

The Rise of Middle Powers: Multipolar Dynamics and the Rebalancing of Global Leadership.

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Introduction

The global order is undergoing a profound transformation. For much of the post-Cold War era, the international system was marked by U.S. unipolarity, where Washington exercised overwhelming political, economic, and military influence. However, this dominance has been increasingly challenged in recent years. The rise of China, the assertiveness of Russia, and the fragmentation of the Western alliance have all contributed to what scholars describe as a shift toward multipolarity².



SEAN summits where middle power leaders are visible Source: Council on Foreign Relations

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² Acharya, A. (2017). *After Liberal Hegemony: The Advent of a Multiplex World Order*. Ethics & International Affairs, 31(3), pp. 271–285.

In this evolving landscape, *middle powers* states that are neither global superpowers nor small states are emerging as critical actors shaping international outcomes. Middle powers can be defined as countries that may lack the military dominance of great powers but still wield significant political, economic, or diplomatic influence. They often do so through coalition-building, mediation, and active participation in multilateral forums.

Examples such as India, Brazil, Turkey, South Korea, and Indonesia illustrate this trend. These countries are exerting influence far beyond their immediate regions, driven by economic growth, strategic geography, and proactive diplomacy. Unlike superpowers, they tend to focus on issue-based leadership whether in climate change, conflict resolution, trade negotiations, or energy security³

In an increasingly multipolar world, the rise of middle powers is not merely a symptom of great-power competition but a crucial force rebalancing global leadership, offering new avenues for diplomacy, governance, and stability. Their emergence signals a more complex and fluid international order where leadership is more shared, diverse, and dynamic than ever before.

What are Middle Powers?

Middle powers are countries that occupy a unique position in the international system. They are not global superpowers like the United States or China, yet they are far from being minor players. Instead, they hold significant weight in global affairs through their economic capacity, political influence, and diplomatic activism. Scholars often describe middle powers as states that “punch above their weight” by shaping international outcomes through coalition-building, norm-setting, and multilateral engagement⁴.

³ Narlikar, A. (2021). *Powers in the Middle: Emerging Economies in International Politics*. Foreign Affairs, 100(4), pp. 122–131.

⁴ Cooper, A. F. (1997). *Niche Diplomacy: Middle Powers after the Cold War*. London: Macmillan.

Unlike superpowers, middle powers usually do not rely on military dominance. Instead, their strength lies in soft power, strategic geography, and the ability to forge partnerships. They are often proactive in international organizations such as the United Nations, G20, ASEAN, or BRICS, where their voices contribute to consensus-building and reform debates⁵. These countries frequently act as *bridges* between developed and developing states, mediating conflicts and promoting global governance on issues like climate change, trade, and regional stability.

Contemporary examples of middle powers include India, Brazil, Turkey, South Korea, Indonesia, and Saudi Arabia.

- **India:** Balances great-power competition, leads the Global South, and has expanded influence through its G20 presidency.
- **Brazil:** Plays a leadership role in climate diplomacy, particularly concerning the Amazon rainforest, and advocates for Global South cooperation.
- **Turkey:** Uses its geographic position to influence both Europe and the Middle East, while pursuing an independent foreign policy that mixes mediation and strategic assertiveness.
- **South Korea:** Known for its technological leadership, soft power, and active diplomacy in Northeast Asia.
- **Indonesia:** As ASEAN's largest member, it promotes regional stability and Indo-Pacific cooperation.
- **Saudi Arabia:** Wields influence through energy diplomacy and its Vision 2030 economic diversification strategy.

⁵ Jordaan, E. (2003). *The Concept of a Middle Power in International Relations: Distinguishing between Emerging and Traditional Middle Powers*. *Politikon*, 30(2), pp. 165–181.

These cases highlight how middle powers differ from traditional great powers. They may lack the global reach of the U.S. or China, but their influence is often decisive in regional and thematic issues. In today's multipolar world, middle powers are not just secondary actors they are essential players that help to rebalance global leadership by providing alternative voices and pathways for cooperation.

WHAT ARE MIDDLE POWERS?



Why are They Rising?

Middle powers are rising because the big powers are facing more problems and limits. The United States is dealing with political divisions at home and less influence in some regions, while China is facing slower economic growth and resistance from other countries⁶. These challenges mean that big powers cannot always lead on every global issue. This has opened space for middle powers to step forward.

