The Agency of Middle Powers in a Fragmented and Polarised World

Thomas Greminger

January 2026

GCSP Policy Brief No.24

GCSP
Geneva Centre for Security Policy

Geneva Centre for Security Policy

The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP) is an international foundation that aims to advance global cooperation, security and peace. The foundation is supported by the Swiss government and governed by 55 member states. The GCSP provides a unique 360° approach to learn about and solve global challenges. The foundation's mission is to educate leaders, facilitate dialogue, advise through in-house research, inspire new ideas and connect experts to develop sustainable solutions to build a more peaceful future.

The GCSP Policy Briefs Series

The GCSP Policy Briefs series addresses current security issues, deduces policy implications and proposes policy recommendations. It aims to directly inform policy- and decision-making of states, international organisations and the private sector.

Under the leadership of Ambassador Thomas Greminger, Executive Director of the GCSP, the series is edited by Professor Nayef Al-Rodhan, Director of the Geopolitics and Global Futures Department, and Doctor Tobias Vestner, Director of the Research and Policy Advice Department & Head of Security and Law, and managed by Ms Christine Garnier Simon, Administration and Coordination Manager, GCSP Geopolitics and Global Futures.

Geneva Centre for Security Policy
Maison de la paix
Chemin Eugène-Rigot 2D
P.O. Box 1295
1211 Geneva 1
Switzerland
Tel: + 41 22 730 96 00
Contact: www.gcsp.ch/contact
www.gcsp.ch

ISBN: 978-2-88947-454-7

About the author

Ambassador Thomas Greminger is the Director of the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP), after taking up this post on 1 May 2021. Previously, he served as Secretary-General of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) from July 2017 to July 2020; as Deputy Director General of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation at the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) from 2015 to 2017; and as the Permanent Representative of Switzerland to the OSCE, the United Nations, and the International Organisations in Vienna from 2010 to 2015. From 2004 to 2010 he served as Head of the Human Security Division of the FDFA, and before two years as Deputy Head of the same division. From 1999 to 2001 he served as Head of Mission and Country Director at the Swiss Embassy in Maputo, Mozambique. From 1992 to 1998 he served in various posts in the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, including Head of the Policy and Research Unit.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Walter Kemp and Gezim Vllasi for their support in writing this GCSP Policy Brief.

Introduction

The international system is entering a period of intensified fragmentation and geopolitical polarisation. Competition among China, Russia, and the United States is reshaping the global order and redefining spheres of influence. These dynamics create both challenges and opportunities for middle powers, which must navigate contested spaces where alignment with one great power can generate tensions with others.

Middle powers face a delicate balance: they seek to preserve their autonomy, influence multilateral institutions and maintain credibility in international networks, and their choices whether to align with a particular great power, hedge their international relationship bets, or engage in principled diplomacy can either stabilise fragmented regions or amplify systemic competition. Yet debates about the future of the international order tend to focus on great powers and institutional reform, leaving the behaviour of middle powers under-explored.

This Policy Brief examines how middle powers can exercise strategic autonomy and influence in a fragmented world. It emphasises behaviour, relational positioning, and policy choices rather than material capacity alone by analysing how middle powers balance principles with pragmatism; manage geography and alignment; and engage in bridge-building, coalition-building, and mediation. It then assesses their capacity to stabilise regional and global orders, support multilateralism, and enhance systemic resilience.

Definition: what makes a middle power?

In a world where three great powers – the People's Republic of China, the Russian Federation and the United States – increasingly compete to shape spheres of influence, the concept of middle powers has regained prominence.[1] Yet there is no single agreed definition of what it means to be a middle power in terms of international relations.[2] That said, a substantial body of academic literature seeks to conceptualize both what and who the "middle powers" are.[3]

[1] E. Bremmer (2025) *The State of Global Governance: Middle Powers and the Search for Stability*, Council on Foreign Relations, https://www.cfr.org/article/state-global-governance-middle-powers-and-search-stability.

[2] D. Capie and P. Evans (2015) "Middle Power", in *The Asia-Pacific Security Lexicon*, ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, pp.155-158.

