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Strengthening Multilateralism amid Strategic Protectionism and Global Technology Competition: A Middle Power Perspective

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Abstract

Global geopolitical fragmentation has reduced the effectiveness of multilateral institutions while shifting international competition beyond military and political dimensions toward strategic protectionism and technological rivalry. This paper examines how middle powers respond to these transformations in strengthening multilateralism. A qualitative approach using policy discourse analysis was applied to the official proceedings of **the Jakarta Geopolitical Forum (JGF) X/2026**, comprising the Opening Remarks, Keynote Address, ten invited presentations, the Conference Summary, and supporting academic literature and international policy documents. The analysis integrates Middle Power Theory, Economic Statecraft, and Technology Competition as complementary analytical frameworks. The findings indicate that middle powers strengthen multilateralism through issue-based coalitions, adaptive diplomacy, and credible leadership. Strategic protectionism has expanded beyond trade policy to encompass financial systems, critical minerals, sustainable industrial policies, and global supply chains, while technological competition increasingly depends on human capital, digital infrastructure, cybersecurity, and artificial intelligence governance. This paper contributes an integrated conceptual framework demonstrating that diplomacy, strategic economic instruments, and technological capabilities are mutually reinforcing dimensions that enable middle powers, particularly Indonesia, to strengthen multilateralism and enhance their role as rule shapers amid global geopolitical fragmentation.

Keywords: Economic statecraft, Middle powers, Multilateralism, Strategic protectionism, Technology competition.

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Introduction

The post-World War II international order is undergoing profound structural transformation. Geopolitical rivalries, economic protectionism, technological advances, climate change, and the fragmentation of global governance are reshaping interstate relations while reducing the capacity of multilateral institutions to respond effectively to cross-border challenges. Against this backdrop, multilateralism has become a strategic imperative for preserving stability, peace, and an effective global governance architecture. In response to these challenges, the 10th Jakarta Geopolitical Forum (JGF) in 2026 adopted the theme "*Strengthening Multilateralism: Survival Amid Global Turbulence and a Fragmented World*" to explore collaborative approaches for fostering cross-border cooperation amid an increasingly fragmented global order (1,2).

Changes in the international system are occurring simultaneously with a shift in the centre of global competition from military dominance to control of technology, financial systems, critical minerals, and strategic supply chains. During the 10th JGF in 2026, the European Union began implementing the Artificial Intelligence Act for high-risk categories (3) ; Poland was recorded as the largest gold buyer among global central banks during 2025-2026 (4), while Indonesia's processed nickel exports exceeded USD 34 billion (5,6). These changes demonstrate that global competition is evolving toward the establishment of technological standards, control of strategic resources, economic resilience, and supply chain control. The discourse within the 10th JGF reinforces these developments through discussions of de-dollarisation, the green economy, and the strengthening of strategic supply chains, and confirms that the multipolar configuration demands a more adaptive, inclusive form of international cooperation capable of generating mutual benefits (7-12).

These changes are occurring more rapidly than international institutions can adjust. The Bretton Woods system was built on a different distribution of power than the current situation. At the same time, the Appellate Body of the World Trade Organization (WTO) ceased operations in December 2019 (13), while various decisions of the Permanent Court of Arbitration face implementation limitations when dealing with the strategic interests of major powers (14). These conditions demonstrate that changes in the distribution of global power are developing faster than the capacity of international institutions to maintain the effectiveness of multilateralism. The discussion in JGF X also shows that international law remains the foundation of relations between states, but its effectiveness requires diplomatic support, trust-building, and sustained multilateral commitment (9).

The changing configuration of global power increases the importance of middle powers in maintaining the effectiveness of multilateralism. Cooperative diplomacy, consensus-building, and a commitment to multilateral cooperation shape the role of middle powers in maintaining the effectiveness of multilateralism (15). Foreign policy flexibility is also a crucial factor in responding to increasing great power rivalry through the implementation of hedging strategies [6]. From a realist perspective, the distribution of power among major powers influences the effectiveness of international institutions (16) . Nevertheless, the discourse at the JGF X/2026 demonstrated that middle powers still have strategic space to strengthen multilateralism through issue-based coalitions, adaptive cooperation, and leadership capable of generating mutual benefits (7).

