

# PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 8 March 2023

---

## Minilateral Cooperation in ASEAN May Help it Overcome Challenges in Multilateralism

*Joanne Lin and Laura Lee\**



*Indonesia's Foreign Minister Rento Marsudi (R) welcomes her Cambodia's counterpart Prak Sokhonn (L) during the 32nd ASEAN Coordinating Council meeting in Jakarta on February 3, 2023. BAY ISMOYO/AFP.*

*\*Joanne Lin is Co-coordinator of the ASEAN Studies Centre at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, and Lead Researcher (Political-Security) at the Centre. Laura Lee is currently a Public Policy and Global Affairs undergraduate at Nanyang Technological University. She was an intern at the ASEAN Studies Centre from May to September 2022.*

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- ASEAN regionalism is increasingly seen as being slow and ineffective, casting doubts on its leadership role in the region.
- Minilateral cooperation in ASEAN will allow a smaller group of like-minded ASEAN countries to work together in a targeted manner to deliver results where it matters.
- Such cooperation is not meant to replace multilateralism but rather to supplement what is not possible in the broader setting, and to promote its eventual expansion into greater regionalism when the time is ripe.
- Minilateral cooperation currently exists in ASEAN in many forms, such as: The Malacca Straits Patrol between Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand; the Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area, and; the Laos-Thailand-Malaysia-Singapore Power Integration Project, among many others. This allows ASEAN countries to respond to opportunities and challenges in their geopolitical environment and to overcome weaknesses in existing ASEAN cooperation.
- ASEAN should look beyond existing minilateral cooperation to address in like manner more challenging issues such as the South China Sea.

## INTRODUCTION

Minilateral groupings such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and the trilateral security pact between Australia, the UK and the US (AUKUS) in the Indo-Pacific region have called into question the effectiveness of ASEAN and the security benefits it offers. It has also cast doubts on ASEAN's centrality, especially its ability to satisfy the strategic needs of major powers.<sup>1</sup>

Although multilateralism will ensure an equal voice across all member countries (regardless of size and power), multilateral organisations are increasingly finding themselves in a deadlock, unable to act or slow to act, resulting in sub-optimal results.<sup>2</sup> This is starkly exemplified in the UN's failure to prevent the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war or to end it.

Similarly, ASEAN finds itself increasingly unable to overcome challenges, with differing national interests among member states leaving the grouping divided and increasingly unable to achieve consensus. Since the bloc's expansion from six to ten members in the 1990s, the divide between maritime and the newer continental (Mekong) countries in Southeast Asia has also become obvious.

In the *State of Southeast Asia 2023 Survey Report*<sup>3</sup>, the top concern about ASEAN among regional respondents (at 82.6%) is that "ASEAN is slow and ineffective, and thus cannot cope with fluid political and economic developments, becoming irrelevant in the new world order". This has prompted observers and scholars to call for a paradigm shift to overcome ASEAN's bureaucratic processes and institutional hurdles, and to become a nimbler organisation that can quickly adapt to rapid geopolitical and economic developments.<sup>4</sup>

This article suggests that ASEAN's ineffectiveness may be overcome by a constructive form of 'ASEAN minilateral cooperation' that allows like-minded ASEAN countries to work together through concrete activities towards shared priorities (especially strategic ones) in a targeted manner for maximal impact.<sup>5</sup> Such minilateral cooperation could focus on issues of common interest and should not be mistaken for minilateral decision-making, which goes against the principles of the ASEAN Charter.

