Journal of Global Politics and Current Diplomacy
2025 • Volume 13 • Issue 2 • Article 13205
ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

MINI-LATERAL DIPLOMACY AFTER FEBRUARY 2022: PROCEDURAL INNOVATION, LEGITIMACY COSTS, AND THE LIMITS OF COALITION GOVERNANCE

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Submitted: 12.9.2025 **Accepted:** 29.11.2025 **Published:** 31.12.2025

Issue: This article is part of the regular issue of JGPCD, Vol. 13(2).

Abstract

The period following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 produced a distinctive governance pattern: the most consequential institutional responses to the aggression were delivered not through universal multilateral organs but through mini-lateral formats—the NATO–Ukraine Council, the network of bilateral security agreements initiated under the G7 Vilnius Declaration, and the oil price-cap coalition. This article treats these three formats as the central objects of analysis rather than as incidental features of a broader order narrative. Drawing on the literatures on mini-lateralism and on procedural legitimacy in international institutions, the article develops a comparative procedural framework—ten institutional dimensions applied across the three cases—and a legitimacy-deficit diagnostic that maps seven criteria onto empirical evidence. The analysis demonstrates that post-2022 mini-lateralism resolved the problem of operational speed and coherence but generated a systematic procedural legitimacy deficit concentrated on contestability and revisability, not on publicity or Charter anchoring. If left unaddressed, this deficit risks converting coalition instruments from expressions of international law into preferences of a bloc.

Keywords

minilateralism; procedural legitimacy; NATO–Ukraine Council; bilateral security agreements; oil price cap; coalition governance; post-2022 international order

INTRODUCTION

The Security Council was already in session when Russian armoured columns entered Ukrainian territory on the morning of February 24, 2022. This temporal coincidence became the expression of an institutional paradox that would define everything that followed: the aggressor's permanent seat and its veto power structurally transformed the Council, which became incapable of responding to the most egregious violation of Article 2(4) since Iraq's invasion of Kuwait thirty-two years ago (United Nations, 1945/2024). However,

what followed was not, as some commentators have hastily concluded, a generalised paralysis of the UN. We could say that we have begun to witness a shift, as governance functions have migrated from universal to coalition-based formats.

Of course, this handover was made quickly, improvised, and with consequences that their architects could not have fully anticipated. For example, the NATO–Ukraine Council was created in Vilnius in July 2023 as a well-structured consultation and planning platform that was integrated between the Alliance and Ukraine—something considerably more than the ad hoc exchanges of previous years. However, it was deliberately placed outside the commitment provided for in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty (NATO, 2023; NATO, 2024b).

In a completely different institutional register, we can catalogue the network of bilateral security agreements that was built up with the G7 Joint Declaration of Support for Ukraine. Thus, more than twenty compacts were created in less than a year, each promising a decade of military assistance, defence industry cooperation, and reform conditionality. Even so, it should be noted that all of these arrangements lack a unified registry, a common format, or any mechanism for inter-signatory coordination (G7, 2023; Carnegie Endowment, 2024). Equally worth examining is the oil price cap coalition, anchored by the G7 and enforced through maritime and transport insurance services domiciled in the coalition states. This coalition was designed to squeeze Russian revenues while keeping oil on the global market, so as to avoid a supply shock that would have punished the sanctioners as much as the sanctioned (US Treasury Department, 2022; Johnson, Rachel, and Wolfram, 2023b). This article, therefore, uses the three formats as case studies, each operating in a different area of governance, even if they follow the same event and respond to the same objective.

That said, each of the three formats raises the same question: what is the procedural legitimacy that protects the function for which they were created? Here, the issue is not effectiveness, which can be debated in the specific terms of organisational management. These three cases are, in essence, instances of a common institutional phenomenon, namely the recourse to mini-lateral governance when universal bodies are blocked.

What can be observed is that, to date, no one has analysed to what extent these instruments can generate legitimacy deficits. The existing literature on mini-lateralism provides the conceptual vocabulary, but not the operational framework that would allow an empirical answer to this question. Thus, we can retain from this literature Naím's (2009) prescription for coalitions built with a precise purpose, Brummer's (2014) analysis of weak law instruments in economic management, Patrick's (2015) warning about forum-seeking costs and institutional fragmentation.

Given this gap in the literature, this article launches the following thesis: post-2022 mini-lateralism has solved the problem of speed and operational coherence, but has generated a deficit of procedural legitimacy through contestability (the absence of independent mechanisms through which affected parties can challenge coalition decisions) and reviewability (the absence of mandatory impact assessments and effective cessation clauses). The deficit is caused neither by publicity, as this is relatively ensured by the three formats, nor by anchoring in the UN Charter, which we find, to varying degrees, in all three formats. The pattern is not intuitive because we would be tempted to assume that formats that bypass the Security Council encounter the greatest difficulties in justifying themselves on the basis of the Charter, but in practice, the problem of justification has been solved much more effectively than that of accountability. If this imbalance is not corrected through procedural reforms, then the instruments that have supported the post-2022 response risk being perceived as legitimised preferences of a bloc, undermining the very support they could provide to non-aligned states.

The argument in this article unfolds over five sections. The first reconstructs the concept of mini-lateralism in international relations theory and creates a ten-dimensional comparative framework designed for replication beyond the cases examined here. The second applies this framework to the NATO–Ukraine Council, the ABS network, and the price cap coalition, producing a comparative procedural anatomy (Table 1) and a detailed inventory of bilateral agreements (Table 2). The third section develops the diagnosis of the legitimacy deficit (Table 3), mapping seven theoretically grounded criteria on the basis of empirical evidence and identifying the pattern described above. The fourth examines the reception by non-aligned states, where

the political consequences of procedural deficits become visible. The last section formulates the reform implications.

MINILATERALISM IN THEORY: FROM CONCEPT TO COMPARATIVE FRAMEWORK

The concept of mini-lateralism was launched in 2009 by Moisés Naím. At that time, he proposed an interpretation that amounted to a deliberately realistic prescription. Thus, mini-lateralism assembles the smallest number of states capable of producing the greatest impact on a given issue and ceases to pretend that a universal consensus is either achievable or necessary (Naím, 2009). The author of this concept was not a theorist who set out to create a school or a research program. However, his label managed to impose itself in the literature and sparked a debate in which theorists such as Stephen Walt, Daniel Drezner and others were engaged, among others. This concept revealed a fault line that the discipline had previously only approached tangentially, through related topics: coalitions of the willing, contact groups, G-x summits, variable geometry arrangements. What Naím achieved, in retrospect, was less the invention of a concept than the naming of a practice whose theoretical implications remained uncharted.

Five years later, Chris Brummer published a monograph that can probably be considered the best-argued analysis of minilateralism to date (Brummer, 2014). In essence, his argument is structural. The author tries to clarify the fact that the broad multilateral negotiations specific to the Bretton Woods period had been gradually replaced by narrower and more targeted formulas, through trade alliances, agreements with limited legal force and financial engineering instruments that operated in the spaces left vacant by the old institutional architecture, without claiming to replace it. From Brummer's perspective, this transformation does not represent a dysfunction, but precisely the expression of the capacity to adapt to a distribution of economic power that had become too dispersed to be managed by a single institutional framework. Even though his analytical contribution was remarkable, his analytical framework remained almost exclusively focused on economic governance and excluded the security dimension. However, the period after 2022 has highlighted this limit of Brummer's conception precisely.

We could say that, almost intuitively, Steward Patrick has shifted the discussion from a simple inventory of advantages to an analysis of the costs involved in mini-lateralism (Patrick, 2015). He does not deny the value of these new formats, as they bring with them the speed, flexibility and modularity needed in the new dynamics of the international system. For this reason, he does not treat them with any defensive reflex of purely procedural legalism. However, Patrick is also attentive to the risks these formats entail. These are the opportunistic proliferation of forums, the erosion of already existing international organisations, and the diminution of institutional and political accountability. His expression of a "fragmented system of redundant institutions" encapsulates exactly the crux of the problem: such structures created to facilitate action end up duplicating, overlapping, and ultimately blocking the very order they were created to defend. Looking at the specific case of the post-2022 war in Ukraine, we note that the transfer of governance functions from the Security Council to coalition formats has not occurred gradually, but abruptly. Moreover, they have not remained limited to trade or finance, but have extended to military security, international criminal liability, and the management of energy interdependence. Here, it becomes clear that the debate about mini-lateralism can no longer be conducted solely in terms of procedural efficiency but inevitably enters the more difficult terrain of legitimacy.

