



## Minilateralism Transforming Global Diplomacy

*This editorial is based on “[Grand Strategy | How minilateralism is reshaping global order](#)” which was published in Hindustan Times on 08/12/2024. The article brings into picture the rise of minilateralism, highlighting how it fosters targeted partnerships to address regional challenges, with India playing a pivotal role in advancing multipolarity. While offering agile solutions, minilateralism’s limited scope may hinder the resolution of broader global issues.*

**For Prelims:** [Minilateralism](#), [Multilateralism](#), [Quadrilateral Security Dialogue](#), [Doha Development Agenda](#), [Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership](#), [China’s Belt and Road Initiative](#), [Covid-19 pandemic](#), [Australia-UK-US \(AUKUS\)](#), [Russia-Ukraine war](#), [Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership](#), [India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement](#), [India-Australia-Japan Supply Chain Resilience Initiative](#).

**For Mains:** Global Order Shifting towards Minilateralism from Multilateralism, Role of India in the Rise of Minilateralism

[Minilateralism](#) is reshaping the global order by fostering partnerships among countries to address specific regional challenges, **moving away from the slower, often ineffective processes of multilateralism**. India plays a pivotal role in this shift, leveraging minilateral frameworks to advance multipolarity and secure its strategic interests. Driven by a desire for trusted partnerships and secure trade, **minilateralism offers countries an alternative to the uncertainties of global governance**. While they provide agile and focused solutions, their limited scope may hinder the resolution of broader global issues.

### What is Minilateralism?

- **Minilateralism** refers to the formation of **smaller, more focused coalitions or alliances involving a limited number of countries** to address specific global, regional, or issue-based challenges.
  - These coalitions are usually formed **among nations with shared interests, goals, or concerns**, allowing for quicker decision-making and more targeted outcomes.
- **Example:** The [Quadrilateral Security Dialogue \(Quad\)](#) involving the **U.S., India, Japan, and Australia** is an example of minilateralism, focused on ensuring a free and open Indo-Pacific.

### How is Minilateralism Different from Multilateralism?

Aspect	Minilateralism	Multilateralism
<b>Number of Participants</b>	Few countries (e.g., 3-10 members).	Broad participation (often global, e.g., UN, WTO).
<b>Focus</b>	Specific issues or regional challenges.	Broad, global challenges requiring universal consensus.

<b>Decision-Making</b>	Faster and more flexible due to fewer members.	Slower due to the need for consensus among many.
<b>Scope of Issues</b>	Narrow, well-defined objectives (e.g., security, trade).	Wide-ranging, addressing global concerns (e.g., climate change).
<b>Inclusivity</b>	Limited to like-minded or strategically aligned nations.	Open to all nations regardless of ideology.
<b>Efficiency</b>	High, as fewer members lead to quicker actions.	Lower, as diverse interests can delay decisions.

## Why is the Global Order Shifting towards Minilateralism from Multilateralism?

- **Fragmentation of Global Consensus:** Multilateralism often struggles to achieve consensus due to the diverging interests of diverse member states, leading to inefficiency and inaction.
  - This paralysis is evident in the **WTO's inability to finalize the [Doha Development Agenda](#)** after over two decades.
  - As a result, countries are opting for smaller, issue-specific coalitions like the **[Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership \(CPTPP\)](#)**.
- **Power Asymmetry and Emerging Geopolitical Rivalries:** The **dominance of major powers in multilateral institutions** sidelines smaller nations, creating dissatisfaction and mistrust.
  - For instance, **[China's Belt and Road Initiative \(BRI\)](#)** is reshaping global finance outside of traditional multilateral frameworks like the **World Bank**.
  - Also, smaller groups such as the **[G7](#)** have emerged as counterbalances, with recent G7 statements addressing China's economic coercion.
- **Efficiency and Speed in Crisis Management:** Minilateral frameworks enable faster responses to crises compared to multilateral setups, which often face bureaucratic delays.
  - During the **[Covid-19 pandemic](#)**, multilateral bodies like the **WHO were criticized for delayed responses**, while the Quad countries agreed to provide over **1.2 billion doses of Covid vaccines** globally.
  - This highlights the agility of minilateral arrangements in addressing emergencies.
- **Focused and Tailored Approaches:** Minilateralism allows countries to collaborate on specific, actionable goals without broader constraints.
  - For instance, the **[Australia-UK-US \(AUKUS\)](#)** pact addresses **regional security and technological sharing** in the Indo-Pacific, bypassing the inefficiencies of broader multilateral agreements like the **[UN Security Council](#)**.
- **Response to Structural Shifts in Global Power:** The rise of regional powers like China and India has led to the creation of minilateral platforms to address regional interests directly.
  - The **[Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership \(RCEP\)](#)**, excluding the U.S., shows how Asian economies are bypassing traditional multilateral systems dominated by the West.
- **Crisis of Legitimacy in Multilateral Institutions:** The inability of institutions like the **UN to address critical issues (e.g., the [Russia-Ukraine war](#))** has eroded their credibility.
  - The growing resistance from host nations against **[UN peacekeeping missions](#)**, seen in **Sudan's rejection of UNAMID, Mali's forced withdrawal of MINUSMA, and the Democratic Republic of Congo's push for MONUSCO's exit**, reflects the loss of credibility.

