UNDERSTANDING INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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Chapter 5

MULTILATERAL INSTITUTIONS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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MULTILATERAL INSTITUTIONS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

Introduction

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as a pivotal region in global affairs. It matters profoundly in socio-economic terms, encompassing 55% of the world's population, contributing over 30% to global GDP, and driving nearly two-thirds of global economic growth (World Bank n.d., see also Chapter 4).[1] Politically and strategically, it is equally vital. The region hosts key global powers such as China, Japan, and India (alongside active involvement from Russia and the United States), and features several prominent geopolitical hotspots, including Taiwan, the South China Sea, the Korean Peninsula, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, and the India-Pakistan border. If these statistics and facts are any indication, managing the multifaceted challenges in the Indo-Pacific will be crucial in shaping the international order in the 21st century. Numerous international institutions with varying objectives, designs, and areas of focus have been established since the end of World War II as part of efforts to address these challenges effectively (Acharya 1997; Beeson and Lee-Brown 2017; Katzenstein 2000).

In the field of international relations (IR), "international institutions" are commonly understood as sets of rules and frameworks that guide the behavior of states and other global actors. Robert Keohane provides a widely recognized definition, describing international institutions as "persistent and connected sets of rules (formal or informal) that prescribe behavioral roles, constrain activity, and shape expectations" (Keohane 1989, 3). This distinguishes them from "international organizations," which may or may not involve formal structures. Mainstream IR theories—realism, neoliberal institutionalism, and constructivism—offer different perspectives on the creation, function, and effectiveness of international institutions. While these theories are valuable in analyzing the foundational objectives

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and guiding principles of multilateral institutions in the Indo-Pacific, none fully explain the distinctive approach to institution-building seen in this region (Acharya and Stubbs 2006; Emmerson 2005; Stubbs 2008). This unique approach, sometimes referred to in terms such as the "Asian Way" or more concretely the "ASEAN Way" of multilateralism, stems from a deliberate rejection of externally imposed models by regional leaders and policymakers. Instead, they advocate for multilateral frameworks that align with the region's specific social, cultural, and political contexts (Acharya 2004; Ba 2009; Capie 2008; Johnston 2003; Rüland 2014).

To contextualize the distinct trajectory of institution-building in the Indo-Pacific, it is useful to illustrate how these developments diverge from the expectations of mainstream IR theories. First, contrary to neoliberal and constructivist expectations—where integrative economic forces and shared challenges like pollution or pandemics typically drive deeper institutionalization (e.g. Haas 1958; Ikenberry 2001; Keohane and Nye 1977)—this has not occurred in the Indo-Pacific as it has in Europe or North America. Instead, institutionalized cooperation in East, Southeast, and South Asia has remained relatively modest and continues to be approached with caution and skepticism, even as cross-border economic ties and other cooperative pressures have grown over time (Haacke 2003; Tan 2015).

Second, realism's assumption that international institutions reflect power dynamics and primarily serve the interests of dominant states does not fully explain the Indo-Pacific context (cf. Krasner 1985; Mearsheimer 1994; Morgenthau 1948; Waltz 1979). Regional institutions in this area are not always dominated by major powers. For instance, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a grouping of small to medium-sized powers established in 1967, was the region's only institution of note until the 1990s. Over time, ASEAN expanded its institutional network in the "ASEAN+N" formats through mechanisms like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Plus Three (APT), the East Asia Summit (EAS), and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+). While new initiatives led by major states have proliferated since the 2010s, no single institution has effectively unified the region's diverse and competing interests, and smaller states continue to play a crucial role within a fragmented institutional architecture (Caballero-Anthony 2014; Yeo 2018).

Then how can we understand the unique way institution-building and regionalism are unfolding in the Indo-Pacific? This chapter explores the factors behind the rise and evolution of the region's institutional framework, situating these developments in a historical context that includes the legacy of colonialism and shifts in postwar economic, political, security, and social/cultural relations within the region. It is important to note that there is no unified institutional framework for regionalism in the Indo-Pacific as a whole, especially when the very concept of an integrated Indo-Pacific region remains unsettled (Beeson and Lee-Brown 2021; Doyle and Rumley 2019; Kolmaš, Qiao-Franco, and Karmazin 2024). Before the popularization of the term "Indo-Pacific," which links East, Southeast, and South Asia, regionalism in these subregions developed somewhat separately,

though neither region has achieved a solidaristic order. The second section focuses on the variation in institutional designs, specifically examining the ASEAN Way or Asian Way of institution-building and evaluating its successes and challenges. The chapter also reviews various conceptual and theoretical perspectives from Asia Studies—such as neorealism, neoliberal institutionalism, constructivism, and domestic politics—to provide competing and complementary explanations for the incentives behind the creation and design of institutions in the region. The third section examines recent developments in Indo-Pacific cooperative security arrangements, linking developments in East, Southeast, and South Asia. It connects these to broader debates on the nature and model of Asian regionalism, including the sustainability of ASEAN centrality, the tension between inclusive and exclusive regionalism, and the influence of power politics in shaping Indo-Pacific regionalism. Lastly, the conclusion offers insights into the potential future trajectory of institutionalized cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

Genesis of Indo-Pacific Multilateral Institutions

Before introducing the historical factors that have influenced the distinct path of institution-building in the Indo-Pacific, it is important to highlight that there is no cohesive institutional framework for regionalism across the entire Indo-Pacific. The region's IR remain fragmented and complex, with the notion of a fully integrated Indo-Pacific still contested (Doyle and Rumley 2019). Prior to the widespread use of the term "Indo-Pacific," regionalism in East, Southeast Asia and South Asia evolved largely independently of each other, despite growing economic, political, and cultural interconnections and some overlapping membership between the institutions of these subregions.

The contemporary institutional structure of the Indo-Pacific is the outcome of a protracted evolution beginning in the colonial era, during which indigenous governance systems led by regional powers such as China and India were reshaped or disrupted (Kang 2005; Pardesi 2019). By the 19th century, all states in the region, with the exception of Thailand, had been drawn into the spheres of influence of European colonial powers. In addition to profound changes in demographics, economic activities, political systems, and culture, colonialism fundamentally redefined the regional order by compelling the colonized states to align politically and economically with imperial powers situated outside the region (Narine 2002). Despite the emergence of early nationalist and independence movements in the interwar period that advocated for self-determination, the enduring influence and dependency on external powers continued well into the post-colonial era. This dynamic not only obstructed the formation of clearly defined regional boundaries in Asia but also prevented the rise of indigenous great power leadership (Goh 2008). Consequently, power relations and hierarchies within the Indo-Pacific have remained contested.

The Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union exacerbated divisions within the Indo-Pacific region, with the strategic interests of regional states

often being subordinated to the priorities of the two opposing superpowers. Although some countries, such as India and Indonesia, pursued non-aligned foreign policies (Abraham 2008), the overarching influence of the Cold War blocs, led by the United States and the Soviet Union, fundamentally shaped regional dynamics. This influence is particularly evident in the US hub-and-spoke system, which involved a network of bilateral alliances with regional partners, at the core of which was the US–Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, signed in 1951 (see Chapter 3). In Southeast Asia, nations like Singapore, the Philippines, and Thailand, as well as, to a lesser extent, Brunei, Indonesia, and Malaysia, viewed the United States as their primary security provider. On the other hand, countries such as China (prior to 1964), India, and Vietnam fostered close ties with the Soviet Union, with examples including the 1978 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between the Soviet Union and Vietnam (Emmers, Liow, and Tan 2010).

