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Brokering Peace: Emerging Middle Powers, Agency and Mediation

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of mediation in emerging middle power conduct in an increasingly fragmented world. It asks why and how emerging middle powers seek mediator roles in international conflicts, focusing on Turkey and Indonesia's responses to the Russia–Ukraine war. Through content analysis of public documents and interviews with diplomats, it argues that the war has enabled emerging middle powers to seek influence by emphasising their bridge-building capacity. While the conventional literature on middle powers explains such activism in terms of the traditional leadership–followership dynamic—where middle powers are seen as followers who act as 'good international citizens'—our findings suggest that international systemic instability, the search for status and domestic factors provide better explanations for their actions. Specifically, we argue that the saliency of middle power followership diminishes as a source of status under conditions of structural uncertainty and manifests through stability-seeking conduct like mediation. Concurrently, we show that mediatory approaches are motivated not only by international considerations but also significantly by domestic elite concerns. These findings contribute to middle power scholarship by illustrating how these states use mediation to seek both domestic regime support and international recognition, offering a more nuanced understanding of emerging middle power agency.

1 | Emerging Middle Powers in an Era of Global Turmoil

As the international system is undergoing a transformation, drifting away from the post-1945 US-led liberal order towards a fragmented and contested global landscape, International Relations (IR) scholars have sought to capture this complexity through concepts such as 'multiplexity' (Acharya 2017; Acharya et al. 2023), 'fuzzy bifurcation' (Higgott and Reich 2022) and 'multi-order world' (Flockhart 2016). Yet amidst this turbulence, how middle powers navigate and assert agency in an increasingly fragmented global order remains underexamined.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 accentuated the resurgence of great power politics and tensions between a US-led Western alliance and a Russia–China axis, raising questions about where middle powers stand during major power confrontation. While the invasion inspired a sense of unity among Western democracies not seen since the first Gulf War (albeit one that is fraying under US President Donald Trump's watch), Western expectations of a globally unified condemnation of Russia went unmet, as many states in the Global South abstained or opposed UN resolutions that sought to condemn Russia (Alden 2023; Miliband 2023).[1] At the same time, a group of middle powers sought to position themselves as mediators and pursued

Policy implications

- Recognising the role of emerging middle powers in mediation may offer valuable insights for international conflict management, particularly in contexts where great powers are divided. A better understanding of the status-related and domestic drivers behind these mediation efforts can help international actors interpret and engage with them more effectively.
- Examples such as the Black Sea Grain Initiative underscore the potential and limitations of collaboration between emerging middle powers and international institutions. Learning from both the successes and shortcomings of such efforts could help shape more adaptable cooperative frameworks.
- Increasing fragmentation and pluralisation of global governance highlight the growing relevance of regional organisations like ASEAN and global forums such as the G20. These platforms offer emerging middle powers opportunities to initiate or contribute to conflict-mitigation efforts of global significance.
- Greater cooperation amongst emerging middle powers themselves may open further avenues for coordinated mediation. Proposals for informal groupings—such as a World Economic Forum white paper's call for a 'middle powers mediation group'—reflect growing recognition of these actors' diplomatic potential. The viability of such initiatives may depend on aligning emerging middle powers' domestic imperatives with broader multilateral goals.
- Cooperation between 'traditional' middle powers and emerging middle powers may offer an opportunity to strengthen mediation initiatives that bridge South–North divides, for instance, in the area of climate change.

self-described policies of 'balance' or 'bridge' between Russia and the West, which sometimes led them to be dubbed 'fence sitters' (Spektor 2023) or 'swing states' (Kupchan 2023). From Turkey's role in brokering the Black Sea Grain Initiative to Indonesia's peace initiative, mediation has emerged as a notable feature of middle power diplomacy, particularly among emerging economies with global aspirations.

As a part of this special issue on reimagining middle powers in an age of global transformation, this article asks: Why and how do emerging middle powers seek mediator roles in their responses to international conflicts? Understanding the use of mediation in middle power statecraft matters for several reasons.[2] Much of the contemporary debate on global power transition tends to revolve around the implications of major power competition, with scholarly and media discourse increasingly using terms that centre great powers, such as 'Second Cold War' or 'New Cold War' (Buzan 2024, 240; Niblett 2024; Brands and Gaddis 2021; Ferguson 2025), or examining the crisis of US global leadership from a lens that concentrates on major power dynamics (see, e.g., Ikenberry et al. 2018; Lake et al. 2021). Meanwhile, middle powers often receive comparatively less attention, frequently examined under the shadow of great powers or cast as targets of influence in narratives about 'swing states' (de Hoop Scheffer 2023; Niblett 2024, 153; Omelicheva 2025). However, in a fragmented world order of increasing variability and power dispersion, middle power strategies warrant closer attention to foster a more nuanced understanding of diverse security perspectives beyond traditional great power binaries.