This debate has subsequently been refined. In 2024, Panda and Ohn edited a special issue of the Australian Journal of International Affairs that discussed case studies from the Indo-Pacific region (e.g. AUKUS, Quad and various other trilateral arrangements). Based on this empirical material, various scholars have proposed some distinctions between forms of mini-lateralism oriented towards alliance formation and those focused on cooperative security (Panda & Ohn, 2024). In parallel, a study by Megan Dee (2024) suggested a distinction between an "inside" mini-lateralism, which operates within established multilateral structures, and an "outside" mini-lateralism, which positions itself as an alternative to them. That said, neither of the two studies mentioned has been applied to the European and transatlantic cases after 2022. This gap in the literature is all the more evident as the case studies mentioned by the two articles highlight at least two elements relevant to the argument of this article: first, the existence of a clear violation of jus ad bellum norms as a triggering event; second, the involvement of universal bodies — the General Assembly, the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court — that functioned as competing legitimizers of the coalition response. In other words, in the post-2022 Euro-Atlantic space, mini-lateralism does not develop on an empty institutional terrain, but in a field already saturated with universal legal claims and political contestations over the meaning of legitimacy.

At this point, I believe that Amitav Acharya's concept of a "multiplex" world order provides the most useful structural framework to understand why the issue of legitimacy cannot be treated as a secondary variable (Acharya, 2014/2018). In such an order, marked by the diffusion of power, the plurality of civilizational claims and the overlapping of decision-making forums, no power centre can universalise without the norms it prefers, without taking some risks. In this logic, mini-lateral formats have a double task: on the one hand, they must produce results where universal bodies are blocked or insufficient; on the other hand, they must do so in a sufficiently transparent, proportionate and reviewable manner so as not to be perceived as mere instruments of a Western hegemony translated into legal language. Hedley Bull's earlier observation goes in the same direction, albeit from a different angle: international order is not maintained by pure hierarchy, but by the observance of rules and the existence of stable mutual expectations (Bull, 2012). At this point in the argument, it becomes clear that formats that circumvent these standards risk eroding not only their own legitimacy, but also the norms they claim to defend. Ian Hurd naturally completes this picture when he shows that authority is not simply proclaimed, but socially conferred, and this conferral depends decisively on the procedures through which power is exercised, not just on the ends invoked in its justification (Hurd, 1999).

From this convergence of literatures emerges the comparative framework of the present article. The analysis that I open at this point has been structured around ten procedural dimensions: (1) origin and legal basis; (2) geometry of membership; (3) duration and temporal scope; (4) functional scope; (5) transparency and notification; (6) humanitarian exemptions; (7) review and termination mechanisms; (8) contestability; (9) deconflictualization protocols; and (10) anchoring in the Charter. The selection of these dimensions is not arbitrary, and this should be made clear. Publicity, reflected especially in the dimensions of transparency and legal anchoring, responds to both Patrick's concern for accountability and Hurd's emphasis on justification as a source of legitimacy. Contestability, present in Bull, Acharya, and the broader tradition of the English School, supports the idea that order presupposes reciprocity and the possibility of objection, not simple imposed conformity. Revisibility transposes the idea that we find, in different registers, in Naím and Brummer: flexibility is a virtue of restricted formats only if it also includes the capacity for self-correction. Finally, deconflictualization responds to a risk that realist literature has long treated as endemic, namely that bypassing universalist deliberation can accelerate escalating dynamics and produce strategic ambiguities that are difficult to control (Mearsheimer, 2014; Krasner, 1999). In essence, the discussion about these formats cannot be limited to their efficiency but must also be extended to the conditions under which they can function without undermining the very normative basis of the order they claim to consolidate.

The aim of this article is not to exhaust the empirical material of a still small number of cases, but to provide an analysis grid that creates comparative interpretations.

METHODOLOGY AND CASE SELECTION

Any comparison of this type requires, from the outset, a clearer explanation of the mechanism used. It is important to note that the thesis of this article is not based on a broad review of the various mini-lateral models, but rather starts from a qualitative comparison of three institutional formats that emerged after the 2022 invasion when a strategic rupture was noted. Each of the three regimes is in different functional registers. Thus, the NATO-Ukraine Council falls more into the sphere of political-military consultations and strategic semantics; the network of bilateral security agreements concerns defense support, capability development and long-term security commitment; at the same time, the price cap coalition falls into the field of economic coercion and sanctions policy. In this logic, this article uses the Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) method, also called Mill's Method of Difference. This comparative design allows us to analyze cases that are as different as possible in terms of political function, but which are held together by a similarity in relation to the triggering event, the time interval and the political core that supported them. In fact, the three formats took shape in about two years after the February 2022 invasion, being initiated and/or consolidated by roughly the same group of G7 and NATO states. Subsequently, they evolved in parallel with universal institutions whose reaction remained either blocked or delayed.

It should also be noted that the ten dimensions introduced in the previous section were defined prior to the empirical analysis, based on a convergence between four distinct bodies of literature. Here we refer to: (a) the literature on minilateralism (especially Naím, Brummer and Patrick); (b) the literature on procedural legitimacy and rule acceptance (Hurd and later the constructivist branch of regime theory); (c) the emphasis placed by the English School on order, restraint and reciprocity; (d) the realist literature on escalation management. Each of the ten

dimensions corresponds to an issue treated as central in at least two of these directions. This overlap does not eliminate interpretation, but it reduces the arbitrariness of the framework.

In turn, the empirical material is organized on three levels. The first level includes the constitutive texts of each arrangement. Specifically, for the NATO–Ukraine Council, we have included the communiqués of the Vilnius and Washington summits; for the network of bilateral security agreements, the twenty-two agreements signed between January and October 2024; for the price cap coalition, the relevant guidance documents issued by the United States Treasury, together with European Union Council Regulation 2022/2367. These documents are treated as primary evidence for the institutional design, as they reveal the stated goals, procedural architecture, and operational logic of each format. The second level concerns implementation, and the analysis begins to focus on the practice observable in OFAC designations and enforcement signals in the case of the price cap, Council statements and subsequent policy positions in the case of the NATO–Ukraine Council, and reporting associated with the Capabilities Coalitions and other enforcement mechanisms in the case of bilateral agreements. The third level includes external assessments prepared by institutions and authors that do not directly address the formats under review, as well as the academic literature discussed earlier. This third level does not replace the first two. Naturally, where the three levels do not converge, I give priority to the founding texts when the question concerns the intended design and to the implementation dossier when the analysis concerns the operational consequences.

The evaluative tool presented in Section IV assigns a qualitative rating (i.e., high, medium, or low) to each format for each of the seven legitimacy criteria. These ratings should be read in an ordinal, not a cardinal, sense. They do not measure legitimacy in a quantitative sense, nor do they claim to capture an exact magnitude. To be clear, a high score indicates the presence of an explicit, operational, and recurrently used mechanism corresponding to the criterion in question. Medium denotes an intermediate situation: either the criterion is only partially institutionalised, or exists formally but is inconsistently applied, or is carried out in practice without being fully incorporated into a stable procedural structure. Finally, low indicates the absence of any recognisable mechanism beyond the rhetorical formula. The thresholds were kept constant in all three cases. In other words, the coding rules were not shifted with the case. Each qualifier can be traced to its documentary basis in the relevant row in Table 1, so that the judgment remains inspectable, not merely stated.

