

AUSINDEX and the Practice of Minilateral Maritime Security Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

Pham Van Thinh

Thu Dau Mot University
HỒ Chí Minh, Viet Nam

Abstract

Amid the growing fragmentation and strategic competition characterizing the Indo-Pacific security environment, flexible forms of security cooperation among middle powers have emerged as a salient feature of the contemporary regional order. This paper examines the India–Australia bilateral naval exercise AUSINDEX as a representative case of minilateral security practice, moving beyond conventional approaches that treat military exercises primarily as instruments of operational training. Drawing on an analytical framework that integrates Global International Relations (IR), middle-power studies, and scholarship on minilateralism, the paper demonstrates that AUSINDEX performs three interrelated strategic functions. First, it contributes to capacity-building and the enhancement of operational interoperability between the two navies. Second, it serves as a flexible instrument of strategic signaling within a competitive regional context. Third, it operates as a connective node within the broader networked architecture of Indo-Pacific maritime security. Through repeated and predictable practices, AUSINDEX helps shape behavioral expectations and cooperative norms without relying on formal alliances or highly institutionalized arrangements. The paper argues that conceptualizing naval exercises as minilateral security practices provides deeper insight into the substantive role of middle powers in sustaining regional stability and contributing to the construction of the Indo-Pacific order.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific security, middle powers, minilateralism, maritime security.

1. Introduction

As the international order increasingly shifts toward multipolarity and fragmentation, the Indo-Pacific has emerged as a central arena of strategic competition and regional security reconfiguration. The growing range of maritime security challenges – ranging from territorial disputes and freedom of navigation concerns to intensifying great-power rivalry – has generated demand for more flexible and adaptive forms of security cooperation. In this context, minilateralism has gained prominence as a defining feature of the regional security architecture, complementing or even extending beyond traditional multilateral frameworks that are widely seen as experiencing “institutional saturation” (Allès & Fournol, 2023; Panda & Ohn, 2024).

Recent scholarship suggests that minilateralism should not be understood merely as a technical solution to the limitations of traditional multilateralism. Rather, it reflects a broader shift in how states—particularly middle powers—exercise agency and perform their roles within a reconfiguring regional order (Acharya, 2014; Efstathopoulos, 2023). Instead of relying exclusively on rigid alliances or highly institutionalized mechanisms, middle powers increasingly favor small-group, task-oriented, and flexible forms of cooperation. Prominent examples include the Quad, AUKUS, and various bilateral and trilateral arrangements in the domain of maritime security (Bisley, 2024; Chan & Rublee, 2024; Wilkins, 2025b).

Within this broader context, the security relationship between India and Australia has emerged as a key pillar of the Indo-Pacific security architecture. Australian strategic documents consistently underscore the centrality of the Indo-Pacific and the importance of cooperation with like-minded partners in upholding a rules-based regional order (Australian Government, 2017, 2020, 2023, 2024). In parallel, India–Australia relations have been upgraded in both breadth and depth, as reflected in the institutionalization of the 2+2 dialogue, expanded defense cooperation, and, notably, the conduct of the bilateral naval exercise AUSINDEX (Australia–India Exercise) (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2023; Indian Navy, 2021, 2023a). AUSINDEX is a bilateral naval exercise conducted between the Royal Australian Navy and the Indian Navy since 2015, focusing on enhancing interoperability, maritime security coordination, and joint operational capabilities between the two Indo-Pacific partners.

Although AUSINDEX has been examined in a number of studies on bilateral maritime security cooperation (Das, 2021; Jha & Star, 2021; Nhat, 2024), most existing analyses continue to approach it primarily as a military exercise or a mechanism for enhancing operational capabilities. This paper argues that such perspectives do not fully capture the broader strategic significance of AUSINDEX. Instead, it asks how AUSINDEX operates as a minilateral maritime security practice, and what this reveals about the role of middle powers in the evolving Indo-Pacific security architecture. On this basis, the paper seeks to contribute to ongoing scholarly debates on minilateralism, maritime security, and the practice-based construction of regional order.

