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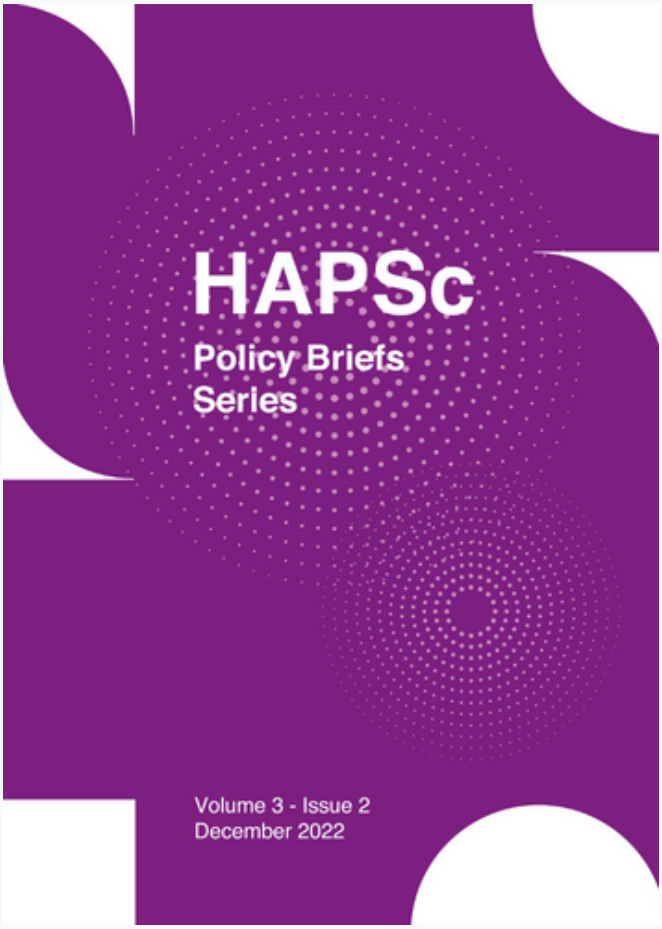

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Minilateralism for Multilateralism: What Role for the EU in the Instrumentalization of the Japan-Australia Strategic Partnership[1]

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Abstract

The era of "permacrisis" gives rise to minilateral arrangements increasingly at the expense of embedded multilateralism in regional governance. The area of the Indo-Pacific has become the bedrock of minilateral security cooperation. The 2022 Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation (JDSC) between Japan and Australia compliments the hub-and-spokes system and poses an opportunity for the European Union to advance its own strategic compass and address regional security and economic issues in transformative and dynamic ways. Minilateralism poses opportunities and challenges. The paper presents policy recommendations for the EU so as to instrumentalize the 2022 JDSC and concludes that despite the merits of informal and non-binding minilateral arrangements, minilateralism should be used to overcome the stalemates in multilateralism rather than replacing inclusive, legally binding, formal agreements that aim at an order-building architecture which advances the role of international institutions.

Keywords: Japan; Australia; EU; Indo-Pacific; minilateralism; cooperation; security; governance; regionalism.

Introduction

Offsetting China's security challenge, the need for tighter economic ties, an appetite for peripatetic diplomacy, and the need for strategic cooperation in the sectors of energy and security governance "stress the use of 'minilateral' initiatives increasingly -involving multiple, but relatively manageable numbers of states- to supplement existing alliance partnerships." (Nilsson-Wright, 2017: 17). Nilsson-Wright argues: "Doubts about the reliability and durability of the international order and regional stability are increasing the pressure on Australia and Japan to develop new forms of cooperation to hedge against uncertainty" (2017: 1). Both Japan and Australia have embraced a cross-regional dual identity of two nations that seat in the region with one foot pointing east and the other west, becoming unifying elements of an evolving strategic culture that re-imagines the Indo-Pacific in the context of the Liberal International Order (LIO). This has great implications for actors such as the European Union (EU) that are also seeking to advance their own autonomous strategic culture and resilience architecture as self-luminous global powers.

