



**INDONESIA, MALAYSIA, AND THE  
PHILIPPINES MUST REDEFINE THEIR  
MINILATERAL MARITIME SECURITY  
FRAMEWORK**

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The South China Sea has transformed into a geopolitical hotspot in recent years, with China's escalating military activities raising significant security concerns for its Southeast Asian neighbors. Beijing's construction of artificial islands, deployment of advanced military assets, and continued violations of exclusive economic zones (EEZs) arguably undermine regional sovereignty and contribute to heightened tensions.

While much of the international community is fixated on the rising tension in this semi-enclosed sea, three ASEAN member states—Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines—have engaged in a minilateral security framework, the [Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement](#) (TCA), but limited to only Sulu and Sulawesi Seas. This minilateralism, while [highly effective](#) within [its current scope](#) and significantly improving maritime security, excludes the South China Sea, rendering it inadequate for addressing emerging challenges.

In 2024 alone, China's coast guard aggressively used [water cannons](#) against Philippine vessels at the Second Thomas Shoal, emblematic of its growing assertiveness. For Indonesia, Chinese coast guard and fishing vessels persistently [intruded](#) into the country's EEZ in the North Natuna Sea, areas that lie along the southern extent of China's nine-dash line claim. Despite the recent Jakarta-Beijing maritime development agreement, Indonesia has reiterated its [rejection](#) of China's expansive South China Sea claims; however, analysts warn that failure to act decisively could [embolden](#) China further. Malaysia, too, faced renewed challenges as Chinese vessels [encroached](#) on energy-rich in its EEZ off the South Luconia Shoals, deploying Coast Guard ships and issuing protests while proposing joint development to intensify pressure without overt aggression. Now it becomes more apparent that as China's presence intensifies, the three nations lack a coherent, unified response.

This demonstrates why the minilateral framework needs to evolve to address the growing state-level geopolitical tensions in the South China sea. Critics might argue that expanding the TCA to the South China Sea could provoke Beijing further or complicate relations within ASEAN, where Cambodia and Laos are more [inclined](#) to adopt pro-China stances.

While these concerns are valid, passivity risks invigorating China, undermining not only the three countries but also the rules-based international maritime order. Besides, the existing framework of ASEAN diplomacy, while important, has proven insufficient to deter China's incremental encroachments, making a more decisive response essential. Although stretching the TCA framework could dilute its effectiveness due to logistical, political, and financial constraints, it is important to consider a more cohesive approach in addressing emerging state-level challenges. The evolving regional dynamics require joint, multinational strategies and broadening the minilateralism could advance more strategic partnerships for a unified response to common challenges.

If the TCA maintains its current scope but expands to address the South China Sea, it would be crucial to balance its focus on maritime security with a broader approach to state-level geopolitical threats. While the Sulu and Sulawesi Seas have seen [reduced](#) incidences of piracy and crime thanks to the TCA, these regions are linked to the shipping routes of the South China Sea. Without addressing the South China Sea, which is increasingly destabilized by territorial disputes and resource grabs, the gains in Sulu and Sulawesi could unravel. Furthermore, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines have an opportunity to solidify their leadership within ASEAN's regional security framework, especially as Malaysia assumes ASEAN chairmanship in 2025. In the same vein, the TCA could serve as a foundation for a new standard of minilateral collaboration, one that bridges the gap between ASEAN's limitations and the global interest in the region.

In revamping the TCA's role, there is the potential for a truly minilateral solution within ASEAN to the South China Sea disputes, one that sets a precedent for managing tensions through regionally driven cooperation rather than external intervention. Accordingly, the TCA must be reimagined to address these complexities, transitioning from a narrowly defined, crime-focused minilateral initiative to a broader security framework capable of responding to state-level threats and ensuring the safety of critical waterways. In this context, Vietnam should also consider joining in this minilateralism, a strategic platform for Hanoi to safeguard its territorial claims in the South China Sea while simultaneously strengthening ASEAN unity in the face of external pressures.

If the TCA is to evolve into this enhanced framework, policymakers must proceed with measured deliberation to ensure its long-term efficacy in balancing the need for cooperation and the risks of exacerbating tensions. It will be crucial to manage ASEAN members' varied interests with China. The framework, on top of that, must be an adaptable structure capable of responding to evolving maritime threats, while at the same time maintaining inclusivity in its decision-making processes. Eventually, Malaysia's ASEAN Chair 2025 must seize the

opportunity to reshape the cooperative arrangement into a more expansive and adaptable framework, as well as set a model for how middle powers leverage minilateralism to navigate global geopolitics.

The views of the author in this commentary are his own and do not represent the official position of the AIIAD or any organization.

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