

Beyond Great Powers: Middle Power Paths to Resilient Multilateralism

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Set amidst growing global challenges and great power politics, this article asks how middle powers might best promote global collective action. Adopting a historical approach, it explores four case studies on middle power multilateralism in (1) post-1974 UN New International Economic Order; (2) post-1989 Bretton Woods institutions; (3) post-1992 European Union expansion; and (4) post-2003 UN South-South cooperation. These inform a policy framework and an ensuing alternative termed “resilient multilateralism.” Adopting a foreign policy standpoint, this alternative entails principles on context specificity, complementarity, consensus building, and non-confrontation. By opening space for global action, it offers a timely approach to countering future shocks and coordination failures—whether wrought through nature or through hands of our own.

Keywords middle powers, resilience, multilateralism, global governance, regional governance

Introduction: The Problem of Global Collective Action

How can middle powers best promote global collective action? This question may strike some as peculiar or even paradoxical. For one, middle powers are inherently constrained in their global role. Their ability to steer global action remains decidedly limited relative to their great power counterparts. Yet, two current and interconnected strands compel a reconsideration of middle power roles today.

First, growing global challenges have already left an indelible mark on the present century. The COVID-19 pandemic adds yet another example of global challenges, in addition to climate change and lasting effects from the global financial crisis and war on terror. Shared across these is an inability to reckon with an increasingly enmeshed and entangled 21st Century. As noted in Park (2020, 8), “Globalization may have brought human lives closer together, but we do not yet seem to know *how* to live so close to one another.” Like Bhagwati’s (1995,

4) depiction of “spaghetti bowl” trade policies, globalization brings complexity, uncertainty, and system-wide risks. Further, its ties that unite are inherently ties that bind. One thus finds backlash (à la Schiller’s “bent twig”) where one sees more harm than help from globalization’s ties (Berlin 1972, 18). Echoed in Brexit, former US president Donald Trump’s “make America great again,” and Alternative für Deutschland’s “*Deutschland. Aber normal*” (Germany. But normal), these attempts to turn back time attest to growing entanglements in 21st Century life.

Second, returning great power politics compound these global challenges. Global integration has brought a retrenchment of geopolitical divides. Contrary to post-Cold War visions of an “end of history,” the world has not coalesced in a universal liberal order (Fukuyama 1989). Unlike hopes of a conversion of the USSR via shock therapy or China via market reforms, *economic* liberalism has not meant *political* liberalism. Despite their close ties in US liberal thought, economic integration has coincided with growing political divides. Reflecting old First versus Second World rivalries, geopolitical fault-lines are again re-emerging, from Ukraine to Syria to the South China Sea—to note only the more obvious examples.

These global challenges and great power politics raise collective action problems amidst post-Cold War globalization. Prior existential risks like nuclear war now extend to climate change, global health, finance, trade, migration, inequality, and beyond. These systemic threats demand greater cooperation and collective action to sustain co-existence into the 21st Century (Fennell 2022). As countries rechart their geopolitical risks and trajectories amidst growing uncertainties, it is worth exploring alternative paths, framings, or contingency plans to realize global action.

Herein enters this article’s turn to middle powers to reconsider paths to global action. Relative to the standing of great powers in international relations (IR) theory, the use of “middle powers” in IR remains fuzzier and more sporadic (Brattberg 2021; Cooper and Dal 2016; Jordaan 2017). This may be understandable, given the larger influence of great powers in global governance and international order. At the same time, there may be vested interests underlying this knowledge gap. As reminded by scholars in global IR, academic knowledge production is shaped by the interests of its creators (Colgan 2019; Kristensen 2015; Levin and Trager 2019). With IR framed by Hoffmann (1977, 41) as an “American social science,” Engerman (2007, 599) reminds of the ties between “American knowledge and global power.” Here, academic theories and theorists act as an invisible hand shaping global realities (see Chang 2002; Gendzier 1985; Gilman 2003; Mackenzie 2006; Packenham 1973; Park 2020).

In the case of IR, the field remains closely tied to Eurocentric worldviews and US interests (Goh 2019; Kang and Lin 2019). With the US setting its global standards, even European contributors are placed into niche schools (e.g., the English school, Copenhagen school). Leading to a tacit “methodological

nationalism,” to cite Unger (2016), it is less surprising to note the peripheral status of middle powers in IR. However, this can render major blind spots for such a purportedly global field—as unpacked in a 2019 special issue on American bias in the *Journal of Global Security Studies* (Avant et al. 2019).

This work correspondingly frames its turn to middle powers amidst not just uneven IR realities, but an uneven IR scholarship. The ensuing historical approach explores four case studies on middle power multilateralism. Capturing geopolitical shifts from the 1970s onwards, they render a policy framework for middle power multilateralism. Proposing “resilient multilateralism” as an alternate strategy, its principles on context specificity, complementarity, consensus building, and non-confrontation embrace global complexity to expand multilateral options. Though not without limitations, resilient multilateralism thus offers a response to growing barriers to global action.

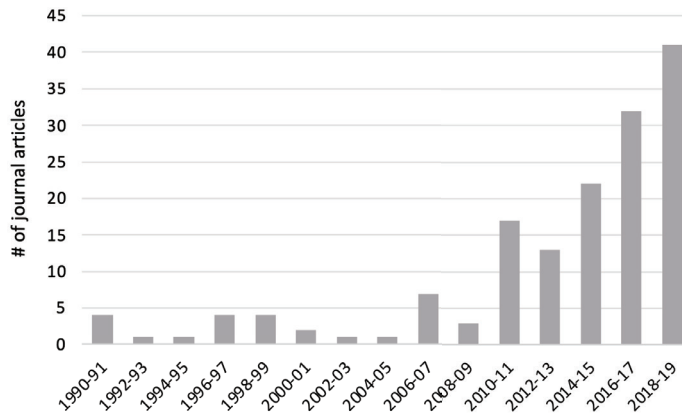
Literature Review: The Lesser Status of Middle Powers

When examining the English-language IR literature, a curious feature can be observed in the lesser status of middle powers as a research topic. For example, a cursory search for “middle powers” in all IR journals listed in the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI) yields seventy-six articles from the past five years. By comparison, a search for “great powers” yields 345 articles in the same period (a 4.5-fold difference).¹

A deeper look at this middle power literature finds the topic concentrated in lower impact factor journals. Amassed in the third and fourth quartiles, this is not a judgement of scholarly quality so much as it is evidence of lesser citation or circulation in IR debates. Tellingly, many of these journals are based in middle power countries. Examples include the *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, *International Journal* (Canada), *International Relations of the Asia Pacific* (Japan), and *Pacific Focus* (South Korea).

