

Bilateralism versus Multilateralism in International Relations: A Comparative Analysis of Diplomacy, Governance, and Global Cooperation

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How to cite this paper: Yorlay, T. T. (2026). Bilateralism versus Multilateralism in International Relations: A Comparative Analysis of Diplomacy, Governance, and Global Cooperation. *Voice of the Publisher*, 12, 533-557.
<https://doi.org/10.4236/vp.2026.123029>

Received: August 1, 2026

Accepted: August 31, 2026

Published: September 3, 2026

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Abstract

The framework of international cooperation has traditionally been influenced by two key diplomatic strategies: bilateralism and multilateralism. Bilateralism focuses on collaboration between two nations, typically through direct discussions and agreements, whereas multilateralism involves collaboration among several countries within structured institutions. This article offers a comparative study of bilateralism and multilateralism in the field of International Relations (IR), looking at their theoretical bases, how they operate, their strengths and weaknesses, and their relevance today. The article uses major IR theories such as realism, liberal institutionalism, and constructivism to explore how these approaches affect global governance, economic collaboration, security alliances, and resolving conflicts. By examining historical and current examples, such as bilateral trade deals, regional alliances, and multilateral organizations like the United Nations and World Trade Organization, the article evaluates how effective each method is in tackling global issues. The study highlights that bilateralism gives countries flexibility, efficiency, and the ability to act independently, while multilateralism brings more legitimacy, the ability to solve problems together, and more stable institutions. However, both methods encounter difficulties in a more complex international environment marked by political rivalry, economic connections, and global threats. The article concludes that bilateralism and multilateralism should not be seen as opposing strategies but as ways that can support each other within a mixed diplomatic system. This balanced approach can improve international collaboration while protecting the interests of individual states in the changing global landscape.

Keywords

Bilateralism, Multilateralism, International Relations, Diplomacy, Global Governance, International Cooperation

1. Introduction

International relations have historically been influenced by the ways in which countries communicate, negotiate, and work together. Two major diplomatic strategies that have significantly shaped the global political and economic environment are bilateralism and multilateralism. Bilateralism involves interactions and agreements between two countries, usually marked by direct discussions and customized policies. Multilateralism, in contrast, involves cooperation among three or more countries, often taking place within structured organizations meant to guide international behavior and encourage collective efforts (Keohane, 1984).

The development of these diplomatic strategies mirrors changes in the global system. In the early modern era, bilateral diplomacy was the main form of international interaction, especially in forming alliances, negotiating trade deals, and making peace pacts. However, the twentieth century saw the growth of multilateral institutions aimed at enhancing global collaboration and reducing conflict. Examples include the United Nations (UN), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Trade Organization (WTO), which illustrate the institutional growth of multilateralism in the international order that emerged after the Second World War (Ruggie, 1992).

Even though multilateral institutions are widely recognized, bilateralism continues to play an important role in international relations. Many countries still place value on bilateral agreements in areas like trade, security, and developmental aid. The increasing number of bilateral trade pacts and strategic alliances shows that countries often choose more adaptable and controlled diplomatic approaches to serve their national goals (Baldwin, 2016).

The interplay between bilateralism and multilateralism has been a topic of discussion among scholars. Some believe that multilateralism is necessary to tackle global issues such as climate change, economic instability, and security risks. Others suggest that bilateralism offers a more practical and efficient way to achieve cooperation, especially when multilateral institutions are not functioning well or are stuck in disagreement (Martin, 1992).

This debate has become especially important in the twenty-first century due to rising geopolitical tensions, economic fragmentation, and challenges to international organizations. With the growth of new powers, changes in global trade, and a growing doubt about international bodies, many countries are rethinking their diplomatic approaches. Some have opted for bilateral agreements instead of multilateral frameworks, while others are working to reform and strengthen existing multilateral institutions.

This article aims to add to this ongoing discussion by offering a thorough comparison of bilateralism and multilateralism in international relations. It will look at the theoretical bases of these approaches, examine how they function in practice, and assess their effectiveness in dealing with modern global challenges.

The main questions this study seeks to explore are:

- 1) What are the main theoretical bases of bilateralism and multilateralism in international relations?
- 2) How do bilateral and multilateral diplomatic methods differ in their organization, decision-making processes, and execution?
- 3) What are the benefits and drawbacks of each approach when dealing with global political and economic challenges?
- 4) To what degree can bilateralism and multilateralism work together or support each other in today's international system?

To answer these questions, the article uses a qualitative analysis method that combines theoretical discussion with specific examples. The research is supported by various academic sources from fields such as international relations, political science, and international political economy.

The article is structured into several parts. After the introduction, the next section provides an overview of existing literature on bilateralism and multilateralism, emphasizing major theoretical viewpoints. The following section explains the research methodology used. The paper then offers a thorough look at bilateralism and multilateralism, covering their historical development, institutional frameworks, and policy impacts. A comparison is then made to assess the pros and cons of each approach. The final parts discuss the wider implications of the findings for global governance and international collaboration, ending with suggestions for future research.

By analyzing bilateralism and multilateralism within a unified analytical framework, this article seeks to deepen our understanding of how states navigate the complex landscape of international diplomacy and cooperation.

2. Literature Review

The concepts of bilateralism and multilateralism occupy a central place in the study of international relations. Scholars across various theoretical traditions have examined these diplomatic approaches to understand how states cooperate, negotiate, and manage conflicts within the international system. The literature surrounding bilateralism and multilateralism explores their historical development, institutional characteristics, and implications for global governance. Both approaches represent fundamental mechanisms through which states pursue their interests and engage with one another in the international arena.

Bilateralism generally refers to interactions and agreements between two states, often characterized by direct negotiation and reciprocal arrangements. Multilateralism, by contrast, involves cooperation among three or more states within structured institutional frameworks, typically guided by common rules and

norms. While both approaches aim to facilitate international cooperation, they differ significantly in terms of decision-making processes, institutional structures, and the scope of issues they address. Scholars have analyzed these differences through multiple theoretical lenses in order to explain why states choose one approach over the other in specific contexts.

