

## The “minilateral moment” and the regional security architecture in the Indo-Pacific

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### Introduction

The rise of China and its adoption to a more assertive international posture since the arrival of President Xi Jinping in office in 2012 portends further shifts in the regional balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. This in turn impacts upon the prevailing regional security order, which is now increasingly contested between China and the US and its allies, with ASEAN finding itself in the invidious position of being potentially caught in the “middle” of two opposing superpower blocs.<sup>1</sup> Each of these parties has sought to advance its preferred “vision” of regional order, based upon national or collective interests, and this frequently finds expression through a variety of institutional instruments known as “security architecture”. In some ways this institutional architecture can be viewed as a “transmission belt” through which national and combined policies are executed with the inter-contestation among different organisations and ad hoc formations mediating the resultant or “prevailing” security order.

Understanding changes in the relative prominence and effectiveness of the institutions that comprise regional security architecture reveals a great deal about the nature of both national strategic policies and how the regional order is being transformed as such components of security architecture wax and wane. But here we are faced with a dilemma. Whilst most scholars and analysts are alert to the importance of studying and understanding security architecture, its immense complexity renders it a difficult concept to pin down and draw clear conclusions from. The second part of this dilemma is the widespread perception in the strategic community that regional security architecture in the Indo-Pacific as “underdeveloped” (or “ineffective”) in comparison to the institutions of the Euro-Atlantic security complex - even as the sheer number of all forms of institutionalism at the bilateral, multilateral and minilateral level continues to expand and evolve to the point of incomprehension.

The (re-)emergence of so-called “minilateral” institutions or ad hoc formations in particular has led to a surge in architectonic scale and complexity, continuing a process of expansion and transformation begun by the proliferation of “strategic partnerships” which preceded it.<sup>2</sup> Formations such as the Australia-UK-US AUKUS arrangement, the Australia-Japan-US Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD) and the Australia-Japan-US-India “Quad” have gained major prominence in current debates appertaining to the security architecture of the Indo-Pacific region. Thus, the current state of regional security architecture is experiencing a “minilateral moment”, with significant implications for its future trajectory.

Taking this into account and in order to reduce the complexity of the conceptual problem of understanding regional security architecture we need to adopt a reductionist approach that can capture the fundamental essence of this

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Wilkins, ‘Searching for a middle path: ASEAN and the “Indo Pacific”’, *JIIA Policy Brief*, Japan Institute for International Affairs, (11 Feb, 2020). [https://www.jiia-jic.jp/en/policybrief/pdf/PolicyBrief\\_Wilkins\\_200211.pdf](https://www.jiia-jic.jp/en/policybrief/pdf/PolicyBrief_Wilkins_200211.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Thomas S. Wilkins, ‘Russo-Chinese strategic partnership: a new form of security cooperation?’, *Contemporary Security Policy* vol. 29, no. 2 (2008), pp. 358-383.

constellation of regional institutions and relationships in a coherent and digestible format. Such an approach also needs to address the attendant issue of how the various elements of regional security architecture can be meaningfully divided to facilitate comprehension of the relationship between them. As mentioned, the explicit incorporation of both minilateral arrangements and strategic partnerships neither of which were explicitly factored into earlier attempts to systematise our understanding of regional architecture, is a necessary intervention. This Commentary represents a “first-cut” effort to provide a structured exposition of how regional security architecture can be understood in a conceptual and holistic format.

## Security architecture

Before proceeding to lay out a three-layered model for capturing the primary mechanisms of regional “security architecture” in the Indo-Pacific it is necessary to address what we understand by this term. Reflecting a lack of definitional or terminological consensus among the scholarly, analyst and political communities, different descriptors are often employed to effectively describe the same thing, sometimes interchangeably. These typically include “regional architecture”,<sup>3</sup> “institutional architecture”<sup>4</sup> or “organizational architecture”.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes these are (problematically) conflated with the notion of “regional (security) order” - which is a different concept - as indicated in the introduction, though the two are related (also see below).<sup>6</sup>

“Security architecture” has been defined by ANU academics Tow and Taylor as: ‘an overarching, coherent and comprehensive security structure for a geographically-defined area, which facilitates the resolution of that region’s policy concerns and achieves its security object’.<sup>7</sup> Though, various other variations on this formula are permissible, this definition is a satisfactory starting point for this study. We should note however, that different actors within the “region” are likely to have divergent, even opposing, views on what these “security concerns” are, how to “resolve” them, and what the ultimate “security object” is, or should, be. This accounts for the following diversity of institutions within the region, which accord with the national and collective preferences of the states involved. The issues raised here will be explored further below.

