# Middle and Emerging Power in Foreign Policy Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper argues that the concepts of 'middle powers' and 'emerging powers' remain analytically ambiguous and often conflated, owing to overlapping parameters and inconsistent theoretical frameworks. While both terms have been widely employed in the study of International Relations – particularly in foreign policy analysis since the early 2000s – they suffer from conceptual limitations that weaken their analytical utility. The long-standing debate over the appropriate variables for defining a 'middle power' has led to the development of multiple, sometimes conflicting, approaches: functional, systemic-structural, psychological, behavioral, positional, and identity. At the same time, the term 'emerging powers' has been criticized as vague or even meaningless, as it often adopts criteria from classical middle power theories without sufficient conceptual distinction. Through a literature-based analysis, this paper explores how the definitional debates around 'middle powers' originated, how the term 'emerging powers' emerged and became entangled with it, and how recent scholars – such as that by Fonseca et al. and Paes et al. – has attempted to reconceptualize 'emerging powers' using more fluid, context-sensitive, and narrative-driven frameworks. In doing so, the study highlights the need for clearer conceptual boundaries to enhance both academic rigor and policy relevance in analyzing state roles in the evolving international system.*

*__Keywords__: Middle Powers, Emerging Powers, Foreign Policy Analysis, International Politics, International System*

*Penelitian ini berargumen konsep 'middle powers' dan 'emerging powers' masih bersifat ambigu secara analitis dan sering kali tumpang tindih. Hal ini disebabkan oleh parameter yang saling beririsan serta penerapan teori yang tidak konsisten. Kedua istilah ini telah digunakan secara luas dalam studi Hubungan Internasional, khususnya dalam analisis kebijakan luar negeri sejak awal milenium baru, untuk mengkaji kemunculan negara-negara yang telah menjadi atau diperkirakan akan menjadi aktor penting dalam sistem internasional. Namun, keduanya menghadapi masalah konseptual yang signifikan. Perdebatan panjang mengenai variabel yang tepat untuk mengkategorikan suatu negara sebagai 'middle power' telah melahirkan berbagai pendekatan: fungsional, struktural-sistemik, psikologi, perilaku, posisi, dan identitas. Perdebatan yang muncul dalam upaya mendefinisikan 'middle powers' tersebut hingga saat ini belum mencapai konsensus. Di sisi lain, istilah 'emerging powers' juga dikritik sebagai istilah yang kurang bermakna secara konseptual, karena sering kali menggunakan parameter dari teori 'middle power' klasik secara sembarangan. Melalui metode studi pustaka, penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana perdebatan seputar definisi 'middle powers' berkembang, bagaimana istilah 'emerging powers' muncul dan kerap disamakan dengan istilah 'middle power', serta bagaimana studi terbaru berusaha mereformulasikan 'emerging powers' melalui pendekatan yang lebih dinamis, kontekstual, dan berbasis narasi. Studi ini menekankan pentingnya batasan konseptual yang lebih jelas untuk meningkatkan ketepatan analisis akademik dan relevansi kebijakan dalam memahami peran negara di tengah dinamika sistem internasional yang terus berubah.*

*__Kata-kata Kunci__: Middle Power, Emerging Powers, Analisa Kebijakan Luar Negeri, Politik Internasional, Sistem Internasional*

Experts recently have used the term 'emerging powers' to review the phenomenon of countries that are claimed to be growing as new significant forces in international relations. For example, the term 'emerging powers' is used to explain the increasing economic capacity and influence of countries such as China (Hopewell 2022; Houghton 2024), India, and Brazil (Hopewell 2022; Parizek and Stephen 2021) in international politics. Karim (2021) and Lees (2021) even broadens the use of the term to define the positions of several countries such as Indonesia and South Africa within the constellation of contemporary global political economy. In short, 'emerging powers' is a conceptual tool to serve two purposes; (1) to identify a country's behavior and categorize its position on the map of international relations, and (2) to predict the degree of a country's influence on global politics.

