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IN SEARCH OF A PLAN B
LIKE-MINDED INTERNATIONALISM AND THE FUTURE OF GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT

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The international landscape in mid-2025 is characterized by a retreat from liberal institutionalism, exemplified by the United States' withdrawal from the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and its adoption of transactional, power-based international relations, and its potential withdrawal from some multilateral bodies. In this context, this paper argues that traditional models of universal multilateralism are increasingly untenable, and that new forms of collective action grounded in shared interests and normative alignment are both necessary and feasible. This paper focuses on developing the concept of 'like-minded internationalism' as a response to the erosion of multilateral cooperation in a period marked by geopolitical contestation and the resurgence of nationalist foreign policies. Drawing on two illustrative cases—UNITAID, a global health financing mechanism, and the High Ambition Coalition, a climate and environmental diplomacy initiative—the paper outlines the characteristics, formation, and operational logic of like-minded internationalism. The paper concludes by considering implications for the future of global development (cooperation). We argue that the 'Plan B' presented is not a retreat from multilateralism, but an adaptive response to its breakdown—one rooted in coalitional agency, institutional pluralism, and strategic pragmatism.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Though the international order has changed greatly over the past decades, the transformation now underway is significantly deeper and more profound. The post-1945 multilateral system—largely constructed under U.S. hegemony and framed by liberal values including open markets, rules-based cooperation, and a commitment to global development—is fragmenting. Over the past decade, a series of systemic shocks, including the COVID-19 pandemic, rising geopolitical tensions, and the return of great-power competition, has exposed the limitations of traditional multilateralism. The recent withdrawal of the United States from Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), alongside its increasingly transactional foreign policy under the second Trump administration, marks a decisive break from the consensus that has underpinned global governance in recent decades. This development has profound implications for international cooperation, particularly in the fields of development, climate, and global public goods.

In this context, this paper develops the concept of like-minded internationalism—a form of collective action that relies on coalitions of countries and actors aligned around shared normative commitments and pragmatic objectives, rather than formal multilateral structures or hegemonic or hierarchical leadership. Like-minded coalitions, we argue, offer a viable institutional response to a more multipolar, contested, and volatile international system. Rather than seeking universal consensus, they build issue-based alliances that are flexible, pluralistic, and often innovative in form. They have the potential to achieve more than the lowest common denominator typically reached by less like-minded groups. Importantly, they reflect a shift from global governance premised on inclusion and universality, to a logic of selective cooperation driven by convergence on key goals.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 gives a historical perspective on the current moment, tracing the rise and partial erosion of liberal multilateralism, and the emergence of new geopolitical fault lines. Section 3 expands on the concept of like-minded internationalism. Section 4 explores two illustrative cases—UNITAID and the High Ambition Coalition—highlighting the conditions under which like-minded coalitions emerge and the political dynamics that sustain them. Drawing on a policy process framework, we analyze how these initiatives were shaped by actors and networks, context and opportunism, and narratives and evidence. The paper concludes by reflecting on the implications of like-minded internationalism for the future of global cooperation, suggesting that it represents not a retreat from multilateralism, but an adaptive response to its breakdown—one rooted in coalitional agency, institutional pluralism, and strategic pragmatism.

II. A BRIEF HISTORY

1. Context

After the experience of two World Wars, 44 countries convened at Bretton Woods in the north-east United States, to consider the future. Exhausted by wars, particularly damaging across Europe, these countries gathered to construct a new world order based on liberal values and norms, led by the West. This approach to development and cooperation, based on liberal values of human rights, civil liberties, and aspirations to greater equity and inclusion, also espoused the concepts of open markets and free trade, taking the view that trade was intractably linked to the prospects of increased development and prosperity for all. Liberal values also included the sensibility that—despite an approach to societal organization based on capitalist principles—the welfare of vulnerable groups and poorer countries was also important. So too was the need to tackle common problems through multilateral approaches.

