



Multilateralisms and minilateralisms in the Indo-Pacific. Articulations and convergences in a context of saturation of cooperative arrangements

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SOMMAIRE

MULTILATERALISMS AND MINILATERALISMS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC. ARTICULATIONS AND CONVERGENCES IN A CONTEXT OF SATURATION OF COOPERATIVE ARRANGEMENTS	3
1. FROM THE PROMOTION OF MULTILATERALISM TO MINILATERAL STANDARD	4
1.1. A multilateral consensus	5
1.2. Minilateral practices with distinct purposes	6
1.3. A convergence of mechanisms	9
2. THE EFFECTS OF OVERLAPPING ARENAS AND MODELS	10
2.1. Overcoming reservations about the Indo-Pacific concept	10
2.2. Minilateralisms dependent on the evolution of bilateral relations	12
2.3. An overwhelming array of opportunities: weakening multilateral mechanisms	13
3. THE CONDITIONS FOR A CONSTRUCTIVE ARTICULATION BETWEEN MODELS	14
3.1. Inclusion and autonomy of regional partners.....	14
3.2. Dealing with the regional deficit leadership.....	15
3.3. Striking a balance between forumisation and bilateralism	16
CONCLUSION	17
ANNEX 1 - DEFINITIONS: MULTILATERALISM, MINILATERALISM, COALITION, ALLIANCE... FROM CONTINUUM TO OPERATIONAL AND POLICY ISSUES	19
ANNEX 2 - FRANCE'S PRESENCE IN THE MAIN MULTILATERAL AND MINILATERAL MECHANISMS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION	20
ANNEX 3 – MAPPING – COMPARED « MULTILATERALITY » OF MAIN ACTORS OF THE INDO-PACIFIC	22

Abstract

Multilateralism and minilateralism have historically worked together in Southeast Asia, the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean region, where different models of multilateral cooperation fall within a continuum rather than distinct categories. The situation has changed with the emergence of the reference to the Indo-Pacific, as the increasing attention paid to regional actors by external powers, primarily through a security or strategic register, tends to favour tightened partnerships. The various Indo-Pacific “agendas”, “visions” and “strategies”, all agreeing on the reference to the “centrality of ASEAN”, do not intrinsically aim to weaken regional multilateralism. However, the multiplication of mechanisms and formats intensifies bilateral and minilateral solicitations towards regional actors. The result is a bypassing of deliberation platforms, a dispersion of means and an overlapping of processes, which in practice weakens the coordinated pursuit of global security objectives in the region.

Multilateralisms and minilateralisms in the Indo-Pacific. Articulations and convergences in a context of saturation of cooperative arrangements

Introduction

In Asia, the regional security architecture was historically built around ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), founded in 1967 at the initiative of its member states. Normative and institutional innovations at the regional level took the form of fora organised concentrically around the association (ZOPFAN, ASEAN+3, ARF, ADMM+). These arrangements aimed to foster the emergence of a regional security community, without compromising the principles of autonomy, sovereignty, and non-interference that regional players see as a prerequisite for political cooperation¹. The emergence of the Indo-Pacific concept has broken with this pattern of initiatives at the regional level: for the first time since the 1960s, ASEAN and its members have assimilated a strategic concept driven by external powers, likely to reshape the configuration of their multilateral cooperation. In this context, the denunciation of the potentially destabilising role played by “minilateral” fora, perceived as exogenous, is recurrent. The latter are often opposed to the multilateral arrangements supported by ASEAN, which are meant to be inclusive, driven by regional players and providing political and strategic predictability. This representation largely converges with the French discourse. Paris is promoting an “inclusive” approach that aims to break away from Quad-style minilateralism² by contributing to the consolidation of multilateral cooperation, as emphasised by the Ministerial Forum for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific initiated in February 2022 by the French Presidency of the European Union³. However, minilateralism is also part of the French repertoire in the region⁴ (see Annex 2).

Nevertheless, the opposition between multilateralism and minilateralism should be put into perspective, taking into account the continuum between these two formats, while at the same time questioning the articulation of the mechanisms and their longer-term contribution to the objectives of regional stability.

¹ Amitav Acharya, “[How Ideas Spread: Whose Norms Matter? Norm Localization and Institutional Change in Asian Regionalism](#)”, *International Organization*, vol. 58, n° 2, 19 mai 2004 ; Ralf Emmers, “[Unpacking ASEAN Neutrality: The Quest for Autonomy and Impartiality in Southeast Asia](#)”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 40, n° 3, 2018, pp. 349-370 ; ou encore Andrew Yeo, *Asia's Regional Architecture: Alliances and Institutions in the Pacific Century*, Stanford University Press, 2019, 264 p.

² The quadrilateral dialogue relaunched in 2017 between the United States, Japan, India and Australia.

³ The first edition of this Forum, held in Paris on February 22, 2022 brought together European institutions, foreign ministers from the 27 EU member states and some 30 Indo-Pacific countries, as well as representatives of regional organisations from the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

⁴ The India-France-Australia dialogue, launched in 2020 and interrupted by the crisis linked to Australia's cancellation of the submarine contract in favour of its commitment in another partnership, AUKUS; or the France-India-United Arab Emirates dialogue initiated in September 2022 and confirmed in February 2023. Under the Swedish presidency of the EU, the format has been maintained through the organisation of the EU Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum in Stockholm on May 13, 2023.

Thus, three preliminary observations can be made:

- **Chronologically, multilateralism did not precede minilateralism at the regional level** – they were instead co-constituted, with ASEAN being prefigured by several embryonic associations with a limited perimeter⁵, then facilitating the emergence of minilateral cooperation between its members.
- **Concerning the method and the articulation of the formats, all Indo-Pacific players practice minilateralism to varying extents** – for example, defence agreements with extra-regional powers⁶ have coexisted with the development of more inclusive arrangements and the institutionalisation of regional multilateralism.
- **Regarding the aims, minilateral partnerships have specific objectives without necessarily conflicting with the ambitions of multilateral arrangements** when they are intended to foster functional cooperation between players pursuing common objectives; in this respect, they may reflect a “multi-speed” multilateralism, which is not always synonymous with fragmented objectives.

However, the multiplication of formats and arenas, and their increasing overlap in the context of intensifying diplomatic and strategic commitment in the Indo-Pacific region, are leading to the weakening of deliberative spaces, the dispersion of means, and the saturation of the agendas and operational capacities of the players involved. In practice, this weakens the promotion and coordinated pursuit of global security objectives in the region⁷. As a contribution to the debate on how to prioritise existing arrangements this note identifies (1) the contrasting practices among players in the Indo-Pacific, within the scope of both the promotion of multilateralism and the minilateral uses with distinct aims; (2) it highlights the limits resulting from the multiplication of multi- and minilateral arrangements; (3) finally, it identifies the conditions for a constructive articulation between these models.

1. From the promotion of multilateralism to minilateral standard

While aiming to strengthen the multilateral security architecture on a regional scale, actors in the Indo-Pacific (hereafter “IP”) are involved in numerous “minilateral” arrangements. These are gradually becoming the standard form of international cooperation in this area. Indeed, they aim to bypass the cumbersome ASEAN-centric arenas, which are becoming less operational due to three combined dynamics: first, the multiplication of players (state and non-state actors); second, the broadening of agendas (including non-state and non-military aspects of security); finally the irreconcilable divergences within arrangements favouring decision-making by consensus, notably on how to deal with China and the United States. However, all minilateral initiatives do not further a common purpose. Some pursue opera-

⁵ For example, in 1961 the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) was created by the Philippines, Thailand and the Federation of Malaya. In 1963, the Maphilindo grouping was formed between Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia.

⁶ The Indonesian approach is opposed to any binding defence agreement. On this aspect, it diverges, for example, from Malaysia's adherence to the Five Power Defence Arrangements set up in 1971, the mutual defence treaty between the United States and the Philippines (1951), or the opening of the Changi naval base (Singapore) to the US Navy.

