



# Effective minilateralism for the EU

## What, when and how

by Erica Moret

Transnational challenges – including terrorism, instability stemming from regional conflicts and fragile states, nuclear proliferation, climate change, trade protectionism and pandemics – cannot be tackled without successful collaboration on a global level. But while the need for more effective co-operation between states remains acute, multilateral talks at the United Nations have often failed, stalled, under-achieved or lacked financing and commitment in recent years.

Large, bureaucratic institutions such as the UN, the EU, NATO and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) cannot be as innovative or responsive as they would always like. They are composed of diverse groups of countries with distinct world-views, resources, objectives and perspectives on threats to security. Frameworks created by such institutions risk becoming inflexible. Attempts to reach agreements between member states can be time-, resource- and energy- intensive. As a result, decision-making can prove cumbersome and slow-paced and lead to watered-down results, often requiring member states to cede control.

Working together effectively in large bureaucracies can also be more challenging when member states are stretched to capacity, be it in terms of troop commitments, funding or political will. In

such cases, member states are likely to focus less on contributing to the ‘global commons’ and instead invest more in domestic concerns.

### A case for targeted minilateralism?

With the exception of recent successes in the Paris climate talks and Iran nuclear negotiations, progress in most areas of global governance has fallen short of expectations over the past two decades. The UN Security Council (UNSC) regularly fails to effectively coordinate appropriate responses to major global threats as permanent members frequently disagree and use their veto powers to block action (the protracted Syrian conflict being one such example).

The UN and other Bretton Woods institutions are seen as out-of-date and unable to enforce compliance or adequately represent the interests of powers such as Japan, India, Turkey, Indonesia and Brazil. The WTO faces a crisis in legitimacy over the failure of its members to reach a global trade accord through the Doha Round. The EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) is seen as punching below its weight in many areas. Current debates in the US on the role of NATO and in the UK over its EU membership are but two examples of a wider loss of faith and waning



solidarity in international and regional institutions.

A characteristic of 21st century international governance is the rising importance of alternative types of collective cooperation. Arrangements based on bilateral or 'minilateral' alliances can allow countries to achieve more with less and react flexibly in response to new challenges. Seen by many as a necessary way forward to break the stalemate that characterises today's global governance structures, *ad hoc* arrangements occurring outside formal structures have scope for supporting and enhancing action taken at the multilateral level. Smaller sized groups, based on shared interests, values or relevant capabilities, can reach an agreement more quickly, and often with bigger and better results.

Minilateralism describes the diplomatic process of a small group of interested parties working together to supplement or complement the activities of international organisations in tackling subjects deemed too complicated to be addressed appropriately at the multilateral level. The process is described by a plethora of terms, including 'smart multilateralism', 'plurilateralism' (in trade) and, in foreign and security policy, 'pooling and sharing' (e.g. through the European Defence Agency), 'smart defence' (in NATO), 'coalitions of relevant players', 'contact groups', 'core groups' and 'shaping powers' (or *Gestaltungsmächte* as recently proposed by the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs). The process can also include codes of conduct, strategic partnerships and engagement with non-state actors and transnational networks, including NGOs or moderate religious groups.

Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, has categorised four types of minilateral groupings. The first, 'elite multilateralism', describes groups such as the G20, composed of powers that serve a leading or pivotal role in a particular domain. The second, 'regional multilateralism', refers to the proliferation of bilateral and regional trade pacts, particularly those in Asia, which have arisen in light of the WTO deadlock. The third, 'functional multilateralism', refers to 'coalitions of the willing and relevant' and can address small chunks of governance as a first step in addressing a wider problem; also termed 'global

governance in pieces' by Stewart Patrick, senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. The fourth, 'informal multilateralism', describes actions employed by national governments to implement measures in line with global norms, particularly in the financial sphere in cases where multilateral agreement is blocked by national parliaments.

## Minilateralism on the rise?

Small groupings of actors working together, either inside or outside the multilateral context, is not a new phenomenon. The Group of 7 (G7), composed of the world's major advanced economies, was forged in the 1970s. In the same decade a group of NATO members worked together to establish an Airborne Early Warning and Control Programme to provide a surveillance capability that could support NATO's wider efforts.

