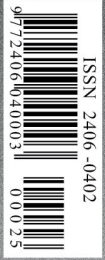


WINTER 2024 / ISSUE NO.25

\$ 12.00 | € 8.50 | 1000 RSD

HORIZONS

JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT



THE AGE OF MINILATERALISM



*Navigating a
Fragmented World*



ADEBAJO • ANTIĆ • BYNG • CAO • CHILDS • CHIRAGOV • HAMIDI
KORTUNOV • MEGRE • QIANG • RIBEIRO • RÜHLE • WEI • ZHIYENBAYEV

WIDENING THE SCOPE

EMERGING PROMINENCE OF MIDDLE POWERS IN GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

Miras Zhiyenbayev

THE way the world has been led, based on shared values and international rules, is facing one of its biggest challenges since the height of the Cold War. This crisis has two main causes. First, the changing balance of power and rivalry among countries, and second, the question of whether our existing global structures can adapt and improve. From a political lens, the prevailing global challenges arise from the emergence of new powers that question the existing international order. Concurrently, there is a global resurgence of nationalism and protectionist tendencies, coupled with a growing skepticism towards established liberal norms and institutions. Historically championed by the West, this liberal global framework is now being reassessed due to the rise of economies like those of China and India, which demand a greater role in global governance.

In the shifting landscape of geopolitics, there is increasing uncertainty regarding the efficiency of current institutions in maintaining balance. In my July 2023

publication for the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies entitled “Widening the Scope: How middle powers are changing liberal institutionalism,” I contend that the strategy of ‘institutionalism by projection’—where dominant powers impose their institutional frameworks on global structures—has seen diminishing returns over time. Critics argue that this approach inadequately represents the diverse perspectives and needs of non-Western states, thereby exacerbating the legitimacy crisis faced by global institutions.

There is a growing argument that institutions, which are central to how countries cooperate, face challenges in making timely and effective decisions. These challenges stem from two main sources. Internally, the bureaucratic structures of these institutions can be cumbersome, leading to slow processes and delayed actions. Externally, the diverse interests of member countries often clash, making it hard to reach quick consensus.

Miras Zhiyenbayev is the Leading Expert at the Department of American and European Studies of the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan.



Photo: Guiliver Image

Presidents of Kazakhstan (Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, left) and Türkiye (Recep Tayyip Erdogan, right), two of the world's many rising middle powers, meet in Ankara in 2022

Many global bodies use a consensus-driven decision model. While this approach emphasizes equality among nations, it can ironically slow things down.

Another big challenge is the way many international organizations make decisions. Their attempts to reach a consensus or full agreement sound ideal in theory. However, this often leads to long discussions, especially on controversial topics, sometimes resulting in no decision at all. For instance, the United Nations Security Council has faced delays in addressing critical issues because permanent members have the power to veto decisions, preventing prompt action.

Additionally, when member countries have different goals and priorities, they are often unable to come to a common ground. This makes the institution slow to respond to global events.

International institutions sometimes struggle to ensure countries' compliance with their decisions. This becomes especially evident in situations that deal with armed conflicts (such as the ongoing one in Ukraine) and major political decisions (like the COVID-19 pandemic), where a country's own interests can overshadow the guidelines set by these institutions, casting doubts on their effectiveness. This not only

raises doubts about the effectiveness of institutionalism but also shows how big powers, claiming to work for the “greater good,” can sometimes twist situations or even mislead other countries, putting their own interests before global safety.

International organizations are meant to promote teamwork and communication between nations. However, they can sometimes become arenas of conflict. Instead of just helping countries work together, they might highlight differences and power struggles. With the

changing nature of global challenges, it is essential to rethink how these platforms work, making sure they focus more on global needs rather than individual country benefits.

This change is more evident as the world shifts from being dominated by one main power to having multiple strong nations. Previously, global discussions were often guided by one dominant country. Now, with no single power firmly in control of global affairs, these organizations must navigate a more complex landscape of multiple influential nations.

