

Crisis as Catalyst: Adaptive Institutionalism and the Revival of Multilateralism in the Post-Pandemic Indo-Pacific

GAJULA SAI NIRANJA

University of Pondicherry

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed significant limitations in existing mechanisms of regional and global governance and raised important questions about how regional institutions adapt to systemic crises. Although existing scholarship has examined pandemic governance, Indo-Pacific regionalism, and the rise of minilateral arrangements, limited attention has been given to the mechanisms through which systemic shocks reshape regional governance architectures and redistribute institutional functions. This article examines how the COVID-19 pandemic transformed regional governance in the Indo-Pacific through the combined perspectives of adaptive institutionalism and new regionalism. The paper's core argument is that the pandemic functioned as a critical juncture that accelerated institutional adaptation, not through the consolidation of a single regional institution or through inevitable institutional fragmentation, but through functional differentiation and the emergence of strategic pluralism. To examine this argument, the study undertakes a qualitative comparative analysis of official policy documents, summit declarations, institutional reports, and relevant scholarly literature, focusing on the evolution of the Quad, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, and ASEAN. The findings demonstrate differentiated patterns of adaptation: the Quad expanded beyond its traditional security orientation into health security, critical technologies, maritime cooperation, and supply-chain resilience; IPEF developed modular mechanisms for economic and supply-chain coordination; and ASEAN sought to preserve regional agency and centrality through strategic hedging and engagement with emerging institutional arrangements. These developments indicate that institutional plurality can generate governance capacity when overlapping institutions develop distinct yet complementary functions in response to common challenges. The article therefore advances strategic pluralism as a conceptual framework for explaining how systemic crises can transform institutional overlap into differentiated and potentially complementary forms of regional governance. It contributes to scholarship on Indo-Pacific regionalism by demonstrating that regional resilience may emerge through distributed institutional adaptation and functional specialization rather than institutional consolidation, while also emphasizing that such pluralism

remains contingent on coordination, political commitment, and institutional complementarity.

Keywords: COVID-19, Indo-Pacific, New Regionalism, Adaptive Institutionalism, Quad, IPEF, ASEAN-centrality

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic represented one of the most consequential disruptions to international politics in recent decades. Beyond its immediate public health consequences, the crisis exposed vulnerabilities in global governance, disrupted international production and supply networks, intensified geopolitical competition, and tested the capacity of existing institutional arrangements to respond to systemic shocks. International organizations faced significant difficulties in coordinating collective responses to rapidly evolving challenges, while states increasingly resorted to unilateral measures to secure vaccines, medical supplies, critical technologies, and other strategic resources. The pandemic consequently generated renewed scholarly debate about the resilience of international institutions and, more importantly, their capacity to adapt when established governance arrangements become inadequate to emerging collective-action problems.

These dynamics were particularly consequential in the Indo-Pacific, where strategic competition, economic interdependence, and institutional pluralism were already reshaping the regional order. Prior to the pandemic, the region was characterized by a proliferation of overlapping institutional arrangements involving both traditional regional organizations and newer minilateral initiatives. COVID-19 intensified these processes by exposing vulnerabilities in regional supply chains, elevating health security and economic resilience on the regional agenda, and accelerating efforts to diversify technological, economic, and strategic partnerships. The pandemic therefore constituted not merely a temporary disruption to regional cooperation but a potential critical juncture through which the functions, mandates, and relationships of existing institutions could be recalibrated.

Existing scholarship provides important insights into these developments but remains analytically fragmented. Research on pandemic governance has primarily examined the weaknesses of international institutions and the difficulties of coordinating collective responses to transnational crises. Scholarship on Indo-Pacific regionalism has focused substantially on strategic competition, particularly the implications of China's rise and the responses of the

United States and its regional partners. Studies of minilateralism have highlighted the growing importance of flexible and issue-specific arrangements, including the Quad, while research on ASEAN has emphasized its continuing efforts to preserve regional centrality amid intensifying geopolitical competition. Although these strands of scholarship illuminate important dimensions of the changing regional order, they have generally examined individual institutions or initiatives in relative isolation.

This creates an important analytical gap. Existing studies have paid comparatively limited attention to how systemic crises generate institutional adaptation and how such adaptation subsequently reshapes the broader architecture of regional governance. In particular, insufficient attention has been given to the mechanisms through which institutions respond to newly exposed governance deficits, expand or recalibrate their functions, and develop relationships of complementarity with other institutional arrangements. The central question, therefore, is not simply whether the pandemic strengthened or weakened regional institutions, but how a systemic crisis altered the distribution and specialization of governance functions across overlapping regional institutions.

This article addresses this question by examining the transformation of regional governance in the Indo-Pacific following the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on adaptive institutionalism and new regionalism, it argues that the pandemic functioned as a critical juncture that accelerated institutional adaptation through functional differentiation and specialization. The central argument is that the crisis did not lead either to the consolidation of a single dominant regional institution or to inevitable institutional fragmentation. Instead, it encouraged the emergence of a more differentiated governance architecture in which overlapping institutions increasingly assumed distinct but potentially complementary functions. The resulting configuration is conceptualized in this article as strategic pluralism.

Strategic pluralism constitutes the article's principal conceptual contribution. It refers not simply to the coexistence of multiple institutions, but to a process through which institutional plurality is transformed into differentiated governance capacity when institutions develop distinct and mutually reinforcing functions in response to common challenges. In this sense, strategic pluralism differs from institutional fragmentation, where overlapping arrangements may generate duplication, competition, or coordination problems. It also complements broader accounts of institutional plurality by directing

analytical attention to the process of adaptation, functional specialization, and institutional complementarity. The concept therefore provides a framework for explaining how regional governance can remain adaptive without necessarily becoming institutionally centralized.

The argument is examined through a comparative analysis of three important components of the evolving Indo-Pacific governance architecture: the Quad, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), and ASEAN. These cases represent different forms of institutional adaptation. The Quad illustrates the expansion of a traditionally security-oriented arrangement into areas including health security, critical technologies, maritime cooperation, infrastructure, and supply-chain resilience. IPEF represents an effort to develop flexible and modular mechanisms of economic governance, particularly in relation to supply-chain resilience, clean energy, and economic coordination. ASEAN provides a contrasting form of adaptation in which an established regional organization seeks to preserve institutional centrality and regional agency through engagement, hedging, and alignment with the principles of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. Examining these cases together makes it possible to assess whether institutional diversification has generated functional complementarity or merely produced additional layers of institutional overlap.

The study employs a qualitative comparative analysis of official policy documents, summit declarations, institutional reports, and relevant scholarly literature. The analysis focuses on changes in institutional mandates, governance functions, patterns of cooperation, and the relationship between emerging and established regional arrangements. Rather than treating institutional adaptation as synonymous with institutional effectiveness, the study distinguishes between functional expansion, institutional specialization, and governance outcomes. This enables a more critical assessment of whether the post-pandemic proliferation of regional arrangements has strengthened regional resilience or generated new forms of institutional competition and coordination challenges.

The article makes three interrelated contributions. First, it demonstrates that systemic crises can act as catalysts for institutional adaptation by exposing governance deficiencies and generating new collective-action demands. Second, it integrates adaptive institutionalism with new regionalism to explain how institutions respond to systemic shocks within a contested and institutionally plural regional environment. Third, it develops strategic pluralism as an analytical concept for understanding how overlapping institutions can acquire differentiated and complementary governance functions without developing into

a single integrated regional architecture. The analysis consequently shifts attention from the conventional question of whether regionalism is becoming more multilateral or more fragmented toward the more analytically significant question of how institutional plurality is organized and whether differentiation can produce meaningful governance capacity.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the literature on pandemic governance, Indo-Pacific regionalism, minilateralism, and institutional adaptation, identifying the principal analytical gap addressed by the study. The third section develops the theoretical framework by bringing together new regionalism and adaptive institutionalism and elaborating the concept of strategic pluralism. The subsequent sections examine the Quad, IPEF, and ASEAN as distinct cases of crisis-induced institutional adaptation and assess the extent to which their evolving functions demonstrate differentiation and complementarity. The conclusion considers the broader implications of these findings for regional governance, institutional resilience, and the evolving regional order of the Indo-Pacific.