With that noted, these latest works present marked growth in middle power research. In contrast to earlier post-Cold War decades, IR scholarship since the 2010s shows notable interest in middle powers (see Figure 1). These latest works reveal a number of motivating factors.

One is a marked shift in geoeconomic contexts by the 2010s. Contrasting a faltering First World with the 2008 global financial crisis and 2013 Eurozone crisis are emerging markets and rising powers. Spurring Cooper and Dal’s (2016) third wave in middle power diplomacy, this ties to the growing role of the G20, the BRICS economies (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), and MIKTA middle powers (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, and Australia). A number of works thus explore prospects for an expanded role of middle powers in regional and global governance in the present century.

Figure 1. Number of Middle Power-Related Articles in SSCI-Listed IR Journals over Time

Source: Author. Data: Web of Science (www.webofscience.com/wos).

Highlighting new contexts post-2008 global financial crisis, Yi, Sohn, and Kim (2018) map new risks and trajectories for social policy. Of key importance here are growing strains as incumbent ideas and institutions fail to match unfolding contexts under globalization. Kim (2015) finds challenges in development that echo the social policies and welfare systems above. Faced with a new donor landscape for development cooperation, Kim thus revisits the role of South Korea in the contexts of the Sustainable Development Goals and middle power initiatives like MIKTA.

Similarly, Onis and Kutlay (2017) highlight the role of Turkey as an emerging middle power in global and regional governance. Again highlighting BRICS and MIKTA, they foresee turbulence for middle powers. Namely, domestic political constraints are illustrated in Turkey with the rise of Erdoğan and the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*). This intersection of domestic politics and international relations is further explored by Lee (2017) and Nayan and Shekhar (2020) in broader Asian contexts. Highlighted are possibilities for not just regional cooperation, but also global conflict as a growing focal point for geopolitical and geoeconomic interests.

For better or worse, these views find grounding in present realities, whether in a US pivot to Asia or a UK tilt to the Indo-Pacific (UK Cabinet Office 2021). Correspondingly, recent works combine geoeconomic with more explicit geopolitical concerns. Here, rising US unilateralism—from the war on terror to actions under Trump—finds a US increasingly distanced from Western allies. Attempts to mend ties (e.g., US President Biden’s “America is back” and “Build back better”) have done little to stem returning great power overtures from Russia and China. The ensuing great power tensions have increasingly left middle power policymakers in a diplomatic bind.

In Europe, Siddi (2019) thus highlights Italy's balancing act between Russian and Euro-Atlantic relations. To this, Græger (2019) finds Norway in a similar bind between US/NATO and Russian ties. Paltiel (2018) further adds Canada's embattled role in US-China tensions. Shifting to the US-China trade war, Jeong and Lee (2021) address the risk of escalation into military conflict. In search of countering strategies, Katsumata and Nagata (2019) investigate the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as a successful case of navigating US-China tensions. Bearing constraints *and* possibilities, Do (2021) finally adds a silver lining in the case of Vietnam's rise despite geopolitical constraints in the South China Sea.

In this shifting policy space, a recurring argument arises in the need for middle powers to ballast volatility and sustain international cooperation/security (Brattberg 2021). Added to global challenges like climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, this turn to middle powers attests to growing recognition of declining unipolarity and the need to reckon with an increasingly multipolar world.

Methodology: Middle Power Multilateralism in History

This recent middle power scholarship adds a further caveat framing this present study. Namely, a number of recent works grapple with the fluid definition of middle powers across this literature.

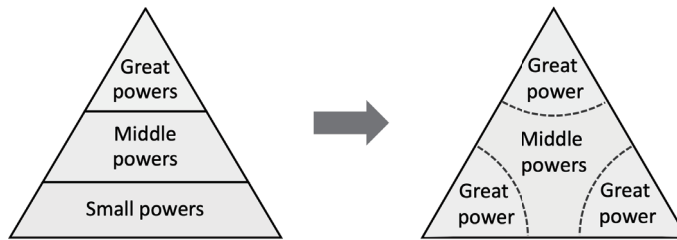
For example, Jordaan (2017) and Andersen (2019) raise scepticism of the middle power term, given its shifting definitions. Highlighting a variety of frameworks used to justify competing definitions, a broad distinction is drawn between traditional versus emerging middle powers. In response, Jordaan calls for a significant narrowing in middle power criteria to enable meaningful analysis of international relations.

Robertson (2017) starts from similar premises in the muddled definitions of middle powers. However, Robertson takes a notably different approach in highlighting deeper, systemic features of middle power discourses. Attempts to define middle powers here are less about proper social science categories and more about exercising power to control middle power narratives. Assuming that there is one singular, static definition of middle powers is thus futile.

In contrast, Woo (2021) offers objective criteria for an alternative definition of middle powers. Distinguishing between latent and mature middle powers, their differences are illustrated in the International Monetary Fund's treatment of India and South Korea. While this could be perceived as defiance of Robertson's posited futility, it could also be framed as what Robertson proposes as a pragmatic solution—not dissimilar from Jordaan's move in narrowing its definitional criteria.

Unsurprisingly, these moving conceptual goalposts and competing premises drive Jeong's (2019) critique of the potential abuses of the middle power category.

Figure 2. This Article's Conceptual Shift in the Framing/Definition of Middle Powers



Source: Author

In it, one can find a vessel to carry all manner of implicit biases and circular reasoning. To an extent, however, this malleability of theoretical concepts and categories is reason for why they exist. Realities constantly change, and so too do its corresponding concepts and categories—at least in theory.

Case in point, Jeong (2020) then offers a genealogy of the term in South Korean contexts. Of particular interest are two translations of “middle power” in Korean: *joong-jin-gook* (used by President Park Chung-hee) and *joong-gan-gook-ga* (used by President Roh Tae-woo). The etymology of the former infers a country in a mid-level stage of development. However, the latter holds another meaning as not just a mid-level country, but as a country that sits between other parties. Framing middle powers as middlepersons or mediators in IR, this departs from a hierarchy of great, middle, and small powers implied in English-language contexts (see Figure 2).

