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Analysis
Paper

45/2026 junio de 2026

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The Concept of Middle Powers and Their Strategies: A Case Study Analysis

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Abstract:

The article examines the role of middle powers in an international environment shaped by geopolitical fragmentation, great-power rivalry, and the gradual weakening of the liberal international order. Drawing on the cases of Spain, Canada, India, Brazil, Türkiye, and ASEAN, it argues that the behaviour of these actors cannot be adequately explained solely through either liberal institutionalism or structural realism. Instead, it proposes a framework of "selective multilateralism." Within this framework, middle powers oscillate between principled and opportunistic forms of multilateralism according to two main variables: their degree of security dependence on a major power and their level of integration into institutions capable of generating meaningful normative commitments. The article concludes that the ongoing transformation of the international system creates new opportunities for middle powers. Those able to maintain autonomous and coherent foreign policy positions may accumulate normative capital, diplomatic credibility, and political influence over the long term, even if doing so entails immediate strategic costs.

Keywords:

Spain, India, Canada, Brazil, Türkiye, Middle Power, Multilateralism, World Order

How to cite this document:

FERNÁNDEZ APARICIO, Javier and PANDEY, Harsh. *The Concept of Middle Powers and Their Strategies: A Case Study Analysis*. IEEE Analysis Paper 45/2026. IEEE web link and/or bie³link (accessed day/month/year)

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Introduction

The literature on international relations typically defines middle powers as those states which, whilst lacking the material, military or economic capabilities of the great powers, possess sufficient political and diplomatic weight and capacity for mediation to influence international governance[1] . Historically, these powers sought to support or balance one great power against another in their international relations, be it the United States, the Soviet Union, Russia or, currently, China. However, today, the current international disorder and confusion[2] , which has accelerated since Donald Trump's arrival in the US presidency for a second term, makes multilateralism a privileged tool for amplifying influence, promoting shared rules and limiting the hierarchical dynamics inherent in a system dominated by actors whose expectations are uncertain.

Thus, rather than competing directly to be part of or come under the protection of a hegemony, the foreign behaviour of middle powers tends to rely on international institutions, cooperation mechanisms and regulatory frameworks capable of reducing power asymmetry. But the contemporary international context presents an apparent paradox. Multilateral rhetoric seems to be gaining momentum precisely at a time when these international institutions are facing what is probably the greatest pressure and scrutiny since the end of the Second World War. Geopolitical fragmentation, rivalry between major powers—currently the United States and China—and the erosion of basic consensus on the international order have weakened the global capacity to manage crises that are themselves global.

Against this backdrop, some recent speeches serve as a starting point to illustrate this dynamic. On the one hand, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney, during the World Economic Forum in Davos; on the other, the Spanish Prime Minister, Pedro Sánchez, at Tsinghua University and in his capacity as a representative of the European Union. Both emphasised the need to strengthen cooperation between major and mid- powers, highlighting the centrality of international law, cooperation and multilateral institutions as pillars of global stability. Their remarks suggest the persistence of a shared narrative that presents mid- powers as defenders of the rules-based international order.

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[1] Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE) (2024). *Middle Powers: Moving Towards a Multipolar Order*. Strategy Papers, 225. Madrid: Ministry of Defence, Higher Centre for National Defence Studies (CESEDEN). Available at: CESEDEN - Strategy Notebook 225 (accessed: 2 June 2026).

[2] THAROOR, S. & SARAN, S. (2020) *The New World Disorder and the Indian Imperative*. New Delhi: Aleph Book Company. ISBN 978-81-942337-3-2.

[3]However, the war in Iran has put this apparent convergence of discourse to the test. Faced with the crisis, Canada chose to back the US-led action, whilst Spain adopted a position more focused on defending international law and distanced itself further from US military intervention. This divergence raises important questions about the real limits of multilateralism among middle powers.

This raises the following question: under what conditions do middle powers uphold their multilateral commitments, and in what circumstances do they tend to align themselves with the great powers? A comparative analysis of various positions—beyond those of Canada and Spain—reveals tensions between rhetoric, strategic interests and international behaviour in a context of growing geopolitical competition.

What do we mean when we talk about a middle power?

Few concepts in international relations have generated as much definitional disagreement as that of the middle power. As Stewart Patrick recently observed in a Carnegie Endowment study published in January 2026, there is still no agreed definition, nor universally accepted criteria or thresholds, nor even an agreed list of states that merit such a designation[4] . This openness to self-identification is not a mere academic curiosity: it is precisely what creates the gap between the powers that present themselves as such and the actual behaviour of states, which this article seeks to explain. The disagreement reflects a genuine tension between what middle powers are and what they do, as well as between the structural position a state occupies and the identity it claims. Defining the concept correctly is important because it determines how we assess whether a state actually acts as a middle power or simply uses the label to further its national interests.