This is aligned to the growing preference for minilateral cooperation among countries (including major powers and ASEAN members). Besides the QUAD and AUKUS, there has been an increasing number of trilateral collaborations and engagements such as the trilateral security dialogue between Australia, Japan and the US and the Australia, India and Indonesia (AII) trilateral. The Five-Power Defence Arrangement between Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore and the UK is an example of minilateral consultative defence cooperation; this was signed in 1971 to safeguard the external defence of Singapore and Malaysia,<sup>6</sup> and its functions later evolved to include non-conventional threats such as piracy and disaster relief.<sup>7</sup>

## MINILATERAL DECISION-MAKING VERSUS MINILATERAL COOPERATION

Minilateralism is not entirely new to ASEAN. The regional organisation has a history of working in smaller groups. According to the ASEAN Charter Article 21, in the implementation of economic commitments, a formula for flexible participation, including the ASEAN Minus X formula, may be applied where there is a consensus to do so.<sup>8</sup> It allows for the gradual, delayed participation of X number of state(s) in economic agreements, given the consensus of all member states (including the X states). This is to enable ASEAN to advance its cooperation and integration without being held back by members who are not ready.

However, misconceptions arise when the ASEAN-X formula is extended to decision-making process within ASEAN, as advocated by some scholars and practitioners. Often, this fails to recognise the high-degree of apprehension among several member states towards any shift away from the ASEAN fundamental principle of consultation and consensus, toward a majority-vote decision-making process.

For example, Professor Thitinan Pongsudhirak has suggested an *a la carte* formula allowing willing members to take common positions without waiting for unanimity among all ten countries. His proposed “ASEAN 5+X” model will allow the five original members of ASEAN, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Singapore to serve as a renewed core.<sup>9</sup> However, such a formula may go against ASEAN’s principle of equality (irrespective of the length of membership) and may deprive the newer members of the opportunity to lead ASEAN.

Similarly, in the case of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), Professor Vitit Muntarbhorn, a UN independent expert, viewed the “X minus Y formula” as a healthy development, especially as the credibility of AICHR is likely to suffer if it sits still on issues that require a substantive response” such as the situation in Myanmar.<sup>10</sup>

While these are innovative suggestions to help ASEAN overcome its alleged tendency to be slow and ineffective, the fear that one’s national interest or position can be overridden by a majority-vote will not sit well with member states. The entrenched processes within ASEAN are unlikely to be open to overnight reform.

Minilateral cooperation as suggested here is not about decision-making in a small group but rather, about an interest group being formed to focus on issues that matter more to some countries than to others. Humanitarian mine actions for example would be more relevant to ASEAN countries impacted by landmines and explosive remnants of war such as Cambodia and Laos, than to others. As such, ASEAN should not view minilateral cooperation to be an activity carried out by an exclusive group of members, but as an initiative involving an initial group of members that are ahead in certain areas of cooperation, and that will expand over time to include other interested members.

Premised upon the non-exclusive nature of such minilateral cooperation, the ASEAN-X formula can be expanded beyond economic cooperation into the security domain (such as areas like terrorism and preventive diplomacy)<sup>11</sup> in order to make progress on key transnational challenges, as well as future areas of cooperation such as artificial intelligence and space technologies where some members may not yet be ready.

ASEAN minilateralism can also take the form of a group of ASEAN members playing a greater leadership role in areas of cooperation that are specifically of greater relevance to them, such as in the case of the South China Sea where only four members are direct claimant states.

## **EXISTING MINILATERAL COOPERATION IN ASEAN**

Similar to minilateral cooperation among major and middle powers, ASEAN countries have tried to develop various security configurations of their own in order to advance their own interests and respond to the opportunities and challenges in their geopolitical environment.<sup>12</sup> This takes into consideration existing gaps in ASEAN cooperation.<sup>13</sup>

On the security front, the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Trilateral Security Cooperation is an example of minilateral cooperation within ASEAN. It boosts cooperation in defence and humanitarian assistance between these three countries which have lingering border management and war legacy-related issues that can occasionally flare up.<sup>14</sup>

