

# Minilateralism: A Concept That Is Changing the World Order

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## The UAE, Israel, India, and other countries are showing why smaller-scale collaboration based on shared interests can offer distinct advantages in a multipolar world.

The global order has experienced notable shifts in the past century, and the conclusion of the Cold War ushered in a unipolar world. But the new millennium, and the emergence of multipolarity, has presented significant obstacles to collaboration. One response to these challenges has been the growing popularity of “minilateralism,” an international relations concept that involves small groups of nations collaborating to tackle problems or pursue mutual goals.

A clear example of minilateralism occurred when the UAE, India, and France recently announced their shared commitment to work together through a trilateral framework in various fields such as defence, energy, and technology. The UAE’s capital, Abu Dhabi, has also formed minilateral partnerships with India to establish an information and communications technology center in Ethiopia, and with Israel to advance a health care facility in Ghana. Additionally, the UAE, along with Indonesia and five other countries, launched the Mangrove Alliance for Climate at COP27 in Egypt. The alliance aims to increase the preservation and rehabilitation of mangrove ecosystems.

While minilateralism has its risks, such as the possibility of exacerbating power imbalances, it also has the potential to be a flexible and innovative approach to diplomacy, particularly in tackling global challenges like climate change, health care, and food security. As such, the rise of middle powers—states with moderate influence on the international stage—and rapid technological advancements make it clear that minilateralism is here to stay and is a viable way forward for countries seeking to address issues that cannot be tackled in isolation.

# An Outdated IR Formula

**D**uring much of the 20th century, global diplomacy was largely shaped by a bipolar international system, in which the superpowers held sway over most of the world's political and economic resources. Then in the early 1990s, the world shifted toward a unipolar system, with the United States assuming the role of the sole global leader.

But that era is now over, and today, we're witnessing another shift in traditional international relations. The Covid-19 pandemic exposed humanity's vulnerabilities and the inadequacy of the current multilateral system in addressing global health crises.

Climate change has also become an increasingly urgent challenge for the survival of humanity. Both crises have forced us to question how nations can collaborate to confront problems that no single country can handle alone.

Despite growing demands for cooperation, the existing system of international relations is struggling under the weight of long-standing and emerging geopolitical rivalries. For example, the Russia-Ukraine war has reintroduced protracted land warfare to the European continent, a development many believed was a relic of history. Additionally, the impending trade and technological division between the US and China has significant implications for much of the world.

Moreover, the meteoric rise of artificial intelligence and the pressing issue of food scarcity in many parts of the world further complicate the mix of problems world leaders must address. Overall, the challenges facing the world appear daunting and seemingly insurmountable. Traditional systems of cooperation are breaking down. A new approach is needed.

## The Return of Minilateralism

**M**inilateralism is not a new concept. From the Concert of Europe in the early 19th century to the Quad (Australia, India, Japan, and the US) today, minilateralism has been around for years. However, its prominence has increased at a time when major global powers are grappling with significant conflicts, such as the war in Ukraine and the growing divide between the US and China.

Minilateralism's notable characteristic is an emphasis on shared interests instead of shared values or ideological alignment. As a result, nations can collaborate on critical issues without having to agree on everything or hold the same worldview.

The International Solar Alliance (ISA), recently established with its headquarters in India, illustrates this well. The ISA is a coalition of 121 countries, primarily in the developing world and including the UAE, with a shared objective of promoting solar energy and combating climate change. The ISA illustrates how diverse nations can work together to achieve a common goal, irrespective of their ideological or religious differences.

In the Middle East in particular, minilateralism has gained popularity, as many countries grapple with the repercussions of decades of conflict, instability, and foreign intervention. In this context, states are increasingly seeking to form partnerships and coalitions to help them address shared challenges. The historic Abraham Accords of 2020 not only normalised relations between Israel and three key Arab states, but also opened the door to new formats of cooperation that were previously unimaginable. The nascent Negev Forum, which brings together the US with Israel, the UAE, Egypt, Morocco, and Bahrain in a new framework for regional cooperation, is another example.

