

When the Centre Does Not Hold: Regional Sovereignty and the Rise of Minilateralism in the Global South

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The fragmentation of traditional multilateral institutions and intensifying geopolitical competition are reshaping the global order, placing unprecedented pressures on small and medium-sized states, particularly across the Global South. This article explores ‘minilateralism’ as an adaptive strategy employed by these states to protect sovereignty, foster resilience, and assert agency amid systemic uncertainty. Through a comparative analysis of three regional minilateral initiatives – the Indonesia–Malaysia–Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT), the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), and the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) – the study examines the varied trajectories, institutional evolutions, and diplomatic innovations that characterize sovereignty-conscious minilateralism. It challenges prevailing assumptions that portray minilaterals as transient or externally dominated, demonstrating instead their role as durable, strategic instruments for smaller states. The article concludes with lessons for theoretical development and practical policymaking, emphasizing the importance of tailoring minilateral designs to regional realities, strategically leveraging sovereignty, and complementing minilateral initiatives within broader multilateral frameworks. The analysis finds that minilateral frameworks in the Global South enable small and medium-sized states to assert sovereignty, navigate geopolitical pressures, and create durable alternatives to traditional multilateralism.

Keywords: Minilateralism, Sovereignty, Global South, Regional Cooperation, Multipolarity.



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Introduction

In his haunting portrayal of a world unravelling, W.B. Yeats wrote, “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.”¹ Today, amid profound transformations in the international system, these lines resonate with renewed urgency. The traditional anchors of global stability – multilateral institutions, great power frameworks, and liberal norms – are increasingly fragmented, unable to contain the forces of competition, fragmentation, and systemic uncertainty. For small and medium-sized states, particularly across the Global South, this unravelling presents not just vulnerabilities but a decisive challenge: how to defend sovereignty, foster resilience, and assert agency when the old certainties of international order no longer hold.

This article explores one strategic response to that challenge: minilateralism. Unlike broad-based multilateralism, minilateral frameworks are smaller, flexible, and interest-driven, designed to enhance resilience, navigate shifting geopolitical landscapes, and preserve autonomy amid external pressures.² Minilateralism is not merely a reactive adjustment to systemic decline; it is increasingly emerging as a proactive, sovereignty-centred strategy for states seeking to adapt without surrendering agency.³ It offers a way for smaller states to shape their regional environments, protect their sovereignty strategically, and build modular coalitions tailored to specific challenges, even though external observers often perceive these arrangements as hedging mechanisms.

Through a comparative analysis of three regional minilateral initiatives – the Indonesia–Malaysia–Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT), the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), and the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) – this study examines how different forms of minilateral cooperation are structured, how they evolve, and how they enable smaller states to navigate multipolarity. The cases span a diverse range of contexts – from economic development and regional integration to sovereignty

1 W.B. Yeats, *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, (New York: Macmillan, 1956), p.184.

2 Slaughter, A.M. and Hale, T. “Multipolarity Is In, Multilateralism Out: How Minilateralism is Remaking Global Governance,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.104, No.4, 2024, pp.47-62.

3 Degtarev, D.A. “Re-Sovereignising Africa in the Context of the New World Order Formation,” *Journal of the Institute for African Studies*, Vol.4, No.69, 2024, pp.29-48.

preservation amid existential security threats – and together illuminate the varied pathways through which minilateralism is being operationalized across the Global South.

In doing so, the article contributes both to theoretical debates on minilateralism and to practical reflections on sovereignty management and regional agency. It challenges prevailing assumptions that view minilaterals as transient or externally dominated, demonstrating instead their capacity for durability, strategic innovation, and resilience. By analysing these minilaterals' institutional trajectories, sovereignty strategies, and diplomatic innovations, the study seeks to advance a more nuanced understanding of how small and medium-sized states are reimagining cooperation in an increasingly fragmented and competitive world order.

