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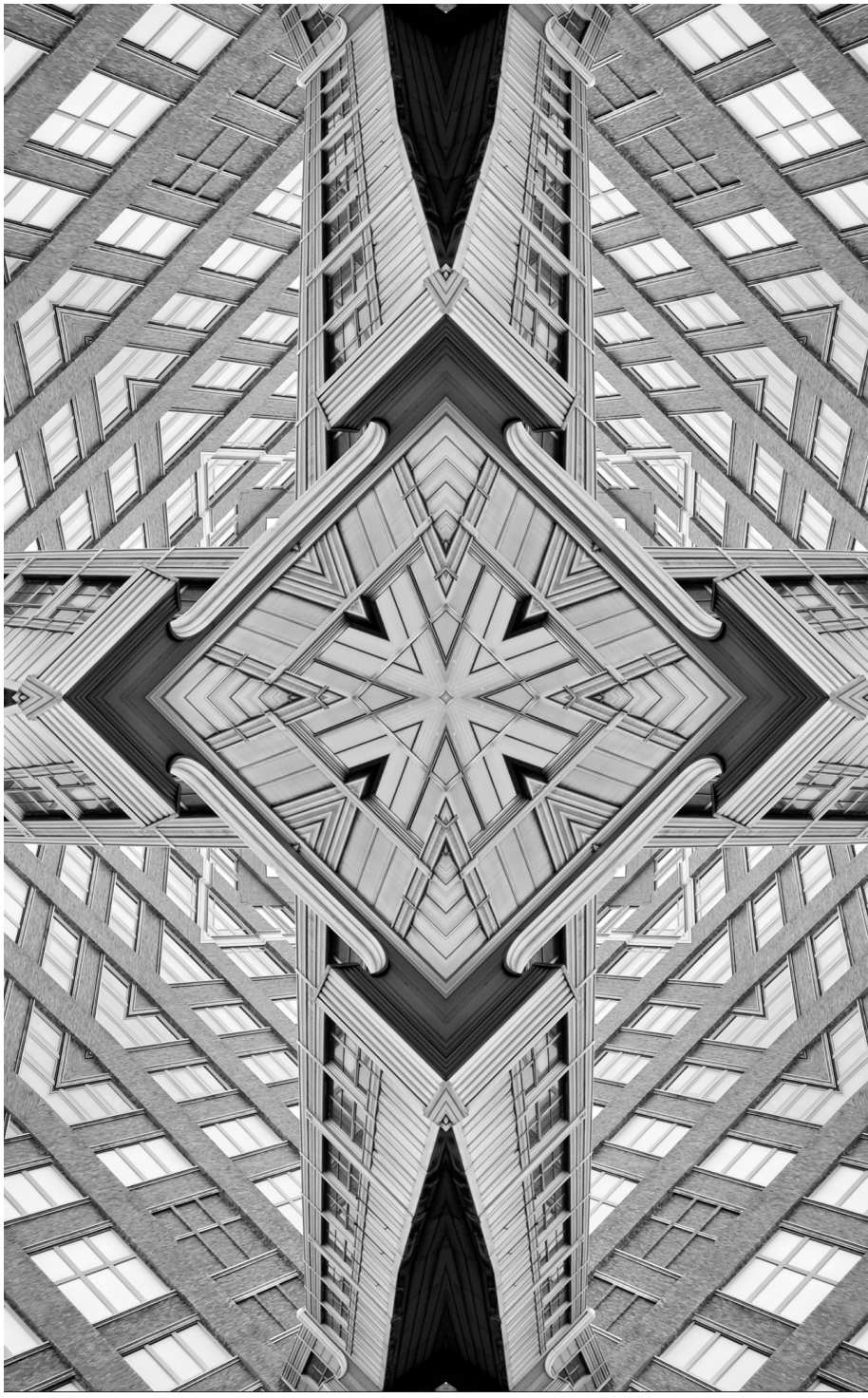

Minilateralism: Weighing the Prospects for Cooperation and Governance

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Abstract

The multilateral frameworks that were established following the Second World War paved the way to strengthening global governance and international cooperation. Over the decades, however, the ability of these multilateral forums to take collective action has been hobbled by institutional inertia, vested interests, and challenges to decision-making. Minilaterals are thus being seen as an alternative route to form partnerships and coalitions "of the willing" to resolve issues of regional and global concern. This brief identifies the strengths and weaknesses of existing minilaterals, and assesses their potential as instruments of international cooperation and governance.

