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Research Article

Bridging the Indo-Pacific and the West Asia: The Strategic Significance of the Red Sea in Emerging Minilateralism

Sibtain Raza

Department of Political Science, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, India

Corresponding Author: *Sibtain Raza

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Abstract

The Indo-Pacific region and West Asia have historically been treated as two distinct spheres of strategic consideration, but the rising interdependencies in geopolitical, economic, and security spheres are increasingly blurring the lines between the two regions. This paper seeks to examine the Red Sea as the primary geographical feature linking the two regions strategically, while also analyzing the ascendance of minilateralism as the primary mode of diplomacy through which nations are navigating emerging areas of shared interests. As a critical conduit of global commerce, the Red Sea, as well as its southern chokepoint, the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, are critical routes through which Indo-Pacific commerce as well as West Asian energy exports are routed.

The strategic importance of the Red Sea was underscored by the Houthi militant attacks on commercial vessels in 2023-24, which led to a 50% reduction in Suez Canal traffic while compelling nations to reroute via the Cape of Good Hope.

In this context, the present paper argues that the traditional multilateral architecture has been structurally unsuitable to address the inter-regional security and economic challenges emerging from the Red Sea littoral. In their place, minilateral formations defined by limited membership, issue specificity, and operational dynamism have emerged as more effective instruments for regional governance. The I2U2 architecture, bringing together India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States, has been examined as a paradigmatic case study for the emergence and evolution of minilateral formations. In its focus on issues like food security, clean energy, and connectivity infrastructure, the I2U2 has been seen to underscore the potential for the institutionalisation of strategic convergence between the Indo-Pacific, the Middle East, and the Persian Gulf without the need for the establishment of traditional alliances. The potential and limitations of the I2U2, and its long-term prospects for reshaping the regional strategic architecture, have been examined in the final sections.

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INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Pacific and West Asia have traditionally been viewed as distinct strategic theatres, but recent developments are blurring this boundary. Scholars note that the Gulf region and the Indo-Pacific are both pivotal to India's "extended neighborhood," underscoring their growing interconnectedness (Baroudi, 2025). Likewise, a recent special issue of *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* was devoted to Gulf states' roles in Indo-Pacific geopolitics, reflecting intensifying scholarly and policy focus on linkages between these regions (Karasik & Riegl, 2023). A convergence of interests is evident in new partnerships and frameworks that span Asia and West Asia. In particular, *minilateral* cooperation – small, flexible groupings of like-minded states – has emerged as a favored diplomatic tool to tackle shared challenges. One prominent example is the I2U2 grouping (India, Israel, UAE, USA), dubbed the "West Asian Quad," which illustrates how Indo-Pacific and West Asian security and economic interests are increasingly intertwined. This review examines the strategic significance of the Red Sea as a junction of these regions and how new

minilateral partnerships like I2U2 are leveraging that significance to advance mutual interests. The analysis explores the Red Sea's role in global security, the rise of minilateralism in this context, and how initiatives such as I2U2 reflect a growing convergence of Indo-Pacific and West Asia strategies.

Strategic Importance of the Red Sea

Figure 1. The Red Sea as a strategic link between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean. The Red Sea (map below) is a semi-enclosed waterway connecting the Indian Ocean (via the Gulf of Aden and Bab-el-Mandeb Strait) to the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean Sea ^[1, 2]. Geographically, it lies at the crossroads of Northeast Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, bordering eight littoral states (including Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Egypt, and Djibouti). Crucially, this sea has become an essential link between the security systems of West Asia and the Indo-Pacific. In effect, the Red Sea region now forms a contiguous strategic space where conflicts and power dynamics spill over between Asia, West Asia, and even Europe.



Fig 1: Map of the Red Sea region, showing the Bab-el-Mandeb chokepoint linking the Indian Ocean (Indo-Pacific) to the Suez Canal and Mediterranean. The Red Sea borders Middle Eastern countries (east) and African Horn countries (west), making it a critical junction of the

Indo-Pacific and West Asia realms.