[3] J. Robertson and A. Carr (2023) "Is Anyone a Middle Power? The Case for Historicization", *International Theory*, 15(3), pp. 379-403; J. de Bhal (2023) "Rethinking 'Middle Powers' as a Category of Practice: Stratification, Ambiguity, and Power", *International Theory*, 15(3), pp. 404-427; A.M. Hynd (2025) "Repositioning Middle Powers in International Hierarchies of Status and Order", *International Relations*, advance online publication; B. Süsler and C. Alden (2025) "Brokering Peace: Emerging Middle Powers, Agency and Mediation", in *Global Society*, Wiley Online Library; J. Fritzler et al. (2025) "Leadership Styles and International Agenda-setting: Understanding Small-state and Middle-power Leadership on the Responsibility to Protect", *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 21(3).

Middle powers are generally understood as states with material capacities exceeding those of small powers, but falling short of those of great powers. Rather than pursuing broad systemic dominance, they leverage their resources through selective leadership, niche diplomacy and active engagement in specific issue areas.[4] Historically, countries such as Australia and Canada were emblematic middle powers associated with notions of "good international citizenship", including support for liberal international norms, peacekeeping, and stability.[5]

Being a middle power can also describe a role as well as a country's capacity, e.g. being a bridge-builder. Contemporary scholars such as Cooper[6] and Neumann[7] emphasise the relational and behavioural dimensions of middle powers such as coalition-building, mediation, norm promotion, and multilateral engagement. This is to say that an important feature of middle powers is inherently relational: their influence depends not only on material resources like GDP or population size, but also on their social positioning, reputation and ability to act within international networks.[8] Occupying the space between great and small powers, they seek to shape regional environments, moderate global affairs, and advance their national interests through proactive and flexible diplomacy.[9] Contemporary examples include emerging actors such as Kazakhstan, Türkiye and the Gulf states,[10] but also states like Brazil, Indonesia, Kenya or South Africa display middle power behavior.[11]

Scholars further note that self-identification and national narratives play an important role in shaping middle power status.[12] Many states are considered to be middle powers because they explicitly embrace this identity in foreign policy discourse, reflecting an *identity-based* strand of the literature in which actors and policymakers help to constitute status through self-ascription and social

[4] A. Chapnick (1999) "The Middle Power", *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, 7(2), pp. 73-82; E. Jordaan (2003) The Concept of a Middle Power in International Relations: Distinguishing between Emerging and Traditional Middle Powers", *Politikon*, 30(2), pp. 165-181.

[5] A.F. Cooper et al. (1993) *Relocating Middle Powers: Australia and Canada in a Changing World Order*, Vancouver, UBC Press.

[6] Ibid.

[7] I.B. Neumann (2013) "Regional Great Powers", *International Studies Review*, 15(1).

[8] M. Chaziza and C. Lutmar (2025a) "Qatar Emerges as an Authoritarian Middle Power through Strategic Specialization and Defensive Activism in the Global System", *Discover Global Society*, 3(1).

[9] Süsler and Alden (2025).

[10] E. Jordaan (2003) "The Concept of a Middle Power in International Relations", *Politikon*, 30(2); A.F. Cooper (2014) *Middle Power Leadership and the Evolution of the G20*, London, Palgrave.

[11] S. Eisentraut (2025)" Going South? Leadership on Global Public Goods", *Munich Security Brief*,1/2025.

[12] M.F. Karim (2018) "Middle Power, Status-seeking and Role Conceptions: The Cases of Indonesia and South Korea", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 72(4); A.M Hynd (2025) "Repositioning Middle Powers in International Hierarchies of Status and Order", *International Theory*, 17(1); C. Baydag and R. Villanueva Ulfgard (2025) "Populist Narratives and Personalized National Role Conception in Middle Powers: The Cases of Mexico and Turkey during the COVID-19 Pandemic", *Third World Quarterly*, 46(2).

recognition.[13] At the same time, some states may not formally label themselves as middle powers, yet still display core middle power characteristics, such as proactive diplomacy, multilateral engagement, coalition-building and niche leadership in specific issue areas.[14] Examples such as Norway, Qatar, Singapore or Switzerland illustrate how behavioral roles and functional influence can align with middle power behavior even in cases where formal self-identification varies. Interestingly enough, some of them explicitly present themselves as "small states".