The academic literature on bilateralism and multilateralism can broadly be categorized into three major theoretical strands: realist interpretations, liberal institutionalist perspectives, and constructivist approaches. Each theoretical perspective provides distinct insights into the motivations of states and the role of institutions in shaping international cooperation.

2.1. Realist Perspectives

Realism is one of the most significant theoretical approaches in the field of international relations. Realist scholars focus on the importance of power, national interest, and security in guiding the actions of states. According to realist theory, the international system lacks a central authority to enforce rules or settle conflicts between independent states, leading to an anarchic structure (Waltz, 1979). In this context, states must depend on their own resources to protect their survival and achieve their goals.

From a realist viewpoint, states are the main actors in international affairs, and their actions are guided by the pursuit of power and security. While cooperation between states is possible, it is typically constrained by concerns about relative gains and the risk that other states may benefit at the expense of the actor. Realist scholars, therefore, approach international institutions with a certain level of caution, arguing that such bodies cannot significantly change the fundamental power relationships within the international system.

Within this framework, bilateralism is often seen as a natural and effective way for states to engage in diplomacy. Realists believe that bilateral agreements offer greater control over negotiation processes and outcomes. Because bilateral negotiations involve only two actors, they simplify the bargaining process and allow states to customize agreements to suit their strategic needs (Mearsheimer, 2001). This flexibility helps states pursue policies that support their autonomy and reduce reliance on external forces.

Another reason realists support bilateralism is that it allows states to better address power imbalances. Stronger states tend to favor bilateral negotiations because they can more effectively influence weaker partners in one-on-one settings. In contrast, multilateral negotiations may spread power across multiple actors and weaken the influence of dominant states through collective decision-making.

Realist scholars also highlight the role of bilateral alliances in maintaining the balance of power in the international system. For example, bilateral security pacts can act as strategic tools to deter potential threats and allow states to coordinate defense policies. These alliances often involve collaboration in military efforts, sharing intelligence, and planning joint strategies.

Although realists are generally skeptical of multilateral institutions, some acknowledge that they may offer certain advantages. Multilateral organizations can help states communicate, reduce uncertainty, and create mechanisms for collaboration in specific areas. For instance, security alliances and international forums may help states express their intentions more clearly and prevent misunderstandings that could lead to conflict.

However, realists maintain that the impact of multilateral institutions is determined by the interests and power of the states involved. According to Grieco (1988), multilateral organizations often reflect the preferences of dominant states and may serve as tools to justify the policies of powerful countries. Consequently, realists are cautious about the ability of multilateralism to achieve genuine international cooperation in an anarchy-driven system.

2.2. Liberal Institutionalism

In contrast to realism, liberal institutionalism presents a more optimistic view of the possibility for international cooperation. Liberal institutionalist scholars stress the importance of international institutions, norms, and rules in promoting cooperation between states. They argue that while the international system may be anarchic, institutions can help address the challenges of anarchy by setting up structured ways for states to interact (Keohane, 1984).

Liberal institutionalists believe that multilateralism is essential for cooperation, as it helps lower transaction costs, improve transparency, and provide tools for monitoring and enforcement. International institutions create spaces for states to negotiate, resolve conflicts, and align their policies on various global issues. By defining clear rules and expectations, these institutions assist states in resolving collective action problems and building trust over time.

A key contribution of liberal institutionalism is the concept of complex interdependence, which suggests that states are more interconnected through economic, political, and social ties (Keohane & Nye, 2001). In such a context, cooperation is not just beneficial but often necessary for dealing with global challenges. Multilateral institutions provide the necessary infrastructure to manage these complex relationships.

Examples of multilateral organizations include the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and the International Monetary Fund. These organizations help establish rules governing trade, finance, security, and development, creating a more structured and regulated international environment.

From the liberal institutionalist perspective, bilateralism is not necessarily at odds with multilateralism. Instead, bilateral agreements can complement broader institutional frameworks. Bilateral treaties may serve as testing grounds for new policies or arrangements that could later be integrated into multilateral agreements.

For example, bilateral trade agreements often include provisions about investment protection, intellectual property rights, and regulatory standards. These pro-

visions may influence negotiations within multilateral institutions, thereby contributing to the evolution of global trade rules.

However, some scholars within this tradition have expressed concerns over the increasing number of bilateral agreements. Bhagwati (2008) notes that the growing number of bilateral trade deals has created a complex web of overlapping rules that may undermine the coherence of the global trading system. This situation, often called the “spaghetti bowl effect,” complicates trade relationships and may reduce the efficiency of multilateral trade institutions.

Despite these concerns, liberal institutionalists generally see multilateralism as the most effective approach to tackling global challenges. Issues such as climate change, financial stability, and international security require responses that go beyond bilateral relationships. Multilateral institutions provide the inclusive platforms necessary for managing such complex issues.

2.3. Constructivist Approaches

Constructivist approaches to international relations provide a distinct viewpoint by highlighting the significance of ideas, norms, and identities in influencing how states behave. Scholars within this school of thought argue that the international system is not only determined by material power or institutional structures but also by the social interactions and shared understandings that affect how states interpret their interests and roles (Wendt, 1999).

From a constructivist perspective, both bilateralism and multilateralism are considered social constructs that reflect the evolving norms and practices of the international community. Rather than seeing institutions solely as tools used by states to achieve their interests, constructivists emphasize how these institutions shape the identities and preferences of states over time.

Multilateralism, in particular, is often connected to norms that promote cooperation, collective responsibility, and international legitimacy. Institutions like the United Nations represent these norms by encouraging principles such as peaceful conflict resolution, respect for sovereignty, and human rights protection. By participating in these institutions, states may adopt shared norms that guide their behavior on the global stage (Ruggie, 1992).

Constructivists also emphasize the role of legitimacy in international cooperation. Multilateral institutions often gain legitimacy through inclusive decision-making and adherence to established rules. This legitimacy can increase compliance with international agreements and encourage states to cooperate even when immediate material benefits are not evident.

