



Beyond Great Powers: Middle Powers and the Future of Multilateral Cooperation

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Abstract

This conference paper presents an academic adaptation of Professor Nick Bisley's presentation at the Jakarta Geopolitical Forum X, examining the evolving role of middle powers in sustaining multilateral cooperation amid increasing geopolitical uncertainty. The presentation explains that the post-Cold War environment, characterised by strategic stability, revitalised multilateralism, and economic openness, has shifted towards intensified great-power competition, institutional fragmentation, and a more politicised global economy. In response, middle powers increasingly rely on both multilateral and minilateral cooperation, although arrangements including the Quad and AUKUS have yet to demonstrate consistent effectiveness. The presentation further argues that effective cooperation depends on clearly defined shared interests, sustained leadership, and tangible outcomes rather than the expansion of institutional mechanisms. The Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) demonstrates the capacity of middle powers to achieve meaningful cooperation through pragmatic leadership and long-term commitment. The presentation concludes by identifying maritime security, domestic security infrastructure, and economic resilience as practical priorities through which middle powers can strengthen international cooperation and contribute to regional and global stability despite their structural limitations.

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Introduction

The contemporary strategic environment differs fundamentally from that which emerged following the end of the Cold War. During the early 1990s, international stability was underpinned by American primacy, the revitalisation of multilateral institutions at both the global and regional levels, and widespread confidence in the benefits of economic openness. Institutions including the United Nations expanded their roles, while ASEAN-centred mechanisms, namely the ASEAN Regional Forum, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus, and the East Asia Summit, reinforced regional multilateral cooperation. The presentation argues that these conditions have changed substantially.

The contemporary international order is increasingly characterised by renewed great-power competition, mounting pressure on multilateral institutions, and a global economic system that has become more closely intertwined with geopolitical rivalry. States are reshaping economic policies to protect strategic interests and strengthen domestic industries, while the leadership traditionally exercised by major powers has become less predictable. These developments have created a considerably more challenging strategic environment for middle powers than that experienced during the post-Cold War period.

Against this background, the presentation examined how middle powers can respond to a more contested, uncertain, and strategically complex international environment. Middle powers were described as states capable of influencing elements of the international order but lacking sufficient capacity to determine global rules or advance national interests independently. This structural reality reinforces the continuing importance of international cooperation and the need to adapt multilateral approaches to address evolving geopolitical challenges more effectively.

Result and Discussion

The presentation explained that the strategic environment confronting middle powers has changed fundamentally. One important response has been the growing reliance on minilateral cooperation through small, focused, and results-oriented arrangements, including the Quad and AUKUS. These mechanisms bring together a limited number of countries pursuing specific strategic objectives when multilateral institutions are perceived as unable to deliver effective outcomes or when participating states face common strategic concerns. Although minilateral initiatives have expanded considerably, their practical effectiveness remains uncertain. The Quad, for example, has established numerous leader-level initiatives covering cybersecurity, climate change, critical technologies, space cooperation, and health security. Nevertheless, the presentation

argued that tangible policy outcomes remain relatively limited, indicating that minilateral cooperation has not yet demonstrated the capacity to replace broader multilateral arrangements.

The discussion further emphasised that the shortcomings of multilateralism cannot be explained solely by renewed great-power rivalry. Several multilateral institutions established during the 1990s and early 2000s have also encountered internal challenges relating to leadership, sustained investment, and implementation capacity. The ASEAN Regional Forum was presented as an example whose limited effectiveness reflects not only strategic competition among major powers but also institutional weaknesses that have constrained the delivery of practical outcomes.

Within Asia, two distinct yet parallel models of regional cooperation were identified. The first consists of long-established cooperative and inclusive institutions centred on ASEAN, which encourage participation by all states willing to observe commonly accepted rules. The second consists of cooperative arrangements that are simultaneously competitive and exclusive. Frameworks including the Quad and AUKUS were presented as mechanisms designed to strengthen the strategic position of participating members within an increasingly contested geopolitical environment rather than as open regional institutions. The coexistence of these two models illustrates the increasingly complex architecture of regional cooperation.

To strengthen cooperation under these conditions, the presentation identified three essential requirements. First, successful cooperation must be based upon clearly defined shared interests. Earlier initiatives among middle powers, including MIKTA, demonstrated that institutional arrangements are unlikely to achieve meaningful progress without a common understanding of collective objectives. Second, effective cooperation requires leadership that is clear, consistent, and sustained over time. Third, cooperative arrangements must produce tangible outcomes. The discussion noted that one source of growing dissatisfaction with multilateralism has been the proliferation of institutional mechanisms without corresponding implementation. Greater emphasis should therefore be placed on improving the performance of existing institutions rather than continually establishing new ones.

The Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) was presented as an example of successful middle-power leadership. Following the withdrawal of the United States from the original Trans-Pacific Partnership in 2017, many observers expected the agreement to fail. However, continued leadership by Japan, Australia, and other participating economies enabled the agreement to proceed successfully. The CPTPP was therefore presented as evidence that middle powers remain capable of delivering effective large-scale cooperation when supported by sustained political commitment and practical implementation.

The presentation also examined the contribution of Track Two diplomacy to multilateral cooperation. Informal dialogue involving academics, experts, and officials participating in their personal capacities provides opportunities to discuss sensitive issues openly and develop practical policy options. However, many existing Track Two mechanisms have increasingly evolved into Track 1.5 processes in which official government positions dominate discussions. Strengthening genuinely independent policy dialogue while improving its connection with policymaking was therefore identified as an important priority.

Finally, the presentation argued that middle powers should adopt realistic expectations regarding the role of multilateral cooperation. Rather than attempting to redesign the international order, greater attention should be directed towards pragmatic coalition-building capable of delivering international public goods in specific policy areas. Three priorities were highlighted. The first concerns maritime security, including both the protection of sea lines of communication and responses to non-traditional maritime challenges i.e. illegal fishing and marine pollution. The second involves strengthening domestic security infrastructure by enhancing cybersecurity, diversifying supply chains, and reducing vulnerabilities associated with an increasingly contested international environment. The third focuses on economic resilience through greater diversification of markets, resources, and supply networks. The presentation illustrated this principle through the observation that diversification strengthens resilience by reducing dependence on any single source of supply, an approach considered increasingly important within a highly politicised global economy.

Conclusion

The presentation concluded by reaffirming that middle powers cannot balance great powers collectively, nor can they fundamentally reshape the international order. Nevertheless, they remain capable of making meaningful contributions within specific areas of international cooperation. Achieving this objective requires flexibility, realistic expectations, sustained leadership, and a willingness to undertake difficult and long-term commitments. Rather than pursuing comprehensive redesigns of global governance, middle powers should concentrate on pragmatic cooperation that produces tangible outcomes and delivers international public goods. By strengthening cooperation in maritime security, domestic security infrastructure, and economic resilience, middle powers can expand their capacity to respond to geopolitical uncertainty while preserving strategic autonomy. Although the challenges ahead are substantial, the presentation emphasised that practical cooperation must begin now if middle powers are to remain effective contributors to a more stable and resilient international order.

Publication Note

This article presents an academic adaptation of the presentation delivered at the 10th Jakarta Geopolitical Forum (JGF X) 2026. Editorial revisions were limited to structure, language, and readability, while the speaker's original arguments, meaning, and policy recommendations remain unchanged.

References

Nick Bisley. Strengthening Multilateralism: Survival Amid Global Turbulence and a Fragmented World [video on the Internet]. Jakarta: Jakarta Geopolitical Forum X; 2026 Jul 9. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IbYayky-FmQ>