2. Theoretical Foundations, Analytical Framework, and Research Methodology

2.1 Theoretical Foundations and Analytical Framework

This paper is grounded in two principal strands of scholarly debate: (i) Global International Relations (IR) and the agency of middle powers in a reconfiguring regional order; and (ii) minilateralism as a flexible form of security cooperation, particularly in the context of Indo-Pacific maritime security. This combined approach allows the analysis to move beyond frameworks that privilege rigid alliances or traditional multilateralism, which have increasingly revealed their limitations amid intensifying strategic competition and the “saturation” of cooperative arrangements (Allès & Fournol, 2023; Panda & Ohn, 2024).

From a Global IR perspective, Acharya (2014) argued that regional orders are not merely the products of global great powers but are constituted through the interactions, norms, and practices of regional actors. Building on this insight, scholarship on middle powers highlights the diverse pathways through which these states exercise agency in shaping their strategic environments, including the use of flexible cooperation, strategic signaling, and norm entrepreneurship (Efsthopoulos, 2023). In the Indo-Pacific context, Australia and India are frequently identified as middle powers possessing both the capacity and the willingness to participate actively in regional order-building, particularly in the domain of maritime security (Das, 2021; Jha & Star, 2021).

Minilateralism serves as the central conceptual lens for analyzing emerging forms of security cooperation in the region. In contrast to traditional multilateralism, minilateralism emphasizes small groupings, task-oriented cooperation, low levels of institutionalization, and high adaptability (Allès & Fournol, 2023; Panda & Ohn, 2024). Studies of the Quad, AUKUS, and similar arrangements demonstrate that minilateralism enables both middle powers and major powers to adjust their strategic postures flexibly, signal deterrence or reassurance, and avoid the political and legal constraints associated with formal alliances (Bisley, 2024; Chan & Rublee, 2024; Wilkins, 2025a).

In the maritime security domain, minilateralism is particularly well-suited to activities such as naval exercises, maritime domain awareness (MDA) cooperation, and initiatives aimed at enhancing operational interoperability. These practices not only contribute to military capability development but also function as instruments of strategic signaling and as mechanisms for linking bilateral and multilateral security structures through networked logics (Brewster & Bateman, 2024; Vijaya, 2024). Recent studies on naval exercises emphasize the need to conceptualize them as security practices with political and strategic significance, rather than as purely technical or training-oriented activities (Rossiter et al., 2025).

On this basis, the study develops a three-pillar analytical framework for examining AUSINDEX. First, AUSINDEX is analyzed as a mechanism for capacity-building and interoperability enhancement, reflecting the practice-based dimension of minilateralism. Second, AUSINDEX is examined as an instrument of strategic signaling that shapes regional perceptions and expectations amid intensifying competition (Koga, 2025; Wilkins, 2024). Third, AUSINDEX is situated within a networked security logic, in which bilateral mechanisms operate as connective nodes that complement broader minilateral and multilateral security structures (Wilkins, 2025b; Wilkins et al., 2024). This framework enables an assessment of AUSINDEX not merely at the bilateral level but as a minilateral security practice that contributes to the shaping of the Indo-Pacific regional order.

2.2 Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative case study approach to examine AUSINDEX as a minilateral maritime security practice within the context of a reconfiguring Indo-

Pacific security architecture. The case study method is particularly well-suited to analyzing how abstract concepts such as minilateralism, strategic signaling, and networked security are enacted through practice, rather than through formal institutions or treaty-based alliances.

AUSINDEX was selected as the case study for three main reasons. First, it represents a relatively stable framework of bilateral naval exercises between two key Indo-Pacific middle powers – India and Australia – with repeated iterations since 2015. Second, in comparison with prominent minilateral mechanisms such as the Quad or AUKUS, AUSINDEX has received limited theoretical attention, particularly from practice-based analytical perspectives, making it a suitable case for scholarly reinterpretation. Third, AUSINDEX operates at the intersection of bilateral cooperation, minilateral dynamics, and the broader regional security architecture, thereby providing an analytically rich site for examining the logic of networked security in the Indo-Pacific.