Countries agreed on the provision of financing to rebuild Western Europe, grants and concessionary financing to support the development of poorer countries, and a system of rules and regulations to monitor trade and the disbursement of financing. They designed an institutional architecture to manage these and other inter-state relationships. The United Nations was established as one of the primary institutions inspired by the vision of those times, to replace the League of Nations. Entities including the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (and later, the World Trade Organization), were also established at this time.

States also agreed to embrace the concept of greater openness in their relations with one another. By 1949, the Geneva Conventions, a series of international treaties guiding interstate relations and matters of diplomacy and protocol, had been adopted. With the baton of Western leadership firmly shifted from Britain to the U.S., American scholars articulated the new role for the United States, that of a hegemonic power and leader of the free world, based on idealism and a mission to spread democracy and freedom, and to 'police' the world.

As a superpower in a bi-polar construct with the Soviet Union, the U.S. and her allies presided over a liberal world order based on free markets and progressively more open trade. Developing countries, the world over, were encouraged to dismantle trade barriers based on the premise that larger trade flows would more than offset important trade-based tax revenues. This institutional architecture and Western global leadership provided a period of relative stability and prosperity across a large swathe of the world. Though the prosperity dividend was not equally distributed, millions were lifted out of extreme poverty, and many variables associated with social welfare improved dramatically (World Bank, 2024b).

2. Then and Now

Over the past several decades the world has changed. The handful of countries that represented the majority shares of global output have been joined by several other countries transforming bundles of economic output into political power on the world stage. Global output has thus shifted from West to East (Borell, 2020). China, for example, has emerged as a superpower: it is forecast to account for 45% of the world's global industrial production by 2030. That share comes at the expense of the West, which is projected to drop to 11% of global production in the next five years (Rapoza, 2025). Despite Western efforts to reduce the effects of China's trade surplus through

tariffs, the country's trade dominance has increased. India is now the world's fifth largest economy. A clutch of Middle Powers, including Brazil, Turkey, Indonesia, South Africa, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and others have emerged as players on the global stage, seeding a mid-layer of multipolarity, providing a wider menu of development cooperation options for poorer countries. The status quo is being increasingly challenged by those that argue that the existing framework is no longer fit for purpose. Western leadership, including that of the U.S., is being contested—and in some cases even replaced—as demonstrated by the growing relevance of China's South-South cooperation approach (Chaturvedi et al 2021).

While tensions within the international structure are nothing new, the last five years of rolling crises, starting in 2020 with the global COVID-19 pandemic, followed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and the war in Gaza in late 2023, have thrown into stark relief divisions between the West and the Global South. Countries on both sides have been deeply divided over a range of issues including equity in access to COVID-19 vaccines, debt relief, interest rates, unilateral western sanctions, and the perception of double standards in applicability of rule of law and other aspects of global governance. Ideological positions have hardened over time. In the process, the West, including blocs such as the U.S. and the EU, have lost significant shares of soft power and influence (Nye, 2025).

Tensions were particularly stark at the 79th session of the UN General Assembly in September 2024, during which leaders of the Global South were united in calls for multilateral reform, including reform of the UN Security Council. In an effort to secure their own interests and to hedge their bets, countries of the Global South have adopted strategies of multi-alignment, acting with others around shared interests, if not values (Ishmael, 2024). They have embarked on processes to deepen South-South cooperation, and to solidify relations with China. In the process they are engaged in multiple initiatives including the building of new trade routes, settling trade in local currencies, building cross-border payment platforms, and establishing new institutions to decrease their reliance on Western partnerships and institutions (Ishmael, 2024).

3. A New Era Shaped by Power, Not by Rules: Realism not Idealism

The challenges posed by this period of crises have pushed countries into adopting more nationalistic and protectionist postures, moving from a focus on 'national interests' but often in combination with enlightened long-term interests (such as 'sustainable development'), which largely shaped the post-Second World War years, into the current era of crude power politics. The onslaught of COVID-19 pushed countries—even in Europe's Schengen area—to close borders. The imperative to put the nation's needs first compelled Western countries to stockpile more vaccines than could be used, while other countries waited for their first doses (MSF, 2021).

