



Minilateralism: an opportunity for the EU's engagement in the Indo-Pacific

By Elena Atanassova-Cornelis and Eva Pejsova | 26 November 2021

Key Issues

- The Indo-Pacific security architecture has seen an emergence of various minilateral cooperative structures.
- This trend is driven by the growing US–China rivalry and the need of regional countries to diversify their options and address burning security issues.
- Minilateralism offers a “third way” between the exclusive US-led alliance system and the rigid ASEAN-centred multilateralism.
- The EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy supports in advocating flexibility, inclusiveness and functional problem-solving.

Introduction

The Indo-Pacific mega-region has been shaken by the ongoing US–China rivalry. This has resulted in the strengthening of traditional partnerships and alliances on both sides, exacerbating the polarising effect. Additionally, the great power rivalry has led to a multiplication of various bilateral strategic partnerships, as well as various formal and informal groupings among the small and middle-sized countries trying to hedge against its negative effects. Finally, we see the emergence of various *ad hoc* cooperative arrangements, addressing a plethora of functional security issues, including maritime security, connectivity and supply chain security.

Some of these mechanisms fall within the scope of what is known as “minilateralism”—small groupings of states, typically with

three to six participants, which engage in security collaboration mostly on an *ad hoc* and informal basis. Focused primarily, but not exclusively, on non-traditional security (NTS) issues, minilaterals are useful for states from two perspectives: first, cooperation among a smaller number of players is easier to pursue than in a multilateral context, and second, these groupings provide opportunities for the participants to diversify their security relations and engage in collaboration with various partners based on specific security needs. “Like-mindedness” is often a driver of the various minilaterals, yet its meaning remains open to interpretation and largely issue-specific.

This remodelled, multi-layered security architecture exposes the limits of existing ASEAN-led multilateral organisations, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum

(ARF) or the East Asia Summit (EAS), to maintain their relevance. At the same time, it questions the capacity of the new minilateral structures to effectively address the region's many burning security issues, from the South China Sea to the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. What has been the added value of these groupings, and how do they change the face of cooperation in the Indo-Pacific? This brief examines this new dynamic with a view to identifying opportunities for the EU's engagement in the region.

Shifting paradigms: from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific

The US-led system of bilateral security alliances has been a central pillar of Asia's security architecture. Established in the context of the Cold War's bipolarity, it remains an exclusive framework with an emphasis on liberal democratic values and shared threats. Although some of the formal US alliances—for example, with Japan and Australia—have evolved over time to also focus on non-traditional security (NTS) issues, defence and deterrence remain their predominant objectives. The US-led bilateralism has evolved hand in hand with the various ASEAN-centric multilateral frameworks, which have primarily focused on dialogue and confidence-building. Some of these, the notable example being the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+), have been successful in addressing specific NTS challenges, especially in the maritime security domain. Struggling to overcome the constraints associated with the functioning of multilateral groupings that include members with divergent, and often conflicting, interests, ASEAN-led configurations have generally underdelivered in achieving specific objectives on the ground.

The rise of China and its competition for regional influence with the US in the security, economic, diplomatic and technological domains have led to a growing polarisation in the region. Beijing has sought to establish its own network of partnerships through bilateral and multilateral means, seen in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the deepening of its security ties with Russia, and the pursuit of a "divide-and-rule" approach towards Southeast Asia. Faced with uncertainties about the sustainability of the US security commitments to the region, as well

as the outcome of the growing Sino-US tensions, Asian countries have responded by strengthening strategic ties with each other and with external players. A notable example is Japan and its alignments both intra-regionally, as with India and Australia, and extra-regionally, as with the EU, the UK and France.

Compared to the exclusive "Asia-Pacific", associated with the "hub-and-spokes" system, the military-strategic focus and Sino-US competition, the Indo-Pacific space can be seen as less contested. Its security architecture exhibits multi-layered characteristics and is inclusive in terms of both partners and issues. The emergence of minilateral cooperation fits within this new dynamic and reflects an effort to deliver effective solutions to the region's many functional security concerns, which neither the traditional alliances nor the existing multilaterals effectively address. It also offers avenues for many regional countries that remain hesitant to align with either camp and seek to expand their space for manoeuvre. While mostly seen as complementary to the existing cooperative system, these new formations should also be assessed independently for their capacity to shape the broader geostrategic landscape.

The strategic, the functional and the rest

Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific is not new. In recent years, however, the trend saw a new momentum in reaction to the shifting regional balance of power between the US and China, leading countries to seek to diversify their security and economic partners and reduce their dependence on either Beijing or Washington. At the same time, the growing array of NTS and non-security issues has exposed the limitations of both the formal alliances and the existing multilateral institutions. The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic at the beginning of 2020 accelerated this dynamic and provided an additional impetus for parties to join forces in addressing the acute health and economic crisis.

