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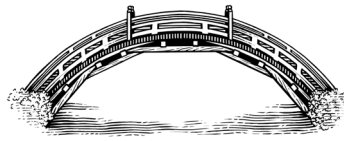
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Minilateral Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific



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Fit for Purpose: Can Southeast Asian Minilateralism Deter?

Evan A. Laksmana

In examining the development of minilaterals anchored in Southeast Asia, this essay considers whether and, if so, how this subregion could contribute to broader capabilities to deter military aggression. The essay argues that Southeast Asia's experience with minilateralism is much more limited, focused, and functionally driven by specific security challenges such as armed robbery. It is unlikely that Southeast Asian states will be comfortable with a broader minilateral arrangement involving extraregional powers designed to deter China or sideline existing mechanisms led by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). For better or worse, a more limited and functionally driven minilateralism gives Southeast Asian states more control over the direction, scope, and quality of cooperation. As well, analysts from the subregion have warned of the possibility that Indo-Pacific minilateral arrangements could become platforms for major powers to extend their influence.¹

The essay is divided into three parts. First, it provides an overview of the recent history of minilateralism in Southeast Asia, with a focus on the Malacca Straits Patrol (MSP) between Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand as well as trilateral security cooperation between Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. It also briefly notes other experiences of minilateralism involving Southeast Asian states beyond the security realm. Next, the essay highlights the different features of minilateralism anchored in Southeast Asia in contrast to U.S.-anchored minilateralism and assesses the likelihood of Southeast Asian-led arrangements contributing to a broader deterrence effort against China. Finally, the essay offers several policy considerations regarding whether and, if so, how Southeast Asian-led minilateralism can be of strategic salience in the Indo-Pacific security landscape.

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¹ Bhubhinder Singh and Sarah Teo, "Introduction: Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific," in *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific*, ed. Bhubhinder Singh and Sarah Teo (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 9.

Southeast Asian–Anchored Minilateralism

In the Indo-Pacific context, minilateralism generally refers to cooperative relations between a group of three to nine countries that are relatively exclusive, flexible, functional, and often informal in nature.² Such arrangements should theoretically be nimbler while providing targeted approaches to address specific challenges in ways that existing mechanisms cannot.³ The “task orientation” of minilateralism also typically renders such groups less threatening to states that perceive themselves to be the target of containment strategies or that have values and interests that depart substantially from perceived multilateral agendas.⁴

Minilateral security cooperation varies based on the grouping’s size, goals, processes, and relation to existing arrangements.⁵ Different major powers, such as the United States and China, also support their own versions of minilateralism. U.S.-anchored minilateralism, for example, has been designed to complement the United States’ Cold War–era system of bilateral alliances with a web of new security mechanisms.⁶ Indeed, the United States remains the central hub, although not necessarily the initiator, in recent minilateral arrangements (e.g., the Quad and AUKUS), backed by a broader strategic framework likely centered on or aimed at China. The strategic asymmetry of power is also another key feature in such U.S.-anchored minilateral arrangements.

But Southeast Asian–anchored minilateral experiences differ. For one, many of the minilateral arrangements in Southeast Asia have been driven by limited functional and security needs. Governments also welcome minilateral arrangements where they are equal veto players, not a subordinated spoke to a more powerful hub. Symmetry of power is a priority in Southeast Asian minilateral arrangements, although it is not always achieved. For these reasons, Southeast Asian states have been reluctant to

² Singh and Teo, “Introduction,” 2. The degree of institutionalization of minilateral arrangements varies; some are based on memorandums of understanding or agreements requiring a yearly implementation framework, while others have joint secretariats or commands. There is no consensus on whether the degree of institutionalization clearly separates minilateralism from multilateralism.

³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴ William T. Tow, “The Trilateral Strategic Dialogue, Minilateralism, and Asia-Pacific Order Building,” in “U.S.-Japan-Australia Security Cooperation: Prospects and Challenges,” ed. Yuki Tatsumi, Stimson Center, April 2015, 25.

⁵ See Wooyeal Paik and Jae Jeok Park, “The Quad’s Search for Non-military Roles and China’s Strategic Response: Minilateralism, Infrastructure Investment, and Regional Balancing,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 30, no. 127 (2021): 37–40; and Troy Lee-Brown, “Asia’s Security Triangles: Maritime Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific,” *East Asia* 35, no. 3 (2018): 163–76.

