



Background Memo

The Asia-Pacific's New Minilateralism¹

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Alliance structures in the world's strategic regions are changing, shifting toward “minilateralism”—small international groups assembled to achieve limited but significant strategic objectives, as opposed to broader, larger, or more formal bilateral or multilateral alliances or institutions. This is especially evident in the Asia-Pacific.

This shift is happening for a number of reasons. Some nations fear that the security architecture and guarantees that the United States created following the Second World War are fracturing. Changing demography, economic output, and military expenditure signal a shift in the relative power of Western states. China and Russia are offering alternative models of domestic and, perhaps, international order. In response, Washington in particular is seeking to construct more flexible and adaptive forms of partnerships that will serve as strategic assets against Beijing. New regional alignments and partnerships are emerging. As power distributions and alliance models change, the status quo in each region is rebalancing.

Two institutional forms have traditionally dominated the Asia-Pacific's security system. The first consists of formal bilateral alliances, particularly the hub and spoke system of nations linked to the United States. The second consists of multilateral security bodies, often but not always linked to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Outside of the ASEAN-linked system, a patchwork of other multilateral bodies exists, including the Chinese-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

These two traditional forms are now being augmented by a proliferation of new minilateral partnerships. The quadrilateral security dialogue between the United States, Australia, India, and Japan, widely known as the Quad, has been the most prominent. The more recent trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, also known as AUKUS, has been another high-profile addition since its formation in September 2021.

The Quad and AUKUS belong to a broader trend involving smaller groupings, some with members that are already part of the Quad or other larger bodies. For example, the long-standing United States-Australia-Japan trilateral security dialogue, which began at the senior official level in 2002, brings together three Quad members. More recently, the Australia-India-Japan trilateral dialogue, formed in 2015, is another important intra-Quad grouping. The United States, India, and Japan have also met for trilateral summit meetings since 2018. Other minilateral partnerships in Asia have developed to draw together small numbers of nations in the region and beyond.

Three strategic trends are driving the Asia-Pacific's new minilateralism and are likely to continue to do so. The first is the rise of China and its resulting competition with the United States, which also involves middle powers such as India and Japan. The second is the weakness of existing regional multilateral security arrangements, which have been unable to resolve many pressing security challenges, such as maritime claims in the South China Sea, leaving a gap that new minilateral arrangements seek to fill. The third is the growing interest in Asian security shown by a range of extra-regional powers, most notably from European nations that are anxious about China's rise and are seeking a greater economic role in Asia. Many of these nations have not played a significant role in the Asia-Pacific in recent decades, but are now seeking partnerships that could help them do so.

China has made clear its opposition to minilateralism in the Asia-Pacific. Not long after the release of the Quad's first joint statement in March 2021, Chinese President Xi Jinping was quoted warning against moves that "stir up ideological confrontation." Since then, many official Chinese statements have condemned the Quad and other similar groupings as what Beijing tends to describe as "small circles." Although Chinese foreign policy may largely abjure formal alliance relationships, China has developed a network of bilateral economic and strategic partnerships since the early 2000s, and it also maintains some larger groupings such as the SCO.

Southeast Asia has a more mixed view of the new minilateralism. A number of Southeast Asian policymakers in private express support for the Quad and AUKUS, although states including Malaysia and Indonesia expressed reservations about AUKUS following its launch. Some countries are concerned that new minilateral groupings will undermine "ASEAN centrality," preferring that the business of regional security be channelled through ASEAN-linked multilateral institutions rather than increasingly taking place in forums such as the Quad, of which ASEAN is not a member.

The rise of minilateralism further complicates Asia's already fragmented security environment. For example, AUKUS, which includes two Quad members, creates overlapping relationships that require some degree of coordination. France's hostile reaction to AUKUS also demonstrated that the creation of a new minilateral body could, if handled maladroitly, provoke distrust in old alliances. To use new bodies to balance China most effectively, the United States and its partners will need to maintain their existing broad, and often divided, coalitions.

None of this means that multilateralism is entirely in decline. Extra-regional states still seek to work with ASEAN as a bloc and attend its many regional meetings. For example, the United Kingdom recently joined ASEAN as a dialogue partner, and it could also seek to join ASEAN Defense Minister Meetings Plus (ADMM-Plus), which comprises ASEAN members and a range of other partner nations. ASEAN also remains an option for addressing many security challenges, in particular those relating to Southeast Asia itself. For instance, it has played a central—if only modestly successful—role in attempts to find a path forward following the 2021 coup in Myanmar.

The trend toward minilateralism is also not uniform or without obstacles. Complex internal dynamics can impede each partnership's development. Until 2021, for instance, fanfare about the Quad had greatly outpaced its actual activities, in large part due to its subtle internal divisions. Recently, the Quad has produced more substantial outputs, including initiatives on vaccines and maritime domain awareness.

The future role of minilateral groupings in the Asia-Pacific depends in large part on the behavior of the two most important regional players: the United States and China. One decisive factor will be the extent to which China continues to behave in ways that other nations in the region and beyond perceive to be assertive, or even aggressive. Such behavior could create further impetus for the development of new and

deeper balancing partnerships and coalitions. Yet the trend toward a new minilateralism also depends on decisions in Washington, and whether the United States will be willing to share capabilities as the basis of new partnerships, as is the case with technology in AUKUS.

Ultimately, viewed from Washington, perhaps the more pertinent question is whether the Asia-Pacific's new minilateral bodies will be able to achieve their objectives, be those balancing China or helping to maintain something akin to the current regional order. Developments over recent years suggest that these minilateral partnerships will continue to grow in prominence, especially given the significance of AUKUS and the ongoing deepening of the Quad partnership. Ongoing moves toward major power competition signal that such bodies will continue to strengthen their capabilities and expand their focus. Minilateralism is therefore likely to remain a central feature of the Asia-Pacific's security landscape for some time to come.

1. This background memo is adapted and excerpted from "[Changing Alliance Structures](#)," IISS Research Paper, December 2021.