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Minilateralism and I2U2 – Refining Realpolitik

Dr Gedaliah Afterman / Dr N. Janardhan / Mohammed Baharoon / Afshin Molavi



Dr Gedaliah Afterman

is head of the Asia Policy Programme, Abba Eban Institute for Diplomacy and Foreign Relations at Reichman University (IDC Herzliya), Israel.

Dr N. Janardhan

is Director, Research and Analysis, Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy, Abu Dhabi, and Non-Resident Fellow, Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington.

Mohammed Baharoon

is Director-General, B'huth (Dubai Public Policy Research Centre).

Afshin Molavi

is Senior Fellow, Foreign Policy Institute, Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, Washington.

Summary

- Disruptions emanating from a combination of socio-economic-political factors, including energy transition, technological revolution, COVID-19, and uncertain international order emanating from superpower rivalry, among others, have encouraged recalibration of diplomatic gameplans globally.
- With bilateralism possibly inching towards a saturation point and multilateralism yielding limited results, the idea of 'minilateralism' or 'plurilateralism' has gained traction in recent years. This includes trilateral and quadrilateral partnerships. Such mechanisms are informal and task-oriented, addressing specific problems with fewer countries involved.
- A byproduct of the Abraham Accords signed in 2020, the I2U2 grouping – comprising India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States – is a good recent example of minilateralism, which has evolved into a significant strategic partnership with multiple dimensions within a short span of coming into existence in 2021.
- This Insight co-authored by four scholars, each a national of the four partner countries, offers a multi-faceted perspective on the developments associated both with the renewed popularity of minilateral diplomacy, as well as the rationale for and successes and challenges associated with the I2U2.
- It documents how, contrary to the misconception that it is a "new Quad" or "Middle East Quad," I2U2 advances realpolitik – a system that promotes practical (economic) rather than ideological (political or security) considerations – and facilitates trade, technology and connectivity. This gels well particularly with several de-escalation moves that are currently underway among erstwhile rivals and competitors in the Middle East with the aim of focusing on economic diplomacy.
- The Insight argues that such a cross-regional-continental partnership – dubbed the 'partnership for the future' – overlooks the strained ties that the grouping's members have with either China or Iran or both. The analysis highlights how middle powers play a vital role despite strategic differences, thus providing a valuable model for shaping future regional dynamics in different parts of a multipolar and multialigned world.
- Finally, it recommends the following policy options:
 - expanding the I2U2 grouping, perhaps, by including S2 – from among South Korea, Singapore and Saudi Arabia – or other like-minded countries like Japan, among others;
 - initiating a feasibility study to explore trilateral Blue Economy Fund to address global issues like carbon neutrality, green energy, and energy security, using artificial intelligence solutions, and developing multi-dimensional tools for regional agriculture development that would improve food security;
 - encouraging the chambers of commerce and industry of the four countries to hold consultations to find synergies among their core strengths and translate them into productive business and joint development projects;
 - exploring holding of regular high-level summits of all concerned nations on a rotating basis to keep the momentum intact;
 - ensuring that the grouping is a harbinger for the present and future in the economic development domain and not a prisoner of the past in the security sphere.

The Issue

Middle powers across Asia and the Middle East have found themselves in increasingly difficult positions in recent times. Heightened international tensions between the United States and Russia over the invasion of Ukraine and between the United States and China in the Taiwan Straits have forced countries in these regions to reassess their strategic positions, due to their reluctance to choose sides. Increasingly feeling the superpower squeeze, some middle powers are looking to new, issue-specific collaborations to secure their interests.

Simultaneously, after witnessing a trend of diminishing returns in recent years from using geopolitics as the fulcrum of their diplomatic strategies, several countries have resorted to tapping geoeconomic synergies to advance their strategic objectives. Following the signing of the 2020 Abraham Accords, which normalised relations between Israel and several Muslim countries, one of these intriguing avenues now being pursued is the establishment of new Middle East-Asia cross-regional partnerships.

