Beyond Collective Balancing: A Typology of Asian Minilaterals and US Strategic Expectations

Kelly A. Grieco

May 2026

APLN | ASIA-PACIFIC LEADERSHIP NETWORK

About the author

Dr. Kelly A. Grieco is a Senior Fellow with the Reimagining US Grand Strategy Program at the Stimson Center, where her work focuses on US foreign policy and defense policy, addressing questions about U.S. military alliances and the security architecture of the Indo-Pacific, as well as military strategy, drone warfare, and the future of war. She is also an Adjunct Professor in the Center for Security Studies at Georgetown University and a Nonresident Fellow at the Brute Krulak Center of the Marine Corps University. She holds a PhD in Political Science from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

@APLNofficial

apln.network

@APLNofficial

@APLNofficial

The Asia-Pacific Leadership Network (APLN) is a network of political, military, and diplomatic leaders from countries across the Asia-Pacific tackling security and defence challenges with a particular focus on addressing and eliminating nuclear weapon risks.

This publication was made possible by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Please direct inquiries to:
Asia-Pacific Leadership Network
APLN Secretariat
4th floor, 116, Pirundae-ro
Jongno-gu, Seoul, ROK, 03035
Tel. +82-2-2135-2170
Fax. +82-70-4015-0708
Email. apln@apln.network

This publication can be downloaded at no cost at **www.apln.network**.

Cover Page Photo: iStock-blackred
Figures/Illustrations: Hunter Slingbaum
Design: Prutha Kulkarni

Beyond Collective Balancing: A Typology of Asian Minilaterals and US Strategic Expectations

Kelly A. Grieco,
Senior Fellow, Reimagining US Grand Strategy Program, Stimson Center

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Asian minilaterals – small, flexible, issue-specific security groupings—have grown in number and visibility across the Indo-Pacific, increasingly drawing Washington's attention as potential vehicles for burden-sharing and regional security coordination. The Biden administration emphasized these arrangements as tools to strengthen cooperative security and uphold a rules-based regional order. The Trump administration, in turn, has pressed allies and partners to assume greater responsibility for their own defense, with analysts identifying minilateral cooperation as one potential mechanism. Senior officials have suggested that middle powers – such as Australia, India, and Japan – could play a larger role in regional security, potentially coordinating their efforts to maintain the balance of power. This framing carries an implicit assumption: that these Asian middle powers will organize themselves into peer coalitions capable of collectively balancing Chinese influence. Whether regional states are in fact moving in this direction, however, remains an open question.

This report argues that this assumption is mistaken, and that the gap between US expectations and regional realities carries significant risks. An empirical analysis of 32 non-US, non-Chinese Asian minilaterals reveals that only 25 percent involve collective balancing among peer states – the model Washington increasingly anticipates. The remaining 75 percent take fundamentally different forms: spheres of influence, in which dominant states like India and Australia manage their immediate neighborhoods hierarchically; client coalitions, in which stronger states organize weaker partners to address specific external challenges such as infrastructure dependencies and supply-chain vulnerabilities; and security communities, in which peer states cooperate on functional issues and confidence-building rather than explicit balancing.

These patterns do not reflect Asian reluctance to manage regional security. Rather, they reflect rational strategic choices shaped by geography, power asymmetries, and local threat perceptions—factors largely beyond Washington's control. The Indo-Pacific's vast distances contribute to widely varying threat perceptions across subregions, making it difficult for potential balancing partners to agree on priorities and sustain coordination. Regional powers like India and Australia tend to concentrate attention and resources on hierarchical neighborhood management, where power asymmetries make cooperative hierarchy more efficient than peer coordination. Southeast Asian states, facing Chinese pressure primarily as economic and maritime coercion rather than an existential military threat, prioritize strategic flexibility and functional cooperation over explicit balancing commitments. US alliance

guarantees further reduce incentives for peer-based coalitions by meeting the security needs of treaty allies like Japan and Australia through hierarchical arrangements with Washington, effectively crowding out independent collective balancing coalitions.

These structural constraints make organizational diversity the equilibrium state of the Indo-Pacific security architecture, not a temporary phase on the way to a network of peer balancing coalitions. Pressuring arrangements to adopt roles they were not designed to fill risks destabilizing the functional cooperation they already provide without yielding valuable alternatives. Spheres of influence help to manage local instability and limit openings for Chinese influence. Client coalitions contest specific dimensions of Chinese power through development financing and supply-chain resilience. Security communities reduce intraregional conflicts that might otherwise invite external interference and become arenas for US-China rivalry. Collective balancing, where it exists, signals that peer cooperation remains a credible option and complicates Chinese strategic calculations. Together, these diverse arrangements contribute more to regional security than any single type could achieve alone.

The solution is not to abandon burden-sharing ambitions but to align them with regional realities. Washington should pursue its core objective—preventing Chinese regional hegemony – by supporting arrangements as they exist rather than pressuring states into coalitions they neither want nor can sustain. Regional states, for their part, should resist one-size-fits-all pressure while clearly communicating how their preferred organizational forms advance regional stability.

Recommendations for the United States:

- Avoid competing with Indian and Australian spheres of influence. Coordinate bilateral engagement with New Delhi and Canberra rather than undercutting regional leadership while welcoming their neighborhood efforts as meaningful burden-sharing.
- Reinforce rather than replicate client coalitions. When Japan or India leads infrastructure and supply-chain initiatives, offer complementary support rather than launching parallel US-led programs that fragment coordination.
- Preserve security communities by avoiding public and private pressure for explicit balancing. Southeast Asian functional cooperation advances US interests by reducing intraregional conflict, even when it avoids anti-China framing.
- Resist creating US-led alternatives that crowd out peer-based coordination. When Washington joins regional frameworks, strategic coordination tends to migrate to hierarchical arrangements, undermining the independent coalitions it claims to support.
- Align rhetoric with realistic expectations about what regional minilaterals can deliver, recognizing diverse forms of burden-sharing as advancing US interests.

Recommendations for Asian States:

- Sphere leaders should institutionalize regional stabilization mechanisms and maintain regular consultations with Washington to coordinate engagement while resisting pressure to convert spheres into explicit anti-China coalitions.
- Client coalition leaders should coordinate among themselves to identify coverage gaps, align standards, and respond collectively to Chinese economic coercion.
- Security community members should maintain their inward functional orientation, resisting balancing commitments that would undermine their trust-building and conflict-prevention functions.
- Collective balancing participants should focus on intelligence-sharing and strategic dialogues on discrete challenges, laying groundwork for deeper coordination over time.
- All regional states should invest in interoperable capabilities (e.g., maritime domain awareness, communications platforms) that enable effective participation across minilateral types.
- The Indo-Pacific's organizational diversity is not an obstacle to overcome but a strategic foundation—one Washington must learn to work with rather than against.

INTRODUCTION

In May 2025, The United States (US) Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth delivered what he called "tough love" to Asian defense ministers at Singapore's Shangri-La Dialogue. While reaffirming American commitment to the Indo-Pacific, he made clear that the Trump administration expected regional allies and partners to assume far greater responsibility for their own security. "We ask – and indeed, we insist – that our allies and partners do their part on defense," Hegseth declared.[1] The message was unmistakable: The era in which the United States served as the primary guarantor of regional security was coming to an end. In its place would be greater burden-sharing, self-reliance, and coordination among Asian states themselves.

This shift is both strategically necessary and long overdue. American resources are finite, and decades of subsidizing regional security have encouraged free riding while discouraging Asian allies and partners from developing their own robust defense capabilities. Regional powers like Japan, Australia, India, and South Korea possess both the capabilities and the incentives to play a larger role in managing regional security challenges.

But while the administration is clear about what it wants, it is far less clear about how states will respond. US strategy documents and senior officials speak confidently about "networks of allies and partners" acting together to "maintain global and regional balances of power."[2] The implicit assumption is that Asian states, particularly middle powers, will organize themselves into peer coalitions capable of collectively balancing Chinese power, often through expanding minilateral arrangements—small, flexible, issue-specific groupings that operate without the constraints of formal alliances or multilateral institutions.[3]

The author thanks Hunter Slingbaum, Will Smith, Alessandro Peri, and Marie-Louise Westermann for their research assistance. The author is also grateful to Akriti Kalyankar, Frank O'Donnell, and Christopher Preble for helpful feedback and comments on earlier drafts. Finally, the author thanks the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for the opportunity to pursue this research.

1 Pete Hegseth, "Remarks by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth at the 2025 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore (As Delivered)," *U.S. Embassy in Singapore*, May 30, 2025, https://sg.usembassy.gov/remarks-by-secretary-of-defense-pete-hegseth-at-the-2025-shangri-la-dialogue-in-singapore-as-delivered/.

2 U.S. Department of Defense, *2026 National Defense Strategy* (Arlington, VA: U.S. Department of Defense, January 23, 2026), https://media.defense.gov/2026/Jan/23/2003864773/-1/-1/0/2026-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY.PDF; The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, November 2025), https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf.

3 So Yeon Ahn, "Trans-regional Minilateralism: Connecting the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific in the Struggle to Reshape the Political Order," The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis 36, no. 4 (2024): 419-47; Kei Koga, "A New Strategic Minilatearalism in the Indo-Pacific," Asia Policy 17, no. 4 (2022): 27-34; Arzan Tarapore and Brendan Taylor, "Minilaterals and Deterrence: A Critical New Nexus," *Asia Policy* 17, no. 4 (2022): 2-7.

This assumption deserves closer scrutiny. Do American expectations align with how Asian states organize security cooperation in practice, and how much influence can Washington realistically exercise over those choices? The answers matter because a widening gap between US ambitions and regional realities could leave Washington frustrated and disengaged when its preferred "networks" fail to emerge, or conversely, could generate political pressure that destabilizes existing, functional arrangements, ultimately undermining regional security.

This paper argues that Asian minilaterals are unlikely to evolve into collective balancing coalitions of the sort implied by US rhetoric and strategy documents, and that American efforts to engineer such an evolution would likely prove futile and counterproductive. An empirical analysis of 32 non-US, non-Chinese Asian minilaterals shows that regional states primarily use these arrangements for purposes other than collective balancing (Figure 1). Some serve as spheres of influence, with stronger states managing weaker neighbors hierarchically. Others function as client coalitions, mobilizing asymmetrical partnerships against specific threats. Still others operate as security communities, focused on functional cooperation rather than explicit balancing. The majority of minilaterals fall into these three categories while only a handful engage in the collective balancing that many US officials increasingly expect.

Figure 1: All Indo-Pacific Non-Major Power Minilateral Partnerships

These patterns do not reflect Asian unwillingness to manage regional security. Rather, they reflect rational strategic choices shaped by geography, power asymmetries, and local priorities—factors largely beyond American control. The Indo-Pacific's vast distances and

ocean barriers temper perceptions of China as an existential threat for many states and produce divergent strategic priorities across potential partners. Regional powers, such as India and Australia, tend to focus on managing instability in their immediate neighborhoods, where power asymmetries make hierarchical arrangements more efficient than peer coordination. By contrast, Southeast Asian states emphasize functional cooperation on transnational issues such as piracy, disaster relief, and counterterrorism while preserving the strategic flexibility needed to navigate great-power competition without antagonizing China or the United States.

This mismatch between US expectations and regional realities carries significant policy implications. If Washington assumes burden-sharing and burden-shifting will naturally produce collective balancing coalitions, it risks misinterpreting organizational diversity as strategic failure. Worse, sustained pressure for explicit balancing could undermine arrangements that already contribute to regional stability, pushing states into symbolic coalitions that satisfy Washington but that do little to address the region's most pressing security challenges.

The solution is not to abandon burden-sharing but to embrace organizational diversity. Rather than insisting that all Asian security cooperation conform to a collective-balancing model, Washington should focus on its core objective: preventing Chinese hegemony. Achieving this requires supporting hierarchical Indian leadership in South Asia, valuing functional cooperation in Southeast Asia, and investing selectively in the few minilaterals with the potential for explicit balancing. Such an approach would advance American interests far more effectively by working with regional arrangements as they exist rather than pressuring states into coalitions they neither want nor can sustain.

This paper proceeds in six sections. The first section documents US expectations for collective balancing and explains why minilaterals are assumed to be optimal for this goal. The second section develops a typology that categorizes minilaterals along two dimensions: (1) whether their primary focus is external balancing versus internal management, and (2) whether member power relationships are asymmetric or symmetric. These dimensions create four ideal types: spheres of influence (asymmetric/internal), client coalitions (asymmetric/external), collective balancing (symmetric/external), and security communities (symmetric/internal). The third section maps 32 minilaterals onto this typology and presents case studies illustrating each type's logic. The fourth section explains why structural constraints—geography, power asymmetries, and US alliances—make organizational diversity the equilibrium state in the region. The fifth section assesses what each minilateral type can realistically contribute to regional security. The paper concludes with policy recommendations for both the United States and Asian states.