Despite the growing use of 'emerging powers', a systemic review to understand the meaning of the term, unfortunately, is still needed. The tendency of scholars to have comfortably confined themselves to employ 'emerging powers' for practical matters has brought the consequences that a serious exploration related to what the word entails and how it should be used are left behind (see i.e Patrick's (2010) "irresponsible stakeholders" and Scott and Wilkinson's (2015) "system preserving powers"). Even if these authors allocated a section within their writings to definition, it commonly contains three features: noting the lack of agreement, criticizing existing definitions, and providing a new definition (Hurrel 2006; Destradi 2016; Miller 2016). While it has been a typical within international relations study – where concept such as power or security is remained contested – this repetitive pattern indicated a crucial trait that there is a continuing struggle to build a conceptual clarity and analytical coherence. The recurring attempts by scholars to introduce new definitions also showed that the current once is either lacking in clarity or applied inconsistently. This practice becomes problematic, as the proliferation of definitions makes it increasingly difficult to establish clear principles that define the phenomenon it represents (Fonseca et al. 2016). Thus, by far it can be said that there has been a relative absence of authoritative writings that particularly focused on providing the term's definition by far within the field of foreign policy analysis as well as international relations. The

importance of grounding such a conceptual definition lies in its ability to provide clear delimitation. A well-defined term not only enhances its validity in terms of knowledge but also strengthens its function in defining reality, removing ambiguity in both academic contexts and practical applications (Fonseca et al. 2016; Kríž et al. 2019)

The circumstance becomes more complicated since the term 'emerging power' often is treated equally with the one of 'middle power'. Defining 'emerging powers' until recently tends to rely on variables long attributed by foreign policy scholars to the term 'middle powers', resulting in a sort of confusion between the terms 'emerging power' and 'middle power'. A strong tendency to associate the term 'emerging powers' with 'middle powers', for instance, is evident in the writings of Karim (2018) and Mcdonald and Paltiel (2016) who refer to some emerging powers countries as new middle powers. Thies and Sari (2018) also applies the middle powers theory to analyze Indonesia's place in international system. Aydin (2021)  also follows this line of thought, using the term 'middle powers' in his discussion of the rise and decline of Turkey and Mexico's power and how it shapes the liberal political order.

Rather than to study the terms individually as it has been done so far, this paper, therefore, aims to elucidate the connection between them. Through an exploration of how the terms 'middle power' and 'emerging power' have been used in the study of International Relations in general and foreign policy analysis – where it frequently operationalized and applied – to answer some critical questions including what the definitions of the terms 'middle powers' and 'emerging powers' are, how they have evolved in the study of international relations, and how the two terms are related. An important finding mentioned within this paper is that although the debate on these two terms has been going on for a long time, there is still no satisfactory conclusion on what precisely defines 'emerging power' and 'middle power'

This paper will be structured as follows: (1) Discussing the development of middle powers theory since its inception, (2) Explore the process that has led to the confusion between the terms 'middle powers' and 'emerging powers', and (3) Examine

the development of the use of the term 'emerging powers' in contemporary international relations studies.

## Classical Middle Powers Theory

In contrast to 'emerging powers' that flourished around two decades ago, the term 'middle powers' emerged rightly after the end of the Second World War first when policymakers and academics used it to map a country's position in the post-war international political structure. As Burges (2005) noted, the term was introduced by Canadian scholars and politicians in the 1940s as they debated how Canada's significance should be perceived in post-war international relations. Thus, the term 'middle powers' is related to how a country views itself within the international environment (see for instance Coats 1947).

Since its emergence in the 1940s, the term 'middle powers' has sparked debate among international relations experts. Theories related to the term can be broadly classified into four approaches, namely the functional, systemic-structural, psychological, and behavioral approaches. It is also worth noting that in more recent developments, Carr (2014) moved away from the functional approach and instead adopted two alternative frameworks: the positional and identity approaches.

*Functional-based Approach*

The first approach to the term 'middle powers' is based on perceiving a state's position in the international environment according to its function within the international system as a whole. Gelber (1946) was the first to academically associate the term 'middle powers' with the capability of certain states to influence international politics or the international system. He used the term to categorize countries that have a significant influence on the international system, yet are not equivalent to countries categorized as 'great powers'. According to him, some countries possess considerable capabilities in determining international political conditions even though their influence is not as extensive as those of great powers. Gelber's view was then adopted by Chapnick (1999) who

stated that functional model refers to a middle power's ability to exert influence and take on specific responsibilities within the international community. In this essence, it also suggests that when a middle power has adequate capacity and capability in certain areas, it can assume greater responsibilities and utilize its strengths to benefit the broader international system, extending its influence beyond its immediate regional context (Kríž et al. 2019).