⁷ The framing adopted favours a broad definition of security issues on a IP scale, converging with the doctrines of regional players for whom security and defence are part of an integrated approach reflected in the notion of national and regional resilience (Delphine Allès, “[Premises, Policies and Multilateral Whitewashing of Broad Security Doctrines: A Southeast Asia-Based Critique of ‘Non-traditional’ Security](#)”, *European Review of International Studies*, vol. 6, n° 1, 2019, pp. 5-26).

tional objectives shared by the region's players, while others' *raison d'être* is to display strategic convergence without going through the deliberation and consensus-building process that characterises multilateral arenas. Despite these differences, the convergence of views on the importance of institutional and regional anchoring, particularly in the context of adherence to the principle of ASEAN's centrality, underscores the fact that the legitimising force behind political and security cooperation is still perceived as being multilateral.

1.1. A multilateral consensus

To varying degrees, the diverse narratives on the IP refer to the promotion of multilateralism and a shared ambition to consolidate the regional security architecture. For example, France's stated aim of strengthening regional multilateral institutions⁸ supporting an "open and inclusive" IP region⁹ echoes American aspirations to strengthen "regional institutions through multilateral engagement"¹⁰, "India's faith in multilateralism and regionalism"¹¹ and Australia's vision of an open, inclusive and resilient IP¹² in which integration, especially economic integration, concerns all the countries in the region¹³. In the same vein, the Canadian strategy intends to build on "key multilateral dialogues and forums in the Indo-Pacific", including with China, and affirms the country's positioning as a "champion of multilateralism"¹⁴. The strategy published by the European Union in September 2021, as well as the visions put forward by its member states (Germany and the Netherlands in September and November 2020), share this objective. This is translated most notably in the adherence to the principle of "ASEAN centrality", with which the organisation nurtures a multi-dimensional partnership that has animated relations between the two organisations for four decades¹⁵.

Japan and the United States are also united by the "centrality and unity" of ASEAN¹⁶, and their ambition to strengthen their contribution to the regional security architecture¹⁷. Australia's "steadfast commitment" to ASEAN's centrality principle, which the country aptly reaffirmed in the AUKUS announcement¹⁸, is reminiscent of India's discourse in which "inclusiveness, openness and ASEAN centrality and unity, therefore, lie at the heart of the new Indo-Pacific" – New Delhi specifying that it does not see the toponym as reflecting a "a strategy or as a club of limited members"¹⁹. A positioning paper issued by the Chinese Ministry of

⁸ French Ministry of Armed Forces, [La stratégie de défense française en Indopacifique](#), May 2019.

⁹ French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, [La stratégie de la France en Indopacifique](#), February 2022.

¹⁰ US Department of Defense, [Indo-Pacific Strategy Report. Preparedness, Partnerships and Promoting a Networked Region](#), June 1, 2019, p. 46.

¹¹ Narendra Modi, "Keynote Address at Shangri-La Dialogue", June 1, 2018.

¹² Department of Foreign Affairs and Commerce of Australia, "Priority 1: Promote a stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific", *Annual Report 2020-2021*, 2021.

¹³ Government of Australia, "Building collaboration", *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*, 2017.

¹⁴ Government of Canada, [Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy](#), 2022.

¹⁵ European Commission, [Joint Communication to the EU Parliament and the Council. The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific](#), September 16, 2021, p. 5.

¹⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "The 24th ASEAN-Japan Summit Meeting", Communiqué, October 27, 2021.

¹⁷ US Department of Defense, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ Department of Foreign Affairs and Commerce of Australia, "Australia's steadfast commitment to ASEAN centrality", Communiqué, September 20, 2021.

¹⁹ Narendra Modi, *op. cit.* The reference to the centrality of ASEAN permeates many Indian discourses, driven in particular by the Act East Policy launched in 2014 and inherited from the Look East Policy put in place in the early 1990s. At the Indian Ocean Conference in Vietnam in August 2018, Sushma Swaraj, then Minister of External Affairs, spoke of ASEAN as "central to

Foreign Affairs in August 2022 also affirmed Beijing's support for ASEAN's continued centrality and "*leadership in the evolving regional architecture*"²⁰.

This consensus, which has become commonplace, raises questions both about its meaning for the players involved and the degree of substance it covers. The principle of ASEAN's centrality can be interpreted in three ways: the organisation's central role in the development of the regional security architecture; its pioneering and lead role in the formulation of the cooperative norms and practices that underpin the mechanisms institutionalising this architecture; finally, its role as a model for other subregional arrangements²¹. This role, spelled out in the *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific* (AOIP – 2019), which highlights the importance of "connecting connectivity", is spread through the forms of cooperation promoted by ASEAN on a regional scale²². This approach built around concentric circles has historically led to the development of loosely institutionalised arenas, extended to numerous regional and extra-regional players (ASEAN Regional Forum from 1994, East Asia Summit in 2005 or, in the field of defence, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus or ADMM+ since 2010 and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum created in 2012).

These arrangements were envisioned as a way of channeling power rivalries by inserting states with divergent interests into a web of relations²³. However, the cohabitation of players now openly displaying their rivalries (China, Russia and the United States, in particular, are members of the ASEAN Regional Forum) is giving rise to growing skepticism about their functionality²⁴. Within ASEAN itself, the difficulty of coordinating the organisation's members on key issues, such as relations with China in the context of the territorial tensions in the South China Sea or the civil war in Myanmar following the military coup of February 2021, has heightened criticism on the operational limits of a consensus-based organisation. This explains the choice of regional actors to invest in parallel minilateral arrangements to implement functional cooperation.

1.2. Minilateral practices with distinct purposes

The use of "minilateralism" (see Annex 1) serves a variety of purposes. The minilateral formats historically deployed in the region, notably by ASEAN members, had functional objectives. Those that emerge in the context of the IP function as a political and strategic display, and may aim to impose operational priorities likely to reinforce or contrast with those of regional players.

the regional maritime architecture". In August 2021, her successor, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, reiterated India's commitment "to support a strong, unified and prosperous ASEAN, one whose centrality in the Indo-Pacific is fully appreciated".

²⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, "[Position Paper of the People's Republic of China on Supporting ASEAN Centrality in the Evolving Regional Architecture](#)", Communiqué, August 4, 2022. The same communiqué welcomed the publication of ASEAN's Indo-Pacific Vision as an "independent initiative", aimed to "enhance ASEAN community building process instead of creating new mechanisms or replacing the existing ones", and expressed China's readiness to engage in concrete cooperation with the organisation in the four priority areas formulated in the document.

²¹ Amitav Acharya, "[The Myth of ASEAN Centrality?](#)", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 39, n° 2, August 2017, pp. 273-279.

²² Association of Southeast Asian Nations, "[ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific](#)", June 23, 2019.

²³ Hidetaka Yoshimatsu, "[ASEAN and Great Power Rivalry in Regionalism: From East Asia to the Indo-Pacific](#)", *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, vol. 42, 2023.

²⁴ Tan See Seng, "[The Responsibility to Provide in Southeast Asia: Towards an Ethical Explanation](#)", Bristol University Press, 2019.

A. Operational minilateralisms: an opportunity for “multi-speed” cooperation

The constraints associated with the quest for consensus in multilateral fora explain certain players’ parallel investment in more limited arrangements around operational or ideological objectives, or ambitions for political rapprochement.

In the past, minilateral cooperation was based on a multi-speed approach, involving players willing to invest in the operationalisation of collectively-determined objectives at varying levels of concern and commitment, often characterised by a lack of trust among partners²⁵. Their more flexible mode of coordination and the limited number of participants, in a context where minilateral arrangements bring partners together around prior agreements on the aims of their cooperation, make them appear more conducive to a practical cooperation, which complements the general objectives defined in a multilateral framework.