⁶ Joel Wuthnow, “U.S. ‘Minilateralism’ in Asia and China’s Responses: A New Security Dilemma?” *Journal of Contemporary China* 28, no. 115 (2019): 135.

engage in minilateral arrangements outside of ASEAN or in those that are directed against China.

Minilateral security arrangements involving only Southeast Asian states have become more prominent over the past two decades. Initially, minilateral groupings that proliferated in the 1990s in this subregion were economically rather than security focused. The Singapore-Johor-Riau Growth Triangle, for example, was created in 1989 and later expanded in 1994 to facilitate cross-border trade and investment flows between Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Around the same time, the Brunei Darussalam–Indonesia–Malaysia–Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area was launched to increase trade, tourism, and investment by facilitating the free movement of people, goods, and services.⁷ The Asian Development Bank-backed Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) was founded in 1992 with Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam as key members. In 1999, the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Development Triangle was founded to focus on infrastructure development, trade, and investment.

Some Southeast Asian minilateral arrangements have also engaged extraregional states. The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), for example, involves Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand and focuses on trade, technology, energy, transport, tourism, and fisheries. Beyond providing specific economic benefits, these minilateral arrangements complement ASEAN multilateralism by narrowing the development gaps between ASEAN member states, facilitating practical and sector-driven cooperation, and strengthening embedded norms of regional economic integration within ASEAN.⁸

However, the experience of Southeast Asian states in minilateral security arrangements is somewhat different. Many still consider security issues, even those limited in scope, such as armed robbery at sea, as sensitive sovereignty problems. This viewpoint makes the process of developing minilateral security arrangements more challenging. Indeed, the development of the MSP suggests that it was the prospect of foreign intervention (including by the United States), not necessarily a worsening

⁷ Christopher M. Dent and Peter Richter, "Sub-regional Cooperation and Developmental Regionalism: The Case of BIMP-EAGA," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33, no. 1 (2011): 29–55.

⁸ Vannarith Chheang, "Minilateralism in Southeast Asia: Facts, Opportunities and Risks," in Singh and Teo, *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific*, 106.

problem of armed robbery in the Strait of Malacca, that initially drove Malaysia and Indonesia to increase coordinated patrols in 2004.⁹

The MSP is a set of cooperative measures undertaken by Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand to safeguard the Malacca and Singapore Straits. Eventually, the patrols came to involve the coast guards, navies, and air forces of these littoral states. The Eyes in the Sky component of the MSP involves aircraft patrols from the four states. In 2006, the MSP Joint Co-ordinating Committee Terms of Reference and Standard Operating Procedures was signed, and the MSP Intelligence Exchange Group was established. Based on the agreements, ships in the MSP have the right of hot pursuit up to five nautical miles into the sovereign waters of a neighbor. Under the MSP, participating navies conduct coordinated sea patrols while facilitating information sharing between ships and their naval operational centers.¹⁰

The MSP is complemented by the Cooperative Mechanism, a different framework of cooperation and voluntary contributions by user states of the straits (especially extraregional states) to enhance navigation safety and environmental protection.¹¹ Although there have been significant operational challenges to the MSP, the group remains the first significantly operationalized minilateral security arrangement in Southeast Asia to have been developed without—and, in fact, out of the fear of prospective intervention by—an extraregional partner.¹²

The MSP was also deemed successful enough that Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines used it as a model to develop their own trilateral cooperation in the Sulu and Sulawesi Seas. Sparked in 2016 by an unprecedented spate of kidnappings reportedly committed by the Abu Sayyaf Group, senior defense officials from the three countries met and negotiated MSP-modeled trilateral cooperative mechanisms, especially coordinated patrols.¹³ The three states then established Maritime Command Centers in Sabah, Malaysia; Bongao, the Philippines; and Tarakan,

⁹ J.N. Mak, "Unilateralism and Regionalism: Working Together and Alone in the Malacca Straits," in *Piracy, Maritime Terrorism and Securing the Malacca Straits*, ed. Graham Gerard Ong-Webb (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006), 155.