The oldest approach is based on material capabilities. In 1984, Carsten Holbraad defined middle powers as those states situated between the great powers and the smaller states in terms of material resources, measurable through GDP, military expenditure, population or territorial size. They are not global powers capable of imposing their preferences internationally, nor are they minor actors: they possess sufficient diplomatic capabilities

[3] TUNNEY, C. (2026) 'Carney says his support for the US and Israel's war on Iran "not a blank cheque"'. In *CBC News*, 10 March. Available at: CBC News (accessed: 2 June 2026).

[4] PATRICK, S. (2026) 'The Middle Power Moment'. In Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 20 January. Available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2026/01/the-middle-power-moment (accessed: 2 June 2026).

to influence certain areas[5] . The definition is intuitive, as it seems clear that countries such as Canada, Australia or South Korea occupy an intermediate position in the international hierarchy. However, capacity indicators say little about how states use these resources or why countries of similar material weight—such as Canada and Spain—may behave very differently in the face of a systemic crisis. As an explanatory framework, this approach leaves much of the observed variation unresolved, including the impact of geography or relations with the great powers. In the words of Gareth Evans, it is easier to define middle powers by what they are not: they are not great powers, but neither are they mere passive recipients of international rules.

A second approach, known as the behavioural turn, was developed primarily by Andrew Cooper, Richard Higgott and Kim Nossal in their influential 1993 study. These authors shifted the focus from what middle powers are to what they do[6] . They identified three characteristic strategies: niche diplomacy, whereby they concentrate limited resources on specific areas where they can exert disproportionate influence; the building of coalitions with like-minded partners; and a consistent preference for multilateral institutions as the primary arena for promoting interests and resolving disputes. This approach proved far more productive from an analytical standpoint and generated a vast body of literature on the foreign policy of Canada, Australia and the Nordic countries. However, it presents a problem of circularity: middle powers are defined by behaving in a multil , and subsequently that very behaviour is used as proof that they are middle powers. Furthermore, the model struggles to explain cases in which a state claims a middle-power identity whilst failing to meet or abandoning multilateral commitments.

A significant refinement comes from the Belfer Center's *Middle Powers* project, led by Meghan O'Sullivan, Rana Mitter and Moeed Yusuf. This approach defines middle powers according to their geopolitical position between the United States and China, their political and economic relevance to regional security, and their capacity to influence global issues. The authors emphasise that middle powers do not constitute a homogeneous bloc, but

[5] HOLBRAAD, C. (1984) *Middle Powers in International Politics*. London: Macmillan Press. ISBN 978-0-333-35183-9.
[6] COOPER, A.F., HIGGOTT, R.A. and NOSSAL, K.R. (1993) *Relocating Middle Powers: Australia and Canada in a Changing World Order*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press. ISBN 978-0-7748-0458-4.

rather exert influence through flexible, issue-specific coalitions[7] . This observation is fundamental: the heterogeneity of interests among middle powers implies that solidarity between them is always contingent and context-dependent, never structural.

The most significant theoretical correction was proposed by Eduard Jordaan in 2003. In an article published in *Politikon*, he argued that the traditional concept of a middle power had been implicitly constructed on the basis of the experience of wealthy, stable, Western countries such as Canada, Australia, Norway or the Netherlands. To overcome this limitation, he introduced the category of emerging middle powers, which included South Africa, Brazil and India[8] . According to Jordaan, these states operate primarily in regional contexts, maintain more ambivalent relations with multilateral institutions—often perceived as instruments of the global North's hegemony—and employ multilateral discourse in a more selective and pragmatic manner. This distinction is particularly useful for analysing India, which does not fully fit either the classical model of a middle power or the category of a great power.

Despite the differences between the various approaches, there are common elements that recur: niche diplomacy, coalition-building, and the role of bridge-builder between great powers and smaller states. However, one aspect that has been insufficiently developed by theory is the problem of self-identification: the gap between proclaiming a middle-power identity and bearing the political and strategic costs that such a status entails. Beyond having the resources to influence international politics, an effective middle power requires a certain motivation and a certain mindset. Its influence grows when it is perceived to defend sovereign equality, international law and shared transnational challenges. Conversely, that influence erodes when the state is seen as a purely transactional or destabilising actor. It is precisely this gap between discourse and implementation that this paper analyses.

