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Signaling in Minilaterals in the Indo-Pacific: The Cases of Quad and AUKUS (2017-2022)

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Abstract: *This article examines the coalition-building efforts of the Quad and AUKUS through the lens of strategic signaling, arguing that minilateral coalitions employ signaling tactics through various means to achieve a common goal. The case studies of Quad and AUKUS demonstrated differences in their strategic signaling. However, their goals are carefully formulated. This article uses discourse analysis to find that the Quad signaled an ambitious "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" as a positive force for the region's security and prosperity. AUKUS, on the other hand, signaled military cooperation as a balance of power amidst an assertive China. While minilateralism is growing in the 21st-century multipolar world, this article examines how these emerging trends of issue-based coalitions, flexible alignments, and informal alliances create avenues for like-minded countries to strengthen capacity-building measures.*

Keywords: *Minilateralism; Indo-Pacific; Security; Signalling; Multipolarism; Multilateralism, World Order*

INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Pacific region has undergone significant transformations and development in recent years. Since the end of World War II, the region has been widely referred to as the Asia-Pacific region based on a US-led system often referred to as the hubs-and-spokes system (Izumikawa 2020). However, there has been a significant change in this system since the 2010s. The rise of China has changed the regional balance of power and influence in political, economic, and military terms. Since 2014, the Chinese government under Xi Jinping has developed its ideas for reorganizing the regional security architecture of the region through several initiatives, including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the establishment of Chinese-led development banks and plurilateral institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the militarization of the South China Sea, as well as expanding bilateral security cooperation. These actions are driven mainly by Beijing's assertions to shape and reshape the existing regional and international order per its interests. The BRI project is a result of such claims. Xi Jinping characterized the US-led hubs-and-spokes alliance system as a relic of the Cold War, calling for a regional security architecture by "Asians for Asians" (Heiduk 2022; Schuman et al. 2023). In response to the growing Chinese influence, the US in 2017 introduced the concept of Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) (The White House 2017). The Indo-Pacific is connected to several aspects of the US-China rivalry.

However, institutionalization and regional cooperation dynamics have transformed, in some sense, and have accelerated in the 21st century. Some scholars have posited the extent of such changes to have been rather radical and have attributed this new dynamism to crucial

factors such as the rise of China, variations of trust and mistrust in the international system, and a decline in American reliability (Stanzel 2018). Furthermore, a preference for cooperation for interactions between actors, soft multilateral balancing, and greater dialogue initiative on regional and international security matters through a proliferation of informal agencies has played a crucial role in shaping the new order in the Indo-Pacific (Parks 2018; Cannon and Rossiter 2022). In recent years, the Indo-Pacific region has endured several shifts, giving rise to an era of coalitions and flexible alliances. This shift is also a natural response to the broader changes in the international system of rising multipolarity, flexible alignments, removing dependencies, and growing minilateralism. The complexities in the Asia-Pacific regional order are additionally propelled by several emerging players in a multipolar world seeking multi-alignments, thus incentivizing the emergence of small, issue-specific minilateralism such as the Quad and AUKUS, simultaneously also posing challenges to maintaining ASEAN unity and centrality (Cooper 2023).

Minilateral security arrangements are increasingly favored today. The revival of Quad with Australia, Japan, India, and the US as its members in 2017 was primarily attributed by several scholars as a response to the rise of China (Zongyou 2022). Nonetheless, the Quad Summit 2021 gave the grouping new energy to signal closer partnership for regional security, prosperity, and innovative collaborations on health, climate, supply chains, and technology. The coalition-building efforts signal the norms and entrepreneurial spirit of the Quad, aiming at a free, inclusive, open, and democratic rules-based order (Press Information Bureau 2021). AUKUS (Australia-United Kingdom-United States), on the other hand, is a defense agreement signaling a military entrepreneurial spirit with a greater focus on defense capabilities (including nuclear submarines), strengthening of bases, technology, and information sharing (Christianson 2024). Such "creative minilateralism" also indicates its potential to change the texture of strategic partnerships and is becoming more favorable in the region (Nilsson-Wright 2017).

