

Toward a New Era in Global Relations

The Potential of Middle Power Diplomacy to Shift Global Political Dynamics

Opinion piece

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The China-West Dialogue (CWD) was founded on the premise that the bilateral US-China relationship is leading the world toward a bipolar competitive era and that a plurilateral process that involves Europe, Canada, China, Japan, and the US would create complexity and dynamics that focus more on substance and less on rhetoric and ideology in addressing and negotiating major issues.

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1. INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

US-China relations shifted into a confrontational mode under the Trump presidency, with tariffs imposed on Chinese exports beginning in early 2018 and in 2020 when Trump labeled the pandemic as being caused by the “China virus.” The Biden administration stayed true to the more aggressive tone of the relationship in both policy and rhetoric beginning with the Anchorage, Alaska, meetings between the highest diplomatic officials of both countries in March of 2021.

The argument in this paper is that, as a result, *2024 could be a year of opportunity* for advancing global governance in addressing global challenges by capitalizing on latent, underlying global political dynamics to tee up a new era in which global governance can advance, even as systemic competition continues between the US, China, and Europe.

From China-West Dialogue’s (CWD) broad engagement of a variety of perspectives from more than a dozen countries including China, the Global South the G7, and the BRICS during the last four years, we conclude that: diversity is a creative force, pluralism is a powerful global political dynamic, and that inclusion is crucial to generating *agency* for humanity in addressing global challenges.

The Brazilian and South African G20 presidencies during 2024 and 2025, with the US to follow in 2026, could become pivotal focal points for the transition to a new era in global relations in which middle-power diplomacy demonstrates the feasibility of advancing humanity’s quest for systemic sustainability, despite the necessary acceptance of geopolitical tensions as a reality.

2. THE ROLES OF MIDDLE POWERS IN GLOBAL RELATIONS

In the current context, most countries do not want to choose between either China or the US. Middle powers find themselves defined by different dynamics. They are capable of independent foreign policy positioning and are contributing to the new global political dynamic of *pluralism*. Pluralism generates complexity, motion, fluidity, and countervailing forces that impact great power relations by scrambling binary tensions, dispersing intensity, and defusing ideological fervor.

Middle Powers exist today and have agency and influence precisely because they are:

- Independently concerned with *global threats* and seek to play a role in addressing them rather than seeking a prominent role in international relations only as a projection of national strength and identity;
- Capable of self-interested contributions to *global decision-making* characterized by diversity of perspectives, competitive behaviors, and shifting coalitions of consensus rather than fixed allegiances based on normative values; and
- Basing their actions and behaviors in the international arena on *national interests* and pragmatic articulation rather than values which have resulted in ideological differences and confrontational tensions.

These foundational shifts mean that **Middle Power Diplomacy (MPD)** is a prominent feature of the new global order now taking shape. Understanding these new global dynamics and nurturing them can make them into transformative forces in defining a new global order.

Middle power diplomacy is based on observations of existing practice that countries are already pursuing their *national interests*, that foreign policies are pragmatic in choosing with whom to align on different issues, shifting allegiances as issue areas change, and that diversity of views is now perceived as an asset for collective decision-making.

Japan, Australia, and Latin America provide good examples of middle-power diplomacy surfacing as an innovative framing for foreign policy in the 2020s.

There is a strain of foreign policy thinking in Japan that supports “the concept of ‘middle power diplomacy’, which aims toward “a more autonomous foreign policy.” The Asia’s Future Report (Soeya and Mochizuki, 2023) proposed that “Japan should...exercise leadership to help mitigate the competition between the U.S. and China in Asia through *constructive diplomacy*....Without this, there can be no solution to transnational problems and no progress toward a world free of nuclear weapons.”

Former Australian Prime Minister, Bob Carr, and former Foreign Minister, Gareth Evans, led a group of 50 Australian signatories to support a “Détente Statement”, which among other things argued that “Australia can contribute to changing [the] environment by renewing our commitment to an *activist middle power diplomacy*.”

Carlos Fortin, Jorge Heine, and Carlos Ominami, prominent thought leaders from Chile each of whom have had significant public policy careers, have edited a book on “Active Non-Alignment and Latin America [as] A New Doctrine for the New Century” (2021) with 24 authors from the

region, which makes clear the degree to which independent *policy space* is a priority for Latin American countries.