The dramatic contraction of global output and systemic shortages focused the attention of many countries inwards, towards domestic imperatives and needs. Shortfalls in national finance forced countries to attend to immediate, domestic needs. Issues on the global agenda, including development cooperation, financing for development, the energy transition, and supporting countries in attaining the SDGs and climate targets, were relegated to the back burner. Friend-shoring and strategic decoupling/derisking has reversed decades of free trade and globalization, leading the World Bank to warn of a "*decade of wasted opportunity*" for many countries of the Global South (World Bank, 2024a).

Amidst all this, populism and nationalism in many parts of the world, including mature Western democracies, have been on the rise. So too is the specter of illiberalism and autocracy (Colley and Nexon, 2021). Polls show that citizens' faith in their governments and institutions is at an all-time low (Pew Research Center, 2024). In the face of deepening inequality within societies, citizens are questioning the ability of democracy to satisfy their needs.

Adding to this milieu, a spate of assertive foreign policy initiatives from the second Trump administration has added layers of turbulence and disruption across markets and value chains around the world. In the first few months after his return to office, Trump has threatened not only to unravel longstanding security and defense pacts with allies, but has also raised unprecedented tariffs on the latter—including Mexico, Canada, the EU, South Korea, Japan, and Australia—as well as on foes, in a broad sweep totaling 183 countries. Tariffs of over 100% have been levied on U.S. imports from China. Markets have tumbled in response, erasing trillions of dollars in value. And while the President has announced a 90 day 'pause' on further escalation, with tariffs applied at 10%, damage has been done both materially and to post-Second World War 'norms'. America has lost soft power around the world as a result. Allies are concerned about the U.S. as a reliable partner and are looking to diversify partnerships and trade away from the U.S., in order to diminish risks (Creel 2025).

Canada and the EU are talking about a new trade deal, engagement in mineral markets, and deeper security arrangements. The UK and the EU are deepening collaboration on security and defense. This period of disruption has provided opportunities too. China is stepping into a leadership void and has proclaimed its openness to the wider world, its intention of salvaging global trade, and of protecting multilateralism as a driving force of the 'Friends of the System' group in support of the WTO (GDToday, 2025; TWN, 2025).

China has met with U.S. allies South Korea and Japan, and the EU and China have established a Commission to consider deeper relations around mutual interests. ASEAN countries are being courted by the EU, as is India, the Latin American region, and multiple countries of the Global South (Hammond, 2025). The latter are accelerating the process of deepening and widen relations amongst themselves, while leveraging this period to seek best offers from the rest of the West.

The U.S. nationalist foreign and trade policies have catalyzed allies and foes alike to diversify partnerships and realign diplomatic relations around common threats and interests. A spirit of 'like-mindedness' is palpable, with far-reaching consequences that will undoubtedly play a role in bridge-building across ideological divides, around a convergence of interests. While the eventual contours are still unclear, old structures are being dismantled, and a new world order is set to emerge.

In the meantime, the current context is often characterized as one of 'global (dis)order.' This concept seeks to capture the coexistence of order and disorder in contemporary international relations, highlighting the fragmentation and contestation of global governance structures, reflecting the erosion of the post-Cold War liberal international 'rules'-based order, and the emergence of a multipolar world characterized by fragmentation, contestation, and competing visions of governance (see for a range of viewpoints, Acharya, 2017; Bremmer, 2012; Chandler, 2014; Hurrell, 2006; Mbembe 2001; Weiss and Wilkinson, 2019). Specifically, the following resonate with the preceding discussion:

- The erosion of multilateral norms and institutions—particularly since the post-Cold War liberal order has come under strain from 'inside' (e.g. U.S. retrenchment) and 'outside' (e.g. assertive authoritarianism, rising powers).
- Fundamental UN principles, such as territorial integrity, are no longer respected by major powers, as shown by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and U.S. threats to Canada and Greenland (Article 2(4): "*All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any State…*").
- The simultaneous presence of order and disorder—in which pockets of stability and cooperation (e.g. in finance or climate) coexist with zones of breakdown or competitive fragmentation (e.g. in trade, migration, and security).
- Competing visions of world order—liberal internationalism, realism, emphasizing power politics favoring national interests, authoritarian statism, post-Western multipolarity, and non-Western perspectives all vie for normative legitimacy and institutional dominance.
- Polycentric governance—the growing role of informal, regional, or ad-hoc groupings (e.g. G20, BRICS) that challenge or bypass traditional global governance structures.

