

From Multilateralism to Minilateralism- A Conceptual Paradigm

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Abstract

Scholars have always struggled with the dilemma of interdependence in a world where nation-states have been the basic unit of political organization for over two centuries. As the primacy of the states continued and complex powers shift recurred, the initial optimism in a world government has come crashing down. Scholars have since then turned into diplomatic interaction between the states to analyze how they relate to each other and form cooperative international organizations, among them the multilaterals and its new avatar, the minilaterals. Considering that it is not the absence of platforms for the states to relate each other, but their astonishing diversity that concerns us, we must look into efficiency of each one of them and why states have prioritized some above the others.

Keywords: Multilateralism, Nation States, Political Organization, Minilateralism, International Cooperation, Diversity of Interests

Multilateralism- A historical and qualitative perspective

The multilateral institutions since the Second World War have been instituted to formalize global norms and sustain a certain sense of predictability to the international system. Structurally, such forums like the UN and WTO have an institutional format with an independent bureaucracy and delegation from a large number of countries. Miles Kahler (1992), one of the earliest scholars to draw distinction between multilaterals and other forms, argues that the vision of multilaterals since 1945 was driven by increasing decolonization of sovereign small states. The formal institutional designs of most post-war multilaterals were said to supplant the disadvantage emerging and small states have faced from the bilateralism of the 1930s and give comparably better opportunities for those who want to accept greater responsibilities and be established powers

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In the qualitative sphere, multilateralism generally involves three features: generalized organizing principles, indivisibility and diffuse reciprocity. Generalized organizing principles involve those principles that do not narrow down to the particularistic interests of each country, but specify certain conducts for ‘a class of action’ that must be adhered by each nation. Indivisibility requires the member countries to accept that there exist some socially constructed public goods. Diffuse responsibility means that member countries do not expect immediate rewards for their efforts and that they would expect only a ‘rough equivalence of the benefits in the aggregate and over time’. These qualities, as listed by Ruggie (1992), is more often contrasted with preferential bilateralism where states are allowed to conduct relations on a case-by-case basis tailored to the needs of both countries and where there is always a balancing of responsibility between them.

To see how these qualities are worked out, we must differentiate between the different understanding of this concept as provided by Wedgwood (2002) i.e., multilateralism in the operation and multilateralism in the authorization. The first category includes countries pooling their resource together, as in the case of military act carried out by a joint force. The later one known as ‘diplomatic multilateralism’ doesn’t involve the participation of all countries, but requires a multilateral institution to grant authority to a state or a small group of states to conduct the operation as was the case of American involvement in the Gulf war. This distinction is important because it allows us to see how some celebrated institutions are more often unilateralism or bilateralism under multilateral cover as has been the case of UN Security council. Questions on Nuclear Non-Proliferation during the Cold War were, for instance, mediated as a bilateral issue between USA and USSR within the larger multinational international order. Putting the qualitative characteristics of multilaterals to test in those situations would give us a hint of why majority of the post-war international multilateral orders have been plagued by instances of bilateralism and unilateralism, a difference that is missed once only superficial quantitative characteristics are analyzed. Critiques against multilateralism could be broadly categorized into two dimensions. The first one given by the realists is that the qualitative characteristics of multilateralism do not fit into the hierarchical power configuration of international system where greater powers avoid being scrutinized by smaller powers. The second one given by the neoliberals problematizes the inefficiencies of large groups with diverse members and conventional multilateral strategy by which norms are to be agreed upon by a large pool of countries. Moises Naim (2009) has thus said

that since 192 countries signed the United Nations Millennium Declaration in 2000, no multilateral initiatives have been successfully endorsed and practicalized due to these issues. These critiques would remain at the center of evaluating why certain states opt for more improvised variety of multilaterals in the form of minilaterals.

Minilateralism- An improvisation

Minilateralism is a relatively later phenomenon that has come as a result of increasing difficulty in maintaining consensus-based traditional multiculturalism that reduces outcomes to the lowest denominator. They are informal, flexible, functional and voluntary frameworks with varied “situational interests, shared values or relevant capabilities” (Patrick, 2016). Though the number of minilateral forums has spontaneously spiked over the last few years, Minilateralism as a concept has been in existence for a long time in a disguised format. Miles Kahler (1992), writing in the wake of cold war, has assessed how large forms of collective action was morphed into smaller and more informal forms of collaboration between some countries within the post-war multilateral institutions. For him and others, those early forums were a mixture of multilateralism, bilateralism and also minilateralism. Similar assessment was also done by Martin (1992), except that she was primarily thinking about groups within the multilateral organization and not organizations like G-7, formed in 1973 and which is often considered as the first instance of pure minilaterals. Thus, even recent scholarship in the field has characterized minilateralism as just another variant of multilateralism, while others like Stewart Patrick (2015) has called it the “New Multilateralism”.