A central issue shaping inter-region relations is the fluctuating presence of the United States, which for over a decade has been perceived to be disengaging from the Middle East in favour of its “pivot to Asia.”¹ Yet the 2022 Ukraine-Russia war has demonstrated to the United States that it cannot reduce its presence in the region without harming its own interests. One of the US’s novel attempts at engaging with the region is the I2U2 framework it established in October 2021 with India, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates. In July 2022, US President Joe Biden’s visit to the Middle East facilitated a virtual summit with I2U2 leaders, which included the announcement of several joint economic projects worth \$2.33bn.²

New inter-regional partnerships, such as the I2U2 group, provide a useful model for shaping additional ‘minilateral’ frameworks in the Middle East and beyond.³ It is also a good example of realpolitik, wherein such agreements enable middle powers to collaborate despite strategic differences between and among them.

Revival of Minilateralism

Minilateralism is not a new diplomatic tool. Several bilateral partnerships evolved into mini groups or even multilateral mechanisms in the past, without any formal strings attached. For example, the first U.S.-Australia-New Zealand Security Treaty was signed in 1951.⁴ Those three countries plus Canada and the

United Kingdom are also engaged in an intelligence sharing minilateral known as the ‘Five Eyes Alliance’ that originated during World War II.

Encouraged by the recent fragmentation of the world order and the quest to exercise strategic autonomy, minilateral formations are getting a new lease of life. With bilateralism inching towards saturation point and multilateralism yielding limited results, the idea of ‘minilateralism’ is again gaining traction in foreign relations.⁵ Minilateral agreements are narrower – and usually informal and flexible – task-oriented frameworks established to address specific problems by small groups of countries with converging interests.

The recent appeal of minilateral cooperation stems from several factors. First, military prowess as a major determinant of national power is diminishing in the 21st century, with technology, connectivity and trade rising in importance. This is evident in the recent success in forging the EastMed natural gas partnership among Israel, Greece, and Cyprus, in contrast with the lack of momentum to advance the agenda of larger security groupings like Middle East Strategic Alliance and Middle East NATO.

Second, new contemporary relationships tend to be more short- and medium-term, agenda-driven partnerships and coalitions, rather than traditional long-term, open alliances.

Lastly, such partnerships are mostly rooted in economic pragmatism, rather than guided by political or security concerns. Multiple bilateral economic engagements also risk creating a situation where countries with similar expertise and interests compete for the same share of the pie, whereas in a minilateral collaboration they could potentially benefit by pooling their resources.

Opposing Interests, Joint Action

Following up on US President Joe Biden’s visit to the Middle East in July 2022, when the first virtual I2U2 Summit was held, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan met Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Riyadh in May 2023, along with Emirati and Indian national security advisers Tahnoun bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Ajit Doval, respectively.⁶

Sullivan travelled to Jeddah amid an increasing pace of regional de-escalation efforts, including the China-brokered agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran to reestablish diplomatic ties and Syria’s readmission to the Arab League. Moreover, UAE-Iran, UAE-Turkey, and Saudi Arabia-Turkey ties have also recently improved.

At the core of these political recalibrations is the region's growing focus on economic diplomacy after more than 10 years of Arab Spring-linked friction and instability.⁷

The US' bid to change tack and implement a more creative regional strategy is also partly conditioned by a downturn in Saudi-US relations and China's increased regional influence.⁸ Washington seeks to expand the scope of the Abraham Accords between Arab countries and Israel and is using the I2U2 partnership as one of its vehicles to do so. This enables Washington to both counter the perception that it is disengaging from the region and consolidate its relationships in the Middle East and Asia.

Minilateral partnerships also offer wider geoeconomic connections with critical partners. The rationale for this strategy was articulated in Sullivan's May 4 speech at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy on the eve of his Middle East visit.⁹ Sullivan stressed that the Biden administration's "new framework for U.S. engagement in the Middle East is built on ... partnerships, deterrence, diplomacy, de-escalation, integration, and values."

According to Sullivan, the key platform for this framework is I2U2, which aims to connect South Asia, the Middle East, and the United States through trade, technology, and diplomacy. "If you remember nothing else from my speech, remember I2U2, because you will be hearing more about it as we go forward," Sullivan stressed.