Accordingly, middle powers are defined here as sovereign states that sit between great powers. This then eliminates a distinction between middle and small powers. Lower-income countries like Belarus or Lithuania and city-states like Singapore thus join a more familiar cast of middle powers (e.g., Canada, Mexico, UK, France, Turkey, South Africa, Australia, South Korea, and Japan). The key criterion here is a geopolitical position *between* great powers. Arguably encompassing most states amidst post-Cold War globalization, it may thus be more useful to define the great powers in question. Though its constituents change over time, the present work concerns itself with a reigning US plus two returning challengers: China and Russia.

This opening up of the middle power grouping may well revive questions on its validity and use. As seen in the middle power literature, the matter of definition remains a thorn in its side. However, this study takes a narrower view on the applicability of any one middle power definition. To recall the malleability and instrumental value of theoretical concepts/categories, this open definition is intended as a starting point rather than as a static premise—as will be seen in the later discussions of possible (semi-)peripheral distinctions between middle powers.

This study's focus on middle power multilateralism further adds another contested concept. As highlighted in an earlier wave of scholarship, multilateralism also finds frequent but fuzzy use in IR (Keohane 1990; Cox 1992; Ruggie 1992). Keohane (1990, 731) offers a baseline definition: "Multilateralism can be defined as the practice of co-ordinating national policies in groups of three or more states, through ad hoc arrangements or by means of institutions." To this, Ruggie (1992, 572) helpfully distinguishes three sites of multilateral relations: international orders, international regimes, and international organizations.

This study adopts Keohane's (1990) state-centric view while focusing on international regimes within Ruggie's (1992) rubric. International orders and international organizations then re-enter the frame as sites for competing international regimes, reflecting Morse and Keohane's (2014, 387) updated focus on contested multilateralism: "Contested multilateralism involves the use of different multilateral institutions to challenge the rules, practices, or missions of existing multilateral institutions." Employed here to frame middle power strategies for enabling multilateral action across varying international organizations and orders, this study turns to the past to explore possible ways forward.

Consequently, this article unpacks four historical case studies on middle power multilateralism in: (1) post-1974 UN New International Economic Order; (2) post-1989 Bretton Woods institutions; (3) post-1992 European Union expansion; and (4) post-2003 UN South-South cooperation. Each associated policy regime will be unpacked into lead actors, global contexts, policy approaches, and outcomes. Notably, only three of the four cases entail middle power-led multilateralism. The exception (the Bretton Woods institutions' Washington Consensus) arguably entails more a constrained (or captive) form of middle power multilateralism. However, it remains valuable as an example of middle power options under severe unipolar constraints. Adding contrast to the other case studies, it follows Cox's (1992) approach in situating multilateralism in world order.

As a closing caveat, these case studies are thus far from exhaustive in their coverage of middle power multilateralism. For one, the fuzzy definitions of middle power and multilateralism may defy the possibility of exhaustive coverage. Instead, this study narrowly samples Cold War and post-Cold War contexts to derive salient lessons for middle power policymakers today. Countering a reliance on great powers for global action, this present work thus comes with a disclaimer of its explicit adoption of middle power standpoints—as diverse and problematic as they may be.

Past Approaches to Middle Power Multilateralism

Post-1974 UN New International Economic Order

In 1974, the Third World raised a declaration at the UN that would set the tone for their geopolitical and geoeconomic efforts across the decade to come. Adopted in the UN General Assembly, resolutions 3201 (S-VI) and 3202 (S-VI) called for a New International Economic Order (NIEO). Though often forgotten in the present day, these Third World efforts capture a remarkable turn in Cold War contexts by the 1970s.

To understand the NIEO, it is worth recalling the geopolitical and geoeconomic contexts surrounding its rise. The end of the World Wars had accelerated decolonization around the world, with colonialism and racism now officially (or at least superficially) on the wane. From fifty-one signatories in 1945, UN membership thus tripled to 154 countries by 1980 (UN 2021). Out of this emerged a new geopolitical front coined the term Third World (*Tiers Monde*) by Alfred Sauvy (1952). Following the “one country, one vote” system of the UN General Assembly, decolonization hence brought the arrival of a major new geopolitical force.

Development further brought economic growth across Third World countries in the 1960s. This growth did not come without issues, however. In addition to problems of distribution/inequality, the 1970s brought significant instability in international finance (e.g., breakdown of the Bretton Woods monetary system), commodity prices (e.g., oil shocks in 1973 and 1979), and environmental sustainability (e.g., Meadows et al. 1972).

Underlying this instability were structural inequalities in the world economy, disadvantaging commodity-based Third World economies versus industrial producers. A key example is the unequal terms of trade argument advanced by Hans Singer and Raúl Prebisch at the UN Economic Commissions of Europe and Latin America, respectively (Singer 1949; UN ECLA 1950). Compatible with a range of intellectual stances (e.g., Keynesian economics, Latin American structuralism, neo-Marxism), they brought a shared conclusion. Formal political independence was not enough. Full decolonization and development would require freedom from economic fetters inherent in the world economy. Centered on the West with the Third World at the periphery, these arguments would also find First World support.

Namely, a radical new generation in the West would bring an amalgamation of New Left, anti-war, and civil rights movements. Sympathetic to anti-imperial and anti-colonial struggles, this alignment would open an opportunity for Third World-led multilateralism. It is here that the UN General Assembly hosted a 1974 special session “Raw Materials and Development”, which saw the adoption of its landmark resolution 3201 (S-VI): “Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order” (UN General Assembly 1974a).

Resolution 3201 (S-VI) can be divided into two parts: a rear-facing summary of global contexts (sections 1–3) and a forward-facing agenda for overcoming global challenges (sections 4–7). Its rear-facing summary contrasts advances in decolonization and development with growing inequalities and injustices—most pointedly in a “widening gap between the developed and the developing countries” (ibid., 3). The vestiges of “colonial domination, foreign occupation, racial discrimination, *apartheid* and neo-colonialism” hindered the equitable distribution of technological and economic gains (ibid., 3).

The rise of the Third World also brought growing strains with a global institutional architecture designed before Cold War decolonization. The result was a global system unfit for peace and progress for future generations. In response, resolution 3201 (S-VI) set out twenty principles upon which to base a NIEO. These lay out obligations for developed countries, developing countries, and all countries combined.

