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Middle Powers in the Multipolar World

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Abstract

With the international system shifting away from Pax Americana and toward a more multipolar world, a class of state actors usually called ‘middle powers’ is the subject of increased attention in policy and academic debates. Despite their rising prevalence, however, references to middle powers are often imprecise, inconsistent, surface level, and ad hoc—reflecting a general bias toward great powers and/or universalism that privileges systemic (global) analysis in mainstream international relations. Drawing on neoclassical realism, cultural realism, security studies, and new regionalist theory, we seek to fill this gap and propose a new and original definition of middle powers across four vectors.

We show that middle powers are better defined by their 1) enduring regional presence and geographic rootedness, 2) considerable economic and military capacity relative to neighbors, 3) historical and cultural pedigree as civilizational states, and 4) the regionally-focused, limited extent of their ambitions — they seek not world domination but a sphere of influence in their near-abroad matching their historical range and scope. The latter offers a key contrast with great powers. The limited, concrete aims of middle powers along with a proper focus on vital interests, territorial sovereignty, and realpolitik born of necessity preclude imperial designs and often mitigate against ideological decision-making.

Given the decline of unipolarity, growing disruptions and backlashes to globalization, and the fracturing and realignment of the global financial and political-economic system, region-based economic and political dynamics are likely to become ever more central to international politics. Understanding future geopolitical trends will depend on recognizing the reality and centrifugal force of multiplicity at the regional or sub-system level to which middle powers are anchored in a cohesive unity—with each civilizational node, the fulcrum of a regional security complex (RSC).

Analogously, some of the premises and theories of neo-realism, traditionally conceptualized globally, are more salutary when applied regionally, where they can be more concretely observed. We identify two strategic postures as especially salient among middle powers, framing and informing their interactions with great powers and their attitude toward the prevailing systemic order (‘liberal international order’ in our case). ‘Status quo middle powers’, for which we offer Japan and Germany as examples, are those satisfied with the relative balance of power in their RSC and working to sustain the extant order in an entente with the status quo great power. In contrast, we present Turkey and Iran as ‘revisionist middle powers’. These states are discontented with their overall standing and the relative balance of power in their RSC and seek to upend the current order for a new one that elevates them, often in alignment with the revisionist great power.

While by no means the last word on the topic, we hope this study can stimulate further thinking and debate on middle powers, especially given the advent of multipolarity and the renewed space and importance that it offers the world’s many regions. Secondly, this work is also intended as a contribution to a more open and less monolithic conception of the international system—where a revitalized concept of multiplicity, the reality of global cultural pluralism, and an emphasis on the role of ‘culture complexes’ combine to propel civilizational states as foundational units in a more fluid, dynamic, and multiplex global system, one that is more inter-civilizational than international. *Ex Uno Plures* (out of one, many), we say.

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Introduction

The Biden administration's completion of the American withdrawal from Afghanistan has triggered hyperbolic—and in light of Washington's bullish response to the Russo-Ukrainian War,¹ frankly untenable—accusations of isolationism.² The fading of the unipolar moment of American dominance and the unilateral influence of the United States is, however, hard to deny.³

In its reaction to 9/11, the U.S. misread the strength of the unprecedented hegemony gifted to it by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. It went on to pursue numerous endless wars, military interventions, and maximalist pressure campaigns around the globe with dubious, yet costly, results and flagging popular support.⁴ All this during a time that has since proved a crucial transitional period, wherein the world witnessed the reassertion of Russian military power and the growth of Chinese technological and economic prowess.⁵

Having overreached and put itself in a more precarious position without expanding its relative power against potential strategic rivals, the United States must now re-examine the cost-benefit calculus of maintaining primacy in a changing world.

1 Jonathan Lemire, "How the Russia-Ukraine conflict has fundamentally changed Biden's presidency," *Politico*, March, 1, 2022: <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/03/01/biden-white-house-russia-putin-00012696>.

2 Ron Elving, "From Washington to Trump to Biden, new presidents meet unwanted foreign crises," *NPR*, January 30, 2022: <https://www.npr.org/2022/01/30/1076527428/from-washington-to-trump-to-biden-new-presidents-meet-unwanted-foreign-crises>.

3 Christopher Layne, "This Time It's Real: The End of Unipolarity and the "Pax Americana"" *International Studies Quarterly*, March 2012: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41409832?seq=1>.

4 The Watson Institute for International & Public Affairs at Brown University's 'Costs of War' Project.

5 "China's Economic Rise: History, Trends, Challenges, and Implications for the United States," EveryCRSreport.com, <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/RL33534.html>.

Much has been written about the opportunities for rival great powers as the post-World War II liberal international order (LIO) dissipates, but comparatively little attention has been given to the likely and substantial influence regional and middle-tier powers could have in the (still-forming) multipolar order that promises to define the remainder of 21st century.⁶

The Primacy of Regions and the Rise of Middle Powers

Much of international relations scholarship, especially in the realist camp, focuses on super-/great powers operating—and often competing—within a global security dynamic ('international system') to achieve security goals that are usually deemed 'objective'. Not only are these great powers perceived as one another's biggest competitors, potential conflict between these global poles could be catastrophic: affecting not just them but also engulfing the entire world (even more so in the nuclear age). Therefore, a disproportionate amount of effort goes to studying and attempting to predict—on the global plane—the behaviors, strategies, and trajectories of these rivals or to speculate on ways to mitigate future conflict(s) between them and/or lessen their severity.

In conceptualizing 'great powers', one would perhaps be forgiven for thinking rather exclusively at the 'system' level or in terms of the *global* structure.⁷ After all, the material capacity to overcome the limitations of distance and geography is one major identifier of a great power. Yet, geography

6 Bruce Jones, "China and the return of great power strategic competition," *Brookings Institution*, February 2020: <https://www.brookings.edu/research/china-and-the-return-of-great-power-strategic-competition/>.

7 A bias often exaggerated in neorealism given the theory's materialist and utilitarian underpinnings. See: Samuel J. Barkin, "Realist Constructivism", *International Studies Review*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2003, 325–42: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3186573>.



is much harder to transcend for lesser powers, which are bounded spatially and territorially to their respective regions and worry, above all, about the regional designs and strategic objectives of their neighbors.