We use the metaphorical expression “architecture” when we are referring to the sum of formal/informal institutional arrangements, whatever their size and scope – these are the “building blocks” of the resultant holistic “architecture”. The actors, be they individual states, groups of states or pan-regional forums, are the “architects” in the building-process. Of course, these architects aim not only at successfully creating institutions as building-blocks of the regional landscape, but the nationally or collectively driven outcome of entrenching a “regional security order” to their liking that safeguards or furthers their national or combined interests and values. Architecture is therefore a concrete representation – a “means” to achieve a desired “end”, however abstract that might be. A good example that illustrates this is the adoption of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision by Quad members, whose primary aim is to uphold a Rules-Based Order. The relationship between architecture and order is therefore syncretic. As Yeo identifies, the components of regional security architecture represent ‘the overarching institutional framework(s) that provide actors with governance structures

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Yeo, *Asia’s Regional Architecture: Alliances and Institutions in The Pacific Century*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Vinod K., Aggarwal, and Min G. Koo, ‘Asia’s New Institutional Architecture’, In Vinold Aggarwal and Min G. Koo (eds.) *Asia’s New Institutional Architecture: Evolving Structures for Managing Trade, Financial, and Security Relations*, (NY: Springer: 2007), pp. 1-34.

<sup>5</sup> Stephan Haggard, ‘The organizational architecture of the Asia-Pacific: insights from the new institutionalism.’ *Regional Economic Integration Working Papers*, No. 71, (2011).

<sup>6</sup> Muthiah Alagappa, (ed). *Asian Security Order: Instrumental and Normative Features*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> William T. Tow, and Brendan Taylor, ‘What is Asian security architecture?’. *Review of International Studies*, vol. 36, no. 1 (2010), p. 96.

that help shape order'.<sup>8</sup> This crucial relationship is one that requires far greater study than has occurred to date.

Three other points are pertinent here as a necessary precursor to the following model itself.

First, the scope of “security architecture” is instinctively on organisations or other arrangements that focus on *security provision*, functionally distinguishing such instruments from what is sometimes referred to as “*economic architecture*” – trade or currency swaps agreements, for example. This is still admissible, but it should be noted that in today’s strategic environment, many institutions have a multi-faceted agenda comprising of security, economic, and other aspects. Moreover, with the heightened recognition of “economic security” itself as a priority area for collaborative endeavours, the demarcation between *distinct* economic and security cooperation is collapsing, rendering the distinction less relevant for our purposes.<sup>9</sup> It is therefore safe to say that when we speak of security architecture, we prioritise those institutions that have “traditional” security (including economic security) as a predominant focus, but way well incorporate other ostensibly “non-security” or “non-traditional security” activities within their remit (for example, pandemic response or climate change). We are not primarily interested in institutions that are ostensibly or solely economic focused, such as Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement towards Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation mechanism (LMC), the Partnership for the Blue Pacific (PBP) or the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI) for example, though they may feature on the margins of the debate as the “economic security nexus” has tightened, and as collective arrangements find themselves having to address economic aspects of strategic competition.<sup>10</sup>

Second, an important qualitative determinant in distinguishing different institutions within the overall picture of regional security architecture is *alignment*.<sup>11</sup> The functional characterisation of different institutions – multilateral, bilateral and unilateral – is essentially divided between those that represent tangible alignment of state interests as reflected in concrete security commitments, and those that are purely procedural and entail participation only. Compare for example NATO as an alignment of states and the Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) as a (currently moribund) dialogue forum. In other words, some, but not all, elements of security architecture are alignments with a high degree of trust, and commonality of strategic purpose based on shared interests and values. At the strongest level of commitment these include formal military alliances, with strategic partnerships and multilaterals reflecting differing degrees of alignment. Alignments are inherently of a *competitive* and *exclusive* disposition, thus ruling out much of the regional multilateral architecture. More inclusive, pan-regional institutional dialogue fora are emphatically *not* alignments of states like the preceding examples, since they are primarily dialogic and do not represent a concrete manifestation of a shared strategic purpose, other than consultation and interaction on broad principles of security concern, around a putative accord on the desire for regional stability. Moreover, alignments manifest themselves as “competing geometries” *within* pan-regional institutions, since some states and groups within these arenas will take incompatible or even adversarial stances.<sup>12</sup>

