

MIRAS ZHIYENBAYEV

WIDENING THE SCOPE

HOW MIDDLE POWERS
ARE CHANGING LIBERAL
INSTITUTIONALISM

FOREWORD BY SHIGEO KATSU



KAZAKHSTAN INSTITUTE
FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES
UNDER THE PRESIDENT OF
THE REPUBLIC OF KAZAKHSTAN

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As the liberal world order faces an escalating crisis, intensified by rising great power rivalries, this book underscores the indispensable role middle powers play in preserving stability and promoting global governance. In the face of an increasingly multipolar world order, author provides a compelling argument for the significance of middle powers. It offers a deep examination of how these nations navigate between the competing pressures of great power politics, while still preserving their unique influence and enhancing multilateral institutions. Departing from the long-standing Europocentric paradigm, it explores the unfolding shifts in global power balances. It reveals how middle powers, through their resourceful diplomacy and commitment to international norms, are pioneering new paths for global governance beyond the traditional frameworks.

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FOREWORD

The demise of the Soviet Union signaled the end of the Cold War and of a more or less stable bipolar world. The ensuing decade and a half centered around a sole global superpower, the United States. The inherently unstable and unsustainable nature of a single superpower setup with essentially no multilateral check-and-balances – even if such superpower imagines itself to be a benign “force for the good”—revealed its flaws in initiating unilateral military actions against more than questionable justifications and scant evidence, most notably in the debacle in Iraq and unintended destabilizing consequences for the whole of the Middle East.

The Great Financial Crisis triggered by Lehman Brothers collapse in 2008 shifted the global spotlight on a rapidly emerging contender to a superpower title, namely China. Capitalizing on its two decades of unprecedented economic growth record and transformation into the world’s manufacturer, China assumed the mantle of the global economic locomotive as the Global North struggled to cope with the worst global economic and financial crisis sine the Great Depression triggered in late 1929.

Confirming China’s arrival, in rapid succession President Xi Jin Ping announced the massive Belt and Road Initiative, proclaimed the Chinese Dream, established itself as a digital technology superpower, and transformed

China's military prowess. The economic gravity point has shifted to Asia, now further buttressed by Emerging India. It is no surprise that the biggest geopolitical rivalry and tensions involve the US and China, with most countries' status reduced to worried bystanders.

The Great Financial Crisis also accelerated the emergence of a new global governance construct, the G-20 grouping of the largest economies, substantially replacing the G-7 as key economic decisionmakers. Born initially as a crisis response mechanism, the G20 at long last recognized the role and weight of leading countries of the Global South, yet, we still have to see how its membership, its *modus operandi*, and ultimately, legitimacy will stand the test of time.

It is this context of a rapidly evolving international order, the importance of comprehensive scholarship to decipher complex political dynamics cannot be overstated. This very endeavor lies at the heart of "Widening the Scope: How Middle Powers are Changing Liberal Institutionalism," a compelling and insightful examination of the changing dynamics of global politics. I commend Miras Zhiyenbayev for offering an incisive analysis of the role and influence of middle powers within international governance structures, filling a much-needed gap in the discourse.

The book analyzes the prevailing global political crisis, a consequence of the failure of international governance mechanisms to effectively manage the shifting power dynamics. The theoretical framework employed enables readers to contextualize this crisis within the broader narrative of international relations, providing an accessible entry point to the multifaceted issues presented.

Through the lens of this political crisis, the role of middle powers within the structures of global governance are scrutinized. A novel and significant perspective emerges, positioning these middle powers as vital, albeit often under-recognized, actors in the international arena. When examining the institutional design of international organizations, the book carefully deconstructs the common perception of these institutions as efficient mechanisms for fostering cooperation, challenging readers to reconsider the influence of power and interest balances in shaping institutional designs.

Miras explores the dilemma faced by the great powers between their desire to uphold the status quo and the recognition of the need for change, thus guiding readers to a nuanced understanding of the complexities these powers navigate as they face new realities on the world stage, and new boundaries middle powers can test while serving increasingly as facilitators.

The book therefore probes the role and strategies of middle powers within global organizations, while also examining the shifting landscape of regional cooperation. I enjoyed the deep dive into more recent forums such as the G20 and MIKTA and have come away with a better understanding of these dynamic mechanisms.

Importantly, the book concludes with offering a bold perspective on the evolution of middle power diplomacy in the 21st century. It emphasizes the needed transition from contested to resilient multilateralism. I recall that some years ago, I had the opportunity to discuss with some countries' leadership the role of middle-power countries such as Kazakhstan or South Korea could play against the

background of great power competition. We agreed that the fate of our planet is too important to leave it in the hands of just two or so countries, as powerful as they may be. Miras Zhiyenbayev offers a compelling narrative for middle power democracies: they have agency. Their leadership roles in a post-US hegemony world will be ever more important, a proposition that is both timely and provocative.

"Widening the Scope: How Middle Powers are Changing Liberal Institutionalism" is a significant contribution to the field of international relations. It deftly combines theoretical rigor with real-world relevance, providing valuable insights for scholars, practitioners, and anyone interested in understanding the complex dynamics of our geopolitical landscape.

It is my sincere hope that this work sparks much-needed debate and discussion amongst academicians and practitioners alike, and I am confident that it will inspire future research on this important topic.

Shigeo Katsu

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Former Vice President
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PREFACE

At the time of penning these words, the global political landscape is witnessing a crisis that is possibly the most consequential since the end of the Second World War. This crisis emerged, not from the global economy, but from the failure of international governance structures to manage the evolving balance of power effectively. This inability has manifested in a myriad of political disputes and power struggles that have touched nearly every corner of the world.

Organizations that govern global politics and economies – including the United Nations (UN), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), – find themselves grappling with severe crises of legitimacy and efficiency. Notably, these entities seem unable to stem the tide of unilateral or bilateral action from powerful states, demonstrating a gap between the existing mechanisms of international governance and the shifting distribution of global power.

This political crisis has underscored the weaknesses of these institutions, reflecting a growing dissonance with the realities of the global political landscape. Significant reforms have been proposed in the architecture of international governance, mirroring similar calls within the IMF and the EU. However, the adequacy of these reforms

remains in question as power struggles between leading nations persist.

The essence of the issue lies in the apparent inability of these organizations to represent a unified world government effectively. As the global power balance continues to shift, these institutions are being challenged to reinvent themselves and their modus operandi. Failing to do so risks perpetuating a system that is no longer effective in managing global political dynamics and containing power struggles between the world's most powerful nations.

In the face of these challenges, it becomes increasingly evident that numerous states are gravitating towards unilateral or bilateral policy solutions, reflecting a growing disillusionment with multilateral institutions. This drift threatens to undermine the fundamental principle of international governance – collective problem-solving in the pursuit of global peace and stability.

As we navigate this new era of global political crisis, the need for effective international governance that can adapt to the shifting global power dynamics becomes more pressing than ever. Confronted with the question of whether they should maintain their engagement in the realm of great power politics or abstain from it, it becomes apparent that global governance institutions cannot merely continue their traditional roles without substantial evolution. The escalating global power contests necessitate that these institutions transform fundamentally, not just superficially, in order to bolster their legitimacy and efficacy within the increasingly complex and contentious international milieu.

This endeavor was originally intended as an exploration of the governance mechanisms of international organizations, but as the guiding principles behind such governance unraveled, it became evident that the insights gained could be applied to a wide array of issues, that limit middle powers in such organization. However, it quickly became apparent that many of my previously held beliefs were flawed.

While it is well known that the UN often struggles with the balance of power among its member states, it is especially revealing to see the extent to which middle powers often have limited influence or leverage. The greater powers, meanwhile, tend to sidestep accusations or resolutions with impunity, further entrenching an imbalance within the system.

In my effort to make sense of these dynamics, I reviewed the models of reformation broadly applicable to international organizations, shedding light on the mechanisms and constraints that shape their actions. Consequently, this project evolved from a study of the international organization and major political crises into an examination of shaping role of middle powers in evolution of international institutions.

This work deviates from the prevalent belief among scholars of international organizations, which holds these institutions as intrinsically efficient and architected purposefully to foster cooperation. Such a view finds its roots in the robust intellectual tradition within organizational economics and an influential branch of research in international relations.

The design of these institutions is primarily dictated by the equilibrium of power and interests. In this context, the role and influence of middle powers in these organizations emerge as crucial factors. Middle powers, caught between the ambitions of smaller nations and the hegemony of the great powers, often serve as brokers and bridge builders. They aim to negotiate and balance power and interests, but their ability to do so is often limited by the dominance of the major powers, and despite their potential collaborative endeavors, appears insufficient in proposing alternatives to the prevailing dynamics of great power politics. This insufficiency originates not merely from the disparities in their relative power but also fundamentally from the inherent divergences in their perspectives towards global governance.

These divergences are demonstrably manifested in the distinctive capacities and aspirations of middle powers to exert influence and project power on the global stage. The differential power projection capabilities and intentions of middle powers, compared to those of great powers, underscore their unique worldviews, which are often fundamentally incompatible with the more dominant paradigms of great power politics.

Additionally, these middle powers frequently find themselves navigating the tension between the need for change and the desire to maintain the status quo. While the existing order may limit their influence, it also provides a degree of predictability and stability. As such, middle powers can simultaneously push for reforms to increase their say in the institutions while advocating for the preservation of elements of the status quo that serve their interests.

The involvement of these middle powers in international organizations thus adds another layer of complexity to the already intricate dynamic of institutional design. It underscores the argument that these designs are indeed more about balancing power and interests rather than merely minimizing costs. As such, any comprehensive understanding of international organizations must consider these factors and their interplay within the larger global context.

In the first part of the book, we embark on a comprehensive examination of the theory and practice of liberal institutionalism, particularly in the context of a monopolar world where a single great power dominates the global stage. We scrutinize how this dominant power and its actions shape the dynamics of international organizations and their ability to foster cooperation and interdependence among nations.

One of the primary focus in this section is the role international organizations play in maintaining the status quo. We discuss the dynamics between the dominant powers and these organizations, and how these interactions either uphold or challenge the existing global order. This involves a critical analysis of the ways in which the status quo is preserved, both through the overt actions of great powers and the more subtle mechanisms of these institutions.

We then delve into the ongoing debate between bilateral and multilateral relations, examining their relevance and impact in today's world. This exploration raises questions about the necessity and relevance of global institutions. Are they becoming redundant in an era

where bilateral relations seem to be the preferred mode of interaction for the great powers, or do they still play a crucial role in maintaining global stability?

Lastly, we address the criticism that international organizations are marked by inefficiency and indecisiveness, leading to what some describe as a systemic crisis of institutionalism. Here, we analyze the sources of these perceived shortcomings, investigate their impact on the overall functionality of these organizations, and discuss potential pathways towards resolving this crisis.

This initial part of the book sets the stage for the arguments and analyses to follow, providing a foundation upon which we build a nuanced understanding of liberal institutionalism, the role of great powers, and the future of international organizations in our increasingly complex world.

In the second chapter of the book, we explore the critical role that middle powers play in international organizations and how they contribute to addressing global challenges at a regional level. This segment delves into the strategies and limitations of these middle powers, offering an understanding of how they navigate the dynamics of larger geopolitical forces and local realities.

We further investigate the changing landscape of multilateral regional cooperation. The shifting balances of power and evolving geopolitical landscape necessitate a thorough evaluation of regional alliances and their impact on global politics. Here, we assess the ways in which regional cooperation is adapting to these new realities

and the role international organizations play in facilitating these changes.

The emergence and evolution of the G20 is an illustrative case of this dynamic, as it has progressively matured into a significant player in global governance. As a forum that unites a diverse array of nations, both from the traditional great powers (e.g., the US, China) and from the emerging economies (India or Brazil), the G20 symbolizes an alternative model to the dichotomy of great powers versus the rest.

Instead, it exemplifies the concept of “middle power diplomacy”. The G20 embodies this model of governance by creating a platform where middle powers can engage with the great ones on relatively equal footing. It acknowledges the growing importance of emerging economies and provides them with a voice in shaping the global economic policy discourse, while also recognizing the continuing role of the traditional powers.

Indeed, an increasingly dynamic form of international cooperation has arisen from middle powers, as embodied by the MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, Australia) forum and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Both groupings offer a distinct perspective on middle power cooperation and represent promising examples of alternative models of governance.

MIKTA, as a forum of middle powers from diverse geographical and economic backgrounds, presents a unique model of cooperation. These countries, although disparate in their regional affiliations, share common characteristics in their influence in global politics. They are economically significant yet not dominant, regionally

influential but not hegemonic, and active in global affairs without the comprehensive capabilities of great powers. MIKTA countries have shown a particular aptitude for harnessing their collective diplomatic influence to advocate for shared interests and norms on the global stage.

In the final chapter of this book, we explore the ascendancy of middle power diplomacy as a potent force in the 21st-century multilateral landscape. We undertake a comprehensive study of the transition from contested to resilient multilateralism, reorienting the discussion away from the traditional understanding of power dynamics.

We will then focus on multilateralism, a characteristic feature of middle power diplomacy. It is through this lens that we will dissect the intricate interplay between middle powers and international institutions, analyzing the implications for global governance. We examine the ways in which middle powers, with their emphasis on cooperation and consensus, contribute to the strengthening and evolution of the multilateral order.

Subsequently, we will examine the concept of middle power democracies, specifically focusing on their evolving leadership roles in the absence of US hegemony. The post-American world order offers an intriguing backdrop to observe the dynamics of middle powers and their potential to drive global initiatives and policies. The analysis will delve into how middle power democracies navigate this geopolitical context, and the strategies they employ to project influence and pursue their international objectives.

Following this, we present an in-depth study of Turkey as a case example of middle power activism. In recent years, Turkey has become an increasingly prominent

actor in international relations, using its growing influence to challenge the existing global order. This examination will explore how Turkey, as a middle power, leverages its geopolitical, economic, and cultural influence to challenge and reshape the system in which it operates.

In the final section, we turn our gaze to Central Asia, a region of increasing strategic importance in the wake of receding great power influences. Particularly, we question if Kazakhstan, emerging as a significant regional player, can fill the power vacuum left by the retreat of traditional great powers. This exploration will delve into Kazakhstan's potential and the implications of its ascension for the future dynamics of Central Asia, providing insights into the shifting power dynamics in a post-Great Game world.

INTRODUCTION

Liberal Institutionalism (LI), a cornerstone theory in the field of International Relations (IR), continues to shape our understanding of global governance, economic interdependence, and multinational cooperation. Rooted in liberal thought, this perspective assumes that international institutions play a crucial role in mitigating anarchy, establishing order, and promoting cooperation among states (Keohane and Martin, 1995).

The evolution of liberal institutionalism is marked by significant milestones. Initially, it developed as a response to the realist outlook, which emphasizes conflict and competition among states in a condition of anarchy (Mearsheimer, 1994). Liberal institutionalists argue that international institutions can, in fact, foster cooperation and improve the prospects for peace. A prominent example was the establishment of the United Nations after World War II, designed to prevent global conflict and foster international cooperation.

Liberal institutionalism gained significant traction during the post-Cold War era, and this period will form the primary focus of our discussion. The end of the bipolar world order provided fertile ground for liberal institutionalist ideas, as evidenced by the rise of various international institutions, particularly in the economic sphere, like the

World Trade Organization (WTO) (Simmons and Martin, 2002).

Two main approaches to liberal institutionalism exist, each focusing on a different mechanism through which institutions promote cooperation. The first, often referred to as “rational institutionalism”, posits that institutions reduce transaction costs and provide information, thus facilitating cooperation among rational, self-interested actors (Keohane, 1984).

The second approach, known as “constructive institutionalism”, emphasizes the role of institutions in shaping states’ identities and interests, arguing that institutions can construct social realities and influence actors’ preferences and behaviors (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998).

Moving forward, we will be employing a blend of the two aforementioned approaches – rational institutionalism and constructive institutionalism – to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the role and influence of great and middle powers in international organizations.

The liberal world order, underpinned by the principles of liberal institutionalism, indeed appears to be facing one of its most severe crises since the height of the Cold War. This crisis is both political, stemming from shifting power dynamics and geopolitical unrest, and conceptual, arising from an increasing uncertainty about the potential for reform and adaptation within the existing institutional frameworks.

Politically, the crisis can be traced to the rise of new powers challenging the existing order, the resurgence of nationalism and protectionism in many parts of the

world, and a growing disillusionment with liberal norms and institutions (Ikenberry, 2018). The liberal world order, historically championed by Western powers, is increasingly being tested by emerging economies like China and India that demand a greater say in international decision-making processes (Acharya, 2014). This changing geopolitical landscape has cast doubts on the ability of existing institutions to maintain the status quo.

Conceptually, liberal institutionalism is grappling with the challenge of responding effectively to these new realities. The theory, traditionally predicated on the idea of reducing anarchy and promoting cooperation through international institutions, now faces the paradox of an increasingly multipolar world where power is more diffused and the role of state actors is more complex (Keohane, 1984).

Moreover, the ‘institutionalism by projection’ approach – the practice of established powers projecting their institutional models onto the international system – is also under scrutiny (Pouliot & Cornut, 2015). Critics argue that this approach fails to accommodate the diverse perspectives and needs of non-Western nations, thereby contributing to the perceived legitimacy crisis of international institutions (Lake, 2009).

Another significant strand of criticism argues that institutionalism, as a cornerstone of international relations theory, is facing a systemic crisis characterized by inefficiency and indecisiveness (Mearsheimer, 1994; Barnett & Finnemore, 2004).

Institutional inefficiency can stem from various sources. Internally, the bureaucratic structure of international organizations can lead to procedural

complexities and delay in decision-making (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004). Externally, the diversity of member states and their conflicting interests can create deadlocks in negotiations, impeding the capacity of these institutions to respond swiftly to emerging challenges (Koremenos et al., 2001).

Indecisiveness is another challenge that is often attributed to the consensus-based decision-making model followed by many international institutions. While this model underscores the principle of sovereign equality, it can also lead to prolonged deliberations and difficulty reaching agreement, particularly in contentious matters (Hurd, 2007). For example, the United Nations Security Council has been criticized for its indecisiveness in addressing certain conflicts and humanitarian crises due to the veto power of its permanent members (Malone, 2004).

Furthermore, critics argue that international institutions, at times, lack the enforcement capacity to ensure compliance with their decisions (Downs et al., 1996). This issue becomes especially pertinent in matters of war and political decisions where national interests can overshadow institutional mandates, further questioning the effectiveness of institutionalism (Mearsheimer, 1994).

At the heart of the crisis lies the uncertainty over whether international institutions can evolve and adapt to reflect the changing realities. Can the liberal world order, as we know it, undergo the necessary reforms to remain relevant and legitimate in an increasingly multipolar world? The answer to this question is critical for the future trajectory of international relations and global governance.

International organizations have a significant role in maintaining the status quo in global politics, a role heavily influenced by the strategic maneuvers of great powers. These influences from great powers may be either direct or indirect, which are often termed as ‘explicit’ and ‘implicit’ influences respectively.

Explicit influence refers to the direct power and control that great powers exert within international organizations. This could be through their voting power in decision-making processes, control over financial resources, or the ability to impose sanctions or rewards (Koremenos et al., 2001). For example, the United States and other great powers possess a significant voting share in the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, allowing them a high degree of control over these institutions’ policies (Woods, 2003).

On the other hand, implicit influence is subtler and more indirect. It could manifest in the way that great powers shape the norms, values, and decision-making paradigms within international organizations. This indirect influence can create an environment where policies and actions align with the interests of these powers, even without explicit coercion (Barnett and Finnemore, 2004). A prominent example is the propagation of liberal market principles within the WTO and IMF, a reflection of the ideological leanings of the Western great powers (Stiglitz, 2002).

Maintaining the status quo is often in the interest of great powers, as it preserves the existing power hierarchies and structures that enable their continued dominance. International organizations, influenced by the explicit and implicit mechanisms of great power control, often play a significant role in sustaining this status quo, though

they can also become arenas for contestation and change (Gruber, 2000).

The growing complexity of global issues underscores the reality that no single nation or group of nations can tackle these problems alone. The intricate and interconnected nature of global challenges, including climate change, global health pandemics, nuclear proliferation, and cyber threats, necessitates concerted multinational cooperation (Hale, 2016).

The geopolitical landscape is further complicated by the rise of new powers and non-state actors, shifts in economic power, and growing interdependence among nations. In this increasingly multipolar world, the capacity of great powers to single-handedly dictate global norms and policies is challenged (Ikenberry, 2018).

International organizations, by their design, provide a platform for cooperation and dialogue among nations. However, as arenas for contestation, they can also facilitate the articulation of alternative perspectives and the negotiation of power shifts. In this context, middle powers and emerging economies often play significant roles, striving to bridge the gap between the established great powers and the developing world (Jordaan, 2003).

The world is facing a panoply of mounting global challenges that include climate change, pandemics, economic inequality, nuclear proliferation, and cyber threats, among others. These issues transcend national borders, and thus, they necessitate international cooperation to effectuate meaningful solutions. An increasing body of literature is highlighting the evolving role

of middle powers and regional cooperation in addressing these global challenges (Cooper et al., 2013).

Middle powers – nations that have moderate influence in the international arena but are not superpowers – are increasingly playing significant roles in the global governance landscape. They act as mediators, norm entrepreneurs, and bridge-builders between the global North and South, contributing to the resolution of complex global issues.

Middle powers occupy a significant, yet often overlooked, space in the international system. These nations are typically characterized by their middling economic and military capabilities, balanced geopolitical influence, and commitment to multilateral diplomacy and international law. Middle powers can further be divided into two categories: traditional or ‘classic’ middle powers and emerging middle powers. Classic middle powers include nations like Australia, Canada, and the Netherlands, which, though not global powerhouses, have long histories of playing outsized roles in global affairs through their influence in international organizations and commitment to global norms (Cooper, 1997).

Emerging middle powers, on the other hand, refer to countries like India, Brazil, and South Africa that have gained increasing influence in recent decades due to their rising economic and geopolitical clout. These countries often seek a greater voice in international affairs to match their newfound power, and they might challenge existing international norms even as they seek to influence them.

When considering middle powers with a regional presence and interests, both rational institutionalism

and constructive institutionalism offer valuable insights. Rational institutionalism can explain how such powers use international organizations to advance their regional interests and obtain strategic benefits (Keohane, 1984). At the same time, constructive institutionalism can shed light on how these powers' identities and behaviors are influenced by regional norms and institutions (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998).

However, for a more nuanced understanding of these middle powers' behaviors and influences, a hybrid approach combining elements from both theories may be beneficial. It would allow us to understand how strategic considerations and normative influences interplay to shape middle powers' roles in international organizations (Nossal, 2000).

Middle powers, as rational actors, interact with international institutions in a way that advances their national interests, reduces uncertainty, and achieves the benefits of cooperation. Simultaneously, these middle powers are also subject to the normative influence of the institutions they participate in, with these institutions potentially shaping their identities, interests, and behavior. This dual approach will provide a more nuanced perspective on the mutual influence between middle powers and international organizations, taking into account both the instrumental benefits and normative impacts.

This approach not only mirrors the complex nature of international relations, but also addresses the interactions between middle powers and international institutions at both the pragmatic and the ideational levels. Our ensuing analysis will unpack this interplay and elucidate how

middle powers navigate, contribute to, and are influenced by international institutions in the post-Cold War world.

As we move forward into an increasingly interconnected world, the complex dynamics of international relations require careful analysis. One particular area of inquiry that has sparked considerable debate in recent years is the relative effectiveness and relevance of bilateral versus multilateral relations. The central question here is whether global institutions, which predominantly follow a multilateral approach, are becoming redundant in the face of bilateral dynamics.

Bilateral relations refer to the direct interactions, agreements, or collaborations between two states. These relations are characterized by their simplicity and pragmatism, often facilitating quick decision-making and implementation (Dür et al., 2010). In contrast, multilateral relations involve multiple states or international organizations. While multilateral diplomacy can be more complex and time-consuming, it is believed to offer a broader and more comprehensive platform for cooperation, potentially achieving shared objectives that might be difficult to accomplish bilaterally (Keohane, 1990).

However, recent trends suggest that bilateral relationships are gaining increased prominence in international politics, posing challenges to the primacy of multilateral approaches. Some argue that this shift may signal the redundancy of global institutions, particularly in the context of the rise of nationalist sentiments, diminishing trust in multilateral institutions, and the perceived inefficiency of these institutions (Mearsheimer, 2019).

Regional cooperation represents another significant facet of global governance. By leveraging geographical proximity and shared cultural, economic, and political ties, regional entities can collaborate more effectively and efficiently to address common challenges. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the European Union (EU), and the African Union (AU) are primary examples of regional cooperation, each with unique methods of problem-solving and conflict resolution (Börzel and Risse, 2016).

Two main approaches shape regional cooperation: the functionalist approach and the constructivist approach. The functionalist perspective emphasizes the role of common interests and rational decision-making, suggesting that cooperation is a result of mutual benefits to be gained (Mitrany, 1966). In contrast, the constructivist approach focuses on shared norms, values, and identities, arguing that these factors form the basis for regional cooperation (Adler, 1997).

Within these structures of regional cooperation, middle powers often play an essential role. These nations hold substantial influence within their regions and on certain global issues, often ‘punching above their weight’ in international diplomacy. The role of middle powers in regional cooperation can be understood from multiple dimensions.

First, middle powers often act as mediators and bridge-builders, leveraging their diplomatic influence to facilitate negotiation and consensus-building. With their unique position between the great powers and smaller states, middle powers can understand and reconcile

different perspectives, fostering more inclusive and balanced outcomes. Examples include Norway's role in peace negotiations and Australia's leadership in forming the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC).

Second, middle powers frequently serve as norm entrepreneurs, advocating for international norms and principles that they believe should guide regional cooperation (Ingebritsen, 2002). By doing so, they can shape the regional agenda, promoting issues such as human rights, democracy, and environmental sustainability. Canada's advocacy for human security in the 1990s and Sweden's commitment to gender equality are illustrative examples.

Third, middle powers can also contribute to capacity-building and technical cooperation in their regions. They often have the resources and expertise to support other countries in areas such as economic development, public health, and disaster management, thereby enhancing regional resilience and stability (Soeya, 2011).

The landscape of multilateral regional cooperation is undergoing substantial change, marked by shifting power dynamics and increasing regionalization. This transformation is characterized by a dual phenomenon: on the one hand, great powers are losing some of their global dominance and are seeking to compensate for this loss through regional cooperation; on the other hand, middle powers are stepping up to address region-specific problems, increasingly becoming key actors in regional governance.

Great powers, such as the United States and China, are witnessing a relative decline in their global presence

due to a range of factors, including economic shifts, increasing multipolarity, and the resurgence of nationalism (Breslin, 2016). To retain their influence, these powers are adopting strategies to strengthen their regional footprints. The U.S., for instance, has been recalibrating its foreign policy focus towards the Indo-Pacific region through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, a strategic forum comprising the U.S., Australia, India, and Japan (Medcalf, 2020). Similarly, China's Belt and Road Initiative demonstrates its ambition to build extensive regional networks through infrastructure development and economic cooperation (Nadège, 2018).

Concurrently, middle powers are emerging as crucial players in addressing region-specific problems. Their understanding of local contexts, diplomatic agility, and commitment to multilateralism uniquely position them to mediate conflicts, promote norm diffusion, and facilitate regional integration. Australia's leadership in forming the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and Norway's role in the Middle East peace process exemplify the impact that middle powers can have on regional cooperation (Jordaan, 2003; Ingebritsen, 2002).

Furthermore, regional cooperation among middle powers can generate solutions to region-specific issues that transcend national borders, such as migration, environmental degradation, and public health crises. An example of this is the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization, where countries like Brazil, Colombia, and Peru work together to address environmental challenges in the Amazon basin (Flemes, 2010).

In essence, the changing landscape of multilateral regional cooperation is characterized by a diffusion of power, with great powers seeking to bolster their regional influence and middle powers assuming a more prominent role in resolving regional issues.

Transnational cooperation also includes intra-regional connectivity, which are increasingly marked by the blurring of national borders and the intensification of cross-border interactions. In this context, middle powers are becoming indispensable actors, especially due to their ability to bridge gaps, facilitate dialogues, and stimulate reforms in international organizations.

The inclusion of middle powers in international organizations is important for multiple reasons. Firstly, these states can bring unique perspectives to the table, given their often hybrid position between developing and developed countries. This allows them to provide a balanced view on global issues, potentially helping to narrow the North-South divide.

Secondly, middle powers often possess considerable diplomatic and normative influence, which they can leverage to promote certain principles and norms within international organizations (Ingebritsen, 2002). This includes, for instance, advocating for human rights, democracy, and environmental sustainability. The impact of middle powers can also be seen in their ability to shape agendas and guide discussions towards these areas.

Lastly, middle powers can play a vital role in amending and reforming the procedures of international organizations without formal changes. Through their diplomatic efforts, they can influence the culture and

practices within these organizations, thereby facilitating procedural changes ‘from within’. This can involve advocating for more transparent decision-making processes, greater inclusivity, and better representation of different regions and interests (Cooper et al., 2013). An example of this is the ‘MIKTA’ group of middle powers (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, and Australia) that has been advocating for reform in the practices and procedures of the United Nations.

As was already mentioned, reforming international organizations represents a significant challenge in the realm of global governance. This is due, in large part, to the vested interests of great powers in maintaining the status quo, given that these existing structures often underpin their dominance (Gruber, 2000). As such, any significant proposed reforms may face resistance from these powers who perceive a threat to their established privileges and power positions.

In contrast, middle powers typically face fewer constraints when it comes to reforming international organizations. They attract less attention and therefore are less likely to provoke strong opposition or engender geopolitical rivalries. Furthermore, because they lack the ability to dominate global governance structures, middle powers have less invested in preserving the status quo and are more open to changes that could make these institutions more representative, efficient, and effective (Adler and Greve, 2009).

This relative freedom allows middle powers to exploit opportunities to instigate or support reforms. This may involve lobbying for procedural changes, promoting

inclusivity, and pushing for greater transparency within these organizations. A case in point is the role of countries like Canada, Norway, and Australia in advocating for reforms within the United Nations system, including the Security Council (Cooper, 2013).

However, it's important to note that while middle powers can capitalize on these opportunities, their capacity to drive substantial reforms should not be overestimated. Changes in international organizations usually require a wider consensus that encompasses both middle and great powers. Consequently, the effectiveness of middle powers in initiating and advancing reforms often relies on their diplomatic skills, strategic alliances, and the prevailing geopolitical context.

Middle powers have been influential in shaping and implementing humanitarian action. They often have the resources, credibility, and diplomatic capacity to advocate for and facilitate humanitarian efforts. Countries like Canada, Norway, and Sweden, for instance, have played significant roles in shaping global norms around humanitarian intervention and in mobilizing responses to humanitarian crises. By leveraging their institutional agency within international organizations, these middle powers can help to prioritize humanitarian action on the global agenda and coordinate effective responses.

Middle powers also have a long-standing tradition of acting as mediators in international disputes, using their 'in-between' status to bridge divides between conflicting parties. Norway's involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and Indonesia's role in facilitating dialogue in the South China Sea disputes exemplify this mediating

role (Ramsbotham, 2011). By providing impartial spaces for negotiation and leveraging their diplomatic networks, middle powers can contribute to the maintenance of international power equilibrium.

As an attempt to better understand the potential roles and opportunities available to middle powers in global governance, it can be useful to conduct case studies on a regional level and extrapolate the findings to a broader context. Regional case studies allow us to delve into the specificities of middle power dynamics, examining the unique strategies and mechanisms these nations use to exert influence.

Central Asia, a region traditionally seen as a geopolitical playing field for great powers, has witnessed a notable shift towards ‘middle power diplomacy’, particularly in the case of Kazakhstan. As one of the region’s key economic and political players, Kazakhstan has leveraged its regional power status to influence regional dynamics and elevate the status of regional institutions.

The term ‘middle power diplomacy’ refers to the diplomatic strategies employed by middle powers to influence global or regional outcomes, often through mediation, norm entrepreneurship, and bridge-building between other states (Cooper, Heine, and Thakur, 2013). In the Central Asian context, this often involves promoting regional cooperation, resolving conflicts, and driving economic integration.

Kazakhstan’s effectiveness in its diplomatic strategies can be attributed to several factors. First, it has shown a unique ability to balance its relationships with major

powers such as Russia, China, and the United States, maintaining cordial relations without overt alignment with any single power (Anceschi, 2014). This balance has allowed it to maintain a degree of independence and strategic maneuverability in its foreign policy.

Second, Kazakhstan has consistently pushed for regional integration and cooperation within Central Asia, promoting dialogue and consensus-building among neighboring states. This is best exemplified by its role in the establishment and development of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) (Cummings and Nørgaard, 2004).

Third, Kazakhstan has effectively utilized its vast natural resources, particularly oil and gas, as a source of economic and political leverage. Its energy diplomacy has enabled it to attract foreign investment, boost economic development, and enhance its regional and global standing (Overland, 2016).

Lastly, Kazakhstan's 'multi-vector' foreign policy, which involves cultivating diverse partnerships and balancing between different global powers, has helped it to navigate complex regional dynamics and maintain stability (Kassenova, 2017).

In the context of the book, 'middle power diplomacy' represents a significant case study of how middle powers can elevate their influence and the status of regional institutions in a geopolitically contested region. The Central Asian case study of Kazakhstan, for instance, provides us with rich insights into how a middle powers can leverage their resources, geographic position, and diplomatic strategies to foster regional cooperation,

mediate conflicts, and drive institutional development. It offers valuable lessons about the role of energy diplomacy, balanced foreign policy, and regional integration efforts in enhancing a middle power's standing and influence.

Such regionally specific observations can then be extrapolated to shed light on the potential roles of middle powers in the wider international arena. By drawing parallels between the regional dynamics observed in these case studies and the broader global context, we can identify strategies and approaches that middle powers could potentially employ to influence international outcomes.

Therefore, the premise of this book lies in the exploration of the ongoing crisis in institutionalism, the role of middle powers in addressing this crisis, and a focused case study on the Central Asian region to expand these ideas. We delve into the concept of liberal institutionalism, the dynamics of great power politics, and the systemic issues that have precipitated a crisis in the international institutional order.

We also discuss how great powers maintain the status quo through international organizations and assess the impact of both bilateral and multilateral relations on the redundancy of global institutions. Further, we evaluate the systemic inefficiency and indecisiveness that characterize the crisis in institutionalism. Our case study of Central Asia provides a regional perspective on these global phenomena, helping us to develop a nuanced understanding of how middle powers can leverage their unique capabilities to influence change in the international institutional landscape.

In essence, this book is a journey through the crisis and opportunities of institutionalism, the evolving role of middle powers, and the dynamic and complex regional geopolitical landscapes that shape our world. By unpacking these dynamics, we hope to provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of global governance and to chart potential pathways towards a more effective, equitable, and sustainable international order.

However, while this extrapolation can provide useful insights, it's important to bear in mind the unique characteristics of different regional contexts. The strategies that work in one region may not necessarily be effective in another due to varying geopolitical, economic, cultural, and historical contexts. Therefore, any extrapolation should be treated as suggestive rather than prescriptive, providing a starting point for further exploration and analysis.

CHAPTER I

LIBERAL INSTITUTIONALISM, GREAT AND MIDDLE POWERS: BEYOND COOPERATION AND INTERDEPENDENCE

The rise of liberal institutionalism after the Second World War stands out as both remarkable and, in certain respects, contradictory. Under American leadership, a far-reaching international system took shape, one that rested on principles of open markets, collective security, multilateral cooperation, and democratic partnership. Within this structure, the United States cast itself as the central actor—offering direction, projecting hegemonic influence, and serving as the stabilizing force behind alliances, economic integration, and the promotion of the values associated with the “free world.”

Western Europe and Japan became deeply embedded in this system, linking their defense strategies and economic development to its foundations. With the Cold War’s conclusion, the reach of this liberal order widened considerably, drawing in states across East Asia, Eastern Europe,

and Latin America that embraced democratic reform and global economic participation. The order's expansion was mirrored in the growth of its institutions: NATO welcomed new members, the World Trade Organization was created, and the G20 advanced to a position of significant global authority.

At the close of the twentieth century, one could be forgiven for perceiving a linear trajectory of progress and liberal internationalism in the world. However, an ironic analysis reveals certain contradictions and limitations within liberal institutionalism. While the order emphasized economic openness, it often favored the interests of the developed Western powers, leaving less affluent countries struggling to fully participate and reap the benefits of globalization. The rhetoric of democratic solidarity and human rights espoused by liberal institutionalism sometimes clashed with the realities of power politics, as the United States and its allies engaged in *realpolitik*, supporting autocratic regimes that served their strategic interests.

At the same time, the trajectory of liberal institutionalism encountered formidable obstacles. Transnational actors, particularly terrorist networks, challenged conventional models of state-centered governance and security. Persistent regional conflicts and deepening economic inequalities further eroded the optimistic vision of a stable and universally prosperous global order. The ascent of emerging powers, most notably China and India, altered existing power dynamics and forced reconsideration of how influence should be shared and negotiated within the evolving international system.

The tragic events of September 11, 2001, and subsequent security concerns diverted attention and resources toward counterterrorism efforts. As a result, liberal institutionalism sometimes took a backseat to unilateral actions, compromising the principles of multilateralism and raising questions about the true commitment to liberal values.

In this light, the narrative of a progressive and liberal internationalist direction appears somewhat idealistic and oversimplified. While liberal institutionalism achieved notable successes in promoting cooperation, stability, and democracy, its inherent contradictions and shortcomings suggest a more nuanced interpretation. The irony lies in the tension between the aspirational goals and the complex realities of power dynamics, economic disparities, and competing interests that shape international relations.

RISE AND FALL OF LIBERAL INSTITUTIONALISM IN MONOPOLAR WORLD

Classical Liberalism diverges sharply from realist assumptions that international politics is inevitably driven by rivalry and conflict over power. Liberal thinkers argue instead that enduring cooperation is possible when states organize into communities of shared values and reinforce these ties through domestic and international institutions. Such arrangements reduce the likelihood of unchecked competition, armed confrontation, and systemic instability.

Scholars of Liberal International Relations theory have consistently underscored the importance of international institutions in facilitating cooperation among states (Keohane 1984, 1989; Keohane & Nye 2000). From this perspective, institutions operate as arenas for interaction, creating rules and expectations that encourage collaborative behavior. Proponents maintain that states, acting as rational entities, tend to value the absolute benefits of cooperation more than the comparative advantages of their counterparts. In this view, institutions function as intervening mechanisms that shape state conduct by influencing policy priorities and guiding decision-making processes.

However, a critical analysis of this viewpoint by their counterparts in realist and neorealist theories (Grieco 1988; Walt 2002) raises some important questions. While liberal scholars advocate for the positive role of institutions in fostering cooperation, it is essential to consider the limitations and complexities inherent in their functioning. The assumption that states will always prioritize absolute gains and disregard relative gains is overly simplistic. States operate within a competitive international system, and concerns about relative power and influence often shape their decision-making processes. Furthermore, the effectiveness of institutions in mediating conflicts and encouraging sustained cooperation is not always guaranteed. Power dynamics, differing interests, and divergent policy preferences among states can hinder the ability of institutions to achieve meaningful consensus and cooperation.

Additionally, the notion that institutions act as intermediaries influencing state behavior overlooks the

agency and autonomy of states themselves. States are not mere passive actors shaped solely by institutional forces. They possess their own policy preferences, national interests, and strategic considerations that may or may not align with institutional goals. While institutions can provide a framework for interaction and facilitate cooperation, they do not guarantee homogeneity or convergence of interests among states.

