POWER ASSYMMETRY AND SECURITY COOPERATION IN THE INDO-PACIFIC: MINILATERALS AND THEMATIC COALITION

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Coalition building is the central feature of all Indo-Pacific strategies. However, if faces two major obstacles: the asymmetry of power between the potential partners and significant differences in the hierarchy of security priorities of small and larger power.

Security priorities of small and larger states differ. Climate change, IUU fishing, piracy, oil spills and more generally environmental threats top the list of the security concerns of small states. The latter also want to stay away from the geostrategic competition with China, which is the primary focus of major powers.

However, as much as small states may want to avoid the consequences of great power rivalries, they are often confronted with larger powers when dealing illegal fishing, environmental degradation, or other threats emerging in today's system.

In addition, small states increasingly wants to be the masters of their own destinies. In this perspective, great power competition gives them greater agency in their engagements with larger powers and it be delusional to expect them to renounce voluntarily the current configuration.

These partly contradictory factors shape small states relations with larger powers and make the process of coalition building more complex. Large powers need therefore redefine their relationship with the smaller states of the Indo-Pacific in order to accommodate, at least partly, their political aspirations as much as their security needs, without cornering them in a situation in which they would have to choose between China and its (mostly) western foes.

The present paper argues that thematic and minilateral coalitions with their emphasis on ad hoc configurations are viable and effective ways to go about coalition building in the Indo-Pacific. Minilateral and thematic coalition are constituted on a commonality of interest and complementarity of capacities which allows them to bypass or even ignore the political polarization which is often the cause of multilateral ineffectiveness. They are pragmatic answers to a systemic problem inherent to the nature of the international system but operating within the system and its constraints and as such, can produce limited but nevertheless significant strategic impacts.

The rise of minilateralism and its significance

Amidst declining confidence in the deliverables of multilateral institutions, minilateral cooperation is now common throughout the Indo-Pacific. Minilateralism is the networking of like-minded states for the purpose of addressing specific strategic challenges wherein each respective member provides unique capabilities towards finding a solution. Unlike multilateral organizations, minilateral efforts are ad hoc in nature and overwhelmingly focused on clearly defined challenge sets. Members are expected, as long as they remain engaged, to leverage their own resources towards the achievement of goals, whether through financial contribution, technical expertise, operational tools, or political/legal energy.

The rise of minilateralism throughout the Indo-Pacific is inextricably linked to the larger trend of strategic competition. It is no accident that the most common members of Indo-Pacific minilateral networks are those that seek to uphold or renew the strength of existing multilateral institutions. States like the United States, Australia, France, Japan, and India each interpret the perception of multilateralism's decline as a threat to national security and a bolster for their main international competitors. Minilaterals like the Quad, AUKUS, various trilaterals, or even the Squad emerged out of the reality of strategic competition and seek to reinforce the current rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific.[1]

Yet, it is a mistake to interpret minilateralism as the inevitable future and the emergence of such network as inherently tied to all aspects of great power competition. Minilateralism, while an option for any regional state, exists with a higher hurdle of entry than traditional multilateral institutions, for each respective member must be ready to leverage some aspect of national wealth to serve the aims of the network itself. The costs of entering minilateral groupings can prove too high for developing states. Joining minilaterals also signals a declaration of intent when it comes to specific regional challenges, declarations that could warrant a response from other powers.

Indo-Pacific minilateralism is an attractive tool for regional middle powers who seek to enhance their national capacity, prioritize specific national interests, and further refine various niche capabilities already held. Such powers also have largely defined the stance ala regional challenge sets. Powers like Australia, Japan, South Korea, and India are the most common members of regional minilaterals. These states, while possibly aligned or opposed to major powers, are deeply enmeshed in multilateralism and seek to signal their continued commitment to such a process. In the meantime, they shall temporarily group with like-minded partners to address specific threats in ways that serve their national interest while also delivering benefits to the larger region.

The myriad of minilaterals that exist often create confusion that in turn lead to regional demands for greater clarification of their purpose. That confusion is part of the logic for minilaterals as they exist to episodically surge forward to address threats. Minilaterals have no secretariats to govern them or branding to identify them. The informality of the majority of them speaks to their intent to reinforce existing regional institutions, not replace the rules that exist.

The case for thematic coalitions: Fisheries and geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific

For the region's developing powers, the logic of minilaterals is attractive and sometimes used. Their temporary nature, their specificity in aim, and an implied commitment to multilateralism are appealing. Yet, the feature of minilateralism that signals a larger political preference can be unwise, if not outright dangerous, for smaller powers seeking to navigate great power competition as can the costs of joining a minilateral prove prohibitive. For such states that find minilaterals attractive there is another emerging trend in the Indo-Pacific: thematic coalitions.

[1] China also engages in minilaterals, despite ample condemnations ones where the United States is a member. The LMC in Southeast Asia is one example. Yet, China's investments in new international partnerships are often attached to larger aims at multilateralism and a comprehensive vision to revise the existing rules-based order to favor their current position as a great power. Institutions such as BRICS and the SCO are examples.

Thematic coalitions run parallel to the formats of minilaterals but with key distinctions. Such coalitions fix their attention on a specific topic, are state-facilitated but not necessarily state-led, and are open to any actor that contributes to their policy aims. A clear example of such coalitions emerges out of the maritime spaces of the Indo-Pacific in the form of fisheries protection and advocacy.

For the states of Indo-Pacific, but especially island states and developing littoral states of Southeast Asia, the protection of fisheries are prominent national security issues. Much of the region relies upon oceanic catch for food security and the explosion of exploitative and illegal fishing is destroying the region's fish stock. Countering Illegal, Unregulated, and Unreported Fishing (IUU-F) and effectively regulating industrial fishing is beyond the capabilities of any regional actor.