In short, the term global (dis)order can be used to interrogate how the normative foundations of the international order are being reconstituted. In this context, new ideas for non-universal multilateralism are emerging. One such idea, which we develop in the next section, is that of 'like-minded internationalism'.

III. IN SEARCH OF A PLAN B: LIKE-MINDED INTERNATIONALISM & GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT CO-OPERATION

The level of disagreement on fundamental aspects of 'development' is increasing globally. The withdrawal of the United States (early 2025) from Agenda 2030 and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) illustrates this shift clearly. Even pariah states such as North Korea and other actors had previously accepted or even supported this framework for development. The U.S. move is now backed by some other countries (such as Argentina), further complicating the global development landscape.

For a long time after the end of the Cold War, development and development policy were often perceived as collaborative spaces. However, over the last five-to-ten years, this field has become increasingly contested (Chaturvedi et al, 2021). Development paradigms are now part of—and often even at the center of—a broader soft-power competition between major players (e.g. China vs. OECD countries). Operational development initiatives, such as China's Belt and Road (BRI) Initiative and the EU's Global Gateway Initiative, have become instruments of geopolitical competition (Klingebiel, 2024).

As alluded to in the previous section, the actions of the second Trump administration go even further. Trump actively seeks to dismantle global governance structures and efforts to build a global development consensus. The first few months of the administration have been dominated by

moves to either ignore or destroy current forms of rules-based international governance, replacing them with a power-based approach that often uses crude forms of coercion. This has a number of implications and spillovers for all forms of international cooperation. This shift has created a context in which a significant 'spoiler group' is not merely a passive threat to the previous development consensus, but is actively working to undermine all efforts at 'soft global governance' (as perceived by the U.S.).

In response, while the right of the U.S. to exercise sovereignty by engineering a dramatic shift relative to its approach to international affairs and foreign policy is understood, other actors find that they now need to push much harder for collective action around mutual interests. In this context, we propose developing and strengthening the concept of 'like-mindedness'. This concept has been discussed in recent years and even several decades ago—for example, in relation to the shared perspectives of Scandinavian countries on various issues, including development policy, gender, and the need to reform the world order (Elgström, 2017; Hveem, 1980). Another example is the IBSA club of countries (India, Brazil, South Africa), which is defined by the feature that it consists of powerful liberal democratic countries from the Global South—a characteristic of like-mindedness (Husar, 2016; Taylor, 2009).

Like-mindedness involves building innovative and flexible international alliances within the framework of global governance. The goal is to establish new mechanisms for collective action to counterbalance the U.S.-led resistance to "*soft global governance*" (U.S. Mission to the UN, 2025). This approach would foster a thematic coalition of countries that share similar views on development issues.

Like-mindedness may also be relevant for managing increasingly complex relationships with different actors simultaneously. Multi-alignment is emerging as a strategy among countries in the Global South to avoid becoming overly dependent on any one major actor or bloc (Ishmael, 2024). Keohane and Nye (1977) already discussed this as "*complex interdependence*": in a world of interdependence, states rationally build diverse relationships across different blocs and sectors.

It is likely that counterbalancing the hegemonic role of the U.S. and some allied countries will require a functioning and significant coalition of states to mitigate the damage and advance a developmental international agenda. The aim is to identify countries and non-governmental partners (including international organizations, philanthropic foundations, and private-sector actors) to mobilize meaningful soft power. A key feature would be the formation of a diverse coalition, representing different income levels (low-income, middle-income, and high-income countries), 'identities' (Global South, etc.), and regional locations. Thus, the coalition would include partners from both the Global South and the Global North. Five characteristics form a definition of like-mindedness, as follows:

- Issue-Based: built on shared normative commitments, not geography, income level, or formal alliance systems.
- Institutional Innovation: departure from traditional multilateralism in terms of non-universal and/or non-binding coalitions.
- Coalition Leadership without Hegemony: leadership from middle powers to shape global agendas.
- Inclusive, Multi-Actor Governance: incorporation of actors from the Global North and South,

reflecting pluralistic governance models.