Thus, structured cooperation between ASEAN members has been set up in the fight against maritime piracy (the Malacca Straits Patrols between Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand) and security and counter-terrorism between Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines²⁶. These smaller formats have helped to give substance to the political and security pillar of ASEAN. Other formats linked to ASEAN share characteristics of multilateralism and minilateralism. This is the case of ADMM+²⁷, which brings together ASEAN members and some of its strategic partners in a relatively closed system, with limited objectives and an operational focus²⁸.

At the level of the IP, certain *ad hoc* arrangements are designed to complement pre-existing multilateral formats. In this respect, Indian diplomats and military officers agree in seeing minilateralism as a means of nurturing institutional formats burdened by their weak capacity for initiative and the inherent limits of coordination within large groups. Restricted arrangements are seen as positively selective, enabling groups of actors already interacting within multilateral arenas to cooperate more effectively, outside institutional constraints²⁹. In the Indian Ocean, this approach was reflected in the organisation of a workshop by India, France, and Australia to share information and knowledge in the maritime field within the multilateral framework offered by the Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) based in Gurgaon, or by the trilateral’s reference to several multilateral arenas in the region (IORA, IONS, ASEAN, EAS or the Pacific Islands Forum)³⁰.

²⁵ Tae-Am Ohm, “[Toward a New Phase of Multilateral Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific Region: Limited Multilateralism or Issue-Based Regionalism](#)”, *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, vol. 9, n° 2, 1997, pp. 137-164; Troy Lee-Brown, “[Asia’s Security Triangles: Maritime Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific](#)”, *East Asia*, vol. 35, n° 3, juin 2018; Bhubhindar Singh, Sarah Teo, *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism, and ASEAN*, Routledge, 2020, 156 p.

²⁶ Evan A. Laksmana, “[Fit for Purpose: Can Southeast Asian Minilateralism Deter?](#)”, *Asia Policy*, vol. 17, n° 4, 2022, pp. 35-42.

²⁷ Set up in 2010, the ADMM+ brings together the 10 ASEAN Member States and 8 “dialogue partners” (Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Russia and the United States).

²⁸ See Seng Tan, « [ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting-Plus. Multilateralism mimicking minilateralism?](#) », in Bhubhindar Singh, Sarah Teo, *op. cit.*

²⁹ Interviews conducted in New Delhi, March 2023. The idea of inclusiveness added by India to the concept of a “free and open” Indo-Pacific is also reflected in the establishment of very broad cooperation initiatives and platforms that present themselves in line with ASEAN’s Indo-Pacific vision (see S. Jaishankar’s speech in November 2020). This is particularly true of the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), launched in November 2019, which in reality refers to a multi-dimensional platform for cooperation, on which India certainly relies to display its multilateral commitment and the inclusive view it takes of the region. Nevertheless, *via* this platform, Indian plurilateralism is *de facto* expressed through a combination of selective and complementary minilateral and bilateral partnerships in the various pillars that make up the initiative.

³⁰ French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, “[India-France-Australia Joint Statement on the occasion of the Trilateral Ministerial Dialogue](#)”, Communiqué, May 4, 2021.

In the Pacific, the Southwest Pacific Dialogue (Australia, Philippines, Indonesia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, and Timor Leste), whose calendar is also linked to ASEAN and ARF meetings, sets the objectives of its cooperation in the fight against illegal fishing and connectivity on a wider scale than the restricted perimeter of its members³¹. The South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting (Australia, Chile, Fiji, France, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Tonga) is not explicitly linked to or supported by a multilateral arena. It is nevertheless part of a broader effort to strengthen cooperation in the Pacific³². In 2022, the 7 countries accepted Fiji's initiative to develop a framework for greater regional coordination of HADR (Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief) activities and agreed to update POVAI ENDEAVOUR, an exercise designed to improve the coordination and interoperability of armaments in the Pacific (maritime security, peacekeeping, humanitarian aid).

B. Political minilateralisms: a risk of circumventing deliberative spaces

Minilateral formats may be complementary to multilateralism. However, some formats initiated independently from any institutional ties can be divisive. In the context of the emergence of reference to the IP, the re-reading of the region in essentially strategic and security terms has also encouraged the intensification of extra-regional minilateral initiatives³³. The numerous dialogues, particularly trilateral ones, that have emerged in recent years aim to develop functional cooperation mechanisms within a partnership approach. Nevertheless, they are characterised by their autonomous and often exogenous nature *vis-à-vis* multilateral arrangements. As such, they arouse a certain mistrust on the part of the latter's stakeholders³⁴.

Criticism of these formats is linked to their origins and aims, which are perceived as reflecting external interests likely to transform the dynamics and priorities of the regional security architecture. This is particularly true of the Quad and the AUKUS alliance, which have their own autonomous political and strategic projects. They are a source of concern to many players, particularly given the risk of heightened tensions with China. Indonesian leaders reacted negatively to the announcement of the formation of AUKUS and Australia's plans to acquire nuclear-powered submarines³⁵. Indeed, it goes against the Archipelago's vision of the IP, which makes maritime cooperation a condition for regional peace by advocating an open, cooperative, and inclusive approach.

In this context, Malaysia expressed its concerns about the alliance's impact on a potential acceleration of the arms race in the region. At the same time, the country remained cautious

³¹ "Ministers agreed to pursue concerted efforts to combat IUU fishing activities across the Southwest Pacific region, encouraging regional and international efforts to do so" (Australian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "[Joint Statement on the 15th Southwest Pacific Dialogue](#)", Communiqué, August 6, 2017).

³² Prime minister of Tonga, "[South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting](#)", Communiqué, October 25, 2022.

³³ India-Japan-Australia dialogue on supply chain resilience since 2015; Japan-Italy-UK trilateral for the development of a new-generation fighter aircraft since 2022; or more recently (2023) the India-Iran-Armenia format to strengthen the International North-South Transport Corridor and another corridor that will connect Russia and Europe *via* Armenia; or the new India-France-United Arab Emirates dialogue announced in February 2023 around a roadmap for cooperation on defence, energy (notably solar and nuclear), technology and climate change. Other dialogues of this type have also gradually emerged, such as the US-Japan-Mongolia and US-Japan-India dialogues since 2015, the US-Australia-Japan trilateral, or the India-France-Australia and Australia-Indonesia-India dialogues since 2020.

³⁴ For example, the BBIN initiative (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal) has been interpreted by some as a way for India to bypass political divergences within the SAARC (Parthapratim Pal, "[Intra-BBIN Trade: Opportunities and Challenges](#)", *ORF Issue Brief*, n° 135, Observer Research Foundation, mars 2016).

³⁵ Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "[Statement on Australia's Nuclear-powered Submarines Program](#)", Communiqué, September 17, 2021.

to avoid any rift, particularly with Australia and the UK, partners in the Five Powers Defence Arrangements³⁶. In the South Pacific, the AUKUS announcement was also greeted with reservations considering the ongoing initiatives to make the region a nuclear-weapon-free zone (Treaty of Rarotonga). In a declaration, the Prime Minister of the Cook Islands described the agreement as a destabilising factor for the Pacific. Several former Prime ministers of the region (Marshall Islands, Palau, Tuvalu, and Kiribati) supported him in a joint communiqué about the format's hijacking, considering the original priority given to environmental security and the fight against climate change in the region³⁷.

To a lesser extent, India had initially expressed reluctance to raise Quad's level or broaden its activities' spectrum. This was before agreeing to integrate Australia into the 2020 edition of the Malabar naval exercise, organised annually with the United States since 1992 and joined by Japan in 2015³⁸. This decision is often associated with the exacerbation of Sino-Indian tensions at the border, as after the clashes that took place in the Galwan Valley in June 2020, which led to the death of 20 Indian ground soldiers³⁹.