“The Nonaligned World: The West, the Rest and the New Global Disorder” was the theme for the May/June issue of *Foreign Affairs* in 2023.

As these brief examples suggest, there could be *a new global order based on secular interests, non-ideological formulations, and multiple sources of global leadership which interactively generate composite outcomes embodying contradictory but valid perspectives from different vantage points that move the world forward to addressing systemic global challenges in significant ways*. This shift in the global political dynamic toward pluralism driven by middle power diplomacy does not inevitably lead to “a new global *disorder*”, but rather could become a more inclusive, integrated network of significant countries to drive global solutions, defining a new global order.

Middle power diplomacy is based on listening, learning, brokering, give-and-get bargaining, inclusion, embracing diversity, being as comfortable with “difference” as with “like-mindedness,” understanding that “shifting coalitions of consensus” is better for global governance than fixed alliances and blocs, and adjusting pre-positioning by being open to enabling unexpected insights and different ways of seeing issues and opportunities to shift perceptions and change positions.

3. OPPORTUNITIES FOR MIDDLE POWER DIPLOMACY: 2024-2025

The challenge for those exercising global leadership is immense: Trying to orches-

trate power dynamics in positive-sum ways to keep the international community whole and manage global relations in ways that strengthen global governance, by invigorating coordinated efforts to generate sustainable outcomes for people and the planet. Despite the global tensions generated by the Ukraine war and the invasion of Gaza, there has been a shift in the tone of China-US relations since the Biden – Xi summit in November 2023 in San Francisco which could open opportunities for middle power diplomacy to play decisive roles in global governance addressing global challenges.

For example, the Bali G20 summit at the end of 2022 set an unexpectedly high mark in convergence among G20 countries on asserting strong adherence to universally agreed norms and principles for international conduct, especially in the face of the Russian war in Ukraine. (G20 Bali Leaders Declaration, paragraphs 3 and 4.) Indonesian President Jokowi and Indian President Modi played key roles in advancing these commitments and in extending ambition to other systemic issues.

The India G20 year in 2023 was a blizzard of G20 official and engagement group meetings, seeming to set a record in the number and size of the meetings held throughout a host country. Both Jokowi and Modi sought to project their capacities to *broker* global deals with domestic benefits for their countries and to *mediate* tense relations between G20 members who were at odds over the war in Ukraine and the situation evolving in Gaza and the Middle East.

The Brazil and South Africa G20 presidencies during 2024 and 2025 provide opportunities for them to capitalize on

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the “pause” in toxic tense geopolitical relations between China and the US during 2024 and to strengthen the roles of middle power diplomacy in global governance.

There are now 17 middle powers in the G20 that are capable of assuming leadership on different segments of the global agenda and working with others to generate agreements on specific issues and convergence where there has been division. There are two categories of countries that qualify as Middle Powers (MP). One is those Advanced Industrial Countries (AIC MPs) from the West, each of whom has regional and global influence in global affairs. The second category consists of Emerging Middle Powers (EMPs) which are rising powers largely from the non-western world.

Macron has made France a leader of an independent vision for Europe. Scholz’s commitment to a multipolar world has put

Germany in a distinctive posture. Borrell's "strategic autonomy" for the European Union has been important in Europe's relations with China. Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's plurilateral leadership within the EU has made Italy influential in Brussels and Washington. A new Labour government in the UK will raise the global profile of Great Britain. Australian and Japanese independent thought streams manifested in the "détente statement" by 50 Australians and the Asia's Future Report (Soeya and Mochizuki, 2023) could increase the policy independence of both countries. Korea's relations with China vis a vis North Korea distances South Korea from lockstep relations with the US. Canada's longstanding tradition of MPD goes back to Lester Pearson and Pierre Trudeau. These characteristics position these AIC MPs as strong players in global relations.

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Saudi Arabia is increasingly asserting itself on the global stage as a global commercial hub and playing diplomatic roles in the Middle East, including working with China on international issues. Turkey has fiercely positioned itself as an EU aspirant and as a global power broker between neighboring Russia and the West while protecting its independent interests in the Mediterranean. The inclusion of the African Union (AU) as the 21st member of the G20 gives greater focus and voice to Africa in global governance. Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico in Latin America, India and Indonesia in Asia, as well as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, South Africa, and the AU, put each of these G20 members in play in the global arena.

