

# Non-Western Middle Powers in Changing Global Order

Moch Faisal Karim, Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia

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## Summary

Literature on international relations has long emphasized the significant influence of great powers in shaping the global order. However, the role of non-Western middle powers has also become increasingly significant in reshaping the global order, particularly in the context of growing multipolarity since the 2008 financial crisis. Through their active participation in global forums and their push for major reforms in international institutions like the UN, G20, and the World Trade Organization, non-Western middle powers such as Brazil, South Korea, Indonesia, South Africa, and Turkey have become pivotal in shaping more inclusive, equitable, and representative platforms, emerging as norm entrepreneurs on the global stage. Unlike traditional middle powers, which typically support Western major powers, these non-Western entities often present a different outlook that does not necessarily align with the current U.S.-led global order, especially amidst the intensifying rivalry between the West and China. Despite their ambivalence toward the liberal order, non-Western middle powers adopt nuanced positions in the context of U.S.–China rivalry. They do not consistently align with either the United States or China. Instead, their strategies often reflect several factors, namely their historical strategic dependence with the United States as well as the presence of geopolitical tensions with China. These two main variables have led to diverse policy response of non-Western middle power toward the changing global order.

**Keywords:** global order, non-Western middle power, norm entrepreneur, roles, global south, alignment, geopolitics

**Subjects:** Diplomacy, Foreign Policy, International Relations Theory, Security Studies

## Introduction

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Scholars in the field of international relations have long debated how changes in the global order predominantly center on the dynamics of great powers, particularly how their interactions create stability or provoke change (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2016; Legro, 2005). This debate highlights the roles these powers assume in maintaining the stability of the global order (Layne, 2018). A significant body of literature examines the impact of great power competition, cooperation, and conflict on driving changes and preserving stability within the international system (He, 2012; Schweller & Pu, 2011; Wohlforth, 2009). Consequently, the global order is often analyzed through the lens of polarization, focusing on the number of major powers and their alignments.

However, with the growing multipolarity of global order, there is a need to pay closer attention to the roles of non-Western middle powers. These countries, which encompass diverse countries ranging from Brazil, South Korea, Indonesia, South Africa, and Turkey, are increasingly active in shaping global order (Dal, 2019; Karim, 2018; Schiavon & Domínguez, 2016). For instance, Brazil has been vocal in advocating for changes within the United Nations, pushing for reforms in the veto

system and seeking more permanent roles in the UN Security Council (Hirst, 2015). Indonesia, on behalf of developing nations, has been emphasizing the need for reforms in multilateralism to achieve more tangible, inclusive, and equitable outcomes and providing a voice for developing countries at the global platforms such as G20, UN, and World Trade Organization (Karim, 2021b). Similarly, Turkey has shown a marked increase in its international engagement, particularly since the mid-2000s, by actively participating in global forums like the UN and the G20 (Dal, 2019). South Korea has been at the forefront of promoting the green growth agenda and aims to bridge the gap between various states, both large and small, leading strategic breakthroughs in the current climate change negotiation deadlock (Watson & Pandey, 2014).

The role of non-Western middle powers is gaining prominence especially when the global order undergoes profound transformations. These transformations are characterized by growing fragmentation and a noticeable weakening of the liberal international order, influenced by both external and internal pressures (Barnett, 2021; Ikenberry, 2018; Mearsheimer, 2019). Externally, the rise of China as a non-Western power offers an alternative to the traditional liberal order. Internally, the changes are primarily driven by challenges within Western nations themselves, including a shift away from a U.S.-centric global hierarchy. Notably, domestic policy shifts in the United States during the administration of Donald Trump that emphasize populism and nationalism have posed challenges to the liberal international order. Ikenberry (2018) noted that while threats to liberal internationalism were expected from rising non-Western states seeking to challenge the postwar order, significant threats have also emerged from within the West itself.

This analysis aims to provide a comprehensive examination of the role of non-Western middle powers in the changing global order. It explores the factors that underpin the roles of these middle powers and how they differ from traditional middle powers. It further examines to what extent such differences in characteristics could make these powers uphold or challenge the present global order. It then proceeds to illustrate how non-Western middle powers have become norm entrepreneurs in specific arenas, though always within or while keeping the broad lines of the current international order in place. As the findings reveal, non-Western middle powers occasionally challenge an international order that is, after all, heavily skewed in the West's favor. Nevertheless, in doing so, they always leave the basic framework and principles of the incumbent international order intact. Although there is some rhetoric toward changing the global order, the underlying aim remains the preservation and strengthening of the prevailing global structures. This account also surveys how middle powers are reacting to the rising rivalry between the United States and China, a key factor shaping changes in the global order. The article outlines how middle powers are developing a more subtle and refined role in reaction to this rivalry, driven by either their alignment with the United States or perceived threats from China, underlined by existing geopolitical tensions.

## Understanding Non-Western Middle Power

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The notion of powers has been a continuously debated in the literature on international relations. The evolution of the concept can be codified into a three-tiered analytical framework reflecting distinctive realist, liberalist, and constructivist images of middle power (Ikenberry & Kupchan, 1990; Kang, 2003; Ross, 2006; Wilkins, 2018). From a realist perspective, middle powers are often defined

hierarchically based on objective assessments of power, typically reflecting their economic size and military capabilities (Gelber, 1945; Glazebrook, 1947). In addition, literature from a liberalist point of view delves into behavior-oriented conceptualizations, considering the roles of middle powers as reflected in their foreign policy behavior and characteristics, such as engagement in multilateralism and advocacy for international norms. Constructivist literature emphasizes the self-identification of middle powers, part of their subjective understanding within the global hierarchy, asserting that how these states perceive and enact their roles on the international stage is influenced by their self-conception.

