

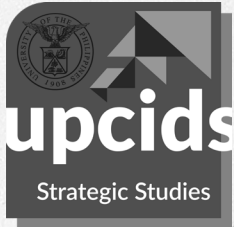
UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES  
CENTER FOR INTEGRATIVE AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES  
STRATEGIC STUDIES PROGRAM

PUBLIC POLICY MONOGRAPH SERIES 2022-02

# A Philippine Perspective: **Capacitating ASEAN to Address Security Issues in Southeast Asia**

RAdm Rommel Jude G. Ong AFP (Ret.) and  
Ramon D. Bandong Jr.





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# A Philippine Perspective: Capacitating ASEAN to Address Security Issues in Southeast Asia

RAdm Rommel Jude G. Ong AFP (Ret.)<sup>1</sup> and  
Ramon D. Bandong Jr.<sup>2</sup>

## **Abstract:**

*Existing ASEAN mechanisms involved in regional security matters deserve further examination with regard to their relevance and appropriateness to twenty-first-century strategic issues confronting Southeast Asia. Notwithstanding the limitations and shortcomings, ASEAN is now faced with dynamic challenges. Foremost of these is China's flexing of its muscle in the region, and the United States' upholding the freedom of the navigation and adherence to international law. At the back of this great power competition is the territorial dispute among claimant-states. Alternative approaches have been proposed over time, one of which is the idea of minilateralism, which has gained traction in recent years. In ASEAN, proposals to form minilaterals on the South China Sea have been discussed, but no formal endorsement nor concrete steps have been taken towards this objective. Questions as to how these minilaterals would operate within the institution, given its unique organizational culture, have also been raised. As for the Philippines, evaluative studies are still being conducted to assess the implication of participating in a minilateral as far as its national interests are concerned. Having clear and delimited objectives, a clarification of funding mechanisms, the creation of a termination clause, as well as the addressing of bilateral issues between members are identified as the essential considerations for the Philippines.*

**Keywords:** ASEAN, minilateralism, South China Sea disputes, regional threats, territorial disputes, maritime security.

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## Introduction

The objectives of this research are: (1) to aid in the development of security-related policies and studies both at the national level and at the regional level by recommending crucial components of a minilateral arrangement for the region given the issues that it faces; (2) to explore the idea of using a minilateral arrangement to solve contentious issues in Southeast Asia, particularly the South China Sea; and, (3) to present the Philippine perspective concerning this minilateral proposal.

As the paper's research statement, the authors express the need for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to develop a more responsive and appropriate security architecture to balance against great power competition in Southeast Asia, or at least, provide an environment in which alternative approaches like minilaterals could work. In this regard, a reevaluation of the current framework of addressing issues within the ASEAN is timely. Mainly, a study on the possibility of establishing a minilateral by selected ASEAN member states seems to be warranted, and the research presents the Philippine perspective on this possibility explicitly. As mentioned previously, the challenges facing the region are dynamic and therefore rigid frameworks, even though they have worked in the past, may be unsuitable. The researchers are confident that the findings and insights provided in the paper would contribute to the efforts being made to provide an alternative solution to the security issues facing ASEAN and Southeast Asia.

## Scope and Limitations

The researchers argue that there is a need to develop the appropriate security architecture to mitigate great power competition in Southeast Asia. The research will focus on the political and military dimensions among the relevant ASEAN member states with respect to the South China Sea issue. In addition to this, defense diplomacy is one of the areas given much attention in the research. However, there is always a potential for scholars to look at ASEAN through a fresh lens. As Dr. Aileen Baviera noted, ASEAN is known as a "norm entrepreneur" in the security arena<sup>3</sup> i.e., an actor that is interested in changing social norms.<sup>4</sup> In this context, the ASEAN is

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3 Aileen S. P. Baviera, "Preventing War, Building a Rules-based Order: Challenges Facing the ASEAN Political-Security Community," in *ASEAN@50 Volume 4 Building ASEAN Community: Political-Security and Socio-cultural Reflections*, edited by Aileen Baviera and Larry Maramis, ([Jakarta]: Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia, 2017), 8–9.

4 The definition of the term "social norms" is elaborated in Cass R. Sunstein, "Social Norms and Social Roles," *Columbia Law Review* 96, no. 4 (1996): 909, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1123430>.



considered a norm entrepreneur since the institution has been introducing new approaches to diplomacy and negotiation to address traditional security concerns. As noted previously, ASEAN prefers a nonconfrontational approach and one that is based on consultation and compromise. ASEAN has been a model for the international community in promoting confidence-building processes and other practices that embody consultation and peaceful dialogue. If one would see ASEAN this way, it could help us look at the issue differently, other than the dire scenario that the realist approach offers. Hence, it is hoped that the research would aid in the development of security-related policies both at the national level and at the regional level. Quoting one of ASEAN's founding fathers, S. Rajaratnam of Singapore, for ASEAN to succeed, its members would have to marry national thinking with regional thinking—that is to “think at two levels” by positing national interests against regional ones.<sup>5</sup> Taking into account the domestic politics and considerations of prospective countries with the larger and overarching regional politics is sensible. Lastly, the researchers have limited the study to finding out if minilateralism will work in addressing the issues on the South China Sea by having a preliminary data gathering and analysis of the acceptability, suitability, and feasibility of a minilateral arrangement. These three factors will be explored further in a follow-up study.

The researchers have conducted focus group discussions (FGDs) as part of the research's data-gathering phase. Participants in the FGDs include key officials from relevant government agencies and high-ranking military officers. By analyzing the data produced from the FGDs, the researchers developed a narrative concerning the possibility of establishing a South China Sea minilateral arrangement. To emphasize, the narrative that the data have produced primarily reflects the Philippine perspective as the FGD participants are all Filipinos who are representing the Philippine government and academic institutions.

## **Historical Antecedents of ASEAN**

Since its inception in August 1967, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) had to navigate the Cold War period and the effects of the Vietnam War. The five founding members had to design an institution that could be able to mitigate the consequences of the geopolitics of that time as well as the effects of the actions and behaviors of the major powers to the region. Indonesia's Foreign Minister Adam Malik,

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5 “The Founding of ASEAN (Part 2),” Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2020, <https://asean.org/about-asean/the-founding-of-asean/the-founding-of-asean-part-2/>.

#### 4 Ong and Bandung

one of the ASEAN's founding fathers, shared his vision of "a region which can stand on its own feet, strong enough to defend itself against any negative influence from outside the region."<sup>6</sup> Another founding father, Thailand's Thanat Khoman, cited that the most important reason why ASEAN was established was to prevent a "power vacuum which could have attracted outsiders to step in for political gains."<sup>7</sup> The characteristic "Asian" value of nonconfrontational style and discreteness had to be integrated into the association to prevent the entanglement of the institution from these major powers which could complicate the security situation and potentially divide Southeast Asia. This value would essentially dictate how agreements are formed in this regional institution. Over time, the so-called "ASEAN Way" has become a unique mark of the institution in conducting diplomacy and in the way the institution deals with the issues in the region.<sup>8</sup> The Association grew with the inclusion of five more states into the Association: Brunei in 1984, Vietnam in 1995, Laos and Myanmar in 1997, and Cambodia in 1999.<sup>9</sup> The addition of these countries made ASEAN more geographically diverse and consequently, more challenges have also been introduced since additional national interests must now be considered as well.

As the Cold War ended, new forms of security threats have emerged, and ASEAN again had to re-evaluate its capacity to address these challenges. In 1993, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) was established during the twenty-sixth ASEAN Ministerial Meeting and Post Ministerial Conference.<sup>10</sup> The twin objectives of the ARF were (1) to foster constructive dialogue and consultation on political and security issues of common interest and concern; and (2) to make significant contributions to efforts towards confidence-building and preventive diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>11</sup>

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6 "The Founding of ASEAN (Part 2)."

7 Thanat Khoman, "ASEAN Conception and Evolution," Association of Southeast Asian Nations, September 1, 1992, <https://asean.org/about-asean/the-founding-of-asean/asean-conception-and-evolution-by-thanat-khoman>.

8 Rodolfo Severino, "The ASEAN Way and the Rule of Law," address at the International Law Conference on ASEAN Legal Systems and Regional Integration, University of Malaya, September 3, 2001, [https://web.archive.org/web/20210415003651/https://asean.org/?static\\_post=the-asean-way-and-the-rule-of-law](https://web.archive.org/web/20210415003651/https://asean.org/?static_post=the-asean-way-and-the-rule-of-law).

9 Reuters, "Timeline: Key dates in ASEAN history," November 20, 2007, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-asean-history-timeline-idUSGOR01167020071120>

10 "ASEAN Regional Forum," ASEAN Regional Forum, accessed December 9, 2020, [aseanregionalforum.asean.org/about-arf/](http://aseanregionalforum.asean.org/about-arf/).

11 "ASEAN Regional Forum."

Although the ARF was not the first attempt of ASEAN to discuss security issues in the region, it does provide a more specific venue as indicated in its objectives. Over time, the ARF has expanded to accommodate more dialogue partners. These ASEAN dialogue partners have participated in various meetings with ASEAN member states and have worked with the association in the crafting of solutions and agreements to these regional issues. Since then, the ARF has become a venue of dialogues and consultations to discuss pressing security issues in the region.