THREE CASES: COMPARATIVE PROCEDURAL ANATOMY

Even though the three mini-lateral formats selected for this article start from the same moment of rupture caused by the institutional shock of February 2022, they diverge when we try to analyse their actual architecture. The divergences are evident in the legal basis, the geometry of membership, and the procedural design; precisely where we need to discuss the efficiency of each format and its legitimacy.

Table 1 presents a synthesis of this anatomy through a comparison structured on ten dimensions. The discussion below does not mechanically resume each rubric, but follows the contrasts that have the greatest analytical relevance and, where necessary, reconstructs their genealogy in the decisions, improvisations, and compromises found between 2022 and 2024.

The NATO–Ukraine Council (CNU)

Of the three case studies, the NATO–Ukraine Council (CNU) seems to have the strongest institutional anchorage. This format is the product of the Summit in Vilnius (July 2023), being reconfirmed in Washington, a year later, by the already famous declaration that “Ukraine’s future is in NATO” (NATO, 2024, July 11). This arrangement creates a structured platform for consultation, joint decision-making and integrated planning between the thirty-two allies and Ukraine.

However, the legal basis of the CNU has a declarative character rather than a real conventional support specific to international legal practice. For this reason, it should be noted that the strength of the format does not come from a new treaty, but from NATO’s institutional architecture and from the Alliance’s capacity to transform political formulas into repetitive practices. As such, the temporal dimension of this type of format is indeterminate, as it is not linked to a precise end date, but to NATO’s institutional continuity and the promise of an open path for Ukraine towards accession. From a functional point of view, the CNU can be considered a bridge between a multinational organization and a state. We can see it as more than a simple ad hoc consultation, but clearly less than the collective defense provided for in Article 5. This ambiguity is not accidental. On the contrary,

it seems to have been designed precisely to maintain a margin for managing escalation that the Alliance needs, while simultaneously transmitting the signal of a political commitment that, under normal circumstances, can no longer be withdrawn.

In terms of transparency, the CNU is a format that is located in a relatively stable area, if we compare it with the standards of alliances: communiqués at the end of summits and public statements of the Council are issued regularly, and the existence of a recognizable institutional scene partially reduces the risk of arbitrariness and opacity. However, reservations arise when the analysis moves from within the Alliance to its external environment. Here we note that there is no standardized practice of notification addressed to non-members or to the UN General Assembly. Of course, this absence matters less for NATO's internal legitimacy, but it matters more for the external perception of the Alliance's role, especially among non-aligned states, which have not requested participation in this framework, but do not have a formal procedure through which to obtain it. In this logic, from a structural point of view, contestability remains restricted, since the consensus rule gives each NATO member an implicit veto. However, it does not open any real institutional channel for contestation from the outside, which is why Ukraine's voice, although procedurally integrated into the architecture of the format, remains inevitably asymmetric in relation to that of the allies that benefit from full membership.

However, the UNC clearly surpasses the other formats studied in this article in the dimension of deconflictualization. NATO's command and control architecture, direct communications infrastructure, and 24-hour consultation clause in the event of an armed attack give it a procedural depth and operational dynamism that neither the network of bilateral security agreements nor the price cap coalition can match.

The Network of Bilateral Security Agreements

In contrast, the Network of Bilateral Security Agreements (BSA) offers the picture of the most innovative institutional experiment, but also the most fragmented procedural arrangement of the three formats. Table 2 traces its chronology, and the sequence of documents that accompany it is telling in itself. The starting point was the G7 Joint Declaration in Vilnius, of 12 July 2023, but the process followed an alert dynamic for a process of building and welding security cooperation. The United Kingdom signed, in Kiev, on 12 January 2024, the first bilateral security agreement. This gesture was followed on 16 February 2024, by the signing in Berlin and Paris, of two Security Pacts between Ukraine and Germany and France, respectively. Thus, by October 2024, 22 bilateral agreements were already in force, to which was added an arrangement at the level of the European Union. It should be noted that we are not dealing with an institution in the classical sense, but with a network, that is, a format that combines a multilateral political matrix with differentiated bilateral commitments, negotiated at an accelerated pace and, to a large extent, under the pressure of the continuation of the war. All these agreements follow a general template: ten-year duration, commitments covering air defence, artillery, armoured vehicles, training, intelligence, cooperation in the defence industry and conditionality of reform. That said, beyond this formal similarity, significant variations appear, especially in the definition of financial commitments. Read carefully, these differences say a lot about the political economy of real-time task sharing. For example, the Baltic states and the Nordic signatories have set multi-annual targets and, in some cases, even expressed them as a percentage of GDP. Most of the other partners, however, have preferred to detail the allocations only for the first year, leaving the rest to annual renegotiation and, implicitly, the volatility of domestic budgetary policy.

The agreement with the United States represents a special and almost paradoxical situation. Signed at the G7 summit in Puglia on 13 June 2024, it is the only arrangement registered at the United Nations and, precisely because of this, the most visibly symbolic. However, it also remains the most fragile from a constitutional point of view, being structured as an agreement of the Executive in Washington DC, which can be revoked with six months' notice and lacks ratification in the US Congress. This combination of maximum symbolic value and minimal constitutional support is the most eloquent expression of the internal tension of the entire ABS architecture. The network produces strong political signals, but they are supported by uneven legal guarantees and insufficiently developed coordination mechanisms. There is no unified register of agreements, no common evaluation framework, no inter-signatory coordination body that would coherently overcome the legacy of the Capabilities Coalitions associated with the Ramstein format. The implication is straightforward: network innovation coexists here with considerable incoherence at the level of its component units.

The Price Cap Coalition

The Price Cap Coalition, in turn, requires a separate analysis, as it introduces a new instrument into the policy of international sanctions. The cap does not simply prohibit trade in Russian oil, but conditions access to maritime services domiciled in the G7 and the European Union on the sale of oil below the threshold of sixty dollars per barrel for crude oil. Johnson, Rachel and Wolfram (2023a) have shown that the fulcrum of the entire mechanism lies in the asymmetry between Russia's relatively low marginal cost of extraction and the international market price. As such, if the cap were set above the cost of extraction, but sufficiently low relative to Brent, Russia would have had an incentive to continue production, while the rent available for budgetary spending would have been compressed. The problem is that the theoretical approach has not been fully translated into practice. The quantitative assessment by Kilian and Rapson (2024) shows that the EU embargo, rather than the price cap, was the main driver of the discount applied to Russian oil in 2023. Furthermore, the cap lost its economic relevance when Urals prices fell below the sixty dollar threshold in the first half of the year, and when ESPO exports from the Pacific were consistently traded above the cap, G7-domiciled services remained involved. Therefore, not only the limits of effectiveness but also the implementation cracks can be distinguished. Ribakova, Hilgenstock and Wolff have identified precisely such shortcomings, such as the sale of tankers by Greek maritime interests to opaque buyers, which facilitated the expansion of a Russian ghost fleet operating outside coalition oversight. From a procedural point of view, the profile of this format is perhaps the most problematic of all. First, a termination clause was not specified. At the same time, there is no mandatory impact assessment and no independent adjudicative body. The implementation of this format has been rather reactive, not through an announced timetable or automatic review mechanisms. OFAC designations in November 2023 produced a temporary widening of the Urals discount. This instrument has operated through spot corrections rather than based on a stable procedural design. Similarly, in the case of humanitarian exemptions for food and fertilizers, these are administered through parallel channels of the European Union and the United States, not organically incorporated into the capping mechanism itself. In this form, the coalition appears as an inventive but procedurally under-institutionalized instrument of economic coercion.

Overall, what can be distinguished from the comparison of the three formats is that mini-lateral governance does not represent a unitary mechanism. This conclusion can also be found in the literature, but it needs more empirical analysis.