COLLECTIVE BALANCING, WASHINGTON'S WAY

The Trump administration's National Security Strategy (NSS) rests on two core principles: First, the United States must prevent any power from achieving regional or global hegemony that could threaten American interests. As the strategy states, the United States "will work with allies and partners to maintain global and regional balances of power to prevent the emergence of dominant adversaries."[4] Second, maintaining these balances requires a fundamental shift in how security burdens are shared. Declaring "the days of the United States propping up the entire world order are over," the strategy commits to building a "burden-sharing network," with the United States acting as "convener and supporter" rather than sole guarantor.[5]

Senior officials have framed this shift in stark terms. Speaking at the Shangri-La Dialogue in May 2025, Hegseth emphasized that Washington seeks allies and partners who can "work far more capably with the United States," signaling the expectation that Asian states strengthen their own defenses rather than rely mainly on Washington.[6] Later, at the Reagan National Defense Forum in December 2025, he charged that decades of US policy had "turned allies into dependents," encouraging them "to free-ride while we subsidize their defense with US taxpayer dollars."[7] In short, the administration is pursuing a strategic recalibration: US security cooperation is no longer open-ended but conditional, organized through "targeted partnerships" that reward states assuming greater responsibility with enhanced access to advanced technologies, intelligence sharing, and defense procurement cooperation.[8]

Asia fits squarely within this vision. The NSS commits the United States to "denying aggression anywhere in the First Island Chain" while stressing that "the American military cannot, and should not, have to do this alone."[9] Secretary of State Marco Rubio has reinforced this message, emphasizing that the United States remains "a Pacific nation" but expects its allies and partners to play a larger role in securing their own neighborhoods. During his visit to the region in July 2025, Rubio praised efforts by allies such as Japan to bolster their national defense capabilities, noting that these steps are "not something we find offensive; it's something we'd be supportive of."[10]

4 The White House, *National Security Strategy*, 10.

5 The White House, *National Security Strategy*, 12.

6 Pete Hegseth, "Remarks at the 2025 Shangri-La Dialogue," May 30, 2025.

7 Pete Hegseth, "Remarks by Secretary of War Pete Hegseth at the Reagan National Defense Forum (As Delivered)," U.S. Department of Defense, December 6, 2025, https://www.war.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/4354431/remarks-by-secretary-of-war-pete-hegseth-at-the-reagan-national-defense-forum-a/.

8 The White House, *National Security Strategy*, 12.

9 The White House, *National Security Strategy*, 24.

10 Marco Rubio, "Secretary of State Marco Rubio Remarks to the Traveling Press," U.S. Department of State, July 11, 2025, https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/07/secretary-of-state-marco-rubio-remarks-to-the-traveling-press.

The administration's expectations for regional minilaterals emerge implicitly from this burden-sharing imperative, suggesting a set of functions these arrangements are expected to perform over the next decade. Foremost, regional states are expected to assume primary responsibility for deterring and defending against Chinese gray-zone coercion, with minilaterals enabling them to act collectively without relying on the United States as the first responder. Speaking in Manila in March 2025, Hegseth made the expectation explicit, announcing Washington would "encourage our partners and allies in the region to step up their efforts and their cooperation to increase defense capabilities and strengthen deterrence."[11] He stressed that such cooperation should extend beyond bilateral ties to include minilateral arrangements, explaining, "The more security cooperation, the better… The more strategic dilemmas for our adversaries, the better."[12] US officials have reinforced this message by publicly welcoming a growing web of minilaterals among regional allies and partners, including intelligence-sharing, reciprocal access agreements, and expanding defense cooperation among Australia, Japan, and the Philippines.[13]

This emphasis on minilateral responses to gray-zone coercion reflects operational realities. Chinese gray-zone activities occur across vast air and maritime expanses and rely on sustained, low-level pressure rather than discrete acts of force, making a persistent presence in these domains essential but resource-intensive. Few regional states can independently field the ships, aircraft, drones, and integrated surveillance networks needed to monitor and respond across hundreds of miles of open air and sea. At an ASEAN Defense Ministers' Plus (ADMM+) Meeting on November 1, 2025, Hegseth proposed that the region develop a shared maritime domain awareness system and strengthen its rapid-response capabilities so that "whoever is on the receiving end of aggression and provocation is then, therefore, by definition, not alone."[14] By pooling assets, sharing intelligence, and coordinating responses, minilateral arrangements allow states to collectively sustain presence and impose costs on Chinese gray-zone coercion while reducing demands on US forces.

11 Pete Hegseth, "Hegseth Says U.S., Philippines Agree on Plan to Reestablish Deterrence in Indo-Pacific," *U.S. Department of Defense News*, March 28, 2025, https://www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/4138090/hegseth-says-us-philippines-agree-on-plan-to-reestablish-deterrence-in-indo-pac/.

12 Pete Hegseth and Gilberto Teodoro, "Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth and Philippine Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro Hold Joint Media Availability," U.S. Department of Defense, March 28, 2025, transcript, https://www.war.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/4138360/defense-secretary-pete-hegseth-and-philippine-secretary-of-national-defense-gil/.

13 The Hon. Richard Marles MP et al., "Joint Readout of the Meeting of Defense Ministers from Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and the United States," *Minister for Defence (Australia)*, November 3, 2025, https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/statements/2025-11-03/joint-readout-meeting-defense-ministers-from-australia-japan-philippines-united-states.

14 Danial Azhar, "Hegseth Says U.S. Ready to Share Tools to Help Allies Counter 'Aggressive' China," *Reuters*, November 1, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/hegseth-says-us-ready-share-tools-help-allies-counter-aggressive-china-2025-11-01/.

U.S. Secretary of War Pete Hegseth speaks during a group event at the 12th ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Nov. 1, 2025.(U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class John Bellino). Wikimedia Commons Image.

Even as US allies and partners use minilaterals to lead day-to-day security operations, Washington expects their militaries to remain interoperable with American forces in the event of a crisis or conflict. US Indo-Pacific Command emphasizes that it "must enable key allies and partners to acquire the necessary capabilities to defend themselves while improving combined interoperability through bilateral and multilateral exercises and operations."[15] Washington seemingly expects minilateral arrangements to maintain, not replace, interoperability with US forces through compatible communications systems, shared doctrine, and regular combined exercises.

Beyond military cooperation, Washington increasingly sees a role for minilaterals in countering Chinese economic coercion and improving supply-chain resilience. The administration has actively encouraged allies and partners to coordinate supply chain security efforts. At the December 2025 Australia-United States Ministerial Consultations, Washington publicly welcomed Australia and Japan's joint investment in gallium production—a critical mineral essential to semiconductors and defense systems. This highlights US support for regional cooperation on supply chain diversification even when the United States is not directly involved.[16]

15 U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, *Indo-Pacific Command Posture Statement 2025* (Submitted to the House Armed Services Committee, April 9, 2025), https://armedservices.house.gov/uploadedfiles/indopacom_posture_statement_2025.pdf.

16 U.S. Department of State and Australian Government, *Joint Fact Sheet on Australia-U.S. Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIIN) 2025 (Washington, DC and Canberra: December 8, 2025)*, https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/12/joint-fact-sheet-on-australia-u-s-ministerial-consultations-ausmin-2025.

Underlying these expectations is a single organizational assumption: that regional states will organize as relative equals to maintain the balance of power. US strategy envisions allies and partners collectively bringing to bear their combined economic and military capabilities through networks and partnerships rather than hierarchical dependence on Washington.[17] In practice, this points toward minilateral arrangements functioning as collective balancing coalitions—symmetric groupings of peer states capable of deterring Chinese aggression while remaining interoperable with US forces. Whether Asian minilaterals are in fact evolving in this direction, however, remains an open question that the following sections address.

A TYPOLOGY OF MINILATERALS

Understanding whether Asian minilaterals are evolving toward the collective balancing model Washington expects requires first examining how these arrangements function in practice. Despite growing scholarly attention to minilaterals, no systematic framework exists to distinguish among them, leaving policymakers uncertain about which arrangements might contribute to collective balancing and which serve fundamentally different strategic objectives.

Literature Review

The existing literature suffers from two core limitations. First, most scholarship defines minilaterals by their size— ranging from "three to five" to "between three to nine" members—treating them as a midpoint between bilateralism and multilateralism rather than analyzing their strategic purposes or internal dynamics.[18] As Felix Heiduk and Thomas Wilkins observe, "too often minilaterals' spatial scale stands in for their actual typology, even as they pursue diverse functional objectives."[19]

Ryosuke Hanada moves beyond this conventional "in-between" framing to distinguish minilaterals from other forms of cooperation, such as plurilateralism and regionalism.

17 The White House, *National Security Strategy*, 12.

18 William T. Tow, "Minilateral Security's Relevance to US Strategy in the Indo-Pacific: Challenges and Prospects," *The Pacific Review* 32, no. 2 (2019): 232-244, 241; Bhubhindar Singh and Sarah Teo, "Introduction: Multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific," in M*inilateralism in the Indo-Pacific: The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue: Lancang-Mekong Cooperative Mechanism, and ASEAN*, eds., Bhubhindar Singh and Sarah Teo (New York: Routledge, 2020), 1-12, 2. See also Kei Koga, "A New Strategic Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific," *Asia Policy* 17, no. 4 (2022): 27-34; Joel Wuthnow, "US 'Minilateralism' in Asia and China's Response: A New Security Dilemma," *Journal of Contemporary China* 28, no. 115 (2019): 133-50; Moises Naim, "Minilateralism: The Magic Number to Get Real International Action," Foreign Policy, June 21, 2009, https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/06/21/minilateralism/; Thomas S. Wilkins, *Strategic Minilateralism and the Regional Security Architecture of the Indo-Pacific: The Quad, AUKUS, and the Trilateral Security Dialogue* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2025), 80-81.

19 Felix Heiduk and Thomas S. Wilkins, "Minilateralism and Pathways to Institutional Progression: Alliance Formation or Cooperative Security Governance?," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 78, no. 6 (2024): 808-27, 810.

He identifies efficient policy implementation as minilaterals' defining feature, showing that they are not merely intermediate forms of cooperation but purposeful instruments designed to bypass bureaucratic constraints and enable rapid coordination in competitive strategic environments.[20] This efficiency derives from their informal nature. Unlike formal intergovernmental organizations or treaty-based alliances, minilaterals lack a founding legal instrument, formal membership procedures, and a permanent secretariat or other significant institutionalization, such as a headquarters and staff.[21] Their informality is thus a deliberate design choice, granting flexibility, lower sovereignty costs, and speed that formal institutions cannot easily match. This functional approach explains why minilaterals have proliferated in the Indo-Pacific amid growing US-China rivalry, though it leaves open the question of whether they serve distinct strategic objectives.

This limitation reflects a broader pattern in the literature. Scholars, including Bhubhindar Singh and Sarah Teo, emphasize shared traits—minilaterals are "relatively exclusive, flexible, and functional in nature," with small memberships lowering barriers to collective action and informal structures allowing policy coordination without requiring states to sacrifice autonomy to binding rules or formal alliances.[22] While these characteristics explain the proliferation of minilaterals, they obscure meaningful variation among them, masking differences that determine what each arrangement can actually accomplish.

In this regard, Thomas Wilkins' recent book, *Strategic Minilateralism and the Regional Security Architecture of the Indo-Pacific*, represents a major advancement in the field. It identifies strategic minilaterals—defined as "approximately three-to-six states aligned for the purpose of pursuing competitive strategic advantage across multiple domains"—as an analytically important subset of minilaterals and conceptualizes them in terms of design,

20 Ryosuke Hanada, "Minilateralism: A New Page for Indo-Pacific IR Lexicon," *The Pacific Review*, September 9, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2025.2556924.

21 See Felicity Vabulas and Duncan Snidal, "Organization without delegation: Informal intergovernmental organizations (IIGOs) and the spectrum of intergovernmental relations," *The Review of International Organizations* 8, no. 2 (2013): 193-220.

22 Singh and Teo, "Introduction: Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific," 2. See also Troy Lee-Brown, "Asia's Security Triangles: Maritime Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific," *East Asia*, no. 2 (2018): 163-76, 168; Stewart Patrick, "The 'New Multilateralism': Minilateral Cooperation, But at What Cost?" *Global Summitry* 1, no. 2 (2015): 115-134; Hoang Thi Ha, "Understanding the Institutional Challenge of Indo-Pacific Minilaterals to ASEAN," Contemporary Southeast Asia 44, no. 1 (2022): 1-30; Wuthnow, "US 'Minilateralism in Asia and China's Response: A New Security Dilemma," 134; Naim, "Minilateralism: the Magic Number to Get Real International Action"; Leah Marchett, "Minilateralism and Backlash in the Nuclear Security Summit: The Consequences of Nuclear Governance outside the IAEA," *Security Studies* 30, no. 5 (2021): 823-59, 824; Amalina Anuar and Nazia Hussain, "Minilateralism for Multilateralism in the Post-COVID Age," RSIS Policy Report, January 2021; Brendon J. Cannon and Ash Rossiter, "Locating the Quad: Informality, Institutional Flexibility, and Future Alignment in the Indo-Pacific," *International Politics* (2022); Elena Atanassova-Cornelis, "Alignment Cooperation and Regional Security Architecture in the Indo-Pacific," *The International Spectator* 55, no. 1 (2020): 18-33; Matthew Gray, "The Rise of Minilateralism, the Indo-Pacific Context, and the Arab-Gulf States," *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 19, no. 1 (2023): 40-56; Nickolay Mladennov, "Minilateralism: A Concept that Is Changing the World Order," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy (2023); Thomas S. Wilkins, "'Alignment,' Not 'Alliance' – The Shifting Paradigm of International Security Cooperation: Toward a Conceptual Taxonomy of Alignment," Review of International Studies 38, no. 1 (2012): 53-76; Wilkins, *Strategic Minilateralism and the Regional Security Architecture of the Indo-Pacific*, 71-78.

function, and durability.[23] This broad multi-domain orientation distinguishes strategic minilaterals from narrower, single-issue minilateral arrangements.[24]

Wilkins' work marks a significant advance, particularly in recognizing that minilaterals are not uniform and in specifying the characteristics of one important subtype. However, it does not offer a broader typology capable of capturing variation across the full range of minilateral arrangements, nor does it identify the key variables that give rise to different types of cooperation.