The conventional approach to measuring middle powers was dominated by realism theories that based the contours of middle powers on material and geopolitical considerations, such as GDP and military expenditure (Holbraad, 1984). Such material-centric definitions provide a straightforward framework to define what is middle power. Yet, at the same time, they seem quite limited in grasping the essence and dynamism of non-Western middle powers in the contemporary global order. The multipolar international system demands a much more nuanced perspective than simple hierarchical classifications. It requires recognition of the diverse behaviors and normative orientations of middle powers (Cooper & Flemes, 2013; Efstathopoulos, 2011; Yanacopulos, 2014).

Consequently, as the global order becomes more multipolar, there has been a redefinition of the concept of middle powers within the global order. This shift in discourse has moved toward a more behavior-based analysis. It allows one to appreciate that a state's status as a middle power cannot be guaranteed by its material capabilities alone (Stairs, 1998). Through this lens, a state's classification as a middle power is also determined by its foreign policy behaviors and strategic engagement in the international order (Cooper et al., 1993).

The strand of literature has also identified what it means by middle power behavior based on the study of traditional middle powers such as Australia, Canada, and Nordic countries. First and foremost, middle power tends to adopt an approach known as "niche diplomacy," which involves strategically concentrating resources in specific areas to exert influence beyond their material capacities (Evans & Grant, 1991). This strategy has enabled them to establish a form of specialized leadership within the established frameworks and power hierarchies of the global order. Additionally, their support for the global order is often portrayed as good international citizenship. This behavioral characteristic includes a commitment to respecting international law, emphasizing multilateralism, pursuing humanitarian and idealistic objectives, and actively supporting a rules-based order. Underpinning these behaviors is the imprint of a democratic identity at home, which influences their foreign policy and international engagements (Abbondanza, 2021).

The characterization of middle powers as primarily focused on issues such as environmental protection, peacekeeping, and democracy promotion is often rooted in the context of Western industrialized nations. This has historically shaped the assumption that middle powers invariably support the current global order—an assumption largely based on the experiences of Western middle powers. However, the rise of non-Western middle powers introduces new dynamics that challenge this traditional understanding. Non-Western middle powers may emphasize the ideational aspects of their domestic ideals, but these are not solely determined by democratic values, especially since such values may not be deeply ingrained in their identity. Thus, the conventional

approaches to middle power theory, which tend to focus on behaviors typical of Western, industrialized nations, may not fully capture the diversity and potential of emerging middle powers. This bias suggests a need for a broader perspective that considers the varied backgrounds and contributions of non-Western middle powers (Jordaan, 2003; Patience, 2014; Ungerer, 2007).

One reconceptualization of middle powers in the global order moves away from traditional Western-centric perspectives by focusing on the roles and contributions of non-Western emerging middle powers. Non-Western middle powers represent a reconceptualization that entails different behavior with traditional middle power although they also still behave in many ways with traditional middle power. These non-Western powers, such as Brazil, Indonesia, and South Africa, exhibit a distinctive agency in navigating the complexities of global governance. Their roles resonate with a form of proactive engagement, often seeking to influence international norms and institutions beyond mere considerations of material power (Jordaan, 2003).

Non-Western middle powers, predominantly from the global south, bring a reformist perspective that has the potential to reshape the global order in a way that better reflects their interests. Indeed these middle powers benefit from the existing global order, but they also seek to assert their agency as determined by a reformist agenda. This reflects a historical evolution in their international strategies—from Third World radicalism, as seen in movements like the Non-Aligned Movement and the New International Economic Order, to a form of reformism that seeks change from within without fundamentally challenging the core norms of the liberal order (Efstathopoulos, 2023). The prevailing academic perspective suggests that non-Western middle powers typically operate within a reformist and risk-averse framework, often not seen as capable or willing to adopt a more confrontational stance (J. Kim, 2024; Umar, 2023). This shift indicates a move away from merely aligning with established powers like the United States to carving out new roles that amplify the voices and interests of global south countries, which have traditionally been seen more as followers than leaders in global governance.

Furthermore, another key aspect that exhibits distinct characteristics in emerging middle powers that set them apart from traditional middle powers is the approach to regionalism. Traditional middle powers often operate beyond their immediate regions, engaging on the global stage without a strong regional focus. In contrast, emerging middle powers are deeply rooted in their regional contexts. They often assume roles of regional leadership and exert significant influence within their geographical areas (Hurrell, 2013). Their global actions are frequently aligned with regional interests, balancing their international ambitions with a commitment to regional leadership (Malamud, 2011; Schoeman, 2000).

Domestic political environment is another source of difference between traditional and non-Western middle power. Traditional middle powers tend to function within settled democratic and liberal norms. These norms are embedded in their identity, which allows them to easily export these values abroad, particularly on issues related to human rights and democratization (Brysk, 2009; Cardenas, 2003). In contrast, non-Western middle powers, usually also adhere to their version of democracy that is based on their local ideals, take a more context-sensitive approach toward

installing and championing liberal-democratic norms in the international arena. This is because, while they believe in democratic ideals, they sometimes do not adhere to a single version of democracy that is underpinned by liberal values.