Fifty-two years after the signing of the ASEAN Declaration in Bangkok, the region faces new challenges and uncertainties. In one of her studies, Dr. Aileen Baviera states that the regional security environment has evolved from a Southeast Asia divided into communist and anticommunist states, to one that experiences relative stability albeit in the presence of intensifying geopolitical rivalries among external forces.<sup>12</sup> The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, and the consequent Global War on Terrorism have presented a new challenge for the ASEAN member states to come together and address this new kind of danger. In the 2001 ASEAN Declaration on Joint Action to Counter Terrorism, the ASEAN has condemned the attacks and viewed them as “an assault on all of us,”<sup>13</sup> which showed ASEAN’s collective response to the issue. More importantly, ASEAN member states have adopted the ASEAN Plan of Action on Transnational Crime and approved the initiatives of the Third ASEAN Ministers Meeting on Transnational Crime (AMMTC) fully.<sup>14</sup> Also, the ASEAN Convention on Counter Terrorism was signed in 2007 by all ASEAN members states which provided the framework for “regional cooperation to counter, prevent and suppress terrorism in all its forms and manifestations.”<sup>15</sup> This convention was significant not only because of the areas of cooperation that were agreed upon by all the members but also for paving the way for other agreements that addressed border security, piracy, and other transnational crimes.

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12 Baviera, “Preventing War,” 5.

13 “2001 ASEAN Declaration on Joint Action to Counter Terrorism,” Association of Southeast Asian Nations, November 5, 2001, <https://asean.org/2001-asean-declaration-on-joint-action-to-counter-terrorism/>.

14 “2001 ASEAN Declaration.”

15 “ASEAN Convention on Counter Terrorism,” Association of Southeast Asian Nations website, January 13, 2007, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/ACCT.pdf>

## The Emerging Security Situation in Southeast Asia

Xi Jinping is driving China's disruptive policies, which impact the global political and economic order, as well as the current dynamics of Southeast Asian security concerns. Even the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has not slowed down its gray-zone activities in the South China Sea. Though significant by itself, it could be seen as just a single piece in its geopolitical strategy for the region.<sup>16</sup> Although China was successful in establishing strategic buffers around its heartland through occupation, cooptation, and creative diplomacy, the weakness of its east coast, which paradoxically houses much of its industries, remains unresolved.<sup>17</sup> China has also felt contained until it has the economic and military capacity to back its ambitions.<sup>18</sup> Its "First and Second Island Chains" defense strategy has worried neighboring countries because it involves several countries in its designated perimeter.<sup>19</sup>

From a naval perspective, to cure their vulnerability in the east coast, China needs to attain the following four objectives: (1) sea control over their "Internal Seas"—the North, East, and South China Seas inclusive of the airspace above them; (2) sustained presence in key features such as the Senkaku Islands, Panatag Shoal, James Shoal, and Riau Archipelago; (3) ensure continued access to SLOCS such as the Luzon Strait, Mindoro Strait, Balabac Strait, and Malacca Strait; (4) influence, engagement or cooptation of key countries such as North Korea, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Philippines, Brunei, and Malaysia (countries that fall astride the so-called nine-dash line). To achieve the first three objectives: sea control, sustained presence, and access to SLOCs, China's People's Liberation Army and People's Armed Police, has

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16 Eli Huang, "China's Master PLAN: How Beijing Wants to Break Free of the 'Island Chains,'" *The National Interest*, May 19, 2017, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/chinas-master-plan-how-beijing-wants-break-free-the-island-20746>; Carl Schuster, "What Are China's Naval Goals? The West Can't Wait to Find Out," CNN International, May 16, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/05/15/opinions/chinese-naval-strategy-schuster-intl/index.html>.

17 Rommel Jude G. Ong, "Notes on "Enhancing the Philippine Maritime Defense Posture," Ateneo de Manila University School of Government, June 9, 2020, [https://adrinstituteblog.files.wordpress.com/2020/06/ong\\_maritime-defense-posture.pdf](https://adrinstituteblog.files.wordpress.com/2020/06/ong_maritime-defense-posture.pdf).

18 Jonathan Pugh, "Is China the New Hegemon of East Asia?," *E-International Relations*, October 8, 2017, <https://www.e-ir.info/2017/10/08/is-china-the-new-hegemon-of-east-asia/>.

19 Kim Sengupta, "China Sea Crisis: Japan to Bolster Military Base on Island Idyll That Could Become Front Line in Event of War," *Independent*, February 13, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/china-military-aggression-island-missiles-troops-south-china-sea-ishigaki-japan-winter-olympics-a8208586.html>.

developed the requisite hard (or military) power at sea. China has the combination of its navy, coast guard, and fisheries militia operating from fixed bases in Hainan, as well as the Paracel and Spratly island groups. However, the airspace is a different matter. They have yet to provide the appropriate land-based aircraft that can establish air superiority on water, and their carrier-based aviation capability is still in its infancy.<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, the United States has only belatedly and slowly accepted the idea that China is a strategic competitor with the intention of replacing it as a global power in a few decades, bent on introducing illiberal practices targeted against the world's democracies, and focused on dislodging it as the resident power in the Indo-Pacific under a shorter timeframe. In no way is the US' shift in its policy towards China more evident in the statement of the United States Secretary of State Michael Pompeo. He delivered this last July of 2020, which declared Beijing's claims in the contested waters as "completely unlawful" and that the United States "stands with [our] Southeast Asian allies and partners in protecting their sovereign rights to offshore resources, consistent with their rights and obligations under international law."<sup>21</sup>

After several years of hiatus, 2017 served as the benchmark year for the revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, which is an informal forum comprised of the United States, Japan, Australia, and India.<sup>22</sup> Also known as the QUAD, it brings together four democracies that aim to secure a "free and open Indo-Pacific; a rules-based order; freedom of navigation and overflight; and respect for international law and maritime security."<sup>23</sup> Although this set of objectives is accepted, diplomatically speaking, each member of the QUAD has their own interest in the grouping which are all tied together by the overarching objective of countering China's recent activities in the region.<sup>24</sup>

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20 Rommel Jude G. Ong, "Enhancing the Philippine Maritime Defense Posture" (paper presented at the ADRI-Stratbase Webinar, June 9, 2020).

21 Michael R. Pompeo, "U.S. Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea," United States Department of State, July 13, 2020, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/u-s-position-on-maritime-claims-in-the-south-china-sea/index.html>.

22 Zaheena Rasheed, "What Is the Quad and Can It Counter Chinas Rise?," Al Jazeera, November 25, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/25/what-is-the-quad-can-us-india-japan-and-australia-deter-china>.

23 Graeme Dobell, "The Indo-Pacific? The Quad? Please Explain . . ." Australian Strategic Policy Institute, April 9, 2018, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/indo-pacific-quad-please-explain/>.

24 Manoj Rawat, "Quad 2.0 Is Off to a Good Start – It Must Keep Going," *The Diplomat*, November 24, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/11/quad-2-0-is-off-to-a-good-start-it-must-keep-going/>.

Expectedly, China has been concerned and suspicious of the QUAD and has released unfavorable statements regarding it.<sup>25</sup> Prompted by a QUAD meeting in September 2020, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin labeled the forum as an “exclusive clique” and suggested that what the grouping does was “contrary” to regional peace, stability, and development.<sup>26</sup> Certainly, talks about future maritime cooperation such as the Malabar naval exercise<sup>27</sup> and the discussions to include other countries in the QUAD (which was labeled as QUAD Plus)<sup>28</sup> would further worry China. It seems that China has been following a “two-pronged” approach to address its QUAD concerns—it issues statements that express mild concern on the grouping while attacking the statements and actions of US Secretary Pompeo.<sup>29</sup> However, there will surely be interest in how the QUAD will proceed in 2021 especially now that Joe Biden is set to take over his country’s leadership starting January.

### **ASEAN’s Response to the Emerging Security Situation**

To be candid, the combination of China’s hard and sharp power across the political, economic, sociocultural, and security fronts in Southeast Asia has compelled individual ASEAN member states to either hedge or bandwagon in order to mitigate impact against their respective countries. Also, ASEAN as a whole will not likely declare solid support to the recent pronouncements of the United States since they are still in the process of negotiating for the Code of Conduct in the South China

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25 Rawat, “Quad 2.0.”

26 “China Criticizes Forthcoming Quad Ministers Meet in Japan, Calls It “Exclusive Clique,” *The Economic Times*, September 29, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/china-criticises-forthcoming-quad-ministers-meet-in-japan-calls-it-exclusive-clique/articleshow/78384294.cms>.

27 Rajat Pandit, “Malabar Exercise of ‘Quad’ Concludes with Clear Message for China,” *The Times of India*, November 20, 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/malabar-exercise-of-quad-concludes-with-clear-message-for-china/articleshow/79325408.cms>.

28 Stephen Biegun, “Deputy Secretary Biegun Remarks at the U.S.–India Strategic Partnership Forum,” United States Department of State, August 31, 2020, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/deputy-secretary-biegun-remarks-at-the-u-s-india-strategic-partnership-forum/index.html>.

29 Shannon Tiezzi, “China’s Two-Pronged Response to the Quad,” *The Diplomat*, October 7, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/chinas-two-pronged-response-to-the-quad/>.