And third, it needs to be recognised that security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region is in a *constant state of flux* as new and existing arrangements jostle for relevance and influence within a crowded space. Specific institutions wax

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Yeo, *Asia’s Regional Architecture*, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Wilkins, ‘Middle power hedging in the era of security/economic disconnect: Australia, Japan, and the ‘Special Strategic Partnership’’. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*. Vol. 23, no. 1 (2023), pp. 93-127.

<sup>10</sup> John, T Pempel, ‘Introduction: The economic–security nexus in Northeast Asia’. In *The Economy-Security Nexus in Northeast Asia*, (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 17-38.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas S. Wilkins, ‘Alignment’, not ‘alliance’–the shifting paradigm of international security cooperation: toward a conceptual taxonomy of alignment. *Review of International Studies*, vol. 38, no. 1, (2012), pp. 53-76.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Wilkins, ‘Searching for a middle path: ASEAN and the “Indo Pacific”’, *JIIA Policy Brief*, Japan Institute for International Affairs, (11 Feb, 2020). [https://www.jiia-jic.jp/en/policybrief/pdf/PolicyBrief\\_Wilkins\\_200211.pdf](https://www.jiia-jic.jp/en/policybrief/pdf/PolicyBrief_Wilkins_200211.pdf)

and wane in importance, old ones are effectively abandoned, and new ones are created. This will naturally affect the regional picture as a whole. Security analysts, scholars and policy-makers have sought to characterise the “nature” of regional security architecture in the Indo-Pacific through a number of (often metaphorical) appellations. The overall picture has been described *inter alia* as a “complex patchwork”,<sup>13</sup> and “latticework”<sup>14</sup> or characterised by “wheels and webs”,<sup>15</sup> and “competitive strategic geometries”<sup>16</sup>. These have all served as shorthand descriptors that allow observers to grasp what constitutes a phenomenon of extraordinary complexity, encompassing as it does a myriad of multilateral, bilateral and minilateral institutions as well as other ad hoc regimes. While such metaphors are evocative of the complex dynamics of regional security architecture as it evolves, they only go so far in helping us gain an analytical purchase on its structural characteristics, and in any case may need revising to account for the renewed prominence of minilateralism.

### Security architecture: 3 “layers”

To break down this complexity it is useful refocus away from holistic impressions to look at the constituent categories of the regional security architecture, rather than seek to capture a vast range of institutions under one overly-elaborate umbrella concept. This can be accomplished by reducing and grouping them into three interlocking “layers” of security architecture – multilateralism, bilateralism, and minilateralism.<sup>17</sup> Other descriptions such as “strata”<sup>18</sup> or “tiers”<sup>19</sup> have been applied before and are equally admissible. Making (relatively) firm distinctions is crucial, as a failure to do so can create misperceptions and compound misunderstandings at a number of junctures. The many (valid) caveats which could be applied, should not inhibit us from attempting to impose a relatively reductionist schemata onto the phenomenon to create a working model. Accordingly, for presentational purposes, it is preferable to treat minilateralism *last* in this exercise, though I propose that it actually occupies the space *in-between* multilateralism and bilaterals.

Occasionally an alternative term – “plurilateralism” is applied to describe sub-regionally self-contained or otherwise exclusive forms of multilateralism (e.g. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation), but the term is not in wide currency, and should be discarded for sake of clarity.

### 1. Multilateralism

The first component, or “layer”, of security architecture comprises of *multilateralism*. This has been defined by Keohane as ‘the practice of coordinating national policies in groups of three or more states, through ad hoc arrangements or by means of institutions.’<sup>20</sup> Most multilateral forms of cooperation have been progressively institutionalised or have become codified as formal organisations. As Yeo reminds us, these institutions are ‘a durable set of rules and practices that shape

<sup>13</sup> Victor D. Cha, ‘Complex patchworks: US alliances as part of Asia’s regional architecture’. *Asia Policy*, no. 11, (2011), pp. 27-50.