Explaining the use of mediatory diplomacy of middle powers has implications for the theoretical and empirical literature concerned with middle power conduct. The conventional understanding of middle powers has been narrowly conceived in the context of great power politics. During the period of the Cold War, 'middlepowermanship'—as coined by Holmes (1966, 432) to describe Canada's role in global politics—was characterised by the preservation of liberal peace and contributions to the US-led liberal order. A focus on the behavioural characteristics of middle powers informed much of the theorising in the post-Cold War era. The classic literature on middle power theory after the Cold War, such as Cooper et al. (1993)'s seminal study on Canada and Australia, described middle powers as bridge-builders and stabilisers of the liberal international order who pursued multilateral solutions to international problems. Conflict mediation was recognised as a form of 'niche diplomacy' pursued by middle powers to amplify influence through multilateralism and liberal institutions associated with international law (Henrikson 1997). However, much of this classic theorising on middle powers emerged within the settled context of a US-led liberal order. Given today's shifting global landscape towards a more multicentred, diversified and networked order, it is essential to rethink middle power behaviour as they pursue increasingly varied strategies.

Recent years have seen a renewed interest in the concept of middle power in IR scholarship as well as in elite discourses and self-identified middle power groupings in international diplomacy (Cooper 2013, 2016; Cooper and Dal 2016; Efstathopoulos 2023; Grzywacz and Gawrycki 1947). Contemporary scholarship distinguishes between 'traditional' and 'emerging' middle powers, portraying the latter—primarily situated in the Global South—as ambivalent towards the liberal international order and identifying them as states that have experienced democratic backsliding, face constrained economic development and have limited global reach (Jordaan 2003, 2017). Yet, despite these constraints, many of these states have sought greater influence in the global arena, with some employing mediation as a foreign policy tool. This warrants further exploration into how and why they pursue bridge-building initiatives while simultaneously contesting the prevailing power structures of the liberal world order.

This article focuses specifically on 'emerging' middle powers, a subset within the broader middle power literature. In line with recent scholarship (Aydın 2021; Öniş and Kutlay 2017), we define middle powers as states that combine mid-range material capabilities with behavioural aspirations for greater regional or global influence and international recognition. We follow Jordaan's (2003) distinction of 'emerging' middle powers, which differ from the 'traditional' middle powers in their domestic constraints and more ambivalent stance towards the liberal international order. Alongside their aspirations for international recognition, the domestic constraints faced by emerging middle powers make it imperative to examine the interplay between internal dynamics and external ambitions. By centring attention

on this subset, which has been underexplored by the conventional middle power scholarship, the article contributes to refining middle power theorising and understanding middle power agency in a changing global context.

Our contribution lies in explaining the foreign policy conduct of emerging middle powers, particularly their use of mediation, a tool historically associated with traditional middle power diplomacy. Mediation is one expression of middle power behaviour, often understood as a form of 'niche diplomacy' in the established literature (Henrikson 1997; Holmes 1970). We do not claim that all middle powers engage in mediation, nor that mediation alone defines a middle power. However, we identify mediation as a common and relatively lower cost diplomatic tool emerging middle powers employ for pursuing international recognition as a global problem solver or peace broker when navigating emerging systemic uncertainty.

Building on the existing literature and examining the role of mediation in emerging middle power diplomacy against the backdrop of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, we make the following arguments. First, the conventional leadership–followership dynamic that positioned middle powers as followers has shifted. In the context of systemic uncertainty and the weakening of leadership in the ongoing global transformation, middle powers find that they can exert greater influence without necessarily aligning with the Western-led liberal international order. This shift is reflected in the increasing variability of middle power approaches to international conflicts, where they seek leadership roles in conflict mediation as part of their broader quest for status recognition. Second, we argue that a mediatory foreign policy approach is a function of domestic elite concerns, which determine the extent to which middle powers take entrepreneurial initiatives. While the use of mediation reflects a broader aim of securing international recognition, it is also leveraged for domestic gains, addressing concerns ranging from economic priorities to demonstrating foreign policy competency for domestic audiences. The conventional literature on middle powers does not give much currency to domestic sources of middle power conduct; however, we show that mediatory approaches are motivated not only by international considerations but also significantly by domestic elite concerns. Our findings contribute to middle power scholarship by illustrating how these states use mediation to seek both international recognition and domestic regime support, offering a more nuanced understanding of middle power agency. In exploring mediation as a foreign policy tool, this paper contributes to the broader aim of refining middle power theory in light of contemporary global dynamics.

Empirically, we focus on two emerging middle powers, Turkey and Indonesia, selected on the basis of their explicit aspirations to assume mediator roles in the Russia–Ukraine war and their geographical representativeness of emerging powers across different regions. Both launched visible diplomatic initiatives in 2022, including President Erdoğan's involvement in the Black Sea Grain Initiative and President Widodo's visits to Kyiv and Moscow. They have also promoted mediation through multilateral forums such as the UN Group of Friends of Mediation and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), reflecting a sustained engagement with mediation as a foreign policy tool. While a number of other G20 countries also expressed interest in mediation, the cases of Turkey and Indonesia illustrate early diplomatic initiatives launched shortly after the invasion and were explicitly framed as peace efforts by actors self-identifying as bridge-builders.[3] They also reflect a consistent record of employing mediation as part of foreign policy strategy.

We utilise a qualitative methodology, employing content analysis of public statements by government elites, public documents produced by foreign ministries, press reports and media interviews with decision-makers to analyse foreign policy responses and priorities. These are complemented by selective interviews with diplomats in Turkey and Indonesia. These primary sources collectively are illuminating for understanding decision-makers' insights and how they view their role as potential mediators. In the next sections, we will first establish the conceptual framework for analysing the role of mediation in middle power foreign policy, examine the empirical cases and discuss the theoretical implications for the scholarship on middle powers.

