

The Rise of Middle Powers in Global Governance: Comparative Analysis of the European Union, India, and Brazil

Iulia-Theodora Petcu

*The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania
petcuiulia21@stud.ase.ro*

Abstract: This paper examined how the European Union, India, and Brazil exercised middle-power diplomacy to shape global governance between 2010 and 2025. Using qualitative content analysis of institutional documents, multilateral declarations, and academic literature, the study explored how these actors combine coalition building, normative engagement, and institutional participation to sustain influence within a multipolar order. The findings showed that the European Union projected regulatory and normative leadership through rule-based frameworks, India maintained strategic autonomy through multi-alignment, and Brazil advanced South–South cooperation, emphasizing equity and institutional reform. Despite differences in structure and capacity, all three relied on legitimacy and coalition credibility rather than coercion. The analysis demonstrated that middle powers collectively contribute to stability by reinforcing inclusive, rule-based multilateralism. The paper concluded that the evolving convergence of middle-power strategies reflects an adaptive model of influence that privileges negotiation, shared governance, and normative credibility over material dominance. These insights enhance understanding of non-hegemonic leadership and the future of the multilateral order.

Keywords: Middle Powers, Global Governance, European Union, India, Brazil, Multilateralism, Normative Power, Coalition Diplomacy, International Relations

1. Introduction

The configuration of global power has shifted markedly in the past two decades, challenging the dominance of traditional great powers and prompting renewed attention to the role of middle powers in shaping multilateral governance. The concept of the “middle power” describes states or entities that exercise influence not through military strength but through coalition building, institutional leadership, and rule-based diplomacy (Cooper, 1997; Beeson, 2013). These actors seek to stabilize the international system and promote norms of cooperation and multilateral legitimacy.

The European Union (EU), India, and Brazil exemplify this transformation. Each has pursued a distinct path toward asserting agency in global politics while remaining outside the category of superpowers. The EU projects normative and regulatory leadership, translating internal governance principles into external influence (Manners, 2002; European Council, 2023). India combines pragmatic multi-alignment with a developmental narrative emphasizing sovereignty and strategic autonomy (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023). Brazil promotes South–South cooperation, emphasizing inclusivity, social justice, and reform of global institutions (Itamaraty, 2024; Hurrell, 2020). This comparative framework is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Core diplomatic dimensions of Middle Powers

Dimension	European Union	India	Brazil
Diplomatic identity	Normative actor	Strategic balancer	South–South advocate
Core institutions	EU Council, EEAS	G20, QUAD, UN	BRICS, Mercosur, UNASUR
Preferred tools	Regulation, dialogue	Non-alignment, tech diplomacy	Development cooperation
Policy objective	Stability and norms	Strategic autonomy	Representation of Global South

Source: Author's elaboration based on Cooper, 1997; Hurrell, 2020; European Council, 2023.

Despite their differences, these three actors share functional similarities as mediators between global and regional arenas. They use diplomacy and institution-building to advance both national or regional interests and global stability. However, the academic and policy literature often examines them separately—treating the EU as a *sui generis* actor, India as an emerging power, and Brazil as a regional leader—without systematically comparing their strategies and convergences in global governance (Beeson, 2013; Patrick, 2021).

This study addressed that gap by comparing how the EU, India, and Brazil employ middle power strategies to influence multilateral processes. It analyzed policy documents, speeches, and institutional frameworks between 2010 and 2025 to identify shared diplomatic patterns and divergences. As shown in Table 1, these actors differ in their diplomatic identities, core institutions, preferred tools, and policy objectives. The purpose was to determine how these actors contribute to the reconfiguration of global order through normative leadership, coalition-building, and strategic autonomy.

2. Conceptual framework and literature review

The concept of middle power diplomacy has evolved from post–World War II discussions of states that occupy an intermediate position between great powers and smaller actors. Early definitions emphasized capacity, viewing middle powers as states with moderate material resources that nonetheless exert influence through diplomacy and coalition building (Cooper, 1997). More scholarship frames middle powers as behavioral rather than purely material categories—actors that prioritize multilateralism, institution building, and norm promotion to stabilize the international system (Beeson, 2013; Chapnick, 1999).