Another is the Malacca Straits Patrol between Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand, which was launched in 2004 to enhance security in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore through coordinated sea patrols and facilitate the sharing of information between ships and their naval operational centres.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, the Sulu Sea Trilateral patrols—a minilateral security collaboration between Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines,<sup>16</sup> was set up in 2017 to address transnational challenges in the Sulu Sea between the three countries. There have been talks to expand and broaden the partnership to other countries in Southeast Asia.<sup>17</sup>

Beyond the trilaterals and quadrilaterals, Our Eyes initiative—a platform for strategic information exchange to combat terrorism and violent extremism among six ASEAN countries, namely Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand—was launched in 2018.<sup>18</sup> The was later adopted as ASEAN Our Eyes initiative under the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and serves as an example of a sub-regional minilateral initiative expanding into a full regional mechanism.

More recently, the first ASEAN Coast Guard Forum—initiated by Indonesia—took place last November to boost maritime security. Eight of the ten ASEAN countries, excepting for Myanmar and Cambodia, attended it;<sup>19</sup> the event was followed by the signing of the ASEAN Coast Guard Declaration<sup>20</sup> to promote safe and secure sea lanes in regional seas. What started as a proposal by the Indonesia Maritime Security Agency (Bakamla) to “present a coordinated approach” in matters relating to the South China Sea<sup>21</sup>, generated a smaller grouping, made up particularly of those most directly involved, such as the claimant states in the case of the South China Sea, that could take the lead. A similar, but more extreme view was also expressed by

Philippines' Senator Maria Imelda Marcos when she proposed a code of conduct among claimants, instead of the 10-member ASEAN and China.<sup>22</sup>

Apart from security initiatives, ASEAN minilateralism in the economic sector such as the Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA, launched in 1994) allows the four ASEAN members to boost growth in trade, investment and tourism through intra-regional shipping routes and air links. While boosting sub-regional economic growth, the initiative also contributes to greater ASEAN economic integration.

A new initiative for a regional QR code payment to be constructed between the central banks of five ASEAN members—Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore, launched in November last year<sup>23</sup> is also a form of minilateral arrangement that can help advance ASEAN economic integration, starting with partners who are ready and willing to later expand to include others in the grouping.

Likewise, energy cooperation through the ASEAN Power Grid to promote regional power interconnection is currently in a “minilateral” phase.<sup>24</sup> At this point, the Laos-Thailand-Malaysia-Singapore Power Integration Project serves as ASEAN’s pilot in addressing technical, legal and financial issues of multilateral electricity trade.<sup>25</sup>

The ASEAN Power Grid was originally envisioned in the 1990s as a region-wide initiative to encourage collaboration on energy efficiency and renewable energy innovation. However, after 20 years, not much progress has been made due to differences in energy policies and commitment, as well as economic inequality among ASEAN member states.<sup>26</sup>

To go beyond this difficult situation, countries that are ready for broader cooperation in the energy sector could proceed first and let others to follow when ready. In this way, cross-border cooperation on bilateral terms may be expanded to a sub-regional level, and ultimately allow for the creation of an integrated multilateral ASEAN power grid system. Similarly, the Trans ASEAN Gas Pipeline could potentially be another model of how bilateral and minilateral cooperation within ASEAN that has the potential to be scaled up to regional level.

## **EXPLORING NEW MINILATERAL INITIATIVES IN ASEAN**

Beyond existing minilateral cooperation in ASEAN, there is potential for ASEAN to expand such an approach in order to address more challenging issues. The South China Sea is an area of contention within ASEAN due to competing national interests and to deep differences between ASEAN countries and China. ASEAN and China have worked together for 20 years on a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea,<sup>27</sup> but with no clear end in sight.