Such a strategy, according to Bilahari Kausikan of the Middle East Institute of the National University of Singapore, suggests that the United States, as an "offshore balancer is not in retreat but demands more of its allies, partners, and friends to maintain regional equilibrium."¹⁰

I2U2-like forums are focused on non-political, pressing regional issues, such as water and food security, space exploration, healthcare, and climate change, which also enhance regional security in the broader sense¹¹. Sullivan's meetings in Riyadh built on recent deals, such as the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements that the UAE signed in 2022 with India and Israel, among others.¹²

The cooperative initiatives discussed in Riyadh included a major cross-regional railway infrastructure project.¹³ This links the ports in Mumbai, India, with Piraeus in Greece through Jebel Ali in the U.A.E., and by rail via Saudi Arabia and Jordan to Haifa in Israel. Most of the infrastructure is reportedly ready barring

a 320-kilometre link from Al Haditha, Saudi-Jordan border, to Beit She'an, Jordan-Israel border. If this is addressed, it could provide seamless connectivity, bringing India closer to European markets. This project could also be linked to the India-Middle East Food Corridor, as well as the petrochemicals, green energy, and technology value chains.¹⁴

This multinational rail and ports deal was formalised during the G20 Summit in New Delhi in September 2023. The deal signed by the UAE, India, Saudi Arabia, the US, the EU and a few other G20 partners is expected to reduce shipping times, costs and fuel use, thus making it an efficient, economical and sustainable project.¹⁵

Each member of this new partnership, thus, brings a unique perspective and, at times, diverging and even conflicting interests. However, their economic focus promotes a shared agenda, thus reducing discord.

For the United States, I2U2 could be seen as part of Washington's preoccupation with great power competition with China. It could be seen as a mechanism to extend its infrastructure investment and food and energy security initiatives to Middle Eastern and South Asian partners, with the intention of demonstrating positive engagement as an alternative to Chinese projects, such as the Belt and Road Initiative.¹⁶ Washington has heard the many critiques of its regional allies, mainly centered on the idea that the US is disengaging from the region, and I2U2 serves as one counterpoint to that idea. Washington also sees this approach as an opportunity to encourage its regional partners to take a more active and independent role in shaping the region's future, allowing the United States to reduce its own resource investment while maintaining its presence and influence.

For India, the UAE and potentially Saudi Arabia in the future, I2U2-like minilaterals provide a platform to highlight the cross-regional reach of their economic engagement and diplomatic initiatives. For decades, the GCC, most notably the UAE, have been engaged robustly in trade and investment across Asia and Africa. India-UAE ties are particularly robust commercially. The I2U2 allows Washington to recognise what has been happening in the region and contributing to accelerating the growth of Middle East-Asia commercial ties. The format allows India to engage more deeply with partners in the Middle East and with the US.

The group is also the first format in which India is simultaneously cooperating with Israel and an Arab country. Most notably, the grouping highlights the

importance of the UAE as the mainstay of India's involvement in the region. After holding their first France–India–UAE trilateral foreign ministers meeting in 2022, India and the UAE now engage bilaterally, trilaterally and in the quadrilateral formats. During a fireside chat at the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy in September 2022, India's External Affairs Minister Dr S. Jaishankar emphasised that I2U2-like minilateralism "form of diplomacy is here to stay, and it is the way forward for many" countries.

For the UAE, the I2U2 pitchforks the UAE's connectivity agenda, which is at the core of its new economic diplomacy pursuits. It further promotes "warm peace" emerging out of the Abraham Accords, which marked an inflection point in West Asian and global affairs. Such groupings thus have the potential to serve as a diplomatic amplifier for Israel's engagement in West Asia.

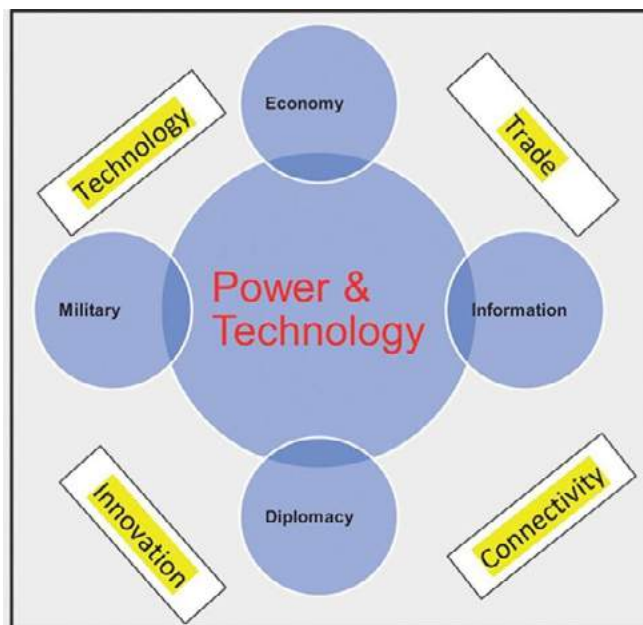
While diverging approaches toward geostrategic and regional issues, particularly China's rising power and global influence, remain a concern, especially for the US, the Gulf countries' participation in US-led initiatives reflects their new penchant for multialignment amid US-China competition.