The Red Sea's strategic value derives largely from its role as a maritime highway for global commerce and energy. It constitutes one of the busiest shipping routes in the world ^[3]. An estimated 12–15% of world trade by volume transits through the Red Sea and Suez Canal, including about 20% of all container traffic and significant portions of petroleum shipments. The narrow Bab-el-Mandeb Strait at the sea's southern end is a true chokepoint: roughly 10% of global seaborne trade (and a comparable share of oil and liquefied natural gas) must pass through this strait to reach Europe or Asia ^[4]. Any disruption here can have outsized effects on supply chains and energy markets worldwide. For instance,

attacks on shipping in the Red Sea (e.g. by Houthi rebels from Yemen) have forced vessels to reroute around the Cape of Good Hope, adding weeks of transit time and raising costs. In early 2024, such Red Sea insecurity cut Suez Canal traffic by half and drove a 74% surge in ships taking the longer Cape route. Clearly, security in the Red Sea is directly tied to Indo-Pacific trade flows and global economic stability.

Figure 2. Global trade flows through key maritime chokepoints (share of world seaborne trade). The strategic importance of the Red Sea is put in perspective when compared to other major trade routes. As shown below, roughly one-sixth of global maritime trade passes through the Red Sea-Suez route, a proportion exceeded only by the Strait of Malacca in Southeast

Asia (which carries about one-third of global trade). By contrast, the Panama Canal in the Americas accounts for only about one-twentieth. This underlines why Red Sea stability is a shared concern for Indo-Pacific and West Asian stakeholders alike, second only to the Asian chokepoints in importance.

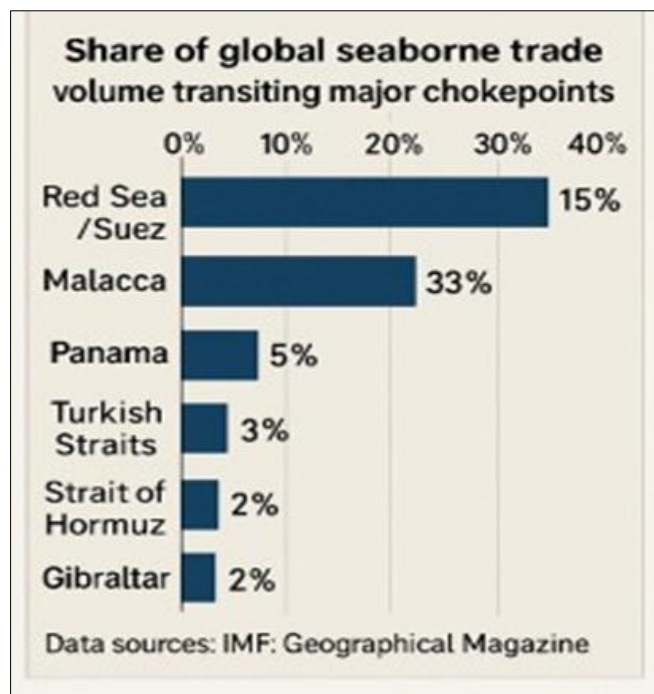


Fig 2: Share of global seaborne trade volume transiting major chokepoints. The Red Sea/Suez route carries ~15% of world trade, reflecting the route's vital role linking Asian and European markets. (Data sources: IMF; Geographical Magazine).

Beyond trade, the Red Sea has immense strategic-military significance. The region has seen a growing foreign military presence and competition for bases, underscoring its role as a hinge between theaters. For example, Djibouti, at the mouth of the Red Sea, hosts military bases of the United States, China, France, Japan, and others, making it one of the most concentrated spots of great-power military presence in the world. Major powers old and new – from the US and Europe to China and Russia – are vying for influence over Red Sea ports and littoral states as part of a “new scramble” for the Horn of Africa. Indeed, the Horn of Africa (on the Red Sea’s western shore) is now considered “an essential component of and the link between” the West Asian and Indo-Pacific security systems. West Asian powers such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Turkey, and Iran have all become deeply involved around the Red Sea and Horn of Africa, projecting influence through ports, investments, and proxy activities. This external engagement has merged once-separate regional security spheres: instability in the Horn (e.g. civil conflicts in Sudan, Somalia, or Yemen) now immediately engages Gulf Arab states and beyond [5]. Conversely, West Asia rivalries (Sunni vs Shia blocs, Iran–Saudi tensions, etc.) play out on African soil and waters, from Sudan to Yemen [5]. As a U.S. Institute of Peace study

observed, “the states on the western side of the Red Sea and the Arab states of the Gulf now operate more as a common political, security, and economic zone,” erasing the old distinction between West Asia and Northeast Africa. This “trans-regional” Red Sea arena is both an opportunity and a source of peril: it fosters new cooperation across continents, but also multiplies the points of conflict. Recent events offer vivid examples. In late 2023, Houthi rebel missile attacks from Yemen struck commercial ships in the Red Sea, prompting the United States to rapidly coordinate a multinational naval response (Operation *Prosperity Guardian*) with over 20 countries from Europe, West Asia, and Asia [6]. Only an agile, collaborative effort spanning CENTCOM and Indo-Pacific partners was able to protect this critical waterway. In sum, the Red Sea’s security challenges (piracy, civil wars, terrorism, great-power rivalry) have global ramifications, demanding joint responses from Indo-Pacific and West Asian powers alike [4].