[7] O'SULLIVAN, M.L., MITTER, R. & YUSUF, M.W. (2025) 'Middle Powers: An Intellectual Framework'. In Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, 20 November. Available at: https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/middle-powers-intellectual-framework (accessed: 2 June 2026).

[8] JORDAAN, E. (2003) 'The concept of a middle power in international relations: distinguishing between emerging and traditional middle powers'. In *Politikon*, *30*(1), 165–181. Available at https://doi.org/10.1080/0258934032000147282 (accessed: 2 June 2026).

Liberal institutionalism

Liberal institutionalism has traditionally been the natural theoretical home of the concept of the middle power. The framework of complex interdependence developed by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye in **Power and Interdependence** (1977) provides the most favourable structural environment for the kind of international action that figures such as Mark Carney or Pedro Sánchez often publicly advocate[9] . In a world characterised by dense networks of economic and institutional interdependence—where military force is not always usable and the various spheres of international politics are not necessarily linked to one another—material capabilities cease to be the sole, or even the primary, source of influence. Soft power, the ability to set normative agendas, reputational capital and the credibility to commit to rules that constrain even the most powerful states become real strategic assets. In this context, countries such as Spain or Canada can exert an influence far greater than a mere assessment of their material capabilities would suggest. From this perspective, international law is not a mere rhetorical device that states use when it suits them and abandon when it no longer does. It functions as what John Gerard Ruggie termed a 'constitutive norm', that is, an essential part of the framework that defines and assesses the legitimacy of state action[10] . For a medium-sized power , consistent respect for international legal norms constitutes not only an ethical commitment but also a strategic investment: it generates reputational capital, confers legitimacy in the eyes of third parties, and positions the state as a norm-setter rather than a mere recipient of norms. The difference is fundamental. A state that only complies with international law when doing so is inexpensive does not truly contribute to the maintenance of the normative order; it simply benefits from it without bearing the costs associated with its upholding.

Liberal institutionalism also offers the most optimistic view of middle powers as genuine architects of the international order. States such as Canada and Norway have not merely been passive participants in multilateral institutions, but active designers of norms and procedures governing such crucial issues as nuclear non-proliferation and the principle of the responsibility to protect. The normative legitimacy they derive from this role is not

[9] KEOHANE, R.O. & NYE, J.S. (1977) *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company. ISBN 978-0-316-48908-5.

[10] RUGGIE, J.G. (1992) 'Multilateralism: The Anatomy of an Institution'. In *International Organization*, 46(3), pp. 561–598. Available at https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300027831 (accessed: 2 June 2026).

a secondary phenomenon, but a tangible source of political influence. It enables them to set agendas, mediate in conflicts, facilitate consensus and hold coalitions of states together in a way that powers with greater material resources but less normative credibility can scarcely replicate.

Structural realism

Kenneth Waltz did not share this view. His theory of structural realism, developed in *Theory of International Politics* (1979), constitutes a powerful and, in a sense, uncomfortable correction to institutionalist optimism[11] . For Waltz, the anarchic structure of the international system generates pressures on the behaviour of states that operate independently of their normative commitments, their institutional membership or the identities they proclaim. In an international system without a higher authority capable of enforcing norms, states cannot fully rely either on the goodwill of others or on the supposed coercive power of international law. They must ultimately resort to self-help and, when unable to guarantee their own security, align themselves with a protective great power. From this perspective, institutions reflect the existing distribution of power rather than independently shaping state behaviour. When systemic tensions rise, states revert to their basic structural positions.

For structural realists, middle powers are essentially secondary allies: states that align themselves with the dominant power and accept varying degrees of subordination in exchange for security guarantees. The discourse of multilateralism is, to a large extent, a diplomatic strategy aimed at projecting autonomy and normative legitimacy, whilst on truly important matters these countries remain within the orbit of the hegemonic power. International law is used instrumentally: it is invoked when convenient, emphasised when it coincides with national interests, and set aside when it entails significant costs. From this perspective, it is no coincidence that many of the states that constantly appeal to international law do so on issues where compliance is relatively inexpensive and where the dominant power supports or tolerates that position.

[11] WALTZ, K.N. (1979) *Theory of International Politics*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company. ISBN 978-0-201-08349-3.

Towards a framework of 'selective multilateralism'

Neither liberal institutionalism nor structural realism, considered in isolation, offers a fully satisfactory explanation of the diversity of behaviour exhibited by middle powers in the contemporary international system. Institutionalism explains too much and predicts more consistent levels of multilateral engagement than we observe in practice. Realism explains too little and fails to account for why some states, such as Spain, maintain costly multilateral commitments even in the face of significant pressure from great powers.