Empirically, the study is based on qualitative analysis of both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include strategic documents, joint statements, press releases, and official materials issued by the Australian Government, India's Ministry of External Affairs, and the Indian Navy concerning AUSINDEX and bilateral maritime security cooperation. Secondary sources consist of peer-reviewed academic literature on minilateralism, middle powers, maritime security, and naval exercises in the Indo-Pacific region. The analysis follows an interpretive and practice-oriented approach, focusing on recurring patterns, the evolution of exercise content, and the ways in which AUSINDEX is linked to wider security structures.

The study does not seek causal generalization. Instead, it aims at analytical generalization, offering conceptually grounded insights into the role of bilateral security practices within minilateral configurations and regional networked security architectures.

3. Findings

3.1 AUSINDEX and Capacity-Building and Operational Interoperability

One of the key findings of this study is that AUSINDEX functions primarily as a mechanism for capacity-building and the enhancement of operational interoperability between the Indian Navy and the Royal Australian Navy. In the context of an increasingly complex Indo-Pacific maritime security environment, the ability to coordinate operations, share information, and develop mutual understanding among naval forces is widely regarded as a foundational condition for maintaining regional stability. Unlike highly institutionalized forms of cooperation, AUSINDEX enables both sides to test and adjust modes of coordination in a flexible manner, consistent with a practice-based logic of minilateralism (Allès & Fournol, 2023; Panda & Ohn, 2024).

From a policy perspective, Australia's strategic documents consistently emphasize the importance of strengthening operational readiness, enhancing interoperability with like-minded partners, and maintaining the capacity to operate effectively in an

increasingly contested maritime environment (Australian Government, 2020, 2023, 2024). India, in parallel, views naval cooperation with Australia as an integral component of its broader efforts to expand its presence and security role in the Indo-Pacific (Das, 2021; Jha & Star, 2021). Within this context, AUSINDEX has emerged as a practical instrument through which abstract strategic orientations are translated into concrete operational capabilities.

The scope and content of AUSINDEX exercises demonstrate a gradual increase in depth and complexity, reflecting the accumulation of capabilities and strategic trust between the two navies. Activities such as anti-submarine warfare, air defense, naval formation maneuvers, officer exchanges, and joint at-sea training are designed not only to enhance technical skills but also to foster a shared “operational language” between the participating forces (Indian Navy, 2021, 2023a). According to official statements by the Indian Navy, AUSINDEX is explicitly intended to deepen mutual understanding of doctrines, procedures, and operational capabilities, thereby reducing the risks of misperception and improving coordination in real-world contingencies (Indian Navy, 2021).

From an academic perspective, studies of naval exercises emphasize that interoperability is not merely a technical issue but a socio-strategic process through which participating forces learn how to “work together” through repeated practice (Rossiter et al., 2025). In the case of AUSINDEX, this process is particularly significant given the differing strategic traditions, naval doctrines, and security priorities of India and Australia. The maintenance of a regular bilateral exercise framework allows both sides to gradually narrow these differences, while simultaneously developing a shared capability base that can be mobilized in broader minilateral or multilateral contexts.

The enhancement of operational interoperability through AUSINDEX should also be situated within the broader context of networked security in the Indo-Pacific. Research on regional security cooperation suggests that systematically developed bilateral capabilities can function as “nodes” within a wider security network, linking various minilateral and multilateral mechanisms (Wilkins, 2025b; Wilkins et al., 2024). In this respect, AUSINDEX does not serve the bilateral India–Australia relationship solely but also contributes to strengthening the ability of both countries to coordinate within frameworks such as the Quad and other maritime cooperation initiatives.

Another important dimension of capacity-building through AUSINDEX concerns the sharing of MDA. As maritime security challenges become increasingly non-traditional and transnational, the sharing of information, data, and situational assessments has become a critical component of effective operational capability (Brewster & Bateman, 2024). Although AUSINDEX is not a dedicated MDA mechanism, the exercises and information exchanges conducted under its framework help to reinforce coordination and mutual trust, thereby laying the groundwork for deeper cooperation in the field of MDA between the two navies.

