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The Middle Power Moment

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Middle powers are having their moment. Not a week passes in the policy world, it seems, without a conference, speech, or article on the role that systemically important, second-tier powers could play in improving international cooperation. And with good reason. Multilateralism is in crisis. The United Nations and other legacy organizations seem fatally blocked, the United States has abdicated its traditional managerial role, and China is unprepared and arguably unsuited to step up as global leader in Washington's place. The long-ailing rules-based international order has died and been interred, but it is unclear what, precisely, will succeed it. At this moment of global turbulence and geopolitical fluidity, might a loose network of middle-ranking powers spanning both the Global South and North help revive and reform multilateral cooperation?

There are grounds for thinking so, provided one takes an expansive view of middle powers to encompass not only states capable of playing an occasional, niche role but also important regional actors ranking below the two existing superpowers. On the surface, conditions seem propitious for middle power activism. Power and agency have shifted to a broader range of players, both emerging and established. The United States has adopted a disruptive America First policy, and few countries are prepared to replace U.S. hegemony with Chinese. International aggression and impunity are back, and the very notion of cooperation under law is under threat. These trends create new opportunities and incentives for already influential states to expand their diplomatic options, assert themselves within and across regions, and ideally advance international cooperation both in standing multilateral institutions and bespoke minilateral coalitions. In the dawning multi-alignment world, middle powers seem destined to have outsized influence over prospects for global stability and the management of transnational challenges.

At the same time, a bit of realism is warranted. To begin with, while a multipolar world is inevitable, it is still incipient. For now, the structure of international politics remains bipolar, dominated by two superpowers. Both may seek to thwart middle power activism and constrain

minilateral initiatives, even as middle powers try to place checks on these two behemoths. Second, today's middle powers are a heterogeneous bunch, and their specific interests, competing values, and distinct visions for the world will often limit their solidarity and enthusiasm for joint projects. Rather than anticipating a consistent, united front, one should expect a shifting set of plurilateral initiatives, as subsets of middle powers opt into (or out of) specific endeavors. Finally, one should avoid idealizing middle powers. Not all are admirable, much less prepared to contribute to international cooperation. And even those that do support multilateralism are motivated not by altruism but by self-interest, albeit enlightened.

Notwithstanding these caveats, middle powers have the potential to help stabilize global order and advance cooperation, if they choose to do so. They can do so both within formal organizations, including the United Nations, and informal, issue-specific clubs. The success of middle power multilateralism will be contingent on whether interested governments can agree on common objectives, marshal resources to advance these, and navigate the tricky domestic politics of internationalism in a populist age. While the range of potential issue areas for cooperation is vast, promising areas for middle power cooperation include trade, climate action and energy security, digital technology, and support for the international rule of law.

What's in a Name?

The concept of middle powers dates to Renaissance Italy. The sixteenth century diplomat and scholar Giovanni Botero used the term to describe a category of states (*menzano*) falling between the great (*grandissime*) and the small (*piccioli*), and each possessing "sufficient strength and authority to stand on its own without the need of help from others." The label gained renewed currency after World War II, courtesy of Australian and Canadian diplomats and academics aiming to carve out a vocation for their nations in the UN and other multilateral bodies. Indeed, Australian minister for external affairs Herbert Evatt invoked the term at the UN's very founding in San Francisco, to refer to those states "which by reason of their resources and geographic position will prove to be of key importance for the maintenance of security in different parts of the world."

Over the past decade the belief has won new converts and inspired a procession of initiatives, events, and publications. Increasingly, the term is applied not just to Western but also to a wider array of emerging powers seeking new room for maneuver—and to avoid exclusive geopolitical alignment. And yet there remains no consensus definition, no accepted criteria or thresholds, nor any agreed list of countries that merit this designation. Some analysts have proposed empirical indicators, such as population and GDP, but the category remains subjective—and open to self-identification.

As Gareth Evans, himself a former Australian foreign minister, suggests, it is easier to classify middle powers by what they are *not*. They are not global powers that can impose their preferences internationally, or even regionally. But unlike minor powers, they have sufficient diplomatic and other capabilities to make their mark in particular domains, as well as a credible track record of creative leadership and stamina in driving global policy innovation. If not the world's main rule-setters, they are not mere rule-takers, either.