Against this backdrop, it is unsurprising that states are seeking new cooperative structures focused on the Red Sea and its environs. Traditional multilateral bodies (such as the Arab League or African Union) have struggled to address cross-regional issues here. This has led to proposals for a dedicated Red Sea forum or coalition. Notably, in April 2022 the 34-nation Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) – a U.S.-led naval partnership spanning many Indo-Pacific and West Asian states – stood up a new Combined Task Force 153 specifically to safeguard Red Sea security [7]. The creation of CTF-153 (involving partners from the U.S., Gulf states, South Asia, Europe, etc.) highlights recognition that the Red Sea is a shared strategic artery. It also exemplifies how *minilateral* initiatives can fill gaps left by broader alliances: CTF-153 was formed ad hoc by a subset of willing nations to address an urgent maritime security need. This trend toward nimble, issue-focused coalitions is increasingly defining the region’s geopolitics, as discussed next.

The Rise of Minilateralism and Converging Regional Interests
Minilateralism – the practice of forming small-group alliances or coalitions for specific objectives – has gained momentum in the 21st-century international order. In contrast to large multilateral institutions, minilaterals emphasize pragmatism, speed, and shared interests over formalistic consensus or ideological alignment. As one analyst quips, it’s about “the smallest possible number of countries needed to have the largest possible impact” on a given problem. These flexible partnerships are often informal and issue-specific, allowing countries to collaborate where their interests align without requiring broad agreement on all matters. They also serve as a response to the paralysis of traditional multilateral bodies – for example, the inability of institutions like the UN Security Council or even regional organizations to effectively manage new security and economic challenges. In the Indo-Pacific, the rise of minilateral initiatives such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) (US, India, Japan, Australia) and AUKUS (Australia, UK, US) reflects frustration with more inclusive forums and a desire for “like-minded” democracies to coordinate on critical issues quickly. Similarly, in the West Asia, after a decade of divisive bloc politics, there is now a

“growth of so-called minilateral initiatives that regroup several countries on an ad hoc basis,” marking a key feature of the region’s new strategic environment. These include both intra-regional partnerships and cross-regional ones.

Notably, West Asia and Indo-Pacific powers are increasingly finding common cause and forming minilaterals that bridge the two regions. This development is enabled in part by the

normalization of relations between Israel and several Arab states (through the 2020 Abraham Accords), and by major Asian states like India and Japan expanding their strategic focus westward. Table 1 below highlights a few examples of emerging minilateral partnerships that link Indo-Pacific and West Asian actors:

Table 1: Emerging Minilateral Groupings Bridging the Indo-Pacific and the West Asia

| Initiative | Member Countries | Purpose and Focus Areas | Launched |
|---|---|--|--|
| I2U2 (“West Asia Quad”) - Indo-Abrahamic Initiative | India; Israel; United Arab Emirates; United States. | Economic and strategic collaboration in six key sectors (water, energy, transport, space, health, food security) with an aim to integrate South Asia & West Asia through technology and infrastructure projects. Acts as a flexible platform to mobilize investments and tackle issues like food shortages and clean energy transition across regions. | 2021 (Announced as “Partnership for the Future”); First Leaders’ Summit in 2022. |
| India-UAE - France Trilateral | India, UAE, and France. | Cooperation across defense, security, energy, and technology. Links a European Indo-Pacific stakeholder (France) with a South Asian power and a Gulf Arab power. Aims to coordinate maritime security in the Indian Ocean, joint defence exercises, energy partnerships, and infrastructure development in Africa/Indian Ocean region. | 2022 (Trilateral dialogue announced at UNGA 2022; joint working groups established in 2023). |
| IMEC – India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor | India, UAE, Saudi Arabia; United States, Israel; European Union (plus partner countries). | A proposed infrastructure & connectivity corridor linking South Asia to West Asia and Europe via rail, shipping lines, and energy pipelines. Envisioned to facilitate trade and energy transport from India to the Arabian Gulf and on to Europe, as an alternative to traditional routes. Gained | 2023 (MoU signed at G20 Summit in New Delhi). |

Sources: Compiled from Joint Statements and media releases.

