



RISING ASIA
JOURNAL



RISING ASIA
FOUNDATION

THE LONG REVIEW

Can “Minilateralism” Deliver Maximum Diplomatic Advantage for the Quad, the Mekong, and Asean?

REVIEW BY SARANYA ANTONY A
Jawaharlal Nehru University

Bhubhinder Singh and Sarah Teo (ed.), *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific: The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism, and ASEAN* (Routledge, 2020), 156 pages, £120 (ebook £31.49).

The post-Cold War regional order in the Asia-Pacific had consisted of the bilateral alliances of the United States, and the multilateral arrangements of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). A relatively new construct, the Indo-Pacific, performs the mind mapping of the Asia-Pacific into the Indo-Pacific, demarcating a swath of area from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean and its surrounding terrestrial world. The recent U.S. withdrawal

of troops from Syria and Afghanistan have exhibited the superpower's changing alliance politics and strategic interests, whereas Asean's contested nature and inactiveness in addressing regional security challenges such as the South China Sea and the Rohingya crisis seeks an alternative mechanism.

As a result, there has been a shift from the paradigm of multilateral and bilateral arrangements to the idea of minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific because of unresolved geopolitical circumstances, changing national interests, the great game of the United States in the Indo-Pacific, national existential crises, and unsatisfactory traditional international alliances. *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific: The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism, and ASEAN*, edited by Bhuhindar Singh and Sarah Teo, both academics at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore, is a noteworthy attempt to analyze the transformative activities of minilateralism and its institutional establishments such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD) and the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC), as well as the multiple impact of U.S. security policy, and Asean and the Asean Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus in the Indo-Pacific.

The major countries involved in minilateral arrangements in the Indo-Pacific region are India, Japan, Australia, South Korea, China, and the United States. One of the prominent minilateral establishment is the QSD, consisting of Australia, Japan, the United States, and India. Minilateralism emerged against the background of escalating Sino-U.S. rivalry, increasing nuclear proliferation by North Korea, and the unresolved territorial disputes of the South China Sea, all of which pose security challenges in the Indo-Pacific. Most of the region's countries, while not obstructing the minilateral arrangements, tend pursue a



balancing strategy in the Indo-Pacific region. Minilateral arrangements by the United States and its alliance partners frequently exclude Chinese participation in order to counteract increasing China's power projection abilities in the Indo-Pacific region, a strategy that can develop into a pro-U.S. regional bloc or into a posture tending toward containing Chinese hegemony in the region.¹ China, however, is also involved in minilateral arrangements in Indo-Pacific such as the LMC, as well as the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM) to combat terrorism, which is framed as a minilateral security initiative involving Pakistan, China, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan that was created in August 2016.

In the context of the Indo-Pacific, minilateral arrangements are not necessarily a counterpunch aimed at counteracting multilateral institutions. Multilateralism is the formal establishment of an entity, or dialogic engagement, by three or more democratic states that focus on inclusive governance. Keohane defines multilateralism as "the practice of coordinating national policies in groups of three or more states, through ad hoc arrangements or by means of institutions."² As a multilateral institution Asean has been experiencing economic slowdown, inactiveness, and lack of unity in maintaining a pluralistic vision and the common good in the region, all of which have contributed to opening the path for the arrival of minilateral arrangements in the Indo-Pacific. The intensification of minilateralism challenges the centrality of Asean in the Indo-Pacific, although some

¹ Joel Wuthnow, "U.S. Minilateralism in Asia and China's Responses: A New Security Dilemma?" *Journal of Contemporary China* 28, No. 115 (2018): 133-150; and 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 (2020): 36-52.

² Robert O. Keohane, "Multilateralism: An Agenda for Research," *International Journal* 45, No. 4 (1990): 1-27.

Asean members are part of minilateral arrangements in the region. In this scenario, the United States can be recognized as a supporter or champion of minilateral engagements in the Indo-Pacific.