Partnership for the Future

The first I2U2 Leaders' Summit was held virtually in July 2022, after the grouping was conceptualised during the meeting of the foreign ministers of the four countries in October 2021. Following the summit, the parties issued a joint statement saying: "This unique grouping of countries aims to harness the vibrancy of our societies and entrepreneurial spirit to tackle some of the greatest challenges confronting our world, with a particular focus on joint investments and new initiatives in water, energy, transportation, space, health, and food security."¹⁷

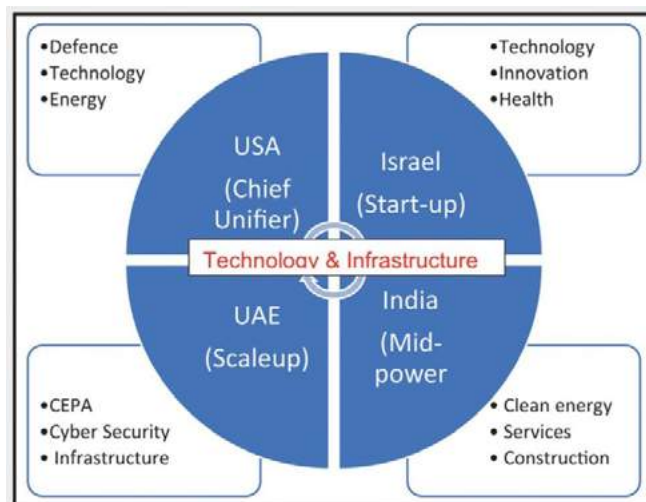
The group agreed to pool resources to modernise infrastructure, expand connectivity between the two Middle East countries, promote startups, advance low-carbon development pathways for industries, find new waste treatment solutions, encourage the development of green technologies, and improve public health. The UAE committed to invest \$2 billion to develop a series of integrated food parks in the Indian states of Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, among others, to enhance the UAE's food security.¹⁸ And the US Trade and Development Agency agreed to set up a \$330-million hybrid renewable energy project in Gujarat. The US and Israeli private sectors agreed to offer innovative solutions to promote the sustainability of these projects.

Task-oriented Nature of Minilateralism



Source: "India-Israel-UAE-US..." *Khaleej Times*, 23 March 2022.

I2U2 Agenda



Source: "India-Israel-UAE-US..." *Khaleej Times*, 23 March 2022.

The group's "partnership for the future" was formed in October 2021, a year after the UAE and Bahrain signed the Abraham Accords agreeing to normalise relations with Israel.¹⁹ The new group took shape amid perceptions of US disengagement from the Middle East and the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. It gathered pace after the Russia-Ukraine war broke out, with a foreign ministers' meeting in March.²⁰

At the time of its formation, it was argued that I2U2 would face “three tests: strategy, sustainability, and substance.” After the summit, however, it was suggested that “there are encouraging signs on all three fronts.”²¹

Biden said the group will identify new infrastructure projects for joint investment and development: “This meeting is just a first step, a chance to demonstrate the value of this new format for cooperation between our four nations.” He added that the food parks had the potential to sustainably increase India’s food yields threefold in five years, which would help tackle food insecurity in South Asia and the Middle East.²²

The food parks will integrate “climate-smart” technologies to conserve water, employ renewable energy sources (wind and solar) complemented by a battery energy storage system, and reduce food waste. This is expected to help India improve its stakes as a global supply chain hub in the food and renewable energy sectors. The renewable energy project would particularly help India meet its climate and energy target of 500 megawatts of non-fossil fuel capacity by 2030.