As this formulation suggests, the concept of a middle power is inherently relative and relational. Historically, middle powers have ranked below the great powers. In today's world, dominated by the United States and China, the category could in principle encompass most other members of the G20 (see table 1), notwithstanding their varying capabilities.

Table 1. G20 Member States

Argentina	China	Indonesia	Russia	Türkiye
Australia	France	Italy	Saudi Arabia	United Kingdom
Brazil	Germany	Japan	South Africa	United States
Canada	India	Mexico	South Korea	

Note: The African Union and the European Union are also formal G20 members and of course capable of playing influential roles in their own right.

To be sure, some governments in this cohort might resist such a designation, aspiring to something grander. These include India, which sees itself as a potential and indeed inevitable great power; Brazil, which prefers the label "major" or "emerging" power; France and the United Kingdom, both former great powers that retain UN Security Council (UNSC) seats; and, of course, Russia, which retains a massive nuclear arsenal, imperial ambitions, and its own UNSC seat.

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Beyond having some means to shape world politics, being an effective middle power requires a certain motivation and mindset. Like all countries, middle powers pursue their national interests, often with great tenacity. But their diplomatic heft hinges partly on their perceived aspirations and actual behavior. They enjoy greater international influence if they appear committed to defending sovereign equality under international law and can be trusted to help address shared transnational challenges and contribute to global public goods. They forfeit this if they are widely regarded, like Russia today, as a destabilizing force. Being a successful middle power, this formulation suggests, implies a problem-solving orientation and a reputation for advancing the collective good, rather than operating on a purely transactional, narrowly self-interested basis. Finally, to be credible, middle powers must be seen as being truly independent—or as Evans puts it, acting as "nobody's deputy sheriff."

Such a value-laden approach to middle powerdom is vulnerable to criticism as being inherently subjective—since it resides in the eye of the beholder—and potentially self-serving—since it suggests a special vocation and global status. It implies that an effective middle power will invest in the international system rather than flex its muscles or seek gains relative to its competitors. No country, of course, is so pure of heart; mixed motives and hypocrisy are inherent in world politics. Still, perceived intentions and reputations matter, particularly when it comes to bridging divides, building coalitions, and brokering deals to address shared dilemmas. A successful middle power is thus not simply a "swing state" or "pivotal power" in a material sense, capable of altering the strategic balance within regions or between blocs. It must also be willing and able to lead, fill vacuums in international cooperation, and defend the international legal order.

The Time is Ripe

Global circumstances are more auspicious for middle power assertiveness and coalition-building than at any moment since the end of the Cold War, though there have been false dawns before. Back in 2008, when the G20 was elevated to the leaders level, some hoped it

might facilitate the emergence of shifting coalitions of consensus, with subsets of middle powers coalescing around common causes and interests. That promise went largely unfulfilled, thanks to persistent U.S. hegemony and divisions between the Global North and Global South. But conditions today are more congenial, as both emerging and established powers are hedging their strategic bets, exploring new partnerships, and seeking to reform and stabilize the multilateral system.

In autumn 2024, when BRICS first expanded to nine (and now ten) nations, analysts debated whether the larger grouping might consolidate into a rigidly anti-Western bloc, arrayed against the G7 in the G20 and other forums. These anxieties proved overwrought. Most BRICS countries, old and new, seek multi-alignment: They want to expand, not narrow, their diplomatic options. Consider India and Brazil. Both have demonstrated an "intersectional" identity. India is a member of BRICS and attends meetings of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, but is simultaneously a member of the Quad, a minilateral security partnership with Australia, Japan, and the United States. Similarly, Brazil has close economic ties with both China and the United States, but treats each bilateral relationship as an open rather than exclusive one.

