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# Occasional Paper

## Indo-Pacific Minilateralism and Strategic Competition (I):

### Australia/Japan and Chinese Approaches Compared



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## ABSTRACT

*This East-West Center Occasional Paper is the first in a set of two papers examining the ways in which Australia and Japan have sought to leverage minilateral forms of cooperation as a means of strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific. The topic of minilateralism is usually treated as response to the rise of China on the part of “Western” countries, but this obscures the fact that Beijing is also a major practitioner of minilateral forms of cooperation. This paper concludes that Australia and Japan have taken a traditional “security-first” approach to minilateralism. This stands in contrast to the more expansive approach pursued by Beijing, which focuses primarily on geoeconomics along with China’s broader goal of becoming a global leader, which has potential implications for international order. This indicates a significant “mismatch” between the respective vectors along which Australia/Japan and China are pursuing competitive advantage, and underscores how Canberra and Tokyo will need to manage the “security/economic disconnect” in the region, questions to be examined further in the second Occasional Paper that follows.*

**KEYWORDS:** AUSTRALIA-JAPAN STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP; MINILATERALISM; STRATEGIC MINILATERALISM; CHINA; QUAD; AUKUS; TRILATERAL STRATEGIC DIALOGUE; GLOBAL COMBAT AIRCRAFT PROGRAM; LANCANG-MEKONG COOPERATION; BRICS

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## INTRODUCTION: MINILATERALISM AS A TOOL OF STRATEGIC COMPETITION

This East-West Center Occasional Paper is part of an Australia-Japan Foundation funded project, entitled "Enhancing Australia-Japan Cooperation: New Approaches to Minilateralism," undertaken by Thomas Wilkins, Miwa Hirono, Kyoko Hatakeyama, and H.D.P. Envall. It is the first in a series of two papers. The second is entitled "Japan/Australia Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific: Advancing Cooperation in Order-building and Geoeconomics."

China's rise over the past decade has profoundly reshaped international relations. This has pushed other countries around the world—but especially in the pivotal region of the Indo-Pacific—to reassess and adjust their foreign policies. In seeking to address the challenges presented by China's rise, other Indo-Pacific countries are looking to boost current mechanisms intended to enhance regional cooperation as well as exploring new ways to cooperate. Bilateral strategic partnerships have proliferated in the region, as have new multilateral forums, such as trade groupings.

Alongside these established mechanisms, however, a new phenomenon of state-to-state cooperation has also captured policy attention—*minilateralism*. Some have gone so far as to argue that international affairs is experiencing an "era of minilateralism."<sup>1</sup>

Although the rise of minilateralism is a global phenomenon, it is especially apparent in the Indo-Pacific. As Tirkey notes, "The Indo-Pacific region has notably emerged as pivot for minilateral activity in recent years."<sup>2</sup> Minilateralism is already significantly transforming the nature of the region's institutional architecture and, as one of the multifarious tools in strategic competition, has the potential to reshape the regional security and economic order into the future. Countries in the region are using minilateralism to combine in small groups with like-minded partners to address shared strategic challenges that are not amenable to resolution through existing multilateral frameworks.

The United States is a major practitioner of minilateral cooperation. It is the lead player in multiple minilaterals. Indeed, Washington's active minilateralism can sometimes overshadow the fact that minilaterals are also a tool of choice for secondary states within the region. That is, countries with significant resources and influence, but not on the scale available the US or China.<sup>3</sup> Two such states in the Indo-Pacific—Australia and Japan—have been highly proactive in forging minilaterals, both together with, but also independently from, their mutual US ally.

Australia and Japan have invested heavily in a range of minilateral forums.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue or TSD (Japan, Australia, and the US) and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Japan,

<sup>1</sup> Husain Haqqani, "The Minilateral Era," *Foreign Policy*, January 10, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/01/10/minilateral-diplomacy-middle-power-india-israel-uae/>.

<sup>2</sup> Aarshi Tirkey, "Minilateralism: Weighing the Prospects for Cooperation and Governance," ORF Issue Brief 489, September 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/minilateralism-weighing-prospects-cooperation-governance/>.

<sup>3</sup> Gabriele Abbondanza, "The Odd Axis: Germany, Italy, and Japan as Awkward Great Powers," in *Awkward Powers: Escaping Traditional Great and Middle Power Theory*, ed. Gabriele Abbondanza and Thomas Stow Wilkins (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 43-71.

<sup>4</sup> 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/>.

Australia, the US, and India), Japan and Australia are also members with the US in the Trilateral Infrastructure Partnership (TIP) and the Partnership for the Blue Pacific or PBP (alongside with the UK and New Zealand). Although Japan is not yet a member of AUKUS (bringing together Australia, the UK, and the US), it may soon join the group's second pillar of cooperation.<sup>5</sup> Japan is also a member of the Global Combat Aircraft Program or GCAP (with the UK and Italy).

Focusing in on the motivations and experiences of countries such as Australia and Japan can reveal much about the emerging strategic competition shaping the Indo-Pacific and, consequently, the policy challenges facing America and its allies and partners. This particular focus also speaks to how secondary states within the region are seeking to navigate accelerating Sino-US rivalry.<sup>6</sup> Since, as Suzuki testifies, such countries “are making their own strategic moves as the United States and China compete for influence in the Indo-Pacific.”<sup>7</sup>

The strategic challenges faced by secondary powers such Japan and Australia inevitably differ from those faced by the US—in particular, Tokyo and Canberra must grapple with a growing “security/economic disconnect” in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>8</sup> In short, they are struggling to reconcile the divergence in their security and economic interests caused by Sino-American rivalry and the increasing role played by economics as a “currency of power politics” (i.e. geoeconomics). The two countries are aligned with the US in security terms but have become increasingly tied to China economically. This divergence means they are continually confronted with geoeconomic dilemmas when managing their relationships with the US and China. Their vulnerability to economic coercion by China has been repeatedly demonstrated.

Viewing minilateralism solely in these terms, however, misses an even bigger picture. Minilateralism should be seen through a wider lens that captures the “interactive” process of strategic competition. Beijing has been highly critical of minilateral institutions such as the Quad and AUKUS. Despite leveling such criticism at these kinds of minilateralism, Beijing has also become a major practitioner of minilateralism itself, as we will demonstrate.<sup>9</sup> As Wang notes, “As part of a shift toward a more activist foreign policy, China has accelerated its engagement in minilateralism.”<sup>10</sup>

That less attention has been paid to China's minilateralism has resulted in a somewhat skewed overall understanding of “minilateralism” as a newly prominent form of regional cooperation. This is problematic given that, as Gong argues, “China's approach deviates from the common understanding of

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<sup>5</sup> Ryo Nakamura, “AUKUS Weighs Japan's Participation in Defense Tech Development,” *Nikkei Asia*, March 2, 2024, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Defense/AUKUS-weighs-Japan-s-participation-in-defense-tech-development>.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen R. Nagy, “US-China Strategic Competition and Converging Middle Power Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific,” *Strategic Analysis* 46, no. 3 (2022): 260–76.