To explore these dynamics, this article proceeds as follows. The next section outlines the theoretical foundations of minilateralism within a shifting multipolar order, emphasizing its strategic relevance for small and medium-sized states. It then examines three comparative case studies – the Indonesia–Malaysia–Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT), the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), and the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) – to illustrate how different regional contexts shape the form, function, and evolution of minilateral cooperation. The article concludes by drawing out comparative insights and practical lessons for theory development and policymaking in the Global South.

Theoretical Discussion on Minilateralism in a Multipolar Order

Minilateralism has gained increasing scholarly attention as the international system fragments and traditional multilateral institutions struggle to adapt. Defined broadly as cooperation among a small number of states focused on specific interests,⁴ minilateralism offers flexibility, speed, and adaptability compared to larger, more cumbersome multilateral frameworks. Yet scholarly debates reveal considerable variation in how minilateralism is conceptualized, its relationship to sovereignty, and its broader geopolitical implications.⁵

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.47.

⁵ Fathah, M.A., "From Multilateralism to Minilateralism – A Conceptual Paradigm," *Electronic Journal of Social and Strategic Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1, April–May 2022, pp.105–113, <https://doi.org/10.47362/EJSS.2022.3107> (Accessed: April 18, 2025).

Some scholars frame minilateralism primarily as a functional alternative to multilateralism, focusing on efficiency and problem-solving within small groups.⁶ Others view it more strategically, emphasizing its role as an adaptive mechanism for states seeking to hedge against great power competition or to maintain autonomy within shifting global alignments.⁷ Still others highlight minilateralism's diplomatic innovations, stressing how small coalitions allow for more creative, culturally resonant, and locally responsive diplomatic practices.⁸

Sovereignty plays a central role across these debates. Traditional perspectives often regard sovereignty as an impediment to regional cooperation, but minilateral experiences increasingly demonstrate the opposite: sovereignty can serve as a strategic foundation for cooperation among smaller states.⁹ By retaining flexibility and minimizing formal supranational authority, minilaterals allow states to collaborate without sacrificing political autonomy.¹⁰ Sovereignty, rather than being eroded, is strategically preserved and exercised.

Institutional evolution within minilaterals also varies widely. Some arrangements, like the IMT-GT, evolve from loose cooperation toward deeper institutionalization through implementation blueprints and sectoral working groups.¹¹ Others, such as the AES, intentionally maintain minimalist, sovereignty-preserving structures to maximize political flexibility.¹² This diversity suggests that minilateral success depends less on specific institutional models and more on alignment with strategic needs, historical experiences, and regional conditions.

Diplomatically, minilateralism expands possibilities beyond traditional intergovernmental negotiations. Minilaterals enable subnational diplomacy, private sector engagement, cultural diplomacy, and pragmatic

6 Slaughter and Hale, *op.cit.*, p.49.

7 Degtarev, *op.cit.*, pp.29-48.

8 C. Slatter and Y. Underhill-Sem, "Reclaiming Pacific Island Regionalism," in S. Firth (ed.), *Globalisation and Governance in the Pacific Islands*, (Canberra: ANU Press, 2006), p.298.

9 Degtarev, *op.cit.*, p.35.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

11 IMT-GT, *IMT-GT Vision 2036*, (Medan: Centre for IMT-GT Subregional Cooperation, 2017), pp.8-13.

12 Ndiaye, B. "A Shift of the Collective Security Architecture in West Africa," *The Defence Horizon Journal*, Vol.5, No.3, 2024, pp.45-61.

multipolar alignments.¹³ In this sense, minilateralism creates versatile diplomatic spaces through which small and medium-sized states can navigate the complexities of a multipolar order.

While early scholarship often portrayed minilaterals as transitional or instrumental – temporary mechanisms toward broader multilateralism or great power hedging – the cases examined here suggest otherwise. Minilateralism increasingly emerges as a permanent, adaptive strategy for sovereignty protection, regional resilience, and strategic innovation.¹⁴ It reflects not just tactical adjustment but a deeper reordering of regional cooperation strategies in an era where the assumptions underpinning multilateral order no longer hold.

The Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT): Minilateralism and Strategic Autonomy in Southeast Asia

The Indonesia–Malaysia–Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT) provides one of the clearest examples of how minilateralism can evolve from pragmatic economic cooperation toward a broader framework of regional resilience. Established in 1993, IMT-GT was driven not by grand geopolitical designs but by the need to address regional development disparities, stimulate border economies, and integrate neglected subnational regions into national and regional economies.¹⁵

Initially, IMT-GT was highly transactional, characterized by ad hoc cooperation among subnational authorities, local business communities, and national governments.¹⁶ However, over time, it matured into a structured minilateral framework, complete with a central secretariat (CIMT), sector-specific working groups, and results-based monitoring systems. The adoption of Vision 2036 and successive Implementation Blueprints reflected institutional consolidation and strategic ambition, extending the focus beyond infrastructure to sectors such as the halal

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹⁴ Slaughter and Hale, *op.cit.*, p.60.

¹⁵ IMT-GT, *IMT-GT Implementation Blueprint 2017–2021*, (Medan: Centre for IMT-GT Subregional Cooperation, 2017), pp.13–17.

¹⁶ Yolin, T.K. and Rantepadang, F.N., “Meninjau Keuntungan dan Tantangan Indonesia Selaku Ketua ASEAN Summit 2023 atas Kerja Sama IMT-GT dalam Kaitan BRI [Reviewing the Benefits and Challenges of Indonesia as Chair of the 2023 ASEAN Summit in Relation to IMT-GT Cooperation within the Context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)]” *Sentris*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 2023, pp.162–176.

industry, digital innovation, sustainable tourism, and climate resilience.¹⁷

IMT-GT also demonstrates how minilateral diplomacy can diversify over time. Beyond government-to-government interactions, IMT-GT actively cultivates subnational diplomacy, private sector partnerships, academic cooperation, and community engagement.¹⁸ These multi-level diplomatic practices have contributed to the Triangle's ability to navigate regional economic shifts and external uncertainties without becoming dependent on any single external actor.

Importantly, IMT-GT shows how minilateralism can complement broader multilateral frameworks. Its activities are aligned with national development plans and ASEAN's regional integration goals,¹⁹ demonstrating nested complementarity between minilateral pragmatism and multilateral legitimacy. Rather than competing with ASEAN, IMT-GT extends and operationalizes ASEAN's broader vision at a more localized level.

However, IMT-GT is not without vulnerabilities. The shift toward private-sector-led development has increased competition among member states, occasionally straining cooperative intent. While institutional frameworks help to manage competition, risks of fragmentation and developmental asymmetries remain.²⁰ Maintaining cooperative momentum requires continuous balancing between national interests and regional goals.

Finally, IMT-GT illustrates an important theoretical insight: although often initiated through transactionalism, minilaterals can evolve toward institutional convergence. IMT-GT's trajectory shows that transactional beginnings are not a liability; with political will and adaptive diplomacy, transactionalism can mature into complementary, enduring regional frameworks.²¹ This evolution challenges negative portrayals

17 Usman, M., Munir, Q., Karim, M.Z.A. et al., "Exploring Causal Relationship Between Trade, Investment, and Economic Growth in the IMT-GT Region," *Proceedings of the International Conference on Economics, Business and Entrepreneurship (ICEBE)*, Vol.7, No.1, 2024, pp.162–176.

18 Saihani, S.B., Mohd Zain, N., Abdullah, S. et al., "Developing Cross-Border Ecotourism Destination in Indonesia–Malaysia–Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT) Region," *TEAM Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, Vol.20, No.2, 2023, pp.17–21.

19 IMT-GT Vision 2036, *op.cit.*, pp.6-8; Implementation Blueprint 2022–2026, *op.cit.*, pp.21–28.

20 Yolin and Rantepadang, *op.cit.*, pp.169–172.

21 A.M. Slaughter and T. Hale, *op.cit.*, p.58.

of transactionalism as inherently unstable, offering a more nuanced understanding of minilateral institutionalization.

