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For Asean, mini-lateralism more practical than multilateralism

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Collaboration among small groups within the bloc does put wider cooperation among member countries at risk.



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The worsening conflict in West Asia has once again exposed the limitations of large-scale multilateralism.

Geographic Reference

As the war involving the United States, Israel, and Iran drags on, the global economy is increasingly vulnerable to disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz, the Red Sea, and the wider Indian Ocean.

For Asean, the consequences are immediate. East Asia imports roughly 84% of its crude oil and 83% of its liquefied natural gas (LNG) from West Asia. When East Asia is affected so is its subset Southeast Asia, which Asean seeks to represent.

Yet Asean has to be practical given its own limitations.

Much of the fertiliser, helium, sulfur, and industrial feedstock needed for semiconductor production and food security also passes through these maritime chokepoints.

In such an environment, Asean cannot rely solely on broad multilateral institutions that often move too slowly during crises. Multilateral Organizations

The future of Asean diplomacy and security cooperation — a more evolved one — may therefore depend more on mini-lateralism than classical multilateralism.

Mini-lateralism refers to smaller, more flexible coalitions among a limited number of countries working toward practical objectives without requiring consensus from all parties.

Unlike rigid institutional arrangements, mini-lateralism is designed for speed, flexibility, and strategic focus. This does not mean Asean centrality should be abandoned.  Multilateral Organizations)

Rather, Asean must adapt its methods of cooperation in order to survive a period of global fragmentation and prolonged geopolitical instability.

The problem with traditional multilateralism is that it often becomes hostage to excessive proceduralism.

The United Nations Security Council is paralysed by veto politics.

The World Trade Organisation struggles to resolve disputes.

Even within Asean itself, the principle of consensus sometimes slows urgent decision-making.

During peacetime, such caution may preserve unity.

During systemic crises, however, excessive caution can become dangerous.

The war in West Asia demonstrates precisely this point. Oil prices remain volatile. Insurance costs for shipping continue to rise.

Supply chains for fertilisers and industrial gases are under pressure. Food inflation remains a serious risk across Southeast Asia.

Asean countries cannot wait indefinitely for global institutions to restore order.

Smaller coalitions within Asean and between Asean members and trusted external partners will become increasingly necessary. One can already see signs of this evolution.

The trilateral cooperation among Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines in the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas against piracy and terrorism was one of Asean's earliest successful mini-lateral frameworks.

It was practical, targeted, and operationally effective.

Similarly, Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia have coordinated maritime security in the Straits of Malacca for years without requiring every Asean member to participate equally.

These examples show that mini-lateralism is not alien to Asean.

It is already embedded within the region's strategic culture

The difference today is that mini-lateralism may become the dominant operational model during an era of prolonged global instability.

Malaysia, as the coordinator of China-Asean relations from 2025 to 2028, is particularly well-positioned to encourage such flexible arrangements.

Putrajaya can help create issues-based coalitions focusing on energy security, food resilience, maritime surveillance, artificial intelligence governance, semiconductor supply chains, and humanitarian assistance.

Yet China has banned all energy exports as well as fertilisers since the beginning of March 2026. There is a limit to what Putrajaya can do with China.

Invariably, not every Asean country can move at the same speed. Nor should they be forced to.

The reality is that Asean members possess different strategic capacities, economic structures, and external alignments.

Vietnam and the Philippines are highly focused on maritime security in the South China Sea. They have their separate arrangements with Japan and the US.

Singapore prioritises financial resilience and trade continuity.

Its stock market is booming from inflow of GCC capital flight although Singapore understands the world economic scenario is dire.

Indonesia remains focused on strategic autonomy and national industrialisation.

Thailand is balancing the rise in the cost of living with the need to receive more fertilisers and energy supplies affected by the impasse in the Strait of Hormuz.

Malaysia seeks to maintain equilibrium among major powers while preserving Asean cohesion.

Mini-lateralism enables these countries to cooperate pragmatically without undermining Asean unity.

This is particularly important when the wider international system itself is fragmenting.

The so-called rules-based order has increasingly shown its inconsistencies.

Major powers frequently invoke international law selectively.

Military interventions often bypass the spirit of multilateralism altogether.

Under such conditions, medium-size powers like Asean members cannot depend entirely on external guarantees.

They must build resilience internally and regionally.

This is where Asean mini-lateralism becomes strategically important.

For example, an Asean energy resilience compact among Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Vietnam, and Thailand could help coordinate emergency fuel reserves, LNG procurement, and shipping security.

A semiconductor resilience coalition involving Singapore, Malaysia, and Vietnam could protect critical supply chains from geopolitical disruptions.

A food security arrangement involving Thailand, Vietnam, and Indonesia could stabilise rice exports during global shortages. These are practical measures.

They are not ideological projects. Importantly, mini-lateralism does not necessarily weaken Asean centrality.

In fact, if managed properly, it can strengthen Asean by demonstrating adaptability.

The European Union itself increasingly relies on coalitions of willing states in sensitive areas such as defence procurement, migration management, and energy policy. Asean may have to evolve similarly.

What matters is maintaining a shared strategic framework even if operational cooperation occurs in smaller clusters.

The danger, however, is that mini-lateralism could eventually become a pathway toward fragmentation if not carefully managed.

If Asean members drift too far apart geopolitically, external powers could exploit these divisions.

This is especially risky amid intensifying rivalry between the United States and China.

Asean must therefore ensure that mini-lateral initiatives remain complementary to Asean institutions rather than substitutes for them.

The Asean Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) remains useful precisely because it provides a broad umbrella framework emphasising inclusivity, dialogue, and cooperation.

Mini-lateralism should operate within this broader strategic vision.

The ongoing war in West Asia is unlikely to end quickly.

Even if temporary ceasefires emerge, the structural tensions involving Iran, Israel, the United States, and wider regional actors will persist.

The consequences for energy markets, maritime trade, and global inflation may continue for years.

Asean therefore faces a new strategic era.

The old assumption that globalisation alone would preserve stability no longer holds.

Instead, resilience, flexibility, and strategic adaptability will define successful regional organisations.

In that context, Asean mini-lateralism may not merely be an option.

It may become a necessity.

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