Pandemic Governance and Institutional Adaptation

The COVID-19 pandemic generated extensive scholarly debate regarding international institutions and global governance. Early studies emphasized the incapacity of existing international institutions (IIs) to coordinate in responding to the evolving crisis. The World Health Organization (WHO), despite being the principal institution for global health governance, got entangled in geopolitical disputes between the great powers, the US and China. This led scholars to highlight the increasing fragmentation of global governance and to question the legitimacy and capacity of the IIs to address global challenges.

Most of the literature on the pandemic focuses on institutional shortcomings. Fidler (2020) argues that international cooperation was seriously constrained due to geopolitical rivalries. Davis and Hobson (2022) situate ‘poly-crisis’ as overlapping with renewed great-power rivalry in a highly interconnected global system, tensions between resource security and energy poverty, climate change, and the unpredictable, evolving character of neoliberalism, which blends persistence with instability. Similarly, Taylor (2021) emphasized the diffusion of centralized international institutions' influence in contemporary global governance and argued that governance increasingly operates through fragmented mechanisms.

Research on vaccine nationalism shows how states prioritized domestic needs over collective action, undermining global cooperation. Vaccine nationalism that involved reserving doses excessively was counterproductive to global pandemic management efforts. The WHO warned that unilateral deals could hinder vaccine distribution to the world's poorest regions, thereby risking the persistence of global health threats (UN Press, 2021). Despite the need for widespread vaccination, hoarding by high-income nations was evident, and conflicts over vaccine supplies emerged even among developed, closely linked European countries (Basrur & Kliem, 2020). The US response is notable for invoking wartime regulations to restrict the export of vaccines and related production materials. This approach signals potential challenges for post-pandemic alliances and hints at challenges to international cooperation on regional and global issues (Paz, 2021).

Multi/Minilateralism and Regional Governance in the Indo-Pacific

The rise of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic and institutional space generated many debates regarding the nature of regional governance and order. Initially, scholarship largely viewed the Indo-Pacific through a geopolitical lens, emphasizing the increasing interconnectedness of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Medcalf (2012, 2014) argues that the Indo-Pacific is a coherent geopolitical system shaped by the integration of economic, security, and maritime dynamics. Similarly, Mohan (2012) highlights the strategic dimension of Indo-Pacific cooperation, particularly among maritime democracies seeking to preserve a rules-based regional order.

However, scholars have challenged the purely geopolitical interpretation of the Indo-Pacific. Acharya (2004; 2018) argues that regional order is not determined solely by power competition but is also shaped by institutions, norms, and regional agency. From this perspective, the Indo-Pacific represents an evolving regional construct in which governance emerges through interactions among states, regional organizations, and transnational actors (He, 2014, 2018). This broader view shifts attention from strategic rivalry to the institutional mechanisms that organize and sustain regional cooperation.

Debates over multilateralism and regional governance have gained significant attention within this context. Traditional regional institutions, specifically ASEAN-led mechanisms, have long served as the foundation of regional cooperation. However, the contemporary transnational challenges have exposed the limitations of conventional multilateral arrangements (Hale et al.,

2013). Hence, smaller and flexible forms of cooperation have proliferated across the Indo-Pacific.

The growth of minilateralism represents one of the most important developments in contemporary regional governance. Minilateralism operates on the principle of bringing together the fewest actors necessary to produce meaningful outcomes. Advocates argue that such arrangements offer greater flexibility, efficiency, and policy responsiveness than larger institutions. The Quad, in particular, has emerged as a prominent example of this trend, expanding its agenda beyond traditional security concerns to encompass vaccine distribution, supply chain resilience, critical technologies, and maritime cooperation (Cannon & Rossiter, 2022; Kliem, 2020). Critics, however, question the legitimacy, inclusivity, and long-term sustainability of minilaterals, arguing that they lead to fragmented governance due to overlapping institutional arrangements and weaken broader multilateral frameworks (Patrick, 2015). These concerns are especially relevant in the Indo-Pacific, where multiple institutional architectures coexist and overlap.

While existing scholarship offers insights into the evolution of Indo-Pacific governance, it pays limited attention to how major crises reshape institutional arrangements. Much of the literature focuses on strategic competition, particularly responses to China's rise, or debates the relative merits of multilateral and minilateral cooperation. Less attention has been paid to understanding how systemic shocks generate institutional adaptation and transformation. The COVID-19 pandemic presents a critical opportunity to examine these dynamics by assessing how regional institutions respond to crisis conditions and whether new forms of cooperation emerged as a result.

This study addresses this gap by analyzing how the pandemic led to the evolution of regional governance in the Indo-Pacific. This study examines how Indo-Pacific institutions adapted to pandemic-induced disruptions. It argues that adaptation occurred not through institutional consolidation but through the emergence of institutional pluralism, whereby multiple institutions assumed differentiated governance functions. This view advances scholarship by demonstrating that institutional resilience in contested regions is achieved through diversification rather than centralization.

A clarification regarding terminology is necessary here. While minilateralism and multilateralism are conventionally treated as distinct forms of institutional cooperation, the distinction is less clear in the contemporary Indo-Pacific. Arrangements such as the Quad and IPEF possess limited membership

and are often classified as minilateral institutions, yet they increasingly perform governance functions traditionally associated with multilateralism, including policy coordination, rule-setting, and the provision of regional public goods. Accordingly, this article uses the terms *minilateral* and *multilateral* interchangeably when discussing the governance functions of the Quad and IPEF, while distinguishing them from traditional universal multilateral institutions and broader regional institutions such as the EU.

Theoretical Framework: New Regionalism and Adaptive Institutionalism

This study adopts new regionalism and adaptive institutionalism as its unified theoretical framework. New regionalism views regions not as fixed geographic or cultural entities but as politically constructed spaces that emerge through state practices, economic interdependence, security imperatives, and normative contestation (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000). In contrast to “old regionalism,” which emphasized formal, legalistic, and deeply integrative models inspired by the European experience, new regionalism in Asia is characterized by overlapping, often informal, or minilateral mechanisms that are better suited to heterogeneous, contested, and geopolitically charged environments. This approach highlights the fluid and contested nature of region-building, in which the “Indo-Pacific” itself serves as a strategic construct advanced by major powers to reframe regional order in response to China’s rise (Medcalf, 2014). Institutions play a central role in this process, serving as platforms for both cooperation and competition.

Adaptive institutionalism complements new regionalism by explaining how institutions respond to exogenous shocks. Institutions consist of sets of rules, norms, and practices designed to reduce uncertainty, facilitate information sharing, and solve collective action problems (Keohane, 2005). However, their survival and effectiveness depend on their capacity to adapt through recalibration, functional specialization, selective deepening, or informal evolution in the face of crises (Bodnieks, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a powerful catalyst in this regard. It blurred the traditional distinction between “low politics” (technical cooperation in health and supply chains) and “high politics” (national security and geopolitical rivalry), prompting a shift from rigid universal multilateralism toward more agile, task-oriented minilateral arrangements in the Indo-Pacific.

This unified framework integrates material (power asymmetries), ideational (norms and narratives), and domestic (political constraints)

dimensions. It accounts for why global institutions such as the World Health Organization faced legitimacy crises due to politicization and sovereignty concerns. At the same time, Indo-Pacific platforms like the Quad and IPEF demonstrated partial resilience through functional cooperation on vaccines, supply chain resilience, and critical minerals. It further explains ASEAN's normative preference for "open regionalism," centrality, and inclusivity as articulated in the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), as well as the hedging strategies adopted by regional states (Kuik, 2022). Domestic-level variables (Rose, 1998), such as U.S. electoral cycles and transactional "America First" policies under the second Trump administration, India's emphasis on strategic autonomy, and economic dependencies in Southeast Asia, mediate the depth and durability of institutional outcomes.