1.3. A convergence of mechanisms

In practice, awareness of the challenges facing minilateral formats disconnected from regional agendas is growing. It has prompted players to work on different forms of convergence between systems. As a result, the Quadrilateral has gradually adopted the practices and objectives that characterise multilateralism in the IP. The forum has also successively included South Korea, New Zealand, and Vietnam as part of the "Quad Plus" initiative, which puts so-called "non-traditional" security issues on its agenda. In this way, it is striving to erase the image of exclusivity and exogeneity that has aroused the mistrust of many regional players. The very announcement of the AUKUS alliance by the United States was presented by President Biden as an American contribution to a *"growing network of partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region: ANZUS; our ASEAN friends; our bilateral strategic partners, the Quad; Five Eyes countries; and, of course, our dear Pacific family"*⁴⁰ – underlining the idea of convergence and mutual reinforcement between all these arrangements and multilateral objectives on a regional scale.

France supports a similar idea and wishes to extend its trilateral dialogues, towards a possible France-Japan-Australia format focusing on the Pacific Ocean, around issues such as climate change, illegal fishing, supply chains, and access to critical materials. However, this arrangement remains autonomously conceived, and risks raising concerns among other partners in the region. The recent activation of the FRANZ agreements (France, Australia, New Zealand) to provide emergency assistance to the Kingdom of Tonga, by mobilising operational resources deployed in New Caledonia and French Polynesia, is part of a partnership perspective and converges with the objectives previously stated by the regional partners.

³⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Malaysia, "[Announcement by Australia, United Kingdom and the United States on Enhanced Trilateral Security Partnership – AUKUS](#)", Communiqué, September 19, 2021.

³⁷ Dechlan Brennan, "[Pacific Responses to AUKUS a Mix of Unease and Understanding](#)", *The Diplomat*, April 18, 2023.

³⁸ Indian Ministry of Defence, "[Malabar 2020 Naval Exercise](#)", Communiqué, October 19, 2020.

³⁹ For an analysis of India's evolving relationship with the Malabar exercise, see Harsh V. Pant, Anant Singh Mann, "[India's Malabar Dilemma](#)", *ORF Issue Brief*, n° 393, Observer Research Foundation, August 2020.

⁴⁰ Presidency of the United States, "[Remarks by President Biden, Prime Minister Morrison of Australia, and Prime Minister Johnson of the United Kingdom Announcing the Creation of AUKUS](#)", September 15, 2021.

This porosity is even more marked in the joint declaration of February 2023 confirming the trilateral dialogue between India, France, and the United Arab Emirates. On this occasion, the three countries expressed their intention to work with IORA in the fields of renewable energies, environment, and biodiversity, and with WHO on health safety⁴¹.

At the same time, dialogue fora bringing together a large number of states, which are multiplying alongside institutional mechanisms, are fostering the holding of restricted formats on the margins of plenary discussions. The 2022 report on the Shangri-La Dialogue, held annually in Singapore, praised the numerous bilateral, trilateral, and minilateral meetings held among participating delegations, noting that the organisers themselves had facilitated nearly a hundred of them⁴². Following the 2018 edition of the Seoul Defense Dialogue, held at the same frequency in the Korean capital, a press release from the Korean Ministry of Defence also highlighted the organisation of parallel minilateral meetings, notably at the vice-ministerial level with ASEAN members and Central Asian countries⁴³.

While the proliferation of minilateral formats is not systematically frowned upon by the countries bordering the IP, their support appears to be conditional on their attachment to multilateral mechanisms. In a deliberative framework, the latter establish the legitimacy of general objectives, which are then translated into operational terms within a minilateral framework. Conversely, the most contested minilateralisms are those that present the image of extra-regional initiatives whose functional scope appears secondary to the stakes of the strategic and political display, or the competition between and for regional players and resources.

2. The effects of overlapping arenas and models

This context of intensified minilateral activity produces a saturation effect, both politically and practically. The notion of IP tends to become commonplace and no longer systematically arouses reticence on account of its supposedly American origins. Nevertheless, the inflation of proposals it generates affects the effectiveness of mechanisms and their articulation with the capacities of the key actors.

2.1. Overcoming reservations about the Indo-Pacific concept

Politically, in a context of a gradual shift of the narrative and center of gravity of the regional security architecture, the proliferation of minilateral formats initially led to a perception of dispossession of regional players (Southeast Asia, Indian Ocean). The result has been a mistrust of the very notion of IP, perceived by its detractors as intrinsically exogenous despite its regional origins. Thus, in the deliberations surrounding the adoption of the AOIP, the most

⁴¹ French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, [Statement of the Government of the French Republic, the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the United Arab Emirates on the Establishment of a Trilateral Cooperation Initiative](#), February 4, 2023.

⁴² International Institute for Strategic Studies, [IISS Shangri-La Dialogue. 19th Asia Security Summit Singapore, 10-12 June 2022](#), September 2022.

⁴³ Korean Ministry of National Defense, ["The 7th Seoul Defense Dialogue \(SDD\) to be held from September 12th to 14th"](#), Communiqué, September 4, 2018.

reluctant leaders tended to borrow the analysis making the IP a “US export”. On top of that, according to the same discourse, the IP would aim at regimenting regional partners in a context of rivalry with China – despite the concept’s regional origins (Indonesia, India, Japan)⁴⁴. This perception stems from the fact that the most visible arrangements – Quad and AUKUS – are exclusive minilateral formats. They embody strategic representations that bypass the centrality of ASEAN and upset the notion of regional autonomy without offering any obvious dividends to ASEAN players. It has long been a springboard for the opposition to politicise the notion of IP. It has been reinforced by Chinese leaders’ rejection of the concept⁴⁵.

However, the gradual depoliticisation of the IP concept, following its ASEAN re-appropriation within the framework of AOIP, growing concerns about China’s assertiveness in the region, and the broadening of security concepts such as Quad and Quad+, have led to shifts in perceptions. The ISEAS (Singapore) annual opinion survey for 2020 showed that besides the 16.2 % of respondents thinking that raising the Quad to ministerial level would have a very negative or negative impact on the subregion’s security, 38 % assume it would not have any impact. On top of that, 45.8 % answered it would even have a positive or very positive impact⁴⁶. Opinion of the Quad has changed favorably in 2023. Indeed, 50.4 % of respondents believe that strengthening the Quad would be positive and reassuring for Southeast Asia. Almost 69 % believe that cooperation with the Quadrilateral Dialogue would be both beneficial and complementary to ASEAN’s efforts⁴⁷. The shift in distrust expressed by stakeholders towards the Quad is particularly linked to its efforts to broaden the spectrum of its activities. Back in 2022, prospects for cooperation in the fields of vaccines and climate change had been positively received by almost 60 % of respondents⁴⁸.

Conversely, in 2022, almost 53 % of respondents still felt that the AUKUS partnership would impact regional security⁴⁹. Its possible contribution to the acceleration of the arms race (22.5 %), the weakening of the nuclear non-proliferation regime (12.3 %), and the weakening of ASEAN’s centrality (18 %) were among the main reasons cited⁵⁰.

Nevertheless, going beyond immediate reactions, the strengthened presence of the United States and the United Kingdom in the region brings to the fore – often covertly – a dual opportunity for players anxious to preserve ASEAN’s centrality: that of producing a balancing effect in the face of China’s increasing activism on a regional scale; and that of reinforcing *de*

⁴⁴ Abe Shinzo’s speech to the Indian Lok Sabha in 2007 and Marty Natalegawa’s speech in Washington D.C. in 2013. In the case of India, although its official political use is relatively late (Narendra Modi’s speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018), the term can be found in the Indian Navy’s maritime security strategy as early as 2015. Some even trace the concept back to the historian Kalidas Nag in his 1941 book *India and the Pacific World*, in which the term referred more to a cultural and civilisational entity.