<sup>7</sup> Hiroyuki Suzuki, “Japan's Leadership Role in a Multipolar Indo-Pacific,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 23, 2020, 6.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Wilkins, “Middle Power Hedging in the Era of Security/Economic Disconnect: Australia, Japan, and the ‘Special Strategic Partnership,’” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 23, no. 1 (2023): 93–127, at 94–95.

<sup>9</sup> Miwa Hirono, H.D.P. Envall, Kyoko Hatakeyama, and Thomas Wilkins, “How Australia and Japan Can Boost Minilateralism to Counter Chinese Influence,” *East Asia Forum*, March 1, 2024, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/03/01/how-australia-and-japan-can-boost-minilateralism-to-counter-chinese-influence/>.

<sup>10</sup> Hongying Wang, “From ‘taoguang yanghui’ to ‘yousuo zuowei’: China's Engagement in Financial Minilateralism,” CIGI Paper 52, December 2014, 1, [https://www.cigionline.org/static/documents/cigi\\_paper\\_no52.pdf](https://www.cigionline.org/static/documents/cigi_paper_no52.pdf).

minilateralism.”<sup>11</sup> To build a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of minilateralism in the region, and thus of the future policy challenges facing the US and its allies, such as Japan and Australia, China’s diverging approach should also be considered.

The aim of this Occasional Paper and its follow-up is to examine the relatively overlooked approaches to minilateralism by Japan/Australia and China. By contrasting the Western experience (but from the vantagepoint of secondary powers specifically) with the Chinese experience, we aim to arrive at a more holistic appraisal of the dynamics of minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific.

This initial Occasional Paper proceeds in three parts. In the first part, we provide the necessary background to minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific. We define and categorize minilateralism and register its advantages and disadvantages. In the second part, we examine the practice of minilateralism specifically from the vantage point of Australia and Japan as allies of the US. We provide capsule case study analyses of the most prominent minilateral formations that Canberra and Tokyo participate in *jointly* (the TSD and Quad) and two other significant ones in which they are *separately* engaged (AUKUS and GCAP). In the third part, we juxtapose this with a Chinese perspective on the minilateral phenomenon to show how Beijing has responded and to illustrate the distinctive way—“minilateralism with Chinese characteristics”—it has implemented its own initiatives. Notable examples of Chinese minilateralism included here are: the Lancang Mekong Cooperation (LMC) mechanism, China-ROK-Japan Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS), the Brazil-Russia-India-China- South Africa (BRICS), and a putative China-Russia-North Korea “strategic triangle.”

What this study reveals is that Australia and Japan have tended to prioritize the security functions of the minilaterals in which they participate. But this has occurred at the expense of a more balanced approach incorporating geoeconomic functions as well as wider socio-economic areas. By contrast, China has been leveraging minilateralism primary to achieve geoeconomic objectives along with leadership goals, which has potential implications for international order. This points to a significant “mismatch” between the respective vectors through which Australia/Japan and China are pursuing competitive advantage. This mismatch has significant implications given the increasing importance of geoeconomic dynamics in the region and the growing vulnerability of secondary powers such as Japan and Australia to the security/economic disconnect.<sup>12</sup>

On this basis, our second Occasional Paper revisits Australia/Japan minilaterals to examine how Canberra and Tokyo should respond to China’s endeavors by building up further capacity in terms of international leadership especially in the geoeconomic realm. The second paper therefore looks at ways in which Australia and Japan could actually and potentially recalibrate their minilaterals to correct this mismatch.

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<sup>11</sup> Xue Gong, “Lancang-Mekong Cooperation: Minilateralism in institutional building and Its Implications,” in *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific: The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism, and ASEAN*, ed. Bhubhindar Singh and Sarah Teo (London: Routledge, 2020), 57-73, at 61.

<sup>12</sup> H.D.P. Envall, Thomas Wilkins, Kyoko Hatakeyama, and Miwa Hirono, “Minilateral Solutions to the Geoeconomic Challenges Facing Japan and Australia,” *East Asia Forum*, March 2, 2024, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/03/02/minilateral-solutions-to-the-geoeconomic-challenges-facing-japan-and-australia/>.

# 1. THE MINILATERAL PHENOMENON

## 1.1. *Defining and characterizing minilateralism*

Though the term is rapidly gaining traction in policy discourses, as well as the scholarly and thinktank communities, *minilateralism* is still attended by certain misperceptions. Commentators frequently mischaracterize examples of minilateralism as “alliances” on one hand or simply as smaller-scale multilateral institutions on the other. While minilaterals, as examples of coordinated policy action, may evince some similarities with these well-established mechanisms of institutional architecture (reflecting their “hybrid” composition), they are in fact distinct from these and represent a separate and (relatively) cohesive phenomenon.

Like many complex concepts, there is no fixed consensus on how to concretely define minilaterals, and scholarly debates continue as to this purpose. In their study of minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific Singh and Teo define them as “cooperative relations that usually involve between three and nine countries, and are relatively exclusive, flexible and functional in nature.”<sup>13</sup> In contrast to *multilateralism*, with which it is often confused or conflated, Tow describes them as “a narrower and usually informal initiative intended to address a specific threat, contingency or security issue with fewer states (usually three or four) sharing the same interest for resolving it within a finite period of time.”<sup>14</sup> While the first definition is extremely broad, the second adds greater specificity to their purpose.

As this paper demonstrates, every example of minilateralism is unique in terms of its composition, objectives, and capabilities. Some of the more robust examples of minilateralism involving several major powers might, as Koga suggests, be termed “strategic minilaterals.”<sup>15</sup> These are formations comprising of major powers with sufficient resources to impact the regional order. Accordingly, minilaterals being used as instruments of strategic competition (e.g. AUKUS or the Quad) might be distinguished from more single-issue specific (“narrow”) minilaterals (e.g. the Singapore-Indonesia-Malaysia Malacca Straits Patrol anti-piracy effort).

As in the case of other forms of regional architecture, strategic minilaterals often blend a range of *security*, *economic*, and *political* functions, even if they are weighted more heavily towards one or the other. In addition, with a more expansive interpretation of what “security” comprises, they often gather non-traditional security issues under their remit, such as maritime, environmental, or human security (development and public goods) functions. Moreover, economics itself has acquired “security” overtones in the era of strategic competition, as encapsulated in the term, “geoeconomics.” In other words, the boundaries between “hard” military cooperation and “broader” security issues have become blurred.