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Multilateral fora, however, seem to have become rigid and difficult to adapt, especially after the covid-19 crisis. "A characteristic of 21st century international governance is the rising importance of alternative types of collective cooperation" (Moret, 2016: 2). As 21st century global governance becomes more and more networked, governance structures that require multilevel coordination, such as security governance, could be better represented by non-hierarchical, decentralized, bottom-up, informal networks of cooperation that foster "innovation, compartmentalization and speed" (Moret, 2016: 3; Slaughter, 2004). This paper examines the opportunities and challenges that arise by minilateral arrangements, especially in the Indo-Pacific region, and the window of opportunity that opens for the EU to capitalize on the 2022 Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation (JDSC) that Japan and Australia agreed on in order to advance its own strategic compass, partnerships, influence and economic interests in the Indo-Pacific area. The paper concludes that the merits, convenience and informality of minilateralism should not overshadow the facilitated access to reduced transactions costs that inclusive, vertical multilateralism provides for middle powers and small states in security governance.

Minilateralism: The "New" Multilateralism After Covid-19?

In this general climate of permacrisis that characterizes the post-covid era, global uncertainty, geopolitical fluidity and unpredictable transnational dynamics press global and middle powers, small states and international organizations to reconsider regional security architectures and the burdens that binding alliance treaties carry. The growing great power rivalry and the political and economic antithesis between the USA and China, that has led to continuous confrontations and stalemates at the expense of international security and cooperation regarding pressing issues such as global health governance, climate change, food insecurity and militarized conflicts, have a spillover effect to the relations of regional powers and small states that increasingly seek to keep their distance from the geoeconomic and security dilemmas that choosing sides entails.

Maxilateralism is extremely time-consuming and requires mechanisms to overcome structural complexity, as the Paris Agreement (2015) and the Montreal Protocol (1989) have shown. Multilateralism fosters binding, inclusive treaties and conflict resolution processes, but it is equally time-consuming and inherently complex due to negotiation dynamics that eventually expand the bureaucratic structure of international institutions, rendering them difficult to reform. Especially after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Mearsheimer's argument that as the balance of power shifts in the global order, "states are likely to be reluctant to join a collective security effort because the system effectively transforms every local conflict into an international conflict" (1994: 32); and Keohane and

Victor's observation that "structural and interest diversity inherent in contemporary world politics tends to generate the formation of regime complexes rather than a comprehensive integrated regime," frame the debate in favor of a more flexible and disaggregated approach to international cooperation (2010: 2).

The shift to "slowbalization" and the ineffectiveness of international institutions to strategically foresight transnational crises and implement crisis mitigation mechanisms that transform dynamic, chaotic patterns of transboundary uncertainty into opportunities for creative policy solutions, as the Covid-19 crisis showed, suggest that regionalization processes are increasing, especially when multilateral frameworks that revolve around a grand power become rigid or conflict with domestic political interests. This is particularly prominent in the region of the Indo-Pacific that is arising as the bedrock of strategic minilateral cooperation in security governance. "Minilateralism can come in several flavors, from regional centered outfits to functional issue-based coalitions of the interested and identity-focused blocks of like-minded allies or partners" (Anuar & Hussain, 2021: 2). It is narrower than multilateralism and revolves around the informal efforts between two, three or four states "to address a specific threat, contingency or security issue within a finite period of time" (Tow, 2019: 235). As Gilley debates: "Middle powers are particularly sensitive and agile in their behavioural diplomacy when filling new niches, identifying new needs, and shifting their strategic and tactical stances as circumstances change" (2016: 657). According to Cha, minilateralism's traits are: "1) a small number of participants relative to multilateral security groupings; 2) its ad hoc characteristics as such groupings are usually formed and disbanded without an institutional legacy; 3) a typical focus on mostly traditional security issues "(Cha, 2003: 116-117, as cited in Tow, 2019: 235-236).