The differences between the three case studies are not only related to the domain (security, defense cooperation, economic coercion), but to the procedural corpus of each arrangement. Of all, the NATO–Ukraine Council probably has the most complex procedural mechanism, but from a functional point of view it is still limited only to consultation and planning, without having a real coercive impact. On the other hand, the Price Cap Coalition proves to be the most creative in terms of the instruments it has been equipped with, but from a procedural point of view it is the most deficient, as it lacks termination grounds, independent control and pre-programmed evaluation cycles. Finally, the network of bilateral security agreements occupies an intermediate position and is best defined by structured fragmentation, benefiting from institutional innovation at the network level, but being procedurally incoherent at the level of each component unit. Therefore, we observe that there is no single form of mini-lateralism, but rather several ways to build capacity for action outside or at the margins of the international framework. As such, the real question that must guide the analysis of these formats must target the procedural properties that make specific formats, created in particular contexts, perceived as more or less legitimate by states outside the coalition. In other words, we must focus on the dynamic relationship between efficiency, procedure and external recognition. It is precisely to this relationship that we turn our attention in the following.

Table 1. Comparative Procedural Anatomy of Post-2022 Mini-Lateral Formats

Procedural dimension	NATO–Ukraine Council	G7 Bilateral Security Compacts	Price Cap Coalition
Origin & legal basis	Vilnius Summit communiqué (July 2023); Washington Summit Declaration (July 2024); no treaty basis	G7 Joint Declaration of Support for Ukraine (July 2023); bilateral executive agreements (not ratified by parliaments in most cases)	G7 Leaders' Statement + EU Council Regulation 2022/2367; Price Cap Coalition Guidance (Dec. 2022); no UNSC mandate
Membership geometry	32 NATO Allies + Ukraine; decisions by consensus within NUC format	Variable: 20+ bilateral agreements (all G7 + Denmark, Netherlands, Finland, Latvia, Spain, Belgium, Portugal, Iceland, Sweden, Norway, Estonia,	G7 + EU + Australia (core); enforcement depends on G7/EU-domiciled shipping, insurance, and

Procedural dimension	NATO–Ukraine Council	G7 Bilateral Security Compacts	Price Cap Coalition
		Lithuania, Poland, Luxembourg, Romania, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Ireland, Croatia, Greece, EU)	financial services providers
Duration & temporal scope	Indefinite; tied to NATO's institutional continuity and Ukraine's membership trajectory	10 years standard; intended to expire upon Ukraine's NATO accession; U.S. agreement terminable by either party with 6 months' notice	Indefinite; no sunset clause; price level ($60/bbl crude) adjustable by coalition consensus
Functional scope	Consultation, joint decision-making, integrated planning; no Article 5 commitment; bridge to membership	Military assistance (air defence, artillery, armour), defence-industrial cooperation, training, intelligence sharing, cyber defence, economic resilience, reform conditionality	Revenue compression via services-centred lever (maritime insurance, shipping, trade finance); systemic risk management (continued supply at capped price)
Transparency / notification	Summit communiqués and public NUC statements; no standardised notification to non-members or UNGA	Agreements published bilaterally; no unified registry or standardised format; varying levels of specificity on financial commitments	U.S. Treasury guidance documents and OFAC advisories published; no systematic independent monitoring; attestation requirements introduced late (Dec. 2023)
Humanitarian carve-outs	N/A (security consultation format, not coercive instrument)	N/A (assistance framework, not sanctions instrument); reform conditionality includes rule-of-law and anti-corruption clauses	Intended to keep Russian oil on market (price reduction, not embargo); no formal humanitarian carve-out clause; food/fertiliser sanctions exemptions handled separately by EU/U.S.
Review / sunset mechanisms	No formal review clause; periodic reassessment via NATO Summit cycle (biennial)	Most agreements specify annual review; financial commitments defined only for first year in most cases; Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Baltic states specify multiyear targets	No sunset clause; price level reviewed "as needed" by coalition; no mandatory impact assessment; enforcement tightened reactively (Nov. 2023 designations)
Contestability	Internal: consensus rule gives each member implicit veto. External: no mechanism for third-party challenge or independent review	Internal: bilateral renegotiation. External: no third-party review; no appeal mechanism for conditionality decisions; U.S. agreement registered with UN (unique case)	Internal: OFAC delisting petitions; EU review procedures. External: no independent adjudicatory body; private actors bear compliance risk with limited due-process guarantees
Deconfliction protocols	24-hour consultation clause in event of armed attack on Ukraine; integrated planning routines; hotline infrastructure via NATO channels	Immediate consultation clause (within 24 hours) in event of future armed attack; no standardised inter-signatory coordination mechanism	No military deconfliction function; market-based: continued flows manage price stability; coordination via G7 economic policy channels
Charter anchoring	Explicit reference to UN Charter principles, territorial integrity, sovereign equality; framed as exercise of collective self-defence (Art. 51) and sovereign choice	Preamble references to UN Charter, territorial integrity, 1991 borders; framed as support for Ukraine's inherent right of self-defence	Implicit: response to aggression condemned by UNGA (A/RES/ES-11/1); no explicit Charter clause in coalition guidance; legitimacy derived from jus ad bellum violation

Source: Author's compilation based on NATO (2023, 2024a, 2024b), G7 (2023), U.S. Department of the Treasury (2022), bilateral security agreement texts (January–October 2024), Carnegie Endowment (2024), SCEEUS (2024), UK House of Commons Library (2024).

Table 2. G7+ Bilateral Security Agreements with Ukraine: Chronological Inventory (January–October 2024)

* UK agreement renewed as "100-year partnership" in January 2025. ** EU agreement expires upon Ukraine's accession. Additional signatories omitted for space; full list: 32 Joint Declaration endorsers.

Partner	Date signed	Duration	Key provisions	Notable features / financial commitment
United Kingdom	12 Jan. 2024	10 years*	Air defence, naval capabilities, training, defence-industrial co-production, cyber, maritime security, energy, critical minerals	Capability Coalitions: Maritime, Drones; £2.5 bn military aid (2024–25); "100-year partnership" renewal Jan. 2025
France	16 Feb. 2024	10 years	Air defence, long-range fires, armoured vehicles, combat air, training, defence-industrial cooperation, demining	Up to €3 bn in military support (2024); co-leads Air Force Capability Coalition
Germany	16 Feb. 2024	10 years	Air defence (IRIS-T, Patriot), armoured	€7.1 bn pledged (2024); largest