According to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, I2U2 set a positive agenda at its first summit: “We have identified joint projects in many areas and have also prepared a roadmap to move forward on them. By mobilizing the mutual strengths of our countries – capital, expertise, and markets – we can accelerate our agenda and contribute significantly to the global economy.”²³ To ensure the momentum of engagement, India’s Ministry of External Affairs said that special envoys of the four countries are having “Sherpa-level interactions” to discuss new projects.²⁴

UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan stressed: “The economy offers the best way to achieve peace, security, and progress, especially when governments and people have the will and courage to build partnerships and face challenges.”²⁵

Israel’s then prime minister Yair Lapid said: “In the 21st century, challenges are local, but solutions are global,” and cited the India-UAE food corridor as “a clear example of a solution to a problem we are all facing.”²⁶

I2U2 could encourage the formation of similar groupings in the future. Members of this group could forge minilateral partnerships with other countries, including Japan and South Korea, among others, which were discussed in Track II workshops at the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy in Abu Dhabi.²⁷ A few ideas that were flagged for active consideration during

the workshop were a trilateral Blue Economy Fund to address global issues like carbon neutrality, green energy, and energy security, using artificial intelligence solutions, and developing an “Arabic chatbot” tool for regional agriculture development that would improve food security.

Since the UAE signed the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement with India and Israel in February and May 2022, respectively, it is also possible that these countries may convert their bilateral arrangements to trilateral or broader cooperation, which could strengthen the I2U2 in the future.²⁸

Far from the Quad

Some have referred to I2U2 as the “new Quad” or the “Middle East Quad,” which is misleading.²⁹ The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, informally called the Quad, includes Japan, India, Australia, and the United States. It has a security overtone to it with the aim of countering China’s growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region. I2U2, on the other hand, targets neither China nor Iran, at least thus far.

I2U2’s economic-focused agenda could also help it to develop quickly in contrast to the Quad’s very slow transformation. While it took 15 years after its genesis for the Quad leaders to meet in Japan in May, the I2U2 summit, though virtual, took place less than a year after the grouping was formed.³⁰

Ahead of the virtual summit, the White House had said that the meeting would “reenergize and revitalize alliances” across the world by cooperating on issues where the four countries are “important innovation hubs.”³¹ The announcement of the \$2.33 billion in projects indicates that I2U2’s focus remains on economic partnerships.

Any pressure for the group to assume an anti-Iran or anti-China tone or both could derail its progress, since the UAE, India, and Israel have different views on how to deal with China than the United States.³²

Even though India fought a war with China in 1962, and the two countries were engaged in brutal border clashes in 2020, it has been the most reluctant member of the Quad in taking an anti-China stance.³³ Despite the unresolved border issues, India and China are important trade partners and active members of the BRICS countries along with Brazil, Russia, and South Africa.³⁴ The US-China competition has tested the UAE and Israel on several issues, but they have managed to delicately balance their relationships with both superpowers.³⁵

India has also not let its good ties with Iran affect its engagement with the other I2U2 partners. In fact, the United States exempted India from sanctions by permitting it to fund and construct the Chabahar Port in Iran.³⁶

The UAE, too, has sought to bridge rather than widen the gulf with Iran recently despite fundamental differences on regional issues. During Biden's visit to the region, Abu Dhabi announced it was returning its ambassador to Tehran after a six-year hiatus. And Tehran reciprocated in equal measure nearly a year later.³⁷

The middle powers are also exercising strategic autonomy more than ever before. This was evident in India and the UAE initially not aligning with the United States on the Russian invasion of Ukraine and abstaining in a crucial U.N. Security Council vote in February.³⁸ Israel also reportedly did not endorse Washington's request to co-sponsor the same resolution condemning Russia's invasion.³⁹

Thus, while national security issues are often intractable, the strength of this grouping is not in trying to pursue a collective security agenda. Each of the countries will continue to pursue its security goals individually or in other formations, but I2U2 is likely to remain successful only if it is a harbinger for the present and future in the economic development domain and not a prisoner of the past in the security sphere.

New Regional Approach

It's worth noting that while the United States is the I2U2 club's chief unifier, the other three members are in and of themselves striving middle powers, with a combined GDP of about \$4 trillion. India's strategic ambition gels well with that of "Start-Up" Israel and "Scale-Up" UAE.⁴⁰ Together, the three can forge their own partnerships, with or without US involvement.