It follows that such geographical and spatial realism frames and qualifies the security calculus of this second class of powers more so than for great powers.⁸ Neither a great power nor a peripheral state, middle powers—especially those discontented about their current status, role, and prestige—occupy an inherently dynamic position in the emerging geopolitical mandala.⁹ One could not speak of ‘middle powers’ without taking into account their symbiotic relationship with the geographical regions wherein they are located and recognizing that “security interdependence is normally patterned into regionally based clusters: security complexes.”¹⁰

As such, this *regional* (and hence comparative) characteristic of middle powers is largely dispositive. For example, Canada’s national wealth and resources, contributions to peacekeeping during the Cold War’s hot phase, and status as a member of the G7 in its latter years have led some to deem it a middle power.¹¹ Yet, it is significantly weaker than the United States in relative terms. Hence, its ability to independently assert its interests in its region—let alone in a global setting—is substantially constrained by its immediate southern

neighbor.

What is more, great powers are an ever-present reality with which regional states must regularly engage with and account for in formulating their grand strategies. The specter of great power politics compels these supra-regional (i.e., super-) powers to interject themselves in and penetrate various world regions — even more so in order to gain leverage in competition with their peers. As great powers, they have a global reach and a more enhanced capacity for force projection in faraway areas, an ability which they use to either preserve the extant balance of power (i.e., status quo) or to secure relative power parity (i.e., *revisionist*). Important to note that power is here defined not exclusively in materialist terms but also encompassing soft power considerations such as cultural distinctiveness, normative influence, international prestige, and the long-term viability of the worldview and form of life it animates.

The prospect of U.S. withdrawal from various regions amid the worldwide adjustments to multipolarity could increase opportunities for mid-range powers to (re-)assert themselves in their respective regions in pursuit of regional dominance, while offering them more strategic autonomy. Their likely ascent, however, also increases the risk of conflict between (geographically-) adjacent middle powers in areas of overlapping security interests and mutual contention.

Since the end of the Cold War, it was widely assumed that ending open antagonism between great powers would afford lesser powers greater room to maneuver. The National Intelligence Council’s *Global Trends 2030* report (2012) predicts, for instance, that middle powers will continue to gain in stature, exerting greater influence on world politics in the coming years—though it specifies neither the reasons for nor the manner

8 Srdja Trifkovic, “The Key to America’s Pathologies”, *Chronicles*, August, 2021: <https://www.chroniclesmagazine.org/the-key-to-america-s-pathologies>.

9 Enrico Fels, “Towards a Middle Power Theory in International Relations”, *Shifting Power in Asia-Pacific?*, Springer, 2017, pp. 195-223: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-45689-8_4.

10 Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 4.

11 Zachary Paikin. “Is Canada Still a Middle Power,” *Institute for Peace & Diplomacy*, April, 2021: <https://peacediplomacy.org/2021/04/22/is-canada-still-a-middle-power>.

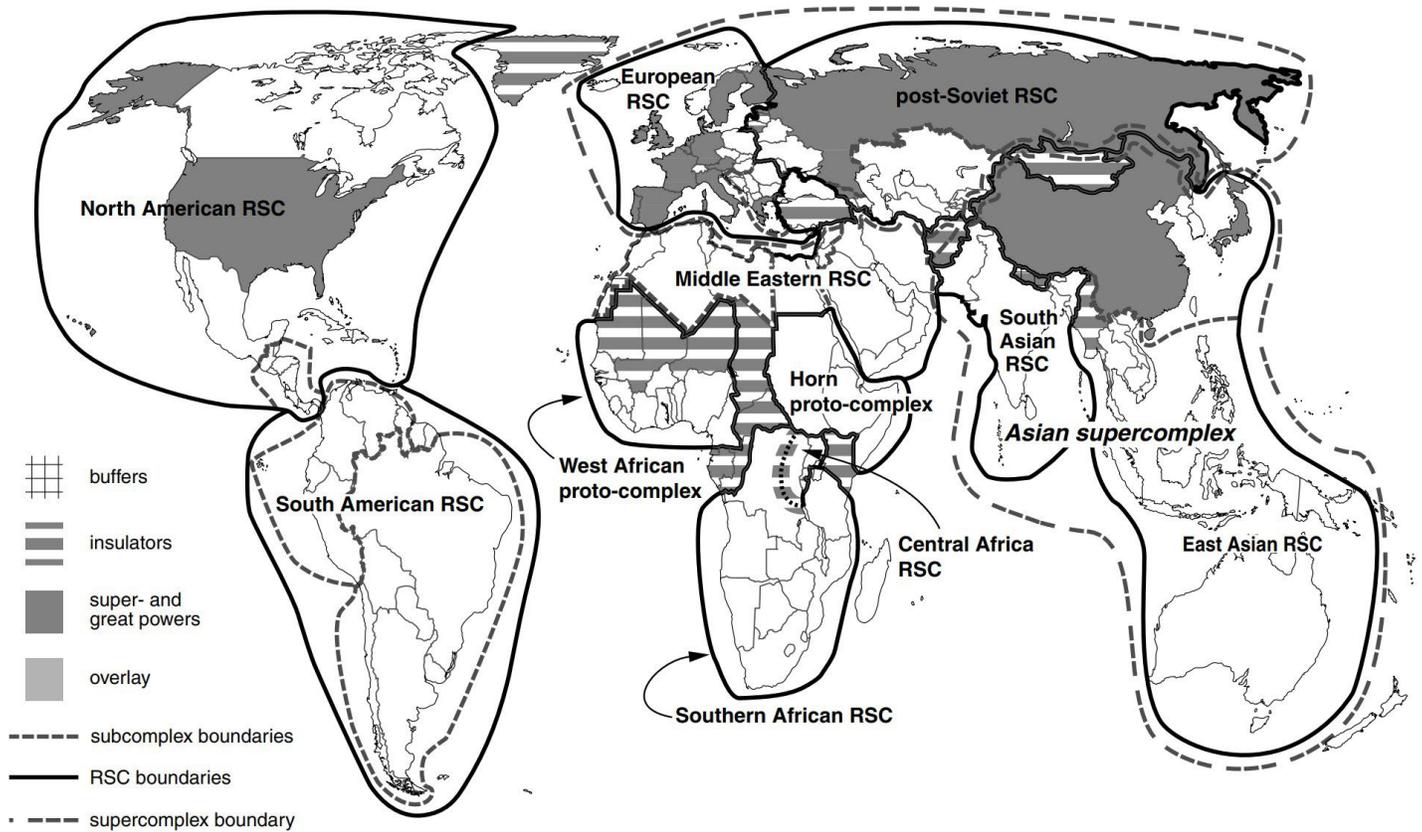


Figure 1. Patterns of Regional Security Post-Cold War, Regions and Powers (2003).

in which this is to occur.¹² It also does not offer a definition, or a set of criteria, for just what constitutes a ‘middle power’.