The scholarly literature explains that minilateralism promotes power asymmetries in the system in the sense that its minimal size excludes other states from participation. Minilateralism is flexible and protects limited sets of interests, and its informality implies that it can disband without any rules or formal long-term reciprocity agreements used by multilateral institutions. Some scholars argue that minilateralism is undemocratic and exclusionary which can widen divisions and heighten mistrust and insecurity in the system. Moises Naim popularized the term minilateralism as a process of bringing the smallest possible number of countries needed to have the largest possible impact on solving a particular problem, in his article, "Minilateralism: The Magic Number to Get Real International Action."³ At least one of the minilateral models for international institutions excludes non-key states and civil society from the decision making forums. As an operational example, a grouping or discourse on international climate change policy might, therefore, be labeled "exclusive minilateralism."

Rising Tide of Minilateralism in the Scholarly Literature

This book stands out as a significant contribution to Indo-Pacific region studies and international relations owing to its principal argument that the geopolitical landscape and security architecture of the Indo-Pacific has witnessed the increasing presence of

³ Moises Naim, "Minilateralism: The Magic Number to Get Real International Action," *Foreign Policy*, June 21, 2009.



minilateralism and its institutions since the late 2000s. The rising profile of minilateralism is driven by unstable U.S. leadership and its alliance network as a bilateral partner in the region, and by the shortcomings of Asean-centric multilateral relations in the Indo-Pacific region. As a diplomatic space, minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific is smaller than multilateral institutions, but it is larger than bilateral linkages. Niam explains that cooperative minilateral relations are defined by a 'magic number' that usually involves between three and nine countries getting together to form a group that is relatively exclusive, pursues a critical mass approach, and remains flexible and functional.⁴ Sometimes, a minilateral group can fall into trilateral engagements and become a mini form of multilateral arrangements without any formal binding. Existing minilateral institutions are the Malacca Straits Patrol minilateral arrangement (2004) made up of Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Singapore; the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC, 2015) involving China, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam; and the Sulu Sea Trilateral Patrols (2017) launched by Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. The Five Power Defence Arrangements were also considered a minilateral defence coalition comprising Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, and the United Kingdom. The minilateral institutions in the Indo-Pacific have developed under two major initiatives: the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, and the Lancang Mekong Cooperation.

The authors, Singh and Teo, employ theoretical background from the literature of Moises Niam, John Nilsson-Wright, Michael J. Green, Ralf Emmers, Robyn Eckersley, Robert Falkner, Clara Brandi, Chris Brummer, Erica Moret, Joel Wuthnow, William T. Tow, Prashanth Parameswaran, and Troy Lee-Brown to explicate the idea of

⁴ Ibid.

minilateralism in the context of the Indo-Pacific.⁵ The authors broadly discuss the considerable influence of multilateralism on framing the idea of minilateralism, and the Asean-centric linkages, to map the new diversion toward minilateralism, U.S.-centric bilateralism, and Chinese regional leadership in the Southeast Asian security architecture. Eventually, the presence of minilateral institutions to solve regional challenges, for example the South China Sea territorial dispute, took a diversion toward a new strategic solution wherein fewer countries seek solutions to specific issues.

The use of minilateralism began showing up in the strategic relations of some countries, with the initiation of U.S.-led minilateral activities in the early 2000s, as Joel Wuthnow explains. The widely