In fact, Grzywacz and Gawrycki (2021) observed that while most middle powers support cooperation to promote norms, ethics, and international public goods, they are currently experiencing de-democratization, where authoritarian tendencies seem to be resurging. This shift has significant implications for how middle powers operate on the world stage and has led other countries, especially in the West, to question their credentials as good international citizens. However, despite the global shift toward de-democratization among non-Western middle powers, not all have undergone an authoritarian turn that changes their foreign policy support for democratic norms. A middle power operating under a consensus-oriented domestic political environment, such as Indonesia, is less likely to alter its support for democracy abroad compared to one in a conflict-oriented environment like Brazil. This variation suggests the potential influence of the domestic political environment on the international behavior of a middle power, especially in response to a global drift away from democratic norms.

The last aspect that differentiates between traditional and non-Western middle powers is the characteristic of their economic development trajectory. Traditional middle powers usually come from developed economies, where issues such as extreme poverty and inequality are less pressing. Non-Western middle powers, despite their high overall economic potential, often face internal economic challenges and disparities (Chen & Ravallion, 2010). These economic realities to some extent underpin their foreign policies, which seek to balance domestic development with aspirations for international leadership and influence. While they sometimes champion liberal ideals of economic development that favor free trade and openness, at other times non-Western middle powers reject such approaches and opt for protectionism, especially if domestic political-economic elites pressure the state to do so.

In particular, Aydin (2021) further described how backsliding on liberal reforms can influence non-Western middle power support for the liberal international order. He argued that the success of domestic reforms by emerging middle powers and enhancement in their capabilities might lead them to embrace foreign policies supportive of the liberal international order. Conversely, regression in these reforms can weaken the position of middle powers, tending to undermine not only the transnational sources of support and legitimacy that new democracies often rely on but also protecting and legitimizing leaders with authoritarian tendencies, thereby greatly influencing the international behavior of these countries.

Much of the “middle power” status often refers to the position of a nation in the international hierarchy, but recognition of such a status is indeed subjective. Brazil and South Korea are two typical non-Western middle powers with significant material capacities and behavioral differences at the international level, yet both share a common ambition for greatness beyond classical definitions of power. This aspiration reflects their objective power and a subjective ambition to extend their influence and leadership beyond traditional roles.

However, the level of self-identification varies among these countries. For example, South Korea self-identifies as a middle power (Teo, 2017), whereas Brazil sees itself as a major power, impacting their global status and identity (Wilkins & Rezende, 2022). Similarly, although Indonesia is often categorized as a non-Western middle power, its elites describe the nation as aspiring to achieve great power status rather than settling for middle power identification. According to Miller (2021), countries' actions are generally driven by the pursuit of status, focusing on strategies to globalize their interests and enhance recognition, challenging the classical power transition theory that emphasizes material markers like economic or military might (Organski, 1958). For countries like Brazil and South Korea, being a middle power goes beyond mere numbers on paper; it includes a subjective dimension where they see themselves as key actors capable of significantly influencing global governance. This perception shapes their foreign policy approaches, pushing them to advocate for greater changes and assert their influence in ways that reflect their broader intentions.

Given the vagueness of the term *middle power*, Robertson (2017) suggested revisions to how the notion is used in scholarly discussions, noting that it has increasingly been presented more as a tool for policy advocacy than mere identification. He advocated for a more nuanced approach that includes in-depth consideration of how the term's definitions have evolved and the nature and criteria of its use. This is also why Abbondanza and Wilkins (2022) argued that some middle powers, such as Brazil, can be conceptualized as "awkward powers." This arises from the discrepancy where some scholars or perhaps elites within the state identify their country as a great power, but it is defined by others as a middle power. In fact, using a robust categorization of middle power, only a few countries such as Canada and Australia are considered the quintessential middle powers, in that they fit the power criteria, behave like one, and self-identify as such (Wilkins, 2018). The awkwardness of this middle power classification stems from these states having significant capabilities and influence, which defies neat categorizations within conventional power hierarchies, yet they possess an ambivalent international status.

The discussion aims to move beyond the debate surrounding the vagueness and awkwardness of middle power by focusing on the non-Western aspects of this category. Whether self-identifying as "traditional" middle powers, "emerging" major powers, or even being seen as an awkward power, non-Western states share a similar ambition to step onto the global stage and demonstrate their unique forms of agency. Particularly in their roles as norm entrepreneurs, these emerging powers are capable of asserting their presence and shaping the global order in ways that reflect their own perspectives and unique interests.

## Non-Western Middle Power and Norm Entrepreneur

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As suggested in the section on "Understanding Non-Western Middle Power," non-Western middle powers have increasingly assumed the role of norm entrepreneurs as a way to play a greater role at the international level. This enactment of role is primarily driven by a reformist mindset aimed at aligning the global order with their ideals. Furthermore, their position as norm entrepreneurs is partly due to their limited material resources, which leads them to focus on creating innovative ideas rather than relying solely on material capabilities. Through norm entrepreneurship, these middle powers use their influence to shape the architecture of global governance and international

institutions. The role of middle powers as norm entrepreneurs also suggest the aspiration to transform changes in specific aspects of the global order (Carr, 2014). To do so, middle power should proactively seek support for their interests by actively promoting their policy ideas to gain international backing. A key point here is that these states cannot achieve their goals alone; they need collaborative efforts (Ravenhill, 2018). By becoming norm entrepreneurs, middle powers are not just promoting policies but also shaping what is considered appropriate behavior in the international community.