NATO has gone on to champion 'smart defence', which includes pooling and sharing of capabilities, harmonising requirements and improving coordination in areas such as cyber and ballistic missile defence. In turn, the European Defence Agency developed the 'Pooling and Sharing Initiative', which prioritises small-scale collaboration in areas such as air-to-air refuelling and maritime surveillance.

In the EU, Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) in defence was introduced through Article 46 of the Lisbon Treaty (TEU), allowing core groups of countries that have fulfilled criteria such as deployability and budgetary commitment to enter into closer cooperation to enhance European defence. Article 44, in turn, allows for the Council to 'entrust the implementation of a task

'Minilateralism describes the diplomatic process of a small group of interested parties working together to supplement or complement the activities of international organisations in tackling subjects deemed too complicated to be addressed appropriately at the multilateral level.'

to a group of member states which are willing and have the capabilities needed to carry out such an operation', particularly with reference to CSDP military operations and civilian missions. Furthermore, 'enhanced cooperation' (Title IV TEU) allows a minimum of nine EU member states to establish advanced cooperation within EU structures.

These are all enabling provisions which may or may not be implemented – but they do exist.

Outside of the EU, rising powers have sought to work together in *ad hoc* groupings, including through the BRICS' New Development Bank, given



the failure of international institutions to adapt to their ascent and better accommodate their interests. At times, rising powers such as India, China and Brazil have tried to build alliances with established powers – demonstrating commitment to preserving the *status quo* in the global system. At other times, they have pursued a leadership role for a group of less prominent, marginalised states – suggesting commitment to a more revisionist agenda.

## What recipes for success?

*Ad hoc* minilateral arrangements are far from ideal, of course. They are invariably less inclusive and predictable than formal international institutions and can suffer from a lack of legitimacy. They can also cloud the chain of command and lead to duplication of effort. Unless used carefully, they could undermine the effectiveness of international institutions and contribute to a global descent into rival alliances.

Such arrangements are often voluntary rather than legally binding. They also risk that some members will sit on the fence and not pull their weight, or use their involvement to argue against contributing or investing in other areas. In the case of the EU, the establishment of minilateral groups presupposes that their activities have been mandated or authorised by all member states. The rule of unanimity remains at the decision-making level in CFSP, with a few listed exceptions.

Despite their weaknesses, these *ad hoc* mechanisms are clearly here to stay and can bring some benefits to regional and global governance, including flexibility, innovation, compartmentalisation and speed. As such, the challenge is to help them succeed. So what makes a minilateral alliance successful in achieving its stated aims?

First is improved dialogue within international institutions on whether, and under which conditions, minilateral initiatives should be permitted, or be better supported. This can only take place when consensus is achieved that such alliances do not pose a threat, but instead can serve a positive complementary role under the right circumstances.

Second is size. Moises Naim at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace has sought to outline the ideal number of participants in

minilateral groupings, concluding that somewhere around 20 is optimal. On matters of global trade, for example, the G20 accounts for 85% of the world's economy and on climate change, the world's 20 top polluters account for 75% of the planet's greenhouse gas emissions. This number is consistent with a recently-formed alliance seeking, with great difficulty, to stem the multi-layered conflict in Syria – currently led by the US and Russia, with participation from the UN, the Arab League, the EU, China, Turkey, Egypt, France, Germany, the UK, Italy, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

‘Despite their weaknesses, these *ad hoc* mechanisms are clearly here to stay and can bring some benefits to regional and global governance, including flexibility, innovation, compartmentalisation and speed.’

Elsewhere, conflict resolution has often been tackled by smaller groupings. From the Dayton Peace Agreement (signed in 1995 by the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, and witnessed

by the US, UK, EU, France, Germany and Russia), to the more recent Normandy format (Germany, France, Ukraine and Russia) seeking to resolve the conflict in eastern Ukraine.

In the context of non-proliferation, smaller groupings also appear preferable, as illustrated by the Six Party Talks on North Korea (Republic of Korea, North Korea, the US, China, Japan and Russia) and the eight actors involved in Iran talks (E3+3 – France, Germany, the UK, the US, Russia and China – alongside the EU and Iran).