A second major limitation of the literature is its US-centric focus. Most studies, including Wilkins' own, examine arrangements such as the Quad and AUKUS, leaving the wider landscape of Asian-led minilaterals—many of which operate without direct US or Chinese participation—largely unexamined. Absent a typology that captures variation among these regional arrangements, scholars and policymakers alike lack the tools to assess whether US expectations for collective balancing align with how Asian states actually organize security cooperation.

This analysis addresses these gaps by developing a typology that builds on Wilkins' insight about strategic minilaterals while identifying the key variables that explain variation across the broader universe of minilateral arrangements. By moving beyond a US-centric focus, it provides the basis for systematically comparing US expectations for collective balancing with how Asian states organize security cooperation in practice.

Strategic Purpose: External Balancing versus Internal Management

The first dimension—strategic purpose—distinguishes arrangements that primarily address external balancing from those focused on internal management. External balancing arrangements coordinate action against common rivals, seeking to maintain the regional balance of power and deter potential challengers. By contrast, internal management arrangements aim to regulate security relations among members themselves, whether through confidence-building measures, conflict prevention, or coordination of overlapping interests.

23 Wilkins, Strategic *Minilateralism and the Regional Security Architecture of the Indo-Pacific*, 20.

24 On strategic minilateralism, see also Kei Koga, "A New Strategic Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific," *Asia Policy* (October 2022): 27-34; Tarapore and Taylor, "Minilaterals and Deterrence"; Thomas Wilkins, Kyoko Hatakeyama, Miwa Hirono, and H.D.P. Envall, "Australia, Japan, and the New Web of Indo-Pacific Minilateralism," East Asia Forum, February 21, 2024, https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/02/21/australia-japan-and-the-new-web-of-indo-pacific-minilateralism/; Matteo Piasentini and Alice Dell'Era, "Beyond the Weak Link: The Philippines' Proactive Role in Emerging US-Led Strategic Minilateralism," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 78, no. 4 (2024): 459-78; Jagannath Panda and Daewon Ohn, "Minilateralism and the New Indo-Pacific Order: Theoretical Ambitions and Empirical Realities," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 78, no. 6 (2024): 767-81; Thomas Wilkins, "Towards Cross-Regional Alliance Integration: Exploring the Modes and Modalities of 'Coalition-Building' Around Minilaterals," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 79, no. 3 (2025): 493-502.

This dimension draws on alliance scholarship, specifically Paul Schroeder's seminal observation that alliances operate as both "weapons of security" for aggregating capabilities against external threats and "instruments of management" to restrain or control states within alliances.[25] Together, these two functions provide the analytical framework for understanding the strategic purposes of security arrangements.

The first of these functions—alliances as weapons of security—reflects the traditional realist conception of alliance formation. In an anarchic international system, states are foremost concerned with survival and must provide for their own security in a competitive, self-help system.[26] When a state threatens to accumulate a preponderance of power or pursue hegemony, other states respond by balancing, either internally through military buildup or externally through alliance formation.[27] Alliances in this framework exist to pool military and economic capabilities against a common adversary, deterring and defending against aggression and ultimately preserving the balance of power.[28] This "capability aggregation model" remains central to balance-of-power theory and to realist explanations of why states pursue economic and security cooperation.[29]

The second function—alliances as instruments of management—recognizes that alliances serve purposes beyond balancing, particularly in managing relations among members themselves. Building on Schroeder's original insight, scholars such as Glenn Snyder, Christopher Gelpi, Jeremy Pressman, Patricia Weitsman, and Celeste Wallender demonstrate how alliances mitigate fears of abandonment and entrapment, constrain allied behavior, and reduce the risk of intra-alliance conflict.[30] Alliances, functioning as institutions, enhance transparency, facilitate communication and build trust to reduce security dilemma dynamics among partners. This perspective recognizes that threats may exist not exclusively outside

25 Paul W. Schroeder, "Alliances, 1815-1945: Weapons of Power and Tools of Management," in *Historical Dimensions of National Security Problems*, ed., Klaus Knorr (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1976), 227-62.

26 Kenneth N. Waltz, Theory of *International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 118.

27 On balance-of-power theory, see T.V. Paul, James Wirtz, and Michael Fortmann, *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004); Michael Sheehan, *The Balance of Power: History and Theory* (London: Routledge, 2004); Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, "Hegemonic Threats and Great-Power Balancing in Europe, 1495-1999," *Security Studies* 14, no. 1 (2005): 1-33; William C. Wolforth et al., "Testing Balance-of-Power Theory in World History," European Journal of International Relations 13, no. 2 (2007): 155-85.

28 See, for example, Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948); Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*; Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).

29 James D. Morrow, "Alliances and Asymmetry: An Alternative to the Capability Aggregation Model of Alliances," *American Journal of Political Science* 35, no. 4 (1991): 904-33.

30 Glenn H. Snyder, "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics," *World Politics* 36, no. 4 (1984): 461-95; Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Christopher Gelpi, "Alliances as Instruments of Intra-Allied Control, " in *Imperfect Unions: Security Institutions over Time and Space*, ed. Helga Haftendorn, Robert O. Keohane, and Celeste A. Wallander (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 107-39; Patricia A. Weitsman, "Intimate Enemies: The Politics of Peacetime Alliances," Security Studies 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1997): 156-92; Patricia A. Weitsman, *Dangerous Alliances: Proponents of Peace, Weapons of War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); Celeste A. Wallander, "Institutional Assets and Adaptability: NATO after the Cold War," *International Organization* 54, no. 4 (Autumn 2000): 705-35; Jeremy Pressman, Warring Friends: *Alliance Restraint in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).

the alliance but within it as well, as states may fear one another as much as, or more than, external adversaries. Weitsman's concept of "tethering" captures this logic, as alliances bind potentially hostile states together, channeling competition into institutionalized cooperation and fostering peaceful relations over time.[31]

While minilaterals differ from traditional alliances in their informality and limited scope, they face analogous strategic choices in their design and operation. Like alliances, minilaterals are purposive security arrangements that must navigate the tension between aggregating capabilities against external threats and managing relations among their own members. The security environment shapes whether a minilateral arrangement prioritizes external balancing or internal management. As Weitsman shows, when external threats are high and clearly defined, capability aggregation dominates, but when threats are lower or more ambiguous, internal management becomes paramount. In practice, however, most minilateral arrangements—like most alliances—serve both functions to some degree, but one purpose typically predominates, distinguishing those designed to address external threats from those designed manage relations among allies.

Power Relations: Symmetry versus Asymmetry

The second dimension—power relations—differentiates minilaterals based on the distribution of material capabilities among members and the resulting opportunities for control. Some arrangements are asymmetric, characterized by substantial and durable power disparities between dominant and weaker members. Others are symmetric, composed of member states possessing roughly comparable capabilities who interact as relative equals.[32] This distinction matters because power distributions fundamentally shape the opportunities and risks inherent in cooperation, determining the mechanisms of influence available to states, the vulnerabilities they confront, and how authority is exercised within the arrangement.

This dimension draws on David Lake's work on security relationships, refined by David Kang, and extended beyond bilateral relationships to settings involving multiple states. Lake conceptualizes security relationships along a continuum from anarchy to hierarchy, with the degree determined by the allocation of "rights of residual control"—that is, who make decisions in areas not explicitly governed by agreement.[33] At the anarchic end, states cooperate while "retaining complete authority over all areas of decision making." At the hierarchic end, a dominant state "possesses full authority to make all residual decisions,"

31 Weitsman, *Dangerous Alliances*, 20-21. See also David H. Bearce, Kristen M. Flanagan, and Katharine M. Floros, "Alliances, Internal Information, and Military Conflict among Member States," *International Organization* 60, no. 3 (2006): 595-625.

32 These definitions are drawn from Brantly Womack, *Asymmetry and International Relationships* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

33 David A. Lake, *Entangling Relations: American Foreign Policy in Its Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 26.

and subordinates "lack this authority."[34] Hierarchy, in Lake's terms, is not purely coercive; it often rests on legitimate authority, akin to a social contract, in which weaker states accept constraints to reap the benefits of cooperation.[35]

However, as David Kang observes, Lake's framework conflates two analytically distinct concepts. Lake treats hierarchy —synonymous with empire or dominance—as the opposite of anarchy, when in fact, Kang argues "equality is the opposite of hierarchy."[36] In other words, the more useful distinction is between hierarchy and equality, as both can exist in a world without a central authority, describing how states relate to one another rather than whether governing authority exists above them. Understood in this way, hierarchy structures interactions and assigns states recognized positions while allowing weaker states "substantial autonomy and freedom."[37] This distinction underlies the asymmetry-symmetry dimension. Asymmetric minilaterals reflect hierarchy within anarchy, in which substantial capability disparities create opportunities for dominant members to exercise disproportionate control over agendas, set priorities, and dictate the terms of cooperation. Subordinate members, however, retain sovereignty and can resist unilateral decisions, making hierarchy continuously negotiated rather than imposed.[38] Moreover, unlike bilateral arrangements, minilaterals allow weaker members to coordinate collectively, reducing the risks of exploitation by the stronger.[39]

In symmetric minilaterals, rough parity of capabilities among members precludes hierarchical control. No state possesses sufficient power advantages to unilaterally impose its preferences. Instead, influence operates through processes of negotiation, norm-setting, and mutual accommodation. Coordination therefore depends on consensus, shared threat perceptions, and reputational incentives rather than enforcement by a dominant actor.[40] Such arrangements are most likely to emerge when members confront similar threats and judge the benefits of cooperation to outweigh the transaction costs of constant negotiation and consensus-building. Yet precisely because they lack hierarchical enforcement mechanisms, symmetric minilaterals are more vulnerable to bargaining breakdowns than asymmetric arrangements.[41]

34 Lake, *Entangling Relations*, 27.

35 Lake, *Entangling Relations*, 26.

36 David C. Kang, "Hierarchy and stability in Asian international relations." *International Relations Theory and the Asia-Pacific*, ed. G. John Ikenberry and Michael Mastanduno (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003): 163-189, 181. See also David C. Kang, "Hierarchy and Legitimacy in International Systems: The Tribute System in Early Modern East Asia," *Security Studies* 19, no. 4 (2010), 591-622; David C. Kang, "Hierarchy, Balancing, and Empirical Puzzles in Asian International Relations," International Security 28, no. 3 (2003/04): 165-180.

37 David C. Kang, "Hierarchy and stability in Asian international relations," 166.

38 Brantly Womack, *Asymmetry and International Relations*, 12-13.

39 Brantly Womack, "Asymmetry Theory and China's Concept of Multipolarity," *Journal of Contemporary China* 13, no. 39 (2004): 351-66.

40 David A. Lake, Hierarchy in *International Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 48-50.

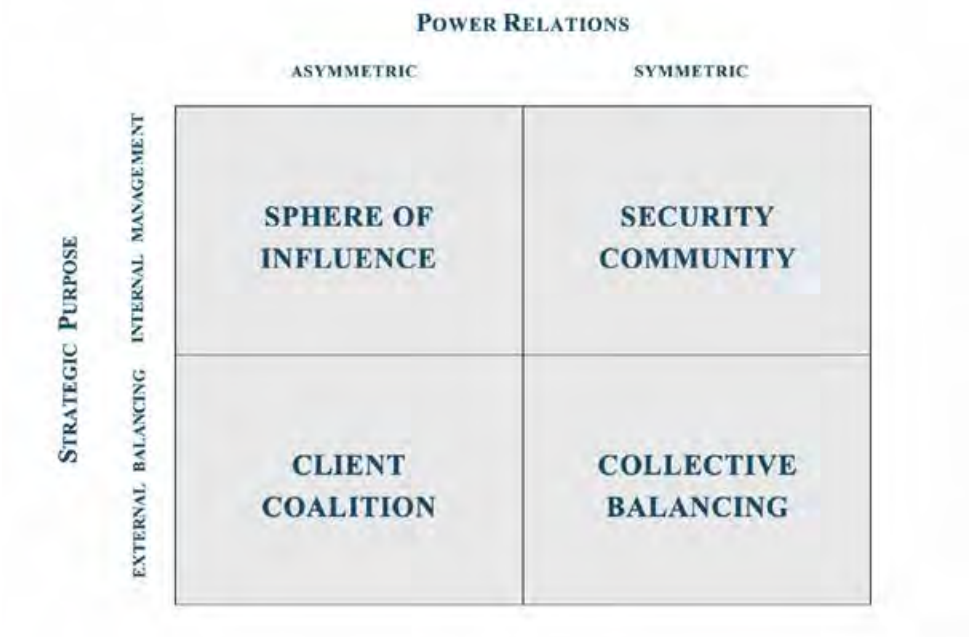
41 Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations*, 94-99; Pressman, *Warring Friends*, 15-20.

Understanding these structural differences in control mechanisms proves essential for assessing which minilateral types can realistically emerge and endure in different Asian contexts. The following section examines how these two dimensions—strategic purpose and power relationships—combine to produce four distinct ideal types of minilateral arrangements, each operating to different logics and serving different strategic functions.