- Strategic Use of Narratives and Timing: use of political windows of opportunity and mobilization of compelling policy narratives grounded in scientific evidence and/or moral urgency, to bring together 'coalitions of the willing.'

In the next section we identify two such examples of like-minded internationalism and discuss the characteristics and the underlying politics that led to their formations.

IV. EXEMPLARS OF LIKE-MINDED INTERNATIONALISM

1. UNITAID

UNITAID (which is a name not an acronym) is the grant-making, global health initiative established in 2006. While not a UN agency, UNITAID has its own Executive Board and governance structures and is hosted within the World Health Organization, within which it operates as a multi-donor partnership with 35-member countries. UNITAID emerged from the convergence of a compelling narrative on global health inequities, a cross-national network of committed actors, and a favorable political window in the early 2000s.

UNITAID was established by France and Brazil, with support from Chile, Norway, and the United Kingdom (Chirac and Lula da Silva, 2004). Its innovation lies in its funding mechanism—a small levy on airline tickets, known as a 'solidarity tax'—which provides a sustainable and predictable revenue stream and was designed to generate predictable and sustainable revenue without relying on traditional aid budgets (Landau, 2004; UNITAID, 2006; UNITAID, 2023). The initiative was rooted in a broader global push to develop new sources of development finance (Atkinson, 2005). Twelve of the member countries apply a flight levy, with France, for example, charging $1 on economy and $10 on business-class outbound flights. In 2023, UNITAID raised around £300 million (UNITAID, 2023) for spending on global health, focused on HIV/AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis. The Executive Board includes Brazil, Chile, Norway, France, Spain, the UK, one member from Africa selected by the African Union, one from Asia, two from civil society, one from the philanthropic sector, and one from the WHO (UNITAID, 2023). The structure of UNITAID thus reflects its like-minded nature: the Executive Board includes countries from the Global North and South, civil society, philanthropic actors, and international organizations, reflecting both normative and structural pluralism in the sense of representation of state and non-state actors, North and South, and technical and advocacy communities (Withrow, 2007).

This pluralistic model of like-mindedness is particularly relevant today, as universal multilateralism comes under increasing strain. The initiative also exemplifies how small, targeted taxes can be pooled to support transnational goals and global public goods (in keeping with Atkinson, 2005; Clunies-Ross, 2004). Unlike many traditional multilateral institutions, UNITAID was not formed through universal consensus or hegemonic direction. Rather, it was grounded in a convergence of shared problem-recognition and a willingness to experiment with new institutional forms. As argued earlier, like-mindedness here refers not to a fixed geopolitical identity, but to an issue-specific alignment based on common values and pragmatic cooperation (Elgström, 2017; Jain, 2013). The case of UNITAID highlights the possibility of advancing collective action through

shared problem recognition and strategic coalitions—i.e. like-mindedness—rather than through hegemonic leadership or universal consensus.

2. The High Ambition Coalition

The High Ambition Coalition (HAC) is an umbrella term that refers to a series of informal coalitions including the High Ambition Coalition for Climate Ambition, the High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People, and the High Ambition Coalition to End Plastic Pollution[1]. The HAC for Climate Ambition is an intergovernmental group of 117 countries established in 2015 by the Republic of the Marshall Islands in the run-up to COP21, and is co-chaired by Costa Rica and France, committed to ambitious climate and environmental policies.

The HAC influenced key elements of the agenda of the COP26 in 2021, including adaptation finance, fossil-fuel regulation, and the timelines for nationally determined contributions (NDCs). It continued its advocacy at COP27, COP28, and COP29, with a particular focus on securing climate finance for Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and Least Developed Countries (LDCs). The HAC also inspired sectoral spin-offs, such as the Shipping High Ambition Coalition under the International Maritime Organization, and the High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People.