"Bilateralism is based on preferentialism," especially in security systems, "and changes its goals and priorities on a case-by-case basis;" this kind of conduct ultimately allows powerful states to form collective defense architectures on the multilateral dynamics that emerge out of bilateral negotiations (Blum, 2008; Tago, 2017: 2). These dynamics have been very typical in the Asia-Pacific region after the 1952 San Franscisco Treaty that established the "hub-and-spokes" assymetric alliance system. Since then, the creation of regional organizations, such as the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and others, has encouraged dialogue but also fragmentation and has not managed to provide concrete plans for a regional security order (Hemmer & Katzenstein, 2002). Minilateral initiatives come to fill this void in the Indo-Pacific as "coalitions of the willing" that seek flexible consensus on quantifiable geostrategic objectives and ad hoc, non-binding, functional regulatory arranegments. Minilateralism,

if carefully handled, can become the basis for embended multilateralism and the creation of innovative regional orders.

There are challenges, however, to this form of alligning interests and cultivating meaningful and trustful interconnections and interdependence. Naím argues that minilateralism, as a policy prescription, must "bring to the table the smallest possible number of countries needed to have the largest possible impact on solvin a particular problem;" he calls this number "the magic number of minilateralism" (2009). Defining this "magic number," however, creates problems of normality and legality, as "fewer members and a narrowly framed agenda could also perpetuate certain narratives that are detrimental to the minilateral itself[3]…Informality becomes a double-edged sword, as it contributes to a loss of focus in minilateral arrangements without organizing principles, while a fluid, non-hierarchical arrangement could create a leadership vacuum that works against minilaterals" (Anuar & Hussain, 2021:3-4). Minilateralism could undermine multilateralism, especially when a power-centric approach is adopted that obliges other nations to resort to network building in order to accelerate the formation of decision-making networks in the periphery of those power-centers, which may weaken the role of regional organizations and their consensus-building efforts that benefit small states' national interest, the majority of which do not belong in minilateral arrangments -this is particularly prominent in the case of the Indo-Pacific. Since minilateral cooperation can be overshadowed by major power rivarly, minilateralism should be a platform for allowing multilateralism to flourish by coordinating small states and middle powers in security governance so as to encourage reconciliation, prosperity and political stability in regional settings (Singh & Teo, 2020; Tow, 2019). Finally, low institutionalization and informality favor poor accountability, "rampant forum shopping and, hence, the rise of club goods than public goods, and can be moraly problematic" because of behaviors that normalize exclusivity and work against the agenda of an inclusive global governance -the "ASEAN minus x" formula is a characteristic example (Anuar & Hussain, 2021: 5). This eventually undermines regional strength and resilience since the three pillars of economic, political/security and social/cultural cooperation and integration in multilateral fora cannot be effectuated. Both the EU and ASEAN base their policy structures on these three main pillars.

The Japan-Australia Case: Bona Fide Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific

On October 22, 2022, Japan and Australia renewed their "special strategic partnership and their commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific that is inclusive and resilient" (Prime Minister of

[3] This is particularly prominent with the China-containment narrative in all minilaterals in the Indo-Pacific area, such as the Quad.

Australia, 2022). Japan is the world's third largest economy and Australia's second largest source of foreign investment and third largest trading partner. This second non-formal, non-binding, bilateral JDSC sets the pathway for the implementation of the January 2022 Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) that advances the defense cooperation between the two countries. RAA, a "Status of Forces Agreement," allows for military interoperability in joint exercises and exchange of personnel in military-civilian operations, reflecting the outcome of ongoing negotiations between the two nations since the 2013 Information Security Agreement, the 2014 announcement of their Special Strategic Partnership in the 21st century, and the 2015 Economic Partnership Agreement (JAEPA), especially in regards to Japan's use of the death penalty which has placed RAA under review by the Australian parliament's Joint Standing Committee on Treaties. As Australia launched its Strategy for Abolition of the Death Penalty in 2018, the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee repeatedly came at odds with the Japanese government's insistent on capital punishment. Despite this stumbling block in the bilateral relations of the two countries, Japan and Australia are determined to advance their strategic partnership with the latest JDSC.