During the Cold War, multilateral institutions in the region were scarce, and security largely depended on bilateral agreements. Unlike its approach in Europe, where NATO was established, the United States was reluctant to support a multilateral defense framework in the Asia-Pacific, fearing it might undermine its bilateral alliances and provide limited military benefits (Capie 2008; Graham 2013). In response to the threat of communist expansion, two early regional organizations were founded under US leadership and funding: The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954 and the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) in 1961. SEATO's members included Australia, Britain, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, and the United States, while the ASA was composed of the Philippines, Malaysia, and Thailand. However, neither organization played a significant military role, and both were eventually dissolved—SEATO in 1977 and the ASA in 1967—due to internal discord, the absence of shared strategic goals, and the lack of US willingness to broker truly multilateral order within these institutions.

In contrast, ASEAN, founded in 1967, proved more enduring. Initially, five members—Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand—came together with strong anti-communist sentiments during the Cold War, though the organization remained largely inactive during this period. Territorial disputes and other conflicts led to a breakdown in diplomatic ties among its members. To address these issues, ASEAN introduced frameworks such as the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) and the Declaration of ASEAN Concord in 1976, which aimed to formalize its objectives and establish a "high council" for dispute resolution (Kahler 2000). Despite these mechanisms, ASEAN opted to resolve disputes through bilateral diplomacy rather than formal institutional processes. Concurrently, its member states continued to maintain separate defense agreements with external powers.

The process of regional integration in South Asia has been even slower, despite the region's shared historical background and strong cultural connections between its states. Several unresolved bilateral disputes, including India's ongoing conflict with Pakistan over Kashmir and Sri Lanka's issue with Tamil citizenship, as well

as the security concerns of smaller South Asian nations regarding India's regional dominance, have impeded the development of a unified approach to regional cooperation (Dash 2008; Pardesi 2019). The proposal for regional cooperation put forth by Bangladesh's leader, Zia-ur-Rahman, in the 1970s was rejected by India and Pakistan, who were cautious about the decision-making process within the proposed regional group. Both countries were concerned that a majority-rule system might undermine their national interests. Cold War politics further complicated matters, as India, aligned with the Soviet Union, viewed Zia-ur-Rahman's ties to Western powers with suspicion, fearing that the new regional organization might serve as the US's tool to counter Soviet influence in South Asia (Ahmed 2013).

India and Pakistan only agreed to join the proposed South Asian regional grouping in 1979, following changes in the regional security landscape caused by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. This shift in dynamics spurred growing demands from smaller neighboring countries for a regional organization that would adopt a decision-making process based on unanimity, exclude bilateral and contentious issues from discussions, and adhere to principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, political independence, and non-interference in internal affairs (Muni 1996). These efforts culminated in the formation of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 1985 (Saez 2011).

With the recession of the Cold War, multilateral cooperative institutions in East, Southeast, and South have experienced significant growth in their scope and influence. ASEAN, in particular, has emerged as a key player in driving regional integration processes. Initially defined by its anti-communist stance, ASEAN evolved into a politically neutral forum that fostered cooperation and accommodation among the region's indigenous political elites, thus enhancing regime legitimacy and supporting nation-building and development efforts. This transformation enabled ASEAN to expand its membership, incorporating Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Vietnam between 1995 and 1999, thereby increasing its regional influence (Ba 2009; Emmers, Liow, and Tan 2010). In 2022, East Timor was accepted "in principle" as a member of ASEAN, in the most recent round of enlargement to date.

The institutionalization of ASEAN, moreover, triggered a new phase of regionalism across the broader region. ASEAN's external engagement, particularly with its "ASEAN+1" dialogue partners, helped establish the foundation for broader regional initiatives. These included the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC, 1989), the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA, 1992), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF, 1994), the ASEAN Plus Three (APT, 1997), the Asia-Europe Meeting (AEM, 1996), the East Asia Summit (EAS, 2005), and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+, 2010).

ASEAN's central role in the Indo-Pacific region challenges traditional assumptions about the dominance of great powers in managing international order (Goh 2008). Rather than being led by major powers, ASEAN, a coalition of small to medium-sized states, has taken a leading role in the creation and maintenance of many of these institutions (Acharya 2009; Katsumata 2011). This unconventional

phenomenon, often referred to as "ASEAN centrality," can be partially understood as a strategic accommodation among great powers (Goh 2011). China, the United States, Japan, and other major states have been generally comfortable with a relatively weak and ineffective institutional framework, not willing to engage in a structure led by any other power (Stubbs 2014). At the same time, the emergence of indigenous great power leadership in the region has been hindered by historical grievances, including the legacy of Japan's imperialism during World War II, China's traditional tribute system and early antagonism toward non-communist regimes, and India's intervention in Kashmir. Additionally, in the early stages of regionalization, both China and India predominantly pursued inward-focused foreign policy strategies. This approach is exemplified by China's "hide your strength, bide your time" doctrine, advocated by Deng Xiaoping and India's reluctance to assume a leadership role in fostering regional integration, a stance associated with Jawaharlal Nehru (Goh 2011; Muni 1996).

The earliest tangible advancements in multilateral frameworks predominantly occurred in the economic and trade sectors, driven by market-oriented reforms and liberalization policies adopted by regional states (Ravenhill 2008). For example, China's economic reforms initiated in the late 1970s and India's economic liberalization since 1991 have facilitated significant foreign trade and investment, spurring economic integration across Asia. The rapid economic growth of Asian nations further reinforced this trend, promoting cross-border trade and cooperation. The ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), established in 1992, exemplifies this progress. Aimed at removing tariff barriers among Southeast Asian countries, AFTA sought to integrate ASEAN economies into a unified production base and foster a regional market. Similarly, South Asia made strides in trade liberalization with the establishment of the SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement in 1993, followed by the South Asian Free Trade Agreement in 2004. These agreements were pivotal in enhancing economic collaboration within the region by lowering trade barriers and promoting economic interdependence (Dash 2008).

During this period, regional boundaries in Asia became increasingly fluid as regional economic cooperation embraced the concept of "open regionalism" (Garnaut 2005; Poon 2001). This approach, distinct from the "closed" and "exclusivist" trading blocs characteristic of Europe and North America at the time, promotes an open multilateral trading system. It ensures inclusivity not only for members within the grouping but also for external actors. The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) was the first major initiative in the region to adopt this principle. Alongside that, APEC embodied a broader vision of the region known as the Asia-Pacific, which incorporates (North) America, East Asia, Southeast Asia, and Australia.

APEC originated from a proposal by Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke in 1989, aimed at enhancing economic ties and fostering interdependence among Asia-Pacific economies. Unlike traditional economic blocs, APEC initially functioned as a dialogue forum on trade and investment, eschewing the rigid institutional

structures characteristic of other economic groups. This less institutionalized form of collaboration was maintained, although there was early resistance from influential players like the United States, who favored the establishment of a formal negotiating framework. APEC gradually evolved, and by 1993, it had established a permanent secretariat in Singapore and developed a comprehensive multilevel mechanism involving heads of state, ministries, and senior officials to address a broad range of economic and trade issues (Harris 2000).