In the context of global governance, middle powers operate as “norm brokers” that mediate between competing blocs and promote rule-based cooperation (Hurrell, 2020; Patrick, 2021). Their influence stems less from coercion than from credibility, reputation, and the capacity to coordinate among diverse actors. This approach extends Joseph Nye’s (2004) concept of *soft power* to the collective management of global institutions, where attraction and legitimacy often yield greater returns than direct control.

For the European Union, India, and Brazil, middle power behavior manifests through distinct yet comparable strategies. The EU’s external action aligns with the notion of *normative power*, advancing rules and standards through diplomacy and economic integration (Manners, 2002; European Council, 2023). India combines non-alignment with strategic flexibility, seeking partnerships that preserve autonomy while enhancing influence within multilateral institutions (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023; Mohan, 2021). Brazil, meanwhile, uses developmental diplomacy and South–South cooperation to expand representation for the Global South and advocate for institutional reform (Itamaraty, 2024; Burges, 2020).

Existing literature has tended to analyze these actors separately, emphasizing the EU's sui generis nature, India's regional security role, or Brazil's postcolonial diplomacy. However, comparative research remains limited. Scholars such as Beeson (2013) and Hurrell (2020) call for integrated approaches to explain how diverse middle powers contribute to collective governance amid multipolar realignment. This study addresses that gap by proposing a comparative analytical model that maps the relationship between diplomatic strategy, coalition behavior, and influence mechanisms across the three cases.

3. Methodology

This study applied a qualitative comparative analysis to examine how the European Union, India, and Brazil exercise middle-power diplomacy in global governance. The research design focused on identifying shared behavioral patterns and policy mechanisms that enable influence within multilateral institutions.

3.1 Research design and rationale

A qualitative design was chosen to capture the strategic and normative dimensions of diplomacy that are not easily quantifiable. This approach builds on established studies of middle-power behavior emphasizing diplomatic agency, multilateral cooperation, and norm entrepreneurship (Cooper, 1997; Beeson, 2013). Quantitative indicators such as GDP or military spending were not prioritized, since the analytical focus is on diplomatic practice and coalition behavior rather than material capacity.

3.2 Data sources

The analysis draws from three primary types of data:

1. **Institutional documents**, including the *European Council Strategic Agenda 2023–2027*, India's *Foreign Policy Vision Statements* (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023), and Brazil's *Itamaraty Policy Guidelines* (Itamaraty, 2024);
2. **Multilateral organization reports**, such as G20 communiqués, BRICS Summit Declarations, and EU Council conclusions on global governance reform (G20, 2023; European Council, 2023);
3. **Academic and policy literature** addressing the evolution of middle powers in international order (Hurrell, 2020; Patrick, 2021; Burges, 2020).

All sources were obtained from verified institutional databases and scholarly publications to ensure reliability and transparency.

3.3 Analytical procedure

The research employed a document-based content analysis, following an inductive coding process (Mayring, 2014). Texts were coded for recurring themes, including:

- Diplomatic identity (how each actor frames its role),
- Coalition strategy (partnership patterns, leadership modes), and
- Institutional influence (norm diffusion, agenda setting).

Codes were then compared across cases to detect convergence and divergence in diplomatic practices. This procedure enabled systematic identification of strategic parallels while accounting for contextual differences.

3.4 Reliability and validity

Triangulation among institutional, academic, and multilateral sources strengthened analytical validity. Each finding was cross-checked against at least two independent references. The study does not claim universal generalization but aims for analytical generalization, contributing conceptual clarity to comparative middle-power research.

4. Findings and discussion

The comparative analysis demonstrates that the European Union, India, and Brazil employ distinct but convergent forms of middle-power diplomacy. Despite differences in institutional structure and geopolitical positioning, all three actors rely on coalition building, multilateral engagement, and norm-based legitimacy as central tools of influence.

