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Session 3: Evaluating the effectiveness of existing fora and CBM regimes in the region and how they cope with new technologies. Is there scope for European contributions?

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Mirror Minilateralism: The Potential of Extra-ASEAN Fora for Confidence-Building Measures in the Indo-Pacific

The member states of the Association of South-East Asian States (ASEAN) have been championing the development and implementation of a confidence-building measures (CBMs) agenda to be shared among the major powers of the Asia-Pacific region since the 1990s.¹ Advancing this agenda has been an important component of what Goh has defined as ASEAN's "omni-enmeshment" strategy, which is the pursuit of an omnidirectional engagement aimed at enveloping each major power in the region "in a web of sustained exchanges and relationships, with the long-term aim of integration".² The primary ASEAN platform tasked with the development of such a CBM agenda is the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).³ This platform was launched in 1994 and groups ASEAN members together with Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, the European Union (EU), India, Mongolia, New Zealand, North Korea, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Russia, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste, and the United States (US). CBMs implemented within the ARF framework have included transparency in defence white papers, the establishment of security dialogues, anti-piracy missions and joint military exercises focused on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.⁴

However, despite initial successes, this CBM agenda has long stalled. Most of the medium and long-term CBMs outlined in the 1995 ARF Concept Paper have yet to be implemented.⁵ Likewise, there has been no substantial progress in adapting the CBM agenda to address new security challenges associated with the military application of emerging and disruptive technologies. In fact, even a major success of the ARF CBM agenda, namely defence white paper transparency among members, has appeared to have diminished in significance over the years as state actors such as China have increasingly used these documents more as tools of "media warfare" than as "purely transparent ... confidence-building measures".⁶ In addition, the Indo-Pacific region continues to suffer a glaring absence of new CBMs aimed at addressing both mutual threat perceptions rising from the competing efforts of major powers in military modernisation and the growing risk of military accidents across the many sites of maritime and territorial contestations.⁷ More to the point, long-standing discussions aimed at developing an ASEAN-China Code of Conduct on the South China Sea should have smoothed, and clarified attitudes on, CBMs but this seems now like a distant prospect.

Against this backdrop, this brief delves in the concept of "mirror minilateralism" as a potential avenue for establishing a new Indo-Pacific CBM regime outside of the ARF framework. Minilaterals can be defined as "small, issue-based, informal and uninstitutionalized partnerships".⁸ The term is used here to refer to parallel minilaterals possessing three key features: (1) pursuit of highly similar CBM agendas, (2) involvement of the middle powers of the region, of single ASEAN states, of the EU and the United Kingdom (UK), in flexible configurations, and (3) avoidance of US and Chinese shared membership. The rest of the brief proceeds as follows. The first section links the stalling of the ARF CBM agenda to China's assertiveness in its near abroad, the emergence of Sino-American great power competition and the consequent "decentring" of ASEAN. The second section provides an overview of recent US-led minilaterals in the region. The third section explores how mirror minilaterals can be organised to rekindle CBMs in the Indo-Pacific.

Exit ASEAN?

The stalling of the CBM agenda in the Indo-Pacific is a direct consequence of the ARF's own demise as a common platform where major powers would cooperate. The ARF's demise reflects the growing dysfunctionality of "big tent" multilateral institutions and of the balkanization of global governance due to the of the fraying international order and the exacerbation of conflict and contestation among great and middle powers alike, fuelled by action/reaction dynamics. Yuzawa identified this trend as early as in 2012 noting "the continuing Chinese opposition to significant cooperation in the ARF – most notably the greater enhancement of military transparency", and the "dwindling commitments to the ARF on the part of ... the United States, Japan, and Australia".⁹ At the same time, ASEAN and its ancillary institutions devoted to the building of a political and security community – ASEAN's first pillar — are profoundly divided on perhaps its most important crisis: how to deal with a member state, Myanmar, responsible for crimes against humanity and continued attacks on civilians. Divisions within the organisation throws into open question ASEAN's distinctive non-intervention and consensus-based approaches to dialogue, partially validating the idea that process doesn't necessarily equate with progress.¹⁰