Similar currents are at play in the Global North—or West, as it is also known. After eight decades of international leadership, the United States has adopted an avowedly nationalist and transactional approach to its foreign, economic, and national security policies, and is pursuing a strategy of dominance via disruption and even imperialism. The Donald Trump revolution has loosened the ties that bind the United States to the broader community of advanced market democracies, long accustomed to America as the anchor of the rules-based international order (and, earlier, of the free world). Stunned by this upheaval, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in April 2025 lamented, "The West as we knew it no longer exists." As 2026 dawned, the U.S. administration doubled down on disruption, deposing the leader of Venezuela and promising more hemispheric interventions in Colombia, Mexico, and Greenland.

For now, no European allies wish to endanger, much less abandon, their security ties with the United States. The same holds true for Australia, Canada, Japan, and South Korea. Still, Western nations are coming to terms with an environment where the United States is often absent, counterproductive, or even adversarial—in short, a problem to be managed. In response, they are diversifying their diplomatic portfolios, investing more in their own defense, and engaging a wider array of partners to advance shared objectives, including on trade, climate action, health security, technological innovation, energy security, and development cooperation.

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This double dynamic creates both an appetite and potential openings for collaboration among middle powers, the vast majority of which have an abiding interest in a functioning multilateral system under international law. Having long played second fiddle in the global orchestra, following tunes set by others, they now have a chance to enter center stage and make themselves heard. "We are moving into a new era of amplified middle power diplomacy," declares Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong. New, purpose-built coalitions will be a big part of this approach. "We are entering an era of 'variable geometry,'" explains Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney in *The Economist*.

Predictably, some of the most ardent advocates of middle power activism, like Wong and Carney, represent middle powers themselves. But global interest in the topic runs wider, evincing a shared sense that this is a rare moment of possibility. As venerable institutions crumble, strategic certainties vanish, and foreign policy shibboleths are found wanting, the window for innovative thinking and bold action is wider than it has been in decades. But it will not be open forever.

The world order is precarious and unbalanced. Multilateral institutions are buckling, and the international legal order itself is under assault. Without renewed collective purpose and mutual restraint, the international system could tumble into a lawless era of violence and spheres of influence reminiscent of the 1930s. At a minimum, the world appears headed toward a less liberal, normatively shallower order. Constructive middle powers can help pull history toward more hopeful scenarios.

They can do so in at least two ways. The first is by recommitting to the principles of the UN Charter and advancing concrete cooperation within formal multilateral institutions, even when the world's two superpowers decline to lead or seek to impose their dominance. The second is by forging ad hoc, informal minilateral coalitions that can advance cross-regional cooperation on specific issues and, ideally, drive reform in more formal international organizations.

One hopeful lesson from the past year is that the multilateral system is not standing still just because the Trump administration has chosen retrenchment and unilateralism. Despite the absence of the United States, the World Health Assembly in May 2025 adopted a Pandemic Treaty. In June, UN member states at the fourth Financing for Development summit endorsed a groundbreaking Compromiso de Sevilla—after the U.S. delegation had quit the meeting. The same month, they approved a wave of commitments at the UN Oceans Summit, again with America AWOL. The pattern repeated itself in November 2025, when Brazil hosted 194 nations—minus the United States, Afghanistan, Myanmar, and San Marino—in Belem for the thirtieth annual UN climate conference. The event generated twenty-nine consensus agreements, alongside nearly 120 multi-stakeholder commitments involving subsets of governments, on topics from phasing out coal to preserving tropical forests forever. The United States may be pursuing America First, but other nations have adopted what could be called the U2 Doctrine: moving forward "with or without you."

The sudden absence of the United States offers middle powers an opportunity to fill the leadership vacuum and exercise agency in international organizations, to defend what should be preserved, jettison what is obsolete, and renegotiate rules so that they work better for all. The need is urgent. The world's main legacy institutions, including the UN system and the Bretton Woods institutions, are too often hamstrung by geopolitics, ill-equipped for modern challenges, and viewed as illegitimate in their governance. A diverse cohort of middle powers spanning the globe could in principle harness its collective diplomatic weight and diversity to bridge international differences and drive reform in more universal bodies and processes. They could also hold the line against any misguided U.S. efforts to dismantle or disrupt critical, if imperfect, international institutions—in effect helping to America-proof world order.