⁵ John Nilsson-Wright, "Creative Minilateralism in a Changing Asia: Opportunities for Security Convergence and Cooperation between Australia, India, and Japan," Chatham House, Research Paper, July 2017; Michael J. Green, "Strategic Asian Triangles," in *The Oxford Handbook of the International Relations of Asia*, ed., Saadia Pekkanen, John Ravenhill, and Rosemary Foot (Oxford University Press, 2014), 758-774; Ralf Emmers, "The Role of the Five Power Defence Arrangements in the Southeast Asian Security Architecture," in *Bilateralism, Multilateralism and Asia-Pacific Security: Contending Cooperation*, ed., William Tow and Brendan Taylor (London: Routledge, 2013), 87-99; Robyn Eckersley, "Moving Forward in the Climate Negotiations: Multilateralism or Minilateralism?" *Global Environmental Politics* 12, No. 2 (2012): 24-42; Robert Falkner, "A Minilateral Solution for Global Climate Change? On Bargaining Efficiency, Club Benefits, and International Legitimacy," *Perspectives on Politics* 14, No.1 (2016): 87-101; Clara Brandi, Axel Berger, and Dominique Bruhn, "Between Minilateralism and Multilateralism: Opportunities and Risk of Pioneer Alliances in International Trade and Climate Politics," Briefing Paper, 16/2015/, German Development Institute, Bonn; Chris Brummer, *Minilateralism: How Trade Alliances, Soft Law and Financial Engineering are Redefining Economic Statecraft* (Cambridge University Press, 2014); Erica Moret, "Effective Minilateralism for the EU: What, When and How?" European Institute for Security Studies Brief, No. 17 (June 2016); Joel Wuthnow, "U.S. Minilateralism in Asia and China's Responses: A New Security Dilemma?" *Journal of Contemporary China* 28, No.115 (2018): 133-150; William Tow, "Minilateral Security's Relevance to US Strategy in the Indo-Pacific: Challenges and Prospects," *Pacific Review* 32, No. 2 (2018): 232-244; Prashanth Parameswaran, "The Limits of Minilateralism in Asean," *Straits Times*, February 15, 2018; Troy Lee-Brown, "Asia's Security Triangles: Maritime Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific," *East Asia* 35, No. 2 (2018): 163-179.



acknowledged literature on minilateralism, apart from Niam's "Minilateralism," includes Aurelia George Mulgan who explains the changing trend of security policy from the perspective of Japan's exclusive bilateral alliances toward modest minilateralism.⁶ An important book outlining minilateralism is Chris Brummer's *Minilateralism: How Trade Alliances, Soft Law and Financial Engineering are Redefining Economic Statecraft* which explicates the weakening of multilateralism and proliferation of minilateralism.⁷

Causes of the Advent of Minilateralism

In the book under review, eleven authors analyze a range of subjects connected to the development prospects of minilateralism and its institutions in the Indo-Pacific. The book is composed of three parts: the first is U.S.-centric minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific; the second is minilateralism in the Mekong sub-region and the LMC mechanism, as well as the predominance of China; and the third part is on the impact of minilaterals including the QSD and Mekong sub-regional platforms on the multilateral centrality of Asean. In their 'introduction,' Singh and Teo contextualise the rise of minilateralism in Indo-Pacific security architecture. They argue that two major reasons prevail for the rise of minilateral establishments in the Indo-Pacific: first, owing to the discriminatory nature of power, minilateralism recognizes that only a select few countries are able to potentially resolve a particular issue, and incorporates them in decision

⁶ Aurelia George Mulgan, "Breaking the Mould: Japan's Subtle Shift from Exclusive Bilateralism to Modest Minilateralism, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 30, No.1 (2008): 52-72.

⁷ Ibid.

making to the exclusion of all others, and second the flexibility of minilateral arrangements because of smaller number of stakeholders.

In Chapter One, William T. Tow explores minilateral engagements connected to security, climate change, arms control, institution building, and trade at the regional level as an effective means of cooperative interaction in the Indo-Pacific that indeed replace the U.S. 'hub-and-spokes' alliance network, especially the U.S. security approaches such as its "America First" strategic posture and its neo-isolationist and offshore balancing. The author describes the uncertainties of U.S. security policy in Indo-Pacific especially during the short-lived "Trump era" when the U.S. relationship with close Asian allies, South Korea and Japan, came under attack from Trump himself, who also downgraded the post-war U.S. alliances in Europe. Tow examines the initiation of U.S. minilateral arrangements in the Indo-Pacific by citing the examples of the North Korean nuclear weapon program, the balancing arrangements organized by the United States, Japan, and South Korea in the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG, in 1999), the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue between the United States, Australia, and Japan (TSD, 2002), and finally the QSD. Tow assumes that, if the regional and global balance of power is indeed transforming, Asean members or other regional states may either reject US minilateral security approaches as inappropriate for their own regional security planning or may prefer to adapt variants of minilateral security which are a better fit for their own national and regional priorities.⁸