Furthermore, the conditions for middle powers to act currently appear more favourable than at any other time since the end of the Cold War. The capacity for influence has been distributed among a greater number of actors, US hegemony has partially fragmented, and no clearly dominant alternative leadership has yet emerged[12] . Mark Carney described this international environment in *The Economist* in late 2025 as an era of 'variable geometry', characterised by shifting plurilateral coalitions in which middle powers participate or withdraw according to the convergence of specific interests and not necessarily because of permanent ideological affinities.

States do not simply act as advocates of multilateralism or as pure realists. They occupy a continuum ranging from principled multilateralism, where normative commitments are regarded as genuine constraints and are respected even at a high cost, to opportunistic multilateralism, where the language of multilateralism is used as just another diplomatic tool, employed when it is beneficial and abandoned when it generates political or strategic costs.

Each state's position within this spectrum depends fundamentally on two variables. The first is the degree of security dependence on a great power. States whose basic security depends on a dominant actor face strong structural pressures to align with its preferences, regardless of the normative commitments they proclaim. The second is the depth of their institutional integration. States integrated into organisations that generate real normative obligations and high reputational costs in the event of non-compliance — the European Union being the clearest example — face different incentives to those whose main institutional ties reinforce, rather than limit, alignment with a great power. The combination of these two variables provides a better explanation for the differences

[12] PATRICK, S. 'The Middle Power Moment' (see note 4).

observed in the behaviour of middle powers than either of the two theoretical traditions—liberal institutionalism and structural realism—taken separately.

US unilateralism and the collapse of the liberal order

One of the key elements in understanding the current crisis of multilateralism lies not in mere rivalry between powers or in the fragmentation of the international system, but in the transformation of the very role played by the United States. The power that for decades acted as the principal architect and guarantor of the liberal international order now appears, paradoxically, as one of the actors most contributing to the erosion of the foundations of that very system. The United States not only designed the orders that emerged after 1945 and after the end of the Cold War, but is now also actively participating in their dismantling[13] .

Following the Second World War, Washington promoted an institutional framework based on international organisations, security alliances and economic norms designed to prevent a recurrence of the confrontational dynamics that had led to the world wars. The United Nations, the Bretton Woods system and NATO constituted essential pillars of an international architecture underpinned by the combination of US power and institutional legitimacy. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, that model was expanded and reformulated under the concept of a 'unipolar moment', incorporating the expansion of Western institutions, economic globalisation and the spread of the liberal paradigm as a universal political horizon; these were the times of the 'end of history'[14] .

However, the structural problem with this order lay in a fundamental contradiction: liberal multilateralism depended to a large extent on a hegemonic power, the United States, which was willing to bear the political, economic and strategic costs of sustaining it. When that power began to perceive that the benefits of the system were outweighed by its costs, the legitimacy of the order began to erode. Donald Trump's return to the White House has accelerated this process. The US National Security Strategy of 2025 represents a

[13] KEOHANE, R.O. and NYE, J.S. Jr. (2025) 'The End of the Long American Century: Trump and the Sources of U.S. Power'. In *Foreign Affairs*, 104(4), pp. 68–79. Available at: Foreign Affairs (accessed: 2 June 2026).

[14] SULLIVAN, D. (2024). 'The Clash of Civilizations and the End of History'. In: Williams, H., Boucher, D., Sutch, P., Reidy, D., Koutsoukis, A. (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of International Political Theory. International Political Theory*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-52243-7_20 (accessed: 2 June 2026).

doctrinal reformulation of *the 'America First'* principle, moving away from the liberal internationalist tradition and proposing a more transactional, nationalist and selective vision of US international engagement. The document explicitly states that 'the days when the United States held up the world order like Atlas are over'[15] .

As might be expected, this shift in discourse and doctrine has led to growing tensions with Washington's traditional allies, reigniting debates over security guarantees and the US commitment to collective defence[16] and including some provocative statements regarding strategic territories, such as Greenland, and disparaging references to Canada, which has contributed to a growing perception of US unpredictability and the deterioration of the transatlantic consensus[17] .

The issue lies not solely in a possible US withdrawal, but in the erosion of the normative foundations upon which the system itself rested, with the immediate consequence of the emergence of a normative and political vacuum and no hegemonic actor capable of replacing it, not even China. Consequently, in this context, the growing diplomatic activity of non-Western actors takes on significance. In this regard, the so-called Tianjin Declaration, adopted at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit on 1 September 2025, was significant, where China, Russia and India agreed to promote a narrative based on multipolarity, state sovereignty and the reform of global governance mechanisms. The joint appearance of Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin and Narendra Modi was interpreted as representing emerging alternatives to traditional Western leadership, and the declaration also incorporated elements relating to technological cooperation, artificial intelligence and alternative mechanisms for international coordination[18] .