This change in power dynamics could lead organizations to aim for

When a major actor finds that an organization’s rules do not align with its interests, it may be less inclined to change the existing system. Instead, they might create new structures that better fit their views.

wide approval, even if it means not being as effective. They might seek acceptance from all major powers just to maintain their standing. On the other hand, if they do their job effectively but upset one of such major actors,

they could lose their credibility. This situation creates a dilemma for international institutions. They might have to choose between being widely accepted and being efficient, a tough balance to strike.

Building on the ideas of Morse and Keohane on “contested multilateralism,” working together on the international stage is not always smooth sailing. It is a mix of competing groups, changing partnerships, and a variety of official and unofficial methods. When looking at the challenges of updating international organizations, the concept of contested multilateralism sheds light on the many hurdles involved.

A key issue is how some international bodies might become ineffective or outdated. When a major actor finds that an organization’s rules do not align with its interests, it may be less inclined to change the existing system. Instead, they might create new structures that better fit their views. While

this leads to more organizations, it can also cause overlaps in responsibilities and dilute the overall effectiveness of global institutions.

But it is important to understand that these complex dynamics do not necessarily point to weaknesses within institutions, nor are they the only reasons for the UN’s challenges. Interestingly, these dynamics have been the foundation for lasting international cooperation, replacing the fleeting ideals seen in the League of Nations.

The UN’s longevity, with close to eight decades of navigating various challenges, showcases the strength of its seemingly contradictory design.

Indeed, in light of the shifting dynamics of global power and the decline of the “Yalta spirit”—an allusion to the cooperative stance post-World War II—it’s clear that forging new international institutions faces immense challenges due to “contested multilateralism.” Great powers are now more engrossed in maintaining their dominance and exerting control than establishing new cooperative platforms. With the world’s power dynamics becoming less monopolistic and more diverse, it is evident that a singular or bipartite dominance does not hold the sway it once did.

Unfortunately, in the perennial dance of international politics, “goodwill” in the lexicon of great powers typically translates to “what’s in it for us?”

This evolving panorama underscores the critical role of the “middle powers.” These nations might not headline global conferences or dominate every conversation, but they possess substantial clout and often act as pivotal connectors, bridging gaps between superpowers and smaller states. Their influence is subtle, yet profound. As the world becomes more multipolar, the strategic importance and mediating role of middle powers in shaping the future of international relations and global governance cannot be underestimated.

Given this context, reforming existing institutions becomes a compelling proposition. The advantage of focusing on reform is that there is already an established framework, historical precedent, and global recognition attached to these institutions, such as the United Nations or the World Trade Organization. Starting from scratch would necessitate building these elements anew, a formidable task in today’s polarized international climate.

Moreover, reforming the current system addresses immediate gaps and inefficiencies, adapting them to contemporary challenges. By refining and modernizing their processes, mandates, and structures, these institutions

can potentially become more responsive, inclusive, and effective. Prioritizing reform over creation is pragmatic. It capitalizes on established goodwill, reputation, and infrastructure while navigating the complex waters of current geopolitical dynamics. However, the success of such reform hinges on the commitment of member states and their willingness to cede some measure of national interest for the collective good.

Unfortunately, in the perennial dance of international politics, “goodwill” in the lexicon of great powers typically translates to “what’s in it for us?” A touch amusing, perhaps, is that while existing systems conveniently uphold the status quo favoring these powers, they seem to develop a sudden allergic reaction to meaningful change. Enter the middle powers, often driven by a noble ambition to tweak the global order. Their efforts, however commendable, often resemble Sisyphus’s eternal struggle—pushing the boulder uphill, only for it to roll down again.

It is somewhat of a theatrical performance. On the one side, middle powers

attempt to inject fresh narratives and challenge orthodoxies. On the other, great powers, often in an almost synchronized ballet, ardently cling to their pedestals of dominance, seemingly wary of the winds of change. When

Historical digressions frequently spotlight middle powers as guardians of global order. As global dynamics shifted post-Cold War, middle powers found themselves in the role of moderators, steering these tectonic shifts within the ambit of globally sanctioned norms.

these great powers do find common ground, it is often in their shared goal of maintaining their lofty positions, casting skeptical eyes at those who might wish to redesign the stage. One can not help but observe the preference of these behemoths for the familiar tune of continuity over the potentially dissonant notes of reform.

