



# FROM MULTILATERALISM TO MINILATERALISM: ASSESSING PAKISTAN'S PREDICAMENTS AMIDST GLOBAL TRANSITION

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TRANSITION

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## ABSTRACT

In the contemporary era, global governance has shifted from traditional multilateral mechanisms to increasingly influential minilateral arrangements. This shift stems from the perceived inefficacy of multilateral frameworks, adjustments in global power balances, and evolving partnership dynamics among nations. This paper examines Pakistan's position within this evolving framework, which is now predominantly shaped by minilateralism. In this recalibration of the international system, the United States has found a regional partner in India, aligning closely with it as a counterweight to China. While India approaches minilateralism as a calculated game of chess, prioritising incremental gains and regional dominance, Pakistan views it through a poker-like framework, aiming for mutually beneficial outcomes. This distinction highlights contrasting national priorities in shaping regional partnerships and maximising strategic advantages. The study explores the strategic isolation Pakistan faces due to its limited inclusion in minilateral groupings that significantly influence regional and global power structures. By assessing the relevance and implications of this new governance model for Pakistan, the paper identifies key weaknesses that require attention and highlights potential advantages Pakistan could leverage within this redefined global order. The study concludes with recommendations for effectively dealing with the shifting geopolitical landscape to enhance Pakistan's prosperity and security.

*Keywords: Multilateralism, Minilateralism, Global order, strategic isolation, emerging alliances*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION .....	1
2. MULTILATERALISM AND MINILATERALISM: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK.....	3
3. DRIVERS OF THE SHIFT TO MINILATERALISM .....	8
3.1 Ineffectiveness of Traditional Multilateral Institutions .....	9
3.2 Adapting to Geopolitical Shifts.....	10
3.3 Economic Security and Innovation through Issue-Specific Blocs .....	10
3.4 Agility in Responding to Global Security and Technological Shifts....	11
3.5 Desire for Strategic Sovereignty Specifically in the Asia-Pacific .....	12
3.6 Need for Tailored Responses to Global Challenges.....	13
4. KEY TRENDS AND INITIATIVES IN MINILATERALISM .....	14
4.1 Quadrilateral Security Dialogue.....	16
4.2 AUKUS.....	17
4.3 I2U2.....	18
4.4 BRICS .....	18
4.5. Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) .....	19
5. PAKISTAN PREDICAMENTS AMID THIS GLOBAL TRANSITION .....	21
5.1 Strategic Isolation and Exclusion from Key Alliances .....	21
5.2 Pakistan's Trade Challenges and Loss of Clout in Regional Development Initiatives .....	26
5.3 Global Governance Challenges and Pakistan's Quest for Diplomatic Relevance .....	29
6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PAKISTAN TO ADDRESS THE CHALLENGES OF MINILATERALISM.....	32
6.1 Enhancing Security Cooperation .....	34
6.2 Economic Opportunities .....	35
6.3 Countering India.....	36
6.4 Balancing Between China and USA.....	37
7. CONCLUSION.....	39

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Drivers of the Shift to Minilateralism.....	09
Figure 2: QUAD - Strategic Alliance of the US, India, Japan, and Australia.....	22
Figure 3: AUKUS Strategic Alignment in the Indo-Pacific.....	24
Figure 4: The Geopolitics of AUKUS.....	25
Figure 5: I2U2 Alliance.....	27
Figure 6: Route of India-Middle East Food Corridor.....	28
Figure 7: BRICS share in key global metrics after expansion.....	31
Figure 7: Pakistan at the Crossroads of Regional Alliances.....	35

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Conceptualising Multilateralism and Minilateralism.....	07
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# 1. INTRODUCTION

The post-World War II era has been characterised by ascendancy of multilateralism, a mechanism designed to foster collective action, stability, and shared governance, via international institutions, such as the United Nations (UN), International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Trade Organisation (WTO).<sup>1</sup> These formal institutions with autonomous bureaucracies were created to establish an all-inclusive framework for deal with global changes. However, the efficacy of multilateralism has come under increased scrutiny in the contemporary era, with geopolitical tensions and strategic rivalries challenging its ability to effectively respond to emerging issues.<sup>2</sup> Resultantly, the world is witnessing a profound shift towards minilateralism, promoting small, issue-specific alliances that are better equipped to address the complexities of fragmented international system, exhibiting greater agility.<sup>3</sup>

Notably, the very powers that once championed the multilateral world order, are driving this profound realignment towards minilateralism. For example, exclusive and strategically-focused groups, such as the QUAD, AUKUS, and I2U2, are backed and advanced by the US.<sup>4</sup> However, this transformation is not merely tactical, highlighting a deliberate response by Western powers to curtail the challenges posed by rising Chinese influence. When viewed within this context, minilateralism offer the

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<sup>1</sup> Madeleine O. Hosli et al., *The Future of Multilateralism: Global Cooperation and International Organizations* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Raisina Debates, "Addressing the Inefficacy of Multilateralism — Are Regional Minilaterals the Answer?," Observer Research Foundation, December 28, 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/addressing-inefficacy-multilateralism>.

<sup>3</sup> Felix Heiduk and Thomas Wilkins, "Minilateralism and Pathways to Institutional Progression: Alliance Formation or Cooperative Security Governance?," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, October 28, 2024, 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2024.2416566>.

<sup>4</sup> Iqra Siddique, "Implications of AUKUS, I2U2, and BRICS for Pakistan," IPRI - Islamabad Policy Research Institute, August 21, 2023, <https://ipripak.org/implications-of-aukus-i2u2-and-brics-for-pakistan/>.

flexibility required to mobilised focused efforts directed against China, which Western states are increasingly willing to support, even it if undermines the once-touted ideals of broad waste governance system. On the other hand, China as an emerging power has also responded to the world's hostility with the alternate minilateral arrangements, such as Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), BRICS, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

In this recalibration of international system, the US has found a regional partner in India, aligning closely with it as a counterweight to China.<sup>5</sup> However, this strategic partnership has profound implications for Pakistan, who faces reverberations due to diplomatic and security isolation. This predicament is not an entirely new phenomenon for Pakistan. For example, in the post-9/11 period, India leveraged the global war on terror to marginalise Pakistan on the international stage, utilising narrative the closely aligned with the Western powers. Therefore, while minilateral may have emerged as a response to specific global threat, its ripple effects have exposed Pakistan to strategic constraints and regional threats, posing a significant challenge to its influence in the transiting global order. A Lack of meaningful participation by Pakistan could not only diminish the state's influence vis-à-vis its regional counterparts but also limit the opportunities for collaboration in securing strategic interests and fostering growth and development through partnership with significant players.

This paper is divided into six sections that collectively examine the global transition from multilateralism to minilateralism, exploring how this trend impacts Pakistan's foreign policy and strategic choices. In doing so, this research contributes

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<sup>5</sup> Sanket Kumar Prajapati, "Emerging Era of Minilateralism in Indo-Pacific," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, January 1, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4496884>.

to the broader discourse on Pakistan's role in this selective international order. This is of critical importance, as the outcomes of this shift will have enduring consequences for Pakistan's regional standing as well as security outlook. This study explores how India is leveraging the global shift towards minilateralism to bolster its strategic position at Pakistan's expense. Furthermore, it assesses the specific implications of Pakistan's exclusion from key minilateral alliances for its security and economic prospects. Finally, it highlights the ways in which Pakistan can assert its relevance within this emergent framework at both regional and global levels?

This paper adopts a descriptive and analytical methodology, and employs secondary sources such as scholarly articles, policy papers, and government reports to explore Pakistan's strategic challenges amidst this global transition. This research operationalises pre-existing data by using graphical presentations, such as maps, diagrams and tables, to illustrate where Pakistan stands in this shift. The overarching objective is to contribute to discourse on Pakistan's future and draft potential strategies for the state in an increasingly fragmented world.

## **2. MULTILATERALISM AND MINILATERALISM: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

The vision of multilateralism that arose in the aftermath of World War II was driven by rapid decolonisation. According to Miles Kahler, multilateral institutions were designed to supplant the disadvantageous position faced by emerging and



small states under the bilateralism of the 1930s and provide them with opportunities to assume a more responsible role within the international system.<sup>6</sup>

According to neoliberal institutionalism, multilateralism is a rational and rule-based mechanism that fosters collaboration within states by diminishing uncertainty, reducing transaction costs, and promoting long-term mutual gains. As opposed to classical realism, which assumes that power politics dominate in an anarchic international system, neoliberal institutionalist suggest that multilateral institutes play a key role in fostering interdependence within states. From this standpoint, multilateralism is a deliberate choice by states that enhances predictability, economic efficiency and diplomatic stability. Regime theory, which formulates a central pillar of neoliberal thought on multilateralism, argues that international institutions play an important role in regulating and structuring state behaviour.

There are three distinct features of multilateralism: generalised organising principles, indivisibility, and diffuse reciprocity.<sup>7</sup> Generalised organising principles are those principles that do not cater to the specific interest of a particular country. Instead, specify a code of conduct for “a class of action” that each nation is expected to adhere to. Indivisibility means that certain goods or benefits exist that are to be jointly shared by all the members of a particular group.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, states must agree

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<sup>6</sup> M Abdul Fathah, “From Multilateralism to Minilateralism- a Conceptual Paradigm,” *Electronic Journal of Social & Strategic Studies* 03, no. 01 (January 1, 2022): 105–13, <https://doi.org/10.47362/ejsss.2022.3107>.

<sup>7</sup> M Abdul Fathah, “From Multilateralism to Minilateralism- a Conceptual Paradigm,” *Electronic Journal of Social & Strategic Studies* 03, no. 01 (January 1, 2022): 105–13, <https://doi.org/10.47362/ejsss.2022.3107>.

<sup>8</sup> John Gerard Ruggie, “Multilateralism: The Anatomy of an Institution,” *International Organization* 46, no. 3 (January 1, 1992): 561–98, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0020818300027831>.

on the shared responsibility of maintaining these goods, as they cannot be enjoyed by a few without benefiting all<sup>9</sup>, such as peace and climate stability.