This article examines the rise of minilateralism, focusing on the Quad and AUKUS coalition-building efforts in the Indo-Pacific. While the Quad emphasizes its normative regional security agenda, AUKUS highlights defense cooperation as a tool for balancing China's growing military influence. Understanding the coalition-building process in minilateral groupings such as the Quad and AUKUS is essential as they signal their strategic intentions implicitly and explicitly, converge on shared interests, and communicate at various levels to avoid misunderstandings. Additionally, due to the dynamics of institutions in the Indo-Pacific region, coalitions, alignments, and alliances must be continually rethought, considering the shifting nature of geopolitics. This article contributes to the evolving literature on signaling and examines the different paths to coalition-building through the cases of Quad and AUKUS in the Indo-Pacific region.

The first section of this article examines the rise of minilateralism and contemporary regional geopolitics. The next explores signaling in IR literature and minilateralism, emphasizing gaps in coalition-building and creative signaling studies. The third analyzes the Quad's strategy to signal normative relevance and inclusivity in the Indo-Pacific. The fourth addresses AUKUS's signaling on nuclear issues, military commitments, and regional responses. The final section considers the future of the Indo-Pacific order, focusing on emerging minilaterals for inclusive growth and security.

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MINILATERALISM IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

The Indo-Pacific region has witnessed a geopolitical churning in the past decade. This has led to the emergence of new nomenclatures (e.g., Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific), new strategic alignments with active and independent foreign policy outlooks, and new minilateral groupings such as the AUKUS and the Quad security dialogue working towards regional security (Rajagopalan 2021). Small coalitions are an effective alternative to cumbersome multilateralism and formal alliances. As traditional multilateral institutions, such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization, become increasingly stagnated and inefficient, minilateral groups have arisen as an alternative means of achieving results. A smaller number of nations focus on niche issues and similar interests to seek creative alternatives to time-consuming multilateralism and limiting alliances (Mohan 2023).

Since the last decade, this region has experienced institutional flux characterized by pressures on multilateralism and an impasse on effective and timely decision-making. Besides continuing multilateralism and bilateral partnerships, a growing proliferation of minilaterals cements the evolving Indo-Pacific strategic concept. The region faces several challenges; existing institutions such as ASEAN face internal issues; Chinese military aggressiveness, especially in the South China Sea (SCS), has increased; and the rules-based international order is eroding amidst intensifying US-China rivalry (Ian 2023). In this scenario, minilateralism provides avenues for middle powers in the region to pursue flexible cooperation and coalitions on issues varying from global health, climate change, economic trade, and digitization to maritime security (Parameswaran 2024). In a speech in 2023, Malaysian PM Anwar Ibrahim painted a rather grim picture, stating that the "dark and self-destructive rivalry is producing exclusionary minilaterals and bifurcations within the region, thereby also indicating the uncertain age of flux" (Parameswaran 2023). In order to navigate this uncertainty, middle powers in the region have been calling for a more diverse, inclusive, and interconnected order that reinforces ASEAN centrality and ASEAN-led mechanisms to engage with other sub-regions (ASEAN 2021).

The region's existing minilaterals, namely the Quad and AUKUS, are crucial to the region's emerging security architecture. Newer minilateral security groupings, such as Australia-Japan-Philippines-US, are also evolving to reinforce traditional alliances using minilateral formats (Harding and Ingram 2024). However, beyond them, Southeast Asian nations have been paving their paths in this direction by pursuing quick and flexible minilateral solutions. Indonesia's call for a maritime coalition of the willing reinstates the need for creative solutions to a long impasse on SCS code of conduct negotiations, greater cooperation amongst coast guards, and intensive maritime and defense collaboration (Jaknanihan 2022). The Sulu Sea trilateral patrols between Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines and the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement (DEPA) between Chile, New Zealand, and Singapore are non-US-led minilateral solutions to address specific challenges in a timely and effective manner (Parameswaran 2024).