2 | Identifying the Role of Mediation in Middle Power Theory

The conventional understanding of middle powers is rooted in the post-1945 geopolitics and was further refined during the post-Cold War unipolar moment. Despite the proliferation of studies on middle powers in recent years and scholarly efforts to adapt the concept to changing global power dynamics (Beeson and Higgott 2013; Cooper and Dal 2016; Efstathopoulos 2023; Hynd 2025; Shin 2025), the analytical relevance of the concept remains contested. Robertson and Carr (2023, 394), for instance, argue that the concept is 'unable to shed its 20th century legacy', concluding that 'the middle power is dead, and the theory must be consigned to history'. However, at the same time, a renewed interest in the middle power concept—both in theory and practice—is gaining momentum, with a diverse range of states, including those in the non-Western world, claiming middle power standing.

Historically, systemic shifts have prompted scholars to rethink the concept of middle powerhood. Increasing fragmentation and contestation in global politics today present a renewed imperative to reassess the role of middle powers in international relations. Cooper et al. (1993, 16), in their seminal study on Canada and Australia after the Cold War, emphasise that waning hegemony and the shifting dynamics of leadership and followership in the international system necessitate a relocation of the middle power concept within a changing structural context. Similarly, Cox (1989, 825) argues that 'middle-power role is not a fixed universal but something that has to be rethought continually in the context of the changing state of the international system'. In this regard, re-examining 'middle powerhood' is particularly relevant as the world undergoes another period of systemic transformation, marked not only by the rise of emerging powers with global aspirations but also by the increasing diffusion of influence across regional actors. The pluralisation of global governance has created new spaces for middle powers to assert agency, with mediation featuring as a key diplomatic instrument in the middle power toolkit, both to navigate a contested international order and to reinforce legitimacy at home.

Early 20th-century conceptualisations of middle powers situated them within a hierarchical international order and viewed them through a structural lens that focused on their material attributes and functions within great power competition. Glazebrook (1947), for instance, examined middle powers within a stratified international system, focusing on their roles in the UN and noted their support for multilateralism. Later in the Cold War period, studies that shifted emphasis on what middle powers *do*, rather than what they *are*, laid the groundwork for the behavioural approach to middle power diplomacy. Scholars during this period identified middle powers as intermediaries who pursued multilateralist policies and as the guardians of the global balance of power protecting peace and order in the international system (Holbraad 1971, 79; 1984, 205). The term was closely associated with their contributions to the liberal order, their performance roles within multilateral institutions that had pacifying effects and their supporting roles in a hegemonic order (Cox 1989, 286). Holmes (1966), for example, described Canada as an archetype of middle power, identifying peace-making and 'international service' as important features of middle power diplomacy. For him, 'international service' involved taking mediatory positions. Referring to Canadian diplomacy regarding the Arab–Israeli and the Dutch–Indonesian disputes, he argued that the concept of middle power 'originally implied a power of medium strength but it began to develop also the connotation of a middle or mediatory position in conflicts' (Holmes 1970, 17). However, during this period, middle power action was significantly constrained and determined by great power competition, while 'middlepowermanship' reflected the preservation of liberal peace within a hegemonic system.

Questions around Cold War alignments and developments in world politics—such as decolonisation, independence movements and the formation of new states in Asia and Africa—broadened the discussion of middle power diplomacy beyond the Western core. However, these debates remained framed within the post-1945 liberal hegemonic order, focusing on how such states functioned within the system to maintain its stability. India under Nehru's leadership in the 1950s, for example, was described as pursuing middle power foreign policy by engaging in inter-bloc diplomacy and playing a leading role in the Non-Aligned Movement (Holmes 1966, 434, 440; Holbraad 1971, 84). Holbraad (1984) observed that such states could seek to leverage their positionality to navigate a volatile Cold War security environment, at times even attempting to defuse tensions between dominant powers. He noted that 'some [middle powers] have remained unaligned, either staying aloof from the central relationship and minding their own domestic and local affairs or, more often, attempting to play the balance between the two sides to their own advantage' (Holbraad 1984, 205–6). While acknowledging that these states could have 'moderating and pacifying influences', he ultimately argued that their primary concerns lay with anticolonial, racial and economic justice (Holbraad 1984, 205). Thus, even as non-Western middle powers gained some recognition, they were still understood as operating under the liberal hegemonic system and within the structural constraints imposed by great powers.