<sup>14</sup> T.J. Pempel, ‘Alliances and the future Asia-Pacific order.’ *Global Asia* vol. 11, no. 1 (2016), pp. 24-27.

<sup>15</sup> Denis C. Blair and Hanley Jr, J.T. ‘From wheels to webs: Reconstructing Asia-pacific security arrangements.’ *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 24, no. 1, (2001), pp. 5-17.

<sup>16</sup> William T. Tow, ‘Asia’s Competitive “Strategic Geometries”: The Australian Perspective’. *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs*, vol. 30, no. 1, (2008), pp. 29-51.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Wilkins, ‘Continued evolutions in the regional architecture of the Asia/Indo-Pacific: A “minilateral” turn?’, *PacNet Commentary*, The Pacific Forum, (27 Aug, 2022).

<sup>18</sup> Akiko Fukushima, ‘ASEAN as a mover of Asian regionalism.’ In *ASEAN Matters! Reflecting on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations*, (NY: World Scientific, 2011), pp. 221-228.

<sup>19</sup> Ryo Sahashi, ‘Security arrangements in the Asia-Pacific: a three-tier approach,’ in *Bilateral Perspectives on Regional Security*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). pp. 214-240.

<sup>20</sup> Robert O. Keohane, ‘Multilateralism: An Agenda for Research’, *International Journal*, Vol. XIV, No. 4. (Autumn 1990), p. 732.

expectations, interests, and behavior'.<sup>21</sup>

Multilateral organisations run the whole gamut between collective defense alliances, such as SEATO (1955-1977), through self-styled “security communities” such as ASEAN, to pan-regional security/economic dialogue forums. The latter essentially boils down to “ASEAN-plus” institutions such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-plus). The ASEAN-plus suite of multilateral institutions is defined by (relatively) pan-regional inclusion, non-binding commitments, and adherence to the “ASEAN Way”.

Other non-ASEAN multilateral organisations of note include: The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), all of which are important sub-regional, rather than fully-inclusive pan-regional, institutions. Some other large institutions fit awkwardly within our remit, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which are largely geo-economic/geopolitical in remit, as well as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) which focuses on economic/development issues. Whether Track 1.5 security symposia such as the Institute for International Strategic Studies (IISS) Shangri-La Dialogue and Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) could be considered as part of the “architecture” is also a difficult question.

These institutions are valuable for confidence-building interaction by regional parties but seldom achieve consensus on security issues given the adversarial nature of states and groups of states within their membership ambit. Because of their very inclusivity, they often have to settle for consensus that represents the “lowest common denominator” among parties, often leaving many states dissatisfied. Critics have insistently pointed to the fact that ASEAN-Plus has not successfully resolved or even adequately addressed any of the traditional security issues and regional flashpoints facing the region.<sup>22</sup> As per Tow and Taylor above, it has not achieved, nor appears likely to achieve in the near-future, “the resolution of that region’s policy concerns and...its security object”, at least as far as many states (such as Japan, the US and Australia) are concerned - at least, not in isolation. Moreover, as strategic competition and superpower rivalry accelerates, such multilateral venues have begun to serve as an “arena” in which these dynamics play out. This potentially stifles their effectiveness.

It also ensures that many states, including some ASEAN members themselves, look to bilateral alliances or partnerships or new minilateral configurations as important security provision mechanisms. The alleged ineffectiveness of the region’s multilateral forums also accounts for the persistence of the US hub-and-spoke alliance system and the spawning of minilaterals that are more targeted at “outputs” rather than “process”. For South East Asia, these include, for example, inter alia, Thai and Filipino bilateral defence alliances with the US, the US-Singapore Strategic Partnership, and the Singapore-Malaysia-Australia-New Zealand-UK Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA).

Yet, multilateral institutions, not least ASEAN itself, can claim to serve as powerful mechanisms in advancing “regionalism” or regional integration, whilst bilateral alliances for example can be viewed as obstructions. Indeed, Yeo argues that ‘Multilateralism is often treated as an ideal outcome or end product of regionalism’.<sup>23</sup> From regionalism stem questions of “community-building” - though ASEAN has had some success on this score among its own membership, its attempt to export the “ASEAN way” to the wider region through ASEAN-plus institutions has not fared as well. Indeed, pan-regional community-building efforts face tremendous obstacles to their attainment as former Australian Prime Minister

<sup>21</sup> Andrew Yeo, *Asia’s Regional Architecture*, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> David M. Jones and Michael L. Smith, ‘Making process, not progress: ASEAN and the evolving East Asian regional order’. *International Security*, vol. 32, no. 1, (2007), pp. 148-184.