The two countries had not renewed their bilateral security cooperation[4] since March 13, 2007 when they signed the first non-formal JDSC[5], a non-binding agreement that mainly focused on cooperation on common regional interests, such as environmental disasters, humanitarian and refugee crises and regional development among others, and "their common purpose in working together with other countries through such fora as APEC, ARF and the East Asia Summit (EAS) to achieve the objective of a prosperous, open and secure Asia-Pacific region" (MOFA, 2007). Their strategic collaboration is further enhanced through annual Japan-Australia Joint Foreign and Defense Ministerial Consultations since 2007 ("2+2"), which rendered the two countries the capstone of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad[6], reestablished in 2017) between Australia, Japan, India and the USA. The Quad framework has the prospect of including more partners such as New Zealand, Vietnam and South Korea ("Quad Plus") and even expanding further to include France, Indonesia, Taiwan, Singapore and the Philippines in order to strengthen trade and economic cooperation ("Quad++"). The 2021 AUKUS trilateral security pact between the USA, Australia and the United Kingdom

[4] Australia and Japan reestablished bilateral relations in 1952. Their post-war relationship began with the establishment of the 1957 Commerce Agreement, which led to deepened cultural ties under the 1976 Nara Treaty or Basic Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation.
[5] This was the second security agreement signed between Japan and another country since 1945. The first was with the USA.
[6] The Quad originated in the four countries Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief cooperation when the 2004 tsunami disaster hit in the Indian Ocean.

created tensions in the Japan-Australia relations when Australia, in its quest for nuclear-powered submarines, cancelled the deals with Japan ($40 bn.) and France ($56 bn.) without notice.

The 2022 JDSC renders Australia Japan's most important regional partner in security governance after the USA, reaffirming their commitment to an open, rules-based, free regional order that is rooted in international law and is free from coercion. It solidifies their strategic partnership outside the Five Eyes (FVEY) intelligence alliance of the Anglo-Saxon system (stemming from the original multilateral agreements BRUSA and UKUSA during and after WWII) to which Japan seeks membership in an effort to counter China's rise and the general climate of global uncertainty that Russia's invasion of Ukraine fosters on all fronts. The latest JDSC covers five areas of security governance at the regional and global levels: security and defense cooperation; economic security cooperation; climate, energy security and energy transition; bilateral trade and investment cooperation; and interregional and transregional cooperation in the context of international and regional organizations, international law treaties such as the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the transatlantic partnership and military alliances. The most important revisions in the 2022 document are: 1) The incorporation of Article 3 of the 1951 ANZUS Treaty[7] so that Japan can exercise the right to collective self-defense[8], protecting the Australian military forces in times of peace and militarized conflict; 2) Several provisions in both countries' foreign, economic and security policy in order to counter China's rise; 3) A blueprint for a ten-year security cooperation that stresses resilience to aggression (including economic coercion), disinformation and other forms of interference as well as the reinforcement of international institutions and regional organizations in order to be more inclusive and transparent (MOFA, 2022).

Minilateralism for Multilateralism in East Asia: The Role of the EU

The EU has a vested interest in security governance in the Indo-Pacific order. It is USA's biggest trading partner, China's second biggest, Japan's fourth biggest and Australia's sixth biggest. "The EU is the largest global investor, with a total stock of €11.6 trillion, compared to the US with €6.8 trillion, China €1.9 trillion and €1.5 trillion for Japan" (Borrell, 2021). Despite the impact of covid-19, the EU remains an economic superpower that fosters oppeness, development assistance and

[7] The precursor of the AUKUS Treaty is the ANZUS Treaty, a 1951 collective, non-binding security agreement between Australia and New Zealand and, separately, between Australia and the USA as a security and defense pact between the three countries in an effort to deal with the rise of communism during the Cold War period and the resurgence of Japan after the end of WWII.

