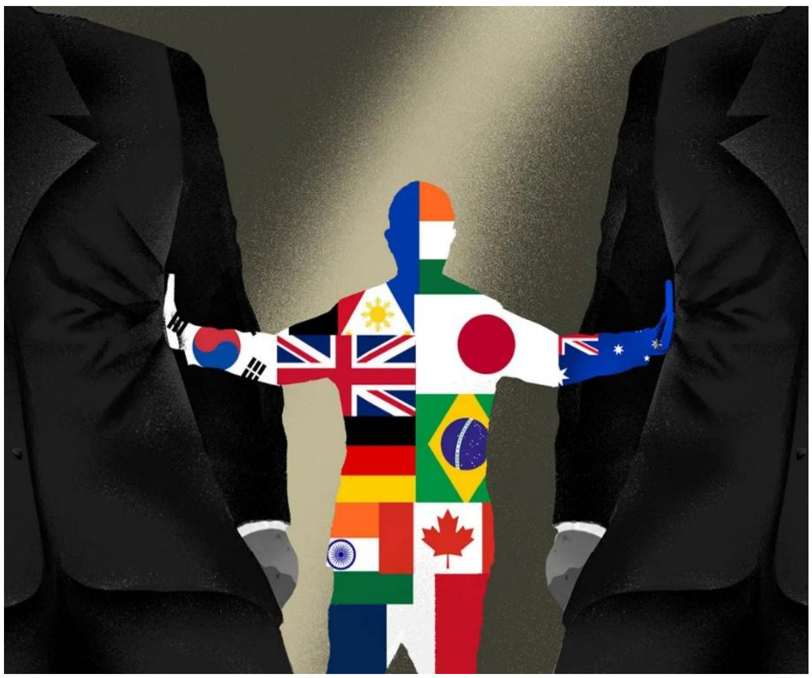
BIPSS Commentary
www.bipss.org.bd
April-2026
BIPSS
Towards a Secure World

Middle Powers in an Era of Overlapping Conflicts: Strategic Adaptation Beyond Alignment

Mohosina Mostofa Mity[1]

Introduction



Source: Foreign Policy

As the Iran war entered its most volatile phase in 2026, Pakistan unexpectedly moved to the center of global diplomacy, acting as a fragile bridge between Washington and Tehran while carefully managing its own security and regional commitments. This role shows us a deeper transformation in how middle powers operate in today's fragmented international system. Pakistan did not align fully with any side. Instead, it combined mediation, limited security engagement, and regional

[1]Mohosina Mostofa Mity is a Research Associate at the Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS). She completed her BSS & MSS in International Relations from the Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP).

outreach. It hosted negotiations, maintained ties with Gulf states, and engaged Iran diplomatically, all while managing domestic economic and security pressures caused by the conflict. This approach shows that middle powers are increasingly required to act across multiple domains at once.

The broader context reinforces this shift. The Iran war has disrupted global energy flows, increased economic uncertainty, and intensified geopolitical competition beyond the Middle East. In such conditions, countries like Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, and Indonesia are also adapting by diversifying partnerships and avoiding rigid alignments. Their policies are shaped not only by security concerns but also by trade, energy dependence, and technological competition.

In this context, strategic flexibility has become more important than formal alliances. Middle powers are no longer defined by their position between great powers, but by their ability to engage different actors simultaneously. Their relevance lies in managing risks, maintaining communication channels, and adjusting quickly to overlapping and evolving crises.

Rethinking Middle Power Strategy in an Era of Overlapping Wars

In 2026, conflicts are no longer separate events. The war involving Iran, the Russia-Ukraine War, and tensions in the Indo-Pacific are linked through energy markets, trade routes, and security partnerships. This has direct consequences for middle powers, as their policies now operate across multiple, connected crisis environments rather than within a single region.

