impact (Whitfield, 2025, p. 2).

Nonetheless, with minilateral alliances such as the Quad and AUKUS in the Indo-Pacific, each serving a distinct function in the economic and security fields, and with multilateral and bilateral alliances already in place in the broader region, the significance of minilaterals for the Indo-Pacific remains enigmatic. On the one hand, these alliances can function as "patchworks" that complement the multilateral tradition and adhere to an "Asian informality" (Tow, 2015, p. 25). Within this context, minilaterals are reduced to an additive element in Indo-Pacific security, serving merely as catalysts for multilateral alliances. On the other hand, as minilateral alliances prioritise shared interests over shared values and embrace ideological diversity to inform pragmatic policy recommendations, they can serve as an alternative approach to many regional security issues that multilaterals fail to address effectively (Markovitz & Whiting, 2026).

Regarding how they have come to appear in the Indo-Pacific panorama, most of the existing minilateral alliances are the result of the institutionalisation of real relationships with larger groups that share key areas of interest, such as maritime defence and security (Roy, 2025). A perfect example of this process would be the 2023 US-Japan-South Korea trilateral alliance (Office of the Spokesperson, 2025). This new intermediate layer of cooperation, between the lower level of bilateralism and the higher level of multilateralism, raises the question of whether it constitutes a new category of alliances or merely a subset of existing multilateral ones (Biba, 2026, p. 2).

Even though these alliances are created through a process of institutionalisation, they work thanks to not being too highly institutionalised, too highly institutionalised, or pro-institutionalised, politically costly cost of entry, plus the lack of need for binding treaties, which allows states to cooperate without full commitment and preserving their sovereignty (Nicolini Gabriel, Mandelbaum & Carvalho, 2020, p.65). Additionally, they can be useful for security cooperation and economic stability, and can act as a balance of power (Tuckfield, 2025). However, this security cooperation for deterrence can lead to escalation by other regional alliances, with the main focus on China and its allies, posing the risk of regional polarisation and even a polarisation race (Roy, 2025).

Its current relevance

Why has this new type of alliance entered the geopolitical arena now? Although one of the central minilateral alliances in this paper has existed for more than a decade, as is the case with the QUAD (Nicolini Gabriel, Mandelbaum & Carvalho, 2020, p. 61), it is in recent years that these alliances have been reignited. One of the main reasons for this phenomenon is the increasing maritime and security threats posed by the Chinese state to the integrity of regional medium and smaller powers, resulting in a need for more flexible coordination (Biba, 2026, p. 2). Furthermore, even though multilateral forums exist in the region, such as ASEAN, this regional cooperation against threats also needs to be faster; thus, minilateral alliances are regarded as a more efficient and direct route to address the different issues affecting their members (Biba, 2026, p.8). Additionally, apart from the security threat China poses to the integrity and stability of the region, North Korea has also increasingly threatened regional security in the Indo-Pacific, prompting the 2023 Camp David agreements, marking a turning point in relations among the United States, Japan, and South Korea, helping to establish their current trilateral relationship as a mini-defense framework against what they view as a common enemy (Curtis, Wright & Kelley, 2024, p.3).

Because these alliances originated largely from shared defence concerns and a common threat perception, their main current area of work is the security arena. Although hard power and military considerations lie at their core, these alliances also engage in a range of activities addressing a broad spectrum of hybrid and non-traditional challenges to regional security. For instance, on one hand, there is the trilateral agreement of US-Japan-ROK working together for a real-time DPRK missile-tracking data-sharing or a sort of trilateral Maritime Security Framework (Roy, 2025); plus AUKUS's focus on developing new capabilities for military purposes, such as "artificial intelligence, cyber and quantum computer" (Tuckfield, 2025). While on the other hand there is the QUAD's functional cooperation with matters like connectivity and infrastructure, and intelligence-sharing (Nicolini Gabriel, Mandelbaum & Carvalho, 2020, p. 66); in addition to minilateral initiatives like "Chip 4" technology dialogue, in which US, Japan and South Korea are taking part with Taiwan, around an issue key not only to regional stability but also to the global semiconductor industry (Curtis, Wright & Kelley, 2024, p.7), and thus to global security.

Having contextualised and decontextualised lateralism's origins and present-day activity, the central question remains: do these alliances serve the purposes for which they were founded and, overall, the cooperation, growth and security of the region?

Assessing Multilateralism as an Ambiguous Concept

With minilateral alliances such as the Quad and AUKUS in the Indo-Pacific, each serving a distinct function in the economic and security-related

fields, and multilateral and bilateral alliances already in place in the broader region, situating minilaterals and their importance for the Indo-Pacific remains enigmatic. On the one hand, these alliances can function as “patchworks” that complement the multilateral tradition and adhere to an “Asian informality” (Tow, 2015, p. 25). Within this context, minilaterals are reduced to an additive element in Indo-Pacific security, serving merely as catalysts for multilateral alliances. On the other hand, as minilateral alliances prioritise shared interests over shared values and embrace ideological diversity to inform pragmatic policy recommendations, they can serve as an alternative approach to many regional security issues that multilaterals fail to address effectively (Markovitz & Whiting, 2026).