*Systemic Approach*

The emergence of a new approach in the study of International Relations in the early 1960s, known as the semi-structural approach, had a notable impact on the debate surrounding the term 'middle powers.'. Middle powers theorists who adopt a structural systemic approach view a country's power as something that can be objectively perceived based on its material capacity and capability. Holbraad (1971), an early middle powers thinker from this approach, argues that what distinguishes middle powers countries from great powers or small or lesser powers "lies in the (material) capabilities they possess and the power they wield." Although the inclination to use material factors as objective indicators to determine which countries qualify to be categorized as middle power is quite strong, scholars in this approach still struggle to agree on which material factors are most important. Wood (1990) and Finlayson (1998) tends to use economic power variables such as gross domestic product (GDP) to classify which countries deserve to be considered middle power. However, Neack (1993) disagrees with the notion that only economic capability should be used as a variable determining middle power status. He expands the indicators by considering several statistical data, including population size, the amount of military expenditure, literacy, and the mortality rate of the population. On the other hand, Chase et al. (1999) offers a different perspective, though they do not entirely dismiss the conclusions reached by the aforementioned thinkers. They argue that middle power status, which they often refer to as a 'pivotal state', can only be assessed based on the importance of a country's position relative to a country that is claimed to be a great power.

*Psychological Approach*

Defining 'middle power' from systemic analysis evidently failed to offer a satisfying answer to end the debates. In his book entitled ''Liliput and Dilemma: Small States in International Politics'', Robert Keohane (1969) criticizes the use of the systemic-structural approach to explain the concept of middle powers. He provides an alternative interpretation, arguing that the definition of power here should not be solely attached to material capabilities alone but also to a psychological ability to influence. Keohane's ideas later became the foundation for what became known as the psychological approach, which later also inspired the emergence of the behavioral approach. Keohane proposes four divisions in the international system that can be used to clarify which countries can be classified as middle powers, which are: (1) 'system-determining' countries, (2) 'system-influencing' countries, (3) 'system-affecting' division, and (4) 'system-ineffectual' division of states. Anicich and Hirsh (2017) then expanded the phycological approach of middle powers by connecting it with national identity and status dynamics. Drawing on social identity theory, they argue that middle powers – states that are neither dominant nor marginal in the international system – experience psychological tension due to their ambiguous global status. This ambiguity generates identity-driven motivations, as seen in countries like Canada, which often strive to preserve a positive national self-image. Such motivations manifest in efforts to differentiate themselves from dominant powers while asserting moral leadership and commitment to multilateralism.

*Behavioral Approach*

Another stand was introduced by Pratt (1990) that observed the role played by countries claiming the middle powers status in the international environment since the 1970s. He found that there is a normative aspect in every behavior taken by middle powers countries. In his paper, Pratt argues that middle power such as Norway, Denmark, and Sweden have chosen to engage in ethical activities. Although Pratt does not consider the ethical dimension as an important prerequisite for the process of classifying a country as a middle power, he manages to highlight an important aspect of middle powers behavior where these countries generally

tend to focus on humane international activities (humane internationalism). The conclusion made by Pratt (1990) was affirmed by Cooper et al. (1993) who criticize the systemic-structural approach that overemphasizes material attributes, such as economic and military capacity and geographical position, in determining a country's middle power status. They shift from the systemic-structural approach by advocating for the importance of the behavioral dimension as a more valid parameter in the classification process. Adherents of the behavioral approach generally argue that countries holding middle powers status are those with altruistic behavior or those focused on activities based on moral-humanity. Behringer (2003) for instance, asserts a similar opinion by saying that a country deserves to be considered a middle power if it plays an active role in endorsing the fulfillment of all aspects of human security. Other authors, namely Rutherford et al. (2003), add that the other middle powers countries' behavioral characteristics are those that are proven to be able to work closely with non-state international actors in fighting for certain common global issues.