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Introduction

The idea of minilaterals is not new: bilateralism, multilateralism and minilateralism have co-existed in global governance since 1945.[1] Notably, the multilateral institutions that were created in the post-war era were negotiated through "disguised" minilateralism, pursued between the United States (US) and other Atlantic powers.[2] For instance, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade 1947 (GATT) can be traced to bilateral or minilateral negotiations between major trading powers, which were subsequently "multilateralised" by including other countries in the discussions.[3]

Nonetheless, it was in the more recent years that there has been a steady proliferation of minilateral initiatives in the areas of trade, security, finance, and climate change. The rise of minilaterals is associated with stagnation in reforms, and the perceived failure of multilateral organisations to achieve global cooperation on the most pertinent issues facing the international community. Present-day multilateral frameworks were mostly established to open a new chapter for strengthening global governance and international cooperation. These structures comprised of formal institutions with independent bureaucracies, where a large number of countries would come together to negotiate and devise norms to address global challenges.

This ideal vision of global cooperation now stands compromised: consensus seems impossible and reforms remain elusive, while vested interests and institutional inertia continue to hamper decision-making.[4] In 2009, Moises Naim famously declared that multilateral initiatives have failed, as talks have stalled, deadlines have been missed, and commitments are no longer honoured—and that one can have the "smallest possible number of countries needed to have the largest possible impact on solving a particular problem".[5] The frustration with multilateralism has emerged as these forums largely failed to fulfill the objectives they set out to achieve—be it the maintenance of international peace and security through the United Nations (UN), or the next round of trade negotiations within the World Trade Organization (WTO).[6] The COVID-19 pandemic has also highlighted the weaknesses of multilateralism; countries largely chose to go it alone or with preferred partners, rather than use multilateral platforms for coordinating efforts to respond to the pandemic.[7]

Introduction

The growth of minilaterals is thus often viewed as a solution to address the inefficiency of multilaterals. While minilaterals cannot replace multilaterals to achieve "true" global cooperation, they can supplement the work of multilateral organisations by providing a platform for diplomacy, confidence-building, and cooperation. This lies in the simplicity and ease that minilaterals are associated with, as opposed to the complex, long-drawn negotiations required in multilateral frameworks. This brief ponders such an assumption, by assessing the strengths and weaknesses of minilaterals, and examining their role and function vis-à-vis multilateral mechanisms. This assessment will be based on a short study of some of the key minilateral initiatives in the past five years, with the aim to identify the challenges and prospects that minilaterals present for international cooperation and governance.

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Minilaterals: Definition and Features

Minilaterals refer to informal and more targeted initiatives intended to address a "specific threat, contingency or security issue with fewer states (usually three or four) sharing the same interest for resolving it within a finite period of time."[8] Certain features are frequently associated with minilaterals: they have a small number of participants, they are ad hoc, and their outcomes and commitments are voluntary in nature. In contrast, multilateralism is defined as a "formal effort by three or more states to build trust and avoid conflict by identifying, institutionalizing and observing rules and norms for a common vision of regional or international order."[9]

However, scholars point out that focusing on the numerical dimension of the definition overlooks the qualitative aspect of what differentiates minilaterals from multilaterals. Minilaterals focus on gathering the "critical mass" of members necessary for a specific purpose, in contrast to the broad and inclusive approach associated with multilaterals.[10] For illustration, the WTO would be a multilateral framework for international trade regulation, while a minilateral (or plurilateral, as referred to in trade policy jargon) would be the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)—a free trade agreement among Asia-Pacific countries.

