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From the CAG Team

Navigating Minilateralism: Challenges and Opportunities for ASEAN

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The rise of minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific presents both challenges and opportunities for the region's key multilateral bloc, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). On one hand, the emergence of smaller, more agile coalitions poses a direct challenge to ASEAN's much vaunted 'centrality' and raises questions about its continued relevance to the region's security architecture. On the other, minilaterals could actually be the much-needed remedy for some of ASEAN's longstanding structural deficiencies. This essay explores how ASEAN can navigate the opportunities and challenges posed by minilateralism amidst the shifting power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific.

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Minilaterals are informal coalitions formed by small groups of states with shared interests, and typically designed to perform specific functions. Their small membership allows them to act more swiftly, flexibly, and decisively, making them generally more effective at addressing challenges compared to their larger multilateral counterparts. The expansion of minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific has largely been driven by ASEAN's institutional ineffectiveness, stemming from its adherence to the 'ASEAN Way,' which emphasises consensus decision-making. As one scholar observed, "ASEAN-led mechanisms often move at a slow pace, measure 'progress' mainly through 'process,' and settle on the lowest common denominator."

This has prompted many Southeast Asian states to bypass ASEAN and form their own subgroups in order to tackle pressing challenges more effectively. The Malacca Straits Patrol and the Trilateral Maritime Patrol are prime examples of such internally driven minilateral efforts, aimed at combating piracy and transnational crime. Although these minilaterals exist outside of ASEAN's ambit, they are not perceived as a threat to the bloc. After all, they consist of ASEAN members engaging in meaningful cooperation to deliver important public goods to the region. In this way, these minilaterals actually provide ASEAN with a means to plug the gaps in its own capabilities and address challenges that it

has struggled to manage effectively.

What is perhaps more concerning for ASEAN is the emergence of externally driven minilaterals in the Indo-Pacific over the last decade, a trend for which, ASEAN again bears some responsibility. ASEAN's decades-long project to "socialise" China into accepting self-restraining norms and becoming a benign and responsible power appears to have failed miserably. Instead, a rising China has repeatedly exploited ASEAN's consensus-based decision-making process and the divergent interests among its member states, to block or dilute initiatives that could challenge its regional ambitions. This was starkly demonstrated in 2012, when Cambodia blocked ASEAN from issuing a joint statement critical of China's assertive behaviour in the South China Sea. Compounding the issue is America's waning influence in the region, diminishing what has traditionally been a crucial check on China's expanding power.

The result is that many external powers have sought alternative mechanisms that can better safeguard their interests. Externally driven minilateral arrangements like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or Quad)—comprising Australia, India, Japan, and the US—and AUKUS—Australia, the UK, and the US—have emerged in response to these shifting dynamics. Even middle powers like Japan, Australia, and South Korea, have tried to initiate their own alternative regional arrangements—albeit to varying levels of

success—further reflecting the growing frustration with ASEAN’s limitations.

Unsurprisingly, ASEAN has not been terribly receptive towards these externally driven minilaterals, viewing them as a direct challenge to its centrality in Southeast Asia and a potential threat to its role in the regional security architecture. Furthermore, there are worries that major powers could exploit these minilaterals to establish competing spheres of influence, a move that could potentially escalate tensions, widen divisions amongst Southeast Asian states, and pressure them into ‘picking sides.’

Interestingly, despite their frustrations with ASEAN, major powers have not shown any inclination to abandon the bloc. In fact, they continue to publicly affirm its centrality, even if such support may seem little more than lip service. Such behaviour is driven by pragmatism. ASEAN, for all its faults, remains the primary platform for diplomatic engagement and multilateral cooperation in Southeast Asia. For external powers like China and the US, supporting ASEAN centrality ensures them a seat at the table where they can continue to influence the region’s institutional architecture and prevent their rivals from gaining dominance. Indeed, engaging with ASEAN will continue to be the most effective way for these powers to shape regional dynamics and assert their influence in Southeast Asia.

That said, the outlook for ASEAN remains uncertain. Though major powers will continue to engage with ASEAN, their support for alternative arrangements is also likely to persist, especially if these groups prove more effective at promoting their interests. There are also signs that the US is increasingly favouring support for specific Southeast Asian countries that endorse its military presence, such as the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam, rather than backing ASEAN as a whole. In the long run, this means that while ASEAN will continue to endure, it risks becoming less consequential and “less central” to regional affairs.

ASEAN can certainly take steps to address its institutional shortcomings and mitigate its waning influence in the region. For instance, it has been suggested that the ‘ASEAN minus X’ approach could be extended beyond economic initiatives to address security challenges, particularly the South China Sea negotiations with China. In this context, the four ASEAN claimant states—Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam—could lead the talks with Beijing, allowing negotiations to be streamlined and expedited. Interestingly, such an approach essentially utilises a *minilateralism-esque* mechanism to help ASEAN overcome the competing national interests and priorities among its members that have long stalled progress in these talks. However, the challenge remains in achieving the needed consensus to implement such a

mechanism in the first place, an irony that brings this issue full circle, and continues to prevent its realisation.

ASEAN could also adopt a more strategic approach towards externally driven minilaterals. While these initiatives are often influenced by geopolitical agendas, they can still be leveraged to ASEAN's benefit. Instead of competing against them, ASEAN could explore opportunities for cooperation by identifying areas where ASEAN institutions and externally driven minilaterals could effectively complement one another. Such collaboration would allow ASEAN to remain involved in all major regional initiatives, whether led by external powers or otherwise, enabling it to advocate for its members' interests and ensure favourable outcomes for the region as a whole.

In conclusion, the rise of minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific presents both challenges and opportunities for ASEAN. While the emergence of these alternative arrangements could potentially dilute ASEAN's role in the regional security framework, they offer the bloc a chance to address its institutional limitations. By strategically engaging with minilaterals to complement its own efforts, ASEAN can remain a key player in promoting regional stability and cooperation, while effectively delivering public goods to the region. However, if it fails to adapt and seize these opportunities, it risks being sidelined as external powers increasingly turn to more

agile and effective alternatives. ASEAN's future influence will depend on how well it is able to evolve and assert its relevance in a rapidly shifting geopolitical landscape.

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