As China, Russia, and the other old power centers of Eurasia rise to challenge U.S. global dominance and possibly also the viability of the liberal international order that the United States and its allies have forged since World War II, both opportunities and dangers abound for middle powers in the emerging multipolar international system. But what, precisely, a ‘middle power’ is remains speculative. Given the shifting structure of the international system, it seems more pressing than ever to form a clear typology for the concept and

12 Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds, *National Intelligence Council*: https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/GlobalTrends_2030.pdf.

devise a rigorous theoretical framework to better understand the ways in which these states could impact the world moving forward.

Regional Security Complexes Revisited

As alluded to already, power in international politics is always in some sense relative: any examination of middle powers should thus inevitably begin by taking into account both the considerations of “great powers” and the comparative advantage of middle powers in their local regions relative to other, smaller powers in their respective geographic spheres.

We hold that understanding “regional security complexes” (RSCs) and their particular dynamics—a concept introduced by Buzan and Waever (2003)—is key to a proper conceptualization of



middle powers:

*Processes of securitisation and thus the degree of security interdependence are more intense between the actors inside such complexes than they are between actors inside the complex and those outside it. Security complexes may well be extensively penetrated by the global powers, but their regional dynamics nonetheless have a substantial degree of autonomy from the patterns set by the global powers. To paint a proper portrait of global security, one needs to understand both of these levels independently, as well as the interaction between them.*¹³

The interlocking consideration of both *balance of power* and *regionality* allows one to discern the single most important quality that distinguishes a ‘middle power’: its relative power advantage when compared to its immediate neighbors. The existence of multiple local regions at the sub-system level also permits a better, more intuitive grasp of the reality of *multiplicity*—if not multipolarity—at the global/system level. We hence agree that *regional security complex theory* (RSCT) “enables one to understand this new [post-Cold War] structure and to evaluate the relative balance of power of, and mutual relationship within it between, regionalizing and globalizing trends.”¹⁴

While we find the Buzan & Wæver model instructive, we nonetheless believe that it possesses some key blind spots that could be better addressed through an adaptation of the RSCT to incorporate our conceptions of ‘middle powers’, ‘peripheral states’, and ‘cultural complexes’. In our scheme, middle powers emerge as anchors to these region-

al complexes, and the regional security complex forms around them. But the question remains: what distinguishes a middle power from other nation-states in a particular regional security complex, and what differentiates it from a great power?

Middle Powers Defined

The answer to the second part of the above question has already been suggested. Great powers are, practically speaking, global players—nations with the ability, or at least the potential, for global force projection and international action. Middle powers, in contrast, are confined—both in intent and their activities—to their designated regional security environments due, for the most part, to their relative resource constraints.

As for the first part of the question, there remains a notable gap in the literature. Specifically, there is no widely accepted definition of what constitutes a middle power. As it stands, middle powers are usually defined by what they are not. Some reference them positively as reliable go-betweens and friendly arbiters for the Western alliance network in sustaining the liberal international order.¹⁵ Others contrast middle powers with small powers and hegemons, emphasizing their unique position to mediate among them to varying degrees.¹⁶ Still, others define middle powers by their behaviors and functions—an approach that often proves nebulous when applied to real-world examples.¹⁷

The absence of a clear definition of a middle

13 Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 4

14 *Ibid.*, p. 3-4.

15 Roland Paris, “Can Middle Powers Save the Liberal International Order”, *Chatham House*, 2019: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2019-06-18-MiddlePowers.pdf>.

16 Dong-min Shin, *Concept of Middle Power and the Case of the ROK: A Review*, Korea Yearbook 2012: Politics, Economy and Society (Netherlands: Brill), pp. 131-52.

17 Adam Chapnick, *The Middle Power*, Canadian Foreign Policy, Vol. 7, No. 2, pp. 73-82, 1999.



power creates a problem, namely that it reinforces the illusion of an international system that is overly uniform, monolithic, or operating within an objective and even norms-based paradigm of security. In this context, the middle power is often reduced to an enforcer or facilitator, if not a cheerleader, for the existing World Order and its leading great power—relegated to the role of a diplomatic intermediary within the international organizations and multilateral frameworks, whose rules and norms are set by the status quo great power (‘hegemon’). Such framing, in addition to being foundationalist and reductionist, effectively dispossesses middle powers of initiative and autonomy, arguably a core ability that should distinguish such powers from minor or peripheral states.

Moreover, the very paradigm privileges great powers and their (often global) outlooks over middle powers and their regional locus of action. In reality, however, not only is multipolarity the world’s historical equilibrium, the world itself is also a *chimera*—a composite of various active regions whose complexity and plurality undergird and drive the international system. As Carl Schmitt has written, “*Die politische Welt ist ein Pluriversum, kein Universum*”: the political world is [essentially] a pluriverse, not a universe.¹⁸ Overcoming the false impression of universality and recognizing that there exist distinct geographic regions and spatial realities that to a large degree shape interests and interactions between states is crucial to making sense of international relations—let alone ‘middle powers’.

Nevertheless, perhaps given the universalist and rationalist predisposition of most mainstream international relations theory, the geo-regional property of middle powers is regularly overlooked in conventional discussions on the subject. Cer-

tainly, physical realities—mountain ranges, proximity to waterways, etc.—matter as they limit and inform states on the strategic choices available to them, while they also frame security concerns. What is more, they are also formative on the cultures of the people who are foundational to a nation-state, from casting their distinctive worldviews and shaping their strategic culture down to impacting their value systems, political regimes, social habits, and even diets.

In this telling, *geography* is fundamental to the creation of clustered, stable groupings of states, while *history* informs the interactions between them, culminating in the perceptions and the inherited biases that drive the decision-makers in each state at any one time. Critically, this implies that *security* (as a human desire) is historically-conceived, subjective, and perceptual—often involving interpretations of risk rather than an objective fact—and that security concerns are ultimately locally-sourced and regional in practice.

It follows that factors such as a favorable geography, demographics, relative internal stability, economic development, military capacity, and a sense of thymotic *will* reflecting historical and cultural solidarity (inherited by the state) all combine to produce countries that can fully defend their independence of action and exert influence on the smaller powers in their vicinity—without, however, rising to the level of a world power capable of extra-regional (or global) power projection.¹⁹ Integrating this postulate with our earlier discussion of RSCs, we identify four elements that taken together are both necessary and sufficient to allow entry in the dynamic-but-still-exclusive club of ‘middle powers’:

18 Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, The University of Chicago Press, 1996 [1927], p.53. [1933: 35–36].