By the mid-twentieth century, realist scholars, confronted with the rapid expansion of postwar institutional frameworks, attempted to fit these developments into their own theoretical lens. Influential works such as Morgenthau's *Politics among Nations* (1948) downplayed the independent significance of institutions, interpreting them instead as outward expressions of the prevailing balance of power. From this standpoint, institutions were regarded as secondary phenomena, with explanatory weight placed squarely on the behavior and interactions of states themselves.

Yet some realist analyses adopted a more differentiated view, most notably Charles Kindleberger's *The World in Depression* (1986). As an early advocate of what became known as "hegemonic stability theory," Kindleberger argued that the turbulence and economic dislocation of the 1930s stemmed from the absence of a single dominant power willing and able to uphold the international order. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the United States came to recognize both its capability and its interest in assuming this hegemonic role. Within this framework, the shared embrace of liberal ideals was not considered essential, since stability and peace could be secured primarily through the

self-interested enforcement of cooperation by a hegemonic power.

This portrayal underscores a critical viewpoint regarding the role of a hegemon within Liberal Institutionalism. Rather than emphasizing the collective pursuit of liberal values and shared norms, it suggests that the establishment of international institutions was primarily driven by the self-serving interests of the hegemon. The hegemon's actions were geared toward advancing its own agenda and maintaining control, rather than fostering genuine cooperation based on shared liberal principles.

While Liberal Institutionalism acknowledges the potential for sustained cooperation through institutions, such analysis highlights the tension between the pursuit of liberal values and the self-interest of the hegemonic power. It prompted scrutiny of the underlying motivations behind the establishment of international institutions and raises questions about the extent to which these institutions truly embody the principles of liberal internationalism.

More recent scholarship, exemplified by John Ikenberry's "After Victory", strives to reconcile realist and liberal perspectives on the phenomenon of post-war institution-building. In Ikenberry's analysis, state power retains its significance, but international institutions and liberal values also play pivotal roles. These institutions, once established, possess a remarkable resilience and resistance to change. They become entrenched, making it arduous to dismantle them. Consequently, a hegemonic state, at the zenith of its power, can utilize institutional rules to exercise self-restraint. Simultaneously, it can

extend its influence into the future, even as its raw power wanes.

An important claim follows from this reasoning: when a hegemon embeds liberal principles into the institutions it creates, these institutions can advance the rule of law and reflect the universal ideals long envisioned by thinkers such as Kant. The hegemon's initial willingness to exercise self-restraint provides a compelling incentive for other states to participate. As more states commit to the institution, its legitimacy and durability are reinforced, allowing it to become self-sustaining. This dynamic helps explain both the broad expansion and the lasting stability of the liberal order that emerged in the wake of World War II.

Although Liberalism struggled to interpret the catastrophic world wars, it experienced a significant renewal in their aftermath. This revival was evident in practice, through the institution-building and relative stability that characterized the second half of the twentieth century, and in theory, through the intellectual rehabilitation of liberal ideas.

Historically, Liberalism has tended to gain renewed influence precisely when confronted with rival theoretical approaches or disruptive global events. Such pressures have driven the evolution of new variants, eventually giving rise to the more sophisticated framework of Liberal Institutionalism that became influential from the 1970s onward. These episodes of challenge and adjustment illustrate Liberalism's enduring resilience and its capacity to adapt to changing international realities.

The stark contrast between the turmoil of the world wars and the subsequent era of institution-building and relative peace served as a catalyst for the revival of Liberalism. It navigated the complexities of international relations, offering a framework that resonated with the prevailing political realities and aspirations for stability. This ability to respond to changing circumstances and incorporate lessons from competing theories or unexpected historical events has been a hallmark of Liberalism's evolution.

The journey of Liberalism, from grappling with crises to flourishing amidst institution-building, demonstrates its capacity to evolve and regain relevance. The ongoing refinement and development of Liberal Institutionalism reflect its adaptability to address the complexities and challenges of a rapidly changing world. It is through these cyclical patterns of struggle, adaptation, and rejuvenation that Liberalism continues to shape and influence the field of international relations.

Such a view encourages us to appreciate the dynamic nature of theory, which adapts and evolves in response to political realities. The interplay between power dynamics, institutional rules, and liberal values shapes the trajectory and longevity of the liberal international order. It presents an ironic twist, as the self-restraint of a hegemon paradoxically helps foster a system that extends beyond its own supremacy.

The durability and expansion of the liberal international order are now under strain, particularly as liberal institutionalism has weakened in a world no longer dominated by a single pole of power.

Among rising middle powers, domestic reforms have slowed, contributing to a reorientation of their foreign policy engagement. Instances of democratic backsliding often originate from complex internal dynamics but have been intensified by the erosion of the liberal order and the growing momentum of deglobalization. Key elements in this process include the revival of trade protectionism, the spread of restrictive immigration policies, the stagnation of regional organizations traditionally aligned with liberal frameworks, and the rise of alternative institutional arrangements. These developments have undermined the foundations of pro-democracy and pro-market coalitions in recently democratized states, creating space for the consolidation and legitimation of more authoritarian leadership. As a result, middle powers facing internal or regional crises have shown reduced involvement in international institutions and have scaled back their efforts to promote norms in regional arenas, thereby placing additional pressure on the stability of the liberal order.

For a state to attain the status of a middle power, it must align its national capabilities with a foreign policy that privileges multilateral cooperation, mediation, coalition-building, and forms of niche diplomacy. Earlier discussions of middle power identity largely centered on advanced, stable democracies such as Canada and Australia. More recently, however, the framework has been applied to a wider set of rising states—including South Africa, Mexico, Turkey, Indonesia, and Malaysia—whose behavior is increasingly examined through the prism of middle power theory. These countries are categorized as middle powers not only because of their intermediate material resources

but also due to foreign policy strategies that highlight coalition-building, multilateral engagement, and diplomatic specialization. They are described as “emerging” because of their expanding economic and military capacities, their visible pursuit of greater influence in global affairs, and the recognition they receive from established powers and peers alike. Such recognition is often demonstrated through inclusion in prominent informal platforms, most notably the G20.

The recent slowdown of liberal reforms in several emerging middle powers has raised concerns about the durability and further expansion of the liberal international order. Domestic drivers of democratic backsliding have been compounded by broader systemic shifts linked to the weakening of the liberal order and the rise of deglobalization. These dynamics have eroded the foundations of pro-democracy and pro-market alliances, enabling the consolidation and legitimation of more authoritarian-leaning leadership. In turn, such conditions have prompted emerging middle powers to reduce their engagement in international organizations and to limit their advocacy of liberal norms in regional politics, creating additional strain on the stability of the global order. For states aspiring to middle-power standing, the path requires aligning material resources with a foreign policy centered on multilateral engagement, mediation, coalition-building, and forms of niche diplomacy. These newer middle powers are distinguished by their combination of moderate capabilities and foreign policy approaches that reinforce their claim to a more visible role in international affairs. These emerging middle powers have exhibited

considerable growth in military and economic capabilities and have secured recognition from their peer nations and established powers, signifying their ambition for an elevated status in global affairs.

The international political landscape is characterized by a stratified hierarchy of states. This hierarchy is constituted by the most influential global actors, the major powers, followed by middle powers with more limited resources and influence, and finally smaller states with the least power. The behaviors and strategic approaches of middle powers, due to their constrained capabilities, have a set of defining characteristics that differentiate them from their major power counterparts (Cooper et al., 1993). One of the key characteristics of middle power diplomacy is a preference for international institutions and a commitment to multilateralism. This proclivity stems from the belief that these institutions can function as constraining mechanisms for the dominant states, thereby creating a more level playing field (Ungerer, 2007). Middle powers often band together in international organizations, forming alliances to leverage their collective influence. A notable instance of this collaborative strategy can be observed in the Cairns Group, a coalition of agricultural exporting nations that successfully influenced the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) (McRae, 1998).

In addition to this, middle powers often adopt a strategy of “niche diplomacy”. This strategy involves focusing their resources and diplomatic efforts on specific areas of global governance where they have the capacity to exert influence (Cooper, 1997). Canada’s role in the Ottawa Treaty, which

led to the prohibition of anti-personnel mines, exemplifies this strategy. Likewise, the Rome Statute that established the International Criminal Court and the indefinite extension of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, both demonstrate the effective execution of niche diplomacy by middle powers (Axworthy, 1997; Thakur, 1998).

Moreover, middle powers frequently play important roles in mediating international conflicts. This is due in part to their reputation for impartiality, making them suitable candidates for facilitation and negotiation roles in a wide variety of conflicts (Evans, 1994).

These functions of middle powers are becoming increasingly important as the contemporary era is witnessing a crisis of institutionalism, as seen in the growing skepticism towards international organizations and agreements (Ikenberry, 2018). The shifting global balance of power and rising nationalism are exacerbating this crisis, which is further compounded by the deepening economic inequalities both within and among nations (Mearsheimer, 2018).

Although the crisis of institutionalism poses serious challenges for the stability of the international order, it also creates opportunities to rethink and reshape global governance arrangements (Scholte, 2011). Middle powers, given their inclination toward multilateralism and diplomacy, are well positioned to contribute to this process. Their material resources provide the basis for more activist foreign policies, yet the extent to which this activism is realized depends on multiple conditions. At the systemic level, moments of uncertainty—such as the post-Cold War transition or periods of financial turbulence—end to expand the space for middle-power initiatives, as

does the broader diffusion of power within the international system. At the domestic level, leadership styles and party ideologies shape the degree of international engagement, as evidenced by cases like Canada and Australia. For emerging middle powers, steady economic growth and progress in democratization enhance the ability to devote greater attention and resources to external affairs, thereby strengthening confidence on the global stage. In addition, rapid improvements in material capabilities often motivate these states to pursue higher status through more visible and assertive roles in international politics.

Throughout the Cold War, middle powers in Europe and East Asia played a supportive role in the creation and maintenance of the liberal international order under U.S. leadership. They derived significant advantages from the security guarantees and economic openness embedded in this system and demonstrated a commitment to its preservation. In the post-Cold War era, newly rising middle powers have similarly drawn benefits from the order while contributing to its stability. These states have been active participants in multilateral bodies such as the United Nations and high-level forums like the G20, where they have built coalitions with like-minded partners to advance common goals. Within these arenas, they have sought to position themselves as bridges between industrialized and developing countries, broadening the scope of issues addressed and strengthening institutional legitimacy. Moreover, emerging middle powers have extended their engagement to causes that transcend narrow national interests, including the defense of human rights.

In the post-Cold War era, emerging middle powers made valuable contributions to the liberal international order, particularly by advancing democratic governance and market-oriented reforms within their regions. Their rise was facilitated by domestic transformations undertaken in earlier decades, which fostered economic development, greater political openness, and social stability. These conditions enhanced their capacity to project soft power, enabling them to encourage democratization, promote economic interdependence, and support cooperative frameworks in their immediate neighborhoods. In doing so, they played an important role in diffusing the norms of the liberal order and extending Kantian principles of peace to states on the periphery.

Yet, more recently, reversals in democratic and economic reforms have weakened the soft power appeal of these emerging middle powers and diminished their proactive engagement in support of the liberal order. Domestic crises and tendencies toward democratic erosion heighten uncertainty in their foreign policy orientations and threaten to dilute their commitment to multilateral approaches. Under such conditions, emerging middle powers may gravitate toward more assertive or even confrontational external policies, show resistance to established international norms, and rely on transactional dealings with regional and global institutions. This evolution risks undermining their credibility as dependable coalition partners and their effectiveness as mediators and consensus-builders in multilateral settings.

The role of emerging middle powers in advancing issues such as human rights, resource governance, and

broader regional norms becomes increasingly limited when their domestic foundations weaken. Democratic regression and stalled reforms erode their credibility, raising doubts about their neutrality and diminishing their capacity to serve as legitimate advocates for liberal values. When economic institutions fail to generate growth or democratic practices lose integrity, these states risk being perceived as inconsistent or even hypocritical in their promotion of international norms.

Although their earlier rise strengthened the liberal international order by reinforcing its institutions and principles, the stagnation or decline of emerging middle powers carries destabilizing consequences, particularly at a moment when the order already faces multiple external challenges. As their influence wanes, they contribute less to legitimizing and sustaining multilateral organizations, and their engagement in specialized areas of diplomacy or norm diffusion recedes. In place of serving as mediators and stabilizers, they may increasingly function as sources of tension and disruption within their regions. This trajectory underscores how the decline of emerging middle powers can threaten both regional security and the broader liberal order—an angle that remains underexplored in much of the scholarship on middle powers. Therefore, we must recognize that theories, like the liberal institutionalist framework, are not static dogmas but dynamic constructs that transform as they encounter the complexities of international relations. The success and endurance of the liberal world order, built upon post-war institutions, reflect a delicate balance between the exercise of power, the preservation of liberal values, and the enduring influence of institutional rules.

BILATERAL VS. MULTILATERAL COOPERATION – REDUNDANCY OF GLOBAL INSTITUTIONS

The notion of multilateralism, while widely employed in International Relations discourse, has long been recognized for its conceptual ambiguity and varied interpretations, as highlighted in earlier scholarship (Keohane, 1990; Cox, 1992; Ruggie, 1992). Keohane (1990, p. 731) offers a foundational definition, describing it as “the practice of coordinating national policies in groups of three or more states, through ad hoc arrangements or by means of institutions.” Building on this, Ruggie (1992, p. 572) identifies three distinct domains in which multilateral interactions operate: international orders, international regimes, and international organizations.

Liberal institutionalist approaches encompass a diverse set of perspectives that emphasize the growing international integration of states and societies. They developed in response to the shortcomings of earlier theories—most notably classical realism and rational choice frameworks—which proved insufficient for capturing the complexity of global interactions. At the heart of liberal institutionalism lies a strong commitment to multilateralism, viewed as an essential instrument for resolving governance challenges linked to both efficiency and legitimacy.

John Ikenberry (2016) argues that the character of an international order reflects the attributes of the state that has the ability to construct it. Historically, such orders have typically been established by dominant powers in the

aftermath of major conflicts—so-called “ordering moments” (Ikenberry, 2001). These arrangements often take the form of hierarchical systems, in which weaker and secondary states accept the norms and rules articulated by leading powers (Slobodchikoff, 2014).

Ikenberry (2001; 2011) identifies three principal mechanisms, or “logics of order,” through which great powers create such systems: balance of power grounded in restraint and accommodation, direct command, and consent. Yet, as Kupchan (2014) notes, hierarchy alone is insufficient to sustain a stable and enduring international order. For long-term resilience, the norms and rules underpinning the order must be broadly acceptable not only to the dominant power but also to subordinate states. These frameworks are intended not merely to secure the interests of the hegemon but also to encourage cooperation, thereby ensuring stability, longevity, and predictability in state behavior (Ikenberry, 2001; Stewart-Ingersoll & Frazier, 2012).

A durable international order can be recognized by its ability to prevent large-scale wars between states, to manage and ideally resolve serious disputes without recourse to armed conflict, and to adapt to non-violent forms of systemic change (Mastanduno, 2002; Bull, 2002, pp. 16–19). Yet, because of the persistent asymmetries of power between dominant and subordinate states, realizing these shared objectives requires purposeful choices and sustained political practice.

However, history has presented challenges to the optimistic belief in the inevitability of peaceful integration into world order through multilateralism. Firstly, as

integration levels increased, they paradoxically contributed to the emergence of violent conflicts and crises from the 1970s onward. This indicates that the anticipated spill-over effects may not always result in harmonious outcomes. A further challenge lies in the phenomenon of “spill-backs,” in which political leaders choose to step away from multilateral commitments and reassert the centrality of territorial sovereignty. Such reversals cast doubt on the assumption that deeper international integration is an inevitable trajectory. By rolling back cooperative frameworks, these retreats weaken the prospects for building and sustaining a more cohesive global order.

The complexities and contradictions within the history of multilateralism underscore the challenges of realizing a fully cohesive and integrated international system. While liberal institutionalist theories offer valuable insights and propose multilateralism as a solution to governance dilemmas, the realities of political dynamics and the resurgence of territorial sovereignty as a potent force caution against overly optimistic assumptions. As we navigate the complexities of a shifting global landscape, a critical and nuanced understanding of the potential benefits and limitations of multilateralism is essential for shaping effective and inclusive approaches to international governance.

Multilateralism, despite the occasional failures of specific multilateral institutions, garnered widespread domestic support in the United States and its allies after the two World Wars. The unexpected popularity of multilateralism, serves as a social fact that is subject to change and does not necessarily follow a linear trajectory.

Ruggie's meticulous analysis of this phenomenon is widely acclaimed for its ability to interweave economic, normative, historical, and political factors in explaining the emergence and significance of multilateralism. It is indeed remarkable how Ruggie managed to connect these diverse elements into a coherent framework. Building upon Ruggie's work, Helleiner further emphasized the need to study neoliberalization tendencies while considering the aforementioned factors, adding another layer to the understanding of multilateralism.

This observation highlights the complexity and surprising nature of multilateralism's popularity and significance. Despite its occasional shortcomings and the inherent challenges it faces, multilateralism has managed to maintain a strong foothold and attract support from powerful actors like the United States and its allies. The ability to navigate and unite economic, normative, historical, and political factors within the framework of multilateralism is an impressive feat.

Thus, the contributions of scholars such as Ruggie and Helleiner shed light on the multifaceted dynamics underlying the rise and persistence of multilateralism. Their nuanced analyses reminds of the unexpected twists and turns in the evolution of global governance, providing valuable insights into the complex interplay between ideology, historical context, and political motivations within the realm of multilateral institutions.

The historical-dialectical perspective, rooted in Gramscian and world-systems traditions, offers a distinctive interpretation of multilateralism. From this standpoint, multilateralism functions simultaneously as an ideology and as a strategy through which cosmopolitan

elites preserve their dominance within a stratified global order. These elites, as principal beneficiaries of an expanding capitalist system, actively promote the notion that the system delivers benefits even to its most disadvantaged participants.

At the same time, the multilateral sphere is understood as a contested space where peripheral states and marginalized social groups can organize collectively. It provides an arena for forging alliances and pressing for structural reforms in the global economy, thereby transforming multilateral institutions into sites of both reproduction and resistance within the world system.

This perspective highlights the inherent power dynamics and struggles within the multilateral system. It acknowledges the presence of influential elites who utilize multilateralism to perpetuate their positions of privilege and influence. Simultaneously, it recognizes the potential for marginalized groups and states to utilize multilateral platforms to campaign for transformative changes in the global economic order.

Within the historical-dialectic approach, multilateralism serves as a site of contention, reflecting the ongoing struggle between the elites seeking to maintain the status quo and marginalized actors pushing for structural change. This nuanced understanding recognizes the multifaceted nature of multilateralism and its implications for power dynamics and efforts to address global inequalities.

In developing formal models that questioned the emphasis on relative gains and the presumed necessity of institutions for multilateralism, scholars such as Duncan Snidal and Robert Powell demonstrated that concerns

over relative gains arise only under particular conditions. These concerns tend to fade in non-security domains or when the number of participating states increases—factors that help explain the persistence of inter-state cooperation. Robert Axelrod similarly acknowledged that many interactions in world politics resemble the Prisoner's Dilemma, where defection appears as the dominant strategy. Yet he showed that in practice, repeated exchanges and the importance of reputation enable cooperation to emerge through patterns of reciprocal behavior, even without central coordination. These theoretical advances shifted liberal thought away from the earlier pursuit of a comprehensive “world government,” emphasizing instead how cooperation could be sustained under existing international structures.

By the 1990s, both domestic and international institutions encountered a critical test of their resilience. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War raised pressing questions: Would international institutions lose relevance in a unipolar system where the United States no longer depended on them to balance the Eastern bloc and might be reluctant to constrain its own dominance? Would interstate conflict become more frequent in the absence of two superpowers capable of disciplining their allies and clients? And, perhaps most strikingly, would solidarity among liberal democracies weaken now that their central adversary had disappeared?

Debates over modern multilateralism reflect two contrasting perspectives on international cooperation. One interpretation depicts multilateralism as inherently cooperative, emphasizing the coordination of national

policies among three or more states, a definition most clearly articulated by Keohane (1990). From this standpoint, multilateral arrangements function as mechanisms for reducing the risk of conflict by lowering transaction costs and facilitating the exchange of relevant information, thereby helping states achieve their objectives more efficiently (Keohane, 1984).

Contrarily, a burgeoning school of thought disputes this cooperative perspective, proposing that international systems are frequently characterized by a lack of unity. This disunity is magnified by significant disputes over multilateral terms, resulting in the evolution of fragmented regime complexes, a departure from unified international systems (Raustiala and Victor, 2004). The resulting condition, termed ‘contested multilateralism’, not only highlights the existing tensions within international organizations, but also underscores the problem of redundancy in these institutions.

It is crucial to recognize that fragmentation and overlap within multilateral frameworks do not inherently reduce their significance. Rather, they point to the need for a reconceptualization of multilateralism itself—one that acknowledges how contestation and institutional plurality are not anomalies but integral features of the practice of multilateral governance.

Advancing this debate, Morse and Keohane (2014) introduce the notion of *contested multilateralism* as a framework for bridging these apparently divergent perspectives. They characterize contested multilateralism as a complex interplay of competing coalitions and fluctuating institutional structures, encompassing both

formal and informal arrangements. According to their argument, multilateralism is not inherently a cooperative entity, defined by consolidated regulations, nor does the opposition to entrenched multilateralism purely take the form of unilateralism or bilateralism. Morse and Keohane argue that contestation typically arises from within the multilateral sphere itself, as states and other actors turn to alternative multilateral venues rather than relying solely on unilateral or bilateral strategies—or they may use these approaches in combination.

Although both state and non-state actors broadly endorse multilateralism as a strategy, they often diverge sharply over the specific policies and priorities that multilateral institutions ought to pursue. This perspective on contested multilateralism challenges the simplistic binary between cooperative multilateralism and unilateral or bilateral action, instead providing a more nuanced account of the complex dynamics that unfold within multilateral institutions.

This perspective underscores the intricacies of contemporary multilateralism, illuminating the ways in which states and non-state actors negotiate within these arenas to further their respective interests. Such a nuanced understanding carries significant implications for the comprehension of the character and operations of international institutions, their efficacy in addressing global challenges, and the wider dynamics of international relations.

Contested multilateralism refers to the deliberate use of multiple multilateral forums to challenge the rules, practices, or mandates embedded within established organizations. This dynamic becomes most visible when

focus from one incumbent institution to another, or when they create an alternative multilateral institution to contest the established ones. Such confrontations, regardless of whether they culminate in the creation of new multilateral organizations, invariably feature a struggle between the rules, institutionalized practices, or missions of two distinct institutions.

Efforts to counterbalance dominant institutions often increase the complexity of an international regime, either by introducing new institutional features or by reinforcing organizations that previously played marginal roles. Such challenges can be reactive—emerging in direct response to decisions taken by established multilateral bodies—or anticipatory, launched in expectation that existing institutions will fail to meet the needs of the contesting actors. The concept of “contested multilateralism” thus refers not to opposition against multilateralism as a general practice, which remains widely accepted, but rather to the rejection of specific institutional expressions of it by coalitions of dissatisfied states or actors. Examples of contested multilateralism can be found across multiple areas of international relations, including counterterrorism and global health, both of which hold direct significance for national security. Its widespread presence in contemporary politics suggests that strategies pursued by powerful states frustrated with how central security issues are addressed often take the form of alternative multilateral arrangements, rather than a turn to unilateral or bilateral action. For this reason, as institutional theorists such as Randall Schweller have noted, dissatisfaction with existing regimes tends to manifest through the

creation, adaptation, or redirection of multilateral forums rather than through the wholesale abandonment of multilateralism itself. Even influential states might find themselves restricted by established institutional practices, but in face of such circumstances, they often exhibit a preference for multilateral approaches over unilateral or bilateral ones (Morse & Keohane, 2014).

The manifestation of contested multilateralism can be identified when the following three criteria, as proposed by Morse and Keohane (2014), are satisfied:

1. A multilateral institution functions within a defined sphere of activity, guided by a clear mandate, codified rules, and established practices that structure its operations.
2. A coalition of dissatisfied actors shifts its engagement away from the incumbent institution and toward an alternative body that operates under different rules and practices. This alternative may be an already existing institution or one specifically created for the purpose of contestation.
3. The rules and practices of the contesting institution directly contradict or substantially alter those upheld by the established institution.

In such cases, weaker states, civil society groups, and even dissatisfied intergovernmental organizations generally succeed in challenging the policies of established multilateral institutions only when their efforts are backed by more powerful states. Consequently, multilateralism frequently becomes their sole viable mechanism to effectively dispute such policies. Conversely, while powerful states may have the option to resort to bilateral or unilateral tactics, they often find incentives to act

multilaterally. The motivations driving such contestation often include the pursuit of broader support, the mobilization of resources, and the quest for legitimacy in opposing established multilateral policies. Yet, while contested multilateralism always entails the use of an existing or newly created institution to challenge the status quo, its outcomes remain uncertain. Some challenges fail to gain traction, producing minimal long-term consequences and leaving the broader regime complex essentially intact. However, more often than not, these challenges result in fundamental alterations in institutional practices or induce a shift in the power distribution among institutions, either by creating a new regime complex or expanding an existing one.

Not all challenges produce immediate effects. A coalition largely made up of weaker states, for example, may only be able to mount a symbolic protest against an existing institutional practice without securing direct change. Yet, over time, even such symbolic acts can influence preferences, norms, and values in ways that erode the legitimacy of the institution. This gradual process may eventually compel reforms within the institution or lead actors to disengage from it altogether.

Dissatisfaction with multilateral institutions frequently arises from external shifts in the global environment or evolving state preferences. These shifts are often driven by pressures originating from domestic constituencies, the influence of other international institutions, or the activism of transnational networks. Occasionally, however, the discontent is generated endogenously due to ingrained practices of established

multilateral institutions.

When dissatisfied actors are unable to achieve reform within an established institution, the conditions for contested multilateralism often emerge. Whether a discontented coalition chooses this strategy depends on several factors: the availability of external alternatives, the extent to which credibility problems obstruct negotiation, and the presence of institutional or domestic constraints.

For a coalition of states—or a mix of states and non-state actors—seeking to amend an institution that resists change, access to an external option is essential. Such alternatives may involve shifting engagement to an already existing multilateral body or creating a new institution better suited to the coalition’s policy goals or preferred institutional design. The critical requirement is that the coalition must not only identify an institution that reflects its interests but also credibly signal its willingness to employ this alternative. The relative power of states within the coalition strongly influences the feasibility of such strategies. Groups including resourceful states with significant institutional leverage are far more likely to secure credible external options than coalitions dominated by weaker actors.

Where external options exist, established institutions typically face strong incentives to adapt, as their authority and influence are threatened by the rise of competing arrangements. Yet adaptation is not guaranteed. As Morse and Keohane (2014) note, there are two principal pathways through which institutional failure to adjust may unfold.

The first pathway emerges when dissatisfied actors attempt to create the impression that they possess viable

external options, even if such alternatives are in fact absent. This strategy often generates credibility problems. If the coalition cannot convincingly demonstrate its willingness or capacity to employ outside options as leverage for reform, its actions may nonetheless trigger contested multilateralism.

The second pathway occurs even when the coalition issues credible threats. In these cases, adaptation may still be blocked due to clashing state interests or entrenched ideational and institutional barriers. Veto players—whether powerful states, entrenched bureaucracies, or other influential actors—may resist the changes sought by the challengers if they believe their policy preferences or institutional authority are at risk. Because institutional identities, roles, and missions are often deeply embedded, they can be particularly resistant to modification.

These dynamics funnel contestation into two broad manifestations. First, coalitions can shift regimes, relocating agenda items to an alternate forum whose mandate, membership, and procedures better align with their preferences; once there, they reinterpret or displace incumbent norms by generating contrary precedents and practices. Second, coalitions can build competitors, engineering new venues—formal organizations, clubs, or transgovernmental networks—whose design encodes their priorities from the start. Both tactics can be reactive (answering an unfavorable ruling, agenda denial, or stalemated reform) or anticipatory (pre-empting likely defeat), and both turn on the same strategic insight: when influence is blocked inside one venue, change the venue—or create another one.

In the case of regime shifting, actors expressing dissatisfaction with an existing set of norms and practices transition to an alternate multilateral forum, offering a more favorable mandate and procedural regulations. Upon integration into this new forum, they attempt to dispute or undermine the authority of the original institution by challenging its established norms. This form of regime shifting can be triggered not only by states – as illustrated in Laurence Helfer’s work – but also by autonomous multilateral organizations that propagate regulations contradicting established international norms.

In contrast, competitive regime creation takes place when dissatisfied actors establish a new institution or adopt informal mechanisms of multilateral cooperation in order to contest the prevailing institutional order. The coalition driving this process does so by creating a multilateral body or forum that better reflects its own preferences, whether through selective membership, informal influence channels, or transgovernmental networks. Once established, this institution is employed to challenge existing organizations or arrangements, generating tensions that may or may not lead to eventual inter-institutional collaboration.

Successful cases of contested multilateralism often result in the creation, expansion, or reinforcement of regime complexes. When an incumbent regime is highly integrated and hierarchical, external challenges tend to fragment it, giving rise to a more complex regime structure. This occurs either through the establishment of entirely new institutions or through the empowerment of previously marginal ones in specific issue areas. Where

a regime complex is already present, successful challenges deepen its complexity by bolstering rival institutions or introducing additional actors into the institutional landscape.

When dissatisfied coalitions are able to identify alternative institutional venues within a given issue area, they may opt to shift their engagement toward forums that offer more favorable mandates or decision-making rules. In doing so, they generate competing norms and practices that directly challenge those of the original institution, setting in motion a process of institutional change. Where no suitable alternatives exist, such coalitions may instead establish new multilateral forums designed with rules and procedures more closely aligned with their own preferences. The creation of such institutions enhances their bargaining power and destabilizes the prevailing institutional equilibrium.

The study of contested multilateralism highlights the fluid character of international institutions, showing how dissatisfied actors actively seek to reshape prevailing norms, practices, and power relations across the multilateral landscape. This dynamic underscores both the significance of institutional alternatives and the central role of competition in influencing the future course of global governance.

For the purpose of this analysis, the study adopts Keohane's (1990) state-centric conceptualization of multilateralism, with a focus on international regimes within the framework furnished by Ruggie (1992). The spheres of international orders and international organizations are subsequently reintegrated as arenas of

competition among international regimes, thereby reflecting the revised emphasis on contested multilateralism as postulated by Morse and Keohane (2014, p.387). Contested multilateralism is defined as the strategic use of alternative multilateral institutions to challenge the norms, practices, or mandates of established ones. This lens is particularly useful for understanding how middle powers craft strategies to advance multilateral initiatives across different organizations and institutional orders. Building on this perspective, the present study turns to historical examples as a basis for anticipating potential future pathways.

Contested multilateralism theory underscores the inherent challenges faced in any reformation of international organizations. One fundamental concern is the potential for redundancy and inefficiency in the international system. The theory posits that when rules of existing international organizations are inappropriate or disadvantageous to a great power, such a state will likely bypass reforming the established organization and instead create alternative institutions that align better with its preferences. This dynamic leads to the replication of multilateral institutions, which can create systemic redundancy while simultaneously weakening the overall effectiveness of international organizations.

Furthermore, the theory suggests that establishing new organizations from the ground up is a nearly impossible task. This is primarily due to the lack of potential unity among international actors, which is necessary to provide the credibility that is indispensable for the effective functioning of any international organization. Therefore,

the conventional approach to reforming international organizations, which involves bottom-up creation or substantial transformation of existing institutions, may not be viable in practice.

The theory also contends that any external influence, including that exerted by groups of middle powers, is likely to be challenged by the great powers. The dynamics of international relations frequently dictate that middle powers and great powers have diverging interests. While middle powers may seek to reform the international system or influence its norms, great powers are typically more interested in maintaining their dominant positions and thus resist systemic change. In addition, great powers are generally more inclined to side with one another against middle powers, since they share a vested interest in preserving the existing system of dominance. Their preference is typically to replace the leading hegemon rather than fundamentally alter the structure of the order itself.

Overall, the theory of contested multilateralism provides critical insights into the difficulties involved in reforming international organizations. It highlights the systemic complexities, the issues related to the credibility of new institutions, and the power dynamics that often hinder effective reformation.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union, in one sense, represented the greatest victory for the liberal order, as it signaled the triumph of liberal values and principles. However, it also presented the greatest challenge, as the international system had to grapple with the uncertainties and power dynamics unleashed by this seismic shift. The

collapse of the Eastern bloc created a vacuum in the global balance of power, casting uncertainty over the role of international institutions and the unity of liberal democracies.

Ironically, the disintegration of the Soviet Union—hailed as a triumph for liberal ideals—also generated profound challenges for the sustainability and effectiveness of the liberal international order. This moment compelled a reexamination of the function and significance of international institutions, the distribution of power within a unipolar system, and the capacity of liberal democracies to preserve cohesion once their unifying external adversary had disappeared. The post-Cold War era became a testing ground for the resilience and adaptability of the liberal order, revealing the complex interplay between ideals and realities in the international arena.

CONCURRENT CRISIS OF THE LIBERAL WORLD ORDER AND THE UNITED NATIONS ORGANIZATION

American liberal hegemony, as a distinct expression of the broader liberal international order, is grounded in several key pillars. Central among them is a commitment to open multilateralism in both trade and institutional arrangements, coupled with the creation of a “managed”

open economy designed to protect the social and economic security of the working class—a framework Ruggie (1982) termed “embedded liberalism.” Equally vital are the principles of liberal democracy, particularly equality and the rule of law, which underpin the system’s legitimacy. Finally, the order is reinforced by a special bond uniting Western liberal democratic states.

It is important to recognize that the spread of Pax Americana has been uneven, and that liberal internationalism itself has undergone considerable change since its origins in 1945 (Ikenberry, 2009). The way these principles have been interpreted and applied has differed across regions and historical moments, underscoring the evolving character of the liberal international order.

Although the U.S.-led organization of this order shows signs of decline (Ikenberry, 2018), the core ideas and principles of liberal internationalism still exert substantial influence in global politics. What sets liberal internationalism apart is its vision of an open, flexible, and rules-based order, rooted in the expansion and consolidation of liberal democracy. Over the decades, its agendas and ideals have been reshaped through the interactions of states with the transformative forces of modernity, giving it both adaptability and endurance.

The underlying objectives of liberal internationalism include creating an international framework that accommodates liberal democratic values, reconciling the complexities arising from sovereignty and interdependence, and safeguarding protections and rights within and

between states. These objectives have sustained liberal internationalism across both its periods of flourishing and its moments of profound crisis over the past two centuries. Despite the upheavals wrought by world wars, economic downturns, and the ascent and decline of fascist and totalitarian regimes, the liberal international project has withstood the tests of time.

In the face of present-day crises, it is expected that liberal internationalism will once again need to undergo a process of introspection and reinvention to ensure its continued relevance and resilience. This imperative for reevaluation mirrors the historical precedent set by liberal internationalism, which has consistently adapted and evolved to confront new challenges.

It is both paradoxical and revealing that the endurance of international institutions may hinge on whether a hegemon is present or absent—a point highlighted in the analyses of John Ruggie (1991) and Robert Keohane (2005). Though their interpretations diverge, both underscore how institutions can demonstrate resilience even without the backing of a dominant power.

In *After Hegemony* (2005), Keohane accepts several realist premises yet disputes the claim that international politics is exclusively a zero-sum struggle for power. Drawing on insights from functionalist and neofunctionalist theory, he contends that institutions can endure because they supply states with services—such as information sharing and enforcement mechanisms—that individual actors cannot provide on their own.

On the other hand, Ruggie takes a different approach in his work on “embedded liberalism” (1991). Departing from realist tenets, he emphasizes the significance of social purpose in sustaining institutions. Ruggie contends that institutions persist so long as a broader community of states continues to uphold the values embedded within them. In doing so, he anticipated the theoretical divisions that would later shape the discipline: Ruggie’s emphasis on shared norms and collective identity foreshadowed the rise of Constructivism, whereas Keohane’s work situated the emerging “Liberal Institutionalism” more closely within a realist framework.

This ironic juxtaposition underscores the complex nature of international cooperation. While Keohane’s perspective suggests that institutions can thrive through functional benefits, Ruggie’s viewpoint emphasizes the shared values and norms that underpin their longevity. However, both perspectives acknowledge the role of power dynamics and the importance of hegemonic influence, albeit from different angles.

In this sense, it becomes apparent that the international system of cooperation, despite its aspirations for inclusivity and universal values, relies on the presence or influence of a hegemon. This recognition deepens our understanding of the foundations of international institutions and prompts critical reflections on the nature of power, the prospects for cooperation, and the durability of the liberal international order over time.

One such question highlights the concerning deviations from Kant’s philosophical foundations within liberal institutions. While Kant envisioned a universal embrace of similar values and institutions as the natural

path to peace, the contemporary expression of democratic peace is far from universal and, in some respects, diverges from Kant's original vision. For Kant, peace was expected to emerge when states and their citizens freely embraced shared values and institutions, thereby fostering reciprocal recognition and hospitality. Critics note, however, a paradox in today's context: while liberal states rarely fight one another, the incomplete universality of liberal norms can justify or even encourage interventions and wars against non-liberal states.

In the quest to secure peace, liberal powers have often sought to impose democratic institutions and liberal values on states that do not share them. Yet such interventions risk undermining the very foundations of Liberal Institutionalism. Coercively promoting liberal ideals amounts to advancing particularist norms under the pretense of universality, stripping non-liberal states of their autonomy to determine their own laws. If true Kantian peace depends on the voluntary adoption of universal political principles, then compelled adherence to liberal rules cannot realize genuine peace. Instead, it erodes the spirit of Liberalism by acting through illiberal means.

This critique underscores the need for liberal institutions to adopt a more cautious and self-reflective approach. Rather than enforcing conformity, they should encourage inclusive and respectful engagement that permits diverse states to follow their own trajectories, while cultivating dialogue and mutual understanding across political systems.

In this context, the perspective of middle powers becomes particularly relevant, as they can offer alternative perspectives and bridge the gaps between liberal and non-liberal states, contributing to a more balanced and inclusive global order.

Non-Western critics have also raised fundamental objections to the core assumptions of Liberal Institutionalism. They argue that the dominance of Western scholars in debates between realists and liberals—and later between neo-realists and neo-liberals—has produced a framework disproportionately centered on Western states and institutions. This bias overlooks the historical and contemporary experiences of non-Western actors, thereby limiting their meaningful inclusion in global governance. Many of the prevailing standards of domestic governance and the design of major intergovernmental organizations continue to embody the perspectives and priorities of the former Western bloc, led largely by North America and Western Europe, which represented some of the earliest liberal democracies.

Even though many states have voluntarily embraced these standards and institutions, Western countries continue to retain a privileged position, securing greater benefits from international organizations and exercising disproportionate influence over global norms. Echoing Marxist critiques, subaltern perspectives contend that the architecture of global governance is designed to favor a narrow stratum of transnational elites. By presenting their own interests as a universal “liberal consensus,” these elites reinforce hierarchical structures that disadvantage non-elites.

These non-Western perspectives highlight the inherent biases and imbalances within global governance structures. The dominance of a limited circle of states and transnational elites erodes the inclusiveness and perceived fairness of international institutions. It casts doubt on the claim of a genuinely universal and equitable liberal order when a select group is able to exert disproportionate influence over the shaping of the global agenda.

Recognizing the perspectives of non-Western middle powers becomes crucial in addressing these imbalances and fostering a more inclusive international system. Their insights and experiences offer alternative viewpoints that challenge the status quo and promote a more equitable distribution of benefits and decision-making power within global governance. Embracing the perspectives of non-Western states is essential for rectifying the inherent biases and power dynamics that persist within liberal institutional structures.