I2U2-like partnerships suggest that a new regional approach is underway to facilitate productive relations between the countries of the Middle East and Asia, partly at the behest of the United States. While Beijing's mediation efforts hogged the limelight, Washington was simultaneously involved in a similar diplomatic effort to help Japan and South Korea overcome their decades long differences.⁴¹ This is good for both Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy and the Middle East's quest for alternative diplomatic and security arrangements. While China remains a factor in the region, the United States could be conveying to its regional partners that its 'pivot to Asia' is not at their expense.

A part of the US's push for an economic-centric approach to the region lies in China's and other Asian countries' thriving economic ties with the Gulf countries. The Belt and Road Initiative, launched in 2013, has enhanced China's growing Middle East engagement. Traditionally centered on trade and investment in the energy sector, Beijing has since expanded its economic activities to include infrastructure projects,⁴² tech-driven smart cities, innovation centers, and 5G mobile network projects. The November 2022 UAE-US agreement to mobilise \$100 billion in clean energy investments by 2035, for example, could be viewed as an effort to offset China's deals in the renewable energy sector.⁴³

The US focus on economic partnerships thus acknowledges China's successful effort to combine diversified economic cooperation and political engagement to effectively advance its regional interests, as seen in President Xi Jinping's impactful visit to Saudi Arabia in December 2022 and Beijing's mediation of the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement. Beijing has also had initial success in expanding the use of yuan by Gulf countries for select transactions, including energy purchases.⁴⁴ Further, in a sign of growing diplomatic and security diversification in the region, Bahrain, Kuwait, and the UAE were granted dialogue partner status by the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in May 2023, joining existing dialogue partners Saudi Arabia and Qatar.⁴⁵

These China-friendly moves in the Middle East and Washington's assessment that major countries "seek to evade the intensifying standoff between the United States, Russia, and China," which was recently revealed in leaked US intelligence documents, may be influencing these new policies.⁴⁶ Biden suggested at the end of the G7 Summit in Tokyo in May 2023 that relations with China are likely to begin to "thaw".⁴⁷ He added: "We're not looking to decouple from China. We're looking to de-risk and diversify our relationship with China."⁴⁸

Though it is unclear when and where the next US-China summit will take place, any summit is more likely to help than hurt ties between the two superpowers. Even just maintaining the status quo is not a bad option. The "de-risk without decoupling" approach – a deviation from the US playbook – partly reflects European and Asian allies' concerns about pushing Beijing too hard.

This non-confrontational, "economics-first" approach fits well with the emerging 'new Middle East', an approach that must be encouraged by all countries, particularly the United States.

Conclusion

Today, middle powers in both Asia and the Middle East are attempting to exercise strategic autonomy in unprecedented ways. While each of these countries will continue to pursue their national security interests individually, or in other frameworks, minilateral arrangements like the I2U2 are a promising path towards economic development and technology cooperation in a world that is in flux. However, these frameworks are likely to succeed only if they leave behind them the legacy focus on the security sphere.

Moving away from war and peace and the zero-sum game of superpower competition, I2U2 provides an important opportunity to advance a positive international agenda bringing Asia and the Middle East closer, while helping the US's bid to reassure and reengage with the region. Its success would enable regional powers to maximise their cooperation and set an agenda focused on regional and global issues of common interest.

India, Israel, and the UAE have already begun to carve out this new path for cooperation, and others may soon join. Simultaneously, it would allow “hyperpower” United States⁴⁹ to remain a relevant player in a changing region without ceding space entirely to China, in what is already a multipolar, “multinetworked,” and “multiplex” world.

Policy Recommendations for I2U2 governments

- Encourage the holding of regular high-level summits of all concerned nations on a rotating basis to keep the momentum intact;
- Ensure that the grouping is a harbinger for the present and future in the economic development domain and not a prisoner of the past in the security sphere.
- Expand the I2U2 grouping by, perhaps, including S2 – from among South Korea, Singapore and Saudi Arabia – or other like-minded countries like Japan, building on the growing interest in trilateral Japan-UAE-Israel cooperation, among others.
- Initiate a feasibility study to explore trilateral Blue Economy Fund to address global issues like carbon neutrality, green energy, and energy security, using artificial intelligence solutions. Development of tools for regional agriculture development that would improve food security could be considered as part of a multi-dimensional approach that emphasises smart irrigation, water networks and supply chain development.
- Encourage the chambers of commerce and industry of the four countries to hold consultations to find synergies among their core strengths and translate them into productive business and joint development projects.

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