⁸ William T. Tow, "Minilateralism and US Security Policy in the Indo-Pacific: The Legacy, Viability, and Deficiencies of a New Security Approach," in *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific: The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism, and ASEAN* (Routledge, 2020), 13-26.



In Chapter Two, Andrew O’Neil and Lucy West discuss the confluence of the strategic interests of the United States, India, Japan, and Australia in the minilateral framework of the Quad or QSD. However, the author argues that there is not much proof to substantiate the coherent strategic intent among the QSD. This chapter tends to challenge an optimistic outlook for the QSD on two grounds: one is “the lack of unity,” and the other is that the Quad is a “distant second” to U.S. alliances in the region, notably the U.S.–Japan–Australia Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD) which is a prevailing trilateral arrangement in Indo–Pacific region. The authors describe the American endeavor to sustain its presence in the Indo–Pacific region to prevent the emergence of Chinese regional hegemony. The authors analyze the transformation of the Asia–Pacific to the Indo–Pacific which encompasses Asian regionalism and security arrangements, followed by a discussion on topics such as the rise of minilateralism predominantly in the form of the trilateral security dialogue, the development and renewal of the QSD and finally, the future prospects of the QSD which is expected to promote the regional security architecture of the Indo–Pacific.⁹

In Chapter Three, Tomohiko Satake shows that as the QSD is revving up to generate balance among the regional powers in the Indo–Pacific, there are differences among its four participant countries especially over their bilateral relations with China. Satake describes the QSD’s possibilities and challenges, arguing that the creation of the QSD could possibly contribute to the development of a stable power balance in the region, but tensions would arise due to the increasing power of China and unresolved strategic tensions between the United States and

⁹ Andrew O’Neil and Lucy West, “The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and Indo–Pacific Minilateralism: Resurrection without Renewal?” in *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific*, 27–41.

China.¹⁰ According to the power transition theory, conflicts are more likely to occur when the power gap narrows between a rising power—China—and the existing hegemon—the United States (Gilpin 1981;¹¹ Kugler and Lemke 1996;¹² Organski and Kugler 1980;¹³ Tammen et al. 2000).¹⁴ Moreover, there is a drift toward the Thucydides Trap as war is not ruled out because an emerging power seeks to displace an existing one (Allison 2017).¹⁵ Major challenges confronting the QSD are each member country's strategic priorities, their relationship with China, and vision for a future regional order. The rise of China has changed their geopolitical preferences, and U.S. containment policy in the region has triggered the intensification of Sino-U.S. rivalry. The Chinese view the Quad as the creation of "little NATO" (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) to contain China (Nicholson 2007).¹⁶ Moreover, Satake has an optimistic view on the QSD, arguing that it is capable of helping in the establishment of an open, inclusive, and pluralistic Indo-Pacific.

¹⁰ Tomohiko Satake, "The Future of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue: Possibilities and Challenges," in *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific*, 42–56.

¹¹ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1981).

¹² Jacek Kugler and Douglas Lemke, ed., *Parity and War: Evaluations and Extensions of the War Ledger* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

¹³ A.F.K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (University of Chicago Press, 1980).

¹⁴ Ronald L. Tammen, et al., *Power Transitions: Strategies for the 21st Century* (New York and London: Seven Bridges Press and Chatham House, 2000).

¹⁵ Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

¹⁶ B. Nicholson, "China Bans Canberra on Security Pact," *The Age*, June 15, 2007.