From a minilateralism perspective, AUSINDEX illustrates a “light” yet effective approach to capacity-building. Rather than pursuing highly binding mechanisms, the two sides have opted for a flexible framework that allows the scope and content of cooperation to be adjusted in response to changing strategic circumstances. This approach aligns with observations that minilateralism enables middle powers to enhance their security capabilities while avoiding the political costs associated with rigid alliances (Allès & Fournol, 2023; Panda & Ohn, 2024; Wilkins, 2025b).

Finally, it is important to emphasize that capacity-building and interoperability through AUSINDEX should not be understood as ends in themselves but as components of a broader strategy aimed at maintaining maritime stability and regional order. Australia’s strategic documents and India–Australia joint statements consistently underscore the importance of a rules-based order and freedom of navigation (Australian Government, 2017; Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2023). In this context, AUSINDEX operates as a minilateral maritime security practice in which capacity-building and interoperability not only serve bilateral interests but also contribute to shaping behavioral norms and shared expectations in the Indo-Pacific maritime domain.

3.2 AUSINDEX as a Strategic Signaling Instrument

Beyond its function in capacity-building and operational interoperability, another key finding of this study is that AUSINDEX operates as a deliberate instrument of strategic signaling in an increasingly competitive Indo-Pacific security environment. Within minilateral structures—characterized by low levels of institutionalization and limited legal commitments—strategic signaling through practice, particularly military exercises, becomes a crucial means of conveying intentions, levels of commitment, and orientations of cooperation among participating states (Koga, 2025; Vijaya, 2024).

From a theoretical perspective, scholarship on minilateralism emphasizes that naval exercises are not merely training activities but constitute a form of “strategic communication” in a fragmented international environment. Through their scale, frequency, content, and geographic setting, states transmit signals that combine elements of deterrence and reassurance without resorting to formal declarations or binding alliance commitments (Allès & Fournol, 2023; Panda & Ohn, 2024). In the case of AUSINDEX, strategic signals are calibrated to be “just strong enough”, reflecting the middle-power status of both India and Australia.

First, AUSINDEX signals a growing degree of strategic convergence between the two countries on regional maritime security issues. The sustained maintenance and gradual upgrading of the bilateral exercise amid intensifying strategic competition indicate that India and Australia not only share short-term interests but are increasingly forming longer-term strategic expectations regarding each other’s roles in the regional security architecture (Das, 2021; Jha & Star, 2021). Joint statements and high-level dialogues—particularly the 2+2 mechanism—provide the political foundation that enables AUSINDEX to function as a consistent signaling instrument

rather than as an isolated symbolic activity (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2023).

Second, AUSINDEX serves as a signal of conditional commitment to a rules-based regional order. Australia's strategic documents consistently emphasize freedom of navigation, the rule of law, and opposition to unilateral actions that alter the status quo (Australian Government, 2017, 2020, 2023, 2024). By conducting AUSINDEX with India—a country that is not a treaty ally—Australia is able to signal support for the regional order without escalating overt confrontation. For India, AUSINDEX provides a platform to demonstrate a more proactive role in regional maritime security while preserving strategic autonomy and avoiding binding alignment within rigid alliance structures (Koga, 2025).

Third, AUSINDEX sends signals to both regional and extra-regional actors regarding the practical ability of India and Australia to coordinate operationally. Studies on naval exercises highlight that it is demonstrated interoperability through practice—rather than declaratory intent—that lends credibility to strategic signals (Rossiter et al., 2025). In the case of AUSINDEX, the expansion of exercise content into areas such as anti-submarine warfare, air defense, and complex operational coordination indicates that signaling is not merely symbolic but anchored in capabilities accumulated over time (Indian Navy, 2021, 2023a).

Crucially, the strategic signaling function of AUSINDEX is not overtly confrontational but operates according to a logic of tactical hedging—simultaneously strengthening cooperation while avoiding escalation. Research on the Quad and AUKUS suggests that middle powers and regional actors often use minilateral mechanisms to signal commitment and resolve without being forced into a binary choice between confrontation and neutrality (Bisley, 2024; Chan & Rublee, 2024; Koga, 2025). AUSINDEX fits this logic by remaining a bilateral exercise that can nevertheless be readily connected to broader minilateral configurations when required.