Partner	Date signed	Duration	Key provisions	Notable features / financial commitment
			vehicles, ammunition, training, defence-industrial cooperation, economic reconstruction	European bilateral contributor; co-leads Armour Coalition
Denmark	23 Feb. 2024	10 years	Military assistance, training, defence-industrial cooperation, F-16 donation programme, demining	Multiyear programme; DKK 10 bn+ committed; co-leads F-16 coalition
Canada	24 Feb. 2024	10 years	Military equipment, training, defence-industrial cooperation, sanctions coordination, economic resilience	CAD 650 mn military aid package (2024); co-leads Counter-IED Coalition
Italy	24 Feb. 2024	10 years	Military equipment, air defence, training, reconstruction, humanitarian demining	8th military aid package; leads Demining Coalition
Netherlands	1 Mar. 2024	10 years	F-16 provision, naval capabilities, training, ammunition, legal accountability support	Major F-16 donor; co-leads Maritime Capability Coalition
Finland	3 Apr. 2024	10 years	Military assistance, defence-industrial cooperation, training, cyber defence, winter warfare expertise	22nd military aid package; focus on artillery, anti-armour
Latvia	11 Apr. 2024	10 years	Military aid, training, demining, IT/cyber cooperation, reform support	0.25% GDP target for Ukraine support (2024–2026)
Spain	27 May 2024	10 years	Military equipment (Leopard 2A4), air defence, training, humanitarian demining	1 bn+ military aid; co-leads Counter-UAS Coalition
Belgium	28 May 2024	10 years	F-16 provision, ammunition, training, defence-industrial cooperation	F-16 donor; leads Ammunition Coalition (with France)
Portugal	28 May 2024	10 years	Military equipment, training, humanitarian support, reconstruction	Military aid packages; modest bilateral commitment
Sweden	31 May 2024	10 years	Military equipment (CV90, Archer), training, defence-industrial cooperation, cyber	Multiyear programme; SEK 75 bn (2024–2026); 5 Capability Coalitions
Norway	31 May 2024	10 years	Military equipment, air defence, training, naval capabilities, Arctic expertise	NOK Nansen Support Programme; multiyear; co-leads IT Coalition
Iceland	31 May 2024	10 years	Humanitarian support, demining, reconstruction, cyber, gender equality in security	Non-military focus; humanitarian and rule-of-law support
United States	13 Jun. 2024	10 years	All domains: air defence, long-range fires, armour, combat air, naval, cyber, intelligence, defence-industrial base, economic resilience, reform conditionality	Sole agreement registered with UN; executive agreement (no congressional ratification); terminable with 6 months' notice; largest bilateral donor ($61 bn+)
Japan	13 Jun. 2024	10 years	Non-lethal equipment, reconstruction, economic resilience, energy security, mine clearance	Non-lethal military aid; $12 bn humanitarian/economic support
Estonia	27 Jun. 2024	10 years	Military aid, cyber, training, IT capabilities, defence-industrial cooperation	0.25% GDP target (2024–2026); co-leads IT Capability Coalition
Lithuania	27 Jun. 2024	10 years	Military aid, training, demining, drone warfare, reform support	0.25% GDP target (2024–2026); leads Drone Capability Coalition
European Union	27 Jun. 2024	Indef.**	Military assistance (EPF), training (EUMAM), sanctions coordination, macro-financial aid, accession framework, energy, reconstruction	**Expires when Ukraine completes accession; €6.5 bn+ EPF; €50 bn Ukraine Facility (2024–2027)
Poland	8 Jul. 2024	10 years	Military equipment, training, logistics, border security, defence-industrial cooperation, energy	Major logistics hub; bilateral security treaty; co-leads Artillery Coalition
Romania	11 Jul. 2024	10 years	Military aid, training, Black Sea security, grain corridor logistics, demining	Danube grain corridor facilitation; F-16 training centre

Source: Author's compilation based on bilateral agreement texts, U.S. Department of State (2024), Carnegie Endowment (2024), SCEEUS (2024), ECFR (2024), UK House of Commons Library CBP-9837 (2024).

THE LEGITIMACY-DEFICIT DIAGNOSTIC

Table 3 distributes seven criteria over the three formats analysed, revealing a pattern that contradicts what the specialised literature says. Intuitively, we are tempted to assume that those formats that bypass the UN Security Council and operate through voluntary coalitions should encounter difficulties in justifying themselves in terms of the UN Charter, because the further they move away from the universalist procedure, the thinner the normative foundation that justifies their existence. However, the evidence does not confirm this assumption. On the contrary, on the dimension of public justification, all three formats obtain average or even above-average scores. This dimension reveals the availability of explicitly formulated reasons, which are accessible to the public and anchored in a recognisable legal language.

If we look at communication as a first indication, we observe that NATO's communication apparatus provided the necessary mechanisms and frameworks that the UNC has taken over almost entirely. References to Article 51, the principle of sovereign equality, are already part of the format's everyday communication. (NATO, 2024b). Similarly, the Price Cap Coalition uses technical but clear communication through Treasury guidelines and OFAC opinions, explaining the effectiveness of the instrument created by compressing revenues and maintaining continuity of supply. After all, these documents provide the public with a legal and economic justification (Johnson & Wolfram, 2024). Even in the case of the network of bilateral security agreements, which obtains the most modest score on this dimension, communication is maintained by publishing each bilateral agreement individually (SCEEUS, 2024; ECFR, 2024). Their problem is the absence of an aggregate document justifying these agreements, as well as the lack of transparency regarding financial commitments beyond the first year.

The picture of anchoring in the Charter is no less relevant. The UNC's references to self-defence and the principle of non-use of force are explicit and recurrent. It can be seen that the preambles of the bilateral agreements invoke the Charter and the borders of Ukraine of 1991. As for the price cap, the normative basis is found in General Assembly resolution A/RES/ES-11/1 on the condemnation of aggression (UNGA, 2022). In short, the post-2022 coalition has done its homework to a large extent on the surface dimensions of legitimacy.

The problem arises in the area of contestability and reviewability. These two spaces raise the question of the ways in which the exercise of power can be verified and evaluated, but especially contested and corrected when circumstances change.

Let us look at the three formats simultaneously to observe the common structural logic. In the case of the UNC, the rule of consensus gives the format a certain degree of internal contestability, since any of the allies can block a decision. This can be considered a protection against hasty action from within. For states outside this format (sometimes even Ukraine may be outside), there is no external control channel; no non-member can formally challenge a decision of the Council. In the same dimension, the network of bilateral security agreements is even more fragile, because it does not even benefit from the internal protection that allied consensus confers. These agreements operate individually as the result of bilateral negotiation, and the only instrument for adjusting the agreement remains renegotiation. In this mechanism, disputes regarding conditionality cannot be escalated to a third body. The problem raised by this absence concerns the conditionality that the ABS network imposes on assistance granted to a state at war through criteria relating to anti-corruption, the rule of law and the transparency of defence procurement. However, these requirements intersect directly with the sphere of Ukraine's internal governance. Therefore, I believe that it is not the lack of an appeal court per se that makes this arrangement problematic, but the fact that a challenge mechanism was not created at the time when reform conditionalities were imposed that have an impact on the system of the state in the midst of war. Analytically speaking, the effects of this conditionality are close in importance to those of the military deliveries themselves. In this logic, we can talk about a procedural asymmetry that the architects of this format would have been reasonably obliged to foresee. The coalition for the price cap undoubtedly offers more, but by no means enough. In its case, there are delisting procedures within OFAC, and review mechanisms also operate in the European Union order. What remains problematic, however, is the disproportion between the burden of compliance, borne mainly by carriers, insurers and financial intermediaries, and the procedural protections effectively available to them. Again, what becomes evident is the absence of an independent adjudicative body capable of issuing at least advisory opinions on contested designations. Such an absence represents, in my view, a structural deficiency in this arrangement. It is sufficient to think of the situation of a Greek shipowner transferring an oil tanker to an undeclared buyer, with the aim of circumventing the regime, and that of a compliant insurer unintentionally facilitating a transaction above the ceiling: although it is clear that the two

situations are distinct, neither of these actors has access to a procedure that comes even close to the requirements of a fair trial, as understood in domestic law.

The problem does not end there, however, but deepens with the introduction of the question of reviewability. In the case of the CNU, the NATO summit cycle generated a de facto review mechanism which, although not originally designed for this purpose, effectively functioned as such: the Vilnius formula was subsequently adjusted in Washington, and this simple mutation is enough to show that the format possesses a certain capacity for evolution even in the absence of a formal termination clause. Such a mechanism is undoubtedly adequate, but it cannot be considered exemplary. It works because NATO has that institutional depth, that planning culture and that political cycle which obliges, almost structurally, to periodic reassessment; other mini-lateral formats do not benefit from such conditions of possibility and cannot reasonably assume them.

Visibly below, from this perspective, is the ABS network. Although annual review clauses exist formally, their non-binding nature, combined with the very wide variation between the multi-annual commitments made by the Nordic and Baltic states and the limited first-year commitments made by other partners, reveals an inconvenient truth about this architecture: it is not cohesion that defines it, but precisely its internal precariousness. If Estonia commits to allocating 0.25% of GDP by 2026, while a larger Western European partner limits itself to a lump-sum payment for 2024, the signal sent to both the Kremlin and Kyiv is no longer one of strategic coherence but rather of managed improvisation (Carnegie Endowment, 2024). The lowest position, in terms of reviewability, is nevertheless occupied by the price cap coalition, and the reason for this ranking is worth remembering. Once set, the $60 threshold quickly became a political fact considerably more rigid than the economic logic of the instrument itself would have allowed. There is no mandatory impact assessment, nor has the tightening of enforcement occurred on the basis of a pre-established review schedule, but reactively, in response to observed deviations; the OFAC designations of November 2023 illustrate precisely this type of reaction, since they did not result from a scheduled reassessment, but from the observation of violations. In this logic, Kilian and Rapson's (2024) observation that the ceiling became economically irrelevant when Urals oil prices fell below this threshold hits the nerve centre of institutional design: the instrument remained unchanged precisely when the market conditions that supported its effectiveness had already changed. We are therefore not just faced with a failure of public policy. More precisely, we are faced with a failure of institutional architecture.