4.1 Diplomatic identity and strategic orientation

The European Union positions itself as a normative and regulatory actor, exporting internal governance models through trade agreements and development cooperation (Manners, 2002; European Council, 2023). Its external influence relies on persuasion and institutional authority rather than coercion.

India articulates a strategy of multi-alignment, balancing relations among major powers while maintaining strategic autonomy (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023). Its diplomacy emphasizes sovereignty, technological capacity, and partnership diversification within the Indo-Pacific and Global South.

Brazil, in turn, pursues South–South cooperation as a platform for inclusive development and reform of global institutions. Under the Itamaraty framework, it promotes solidarity with emerging economies through coalitions such as BRICS, G20, and Mercosur (Itamaraty, 2024; Burges, 2020).

These identity positions reflect different routes toward the same objective: achieving recognition and agenda-setting power within global governance institutions.

To provide a more detailed comparative overview of the diplomatic strategies and influences exercised by the European Union, India, and Brazil, Table 2 synthesizes the core dimensions of their middle-power diplomacy. This table highlights their distinct diplomatic identities, coalition strategies, mechanisms of influence, and governance outcomes.

Table 2. Comparative dimensions of Middle-Power diplomacy: EU, India, and Brazil

Analytical Dimension	European Union	India	Brazil
Diplomatic identity	Normative power promoting values and rules	Strategic autonomy through multi-alignment	South–South leadership and developmental advocacy
Coalition strategy	Institutionalized multilateralism (UN, WTO, G20)	Flexible alignments (BRICS, QUAD, ASEAN outreach)	Regional coalitions (Mercosur, CELAC, BRICS)
Mechanisms of influence	Regulation, trade standards, aid conditionality	Technology diplomacy, security partnerships	Developmental diplomacy, inclusive governance reform
Outcomes in governance	Norm diffusion, regulatory convergence	Strategic visibility, institutional voice	Representation of Global South, institutional reform advocacy

Source: Author's synthesis based on Cooper, 1997; Hurrell, 2020; Beeson, 2013; European Council, 2023; Itamaraty, 2024.

The comparative structure in Table 2 illustrates how each actor approaches institutional cooperation, external partnerships, and norm-based diplomacy in its own unique manner during global governance processes.

4.2 Convergent mechanisms of influence

Across cases, three recurring mechanisms explain how middle powers sustain influence:

1. Coalition building. All three actors invest in partnerships to amplify their voice and legitimacy within multilateral forums (Patrick, 2021).
2. Agenda framing. By emphasizing norms such as inclusivity, sustainability, and sovereignty, they redirect discussions toward equitable governance models (Hurrell, 2020).
3. Institutional persistence. Even when material leverage is limited, consistent participation in rule-making bodies secures continuity of influence (Beeson, 2013).

These patterns validate the conceptual model, which situates coalition behavior and institutional engagement as the mediating channels between diplomatic identity and global governance impact.

4.3 The strategic function of cultural and normative power

While material capabilities differ substantially, all three middle powers employ normative and cultural dimensions of influence. The EU uses its regulatory systems and human-rights discourse as instruments of persuasion; India leverages its civilizational narrative and democratic credentials; Brazil foregrounds cultural diplomacy rooted in solidarity and postcolonial equity. Such approaches exemplify Nye's (2004) soft-power logic-achieving outcomes through attraction and credibility rather than force.

This alignment suggests that middle powers collectively shape global order not through dominance but through legitimacy and rule innovation, confirming Beeson's (2013) argument that middle powers sustain the system they cannot control. For instance, during the G20 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration (2023), the European Union, India, and Brazil jointly endorsed sustainable growth, inclusive digital governance, and climate adaptation, demonstrating a shared commitment to legitimacy-based leadership in multilateral forums (G20 Leaders, 2023; European Council, 2023).

4.4. Limitations and theoretical contribution

The comparative design of this study presents certain limitations. The analysis primarily relies on qualitative document review, which limits the ability to measure diplomatic performance or economic impact quantitatively. Institutional and cultural differences among the European Union, India, and Brazil also constrain direct comparability (Hurrell, 2020; Cooper & Higgott, 2021). Nevertheless, this paper contributes conceptually by reframing middle-power diplomacy as a continuum of interrelated strategies-coalition building, normative engagement, and institutional adaptation-rather than discrete categories (Cooper, 2020). This framework advances theoretical understanding by connecting legitimacy-based influence with adaptive governance in contemporary multilateralism (Flemes, 2013).