While indivisibility ascertains that all member states share advantages of cooperation, it also implies that they collectively endure the consequences of failures, disruptions, or noncompliance. This concept is significant as it reinforces interdependence between states, as well as the necessity of cooperative mechanisms in face of shared challenges. It also explains the issue of free riding in multilateralism, whereby least ambitious member states reap benefits of collective actions or public goods while avoiding the cost of participation or contributing their fair share. In multilateralism, diffused responsibility implies that no single country is immediately compensated for its individual contribution, but the burden of effort is spread across all member states. Therefore, outcomes or rewards are long-term, and “rough equivalence of benefits” is enjoyed by states over a period of time.<sup>10</sup>

As opposed to multilateralism, minilateral initiatives are “informal, flexible, functional, and voluntary frameworks with varied situational interests, shared values or prevalent capabilities.”<sup>11</sup> The purpose behind minilateral forums is to reach the highest efficacy in group problem-solving by the least number of actors. Depending on the type of grouping, the number of players could vary. It could be as low as three states, as is the case in trilateral alliances, such as Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines

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<sup>9</sup> Erel Segal-Halevi and Warut Suksompong, “Democratic Fair Allocation of Indivisible Goods,” *Artificial Intelligence* 277 (September 3, 2019): 103167, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.artint.2019.103167>.

<sup>10</sup> John Gerard Ruggie, “Multilateralism: The Anatomy of an Institution,” *International Organization* 46, no. 3 (January 1, 1992): 561–98, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0020818300027831>.

<sup>11</sup> Stewart Patrick, “World Order: What, Exactly, Are the Rules?,” *The Washington Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 7–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660x.2016.1170477>.

Cooperation (IMPC), or as high as twenty states, as in the case of blocs like G-20.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the key feature of minilateralism is its relative exclusivity<sup>13</sup>, which ultimately resolves the issue of conditional cooperation that arises in multilateral institutes.

Similarly, in minilateralism, countries collaborate outside the traditional confines of external ministries in various forms, such as shared production, business collaborations, and people-to-people exchanges. The involvement of the private sector, civil society, groups, and local governments of the partnering countries is also a common feature, depicting the new reality of the global order where states continue to disaggregate.

Table 1 conceptualises the key distinctions between multilateralism and minilateralism, offering a comparative analysis of their historical context, core features, operational modes, and criticisms. It illustrates how minilateralism emerges as a response to the limitations of traditional multilateralism, while complementing global cooperation through more focused and flexible frameworks.

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<sup>12</sup> M Abdul Fathah, "From Multilateralism to Minilateralism- a Conceptual Paradigm," *Electronic Journal of Social & Strategic Studies* 03, no. 01 (January 1, 2022): 105–13, <https://doi.org/10.47362/ejsss.2022.3107>.

<sup>13</sup> "Minilateralism, Effective Multilateralism and the Global Nuclear Order – Contemporary Security Policy," July 8, 2024, <http://contemporarysecuritypolicy.org/minilateralism-effective-multilateralism-and-the-global-nuclear-order/>.

<b>Aspect</b>	<b>Multilateralism</b>	<b>Minilateralism</b>
<b>Historical Context</b>	Emerged post-World War II due to decolonisation and state independence	Developed in response to challenges in consensus-based decision-making in traditional multilateralism
<b>Key Features</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Generalized organising principles</li> <li>Indivisibility</li> <li>Diffuse reciprocity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Informal and flexible frameworks</li> <li>Relative exclusivity</li> <li>Trans-governmental cooperation</li> </ul>
<b>Principles</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Code of conduct applicable to all nations</li> <li>Shared goods must benefit all members</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Aims to solve problems with minimal actors</li> <li>Issues are broken down into specific dimensions</li> </ul>
<b>Operational Modes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Resource pooling for joint objectives</li> <li>Requires broad participation (diplomatic multilateralism)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collaboration beyond traditional government confines</li> <li>Involves private sector and civil society</li> </ul>
<b>Criticisms</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hierarchical power dynamics</li> <li>Difficult consensus due to diverse interests</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of procedural justice</li> <li>Trust deficit among non-member countries</li> </ul>
<b>Solutions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish synergy with minilateralism for legitimacy and cooperation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Initiate transparency in actions to build trust among broader coalitions</li> </ul>
<b>Role in Global Order</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Challenges status quo by treating all states as equal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Acts as a supplement to existing multilateral institutions, emphasising targeted areas</li> </ul>
<b>Examples</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>UN, WTO, NATO</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>G-20, Quad, trilateral alliances (e.g., IMPC)</li> </ul>
<b>Long-term Outlook</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Multilateral organisations will remain relevant as minilateral states seek legitimacy and collaboration</li> </ul>	Minilateralism addresses specific issues, but does not replace the need for broader institutional frameworks

**Table 1: Conceptualising Multilateralism and Minilateralism<sup>14</sup>**

<sup>14</sup> Drawn by author based on personal analysis and understanding of the subject matter.

### 3. DRIVERS OF THE SHIFT TO MINILATERALISM

As global dynamics shift, the classic model of multilateralism is being substituted by more flexible and tailored alternatives. Developing countries face disadvantages in global cooperation due to limited resources and historical imbalances. Embracing strategies such as alliances, technology transfer, diversifying partnerships, advocacy, and cultural diplomacy has helped these countries overcome challenges and enhance their global participation. Through proactive measures, developing countries can ensure that their unique perspectives and needs are recognised and integrated into global solutions. This context highlights the relevance of minilateralism.<sup>15</sup> However, various factors are driving this shift from multilateralism to minilateralism including geopolitical, economic, technological, and institutional factors. Thereby, these drivers are discussed in detail below as:

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<sup>15</sup> “How Developing Countries Can Benefit From Global Collaboration,” World Economic Forum, September 10, 2024, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/09/how-developing-countries-empower-themselves-to-navigate-the-challenges-of-global-cooperation-sdim23/>



**Figure 1: Drivers of the Shift to Minilateralism<sup>16</sup>**

### **3.1 Ineffectiveness of Traditional Multilateral Institutions**

The dysfunction of traditional multilateral institutions, such as the UN and the WTO, is a crucial factor in the shift towards minilateralism. These institutions are often rendered ineffective in addressing critical global challenges.<sup>17</sup> This frustration came about due to the failure of key multilateral forums to attain their stated goals, especially in the face of the most critical issues facing the international community. For instance, the war between Russia and Ukraine has reintroduced land warfare to the European continent, an advancement regarded by many as a relic of the past. Furthermore, crises like the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the inherent vulnerabilities

<sup>16</sup> Drawn by authors.

<sup>17</sup> C. Raja Mohan, "Minilaterals Are the New Multilaterals," *Foreign Policy*, November 10, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/11/minilateral-alliances-geopolitics-quad-aukus-i2u2-coalitions-multilateralism-india-japan-us-china/>

and inadequacies associated with supranational organisations in dealing with global health crises. Moreover, issues like climate change and the meteoric rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and emerging technologies have forced states to question how they can deal with common challenges that no single state is well-equipped to handle alone.

On the other hand, Issue-specific institutions or "regimes" establish rules, norms, and decision-making procedures that define legitimate actions in various domains of international system.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, Minilateralism offers a more flexible and issue-focused approach, allowing small groups to tackle specific problems efficiently, as extensive consensus is not required. Even though there exist issue-specific multilateral organisations as well, such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), they still operate within a broad-based institutional framework that require larger consensus, making decision making process slower.

### **3.2 Adapting to Geopolitical Shifts**

Ongoing geopolitical rivalries, such as the US-China divide and conflicts like the Russia-Ukraine war, complicate traditional diplomatic efforts, making smaller coalitions more appealing. Countries are motivated to form minilateral partnerships to enhance their security, competitiveness, and prosperity through focused agreements in trade, technology, and infrastructure. For example, Three Sea Initiative (3SI) is a grouping of 12 Central and Eastern European states that aims to enhance energy, digital, and transport infrastructure with the broader goal of countering Russian influence and energy diversification. Despite the prevalence of broader multilateral frameworks, such as the EU and NAT, 3SI provides a more

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<sup>18</sup> Baylis, Seve Smith, and Patricia Owens, *The Globalization of World Politics an Introduction to International Relations*, 9th ed. (Oxford University Press, 2023).

flexible and targeted forum to address specific regional needs of the member countries.

While historically, there have been examples where initiatives, such as BENELUX or ECSC, aimed at economic integration, ultimately evolved into multilateral structures like the EU, minilateral grouping like 3SI lacks the institutional mechanisms or integrationist objectives that could lead its transition into a broader multilateral framework. Functional, project based initiatives seek pragmatic cooperation on specific sectors as opposed to political unity. Therefore, traditional systems are breaking down, creating a necessity for new cooperative frameworks that can operate independently and effectively in a fragmented international landscape.<sup>19</sup>

### **3.3 Economic Security and Innovation through Issue-Specific Blocs**

Minilateral blocs improve connectivity and cooperation among member countries, enhancing regional stability and economic ties. Groups like the Chip4 Alliance, including US, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, demonstrate how minilateralism facilitates collaboration in crucial sectors such as semiconductor manufacturing, promoting resilience and innovation. Therefore, growing concerns over supply chain vulnerabilities and dependence on single-source supplier, along with the need to protect critical industries amid rising global tensions promoted states to formulate issue-specific alliances focused on economic security.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), backed by US, is another prominent economic forum

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<sup>19</sup> “Minilateralism: A Concept That Is Changing the World Order,” The Washington Institute, n.d., <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/minilateralism-concept-changing-world-order>

<sup>20</sup> Mariya Kanwal, “Mariya Kanwal,” August 21, 2024, <https://issi.org.pk/issue-brief-on-the-rise-of-minilateralism/>



designed to improve collaboration in digital trade, security of supply chain and clean energy.

