

# From Bandwagoning to Balancing: Middle Powers and the Reconfiguration of the Global Order''

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## Abstract:

The middle powers comprise countries that possess sufficient resources and influence to be significant players but lack the global reach of superpowers. This study investigates the potential for rising nations in the Global South to establish a cohesive bloc capable of challenging Western hegemony by exploring future scenarios. Using scenario planning, it examines converging and diverging factors, economic shifts, geopolitical alignments, multilateralism, transnational challenges, and internal dynamics that will shape their unity and agency. The analysis outlines possible routes from fragmentation to a coordinated counterweight, assessing the conditions under which a bloc could arise and its ability to challenge the global order. MIKTA, comprising Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, and Australia, exemplifies such middle-sized collaboration in sustainable development and governance. Ultimately, this study underscores the unpredictability of global power dynamics and the pivotal junctures that will define the Global South's collective capacity.

**Keywords:** Global South, multilateralism, geopolitical alignments, economic governance.

## INTRODUCTION

Western powers dominated the post-Cold War order, motivating many Global South states to pursue bandwagoning to secure economic and security advantages. As the global system becomes more contested, middle powers are shifting toward balancing. Defined by their capacity to influence regional and limited global affairs through diplomacy, coalition-building, and multilateralism, middle powers support alternative narratives in global governance. Prominent Global South examples include Brazil, India, South Africa, Indonesia, and Nigeria, actors increasingly active in global forums and reformist in outlook.

This study analytically and prospectively explores these selected middle powers, excluding traditional great powers. It focuses on states exercising niche diplomacy, seeking strategic autonomy, and aspiring to rebalance global power.

## CONCEPTUALIZING MIDDLE POWERS AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH

“Middle power” refers to nations neither weak nor hegemonic but with the institutional, material, and normative capacity to shape agendas. Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal (1993) define them as actors that strengthen the liberal order through diplomacy, multilateralism, and norm promotion. Their strength lies in mediation and coalition-building rather than dominance.

In the Global South, historical legacies crucially inform middle-power behavior. Colonial subjugation and exclusion from early global institutions influence these states' foreign policies, driven by narrative restoration and normative reform as much as power pursuit. For India, Brazil, and South Africa, foreign policy becomes a vehicle for reclaiming civilizational identity and moral authority.

Emerging middle powers, described by Jordaan (2003), display reformist or revisionist tendencies and hold ambivalence toward Western-dominated institutions. The Global South functions less as a

geographical entity and more as a political-intellectual community united by historical marginalization and the shared pursuit of global equity (Acharya, 2017). Yet internal diversity varying regimes, economies, and strategies complicates its cohesion. Ayooob's (2002) Subaltern Realism explains these nations' distinct security and governance concerns compared to the Global North.

Heine (2016) argues that middle powers are best understood through their strategies in multilateral diplomacy and coalition-building, balancing ambition with constraint.

### **STRATEGIC BEHAVIORAL SHIFTS: FROM BANDWAGONING TO BALANCING**

Bandwagoning involves aligning with powers for protection or gain, often at the cost of autonomy. The shift reflects deeper changes in a state's perception of its security and long term strategic goals. Initially states adopt bandwagoning but later divert towards balancing as their capabilities mature, perceptions evolve or maybe their intentions come into question

Balancing represents a more assertive and autonomous posture. This form of behaviour tends to emerge in multipolar or fluid systems where no single hegemony can guarantee stability and compel middle powers to diversify their dependencies.

For middle powers, this transition rarely occurs, which they sometimes refer to as "Hedging".

The movement from bandwagoning to balancing marks the evolution of strategic self awareness which signals a preference for autonomy and long term resilience over short term security guarantees which not only reflects shift in power dynamics but also growing confidence among smaller and middle tier states.

### **CASE STUDY: INDONESIA AND MEXICO**

#### **INDONESIA: FROM BANDWAGONING TO AUTONOMY-SEEKING DIPLOMACY**

During the Cold War and Suharto's regime, Indonesia aligned with the West, particularly the United States, pursuing security and aid despite a nominally non-aligned stance. Since the post-Suharto era, Jakarta has shifted toward balancing, leading ASEAN in promoting a regional order resistant to domination by either China or the U.S. It blends economic engagement with China's Belt and Road Initiative and maritime security cooperation with the U.S., India, and Australia under its "free and active" foreign policy. Indonesia's leadership in ASEAN underscores its role as a balancing middle power seeking strategic autonomy and normative influence.

#### **MEXICO: NAVIGATING BETWEEN DEPENDENCE AND DIVERSIFICATION**

Historically, Mexico's proximity to and integration with the United States under NAFTA signified economic and security bandwagoning. Over the last decade, however, Mexico diversified its diplomacy, expanding the Pacific Alliance, deepening EU trade ties, and engaging actively with Asia. It has taken regional leadership through Latin American cooperation, defended sovereignty, and adopted progressive positions in multilateralism on issues such as climate and health.

Both cases illustrate a subtle transition from dependency to balancing. Indonesia balances China via regional diplomacy, while Mexico pursues "soft balancing" against U.S. dominance through multilateral and legal instruments.