[8] Japan's Legislation for Peace and Security (2014,took effect in 2016) allows Japan to play a proactive role in the security and stability in the Indo-Pacific and the world by strengthening the Japanese Self-Defense Forces to provide logistics, support and search and rescue operations to the military forces of allied nations, as well as participating in international peace cooperation activities.

resilience in the global order while it combats the climate crisis and global inequalities (Borrell, 2021). Prosperity in Europe is closely linked to security and conflict resolution in East Asia, something that EU's policymakers have made clear in the Guidelines on the EU's Foreign and Security Policy in East Asia (2007, updated in 2012), the EU's Global Strategy (2016), the updated EU-ASEAN Strategy (2020), and the new Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific (2021). Thus far, "the EU's role in regional security has mainly taken the form of support for the relevant international, multilateral fora" (Casarini, 2017: 21). Europe's engagement in East Asia and the Indo-Pacific "goes well beyond trade and development aid to include high-tech, political, security and defense-related policy areas" (Casarini, 2017: 22). In 2019, the EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement entered into force and, in 2022, the EU-Japan Strategic Partnership was established, a framework for shared values and prosperity. The two actors have also established robust collaboration and exchange of knowledge for artificial intelligence (AI)-driven innovation; they are working on introducing the EU-Japan Digital Partnership; and they have founded the EU-Japan Center for Industrial Cooperation. On October 21, 2022, one day before the Japan-Australian JDSC was finalized, the EU-Australia Framework Agreement became also effective regarding a wide range of areas, such as foreign and security policy, climate change, sustainable development, economic and trade matters.

It is obvious that the EU's soft-power approach, lack of "binding military alliances in the area, and its neutrality vis-à-vis the region's outstanding territorial and maritime disputes" can establish the EU as a facilitator of dialogue in an array of issues, such as "the North Korean nuclear dossier," the restoration of JCPOA[9], the stabilization of Afghanistan, and the Ukrainian conflict; a guarantor of trust-building between China, USA, Japan, Australia and many small states of the Southeast Asia region; and a capacity-builder, especially in "the management of nuclear resources" in the context of the EURATOM Treaty (Casarini, 2017: 26). More specifically, EU's Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific defines the region of the Indo-Pacific as the area from the African east coast to the Pacific islands, in contrast to USA's and Japan's conceptions of this space, which has normative and geopolitical implications for the viability and flexibility of the LIO that must make inclusivity one of its central pillars in the midst of geopolitical competition. It has, thus, implications for EU's quest for strategic autonomy which stresses the integration of member states' strategic visions and collective capacity building; resilience of global value chains; EU's self-actualization as a global role-model; and EU's autonomy from the influence of external actors, such as Russia and China, that induce complex interdependences which may be detrimental in times of transnational crises and regional

[9] The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or the Iran nuclear deal.

conflicts. Covid-19 and the war in Ukraine have demonstrated this prominently: the EU has found itself repeatedly dependent on Russia for energy supplies and on Asia, and especially China, for the imports of decisive materials such as masks, medical and pharmaceutical items, semiconductors and critical raw materials.