⁴⁵ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “[Wang Yi: The U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy is Bound to Be a Failed Strategy](#)”, Communiqué, May 22, 2022.

⁴⁶ ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, [The State of Southeast Asia 2020 Survey Report](#), ASEAN Studies Centre, January 16, 2020, p. 33.

⁴⁷ ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, [The State of Southeast Asia 2023 Survey Report](#), ASEAN Studies Centre, February 9, 2023, pp. 32-33.

⁴⁸ ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, [The State of Southeast Asia 2022 Survey Report](#), ASEAN Studies Centre, February 16, 2022, p. 28.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁵⁰ On this last point, another survey conducted by the Asia Society Policy Institute as part of a conference entitled “Is Minilateralism the Future of the Indo-Pacific?” (March 2022) highlighted that a majority of participants recognised the growing need for minilateral formats in the Indo-Pacific (69 %) on the basis of shared interests rather than values (72.4 %). However, just over half (51 %) saw the inherent exclusivity of these practices as a challenge to the legitimacy of multilateral platforms, notably ASEAN (see Asia Society Policy Institute, “[Is Minilateralism the Future of the Indo-Pacific? – Summary Report](#)”, March 29, 2022).

facto ASEAN's centrality and the role of its members as essential partners for third powers, notably France, wishing to retain a strategic role in the region. At a press conference in May 2023 for example, Singapore's Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan stated that, from a strategic standpoint, the country would support AUKUS insofar as the alliance made a constructive contribution to regional security, underlining Singapore's long-term relations with the three countries⁵¹. Similarly, despite an initial negative reaction, the Prime Minister of the Cook Islands was reassured by President Biden on the fact that AUKUS will respect the Treaty of Rarotonga⁵².

2.2. Minilateralisms dependent on the evolution of bilateral relations

The main criticisms of minilateral agreements concern their functionality and stability. In fact, their claim to flexibility and efficiency is operationalised in contrasting ways. Unlike cooperation linked to the agenda of a multilateral organisation, many of the minilateral formats born out of a concern for political and strategic rapprochement are seeking their own agenda. Far from reinforcing the stability of the security architecture, minilateralisms depend on the evolution of bilateral relations that are *de facto* priorities for the players involved. Thus, on the one hand, the fate of Quad is largely determined by the evolution of relations between the United States and the three other members. On the other hand, it depends on the relations between the latter and China. The trilateral India-France-Australia dialogue launched in 2020 presents a similar situation. It was put on hold due to the deterioration of bilateral relations between France and Australia following the announcement of AUKUS. In March 2023, a "Track 2" level meeting (researchers and experts) aiming to identify concrete areas of cooperation around which to relaunch cooperation between the three countries was organised.

This search for substance, beyond the political underpinnings that preside over the creation of these arrangements, also concerns the trilateral India-Japan-Italy dialogue set up in 2021. Despite the partners' stated desire to cooperate, no agenda or field of action seems to have been precisely established so far. The thematic uncertainty surrounding the creation of these dialogues is partly offset by the use of communities of experts which try to identify areas of mutual interest that might guide the operationalisation of these formats⁵³. However, these are not making up for a political commitment whose limits are sometimes also due to the overloading of agendas.

⁵¹ Singaporean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [Transcript of Joint Press Conference of the 13th Singapore-Australia Joint Ministerial Committee in Canberra, Australia](#), May 1, 2023.

⁵² Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Immigration of Cook Islands, ["Prime Minister Mark Brown Meets with U.S. Counterparts in Washington D.C."](#), Communiqué, April 3, 2023.

⁵³ In this case, a potential focal point would be the technological field, where the three countries are particularly complementary (Harsh V. Pant, Mauro Bonavita, ["India-Italy-Japan is the troika that can one-up China. It starts with Meloni's Delhi visit"](#), *The Print*, February 28, 2023).

2.3. An overwhelming array of opportunities: weakening multilateral mechanisms

Indeed, one of the greatest limitations of superimposed cooperation arrangements lies in the dilution of resources. What is at stake is not so much the “minilateral” or “multilateral” nature of the formats, but rather their multiplication. The increased visibility of the “Indo-Pacific” among the world’s strategic priorities has gone hand in hand with a reinvestment, particularly by OECD members, of various cooperations in this area, if possible for strategic or security reasons. The result is an excess of offers, particularly in South-East Asia, where each partner would like to initiate its minilateral arrangements and emerge as a “third” partner in a context of competition between China and the United States. Regional partners can no longer absorb all the proposals for cooperation, which are often perceived as redundant, ill-adapted to their needs, or not taking into account what already exists. The field of maritime safety is a prime example. In this area, regional cooperation is already well advanced, notably at the ASEAN level⁵⁴, and has long been the subject of structured cooperative arrangements at the multilateral level (including ADMM+, the information fusion centers of Singapore, Gurgaon, and Madagascar, and IORA) or bilateral level (with Japan, the United States, the European Union⁵⁵, the Netherlands, and France in particular). Then, cooperation proposals in this area putting forward general objectives without tackling concrete themes are perceived as redundant and attract only limited investment.

Failure to take account of pre-existing arrangements also runs the risk of leading to a poor assessment of the most appropriate channels for cooperation. For example, the principle of ASEAN’s centrality does not mean that the regional organisation’s General Secretariat is the best interlocutor for initiating cooperation. In fact, the Secretary General and his administration have no autonomy *vis-à-vis* member states and rely on limited administrative capacities. Then inflation of proposals, which the political, administrative, diplomatic, and strategic capacities of regional players are unable to absorb, encourages the implementation of “forum shopping” logic. This in turn results in a competition between all the cooperation opportunities. This is as true for military exercises (armies are unable to invest constructively in all exercise opportunities) as it is for political fora (in which diplomats at the highest level cannot systematically take part) and track 1.5 or 2.0 meetings (experts themselves being over-solicited).

In this context, the political and strategic proposals that come out on top are those likely to pay dividends in the short term, or which emanate from partners with whom an intensification of bilateral relations is expected (in terms of strategic acquisitions or political support, for example). This logic finds a particular incarnation in the concept of plurilateralism, defined by Indian Foreign Minister Jaishankar as “*a parallel pursuit of multiple priorities, some*

⁵⁴ Evan A. Laksmana, “[Drifting towards Dynamic Equilibrium: Indonesia’s South China Sea Policy under Yudhoyono](#)”, in Ulla Fionna, Dharma Negara, Deasy Simandjuntak, *Aspirations with Limitations: Indonesia’s Foreign Affairs under Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono*, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018, pp. 153-175.

⁵⁵ The European “Enhancing Security Cooperation In and With Asia” program presented in July 2019 is based on 7 priorities, including maritime security, through which the EU is committed at inter-multilateral (strengthening ties with ASEAN) or multilateral (Operation Atalanta) level, but above all bilaterally with, in Southeast Asia, Indonesia in particular (counter-terrorism, bilateral consultations on security and defence issues, or bilateral military commitments). In the Indian Ocean, the EU has also set up the IORIS collaborative regional platform, initiated by the EU CRIMARIO project, for information sharing and event at sea management.

*of whom could be contradictory*⁵⁶ – the contradiction finding its limit when resource constraints force to make choices. In a situation of limited capacities, this results in a *de facto* weakening of the multilateral mechanisms on which the regional security architecture is based. As seen in the context of overlapping mini- and multilateralism in the field of international trade⁵⁷, multilateral mechanisms find themselves in competition with, or even emptied of their substance by, opportunistic cooperative ventures, likely to pay dividends in the shorter term.

3. The conditions for a constructive articulation between models

The superimposition of mechanisms and the saturation of agendas resulting from the multiplication of minilateral proposals that are independent of regional multilateral arenas have led to the weakening of the latter. This results in a dilution of legitimacy and a weakening of the stability of cooperation in the IP. The recognition of the autonomy of regional partners could be one way to constructively articulate the different cooperative formats. Nevertheless, the current leadership deficit needs to be taken into account to find a balance between bilateral impulses and multi-stakeholder forums serving as fora for the dissemination of regional security standards.