These examples demonstrate how countries are strategically “bridging” Asia and the West Asia in flexible formats. Each grouping is driven by a convergence of interests. For instance, the I2U2 brings together a unique mix of capabilities: U.S. capital and technology, Emirati investment funds and strategic location, Indian manufacturing base and market, and Israeli technology and innovation hub role. By combining these strengths, the I2U2 countries seek to address common challenges (like climate-proofing food supply chains and developing green energy) that no single country or traditional alliance could solve alone. Crucially, these minilaterals are *interest-driven* rather than ideology-driven. They unite partners that may differ in governance systems or alliances, but share pragmatic goals – a hallmark of 21st-century diplomacy in a multipolar world. As former diplomat Nickolay Mladenov observes, such small-group collaborations are “agile and adaptable,” often achieving in months what larger groupings take years to do. For example, while the Quad (US-Japan-India-Australia) took over a decade to hold its first leaders’ summit, the newly formed I2U2 held a heads-of-government summit (virtually) less than a year after its formation. This agility is especially valuable in fast-moving domains like technology, or during crises (as seen in the quick coordination for Red Sea maritime security operations).

It is also telling that Gulf Arab states like the UAE and Saudi Arabia are enthusiastic participants in multilateral agreements with Asian powers. Gulf countries perceive minilateralism as “a strategic imperative with significant implications for their security, competitiveness, and prosperity,” and have actively explored new club-like partnerships across regions. The UAE, in particular, has been a champion of such formats – hosting Track II dialogues to forge novel partnerships with countries like India, Israel, Japan, and South Korea on issues ranging

from energy to infrastructure. Middle powers in the West Asia are thus not mere “objects” of great-power competition but *agents* shaping their own multiregional networks (Karasik & Riegl, 2023). This trend marks an “Asianization” of West Asia geopolitics, wherein Asian and West Asian states collaborate directly in ways that bypass older Euro-American frameworks (Soliman, 2023). Some analysts even foresee the I2U2 expanding into an “I2U2+” format by inducting additional West Asian partners (e.g. Saudi Arabia and Egypt), thereby creating a more muscular coalition spanning the Arabian Sea to the Indian Ocean^[8]. Indeed, a policy paper from the West Asian Institute dubbed “*The I2U2 needs muscle. Cairo and Riyadh can help.*” argues that adding those two countries could transform I2U2 into an effective regional security mechanism^[9]. All of these developments indicate a rapid realignment: security and economic architectures of the Indo-Pacific and West Asia are growing intertwined, with the Red Sea as their meeting point and minilateralism as the vehicle.

I2U2: A Case Study of Indo–West Asia Convergence

The I2U2 grouping – comprising India, Israel, the UAE, and the USA – exemplifies the convergence of Indo-Pacific and West Asian interests through minilateral cooperation. Announced in late 2021 as an initiative for “Partnership for the Future,” the I2U2 was elevated with an inaugural leaders’ summit in July 2022. It has since been informally dubbed the “West Asian Quad,” highlighting its parallels to the Indo-Pacific Quad and its focus on West Asia (Middle East) cooperation. Notably, I2U2 reimagines the West Asian t as part of a broader “West Asian” framework, explicitly linking it with South Asia and the Indo-Pacific. In other words, the very concept of I2U2 blurs regional lines: it treats the Middle East (West Asia) and South

Asia as a contiguous strategic space where partners can pursue common goals.

Goals and Focus: The I2U2's agenda reveals the cross-regional issues it seeks to tackle. According to the group's joint statement, its focus is on six sectors – water, energy, transportation, space, health, and food security. These are domains of critical importance to both the Indo-Pacific and West Asia. For example, *food security* is a pressing concern for Gulf States (which rely heavily on food imports) and is also a priority for India (which has vast agriculture but needs investment and technology). *Energy transition* and *infrastructure connectivity* similarly resonate in all four countries' strategic plans. By investing in such projects, I2U2 aims to “improve the movement of people and goods across

hemispheres” and build resilience against global challenges. Unlike traditional security alliances, I2U2 is primarily billed as an economic and technology partnership. However, its implicit strategic logic is to fortify the economic foundations of regional security – e.g. bolstering supply chains, resource security, and regional interdependence – which in turn has geopolitical benefits (such as reducing vulnerability to coercion or shocks).

