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Minilateralism in Azerbaijan's Foreign Policy Strategy

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Key takeaways:

- *An increasing number of states worldwide are preferring to cooperate in 'minilateral', as opposed to 'multilateral' cooperation formats.*
- *Minilateralism, despite being the by-product of multilateralism's shortcomings, is considerably different, with greater emphasis on developing mutual understanding and solidarity whilst incorporating both the shared interests and values of the countries concerned.*
- *Engagement in 'minilateral' frameworks is one of the several key directions of Azerbaijan's foreign policy.*
- *This pursuit of minilateralism stems from Azerbaijan's disillusionment with certain multilateral platforms but also with the nature of some of its bilateral relations.*
- *To address these inconsistencies, Azerbaijan is engaging in several different cooperation mechanisms, including minilateralism, but is not restricting itself to just one format.*
- *Minilateralism is a global idea, with many examples worldwide, is still undergoing evolution and can appear in many different formats.*

Inter-state cooperation in international affairs, despite being the bedrock of all inter-state relations, is in a constant process of evolution and transformation. The determination shown by states across the 20th century to institutionalize their contacts in a bid to prevent full-scale conflict has only taken the international community so far. The current global climate is one of hostility, unpredictability and fragmentation, where multilateralism's theoretically innate capacity to accelerate economic prosperity and security has been overshadowed by great power competition for spheres of influence. As the international order undergoes a profound transformation, the final outlook of which is indefinite, states are looking for alternatives. States which already classify as 'middle powers' and also those resembling ones in terms of the influence of some of their actions are increasingly reliant on much narrower formats of cooperation, which, on a conceptual level, differ considerably from the now traditional format of 'multilateralism'.

Minilateralism: the concept at a glance

The primary example of such a format, described by some as ‘minilateralism’, focuses on cooperation in considerably smaller groups of states. Considered as the [‘by-product’](#) of multilateralism and its limitations, the tendency of states to engage in this format is becoming increasingly apparent across all spheres of international affairs. Minilateralism is distinct to traditional bilateral cooperation frameworks, which still underpin modern-day diplomatic relations. Instead, cooperation in this format is usually between 3-6 states but is not limited to this range. It is distinguished by a focus on bringing together a small number of states in more ‘informal’ [settings](#) and achieving swift and efficient results with the [highest possible impact](#), with all parties to the respective framework, ideally, possessing an equal degree of influence on the format. Moreover, minilateralism can be divided into [four](#) primary categories – ‘partnership-based’, ‘major-power-led’, ‘sectoral’ and ‘issue-based’. These, however, are not definitive, and can intersect, as will be demonstrated.

Characterized by a greater sense of individual autonomy, states in ‘minilateral’ frameworks do not simply contribute to a common agenda defined by a great power – they themselves play a role in defining it. Minilateral frameworks resist the urge of portraying cooperation through the lens of a specific and overarching ideology, the implementation of which has, over time, proven to be largely flawed. In addition, they exempt themselves from the complex [bureaucratic responsibilities](#) associated with multilateralism. These tend to act as a major constraining factor, limiting how much of the ‘cooperation’ is actually dedicated to productive and substantive dialogue as opposed to institutional formalities.

Minilateralism addresses these issues by allowing states to achieve what has recently proven a challenge under conventional cooperation frameworks – the establishment and operationalization of *mutually beneficial* cooperation. Both in terms of forward-looking initiatives but also sudden [crisis response](#), this approach enables the construction of highly flexible and infallible partnerships among states which not only possess mutual appreciation and respect for each other but acknowledge that prioritizing working with a select but harmonious ‘few’ as opposed to the ‘many’ offers a greater chance for the fulfilment of their respective nationally determined interests and priorities. This is emphasized by [Moisés Naím](#), who argues that minilateral frameworks are unique in that their agenda is shaped around ‘more narrow and specific issues’ which concern directly those actors involved in the format.