In short, minilateralism is a symptom of the region's increasing rivalry, not the cause. On the other hand, as William Tow states, the emerging phenomenon of minilateralism should not be viewed as "completely replacing existing alliances and institutions but complementing them" (Tow 2018). This holds as governments continue to engage in regional and multilateral platforms alongside minilateral settings. Successful solutions from minilateral forums can be

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expanded to regional and multilateral levels, gaining broader international support. Thus, consensus and collaboration among smaller nations are essential for effective signaling in a polarized international landscape.

LITERATURE REVIEW OF SIGNALLING IN IR DISCOURSE

The signaling literature in International Relations (IR) gained prominence in the post-Cold War period. Drawing on analyses of events during the Cold War, this literature explores crisis bargaining, examines the formulation of costly signals, and identifies mechanisms for delivering effective and credible signals to target states (Gartzke et al. 2017). However, in this context, a target state would necessarily imply the presence of an adversarial state (Koga 2024). The conventional research scope of signaling to adversarial states fails to consider the signals sent to allies and strategic partners to understand their stance. In this regard, several recent studies have emerged to signal a commitment to pre-existing allies. Gannon and Kent (2021) on signaling explain why states exercise costly signaling and contribute to coalition warfare in pursuing their desire for a strong relationship with a coalition leader. Signaling in major IR literature is often characterized as a costly endeavor (Fuhrmann and Sechser 2014). Alliance politics as a theoretical framework is employed to study signaling to allies fearing entrapment, reliability, and abandonment, and therefore, need signals of assurances and reassurances from alliance partners (DiGuiseppe and Shea 2021). Signaling in hubs-and-spokes networks fails to consider the newer forms of network building of multi-layered, informal, and flexible networks emerging in the Indo-Pacific region in present-day politics (Joshi 2022). In this manner, signaling is widely associated with commitment to formal alliances.

Therefore, signaling in minilateral coalition-building in the past decade has been explored less in the current discourse. As mentioned above, the existing literature weighs alliance partners and adversaries as a given, signaling clear and definite commitment goals, thereby making all security threats, including military threats, cogitable (Koga 2023). This framework, however, does not apply to minilateral groupings within a multiplex order that prioritizes informal and flexible dialogue mechanisms. Furthermore, contemporary coalitions differ significantly from those of the past. Indeed, a coalition of the willing was formed during the 1991 Gulf War or the War on Terror. However, their strategic objectives of winning the war and adversaries were marked (Cooper 2008). In times of peace, minilateral groupings are fluid and multipurpose, pursuing common interests without necessarily prioritizing a goal. Specifically, minilateral coalitions can converge on specific interests and agree to prioritize cooperation (Tirkey 2021).

Moreover, minilaterals do not have clear objectives at the outset of their coalition-building process. Instead, minilateral coalitions are pursued by an initiator state which signals its strategic objectives either implicitly or explicitly to like-minded countries with similar interests. Communication is fundamental to this process to avoid misinterpretations that could cause hindrances to the coalition-building process from kicking off (Koga 2024). Besides communication, the minilateral coalition-building process can face other challenges. For example, the idea of Quad was first introduced in 2004 by Japanese PM Shinzo Abe. Perhaps communication was well-taken, but its partners and allies did not share a common vision or

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common interests until the concept of Quad was revived in 2017 due to the changing geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific region.

Signaling in a minilateral coalition-building process is also considered an inexpensive exercise that does not warrant commitment and costs. Such cheap talk and non-verifiable claims in pseudo-signaling can question the credibility of signaling (Sartori 2007; Morrow 2009; Carson and Yarhi-Milo et al. 2018). Nevertheless, such informal discussions play a crucial role in revealing the interests and preferences of a state (Van Willigen and Blarel 2024). For instance, the US did not have a concrete plan to develop the functioning of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) despite a commitment to strengthening economic cooperation in the region. With commitment from Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, and Singapore and communicating with its strategic partners, IPEF was conceptualized in 2022 as a framework to facilitate trade, technology transfers, standards of the digital economy, creating resilient supply chains and climate cooperation and other shared areas of interest (Goodman and Reinsch 2022).