At the same time, constructivist scholars acknowledge that bilateral relationships can also be shaped by social and normative factors. Historical connections, cultural similarities, and shared political values can influence the development of bilateral partnerships. For instance, states with similar democratic systems or cultural backgrounds may be more likely to form close bilateral ties and strategic alliances.

These social dynamics show that state behavior cannot be fully explained by material interests alone. Instead, the identities and perceptions of states significantly influence whether they choose bilateral or multilateral forms of cooperation.

2.4. Contemporary Debates

In recent years, scholars have increasingly focused on the evolving relationship between bilateralism and multilateralism in the context of globalization and shifting power dynamics. The international system is undergoing significant transformation due to the rise of new powers, technological advances, and the increasing complexity of global governance.

One major debate centers on the future of multilateral institutions in an era of geopolitical competition. Some scholars argue that the traditional multilateral order established after World War II is facing new challenges as states pursue more flexible and interest-driven forms of cooperation.

The emergence of rising powers such as China, India, and Brazil has contributed to the diversification of global governance structures. These countries often push for reforms in existing multilateral institutions while also engaging in bilateral and regional initiatives to increase their influence.

According to Acharya (2014), the international system may be moving toward a “multiplex” or hybrid model of global governance. In this model, bilateral, regional, and multilateral mechanisms coexist and interact to tackle complex global challenges. Rather than replacing multilateral institutions, bilateral agreements and regional organizations may serve as complementary platforms for cooperation.

Other scholars suggest that the perceived decline of traditional multilateral institutions could lead to a resurgence of bilateral diplomacy and informal coalitions. In some cases, states may prefer smaller, more flexible arrangements that allow them to pursue specific goals without being bound by the constraints of large international organizations.

Overall, the literature underscores the importance of understanding the strengths and limitations of both bilateralism and multilateralism. While bilateral agreements offer flexibility and efficiency, multilateral institutions provide legitimacy and the capacity for collective problem-solving. The interaction between these two approaches continues to shape the evolving landscape of international relations and global governance.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative analytical approach to examine the comparative dynamics of bilateralism and multilateralism in international relations. The methodology combines theoretical analysis with illustrative case examples drawn from historical and contemporary international diplomacy.

First, the study reviews key theoretical perspectives within the field of interna-

tional relations, including realism, liberal institutionalism, and constructivism. These frameworks provide a foundation for understanding the motivations and strategies of states in choosing bilateral or multilateral approaches.

Second, the study analyzes the structural characteristics of bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, with a focus on aspects such as negotiation processes, institutional frameworks, decision-making mechanisms, and enforcement capabilities.

Third, the research incorporates selected case studies that illustrate how bilateral and multilateral approaches function in practice. These examples include bilateral trade agreements, security alliances, and multilateral institutions involved in global governance.

Finally, the study conducts a comparative evaluation of bilateralism and multilateralism by examining their advantages, limitations, and effectiveness in addressing various international challenges. The analysis considers factors such as efficiency, legitimacy, inclusiveness, and adaptability within the evolving international system.

Case Selection Criteria

The illustrative cases examined in this article were selected through a purposive sampling approach based on their relevance to understanding the practical application of bilateralism and multilateralism in contemporary international relations. The selection was guided by three main criteria: historical significance, institutional relevance, and analytical contribution. Bilateral trade agreements were selected based on their ability to demonstrate how states use direct negotiations to advance economic interests, enhance market access, and maintain policy flexibility. Security alliances were chosen because they illustrate the role of bilateral and multilateral arrangements in addressing strategic interests, collective defense, and geopolitical cooperation. International organizations were selected based on their global influence, degree of institutionalization, and capacity to shape state behavior through common rules, norms, and decision-making mechanisms. Examples such as the United Nations, World Trade Organization, and other relevant diplomatic arrangements were included not as exhaustive case studies but as representative illustrations of broader patterns in international cooperation. The purpose of these examples is therefore not to provide a comprehensive evaluation of individual agreements or institutions, but to highlight the distinct characteristics, advantages, and limitations of bilateral and multilateral approaches within the broader framework of global governance.

4. Bilateralism in International Relations

Bilateralism is one of the earliest and most established forms of diplomatic engagement in international relations. At its heart, bilateralism refers to a relationship between two sovereign nations that engage in direct negotiations to reach agreements on various issues. These agreements can cover areas such as trade, security collaboration, diplomatic recognition, environmental policies, cultural

initiatives, technology sharing, and development support. Through bilateral diplomacy, countries build structured relationships that allow them to work towards shared goals while retaining control over how agreements are made and carried out.

In the past, bilateral diplomacy was the main method used in international relations before the 20th century. During the time of the European balance of power, nations often used bilateral treaties and alliances to promote their national interests and ensure stability (Kissinger, 1994). With no large international organizations present, most diplomatic activity happened through direct talks between governments. Bilateral agreements were frequently used to resolve conflicts, settle borders, promote trade, and coordinate military efforts.

The Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 is often considered the foundation of the modern state system. It reinforced the idea that all states are equal and helped make bilateral diplomacy the main way countries interacted with each other. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, bilateral treaties were widely used to manage trade, set up diplomatic missions, and create military alliances.

Even though the 20th century saw the rise of multilateral institutions such as the United Nations and the Bretton Woods organizations, bilateral diplomacy has remained an important part of international relations. Many countries still use bilateral agreements to build strategic partnerships, negotiate trade deals, and coordinate on security matters. In fact, as global governance becomes more complex, some countries have found bilateralism more useful because it offers more flexibility and targeted cooperation.

4.1. Characteristics of Bilateralism

Bilateral agreements are defined by several key features that set them apart from multilateral agreements. One of the most important traits is the limited number of participants. Bilateral negotiations involve only two states, which makes the decision-making process simpler and allows for more flexibility in forming agreements. Since there are fewer participants, bilateral discussions can move forward more quickly than multilateral ones, where consensus among many parties might be hard to reach.

A second key characteristic of bilateralism is its focus on reciprocity. In most bilateral agreements, each state makes commitments that are matched by the other. This back-and-forth structure helps both sides feel that the agreement is fair and beneficial.