Minilateral cooperation is being witnessed on all vital themes for international cooperation, such as climate change, economic cooperation, trade, connectivity, financial regulation, and security. The growth of regional clubs for international economic cooperation, such as the European Union (EU) and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), as well as more groupings with more diverse memberships, like the G20, are supplanting "global" multilateralism.[11] The creation of the smallest group necessary to achieve a particular goal, and a turn from formal treaties to non-binding accords and other soft-law mechanisms—are associated with ease and simplicity.[12]

Even for regulating financial markets, regulators and countries now lean towards informal mechanisms such as the Basel Committee and the Financial Stability Board, which tend to adopt "soft law" methods such as recommendations, pledges, commitments, and memorandums of understanding to achieve outcomes and objectives.[13] Such ad hoc approaches to international cooperation bring certain advantages, including speed, flexibility, modularity, and possibilities for experimentation.[14] These arrangements are

voluntary, and follow a bottom-up approach. With a smaller membership, they can expedite decision-making and facilitate policy coordination on important focus areas.

One of the reasons for the shift to minilateralism is the growing importance of strategic alliances over global cooperation. These initiatives can facilitate the creation of issue-specific partnerships between like-minded countries. For instance, minilaterals can provide a forum to strengthen defence and security cooperation in new regional theatres, such as the Indo-Pacific. Because of the importance of security cooperation in this region, a range of minilaterals, such as the Quad,[a] the India-Japan-US trilateral, and the India-France-Australia trilateral have been created to advance the interests of like-minded countries. They also provide an avenue for participation of countries like India, who lack a similar decision-making capacity in forums like the UN Security Council.

Large organisations with formal institutional structure, international bureaucracies, and heterogenous membership, can face hurdles that impede prompt decision-making. These transaction costs associated with multilateral frameworks have made minilateralism a more preferred mechanism. Moreover, the evolving global order and the changing nature of threats are posing difficult questions on the continued relevance of multilateral frameworks. The threat of a global, devastating war drove consensus and precipitated political will towards creating large, multilateral organisations for the maintenance of international peace and security, such as the UN. After the fall of the Soviet Union, such threat of war, or a common challenge to international peace and security, gradually dissipated.

Following the Second World War, the US—as a dominant power—pushed for the establishment of the Bretton Woods Institutions and the UN. However, inconsistency in the US's global leadership over the years—much before the Trump administration championed the "America First" approach—has challenged the country's leadership in multilaterals. Furthermore, the rise of a multipolar world—along with the emergence of geopolitical rivalry between the US and China—have heightened fissures in multilateral organisations and stalled decision-making and institutional reforms. For instance, the permanent

a The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue comprises the US, India, Japan, and Australia.

membership of the UN Security Council continues to reflect the power structures of a bygone era, and the initiatives for reform have been slow. In the Bretton Woods Institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), reforms in voting share have been piecemeal; the system continues to grant the US an effective veto over any crucial decision.[15]

A relatively unexplored line of enquiry is the correlation between improvement of information and communications technology, and the growth of minilaterals. While this may appear to be a tenuous connection so far, it is undeniable that technology—from telephonic communications, to the Internet—are allowing countries to expand their networks of global and regional cooperation.[16] The rise of technology has undeniably given way to less formal means of communication. In the opinion of scholars such as Chris Brummer, law professor at Georgetown University, with the decline of formality in communications, there is also less preference for formal, large organisations usually characterised by cumbersome procedures.[17]

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The Strengths and Weaknesses of Minilaterals

Minilaterals allow a group of countries with shared interests and values to bypass seemingly moribund frameworks, and resolve issues of common concern.[18] Indeed, the failure of the Doha round of WTO negotiations to conclude since 2008 is illustrative. While developing countries intended to pursue the original objectives of the negotiations—i.e., for a single undertaking approach towards a development-oriented agreement—developed countries were keen on introducing new issues to the table.[19] According to Richard Baldwin, Professor of International Economics at The Graduate Institute, Geneva, negotiations have been slowed by the "impossible trinity":[20] WTO rules a) apply universally, in other words for all members; b) are resolved in consensus; and c) can be implemented via a binding system of dispute resolution. Complicating the matter is that WTO membership has not only grown over the years, but it has also become more heterogeneous.[21]