The aftermath of the Cold War marked a significant advancement in middle power theory, with scholars shifting the focus from a positional framing to a behavioural one and placing greater emphasis on middle powers' capacity for entrepreneurial diplomacy (Chapnick 1999; Cooper et al. 1993; Higgott and Cooper 1990; Ravenhill 1998). This scholarship examined their ability to formulate new ideas, build coalitions and exert influence in niche domains, closely tied to high-profile diplomatic initiatives such as the global prohibition of antipersonnel landmines and the concept of Responsibility to Protect. Cooper et al.'s (1993) work on Canada and Australia laid the groundwork for theorising middle power behaviour in the emerging post-Cold War world order, reinvigorating scholarly discussion on their role in international politics. In their study, middle powers were described as pursuing 'niche diplomacy', identifying areas where they had particular expertise and concentrating their resources on areas that are likely to yield more impact, given that they lack sufficient resources to pursue a grand global strategy (Cooper et al. 1993, 19, 145; Cooper 1997). Middle powers were widely accepted to be bridge-builders, striving to link up different clusters of states built around certain interests and ideas, consensus-seeking interlocutors who pursued 'multilateral solutions to international problems' and actors guided by notions of 'good international citizenship' (Cooper et al. 1993, 19). They were generally understood to support and, at times, critique the *dominant power's leadership* but ultimately remained aligned with it, functioning as *followers* within the liberal international system. For instance, Canada and the Scandinavian countries were often described as typical middle powers, advocating for reforms within liberal institutions and norms, and seeking to influence dominant powers, namely, the United States, to adhere more closely to these values. Crucially, they were regarded as key contributors to shaping and refining the liberal international order, advocating for multilateral solutions and promoting values such as human rights and peacekeeping.

Mediation has been recognised as a form of middle power niche diplomacy, with middle powers exercising what Henrikson (1997, 55–60) termed 'managerial influence' through various forms of mediation, including conciliation and bridge-building. Norway's foreign policy exemplifies this approach, leveraging its Scandinavian identity and neutrality to assume the role of a mediator and global peacemaker, facilitating peace talks in international conflicts such as Israel–Palestine, Guatemala, Sudan and Sri Lanka (Kelleher and Taulbee 2006). Despite its small size, Norway is often regarded as engaging in middle power niche diplomacy, 'punching above its weight' in global affairs to enhance its status as a 'good power' (Wohlforth et al. 2018, 530), illustrating how middle power standing is shaped more by behaviour and niche diplomacy than by size (Österud 1997, 98).

However, the rise in prominence of emerging powers since the turn of the century posed a challenge for the middle power theory, especially regarding the role of middle powers as stabilisers of liberal internationalism. Much of the theorising in the 1990s occurred under the structural conditions of a liberal hegemonic order, where middle powers played legitimising roles within the international system. The emergence of what Jordaan (2003, 2017) terms 'emerging' middle powers introduced a shift. Unlike 'traditional' middle powers—such as Canada, Australia and the Netherlands—which were typically wealthy, stable and egalitarian social democracies promoting a liberal international order, emerging middle powers began to adopt more visible internationalist postures in the post-Cold War period and, in many

cases, had a lower quality of development and democratisation experiences. These emerging middle powers, often situated in the Global South, typically had semiperipheral roles in the global economy, experienced significant income inequality that accompanied rapid economic growth and often approached global governance with structural concerns about the international power hierarchy (Alden and Vieira 2005, 1077–81).

In contrast to the first generation of middle powers, the new wave is more inclined to contest or bargain with great powers over global governance, driven by a desire to attain higher status while challenging the prevailing power structures of the post-1945 international order that had relegated them to peripheral roles. Their foreign policy is closely linked to domestic concerns, such as economic inequality and developmental imbalances, which push them to assert both international prestige and domestic legitimacy. As a result, emerging powers often engage in status assertion, using international roles like conflict mediation to strengthen their global standing and consolidate domestic political support. This focus on emerging non-Western middle powers is particularly relevant in the context of shifting leadership dynamics and the decline of US hegemony.

The existing literature has underexamined how emerging middle powers seek to assume roles traditionally held by established middle powers. Conflict mediation is one such area where emerging middle powers seek out enhanced opportunities to assert leadership. Some notable accounts highlight the increasing emerging middle power interest in international conflict mediation, such as Levaggi and Yilmaz (2019), who examine the roles of Brazil and Turkey in facilitating the 2010 Iran nuclear deal, where mediation responsibilities were partially delegated from established to emerging powers, although their attempt to provide a negotiated solution ultimately failed to gain recognition from the established powers. What these studies neglect, however, is an understanding of the drivers behind emerging middle powers' expansive efforts in mediation and its links to status-seeking within an international system undergoing profound structural changes.

In the next sections, we examine how changing systemic conditions are decoupling reflexive middle power followership from dominant power leadership and, in that context, the role that mediation plays in addressing emerging middle power's search for status recognition. We follow that section with an examination of the cases of Turkey and Indonesia against the backdrop of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In addition to the emphasis on status recognition at the international level, we highlight that elite concerns in the domestic arena, such as the economic implications of the war and the governments' domestic image, serve as key intervening variables driving emerging middle power initiatives to act as potential peace brokers.