Four Ideal Types

Combining these two dimensions—strategic purpose and power relationships—yields four ideal types of minilateral arrangements (Figure 2). When asymmetry combines with internal management, minilaterals function as spheres of influence, in which dominant states organize and stabilize their immediate neighborhoods through negotiated hierarchy. When asymmetry aligns with external balancing, arrangements take the form of client coalitions, mobilizing unequal partners against specific threats while preserving hierarchical authority. By contrast, symmetric arrangements oriented toward external balancing correspond to collective balancing coalitions, in which peer states seek to aggregate capabilities against a shared adversary without hierarchical leadership. Finally, when symmetry combines with internal management, minilaterals resemble security communities, emphasizing confidence-building, functional cooperation, and the regulation of relations among equals rather than explicit balancing.

Figure 2: Ideal Types of Minilateral Coalitions



Spheres of Influence

Spheres of influence represent hierarchical minilaterals in which a dominant regional power organizes cooperation among weaker neighbors primarily to manage relations within its immediate neighborhood. The combination of power asymmetry and an inward focus

produce a distinctive strategic logic. Material power differences create opportunities for hierarchical control, positioning the dominant state to shape agendas, coordinate activities, and exercise leverage through inducements, conditional commitments, or threats of disengagement. Rather than directing this leverage externally against shared threats, spheres channel control inward toward order maintenance within the regional neighborhood. As Van Jackson emphasizes, spheres involve "some amount of control over a given territory or polity" by a dominant state, especially regarding third-party relations, and "exclusion of other external actors from exercising that same kind of control over the same space."[42]

Within spheres, control relies less on overt coercion and more on strategic leverage exercised through the minilateral cooperation itself. The minilateral's activities—consultations, joint patrols, infrastructure projects—serve as channels for influence. Meetings become venues for diplomatic pressure, security cooperation creates dependencies, and economic initiatives create vulnerabilities. As Jeremy Pressman argues, dominant states in asymmetric relationships can use these channels to mobilize their power advantages and restrain weaker members.[43] Weaker members consequently experience what Brantly Womack describes as "asymmetric exposure," in which they are more vulnerable to shifts in cooperation and thus have proportionally more to gain, or lose, from the relationship.[44] This exposure, in turn, creates incentives for accommodation even in the absence of formal subordination. In this way, hierarchy within spheres remains negotiated rather than absolute, as cooperation is continually bargained over, subordinate demands addressed, and the benefits of participation demonstrated to sustain compliance.

Minilaterals constitute a particularly useful institutional form for sustaining spheres of influence. Dominant states could instead pursue purely bilateral "hub-and-spoke" arrangements, which as Victor Cha's powerplay logic demonstrates, maximize control by preventing coordination among subordinates.[45] But minilaterals offer advantages when effective governance requires direct interaction among weaker states, such as resolving border disputes, managing shared river systems, or coordinating disaster response, or when legitimacy concerns demand reducing the appearance of imperial domination.

Whereas collective balancing aggregates peer capabilities against external threats, spheres channel asymmetric power toward managing neighbors and maintaining order. Spheres thus promote regional stability not through collective military power, but by managing asymmetric relationships and sustaining hierarchical authority.

42 Van Jackson, "Understanding spheres of influence in international politics," *European Journal of International Security* 5, no. 3 (2020): 255-73.

43 Pressman, *Warring Friends*, 4.

44 Womack, *Asymmetry and International Relationships*, 44.

45 Victor Cha, *Powerplay: The Origins of the American Alliance System in Asia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

Client Coalitions

Client coalitions share the hierarchical power structure of spheres of influence but redirect this asymmetry toward external balancing rather than internal management. The most powerful member or members organize weaker partners to deter or counter external adversaries, providing strategic direction and access to resources weaker members lack, such as advanced weapon systems and intelligence, development financing for infrastructure projects, or critical technologies like 5G networks and semiconductors. Weaker members, in turn, contribute military capabilities, political support, and access to strategic locations and markets. Together, these complementary contributions combine to produce greater collective capability. As James Morrow observes, asymmetric cooperation involves an exchange in which the stronger state supplies security while the smaller state cedes autonomy by aligning with the patron's strategic preferences.[46]

Client coalitions organize around discrete external challenges, such as joint weapons development, supply chain resilience, countering economic coercion, or coordinated diplomacy, enabling targeted capability aggregation.[47] Their primary purpose is to address specific vulnerabilities or opportunities in competition with a shared adversary, not to manage internal relations or comprehensive balancing across all dimensions of rivalry.

This narrow scope makes minilateral arrangements particularly well suited to client coalitions, but the resulting coordination logic differs fundamentally from collective balancing. Whereas collective balancing requires sustained coordination among states with comparable capabilities across a broad security agenda, client coalitions organize asymmetric partnerships under dominant-state leadership to address specific external challenges. Client coalitions therefore enable deterrence and balancing through hierarchy rather than symmetry, reflecting a distinct strategic logic shaped by underlying power asymmetries rather than peer coordination.

Collective Balancing

Collective balancing refers to symmetric minilaterals in which peer states coordinate capabilities to deter or counter a common external threat without hierarchical leadership. Members possess roughly comparable material resources, and decision-making authority is sufficiently dispersed to prevent any single state from unilaterally dictating strategy or outcomes. The primary objective is external capability aggregation rather than internal order management. By pooling resources and coordinating action, these arrangements seek to enhance deterrence while preserving the strategic autonomy of each member.

46 Morrow, "Alliances and Asymmetry."

47 Glenn Snyder distinguishes between general (comprehensive) and specific (limited) alliances. See Snyder, *Alliance Politics*, 26-27.

Collective balancing emerges under conditions of power symmetry and shared threat perception, but these same conditions render cooperation inherently fragile. No single member can address the threat alone, making cooperation strategically necessary. At the same time, power is roughly equal among members, giving each enough leverage to bargain and forcing states to demand credible commitments rather than accept terms imposed by a dominant state. Asymmetric cooperation rests on complementary exchange, in which major powers trade security and economic benefits for the autonomy of weaker partners, producing durable bargains in which each side supplies what the other lacks. Symmetric cooperation, by contrast, brings together states with similar capabilities and high autonomy but limited security benefits to offer one another. The resulting narrow utility surplus makes symmetric arrangements particularly vulnerable to abandonment when relative capabilities shift or interests diverge.[48]

These structural conditions heighten concerns about reliability and strategic uncertainty. In symmetric arrangements, mutual dependence exacerbates concerns about opportunism by increasing each member's vulnerability to abandonment and free riding.[49] To mitigate these risks, Michaela Mattes finds that symmetric coalitions often require costly, reliability-enhancing mechanisms, including institutionalization, precise commitments, and issue linkage.[50] More broadly, collective balancing coalitions face higher governance costs than hierarchical arrangements. Coordination among peers requires sustained diplomatic engagement and consensus-building to reconcile overlapping but not identical interests and strategic priorities, leaving these arrangements more exposed to bargaining failures, free riding, and abandonment than asymmetric arrangements.[51] States are therefore unlikely to invest in these costly governance mechanisms until they are confident that potential partners share their strategic objectives and will sustain cooperation over time.

This creates a fundamental challenge in today's multipolar environment, where states face deep uncertainty about which prospective partners are truly resolved to align against shared threats. As Kei Koga argues, states manage this uncertainty through "tactical hedging"—a signaling process in which an initiating state proposes temporary cooperation to elicit reactions from potential partners and assess their willingness to coordinate. The initiator sends deliberately ambiguous signals, proposing consultative frameworks, joint statements, or coordinated responses to specific challenges, without explicitly naming adversaries or making binding commitments. These interactions function as probes, testing shared threat perceptions, willingness to bear costs, and the prospects for deeper, more sustained cooperation.[52]

48 Morrow, "Alliances and Asymmetry," 918.

49 Snyder, *Alliance Politics*, 180-183.

50 Michaela Mattes, "Reputation, symmetry, and alliance design," *International Organization* 66, no. 4 (2012): 697-707.

51 On intra-alliance bargaining, see Morrow, "Alliances and Asymmetry"; Paul A. Papayoanou, "Intra-alliance bargaining and US Bosnia policy," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 41 no. 1 (1997): 91-116; Evan N. Resnick, "Strange bedfellows: US bargaining behavior with allies of convenience," *International Security* 35, no. 3 (2010): 144-184; Paul Poast, "Does issue linkage work? Evidence from European alliance negotiations, 1860 to 1945," I*nternational Organization* 66, no. 2 (2012): 277-310.

52 Kei Koga, "Withering FOIP? Japan's Evolving Indo-Pacific Vision from Kishida to Ishiba," *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* (2025), https://doi.org/10.1177/23477970251404237.

Minilaterals are well suited to this signaling and discovery function, especially in context of the current strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific. Their informal character, limited scope, and absence of binding commitments enable states to test cooperation without locking themselves into formal alliances. States can launch trilateral maritime security dialogues, coordinate on supply-chain resilience, or participate in joint exercises without declaring these arrangements as formal anti-China coalitions, all while assessing partners' resolve. If tactical probing reveals durable political alignment—partners consistently participate, take meaningful action when costly, and sustain cooperation over time—these arrangements may deepen toward more binding cooperation, potentially formalizing into alliances with explicit defense commitments. Such an evolution, however, is far from guaranteed. Domestic political constraints, the desire to preserve strategic flexibility, and fears of provoking Chinese retaliation may instead lead states to sustain informal cooperation indefinitely. This approach avoids the sovereignty costs and entrapment risks associated with institutionalized cooperation.

Security Communities

Security communities are symmetric minilaterals in which states possessing roughly comparable capabilities coordinate primarily to manage relations among themselves and address shared functional challenges, rather than aggregating capabilities to counter external adversaries. Members cooperate on transnational issues like maritime security, disaster response, and counterterrorism, aiming to sustain peaceful relations through mutual restraint and functional cooperation.

The core distinction from collective balancing lies in strategic orientation, not power relations. Both types feature peer relationships where no single member can impose decisions unilaterally. But whereas collective balancing directs symmetric relationships outward to aggregate capabilities against external threats, security communities channel cooperation inward, focusing on managing security dilemmas among members, building confidence through transparency and consistent communication, and addressing shared functional challenges.

Drawing on Patricia Weitsman's concept of "tethering," security communities can be understood as binding potentially competitive states together through institutionalized cooperation, redirecting rivalries toward joint problem-solving rather than military competition.[53] Regular interaction through dialogues, joint exercises, and consultation mechanisms reveals information about capabilities and interests, mitigating private information and misperception and reducing the likelihood that disputes escalate into uses of force.[54]

53 Weitsman, *Dangerous Alliances*, 20-21.

54 James D. Fearon, "Rationalist explanations for war," *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (1995): 379-414.

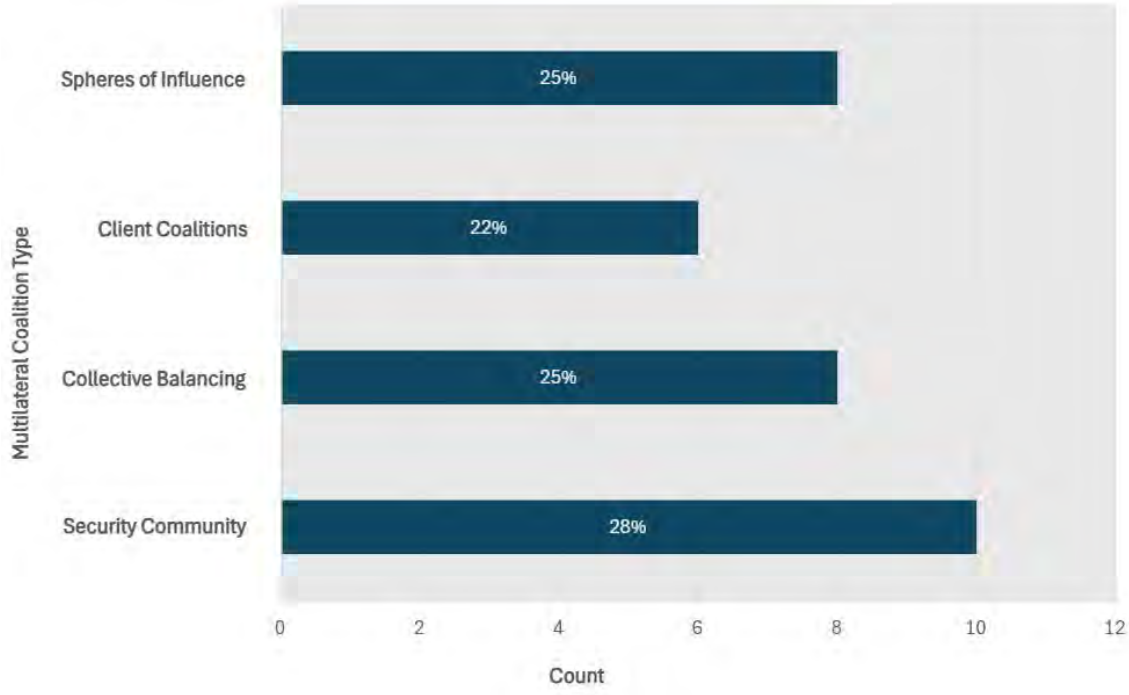
Minilaterals prove particularly useful for security communities when functional cooperation requires direct coordination among specific subsets of states. Maritime security among littoral states sharing sea lanes, water resource management among neighbors, or counterterrorism among states confronting similar threats all benefit from focused groupings that facilitate coordination without region-wide institutional complexity. Security community minilaterals often reinforce broader multilateral frameworks by addressing specific challenges while aligning with principles embodied in institutions like ASEAN, tackling transnational issues while mitigating perceptions of challenging existing multilateral frameworks and norms.[55]

Together, these four ideal types provide an analytical framework for understanding variation among Asian minilaterals and for assessing whether US expectations for collective balancing align with regional practice. The next section maps existing Asian minilaterals onto this typology and uses case studies to illustrate how each type functions in practice.