As the field of international relations theory continues to evolve, these contrasting perspectives remind us of the dynamic interplay between theory and practice. The irony lies in the recognition that the international system, in its pursuit of cooperation and stability, depends on both the functional benefits provided by institutions and the presence or influence of a hegemon.

In this context, it is worth considering that the most promising avenue for reformation lies not in predictable confrontations among multiple poles of power or in bipolar dynamics, but rather in the constructive engagement of middle powers. These nations, often overshadowed by their larger counterparts, possess

distinctive capabilities and diplomatic acumen that allow them to navigate the intricacies of global governance with finesse. Through the strategic use of their distinct position, middle powers are well placed to play a pivotal role in redefining and strengthening the foundations of the liberal international order.

Therefore, as we embark on this critical journey of rethinking and reinventing liberal internationalism, it is essential to honor the essence of its storied past. Through careful analysis and measured skepticism, we will bear witness to the enduring resilience and transformative potential of this tradition. The role of middle powers shall assume prominence, illuminating a path forward that is both unexpected and intellectually captivating.

The operations of international organizations are generally aligned to a significant extent with the aspirations of their most influential member states. It is typically these dominant powers that set the agenda and drive policy decisions. However, the potential for lesser powers to significantly influence the decisions made within these bodies should not be entirely dismissed. While they may not command the same level of clout as the larger states, their collective voices and strategic alliances can sometimes sway decisions and contribute meaningfully to the policy-making process.

How far do the actions of international organizations align with the aspirations of their most influential member states? Is it possible for lesser powers to significantly affect the decisions rendered within these bodies? A recent observation by experts studying international organizations stated that “there seems to be a unanimous understanding that smaller

states have negligible impact on the behaviour of International Organisations” (Lyne, Nielson and Tierney, 2006, p.56). This perspective reflects the enduring view that a state’s power is rooted in its material capabilities and that international organizations primarily operate as arenas shaped by the power relations among their members (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 1994). In line with this reasoning, Drezner (2007) argues that a “concert of great powers is an essential and adequate precondition for successful governance across any international issue.” Similarly, liberal intergovernmentalism explains European integration as the product of the preferences and bargaining strategies of Europe’s three largest states (Moravcsik, 1998). Extending this logic, the rational design approach to international institutions posits that disparities in power among members generate unequal levels of institutional influence and control (Koremenos, Lipson, & Snidal, 2001).

The dominant view holds that power within international organizations is disproportionately concentrated in the hands of stronger states. The force of this argument rests on the limited unilateral alternatives available to smaller powers, which restricts their ability to secure comparable gains outside of structured multilateral frameworks (Katzenstein, 1985; Moravcsik, 1998; Stone, 2011). Even when these states hold numerical advantages in bodies that rely on majority voting, they are generally unable to drive meaningful changes in regimes that run counter to the preferences of great powers.

The reason for this seeming powerlessness is not far-fetched: any attempt by the less powerful nations to impose their will on the more potent ones could provoke the latter into withdrawing their crucial support for the institution (Krasner, 1985, p.30). This perceived threat has a chilling effect on the ambitions of minor powers and aids in maintaining the status quo. Moreover, the balance of power is further tipped by the ability of the more influential nations to proceed unilaterally, thereby disregarding the interests of the minor powers when it serves their purpose. One of the significant implications of this power imbalance is the potential to coerce minor powers into consenting to multilateral cooperation, even when such collaboration might leave them in a position worse than their previous state (Gruber, 2000). In such circumstances, the status quo is retained not by choice but by the minor powers' limited capacity to negotiate better terms within the institutional framework. Thus, the structure of international organizations tends to sustain the status quo, predominantly benefiting the most influential member states while leaving minor powers at a distinct disadvantage.

Contrary to conventional assumptions, recent scholarship shows that smaller powers are capable of exerting meaningful influence over the behavior of international organizations, including financial institutions and the European Union. Empirical research demonstrates that even relatively weak states can play a decisive role in shaping the operations of international financial institutions (Lyne, Nielson, & Tierney, 2006; Copelovitch et al., 2013). This challenges the notion that these institutions are merely

arenas for power interactions between member states, exclusively dominated by great powers.

Stone (2011) offers an interesting perspective, asserting that powerful states often yield disproportionate influence in institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the EU to weaker members. This concession occurs during ordinary times in exchange for the consent of weaker powers to the exercise of informal governance by great powers during exceptional circumstances when their core interests are at stake. This gives the smaller states a level of sway in decision-making processes, albeit conditional and circumstantial, potentially disrupting the status quo.

The World Trade Organization's Doha round of talks further illustrate the capacity of coalitions of minor powers. These coalitions, as studies show (Narlikar, 2005), can block multilateral trade agreements, thereby demonstrating their ability to influence outcomes at a multinational level. Studies of EU decision-making likewise reveal that smaller states can exercise considerable influence (Mattila, 2006; Aksoy & Rodden, 2009). Although resource-rich members often dominate intergovernmental bargaining, their power is moderated—and at times counterbalanced—by the leverage of weaker states. This influence stems primarily from institutional arrangements, such as veto powers and rotating presidencies, as well as from the political skill and personal leadership of national representatives (Tallberg, 2008).

Moreover, the capacity of smaller states to issue credible vetoes or threaten withdrawal enables them to shape decision-making within the Council of the EU

(Slapin, 2009; Schneider, 2011). Taken together, this evidence demonstrates that minor powers can and do exert meaningful influence over the functioning of both international financial institutions and the EU, thereby challenging the traditional view of international organizations as arenas dominated exclusively by great powers.

Contemporary international relations point to a deep crisis of institutionalism, exemplified by the fragile position of the United Nations (UN) within a declining U.S.-centered order. The UN now occupies an ambiguous role, functioning at times as a central pillar of global governance and at other times as a marginalized actor—an ambivalence that mirrors the turbulence of liberal internationalism itself (Cooley & Hexon, 2020). This unsettled status compels a critical reassessment of the UN's future, which in turn sheds light on the fundamental challenges facing the liberal international order.

The roots of the rules-based global order, in which the UN has a central role, are deeply pragmatic and realist, a fact that appears to have been forgotten by liberal internationalists (Ikenberry, 2011; Ikenberry, Parmar, & Stokes, 2018). Thus, the survival of liberal internationalism in the evolving international order necessitates a revised formulation that reinvigorates pragmatism and reaffirms the imperative of compromise in global affairs.

The emergence of such a revision is arguably more likely to come from 'middle powers', nations that possess sufficient authority to act autonomously from the great powers which renders them more inclined towards negotiation rather than resorting to force.

Debates surrounding the crisis of liberal internationalism have increasingly centered on themes of hegemonic decline, imperial overstretch, and the rise of major powers such as China—a focus that was further sharpened by Donald Trump’s presidency (Norrlof, 2018). While the United States has played a decisive role in both constructing and, more recently, destabilizing the post-1945 institutional order, it is essential to adopt a wider lens to fully grasp the complexity of this crisis. Such a perspective allows for a clearer understanding of the forces that have driven the global order into its current state of uncertainty and opens space to consider the possible trajectories of liberal internationalism, along with the actors most likely to sustain it in the future.

In this setting, the expectation that the United States should once again assume the mantle of “leader of the free world” is viewed as counterproductive. Such a perspective prevents a sober evaluation of how order might instead be upheld by lesser powers that remain committed to rules-based and institutionally anchored global governance. Traditionally, debates on middle powers have distinguished between Western middle powers—seen largely as stabilizers and legitimizers of the U.S.-led order—and emerging middle powers from the Global South, often characterized as revisionist and counter-hegemonic actors (Cooper, 1997; Jordaan, 2003).

Yet this dichotomy has become increasingly insufficient. When the hegemon actively works to dismantle the very institutional order it helped to build, the liberal internationalism advanced by “traditional” middle powers acquires a counter-hegemonic character,

while the reforms advanced by emerging middle powers may appear as stabilizing contributions (Cooper & Dal, 2016).

Hurrell aptly remarks that “both the players and the plot look very different than just a short while ago” (Hurrell, 2007, p. 203). Echoing this, the present study draws on Jordaan’s suggestion to reserve the term “middle power” for mid-range states that actively support the liberal international order (Jordaan, 2003). Unlike Jordaan, however, this analysis places less emphasis on their connection to U.S. hegemony and instead highlights their consistent inclination toward multilateralism and negotiated solutions to global challenges, regardless of whether they are located in the West or the Global South.

Preserving this more traditional understanding of middle powers offers two advantages in the current transitional moment. First, it helps move beyond the tendency to equate internationalism and global governance exclusively with Western states, by recognizing the agency of actors from the Global South as essential to both historical and contemporary processes of reordering (Acharya, 2014). Second, it underscores that global power shifts are substantive and lasting. The need for a revised and more pragmatic form of liberal internationalism arises directly from this reality.

To substantiate these claims, this study first examines the precarious role of the United Nations within the U.S.-led order and its links to the broader crisis of liberal internationalism (Luck, 2003). It then looks ahead to consider how a redefined, pragmatic form of middle-power liberal internationalism—anchored in the UN—

could contribute to stabilizing the current interregnum (Cooper & Heine, 2010). The United Nations itself embodies a paradox. Its legitimacy derives from universal declarations issued in the name of “we, the peoples,” yet membership is granted exclusively to states rather than individuals (Claude, 1966). It proclaims the sovereign equality of all members, but simultaneously endows five great powers with exceptional authority to preserve peace and security (Luck, 2003). While it pledges to pursue its goals through collective action, its institutional structures frequently foster fragmented and inconsistent approaches to global problem-solving (Weiss, Forsythe, Coate, & Pease, 2018). These structural tensions have left the organization vulnerable to criticism from across the political spectrum.

Contrary to common assumptions, these contradictions are neither design flaws nor the main source of the UN’s recurrent crises. Rather, they have consistently provided a durable foundation for sustained cooperation, succeeding where the League of Nations had failed (Hurd, 2007). The UN’s survival for more than seven decades, despite repeated crises and major setbacks, demonstrates the resilience of its paradoxical institutional design (Claude, 1966).

Most scholars of international relations—whether realist or liberal—concur that the end of the Cold War unleashed a wave of “liberal triumphalism,” which ultimately contained the roots of its own crisis (Kupchan, 2002; Ikenberry, 2018). The collapse of bipolar constraints pushed liberal internationalism toward an unstable and unsustainable form, characterized by prescriptive policies and coercive measures aimed at

constructing the conditions for “true freedom” (Fukuyama, 1992). Yet the narrative of liberal hubris becomes more nuanced when examined through the lens of the United Nations. From this vantage point, two interconnected paradoxes emerge: first, that the UN both enabled and restrained liberal overreach after the Cold War; and second, that during this unipolar moment the UN was simultaneously marginalized and reshaped.

To engage these debates, the following sections will demonstrate how some liberal initiatives expanded the UN’s authority, while others contributed to its marginalization. This will be followed by an examination of the organization’s transformation and its implications for the broader crisis of the liberal order. At the normative level, the UN has long championed a people-centered, post-Westphalian vision of peace, security, and development (Evans, 1997). Importantly, this agenda did not emerge solely after the Cold War but has been embedded in the UN’s mission since its founding. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted in 1948, has steadily evolved, adding new categories of rights-holders and expanding dimensions of protection, even during the Cold War (Morsink, 1999). Throughout both the drafting of the UDHR and its subsequent development, actors from the Global South played a central role alongside their Western counterparts. As Petrasek (2022) observes, the historical record makes clear that many non-Western states—regardless of their liberal orientation—were critical in placing and keeping human rights at the core of the UN agenda, a dynamic that remains visible today.

At present, the idea of liberal overreach is increasingly linked to the broadening scope of the human rights agenda, a shift driven in part by the rise of backlash politics within the traditional Western centers of the liberal order. Not long ago, however, critiques of liberal hubris were directed mainly at the interventionist policies designed to address so-called failed or conflict-prone states in the Global South (Paris, 2001).

In both the pre- and post-9/11 periods, the United States—long characterized by its ambivalent approach to multilateralism—often preferred to act through “coalitions of the willing” or through selective, less universal organizations (Patrick, 2002). As a result, the UN was largely relegated to humanitarian tasks such as “saving strangers” in distant crises, while Western security and economic priorities were pursued through channels that imposed fewer constraints on U.S. dominance.

While the United Nations (UN) has undeniably been central to the expansion of the universal human rights framework, its role in driving “hyperglobalization” has been comparatively restrained (Scholte, 2005). The UN was not the architect of what Michael Mann has termed the “Great Neoliberal Recession of 2008” (Mann, 2013).

The liberalization of trade and financial markets—together with the push for privatization and the outsourcing of public services—was advanced primarily through institutions that were less universal and more heavily dominated by Western powers. Key among these were the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and

the European Union (EU) (Stiglitz, 2017).

By contrast, economic debates within the UN framework—most notably through the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and agencies reporting to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)—have tended to reflect the priorities of developing countries. These bodies have consistently advanced a social-liberal agenda centered on redistribution, social equity, and universal welfare provision, standing in opposition to the neoliberal focus on supply-side economics (Annan, 2002).

Yet this orientation did not make the UN the primary venue for addressing the immediate consequences of the 2007–2008 financial crisis or for subsequent efforts to “make globalization work for all” (Stiglitz, 2017). Instead, the United States and its European partners looked to institutions such as the OECD, IMF, World Bank, and especially the Group of 20 (G20). Originally established in the wake of the 1997–1998 Asian financial crisis, the G20 was designed to bring major emerging markets into discussions on the global financial system and international economic governance (Cooper, 2010).

In the aftermath of the 2007–2008 financial crisis, the G20 was elevated from a forum of finance ministers and central bank governors to one involving heads of state and government. It was subsequently declared the “premier forum for our international economic cooperation,” a move that further entrenched the marginalization of the UN in global economic governance (Kirton, 2013).

Many liberal internationalists argue that the way to

revive the United Nations and prevent it from falling into what has been described as a “yawning chasm of irrelevance” is by engaging non-state actors and mobilizing private resources (Jönsson & Tallberg, 2010). Looking ahead, the UN’s comparative advantage may lie in shifting its focus from states to people, functioning less as the sole “centre” of solutions and more as a “hub” that connects diverse global actors. Its enduring strength resides in its ability to convene broad networks, channel them toward shared objectives, and oversee the progress made toward those goals (Weiss & Thakur, 2010).

This model of engagement—commonly referred to as multistakeholderism—carries its own limitations. Although it widens participation by incorporating a greater array of actors, it rarely translates into stronger representation for marginalized groups or the everyday concerns of ordinary citizens. More importantly, it fails to address the deeper problem: the UN’s decision-making architecture remains rooted in the geopolitical and economic realities of a bygone era (Luck, 2003).

When the UN was founded in 1945, it consisted of just 51 member states; today, membership has expanded to 193. At its inception, the global economy revolved largely around trade; in the present, it encompasses not only trade but also finance, global production networks, and complex value chains (Helleiner, 2011). Similarly, while the UN initially stood as the central institution of global governance, the landscape has since evolved into a crowded field of intergovernmental, non-governmental, and hybrid organizations (Betsill & Corell, 2008).

The demand for far-reaching reforms within the UN—most notably of the Security Council—has never appeared more urgent. Yet the likelihood of meaningful progress continues to diminish (Karns, Mingst, & Stiles, 2015). Heightened frictions among the Permanent Five, coupled with the retreat of major powers from their earlier roles as “responsible stewards” of international order, have stalled the reform debate at a deadlock (Hurrell, 2007).

Consequently, the reform discourse has shifted away from altering core decision-making structures and toward narrower objectives such as bureaucratic streamlining and managerial efficiency. Paradoxically, however, this very inability to enact sweeping institutional change underscores the UN’s continuing utility. Precisely because of its structural constraints, the UN remains a critical forum for liberal internationalism in this period of uncertainty—serving as a space where the difficult but essential practice of compromise can still be cultivated and sustained (Ingebritsen, 2002).

The persistence of liberal “nostalgia” is often viewed as an obstacle to developing a sober assessment of the mechanisms and actors that could safeguard elements of liberal internationalism within a future world order. Underlying this critique is the recognition that the emerging order is not a predetermined outcome but an evolving construct shaped decisively by human agency (Cox, 1981). The current phase of global realignment represents not merely a redistribution of material capabilities but a broader renegotiation of norms, values, and institutional arrangements. To interpret these transformations exclusively in terms of “who is up and

and who is down” risks flattening the complexity of systemic change. Such a view fails to appreciate the historicity and multiplicity of ways in which social power is constituted and world orders are reconfigured (Adler & Bernstein, 2005).

As the United States disengages from many UN endeavors, China has increasingly come to regard all facets of the organization as critical arenas for projecting its image as a responsible global leader and for shaping the behavior of both member states and UN officials in ways that align with Chinese national interests (Economy, 2018). A Chinese diplomat made this strategy explicit, describing Beijing’s use of the UN as a means of “translating domestic governance philosophies into international consensus” (Foot, 2016).

This juxtaposition—between American disregard for multilateralism and China’s assertive, albeit illiberal, embrace—places the UN Secretary-General in a particularly delicate position. He carries both a vested interest in, and a normative responsibility for, defending the universal values and moral authority of the United Nations, while also ensuring its continued relevance as a forum where member states can pursue common solutions to shared challenges (Thakur, 2018). Yet such a role cannot be fulfilled in isolation. Meaningful success depends on the willingness of member states to recommit to binding international cooperation and to furnish the necessary political and financial support to sustain the multilateral system.

In an interdependent world, as Secretary-General Guterres stresses, states cannot satisfy their citizens' expectations of protection without cross-border cooperation; multilateralism is thus a necessity rather than a policy taste. That framing reprises the realist pragmatism that informed the UN's design as a deliberately limited instrument (Acharya, 2019).

Treating the so-called "crisis of the liberal order" as an unsettled interregnum—one in which alternative arrangements are imaginable but not yet consolidated—the preceding analysis revisited the United Nations' pragmatic origins and its shifting place within a U.S.-centered order. The central lesson is that the Charter, far from rigid, embeds considerable latitude for institutional reinterpretation and adjustment (Willetts, 2006).

The UN's longevity stems from this malleability. Practices never inscribed in the Charter—most famously, peacekeeping improvised during the Cold War—became emblematic of the organization; more recently, the UN has drawn private firms and market-based instruments into delivering global public goods (Aoi, de Coning, & Thakur, 2007). These adaptations reflect a paradoxical architecture straddling the national and the global, enabling different actors to enlist the UN for different purposes across decades while keeping it relevant.

At the same time, the UN no longer monopolizes global governance; formal and informal platforms such as the G7 and G20 have also become pivotal venues. Yet the diffusion of authority does not foreclose a central role for the UN; it recasts it. Rather than acting as a singular command center, the organization can function as a hub that links specialized forums, sets common reference points, and arbitrates boundary questions.

Amid energetic—but often caricatured—portrayals of the UN as a monolithic, unaccountable “globalist elite,” defenses of a fraying rules-based order have shifted toward a statist register: the issue is less what states owe to multilateralism than how multilateralism equips states to deliver for their citizens. Hence Secretary-General António Guterres’s insistence that multilateralism is not elective but operationally essential in an interdependent age. As he puts it, “Governments will not be able to meet their people’s expectations for protection in the absence of international cooperation.” Read alongside the argument above, this reframes the UN’s role—not as a single command center but as a coordinating hub whose limited design and universal reach steer multiple forums toward common reference points. In short, realist pragmatism—the animating spirit behind the Charter’s deliberately modest instrument—remains the strongest rationale for a UN that helps sovereign states meet shared challenges (Acharya, 2019).

CONCLUSIONS TO CHAPTER I

In the realm of international politics, a paradox often arises for the most influential players: the great powers. These entities, which hold an exorbitant amount of influence and resources, are inherently positioned to be the key drivers of change. They have the ability to shape international norms, promote transformative initiatives, and dictate the trajectory of global policies. Yet, the irony lies in their entrenched investment in the very system that provides the means to exercise this dominion.

This creates a significant paradox for the great powers. Their potential to drive systemic change is thwarted by their very dependency on the existing system. Their continued dominance relies on the status quo, which is often at odds with the radical change they could potentially advocate for and implement. The existing international order, characterized by norms, treaties, alliances, and institutions, essentially serves as a platform for the projection of great powers' influence.

For instance, in the face of calls for systemic reform in international governance or global financial architecture, these powers are caught in a conundrum. While they have the capacity to push for reform, doing so might risk altering the dynamics that favor them. Similarly, in response to calls for enhanced multilateralism or democratization of international institutions, these powers find themselves walking a tightrope between appeasing the demands for reform and safeguarding their vested interests.

The crux of this irony, therefore, lies in the delicate balance between power and change. While the great powers are best positioned to instigate systemic changes, they are simultaneously the most invested in preserving the structures that maintain their privileged position. It is this investment that often results in a stalemate, with the potential for reform being compromised by the very forces that hold the power to initiate it.

The great powers' paradox, as we have seen, emanates from their central dilemma: whether to initiate transformative changes that could potentially destabilize their dominion, or to maintain the status quo that secures their hegemony but may lead to systemic redundancy. This ironic predicament invariably leads us to the question:

Should they instigate these changes, or is there an alternative that does not result in systemic inertia?

Arguably, the most viable solution to this conundrum lies in gradual yet decisive transformation. While immediate and drastic overhauls could indeed unsettle the power structures, a series of calibrated, stepwise modifications might strike a balance between the need for change and the stability of power dynamics. This approach requires a reframing of the conventional perspective on power and influence, a shift from domination to stewardship.

In the spirit of stewardship, great powers would then serve as architects of change rather than its deterrents, guiding the system's evolution to reflect the changing realities of global politics. They would strive to create an environment conducive to shared decision-making and more equitable power distribution, while concurrently ensuring the stability and integrity of the system that enables their influence.

This transformative shift from domination to stewardship could manifest in a variety of ways. It might include more transparent and inclusive decision-making processes, increased recognition and accommodation of emerging powers, and proactive efforts to address systemic disparities. The goal would not be to dismantle the structures of power, but to shape them into more adaptive, responsive, and representative frameworks.

The irony is that, by choosing to champion this shift, the great powers could indeed be securing their own relevance in the evolving international order. The alternative – clinging to outmoded structures of power –

risks leading to redundancy and obsolescence. As the global political landscape continues to shift, so too must the actors that shape it. Therefore, the ironic solution to the great powers' paradox may indeed be to embrace the very change they seem most poised to resist. This ironic twist represents an opportunity for great powers to demonstrate global leadership by navigating the delicate balance between preserving their influence and fostering systemic evolution.

Nevertheless, the postures of great powers are often characterized by a pronounced focus on maintaining the status quo rather than initiating significant changes within the operational frameworks of international institutions (Mearsheimer, 2001). This tendency towards the status quo emanates primarily from their strategic interests in retaining their dominance and influence within the global arena. Accordingly, rather than investing in the transformation of institutional frameworks, great powers tend to consolidate their regional presence to compensate for any potential loss of influence within these institutions (Morse & Keohane, 2014).

In light of these dynamics, the tactics adopted by great powers often involve strengthening their regional footprints, particularly in instances where their global influence might be wavering or under threat. These powers, cognizant of the difficulties involved in effecting substantial changes in international organizations, opt instead for strategies that amplify their regional presence and thus reinforce their overall influence in international affairs (Hurd, 2007).

Within this context, it is noteworthy that the contemporary landscape of multilateral regional cooperation is increasingly characterized by a dispersion of power. Great powers, through their concerted efforts to augment their regional clout, are instrumental in this evolving paradigm. However, it is important to recognize the concomitant rise of middle powers and their increasingly conspicuous role in addressing regional issues (Cooper et al., 2013). Notwithstanding the attempts of great powers to retain their preponderant status, middle powers are progressively exerting influence, effectively contributing to a more complex and multipolar regional and global order. This multiplicity of actors and the diffusion of power within the regional context are indicative of a shift from a traditionally unipolar or bipolar international system to a more complex and nuanced multilateral landscape. A comprehensive understanding of these dynamics is crucial to analyze and predict the future trajectories of international politics and the evolving role of international institutions therein.

CHAPTER II

MIDDLE POWER COOPERATION TO ADDRESS GLOBAL CHALLENGES AT THE REGIONAL LEVEL

In this chapter, we will further delve into the increasing role of middle powers and regional cooperation in addressing global challenges. We aim to shed light on how these actors and strategies can offer new avenues to global problem-solving and foster a more equitable and sustainable future. However, before the analysis of regional cooperation, it is crucial to establish a clear understanding of the concept of a “middle power” and provide a comprehensive definition within the specific context of this research.

Middle powers occupy a noteworthy position within the global order, as they are increasingly assuming strategic roles that enable them to mold regional political, economic, and security landscapes (Bergin et al., 2014). Notwithstanding their importance, the defining parameters of what constitutes a middle power

are yet to be clearly delineated, as a consequence of the prevailing approaches' rhetorical leanings. The endeavor to establish an unambiguous definition or to incessantly redefine it is not only fruitless but also inadvertently hampers the progression of our understanding. The task of effectively articulating the concept of 'middle powers', in order to transcend its current impasse, calls for a more pragmatic and adaptive definitional methodology.

Debates over what qualifies a state as a "middle power" have long perplexed both scholars and policymakers. The label has been stretched to cover a strikingly broad set of cases—India, New Zealand, Nigeria, Brazil, and more—inviting McMahon's (2012) wry observation that "everyone is a middle power now." At the same time, some governments that once wore the badge have grown wary of it (Bergin et al., 2014). To navigate this contested terrain, the present study follows Jeffrey Robertson's survey of how the term has evolved and been deployed across the literature (Robertson et al., 2017).

A principal source of confusion is that "middle power" rests on distinct, often overlapping logics. Holbraad (1971) and, later, Beeson and Higgott (2014) show that conventional usage groups around three ideas: (1) a state's positional location between great-power poles; (2) its intermediate material scale; and (3) its mediating role within ideological or political cleavages. Each of these emphasizes a different intuition—systemic location, size, or bridge-building capacity.

Soward's early analysis (1963) reached a similar threefold division but with a different emphasis. First, capacity-based approaches anchor the category in material resources—neither minimal nor preponderant.

Second, a functionalist reading—shaped by Canada’s experience—shows how certain states carve out distinctive roles despite limited size. Third, a practice-focused strand highlights recurrent diplomatic habits: retaining specialized “strategic know-how” in key issue areas and collaborating closely with like-minded partners. Later work bundled these habits under the banners of coalition-building and niche diplomacy, shifting the emphasis from what states are to what they routinely do.

On the back of the post-Cold War revival, Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal (1993) systematized the field into four families of definition—positional, geographic, normative, and behavioural. The positional view returns to hierarchy: middle powers sit on the system’s middle rung. The geographic view appears in two variants: states whose regional location furnishes distinctive leverage, and states situated—spatially or ideationally—between rival great powers. The normative view identifies actors that function as “honest brokers,” mediating and facilitating across divides: they operate globally without hegemonic reach. Finally, the behavioural view—championed by Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal and foreshadowed in Evans and Grant (1995)—collects a recognizable repertoire of conduct: prioritizing multilateral solutions, brokering compromise in disputes, and practicing “good international citizenship.”

Taken together, these strands explain both the appeal and the slipperiness of the category. Because the label can rest on position, place, principles, or practice—and often on a blend of all four—its boundaries remain

elastic as rising states seek recognition and established ones recalibrate their identities. That elasticity fuels both the proliferation of the term and the reluctance of some to claim it, while preserving a common thread: middle powers are identified not only by what they possess, but by the coalitions they assemble and the diplomatic roles they choose to perform.

More recent efforts to tidy the concept start with Andrew Carr's (2014) reconceptualization, which trims middle-power definitions to three strands: position, behaviour, and identity. *Position* refers to observable endowments—GDP, military capability, population—while also accommodating power-relevant context such as geography, strategic location, and proximity to great-power centers. *Behaviour* captures recurring diplomatic patterns, building on Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal: privileging multilateral solutions, brokering compromises, and practicing “good international citizenship.” *Identity* denotes cases where governments explicitly style themselves as middle powers, a useful category given the growing and diverse set of states claiming the label.

Earlier schemata map onto similar families. Near the close of the post-Cold War decade, Chapnick (1999) synthesized three models: a functional view (echoing Soward) that emphasizes the roles states can perform within international society; a hierarchical view that places states above small powers but short of great-power status on material indices; and a behavioural view that stresses commitments to multilateralism, conflict management, and moral suasion. Ungerer (2007) likewise distinguishes uses of the term that emphasize geographic, material, and behavioural attributes.

Some scholars refine the field by anchoring definitions in one of Carr's axes. Jonathan Ping (2005) criticizes the literature's limited cumulation and, drawing on hybridization theory, proposes a composite statistical measure to operationalize the category. Carr (2014) also develops capacity-based approaches further, acknowledging the intrinsic difficulty of measuring "power" and offering a more systematic procedure to handle those obstacles. Taken together, these contributions explain both the elasticity and persistence of the label: middle powers can be identified by where they sit, what they do, and how they understand themselves.

A growing strand of scholarship questions whether "middle power" can sustain a stable meaning at all. Jordaan (2017) and Andersen (2017) note that the term is used with shifting criteria across studies, typically toggling between "traditional" and "emerging" variants, and they warn that this fluidity blurs analysis. Responding to this problem, Jordaan urges narrowing the category so that the label facilitates, rather than confuses, empirical and theoretical work.

Against this backdrop of skepticism, many authors nonetheless pursue eclectic syntheses that fuse multiple strands of definition. Jordaan's earlier contribution (2003) distinguishes emerging middle powers—those on upward economic trajectories—from traditional ones with durable prosperity and democratic consolidation. Robertson (2006) pushes the fusion further by layering three dimensions: states first assume a function in international society (irrespective of immediate capability), then acquire middle-power capacity through development, and eventually

display middle-power behaviour as their political and social institutions mature.

Other efforts reimagine the category from historical and normative vantage points. Patience (2014) revisits past “imaginings” of what middle powers are for and proposes a triad of types keyed to distinct intellectual lineages: a Concert of Europe model, a regionalist model, and a neo-Kantian model. In a different vein, Kim Sangbae (2009, 2011) links classic IR debates to advances in information technology, recasting middle powers as network nodes whose significance derives from their position and connectivity within diplomatic webs.

Even so, every definitional route carries liabilities. The field’s proliferation of criteria—geographic, material, normative, and behavioural—invites synergy but also inconsistency, which has fueled debate while complicating pedagogy and cumulative theory-building. For that reason, recent attempts to tidy the landscape often anchor on one dimension and then build outward. Jonathan Ping (2005), for example, criticizes the lack of cumulative refinement and, drawing on hybridization theory, proposes a composite statistical metric to operationalize the category. Carr (2014) similarly systematizes capacity-based approaches, acknowledging the intrinsic difficulty of measuring “power” and proposing procedures to mitigate it. Taken together, these interventions show why the label persists despite its elasticity: it can be specified by where states sit, what they do, and how they define themselves—but without tighter criteria, its analytical utility remains contested.

Skepticism about the category has mounted in recent years. Jeong (2019) warns that “middle power” can be misused—smuggling in implicit biases and circular reasoning—precisely because scholars deploy shifting premises to define it. Yet this very elasticity may also mirror the fluid nature of international politics, suggesting that our concepts must evolve alongside changing realities rather than fix on a single, timeless formula.

Robertson (2017) pushes the critique further by shifting attention from taxonomy to power. For him, arguments over “what counts” as a middle power are not merely exercises in classification; they are struggles to shape the discursive terrain itself. On this view, the search for a definitive, once-and-for-all definition is misguided, because the label functions within wider contests over authority and agenda-setting.

Against that backdrop, Woo (2021) offers a pragmatic counterproposal grounded in more objective criteria. He differentiates latent from mature middle powers and illustrates the distinction through the International Monetary Fund’s divergent treatment of India and South Korea. Read one way, this challenges Robertson’s claim about definitional futility; read another, it complements it by narrowing the category for analytical use—much as Jordaan’s call for tighter criteria intended.

A number of scholars implicitly take a contextual tack. Cooper (2013), examining middle powers in global governance and the G20, frames his intervention as a re-assessment of the diplomatic styles and effects of “secondary or intermediate” actors in an era of diminished hegemony and leadership. Rather than insisting on a single yardstick, this approach asks

how position, behaviour, and identity interact in particular institutional settings—accepting that the meaning and utility of “middle power” will vary with the forum, the issue, and the moment.

Power remains the key lens through which international relations classifies states, even if scholars disagree on its exact contours—whether cast as soft, hard, sharp, smart, or coercive (Haukkala, 2011). Whatever the taxonomy, some states clearly command greater influence than others. The distribution of both material and ideational resources structures the system into uni-, bi-, or multipolar configurations, depending on how many great powers anchor it (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Within this landscape, the classic account of middle powers links their influence to niche diplomacy and to a reputation for “good international citizenship”—a readiness and capacity to sustain cooperative norms (Jordaan, 2003). Yet that favorable view carries a normative tilt: middle powers are often expected to act constructively abroad only when those initiatives dovetail with domestic priorities (Cooper, 1997).

Domestic politics frequently narrows room for maneuver. Vulnerable constituencies—exposed to shifts in the global economy—may press governments to hold back, even when international audiences anticipate leadership (Cooper, 1997). The practical implication is that middle powers must craft strategies that reconcile internal coalitions with external commitments, rather than treating them as separate tracks.

To make sense of how this role evolves, Cox (1989) urges continuous reconsideration of what “middle power” practice should entail as the wider system changes. Such a perspective helps explain the mixture of persistence and adaptation visible over time. Indeed, the traditional foreign-policy aims of self-identified middle powers—typically supportive of system maintenance—have remained salient despite shifting conditions (Chapnick, 1999).

A workable way to specify the category, following Robertson et al. (2017), is to see a middle power as a state that possesses both the motivation and the capabilities—material assets, diplomatic reach, and policy ingenuity—to cooperate with like-minded partners in strengthening institutions that govern the global commons. This formulation marries capacity with intent and locates middle-power influence where it most often manifests: in coalition-building and institution-shaping.

NORTH VS. SOUTH: GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCE OF MIDDLE POWERS

In the preceding chapter, we embarked on an extensive exploration of the role and characterization of ‘middle powers’ within the international system, providing a thorough understanding of the multifaceted dynamics they bring to the global governance table. As we turn the page to this chapter, it is worth remembering that middle powers, with their distinct positioning and capabilities, shape the course of international relations in significant

ways, straddling the gap between smaller nations and the colossuses of the global stage.

In the realm of international relations theory, the analysis of middle powers is a critically insightful avenue. It unveils the distinctive roles these nations play and the impacts they exert on the mechanics of global governance. The nomenclature of ‘middle powers’ is a subject of diverse interpretations and definitions, with multiple ways to identify and categorize these countries. A commonly cited framework—valued especially by policymakers—assesses a state’s standing through measurable indicators such as its GDP, demographic weight, and level of defense spending (Cooper, Heine, & Thakur, 2013).

By employing this quantitative framework, a country can be ascertained as a middle power if it exhibits proximity to the world’s superpowers concerning these measures, albeit falling short of surpassing them. While these nations might not hold the commanding authority that the superpowers wield, their relatively significant resources and influence position them as crucial actors in the international system, capable of engendering consequential impacts on global governance. As we delve further into this chapter, we will examine the strategic manoeuvres of such middle powers within the broader global context and how their actions influence the dynamics of international institutions and governance.

Conceptualised as those nations that occupy a space between small and major powers (Taylor, 2010), these middle powers represent states with mid-range levels of power (Cooper, Higgott, & Nossal, 1993). However, the

task of accurately delineating what characterises a middle power is fraught with challenges due to varied perspectives on the factors that constitute a state's power.

Within these debates, Bernard Wood's (1988) contribution is notable for its distinctive methodology. He proposed a primarily economic criterion, classifying middle powers by their Gross National Product (GNP). According to his assessment, states ranked between sixth and thirty-sixth globally by GNP in 1979 qualified as middle powers. GNP was favored for its relative ease of calculation and the perception of neutrality it conveyed.

Yet, Wood complicated this metric by incorporating Algeria, Iran, and Pakistan into his list, arguing they possessed exceptional regional or global significance. This adjustment implicitly underscored the limitations of relying on a single quantitative measure, reflecting Holbraad's (1984) broader conception of power that factors in leadership capacity, domestic cohesion, and diplomatic competence. In this way, Wood acknowledged that power is multidimensional and cannot be reduced to economic indicators alone.

Although much of the scholarship has moved away from defining middle powers strictly through material capacity or systemic ranking (Neumann & Gstöhl, 2004), some analysts continue to defend this line of reasoning. Gilley and O'Neil (2014), for example, adopt a hierarchical framework that situates middle powers just beneath the most prominent global actors—whether established or rising—such as the United States, China, Russia, France, Germany, Britain, Japan, and India. Yet this perspective highlights a persistent difficulty: no consensus exists on how to construct a comprehensive index of state power,

nor on the appropriate weighting of its diverse elements, ranging from economic and military resources to diplomatic influence (Gilley & O'Neil, 2014).

A fundamental issue with recognising middle powers based on a form of international ranking is the inherent assumption that states with similar standing will exhibit parallel international behaviour. A thorough examination of Wood's (1988) list, encompassing a range of countries from India, apartheid South Africa, Sweden, to communist states such as Czechoslovakia and China, unveils the great disparity in foreign policies among similarly ranked states. Echoing this sentiment, Gilley and O'Neil's (2014) more contemporary list displays an analogous diversity, with the inclusion of countries as disparate as Spain and Saudi Arabia, and Italy and Iran.

This diversity challenges the presumption of homogenous behaviour among middle powers. As an illustration, Cooper (2008) posits that Iran is a robust global middle power, yet discerning commonalities between Iranian foreign policy and that of Canada, a country widely regarded as a middle power, proves elusive. In fact, this discrepancy is not limited to these examples but pervades the broader concept of middle powers. Ravenhill (2017) elucidates this by stating that middle powers are countries sandwiched between great powers, regardless of whether they are emerging or established, and small powers. Given the paucity of great powers, this dichotomy implies that a substantial majority of the world's nations must be categorised within these two remaining brackets.

However, it becomes increasingly evident that ranking

alone provides a rather limited insight into the behavioural traits or potential actions of middle powers. As Walt (1998) posits, foreign policy does not unambiguously or directly stem from a state's capacity, power, or international standing. This is especially pertinent in a unipolar international system where foreign policy may be less predictably linked to a state's power. Consequently, many scholars studying middle powers have shifted their focus towards analysing their international behaviour (Ungerer, 2007), although maintaining a vague and unspecified notion of middling power – necessary to avoid rendering the term 'middle power' a misnomer.

The shift from a power-centric to a behaviour-centric perspective has led to some peculiar outcomes in the identification of middle powers. An instance of this is the classification of India, a nation of significant size and population, as a middle power (Buzan & Wæver, 2003), which, it could be argued, undermines the concept of 'middling' size that is traditionally associated with the definition of middle powers.

Notwithstanding the complexity of determining middle powers based on size, the ambiguity persists when analysing behaviour. Brazil serves as a case in point, exhibiting characteristics of middle power behaviour (Hurrell, 2007), yet scholars remain at odds over whether its vast scale disqualifies it as a middle power (Amorim, 2010).