Building on these insights, this article develops the concept of strategic pluralism and distinguishes it from Acharya's (2017) conception of a multiplex world order. Acharya's multiplexity provides a broader account of the structural character of contemporary international order, in which multiple actors, institutions, and overlapping forms of regional and global governance coexist without a single dominant centre. Strategic pluralism addresses a more specific question: how can such institutional plurality generate effective governance when institutions encounter common challenges, and existing arrangements prove insufficient? The distinction is therefore between multiplexity as a condition of institutional plurality and strategic pluralism as a mode of organizing that plurality. Not all overlapping institutional arrangements are necessarily complementary; they may also compete, duplicate functions, or generate institutional fragmentation. Strategic pluralism emerges when institutional plurality is accompanied by functional differentiation and complementarity, in which institutions assume distinct yet mutually reinforcing governance responsibilities. Strategic pluralism, therefore, conceptualizes the process through which overlapping institutions adapt and become functionally differentiated in response to common challenges, rather than simply describing their coexistence. In this sense, the concept complements rather than replicates the multiplex world-order perspective: multiplexity helps explain the structural environment within which institutional diversity exists, while strategic pluralism explains how that diversity can be transformed into distributed and complementary governance capacity under conditions of systemic crisis.

Quad: Functional Adaptation and Governance Outcomes

The evolution of the Quad during and after the COVID-19 pandemic provides an important case of crisis-induced institutional adaptation. Originally conceived as an informal strategic and security dialogue among Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, the Quad progressively expanded its agenda in response to governance challenges exposed by the pandemic. From the perspective of adaptive institutionalism, this expansion illustrates how systemic crises can create new collective-action demands and encourage institutions to develop functions beyond their original mandates.

The Quad's post-pandemic evolution is also evident in its continued institutional activity. The 11th Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting, held in New Delhi on 26 May 2026, reaffirmed the grouping's commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific and announced initiatives including the Indo-Pacific Energy Security Initiative, the Quad Ports of the Future Partnership, with a pilot project in Fiji, and further implementation of the Critical Minerals Framework to strengthen supply-chain resilience. The meeting also emphasized maritime domain awareness, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and regional stability (MEA, 2026). These developments indicate that the Quad has evolved from a primarily strategic dialogue into a more functionally differentiated mechanism addressing a broader range of regional governance challenges.

The pandemic provided an important catalyst for this transformation. As COVID-19 exposed vulnerabilities in global health systems and international supply chains, the Quad sought to position itself as a mechanism for coordinated responses to emerging transnational challenges. The early Quad-Plus virtual meeting, which involved New Zealand, South Korea, and Vietnam, demonstrated the grouping's flexibility and networked approach to crisis management (Smith, 2020). Although the Quad remained a limited-membership arrangement, such initiatives indicated its capacity to extend cooperation beyond its core membership and broaden its functional agenda. This development was particularly significant in the areas of vaccine diplomacy, health security, and economic recovery.

The institutionalization of this broader agenda became more visible in 2021. The Leaders' Summit and the *Spirit of the Quad* statement reinforced the grouping's normative commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific. Subsequent initiatives demonstrated an increasing capacity for functional cooperation. These included commitments of more than \$5.2 billion to COVAX, the delivery of more than 670 million vaccine doses globally, including 265 million to the Indo-

Pacific, \$524 million to the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), and a \$50 billion five-year infrastructure commitment (MOFA, 2022). Although the Quad vaccine partnership encountered implementation delays, these initiatives nevertheless demonstrated the grouping's capacity to extend its activities beyond traditional security concerns and respond collectively to non-traditional security challenges.

The Quad subsequently diversified its governance functions across several additional policy domains. The Quad Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation Package (Q-CHAMP) addressed climate resilience, while the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) strengthened regional maritime monitoring capabilities. Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), 5G diversification, semiconductor supply-chain security, and the Quad Fellowship further expanded the grouping's functional portfolio. These initiatives suggest that the Quad's institutional adaptation has involved not merely an expansion in the number of policy areas covered but also a shift towards issue-specific and functionally differentiated cooperation.

Supply-chain resilience represents a particularly significant dimension of this adaptation. The pandemic exposed the risks associated with concentrated production networks and excessive dependence on limited suppliers. In response, Quad members increasingly prioritized critical minerals, semiconductors, advanced technologies, clean-energy supply chains, and maritime infrastructure. The 2023 Hiroshima Summit introduced initiatives including the Clean Energy Supply Chains Initiative, Health Security Partnership, Infrastructure Fellowships, Investors Network, and Standards Cooperation (*Quad Leaders' Joint Statement*, 2023). The 2024 Wilmington Summit further expanded this agenda through cooperation on health security, the Quad Cancer Moonshot, critical minerals, artificial intelligence, maritime information, and semiconductor supply-chain diversification (MEA, 2024). The trajectory demonstrates how pandemic-induced vulnerabilities were translated into longer-term mechanisms for economic and technological resilience.

The Quad's subsequent evolution also provides evidence of institutional continuity under changing domestic political conditions. Despite the challenges associated with the second Trump administration's more transactional foreign-policy priorities, tariff disputes, and the postponement of the 2025 Leaders' Summit, the Quad continued to develop new areas of cooperation. In 2025, initiatives included the Quad Critical Minerals Initiative, a Space Cooperation Group, the Ports of the Future Partnership, and additional STEM scholarships for

students from the Indo-Pacific (U.S. Department of State, 2025). The May 2026 Foreign Ministers' Meeting further reinforced this trajectory by extending cooperation into energy security, ports, critical minerals, maritime awareness, and humanitarian assistance (MEA, 2026). The continuity of these initiatives suggests that the Quad has acquired a degree of institutional resilience despite changes in the domestic political priorities of its member states.

From the perspective of this study's theoretical framework, the Quad therefore represents a significant case of functional institutional adaptation. Its evolution has involved a movement from a predominantly security-oriented dialogue towards a broader governance mechanism encompassing health security, climate resilience, maritime awareness, infrastructure, critical technologies, and supply-chain resilience. Importantly, this transformation does not imply the emergence of a fully institutionalized regional organization. Rather, the Quad has retained its informal and flexible character while progressively developing specialized mechanisms to address specific governance challenges. This pattern is consistent with the new regionalist understanding of the Indo-Pacific as a region characterized by overlapping and flexible institutional arrangements.

At the same time, the Quad's adaptation should not be equated automatically with effective governance. The grouping lacks binding legal commitments, a permanent institutional bureaucracy, and formal enforcement mechanisms. Its effectiveness therefore remains strongly dependent on the political commitment and strategic priorities of its four member governments. Changes in domestic political leadership, competing national interests, or shifts in U.S. regional engagement could affect the durability of its initiatives. The Quad consequently illustrates both the potential and the limitations of strategic pluralism: institutional flexibility enables rapid functional adaptation, but the absence of deeper institutionalization may constrain the sustainability and implementation of its commitments.

Overall, the Quad demonstrates that crisis-induced institutional adaptation can occur through functional expansion, specialization, and issue-specific cooperation rather than institutional consolidation. Its post-pandemic trajectory provides empirical support for the article's broader argument that regional governance in the Indo-Pacific is increasingly organized through overlapping institutions performing differentiated functions. Whether this differentiation contributes to strategic pluralism, however, depends on the extent to which the Quad's expanding activities complement rather than duplicate the

functions of other regional institutions and contribute to broader regional governance capacity.

The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework: Economic Adaptation and Institutional Innovation

Whereas the Quad expanded its activities primarily in response to security, health, and regional public-goods challenges, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) emerged as an institutional response to economic vulnerabilities exposed and intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic. The disruption of global supply chains, growing concerns over economic dependence, and heightened competition over critical technologies demonstrated that economic resilience had become an increasingly important component of regional security. IPEF therefore represents a distinct form of institutional adaptation in which economic governance, supply-chain resilience, clean energy, and regulatory cooperation became instruments of regional order.

Launched in 2022, IPEF sought to establish new forms of economic cooperation without reproducing the conventional model of comprehensive trade liberalization. Its four pillars—Connected Economy (Trade), Resilient Economy (Supply Chains), Clean Economy, and Fair Economy—were designed to address emerging economic challenges while avoiding politically sensitive market-access negotiations (Office of the USTR, 2022). Its modular structure, which permits participating countries to engage selectively across different pillars, reflects an adaptive institutional design suited to a heterogeneous regional environment. In this respect, IPEF differs from traditional free-trade agreements such as the CPTPP and RCEP, which rely more heavily on negotiated market-access commitments. It also represented an attempt to address the institutional space created by the United States' withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership in 2017 through an emphasis on economic resilience, diversification, and de-risking.