This theatre of international politics, while

often spotlighting the grand narratives of superpowers, sees some of its most compelling acts played out by the middle powers. These players, adept at navigating the nuances, bring a depth and versatility to the global stage.

Amidst the cacophony of dominant voices, middle powers champion a unique brand of diplomacy. Their approach, fittingly termed ‘middle power diplomacy,’ pivots on collaborative endeavors, championing global norms, and facilitating dialogue even amongst the heaviest hitters. While they

may not possess the colossal resources or the overt dominance to reshape institutions wholesale, their finesse lies in fine-tuning, shaping narratives, and nudging agendas.

Participating in this ‘middle power politics’ enables them to carve out a niche, one that not only complements but occasionally challenges the well-trodden paths of ‘great power politics.’ These nations, by virtue of their distinct positioning, do not necessarily upend the chessboard. Still, they are masters at introducing unexpected moves, adding layers to the game of multilateralism. Their influence, subtly steering and sometimes redefining the rules, enriches the mosaic of international relations, making it far more complex and vibrant.

EVOLVING NATURE OF ‘MIDDLEPOWERMANSHIP’

It is a tad ironic—and perhaps telling—that much ink has been spilled over categorizing these entities than analyzing their roles, actions, or contributions. The allure of neatly slotting nations into hierarchical compartments often overshadows the more intricate nuances of their actual global engagements.

Traditionally, these powers have been perceived through the lens of economic metrics or military prowess, with a nod towards their penchant for multilateral diplomacy and reverence for international law. Yet, as the contours

of geopolitics evolve and the number of these actors burgeons, it is increasingly evident that such cookie-cutter classifications are, at best, rudimentary and, at worst, misleading.

As scholars debate, redefine, and re-debate the taxonomy of middle powers, it becomes a veritable quagmire of nomenclature. Notwithstanding these deliberations, for the purpose of our discourse (and congruently, in my literary work), I resonate with the delineation provided by Australian professor Jeffrey Robertson, which depicts middle powers as “states endowed with the requisite interest and capabilities to collaboratively enhance governance institutions pertaining to global commons.”

Middle powers are akin to multifaceted gems, each reflecting varied hues depending on the circumstances. These nations, operating at the nexus of preservation and transformation, exhibit a fascinating duality. On one hand, they find solace in the predictability of existing global structures; on the other, they challenge, question, and sometimes reform these systems.

Historical digressions frequently spotlight middle powers as guardians of global order. As global dynamics shifted post-Cold War, with giants like China emerging from the shadows, middle powers found themselves in the role of moderators, steering these tectonic

shifts within the ambit of globally sanctioned norms. Yet, there is a delightful paradox inherent in their character—a simultaneous alignment with the existing power equilibrium while reacting heterogeneously to it. Delving into strategic lenses, like the “soft balancing” strategy, helps decode some of the diplomatic maneuvers middle powers employ to subtly resist dominant hegemonies.

But let us be candid: slapping a singular label on middle powers, whether based on their relative global stature or their image as the quintessential “good international citizens,” is an oversimplification. It is akin to judging a book purely by its cover or genre, without diving into its rich narratives. The sheer inconsistency or, dare I say, unpredictability in their international conduct nudges us to reassess our monolithic views.

To pigeonhole middle powers as mere balancers in the global equilibrium would be an oversight, especially when there is empirical evidence of their counter-hegemonic tendencies, particularly among the *nouveau* middle powers. Thus, a sophisticated understanding of these actors should embrace their multifaceted personas, sculpted by

historical legacies, regional ties, economic entanglements, and distinct ideologies.

The juxtaposition between middle powers and their ‘greater’ counterparts is not just a difference in size or resources; it is a divergence in ethos and approach. At the heart of middle powers’

To pigeonhole middle powers as mere balancers in the global equilibrium would be an oversight, especially when there is empirical evidence of their counter-hegemonic tendencies, particularly among the nouveau middle powers.

diplomatic maneuvers lies a principled commitment to the global rule-book. For these states, principles are not mere diplomatic instruments; they are the anchors of international engagement. This commitment is not swayed by the might of the country on the opposite side of the table. Whether engaging with a small island nation or a sprawling superpower, the ethical compass remains the same.