A notable branch of the behaviour-based approach defines middle powers as "good international citizens,"

embodying the ethos of “humane internationalism” (Cooper, Higgott, & Nossal, 1993). Within this perspective, traditional middle powers are portrayed as altruistic actors, visible in their roles as major providers of development assistance, consistent contributors to United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations, and mediators in violent conflicts. Gareth Evans (2003), Australia’s former foreign minister, famously advanced this view, citing Chile’s decisive vote in the UN Security Council in 2003 that blocked U.S. efforts to secure a UN mandate for the Iraq invasion. Yet the image of middle powers as moral exemplars has faced sustained criticism. Scholars note that such portrayals risk romanticising historical precedents, suffer from conceptual ambiguity, and obscure less laudable episodes in these states’ foreign policies (Neumann & Gstöhl, 2004).

As Ungerer (2007) observes, middle powers, like any state, have at times pursued controversial courses of action, complicating the claim to moral authority. A different behavioural interpretation sidesteps normative assumptions, instead emphasising the methods of middle-power engagement (Cooper, 1997). Despite operating with constrained capabilities that confine them to select issue areas, middle powers are frequently recognised for diplomacy marked by “entrepreneurial flair and technical competence” (Long & Woolaver, 2018). Such limitations naturally draw them towards multilateral forums and coalition-building. In practice, their interventions often take the form of mediation, facilitation, or bridge-building, reflecting an inclination to foster compromise rather than impose outcomes (Evans, 1993).

However, it is crucial to note that middle power states

do not consistently exhibit these behaviours. They do so selectively, giving rise to the concept of ‘niche diplomacy’ (Keating, 1993). This approach implies that middle powers concentrate their efforts on specific areas of international affairs where they can wield a substantive influence, instead of adopting a broad approach to global issues.

Seen through a constructivist lens, Hurrell (2008) recasts “middle power” less as a material rank than as an identity or ideology that states actively construct. On this view, a country qualifies when it narrates itself as a middle power and aligns diplomatic practice with that script. This identity-centered turn, however, has drawbacks. Self-designation is uneven: some governments—Australia, Canada, and South Korea are frequent examples—explicitly embrace the label, whereas others commonly coded by scholars as middle powers, such as Brazil and South Africa (Jordaan, 2003), maintain foreign-policy traditions and bureaucratic cultures that do not consistently affirm that self-image. The gap between scholarly classification and official self-understanding highlights the limits of identity alone as a defining criterion.

An additional issue arises with the principle of self-definition. If a country proclaims itself a middle power, such as Malaysia, should this self-proclamation be accepted as accurate, or should an independent set of criteria inform our understanding of its status? Arguably, the latter approach seems more reasonable. Accepting a country’s self-proclaimed status without scrutiny can lead to misrepresentations – as when the Democratic People’s

Republic of Korea describes itself as a democracy, a claim that is demonstrably untrue.

One strand of behaviour-focused scholarship casts middle powers as systemic stabilisers (Ravenhill, 1998). Their activism is rooted in enlightened self-interest: vulnerability to turbulence abroad gives them a strong stake in order at home. From this vantage, the quest for stability, predictability, and legal constraint propels middle powers toward conflict mitigation, institution-building, and fidelity to international law (Cooper, Higgott, & Nossal, 1993).

Because their resources are finite, these states amplify influence through coalitions and by working inside multilateral organisations. When great powers decline to underwrite order, middle powers frequently step forward—and, in some accounts, are expected to do so (Cooper, Higgott, & Nossal, 1993). A persistent theme in the literature is the waning capacity or willingness of the United States to provide leadership and the corresponding need to widen the circle of states engaged in managing international order (Higgott, 1998). Dispersing responsibility in this way heightens the relevance of mid-range actors.

Consistent with this orientation, middle powers generally favour continuity and rule-governed change; when shifts are unavoidable, they seek to channel them through orderly procedures (Ravenhill, 1998). Since the Cold War's end, the most consequential shift has arguably been the rise of China—a development that frames, and tests, middle-power strategies for sustaining stability.

Power transitions have long been associated with turbulence and a heightened risk of great-power conflict. In that setting, middle powers have an obvious incentive to encourage China—much as they once did the United States—to operate through multilateral institutions and to observe broadly accepted rules of interstate conduct (Hurrell, 2007).

Yet the stabiliser image does not fit all cases. Responses to hegemony vary widely, especially among emerging middle powers. It is useful to distinguish several recurrent postures toward the United States and the liberal order; doing so underscores a key divide between traditional and newer middle powers. One reading casts middle powers primarily as buttresses of hegemony: a conservative preference for order and continuity typically translates into support for the U.S.-led liberal system (Chapnick, 1999). This view aligns with Neack's (1995) argument that middle powers secure relevance by making themselves useful to the prevailing great powers, and with Cox's (1987) claim that they help sustain and legitimise the existing order.

Legitimation occurs when middle powers endorse and enact the rules, values, and routines that define a given international system (Cooper, Higgott, & Nossal, 1993). This role is especially salient in approaches that treat hegemony as more than material preponderance—as a structure of consent to the principles and ideologies of a particular order (Keohane, 1984). For that consent to hold, weaker states must see the hegemon's preferences as aligned with a putative general interest and observe it making concessions that preserve a sense of mutual benefit (Keohane, 1984).

A basic precondition for credible middle-power diplomacy is autonomy from the dominant state. Even accounts that cast middle powers as supporters of hegemony concede this point: Cox (1987) argues they must retain sufficient distance from major powers, and Evans (1993) adds that such independence is essential if they are to function as impartial mediators and “honest brokers.”

Set against this backdrop, a second line of interpretation portrays middle powers as ambivalent toward U.S. leadership. Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal (1993) read their preference for multilateral forums and international law less as protection from hostile rivals than as a hedge against the overbearing influence of powerful allies—a “safety in numbers” strategy that diffuses great-power dominance.

When clashes with major powers occur, they typically arise from middle powers’ insistence that all states, large or small, abide by agreed rules of conduct (Ungerer, 2007). Yet these efforts are usually framed within the reigning normative repertoire—human rights, multilateralism, democracy, open markets, and peaceful dispute settlement—rather than against it. Even at their most forceful, attempts to restrain a hegemon stay within system-sanctioned principles and are therefore reformist, not revolutionary (Ungerer, 2007).

Despite serving as sporadic antagonists or dissenters on specific matters, middle powers have assumed the roles of ‘supporters’ and ‘loyalists’ to the prevailing authority in the aftermath of the Cold War, as per the first two schools of thought (Cox, 1981). These perspectives suggest a harmony and alignment of interests between middle powers and the

global hegemon. The third perspective, on the other hand, positions the interests of middle powers as challenging or counterbalancing the supremacy of great powers (Soeya, 1997).

In this third viewpoint, middle powers exhibit a preference for a multipolar international order. This inclination arises due to the democratization of influence it entails; more states are able to exert influence over specific international issues in such an order (Holbraad, 1984). The first two perspectives resonate with the posture and actions of traditional middle powers, while this third perspective seems especially relevant to the conduct of emerging middle powers.

Emerging middle powers exhibit a distinct attitude towards the United States and the liberal international order, which the U.S. has historically spearheaded. The key difference between emerging and traditional middle powers becomes evident in this attitude (Mearsheimer, 2001). Traditional middle powers, such as Canada and Australia, have generally been unwavering followers of the U.S. and do not question American international leadership at a foundational level (Cooper, 1997).

Contrarily, emerging middle powers, such as India or Brazil, often display a resistance to the U.S. and challenge international structures more deeply than their traditional counterparts (Jordaan, 2003). This is not to say that emerging middle powers desire a radical transformation of the global order. Previously, this author posited that emerging middle powers seek a 'reformist' change – a modification that, while significant, still aligns with and supports the current international order and its liberal character.

Earlier summaries may understate the extent to which emerging middle powers diverge from the prevailing hegemonic order. South Africa illustrates this trajectory: its external conduct has reflected a solidarist orientation rooted in Global South politics and a willingness to advance agendas that move beyond incremental reform. In several arenas, its stance cannot be captured by “reformist” fine-tuning alone; rather, it signals a deeper readiness to renegotiate the distribution of voice, status, and rules in global governance.

This pattern aligns with a third view of middle-power behaviour: some mid-rank states now aspire to systemic change that departs from liberal precepts and resists U.S. leadership. The literature increasingly documents this kind of contestation emanating from non-traditional middle powers (Jordaan, 2003). The aim is not merely to soften the edges of the existing order, but to redirect rule-making authority toward alternative principles—developmentalism, sovereignty-first security conceptions, or South–South solidarity—thereby widening the legitimate repertoire of international conduct.

Several drivers push emerging middle powers toward this stance. Ideational legacies matter: anti-colonial narratives and justice claims make redistributive and non-hierarchical arrangements attractive. Domestic politics also looms large: party ideologies, coalition bargains, and the social bases of governing movements can privilege autonomy and policy space over liberal conditionality. Strategic calculations reinforce these preferences: hedging against great-power pressure and diversifying partnerships can be safer than bandwagoning in a fluid distribution of power. Finally, status concerns motivate visible norm entrepreneurship; being seen to lead alternatives can translate into regional clout and global recognition.

Recent middle-power activism looks less like the old ethos of like-minded followership and more like strategic dissent. Pape's notion of "soft balancing" (2005) helps explain the turn: indirect efforts to check a hegemon by complicating, slowing, or raising the costs of unilateral moves. Drawing on this, Flemes (2007) shows rising middle powers frustrating U.S. unilateralism not via hard counter-alliances but by deepening South–South ties, widening agendas, and multiplying venues where rules can be set. In this reading, coalition-building among Southern states aims to shift economic leverage away from Washington.

Examples abound. Stephen (2014) flags India, Brazil, and South Africa as frequent antagonists of U.S. initiatives. Turkey has moved from habitual Western alignment to a more autonomous profile, while Indonesia's priorities diverge notably from those of a traditional middle power like Australia (Neack, 2019). The common thread is a readiness to contest post-Cold War hierarchies rather than echo them.

Cooper captured the change with his observation about a fading "sense of like-mindedness based on shared attitudes" (2005). Where earlier cohorts often backed U.S.-led initiatives, many contemporaries are willing to contradict them—without abandoning multilateralism itself. Instead, multilateral forums become instruments for constraining dominance, amplifying voice, and redefining acceptable practice.

Neack (2019) pushes the point: emerging middle powers "seek fundamental revisions" to core postwar institutions. Hence the strategic repertoire now blends three tracks. First, continued engagement inside existing

bodies to influence outcomes. Second, sustained advocacy for procedural and representational reform. Third, creation of parallel mechanisms whose mandates, membership, or decision rules better fit their preferences. As Cooper and Flesmes ask, will middle powers work with what is there or build alternatives? For most emerging actors, the answer is a pragmatic mix of all three.

Emerging middle powers increasingly use the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) as both stage and lever. Many pursue non-permanent seats—Brazil’s repeated elections are emblematic (United Nations, 2021)—while simultaneously pushing to reshape the Council. Reform agendas vary. Via the African Union’s Ezulwini Consensus, South Africa supports more permanent members with veto rights (Lynch, 2006). Brazil, working in the G4 with Germany, India, and Japan, likewise backs additional permanent seats but does not demand vetoes for the newcomers (Hurrell, 2006). Others—Mexico, South Korea, and Turkey—rally under United for Consensus to promote a more limited redesign than the G4 or African Group proposals (Volgy et al., 2011). Taken together, these efforts pair access to the UNSC’s agenda with attempts to recalibrate its representation, rules, and perceived legitimacy.

A parallel track has been to build or empower alternative institutions. Similar patterns surround the Bretton Woods institutions, where emerging middle powers mix participation and reform advocacy with the creation of supplementary platforms. In effect, the contemporary middle-power repertoire blends seat-seeking, rule-revision, and institution-building to expand influence within the central organs of global governance.

A cohort of newer middle powers—Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico, Turkey, and South Korea—figures prominently among the World Bank’s largest borrowers (World Bank, 2022). From that vantage point they have pressed for governance changes at the International Monetary Fund (IMF), focusing especially on recalibrating voting shares to mirror the rising weight of economies outside the traditional OECD core (Woods, 2006). Limited movement followed: in 2016 the IMF approved quota shifts that raised the formal voice of Brazil, China, India, and Russia, while South Africa’s share fell (IMF, 2016). Even so, the aggregate result left developing states’ representation lagging behind their expanded economic footprint, sustaining long-standing claims that voice and vote remain misaligned with contemporary capabilities.

Underrepresentation at the Fund—and dissatisfaction with the dollar’s centrality—also spurred institutional entrepreneurship by the BRICS. In 2014 they launched the New Development Bank (NDB), envisaged as a complementary yet *alternative* source of finance to the U.S.-anchored Bretton Woods pair (Stuenkel, 2015; NDB, 2014). Whether the NDB’s lending philosophy and safeguard regime will ultimately diverge meaningfully from World Bank–IMF practice remains an open question; nonetheless, its mandate signals an intent to widen the menu of development finance and reduce reliance on legacy institutions perceived as slow to adapt.

These counterhegemonic impulses surface as well in voting behavior. Gilley and O’Neil (2005) argue that new middle powers often resist norms read as Western-imposed. UN General Assembly rolls offer a snapshot: U.S. government tallies for 2012–2015 show coincidence rates

with Washington above 90 percent for Australia and Canada, but below 50 percent for Brazil and Turkey (U.S. Department of State, 2016). The pattern captures a broader posture—continued engagement with multilateralism, coupled with greater willingness to distance from U.S. positions when perceived interests or principles diverge.

Building on these debates, Gilley and O’Neil (2005) argue that many new middle powers—despite being democratic at home and upholding civil liberties domestically—display marked scepticism toward liberal-democratic agendas when these are projected outward. In their reading, such states are less inclined than traditional middle powers to champion universal human-rights promotion as a foreign-policy priority.

A Canadian parliamentary assessment of the newly created UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC, established 2006) offers a concrete illustration. The report faulted the Council for its inability to pass strong resolutions and traced the shortfall to resistance from developing states—among them several emerging middle powers—that repeatedly voted down Western-sponsored initiatives (Canada Parliament, 2007). The criticism suggested not an absence of democratic credentials at home, but a reluctance to endorse what was perceived as externally driven norm entrepreneurship abroad.

Country-level records reinforce the point. On the UNHRC, South Africa and Brazil have been accused of underperforming on rights promotion; South Africa and Indonesia have also drawn censure for defending governments with notorious human-rights records (Human Rights Watch, 2013). Turkey—though not serving.

on the Council at the time—was identified as gravitating toward coalitions of states with weak democratic credentials and pronounced anti-Western alignments (Öniş & Yılmaz, 2009). Taken together, these cases capture a broader pattern: emerging middle powers remain engaged multilaterally, yet frequently balk at Western-led rights agendas, privileging sovereignty, non-interference, or alternative coalitional logics over the global diffusion of liberal norms.

Chris Alden (2007) observes that many regional organizations in the developing world have not functioned as effective channels for diffusing progressive norms into global governance. Instead, they frequently operate as protective shields, limiting outside scrutiny and intervention on behalf of members with troubling human-rights records.

This third reading—casting emerging middle powers as adversaries of hegemony—sits uneasily alongside the familiar image of middle powers as custodians of international stability. The oft-asserted preference for order appears to clash with advocacy for a transition away from a U.S.-led unipolarity toward a more plural, multipolar configuration (Cooper et al., 2012). The tension is not merely semantic; it raises the question of whether the pursuit of a more balanced distribution of influence inadvertently trades perceived stability for greater systemic volatility.

Structural arguments reinforce the dilemma. Wohlforth (1999) contends that unipolarity tends to be more stable than bipolar or multipolar orders because the dominant state's preponderance creates a wide power gap. Jervis (1997) adds that such disparities dampen the risk

of great-power war: when relative capabilities are not seriously contested, opportunities for miscalculation or spirals of competitive arming narrow. If emerging middle powers champion multipolarity while claiming the mantle of stabilizers, they must reconcile these theoretical critiques with their practical diplomacy.

Although Kenneth Waltz (1979) cautions that concentrations of power can threaten others, who wields that preponderance matters. John Ikenberry (2011) captures this nuance with his depiction of the United States as a “liberal leviathan.” In his account, the U.S.-led system, while hierarchical, is buffered by liberal features: the hegemon supplies global public goods, sustains dense networks of consultation and influence, and accepts negotiated rules and institutional constraints that limit arbitrary action.

By contrast, middle powers pressing for multipolarity effectively endorse a reordering of great-power standings. Moving away from unipolarity risks significant turbulence. Graham Allison’s (2017) historical survey is sobering: of sixteen major power transitions over the last five centuries, twelve ended in war. If multipolarity is the destination, the journey may entail heightened contestation, crisis-prone signaling, and overlapping spheres of influence that complicate crisis management.

The stabilizer image of middle powers therefore sits uncomfortably with the behavior of a new cohort whose diplomacy often contradicts that role. Many emerging middle powers exhibit durable skepticism toward U.S. primacy, a posture rooted in domestic coalitions, strategic hedging, and alternative normative visions.

Brazil captures the tension between a long-standing Western orientation and a renewed drive for wider, South–South engagement (Souza, 2023). The contrast sharpened under President Lula, whose outreach to the Global South was read by some observers as undoing years of effort to deepen ties with Western partners (Spektor, 2010).

South Africa shows a similar tilt: closer identification with the Global South coexists with foreign-policy strands that remain recognizably “Western” in tone and practice (Nel, 2015). Indonesia, by contrast, often vacillates—at times a cooperative Western partner, at others cast as a “problem state” in regional and global diplomacy (Rüland, 2012).

Turkey offers a further illustration. The Kemalist period anchored Ankara firmly to the West, but the Justice and Development Party (AKP) era has seen a pronounced reorientation, including expanded links with the Islamic world (Çağaptay, 2014). As Neack (2017) notes, Turkish diplomacy oscillates between revisionist impulses and support for the prevailing order; episodes of assertive autonomy are frequently followed by renewed adherence to the status quo when core security interests are at stake (Neack, 2017).

Divergent stances among emerging middle powers toward the hegemonic order stem from multiple sources. One lies in domestic political economy: van der Westhuizen (1998) argues that class cleavages often force governments to navigate a fraught trade-off between market liberalization and redistribution. Another concerns role conception. Many of these states cast themselves as interlocutors for the developing world in dealings with

industrialized powers, adopting a spokesperson's mantle that shapes external alignments and negotiating style. Indonesian leaders, for instance, frequently describe their country as a bridge linking small and great powers, mediating across status and interest divides. Mexico performed a similar bridging function during the Heiligendamm process, positioning itself between North and South to widen agenda ownership (Hurrell, 2008). South Korea likewise dramatized its intermediary identity by hosting the first G20 summit outside the Anglophone core, using that moment to underscore its own passage from developing to advanced status.

Yet this bridge role generates cross-pressures. By definition, mediators straddle constituencies with competing priorities, and the pull of opposing demands can become acute. The World Trade Organization offers a clear illustration. As Burges (2009) recounts, Brazil initially assembled a coalition of Southern states to secure a seat at the principal bargaining table with the European Union, India, and the United States. Once that objective was achieved, however, Brasília's preferences diverged: it pressed partners for additional concessions—such as on non-agricultural market access—thereby shifting away from the coalition's original platform. The episode captures a broader dynamic: emerging middle powers can leverage South–South solidarity to gain access and influence, only to recalibrate their positions as national interests, domestic coalitions, and leadership ambitions reassert themselves.

Emerging middle powers that lean toward South–South solidarity often adopt a sovereignty-first posture that can blunt human-rights advocacy (Acharya, 2018).

The resulting friction between local norms and agendas read as Western is not abstract; it shapes concrete choices in diplomacy and security policy.

South Africa illustrates the dilemma vividly. As Nathan (2012) argues, Pretoria's external conduct must constantly balance professed liberal commitments with a strong identity tethered to Africa and the Global South, producing recurrent trade-offs when regional solidarity collides with universalist rights claims. Turkey offers another case. Under the Justice and Development Party, Islamic references have become more salient in domestic and foreign policy, a shift that informed Ankara's caution over NATO's 2011 intervention in Libya and, more broadly, a preference for restraint when intervention is framed through Western liberal idioms (Çağaptay, 2014).

Indonesia's record underscores the same tension from a different angle. Though democratic at home, Jakarta's role in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation aligned it with UN initiatives on "defamation of religions"—resolutions many jurists viewed as curbing protected expression and distorting international free-speech standards (Hicks, 2012). Across these cases, ambivalence toward liberal internationalism is compounded by a final, uncomfortable fact: despite constitutional guarantees, many emerging middle powers wrestle with serious rights challenges domestically. Those internal deficits not only constrain the credibility of their external advocacy but also incentivize diplomatic positions that privilege non-interference and cultural pluralism over the extraterritorial promotion of liberal norms. This tension propels emerging middle powers along two divergent tracks.

On one side, they may lean into international mechanisms to help tackle domestic shortcomings. A notable example is Latin America's leadership on sexual orientation and gender identity at the UN Human Rights Council: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay jointly sponsored a landmark 2014 resolution, signaling an embrace of the liberal strands of the international order (Bauder, 2016). On the other side, states facing acute internal rights deficits may prefer strategic silence abroad so as not to spotlight their vulnerabilities; Indonesia's reluctance to foreground sensitive rights issues internationally illustrates this evasive posture (Tan, 2017).

Regional position adds a second layer of strain. Most new middle powers are simultaneously recognized as regional powers (with Mexico and South Korea frequently noted as exceptions to this tendency), and in many cases it is precisely their regional preponderance that underwrites their middle-power status in global affairs (Söderbaum & Taylor, 2008; Schirm, 2010). South Africa and Brazil have often operated as regional stabilizers and brokers (Soares de Lima & Hirst, 2006), while Turkey has incrementally consolidated a leadership role in its neighborhood (Öniş, 2011). Yet assertions of leadership seldom go uncontested. Regional peers may resist—whether from fear of dominance, competitive ambition, or divergent normative preferences—complicating efforts to convert regional weight into legitimate influence (Santiso, 2003).

The foregoing analysis identifies a wide array of drivers behind emerging middle powers' ambivalent postures toward the liberal hegemonic order. Given both

their number and their character, these drivers are unlikely to fade soon; if anything, they suggest that counter-hegemonic impulses in the foreign policies of many such states will endure.

This persistence exposes the limits of familiar classificatory moves. Ranking states by size, aggregate power, or capabilities offers little purchase on how they will act internationally; these indicators do not reliably predict diplomatic choices or coalition strategies. Nor does the trope of the “good international citizen” resolve the problem: empirical records repeatedly show conduct at odds with that ideal, making the label as much aspiration as description.

Capacity constraints compound the difficulty. By definition, middle powers operate with finite resources; their trademark roles—niche entrepreneurship, coalition-building, or bridge-making—are episodic, issue-bound, and contingent on windows of opportunity. Because these interventions are intermittent rather than continuous, they furnish a weak basis for forecasting behavior and, consequently, for theory that aims to generalize across cases. Self-designation fares no better. If “middle power” status rests on how governments style themselves, analysts still require an external, shared understanding of what counts as middle-powership—an understanding that remains contested.

Taken together, these shortcomings persist whether the subject is “new” or “traditional” middle powers. The one definition often left standing is the claim that middle

powers function as stabilizers of the international system. Yet that, too, is under strain. A notable subset—especially among non-traditional cases—pursues counter-hegemonic strategies that can unsettle prevailing arrangements, from forum-shifting and norm reinterpretation to the sponsorship of parallel institutions. Recognizing this divergence sharpens a fundamental query posed by Stephen (2012): if a state routinely adopts antagonistic positions toward U.S. leadership, can it still be meaningfully classified as a middle power? The question does not merely police a label; it forces a reconsideration of whether “middle power” denotes a stable role in support of order, or a family resemblance across heterogeneous strategies—some conserving, some reformist, and some openly revisionist.

Chen Zhao (2016) proposes recasting the category by treating traditional cases like Canada and Australia as outliers due to their tight U.S. alignment and reserving the label for “unaligned new middle powers” (e.g., Indonesia, South Africa, Turkey)—a shift that would fundamentally redefine the term. Jordaan (2017) advances the opposite remedy: drop qualifiers (“emerging,” “Southern”) and exclude counter-hegemonic intermediates, limiting “middle power” to mid-range states that actively sustain the liberal international order. By this logic, South Korea fits: a close U.S. ally that shares many American values, participates deeply in global governance, and—as an OECD member—has economic interests closer to traditional middle powers than to many newer claimants.

Murphy (2013) likewise notes that Indonesia's opposition has eased in recent years. Mexico may also fit the middle-power label: despite its developing status, it rarely challenges the hegemonic order's core principles, in large part due to the United States' substantial influence over its affairs.

While Jordaan's (2017) proposed approach offers a valuable lens to analyse international relations, it does adopt a reductionist perspective by applying a limited set of criteria to classify middle powers. On one hand, this methodology carries potential benefits. By narrowing the definition of middle powers to states that actively support the liberal international order, it provides a clear, workable framework to identify and study these actors. This could simplify research in this field and provide a level of coherence to discussions and debates about middle powers and their roles in international affairs.

On the other hand, such a reductionist approach might limit the depth and scope of understanding we can gain about the complexities and nuances of middle powers. The international landscape is dynamic, and states do not necessarily fit neatly into binary categories. For instance, nations such as Brazil and India are often classified as middle powers, yet they exhibit both support for and resistance to the liberal international order (Soares de Lima & Hirst, 2006; Baru, 2012). Similarly, Turkey's foreign policy under different administrations has oscillated between support for Western norms and alignment with Islamic worldviews (Oguzlu, 2008). If we follow Jordaan's proposed approach, these states would be excluded from

the category of middle powers despite the influential roles they play in international politics.

Therefore, while a reductionist approach can certainly be useful for certain aspects, it may not universally apply to the study of middle powers. Its greatest value lies perhaps in its capacity to highlight a particular dimension of middle powers – their relationship with the liberal international order. However, a comprehensive understanding of middle powers will require a more nuanced approach that takes into account factors such as regional influences, historical trajectories, economic interdependencies, and ideological positions. Such an approach would be more inclusive and reflective of the multifaceted nature of international politics. The dynamic interplay of forces that shapes the behaviors and strategies of middle powers warrants an all-encompassing approach, rather than one exclusively centered on their alignment with or opposition to the liberal international order.

The critical need for a comprehensive understanding of middle powers from both ends of the spectrum stems from their multifaceted and complex roles in international politics. Middle powers are not simply state actors positioned between major and minor powers; they are influential participants with distinct roles and strategies. Their identity is influenced by a combination of their historical legacies, regional contexts, economic dependencies, and ideological leanings.

The Group of Twenty (G20)—which convenes nineteen national governments, the European Union, and their central bank leaders—stands as the clearest illustration of

this widening scope of responsibility. According to the evaluation by Gilley and O’Neil (2014), a considerable number of G20 members can be classified as middle powers. Cooper (1997) further notes that while attention often gravitates towards the major powers in the G20, middle powers are the forum’s greatest advocates and the ones who work relentlessly behind the scenes to ensure its functionality.

As we delve into the following chapter, we’ll be exploring the middle powers of the Global South in greater depth. Our aim is to reassess and reframe their roles within the context of the contemporary international system. We will examine their distinct characteristics, challenges, and contributions, which often diverge from traditional notions of middle power behavior. Through this in-depth exploration, we will come to a richer and more nuanced understanding of the multifaceted nature of middle powers, thus paving the way for more effective analyses and policy-making strategies in international relations. This reassessment and reframing will provide us with a more holistic picture, enabling us to navigate and understand the intricate landscape of global politics with greater nuance and depth.

SOUTH-SOUTH COOPERATION: EMERGING ALTERNATIVE TO EUROPOCENTRIC INTERNATIONAL ORDER

The dynamic and complex international environment is continually being reshaped, partially, through the evolving roles of non-Western middle powers, also referred to as 'Southern middle powers' (Cooper et al., 2013). A prevalent challenge for these countries lies in their engagement with the liberal international order, particularly in an era where Western democracies are battling the rise of populism, and certain Southern powers are augmenting their authoritarian influence (Hurrell, 2006). This discourse necessitates a reassessment of the systemic role of Southern middle powers in the contemporary international arena.

Firstly, despite the structural and material constraints Southern middle powers face, they hold theoretical potential to chart distinct courses within the international order. Such countries possess the capability to alleviate challenges within this global structure, thereby exerting significant agency (Woods, 2008). There is a possibility for these nations to engage in diverse internationalisms, promoting collective action for addressing global challenges. Indeed, the potential for these powers to act as bridge-builders or facilitators among nations is a critical topic of inquiry (Ravenhill, 1998).

Secondly, Southern middle powers are also in a position to coordinate coalitions of like-minded actors.

This coordination may include both horizontal (with other middle powers) and vertical (with larger or smaller powers) relationships (White, 2011). A salient example is the 'IBSA Dialogue Forum' (India, Brazil, South Africa), which illustrates how these nations are forging partnerships based on shared interests, and employing diplomacy to enhance their collective bargaining power (Flemes, 2007). Thirdly, sustaining the operation of existing multilateral institutions remains an area of potential influence for Southern middle powers. Their role in upholding the norms and principles of these institutions, including peacekeeping and the upholding of human rights, is significant (Geldenhuis, 1997).

Historically, internationalism has been the hallmark of the middle-power category, grounding these states' disposition and capacity to fashion distinctive roles, strategies, and interests in the global arena, and operating as a constitutive principle shaping their external behaviour across issue areas (Chapnick, 1999). Although Western middle powers have, on the whole, performed a relatively constant systemic function—despite periodic oscillations in capability—rising counterparts from the Global South articulate a more indeterminate internationalism and identity claim (Cooper, 1997). Many pursue what may be termed *reformist internationalism*, a two-step trajectory: first, incorporation and ascent within the liberal order, enabled chiefly by the expansion of material-economic capacities; and second, a reorientation of ideas that tempers transformative ambition and softens the Third Worldist counter-hegemonic project, privileging incremental adjustment over wholesale redesign (Ayoob, 2003).

The dual trajectory described above inclines emerging middle powers to act as stabilizers and validators of the liberal order, pursuing adjustment from within—redistributing decision-making weight across institutions—while stopping short of contesting foundational orthodoxies such as privatization, deregulation, and liberalization (Acharya, 2004). Yet the diplomatic conduct of these states during their ascent seldom maps neatly onto reformism; cross-pressures at home and abroad generate recurrent inconsistencies (Beeson, 2009).

Post-Cold War experience makes these tensions visible. Reformist agendas advanced by Brazil and South Africa did not reconfigure the hierarchical decision procedures of global governance, notwithstanding their heightened prominence in venues like the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Narlikar, 2003). Domestic cleavages frequently compelled Pretoria, for example, to balance leadership claims in the Global South—voiced through anti-imperialist rhetoric—against the practical need to preserve advantageous trade and investment ties with core Western economies (Alden, 2010). At the same time, governments seeking to leverage expanding material capabilities to escape the perceived constraints of “middle power” status have subjected reform internationalism itself to scrutiny, exploring strategies aimed at surpassing its incrementalist logic (Flemes, 2010).

Amid shifting global alignments, some states have therefore adopted a more assertive posture: not abandoning multilateral engagement, but moving beyond narrow reformism to challenge aspects of the established liberal order while avoiding outright repudiation of it. This

emergent stance signals a willingness to test institutional boundaries and redistribute authority, even as core market-oriented norms remain intact—an evolution that both affirms and strains the stabilizing role long associated with middle powers. This pattern unsettles routine dynamics of international order and foregrounds difficult questions about these states' obligations and roles (Rapkin & Thompson, 2003). Predominantly located in the global South and typically democratic, these actors advance a vision of plural international society that diverges sharply from Western expectations, most visibly in debates over humanitarian intervention and in controversies surrounding United Nations Security Council (UNSC) reform (Chesterman, 2011).

The label “Southern middle powers” has therefore gained currency as a way to capture the contemporary trajectories of countries such as Brazil and South Africa, a usage grounded in three principal claims (Cooper et al., 2013).

First, so-called emerging economies display highly uneven crisis resilience—as seen in divergent responses to the 2008 financial shock and the COVID-19 pandemic—and exhibit wide variation in growth performance. This heterogeneity implies that “emergence” is not a stable or durable condition for many states. Structural headwinds—heavy indebtedness, demographic decline, stalled domestic reform, and volatile commodity prices—constrain upward mobility and may arrest or reverse status gains (Schirm, 2010). Accordingly, the very category of emerging middle power warrants skepticism in light of these socioeconomic burdens.

Second, the external policies of non-Western middle powers are oriented chiefly toward the Global South. Their diplomatic agendas are shaped—though to varying degrees—by demands for regional stewardship and South–South cooperation, which structure priorities, partnerships, and venues of engagement (Woods, 2008).

Third, the impetus for reform has dimmed as China’s large-scale initiatives—most visibly the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)—have eclipsed middle-power proposals in scope and visibility. Multistate consortia that include these actors, such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), are themselves divided over how far reform should go in addressing systemic challenges like climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, further blunting momentum (Narlikar, 2010).

Against this backdrop, Southern middle powers are drifting toward an ambivalent internationalism. They still assume familiar roles—mediator, facilitator, bridge-builder—but deploy them selectively and episodically, calibrating effort to fit domestic constraints and shifting external incentives (Cooper et al., 1993). Periodic shocks and fiscal or political headwinds have pushed some, notably Brazil, into status downgrading—a retrenchment in which pragmatic management of commitments supersedes earlier leadership aspirations (Pinheiro & Gaio, 2014).

This more calculated allocation of diplomatic capital invites a reassessment of baseline expectations that middle powers will inevitably act as legitimisers and stabilisers of the prevailing order. As Cox (1987) cautioned, the middle-power role is not a fixed constant but a

variable—contingent on material capacities, regional positioning, and the evolving configuration of the international system—and thus requires continual re-evaluation.

Ambivalent internationalism confronts Southern middle powers with a strategic fork in the road. It can crystallize into a firmer, more substantive commitment to the liberal order, or it can slide into selective disengagement from initiatives that provide that order with tangible support (Cooper et al., 1993). If these states pursue a more purposive internationalism—signalled by consistent policy choices across political and economic domains such as migration and trade—and sustain that pattern over time, they can move closer to the core of order maintenance by reinforcing its institutions and norms (Reich & Lebow, 1994).

Historically, expectations have run in this direction: middle powers are presumed to convene and lead coalitions of like-minded states dedicated to internationalism, multilateral cooperation, and “good international citizenship” (Evans & Newnham, 1998). Broad-based constellations that combine several middle powers with smaller states can aggregate bargaining power in defence of key pillars of the liberal order, from rule-making to compliance monitoring.

Crucially, the glue of like-mindedness is not purely normative. Alongside shared commitments to responsible conduct sits an instrumental logic of mutual empowerment—pooling influence to compete more effectively in a multipolar environment (Bennett, 1991). Defined in this flexible way, coalition membership can span both Western and Southern middle powers, enabling

cross-regional coordination around overlapping interests (Cooper et al., 2013). As Southern middle powers expand their presence and organizational capacity, they can enhance not only the effectiveness but also the legitimacy of such coalitions, shaping global governance agendas while demonstrating that a diverse middle-power bloc can buttress, rather than erode, the institutional foundations of the liberal order.

Current debates therefore ask whether middle powers can assemble like-minded groupings capable of tackling systemic challenges—authoritarian resurgence and pandemic risks among them—and whether Southern middle powers can credibly lead such efforts. On the first question, an emerging consensus favours informal, problem-driven arrangements. Ad hoc alignments of advanced democracies—Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, and the United Kingdom—are frequently cited as platforms that could counter the unilateralism of China, Russia, and the United States, defend the rules-based order, and incubate new institutions committed to liberal values (Rapp-Hooper & Ikenberry, 2019).

Plurilateral, issue-based caucuses of like-minded democracies are likewise positioned to advance cooperation on climate governance and World Trade Organization (WTO) reform, thereby reinforcing the liberal order through targeted, flexible commitments (Schirm, 2010). Because such groupings are not locked into the rigidities of formal “static” alliances, they can broaden participation beyond executives—enabling legislatures and other domestic actors to coordinate on “democracy-adjacent” agendas, including anti-corruption, justice, anti-discrimination, and post-crisis economic recovery

(Vabulas & Snidal, 2013). Practical variants already circulate: Japan's proposed Arc of Democracies, Germany's Alliance for Multilateralism, and the United Kingdom's call for a D-10 Summit of Democracies exemplify the strategy of modular, mission-oriented coalition-building aimed at cushioning the liberal order against great-power unilateralism while delivering concrete public goods.

Although informal and issue-specific mobilization looks promising, the precise contribution of Southern middle powers remains uncertain. Like-mindedness can spur coordinated or ad hoc action across these states, yet shared outlooks are frequently refracted through persistent North–South cleavages that shape agendas and alignments (Narlikar, 2010). One route to renewing the liberal order is to widen coalitions to include non-Western democracies and to reallocate rights and responsibilities so that these actors exercise greater authority within global governance (Nayyar, 2008).

Such groupings could, for example, reinvigorate the human-rights regime by advancing a program tied to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and by promoting reforms to UN treaties and to bodies such as the Human Rights Council (Alston, 2017). Yet broadening participation is a double-edged sword: bringing Southern middle powers into a democratic caucus enhances representativeness and legitimacy, but it can also weaken like-minded cohesion because interpretations of core issues—democracy promotion among them—diverge across contexts (Cooper et al., 2013).

Brazil, India, and South Africa exemplify this tension. Each can serve as a democratic reference point in its

region; nevertheless, specific domestic policies have led some Western observers to question the depth or consistency of their democratic practices relative to established Western peers (Cooper et al., 2013). Compounding matters, the imperative to resist great-power pressures often absorbs diplomatic bandwidth that might otherwise be used to forge alliances with ideationally similar partners. The result is an ambivalent pattern: inclusion that strengthens legitimacy but complicates cohesion, and leadership potential that coexists with domestic and geopolitical constraints on sustained coalition-building.

Southern middle powers operate within an emerging dual hierarchy dominated by the United States and China, seeking to avoid entangling dependence on either pole while exploiting bargaining space generated by U.S.–China rivalry (Foot & Walter, 2011). Reluctant to enlist in a U.S.-led concert of democracies—lest they jeopardize access to Chinese trade and investment—they instead deploy mixed strategies of engagement, hedging, and selective alignment to steady, or at least manage, the evolving structure.

In the Indo-Pacific, the Quad—linking Australia, India, Japan, and the United States—has offered one venue for Asian middle powers to shape responses to China’s rise. Yet others, notably South Korea and Indonesia, prioritize policy autonomy, crafting bespoke options for interacting with the liberal order while avoiding hard alignment. Their approach underscores a preference for manoeuvrability over bloc discipline, even as they remain embedded in U.S.-anchored security and economic networks.

Prospects for a self-standing coalition of Southern middle powers remain uncertain. The IBSA forum (India, Brazil, South Africa) repeatedly invoked democracy as a guiding principle for conflict management in statements from 2003 to 2011, but its profile has been eclipsed by BRICS. Within that broader grouping, hesitation to confront the authoritarian practices of Russia and China has constrained IBSA's ability to parlay its democratic credentials into sustained democracy promotion (Malamud & Gardini, 2012). The result is a characteristic ambivalence: Southern middle powers seek greater collective voice, yet the imperatives of hedging between the two apex powers, and the centripetal pull of BRICS, complicate efforts to institutionalize a distinct, values-forward coalition.

A further example is MIKTA—Mexico, Indonesia, Korea, Turkey, and Australia—which was conceived to capitalize on the post-2008 turn toward informal, minilateral formats. In practice, however, thin institutionalization and coordination shortfalls have limited its ability to project democratic credentials or to operate credibly as a bridge across North–South divides (Armijo, 2017).