The framework's initial rationale was closely associated with concerns over China's position within regional production and value chains. IPEF sought to strengthen cooperation in areas including digital governance, labour standards, sustainability, and supply-chain resilience (Goodman & Reinsch, 2022). Unlike conventional FTAs, however, it did not initially offer comprehensive tariff concessions or broad market-access commitments. Instead, it emphasized regulatory cooperation, coordination, and non-traditional forms of economic governance. This design enhanced its flexibility but simultaneously generated

questions concerning its capacity to provide sufficient incentives for participation.

The responses of regional states also demonstrate the political constraints underlying institutional adaptation. Several Southeast Asian participants remained cautious about becoming directly aligned with either the United States or China and continued to emphasize ASEAN centrality. India's participation likewise reflected a pragmatic approach to economic diversification, particularly in the context of concerns over concentrated supply chains and dependence on particular suppliers for strategic goods and critical minerals (Ministry of Commerce & Industry, 2022). These differing interests demonstrate that institutional adaptation in the Indo-Pacific is shaped not only by external shocks but also by divergent national preferences and regional political constraints.

Progress across the four pillars has been uneven, providing an important illustration of both the adaptive capacity and institutional fragility of IPEF. The Resilient Economy pillar progressed relatively rapidly through the IPEF Supply Chain Agreement, signed on 14 November 2023. The agreement established institutional mechanisms including a Supply Chain Council, a Crisis Response Network, and a Labor Rights Advisory Board, with sector-specific cooperation covering areas such as semiconductors and critical minerals (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2023). These arrangements seek to address vulnerabilities exposed by the pandemic and subsequent disruptions to global production networks. The development of such mechanisms indicates that IPEF has moved beyond broad political commitments towards more specialized forms of economic coordination.

The Clean Economy pillar represents another dimension of institutional adaptation. The Clean Economy Agreement, signed in June 2024, sought to mobilize investment and strengthen cooperation in renewable energy, clean technologies, and climate-related economic activity. Instruments such as the Catalytic Capital Fund and the Clean Economy Investor Forum were designed to facilitate private investment in areas including green hydrogen and electric-vehicle supply chains (Ministry of Commerce & Industry, 2024). The pillar consequently extends the framework's governance agenda beyond conventional trade to encompass the intersection of economic resilience, energy security, and climate governance.

The Fair Economy pillar similarly demonstrates the expansion of economic cooperation into regulatory and governance domains. Its emphasis on anti-corruption, tax transparency, asset recovery, and measures against illicit

financial flows reflects a broader understanding of economic resilience in which institutional integrity and regulatory capacity form part of the regional economic governance agenda. IPEF therefore illustrates a shift from traditional trade-centred regionalism towards a more issue-specific and regulatory form of economic cooperation.

In contrast, the Connected Economy (Trade) pillar has demonstrated the limits of this adaptive model. Negotiations encountered significant difficulties over digital trade, data governance, data localization, and other sensitive regulatory issues. The absence of comprehensive market-access commitments also limits IPEF's capacity to reshape established regional trade patterns. This asymmetry across the four pillars is analytically significant: IPEF's modular structure enables cooperation where political agreement is feasible, but it also permits stagnation where national interests diverge sharply. Adaptability, therefore, provides flexibility without necessarily guaranteeing comprehensive institutional effectiveness.

The framework's future trajectory is further complicated by changes in U.S. domestic politics. The return of Donald Trump to the White House in January 2025 introduced considerable uncertainty regarding the durability of U.S. commitment to IPEF. The administration's preference for bilateral economic arrangements and its criticism of multilateral economic frameworks raised questions about the continuity of the initiative (Murphy, 2024). This vulnerability demonstrates the importance of domestic political variables in determining the durability of regional institutions. Unlike deeply institutionalized regional organizations, IPEF remains highly dependent on sustained political commitment from its principal sponsor.

The limitations of IPEF are therefore as important to understanding its institutional adaptation as its achievements. Its absence of comprehensive tariff concessions and market-access incentives reduces its attractiveness to some participating states, while its relatively limited financing capacity constrains its ability to compete with large-scale infrastructure and connectivity initiatives. Moreover, uncertainty surrounding U.S. policy continuity can weaken the credibility of long-term commitments. These limitations suggest that institutional innovation does not necessarily translate into institutional consolidation or durable regional influence.

Nevertheless, IPEF should not be assessed solely according to the standards of conventional free-trade agreements. Its significance lies partly in its attempt to develop alternative mechanisms of economic coordination without

requiring comprehensive trade liberalization. The Supply Chain and Clean Economy pillars, in particular, demonstrate how economic governance can be reorganized around resilience, diversification, technological security, and sustainability. Rather than replacing existing China-centred economic networks, IPEF can therefore be understood as a complementary coordination and norm-setting platform seeking to diversify regional economic relationships.

From the perspective of this study's theoretical framework, IPEF represents a mixed but significant case of institutional adaptation. Its modular architecture illustrates functional specialization and selective participation, while the uneven progress across its pillars demonstrates the constraints imposed by divergent national interests and domestic political conditions. IPEF consequently provides evidence for the argument that post-pandemic regional governance is increasingly characterized by differentiated institutional functions rather than comprehensive institutional integration.

At the same time, IPEF illustrates the conditional nature of strategic pluralism. Its economic and supply-chain functions potentially complement the security-oriented and strategic activities of the Quad and the broader normative and coordinating role of ASEAN. However, such complementarity cannot be assumed. The effectiveness of this emerging division of institutional labour depends on political continuity, credible incentives, coordination with ASEAN-led mechanisms, and the willingness of participating states to sustain commitments over time. IPEF therefore demonstrates both the potential of functional differentiation to strengthen regional governance and the risks that political uncertainty and weak incentives may convert institutional plurality into fragmentation.

ASEAN's Response: Preserving Regional Agency and Managing Strategic Pluralism

While the Quad and IPEF illustrate institutional adaptation through the expansion and creation of new governance mechanisms, ASEAN represents a different mode of adaptation centred on preserving regional agency and institutional relevance amid a rapidly changing Indo-Pacific order. Rather than functioning as a passive observer of intensifying great-power competition, ASEAN has sought to manage the proliferation of regional initiatives while maintaining its institutional centrality. Its response to the post-pandemic regional environment can therefore be understood as a strategy of institutional hedging, through which ASEAN engages multiple external initiatives without allowing

any single power or institutional arrangement to displace ASEAN-led regional mechanisms.

ASEAN's engagement with the Quad and IPEF reflects this pragmatic yet cautious approach. Most Southeast Asian states recognize that U.S.-led initiatives can provide economic, technological, and security benefits in the context of intensifying U.S.-China competition. At the same time, concerns remain that the proliferation of minilateral arrangements could marginalize ASEAN or weaken its role in shaping the regional order. ASEAN's response has consequently sought to balance the benefits of participation with the preservation of ASEAN centrality, understood not simply as an institutional aspiration but as a mechanism for maintaining regional agency within an increasingly crowded institutional environment.

ASEAN's position, however, is not uniform across its member states. Differences in threat perceptions, economic dependence on China, domestic political priorities, and assessments of U.S. strategic engagement produce significant variations in national preferences (Kuik, 2022). Vietnam and the Philippines have generally viewed stronger U.S. engagement and security cooperation as useful in responding to China's maritime assertiveness in the South China Sea. Cambodia and Laos, by contrast, have tended to adopt more cautious positions given their close economic and political relationships with Beijing. Indonesia and Malaysia have generally emphasized inclusivity, strategic autonomy, and the avoidance of rigid bloc politics. These differences demonstrate that ASEAN centrality operates within a politically heterogeneous organization and that the organization's adaptive capacity is partly dependent on its ability to accommodate divergent member-state preferences.