Policy Recommendations

The EU must capitalize on the 2022 JDSC between Japan and Australia in order to:

1) Overcome the stalemates that characterize multilateralism in the "permacrisis" era. It should engage minilateralism's rise in the Indo-Pacific to revive and expand multilateralism in security governance and not only by employing EU's most appreciable public policy charisma: the capacity for "connectivity" inside and across regions as a key tool for cooperation, especially in times of uncertainty. Connectivity fosters multilateralism and vice versa, hence, they promote cooperation conjointly, and this is also the agenda of regional institutions such as ASEAN, ASEAN+3, EAS and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The 2022 US Strategy for the Indo-Pacific also proposes a connectivity agenda with an emphasis on the digital domain and international law in maritime spaces. Since better connectivity requires multilateralism, the EU should create a distinct blueprint for a sustainable, smart and secure connectivity agenda for East Asia, that draws on the parameters of sustainable infrastructure, digital innovation, seamless logistics, regulatory excellence and people mobility, as they unfold in the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 and the EU Strategy for Connecting Europe and Asia (2019). The 2019 Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure between the EU and Japan and the 2022 JDSC between Japan and Australia should become a foundation for implementing EU's Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo Pacific and its Global Gateway initiative that is paramount for establishing the EU as a connectivity and innovation hub in the Indo-Pacific region.

2) Instrumentalize minilateralism between Japan and Australia to compliment the San Francisco System's alliance politics in order to transform the "hub-and-spokes" architecture to a "hybrid wide area network" (WAN) architecture (a combination of full mesh and hub-and-spokes systems): a form of "any-to-some" system within the LIO premises, that allows for the creation of mesh networks between international institutions, middle powers and small states. Despite the fact that the hub-and-spokes system is easy to manage because the main concern is always the hub, the incorporation of mesh networking allows for adaptability to increased or decreased scalability, less network latency, reliable collaborative agendas and open communication, all of which are important for complexity management in global governance.

Establishing a non-hierarchical modus-operandi in a multipolar system between middle powers, small states and regional/international organizations, especially when grand powers exhibit signs of decline, withdrawal, isolationist or unilateralist behavior that increase insecurity and instability in security alliances, increases self-organization and adaptability as free flows of information pass through the middle points of this architecture without needing the hub as a guarantor. Communication, thus, is greatly facilitated in times of global shocks. In this hybrid WAN system, the EU, Japan and Australia become, at the same time, both a hub and an ad hoc mesh network that connect the EU to East Asia and the Indo-Pacific via other minilateral arrangements, such as the Quad, and Japan and Australia to the transatlantic system without the US-China rivalry interrupting strategic cooperation and value chains. This is key in the promotion of strategic autonomy for the EU and resilience for the EU, Japan, Australia and all actors that form relations of interdependency with them in various sectors, especially in times of transnational crises or grand power rivalries when global value chains get interrupted.

3) Build trust, capacity and network-sharing via diversified diplomatic channels and concert diplomacy, which could be crucial for the free flow of information and consensus-building in minilateral fora that serve later as a building block for embedded multilateralism. The EU-Australia leaders' meeting that took place on November 16, 2022 affirms the importance of facilitating frequent and flexible agendas of global governance and national interest without the burdens of institutionalized bureaucracies. The versatility of the 2022 JDSC in an informal, non-binding setting frees the EU to adopt a networked strategy and a shared-values campaign in East Asia with the potential of fostering increased dialogue with China that is crucial for resolving the tensions in the Korean Peninsula, the Taiwan strait and the East and South China Seas in a non-militarized manner. The 2022 JDSC is a response to the increased threat that both Japan and Australia feel by China on all fronts. It is an opportunity for the EU to advance its role as a peace-builder and facilitator of conflict resolution processes in the Indo-Pacific since the majority of minilateral initiatives have a defense-offense military character vis-à-vis China's rise and behavior in the region.

4) In light of grand power tensions, the EU's holistic approach to security governance can act as an integrative platform for problem-solving in a part of the world that does not have a clear conception of order and where great powers' conceptions of how this order should be clash on a regular basis. In this regard, the EU should work with Japan and Australia to strengthen the Asia-Europe Meeting's (ASEM), ASEAN's, EAS' and ARF's capabilities so as to offer flexibility and options to the small states of the region, that do not wish to align against China formally due to economic and trade costs, so as not to be excluded from the connectivity and innovation grids that the EU, Japan and Australia

can build in East and Southeast Asia. Minilateralism, hence, should become a basis for expanding LIO's multilateralism eventually and strengthening the ASEAN and transatlantic ecosystems.