In addition, AUSINDEX functions as a reassurance signal to like-minded partners in the region. The maintenance of a stable and predictable naval cooperation framework between India and Australia helps to alleviate concerns over potential security vacuums in the Indo-Pacific, particularly at a time when traditional multilateral mechanisms face growing difficulties in delivering timely responses (Wilkins, 2024; Wilkins, 2025b). In this sense, AUSINDEX contributes to reinforcing expectations that middle powers can play an active role in sustaining regional stability through practice rather than relying solely on major powers.

Finally, the effectiveness of AUSINDEX as a strategic signaling instrument lies in its repetition and consistency. Unlike one-off events, AUSINDEX is conducted regularly and has progressively expanded in scope, thereby generating a cumulative “chain of signals” over time. This aligns with the argument that within minilateral structures, strategic signaling is not an instantaneous act but the outcome of repeated practice

through which intentions and commitments are gradually tested and validated through behavior (Rossiter et al., 2025; Vijaya, 2024).

Taken together, AUSINDEX demonstrates that bilateral naval exercises can move beyond a purely training-oriented function to become a flexible strategic signaling instrument suited to the competitive and fragmented Indo-Pacific environment. Through AUSINDEX, India and Australia simultaneously signal strategic convergence while preserving policy flexibility, illustrating how middle powers employ minilateralism as a means of signaling and managing uncertainty in a reconfiguring regional order.

3.3 AUSINDEX and the Logic of Networked Security Beyond the Bilateral Level

Beyond its roles in capacity-building and strategic signaling, another key finding of this study is that AUSINDEX operates according to a logic of networked security, in which bilateral mechanisms do not exist in isolation but function as nodes linking wider minilateral and multilateral security structures in the Indo-Pacific. This perspective allows AUSINDEX to be understood not merely as an intensified bilateral relationship but as a security practice that helps weave together increasingly overlapping layers of regional cooperation (Allès & Fournol, 2023; Wilkins, 2025a).

From a theoretical standpoint, recent scholarship on minilateralism highlights a shift away from hierarchical security architectures centered on rigid alliances toward flexible cooperative networks, where small-scale mechanisms can connect, reinforce, and complement one another (Panda & Ohn, 2024; Wilkins, 2025a). Within such a structure, high-quality bilateral relationships play a foundational role, enabling horizontal expansion of cooperation without requiring high levels of institutionalization. AUSINDEX fits this logic by maintaining a clearly bilateral character while retaining the capacity to intersect with other minilateral arrangements in the region.

A clear manifestation of this networked security logic is the potential linkage between AUSINDEX and broader minilateral frameworks, particularly the Quad. Although AUSINDEX is not an official Quad activity, the fact that both India and Australia are core Quad members creates significant strategic overlap. Studies of the Quad indicate that its effectiveness derives not only from high-level meetings but also from dense networks of overlapping bilateral and trilateral cooperation among its members (Bisley, 2024; Koga, 2025). In this context, AUSINDEX can be understood as a bilateral platform that enhances coordination capacity and mutual trust, thereby indirectly strengthening the operational effectiveness of larger minilateral structures.

The networked logic of AUSINDEX is also evident in its complementarity with regional initiatives on MDA. Existing research emphasizes that MDA has become a central pillar of Indo-Pacific maritime security, requiring coordination across multiple states and mechanisms (Brewster & Bateman, 2024). While AUSINDEX is not an MDA-specific framework, the exercise's practices of information exchange, operational coordination, and trust-building provide important foundations for

linking bilateral and minilateral MDA initiatives. In this sense, AUSINDEX contributes to the region's "soft infrastructure" of networked security through repeated and predictable practices.

Another important dimension of the networked security logic is flexibility in adjusting the scope and intensity of cooperation in response to changing strategic contexts. Studies on regional security cooperation suggest that middle powers tend to favor mechanisms that allow them to "open" or "close" levels of engagement without incurring high political costs (Vijaya, 2024; Wilkins, 2024). AUSINDEX meets this requirement by remaining a bilateral exercise while retaining sufficient flexibility to expand its content, invite observers, or coordinate indirectly with other mechanisms when necessary. This flexibility enables both parties to avoid rigid commitments while maintaining strategic convergence within the broader regional security network.