IMT-GT's trajectory offers not only theoretical lessons but important policy considerations. Policymakers should prioritize balancing the growing role of private-sector investment with mechanisms that preserve regional equity and cohesion. As competition for investment intensifies among member states of minilaterals, there is a need to strengthen frameworks for joint branding, corridor-wide value chains, and coordinated infrastructure planning. Policymakers should also institutionalize conflict-resolution mechanisms to pre-empt tensions arising from asymmetrical development gains. Additionally, minilateral actors must continue embedding subnational diplomacy within national strategies, ensuring that the decentralized strengths of the initiative are preserved even as regional economic pressures grow. Given the increasing volatility of global markets, fostering economic diversification – including investment in green industries, digital connectivity, and climate resilience – will be vital for ensuring that minilaterals maintain their strategic autonomy and development relevance in the years ahead. While the IMT-GT case highlights the role of economic pragmatism and regional integration, the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) presents a different trajectory, where cultural diplomacy and sovereignty preservation take centre stage amid intensifying external pressures.

The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF): Adaptive Multilateralism, Sovereignty, and Strategic Autonomy in a Fragmented Regional Order

The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), consisting of 18 members – including 14 independent Pacific Island countries (Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu), along with Australia, New Zealand, and the French territories of New Caledonia and French Polynesia – occupies a unique position in minilateralism studies. Although often regarded as a multilateral institution, PIF increasingly operates with the flexibility and strategic focus characteristic of minilateral arrangements. Founded in 1971 to amplify Pacific voices in global diplomacy, it has evolved

into a sovereignty-conscious coalition, navigating profound internal asymmetries and intensifying external geopolitical competition.²²

Unlike IMT-GT, PIF's origins were explicitly political. It sought to assert regional identity and autonomy at a time when decolonization was reshaping the Pacific.²³ Over time, however, internal tensions emerged, rooted in disparities among members' size, wealth, and diplomatic clout. Australia and New Zealand's outsized influence, and the perceived marginalization of Micronesian states, periodically strained cohesion.²⁴

These dynamics intensified with external geopolitical competition. The Pacific region's strategic significance has attracted renewed engagement from the United States, China, and other powers, exacerbating internal divisions.²⁵ External actors have sometimes exploited asymmetries within PIF, selectively courting smaller states and undermining collective decision-making.

Despite these challenges, PIF has demonstrated remarkable resilience. Cultural diplomacy – particularly the Talanoa dialogue process – has helped maintain cohesion by emphasizing consensus, inclusivity, and shared Pacific identity.²⁶ PIF's diplomatic innovations have allowed it to manage tensions while leveraging its collective voice in international forums such as the UN, APEC, and climate change negotiations.

PIF also exemplifies sovereignty-conscious diplomacy. Member states insist on diplomatic engagement that respects national sovereignty and regional norms, resisting external pressures that seek to impose great power rivalries onto Pacific politics.²⁷ The 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent reaffirms these principles, emphasizing regional solidarity, sustainable development, and strategic autonomy.²⁸

22 Simmons, M.M.L., *Subregionalism, the Pacific Islands Forum, and Regional Security*, Kenney Paper No.9, (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University Press, 2024), pp.10–13.

23 Shibuya, E., "The Problems and Potential of the Pacific Islands Forum," in P. Evans and M. Stubbs (eds.), *Asia-Pacific Security: Policy Challenges*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003), pp.102–115.

24 Lawson, S., "Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands Forum: A Critical Review," *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, Vol.55, No.2, 2017, pp.214–235.

25 Siekiera, J., "Pacific Islands Development Forum – Emergence of the New Participant in the Pacific Regionalism," *Studia Iuridica Lublinensia*, Vol.28, No.3, 2019, pp.81–84.