Various studies have described multilateralism, economic statecraft, the green economy, digital transformation, cybersecurity, and artificial intelligence governance as distinct fields of study. These approaches have not yet clarified the relationship between diplomatic capacity, strategic economic instruments, and technological capacity in shaping the effectiveness of middle powers in an era of geopolitical fragmentation. However, research integrating the perspectives of academics, policymakers, international organisations, industry, and technology practitioners within a unified analytical framework remains limited, particularly in explaining the interaction between diplomatic, economic, and technological dimensions in strengthening multilateralism.

This research uses the entire discourse emerging from the 10th JGF in 2026 as the primary data source through a policy analysis of that discourse. The analysis is conducted by synthesising various ideas developed during the forum and then connecting them to middle power theory, economic statecraft, green industrial policy, and technology competition. Unlike previous studies that examine these dimensions separately, this study demonstrates that the effectiveness of multilateralism amid global turbulence depends on the interplay between diplomatic capabilities, strategic economic instruments, and technological capabilities. It contributes an integrated analytical framework for explaining how these dimensions enable middle powers to strengthen multilateralism and establish themselves as rule shapers in global governance.

Based on this background, this article answers three main questions. First, what cooperation strategies are most relevant for middle powers in facing pressures on the multilateral system? Second, how does strategic protectionism in the trade sector, the financial system, the green economy, and technology affect Indonesia's position in global governance? Third, what institutional, economic, and technological capacities need to be strengthened so that Indonesia can establish itself as a rule shaper in international governance in an era of geopolitical fragmentation and technological transformation?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Studies

Middle power theory serves as a conceptual foundation for understanding how middle-power states maintain the effectiveness of multilateralism amidst changes in the global distribution of power. Middle powers are understood as states capable of influencing certain issues while not dominating the international system (15). This position is more accurately identified through diplomatic behaviour than through economic size or military strength (17). The primary characteristics of middle-power states include cooperative diplomacy, consensus-building, and a commitment to multilateralism (7). The literature also distinguishes between old middle powers and emerging middle powers (9), while hedging strategies are considered enabling states to maintain flexibility in the face of great power rivalry (16). From a realist perspective, the distribution of power among major powers influences the effectiveness of international institutions (13). Conversely, multilateralism and minilateralism remain relevant as mechanisms for maintaining the stability of global governance (1,11,12,14). These differing perspectives demonstrate that the strategic space of middle powers depends on their ability to combine diplomacy, leadership, and international cooperation in responding to changes in the international system.

Changes in the strategic environment have expanded the instruments of interstate competition from the diplomatic dimension to the use of economic and technological tools as sources of strategic advantage. Economic statecraft is understood as the use of economic instruments to achieve foreign policy goals (18). Economic dependence and global networks can also develop into sources of political influence through weaponised interdependence (19,20). At the same time, green industrial policy has developed into a strategic instrument to increase national competitiveness (21,22). In the technological dimension, technology diffusion is considered a key determinant of long-term competitive advantage (23), while the increasing demands for digital sovereignty place technology as a new arena in geopolitical competition (24). These three perspectives complement each other as a conceptual basis for interpreting the relationship between diplomatic strategy, strategic economic instruments, and technological capacity in strengthening multilateralism amidst geopolitical turbulence and fragmentation of global governance.

Emperical Studies

Previous studies suggest that multilateralism faces mounting challenges arising from shifts in the distribution of power, intensifying geopolitical rivalry, and the declining ability of multilateral institutions to uphold a rules-based order. The transition toward a multipolar system has been accompanied by weaker dispute-settlement mechanisms, deepening political and economic fragmentation, and growing competition among states to shape the future architecture of global governance (2,3,12,13,25,26). In response, middle powers have increasingly relied on cooperative diplomacy, hedging, and regional partnerships to navigate strategic rivalry (16,27,28). A similar perspective emerged from the JGF X/2026, which identifies multilateral reform, credible diplomacy, and middle-power leadership as essential foundations for sustaining long-term cooperation (29-32).