These actions, often seen as efforts to rein in larger powers that might be inclined to deviate from international norms, have a nuanced quality to them. They signal a commitment to a regulated global order, where might does not translate to an automatic right. By upholding standards ranging from human rights conventions to guidelines for peaceful conflict resolution, middle powers champion the universality of rules. However, this is not to say that they are perpetual naysayers or rebels. Their interventions,

while assertive, usually stop short of advocating for a wholesale upending of the global order. Instead, they tend to favor recalibration over revolution.

There is some attractiveness to the concept of a multipolar world—a global setting where power is not hoarded but rather dispersed. In such a configuration, every nation, irrespective of its size, has a seat at the decisionmaking table. This democratizing thrust aligns with the essence of middle powers. Their vision is not of a world where they replace the current hegemonies but of a global stage where voices are many and varied, and where dialogues and policies emerge from a chorus rather than a solo.

The G20 epitomizes the “middle-powermanship” phenomenon, seamlessly blending the traditional with the transformative. It is a consortium where the historically dominant powers and the emerging economies find a shared platform, advocating for mutual interests while also wrestling with inherent differences.

What differentiates the G20 from other multilateral forums is its inclusivity. It

harmoniously houses both the historic stalwarts of global governance and the assertive newcomers. These newcomers, primarily from the Global South, bring to the table not just their burgeoning economic prowess, but a distinct geopolitical narrative—one that has often been on the receiving end of global policies.

There is a critical nuance in the behavior of these emerging economies within the G20. While they respect the expertise and insights of formal international bodies, they resist the trappings of complete reliance. This approach might be perceived as a calibrated skepticism, originating from his-

torical experiences where international institutions, with their one-size-fits-all solutions, sometimes failed to grasp local complexities.

The traditional champions of multilateralism, under varied pressures, are showing signs of ambivalence towards the very edifice they helped build. Meanwhile, emerging powers, while embedded in the current system, are flexing their muscles. Their vision is not just to assimilate but to co-create, not just to play by the rules but to have

By upholding standards ranging from human rights conventions to guidelines for peaceful conflict resolution, middle powers champion the universality of rules. However, this is not to say that they are perpetual naysayers or rebels. They tend to favor recalibration over revolution.

a say in rule-making. This dual ambition manifests in tangible ways. Beyond the G20, we observe the proliferation of regional and sub-regional platforms, and the formation of new multilateral institutions that resonate with the priorities of the emerging economies. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (NDB) are emblematic of this shift—indicating a world where the locus of power is not monolithic but distributed.

The ‘differentiated inclusion’ strategy, while a visionary maneuver, is undergirded by a pragmatism that recognizes the need for adaptability in a rapidly transforming world. This approach magnifies the G20’s responsiveness to an ever-evolving global landscape, while concurrently amplifying the consortium’s relevance to a diverse ensemble of stakeholders.

The nuance of ‘differentiated inclusion’ lies in its dualism. It is both a celebration of diversity and a nod to the irrefutable value of synergy. There is a quite delicate dance of leadership within the G20, where every move must be orchestrated with an eye on the bigger picture and an ear to the ground. As the crucible where global economic destinies are forged, it is indispensable for the G20 to ensure its undertakings mirror the aspirations of

its varied members, whilst catering to overarching global imperatives. Without a looming specter to rally against, the consortium’s members can become ensnared in their parochial interests. The quest then becomes not about achieving holistic progress, but rather, outmaneuvering fellow members. Yet, it is precisely this dynamism—this play of varying national aspirations and strate-

The G20 epitomizes the “middlepowermanship” phenomenon, seamlessly blending the traditional with the transformative.

gies—that makes the G20 a microcosm of the larger world stage.

The adoption of broader deliberative realms, as evidenced by the consortium’s forays into sustainable development and digital transformation, is emblematic of the G20’s cognizance of its pivotal role. By encompassing diverse thematic arenas, it does not merely cater to the exigencies of the present, but endeavors to sculpt an inclusive and sustainable future.