The Distribution of Asian Minilaterals

Figure 3 presents the distribution across the four ideal types, revealing significant variation in how Asian minilaterals organize security cooperation. The dataset of minilaterals and their categorization are provided in Table 1 in the Appendix.

Figure 3: Distribution of Minilaterals



55 Hoang Thi Ha, "Understanding the institutional challenge of Indo-Pacific minilaterals to ASEAN," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 44, no. 1 (2022): 1-30; Felix Heiduk and Thomas Wilkins, "Minilateralism and pathways to institutionalism progression: alliance formation or cooperative security governance?" *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 78, no. 6 (2024): 808-27.

This distribution shows a fundamental mismatch between US expectations and regional practice. While Washington increasingly expects Asian states to organize as peer coalitions capable of collectively balancing Chinese power, such arrangements comprise only 25 percent of minilaterals. The vast majority instead take the form of spheres of influence, client coalitions, and security communities, emphasizing internal order or asymmetric balancing over peer-based collective deterrence. While these latter arrangements can still produce indirect balancing effects, helping consolidate regional order and limiting Chinese strategic inroads, balancing coalitions remain the most effective minilateral design for this explicit purpose. The following subsections examine each type, demonstrating through case studies how these arrangements function in practice.

Spheres of Influence

Spheres of influence constitute 25 percent of Asian minilaterals (8 of 32), clustering in two sub-regions, with one centered on India in South Asia and another anchored by Australia in the Pacific (Figure 4). In South Asia, India functions as the central organizing power, leading five arrangements—India-Bhutan-Bangladesh, Nepal-India-Bangladesh, Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN Initiative), India-Myanmar-Thailand (IMT-TH), and the Colombo Security Conclave. In the Pacific, Australia organizes three Pacific-focused groupings—Timor-Leste-Indonesia-Australia (TIA-GT), Australia-Indonesia-Papua New Guinea, and France-Australia-New Zealand (FRANZ).[56] These patterns reflect the typology's prediction that geographic proximity and substantial power asymmetries enable hierarchical neighborhood management. The Colombo Security Conclave illustrates how this logic operates in practice.

Figure 4: Indo-Pacific Minilateral Partners, Spheres of Influence

56 FRANZ (France-Australia-New Zealand) represents a shared sphere in which the three powers jointly manage Pacific Islands disaster response and climate resilience, coordinating information sharing and infrastructure development to maintain influence over Pacific Island states.

The Colombo Security Conclave

The Colombo Security Conclave (CSC) illustrates how India employs negotiated hierarchy to manage its immediate neighborhood while preserving the formal sovereignty of participating members. What began in 2011 as a trilateral National Security Advisor-level dialogue among India, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives stalled amid political tensions but was reconvened in 2020 and formally institutionalized. The initiative has since expanded, with Mauritius joining as a full member in 2022, Bangladesh in 2024, and Seychelles in late 2025.[57]

The CSC operates through five functional pillars dedicated to maritime safety and security, counterterrorism and radicalization, trafficking and transnational crime, cybersecurity and protection of critical infrastructure, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.[58] Importantly, these cooperation areas were decided through consultation rather than imposed by India—a deliberate effort by New Delhi to address longstanding complaints about India "playing Big Brother" and imposing its agenda on them.[59] As one Indian official emphasized, "These are issues that the member countries face. They are common challenges that need to be dealt with," underscoring that topics were proposed collectively rather than dictated by India.[60] By focusing on non-traditional security threats, the CSC allows India to organize regional cooperation as a shared responsibility while reinforcing an inward-facing logic of order management.

India exercises hierarchical control through three mechanisms. First, operational cooperation centers on regular naval exercises and maritime coordination. The biannual DOSTI exercises conduct trainings on humanitarian assistance, anti-piracy, and counterterrorism operations in the Indian Ocean.[61] By providing advanced naval platforms, maritime patrol aircraft, satellite surveillance, and logistical support, India builds interoperability that fosters dependencies on its capabilities and leadership. Smaller countries contribute access to exclusive economic zones, port facilities, and political backing, reinforcing India's sphere of influence.

57 Harsh V. Pant and Aditya Gowdara Shivamurthy, "The Evolving Role of the Colombo Security Conclave," Observer Research Foundation, December 26, 2023, https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-evolving-role-of-the-colombo-security-conclave.

58 Elizabeth Roche, "Why did India's China-Related Concerns Not Figure on the Agenda of the Colombo Security Conclave in Delhi?," The Diplomat, November 21, 2025, https://thediplomat.com/2025/11/why-did-indias-china-related-concerns-not-figure-on-the-agenda-of-the-colombo-security-conclave-in-delhi/.

59 Elizabeth Roche, "Why did India's China-Related Concerns Not Figure on the Agenda of the Colombo Security Conclave in Delhi?," *The Diplomat*, November 21, 2025, https://thediplomat.com/2025/11/why-did-indias-china-related-concerns-not-figure-on-the-agenda-of-the-colombo-security-conclave-in-delhi/.

60 Quoted in Elizabeth Roche, "Why did India's China-Related Concerns Not Figure on the Agenda of the Colombo Security Conclave in Delhi?," *The Diplomat*, November 21, 2025, https://thediplomat.com/2025/11/why-did-indias-china-related-concerns-not-figure-on-the-agenda-of-the-colombo-security-conclave-in-delhi/.

61 Lt Col Ahmed Jameel, "Exercise Dosti: Enhancing Maritime Diplomacy in the Indian Ocean Small States," *Maldives National University* (blog), December 21, 2025, https://mnu.edu.mv/exercise-dosti-enhancing-maritime-diplomacy-in-the-indian-ocean-small-states/; Manav Saini, "Colombo Security Conclave: Need for Transition towards Sustainable Energy Security," *Journal of the United Service Institution of India* 153, no. 633 (July-September 2023): 453-62.

Second, India has progressively institutionalized this sphere through its maritime domain awareness infrastructure. India's Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), established in 2018, integrates CSC members through liaison officers and real-time data sharing.[62] Coastal radar chains constructed in the Maldives, Mauritius, and Seychelles feed data into Indian command centers, creating an integrated surveillance network under Indian coordination.[63] India has also transferred patrol vessels to member states and provides extensive coast guard training, creating structural dependencies with members reliant on Indian systems, expertise, and operational coordination.[64]

Third, high-level diplomatic forums enable India to manage bilateral disputes among members that might otherwise invite Chinese interference. Members signed a formal charter in 2024 establishing permanent institutions, including a secretariat in Colombo, annual working groups, and standard operating procedures for coordinated maritime operations. NSA-level meetings held annually or semi-annually provide strategic coordination. During the Maldives' 2024 "India Out" campaign, which called for the withdrawal of Indian miliary personnel operating gifted aircraft and vessels, the CSC framework provided channels for continued dialogue and coordination despite political tensions.[65] Similarly, Bangladesh participated in the 2025 NSA-level meeting despite strained bilateral relations over border and water-sharing disputes, illustrating how India uses institutionalized cooperation to manage relations with neighbors.[66]

These episodes reveal a structural reality: India's sphere is continuously contested rather than settled. Bangladesh hedges, the Maldives periodically campaigns against Indian military presence, and Nepal oscillates between accommodation and resistance, illustrating how weaker members routinely seek to balance against Indian dominance even as they depend on Indian capabilities and leadership. This resistance defines spheres of influence, as hierarchical arrangements are never simply imposed. They are continuously renegotiated, with dominant states obliged to demonstrate the benefits of cooperation to keep weaker members in line.

62 Sayantan Haldar, "Prioritising Maritime Domain Awareness in the Indian Ocean," *Observer Research Foundation* (Expert Speak – Raisina Debates), December 18, 2024, https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/prioritising-maritime-domain-awareness-in-the-indian-ocean.

63 Ankit Panda, "India Unveils New Coastal Surveillance Radar Network," *The Diplomat*, March 26, 2015, https://thediplomat.com/2015/03/india-unveils-new-coastal-surveillance-radar-network/.

64 Mandeep Singh, "India, Maldives Strengthen Maritime Security Ties to Support Regional Stability," *India Peace Defence Forum*, November 8, 2024, https://ipdefenseforum.com/2024/11/india-maldives-strengthen-maritime-security-ties-to-support-regional-stability/.

65 The Maldives was absent, however, from the 2024 NSA-level meeting of the Colombo Security Conclave but participated in maritime exercises. See Aditya Gowdara Shivamurthy, "The Challenges in Muizzu's Maldives: A Stocktaking," OFR Occasional Paper No. 433 (Observer Research Foundation, April 5, 2024), https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-challenges-in-muizzus-maldives-a-stocktaking.

66 Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "7th NSA-Level Meeting of the Colombo Security Conclave", press release, November 20, 2025, https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/40314/7th_NSALevel_Meeting_of_the_Colombo_Security_Conclave_November_20_2025. See also Sushant Singh, "How India Alienated Bangladesh," *Foreign Policy*, May 22, 2025, https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/05/22/india-bangladesh-tension-trade-border-siliguri/.

The CSC is best understood as a sphere of influence rather than a collective balancing coalition. While members participate as formal equals and decisions are consensus-based, their reliance on Indian capabilities and leadership creates leverage for New Delhi to shape agendas, set operational priorities, and guide arrangement's strategic direction. The CSC deliberately avoids an explicit anti-China framing—even as Chinese port investments and naval activity remain an implicit concern—allowing members such as Sri Lanka to maintain economic ties with Beijing while reassuring India that their territory will not be used "in any manner inimical to the security of India."[67] India exercises influence through meetings, joint exercises, and capacity-building initiatives, positioning itself as the central provider of regional maritime security and sustaining cooperation through functional mechanisms that serve both India's strategic interests and the practical security needs of its neighbors.

Security Communities

Security communities constitute the largest category at 28 percent (9 of 32), reflecting Southeast Asia's institutional preference for managing security through peer-based functional cooperation and consensus-driven decision-making rather than explicit balancing (Figure 5).[68] Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines (INDOMALPHI) coordinates maritime patrols in the Sulu and Sulawesi Seas—waters where overlapping sovereignty claims and maritime boundaries could otherwise fuel conflict. The trilateral arrangement redirects potential rivalry into cooperative law enforcement against non-state threats like armed robbery, kidnapping, and terrorism. Maritime command centers in Tarakan (Indonesia), Tawi-Tawi (Philippines), and Tawau (Malaysia) facilitate intelligence sharing while regular working-group meetings coordinate air and sea patrols.[69]

67 Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "India – Sri Lanka Joint Statement: Fostering Partnerships for a Shared Future," December 16, 2024, https://www.mea.gov.in/incoming-visit-detail.htm?38797/India++Sri+Lanka+Joint+Statement++Fostering+Partnerships+for+a+Shared+Future.

68 Gillian Goh, "The 'ASEAN Way'" *Pacific Review* 13, no. 3 (2000): 113-118; Taku Yukawa, "The ASEAN way as a symbol: An analysis of discourses on the ASEAN norms," *The Pacific Review* 31, no. 3 (2018): 298-314.

69 Gusty Da Costa, "Trilateral Partnership Strengthening Maritime Law Enforcement in Southeast Asia," Indo-Pacific Defense Forum, June 14, 2024, https://ipdefenseforum.com/2024/06/trilateral-partnership-strengthening-maritime-law-enforcement-in-southeast-asia/.

Figure 5: Indo-Pacific Minilateral Partners, Security Communities

Economic growth triangles operate according to a similar logic, with initiatives like Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT), Singapore-Malaysia-Indonesia (SIJORI), and Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA), pursuing coordinated infrastructure investment and building economic corridors that integrate subregions. Mainland Southeast Asian arrangements, including Ayeyawady-Chao-Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) and Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam (CLMV), focus on economic development, connectivity, and shared environmental risks.[70] Although economic in focus, these arrangements help manage security relations through institutionalized cooperation—regular ministerial meetings, senior official contacts, working groups—creating routine interactions and shared objectives that make sustained cooperation more advantageous than zero-sum competition. The Five Power Defence Arrangements exemplify this security community logic.

70 Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS), https://www.acmecs.org/; "Joint Media Statement of the Seventeenth CLMV Economic Ministers' Meeting," November 7, 2025, https://asean.org/joint-media-statement-of-the-seventeenth-clmv-economic-ministers-meeting/.

Five Power Defence Agreements

The Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) demonstrate how peer-based functional cooperation manages security dilemmas without explicit balancing. Established in 1971 following Britain's military withdrawal "east of Suez," the FPDA brings together Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom through a deliberately ambiguous "consultative agreement" that obligates members only to consult in the event of threats to Malaysia or Singapore.[71]

The FPDA's core function is managing what one analyst described as "the most sensitive and unstable relationship between any pair of ASEAN members."[72] Singapore and Malaysia inherited competing territorial claims, water supply dependencies, economic competition, and ethnic tensions arising from Singapore's Chinese majority population within a Malay-majority region.[73] These factors generated an acute security dilemma, as defensive measures by one— Singapore's rapid military modernization, Malaysia's defense procurement choices— could be interpreted as offensive preparations, risking arms races and preventative conflict.