<sup>13</sup> Bhubhindar Singh and Sarah Teo, “Introduction: Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific,” in *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific*, ed. Singh and Teo, 1-12, at 2.

<sup>14</sup> William Tow, “Minilateral Security’s Relevance to US Strategy in the Indo-Pacific: Challenges and Prospects,” in *Contested Multilateralism 2.0 and Asian Security Dynamics*, ed. Kai He (London: Routledge, 2020), 47-61, at 50.

<sup>15</sup> Kei Koga, “A New Strategic Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific,” *Asia Policy* 17, no. 4 (2022): 27-34.

## 1.2. *Advantages and disadvantages of minilateral cooperation*

Participation in minilaterals accrues certain benefits to its members that are inherent to their nature. First, as a supplement to a member state's own national capabilities, minilaterals facilitate the pooling of resources and creation of new external capabilities through coalition formation towards achieving joint policy objectives. Second, in comparison with large and unwieldy multilateral organizations, minilaterals are more flexible and agile mechanisms to achieve tangible policy outcomes. With their exclusive composition of states with shared interests translating into common objectives, achieving consensus decision-making is easier, thus creating operational efficiencies. Third, minilateral cooperation is not bound by formal treaties or charters (as with alliances or multilateral organizations), thus allowing flexibility in terms of member's commitment.<sup>16</sup> States are thus able to regulate their participation in line with their national policy preferences and comfort levels without foreclosing on cooperation with states outside the minilateral compact.

But participation in minilateralism also comes with attendant risks. First, it may be difficult to regulate power asymmetries between partner states (in the absence of a strong formal institutional structure). This may cause inequalities in bargaining outcomes between the strongest and the weakest member states (i.e. the most powerful member may dominate the agenda). Second, their exclusiveness can be problematic. Outside parties may naturally feel affronted at their omission, including otherwise close partners. Other excluded states may feel confronted by minilateral groupings with whom they have antagonistic relations, thus further exacerbating security tensions. Lastly, as new components of the region's already cluttered regional institutional architecture, minilaterals may struggle to gain acceptance ("legitimacy") alongside more venerable institutions. In some instances, established regional institutions may perceive them as an unwelcome challenge to their own authority or view them as sources of division and instability.

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<sup>16</sup> Brendon J. Cannon and Ash Rossiter, "Locating the Quad: Informality, Institutional Flexibility, and Future Alignment in the Indo-Pacific," *International Politics* (2022): 1-22, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-022-00383-y>.

## 2. AUSTRALIA AND JAPAN: SECURITY-FOCUSED MINILATERALISM

Since both Australia and Japan are “core” US allies, this has greatly shaped their individual and joint approaches. Nevertheless, while a strong claim can be made that Australia-Japan minilateralism is designed to connect with Washington’s Indo-Pacific Strategy and is thus simply part of America’s efforts to revitalize its “networked” alliance system, upon closer inspection we can identify drivers specific to these states as secondary powers and bilateral strategic partners.<sup>17</sup>

We argue that Australian and Japanese participation in minilateralism, either together, or separately, is primarily focused on *security* outcomes. The following section develops this argument by analyzing the most important of these security-minilaterals—the TSD and the Quad, plus AUKUS and GCAP.

### 2.1. *The Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD)*

The TSD between Canberra, Tokyo and Washington was initiated in 2002 but has typically attracted less analytical attention than other minilaterals. Nevertheless, due to China’s assertive maritime behavior, the TSD has been galvanized as an instrument of strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific era and emphatically embraced the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) policy vision of a rules-based order but backed with deterrent power.<sup>18</sup> The TSD unites US treaty allies, Japan and Australia, and therefore also encompasses the bilateral Australia-Japan “Strategic Partnership.” Taken together, it constitutes something approximating a “quasi-alliance.”<sup>19</sup> The TSD’s formal institutional framework is quite scant, revolving around irregular heads of government and ministerial meetings, with a separate trilateral Security and Defense Cooperation Forum (SDCF).<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, the degree of strategic alignment and strategic trust between the three members is extremely robust, thereby permitting deep cooperation on security, defense, and military issues. In this sense, the TSD has served to create a trilateral “core” within the US alliance network potentially capable of collective deterrence and collective self-defense.<sup>21</sup>

Australia and Japan clearly derive advantages from the TSD framework, both individually and jointly. As powers lacking the strategic weight of the US or China, their national security is dependent in large measure upon their bilateral treaty alliances with Washington. Yet, both allies recognize this as a necessary but insufficient solution to ensuring regional deterrence now that uncontested American primacy has faded. With both Canberra and Tokyo expressing their deep concern over the unstable

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Wilkins, “A Hub-and-Spokes ‘Plus’ Model of US Alliances in the Indo-Pacific: Towards a New ‘Networked’ Design,” *Asian Affairs* 53, no 3 (2022): 1-24.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Marles, Nobuo Kishi, and Lloyd Austin, “United States-Japan-Australia Trilateral Defense Ministers Meeting—2022 Joint Vision Statement,” June 11, 2022, <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/statements/2022-06-11/united-states-japan-australia-trilateral-defense-ministers-meeting-2022-joint-vision-statement>.

<sup>19</sup> H.D.P. Envall and Thomas S. Wilkins, “Japan and Australia: Forging an Indo-Pacific Partnership,” in *Handbook of Japanese Security*, ed. Leszek Buszynski (Tokyo: MHM Limited, 2024), 384–99, at 385.

<sup>20</sup> John Hemmings, “Quasi-alliances, Managing the Rise of China, and Domestic Politics: The US-Japan-Australia Trilateral 1991-2015,” London School of Economics and Political Science, PhD thesis, 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Wilkins, “US-Japan-Australia Trilateralism: The Inner Core of Regional Order Building and Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific.” *Asia Policy* 19, no. 2 (2024): 159-185.



security environment in the region with respect to potential military actions by China, North Korea or Russia, separate bilateral alliances are enhanced and “triangulated” through the TSD process.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, the TSD has been instrumental in facilitating genuine three-way military and defense cooperation. This is reflected in rotational deployments by the US and Japan to Australia’s Northern Territories and a growing number of trilateral military exercises, such as Southern Jackaroo and Cope North. These are designed to develop a combined trilateral capability to react to the outbreak of a crisis contingency in the region through increasing interoperability, as they move in the direction of joint strategic planning. In essence, the TSD partners are the closest the region has to an informal “Asian NATO.”<sup>23</sup>

Yet, while Canberra and Tokyo realize that they must do more through their own efforts to support the US position in the region—as signaled by significant national military build-ups—they harbor lingering fears that the US may “abandon” them, especially in the event of a second Trump administration. The accelerating embeddedness of the TSD partners offers an additional safeguard against such a scenario through institutional continuity and inter-allied connectivity. Indeed, the TSD is the best illustration of what Taylor and Tarapore identify as the “nexus between minilateralism and deterrence.”<sup>24</sup>

## 2.2. The Quad

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue is undoubtedly emblematic of the “Indo-Pacific” concept, a vehicle for pursuing a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision and, therefore, a tool of strategic competition. Yet its hard-security functions are currently rather limited in comparison to the other cases presented here. Former Japanese Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa has emphatically claimed that the Quad is “not for security issues, nor military issues.”<sup>25</sup> With its antecedents in the Australia-Japan-US-India “core group” disaster relief response to the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, a Quad was initiated in 2007, only to be dissolved in 2008. As mutual embrace of the Indo-Pacific concept and accelerating strategic competition took hold it was revived in 2017, simply as the “Quad.”