*Positional Approach*

Carr (2014) mentioned that defining "middle power" through positional approach relies on quantifiable factors such as GDP, population size, military strength, and defense spending to objectively classify countries. These indicators allow the creation of country ranking and particularly attractive due to the widely data availability which offers a straightforward way to categorize states based on their relative size. Such approach also highly applicable and remain relevant overtime. Although positional approach is considered easy to develop, it lacks conceptual depth as a definition as mentioned by Carr (2014). One major critique of the positional approach is that it often relies on averages, which can mask the distinct strategic needs and realities of different countries. By focusing on averages and rankings, this approach fails to account for the nuanced ways in which countries like Australia behave in their specific geopolitical context. This limitation suggests that power cannot be solely defined by size or spending, as different countries may have different strategic priorities that are not reflected in raw numbers (Carr 2014). Križ et al. (2019) also raised

concerns regarding the objectivity of this approach, particularly emphasizing the limitations inherent in relying on qualitative indicators. While these indicators can offer valuable insights into the complex and context-specific nature of state behavior and influence, they are inherently interpretative and may lack standardization. As the definitional criteria for identifying middle powers are often constructed by the researchers themselves, there is a significant risk that a state's classification as a middle power may reflect subjective judgments rather than universally accepted benchmarks.

*Identity Approach*

Although less popular, the identity approach in defining 'middle power' can still be traced in its application. This approach is rooted in constructivism, particularly stemming from Finnemore and Sikkink (2001) who argue that a nation's actions can be understood through its perception of its identity. The identity approach takes into account both the declarations of political leaders regarding middle power status and the influence of public opinion. The identity approach to middle power status views it as a politically constructed category, one that is deliberately shaped by policymakers to influence and manage the perception of a state's international role. This perspective underscores the idea that a country's self-identification is not merely a passive reflection of its global standing, but an active process wherein policymakers assert and promote a particular image of the nation's international identity (Carr 2014; Kríž et al. 2019). The identity approach has several limitations, particularly regarding the subjectivity and fluidity of self-ascribed labels. Since middle power status is based on political narratives promoted by national leaders, it is unstable and can shift with changes in government and political agendas. This volatility undermines the reliability of the label, as different administrations may redefine a country's role based on their foreign policy priorities. Additionally, the politicization of middle power status risks associating it with specific political ideologies, making it less neutral. The lack of clear criteria for defining middle power status further dilutes its meaning, allowing even less influential states to claim the label, making the concept overly inclusive and less useful for distinguishing countries in the global order (Carr 2014).

## Middle Powers and Emerging Powers:
## The Conflation of Terms?

Until the 1980s, international relations scholars were still primarily focused on the debate to determine the appropriate parameters for classifying why countries deserve to be called middle powers in international politics, often using countries like Canada and Australia as the object of analysis. They generally employed various approaches derived from grand theories in the study of international relations to verify the eligibility of a country to hold middle powers status, especially systemic-structural and functional approaches.

However, the publication of Selcher's book on 1981, entitled ''Brazil in the International System: The Rise of a Middle Power'' marked a new phase in the debate on middle powers. In this book, Selcher (1981) tried to use a systemic-structural approach to explore the emergence of a new middle power country in international politics, specifically Brazil. Selcher (1981) analyzed the relationship between Brazil's material capabilities and its potential to influence international politics. He employed some tangible parameters in his analysis such as military capabilities, industrial and agricultural output, consumption, and diplomatic capabilities. By comparing Brazil with several other countries using these parameters, Selcher (1981) concluded that Brazil deserved to be categorized as a new middle power in the 1980s international system. Although Selcher's book (1981) does not explicitly introduce the terms 'emerging powers' or 'new middle powers', his analysis of Brazil and his argument that Brazil has the potential to be categorized as a middle power represented a significant development. This was because he brought up the idea of the possibility of new middle powers emerging at a time when the average study of middle powers primarily focuses on traditional middle powers countries, including Canada, Australia, Norway, Sweden, and Spain.

In more recent research, the discourse regarding middle power evolves in at least two new directions. First, there has been an expansion of the parameters used to define the term middle powers. While the classical approaches remain somewhat relevant, new perspective are enriching and adding greater analytical nuance.

For instance, a study by Karim and Nabila (2022) introduces the element of role conception within the framework of behavioral approach. Rather than merely adopting the moral-humanitarian tendency as proposed by Behringer (2003), Karim and Nabila (2022) argued that middle power takes up specific role conception to define their position based on several sources, particularly within the context of *vis-à-vis* rising new power. Using the case of China's rise, the study identified four main role conceptions that may be endorsed by middle power countries in Asia-Pacific region, depending on their alignment to the United States and their perceived risk of geopolitical tension with China. These roles are: (1) regional leader, (2) faithful ally, (3) active independent, and (4) bridging.