## What Role does India Play in the Rise of Minilateralism?

- **Leadership in Regional Security:** India is positioning itself as a key player in minilateral security frameworks to counterbalance China's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific.
  - Through the **Quad (India, USA, Japan, and Australia)**, India is working on maritime security, countering illegal fishing, and ensuring freedom of navigation in the region.
  - Simultaneously, **India remains engaged in [SAARC \(South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation\)](#)**, focusing on regional stability, counterterrorism, and economic cooperation.
- **Economic Partnerships Through Targeted Agreements:** India has been proactive in minilateral trade and economic agreements to enhance regional supply chains and reduce dependency on China.

- For instance, under [India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement](#), both countries agreed to **double the trade in non-petroleum products to USD 100 billion by 2030**.
- **Strategic Technology Collaborations:** India is leveraging multilateral platforms to advance its technology and innovation capabilities.
  - For example, **India's partnership with Japan and the USA under the Quad** focuses on **semiconductor manufacturing**.
    - India will establish a **multi-material semiconductor fabrication unit in Jewar, Uttar Pradesh**, following an agreement with the US.
- **Climate Leadership through Specialized Coalitions:** India leads multilateral climate action initiatives, such as the [International Solar Alliance \(ISA\)](#), focusing on solar energy solutions for developing nations.
  - Also, the [Global Biofuels Alliance](#), launched during **India's G20 presidency**, marks a significant step towards sustainable energy transition.
  - This shows India's leadership in climate-focused multilateral frameworks to tackle specific global challenges.
- **Building South-South Cooperation:** India is at the forefront of fostering multilateral South-South cooperation to promote development in the Global South.
  - The [India-Brazil-South Africa \(IBSA\) Dialogue Forum](#) focuses on poverty alleviation, trade, and sustainable development.
  - **In 2023, India hosted the Voice of the Global South Summit**, bringing together countries to discuss global inequalities and reforms in multilateral systems.
- **Advancing Supply Chain Resilience:** India has become a crucial player in multilateral efforts to build resilient and diversified global supply chains.
  - Through the [India-Australia-Japan Supply Chain Resilience Initiative \(SCRI\)](#), India is facilitating global supply chain diversification **with India as a major beneficiary**.

## What Challenges does India Face in Navigating Multilateralism?

- **Balancing Strategic Autonomy with Partnerships:** India's historical **non-alignment policy conflicts** with deeper alignment required in multilateral frameworks.
  - For instance, **QUAD Alliance** raises concerns about India's **strategic autonomy** and its balancing act with Russia, a long-term defense partner.
  - India procured **36% of its defense equipment from Russia in 2023**, while simultaneously engaging in Quad maritime exercises with the U.S.
  - This duality complicates India's ability to commit fully to any singular multilateral agenda.
- **Managing Diverging Interests Among Partners:** Multilateral frameworks often involve countries with conflicting priorities, **making consensus-building challenging for India**.
  - In the Quad, **the US's strong anti-China stance contrasts with India's cautious approach** due to its economic ties with China, as its largest trading partner in 2023-24.
  - Such divergences can dilute the effectiveness of joint actions and strain India's leadership role within these alliances.
- **Uneven Focus on Key Issues:** Multilateral frameworks often focus narrowly on specific goals, sidelining broader issues critical to India's interests.
  - For instance, the Quad emphasizes Indo-Pacific security but offers limited collaboration on **climate change or WTO reforms**, key areas for India.
  - India, in pursuit of its sustainability goals, requires substantial climate finance, estimating the need for around **\$2.5 trillion for its climate change by 2030**, underscoring the need for diversified international cooperation.
- **Resource and Capacity Constraints:** India's institutional capacity and financial resources are stretched thin, limiting its ability to lead or actively participate in multiple multilateral forums.
  - For example, **managing roles in the International Solar Alliance, the Quad, and the BRICS** simultaneously requires significant diplomatic and financial bandwidth.
  - **India's defense budget, at \$72.6 billion in 2023, is already strained**, leaving limited room for additional commitments.
- **Risk of Marginalization in Global Institutions:** Over-reliance on multilateralism risks **sidelining India in traditional multilateral platforms** where larger reforms are necessary.
  - For instance, **India's push for UN Security Council reforms** remains stalled, with little

- progress despite its active role in minilateralism.
- This raises concerns that focusing on smaller alliances might undermine its long-term goals for global institutional reform.
- **Lack of Cohesive Domestic Consensus:** India faces domestic opposition to deeper minilateral commitments due to concerns about sovereignty and over-dependence on foreign alliances.
  - For instance, **debates around joining RCEP highlighted** fears about adverse impacts on domestic industries, **leading India to opt out in 2020.**
  - This reflects internal challenges in aligning national interests with international commitments.
- **Overlapping Frameworks and Duplication:** The proliferation of minilateral platforms risks duplicating efforts and creating inefficiencies.
  - For example, **India is part of both the Quad and I2U2**, which overlap in areas like technology and infrastructure cooperation.
  - Managing coherence among these frameworks is challenging, especially as partners prioritize different agendas in each grouping.