30 Niranjan Marjani, “What Is ASEAN’s Stand on US-China Disputes in the South China Sea?” *ASEAN Today*, July 28, 2020, <https://www.aseantoday.com/2020/07/what-is-aseans-stand-on-us-china-disputes-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

Sea.<sup>30</sup> In fact, a vision statement from ASEAN released two weeks before the U.S. State Department statement has reaffirmed ASEAN's commitment to finish the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.<sup>31</sup> In the same vision statement, ASEAN also emphasized the "importance of non-militarisation and self-restraint in the conduct of activities that would complicate or escalate disputes."<sup>32</sup> Moreover, ASEAN member states would understandably display hesitation on this matter since China has been the region's largest trading partner<sup>33</sup> and therefore would not want to compromise their economic activities.

ASEAN is also cautious with the recent developments involving the QUAD not only because of its overt anti-China posture and its consequences but also because the forum might somehow erode ASEAN's centrality.<sup>34</sup> It is also interesting to note that in the QUAD meeting held in Tokyo last October 2020, ASEAN was not invited, considering the huge significance of the agenda for the region.<sup>35</sup> In a way, ASEAN faces the challenge of navigating the emerging great power strategic competition and maintaining its relevance as an institution in the region.

Perhaps one of the most contentious issues that ASEAN has to face is the territorial dispute among some of its members in the South China Sea. The dispute has driven a wedge among its members and has introduced some doubts about whether the organization is actually united.<sup>36</sup> ASEAN has even been criticized for its approach in handling and addressing issues. Criticisms of being too slow to adapt as well as

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31 "ASEAN Leaders' Vision Statement on a Cohesive and Responsive ASEAN: Rising Above Challenges and Sustaining Growth," Association of Southeast Asian Nations, June 26, 2020, <https://asean.org/storage/2020/06/Final-ASEAN-Leaders-Vision-Statement-on-a-Cohesive-and-Responsive-ASEAN-final.pdf>.

32 "ASEAN Leaders' Vision Statement."

33 "China Remains ASEAN's Largest Trading Partner Hitting US481 Billion in Two-Way Trade," Business Today, November 12, 2020, <https://www.businesstoday.com.my/2020/11/12/china-remains-aseans-largest-trading-partner-hitting-us481-billion-in-two-way-trade/>.

34 Umair Jamal, "Is the Quads Anti-China Vision Pushing ASEAN Away?" ASEAN Today, October 23, 2020, <https://www.aseantoday.com/2020/10/is-the-quads-anti-china-vision-pushing-asean-away/>.

35 Sarah Teo, "What the Quad Meeting Means for ASEAN," *The Diplomat*, October 9, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/what-the-quad-meeting-means-for-asean/>.

36 Shi Jiangtao, "ASEAN Confusion Shows Disunity Over South China Sea Row," *South China Morning Post*, June 16, 2016, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1975931/asean-confusion-shows-disunity-over-south-china-sea-row>.

accusations of disunity, as shown by the 2012 Phnom Penh debacle, have eroded the confidence of states on the capacity of ASEAN to be at the center of issues in the region.<sup>37</sup> This seems to confirm Baviera's opinion that the South China Sea is the "hard test case" for ASEAN.<sup>38</sup> She believes that addressing the South China Sea dispute is a test of the "efficacy of the multilateral security cooperation mechanisms" as well as the leadership and centrality of ASEAN because non-ASEAN parties are involved.<sup>39</sup>

Clearly, working closely with states that are stakeholders in the disputes is critical. Being the most powerful claimant in the troubled sea, China's participation in addressing this regional issue is, without a doubt, the most vital. On the other hand, dealing with the United States would be tricky—it is not a claimant, but it undeniably has a huge stake in the South China Sea disputes. This also applies to the other states in the Asia-Pacific region such as Japan, India, Australia, and Russia. Balancing the interests of these actors while trying to find the best solution for all parties concerned is perhaps the most difficult task for ASEAN to date. As Baviera has stated, the disputes "places the spotlight on ASEAN's capabilities to manage regional tensions while relying almost exclusively on its norms and diplomatic instruments."<sup>40</sup> With the developments in the region too quick to change and the security situation too volatile, ASEAN's capabilities will undoubtedly be tested in the coming years.

Is ASEAN capable of addressing the security issues it now faces particularly the South China Sea disputes given its organizational limitations? Usual criticisms include the limitations of how ASEAN leaders prefer how things are done, that the cohesion of ASEAN member states is weak, and that the organization has been reduced to a "talk shop."<sup>41</sup> Given the nature of ASEAN as a process-oriented institution, these criticisms may be justified. In addition to these, opinions that ASEAN is in disarray because of the alleged interference of external parties have been popular too, especially in recent years. The failure of ASEAN to issue a joint statement in Phnom Penh in 2012, which is

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37 Satu Limaye, "The Impact of South China Sea (SCS) Tensions on ASEAN: An 'Eye-of-the-Beholder' Dilemma," *The Asan Forum*, 31 July 2015, <http://www.theasanforum.org/the-impact-of-south-china-sea-scs-tensions-on-asean-an-eye-of-the-beholder-dilemma/>.

38 Baviera, "Preventing War," 14.

39 Baviera, 14.

40 Baviera, 12.

41 Sheldon W. Simon, "The ASEAN Regional Forum: Beyond the Talk Shop?," *The National Bureau of Asian Research*, 11 July 2013, accessed 25 November 2020, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/the-asean-regional-forum-beyond-the-talk-shop/>.



a first in the organization's history, seems to validate these opinions. One observer even noted that the events that unfolded in Phnom Penh in 2012 are a reflection of China's desires for the region, which is short of identifying a culprit for the failure.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, these criticisms may be unfair too. The "ASEAN Way," which is recognized as an approach that emphasizes non-confrontation, consultation, and consensus-based decision-making, could also be the reason why ASEAN still exists.<sup>43</sup> The past achievements of the ASEAN, particularly the signing of significant declarations such as the Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) in 1971, the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) in 1976, and the Southeast Asian Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone Treaty (SEANWFZ) in 1995, cannot be discounted too. In fact, these declarations could be ASEAN's contributions in stabilizing the region which could very well serve as models for other intergovernmental organizations in the world. However, the question of relevance remains. Given the dynamic situation of the region, is ASEAN flexible enough to anticipate and address the security issues faced by the region?

### **Possible Approaches to Multilateral Cooperation in Southeast Asia**

Ideally, if all ASEAN member states take a single position in addressing the various regional security concerns in general, and the South China Sea dispute in particular, it could aspire for a multipolar Southeast region, in which it could generate sufficient leverage and gravitas to deal with the two contending powers. A multipolar situation in Southeast Asia could mean several things for ASEAN member states. For one, a multipolar system would offer ASEAN and its members an alternative option instead of just hedging or siding with a major power. Having several powers vying for influence in the region, it could make ASEAN an effective platform for collective bargaining as far as its members are concerned.<sup>44</sup> Having a multipolar order in the region could put ASEAN in a well-placed position when negotiating with the major powers, especially on sensitive issues like territorial claims. Some observers have also noted that the apparent

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42 Ernest Z. Bower, "China Reveals Its Hand on ASEAN in Phnom Penh," Center for Strategic & International Studies, 20 July 2012, accessed 12 December 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-reveals-its-hand-asean-phnom-penh>

43 Baviera, "Preventing War," 4.

44 Ja Ian Chong, "ASEAN and the Challenge of a Multipolar World," *Columbia-Harvard China and the World Program*, November 15, 2018, [https://cwp.sipa.columbia.edu/news/asean-and-challenge-multipolar-world-cwp-alumni-ja-ian-chong\\_](https://cwp.sipa.columbia.edu/news/asean-and-challenge-multipolar-world-cwp-alumni-ja-ian-chong_)

tilting of certain ASEAN countries towards a specific major power is temporary.<sup>45</sup> In an interview, Bilahari Kausikan, Singapore's former Permanent Secretary of Foreign Affairs, shared his view that there is a natural inclination in Southeast Asia towards multipolarity.<sup>46</sup> According to him, Southeast Asian nations are no stranger to great power competition, and therefore the belief that the countries in the region would see the security order as binary is misleading.<sup>47</sup> This argument is backed by the region's historical experience with colonialism as well as by the assumption that countries are generally not monolithic but instead complex actors which operate primarily based on their national interests. Given this, there would be a natural tendency for many Southeast Asian countries to view the international system, along with the major powers that dominate it, as complex and multivariate. Therefore, any attempts to simplify the security order could provide a distorted view and thus, pointless.

Multipolar or not, ASEAN has to organize its internal affairs in order to prevent other countries from exploiting its agenda and its capacity to unify its members towards their shared objectives. This was seen during the 1980s when ASEAN was more unified, which enabled its members to withstand the pressures coming from the United States, China, and the Soviet Union, especially during the time when Vietnam occupied Cambodia.<sup>48</sup> Obviously, the situation in the 1980s was entirely different from what we see today. The threats and challenges have taken new forms which means that there is now a demand for solutions that are both sustainable and practical. One thing that ASEAN can do is to reevaluate its institutions and update its own institutional capabilities in order for it to become more adaptive to the present challenges in the region.<sup>49</sup> By now, ASEAN should have learned that some of its methods have become less effective and therefore should be more open to changes in its approach to doing things. This undertaking becomes more important for ASEAN given the intensifying rivalries not just between the United States and China but also with the involvement of other significant powers in the region such as Russia, Japan, India, and Australia. The change in the dynamics between these major powers is further complicated by various factors such as regime change, economic fluctuations,

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45 Bilahari Kausikan, "Asia Policymaker Perspectives: Multipolarity and Great Power Competition in Southeast Asia," interview by Andrew Yeo, Global Counsel, February 24, 2020, <https://www.global-counsel.com/insights/report/asia-policymaker-perspectives-multipolarity-and-great-power-competition-southeast>.