[15] THE WHITE HOUSE (2025) *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. Washington, D.C.: The White House. Available at: The White House – National Security Strategy 2025 (accessed: 2 June 2026).

[16] DOUCET, L. (2026) 'What do Trump's latest comments on leaving NATO mean for the alliance?'. In *BBC News*, 1 April. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c79je4vldq5o (accessed: 2 June 2026).

[17] ASKER, J.P. (2025) 'Trump revives talk of Canada as the 51st state'. In *CBC News*, 30 June. Available at: https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/trump-51st-state-again-1.7647268 (accessed: 2 June 2026).

[18] BALME, S. & LE CORRE, P. (2025) 'Putin, Xi, Modi and the Tianjin Pact. Full text of the SCO countries' declaration'. In *Le Grand Continent*, 2 September. Available at: https://legrandcontinent.eu/es/2025/09/02/putin-xi-modi-y-el-pacto-de-tianjin-texto-integro-de-la-declaracion-de-los-paises-de-la-ocs/ (accessed: 2 June 2026).

Spain: principled multilateralism with strategic dividends

The lecture delivered by Pedro Sánchez at Tsinghua University in February 2026[19] was not the typical speech by a European leader seeking economic accommodation with an emerging power. Rather, it constituted an affirmation of political identity. Sánchez argued that Spain does not act as a mere representative of a homogeneous Western bloc subordinate to Washington's preferences, but as an independent middle power, consistently committed to international law and capable of engaging with China and other global actors according to its own criteria.

The evidence observed in three of the major recent international crises—Gaza, Ukraine and the 2026 war with Iran—supports a more favourable interpretation[20] . In the case of Gaza, Spain was one of the first European states to formally recognise the Palestinian state in May 2024. This decision led to diplomatic tensions with the United States and Israel, but it also significantly bolstered Spain's image in the Arab world and across much of the Global South. Crucially, Madrid maintained its position even as external pressures mounted, allowing us to distinguish between a principled policy and a mere image-building strategy. With regard to Ukraine, Spain has consistently supported Ukrainian sovereignty, with a strategic assessment of the conditions necessary for a sustainable diplomatic solution.

Spain's response to the Iranian crisis of 2026 is more revealing. When the United States launched attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities without authorisation from the United Nations Security Council and despite warnings from several European allies, Spain led a European response that formally condemned the operation, considering it contrary to international law and a dangerous precedent for the unilateral use of force that could not be endorsed by states committed to a rules-based international order[21] . The partial alignment of Italy, Belgium, Ireland and, in a more nuanced manner, France with the

[19] 'Speech by the Prime Minister, Pedro Sánchez, at Tsinghua University', *La Moncloa*, 13 April 2026. Available at: https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/lang/en/presidente/intervenciones/paginas/2026/20260413-trip-to-china-first-day-lecture.aspx (accessed: 2 June 2026).

[20] DONMEZ, B.B. (2026) "Spain's Sánchez slams double standards, says stance on Ukraine and Greenland must also apply to Gaza and Lebanon". In *Anadolu Agency*, 25 March. Available at: https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/spains-sanchez-slams-double-standards-says-stance-on-ukraine-and-greenland-must-also-apply-to-gaza-and-lebanon/3878658 (accessed: 2 June 2026).

[21] "Spain's Sánchez stands firm on opposition to war in Iran despite Trump's trade threats". In *The Hindu*, 4 March. Available at: https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/spains-sanchez-stands-firm-on-opposition-to-war-in-iran-despite-trumps-trade-threat/article70702934.ece (accessed: 2 June 2026).

Spanish position points to the emergence of what might be termed a 'moment of European middle power'[22] .

In any case, Spain has consistently positioned itself at the forefront of this stance, not as a disruptive actor, but as a state that formulates principled arguments from a solid European institutional foundation, and its strategic benefits are beginning to become apparent. Spain has accumulated diplomatic capital in the Arab world, Latin America and the African Union that other major European states, more closely aligned with Washington, do not possess to the same extent. Its credibility with numerous countries in the Global South has increased significantly. Likewise, within the European Union, its defence of a coherent agenda for European strategic autonomy has expanded its capacity for political influence.