In their present configuration, many Southern middle powers exhibit only modest like-mindedness. They confront a strategic choice: either invest the resources needed to align their diplomacy with fellow democracies to address cross-border challenges, or prioritize narrow national agendas through selective bilateral partnerships and hedging (Cooper, 2016).

If they pursue the former, building thicker consensus and assuming leadership in coalitions that mix Southern

and Western middle powers alongside smaller states, these actors could assemble broad-based groupings capable of playing a genuinely systemic role in shoring up the liberal order (Narlikar, 2010).

Historically, adherence to multilateralism has been a defining trait of middle-power internationalism. Such states have treated multilateral organizations as the most effective venues for tackling global problems—while also using them to amplify bargaining leverage and to perform identities as responsible international citizens (Chapnick, 1999). Delivering on that tradition requires sustained activism: substantive contributions to existing regimes where possible, and, where gaps persist, the design of new, purpose-built arrangements that extend cooperative capacity.

The post-2008 elevation of middle powers within the G20 underscores how inclusion in major forums can help buffer crises confronting the liberal order (Cooper, 2016). Yet the current fragility of multilateralism raises doubts about whether Southern middle powers possess the capacity—political and institutional—to reinvigorate core venues such as the UN and the WTO.

A central test for multilateralist middle powers is whether they can supplement great-power leadership when it falters. Revitalizing the liberal order will demand pragmatism and compromise; in principle, middle powers can help sustain a rules-based system not strictly dependent on a single hegemon (Keohane, 1984). As Andersen (2017) suggests, meaningful revision is most likely to originate from actors sufficiently autonomous to act without great-power permission. In practice, however, constrained capabilities and limited coercive leverage push

these states toward bargaining, brokerage, and rule-crafting rather than forceful imposition.

Even within these limits, middle powers can steward regimes that restrain unilateralism during transition periods—often by operationalizing and clarifying existing legal frameworks, such as the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Evans, 1997). Concrete precedents exist: Asia-Pacific middle powers—Australia, Indonesia, and South Korea—coordinated to keep the Trans-Pacific Partnership alive after the United States withdrew, exemplifying coalitionary maintenance of liberal trade rules (Capling & Ravenhill, 2011). A complementary pathway is to assemble communities of the like-minded—potentially through “open regionalism”—and then institutionalize cooperation around shared problem sets. Such efforts, however, can collide with established organizations and may falter if middle-power leadership appears self-interested or unilateral, undermining the very legitimacy they seek to bolster.

Southern middle powers face additional obstacles in executing multilateralist roles. Instead of acting as rule-makers in universal bodies, they often pivot to rule-promotion at the regional level—e.g., advancing standards in areas such as competition law and policy—so as not to overtly clash with great-power preferences. In parallel, many display receptivity to alternative development institutions beyond the liberal core, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the BRICS-sponsored New Development Bank. Located outside mainstream Western architectures, these platforms create space for more interventionist variants of state capitalism and policy experimentation (Stuenkel, 2013).

If, as argued above, like-minded coalitions are a precondition for effective collective action, then intra-middle-power divisions threaten their prospects as leading multilateralists. Status-seeking frequently takes precedence, and competitive signaling among peers can crowd out cooperative follow-through—undermining commitments in established forums and eroding credibility, for example in meeting agreed G20 targets (Larson & Shevchenko, 2014). The combined effect is a pattern of selective regional norm entrepreneurship coupled with fragmented coalition politics, which constrains Southern middle powers' capacity to shape global rules directly even as they experiment with alternative venues and models of economic governance. Prospects for reinforcing the liberal order are tangible: countries such as Indonesia and South Korea are cultivating like-minded “communities of practice” through bilateral defence and security partnerships. To translate these experiments into system-wide effects, however, they require tighter coordination and stronger, sustained commitments that can scale into multilateral action (Laksmana, 2011). To date, collective initiatives by Brazil, Mexico, South Africa, South Korea, and Turkey have largely reflected selective multilateralism—useful for advancing discrete interests but still short of the breadth needed to maintain and renew multilateralism's core regimes (Cooper & Mo, 2013).

For Southern middle powers, this creates a strategic fork. One path emphasises niche diplomacy: acting as catalytic brokers that shore up and revitalise key liberal-order regimes at critical junctures. The other privileges selective engagement with particular regimes—most

commonly trade and investment—aligned closely with domestic priorities and status concerns (Chimni, 2007). If governments choose the former and mobilise diplomatic capital to provide intellectual and entrepreneurial leadership across a wider agenda—tabling proposals, convening coalitions, and shepherding negotiations that address today’s multilateral deficits—they can plausibly be seen as pivotal supporters of liberal institutions.

In practice, many states straddle both logics. They deploy targeted initiatives where payoffs are immediate, while experimenting with broader coalition-building when windows open. The MIKTA grouping—Mexico, Indonesia, Korea, Turkey, and Australia—illustrates this hybrid strategy: conceived to harness post-2008 informal minilateralism, it offers a platform for coordinating cross-regional priorities and testing policy ideas. Coupled with the visibility and convening power afforded by the G20, such formats can incubate norms, pilot cooperative tools, and amplify middle-power voice within global governance—provided members invest in deeper coordination and follow-through (Cooper & Mo, 2013).

RISE OF G20 AS PREMIER FORUM FOR MIDDLE POWER COOPERATION

G20 has emerged as a pivotal entity in the international political economy, superseding alternatives such as the

G7 and the BRICS as the paramount forum for economic cooperation. This was firmly reiterated at the Pittsburgh summit in 2009 when G20 leaders affirmed the Group's role as the 'premier forum for international economic cooperation' (Cooper, 2010).

Functioning as an informal 'board of directors' for international financial institutions, the G20's scope extends beyond mere consultation and collaboration. It actively prescribes mandates to international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Financial Stability Board, and meticulously reviews reports submitted as responses to their requests (Callaghan & Hubbard, 2016).

This arms-length relationship has manifested intentionally; many G20 countries, particularly the burgeoning economies, are hesitant to accord preponderant authority to formal international organizations (Vestergaard & Wade, 2015). They favor the utilization of these institutions as technical consultants, capitalizing on their expertise while avoiding absolute reliance on them.

In the evolving dynamics of the G20, a discernible theme is the gradual attrition of a long-standing, and possibly outdated, global order (Helleiner, 2014). Intriguingly, some established proponents of multilateral cooperation are showing signs of ambivalence, and in some cases, retreating from the global order they were instrumental in constructing.

At the same time, several rising powers pursue a carefully calibrated dual track—operating as insiders that comply with prevailing rules while acting as outsiders seeking to reshape them. Deeply embedded in existing architectures of global governance, they nevertheless

expand space for autonomous action. The aim is strategic: to avoid being boxed into the G20 alone and to develop parallel institutions whose mandates and memberships correspond more closely to their own priorities.

The evolving institutional landscape features not only BRICS but also the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (Armijo & Roberts, 2014). Taken together, these platforms reflect deliberate strategies by rising powers to project influence and reconfigure governance arrangements in ways that more closely align with their interests.

Furthermore, these emergent states have utilized their G20 memberships to wield influence within the group. Primarily, they have led efforts advocating for governance reforms within the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The focus of these reforms is to increase the voting share of non-western countries, thereby challenging the traditionally dominant Western influence within the IMF (Griffith-Jones & Ocampo, 2018).

International organizations have been proactive in their engagement with the G20 process, cognizant of the Group's increasing influence and significance (Carin & Smith, 2010). Striving to retain relevance and to advance their interests, these organizations have made concerted efforts to be included in the G20's discourse. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), for instance, has lobbied aggressively for the G20 to incorporate anti-corruption initiatives into their agenda (Heimann & Pieth, 2017).

The inception of the G20 occurred amidst a significant global crisis, where the organization played a pivotal role in coordinating policy responses (Hajnal, 2014). This ‘crisis management rationale’ remains embedded in the ethos of the G20, rendering it a vital mechanism – an international insurance club – for potential crises of similar or even greater magnitude. Whether such crises emerge from the global financial system or other sectors, the G20 is perceived as a crucial element in the global response framework.

Viewed through a realist lens, the G20 functions as a bargaining arena in which states pursue advantage for their own constituencies (Kahler, 2013). Delegations navigate dense transactional politics—trading concessions, stalling unwanted proposals, and maneuvering to shape outcomes—so that the forum resembles a clearinghouse where the principal economic powers reconcile competing priorities.

Institutionally, the format routinizes elite contact. A rotating presidency allows each member, in turn, to assume stewardship and to advance a broadly framed, and often deliberately elastic, agenda for a year (Cooper & Thakur, 2013). The cycle structures repeated interactions, generating political capital and durable networks that can be mobilized later when support is needed for specific initiatives.

On this reading, the G20’s core utility lies in advancing national interests where overlap exists and side-payments are viable (Ravenhill, 2018). A minimalist, interest-based interpretation also helps explain the group’s cohesion: no member has opted out, in part because the benefits of continued access—to agenda-setting opportunities, information flows, and reciprocal backing—remain persuasive even as incentives shift over time.

A minimalist reading is insufficient to explain the G20's persistence. Beyond aggregating the lowest common denominator of national self-interest, the forum is intended to advance the global common good by cultivating shared understandings of collective problems and delivering policies that reflect joint stewardship of the global commons (Bradford & Linn, 2010). In this sense, the G20's value proposition extends from transactional bargaining to agenda-setting and norm articulation around cross-border responsibilities.

Leadership within the G20 is therefore intrinsically complex, demanding a balancing act that weighs domestic priorities against the salient concerns of other members (Cooper & Thakur, 2013). Absent an acute, synchronizing shock—such as a financial crisis—consensus on foundational issues tends to prove elusive. In such conditions, even widely acknowledged goals, including resisting trade protectionism and curbing dangerous climate change, become harder to operationalize at scale (Callaghan & Hubbard, 2016).

Unlike the G7's portrayal as a club of broadly like-minded states, the G20 convenes the world's largest economies—established and rising alike—to coordinate and deliberate on problem-solving strategies (Hajnal, 2014). These actors frequently diverge on diagnostics as well as remedies (Armijo & Roberts, 2014). The resulting heterogeneity can sap momentum and, at times, incentivize a performative return to the appearance of like-mindedness—signalling cohesion to sustain credibility and productivity even when underlying preferences remain far apart.

Despite potential resurgences in its relevance, the G7 does not appear to have a straightforward path towards recalibration, particularly given the internal disagreements over fundamental issues (Bradford & Linn, 2010). The persistent dichotomies and the complexities within these global fora underscore the importance of nuanced leadership that is capable of navigating these differences while fostering productive discussions and resolutions.

As global conditions shift, the G20 increasingly flirts with ad hoc, issue-specific initiatives undertaken by subsets of its members. A key marker of this turn was President Emmanuel Macron's call for "vanguard countries," an à la carte format that gathers willing states around particular dossiers (Clegg, 2022). Such flexibility, however, demands careful stewardship: without guardrails, these coalitions risk hollowing out multilateralism by spawning parallel venues rather than reinforcing the existing architecture (Vestergaard & Wade, 2012).

In contrast to a minimalist model, the G20 has also expanded inclusivity since 2008—both by widening its agenda and by bringing a larger constellation of stakeholders into preparatory and outreach processes (Cooper & Thakur, 2013). Inclusiveness, though normatively attractive, is administratively demanding: large, diverse configurations are harder to coordinate and often slower to reach agreement, especially when rapid, crisis-driven responses are required. This procedural drag raises questions about output legitimacy—whether the forum can deliver timely, effective solutions even as it strives to be broadly representative (Kahler, 2013). The

challenge, therefore, is to harness minilateral agility inside a broadly inclusive framework in ways that strengthen, rather than fragment, the multilateral system. To address these coordination challenges, the G20 has embraced a strategy of “differentiated inclusion,” broadening the range of actors involved as its remit has moved well beyond core macroeconomic concerns such as financial stability and growth. The contemporary agenda now routinely spans climate governance, sustainable development, women’s empowerment, digitalisation, and the future of work. This thematic expansion has prompted the creation of additional working, study, and task groups, deepening the forum’s policy architecture; ministerial gatherings have accordingly become a regular fixture of the annual cycle. Crucially, the G20 is more than the highly visible two-day leaders’ summit. Its processes mobilise a wider array of national bureaucracies and sectoral agencies from member states, embedding cooperation across multiple administrative layers (Cooper & Thakur, 2013). In parallel, the forum has increasingly drawn in auxiliary participants from the international arena, a move intended both to sharpen technical problem-solving on specific files and to bolster the perceived legitimacy of outputs (Armijo & Roberts, 2014).

While the grouping—nineteen states plus the European Union—initially highlighted membership exclusivity during the acute phase of the global financial crisis, recent practice has tilted toward inclusivity and outreach as legitimacy imperatives have grown (Callaghan & Hubbard, 2016). Rotating presidencies now customarily invite additional governments as guests. Among the regular invitees are larger European economies such as Spain and

the Netherlands, which have periodically questioned the forum's composition, as well as smaller partners that speak for regional organisations. The cumulative effect of these adaptations is a more permeable and functionally diversified G20, designed to accommodate a wider set of voices while preserving a manageable core capable of advancing collective decisions.

Despite the continent's size and demographic weight, Africa remains largely sidelined within the G20: South Africa is the sole African member, Nigeria—Africa's largest economy—is absent, and the African Union, when present, typically participates as a guest rather than a full member. This arrangement preserves an inner circle for targeted consultations among G20 members, while reserving separate interaction rounds with guests before broadening engagement to “the wider world” (Hajnal, 2014).

Concerned with output legitimacy, the G20 seeks to shape global debates through evidence-based agendas, higher-quality inputs, and negotiated outcomes (Armijo & Roberts, 2014). Lacking a permanent secretariat or robust coordinating bureaucracy—beyond the loose troika of past, current, and incoming hosts—the forum routinely commissions international organizations to supply analytical support for work streams and to assist with implementation of decisions. Yet these contributions can produce knock-on effects, as participating organizations press for more formalized inclusion “at the top table,” potentially complicating the forum's governance equilibrium (Kahler, 2013).

G20 as an international forum of governments and central bank governors from major economies, has been instrumental in shaping the global economic and political

dialogue. This shift acknowledges the necessity of including a wider array of societal stakeholders, ranging governmental and non-governmental organizations to private sector entities and think tanks, in policy deliberation and decision-making processes (Kirton, 2013).

Inherent in the evolution of the G20, as an expansive governance structure, are critiques that question its efficiency. These critiques can be positioned within the broader literature on global governance (Kahler, 2013) and multilateralism (Keohane, 1990). A central concern revolves around the effectiveness of the G20 in navigating the complexities and challenges that arise in its unique role as an inclusive and wide-ranging global governance structure.

The G20's internal dynamics are affected by its positioning amidst discourses concerning multilateral systems and international negotiations (Jørgensen, 2019). As an exclusive club designed to foster trust, cultivate reputations, promote open communication, uphold fairness, and construct an 'esprit de corps', or a collective identity among its members, the G20 naturally encounters hurdles, even within its circle (Pettis, 2013). This complexity is encapsulated in the 'cooperation hexagon' paradigm that strives to address these challenges (Slaughter, 2004). There are striking parallels between the criticisms levelled against the G20 and those directed towards the European Union's (EU) erstwhile Common Foreign and Security Policy, particularly the concept of the 'capability-expectation gap'. This analogy highlights the inherent difficulties of managing expectations and delivering

capabilities in large, multilateral institutions.

The metamorphosis of the G20 into a hub of global governance does not imply the depletion of its effectiveness. The parameters for evaluating the G20 have evolved, and while it was once appraised based on policy output and implementation of specific commitments, it is now also assessed on its contributions to the maintenance of global governance (Cooper, 2021). This shift in evaluation is an adaptation to an era marked by increasingly contested multilateralism.

The G20, in certain aspects, has proven instrumental in stabilizing international cooperation. This is achieved not merely by functioning as an intergovernmental forum, but also by facilitating engagement with societal actors that endorse international cooperation. By incorporating these stakeholders, the G20 has the potential to stabilize, and possibly even reshape, multilateral cooperation beyond the traditional confines of nation-states.

Yet the magnitude of today's systemic crises—climate disruption, widening inequality, and the accelerating fourth industrial revolution—renders simple preservation of existing cooperation inadequate. Meeting these meta-challenges requires anticipatory, not merely reactive, governance. The question, then, is how the G20—both a convener of major economies and a key node in global governance—can catalyse and coordinate effective multilateral action commensurate with the scale and transformative character of these problems. That requires agenda-setting, norm development, financing mechanisms, and experimentation that move faster than crisis onset.

The G20's performance rests on its ability to forge political coalitions, enlist backing from international organizations, and continually fine-tune its core working-group machinery. Whether this requires a more formal, standing institutional architecture remains contested. Historical experience indicates the forum is most effective when the rotating presidency assembles a broad intra-G20 coalition and secures robust technical support from key international bodies—an alignment that facilitates not only the adoption of joint initiatives but also their continuity across successive chairs.

Within this configuration, the distinctive place of rising powers—often caucusing through formations such as MIKTA or BRICS—deserves particular scrutiny given their status-seeking trajectories. Integrating these actors into global governance has drawn sustained scholarly attention (Armijo & Roberts, 2014), yet the perceptions and expectations of their domestic publics are too seldom foregrounded.

A legitimacy-focused view of club governance reveals salient patterns (Brandi, 2023). On output legitimacy, established and rising powers converge, privileging effectiveness as the principal yardstick. By contrast, on input legitimacy, participatory inclusion registers as a somewhat more salient criterion for societal actors in rising powers than for those in long-standing members—highlighting a modest but meaningful divergence that may shape preferences for process design and voice allocation within the G20.

Input legitimacy thus appears to weigh somewhat more heavily for societal actors in rising powers than for

those in long-standing members. In addition, speakers from rising powers more frequently foreground the problems facing poorer countries than do their counterparts from established powers, suggesting a divergence in priorities that could shape both the G20's agenda and its governance role going forward (Cooper, 2010).

Beyond the simple dichotomy of “established” versus “rising,” the G20 also contains a cohort commonly described as middle powers. The MIKTA caucus—Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, and Australia—illustrates this subset, yet it has received only limited scholarly attention within the club-governance literature (Cooper & Antkiewicz, 2014). Closer analysis is warranted to understand how such actors navigate G20 processes: which policy areas they privilege, how they reconcile competing interests, and what strategies they employ to enhance status without eroding coalition cohesion.

A further cross-cutting trait among rising powers is their emphasis on South–South Development Cooperation (SSDC) as a marker of distinction from traditional donors (Kloke-Lesch et al., 2012). While SSDC serves as a common identity claim, practices vary markedly—across financing modalities, conditionality norms, and sectoral priorities—inviting comparative inquiry into how these differences translate into bargaining positions within the G20. As platforms like the G20 have grown in salience, the visibility of middle powers has risen in tandem. Within this constellation, MIKTA functions as a distinctive, cross-regional node that can broker agendas between North and South, provided its members can align their status-seeking with collective problem-solving. Mapping these

dynamics—priorities, frictions, and coalition tactics—offers a clearer view of how middle powers, and especially MIKTA, might influence the forum’s evolving division of labour and its legitimacy claims in global governance.

Analysts often anticipate that middle powers will either bandwagon with a great power—frequently the United States—or husband scarce resources by targeting a narrow set of multilateral ventures (Ravenhill, 1998). Scholarship that adopts this behavioural lens is less normative than descriptive: it asks how middle powers *do* act, not how they *should* act, yielding empirical accounts of the techniques these states use to shape outcomes despite constrained capabilities (Cooper, Higgott, & Nossal, 1993).

Within this tradition, Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal (1993) discern a recurrent repertoire. First, entrepreneurial middle powers can spark initiatives, injecting proposals and brokering first moves when others hesitate. Second, they operate as facilitators, structuring agendas and assembling ad hoc, issue-specific coalitions to carry proposals forward. The push by several states to advance trade liberalization in the 1990s exemplifies such agenda entrepreneurship and coalition craft. Because middle powers lack the hard-power endowments of major states, these catalytic and convening functions are pivotal to their influence.

Finally, middle powers often assume managerial roles: designing or refining institutions—whether formal organizations or looser regimes—and contributing to norm- and rule-making. Through these catalytic, facilitative, and managerial strategies, they convert limited

material weight into procedural leverage, amplifying their voice within a system otherwise tilted toward the great powers (Cooper, Higgott, & Nossal, 1993). Due to their relatively weaker position within the international hierarchy, middle powers tend to resort to the tools of soft power, leveraging their technical expertise and entrepreneurial capacities to influence outcomes (Nye, 2004). It is generally observed that such states are likely to align with the leading positions of major powers, or alternatively, concentrate their resources on a limited array of multilateral endeavors (Cooper, Higgott & Nossal, 1993).

This behavioral perspective shifts the focus from the normative question of how middle powers ought to behave, towards an empirical examination of how they indeed act within the international arena. Scholars like Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal have identified a distinct pattern in middle power behavior, categorizing their role into three primary functions (Cooper, Higgott & Nossal, 1993). Initially, they suggest that middle powers can act as catalysts, sparking diplomatic initiatives through their entrepreneurial aptitude. Secondly, middle powers can assume the role of facilitators, helping set agendas and construct issue-specific coalitions in support of these initiatives. This is analogous to middle powers' efforts in championing causes like trade liberalisation in the past decades. These strategies are central to middle powers since they lack the structural resources of power that are typical of major powers. Finally, such states often transition into managers, contributing to the establishment and development of institutions, be they

formal organizations, regimes, or the cultivation of norms and conventions.

In the context of the G20 framework, this nuanced understanding of middle powers provides a critical lens through which we can understand and evaluate their evolving role and contributions within this international forum.

Much of what we know about middle-power strategy comes from post-Cold War empirical work conducted before the G20 era. In that unipolar context, U.S. predominance allowed middle powers to straddle dual roles—backing Washington on core economic and security files while advancing niche agendas such as the anti-land mine campaign. The subsequent rise of the BRICS reconfigured these dynamics, introducing additional centres of gravity that may dilute the space for middle-power influence within global bargaining.

Even so, the creation of the G20 opened avenues for smaller and middle powers to participate in debates over reforming global governance. Reflecting this redistribution of power, a growing literature has explored how middle powers operate under the new conditions (Ravenhill, 2010; Soeya, 2011). These contributions deepen our understanding of middle-power behaviour within the G20's club setting; yet, despite this progress, systematic empirical studies remain sparse. As a result, important questions persist about when and how middle powers convert agenda entrepreneurship, coalition brokerage, and institutional management into durable influence in an increasingly multipolar order.

More systematic inquiry is needed to test how far prevailing theories of middle-power behaviour correspond

to what these states actually do within the G20 setting. As a relatively new yet pivotal forum, the G20 offers a privileged vantage point for examining not only middle-power conduct, but also their underlying preferences, strategic repertoires, and the ways they navigate—and reconcile—competing governance claims advanced by established and rising powers alike, including variation across issue areas and presidencies.

The potential for semi-peripheral nations to take up the mantle of global governance and stewardship is a concept that must be judiciously assessed. Embedded within the consistent surge of middle power activism, there exists a vibrant thread of aspiration. This concept is reminiscent of the notion of exemplary international citizenship, yet it is paradoxically interwoven with elements of opportunism and strategic non-involvement (Cooper, 2015). Regardless, the genuine consciousness exhibited by recognized middle powers in embracing this responsibility cannot be entirely disregarded.

The main focal point of international relations has been the delicate balance between the rights and obligations of major powers. However, this equilibrium is not exclusive to them. Middle powers, akin to their greater counterparts, can be perceived as embracing the duty that emanates from administrative responsibilities (Evans, 1994).

Yet, the reigning modality is a paradigm marked by a subtle, pragmatic approach. This approach usually exhibits a tendency towards quiet diplomacy with few exceptions. Faced with the demands in the early years of the 21st century to democratize the global governance system, middle powers discerned that the fruits of such a reform

process would largely benefit the emerging major powers (Moravcsik, 2008). This development could potentially lead to a diminution of their established status and benefits. To an extent, this realization arguably reinforced a pragmatic approach to safeguard vested interests. It must be acknowledged that highlighting the pragmatic foundations of traditional middle power diplomacy does not serve to camouflage an inherent dissatisfaction with the prevailing strategy.

The 21st-century dynamics between superpowers and middle powers have undergone a fundamental transformation, imposing a sense of irregularity and unease on the traditional diplomacies of middle powers (Holbraad, 1984). There has been a notable shift in middle power activity, with traditional arenas such as the United Nations, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, and International Financial Institutions, no longer offering these nations a favored status. This shift is particularly palpable in the International Monetary Fund, where traditional middle powers, notably in Europe, are under pressure to realign their voting power, shares, and leadership of established constituency groups (Dell, 2015). These changes raise the question of how middle powers can adapt and maintain their influence within international institutions like the G20, where major and emerging powers dominate. A comprehensive exploration of these dynamics and the future trajectory of middle power activism in this changing international context will undoubtedly be a valuable contribution to international relations discourse.

The advent of MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, Republic of Korea, Turkey, and Australia) signified a substantial shift in the dynamics of ad hoc diplomatic design. This group's formation marked the initiation of a dedicated forum for these middle powers, reshaping the existing international diplomatic structure (Armstrong, 2014). Nevertheless, a consolidated consensus on the normative element to highlight remains elusive, leading to the forum's existential justification appearing as a nebulous aggregation of domestic attributes and shared global objectives.

Primarily, these shared domestic traits embody a collective allegiance to democracy. However, it should be noted that the democratic ethos of these nations is faced with contextual challenges in certain instances (He, 2017). Moreover, these countries also share global objectives, emphasizing broader global governance, especially in the G20 context (Stuenkel, 2013).

Despite representing an evolution from the loosely coordinated activities of preceding times, MIKTA currently lacks a comprehensively articulated collective directive. This lack extends to the development of a shared sense of solidarity (Kim & Kim, 2015). Despite these challenges, it's notable that middle powers have thus far refrained from gravitating towards the formation of a caucus. This restraint may reflect the diverse nature of these countries, signaling the respect for their heterogeneity.

The nations comprising MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, Republic of Korea, Turkey, and Australia) represent a crucial component of the modern international diplomatic system. Despite welcoming their ascension to influential positions in global governance, each nation has pursued

distinct, nuanced agendas reflecting their specific domestic and international concerns (Armstrong, 2014).

For instance, the Republic of Korea played a pivotal role in widening the global discourse beyond the financial crisis. It fervently advocated for an agenda premised on the concept of self-sustaining growth, extending the conversation towards encompassing broader international development (Park, 2012). On a similar note, Mexico exhibited ambition in expanding the scope of international attention. It accentuated issues such as 'green growth' and youth employment, demonstrating its commitment to sustainable development and social justice (Hochstetler & Milkoreit, 2014).

The competencies necessary for successful middle power diplomacy, such as building consensus, problem-solving, and engagement in multilateral diplomacy, are currently either being employed in a more constrained manner or facing depreciation in terms of comparative advantage (Ungerer, 2007). The case of MIKTA offers a rich example in this regard. As a collective of middle power nations, MIKTA celebrated its elevation to the G20 leadership level. Yet, several of its member states simultaneously curtailed the G20's ambitions, particularly in relation to proposals for extensive banking regulations (Higgott, 2014). This tendency underscores a predilection for a pragmatic approach that accentuates competitive advantage, revealing a consistent proclivity towards ad hoc over collective behavior throughout the years.

Examining the interactions between states in the realm of international relations, the role of middle powers stands out as a crucial and compelling study area. The concept of

a middle power is multifaceted and extends beyond merely numerical rankings or raw power capabilities; it implies a specific set of behaviours, practices, and commitments to the international system (Chapnick, 1999). This academic discourse presents an evaluation of the MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, and Australia) as an epitome of collaborative behaviours exhibited by middle powers, underlining their commitment to the international system and the promotion of equilibrium within it.

The cooperation amongst the MIKTA countries provides a prime example of middle power diplomacy in action, using the power of multilateral collaboration to increase their collective influence on the global stage (Prys, 2010). The formation of MIKTA in 2013 was a strategic alignment by the five countries, seeking to leverage their collective bargaining power to effectively address both regional and global challenges (Higgott & Nossal, 2008).

The approach of these nations towards multilateral organizations reveals an unwavering commitment to the principles of multilateralism, reinforcing the values of international cooperation, mutual respect, and dialogue (Kim, 2014). Such behavior offers an implicit rejection of the notion that a state should only commit to a multilateral organization when it appears beneficial or during times of crisis. It projects an image of steadfast dedication to multilateralism that leads other states to trust their commitments and anticipate their actions within the constraints and spirit of the multilateral organizations (Cox, 2007).

One of the fundamental choices these countries face is whether to use their G20 membership to extend their

global influence or to concentrate on bolstering their regional standing. This binary decision is not unique but seems ubiquitous across all MIKTA nations, each striving to balance these two spheres of influence (Murray, 2017).

Mexico has sought to widen its alliance portfolio beyond NAFTA, helping to launch and steer region-building initiatives such as the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) and, with Chile, Colombia, and Peru, the Pacific Alliance—signals of a deliberate strategy to diversify commitments and institutional ties (Vadell, 2016).

At the same time, Indonesia and Korea have sustained their core affiliations—Indonesia through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Korea via ASEAN+3—while layering on complementary platforms, notably Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and, in Korea's case, the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative, which has expanded its regional agenda and convening role (Emmers, 2014; Kim, 2016).

Similarly, Turkey has broadened its diplomatic aperture by foregrounding engagement with the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), using that forum to extend its regional reach and to anchor initiatives that straddle economic and political cooperation, thereby deepening its presence across adjacent neighborhoods and into wider global circuits (Larrabee, 2007).

A well-reasoned comparison can be made to the BRICS nations, where a step-by-step methodology has served to alleviate collective action pressures, thereby fostering trust-building among member nations (Stuenkel, 2013). Such a tactic encourages the nurturing of a

particular ‘club culture,’ underpinned by efforts to minimize disparities and maximize areas of shared interest (Armijo, 2007). By maintaining a muted presence and typically holding meetings on the sidelines of annual United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) openings or the G20, MIKTA has been able to quietly participate in the global debate (Bishop, 2014).

However, it is vital to note that this discreet approach could increasingly become a challenge in the face of changing global contexts. The world is currently experiencing significant shifts due to factors such as the ongoing pandemic and shifting geopolitical dynamics (Shambaugh, 2020). Given this turbulent context, MIKTA’s ability to maintain a low-key approach could be increasingly tested. If MIKTA continues to exhibit relative inactivity as a result of its restrained *modus operandi*, it runs the risk of becoming a target for criticism. This criticism might stem from perceptions that the organization is not actively contributing to resolving global issues, despite its unique position as a collaborative entity composed of middle powers (Cooper, 2017).

The role of middle powers extends beyond a normative framework to encompass a functional dimension, wherein these nations undertake a wide array of routine responsibilities concerning the global system (Cooper, 1997). This notion of ‘followership’ should not be conflated with passive acquiescence; rather, it denotes a considerable emphasis on proficiency across diverse issue areas (Long & Ungerer, 2016). Key strategies for the execution of these responsibilities are often rooted in technical expertise and entrepreneurial initiatives (Cooper & Mo, 2013).

Nevertheless, akin to the normative component, the ability of middle powers to effectively perform this managerial role appears to have significantly diminished. This decline can be attributed to a variety of factors, including structural impediments that have surfaced, undermining traditional middle powers' capabilities. One could posit that MIKTA countries, as middle powers, face similar challenges.

Structural impediments could include the shifting dynamics of the global order and the complexities introduced by the digital age (He, 2018). As these middle powers grapple with these challenges, the value of MIKTA as an example of cooperative behaviour among middle powers is thrown into sharper relief. Yet, MIKTA's ability to navigate these issues and maintain its functional role will ultimately determine its value within the international system.

Building upon these notions, one might argue that the evolving global landscape necessitates a comprehensive reassessment of the middle power's role. There is a compelling case to suggest that these nations ought to prioritize the development of strategic partnerships and alliances as a means to augment their influence and sustain their relevance within the global system (Long & Ungerer, 2016). This strategy may entail refining their diplomatic acumen, employing strategic negotiation tactics, and leveraging soft power more effectively to safeguard their interests amidst a changing world order (Nye, 2004). As the geopolitical landscape undergoes transformation, the ability of middle powers to adapt their diplomatic strategies

will be critical to their effectiveness in preserving global order and stability (Cooper & Mo, 2013).

Adding to this scholarly discourse, middle powers, represented by MIKTA, often attract criticism for serving predominantly as discussion platforms without the follow-through of substantive action (Bishop, 2014). Further contention is their tendency to prioritize regional issues, which are of specific interest to individual member nations, over global concerns (Jordaan, 2003). This approach risks casting MIKTA merely as a platform of convenience, utilized for directing attention towards isolated issues of interest to individual members, rather than addressing collective concerns.

A potential area of concern is the potential lack of collective consensus within MIKTA on pressing global issues, such as the reform of International Financial Institutions or matters pertaining to human rights (Cooper, 2017). Failure to achieve agreement on these significant matters could suggest an inability of MIKTA to establish a viable club culture underpinned by shared ideational or normative values (Bishop, 2014). Moreover, by operating predominantly as a dialogue process or consultative mechanism over an extended duration, MIKTA risks being perceived as merely a construct of foreign ministries. This perspective could foster limiting perceptions concerning divergent national interests and bureaucratic ownership, which could potentially obstruct wider cooperation (Cooper & Mo, 2013).

An emergent question pertains to whether MIKTA can establish a significant niche for itself, serving as its unique identifier within the international system. One possible

direction is its adoption of a functional approach towards the distribution of global public goods (Cooper, 2017). In contrast to the G7 or BRICS nations, MIKTA does not evoke substantial apprehension about undertaking collective actions that may challenge or impose discipline on the global status quo (Armijo, 2007). However, an exclusive pursuit of this functional approach could risk diminishing rather than bolstering the ‘brand’ of middle power diplomacy that has been carefully built over preceding eras.

Historically, the first wave of middle power diplomacy sought to manage the system, while the second wave was characterised by emotive engagement and occasional challenges to great powers on specific issues (Cooper, 1997). In contrast, the current MIKTA approach seems to lack the ambition and emotive thrust that underscored these past initiatives, raising questions about its capacity to exert influence and initiate change on the global stage.

The identity of middle powers within the MIKTA framework appears to be less tethered to their historical roles in technically-oriented coalitions, and more linked to their crucial positions within the G20 (Cooper, 2013). It is this G20 membership that appears to serve as the catalyst for collective ideation and potentially operational activities (Cooper & Mo, 2013). An earnest examination of MIKTA’s relevance and the potential risks it confronts is likely still in its nascent stages and yet to fully manifest.

The G20’s role extends beyond its well-recognized functions in economic governance. This is particularly pertinent in the current era, where the United States no longer wields unchallenged authority over the rest of the world, specifically in relation to China and the BRICS nations

(Armijo, 2007). As a central institution in global affairs, the G20 may well evolve to become the barometer of the global system's capacity to address issues encompassing both deadlock and crisis management (Pauly, 2017).

Thus, the role and influence of MIKTA, within the G20 framework, present valuable insights into the cooperative behaviour of middle powers and the evolving nature of their diplomacy within a shifting geopolitical landscape.

The middle powers, as entities with a substantial interest in the effective functioning of both the system at large and the G20, could increasingly come to be identified by their roles as entrepreneurs and system stabilisers under progressively uncertain and stressful global conditions (Cooper, 2017). The manifestation of this role could be individual or collective, and it is likely to determine the utility of the middle power model in the future.

Consistent with historical precedents, it is of utmost importance to convince the powers beyond the G20 of the universal benefits that a balanced global order provides (Pauly, 2017). Equally critical is the effective management and restraint of potentially detrimental actions by great powers, both established and emergent (Bishop, 2014). The middle powers, represented by MIKTA, thus play a vital role in ensuring a balanced, fair, and functional global system, both through MIKTA and G20 context.

Although the operational flexibility and organizational fluidity of the G20 have been perceived as potential weaknesses, these qualities can also be conceptualized as sources of strength. The evolution of the group has emphasized the network characteristics of the G20, even

as the efficacy of the club culture has been diminished. This broadening of the G20's membership – a phenomenon termed 'stretching out' – underlines a pivotal question about the future direction of the G20 (Alexandroff & Kirton, 2010).

One view anticipates the G20's drift toward a minimalist format—serving chiefly as a venue for leader-level bilaterals and transactional deals. In sharp contrast, a rival image envisions the forum consolidating an expanded summit model, with clear expectations that it will widen and deepen its policy docket.

Actors both inside and outside the core continue to show up and engage, with little sign of participation fatigue. Although the early, crisis-driven tempo has ebbed, acknowledgement of the G20's role as a hub within the global governance architecture has spread (Hajnal, 2014). The forum's trajectory will thus hinge on how it reconciles these competing logics with the shifting demands placed on international cooperation.

CONCLUSIONS TO CHAPTER II

As we conclude Chapter II, it becomes evident that middle powers play a crucial role in shaping regional responses to global challenges. These states, while not the most powerful actors on the global stage, wield significant influence and can drive regional cooperation towards

addressing global issues. The geographic location of these middle powers, as well as their cultural, economic, and political contexts, are integral to understanding their distinct approaches to international relations and the strategies they employ to exert influence at the regional level.

The generational differences between middle powers, as outlined in the North vs. South analysis, further underscore the complexities of defining and understanding middle powers. Traditional middle powers in the North, such as Canada and Australia, may differ significantly in their priorities, capabilities, and strategies from emerging middle powers in the South. These variations can be seen in their approach to international law, norms, and institutions, which further contribute to the complexity and dynamism of international relations.

South-South cooperation represents an emerging alternative to the Eurocentric international order, offering a fresh perspective on global governance. This form of cooperation enables middle powers from the Global South to forge partnerships based on shared development goals and common challenges, thus broadening the scope of international cooperation beyond traditional North-South dynamics.

The assumption of the G20 presidency by countries like India and Indonesia provides a distinctive vantage point to understand the evolving dynamics of global governance. These rising powers' experiences present unique challenges and opportunities, offering insight into the contemporary global governance landscape.

India's presidency of the G20 in 2022 came at a critical juncture. While its ascendancy symbolized the shifting power dynamics within the global economic order, the presidency also brought with it considerable challenges. Given India's developmental priorities and its increasing global stature, the country faced the dual task of aligning the G20 agenda with its national objectives and catering to broader international expectations (Ullah & Ferdous, 2022). Additionally, amidst increasing geopolitical tensions and the ongoing global health crisis, India's role as G20 president required deft diplomacy and strategic vision to maintain the G20's relevance and effectiveness.

Indonesia's assumption of the G20 presidency in 2023 presents similar challenges and opportunities. As a middle power, Indonesia has the potential to leverage its G20 leadership to address both global and regional concerns. Among the challenges Indonesia faces include managing disparate national interests within the G20, navigating the global response to climate change, and addressing post-pandemic economic recovery.

In conclusion, the role of middle powers within the G20 and their engagement in global governance, particularly in economic diplomacy, have been subjected to considerable examination. Emerging from the height of the economic crisis in 2008, the majority of middle power diplomacy efforts were focused on economic issues. However, a series of events and crises over the past years has led to a discernible shift from economics to security.

The Trump presidency represented a significant turning point in global politics, with the United States taking an increasingly unilateral approach to global

governance, disrupting traditional alliances and exacerbating U.S.-China tensions Hurrell, 2022). This geopolitical climate necessitated a recalibration of middle powers' diplomatic strategies as they sought to navigate these increasingly volatile dynamics.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic further underscored the importance of non-economic dimensions of global governance (Smith, 2022). As middle powers grappled with the global health crisis, the focus of their diplomatic efforts expanded to include public health and associated social issues, highlighting the necessity for a more holistic approach to global governance.