Notably, the networked security logic embodied by AUSINDEX also reflects how middle powers contribute to regional order-building through practice rather than through the imposition of norms or the creation of new institutions. From a Global IR perspective, Acharya (2014) argued that regional orders are constructed through repeated interactions and practices among regional actors. In this case, AUSINDEX does not seek to replace existing structures but instead functions as a complementary practice that increases connectivity density and coordination capacity within the regional security network.

Compared with rigid alliances, the networked security logic represented by AUSINDEX offers distinct advantages in managing uncertainty and strategic competition. Research on minilateralism suggests that cooperative networks enable states to pursue collaboration while preserving strategic autonomy and policy adjustment space as security environments evolve (Allès & Fournol, 2023; Panda & Ohn, 2024). In the Indo-Pacific – where strategic boundaries are often ambiguous and rapidly shifting – this capacity is particularly valuable for middle powers such as India and Australia.

Finally, situating AUSINDEX within a networked security logic highlights its significance beyond the bilateral India–Australia relationship. AUSINDEX illustrates how a bilateral mechanism can contribute to a layered regional security architecture, in which bilateral, minilateral, and multilateral levels do not compete but instead interlock and reinforce one another through networked connections (Wilkins, 2025b; Wilkins et al., 2024). In doing so, AUSINDEX clarifies the substantive role of middle powers in sustaining stability and order in the Indo-Pacific through flexible, scalable, and practice-based security cooperation.

4. Discussion

The findings from the AUSINDEX case suggest that minilateralism in Indo-Pacific maritime security is not merely an alternative institutional choice but a practice-based mode of security cooperation that reflects how middle powers adapt to an increasingly fragmented strategic environment. When the results presented in

Section 3 are situated within the Global IR framework and the literature on middle powers, AUSINDEX clearly illustrates how repeated practices become mechanisms through which roles, norms, and elements of regional order are constructed – rather than relying on rigid alliances or highly institutionalized multilateral arrangements.

First, the findings on capacity-building and operational interoperability demonstrate that minilateralism operates most effectively at the level of practice rather than policy declarations. By enhancing coordination capabilities through bilateral naval exercises, India and Australia are able to translate abstract strategic orientations into concrete operational capacities, thereby reinforcing their agency within the regional security structure. This aligns with Global IR arguments that regional orders are built from the bottom up through interaction and practice among regional actors, rather than imposed by global power centers. In this case, AUSINDEX shows how middle powers can shape the strategic environment not through coercion or domination but by making cooperation operational, routine, and predictable.

Second, the analysis of AUSINDEX as a strategic signaling instrument clarifies the role of minilateralism in managing uncertainty. The findings in Section 3.2 indicate that strategic signals are conveyed less through formal diplomatic statements than through carefully designed military practices defined by their scale, frequency, and operational content. This approach enables middle powers to signal strategic convergence while avoiding the political costs and escalation risks associated with formal alliances. From a theoretical perspective, this reinforces the argument that minilateralism functions as a form of institutional hedging, allowing states to calibrate their commitments and signals in response to changing strategic conditions.

Third, the networked security logic derived from Section 3.3 highlights analytical value beyond the bilateral level. AUSINDEX operates as a node within a wider regional security network, where bilateral, minilateral, and multilateral mechanisms are interlinked rather than hierarchically ordered. This perspective helps explain why bilateral exercises, despite their limited scale, can generate structural effects when embedded within broader cooperative networks. Theoretically, this contributes to the minilateralism literature by emphasizing connectivity and complementarity, rather than treating minilateral arrangements as competitors to traditional multilateralism.

Fourth, a brief comparison with other naval exercises in the Indo-Pacific helps clarify whether AUSINDEX represents a distinctive or representative case. Bilateral exercises such as the India–France Varuna exercise similarly emphasize interoperability, operational coordination, and joint naval readiness between long-standing strategic partners. However, while exercises such as Varuna largely reinforce established bilateral defense partnerships, AUSINDEX operates within a broader Indo-Pacific strategic environment where bilateral cooperation simultaneously connects to wider minilateral configurations. In this sense, AUSINDEX occupies an intermediate position between traditional bilateral naval cooperation and emerging minilateral security practices, illustrating how middle-power exercises can function as building blocks within a wider networked regional security architecture.