Duties for all countries include respect for national sovereignty (principles a, d, e), international cooperation (principle b), equitable economic relations (principles c, g, j, l), and sustainability (principle q). Particular duties for *developed* countries then include preferential treatment for developing countries (principles k, n, o, p). Added to this was full restitution for and condemnation of colonialism, foreign occupation, and racial discrimination (principles f, h, i). Finally, *developing* countries were to refocus all their efforts towards national development and international cooperation with fellow developing countries (principles m, r, s, t). Combined, these obligations underpinned a vision for a more peaceful, equitable, and sustainable international order.

This declaration would bring vast mobilization across UN institutions, proliferating beyond economic to political, legal, technological, and other social dimensions (UN General Assembly 1974b, 1974c, 1975). By 1980, one thus finds the NIEO joined by a “New World Information and Communication Order” (UNESCO 1980), a “New International Socio-Cultural Order” (Sauvant 1981), and a “New International Humanitarian/Human Order” (UN General Assembly 1981, 1983).

However, the NIEO would find little support from the USSR and even less from US officials. Western New Left calls for Third World liberation would soon be followed by a less sympathetic political Right. Recall Ronald Reagan’s disdain for postcolonial opposition to the US in the UN, which he vented in 1971 to Richard Nixon, “To see those, those monkeys from those African countries—damn them, they’re still uncomfortable wearing shoes!” (Naftali 2019, para. 1). A reminder that a formal end to racism and colonialism hardly meant a *de facto* end, the 1980s would bring a closing window of opportunity.

In particular, the 1982 emerging market debt crisis and coming collapse of the USSR would bury the NIEO. Highlighting the importance of global contexts in shaping policy frontiers, this attempt to re-order great powers adds a further

warning. Directly challenging great powers as middle powers is fraught with endogenous (e.g., internal divisions, coordination failures) and exogenous risks (e.g., geoeconomic, geopolitical volatility).

Post-1989 Bretton Woods Institutions

Post-1989 Bretton Woods institutions, acting as a vehicle for the Washington Consensus, would bring markedly different contexts than those of the UN NIEO. Instead of Third World actors and UN institutions, this policy regime extends from a unipolar US and Bretton Woods institutions; namely, the IMF and World Bank.

Unlike the UN and its “one country, one vote” system, governance at the IMF and World Bank is weighted by country funding in said institutions. Rendering greater control for the US and its wealthier allies, the Bretton Woods institutions host a more exclusive arena than the UN. The 1980s would further see collapse of bipolar into unipolar world order. Captured in the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall, these overt geopolitical changes also bear quieter ideological shifts.

Namely, intellectual foundations in dependency theory, neo-Marxism, and neo-colonialism would implode in the 1980s. One cause is political collapse of the Western New Left, adding to an impasse for former neo-Marxist theorists (Booth 1985). Along with it comes a fall in Third World intellectual movements, framed by Larrain (1989) as a betrayal of Third World intellectuals by their First World allies.

Third World economic crises by the 1980s would further reduce space for alternatives. Paving the way for Harberger’s (1996) “good economics” to arrive in Latin America from the US, this coincides with the global proliferation of structural adjustment policies. Added to what Sachs (1995) terms “shock therapy” for post-Soviet economies, the spread of US-style economic liberalism via structural adjustment would bring new terms for world order: the Washington Consensus instead of the NIEO.

Coined by John Williamson (1990), the Washington Consensus originally spanned ten policies. Reflecting US policies on Latin America after the 1982 emerging market debt crises, they would come to represent a new post-Cold War policy regime faced by sympathetic and unsympathetic middle powers, alike. These policies broadly encompassed three priorities.

First was a reduction in public spending and budget deficits (fiscal discipline, re-ordering public expenditure priorities). Second were policy instruments geared towards shrinking not just public spending, but the very role of the state, itself (privatization, deregulation). In place of the state would enter the market. The remaining six policies hence turn to a liberation of market forces (tax reform, liberalising interest rates, competitive exchange rates, trade liberalization, liberalization of inward foreign direct investments, property rights).

Consequently, the main thrust of the Washington Consensus would be

to reduce the role of the state and increase the role of markets for growth and development. While not originally intended to capture a geopolitical or geoeconomic moment, Williamson's (ibid.) synopsis would become inseparable from critiques of US-led neoliberalism, globalization, and hegemony. Without getting entrenched in ensuing debates, the Washington Consensus thus captures the arrival of a global policy regime. Like Fukuyama's (1989) "end of history" or Thomas Friedman's (2005) "flat world," Williamson's (1990) Washington Consensus would strike a chord in capturing a new historical milieu.

The Washington Consensus hence reflects policies applied not just in post-1982 Latin America and Africa, but also the post-1991 shock therapy applied to former Soviet economies and the post-1997 IMF conditionalities in the Asian financial crisis. Underpinning these US-led policies in the Bretton Woods institutions was a belief in rapid transition to free market capitalism as both possible and desirable through a universal set of policies.

By the 1990s, the consolidation of this new policy regime would enable rapid globalization over the ensuing decades. Economic integration and unhindered movement for capital and certain elites would inspire views of a fading nation-state. However, globalization would not come without costs and discontents. In addition to corruption (e.g., crony capitalism) from sudden policy shocks, the ensuing dissolution of welfare systems and public goods would bear major human costs (Williamson 2009; de Vogli and Gimeno 2009; Murrell 1993). Exacerbating socioeconomic inequalities, its policies seeded a precarity in both domestic and international politics—the effects of which continue to unfold today, from populist backlash against the "tyranny of experts" (Easterly 2014) to Russian existential anxieties post-Soviet collapse (Arbatov 2001).

At a broader level, the Washington Consensus thus warns against universal policy prescriptions in a diverse human world. Even more dangerous if led by narrower great power interests, the end of the Cold War yet brought a collapse of alternatives. Leading to concerns of a shrinking policy space (Chang 2006), US unipolarity still promised public goods (e.g., gains from trade, lasting peace). Of course, the benefit of hindsight now reveals the Faustian nature of such a bargain. Namely, there is no guarantee that such powers will not be abused. Joining great powers may seem the only option, but a unipolar system hardly guarantees that the hegemon will fulfil its end of the bargain.

Post-1992 EU Expansion

Amidst post-Cold War world order, European states provide a powerful example of manoeuvring across a constrained policy space. While allied to the US as part of the First World, these ties belie regional efforts to proxy great powers through the European Union (EU).