The war in Ukraine added another layer of complexity to the changing geopolitical landscape, raising serious security concerns and further shifting the focus of middle power diplomacy from economics to security (Walker, 2023). The conflict has brought attention to the necessity for concerted diplomatic efforts to maintain peace and security in the face of escalating global tensions.

These events underline the evolving nature of middle power diplomacy and the changing global governance landscape. Understanding the theory of middle power engagement is, therefore, only one piece of the puzzle. As we move forward, it is crucial to understand the practice of middle power diplomacy in an increasingly complex and interdependent world, a topic that will be the focus of the next chapter.

CHAPTER III

MIDDLE POWER DIPLOMACY IN 21ST CENTURY: FROM CONTESTED TO RESILIENT MULTILATERALISM

The chapter focuses on the practice of middle power diplomacy, highlighting the growing divergence between traditional or ‘Northern’ middle powers and emerging or ‘Southern’ middle powers. There is a burgeoning interest in examining the role and influence of these powers, particularly in light of shifts in global power dynamics.

Middle power diplomacy can be broadly conceptualized as a range of global and regional initiatives undertaken independently by middle powers, without the immediate support of hegemonic states (Adler-Nissen, 2014). These initiatives have proven instrumental in shaping international politics and have often pioneered novel approaches to global governance and peacebuilding.

The 21st century presents an array of challenges and opportunities for middle powers. Amidst the ascendance of dynamic rising states and the proliferation of influential non-state actors, middle powers have been subjected to

scrutiny. Critics have argued their waning influence, citing the rise of new power clusters like BRICS and MIKTA as evidence of this decline (Schiavon & Dominguez, 2016; Parlar Dal & Kursun, 2016).

Nonetheless, the evolving global power landscape offers middle powers opportunities for creative engagement and cooperation. For instance, the G20's formation opened up avenues for middle powers to navigate and shape global politics more directly. This shift towards informalism offers a space where middle powers can exert their influence beyond traditional power structures (Cooper, 2017).

Emerging powers like the BRICS have utilized these platforms to enhance their global status and reshape the global order, thereby challenging conventional norms of global governance. This transformation from an understated diplomatic forum to a high-profile summit process underpins the growing assertion of middle powers in international politics (Armijo & Roberts, 2014).

The role of middle powers in the global political sphere holds a unique position of bridging the gap between major powers and smaller states. With the capacity to exert regional influence and concurrently navigate global diplomatic affairs, middle powers are poised to maneuver within complex regional-global intersections. The critical question is how these nations balance these dual roles and how their regional and global identities intersect, influence, and inform one another.

In the face of the 21st century's dynamic geopolitics, a renewed focus has been cast upon the diplomatic practices of middle powers. The emerging group of dynamic states and increasingly influential non-state actors present an

interesting paradox. They have simultaneously propelled the perception of declining influence of traditional middle powers and unveiled opportunities for increased coherence and unity through initiatives such as MIKTA (Schiavon & Dominguez, 2016; Parlar Dal & Kursun, 2016).

In a world trending towards multipolarity, where power gravitates around a few dominant poles, middle powers could potentially find their influence marginalized. However, under an alternative assumption of an increasingly diffused power landscape, the role of middle powers could be augmented. This depends on their ability to skillfully traverse an institutional environment showing both concentration and fragmentation (Cooper, 2013).

The ascendancy of informalism in global politics brings to the forefront a wider range of actors. It expands representation beyond the traditional Western elite, previously encapsulated within G7, and allows middle powers a more direct route to influence global politics. The establishment of the G20 marks a turning point, opening up avenues for diplomatic practices previously relegated to the periphery.

Conceptually, groupings like BRICS and MIKTA serve as benchmarks for how inclusive informalism will be, evolving from understated diplomatic forums to high-profile summit processes. The transformation of BRICS, in particular, has not been solely a reaction to perceived systemic inequities. It has also been driven by its members' self-perception as emerging powers that warrant increased recognition within the global system (Armijo & Roberts, 2014).

Cultivating a shared middle-power identity remains valuable despite heterogeneity among individual states. A common role conception can stitch together traditional and non-traditional middle powers within global governance—especially in flexible, informal settings like MIKTA—creating connective tissue across otherwise disparate actors. Positioned, in the G20 context, between the G7 and the BRICS caucus, this collective stance highlights how middle powers can exploit diplomatic room for manoeuvre, converting structural constraints into opportunities for agenda-setting, brokerage, and coalition-building.

Even so, MIKTA's composition strains conventional understandings of what counts as a middle power. While all members are analytically coded as such, the meaning of the label is interpreted unevenly—and at times inconsistently—across capitals. On one reading, Mexico and Turkey qualify by virtue of a bridging function anchored in geography and cross-regional linkages (Barratta, 2008). On another, Turkey, South Korea, Indonesia, and Mexico are cast as non-traditional middle powers, differentiated from the historically “Northern” cohort by developmental trajectories, security alignments, and role conceptions that diverge from classic templates (Destradi, 2010). This definitional elasticity both widens the tent and complicates coordination, underscoring the need to treat “middle power” less as a fixed category and more as a family resemblance shaped by context and coalition practices. Ambivalence towards fully embracing the middle power identity appears common amongst non-traditional middle powers, suggesting an ongoing evolution of the concept (Chapnick, 1999; Destradi, 2010).

The admission of middle powers into the G20 marks a conspicuous break with past practice, when such states stood outside elite summitry. By parlaying this upgraded status into agenda influence—and by convening parallel caucuses such as MIKTA—they have advanced the legitimacy, and potentially the efficiency, of global governance (Cooper & Mo, 2013). Alongside this drift toward global informalism runs a second, complementary track: renewed investment in regional organizations as platforms for voice and policy experimentation.

For Mexico, that regionalist turn centers on North America and the wider Americas through the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) and the Pacific Alliance with Chile, Colombia, and Peru, signaling a deliberate diversification of institutional commitments (Bulmer-Thomas, 2014). Indonesia and South Korea have likewise anchored their diplomacy in ASEAN and ASEAN+3, while layering on initiatives such as the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative in Seoul's case, thereby knitting together subregional and transregional cooperation (Hemmings, 2016). Australia, for its part, has displayed episodic regional leadership, most ambitiously in its proposal for an Asia Pacific Community, which sought to recalibrate forums and agendas across the neighborhood (White, 2008).

Turkey pursued an energetic outreach strategy in the 2000s to deepen regional ties. Despite recent friction and uncertainty with the European Union, the EU remains Ankara's principal institutional link to its European environment. In parallel—and with mixed results—Turkey has attempted to strengthen cooperation through the South East Europe Cooperation Process (SEECP) and the

Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), underscoring a continued search for regional platforms that complement, rather than replace, broader club-level engagement (Oğuzlu, 2008).

Beyond their immediate neighborhoods, many middle powers have pursued sectoral forms of cooperation—often with regional organizations—by securing permanent-observer status, signing cooperation or mutual-assistance accords, and building technical linkages across policy domains.

Yet their ability to project influence much beyond their regions is circumscribed by risk and cost. Aspirations to a global footprint run up against symbolic hurdles (visibility, credibility, recognition) as well as material limits (resources, deployable capacity). In practice, country agendas remain anchored in proximate concerns: migration pressures for Mexico; security and democracy-governance dilemmas for Turkey; consolidation of ASEAN community norms for Indonesia; careful navigation of U.S.–China competition for Australia; and peninsular stability alongside North Korea’s nuclear challenge for South Korea (Heine & Thakur, 2011).

Unsurprisingly, domestic audiences in many non-traditional middle powers tend to favor regionalism. That preference underscores the contested character of middle-power status—positioned at the seam between regional obligations and global expectations, and continually negotiating the trade-offs between them.

Conceptually and pragmatically, middle-power multilateralism is best understood as a collective international role. The premise is straightforward: these states exert meaningful influence chiefly when they act in

concert with others, and such collective action most often unfolds in multilateral venues. This role conception, in turn, calls for closer comparative inquiry into how middle powers assemble coalitions, broker compromises, and institutionalize cooperation across issue areas and regions—probing when regional initiatives scale up to global effect, and when they remain bounded within their immediate neighborhoods.

Despite the importance of middle-power multilateralism, the literature probing its dynamics remains relatively thin. A landmark contribution by Andrew F. Cooper and Parlar Dal (2016) traces three waves of middle-power diplomacy. The first, in the immediate post-1945 period, saw traditional middle powers—Canada and Australia foremost—embed multilateralism through the United Nations and affiliated bodies. A second wave featured ad hoc activism by emerging middle powers clustered around specific issue niches. Most recently, a third, contemporary wave has taken shape within informal or “club” settings—most notably the G20—and through cross-regional initiatives such as BRICS and MIKTA, where middle powers experiment with new modalities of coordination (Cooper & Parlar Dal, 2016).

Today’s environment calls for more systematic scrutiny because multilateralism is unfolding along two partially contradictory trajectories. On one side, it is becoming more informal, with cooperation increasingly organized through coordination of national policies rather than treaty-based bargains (Haass, 2009). On the other, rising populist and nationalist currents have eroded U.S.-led multilateralism’s coherence: Washington’s retrenchment from several multilateral arenas, the surge

of protectionist/isolationist impulses under the Trump administration, and parallel swings toward nationalism and bilateralism in other Western capitals have collectively weakened the effectiveness of multilateral practices—even as the global political economy is managed through more complex, multipolar power-sharing arrangements.

Amid uncertainty—and as multilateralism morphs into looser, “multi-bi” arrangements—middle powers encounter new headwinds: reengaging a United States no longer the unambiguous champion of global governance and mediating across a persistent North–South divide. In today’s environment, their capacity to mount collective initiatives—especially alongside traditional partners such as the United States—appears constrained. Even as the shifting landscape narrows their “collective international role” within formal forums, middle powers still retain strategic assets that can widen diplomatic room for manoeuvre. Despite setbacks to the roles long anticipated for them, their distinctive brand of multilateralism can be evaluated through four core attributes. Taken together, these features equip middle powers to assemble coalitions, catalyse cooperation, and advance shared goods in an order lacking a dominant hegemon:

1. *Strong commitment to global governance:* Middle powers demonstrate a sustained inclination to underwrite and enhance the machinery of global governance (Ravenhill, 1998). They routinely invest resources in international institutions, recognizing their utility in confronting transnational challenges and upholding international order.

2. *Reform activism and status upgrading*: Middle powers regularly press to recalibrate authority within global governance (Jordaan, 2003). Through campaigns for voice, vote, and institutional redesign, they seek to elevate their standing and shape rules commensurate with their growing capabilities.
3. *Value-driven problem solving*: These states pair material initiatives with strong normative commitments to addressing transboundary challenges (Cooper, 2011). They often act as consensus entrepreneurs—bridging divides, crafting workable compromises, and advancing cooperative solutions across contested issue areas.
4. *North–South brokerage*: Occupying a distinctive hinge position, middle powers frequently align with—or mediate between—advanced and developing economies (Browning, 2017). This brokerage enables dialogue formation, cross-regional coalition building, and the reconciliation of divergent interests and perspectives.

Amid perceptions of declining U.S. and other major-power influence across multiple issue areas, middle powers have widened their bargaining space and amplified their individual contributions to global rule-making. Nowhere is this more evident than in their long-standing imprint on the design and evolution of the international trade regime.

A second, related strength is a more assertive reformism: contemporary middle powers press for recalibrated voice and status within established

institutions and, when blocked, pivot toward newer venues that privilege informality and flexible decision rules (Cooper & Mo, 2013). This turn signals, especially among non-traditional cases, a purposeful foreign-policy activism aimed at legitimating their international standing before both domestic and external audiences.

Third, both traditional and emerging middle powers articulate robust normative and ideational commitments to tackling problems of global governance—though, as critics note, these pledges can drift toward rhetoric absent sustained implementation (Neack, 2013).

Finally, many non-traditional middle powers operate as bridges between advanced and developing economies, balancing ties to both camps in ways that sustain diplomatic influence and facilitate cross-bloc coordination.

These assets foreground a persistent puzzle at the heart of middle-power diplomacy: how much variation should we expect in their multilateral practice, and how large is the gap between proclamations of internationalism and operational delivery? In crafting distinctive global-governance strategies and a recognizably “middle-power” diplomatic style, these states have encountered significant constraints—material, institutional, and political—that have at times blunted their effectiveness as intermediaries and managers of cooperation, even as they seek to convert limited hard power into procedural leverage within an increasingly complex multilateral order.

Central to the discourse on middle power diplomacy is the query regarding the anticipated variations in the multilateralism of middle powers and the possible

incongruence between their rhetoric on multilateralism and their practices. Middle powers, in the course of establishing their unique middle power diplomacy via distinctive global governance strategies, have faced a myriad of challenges. These difficulties, to a certain extent, have hindered them from executing their intermediary and managerial roles in global affairs effectively.

Among the most salient obstacles are four interrelated problems: (1) a widening gap between expectations and practice; (2) policy overreach relative to available capacity; (3) tension between regional and global orientations; and (4) constrained leverage in the face of great-power politics.

First, the expectations–practice gap captures the disjunction between middle powers’ rhetorical commitments to stewarding global governance and the extent to which those commitments translate into sustained implementation. This discrepancy frequently arises from domestic political constraints, regional entanglements, or institutional limits at the international level that inhibit the full realization of stated objectives (Ungerer, 2007).

Second, middle powers at times overextend, effectively “punching over their weight” by advancing ambitious policy agendas without commensurate diplomatic, financial, or bureaucratic resources. Such overreach can diffuse effort, strain administrations, and diminish overall effectiveness, even when initial initiative-taking succeeds in setting the agenda (Soeya, 1998).

Third, an enduring regional–global imbalance reflects the tendency to privilege proximate, neighborhood concerns—where payoffs are immediate and reputational returns are clearer—over broader global engagements.

While rational, this prioritization can narrow voice and reduce influence at the global level, limiting the capacity to shape rules and norms beyond the region (Browning, 2017).

Fourth, and compounding the previous three, middle powers possess limited influence amid great-power contention. Even when they broker coalitions, agenda-control and veto points dominated by major powers, together with disparities in material capabilities, can curtail middle-power initiatives or redirect them into lowest-common-denominator outcomes. The combined effect is a structural headwind: aspirations to act as intermediaries and managers of cooperation are real, but translating them into durable, system-level change requires navigating persistent capability constraints, layered constituencies, and the hard politics of great-power rivalry.

The first challenge in the field of middle power diplomacy pertains to these powers' struggle to strike a fine balance between their global roles, as envisaged in the wider international community, and their actual performance. Conventionally, the term "middle power" carries a positive connotation, which inevitably elevates the anticipations about the potential roles these states may undertake in global governance (Cooper, 1997). Thus, the challenge arises when there is a discrepancy between these expectations and their actual capacity or willingness to fulfil these roles.

A second, recurrent difficulty arises when middle powers attempt to project influence beyond their real capacity—"punching above their weight"—especially when joining major powers in collective responses to global

Pressures can also pull attention inward. The outbreak of severe crises or conflicts in their neighborhoods often redirects diplomatic bandwidth toward regional priorities, with the unintended effect of rendering middle powers more quiescent in wider arenas and diminishing their ability to shape global agendas (Ravenhill, 1998). As proximate stakeholders, they are indispensable in regional conflict management—exposure and vulnerability are highest close to home—yet fulfilling a wider, collective role requires a careful calibration of regional and global commitments (Ungerer, 2007).

A further, cross-cutting challenge concerns role expectations. Middle powers—traditional and emerging alike—are often presumed to adopt intermediary positions that do not threaten either great-power or small-state interests. In practice, however, even with recent gains in material capacity and diplomatic activism, their leverage in dealings with the great powers remains circumscribed (Jordaan, 2003). The constraint reflects relative deficits not only in material resources but also in ideational reach and behavioral clout. To be sure, they have crafted sophisticated repertoires—agenda entrepreneurship, coalition brokerage, and norm advocacy—that make them valuable problem-solvers in specific domains (Cooper, 1997). Nonetheless, converting these tools into durable influence depends on navigating the broader geopolitical currents set by major-power competition.

Against this backdrop, influential “club” formats such as the G20 face mounting scrutiny from diverse societal actors who expect them to tackle systemic threats spanning environmental and economic spheres. At the forefront are the risks associated with potentially catastrophic climate

change and a reassessment of the gains and distributional effects of global trade flows—pressures that test both the responsiveness of club governance and the capacity of middle powers to help steer it (Cooper & Antkiewicz, 2008).

Critics contend that a central weakness of the G20 lies in its apparent inability—or unwillingness—to tackle systemic problems with sufficient rigor (Hajnal, 2016). This judgment has been reinforced by a broader backlash against cooperative internationalism in favor of sovereignty-first politics, a shift that places the very premises of rules-based multilateralism under strain.

Across several pivotal G20 members, both governments and publics exhibit mounting unease with economic globalization and transnational solidarity, pressures frequently linked to widening domestic inequalities and the populist mobilizations they fuel (Hurrell & Sengupta, 2012). These dynamics complicate an already demanding diplomatic environment, narrowing room for compromise and thereby raising the transaction costs of effective middle-power coalition-building.

The resurgence of nationalist rhetoric—captured in slogans such as “my country first”—has, in turn, prompted doubts about the forum’s capacity to articulate and advance the global common good (Lucey & Rehrl, 2017). Questions of legitimacy now come not only from outside the club—non-members affected by the spillovers of G20 decisions—but also from within, as intra-member discord and divergent priorities erode confidence in collective purpose (Hajnal, 2016).

These critiques reverberate beyond elite politics. Societal pushback threatens the G20’s *raison d’être* and risks dampening governments’ willingness to underwrite

future cooperative ventures (Cooper, 2013). For middle powers, the consequence is a tighter operating space: even as they seek to mediate among divergent preferences, the combined weight of nationalist retrenchment, legitimacy disputes, and distributive conflicts makes it harder to exercise influence within multilateral arenas and to translate agenda entrepreneurship into durable outcomes.

Middle-power diplomacy has seen significant evolution in its collaborative activity, particularly in the post-Cold War era. This period has allowed middle powers an expanded scope of maneuverability, enabling them to broaden their range of activities (Cooper, 1997). Rather than deriving from structural forms of power, the leadership and initiative-taking of middle powers stem from their innovative use of diplomatic talents, imbuing their diplomacy with the capacity to cultivate consensus and cooperation on an issue-specific basis (Chapnick, 1999). This process is invariably differentiated and carries a significant temporal aspect. Middle-power collaboration has changed markedly since the Cold War's end. With superpower constraints loosened, these states gained greater room to manoeuvre and widened the scope of issues on which they could act (Cooper, 1997). Their influence has rarely flowed from structural heft; instead, it has derived from inventive diplomacy—agenda entrepreneurship, coalition brokerage, and norm advocacy—that can stitch together ad hoc consensus around specific problems (Chapnick, 1999). Such initiative is uneven across cases and periods: it is episodic, highly context dependent, and sensitive to timing as windows of opportunity open and close.

Revisiting what counts as “middle-power behaviour”

therefore begins with the composition of the category itself. The first post-war expansion of the group drew in prominent non-aligned states—notably India, Brazil, Yugoslavia, and Indonesia—whose activism blended classical middle-power traits with systemic critique (Neack, 2003). India, in particular, paired mediation and institution-building with a sustained challenge to hierarchies embedded in the international order, illustrating how role conception and contestation can coexist within the same diplomatic repertoire.

The contemporary environment poses a dense cluster of tests. Foremost is the sharpening rivalry between the United States and China, which now spans trade, technology, security, and rules-setting. Middle powers must hedge, diversify, and sometimes choose, all while protecting policy autonomy and supply-chain resilience (Goh, 2014). A second pressure point came with the Trump administration’s unilateral tilt and skepticism toward multilateral bargains, which unsettled long-standing assumptions about American stewardship and forced partners to reconsider burden-sharing, contingency planning, and forum choice (Patrick, 2017). A third shock—COVID-19—exposed vulnerabilities in health security, data sharing, logistics, and financing, revealing both the indispensability and the fragility of existing governance mechanisms (Hurrell, 2020). Finally, the war in Ukraine, with its risks of escalation and cascading economic effects, has rekindled hard-security dilemmas, energy insecurity, and sanctions coordination challenges that reverberate through middle-power strategies.

MULTILATERALISM: HALLMARK OF MIDDLE-POWER DIPLOMACY

The relevance of middle power diplomacy can initially appear limited or even paradoxical. By definition, these states operate with fewer resources and less leverage than the dominant powers, which restricts their ability to steer international outcomes on their own. Yet reassessing their place in global politics has become both necessary and urgent, driven by two closely linked dynamics of the current era.

A series of intensifying crises has exposed vulnerabilities in the global system. The COVID-19 pandemic is the most recent example, joining the accelerating climate emergency, the lingering effects of the financial crisis, and the continuing repercussions of the war on terror. What these developments share is the world's persistent difficulty in coping with the intricate interdependencies of the twenty-first century. As Park (2020, p. 8) observes, "Globalization may have brought human lives closer together, but we do not yet seem to know how to live so close to one another."

Against this backdrop, middle powers acquire distinctive importance in multilateral arenas. Their strength lies not in unilateral action but in forming coalitions, facilitating dialogue among stronger states, and advancing shared principles and norms. Through such multilateral engagement, they are able to extend their influence beyond what their material capabilities alone would predict, thereby shaping international outcomes more significantly than their relative power would suggest.

Firstly, a myriad of escalating global challenges have

made their mark on the fabric of the twenty-first century. The cataclysmic COVID-19 pandemic stands as the most recent manifestation of these global predicaments, coupled with the intensifying implications of climate change and the enduring ramifications of the global financial crisis and the war on terror. The common thread linking these concerns is the prevailing inability to adapt to and navigate the complex intricacies and interdependencies of the twenty-first century.

A multilateral orientation enables middle powers to act as connectors among diverse actors, fostering more coherent and coordinated strategies for addressing global problems. It underscores the importance of cooperation, compromise, and respect—principles that are indispensable in an era of deep interdependence.

At the same time, the revival of great power rivalries intensifies the complexity of these challenges. Globalization, instead of erasing geopolitical divisions, has in many ways reinforced them. This reality contrasts with the optimistic projections of the post-Cold War period, particularly Fukuyama's (1989) thesis of an 'end of history' and the anticipated rise of a universal liberal order. Efforts to transform the USSR through rapid economic liberalization or to reshape China through integration into global markets have not yielded the expected democratic outcomes. The assumption that economic openness naturally produces political liberalism has proven misplaced. Instead, economic interdependence has developed alongside growing political polarization, as illustrated by renewed tensions in Ukraine, Syria, and the South China Sea.

The convergence of transnational crises with great

power competition generates significant collective action problems under the conditions of globalization. Security threats today extend well beyond the nuclear domain, encompassing climate change, pandemics, instability in global finance and trade, migration pressures, and rising inequality. Addressing these systemic risks requires more effective collaboration and collective problem-solving to secure sustainable coexistence in the twenty-first century (Fennell, 2022).

As governments reassess their strategic outlooks under conditions of heightened uncertainty, the search for new policy frameworks and fallback mechanisms has gained urgency. This search highlights the distinctive contribution of middle powers within multilateral diplomacy. Their coalition-building capacity, role as intermediaries between stronger states, and promotion of shared norms illustrate why the multilateral dimension of their diplomacy is indispensable (Cooper, Higgott, & Nossal, 1993).

Yet, the discipline of international relations remains deeply marked by Eurocentric and US-centric traditions, as noted by Goh (2019). Against this backdrop, Park's concept of "resilient multilateralism" offers a valuable reorientation. It stresses adaptation to specific contexts, complementarity rather than exclusivity, and an emphasis on dialogue and consensus, thereby widening the toolkit available to manage global complexity.

In parallel, recent scholarship increasingly incorporates geoeconomic dynamics into analyses of power politics, clarifying the dilemmas middle powers face when caught between escalating rivalries. Many of these states are operating under growing diplomatic pressure, forced to

balance economic imperatives with security concerns.

Within this shifting environment, one consistent theme is the expectation that middle powers act as stabilizers, working to sustain cooperation and preserve international order. Their engagement has been particularly visible in responses to planetary challenges such as climate change and the COVID-19 crisis. This trend reflects both the decline of unipolarity and the growing necessity of inclusive cooperation within a multipolar international system.

This trajectory reinforces the central role of middle powers in sustaining multilateral diplomacy. Their ability to forge alliances, act as intermediaries among dominant states, and advance international norms confirms their significance in shaping global affairs (Cooper, Higgott, & Nossal, 1993).

Drawing on different policy traditions, recent scholarship points toward the formulation of a composite approach identified as “resilient multilateralism” (Park, 2020). This framework stresses the systemic linkages necessary for effective global cooperation and parallels interdisciplinary attempts to address the complexity and interconnectedness of contemporary societies.

The notion of resilience, initially rooted in disciplines such as psychology, ecology, and disaster management, has increasingly entered the discourse of international relations, particularly through debates on environmental sustainability (Bourbeau, 2018). Policymakers—especially within Europe—have adopted resilience as a guiding principle for policy formulation (Paul & Roos, 2019; Tocci, 2020). Within this setting, resilience spans a broad range of priorities, including economic security, strategic

statecraft, climate adaptation, and the management of global governance challenges.

When applied to middle powers, resilient multilateralism requires a shift in perspective. Rather than focusing primarily on state actors and the restrictions imposed by stronger powers, attention is redirected to the arenas and patterns of interaction that define global politics. By recognizing the systemic dynamics of post-Cold War globalization, resilient multilateralism draws on earlier scholarly and policy debates to distill four guiding principles, each grounded in prior case studies.

The first principle highlights the importance of context specificity as the basis for policy design. Since constraints on policymaking vary across settings and evolve over time, this principle calls for adaptive and flexible approaches, similar to the European Union's reliance on policy experimentation. Such adaptability stands in contrast to rigid, universalist frameworks like the Washington Consensus, which have largely been advanced by great powers. Yet, context specificity also entails constant recalibration and iterative learning. In this respect, the relatively ad hoc nature of South-South Cooperation, borrowing Keohane's (1990) terminology, offers practical avenues for exploratory partnerships and preliminary coalition-building (Keohane, 1990).

The second principle highlights the value of complementarity in implementing context-sensitive strategies. This requires diversification across both multilateral approaches and partners, spanning middle and great powers alike. The balance of such engagement depends on available resources and geographic proximity to major power spheres of influence. A diversified

orientation provides flexibility and, at times, calculated ambiguity, enabling middle powers to adjust as geopolitical conditions evolve. As Kissinger (2012) observed, “Ambiguity is sometimes the lifeblood of diplomacy.” Such diplomatic ambiguity can serve as a safeguard, maintaining space for cooperative action (Kissinger, 2012).

The third principle emphasizes consensus building as a central practice. This follows naturally from the pursuit of more fluid and adaptable policy spaces. Although bilateral dealings with great powers may restrict the scope for middle powers to set the agenda, consensus-driven processes allow them to shape the platforms and rules through which all actors engage. In this regard, their numerical weight provides a comparative advantage in influencing global norms.

The fourth principle advocates a non-confrontational posture in dealings with major powers. Building on the consensus-building approach, lessons from the New International Economic Order (NIEO) reveal the limitations of direct challenges to great powers, even when pursued through coalitions. Coordination problems have often undermined such efforts. Here, South-South Cooperation again demonstrates its relevance within resilient multilateralism, offering a flexible mechanism for networking that strengthens both consensus-building efforts and non-confrontational engagement.

Together, these four elements of resilient multilateralism aim to expand the policy space available for collective initiatives in today’s conditions. The framework embraces complexity and promotes a more fluid international environment, drawing on the agility and

numerical weight of middle powers. Rather than aspiring to comprehensive system-building, the approach stresses pragmatism, adaptability, and sensitivity to context.

Like all strategic models, resilient multilateralism carries certain limitations. It is particularly relevant in moments of transition away from unipolar dominance, where the trade-offs differ from those under a stable unipolar order. In a functioning unipolar system, alignment with a great power can offer clear benefits, while opting out of such an alliance might impose economic or security costs beyond the shelter of the unipolar framework. In these circumstances, choosing to align with dominant powers may represent a less ambitious but stable equilibrium, diminishing the rationale for resilient multilateralism.

Moreover, the strategy can be vulnerable to divide-and-rule tactics aimed at weakening middle power cohesion. Although the progression toward multipolarity may reduce these risks, resilient multilateralism still faces the enduring challenge of fostering genuine collective action. Resilient multilateralism ultimately depends on the difficult but necessary achievement of collective action. Its effectiveness is inseparable from the ability of states to generate shared strength through coordinated effort. The logic of the prisoner's dilemma illustrates this point clearly: diplomatic ambiguity quickly loses value if all states decide to side with a great power. For resilient multilateralism to take hold, at least some actors must maintain a measure of ambiguity and a willingness to cooperate, creating the initial "activation energy" required to launch broader initiatives. If international politics were

to be dictated entirely by unilateral choices or rigid bifurcations—such as the reimposition of an iron curtain—then the strategy would be stifled, especially if major powers worked actively to block the formation of a critical mass of ambiguous middle powers. A second limitation concerns the costs of operationalizing this approach. Because resilient multilateralism entails multiple strategies across diverse policy spheres, it can place a substantial burden on states with limited resources. In this respect, international organizations like the United Nations remain vital. The General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and specialized agencies provide inclusive platforms that ease some of these burdens. Yet the UN's role is ultimately supportive; it cannot substitute for the economic capacity or political will of states themselves. Without adequate resources and determination, the ambitious scope of resilient multilateralism risks exceeding the means of many middle powers.

Beyond these challenges, further refinement can come from examining the diversity that exists within the category of middle powers. This does not mean returning to binary distinctions between large and small states or between developed and developing economies. Instead, distinguishing between semi-peripheral and peripheral middle powers may better capture the systemic logic of resilient multilateralism. Such differentiation acknowledges that not all middle powers wield the same capabilities or operate under identical constraints, and that their contributions to multilateral strategies will vary accordingly.

Rather than reverting to simplistic binaries such as middle versus small states or developed versus developing economies, it may be more accurate to distinguish between semi-peripheral and peripheral middle powers. Such a subdivision aligns with the systemic orientation of resilient multilateralism, recognizing that different middle powers possess varying levels of resources and influence, which in turn shape their capacity to engage in multilateral strategies.

Another dimension worth considering is the role of South-South Cooperation (SSC) in advancing middle power-led multilateral initiatives. Given the significant demands and costs associated with resilient multilateralism, SSC may function as a useful complement by providing a lower-profile and less resource-intensive mechanism within a broader middle power strategy. By enabling more incremental and exploratory forms of cooperation, SSC can reduce entry costs while still contributing to coalition-building. Yet this potential requires a critical reassessment of SSC's foundations, particularly since uneven power relations exist both among middle powers themselves and in their interactions with stronger states.

In conclusion, resilient multilateralism should be understood as a provisional and context-specific response to the turbulence of the present international order. Its realization depends on coordinated action that bridges domestic and external policy domains, resembling the principle of governance ambidexterity (Kim & Lim, 2017; Kim & Kim, 2020). The framework does not dismiss the enduring role of great power politics (Che, 2021), but it underscores the necessity of exploring avenues that allow

middle powers to exercise agency on the global stage. Even amid constraints and uncertainty, international arenas remain dynamic spaces where meaningful change can occur.

In drawing this chapter to a close, the framework of resilient multilateralism offers valuable insight into the practical dimensions of middle power diplomacy and activism. Yet our interpretation departs from Park's proposal of classifying middle powers into semi-peripheral and peripheral states. We suggest instead a division into two groups: those that emphasize alignment with great powers, and those that operate without such an emphasis.

The first group consists of the more traditional middle powers, largely Western democracies, which continue to prioritize the role of the United States within their multilateral engagements. These actors can be described as "regime supporters," given their orientation toward sustaining existing power structures. By contrast, the second group includes emerging middle powers that refrain from centering their diplomacy on any particular great power. This group is composed both of states in the Global South and of democratic reformers, and they may be considered "challengers." Their posture is not adversarial but reflects a desire to reshape prevailing arrangements in line with alternative visions of order.

The divergence between these two groups is evident in their responses to recent global crises, highlighting the distinct strategies through which each navigates international politics. This variation is significant, as it illustrates how different types of middle powers carve out space within an often volatile environment. Their contrasting practices reveal the evolving character of

recent crises, aiming to further elucidate the intricacies of their respective diplomatic strategies and their implications for the current and future state of global governance. This deepened insight will allow for a more nuanced understanding of the functional adaptability of middle powers and the potential for reshaping the contemporary international system.

MIDDLE POWER DEMOCRACIES: LEARNING TO LEAD WITHOUT THE US

Democratic middle powers comprise a wide spectrum of states, yet traditional U.S. allies such as Canada, the European Union (EU), the United Kingdom (UK), Japan, South Korea, and Australia consistently demonstrate a strong attachment to multilateralism and the principles of a rules-based order (Hurrell, 2018; Baumann, Rittberger, & Wagner, 2001). These states regard such commitments as essential to sustaining predictable and cooperative international relations, ensuring the smooth operation of global commerce, and providing smaller nations with protection against coercion from stronger actors.

In recent years, the weakening of the international order and the sharpening rivalry between the United States and China—particularly during the Trump

administration—prompted a recalibration of middle power diplomacy (Hurrell, 2018). Middle powers increasingly concentrated their diplomatic energy on reinforcing multilateralism and defending rules-based arrangements independently of both Washington and Beijing. Against the backdrop of intensifying geopolitical competition, their ability to mobilize diplomatic capital in support of international norms has become all the more significant (Destradi, 2017).

The international institutions, norms, and frameworks associated with this order operate as stabilizing pillars that temper volatility in world politics (Ruggie, 1992). By guaranteeing openness and predictability in global trade, they not only underpin prosperity but also function as protective buffers for smaller states, limiting the capacity of stronger countries to impose their will (Ikenberry, 2011).

For this reason, many small and mid-sized powers in Europe and Asia express deep concern over any erosion of the rules-based order in favor of a more transactional, zero-sum logic of power politics. Such a shift raises the likelihood that authoritarian powers, notably Russia and China, could entrench spheres of influence or violate international law with relative impunity (Destradi, 2017; Walt, 2018). This scenario would jeopardize both stability in international relations and the sovereignty of weaker states, making the defense of a rules-based order not simply a preference but an existential necessity for these countries.

The United States' traditional allies experienced a sense of unease with the advent of the "America First"

foreign policy under President Donald Trump's administration, which prioritized national sovereignty over multilateral cooperation and preferred transactional relationships over robust alliances (Patrick, 2020). This departure from the traditional U.S. foreign policy led these allies to explore alternative strategies to preserve their interests and uphold international norms. These strategies were centered around enhancing their autonomy, diversifying their partnerships, and investing more resources in strengthening ties among themselves (Carafano, 2021).

This dual approach served a twofold purpose. It conveyed a clear message to Washington about their discontent with the new American foreign policy, and it was also a concerted attempt to fortify multilateralism in a period marked by skepticism and, at times, open hostility from the United States towards this concept (Patrick, 2020). Concurrently, China was actively attempting to destabilize multilateralism in various ways, further increasing the imperative for these middle power initiatives (Economy, 2018).

The contemporary middle power diplomacy efforts can be contextualized around four central themes: a) the preservation of multilateralism, b) diversification of security partnerships, c) navigating the US-China tensions, and d) response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Cooper, 2020).

In the face of President Trump's recurrent criticism of multilateralism, middle powers felt compelled to launch initiatives aimed at reinforcing the infrastructure that enables global cooperation and coordination on critical issues such as trade, climate change, economics, and

nonproliferation (Bouchard & Peterson, 2014). A notable example is the reaction following the United States' withdrawal from the Paris climate accords. In response, several middle powers, seeking to fill the gap left by U.S. disengagement, doubled down on their own climate commitments and bolstered cooperation among themselves (Hale, 2017).

The “America First” orientation of the Trump administration compelled longstanding U.S. allies to reconsider their diplomatic strategies, setting the stage for a particularly active phase of middle power diplomacy. France, Germany, the United Kingdom (UK), and the European Union (EU) sought to preserve the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the nuclear deal with Iran, despite Washington's unilateral withdrawal and repeated efforts to undermine it. Their initiative was directed at maintaining the credibility of an agreement central to nuclear nonproliferation and regional security.

At the same time, Japan assumed a leadership role after the United States exited the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). By rallying the remaining ten participants, Tokyo was instrumental in transforming the initiative into the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) (Urata, 2018). This achievement demonstrated the determination of middle powers to uphold and adapt multilateral trade frameworks in defiance of U.S. economic nationalism.

Equally, the Trump administration's protectionist policies galvanized middle powers to defend the broader multilateral trading system. With the World Trade Organization (WTO) facing simultaneous pressure from both Washington and Beijing, Canada spearheaded the

creation of the Ottawa Group. This coalition, which brought together Australia, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and the EU (but excluded the United States), advanced pragmatic reform proposals aimed at reinforcing the WTO's core functions. Following the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, the group expanded its agenda to include reforms in public health, transparency, and digital governance (Song & Agarwal, 2023).

Furthermore, in response to Washington's obstruction of appointments to the WTO appellate body, a coalition of states—including EU members, Japan, and Australia—moved to circumvent the U.S. position by creating an interim dispute settlement system. Strikingly, this mechanism also gained support from China, underscoring the extent to which middle powers were prepared to innovate diplomatically in order to safeguard the rules-based trade order (Mavroidis, 2022). This initiative illustrates once more how middle powers adapt their strategies to preserve institutional integrity in the face of great power obstruction.

Beyond defending existing structures, middle powers have increasingly expanded their trade relations through alternative arrangements outside the traditional WTO framework. A prime example is the EU–Japan Economic Partnership Agreement, which created the largest free trade zone in the world, covering nearly one-third of global GDP (Kawasaki, 2019). The urgency of these negotiations was heightened by the Trump administration's imposition of unilateral tariffs on both the EU and Japan, along with the U.S. withdrawal from negotiations on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) (Akman, 2020). Such

developments highlight how middle powers not only defend but also actively reshape the global trade architecture.

The European Union has been especially active in advancing new bilateral and plurilateral trade agreements. In recent years, it has finalized deals with Canada, Mexico, the Mercosur bloc in Latin America, Singapore, and Vietnam (De Bièvre & Poletti, 2020). These agreements lay important groundwork for the eventual prospect of an EU–ASEAN mega trade deal. Parallel negotiations with Australia and New Zealand are also underway (Jallat, 2020).

Middle power diplomacy has likewise expanded into the technological domain, where states have sought to harmonize approaches to emerging challenges. At the 2019 G7 summit in Biarritz, France and Canada launched the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence (AI), intended to promote responsible AI use in line with human rights principles (Bryson & Winfield, 2020). Initially, the United States stood apart as the only G7 member not involved, but in May 2020 it declared its support, and by June 15, 2020 the initiative was formally launched with the participation of Australia, Canada, Mexico, Singapore, and others.

Japan has also taken leadership in the digital sphere. At the 2019 G20 summit in Osaka, it introduced the Free Trade and Data Free Flow with Trust initiative, designed to create global rules for cross-border data governance—a subject Tokyo has pursued in dialogue with the EU and other partners (Meltzer, 2019). Meanwhile, France has advanced the “Paris Call” for international collaboration on cybersecurity, which has attracted support from roughly 78 countries (not including the United States and China)

and about 650 companies. These developments illustrate how middle powers are moving proactively to shape global governance frameworks in digital trade, data, and cybersecurity, thereby reinforcing their role in setting international norms in new and evolving policy arenas.