46 Kausikan.

47 Kausikan.

48 Chong, "ASEAN and the Challenge."

49 Chong.

social movements, as well as black-swan events such as a pandemic. Needless to say, ASEAN has to manage its affairs more carefully now given that the stakes have become too high and the issues too important to be swept under the rug.

However, despite the ASEAN's mantra of "centrality" in its five decades of existence, the fact remains that not every member state in the association has the same interest. One could argue that the declarations made by ASEAN are a manifestation of the collective voices of the ten member states. However, there will always be differences in how issues are seen by the members—some issues are on top of some countries' agenda while for some these same issues are just being monitored for developments. One example would be the Mekong issue which is especially crucial for Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia, but not so much for the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia. The same could be said about the territorial disputes in the South China Sea to which only five of the ten ASEAN member states are claimants to parts of it. Although ultimately, these issues affect all ten ASEAN member states in one way or another, it is still a fact that a country naturally prioritizes some issues over others.

In an article about the multilateral security architecture in the region, Herman Joseph Kraft raises questions on its sustainability in the region as driven by ASEAN.<sup>50</sup> He noted that going back to alliance politics and balance of power politics, which could be a direct consequence of the intensifying rivalry between the United States and China, is essentially in conflict with the multilateral institutions and arrangements that ASEAN has been espousing for many years.<sup>51</sup> This could create problems within ASEAN since the institutions that ASEAN had been relying for so long on stability and success in maintaining healthy relations are therefore jeopardized. The ASEAN Regional Forum, an institution that embodies ASEAN "centrality," puts ASEAN in a significant position to set agenda for the region. The scholar Alice Ba even noted how the ARF was successful in giving small and middle powers "an equal and even central standing" in developing frameworks to address critical issues.<sup>52</sup> However, the norms and practices that made ASEAN capable of managing conflicts among its member states may not be as effective when applied with platforms such as the ARF. Since the institution involves states that have interests that are not necessarily shared by other ASEAN member countries, the ARF could be just another setting for a great power

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50 Herman Joseph S. Kraft, "Great Power Dynamics and the Waning of ASEAN Centrality in Regional Security," *Asian Politics & Policy* 9, no. 4, (2017): 597–612, <https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12350>.

51 Kraft, 598.

52 Alice Ba, quoted in Baviera, "Preventing War," 11.

drama while ASEAN watches helplessly. The American scholar William Tow, as cited by Kraft in his article, has stated that great powers would readily abandon the ASEAN-driven security multilateralism once it is in direct conflict with their core national interests.<sup>53</sup> This compels us to reflect on ASEAN's effectiveness in playing its role in the region that is increasingly becoming more perilous. Regardless of ASEAN's past achievements and its supposed organizational limitations, threats in the region, most especially the consequences of great power competition, remain, and the leaders of ASEAN member states need to confront them sooner than later. In addition to this, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced many governments in the region to shift their focus from geopolitical concern to domestic needs such as public health care. Although the dispute-related efforts of claimant countries continue despite this, one could safely assume that the pandemic has forced governments to expend more energy and resources on pandemic response than to other equally important problems. Taking the case of the Philippines, the reallocation of budget to the pandemic relief efforts may justify this assumption and that it may have consequences in terms of the operations of relevant agencies.<sup>54</sup> Concerning economics and trade, the pandemic has limited countries to conduct economic activities as countries closed their borders which effectively changed the way how people do their work. As a direct consequence of the pandemic, many businesses have either closed or have fundamentally modified their operations. A report by the Asian Development Bank in September 2020 has projected a 7.3% contraction in the Philippine economy for the remaining months of 2020 before it could bounce back in 2021.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, this economic decline and a shift in government priorities have a profound effect on the country's security. In June 2020, President Duterte expressed concerns about the "alarming incidents" in the South China Sea during the 36th ASEAN Summit meeting.<sup>56</sup> This is consistent with the Asia Maritime

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53 William Tow, "Great Powers and Multilateralism: The Politics of Security Architectures in Southeast Asia," in Ralf Emmers (Ed.), *ASEAN and the Institutionalization of East Asia*, edited by Ralf Emmers (London: Routledge, 2012), 160–61, quoted in Kraft, "Great Power Dynamics," 602.

54 Frances Mangosing, "Lorenzana: Budget Constraints Delay Brahmos Deal," *Inquirer.net*, November 30, 2020, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1366381/lorenzana-budget-constraints-delay-brahmos-deal>.

55 "Philippine Economy to Decline Further in 2020 Amid COVID-19, With Recovery in 2021," Asian Development Bank, September 15, 2020, <https://www.adb.org/news/philippine-economy-decline-further-2020-amid-covid-19-recovery-2021>.

56 Eimor Santos, "Duterte to ASEAN: South China Sea Incidents Amid Pandemic 'Alarming,'" CNN Philippines, June 26, 2020, <https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/6/26/Duterte-ASEAN-Summit-South-China-Sea.html>.

Transparency Initiative report that the COVID-19 pandemic has not prevented the Chinese Coast Guard from conducting its operations in the disputed sea but it has even increased its activities in the area from December 2019 to November 2020.<sup>57</sup> This was also confirmed by Armed Forces of the Philippines' Chief of Staff Gen. Gilbert Gapay, who stated that the Philippine military continues to monitor the situation in the West Philippine Sea and that it is aware of the extent of the operations of the Chinese military in the area.<sup>58</sup> Given the impact brought about by the pandemic, one could assume that other ASEAN member states were also compelled by circumstances to reevaluate their priorities, with the careful management of resources as their primary consideration. If the sustainability and practicality of multilateralism as regards the South China Sea issues are in doubt, which approach would work? One alternative for the conventional forms of cooperation for the South China Sea issue could be minilateralism. This form of cooperation emphasizes flexibility and forms membership based on situational interests, shared values, and relevant capabilities.<sup>59</sup> Minilateralism is also not legally binding and focuses on multilevel and multi-stakeholder rather than state-centric concerns.<sup>60</sup> Given these advantages, will this be a suitable approach for ASEAN member states dealing with the South China Sea issue? Applying minilateralism in ASEAN may be promising since it “gels well” with the “ASEAN Way” and therefore there is an opportunity to produce meaningful results.<sup>61</sup> However, minilateralism could entail sacrificing ASEAN “consensus” in order to solve a contentious issue like territorial disputes.<sup>62</sup> Minilateralism will pave the way for those among ASEAN member states with interests in the South China Sea to collaborate, to

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57 “Still on the Beat: China Coast Guard Patrols in 2020,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, December 4, 2020, <https://amti.csis.org/still-on-the-beat-china-coast-guard-patrols-in-2020/>; “China Increased Patrols in Disputed Sea During Pandemic: Report,” ABS-CBN News, December 6, 2020, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/12/06/20/china-increased-patrols-in-disputed-sea-during-pandemic-report>.

58 Anna Felicia Baja, “Gapay Admits Chinese Vessels in West Philippine Sea Increased Amid COVID-19 Pandemic,” GMA News Online, December 7, 2020, <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/nation/767029/gapay-admits-chinese-vessels-in-west-philippine-sea-increased-amid-covid-19-pandemic/story/>.

59 Stewart M. Patrick, “Making Sense of ‘Minilateralism’: The Pros and Cons of Flexible Cooperation,” Council on Foreign Relations, January 5, 2016, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/making-sense-minilateralism-pros-and-cons-flexible-cooperation>.

60 Patrick, “Making Sense of ‘Minilateralism.’”

61 Angaindrankumar Gnanasagaran, “Is Minilateralism the Way Forward?,” *The ASEAN Post*, May 27, 2018, <https://theaseanpost.com/article/minilateralism-way-forward>.

62 Gnanasagaran.

the exclusion of others that have no interest whatsoever, such as Cambodia, Laos, or Thailand. This could make things easier for the countries involved since they can now focus on smaller and disaggregated parts of the issue.

The concept of minilateralism has received considerable attention recently as scholars and policymakers search for alternative approaches to diplomacy. Studies exploring this concept have proliferated in recent years due to the growing dissatisfaction with the traditional forms of engagement, most notably multilateralism. Although the term “minilateralism” was first coined by Miles Kahler in his 1992 article “Multilateralism with Small and Large Numbers,”<sup>63</sup> the term was once again popularized in the past decade by the journalist Moises Naim.<sup>64</sup> These studies often highlight the differences of minilateralism, on the one hand, with multilateralism and bilateralism, on the other hand. These studies often examine the advantages and disadvantages of adopting this relatively new approach in relation to traditional arrangements. The flexible nature of a minilateral arrangement could lead to the members meeting their objectives more efficiently since there are no formal and legal bindings that could delay or hinder them. However, fundamental issues like the possible disapproval of major powers and the consequent lack of support from these countries could render the effort of the member states useless. Persisting domestic issues between potential member states could also be significant in the success of the minilateral agreement. In any case, the literature offers several insights on how minilateralism could be applied in the context of addressing the security issues of ASEAN in the South China Sea.