The FPDA mitigated escalation risk through transparency mechanisms that revealed capabilities and intentions. The Integrated Air Defense System linked the Malaysian and Singaporean air forces through coordinated radar surveillance, air traffic control, and rapid-response procedures, fostering constant communication and operational integration.[74] This interdependence raised the costs of defection and effectively discouraged unilateral action.

Regular exercises further institutionalized cooperation. Beginning in 1972, air defense exercises grew from two to four days, providing structured opportunities for both militaries to understand each other's force postures, training, and operational doctrines.[75] While Malaysia initially refused to host land exercises with Singaporean troops, by the 1990s the annual Exercise Suman Warrior series involved Singapore's ground forces operating in Malaysia, reflecting growing trust.[76] Naval exercises similarly expanded to include

71 Damon Bristow, "The Five Power Defence Arrangements: Southeast Asian's Unknown Regional Security Organizations," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 27, no. 1 (2005): 1-20.

72 Tim Huxley, *Defending the Lion City: The Armed Forces of Singapore* (St Leonardo: Allen & Unwin, 2000), 45. The 2025 Thailand-Cambodia border conflict suggests that the Singapore-Malaysia relationship may no longer be ASEAN's most unstable bilateral pairing.

73 Timothy Huxley, "Singapore and Malaysia: A Precarious Balance?" *The Pacific Review* 4, no. 3 (1991): 204-13; Joey Long, "Desecuritizing the Water Issue in Singapore – Malaysia Relations," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* (2001): 504-32; K.S. Nathan, "Malaysia – Singapore Relations: Retrospect and Prospect," Contemporary Southeast Asia (2002): 385-410.

74 Raif Emmers, "The Five Power Defence Arrangements and Defense Diplomacy in Southeast Asia," *Asian Security* 8, no. 3 (2012): 271-86, 272-3.

75 Carlyle A. Thayer, "The Five Power Defence Arrangements: The Quiet Achiever," in First Berlin Conference on Asian Security (Berlin Group), discussion paper, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin, 14-15 September 2006, 5.

76 Abdul Rahman Yaacob, "The Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) and Regional Order: The utility of FPDA military exercises for Malaysia and Singapore," *Contemporary Security Policy* 46, 4 (2025): 830-54, 844.

coordinated patrols, anti-submarine warfare training, and surface warfare drills.[77] As trust and cooperation deepened, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew suggested in the early 1990s that both countries open their military facilities for mutual inspection, demonstrating that Singapore's arsenal "was not offensive in nature," a move Malaysia reciprocated.[78]

What distinguishes the FPDA as a security community is its sustained inward orientation. Exercises and integrated air defense address real defense needs, but their primary effect is relational, mitigating security dilemmas, building trust through routine interaction, and creating operational interdependencies that raise the costs of military conflict. Malaysia and Singapore have resolved disputes through legal arbitration rather than force, avoided arms racing despite continued modernization, and maintained extensive integration. Decades of cooperation have been formalized through defense minister and chiefs' meetings, the Consultative Council, and the Professional Forum for officers, embedding confidence-building into daily practice and making cooperation resilient to shifts in domestic politics. The FPDA has endured major regional shifts—from the Cold War's end to China's rise—because its core function does not rely on consensus about a single external threat.

Client Coalitions

Client coalitions constitute 22 percent of minilaterals (7 of 32), organized primarily by Japan and India to provide alternatives to China's Belt and Road financing in mainland Southeast Asia (Figure 6). India's Mekong-Ganga Cooperation convenes annual ministerial meetings with Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam, directing approximately $1.76 billion in Lines of Credit toward infrastructure, digital connectivity, rural electricity, and water resource management.[79] The Japan-Mekong Partnership follows similar logic, with Japan engaging the same five states through annual summits and ministerial meetings, financing infrastructure as a clear alternative to Chinese projects.[80]

77 Yaacob, "The Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) and Regional Order," 843.

78 Tamotsu Fukuda, *Managing the Security Dilemma in East Asia: The Potential and Performance of Confidence Building Measures* (Canberra: Australian National University, Strategic Defence Studies Centre, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, December 2002), https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/server/api/core/bitstreams/f269a32b-1217-48bd-80f9-a960971877b4/content.

79 Sreeparna Banerjee, "Building Corridors of Influence: India and China's Infrastructure Initiative in Myanmar and Thailand," ORF Occasional Paper No. 475 (Observer Research Foundation, May 23, 2025), https://www.orfonline.org/research/building-corridors-of-influence-india-s-and-china-s-infrastructure-initiatives-in-myanmar-and-thailand#_edn82.

80 Kei Koga, "The Emerging Power Play in the Mekong Subregion: A Japanese Perspective," *Asia Policy* 17, no. 2 (2022): 28-43.

Figure 6: Indo-Pacific Minilateral Partners, Client Coalitions

Where projects require greater resources, Japan and India have combined efforts through trilateral arrangements. Japan-India-Bangladesh infrastructure projects connect India's Northeast through Bangladesh to Southeast Asia while a proposed India-Japan-Sri Lanka export-oriented industrial corridor aims to improve connectivity and supply-chain resilience, preventing China from consolidating control over key trade and logistics routes.[81] A similar logic operates in the Pacific, where Australia, New Zealand, and Fiji seek to deepen economic integration through expanded trade and investment, advancing a shared vision of a "peaceful, prosperous, and resilient Pacific."[82] Across these cases, dominant states mobilize resources to address specific vulnerabilities, creating asymmetric partnerships based on mutual balancing interests. The Japan-Mekong Partnership demonstrates this dynamic.

81 Purnendra Jain, "The Japan-India-Bangladesh Strategic Triangle Unfastened," IDE Policy Brief No. 210 (Institute of Developing Economies –JETRO, February 19, 2025), https://www.ide.go.jp/Japanese/Publish/Reports/AjikenPolicyBrief/210.html.

82 Joint Statement: Trilateral Australia-Fiji-New Zealand Trade Ministers Meeting (21 September 2024), https://www.trademinister.gov.au/minister/don-farrell/statements/joint-statement-trilateral-australia-fiji-new-zealand-trade-ministers-meeting-saturday-21-september-2024-rotorua-new-zealand; Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI), Japan, *Conceptual Roadmap on Building Export-Oriented Industrial Corridor* (September 30, 2025), https://www.meti.go.jp/press/2025/09/20250930002/20250930002-b.pdf.

Japan-Mekong Partnership

The Japan-Mekong Partnership illustrates how medium powers organize asymmetrical arrangements toward external balancing objectives. Established in 2008 and formalized through the 2009 Tokyo Declaration, the partnership brings Japan together with Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam through annual ministerial meetings and Japan-financed development projects.[83]

Although official documents avoid explicitly framing the initiative as anti-China, policymakers and analysts widely interpret it as part of Japan's response to Beijing's growing influence, particularly following the launch of China's Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Framework in 2016.[84] Tokyo centers the partnership around "quality infrastructure," emphasizing transparency, debt sustainability, and environmental standards—principles understood as contrasting with Chinese lending practices.[85] The 2024 Mekong-Japan Cooperation Strategy situates this engagement within Japan's broader Free and Open Indo-Pacific initiative, noting that "the Mekong sub-region has the geographical advantage and plays an important role in maintaining peace, stability, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific."[86]

Japan mobilizes resources asymmetrically toward Mekong states, targeting economic dependence and infrastructure gaps. The 2018 Tokyo Strategy established a framework across connectivity, people-to-people exchanges, green technologies, and industrial development, which the 2024 Mekong-Japan Cooperation Strategy expands to include the digital economy, cybersecurity, and nontraditional security threats.[87] Japan chairs consultations, controls financing decisions through the Japan International Cooperation Agency, and determines which proposals receive support, such as the East-West and Southern Economic Corridors linking Southeast Asian industry to Japanese supply chains.[88] Mekong states provide access, political support, and diplomatic backing, allowing Japan to finance projects and set standards while they preserve strategic flexibility.

83 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, "Tokyo Declaration of the First Meeting between the Heads of the Governments of Japan and the Mekong Region Countries" (Tokyo, November 7, 2009), https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/mekong/summit0911/declaration.html; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, *Mekong-Japan Cooperation Strategy 2024* (adopted at the 15th Mekong-Japan Foreign Ministers' Meeting, July 26, 2024), https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100703926.pdf.

84 Sovinda Po and Christopher B. Primiano, "Explaining China's Lancang-Mekong Cooperation as an Institutional Balancing Strategy: Dragon Guarding the Water," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 75, no. 3 (2021): 323-40.

85 Alexandra Sakaki, "Japan in Southeast Asia: Countering China's Growing Influence," SWP Research Paper (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, 2025), https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/japan-in-southeast-asia-countering-chinas-growing-influence.

86 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Mekong-Japan Cooperation Strategy 2024*, June 26, 2024.

87 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, *Tokyo Strategy 2018 for Mekong-Japan Cooperation* (adopted October 9, 2018), https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000406731.pdf; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Mekong-Japan Cooperation Strategy 2024*, June 26, 2024.

88 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, *Co-Creation for Common Agenda Initiative* (September 2023), https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100564102.pdf.

The partnership's persistence demonstrates the viability of client coalitions in addressing external challenges through asymmetric cooperation. Japan channels financial and technical advantages through institutionalized mechanisms that deliver tangible development benefits while countering Chinese influence. Mekong states gain access to Japanese capital, expertise, and markets, fostering strategic autonomy and leveraging Japanese alternatives to negotiate with China. Chinese state media have criticized Japan's security-oriented assistance as contributing to the "threatening peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region," confirming Beijing perceives these arrangements as strategic countermeasures.[89] The partnership reflects mutual balancing interests, as Japan secures partners for its FOIP framework while Mekong states reduce dependence on China.

Collective Balancing

Collective balancing coalitions constitute only 25 percent of Asian minilaterals (8 of 32), revealing a gap between Washington's expectations and the regional practice. Three patterns emerge from the data (Figure 7). First, they are distinctly transregional, linking states across different subregions—and in some cases across continents—rather than organizing neighbors within a single geographic area. Australia-India-Indonesia spans South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific while India-Australia-France connects South Asia, the Pacific, and Europe. These coalitions emerge not from geographic proximity but from convergent threat perceptions, with states seeking partners beyond their immediate neighborhood to counter China.

Figure 7: Indo-Pacific Minilateral Partners, Collective Balancing

89 Wu Yixue, "Carefully Picking Countries for Security Aid Odd Way for Tokyo to Mend Ties with Beijing," *China Daily Global*, December 3, 2024, https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202412/03/WS674e474da310f1265a1d0aa2.html.

Second, collective balancing in Asia is overwhelmingly India-centric. Five of eight arrangements—India-Japan-Australia, India-Australia-France, India-Italy-Japan, India-Japan-South Korea, and India-France-UAE—count India as a member. This concentration reflects India's unique position as a large and growing power with significant military capabilities, direct territorial disputes with China, and no formal treaty allies, creating strong incentives for peer coalitions.[90]

Third, most collective balancing arrangements concentrate on maritime security. Five of the eight cases—India-Japan-Australia, India-Australia-France, India-France-UAE, Singapore-India-Thailand (SITMEX), and Australia-India-Indonesia—prioritize naval cooperation, freedom of navigation, and maritime domain awareness.[91] This focus reflects both the region's maritime geography and the fact that China's challenge to regional order is most visible at sea. Maritime coordination also requires lower interoperability than land-based operations, allowing states to conduct joint patrols and exercises without developing integrated coordination mechanisms. The India-Japan-Australia trilateral illustrates why collective balancing emerges but remains shallow.

Australia-India-Japan

The India-Japan-Australia trilateral shows how even favorable conditions often fail to produce the robust collective balancing. Established in 2015, the arrangement brings together three Indo-Pacific middle powers with significant capabilities and some of the region's most capable navies outside of the United States and China. Although the initial dialogue emphasized that cooperation was "not an anti-China front," subsequent statements and activities reflected shared concerns about China's growing power and assertiveness.[92] A decade later, however, the arrangement has evolved little beyond periodic consultations and modest economic cooperation.

The trilateral emerged from shared but distinct security concerns. Japan faces maritime coercion and concerns over Taiwan-related contingencies; India contends with Himalayan border disputes and growing Chinese naval activity in the Indian Ocean; and Australia confronts economic coercion and China's expanding military presence in the South China Sea and South Pacific.[93] These pressures created incentives for coordination, with one analyst describing China's behavior as providing "the glue that binds the trilateral together."[94] Collectively, the three states form a "maritime arc" linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans

90 P.S. Raghavan, "The making of India's foreign policy: From non-alignment to multi-alignment," *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 12, no. 4 (2017): 326-41.

91 Troy Lee-Brown, "Asia's security triangles: Maritime minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific," *East Asia* 35, no. 2 (2018): 163-76.

92 Suhasini Haidar, "China's Actions Cause for Concern: Australia," *The Hindu*, June 9, 2015, https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/interview/chinas-actions-cause-for-concern-australia/article10864422.ece.

93 Ian Hall, "The Australia-India-Japan Trilateral: Converging Interests… and Converging Perceptions?," *The Strategist*, March 17, 2017, https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/australia%C2%AD%C2%AD-india-japan-trilateral-converging-interests-converging-perceptions/.