Bilateralism also enables states to create agreements that fit their specific needs and situations. Unlike multilateral agreements that must consider many different priorities, bilateral arrangements can be designed to address the unique economic, political, or security interests of the two involved states. This customization makes bilateral diplomacy especially useful for governments looking for targeted solutions to particular problems.

Moreover, bilateral diplomacy often strengthens the diplomatic ties between

states. Regular contacts, negotiations, and cooperation can foster trust, mutual understanding, and lasting strategic friendships. The diplomatic channels created through bilateral agreements may extend beyond formal treaties and may include joint commissions, dialogues, and formal consultation processes.

Another standout feature of bilateralism is its flexibility in terms of institutions. Bilateral agreements generally require fewer formal procedures and bureaucratic processes than multilateral institutions. This adaptability allows states to modify agreements more easily in response to changes in political, economic, or security situations.

4.2. Bilateralism in Economic Relations

One of the most significant areas where bilateralism has grown in recent years is in international trade and economic cooperation. Since the late 20th century, the number of bilateral trade agreements has increased as countries aim to improve market access, promote investments, and strengthen economic partnerships.

According to [Baldwin \(2016\)](#), the increase in bilateral trade agreements reflects the growing complexity of the global trading system and the difficulties in negotiating comprehensive multilateral trade agreements within institutions like the World Trade Organization. As multilateral talks often hit political roadblocks, many countries have turned to bilateral agreements as an alternative means to push for trade liberalization.

Bilateral economic agreements can take many forms, such as free trade agreements (FTAs), bilateral investment treaties (BITs), economic partnership agreements, and double taxation treaties. These agreements typically aim to reduce tariffs, remove trade barriers, encourage foreign direct investment, and promote cooperation on regulations between the countries involved.

For instance, bilateral free trade agreements often contain provisions on protecting intellectual property, resolving disputes, setting labor standards, enforcing environmental regulations, and regulating digital trade. These agreements allow countries to negotiate specific economic policies that align with their domestic goals and strategic interests.

Bilateral economic diplomacy is also crucial in development cooperation. Many countries provide development assistance and technical support through bilateral agreements that target infrastructure, education, healthcare, and technology transfer. These provisions let donor countries focus their aid on specific strategic aims, while allowing recipient countries to tackle their own development needs.

Despite these benefits, the growth of bilateral trade agreements has led to concerns about the fragmentation of the global trade system. [Bhagwati \(2008\)](#) describes this as the “spaghetti bowl effect,” referring to the complex web of overlapping bilateral agreements that result in inconsistent trade rules and regulatory systems. This fragmentation can create extra administrative burdens for businesses and complicate international trade by introducing multiple sets of rules for different trading relationships.

Nevertheless, bilateral economic agreements continue to play an important role in shaping global economic governance, particularly in regions where multilateral negotiations have stalled.

4.3. Bilateralism in Security Cooperation

Bilateralism also plays a significant role in international security arrangements. Many defense alliances, military partnerships, and strategic cooperation agreements are built on a bilateral basis. These kinds of agreements allow countries to work together on security strategies, share intelligence, engage in joint military exercises, and make mutual promises to defend each other.

Historically, bilateral security treaties have been central to the defense policies of major powers. These agreements usually focus on specific security issues and offer customized frameworks for cooperation between two countries. Often, these bilateral defense arrangements support larger multilateral security alliances by addressing particular regional threats or strategic goals.

For example, bilateral military cooperation agreements often involve joint training programs, transfers of weapons, collaboration on defense technologies, and coordinated military planning. These partnerships help countries improve their defense capabilities while also building stronger political and strategic relationships with important allies.

From a realist viewpoint, bilateral security arrangements allow countries to have more control over their strategic commitments while reducing the risks involved in broader collective defense obligations (Mearsheimer, 2001). Bilateral alliances can be flexible, as they allow nations to adapt their security policies in response to changing geopolitical situations.

Moreover, bilateral security agreements can act as tools of deterrence. By formalizing defense cooperation between two countries, these agreements show a united stance and may prevent potential adversaries from taking hostile actions.

However, bilateral security arrangements can sometimes cause geopolitical tensions, especially when they are seen as a threat by other countries. In certain cases, bilateral alliances could lead to regional power struggles and security dilemmas.

4.4. Advantages of Bilateralism

There are several benefits often linked to bilateral diplomacy. One of the key advantages is the efficiency of negotiations. With only two parties involved, negotiations can move faster and be less restricted by the procedures needed in multilateral settings where many stakeholders are involved.

Another benefit is the flexibility provided by bilateral agreements. Countries can create policies and commitments that suit their particular interests, allowing them to deal with specific economic, political, or security issues. This flexibility helps governments find practical solutions that align with their national priorities.

Bilateral diplomacy also helps in building strong diplomatic ties between the involved countries. Regular interactions and talks offer chances to build trust and

work together on various policy areas. Over time, these relationships might expand into broader strategic partnerships that go beyond the initial agreement.

Additionally, bilateralism can allow countries to bypass the constraints of multilateral organizations. Some governments view multilateral institutions as slow, bureaucratic, or influenced by conflicting interests. In such cases, bilateral talks might offer a simpler and more direct way to achieve policy goals.

Another benefit is the opportunity for policy experimentation. Bilateral agreements can serve as a testing ground for innovative policies that might later be included in larger regional or multilateral frameworks.

4.5. Limitations of Bilateralism

Even though there are benefits, bilateralism has its limitations too. One major drawback is the possibility of unequal bargaining power between the countries involved in negotiations. When one country is much stronger than the other, it might have too much influence over the agreement's terms. This imbalance could result in outcomes that mostly benefit the stronger country while limiting the policy freedom of the weaker partner.

Another limitation is the lack of inclusiveness in bilateral arrangements. Because these agreements involve only two countries, they may not address broader regional or global issues that require collective action. Problems like climate change, financial stability, and international security often need responses from multiple actors, making bilateral agreements insufficient on their own.