American scholar William Tow points out that minilateralism had enjoyed a more prominent position when it comes to navigating the complex nature of contemporary Asia-Pacific geopolitics.<sup>65</sup> Using the Trilateral Security Dialogue as a case study, Tow’s article explores how minilateral security politics have advanced

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63 Miles Kahler, “Multilateralism with Small and Large Numbers,” *International Organization* 46, no. 3 (1992): 681–708, quoted in Stewart Patrick, “The New ‘New Multilateralism’: Minilateral Cooperation, but at What Cost?,” *Global Summitry* 1, no. 2 (Winter 2015): 116, <https://doi.org/10.1093/global/guv008>.

64 Patrick, “The New ‘New Multilateralism,’” 116.

65 William Tow, “The Trilateral Strategic Dialogue, Minilateralism, and Asia-Pacific Order Building,” in *US–Japan–Australia Security Cooperation: Prospects and Challenges*, edited by Yuki Tatsumi, (Washington, DC: Stimson Center, 2015), 23.

in the Asia-Pacific region during the post–Cold War era. The author evaluates the “hub-and-spokes” system of the United States, which has been in operation since the Cold War has started, and explores its utility and applicability in today’s regional security context. Tow also examines arguments that question minilateralism as a “better fit” for the postwar Asian model of informal negotiations and institution building.<sup>66</sup> Tow also noted that the success of trilateral and minilateral arrangements would depend upon striking a judicious politico-diplomatic balance.<sup>67</sup> He elaborates on this argument by explaining that minilateral arrangements could only be effective if the countries involved could advance their interests and band together while getting the support of major powers.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, preventing those countries that are outside the minilateral arrangement from being suspicious of their agenda is also crucial to their success. According to Tow, minilateral efforts could only be effective if they will not be perceived as quasi-containment initiatives and instead a legitimate consulting mechanism for managing regional security.<sup>69</sup>

The scholar Michael Green examines why trilateralism/minilateralism could produce greater security and stability in the region rather than mistrust and competition, which are found in some traditional security arrangements.<sup>70</sup> According to him, this is possible because minilaterals that operate within a multilateral framework tend to provide soft forms of hedging which minimize the risks of a security dilemma.<sup>71</sup> Green also categorizes the trilaterals found in Asia. The author classifies groupings according to three basic types: (1) like-minded allies and partners seeking to shape the emerging architecture and regional balance of power; (2) economically interdependent neighbors seeking to accelerate economic and political cooperation and reduce tensions; (3) great powers seeking to increase mutual confidence.<sup>72</sup> Another notable analysis made by Green pertains to the reasons why trilateralism has gained traction in Asia. Similar to Tow’s observation, Green notes that deficiencies in the “hub-and-spokes” system employed by the United States have prompted other states to group into trilaterals. In addition to this, states that are attracted to forming trilaterals are looking for ways to be effective and advance confidence-building measures while recognizing

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66 Tow, 23.

67 Tow, 23.

68 Tow, 23.

69 Tow, 30.

70 Michael Green, “Strategic Asian Triangles,” in *The Oxford Handbook of The International Relations of Asia*, edited by Saadia Pekkanen, John Ravenhill, and Rosemary Foot (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 759.

71 Green, 759.

72 Green, 764.

the divergence of views of the states involved.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, states are incentivized to join trilaterals since this could enhance their influence and strategic ties to other states without losing the necessary economic, political, or security ties with their neighbors.<sup>74</sup>

In a study that explores the rise in prominence of alternative approaches in diplomacy, Stewart M. Patrick argues that the rise of minilateral cooperation reflects the failure of formal international organizations to adapt to complex global challenges, dramatic power shifts, and growing normative divergences in world politics.<sup>75</sup> However, the author weighs the advantages of this security arrangement with its disadvantages and warns of the dangers of its careless application to the stability of the regional security architecture. Patrick also cited the prominent scholar John Ruggie in explaining why minilateral arrangements abound. Ruggie, in his 1993 book *Multilateralism Matters: The Theory and Praxis of an Institutional Form*, believes that the defining feature of the twenty-first-century multilateralism is because of the increase in the number of alternative forms of collective action and networks.<sup>76</sup> Patrick added that the membership of these networks varies but the factors regarding situational interests, shared values, or relevant capabilities remain.<sup>77</sup> One notable insight that Patrick offered is the capacity of minilateral arrangements to involve several stakeholders which, according to him, is a “shift away from traditional intergovernmental diplomacy.”<sup>78</sup> Patrick added that minilateral arrangements are increasingly multilevel, which means that political units above and below the state are also involved.<sup>79</sup>

In terms of disadvantages, Patrick identified various reasons why states should be circumspect in pursuing this type of arrangement. One interesting reason that he noted is that it could bring us to a “world rampant on forum shopping” and that this could compromise the role of other forms of security arrangements.<sup>80</sup> Patrick even went so far as to declare that equity and justice could be “casualties” of this “new multilateralism” since informal coalitions could perpetuate the narrow interests of

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73 Green, 760–63.

74 Green, 763–64.

75 Patrick, “The New ‘New Multilateralism,’” 115.

76 Patrick, “The New ‘New Multilateralism,’” 116. See also John Ruggie, ed., *Multilateralism Matters: The Theory and Praxis of an Institutional Form* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

77 Patrick, “The New ‘New Multilateralism,’” 116.

78 Patrick, “The New ‘New Multilateralism,’” 123–24.

79 Patrick, “The New ‘New Multilateralism,’” 124.

80 Patrick, “The New ‘New Multilateralism,’” 128.



the dominant players only and ignore other issues especially those experienced by other less dominant actors.<sup>81</sup> Lastly, Patrick warned of the inappropriate and careless use and advancement of minilateralism. Similar to Tow's argument, Patrick believes that minilateral arrangements risk undermining the legitimacy and effectiveness of international organizations and that poor management of minilateral arrangements could contribute to the forming of rival coalitions.<sup>82</sup>

Moises Naim promoted the idea that the success of security arrangements lies in the number of its members.<sup>83</sup> Naim believes that the most efficient approach to solving the world's complex problems is to bring together the smallest possible number of member states needed to produce meaningful results.<sup>84</sup> For Naim, the determination of this "magic number" depends profoundly on the issue at hand.<sup>85</sup> He arrives at this conclusion through his observation that multilateral talks have failed even though the number of international collaborations involving several states has increased. Naim attributed this to the failure of those involved in arriving at a consensus as well as the dominant but misguided belief that only multilateral arrangements could lead to real international action.<sup>86</sup>

Sarah Teo contends that the rise of minilateral arrangements may pose a serious challenge to the multilateral architecture in the region.<sup>87</sup> This includes ASEAN, which has been criticized for its perceived inability to address regional problems.<sup>88</sup> Teo also emphasized the faster decision-making process in a minilateral set-up, which is attractive to actors that were previously frustrated by not being able to act on issues due to the failure to arrive at a consensus.<sup>89</sup> Another attraction according to Teo is its capacity to operationalize multilateral-level dialogue, which means that it could actually complement and support the objectives of the larger multilateral arrangements.<sup>90</sup>

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81 Patrick, "The New 'New Multilateralism,'" 129–30.

82 Patrick, "The New 'New Multilateralism,'" 130.

83 Moises Naim, "Minilateralism," *Foreign Policy*, June 21, 2009, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/06/21/minilateralism/>.

84 Naim

85 Naim

86 Naim

87 Sarah Teo, "Could Minilateralism Be Multilateralism's Best Hope in the Asia Pacific?" *The Diplomat*, December 15, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/12/could-minilateralism-be-multilateralisms-best-hope-in-the-asia-pacific/>.

88 Teo.

89 Teo.

90 Teo.

One question that arises is the effectiveness of minilateral arrangements in Southeast Asia. While there are actual and operating arrangements that can be considered minilateral in Asia, the question of effectivity remains. Victor Cha has observed that in Asia, informal institutions function more effectively than formal ones.<sup>91</sup> He added that ad hoc institutions appear to have been more successful at taking tangible, coordinated steps to solve substantive problems, as was seen during the tsunami of 2004.<sup>92</sup> Cha also enumerated the advantages of forming these ad hoc institutions in solving complex issues in the region, particularly in overcoming the collective action dilemma.<sup>93</sup> According to him, the membership problem is relatively easy to solve because the actors that have vital interests in the issue will readily step forward.<sup>94</sup> Secondly, since the grouping was formed to accomplish specific tasks, there is an understanding among members that procedural discussions and other formalities are counterproductive.<sup>95</sup> Instead, members are naturally drawn to the idea of accomplishing the tasks in the shortest possible time. Third, is that ad hoc groupings enable the members to develop habits of consultation, greater transparency, and a degree of familiarity and trust, which are all essential in addressing issues in the region, especially the most complex ones. Lastly, ad hoc groupings are believed to create an environment that is inclusive and unrestrictive since the nature of the arrangement permits members to join or leave the group without the rigid rules and regulations usually found in formal organizations. Thus, these arrangements circumvent the collective action problems since members are attracted and want to join the coalition in the first place.<sup>96</sup>

### **Trilateral Cooperation Agreement–INDOMALPHI: A Case Study in Minilateralism**

Among the collaborations formed in the region in recent years, the most notable example is the Trilateral Cooperation Agreement (TCA) involving Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. The TCA–INDOMALPHI was initially established in 2017 to address the spike in armed robbery at sea and kidnapping perpetrated by the Abu

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91 Victor Cha, "American Alliances and Asia's Regional Architecture," in *The Oxford Handbook of The International Relations of Asia*, edited by Saadia Pekkanen, John Ravenhill, and Rosemary Foot, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 744.