Styling itself as “a force for regional and global good,” it involves irregular heads of government meetings and oversees a number of working groups dedicated largely to non-traditional security issues.<sup>26</sup> This includes, for example, health, maritime, environmental, space and cyber security, counterterrorism, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, as well as development assistance and cooperation on critical and emerging technologies.<sup>27</sup> Though these activities speak to the notion of

<sup>22</sup> Tomohiko Satake and John Hemmings, “Japan-Australia Security Cooperation in the Bilateral and Multilateral Contexts,” *International Affairs* 94, no. 4 (2018): 815-34.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas S. Wilkins, “Towards a ‘Trilateral Alliance?’ Understanding the Role of Expediency and Values in American-Japanese-Australian Relations,” *Asian Security* 3, no. 3 (2007): 251-78.

<sup>24</sup> Arzan Tarapore and Brendan Taylor, “Minilaterals and Deterrence: A Critical New Nexus,” *Asia Policy* 29, no. 4 (2022): 2-7, at 7.

<sup>25</sup> Anthony Milner, “A Less Muscular Quad is Evolving,” *Australian Financial Review*, May 23, 2023, <https://www.afr.com/policy/foreign-affairs/a-less-muscular-quad-is-evolving-20230522-p5da5i>.

<sup>26</sup> Penny Wong, “Joint Statement: Quad Foreign Ministers’ Meeting, New Delhi,” March 3, 2023, <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/media-release/joint-statement-quad-foreign-ministers-meeting-new-delhi>.

<sup>27</sup> US Department of State, “Joint Statement of the Quad Ministerial Meeting in New Delhi,” March 3, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-of-the-quad-ministerial-meeting-in-new-delhi/>.

“security” in broad terms, there is currently no pretense of contributing to regional deterrence in military terms.

This has led commentators to level strong criticism at the Quad for “lacking teeth” in the face of strategic competition and led to advocacy to remedy this situation.<sup>28</sup> Advocates in Canberra and Tokyo, as well as Washington, are seeking to increase maritime security cooperation—for example through the Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) framework.<sup>29</sup> With all four countries participating in the Malabar joint naval exercises (outside of the official Quad framework), analysts have pointed to the potential for combined naval deterrence.<sup>30</sup> This would certainly be welcome in Tokyo and Canberra; however, it would be difficult to achieve given that India is not a US treaty ally.<sup>31</sup> Still, the Quad is highly significant in terms of contributing to regional order-building and holds potential as a vehicle for geoeconomic cooperation as well (as will be explored in detail in our next paper).

### 2.3. AUKUS & GCAP

Australia and Japan also participate in security-focused minilaterals separately from each other and outside their bilateral Strategic Partnership. Yet these examples of outside cooperation are highly complementary to the TSD and Quad. This suggests that, while the two countries’ take an instrumental approach to minilateralism (i.e. varying their participation to their specific needs), they are also seeking to achieve shared objectives *in parallel*. This points to a wider “nexus” of minilateral configurations that is cross-bracing and mutually reinforcing.

The two most significant cases are AUKUS (Australia-UK-US) and GCAP (the Global Combat Air Program, which brings together Japan, the UK, and Italy). These minilaterals are of a different complexion to TSD and Quad, as they are more narrowly focused on defense-technological cooperation rather than broader collective efforts to shape the regional security order. Again, however, they amply illustrate the hard-security focus of Australian and Japanese minilateral efforts.

The creation of AUKUS in 2021 has led to a trilateral partnership between Canberra, London and Washington aimed at joint provision and development of nuclear-powered submarines for Australia (and the UK).<sup>32</sup> It also contains a second “pillar” aimed at jointly developing critical and emerging technologies, including many with defense applications. AUKUS has scant pretensions to contributing to

<sup>28</sup> Tom Corben and Ashley Townshend, “Quad Must Be a Seagoing Deterrent,” *Australian Financial Review*, September 24, 2021, <https://www.afr.com/policy/foreign-affairs/quad-must-be-a-seagoing-deterrent-20210923-p58u6e>.

<sup>29</sup> Australian Government, “Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness,” n.d., accessed March 4, 2024, <https://www.pmc.gov.au/resources/quad-leaders-summit-2023/indo-pacific-partnership-maritime-domain-awareness>.

<sup>30</sup> James Holmes, “To Counter China, the Quad Should Own the Military Side of Containment,” *National Interest*, October 22, 2021, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/reboot/counter-china-quad-should-own-military-side-containment-195269>.

<sup>31</sup> Kyoko Hatakeyama, Thomas Wilkins, Miwa Hirono, and H.D.P. Envall “The Quad’s Growing Focus on Maritime Security,” *East Asia Forum*, February 28, 2024, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/02/28/the-quads-growing-focus-on-maritime-security/>.

<sup>32</sup> Australian Government, “Fact Sheet: Implementation of the Australia–United Kingdom–United States Partnership (AUKUS),” n.d., accessed March 4, 2024, <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/AUKUS-factsheet.pdf>.

the Indo-Pacific regional order in the near future except through enhancing Australian (and therefore joint) deterrence and collectively pooling resources towards advanced technological competition with China. While AUKUS might appear to be simply about strengthening Australian defense capability, this endeavor will benefit Japan by increasing Australia's value as a strategic partner and reinforcing the TSD's collective deterrence from which Japan and the US gain. Tokyo is supportive of AUKUS for the additional "allied" capability it will afford, and the potential contribution it could make to Japan's defense, even if indirectly.<sup>33</sup> There is also the possibility that Japan may join AUKUS, at least in terms of participating in the group's second pillar.<sup>34</sup>

Meanwhile, in 2022, Japan together with two of its European strategic partners, the UK and Italy, established GCAP, a minilateral forum with the aim of co-developing a sixth-generation fighter. Since the US is not involved in the project, this represents a distinct example of secondary powers engaging in cross-regional minilateral cooperation to strengthen their joint capabilities. As with AUKUS, GCAP is devoted to developing a major weapons platform which will contribute to Japan's deterrence capability (and that of its strategic partners).