For developing countries, their numbers are their greatest bargaining power; developed countries—less in number—view this as "tyranny of the majority" which has obstructed consensus in large multilateral organisations. The prevailing North-South dichotomy, where developing countries are keen on retaining special and differential treatment, while developed countries want to shift to discussing new issues outside the Doha development agenda, has become an inflection point for trade negotiations. This dichotomy exists in climate negotiations as well: developing countries point to the historical responsibility of industrialised nations for global warming, while developed countries argue that such an argument is moot as emissions have increased from countries like China, India, and Brazil.

Consequently, in international trade regulation, more success has been achieved in concluding plurilateral initiatives as opposed to multilateral agreements. Because of the slow pace of the Doha trade negotiations, countries have increasingly explored minilateral and plurilateral mechanisms to renegotiate tariffs and remove barriers to trade. Examples include the Trans Pacific Partnership Agreement, the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, and the more recent RCEP, signed in November 2020.

However, minilateralism also presents dangers of forum-shopping, undermining critical international organisations, and reducing accountability in global governance.[22] Minilaterals promote voluntary and non-binding targets commitments, and not legally binding ones. For countries that are increasingly

The Strengths and Weaknesses of Minilaterals

showing a preference for "soft law" mechanisms which are easier to negotiate, minilaterals make for an attractive alternative to multilaterals. However, this gives rise to compliance and accountability issues, which can in turn frustrate the objectives of global governance and international cooperation. For instance, the G20's Mutual Assessment Process (MAP)—where members share national economic plans and disclose their potential negative impacts—has been criticised for being 'toothless'.[23] It is not immediately clear if the existence of the G20 Framework or the mutual assessment peer review process has actually influenced the policy choices of countries.[24] In this context, it is difficult to measure the actual qualitative and quantitative outcomes of minilaterals.

Moreover, the voluntary, non-binding and consensus-based nature of minilaterals may be less effective in shaping state policy, interests and behaviour. Multilateral organisations, via legally binding frameworks and through their independent bureaucracies, can help shape state behaviour by applying both incentives and constraints. Supranational bodies such as the European Union (EU) have not only helped coordinate political, economic and strategic relations of member countries, but have also consolidated the geographical identity of the region. While the EU has struggled with the ability to act collectively or effectively due to structural issues, it remains one of the most successful experiments in regional organisations.

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In contrast, other regional organisations such as the ASEAN function through a broad reading of the principle of non-interference in internal affairs and operate through consensus—a format that is emulated by minilaterals.[25] The "ASEAN Way"—the term for the forum's distinctive diplomatic style that guards sovereignty—has limited its ability to influence the behaviour and policies of its members.[26] This is perhaps why various security concerns in the region, such as the question of Taiwan and tensions in the South China Sea, continue to remain unresolved.

The Strengths and Weaknesses of Minilaterals

Preference for minilaterals may also undermine the efficiency and legitimacy of international organisations. This will reduce the incentive for countries to engage with multilateral frameworks—a possibility that not only impacts their relevance, but can also hamper their programmes. For instance, WHO and UNICEF regional offices work with governments to provide important technical and managerial support to implement schemes in health, nutrition, education, and child protection.

Within minilaterals, key to steering countries towards measurable outcomes are leadership, political will, and bilateral relations between members. In 1999, the Trilateral Cooperation and Oversight Group (TCOG) was established between the US, Japan and South Korea in response to North Korea's intensifying nuclear programme. However, the minilateral floundered due to the historically strained ties between South Korea and Japan.[27]

Change in political leadership may also influence the foreign policy priorities of a country, which may in turn affect a member's willingness to participate in a minilateral.[28] The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), for example, was first discussed by the US, India, Australia and Japan in 2004, to coordinate humanitarian efforts following the Indian Ocean tsunami disaster. However, Shinzo Abe's resignation in 2007 as Japan's prime minister and Kevin Rudd's election as Australia's new prime minister in the same year caused the first Quad to fail. The absence of Abe, who is credited with initiating the Quad, and Rudd's withdrawal from the Quad proposal marked the end of Quad 1.0.