Given their reformist mindset, in enacting their role as norm entrepreneurs, non-Western middle powers are not confined to merely supporting the existing global order with new ideas. Instead, they are eager to introduce innovations that may challenge existing global norms. This proactive engagement often stems from a desire to correct gaps or imbalances in the current system, a sentiment particularly pronounced in the post-2008 financial crisis era, which was marked by shifts in global power dynamics and questions about U.S. hegemony. Non-Western middle powers have emerged as significant players, advocating for reforms and a recalibration of the global governance framework. In their pursuit of reform, middle powers effectively utilize their normative strengths to lead diplomatic initiatives. This approach is rooted in their ability to use nonmaterial resources, such as persuasive narratives, to build large coalitions. However, due to their limited material resources, middle powers strategically focus on specific norms where their concentrated efforts can have a significant impact.

Like their traditional counterparts, to play a greater role at the global level without mobilizing huge material resources, non-Western middle powers may assume three roles: catalyst, facilitator, and manager. As catalysts, they aim to provide the intellectual backing to initiate new initiatives. In this phase, their ability to generate new norms is crucial in setting the agenda and mobilizing support. In the facilitation stage, middle powers aim to foster collaboration among different stakeholders by employing strong diplomatic skills such as planning and organizing meetings, providing technical support like drafting declarations, and ensuring effective communication among parties (Chapnick, 1999). Finally, as managers, middle powers may take on the responsibility of supporting and even building institutions that fill gaps in the current system or complement existing institutions. This role encompasses everything from developing norms and organizing meetings to finding sponsorship and initiating new international organizations (Henrikson, 1997). By assuming these roles, middle powers emphasize the use of nonmaterial assets to achieve meaningful change and influence in the international arena (Beeson & Higgott, 2014; Cooper et al., 1993).

Even though non-Western middle powers often challenge Western dominance of the global order as a way to advocate for justice and fairness in many aspects of global policy formulation, they tend to strongly perpetuate the liberal international order. These countries are often seen as “good citizens” in the international system. This perception of non-Western middle powers as contributors to the current global order stems partly from their desire to reform from within, advocating for norms that not only uphold but also aim to improve and enhance the ethical foundations of the international order (Abbondanza, 2022). Efstathopoulos (2023) noted that this support for the liberal order is evident in middle powers’ historical commitment to internationalism, their efforts in coalition-building with like-minded democracies, and their active participation in multilateral institutions.

With the liberal order being contested by authoritarian major powers like China and Russia as well as internal erosion of liberal value within the core of Western countries, non-Western middle powers are increasingly perceived as having the responsibility of sustaining liberal order. As argued by Paris (2019), while middle powers cannot prevent the disintegration of the liberal order on their own, they can play a crucial role in slowing its erosion. They can contribute by renegotiating and reviving trade agreements, particularly within the World Trade Organization, and sustaining global policy campaigns, such as those aimed at combating climate change. Essentially, middle powers can provide examples and support norms concerning trade liberalization and enhanced cooperation on issues like climate change, thereby reinforcing the resilience and adaptability of the liberal international order.

While they play a role in supporting the liberal international order, non-Western middle powers, especially those from the global south, have complicated engagements with the liberal international order, often characterized by ambivalence or resistance toward promoting liberal norms such as human rights and democracy (Efstathopoulos, 2021). Middle powers like Indonesia, Brazil, and South Africa, despite being democracies, demonstrate limitations in championing liberal norms within their foreign policies. They engage selectively and inconsistently with promoting human rights and democracy agendas on the global front (Karim, 2023). For example, South Africa, despite being regarded as a beacon of democracy, has been noted for shielding regimes that violate human rights. This protective attitude is particularly evident in the actions of the UN Human Rights Council. During the Universal Periodic Review sessions, South Africa's behavior toward developing nations contrasts sharply with its treatment of Western states. When reviewing developing nations, South Africa often uses its allotted time to praise these countries and ask only soft, nonthreatening questions. In contrast, its stance toughens noticeably when reviewing Western nations. A notable instance is when South Africa expressed concern during Germany's review, arguing that right-wing extremist ideology is not confined to the fringes but is part of the broader German political landscape. This selective critique points to a broader pattern of combativeness by South Africa within the council (Jordaan, 2014).

This ambivalence can be understood through the notion of ambivalent internationalism, where non-Western middle powers, faced with various internal and external challenges, navigate the complexities of the international system with a degree of strategic ambiguity. Their commitment to the liberal international order has never been steadfast or firmly grounded, but instead fluctuates, indicating a form of internationalism that is responsive to global political changes and national interests (Efstathopoulos, 2021). Such ambivalence allows these countries to make critical choices regarding their roles and strategies in the international order, enabling them to reassess their positions according to their capacities and priorities. This adaptability of emerging middle powers in dealing with global challenges reflects their ongoing reassessment of their commitment to the normative and functional practices of the liberal international order.

If liberal norms truly lie at the very center of the global order, an important question arises: Why do non-Western middle powers behave in such a nuanced manner, at times accepting liberal norms, yet at other times resisting them? For instance, liberal norms such as trade liberalization, human rights, and democracy often seem universally appealing, yet these norms are not automatically

integrated into the foreign policy identity of non-Western middle powers. Mainstream international relations, particularly from rationalist and constructivist perspectives, offers insights into the dynamics of this engagement.