Taken together, the AUSINDEX case suggests that the role of middle powers in the Indo-Pacific should not be understood primarily in terms of material capabilities or formal institutional status but through their ability to generate repetitive, flexible, and scalable security practices. Through AUSINDEX, India and Australia do not seek to reconfigure the regional order in confrontational terms; instead, they contribute to shaping behavioral expectations and cooperative norms within a complex and contested strategic environment.

From an academic perspective, this discussion underscores the need to expand the study of minilateralism toward practice-oriented approaches, in which military exercises and maritime cooperation are treated as central units of analysis. From a policy perspective, the AUSINDEX case suggests that investing in high-quality bilateral mechanisms can produce spillover effects across regional security networks—particularly for middle powers seeking to expand their room for maneuver in a reconfiguring Indo-Pacific order.

5. Conclusion

This paper has examined AUSINDEX as a representative case to demonstrate how bilateral naval exercises can operate as minilateral security practices in the context of an increasingly fragmented and competitive Indo-Pacific security architecture. Rather than approaching AUSINDEX solely as a military training activity, the study shows that bilateral naval exercises can simultaneously perform multiple strategic functions, ranging from capacity-building and strategic signaling to linking broader security structures through a networked logic.

The empirical findings indicate, first, that AUSINDEX plays a significant role in enhancing operational capacity and interoperability between the Indian Navy and the Royal Australian Navy. Through repeated and increasingly complex practices, the two sides not only accumulate technical capabilities but also develop mutual trust and a shared “operational language”—key foundations of sustainable security cooperation. Second, AUSINDEX functions as a flexible strategic signaling instrument, enabling two middle powers to demonstrate strategic convergence and commitment to a rules-based regional order while avoiding the political costs and escalation risks associated with formal alliances. Third, when situated within a broader networked security context, AUSINDEX illustrates how a bilateral mechanism can function as a connective node, complementing and reinforcing other minilateral and multilateral structures in the region.

From a theoretical perspective, the paper contributes to the study of minilateralism and maritime security by emphasizing a practice-based approach, in which military exercises are treated as central units of analysis for understanding how regional order is constructed from the bottom up. This perspective complements institution- and alliance-centered analyses, while clarifying the agentic role of middle powers within Global IR. More specifically, the study advances existing scholarship by demonstrating how a single bilateral naval exercise can simultaneously perform multiple strategic functions—capacity-building, strategic signaling, and networked

connectivity. By integrating these dimensions within a unified analytical framework, the paper moves beyond earlier studies that examined naval exercises primarily as operational or diplomatic tools, offering a more comprehensive interpretation of how minilateral practices contribute to the evolving Indo-Pacific security architecture.

From a policy standpoint, the AUSINDEX case suggests that investment in high-quality bilateral mechanisms that are scalable and network-compatible can generate spillover effects across regional security networks. As the Indo-Pacific continues to face strategic uncertainty, minilateral practices such as AUSINDEX are likely to remain important tools through which middle powers manage risk while contributing to regional stability and order.