Early Initiatives: The I2U2 moved quickly from concept to concrete cooperation. At the 2022 summit, two flagship initiatives were announced: a major agriculture-food security project and a clean energy project, both to be based in India and jointly supported by the four nations. Table 2 summarizes these initiatives:

Table 2: Key I2U2 Development Initiatives (announced 2022)

| | Description and Objectives |
|--|--|
| Project Integrated Food Parks in India | UAE to invest \$2 billion to develop a series of state-of-the-art food processing parks across India. These food parks will incorporate climate-smart technologies to reduce waste, conserve water, and use renewable energy, with the goal of improving crop yields and food supply stability. India will provide land and farmers for the projects. Israel and the U.S. will contribute expertise in agricultural technology and logistics. By linking Gulf investment and Israeli agri-tech with Indian agricultural capacity, the project aims to tackle food insecurity in South Asia and the West Asian through a sustainable supply chain. |
| Hybrid Renewable Energy Plant in Gujarat | The I2U2 coalition will support a \$330 million hybrid renewable energy project in Gujarat state, India. The plan is to build 300 MW of hybrid wind and solar capacity, along with a battery storage system, to provide clean energy. The U.S. funded a feasibility study for the project, and UAE companies are exploring investments and knowledge partnership roles. Israel and the U.S. will coordinate with the UAE and India to attract private sector participation. This project is intended to make India a hub for renewable technology supply chains, while helping all four countries progress toward climate and energy security goals. |

Sources: I2U2 Joint Leaders' Statement (July 14, 2022).

These initiatives demonstrate the practical synergy that I2U2 is designed to harness. For the UAE and Israel, investing in Indian green energy and food infrastructure provides not only economic returns but also greater regional stability (by ensuring reliable food and energy supplies across West and South Asia). For India, partnership with wealthy Gulf and high-tech Israeli partners accelerates its development of critical sectors and cements its role as a bridge between Asia and the West Asian. The United States, for its part, supports these projects to strengthen ties with key regional partners and to present a positive, alternative development model in the West Asian /South Asia – implicitly countering the influence of strategic rivals' initiatives (such as China's Belt and Road projects). Indeed, analysts note that bolstering I2U2 can provide a “counterweight to PRC–Russia–Iran malign influence” in the Indian Ocean and West Asian region. By offering a cooperative, US-aligned platform for regional development, I2U2 helps align the strategic visions of its members in support of a rules-based, connectivity-oriented order (as opposed to one dominated by great-power coercion).

Security Dimensions: Although I2U2 is not a military alliance, it carries security implications. All four members share concerns about regional security threats, from terrorism to maritime security to the destabilizing activities of Iran and its proxies. The grouping provides a diplomatic venue to coordinate policies on these issues. For instance, during the 2023 regional flare-ups (the Israel–Hamas war in Gaza and Houthi attacks in the Red Sea), I2U2 countries consulted on

responses. The US Department of Defense acknowledged that India, Israel, the UAE, and the US were key partners in efforts to keep the Bab el-Mandeb Strait “free and open” during the Red Sea crisis, building upon the interoperability and trust developed through initiatives like the Combined Maritime Forces. In another example, Israel's cooperative missile defense engagements with the UAE, Bahrain, and India in 2024 were cited as fruits of the new West Asian partnerships (linking with the Abraham Accords). Such coordination indicates that I2U2 has an inherent strategic logic: it complements bilateral security ties and could evolve into a more formal security dialogue over time. Observers have therefore called I2U2 the nucleus of a potential “Middle East Quad” that might, down the line, discuss defence cooperation or joint military exercises (Soliman, 2022). Already, the members have agreed to establish an I2U2 Business Forum in the UAE to involve the private sector in their projects, and working groups that span officials from foreign ministries, defence, and finance (Wilson Centre, 2023). Over the longer term, the inclusion of additional like-minded countries (e.g. Saudi Arabia) or coordination with other multilateral organisations (like the Quad) could enhance I2U2's capacity to address security issues that span from the Indian Ocean to the Levant.