<sup>23</sup> Andrew Yeo, *Asia’s Regional Architecture*, p. 7.

Kevin Rudd discovered when his ill-fated “Asia-Pacific community” initiative fell flat in 2009. No one has been bold enough to speak of an “Indo-Pacific community” to date. Yet again, due to their inclusion of adversarial states (in alignment), regionalism itself has become a contested process. While some parties, notably China seek to emphasise selected institutions that exclude the US, such as the ARF, Japan and Australia, for example prioritise inclusive institutions such as the EAS above all. These are competing dynamics between “open” (inclusive) and “closed” (exclusive) regionalism.

## 2. Bilateralism

The second “layer” consists of *bilateral security cooperation* – chiefly individual US alliances with Asian allies, but also an increasing network of bilateral strategic partnerships among like-minded countries. It is at this point we (in most cases) cross the threshold of *alignment*, where states make firmer commitments on cooperation, especially in the military/defence sphere, up to the point of binding military defence agreements, which are absent among the multilateral institutions described above. This distinction between multilateral dialogue forums or other cooperative multilateral institutions must be stressed and the purpose and content of alignments and multilateral organisations on no account qualitatively conflated.

*The US alliance system* is a series of treaty agreements with Indo-Pacific allies created in the early years of the Cold War and has since become known as the “hub-and-spokes” system, in which a high degree of alignment is in evidence.<sup>24</sup> Australia (originally in the form of ANZUS with New Zealand), Japan, South Korea, the Philippines and Thailand, form the allied “spokes” revolving *separately* around the US “hub”. The original treaty system is still legally in place providing American defence guarantees to its recipients, but the *de facto* nature of American alliances in the Indo-Pacific has evolved substantially over time to reflect changes in the internal and external dispositions of the allies.

This metamorphosis can be characterised as follows.<sup>25</sup> Some allies, such as Australia and Japan, have assiduously worked to deepen and expand their bilateral alliance relations with the US, whilst Thailand and New Zealand have drifted toward the periphery of the alliance orbit in practical terms. The alliance proximity of South Korea and the Philippines has fluctuated, often in respect to the internal politics of the day. Added to this reshuffling of the original “hub-and-spokes” in terms of proximity to Washington is the shift towards a “networked (alliance) architecture”. As advertised in the US Indo-Pacific Strategy document, this entails the forging of bilateral Strategic Partnerships with key states in the region, encouraging the same between “spoke” allies, and the US participation in minilaterals themselves. The current state of the US alliance system might be dubbed a “post-hub-and spokes” or “redux”.

Contrary to the formal military treaty alliances just described, *strategic partnerships* are a relatively novel but widely proliferating phenomenon in the region’s architecture. These are forms of security cooperation which have brought states with shared values and interests into alignment in a non-alliance format to practically address common security concerns.<sup>26</sup> In the absence of a formal alliance treaty, these partnerships are designed to pool national resources and capabilities to achieve diplomatic, security, defence, military and economic outcomes. For Australia, like many states in the region, these have become an important mechanism to advance national interests through the creation of new capabilities. Australia has wide portfolio of regional strategic partnerships of various descriptions, including, *inter alia*, with India, South Korea, Singapore, Indonesia, and most prominently: Japan. As mentioned, the US has likewise forged strategic partnerships with countries outside the alliance fold, such as India, Indonesia, and Singapore. Japan is a major

<sup>24</sup> Victor D. Cha, *Powerplay: The Origins of The American Alliance System in Asia*, (Princeton University Press, 2016).

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Wilkins, ‘A hub-and-spokes “plus” model of us alliances in the Indo-Pacific: Towards a new “networked” design’, *Asian Affairs*, (2022) pp. 1-24.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Wilkins, *Security in Asia-Pacific: The Dynamics of Alignment*, (Boulder, CO: Lynn Rienner Pres, 2019), Chapter 6.



practitioner of strategic partnering also, making them a key element of its security strategy.<sup>27</sup> With Australia at the forefront, Japan has also aligned with India, the Philippines and Singapore, among others.