### **3.4 Agility in Responding to Global Security and Technological Shifts**

With the increased US-China strategic competition and the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war, existing multilateral security cooperation systems face limitations. The inclusive nature of these systems often results in delays in decision-making. In contrast, minilateral security cooperation frameworks can effectively address specific issues, optimised for achieving precise goals through their distinct governance structures. Emerging technology cooperation is particularly emphasised within minilateral frameworks, such as the Quad and the US-ROK-Japan trilateral partnership. Advanced technology is crucial for enhancing a country's economic resiliency and competitiveness. Initiatives like the Quad Leaders' Summit in Hiroshima and the Camp David Summit showcase the focus on critical and emerging technology cooperation, highlighting minilateralism role in a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape.<sup>21</sup>

### **3.5 Desire for Strategic Sovereignty Specifically in the Asia-Pacific**

Minilateralism has gained traction in Asia and the Indo-Pacific, particularly as a means to counter rising Chinese influence in the region. Owing to their colonial history, nations in Asia prefer independence over formal alliances; thus, minilateral frameworks allow for cooperation without compromising strategic sovereignty. For example, India utilises this approach to engage in security cooperation through the Quad, enabling strategic dialogue while maintaining its independent foreign policy.

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<sup>21</sup> "Minilateralism: A Newfound Approach to Bolstering the US-Indo-Pacific Partnerships in Emerging Technology," Wilson Center, n.d., <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/minilateralism-newfound-approach-bolstering-us-indo-pacific-partnerships-emerging>

This format allows states to retain their agency and not be locked into US-directed systems.<sup>22</sup>

### 3.6 Need for Tailored Responses to Global Challenges

The transition from a unipolar world post-Cold War to a multipolar world has created significant obstacles to collaboration, prompting the formation of smaller-scale partnerships based on shared interests. Minilateralism allows for more agile and adaptable diplomatic channels compared to traditional multilateral systems, enabling quicker responses to crises and opportunities. Collaboration based on shared interests rather than shared values facilitates cooperation among diverse nations, making it easier to address specific issues without requiring consensus on all matters.

Urgent global issues like climate change, health crises (e.g., COVID-19), and food security highlight the inadequacies of traditional multilateral systems, necessitating new approaches. The rise of middle powers is shifting international dynamics, with these countries leveraging minilateralism to assert their influence and shape international affairs. Rapid advancements in technology necessitate collaboration that can quickly adapt to changing landscapes, which minilateralism provides.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> C. Raja Mohan, "Minilaterals Are the New Multilaterals," *Foreign Policy*, November 10, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/11/minilateral-alliances-geopolitics-quad-aukus-i2u2-coalitions-multilateralism-india-japan-us-china/>

<sup>23</sup> "Minilateralism: A Concept That Is Changing the World Order," The Washington Institute, n.d., <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/minilateralism-concept-changing-world-order>

## 4. KEY TRENDS AND INITIATIVES IN MINILATERALISM

The evolution from multilateralism to minilateralism highlights how states are now pursuing pragmatic, objective-driven partnerships, greatly impacting how they interact with regional and global players. Various trends define the contours of this emerging minilateral landscape.

First, as China's influence extends in Asia, Africa, and beyond, the US and its allies have resorted to minilateralism as a tool for managing power imbalances. The overarching objective is to encircle China, especially in the Indo-Pacific region, and to attain this, states are increasingly formulating targeted alliances.<sup>24</sup> This trend does not imply a direct confrontation with China; instead, it is increasingly focused on containing the rise of China through security collaboration and defence alliances, economic counterweights, technological cooperation, and diplomatic realignment on regional issues. Serving as an instrument of strategic competition, these groupings have the probability to intensify rivalries and transform regional power dynamics.

Secondly, middle powers, such as Australia, Japan, South Korea, Canada, and the UAE, are emerging as significant stakeholders in bringing out this global transformation. This trend is particularly significant because it represents a deliberate strategy by emerging powers to secure their strategic interests and balance their relationships with major powers<sup>25</sup>, without becoming entangled in constraints and competition prevalent in large multilateral forums. For instance, South Korea takes

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<sup>24</sup> Dominika Urhová, "The Shifting Balance of Power and the Rise of Minilateralism: The Indo-Pacific and Beyond," Chinaobservers, June 6, 2023, <https://chinaobservers.eu/the-shifting-balance-of-power-and-the-rise-of-minilateralism-the-indo-pacific-and-beyond/>.

<sup>25</sup> Ziya Öniş and Mustafa Kutlay, "The Dynamics of Emerging Middle-power Influence in Regional and Global Governance: The Paradoxical Case of Turkey," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 71, no. 2 (June 21, 2016): 164–83, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2016.1183586>.

part in various regional minilateral trade and security agreements, allowing to take reap benefits of partnership from both Western and regional allies, while also balancing its complex relationship with China.<sup>26</sup>

Thirdly, disaggregation of multilateral efforts into smaller, more manageable components is another prominent trend in minilateralism. By moving away from “one-size-fits-all” approach, this trend highlights how regime complexes are formed, where different aspect an issue are tackled through various initiatives.<sup>27</sup> Such an approach is rooted in the proposition that smaller and more agile coalitions are better equipped to respond efficiently to urgent global challenges.<sup>28</sup>

Lastly, there is a trend towards involving a broad range of actors in global governance, moving beyond the traditional role of governments. This trans-governmental cooperation implies that countries collaborate outside the traditional confines of external ministries in various forms, such as shared production, business collaborations, and people-to-people exchanges.<sup>29</sup> The involvement of the private sector, civil society, groups, and local governments of the partnering countries is also a common feature, depicting the new reality of the global order where states continue to disaggregate.

Therefore, key trends in minilateralism highlight transforming power structures and global dynamics, especially in the context of the rise of China. The following

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<sup>26</sup> Jongryn Mo, “South Korea’s Middle Power Diplomacy: A Case of Growing Compatibility between Regional and Global Roles,” *International Journal Canada S Journal of Global Policy Analysis* 71, no. 4 (December 1, 2016): 587–607, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020702016686380>.

<sup>27</sup> Stewart Patrick, “The New ‘New Multilateralism’: Minilateral Cooperation, but at What Cost?,” *Global Summitry* 1, no. 2 (December 1, 2015): 115–34, <https://doi.org/10.1093/global/guv008>.

<sup>28</sup> Felix Heiduk and Thomas Wilkins, “Minilateralism and Pathways to Institutional Progression: Alliance Formation or Cooperative Security Governance?,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, October 28, 2024, 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2024.2416566>.

<sup>29</sup> Stewart Patrick, “The New ‘New Multilateralism’: Minilateral Cooperation, but at What Cost?,” *Global Summitry* 1, no. 2 (December 1, 2015): 115–34, <https://doi.org/10.1093/global/guv008>.

section delineates specific multilateral initiatives that showcase these trends, followed by an analysis on how India has leveraged these opportunities to amplify challenges for Pakistan.

#### **4.1. Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD)**

The Quad is a strategic alliance between Australia, India, Japan, and the United States that aims to promote an open, stable, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region. It strengthens collaboration with partners in Southeast Asia, the Pacific, and the Indian Ocean, tackling issues including health security, climate change, infrastructure, new technologies, cybersecurity, humanitarian aid, and counter-terrorism. The Quad supports ASEAN centrality and the Pacific Islands Forum while recognising local objectives, such as the Blue Pacific Continent's 2050 Strategy. It was founded in reaction to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and focusses on diplomacy rather than security.<sup>30</sup>

On September 21, 2024, President Joe Biden convened the fourth Quad Leaders' Summit at Archmere Academy in Delaware, which included Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio, and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The Quad is now implementing meaningful projects around the Indo-Pacific region, such as the Quad Vaccine Partnership, the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA), the Quad Infrastructure Coordination Group, and Clean Hydrogen Partnership. These initiatives focus on pandemic response, disaster management, maritime security,

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<sup>30</sup> "The Quad," Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d., <https://www.dfat.gov.au/international-relations/regional-architecture/quad>.

infrastructure development, key technologies, climate change, and cybersecurity, with the goal of increasing partner nations' resilience.<sup>31</sup>

## 4.2. AUKUS

In September 2021, the presidents of Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States announced the formation of "AUKUS," an improved trilateral security collaboration aimed at improving each government's capabilities to assist security and defence objectives. Building on long-standing bilateral relationships, AUKUS encourages more information and technology cooperation, as well as the integration of security-related research, technology, industrial bases, and supply chains. The partnership launched an 18-month trilateral consultation period, with two main goals: assisting Australia in acquiring nuclear-powered submarines for the Royal Australian Navy, and improving joint capabilities in cyber, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and undersea capabilities. On March 13, 2023, AUKUS partners presented a plan to develop a nuclear-powered submarine capability in Australia while complying with non-proliferation criteria.<sup>32</sup>

On September 26, 2024, UK Defence Secretary John Healey hosted Australian Defence Minister Richard Marles and US Secretary of Defence Lloyd J. Austin III in Greenwich, London, to reaffirm their support for AUKUS. The ministers reviewed how to keep the Indo-Pacific free and safe in the face of increasing security threats, as well as progress made since their previous meeting in December 2023. Key areas of focus included the development of conventionally armed, nuclear-

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<sup>31</sup> U.S. Mission India, "Fact Sheet: 2024 Quad Leaders' Summit - U.S. Embassy & Consulates in India," U.S. Embassy & Consulates in India, September 23, 2024, <https://in.usembassy.gov/fact-sheet-2024-quad-leaders-summit/>.