The other dimensions (i.e. humanitarian performance, non-discrimination and deconflictualization) do not alter the general pattern identified so far. On the contrary, they confirm it, each in its own register and through its own specific vulnerability. In the matter of humanitarian performance, I believe that the architects of the ceiling can be granted a wider margin of indulgence than that accepted by a considerable part of their critics. There was, after all, a real and recognisable design intention: to keep Russian oil in the market circuit, in order to avoid a supply shock that would have severely affected energy-dependent states, including those in the Global South. Such a concern for systemic risk should not simply be erased from the balance sheet for the sole reason that execution has proven uneven. What remains, however, difficult to defend concerns the choice to administer the exceptions relating to food and fertilisers through distinct channels of the European Union and the United States, rather than by incorporating them into the architecture of the ceiling itself. By this option, an essential guarantee was relegated to the level of a secondary bureaucratic issue and, precisely by doing so, critics were offered a rhetorical foothold that a more rigorously constructed instrument could have neutralised in the first place. (Palestini and Portela, 2025; RUSI, 2023).

The diagnosis regarding non-discrimination is even more severe. The secondary enforcement regime is perceived, in many non-aligned states, as structurally biased, and this perception is not without empirical support. The fact that oil tankers previously in Greek ownership, later transferred to opaque buyers, contributed to the very creation of the ghost fleet that the coalition is now trying to limit has not gone unnoticed either in New Delhi or in Ankara (Ribakova et al., 2023; Chatham House, 2024). At the same time, the costs of compliance seem to be borne disproportionately by service providers in coalition states, and not by the Russian entities that the regime claims to directly target. In this logic, what appears is not just an imperfect distribution of tasks, but a genuine inversion of distribution, which represents one of the most corrosive procedural deficiencies of the instrument.

The picture does not become more favourable in terms of deconflictualization either. One could say that the differences between the three formats appear here in an almost abrupt form. CNU benefits from the NATO command infrastructure and the existence of a twenty-four-hour consultation clause. The ABS network has bilateral consultation triggers, but no protocol between the signatories. The price cap coalition, on the other hand, has no military deconflictualization function, and this fact became visible with the collapse of the Black Sea Grain Initiative

in July 2023 (IFPRI, 2023; European Council, 2023). What is observed, therefore, is not just a variation of degree, but a difference of institutional nature: where the first two formats try, albeit unevenly, to organize the relationship between support and risk of escalation, the third leaves this dimension outside its own design.

That said, if this diagnosis is read as a whole, and not as a simple succession of partial assessments, then the answer can be reduced to identifying a fundamental asymmetry between justification and responsibility. Post-2022 mini-lateralism has invested massively and with no negligible success in the external dimensions of legitimacy: declarations, communiqués, orientation documents, repeated references to the Charter. It is precisely these elements that differentiate the post-2022 response from previous episodes of coalition governance—the 2003 Iraq intervention being the most obvious example—in which the justification apparatus proved thin, contested, and ultimately discredited. But the investment stopped precisely at the point where it should have become more costly and, therefore, more significant. Contestability and reviewability, that is, those mechanisms by which actors outside the coalition can inspect, challenge, and impose corrections to its conduct, remain severely underdeveloped in all three formats.

Table 3. Mini-Lateral Legitimacy Deficit Diagnostic: Theory–Practice Mapping

Legitimacy criterion	Theoretical source	NATO–Ukraine Council	G7 BSAs	Price Cap Coalition
Public justification	Patrick (2015); Acharya (2014)	HIGH. Summit communiqués, Washington Declaration, public NUC statements; legal rationale explicitly anchored in Charter principles and UNGA resolutions	LOW–MEDIUM. Agreements published bilaterally but no common format; financial commitments often vague beyond Year 1; no unified public justification for conditionality terms	MEDIUM. Treasury guidance and OFAC advisories published; economic rationale articulated; but enforcement escalation (Nov. 2023) was reactive, not pre-announced
Contestability	Patrick (2015); Hurd (1999)	LOW. Consensus rule gives internal veto but no external review; non-members cannot formally challenge NUC decisions; Ukraine's voice is structured but asymmetric	LOW. Bilateral renegotiation is the sole adjustment mechanism; no third-party review of conditionality or reform benchmarks; no appeal for disagreements on implementation	MEDIUM. OFAC delisting petitions and EU review procedures exist; but private actors bear compliance risk with limited procedural protections; no independent adjudicatory body
Revisability	Naím (2009); Patrick (2015)	MEDIUM. No formal sunset; but NATO Summit cycle forces periodic reassessment; Washington 2024 updated the Vilnius formula	LOW–MEDIUM. Annual review clauses exist but are non-binding; most financial pledges cover only Year 1; Baltic and Nordic exceptions with multiyear targets	LOW. No sunset clause; $60/bbl threshold adjusted only by coalition consensus; no mandatory impact assessment; enforcement tightened ad hoc
Charter anchoring	Bull (2012); Philpott (2001)	HIGH. Explicit references to Art. 51, Art. 2(4), sovereign equality; collective defence framed as exercise, not negation, of sovereignty	MEDIUM. Preamble references to Charter and 1991 borders in all agreements; but operational content is bilateral, not anchored in UNGA mandates; only U.S. agreement registered with UN	LOW–MEDIUM. UNGA resolution A/RES/ES-11/1 provides implicit anchor; no explicit Charter clause in coalition guidance; legitimacy derived indirectly from jus ad bellum violation
Humanitarian performance	Alexandrescu (2024); Palestini & Portela (2025)	N/A. Security consultation format; no direct humanitarian externalities	MIXED. Reform conditionality includes positive obligations; but no systematic humanitarian impact assessment of assistance effects on civilian population	MEDIUM–HIGH on design intent (supply continuity); LOW on execution (food/fertiliser exemptions handled separately; Global South criticism of collateral energy price effects)
Non-discrimination	Krasner (1999); Acharya (2014)	MEDIUM. Open-door policy in principle; but practical membership conditionality creates asymmetry	LOW–MEDIUM. Variable geometry: some partners commit 0.25% GDP, others make minimal pledges; no common burden-sharing formula	LOW. Secondary enforcement perceived as discriminatory by non-aligned states; Greek shipping interests enabled Russian shadow fleet; compliance costs fall on coalition service providers
Deconfliction capacity	Brummer (2014); Patrick (2015)	HIGH. 24-hour consultation clause; integrated planning routines; hotline infrastructure via NATO C2 channels	LOW. 24-hour consultation clause present but no inter-signatory coordination mechanism; Capability Coalitions provide partial but issue-specific coordination	LOW. No military deconfliction function; market-based stabilisation; coordination via G7 economic channels only; no mechanism to manage retaliation risk

Source: Author's analytical framework. Assessments (HIGH / MEDIUM / LOW) are qualitative and based on procedural analysis of published instruments and secondary literature.

RECEPTION BEYOND THE COALITION: THE GLOBAL SOUTH AND THE LEGITIMACY TEST

The conclusions that emerge from Table 3 could remain a mere academic exercise if the procedural deficits they reveal did not have a recognisable political counterpart. This counterpart is sufficiently obvious that the relationship between the architecture of instruments and the reactions of the non-aligned world can no longer be treated as simple interpretative speculation. A 2024 issue of the Chinese Journal of International Politics brought together contributions devoted to the way in which India, Brazil, Iran and China responded not only to the war as such, but also to the governance architecture coagulated around it (CJIP, 2024). From these contributions, it emerges that the strategies of these states are more sophisticated and more revealing of the logic of a multiplex order than the public discourse in Western capitals has usually admitted.