92 Cha, 745.

93 Cha, 746–48.

94 Cha, 746–48.

95 Cha, 746–48.

96 Cha, 746–48.

Sayyaf Group, which had impacted the maritime security of the three countries.<sup>97</sup> The agreement led to the launching of the Trilateral Maritime Patrols (TMP) which was established with ASEAN in mind, particularly, “the spirit and centrality of ASEAN, in maintaining stability in the region in the face of non-traditional threats such as piracy, kidnapping, terrorism and other transnational crimes in regional waters.”<sup>98</sup> The TMP is primarily concerned with the conducting of coordinated patrols as well as the exchange of information and intelligence.<sup>99</sup> It was stated in the joint statement of the three countries that the TMP that was to operate in the Sulu Celebes Seas would be modeled after the Malacca Straits Patrol (MSP).<sup>100</sup> The MSP is a framework of cooperation between Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand that aims to secure the Straits of Malacca and Singapore. Having this as a model for a new maritime security framework provided the framers of the TMP with lessons that the members of the MSP have already acquired. Some of the lessons from the MSP include the sensitivity to the differentiation of patrol type (joint vis-à-vis coordinated), optimized information gathering and sharing mechanisms, and dealing with the question of criminal jurisdiction.<sup>101</sup> In drawing lessons from the MSP, the framers of the TMP had to consider factors such as the cost of operations, financial contribution, standard operation procedures, and the issue of “hot pursuit.”<sup>102</sup> The TCA–INDOMALPHI is a unilateral arrangement established by the three countries that share a common maritime space and face a common security threat. In this case, it was the rise of

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97 Ian Storey, “Trilateral Security Cooperation in the Sulu–Celebes Seas: A Work in Progress,” *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 48, August 27, 2018, [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2018\\_48@50.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2018_48@50.pdf).

98 Francis Chan and Wahyudi Soeriaatmadja, “Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines Launch Joint Operations in Sulu Sea to Tackle Terrorism, Transnational Crimes,” *The Straits Times*, June 19, 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/indonesia-malaysia-and-philippines-launch-joint-operations-in-sulu-sea-to-tackle-terrorism>.

99 Storey, “Trilateral Security Cooperation.”

100 Voltaire Gazmin, Hishahimmudin Tun Hussein, and Ryamizard Ryacudu, “Joint Statement: Trilateral Meeting among the Defence Ministers of the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia,” Department of Defense (Philippines), June 20, 2016, Accessed 13 December 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20180328230757/http://dnd.gov.ph:80/PDF%202016/Press%20-%20Trilateral%20Meeting%20among%20the%20Defence%20Ministers%20of%20the%20Philippines,%20Malaysia%20and%20Indonesia.pdf>.

101 Hadyu Ikram, “Sulu–Sulawesi Seas Patrol: Lessons from the Malacca Straits Patrol and Other Similar Cooperative Frameworks,” *International Journal of Marine and Coastal Law*, no. 33 (2018): 10–18.

102 Ikram, 10–24.

maritime incidents linked to transnational terrorism and criminality, which has an impact on the economies of the three countries. The TCA–INDOMALPHI was designed as an ad hoc framework, which involved three engagement mechanisms: (1) maritime and air patrols (i.e., registered, coordinated, or joint), (2) information sharing protocol, and a (3) communications interoperability protocol. Although it is too early to declare the TCA as a success, it nonetheless provided insights on how a minilateral arrangement can be organized and employed in the region.

In drawing lessons from the TCA–INDOMALPHI, defense and security planners need to ask these questions: (1) Is a minilateral arrangement a suitable model to balance off against great power competition in the South China Sea? (2) Is it acceptable among ASEAN member states with national interest in the South China Sea? (3) Is it feasible to operationalize and sustain among the concerned ASEAN member states? (4) Additionally, if the TCA–INDOMALPHI was judged as a success because it decreased the piracy attacks in its jurisdiction, what would be the criteria of success for a South China Sea minilateral?

The discussion among the governments of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines over the South China Sea dispute started sometime in early 2016. A working draft of the TCA–INDOMALPHI was created in early 2017. More than three years since its inception, an assessment of the grouping may be a useful process in determining the answers to the four issues earlier raised. In the conduct of two separate focus group discussions involving senior defense, foreign affairs, and military officials as well as representatives from the academe, several observations were put forward.

First, it was noted that while the initial two years of the grouping's establishment were successful, the latter year's performance was deemed unsatisfactory.<sup>103</sup> There was a perceived waning of commitment to the agreement's objectives among the member countries, which casts doubt on its sustainability.<sup>104</sup> Second, unsettled bilateral issues among member countries, such as the Philippine claim over Sabah, have an impact on the effectiveness of the grouping.<sup>105</sup> This observation supports the notion that the challenges facing minilateral arrangements lie on the political and strategic levels. Admittedly, the territorial dispute between Malaysia and the Philippines was purposely not discussed to avoid any political issues that might derail the negotiations on the grouping.<sup>106</sup> Third, there are still major issues at the operational and tactical

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103 Ma. Carmina Acuña, focus group discussion, September 21, 2020.

104 Teodoro Cirilo Torralba, focus group discussion, September 21, 2020.

105 Jeffrey Hechanova, focus group discussion, September 21, 2020.

106 Rommel Jude G. Ong, focus group discussion, September 21, 2020

level such as difficulties in interoperability, communication, and coordination, and these issues are reflective of unexpected impediments in the implementation of the TCA–INDOMALPHI. Lastly, it would be expedient for a South China Sea minilateral to have some sort of metrics of success. The MSP experience, and to some extent the grouping, have shown us that having clear indicators of success could lead to adjustment and consequently improvement. The planners for any South China Sea minilateral arrangement should consider this and identify the criteria early on. After all, if a minilateral arrangement has the capacity to evaluate its progress against its stated objectives, the arrangement could further be improved.

### **Prospects for Minilateralism for the Philippines**

The Philippines' geopolitical circumstance places it in the middle of an emergent US–China strategic competition with the South China Sea as one of many potential flashpoints for conflict. On the other hand, China, as a regional hegemon, has employed its available hard power to attain effective sea control not only in the South China Sea but may even try to extend this towards key archipelagic straits under Philippine jurisdiction. As a complementary effort, Chinese sharp power is directed at our political and economic elites, with the intent of coopting them to serve their own interest over that of the country. The combined impact of these developments has the potential to harm the country's food and energy security, trade, and the integrity of our governance mechanisms, among others.

Given this security environment, the country's limited military capabilities and diplomatic gravitas are no match. Our default policy in the past has been to rely on the Philippines–US Mutual Defense Treaty to buttress our weaknesses. However, the current administration's erstwhile “independent foreign policy” posture and its transactional approach to the Philippines–US alliance have weakened its utility as a counterfoil to China's aggressive posturing in the South China Sea. Juxtaposing these situations with the seemingly effective influence operations by China show indicative inroads in critical institutions of the country.

In the same vein, we look at ASEAN in the same perspective as did two of its founding fathers, Indonesia's former Foreign Minister Adam Malik and Thailand's Thanat Khoman—ASEAN as an organization that can defend itself against negative influence from outside the region, and prevent a power vacuum that could attract outsiders to step in.<sup>107</sup> However, knowing the current lack of cohesion among the

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107 Khoman, “ASEAN Conception and Evolution.”

ASEAN member states in key strategic issues involving China, it would be next to impossible to harness the full potential of all members to come up with a countervailing regional security architecture that can balance the two great powers. Hence, we look at minilateral arrangements as a more pragmatic approach to establishing a workable regional security architecture.

Therefore, two relevant questions can be raised: (1) will DND/AFP and DFA as well as their defense and security planners buy in to the idea of a minilateral arrangement as a viable approach to address our concerns in the West Philippine Sea? (2) if so, will our planners be allowed to advocate the concept in all relevant ASEAN forums?<sup>108</sup> First off, there seems to be a need for the Philippines to balance between an inward-looking approach and an outward-looking one in terms of policy. The government should be able to be deeply aware of its domestic concerns, while continuously enhancing its cooperation with its neighbors.<sup>109</sup> This balancing of approaches even becomes more important because of the COVID-19 pandemic in which governments are expected to satisfy the needs of their population while maintaining their international engagements or obligations. Another concern would be how the government could sustain an agreement on a long-term basis. According to DND Assistant Secretary Teodoro Torralba, the developments that were seen in the implementation of the TCA–INDOMALPHI over the years, particularly the changes in how the TMP operated since its creation, should guide the planners of a South China Sea minilateral arrangement to design it to be more enduring and sustainable.<sup>110</sup> In order to design the initiative to be balanced and sustainable, it would be necessary for the planners to conduct a feasibility study. Dr. Jay Batongbacal of the University of the Philippines College of Law suggested that a feasibility study could be useful, not only because it could delimit the issue right from the start but also because it could identify and anticipate the potential issues that may come into play once the minilateral agreement is in operation.<sup>111</sup>

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107 Khoman, "ASEAN Conception and Evolution."

108 The planners include the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM), ASEAN Navy Chiefs Meeting (ANCM), ASEAN Military Operations Informal Meeting (AMOIM), ASEAN Military Intelligence Informal Meeting (AMIIM), etc.

