



## Rise of Minilateralism

**For Prelims:** [Indo-Pacific](#), Squad, [World Trade Organization \(WTO\)](#), forum-shopping, [Trans-Pacific Partnership \(TPP\)](#), [Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership \(RCEP\)](#), [Quadrilateral Security Dialogue \(Quad\)](#), Trilateral Cooperation and Oversight Group (TCOG)

**For Mains:** [Chinese aggression](#), [Indo-Pacific](#), [World Trade Organization \(WTO\)](#), [Quadrilateral Security Dialogue \(Quad\)](#), [Multilateralism](#), [Global order](#), Importance and Challenges of Minilateralism

**Source:** [ORF](#)

### Why in News?

Recently, the rise of [Chinese aggression](#) in the [Indo-Pacific region](#) has prompted the formation of the **Squad** highlighting the growing importance of “minilateralism.”

- A squad is a **multilateral group** consisting of the US, Japan, Australia, and the Philippines.

### What is Minilateralism?

- **About:**
  - Minilaterals refer to **informal and more targeted initiatives** intended to **address specific threats**, contingencies, or security issues with a small number of states (usually three or four) sharing the same interest in resolving it within a finite period.
  - These arrangements focus **on a specific purpose** rather than broad inclusivity without a permanent or formal institutional structure.
  - **Outcomes** and commitments within minilaterals are **non-binding and voluntary**, relying on the willingness of the participating states.

Minilateral Grouping Type	Examples of Institutions in the Recent Spotlight
Partnership Minilaterals	Quad; Australia-UK-US trilateral security mechanism (AUKUS); Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP); India-Japan-Australia trilateral; India-Israel-UAE-US mechanism (I2U2)
Single-Power Led Minilaterals	Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC); Mekong-US Partnership (MUSP)
Sectoral Minilaterals	Digital Economy Partnership Agreement (DEPA); Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA)
Issue-Based Minilaterals	Just Energy Transition Partnerships (JETPs); Malacca Straits Patrols (MSP); Japan-UK-Italy Global Combat Air Program (GCAP)

#### ▪ **Reasons for Rise of Minilateralism:**

- The **evolving global order** and the changing nature of threats have posed challenges to the continued relevance of multilateral frameworks in resolving local conflicts and issues.
- The inconsistency in **US global leadership** and the rise of a **multipolar world**, along with geopolitical rivalry between the US and China, have highlighted fissures in multilateral organisations.
  - For instance, the **UN Security Council's** permanent membership reflects outdated power structures and ineffectiveness.
- Global institutions like the **World Trade Organization (WTO)** have **struggled to reach consensus on complex issues** due to diverse memberships and conflicting priorities.
- **Global problems** can have **regional variations**. Minilateral organizations can tailor solutions to the needs of a smaller group facing a particular challenge.
- The improvement of information and communications technology has facilitated the growth of minilaterals.
  - Informal communication methods have made it easier for states to engage in **flexible and targeted cooperation, supporting the growth of minilateralism.**
- The fallout of the **Covid-19** pandemic has further driven the emergence of **strategic minilaterals** and targeted ones focused on various issues, including **supply chain resilience**.
  - Example, India set up an electronic platform to help member countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to fight the Covid-19 pandemic.

#### ▪ **Contrast with Multilateralism:**

- Multilateralism involves a **formal effort by three or more states** to build trust and avoid conflict through the **institutionalisation and observation** of rules and norms for a common vision of regional or international order.
- Multilateral frameworks, such as the **World Trade Organization (WTO)**, emphasise broad and inclusive participation, unlike the more focused and flexible nature of minilaterals.

#### ▪ **Contrast with Regional Organisations:**

- **Minilateralism** focuses on **urgent, specific issues** and forms flexible, ad-hoc coalitions, like the Quad for **Indo-Pacific security** and economic concerns.
- **Regional organizations address a broad range of issues**, including economic integration and security, through structured and formal cooperation, such as the **European Union (EU)**.

## Squad and QUAD

#### ▪ **Formation and Role of the 'Squad':**

- To enhance the **Philippines' maritime security**, defense ministers from the **US, Japan, Australia**, and the Philippines convened in Hawaii to discuss advancing maritime cooperation. This new grouping has been informally named 'Squad'.
- It aims to strengthen **collaborative efforts** to counter Chinese aggression in the **South China Sea (SCS)**.
  - This formation is particularly significant given the **physical confrontations between Chinese and Philippine forces**, which have heightened tensions and prompted calls for **proportional countermeasures** by the Philippines.

#### ▪ **Comparison with the Quad:**

- The **Quad**, comprising the **US, Japan, Australia, and India**, aims to ensure a **secure and stable Indo-Pacific broadly**, while the 'Squad' specifically addresses the security dynamics in the SCS.