We can consider the case of India as the most eloquent. New Delhi's refusal to adopt sanctions against Russia, its adoption of a carefully calibrated ambiguity of the language of condemnation, and the intense diplomatic activity carried out within the G20 under the Indian presidency in 2023 cannot be explained by simply reducing it to an alleged pro-Russian reflex. In fact, the real stakes were to preserve a strategic space for manoeuvre between Washington and Moscow, while simultaneously asserting India as a major voice of the non-aligned Global South. The strategy worked, at least on its own terms. The consensus declaration adopted at the G20 summit in New Delhi in September 2023 was accepted by both Western and non-Western members. It became possible only by toning down the language regarding Russian aggression, which caused irritation in Kyiv and several European capitals. It was precisely through this balancing act that India demonstrated to its domestic public and a significant part of the Global South that it could address great power competition without being drawn into the logic of exclusive alignment.

Lula's Brazil followed a distinct logic, but it came remarkably close. The Brazilian president condemned the invasion but refused to deliver arms to Ukraine, rejected participation in the sanctions regime, and promoted a ceasefire framework that Western partners viewed as premature and overly concessionary to the aggressor. The Sino-Brazilian six-point proposal of May 2024 called for an international conference "recognised by both Russia and Ukraine" and based on "equal participation of all parties." This initiative should be read less as a realistic instrument of regulation and more as a diplomatic artefact designed to signal the Global South's capacity for initiative. It is debatable whether such performative mediation formulas bring the prospect of a negotiated peace closer or, on the contrary, distance it. One fact, however, remains difficult to dispute. The major non-aligned states have preferred to present themselves not as auxiliary extensions of the Western coercive effort, but as autonomous brokers in a pluralised international environment. In other words, we have exactly the type of behaviour that the framework proposed by Acharya would have us expect (Acharya, 2014).

As for Iran, it falls into a different analytical quadrant. In this case, it is no longer a question of strategic prudence or flexible balancing, but of an increasingly explicit alignment, fuelled by the logic of regime solidarity under the common pressure of Western sanctions. The accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in 2023, the invitation to join BRICS in 2024, and the deepening of military cooperation with Moscow, including the provision of Shahed drones widely used against Ukrainian civilian infrastructure, indicate a trajectory that cannot be explained solely by objections to the procedural legitimacy of the coalition. Rather, we are dealing with a previous strategic choice, through which Iran is increasingly clearly entering a counter-Western alignment that is still in the process of institutional sedimentation. Mentioning this case is necessary because it highlights the external limit of our hypothesis. Where a state is already engaged in a logic of counter-alignment, improving the procedure within the coalition instruments will not produce a significant change in behaviour. In contrast, where states effectively practice cautious balancing strategies, and this seems to be the dominant situation in the non-aligned world, the procedural quality of coalition governance becomes a truly decisive variable.

At this point, the content analysis carried out by Palestini and Portela (2025) on the speeches in the UN General Assembly on unilateral sanctions, before and after February 2022, acquires particular importance. In their conclusion, the authors argue that the Russian invasion neutralised some of the conventional objections previously raised against unilateral sanctions. In particular, it weakened the general thesis according to which the principles of the Charter would prohibit, *en bloc*, all unilateral coercive measures. At the same time, the challenge focused on a narrower but politically more powerful ground, namely on the collateral effects suffered by third states. In the post-invasion period, the states that challenged the sanctions did so almost exclusively by invoking economic and humanitarian externalities, not defending the sovereign rights of the aggressor. This mutation is

essential for the argument of the present article. It shows that the main objection of the non-aligned states did not concern the principle of coalition action against aggression. Judging by the votes in the General Assembly, this principle enjoys broad support. The objection was rather aimed at the perception that the coalition instruments do not contain sufficient guarantees against harm caused to actors not directly involved. In other words, the criticism formulated by these states overlaps almost exactly with the deficits in contestability and reviewability identified in Table 3. The BRICS expansion in 2024 must be read in this register. I have reservations about interpretations that see in this expansion evidence of the consolidation of a coherent anti-Western bloc. The new members are too heterogeneous in terms of interests, too dependent, to varying degrees, on Western markets and security guarantees, and, in some cases, too competitive with each other to form an operational coalition in the strict sense. We can look, in this sense, to the relations between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates or those between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In this logic, the expansion of BRICS does not necessarily herald the emergence of a bloc, but rather signals a growing demand for institutional diversification, for reducing dependence on the regulatory and financial infrastructure of a single pole, and for access to those governance frameworks in which the rules that shape the international economic environment are formulated. Sanctions and the price cap mechanism have shown how far Western regulatory influence can extend over maritime services, insurance markets, and private compliance networks, even without strong external control or independent oversight. That is precisely why a significant part of the non-aligned world has come to consider reducing dependence on the financial infrastructure located in the West as a strategic necessity (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023; Reuters, 2023; Chatham House, 2024). There is, of course, a counterargument that is worth considering. In an anarchic system, legitimacy always remains questionable. It is difficult, in such a systemic context, to achieve procedural perfection, while even universal institutions have never achieved it. The veto right in the Security Council remains the most obvious example of a procedural feature that is difficult to defend normatively, but tolerated for a long time because states preferred this formula to its alternative. Even so, the analogy should not be pushed too far. The veto is tolerated because it is integrated into a constitutional regulation whose costs and benefits are distributed, even if unequally, across the entire community of members. Coalition instruments do not benefit from such a framework. They are, by their nature, voluntary. Their effectiveness depends on participation beyond the initial core. And participation beyond the core depends, ultimately, on perceived fairness. Hence, the practical stakes of procedural reform. If coalition states invest in independent monitoring, mandatory impact assessments, public criteria for waivers, and credible review mechanisms, then the legitimacy deficit can be reduced, and the strategic calculus of non-aligned states can shift, at least marginally, in favour of cooperation. If they do not, the instruments will likely remain effective within the coalition perimeter, but will gradually lose their appeal outside it. And this loss will push non-aligned states toward parallel financial architectures, alternative payment systems, and institutional frameworks in which the coalition's influence is reduced.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONAL REFORM

The present analysis paves the way for the formulation of four operational recommendations. Each of them addresses a specific legitimacy deficit that has been highlighted in Table 3. Equally, each can be taken up through already existing institutional channels, without calling into question a renegotiation of the frameworks established by the treaties. Ultimately, these recommendations refer to a concrete political framework, which can facilitate reforms that can be supported and eventually put into practice.

The first recommendation proposes the establishment of a transparency regime applicable to all mini-lateral security arrangements. Such a regime has the potential to increase the level of legitimacy of the action of these formats both internally and externally. From the analysis highlighted in the previous section of this article, it emerges that both the network of bilateral security agreements and the NATO–Ukraine Council need a standardized notification model, which would be registered in a register open to all UN member states. Such a register should specify the scope of the arrangement, its activation conditions, its duration, the financial commitments assumed and the relevant consultative procedures. Naturally, such a model does not require the acquisition of binding legal force. Ultimately, its importance lies not in formal constraint but in the ability to produce a minimum level of predictability. To the extent that non-aligned states can anticipate the effects of a security regime, they can better define their positions and have a better formulated risk assessment. In an anarchic international system, the selfishness of states manifests itself by protecting and promoting their own national security interests. In this logic, it would be expected that these states would be willing to perceive such an arrangement in more optimistic terms without classifying it ab initio as a manifestation of a bloc's discretionary

power. In this regard, precedents such as the arms transfer registers and confidence-building measures developed in the OSCE area can be used, which have long shown that transparency is possible even without full conventional formalisation (Patrick, 2015).