Also, as with the second pillar of AUKUS, there are hints that cooperation will be more expansive than the centerpiece fighter project. According to the Japanese government, "It will deepen our defense cooperation, science and technology collaboration, integrated supply chains, and further strengthen our defense industrial base."<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, while Australia and the US are not members, the "networked" minilateral effect is again apparent in reinforcing the US alliance system through enhanced "allied" capability. An American endorsement of the GCAP states that it will "greatly strengthen the U.S.-Japan Alliance and build on our cooperation with likeminded partners, further enabling joint responses to future threats in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond."<sup>36</sup> GCAP also serves Australian and Japanese interests by cultivating the strategic attention of European powers in the Indo-pacific.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Nobukatsu Kanehara, "AUKUS and Japan," *AJISS-Commentary*, September 12, 2021, [https://www.jia.or.jp/en/ajiss\\_commentary/aukus-and-japan.html](https://www.jia.or.jp/en/ajiss_commentary/aukus-and-japan.html).

<sup>34</sup> Nakamura, "AUKUS Weighs Japan's Participation in Defense Tech Development."

<sup>35</sup> Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Joint Leaders' Statement," December 9, 2022, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100432107.pdf>.

<sup>36</sup> Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "U.S. Department of Defense and Japan Ministry of Defense Joint Statement on Cooperation for Japan's Next Fighter Aircraft," December 8, 2022, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100432108.pdf>.

<sup>37</sup> Gabriele Abbondanza and Thomas Wilkins, "Europe in the Indo-Pacific: Economic, Security, and Normative Engagement," *International Political Science Review* (2023): 1-7, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01925121231202694>.

### 3. MINILATERALISM WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS

How does China's minilateralism compare to the efforts of Japan and Australia? There is no shortage of critique from Chinese quarters of the kind of security minilateralism in which Australia and Japan participate alongside their allies and partners. Chinese observers are highly critical of the kinds of security minilateralism pursued by Australia and Japan. Chen, for instance, assesses that these minilaterals have "had a relatively negative impact on inter-state relations and the regional order in the Asia-Pacific."<sup>38</sup>

China's conception of regionalism, and thus its broader strategic narrative, radically differs from that of Australia and Japan. Beijing repudiates the "Indo-Pacific" framework. Instead, it views the Indo-Pacific concept as an attempt by the US, Japan, and Australia to impose a new strategic geography upon the Asian "heartland." Additionally, Chinese analysts criticize Western minilaterals as vehicles for imposing a form of "values-based" order on the region—values such as freedom and democracy (as exemplified by FOIP).

In its own narrative, Beijing prefers to emphasize its own concepts, such as "common destiny for mankind" (or "community of shared future for mankind") and "win-win" solutions. In contrast to the exclusive purported "Cold War mentality" that American alliances and offspring minilaterals represent, Beijing highlights the primacy of non-interference with national sovereignty and the promotion of alternative models of economic development.<sup>39</sup> It is through these alternative ideas—a "geopolitical code," in Godehardt's words—that China under Xi Jinping is seeking to reassure the world about Chinese intentions as it seeks to make its influence felt on the international stage.<sup>40</sup>

To concretely entrench this influence, Beijing has leveraged international mechanisms to further its global governance aims, including multilateral institutions, such as the United Nations.<sup>41</sup> Then there are Chinese-led multilaterals, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), as well as connections with other regional bodies, notably ASEAN. Since none of the Western minilaterals include ASEAN states, Chinese analysts highlight how they challenge "ASEAN centrality" and are part of a "trend toward de-ASEANization."<sup>42</sup> Beijing distinguishes its own approach to minilateralism through explicit cooperation with ASEAN agendas (e.g. through the LMC below).

However, Beijing has also sought to use minilateral arrangements, such as BRICS, to further its aims, notably in terms of tapping into support from the "Global South." Indeed, lacking unifying security aims with its minilateral partners for the most part, China has sought to build minilaterals around geoeconomic and financial governance, denouncing Western preoccupations with security issues as

<sup>38</sup> Chen Qinghong, "Asia-Pacific Minilateral Cooperation and Its Impact," *CIR* 31, no. 3 (2021): 123-39, at 123.

<sup>39</sup> See Liza Tobin, "Xi's Vision for Transforming Global Governance: A Strategic Challenge for Washington and Its Allies," *Texas National Security Review* 2, no. 1 (November 2018): 152-64, at 153-59; Bates Gill, *Daring to Struggle: China's Global Ambitions Under Xi Jinping* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 179-82.

<sup>40</sup> Nadine Godehardt, "China's Geopolitical Code: Shaping the Next World Order," Mapping China's Strategic Space: Geopolitics, National Bureau of Asian Research, January 24, 2024, <https://strategicspace.nbr.org/chinas-geopolitical-code-shaping-the-next-world-order/>.

<sup>41</sup> "In the UN, China Uses Threats and Cajolery to Promote its Worldview," *Economist*, December 7, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/china/2019/12/07/in-the-un-china-uses-threats-and-cajolery-to-promote-its-worldview>.

<sup>42</sup> Chen, "Asia-Pacific Minilateral Cooperation and Its Impact," 125.

“surpassing nominally important economic questions.”<sup>43</sup> To avoid contentious security issues, Beijing has preferred to exercise its economic power as an enticement for cooperation frequently framed as “promoting regional prosperity.”<sup>44</sup> As Kobayashi and Sanchez note, “China is seeking to maximize its interests via minilateral arrangements and institutions, which reform the *status quo* or, alternatively, create new paths that better reflect Chinese interests and ideas.”<sup>45</sup>

For China, therefore, minilateralism serves as but one mechanism in a multidimensional approach to regional architecture that leverages both an extensive range of bilateral Strategic Partnerships as well as multilateral institutions. In fact, China is seeking to create a web of interlocking bilateral, multilateral and minilateral arrangements to advance its diplomacy, often leading to a blurring of boundaries between them. This is further reflected in China’s apparent willingness to expand the reach of *minilateral* formations into a *multilateral* format over time, through the addition of new members. This is evident in the case of the Shanghai Five minilateral becoming the multilateralized Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The ongoing expansion of BRICS also points to this trend. This means that although China is strategically competing with the US and its allies in the broader context, it is competing across different vectors.