In the quantitative sphere, minilaterals are just a subset of multilateralism, except that they logically point to a lesser number of participants than multilateralism. But the basic purpose behind every minilateral forum is to use the least number of actors (known as the magic number) to achieve the greatest impact on problem-solving in the group formation. This magic number could vary considerably and can be lower as three in the case of trilaterals like Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines Cooperation (IMPC) and can be higher as twenty in the case of economic groups like G-20. This numeric aspect brings us into the basic qualitative feature of minilateral forums i.e., their relative exclusivity. Contrary to the inclusive approach of multilateralism that comes from their focus on indivisibility and generalized organizing principles, minilateral forums follow a critical mass approach, meaning that they bring to the table only those countries that are relevant

and makes the biggest impact on the issue in question. Smaller number of stakeholders further means that they are relatively more flexible and that fewer sets of interests are involved in the forums.

Kenneth Oye (1986) consider minilaterals as solving the difficulties of conditional cooperation in multilateral institutions: lower feasibility of sanctions, lower transparency and control over other's action and inability to identify common interests. It must be emphasized here that the greatest impact of minilaterals is thus in the likeness and robustness of their cooperation and not in the expansiveness of the gains incurred from it as an effective multilateral forum would usually trump in that aspect. As noted by John Chamberlin (1982) in his critique of Olson (1968), collective arrangement of more countries could often produce more superior results as in the case of climate laws and the laws of the sea like the UNCLOS. Olson's argument that the size of the group diminishes optimal amount of collective good only holds when goods are characterized by crowding and not in these instances where efficiency of the goods is directly proportional to the number of those following these laws. Kahler (1992) is thus vindicated that even big powers would make side-payments to encourage other nations to accept their agreement.

The choice of informality and institutionalization

Minilateral forums are also informal and functional- meaning that they typically have a targeted approach to address specific challenges and that they lack institutional processes that are built around rules and drawn-out-negotiations. This ambiguity is beneficial in the sense that "broad aims and vague language provide space to maneuver among members that cannot agree on appropriate actions, even if there is consensus on reasonable interests" (Anuar & Hussain, 2021). Minilaterals often involve treaties that are negotiated, but more or less they have "pledge and review" arrangements where nations take certain commitments and they are then submitted for other country's assessment. This characteristic feature of minilateral has allowed it to be a regular format for governance in domains like outer space, maritime security and cyber security that are increasingly contested and congested. Countries who are averse to abide by formal mechanism have made use of such flexible and functional forums to supplant rival parties as is clearly evident in the case of Lancang-Mekong Cooperation formed by China and Mekong-US partnership under American administration. However, low institutionalization has its own problems in the form of

loss of focus, shorter life expectancy and lack of organizing frameworks to coordinate inconsistent and unstructured progress of each member. This issue would loom large in the security sector where certainty of commitments would favour formal security alliances in any day.

The relevance of institutionalization to the efficacy and progress of the group is undisputed that many, including Hardin (1982) in his well authored “Collective Actions”, see them as resolving the lack of thick network of mutual interactions in large multilateral regimes. Be that as it may, institutionalization is not and need not be the privilege of multilaterals as studies indicate that the institutionalization of organizations like BRICS has enhanced their effectiveness in the fields of trade and anti-terrorism. Some minilaterals like the India-France-Australia dialogue often conduct assessment of their effectiveness, but such developments have not been institutionalized enough to be counted as a broad pattern. Moreover, the reliance on informal links and inter-personal relationship makes them vulnerable to changes in domestic politics, regional environment and ultimately to buy-ins from the government of the day. Most multilaterals usually have an institutional structure and long-time life expectancy as they are driven by the diffuse responsibility and generalized organizing principles. These principals meant that member states do not see multilaterals as mere functional organizations where they can take advantage of the resources of the other nations, but also as organs of global norm creation and community mediation. Quite contrastingly, the same is a problem for minilaterals as they are no longer able to function when geopolitical advantage of the said country and their ability to contribute to substantial policy issue are diminished. Lack of institutional designs to downsize the group or add an alternative member aggravate the problem. Though fresh minilaterals could be an alternative, they run the risk of duplicating policy efforts.