### **MIKTA AND BEYOND – REGIONAL PLATFORMS AS NORMATIVE INCUBATORS**

The twenty-first-century order is shaped by institutional pluralism and dispersed power, with middle-sized states experimenting with cooperative models. Platforms such as ASEAN, the African Union (AU), CELAC, IBSA, and MIKTA are "normative incubators," promoting development, equity, and inclusion through diplomacy and coalition-building (Gray, 2018).

MIKTA-Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, and Australia, stands out for integrating diverse regions and systems around shared goals such as global public goods, gender equality, and digital governance. Its flexible informality enables cooperation without rigid hierarchies (MIKTA Communiqués 2014–2023).

IBSA (India-Brazil-South Africa), meanwhile, represents democracies with common reformist and developmental goals. Its trilateral cooperation and South-South solidarity reflect stronger normative cohesion (Puri, 2013). Similarly, the AU and CELAC promote regional voices despite internal challenges rooted in postcolonial fragmentation (Tieku, 2004; Gardini, 2011).

These coalitions share a “soft balancing” ethos reframing norms without direct confrontation (Paul, 2005). By providing ideational leadership and mediating global issues, they advance a polycentric governance model where middle powers act as agents of inclusion rather than subordinates in a unipolar or bipolar system.

### **CRITIQUE OF TRADITIONAL MIDDLE POWER THEORY**

Traditional theorization, grounded in liberal internationalism, portrays middle powers as stabilizers and norm entrepreneurs committed to sustaining order (Cooper, Higgott & Nossal, 1993). However, this view based on Western cases like Canada and Australia fails to capture the diversity of developing middle powers. Its assumptions about democratic values, institutionalism, and benevolent multilateralism often obscure postcolonial agency.

It also conflates capacity measures (GDP or military power) with behavior (diplomacy or activism) and therefore limits analytical precision (Heine, 2016). Emerging middle powers like Brazil, India, or Turkey embody both cooperation and contestation, challenging the claim that middle powers are merely systems-stabilizing.

These nations’ strategies reflect hybrid motives seeking autonomy, reform, and recognition while navigating . Their activism is not driven by Western liberal norms but by reformist, justice-based ethics rooted in historical inequities (O’Neill, 2019). Traditional theory’s oversight of historical grievance and subaltern subjectivity undermines its ability to interpret the Global South’s evolving diplomacy.

### **REIMAGINING GLOBAL GOVERNANCE – TOWARDS A MIDDLE POWER-LED ORDER?**

As the liberal order fragments under rising great-power rivalry, institutional stasis, and shifting economic centers, middle powers occupy a critical mediating role (Acharya, 2017; Narlikar, 2010). Yet moving from symbolic to structural influence requires proactive institution-building, strategic leadership, and sustained coordination (Gray, 2018).

### **CONSTRAINTS**

Middle powers face significant internal and external constraints. Domestically, political instability, economic fragility, and populism erode institutional continuity (Heine, 2016). Bureaucratic underdevelopment leads to a gap between rhetoric and performance (Patrick, 2014). Technological dependence and limited infrastructure hinder digital autonomy, and authoritarian tendencies challenge their moral claims globally.

Institutional weakness also limits structural influence. Informal coalitions like MIKTA lack secretariats, enforcement mechanisms, and resource bases for sustained diplomacy (Gray, 2018). Without institutionalization, they risk irrelevance in a fluid geopolitical landscape.

Externally, intensifying U.S., China polarization constrains middle-power autonomy, forcing states to hedge or oscillate between alignments. This dynamic exposes them to economic coercion and strategic entanglement (Paul, 2018). Normatively, diverging political systems, liberal and illiberal, democratic and authoritarian complicate collective identity and consistent reformist agendas (Jordaan, 2003; O'Neill, 2019).

Moreover, most lack future-oriented planning capacity. Addressing transnational issues like digital authoritarianism, climate migration, and economic volatility requires anticipatory governance rarely found in these countries (Patrick, 2014). Hence, many initiatives remain reactive rather than transformative.

## OPPORTUNITIES

Despite constraints, middle powers remain crucial agents of stabilization and innovation. Their dispersed yet coordinated influence can generate pluralism in norm production and governance models. Investing in institutional resilience, shared political will, and strategic foresight could convert their symbolic activism into substantive reform. Working collectively across platforms can reduce dependency and increase representativeness in multilateral negotiations.

## CONCLUSION

Scenario planning allows middle powers to navigate uncertainty and identify cooperation pathways amid rapid technological, ecological, and geopolitical shifts. Four broad futures capture their potential trajectories:

1. Reinvention of Liberal Multilateralism – Middle powers reinvigorate institutions and promote inclusive rules-based norms.
2. Fragmented Order and Issue-Based Coalitions – Consensus weakens, prompting ad-hoc alliances focused on narrow interests.
3. Competitive Multipolarity – Normative contestation deepens as great-power rivalry sharpens, forcing strategic hedging.
4. Authoritarian Pushback – Democratic erosion and value conflict create new divides, diminishing principled cooperation.

In each case, middle powers' choices whether toward revitalizing norms, fostering innovation, or mediating rivalry will shape global order. Though diverse and constrained, they remain key architects of pragmatic multilateralism. Their adaptability and collective agency will determine whether the future world becomes inclusive, polycentric, and equitable or reverts to fragmentation and hierarchy.

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