Furthermore, the dynamism and magnitude of the G20 also mean that it cannot afford to function in isolation or merely as a reactive entity. The collective responsibility it shoulders mandates proactive foresight. In line with this, the G20 must champion a renewed vision for international collaboration, one that is not just reflexive of current disruptions but is anticipatory of emerging global shifts.

Amidst the complex variety of global challenges, the G20’s unique positioning affords it a distinct advantage. It represents a synthesis of diversified economic perspectives, encompassing both the developed and the developing world. This composite representation can be harnessed to forge innovative solutions that are equitable and cognizant of varied developmental trajectories. For instance, while addressing climate transformations, the G20 can advocate for solutions that recognize the differential responsibilities and capacities of countries, thereby shaping a more nuanced and inclusive environmental agenda.

Legacy powers, with their historically entrenched positions, often focus on maintaining the existing order while maximizing the efficacy of policies and initiatives. They prioritize outcome legitimacy because they have a vested interest in preserving a system that has, for the most part, served their interests.

Similarly, in the face of the fourth industrial revolution, the G20 can lead the charge in harmonizing global standards, fostering technological collaborations, and ensuring that digital dividends are equitably disseminated. This would entail understanding and mitigating the potential societal disparities that the digital era might exacerbate. By doing so, the consortium would be enacting its role not just as an economic catalyst but also as a guardian of global equity.

To bolster its influence and credibility, the G20 should also cultivate deeper engagements with non-state actors, including academia, civil society, and the private sector. Such interactions can engender richer policy discourses and facilitate the translation of high-level deliberations into tangible outcomes. The G20’s rotating presidency, while providing diversity in leadership, necessitates continuity in its strategic vision. This implies that the baton of governance must be passed seamlessly, ensuring that foundational initiatives are carried forward, refined, and actualized. The rotating presidency should not lead to episodic endeavors but should reinforce a coherent and cumulative approach to global governance.

The interplay between legacy and emerging powers within institutions like the G20 is emblematic of the changing dynamics in international relations and global governance. The emphasis placed on different types of legitimacy—outcome versus input—reveals deep-seated beliefs, priorities, and histories of each nation and its constituents.

Legacy powers, with their historically entrenched positions, often focus on maintaining the existing order while maximizing the efficacy of policies and initiatives. They prioritize outcome legitimacy because they have a vested interest in preserving a system that has, for the most part, served their interests. This focus on outcome legitimacy is also a manifestation of their confidence in shaping and driving institutional agendas.

Emerging powers, on the other hand, place a premium on input legitimacy. Having been on the periphery or even excluded from many global decisionmaking processes in the past, these nations seek representation, voice, and influence. They advocate for a more inclusive and participatory approach to decisionmaking. Their focus on the challenges of less affluent nations stems from their historical experiences, regional affiliations, and a desire to champion a more equitable global order.

These nations can bridge the divide, offering both a nuanced perspective and mediating capabilities. Middle powers often possess the dexterity to navigate the complex terrains of international relations, forging alliances, and promoting collaborative efforts. Their

involvement in the G20, and other global governance platforms, introduces a moderating influence, potentially counteracting any polarization between legacy and emerging powers.

However, for all its strategic adaptability, the G20's essence remains rooted in power negotiations. The amphitheater

Emerging powers place a premium on input legitimacy. Having been on the periphery or even excluded from many global decisionmaking processes in the past, these nations seek representation, voice, and influence.

may have expanded, the actors diversified, and the script evolved, but at its core, the G20 remains a fulcrum where national interests intersect, sometimes in harmony and sometimes in contestation, with global objectives. In this complex matrix, the enduring challenge and opportunity for the G20 lies in sculpting a narra-

tive where both national ambitions and global needs coalesce to create a harmonious symphony of progress.

WIDENING THE SCOPE OF POWER RELATIONS

The middle powers seemingly found their calling card—a penchant for strategic global and regional gambits, all without needing a nod of approval from the bigwigs of hegemony. With a knack for subtly molding international politics' clay, these states have a storied past of (surprisingly) laying the blueprint for some rather clever global

governance and peacekeeping strategies. Framed as “concerted international engagement,” this is less about them trying to own the stage, but rather realizing that there is more oomph in their position when they interact with fellow international players.