94 Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "Australia-Japan-India Trilateral Sets Sights on Supply Chain Resilience," *The Diplomat*, October 2, 2020, https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/australia-japan-india-trilateral-sets-sights-on-supply-chain-resilience/.

that could, if effectively coordinated, constrain Chinese power projection.[95] Early dialogues emphasized maritime security and the rules-based order, implicitly challenging Chinese territorial claims and gray-zone coercion.[96]

Despite this strategic logic, the trilateral has not generated sustained operational cooperation. Senior officials met only four times between June 2015 and December 2017 to discuss regional security and potential initiatives.[97] The trilateral never held combined naval exercises, developed shared intelligence mechanisms, conducted coordinated maritime patrols, or established a standing defense dialogue outside bilateral frameworks. After the fourth dialogue, the formal track went dormant, with no publicly reported efforts to continue regular consultations.[98]

Where cooperation materialized, it remained narrowly focused on economics. The Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI), launched in 2021, represents the trilateral's most concrete achievement, establishing ministerial consultations on supply-chain diversification. Yet even SCRI has functioned largely as a consultative forum rather than a mechanism for coordinated action, producing limited substantive outcomes.[99]

The revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) in 2017 further reduced incentives to deepen trilateral cooperation. As the Quad elevated to leader-level summits in 2021, strategic coordination migrated to that framework, where US leadership absorbed coordination costs. In short, the presence of this hierarchical alternative crowded out investment in a parallel, peer-based trilateral.[100]

Underlying these dynamics are deeper strategic differences. Japan and Australia operate firmly within a US-led regional security architecture, viewing their alliances with Washington as foundational. India adheres to strategic autonomy, prioritizing regional centrality and multi-alignment over formal alignments. These differences generate policy friction. India's position on exclusive economic zones, requiring prior consent for foreign military vessels,

95 Yogesh Joshi, *India-Japan-Australia Minilateral: The Promise and Perils of Balancing Locally*, ORF Occasional Paper (New Delhi: Observer Research Foundation, May 24, 2017), https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-japan-australia-minilateral-the-promise-and-perils-of-balancing-locally.

96 Suhasini Haidar, "China's Actions Cause for Concern: Australia," *The Hindu*.

97 Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), Diplomatic Bluebook 2016: *Chapter 2, Section 1 –Asia and Oceania*, https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/other/bluebook/2016/html/chapter2/c020100.html; Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia), *An India Economic Strategy 2035: Chapter 17 –Bilateral Architecture* (Canberra, DFAT, 2018), https://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/trade-and-investment/india-economic-strategy/ies/chapter-17.html.

98 Ministry of External Affairs (India), "4th India-Australia-Japan Trilateral Dialogue," press release, December 13, 2017, Government of India, https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/29176/4th_IndiaAustraliaJapan_Trilateral_Dialogue_December_13_2017.

99 Jagannath Panda, "The Structural Limits of the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative," PacNet 31 (Pacific Forum, Honolulu, HI, July 8, 2021), https://pacforum.org/publications/pacnet-31-the-structural-limits-of-the-supply-chain-resilience-initiative/.

100 Sanchari Ghosh, "Four Legs Bad, Three Legs Better? Rescuing the Quad With an India Japan Australia Grouping," *The Interpreter* (Lowy Institute), September 1, 2025, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/four-legs-bad-three-legs-better-rescuing-quad-india-japan-australia-grouping.

aligns more closely with China's than that of Australia or Japan.[101] India has also remained largely neutral on Chinese behavior in the South China Sea, which Japan and Australia view as directly threatening their security.[102]

India-Japan-Australia thus demonstrates collective balancing's core dilemma. Shared threat perceptions and power symmetry can bring states together, but governance costs, bargaining friction, and divergent strategic priorities often prevent meaningful capability aggregation. Despite capable partners, overlapping concerns about Chinese power, and over a decade to develop institutional mechanisms, the trilateral remained largely consultative. The Quad tells a different story. Its elevation shows how US-led hierarchical arrangements can more effectively resolve collective-action problems—often at the expense of regional efforts to organize independent balancing coalitions.

Minilateral Diversity as Equilibrium

The observed distribution—with collective balancing comprising only 25 percent of arrangements-raises a critical question: Does this pattern represent an early stage in minilateral evolution, or does it reflect durable structural constraints? If the former, strategic patience might eventually produce the peer coalitions Washington seeks. If the latter, sustained pressure risks destabilizing functional arrangements without yielding viable alternatives. This section argues the latter, as three structural factors largely beyond Washington's control make organizational diversity the equilibrium state.

Geographic Fragmentation

The Indo-Pacific's vast distances and maritime geography fundamentally shape how states perceive threats and organize security cooperation. Unlike Europe, where proximity concentrates threats and encourages coalition formation, Asia's distances and ocean barriers fragment threat perceptions, producing divergent strategic priorities that complicate sustained peer cooperation.[103]

101 Office of the Judge Advocate General, *Military Activities in the Exclusive Economic Zone*, International Law Studies, Vol. 97 (2021), 46, U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons, https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2944&context=ils.

102 Pooja Bhatt, "Indian Presence in the South China Sea: Strategic Compulsions," *Institute for Security & Development Policy*, June 30, 2023, https://www.isdp.eu/indian-presence-in-the-south-china-sea-strategic-compulsions/; Premesha Saha, "India's Reformed Approach Towards the South China Sea Dispute: Is There Scope to Do More?," in *The South China Sea: The Geo-political Epicenter of the Indo-Pacific?*, ed. N. Hung Son and N. Thi Lan Anh (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2025), 43-59.

103 Kelly A. Grieco and Jennifer Kavanagh, "The Elusive Indo-Pacific Coalition: Why Geography Matters," *The Washington Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (2024): 103-121.

States separated by maritime expanses often do not experience Chinese coercion in the same way, and threats salient in one subregion may appear distant or manageable in another. For India, China represents a direct land threat along the Himalayan frontier, where border disputes have generated recurring crises, most recently the 2020 Galwan Valley Clash.[104] This territorial dimension raises the stakes for New Delhi in ways it does not for maritime Southeast Asian states. India's strategic attention consequently focuses on managing its immediate South Asian neighborhood, where instability could invite Chinese influence or create strategic vulnerabilities. As C. Raja Mohan argues, India's "extended neighborhood" concept reflects this geographic imperative, prioritizing regional order in South Asia and the Indian Ocean over distant theaters like the South China Sea or Taiwan Strait.[105] To be sure, India's shifting strategic environment increasingly requires engagement beyond South Asia, including building issue-based coalitions across the broader region as Chinese power expands on its periphery. Yet as Shivshankar Menon acknowledges, India's "higher priority" remains stabilizing and managing its immediate periphery, particularly the subcontinent."[106] This focus produces the spheres of influence where India channels resources toward hierarchical neighborhood management, even as the China challenge pushes New Delhi toward broader regional engagement. The pattern is different in Southeast Asia, where states experience Chinese pressure primarily as economic and maritime coercion—coast guard incursions, fishing fleet harassment, infrastructure dependencies—rather than territorial conquest.[107] To be sure, these activities threaten sovereignty and economic interests, but they also rarely pose existential risks comparable to great-power land warfare. This shapes Southeast Asian strategic preferences toward hedging rather than explicit balancing.[108] States seek to preserve flexibility, maintaining economic ties with China while developing security relationships with the United States and regional partners. This strategy manifests in security communities like INDOMALPHI and the FPDA, which address functional maritime challenges without requiring members to adopt shared threat assessments of China or coordinate explicit balancing measures.

These geographic realities mean that China poses qualitatively different challenges across subregions, making it difficult for potential balancing partners to agree on priorities, allocate resources, or sustain coordination over time.[109] The India-Japan-Australia trilateral's

104 Yudhijit Bhattacharjee, "Why Do India and China Keep Fighting Over This Desolate Terrain?," *The New York Times Magazine*, June 27, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/27/magazine/india-china-border.html.

105 C. Raja Mohan, "A bolder foreign policy," The Hindu, October 14, 1999; C. Raja Mohan, "India and its extended neighborhood," *The Hindu*, June 8, 2000. See also David Scott, "India's 'Extended Neighborhood' Concept: Power Projection for a Rising Power," *India Review* 8, no. 2 (2009): 107-43.

106 Shivshankar Menon, *India and Asian Geopolitics: The Past, Present* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2021), 347.

107 Gregory B. Poling *Crossroads of Competition: China in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands*, written testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, March 2025, https://www.csis.org/analysis/crossroads-competition-china-southeast-asia-and-pacific-islands.

108 Darren J. Lim and Zack Cooper, "Reassessing Hedging: The logic of alignment in East Asia," *Security Studies* 24, no. 4 (2015): 696-727.

109 Grieco and Kavanagh, "The Elusive Indo-Pacific Coalition."

stagnation illustrates this dynamic. While all three states share concerns about Chinese power, their priorities differ substantially. Japan prioritizes Taiwan contingencies and East China Sea disputes, Australia the South China Sea and Pacific island influence, and India on Himalayan border management and the Indian Ocean. These different geographic imperatives generate different operational requirements, Japan requiring air and missile defense and sea denial capabilities, Australia relying on long-range strike and submarine forces, and India needing mountain warfare capabilities and a blue-water navy spanning from the Straits of Malacca to the Persian Gulf. Coordination across these diverse priorities demands extensive diplomatic investment and consensus-building, raising governance costs without necessarily producing greater aggregate capability than pursuing parallel bilateral cooperation with the United States.

Distance compounds these challenges. Collective balancing assumes peer states facing a common threat will aggregate capabilities to enhance deterrence. But in Asia's vast maritime expanse, mutual reinforcement is often impractical. Indian naval forces operate primarily in the Indian Ocean, Japanese forces in the Western Pacific, and Australian forces from the Coral Sea to Southeast Asian waters. Coordinating these distances requires extensive communication, intelligence sharing, and interoperability—investments that symmetric arrangements, lacking hierarchical authority to allocate burdens, rarely make. As a result, collective balancing arrangements, where they emerge at all, remain shallow and limited in scope rather than developing into deep strategic partnerships.

Power Asymmetries

Beyond geography, regional power distributions systematically favor hierarchical arrangements over peer coalitions. In South Asia, India's economy far exceeds most of its neighbors, creating the capability differential that underwrites spheres of influence. Similarly, Japan's economy is significantly larger than that of the Mekong states, facilitating client coalitions through development assistance. By comparison, peer relationships among middle powers—India, Japan, Australia, South Korea – are rare because these states are geographically distant and face different primary threats.

The scarcity of peer relationships in Asia reflects underlying power distributions. Regional powers capable of collective balancing are few and geographically dispersed, with most states clustering around dominant neighbors. India dominates South Asia, Indonesia anchors maritime Southeast Asia, and Australia organizes the South Pacific. These power asymmetries create natural conditions for hierarchical cooperation – spheres and client coalitions—rather than peer-based balancing. States seeking partners with comparable capabilities must reach across subregions, accepting higher coordination costs and reduced operational compatibility.

US Alliance System

The presence of US alliances further reinforces hierarchical logics and reduces incentives for collective balancing. Treaty allies like Japan, South Korea, Australia, and the Philippines already participate in asymmetric security relationships with Washington, receiving extended deterrence, intelligence sharing, and access to advanced capabilities in exchange for hosting US forces and supporting American strategic objectives. Their security needs are largely satisfied through these commitments, reducing incentives to invest in costly peer coalitions with uncertain reliability. Moreover, these states anticipate continued US involvement, which limits their willingness to make the sovereignty sacrifices and pay the coordination costs that collective balancing requires.

The Quad's displacement of the India-Japan-Australia trilateral illustrates this dynamic. When the United States joined consultations, coordination migrated to the hierarchical framework, with Washington absorbing the costs and reducing the incentives for Japan, India, and Australia to pursue independent collective balancing.

The result is an equilibrium in which hierarchical arrangements – both US-led hub-and-spoke alliances and regional spheres and client coalitions—dominate the security architecture while collective balancing remains limited. Converting these hierarchical arrangements into peer coalitions would require either dramatic shifts in US commitment credibility or fundamental changes in regional power distributions – neither of which appear imminent.

What Each Type Contributes

These structural constraints explain why collective balancing remains rare and shallow. But minilaterals need not coalesce around peer-based balancing to matter strategically (Figures 8-9). India, for instance, participates in 16 minilateral arrangements across all four types, only seven of which involve collective balancing, connecting with 39 partner countries—the widest network in the region. Indonesia engages 18 countries across its minilaterals, operating entirely through spheres of influence and client coalitions, with no collective balancing, yet ranks among the region's most connected states. By delivering concrete security goods—such as counterterrorism cooperation and development assistance – they enhance regional stability while indirectly reinforcing the balance of power. Recognizing both their direct and indirect contributions is essential for setting realistic policy expectations.