As noted, the bilateral strategic partnership mechanism is now a widespread and fixed feature of security architecture, having emerged in the mid-1990s with the declaration of Strategic Partnership between Russia and China – a relationship they now describe as a “no limits partnership”. Strategic partnerships have emerged as an important supplementary to both multilateral forums and alliance relations and are often found operating within minilaterals. Some strategic partnerships – such as Australia-Japan and US-India are far more developed than others (sometimes attracting the sobriquet of a “quasi-alliance”), and the moniker of “Strategic Partnership” requires evidence that the relationship is materially substantiated, as some nominal partnerships lack any substance to lend the mechanism credence.

### 3. Minilateralism

Though *minilateralism* is presented last for the purpose of conceptual coherency and due to its relative novelty, it should be conceived of as occupying the space in-between multilateralism and bilateralism, since minilaterals are smaller-sized than multilaterals, but obviously greater than bilaterals. It could also be suggested that minilaterals operate at the interface between multilateralism and bilateralism, and clearly their membership overlaps with institutions in each of the former two layers. Since the scholarship on conceptualising minilateralism is still in a nascent phase I concentrate here on outlining their typical characteristics in order to provide general operating assumptions. There are both quantitative and qualitative aspects to minilaterals as a study edited by Singh and Teo has pointed out.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, Tow has additionally sought to characterise them in their ‘elite’, ‘regional’, ‘functional’ ‘informal’ and ‘minilateral security’ guises.<sup>29</sup> It is the last of which concern us specifically in this Commentary, but the boundaries between these characterisations are not always clear-cut.

While scholars and analysts are currently working to establish firm definitions and properties of minilaterals – an endeavour this Commentary also seeks to further – a number of observations can be made as to their purpose and nature.

A provisional definition of minilateralism is: *a small-group of states – perhaps 3-6<sup>30</sup> – engaged in a form of ad hoc or institutionalised cooperation towards a common security purpose or purposes.*

There is no fixed or optimum membership size for minilaterals – they could be trilateral, quadrilateral, or greater – but at some undefined point, once large enough, say 10 members (like ASEAN), they would probably qualify as constituting a “multilateral” formation. At present, such small-group minilaterals retain exclusivity, at least in terms of their “core” membership. Yet, this exclusivity, does not appear to preclude third party state interacting with the core minilateral membership on select issues, as affiliates, as the “QUAD-plus” formula has shown.

Compared with multilateralism, Tow argues that ‘Minilateralism is, conversely, a narrower and usually informal initiative intended to address a specific threat, contingency or security issue with fewer states (usually three or four) sharing the same interest for resolving it within a finite period of time.’<sup>31</sup> In this sense they could be likened to “coalitions of the willing” bringing together a cross-section of interested parties, some or all of which will also be participants in larger multilateral fora (Layer 1) or engaged in bilateral alliances or partnerships (Layer 2).

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Wilkins, ‘Japan’s Security Strategy’, *Special Report*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 22 July 2022.

<sup>28</sup> Bhubhindar Singh, and Sarah Teo (eds), *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific: The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism, and ASEAN*. (London: Routledge, 2020).

<sup>29</sup> William T. Tow, ‘Minilateralism and US security policy in the Indo-Pacific: The legacy, viability and deficiencies of a new security approach’, in *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific*, p. 15.

<sup>30</sup> This is the author’s preference, Singh and Teo indicate 3-9 members.

<sup>31</sup> William T. Tow, ‘Minilateral security’s relevance to US strategy in the Indo-Pacific: Challenges and prospects’, in Kai He (ed), *Contested Multilateralism 2.0 and Asian Security Dynamics*, (London: Routledge, 2020), p. 235.