<sup>32</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, "AUKUS: The Trilateral Security Partnership between Australia, U.K. and U.S.," n.d., <https://www.defense.gov/Spotlights/AUKUS/>.

powered submarines and advanced capabilities, as well as amendments to export control regimes to facilitate secure, license-free defence trade, with the goal of enhancing innovation and strengthening the three nations' defence industrial bases.<sup>33</sup>

### **4.3. I2U2**

The I2U2 Group, which includes India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the United States, conducted its inaugural leaders' conference on July 14, 2022. This unique alliance identifies and funds initiatives to address global concerns, mainly in water, energy, transportation, space, health, food security, and technology. Notable initiatives include \$2 billion I2U2 Food Parks Initiatives in India, a 300 MW hybrid renewable energy in Gujrat, and collaborative efforts in satellite technology for climate monitoring. I2U2 seeks to modernise infrastructure, encourage low-carbon growth, and improve public health by using private sector funding and knowledge. The group's projects are not geographically limited, allowing for great outcomes wherever possibilities emerge.<sup>34</sup>

### **4.4. BRICS**

The term "BRICS," created by Goldman Sachs economist Jim O'Neill in 2001, refers to Brazil, Russia, India, and China, which he believes will threaten the G7 economies. Russia organised the first official BRIC meeting in 2009 to fight Western dominance, and South Africa joined in 2010. The union expanded further in 2023, inviting Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, however

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<sup>33</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, "AUKUS Defence Ministers' Meeting Communique," n.d., <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3918402/aukus-defence-ministers-meeting-communique/>.

<sup>34</sup> "I2U2 - United States Department of State," United States Department of State, February 27, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/i2u2/>.

Argentina rejected due to its new pro-West leadership. BRICS meets yearly, with each member taking turns as chairman, and functions by agreement without a written charter or staff. Its key objectives include advocating for greater representation in global institutions, coordinating economic policies, reducing reliance on the US dollar, and establishing alternative financial systems through initiatives like the New Development Bank and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement..<sup>35</sup>

The BRICS summit, hosted by Russian President Vladimir Putin in Kazan from October 22 to 24, 2024, brought together leaders from two dozen nations, making it Russia's largest assembly in years. Amid lingering tensions from the Ukraine conflict, this conference served as a strategic step for Russia to exert its power and demonstrate its commitment to establishing alliances with rising countries.

BRICS is primed for additional growth, with numerous Southeast Asian nations, including Thailand and Malaysia, indicating an interest in joining. This increased interest mirrors a wider trend in which nations seek alternatives to conventional alliances, rather than taking sides in geopolitical crises, as observed by Brookings Institute researcher Tara Varma.<sup>36</sup>

#### **4.5. Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)**

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<sup>35</sup> Mariel Ferragamo, "What Is the BRICS Group and Why Is It Expanding?," Council on Foreign Relations, October 18, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-brics-group-and-why-it-expanding#chapter-title-0-3>.

<sup>36</sup> Sarah Shamim, "Russia's BRICS Summit: What's on the Agenda and Why It Matters to Putin," Al Jazeera, October 23, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/10/22/russias-brics-summit-whats-on-the-agenda-and-why-does-it-matter>.



The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is a regional organisation established on June 6, 1997, when Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand signed the Bangkok Declaration. Initially known as BIST-EC, it expanded to include Myanmar, Bhutan, and Nepal until rebranding as BIMSTEC in 2004. The programme encourages economic cooperation among Bay of Bengal countries, first focusing on commerce, technology, and energy, but now including agriculture, public health, and climate change. The BIMSTEC Secretariat in Dhaka, founded in 2014, fosters collaboration by allowing each member state to lead certain areas, such as commerce for Bangladesh and security for India.<sup>37</sup>

Cooperation within BIMSTEC is based on the values of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, political independence, and non-interference in internal matters, with an emphasis on non-aggression, peaceful cohabitation, mutual respect, and benefit. Furthermore, BIMSTEC's activities supplement existing bilateral, subregional, regional, and international collaboration among its members.<sup>38</sup>

An informal conference of BIMSTEC Foreign Ministers was held in New York on September 27, 2024, on the fringes of the UN General Assembly, sponsored by India and led by External Affairs Minister Dr S. Jaishankar. The discussions cantered on improving cooperation in health, food security, climate change, and commerce, while emphasising the importance of improved physical, marine, and digital connectivity. Member nations approved the development of BIMSTEC Centres of

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<sup>37</sup> "History - Home-The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic," n.d., <https://bimstec.org/history>.

<sup>38</sup> "Principles - Home-The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic," n.d., <https://bimstec.org/principles>.

Excellence and pledged to strengthen collaboration ahead of the forthcoming Leaders' Summit.<sup>39</sup>

## **5. PAKISTAN PREDICAMENTS AMID THIS GLOBAL TRANSITION**

The global governance structures fragment and regional alliances and minilateral groupings take precedence over multilateral forums, Pakistan finds itself at crossroads. The country faces exclusion from significant strategic, diplomatic, and economic groups, while on the other hand, India, its arch rival, forges ahead in forming alliances in these new structure. The following section will highlights Pakistan's predicaments amidst this global transition, underscoring the ways in his minilateralism has shaped regional and global power dynamics.

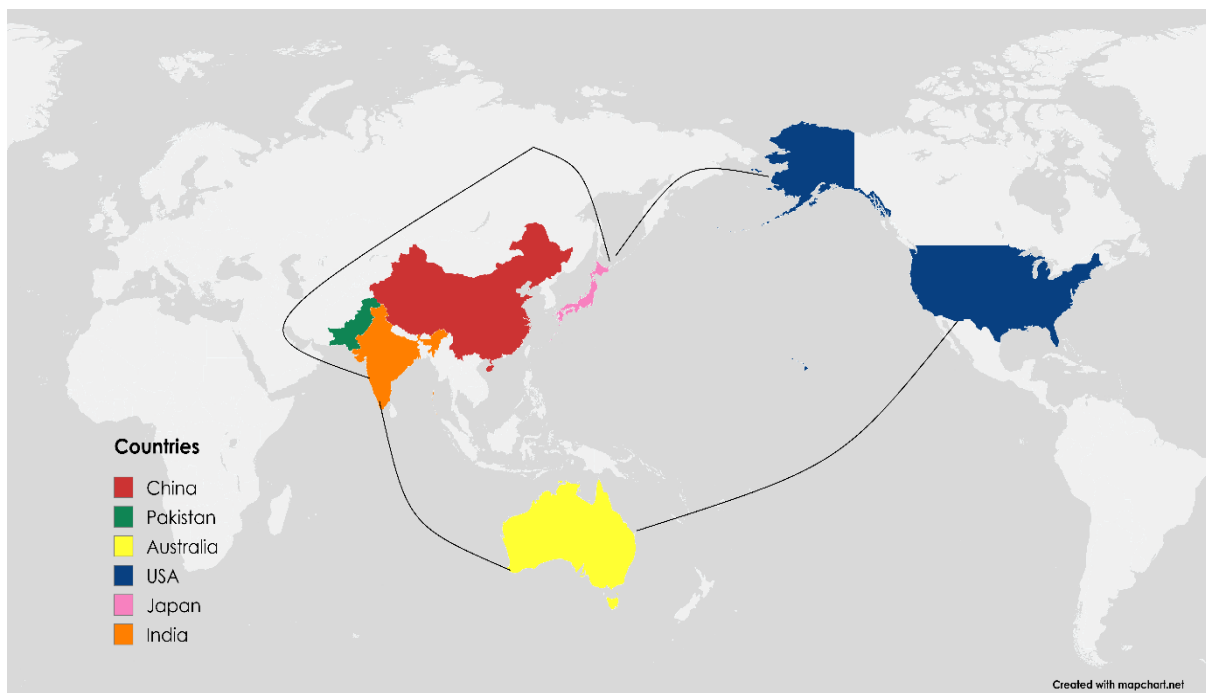
### **5.1. Strategic Isolation and Exclusion from Key Alliances**

Pakistan strategic positioning in South Asia that connects it with Middle East, Central Asia, and crucial geographical locations in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), have amplified its strategic and economic vulnerabilities amidst this global transition. In the era of minilateralism, the most pressing issue faced by Pakistan is its exclusion from prominent minilateral initiatives. This exclusion limits it access to high tech collaborations, security partnerships, and infrastructure projects, constraining its ability to operate in the evolving global order.

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<sup>39</sup> Home-The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic, "Inaugural Meeting of the BIMSTEC Foreign Ministers on the Sidelines of 79th Session of United Nations General Assembly (UNGA)," n.d., <https://bimstec.org/event/211/inaugural-meeting-of-the-bimstec-foreign-ministers-on-the-sidelines-of-79th-session-of-united-nations-general-assembly-unga->.

Pakistan is significantly impacted by the regional changes, and the development around rapidly transforming maritime setting of the IOR.<sup>40</sup> Pakistan's major interest lies along the coastline where Sea Lanes of Communication (SLO) transverse which is significant for global oil trade.<sup>41</sup> However, despite being a primary littoral country in the region with maritime access via the Arabian Sea, Pakistan has majorly being excluded from regional discussions and dialogues due a combination of factors, including political tensions with India, security concerns, and its economic instability. This, coupled with India's status as the "Net Security Provider" in the Indo-Pacific complicates Pakistan's position.<sup>42</sup>



**Figure 2: QUAD - US, India, Japan, and Australia Strategic Alliance<sup>43</sup>**

<sup>40</sup> Zainab Ahmed, "Great Power Rivalry in Indo Pacific: Implications for Pakistan," *Strategic Studies* 41, no. 4 (February 24, 2022): 56–75, <https://doi.org/10.53532/ss.041.04.0037>.

<sup>41</sup> Bashir, N., "Major Powers' Interests in Indian Ocean: Challenges and Options for Pakistan", (Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI) and the Hanns Seidel Foundation, November 2024), <https://ipripak.org/major-powers-interests-in-indian-ocean-challenges-and-options-for-pakistan/>

<sup>42</sup> Sufian Ullah and Zeeshan Hayat, "India as a Net Security Provider in Indo-Pacific and Implications for the Region," *NUST Journal of International Peace and Stability*, n.d., 26–39, <https://doi.org/10.37540/njips.v4i1.77>.

<sup>43</sup> Map created by the authors, based on an online public domain map.

As the figure 2 depicts, The QUAD countries form a broad arc around China, extending from Japan in the northeast, India in the west, and Australia in the south, with the United States maintaining a presence in the Pacific. The geographical positioning suggests a strategic encirclement of China, with significant repercussions for Pakistan. For example, situated in close proximity to Pakistan, India's Quad membership significantly enhances its geopolitical leverage in South Asia. Former's absence implies that with India's strong security ties with Quad members, Pakistan lacks access to such high-level defence partnerships. These includes initiatives, such as Communication Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) and Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA)<sup>44</sup>, as well as joint naval exercises between India and Japan, including JIMEX and Dharma Guardian. With enhanced regional naval and security cooperation, New Delhi could assert dominance in areas near Pakistan's maritime zones, leading to power imbalance.