26 Simmons, *op.cit.*, pp.12-14; Slatter and Underhill-Sem, *op.cit.*, pp. 298-301.

27 *Ibid.*

28 Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, *2050 Strategy Implementation Plan 2023–2030*,

Nonetheless, tensions between national and collective sovereignty persist. Some members prioritize national interests, occasionally weakening PIF's collective leverage. This inherent tension is both a structural reality and a vulnerability, requiring continuous diplomatic management to sustain regional coherence.

The Pacific Islands Forum demonstrates that minilateralism can be strategically embedded within broader multilateral structures, enhancing legitimacy while maintaining operational flexibility. Its experience underscores the importance of diplomatic culture: practices such as *Talanoa* reinforce institutional resilience and help mitigate internal asymmetries. Moreover, sovereignty-conscious minilateralism can expand the agency of small states amid intensifying geopolitical competition, provided internal divisions are carefully managed. Far from being merely a tool of larger powers, minilateralism in the Pacific context has evolved into an architecture for collective action, norm entrepreneurship, and sovereign self-definition – albeit one continually challenged by internal tensions and external pressures.

Building on the lessons of adaptability and cultural diplomacy, the PIF experience illustrates that cultural legitimacy and sovereignty-conscious diplomacy are critical assets, but they must be actively reinforced to remain effective under mounting external pressures. Policymakers should prioritize strengthening internal consensus mechanisms, including the use of flexible opt-in models that allow diverse national interests to coexist without fracturing collective voice. To guard against external powers' circumvention of minilateral mechanisms through bilateral incentives, member states could enhance minilateral diplomatic protocols by requiring greater transparency and collective consultation before individual agreements with external actors are finalized. Further investment in cultural diplomacy, particularly through initiatives that amplify minilateral narratives, can help maintain regional solidarity and international visibility. Finally, capacity-building efforts aimed at smaller member states – particularly in technical negotiation, fiscal management, and strategic communication – would help mitigate internal asymmetries and reinforce minilateral collective agency. In contrast to PIF's evolution within a multilateral framework, the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) emerged under conditions of acute insecurity, demonstrating

(Suva: Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2023).

how unilateralism can serve as a defensive strategy to preserve sovereignty amid existential threats.

The Alliance of Sahel States (AES): Unilateral Sovereignty, Strategic Diversification, and Defensive Regionalism

The Alliance of Sahel States (AES) represents a different face of unilateralism – one shaped primarily by acute security imperatives and existential threats to sovereignty. Formed in 2023 by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, the AES emerged after these states faced internal instability, insurgencies, military interventions, and growing alienation from traditional regional organizations, particularly the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).²⁹

The AES was not born from a desire for economic integration or diplomatic diversification but from immediate security needs. Its formation followed successive coups that placed the member states at odds with ECOWAS and Western partners, prompting them to seek alternative frameworks to safeguard sovereignty, coordinate defence, and assert political autonomy.³⁰

Institutionally, the AES remains minimalist by design. Coordination is conducted at the highest political levels, emphasizing flexibility and sovereignty retention over bureaucratic expansion.³¹ While the Alliance has expressed aspirations to evolve into a confederation, reflecting a deeper commitment to collective action, it continues to prioritize swift, leader-driven decision-making suited to volatile environments.

29 Afriyie, F.A., “Dissecting the Alliance of Sahel States’ Withdrawal from ECOWAS,” Research Center for Analysis and Security Studies (RECASS), Briefing Paper, October 2024, Available at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/384739234> (Accessed: April 25, 2025); Besliu, R., “No World Order: The Sahel’s Great Schism,” *Green European Journal*, August 22, 2024, Available at: <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/no-world-order-the-sahels-great-schism/> (Accessed: April 25, 2025).

30 Alliance of Sahel States, *Charter of Liptako-Gourma Establishing the Alliance of Sahel States*, 2023.

31 Bassou, A., “From the Alliance of Sahel States to the Confederation of Sahel States: The Road is Clear, But Full of Traps,” Policy Center for the New South, Policy Brief No.19/24, April 2024, Available at: <https://www.policycenter.ma/publications> (Accessed: April 25, 2025); Kohnert, D., “Navigating Rivalries: Prospects for Coexistence between ECOWAS and AES in West Africa,” *Munich Personal RePEc Archive (MPRA)*, Paper No.121554, August 17, 2024, Available at: <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/121554/> (Accessed: April 25, 2025).