As mentioned above, ARF's irrelevance reflects the significantly diminished status and agency of ASEAN since great power politics re-emerged across Asia and the Pacific Oceans between the late 2000s and early 2010s. Two processes have mainly contributed to ASEAN's decline. First, ASEAN has failed to respond decisively and cohesively to growing Chinese assertiveness in the maritime and territorial contestations of the South China Sea. This failure is often imputed to Beijing's successful co-optation of member states such as Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar, which in turn has been facilitated by a different relationship with China compared to several littoral states facing the South China Sea.¹¹ It should be noted, however, that even those littoral states tend to eschew an overly adversarial position vis-à-vis Beijing, not least due to geographic proximity and deep economic links.¹² Second, ASEAN's failure, coupled with single member states' decision to continue pursuing hedging strategies in the face of Sino-American competition, has prompted Washington and Japan to deter and/or circumvent Beijing through a network of security-focused minilaterals involving like-minded polities.¹³ This approach has resulted in the virtual circumvention of ASEAN in regional security policy-making.¹⁴

Scholars and practitioners may counter such reading by emphasising either the continuing reference to the organisation's "centrality" by state actors involved in US-led minilaterals, or the viability of ASEAN member states' hedging strategies to ASEAN's own "primary institutions".¹⁵ Yet competing efforts for military modernisation, continuing and intensifying maritime and territorial contestations, and the absence of any meaningful development in the CBM agenda remain evidence that the cohesive framework that enabled ARF CBMs in the previous decades has been pulled apart by recent geopolitical trends, including Sino-American competition.

Enter Minilaterals

The two main minilaterals implicitly targeted at China are the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ("Quad"), consisting of the US, Japan, India, and Australia (a platform originally advocated by Tokyo in 2006-07, and eventually revamped during the Trump administration in 2017, but effectively re-invented by the Biden administration since 2021), and AUKUS, the security pact focused on sharing and fostering defence technology for nuclear-powered submarines and beyond – including the US, Australia, and the UK – signed in 2021. Other frameworks have also recently emerged in 2023: the US-Japan-Philippines and the US-Japan-South Korea

trilaterals. These recent trilaterals possess significant implications for regional security, as they hint at a potential shift away from the traditional “hub and spokes” US alliance system towards forms of “integrated deterrence”. In addition to these platforms, the Biden administration has effectively utilised and revitalized other fora and institutions in its foreign policy and security strategy. Both the “G7 Plus” framework and NATO’s Indo-Pacific partnerships have been leveraged to solidify a transregional coalition comprising the US, its treaty allies, and India.¹⁶ This transregional coalition has emphasised the upholding of a “rules-based order”, the securitization of global supply chains, the need to “de-risk” away from China, as well as the stability in the Taiwan Strait in the face of growing Chinese military pressure against the self-ruled island.¹⁷

In this context of comprehensive great power competition between the US and China and stress on economic security, several other US-led minilaterals have taken on an implicit hard-nosed character toward Beijing. One example is the Partnership for the Blue Pacific (including the US, Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the UK, Canada, Germany, and South Korea) aimed at supporting the island countries of the Pacific in response to Chinese probes in the region. Another case is the Trilateral Infrastructure Partnership, which involves the US, Japan, and Australia, and is focused on Southeast Asia and the Pacific Ocean. These initiatives are effectively aimed at denying China a sphere of influence. A third one is the “Chips 4” working group on semiconductors, including the US, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. This minilateral was first mobilised shortly before Washington’s 7 October 2022 export controls on high-end semiconductors imports and production capacity against China, themselves aimed at stifling Beijing’s military sector and ability to innovate and lead in new technologies.

Mirror Minilateralism and CBMs

Existing US-led minilateral initiatives cannot replace the ARF in revitalizing a regional CBM agenda. China has no incentive to legitimize American-led forums designed to deter its actions. Meanwhile, those ASEAN member states which are still pursuing hedging strategies would view direct engagement with these forums as potentially damaging to their relations with Beijing. Nonetheless, the security dynamics resulting from the proliferation and consolidation of US-led minilaterals may provide an opening to rekindle the CBM agenda in the Indo-Pacific. For instance, the recent announcement of the revival of the China-Japan-South Korea trilateral – dormant since 2019 – shortly after the Camp David summit between Washington, Tokyo and Seoul in August, suggests that successful US minilateral efforts may prompt Beijing to intensify its effort to create a wedge in Washington’s alliances with the region’s other main democratic powers.¹⁸ More simply, the Chinese government might be willing to open communication channels precisely because it confronts an increasingly united front, so to speak, among (some of the) regional US allies and partners.¹⁹