Some analysts [restrict](#) the definition of minilateralism to purely “interest-centred” frameworks, within which the values shared by actors do not necessarily overlap. The current international climate, however, is dismissing this assumption. A rapidly increasing number of states across all continents, most notably in the Global South, are choosing to work ‘minilaterally’ precisely to begin a gradual but highly important process of instilling specific values. These, however, concern the ‘mode of operation’, as opposed to overarching ideals. They emphasize the importance of mutual respect for each other’s interests, sovereignty and territorial integrity. This stems from a shared disillusionment and unease by several ‘small’ or ‘middle’ powers with traditional multilateral frameworks where great powers are proving to be increasingly assertive and dominant in imposing their positions on the rest. This is particularly relevant with regards to security matters, an area where ‘smaller’ states are determined to gain more agency given the weakening authority of international law. This thinking is a key pillar of the realist school of thought, which proposes that international institutions are created by great powers primarily to exert influence over other states. For example, John Mearsheimer, in his article titled [“False Promise of International Institutions”](#), argues that such formats are underpinned by the desire of powerful states to pursue relative, as opposed to absolute gains, prioritizing their own survival and security over benefits from cooperation. Therefore, by ‘taking matters into their own hands’, ‘smaller’ states are looking to minilateral settings where they can ‘take matters into their own hands’ and work with [‘like-minded’](#) actors that not only have similar interests but also have a shared vision for how inter-state relations should be conducted.

Minilateralism’s place in Azerbaijan’s vision

As a concept, minilateralism has existed for [some time](#). However, its current strategic significance for international affairs is unprecedented. Influential international institutions are continuing their operation but, as of today, are facing significant obstacles, partly due to the inability of member states to converge on key issues due to intense geopolitical competition. Crucially, there are regions that are yet to benefit from well-established multilateral frameworks that serve as the ‘standard bearer’ of all regional affairs and stimulate integration. Among these is the South Caucasus, which as a result of the decade-long Armenian occupation of Azerbaijani territory is devoid of cooperation mechanisms that are able to bring together all of the region’s countries. Mediation attempts, including by the OSCE Minsk Group, failed to resolve the conflict in a timely manner. In the post-conflict era, trilateral formats are being sidelined in favour of a bilateral approach between Azerbaijan and Armenia with the

hope of achieving peace. Hence, given that engagement between the region's countries and various multilateral platforms has been inconsistent, the pursuit of cooperation in minilateral settings could be transformational for the region's security, prosperity and connectivity to the rest of the world.

For Azerbaijan and its foreign policy, this format represents a unique opportunity to implement a vision which it has already been working on for several years. Fatigued and disillusioned by the inability of some of its 'historical' and regional partners to demonstrate reciprocity and adequate solidarity in times of crisis, minilateralism presents Baku with an opportunity to make a lasting contribution to the re-definition of how inter-state relations are conducted. As mentioned above, 'big brother' relationships are not in the country's interest, and, if anything, have proven to be highly damaging for its national interests. Russia is a prime example in this regard. Despite extensive economic ties between the countries, on more than one matter Azerbaijan has felt that its voice and agency is not sufficiently respected in Moscow. This, among several other instances, includes the tragic Azerbaijan Airlines crash in December 2024, confirmed to have been a consequence of a Russian air defence mishap. The Russian side has resisted calls from Azerbaijan to accept responsibility and pay compensation, as [revealed](#) by President Ilham Aliyev during the Third Shusha Digital Forum held in July 2025. Further incidents point to Russian assertiveness against Azerbaijan, with widespread cyberattacks on local Azerbaijani media in February 2025 originating in Russia, as per the Azerbaijani Parliament's [Commission](#) against Foreign Interference and Hybrid Threats.

Elsewhere, Azerbaijan's relationship with the European Union has also suffered from major inconsistency. In times of crisis and sudden policy shifts, such as the European Union's pursuit of alternative energy supplies to Russian ones after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, Azerbaijan was ready to cooperate and fulfilled all of its relevant obligations. The country [increased](#) its supply of gas to Europe by 60% from 2021 to 2024 (8 bcm to 13 bcm). However, in return, the EU's actions in the South Caucasus have lacked the political sensitivity which any external involvement or mediation must possess. More often than not, EU institutions, particularly under the leadership of the now former High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell, have jeopardized momentum for peace talks by pursuing initiatives that undermine Azerbaijan's national interests. Individual member states like France have generally directed the EU's role in the region away from one of a neutral mediator to one that is disproportionately concerned with Armenian interests and, simultaneously, supportive of anti-Azerbaijani rhetoric. Essentially, the country's reliability and adaptability concerning energy security has not been adequately

mirrored by Brussels, an issue that lies at the heart of the search for 'new' kinds of relationships. This, however, cannot be applied blindly to all member states. Azerbaijan [supplies gas](#) to ten European countries, eight of which are EU members and share comprehensive and multifaceted bilateral relations with Baku. Moreover, Kaja Kallas' visit to Azerbaijan in [April 2025](#) served to generate new momentum between the sides, increasing hope for a more balanced approach to Azerbaijan, underscored by a positive tone and mutual understanding. This development demonstrates that Azerbaijan is not 'for' or 'against' cooperation with a specific actor or in a specific format. Rather, the country is determined to ensure that its participation is adequately valued and the benefits it obtains are forward-looking.