In sum, middle power status is context-dependent and relational. It is defined less by absolute capabilities than by functional roles, strategic behaviour, engagement with the international order, and identity construction, making middle powers particularly sensitive to changes in the structure and norms of the international system.

Strategic autonomy and agency: key features of middle powers

Middle powers are distinguished by their capacity to preserve their strategic autonomy and discretionary agency while remaining embedded in alliances and international institutions.[15] Unlike small states, which often have limited room for manoeuvre, middle powers can shape outcomes through selective engagement with key issues affecting international relations.[16] In an increasingly polarised international environment, maintaining diversified relations becomes an asset rather than a liability. The more great powers exert regional hegemony, the more countries are likely to act as middle powers, navigating their way between China, Russia and the United States.[17]

Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy provides a clear illustration of this logic. Constrained by geography and historical legacies, Kazakhstan nevertheless balances its relations between Russia (its closest great power neighbour), China, the European Union, and the United States.[18] Similarly, Qatar's[19] diversified diplomatic partnerships allow it to act flexibly across security, energy and

[13] S. Teo (2022) "Toward a Differentiation-based Framework for Middle Power Behavior", *International Theory*, 14(1), pp. 1-24; J. Robertson and A. Carr (2023) "Is Anyone a Middle Power? The Case for Historicization", *International Theory*, 15(3), pp. 379-403.

[14] C. Efstathopoulos (2018) "Middle Powers and the Behavioural Model", *Global Society*, 32(1), pp. 47-69; M. Chaziza and C. Lutmar (2025b) "Oman's Niche Diplomacy: Middle Power Strategies in a Shifting Middle East", *Social Sciences*, 14(9), p. 511.

[15] Robertson and Carr (2023).

[16] Efstathopoulos (2018).

[17] Teo (2022).

[18] N. Nyshanbayev et al. (2024), "The Republic of Kazakhstan's Multi-vector Foreign Policy", *New Perspectives*, 33(1), pp. 43-63.

[19] Chaziza & Lutmar (2025a).

mediation domains, giving it an out-sized role as a small state exercising middle power agency.

Middle powers may be members of an alliance, but this relationship does not need to be exclusive and allows them to maintain good relations with a wide range of partners. Türkiye is a case in point: it became a NATO member in 1952, joined the EU Customs Union in 1995 and maintains a strategic partnership with the United States, while balancing great powers (such as Russia) to escape too strong a dependance on any of them. Its purchase of the Russian S-400 anti-aircraft missile system reflects its aim to assert its strategic autonomy and strengthen its bargaining power within NATO.[20]

Furthermore, middle power engagement may be fluid and issue dependent. A country may have core allies, but join a different coalition, depending on the issue. This has been referred to as "flexilateralism"[21] – multilateralism at various levels, in different configurations depending on the issue – or "multi-alignment".[22] Such strategies allow middle powers to retain agency, hedge against uncertainty and exploit diplomatic opportunities in a fragmented international system.

Principles matter: the relevance of predictability, reliability and good reputation

However, middle power behavior cannot be completely transactional. These states have a vested interest in a predictable, fair and rules-based international system.[23] Their principles must remain consistent even as their engagement strategies vary. Norway, Qatar, and Switzerland illustrate how principled mediation and facilitation enhance their influence, enabling states to convene diverse actors and act as bridge-builders. Middle powers must not pursue interventionist or militaristic policies and must be concerned about maintaining their good reputation. By combining stable principles with adaptive strategies, middle powers retain their agency even in polarised or unpredictable environments.

[20] S. Aydin-Düzgit et al. (2025) "Strategic Autonomy in Turkish Foreign Policy in an Age of Multipolarity: Lineages and Contradictions of an Idea", *International Politics*, pp. 1-22.

[21] W.A Kemp (2022) *Security through Cooperation: To the Same End*, Routledge.

[22] J. Ravenhill (1998) "Cycles of Middle Power Activism: Constraint and Choice in Australian and Canadian Foreign Policies", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 52(3), pp. 309-327.

[23] Cooper et al. (1993).

What role does geography play?