The EU should introduce a "flexibility provision" pillar in its strategy for the Indo-Pacific that incorporates minilateralism as a foreign-policy tool that relaxes treaty commitments intentionally so as to induce trust-building and cooperation by encouraging states to yield deeper concessions (Kucik & Reinhardt, 2008). This not only will it draw small states and middle powers around multilateral fora in search of similar agendas and preferences, but also it will attract the USA and India to reconsider policies and preferences and renegotiate with friends and foes. In fact, the Japanese approach of engaging with India can facilitate the EU-India cooperation from sub-national diplomacy between India and EU's member states, such as the Netherlands, to a formal EU-India Comprehensive Agreement that is encountering roadblocks despite the commitment of both sides to the EU-India Strategic Partnership: A Roadmap to 2025 (2020).

Finally, EU member states could play a fundamental role in transforming EU's strategic compass in the Indo-Pacific and advancing its autonomy agenda as a global power. France, in particular, via its seven overseas territories, locates 93% of its exclusive economic zone in the Indian and South Pacific Oceans and has permanent military and naval forces in the region. France has developed its own Strategy for the Indo-Pacific (2018) which establishes close partnerships with Japan and India over maritime safety and security, management of marine resources, climate change and the promotion of a free and open Indo-Pacific. In this respect, EU's support for "flexible" trilaterals and quadrilaterals in the region, such as Quad+1 (+France), Quad++ in which Indonesia, Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia, South Korea and New Zealand, that are France's strategic partners, could play meaningful roles in an ad hoc basis advancing their own interests at the same time, could connect the goals and strategic interests of the 2022 Japan-Australia JDSC to EU's Global Strategy and the Global Gateway in a more flexible and time-efficient manner. In addition, the fact that both France and the EU adopt an "open dialogue" stance toward China without antagonizing it stimulates the much-needed prospects for deeper cooperation and knowledge-sharing regarding innovation, climate change, issues of the global health governance agenda, conflict resolution and the promotion of the rule of law and respect for human rights.

Multilayered minilaterals need management and commitment even if they are not binding and formal. Only the USA has played a meaningful role thus far toward this direction. This is a window of opportunity that the EU must not waste in its quest for "self-actualization," as it is proposed in the EU Global Strategy. In fact, the best strategy is to instrumentalize the Japan-Australia JDSC to create policies that allow security- and innovation-related domestic stakeholders (for example, businessmen

and scientists are prominent security stakeholders in Japan) to play a forefront role in the "connectivity" agendas of the three actors and their partners in order to allow minilateralism to unblur the fine lines regarding which countries align on specific issues and in what areas. This would develop a blueprint for concert diplomacy to develop bilateral and multilateral networks that advance LIO's norms and interests in a part of the world that is still in search of order.

Conclusion: Minilateralism for Multilateralism

With the Indo-Pacific becoming the global center of gravity, representing 60% of global GDP and two-thirds of global growth, minilateralism has the prospect of advancing multilateralism in an area of the world that experiences "imperial fatigue" while the LIO is withering away. The Indo-Pacific region is already characterized by intense power rivalries which augment global uncertainty and insecurity in all governance structures. Ikenberry and Tsuchiyama's prognosis that "for years to come, the Asia-Pacific [the Indo-Pacific today] will be a region that will exist somewhere between a balance of power and a community-based security order" was fairly accurate (2002:69). It is a vast space where several hegemonic, normative, social/cultural, political and economic orders collide, and the space where LIO's viability and adaptability is already being tested. Alliance coordination, hence, needs management: minilateralism should be welcomed in EU's foreign-policy toolbox because it assists policymakers to unclear priorities in order to prioritize policy agendas on shared critical interests and combat strategic ambiguity in the era of "permacrisis," which is crucial for achieving strategic autonomy. The best way to achieving policy coordination is by the adoption of the same vision of "order" for the Indo-Pacific, based on a collective "strategic concept" for all LIO's members, partners and stakeholders, that defines Indo-Pacific's normative (free and open, respect for international law) and geographical structures (what are its boundaries and mapping) in order to understand the security environment holistically. This, in its turn, assists to overcome disinformation and populism agendas, nationalism, interruption of global value chains during grand power competition, mistrust and misappropriation of resources and capabilities in security governance, which costs time and money.