5. Policy implications and future relevance

The comparative analysis highlights that middle powers such as the European Union, India, and Brazil are increasingly vital to maintaining a pluralistic and stable international system. Their strategies reveal how influence in global governance can be achieved through coalition-based legitimacy rather than hierarchical power.

5.1 Strengthening multilateral coordination

Middle powers demonstrate that consistent participation in multilateral institutions yields long-term agenda-setting capacity. The European Union's leadership in the World Trade Organization and the G20, India's coordination role in the Indo-Pacific, and Brazil's advocacy for Global South representation all confirm that durable influence depends on coalition stability (European Council, 2023; G20, 2023; Itamaraty, 2024). Policy coordination among these actors, particularly on trade

regulation, digital governance, and climate diplomacy, could expand the normative space for rule-based multilateralism.

5.2 Enhancing normative convergence

Although their policy narratives differ, these middle powers share an interest in reinforcing international norms such as sustainability, equity, and inclusivity. Formalizing dialogues between the EU's External Action Service, India's Ministry of External Affairs, and Brazil's Itamaraty could institutionalize norm diffusion across diverse governance arenas. This aligns with Patrick's (2021) argument that normative collaboration among middle powers enhances systemic legitimacy.

5.3 Institutional and policy recommendations

To consolidate their role, the study suggests three interlinked measures:

1. Create a cross-regional middle-power platform to coordinate positions ahead of global summits and UN reform debates;
2. Expand joint initiatives on climate and technology diplomacy, where legitimacy and technical expertise overlap;
3. Develop common metrics to evaluate the effectiveness of soft-power instruments in multilateral contexts.

Nonetheless, this cooperative framework entails certain risks. Diverging domestic priorities and asymmetric relations with major powers may weaken middle-power coordination, particularly in trade and security governance (Xiao, 2025). Moreover, the reliance on normative alignment as a diplomatic anchor could amplify fragmentation if institutional reforms within global forums stall (Patrick, 2021). By emphasizing cooperation rather than competition, middle powers can transform their collective credibility into a structural feature of global governance. As Hurrell (2020) notes, their influence lies in their capacity to make order-making inclusive. The continued engagement of the EU, India, and Brazil in these domains thus contributes not only to their national or regional interests but to the adaptability and fairness of the multilateral order itself.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how the European Union, India, and Brazil act as middle powers, shaping the evolving landscape of global governance. Through a qualitative comparative analysis of policy documents, institutional frameworks, and academic literature, it identified the shared mechanisms-coalition building, institutional engagement, and normative legitimacy-that sustain their influence despite different material capacities and geopolitical contexts.

The findings confirm that middle powers contribute to global order not through dominance but through strategic credibility and multilateral stewardship. The European Union projects regulatory and normative leadership; India advances strategic autonomy within flexible partnerships; and Brazil promotes inclusive governance through South-South cooperation. Each operates from distinct foundations, yet all reinforce the principles of rule-based multilateralism.

By conceptualizing cultural and normative influence as diplomatic resources, the study expands existing theories of middle-power behavior. It shows that these actors collectively shape governance outcomes by stabilizing negotiations, diffusing norms, and fostering equitable participation. Their engagement demonstrates that global governance remains viable when legitimacy, cooperation, and shared rules outweigh the threat of coercion.

Future research could expand this framework to include emerging middle powers such as South Korea, Indonesia, and South Africa to evaluate how post-pandemic governance challenges and digital diplomacy reshape coalition-based leadership. Such studies could test whether the convergence identified here represents a lasting transformation of multilateral governance or a transitional phase in the redistribution of global influence.