Canada: rhetorical multilateralism and structural alignment

Mark Carney can easily be regarded as a serious and substantial statesman. His speech in Davos in January 2026 was not mere empty rhetoric[23] . He correctly diagnosed the fragmentation of US hegemony, the emergence of a normative vacuum and the special responsibility of middle powers to uphold cooperative forms of international governance. However, the gap between that speech and Canada's behaviour during the Iranian crisis demands an explanation. The authors argue that this explanation lies not so much in Carney's personal convictions as in the structural constraints that bind any government, given that it is deeply integrated into the US security architecture.

The NORAD system is probably the closest bilateral military integration mechanism in the world, with Canadian and US officers working together on North American air defence. This is not merely a revisable political agreement, but an operational integration that forms an essential part of Canada's defensive capability. Added to this is the Five Eyes intelligence alliance, the depth of which is such that a significant break by Ottawa on issues considered priorities by Washington would be perceived as a fundamental disruption of the bilateral relationship.

[22] PALA, M. (2026) 'Explainer: Where does Europe stand on US-Israeli strikes against Iran?' In *Anadolu Agency*, 7 March. Available at: https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/explainer-where-does-europe-stand-on-us-israeli-strikes-against-iran/3853996 (accessed: 2 June 2026).

[23] 'Davos 2026 Special Address by Mark Carney, Prime Minister of Canada'. In *World Economic Forum*, January 2026. Available at: https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/01/davos-2026-special-address-by-mark-carney-prime-minister-of-canada/ (accessed: 2 June 2026).

When the United States attacked Iran in 2026, Canada refrained from publicly backing the operation. The official position expressed concern about Iran's nuclear programme, emphasised the need for diplomatic solutions, and carefully avoided condemning the bombings. Carney even stated that Washington had acted without consulting its allies, including Canada, whilst the Defence Minister assured that Ottawa had not participated in the planning or execution of the operation. However, the structural realities of NORAD and Five Eyes make it difficult to draw a clear distinction between not formally participating and indirectly facilitating the action. This ambiguity was highlighted by various critics and reflects what the authors term 'structural alignment'. It is not enthusiastic support, but rather a calculated complicity expressed through carefully nuanced diplomatic language[24] .

The main lesson from the Canadian case is that security dependence on a dominant power is one of the best predictors of a country's abandonment of multilateral commitments when these conflict with the interests of its principal ally. A country may have a prime minister committed to multilateralism, a diplomatic service dedicated to the United Nations and a public opinion favourable to a rules-based international order, yet still find itself compelled to act in accordance with the imperatives of its security architecture.

India: strategic autonomy as the identity of a middle power

India represents the most complex case from a conceptual point of view. Even before analysing its behaviour, a preliminary question arises: is it really a middle power, or should it be considered an emerging great power that uses the language of middle powers in an instrumental manner? As C. Raja Mohan points out in a Belfer Center study, India's rapid economic growth and expansion of national power make the country more than just a traditional middle power, although it still faces significant structural constraints[25] .

[24] GOLDSTEIN, L. (2026) 'Canada is all over the map on the war in Iran'. In *The Times of Israel Blogs*, 10 March. Available at: https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/canada-is-all-over-the-map-on-the-war-in-iran/ (accessed: 2 June 2026).

[25] RAJA MOHAN, C. (2025) *India: Leaning to One Side (Cautiously)*. Middle Powers Project Country Report. Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, 20 November. Available at: https://www.belfercenter.org/research-analysis/india-leaning-one-side-cautiously (accessed: 2 June 2026).

By early 2025, the Indian economy had exceeded four trillion dollars and was growing at an annual rate of 7%, with prospects of becoming the world's third-largest economy before the end of the decade. However, its GDP per capita stood at around $2,900, placing it very low on the global scale. This disparity between aggregate power and individual development constrains its capacity for influence. Added to this are increasingly advanced armed forces, enormous demographic weight, growing technological sophistication and a renewed sense of civilisational confidence. All of this points towards aspirations of a great power rather than a middle power[26] .

However, India continues to use concepts such as strategic autonomy, multi-alignment, mediation capacity and independence of judgement, which are characteristic of the traditional vocabulary of middle powers. The explanation lies in the historical foundations of its foreign policy, as it is largely a contemporary adaptation of the Non-Aligned Movement promoted by Jawaharlal Nehru in the 1950s. Although the international context has changed profoundly since the Cold War, the logic remains recognisable and India does not wish to become a client of any great power; it aspires to maintain functional relations with all of them and seeks to preserve the greatest possible freedom to define its own interests[27] .