### 3.1. Lancang Mekong Cooperation (LMC)

The Lancang Mekong Cooperation format was established in 2016 at the China-ASEAN Leaders Meeting and brings China together with Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Thailand (all ASEAN members) to sustainably manage the water resources between these riparian states. With its secretariat based in Beijing, the LMC’s organizational structure is based upon a “3+5” formula. In clear emulation of ASEAN, it is based around three “pillars”: (i) political-security issues; (ii) economic affairs and sustainable development; and (iii) social affairs and people-to-people exchanges. These pillars cover five clusters of activities, including: regional connectivity, industrial cooperation, cross-border economic cooperation, water resources management and agricultural cooperation, and poverty reduction.<sup>46</sup>

This demonstrates two features of China’s minilateralism. First, it covers multi-dimensional fields that go beyond hard security issues and encompass political and socio-economic issues. Second, contrary to the Western practice of minilateralism, China’s minilateralism adopts a more formal organizational format, taking its cues from ASEAN multilateralism. This also defies assumptions that minilaterals (as per the Western experience) will not be formally institutionalized.

The LMC brings important benefits to its Southeast Asian members, particularly in terms of infrastructure financing and development, and assistance in education and poverty reduction through funds distributed from Beijing (public goods), all of which aligns with China’s cooperation with its bilateral partners in Southeast Asia and with ASEAN. Beijing takes a multi-pronged approach to regional cooperation—with collaboration occurring across the multilateral, minilateral and bilateral levels. The LMC intersects and overlaps with China+1 bilateral agreements, but also with the BRI. As Gong notes,

<sup>43</sup> Chen, “Asia-Pacific Minilateral Cooperation and Its Impact,” 129.

<sup>44</sup> Chen, “Asia-Pacific Minilateral Cooperation and Its Impact,” 130.

<sup>45</sup> Yuka Kobayashi and Amaia Sanchez, “Minilateralism à la Chine: Strategic Responsibility in Climate Change and Global Finance,” Lau China Institute Policy Paper Series 1, no. 6 (2017): 1-17, at 15.

<sup>46</sup> Lancang-Mekong Cooperation China Secretariat, “3+5 Cooperation Framework,” December 14, 2017, [http://www.lmcchina.org/eng/2017-12/14/content\\_41449855.html](http://www.lmcchina.org/eng/2017-12/14/content_41449855.html).

this reflects “Beijing’s growing interest in establishing different levels of mechanisms to promote its interests in Southeast Asia.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, the formal apparatus of the LMC itself is inter-meshed within a complex of other bilateral and multilateral arrangements, employed between Beijing and the continental Southeast Asian states. Furthermore, the LMC advertises its intent to connect with ASEAN’s Master Plan goals and invites the ASEAN Secretariat to LMC meetings.

While cooperation spans the multilateral, minilateral and bilateral levels, the LMC organisation allows Beijing to cultivate a political sphere of influence in the neighboring sub-region in a way that is aligned with its economic interests. Indeed, as Wu points out, “Enhancing its influence in Indochina is China’s geostrategic goal for the LMC.”<sup>48</sup> Most obviously the LMC serves the economic interests of China in terms of exporting excess industrial capacity, as well as allowing it to exercise economic statecraft through economic dependence to gain political leverage over the Mekong countries.<sup>49</sup>

Moreover, despite Beijing’s critique of US-centered minilaterals for their exclusivity, the LMC is a mechanism that effectively shuts out countries such as Japan, Australia, and the US. Indeed, the LMC is an example of minilateralism being used as a cover to exclude external players. China does this by emphasizing the LMC’s identity connections, dominating its agenda, and exploiting economic dependence.<sup>50</sup> Chinese statements on the LMC are “geopolitically coded” (see Godehardt),<sup>51</sup> making references to the region’s “common identity” and “shared future,” and thus show how Beijing is seeking to ensure that the Mekong subregion remains within its sphere of influence.<sup>52</sup>

Furthermore, as the source of the Lancang river (known downstream as the Mekong), China has effective control of the flow to downstream states. Indeed, the issue of water resource management, and thus water security, only became a serious issue in need of minilateral cooperation after China’s extensive dam construction upstream. Wu presents this as an example of Beijing’s “fait accompli tactics.”<sup>53</sup> This leaves the Mekong states with no other option but to cooperate with China through this minilateral format, especially as it displaces indigenously established institutions in Southeast Asia, such as the Mekong River Commission, which cannot compete with the LMC in terms of the provision of public goods resources.

It is at this juncture that issues such as water management and economic cooperation assume security-like overtones. The LMC has become a tool for Beijing to structure the security governance of this sub-region, as the emphasis on the politico-security “pillar” becomes more salient. There are good reasons for this as many of the Mekong states face non-traditional security threats in addition to water security, such as international money laundering, human trafficking, as well as drugs and arms smuggling. However, as Gong notes, “By including political and security cooperation, the LMC’s objectives are not merely driven by economics; in fact, they are part of China’s broader strategy.”<sup>54</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Xue Gong, “Lancang-Mekong Cooperation: Minilateralism in Institutional Building and Its Implications,” in *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific*, ed. Singh and Teo, 57-73, at 57.

<sup>48</sup> Shang-su Wu, “Lancang-Mekong Cooperation: The Current State of China’s Hydro-Politics,” in *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific*, ed. Singh and Teo, 74-87, at 78.

<sup>49</sup> Gong, “Lancang-Mekong Cooperation,” 58.

<sup>50</sup> Gong, “Lancang-Mekong Cooperation,” 57.

<sup>51</sup> Godehardt, “China’s Geopolitical Code.”

<sup>52</sup> Lancang-Mekong Cooperation China Secretariat, “3+5 Cooperation Framework.”

<sup>53</sup> Wu, “Lancang-Mekong Cooperation,” 74.

<sup>54</sup> Gong, “Lancang-Mekong Cooperation,” 59.

As well as entrenching China's influence in sub-regional security governance, the LMC provides Beijing with valuable geopolitical leverage. In addition to harnessing Mekong states to its economic sphere of influence and having dominance over water resources, it is able to utilize the LMC to divide its members states on other issues. For example, China has territorial disputes with LMC member Vietnam in the South China Sea. Hanoi's economic dependence on China, including through the LMC, gives China a further pressure point through which to influence Vietnam's stance over the dispute. Similar influence over Cambodia was applied in 2016 within ASEAN to prevent a formal statement on the South China Sea dispute. The LMC can thus be said to play an important role in extending China's influence by fostering internal divisions within ASEAN.<sup>55</sup>

### 3.2. *The Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS)*

The China-South Korea-Japan TSC is a minilateral forum that emerged well before the debut of the Quad or AUKUS. Although it was initiated by Japan in 1999, it was in 2011 that the TSC was formalized into "an international organization established with a vision to promote lasting peace, common prosperity and shared culture among the People's Republic of China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea" by South Korea's initiative.<sup>56</sup> Headed by a secretary-general and two deputy secretary-generals, it has a clear organizational structure spanning political, economic, and socio-cultural affairs, as well as management and coordination.