Beyond driving progress in standing, treaty-based bodies, middle powers can spur pragmatic collective action on specific challenges through narrower minilateral or plurilateral arrangements, as well as cross-regional partnerships and configurations

involving strange (in historical terms) bedfellows, such as the deepening strategic alignment between France and Indonesia. A hallmark of twenty-first-century international diplomacy has been the proliferation of ad hoc, informal, and flexible coalitions uniting the interested, capable, and like-minded. Such "G-x" frameworks ("x" referring to the number of countries needed for progress), can avoid common drawbacks of universal membership organizations, which are often lumbering, outdated, and sclerotic. They can allow subsets of nations to collaborate in a modular, nimble, and selective manner, while holding out the prospect that other nations may join in the future.

Already, the Trump revolution has stimulated reactive middle power activism within the G20. On November 22–23, 2025, the forum convened in Johannesburg, South Africa, for its annual summit—minus the United States, which boycotted the event. Trump himself placed heavy pressure on other G20 governments not to sign on to a final summit declaration. He got little traction from middle powers from both the Global North and South. While regretting the U.S. absence, French President Emmanuel Macron insisted, "it should not block us." More pointedly, South African Foreign Minister Ronald Lamola declared, "the G20 should send a clear message that the world can move on with or without the U.S." In the end, the group ignored Trump. As the G20's rotating chair shifts to the United States, which has outlined a "back-to-basics" agenda at odds with Global South priorities, it will be interesting to see whether other countries follow the U.S. lead—or instead fight to preserve what has been built.

Regardless, one should expect middle powers to rely increasingly on flexible minilateral coalitions. The specific composition and geometry of these arrangements will vary with the issue area, reflecting what might be called the four Rs. That is, participants should be *relevant* to the specific challenge; be *ready* to commit to the joint objective; have the *resources* to make a difference through collective action; and command sufficient *respect*, including trust within their own regions.[1]

Minilateral frameworks can be useful vehicles for practical, results-driven cooperation. Still, they do pose systemic risks. One is that they will displace and cripple standing, treaty-based international organizations grounded in law. Multilateral cooperation is too important and complicated to be left to ad hockery, akin to an endless series of pickup basketball games. High ambition coalitions can drive progress and reform in universal bodies, but they cannot substitute for those standing frameworks entirely. A second risk is that minilateralism will exacerbate global fragmentation, as nations create parallel clubs, exclusive blocs, and even competing sub-orders—a dynamic that is visible in the anti-Western tilt of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. To avoid this prospect, constructive middle powers should try to design and pursue coalitions that complement and bolster, rather than replace or undermine, the United Nations and other universal bodies whose capabilities and legitimacy the world needs over the long term.

Although most minilateral initiatives will be narrow and informal in their inception, experience suggests that their remit can expand over time. The Quad, for instance, originated in late 2004 as a humanitarian response to the Indian Ocean tsunami, but gradually morphed into an increasingly developed security partnership. The G20, likewise, first emerged in 1999 after the Asian financial crisis as a forum for macroeconomic coordination among finance ministers and central bank governors, before being elevated to the leaders level in 2008 during the global financial crisis. Minilateral frameworks may also become incorporated in—or give rise to—more encompassing, permanent institutions. The Financial Action Task Force, for example, began as

a G7 initiative to combat money laundering and (later) terrorist financing. It now includes forty members, and its standards (including distinctions between "cooperating" and "non-cooperating" jurisdictions) have been endorsed by formal bodies like the International Monetary Fund and the UNSC. A more recent example is the High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People. Established in January 2021 under the leadership of France and Costa Rica, it seeks to permanently protect biodiversity on at least 30 percent of Earth's marine and terrestrial surface. Less than two years later, the parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity endorsed that headline goal as a core component of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

Don't Get Carried Away: Managing Expectations

While conditions are conducive to middle power activism, one should not ignore the impediments to—and prerequisites for—translating this potential into collective influence. First, middle powers can expect resistance from the United States and China, which would naturally prefer nations to choose their respective sides in a bipolar rivalry. Beijing makes no secret of its desire to give the expanding BRICS coalition an anti-Western thrust, while Washington has pressured third countries to align with it on topics from critical minerals to advanced technology. Middle powers must navigate between these self-interested and sometimes predatory superpowers. They must cultivate their capacity for independence and hedging, at times by playing the rivals against each other. And they must act collectively as counterweights, rather than allowing themselves to be divided, when China and the United States throw their weight around.

