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Diplomacy in the Indo Pacific and the Rise of Minilateralism

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Abstract

The present geopolitical landscape has witnessed a seemingly drastic transition, with the widespread emergence of multifarious groupings, popularly referred to as "Minilaterals", premised upon the imperative understanding of peace building and conflict resolution, and shared threat perceptions, with regards to numerous strategically viable areas. The growing realization of the virtual deficiencies of singular organizations in combating regional challenges, through calibrated options and the pronounced infringements of broader strategic interests, have accentuated the need for the constitution of such multilateral organizations. The Indo-Pacific replete with a wider array of opportunities to broaden international partnerships, has emerged as the bastion of profound diplomatic engagements thereby taking shape as one of the most coveted realms of contemporary international relations. Kicking off proceedings with the actively revamped Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), a brainchild of the United States, integrating presently developing proponents of India, Japan and Australia into the fold of strengthened commitment against Chinese belligerence, this rapidly evolving phenomenon of "Minilateralism", has remained manifest in the recently constituted AUKUS (comprising Australia, UK and the US) and the renewed fervor of the Shanghai Co-operation Organization (SCO), skewed towards pursuing narrow and monolithic interests of international consolidation. The fundamental flashpoint, therefore pertains to the overall credibility of these thickets of steadily developing channels of dialogue and negotiation, thereby weighing in the prospects of co-operation and governance in the wider expanse of the Indo-Pacific, which this article seeks to delve into, quite incisively.

Keywords: Geopolitical, Multifarious groupings, Minilaterals, Indo-Pacific, QUAD

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1. Increased Diplomacy in the Indo Pacific: The Need for Nuanced International Co-operation

A relative premise for the emergence of diplomacy has to rest on the larger historical shifts in the geopolitical arena, coupled with the rudimentary aspect of the prospective shift in the balance of power. With the strategic rise of the Chinese hegemonic influence and the increased involvement of its Asian neighbors, Japan, India and Singapore in the overall framework of conflict management and the broader levels of co-operation amongst

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the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), efforts have been spruced up by West to maintain its foothold in the region, without being completely annihilated.

Such pronounced instances of multilateral dialogue and the subsequent realisation of the larger international perspective from the lens of mutual interests have been responsible for the underlying foundations of these distinctive units of co-operation. Moreover, the “Growth of Populism and Nationalism as strong forces and the consequent support for inclusive multilateralism in the Indo Pacific”, as pointed out by Brookings expert, Thomas Weight, have lent substantial character to the same.

From the economic perspective, diplomatic promises widened with the signing of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), by 13 countries of South East Asia inclusive of the QUAD allies headed by the US, with the objective of advancing sustainable economic development, strategic inclusiveness and competitiveness for the overall advancement of peace and stability in the region.

“The future of the 21st Century is largely written in the Indo Pacific”, as quoted by the US President, Joe Biden, reflects the spirit of the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) as a part of the “Pivot to Asia”, policy as manifest in the revamped entity of the QUAD, and the subsequent trialterals between India, Indonesia, Australia and France spearheading the agenda of larger institutions like the BRICS, SCO, G7 and the G20.

2. Emerging Trends and Lack of Productivity of Multilateral

Pou Sothirak, an expert on International affairs at the Asian Institute of Policy Studies, cited two emerging trends of minilateralism based on sustained geoeconomic and security interests, respectively. In a survey conducted by the “Diplomat”, citing public sentiment, it was reported that 68.97% of the individuals remained inclined towards newer patterns of minilateralism, in the rapid changing geopolitical climate of the Indo-Pacific, most notably 72.41% voting such changes in the spheres of common interests and values.

Larger factors such as the inertia and stagnation of such multilateral organisations such as the United Nations comprising more formal political structures, and the changing nature of contemporary threats, coupled with the growth of technology in the form of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT), have undeniably paved the way for more informal means of dialogue and negotiation, something which the minilaterals promise to incorporate.

Moreover, the capacity constraints of nations like India, Japan and Singapore, in view of the excessive Chinese Hegemony have stemmed the rise of the consistent need for more advanced diplomatic endeavors, as reflected in the words of Richard Baldwin, Professor of International Relations at the Institute of Geneva, suggesting a “Plausible Trinity” based upon “universal application”, “consensus building” and “institutionalised forms of conflict management”.

3. The Sanctity of Minilateralism: Challenges and Criticisms

However, the picture is not totally rosy as it seems. Despite the strategic viability of these minilaterals, these have been alleged to have diminished the sanctity of multilateral frameworks such as the United Nations, but also themselves.

Drawing on a personal perspective, this aspect has three facets. Firstly, the increased preference for minilateralism and its channelized growth, has disrupted the process of international interdependence and globalization, leading to the fragmentation of the global governance mechanisms as seen in the ambiguity of the QUAD’s strategic interests to curtail Chinese belligerence.

Secondly, the presence of existing disparities with regards to the convergence of interests as far as minilaterals are concerned, have culminated in the revival of threat perceptions and questions on practical feasibilities, as reflected in the increased role of China in the SCO and BRICS, as opposed to regional forums of the ARF (ASEAN Regional Forum) and G20, thereby disrupting the process of consensus building.

Lastly, instances of incompatibility of interests have also coupled with centralising nature of such institutions, have fostered accountability and compliance issues, arising from non binding targets and commitments in mutually institutionalised exclusive power blocs, as opposed to the legally sanctioned ones, accentuating the exciting differences in the Indian Subcontinent.

4. Conclusion

Taking into account both its strategic prospects and drawbacks, it could be said that minilateralism as a process cannot remain isolated and has to complement the existing multilateral institutions and attempt to diversify its geopolitical horizon, across various aspects of policy formulation and co-ordination in a politically active area as that of the Indo Pacific.

Moreover, successful outcomes, can only be materialized, should member nations endeavour to bring about the very atmosphere of discourse as in minilaterals, in the larger regional and multilateral framework as well. Concludingly, it could be claimed that, despite the calibrated stance adopted by the West through such distinctive units to sway the political favour in its fray, a lot still needs to be worked upon, given the tremendous hegemonic shift in present day international affairs.

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