

The Rise of Minilateralism in International Relations: Strategizing Regional Solutions for Regional Problems

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Abstract

This article examines the increasing importance of minilateralism as a more flexible and viable alternative to multilateralism, particularly for developing countries. The paper posits that minilateralism offers a targeted and practical platform for addressing shared challenges and regional crises. Through a comprehensive review of existing literature and an analysis of practical experiences, the findings suggest that multilateral organizations are becoming increasingly hindered by rivalries among global superpowers. The article identifies several key factors contributing to the rise of minilateralism, including economic rivalries, geopolitical shifts, institutional fatigue, and the need for agile diplomacy. Additionally, it underscores the functional significance of minilateralism for continental and regional organizations in fostering inter- and intra-regional partnerships. The study concludes by asserting that minilateralism should not be viewed as a replacement for multilateralism, but rather as a complementary mechanism for advancing regional solutions to regional problems within a fragmented global or regional order.

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Introduction

Current international relations has shown the relative importance and significance of *minilateral* cooperation as opposed to multilateral institutions. In response to resolving international disputes, the origin of multilateralism is rooted in the Westphalia agreement – resulted in the redistribution of European power. The 1815 Congress of Vienna after the defeat of Napoleon in Europe can be considered another earlier multilateral initiative (Chikvaidze, 2020; Jaldi, 2023b). Multilateralism finally took organizational form following the establishment of the League of Nations after the end of World War I. However, due to structural limitations, the League of Nations failed to fulfill its original purpose, culminating in the outbreak of the more devastating World War II (Jaldi, 2023a). Nevertheless, it laid the foundation for the development of more robust and resilient multilateral organizations, such as the United Nations (UN) and its specialized agencies, as well as regional entities like the European Union and the Organization of

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African Unity (now known as the African Union). This period also saw the formation of several Regional Economic and Security Communities (RECs).

Although these multilateral organizations resemble a loose federation, they necessitate that states adhere to broader frameworks and binding agreements. Over the past century, multilateralism has significantly influenced global affairs and international relations. Today, most multilateral organizations and institutions involve nearly all states worldwide in efforts to foster economic and security cooperation. However, multilateralism neither lived up to its expectations nor taken significant reform initiatives. This is largely due to geopolitical competitions and ideological conflicts of major powers such as the US, China and Russia. Withdrawal of the United States from the Joint Comprehension Plan of Action (JCPAO) nuclear deal in 2017, the failure of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to stop the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war and the 2023 Israel-Hamas war can be illustrative examples how multilateral frameworks are becoming increasingly untenable.

While multilateral frameworks remain important for addressing major global crises like climate change, there has recently been a shift away from multilateral organizations toward *minilateral* cooperation (Jaldi, 2023b; Patrick, 2015a). Researchers and practitioners (including policymakers) have identified several factors driving states to form more focused, targeted, and interest-driven partnerships, often without requiring consensus on all issues (Dee, 2024a; Heiduk & Wilkins, 2024). This approach helps avoid the lengthy bureaucracy that can arise from ideological conflicts among major powers over agendas in multilateral organizations (Dell’Era & Piasentini, 2024; Mladenov, 2024). Consequently, states can choose the type of cooperation they pursue, rather than simply following the decisions made by multilateral institutions.

At this juncture, it is important to pose questions: Why has multilateralism failed? Is multilateralism in crisis, or does it signal a new form of regionalism? Is *minilateralism* a replacement for multilateralism, or does it represent a new iteration of multilateralism? The following section provides a thorough discussion of why *minilateralism* is significant today and assesses the readiness of rising and developing nations to engage in this new form of cooperation.

Minilateralism as a Preferred Partnership Initiative

As a form of partnership initiative, *minilateralism* is not a new phenomenon. It has been around over the years in the form of bilateral, trilateral or quadrilateral cooperation of some sort between states (Mladenov, 2023). Its prominence, however, has increased very recently at a time when major global powers were grappling with significant challenges and open conflicts, such as the growing economic divide between the United States and China, Brexit, COVID 19 Pandemic as well as the ongoing Russo-Ukraine war, the Middle East crisis and the recurrent failure of international organizations to stop such crisis.