Such identification is valuable to elucidate the behavior of middle power countries that diverge from the commonly assumed preference for hedging in response to the rise of China. For example, in the case of South Korea. Given its high alignment with the United States and the need to manage geopolitical tensions with China, the country is inclined to embrace a bridging role rather than fully pursuing a hedging strategy. South Korea recognizes the strategic importance of its alliance with the U.S. while also understanding that directly confronting China carries significant risks. Therefore, it demonstrates middle powerhood by positioning itself as a bridge to ease tensions between the two major powers (Karim and Nabila 2022). Since the reign of Park Geun-Hye in 2013, South Korea has maintained balanced relations with both countries, relying on the premise of not choosing one over the other (Rubiolo and Aguirre 2023). This interaction is marked by Seoul's attempt to play a more proactive role in multilateral affairs, engaging both the United States and China in regional forums (Snyder 2016). Further, research by Kelkịtlị (2023) highlights the use of soft power as another attribute of middle power behavior. Also known as niche diplomacy, such efforts are often employed by middle powers to build coalitions, mediate conflicts, and extend influence through non-military means. Türkiye, for instance, has increasingly exhibited these traits since the early 2000s, particularly through initiatives in the Balkan region (Kelkịtlị, 2023). These cases of framework expansion mark a shift in how middle powers are understood and show that rigid classifications may be insufficient

to capture their responses to shifting global dynamics.

The second notable development in the broader discourse on middle power theory is the growing use of the term *emerging middle power* to capture the evolving status of certain states. This usage may be rooted in Shoeman's work (2000), in which he introduced the term *new middle power*. In recent years, those two terms have often been used interchangeably. However, it is important to note that there is an increasing effort to provide clearer definitions and conceptual distinctions for the latter. Such attempt can be found in the works Öniş and Kutlay (2017), Jordaan (2017), and Xiao (2025). Notably, the push to redefine the concept of *emerging middle power* and distinguish it with *traditional middle power* reflects a broader shift away from Western-centric frameworks, increasingly informed by the study of Global South countries whose political agency and regional roles offer alternative models of middle power behavior.

While both traditional and emerging middle powers share material limitations – such as military capacity, size, and demographics – they differ in their roles within the international system. Traditional middle powers, like Canada, Australia, and Sweden, are typically seen as catalysts for liberal order and facilitators of pro-status-quo coalitions (Öniş and Kutlay 2017). In contrast, emerging middle powers often face internal constraints that limit their ability to serve as role models or stability providers. Their semi-peripheral position in the global economy also contributes to a more hesitant stance toward legitimizing the existing liberal order, setting them apart from their traditional counterparts (Öniş and Kutlay 2017). For instance, countries like Turkey, Indonesia, and Brazil have demonstrated middle power ambitions but often pursue foreign policy strategies shaped by domestic political dynamics and regional priorities rather than a commitment to uphold the liberal international order (Jordaan 2017; Xiao 2025).

In line with this shift, it becomes crucial to examine how power trajectories in the Global South reshape the very criteria of *middle powerhood*. Rather than focusing solely on material benchmarks or alliance-building within Western-led institutions, many emerging middle powers articulate their status through regionally embedded leadership and strategic autonomy. Indonesia's

ASEAN leadership, Brazil's South-South cooperation strategy, and Türkiye's multidirectional diplomacy all exemplify how these actors assert influence through platforms often overlooked in traditional international relations discourse (Öniş and Kutlay 2017). Their diplomatic activism, institutional entrepreneurship, and normative projection do not necessarily seek to uphold the liberal international order but rather to diversify pathways of legitimacy and order-making.

Moreover, the interplay between domestic legitimacy and foreign policy behavior is becoming an increasingly salient factor distinguishing emerging middle powers. While traditional middle powers often enjoy stable democratic institutions that reinforce their reputational capital abroad, emerging middle powers frequently navigate complex domestic landscapes that directly inform their international stance. For instance, contestations over democratic backsliding, economic populism, or nationalist rhetoric shape not only their global image but also their preferred diplomatic practices. This internal-external nexus complicates efforts to categorize them through fixed lenses, reinforcing the need for adaptive, multi-dimensional frameworks that accommodate evolving patterns of agency and constraint.