Multilateral organisations also help build consensus towards legally binding treaties, such as the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) which provides a rules-based framework for minilateral cooperation as well. The growing preference for "soft law" mechanisms such as pledges, commitments and memorandums of understanding, can hamper the existence of a rules-based framework in the global order. Moreover, in various segments, minilateral alliances are viewed as second-best options—since they may have a detrimental effect on countries that are not part of negotiations, or that they may reduce incentives to engage with existing multilateral efforts—such as what was seen in the Doha trade negotiations.[29]

The following tables provide an overview of the most important minilaterals that have been formed in the last five years. Table 1 looks at security-related minilaterals, Table 2 is an overview of those for connectivity, infrastructure, and development cooperation, while Table 3 details minilaterals (or plurilaterals) for economic cooperation. There are minilateral initiatives that were created with a specific objective, but eventually broadened their areas of cooperation. The Quad, for instance—launched for the purpose of creating a free and open Indo-Pacific—recently expanded its cooperation to include access to COVID-19 vaccines, climate action, and critical and emerging technologies. [30]

Table 1: Minilaterals for Security Cooperation (2016-2021)

Minilateral/ Plurilateral	Year Created	Objectives	Significant Meetings and Outcomes
India-France-Australia Trilateral Dialogue	2020	Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region	• Foreign Secretaries' Dialogue (2020), followed by the first Ministerial Dialogue (2021).
Indonesia-Malaysia-The Philippines Cooperation (IMPC)	2016	To fight piracy, sea robbery, violent extremism and terrorism	• Meetings at the level of foreign ministers, defence ministers, chiefs of defence. • Air and navy patrols in the Sulu Sea.[31]
Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) *Members: India, Australia, US, Japan*	2017	Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region	• Elevated meeting to leaders' level in 2021.[32] • Launch of the Quad vaccine partnership, and working groups on climate and, critical and emerging technologies.[33] • Joint naval exercises (2020).[34]

A Survey of Recent Minilaterals

Minilateral/ Plurilateral	Year Created	Objectives	Significant Meetings and Outcomes
Australia-Japan-India (AJI) Trilateral	2015	Supply Chain Resilience in the Indo-Pacific	• Ministerial-level meetings.[35] • Launch of Supply Chain Resilience Initiative to attain strong, sustainable, balanced and inclusive growth in the region.[36]
India -Italy-Japan Trilateral	2021	Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region	• Meetings with senior foreign ministry officials.
Australia-India-Indonesia Trilateral	2017	Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region	• Senior-level meetings.[37]
Japan-US-India	2018	Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region	• Leader-level meetings, at the sidelines of G20 summits.
Afghanistan – Turkmenistan – US Trilateral	2020	Political, security, and economic matters	• In the 2020 meeting, participants committed to the Afghan peace process and improving security cooperation.[38]
US-Afghanistan-Uzbekistan-Pakistan	2021	Quad Regional Support for Afghanistan-Peace Process and Post Settlement	• No meetings yet. Aims to cooperate to expand trade, build transit links, and strengthen business-to-business ties.[39]

The Indo-Pacific region has notably emerged as pivot for minilateral activity in recent years. Apart from the Quad, a number of trilaterals have been established for enhancing cooperation and maritime security in the region, such as the India-France-Australia, Australia-Japan-India, Japan-US-India, and India-Italy-Japan. These minilaterals provide an opportunity for middle powers such as Australia, India, and Japan, to build on common interests and strengthen the regional economic and security architecture.[40] While security is the primary driver for the creation of these forums, a few of them, such as the India-Italy-Japan trilateral, have expanded their objectives to cover collaboration with third countries, multilateralism, and socio-economic concerns. [41]

Depending on the aims and objectives of each grouping, the summit meetings take place at different levels of seniority and may involve one or more key ministry. The Japan-US-India trilateral meetings have taken place at the level of heads of state, since they occur at the sidelines of G20 summits.[42] Meanwhile, meetings for the Indonesia-Malaysia-The Philippines Cooperation (IMPC) grouping—concerned with fighting piracy, sea robbery, violent extremism and terrorism—have taken place at the level of foreign ministers and defence ministers.