Middle powers are often described as balancing between major powers. This view is incomplete. In an interconnected conflict system, their main task is to manage competing pressures at the same time. For example, Türkiye is involved in Black Sea security linked to the Ukraine war, while also maintaining energy and political ties with actors affected by the Iran conflict.[2] Its policy is not about choosing one side, but about preventing tensions in one area from affecting its position in another. This reflects a shift from balance to what can be called "risk management across regions"

---

[2] Daily. 2025. "Türkiye Suggests New Deal for Black Sea Security after Attacks." Daily Sabah. December 14, 2025. https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkiye-suggests-new-deal-for-black-sea-security-after-attacks.

A similar pattern can be seen in India. It expands cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, continues energy and defense ties with Russia, and keeps diplomatic space with Iran.[3] These decisions are often seen as strategic hedging. However, when conflicts overlap, hedging becomes more difficult. Stronger ties in one area can create pressure in another, especially when partners are involved in different conflicts.

This creates a basic tension in middle power strategy. On one hand, diversification of partnerships is necessary to reduce dependence. On the other hand, interconnected conflicts make diversification less stable, as risks can spread across sectors. For instance, shifting energy imports due to disruptions linked to Iran may increase exposure to new suppliers who are themselves part of other geopolitical tensions. Another issue is that middle powers are expected to act as stabilizers, but their capacity is limited. They can support mediation or maintain dialogue, but they cannot control how conflicts interact at the global level. This limits their ability to shape outcomes, even when they are active diplomatically.

Taken together, these cases show that middle powers are not simply navigating between major powers. They are operating within a system where conflicts are connected, and where decisions in one area can create risks in another. Their strategy is therefore less about alignment and more about managing exposure across multiple, overlapping pressures.

The Dual Role of Middle Powers in Contemporary Conflicts

Middle powers are often presented as neutral mediators, but in practice their role is more complex. Many of them are involved in conflicts even while they try to manage or reduce tensions. This creates a dual position where mediation and involvement operate at the same time, rather than as separate choices.

A clear example is Qatar. It maintains communication with major actors and supports ceasefire efforts, including discussions between the United States and Iran, while staying politically and economically engaged in the region. Recent reporting shows that Qatar continues to coordinate

[3] Puri, Shreya. 2026. "How India Is Playing Every Side of the Iran Conflict - Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee Research Foundation." Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee Research Foundation. March 17, 2026. https://spmrf.org/how-india-is-playing-every-side-of-the-iran-conflict/.

with multiple sides and support diplomatic efforts, even when it is not acting as a formal mediator.[4] This highlights that mediation depends on active involvement rather than distance.

Another case is Saudi Arabia. It has taken part in diplomatic initiatives related to the Ukraine war and regional tensions, while also strengthening its own security posture and warning of possible retaliation against threats as it has done with Iran recently.[5] Saudi Arabia has notified Iran that attack on the kingdom would have a boomerang effect. At the same time, it hosts high-level diplomatic engagements and cooperation talks, showing that mediation and strategic interests are closely linked. In April 2026, Saudi hosted Ukrainian President twice and discussed how security cooperation can be enhanced between the two countries.[6]

Source: The New York Times

[4] Reuters Staff. 2026. "Qatar Emir, Trump Discuss Washington-Tehran Ceasefire." Reuters, April 24, 2026. https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/qatar-emir-trump-discuss-washington-tehran-ceasefire-2026-04-24/.

[5] 32nd anniversary issue-I. 2026. "The Financial Express." The Financial Express. 2026. https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/world/saudi-arabia-reserves-right-to-military-action-against-iran-foreign-minister-says.

[6] Reuters Staff. 2026. "Zelenskiy Seeks to Develop Security Co-Operation after Saudi Visit." Reuters, April 24, 2026. https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/zelenskiy-arrives-saudi-arabia-seeking-security-cooperation-2026-04-24/.