Strategic Advantages of Minilateralism

Minilateral alliances, by definition, are an exclusive and flexible component of Indo-Pacific regional security. Unlike multilateral alliances, which have rigid decision-making processes and limited policy output in short time frames, and bilateral alliances with insufficient procurement and defence capacity for the broader region, minilateral alliances compensate for these deficiencies in traditional alliances. Compared to the comprehensive approach of multilateralism, minilateralism benefits from adaptability and flexibility, making these alliances more “dispensable” since they don’t possess a bureaucratized structure, leading to a “natural selection” where only the minilateral alliances that are fit for purpose can continue to be a deciding factor in Indo-Pacific affairs (Envall, 2023). Additionally, this informality of minilateralism can help reinforce “hybrid” minilateralism, which involves issue-specific groupings within larger multilateral alliances such as ASEAN, ultimately revitalising this regenerative structure. In addition, minilateralism functions as a “force-multiplier”, where bilateral alliances in the Indo-Pacific remain restricted (Envall, 2023). Since bilateral alliances in the region can’t be extensive, minilaterals may increase ground coverage and the effectiveness of procurement and supply chains to further the agenda of a relatively small alliance.

Another unique advantage of minilateral alliances in the Indo-Pacific is the unanimous objective shared by the participant countries of various minilaterals: countering China’s initiatives in the region, but with different strategies for each alliance. While minilaterals such as the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD), AUKUS, and the Quad all promote a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific”, TSD and AUKUS focus on “material order-building” and military, and the Quad focuses on “normative order-building” (Biba, 2026, p.17). Thus, even though the strategic frameworks of these minilaterals are congruent, the former two alliances establish a power dynamic centred on resource output and industrial capacity. In contrast, the latter, the Quad, establishes a value-based order within the Indo-Pacific. These distinct agencies of the multilaterals allow for greater flexibility and

policy-driven actions, without having to restrain their activities to the doctrine of a multilateral alliance.

Challenges of Multilateralism in the Broader Regional Context

Despite certain advantages that come with a high level of multilateral presence in the Indo-Pacific, there are structural drawbacks as well. The main argument against the emerging minilaterals is the overlap of institutions in the region, which concerns the middle powers in the international context. As middle powers seek to self-govern and increase their influence, minilateral alliances are increasingly appealing compared to multilaterals, resulting in an overproduction of joint statements, meetings, and groupings without concrete, distinct outcomes (Kumar, 2026). In addition, joining minilateral alliances without specific policy goals can augment “forum-shopping”, with minilaterals becoming exclusive “clubs” for middle powers.

As minilaterals are more susceptible to domestic policies and temporary political turmoil (Anuar & Hussain, 2021, p. 5), and, in their approach, overlook value-based or ideological inconsistencies, they merely become an “extension” of multilateral alliances or are seen as “supplementary” actors. This temporality of multilaterals results in short-term priorities, making it considerably more difficult to address broader regional issues and to commit to shared visions. For example, as the United States has much greater concerns over the South China Sea than India, and as Sino-Indian land borders aren’t the regional priorities of Japan and Australia, the Quad struggles to become an effective deterrent that can concentrate on Indo-Pacific regional security as a whole (Zhang, 2022, p.47).

Lastly, minilaterals can only function as alliances that sustain Indo-Pacific security if they are seen as beneficial to the region rather than as an “anti-China” bloc. If minilaterals such as the Quad and AUKUS present themselves as anti-China groupings, they risk fragmenting the Indo-Pacific rather than consolidating and partnering with other actors, mainly ASEAN (Koga, 2022, pp. 33–34). Currently, minilaterals in the region frequently partner with the United States, thereby hindering potential fusion with other actors who regularly work with China, creating fragmentation that only increases as more minilaterals emerge.

Conclusion

In conclusion, numerous minilateral alliances in the Indo-Pacific region emerged to address the economic and security challenges that traditional alliances have yet to resolve. The Indo-Pacific region, a major hub for these minilateral ambitions, has seen progress thanks to the unique flexibility and informality of these alliances. Having originated from a common need of defence and specific interests, these alliances continue to emerge across the region’s geopolitical landscape, and their activities are also expanding beyond their original security focus. Despite their good intentions for

regional cooperation, they have also triggered potential fragmentation, as well as short-term projects that are insufficient to sustain a completely conflict-free region. Finally, it is still too early to thoroughly determine the quality of the impact of minilateral alliances in the Indo-Pacific. Yet, it can be concluded that they must be analysed through case analysis and specific timeframes to determine whether they can provide the conditions and usefulness for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) region, a Japanese regional vision first proposed by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (Abe, 2016).

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