The HAC played a significant role in core aspects of the Paris Agreement, including the 1.5-degree Celsius limit despite expectations that a 2-degree goal would be agreed (High Ambition Coalition, 2025a). Other HAC goals of note are the aim to protect at least 30% of the world's land and oceans by 2030 (known as '30 by 30'), and a commitment to develop an international legally binding instrument to end plastic pollution by 2040 (High Ambition Coalition, 2025b; UNEP, 2022).

Despite sectoral differences, both UNITAID and HAC embody the logic of like-mindedness introduced in the previous section in the following ways:

- Issue-Based Like-Mindedness: Both are built on shared normative commitments—UNITAID to health equity, and HAC to environmental and climate ambition—rather than on geography, income level, or formal alliance systems.
- Institutional Innovation: Both represents a departure from traditional multilateralism—UNITAID through innovative financing (airline ticket tax), and HAC through informal diplomacy and non-binding coalitions pushing progressive goals.
- Coalition Leadership without Hegemony: Neither initiative was driven by hegemonic powers. Instead, leadership came from middle powers (France, Brazil) and vulnerable island states (e.g. Marshall Islands), showing how diplomatic entrepreneurship can shape global agendas.
- Inclusive, Multi-Actor Governance: Both coalitions incorporate actors from the Global North and South, and engage with civil society and technical communities, reflecting pluralistic governance models.
- Strategic Use of Narratives and Timing: Each initiative has succeeded by seizing political windows of opportunity and mobilizing compelling policy narratives grounded in scientific evidence and moral urgency.

1. Thank you to Jun-Rong Lin for additional research on the HACs.

As argued in the previous sections, the retreat of the United States from global development (cooperation)—and its increasing antagonism toward multilateral norms—necessitates a renewed focus on coalitional forms of international cooperation. Both UNITAID and the HAC offer instructive examples of how institutional innovation can proceed without hegemonic sponsorship. They also signal a shift in global governance from universalism to selective cooperation as exemplified in building a 'coalition of the willing'.

The next section proceeds by focusing on the underlying politics behind UNITAID and HAC and how and why they were enacted, and by whom. A synthesis framework for the study of the politics of policy processes—how policies are enacted or implemented—views policy as an outcome of the interaction of actors/networks, context/strategic opportunism, and policy narratives/evidence (see for discussion, Heikkila and Cairney, 2014; Sapienza et al, 2024; Shiffman and Smith, 2007; Walt and Gilson, 1994). Each of these is now discussed in turn.

3. Policy Actors and 'Knit-Working': Who Made it Happen?

As noted, UNITAID's founding coalition was initiated by France and Brazil, led by Presidents Jacques Chirac and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who publicly championed the idea of a solidarity levy to address global health inequalities (Chirac and Lula da Silva, 2004). France became the largest contributor, while Brazil's leadership helped legitimize the initiative within Latin America and the Global South. The coalition then started to grow through 'knit-working' (stitching coalitions together), expanding first to include Chile, Norway, and the UK, each bringing distinct capacities and legitimacy to the effort, including political support and financial contributions (UNITAID, 2006). Other countries were also included. Norway's participation reflected its foreign-policy emphasis on global justice, and the UK added technical and political heft in global health governance.

Major high-income countries including the United States, Japan, Canada, and Russia declined to support UNITAID, often citing concerns about international taxation and state sovereignty (Withrow 2007). This underlines the point that institutional innovation can emerge from coalitional leadership even without hegemonic endorsement.

The initiative was also supported by a wide range of civil society organizations and global health actors, including Médecins Sans Frontières and the Clinton Foundation. The WHO played a hosting and convening role. The resulting coalition can be seen as a transnational epistemic community, aligned around the shared goal of health equity (Haas, 1992; Shiffman and Smith, 2007; Withrow, 2007). The governance structure embedded in this network includes actors from civil society, philanthropy, and the WHO, forming something resembling what Haas (1992) terms an "epistemic community"—a network of professionals with shared values and technical knowledge.