Protecting fisheries is a collaborative effort in the Indo-Pacific, one that is gaining scale and diversity of partners. State-sanctioned efforts, such as common regulatory mechanisms, catch-limit enforcement, and support for Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) are matched with a growing cache of oceanic data that assist in tracking biomass and climate conditions, along with emerging networks of non-government organizations committed to drawing attention to the scale of overfishing in the region. Private organizations like the Joint Analytical Cell utilize various technical data sets built upon AIS and VMS signals merged with machine learning tools to provide awareness of potential hotspots for IUU-F. Artisanal fishing communities in the region, commonly isolated from the larger maritime community are increasingly integrated into national and regional efforts to sustain fisheries. Reporting on the health of the seas is becoming more frequent and often tied to fisheries protection networks.

Coalitions built around fisheries protection do have geopolitical impacts. China's overseas fishing fleet, the largest in the world, is commonly put into the spotlight for its opaque and sometimes illegal operations. Chinese fishing vessels are also used to intimidate neighbouring states over maritime sovereignty claims, with these vessels also used as a direct tool for confrontations at sea. The presence of the Chinese maritime militia is well known and shows how protecting fisheries can easily become a matter of geopolitical tension. Efforts tied to fisheries protection are related to the larger process of maritime domain awareness, which is tied to great power competition due to the plethora of tensions in the waters of the South China Sea. Yet, these coalitions are driven by specific regional needs and have diversified stakeholders. Larger powers, even if tied to the problem that such coalitions seek to address, can neither dismiss these efforts nor seek to control them. Thematic coalitions, therefore, become a tool for smaller states to expand their community of interest, gain new partners, and raise the prominence of the challenges they face, all while diminishing the risk of larger political entanglement.

Managing security in situations of power asymmetry: Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) as a synthesis of contemporary trends and responses.

Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) is one such domain where thematic coalition would make eminent sense. HADR illustrate both the political necessity of such coalition and the practical difficulty to implement the concept.

HADR operations are increasingly central in Indo-Pacific cooperation. But while the increasing number of catastrophic events, linked to climate change in particular, call for collective responses, geopolitical trends simultaneously pull HADR in another direction. In an increasingly polarized world, the ability to respond to disaster – together with other tools – has become an instrument for asserting influence, with the potential to affect coalition building in the Indo-Pacific.

Two phenomena are particularly salient in this context: Growing militarization due to political motives linked to China's emergence as a major HADR actor is, in a context of intensifying power competition, making HADR competitive. In the process, it turns sometimes an intrinsically cooperative activity into a zero sum-game; Small states also have political aspirations of their own. They want a greater appropriation of HADR operations as manifestation of their sovereignty.

These considerations should plead for the creation of coordination mechanisms allowing a greater participation of the smaller states. In practice such an evolution is impeded, partly or in totality, by two factors: the preference of larger powers for bilateral cooperation in which preserves their preponderance; the weak capacities of the small countries, this latter factor reinforcing the former.

The temptation is therefore natural for them to behave opportunistically. Indeed, small recipient states are not the passive object of external benevolence. If they greet HADR operations - wherever they come from, with relief and gratitude, they have also fully understood the opportunities that may arise from this emerging situation. HADR is often the first step in establishing new partnership with potential benefits. This is particularly true in the case of China for which, HADR is a component of its development aid policy.

Setting up coalitions where small states would contribute not only to the HADR of their own territory but also to the one of the region for which a specific coalition would have been set up would help avoid this trap. Although not dedicated exclusively to HADR, the Pacific Response Group (PRG) that the South Pacific Defence Minister's Meeting (SPDMM)[2] is trying to set up since 2023, is a step in this direction. The PRG would be a standing body of, regrouping military personnel of the SPDMM member states, to be used only for operational responses. It would therefore include countries with very different level of capabilities, but command would be entrusted to officers belonging to all SPDMM countries. The asymmetry of capacities is unlikely to disappear soon and the PRG is not yet finalized but it constitutes nevertheless an interesting attempt to manage differences while satisfying partly the aspirations of smaller states.

Conclusion: Thematic and minilateral coalitions reinforce the larger multilateralism

Neither thematic coalition nor minilateral formats weaken multilateralism even if they are often initiated to overcome some of its failures. Both operate within the normative framework defined by multilateral institutions. Their objectives enter the categories defined by the various institutions that express the will of the international community. The scope of the objectives of both thematic and minilateral coalitions is moreover more limited but with an obligation of

[2] The SPDMM includes Australia, Chile, Fiji, France, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Tonga.

success. Their contrition gives in turn greater credibility to the objectives set up by international bodies with universal competence.

The reason for their popularity - and sometimes success - should not be misunderstood though. The participation of small states in thematic coalitions does not provide per se the capacities necessary to resolve the problem at stake. If the term “mutualisation” is often used to explain the value of thematic coalition but one can legitimately ask when “mutualisation “ becomes “dilution”. Minilateral coalitions usually do not experience that sort of problem because they are constituted most of the time on a commonality of interest, but also on a complementarity of capacities.

Thematic focuses allow collations to bypass or even ignore the polarization which is the cause of multilateral ineffectiveness. They are both pragmatic answers to a systemic problem inherent to the nature of the international system but operating within the system and responding to its constraints.

As such they should be welcomed by the larger actors but do not exonerate the latter from their responsibilities. Great powers will still have to provide assistance which will still require them to rework their own structures, foreign assistance and outreach and therefore bear the largest costs. Ultimately, their influence will lie as much in their capacity “to do with” as in their willingness “to do for”. Not out of benevolence though, but because the current configuration of the international system requires it.

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