Diplomatically, the AES practices transactional multipolarity. Member states diversify partnerships beyond traditional Western allies, engaging actors such as Russia, Türkiye, and China.³² This diversification is pragmatic, aiming to reduce dependency on any single external partner while maintaining maximum flexibility. However, this strategy carries risks of strategic capture and external manipulation, particularly given the severe resource and security vulnerabilities of the member states.³³

Unlike IMT-GT and PIF, AES emerged in an environment where the external geopolitical competition was not an ancillary factor but a central reality. The Sahel's strategic importance – its role in migration routes, counterterrorism efforts, and natural resource access – places AES at the centre of global rivalries. This context complicates internal coordination and external diplomacy, making sovereignty both the goal and the currency of AES diplomacy.

The AES experience also highlights the fragility of sovereignty-centred minilateralism in unstable environments. While minilateral cooperation enhances immediate security and diplomatic flexibility, it does not by itself resolve underlying governance challenges or economic vulnerabilities. Survival, rather than resilience, remains the short-term priority.

Nevertheless, AES provides important theoretical lessons. It underscores that minilateralism can serve not only developmental or diplomatic goals but also urgent sovereignty preservation. It also demonstrates that minimalist, sovereignty-anchored institutional designs can be strategically functional in high-risk environments, even if they remain vulnerable to external pressures and internal instability.

The Alliance's ongoing evolution – its efforts toward confederation, expansion of cooperative frameworks beyond defence, and diversification of external partnerships – demonstrates that even security-driven minilaterals can adapt over time. Whether the AES endures or fragments will depend on its ability to institutionalize cooperation without undermining sovereignty and to navigate external engagements without falling into strategic dependency.

32 Robertson, K., "An Iron Curtain in the Sahel," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, August 15, 2024, Available at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iron-curtain-sahel> (Accessed: April 25, 2025).

33 Ndiaye, B. *op.cit.*, pp.45-61.

The AES experience underscores both the strategic utility and the vulnerabilities of sovereignty-centred minilateralism in high-risk environments. Emerging from existential security threats, minilaterals face acute challenges that demand careful policy responses. To maintain strategic autonomy, policymakers must manage security partnerships prudently, avoiding excessive reliance on any single external actor even as diversified diplomatic engagement remains necessary. Institutionalizing mechanisms to vet external security and development partnerships – such as through joint councils or independent audits – could help reinforce this autonomy.

At the same time, building internal legitimacy will be crucial. Gradual civilian transitions (in cases of military governments), participatory governance initiatives, and inclusive national dialogues would strengthen the domestic foundations of minilaterals, reducing the risks of internal fragmentation. Incremental expansion of cooperation beyond a single sector could foster broader regional resilience, provided it does not erode the minimalist flexibility that is needed to sustain cohesion. Carefully balancing sovereignty preservation with selective functional integration will be key to securing minilaterals' long-term viability.

Comparative Minilateralism: Strategic Lessons, Theoretical Insights, and Policy Implications

Taken together, the IMT-GT, PIF, and AES illustrate the varied regional expressions of minilateralism across the Global South, shaped by distinct strategic imperatives and historical experiences. Collectively, these cases affirm that minilateralism is no longer a transitional mechanism but has matured into an enduring structure for advancing regional agency and resilience. A comparative analysis of the Indonesia–Malaysia–Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT), the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), and the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) underscores the diversity, adaptability, and strategic depth of minilateralism in the Global South. Rather than conforming to a single archetype, these cases reveal how minilateral frameworks are shaped by regional exigencies, historical experiences, and evolving strategic imperatives. Collectively, they illustrate that minilateralism is not merely a fallback from failed multilateralism, but an increasingly permanent feature of contemporary regional governance.