Challenges and Prospects: The I2U2 faces some hurdles that mirror the broader challenges of Indo-Pacific–West Asian convergence. One challenge is maintaining momentum and political alignment among four disparate governments. Domestic politics or external shocks can slow cooperation. For

example, the outbreak of war in Gaza in 2023 and related Red Sea missile attacks created tensions that “*slowed but did not terminate*” I2U2 cooperation (Sheikh, 2024). The UAE and India had to carefully navigate their reactions to the Israel–Hammas conflict, even as Israel (an I2U2 member) was directly involved. Such events illustrate that while shared interests exist, differing threat perceptions or political pressures can complicate minilateral diplomacy. Another challenge is ensuring that I2U2 initiatives deliver tangible results. Unlike a formal institution, a minilateral’s legitimacy rests on its effectiveness. The group will be judged on whether projects like the food parks and renewable plant actually get implemented and yield benefits. If they falter, skepticism will grow. There is also the question of scope: I2U2 must avoid overextension. Thus far it has wisely focused on economic areas with win-win potential, rather than divisive security matters. Over time, however, as trust deepens, the group *could* expand into strategic coordination – for instance, consultations on maritime security in the Red Sea/Indian Ocean, counterterrorism, or cyber security. Doing so would institutionalize the Indo-Pacific–Middle East link in a more explicit security sense. Already, India’s historic West Asia policy of avoiding entanglements is shifting towards more engagement, as exemplified by its participation in I2U2 and naval forays into the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea (Mishra & Gurjar, 2022). Each I2U2 nation is exercising greater strategic autonomy: India deepening ties in West Asia beyond its non-alignment comfort zone, the UAE and Israel diversifying partnerships beyond their traditional Western allies, and the US supporting regional solutions rather than acting unilaterally. If managed well, I2U2 can thus be a framework that “*engineers a redirection*” of regional alignments toward mutual cooperation (Sheikh, 2024). Its success could inspire similar ventures – perhaps an energy or maritime pact bringing in other Indo-Pacific and West Asian players.

CONCLUSION

The Red Sea has emerged as more than just a shipping lane – it is a geopolitical hinge joining the Indo-Pacific with the West Asian. As we have discussed, its stability is vital to both regions’ security and prosperity, and it has accordingly become a theater of both collaboration and competition among regional and extra-regional powers. In this milieu, minilateralism offers a creative way to bridge geographic and political divides. Small, interest-driven groupings like I2U2 are enabling Indo-Pacific and West Asian states to pursue common goals, from safeguarding maritime routes to building resilient infrastructure and advancing new technologies. These partnerships reflect a pragmatic convergence: countries such as India, the UAE, Israel, and the US find that they can achieve more by combining their comparative advantages and addressing challenges collectively rather than in isolation. The strategic significance of the Red Sea is central to this convergence – it is the literal and figurative meeting point of their interests. Looking ahead, the success of emerging minilaterals will depend on staying power and inclusivity. They should complement, not supplant, broader multilateral efforts. For

example, an I2U2 that delivers results could reinforce initiatives like the Abraham Accords and even dovetail with the Quad or Indian Ocean Rim Association on areas of overlap. Furthermore, expanding the circle to include other stakeholders (e.g. welcoming Saudi Arabia or Egypt into I2U2+ discussions, or coordinating with European partners in Red Sea security) may enhance legitimacy and impact ^[9]. The Red Sea’s challenges – from climate change to great-power rivalries – cannot be solved by any single coalition, but the minilateral trend provides a flexible scaffolding for targeted cooperation. In an era of geopolitical fluidity, bridging regions through shared interests is a prudent strategy. The Indo-Pacific and the West Asian, once seen as separate worlds, are finding common ground in initiatives that span the Red Sea and beyond. As one commentary put it, we are witnessing “*the confluence of the two seas*” (borrowing a phrase from the 17th-century Mughal prince Dara Shikoh) – a dynamic coupling of the Indian Ocean and the waters of the West Asian into a unified arena of freedom and prosperity (Marshall, 2022) ^[10]. In sum, the Red Sea’s strategic currents are carrying Indo-Pacific and West Asian partners into closer alignment. Minilateral groupings like I2U2 ride those currents, and their voyage has only just begun, with implications that are likely to shape the regional order in the years to come.

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About the corresponding author



Sibtain Raza is affiliated with the Department of Political Science at Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, India. His academic interests lie in political theory, governance, and public policy. He is engaged in scholarly research and contributes to academic discussions through his work in contemporary political studies and interdisciplinary perspectives.