ASEAN's engagement with the Quad illustrates this balancing strategy. ASEAN has welcomed repeated affirmations of ASEAN centrality and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) in Quad statements. Areas of Quad cooperation, including critical minerals, maritime security, climate resilience, and humanitarian assistance, overlap with several ASEAN priorities. Such convergence provides opportunities for functional cooperation without requiring ASEAN to formally align with the strategic objectives of the Quad. At the same time, ASEAN remains concerned that an increasingly security-oriented Quad could intensify regional polarization if its activities are perceived as contributing to exclusive strategic blocs (Acharya, 2021; Laksmna, 2020).

Regional perceptions of the Quad further reinforce the cautious nature of ASEAN's response. The *State of Southeast Asia Survey* (2021) indicated that

fewer than half of respondents regarded the Quad as making a positive or very positive contribution to regional security. Similarly, an Australian Strategic Policy Institute survey found that a substantial proportion of respondents viewed the Quad primarily in diplomatic and symbolic terms rather than as a critical regional initiative (Choong, 2021). Indonesian President Joko Widodo's 2023 call for the Quad to be regarded as a partner rather than a competitor further reflected the preference among several Southeast Asian states for engagement without bloc formation (Chaudury, 2023).

The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) provides the principal normative framework through which ASEAN approaches these emerging arrangements. The AOIP emphasizes dialogue, inclusivity, economic cooperation, maritime cooperation, and sustainable development rather than the formation of exclusive security blocs. ASEAN's engagement with the Quad can therefore be interpreted as conditional institutional accommodation: ASEAN does not seek to prevent the emergence of new regional initiatives but seeks to ensure that such initiatives remain compatible with principles of openness, inclusivity, and ASEAN centrality. The AOIP consequently serves not only as a normative statement but also as an institutional instrument through which ASEAN attempts to shape the terms of regional engagement.

ASEAN's approach to IPEF reveals a similar pattern of selective engagement. Seven ASEAN member states joined the initiative, reflecting the attractiveness of its flexible and pillar-based structure, particularly in areas such as supply-chain resilience and clean energy. The framework provides opportunities for cooperation without requiring comprehensive trade liberalization or mandatory participation across all areas. This flexibility makes IPEF broadly compatible with ASEAN's preference for open and inclusive regionalism (Hooi, 2022; MIDA, 2022).

At the same time, ASEAN states have not regarded IPEF as a substitute for existing regional economic arrangements. The continued preference for established frameworks such as RCEP and CPTPP reflects the importance attached to market access, trade liberalization, and more institutionalized economic commitments. While IPEF provides opportunities for cooperation in supply-chain resilience, digital governance, clean energy, and economic security, its absence of conventional market-access provisions limits its attractiveness to states seeking tangible trade benefits. The differentiated preferences of ASEAN states therefore indicate that IPEF is generally perceived as a complementary mechanism rather than an alternative to existing regional economic architectures.

The interaction between ASEAN, the Quad, and IPEF illustrates an important feature of the emerging Indo-Pacific governance architecture. ASEAN does not seek to eliminate institutional diversification; instead, it seeks to manage diversification while preserving regional agency. Its strategy involves maintaining relationships with multiple institutional arrangements, extracting functional benefits from each, and simultaneously promoting an inclusive regional framework through ASEAN-led mechanisms. This strategy is consistent with the new regionalist conception of regional order as open, plural, and institutionally overlapping.

From the perspective of adaptive institutionalism, ASEAN's response represents a form of institutional adaptation through strategic hedging rather than functional expansion. Unlike the Quad, which expanded its functional agenda, or IPEF, which introduced a new modular economic-governance architecture, ASEAN has primarily sought to preserve its existing institutional principles while adapting its engagement strategies to changing regional conditions. It has therefore responded to systemic uncertainty without fundamentally abandoning its core commitments to centrality, inclusivity, dialogue, and open regionalism. This strategy also illustrates how institutional centrality can function as an adaptive mechanism. By positioning itself as an inclusive platform capable of engaging both established and emerging regional institutions, ASEAN seeks to retain influence without directly competing with every new initiative. Engagement with the Quad and IPEF can thus provide access to security, economic, technological, and resilience-related benefits while reducing the risks associated with exclusive alignment. In this sense, ASEAN's adaptation reflects the agency of smaller and middle powers in shaping regional order under conditions of great-power competition.

However, ASEAN's adaptive capacity is constrained by internal divisions. Divergent threat perceptions, varying economic dependencies on China, and differences in national strategic preferences can limit the organization's ability to formulate unified responses to major regional challenges. Consequently, ASEAN's adaptation has generally been characterized by institutional flexibility and diplomatic accommodation rather than decisive collective action. Centrality provides a mechanism for maintaining relevance, but it does not eliminate the coordination problems arising from internal heterogeneity.

ASEAN therefore represents a distinctive dimension of strategic pluralism. Its objective is not to consolidate regional institutions into a single

architecture but to ensure that institutional diversification remains open, inclusive, and compatible with ASEAN-led regional mechanisms. The Quad's security and resilience functions, IPEF's economic and supply-chain functions, and ASEAN's coordinating and normative functions can potentially operate as differentiated components of a broader regional governance system. Yet such complementarity remains contingent rather than automatic. It depends on the extent to which emerging institutions recognize ASEAN centrality, avoid unnecessary duplication, and contribute to shared regional objectives.

ASEAN thus demonstrates that strategic pluralism involves not only the emergence of new institutions but also the adaptation of established institutions to manage institutional diversity. Its experience suggests that regional governance capacity may emerge through a differentiated division of institutional functions, provided that plurality is accompanied by inclusivity, coordination, and respect for regional agency. At the same time, ASEAN's internal divisions demonstrate the limits of this model and caution against equating institutional centrality with effective collective action.

The comparative evidence demonstrates that the COVID-19 pandemic did not generate a uniform institutional response across the Indo-Pacific. Instead, different institutions adapted according to their pre-existing mandates, institutional capacities, political constraints, and regional roles. The Quad, IPEF, and ASEAN consequently represent three distinct pathways of post-pandemic institutional adaptation. This pattern provides empirical support for the concept of strategic pluralism. The existence of multiple institutions alone does not constitute strategic pluralism. Rather, strategic pluralism becomes visible when institutions adapt in ways that allow them to perform differentiated functions within a broader regional governance environment. At the same time, the cases demonstrate that complementarity remains conditional. Where mandates overlap without coordination, institutional plurality may generate duplication and fragmentation.

From Minilateralism to Distributed Multilateralism: Reconfiguring Regional Governance in the Post-Pandemic Indo-Pacific

The post-pandemic evolution of the Indo-Pacific does not indicate a straightforward return to conventional multilateralism founded on universal membership, formal legal commitments, and centralized institutional authority. Instead, it points towards a more differentiated regional order in which multiple institutions and groupings contribute to governance through specialized,

overlapping, and sometimes complementary functions. The Quad, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), and ASEAN-led mechanisms illustrate how regional cooperation is increasingly organized through a combination of established multilateral institutions, minilateral partnerships, and flexible issue-specific arrangements. This pattern is broadly consistent with scholarship on multiplex regional orders and new regionalism, which emphasizes institutional plurality, overlapping memberships, and the coexistence of different forms of regional cooperation (Acharya, 2017; Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000).

This development challenges the tendency to conceptualize multilateralism and minilateralism as mutually exclusive forms of cooperation. Minilateral arrangements can perform specialized functions within a wider regional governance architecture rather than necessarily replacing multilateral institutions. The Quad illustrates this possibility. Although it lacks a treaty, permanent secretariat, and legally binding decision-making structure, its agenda has expanded beyond strategic consultation to encompass health security, maritime domain awareness, critical and emerging technologies, cybersecurity, infrastructure, climate and clean energy, disaster response, and supply-chain resilience. Initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness also demonstrate how a small grouping can seek to provide region-wide public goods by cooperating with states and institutions beyond its four-member core.