In 2024, the framework will be expanded to 14 countries, including India, Southeast Asian nations, and smaller Pacific island states, to create an inclusive framework (Ministry of Commerce and Industry, 2023). Japanese PM Kishida also stated that an exclusionary economic framework for a few select economies would create tensions with ASEAN states. To accomplish the purposes of IPEF, it must be an inclusive framework to "demonstrate practical benefits and gain active cooperation from Southeast Asian nations" (Yomiuri Shimbun Online 2023). Signaling through cheap talk has proven helpful in obtaining knowledge of a state's interests and preferences to develop further mechanisms to realize common interests.

Therefore, the complexity of comprehending signaling in minilateral coalition-building efforts arises due to its inexpensive nature to signal, sometimes ambiguously, to maintain its flexible and informal character. Moreover, effective signaling is critical to coordinating strategic priorities. Signaling is likely ineffective in case of contradictory pre-existing beliefs (Koga 2024). However, if reactions surface, both positively and negatively, the minilateral coalition has the potential to impact the geopolitical environment. Considering the impact and responses to the Quad and AUKUS, minilateral coalitions are proving to become more favorable, even indispensable, in the present-day strategic environment of the 21st century.

METHODOLOGY

In general, the purpose of qualitative discourse analysis is "to analyze communication [texts] in a systematic way according to specific rules and theoretical principles in order to draw conclusions on certain aspects of the communication" (Mayring and Fenzl 2008). In this case, conclusions about the discursive support from the Member States of the two cases in this study, namely the Quad and AUKUS, will be drawn. This article analyses the the type of foreign policy, rhetoric, and strategic signaling embodied as evidenced in primary sources such as official speeches, governmental documents, press releases, minilateral outcome documents, and secondary sources such as journal articles and other related literature.

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THE QUAD SECURITY DIALOGUE: A NORM-BUILDING INSTITUTION?

The Quad minilateral grouping is considered an idea proposed by former Japanese PM Shinzo Abe and his administration. Despite initial signaling, the Quad as a grouping did not launch (Fraser 2023). Some scholars account for loose coordination and responsiveness within the TCG during the 2004 Indian tsunami. Moreover, well-established bilateral and trilateral relationships already existed among three of the four members. Moreover, the strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific did not compel the rise of minilateral groupings such as the Quad, as their commitments to the war on terror seemed to be a priority. The inability of the four states to effectively communicate and coordinate their policies due to divergent strategic interests led to its quick collapse. However, Japan's role is crucial in formulating a democratic strategic framework emphasizing value-oriented diplomacy to uphold the rules-based international order. The first meeting in April 2007 did not have a preconceived agenda and was described as "exploratory" in nature. Its purpose was to envision value-based security frameworks, foster strategic dialogue, and plan joint military exercises, thereby establishing it as a grouping with political and military undertones (Chellaney 2007; Smith 2020).

However, the strategic environment of the Indo-Pacific region began to shift with the rise of China under Xi Jinping. The initial gaps in threat perception toward China brought convergences in the grouping, thus leading to attempts to revive the Quad in 2016. Abe's desire to form the Quad has been consistent. Despite its initial collapse, Abe, in his 2012 article titled "Asia's Democratic Security Diamond", emphasized the importance of democratic states such as Japan, India, Australia, and the United States, along with other democratic partners like the United Kingdom and France, cooperating collectively to counter Chinese maritime aggression in the South China Sea and the East China Sea (Abe 2012). The lack of enthusiasm can be attributed to the non-immediacy of the Chinese threat. Despite the lack of support from strategic partners and unwillingness to institutionalize, Japan introduced its grand plan in 2016 called the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) through a speech in Kenya (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2016). Though it lacked concrete formalizing at first, it was founded upon three normative, value-based principles- promotion and establishment of the rule of law, freedom of navigation, and free trade; pursuit of economic prosperity, and improving connectivity and commitment to ensuring peace and stability in the region (Government of Japan 2016).