Middle powers have also launched new diplomatic efforts aimed at strengthening existing multilateral frameworks. A prominent example is the Alliance for Multilateralism, introduced by France and Germany at the 2019 UN General Assembly. The initiative advocates for a rules-based international order capable of addressing a wide spectrum of transnational challenges, from humanitarian protection and climate change to cybersecurity and arms control. Among its most notable achievements has been its role in advancing negotiations toward an international legal convention on the regulation of lethal autonomous weapons.

The alliance has also pressed for stronger implementation of international humanitarian law, greater accountability for human rights abuses, and more effective global cooperation in public health—particularly in response to the COVID-19 crisis. Today, nearly 60 countries and the European Union actively participate, underscoring the convening power of France and Germany and their shared alignment with other small and medium-sized states (Bow & Lane, 2020). Yet the absence of the United States, Russia, and China is striking. While not formally conceived as an anti-Trump initiative, the alliance was nevertheless designed in part to offset the perceived leadership vacuum created by U.S. retrenchment under the Trump administration.

At the same time, U.S. allies have sought to balance

their long-standing reliance on American security guarantees with greater strategic autonomy. European partners and Canada have increased their leadership roles within NATO (Smith, 2020), while defense and security cooperation has accelerated outside NATO through EU mechanisms such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defense Fund. These efforts reflect a broader dual strategy: encouraging U.S. engagement through burden-sharing while simultaneously diversifying security arrangements to reduce vulnerability to shifts in American policy.

Several European states have also deepened defense cooperation through initiatives such as the French-led European Intervention Initiative, which brings together those European militaries most capable and politically willing to undertake joint operations. The purpose of such frameworks is not to replace NATO, but rather to strengthen European strategic autonomy and reduce excessive dependence on Washington.

Importantly, the growing network of regional ties among middle powers is not conceived as a substitute for U.S. leadership, nor as a deliberate attempt to contain China. Instead, these initiatives aim to complement relations with Washington while advancing a more multidimensional Indo-Pacific order—one less narrowly defined by U.S.–China rivalry (Abbondanza, 2022). This regional web coexists with bilateral and minilateral security arrangements that also include the United States, most notably the evolving Quadrilateral framework linking the U.S., Australia, India, and Japan.

Beyond such intraregional groupings, new forms of security cooperation are emerging between European and

Asian middle powers with shared strategic outlooks. The United Kingdom and France have both expanded their defense presence in the Indo-Pacific (Beeson & Lee-Brown, 2021). France, in particular, has pursued broader partnerships with Japan, Australia, and India, reflecting its ambition to play a greater regional role. President Macron has even advanced the idea of a Canberra–New Delhi–Paris axis as a platform for addressing Indo-Pacific security challenges (Szilágyi, 2022).

In the aftermath of Brexit, the United Kingdom has also sought to expand its strategic footprint in the Indo-Pacific, placing particular emphasis on deepening security and economic partnerships with Australia and Japan. These initiatives highlight the continued activism of middle powers in sustaining the rules-based international order through carefully cultivated strategic alignments.

Other European states, including Germany and the Netherlands, have likewise demonstrated a growing interest in extending their presence in the region (Hakata & Cannon, 2021). Complementing these national efforts, the European Union (EU) has been working to strengthen its security and diplomatic profile in Asia (Wagner & Anh, 2020).

This growing engagement is shaped by mounting concerns among democratic U.S. allies in both Europe and Asia regarding China’s rise and its global promotion of authoritarian governance and state capitalism (Pei, 2020). At the same time, these states have grown uneasy over intensifying U.S.–China rivalry. The Trump administration’s confrontational posture toward Beijing—especially its push for “decoupling”—did not secure broad endorsement from middle powers, which viewed such

measures as destabilizing and overly rigid.

In response, many of these middle powers have tried to balance their policies by maintaining constructive engagement with both Washington and Beijing wherever feasible. They have also launched initiatives to reinforce multilateral cooperation in addressing challenges linked to China's expanding influence. One prominent example was the creation of a trilateral framework between the EU, Japan, and the United States aimed at countering Chinese industrial subsidies deemed inconsistent with WTO rules (Plummer, 2019).

The approach adopted by the EU and Japan diverged markedly from that of the United States. Rather than relying on pressure tactics aimed at intimidating China or threatening unilateral withdrawal from the WTO, they sought to build broader coalitions of states to address systemic shortcomings from within the organization. This coalition-oriented strategy reflects a more constructive and inclusive vision of multilateral reform.

Their posture also differed in relation to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While Washington has generally treated the BRI as a strategic threat, European and Japanese policymakers have opted for a more pragmatic stance. These middle powers have attempted to shape the rules of global connectivity by promoting alternative investment standards, funding competing infrastructure projects, and, in some instances, cooperating directly with Beijing (Mohan, 2018). For example, construction of the Pelješac Bridge in Croatia, a BRI-linked project, was partially financed through EU Cohesion Funds.

Japan, working closely with Australia, has supported the U.S.-backed Blue Dot Network, which promotes

common principles for high-quality infrastructure development (U.S. Department of State, 2019). In parallel, the EU and ASEAN signed a joint statement pledging enhanced cooperation on infrastructure connectivity, reinforcing the multilateral dimension of these efforts.

During the Trump administration, the EU and Japan also worked in tandem with the United States to manage specific concerns about China, particularly regarding foreign investment screening and the security risks posed by 5G networks. Yet they simultaneously pursued engagement with Beijing in the economic sphere. In December 2020, ignoring a request for consultation from the incoming Biden national security team, the EU concluded a Comprehensive Agreement on Investments with China after seven years of negotiation. Similarly, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and other regional states joined China in signing the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in November 2020. Together, these developments reflect the balancing act middle powers have pursued: constraining China where necessary, engaging where beneficial, and shaping global rules to prevent domination by any single great power.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, middle power diplomacy played an especially prominent role. When President Trump announced in April 2020 that the United States would suspend funding for the WHO, the European Union responded decisively. In a demonstration of leadership that would have seemed unlikely only a decade earlier, the European Commission—working alongside the UK, Canada, Japan, and several other partners, but notably without U.S. involvement and with only limited participation from China—organized a global pledging

conference on May 4, 2020. The event successfully raised 7.4 billion euros to support the development of a coronavirus vaccine. Uniquely, the initiative brought together both public and private actors, including the WHO and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, reflecting a novel form of inclusive multilateral action.

These efforts illustrate how middle powers have been willing to assume leadership roles in orchestrating international responses when traditional great powers, particularly the United States and China, have stepped back. The European Commission, in particular, has sought to reposition itself with a more explicitly “geopolitical” identity, and its initiatives during the pandemic demonstrate how this ambition is beginning to take concrete form in practice.

Amid the global health crisis, middle powers demonstrated considerable adaptability, stepping forward in varied and often bold ways. New Zealand, for example, openly supported Taiwan’s inclusion in the World Health Organization in May 2020, even in the face of strong opposition from Beijing (Smith & Lee, 2023). Actions such as this illustrate how middle powers sought to utilize existing multilateral channels to organize a coordinated response during the early phases of the pandemic.

French President Emmanuel Macron also positioned himself at the forefront of these efforts, advocating for an enhanced role for both the G7 and G20 in coordinating pandemic responses (Hofmann, 2023). A symbolic act of solidarity came through the joint proposal by France and Tunisia at the UN Security Council, calling for a global ceasefire while the world grappled with COVID-19. After extensive negotiations, the resolution was adopted on July

Beyond formal institutions, coalitions of middle powers worked to foster collective action. In April 2020, thirteen countries—including Canada, France, Germany, South Korea, and the UK—issued a joint declaration urging stronger global coordination, which launched the Ministerial Coordination Group on COVID-19 (Ministerial Coordination Group on COVID-19, 2020). Similarly, the Alliance for Multilateralism, led by Germany and France together with 22 partner states, released a joint statement emphasizing cooperative action (Alliance for Multilateralism, 2020).

Elements from these declarations were later incorporated into the World Health Assembly resolution, such as the principle that coronavirus vaccines should be treated as a “global public good.” Looking ahead, the alliance has outlined plans to address WHO reform, supply chain resilience, and equitable vaccine distribution, while involving not only foreign ministers but also health, economic, and other key national policymakers. These developments underscore how middle powers, against the backdrop of heightened U.S.–China tensions, took on a proactive role in shaping the international crisis response and advancing new norms for global cooperation.

The range of examples outlined above underscores a clear trend among middle powers: a collective determination to defend and advance multilateral solutions during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly at a time when neither the United States nor China was perceived as providing effective leadership. Notably, while Washington struggled with the domestic management of the pandemic, several countries in Europe and Asia—including Germany, South Korea, and New Zealand—

navigated the crisis with greater success. Their comparatively effective responses enhanced their reputations and positioned them as credible leaders in shaping the global public health agenda (Smith & Lee, 2023; Hofmann, 2023).

Middle power diplomacy during the Trump era thus came to embody a shared effort by like-minded democracies to align their interests and to assume greater responsibility for sustaining multilateralism. This cohesion enabled them to launch initiatives and fill gaps in international governance, often without direct U.S. involvement, as seen most clearly during the pandemic and amid intensifying U.S.–China rivalry (Washington Quarterly, 2021). Yet while these efforts yielded tangible accomplishments, the overall record remains mixed. Consequently, it would be premature to speak of a definitive “middle power moment.” Rather, what emerges is an evolving pattern of activism that signals both the possibilities and the constraints of middle power diplomacy under conditions of great power volatility.

Future prospects for middle power diplomacy should be approached with tempered expectations, unless these burgeoning partnerships and networks manage to surmount principal challenges and obstacles. One of the primary challenges is that, although middle powers generally align in their international perspectives, their consensus has its bounds. Even within a group of democratic countries with a similar inclination towards multilateralism – Canada, Germany, France, Australia, Japan, and South Korea for example – critical differences are evident, particularly in regards to their stance on China (Brown & Foot, 2023).

Democracy today faces mounting pressures worldwide, with elected governments struggling against the rising influence of authoritarian regimes. These challenges have been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has further heightened the risks of democratic backsliding (Kendall-Taylor & Shullman, 2020). Addressing global threats has become more difficult still due to internal strains within democratic societies, where growing segments of the population voice frustration over persistent socio-economic inequalities and unresolved racial injustices (Putnam, 2020).

During Donald Trump's presidency, the United States—long regarded as a central champion of democracy—was widely perceived as stepping back from its leadership role in promoting democratic values abroad. This retrenchment created a vacuum, generating uncertainty but also opportunities for other democratic actors to step forward.

Many middle-power democracies anticipate that the Biden administration will signal a renewed American commitment to democracy promotion (Ikenberry, 2021). Indeed, there is evident intent within Washington to restore democratic institutions and reassert leadership both at home and internationally. Yet rebuilding capacity faces serious obstacles, not least the weakening of key segments of the diplomatic corps and bureaucratic infrastructure over the preceding four years (Lindsay, 2020).

For this reason, middle-power democracies—countries that have consistently integrated democracy support into their foreign policies regardless of their relative geopolitical weight—will be essential in revitalizing

global democracy promotion strategies. Although these states have pioneered new approaches and employed diverse diplomatic tools in recent years, their achievements have thus far fallen short of their collective potential. Harnessing this latent capacity will be critical for modernizing and strengthening democracy support in the years ahead.

Although some middle-power democracies have shown resilience and innovation in adapting to global shifts, they have not yet maximized their collective influence. The urgent need for a reimagined and more effective approach to democracy support highlights the growing importance of these states within today's geopolitical environment. It falls upon them to harness their combined diplomatic weight to strengthen democratic norms at a time of significant strain. If they succeed, middle powers may still reshape the future landscape of democracy support (Cooper, 2017).

Even with the change in U.S. presidential leadership, structural weaknesses within the American democratic model have become so visible that they are likely to constrain Washington's ability to lead global democracy promotion effectively. Policy course correction is rarely immediate, and institutions weakened over time will require years of investment to rebuild (Lindsay, 2020). Moreover, the United States no longer holds the uncontested economic, military, and political dominance that characterized its earlier era of global democratic leadership (Nye, 2015).

In this context, the role of other pro-democracy actors becomes paramount. Middle-power democracies—countries with proven commitment, experience, and

capacity to advance democratic practices abroad—are positioned to play a decisive role. While many of these states adopted a cautious posture on international democracy issues during the turbulence of the Trump presidency, conditions now call for a more assertive stance. The moment has arrived for middle powers to assume greater initiative and to demonstrate that they can contribute meaningfully to advancing a more democratic twenty-first century.

The Chinese Communist Party's International Department has expanded its outreach to foreign political parties and politicians, offering training programs that showcase how an authoritarian system can achieve rapid economic growth while also promoting party-building techniques (Shambaugh, 2013). This form of party-to-party assistance is explicitly designed as a counterweight to Western-style democracy promotion, presenting an attractive narrative to governments and ruling elites seeking to legitimize their domestic governance models.

At the same time, China has increasingly demonstrated both the willingness and the capability to impose severe penalties for even minor challenges to its sovereignty. This tendency has created widespread caution among states, many of which are reluctant to confront Beijing directly on issues related to democracy and human rights (Feldstein, 2020).

For democracy advocates, these developments echo Cold War-era dilemmas, when strategic considerations frequently clashed with normative commitments. Today, democracies such as Germany and Japan face a similar quandary: they are compelled to oppose policies from Beijing that erode democratic standards while

simultaneously attempting to sustain their own democracy-promotion efforts without allowing them to become entangled in great-power rivalry (Nossel, 2020).

Rising tensions and security competition among major powers have further reinforced a pragmatic tendency within democracies to prioritize strategic partnerships over the advancement of democratic values. Under such geopolitical pressures, even the United States has been more inclined to cooperate with non-democratic regimes or to downplay democratic backsliding among allies in order to secure broader strategic objectives—contrasting sharply with the relatively less constrained environment of the early post-Cold War years (Nye, 2004).

The COVID-19 pandemic has added another layer of difficulty to an already strained field of democracy promotion. A number of authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes have used the health emergency as justification for imposing new restrictions on political activity and civil liberties, thereby accelerating the broader global drift toward authoritarianism (Shahbaz & Funk, 2021).

Authoritarian powers—most prominently China—have also sought to exploit the crisis to advance narratives portraying authoritarian governance as more effective than democratic systems. Meanwhile, established democracies, preoccupied with containing the pandemic at home, have found their capacity to champion democratic values abroad significantly reduced. In the case of the United States, the inability to mount a coherent response not only weakened its credibility but also undermined the perceived attractiveness of democracy as a model of governance. Deepening political polarization has further eroded the

appeal of the U.S. democratic example, compounding the sense that democracy itself is on the defensive (Helleiner & Pickel, 2005).

The COVID-19 pandemic has also disrupted many traditional forms of democracy assistance and diplomacy. Travel restrictions and domestic lockdowns curtailed in-person initiatives, while the global economic downturn reduced the availability of both domestic and international resources for democracy support. In many cases, foreign aid was redirected to immediate priorities such as emergency healthcare and poverty alleviation (Sachs, 2020).

Another obstacle is the lack of consistent formats for dialogue and coordination, which leaves middle power diplomacy fragmented and largely situational. While issue-specific coalitions can provide flexibility, their reactive character limits their ability to shape proactive international agendas (Lang, 2019). Furthermore, some pivotal actors—such as Australia, South Korea, and India—remain outside existing multilateral coordination groups like the G7, constraining their capacity to influence outcomes (Pempel, 2021).

Instead of pursuing narrowly defined strategies, middle powers could broaden engagement by partnering with democratic members of the G7 as well as regional swing states such as Indonesia, Mexico, and Brazil. By forming agile, issue-focused coalitions that include both states and non-state actors, middle powers could increase their collective influence. The Alliance for Multilateralism illustrates this potential, but at present it remains heavily driven by Berlin and Paris, with limited enthusiasm from other capitals (Alliance for Multilateralism, 2020). Without

more formalized structures and regular convening mechanisms, middle power initiatives risk remaining ad hoc and reactive.

Domestic political turbulence also poses challenges. Countries like Italy and Australia, for instance, have faced unstable coalitions and internal political volatility in recent years (Campbell, 2021; Tavares de Almeida, 2020). The pandemic has only amplified such pressures, encouraging inward-focused politics that detract from external commitments.

Finally, the intensification of great power rivalry, while at times motivating middle power action, risks making international relations increasingly transactional and less norms-based. Unless carefully managed, this dynamic could shrink the room available for like-minded middle powers to pursue constructive diplomacy with global partners (Acharya, 2020).

As the pandemic revealed, the suggestion that middle powers could realistically close the leadership gap between the EU and China appears overly ambitious, particularly when the United States retains the option of actively obstructing such efforts (Bennett, 2020). Nonetheless, middle powers must continue to innovate and foster distinct diplomatic strategies. Incorporating non-governmental organizations and private sector actors into these initiatives is especially important. The EU's global vaccine pledging conference provides a clear example of this type of effective cooperation.

At the same time, middle-power democracies face significant constraints in advancing democracy abroad. Only a limited number—most prominently France and the United Kingdom—possess sufficient hard power and

diplomatic reach to influence developments independently in other countries. For the majority, the recognition is clear: their individual actions have little capacity to shape outcomes, particularly when it comes to imposing economic or diplomatic sanctions (Bennett, 2020).

Although middle-power democracies demonstrate agility and creativity in their diplomacy, they generally avoid overt confrontations. Many operate on the assumption—sometimes framed as a pragmatic rationale—that forceful attempts to induce political change in other countries are counterproductive. Instead, bilateral engagement is often complemented by strong investment in multilateral initiatives, which provide a means of amplifying their otherwise limited influence.

Because coordination requires reconciling diverse national interests, middle-power strategies are frequently more measured, deliberate, and dispersed than those of major powers like the United States. This creates a constant balancing act: ensuring that middle powers remain relevant actors in multilateral diplomacy while recognizing the boundaries of their capacity. This balancing underscores the distinctive contribution of middle powers to global governance, revealing their cautious yet purposeful approach to advancing political change.

When a state takes the risk of openly defending democratic principles, it needs confidence that others will rally behind it. At times, solidarity may consist of rhetorical backing and the reassurance of collective support. At other moments—such as when pro-democracy actions trigger punitive trade sanctions or energy cutoffs—real, material assistance becomes essential.

Although a collective security guarantee comparable to NATO is improbable in the democratic domain, a clearer sense of both ideological and practical solidarity is vital. Without it, middle powers will remain hesitant to champion democracy in the face of likely retaliation from authoritarian regimes. With it, they may feel secure enough to assume a stronger role in protecting and promoting democratic values globally.

The clearer and more explicit the principles of solidarity and practical support are made, the stronger their deterrent potential becomes. Authoritarian regimes may think twice about attempting to isolate democratic states if earlier efforts to do so have failed. By contrast, if such regimes see democracies retreating from allies or abandoning their principles out of fear of retaliation, the mere threat of reprisal will increasingly serve as a powerful instrument of authoritarian influence.

Many of the areas where this dynamic plays out are also those in which the United States has adopted a more restrained role, creating space for middle-power democracies to take the lead. The United Kingdom, for instance, has advanced anti-corruption initiatives; Canada and Sweden have been pioneers in embedding justice and inclusion into their feminist foreign and development policies. Australia initiated a call for an independent investigation into the origins and handling of the pandemic, while South Korea spearheaded the UN's first Group of Friends on COVID-19 and global health security (Choe, 2020).

In the digital sphere, the European Commission has introduced a wide range of proposals that address the regulation of online platforms, including political

advertising on social media, the handling of disinformation, and stricter rules on the export of surveillance technology. These initiatives underscore the proactive role of middle powers in filling governance gaps and shaping norms in critical areas where larger powers have been hesitant or inconsistent.

The European Union has taken notable steps in regulating the digital domain, introducing export controls on surveillance technologies alongside broader initiatives such as the Digital Services Act, the European Democracy Action Plan, and new regulations on artificial intelligence. Collectively, these measures will shape the intersection between technological development and the safeguarding of democratic rights.

Focusing on these adjacent policy areas also offers an additional advantage. A key determinant of democracy's renewal at the global level will be whether democratic governments can convincingly address the major social and economic challenges that their citizens confront. For populations in middle-power democracies, it is often easier to understand why resource-constrained governments in the post-pandemic context prioritize pressing issues such as climate change, digital surveillance, and data regulation, all of which directly affect daily life and well-being.

When democracy policy is framed in this way, it reinforces the necessity of linking external and internal agendas. Advocates of democracy must ensure that foreign policy commitments align with domestic practice. For example, the United Kingdom's campaign against kleptocracy abroad needs to be accompanied by robust regulation of its own financial and property markets,

which otherwise risk enabling global money laundering (Sharman, 2017). Similarly, its promotion of media freedom internationally requires a careful re-examination of domestic libel laws, which in their current form can be exploited to stifle democratic activism in other states (Mullis & Scott, 2012).

Middle-power democracies may increasingly need to establish new institutional linkages and build stronger ties between domestic and international democratic activists, thereby weaving together internal reform and external engagement into a coherent agenda. Importantly, resolving democratic shortcomings at home should not be treated as a prerequisite for contributing abroad. These domestic challenges are often deeply entrenched and unlikely to be settled quickly. Instead, advancing reforms simultaneously at home and overseas should be seen as a source of strength—an opportunity to pursue a shared democracy agenda that reinforces credibility. Democracies that openly acknowledge and work to remedy their own deficits can act with greater humility and thus project more authenticity in their global democracy-support efforts. This approach also enables middle powers (and a more self-reflective United States) to partner with others on democratic issues without appearing to speak from an unquestioned position of authority.

Informal and flexible coalitions of middle-power democracies could also heighten their impact by coordinating within established international institutions such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and key regional organizations. Although some carry historical, colonial, or geopolitical baggage, these states are often perceived as acting with more goodwill and

face less suspicion of pursuing strategic dominance compared to the United States (Jordaan, 2003). Much as the G7 once provided smaller states with the ability to amplify their influence through bloc voting, a collective of middle-power democracies—operating independently of U.S. leadership—could wield significant sway in shaping global agendas (Lopes, 2015). Crucially, such an initiative should not be confined to familiar groupings of Australia, Canada, and European partners. To be credible and effective, it must embrace a wider range of democratic actors from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, ensuring that the framework reflects a genuinely global coalition.

The coherence and coordination offered by such a bloc would provide a powerful counterweight to attempts by authoritarian powers, notably China and Russia, to instrumentalize multilateral institutions for purposes that run counter to democratic norms. Importantly, this could be achieved without triggering excessive resistance against any single democracy (Mansfield & Solingen, 2020). Such forums are also the sites where critical decisions on interlinked issues—including human rights protections and technology governance—are increasingly made.

Middle powers should also seek to capitalize on their relatively successful domestic responses to the COVID-19 crisis by intensifying leadership in global public health (Lee & Baumgartner, 2020). Their demonstrated competence during the pandemic can serve as a model for others and enhance their legitimacy on the international stage, particularly at a moment when the United States struggled with its domestic outbreak (Lieberman & Singham, 2020). Still, for middle power diplomacy to be truly impactful, it must move beyond rhetoric and deliver

concrete outcomes.

Tangible results, rather than abstract appeals to principle, remain the most persuasive demonstration of multilateralism's value (Mearsheimer, 2019). To achieve this, middle powers must also be willing to engage in a more transactional style of cooperation with prospective partners. Such an approach would help ensure their continued relevance in an increasingly competitive international order (Lang, 2019). Practical strategies could include joint efforts on pressing security challenges such as maritime security and freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific, as well as collective support mechanisms to withstand economic coercion from China.

Middle powers must also recognize the urgency of addressing weaknesses within the current multilateral system and commit to reforms that improve transparency, accountability, and institutional effectiveness (Chapnick & Kukucha, 2020). Recent European efforts to engage Washington on reforming the WHO reflect a more pragmatic and results-oriented understanding of multilateralism than was often evident in earlier decades (Hoffmann & Patel, 2020).

By consistently defending and revitalizing rules-based cooperation, middle powers could present a diplomatic alternative to the binary framework of U.S.–China competition—one that might also resonate with other international actors (Lang, 2019). Realizing this vision, however, requires the formation of effective coalitions and the cultivation of partnerships across a range of issue areas, including cybersecurity, human rights, emerging technology governance, supply chain resilience, climate change, and global health security (Carin & Smith, 2020).

President Biden’s proposed “free world” agenda and his call for a global summit for democracies illustrate one possible avenue for advancing such selective coalitions. Another is the proposed D10 format for multilateral cooperation, which would broaden the G7 by incorporating additional democracies (Beauchamp, 2020). These smaller, issue-focused groupings of like-minded states could help bypass the skepticism toward large, slow-moving multilateral forums that had already become prevalent in the United States, even during the Obama administration (Patrick, 2012).

At the same time, given the absence of a decisive Biden victory in the November 2020 election and the lingering instability that followed, sustaining strong middle-power partnerships may serve as an important safeguard against the possible return of Trump’s “America First” approach in a post-Biden era (Wright, 2020). Confidence in U.S. reliability has been shaken by the disruptions of the Trump presidency, and as a result, middle powers are likely to remain wary of being instrumentalized as tools in Washington’s strategic competition with Beijing—even if such efforts are pursued with greater diplomatic tact under the Biden administration (Selden, 2021).

This caution is particularly evident in Europe. The European Union has reinforced its commitment to “strategic autonomy”, even after the transition from Trump to Biden (Shapiro, 2021). Leading European figures, including Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron, have been reluctant to align fully with the United States in opposition to China (Patel, 2021). By contrast, Asian middle powers such as Australia and Japan may show

greater readiness to join U.S.-led coalitions, raising the prospect of internal divergences within the broader community of middle powers (Hemmings & Fey, 2020).

Although the Biden administration should actively seek to build effective coalitions with like-minded states on issues such as technology governance, supply chain resilience, and multilateral reform (Ikenberry, 2020), this does not mean that Washington must always take the lead. Indeed, in some contexts, stepping back could serve U.S. interests by encouraging more equitable burden sharing and empowering other partners to drive diplomatic initiatives. Such an approach may enhance both the legitimacy and sustainability of collective action (Kupchan, 2021).

Amid the persistence of a global democratic recession and the intensification of authoritarian tendencies accelerated by the pandemic, the international pro-democracy community is in urgent need of renewal, creative strategies, and fresh leadership. Although the Biden administration has sought to re-establish the United States as a leading advocate of democracy, this reconstruction will take time, not least because of the serious domestic democratic challenges confronting the U.S. and its relative decline in international influence over the past two decades (Diamond, 2020).

Revitalizing global democracy support requires contributions from all sectors—governmental and non-governmental, Western and non-Western alike. Within this landscape, middle-power democracies have a particularly important role to play, as their engagement is central to rebuilding momentum around democratic norms and practices.

Despite their clear commitment and the significant diplomatic and financial resources they have invested in democracy promotion, the combined effect of middle-power democracies has thus far fallen short of the sum of their individual initiatives (Cooper & Mo, 2013). Their collective influence could be substantially greater if they enhanced coordination and concentrated leadership on a limited number of priority areas where their comparative advantages are most visible.

CHALLENGING THE SYSTEM THROUGH MIDDLE POWER ACTIVISM: CASE OF TURKEY

With the unfolding geopolitical dynamics in the contemporary international system, Turkey's role and potential contributions as a middle power have become particularly significant. Its adept maneuvering, coupled with a strategic approach toward leveraging its unique geopolitical positioning, signify Turkey's growing prominence in international politics. The nuanced interplay of power dynamics, coupled with the unique attributes of Turkey's status, provide fertile ground for further scholarly exploration of proactive middle power diplomacy.

The contention set forth is that the roles traditionally ascribed to middle powers as 'stabilisers' and 'supporters of the system' – as often characterised in the cases of Australia and Canada – may not necessarily be applicable to certain emergent middle powers, especially those hailing from the Global South.

Turkey's foreign policy in recent years has shown a clear shift toward the use of coercive diplomacy, marking an unusual activation of its middle-power status. This evolution has unfolded alongside a distancing from its traditional Western partners and a gradual rapprochement with non-Western actors. From President Erdoğan's perspective, membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation appears as a credible alternative to Turkey's long-delayed bid for European Union (EU) accession.

At the same time, Ankara has preserved transactional relationships with Western powers, relationships grounded not in shared values but in mutual necessity. Despite persistent political frictions and low levels of trust, the EU remains Turkey's leading trade partner and principal source of foreign direct investment. Moreover, while Turkey has strengthened its ties with Russia, there is no evidence that it intends to leave the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Yet, Turkey's foreign policy suffers from a lack of consistent strategy, leaving it in an ambiguous and precarious position. In attempting to balance major powers against one another, Ankara risks being drawn into the epicenter of great-power competition without solid safeguards. A state once regarded as a Western-oriented middle power, cautious in its activism, has transformed into a more interventionist actor—evident in its assertive military operations and reliance on coercive diplomacy (Subaşat, 2014; Öniş & Kutlay, 2017).

Turkey's geography makes it highly susceptible to global power realignments and the instability generated by regional vacuums. As a result, Ankara faces a strategic dilemma: whether to retain its established ties with

Western institutions or to recalibrate toward non-Western forces, particularly Russia and China.

The rise of emerging middle powers is often tied to their ability to develop and disseminate indigenous military technologies, both at home and across their surrounding regions. A striking example of this dynamic is Turkey's ascent as a significant drone power. By embracing drone warfare, Ankara has elevated the international visibility of its expanding defense sector and invigorated its middle-power activism.

Through this technological edge, Turkey has gained notable military and strategic advantages in multiple regional theaters, surpassing its previous conventional warfare capacities. Its drones have been deployed in conflicts spanning the Middle East, North Africa, the Caucasus, and both the Black and Mediterranean seas. In parallel, drone production has enabled Turkey to emerge as an alternative supplier in the arms market, building new partnerships and alliances with neighboring and regional states. Turkish unmanned systems have been exported to countries such as Qatar, Azerbaijan, Poland, and Libya, further reinforcing its reputation as a defense innovator.

Domestically, the success of Turkey's drone program has fostered national pride and bolstered government backing. Large-scale production has secured Turkey a prominent position in the global drone industry, while extensive publicity of battlefield achievements has been amplified through state-controlled media. This has not only heightened nationalist sentiment but also fueled public enthusiasm for technology-centered festivals across

the country, where drones are prominently displayed as emblems of national achievement and self-reliance.

The integration of drones has significantly enhanced Turkey's military capabilities, enabling more effective operations in difficult terrains such as the country's southeast and northern Iraq, where cross-border missions have become more efficient. Public opinion—including that of opposition parties—has largely endorsed the use of drones in counterterrorism campaigns in Iraq and Syria, seeing them as vital for strengthening border security and restoring trust in the government's capacity to maintain national safety.

Internationally, Turkey's adept deployment of drones has increased demand from foreign governments for these combat-tested systems. This surge in interest has positioned Ankara as a credible alternative supplier of advanced military technology, bolstering its bargaining power and strengthening its hand in negotiations within the global balance of power.

At the same time, Turkey's domestic politics have experienced a marked authoritarian-populist shift compared to many other states, a development widely recognized in scholarly analyses (Öniş, 2015; Somer, 2016). According to the 2021 V-Dem Institute report, Turkey ranked among the top three "autocratising" nations of the previous decade. These parallel transformations in both the external and internal domains have fostered a path-dependent evolution in Turkey's foreign policy throughout the 2010s—one that has grown steadily more assertive, unilateralist, and increasingly anti-Western in orientation.

Uniquely situated as a middle power, Turkey combines a historically robust military tradition with rapidly advancing capabilities, a combination that has underpinned its gradual shift toward more coercive foreign policy behavior (Bağcı & Kurç, 2017; Kurç, 2017). This development is further reinforced by the revival of “neo-Ottoman” sentiment, which expands Ankara’s perceived role beyond that of a conventional middle power and projects a more expansive vision of national identity and influence (Hintz, 2018).

The activism of this atypical middle power has, in turn, strengthened the position of an authoritarian-populist government at home by fueling nationalist sentiment and generating short-term political gains. Turkey’s case illustrates how middle-power activism—particularly when driven by coercive diplomacy—can provide insights into broader strategies of multilateral diplomacy, with implications extending far beyond its immediate region.

Within international relations theory, status is a critical concept, defined as the collective perception of a state’s standing and its ranking on attributes considered valuable. As Renshon (2017, p. 33) explains, status encompasses three dimensions: positional (a state’s rank in a hierarchy), perceptual (how others view it), and social (its participation in networks and organizations). Paul, Larson, and Wohlforth further clarify that status manifests in two interconnected ways: through membership in exclusive groupings of states and through a state’s relative rank within such groups. To fully grasp its complexity, status must be understood across three conceptual layers—collective (shared recognition among states),

subjective (individual perceptions and sentiments), and relative (comparisons drawn between states).

Within this framework, Turkey occupies a particularly distinctive role. Emel (2019) contends that Ankara is actively striving to elevate its position, seeking recognition as a pivotal actor in the international system. Its geographic location—bridging Europe and Asia—provides Turkey with unique opportunities to leverage its middle-power status. This position allows it to maneuver within the complexities of global politics in ways that serve national interests while also acknowledging the broader dynamics of the international order.

Turkey's pursuit of greater status is deeply embedded in its foreign policy conduct, reflecting a deliberate effort to enhance its international image. Its approach blends elements of *Realpolitik*, emphasizing pragmatic and interest-driven decision-making, with the normative aspirations of liberal internationalism. The coexistence of these two strands lends Turkey's diplomacy both a practical edge and a normative appeal, enabling it to adapt flexibly to shifting international currents while projecting itself as a responsible stakeholder.

In terms of expectations from global governance structures, Turkey's goals within the G20 highlight two principal ambitions: securing status within elite circles and participating actively in the shaping of international governance. The aspiration for middle-power recognition within the G20 framework dovetails with broader strategies aimed at enhancing Turkey's social standing, upward mobility, competitiveness, and creative influence on the global stage (Cooper, 2015).

Compared with the more assertive social mobility strategies it pursued toward the European Union in the early 2000s, Turkey's status-seeking within the G20 has remained relatively restrained and moderate. Its social competition efforts also appear less pronounced, particularly when measured against the activism of other middle-power members of the group.

Although Ankara frequently signals an eagerness to introduce new policy priorities and raise its profile in G20 deliberations, it has yet to pursue a robust social creativity strategy at the practical level. In terms of global governance, however, Turkey has aligned with other rising middle powers in advocating reforms to international institutions that would grant greater influence to emerging states. At the same time, it has promoted liberal internationalist principles such as free trade and good governance as central pillars of the evolving global order.

Notably, Turkey's expectations of its role within the G20 framework are relatively high, as reflected in its chosen strategies for pursuing status. Among the triad of approaches—social mobility, social competition, and social creativity—Ankara appears best positioned to advance social creativity, particularly through its inclusion of policy initiatives tied to global security, migration, and peacebuilding within its G20 agenda (Wade, 2011).

The Turkish case illustrates how status politics are deeply influenced by national role conceptions articulated by leaders, their role expectations, and the perceptions of other actors regarding Turkey's unique position and performance. In this sense, the presence (or absence) of clear role conceptions and expectations can shape whether a state is considered a weak or strong status-seeker within

international organizations. Likewise, ineffective role performance offers insight into the conditions under which Turkey's pursuit of status risks fueling geopolitical rivalry and intensifying competition over material power (Volgy, Corbetta, Grant, & Baird, 2011).

The status politics of Turkey have been shaped not only by its leaders' national role conceptions and role expectations but also by the anticipations of other actors regarding how Turkey should behave on the international stage. Strong role conceptions and expectations can determine whether a state is perceived as a weak or strong status-seeker in multilateral settings. Conversely, weak role performance provides insight into conditions where Turkey's pursuit of recognition provokes geopolitical rivalries and intensifies material power competition (Volgy, Corbetta, Grant, & Baird, 2011).

When compared to its G20 counterparts, such as Russia and China, Turkey's approach to status competition is relatively modest. Moscow and Beijing actively engage in robust status politics, using niche diplomacy to carve out distinct domains of influence. In Central Asia, for instance, Russia asserts itself as the provider of hard security while China focuses on infrastructure and economic integration. This division of roles both fosters cooperation and allows each to bolster its prestige within its area of specialization.

In contrast, Turkey has not demonstrated the same intensity in status competition within the G20 context. Instead, it appears more ambitious in pursuing status through social mobility and social creativity. This tendency reflects the absence of a well-developed conceptualization of the middle-power role among Turkish elites, who often

frame Turkey's identity alongside regional great powers rather than positioning it firmly as a middle power. This perception extends not only to its engagement within the G20 but also across other formal and informal international organizations.

Turkey's efforts to elevate its standing as an emerging middle power reveal a clear preference for strategies of social mobility and social creativity over direct social competition. This orientation stems from the high-status aspirations held by the country's political elite, who envision a role for Turkey that extends well beyond the conventional expectations typically associated with a medium-sized state.

CENTRAL ASIA AFTER GREAT GAME – CAN KAZAKHSTAN FILL THE POWER VACUUM?

The geopolitical landscape and experience of Kazakhstan poses an intriguing theoretical conundrum. Characterized as a secondary power, Kazakhstan holds a position of moderate regional influence and has achieved an equivalent level of international recognition, navigating its relationships with neighboring Great Powers without succumbing to client state status. The nation shares a border with China, and while engaging in healthy trade and diplomatic relations, it remains free from China's domination. Similarly, it lies adjacent to Russia, and

despite the considerable ethnic Russian population within its borders, it is not under Russian control (Anceschi, 2010).

Notably, Kazakhstan has managed to affirm its sovereignty while concurrently maintaining positive relations with Russia, demonstrating a complex, nuanced balance in its foreign policy. This situation is particularly significant as it exemplifies Kazakhstan's strategic diplomacy and its astute approach to maintaining independence whilst nurturing relations with global powerhouses (Kassenova, 2008).

Kazakhstan has adopted a distinctive foreign policy approach known as “multivectorism,” which is defined as a pragmatic, non-ideological strategy for developing international relations (Nazarbayev, 2017). Outlining its objectives, President Nazarbayev emphasized that the purpose of multivectorism is to cultivate friendly and predictable ties with all states that play a significant role in global affairs and hold particular relevance for Kazakhstan. At its core, this strategy seeks to establish mutually beneficial cooperation with a wide range of partners (Bratersky & Toloraya, 2012).

In practice, multivectorism functions as a form of relational power, allowing a smaller state to reduce dependency risks while managing asymmetrical relationships (Sullivan, 2019). As Cooley (2012) observes, Kazakhstan—like other Central Asian states—has strategically used the competition between Russia, China, and the United States to advance its own interests. By exploiting great-power rivalries, it has secured greater benefits, external assistance, and more favorable contractual arrangements. In this way, Kazakhstan has

skillfully navigated a complex geopolitical environment through the calculated application of multivectorism.

Kazakhstan's seemingly rational and strategic pursuit of multivectorism, particularly in its dealings with great powers, makes realism an appropriate theoretical starting point. Balance of power theory suggests that states form alliances to counterbalance a potential hegemon's superior capabilities (Waltz, 1979). By contrast, bandwagoning involves aligning with the stronger power (Schweller, 1994). Walt (1987) maintains that balancing is the more common strategy, with bandwagoning reserved for situations in which states are weak, lack alternative allies, and believe appeasement of the rising hegemon is feasible.

Yet this binary lens of balancing versus bandwagoning does not adequately explain the intricacies of Kazakhstan's foreign policy. The country simultaneously engages three great powers—China, Russia, and the United States—while also cooperating with the European Union on economic issues. Such multifaceted engagement runs counter to classical realist predictions. As Bobo (2017) argues, the “simplistic dichotomy” of balancing or bandwagoning cannot capture the complexity of Kazakhstan's strategic preferences.