Geography operates as a conditioning variable rather than a defining criterion of middle powers.[24] The British geographer Halford Mackinder once called Kazakhstan the ultimate middle power. Indeed, its geographic position between major powers exerts pressure to balance its commitments and hedge its bets, while it clearly shapes its multi-vector diplomacy.[25] Similarly, Qatar's location in a contested region and its strong security concerns have influenced its emphasis on mediation and strategic connectivity. Conversely, Norway's peripheral geography demonstrates that geography alone does not determine middle power behaviour. Canada may once again emerge as a middle power by necessity, wedged as it is between China, Russia and the United States (its immediate neighbour).

A geographic position between great powers may, however, also turn out to be too much of a liability for middle power behavior. In Europe, countries wedged between Russia and the West (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine) are often referred to as "in-between countries" and cannot act as middle powers. They are constrained by contested environments that push them toward bandwagoning. Such pressures will further rise, should the spheres-of-influence policies of great powers continue to expand.

Geography amplifies strategic options, enabling intermediary or hub roles, but middle power status ultimately emerges from policy choices and strategic agency rather than location alone.

Policy choices: bridge-building, coalition-building, peace-making and economic connectivity

Middle powers pursue interests that combine national security with systemic stability, investing in a predictable, rules-based order that protects sovereignty and enables influence. They operationalize influence through various forms of diplomatic strategies:

- bridge-building: facilitating dialogue between opposing poles (e.g. Norway's or Switzerland's facilitation of peace processes);
- coalition-building: creating interregional alliances to generate majorities for multilateral reform or governance agreements (e.g. Kazakhstan's multilateral hosting);[26]

[24] Efstathopoulos (2023).

[25] Nyshanbayev et al. (2023).

[26] Laruelle, 2021

- mediation: facilitating negotiations and dialogue between parties in conflict (e.g. Oman's or Qatar's regional mediation); or[27]
- economic connectivity: linking stakeholders across different economic regions to enhance cooperation and influence (e.g. Kenya facilitating WTO's "Nairobi Package").

These policy choices demonstrate how strategic autonomy and agency are translated into tangible influence, as middle powers convene parties, provide procedural expertise, and foster dialogue across domains.

Political commitment and diplomatic skills as enablers

Translating middle power policy into effective action requires both political commitment and diplomatic tradecraft. Kazakhstan, Norway, and Qatar illustrate how leaders invest political capital, time, and reputation in processes, while relying on skilled diplomacy to achieve tangible outcomes.

Recent dispute settlement processes highlight the need for complementary contributions from both great and middle powers to create and sustain momentum in a particular process. Great powers often act as powerbrokers, leveraging influence to bring parties to the negotiation table and offering political or security guarantees for the settlement agreement. However, in addition, impartial and credible facilitators and mediators are needed who bring relevant process and subject-matter expertise to the table and offer safe spaces for dialogue and negotiations. We have seen the United States assuming the former role in the processes that led to the "Gaza Peace Plan" or negotiations related to ending the war in Ukraine.[28] China's serving as guarantor in the rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia[29] is another example, while the role of carefully crafting an agreement was assumed by Oman or by regional actors like Qatar or Saudi Arabia in the case of Gaza, or Brazil, Switzerland, and Türkiye in the case of Ukraine.

This complementarity demonstrates the potential for cooperative diplomacy, where great powers contribute leverage and guarantees, while middle powers bring expertise, credibility, and tradecraft to achieve sustainable settlements. Middle power agency thus depends not only on principles, reputation, and policy choices, but also on committed leadership and skilful diplomacy, enabling such countries to operate effectively in complex, multi-actor processes.

[27] Chaziza & Lutmar (2025a; 2025b).

[28] J.C. Reynolds and N. Wootton-Cane (2025) "Key Details of the Latest Ukraine Peace Deal – and the Main Hurdles Russia Keeps Putting in the Way", *The Independent*, 29 December.

[29] L. Ali (2025) "Implications of Recent Escalations for the Saudi–Iran Rapprochement and China's Role", Gulf Research Center, June.