Second, and more fundamentally, middle powers are a heterogeneous lot. They have diverse national preferences, grounded in distinct historical traditions and experiences, perceived interests, cultural values, and domestic institutions. They will not always agree on what aspects of the world order should be defended, retrofitted, jettisoned, or (re)invented, and they are particularly apt to be at loggerheads on fundamental questions of international governance reform, such as how to design a more legitimate and effective UN Security Council. Middle powers from the Global North are also more likely to bemoan the passing of the "liberal international order," framing it as a moment of crisis and source of risk. Those from the Global South will be less nostalgic, treating its demise as a welcome (if overdue) opportunity to right past wrongs and create a more inclusive and equitable global system.

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Third, it would be a mistake to portray middle powers as motivated by altruism or benevolence, rather than self-interest. At times, the discourse surrounding middle powers shades into uncritical, self-congratulatory boosterism. To the degree that such nations support multilateralism, they do so because they perceive a rule-governed, predictable international order based on sovereign equality as the best way to protect themselves and pursue their national well-being. This may be enlightened, but it is self-interested.

Fourth, some middle powers lack the credibility to champion multilateralism, given their destructive behaviors and untrustworthy reputations. The premier example here is Russia, whose unprovoked invasion of Ukraine presents this century's biggest threat to world

order. Another such country is Iran, whose destabilizing regional interventions have alienated it from most countries in its neighborhood. A more complicated case is Türkiye, whose ambitions to build a regional order several years ago fell flat, in part due to lack of trust from its neighbors about its motivations. By contrast, South Africa has successfully raised its international profile thanks to the normative coherence of its positions and acceptance of its actions, particularly in Africa. As these examples attest, all middle powers are entangled in and dependent on some measure of good will in their respective regions; they are unlikely to be influential unless trusted in their neighborhoods.

The upshot: Some middle powers are simply better suited and positioned to promote a stable, just, and cooperative global system based on international law, collective security, shared prosperity, and human dignity. Middle powers hoping to revive multilateralism through coalitional cooperation must be willing to exclude unhelpful countries, particularly aggressive authoritarian ones. This is not the same as recommending a democracy litmus test for middle power cooperation. The problems of interdependence do not sort themselves neatly by regime type, and the many real-world gradations between "pure" democracies and autocracies complicate any such designations. Accordingly, middle power minilateralism must tolerate pluralism and difference and adopt a looser concept of "like-mindedness" that refers to shared, sometimes situational, interests as opposed to deeply held values. Still, some attentiveness to regime *behavior* is warranted, to ensure that coalitional cooperation does not degenerate into clubs of thugs. At a minimum, participation in such frameworks should be contingent on support for UN Charter principles.

Middle Power Multilateralism in Practice

For the foreseeable future, middle power multilateralism is likely to be pragmatic and opportunistic, rather than institutionalized. It will focus on specific issues and immediate functional challenges, where a subset of countries sees the opportunity to stake out leadership positions and make a difference.

The more ambitious alternative would be to establish a new, standing minilateral forum of constructive middle powers. During Trump's first term in office, the French and German governments tried something of this sort, announcing with fanfare in September 2019 a new "Alliance for Multilateralism." The initiative had two goals. The first was to demonstrate that a silent majority of countries remained committed to multilateral principles and the United Nations. The second was to provide a mechanism to facilitate cooperation by "a global network of like-minded states," on issues ranging from climate change to cyberspace, human rights, and lethal autonomous weapons systems. While the sponsors insisted that the initiative was not directed "against" any country and that all nations could join, it was clearly a veiled rebuke to the United States.