This logic is clearly reflected in its institutional stance. India is simultaneously a member of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), alongside the United States, Japan and Australia, and of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, dominated by China and Russia. Furthermore, New Delhi has sought to prevent the Quad from becoming a formal military alliance, preferring to maintain it as a forum for regional cooperation and the provision of public goods. No other state of comparable strategic weight participates simultaneously in both platforms under similar conditions.

India's abstentions in United Nations votes on Ukraine and subsequently on US strikes against Iran have been interpreted as neutrality, strategic calculation or simple opportunism. Unlike Nehru's classic non-alignment, which incorporated a normative

[26] TELLIS, A.J. (2021) 'Non-Allied Forever: India's Grand Strategy According to Subrahmanyam Jaishankar'. In *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 3 March. Available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2021/03/non-allied-forever-indias-grand-strategy-according-to-subrahmanyam-jaishankar (accessed: 2 June 2026).

[27] RAGHAVAN, S. (2023) 'Is there a way out of the troubled India-China relationship?'. In *Frontline*, 17 February. Available at: https://frontline.thehindu.com/world-affairs/is-there-a-way-out-of-the-troubled-india-china-relationship/article66471168.ece (accessed: 2 June 2026).

dimension linked to decolonisation and peaceful coexistence, contemporary multi-alignment is far more instrumental. It consists of avoiding commitments that might limit future strategic options. In other words, strategic autonomy becomes a guiding principle in the institutional design of foreign policy, but the big question is whether India will be able to maintain this position as international polarisation increases.

India maintains a primarily economic approach to the multilateral frameworks led by China and Russia, whilst with Europe it has begun to develop initiatives with a deeper normative and strategic dimension, such as the India-EU Security and Defence Partnership. This behaviour suggests that, although Indian foreign policy may appear realist at first glance, it also incorporates elements of values, norms and institutional commitment that bring it partially closer to the behaviour characteristic of a middle power[28] .

Other actors, between strategic flexibility and its limits

Beyond the cases of Canada, Spain and India, other actors considered middle powers allow us to observe different strategies for adapting to the context of international fragmentation. There is no single model of behaviour, but rather varying degrees of autonomy, alignment and strategic flexibility, revealing both the opportunities and the contradictions of the current international moment.

[29]Brazil offers a particularly significant case study. The return of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva marked a return to a traditional narrative of strategic autonomy, institutional reform and defence of the Global South. In his address to the United Nations General Assembly, Lula emphasised the need to democratise international institutions, reform the Security Council and strengthen multilateral mechanisms in the face of growing global polarisation. Brazil's position is presented as a call for a less hierarchical and more representative international order. However, the gap between rhetoric and actual capacity remains considerable. Brazil maintains global aspirations and ambitions for diplomatic leadership, but faces economic constraints, internal political fragmentation and a regional environment that is less cohesive than in previous periods.

[28] SPANISH INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC STUDIES (2025) *India: keys to its rise as a global power*. Strategy Paper 230. Madrid: Ministry of Defence, Higher Centre for National Defence Studies (CESEDEN). Available at: https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/cuaderno-de-estrategia-230 (accessed: 2 June 2026).

[29] 'Lula's doctrine against anti-democratic forces at the United Nations: full speech'. In *Le Grand Continent*, 23 September. Available at: https://legrandcontinent.eu/es/2025/09/23/la-doctrina-lula-contra-las-fuerzas-antidemocraticas-en-las-naciones-unidas-discurso-completo/ (accessed: 2 June 2026).

Turkey probably represents the most visible case of maximalist middle-power enterprise. A formal member of NATO, yet on good terms with Moscow, under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, it has developed an extraordinarily flexible foreign policy, capable of alternating between cooperation and competition depending on strategic circumstances. This pragmatism increases its autonomy and room for manoeuvre, but also entails significant reputational costs in certain scenarios[30] .

Turkey possesses several characteristics typical of a middle power, such as a strategic geographical position between Europe, the Middle East, the Caucasus and Central Asia, significant military capabilities and an active diplomacy that seeks to increase its room for manoeuvre through a combination of strategic autonomy, pragmatism and diversification of alliances, including its role as an international mediator in the war in Ukraine, Africa, the Middle East and Asia, but some experts consider that Ankara still lacks a coherent and sustainable long-term strategy[31] .

Finally, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) presents a different case: an attempt to collectively institutionalise the behaviour of middle powers through the principle of so-called ASEAN centrality. The organisation has historically sought to establish itself as a neutral platform for dialogue and balance between major powers[32] . However, its structural limitations have become increasingly apparent. Deep internal differences regarding the South China Sea, differing perceptions of China and the inability to generate consensual responses to the crisis in Myanmar have significantly reduced its capacity for action. ASEAN centrality remains a relevant diplomatic reference point, although in practice it reflects the limits of collective action among actors with divergent strategic interests, a difficulty not entirely unfamiliar to other regional projects such as the European Union.