⁶ Ikenberry, G. J. (2018). *The End of Liberal International Order?*. International Affairs, 94(1), pp. 7–23.

Countries like India, Brazil, and South Korea are growing in trade, investment, and technology. Turkey and Indonesia are becoming important voices in peace talks and regional cooperation. On global issues such as climate change and energy security, Brazil and Saudi Arabia are playing key roles in shaping discussions⁷.

Unlike superpowers, middle powers usually do not rely only on military strength. Instead, they use smart diplomacy, flexible partnerships, and coalition-building to increase their influence. This makes them valuable “bridge-builders” between powerful and smaller states. As a result, middle powers are becoming more important leaders in today’s multipolar world.

How Middle Powers Shape the World

Middle powers are countries that may not have the overwhelming influence of superpowers like the United States or China, but they play a crucial role in shaping global stability, cooperation, and development. Their actions often fill gaps in international diplomacy, helping to prevent conflicts, strengthen alliances, and lead on global challenges.

One of the main ways middle powers contribute is by acting as mediators in conflicts. Turkey, for example, maintains relationships with both NATO allies and Russia, positioning itself as a negotiator in regional disputes and preventing tensions from escalating⁸. Indonesia similarly promotes dialogue within ASEAN, fostering regional cooperation and reducing potential friction among its neighbors. South Africa has also used its diplomatic influence in Africa to mediate disputes and support peacekeeping efforts in countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo.

⁷ Patrick, S. (2023). *The Role of Middle Powers in Global Governance*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

⁸ ResearchGate. 2023. *Middle Powers Between the West and the Rest: Turkey During the Russian War on Ukraine*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/390278619_Middle_Powers_Between_the_West_and_the_Rest_Turkey_During_the_Russian_War_on_Ukraine.

Middle powers also play a significant role in building and strengthening regional and global alliances. Platforms such as ASEAN, BRICS, and the G20 allow these countries to coordinate policies, amplify their collective voice, and influence global decision-making that might otherwise be dominated by superpowers⁹. India, for instance, has emerged as a prominent leader of the Global South, advocating for fair trade, technology access, and climate support for developing countries. Mexico has leveraged its position in Latin America to participate actively in regional initiatives and multilateral trade agreements, ensuring that the interests of smaller nations are represented on the global stage.



NATO Summit Source:NATO

Another key contribution of middle powers is leadership on global challenges. Brazil has taken a strong stand in climate diplomacy, protecting the Amazon rainforest and shaping international environmental agreements¹⁰. Saudi Arabia uses its energy diplomacy to influence global oil policies while promoting sustainable energy solutions. Norway, a smaller but influential country, is recognized for its role in peace negotiations and international development, providing expertise and funding to resolve conflicts and support humanitarian initiatives. These countries also contribute to food security, global health, and technological development, showing that influence is not limited to the largest nations.

⁹ Chatham House. 2025. *Continuity and Non-Alignment Shape Indonesia's Foreign Policy*. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/03/competing-visions-international-order/08-continuity-and-non-alignment-shape-indonesias>.

In addition to these roles, middle powers often innovate in international cooperation. For example, South Korea has used technology diplomacy to share digital infrastructure and innovation strategies with other developing nations. Egypt plays a strategic role in regional water diplomacy through its management of the Nile, balancing cooperation and competition with upstream countries. By acting in these ways, middle powers help create a global order that is more balanced, inclusive, and cooperative.

In essence, middle powers shape the world by building bridges, creating partnerships, mediating conflicts, and leading on shared global problems. Their combination of diplomacy, strategy, and innovation ensures that even countries without superpower status can have significant influence in promoting peace, development, and sustainable solutions across the world.

Impact on Global Leadership

The global leadership landscape is undergoing a profound transformation as the world shifts from a unipolar or bipolar order, dominated by one or two superpowers, to a multipolar system characterized by multiple centers of power¹¹. This transition signifies a move away from dominance by a single hegemon to a more distributed form of global governance, where influence is shared among various nations and regional blocs.

¹¹ CIGI Online. 2024. *Transforming the United Nations for a Multipolar World Order*. <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/transforming-the-united-nations-for-a-multipolar-world-order/>.