As Tatsumi and Kennedy note, dividing the geopolitical construct of the Indo-Pacific into strategic subregions according to sealane boundaries will revive multilateralism inevitably around clear security and defense agendas (2022: 11). Policy coordination for a large group of international institutions, middle powers and small states depends on defining clearly the subregional diplomatic theaters, such as the one of East Asia, and prioritizing minilaterals as a basis for multilateralism later, at a macro scale, where everyone should have an equal voice. The prioritization should enter into

force according to multi-sector specificities pertaining to economic, defense/security, maritime, infrastructure, humanitarian and human rights urgencies in alignment with LIO's scope and vision. For example, not all countries in the area have military concerns vis-à-vis China's agency -in fact, China expands prosperity and economic security for many small states in the Indo-Pacific region. Minilateralism, hence, allows for agendas to be developed. These are tailored to the needs and specific interests of middle powers and small states without the one-size-fits-all approach that multilateral fora adopt regarding key issues, that is centered around grand powers' dynamics and their national security strategy agendas. This may be the best way to deliver the message to China that the transatlantic partners and their allies are not there to antagonize it, but they have a vested interest in the consolidation of a rules-based order, which China is welcome to be part of (Tatsumi & Kennedy, 2022).

Overcoming the Neorealist and Neoliberal Narratives

Gruber (2000) argues that strong states force weaker states in multilateral arrangements to adopt less than optimal options that weaker states accept than being excluded entirely from institutionalized cooperation. This is the neorealist paradigm, of course, which depicts the "reality" of multilateralism and explains the crisis it undergoes in a polycentric global order inside which power diffusion offers many alternatives to small states. Escaping the "power politics" trap, as Gruber notes, entails a "go-it-alone" power exercised by the regimes' beneficiaries, and "that's why minilateralism will work in some contexts but not in others" (Gruber, 2000; Walt, 2009). Ruggie states that "a hallmark of 21st century multilateralism is the rising prominence of alternative forms of collective action as complements to -and often substitutes for- traditional intergovernmental cooperation" (Ruggie, 1993, as cited in Patrick, 2015: 116).

"Formal organizations persist, but governments increasingly participate in a bewildering array of flexible networks whose membership varies based on situational interests, shared values, or relevant capabilities (Patrick, 2015: 116). Patrick calls this disagregated, voluntary, transgovernmental, regional, multi-stakeholder, bottom-up arrangments the "new 'new' multilateralism" (2015: 116). Neoliberals, hence, are also becoming increasingly skeptical of multilateralism and highlight the failure of international institutions in the post-pandemic era. As Patrick states, "when it comes to multilateralism, bigger is rarerely better" (2014: 3). Drezner (2009) also argues that "multilateral cooperation is becoming an unresasonable obsession when it comes to decision-making."

By picking and choosing among diverse actors, the EU can uphold the tenets of LIO in the Indo-Pacific, by supporting democratic powers' ideas," such as Japan's and Australia's, "for reforming

what liberal order actually means" since countries, like India, are still reluctant to engage fully with the EU "on democracy support without a far-reaching relbalancing of international power" (Youngs, 2018). Minilateralism for multilateralism, hence, helps the EU, other international organizations, middle powers and small states to deal with USA's rentrenchment without weaken the LIO. As Rothkopf (2012) puts it, "for multilateralism, this is the moment before the dawn: multilateralism will ultimately flourish again not because it is more equitable but because we cannot solve global problems without it".

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