The evolving strategic environment has broadened interstate competition beyond traditional diplomacy to include economic and technological instruments as key sources of national advantage. Trade, critical minerals, supply chains, foreign exchange reserves, and green industrial policies are increasingly leveraged to enhance competitiveness and strengthen countries' bargaining positions within the global economy (4,6,33-36). Meanwhile, artificial intelligence, semiconductors, cybersecurity, and data governance have become critical drivers of economic resilience, innovation, and national competitiveness (23,24,37-39). This perspective is reinforced by discussions in the JGF X/2026 Joint Working Group on Global Economic Cooperation, which identified de-dollarisation, critical mineral downstreaming, digital transformation, supply chain resilience, cybersecurity, and artificial intelligence governance as key dimensions of the contemporary geopolitical landscape (5,40-46).

Nevertheless, empirical evidence continues to develop within separate analytical frameworks. Studies on multilateralism generally focus on international institutional reform, while research on middle powers, economic statecraft, and technological competition focuses more on diplomacy, economic instruments, and digital transformation sectorally. The relationship between diplomatic capacity, strategic economic instruments, and technological capacity in strengthening multilateralism has not been widely analysed within a unified conceptual framework. Furthermore, no research has yet synthesised the entire strategic discourse of the JGF X/2026 through a policy discourse analysis approach. This empirical gap forms the basis of this study, which attempts to explain the interrelationships between the multilateralism crisis, middle power strategies, strategic protectionism, and technological competition within a single, integrated analytical framework.

METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with a design for policy discourse analysis (47) to analyse the entire discourse regarding middle powers' responses to strategic protectionism and the growing global technological competition at the JGF X in 2026. Primary data include the opening remarks, keynote address, ten speaker presentations, and conference summary published in the Proceedings of JGF X/2026 (5,29-32,40-46). Secondary data were obtained from books, scientific articles, international organisation reports, and official documents regarding multilateralism, middle powers, economic statecraft, strategic protectionism, and technological competition(1-4,6,7,9-28,33-39,48,49). All documents were verified, systematically reviewed, and grouped into four main issues: the multilateralism crisis, middle power strategies, strategic protectionism, and global technological competition. Each issue is analysed using middle power theory, economic statecraft, and technology competition as conceptual lenses to explain the linkages between diplomacy, strategic economic instruments, and technological capacity in strengthening multilateralism. The credibility of the research findings is maintained through source triangulation by comparing the findings of the Proceedings of the JGF X/2026 with academic literature, international organisation reports, and relevant policy documents to ensure conceptual and empirical consistency.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Crisis of Multilateralism and Middle Power Responses

A thematic analysis of the first session of the JGF X/2026 yielded three main themes: the reconfiguration of multilateralism, strengthening the role of middle powers, and developing more adaptive cooperation mechanisms. These three themes illustrate the changing strategic environment that is encouraging middle powers to develop more flexible diplomatic patterns to respond to geopolitical fragmentation. This approach places issue-based coalitions, sustainable leadership, and an orientation toward mutual benefit as prerequisites for successful international cooperation. The sustainability of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) following the United States' withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) demonstrates that institutional adjustments can maintain effective collaboration despite changes in the international political configuration [26]. Indonesia's position is also considered offering a growing opportunity to strengthen its leadership in the Global South through active diplomacy and the development of strategic dialogue forums that bring together governments, academics, industry players, and the public to formulate solutions to various global geopolitical and economic challenges(30).

The analysis underscores that successful cooperation depends on fostering trust, reconciling diverse interests, and establishing institutional arrangements that reduce the risk of conflict. Indonesia's experience during the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) negotiations reinforced the value of consensus-based diplomacy in accommodating competing national interests. The forum further highlighted multilateral guarantee mechanisms as a means of enhancing certainty throughout the negotiation process while broadening opportunities for middle-power facilitation (31). Overall, the findings suggest that middle-power influence is shaped by institutional credibility, leadership quality, diplomatic capabilities, and enduring cross-border partnerships.