IPEF provides a second example of differentiated regional cooperation. Launched in May 2022, it was organized around four pillars covering trade, supply chains, clean economy, and fair economy. Its variable participation arrangements allowed states to join selected pillars rather than requiring identical commitments across the entire framework. India, for example, joined the framework and participated in three pillars while remaining outside the Trade Pillar negotiations. IPEF should not, however, be treated as merely an informal consultative mechanism. Agreements concerning supply chains, clean economy, fair economy, and the overarching institutional framework have progressively formalized significant parts of the initiative. Its architecture is therefore better described as modular and unevenly legalized rather than simply informal.

IPEF also differs from conventional trade agreements. It does not primarily offer tariff reductions or reciprocal market access. Instead, it focuses on regulatory cooperation, supply-chain resilience, clean-energy transitions, anti-corruption measures, investment facilitation, technical assistance, and capacity-

building. This design increases flexibility but also creates limitations. In particular, the absence of substantial market-access commitments may reduce its attractiveness to participating economies, while changes in United States domestic politics can affect implementation and long-term credibility.

ASEAN occupies a different but equally significant position within this evolving architecture. The *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific* emphasizes ASEAN centrality, openness, transparency, inclusivity, respect for international law, and the use of existing ASEAN-led mechanisms (ASEAN, 2019). These principles provide a normative framework through which ASEAN attempts to shape the development of the wider Indo-Pacific order without endorsing an exclusive bloc structure. ASEAN-led institutions - including the East Asia Summit, ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus, and Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum - continue to provide broader venues for dialogue, legitimacy, and confidence-building.

The relationship between ASEAN and newer minilateral arrangements nevertheless requires careful description. ASEAN is not institutionally represented in IPEF, although seven ASEAN member states participate individually. Similarly, ASEAN's relationship with the Quad is based principally on dialogue, functional cooperation, and the Quad members' repeated declarations of support for ASEAN centrality. These developments suggest that minilateral initiatives do not automatically displace ASEAN-led institutions. They can coexist with them when their activities are sufficiently open, functional, and compatible with regional priorities. Nevertheless, rhetorical support for ASEAN centrality should not be equated automatically with ASEAN control over the regional agenda.

Building on scholarship on multiplexity, new regionalism, and institutional overlap, this chapter conceptualizes the emerging configuration as distributed multilateralism. Unlike conventional models that associate multilateral governance with a relatively centralized institutional framework, distributed multilateralism involves the allocation of governance functions across multiple institutions, coalitions, and policy platforms. Its principal characteristics include functional specialization, overlapping membership, variable participation, differentiated legalization, institutional complementarity, and coordination across governance arrangements.

Strategic pluralism and distributed multilateralism describe related but distinct dimensions of this development. Strategic pluralism refers to the process through which states participate in multiple arrangements, preserve institutional

options, and encourage functional differentiation among governance platforms. Distributed multilateralism refers to the broader governance configuration that can emerge when this plurality contributes to sustained collective action. Strategic pluralism is therefore an institutional process or strategy, whereas distributed multilateralism is a possible systemic outcome.

The Indo-Pacific has not, however, developed into a fully integrated or consistently coordinated multilateral order. Institutional plurality can produce duplication, forum shopping, exclusion, and competing standards as readily as complementarity. The Quad remains dependent on convergence among four governments whose strategic interests are overlapping but not identical. IPEF's durability depends heavily on domestic political support, particularly in the United States, and its economic appeal is constrained by its limited market-access provisions. ASEAN's collective action remains affected by consensus-based decision-making, divergent threat perceptions, development gaps, and disagreements over relations with the major powers. ASEAN centrality therefore remains an important legitimating and convening principle, but its practical influence varies across policy areas.

A further complication is that regional institutional plurality includes mechanisms not addressed directly by the Quad-IPEF-ASEAN comparison. The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, the Pacific Islands Forum, AUKUS, and bilateral and trilateral strategic partnerships also contribute to the Indo-Pacific order. RCEP and the CPTPP are particularly important because they provide forms of economic integration and market access that IPEF does not. Their inclusion reinforces the argument that no single organization dominates regional governance, but it also demonstrates that distributed governance is not necessarily coherent or universally inclusive.

The significance of the post-pandemic transformation therefore lies in its hybrid and contested character. Regional governance increasingly combines the legitimacy and convening capacity associated with multilateral institutions with the flexibility and functional concentration of minilateral arrangements. The Indo-Pacific consequently exhibits a movement away from the expectation of a single institutional hierarchy and towards a differentiated architecture in which governance capacity is distributed across multiple platforms.

The pandemic accelerated this development by elevating health security, supply-chain resilience, digital connectivity, economic security, and infrastructure as regional priorities. It did not create institutional plurality, which

predated the crisis, but it intensified incentives for existing and emerging arrangements to adapt and specialize. The resulting order is neither purely multilateral nor purely minilateral. It is an evolving architecture in which multilateral institutions, minilateral partnerships, and issue-specific coalitions interact within a broader framework of strategic pluralism. Whether this architecture develops into effective distributed multilateralism will depend on its capacity to generate coordination and regional public goods without deepening fragmentation, exclusion, or strategic polarization.

COVID-19 as a Critical Juncture in Indo-Pacific Regional Governance

COVID-19 can be understood as a critical juncture in Indo-Pacific regional governance, although not as a deterministic or uniformly transformative event. In historical institutionalism, a critical juncture refers to a relatively brief period in which the range of available choices expands and actors' decisions are more likely to influence subsequent institutional development (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007; Capoccia, 2015). The pandemic disrupted established expectations concerning the relationship between economic interdependence, public health, and national security; exposed deficiencies in regional coordination; and created new pressures for cooperation in health security, supply-chain resilience, technological governance, and infrastructure preparedness.

The significance of COVID-19 therefore extended beyond its immediate public-health consequences. The pandemic temporarily opened questions about the adequacy, scope, and future direction of existing Indo-Pacific institutions. However, the crisis itself did not automatically produce institutional transformation. Critical junctures create conditions of heightened contingency, but their consequences depend on the choices of political actors, institutional legacies, and existing distributions of power (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). COVID-19 should consequently be understood as a period that expanded the possibility of institutional change rather than as an event that predetermined a particular regional outcome.

The pandemic also reordered the Indo-Pacific governance agenda. Public health increasingly became linked to national and regional security, while issues previously treated primarily as economic or technical acquired strategic significance. Supply-chain disruption was reframed as a problem of resilience and economic security; vaccine production and distribution became instruments of both humanitarian cooperation and diplomatic influence; semiconductor and

digital-technology dependence came to be viewed as strategic vulnerability; and infrastructure and connectivity became increasingly associated with health preparedness, economic recovery, digital governance, and geopolitical influence (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2021; Government of India, 2021).

The Quad's post-2020 initiatives illustrate this agenda expansion. In 2021, Australia, India, Japan, and the United States advanced cooperation on COVID-19 vaccines, critical and emerging technologies, semiconductor supply chains, 5G diversification, cybersecurity, and infrastructure coordination (Government of India, 2021). The Quad Vaccine Partnership also sought to expand vaccine manufacturing and distribution across the Indo-Pacific, demonstrating how public-health cooperation became connected to regional diplomacy and strategic influence (Government of India, 2021).

COVID-19 did not, however, create supply-chain security politics independently. Concerns regarding economic dependence, production concentration, U.S.–China strategic competition, and technological vulnerability had already emerged before the pandemic. COVID-19 nevertheless exposed the fragility of highly concentrated and efficiency-oriented supply chains and converted these concerns into more urgent questions of national resilience and strategic risk management (ADB, 2021). The later development of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework's Supply Chain Agreement provides evidence of this institutional response. Signed in November 2023 and entering into force in February 2024, the agreement established a Supply Chain Council, a Crisis Response Network, and a Labour Rights Advisory Board to strengthen cooperation during supply-chain disruptions (Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, 2023, 2024).

Vaccine production and distribution similarly became associated with both humanitarian assistance and geopolitical competition. The Quad's vaccine initiative sought to deliver more than 1.2 billion doses and relied substantially on India's manufacturing capacity, while also involving cooperation with international health organisations and vaccine-distribution mechanisms (Government of India, 2021). Vaccine diplomacy should therefore not be interpreted only as an instrument of rivalry. It also generated new forms of regional cooperation, although unequal access to vaccines and medical supplies revealed the distributive limitations of Indo-Pacific governance.