19 Georga Nonnenmacher, “The Rise of a Middle Power?” *Australian Institute of International Affairs: Australian Outlook*, May 2020. <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/the-rise-of-a-middle-power/>.



1. *Geo-regionality*: they are states situated in and shaped by their particular regions within a regional security complex. These complexes are historically dynamic and can enlarge or shrink somewhat over time. Moreover, the geographic constraints and advantages that define their territorial expanse and put them in a favorable, if not inherently dominant, position vis-à-vis the RSC's other actors also inform their pride of place and sense of history, determining and locking in their *vital* interests across time.
2. *Relative Material Advantage*: They are states that possess a certain degree of material capability and operational resources enough to create and maintain comparative superiority—both militarily but also in terms of economic and human capital—allowing them to outperform their proximal neighbors in the pursuit of their goals.²⁰
3. *Status as a Cultural State*: They represent countries with long historical memories, often espousing distinctive values, committed to the preservation of their cultural form of life in the present and the future, and aspiring to achieve recognition and the respect of their peers. The historical and cultural continuities also breed greater solidarity and higher internal stability with an attendant and heightened level of interest in the immediate abroad that is shaped by their singular historical and cultural legacy.
4. *Limited, Non-global Aims*: Due to their comparatively limited capabilities (namely, the inability to pursue interests far beyond their regions as great powers can), and thanks to

their emphasis on cultural particularity and prioritization of vital interests, these states have narrower goals and strategic concerns that are limited to the near abroad, and which do not change drastically over time, enduring even between different political regimes.

Certainly, the importance of comparative advantages for power aggregation cannot be overlooked. A larger population, size of the economy (especially GDP as measured by purchasing power parity), and military capability combine to create the basic material conditions to enable one country to exert its geopolitical weight to a greater degree than most adjacent nations.²¹ Their achievement of or struggle for influence and perhaps suzerainty over smaller countries in their regions, however, could at times have global ramifications—especially when those peripheral states band together with (outside) middle or great powers (through security partnerships or formal alliances like NATO) to act as ‘regional balancers’ to the autochthonous or core middle power. As such, in the best case scenario, the most a middle power can realistically hope for is securing a sphere of influence within its designated RSC.

Accordingly, even more so than great powers, middle powers are defined by their relations with other powers in a way that augments, diminishes, or qualifies their material capabilities. It is impossible, therefore, to adequately define a middle power and/or understand its strategic trajectory without reference to its geographic region and the relative positions of both its neighbors within and the propinquitous middle powers outside the RSC—not to mention the interests of the external great powers.

20 See table on following page. [IMF 2022 Forecast](#) data for GDP measured by Purchasing Power Parity; controlled for population (>60 Million).

21 Tanja Börzel and Thomas Risse, “The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism,” Oxford University Press; 1st edition. February 2016.



Rank	Population (2020)	PPP GDP (2022)
1.	China 1.4b	China 29.83t (USD)
2.	India 1.38b	USA 24.8t
3.	USA 331m	India 11.3t
4.	Indonesia 273m	Japan 5.97t
5.	Pakistan 221m	Germany 5.2t
6.	Brazil 213m	Russia 4.7t
7.	Nigeria 206m	Indonesia 3.84t
8.	Bangladesh 165m	Brazil 3.59t
9.	Russia 146m	France 3.55t
10.	Mexico 129m	UK 3.54t
11.	Japan 126m	Turkey 3.05t
12.	Ethiopia 115m	Mexico 2.87t
13.	Philippines 110m	Egypt 1.49t
14.	Egypt 102m	Thailand 1.43t
15.	Vietnam 97m	Vietnam 1.25t
16.	DR Congo 90m	Iran 1.25t
17.	Turkey 84m	Pakistan 1.24t
18.	Iran 84m	Nigeria 1.2t

The relational element with neighbors and sometimes rivals is an especially significant identifier. One could view the Republic of Korea's economic might, bustling cities with a high standard of living, and its influential culture and judge it a middle power. But flanked by larger and more consequential states such as China and Japan, South Korea's strategic freedom is rather limited. As the central geopolitical fault line between China, Japan, and even Russia, the presently-divided Korean pen-

insula has alternated as a buffer and a protectorate, seen much violence, and paid a high cost in the historical tug of war between these powers. If, however, one were somehow to relocate South Korea to a more favorable, less contested location—in Africa or South America for instance—it is conceivable that it would emerge as a dynamic and formidable middle power. When all is said and done, geography is the most fundamental determinant of power.



Likewise, Mexico—one of the world’s wealthiest countries by GDP with a population larger than Japan—in theory, meets a good number of the middle power requirements stipulated earlier, but its global reach is dwarfed and its regional presence overshadowed by its giant northern neighbor, the United States. Similar examples abound.

Lastly, recall that regional security complexes are distinct territories that are limited and shaped by geographic realities (e.g., presence of rivers, mountainous terrain, elevation above sea level, or deserts, etc.), within which specific states interact in somewhat consistent and predictable ways across time. Such spatial and regional realities coupled with historical experiences passed on

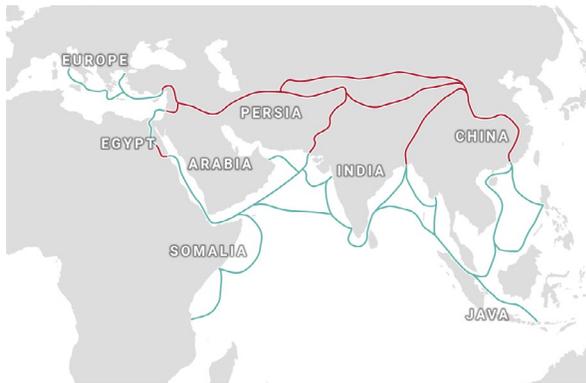


Figure 2. The Silk Road and the world’s major culture complexes (11th century CE).

over many generations influence and condition the perceptions of states over time, meaning that the way a state sees itself in relation to others—if at all unitary—is not objective or rational but rather historically-determined (i.e., *a posteriori*). The corollary is that states outside of a particular region will often struggle to understand the particular outlook, values, and politics of that complex by virtue of the fact that they exist outside of it and lack a connection to the culture and worldview predominating in that sphere. They, hence, routinely project their experience and values upon others—a distortion which finds especial salience, and is rather prohibitive, when trying to make

sense of a society’s threat perception and risk tolerance.