The ability to coordinate in a smaller group format than multilaterals is a perceived advantage. Multilateral organisations contain integral impediments to achieving consensus and engaging in practical security cooperation due to their large, and possibly adversarial, membership. An implicit driver in the growth of minilateral institutions has been accumulating dissatisfaction with multilateral forums to make progress in addressing security challenges effectively, thus causing states to focus on minilateral and bilateral arrangements to rectify this deficiency. When certain states find themselves in agreement over a problem and the necessary course of action, they elect to escape such fetters and operate minilaterally. In this respect they can be thought of as “operationalising multilateralism” to “get things done” in a more manageable format.<sup>32</sup> Acting in “coalition” to pool capabilities and share burdens is a further attraction. Other analysts have gone as far to suggest that minilaterals, such as the Quad, are picking up the slack left behind by ASEAN multilateralism in “balancing” China.<sup>33</sup>

Another thing the putatively distinguishes minilaterals from multilaterals and permits them to do this, is the condition of *alignment* between the member states. States do not typically form focussed minilaterals – at least in the security sense – with rivals or adversaries. Also, for economics-focussed minilaterals this may not prove the case (e.g. The Japan-China-South Korea Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat). Some meaningful degree of alignment on shared values and interests is usually a sine qua non for effectuating minilateral security cooperation, and membership is exclusive to those that adhere to these. In some examples, such as the Australia-UK-US AUKUS and the Australia-Japan-US Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD), an incipient deterrence function can also be identified. In terms of strategic commitment this places them on a level similar to some of the more developed strategic partnerships, but they fall short of alliances, since the ultimate commitment to mutual military assistance is absent. This condition therefore speaks to a degree of “hybridity”, with some alliance-like (and strategic partnership-like) characteristics signalling alignment, but retaining some aspects of multilateral cooperation, albeit in a smaller format. Comparison assists us in distinction. While sometimes labelled “dialogues” (which sounds less potentially threatening?) they are on a qualitatively different scale than regional dialogue forums such as the EAS or ARF.

Many commentators have emphasised the temporary or ad hoc nature of minilateral configurations since they lack the full panoply of organisational structuring (e.g. permanent secretariats), and seen this as an indicator of their transient nature. However, any substantial and successful case of minilateralism will likely formalise and institutionalise its cooperation, for example, by joint declarations, the publication of a common agenda, and the development of bureaucratic infrastructure, such joint working groups. The focus on overt organisational institutionalism may miss the point that many examples of minilateralism operate at the interstices of already highly well-developed and institutionalised relationships such as alliances, or other forms of cooperative infrastructure, and which pre-existing mechanisms can be used to leverage minilateralism rather than demand a new set of mechanisms.

Since minilaterals are perceived by their members as more flexible and less-binding instruments than alliances – a feature they share with strategic partnerships – members are at liberty to regulate their level of commitment and contribution on any aspect of cooperation in accord with national preferences and capacities (this also applies to multilaterals). In the event that engaging in minilateral cooperation compromises a core national interest or is otherwise seen as not worthwhile in light of expected benefits, a state may exit the relationship, or if the feeling is mutual, the institution may dissolve, or become moribund. Alternatively, if minilateral cooperation delivers on its promise for its member states, it is likely, like other institutions, to either expand or deepen its collaboration (leading to speculation that

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<sup>32</sup> Interview with Washington-based security analyst.

<sup>33</sup> Track 2 discussion, United States Studies Centre. [Chatham House Rules]



minilaterals may evolve into alliances), and/or invite new members. Their relative success or failure might also hinge upon the degree to which they gain acceptance and legitimacy within the region. For example, Beijing’s concerted attempt to stymie AUKUS and turn ASEAN states against the grouping, is a good example of the headwinds that other bespoke minilaterals face.

## Conclusions

Regional security architecture in the Indo-Pacific has become almost unfathomably complex over the past two decades. There are several factors that account for this. First, the regional scope of security architecture has expanded from the original “Asia-Pacific” remit – which was complex enough already – to the broader “Indo-Pacific” region. This has led to the incorporation of a multitude of additional actors and institutions. Second, where once we were able to confidently distinguish between *multilateral* (mainly ASEAN institutions) and *bilateral* (mainly the US alliance system) layers, we now have to incorporate a third layer – *minilateralism*. Likewise, both the multilateral and bilateral layers have expanded. In the first instance by the creation of new multilateral institutions driven by Beijing, for example the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and Belt and Road Initiative, and in the second by the emergence of bilateral security arrangements – strategic partnerships – between a range of regional states. All of these components exist within a state of dynamic tension due to their evolution and “competitive geometries” between the states that populate the various instruments of architecture in each of the layers. The prevalence of minilaterals will contribute further to this dynamic tension within the regional security architecture as new formations emerge or collapse and rivalrous states seek to enhance their influence by means of such mechanisms to achieve a favourable balance of power or advance their own preferred strategic narratives.

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