¹⁰ There have been discussions for joint, rather than coordinated, sea patrols among the navies, but no solid agreement has been reached as of yet. See Sheldon W. Simon, "Safety and Security in the Malacca Straits: The Limits of Collaboration," *Asian Security* 7, no. 1 (2011): 35–36.

¹¹ Hadyu Ikrami, "Sulu-Sulawesi Seas Patrol: Lessons from the Malacca Straits Patrol and Other Similar Cooperative Frameworks," *International Journal of Marine and Coastal Law* 33, no. 4 (2018): 806.

¹² John F. Bradford, "The Growing Prospects for Maritime Security Cooperation in Southeast Asia," *Naval War College Review* 58, no. 3 (2005): 68–69.

¹³ Ikrami, "Sulu-Sulawesi Seas Patrol," 809.

Indonesia, to coordinate patrols and manage the exchange of information and intelligence. Resembling the MSP, coordinated patrols in the seas mean that each country patrols its respective territory under its respective national command and coordinates its actions with the others. Despite the apparent benefits of joint patrols allowing uniform, efficient, and timely responses,¹⁴ coordinated patrols were preferred, partly because they give each participant equal veto power over the pace, manner, and scope of cooperation.

In mainland Southeast Asia, security minilateralism has also tended to be limited in scope. The riparian states of the Mekong River (Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam) created the Mekong River Commission (MRC) in 1995, for example, to address water security issues.¹⁵ Joint river patrols between China and lower Mekong countries, including Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand, began in 2011, driven by terrorism and trafficking concerns. For Beijing, this was the first time in decades that Chinese forces had operated beyond Chinese territory in a non-UN mission.¹⁶

Is Southeast Asian–Anchored Minilateralism Different?

The previous section highlighted the limited scope, pace, and operating modalities of existing security minilateralism in Southeast Asia. Despite initial resistance to such arrangements, states gradually have learned to adopt them when they are given equal and regular veto power (through committee processes, for example) over policies, mechanisms, resources, and activities. Minilaterals have allowed Southeast Asian states to claim sufficient responsiveness to shared security challenges and prevent extraregional intervention. It is likely that the comfort level between the several Southeast Asian states that facilitated these arrangements grew out of various ASEAN-related processes over several decades.

Given these features, it is difficult to envisage Southeast Asian minilateral arrangements contributing to general and collective-actor regional deterrence, which refers to the ability of a group of states functioning together to respond forcefully so that potential challengers decide it is not worth the effort to even consider an attack.¹⁷ Instead, Southeast Asian security minilateralism has primarily been geared

¹⁴ Ikrami, “Sulu-Sulawesi Seas Patrol,” 809.

¹⁵ Chheang, “Minilateralism in Southeast Asia,” 107.

¹⁶ See Xiaobo Su, “Nontraditional Security and China’s Transnational Narcotics Control in Northern Laos and Myanmar,” *Political Geography* 48, no. 2 (2015): 78.

¹⁷ See Patrick M. Morgan, *Deterrence Now* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 175–78.

toward cooperating enough to prevent external intervention while addressing routine security challenges. Any deterrence component is likely aimed at nonstate actors (e.g., terrorist groups). The idea that Southeast Asian–anchored minilateralism can contribute to collective-actor deterrence—against China, for instance—is flawed. For one, mainland Southeast Asian states have their own minilateral arrangements with China. Added to this, general collective deterrence is not only too broad but also likely to dilute each regional state’s strategic veto power. At best, the Southeast Asian experience suggests familiarity with deterring nonconventional transnational security threats rather than a regional military power.

For collective-actor deterrence to work, robust institutionalized arrangements are needed. The more institutionalized the arrangements among the actors seeking to act in a unified manner, the more likely they can pursue deterrence in their own right—as with NATO, for example, with its well-established procedures, common command structure, and elaborate forces, planning, and training. Yet minilateral arrangements in Southeast Asia have been relatively successful even when they have not been deeply institutionalized. That each arrangement requires regular committee meetings or planning sessions is arguably a sign of under-institutionalization, as is the need for each member to decide on the activities, resources, or policies it is ready to commit to during a given period. Indeed, if one accepts that ASEAN has facilitated the rise of minilateral arrangements among Southeast Asian states, informality and consensus-seeking—key tenets of the “ASEAN way”—must necessarily be a significant part of that foundation too. In short, the experience of Southeast Asian–anchored minilateral arrangements is simply not suited to general and collective deterrence-oriented, strategic arrangements.