The securitisation of semiconductors and digital technologies also requires a qualified causal claim. Semiconductor security was shaped not only by COVID-19 but also by U.S.–China rivalry, technology restrictions, Taiwan's

centrality to global semiconductor production, and the digitalisation of economic activity. The pandemic accelerated and legitimised these concerns by demonstrating how disruptions in production, transport, and critical components could affect economic recovery, public administration, and national resilience. The Quad's commitment to strengthening critical-technology and semiconductor supply chains illustrates this process (Government of India, 2021).

Infrastructure and connectivity were likewise strategic issues before COVID-19. The pandemic did not create their geopolitical importance, but it broadened their meaning. Digital networks, transport systems, logistics, health facilities, water and sanitation infrastructure, and emergency supply corridors increasingly came to be understood as components of regional resilience. In this context, infrastructure became connected not only with economic development but also with public-health preparedness, crisis management, and geopolitical influence (Government of India, 2021).

The ASEAN experience demonstrates that COVID-19 generated institutional adaptation without necessarily producing fundamental institutional transformation. ASEAN established mechanisms such as the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund and the ASEAN Regional Reserve of Medical Supplies for Public Health Emergencies. These initiatives were designed to mobilise financial resources, support vaccine and medical-supply needs, and strengthen preparedness for future public-health emergencies (ASEAN, 2020a, 2020b). Nevertheless, ASEAN's response remained strongly shaped by consensus, sovereignty, non-interference, and state-centric diplomacy. The pandemic therefore exposed the tension between the need for collective regional action and the limited authority of regional institutions (Wicaksana et al., 2023).

The pandemic also encouraged institutional layering and minilateralisation. Rather than replacing existing regional organisations with a single new governance structure, COVID-19 contributed to the multiplication of overlapping arrangements involving ASEAN, ASEAN Plus Three, the Quad, COVAX, the WHO, IPEF, and bilateral vaccine and supply-chain partnerships. This pattern suggests that Indo-Pacific regional governance developed through the addition of new mechanisms alongside existing institutions rather than through institutional replacement.

At the same time, COVID-19 produced both cooperation and fragmentation. It encouraged information sharing, vaccine partnerships, emergency coordination, and supply-chain initiatives, but it also reinforced national self-help, export restrictions, border controls, unequal access to medical

goods, and competition for influence. The pandemic thus revealed a central contradiction of Indo-Pacific governance: deep functional interdependence coexists with weak collective authority and considerable variation in state capacity (ADB, 2021; Wicaksana et al., 2023).

COVID-19 also affected the domestic foundations of regional governance. In several Indo-Pacific states, emergency measures expanded executive authority, restricted mobility, strengthened the role of security institutions, and generated controversies concerning civil liberties and information control. These domestic responses influenced the ways in which regional states interpreted health security and crisis governance. The pandemic was therefore not only an intergovernmental event; it was also a domestic political process that affected the legitimacy, capacity, and accountability of public institutions (Wicaksana et al., 2023).

COVID-19 is therefore best understood as an accelerator, reorienting shock, and catalyst for institutional layering rather than as the sole cause of institutional change. It intensified pre-existing tendencies toward minilateral cooperation, selective supply-chain diversification, health diplomacy, and the securitisation of economic and technological interdependence. Its long-term significance lies less in the creation of a single regional institution than in the gradual redefinition of what counts as security, resilience, and governance in the Indo-Pacific.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic did not simply disrupt existing patterns of regional cooperation in the Indo-Pacific; it exposed the limitations of relying on a single institutional arrangement to address complex, interconnected challenges. The subsequent evolution of the Quad, IPEF, and ASEAN demonstrates that institutional responses to crisis have been characterized less by consolidation than by adaptation, diversification, and functional differentiation. Health security, supply-chain resilience, critical minerals, infrastructure, economic coordination, and regional legitimacy have increasingly been distributed across different institutional platforms.

The analysis shows that this differentiation does not necessarily amount to institutional fragmentation. The Quad has developed capacities for strategic cooperation and the provision of regional public goods, while IPEF has focused on economic resilience and supply chain governance. ASEAN, despite internal divisions and continuing constraints on collective action, remains important as a

source of regional legitimacy, inclusivity, and institutional centrality. These arrangements do not constitute a unified institutional architecture in any formal sense, nor do they eliminate competition and duplication. Rather, their coexistence demonstrates how different institutions can assume distinct governance functions within an increasingly crowded regional order.

This finding also helps clarify the relationship between the paper's concept of strategic pluralism and broader accounts of institutional plurality, particularly Acharya's conception of a multiplex world order. Multiplexity captures the broader structural condition in which multiple actors, institutions, and overlapping orders coexist. The analysis here suggests that such plurality can, under particular conditions, acquire a more functional character. When institutions respond to common challenges by developing differentiated and mutually reinforcing roles, institutional diversity can become a source of governance capacity rather than merely a manifestation of institutional overlap. Strategic pluralism, therefore, draws attention not simply to the existence of multiple institutions but to the processes of adaptation, functional specialization, and complementarity through which institutional plurality may contribute to regional resilience.

At the same time, the evidence cautions against viewing strategic pluralism as an inherently efficient or stable form of governance. Institutional overlap can lead to duplication, coordination problems, competing priorities, and uncertainty about leadership and responsibility. The Quad and IPEF also remain highly dependent on the political commitment of their participating states, while ASEAN's capacity to provide collective regional leadership is constrained by divergent national interests. Strategic pluralism should therefore be understood as a contingent form of governance rather than an automatic solution to institutional fragmentation.

The Indo-Pacific consequently illustrates a broader transformation in the way regional governance may operate under conditions of systemic uncertainty. Crises can generate institutional innovation without producing institutional consolidation, allowing governance functions to be distributed across multiple platforms. Whether this arrangement enhances regional resilience depends on the extent to which institutional differentiation is accompanied by meaningful complementarity and coordination. Future research should therefore examine whether the patterns of functional specialization identified in this study endure beyond the pandemic and whether similar forms of distributed institutional

adaptation emerge in response to other systemic shocks, including climate change, technological disruption, and geopolitical crises.

The significance of the Indo-Pacific experience ultimately lies not in the emergence of a single new institutional order, but in the possibility that regional governance can remain adaptive while operating through multiple and overlapping centers of cooperation. The durability of this emerging pattern will depend on whether these institutions can translate functional specialization into sustained, mutually reinforcing governance outcomes.

References

- Acharya, A. (2004). How Ideas Spread: Whose Norms Matter? Norm Localization and Institutional Change in Asian Regionalism. *International Organization*, 58(2), 239–275.
- Acharya, A. (2017). After liberal hegemony: The advent of a multiplex world order. *Ethics & International Affairs*, 31(3), 271–285.
- Acharya, A. (2021). *ASEAN and regional order: Revisiting security community in Southeast Asia*. Routledge.
- Acharya, A. (2018). *The end of American world order* (Vol. 6). Polity Press.
- ASEAN. (2019). *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific*. ASEAN Secretariat.
- ASEAN. (2020a). *ASEAN COVID-19 response fund: Terms of reference*. <https://asean.org>
- ASEAN. (2020b). *ASEAN regional reserve of medical supplies for public health emergencies: Terms of reference*. <https://asean.org>
- Asian Development Bank. (2021). *Asia-Pacific trade facilitation report 2021: Supply chains of critical goods amid the COVID-19 pandemic—Disruptions, recovery, and resilience*. <https://www.adb.org/publications/asia-pacific-trade-facilitation-report-2021>
- Association of Southeast Asian Nations. (2019, June). *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific*. ASEAN. <https://asean.org/speechandstatement/asean-outlook-on-the-indo-pacific/>
- Basrur, R., & Kliem, F. (2020). Covid-19 and international cooperation: IR paradigms at odds. *SN Social Sciences*, 1(7), 1–10.
- Bodnieks, V. (2020). The New Institutionalism: A tool for analysing defence and security institutions. *Security and Defence Quarterly*, 32(5), 83–94.