Moreover, the increase in bilateral agreements can lead to complex and overlapping regulatory systems. When multiple bilateral agreements cover areas like trade, investment, and regulatory standards, businesses and governments could face more administrative difficulties. This fragmentation may raise transaction costs and reduce the effectiveness of international economic cooperation.

Lastly, bilateral agreements may lack the legitimacy that is usually associated with multilateral institutions. Multilateral frameworks typically involve wider participation and open decision-making processes, which enhance the perceived credibility of international rules and agreements. In contrast, bilateral agreements might be seen as reflecting the interests of just the involved countries rather than the wider international community.

In summary, while bilateralism remains an important part of international diplomacy, it is not without its difficulties. Understanding both the benefits and drawbacks of bilateral agreements is essential for assessing their role in the broader context of global governance.

4.6. Distinguishing Bilateralism from Regionalism, Minilateralism, and Informal Coalitions within the Context of Hybrid Governance

Bilateralism refers to cooperation between two sovereign states that pursue mutually agreed objectives through direct diplomatic engagement. Such cooperation

is typically governed by formal treaties, agreements, memoranda of understanding, or established diplomatic mechanisms, with decisions reached jointly by the two participating governments. Bilateral arrangements are generally tailored to the specific interests and priorities of the parties involved, allowing flexibility and responsiveness in addressing political, economic, security, and development issues. Within hybrid governance, bilateralism complements broader governance frameworks by facilitating targeted and customized cooperation while coexisting with regional and multilateral institutions (Keohane & Nye, 2012; Ruggie, 1993).

In contrast, regionalism involves cooperation among multiple states within a defined geographic region and is characterized by a relatively high degree of institutionalization. Regional arrangements are generally anchored in formal organizations with permanent institutions, legal frameworks, and established decision-making procedures, such as consensus or voting mechanisms. Their principal objective is to promote regional integration and collective action across policy areas including trade, security, political cooperation, and infrastructure development. Unlike bilateralism, regionalism is inherently multilateral and seeks to advance common regional interests through institutionalized governance structures (Börzel & Risse, 2018; Fawcett, 2023).

Minilateralism differs from both bilateralism and regionalism by involving a small, carefully selected group of states, chosen because of their strategic importance, capabilities, or shared interests rather than geographic proximity. Although minilateral arrangements may exhibit some institutional features, they are generally less formal and bureaucratic than regional organizations. Decision-making tends to be streamlined and consensus-oriented, enabling participants to respond more effectively to complex global challenges. Consequently, minilateralism is widely regarded as a pragmatic governance approach that prioritizes efficiency and problem-solving over universal participation (Kahler, 1992; Narlikar, 2020).

Informal coalitions, by comparison, consist of variable groupings of states and, in some instances, non-state actors that voluntarily cooperate to address specific issues or emerging global challenges. These coalitions are characterized by low levels of institutionalization, lacking permanent secretariats, legally binding agreements, or formal governance structures. Their decision-making processes rely primarily on political commitment, voluntary coordination, and consensus rather than legally enforceable obligations. Owing to their flexibility and adaptability, informal coalitions have become increasingly significant in contemporary global governance, particularly in addressing transnational issues that require rapid and coordinated responses (Roger, 2020; Vabulas & Snidal, 2021).

Accordingly, while bilateralism, regionalism, minilateralism, and informal coalitions may all coexist within systems of hybrid governance, they should not be treated as interchangeable concepts. They differ fundamentally in their membership, degree of institutionalization, and decision-making processes. Bilateralism is confined to cooperation between two states; regionalism involves geograph-

ically defined and highly institutionalized collective governance; minilateralism brings together a limited number of strategically selected states to enhance effectiveness and efficiency; and informal coalitions rely on flexible, voluntary cooperation with minimal institutional constraints. Recognizing these distinctions enhances conceptual clarity and provides a more nuanced understanding of the diverse mechanisms through which states and other actors pursue governance in an increasingly complex international system (Abbott & Faude, 2022; Zürn, 2014).

5. Multilateralism in International Relations

Multilateralism refers to a form of international cooperation where three or more states work together within structured frameworks to tackle common issues. Unlike bilateralism, which involves direct interaction between two states, multilateralism focuses on collective decision-making, shared rules, and formalized cooperation among multiple actors. Multilateral arrangements usually function through international organizations, treaties, and regimes that set norms and procedures for how states behave in the international system.

The development of modern multilateralism is closely tied to the creation of international institutions during the twentieth century. After the devastation of the First and Second World Wars, policymakers and scholars began to realize the importance of institutional mechanisms that could promote cooperation, prevent large-scale conflicts, and manage global economic relations. The establishment of international organizations marked a significant change in diplomatic practices, as states started to institutionalize cooperation within formal frameworks meant to regulate international interactions.

One of the earliest attempts to institutionalize multilateral cooperation was the formation of the League of Nations in 1920. Although the League failed to prevent the outbreak of the Second World War, it set important precedents for the development of modern multilateral institutions. After the Second World War, the international community aimed to build a more effective system of global governance that would support peace, economic stability, and international cooperation.

As a result, several major international institutions were established in the post-war period. Organizations such as the United Nations (UN), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) - which later evolved into the World Trade Organization (WTO) - became key pillars of the multilateral international order. These institutions were designed to facilitate cooperation in areas such as international security, economic development, trade regulation, and financial stability (Keohane & Nye, 2001).

Multilateralism has since become a central element of global governance. In an increasingly interconnected world, many global challenges—such as climate change, economic crises, terrorism, and pandemics—require coordinated responses from multiple states. Multilateral institutions provide platforms where governments can negotiate agreements, coordinate policies, and develop collective solutions to

complex international problems.

5.1. Characteristics of Multilateralism

Multilateralism is characterized by several distinct features that set it apart from bilateral diplomacy. One of the most important features is the involvement of multiple states within structured institutional frameworks. These institutions serve as venues for negotiation, dialogue, and decision-making, allowing governments to coordinate policies and address common challenges collectively.