Furthermore, as Quad's framework expands beyond defence and security cooperation to encompass collaboration on economic and technological ground, Pakistan also faces the heightened risk of potential economic exclusion. For example, Quad member states, especially US and Japan has initiated infrastructure projects, such as Blue Dot Network, Partnership for Global Infrastructure and aimed at countering China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)<sup>45</sup>. These projects bypassing Pakistan could marginalise state's economic interests in the longer run. For example, focus on these infrastructure projects on specific regions, such as Southeast Asia and the Pacific Island, may exclude Pakistan from investment opportunities.

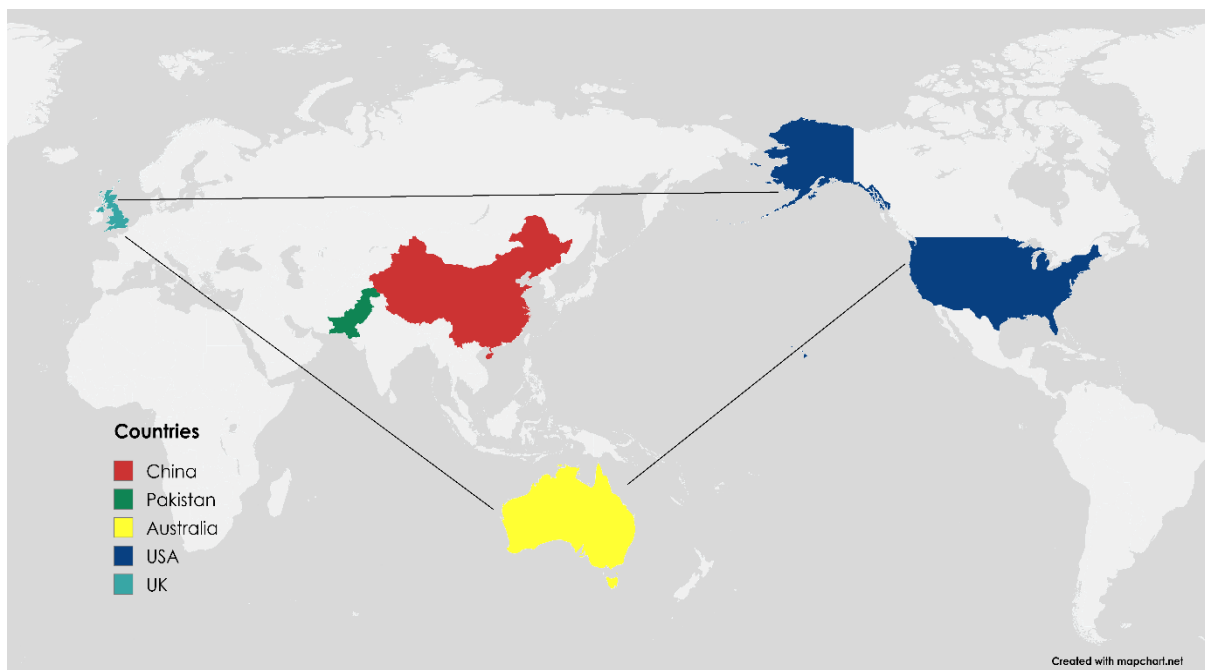
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<sup>44</sup> Muhammad Ali Baig and Alyan Waheed, "LEMOA, COMCASA, And BECA in India's Foreign Calculus" (Institute Of Strategic Studies Islamabad, July 22, 2022), [https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/IB\\_Ali\\_Baig\\_and\\_Alyan\\_July\\_22\\_2022.pdf](https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/IB_Ali_Baig_and_Alyan_July_22_2022.pdf).

<sup>45</sup> Bart Gaens and Ville Sinkkonen, "Contentious Connectivity—the USA, Japan, and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific," *East Asia* 40, no. 3 (May 1, 2023): 265–91, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12140-023-09407-7>.

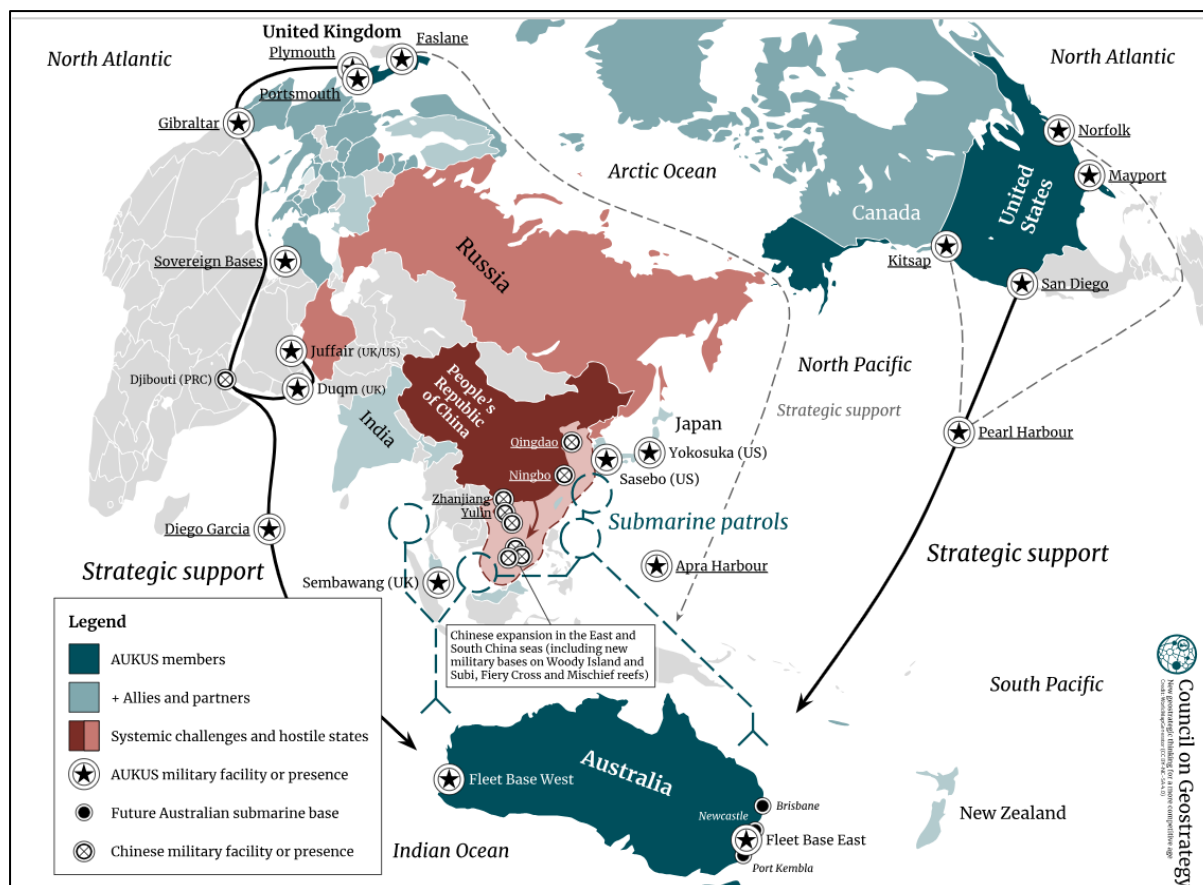
Apart from Quad, AUKUS, a strategic trilateral partnership between Australia, the UK and the US, reflects another consolidated security network across the Indo-Pacific. Figure 3 depicts multiple nodes where there is active participation of AUKUS, supplemented by key allies, such as Japan, South Korea, and Singapore.

As the map depicts, Pakistan's lack of participation in strategic points associated with AUKUS highlights its detachment from the regional security architecture that is increasingly focused on countering China. This strategic isolation could potentially obstruct Pakistan leeway in dealing with emerging threats in region, especially when it is not the beneficiary of collaborative defence and security initiatives.



**Figure 3: AUKUS Strategic Alignment in the Indo-Pacific<sup>46</sup>**

<sup>46</sup> Map created by the authors, based on an online public domain map.



**Figure 4: The Geopolitics of AUKUS<sup>47</sup>**

What emerges as a further challenge to Pakistan's position is growing militarisation of the IOR. As the figure 4 depicts, India's involvement in the US and the UK bases around the region creates de facto encirclement, thereby restricting Pakistan leverage over key maritime routes. Furthermore, AUKUS could serve as a probable platform for New Delhi to negotiate for upgraded nuclear technologies, thereby disrupting regional balance of power.

The map also identifies Chinese military presence, especially in the Horns of Africa and the South China Sea, which is presented as an underline rationale for formation of AUKUS. While Pakistan strategic ties with China benefits it on bilateral level, it does not integrate the state into security frameworks of the Indo-Pacific.

<sup>47</sup> "The geopolitics of AUKUS," Council on Geostrategy, March 23, 2023, <https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/research/the-geopolitics-of-aukus/>.

Therefore, the portrayal of Beijing as a “systemic challenger” indirectly reflects on Pakistan’s already precarious position.