The conclusion of the Cold War and the increasing interconnectedness of regional economies gradually fostered momentum for security-related discussions in the Indo-Pacific. This momentum soon evolved into deliberations on establishing a regional security forum that could incorporate key stakeholders and address critical security issues impacting regional stability and order. ASEAN, recognizing the risks of marginalization within the complex regional security dynamics, capitalized on the emerging consensus around the necessity of a new security architecture by proposing the creation of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) (Emmers and Tan 2011). The ARF, established as the first regional security forum with comprehensive representation of major regional powers, held its inaugural meeting in Bangkok in 1994 and has convened annually alongside the ASEAN Summit since then.

ASEAN states designed the ARF with strategic foresight, particularly to ensure continued US engagement in the region. They feared that the absence of an American presence might lead to a power vacuum, thereby escalating competition and rivalry among major Asian powers (Kuik 2008). The ARF sought to sustain a delicate balance of power, which was deemed essential to preserving the fragile post-Cold War peace. By creating a multilateral platform for dialogue and collaboration, rather than a tool of common security or even defense, ASEAN aimed to secure the active participation and commitment of all relevant actors in addressing pressing security challenges and fostering regional stability. In doing so, the ARF has been largely successful, tying many parties, including the EU, US, Russia, and China, to a web of defense consultations. That said, since it subscribes to the ideas of "open regionalism" identified above, complicated and close coordination requiring modes of collective security, or even defense, are clearly outside of the ARF's purview.

The 1997 Asian Financial Crisis revealed significant weaknesses within regional institutions, prompting a new wave of institutionalization efforts. The crisis undermined the credibility of APEC and ASEAN due to their inability to mount effective responses. In its aftermath, APEC began addressing broader issues beyond trade and economic integration, including poverty alleviation, corruption, women's issues, terrorism, and the 1999 East Timor crisis (Harris 2000). This shift marked a loosening of the region's traditional resistance to intervening in internal affairs, reflecting evolving institutional priorities and a more fluid security architecture.

Similarly, ASEAN started to gradually adapt its long-standing norms of non-interference. Through frameworks such as "constructive engagement," "flexible engagement," and "enhanced interaction," ASEAN began exploring a more

proactive approach to internal matters (Bellamy and Beeson 2010; Haacke 1999; Oba 2019). This evolution was formalized in the adoption of the Bali Concord I in 2003, which aimed to establish security, economic, and socio-cultural communities to enhance coherence among institutional frameworks and their respective agendas. The ASEAN Charter of 2007 further advanced these reforms by introducing a formalized governance structure and institutionalizing the organization. These developments signaled ASEAN's shift toward a more structured and comprehensive approach to regional governance (Tan 2013).

Moreover, the Asian Financial Crisis served as a catalyst for the formal establishment of the ASEAN Plus Three (APT, ASEAN plus China, Japan, and South Korea) framework. The concept of APT originated from the East Asian Economic Caucus proposed in 1990 by Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. This initiative aimed to provide East Asia with a unified voice in international trade negotiations and to function as a political counterbalance to external influences in regional affairs, although its progress has often been impeded by historical animosities and unresolved disputes among member states (Bowles 2002). The Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI), a currency swap agreement designed to help stabilize currencies across the region, is often regarded as one of the most significant achievements of the APT. It represents a regional response to the 1997 financial crisis, addressing vulnerabilities in the global financial system and reducing dependence on external institutions like the IMF. In 2010, the CMI was upgraded to the CMI Multilateralization, significantly expanding the finance pool for liquidity support during financial crises. However, the mechanism has never been activated, partially due to internal disagreements, limited funding, and complex application processes.

Over the years, the active engagement of regional states has significantly enhanced multilateral cooperation and fostered a stronger sense of regionalism, as evidenced by the steady expansion of many regional organizations' focus areas beyond economic collaboration to include a wide range of issues. Since the events of 9/11 and the Bali bombings, ASEAN, the ARF, and the SAARC have assumed pivotal roles in counter-terrorism efforts (Choudhry and Jabeen 2013). Additionally, a broad array of transnational issues—including public health concerns, transnational organized crime, migration, and environmental challenges such as haze, food security, and climate change—have been increasingly addressed through multilateral discussions among policy networks and epistemic communities within the region (Elliott 2017; Hameiri and Jones 2015; Qiao-Franco 2023). These developments highlight the growing scope and depth of regional institutional engagement in addressing complex and interconnected challenges.

Progress in Southeast and East Asia prompted countries in the Bay of Bengal region to consider a similar model of collaboration. The Bay of Bengal nations recognized the strategic importance of their region for trade and connectivity. Efforts by Thailand and India through their "Look West" and "Look East" policies converged in the establishment of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), which emerged from exploratory

initiatives led by Bangladesh and Thailand in 1994 (Yahya 2005). BIMSTEC, focusing on practical, sector-specific cooperation in areas like energy, technology, and disaster management, was formalized through the 1997 Bangkok Declaration. Its membership grew with Myanmar joining later in 1997 and Nepal and Bhutan in 2004, demonstrating a widespread aspiration for regional integration. India's shift of emphasis from the SAARC to BIMSTEC since 2021 has provided momentum to the latter's development. However, it remains to be seen if this momentum will translate into tangible outcomes given BIMSTEC's institutional weaknesses and member states' varying priorities.

The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and Mekong–Ganga Cooperation (MGC), established in 1997 and 2000, respectively, serve as additional mechanisms aimed at enhancing South Asian cooperation. The IORA seeks to integrate South Asian countries into a broader framework of collaboration among Indian Ocean states, with a primary focus on economic development and maritime security. In contrast, MGC emphasizes fostering cultural connectivity and strengthening people-to-people linkages between South Asia and Southeast Asia. However, like the SAARC and BIMSTEC, both organizations have remained relatively weak in terms of institutionalization. Notably, none of these South Asian frameworks address traditional security issues, which continue to be managed predominantly through bilateral engagements. As noted by Arndt Michael (2013), this dynamic is significantly influenced by India's strategic perceptions and preferences. Two key factors are India's adherence to the principles of independence and bilateralism, which contribute to its skepticism toward security integration. Furthermore, India's dominant position within the region has often resulted in sidelining initial proponents of regional cooperation, as India reoriented regional organizations to align more closely with its national interests.

In Northeast Asia, trilateral cooperation among China, Japan, and South Korea, which originated within the framework of the APT, was formalized in 2007 with the Trilateral Summit. This platform was designed to promote dialogue on issues such as trade, investment, disaster management, climate change, and regional security challenges, including North Korea's nuclear program. While the Trilateral Summit has enabled discussions on these key topics, its progress has largely remained confined to high-level dialogues, with limited advancement beyond its initial establishment (Madhur 2013; Yeo 2017). The proposal for a China–Japan–South Korea Free Trade Agreement was introduced in 2002, and formal negotiations began in 2012. Despite some progress, the agreement has encountered periodic delays and stagnation due to persistent geopolitical tensions among the three countries. Direct trilateral cooperation continues to face significant obstacles, particularly concerns over regional dominance and strategic imbalances. In contrast, ASEAN-centered platforms, such as the APT, provide a neutral and inclusive framework that facilitates collaboration by mitigating these tensions.

The Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) are

the newest regional institutions to add to the mix. The CPTPP evolved from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), initially launched in 2008 by the United States to establish high trade standards and counterbalance China's influence. After the United States withdrew under Donald Trump, the remaining TPP members re-branded the agreement as the CPTPP, which was finalized in 2018. Conversely, RCEP was initiated in 2012 as part of a growing emphasis on economic integration within Asia. Driven by China's interest in countering US-led initiatives like the TPP, RCEP's development accelerated, culminating in its adoption in 2020 (Wilson 2015). Despite overlapping membership, RCEP and the CPTPP diverge in their focus: RCEP prioritizes broad and flexible tariff reductions and regional integration but is less ambitious in its commitments to labor, environmental, and reform standards, whereas the CPTPP emphasizes comprehensive reforms in trade, labor, environmental, and digital regulations, while maintaining its original objective of countering China's influence. The establishment of both agreements reflects the geopolitical dynamics within the Indo-Pacific. The future trajectory of these two trade partnerships, which differ in their levels of ambition, scope of commitments, and membership composition, remains uncertain as regional states navigate their choices regarding which vision for the Indo-Pacific trade system best aligns with their economic and political priorities.

For an overview, Table 5.1 captures the essential details about the regional institutions outlined above, highlighting their establishment dates, membership composition, and primary areas of cooperation.

Overall, despite notable advancements, robust regional institutions in the Indo-Pacific have not emerged. This is palpable for several reasons. First, the legacy of colonialism has fostered a strong adherence to nationalism and the principles of Westphalian sovereignty. This historical experience has instilled a reluctance among post-colonial states to cede significant authority to supranational organizations, thereby limiting the formalization and depth of regional cooperation (Alice 1997). Within this context, most regional institutions reflect domestic political priorities, such as the consolidation of viable governments, rather than a collective commitment to multilateralism (Acharya 1997; Jayasuriya 2009; Katzenstein 2000). Hence, multilateralism in Asia is largely an extension of national power rather than an independent force (Green and Gill 2009). For the same reasons, despite a growing web of overlapping institutions, the intergovernmental nature of regionalism has been maintained, where sovereignty remains paramount and non-state actors wield limited influence (Narine 2002).

Second, deep-seated divisions among regional states, rooted in ethnic, linguistic, religious, and cultural heterogeneity, continue to impede regional unity. These divisions are exacerbated by unresolved historical conflicts and disputes, which fuel mistrust and hinder collective identity formation (Emmers and Tan 2011). For example, the India–Pakistan conflict and disagreements over the Taliban government's legitimacy in Afghanistan have paralyzed the SAARC since 2021. In Northeast Asia, progress on negotiations for the proposed China–Japan–South Korea

TABLE 5.1 Summary of key regional institutions in the Indo-Pacific.

Organization/Initiative	*Establishment Time*	*Member States*	*Areas of Cooperation*
Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO)	1955 (dissolved in 1977)	Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan (including East Pakistan, now Bangladesh), Philippines, Thailand, United Kingdom, United States	Collective defense, containment of communism, military cooperation, and cultural and educational collaboration.
Association of Southeast Asia (ASA)	1961 (dissolved in 1967)	Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand	Regional economic, social, cultural cooperation, and containment of communism
ASEAN	1967	Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand (original members). Later joined by Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia.	Political-security cooperation, economic integration, socio-cultural development, environmental sustainability, and regional stability.
ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)	1994	27 members, including ASEAN countries plus Australia, Canada, China, EU, India, Japan, Russia, South Korea, New Zealand, and the United States, among others.	Dialogue on political and security issues, confidence-building measures, preventive diplomacy, and conflict resolution.
ASEAN Plus Three (APT)	1997	ASEAN countries plus China, Japan, and South Korea.	Economic integration, financial cooperation, regional stability, disaster management, and food and energy security.
Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)	1997	23 members, including Australia, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kenya, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritius, Mozambique, Singapore, Somalia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Thailand, UAE, Yemen, among others.	Maritime safety and security, trade and investment facilitation, disaster management, fisheries management, blue economy, science and technology

(*Continued*)

TABLE 5.1 (Continued)

Organization/Initiative	*Establishment Time*	*Member States*	*Areas of Cooperation*
SAARC	1985	Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka	Economic, social, and cultural development; poverty alleviation; regional integration; and cooperation in areas like energy, agriculture, health, and education.
Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC)	1989	21 members, including ASEAN countries, Australia, Canada, China, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Russia, South Korea, the United States, and Vietnam, among others.	Trade and investment liberalization, economic and technical cooperation, and regional economic integration.
BIMSTEC	1997	Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand	Trade and investment, transport and connectivity, energy, technology, tourism, public health, climate change, and poverty alleviation.
China-Japan-South Korea Trilateral Summit	1999 (informal); 2008 (formal Secretariat)	China, Japan, South Korea	Economic integration, cultural exchange, environmental protection, disaster management, and regional stability.
Mekong–Ganga Cooperation (MGC)	2000	India, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam	Cultural and historical ties, tourism, education, connectivity, cooperation in small and medium enterprises
Six Party Talks	2003	China, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, Russia, United States	Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, peace and stability in Northeast Asia, and addressing North Korea's nuclear program.
East Asian Summit (EAS)	2005	ASEAN countries plus Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Russia, United States.	Regional peace and stability, economic integration, energy security, education, disaster management, and environmental protection.

(*Continued*)

TABLE 5.1 (Continued)

Organization/Initiative	*Establishment Time*	*Member States*	*Areas of Cooperation*
Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)	2007 (initially); revitalized in 2017	Australia, India, Japan, United States.	Security and defense cooperation, maritime security, regional stability, infrastructure development, technology, climate change, health, and disaster response.
ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+)	2010	18 members, including ASEAN countries, Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Russia, United States	Regional defense and security cooperation, confidence-building measures and dialogue, counterterrorism, peacekeeping, maritime, security, and humanitarian aid.
Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP)	2018	Australia, Canada, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, Brunei, Chile, Peru	High-standard trade rules covering goods, services, investment, labor, environment, and digital trade.
Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)	2020	ASEAN countries plus Australia, China, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea	Trade liberalization, investment, intellectual property, e-commerce, economic integration, and strengthening supply chains in the Asia-Pacific region.

Source: Created by authors.

Free Trade Agreement has faced significant obstacles since 2019, primarily due to escalating geopolitical tensions and the increasing convergence in the industrial structures of the three nations involved. Likewise, internal divisions within ASEAN have become more pronounced, particularly in relation to territorial disputes between certain member states and China. These divisions have complicated efforts to achieve a unified approach to addressing sovereignty issues in the South China Sea. While regionally, these discords can be muted, as the outburst of new platforms since the 1990s has illustrated, on the large and diverse platform of the Indo-Pacific, the differences among parties inhibit any push for closer and institutionally strong cooperation.