Despite the increase in the number and size of global multilateral organizations, their internal functional structures remain largely symbolic, failing to fulfill their primary purposes. As a result, multilateral cooperation has become nearly impossible (Hass, 2010; Mladenov, 2023). Consequently, states are reverting to traditional realist theories and *realpolitik* to pursue their national interests (Mawar, 2024; Mladenov, 2023). They are forming alliances with countries that

share similar aspirations and values, rather than promoting integration within international institutions (Bew, 2014). The existing system of international relations is struggling under the pressures of longstanding and emerging geopolitical rivalries (Hass, 2010; Mawar, 2024). This has led states to grapple with lengthy bureaucratic processes and complex solutions to the acute crises they face, prompting them to seek cooperation with other nations experiencing similar challenges. Notable examples of this shift include the US-Japan-Australia Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD), the Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) trilateral initiatives, the US-Japan-India-Australia (QUAD), the India-Israel-US-UAE (I2U2), and the BRICS (now BRICS+) initiatives. These *minilateral* partnerships, which involve intra-continental, inter-continental, and intra-regional and inter-regional trilateral and quadrilateral initiatives, are gaining prominence in today's geopolitical landscape.

On the other hand, there is also tendency to an issue based cooperation of states instead of the traditional broad based partnership initiative. This allowed states to focus on shared interests that really matters them the most in short term instead of the long term legal abound relations. This gives states more flexibility to forge relations on the basis of shared ties without necessarily agreeing on everything. It is non-binding, non-coercive and informal. It also provides a very speedy and innovative approach to diplomatic initiatives compared to the traditional hegemonic dominance of super powers which increasingly resulting in deadlocks in multilateral practices (Dee, 2024b). Since it is a more focused and issue based discussion of fewer states, there is a short bureaucracy of issuing decision over the given matter – ultimately finding “regional/local solution for regional/local problems” instead of forging “global solutions to regional/local problems” as it has been the case in multilateral forums in the past and even today.

Multilateral platforms often fail to consider local contexts when developing solutions to local issues. In contrast, *minilateralism* involves bringing together the smallest number of interest groups necessary to create the largest possible impact on a specific problem. These interest groups, which can be viewed as clubs of the willing, are the most relevant participants for addressing a particular common concern. By facilitating more focused, flexible, and pragmatic solutions to problems that often prove controversial in multilateral frameworks, scholars frequently refer to *minilateral* initiatives as "new forms of multilateralism." This approach is seen as a step toward addressing the inadequacies of traditional multilateral frameworks in advancing collective action (Patrick, 2015)

Minilateral initiatives are significant and relevant for all types of states—whether big or small, developed, least developed, or developing—but they hold particular importance for middle powers and developing states. Because many challenges within multilateral frameworks, such as in the UN Security Council (UNPSC) and international financial institutions (IFIs) like the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), often originate from these states. As a result, finding effective solutions to pressing issues in multilateral platforms has become increasingly frustrating for them. It is important to note, however, that *minilateralism* does not replace multilateralism. Rather, it serves as a complementary and more practical approach that facilitates cooperation among interest-driven states on shared concerns.

Minilateralism and its Relevance for Africa

Following the end of WW II and particularly after decolonization, Africa has become increasingly engaged in global politics and governance (Tirkey, 2021). This participation is crucial for the continent, as many issues decided by the UN and International Financial Institutions (IFIs) have direct impacts on African nations. Notably, many situations requiring UN resolutions, such as civil war matters, interstate conflicts, and subsequent post-conflict interventions, originate from Africa and the developing nations (Dee, 2024). However, responses to these issues often falter or prolong due to stark geopolitical competition and ideological conflicts among major powers with veto authority in the UN Security Council (Eguegu et al., 2024). This does not imply that highly politicized conflicts can be resolved through *minilateral* initiatives. Instead, addressing the root causes of such conflicts—such as poor governance, corruption, economic inequality, relative poverty, unemployment, and the resource curse—could have been solved through cooperation among states with shared interests, utilizing flexible, focused, and ad-hoc partnership frameworks before engulfing nations in the form of civil wars or interstate conflicts.

In a similar vein, Africa's multilateral arrangements and governance frameworks often struggle to address the continent's growing challenges and lack institutional enforcement capacities (ISS, 2023). For example, the African Union (AU), as a continental multilateral organization, frequently fails to respond effectively to escalating political and security issues such as coups, terrorism, civil wars, unemployment, migration, cross-border crime, arms proliferation, insurgencies, and interstate tensions, despite having a decorated peace and security architecture and Agenda 2023 (Mensa-Bonsu, 2012). Since the 1990s, the AU has shifted its traditional focus on conflict resolution to a principle known as "African Solutions for African Problems" (AfSol), recognizing that importing solutions from outside Africa has often proven ineffective or even counterproductive (ISS, 2023). While foreign intervention is not inherently negative, it often fails to account for the unique contexts of African issues and does not prioritize solutions that favor the continent. Moreover, experiences since the adoption of AfSol indicate that the AU and its agencies have sometimes been slow or ineffective in their responses to challenges.