Since its return in 2017, the Quad has sparked widespread interest and debate regarding its geopolitical relevance. However, most of the attention was on the future, including what the Quad may become. The Quad soon held several meetings, initially at the military officers' level. Later in 2019, the Quad Foreign Ministers meeting was convened in New York. By September 2021, the Quad security grouping was upgraded to the summit level. The statement issued after the first summit meeting laid out the overarching purpose and vision for the region that is signaling for a free, open, and inclusive rules-based order rooted deeply in protecting international norms, upholding international law, and remaining undaunted by coercion to bolster Indo-Pacific security architecture (The White House 2021).

The Quad's coalition-building efforts aim to signal the grouping as a force for good to the broader audience. In order to bring tangible results, they sought closer cooperation on global health security since the COVID-19 pandemic. In this regard, they led efforts to strengthen health systems, adapt to collective approaches to procurement of supplies, vaccine

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diplomacy, and create a global health security focused on prevention, preparedness, and rapid response. Over the past few years, the Quad members have brought closer cooperation in infrastructure, climate action, disaster preparedness, and other spheres, such as space, to build capacity to respond to unexpected catastrophes and ensure sustainability in using space, resources, and ease of living. The Quad also focuses on harnessing critical and emerging technologies to enhance regional security and prosperity. However, they have indicated the importance of technology development guided by their shared democratic values, respect for international norms, and territorial sovereignty. Individually and together, they have signaled to each other and the wider audience the vitality of ensuring an inclusive, free, and open region governed by universal rules and norms (Australian Government 2023). They have welcomed AOIP and the European Union (EU) Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific (Ministry of External Affairs 2021; The White House 2023). As mentioned earlier, ASEAN countries view exclusionary groupings with skepticism as they are centrally situated in the region. Hence, the subsequent summits have emphasized the importance of ASEAN unity and signaled their strong support for ASEAN centrality for the practical implementation of the ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP).

The Quad nations are also part of joint military exercises. The Malabar Exercise, a bilateral drill between India and the United States, has evolved into one of the leading multilateral naval exercises to improve operational coordination, intelligence sharing, and naval interoperability among the Quad countries. The exercise began in 1992 as a bilateral endeavor between India and the United States along the Malabar Coast, located in the southern part of India's west coast. It expanded in 2007 to include Japan and Australia, and Japan became a permanent partner in 2015. Australia rejoined the exercise in 2020, marking the Quad's first combined involvement in military drills (Ministry of Defence of India 2024).

The outgoing US President, Joe Biden, hosted the 2024 Quad summit in Delaware, USA, where the leaders, without directly naming China, expressed grave concern about the situation in the South China Sea and nearby waters, condemning the "dangerous" use of coast guard and maritime militia vessels in that region. The leaders issued a joint statement announcing many new and ambitious projects in marine security, infrastructure, key and emerging technologies, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief. A crucial outcome of the summit was the resolution to conduct joint coast guard operations, including launching the first-ever "Quad-at-Sea" ship observation mission in 2025 to promote maritime safety in the Indo-Pacific. The leaders also announced a new regional Maritime Initiative for Training in the Indo-Pacific (MAITRI) to help partners maximize the capabilities available through Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) and other Quad efforts (The White House 2024).

The Quad was still cautious about integrating its military cooperation, especially Malabar Exercises, albeit it has become increasingly Australia-India-Japan-US-oriented (Parameswaran 2021). Instead, the Quad evolved into one of the leading frameworks for implementing a FOIP that would deliver regional public goods in the Indo-Pacific region, such as the COVID-19 vaccines, thus securing the coalition more concretely.

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AUKUS: A TACTICAL TOOL?

Formally announced in September 2021, AUKUS, led by an Australian initiative, reinforced trilateral security cooperation between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the US (Department of Defense of the US 2021). AUKUS's strategic goal is to preserve and improve the traditional balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region in its favor by enhancing Australia's military capabilities under the advert of international rules-based order (Luthra 2023). Recognizing that the existing international order no longer ensures US unipolarity, AUKUS decided to adopt a two-pronged approach: Pillar I to bolster Australia's military capabilities through the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines with technological assistance from the UK and/or the US and Pillar II to facilitate cooperation on defense technologies, including, artificial intelligence, maritime technology, quantum technologies, and, cyber capabilities (Kahn 2023).