6. References

- Acharya, A. (2014). Global International Relations (IR) and regional worlds: A new agenda for international studies. *International Studies Quarterly*, 58(4), 647–659.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/isqu.12171>
- Allès, D., & Fournol, T. (2023). *Multilateralisms and minilateralisms in the Indo-Pacific: Articulations and convergences in a context of saturation of cooperative arrangements* (Recherches & Documents, N°08/2023). Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique.
<https://www.frstrategie.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/recherches-et-documents/2023/092023-2.pdf>
- Australian Government, Department of Defence. (2020). *2020 Defence strategic update*.
<https://www.defence.gov.au/about/strategic-planning/2020-defence-strategic-update>
- Australian Government, Department of Defence. (2023). *National Defence: Defence strategic review 2023*.
<https://www.defence.gov.au/about/reviews-inquiries/defence-strategic-review>
- Australian Government, Department of Defence. (2024). *2024 National Defence Strategy and 2024 Integrated Investment Program*. <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/strategic-planning/2024-national-defence-strategy-2024-integrated-investment-program>
- Australian Government. (2017). *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*.
<https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/2017-foreign-policy-white-paper.pdf>
- Bisley, N. (2024). The Quad, AUKUS and Australian security minilateralism: China's rise and new approaches to security cooperation. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 34, 564–576.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2024.2365241>
- Brewster, D., & Bateman, S. (2024). *Maritime Domain Awareness 3.0: The future of information and intelligence-sharing in the Indian Ocean*. National Security College, ANU.
<https://nsc.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/2024-09/Maritime%20Domain%20Awareness%203.0%20Report%202024.pdf>
- Chan, L.-H., & Rublee, M. R. (2024). The promise of AUKUS: Implications of its minilateral institutional form. *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 78(6), 848–868.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2024.2421369>
- Das, S. (2021). Middle power cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: India and Australia at the forefront. *International Studies*, 58(4), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00208817211056742>
- Efstathiopoulos, C. (2023). Global IR and the middle power concept: Exploring different paths to agency. *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 77(2), 213–232.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2023.2191925>
- Indian Navy. (2021). *Royal Australian Navy and Indian Navy commences bilateral exercise – “AUSINDEX”*.
<https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1752545®=48&lang=2>
- Indian Navy. (2023a). *AUSINDEX*.
<https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1952521®=48&lang=2>
- Indian Navy. (2023b). *INS Vagir on an extended range deployment to Fremantle, Australia*.
<https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1950460®=48&lang=2>
- Jha, P., & Star, S. (2021). India–Australia: Defining new horizons of engagement. *Strategic Analysis*, 45(5), 411–430. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2021.1965344>

- Koga, K. (2025). Tactical hedging as coalition-building signal: The evolution of Quad and AUKUS in the Indo-Pacific. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 27(1), 109–134. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481241227840>
- Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. (2023, November 21). *Joint statement: Second India–Australia 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, New Delhi (20 November 2023)*. https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/37284/Joint_Statement_Second_IndiaAustralia_22_Ministerial_Dialogue_New_Delhi_20_November_2023
- Nhat, T. T. (2024). Hợp tác an ninh hàng hải Australia – Ấn độ thông qua AUSINDEX [Maritime security cooperation between Australia – India through AUSINDEX. *Tạp chí Khoa học - Đại học Thủ Dầu Một (Thu Dau Mot University - Journal of Sciences)*, 5(72), 43–50. <https://vjol.info.vn/index.php/tdm/article/view/105020>
- Panda, J., & Ohn, D. (2024). Minilateralism and the new Indo-Pacific order: Theoretical ambitions and empirical realities. *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 78(6), 767–781. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2024.2410411>
- Rossiter, A., Heng, Y.-K., & Cannon, B. J. (2025). Looking under the hood of joint naval exercises: Motives and perceived benefits for Japan. *The Pacific Review*, 38(1), 147–172. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2024.2366791>
- Vijaya, P. (2024). Signaling in minilaterals in the Indo-Pacific: The cases of Quad and AUKUS (2017–2022). *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs*, 10(3), 131–148. <https://doi.org/10.47305/JLIA24103131v>
- Wilkins, T. (2024). U.S.–Japan–Australia trilateralism: The inner core of regional order building and deterrence in the Indo-Pacific. *Asia Policy*, 19(2), 159–185. <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2024.a927099>
- Wilkins, T. (2025a). Towards cross-regional alliance integration: Exploring the modes and modalities of ‘Coalition-Building’ around minilaterals. *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 79(3), 493–502. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2025.2501968>
- Wilkins, T. (2025b). *Strategic minilateralism and the regional security architecture of the Indo-Pacific: The Quad, AUKUS, and the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-96-4791-0>
- Wilkins, T., Hirono, M., Envall, H. D. P., & Hatakeyama, K. (2024). *Indo-Pacific minilateralism and strategic competition (I): Australia/Japan and Chinese approaches compared* (East-West Center occasional paper) East-West Center. https://www.eastwestcenter.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/EWCOP_%239_6_4_2024_0.pdf