Azerbaijan's 'minilateral' initiatives

In light of such inconsistencies, Baku's pursuit and focus on such formats is laying important foundations for the long-term security and prosperity of both the South Caucasus and broader Eurasia. Arguably, the most prominent example of this is the Azerbaijan-Türkiye-Pakistan trilateral cooperation platform, which builds on foundationally strong ties between the countries on respective individual levels by uniting them over issues of common interest. The countries, in addition to providing unwavering support for each other's statehood in times of crisis, have consistently outlined the importance of this particular framework for the advancement of a 'common vision' on matters of mutual interest. During the [Lachin Summit](#) attended by the leaders of the three countries on May 28, 2025, among the most emphasized concepts was the need for 'solidarity', something which, as mentioned previously, has been lacking in conventional multilateral settings. Crucially, and as highlighted by Pakistan's Prime Minister [Shehbaz Shariff](#), cooperation between these three countries is 'time-tested' and has withstood the challenge of external pressure in the face of direct threats to each country's national security and territorial integrity. This particular example disproves the suggestion that minilateral settings are purely interest-based frameworks. Instead, they represent a complex fusion of shared identity, a vision on how inter-state ties should be constructed and conducted, a rejection of the supremacy of one or more states in a specific framework, and also mutual interests which may change depending on the broader geopolitical context.

As described initially, minilateralism comes in different formats. This example, however, demonstrates that some formats can be a mixture of the four categories. For instance, a 'minilateral' based on 'partnership' may be able to take on so much that it can also be categorized as sectoral and issue based. This combination elevates

the framework's overall agency and its ability to drive change on a general level. The Azerbaijan-Türkiye-Pakistan format supports this claim, with advanced military and security cooperation, which may seem like the priority of the three countries, not preventing joint work on other sectors vital for the country's economies. As underlined by President [Ilham Aliyev](#) in Lachin, the economic relationship between the countries is based on mutual investment, with Azerbaijan having invested 20 billion US dollars into Türkiye's economy and preparing an initial investment of 2 billion US dollars in Pakistan's economy, focusing on a [wide range](#) of areas like agriculture, energy and industry.

Most importantly, whilst working on joint projects which will advance the country's individual economic resilience but also deliver important security guarantees in times of increasing hostility, the three states enjoy equal degrees of agency in their relationship. All three leaders regularly refer to each other as 'brothers', which, despite being a major statement on a symbolic and emotional level, does translate into reality. Minilateral frameworks avoid 'big brother' and 'small brother' dynamics, even if one or two of the countries may be smaller in size than the third actor. The sides treat each other with equal respect, and as suggested by the President of Türkiye, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, regularly 'listen' to each other and carry out exchange of views on highly complex matters.

Political will and 'common' responses to challenges

Given that minilateral frameworks lack the institutionalization of multilateral frameworks and are free from bureaucratic constraints, it is a concept that depends, in its entirety, on political will and strategic foresight. However, in an era of international affairs defined by competition for influence between both 'great powers', in the traditional sense, and also 'powerful members' within specific institutions, minilateralism is precisely the opportunity for 'smaller' states to act in accordance with their *own* political will. The above examples demonstrate that the agenda of influential organizations which, a priori, should be based on reciprocity, can be overtaken by the interests and priorities of a specific state or even a powerful individual. Azerbaijan's experience and its emphasis on cooperation with Türkiye and Pakistan highlights that the best guarantor of national security is not necessarily membership of a big, 'powerful' and influential bloc. Instead, it is close partnership and alliance with trustworthy neighbours that can allow a country to maximize its potential and effectively manage its resources.

Minilateralism also serves as a useful response mechanism to changes in regional security. Azerbaijan's emphasis on close cooperation with its 'like-minded' partners also takes into consideration the importance of self-sufficiency when it comes to military matters. The outbreak of armed conflict is no longer a rarity, which is why the country is continuing efforts to modernize its armed forces. Minilateral platforms are equally important here as they are more efficient, rely less on actors external to the region and operate from the starting point of 'converging interests'. Military cooperation aside, Azerbaijan is also relying on minilateralism to pursue international transport and logistics projects which will help interregional connectivity. President Ilham Aliyev attends [summits](#) between Central Asian nations, with some analysts suggesting that a 'C5+1 format', with the region's five countries working alongside Azerbaijan, is the expected new normal going forward.