From a rationalist standpoint, non-Western middle powers are often constrained in their promotion of liberal norms by a protective stance toward national interests and a degree of reservation against what is often perceived as a Western-centered liberal order. This perspective reiterates the strategic state interests where the entrenchment of liberal norms, such as human rights, may be calibrated against national priorities and autonomy. For instance, countries like Indonesia or Brazil might perceive that aligning too closely with Western articulations on human rights or trade liberalization could compromise their unique sociopolitical landscapes and developmental trajectories.

Constructivist perspectives, conversely, emphasize the transformative potential of liberal norms as powerful conduits of morally desirable values that can reshape state identities and interests. This viewpoint suggests that the internalization of liberal norms, such as human rights and democratic governance, within the domestic landscapes of emerging powers can influence their engagement at the global level. For example, Indonesia's journey of democratization post-1998 has been accompanied by a more active engagement with international human rights regimes, reflecting a domestic recalibration of values and institutions in alignment with certain liberal norms (Karim, 2021a).

From a constructivist perspective, the integration of liberal norms into a middle power's identity is complex and may not always be in harmony with its biographical narrative. Indonesia serves as an illustrative example of this. As a promoter of democracy, Indonesia has sought to expand its influence in Southeast Asia. It has done so by embedding democratic values into the goals and operations of the Association of Southeast Asian nations (ASEAN), thereby establishing itself as a key regional leader advocating for democratic principles within the association. This initiative by Indonesia has played a crucial role in steering ASEAN toward a more democratic orientation.

But it was not always a walk in the park for Indonesia in trying to incorporate democratic principles within the premise of ASEAN, much less in fostering harmony and unity within the association. Indonesia, being a major regional player and firm advocate of democracy and human rights, often finds itself at odds with other members (Karim, 2017). Committed to building consensus in the region, Indonesia has faced opposition from some of the newer ASEAN members, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam, collectively known as CMLV. While the original ASEAN members have been ready to evolve with global changes, these new members have been hesitant to adopt the democratic principles Indonesia is trying to propagate within the organization. Therefore, it is difficult for middle powers like Indonesia to synchronize their progressive agendas with the diverse perspectives and historical contexts within regions.

Because some member countries opposed this, even though these values were recognized within the principles and goals of ASEAN, there was no formal mechanism for enforcing them within the organization's proceedings. As a result, Indonesia had to accept that these values, although officially part of ASEAN's framework, did not reflect the practical situation across all member states. This episode illustrates the intricate challenges that middle powers like Indonesia face in playing their roles on the international stage (Umar, 2023). Conflicts of interest can arise between different roles

and the materialization of state identity, especially when such values are not universally accepted or implemented within a regional organization. What emerges is a dynamic interaction between a state's aspirations, its leadership role in the region, and the practicalities of consensus-building in an international environment that is diverse and multifaceted.

### Non-Western Middle Powers and Great Power Rivalry

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In the section “Non-Western Middle Powers and the Norm Entrepreneur,” how non-Western middle powers have embraced the role of norm entrepreneurs was explored, exhibiting behaviors that range from challenging and adopting to being ambivalent toward the global order. This section shifts focus to another critical aspect of their international engagement: the response of emerging middle powers to the great power rivalry, particularly the rise of China as a significant reshaping force in the global order. Characterized by its remarkable economic growth and an increasing desire to assert itself as a major global player, China's ambitions have significantly altered the dynamics of international power (Buzan, 2010; Xuetong, 2006). Its emergence as a potential great power has notably intensified its rivalry with the United States, which has long been a dominant force in maintaining the existing global order. China's rise is often perceived as a challenge to the liberal international order, particularly in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis. Concerns have been raised that China, viewed by some as a revisionist state, seeks to reshape the global order to better serve its national interests (Huiyun, 2009). At the global level, apprehensions exist that a more influential China might undermine the liberal values that have traditionally underpinned the global order, especially given its authoritarian governance model (Yang & Liu, 2012).

With its growing economic and military might, China has also increased its geopolitical influence through economic initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Although China presents the BRI as a means to enhance connectivity and economic cooperation, its impact is more pronounced in the realm of geopolitics than in global development governance. This is because such substantial investments inevitably lead to significant geopolitical repercussions, particularly in areas like the United States, where geopolitical contestations between China and other major powers are intensifying (He & Li, 2020).

The shifting geopolitical landscape has ignited a contentious debate among scholars on how middle powers, particularly in Asia, should respond to China's rise (Gilley & O'Neil, 2014). Some believe middle powers should align with China, while others argue for an alignment toward the United States as a counterbalance to China's influence. However, there appears to be an emerging consensus that many middle powers are adopting a hedging strategy. This approach involves a balancing act rather than explicitly choosing between alignment with China or the United States (Cheng-Chwee, 2008; Goh, 2008; Karim & Chairil, 2016). Hedging entails a blend of policies that manage the uncertainties associated with a rising power like China (Tessman & Wolfe, 2011). It represents a pragmatic stance where states prepare for potential military conflict while fostering economic and diplomatic ties, thus avoiding direct confrontation with great powers (Koga, 2018).