The Indo-Pacific—and the Asia Pacific, more generally—suffers from an institutional deficiency, where extant frameworks such as the ASEAN Region Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS) have been criticised for merely being "talk shops" where lofty promises are made but no significant results are reached.[43] Indeed, formal institutions have had little success in Asia, due primarily to differences in geography and regime types, divergent threat perceptions, and lack of intra-regional trade.[44] On this point, it has also been argued that the Indo-Pacific regional conceptualisation is utilised by the Quad countries to address the deficiencies in Asia's maritime security and institutional architecture.[45] As a result, such minilateral initiatives can help establish consultations, transparency, and a degree of familiarity and trust between members.

However, there is a clear drawback to solely focusing on minilaterals as the only means for security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. Most of the countries within the geographical construct of the Indo-Pacific are outside these exclusive groupings. Members might be able to achieve results *inter se*, however, other forums—such as ASEAN—have yet to show an inclination towards embracing this regional construct.[46] Minilateral initiatives in the Indo-Pacific and Asia region also appear to have been created with specific geostrategic objectives. The creation of the Quad and related trilateral groupings are frequently seen as a means to counter the rise and influence of China in the neighbourhood. The rise of China as a significant political, economic and military power is treated with anxiety, and its flagship Belt and Road Initiative is seen as a means to consolidate Beijing's geopolitical reach.

Beijing, for its part, has introduced initiatives such as the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) mechanism at the sub-regional level; its aim is to extend China's influence in Southeast Asia. Standing out as a direct challenge to the LMC is the Mekong-US partnership mechanism, though its capacity in providing infrastructure development, investment and trade, remains to

be seen.[47] Similarly, China and Russia have proposed the setting up of a new "regional security dialogue platform", as their foreign ministers criticised the US for forming small circles to seek bloc confrontation.[48] Minilateralism also fits China's approach to be functional and flexible, since it has shown reticence to abide by formal frameworks such as the UNCLOS.

To be sure, fluid frameworks may struggle to achieve concrete outcomes. The litmus test, therefore, would be their ability to foster actual cooperation, and overcome the challenges posed by ad hoc mechanisms to achieve measurable outcomes. In some cases, minilaterals make efforts to assess the outcomes achieved in subsequent meetings. For instance, the 2021 Ministerial level dialogue of the India-France-Australia trilateral measured results from the previous 2020 foreign secretaries' meetings, and concluded that outcomes have progressed on three pillars: maritime safety and security, marine and environmental cooperation, and multilateral engagement.[49] As such, an important metric for their success is going beyond purely rhetorical and visionary statements, to making an actual impact.

Several minilaterals studied in this brief are both the cause and effect of the 21st-century's great-power competition. While other minilaterals are not free from underlying strategic ends, they were also established for more quantifiable objectives. The India-Iran-Afghanistan trilateral for the Chabahar port—an important project for India to counter the China-Pakistan axis—was created for a specific purpose with a measurable outcome. The development of the Chabahar port, and the international trade and transit corridor, relies on investment towards infrastructure development from the concerned parties—an aspect that can be measured in real time by monitoring funds deployed, contracts signed, and on-ground development of infrastructure. While progress in operationalising the port has been slow due to US sanctions on Iran, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs earmarked funds in 2020-21 for the project.[50] However, as discussed earlier, such frameworks are also not free from the impact of change in political leadership in the country. With the political turmoil in Afghanistan following Taliban's capture of the country, it remains to be seen if the Chabahar agreement, or any of the minilaterals involving Afghanistan, will be able to achieve their objectives.