109 Acuña, focus group discussion; Junever Mahilum-West, focus group discussion, September 21, 2020; Torralba, focus group discussion.

110 Torralba, focus group discussion.

111 Jay Batongbacal, focus group discussion, September 21, 2020.

Since the prospective members of the minilateral arrangement would come from ASEAN member states, how will this setup work within an ASEAN framework? Dr. Batongbacal believes that if a minilateral arrangement from ASEAN member states is formed, it could move things forward in ASEAN meetings and could lead to a stronger position among the ASEAN member claimants vis-à-vis China.<sup>112</sup> However, one crucial thing to consider is the dynamics of the political leadership within the ASEAN member states regarding this minilateral arrangement. It was observed that at the operational and tactical levels, the TCA–INDOMALPHI was manageable<sup>113</sup> but the challenge still lies at the level of each country's political leadership.<sup>114, 115</sup> Also, any risk that a minilateral arrangement would interfere with ASEAN is unlikely since there are already various minilateral frameworks existing and operating in the region that even includes ASEAN states as members.<sup>116</sup> However, caution should still be applied in the crafting of the rules of the minilateral arrangement<sup>117</sup> as well as the criteria of inviting members to it<sup>118</sup> so that the arrangement itself would not be in conflict with ASEAN's overarching objectives.

The framework for a proposed minilateral arrangement should be based on a careful study and should anticipate potential issues, i.e., bilateral disputes, that the concerned ASEAN member states might encounter in the future.<sup>119</sup> With the experience with the TCA–INDOMALPHI, it was shown that a minilateral-level agreement could realistically move forward if the governments involved are willing to set aside, albeit temporarily, the issues between them and focus on the points that they could agree on during the negotiation phase.<sup>120</sup> However, such accommodation does not guarantee that the goodwill during the negotiations can be sustained over time. In the implementation phase, this could pose complications at the operational and tactical level.<sup>121</sup> This happened in Sandakan, in which the Philippine military (Armed

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112 Batongbacal.

113 Ong, focus group discussion.

114 Ong.

115 Hechanova, focus group discussion.

116 Batongbacal, focus group discussion.

117 Batongbacal.

118 Jaime Naval, focus group discussion, September 24, 2020.

119 Batongbacal, focus group discussion.

120 Ong, focus group discussion.

121 Ong.

Forces of the Philippines) have to calibrate their TCA–INDOMALPHI conduct of operations lest they inadvertently recognize Sabah as Malaysian territory. Similar conditions were also present with respect to disputes over the Sipadan and Ligitan islands between Indonesia and Malaysia, as well as the contention over Pedra Branca between Singapore and Malaysia. Ideally, it might be better to thresh out the potential issues among prospective members at the onset.

Captain Dianne Despi opines that the Philippines is more of a match rather than a fire—it could start the discussions on certain issues and be involved in the conceptualization phase of the proposed solutions.<sup>122</sup> It is in a position not only to solve its own security problems but also to contribute to the addressing of the larger issues in the region, including the stability of the region since it has the capability to initiate issues in the ASEAN agenda.<sup>123</sup> As an example, during the presidency of Benigno Aquino III, he had been active in putting forward its interests with respect to the South China Sea before ASEAN. In one of his statements, President Aquino thinks that “ASEAN should not allow any country, no matter how powerful, to claim an entire sea as its own and to use force or the threat thereof in asserting such a claim,”<sup>124</sup> indicating a prescriptive approach in addressing the situation in the South China Sea and, not surprisingly, reflects the Philippine position on the issue. His foreign affairs secretary, Albert del Rosario, even urged ASEAN in the 2015 ASEAN Summit to “stand up for what is right” pertaining to what ASEAN should do in response to China’s actions in the South China Sea.<sup>125</sup> Although these calls have not translated to significant progress in addressing the issue, they nevertheless illustrate the capability and willingness of the Philippine government to put the South China Sea dispute at the top of the agenda of major ASEAN meetings. The challenge, however, is on how to establish and sustain institutionalized rules in order for it to produce tangible and more concrete cooperation mechanisms.<sup>126</sup> Despi, however, believes that this could be addressed by

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122 Dianne Despi, focus group discussion, September 24, 2020.

123 Michael Vincent Mallari, focus group discussion, September 24, 2020.

124 RG Cruz, “PNoy to ASEAN: Deal with Maritime Disputes,” ABS-CBN News, November 21, 2015, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/nation/11/22/15/pnoy-to-asean-deal-with-maritime-disputes>.

125 Albert del Rosario, quoted in Martin Abbugao, “PH Warns of Beijing’s ‘De Facto’ Control of South China Sea,” *Rappler*, April 26, 2015, <https://www.rappler.com/world/91182-philippines-asean-warning-de-facto-control-south-china-sea/>.

126 Abbugao.



a combination of coordination between government agencies, cooperation from the private sector, and the existence of feedback mechanisms.<sup>127</sup>

If a minilateral arrangement for the South China Sea is actualized, which among the ASEAN member states should be a party to it? Relatedly, should a non-ASEAN country be considered? These questions are essentially about two things, namely: (1) the ideal number of members that the minilateral arrangement needs to have in order to be effective, and (2) the criteria for membership to this minilateral arrangement. With regard to the first point, one could even ask if there is such a thing as an ideal number as far as membership to this arrangement is concerned. Unsurprisingly, opinions on this matter vary. As mentioned in the previous section of this paper, the journalist Moises Naim argues that the “magic number” lies on the issue at hand.<sup>128</sup> The literature suggests that a smaller number is more suitable than a large one. This is probably based on the rationale that the essence and objectives of a minilateralism are defeated with too many members. One observer also noted that having too many members could, in effect, dilute the objectives of the minilateral itself since there would be too many national interests that must be balanced.<sup>129</sup> On the other hand, some would argue that it might not be a bad idea to admit more members, even non-ASEAN countries, since this would present a more formidable grouping of nations which would then contribute to the accomplishment of its objectives.<sup>130</sup>

An equally important matter for the planners is determining or qualifying which specific countries will be considered for admission. The most obvious criterion for membership would be the interest of the country and its level of involvement in the issue. If a country has a stake in the issue even though it is not an actual claimant, there will be an expectation that the country will provide material and technical resources to help solve the problem. For example, a country like Singapore, which has no claims in any part of the South China Sea, could argue that it has national interests in the territorial dispute since its economy is very much connected to what happens in that part of the region. Another thing to bear in mind is the non-invitation of certain countries to the minilateral, and by extension, the consequence of that act

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127 Dianne Faye C. Despi, “Maritime Security Cooperation: The Philippine Experience,” Asia Pacific Pathways to Progress Foundation, Inc., October 8, 2019, <https://appfi.ph/resources/commentaries/2888-maritime-security-cooperation-the-philippine-experience>.

128 Naim, “Minilateralism.”

129 Rommel Cordova, focus group discussion, September 24, 2020.

130 Naval, focus group discussion.

of excluding them. The action of inviting and excluding countries to a minilateral arrangement is a political act by itself, which sends both intended and unintended signals to others.<sup>131</sup> Some observers are concerned that a minilateral arrangement focused on the South China Sea dispute, that excludes Cambodia, Laos, or Myanmar, will produce inadvertent consequences on ASEAN unity.<sup>132</sup> Moreover, the exclusion of these countries could motivate less friendly countries to form a countervailing response against the minilateral itself.<sup>133</sup>

If the objectives of the minilateral have already been outlined and the prospective members are identified, is the Philippines ready to initiate the proposal and invite other countries for discussions? If the major powers, i.e., the United States and China, find the minilateral arrangement problematic, what would be their likely response towards it? The answer may depend on the position taken by major countries to the proposal, specifically whether they would support it or not. Dr. Batongbacal believes that the opinions and reactions of the major powers are key considerations for any planners involved in setting up a minilateral arrangement. For example, the support of the United States through its statements and pronouncements could spell the difference between the success or failure of such initiative, although it is expected that the Americans will support it because they have already expressed interest in the idea.<sup>134</sup> In the case of China, it will likely disapprove of the objectives of such initiative because of its aversion to efforts involving greater unity in the region.<sup>135</sup> Considering China's response to the formation of the QUAD, China would likely perceive it as an effort aimed at containing and suppressing them. Likewise, if the QUAD as a group, or its member states individually, expresses support for the minilateral arrangement, it will trigger a similar response from China.

Apart from these two major powers and the QUAD, the response of other parties within and beyond the region is also worth considering. As for the European Union (EU), given its predilection to international cooperation and agreements, it would probably welcome the idea of the proposal. However, the EU as a whole would probably be careful not to provoke China, which is its second-largest trading partner

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131 Naval, focus group discussion.

132 Mallari, focus group discussion.

133 Naval, focus group discussion.

134 Batongbacal, focus group discussion.

135 Batongbacal, focus group discussion; Cordova, focus group discussion.

after the United States.<sup>136</sup> However, the actual reactions and level of participation [or lack thereof] of these countries to the proposal remain to be seen. In any case, farsighted and thoughtful drafting of the minilateral arrangement would be necessary as far as the would-be planners are concerned, since it is evident that the implications of the South China Sea disputes extend beyond the region.

## Lessons Learned

The lessons offered by the TCA–INDOMALPHI and the MSP experience are instructive as the objectives of this agreement are parallel with a possible minilateral arrangement for the South China Sea. The inputs acquired at the policy and operational level can serve as a guide in any proposal. From the Philippine perspective, a combination of policy introductions and addressing the practical challenges could hasten the efforts of the country to initiate a South China Sea minilateral solution.