States have increasingly shifted from multilateral international and regional platforms to *minilateral* cooperation. This transition allows them to bypass institutional obstacles and engage more effectively with like-minded countries. As a result, they can avoid the lengthy processes and bureaucratic hurdles common in multilateral arrangements while seeking solutions to chronic issues. Currently, Africa is focusing on intra-Africa economic and security frameworks, many of which were established after the introduction of the AfSol initiative, signaling a move away from searching global solutions to local problems. Examples include the Multinational Joint Task Force (MJNTF) formed to combat Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin, the Nile Basin Initiatives (NBI) evolving into the Nile River Basin Commission (NRBC) encompassing ten riparian states, the 2018 trilateral cooperation agreement among Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia following their rapprochement, and IGAD's Red Sea and Gulf of Aden Task Force (RESGA) established in 2019. These are few examples of intra-Africa partnership initiatives founded on the basis of shared interests and values over issues of common concern.

On the other hand, the major global powers, particularly the USA, Western nations, and China, have engaged with Africa for quite some time, especially after the Cold War. They established spheres of influence across various regions of Africa, with their cooperation primarily being

bilateral. However, history indicates that it has largely been the interests of these global powers that have prevailed in Africa, rather than the interests of African nations (Rondos et al., 2017). Recently, regional powers such as Qatar, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Turkey have expressed interest in commercial and security cooperation with African states (Rondos, 2016; Verhoeven, 2018). This has led to increased Gulf-Africa *minilateral* cooperation (Dent & Ferragamo, 2024; Munyati, 2024). Some analysts argue that the shift of Arab influence from Egypt, Syria, and Iraq following the Arab Uprising of 2011, along with the war in Yemen, has driven Gulf states to focus their attention on Africa, particularly the Horn of Africa, as a key destination for their petrodollar investments (Ding, 2024). Additionally, the Horn of Africa and Gulf share historical, cultural, and religious ties, geographically connected through the Red Sea.

The Gulf primarily engaged with a conflict-ridden Africa, especially the Horn of Africa, where many states faced interstate tensions and internal crises even as they sought to rekindle relations. Consequently, Gulf nations approached the continent as conflict mediators (Mason & Mabon, 2022). For instance, Qatar attempted to mediate the 2008 conflict in Sudan between the government and rebel forces and deployed peacekeeping troops in the Eritrea-Djibouti conflict in 2011. Similarly, Turkey sought to mediate the conflict between Somalia and Somaliland from 2011 to 2013 and addressed the ongoing tensions between Ethiopia and Somalia that arose after the signing of the Ethiopia-Somaliland Memorandum of Understanding. Prior to these efforts, the KSA and the UAE facilitated the rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea (Aweke & Seid, 2022). As a result of this renewed Gulf-Africa cooperation, Gulf States began to establish trilateral, quadrilateral, and other forms of *minilateral* economic and security partnerships with countries in the Horn of Africa and beyond.

Among the prominent Gulf-Africa *minilateral* platforms, the 2009 Djibouti Code of Conduct stands out, as it was signed by states on both sides of the Red Sea, committing them to combat piracy and armed robbery in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. Years later, in 2020, a similar agreement was reached between the Arab and African Coastal States of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, known as the "Red Sea Council." Additionally, the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) established a Task Force in 2019 to promote regional cohesion and cooperation among the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden States (RESGA). In 2019, the UAE partnered with India to construct an information communication technology (ICT) center in Ethiopia, and as part of the Abraham Accords, the UAE collaborated with Israel in 2022 to build a healthcare facility in Ghana.