## What are the Advantages of Minilaterals?

- Minilaterals allow countries with shared interests and values to **bypass stagnant frameworks** and resolve issues of common concern. For example, the **Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal**

[\(BBIN\) Motor Vehicles Agreement \(MVA\)](#) was conceived even the SAARC failed to facilitate a similar initiative.

- Minilaterals provide a **flexible and modular approach** to international cooperation. They can be **formed quickly** to address specific issues and are not bound by the extensive formalities of multilateral frameworks.
  - This flexibility is evident in trade agreements like the [Trans-Pacific Partnership \(TPP\)](#) and the [Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership \(RCEP\)](#), which were concluded as minilateral agreements.
- The **voluntary and non-binding nature** of minilaterals allows for rapid decision-making and adaptation to changing circumstances.
- Minilaterals facilitate the creation of **issue-specific partnerships** and strategic alliances, particularly in regions like the Indo-Pacific.
  - Examples include the **Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)** and the **Trilateral Cooperation and Oversight Group (TCOG)**, which address regional security concerns more effectively than larger, more formal organisations.
- In case of disasters, **regional minilateral forums can promptly come to the rescue of affected nations**.
  - For example, India has sent the [Indian Naval Ship \(INS\) Kesari](#), carrying **food items and medical assistance teams**, to countries in the **southern Indian Ocean** to deal with Covid-19 pandemic as part of a [Mission Sagar initiative](#).

## What are the Issues Associated With Minilateralism?

- Minilaterals can lead to **forum shopping**, undermining **critical international** organisations, and **reducing accountability** in global governance.
  - By promoting voluntary commitments rather than legally binding ones, minilaterals may **weaken the enforcement** of international norms and standards.
- Preference for minilaterals may **reduce the incentive for countries to engage with multilateral frameworks**.
  - This can impact the relevance and effectiveness of organizations like the [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#) and the [United Nations Children's Fund \(UNICEF\)](#), which rely on multilateral cooperation for their programs.
- Minilateral success often **depends on leadership, political will**, and bilateral relations among members.
  - **Changes in political leadership or strained relations can derail minilateral initiatives**, as seen with the initial failure of the Quad due to leadership changes in Japan and Australia.
- Minilateral alliances may have **negative impacts** on countries **not part of the negotiations**, reducing their incentive to engage with existing multilateral efforts.
  - This was observed in the [Doha trade negotiations](#), where the focus on plurilateral initiatives hindered broader multilateral progress.

## Note

- **Forum shopping** happens when people choose specific groups where they can push their policies forward, based on the **favourable rules or characteristics** of those places.

## Way Forward

- **Integration with Multilaterals:** Minilateralism **should supplement** rather than undermine the work of larger multilateral organisations.
  - For example, in [climate action](#), minilateralism can facilitate cooperation on [renewable energy technologies](#) and engage **sub-national** and [non-government actors](#) to develop innovative solutions.
  - For example, the International Solar Alliance (ISA) is an action-oriented, member-driven, collaborative platform for increased deployment of solar energy technologies.

- **Forward-Looking Perspectives: A forward-looking approach** is essential to understand how minilateralism will impact security and strategic outcomes in various regions.
  - Ensuring **plurality and diversity** in minilateral institutions can help accommodate different groupings' needs, and address issues of shared interest.
  - For example, under [Security and Growth for All in the Region \(SAGAR\)](#) India seeks to **deepen economic and security cooperation with its maritime neighbours** and assist in building their maritime security capabilities.
- **Clear Objectives:** To maximise their effectiveness, minilateralism should **set concrete and measurable objectives**.
  - This approach will enhance their role as a **tool of diplomacy** and help **streamline negotiations** before multilateral platforms.
  - The rise of the 'Squad' and similar minilateral groupings **highlights a strategic adaptation** to the evolving security landscape in the Indo-Pacific.

**Drishiti Mains Question:**

Q. Assess the relevance of minilateralism in contemporary global governance. Discuss its advantages and limitations.

## UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Question (PYQ)

**Prelims:**

**Q. In which one of the following groups are all the four countries members of G20? (2020)**

- (a) Argentina, Mexico, South Africa and Turkey
- (b) Australia, Canada, Malaysia and New Zealand
- (c) Brazil, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Vietnam
- (d) Indonesia, Japan, Singapore and South Korea

**Ans: (a)**

**Q. Consider the following statements: (2016)**

1. New Development Bank has been set up by APEC.
2. The headquarters of the New Development Bank is in Shanghai.

**Which of the statements given above is/are correct?**

- (a) 1 only
- (b) 2 only
- (c) Both 1 and 2
- (d) Neither 1 nor 2

**Ans: (b)**

**Mains:**

**Q. What do you understand by 'The String of Pearls'? How does it impact India? Briefly outline the steps taken by India to counter this. (2013)**

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