The TSC convenes trilateral cooperation summits, ministerial meetings, and has established over 70 dialogue mechanisms. It has also executed over 100 exchange and cooperation programs. Its remit extends across multiple fields—from agriculture and fisheries to customs and intellectual property rights.<sup>57</sup> This appears quite impressive, even as its regional visibility remains low. Although the TCS is ostensibly a forum to discuss "high politics" issues, in practice its deliverables have been more in the realm of minor customs agreements and standards setting as well as cultural exchange, sporting events and public health issues, that is, classic "low politics" concerns. By covering the three most important countries in Northeast Asia, however, it is not only exclusive but reflects Beijing's preference for narrow regionalism ("Asia for the Asians," as per Xi Jinping's depiction).<sup>58</sup>

As a minilateral vehicle for extending Chinese influence, however, the TCS is limited due to its focus on "low politics". Moreover, the TCS is riven with internal tensions between its three members and limited by the fact that it did not begin as a Chinese initiative. Although the Sino-Japanese relationship is officially described as a "mutually beneficial relationship based on common strategic interests," it is in reality clearly circumscribed.<sup>59</sup> Beyond its minilateral initiatives discussed earlier, Tokyo is also upgrading its military capabilities and alliance with the US in response to growing tensions in the maritime

<sup>55</sup> Wu, "Lancang-Mekong Cooperation," 80.

<sup>56</sup> Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat, "What is TCS," n.d., accessed March 4, 2024, <https://www.tcs-asia.org/en/about/overview.php>.

<sup>57</sup> Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat, "Topics," n.d., access March 4, 2024, <https://www.tcs-asia.org/en/cooperation/topic.php>.

<sup>58</sup> Cited by Linda Jakobson, "Reflections from China on Xi Jinping's 'Asia for Asians,'" *Asian Politics & Policy* 8, no. 1 (2016): 219-23, at 219.

<sup>59</sup> Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Japan-China Joint Press Statement," October 8, 2006, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/china/joint0610.html>.

domain.<sup>60</sup> Meanwhile, Tokyo-Seoul relations, tumultuous over recent years due to the two countries' "history issues," have recently thawed as Seoul and Tokyo have sought to mend fences in response to regional security challenges. Instead, they have reconstituted minilateral cooperation with the US based on their joint statement made at Camp David in August 2023, which included shared concerns regarding "actions inconsistent with the rules-based international order."<sup>61</sup> This recently revitalized trilateral may soon join the front ranks of US/ally-centered minilateralism, alongside the TSD, Quad, and AUKUS.

### 3.3. BRICS

Perhaps the most prominent of China's minilaterals is the Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa (BRICS) formation.<sup>62</sup> BRICS is notable for typifying Beijing's cross-regional approach to minilateralism (as per AUKUS or GCAP), by connecting "Indo-Pacific" countries with Brazil and South Africa, two emerging powers external to the region. Beginning as a term coined by the Goldman Sachs investment bank to describe the potential of the four emerging powers in 2001, BRICS transformed itself into an intergovernmental organization holding its initial summit in 2009. South Africa joined in 2010. It has now expanded to nine members (with the addition of Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates), although it will retain the BRICS name.<sup>63</sup> Headquartered in Shanghai, BRICS holds annual leadership summits, and has a rotating presidency. Given its increasing size, it is now potentially about to become a multilateral organization, as other states join the queue for membership accession.

BRICS is highly indicative of the way in which Beijing employs geoeconomic tools to enhance Chinese international leadership and expand its influence.<sup>64</sup> In 2014, BRICS set up two new financial institutions—the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA) and the New Development Bank (NDB). These two institutions are designed to give Asian (and other emerging) countries a greater voice in global financial governance,<sup>65</sup> and their creation has led to speculation that BRICS will work towards "de-dollarization."<sup>66</sup> These institutions are also representative of how China has employed minilateralism to cultivate the "Global South" through offering alternative sources of infrastructure financing for developing countries.<sup>67</sup> China can readily supply the capacity for infrastructure projects in energy and

<sup>60</sup> Thomas Wilkins, "Japan and Multipolarity in Asia: National Mobilisation and Resilience," *Report*, United States Studies Centre, February 29, 2024, <https://www.ussc.edu.au/japan-and-multipolarity-in-the-indo-pacific-national-mobilisation-and-resilience>.

<sup>61</sup> White House, "The Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States," August 18, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/08/18/the-spirit-of-camp-david-joint-statement-of-japan-the-republic-of-korea-and-the-united-states/>.

<sup>62</sup> BRICS, "BRICS Information Portal," n.d., accessed March 11, 2024, <https://infobrics.org/>.

<sup>63</sup> "The BRICS Bloc is Riven with Tensions," *Economist*, August 17, 2023, <https://www.economist.com/international/2023/08/17/the-brics-are-getting-together-in-south-africa>; BRICS, "History of BRICS," n.d., accessed March 11, 2024, <https://infobrics.org/page/history-of-brics/>.

<sup>64</sup> Wang, "From 'taoguang yanghui' to 'yousuo zuowei,'" 1.

<sup>65</sup> "Wang Yi: Jiaqiang 10+3 hezuo, tuijin dongya gongtongti jianshe [Strengthen Cooperation and Promote the Building of an East Asian Community]," *Xinhua*, August 10, 2014, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2014-08/10/c\\_1112007246.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2014-08/10/c_1112007246.htm).

<sup>66</sup> Robert Greene, "The Difficult Realities of the BRICS' Dedollarization Efforts—and the Renminbi's Role," Working Paper, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 2023, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/202312-Greene\\_BRICS.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/202312-Greene_BRICS.pdf).

<sup>67</sup> "Xi Jinping Wants to be Loved by the Global South," *Economist*, October 19, 2023, <https://www.economist.com/china/2023/10/19/xi-jinping-wants-to-be-loved-by-the-global-south>.



transportation (serving Beijing's economic goal of exporting excess industrial capacity, thus showing how minilateralism can be harnessed to serve national interests and attain geopolitical influence). Again, minilaterals such as BRICS serve to enhance China's global governance profile, which may lead to the alteration of the US dollar-centric international financial order, along with wider revisions to global governance. As Wang argues, such "minilateral financial arrangements provide grounds for China to test its leadership skills."<sup>68</sup>

Additionally (with the exception of Russia), the BRICS countries also form another minilateral known as BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India and China) to represent themselves as "developing countries" and, in cooperation with the "like-minded developing countries on climate change" (LMDC), to collectively negotiate a position on climate change in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.<sup>69</sup> Again, these interleaving institutions and forums form part of a greater holistic approach on the part of Beijing. China's initiatives in these areas, according to Wang, "should be understood as part of the overall diplomatic strategy to improve China's global image and political influence."<sup>70</sup>