Claimant and non-claimant states within ASEAN may not share the same level of interest and priority with regard to the negotiations. Four out of the ten ASEAN members are claimant states, namely Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam, while Indonesia has an overlapping claim with China in the Natuna Islands. Scholars have observed that non-claimant members have little or no interest in standing up against China.<sup>28</sup> They have also noted the

possibility of an intra-ASEAN caucus (or an ASEAN South China Sea Forum) to coordinate more closely with each other on their respective national positions on the South China Sea issue and the Code of Conduct negotiations.<sup>29</sup> Such a caucus or forum may also be used for intra-ASEAN settlement of disputes. By settling disputes among themselves first, ASEAN claimants of the South China Sea may have a stronger stance in negotiating a Code of Conduct with China.<sup>30</sup> A consensus between the claimant states could serve as ASEAN's negotiating position against China, resulting in greater bargaining power for ASEAN.

Indonesia and Vietnam set the stage for closer coordination by coming up with an agreement to demarcate their exclusive economic zones (EEZ) in December last year after 12 years of negotiation. The successful EEZ delimitation between Indonesia and Vietnam may also encourage the Philippines and Malaysia to follow suit.<sup>31</sup>

However, for such a minilateral caucus to work, a consensus should first be reached among all ASEAN countries to agree to leave certain issues and decision-making to a group of ASEAN members. In the case of the South China Sea, once claimant states have agreed on a common position, consensus should also be sought from non-claimant states, since the COC is to an agreement between all ten ASEAN countries and China (rather than between the claimant states alone).

Another potential area for minilateral cooperation is the ASEAN peacekeeping force. The initiative was proposed in 1994, 2003, and 2015 by Indonesia and Malaysia but failed to attain consensus among all ASEAN members.<sup>32, 33</sup> This is considering that eight ASEAN members (except Laos and Myanmar)<sup>34</sup> have contributed to the United Nations peacekeeping missions. The ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting has been cooperating closely on peacekeeping operations, including through the ASEAN Peacekeeping Centres Network (APCN).<sup>35</sup> However, a joint force under the banner of ASEAN seems to be a distant dream. For the strong proponents of this initiative, perhaps a good starting point could be an ASEAN-X peacekeeping force to which willing members may contribute under the banner of ASEAN, allowing other members to join when they are ready.

Other forms of minilateral cooperation to complement ASEAN's work could be in enhanced cooperation on counter-terrorism and anti-radicalisation among high-risk countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Singapore.

## **CONCLUSION**

Evolving geopolitical developments necessitate an exploration of new approaches to cooperation in order for ASEAN to stay relevant and uphold its centrality. The opportunity cost is high if ASEAN fails to take concrete action in dealing with important regional issues such as the South China Sea. While the preservation of ASEAN unity is important, the regional bloc must balance the usefulness of moving together against the loss of credibility if it fails to act.

Minilateral cooperation within ASEAN will allow it to make greater progress and to better serve the diverse interests of member states. Such cooperation is not meant to replace multilateralism but to supplement what is not possible in the broader setting, while facilitating its eventual expansion into greater regionalism when the time is ripe.

## ENDNOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> Joanne Lin, “ASEAN and ADMM: Climbing Out of a Deep Hole”, *Fulcrum*, 28 June 2022, <https://fulcrum.sg/asean-and-admm-climbing-out-of-a-deep-hole/>

<sup>2</sup> Frederick Kliem, “How Indonesian chairmanship can revitalize ASEAN centrality”, Jakarta Post, 17 October 2022, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/opinion/2022/10/16/how-indonesian-chairmanship-can-revitalize-asean-centrality.html>

<sup>3</sup> Seah, S. et al., *The State of Southeast Asia 2023 Survey Report*, Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2023, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/The-State-of-SEA-2023-Final-Digital-V4-09-Feb-2023.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> See Thitinan Pongsudhirak, “The end of Asean as we know it”, *The Straits Times*, 14 October 2022, <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/the-end-of-asean-as-we-know-it>; and Mark S. Cogan, “Need for ASEAN Reform has Never been Greater”, Institute for Security and Development Policy”, 4 November 2022, <https://www.isdp.eu/need-for-asean-reform-has-never-been-greater/>

<sup>5</sup> Bhubhinder Singh and Sarah Teo, *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific: the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism, and ASEAN*, Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> This is following the withdrawal of British forces from Singapore.