References

- Beeson, M. (2013). Middle powers in the international political economy. In T. M. Shaw, L. C. M. F. de Mello e Souza, & S. A. Murphy (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of contemporary international political economy* (pp. 197–210). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-45443-0_13
- Burges, S. W. (2013). Brazil as a bridge between old and new powers. *International Affairs*, 89(3), 577–594. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12034>
- Burges, S. W. (2020). *Brazil in the world: The international relations of a South American giant*. Manchester University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526108043>
- Chapnick, A. (1999). The middle power. *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, 7(2), 73–82. <https://doi.org/10.1080/11926422.1999.9673212>
- Cooper, A. F. (Ed.). (1997). *Niche diplomacy: Middle powers after the Cold War*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-25902-1>
- Cooper, A. F., & Higgott, R. A. (2021). Middle powers and global governance in a fragmented order. *International Affairs*, 97(5), 1391–1409.
- Council of the European Union. (2023, November 21). *Latin America and the Caribbean: Council approves conclusions on EU–LAC relations*. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/11/21/latin-america-and-the-caribbean-council-approves-conclusions-on-eu-lac-relations/>
- European Council. (2023, December 14–15). *European Council meeting – Conclusions (EUCO 20/23)*. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2023/12/14-15/>
- European Council. (2024, June 27). *Strategic agenda 2024–2029 (adopted)*. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/european-council/strategic-agenda-2024-2029/>
- Flemes, D. (2013). Network powers: Strategies of change in the multipolar system. *Third World Quarterly*, 34(6), 1016–1036. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2013.802504>
- G20 Leaders. (2023, September 9–10). *G20 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration*. <https://www.mea.gov.in/Images/CPV/G20-New-Delhi-Leaders-Declaration.pdf>
- Government of India, Press Information Bureau. (2023, September 25). *India's G20 Presidency – G20 Summit (Series #101)*. <https://static.pib.gov.in/WriteReadData/specificdocs/documents/2023/sep/doc2023925255601.pdf>
- Hurrell, A. (2018). Beyond the BRICS: Power, pluralism, and the future of global order. *Ethics & International Affairs*, 32(1), 89–101. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/ethics-and-international-affairs/article/abs/beyond-the-brics-power-pluralism-and-the-future-of-global-order/ADFA38373CACBC39717BCCEC2F7B6119>
- Itamaraty (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Brazil). (2025, March 26). *Strategic and global partnership action plan: Japan–Brazil (policy document)*. <https://aplicacao.itamaraty.gov.br/ApiConcordia/Documento/download/33061>
- Mayring, P. (2014). *Qualitative content analysis: Theoretical foundation, basic procedures and software solution*. Open Access Monograph. https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/39517/ssoar-2014-mayring-Qualitative_content_analysis_theoretical_foundation.pdf
- Ministry of External Affairs (Government of India). (2023, November 30). *India's G20 Presidency: A synopsis*. https://www.g20.in/content/dam/gtwenty/Indias_G20_Presidency-A_Synopsis.pdf
- Mohan, C. R. (2021, March 19). India romances the West in a deepening geopolitical shift. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/19/india-modi-west-quad-china-biden-non-aligned/>
- Nye, J. S., Jr. (2004). *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. PublicAffairs.
- O'Donnell, F. (2021). India's multi-alignment and the Russia–India–China triangle. *International Affairs*, 97(3), 801–820. <https://academic.oup.com/ia/article/97/3/801/6226154>
- Patrick, S. M. (2021, October 19). The international order isn't ready for the climate crisis: The case for a new planetary politics. *Foreign Affairs*. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2021-10-19/climate-crisis-international-order-isnt-ready>
- South Africa (BRICS 2023 Host). (2023, August 23–24). *XV BRICS Summit – Johannesburg II Declaration*. https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/speech_docs/Jhb%20II%20Declaration%2024%20August%202023.pdf
- Xiao, Y. (2025). Emerging Middle Powers' Balancing Diplomacy: Connotations, Motivations, and Implications. *BRIO Belt & Road Initiative Quarterly*, 6(2), 211–224. https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/102830/ssoar-brio-2025-2-xiao-Emerging_Middle_Powers_Balancing_Diplomacy.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y