The strategic objectives for AUKUS have been clearly stated since its inception. AUKUS is symbolic of strategic choices for Australia and the UK to establish and maintain long-term security alignment with the US in the region (Pongsudhirak 2021). Until the formal announcement of the trilateral agreement, Australia's initiative and subsequent discussions leading up to it were kept internal and confidential. Nonetheless, the grouping took shape at a startling pace mainly due to the willingness and need to elevate the role of middle powers such as Australia to balance China. Australia's crumbling ties with China and trade wars in 2020 helped Australia accelerate its effective signaling to strengthen AUKUS (Vijaya 2021). For the UK, AUKUS is a valuable signaling tool for repositioning itself post-Brexit in the EU and Indo-Pacific regions. Moreover, AUKUS is not a collective security pact like NATO but an informal alliance of three close allies to exhort security cooperation, defense cooperation, and mutual military support to enhance capacity-building and deterrence capabilities (Panda 2022).

Coalition-building efforts for AUKUS commenced in 2016 after Australia voiced concerns over the delays in negotiating submarine deals with the French Naval Group (Sheftalovich 2021). However, before that, the three members began sharing similar security perspectives for the Indo-Pacific region. Since the rise of China and challenges to the status quo liberal international order became eminent, the members of the grouping experienced strategic convergence in their perception of threat and their vision for the region. The UK began to tilt toward the Indo-Pacific region and considered strengthening the UK's nuclear industry (Breslin and Burnham 2023). Thus, strategic convergence among the alliance partners led to signaling commitments to the region and sharing nuclear technology with Australia through the 2017 National Security Strategy released by the US (The White House 2017).

To be precise, AUKUS is an exclusionary security minilateral grouping signaling its ability to build nuclear-powered submarines to the international community and the region. Australia's withdrawal from its deal with France's Naval Group demonstrated its unwillingness to form an inclusive coalition after rejecting France's offer of nuclear submarines (Willsher and Hurst 2021). Furthermore, the AUKUS addressed the potential of nuclear technology transfer (Luthra 2023). While technology and information transfer issues exist between close and trusted allies, Australia sought to explore mechanisms for acquiring nuclear-powered submarines from the US and the UK. In 2024, Australia recently announced a 3 billion USD deal to acquire nuclear submarines from the UK by 2030 and bolster the nuclear industry mutually (The Economic Times

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2024). In 2024, the AUKUS members also streamlined defense trade to increase investments and reduce red tape. They are boosting licence-free trade by reforming the International Traffic of Arms Regulations (ITAR). The Australian government has committed 28 million USD to implement reforms in the Defence Trade Controls Amendment Act 2024 to accelerate trade and defense partnerships under AUKUS (Australian Government 2024). Initiatives like Project Convergence are critical for the member nations to work together, test and implement new technologies to improve interoperability and refine joint tactics (Abke 2024). Though Australia was aware of the restrictions to a nuclear arrangement, it strategized its goals and signals that they were not limited to nuclear options in its vision for coalition-building. By seeking greater military cooperation, technological innovation, and mutual capacity-building measures, the alliance members ensured the long-term sustainability of its coalition-building process (Koga 2024).

Notably, AUKUS signals its interest in remaining deeply engaged in the Indo-Pacific security architecture by enhancing its capability to deter Chinese threats to the region's values, prosperity, and overall security (The White House 2023). Australia has taken a stronger position against China through AUKUS. The agreements under AUKUS are adjusted with a particular emphasis on China, and the implementation of the agreements is ensured to be practical. Strategic and operational agreements will make AUKUS a viable hard-power deterrent against China (Singh 2023).