Figure 8: Regional Minilateral Participation

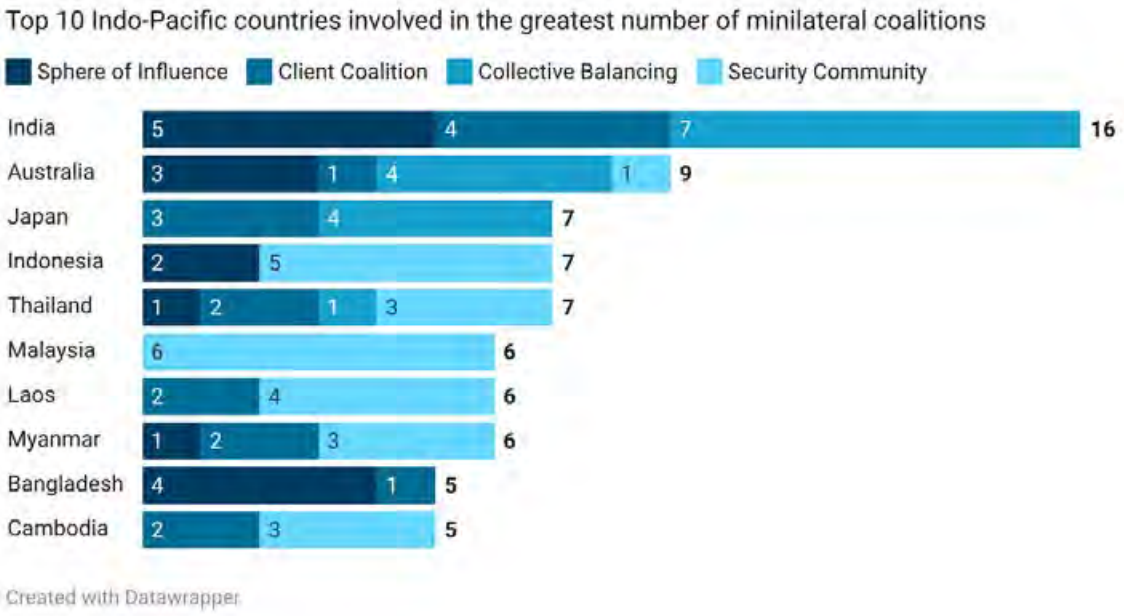
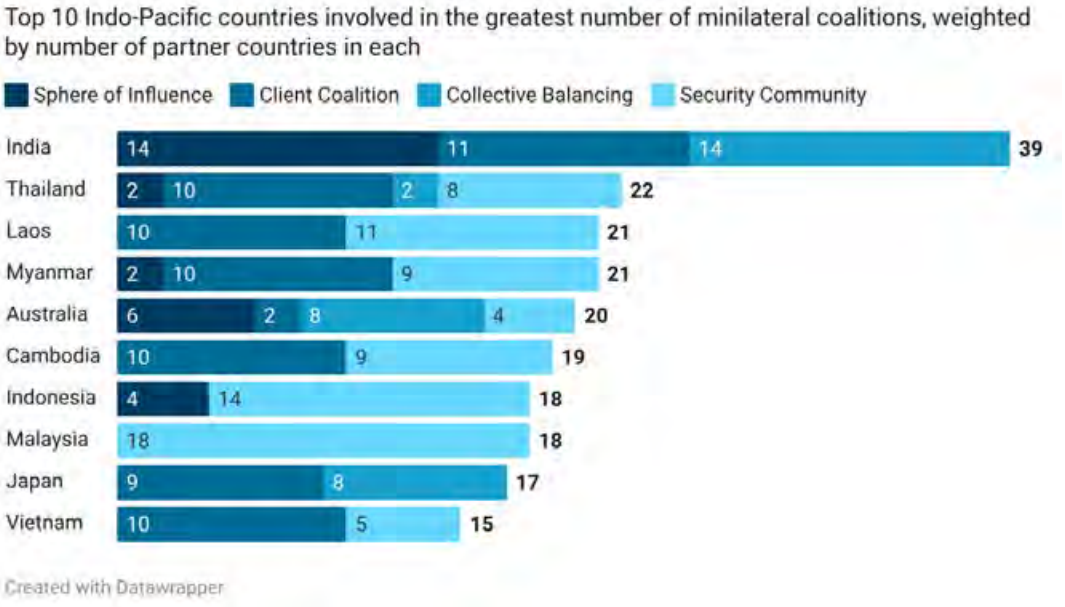


Figure 9: Regional Minilateral Reach



Spheres of influence contribute by managing instability where dominant powers have both the interests and capabilities to maintain order. By delegating regional management to states with superior local knowledge, sustained attention, and direct stakes in outcomes, these arrangements stabilize local states, reduce openings for Chinese influence, and discourage direct US-China competition that could destabilize the region. In this way, spheres of influence provide immediate security benefits while indirectly countering Chinese power and preserving the regional balance.

Client coalitions contribute by mobilizing asymmetric partnerships to contest specific dimensions of Chinese influence without requiring formal balancing commitments. By targeting discrete vulnerabilities—such as infrastructure gaps, supply chain dependencies, or climate change risks—these arrangements promote focused countermeasures. They also advance burden sharing by allowing medium powers to lead in their priority theaters in ways that contest Chinese initiatives, which in turn advances US objectives, reduce demands on American resources, and indirectly shapes the regional balance of power

Security communities make perhaps the most underappreciated contribution by reducing potential conflicts that might draw in Washington or Beijing. Great-power wars often start over seemingly peripheral disputes but escalate rapidly into wider conflicts. By institutionalizing confidence-building measures and mechanisms for conflict resolution among regional states, security communities remove flashpoints that could invite external intervention or create openings for Chinese influence. They also allow regional states to allocate resources toward functional challenges rather than competition with neighbors, creating more stable partnerships and limiting opportunities for external interference.

Collective balancing, where it exists, allows states to signal dissatisfaction with Chinese behavior and explore cooperation without the binding commitments of formal alliances. Even limited coordination can complicate Chinese calculations by demonstrating that regional states possess options beyond bilateral security ties with the United States. Although structural constraints limit how far such arrangements can deepen, they show that peer-based cooperation remains a credible option, diversifying the regional security architecture beyond purely hierarchical balancing arrangements.

Recognizing these diverse contributions does not mean abandoning efforts to strengthen collective balancing where opportunities exist. Instead, regional security depends on arrangements serving complementary functions: spheres manage local instability, client coalitions contest specific Chinese influence, security communities build intra-regional trust, and collective balancing coalitions aggregate capabilities where states have the will and ability to coordinate, however constrained. This organizational diversity reflects regional adaptation to varied strategic contexts, producing a regional security architecture that preserves the balance of power and provides greater regional security than any single minilateral type alone could achieve.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The problem with US strategy is not insufficient regional enthusiasm for cooperation, but misplaced expectations about what most minilaterals can deliver. Because minilateral diversity reflects durable structural constraints rather than temporary political hesitation, pressuring arrangements to adopt explicit balancing roles risks undermining the stability they provide. Washington should instead embrace organizational diversity and tailor support to the distinct contributions each arrangement type makes to regional security. Regional states should similarly resist one-size-fits-all pressures, preserving arrangements that serve their security needs while clearly communicating how their preferred organizational forms advance regional stability.

Recommendations for the United States

- **Avoid competing with spheres of influence in South Asia and the Pacific.** US bilateral engagement with states in the Indian and Australian spheres—like security assistance to the Maldives and access agreements with Pacific Island countries—should avoid undercutting regional leadership. Power asymmetries and geographic proximity make India and Australia more effective neighborhood managers than distant American engagement. Washington should coordinate with New Delhi and Canberra when engaging their immediate neighbors to ensure US activities reinforce rather than compete with sphere arrangements. That said, coordination does not mean complete deference, as there will be times when US interests require direct engagement. It should also welcome Indian and Australian regional stabilization efforts as valuable burden-sharing.

- **Reinforce rather than replicate client coalitions.** When Japan or India launches infrastructure initiatives in the Mekong or Indian Ocean, Washington should offer complementary support—technical expertise, financing for gaps beyond their capacity—rather than launching parallel US-led programs that fragment donor coordination. This requires regular consultations with Tokyo and New Delhi to identify coverage gaps and coordinate standards, recognizing that Japan and India lead these efforts due to their greater regional presence and sustained commitment.

- **Preserve security communities by avoiding pressure for explicit balancing.** Southeast Asian functional cooperation—INDOMALPHI maritime patrols, FPDA integrated air defense, economic triangles—advance US interests by reducing intraregional conflicts and building foundations for coordination, even when arrangements avoid anti-China rhetoric. Public demands that Southeast Asia adopt explicit balancing orientations risk forcing them into untenable positions, potentially causing functional arrangements to collapse. Instead, Washington should recognize and support security communities as key contributors to regional security.

- **Avoid crowding out peer-based coordination with US-led alternatives.** When Washington joins regional frameworks, coordination migrates to hierarchical arrangements where US leadership absorbs costs, undermining peer-based cooperation. If Washington seeks burden-sharing through peer coalitions, it should resist creating competing frameworks that substitute American leadership for regional coordination. It should preserve space for peer-based arrangements by maintaining distance from consultations not requiring US participation, recognizing that American involvement often prevents rather than facilitates the collective balancing Washington claims to support.

- **Recognize diverse forms of burden-sharing as advancing US interests.** When India stabilizes South Asia, Japan finances Mekong infrastructure, or Australia strengthens Pacific Island governance, these activities help maintain the regional balance of power. Washington should publicly acknowledge these contributions rather than dismiss arrangements that do not conform to its preferred model. It should also align rhetoric with realistic expectations about what regional minilaterals can achieve, avoiding statements that pressure all cooperation toward explicit balancing.

Recommendations for Asian States

- **Sphere leaders should institutionalize regional stabilization mechanisms.** India and Australia should develop robust capabilities for managing their neighborhoods—maritime domain awareness networks, crisis response capacity, development financing mechanisms, and deeper consultations—that demonstrate credible regional leadership. They should also maintain regular consultations with Washington to coordinate engagement while resisting pressure to turn spheres into explicit anti-China coalitions that could undermine local stability.

- **Client coalition leaders should coordinate among themselves to enhance collective leverage.** Japan, India, and capable regional powers should institutionalize consultations on infrastructure financing, capacity-building, and technology partnerships to identify coverage gaps, align standards, and prevent duplication of effort. When China imposes economic coercion, coordinated responses—such as joint financing, diplomatic support, and market access—impose costs and demonstrate that coercion will be collectively resisted. By coordinating responses, regional partners can collectively manage economic pressures, strengthening resilience and regional stability.

- **Security community members should resist conversion to explicit balancing coalitions.** Chinese maritime encroachments and US pressure for explicit alignment both risk transforming arrangements focused on managing intraregional relations into anti-China coalitions. This would sacrifice the trust-building and conflict-prevention functions these arrangements currently serve. Security communities should maintain their focus on internal management—including resolving territorial disputes among members, coordinating on transnational threats, and building economic integration—while avoiding commitments that would force them to choose between great powers.

- **Collective balancing participants should use consultative mechanisms to assess and coordinate on specific regional challenges.** Peer states should focus on intelligence-sharing and strategic dialogues addressing discrete challenges—such as maritime expansion in particular areas, economic coercion tactics, and technology dependencies. Developing a common understanding of these challenges lays the groundwork for functional coordination, even when members maintain different overall strategic orientations toward China.
- **All regional states should invest in capabilities facilitating participation across minilateral types.** They should prioritize developing maritime domain awareness networks, interoperable communication platforms, and other systems that make them valuable partners in hierarchical client coalitions, peer-based collective balancing arrangements, or functional security communities. Such investments preserve strategic options and contribute to regional security, allowing states to remain effective partners regardless of how minilateral cooperation evolves.

The Indo-Pacific security architecture will remain organizationally diverse for the foreseeable future. Success in maintaining the balance of power depends not on homogenizing this diversity, but on understanding what each minilateral type can contribute and supporting those contributions strategically. Washington's burden-sharing goals are attainable, but only if American expectations reflect regional realities rather than trying to remake Asian minilaterals. The alternative—sustained pressure for explicit balancing—risks undermining functional cooperation and leaving the region less—not more—secure, not because of Chinese strength alone, but because of Washington's own strategic overreach and mismanagement of allied and partner relationships.

APPENDIX

Table 1. All Indo-Pacific Non-Major Power Minilateral Partnerships by Type

	ASYMMETRIC	SYMMETRIC
INTERNAL MANAGEMENT	***SPHERE OF INFLUENCE*** India-Sri Lanka-Maldives (Colombo Security Conclave) India-Bhutan-Bangladesh Nepal-India-Bangladesh India-Myanmar-Thailand (IMT-TH) BBIN Initiative (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal) FRANZ Arrangement Timor-Leste-Indonesia-Australia (TIA-GT) Australia-Indonesia- Papua New Guinea (PNG)	***SECURITY COMMUNITY*** Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement (TCA)/ Indomalphi Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT) SIJORI Growth Triangle (Singapore-Johor-Riau) Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA) Coral Triangle Initiative on Coral Reefs, Fisheries, and Food Security (CTI-CFF) Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Development Triangle (CLV-DTA) Thailand-Laos-Myanmar Ayeyawady – Chao Phraya – Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam (CLMV)
EXTERNAL BALANCING	***CLIENT COALITION*** India-Japan-Sri Lanka India-Japan-Bangladesh Australia-Fiji-New Zealand India-Sri Lanka-UAE Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Japan-Mekong Partnership Program	***COLLECTIVE BALANCING*** India-Japan-Australia India-Japan-South Korea Japan-South Korea-Australia Australia-India-Indonesia India-Australia-France India-France-UAE SITMEX (Singapore-India-Thailand Maritime Exercise) India-Italy-Japan

About APLN

The Asia-Pacific Leadership Network (APLN) is a Seoul-based organisation and network of political, military, and diplomatic leaders and experts from across the Asia-Pacific region working to address global security challenges, with a particular focus on reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons risks.

The mission of APLN is to inform and stimulate debate, influence action, and propose policy recommendations designed to address regional security threats, with an emphasis on nuclear and other WMD (weapon of mass destruction) threats, and to do everything possible to achieve a world in which nuclear weapons and other WMDs are contained, diminished, and eventually eliminated.

APLN

ASIA-PACIFIC LEADERSHIP NETWORK

apln.network @APLNofficial @APLNofficial @APLNofficial