Third, smaller states in the Indo-Pacific remain wary of institutions dominated by larger powers. In South Asia, smaller states often perceive India's regional dominance as a threat, hindering their commitment to deeper institutional integration (Ahmed 2013). Likewise, in East and Southeast Asia, uncertainties arising from power transitions, multipolarity, and a complex security environment compel smaller states to hedge strategically toward more powerful nations, particularly China (Wicaksana and Karim 2023). To counter potential marginalization and prevent the dominance of a single major power, smaller states have adopted "open regionalism" as a pragmatic approach to protect their interests and maintain a balanced distribution of power. This inclusive framework, as highlighted by former Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, balances flexible participation with fostering stability and resilience in regional cooperation, ensuring the engagement of dominant actors (Lee 2017). Beyond these deliberate efforts to maintain openness to both intra-regional and extra-regional powers, this approach also reflects the historical reliance of Asian states on external actors, especially the United States. The US's strategic influence continues to shape the region's security and economic dynamics (Narine 2002). While economic and military interdependence with external powers reinforces these ties, it simultaneously hinders the development of more cohesive and autonomous regional institutions.

Institutional Design and Structures: Multilateralism with Asian Characteristics

International institutions formed within the distinct regional contexts of Southeast Asia, East Asia, the Asia-Pacific, and more recently, the Indo-Pacific, have emphasized their unique decision-making norms and diplomatic practices (Acharya and Johnston 2007). Central to this distinctiveness is the concept of the "ASEAN Way," or occasionally the "Asian Way" (Acharya 1997; Capie 2008). This concept is closely linked to the phenomenon of ASEAN centrality, wherein a coalition of small to middle powers assumes a pivotal role in shaping and advancing the development of multilateral institutions in the region (Acharya 2017; Ba 2012; Katsumata 2003).

This distinctive process of institution-building has propagated the ASEAN approach to interstate relations in the broader regional context of multilateralism.

Amitav Acharya was among the first scholars to analyze the ASEAN Way, characterizing it as a method marked by discretion, informality, pragmatism, expediency, consensus-building, non-confrontational bargaining styles, and deliberate avoidance of excessive institutionalization. This approach contrasts sharply with the adversarial and legalistic decision-making practices commonly observed in Western multilateral negotiations (Acharya 1997, 329).

The ASEAN Way can be understood as a code of conduct for inter-state dispute resolution and regional cooperation, developed by ASEAN member states to promote regional peace and stability. Rooted in the conflict resolution traditions of Southeast Asia, it reflects an evolving approach shaped by the organization's experiences since its founding in 1967. This framework emerged from efforts to address various challenges, including fostering regional economic cooperation, managing inter-state disputes such as the Philippines-Malaysia territorial conflict over Sabah and the Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia. Additionally, it reflects ASEAN's commitment to mitigating the recurring risks of external interference by major powers such as the Soviet Union, China, and the United States in regional affairs.

A significant aspect of the ASEAN Way has been formalized and codified through the TAC (Emmers, Liow, and Tan 2010). Signed during ASEAN's first summit in Bali in 1976, the TAC has since been adopted by non-ASEAN states, including China and India in 2003, Japan and Russia in 2004, and the United States in 2009. The treaty incorporates principles drawn from the UN Charter and the 1955 Bandung Conference in Indonesia, emphasizing core tenets such as mutual respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and national identity, as well as non-interference in internal affairs, the right of states to exist free from external coercion or interference, peaceful dispute resolution, and the renunciation of force or threats of force. Although these principles are consistent with the norms of the Westphalian system and are broadly acknowledged in IR, the ASEAN Way is distinctive in its application of these norms within a regional context. It integrates traditional Southeast Asian approaches to conflict resolution, emphasizing informality, discretion, non-confrontational consensus-building, and a minimalist approach to institutional structures and institutionalization.

The preference for informality and the deliberate avoidance of excessive institutionalization are evident in ASEAN's dialogue process, which is often described as "unstructured," with no clear format for decision-making or implementation. Discussions typically lack a formal agenda, and issues are addressed on an ad hoc basis as they arise (Stubbs 2014). Regional consultations are generally open-ended, without being tied to specific timelines. This informality fosters a comfortable environment for participants, enabling a flexible decision-making process that accommodates changes in national bargaining positions. Additionally, much of the intra-ASEAN cooperation is driven by interpersonal relationships rather than the strength of formal institutions.

The preference for informality is closely linked to another key element of the ASEAN Way—institutional minimalism (cf. also Box 5.1). Regional institutions

in Southeast Asia typically operate with few formal procedures, and when institutions and procedures are established, they are often ad hoc rather than permanent (Ba 2009). In fact, most institutions in the Indo-Pacific lack secretariats and impose minimal obligations on their members. Those that do have secretariats generally delegate few responsibilities to them. For example, while the ASEAN Secretariat provides administrative support for initiatives like the ARF, APT, EAS, and ASEAN itself, it remains relatively small compared to its European Union counterpart in Brussels, despite gradual expansions in staff and responsibilities over time.

Regional states have generally rejected the concept of a centralized, permanent bureaucracy with decision-making authority. Instead, decision-making and coordination are primarily managed through various regular yet flexible intergovernmental frameworks that do not involve the delegation of state sovereignty to a regional authority. For example, the ASEAN process includes an annual meeting of foreign ministers, a formal biennial summit of leaders, and special meetings as required. Additionally, numerous ASEAN-related meetings involve ministers, senior officials, and parliamentarians. Similarly, the BIMSTEC process features a summit of heads of state or government as the highest decision-making body, along with regular ministerial and bureaucratic consultations. The BIMSTEC Secretariat and Permanent Working Committee are primarily responsible for coordinating the group's activities and handling routine administrative and operational matters.

In addition to its emphasis on informality and reluctance to adopt formal institutions, the ASEAN Way, or the broader Asian Way of institution-building, is distinguished by its focus on consensus. While consensus-based decision-making is a common feature in many regional and multilateral contexts, within the ASEAN framework, it is particularly associated with the concepts of "musjawarah" or "mufakat," which originate from a traditional Javanese style of decision-making in village society (Acharya 1997). In its Javanese context, musjawarah refers to a decision-making process in which a village leader makes significant decisions affecting the community. It implies that a leader should avoid acting arbitrarily or imposing their will, instead offering gentle suggestions for the direction the community should take. This approach emphasizes the importance of consulting all participants and considering their perspectives and feelings before reaching a final decision.

The practice of consultations and the creation of a comfortable environment are thus critical components of consensus-building within ASEAN. This approach emphasizes the importance of establishing a non-hostile psychological atmosphere during consultations. An essential aspect of this environment involves preventing open and public disagreements among participants, particularly during the initial stages of cooperation, before more substantive dialogue can take place. While ASEAN members may engage in private debates and disagreements on specific positions, they avoid publicizing these differences, particularly when interacting with external actors. Even in cases where consensus proves unattainable, ASEAN members often present a unified stance on the issue at hand. There is a clear tendency to downplay or frame internal disagreements positively, with considerable

effort to avoid isolating or embarrassing any member in international forums. Even when one ASEAN member proposes a position that is not acceptable to others, the group refrains from actions that could cause the member to "lose face" on the international stage (Capie 2008; Rüland 2014).