## What Measures can India Adopt to Balance Minilateralism with Multilateralism?

- **Champion Reforms in Multilateral Institutions:** India can advocate for reforms in multilateral platforms like the **UN, WTO, and IMF** to make them more inclusive and efficient. ]
  - It should push for **UN Security Council reforms**, leveraging its growing global stature and alliances in the Global South.
  - By collaborating with minilateral partners like **Brazil and South Africa in forums such as IBSA**, India can create momentum for these reforms.
- **Strengthen Regional Multilateral Frameworks:** India should work to revitalize and strengthen **SAARC and BIMSTEC** while using minilateralism to address specific regional issues.
  - For example, India could propose linking the **Quad's maritime initiatives with BIMSTEC's blue economy projects** to ensure broader regional cooperation.
- **Develop a "Hybrid Diplomacy" Model:** India can create a structured hybrid approach where **minilateralism complements multilateralism, ensuring neither undermines the other.**
  - For instance, India could expand the **International Solar Alliance (ISA)** by integrating more countries from the Global South while using smaller coalitions like the Quad to expedite technology transfers.
- **Establish Leadership in Global South Coalitions:** India can focus on leading the Global South in multilateral forums while engaging in targeted minilateral initiatives for specific challenges.
  - Building on the G20 presidency in 2023, India could **institutionalize the Voice of the Global South Summit** as an annual multilateral platform.
  - **With over 60% of the world's population in the Global South**, India can act as a bridge between smaller coalitions and larger multilateral bodies.
- **Align Minilateral Agendas with Multilateral Goals:** India can align its minilateral initiatives with broader multilateral goals like the **UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**.
  - For example, India could integrate the **Quad's technology-sharing initiatives with UNDP programs** to achieve SDG 9 (industry, innovation, and infrastructure).
  - India's domestic renewable energy targets, aimed at 500 GW capacity by 2030, can also be **aligned with ISA's global solar goals.**
- **Leverage Economic Diplomacy for Multilateral Impact:** India should use its minilateral economic partnerships to influence multilateral trade policies.
  - For instance, India could integrate the **India-UAE-Israel trilateral trade initiatives** with larger trade blocs like the **African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)**.
  - **With AfCFTA covering 54 countries**, this linkage can amplify India's economic and multilateral influence.
- **Enhance Regional Connectivity for Multilateral Integration:** India can use its leadership in regional connectivity projects to bridge the gap between minilateral and multilateral initiatives.
  - For example, India could expand the **India-Bangladesh-Nepal cross-border energy trade initiative** to include **BIMSTEC countries**, aligning with broader multilateral energy cooperation.
  - India is exporting **1,160 MW of electricity to Bangladesh**, showcasing its potential as a

regional energy hub.

- **Promote Plurilateralism as a Bridging Mechanism:** India could advocate for plurilateral agreements as an intermediate step between **minilateralism and multilateralism**.
  - For example, India could push for a plurilateral agreement on **global vaccine manufacturing standards**, building on its Quad Vaccine Initiative.
  - India is already a **global vaccine leader**, producing over **60% of the world's vaccines**, giving it credibility to lead such efforts.
- **Advocate for Multilateral Digital Governance:** India can use its leadership in minilateral digital partnerships to push for global digital governance norms through the UN and WTO.
  - For example, India could propose linking the **India-EU Connectivity Partnership with multilateral frameworks like the Digital Public Goods Alliance**.
  - **India's Aadhaar system**, the largest biometric database globally, could be a blueprint for scalable digital governance solutions.

## Conclusion

Minilateralism is reshaping global governance by **offering agile solutions to regional challenges through targeted partnerships**. India's leadership in this shift, particularly in frameworks like the **Quad**, enhances its global standing while securing strategic interests. However, the limited scope of these coalitions poses challenges for addressing broader global issues. To strike a balance, **India should champion reforms in multilateral institutions, adopt a hybrid diplomacy model**, and align minilateral agendas with broader global goals, ensuring both regional and global cooperation thrive.

### **Drishti Mains Question:**

"Minilateralism is emerging as a dominant approach in global governance, offering flexible and focused solutions to regional and global challenges". Discuss the advantages and limitations of minilateral frameworks.

## 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)

PDF Reference URL: <https://www.drishtias.com/current-affairs-news-analysis-editorials/news-editorials/10-12-2024/print>