In a way, minilateral groupings seek to establish a certain equilibrium in an increasingly uncertain regional environment by acting as problem-solving frameworks. Beyond the Indo-Pacific, they also provide useful avenues for middle powers to

discuss issues of common interest, as shown by the cross-regional MIKTA grouping, formed in 2013 between Mexico, Indonesia, the ROK, Turkey and Australia.

To be sure, some Indo-Pacific minilaterals have a more explicit geostrategic focus than others. One example is the US–Japan–Australia trilateral, which reached the highest level of institutionalisation both in practical terms, achieving military interoperability among the three countries, and at the political level, represented by the foreign ministerial-level meetings held since 2006. The announcement in mid-September 2021 of a new security pact by Australia, the UK and the US (known as “AUKUS”), strengthening cooperation in information- and technology-sharing, starting with

At the lower end of the strategic spectrum, many minilaterals emerged around a specific functional focus, but proved to be of great added value for regional stability. At the sub-regional level, the Malacca Strait Patrols have been an early example of a problem-solving mechanism countering piracy in the international strait between Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore. The Sulu Sea Trilateral Patrols, launched in 2017 by Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines to strengthen border control and combat terrorism, have importantly enhanced security cooperation between the three partners. Finally, the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) initiative, formed in 2015 and connecting China, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam, originally focused on water management, but has gradually evolved to a more comprehensive cooperation

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Canberra’s decision to acquire nuclear-powered submarines from the US, is another example, suggesting an insistence by the US and some of its key allies on a more “exclusive” conceptualisation of the Indo-Pacific. While long-term effects of the partnership remain to be seen, the decision entailed several immediate considerations. First, it reflects a more explicit, Washington-led pushback against China’s assertiveness, thereby complicating the EU’s own “inclusive” approach to the Indo-Pacific. Second, the major diplomatic row it generated in US–France relations has undermined a possible Euro-American collaboration in the Indo-Pacific due to the exclusion of France—a key European player in the region. Finally, the pact attests to the fluidity of the regional security architecture in the Indo-Pacific, where the formation of the various minilateral groupings remains subject to geopolitical rivalries.

promoting economic growth, people-to-people exchanges, trade, connectivity and coordination in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic.

NTS constitutes a common working ground for minilateral cooperation. India, not being a part of the formal US-led alliance system and wary of joining an anti-China coalition, has been instrumental in defining the objectives of the US–Japan–India cooperation (with ministerial-level meetings since 2015) largely in NTS terms. Despite the growing military-to-military links in the framework of the Malabar exercise, this grouping prioritises the promotion of connectivity and maritime capacity-building in the region. Similarly, the Japan–India–Australia trilateral meetings, held since 2015, first focused on connectivity. High-level consultations eventually led to the establishment of the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI) by the three trade ministers in April

2021—in the context of the Covid-19 crisis—in an effort to decrease the excessive dependency on China for medical supplies, semiconductors and other strategic resources.

Arguably the most significant minilateral formation in the Indo-Pacific to date remains the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the “Quad”), bringing together the US, Japan, India and Australia. The Quad originated in the four countries’ Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) cooperation in the wake of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami disaster, and was suspended from 2007 to 2017 because Australia and India were wary of provoking a backlash from Beijing. At the Quad’s recent in-person summit, hosted by Joe Biden in September 2021, leaders reaffirmed their joint commitment to promoting a free, open and rules-based order “rooted in international law and undaunted by coercion”. However, the actual cooperation remains limited to NTS, such as maritime domain awareness, vaccines, clean energy and space.

The “Quad Plus” framework demonstrates the flexibility and adaptability of minilateral formations. While the revival of the core group has an obvious strategic subtext, the inclusion of the “plus” partners, notably Vietnam, New Zealand and South Korea, has managed to increase the Quad’s relevance by focusing on practical problem-solving and non-security issues, such as vaccine diplomacy and supply chain resilience. Other countries, such as France, Taiwan, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines, have been invited to join the initiative in various informal settings and levels of engagement. Finally, the inclusion of global partners, such as Brazil and Israel (sometimes referred to as “Quad++”), aims at strengthening trade and economic cooperation, in line with the broader values behind the Indo-Pacific concept: freedom of trade, freedom of navigation and rule of law.

Although many countries, including in the EU, remain reluctant to formally join the grouping due to concerns about maintaining their strategic independence, they are eager to work with the Quad partners with whom they share many values, objectives and views of the future Indo-Pacific order. In any case, the Quad seems to provide a cornerstone for various bilateral, trilateral and other minilateral formations

of either economic or strategic focus that are likely to remain the building blocks of the expanding regional cooperative security architecture.