It is important to recognize that the consensus-based decision-making system in ASEAN is characterized by flexibility rather than unanimity. Consensus does not necessitate complete agreement from all parties but instead focuses on identifying a path forward that garners broad support. Cooperation can proceed even in the presence of disagreements among certain parties, as long as their fundamental interests are not overlooked. These dissenting states can later join the cooperative process once they are prepared to do so. This flexible approach to consensus is particularly evident in economic cooperation, where it is used to accommodate national differences through the "ASEAN Minus X" formula (Emmers 2017).

BOX 5.1 A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE INSTITUTIONAL DESIGNS OF ASEAN AND THE EU

ASEAN and the EU are frequently regarded as two of the most successful regional organizations. Despite the clear differences in their approaches to regionalism, comparisons between these two institutions have become a popular topic in IR area studies and comparative regionalism literature (Acharya and Johnston 2007; Beeson and Jayasuriya 1998; Kahler 2000; Katzenstein 2005; Yeo 2010). Both organizations operate across multiple sectors, including peace and security, economic development, and socio-cultural exchange, with each sector managed by specialized committees or directorates. However, their institutional designs differ significantly, reflecting varying levels of ambition and integration, influenced by their respective historical and political contexts.

Scholars in area studies and comparative regionalism often argue that East Asian institutions, such as ASEAN, are "under-institutionalized" or less legally structured compared to their European counterparts. A comparison of ASEAN and the EU reveals that ASEAN has a relatively simpler structure, consisting of the ASEAN Summit, the ASEAN Secretariat, and sectoral ministerial bodies. In contrast, the EU's structure is more intricate, featuring the European Parliament as the legislative body, the European Commission as the executive, the European Council as the strategic decision-making body of leaders, and the Council of the EU as a co-legislative body representing governments. When comparing the secretariats of both organizations, it is notable that ASEAN and the EU have similar populations, approximately 500 million people each. However, ASEAN's Secretariat employs fewer than 300 staff members and operates

with an annual budget of approximately $14 million, while the European Commission employs around 25,000 staff and manages an administrative budget exceeding $11 billion.

ASEAN's institutional design is not only characterized by a "thinner" secretariat but also by the limited power granted to its institutions. Overall, ASEAN is a loosely structured, intergovernmental organization that emphasizes state sovereignty and non-interference, requiring minimal changes in member behavior, imposing fewer binding obligations, and lacking strong enforcement mechanisms. In contrast, the EU is a supranational organization endowed with substantial authority over its member states, including legally binding regulations, directives, and a robust enforcement framework through institutions such as the European Court of Justice. ASEAN's focus remains on cooperation rather than integration, in contrast to the EU's establishment of a single market, customs union, the Eurozone, and extensive legal harmonization among member states.

Nevertheless, some scholars contend that the differences between European and East Asian institutions and their processes of institutional building may be less pronounced than commonly suggested, emphasizing the role of intergovernmentalism in both regions. For example, while the EU is more supranational in nature, it still relies on consensus-based decision-making within the European Council, which is composed of heads of state or government. Additionally, much of the literature on norm diffusion has drawn comparisons between ASEAN and other Indo-Pacific institutions and the EU as a model of successful regionalism, though norms are adapted to fit the distinct political and cultural contexts of the region (Acharya 2004; Jetschke and Murray 2012). Recent geopolitical shifts, including the global rise of nationalism and populism, are expected to influence multilateral processes and institutional designs in both regions, potentially fostering greater convergence or divergence in institutional arrangements.

The effectiveness and contributions of the distinct institutional design and features of regional organizations in the Indo-Pacific have been a subject of ongoing debate among both scholars and policymakers. The strengths and limitations of the ASEAN Way in addressing security concerns and the economic vulnerabilities of its members have been examined with evidence supporting a wide range of often conflicting arguments and perspectives.

Criticism of the ASEAN Way largely stems from realist and functionalist viewpoints. Critics argue that the region's institutional arrangements are not optimized for efficiency, decisive action, or meaningful progress in line with their stated ambitions. These critiques downplay the socializing influence of the process, focusing instead on outcomes that they deem disappointing, such as a lack of influence over

state preferences, limited effectiveness, and even the counterproductive effects of the ASEAN Way in restricting state actions (Aggarwal and Chow 2010; Jones and Smith 2007). Additionally, critics highlight the inability of ASEAN mechanisms to resolve core conflicts, with major regional issues—such as Taiwan, North Korea, and the South China Sea—remaining largely off the agenda of forums like the ARF, the EAS, and the APT. The failure to move beyond confidence-building measures to preventive diplomacy is a key point of critique (Emmers and Tan 2011; Javaid 2010; Jones and Jenne 2016). From a realist perspective, this critique resonates with the broader skepticism about the ability of international institutions to meaningfully shape the behavior of sovereign states, particularly major powers (Mearsheimer 1994). In contrast, from a neoliberal institutionalist standpoint, regional organizations in the Indo-Pacific are viewed as lacking many of the institutional features considered essential for fostering effective cooperation (cf. Koremenos, Lipson, and Snidal 2003), particularly given the region's foundational difficulties in coordinating collective action and addressing disputes.

Proponents of the ASEAN or Asian Way emphasize the tangible perceptual and behavioral impacts of regional security dialogues, arguing that conventional functionalist and realist theories in IR provide limited analytical tools for evaluating the effectiveness of these regional practices. This limitation arises from their inability to account for the unique "political rationalities" that distinguish Asian contexts from Western ones (Ba 2009; Johnston 1999; Khong and Nesadurai 2007). Unlike European liberal rationalism, which emphasizes domestic political and economic convergence among member states, Asian international institutions explicitly reject such standardization in favor of communalism and solidarism (Johnston 2012; Pettman 2010). For instance, the organization of EAS illustrates this approach. ASEAN's framework for EAS membership requires only that prospective members maintain cooperative relations with ASEAN and adhere to the TAC, without imposing requirements related to domestic political structures or ideologies.

The multilateralism observed in Asia has been conceptualized as a socially constructed and discursively realized phenomenon, shaped by norms, cultural traditions, and "cognitive priors" (Acharya 2004). This perspective aligns closely with constructivist approaches in IR. This literature contends that examining the social-psychological dynamics within Asian institutions reveals cooperative outcomes driven by processes such as deliberation, persuasion, social pressure, and mimicry, alongside intentional efforts to cultivate interpersonal relationships (Beeson and Jayasuriya 1998; Katsumata 2009). Consequently, institutions are viewed not merely as frameworks that constrain strategic actors with fixed interests but as environments where social interactions foster emergent cooperative behaviors and shared identities.

Attention to social-psychological dynamics has proven particularly effective in promoting peace both within ASEAN and in its external relations, independent of factors such as economic interdependence, influence of the United States, or the

presence of liberal political regimes. The contrast between conflict data from the pre– and post-Cold War periods is striking, revealing a notable increase in regional peace. While some critics argue that the ASEAN Way focuses on managing disputes rather than resolving them, it has nonetheless contributed to prolonged periods of peace or delayed the outbreak of conflicts. Over time, the accumulation of peace fosters habits of cooperation (Glas 2017), while perceptions of other states' behavior become more benign or context-dependent, thereby rendering conflicts more manageable (Kivimäki 2001).