The 9 EMPs along with the 9 AIC MPs constitute a significant and diverse number of Middle Powers that have the potential to change the global landscape, if and as they choose to exercise global leadership in ways that *cut across* traditional groups, *incorporate* contradictory viewpoints and *focus* hard on practical policy issues and avoid ideological polemics and geopolitical theatrics.

The full potential of MPD becoming a significant force in global relations depends on the degree to which these two categories of MP countries resist the temptation to form blocs generating and amplifying tensions between the G7 + and the BRICS+. Rather, embracing the modality of *shifting coalitions of consensus* by affiliating with countries in the other category would engender the *pluralism* that entails the complexity, diversity, inclusion, and pragmatism necessary for global governance, which in the end is a professional endeavor.

The superpowers – the United States, China, and Europe – have much to gain from MPD becoming a growing force in global affairs by facilitating the advance of an otherwise stalled global agenda, by *pluralizing* US-China relations, by interceding between Russia and the West on Ukraine, and by containing the spillover effects of the violence in Gaza.

These positive effects of MPD implicitly assume that the US and China could be open to its advantages. On the other hand, if internal polarization in the US leads to a second term of populist nationalism, CWD deliberations have concluded that such a result could paradoxically mobilize even greater MPD than under a more benign scenario. This realization provides a window into why MPD has appeal, precisely to protect "autonomy", independence, and policy space for varied national interests and a variety of different constructs of strategic advantage.

Both Brazil and South Africa are members of the BRICS and at the same time, each with open relations with the United States and Europe could position each of them to *bridge divides* between countries in the G7 and the BRICS. Identifying what those opportunities are and how to develop approaches to differences in perspective will require forethought and skill.

Indeed, perhaps the greatest opportunity during this brief two-year window is to reconcile some of the tensions between the so-called "Global South" and the "Great Powers" by not only asserting middle power diplomacy as an instrument of leadership by middle powers but also by enabling great powers to understand the advantages of the styles and approaches of MPD which might serve as a preferable

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dominant modality for interactions of all the major players in global governance.

What could be the most important result of two years of middle-power diplomacy might be the realization by both the US and China that reigning in the hegemonic impulse might be a more effective way to keep the international community whole and move global governance forward into a new dynamic that is more productive and effective. In recent years, the divide between the West and the rest of the world, and the "great powers" and "middle powers" in the international arena, constrained ambition and limited the delivery of results.

It might very well be in the interest of the United States to alter the tone and approach to be more consistent with MPD for the US G20 Year in 2026, leaving the hegemonic rhetoric for the G7 Summits of the "like-minded." There could /should

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be a realization that the global context has indeed changed, that significant countries seek their place and space in the global order, and that interactive, fluid, adaptive, responsive global leadership is more effective than the assertive dominance characteristic of the previous global order.

CONCLUSIONS:

- The issue for Brazil and South Africa is how to *mediate* between the multiple modalities of the global order, between the BRICS and the G7, between the West and the Global South, and *bridge* divides rather than take sides.
- Can Brazil and South Africa build on the potential that middle power diplomacy seems to offer to *shift the dynamics* from the dominance of hard power geopolitical tensions severely limiting global governance to an eclectic world in which diversity, pluralism, and pragmatism drive greater global action?
- This eclectic world of middle power diplomacy has the potential to generate *complex convergences* that better

reflect and embody broad and varied interests rather than drilling down on core values and systemic competition as the only drivers of global negotiations and outcomes.

- Not an easy task, but one that Brazil and South Africa could undertake to demonstrate their form of leadership and the capacity of Middle Powers to lead, even in challenging moments like these. A focus on *human security* to integrate the Brazilian priorities of inequality, climate, and international reform could clarify the strategic thrust needed now. Perhaps, a new global order could result from the changes in mindsets, narratives, and behaviors globally that become more visible and valid in the next two years with Brazil and South Africa showing the way forward.

The opinions expressed in this article correspond to its author and are his sole responsibility.

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