Given the variety of responses that middle powers have at their disposal, a question arises: What factors drive non-Western middle powers to adopt a specific role in navigating the U.S.–China rivalry? The role they take in responding to this rivalry may provide critical insights into regional stability mechanisms and the future trajectory of international relations, especially in a growing multipolar world. Building on Karim and Nabila (2022), understanding the roles of middle powers in the U.S.–China rivalry requires considering two primary factors: the degree of alignment with the United States and the potential for geopolitical tensions with China.

Arguably, “alignment” can be defined as “expectations of states about whether they will be supported or opposed by other states in future interactions” (Snyder, 2007, p. 6). In this sense, alignment is not necessarily signified by formal treaties as an alliance would be, but rather it is delineated by a variety of behavioral actions that emphasize the informal nature of such cooperation. This concept is expanded by borrowing Wilkins’ definition of alignment, which presents it in broader terms that include *coalitions*, *security communities*, and *strategic partnerships*; it encompasses more than just the conventional “alliance” archetype (Wilkins, 2012).

The alignment with the United States among middle powers can be categorized into two distinct types: high-level and low-level alignments. High-level alignment typically involves formal alliances with the United States, where middle powers and the United States share a mutual commitment, often rooted in historical and strategic considerations. For many countries, particularly those in the West and members of NATO, the United States is a pivotal ally, relied upon for military support and national security. These alliances, many of which originated during the Cold War, continue to exert significant influence on these nations’ foreign policy decisions, especially in matters related to military and security, particularly in countries hosting U.S. military bases.

Conversely, low-level alignment with the United States can be defined by the absence of formal alliance structures. This means that although non-Western middle powers have some degree of strategic partnerships with the United States, without formal alliances, they might be considered to have some sort of alignment with the United States. The bottom line is that middle powers with low-level alignment do not heavily rely on the United States for their security needs. This also means that they do not view the United States as a primary ally due to their strategic culture or geopolitical position. However, despite not seeing the United States as a primary ally, non-Western middle powers may opt for limited alignment with the United States, balancing their strategic interests against the potential costs of high-level alignment. It is important to distinguish between being a formal U.S. ally and having a strategic partnership. While middle powers may seek external security assistance from great powers, they often refrain from entering into defense pacts. Consequently, many non-Western middle powers do not have specific formal security treaties with the United States, although they may engage in joint military exercises and other forms of cooperation.

The second factor in understanding what roles that non-Western middle powers take in light of the U.S.–China rivalry is the level of geopolitical tension they experience with China. The nature of these tensions, whether perceived as benign or contentious, directly impacts how middle powers respond to China’s growing influence and their engagement with the United States. In other words,

this geopolitical tension influences whether they adopt strategies of alignment, balancing, or hedging in relation to both China and the United States (Nagy, 2022). In regions where China's actions are perceived as assertive, particularly in territorial disputes, non-Western middle powers may feel compelled to strengthen their alliances with other major powers, like the United States, as a counterbalance. Conversely, if China's rise is viewed as an economic opportunity for regional development, middle powers may pursue more cooperative relationships with Beijing (Liu & Lim, 2020). Such an approach might involve engaging in bilateral trade agreements, participating in China-led initiatives, or advocating for multilateral dialogue to address shared challenges that they have with China.

A notable example that illustrates geopolitical tension with China, particularly arising from economic and territorial disputes, is the long-standing conflict over the South China Sea, a region of significant strategic and economic importance.

This area, recognized mostly as international waters, has been a focal point of contention since 1951 when China first asserted its sovereignty over the Spratly and Paracel Islands (Fravel, 2011), both of which are also claimed by the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Taiwan. Despite international regulations, China's stance on the South China Sea has been reinforced over the years through legislative measures. In 1992, the Law on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone of the People's Republic of China was enacted, followed by the Law on the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and the Continental Shelf in 1998. These laws, which form the legal foundation of China's claims to maritime rights in the region (Fravel, 2005), are in direct violation of international law. The strategic significance of the South China Sea, rich in oil, gas, and other resources, and its role in meeting the growing global energy demand, have led to assertive postures from both China and the ASEAN countries involved in the dispute (Buszynski, 2012). This domestic regulation is against the international law.

Despite the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea not recognizing China's expansive claims, which extend beyond the EEZ and are based on historical rights (Hayton, 2018), China has maintained its presence in the Paracel Islands. The dispute is further intensified by the economic potential of the region. For example, Vietnam, through its state-owned enterprise PetroVietnam, derives a significant portion of its GDP from oil production in the South China Sea, with plans for further expansion in the region (Buszynski, 2012). This pursuit of resource development in contested waters indicates the likelihood of heightened tensions and potential conflicts with China in the future.

The rise of China as a major player in the international economy has been accompanied by a significant modernization of its naval capabilities. This development, aimed at bolstering China's ability to assert territorial claims and deter potential confrontations, has altered the geopolitical landscape (Fravel, 2005). In this context, it is useful to categorize the nature of geopolitical tensions faced by middle powers into two distinct categories: high risk and low risk.

High-risk geopolitical tension typically characterizes situations where a middle power is embroiled in multiple official territorial disputes. This is particularly evident in the case of countries involved in the South China Sea dispute, where several nations find themselves in direct territorial

contention with China (J. Kim, 2015). The proximity of these countries to China, coupled with historical and ongoing territorial conflicts, heightens the risk of geopolitical tension. However, it is noteworthy to mention that geographical proximity to China does not universally translate into disadvantageous positions. An example of a country that has managed to derive benefits from its proximity to China is North Korea, which has navigated its relationship with Beijing to its advantage (Chung & Choi, 2013).