Building new alliances to reform multilateral institutions

Middle powers are particularly well placed to contribute to multilateral reform by forming issue-specific or ad hoc coalitions that reflect diverse regional interests in order to overcome blocked existing frameworks.[30] They have the ability to help repair, adapt, and stabilize the international order, using their autonomy and credibility to open spaces for dialogue, reduce tensions, and advance both national and regional objectives.

However, if middle powers want to use their agency and autonomy more effectively, they must act more collectively. If we expect middle powers to take on a custodian role in strengthening multilateral institutions and protecting global norms, they will have to work more systematically in groups, clubs, and alliances. This would also imply overcoming some of the rivalry and mistrust that we often observe between middle powers and within regions.

An interesting example of an unusual alliance playing a substantial role in shaping a continental order was the "N+N" (neutrals and non-aligned) group[31] during the Helsinki Process. This group of countries played an important facilitating role between the two superpowers (Russia and the United States) in the early 1970s and contributed significantly to a stable European security order in the second half of the Cold War and in its aftermath.

Should the current US-driven settlement process end hostilities in Ukraine, we may soon again need a new coalition of states that are willing to pull together, overcome deep divides and work towards reconstructing a European security order that goes beyond relying solely on deterrence. We would need committed and credible forces facilitating military risk reduction, reinvigorating confidence- and security-building measures, preparing arms control agreements, and strengthening inclusive institutions for security dialogue and cooperation. What could a new alliance resembling the commitment of the N+N fifty years ago look like? Could it be an alliance of middle powers like Kazakhstan, Norway, and Türkiye together with other neutrals like Austria, Ireland, Malta, and Switzerland, and a few states with a particular affinity for cooperative security and the OSCE like Germany and Italy?

Reforming the UN is another area where we need new alliances. There is currently a movement led by civil society actors entitled "Coalition Article 109" that seeks to mobilize UN member states ready to invoke a Charter review

[30] A.R.M. Umar (2003) "The Rise of the Asian Middle Powers: Indonesia's Conceptions of International Order, *International Affairs*, 99(4), July.

[31] During the Helsinki Process in the 1970s, the N+N group included neutral and non-aligned states such as Austria, Cyprus, Finland, Malta, Sweden, Switzerland and Yugoslavia. These states cooperated to facilitate dialogue between NATO and Warsaw Pact countries, bridging East-West divisions and contributing to the negotiation of the Helsinki Final Act; see OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) (n.d.) *The Helsinki Process 1973-1975: Historical Overview*, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/a/4/585724.pdf.

conference as envisaged by article 109 of the UN Charter. Is the time ripe for a comprehensive UN reform? There are serious doubts that this will happen, given the lack of multilateral commitment by the great powers. At the same time, watching the multilateral system continue to unravel without at least preparing the ground for significant reform is not a compelling alternative. This is definitely an interesting area for middle power engagement.

Conclusion

In a world increasingly defined by great power rivalry, middle powers are uniquely positioned to stabilise, shape and reform the international order. Their influence does not stem from capabilities alone, but from the ability to exercise discretion, build coalitions and mediate across divides. They can leverage credibility and principled engagement to create openings where great powers are constrained or polarised.

Strategically, middle powers must act collectively and in response to specific issues when they arise, using flexible, adaptive coalitions to overcome deficiencies in multilateral mechanisms and institutions, uphold and create new common norms, and facilitate dialogue during conflicts. Their effectiveness hinges on the combination of political commitment, diplomatic skill and reputational capital.

Looking ahead, middle powers face both opportunities and imperatives: while they can shape regional and global governance, influence security and economic architectures, and act as bridge-builders between competing poles of power, realising this potential requires coordinated action, long-term vision, and the willingness to lead on principled yet pragmatic agendas. In strategic terms, the resurgence of middle powers may be the most viable path to sustaining a rules-based international order in an increasingly fragmented and multipolar world.

Building Peace Together

Geneva Centre for Security Policy
Maison de la paix
Chemin Eugène-Rigot 2D
P.O. Box 1295
1211 Geneva 1
Switzerland
Tel: + 41 22 730 96 00
Contact: www.gcsp.ch/contact
www.gcsp.ch

ISBN: 978-2-88947-454-7

GCSP
Geneva Centre for Security Policy