No longer content with merely stitching together global initiatives, this approach, that was named “resilient multilateralism” by an international development scholar Albert Sanghoon Park, aims to weave a comprehensive narrative that captures the essence of contemporary interdisciplinary challenges.

Reimagining middle power behavior through this lens requires a recalibration of our traditional perspectives. One must elevate the discourse beyond individual actors or the looming shadows of the great powers. Instead, a laser focus is essential on the platforms and interactive mechanisms that genuinely steer international dynamics. Recognizing the multifaceted post-Cold War globalization, this paradigm prudently merges academic scholarship and policy frameworks, encapsulating four seminal principles extracted from historical analysis.

The goal? Develop a dynamic policy environment. While bilateral engagements with dominant forces set certain interaction parameters, the broader canvas of consensus can potentially reshape our foundational

Great powers, owing to their dominant stature, often align with a concept known as “contested multilateralism.” A global governance structure that, while seemingly multilateral, is distinctly orchestrated by a privileged echelon of powerful nations, often sidelining the essence of true collaboration.

international dialogues. Here, the instrumental role of middle powers becomes salient. Their consistent presence across global platforms uniquely positions them to influence and calibrate the course of international norms. It emphasizes the complex web of global interrelations and advocates for harnessing the skillfulness of middle powers. The directive is clear. Transcend traditional global system perspectives and pri-

oritize pragmatism, adaptability, and acute contextual awareness.

Analyzing the tactical orientations of both great and middle powers within the international arena illuminates contrasting paradigms at play. Great powers, owing to their dominant stature, often align with a concept known as “contested multilateralism.” This framework suggests a calculated maneuver by these hegemonic states to mold international regulations, catering

to their strategic interests. In some instances, this might involve sidestepping or even reshaping existing institutional setups. The upshot? A global governance structure that, while seemingly multilateral, is distinctly orchestrated by a privileged echelon of powerful nations, often sidelining the essence of true collaboration.

Middle powers, on the other hand, champion a different hymn—that of “resilient multilateralism.” At its core, this paradigm champions adaptability, harmony, and nuanced diplomacy. Recognizing the ever-shifting landscape of international relations, it seeks to champion solutions that are not just versatile but also inclusive, reflecting the intricate maze that is contemporary geopolitics. Through the lens of resilient multilateralism, nations that might otherwise be dwarfed by the behemoths of global politics carve out a space. They form alliances, influence global narratives, and ensure that their voices, far from being mere echoes, form a critical part of the global discourse.

Contested multilateralism, inherently, fosters a realm of perpetual jostling,

setting the stage for an era where the quest for dominance is never-ending. This stands in stark contrast to resilient multilateralism, which emerges as the favored rallying cry of middle powers. This paradigm places a premium on

dialogue, reconciliation, and joint undertakings. It not only sheds light on the nuanced facets of global diplomacy but also solidifies the structural integrity of international systems, creating an environment ripe for collective advancement and equilibrium.

While contested multilateralism seeks to mold, if not distort, international cooperation to favor a select group of power-

ful actors, resilient multilateralism champions the collective strength and adaptiveness to navigate an increasingly complex global environment. Although they might appear to be at opposing spectrums, there is an underlying potential for these frameworks to complement each other. The structural rigidity characteristic of contested multilateralism can be tempered by the inherent flexibility espoused by resilient multilateralism, paving the way for a more synchronized global dynamic.

While contested multilateralism seeks to mold, if not distort, international cooperation to favor a select group of powerful actors, resilient multilateralism champions the collective strength and adaptiveness to navigate an increasingly complex global environment.

The title of my book *Widening the Scope: How Middle Powers Are Changing Liberal Institutionalism* (2023), stems from this observation. Appreciating the possible synergies between these multilateral frameworks, when aptly balanced, is instrumental. It not only strengthens overarching governance structures but also fosters a more cohesive, interconnected international environment.

Historically, world policy was predominantly hierarchical. However, with the advent and increasing prominence of middle powers, there has been a significant shift towards a more horizontal structure in global politics. These middle powers bring about an essential breadth to a system that was once strictly vertical, democratizing international discourse and ensuring a more inclusive and diverse approach to world policy. ●