This pattern is becoming more common. In the ongoing Iran war, several middle powers including Pakistan, Türkiye, and Egypt have stepped forward as mediators while remaining directly affected by the conflict and its economic and security consequences. This shows that mediation is no longer limited to neutral actors; it is carried out by states that are part of the conflict environment.

This creates a clear tension. Mediation requires trust from different sides, but involvement often reflects clear interests. If a country is too closely linked to one side, its credibility may weaken. However, without such links, it may not have enough access or influence to mediate effectively. As a result, middle powers do not operate as neutral actors outside conflicts. Their role is based on selective engagement such as maintaining ties with different sides while protecting their own interests. Their effectiveness depends on how well they manage this balance, rather than on remaining fully neutral.

Middle Powers and the Politics of Supply Chains, Sanctions, and Energy Security

In 2026, economic security has become a central dimension of middle power behavior as conflicts reshape global energy flows, trade networks, and industrial supply chains. The disruption linked to the Middle East conflict has had system-wide effects, especially through the Strait of Hormuz, which carries about 25–30% of global oil trade and around 20% of LNG flows.[7] This creates immediate pressure on energy-importing middle powers where higher import costs translate directly into inflation and fiscal strain.

Energy markets illustrate how middle powers are forced into reactive adjustment. The World Bank estimates that energy prices rose sharply in 2026, with overall commodity prices increasing by around 16% and energy prices by more than 24%, driven largely by geopolitical.[8] For economies

[7] "How the War in the Middle East Is Affecting Energy, Trade, and Finance." 2026. IMF. March 30, 2026. https://www.imf.org/en/blogs/articles/2026/03/30/how-the-war-in-the-middle-east-is-affecting-energy-trade-and-finance.

[8] Group, World Bank. 2026. "Middle East War to Spark Biggest Energy Price Surge in Four Years." World Bank. World Bank Group. April 28, 2026. https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2026/04/28/commodity-markets-outlook-april-2026-press-release.

like South Korea, which depend almost entirely on imported crude oil and energy, this creates a policy dilemma between stabilizing domestic prices and maintaining fiscal discipline. Similar pressures are visible in India, where fuel price management remains closely tied to inflation control.

Supply chains have become equally vulnerable. Asia's manufacturing hubs—particularly Vietnam and Malaysia—depend heavily on imported intermediate goods, especially semiconductors and petrochemical inputs. IMF analysis shows that disruptions in energy and shipping routes are increasing production costs and weakening export competitiveness across Asia's industrial economies.[9] This shows that supply chain risk is no longer sector-specific but system-wide.

Sanctions further complicate economic adjustment. Middle powers such as the United Arab Emirates and Turkey increasingly function as trade intermediaries, navigating between competing regulatory regimes while maintaining access to global markets. According to OECD assessments, rising trade restrictions and export controls are fragmenting global commerce and reducing predictability in cross-border transactions.[10]

Energy diversification strategies also reveal structural limits. Japan and South Korea have expanded LNG sourcing beyond traditional suppliers, but transportation costs and infrastructure constraints reduce efficiency gains. Meanwhile, India's crude oil diversification strategy shows that not all suppliers are technically substitutable, which increases refining costs despite improved supply.[11] Overall, middle powers are not simply responding to shocks. They are managing a system where energy, trade, and sanctions interact continuously. Their challenge is not only access to resources, but maintaining economic flexibility in an increasingly fragmented global economy.

[9] "Asia's Economic Resilience Is Being Tested by the Energy Shock." 2026. IMF. April 16, 2026. https://www.imf.org/en/blogs/articles/2026/04/16/asias-economic-resilience-is-being-tested-by-the-energy-shock.

[10] OECD. 2024. "Economic Outlook." OECD. 2024. https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/economic-outlook.html.

[11] S Dinakar. 2026. "Global Crises Reveal the Limits of India's Oil Diversification Strategy." @Bsindia. Business Standard. April 19, 2026. https://www.business-standard.com/economy/news/global-crises-reveal-the-limits-of-india-s-oil-diversification-strategy-126041900738_1.html.