## Searching for Emerging Power's Definition

The emergence of the term 'new middle powers,' or 'emerging middle powers' followed by 'emerging powers,' has sparked a debate among scholars in international relations studies due to the lack of a clear definition for these two terms. Some researchers like Cooper (1997), van der Westhuizen (1998), and Schoeman (2000), who used the term to assess the potential of countries like Turkey, Malaysia, and South Africa, have been criticized for arbitrarily applying traditional middle powers concepts in their analysis. These three thinkers rely on conceptual parameters used by traditional middle powers approaches without first attempting to conceptualize what constitutes an emerging power. At least two researchers, Jordaan (2003) and Hurrel (2006), have attempted to provide a comprehensive understanding of emerging powers and to identify the differences between traditional middle power

and emerging power. Jordaan (2003) was the first expert to systematically map the differences between traditional middle power and emerging power. In his analysis, Jordaan (2003) identifies at least four key distinctions between traditional middle power and emerging power. First, concerning the degree of democratic implementation in the domestic political system. While classical middle powers have implemented democratic principles in their political systems and secured a more established democratic culture, emerging power are often in the process of transitioning to a democratic society. Second, there is a difference in the focus of foreign policy. Middle power, having emerged during the Cold War, generally center their foreign policy attention on military issues. Hence, cooperation between classic middle power is predominantly built on military alliance agreements. In contrast, emerging power arose in the era after the end of the Cold War, so their foreign policies focused more on economic issues, emphasizing economic cooperation rather than military alliances.

The third aspect relates to the structural conditions of traditional middle power and emerging power. Middle power can be categorized as developed countries with high standards of living while emerging power are developing or semi-periphery countries that still face significant problems related to economic and social inequality. The fourth factor concerns their respective status in the region. Middle power are not always the dominant actors in their regions as their capabilities are often relatively similar to those of other regional actors. For example, in the European region, none of the countries attaining the middle powers status are dominant actors. On the contrary, emerging power are usually the dominant actors in their regions. So it is not surprising that emerging power often serve as the initiators and unifying forces for regional cooperation.

Meanwhile, Hurrel (2006) complements Jordaan's (2003) work. In his attempt to find a conceptual definition of the term emerging powers, he compares several countries that international relations scholars frequently regarded as the 'next big thing', namely Brazil, India, Russia, and China. Hurrel (2006) posits that by examining the similarities among these four countries, one will at least be able to clarify the characteristics of the so-called emerging powers

countries and how they differ from the classic middle power countries. There are four general characteristics of emerging power according to Hurrel (2006): (1) they own relatively similar military, economic, and political capabilities and resources, as well as a significant ability to influence international stability, (2) there is a uniform perception of themselves as countries entitled to a more significant role in the international syste, (3) the relations among emerging power are complex and close, giving them the capacity to cooperate in various multilateral forums or international negotiations, and (4) emerging power are generally positioned outside the alliance of countries adhering to the liberal paradigm under the hegemony of the United States. As stated by Hurrel (2006), this fourth aspect is a clear marker to differentiate traditional middle power from emerging power. He writes, "Unlike Japan, South Korea, Canada, Australia, and major European countries (both as blocs and individually), they (China, Russia, India, and Brazil) are not tightly integrated into the alliance system under the leadership of the United States" (Hurrel 2006).

In more recent studies, Fonseca et al. (2016) and Paes et al. (2017) offer alternative conceptualizations of emerging powers from distinct perspectives. Fonseca et al. (2016) examine how the term "emerging power" is used across political economy literature and argue that its evolving usage reflects, and at times conceals, the growing influence of intermediate states. The study showed that the emergence of these powers was seen as a reflection of an intermediate country's upward movement towards a more advantageous structural position, narrowing the gap in influence between its own agency and those that shape the global system. This upward shift is not merely economic but also political, where the country leverages its economic rise to assert greater influence in international governance. Therefore, to be classified as emerging power, a country must be able to translate its sustained economic growth into enhanced political power.

In another research, Paes et al. (2017) defining emerging power from the perspective of narrative changes. This way of redefinitions brings a more powerful discourse as it is no longer consider emerging power as mere new actors but as forces that are reshaping the system in complex, and sometimes contradictory

ways. Paes et al. (2017) argues that the term captures a broader structural change in global stratification, reflecting the gradual ascent of intermediate states to more prominent positions in the international hierarchy. In this sense, at least, there are three narratives changes that can identify the status of emerging power. First, the rise of intermediate states through their material foundations. These include disruptions in the global distribution of economic transactions that reposition a state's status and provide the economic leverage necessary to project political influence. Second, the way these states navigate and challenge existing inequalities within international institutions. By engaging in multilateral activism, such actors – often historically excluded from the dominant global order – seek to influence the normative frameworks that govern global regimes. This dimension invites inquiry into their capacity to function as meta-powers that not only contest but also reshape global governance from within.