Although some forty countries attended its launch, the alliance ultimately flopped, for at least three reasons. Some U.S. allies worried about alienating their patron. Many non- or partial democracies perceived it as an exclusive democratic club in which they were unwelcome. Most importantly, the project was too embedded in the politics of Europe and the Global North to be credible in the wider international community.

In theory, middle powers could make a second stab in this direction, creating a more inclusive Partnership for Multilateralism open to all interested and capable states committed to UN Charter principles. Such a body could provide a hub to forge issue-specific coalitions of variable geometry, in cooperation with smaller nations and relevant stakeholders. It is unclear, however, that such an additional layer of organization is required for interested middle powers to launch minilateral initiatives, or how such a platform would add to the existing panoply of standing diplomatic forums, from the G20 to BRICS to the India-Brazil-South Africa Forum, as well as the United Nations itself.

Regardless of whether middle powers choose to build such a platform, they can pursue pragmatic minilateral and cross-regional collaboration in specific issue areas. The success of these efforts will hinge on mutual trust and alignment. To fill vacuums in international cooperation, middle powers will need to reach common ground on critical issues of demand and supply—and balance their minilateral commitments with domestic political realities.

The objective *need* for multilateral cooperation is massive, encompassing challenges related to disruptive technologies, climate change, nuclear proliferation, trade fragmentation, uncontrolled migration, demographic imbalances, stalled development, pandemic disease, economic inequality, and much more. But the actual *demand* for cooperation among UN member states is uneven. Collaboration among middle powers will invariably depend on how they navigate their diverse threat perceptions and preference hierarchies—and reconcile these when they collide. Some domains may be ripe for cooperation; others, too fraught. Middle powers from the Global North may also have a status quo bias, seeking to restore or preserve legacy institutions, whereas those from the Global South may see greater opportunity in disruption. Who in practice will set the agenda and determine priorities for international action?

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Then there is the supply side. The multilateral system is entering a period of resource constraints, particularly in the wake of U.S. retrenchment. Middle powers must assume greater leadership both within ad hoc frameworks and standing treaty-based bodies, spearheading ad hoc coalitions and helping deliver global public goods—at least in certain niches. So far, it is unclear that they are willing to step up. Funding for the United Nations provides a case in point. In 2024, the United States provided 26.7 percent of UN humanitarian assistance, worth nearly $9.9 billion. Trump has since slashed those voluntary contributions to $2 billion, and no donors, either established or emerging, have moved to fill this hole. The U.S. administration has also made draconian cuts to the UN's regular budget and zeroed out U.S. contributions to UN peacekeeping, depriving the world body of more than $2.3 billion compared to 2024 for these purposes. This is a large sum, but hardly gargantuan in the context of a world economy valued at approximately $117 trillion. To be credible defenders of multilateralism, middle powers will need to back their rhetoric with resources.

Finally, middle powers must try to reconcile any new international commitments with domestic political realities—by no means a simple feat in a populist era.

All national leaders play a two-level game, balancing domestic imperatives with the realities of global interdependence. What is important is that they do so in conformity with existing rules of state conduct, rather than contributing to the ongoing erosion of the international legal order. Multilateral cooperation cannot long endure in a world where the generic objective of "taking back control" from international institutions prevails over the recognition of sovereign responsibilities.

The global agenda is vast, but several domains offer potentially promising terrain for middle power cooperation, including across North–South divides.

One obvious sphere is trade. Trump's tariffs, in combination with the U.S-China geopolitical rivalry and the paralysis of the World Trade Organization (WTO), have upended global commerce, further fragmented the world economy, and left nations scrambling to secure supply chains for critical goods. They have also stimulated a global race for free trade agreements, with middle powers deeply involved. The EU has concluded a free trade agreement with Indonesia, has updated its existing pact with Mexico, and is seeking to finalize pacts with Mercosur and India. Middle powers are working to stabilize and steady the global trade regime, including through the Ottawa Group's efforts to reform the WTO, and spearheading plurilateral deals like the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, which is currently in expansion talks with Indonesia, the Philippines, and the UAE.