Another key characteristic of multilateralism is the presence of established rules and norms that regulate state behavior. These rules are often codified in international treaties, conventions, and agreements. By creating a rules-based system, multilateral institutions aim to promote predictability and stability in international relations. States that participate in multilateral agreements are expected to follow these rules and fulfill agreed-upon obligations.

A third defining feature of multilateralism is collective decision-making. Unlike bilateral negotiations, which involve only two parties, multilateral negotiations require the participation and consent of multiple states. This process usually involves complex bargaining and compromise as governments attempt to reconcile diverse national interests within a common framework.

Multilateral institutions also promote principles such as transparency, equality, and inclusiveness among participating states. Although power disparities still exist in international politics, multilateral frameworks try to offer smaller or less powerful states opportunities to participate in decision-making processes. For example, the United Nations General Assembly operates on the principle of sovereign equality, giving each member state one vote regardless of its size or power.

Another important characteristic of multilateralism is its ability to address global or regional issues that cannot be effectively managed through bilateral agreements alone. Transnational challenges such as environmental degradation, global financial instability, and international security threats often require coordinated responses from multiple countries. Multilateral institutions, therefore, serve as mechanisms for collective action in addressing these complex problems.

5.2. Multilateralism and Global Governance

Multilateral institutions play a central role in the functioning of global governance. Global governance refers to the system of rules, institutions, and processes that regulate international interactions and facilitate cooperation among states and non-state actors. Unlike domestic governance, which is typically enforced by centralized authorities, global governance depends largely on voluntary cooperation and institutional frameworks.

Multilateral organizations provide important platforms for diplomacy and policy coordination. Through regular meetings, negotiations, and conferences, these institutions enable states to exchange information, discuss shared concerns, and develop joint strategies. For example, the United Nations serves as a central forum

for diplomatic dialogue and conflict resolution, while specialized agencies within the UN system address issues such as health, education, and development.

In the economic sphere, institutions such as the World Trade Organization regulate international trade by establishing rules governing tariffs, subsidies, and dispute resolution mechanisms. These rules help create a more predictable and stable trading environment, which supports economic growth and international investment.

Multilateral institutions also play an important role in addressing global environmental challenges. International agreements such as climate change treaties and biodiversity conventions rely on multilateral cooperation to coordinate environmental policies across national borders. These agreements illustrate how multilateral frameworks can be used to manage shared global resources and mitigate environmental risks.

Liberal institutionalist scholars argue that multilateral institutions help reduce uncertainty in international relations by establishing clear expectations regarding state behavior (Keohane, 1984). By providing mechanisms for monitoring compliance and resolving disputes, these institutions encourage states to cooperate even when short-term incentives for non-cooperation may exist.

Moreover, multilateral institutions often facilitate cooperation between states and non-state actors such as international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and multinational corporations. This broader participation reflects the increasing complexity of global governance in an era of globalization.

5.3. Advantages of Multilateralism

Multilateralism brings several key benefits to international collaboration and global governance. One of the most important advantages is inclusiveness. Multilateral institutions allow many countries to take part in decision-making, which makes international agreements more legitimate. When decisions are made through inclusive discussions, they are more likely to be accepted and followed by the countries involved.

Another major benefit of multilateralism is its capacity to tackle collective action challenges. Many global issues, such as climate change, health crises, and financial instability, need cooperation from multiple nations. No single country can solve these problems alone, so international collaboration is essential.

Multilateral institutions also offer structured methods for managing conflicts and resolving disputes. Through diplomatic talks, mediation, legal processes, and arbitration, these bodies provide peaceful ways to settle international disagreements. This is crucial for maintaining peace and preventing conflicts from turning into violence.

Another advantage of multilateralism is the promotion of shared international norms and standards. Treaties, conventions, and established practices help create common expectations about how countries should behave in international relations. These norms cover areas such as human rights, environmental protection,

arms control, and trade.

As these norms develop over time, they help make the international system more predictable and stable. Countries become more familiar with established rules, which reduces uncertainty and supports long-term cooperation.

Multilateralism can also improve the effectiveness of international cooperation by combining the resources and expertise of many countries. International organizations often coordinate efforts in areas like humanitarian aid, peacekeeping, and development, which would be hard for individual nations to manage alone.

5.4. Limitations of Multilateralism

Even though multilateralism has many strengths, it also faces several important challenges. One common issue is the difficulty of reaching an agreement among many states with different interests. Reaching a consensus can be time-consuming and challenging, often leading to long negotiations as governments try to balance competing priorities.

Another challenge is the risk of inefficiency within large international organizations. These institutions often have complex bureaucratic structures that can slow down decision-making. Administrative rules, internal policies, and political disagreements may prevent these bodies from responding swiftly to global issues.

Power imbalances among nations also pose difficulties for multilateral governance. While these institutions aim to treat all members equally, powerful countries often have a strong influence on decisions. Critics argue that dominant states may shape the agenda and policies of international organizations to serve their own interests. This can reduce the perceived fairness of multilateral systems, especially when smaller or developing countries feel their voices are not adequately heard. As a result, there are frequent discussions about making these institutions more representative and effective.

Another limitation involves the enforcement of international rules. Unlike domestic legal systems, the international system does not have a central authority to enforce laws or punish violations. Therefore, the success of multilateral agreements often depends on the voluntary compliance of states. When countries fail to follow international rules, enforcement can be limited or politically challenging. This can reduce the effectiveness of multilateral agreements, particularly in areas where national interests conflict strongly.

Finally, multilateral institutions may struggle to keep up with fast-changing global conditions. The structures established after the Second World War were designed for the geopolitical landscape of that time. However, the emergence of new economic powers and evolving security challenges has led to calls for reform to ensure that these institutions remain relevant and effective in today's world.

6. Comparative Analysis of Bilateralism and Multilateralism

A comparison between bilateralism and multilateralism reveals how these two approaches are different and how they can work together in the international system.

Bilateralism refers to direct communication and cooperation between two nations, while multilateralism involves several countries working together within established organizations or institutions. Both methods are important ways for countries to achieve their goals, resolve conflicts, and work on global problems.