Third is communication and coordination between and within international institutions. In the context of European defence, for instance, successful outcomes require that the various minilateral initiatives underway are coordinated carefully with one another to avoid replication of effort. Similarly, improved dialogue is also vital between organisations such as NATO, the EU and the UN, particularly in relation to multiple coalitions operating in conflict zones.

Fourth, minilateral initiatives appear more likely to succeed if their efforts are facilitated and supported by the multilateral institutions under which they are housed. Vivien Pertusot of the *Institut français des relations internationales* (IFRI) has suggested that international organisations such as NATO and the EU could facilitate exchanges between minilateral groups; serve as a mediator over competing agendas; provide expertise where required; help





to identify shortfalls and advise on potential solutions. Nevertheless, unilateral initiatives that are directly created and managed by international institutions could run into difficulties, not least as they may not always suit member state interests.

Fifth is clarity of purpose. Partners in a targeted alliance are called to ensure that they share a joint vision, work to clearly defined objectives, forge agreement on how to share benefits more widely and be able to demonstrate where value is added to the wider group. In the case of the EU, members of a unilateral alliance would presumably have to respect the 'constitutional' responsibility of loyal cooperation with EU institutions to avoid the EU's external action and defence integration from becoming 're-nationalised', undermined or weakened.

Finally, the nature of an alliance may also play a role in its sustainability and value. Research by Amrita Narlikar, president of the German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA), into the alliance-building of rising powers suggests that bloc-type coalitions, characterised by the sharing of common identities and beliefs, tend to be longer-lasting and are what states such as India, Brazil and China have tended to favour in the past, particularly in relation to international security governance. Issue-based alliances, which are often formed for instrumental reasons, tend to unravel more easily.

## Sanctions and refugees

The tentative early success of the Iran nuclear talks that culminated in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) serves as an example in which multiple unilateral alliances worked alongside, and sometimes drove, the wider multilateral process, as well as facilitating eventual agreement at the UN. Such a model has been hailed as a potential recipe for a more effective and efficient future EU foreign policy.

E3/EU+3 negotiations with Tehran were largely conducted outside the UN framework but, once an agreement was reached, the deal was swiftly approved by the UNSC. Negotiations also included secret US-Iran talks and multiple layers of sanctions imposed at the multilateral (UN), regional (EU) and national levels (including the US, Japan, South Korea, Canada, Australia, India, Israel and Switzerland).

Sanctions imposed by small groups of national or regional actors that precede, and even facilitate, UN sanctions is a trend that is not unique to the Iran case. According to sanctions experts Thomas Biersteker

and Clara Portela, arms embargoes imposed by the EU on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) pre-dated identical sanctions imposed by the UN. More widely, over 70% of UN targeted sanctions put in place since the end of the Cold War have been preceded by sanctions imposed by individual nations or regional groups – often working in unison – including in the cases of Libya and Haiti, according to the Geneva-based Graduate Institute's 2016 Targeted Sanctions Database. The EU, while essentially a keen multilateral actor, has been using non-UN sanctions with increased frequency in recent years, albeit typically imposed in unilateral collaboration with other countries – particularly the US – and regional powers – including the African Union, the Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS) and the Arab League. The overall legitimacy of these actions, however, is currently being contested at the UN as well as by Russia and China.

Finally, Europe's refugee crisis is providing a tragic and intensely politicised example of an arena where new, and often unexpected, tensions are arising from the bilateral to multilateral levels. 'Messy multilateralism', including a host of burgeoning unilateral initiatives, has rarely been more acute than in the case of the various activities seeking to address the humanitarian emergency, which include NATO and EU maritime operations, European coast guards, humanitarian organisations and delicate bilateral relations between Turkey and the EU, to name but a few. And all this is occurring in an area where multilateral regimes are still partial, weak or non-existent.

As the launch of the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) on foreign and security policy approaches, the EU faces its toughest range of cross-border challenges in over a generation. If used judiciously and strategically, strengthened links with (and participation in) unilateral initiatives – including those from outside Europe – may indeed afford the EU more flexibility and adaptability in the crucial years to come. Especially if and when these initiatives serve as building blocks for a broader – preferably multilateral – framework.

*Erica Moret is a Senior Researcher, Programme for the Study of International Governance, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva.*