3 | Mediation in Systemic Uncertainty: Moving Beyond Followership

The rise in the number of emerging middle powers whose primary foreign policy expression of that category is through the pursuit of mediation is indicative of the ongoing and disruptive changes occurring in global politics. Behind this phenomenon is an international system that is in flux, loosening the bonds of leadership and followership that had guided middle power conduct during the more settled conditions of the post-Cold War period. Coupled with these changing structural circumstances are the particularist concerns of emerging powers, whose fixation on their position within the power hierarchies of the international system drives their foreign policy choices. They recognise that ongoing instability harms the very liberal international trading system that served as the backbone of their economic rise and that the fallout from such instability disrupts supply chains and market access that can have a knock-on effect on their own economies. Moreover, as was clearly demonstrated by the Russia–Ukraine war, vital grain exports from Ukraine were blocked, forcing a sharp rise in food prices and other inflationary pressures that threaten domestic stability in middle emerging powers as well as smaller states. Understood in this context, the necessity of pursuing mediation strategies to mitigate the negative impact of conflicts on the domestic economy, alongside its positive influence on raising the profile of status-seeking middle emerging powers for international and domestic audiences, makes imminent sense. As the Turkish foreign minister noted following the Istanbul peace talks between Ukraine and Russia, the inability of the international system to produce 'peace, stability and justice' underscores the perceived need for regional actors to assume a greater role in managing instability and to step in where global mechanisms have faltered (Daily Sabah 2025).[4]

Scholars have designated the search for recognition within power hierarchies of the international system by emerging powers as a key foreign policy driver (Mukherjee 2023). Larson and Shevchenko (2019), proponents of Social Identity Theory as a tool for understanding status in the international system, set out the strategies employed by rising powers to achieve international recognition, including emulation, competition and creativity. Renshon (2017) examines the issue through a Realism lens and delves into the relationship between conflict and status-seeking states bent on securing a position within the power hierarchy. Mukherjee's International Status Theory offers a structural explanation for their conduct rooted in a reading of the balance of ideational factors like status over material factors in an emerging power's foreign policy decisions. Membership in the great-power club provides symbolic equality and status with great powers, but the drive to achieve it, according to Mukherjee, is subject to a set of perceptions of accessibility of that international order for prospective members:

> Two variables influence the strategy a rising power will adopt to achieve its status goals: the institutional openness and the procedural fairness of an international order's core institutions. A rising power is more likely to support an order whose core institutions are open to new powers joining their leadership ranks, and that treat the rising power in a fair manner. It is more likely to challenge an order that is lacking in these features
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> (Mukherjee 2022, 6).

While convincing, what these structural explanations do not address are conditions in which the prevailing international order

itself is in flux and the concurrent impact that this has on leadership–followership. With status unhinged from the signposts of recognition by great powers who themselves are engaged in positioning in relation to changing international expectations, it becomes much more difficult to assert what should be a middle power strategy for achieving recognition. In other words, the weakness or absence of 'leadership' that defines and enforces an 'international order' undermines the criteria and accompanying conduct that defines what is 'good citizenship', the essence of followership behaviour.

In this important respect, the ongoing systemic instability upends one of the conventions of middle power theory that is the leadership–followership dynamic characteristic of middle power foreign policy. The result poses stark choices for middle powers as to their alignment with great powers. Do they align themselves with a declining G7 that may not be willing or able to enforce the institutionalised 'rules-based order'? Or would it be better to demonstrate affinity towards a rising BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) that as yet has not demonstrated its capacity to lead? In any case, neither putative order offers the requisite firm standing that addresses the needs for status for a rising power or middle power. This uncertain situation tends to invoke the adoption of a hedging strategy that tries to strike a balance between competing great powers by offsetting inherent power asymmetries through a mix of foreign policy accommodation and confrontation (Ciorciari and Haacke 2019). It echoes some of the sentiment expressed by Chilean scholars who have called for a more transactional approach to foreign policy by the Global South through 'active non-alignment' in response to the pressures of great power competition (Fortin et al. 2023).

In lieu of clear guidelines of what constitutes affirming terms for gaining status, emerging powers—and that would include middle powers—hedge their position, searching for status recognition within an established formal, if declining institutional order, and a rising, if informal and still prospective order. Part and parcel of the hedging strategy is found in promoting stability-seeking foreign policy as a recognised international public good, one that sits well with the majority of states in the international system and, at least in principle, secures the tacit support of great powers even if their actions speak otherwise. In this respect, middle and emerging powers gain enhanced recognition across the great power divide by arguing for and engaging in mediation that aims to resolve outstanding problems in the international system. Foreign policy mediation, while not necessarily aligned to a particular great power dispensation in the contested international order(s), carries with it a positive status, one that goes beyond sitting out these problems like Ukraine and Gaza, implicit in what is the *inactive* form of the rhetorically charged 'active non-alignment'. To be a supporter of ending the conflicts and turbulence in the international system is to find a middle power foreign policy that is both normative and order-shaping.

4 | Linking Emerging Middle Power Mediatory Diplomacy to Domestic Politics

Beyond serving as a tool for navigating a fragmented international order, middle power engagement in mediation is also driven by domestic political imperatives. Elite concerns, ranging from economic pressures to legitimacy challenges, shape the scope and nature of their diplomatic interventions. In contexts of economic uncertainty and political volatility, a mediatory approach functions not only as a means of international positioning but also as a mechanism for managing domestic political narratives and consolidating regime support at home. These dynamics are particularly pronounced in emerging middle powers, where the imperative to reinforce economic stability and assert leadership competency raises the stakes of foreign policy activism.

Turkey's approach to mediation in the Russia–Ukraine war exemplifies how emerging middle powers instrumentalise mediation diplomacy to serve both international ambitions and domestic imperatives shaped by economic vulnerabilities and leadership concerns. Recent scholarship has underscored the role of domestic security perceptions, increasing authoritarianism and Turkey's broader contestation of the liberal international order as key drivers of its middle power foreign policy (Aydın-Düzgit 2023; Balta and Bal 2025; Öniş and Kutlay 2017; Öniş and Uluyol 2025; Süsler 2019). Within this context, mediation has emerged as a diplomatic tool through which Ankara seeks to both navigate major power confrontation and manage regime concerns.