Middle powers that do not have territorial disputes with China often experience lower levels of geopolitical tension. Consequently, they face a diminished risk of geopolitical strain. For example, nations that are not involved in the South China Sea disputes generally encounter less geopolitical tension with China. Although there may be occasional incidents, such as the deployment of military assets in contested waters, these countries are generally viewed as having a low risk of geopolitical tension, provided there is mutual recognition and respect for sovereignty over the territories in question.

Non-Western middle powers with low-level alignment with the United States and rare geopolitical tension with China tend to assume the role of facilitators in response to China's rise. This stance permits a more flexible approach, as these countries are not tightly bound by obligations to the United States. This would allow them greater freedom to engage with China without the constraints of a rigid alliance. Indonesia exemplifies this situation. With less alignment with the United States and less geopolitical tension with China, Indonesia then positions itself as a facilitator and charts its relationship with China. However, Indonesia is outside the structure of formal security alliances with the United States and is not a claimant in the South China Sea disputes (Kipgen, 2021). And because of that, Indonesia would be able to deal with China or other regional powers, obviously, with pressures on direct geopolitical conflict.

Indonesia's diplomacy in the South China Sea dispute may be explained by its position as a regional facilitator; it called for negotiating with China and thus would appear to reflect the Indonesian objective of constructive dialogue among stakeholders (McRae, 2019). It is also suspicious of U.S. efforts to exclude China from regional arrangements and would like to see an equitable, inclusive arrangement between major powers to guarantee regional stability. This diplomatic balancing act underlines Indonesia's commitment to an open regional order in which the voices of all big powers like China have to be recognized. As a regional leader, Indonesia always tries to engage China actively through regional processes, and one of these would indeed be the ASEAN framework—cooperation in order to bring about a cohesive and stable environment (Anwar, 2020).

However, non-Western middle powers that have high-level alignment with the United States will tend to be careful in their relationship with China lest they turn off their main ally. In the absence of limited geopolitical friction, these states may not necessarily have to engage Beijing on security matters. But if the stakes become really high in terms of geopolitical tension with China for any middle power, then there could be a focus on dealing with this critical element of foreign policy by perhaps taking up a bridging role to handle the complexities of that relationship.

South Korea exemplifies this. Unlike Indonesia, which may have a strategic partnership with the United States, South Korea is a non-Western middle power that has a formal alliance with the United States. The strategic place in which South Korea finds itself as a middle power with high-level alignment with the United States seems to present an almost cautious sense in its ties with China, making it a subtle balancing act so as not to antagonize its leading ally. It is geographically very close to China and therefore has faced much geopolitical tension, especially with North Korea. This is a geopolitical and political environment that forces Seoul to be very careful in carrying out its diplomatic strategy, maintaining tight security and economic relations with the United States on one hand, but preserving a good relationship with China on the other (Yoo, 2014).

Seoul's efforts to navigate this intricate geopolitical landscape have led it to adopt a bridging role between the United States and China. This role is evident in South Korea's initiatives to encourage Beijing's alignment with the international community, particularly during China's economic reforms, aiming to draw China away from an exclusive reliance on North Korea (H. Kim, 2014). Additionally, South Korea's active participation in multilateral talks, such as the six-party discussions on North Korea's nuclear program, underscores its commitment to mediating complex regional security issues. Despite challenges, including mistrust among the involved parties, South Korea's role in these talks highlights its efforts to facilitate dialogue and cooperation between North Korea and the United States, as well as other regional powers (Choo, 2005).

Moreover, South Korea recognizes the importance of maintaining its alliance with the United States as a deterrent against a rising China, while also acknowledging the risks of an overly close relationship with the United States and a strained relationship with China, given their geographical proximity. This understanding has led South Korea to explore additional forms of regional cooperation. For instance, as an active participant in ASEAN Plus Three since 1997, South Korea has leveraged its position as a middle power to foster connections between China and other global actors, contributing to the creation of regional cooperation frameworks alongside ASEAN and Japan (M.-H. Kim, 2014).

Middle powers with a close alignment to the United States, and at the same time low geopolitical tension with China, may strive to assume the position of a faithful ally; this strategic placement allows them to align closely with the United States without being restricted by immediate geopolitical challenges with China, while still maintaining some level of economic cooperation. By contrast, those with middling levels of alignment with the United States and high geopolitical tension with China might pursue a policy of active independence. This approach enables these states to hedge the risks of rising geopolitical tensions by broadening international relationships, reducing dependence on any one power center, and maintaining a more autonomous foreign policy.

Turkey exemplifies the role of a middle power that maintains a strong alignment with the United States while experiencing low geopolitical tension with China, positioning itself as a faithful ally to the United States. This relationship allows Turkey to closely align with the United States, benefiting from its institutional ties with the West, without facing immediate geopolitical challenges from China. However, Turkey's engagement with China is characterized by pragmatic and rational calculations, rather than ideological alignment (Öniş & Yalikul, 2021).