The low hanging fruits to harvest in Africa through *Minilateralism*

Minilateralism is not centered on humanitarianism; rather, it adopts a market-oriented approach focused on transactions. It emphasizes balancing exchanges – trade-offs, deals, and agreements. Therefore, when considering *minilateral* cooperation among two or more partners, it is logical to assess the trade-offs from both economic and security perspectives. In the context of various Africa-related partnerships, such as Africa-Gulf, Africa-Asia, Africa-China, Africa-Russia, Africa-US, and Africa-EU cooperation, Africa presents numerous trade-offs. The continent is rich in diverse resources that can supply foreign industries and offers a significant market for processed

goods. Additionally, Africa boasts abundant arable land, making it an attractive destination for foreign investment and capable of providing a steady supply of food stuff to the global market. Currently, investment in Africa, particularly in sectors such as mining, agriculture, technology, building construction, telecommunications, and real estate, is flourishing. Accordingly, these economic opportunities are accelerating Gulf investments in Africa. This is closely intertwined with security considerations. Investments could promote peace and stability in Africa, which in turn could safeguard Gulf States' security interests. It is also a win-win mutually beneficial approach where African nations gain access to much-needed capital from the Gulf without the strings of traditional donors.

Challenges of *Minilateralism*

As a very flexible and agile cooperation initiative, *minilateral* cooperation may suffer from various challenges going forward. This has been approached by scholars from two perspectives (Anuar & Hussain, 2021; Patrick, 2015b) – challenges within the *minilateral* partnership and to the multilateral global order. Of course, some are specific to the type of *minilateral* partnership initiative being pursued. Issue-based cooperation, for instance, may run into some difficulties since the aim is to leverage negotiations into breakable agendas. Others may require very much fewer members and some may composite greater numbers.

Challenges within Minilateral Partnerships

Most *minilaterals* face challenges related to defections or withdrawals due to their flexible and interest-driven nature. States can withdraw from the initiative at any time without prior consultation or notice, and there are no binding agreements or obligations to hold them accountable for prior commitments. This lack of accountability can undermine the initiative's overall objectives and lead to concerns about trust and confidence among the remaining members. The Sanaa Forum illustrates this issue. Established in 2002, it aimed to foster security cooperation among the Southern Red Sea states of Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia, and Yemen (Farajat, 2018). However, lessened commitment from members and subsequent withdrawals ultimately led to its dissolution.

On the other hand, the rise of *minilateral* partnerships could result in a variety of conflicting agreements, as nations' form alliances based on narrow interests rather than shared values. This can lead to states having divergent interests while participating in overlapping partnerships. Consequently, they may prioritize one alliance over another, akin to chasing after a chicken and losing sight of their own direction. As a result, these partnerships may ultimately falter and achieve little success. Additionally, when regional or global geopolitical turmoil arises, there may be state's tendency to favor practical partnerships over political considerations, complicating decision-making.

Challenges to the global multilateral order

Minilateral cooperation undermines the operations of international institutions such as the UN and similar regional multilateral organizations such as the EU and AU. Its flexible and agile nature, which accommodates a variety of members in decision-making and promotes reduced bureaucracy, often leads states to prioritize *minilateral* partnerships over multilateralism. As a

result, states tend to focus on short-term interests or immediate problems, neglecting long-term goals and aspirations. This tendency has the potential to weaken the operations of international institutions and the multilateral order overall. Furthermore, it may contribute to international fragmentation due to less institutionalized decision-making, potentially exacerbating global power imbalances. Consequently, this could render international institutions, including the United Nations and its functional agencies, ineffective in promoting peace and stability.

Conclusion

Minilateralism is not a substitute for multilateralism; rather, it has gained prominence as a response to the crises faced by multilateral forums due to various factors. It does not equate to regionalism, as it often transcends geographical boundaries. In *minilateralism*, the emphasis is placed on the shared interests and values among partners. Its flexibility, focus, agility, and issue-based approach have led to an increasing preference among states for *minilateralism* over traditional multilateralism. This model allows states to forge relationships based on mutual interests and values. Trilateral and quadrilateral or may be more economic and security partnerships such as the QUAD, the I2U2, BRICS+, the BRI, the Red Sea Council, and the RESGA are amongst the notable *minilateral* cooperation.

Minilateralism has proven effective in addressing urgent challenges that states encounter, often outperforming the broader traditional multilateral efforts especially in middle power states and developing nations. However, while *minilateral* partnerships have become feasible, they should not be viewed as replacements for multilateralism; rather, they serve as complements. There are areas where multilateralism remains crucial such as discussions concerning climate change, as well as others where *minilateralism* may be more effective than multilateral approaches.

Nevertheless, *minilateral* partnerships also face challenges. The inclusive nature of *minilateralism*, for instance, allows various states to actively participate in decision-making, but this may diminish their interest in multilateral frameworks, complicating efforts to promote international peace and security. Additionally, the potential for states to defect or withdraw from *minilateral* partnerships without prior notice poses a challenge that could impact the future of *minilateralism*.

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