These inconclusive debates regarding how to characterize and evaluate the effectiveness of institutions in Asia and the Indo-Pacific are likely to persist, given the fundamentally different assumptions that observers have about the forces and dynamics that influence diplomatic and strategic outcomes in the region. However, these discussions warrant serious consideration, as dissatisfaction with regional institutions—particularly ASEAN-led security forums—has spurred efforts by major powers to create alternative mechanisms. These alternatives are intended to foster more immediate and coordinated functional responses, including the recent development of various minilateral initiatives in the Indo-Pacific, as outlined below.

The Evolving Indo-Pacific Order and the Rise of Alternative Models for Institutional Construction?

Since the early 1990s, a key driver of Indo-Pacific multilateral cooperation has been the institutionalization of ties between major powers through or facilitated by ASEAN-led frameworks such as the ARF, APT, EAS, and ADMM-Plus. Although there is ongoing discussion regarding whether ASEAN's vital role in shaping and managing the regional architecture is a necessity or a deliberate choice by major states, ASEAN centrality is widely recognized as an established reality, exemplified by its ability to set agendas for multilateral processes and apply its norms and practices to these interactions (Tan 2017). While major powers have occasionally advanced their own multilateral initiatives, they have generally adhered to the protocol of consulting with ASEAN. However, recent developments suggest that the consensus on ASEAN centrality as the organizing model for regional multilateral cooperation—whether in Asia, the Asia-Pacific, or the Indo-Pacific—may no longer be guaranteed (Acharya 2017; Anwar 2022; Ba 2012).

From the 2010s onward, the region has witnessed the emergence and rapid proliferation of new initiatives spearheaded by major powers, signaling a shift in institution-building dynamics influenced by changing political, security, and economic conditions (Beeson and Lee-Brown 2017; Emmers and Ravenhill 2011). Among the most consequential developments has been China's ascendancy, which has increasingly positioned it as a competitor to the United States in both economic and military domains (Pan 2014). The Indo-Pacific power balance has tilted in favor of China, particularly through its Belt and Road Initiative, the Asian Infrastructure

Investment Bank, the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation mechanism, and other China-led regional frameworks. These initiatives have enabled China to make significant investments in infrastructure projects—including roads, railways, airports, seaports, and power plants—thereby deepening its ties with neighboring countries.

In response to shifting power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific, the United States has implemented its "Pivot to Asia" strategy, emphasizing the reinforcement of bilateral alliances, defense collaborations, and "strategic partnerships." While constructive cooperation and fostering regional multilateralism was understood to be among the key principles of the US's reorientation to Asia, this period has rather witnessed the emergence of new minilateral security dialogues among like-minded nations, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)—comprising the United States, Japan, Australia, and India—and AUKUS, a security pact involving the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom.

The Quad originated informally in the wake of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, serving as a platform for coordinating disaster relief efforts among its four member states. The concept of formalizing this grouping gained momentum in 2007 when Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe advocated for a strategic dialogue grounded in shared values such as democracy, the rule of law, and a commitment to a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (Koga 2020). This led to the first official Quad meeting during the ARF meeting in Manila in 2007. However, the initiative soon lost traction, partly due to China's concerns over its potential as a containment strategy, relatively modest interest from India and eventually even the United States, and the election of relatively pro-Chinese Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in Australia. The Quad remained dormant until its revival in 2017 amidst growing geopolitical challenges in the Indo-Pacific, particularly China's emergence as a global power. In 2020, the Quad expanded into the Quad Plus framework, incorporating additional countries like New Zealand, South Korea, and Vietnam, albeit on a more informal basis.

AUKUS, announced in 2021, signifies a deepened defense partnership among its three member states of Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, which already—together with Canada and New Zealand—engages in intelligence sharing through the Five Eyes Alliance. AUKUS focuses on defense and security issues, with a particular emphasis on maritime security and technological collaboration in areas such as cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, and quantum computing. One of its most prominent features is the provision of nuclear-powered submarines to Australia, a move that has sparked concerns regarding nuclear non-proliferation. However, AUKUS does not directly address broader regional challenges, such as economic development, humanitarian needs, or environmental issues.

The prominence of minilateralism in Indo-Pacific institution-building reflects a long-standing academic inquiry regarding the relative effectiveness of multilateral frameworks with varying participant numbers (Falkner 2016; Kahler 1992). Advocates for smaller groupings argue that they are often more effective than larger ones in fostering agreement and ensuring commitment among members. The G20,

established in 1999, is frequently cited as an exemplar of this approach (Jokela 2011; Patrick 2015).

Whether these advantages will manifest in the Indo-Pacific remains uncertain. Smaller groupings may enhance coordination, information-sharing, and the development of unified security strategies that broader, multilateral frameworks—like those centered on ASEAN—have struggled to achieve. Proponents of minilateralism often critique ASEAN's informal and consultative approach, arguing that it is inadequate for addressing the region's pressing security challenges. They contend that ASEAN's claims of inclusivity and harmony lack substantive impact, further highlighting the need for more focused and action-oriented initiatives in the Indo-Pacific (Ha 2022; Tow 2020).

However, harmonizing policies and strategies within emerging Indo-Pacific frameworks may still prove challenging. Middle powers such as South Korea and Vietnam often strive to maintain balanced and constructive relationships with both the United States and China, avoiding overt alignment with either. India, too, plays a pivotal but cautious role in these evolving power structures, showing reluctance in fully advancing new Indo-Pacific security arrangements. While India broadly supports these initiatives—consistent with its "Look East" and "Act East" policies under Narendra Modi, which aim to reduce economic reliance on China and counter Beijing's assertiveness along its disputed northern border—its commitment is tempered by lingering reservations about deviating from its traditional non-aligned stance (Chacko 2014; Purushothaman and Unnikrishnan 2019). These factors underscore the significant coordination challenges that must be addressed to ensure sustained engagement and effective implementation of such initiatives.

The revitalization and creation of these minilateral Indo-Pacific initiatives also highlight broader debates regarding the nature and framework of regionalism. A key question is whether ASEAN can maintain its centrality and avoid being eclipsed by major powers, thereby risking diminished influence in shaping the regional order. ASEAN's concerns about its relevance were evident in the *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific* (2019), which emphasized its aspiration to remain the primary driver of regional cooperation through ASEAN-led institutions (Dung 2022; Zha 2023). Without ASEAN's endorsement and active participation, initiatives such as AUKUS or the Quad may face limitations in addressing collective security challenges that require input from a broader spectrum of Indo-Pacific nations.

The evolving Indo-Pacific dynamics carry significant political implications that extend beyond the challenge to ASEAN centrality. Notably, the initiatives discussed reflect growing regional dissatisfaction with ASEAN's inclusive, open-ended frameworks and its conventions for regional architecture. In contrast, the new institutional constructs are characterized by exclusivity and competitiveness in seeking to change the balance of power (Beeson and Lee-Brown 2021). This realist IR strategy involves countering perceived pressures or threats by establishing, leveraging, and dominating multilateral institutions (He 2008). Such approaches resonate with broader discussions in classical and neorealist traditions on

strategies like balancing, bandwagoning, and appeasement as responses to major power behavior.