Strategic Protectionism and Economic Statecraft

A synthesis of the discourse from the second session of the Jakarta Geopolitical Forum (JGF) X/2026 identified four strategic themes: trade diversification, financial system resilience, critical mineral downstreaming, and supply chain transformation in response to rising strategic protectionism. Together, these themes reflect the evolution of global competition beyond trade liberalisation toward the control of strategic resources, sustainability standards, and international value chains. Within this context, diversified partnerships through ASEAN, BRICS, the G20, APEC, and the World Trade Organization (WTO), supported by evidence-based dialogue and pentahelix collaboration, have emerged as effective mechanisms for preserving trade openness while enhancing national economic resilience (40). This development is consistent with rising central bank gold purchases since 2022, stronger demand from developing economies, and the diversification of foreign exchange reserves, highlighting a growing emphasis on financial resilience amid geopolitical uncertainty (41).

The analysis further reveals that critical mineral downstreaming has generated substantial value added for domestic industry, as reflected in the rise of processed nickel exports from approximately USD 3 billion in 2010 to more than USD 34 billion during 2022-2023 (5). However, Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) standards may constrain market access without stronger regulatory harmonisation and cross-border policy coordination (5). The forum also emphasised that regulatory certainty, logistical efficiency, and technology transfer are essential enablers of sustainable investment and greater competitiveness in critical mineral-based industries (42). Collectively, these findings suggest that economic statecraft delivers stronger outcomes when trade policy, strategic resource management, industrial transformation, and international partnerships are aligned within a coherent development agenda.

Technology Competition and National Capacity Development

A synthesis of the discourse from the third session of the JGF X/2026 identified four strategic priorities: national digital capability, artificial intelligence-driven industrial transformation, digital infrastructure, and AI governance as foundations of national competitiveness. Collectively, these priorities indicate that global competition is no longer determined solely by a country's capacity to generate innovation, but also by its ability to develop an ecosystem supported by skilled human resources, robust institutions, and reliable infrastructure. Indonesia's abundant critical minerals, large digital market, and demographic dividend provide favourable conditions for accelerating digital transformation. However, limited computational capacity, digital infrastructure, and technological capabilities continue to constrain sustainable value creation (43). These challenges also underscore the need for reskilling and upskilling programmes to ensure that productivity gains are matched by improvements in workforce capabilities (44).

The analysis further highlights that a resilient digital ecosystem depends on reliable infrastructure, trusted partnerships, and strategic technologies, including post-quantum cryptography, sovereign cloud, digital identity, and cybersecurity (45). Equal emphasis is placed on artificial intelligence governance through the establishment of auditing mechanisms, testing institutions, certification systems, and qualified experts to ensure that AI applications adhere to the principles of security, ethics, and accountability (46,48,49) Collectively, these findings suggest that coherent digital policies, skilled human capital, strong institutions, and international collaboration constitute the foundation of national competitiveness, providing Indonesia with a stronger basis for shaping global technology standards.

Discussion

Reconfiguring Middle Power Strategy in a Fragmented International Order

Geopolitical fragmentation is reshaping how middle powers sustain their relevance in global governance. The resilience of multilateralism depends on their ability to forge issue-based coalitions, expand diplomatic networks, and promote dialogue that generates shared benefits. This pattern is consistent with Middle Power Theory, which identifies cooperative diplomacy, consensus-building, and a commitment to multilateralism as the defining attributes of these states (7). It also accords with studies showing that Southeast Asian countries preserve foreign policy flexibility through adaptive approaches in response to intensifying great power rivalry (16,28).

Domestic capabilities also shape the effectiveness of foreign policy. Although diplomatic behaviour remains a defining characteristic of middle powers (17) their influence ultimately rests on institutional credibility, governance quality, and the alignment of national interests with broader multilateral agendas. From a realist perspective, the distribution of power continues to shape the performance of multilateral institutions (13). Nevertheless, hedging and the concept of emerging middle powers better explain Indonesia's flexibility in engaging multiple major powers without aligning exclusively with any one of them (9,27). Consequently, the influence of middle powers amid geopolitical fragmentation stems from credible institutions, sound governance, and effective diplomacy that enable productive engagement within multilateral frameworks.