The EU dates back to long precedents since the close of the World Wars. Shortly after World War II, Churchill (1946) proposed a "United States of Europe"

to respond to twin existential threats. Namely, domestic post-war recovery and rising nuclear threats demanded greater regional integration. This union would be trialled with the 1957 Treaties of Rome, which established the European Coal and Steel Community and Euratom. Originally involving six states (Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, West Germany), the ensuing decades brought expanding regional integration (e.g., 1965 Merger Treaty, 1970 Treaty of Luxembourg, 1975 Treaty of Brussels, 1985 Single European Act).

The 1992 Maastricht Treaty would mark a turning point, officially coining the “European Union” and establishing a new structure and policy remit (EU 1992). Now encompassing twelve member states, the EU encompassed three pillars: (1) the European community consolidating the European Economic Community, European Coal and Steel Community, and Euratom, (2) a common foreign and security policy to represent common EU identity and interests on the world stage, and (3) cooperation on justice and home affairs through Europol—a new European police force. In addition to this new institutional architecture, the EU’s policy remit would expand to realize a common regional economy and identity (e.g., plans for common EU citizenship and common currency).

The 1992 Maastricht Treaty was followed by the 1997 Amsterdam Treaty, the 2001 Treaty of Nice, and the 2007 Treaty of Lisbon (EU 1997, 2001, 2007). In addition to streamlining bureaucracy, these treaties expanded the legal status and role of the EU. For example, the Treaty of Amsterdam expanded the EU’s legal jurisdiction at home (e.g., Europol policing of intra-EU crime, the Shenghen Agreement on internal movement) and abroad (e.g., as a distinct actor in foreign affairs—especially in international security and the UN). The 2001 Treaty of Nice then set the stage for a near doubling in EU membership from fifteen states in 2001 to twenty-seven by 2007. This Eastward expansion added post-Soviet states to a core of Western/Central European powers.

Today’s EU thus represents a culmination of decades of policy experimentation and innovation. However, despite (or rather due to) its rapid growth, the EU faces two key challenges of its own. One is backlash at home from Eurosceptics—most notably in the departure of the UK with Brexit. Of added relevance in Poland, Hungary, and Italy today, rapid EU expansion has not come without major challenges (Nyyssönen 2018). As evidenced in the spread of populist nationalisms in Europe, the nation-state is still very much alive—and fiercely kicking.

These internal divides open secondary risks for foreign intervention in EU affairs. Palpable in both EU-China and NATO-Russia relations, border states continue to be a site of geopolitical contestation (e.g., Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine). To this, one cannot forget the US and its unilateralism—especially across the younger Bush, Obama, and Trump administrations—for adding to the impetus for European integration.

The EU thus offers a third strategy of proxying great powers through

regional integration. Caught in a web of great power interests, EU leaders have called explicitly for a more geopolitical EU (Macron 2019; von der Leyen 2019). In a world “where too many powers only speak the language of confrontation and unilateralism” (von der Leyen 2019, 6), the EU Commission President adds, “We have the duty to act and the power to lead” (ibid., 10). Citing the EU’s status as “the world’s trading superpower,” this harkens back to Churchill’s logic for a “United States of Europe.”

Yet, the EU’s considerable domestic and foreign challenges remind of the challenges of regional governance. While seven decades of policy experimentation and innovation have established the EU as a geopolitical and geoeconomic force, whether that force can be effectively wielded remains to be seen. The prospect of forging a common regional identity remains arduous (Fennell 2022; Park 2021). Underestimating regional diversity can lead to institutional overstretch, internal vulnerabilities, and unsustainable grounds for collective action.

Recent events attest to the mounting challenges on the EU’s horizon. The COVID-19 pandemic and present crisis in Ukraine add to incumbent trials in Brexit, Trump, migration crises, and rising populism. A silver lining may lie in a (temporary) internal unity forged through external great power pressure. Lithuania’s support of Taiwan, Macron’s EU army, and von der Leyen’s geopolitical EU had raised internal frictions only months ago. However, Germany’s sudden shift on military spending and Russian energy dependence mark new prospects for proxying great powers. The EU’s collective response to these internal and external challenges will offer especially valuable insights for middle power multilateralism and regional/global governance in the years to come.

Post-2003 UN South-South Cooperation

If the EU was christened in a time of rising unipolarity, then South-South cooperation (SSC) arises amidst a shift in narratives. On one hand, emerging markets and rising powers held greater stature as sources of growth and investment in the 2000s. On the other were faltering Western economies following the 2008 global financial crisis and 2013 Eurozone crisis. Bringing together “global South” instead of “Third World” actors, they would again find a forum in the UN.

If the EU has clear Cold War precursors in the 1957 Treaties of Rome, then SSC has clear precursors in the 1978 Buenos Aires Plan of Action (BAPA) on Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries (TCDC). Part of the larger institutional mobilization surrounding the NIEO, the BAPA presents a blueprint for major changes to developing assistance. Emphasizing that TCDC is not a replacement for all forms of development assistance, the rise of the Third World yet presented TCDC as a powerful channel for Third World development and solidarity.

But as Third World came to be replaced by global South, so too did TCDC find new clothes as SSC by 2003. Namely, UN General Assembly resolution

58/220 rebranded the UNDP Special Unit for TCDC as the Special Unit for SSC (UN General Assembly 2003). Marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of BAPA's UN General Assembly endorsement, it also set December 19 as the United Nations Day for South-South Cooperation. As a further sign of the times, the NIEO would also be revived in anticipation of the thirty-fifth anniversary of its original declaration (UN General Assembly 2008).

This revival of NIEO rationales can be seen in the 2009 Nairobi outcome document for the UN High-level Conference on SSC. Invoking Third World solidarity, the document states that "the increasing economic dynamism of some developing countries in recent years has imparted greater energy to South-South cooperation... we recognize the solidarity of middle-income countries with other developing countries with a view to supporting their development efforts" (UN General Assembly 2009, 2). While diplomatically reiterating that SSC is not meant to replace North-South cooperation, emerging markets and rising powers seemingly reopened a path for solidarity and collective action across the global South.