Table 2: Minilaterals for connectivity, infrastructure, and development cooperation (2016-2021)

Minilateral/ Plurilateral	Year Created	Objectives	Significant Meetings and Outcomes
India-Iran-Afghanistan (Chabahar Agreement)	2016	Establishment of Transport and Transit Corridor	• Trilateral Agreement signed in 2016, first meeting held in 2018.[51]
India-Russia-Bangladesh Trilateral Cooperation	2018	Civil nuclear cooperation	• Signing of memorandum of understanding for construction of the Rooppur nuclear power plant in Bangladesh.
India-Iran-Uzbekistan	2020	Trade, economy and connectivity	• Trilateral meeting on joint use of the strategic Chabahar port. First meeting in December 2020 at the level of senior officials.[52]
Afghanistan-Turkmenistan-Azerbaijan Trilateral	2021	Cooperation on Eurasian Connectivity	• A tripartite roadmap for deeper cooperation on the Lapis Lazuli Corridor.[53]
Blue Dot Network (BDN) *Members: US, Japan, Australia*	2019	Infrastructure development	• Helps members coordinate national approaches for infrastructure diplomacy, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region.[54]
Mekong-US Partnership *Members: US, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam.*	2020	Development of the Mekong sub-region through cooperation	• Aims to cooperate on economic connectivity, energy security, human capital development, transboundary water and natural resources management, and non-traditional security.

Minilateral/ Plurilateral	Year Created	Objectives	Significant Meetings and Outcomes
Three Seas Initiative (3SI), also known as the Baltic, Adriatic, Black Sea (BABS) Initiative *Members: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia*	2015-16	Co-operation in economic matters: energy, transport and communications infrastructure.	• Annual summits with heads of states. • Established the 3SIIF (Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund) in 2019 to target critical infrastructure investment in Europe.
Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) *Members: China, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam*	2016	Cooperation between the riparian states of the Lancang River and Mekong River.	• Three pillars of cooperation: political-security issues; economic affairs and sustainable development; and social affairs and people-to-people exchanges.[55]

Other forums have similarly targeted aims: trade-related arrangements, notably regional free trade agreements (FTAs), seek to liberalise trade and investment. Their provisions are enshrined in clear, measurable terms through legally binding agreements. Progress on FTAs can be examined by assessing the ratification status of the agreement, followed by studying the law and policy changes introduced by members to adopt FTA provisions.

The challenge in measuring outcomes from minilaterals is that the results of meetings are articulated in statements, press releases and memoranda of understandings; absent are concrete commitments, hard deadlines, and a discernible implementation framework. Nonetheless, such statements hold immense value in gauging the foreign policy trajectory of member countries, their preferred partnerships and alliances, and understanding the issues that have gained the highest level of salience between a group of countries.

Table 3: Minilaterals for Economic Cooperation (2016-2021)

Minilateral/ Plurilateral	Year Created	Objectives	Significant Meetings and Outcomes
Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), previously the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) *Members: Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, Vietnam*	2016	Free trade agreement between Pacific rim countries.	• The CPTPP has entered into force for Australia, Canada, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, Singapore and Vietnam.
Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEP) *Members: China, South Korea, Japan, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Philippines, Indonesia, Australia, New Zealand*	2020	Free trade agreement built upon ASEAN+1FTAs	• The RCEP will take effect after it has been ratified by at least six ASEAN and three non-ASEAN signatories. As of writing this brief, Japan, Singapore, China and Thailand have completed the ratification process.[56]

Minilateral/ Plurilateral	Year Created	Objectives	Significant Meetings and Outcomes
United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA)	2018-19	Replaced the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)	• The USMCA builds on the NAFTA. The new Agreement received bipartisan support in the US Senate.[57]

A common feature among minilaterals is the absence of a formal institutional structure, through a dedicated secretariat and brick-and-mortar offices. As such, these initiatives would not have the same institutional memory associated with multilaterals, which makes it significantly harder to track statements, meeting records, funds deployed, and outcomes achieved. Some minilaterals, such as the India-France-Australia trilateral dialogue, assess outcomes in progressive meetings. However, this does not seem to be a common feature across the board. While this may make it considerably harder to track implementation, the confidential nature of minilaterals is also seen as a strength as it allows members to discuss issues in an open, free and flexible manner. The ad hoc nature of discussions gives the freedom to member states to adopt the objectives and priorities of minilaterals to address the most pressing issues they face.