This posture builds on a longer trajectory in which mediatory diplomacy emerged as a central feature of Turkey's pursuit of an 'active' foreign policy in the post-Cold War era, where regional instability increased the appeal of intermediary roles (Dal 2018; Sofos 2023). By the early 2000s, strategic reassessments of Turkish foreign policy envisioned the country as a multicivilisational actor capable of generating influence through intercivilisational dialogue and inter-bloc diplomacy (Cem 2001, 5, 49). The Justice and Development Party (AKP) era further built on these ambitions, moving from mediation primarily aimed at managing immediate security concerns, such as Turkey's earlier mediation efforts during the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), to a more ambitious approach that sought visibility on the global arena. Examples include Turkey's mediation attempts in the 2010 ethnic conflict in Kyrgyzstan, alongside its co-chairing of the UN's 'Friends of Mediation' initiative since 2010, which reflected this ambition (Dal 2018, 2299–306).

During this period, Turkish policy discourse emphasised tailoring diplomatic tone to local cultural and political contexts as a way of enhancing credibility. As Turkey's former foreign minister articulated it, 'If we are mediating between the Iraqi people, we should speak like Baghdadis. We have to speak like Damascenes if the issue is Syria' (Davutoğlu 2013, 90). The idea that Turkey should leverage its identity to cultivate an image of an 'honest broker', especially when engaging beyond the Western sphere, continues to inform its mediation strategy, such as in sub-Saharan Africa, where Ankara employs an anticolonial discourse critiquing the West in order to position itself as a more legitimate interlocutor in the eyes of postcolonial states (Sofos 2023, 7). In recent years, Turkey's mediatory diplomacy has increasingly coexisted with a more assertive regional posture and expanding hard power projection (see, e.g., Soyaltin-Colella and Demiryol 2023). While the discourse of honest broker remains salient in official rhetoric, in practice, mediation

has often been strategically employed to support broader efforts at consolidating influence.

Mediation has since become formally embedded in Turkish foreign policy strategy, explicitly framed as a tool for attaining greater international visibility and recognition, and with a dedicated department established within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to support mediation policies (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2024, 44, 80). As outlined in official strategy documents and the 'Century of Türkiye' discourse, mediation serves as a means of positioning Turkey as a globally influential actor (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2025a, 2025b, 34). The Turkish foreign minister has often presented it as contributing to the enhancement of Turkey's global stature (Fidan 2024). Ankara's emphasis on recognition, alongside its critique of the Western-dominated power structures in global governance, reflects broader status-seeking tendencies that shape its international engagement in recent decades. As Dal (2019, 588) argues, for emerging middle powers like Turkey, status-seeking is closely linked to recognition through tangible status markers, such as leading mediation initiatives and hosting international summits. In this sense, assuming the role of a peace-maker in international conflicts is an expression of Ankara's ambition for international recognition as well as a diplomatic tool responsive to geopolitical and domestic imperatives (see also Aydın 2021, 1385).

In the context of the Russia–Ukraine war, a mediatory framing aimed to function as a diplomatically productive yet relatively lower cost policy strategy, enabling Ankara to preserve its economic ties with Moscow, mitigate the domestic fallout of the war's economic shocks, particularly at a time of deepening economic crisis in Turkey, and simultaneously project the image of a constructive international actor. A realist and legalist reading of Turkey's role further emphasises its unique geographic position within the straits of Bosphorus and Dardanelles and, through the 1936 Montreux Convention, its legal position that holds authority over the naval access to the Black Sea, which makes Turkey a structurally embedded player in the region's security architecture. In this sense, bridge building and mediation are also linked to geographic realities, not unlike the positioning of Singapore and Malaysia in the Malacca Strait. In the aftermath of the invasion, President Erdoğan described Turkey's stance as a policy of 'balance', framing the country as a stabilising actor that maintained strong relations with both sides, highlighting deep energy and trade ties with Russia, while also underlining cooperation with Ukraine in sectors such as agriculture and grain exports (Türkten et al. 2022).

From Kyiv's perspective, as Ukraine's ambassador to Turkey articulated, Ankara was seen as 'the only practical mediator' capable of producing tangible outcomes in the early phase of the war (Vasyl Bodnar, Interview, 11 April 2023). He argued that Turkey's ability to 'exercise its own interpretation'—shaped by an understanding of Ukrainian concerns and a pragmatic decision to refrain from joining Western sanctions—positioned it as a viable interlocutor capable of facilitating dialogue with Russia. Key examples cited included the March 2022 trilateral meeting between Russia and Ukrainian foreign ministers in Antalya, Turkey's co-brokering of the Black Sea Grain Initiative in July 2022 alongside the UN and the September 2022 prisoner swap agreement, all of which highlighted Ankara's capacity to engage both sides and facilitate concrete outcomes. While these efforts initially signalled Turkey's diplomatic effectiveness, particularly the grain deal, the eventual breakdown of the initiative under renewed tensions revealed the fragility of such mediatory initiatives.