This is especially laid out in the Nairobi document's sections 11, 17, and 18. Framing SSC as a manifestation of global South solidarity, the document states, "We recognize that developing countries tend to share common views on national development strategies and priorities when faced with similar development challenges" (*ibid.*, 3). Furthermore, "We reaffirm that South-South cooperation is a common endeavour of peoples and countries of the South, born out of shared experiences and sympathies, based on their common objectives and solidarity, and guided by, *inter alia*, the principles of respect for national sovereignty and ownership, free from any conditionalities" (*ibid.*, 3).

SSC hence seizes upon the rise of the global South to revive NIEO strategies of subaltern cooperation to counter great powers—albeit now in unipolar (versus bipolar) contexts. Shared policy constraints would provide a basis for collective action. However, this approach of shifting away from North-South dependencies raises questions on overly idealistic operational assumptions and the limited scope and scale of ensuing efforts.

For example, SSC's reliance on political solidarity is re-stated in the latest 2019 UN report on SSC: "We acknowledge the voluntary, participative, and demand driven nature of South-South Cooperation, born out of shared experiences and sympathies, based on their common objectives and solidarity" (UN 2019, 5). However, the EU case reminds of the difficulties in coordinating across wealthy European nations despite seven decades of trial and error (not to mention their long-shared history). Given the diversity of middle power constraints, both domestic/endogenous and international/exogenous, premising SSC solidarity on assumed commonalities adds major risks.

Indeed, the 2009 Nairobi outcome document acknowledges "the need to reinvigorate the United Nations development system in supporting and

promoting South-South cooperation” (UN General Assembly 2009, 5). Despite extensive consultation and operational guidelines (UN General Assembly 2016), resource constraints are again highlighted at the second UN High-level Conference on SSC (UN General Assembly 2019). Added to the voluntary and participatory approach adopted by SSC, this raises inherent limitations for the political scope and economic scale of ensuing efforts. Born out of an idealism inherent in the NIEO and inherited by SSC, rising great power tensions further stress these inherent limitations.

None of the above concerns should detract from the possibility of SSC as an alternative mode of multilateral action. However, its internal principles and external contexts raise questions regarding its larger significance. On one hand, its less confrontational approach relative to NIEO precedents bring a subtler attempt to *de-centre* great powers (as opposed to a direct *re-ordering*). On the other hand, its limitations raise questions on the extent that ensuing attempts can move the needle, so to speak, in regional and global governance. Its aims to do so are clear in the contexts of global South uplift. Whether its ambitions can be reconciled with its constraints, however, remains to be seen.

Summary

These four case studies offer a historical sketch of global contexts and policy approaches from the 1970s–2010s. To recall, they do not represent an exhaustive account of middle power policies during the period. Rather, they highlight valuable historical precedents or paradigms for global collective action. Salient characteristics of each example are summarised in Table 1 (following page).

Of particular emphasis is the significance of geoeconomic and geopolitical contexts when designing middle power policies. Recalling Cox (1992, 163), understanding multilateralism “must begin with an assessment of the present and emerging future condition of the world system.” Laying a global arena for Morse and Keohane’s (2014) contested multilateralism(s), these case studies remind of a historic Third World rise and more recent Southern return amidst present shifts towards multipolar world order. Correspondingly, these features premise a return to present contexts to chart potential paths for multilateral action.

Past Lessons, Future Paths: Towards Resilient Multilateralism

A Policy Framework on Multilateral Approaches

Having examined four past approaches, we return to our core question: What kind of multilateralism best enables middle powers to promote global action? To begin, a policy framework can be derived from these four case studies (see Figure 3). Adopting a foreign policy standpoint, its two axes on the scope of policy agendas (from thin to thick) and actors (from a few to many) chart a policy space

Table 1. Summary of the Four Policy Case Studies on Middle Power Multilateralism

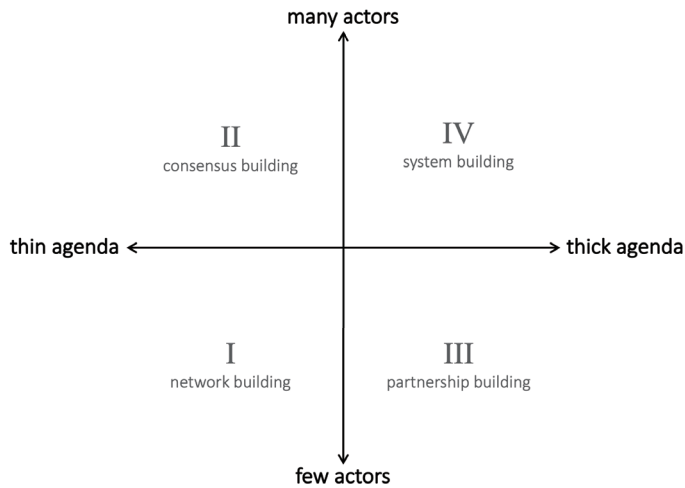
	NIEO (1970s–80s)	BWI (1980s–90s)	EU (1990s–00s)	SSC (2000s–10s)
Lead actors	Third World + UN	US + IMF, World Bank	European states	Global South + UN
Policy approach	Re-order great powers (<i>NIEO + variants</i>)	Join great powers (<i>Washington Consensus</i>)	Proxy great powers (<i>Rome, Maastricht</i>)	De-centre great powers (<i>Buenos Aires, Nairobi</i>)
Geopolitical/ geoeconomic contexts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rise of the Third World (<i>decolonization, development</i>) • Non-alignment versus US-USSR polarization • First World support for Third World democracy (<i>New Left, civil rights, anti-war movements</i>) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fall of the Third World (<i>economic, political, intellectual crises</i>) • Fall of the New Left/ return of political Right • First World turn to anti-communism over Third World democracy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • US political, economic unipolarity/ hegemony (<i>growing unilateralism, market dominance</i>) • Shrinking policy space • Cold War precedents (<i>“United States of Europe”</i>) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unequal world order (<i>US/West/ global North</i>) • New frontiers for growth/ investment (<i>emerging markets, BRICS, rising powers</i>) • From unipolarity to multipolar world order
Policy outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vast institutional and intellectual mobilization • Perceived as a threat by great powers • Ran out of time; short window of opportunity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unified policy regime driving globalization • Major social costs of structural adjustment • Backlash against US, BWI, globalization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rapid geographical and sectoral expansion • From economic to legal, political union • Domestic backlash and foreign intervention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revived NIEO ideas • Formal implementation in UN institutions • Limited political scope and economic scale
Key lessons	Do not compete directly with great powers as a middle power	Trading political agency for global public goods is risky; no guarantees	Middle powers also face internal divisions and hierarchies of their own	Middle power solidarity as a means, not an end; limited impact

Source: Author

with four quadrants.