Why Middle Power Coalitions Remain Fragile

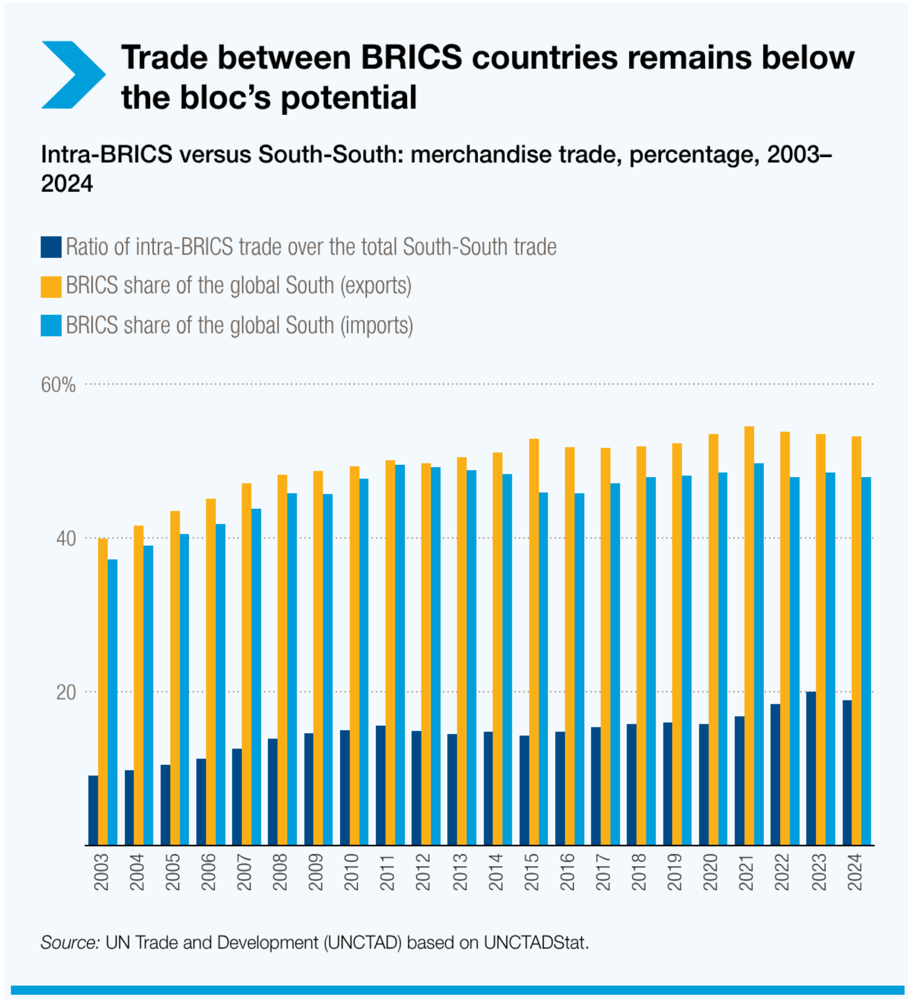
Middle power coalitions often look stable in theory, but in practice they remain fragile because the interests of member states are rarely aligned beyond a short-term issue. Most cooperation is issue-based rather than value-based, which limits long-term cohesion. Even when states agree on broad goals such as “strategic autonomy” or “de-risking,” their economic and security priorities differ significantly.

A clear example is the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) involving countries such as Australia, Japan, and Vietnam. While all members support economic cooperation, negotiations on trade standards and supply chain rules have progressed slowly because countries disagree on labor rules, market access, and digital trade regulations.[12]

On the other hand, intra-BRICS trade has expanded strongly over the past two decades, increasing more than 13 times since 2003 and reaching around USD 1.17 trillion in 2024.[13] However, this expansion has not translated into deep economic integration. Trade within BRICS remains structurally uneven, with China acting as the dominant hub while other members vary significantly in their dependence on intra-bloc markets. BRICS economies are linked more through resource–manufacturing complementarities than through balanced industrial interdependence. A large share of member states’ trade still takes place outside the bloc, showing continued reliance on global trade networks rather than intra-group exchange. This indicates that BRICS functions more as a coordination platform than a fully integrated economic union.