The rise of middle powers suggests the resurgence of both *realpolitik* and cultural sovereignty—realities much of the 20th century had tried to erase. The dawn of Wilsonian idealism and the unleashing of national self-determination movement around the world with American leadership may have contributed to the unraveling of the (Europe-led) colonial system, but it also systematically undermined the authority of the world’s oldest and most distinctive cultures and supplanted global cultural pluralism for the ideological hegemony of Western liberalism—a process that began with the advent of capitalist economics and maritime empires in the 1500s, but which accelerated exponentially and solidified in the post-World War II period. Today, with the return of age-old civilizational states as either middle or great powers, cultural sovereignty (and the quest for it) could soon occupy a more central role in what should perhaps be called ‘inter-civilizational’ rather than international politics, and replace national sovereignty as the most determinative factor in global geopolitics.

A major reason for this necessary paradigm shift is that middle powers are civilizational states, firmly rooted to a particular land, tradition, and culture and possessing a powerful historical memory. Compared to the ideological impetus of the superpowers of the 20th century, access to a historical consciousness—not ideology—is the engine that most often drives these states, linking the interests of the past and the future of ‘a people’ with the concrete realities faced by the present generations. In other words, what makes these entities ‘civilizational states’ is that their statehood is centered on, and ultimately legitimized by, them embodying a singular culture with both a continuous historical pedigree and self-awareness—their dif-



The World's Culture Complexes

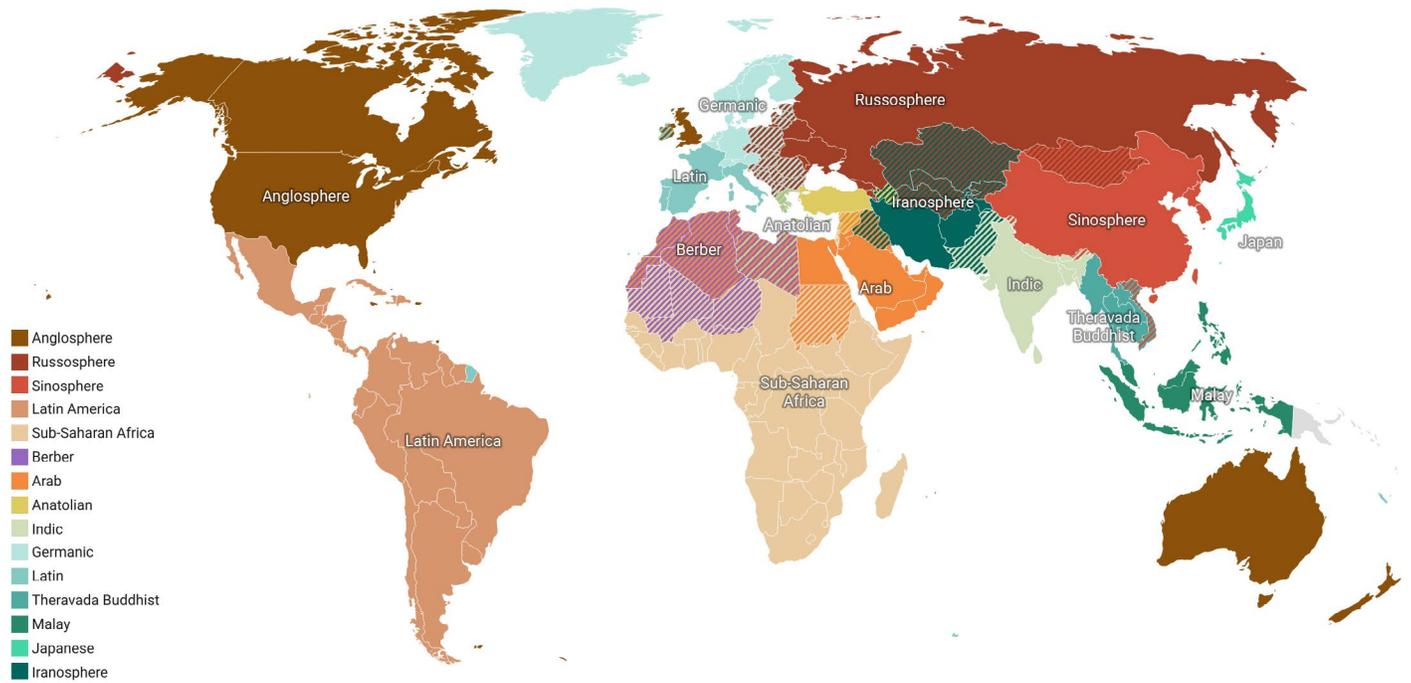


Figure 3. Contemporary divisions of the world's culture complexes.

ferent weltanschauungs and being-in-the-world also differentiating them from one another. As Samuel Huntington wrote in the famed 1993 *Foreign Affairs* article,

*The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future.*²²

Huntington certainly had the right instinct. Many of the most pivotal and enduring conflict zones of today and the major sources of global instability —

22 Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?", *Foreign Affairs*, 1993: <https://archive.fo/iRfCM#selection-1721.135-1721.543>.

viz. Ukraine, Iraq, Korea, Yemen, Syria, Karabakh — are, indeed, located in the gray zones between major culture-complexes (which also largely match the boundaries of the RSCs). Nevertheless, the notion of the inevitability of clash between these complexes is something we outright reject and for which we hope to offer a corrective here. By adopting a universalist, maximalist, and zero-sum understanding of civilizations, Huntington projected onto history a framework informed by the parochial Western religious (i.e., protestant) experience, whose inherent universalism naturally led to presupposing existential conflict as an inescapable fact or even a *modus vivendi* for the theory. All this notwithstanding, the important point is that the geopolitical pluriverse discussed earlier maps onto a geocultural pluriverse.

In contrast to Huntington's civilizations model (which is effectively a religious mandala), not only do cultures lack an inherent universalism,



but they are the very embodiment of particularity. While each considers itself unique and special, perhaps even with a privileged position in world history, a healthy culture is neither exceptionalist nor eschatological: an exceptionalism or utopianism that ideologizes one cultural form into a world-historical idea, uprooting it from its soil and turning it into a cause to be realized all over the globe (like Vladimir Lenin would do Russia and Woodrow Wilson America), such a missionary fixation to transform the world and remake it in a certain image with the might of the modern state — this is the realm of ideology and represents a pathology of culture. Far from seeking such apotheosis, culture-complexes are dynamic, living organisms that seek their own survival, security, and flourishing via achieving dominion over the particular spatial area (i.e., habitat) in which the culture-complex has been active.