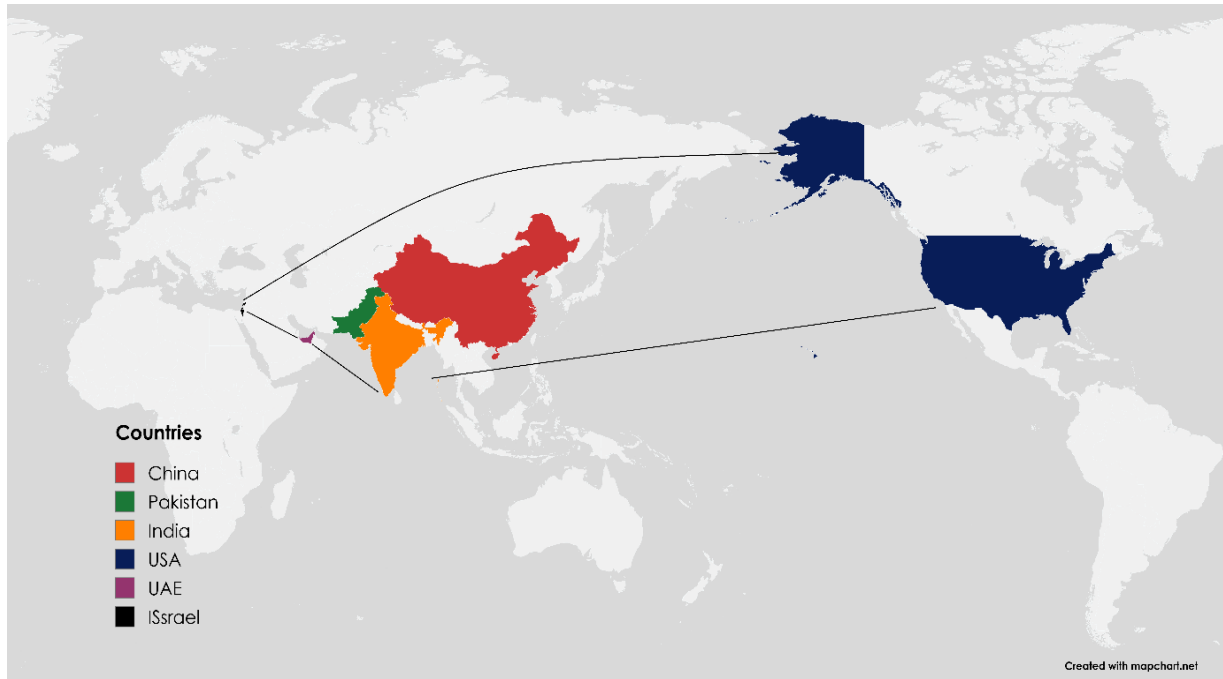
Apart from the Indo-Pacific, Bay of Bengal region is also being increasingly influenced by India-lead initiatives; for example, Pakistan’s exclusion from regional initiatives, such as BIMSTEC limits Pakistan’s influence in regional projects and decision making.<sup>48</sup> This, coupled with India’s Act East Policy marginalises Pakistan’s role in Eastward connectivity in South Asia. Additionally, offshore drilling in the region excludes Islamabad from regional energy initiatives, and boosts India’s dominance in regional maritime logistics.

## **5.2. Pakistan's Trade Challenges and Loss of Clout in Regional Development Initiatives**

With the emergence of minilateral groups, such as the I2U2, Pakistan is expected to face a wide array of challenges, especially when it comes to regional trade dynamics. The figure 5 illustrates the I2U2 alliance, which includes India, Israel, the UAE, and the US, focused on economic collaboration, regional security, and technological innovation.

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<sup>48</sup> Constantino Xavier, “Bridging the Bay of Bengal: Toward a Stronger BIMSTEC” (Carnegie India, February 22, 2018), <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2018/02/bridging-the-bay-of-bengal-toward-a-stronger-bimstec?lang=en&er=india>.



**Figure 5: I2U2 Alliance<sup>49</sup>**

The alliance between India, Israel, the UAE, and the US could potentially generate competitive dynamics for Pakistan in the region where it has traditionally held influence. Pakistan's is highly dependent on remittances from its labour force in Gulf countries, as it not only significantly contributes to foreign exchange reserves, but also represent a vital revenue stream. In 2022, Pakistan's remittances for Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries amounted to \$16.95 billion.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, Pakistan's petroleum and gas exports from states, such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, amounts 80 percent and 29 percent, respectively.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, this cycle of dependence makes Pakistan vulnerable to external pressures from the GCC countries, especially if the regional dynamics favour India.

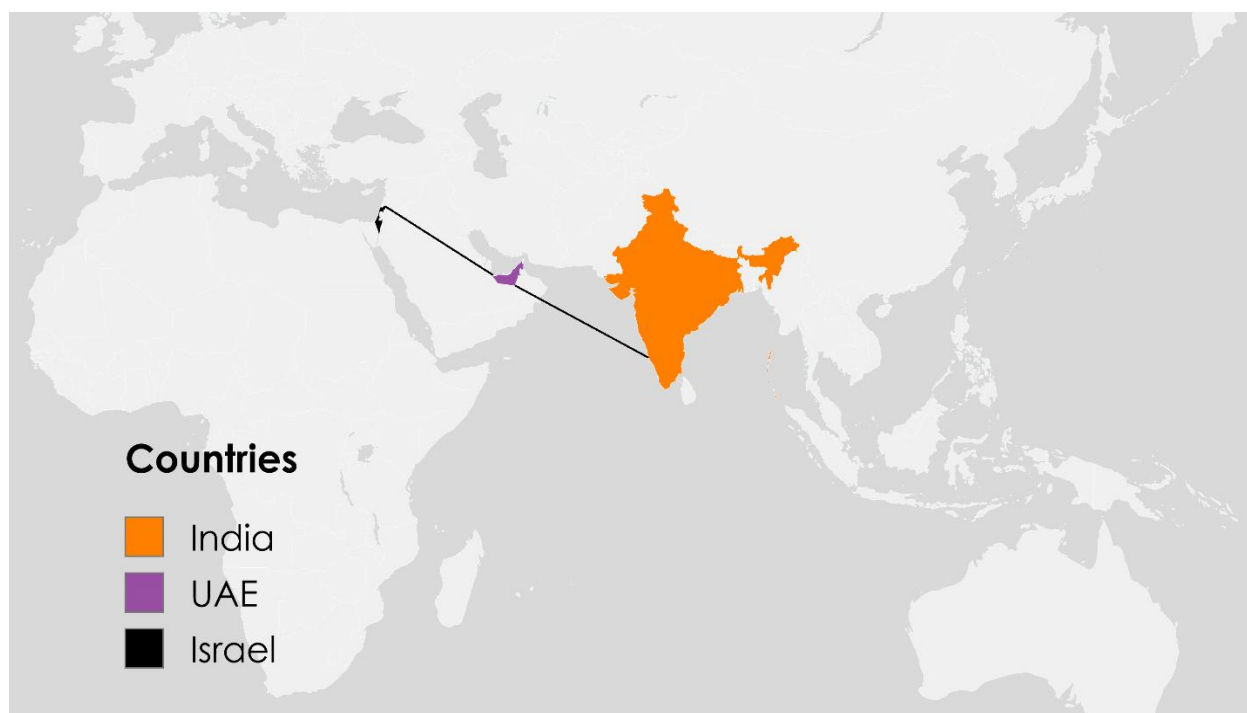
<sup>49</sup> Map created by the authors, based on an online public domain map.

<sup>50</sup> Syed Fraz Hussain Naqvi and Khatim Ghani, "India and I2U2: A Challenge to Pakistan's Traditional Influence in the Middle East" (Institute of Regional Studies Islamabad, October 2022), <https://irs.org.pk/Focus/08FocusOct22.pdf>.

<sup>51</sup> Syed Fraz Hussain Naqvi and Khatim Ghani, "India and I2U2: A Challenge to Pakistan's Traditional Influence in the Middle East" (Institute of Regional Studies Islamabad, October 2022), <https://irs.org.pk/Focus/08FocusOct22.pdf>.



Furthermore, UAE and Israel's investment in India's agriculture and renewable sectors, such as the \$2 billion agricultural project in Gujrat depicts how Pakistan is at a disadvantageous position when it comes to attracting regional development funds.<sup>52</sup> Another project is the proposed India-Middle Food Corridor between UAE, Israel, and India, as depicted by the figure 6.



**Figure 6: Route of India-Middle East Food Corridor<sup>53</sup>**

The route of this corridor seeks to generate a streamlined supply chain across the Arabian Sea, bypassing Pakistan, and cutting it out of profitable trade network. Realisation of this corridor could allow India to monopolise food exports to Middle East, impacting Pakistan's agricultural export base.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, due to its absence

<sup>52</sup> "The India-Middle East Food Corridor: How the UAE, Israel, and India Are Forging a New Inter-regional Supply Chain," Middle East Institute, July 27, 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/india-middle-east-food-corridor-how-uae-israel-and-india-are-forging-new-inter>.

<sup>53</sup> "The India-Middle East Food Corridor: How the UAE, Israel, and India Are Forging a New Inter-regional Supply Chain," Middle East Institute, July 27, 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/india-middle-east-food-corridor-how-uae-israel-and-india-are-forging-new-inter>.

<sup>54</sup> "The India-Middle East Food Corridor: How the UAE, Israel, and India Are Forging a New Inter-regional Supply Chain," Middle East Institute, July 27, 2022,

in emerging minilateral groupings, Pakistan risks losing partnership in key critical development areas and investment opportunities.

Even on geopolitical grounds, India's growing stature and favourable position in the Middle East has directed the focus of Gulf States towards New Delhi. For instance, following the revocation of Article 370 and 35A, UAE awarded India's PM with highest civilian honour.<sup>55</sup> Likewise, Pakistan's ties with countries, including Turkey, Iran, and Malaysia with regards to the Kashmir issue is viewed by Saudi Arabia as a threat to its leadership in the Muslim World, limiting Islamabad's pursuit of alliances, especially the ones that do not align with GGC's preferred policies.

### **5.3. Global Governance Challenges and Pakistan's Quest for Diplomatic Relevance**

BRICS, initially a bloc comprising of five emerging economies, has rapidly evolved into a significant voice for the global South on both geopolitical and geo-economic grounds.<sup>56</sup> The bloc's recent expansion to include states from Africa and Middle East depicts its intention to formulate an alternative to Western-dominated global order that focuses on principles such as regional sovereignty, economic resilience, and South-South cooperation. Amidst these evolving global order,

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<https://www.mei.edu/publications/india-middle-east-food-corridor-how-uae-israel-and-india-are-forging-new-inter>.