One of the clearest insights from the comparison is that minilateral frameworks are profoundly context driven. IMT-GT originated to address cross-border economic disparities, evolving gradually into a structured cooperation model aligned with ASEAN integration. Through its evolution, IMT-GT advances regional economic agency, allowing border provinces and national governments to shape development trajectories beyond external dependencies.

PIF, while initially formed as a multilateral forum, has adapted minilateral traits over time to balance internal asymmetries and external pressures, leveraging indigenous diplomatic practices such as the Talanoa dialogue to maintain cohesion. Through its sovereignty-centred diplomacy, the Pacific Islands Forum reinforces the diplomatic agency of Pacific states in shaping global norms and partnerships.

In stark contrast, the AES emerged out of existential security crises, driven by a need to defend sovereignty and territorial integrity in an environment of acute instability and external isolation. For the AES, minilateralism provides a vital mechanism to safeguard security agency and resist external political interventions in a volatile regional environment. This variation challenges universalist theories that portray minilateralism as a monolithic or transitional phenomenon.

Institutional development across the cases further reflects adaptive pragmatism rather than strict path dependency. IMT-GT demonstrates incremental institutional convergence, maturing from transactional cooperation into a results-based governance structure integrated with national plans and ASEAN objectives. PIF, blending cultural legitimacy with formal processes, has evolved into a flexible sovereignty-conscious institution. AES remains deliberately minimalist, prioritizing sovereignty and operational agility over bureaucratic complexity. These trajectories suggest that successful minilaterals do not necessarily progress toward deeper supranationalism; instead, they evolve in ways that preserve their relevance to the specific needs of their members.

Sovereignty management emerges as a central and nuanced theme. Rather than being a barrier to cooperation, sovereignty is strategically leveraged to enhance agency. IMT-GT reinforces sovereignty by diversifying economic partnerships and embedding local priorities within broader regional strategies. PIF negotiates tensions between collective and national sovereignty through culturally embedded diplomatic practices, maintaining flexibility in the face of external pressures. AES

places sovereignty at the core of its very existence, viewing stabilization and autonomy as prerequisites for any further political or economic integration. These examples refute traditional assumptions that regional cooperation requires the dilution of sovereignty, illustrating instead that sovereignty-driven regional frameworks can make minilateral cooperation more resilient and adaptive.

Diplomatic innovation is another critical comparative insight. IMT-GT exemplifies multi-level diplomacy, engaging provincial authorities, the private sector, and universities alongside national governments. PIF elevates cultural diplomacy through *Talanoa*, reinforcing relational legitimacy. AES practises transactional multipolar diplomacy, diversifying external partnerships to resist strategic dependency. The cases collectively highlight the diplomatic versatility of minilateralism, enabling small and medium-sized states to blend transactional, normative, and culturally embedded strategies to advance their interests.

Despite their adaptability, all three cases face persistent vulnerabilities: institutional fragility, susceptibility to external manipulation, coordination fatigue, and internal asymmetries. IMT-GT must carefully balance competition and solidarity as it leans more heavily on private-sector-driven growth. PIF must continuously manage internal fractures exacerbated by external geopolitical courtship. AES confronts the twin challenges of external dependency risks and internal political fragility. These vulnerabilities reinforce the need for adaptive governance mechanisms, proactive diplomatic strategies, and continuous efforts to cultivate internal solidarity.

Theoretically, the experiences of IMT-GT, PIF, and AES invite a reconceptualization of minilateralism. Far from being transient, these frameworks demonstrate that minilateralism can be a strategic, resilient, and permanent feature of regional governance. They suggest that scholars and policymakers should move beyond simplistic binaries between minilateralism and multilateralism and instead embrace a view of layered and complementary governance, where sovereignty preservation, institutional adaptability, and diplomatic innovation are critical to institutional durability.

