

Selective Multilateralism: How States Pick and Choose Global Rules

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Introduction



Source: UN Information Service Nairobi

In recent years, countries around the world have repeatedly expressed their support for international cooperation and a “rules-based international order.” Institutions such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization and the World Health Organization were created to ensure that global challenges are addressed collectively and according to agreed rules. In principle, multilateralism suggests that states follow the same norms and commitments regardless of changing political interests. In practice, however, global politics often works differently.

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Many governments today appear to support multilateral frameworks while selectively interpreting or applying their rules. States may actively participate in some international agreements but remain hesitant toward others. In certain cases, they even bypass global institutions by forming smaller coalitions or regional arrangements that better reflect their strategic priorities. This pattern reflects a growing tendency in international politics that can be described as selective multilateralism. Rather than rejecting international institutions entirely, states increasingly treat them as flexible instruments. They engage with global rules when cooperation advances national interests, but distance themselves when those same rules impose constraints. This approach can be seen across various policy areas, including trade, security cooperation, climate governance, and emerging technological regulation.

Such selective engagement raises important questions about the future of the global order. If states increasingly choose which rules to follow and which institutions to prioritize, the coherence and effectiveness of multilateral governance may gradually weaken. At the same time, this behavior also reflects the realities of a more competitive and fragmented international environment.

Understanding how and why states adopt this selective approach is therefore essential. It reveals not only how global governance is evolving, but also how power, interests, and institutions interact in shaping today's international system.

Norm Shopping: How States Navigate Competing Global Institutions

In today's international system, countries rarely depend on only one global institution to solve a problem. Instead, they often move between different organizations and agreements to find the rules that best serve their interests. This practice is sometimes called “norm shopping” or “forum shopping.” It reflects a situation where multiple international institutions exist for similar issues, allowing states to choose the most favorable platform for negotiations or dispute settlement.²

The 2024 India–EFTA Trade and Economic Partnership Agreement can be an interesting case. India negotiated a trade agreement with the European Free Trade Association countries—Norway, Switzerland, Iceland, and Liechtenstein—after more than a decade of negotiations. The agreement

² “Forum Shopping: A Legal Loophole or a Strategic Advantage? A Glance at the Italian Experience.” 2025. Ibanet.org. 2025. <https://www.ibanet.org/forum-shopping-Italian-experience>.

includes tariff reductions and a long-term investment commitment of around \$100 billion from the EFTA side to India over fifteen years.³ This deal shows how countries sometimes move toward regional frameworks rather than waiting for broader multilateral trade reforms.



Source: The India Forum

Another example can be observed in global finance. Countries facing economic pressure often choose between institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, regional development banks, or alternative financial networks. Recent debates about financial system fragmentation show that governments are increasingly exploring parallel arrangements and regional mechanisms when global institutions appear politically constrained.

These patterns suggest that international cooperation today is not disappearing but becoming more complex. States are navigating a dense landscape of institutions, agreements, and partnerships. By

³ "India-EFTA Trade Pact: Boosting \$100 Billion Investment and 1 Million Jobs." 2025. Pib.gov.in. 2025. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaselframePage.aspx?PRID=2177724®=3&lang=2>.

strategically selecting where to negotiate and which rules to follow, governments gain greater flexibility in pursuing their economic and political priorities. Norm shopping therefore illustrates how global governance is gradually shifting from a single universal framework to a more layered and competitive institutional environment.

How Digital Platforms Are Quietly Reshaping State Participation in Global Rules

In the past, international cooperation was mostly shaped by governments and formal institutions. Today, digital technology companies are increasingly influencing how states engage with global rules. Large platforms such as Google, Meta Platforms, and Microsoft now control key infrastructures of the digital world such as search engines, social media networks, cloud services, and artificial intelligence tools. Because these systems operate across borders, governments often adjust their international policy positions according to the technological ecosystems they depend on.

One example can be seen in the debate on artificial intelligence governance. When discussions began within the United Nations about global AI norms, countries with strong domestic technology industries pushed for flexible regulations that would not restrict innovation. The European Union, by contrast, developed stricter regulatory frameworks such as the AI Act⁴, reflecting its emphasis on privacy and digital rights. These different approaches show how domestic digital economies shape a country's willingness to support particular global rules.