### 3.4. An emergent China-Russia-North Korea "triangle"?

Finally, there is another putative "strategic Asian triangle" linking Beijing to Moscow and Pyongyang.<sup>71</sup> This case of trilateral cooperation has, as its minilateral antecedent, the failed Six-Party Talks process, which brought these countries together with Japan, South Korea, and the US in a futile attempt to arrest Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions. China, Russia, and North Korea, as Bennett observes, seem to be "natural allies," representing a "developing imperialist partnership."<sup>72</sup> Others have identified this new arrangement as an emerging "tripartite pact."<sup>73</sup>

Though no formal mechanism exists to operationalize cooperation trilaterally, many of the policies taken by the three countries align to present challenges to Australia and Japan.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, China and Russia are closely aligned through their "no limits" strategic partnership, Beijing has a formal military alliance with Pyongyang, and Russia continues to have residual ties with its one-time North Korean ally.<sup>75</sup> Russia is challenging the international order and, indeed, is receiving support from the other two

<sup>68</sup> Wang, "From 'taoguang yanghui' to 'yousuo zuowei,'" 5.

<sup>69</sup> United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Secretariat, "Conference Room Paper: Group of Like Minded Developing Countries and the African Group of Negotiators," n.d., accessed March 4, 2024, [https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/3\\_11\\_21\\_%20Joint\\_CPR\\_New%20Goal.pdf](https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/3_11_21_%20Joint_CPR_New%20Goal.pdf)

<sup>70</sup> Wang, "From 'taoguang yanghui' to 'yousuo zuowei,'" 5.

<sup>71</sup> Michael J. Green, "Strategic Asian Triangles," in *The Oxford Handbook of the International Relations of Asia*, ed. Saadia M. Pekkanen, John Ravenhill, and Rosemary Foot (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 758-74.

<sup>72</sup> Bruce W. Bennett, "North Korea, Russia and China: The Developing Trilateral Imperialist Partnership," *RAND Blog*, September 13, 2023, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2023/09/north-korea-russia-and-china-the-developing-trilateral.html>.

<sup>73</sup> Oriana Skylar Mastro, "The Next Tripartite Pact? China, Russia, and North Korea's New Team is not Built to Last," *Foreign Affairs*, February 19, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/next-tripartite-pact>.

<sup>74</sup> Gilbert Rozman, "The China-Russia-North Korea Triangle After Kim Jong-un's Turn to Diplomacy," Korea Economic Institute, July 29, 2019, [https://www.keia.org/sites/default/files/publications/kei\\_jointus-korea\\_2019\\_1.0.pdf](https://www.keia.org/sites/default/files/publications/kei_jointus-korea_2019_1.0.pdf).

<sup>75</sup> See Lindsay Maizland, "China and Russia: Exploring Ties Between Two Authoritarian Powers," Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounder, June 14, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/china-russia-relationship-xi-putin->

partners: China supports Russia in the latter's fight with Ukraine through the UN while North Korea provides material military support. North Korea's military preparations and nuclear posture pose a common threat to the region—an issue that Canberra and Tokyo have repeatedly condemned. This serves the strategic purposes of China by distracting attention and resources from Australia, Japan, and the US away from its own assertive actions in the East and South China Seas and the Taiwan Strait.

However, while the three countries offer “parallel” challenges to the US and its allies, there are also divergences between the three that limit their capacity to develop any cohesive united front.<sup>76</sup> Accordingly, the danger that a strategic triangle might present in terms of *combined action*—such as trilateral naval exercises—remain unclear.<sup>77</sup> It is therefore unlikely, as Hotta concludes, that the relationship between the three countries “will develop into something like a trilateral alliance.”<sup>78</sup>

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taiwan-ukraine; International Institute for Strategic Studies, “The Surge of Activity in Relations Between North Korea and Russia,” *Strategic Comments* 29, com. 30, October 2023, <https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/publications/strategic-comments-delta/2023/10/29-30-the-surge-of-activity-in-relations-between-north-korea-and-russia.pdf>; Evans J.R. Revere, “Lips and Teeth: Repairing China-North Korea Relations,” *Global China: Assessing China's Growing Role in the World*, Brookings Institution, November 2019, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/FP\\_20191118\\_china\\_nk\\_revere.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/FP_20191118_china_nk_revere.pdf).

<sup>76</sup> Andrei Lankov, “The Relations in Pyongyang-Moscow-Beijing Triangle,” paper presented at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies, December 21, 2023.

<sup>77</sup> Chad De Guzman, “Why China, Russia, and North Korea Joining Forces in the Indo-Pacific Isn't a Prelude to War,” *Time*, September 5, 2023, <https://time.com/6310786/china-russia-north-korea-indo-pacific-alliance/>.

<sup>78</sup> Yukihiro Hotta, “The China-Russia-North Korea Triangle Looks Unlikely to Last,” *Japan Times*, December 5, 2023, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/commentary/2023/12/05/world/china-russia-north-korea/>.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

- Comparative analysis between (Western) power minilateralism and distinctive “minilateralism with Chinese characteristics” helps identify important divergences in its practice that have been overlooked and rounds out our holistic understanding of the minilateral phenomenon.
- While the presence of the US in most of the minilaterals in which Australia and Japan engage suggests that Washington will dominate the agenda, it is often Canberra and Tokyo that have made the running to form or strengthen these institutions as a way ensuring continued American engagement in their security.
- Australia and Japan largely frame their minilateral cooperation through the Indo-Pacific concept and affiliated Free and Open Indo-Pacific policy vision (even when it entails extra-regional partners). Order-building, as seen through most minilaterals, is a means to maintain a military balance of power, supplemented by their own increased military capabilities.
- China rejects both these initiatives. While maintaining a narrower “Asia-Pacific” descriptor, in practice it also pursues a minilateralism that transcends regional boundaries. China adopts minilaterals in addition to bilaterals and multilaterals as further a means of expanding its influence over the neighboring region and beyond.
- Australia and Japan’s practice of minilateralism is primarily focused upon the traditional security dimension of strategic competition: building combined capabilities towards deterrence. The main intent is to enhance Australian and Japanese security through strengthened defense partnerships within the broader US-alliance network.
- China’s minilateral approach is accompanied by an emphasis on geoeconomics, which is Beijing’s preferred channel for gaining strategic advantage. China has few potential partners with whom it enjoys sufficient strategic trust to build more sensitive security minilaterals.
- With both constituencies employing minilateralism in different forms and along different vectors of strategic competition, this not only exacerbates the divergent security and economic trends that define the Indo-Pacific, but also suggests that where possible Canberra and Tokyo should consider closing the gap in geoeconomics/order-building through their minilateralism.