At the same time, these mediatory efforts also served a domestic function, providing a stage on which the government could project diplomatic competence, buffer economic vulnerabilities and reinforce its narrative of strong leadership amid the mounting economic crisis in Turkey. As Öniş and Uluyol (2025, 10) and Balta and Bal (2025, 14) observe, the projection of Turkey as an influential global actor was also carefully curated for domestic audiences as part of a broader strategy of consolidating regime support. An illustrative example is the narrative presented by President Erdoğan (2023) in a televised address during the 2023 general elections, where he celebrated Turkey's foreign policy achievements, including its dialogue with Russia and its mediatory role in the Russia–Ukraine war, as a mark of his government's unique competence. Framing such successes as unattainable under opposition leadership, Erdoğan invoked them as proof of his government's diplomatic prowess and ability to navigate complex global dynamics, thereby reinforcing the image of a strong and competent leader for domestic audiences.

The foreign policy activism became crucial as domestic discontent mounted, and soaring inflation and a weakening lira created a politically precarious environment for the AKP government, with the cost-of-living crisis playing a defining role in the March 2024 local elections, which marked the party's most significant electoral defeat since coming to power in 2002 (Samson et al. 2024). Against this backdrop, a mediatory approach functioned not only as an external projection of agency but also as a tool for internal reassurance, aimed at maintaining regime resilience during a period of acute political and economic strain.

Indonesia's mediatory diplomacy similarly reflects the entanglement of international positioning with domestic imperatives, albeit within a different political context. Yet here too, elite anxieties about domestic economic vulnerability and political legitimacy, along with public sentiments, have shaped the contours of foreign policy activism. Particularly in the wake of economic disruptions caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Jakarta has deployed mediation as a means of asserting agency, mitigating domestic uncertainty and projecting an image of competent governance both at home and on the international stage.

Indonesia's role as a mediator is as much a product of its assumed role as host of the G20 in 2022 as it is its historical self-identity as a leader of the Non-Aligned Movement. Central to this outlook is the guiding principle of *bebas-aktif* (independent and active) foreign policy, which underscores Indonesia's commitment to autonomy and a proactive diplomatic posture in regional and global affairs (Laskamana 2011, 162; Acharya 2014, 5–9; Umar 2023, 1463). Mediation, within this framework, functions as a pragmatic instrument, supporting Jakarta's aspiration to play a more active role as a regional leader and a global actor (Karim 2021, 12; see also Anwar 2023, 366; Thies and Sari 2018). Though limited in outcome, previous efforts such as

Indonesia's involvement in the Mindanao peace process through the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) from 1993 to 1996 and its attempted facilitation of dialogue in the Cambodia–Thailand border dispute through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2011 illustrate the recurring presence of mediation in its diplomatic repertoire (International Crisis Group 2011; Magdalena 1997; Roberts and Widyaningsih 2015).

Mediation in the case of Indonesia similarly reflects a recognition-seeking expression of its aspiration to be seen as a constructive international actor. As Santikajaya (2016, 568) notes, Indonesia's ambition to play the role of a bridge-builder underpins its middle power diplomacy but, unlike traditional Western middle powers, who are stabilisers of the US-led international order, Indonesia's assumed role is more about amplifying developing country perspectives to global issues. Karim (2018, 344) similarly notes that Indonesia's pursuit of status is performed through its aim of becoming a regional leader, the voice for developing countries and a bridge-builder. Its roles in international forums, including G20 presidency in 2022 and ASEAN chairmanship in 2023, offer platforms and status markers through which to pursue greater recognition as a globally relevant and bridge-building actor. In this sense, mediatory diplomacy serves both as a means of seeking international recognition and as a continuation of its self-image as a representative of the developing world, while also reflecting foreign policy making in its domestic context.

In the context of the Russia–Ukraine war, President Joko Widodo's visit to Kyiv and Moscow in June 2022 was framed in public discourse as a revitalisation of peace efforts, but it was fundamentally driven by immediate domestic concerns. As Widodo himself emphasised, the need to stabilise global supply chains, particularly for food, was central to Indonesia's engagement (Republic of Indonesia 2022). The war's disruption of wheat exports had significant repercussions for Indonesia, one of the world's largest importers of Ukrainian wheat. Rising global prices intensified domestic economic pressures, impacting essential wheat-based foods, such as instant noodles, which are consumed widely across the country and place Indonesia as the world's second-largest instant noodle market (Dharmaputra 2022). Attempting to secure a steady supply of wheat, therefore, was not only an economic imperative but also a political one, closely tied to the government's domestic legitimacy.

Recent scholarship has underscored the centrality of domestic determinants in shaping Indonesia's response to the Russia–Ukraine war (Dharmaputra 2023; Sebastian and Marzuki 2024; Sebastian and Priamarizki 2024). As Sebastian and Priamarizki (2024, 786–87) argue, Jakarta's posture reflected a transactional logic rooted in domestic imperatives, prioritising economic interests over ideological commitments to Global South solidarity and displaying an 'interest-based approach to peacemaking'. These included concerns over post-COVID-19 economic recovery, maintaining economic ties with Russia, and projecting international leadership competence—most notably through Indonesia's G20 presidency in 2022 and ASEAN chairmanship in 2023—as well as navigating considerable anti-Western and pro-Russian public sentiment and elite divisions over foreign policy (Wardhani and Dharmaputra 2024, 630; Sebastian and Marzuki 2024, 987–90; Dharmaputra 2023).