Emergence of a Multipolar World Order

In a multipolar world, power is no longer concentrated in the hands of a single dominant state but is diffused among several influential countries and regional organizations¹¹. This diffusion of power is evident in the increasing influence of emerging economies and regional powers such as China, India, Brazil, Turkey, and Indonesia. These nations are asserting themselves as key players in global affairs, challenging traditional power structures and advocating for a more inclusive international order.

Shared and Diverse Leadership

The shift towards a multipolar world has led to a more shared and diverse leadership in global governance¹². Multilateral institutions like the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and the International Monetary Fund are experiencing increased participation and influence from a broader range of countries. This diversification allows for a wider array of perspectives in decision-making processes, leading to more balanced and representative outcomes. For instance, the rise of the BRICS group (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) exemplifies how emerging economies are collaborating to reshape global economic and political norms.

Opportunities in a Multipolar World

The emergence of multiple power centers presents several opportunities:

- **Enhanced Cooperation:** Countries can collaborate on global challenges such as climate change, pandemics, and economic inequality, pooling resources and expertise to address these issues more effectively¹².
- **Increased Innovation:** A more competitive international environment can spur innovation as nations strive to lead in technology, sustainability, and governance.
- **Balanced Development:** With more actors involved in global decision-making, there is potential for more equitable development policies that consider the needs of diverse populations.

¹¹ CIGI Online. 2024. *Transforming the United Nations for a Multipolar World Order*. <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/transforming-the-united-nations-for-a-multipolar-world-order/>.

¹² Project Syndicate. 2024. *Middle Powers Mean a Multipolar World, Not U.S. Hegemony or U.S.-China Bipolarity*. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/middle-powers-means-multipolar-world-not-us-hegemony-or-us-china-bipolarity-by-dani-rodrik-2024-11>

Challenges in a Multipolar World

A multipolar world also introduces several challenges¹³:

- **Geopolitical Tensions:** Competing interests among rising powers can lead to regional conflicts and rivalries, complicating diplomatic relations.
- **Institutional Gridlock:** The increased number of influential states can make consensus-building more difficult, leading to delays or paralysis in international institutions.
- **Power Struggles:** Established powers may resist the changing dynamics, leading to friction and potential instability as they seek to maintain their influence.

The Role of Middle Powers

Middle powers countries that are not superpowers but still have significant regional or global influence play a crucial role in navigating this multipolar landscape¹³. They often act as mediators, facilitators, and bridge-builders, helping to reconcile differences and promote cooperation among major powers. For example, Norway has established a reputation as a mediator in international conflicts, leveraging its diplomatic neutrality and commitment to peace.



¹³ Modern Diplomacy. 2024. *The Role of Middle Powers in Shaping a Multipolar World Order*.
<https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2024/09/17/the-role-of-middle-powers-in-shaping-a-multipolar-world-order/>

The transition to a multipolar world order is reshaping global leadership by distributing power more evenly among a diverse set of actors. While this shift offers opportunities for more inclusive and cooperative global governance, it also presents challenges that require careful management and diplomacy. Middle powers, with their unique position and capabilities, are instrumental in facilitating dialogue and cooperation in this evolving international system.

Conclusion

The global order is shifting away from one dominated by a single superpower toward a more multipolar system with many centers of influence. This transition has created opportunities for middle powers to emerge as important players in international politics. While they may not match the strength of superpowers, their influence lies in their ability to act as mediators, build partnerships, and lead on key global issues.

Middle powers rely less on hard power and more on diplomacy, coalition-building, and active participation in international forums. By doing so, they help make global leadership more shared, diverse, and inclusive. Their role is especially important in areas like climate change, trade, regional security, and energy, where cooperation is needed across borders.

Rather than replacing superpowers, middle powers are reshaping how global leadership works. They act as bridge-builders, connecting stronger and weaker states, and creating space for dialogue instead of rivalry. This makes them crucial in preventing conflicts, promoting collaboration, and finding collective solutions to global challenges. Looking ahead, the future of international relations will depend on cooperation among all levels of power superpowers, middle powers, and smaller states. In this more balanced system, middle powers will continue to play a pivotal role by ensuring that global governance remains inclusive, dynamic, and responsive to the needs of a changing world.