The original HAC was spearheaded by the Republic of the Marshall Islands' foreign minister, Tony de Brum, who united a cross-regional coalition including SIDS, LDCs, and progressive developed countries including France, Germany, and Norway. The coalition functioned as a diplomatic 'force multiplier', allowing vulnerable states to shape the Paris Agreement's final language (High Ambition Coalition, 2025a). It operated informally and outside traditional negotiating blocs, but was highly effective in reframing the narrative of climate ambition and fairness.

The HAC operations were likened to a "*mosquito fleet*", employing bilateral diplomacy to mobilize support and expand participation. The phrase was used by de Brum to describe the HAC's

diplomatic strategy during the 2015 Paris climate negotiations. De Brum said the "*mosquito fleet*" would send envoys to various parties with which they had bilateral ties, aiming to "*bite them in a nice way*" to garner support for ambitious climate goals.

The HAC does not maintain a formal or fixed membership list; instead, membership remains fluid and informal. Participation is ad hoc and issue-specific, with no equivalent of permanent membership. The Republic of the Marshall Islands continues to serve as the coalition's convener, maintaining its central role in shaping the coalition's agenda and identity.

In both cases, coalitions succeeded not because of hegemonic leadership, but due to like-minded coalitional entrepreneurship.

4. Policy Context and 'Strategic Opportunism': Why Then, Why That Way?

UNITAID's emergence must be situated in the broader policy environment of the early 2000s and the 'strategic opportunism' of actors during a period of global disillusionment with traditional aid mechanisms. The early 2000s saw rising inequality in access to life-saving treatments for HIV/AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis, and a perceived legitimacy vacuum following the Iraq War (UN Millennium Project, 2005; WHO, 2003; Landau, 2004).

At that time, the global health landscape was marked by crisis: millions lacked access to life-saving treatments for AIDS, malaria, and TB, and official development assistance (ODA) flows were stagnant or declining (UN Millennium Project, 2005). Meanwhile, the global airline industry was growing rapidly, providing a politically palatable base for innovative taxation.

The initiative benefited from a favorable moment in global politics. U.S. unilateralism following the invasion of Iraq had weakened American legitimacy in multilateral forums, creating space for alternative leadership. UNITAID was a product of this moment: a strategic intervention in a fluid political context (Withrow, 2007).

Two countries seized this window of opportunity to institutionalize an innovative financing mechanism (Clunies-Ross, 2004; Binger, 2005). Both were seeking to enhance their international standing through multilateral leadership, and both had domestic support for initiatives framed as moral, redistributive, and practical. The symbolic resonance of taxing airline travel—a luxury associated with globalization—was also powerful (Landau, 2004).

HAC's emergence was similarly opportunistic. In 2015, deep divisions between the Global North and South threatened to derail climate change negotiations. The Marshall Islands mobilized diplomatic capital to create a coalition that demanded inclusion of the 1.5°C goal—backed by strong scientific evidence and political momentum following the 2014 IPCC report (High Ambition Coalition, 2025a). Subsequently, HAC has focused on biodiversity and plastic pollution arising during moments of increased global attention to environmental crises, and dissatisfaction with slow-moving multilateral negotiations (UNEP, 2022).

In both cases, opportunism and timing were critical—showing that like-mindedness can crystallize in moments of institutional flux (as noted by Walt and Gilson, 1994).

5. 'Sticky' Policy Narratives and Evidence: How Was it Justified and Mobilized?

The legitimacy of UNITAID rests on a compelling or 'sticky' policy narrative. Advocates highlighted the massive gap in access to essential treatments, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, and the insufficiency of existing aid modalities (UN Millennium Project, 2005). They framed the airline tax as a light-touch, broadly progressive, and sustainable solution. UNITAID's legitimacy was thus constructed through a compelling and evidence-backed narrative of global redistribution.