[30] AYDINLI, E. (2024). Türkiye's middle-power aspirations. In *GIS Reports Online*, 30 May. Available at: https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/turkiye-middle-power-aspirations/ (accessed: 2 June 2026).

[31] VALANSI, K. (2025). The Concept of Middle Power and Türkiye's Foreign Policy. In *Global Panorama*, 26 June. Available at: https://www.globalpanorama.org/en/2025/06/the-concept-of-middle-power-and-turkiyes-foreign-policy-karel-valansi/ (accessed: 2 June 2026).

[32] 'ASEAN Political-Security Community Strategic Plan'. Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, 2025. Available at: https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/06.-APSC-Strategic-Plan_adopted.pdf (accessed: 2 June 2026).

Conclusion: integration does not solve everything

The main takeaway from this comparison is that institutional integration is a necessary but insufficient condition for principled multilateralism. What is truly important is the normative character of institutions and the type of incentives they generate. For example, the European Union creates a real normative pull: it demands consistency with shared principles, maintains accountability mechanisms and fosters a community of peers that rewards consistency and penalises deviations. In contrast, security alliances such as NATO or Five Eyes tend to reinforce pre-existing strategic dependencies, transforming a structural dependency into an additional institutional constraint.

This observation challenges one of the most widespread premises of liberal institutionalism: the idea that greater participation in institutions automatically produces more multilateral behaviour. Not all institutions have the same effects or promote the same types of behaviour. Another relevant finding, derived from the analysis by Stewart Patrick (2026), is that multilateral institutions have continued to function despite the partial withdrawal of the United States. The WHO Pandemic Treaty adopted in May 2025, the Seville Commitment on development financing, and the Belém climate agreements during COP30 moved forward without US participation. Patrick calls this phenomenon the 'U2 Doctrine' of international cooperation, that is, moving forward with or without the hegemonic power.

Within the framework of selective multilateralism, this development has significant implications. The conditions for middle powers to practise principled multilateralism have improved precisely because the US withdrawal has reduced the costs of deviating from its preferences. From this perspective, Spain's position is now more sustainable than it would have been a decade ago.

The final observation concerns the time horizon of the benefits derived from a principled foreign policy. Spain's consistent stance has produced measurable results: greater credibility in the Arab world and Latin America, growing influence in the European Union's foreign policy debates, and a consolidated reputation among the countries of the Global South as a relatively independent European partner. However, these benefits accumulate slowly. They are the result of years of consistent behaviour and the gradual accumulation of reputational capital, not of immediate strategic gains. This creates a significant political problem in democracies with short electoral cycles. The costs of challenging a dominant

ally are immediate, visible and easily attributable to those in power. The benefits of policy coherence, by contrast, are diffuse, take years to materialise and are difficult to capitalise on politically. Understanding this asymmetry is fundamental not only to explaining why so few states maintain consistent multilateral commitments, but also to reflecting on how the incentives shaping their behaviour might be altered.

Nor should the apparent gap between multilateral rhetoric and the actual behaviour of middle powers be interpreted as an exercise in political inconsistency or hypocrisy. Rather, this tension stems from structural factors deeply linked to security dependencies, the relative position of each state within the international system, and the institutional context in which it conducts its foreign policy. Middle powers operate in a particularly complex intermediate space: they lack the capabilities necessary to unilaterally impose their preferences, yet possess sufficient resources to attempt to influence the norms, institutions and dynamics of international governance. Their scope for action, therefore, depends to a large extent on the stability of the strategic environment and the predictability of existing multilateral frameworks.

The current transformation of the international system is profoundly altering these conditions. The progressive weakening of US leadership, growing competition among great powers and the erosion of normative consensuses inherited from the post-1945 liberal order have created a more uncertain, yet also a more open and e landscape. The crisis of traditional multilateralism does not necessarily imply the disappearance of spaces for cooperation; on the contrary, it may favour the emergence of new forms of initiative and capacity for action on the part of intermediate actors. Put another way, acting in accordance with certain principles does not necessarily constitute a strategic disadvantage, but may, in the long term, become a source of political power. The current moment appears to present a significant opportunity for middle powers. However, this opportunity also brings new demands, and not all middle powers will be equally prepared. Perhaps those willing to bear short-term political or strategic costs by adopting relatively autonomous positions vis-à-vis the great powers could, over time, accumulate significant reserves of normative capital and diplomatic credibility.

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