This sort of institutional balancing departs from the traditional approach of balancing practiced in the region. Scholars have used terms such as "low-intensity balancing" (Roy 2005), "soft balancing" (Pape 2005), or "balancing of influence" (Ciorciari 2008) to describe the eclectic strategy smaller states in the region have taken. For instance, ASEAN's balancing has added elements of engagement, hedging, and insurance. Engagement involves actively trying to modify another state's preferences. To be specific, ASEAN is engaging the United States, China, and other powers in regional institutions, thereby promoting the recognition of cooperative security conceptions and putting institutional constraints on unilateral actions by them. Hedging in the Asian context is for domestic regime legitimation purposes rather than decided by systematic distribution of power (Kuik 2008). It is often applied under conditions of uncertainty, but where there is little evidence of imminent threat, and typically involving efforts to avoid taking sides while investing in both deterrence and assurance (Kuik 2008). And finally, insurance policies are premised on the assumption that acute threats are rare events, in contrast to balancing in transatlantic IR that assumes acute threats are common and/or inevitable (Johnston 2012). For example, ASEAN states maintain a US presence as insurance alongside using regional economic integration to tie interests together with China and move toward the development of economic and social community (Ciorciari 2008).

The long-term effects of initiatives like AUKUS and the Quad on the strategic balance of power in the Indo-Pacific remain uncertain. However, their shift toward a more exclusive framework risks undermining efforts to facilitate diplomatic engagement, dialogue, and trust-building in the region. Instead, these developments could intensify competitive dynamics and deepen regional divisions. While such initiatives may enhance the defense capabilities of certain countries, they also risk escalating regional tensions and potentially provoking conflict, thereby making the regional order more precarious and unstable (Zala 2020). China has voiced strong objections to these arrangements, viewing them as containment strategies. For instance, Beijing has criticized the Quad as an "Asian NATO" and interprets it as a US-led effort to encircle China (Wuthnow 2019). Consequently, heightened strategic competition and growing distrust could render the security environment more volatile, undermining prospects for stable regional dynamics.

Additionally, the increasing variety of security frameworks has disrupted the status quo by linking East, Southeast, and South Asia under a nascent pan-regional architecture. However, the amorphous and underdeveloped geopolitical concept of the Indo-Pacific poses significant challenges to the emergence of a coherent regional framework. Concerns arise regarding whether a regional architecture can be effectively designed to address the diversity of the Indo-Pacific. At present, the foundations for regionalism—such as a shared identity, common interests, and cohesive normative principles—are largely absent (Kolmaš, Qiao-Franco, and

Karmazin 2024). Expanding the geographical scope of regional platforms risks making Asian regionalism less coherent and existing architectures more unwieldy.

Moreover, such expansion dilutes the political meaning and identity of concepts like Asia, East Asia, or Southeast Asia, which various regional institutions had previously sought to define and consolidate (Emmers, Liow, and Tan 2010). The growing number of overlapping cooperative arrangements adds complexity to efforts aimed at refining or reshaping the regional architecture. While these Indo-Pacific mechanisms offer new opportunities for collaboration, they may also introduce challenges to achieving greater cohesion and alignment within the regional order.

Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific, characterized by both dynamism and contestation, requires robust international institutions capable of uniting regional states to address complex challenges amidst significant geopolitical transformations. Achieving this unity, however, is difficult due to entrenched mutual distrust, a strong aversion to ceding sovereignty to international institutions, divergent views on the norms and principles governing IR, and persistent national rivalries. These factors hinder full regional commitment to community-building efforts. Efforts to foster regional integration, such as open regionalism, ASEAN centrality, the ASEAN Way, and prioritizing economic integration, have historically focused on informal, consultative, inclusive, and open-ended approaches. While these measures have facilitated positive regional norms, they are increasingly regarded as ill-equipped for addressing the Indo-Pacific's pressing security challenges, particularly in the context of China's rise and the United States' strategic rebalancing, which have intensified regional power rivalries. Consequently, minilateral security initiatives and bilateral arrangements have emerged or been revitalized, offering new opportunities for cooperation but also presenting challenges to achieving greater cohesion and alignment within the regional order.

The trajectory of multilateral institution-building in the Indo-Pacific remains uncertain. It is unclear whether the emerging Indo-Pacific framework will evolve into a viable multilateral cooperation structure or coexist with narrower, subregional frameworks such as those in Southeast Asia, East Asia, South Asia, and the Asia-Pacific. Substantive cooperation on urgent regional challenges may continue to occur within more localized institutions like ASEAN or BIMSTEC, where shared interests, norms, and institutional foundations are stronger. However, no single regional institution appears capable of accommodating the diverse interests, calculations, and trade-offs of all regional actors. Regional states are likely to persist in utilizing a variety of strategies, such as non-alignment, engagement, hedging, and balancing, to protect their interests. These approaches, coupled with the ongoing competition among overlapping regional institutions, imply the potential for the continued proliferation of loosely interconnected frameworks extending across Southeast Asia, East Asia, South Asia, the Asia-Pacific, and the Indo-Pacific.

The vision of a cohesive regional community remains distant, as there is no coalition or concert of regional great and middle powers to advance such an agenda. While a credible, top-down political initiative to construct a unified regional architecture is unrealistic, practical steps can help address the fragmentation of existing institutions. First, fostering trust and comfort among Indo-Pacific states is essential. While ASEAN member states have decades of experience in regional reconciliation, such opportunities have not extended to Northeast Asian and South Asian states, whose interactions remain predominantly bilateral. Regional mechanisms, even if limited in their ability to resolve conflicts or promote deep collaboration, can serve as platforms to moderate interstate tensions and constrain deviant behaviors of member states. Second, overlapping regional institutions could benefit from clarifying and streamlining their roles and responsibilities. This reform would reduce duplication, enhance coherence, and allow institutions to adapt their mandates to address evolving regional needs more effectively. Third, existing institutions have encountered difficulties due to the rapid expansion of both their membership and the scope of their agendas, which has diminished their effectiveness. To strengthen these institutions without abandoning the ASEAN Way of coordination, it will be necessary to prioritize initiatives with well-defined objectives and ensure sufficient resource allocation. These recommendations do not purport to provide a comprehensive solution to the region's challenges; rather, they seek to stimulate an essential dialogue focused on addressing the complexities of the Indo-Pacific and fostering a more stable and cooperative regional order.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What are the key driving forces behind the emergence of multilateral institutions in the Indo-Pacific?
- What is ASEAN centrality? Why is it possible in the region? Is it sustainable?
- What are the unique features of institution-building in the Indo-Pacific? How can we evaluate their efficacy in managing security conflicts and economic cooperation, and other areas of regional cooperation?
- Why did a European Union-like regional organization fail to take shape in the Indo-Pacific?
- What is open regionalism? Why is open regionalism practiced in the region? Is it desirable?
- Why have so many regional institutions been established over the past few decades in the Indo-Pacific?
- How is ASEAN's balancing different from power balancing in transatlantic relations?
- What implications do the emerging overlapping regional institutions have for an evolving regional architecture in the Indo-Pacific?

Note

1 These statistics are calculated using a combination of data from the "South Asia" and "East Asia & Pacific" regions in the "World Bank Databank - World Development Indicators" for 2023. The figures may vary depending on the specific geographic definition of the Indo-Pacific.

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