One of the advantages of minilateralism is that it can be more agile and adaptable than traditional diplomatic channels. In 2021, India, Israel, the UAE, and the US announced a "Partnership for the Future" that soon became known as the I2U2 format.

This innovative cross-regional initiative aimed to spur non-traditional cooperation. While it took the Quad 15 years

from its inception for its leaders to meet in Japan in 2022, the first I2U2 summit, albeit virtual, took place less than a year after its formation.

For Gulf states, minilateralism is currently a strategic imperative with significant implications for their security, competitiveness, and prosperity. The Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy (AGDA) in Abu Dhabi, which I lead, has hosted several Track II discussions aimed at exploring new partnerships among the UAE, South Korea, Japan, Singapore, and Israel.

These discussions have centred on forging agreements on issues such as energy, infrastructure, trade, and technology. By doing so, Gulf states hope to build a network of minilateral partnerships that can contribute to their economic growth and stability while also enhancing regional and global security.

## Middle Powers' Moment

As middle powers increasingly shape international affairs, the appeal of minilateralism is becoming the preferred approach for many countries. Speaking at AGDA a few months ago, India's external affairs minister, S. Jaishankar, described minilateralism as a "form of diplomacy [that] is here to stay, and it is the way forward for many" countries.

Minilateral formats are nimbler and more flexible than traditional diplomacy, allowing countries to react faster to crises or opportunities without being bogged down by bureaucracy. This flexibility also allows governments to build stronger, more intimate relationships based on shared interests, rather than being forced to work within the framework of a larger, less cohesive group.

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which began in 2013, is the most prominent example of this trend. The BRI aims to construct a new global trade network spanning Asia, Europe, and Africa through investment in infrastructure projects, trade, and people-to-people exchanges.

Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) initiative is similar, with a focus on promoting regional economic growth and stability by building bridges with other nations. First introduced by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2016, FOIP seeks to ensure an Indo-Pacific region that is prosperous and peaceful. The initiative welcomes the participation of all nations that share its vision, and there is no fixed number of countries that are part of it.

N. Janardhan, director of research and analysis at AGDA, says new clubs are also being formed to control vital resources; he points to Indonesia's plan to build "an OPEC-like" structure to control trade in nickel, cobalt, and manganese.

## No Silver Bullet

Minilateralism does have drawbacks. One risk is that it may be exclusionary and exacerbate power imbalances, potentially prioritising short-term interests over long-term goals. Its proliferation may also lead to a multitude of conflicting agreements, with different nations forming alliances based on narrow interests rather than shared values.

This fragmentation of the international order could make it even more challenging to address global challenges that require a coordinated global response, such as climate change, food security, and nuclear proliferation. International fragmentation could ultimately make it more difficult for nations to achieve collective goals and hinder the efforts of international organisations such as the United Nations to promote peace and stability.

Still, the strength of minilateralism lies in identifying avenues for mutually and globally beneficial cooperation, rather than pursuing a collective (and often intractable) security agenda. By emphasising interests, promoting greater collaboration, and leveraging new technology and innovation, middle powers can take a more proactive and equitable approach to addressing global concerns. Potential drawbacks notwithstanding, minilateralism is, and will

remain, a constructive tool for cooperation among nations.

## ‘Innovative and Flexible Approach’

Put simply, the benefits of minilateralism outweigh the costs. The rise of middle powers and rapid technological advancements make it clear that minilateralism is a viable way forward for many countries, including those in the Middle East.

By focusing on specific issues and working collaboratively, middle powers can make a significant impact on the world stage by bypassing the bureaucratic red tape that so often derails progress. The benefits of minilateralism are clear, and its continued proliferation is a sign of its growing importance in today’s complex and rapidly changing world.

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