The airline levy was supported by technical studies showing it could raise hundreds of millions with minimal disruption (Landau, 2004; Atkinson, 2005; Clunies-Ross, 2004). Policy reports also emphasized the cost-effectiveness of addressing HIV/AIDS, malaria, and TB through global procurement and market shaping (Atkinson, 2005; WHO, 2003).

The moral framing—that those who benefit from globalization should contribute to correcting its harms—was important to building cross-national support (Binger, 2005). This message resonated across different national contexts and helped UNITAID secure the support it needed.

HAC's climate diplomacy also relied on ethical and evidence-based narratives. SIDS asserted their existential vulnerability, reinforced by IPCC science, to reframe ambition as both a scientific and moral imperative (Shiffman and Smith, 2007; High Ambition Coalition, 2025a). In biodiversity and plastics governance, HACs have continued to use planetary boundaries and ecological tipping points as discursive anchors to justify urgent action (UNEP, 2022). In both cases, evidence has been not only a tool of persuasion but a foundation for moral legitimacy and coalitional solidarity.

In sum, UNITAID and the High Ambition Coalitions are examples of like-minded internationalism in the sense that these cases have shared purposes that substitute for multilateral consensus; are pluralistic coalitions that have brought legitimacy and resilience; and are examples of political opportunism with compelling policy narratives framed within a specific window of institutional possibility. Thus, these examples demonstrate a 'proof-of-concept' in an age marked by fragmentation and contestation. Specifically, like-minded internationalism offers a viable model for advancing developmental and environmental goals through non-universal, coalitional agency, technical and political credibility, and shared values.

V. CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have discussed the concept of 'like-mindedness' and offered examples. What to conclude?

First, shared purpose can to some extent replace universal multilateralism. The countries that launched UNITAID and the HACs recognized a common policy problem and were willing to act collectively. In today's fragmented world order, similar coalitions could form around issues such as climate adaptation, digital regulation, or pandemic preparedness.

Second, building networked coalitions or 'knit-working' is important. UNITAID and HAC have succeeded because of the bringing together and interplay between North and South, and in the case of UNITAID, state and non-state actors, public and private sectors. This knit-worked pluralism has enabled resilience, legitimacy, and strategic agility. Future institutional efforts could prioritize inclusive governance and transnational partnerships that combine technical expertise with political will.

Third, strategic opportunism is also important. UNITAID and HAC emerged not from a long-planned global agreement, but from a strategic intervention at a time of political possibility. Seizing such windows requires institutional entrepreneurship, a 'sticky' policy narrative framing, and the ability to mobilize both evidence and alliances quickly. In an era defined by contestation and uncertainty, UNITAID and HAC offer hopeful examples: coalitions of the willing that have institutionalized like-mindedness. As such, they remain models for how international cooperation can be reimagined under adverse conditions of non-universal multilateralism.

As is evident, like-mindedness is in many respects not a new concept. However, today's fundamentally shifting global context demands new approaches to international cooperation. When core principles and rules are no longer accepted by one or more dominant actors, power dynamics begin to replace previously established modes of cooperation (Walt, 2025). For instance, the open use of coercion as a tactic in day-to-day international relations signals a profound change in the foundations of global diplomacy. This creates an urgent need for other actors to respond—developing alternative forms of cooperation to ensure that goals framed around mutual interests can still be met. This is why like-mindedness, as a tool to reinforce and defend non-universal multilateralism, has gained renewed and critical relevance.

For like-minded decision-makers, the search for new tactics and strategies has become a matter of survival as independent actors. More broadly, they must resist becoming mere 'norm takers', who passively accept decisions imposed by more powerful states. Instead, they must assert themselves as 'norm makers' in the pursuit of more robust forms of multilateralism.

In an increasingly hostile international environment, like-minded coalitions of willing countries striving to build positive platforms for collective action are more relevant than ever. This urgency creates strong incentives to overcome classic collective-action problems, such as free-riding. It also calls for flexible, rapidly deployable formats that can adapt quickly to change, supported by iterative learning through trial and error. Crucially, it requires moving beyond traditional national identities and legacy positions, which often act as barriers to forming innovative and agile alliances.

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