Third, the interplay between regional and global dynamics. Their pursuit of global influence is frequently intertwined with regional ambitions, where they must simultaneously manage sources of cooperation and potential threats. Regional platforms, therefore, become both arenas for influence and crucibles of geopolitical friction China and India, for instance, consistently follow the pattern above. In recent years, China has demonstrated a rising trajectory of economic growth that is projected to translate into greater political influence, particularly through initiatives such as the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (Enderwick 2018; Kuik 2021). Both countries, once considered excluded from the global order, have gained greater prominence in international organizations and actively participate in regional forums such as BRICS (Parizek and Stephen 2021)

Further, both Fonseca et al. (2016) and Paes et al. (2017) highlight the need to move away from static definition of emerging power and considering historically contingent and structurally constrained nature of change. While emerging powers represent a challenge to the prevailing global stratification, they also embody the contradictions and limits inherent in any attempt to transcend it. As such, the definition of emerging powers must extend beyond their current geopolitical behavior to theorize the underlying conditions

that enable or inhibit their systemic transformation. These ideas show how emerging powers is both a big change and part of an ongoing struggle. These countries challenge the old global system, but at the same time, they face limits. Some structures are hard to break, and rising power doesn't always lead to lasting influence. Hence, the conceptualization of emerging power needs to rise the questions whether these states have the capacity to sustain their influence, restructure global norms, and ultimately reconfigure power relations – or whether they remain bound by the systemic inertia of the international order (Paes et al. 2017).

Building upon these conceptual foundations, this article argues that the analytical separation between "emerging" and "middle" powers must go beyond descriptive classification and evolve into a functional framework that captures agency, intent, and systemic friction. While traditional middle powers have often been defined by their roles as status quo stabilizers within liberal institutional frameworks, emerging powers are increasingly distinguished not merely by their economic rise but by their strategic ambitions to renegotiate their position within the global hierarchy. This renegotiation is evident not only in their assertive foreign policies and regional leadership but also in their institutional innovation and normative contestation at the global level. Therefore, instead of treating these categories as rigid or binary, this article proposes a spectrum-based approach that accounts for transitional dynamics, allowing scholars to trace how certain middle powers evolve into emerging powers depending on their capacity to convert material capabilities into normative leadership and structural influence. This framework not only helps to bridge the conceptual gap in existing literature but also provides a more nuanced lens through which to understand global power realignments in the 21st century.

## Conclusion

The terms 'middle powers' and 'emerging powers' have been widely used in foreign policy and international relations in general, especially in analyzing the rising influence of certain countries on the international system. However, an examination through literature finds that both terms remain ambiguous until now due to

the fact scholars continue to voice different opinions on the precise parameters that can be used to define middle powers and emerging powers. The definition of 'middle powers' is still largely tied to rigid frameworks – functional, systemic, psychological, behavioral, positional, and identity-based – that aim to standardize state classification through fixed parameters. What is notably absent in these approaches is the recognition of the dynamic, evolving roles that states may play in varying geopolitical contexts.

In contrast, the concept of 'emerging powers' introduces a more fluid and context-sensitive lens. In older paradigm, experts often rely on many conceptual variables borrowed from classical middle powers in defining emerging and arbitrarily use the concept within their analysis. However, recent developments – particularly the works of Fonseca et al. and Paes et al. – challenge this approach. These scholars argue that emerging powers cannot be captured through static criteria, instead, they should be understood through their historical trajectories, shifting narratives, and evolving political-economic influence. This dynamic and narrative-based framing sets emerging powers apart from middle powers, whose definitions continue to rely on quantifiable yet increasingly outdated indicators. As emerging powers rise and reshape global norms, there is a growing need for conceptual tools that reflect this fluidity. Adopting such an approach would not only improve analytical clarity but also enhance the relevance of foreign policy analysis in a rapidly changing international order.

## About the Author

Rochdi Mohan Nazala joined the Department of International Relations, Universitas Gadjah Mada as a lecturer upon completing his doctoral at the Rutgers University. His publications cover several themes, including foreign policy, international political theories, security, and political violence. Currently he is conducting research on the conflict in Papua and Indonesian security sector reform. He can be contacted via e-mail at mohan@ugm.ac.id.

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