Such cultural realism signifies that the differences among the world's major cultures are substantive enough to proliferate differential realities and perceptions. It holds that we humans, as *homo cultus*, do not experience reality as an objective fact across 'humanity' but rather that we inhabit various realities. The telos of any culture-complex being self-actualization (of its form of life), its will to power must be self-directed rather than having an outward focus or an external locus of control. Thus, the fact of global cultural pluralism does not preclude the possibility of civilizational rivalry (agon) but takes issue with the universalist hegemonic framing of it as a Manichean antagonism.

As Huntington observes,

The clash of civilizations thus occurs at two levels. At the micro-level, adjacent groups along the fault lines between civilizations struggle, often violently, over the control of territory and each other. At the

macro-level, states from different civilizations compete for relative military and economic power, struggle over the control of international institutions and third parties, and competitively promote their particular political and religious values.²³

Here, the so-called micro-level of conflict generally agrees with realist principles and could hence affirm relations of either *friendship* or *enmity* occurring intermittently depending on the particular context and the balance of power. At the “macro-level”, however, one sees precisely the universalist bias and presumptions of Huntington’s model, which again falsely and parochially assumes that, just as with the West, other civilizations must compete to impose their worldviews globally and achieve global predominance over a unified world ‘system’ and its prevailing institutions — thus making relations of antagonism between them inevitable.

Although it is true that “geographical propinquity [could give] rise to conflicting territorial claims” especially in and around the fault line states or insulates, a desire for arbitrary territorial expansion, interventionism outside one’s own RSC, or an external locus of control in general is often indicative of internal decay—of a declining culture-complex overreacting to its failures and feelings of powerlessness through aggressive behavior.²⁴ As Toynbee observes,

An increasing command over environments is a concomitant of disintegration rather than of growth. Militarism, a common feature of breakdown and disintegration, is frequently effective in increasing a society’s command both over other living societies and over the inanimate forces of

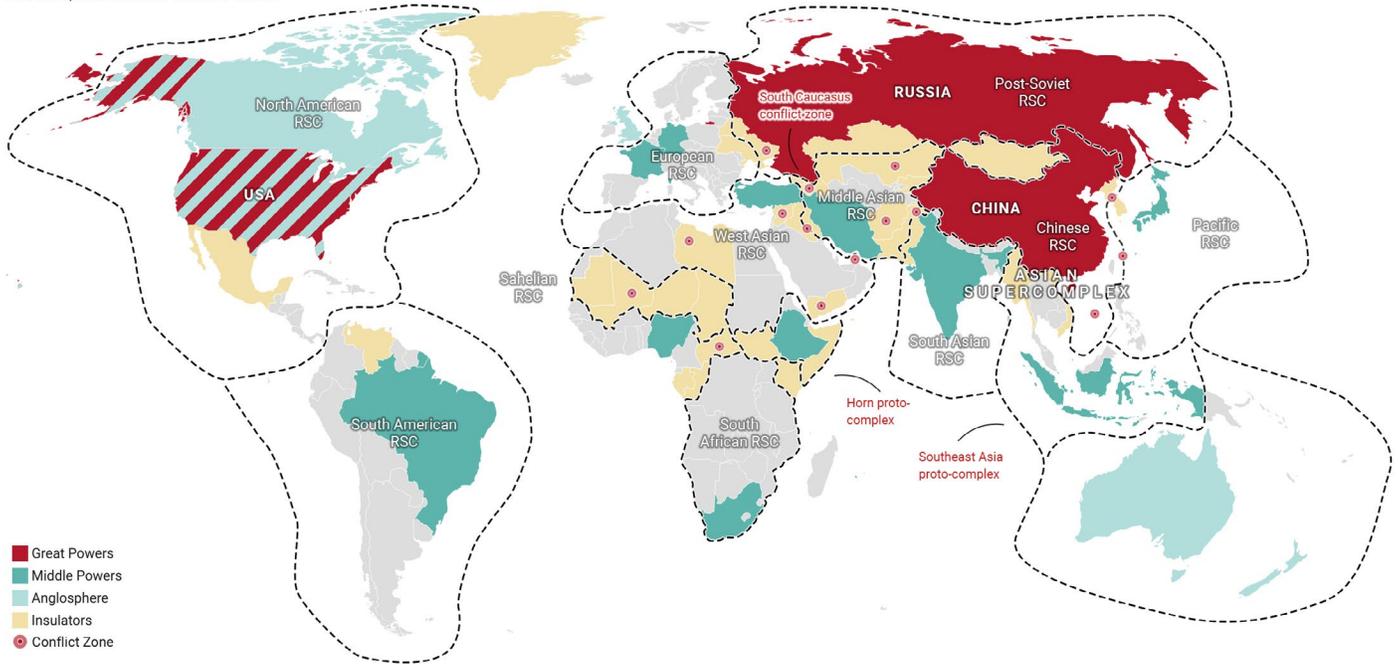
²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.



Regional Security Complexes

Reconceptualized with Middle Powers



Note: This map marks Russia as a great power. Moscow's relative power status, however, is in a state of flux and far more ambiguous. A compelling case could be made that Russia is the world's strongest (revisionist) middle power as evidenced by its recent behavior in Ukraine and Syria.

Figure 4. The world's regional security complexes re-envisioned to account for contemporary middle powers.

nature...Sooner or later, however, disillusionment is bound to follow; for a society that has become incurably divided against itself is almost certain to 'put back into the business' of war the greater part of those additional resources, human and material, that [its warmaking abroad] has incidentally brought into its hands.²⁵

When compared to Huntington's idea of civilizations—essentialistic conceptions representing the ideologization of a culture into a universal category, destined to clash over their antithetical, universalist worldviews which motivate their quests for world domination—cultures collide most commonly at their borderlands when involved in a security dilemma (real or perceived)

25 Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History: Abridgement of Volumes I-VI* by D.C. Somervell, Oxford University Press, 1947, p.418-419.

with their neighboring cultures (making proxy wars in fault line countries quite common) or when reacting against the geographical overreach of another culture-complex possessing both the intent of acting universally (i.e., ideologically) and the ability to do so (i.e., great power).²⁶ In that sense, *ceteris paribus*, core middle powers, as civilizational states, are best positioned to defend against ideological empires' interventions, if they so choose. In combination with rival great powers, they are the international system's natural barriers against global hegemony.