Climate change and renewable energy offer a second promising area for middle power multilateralism. Trump may consider climate change a "con job," but middle powers remain parties to the Paris Agreement, providing a foundation for enhanced cooperation based on common (if differentiated) responsibilities. Priorities could include: establishing more equitable finance models, for instance expanded blended finance arrangements and debt-for-climate swaps; jointly developing clean energy technologies, such as carbon capture and green hydrogen; enabling resource-rich countries to shift from simple raw material extraction to processing of critical minerals; and placing the Just Energy Transition Partnerships program—still supported by France, Germany, Japan, and the United Kingdom after the U.S. withdrawal—on a firmer financial footing. None of these initiatives will prevent individual middle powers from cutting bilateral deals with China—the world's leader in clean energy technologies, including battery production, solar panels, and EVs—or with the United States, for that matter. But such pragmatic, sector-specific steps will empower partners to advance their shared objectives, while reducing dependencies and building resilience.

Artificial intelligence is another potential area for collaboration, albeit a tricky one. The United States and China are locked in an all-consuming competition to dominate frontier AI models and their applications, creating quandaries for middle powers, including in the developing world, over whether to bandwagon with one player or hedge, in an effort to preserve autonomous technology policies and develop indigenous, sovereign capabilities. Since Trump's return to office, the European Union, which has positioned its "trustworthy AI" model as an alternative to the U.S. laissez-faire and Chinese authoritarian approaches, has intensified its AI cooperation with middle powers from the Global South, including Brazil and India. Such cooperation faces hurdles, however. They include the EU's own onerous regulatory burdens; divergent digital priorities of potential partners, not least over how to balance safety and innovation; and pressure from the Trump administration to adopt U.S.-led technology.

The trickiest area for middle power cooperation is likely to be global governance reform, a topic that exposes divisions not just between countries of the Global North and South but also within those two cohorts.

Consider UNSC reform, the thorniest topic. While all UN member states support it rhetorically, they diverge sharply on the nature of any enlargement. The leading aspirants to new permanent seats are the so-called G4 coalition, comprising Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan. Each faces opposition from regional middle power rivals (respectively, Argentina and Mexico, Italy and Poland, Pakistan, and South Korea). The same holds true in Africa. Although the African Union has endorsed two permanent (and two additional rotating) seats for the continent, there is no consensus on which countries merit permanent status. Meanwhile, when it comes to reform of the Bretton Woods Institutions, North–South rifts come to the fore. European states may talk a good game about expanding representation on the governing boards of the IMF and World Bank, but they resist diluting their voting shares and chairs all the same.

Conclusion

Most middle powers have an abiding interest in a resilient multilateral system under law, in which countries cooperate to advance collective security, shared prosperity, planetary habitability, and human dignity. The future of international cooperation rests partly on their shoulders.

In a widely circulated piece in *Foreign Affairs*, Finnish President Alexander Stubb framed the fundamental choice facing the world today as one between "multilateralism or multipolarity"—that is, between a world of rules and a world of power. That juxtaposition is problematic on at least two grounds. To begin with, the polarity of the international system at any given moment is not a matter of choice, but a matter of fact. It is simply a description of how many major centers of power (or poles) exist. The actual long-term challenge for the international system is building a world in which multilateral norms can flourish *under* conditions of multipolarity—that is, creating a system in which the two can be made to coexist. This will require the world's leading powers to commit themselves to rule-bound behavior.

Complicating matters, the current international system is not yet multipolar but remains bipolar in important respects; multipolarity is still incipient. This reality raises the hurdles to international cooperation. Middle powers supporting multilateralism must contend with a rogue United States scornful of normative constraints and a self-absorbed China that shirks global responsibilities. They must serve as checks on the two superpowers, so that the latter cannot run roughshod over others, and act as stewards of the international system and law, leveraging their position to call out UN Charter violations.

Despite these daunting structural impediments, middle powers have an important role to play in reviving international cooperation and adapting multilateralism to a dawning multipolar world that will be very different from the liberal international order shaped by American might and enlightened self-interest after 1945. The good news is that the end of U.S. hegemony need not be the death-knell of multilateralism, as the international system retains a solid normative institutional foundation, in the form of the UN Charter.

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Notes

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