This example, just like Azerbaijan-Türkiye-Pakistan, underlines the flexibility of minilateralism as a concept and its ability to take shape in different ways. The first example challenges the assumption that minilateralism is purely interest based, with relations between the three countries overwhelmingly defined by strategic confluence, shared vision on key matters and genuine amicability. The second example, however, demonstrates that agreement on *everything* and perfect harmony is not a pre-requisite for successful minilateralism. States can disagree on certain issues, but this does not prevent them from calling each other strategic partners and engaging in mutually beneficial cooperation. The 'sectoral' and 'issue-based' logic is equally relevant here. With some Central Asian countries, Azerbaijan has deeper cooperation in certain areas than with others, but this does not detract from the overarching importance of their interdependence. Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan, for example, despite sharing a strategic partnership and extremely affectionate ties between their leaders, are open about the need for [further](#) strengthening and diversifying economic ties. Certain periods in a relationship can be characterized by cooperation on a specific element, with the bilateral or trilateral agenda able to swiftly alternate between sectors depending on the broader context. It is precisely this 'elasticity' and 'adaptability' that has transformed minilateralism into the preferred option for so many states.

A global idea

More global examples of minilateralism further underline these dynamics. In September 2021, Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States signed a security pact, referred to as AUKUS. The pact was an attempt by the US and the UK

to consolidate their influence in the [Indo-Pacific](#), focusing on a specific element of their military development, which in this case was technological advancement. As per the agreement, the countries now engage in the joint development of crucial technologies, with the US and UK [supporting Australia](#) through knowledge and resource sharing in its goal of [obtaining](#) a nuclear-powered submarine capability. Moreover, the sides agreed to cooperate in the spheres of cybersecurity and artificial intelligence, areas where the US and the UK have world-leading capabilities.

The strategic rationale behind this pact is as intriguing as it is complex. According to the globally accepted definition of the different types of minilateralism, this example fits within both the 'major-power-led', 'partnership' and 'issue-based' categories. Therefore, even though one could suggest that this is primarily a self-interest-based initiative given the expected outcomes of the cooperation and their benefits for each country's defence industries, there is a deeper factor underpinning this platform. All three countries, despite occasional strategic disagreements and uncomfortable co-existence on sensitive issues (as in the ongoing Starmer-Trump era), have unwavering trust in each other in the sphere of intelligence. This can particularly be said about the UK-US relationship, which is known to be the most significant intelligence sharing partnership in the world. This, however, expands beyond these two countries, with the famous ["Five Eyes Intelligence"](#) alliance between the US, UK, Australia, Canada and New Zealand acting as an important foundation for all other contacts between these actors. This once again demonstrates that without underlying trust, solidarity and companionship, minilateralism is not possible, refuting the suggestion that it is a purely self-serving and self-centered approach to cooperation.

Conclusion

Minilateral platforms serve different purposes and should not be grouped under one, general bracket. Described by one expert as ["fast multilateralism,"](#) minilateralism is gaining increasing prominence in international affairs and, whilst doing so, is also undergoing evolution. Assumed by many to be the 'informal' version of multilateralism which is designed to avoid institutional constraints and is essentially ad-hoc in nature, the increasing tendency of states to engage in minilateral settings is changing this perception. Minilateralism is more than just 'interest-based' or 'value-based', which is an outdated binary for contemporary international affairs. It is somewhat of an intersection of both but with the essential caveat of being held up by unwavering 'solidarity' and 'trust'.

For Azerbaijan, minilateralism is one of the many important directions in which the country's foreign policy apparatus is operating. Pursuing minilateral frameworks does *not* mean Azerbaijan is shifting away from conventional multilateralism. In fact, the country's chairmanship of the Non-Aligned Movement between 2019 and 2023, the world's second largest gathering of states after the United Nations, and also its hosting of COP29, focused predominantly on helping deliver climate finance to least-developed countries, demonstrates the country's flexibility. More recently, the country's role as a mediator, including between Türkiye and Israel as well as between Israel and Syria demonstrates its emphasis on direct and high-level engagement on the most sensitive issues.

Simply put, as an actor that has suffered from asymmetric relationships where its input has not been adequately valued, Azerbaijan is contributing to the development of a new approach to inter-state relations. Despite still being a concept 'in evolution', minilateralism, given its inherent emphasis on reciprocity and solidarity, will continue to play a key role in this process.

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