In sum, a middle power is best defined by its rela-

26 While, at the global level, securitization is frequent and practically all 'threats' are perceptual and subjective, securitization remains a real possibility also at the regional level, although perhaps with a lower probability: two proximate states could well develop augmented threat perceptions that are mutually reinforced out of fear and history of past aggression and conflict.



tive power and superiority within the regional security complex it anchors, a well-developed cultural tradition and sense of identity that are the wellspring of relative solidarity, aspiration and capacity for regional—though not global—dominance, and ability to chart a course of import *vis-à-vis* great global powers while retaining its autonomy.²⁷ While as the poles in the primary system, great powers can intervene into individual RSCs from “above” to impact their local dynamics, this “overlay is not a one-way process” since it is often true that “local partners exploit external patrons to pursue local opponents.”²⁸ Ultimately, the relative autonomy of middle powers reflects the relative insulation of a region (i.e., the RSC’s autonomy) from outside penetration: this autonomy is bound to increase as unipolarity ends, great powers retrench, and globalization fractures into multiple regional trade networks using the core middle powers as economic hubs. At the same time, most conflicts will remain highly localized driven by considerations of regional balances of power between neighboring states.

The regional requirement is thus a *sine qua non* for the category of middle powers, but the domestic health of a state matters too. Internal socio-political considerations, including regime stability, social cohesion, self-confidence, a common purpose, and effective leadership are the basic building blocks for all *power*: middle powers are no exception. Moreover, as highly relational actors, middle powers tend to define their national interests regionally, and can only be understood within the context of the history and geopolitical circum-

27 William Oosterveld and Bianca Torossion, “A Balancing Act: The Role of Middle Powers in Contemporary Diplomacy,” *Netherlands Institute for International Relations*: <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2018/strategic-monitor-2018-2019/a-balancing-act/>.

28 Robert E. Kelley, “Security Theory in the ‘New regionalism,’” *International Studies Review*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2007, p. 200: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4621805>.

stances of the region in which they reside.

Therefore, based on our established criteria, we propose that Japan, Turkey, Iran, Brazil, Indonesia, India, Germany, France, the Anglosphere (the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand when & where they work in tandem), Nigeria, and South Africa are all better understood as middle powers in the current global landscape.

The Strategic Postures of Middle Powers

But how do middle powers define their strategic choices and alignments, and in what way does this matter? At first glance, the countries designated as middle powers above do not behave in a similar fashion. Many appear to be as divergent from one another as they are from great powers, and this would seem to preclude the usefulness of the typology structurally-speaking. Aside from their profound differences as cultural poles, by focusing on the strategic behaviors of middle powers, they could be divided along two separate clines: ‘revisionist’ and ‘status quo’.

In his magisterial work, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, Paul Kennedy assigns historical significance to both revisionist and status quo middle powers—and the critical roles they play in geopolitical crises.²⁹ Many middle powers are already recalibrating their roles in response to the changing dynamics of the international system toward multipolarity. This creates an interesting set of opportunities for nations of both status quo and revisionist dispositions.

A ‘revisionist middle power’ (RMP) is inclined to resent the extant balance of power in its RSC as not reflecting its historical influence and geopolitical weight in the region, and actively resists the prevailing world order (i.e., the LIO), which it blames

29 Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers*, Random House (1987).



for its diminished position or status and believes unjust. RMPs are noteworthy, not for their ability to directly challenge a great power, but for having the capacity and willingness to assert their interest in a way that credibly threatens to alter the material situation in a major geopolitical theater (usually in and around their respective RSCs) and undermine the status quo great power it perceives as hegemonic and threatening to its form of life. RMPs can operate directly, or through proxies, or both (as Iran, for example, does), and their interests can manifest along territorial or ideological or institutional lines—or all of the above (as they do with Turkey).

Conversely, a ‘status quo middle power’ (SMP) is generally content with the extant balance of power in and around its RSC and believes itself a stakeholder to and beneficiary of the primary systemic order (the LIO). It feels secure in the protections and guarantees offered to it by the status quo great power and is usually happy to leverage its middle power position as the lynchpin of a given regional security arrangement to help safeguard and advance the norms and interests of the existing world-system, often by employing diplomacy on bilateral, multilateral, or institutional fronts. The normalized, institutionalized, and often-formalized nature of the partnerships between the hegemon and the SMPs to preserve the existing order is the basis of the so-called “international community”. In the current context, the symbiotic commitment to the status quo by the SMPs and the hegemon (i.e., the U.S.) is a source of stability and legitimacy for the liberal international order, giving it an additional layer of authority and even respectability as a consensual, rather than merely hegemonic, order.

The strategic trajectories of middle powers—best determined by their ‘status quo’ or ‘revisionist’ posture in their respective regions—could ripple

well beyond their own regions proper, especially in the case of the SMPs that work in concert with the United States to maintain the so-called ‘rules-based’ international order and with it the ideological supremacy of Western liberalism. In our time, Germany, Japan, and the core Anglosphere (i.e., the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand) offer clear examples of status quo middle power behavior, while Turkey and Iran often behave as revisionist middle powers.³⁰

Given its relative security and general satisfaction with the global and regional balance of power, an SMP’s primary strategy is to work within the U.S.-led system to further its (mostly economic) objectives while still increasing its soft power and good standing in the International Community and within the (liberal) regional and multilateral organizations of the Free World where it is a major stakeholder. This can be accomplished by taking on greater responsibilities in a region, while remaining closely affiliated or allied with the United States. As the most important member of the European Union and an active player in the NATO alliance yet with its own sovereign economic pursuits and diplomatic initiatives, Germany is the pre-eminent contemporary example of an SMP.³¹

Though less diplomatically dynamic, Brazil’s turnaround on its views regarding Cuba³² under the Bolsonaro government as well as an increasing-

30 Andrew Mycock and Ben Wellings, “The UK After Brexit: Can and Will the Anglosphere Replace the EU?”, *Cicero Foundation Great Debate Paper*, No. 19/02, July 2019: https://www.cicerofoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/Mycock_and_Wellings_The_UK_After_Brexit.pdf.

31 Emily Schultheis and Uri Friedman, “Germany Preps a Plan B for Trump’s Foreign-Policy ‘Zigzag,’” *The Atlantic*, February 2019: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/02/germany-preps-plan-b-uncertain-america-foreign-policy/582715/>.