The second recommendation concerns the introduction of a minimum code of diligence in the use of economic coercion by the coalition. The costs and risks of a sanctions policy are felt by all coalition participants. As such, it is expected that all these actors feel part of the major decisions of the coalition. Both the price cap regime and the sanctions policy as a whole could be better received if a minimal set of procedural requirements were adopted, even in the form of a General Assembly resolution of principles. A first requirement that should be taken into account is the obligation of a public justification of the necessity and proportionality of coercive policies, explicitly related to an identified and proven violation of the jus ad bellum norms. The second could be the establishment of humanitarian exemptions correlated with independent monitoring and revised accordingly. The third would consist in the inclusion of cessation clauses and mandatory impact assessments, capable of distinguishing between the intended coercive effect and the collateral costs borne by third parties. Finally, a fourth requirement would concern secondary application, which should be subordinated to a standard criterion of non-discrimination, in order to limit as much as possible the perception of a selective administration in favour of the bloc.

Critics could object that such standards reduce the political flexibility of the coalition. Of course, such an interpretation deserves to be taken seriously, but without being absolute. After all, standards do not neutralize pressure, but discipline it. They do not eliminate the capacity for coercion, but rather force the coalition to clarify and make visible its goals, procedures, and effects. This is precisely where their stake lies. In the absence of such discipline, non-aligned states will continue to interpret these practices as expressions of discretionary power. However, their introduction would help these states to perceive them as forms of action subject to clearly formulated rules (Acharya, 2014; Brummer, 2014).

The third recommendation envisages the establishment of an independent mechanism to monitor and review the network of bilateral security agreements. The fact that there are over twenty such agreements, but no common coordination body, common evaluation framework or mechanism to adjust the distribution of tasks, makes this architecture impressive in its scope, but it remains vulnerable due to the lack of coherence. The introduction of a secretariat function either within the NATO-Ukraine Council or in a parallel framework organised under the auspices of the Vilnius Declaration could fulfil three basic tasks: to aggregate reporting on commitments made and funds actually mobilised, to coordinate the work of the Capability Coalitions along the various bilateral channels, and to publish annual assessments of implementation against declared objectives. The advantage of such a permanent function is that it addresses the problem of reviewability deficit without reopening negotiations on the underlying agreements and without disrupting the already existing architecture. In essence, it would bring coherence where there is currently only juxtaposition.

The fourth recommendation concerns the regime of coalition sanctions and proposes the introduction of a contestability clause. For example, in the current configuration of the cap, private actors (e.g. carriers, insurers, financial intermediaries) bear a substantial part of the compliance risk, without benefiting, in return, from procedural protections commensurate with this burden. In such conditions, it is necessary to establish an independent review panel, built on the logic in which the General Court of the European Union examines restrictive measures, competent to analyse delisting requests, licensing challenges and complaints regarding disproportionate damages, under conditions compatible with the requirements of a fair trial. The publication of advisory opinions and reasoned decisions would not only produce legal clarification but would also create a reputational incentive in favour of procedural discipline. In terms of external perception, the effect would be clear: non-aligned states would receive the signal that coalition instruments are not left exclusively to the discretion of the political preference of more powerful actors, but can be subjected, even minimally, to the control of justification and review.

In essence, all these recommendations are supported by the same logic. They aim to introduce procedural disciplines into formats originally designed for speed and flexibility, without abolishing the operational advantages that make mini-lateralism attractive. Their starting point is simple but often ignored: legitimacy is not a normative whim that can be satisfied after achieving effectiveness, but rather one of the conditions of effectiveness. The projection capacity of coalition instruments depends, ultimately, on the extent to which states outside the coalition are willing to tolerate them, adapt to them, or, at least, not actively work against them. In the

absence of such a provision, even instruments that work in the short term risk gradually consuming their own operating conditions.

CONCLUSION

After 2022, it became evident what the theoretical literature of mini-lateralism had been trying to argue for over a decade: when universal decision-making mechanisms and instruments become blocked, narrow coalitions are created or activated in order to accelerate decision-making and action. In other words, a competitive advantage is created in favour of these coalitions that derives from this rapid reaction capacity, from a certain higher decision-making coherence, but also from the ability to develop instruments that a multilateral structure is not able to produce with the same promptness. In this sense, the NATO-Ukraine Council, the networks of bilateral security agreements and the price cap coalition are examples that confirm the new mutations in the international system. As such, it can be seen that the creation of the UNC in just a few months, followed by the year-long formalisation of a network of bilateral agreements, in parallel with the conception and operationalisation of the price cap coalition, can no longer be considered mere marginal adjustments. The three examples are the expression of a broadening of the governance repertoire in the face of a major strategic shock. This article aims to demonstrate that the procedural price of such speed itself was not distributed randomly. Table 3 presents a synthesis that suggests the three formats analysed have solved even the problem of justification. Each of the three formats is anchored in the language and limits imposed by the UN Charter. Put differently, we are not witnessing the undermining of the international system's institutional architecture through the creation and consolidation of these three formats. On the contrary, they seem to fill a gap that arose from the impossibility of multilateralism to create prompt decisions due to the cumbersome decision-making mechanisms with which these organisations were endowed. Beyond legitimacy, the problem that mini-lateral formats face is that of accountability, and the most serious deficits focus on contestability and reviewability, that is, precisely on those dimensions that concern not the reasons invoked for the exercise of power, but the way in which its exercise can be controlled, verified and corrected. Such a pattern produces a relatively predictable political consequence. In general, non-aligned states do not question the legitimacy of coalition instruments, but perceive them as being too inconsistent and disciplined in their implementation. This perception erodes precisely the external support base on which the coalition's long-term effectiveness depends. What Table 1 (comparative procedural anatomy) and Table 2 (inventory of bilateral agreements) attempt to do, beyond empirical support for the article’s argument, is to provide tools that can be used beyond it. In this logic, the ten-dimensional framework can also be tested, subsequently, by researchers concerned with AUKUS, Quad, I2U2 or other contemporary mini-lateral formats. Equally, the inventory of bilateral security agreements can be considered a reference point against which the implementation, distribution of tasks and institutional evolution of this network can be tracked in the coming years. This dynamic of creating and consolidating mini-lateral platforms shows that we are facing a procedural, not a constitutional, reform. They have demonstrated over the past three years that this reform does not require the creation of new treaties. Beyond their legitimacy, these formats must introduce transparency tools and norms, due diligence obligations, mechanisms for independent control, and mandatory evaluation cycles to strengthen the coalition's credibility. From the perspective of the design of international institutions, the impact of these coalitions can be amplified if such coalitions make their rationales public, accept scrutiny, and revise their instruments when contexts change. Operational ingenuity, however inventive its architects, cannot substitute for the procedural credibility that makes coalition instruments legible—and therefore tolerable—to states outside the bloc. After all, legitimacy is not achieved through repeated declarations, but is built through publicly exposed rationales, through procedures that can be challenged, and through decisions that can be reviewed when the evidence requires it.

DECLARATIONS

Acknowledgements

The author thanks the anonymous reviewers and the editorial team of the *Journal of Global Politics and Current Diplomacy* for their constructive comments on earlier versions of this manuscript.

Funding

The author received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors for the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

Author Contributions

M. Alexandrescu is the sole author and was responsible for all aspects of this research: conceptualisation, design of the comparative procedural framework, development of the legitimacy-deficit diagnostic, collection and analysis of primary documents, writing the original draft, and reviewing and editing all subsequent versions, including the construction of all tables.

Competing Interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Ethical Approval

Not applicable. This study analysed publicly available institutional documents and policy texts; no human subjects were involved and no institutional ethics approval was required.

Informed Consent

Not applicable. No new data involving human participants were collected by the author.

Data Availability

All primary documents analysed in this article — NATO–Ukraine Council communiqués, G7 Joint Declarations, bilateral security agreements between G7+ states and Ukraine, and the Price Cap Coalition guidance documents — are publicly available from the institutional repositories of NATO, the G7, the participating governments, and the U.S. Department of the Treasury. Full citation details are provided in the References list.

Use of Generative AI

The author declares the use of generative AI tools for proofreading assistance. All conceptual work, analytical framework, empirical interpretation, and substantive arguments are entirely the author's own. No generative AI was used to draft the analysis or to formulate the conclusions.

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