Experts in international relations have often discussed the pros and cons of bilateral and multilateral strategies. Bilateralism is usually seen as fast, adaptable, and allows for more control over the negotiation process. On the other hand, multilateralism is often viewed as more democratic, inclusive, and stable because it includes more countries in the decision-making. However, it's not always clear-cut whether a country should choose one method over the other. In reality, states often use both approaches based on the situation, the balance of power among the involved countries, and the bigger picture of global politics.

By comparing bilateralism and multilateralism systematically, we can better understand their strengths and weaknesses. This section looks at several key areas of comparison, including how quickly decisions can be made, how power is distributed, the range of cooperation they support, the stability of the institutions involved, and how these approaches can support each other.

6.1. Decision-Making Efficiency

A major difference between bilateral and multilateral approaches is how quickly decisions can be made. Bilateral negotiations usually involve just two countries, which makes the process simpler and faster. With fewer participants, it is easier to identify common goals, make compromises, and reach agreements in a short time.

Bilateral diplomacy also allows for more flexible negotiations. Governments can make changes to their proposals, adjust their positions, and respond quickly to new situations without needing to consult many other nations. This adaptability often makes bilateral agreements useful for solving urgent or specific problems.

In contrast, multilateral negotiations involve many countries with different interests, goals, and political systems. This makes the process more complex and time-consuming. Reaching an agreement often requires many discussions, negotiations, and compromises. These steps can extend the time needed to finalize agreements and sometimes cause delays or deadlocks.

For example, negotiations at organizations like the World Trade Organization often take a long time because member states have different economic interests. Similarly, international climate talks have taken years to reach major agreements.

Despite these difficulties, multilateral decision-making has important benefits. When many countries are involved, the agreements are more likely to reflect a wide range of views and interests. This inclusiveness can make international agreements more accepted and effective.

Thus, although bilateral diplomacy can lead to quicker agreements, multilateral frameworks offer broader representation and stronger legitimacy, which can help ensure that international policies are implemented successfully.

6.2. Power Dynamics

Another important aspect of comparing bilateralism and multilateralism is how power is distributed among the participating countries. In bilateral negotiations, the difference in power between the two countries can greatly affect the outcome. If one country has more economic, military, or political strength, it may be able to dominate the weaker player.

This imbalance can result in agreements that favor the stronger country. For example, powerful nations might use their economic influence to get better trade deals or impose conditions on weaker nations. This can create unfair negotiations where one side has more control.

Multilateral institutions, on the other hand, often have rules designed to reduce these power imbalances. Many international organizations have procedures that promote equal participation and decision-making among all member states.

For instance, in the United Nations General Assembly, each member state has one vote, regardless of its size or economic power. Many organizations also use formal rules and procedures that help manage negotiations and stop powerful countries from making decisions alone.

It's important to note that power imbalances still exist in multilateral settings. Strong countries often use diplomatic, economic, or leadership influence to shape outcomes. However, multilateral frameworks can give smaller nations a chance to build alliances and negotiate together with more powerful countries.

In this way, multilateralism helps create a more balanced environment where weaker states can speak out through collective action.

6.3. Scope of Cooperation

Bilateral and multilateral approaches also differ in the areas they can address. Bilateral agreements usually deal with specific issues or relations between two countries. These can cover areas like trade, investment, security cooperation, or formal recognition.

Because bilateral agreements involve only two countries, they can be customized to meet the needs and priorities of both nations. This targeted approach helps them respond to specific economic, political, or strategic concerns.

However, the limited focus of bilateral agreements may make it hard to tackle larger regional or global issues. Many modern problems, such as climate change, global health, terrorism, and financial stability, require collaboration between multiple countries.

Multilateral frameworks are better suited for dealing with these complex international challenges. They bring together various countries in a common structure, making it easier to take joint actions and coordinate policies between nations.

For example, addressing climate change requires cooperation among many countries because greenhouse gases come from many sources around the world. Similarly, managing global health, like responding to pandemics, needs coordinated efforts between several countries and international groups. Therefore, mul-

tilateral institutions provide the necessary platforms for dealing with issues that go beyond the scope of bilateral relationships.

6.4. Institutional Stability

Another key difference between bilateralism and multilateralism is how stable the institutions are. Multilateral institutions usually work within official structures that set long-term rules, processes, and ways of governing. These structures help keep the institution stable by offering clear guidelines for working together internationally.

By using treaties, conventions, and official mandates, multilateral institutions create lasting rules that shape how countries act over time. These rules often stay in place even if different governments come to power or political situations change. This means multilateral institutions can offer ongoing stability and predictability in international relations.

In contrast, bilateral agreements may be more affected by changes in domestic political leaders or shifts in foreign policy goals. Since these agreements often lack the wide-ranging institutional systems found in multilateral organizations, they are easier for governments to change, pause, or end.

However, this flexibility can also be beneficial in certain situations. Bilateral agreements can be adjusted more easily to new conditions, allowing countries to change policies or update terms without going through complex institutional steps.

So, while multilateral institutions offer more stability and long-term continuity, bilateral agreements provide flexibility and the ability to respond to changing political and economic situations.

6.5. Complementarity between Bilateralism and Multilateralism

Even though bilateralism and multilateralism are often seen as opposing diplomatic methods, they usually work together in practice. Many international efforts include a mix of bilateral and multilateral mechanisms that help tackle different areas of global governance.

Bilateral agreements can act as a starting point for larger multilateral structures. For instance, countries may first create bilateral trade deals that later support the formation of regional or global trade rules. Similarly, bilateral security partnerships can help build stronger cooperation within larger multilateral security alliances.

Sometimes, bilateral diplomacy can help move things forward when multilateral talks reach a standstill. By making agreements with key allies, countries can create momentum for wider international cooperation.

On the other hand, multilateral institutions can set the overall framework that guides bilateral interactions. The rules and norms developed within these organizations often influence the terms of bilateral agreements and set expectations for the countries involved.