Case 1 on the NIEO falls in the most extensive and expensive approach of system-building (Quadrant IV). This coalition of Third World actors and allies captures a rare moment in history. Challenging bipolar dichotomies of the Cold War (i.e., US capitalism versus USSR communism), the economic, political, and

Figure 3. Policy Framework Charting Approaches to Multilateralism



Source: Author

intellectual mobilization of Third World players at the UN presented a direct attempt to re-order great powers.

Case 2 on the Bretton Woods institutions and their Washington Consensus captures a competing and ultimately victorious design for international order (Quadrant IV). Institutionalized in the IMF and World Bank, this US-led policy regime rises amidst internal crises in the Second and Third Worlds. Out of this came a unipolar moment for the US, with middle powers having little seeming recourse beyond joining great powers in post-Cold War international order.

Case 3 then traces a response from European actors. Building on Cold War precedents, growing US unilateralism and the fall of the USSR spurs rapid expansion for the EU. What starts as a narrow set of economic policies and European partners (Quadrant III) expands by 1992 with elements of consensus building (Quadrant II). This comes with geographical expansion across post-Soviet states and sectoral expansion from economic into political and legal institutions. However, attempts to proxy great powers (Quadrant IV) face challenges as internal cohesion in the face of migration, Brexit, and COVID-19 wears thin.

Case 4 on South-South cooperation revives the spirit of the NIEO to de-centre great powers. Tied to lower-cost network building approaches (Quadrant I), these efforts lay grounds for potential expansion into consensus, partnership, and system-building efforts (Quadrants II–IV). However, SSC lacks the geopolitical momentum of the NIEO and its unique historical moment. Furthermore, its reliance on Southern solidarity and its limited resources constrain its potential to stir regional and global action. Yet, it offers a valuable tool in a potential strategy termed “resilient multilateralism.”

Resilient Multilateralism as a Hybrid Strategy

The policy framework set out in Figure 3 charts a potentially infinite array of policy paths. However, lessons from these past multilateral policy regimes can be combined to offer a hybrid strategy called resilient multilateralism.

Resilient multilateralism places focus on the systemic relations structuring global action. This reflects present interdisciplinary efforts to reckon with the complex and interconnected nature of contemporary life. Spurred by environmental sustainability, the adoption of resilience as a concept from psychology to ecology and disaster management has increasingly been applied to international relations (Bourbeau 2018; Hill and Kakenmaster 2018). Policymakers—especially in Europe—have also increasingly used resilience to frame policy efforts (Paul and Roos 2019; Tocci 2020; UK Cabinet Office 2021). Here, one finds a range of priorities, from economic security and statecraft to climate change and global governance.

When applied to middle powers, this entails a gestalt shift or flipped perspective. Instead of focusing on individual actors and great power constraints, focus shifts to the sites and forms of interaction shaping international relations. Highlighting the systemic contexts/constraints of post-Cold War globalization, resilient multilateralism builds on academic and policy precursors to derive four principles derived from the prior case studies.

First is the primacy of context specificity as a starting point for policy considerations. Given policy design constraints that change across place and time, context-specificity prioritizes adaptive policy efforts, as seen in the EU's policy experimentation. This stands at odds with static, universal policy regimes like the Washington Consensus, which are more the province of great powers. However, context specificity requires constant testing and course correction. In this regard, the more "ad hoc" basis (to borrow from Keohane 1990) of SSC offers potential means to test or pre-invest in potential coalitions or partnerships (Quadrants II, III).

Second is an embrace of complementarity to implement context-specific policies. This entails diversifying across multilateral approaches (Sectors I–IV) and partners (middle and great powers). This balance may shift depending on middle power resources (e.g., ability to fund activity in Quadrants II, III) and geopolitical proximity (e.g., to spheres of great power influence). However, this diversified approach renders a flexibility and ambiguity to adapt in tune with geopolitical shifts. As put by Kissinger (2012, 356), "Ambiguity is sometimes the lifeblood of diplomacy." Diversification can yield a diplomatic ambiguity to preserve space for collective action.

Third is an emphasis on consensus building. If the first two principles aim for a more dynamic policy space, then this third points to an ensuing strategy. When interacting with great powers, less can be done to set the terms of engagement in bilateral settings. However, consensus building adds the possibility of shaping

the very playing field upon which all powers stand. Here, middle powers hold a comparative advantage in shaping global norms by merit of their greater numbers.

Indeed, middle powers play an important role in the court of public opinion. Great powers do not live on hard power, alone. Their status requires recognition from other states. Echoing Hegel's ruler-servant (*Herrschaft und Knechtschaft*) dialectic, rulers are dependent on those serving to gain recognition as the ruler. If the perception of power is dispelled (e.g., calling out an emperor with no clothes), effective rule becomes difficult. It is in these contexts that middle powers shape the normative grounds upon which all powers stand.

Fourth is a non-confrontational approach to great power relations. Tied to consensus building to target the global playing field (as opposed to the players), the NIEO again warns against directly challenging great powers. Even in coalition (e.g., the EU, global South), disadvantages remain for internal coordination. Again pointing to SSC as a valuable mode within resilient multilateralism, its network-building effects carry benefits for consensus building and non-confrontation—including when extended to other middle and even great powers via Triangular Cooperation (TrC). Its limitations in economic scale and political scope yet remind of its complementary role as part of a diversified policy regime.

Combined, these four principles of resilient multilateralism aim to maximise policy space for collective action in present contexts. Rendering an embrace of complexity, this aims for a more fluid, dynamic global arena catering to middle power strengths (e.g., agility, greater numbers). This also means turning away from global system building (Quadrant IV). Emphasizing pragmatism, flexibility, and context-specificity, old revolutionary calls *à la* NIEO are put aside. Rather, if this entails a revolution, then it is a quiet revolution; a sea-change in sentiments, a shift in normative grounds upon which all powers play.

Weaknesses of Resilient Multilateralism

With that said, every policy strategy has its weaknesses. Resilient multilateralism is no different. First, resilient multilateralism narrowly applies to a transition state away from unipolar order. Trade-offs and risks vary significantly in a unipolar order versus unstable but flexible transitioning ones. For example, the benefits of allying to a great power in Figure 4 may be higher in a fully functioning unipolar order. Similarly, not allying may be more costly in terms of economic and security prospects outside the unipolar umbrella.