Disaggregated and multi-level focus

Another feature of minilaterals is that they breakdown problems into specific dimensions than addressing the expansive and comprehensive box of global issues at once. In this instance, they can be equated with what Patrick (2015) has called “disaggregated multilateralism” that pursue “global governance in pieces” and result in a “regime complex”. A regime complex is not just about a single comprehensive treaty, but a cluster of collaborative activities and arrangements. A relative example can be the prescribed sector-specific accords among a subset of WTO members

after the failure of Doha talks on trade liberalization. Multi-stakeholder and ‘trans-governmental’ cooperation of minilaterals are a further distinction from traditional multilateralism. The cooperation between the countries in the forum increasingly takes place outside the confines of external ministries among the transnational network of government officials, cooperate institutions and NGOs. The newly emerged forum of India-US-UAE-Israel is an epitome of prioritizing non-governmental relations in the form of joint production, business to business collaboration and people to people interaction. They involve private sector, local governments and civil society groups from each country working in partnerships. The emergence of such a feature concurs with the new reality of sovereign states trying to tame the globalization as they continue to disaggregate and their subjects continue to engage independently with elements from other states. Technical agencies and issue-specific specific experts would score here more than the diplomats whose agency is limited to facilitation.

Questions of justice and legitimacy

While these benefits are unprecedented and revolutionary, a broader issue of concern is that the structure of minilateral forums lack procedural justice, face trust deficit from countries that are not part of the group and are morally problematic. Prasanth Parameswaran (2018) has pointed out how negative perceptions of the groups being targeted at some or following the path of unilateralism would hinder legitimacy of all the minilaterals in place. This has plagued organizations such as the Indo-Pacific Quad that have raised concerns among countries like China. Avoiding such trust deficits would require, as stated by Joshua Cohen and Charles Sabel, a process by which countries of the minilateral group could explain the efficacy of their acts to the larger multilateral group of nations who can in turn acknowledge their legitimacy, a kind of “diplomatic multilateralism”. Another solution is the “inclusive minilateralism” propounded by Robyn Eckersley (2012) on the question of climate negotiations. They are based on the principle of “common but differentiated representation” within the parameters of UNFCCC. All of them however point to harnessing the synergy between multilateralism and minilateralism without each one of the two subverting the work of others.

The synergy between Multilateralism and Minilateralism

Even though minilaterals do not strictly pursue the goal of international cooperation and global governance, scholars maintain that they should be considered as a bridge building component of larger multilateral world order. Taking due note of deficiencies in both minilateral and multilateral setup, William Tow (2018) had made it clear that minilaterals shouldn't be seen as "completely replacing existing alliances institutions but as complementing them". Minilaterals could be harnessed to focus on niche areas where not all countries have the ability to focus due to capacity constraints, but which could be later taken up multilateral forums for further institutionalization. Technologically and financially advanced countries could jointly explore potentials for research and development of technologies, interact with cooperative sector and big tech to provide innovative solutions for multilateral institutions to address issues like climate change. Paris negotiations of 2015 were given an unprecedented impetus when US-Chinese agreement on reduction of emissions was finalized in November 2014. If not a minilateral, the agreement signaled how similar exclusive agreements would stimulate dynamism to multilateral process by building trust and exploring potential comprise between countries whose actions count. On the other hand, minilaterals between developing, poor and vulnerable economies would provide them with enough strategic hedge against the domination of bigger interests in multilateral forums.

The fears of multilateral forums becoming obsolete are also rather unwarranted as they are always desired by even minilateral states looking for legitimacy of their actions, information advantage and larger burden sharing. Countries such as US and Russia looking for legitimacy in multilateral forums have recognized minilaterals to explore ties with emerging powers, often using them to bring close allies and neutral friends together under their lead in an attempt to create more expansive diplomatic advantage in multilateral forums. Further, it is the rule-based framework and legally binding treaties of multilaterals like UN Convention on the Law of the Sea that facilitates minilateral cooperation. Simultaneously seeking the efficiency of minilaterals and recognition of multilaterals is often expected not just from a liberal institutionalist perspective, but also from the realist understanding of international relations.

The fates of minilaterals like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue for security cooperation, Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) for cooperation in connectivity and infrastructure, and

Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnerships Agreement (RCEP) in the domain of economic cooperation are telling examples of the pros and cons emanating from the minilateral revolution. A glance into the developments surrounding them would show instances of their flexibility, multistakeholder focus and robust dividends but also instances where they have shown little compactness vis-à-vis domestic backlash, change in governments and power-shifts. Wholly, development of a new foreign policy toolkit in the form of minilaterals would mean that there are much more options that accommodate the imperatives of different countries. While this work has attempted to draw a conceptual paradigm of the evolution from multilateralism into minilateralism, there is much to be analyzed to see how various groupings engage with each other and how did they relate to geopolitical scenario in which they are formed. They will have bearings upon on how we understand the conceptual world of these foreign policy instruments. More research should explore pathways by which countries could engage with minilateral developments in a way that do not cancel the years of work multilateral groups have undertaken. Preliminary analyses of concrete objectives and their geopolitical effects, periodical assessments and an understanding among the countries on the fate of these forums during a potential crisis are some of the points for the member countries to think about.

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