In Chapter Four, Xue Gong focuses on Chinese expansion in the Indo-Pacific through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, as well as Chinese participation in Asean's multilateral forums. China's strong involvement in the Mekong subregion is demonstrated in its initiative to form the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation which comprises of the riparian states of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. The major focus areas of the LMC are political-security issues, economic affairs and sustainable development, social affairs and people to people exchanges. Xue Gong explains that China has used minilateralism intentionally to improve its relationship with the Mekong countries by selectively embracing water resources management cooperation in order to shape regional security governance. Chinese influence has grown through the LMC's scope of geopolitical and geo-economic collaborations. The Mekong sub-region has been an important target for China's peripheral diplomacy as Beijing has attempted to shape regional governance and to reinforce multipolar structures under a China-led regionalism in the Mekong sub-region through political cooperation. Xue Gong argues that the Chinese leadership—in reaction to geopolitical tensions and geo-economic competition with the United States and other regional powers—has sought to create an institution that could help to strengthen its leadership, improve its global image on matters relating to water governance, and enhance its security environment.¹⁷

¹⁷ Xue Gong, "Lancang-Mekong Cooperation: Minilateralism in Institutional Building and its Implications," in *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific*, 57-73.



The leaders of China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam at the first meeting of the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation in March 2016. Source: Mekong River Commission.

In Chapter Five, Shang-su-Wu examines China's initiative to develop the Mekong basin through the establishment of the LMC wherein the Chinese maintain substantial influence due to the fact that the Lancang River flows downstream to other riparian countries. China's unilateral actions and its *fait accompli* tactics have irreversibly changed the status quo, leaving its downstream neighbors with no feasible alternative. This is because the establishment of the LMC is grounded in specific geopolitical characteristics that are absent in other areas adjacent to China, thus suggesting the infeasibility of replicating the LMC's institutional form elsewhere.

The LMC's special geopolitical characteristic is the Mekong River, known as Lancang River in China, that flows through five downstream Southeast Asian countries—a unique sharing system that is absent in other areas adjacent to China. Shang-su-Wu argues that as an upstream state, China has brought the downstream Mekong riparian states under its sphere of influence by exercising its substantial upper hand through water management and construction of dams. China's strategic goal is to use the LMC to expand its influence in Indochina. By



its association with the LMC, China uses hydro-politics as a tool to reshape the political landscape of Southeast Asia through regional cooperation and geopolitical expansion. For Beijing, Southeast Asia is presumably a region where it can effortlessly impose its hegemony, unlike the regions of Central and South Asia where China confronts both Russia and India.¹⁸

In Chapter Six, Huong Le Thu analyzes the relationship between Asean and the minilateral arrangement of the QSD, outlining Asean's view of the QSD from two perspectives: the QSD as a challenge to Asean centrality, and the perceptions of the Southeast Asian policy community of the QSD. The author's study was based on an original quantitative survey conducted in April to July 2018 that collected data from 276 respondents from all ten Asean member countries such as experts from government agencies, the armed forces, academia, think tanks, businesses, and the media. This chapter attempts to answer some crucial questions: What are Asean's concerns about the emerging minilaterals in the region? How will minilateralism affect Asean unity and centrality in the regional security architecture? Le Thu argues that the majority of the people interviewed support the QSD initiative and they value its cooperative mechanisms. The survey finds that Asean does not reject minilateral engagements. Not all emerging minilaterals are constructed to compete with, or mount a challenge, to Asean-centered regionalism.

Le Thu, however, argues that the popular perception of the QSD is that it is able to challenge Asean's centrality. A widely prevalent perception is that Asean member states view the QSD with concern, as they fear the informal body could eclipse the bloc's leading role in

¹⁸ Shang Su-Wu, "Lancang-Mekong Cooperation: The Latest Stage of China's Hydro-politics," in *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific*, 74.

regional affairs (Singh 2018).¹⁹ The emergence of the Quad-plus has been viewed as the cause of decay of the Asean-centered institutionalized system in Asia (Tsvetov 2017).²⁰ However, the majority of Southeast Asian respondents believe that the QSD could complement Asean, rather than challenge or side-line it. The survey finds that the QSD is able to contribute to stability and peace in the Indo-Pacific. Another perception stated in the chapter is that the minilateral initiatives of the QSD challenge the flawed centrality of Asean because centrality needs to be earned by the institution both nominally or functionally.²¹ The “flawed” centrality refers to Asean’s diminishing unity, and its inability and reluctance to find consensus on regional crises, such as China’s assertiveness in the South China Sea disputes, as well as Cambodian opposition to consensus-forming processes.