Despite Turkey's relatively small share in Chinese outward foreign direct investment, standing at 0.5% (Gürel & Kozluca, 2022), the economic relationship between the two countries is noteworthy. China, while not being one of Turkey's top investing countries, still plays a significant role in Turkey's economic landscape. The European Union and Gulf states, notably Qatar, continue to dominate Turkey's investment portfolio, but the potential for economic cooperation with China remains substantial. This potential is particularly evident in Turkey's need for Chinese technology and foreign investments and China's desire to advance its BRI initiative (Güneylioğlu, 2022). These mutual interests provide a foundation for a connection between the two countries, allowing Turkey to balance its strong ties with the United States while fostering economic cooperation with China.

Vietnam's strategic positioning in the context of U.S.–China relations exemplifies the stance of a middle power with lower alignment to the United States and higher geopolitical tension with China, adopting a policy of active independence. Geographically sharing both land and maritime borders with China, Vietnam has a history of border conflicts with its northern neighbor, including the significant Sino–Vietnamese War in 1979. These tensions have persisted, particularly in the contentious South China Sea, a region of critical importance to Vietnam's national interests both socioeconomically and geostrategically (Thayer, 2011).

Despite historical ties and ideological similarities with China, Vietnam has increasingly sought to strengthen its ties with the United States, especially in response to China's rising assertiveness in the South China Sea. This shift is indicative of Vietnam's strategic approach to balancing its national integrity against the backdrop of China's growing regional influence. The Communist Party of Vietnam, recognizing the potential threats posed by China's actions in the South China Sea, has actively worked to deepen the strategic partnership with the United States (Khanh Van & Trung, 2021). Vietnam's strategic leaning toward the United States can be partially viewed as an extension of its post-Doi Moi foreign policy, which emphasizes independence, self-reliance, multilateralism, and diversification. Vietnam's apparent support for the U.S. Indo–Pacific strategy is a case in point, demonstrating its foreign policy leanings toward the United States. While countries in the region such as Indonesia might be suspicious of a U.S.–led Indo–Pacific strategy that seems to undermine China's influence in the region and potentially invite external meddling in regional issues, Vietnam surprisingly appears in favor of such a strategy. A key aspect of the Indo–Pacific strategy is how the United States has revitalized the significance of the Quad, involving Japan, Australia, and India, to maintain a regional rules–based order. Vietnam's support for the Indo–Pacific strategy can be attributed to its increasingly firm stance against China, combined with converging interests between the United States and Vietnam in upholding a regional rules–based order, especially in response to China's provocations in the South China Sea (Trinh & Huyen Ho, 2024). This move toward the United States, despite Vietnam's historical and ideological proximity to China, underscores its pursuit of an independent foreign policy that prioritizes national security and territorial integrity.

From this discussion, it is clear that the strategic choices of middle powers in the context of the U.S.–China rivalry are influenced by non–Western middle powers' alignment with the United States and their geopolitical relations with China. These factors collectively shape their roles, ranging from facilitators and bridge–builders to faithful allies and active independents, as they navigate the evolving landscape of international relations.

## Conclusion

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This article offers several critical insights into the role non-Western middle powers are playing in the changing global order. First, non-Western middle powers actively contribute to the revision of those aspects of the liberal order that are considered inefficient or inequitable while ensuring the retention of its functional components. This balance is important for the global order to develop in a way that is fairer and more representative of diverse interests. However, there lies a problem with their ambivalence, especially among those experiencing changes at home. To do so, non-Western middle power takes a role as a norm entrepreneur that actively reshapes and redefines global norms and standards. Their advocacy is centered around reforming the current system to address its shortcomings and to better reflect a wider range of global interests and perspectives. This involves championing changes that not only challenge the status quo but also seek to introduce more inclusive and representative practices within the international framework. Second, while non-Western middle powers may contest the liberal order, it does not automatically lead them to challenge the United States as the dominant hegemony in the current liberal order. Whether they are in contest the United States or sided with the United States against rising powers such as China are deeply influenced by their alignment strategy as well as their geographical proximity to China. These non-Western middle powers have more nuanced choices and agency to determine their foreign policy agenda. The bottom line is that such strategy should uphold a rules-based and inclusive international order while enabling the non-Western middle powers to play a greater role in reshaping global order that better reflects the voices of the rest.

The notion of non-Western middle power reveals something that is useful. First, while these countries have been seen primarily as regional powers with major power aspiration, the notion of non-Western middle power better captures their positionality at the global level. They are indeed still a middle power, but their behavior transcends traditional middle power. Their non-Western agency has shown them to be more nuanced in their approach and hence less likely to be predictable. Furthermore, while the literature on emerging middle power has evolved, the notion of middle power should be revisited given the growing presence of non-Western actors—part of the broader “rise of the rest”—who are increasingly shaping the global order in this role.

However, the term *non-Western* is also very broad and encompasses a variety of powers that may not share similar values. Consequently, the role of emerging middle powers as norm entrepreneurs is riddled with contradictions and complexities. It seeks to create a more inclusive global order by challenging existing norms and practices considered biased toward the interests of major Western powers. Furthermore, these middle powers also maintain an ambivalent approach. They advocate for change while carefully preserving certain aspects of the existing liberal order. This ambivalence stems from an understanding of the advantages that the liberal order offers and the dangers associated with any radical change. As a result, non-Western middle powers often find themselves in the position of advocating for reform while carefully ensuring that such changes do not rattle the foundational principles of the international system. It is this combination of challenge and accommodation with the global order that informs the strategic approach by non-Western middle powers. Their approaches bespeak an informed sense of the dynamics of global governance and a growing power to have a say in the future course of international relations.

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