<sup>7</sup> Lim Min Zhang, “Five-power defence pact’s challenges 50 years on”, *The Straits Times*, 14 November 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/five-power-defence-pacts-challenges-50-years-on>

<sup>8</sup> The ASEAN Charter, ASEAN Secretariat, 2008, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/archive/publications/ASEAN-Charter.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Thitinan Pongsudhirak, “The end of Asean as we know it”, *The Straits Times*, 14 October 2022, <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/the-end-of-asean-as-we-know-it>

<sup>10</sup> Vitit Muntarbhorn, “Stepping stones for Asean’s rights body”, Bangkok Post, 5 October 2022, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/2407276/stepping-stones-for-aseans-rights-body>

<sup>11</sup> Ralf Emmers, “ASEAN minus X: Should This Formula Be Extended? S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) Commentary, No. 199, 24 October 2017, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/CO17199.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Prashanth Parameswaran, “What Lies Ahead for Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Trilateral Security Cooperation?”, *The Diplomat*, 24 October 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/what-lies-ahead-for-cambodia-laos-vietnam-trilateral-security-cooperation/>

<sup>13</sup> Ranamita Chakraborty, “ASEAN states lead in regional maritime security cooperation, but more needs to be done, say experts”, GovInsider, 10 October 2022, <https://govinsider.asia/intl-en/article/asean-states-lead-in-regional-maritime-security-cooperation-but-more-needs-to-be-done-say-experts>

<sup>14</sup> Prashanth Parameswaran, “What Lies Ahead for Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Trilateral Security Cooperation?”, *The Diplomat*, 24 October 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/what-lies-ahead-for-cambodia-laos-vietnam-trilateral-security-cooperation/>

<sup>15</sup> Ministry of Defence, Singapore (MINDEF), Fact Sheet: The Malacca Straits Patrol, <https://www.mindef.gov.sg/web/portal/mindef/news-and-events/latest-releases/article-detail/2016/april/2016apr21-news-releases->



<sup>33</sup> Victor Bernard, “Is It Time for a Peacekeeping Force for ASEAN?”, The Asia Foundation, 3 February 2016, <https://asiafoundation.org/2016/02/03/is-it-time-for-a-peacekeeping-force-for-asean/>

<sup>34</sup> David Capie, Evolving Attitudes to Peacekeeping in ASEAN, National Institute for Defense Studies, International Symposium on Security Affairs 2014, “New Trends in Peacekeeping: In Search for a New Direction”, 5 November 2014,

<http://www.nids.go.jp/english/event/symposium/pdf/2014/E-06.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> ASEAN Secretariat, ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting,

<https://admm.asean.org/index.php/about-admm/about-admm.html>

<p><b><i>ISEAS Perspective</i></b> is published electronically by: <b>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute</b></p> <p>30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace Singapore 119614 Main Tel: (65) 6778 0955 Main Fax: (65) 6778 1735</p> <p>Get Involved with ISEAS. Please click here: <a href="https://www.iseas.edu.sg/support/get-involved-with-iseas/">https://www.iseas.edu.sg/support/get-involved-with-iseas/</a></p>	<p>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute accepts no responsibility for facts presented and views expressed.</p> <p>Responsibility rests exclusively with the individual author or authors. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without permission.</p> <p>© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each article.</p>	<p>Editorial Chairman: Choi Shing Kwok</p> <p>Editorial Advisor: Tan Chin Tiong</p> <p>Editorial Committee: Terence Chong, Cassey Lee, Norshahril Saat, and Hoang Thi Ha</p> <p>Managing Editor: Ooi Kee Beng</p> <p>Editors: William Choong, Lee Poh Onn, Lee Sue-Ann, and Ng Kah Meng</p> <p>Comments are welcome and may be sent to the author(s).</p>
---	---	---