Data governance provides another example. Countries increasingly support international standards that align with their domestic digital policies. The European approach emphasizes data protection, influenced by its General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).⁵ Meanwhile, other governments prioritize data flows to support digital commerce and cloud services. As a result, negotiations on

⁴ European Commission. 2025. "AI Act." European Commission. August 1, 2025. <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/regulatory-framework-ai>.

⁵ "Global Adoption of Data Privacy Laws and Regulations - IEEE Digital Privacy." 2025. IEEE Digital Privacy. 2025. <https://digitalprivacy.ieee.org/publications/topics/global-adoption-of-data-privacy-laws-and-regulations/>.

cross-border data rules often reflect technological alliances rather than purely diplomatic considerations.

There are also cases where governments coordinate closely with technology companies before supporting global initiatives. During discussions on cybersecurity norms and digital infrastructure protection, governments frequently consult domestic technology firms because these companies operate the systems that would be affected by new rules. This evolving dynamic can be described as algorithmic multilateralism. International cooperation in the digital age is no longer shaped only by diplomatic negotiations among states. Instead, it increasingly reflects the interaction between governments, technological ecosystems, and digital platforms. As technology becomes central to economic and political power, the relationship between states and digital companies will likely continue to influence how global rules are negotiated and implemented.

Why States Prefer Small Coalitions Over Universal Institutions

In recent years, many countries have started relying less on large global institutions and more on smaller, flexible coalitions. Instead of negotiating with more than 190 countries in organizations like the United Nations, governments increasingly prefer working with a limited group of partners that share similar strategic interests. This shift is often described as minilateralism.⁶

One reason behind this trend is efficiency. Large multilateral institutions often move slowly because every member state has different priorities. For example, negotiations within the World Trade Organization on global trade reforms have remained stalled for years due to disagreements between developed and developing economies. In contrast, smaller arrangements allow states to make decisions much faster because the number of participants is limited and their interests are more aligned.

Security cooperation provides a clear example. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, which includes the United States, India, Japan, and Australia, focuses on maritime security, supply chain resilience, and technological cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. Rather than trying to build consensus among many countries, these four states coordinate policies directly to address shared

⁶ Biba, Sebastian. 2026. “‘Is It Good or Is It Bad?’: Minilateralism and Its Effects on the Indo-Pacific Security Architecture.” *The Pacific Review*, January, 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2026.2614596>.

strategic concerns. A similar pattern can be seen in the AUKUS partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, which concentrates on advanced military technologies such as nuclear-powered submarines and cyber capabilities.

Climate cooperation also shows this shift. While the Paris Climate Agreement remains a global framework, several smaller climate clubs have emerged where countries coordinate policies on clean energy and green technology more closely. These arrangements allow governments to move forward with specific projects even when global negotiations progress slowly.

This growing reliance on small coalitions suggests that states are not abandoning international cooperation entirely. Instead, they are choosing formats that offer greater flexibility and quicker results. Minilateral arrangements therefore function as escape routes from complex global negotiations, allowing governments to pursue cooperation in ways that better match their strategic and economic priorities.

The Quiet Fragmentation of the Rules-Based Order

For decades, the idea of a “rules-based international order” suggested that global institutions would provide a single framework for managing conflicts, trade, and global challenges. Today, however, that system is gradually becoming more fragmented. Instead of one coherent set of rules, different regions and political blocs are increasingly interpreting global norms in their own ways.

Climate governance offers an important example. Negotiations under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change continue to produce global agreements, yet implementation often varies widely across countries. Recent studies show that global climate governance has become fragmented and increasingly complex, with overlapping institutions, initiatives, and policy frameworks operating simultaneously rather than under a single coordinated structure.⁷ This creates a situation where countries support the overall framework but follow different standards and timelines at the national level.

⁷ “Human Security and Governance Advancing the Pact for the Future and Environmental Governance.” 2025. <https://www.stimson.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/GGIR-2025.pdf>.