In Chapter Seven, Vannarith Chheang studies minilateralism in terms of economic minilateralism and political-security minilateralism. In addition, this chapter outlines the externally driven minilateralism in Southeast Asia with its associated risks and concerns. Minilateralism in Southeast Asia developed through economic cooperation and non-traditional security issues of piracy, the environment, and human and drug trafficking. Minilateralism can be bonus for Asean if properly used to produce consensus-based decision making by inter-governmental organizations, particularly on regional security matters such as the South China Sea issue. The minilateral arrangements, however, are a

¹⁹ Swaran Singh, “Is India Shifting the Goalposts in Indo-Pacific Debate?” *Asia Times*, July 9, 2018.

²⁰ Anton Tsvetov, “Will the Quad Mean the End of ASEAN Centrality?” *The Diplomat*, November 15, 2017.

²¹ Huong Le Thu, “The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and ASEAN Centrality,” in *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific*, 88-102.



threat to the centrality and unity of Asean because they are creations of the major powers that are dominant in the region.

On the one hand, economic minilateralism, including cross-border trade and investment, tourism, infrastructure development and connectivity, is complementary and relatively effective because it is driven by state and market forces. These arrangements help reduce poverty and narrow the development gap at the sub-regional level, especially in the border regions. Some of the institutional arrangements related to economic minilateralism are the groupings of Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore Growth Triangle, the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Development Triangle, the Singapore-Johor-Riau Growth Triangle, and the Greater Mekong Subregion (China, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand) which have the advantage of geographical proximity to conduct cross-border trade and investment.

On the other hand, political-security minilateralism puts the centrality of Asean at risk because it involves security cooperation and defence coalition between a few like-minded countries operating under the scenario of geostrategic rivalry between the major powers to address non-traditional security issues of terrorism, transnational crimes, natural disasters, and water resources management. The major powers have, in fact, led the minilaterals, starting with the first minilateral defence coalition in Southeast Asia, the FPDA, that aims to deal with terrorism and maritime security, followed by a string of initiatives such as the Malacca Straits Patrol, Trilateral Patrols in the Sulu-Celebes Seas, the Mekong River Commission, and joint patrols between China and the Mekong countries. As U.S.-China rivalry weakens the multilateral institutions, the weaker states have looked for

alternative minilateral mechanisms.²²

In Chapter Eight, See Seng Tan discusses structural and institutional conditions behind the accomplishments of the Asean Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus). This chapter analyzes Asean, minilateralism, and ADMM-Plus as a multilateral form which, nonetheless, behaves in ways one might expect of a minilateral club. The idea of ADMM-Plus constituting a mimicry of minilateralism by a multilateral arrangement might seem far-fetched, but it is not unreasonable against a regional backdrop of "frustrated" multilateral experiments (Nair 2009).²³ See Seng Tan examines the ADMM-Plus by the yardstick of size, composition, and nestedness within larger groupings. The author finds that Asean states have not been loath to experiment with minilateral cooperation among themselves, as and when they believed regional circumstances warranted it. However, the minilateral spirit of the ADMM-Plus does not fulfil the core requirement of minilateral arrangements, for small sub-groups of actors to collaborate over specific concerns informally without being enclosed within a larger institutional setup. In the sense that, Asean-Plus is an Asean-based institution that adheres more or less to Asean norms and conventions. As the ADMM-Plus represents the collective quest for effective multilateral cooperation, its members have pursued a pragmatic conduct that seems to challenge some of Asean-led multilateralism's most cherished conventions, such as the long-

²² Vannarith Chheang, "Minilateralism in Southeast Asia: Facts, Opportunities and Risks," in *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific*: 103-119.