- Cannon, B. J., & Rossiter, A. (2022). Locating the Quad: informality, institutional flexibility, and future alignment in the Indo-Pacific. *International Politics*, 1.
- Capoccia, G. (2015). Critical junctures and institutional change. In J. Mahoney & K. Thelen (Eds.), *Advances in comparative-historical analysis in the social sciences* (pp. 147–179). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316273104.007>
- Capoccia, G., & Kelemen, R. D. (2007). The study of critical junctures: Theory, narrative, and counterfactuals in historical institutionalism. *World Politics*, 59(3), 341–369. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887100020852>
- Chaudury, D. R. (2023, May 13). QUAD should be viewed as partner not competitor: Indonesia. *The Economic Times*. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/see-quad-as-partner-not-competitor-indonesia/articleshow/100194126.cms?from=mdr>
- Choong, W. (2021). The Quad and the Indo-Pacific: going slow to go further. https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/ISEAS_Perspective_2021_125.pdf
- CSIS. (2023). IPEF: Three Pillars Succeed, One Falter. CSIS. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/ipef-three-pillars-succeed-one-falters>
- CSIS. (2024). The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework Singapore Ministerial: The Private Sector's Role in the Initiative's Durability. CSIS. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/indo-pacific-economic-framework-singapore-ministerial-private-sectors-role-initiatives>
- Davies & Hobson. (2022). An embarrassment of changes: International Relations and the COVID-19 pandemic. *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 150-168.
- Fidler, D. P. (2020). The covid-19 Pandemic, Geopolitics, and International Law. *Journal of International Humanitarian Legal Studies*, 11(2), 237–248.
- Goodman, M. P., & Reinsch, W. A. (2022, January 26). Filling in the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework. Centre for Strategic and International Studies. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/filling-indo-pacific-economic-framework>
- Government of India. (2021, September 25). *Fact sheet: Quad leaders' summit*. Press Information Bureau. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=175794>

- Hale, T., Held, D., & Young, K. (2013). Gridlock: Why global cooperation is failing when we need it most. *Polity*.
- He, K. (2014). A Strategic Functional Theory of Institutions and Rethinking Asian Regionalism: When Do Institutions Matter? In *Asian Survey*, 54(6), 1184-1208.
- He, K. (2018). Three Faces of the Indo-Pacific: Understanding the Indo-Pacific from an IR Theory Perspective. *East Asia*, 35(2), 149-161.
- Hettne, B., & Söderbaum, F. (2000). Theorising the rise of regionness. *New Political Economy*, 5(3), 457-472.
- Hettne, B., & Söderbaum, F. (2000). Theorising the rise of regionness. *New Political Economy*, 5(3), 457-472.
- Hooi, K. Y. (2022, August 9). Malaysia and the 'Indo-Pacific': Why the Hesitancy? *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/malaysia-and-the-indo-pacific-why-the-hesitancy/>
- Indo-Pacific Economic Framework. (2023). *Agreement relating to supply chain resilience*. https://www.state.gov/ipef-supply_chain-agreement
- Indo-Pacific Economic Framework. (2024). *IPEF Supply Chain Agreement enters into force*. https://www.state.gov/ipef-supply_chain-agreement
- Introduction: theories of new regionalism. (2003). In *Theories of new regionalism: A Palgrave reader* (pp. 1-21). Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Keohane, R. O. (2005). *After hegemony: Cooperation and discord in the world political economy*. Princeton University Press.
- Khalid, I. (2023, July 13). Flawed IPEF Won't Solve Global Supply Chain Issues. *Geopolitical Monitor*. <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/flawed-ipef-wont-solve-global-supply-chain-issues/>
- Kliem, F. (2020). Why quasi-alliances will persist in the Indo-Pacific? The fall and rise of the Quad. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 7(3), 271-304.
- Kuik, C. C. (2022). Hedging via Institutions: ASEAN-led Multilateralism in the Age of the Indo-Pacific. *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding*, 10(2), 355-386.
- Laksmana, E. A. (2020). Whose centrality? ASEAN and the Quad in the Indo-Pacific. *The Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, 3(5), 106-117.
- MEA. (2024, August 21). The Wilmington Declaration Joint Statement from the Leaders of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States. Government of India. <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/38320/>

- MEA. (2026, May 26). Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting Joint Statement. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/41233/Quad+Foreign+Ministers+Meeting+Joint+Statement+May+26+2026>
- Medcalf, R. (2012). Pivoting the Map: Australia's Indo-Pacific System. Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, The Australian National University.
- Medcalf, R. (2014). In defence of the Indo-Pacific: Australia's new strategic map. *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, (68(4)), 470–483.
- MIDA. (2022, July 27). Malaysia proposes establishment of Indo-Pacific Economic Framework Centre of Excellence. Malaysian Investment Development Authority. <https://www.mida.gov.my/mida-news/malaysia-proposes-establishment-of-indo-pacific-economic-framework-centre-of-excellence/>
- Ministry of Commerce & Industry. (2022, September 10). The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity. Ministry of Commerce & Industry. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1858243>
- MOFA. (2022, May 24). Quad Joint Leaders' Statement. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page1e_000401.html
- Mohan, R. C. (2012). Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific . <https://carnegieindia.org/2012/10/24/samudra-manthan-sino-indian-rivalry-in-indo-pacific-pub-49591>
- Murphy, E. (2024, March 24). The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework's uncertain future. Centre for Strategic and International Studies. <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/03/24/the-indo-pacific-economic-frameworks-uncertain-future/>
- Ngamyingsanga, B. (2026, January 9). Southeast Asia Global Relations Outlook Part 2: U.S. and China. South East Asia Public Policy Institute. <https://seapublicpolicy.org/part-ii-asean-and-global-horizons/>
- Office of the United States Trade Representative. (2022). Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF). Office of the United States Trade Representative. <https://ustr.gov/trade-agreements/agreements-under-negotiation/indo-pacific-economic-framework-prosperity-ipef>
- Office of the United States Trade Representative. (2022). *Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity*.

- Pacific Economic Cooperation Council. (2025). The State of the Region: 2025-2026. <https://www.pecc.org/resources/regional-cooperation/2848-state-of-the-region-2025-2026/file>
- Patrick, S. (2015). The new “new multilateralism”: Minilateral cooperation, but at what cost? *Global Summitry*, 1(2), 115–134.
- Paz, C. (2021, May 13). America’s Vaccine Nationalism Isn’t Working. *The Atlantic*.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2021/05/america-vaccine-success-world-covid-equity/618839/>
- Quad Leaders’ Joint Statement. (2023, May 20). Prime Minister of Australia. <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/quad-leaders-joint-statement>
- Rose, G. (1998). Neoclassical realism and theories of foreign policy. *World Politics*, 51(1), 144–172.
- Smith, J. M. (2020). How America Is Leading the “Quad Plus” Group of 7 Countries in Fighting the Coronavirus. The Heritage Foundation. <https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/commentary/how-america-leading-the-quad-plus-group-7-countries-fighting-the>
- Taylor, R. C. (2021). The global governance of pandemics. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 43(6), 1540.
- U.S. Department of Commerce. (2023, May 27). Press Statement on the Substantial Conclusion of IPEF Supply Chain Agreement Negotiations. U.S. Department of Commerce. <https://www.commerce.gov/news/press-releases/2023/05/press-statement-substantial-conclusion-ipef-supply-chain-agreement>
- U.S. Department of State. (2025, July 1). 2025 Quad Foreign Ministers’ Meeting. <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/07/2025-quad-foreign-ministers-meeting>
- UN Press. (2021, October 24). Vaccine Nationalism. United Nations. <https://press.un.org/en/2021/sgsm20986.doc.htm>
- UNCTAD. (2024). https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/tdr2021_en.pdf
- Wang, C. N. (2022). China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Investment Report 2021. https://greenfdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Nedopil-2022_BRI-Investment-Report-2021.pdf
- Wicaksana, I. G. W., Nauvarian, D., & Pramudia, P. S. (2023). ASEAN, COVID-19 and Myanmar crisis: Dealing with critical juncture. *International*

Area Studies Review, 26(1), 40–54.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/22338659221151129>