It is also observed that economic and trade related minilaterals (or plurilateral arrangements), often generate significant debate among the public of participating countries. The withdrawal of the US from the TPP and the withdrawal of India from RCEP, was a result of the opposition to entering these agreements from important stakeholders among the public. The TPP nevertheless survived the withdrawal of a key country from the agreement, and the remaining members entered into the largely intact CPTPP. Meanwhile, the affirmation received from the US public for the USMCA, or the renegotiated version of the NAFTA, played a significant role in the acceptance of the revised FTA. For other minilaterals, such as those on infrastructure, security and energy, there are fewer instances of a comparable level of debate among the public to engage with, or refrain from joining such initiatives.

The minilaterals studied in this section are mostly "coalitions of the willing" to address a specific issue, or engage with a defined geographic region, or achieve a specific objective. In comparison with multilaterals, they do not aim to pursue a larger, comparable goal of achieving international cooperation or devising norms for global governance. Nonetheless, minilaterals do have the intention to support and cooperate towards larger goals, such as adhering to international law, freedom of navigation, and finding peaceful settlement to disputes. In this regard, minilaterals may also play an important role—if members are willing—to generate consensus on new norms and rules.

> "Minilaterals not only aim for a specific objective, they also support larger goals such as adhering to international law."

Discussions on new areas of concern, such as critical and emerging technologies, cybersecurity and supply chain resilience, could lead to the devising of new norms between a select group of countries. New sectors and issues particularly related to 5G, digital trade, ocean acidification, climate change and climate finance, are being increasingly discussed in minilateral platforms. While the norms discussed may be applicable only to the members of a minilateral grouping, they can point to an emerging consensus on the form and substance of new regulations. However, there is also a concern that such norms may become fragmented, lack consistency, and rather contribute to a weakening of global governance in the long run. The future impact of minilaterals—or multilaterals and global governance—will be based on their ability to foster cooperation and collaboration on international issues, rather than leading to a fragmentation of global governance mechanisms.

Conclusion

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Minilaterals can help in framing targeted partnerships that can focus energies on shared interests and concerns.[58] Members have the option of engaging with different countries over separate frameworks, to coordinate policy approaches. At the same time, the proliferation of minilaterals can lead to a disjointed approach towards policy and strategy on a common issue. Too many frameworks can lead to fragmentation of action, and dilute outcomes which may, in turn, weaken cooperation on global issues. Some of the means by which minilaterals can be more effective is for members to commit to a joint vision, create benefits for members, and work towards clear, measurable, ambitious, and time-bound obligations.

More ways need to be explored on how minilaterals can supplement the work of multilaterals—and not subvert the work that is being done by these larger organisations. In climate action for instance, minilaterals can help countries to cooperate on research and implementation of technologies in the field of renewable energies. They can provide an inclusive platform for interacting with sub-national and non-government actors to formulate innovative solutions for global warming. In trade negotiations, minilaterals can fill gaps in multilateral frameworks, and allow countries to engage in political dialogue to resolve outstanding, global-level issues. In security cooperation, minilaterals are a useful tool of diplomacy as they complement existing bilateral partnerships, allow countries to focus on specific regions, while the closed-door nature of discussions in minilaterals helps retain confidentiality.

A forward-looking perspective needs to be implemented in deducing how minilaterals will affect security and strategic outcomes in diverse neighbourhoods, and how their operations and outcomes can be improved. Plurality and diversity of institutions can help accommodate the imperatives of different groupings; for instance, strategic alliances or minilaterals between developing countries, LDCs and vulnerable economies can help ensure that the discourse generated from minilaterals does not lean heavily towards the interests of major powers.

Minilaterals provide a pathway for increasing political dialogue and enhancing confidence-building between key partners. This in turn can widen opportunities for streamlining negotiations before multilateral platforms and work towards the larger goal of international cooperation and global governance. As part of the foreign policy toolkit, the operation of minilaterals can be improved by setting concrete and measurable objectives, and by utilising them judiciously to supplement efforts of existing multilateral frameworks.

Endnotes

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