A study on the development of a framework for Philippine security cooperation points out that the country would benefit from the creation of a comprehensive national marine policy and a coordinated maritime security strategy.<sup>137</sup> It also proposes a framework centered on the characteristics of “functionality, inclusivity, and sustainability” that could contribute to “maximizing the potential of Philippine participation in regional maritime security cooperation initiatives.”<sup>138</sup> The three components of this framework involve working on the “convergence points” or the common interests, the “coherence of initiatives” of both state and nonstate actors, and the efforts of the government to develop institutions that would promote coordination as well as proper monitoring and evaluation processes.<sup>139</sup> If applied to the proposed minilateral arrangement for the South China Sea, mechanisms that would tie these three components may ensure that the agreement is both practical and continuous.

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136 European Commission of the European Union. “Client and Supplier Countries of the EU27 in Merchandise Trade (value %) (2019, excluding intra-EU trade).” Last updated 18 March 2021. [http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc\\_122530.pdf](http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc_122530.pdf).

137 Dianne Faye C. Despi, “Developing a Framework for Philippine Security Cooperation in a Changing Maritime Milieu,” APPFI Research Paper MDS 2019-01( Quezon City: Asia Pacific Pathways to Progress Foundation Inc.), [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340272338\\_Developing\\_a\\_Framework\\_for\\_Philippine\\_Security\\_Cooperation\\_in\\_a\\_Changing\\_Maritime\\_Milieu](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340272338_Developing_a_Framework_for_Philippine_Security_Cooperation_in_a_Changing_Maritime_Milieu).

138 Despi, “Developing a Framework.”

139 Despi, “Developing a Framework.”

Therefore, a further examination of this framework, along with the application of the lessons provided by other minilateral experiences, particularly in the TCA–INDOMALPHI and the MSP would greatly assist the Philippine government should it advocate for a minilateral arrangement for the South China Sea among ASEAN member states.

In addition to this, a calculation of the costs and benefits of joining a minilateral should be taken into consideration. A study on the decision of Indonesia and the Philippines to cooperate in the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas illustrates this point.<sup>140</sup> The decision of the two countries to cooperate was heavily reliant on the following factors: that there was a low degree of legislation involved, and therefore a low degree of sovereignty costs. The benefits offered by the cooperation exceeded the costs, and both countries were permitted to exercise a high degree of control over the course of negotiations.<sup>141</sup> As shown by this example, the fear of most countries that joining a minilateral, or any grouping for that matter, would infringe their sovereignty is somehow mitigated. If this is applied to the proposed South China Sea minilateral, an emphasis should be given to the low degree of legislation that the minilateral would require to its members so that concerns about diminished sovereignty are allayed. Combining this with the high degree of control that the minilateral would allow its members could probably make the minilateral more attractive to prospective members.

One of the lessons from the MSP is its funding mechanism. The MSP's Cooperative Mechanism (CM) works by inviting voluntary contributions from the Straits of Malacca stakeholders via the Aids to Navigation Fund and the Malacca and Singapore Straits Trust Fund.<sup>142</sup> This way, the costs of the grouping were not solely shouldered by the four members, which effectively made the initiative more sustainable. In the case of the proposed minilateral arrangement for the South China Sea, a similar funding mechanism could also be considered since its geographical coverage is more extensive than that of MSP and therefore could be more costly.

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140 Senia Febrica, "Securing the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas from Maritime Terrorism: A Troublesome Cooperation?" *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8, no. 3, (2014): 64–83.

141 Febrica, 77.

142 Ikram, "Sulu–Sulawesi Seas Patrol," 21–22.

## Recommendations

In any case, the planning for a minilateral arrangement should involve the following considerations. First off, the participation in the minilateral arrangement should be based on convergence of respective national interests of prospective ASEAN member states, particularly on the South China Sea issue.

Second, the discussions should be delimited at the very beginning. To further solidify the position among concerned ASEAN member states, the objective of the agreement, and the *raison d'être* of the grouping should be clear and must have been agreed on by all members.<sup>143</sup>

Third, it may be necessary to put into writing a clause in an agreement, which states that bilateral issues between member states should not in any way compromise the minilateral operations and activities.<sup>144</sup> However, the practicality of this approach is still subject to validation when one takes into consideration the dynamics of any negotiation. Asking the other party to agree and sign a written declaration could impede negotiation. It might be more prudent to conduct discussions and confidence-building measures first before taking up the issue of a specific clause in an agreement.<sup>145</sup>

Fourth, there should be a discussion on the inclusion of the computation of the actual costs and financial contribution of members.<sup>146</sup> Further, it should also have a mechanism in place that would anticipate the possible retaliatory actions of potentially hostile states to prospective members.<sup>147</sup> This mechanism could take the form of a body that would offer incentives, alternatives, or protection from those against the minilateral<sup>148</sup> which could be patterned to MSP's funding arrangement.<sup>149</sup>

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143 Ong, focus group discussion.

144 Batongbacal, focus group discussion.

145 Ong, focus group discussion.

146 Ikram, 10–18.

147 Batongbacal, focus group discussion.

148 Batongbacal.

149 Similar to Malacca Straits Patrol's Cooperative Mechanism, this arrangement could also invite voluntary contributions to interested parties and stakeholders, including multinational corporations.

Fifth, a continuity and succession management scheme should be factored into the organizational culture. Due mostly to reassignment or rotation of the military officers and even the civilian officials, there was anecdotal evidence that this affected the leadership and policy implementation aspect of the TCA–INDOMALPHI as it moved towards its third year of operations.<sup>150</sup>

Sixth, given the ad hoc nature of a minilateral arrangement, it should either have a termination point or a capacity to evolve.<sup>151</sup> In addition, it is also essential to introduce a rubric of success for the minilateral arrangement. As found in the TCA–INDOMALPHI experience, an optimized data collection mechanism, as well as excellent data analysis and information dissemination programs, will contribute to the success of the minilateral.<sup>152</sup>

## Summary

Xi Jinping's China Dream and its embedded strategies were driving the security tension in Southeast Asia in general, and the South China Sea in particular. Their combination of hard and sharp power directed at the United States, the adjacent countries around China's east coast, and the introduction of illiberal practices against the democracies in the world is fueling the tension between China and the United States as well as in other middle powers in Europe and the Asia-Pacific.

Amidst this challenging landscape, ASEAN has either hedged or joined the bandwagon of China. But this has in no way reduced the security tension in the region. The logical approach would be for ASEAN to step up its game and act in the manner that the founding fathers have envisioned the association to be—a countervailing force that can balance outside interests (i.e., US and China), and preserve its identity and ensure the survival of Southeast Asia. However, that could not be the case anymore. The expansion of ASEAN from the original five members to ten has not strengthened the association, but in fact, diluted its cohesion. This was best exemplified by the actions of Cambodia and, to some extent, Laos in the recent gathering of the ASEAN leadership. To put it simply, multilateralism may have lost its effectiveness given the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity of the Southeast Asian security environment.

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150 Torralba, focus group discussion.

151 Ong, focus group discussion.

152 Regional Forum examines challenges in INDOMALPHI maritime security cooperation," Asia Pacific Pathways to Progress Foundation, Inc., September 2, 2019, <https://appfi.ph/news-events/51-events/2846-regional-forum-examines-challenges-in-indomalphi-maritime-security-cooperation>.

The next logical step would be to carve out a minilateral arrangement within ASEAN, among member states who have their respective national interest in a peaceful South China Sea, as well as the political will to challenge China's assertive policy and assuage the United States and its allies, thus allowing for breathing space for Southeast Asia to thrive without a sense of uncertainty. The rationale for this is to simplify the talks by minimizing the parties, and by extension, the interests, involved. Moreover, a minilateral arrangement tends to be effective because it requires specificity in terms of its stated objectives as well as the relative simplification of the discussions by the members. The prospect of establishing a minilateral arrangement to address the South China Sea dispute could be a risk worth taking. Especially for those claimant countries that find ASEAN mechanisms and other multilateral fora rather inadequate, a minilateral arrangement still presents an attractive option.

However, while the authors aspire for a minilateral arrangement in Southeast Asia, this is, admittedly a stopgap measure. The ideal solution is still to strive for the cooperation of all ASEAN member states, and hopefully allow for a multipolarity to take shape in Southeast Asia. This would provide ASEAN with the means to balance off the two contending powers—the United States and China, to attain self-sufficiency in guaranteeing its own security, and to gain more elbow room for foreign policy decisions.

Examining the Philippine perspective on this matter provides the following vital insights. The prospect of an alternative approach to the Philippine government as regards the resolution of the South China Sea territorial disputes could be greatly advantageous as far as its national interests are concerned. The minilateral initiative could also bring together ASEAN countries to actively look for other solutions while at the same time working on the crafting of the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea with China under the ASEAN framework.

Moreover, the matter forces the Philippines to give proper attention to its bilateral relations with its neighboring Southeast Asian countries, particularly to those that it has unsettled issues. This is important since the establishment of a minilateral agreement would depend on the willingness and trust of the members with one another and resolving the issues first could be a huge step forward as far as the objectives of the minilateral are concerned. Still, the challenge is on creating a well-designed agreement that would offer real and long-lasting solutions without compromising ASEAN.

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