



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
Number of Participants	Few countries (e.g., 3-10 members).	Broad participation (often global, e.g., UN, WTO).
Focus	Specific issues or regional	Broad, global challenges requiring

	challenges.	universal consensus.
Decision-Making	Faster and more flexible due to fewer members.	Slower due to the need for consensus among many.
Scope of Issues	Narrow, well-defined objectives (e.g., security, trade).	Wide-ranging, addressing global concerns (e.g., climate change).
Inclusivity	Limited to like-minded or strategically aligned nations.	Open to all nations regardless of ideology.
Efficiency	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)

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