Therefore, the presence of both bilateral and multilateral mechanisms reflects

the complexity of modern international relations. Rather than being mutually exclusive, these approaches often function as supporting tools that help countries use different diplomatic strategies.

6.6. Implications for Global Governance

The changing relationship between bilateralism and multilateralism has important effects on global governance. In a more connected and interdependent world, many of the most serious global problems need solutions that go beyond national borders.

Global governance refers to the system of institutions, rules, and processes used by states and other actors to work together on shared problems. Within this system, both bilateral and multilateral diplomacy play important roles in shaping international cooperation.

Multilateral institutions remain vital for dealing with large-scale global issues like climate change, financial instability, international security, and public health crises. These issues involve complex interactions between many countries and require coordinated efforts that cannot be achieved through bilateral agreements alone.

For example, international climate agreements depend on the involvement of many countries to cut greenhouse gas emissions and support sustainable development. Similarly, global health governance relies on collaboration among governments, international organizations, and scientific groups to track disease outbreaks and manage pandemic responses.

At the same time, bilateral diplomacy continues to play an important role in building strategic partnerships and advancing national interests. Through bilateral agreements, countries can strengthen economic ties, align on security policies, and work together on specific issues.

In many cases, bilateral relationships form the basis for broader multilateral efforts. Strong bilateral ties can build trust between countries and create opportunities for deeper cooperation within multilateral settings.

The rise of hybrid governance structures indicates that the future of international cooperation will likely involve a mix of bilateral, regional, and multilateral approaches. Regional organizations, strategic alliances, and issue-focused coalitions are increasingly supporting traditional multilateral institutions.

This layered approach to global governance allows countries to use flexible diplomatic strategies while keeping institutional frameworks in place for collective action. Bilateral agreements can tackle specific policy goals, while multilateral institutions offer broader structures for coordinating international responses to global challenges.

In the end, understanding the evolving relationship between bilateralism and multilateralism is crucial for creating effective strategies for international cooperation in the twenty-first century. Policymakers and scholars must recognize the strengths and limitations of each approach in order to build governance systems capable of dealing with the growing complexity of global issues.

7. Conclusion

This article has provided a comparative analysis of bilateralism and multilateralism in international relations, examining their conceptual foundations, operational characteristics, and roles in shaping patterns of international cooperation. Both approaches represent fundamental mechanisms through which states engage in diplomacy, negotiate agreements, and address shared political, economic, and security challenges. Throughout the evolution of the international system, bilateral and multilateral forms of diplomacy have played critical roles in structuring interactions among states and facilitating cooperation in an increasingly complex global environment.

Bilateralism offers several important advantages that continue to make it a significant component of international diplomacy. One of its primary strengths lies in its flexibility. Because bilateral agreements involve only two parties, they allow governments to design policies and commitments that reflect their specific national interests and priorities. This flexibility enables states to respond more effectively to unique political, economic, or security circumstances. Bilateral negotiations are also generally more efficient than multilateral negotiations, as the smaller number of actors involved reduces the complexity of decision-making processes. As a result, states can often reach agreements more quickly and implement them with fewer procedural constraints.

In addition, bilateral diplomacy allows states to maintain a high degree of strategic autonomy. Governments are able to negotiate directly with specific partners, develop tailored arrangements, and maintain greater control over the terms and outcomes of agreements. Bilateral relationships can also foster stronger diplomatic ties between countries by encouraging continuous engagement, dialogue, and cooperation. Over time, such interactions may evolve into broader strategic partnerships that extend beyond individual agreements and contribute to long-term stability in bilateral relations.

Multilateralism, on the other hand, offers a different set of advantages that are particularly relevant in addressing large-scale global challenges. Multilateral institutions promote inclusiveness by allowing multiple states to participate in decision-making processes and negotiations. This inclusiveness enhances the legitimacy of international agreements because they are developed through collective deliberation rather than through limited bilateral arrangements. The participation of multiple states also increases the likelihood that agreements will reflect diverse perspectives and interests.

Furthermore, multilateralism provides institutional stability through established rules, norms, and governance structures. International organizations and regimes create frameworks that regulate state behavior and promote predictability in international relations. These frameworks are especially important for managing complex transnational issues such as climate change, international trade regulation, global health governance, and collective security. Because these problems transcend national boundaries, they require coordinated action among multiple

states, which multilateral institutions are specifically designed to facilitate.

The analysis presented in this article demonstrates that bilateralism and multilateralism should not be viewed as competing or mutually exclusive alternatives. Instead, they represent complementary tools within the broader architecture of international diplomacy. In many cases, bilateral agreements serve as building blocks for broader multilateral frameworks, while multilateral institutions provide overarching structures that guide bilateral interactions. The coexistence of these approaches reflects the multifaceted nature of international relations, where states often employ multiple diplomatic strategies simultaneously to achieve their objectives.

As the international system continues to evolve in response to globalization, shifting power dynamics, and emerging global challenges, policymakers and scholars must recognize the importance of integrating both bilateral and multilateral approaches. A balanced diplomatic strategy that effectively combines the flexibility of bilateralism with the legitimacy and inclusiveness of multilateralism can enhance global cooperation and strengthen the mechanisms of international governance. By leveraging the strengths of both approaches, states can better navigate the complexities of the contemporary international system and contribute to a more stable and cooperative global order.

8. Limitation and Future Research

While this article provides a comparative examination of bilateralism and multilateralism by exploring their theoretical foundations, operational characteristics, strengths, and limitations, it does not undertake an empirical assessment of implementation outcomes across a defined sample of cases. The analysis relies primarily on theoretical discussions and illustrative historical and contemporary examples rather than systematic comparative measurements of effectiveness, efficiency, or long-term impact. Therefore, the study does not seek to rank bilateralism or multilateralism as universally superior approaches to international cooperation. Instead, it argues that both approaches represent complementary diplomatic instruments whose effectiveness depends on specific political, economic, institutional, and strategic contexts. Future research could build on this framework by conducting comparative case studies or empirical evaluations to determine the conditions under which bilateral or multilateral arrangements are more effective in addressing particular global challenges.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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