

The rise of minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific (a personal reflection)



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An overview

The present geopolitical landscape has witnessed a significant shift, marked by the emergence of various groupings, commonly known as “Minilaterals”. Small groups of nations come together to address issues or pursue common goals. A prime example is the recent commitment of the United Arab Emirates, India, and France to collaborate in various fields such as defence, energy, and technology. Such collaborations address immediate issues and potentially bring about positive changes in international relations, fostering a more cooperative and interconnected global community.

This is premised upon the imperative understanding of peacebuilding and conflict resolution and shared threat perceptions regarding numerous strategically viable areas. The growing realisation of the virtual deficiencies of singular organisations in combating regional challenges through calibrated options and the pronounced infringements of broader strategic interests have accentuated the urgent and vital need for the constitution of such multilateral organisations, underscoring their necessity and importance.

The Indo-Pacific, a term that geopolitically covers all nations and islands surrounding either the Indian Ocean or the Pacific Ocean, including mainland African and Asian nations like India and South Africa and Indian Ocean territories such as the Kerguelen Islands and Seychelles, is a critical player in shaping contemporary international relations. It offers many opportunities to expand international partnerships and has emerged as a significant area of diplomatic engagement. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), a key player in the Indo-Pacific region, has been actively revamped. This initiative, a brainchild of the United States, has integrated developing proponents like India, Japan, and Australia. Together, they have strengthened their commitment against Chinese belligerence, marking a significant and impactful development in the evolution of minilateralism. AUKUS, also styled as Aukus, is a trilateral security partnership for the Indo-Pacific region between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, and the renewed enthusiasm of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), skewed towards pursuing narrow and monolithic interests of international consolidation.

The fundamental flashpoint, therefore, pertains to the overall credibility of these thickets of steadily developing channels of dialogue and negotiation. This weighs on the prospects of cooperation and governance in the broader expanse of the Indo-Pacific, which this article seeks to delve into quite incisively.

Diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific

A relative premise for the emergence of diplomacy has to rest on the more significant historical shifts in the geopolitical arena, coupled with the rudimentary aspect of the prospective shift in the balance of power. With the strategic rise of the Chinese hegemonic influence and the increased involvement of its Asian neighbours, Japan, India and Singapore, in the overall framework of conflict management and the broader levels of cooperation amongst the members of the

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), efforts have been spruced up by West to maintain its foothold in the region, without being annihilated.

Such pronounced instances of multilateral dialogue and the subsequent realisation of the larger international perspective from the lens of mutual interests have been responsible for the underlying foundations of these distinctive cooperation units. Moreover, the “Growth of Populism and Nationalism as solid forces and the consequent support for inclusive multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific”, pointed out by Brookings expert Thomas Weight, have lent substantial character to them.

From the economic perspective, diplomatic promises widened with the signing of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) by 13 Southeast Asian countries, including the QUAD allies headed by the US. The objective is to advance sustainable economic development, strategic inclusiveness, and competitiveness for regional peace and stability.

“The future of the 21st Century is largely written in the Indo-Pacific”, as quoted by the US President, Joe Biden, reflects the spirit of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) as part of the Pivot to Asia policy, as manifest in the revamped entity of the QUAD and the subsequent trilateral between India, Indonesia, Australia, and France spearheading the agenda of larger institutions like the BRICS, SCO, G7, and the G20.

Emerging trends

Pou Sothirak, an expert on International affairs at the Asian Institute of Policy Studies, cited two emerging trends of minilateralism based on sustained geoeconomic and security interests, respectively. In a survey conducted by the “Diplomat”, citing public sentiment, it was reported that 68.97% of the individuals remained inclined towards newer patterns of minilateralism in the rapidly changing geopolitical climate of the Indo-Pacific, most notably 72.41% voting for such changes in the spheres of common interests and values. More significant factors, such as the inertia and stagnation of multilateral organisations such as the United Nations comprising more formal political structures and the changing nature of contemporary threats, coupled with the growth of technology in the form of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), has undeniably paved the way for more informal dialogue and negotiation, which the mini-laterals

promise to incorporate.

Moreover, the capacity constraints of nations like India, Japan and Singapore, because of the excessive Chinese Hegemony, have stemmed the rise of the consistent need for more advanced diplomatic endeavours, as reflected in the words of Richard Baldwin, Professor of International Relations at the Institute of Geneva suggest a “Plausible Trinity” based upon “universal application”, “consensus building”, and “institutionalised forms of conflict management”.

Challenges and critic

Despite their strategic viability, these mini-laterals have been alleged to have diminished the sanctity of multilateral frameworks such as the United Nations and themselves. Drawing on a personal perspective, this aspect has three facets. Firstly, the increased preference for minilateralism and its channelised growth has disrupted the process of international interdependence and globalisation, leading to the fragmentation of the global governance mechanisms, as seen in the ambiguity of QUAD’s strategic interests to curtail Chinese belligerence. Secondly, the presence of existing disparities regarding the convergence of interests as far as mini laterals are concerned has culminated in the revival of threat perceptions and questions on practical feasibilities, as reflected in China’s increased role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS, as opposed to regional forums of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and G20, thereby disrupting the process of consensus building. Lastly, instances of incompatibility of interests, coupled with the centralising nature of such institutions, have fostered accountability and compliance issues arising from nonbinding targets and commitments in mutually institutionalised exclusive power blocs, as opposed to legally sanctioned ones, accentuating the exciting differences in the Indian Subcontinent.

The way forward

Considering its strategic potential and limitations, it could be argued that minilateralism cannot operate in isolation and must complement existing multilateral institutions instead. It should seek to broaden its geopolitical reach across various policy formulation and coordination aspects within the Indo-Pacific, a region of significant political activity. Moreover, successful outcomes can only be realized if member nations strive to foster constructive dialogue

within multilateral, regional, and multilateral frameworks. In conclusion, despite the calculated efforts of the West to influence political dynamics through such distinct units, there is still much work to be done, particularly in light of the significant shift in global power dynamics.

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