For policymakers, several practical implications emerge. Institutional structures must align with regional strategic realities rather than forcing convergence toward multilateral templates. Sovereignty should be leveraged strategically to foster cooperation rather than being viewed

solely as a constraint. Diplomatic practices should be diversified, incorporating subnational actors, the private sector, and cultural diplomacy alongside traditional statecraft. Minilateral initiatives should be embedded within broader multilateral norms and frameworks to enhance legitimacy while preserving operational flexibility.

Ultimately, the comparative study of IMT-GT, PIF, and AES affirms that minilateralism, when properly tailored to context, can provide small and medium-sized states with a durable mechanism for navigating geopolitical turbulence, protecting sovereignty, and shaping regional futures on their own terms.

Together, the IMT-GT, PIF, and AES demonstrate that sovereignty-driven minilateralism is neither transient nor peripheral. It has become a vital strategic tool through which small and medium-sized states across the Global South are safeguarding autonomy, adapting to systemic uncertainty, and reshaping regional governance on their own terms.

Conclusion

Framing the core inquiry around regional agency and sovereignty in the Global South, this study asks: how are small and medium-sized states using minilateral frameworks to protect sovereignty, assert agency, and navigate a fractured international order? The findings show that minilateral arrangements – IMT-GT, PIF, and AES – have emerged as viable and often preferred mechanisms for navigating geopolitical fragmentation while preserving autonomy. These arrangements are not merely reactive stopgaps but strategic instruments through which smaller states build resilience, assert agency, and recalibrate cooperation on their own terms. Where traditional multilateralism has faltered, minilateral initiatives rooted in local realities and sovereign priorities have taken root, offering alternative models for regional governance in an increasingly volatile global order.

As the certainties of international order unravel, minilateralism has emerged not as a temporary fix but as a strategic craft of survival and sovereignty. Small and medium-sized states across the Global South are no longer just responding to fragmentation – they are proactively shaping regional orders that reflect their priorities and realities. The experiences of IMT-GT, PIF, and AES show that where multilateral frameworks have faltered, adaptive minilateralism rooted in local

agency and regional purpose is taking hold, offering new pathways for cooperation and resilience.

This broader turn toward innovation reflects a deeper truth: as Yeats foresaw, when the centre fails to hold, the task is not simply to endure, but to build anew. Across the Global South, small and medium-sized states are forging adaptive regional arrangements that protect sovereignty, foster resilience, and redefine cooperation amid an increasingly fractured global order. Minilateralism – small, focused, and flexible by design – is thus no longer a peripheral strategy, but a durable response to the demands of a multipolar world.³⁴

The cases of IMT-GT, PIF, and AES demonstrate that minilateralism is far from uniform. Rather, it adapts to the specific needs of different regions: fostering economic convergence and diversification in the IMT-GT; enabling sovereignty-conscious, culturally grounded diplomacy in the PIF; and anchoring defensive regionalism in the AES. These pathways illustrate minilateralism's flexibility and its capacity to empower smaller states amid intensifying geopolitical competition.

Such findings challenge earlier portrayals of minilateralism as merely transitional, shallow, or externally dominated. Instead, they reveal that, when driven by smaller states, minilaterals can protect sovereignty, expand diplomatic agency, and build regional resilience. Yet vulnerabilities – strategic capture, internal divisions, and institutional fragility – persist and must be actively addressed through adaptive governance and diversified diplomatic strategies.

For policymakers, the lesson is clear: sovereignty must be leveraged as a foundation for cooperation; minilateral frameworks must be aligned with local strategic realities; and effective minilateralism must complement, rather than undermine, broader multilateral norms in order to reinforce legitimacy and resilience.

In a world where old centres falter and new peripheries rise, the agency of smaller states will increasingly shape regional and global dynamics. Through minilateralism, they are not merely reacting to global disorder – they are actively constructing alternative futures. As Yeats warned of chaos, these emerging coalitions offer a different response: adaptive sovereignty, strategic innovation, and the collective reimagining of the global order.

³⁴ Slaughter and Hale, *op.cit.*, p.47.