An opportunity for the EU’s engagement

In many ways, minilateralism offers ideal avenues for the EU to push forward its foreign policy agenda in the region. The new [Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific](#), from September 2021, is built on the promotion of flexible engagements and prioritises problem-solving over strictly strategic alignment, which is very much in line with the trends described above. A recent boost in political and security cooperation with Japan and India, but also the ROK, Vietnam, Indonesia and Singapore, attests to the EU’s expanding partnership network in the region, which can serve as a basis for further cooperative arrangements. Shared interests are a key driver of minilateral cooperation. Therefore, a good starting point is to build on its revived bilateral relations with key regional players, notably Japan, India and Australia.

The EU–Japan partnership is the most advanced in this regard, culminating in the signing of an Economic Partnership Agreement and a Strategic Partnership Agreement in 2018, followed by a Connectivity Partnership in 2019. Sharing the same liberal democratic values and interests in promoting a rules-based order free from domination and coercion, Tokyo and Brussels have exhibited an increased convergence in strategic thinking on the Indo-Pacific. Both partners have the potential for deepening bilateral cooperation, as well as seeking minilateral cooperation with other like-minded nations. Providing sustainable connectivity and quality infrastructure with a focus on the strategic infrastructural projects, maritime capacity-building of the nations in South and Southeast Asia would be some of the lower-hanging fruits.

EU–India relations have also undergone a major upgrade. Although officially “strategic partners” since 2004, the EU and India have made little progress due to differences on trade and an overall lack of common strategic priorities. With the publication of the EU’s Strategy on India in 2018 and the adoption of the Roadmap to 2025 at the bilateral summit in July 2020, Brussels and New Delhi vowed

to strengthen cooperation in the maritime domain, counter-terrorism and cybersecurity, as well as work on sustainable connectivity and environmental security. Opportunities to include other partners in their planned activities abound, notably in promoting better connectivity and governance in the Indian Ocean region, Africa or the broader Middle East.

An EU–Japan–Australia trilateral would include two US treaty allies, Japan and Australia, which have built a bilateral security partnership based on the shared China threat and commitment to keeping the US engaged in the region. Therefore, such a formation may focus on bringing America into the cooperative framework. The promotion of the rule of law at sea and joint norm-setting may also figure more prominently. Bridging the Japan–EU Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure with the Australia–US–Japan Blue Dot Network initiative would be most welcome—as promised in the “Global Gateway” initiative announced during the annual [State of the Union](#) address on September 15, 2021, in response to the Chinese BRI.

In the case of an EU–Japan–India trilateral, India’s wariness about antagonising Beijing and commitment to a non-alignment policy would converge with the EU’s own approach, leading to a grouping that is likely to prioritise more low-key security initiatives, such as connectivity and maritime capacity-building—two shared objectives of the three players in which they all engaged individually through various projects in the region. Differences on US–China relations are likely to be

more pronounced than in the EU–Japan–Australia grouping.

Indeed, a potential advantage for the EU in engaging in minilateral channels is also the possibility to include China. Albeit officially opposed to such initiatives, China sees the limitations of minilateral cooperation and may consider joining to promote its own interests, or even as an opportunity to undermine the US influence in the region from within. The EU’s Indo-Pacific Strategy explicitly promotes an inclusive approach. Whether on trade, connectivity, health security or global issues, such as climate change and environmental management, China remains a key player that cannot be set aside, and working with additional partners may dilute Beijing’s assertiveness by adding the EU’s normative power.

Conclusion

The promotion of “effective multilateralism” has been a logical and consistent basis of the EU’s foreign policy agenda for the past two decades. In light of Brussels’s ambition to move beyond rhetoric, there has been a renewed interest in valorising effectiveness and practical cooperation over formal institutional arrangements. In contrast to the more rigid and contested Asia-Pacific space, the multi-layered Indo-Pacific security architecture provides various *ad hoc* channels for the EU to secure its interests and implement its policies. In this regard, the growing appetite for minilateral cooperation operating outside of the strict US–China binary offers a most welcome opportunity for the EU to deliver concrete results and demonstrate its added value to regional and global security.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Elena Atanassova-Cornelis

Dr. Elena Atanassova-Cornelis is a Senior Lecturer in International Relations of East Asia at the Department of Politics, University of Antwerp, and the School of Political and Social Sciences, Université Catholique de Louvain, both in Belgium. She is concurrently a Visiting Professor at the Brussels School of International Studies (BSIS) of the University of Kent, as well as an Associate Fellow at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP) in Switzerland.

elena.atanassova-cornelis@uantwerpen.be



Eva Pejsova

Dr. Eva Pejsova is Senior Japan Fellow, leading the Japan program, at the Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy. She is also an Associate Fellow at the French “Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique” (FRS). Previously, she was in charge of the Asia portfolio at the European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) and has previously worked with the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the French Prime Minister’s Office, the OECD and the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF).

eva.pejsova@vub.be

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Visitor’s address:

Pleinlaan 5, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

Mailing address:

Pleinlaan 2, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

info_bsog@vub.be

www.brussels-school.be