[12] Wang, Zhuo, Xun Wang, and Jiancheng Zheng. 2025. “Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF): The Economic Foundation of Military Small Multilateral Transformation into a Convention Organization.” Chinese Journal of International Review 07 (03). https://doi.org/10.1142/s2630531325500167.

[13] “Two Decades of Intra-BRICS Trade: Trends, Patterns and Policies |.” 2026. UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD). February 17, 2026. https://unctad.org/publication/two-decades-intra-brics-trade-trends-patterns-and-policies.



These cases show that middle power coalitions are constrained by structural differences in economic dependence, external alliances, and domestic priorities. As a result, cooperation tends to be temporary, selective, and vulnerable to external shocks, making long-term strategic unity difficult to sustain.

The Missing Middle Powers in Global Conflict Narratives

key nations, including the US, China, and Russia, continue to have a key role in global conflict narratives in 2026. Due to this concentration, there is an analytical gap where a number of Global South states and middle powers are actively influencing outcomes but are not given enough credit. Countries like Indonesia, Bangladesh, and important African nations serve as examples of how influence in modern conflicts can be achieved by diplomacy, economic stability, and crisis mediation in addition to military might. For instance, by emphasizing strategic autonomy within

ASEAN frameworks, Indonesia has consistently and quietly supported ASEAN-led discussion mechanisms and regional balance in the Indo-Pacific. This is indicative of a larger trend in which middle powers favor multilateral and institutional strategies over direct alignment. This is indicative of a larger trend in which middle powers favor multilateral and institutional strategies over direct alignment. In a similar vein, African nations like South Africa have progressively shaped their diplomatic stances on international issues, including demands for negotiated resolution in foreign conflicts, through organizations like the African Union and BRICS. Even though their influence is not prominent in popular geopolitical narratives, these roles show that Global South actors are actively participating in creating diplomatic responses rather than being passive beneficiaries of global instability.

Bangladesh provides a particularly important case of a missing middle power in global conflict narratives. Despite limited visibility in global strategic discourse, it is deeply embedded in the economic and security consequences of global instability. Bangladesh's economy is highly dependent on external trade, especially the ready-made garment sector, which links it directly to fluctuations in global demand, shipping disruptions, and energy price shocks. Bangladesh's growth trajectory is closely tied to external stability, particularly in trade logistics and energy import costs, making it highly sensitive to global conflicts even without direct involvement in them. At the same time, Bangladesh has consistently pursued a foreign policy of balanced engagement, maintaining relations with multiple major powers while avoiding rigid alignment. This allows it to preserve economic stability while navigating a fragmented international environment. However, this balancing strategy also contributes to its underrepresentation in global conflict analysis, which tends to prioritize formal alliances and military coalitions over adaptive diplomatic behavior.

Conclusion

Middle powers today operate in a world where change is constant and certainty is limited. Their role is no longer defined by fixed positions or simple alignment with larger powers. Instead, they work through adjustment, flexibility, and careful decision-making across political and economic spaces. This makes their behavior less visible, but it is increasingly important for keeping global systems functional. Many of these countries manage pressure from trade shifts, energy instability, and diplomatic competition while still trying to maintain internal stability and external relationships. Their choices often focus on reducing risk rather than gaining dominance. At the same time, they contribute to keeping dialogue open between different sides in a divided international environment. Even when they are not at the center of global attention, their actions influence how stability is maintained in uncertain conditions. Understanding their role helps to better explain how the present global order actually works in practice.