Another illustration can be found in the growing debate over international courts. Institutions such as the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice were designed to provide legal authority beyond national politics. However, in recent years several states have increasingly questioned their jurisdiction or refused to comply with certain rulings. In late 2025, for example, Russia introduced legal changes allowing it to disregard judgments issued by international or foreign courts unless they are explicitly recognized by its domestic law.⁸

At the same time, alternative geopolitical groupings are emerging that promote different visions of global governance. The expansion of forums such as BRICS reflects efforts by many developing countries to reshape global decision-making structures.⁹ Yet these platforms also face internal disagreements about priorities and institutional direction. Taken together, these developments suggest that the global order is not collapsing, but it is quietly transforming. Instead of a single universal framework, international governance is evolving into a landscape of overlapping rules, competing institutions, and diverse interpretations of global norms. This fragmentation raises an important question: whether the future of international cooperation will depend less on universal rules and more on how states navigate this increasingly complex institutional environment.

Way Forward: Possible Future Trends in Global Governance

The current changes in international cooperation do not necessarily mean that global institutions will disappear. Instead, many experts suggest that the system of global governance is entering a transitional phase, where institutions, coalitions, and new forms of cooperation will gradually adapt to changing geopolitical realities. United Nations and other global institutions are already discussing reforms to respond to new global challenges such as digital governance, climate risks, and emerging technologies.¹⁰

⁸ Reuters Staff. 2025. "Putin Amends Law to Let Russia Ignore Foreign Criminal Courts." Reuters, December 29, 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/world/putin-amends-law-let-russia-ignore-foreign-criminal-courts-2025-12-29/>.

⁹ Watts, Jonathan. 2025. "Brics Summit in Brazil Tries to Reinvent Collective Approach to World's Problems." The Guardian. The Guardian. July 7, 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/jul/07/brics-summit-brazil-president-lula>.

¹⁰"Shaping the Future of Global Governance." 2024. United Nations University. 2024. <https://unu.edu/cpr/news/shaping-future-global-governance>.

One likely trend in the coming years is the reform and modernization of international institutions. Many analysts argue that current global institutions reflect the power structure of the mid-twentieth century rather than today's world. For example, debates about reforming the UN system increasingly focus on giving greater representation to emerging powers from Asia, Africa, and Latin America.¹¹ If such reforms gradually take place, they could restore some confidence among states that global institutions represent contemporary political realities.

Another important trend is the rise of polycentric governance¹², where global problems are managed through multiple levels of cooperation rather than a single universal institution. In this system, international organizations, regional bodies, and informal coalitions operate simultaneously. Scholars note that global governance is increasingly becoming a network of overlapping institutions rather than a single centralized framework. This structure may appear complex, but it can also provide flexibility by allowing different actors to cooperate on specific issues.

Technology is also expected to play a significant role in shaping the future of international cooperation. Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, big data, and blockchain are already influencing governance systems, from data regulation to global cybersecurity coordination. Research suggests that these technologies will require new international standards and cooperative mechanisms in the coming decade. Governments may therefore develop new digital cooperation platforms and technical agreements that operate alongside traditional diplomatic institutions.

Another probable development is the growing influence of middle powers and regional actors in global decision-making. Countries that are not traditional superpowers are increasingly participating in shaping global norms through regional organizations and cross-regional

¹¹"Shaping the Future of Global Governance." 2024. United Nations University. 2024.
<https://unu.edu/cpr/news/shaping-future-global-governance>.

¹² "Validate User." n.d. Academic.oup.com. <https://academic.oup.com/isr/article/22/4/903/5571549>.

partnerships. These states often act as mediators between major powers and smaller countries, helping to build consensus on complex global issues.

Economic pressures may also encourage stronger cooperation in certain areas. International financial institutions have warned that economic fragmentation can slow global growth and increase uncertainty. As a result, governments may gradually seek pragmatic cooperation in areas such as supply chains, financial stability, and climate finance even when geopolitical competition continues.

Overall, the future of international cooperation will likely be more diverse and multi-layered than in the past. Instead of a single dominant system, global governance may evolve into a combination of reformed institutions, regional arrangements, and issue-specific partnerships. The key challenge for policymakers will be ensuring that these different mechanisms remain connected and capable of addressing global problems that no single country can solve alone.