

Middle Powers and the Changing Global Order

Mains: GS II – International Relations

Why in News?

The contemporary international order is undergoing a profound transformation and has seen the rise of middle powers.

What is a Middle Power?

- **Definition** – A middle power is broadly understood as a country that possesses capabilities greater than those of small states but falls short of the economic, military and strategic capabilities of great powers.
- Despite these limitations, middle powers possess sufficient influence to shape regional and, in certain areas, global outcomes.
- **Origin of the concept** – The intellectual roots of the concept can be traced to the Italian philosopher Giovanni Botero, who in *The Reason of State* (1589) discussed the idea of a “middle-sized dominion”.
- He argued that such states possessed sufficient strength and authority to maintain themselves without depending entirely on larger powers.
- **Associated countries** – The concept gained prominence during the Cold War, particularly in relation to countries such as Canada, Australia and the Nordic states.
- In recent decades, the category has expanded to include emerging powers such as India, Brazil, South Africa, Türkiye and others.
- However, there is no universally accepted definition of a middle power. Some scholars classify states on the basis of material capabilities such as military strength, economic size and geographic influence. Others focus on their foreign-policy behaviour, particularly their tendency to promote multilateral cooperation and mediate international disputes.

What are the distinctive features of middle powers?

- **Significant but limited capabilities** – They cannot unilaterally shape the global system like the United States or China, but they possess sufficient economic, diplomatic or military resources to influence particular issues.
- **Often pursue strategic autonomy and diplomatic flexibility** – Rather than permanently aligning themselves with one great power, they seek room for manoeuvre and maintain relationships with competing centres of power.
- **Frequently employ multilateralism and coalition-building** – Since they cannot rely solely on hard power, middle powers use institutions, diplomacy and partnerships

to amplify their influence.

- This has given rise to the concept of “niche diplomacy”, in which a country concentrates its limited resources on specific areas where it possesses expertise or comparative advantages.
- Instead of attempting to dominate every issue, it seeks influence through targeted initiatives.

Why Are Middle Powers Becoming More Important?

- **Changing distribution of global power** – The post-Cold War period was characterised by considerable American predominance.
- However, the emergence of China, the resurgence of Russia, the growing strategic importance of the Global South and increasing geopolitical fragmentation have created a more complex international system.
- **Weakening of confidence in multilateral institutions** – The United Nations Security Council remains constrained by great-power rivalry, while institutions dealing with trade, climate change, development and global security often struggle to achieve consensus.
- In this environment, middle powers can act as bridges between competing blocs.
- Their relationships with multiple major powers allow them to facilitate dialogue, mediate disputes and build issue-specific coalitions.
- Their importance has been particularly visible in conflicts and crises across West Asia, Eastern Europe and the Indo-Pacific, where several middle powers have attempted to maintain diplomatic channels with different sides.
- **Revival of Multilateralism** – Middle powers have an inherent interest in a rules-based international system.
- Unlike great powers, they have fewer capabilities to impose their preferences unilaterally. Stable international rules therefore provide them with greater security and diplomatic space.
- Countries such as India, Brazil and South Africa have repeatedly advocated reform of global institutions to make them more representative of contemporary realities.
- Their participation in platforms such as the G20, BRICS, the United Nations and regional organisations reflects an attempt to strengthen the voice of emerging economies.
- The experience of Brazil's leadership in global climate diplomacy and South Africa's role in multilateral forums demonstrates how middle powers can assume greater responsibility when major powers are unwilling or unable to provide collective leadership.
- This phenomenon can be described as a “**with or without you**” approach: middle powers increasingly seek to advance cooperation even when one or more major powers are unwilling to participate.
- **India's Role as a Middle Power** – India represents one of the most significant examples of an emerging middle power seeking a larger role in global governance.
- Its foreign policy combines strategic autonomy with active multilateral engagement.
- India maintains partnerships with the United States, Russia, Europe, Japan and countries of the Global South while avoiding exclusive dependence on any one bloc.
- India's leadership of the G20 in 2023, emphasis on the Global South and advocacy for

reform of international institutions demonstrate its ambition to shape the global agenda rather than merely respond to it.

- India's approach also reflects its civilisational and strategic preference for multipolarity, where multiple centres of power coexist and no single state dominates the international system.

What are the limitations of middle-power leadership?

- **Dependent on others** - They remain dependent on major powers for security, technology, investment and access to global markets. This can limit their freedom of action.
- **Differing values** - Middle powers themselves do not always share the same values or strategic interests.
- India, Brazil, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, South Africa and other emerging powers have different political systems, regional priorities and interpretations of international order.
- **Geopolitical competition can divide them** - Their cooperation may weaken when major powers exert economic or military pressure.
- **Lack of resources** - Middle powers may lack the financial, military and institutional resources required to sustain long-term global initiatives. Diplomatic influence cannot always compensate for material limitations.
- **Excessive emphasis on sovereignty and non-interference** - It may sometimes make it difficult to build consensus on humanitarian crises, conflicts and global public goods.

What the middle powers should do?

- Strengthen issue-based coalitions on climate change, health, food security and emerging technologies;
- Support reform of global institutions to improve representation and legitimacy;
- Expand cooperation among developing countries through technology, finance and capacity building;
- Preserve strategic autonomy while avoiding rigid bloc politics;
- Strengthen mediation and preventive diplomacy in regional conflicts;
- Develop common positions on global challenges without sacrificing national interests.
- The objective should not be to replace great powers but to create a more inclusive and resilient international order in which power is distributed across several centres.

What lies ahead?

- Middle powers are increasingly important actors in a world marked by geopolitical fragmentation and institutional uncertainty.
- Their strength lies not in overwhelming military capability but in their ability to build coalitions, mediate conflicts, connect different geopolitical blocs and promote multilateral solutions.
- However, their emergence does not automatically guarantee a stable world order.
- Their competing interests, dependence on major powers and limited resources can constrain their collective influence.

- The future of global governance may therefore depend on whether middle powers can transform their growing diplomatic activism into sustained institutional cooperation.
- For countries such as India, the opportunity is significant: to move from being rule-takers to rule-shapers and from regional actors to responsible stakeholders in a genuinely multipolar world order.

Reference

[The Indian Express| Middle Powers](#)