One of the central features of multivectorism is the firm assertion and protection of state sovereignty, designed to prevent Kazakhstan from being reduced to the role of a client state under any of the major powers. What is especially notable is that, while Kazakhstan maintains active relationships with these dominant actors, it does not seek to construct a regional bloc modeled on the European Union (EU) (Li, 2020). Instead, its strategy is geared toward pragmatic engagement across multiple vectors without

binding itself to a single hegemonic structure.

To sustain the delicate balance of safeguarding sovereignty while maintaining constructive relations with Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union, Kazakhstan has relied on a diverse set of mechanisms. Russia and China, by virtue of their geographical proximity, inevitably command the most immediate attention. Yet the economic and security weight of the EU and the United States also requires careful and continuous management (Anceschi, 2020).

A key instrument in this balancing effort has been Kazakhstan's active role in shaping regional institutions and pursuing multilateral solutions to regional challenges. This approach helps to embed the great powers within structured, ongoing, and mutually advantageous interactions with Central Asia, thereby reducing the risks associated with one-sided dependency (Tsygankov, 2013).

Equally important is Kazakhstan's cultivation of a distinct national identity as a Eurasian state, one that emphasizes both independence and sovereignty. Rooted in a historical narrative deliberately framed apart from Russia, this "Eurasian" identity was articulated early in the post-Soviet era. It allows Kazakhstan to recognize its geographical and cultural closeness to Russia while simultaneously underlining its political and strategic distinctiveness (Laruelle, 2008).

Although Kazakhstan's multilateral diplomacy can be interpreted as an expression of its desire to be viewed as a responsible global actor, its motivations clearly extend beyond a simple commitment to good citizenship. Kazakhstan regards diplomacy as a strategic instrument for constructing a durable network of relationships with

regional neighbors and great powers alike. Such a web of interconnections is designed not only to forestall regional instability that might endanger its sovereignty and security but also to reinforce Kazakhstan's international standing. These diplomatic "enmeshments" simultaneously assert national independence while embedding the state within multiple, overlapping partnerships.

It is particularly striking to observe this level of diplomatic activity emerging from a Central Asian state. As used here, the concept of "enmeshment" does not imply the pursuit of a supranational Central Asian project. Instead, it denotes a distinctly Kazakhstani foreign policy approach focused on preserving sovereignty and autonomy while engaging major actors on multiple fronts (Kembayev, 2018).

Regionally, Kazakhstan has played an active role in institutions spanning political, economic, and cultural domains. It has deepened its cooperation with Europe through membership in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and engaged in sustained lobbying of the United States and European states. These efforts culminated in Kazakhstan becoming the first Central Asian and post-Soviet state to hold the rotating chairmanship of the OSCE in 2010. For the Kazakhstani leadership, this achievement represented both international validation of its legitimacy and a concrete demonstration of the effectiveness of its multivector diplomacy (Anceschi, 2010).

Following the OSCE's announcement of Kazakhstan's appointment, the country's foreign minister emphasized that "since the first days of independence, Kazakhstan has

consciously chosen balanced approaches in foreign policy, and the strategy of multilateral partnership became its core... Kazakhstan has proven itself as a proponent of active participation in resolving issues of international security” (Ioffe, 2010).

During its chairmanship, Kazakhstan convened the first OSCE summit in over a decade and facilitated the adoption of the Astana Commemorative Declaration, a reaffirmation of the organization’s guiding principles. Nearly a decade later, Miroslav Lajčák, the 2019 OSCE chairperson-in-office, praised Kazakhstan’s continuing role, noting that “thanks to its balanced and pragmatic domestic and foreign policy, Kazakhstan is a reliable and trustworthy partner of the organization” (Lajčák, 2019).

Kazakhstan’s broader diplomatic activism has also been visible in its contributions to international peace and security beyond Europe. Alongside its commitment to nuclear non-proliferation, the country has played a notable role as a host of peace negotiations. In 2015, it initiated the Astana Process, an international platform for dialogue on the Syrian conflict that brought together Iran, Russia, Turkey, the Syrian government, and elements of the opposition (Mamedova, 2018). President Nazarbayev underscored the value of this initiative in his 2018 national address, describing the Astana Process as “nearly the only effective working format of talks on a peaceful settlement and recovery of this country from the crisis!” (Nazarbayev, 2018). Although Kazakhstan did not directly participate in the negotiations themselves, its role as host significantly boosted its international visibility and enhanced its reputation as a credible diplomatic actor.

Kazakhstan's regional and global diplomatic initiatives highlight its capacity to act effectively both within Central Asia and on the international stage, positioning itself as a state able to lead, convene, and participate in multilateral engagements alongside the great powers. These efforts have strategically woven Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union into a broad web of political and economic ties (Kembayev, 2020). Relative to states of comparable size and development, Kazakhstan's prominent role in regional and international organizations stands out as highly unusual.

What began as a strategy rooted in the imperative of state survival has, over time, yielded considerable benefits (Sharipova & Arystan, 2019). Following Russia's annexation of Crimea, the concern for survival once again moved to the forefront of Kazakhstan's foreign policy agenda, particularly in relation to Moscow. Multivectorism has functioned as the primary safeguard, simultaneously asserting Kazakhstan's sovereign identity while enabling the cultivation of diverse relationships with regional and global powers (Kaliyeva, 2022). As Kaliyeva observes, this strategy not only addressed survival challenges but also preserved national dignity and supported ambitious initiatives, such as Kazakhstan's bid to rank among the world's top 50 most competitive economies.

Yet, the recent deterioration in relations between Russia and the West has placed new strains on Astana's multivector approach. The intensifying confrontation between Moscow and Western capitals complicates Kazakhstan's ability to maintain a careful balance among competing great-power interests. As a result, Kazakhstan's multivectorism has grown increasingly reactive, with the

government adopting a cautious posture in international disputes that directly involve Russia (Schroeder, 2019).

Although Kazakhstan is a unitary state, the Nazarbayev administration has long recognized that the country's peace and prosperity depend on its ability to manage harmonious multiethnic relations. Ethnic Russians represent nearly one-quarter of the population, forming a Slavic majority in several northern administrative districts—including North Kazakhstan, Kostanay, and Akmola—as well as in areas along the eastern border, particularly in East Kazakhstan and Pavlodar (Morozov, 2015).

To strengthen ethnic Russians' sense of inclusion within the political system, the Kazakhstani government has granted both Kazakh and Russian the status of official languages, ensuring legal equality between them. Moreover, the establishment of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan has institutionalized representation of minority groups by contributing to policy formulation and electing several deputies to the Majlis. These measures underscore Kazakhstan's image as a stable and peaceful multiethnic state.

This domestic inclusivity complements the broader proactive orientation of Kazakhstan's multivector foreign policy. Under Nazarbayev, the country leveraged its status as a developing state to carve out a distinctive role in the international system. It dismantled its inherited nuclear arsenal and positioned itself as a leading advocate for nuclear non-proliferation, opened its oil and gas sector to foreign investment, and consistently emphasized the protection of minority rights. Collectively, these efforts have sought to maximize Kazakhstan's international

credibility while carefully balancing the competing interests of global powers (Mankoff, 2012).

In recent years, however, Kazakhstan's proactive foreign policy has been overshadowed by international developments, particularly Russia's reliance on military force and the subsequent deterioration in relations among the great powers. These shifts have compelled Kazakhstan to move from a largely proactive stance to one of adaptation and caution, placing new strains on its multivector strategy (Schroeder, 2019).

A turning point in Russia's diplomacy came in autumn 2013, when President Putin published an open letter in *The New York Times* warning against U.S. military intervention in Syria following an alleged chemical weapons attack by the Assad government (Putin, 2013). This intervention positioned Russia as a mediator, playing a decisive role in halting a proposed U.S.-led offensive by persuading Damascus to surrender its chemical weapons stockpiles.

Yet, only two years later, Russia's role in Syria shifted dramatically from mediator to direct participant. By 2015, Moscow had deployed thousands of troops and relied heavily on airpower to bolster the embattled Assad regime. This intervention substantially weakened opposition forces and underscored Russia's willingness to assert itself militarily in regional conflicts (Katz, 2015).

In early 2017, Astana became the stage for negotiations that brought together delegations from Moscow, Ankara, Tehran, Damascus, and representatives of the Syrian opposition. Excluded from the talks were groups such as the Kurdish YPG, the Islamic State of Iraq

and the Levant (ISIL), and Al-Qaeda affiliates. The central goal of these discussions was to achieve a durable ceasefire in Syria (Barnard & Saad, 2017).

The first round, held at the Rixos President Hotel on January 23–24, 2017, ended without major breakthroughs. Nevertheless, it produced an important joint statement by Russia, Turkey, and Iran, affirming their support for Syria’s “sovereignty, independence, unity, and territorial integrity,” and committing to uphold a “partial cease-fire,” though no mechanisms for enforcement were agreed upon (Barnard & Saad, 2017).

Subsequent rounds of negotiations, also under the sponsorship of Russia, Turkey, and Iran, introduced the proposal of “de-escalation zones.” However, the Syrian opposition rejected this plan, leaving key questions about the establishment, oversight, and security of such zones unresolved (Barnard & Gladstone, 2017).

Kazakhstan’s role as host in these talks illustrates the potential of multivector diplomacy to contribute meaningfully to regional conflict management. Even without being a direct participant, Astana’s facilitation of dialogue demonstrated the utility of its balanced foreign policy in advancing peace processes.

Multivectorism thus remains Kazakhstan’s most viable foreign policy strategy, essential for preserving stability, supporting development, and safeguarding sovereignty. Yet in today’s geopolitical environment—characterized by heightened tensions among major powers and a possible decline in Western engagement in Central Asia—Astana faces the urgent task of reassessing and recalibrating this strategy to ensure its continued effectiveness (Ismagambetov, 2017).

One promising path for Kazakhstan would be to build a more durable framework for cooperation with Western partners while simultaneously promoting political and economic reforms among the Central Asian republics. Mechanisms such as the C5+1 platform provide opportunities for Astana to shift from a predominantly reactive posture to a more proactive role in shaping regional and international affairs (Mankoff, 2017).

At the same time, maintaining balanced relations requires Kazakhstan to preserve formal economic, political, and security ties with Russia and China. This is especially critical given that “Russia’s demonstrated use of coercion as a tool for achieving its foreign policy objectives makes multi-vectoring even more appealing, while simultaneously increasing its associated risks” (Holmquist, 2015).

Kazakhstan’s ability to navigate this complex geopolitical environment depends on its skill in triangulating carefully among the major powers. This can be achieved by engaging in competing regional initiatives while adopting a more proactive role in fostering regional development. In effect, Astana should continue to advance a strategy of proactive multivectorism, seeking not only to sustain but also to reinvigorate the dynamic great-power competition that underpins and gives vitality to the doctrine itself (Holmquist, 2015).

In conclusion, as the historic “Great Game” in Central Asia receded, Kazakhstan’s pursuit of a multivector foreign policy has become increasingly complex. Although Astana aspired in the 2000s to emerge as both a regional leader and a potential middle power, the trajectory of this ambition has been profoundly shaped by external

conditions beyond its control.

Central Asia remains one of the few regions of the world without a clear middle power, a distinction shared by parts of Africa. This absence makes the region particularly vulnerable to the dominance of great powers, a vulnerability heightened by its proximity to both Russia and China. The presence of committed middle powers could help mitigate this susceptibility by fostering a balance of influence and contributing to regional stability. To achieve this, such actors would need to engage actively and cultivate cooperative alliances aimed at maintaining equilibrium and counterbalancing the overwhelming weight of the major powers.

For Kazakhstan and its Central Asian neighbors, the task is to move beyond the role of passive participants in the geopolitical contest and position themselves as genuine stakeholders with agency in shaping outcomes. This requires a proactive orientation, deepening engagement with global partners on issues such as regional security, economic integration, and sustainable development.

Given the region's considerable geopolitical and geostrategic significance, Central Asia warrants greater attention from the broader international community. At the same time, the Central Asian states must seize the initiative, leveraging their collective potential to shape their own future rather than remaining pawns on the wider geopolitical chessboard.

CONCLUSIONS TO CHAPTER III

As we draw the conclusions for this chapter, it becomes increasingly clear that the role and the influence of middle powers within the international system cannot be downplayed. Often positioned as managers, middle powers contribute to maintaining the equilibrium in international relations, preserving order and balance through their diplomatic activities (Cooper, 1997). While this role is not typically encapsulated in conventional academic discourse, the essential understanding is that middle powers' affiliation with multilateral organizations reflects a steadfast commitment to international engagement, as opposed to an opportunistic or sporadic interaction.

The academic conception of 'middle powers' serves to demarcate a unique group within the international community, distinguished by their specific foreign policy practices. While the term 'middle power' is fraught with elasticity, inconsistency, and subjectivity (Cooper, 2011), a key defining trait is their propensity towards multilateral diplomacy and active involvement in global initiatives. It's an undisputed fact that middle powers' commitment to multilateral solutions to global challenges is a distinguishing characteristic of their conduct, even as the term 'middle power' encompasses a broad and diverse range of states.

The ascension of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States brought about a shift in the traditional dynamics of international relations, particularly for those democratic middle powers closely aligned with the United States. The "America First" policy, marked by skepticism

towards multilateral institutions and a propensity for unilateral action, created an unprecedented divergence in the international policy objectives between the United States and its democratic middle power allies.

Under the Trump administration, democratic middle powers witnessed a United States that appeared to be withdrawing from its traditional role as the leading advocate for democracy and human rights. This disconcerting shift, combined with an increasing emphasis on national interests and the skepticism towards multilateral cooperation, signaled a seismic shift in U.S. foreign policy. These developments instigated democratic middle powers to rethink their dependence on the United States and prompted them to seek alternative pathways to advance their diplomatic agendas.

The Trump presidency, despite its potential negative impact on democratic norms, inadvertently underscored the necessity for greater cooperation among democratic middle powers. This era illuminated the vulnerabilities inherent in the over-reliance on a single great power for the preservation of shared democratic values. Consequently, it catalyzed a newfound realization amongst democratic middle powers regarding the critical need for cooperative action independent of the United States.

Democratic middle powers such as Canada, Australia, and the member states of the European Union began to assert a more independent stance on various global issues. They stepped up to fill the leadership vacuum left by the United States, particularly in areas where U.S. engagement was lacking or counterproductive. Multilateral engagements, such as the Paris Climate Accord and the

Iran nuclear deal, witnessed the increased proactive participation of these democratic middle powers despite the U.S. withdrawal.

The newfound resilience and independence of democratic middle powers were not merely reactionary but also strategic. These nations recognized the value of their collective agency and influence in shaping international norms and policies. They saw the potential to foster a more balanced and inclusive global order that could withstand shifts in great power politics.

Recent crises—including the COVID-19 pandemic, global economic volatility, and the escalating threat of climate change—have underscored both the responsibilities and opportunities that middle powers hold within the international system. These turning points have also brought renewed attention to the different dynamics characterizing various forms of middle-power cooperation, especially in their interactions with great powers.

Middle-power collaboration has expanded in response to these global challenges, but it is crucial to distinguish between “true” middle-power coalitions, such as MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, and Australia), and groupings that also include great powers, such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) or the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Partnerships that involve great powers do provide tangible benefits for participating middle powers, particularly in terms of financial resources and access to funds. For example, BRICS members established the New Development Bank, which has played a pivotal role in supporting infrastructure and sustainable development projects across member states. At the same time, great powers

benefit from the presence of middle powers in these arrangements, as it lends them added regional representation and strengthens their global influence. Yet, coalitions composed exclusively of middle powers often deliver more meaningful and balanced outcomes. These partnerships allow states to combine their resources, exchange expertise, and craft joint strategies for addressing pressing global challenges without the structural dominance of great powers. The absence of hegemonic actors fosters a more egalitarian environment, ensuring that both responsibilities and benefits are more equitably distributed among the member states.

The MIKTA coalition offers a prime example of the successful application of ‘true’ middle power cooperation. Here, we see an absence of great power influence, a convergence of democratic values, and a shared commitment to effective multilateralism. The group has worked collaboratively on issues such as climate change, economic development, and pandemic response, leveraging their collective diplomatic clout to influence international policy and promote shared interests.

Consequently, it can be argued that ‘true’ middle power coalitions, while often overlooked in favor of larger, more high-profile groups, offer a more effective and equitable platform for middle powers to exert influence on the global stage. They harness the collective strength of middle powers and serve as crucial actors in addressing global crises and shaping international norms.

The prominent example of such approach is Turkey. Turkey’s geopolitical position has long been an asset for its global engagement. Coupled with this are the nation’s persistent aspirations to be recognized as a significant

international actor, which has led to an increasing emphasis on its status as a middle power and projected through its active involvement in middle power cooperation.

One of the clearest manifestations of Turkey's middle power diplomacy can be seen in its active involvement in the MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, Australia) coalition. As part of this middle power grouping, Turkey has been able to promote its interests, values, and perspectives at an international level, enhancing its diplomatic reach and influence. Through these multilateral engagements, Turkey has been able to voice its stance on various global issues, from sustainable development to conflict resolution, thereby asserting its role as an active and constructive international player.

Simultaneously, Turkey's strategic location at the crossroads of a particularly tumultuous region, the Near and Middle East, has positioned it as a vital hub and mediator. This geopolitical significance has offered Turkey various asymmetric opportunities. A case in point is its rapid emergence as a global leader in drone technology, defying traditional power hierarchies in the field of military technology. With the indigenous development and successful deployment of armed drones, Turkey has established itself as a pioneer in this domain, leveraging its newfound prowess to exert influence and shift power dynamics at both regional and global levels.

Furthermore, Turkey's proactive engagement with all powers involved in its surrounding region – including the European Union, Russia, and the United States – is indicative of its unique middle power diplomacy. Balancing

its relationships with these various powers allows Turkey to maintain a flexible and pragmatic foreign policy approach, all the while retaining its autonomy and expanding its influence.

In conclusion, Turkey's positioning as a middle power—reinforced by strategic cooperation with other middle powers and its unique geographic crossroads—affords it multiple avenues for projecting influence on the international stage. By combining regional mediation, technological innovation, and participation in multilateral frameworks, Turkey demonstrates how middle powers can effectively leverage their distinctive assets to extend global influence.

Central Asia, by contrast, represents a region long defined by its vulnerability to great-power rivalries. Historically, the so-called “Great Game”—originally denoting the strategic competition between the British and Russian Empires in the 19th and early 20th centuries—was transformed in the late 20th and early 21st centuries into a new geopolitical contest involving the United States, Russia, and China. The region's abundant natural resources, including oil, gas, and minerals, have only heightened its strategic significance, ensuring its place as a focal point of global competition.

Within this environment, Kazakhstan—the largest and most economically capable state in Central Asia—has sought to assert itself as both a regional leader and a potential middle power. Its candidacy for this role rests not only on its considerable natural resource endowment and geographic scale but also on its strategic location at the heart of Eurasia. By positioning itself as a critical hub in China's Belt and Road Initiative, specifically the Silk Road

Economic Belt, Kazakhstan aims to transform its geography into an instrument of influence and connectivity.

However, the heightened attention from the great powers has paradoxically limited the scope for regional cooperation and has posed significant challenges to Kazakhstan's aspirations. This has been particularly evident in recent years as the United States and the European Union have somewhat distanced themselves from the region, leading to an increased influence of Russia and China.

Consequently, Kazakhstan finds itself in a delicate balancing act. On the one hand, it must manage its relations with its powerful neighbors to ensure its sovereignty and territorial integrity. On the other hand, it must endeavor to cultivate broader international relationships to bolster its aspirations for greater autonomy and influence. In this context, middle power cooperation presents a valuable opportunity for Kazakhstan to engage more broadly and diversify its external relations.

Furthermore, Kazakhstan's role as a regional power is of considerable importance to the other Central Asian countries. It acts as a 'living wall', buffering them from the direct influence of great powers. This crucial role underlines the need for further engagement from other middle powers and greater international attention to the region. A collaborative middle power approach could potentially facilitate greater regional unity, foster cooperative security, and contribute to the development of a more balanced and diversified international order in Central Asia.

CONCLUSIONS

With the dawn of this fresh epoch of global political instability, the urgency for capable international governance – adept at adjusting to the fluid dynamics of global power – becomes paramount. The demand extends beyond mere reform; these institutions must fundamentally metamorphose to curtail escalating power struggles, thereby buttressing their legitimacy and potency within the international arena.

At their core, international organizations serve as conduits for cooperation and dialogue among nations. Nonetheless, they can also precipitate contention, providing a platform for articulating alternative perspectives and brokering shifts in power dynamics. Herein, middle powers and burgeoning economies frequently assume a pivotal role, endeavoring to bridge the chasm between the entrenched great powers and the developing world.

Ultimately, the ongoing transformation of the international order is deeply intertwined with the evolving narratives of middle powers and emerging economies. Their strategic maneuvers—across both regional and global arenas—demonstrate adaptive approaches to the shifting demands of global governance. Increasing assertiveness, the forging of strategic partnerships, and active engagement in multilateral institutions all signal a broader recalibration of power. Together, these developments highlight a significant reconfiguration of global dynamics, in which middle powers play an increasingly central role.

In the intricate dynamics of international politics, a peculiar paradox often surfaces, predominantly affecting the central players – the great powers. Possessing a disproportionate degree of influence and resources, these entities are intrinsically primed to be the pivotal instigators of change. They have the capability to mould international norms, spur transformative initiatives, and delineate the course of global policies. However, the irony resides in their deep-rooted investment in the system that endows them with the means to exercise such dominance.

The existing international order – characterized by norms, treaties, alliances, and institutions – essentially functions as a medium for the projection of the influence of these great powers. It operates as the stage where their political, economic, and military prowess is acknowledged and implemented. The more extensive a power's investment in this system, the more effective it becomes in asserting its interests and preserving its hegemonic status. Thus, the system evolves into a double-edged sword. It provides the instruments for control and manipulation, but simultaneously, it ties the hands of the wielder to its preservation.

This engenders a profound paradox for the great powers. Their potential to propel systemic change is hampered by their very dependency on the existing system. Their continued dominance hinges on the status quo, which is frequently discordant with the radical change they could potentially champion and enforce.

In the face of calls for systemic reform in international governance or global financial architecture, these powers find themselves ensnared in a conundrum. They possess

the capacity to advocate for reform, but doing so might risk upsetting the dynamics that favour them. Likewise, responding to calls for enhanced multilateralism or democratization of international institutions leaves these powers treading a tightrope between placating demands for reform and safeguarding their vested interests.

The essence of this irony, therefore, resides in the delicate equilibrium between power and change. While great powers are optimally positioned to instigate systemic changes, they are simultaneously the most invested in preserving the structures that uphold their privileged position. It is this very investment that frequently culminates in a deadlock, with the potential for reform being undermined by the forces that hold the capacity to initiate it.

The paradox of the great powers, therefore, stems from their fundamental dilemma: whether to commence transformative changes that could potentially destabilize their hegemony, or to maintain the status quo that secures their dominance but could potentially lead to systemic redundancy. This ironic predicament naturally raises the question: Should they instigate these changes, or is there an alternative that doesn't result in systemic inertia?

Arguably, the most feasible solution to this conundrum is a gradual but decisive transformation. While immediate and drastic overhauls could undoubtedly shake the power structures, a series of calculated, progressive modifications could strike a balance between the necessity for change and the stability of power dynamics. This approach necessitates a reframing of conventional perspectives on power and influence, shifting from domination towards stewardship.

As stewards, great powers could transition to becoming architects of change rather than its impediments, guiding the system's evolution to reflect the changing realities of global politics. They would strive to create an environment conducive to shared decision-making and more equitable power distribution, while concurrently ensuring the stability and integrity of the system that enables their influence.

This transformative shift from domination to stewardship could manifest in various ways. It might encompass more transparent and inclusive decision-making processes, increased recognition and accommodation of emerging powers, and proactive efforts to address systemic disparities. The objective wouldn't be to dismantle power structures, but rather to mould them into more adaptive, responsive, and representative frameworks.

In this ironic twist, by choosing to champion this shift, the great powers could indeed be securing their own relevance in the evolving international order. The alternative – clinging to outmoded structures of power – risks leading to redundancy and obsolescence. As the global political landscape continues to shift, so too must the actors that shape it. Therefore, the ironic solution to the paradox of the great powers may indeed be to embrace the very change they appear most poised to resist.

Nevertheless, the dispositions of great powers are often marked by an overt focus on maintaining the status quo rather than instigating significant changes within the operational frameworks of international institutions. This tendency towards the status quo primarily stems from their strategic interests in retaining their dominance

and influence within the global arena. Rather than prioritizing the reform of institutional structures, great powers increasingly focus on reinforcing their regional presence as a way to offset potential declines in their influence within those institutions.

In the light of these dynamics, the strategies adopted by great powers often involve bolstering their regional footprints, especially when their global influence appears to waver or is under threat. Cognizant of the difficulties entailed in bringing about substantial changes in international organizations, these powers opt for strategies that amplify their regional presence and thus reinforce their overall influence in international affairs.

Within this context, it is notable that the contemporary landscape of multilateral regional cooperation is increasingly characterized by a dispersion of power. Great powers, through their concerted efforts to enhance their regional clout, are instrumental in this evolving paradigm. However, it is vital to acknowledge the concurrent rise of middle powers and their increasingly conspicuous role in addressing regional issues. Despite the attempts of great powers to retain their preponderant status, middle powers are progressively exerting influence, effectively contributing to a more complex and multipolar regional and global order.

This multiplicity of actors and the diffusion of power within the regional context indicate a shift from a traditionally unipolar or bipolar international system to a more complex and nuanced multilateral landscape. A comprehensive understanding of these dynamics is essential to analyse and predict the future trajectories of

international politics and the evolving role of international institutions therein.

In this era of escalating global challenges, spanning climate change, pandemics, economic disparity, nuclear proliferation, and the rising tide of cyber threats, it becomes increasingly apparent that these transboundary issues demand transnational solutions. These challenges defy the confines of national borders and mandate an unprecedented level of international cooperation. This narrative has spurred a burgeoning discourse focusing on the evolving roles of middle powers and regional cooperation in the navigation of these global complexities.

Middle powers, defined as nations that wield moderate influence on the international stage yet do not qualify as superpowers, are progressively assuming more pronounced roles within the global governance framework. With their unique positions, they can serve as mediators, creators of norms, and connectors between the global North and South, thereby actively contributing to the resolution of intricate global issues.

The imperative to thoroughly understand middle powers from a multifaceted perspective arises from their intricate roles in international politics. Middle powers are more than simply state actors sandwiched between great powers and minor powers; they are active contributors with distinctive roles and tactics in the global theater. Their identities are shaped by a mix of their historical imprints, regional contexts, economic interdependencies, and ideological underpinnings.

Middle powers hold a significant, yet often underappreciated, niche in the international system.

These nations are generally marked by their intermediate economic and military prowess, balanced geopolitical sway, and allegiance to multilateral diplomacy and international law.

Middle powers, acting as rational entities within the international system, interact with international institutions to further their national interests, mitigate uncertainty, and reap the benefits of cooperation. However, they are not just passive recipients; these middle powers are also subject to the normative influences of the institutions in which they participate. Institutions can thus shape middle powers' identities, interests, and behavioral norms. This dual dynamic fosters a more refined understanding of the reciprocal influences between middle powers and international organizations, factoring in both instrumental gains and normative effects.

Incorporating middle powers into international organizations is beneficial for several reasons. Firstly, middle powers, often occupying a unique position between the developed and developing world, can offer invaluable insights. Their balanced outlook on global challenges can help bridge the gap between the global North and South.

Secondly, middle powers wield considerable diplomatic and normative power. They can use this influence to champion specific principles and norms within international organizations, which could encompass advocacy for human rights, democracy, or environmental sustainability. Their influence can also extend to agenda-setting and steering conversations towards these important areas.

Finally, middle powers can facilitate changes within international organizations without formally altering their structures. Their diplomatic initiatives can subtly transform the cultures and practices of these institutions, enabling procedural alterations from within. Such changes can include promoting transparency in decision-making, fostering inclusivity, and advocating for better representation of various regions and interests. An exemplification of this is the MIKTA group of middle powers, comprising Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, and Australia, which has been pushing for reform in the United Nations' practices and procedures.

As was already mentioned, reforming international organizations represents a significant challenge in the realm of global governance. This is due, in large part, to the vested interests of great powers in maintaining the status quo, given that these existing structures often underpin their dominance. As such, any significant proposed reforms may face resistance from these powers who perceive a threat to their established privileges and power positions. In contrast, middle powers typically face fewer constraints when it comes to reforming international organizations. They attract less attention and therefore are less likely to provoke strong opposition or engender geopolitical rivalries. Furthermore, because they lack the ability to dominate global governance structures, middle powers have less invested in preserving the status quo and are more open to changes that could make these institutions more representative, efficient, and effective.

This relative freedom allows middle powers to exploit opportunities to instigate or support reforms. This may

involve lobbying for procedural changes, promoting inclusivity, and pushing for greater transparency within these organizations. A case in point is the role of countries like Canada, Norway, and Australia in advocating for reforms within the United Nations system, including the Security Council.

However, it's important to note that while middle powers can capitalize on these opportunities, their capacity to drive substantial reforms should not be overestimated. Changes in international organizations usually require a wider consensus that encompasses both middle and great powers. Consequently, the effectiveness of middle powers in initiating and advancing reforms often relies on their diplomatic skills, strategic alliances, and the prevailing geopolitical context.

Middle powers have been influential in shaping and implementing humanitarian action. They often have the resources, credibility, and diplomatic capacity to advocate for and facilitate humanitarian efforts. Countries like Canada, Norway, and Sweden, for instance, have played significant roles in shaping global norms around humanitarian intervention and in mobilizing responses to humanitarian crises. By leveraging their institutional agency within international organizations, these middle powers can help to prioritize humanitarian action on the global agenda and coordinate effective responses.

Middle powers also have a long-standing tradition of acting as mediators in international disputes, using their 'in-between' status to bridge divides between conflicting parties. By providing impartial spaces for negotiation and

leveraging their diplomatic networks, middle powers can contribute to the maintenance of

Policy options that resonate with the inherent behavioral patterns of middle powers are generally the most viable. These patterns are marked by modest ambitions, a commitment to preserving stability and equilibrium in the international system, and an emphasis on coalition-building through mediation. Middle powers often address global issues via multilateral frameworks, resist sweeping changes to the existing order, and seek to ease great-power security dilemmas through regional cooperation and bridging alignments. Their diplomacy frequently prioritizes issues of “low politics,” such as trade, development, and humanitarian concerns. Because most of these strategies demand either substantive content or multilateral coordination, they highlight the importance of multi-stakeholder diplomacy as an essential complement to middle-power foreign policy.

The characteristic non-confrontational stance of middle powers reflects their limited interest in exercising hegemonic dominance. Instead, they prioritize stability and balance, which has led scholars to describe them as “trustworthy” or “good international citizens,” occupying a perceived higher moral ground. Yet this image is better understood as pragmatic rather than idealistic, rooted in practical calculations rather than moral exceptionalism.

At both regional and global levels, middle powers typically work to maintain equilibrium through diplomatic cooperation, recognizing that such conditions provide the greatest returns for their security and prosperity. Their aversion to escalating tensions or crises often drives them to engage in conflict management and containment. This

pragmatic orientation is equally visible in their engagement with international organizations and legal regimes, where middle powers reinforce norms and institutional structures.

A distinction in modern diplomacy lies in the shift from traditional middle power diplomacy, where interactions occur primarily among state agencies, to a more inclusive approach that necessitates the participation of non-state actors. Contemporary diplomatic practices not only call for the incorporation of multilateral platforms but also require non-state actors' involvement. Consequently, non-state actors with converging interests and expectations can amplify the influence of middle powers within regional and international forums.

Although revising the international order could, in theory, curb great-power dominance and widen room for maneuver, most middle powers resist revisionism. They read sweeping redesigns as destabilizing and instead try to anchor stability through patient consensus-building and procedural cooperation and regular confidence-building measures across priority issues.

These states envision a more inclusive global arena—less polarized, less crisis-prone, less coercive—with broader, plural participation by countries across the power spectrum. In such an ecology of interaction, middle powers are best placed to function as intermediaries and conflict brokers, translating between actors that rarely trust one another.

Operating as a “go-between” enables them to engage major powers and manage intricate alignment problems. As Spero (2009) notes, this posture can enable middle powers to shape—and sometimes ease—great-power

security dilemmas via regional, cooperative bridging alignments. Such bridging reflects the ethic of the “good international citizen,” as middle powers seek to dampen local security spirals by maintaining working ties with all neighboring states.

Dense state-to-state linkages cultivate relationships designed to contain threatening alignments rather than pit camps against each other, retreat into neutrality, or default to proud non-alignment. Middle powers can also mediate between shifts in others’ material incentives and the deeper causal mechanisms and ideas that structure foreign-policy choice. Following Glaser, the promise of middle-power bridging rests on the claim that cooperative policies can substantially shape international outcomes.

Accordingly, the repertoire of middle-power policy is guided by principles of consent, inclusion, mediation, and stabilization. Typically they adopt a non-aggressive style of alliance management, elevating moral claims and epistemic rationales above competitive posturing. Their characteristic modesty likewise channels external behavior. The agenda tends to emphasize “low politics”—domains not existential for state survival yet critical for societal welfare, such as trade, development, and humanitarian cooperation. While middle powers cannot wholly escape “high politics,” they rarely choose to lead on those issues, preferring to avoid becoming collateral in contests among the great powers.

A clear illustration of how middle powers shape international security lies in the United Nations Security Council’s design, which pairs permanent seats with rotating, non-permanent ones. By contrast, domains often labeled “low politics”—peacebuilding, environmental

stewardship, and human rights—tend to generate fewer clashes. Because great powers more readily converge in these arenas, middle powers are less prone to marginalization, procedural exclusion, or punitive targeting.

Even so, the policy repertoire associated with middle powers is not a fixed doctrine. The very category of “middle power” is elastic, demanding continual revisiting as systemic conditions mutate. These states operate in ceaseless dialogue with regional images of their role, shifting development trajectories at home and abroad, and the evolving strategies of larger actors, including transnational stakeholders that crowd the field.

Accordingly, their options require persistent review and recalibration to capture incremental shifts. That malleability also breeds indeterminacy: middle-power strategies swing with changing perceptions, feedback effects, and interest alignments, making pathways difficult to forecast *ex ante* and complicating efforts to sequence long-term reforms.

Meanwhile, informalism in world politics has widened the stage. Representation has broadened beyond the traditional Western core symbolized by the G7, offering middle powers more direct entry points into agenda-setting. The advent of the G20 marked a qualitative break, institutionalizing spaces where previously peripheral diplomatic practices could be tested, coordinated, and scaled across finance, health, technology, and regional security and law.

Conceptually, groupings such as BRICS and MIKTA operate as yardsticks for how inclusive informalism can become, evolving from understated diplomatic caucuses

into headline summit processes. The BRICS trajectory, in particular, has reflected more than a reaction to structural inequities; it has been propelled by members' self-understanding as ascendant states entitled to greater recognition and voice in global management. Over time, the visibility and ritual of summitry also create reputational stakes and shared expectations, reinforcing commitments that began as tentative coordination.

Despite periodic setbacks to their expected middle-power roles, their distinctive multilateralism can still be appraised through a set of core features. A first is a visible readiness to underwrite global governance: middle powers invest time, capital, and legitimacy in international institutions because they view rules and regimes as scalable tools for managing transboundary problems. A second is a sustained effort to reform the architecture itself—pushing for fairer representation, procedural upgrades, and status gains that translate into real agenda-setting capacity. Third is a thick layer of normative and ideational commitment to problem-solving; these states habitually frame cooperation in terms of shared responsibility, and they work to narrow North–South divides by convening, standard-setting, and consensus building. Fourth is positional hybridity: an ability to align with, or bridge between, developed and developing constituencies, generating dialogue, brokered alliances, and mediation across divergent interests.

Taken together, these traits enable middle powers to build coalitions, encourage collaboration, and supply collective goods in an order where no single actor monopolizes authority. The same qualities help insulate them from zero-sum pressures that might otherwise

marginalize them on so-called low-politics agendas—peacebuilding, environmental stewardship, and human rights—arenas in which great-power preferences more readily converge and in which constructive middle-power agency is less likely to be bypassed, excluded, or punished. In that environment, the capacity to convene, translate, and reconcile becomes a tangible source of influence.

Informal “club” formats such as the G20 now face intense scrutiny from diverse societal constituencies that expect them to grapple credibly with systemic risks that cut across policy silos—from environmental collapse and pandemic preparedness to financial fragility and uneven trade gains. The agenda is no longer optional: accelerating climate disruption and a reassessment of the benefits and distributional effects of cross-border commerce have turned once technocratic debates into core questions of global security and domestic legitimacy.

Critics contend that the G20’s core weakness is not simply capacity but resolve—a persistent reluctance to treat these challenges as existential rather than peripheral. That frustration is amplified by a sovereigntist backlash against cooperative internationalism, which reframes rules-based multilateralism as an intrusion on democratic control, eroding public tolerance for delegation to global institutions.

Within several pivotal G20 members, both governments and electorates exhibit rising unease with globalization and transnational solidarity. Inequality trends and spatially concentrated losses fuel populist pressures, narrowing room for compromise. These political headwinds complicate the already delicate craft of middle-power diplomacy, which relies on consensus, incremental

bargains, and reputational trust to stitch coalitions together.

Nationalist rhetoric—condensed into “my country first” tropes—further undercuts the G20’s claim to steward the global commons. Challenges to legitimacy now arrive from two directions: outsiders affected by the bloc’s spillovers, and insiders who question whether summitry delivers tangible benefits. Contestation within the membership blurs the line between forum and faction, weakening the group’s ability to convene, coordinate, and commit.

The costs of this legitimacy deficit are not abstract. Societal pushback jeopardizes the political capital leaders need to underwrite cooperative ventures, disincentivizing ambitious agreements exactly when they are most needed. For middle powers, the resulting environment raises the transaction costs of coalition-building and narrows the policy space available in multilateral arenas, making influence harder to sustain even when their proposals are practical and in the collective interest.

In concluding, the evolving global order depends in no small part on the steady work of middle powers. Occupying a space between the reach of great powers and the constraints of small states, they exercise influence through persistence rather than shock, pressing institutions such as the United Nations to broaden representation, improve equity, and respond to a wider range of problems. Their objective is not disruption, but incremental recalibration—shifting agendas and procedures so that multilateral bodies better reflect contemporary realities without breaking the architecture that sustains cooperation.

Regionally, their imprint is even clearer. Acting as conductors, they translate across rival centers of power

and the rest of the neighborhood, building confidence, brokering dialogue, and turning latent interests into workable bargains. Through regional organizations they can set priorities closer to the ground, shaping policies that resonate with local conditions while defusing spillovers from great-power competition.

Equally significant is the way middle powers collaborate with each other. In platforms such as the G20 and in regional groupings like ASEAN and MIKTA, they practice strategic coordination, exchange political capital, and convert shared preferences into joint initiatives. These venues allow them to articulate interests on equal terms, inject practical proposals into crowded agendas, and socialize peers into habits of collective problem-solving.

The architecture of the next world order will be determined not only by the rivalry of great powers but also by how deftly middle powers navigate and temper that rivalry, and by how effectively they align with one another to reform rules and deliver public goods. The balance between competition at the top and coalition-building in the middle will shape the scope and texture of global governance in the decades ahead.

This perspective underscores why middle powers matter. Their strategic location in the system, aptitude for coalition work, and capacity to move institutions through gradual, cumulative change make them indispensable to an order under strain. As governments confront intersecting crises, the leverage and learning generated by middle-power cooperation will only grow in importance, warranting sustained attention in future research and policy debate.

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