In such cases, forsaking resilient multilateralism for a “join great powers” scenario may offer a suboptimal but stable equilibrium. Further, resilient multilateralism may still break down if middle powers face divide and conquer tactics. Increasing multipolarity may temper such risks, but resilient multilateralism still requires a precious commodity: collective action.

Second, resilient multilateralism depends on collective action to gather strength. As highlighted in the prisoner's dilemma, diplomatic ambiguity becomes

Figure 4. A Prisoner's Dilemma Faced by Middle Powers

		Middle power B	
		ally to a great power	don't ally to great power
Middle power A	ally to a great power	0 , 0	2 , -2
	don't ally to great power	-2 , 2	1 , 1

Source: Author

less sustainable if all other countries ally to a great power. This requires a modicum of collective action and ambiguous players for resilient multilateralism to start (an initial activation energy of sorts). Derailed if international relations are unilaterally mandated or bifurcated into separate spheres (e.g., the iron curtain), resilient multilateralism can thus be curbed if great powers prevent a critical mass of ambiguous middle powers from emerging.

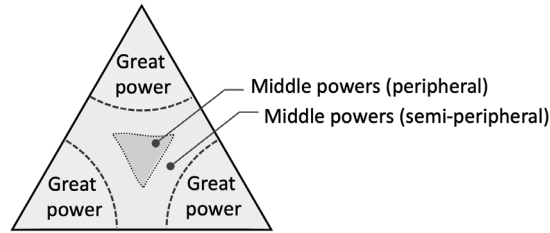
Third, the costs of resilient multilateralism may be prohibitive for some middle powers. Its multi-prong strategy adds significant operational burdens. In this regard, the UN can be spotlighted for its role and continued significance as an inclusive forum (at least at the level of the General Assembly, ECOSOC, and select specialized agencies). However, the UN can only do so much as an intergovernmental organization supporting—not replacing—state functions. Without economic resources and political will, resilient multilateralism may prove difficult to sustain.

Further, middle powers encompass a considerable diversity. European states may have been able to base the EU on shared geopolitical, institutional, and historical contexts, but limits can be seen in its strained internal relations today. Similar efforts in Asia may further prove difficult (e.g., unreconciled histories across Asia), despite ASEAN implementing familiar patterns in its “one vision” and “one identity” tied to its “one community” (Fennell 2022; Park 2021).

Consequently, two tentative directions can be highlighted for advancing resilient multilateralism. One lies in the possibility of restoring a subdivision within middle powers to grasp its internal diversity. However, this does not entail returning middle/small power or developed/developing groupings. Rather, dividing middle powers into semi-periphery/periphery may better reflect the systemic framing inherent in resilient multilateralism. Though decidedly tentative, Figure 5 illustrates one such possibility, echoing SSC’s de-centring of great powers.

Second, SSC and TrC may offer a vital catalyst for spurring middle power-

Figure 5. A Possible Subdivision of Middle Powers for Future Consideration



Source: Author

led multilateralisms. Given the prohibitive costs and preconditions required for resilient multilateralism, the lower profile of SSC and TrC may offer an important complement—even if part of a lower energy/cost segment of a middle power strategy portfolio. However, this mechanism will require careful reassessment of SSC's implicit premises in the face uneven power dynamics within and beyond middle powers. For example, does China as a self-labelled developing country whilst rising/returning as a great power fall under SSC or TrC? What other normative and potentially contentious country cases emerge across different middle and great powers in SSC/TrC? More bluntly, to what extent does Southern solidarity exist in real life? Such questions point to possible reforms to adapt SSC/TrC to rapidly shifting geopolitical contexts while maximising subaltern roles in multilateralism.

Consequently, resilient multilateralism must be seen here as a tentative and specific response to present global challenges. Its path to global action requires active coordination, including between states' domestic and foreign policies (akin to an ambidexterity in governance [Kim and Lim 2017; Kim and Kim 2020]). It also concedes that great power politics may be unavoidable (e.g., Che 2021), but this only adds impetus for exploring middle power paths to global action. However uncontrollable and constrained, international arenas do not remain static nor devoid of opportunities for change. As reminded by UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld (1964, 63): "We are not permitted to choose the frame of our destiny. But what we put into it is ours."

Conclusion: Collective Action in the 21st Century

This article started with a problem of global collective action. Set in the contexts of post-Cold War globalization, it highlights growing global challenges and great power politics. Proliferating across global sustainability, health, trade, finance, migration, and security, it turns to middle powers in a search for alternatives. Largely overshadowed by great powers in IR theories/realities, this article draws

lessons from four historical cases of middle power multilateralism (post-1974 NIEO, post-1989 Bretton Woods institutions, post-1992 EU expansion, post-2003 South-South cooperation).

In addition to deriving a framework for middle power policy options, these lessons culminate in “resilient multilateralism” as an alternative strategy. Aiming to preserve and expand space for multilateral action, it emphasises four principles: context specificity, complementarity, consensus building, and non-confrontation. However, these carry limits in their specific relevance to contexts of fading unipolarity. Even then, resilient multilateralism may still prove too costly for some middle powers to deploy.

Ensuing ideas of SSC/TrC as a potential catalyst for resilient multilateralism and of further disaggregating middle powers (periphery/semi-periphery) thus point to directions for further work. Indeed, the revival of NIEO tenets in SSC point to a larger history to be revisited, echoing early Cold War ideas of technical assistance. History hence remains instrumental in spurring not only ideas for moving forward, but also in understanding how we—and how others—perceive present global and geopolitical challenges (Park 2016, 2017; Koo 2020; Vershinin 2021). Complementing past examples with present cases of middle power multilateralism (e.g., SSC/TrC, African Union, EU-ASEAN ties) would also stress-test the merits and constraints of this resilience-based strategy.

As a final disclaimer, these directions add a complement to—not a replacement for—incumbent theories and policies on great powers. However, compelled by global challenges in this century, this study on middle power multilateralism contributes a limited but valuable glimpse into the possibilities for global collective action that lie beyond great powers.

Notes

1. Search results retrieved through Web of Science using both singular and plural versions of each term. Search categories included article titles, abstracts, and keywords. Results current as of November 18, 2021.

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