<sup>55</sup> Dalbir Ahlawat and Kedar Thaakar, "Kashmir Imbroglio Resolved: Strategic Options for Pakistan," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, February 4, 2021, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/2493118/kashmir-imbroglio-resolved-strategic-options-for-pakistan/>.

<sup>56</sup> Stewart Patrick, "BRICS Expansion, the G20, and the Future of World Order," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 9, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/10/brics-summit-emerging-middle-powers-g7-g20?lang=en>.

Pakistan applied to be a formal BRICS member in November 2023.<sup>57</sup> Pakistan's bid to become a member state of BRICS is majorly driven by its mounting economic challenges, which include slow GDP growth, increasing debt, and limited foreign investment. In this context, BRICS membership could provide crucial financial support to Pakistan through institutions like the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingency Reserve Arrangement (CRA). Even though Pakistan's membership request was initially perceived optimistically, with key members, such as Beijing and Moscow, backing Pakistan's membership, the state confronts myriad of challenges that thwarts its ambitions.

First and foremost factor is Pakistan's longstanding and complexed relation with India, a founding member of BRICS. India yields considerable influence in shaping the bloc's direction, which is particularly important because BRICS operates on a consensus driven model, meaning that each state possess a say in the decision making, including bloc's expansion.<sup>58</sup> New Delhi's reluctance stems from its strategic concerns, fearing that Pakistan's inclusion could enhance China's influence within the bloc. However, this pattern is not new; for example, during the Cold War, India's opposed Pakistan's inclusion into the Non Aligned Movement (NAM), which reflects New Delhi's longstanding approach to restrict Islamabad's diplomatic reach.<sup>59</sup> Prime Minister Modi has also openly advocated for Pakistan's isolation, particularly in the aftermath of Uri attack in 2016.

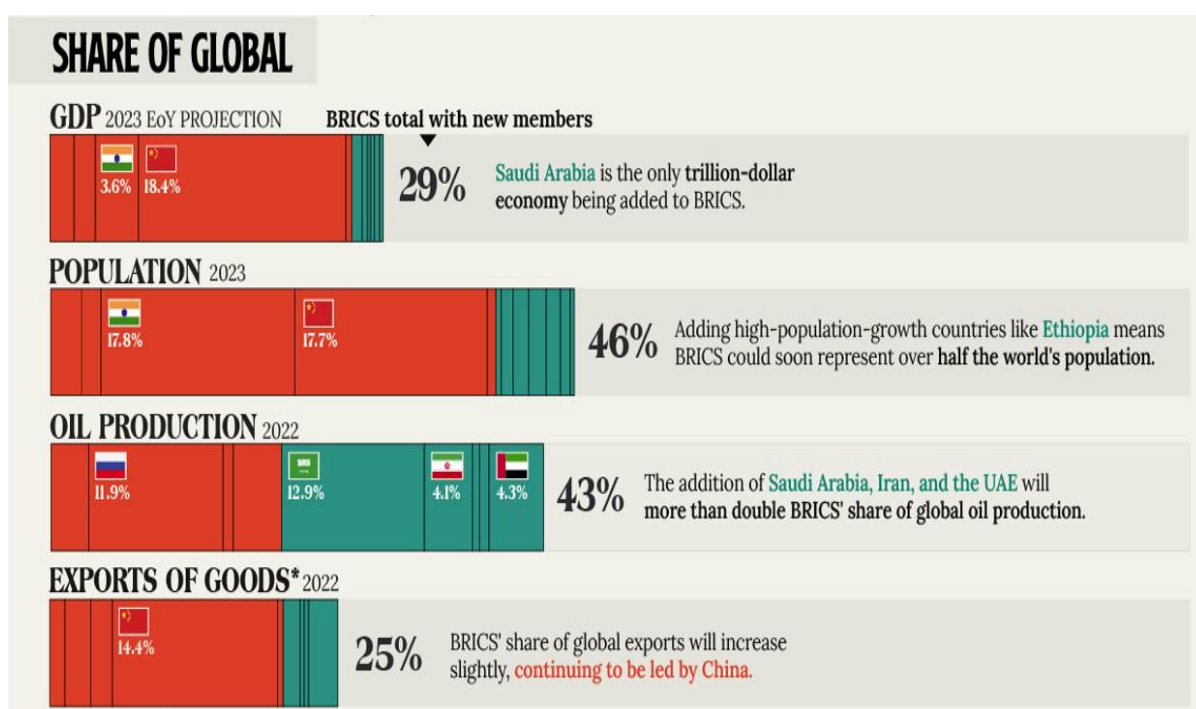
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57 Faiqa Muqeem, "Analysing Pakistan's Bid to Join BRICS," Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research, May 3, 2024, <https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/trade-economics/analysing-pakistans-bid-to-join-brics/>.

<sup>58</sup> Logan Cochrane and Esmat Zaidan, "Shifting Global Dynamics: An Empirical Analysis of BRICS + Expansion and Its Economic, Trade, and Military Implications in the Context of the G7," *Cogent Social Sciences* 10, no. 1 (March 23, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2024.2333422>.

<sup>59</sup> Logan Cochrane and Esmat Zaidan, "Shifting Global Dynamics: An Empirical Analysis of BRICS + Expansion and Its Economic, Trade, and Military Implications in the Context of the G7," *Cogent Social Sciences* 10, no. 1 (March 23, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2024.2333422>.

Pakistan's precarious economic situation is another crucial factors. BRICS has repeatedly preferred members with growing, stable economies with the ability to contribute towards bloc's goal of forming global financial order independent of West.<sup>60</sup> For example, the inclusion of states like Saudi Arabia and UAE indicates BRICS' strategic orientation towards strengthening its influences in key areas, such as energy and global trade. Similarly, lack of sustained political based for growth and cooperation further compounds Pakistan's membership challenges.



**Figure 7: BRICS share in key global metrics after expansion<sup>61</sup>**

Figure 7 depicts rising influence of the BRICS in key global metrics. For example, bloc's substantial share of world's GDP depicts its capacity to influence global economic policies. Pakistan, being an outsider, lacks access to this influential

<sup>60</sup> Faiqa Muqem, "Analysing Pakistan's Bid to Join BRICS," Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research, August 26, 2024, <https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/trade-economics/analysing-pakistans-bid-to-join-brics/>.

<sup>61</sup> Marcus Lu, "Visualizing the BRICS Expansion in 4 Charts," Visual Capitalist, August 24, 2023, <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/visualizing-the-brics-expansion-in-4-charts/>.

network, missing out on bargaining power that accompanies being part of a large economic bloc.

Moreover, with a probability of encompassing more than half of the global population, BRICS can amplify voices of global south and advocate for more equitable representation in international bodies. Again, Pakistan's absence from this large population based coalition means that Islamabad has to rely on limited diplomatic avenues to deal with its issues relating to development and equal access to resources.

As the figure depicts, with the addition of major oil producing and exporting nations, such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and UAE, BRICS has substantial leverage over global energy prices.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, Pakistan as an energy dependent nation, finds itself in a disadvantageous position, as it does not have access to this energy rich network, and it cannot negotiate energy terms internally like member states.

Lastly, a strong export base strengthens BRICS economic position globally, which also enhances bloc's ability to establish trade policies and economic partnerships with other region. India is fostering robust economic partnerships with states, such as Brazil, Russia and South Africa, whereas Pakistan's opportunities for market expansion and trade diversification remain limited.

Overall, Pakistan's absence from the bloc signifies a missed opportunity by Islamabad to assert its influence in a platform that is redefining global governance structure. It could potentially reduce Pakistan's stake in shaping this transiting global paradigm, where merging economies, especially India, is increasingly asserting its

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62 Gracelin Baskaran et al., "Six New BRICS: Implications for Energy Trade," Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 25, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/six-new-brics-implications-energy-trade>.

authority. Even though Pakistan's prospect for joining BRICS may appear limited in the current scenario, Pakistan's participation could offer several strategic benefits in the longer run. For instance, through its strategic location, it can serve as a link between BRICS member in Central Asia and Middle East. On the other hand, bloc's membership could reduce Pakistan's reliance on International Monetary Fund (IMF). Moreover, as NDB allow borrowing in local currencies, Pakistan could efficiently manage its foreign reserves.

## **6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PAKISTAN TO ADDRESS THE CHALLENGES OF MINILATERALISM**

New minilateral arrangements such as QUAD and AUKUS are believed to be a containment strategy by the US and its allies against China. This, however, pushed Pakistan into a new myriad of challenges because of India's direct involvement in many such alliances. Alliances that primarily surface as military partnerships also explains the deepening trust among the allied nations that goes beyond the defence partnerships. India has leveraged the West's fear towards China's uprising through ease in sanctions that generally applies on other countries, getting concessions on issues such as Civilian Nuclear Technology and enhanced trade ties on better terms and conditions than available to other countries.

On the contrary, Pakistan's relevance in the Western security paradigm has weakened after the US sought exit from Afghanistan. On one side, this has caused a new security situation in Pakistan, and on the other has compelled to reconsider and reconfigure the nature of partnerships to be sought. However, it is not just the minilateral blocs of the West, Pakistan is missing on; arrangements such as BRICS

has not agreed yet on giving Pakistan a full membership despite China being the member of the bloc. This highlights complexities of minilateralism, where such arrangements are not solely aimed at countering China. In fact, Beijing itself participates in several minilateral frameworks, emphasising on regional cooperation and shared strategic goals. Given these challenges, it is essential for Pakistan to adapt its strategy, and the following recommendations aim to address this need.