3.1. Inclusion and autonomy of regional partners

Beyond the vague consensus surrounding the assertion of ASEAN's centrality, the consolidation of a regional security architecture requires the establishment of deliberative mechanisms that generate legitimacy and long-term stability, despite the weight of their decision-making processes. In this respect, a first operating principle would be to rationalise investment in minilateral arrangements, giving priority to those that explicitly aim to implement cooperative ventures moving in the same direction, rather than multiplying autonomous arrangements.

The emergence of concepts such as mini-multilateralism, which has become frequent in the ASEAN context⁵⁸ or the shaping of the cooperation in maritime safety on a regional scale⁵⁹, underlines an aspiration to rationalise the relationship between levels and types of commitments. Nevertheless, the red lines of multilateral cooperation still need to be taken into account. In a context where multilateral formats value consensus-building and where the stabilisation of relations takes precedence over their functionality, calls to choose sides are received as disqualifying injunctions. They are seen as contradictory to the principles of inclu-

⁵⁶ Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, *The India Way. Strategies for an Uncertain World*, HarperCollins, 2020, p. 16.

⁵⁷ Naoise McDonagh, "[Is plurilateralism making the WTO an institutional zombie?](#)", *East Asia Forum*, February 17, 2021.

⁵⁸ Kasira Cheeppensook, "AOIP and ASEAN's Future Outlook on the Indo-Pacific: the Thai Perspective", in Pou Sothirak, Bradley J. Murg, Charadine Pich, *ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific and U.S.-China Rivalry*, Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, January 2023, pp. 73-86.

⁵⁹ Troy Lee-Brown, "[Asia's Security Triangles: Maritime Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific](#)", *East Asia*, vol. 35, June 14, 2018, pp. 163-176.

sion, non-interference, and mutual respect that lie at the foundation of multilateral organisations and dialogues in the region⁶⁰.

In this respect, the principle of autonomy asserted by India reveals a pragmatic approach, favoring a multiplication of partnerships coupled with an explicit rejection of binding alliances (membership of the Quad at the same time as of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation), while accepting the contradictions that may result⁶¹. This is comparable to Indonesian positions. Since the end of the 2000s, the country has updated the concept of non-alignment by referring instead to the multiplication of friendships or a dynamic equilibrium between China and the United States. In this way, it has extended the refusal of binding alliances that is constitutive of Indonesia's international identity.

3.2. Dealing with the regional deficit leadership

Basing the articulation of mechanisms on a better integration of regional partners seems to be a quite consensual project. The main hurdle remains the current leadership deficit among the IP's riparian states.

Within ASEAN, initiatives driven by the organisation can only emerge if they are supported by influential members, as was the case for Indonesia during the negotiations that led to the adoption of the AOIP. While Indonesia is assuring the organisation's Secretariat General in 2023, its leaders are wary of promoting a strong political agenda focusing on consensual themes, notably economic development, and infrastructure. This choice has been justified by the desire to give material substance to the AOIP, but it is also due to internal and regional considerations. A change of executive in Indonesia is looming for 2024 (general election), and Joko Widodo, who has not pursued an ambitious international programme during his two terms in office, does not intend to propose a disruptive agenda for the end of its presidency. At the organisational level, ASEAN is hampered by the civil war in Myanmar, which it is failing to address. The instability resulting from the power transitions underway in Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam, and Singapore's preference for influence and pragmatism over leadership, offer few alternatives in the short term.

Outside Southeast Asia, Australia has joined ASEAN-led mechanisms (ARF, EAS, ADMM+). Nevertheless, this investment remains limited. Its efforts are still aiming at maintaining a lasting influence in its immediate neighborhood, notably with the "Pacific family", and its commitments have focused primarily on sub-regional arrangements (Pacific Community, Pacific Islands Forum, but also Western Pacific Naval Symposium, South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting, Southwest Pacific Dialogue and Southwest Pacific Heads of Maritime Forces Meeting). While its participation in the IORA and IONS in the Indian Ocean is coherent given the country's geographical position, it underlines its difficulty in assuming a commitment covering the entire IP. The recent creation of a Pacific Fusion Centre, following the conclusion of a memorandum of understanding with the government of Vanuatu (between 2019

⁶⁰ See the 1967 Bangkok Declaration setting out the founding principles of ASEAN; the 1999 Declaration on the principles guiding relations between CICA member states; the 1997 Bangkok Declaration at the origin of BIMSTEC; the 2005 Declaration on the New Asian-African Strategic Partnership (NAASP); or, more broadly, the founding principles of IORA, the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), the Asia-Middle East Dialogue (AMED) or the South West Pacific Dialogue (SwPD).

⁶¹ See Christophe Jaffrelot's review for the Atlantic Council : "[Christophe Jaffrelot reviews 'The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World' by Dr S. Jaishankar](#)", Atlantic Council, May 26, 2021.

and 2021 the Centre was in Canberra⁶²) seems to confirm the dynamic of geographically well-delimited commitment.

Meanwhile, India's claim to the role of regional leader encounters several limitations. In addition to the initiatives it has implemented in the region (SAGAR – Security and Growth for All in the Region in 2015, IPOI – Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative in 2020, or the posture of “net security provider” in the Indian Ocean), India is positioning itself as the “voice of the Global South”⁶³, especially while presiding the G20. India's ability to win support and position itself as a pillar of multilateral reform at the regional level is less obvious. Indeed, this process is limited by the contradictions between internal political developments and the Narendra Modi government's ongoing commitment to a “free, open and inclusive” IP. While India's Western partners remain relatively cautious regarding these internal political developments, particularly on the front of pluralism and religious freedom⁶⁴, some leaders in the region have denounced the stance taken by BJP cadres, especially towards Muslim minorities⁶⁵. More generally, confidence in India's regional commitment in the face of Sino-American strategic rivalry remains relatively limited among ASEAN members while it is perceived as credible from a European perspective. Fear of a lack of domestic stability, a perceived deficit of capacity or political will, or doubts concerning the reliability of this commitment are among the main reasons given to explain this skepticism⁶⁶.

This absence of leadership to guide the consolidation of the regional multilateral architecture has contributed to regional players increasingly taking charge of numerous parallel initiatives grafted onto their respective strategic agendas. However, with a view to rationalising commitment and articulating levels, this situation should not be seen as a sufficient reason to bypass multilateral arenas. Those are remaining the only spaces for socialisation and legitimisation likely to produce sustainable norms and objectives on a regional scale.

3.3. Striking a balance between “forumisation” and bilateralism

The challenge, particularly for states outside the region - or perceived as such, which remains largely the case for France despite its territorial presence in both oceans - is therefore to find the right levels to invest to rationalise their commitments without conflicting with multilateral structures. In addition to the aforementioned challenge of articulating efficient minilateral formats within the framework of a multi-speed multilateralism that legitimises initiatives, the strengthening of bilateral relations is a necessary step in promoting the consolidation of multilateral structures. These mechanisms have little autonomy from their

⁶² Australian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “[Australia and Vanuatu sign Pacific Fusion Centre MOU](#)”, Press communiqué, April 8, 2022.

⁶³ Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “[Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi's Opening Remarks at the Concluding Leaders' Session of the Voice of Global South Summit](#)”, January 13, 2023.

⁶⁴ This year, for the fourth year running, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) asked the U.S. State Department to designate India as a “country of particular concern” in terms of its treatment of religious minorities.

⁶⁵ In May 2022, BJP spokeswoman Nupur Sharma's remarks on television about the Prophet Mohammed, combined with other comments by BJP cadres such as Naveen Jindal a few days later, were followed by official complaints from a dozen countries. These included Indonesia, which summoned the ambassador posted in Jakarta, as well as the United Arab Emirates, the Maldives, Jordan, Bahrain and Libya, Qatar, Kuwait, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Oman and Afghanistan.