²³ Deepak Nair, "Regionalism in the Asia Pacific/East Asia: A Frustrated Regionalism?" *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 31, No. 1 (2009): 110-142.



standing support for open regionalism and inclusive multilateralism through the ADMM-Plus and the Asean Regional Forum or ARF.²⁴

The Future May Belong to Minilateralism

The strength of the book is its exploration of the understudied concept of minilateralism by an exceptional critique of U.S.-centric bilateralism and Asean-centric multilateral arrangements in the Indo-Pacific. The book chapters, emphasizing the presence of minilateralism in the regional security paradigm of the Indo-Pacific, and offering insightful and thought-provoking themes, would be useful for researchers, policymakers, and practicing diplomats. It is a valuable contribution to the field of international studies of the Indo-Pacific and to policy analysis programs.

The theoretical background covers a swath of Indo-Pacific international relations, public policy, and diplomatic affairs of countries involved in minilateralism, multilateralism, bilateralism, and regionalism, as well as their geopolitical strategies and changing security dynamics. The still-evolving phenomenon of minilateralism is discussed in depth from a global south or non-western perspective on the Indo-Pacific security architecture within international relations. Most of the references chosen in this edited volume are non-western which provides an alternative approach to the study of international relations, and an avenue to understand diplomatic relations beyond the multilateral and bilateral alliances in the Indo-Pacific security architecture. The book deftly examines the prospects, policymaking, and alliance creation in the Indo-Pacific.

²⁴ See Seng Tan, "Asean Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus: Multilateralism Mimicking Minilateralism," in *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific*, 120-134.

The conception of minilateralism is a contested idea as there has been a continuing debate among scholars of international relations over the decline of U.S.-led unipolarity and the rise of multipolarity. The new world order has inevitably affected the Indo-Pacific, where Asean promotes multilateralism, but Asean's response is increasingly seen as ineffective in the face of uncertain political collaborations, unresolved security challenges, and changing dynamics of geopolitics. As a result, the stage was set for the emergence of minilateralism.

Both minilateralism and multilateralism are contested on account of composition, flexibility, informality, and exclusivity. Minilateralism is considered non-democratic and discriminative because of major power engagements in minilateral arrangements. The major powers' national interest prevails over the weaker countries, in the sense that the dominant state does whatever their national interest prompts and the weak must adjust to it, in most diplomatic alliances. Minilateralism, however, is an alternative approach to multilateral and bilateral alliances, but the position of weaker countries remains shaky. Nonetheless, minilateralism certainly has a future in the Indo-Pacific.

Note on the Author

Saranya Antony A is a PhD scholar pursuing research on "Higher Educational Reforms and Transformation of Public Universities in Lithuania and India in the Neoliberal era" at the Centre for Russian and Central Asian Studies (CRCAS), School of International Relations Studies (SIS), Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. She studied in the Department of Education Sciences, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Kaunas Technological University, Lithuania for one semester under the Erasmus + Learning Mobility Fellowship in 2018. She completed her MPhil in 2016 from CRCAS, SIS, JNU. The topic of her



dissertation was “Representation of Russia in the Baltic Media over Ukraine Crisis of 2014.” She did her MA in Politics (international studies) from SIS, JNU. Her publications are, “The Singing Revolution, Independence and Democratic Transformation in Baltic States: Nationalism, Identity and Culture,” in *Nation Building in Baltic States History, Memory and Identity* (New Delhi: Adroit Publishers, 2018); and “Mapping of Neoliberal Reforms and Students’ Resistance Movement in Indian Public Universities Since 2014,” in *Sketches on Developing India: A Socio-Economic Perspective* (Kerala: Academic Publication Wing, 2019).