## **6.1. Enhancing Security Cooperation**

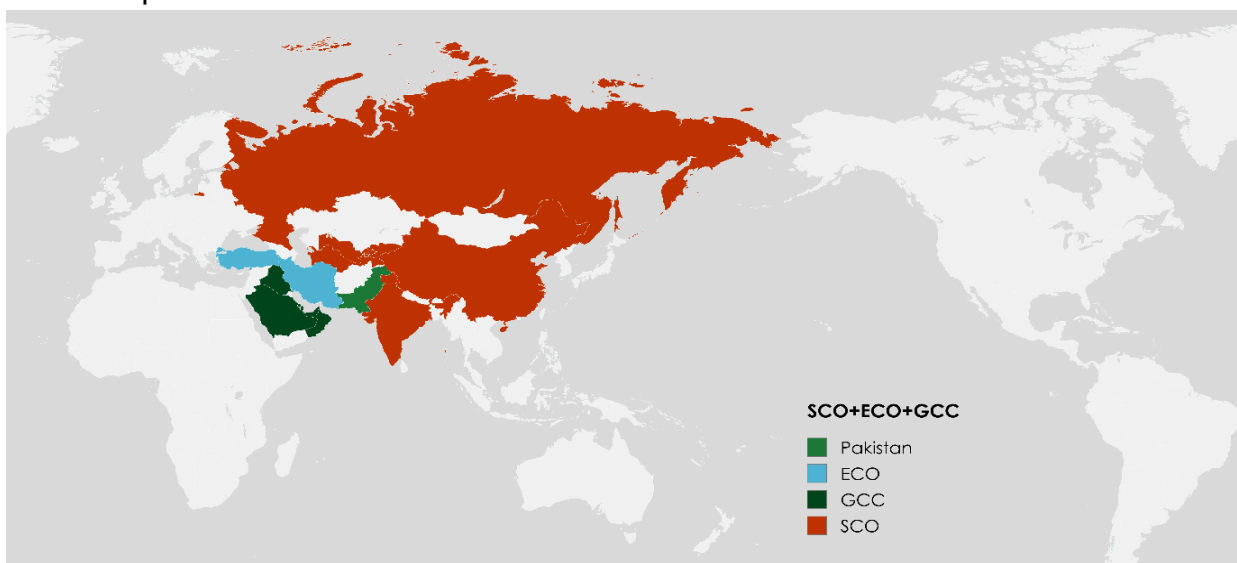
While western lead minilateral arrangements are mainly directed towards China, Pakistan also faces hostile security situation in the region both internally and on its borders. Pakistan enjoys friendly ties with China that spans over the decades. Relationship based on mutual respect, trust and mutual economic and security interests have strengthened these ties over the time. However, Pakistan must enhance its security cooperation within and across the region. Pakistan should leverage its ties with China to seek greater security guarantees within the region especially from the countries like Afghanistan and Iran that seek Chinese diplomatic support and investments.

Despite India's alignment with organisations like QUAD and I2U2, which were established largely to counter the influence of China, it has maintained working relationship with both nations. This represents an opportunity for Pakistan to exercise smart diplomacy aimed to engage with India at all levels. Pakistan should reorient its security outlook in a similar fashion—open to engage with all nations based on mutual benefits. It is therefore important that these new minilateral alliances, directed mainly at China, and having implications for Pakistan, should be approached with balanced engagement strategy.

Apart from adopting a balanced approach, security relationships with Russia and China remains integral to regional security balance. Pakistan's alliance with Iran, Turkey, and Central Asia—alongside China and Russia—could create a strong coalition to counterbalance alliances such as QUAD, AUKUS, and I2U2.

## 6.2. Economic Opportunities

Minilateral platforms—old or new—can open up new markets and investment opportunities. While this can be detrimental in protecting the economic interests of the nations that face disadvantage in a multilateral governance system, capacity building at home is a prerequisite to harness the full potential of these blocs. Existing partnerships like BRI, SCO, ECO as well as friendly relations with the GCC can bring mutual benefits, as Pakistan remains central to all these strategic alliance as shown in the map below.



**Figure 8: Pakistan at the Crossroads of Regional Alliances<sup>63</sup>**

It is interesting to note that China continue to strengthen its economic ties even with the countries that are presumed to be part of minilateral alliances mainly

<sup>63</sup> Map created by the authors, based on an online public domain map.



directed against it. For instance, Australia, one of the three members of the AUKUS, remains one of China's largest trading partner, with a trade volume of USD 200 billion in 2022.<sup>64</sup>

This has a lesson for Pakistan as well in its approach towards economic opportunities. Although, the western lead minilateral blocs seems hostile towards Pakistan as an extension to China's containment, country should take benefit of the opportunities available because of these new minilateral engagements. For example, Pakistan's share in the European Union's (EU) export stands at 0.56 percent despite been awarded GSP+ status by the EU to access its markets on reduced tariffs. Similarly, Pakistan's total exports to China remained merely USD 2.79 billion despite having free trade agreements with China.<sup>65</sup> These statistics highlights the need for Pakistan to strengthen its internal capacity to maximise the potential of such partnerships and obtain benefits from emerging minilateral framework, even if a few bloc seem initially hostile.

### **6.3. Countering India**

India has leveraged the fear of China's rise in the western World. From taking concessions in Civil Nuclear Technology to World's silence on Human rights abuse in Indian Occupied Jammu and Kashmir, India has capitalised on the emerging geopolitical landscape. Moreover, India has strengthened its partnership with GCC countries—once considered Pakistan's all-weather refuge. Additionally, India has managed to maintain strong defence ties with Russia and central Asian states despite the USA and Europe continuously reminding India of their concerns.

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<sup>64</sup> <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/chn/partner/aus>

<sup>65</sup> <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/pak/partner/chn>

While partly this has been a result of India's strengthening economy, India has remained successful in rightly positioning itself diplomatically as well. Meanwhile, Pakistan has faced internal turmoil, terrorism and economic meltdown resulting in our diplomatic standing as well. However, minilateral arrangements have provided Pakistan with the opportunity window to reorient its position. While India is being given diplomatic edge in the region by the western allies, it is important that Pakistan leverage the same benefit from China. However, India's strengthening ties should not be seen as an excuse to scale down our diplomatic engagement with western nations. Rather India's dichotomous approach based on identifying exclusive mutual benefits i.e. simultaneous engagement with organisations such as QUAD and BRICS—has many lessons for Pakistan in approaching the new global governance order. Pakistan should engage at all levels with diverse minilateral alliances with secular outlook as well as India's pain points with the western blocs like Khalistan movement should be used to counter India's propaganda against Pakistan at all levels.

#### **6.4. Balancing Between China and USA**

Pakistan is often perceived as China's trusted partner. Hence, hostility towards China also extends to Pakistan as well. In a complex security landscape like this, it is important that Pakistan navigate its relationship with different minilateral blocs carefully. While China remains Pakistan's close ally, it is important for the state to keep good working relationships based on mutually exclusive benefits. While China has supported Pakistan's cause at different international forums, USA remained Pakistan's biggest export partner. Traditionally, Pakistan continue to receive support from USA in military equipment, intelligence sharing and trainings.

Moreover, Pakistanis continue to choose Australia, UK and Europe as their second home. Minilateralism provides Pakistan with a strategic opportunity to better its geopolitical landscape by actively engaging with both China and USA leveraging the geostrategic location. Participating in projects such as the IMEC and utilising its strong relationship with China through CPEC can generate synergies, increasing infrastructure development and regional connectivity.<sup>66</sup> Navigating the obstacles that these programmes present, such as balancing ties with other states, is critical for Pakistan's strategic posture.

Pakistan should prioritise its interests while maintaining sovereignty by strategically leveraging alliances, solving regional concerns collectively, and adapting to the changing geopolitical scene. These agreements not only provide immediate benefits, but also set the path for a more stable and prosperous future in a complicated and linked world.

Furthermore, Pakistan should maintain its good relations with majority of the BRICS members to access the advantages offered by this new coalition. However, a secular outlook of economic policies should be maintained for a continued access to world markets. India has many lessons to offer in this regard: Despite having border clashes between China and India, China continue to be the biggest exporting trade partner. At the same time, USA remained India's biggest export market. Hence, Pakistan must navigate the complexities of engaging in multiple initiatives carefully to

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<sup>66</sup> "View of INDIA-MIDDLE EAST-EUROPE CORRIDOR (IMEC): RHETORIC, REALITIES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PAKISTAN," n.d., <https://margallapapers.ndu.edu.pk/site/article/view/241/160>.

ensure that Pakistan does not alienate its key partners while pursuing new opportunities for growth.<sup>67</sup>

## 7. CONCLUSION

As the world grapples with challenges, such as climate change, inequality, tensions between the global north and south regarding division of resources and power amid renewed geopolitics interests, traditional multilateralism has loose its ground. In this evolving global political landscape, minilateralism has found its appeal, subduing the traditional effectiveness of multilateralism. However, amidst these shifts, Pakistan has found itself encircled in reconfigured minilateral geopolitical blocs amid the West's desire to confront China's uprising.

To say the least, the hegemony of the US has been challenged by countries like China and Russia in the traditional multilateral governance system. As a consequent, US is forced to get into minilateral engagement with its allies to confront China. Similarly, minilateralism has provided an alternate path to the middle powers as well as regions to come together to forge new alliances, start new partnerships and ink new agreements. AUKUS, QUAD, and I2U2 — western lead minilateral blocs - are being challenged by the Chinese lead blocs such as SCO and BRICS.

However, some countries like India has leveraged the changing global governance paradigm to its advantage. It continued its policy of non-alignment while remaining member of minilateral blocs from both camps. This carries implication for

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<sup>67</sup> "View of INDIA-MIDDLE EAST-EUROPE CORRIDOR (IMEC): RHETORIC, REALITIES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PAKISTAN," n.d., <https://margallapapers.ndu.edu.pk/site/article/view/241/160>.

Pakistan as it seeks to balance relations between China and the US. This remains important as India continue to show hostility towards our country.

It is therefore important that in an ever-evolving world—where countries seek ties based on mutual benefits, and nations are transitioning towards minilateral alignments—we should seek partnerships that drives us towards prosperity without involving us in unwanted conflicts. While we consider these alignments, it is important that we engage our neighbours in dialogue and take steps to reduce mistrust among the neighbouring nations. While Pakistan must navigate the complexities of engaging in multiple initiatives carefully, ensuring that Pakistan does not alienate its key partners while pursuing new opportunities for growth remains critical. It can serve as strong base for us to seek partnerships beyond our boundaries and provide us with ample space to bargain benefits in more comfortable position.

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