Strategic Protectionism Beyond Trade Competition

The evolving global economy has transformed strategic protectionism beyond conventional trade policy, extending its use to financial systems, critical minerals, sustainability standards, and supply chains as instruments of geopolitical competition. Rather than relying solely on tariffs and trade barriers, states increasingly compete through control of strategic resources, diversification of foreign exchange reserves, harmonisation of regulatory standards, and the expansion of value-added industries. This evolution is consistent with studies describing the emerging global economic architecture, in which economic instruments function as integral components of national security and foreign policy (4,6,35,36).

This development aligns with the concept of economic statecraft, which views economic instruments as part of foreign policy (18) and supports the argument that economic interdependence can develop into a source of political influence through interconnected global networks (19,20). Industrial policy is also positioned as an instrument to enhance national competitiveness (21,22). Within this framework, the effectiveness of economic statecraft depends on the ability to harmonise regulations, expand technology transfer, strengthen international partnerships, and sustainably increase domestic value-added. This interpretation extends the previous discussion by showing that industrialisation strategies will provide more sustainable benefits when integrated into a multilateral framework that encourages international collaboration and strengthens shared interests.

Technology Competition and Indonesia's Capacity as a Rule-Maker

Technology competition has become a defining factor in shaping a country's position within the international system. Competitive advantage now depends on the diffusion of innovation across economic sectors rather than its creation solely at the laboratory level (23). At the same time, digital sovereignty, strategic technologies, and artificial intelligence governance are reshaping competitiveness and the global distribution of power(24,37,38). Within this context, Indonesia's aspiration to become a technology rule-maker requires investment in human capital, institutional capacity, certification systems, computational infrastructure, and international collaboration. Together, these elements provide the foundation for enhancing national competitiveness while enabling Indonesia to contribute more effectively to the development of global technology governance in support of multilateralism (43-46,48,49).

Integrating Middle Power Theory, Economic Statecraft, and Technology Competition

Geopolitical fragmentation indicates that no single theoretical perspective can fully explain the evolving dynamics of multilateralism. Middle power diplomacy and leadership sustain multilateral cooperation (7-14,16,17,27), while economic instruments continue to redefine a country's strategic position within the broader geopolitical landscape (18-22). Meanwhile, technological innovation, digital governance, and technological capabilities have become central drivers of contemporary power distribution (23,24,37,38). Taken together, these perspectives highlight the complementary relationship between diplomacy, strategic economic instruments, and technological capabilities in reinforcing multilateral cooperation. Building on this synthesis, the study develops a unified conceptual framework, grounded in a policy discourse analysis of the JGF X/2026, to examine Indonesia's pathway toward stronger multilateral engagement amid geopolitical turbulence and a fragmented world order.

Conclusion

Multilateralism amid global turbulence depends on how effectively middle powers align diplomatic engagement, strategic economic instruments, and technological capabilities within adaptive national policies. This approach is reinforced through issue-based coalitions, credible leadership, and cooperative mechanisms that generate shared benefits. At the same time, strategic protectionism has expanded beyond trade policy to encompass financial systems, critical minerals, supply chains, and sustainability standards as instruments of geopolitical competition. This transformation highlights the central role of human capital, digital infrastructure, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence governance, and institutional capabilities in positioning Indonesia as a rule-maker in global technology governance. Together, Middle

Power Theory, Economic Statecraft, and Technology Competition provide a comprehensive framework for explaining how geopolitical, economic, and technological fragmentation is reshaping contemporary world politics.

This study is limited to synthesising policy discourses presented at the JGF X/2026 and therefore does not capture developments in other multilateral forums or subsequent policy implementation. Future research should broaden the analytical scope by comparing multiple forums, combining policy discourse analysis with interviews involving policymakers, international organisations, and industry representatives, and evaluating how the forum's recommendations are translated into diplomatic practice, economic policy, and technology governance. Such efforts would strengthen the empirical foundation of this field and deepen understanding of how middle powers foster multilateral cooperation within a fragmented world order.

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