⁶⁶ To the question: “If ASEAN were to seek out ‘third parties’ to hedge against the uncertainties of the US-China strategic rivalry, who is your preferred and trusted strategic partner for ASEAN?”, India thus remains in the minority with just 11.3 % of positive opinions, up from 5.1 % in 2022, but far behind the European Union (42.9 % in 2023). See ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, [The State of Southeast Asia 2023 Survey Report](#), ASEAN Studies Centre, February 9, 2023, p. 38.

members. This raises the question of the best way to channel the diplomatic and material resources generated by the reorientation of political and strategic agendas towards the Indo-Pacific – the promotion of a subject at ASEAN headquarters, for example, is difficult to achieve without parallel support from influential members.

Another particularity of the IP is the “forumisation” of strategic discussions. This trend is receiving mixed attention – from constrained investment to skepticism. The phenomenon has intensified with the appearance of nine fora⁶⁷ led by regional states between 2010 and 2020, in addition to the pre-existing mechanisms implemented within the ASEAN framework (e. g. ASEAN-ISIS or CSCAP). Exchanges and debates within the IPRD framework (20 countries in 2022), for example, feed into the conduct of India’s maritime policy (SAGAR) and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative. The India-Africa Defence Dialogue, which has been held biennially since 2020, has also recently given rise to the India-Africa Security Fellowship Programme. This initiative, which is run by the think tank MP-IDSA on behalf of the Ministry of Defence⁶⁸, consists of inviting experts from African countries to conduct research that will in the end feeds into India’s understanding of security challenges in Africa and helps to reorient India’s priorities in the region.

The multiplication of multi-stakeholder meetings running in parallel with institutional mechanisms is perceived by some European practitioners, particularly in France, as a source of confusion, due to the accumulation effect it inspires. However, a lasting presence within these mechanisms offers the advantage of providing an additional channel for strengthening bilateral and multilateral relations. Moreover, it contributes to the development of narratives that guide strategic frameworks in the region. Multi-stakeholder fora contribute to the circulation of norms that ultimately have a significant influence on national and regional agendas. The 1990s and 2010s, when the notions of “regional resilience”⁶⁹ and “non-traditional security”⁷⁰ spread out first in the framework of think tank meetings and meetings in the 1.5 format⁷¹, demonstrated this. The growing number of meetings between Chinese and ASEAN think tanks underlines the attention paid to these players, closely linked to diplomatic and strategic circles, by the PRC’s leaders⁷².

Conclusion

In short, the analysis of the articulation of multi- and minilateral arrangements in the region calls for a rationalisation of the commitments deriving from Indo-Pacific “strategies”. The agenda saturation and the superimposition of structures, as described in this note, indirectly

⁶⁷ Putrajaya Forum (Malaysia, 2010), Jakarta International Defence Dialogue (Indonesia, 2011), Seoul Defense Dialogue (South Korea, 2012), Indo-Pacific Environmental Security Forum (United States, 2013), Ulaanbaatar Dialogue (Mongolia, 2014), Raisina Dialogue (India, 2016), Indian Ocean Conference (India, 2016), Indo-Pacific Regional Dialogue (India, 2018), India-Africa Defence Dialogue (India, 2020).

⁶⁸ “[India-Africa Security Fellowship Programme](#)”, MP-IDSA/Indian Ministry of Defence.

⁶⁹ Amitav Acharya, “[How Ideas Spread: Whose Norms Matter? Norm Localization and Institutional Change in Asian Regionalism](#)”, *International Organization*, vol. 58, n° 2, May 19, 2004.

⁷⁰ Erin Zimmerman, *Think Tanks and Non-Traditional Security. Governance Entrepreneurs in Asia*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

⁷¹ Diane Stone, “[The ASEAN-ISIS Network: Interpretive Communities, Informal Diplomacy and Discourses of Region](#)”, *Minerva*, vol. 49, May 3, 2011, pp. 241-262.

⁷² Yanjun Guo (ed.), *2030 Vision for ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership. Perspectives from Think-Tanks*, World Scientific, July 2018, 168 p.

weaken regional multilateralism which is circumvented by a multitude of autonomous minilateralisms. These mechanisms try to respond to a perceived strategic urgency caused by an increasing Chinese assertiveness and competition between the “new” IP players in the new center of gravity of world politics.

Nevertheless, the inflation of minilateral arrangements is likely to weaken the regional security architecture in the longer term. It could indeed disintegrate the spaces for deliberation, norm production, and legitimacy. Thus, the rationalisation process consists in avoiding creating new cooperations with unclear aims and deepening the saturation effect. At the same time, the process should acknowledge that minilateralism is *de facto* the norm for security cooperation in the region. The challenge for the operationalisation of Indo-Pacific “strategies” or “visions” is therefore to link them to lasting multilateral arrangements. This can either consist in favoring multi-speed formats (multilateral deliberation of general norms and objectives, minilateral operationalisation) or in engaging in the circulation and anchoring of norms irrigating multilateral cooperation. This is even more crucial in the IP context where multi-stakeholder fora are developing.

Annex 1 - Definitions: multilateralism, minilateralism, coalition, alliance... from continuum to operational and policy issues

“Multilateral” institutional formats and dialogues, “minilateral” clubs, and “alliances” or “coalitions” are frequently opposed in diplomatic and strategic discourses on the Indo-Pacific. Multilateralism (of the ASEAN type) is generally invested with a positive connotation. It is associated with greater inclusiveness, better representativeness of actors, and goals aiming at structuring and stabilising the international system. Minilateralism (Quad type) refers to exclusive dialogue clubs built around shared identities or general interests, with no quest for representativeness or legitimacy. Alliances imply mutual, binding, and lasting responsibilities. Finally, coalitions reflect a desire to organise in order to pursue defined objectives and identified interests – AUKUS thus stands somewhere between an alliance and a coalition.

Far from being opposed, these different models fall within a continuum that evolves according to the perceptions of players. These representations are largely based on the model's effectiveness and the political and strategic opportunity it offers. As a result, new concepts are emerging to describe cooperative spaces that combine these models: plurilateralism refers to a superposition of mini- and multilateral formats weaving a web of interactions. “Forumisation”, on the other hand, describes the multiplication of weakly institutionalised dialogues, in which non-state actors can take part. They aimed at fostering political convergence around shared concerns without seeking binding commitments (Raisina Dialogue, Shangri-La Dialogue).

To go further:

- Stewart Patrick, “[The New ‘New Multilateralism’: Minilateral Cooperation, but at What Cost?](#)”, *Global Summitry*, vol. 1, n° 2, Winter 2015, December 18, 2015, pp. 115-134.
- Moises Naim, “[Minilateralism. The magic number to get real international action](#)”, *Foreign Policy*, June 21, 2009.

Annex 2 - France's presence in the main multilateral and minilateral mechanisms in the Indo-Pacific region

As a founding member of the Pacific Community, which was set up in the aftermath of the Second World War (1947), France participates in several multilateral regional or sub-regional organisations through its territories in both oceans. For example, it was through La Réunion that France joined the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) in 1986, just four years after its creation. In the Pacific, New Caledonia enabled France to gradually join the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), first as an associate member in 1999, then as an observer in 2006. Noumea was admitted as a full member ten years later alongside French Polynesia. Within the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF), which was created by Fiji in 2013 a few years after its exclusion from the PIF, New Caledonia has no special status. Nevertheless, it contributes to the organisation's work. More recently, France's multilateral commitment in the Indo-Pacific was confirmed by its membership of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) in December 2020, 19 years after joining the organisation as a dialogue partner. Within IORA, France notably chairs sub-working groups in the tourism and research sectors. A few months earlier, in March 2020, a one million euros funding program had been set up by the French Development Agency (AFD) to build the capacity of IORA's General Secretariat and support its blue economy projects.