Beijing’s efforts and desire to create a wedge in US alliances, in turn, would place countries such as Japan and South Korea, but also Australia, in a unique position to spearhead an effort to launch a new CBM agenda in the region together with China. This new agenda could focus, rather than on ambitious constraint and access measures, on information, communications and notification measures,²⁰ with an eye on the military application of new technologies and the role of automation.²¹ More simply, it could also be aimed at holding security dialogues and establishing fruitful confidence-building mechanisms with China on their own merit. For instance, the recently inaugurated Japan-China military hotline and the need to resume and establish similar channels of communications between US and Chinese military compartments, as well as their respective civilian bosses, would be already an important step forward.

Against this backdrop, middle powers could play a pivotal role by acting as a connective tissue between US-led minilaterals on one side and new, China-including minilaterals without US presence on the other side. This development may lead to a cascading effect. Japan, South Korea and Australia could then attempt to pursue a similar CBM agenda with those selected ASEAN member states which are particularly concerned with Beijing's inroads in the South China Sea and ASEAN's own paralysis. These developments could in turn stimulate the ongoing negotiations between ASEAN and China on a South China Sea Code of Conduct.²² Finally, a proliferation of CBM-focused minilaterals could also create an opening for EU member states and the UK – all actors already involved in security projection in the region –²³ to engage with the more proactive ASEAN states. In short, unilateral deterrence could be exploited from multiple sides to advance a relatively coherent yet minimal regional CBM agenda, overcoming the current deadlock.

Conclusion

Mirror unilateralism, namely the emergence of parallel minilaterals premised on a deterrence-prone “position of strength” by other initiatives may feed into a constructive CBM agenda without sharing membership between US and China, and they may offer a realistic way out from the current impasse. It acknowledges the exhaustion of major multilateral platforms such as the ARF, while recognising the limitations of existing US-led minilaterals like the Quad and AUKUS in effectively engaging with other regional actors and reigniting the CBM process. In doing so, mirror unilateralism provides a viable pathway for advancing the CBM agenda as the Indo-Pacific regional order continue to remain in flux in the short to medium term. In this space, the EU and its member states, especially their emphasis on “effective multilateralism” and their stakes in regional peace and prosperity may facilitate their role as honest brokers in some new minilaterals with regional actors, including China.

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¹ For a definition and synopsis of CBMs, see: Richard E. Darilek, “East-West Confidence-Building,” in *A Handbook of Confidence-Building Measures for Regional Security*, eds. Michael Krepon et al. (Washington, DC: Stimson Center, 1993), 17 -29.

² Evelyn Goh, “Great Powers and Hierarchical Order in Southeast Asia: Analyzing Regional Security Strategies,” *International Security* 32, no. 3 (2007): 120-121. “Integration” is to be intended here as the act of altering state actors' preferences and identities to foster a workable *modus vivendi*, so that these actors would “take into greater account the integrity and order of the system”.

³ “About ARF,” ASEAN Regional Forum, <https://aseanregionalforum.asean.org/about-arf/> (accessed on November 30, 2023); Paul Midford, *Overcoming Isolationism: Japan's Leadership in East Asian Multilateral Security* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020), 104-119.

⁴ Paul Midford, *Overcoming Isolationism: Japan's Leadership in East Asian Multilateral Security* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020), 142.

⁵ “The ASEAN Regional Forum: A Concept Paper,” ASEAN Regional Forum, <https://aseanregionalforum.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Concept-Paper-of-ARF.pdf> (accessed on November 30, 2023).

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- ¹⁹ Thomas Christensen, *Worse than a Monolith: Alliance Politics and Problems of Coercive Diplomacy in Asia* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).
- ²⁰ On CBM categorisation see: Darilek, "East-West Confidence Building," 25-26.
- ²¹ See: Todd S. Sechser, Neil Narang and Caitlin Talmadge, "Emerging Technologies and Strategic Stability in Peacetime, Crisis, and War," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 42, no. 6 (2019): 727-735; Christopher F. Chyba, "New Technologies & Strategic Stability," *Daedalus* 149, no. 2 (2020): 150-170.
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