Finally, Southeast Asian–anchored minilateral arrangements are also often designed as part of or as complements to existing ASEAN-led institutions. Indeed, security minilateral arrangements that focus on practical cooperation—particularly in the areas of capacity building and information sharing—for nontraditional security issues, such as terrorism or resource security, have been presented as complementary to the realization of the ASEAN Political-Security Community.¹⁸ The ability of Southeast Asian governments to engage in “sensitive” minilateral security arrangements has often depended on their ability to present or frame

¹⁸ Chheang, “Minilateralism in Southeast Asia,” 108.

such cooperation as being part of, complementary to, or facilitated by ASEAN-led institutions.

Conclusion: Southeast Asian Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific?

The Southeast Asian minilateral experience is unique in several points. First, the narrative that Southeast Asian states do not welcome arrangements such as the Quad or AUKUS because they are unfamiliar with minilateralism is false. Southeast Asian states have been members of minilateral arrangements for decades. Rather, their minilateral experience has been much more limited and driven by specific security needs. They are also more comfortable in arrangements where each member holds equal veto power and the asymmetry of power is not overwhelming. Their minilateral preferences and orientations are much more linked to considerations surrounding ASEAN-led institutions rather than bilateral alliances. Concerns that the Quad, for example, could be a vehicle for great-power competition exacerbates the broader ambivalence regarding such “new” minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific.

Second, if deterrence is defined as general collective-actor deterrence, then Southeast Asian minilateralism may be incompatible with such goals. As the examples of the MSP and trilateral cooperation in the Sulu Sea suggest, those minilateral arrangements were designed with managing nonstate actors foremost in mind. There is an ongoing discussion among regional analysts about whether it is time for Southeast Asian states to consider broader minilateral arrangements beyond specific security needs so as to recraft the regional order or push back against detrimental behaviors (for example, maritime gray-zone tactics).

Yet Southeast Asian states worry that minilateral arrangements, such as the Quad, can be used to target another state (for example, to contain China). The policy challenge here is to strike that fine balance between working collectively under a minilateral arrangement in a way that addresses state-based security challenges without seemingly targeting that state. Such a balance is particularly salient as far as China is concerned because many Southeast Asian elites consider Beijing as a provider of public goods and private benefits crucial to their own domestic legitimacy and power.¹⁹

¹⁹ See Evan A. Laksmana, “Why There Are No Grand Alliances in Asia,” *Australian Financial Review*, November 26, 2021 ~ <https://www.afr.com/policy/foreign-affairs/there-are-no-grand-alliances-in-asia-20211124-p59bmh>.

Third, whether Southeast Asian–anchored minilateralism could be a significant feature of the Indo-Pacific depends on two major considerations. One is the extent to which regional policymakers accept that ASEAN remains central to the region’s cooperative architecture; some members continue to recognize this, but others prefer not to.²⁰ If the consensus view within the broader region is that ASEAN needs to remain central in any emerging Indo-Pacific architecture, then minilateral arrangements will have to be filtered through ASEAN-related institutions, such as the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. In effect, ASEAN-related mechanisms may dilute, if not absorb, those minilateral experiences. Added to this is the extent to which Southeast Asian states can grow more comfortable with being part of minilateral arrangements involving extraregional powers. Thus far, the record of Southeast Asian states being part of minilateral arrangements with China, Japan, the United States, and others is mixed.

Taken together, these findings indicate that extraregional powers should be cautious when suggesting that Southeast Asian states are open to joining new groupings like the Quad or that this subregion could develop new arrangements to deter China. To be sure, some Southeast Asian states are ambivalent toward China. But within the context of collective-actor deterrence, the experience of Southeast Asian minilateralism suggests the primacy of sovereignty, veto power, and limited security goals as necessary ingredients. That said, if and when Southeast Asian states decide to seriously consider “non-ASEAN” options in the Indo-Pacific, it would be difficult to ignore the potential utility of minilateral arrangements for regional order and security architecture building. ♦

²⁰ Huong Le Thu, “The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and ASEAN Centrality,” in Singh and Teo, *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific*, 98.