France's efforts to connect to the mechanisms set up by ASEAN (as an ASEAN dialogue partner since 2020, Paris has temporarily joined an ADMM+ expert group, as it is unable to join the mechanism as a full member; on the other hand, it is only present within the ASEAN Regional Forum through the European Union), as well as its willingness to join ReCAAP (Regional Co-operation Agreement to Combat Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia), have completed its commitment to numerous multilateral initiatives that evolve in parallel to institutional mechanisms. France takes part in some fifteen multilateral conferences, fora, and dialogues, including the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS). It chaired the IONS in the summer of 2021 and already participates in the three working groups structuring the initiative (HADR, maritime security, and information sharing).

Paris also contributes to regional efforts in maritime domain awareness and information fusion through its network of liaison officers deployed in several key centers, such as the Information Fusion Centre (Changi, Singapore) since 2009, and the Information Fusion Centre - Indian Ocean Region (Gurgaon, India) since 2019. The various components of the French armed forces in the region also take part in several multilateral exercises, such as the Milan exercise organised every two years by the Indian Navy, the Komodo exercise initiated by Indonesia, Cobra Gold (USA/Thailand) or Pirap Jabiru proposed by Australia and Thailand. Some of these maneuvers are even initiated by France, such as the Croix du Sud exercise organised by the Armed Forces in New Caledonia (23 countries in 2023), or the Marara exercise which is organised by the forces based in French Polynesia.

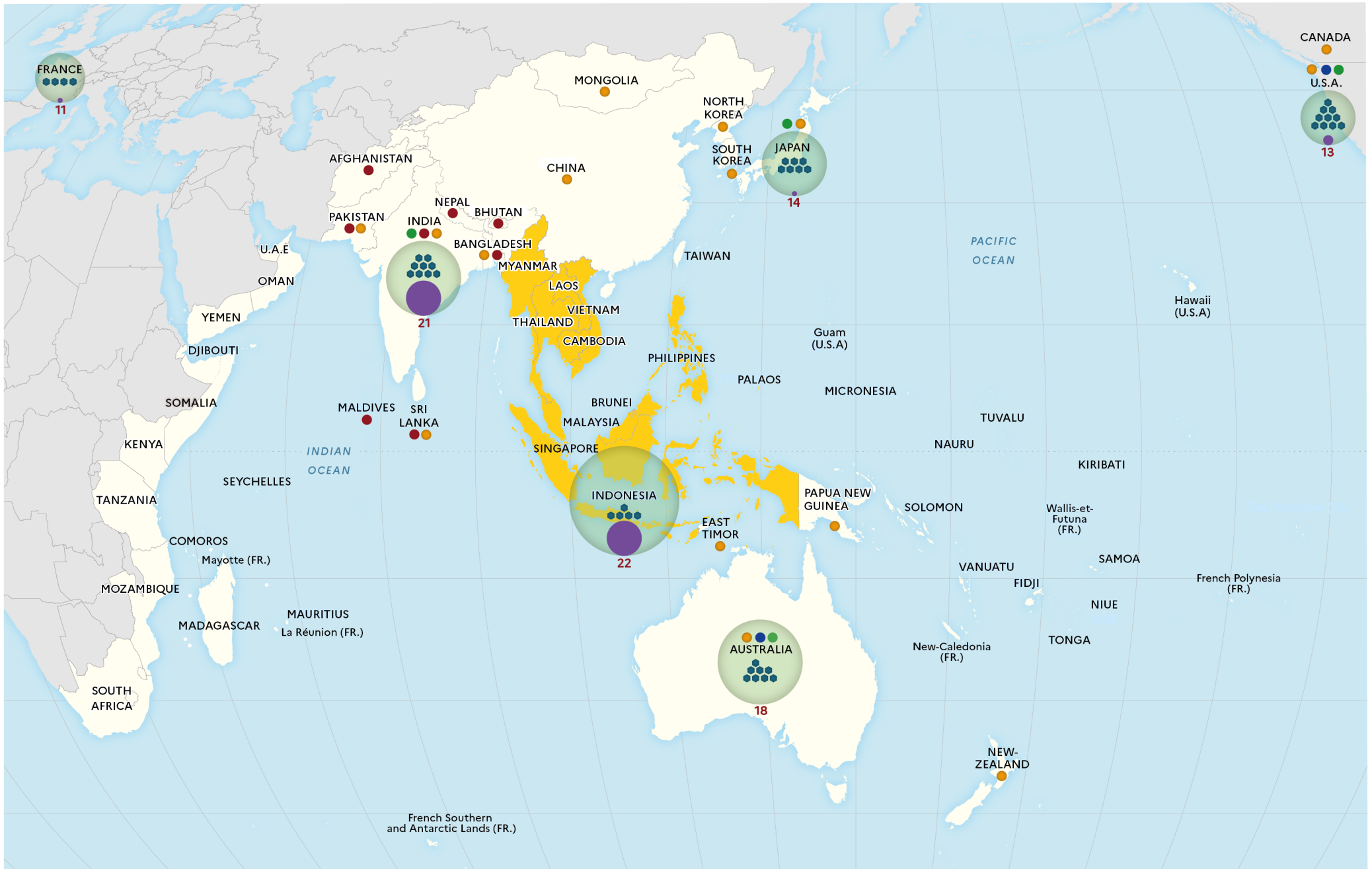
In addition to multilateral formats, France's Indo-Pacific strategy is also embodied in its participation in various minilateral arrangements. The signing of the FRANZ agreements in 1992 with Australia and New Zealand was followed, a few decades later, by the establishment of other more informal and political trilateral formats. They include the India-France-Australia dialogue since 2020 or the India-France-United Arab Emirates dialogue launched in February

2023. The establishment of the Pacific QUAD (with the United States and New Zealand) is also an illustration of the scope of French participation in more restricted cooperation mechanisms.

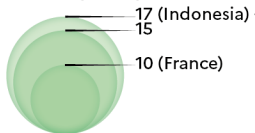
Annex 3 – Mapping – Compared “multilaterality” of main actors of the Indo-Pacific

The aim of the map accompanying the research note is to measure the “multilaterality” of 6 countries (India, Indonesia, Japan, the United States, Australia and France). For this purpose, a score system has been developed and applied to each of these countries, based on two indicators:

- Firstly, their degree of participation in multilateral mechanisms in the region (fixed points). The allocation of points is based on a sample of 25 formats comprising 9 international organisations, 13 multilateral political dialogues and forums and 3 information fusion centres. These formats were selected on the basis of their relevance (excluding those in which none of the six countries participates) and the fixed and permanent nature of their membership.
- Secondly, the degree of initiative of these countries in creating multilateral arrangements in the region (bonus points). Additional points are awarded to countries that have: 1/ either contributed to the creation of one or more of the 25 multilateral arrangements (+1); 2/ or set up other multilateral formats with flexible membership (dialogues and fora) (+1).



Score of participation in intergovernmental mechanisms



Indicative number of multilateral formats to which the country belongs

Score of initiative in creating intergovernmental mechanisms



22 Total integration score
*+2 pts for ASEAN (centrality)

Main intergovernmental groupings

- ASEAN
- ASEAN Regional Forum
- SAARC
- AUKUS
- QUAD

Multilateral partnerships

Indicative number of multilateral partnerships to which the country belongs

**The calculation of the score is based on a sampling of 25 multilateral mechanisms, including 9 organizations (ASEAN, IORA, IOC, SCO, SAARC, BIMSTEC, Pacific Community, Pacific Islands Forum, Colombo Plan); 13 forums and forums for dialogue (ASEAN+3, ARF, EAS, ADMM+, APEC, CICA, IONS, WPNS, SPDMM, ASEM, ADEM, SwPD, CSCAP) and 3 information-fusion plans (IFC, IFC-IOR, ReCAAP).