Considering its hard power posturing, China has criticized AUKUS for representing an "outdated cold war mentality" by pitting against Chinese military expansion and influence (Yan 2021). ASEAN nations such as Indonesia and Malaysia also echoed concerns regarding the risks of arms race and nuclear proliferation threatening the peace and stability of the Indo-Pacific region (Li 2022). Indeed, exclusionary alignments are seen as a detriment to the region. Moreover, Australia's signaling for nuclear proliferation is perceived as a contradictory signal to its rhetoric of rules-based international order. Nevertheless, strengthening the pillars of AUKUS would ensure intensive engagements at various levels in the government, civil society, industry, and other sectors focused on capacity, credibility, and intent for safer security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region. Surprisingly, Japan has signaled its interest in joining AUKUS and deepening its cooperation in the region, thus making the coalition more relevant and credible to the challenges of the present time (Peri 2024). Hence, it is clear that despite some concerns about the emergence of this trilateral grouping, broadening its strategic vision and re-emphasizing the peace and stability of the region validates its strategic convergence for a longer time.

CONCLUSION

In short, signaling is a valuable framework for understanding the strategic convergences of minilateral alliances. Signaling in minilaterals can be explicit or implicit. Though signaling has been referred to as a costly alignment, inexpensive means have also shown successful results in minilateral coalition building. Minilateral coalitions do not necessitate similar threat perceptions. While similar threat perceptions are helpful for any coalition, minilaterals can also converge for specific goals despite dissimilar perceptions of threats. Minilaterals additionally break the conventional norms of pre-set objectives in alliances. Therefore, strategic goals in a minilateral alliance can either be exploratory or pre-set for its functioning.

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This article has argued that Quad's coalition-building process took several years to achieve strategic convergence towards an inclusionary alliance. On the contrary, AUKUS's exclusionary coalition surprised many countries, garnering harsh and critical responses. Both the Quad and AUKUS seek to present a vision to ensure the peace and stability of the region and address some common security challenges. Furthermore, both the minilateral groupings inspire the growing network of informal alliances for digital infrastructure, calls for a maritime coalition of the willing, and other such initiatives. The emerging networks of informal alliances benefit states in the region aiming to de-risk from China and diversify their partnerships.

Consequently, institutionalizing Indo-Pacific minilateralism has not followed a linear trajectory. Minilateralism changes with time based on the evolution of a strategic environment and the necessity for collaboration. The formation of Quad and AUKUS demonstrates the dynamic nature of institutions in the Indo-Pacific region.

The Indo-Pacific region is experiencing strategic transformations defining the era of coalitions upon us. In recent years, there has been a significant shift in the polarity of the international order, alignments for strategic signaling, and minilateral coalitions to overcome the ineffectiveness of multilateral institutions in the region. Each emerging coalition in the region has a different set of countries, signaling tactics, and objectives, thus resulting in a diverse range of coalitions with distinct characteristics. To be sure, bilateralism and multilateralism arrangements do not become redundant. Instead, the emerging multi-layered form of communication comprises intensive engagements in all different formats, including bilateral, multilateral, minilateral, and plurilateral forms, sometimes leading to spillover of issues discussed (Wilkins 2023). Thus, exclusionary alliances will be detrimental to the region's overall security and prosperity in the complex web of interdependence in the system. Multi-alignment and informality have caused a decentralization of the international system, compelling further research. Middle powers also present new opportunities to pursue transcendental institutionalism and normative diplomacy in today's Indo-Pacific region.

Finally, the impact of great power competition cannot be overlooked due to the complex nature of dilemmas affecting middle power relations with major players worldwide, causing strains in creating a peaceful and stable order. Middle and small powers in the region are skeptical of the presence of major powers such as the US and an assertive China. By pursuing co-engagement strategies, these states seek diversification in bilateral, multilateral, minilateral, and informal coalitions shaping the dynamic institutionalization and normative diffusion in the transitioning era of a multiplex world order.

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CONTRIBUTOR

The author contributed solely to the intellectual discourse that forms the foundation of this article, as well as its writing and editing, and assumes full responsibility for its content and interpretation.

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