When asked about Indonesia's initial response and mediation attempt in the early months of the war, both Ukrainian and Russian ambassadors to Indonesia noted the domestic politics dimension. Ukraine's ambassador argued that Widodo had a 'historical opportunity' to play a leadership role but noted concerns over domestic popularity, the pressure to stabilise food prices and anti-Western public sentiments as key determinants of Indonesia's response (Vasyl Hamianin, Interview, 23 May 2023). Russia's ambassador, meanwhile, described Indonesia's 'neutral' official stance but noted alignment with 'pro-Russian' public opinion, describing this orientation as rooted in historical solidarity and citing Moscow's past support for Indonesia's anti-colonial struggle and territorial integrity (Lyudmila Vorobieva, Interview, 23 May 2023). Vorobieva characterised Jakarta's diplomacy as increasingly 'proactive' and praised its G20 leadership for not concentrating on 'divisive issues' despite Western pressure, interpreting this as evidence of Indonesia's balanced approach. These perspectives reveal how Indonesia's domestic priorities shaped its posture and how this posture was variably received, with Moscow framing it as a form of strategic non-alignment and Kyiv questioning its efficacy.

Taken together, the cases of Turkey and Indonesia reveal how emerging middle powers have instrumentalised mediation in response to the Russia–Ukraine war and how mediation functions as a high-profile and relatively low-cost tool of strategic balancing. In both contexts, a self-described 'active' and independent foreign policy has enabled leaders to pursue a bridging role while simultaneously buffering domestic political and economic pressures. In this way, mediation offers status-seeking emerging middle powers an opportunity to accrue recognition through the stabilisation of regional conflicts. But equally, mediation provides gains for political elites who use it to improve their standing amongst domestic audiences.

5 | Conclusions

This article examined the role of mediation in middle power conduct in an increasingly fragmented world, with a particular focus on emerging middle powers. Our investigation of two examples, Turkey and Indonesia, and their efforts to position themselves as mediators in the Russia–Ukraine war demonstrates how emerging middle powers utilise their bridge-building capacity to gain recognition internationally and domestically. Concurrently, this study reveals the forms of mediation pursued by middle emerging powers—substantive, in Turkey's case, resulting in a deal that opened up grain exports to vulnerable markets; and performative, in Indonesia's case, highlighting a public-facing approach that emphasises intent without the ability to produce concrete policy outcomes.

While the conventional literature on middle power diplomacy explains such activism in terms of the traditional leadership–followership dynamic—where middle powers are seen as followers who act as 'good international citizens'—our findings suggest that international systemic instability, the search for status and domestic factors provide better explanations for their actions. Specifically, we argue that the saliency of middle power followership as a source of status diminishes under conditions of structural uncertainty, and as a result, is more likely to manifest through

stability-seeking conduct like conflict mediation. Concurrently, the conventional literature does not give much currency to domestic sources of middle power conduct; however, the article shows that mediatory approaches are motivated not only by international considerations but also by domestic elite concerns. These findings contribute to middle power scholarship by illustrating how these states use mediation to seek both domestic regime support and international recognition, offering a more nuanced understanding of middle power agency.

Our analysis suggests that the ongoing systemic instability is unravelling the established pathways to recognition. In this environment, mediation has become an attractive foreign policy instrument: It is low-cost, high-visibility and normatively resonant across a broad spectrum of international actors. As such, in addition to stability-seeking, it offers a performative strategy that allows emerging middle powers to navigate a contested landscape, hedge between blocs and pursue influence amid uncertainty. For emerging middle powers operating in this changing environment, the lure of claiming to play a contributing role to global stability through mediation provides its own stepping stone to acquiring greater prestige on the international stage. All of these dynamics invite renewed scholarly attention to middle power conduct, one that takes into account the strategic and often domestic dimensions of status-seeking in a world undergoing profound transformation.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Endnotes

[1] Notably, in April 2022, despite overwhelming evidence of human rights violations, 58 states abstained 24 states voted against a draft UN resolution seeking to expel Russia from the UN Human Rights Council. These included many African, Asian, Middle Eastern and Latin American states. See also the Foreign Affairs (2023) issue titled 'The Nonaligned World' for a collection of essays about views from Africa, Latin America, and South and Southeast Asia regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

[2] This paper is not concerned with assessing the effectiveness of mediation per se. Rather, it focuses on how mediation is framed and instrumentalised within the foreign policy narratives of emerging middle powers, particularly as a tool for navigating both international positioning and domestic political imperatives.

[3] Other G20 states who expressed interest in mediation include Brazil and South Africa. See Belém Lopes and Vazquez (2024) and Brosig (2024) for assessments of Brazil's and South Africa's responses to the Russia-Ukraine war.

[4] The stability sought by emerging middle powers in this context is not the stability of the LIO's hegemonic structures, but rather one that reflects the particularist concerns of emerging middle powers amid systemic uncertainty. See, e.g., Yoo (2025) for a discussion of the concept of the stabiliser and how it may help explain the behaviour of other emerging middle powers such as South Korea in the face of regional insecurity.

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