32 Michelle Nichols, “Brazil for first time votes against U.N. call for end to U.S. embargo on Cuba,” Reuters, November 7, 2019: <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-usa-cuba-un-idINKBN1XH2TF>.



ly hawkish posture towards Venezuela implies a greater desire to take part in hemispheric politics in ways friendly to Washington's objectives.³³ This in turn shows that despite Washington's re-thinking the extent of its global role, America will continue to remain a great polar power most wedded to the status quo, with many traditional allies (especially SMPs) looking to maintain and even expand their warm relations with it in the times to come, perhaps even viewing this effort as aiding their regional power and status. As Bolsonaro's example clearly demonstrates however, such efforts will not stop SMPs from using their influence for their own independent objectives and even to advance domestic political agendas occasionally at odds with the liberal consensus in Washington.³⁴

Needless to say, the geopolitical intentions of revisionist middle powers are more ambiguous and harder to predict. As they vie to elevate their position in their RSCs and maximize their relative power, RMPs generally operate in a more real-politik manner and have a higher risk tolerance, which both expands the range of potential actions available to them and, naturally, increases risks of dangerous backlash. Turkey and Iran are two noteworthy examples of such middle powers differentiated by their contrarian strategic posture and resistance to the extant order. Once a close ally to the United States, Iran has obviously been the revisionist power par excellence since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Turkey's case is a bit more complicated. Although Ankara began the postwar era as a status quo power and continues to leverage and benefit from NATO membership in many re-

spects, it has become progressively more revisionist in the last two decades at Erdogan's direction with the more illiberal Turkish state increasingly disillusioned with the liberal West and embracing neo-Ottomanism.

Status Quo Middle Powers: The Cases of Japan & Germany

Two countries that best embody the status quo middle power today are Japan and Germany. As Axis powers, both countries tried unsuccessfully to destroy the liberal world order and become hegemon in their own right in World War II. Of course, they were decisively and comprehensively defeated by the Allies and became occupied and restructured by the victors after the war. In both nations, militarism faced a severe public backlash and was fully rejected institutionally, leading the former Axis powers to reinvent themselves as manufacturing and commercial powers instead. Although today Tokyo is a more significant military power than Berlin, perhaps due to China's rise and the absence of a NATO-like alliance structure in Asia, Germany's temporary division—as one of the primary fronts in the Cold War—brought about its re-militarization much sooner. Both middle powers have also experienced U.S. largesse, underwent rapid reconstruction and economic development under America's leadership, and were successfully integrated within the global economy—thus ironically achieving many of the failed objectives of their formerly militarist regimes. As such, they are largely content with the present international order and remain generally cautious against revisionist great powers such as China and Russia.

33 "Pompeo, Brazil's New Government Target Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua" *Reuters*, January, 2019: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-brazil-venezuela/pompeo-brazils-new-government-target-cuba-venezuela-nicaragua-idUSKCN1OW0VQ>

34 Steen Fryba Christensen, "Brazil's Foreign Policy Priorities," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No.2: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42002122?seq=1>.



East Asian Regional Security Complex

■ Great Powers ■ Middle Powers ■ Insulators ● Conflict Zone

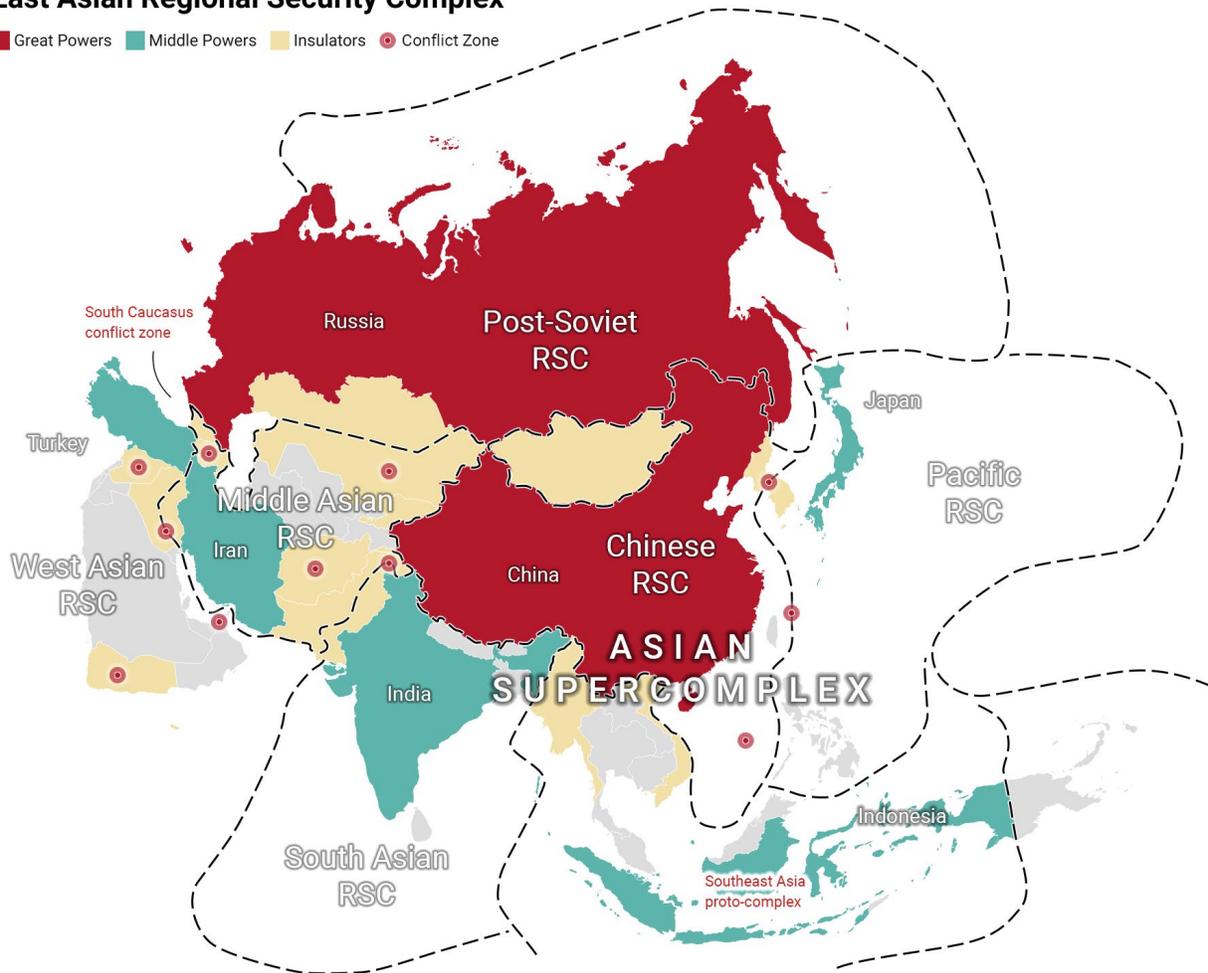


Figure 5. The regional security complexes of Asia and the wider Asian supercomplex.

Japan

Contemporary stereotypes tend to describe the modern Japanese state as historically schizophrenic: oscillating between ‘cautious subordinate ally’ or ‘aggressive imperial power’. But even before it became an integral part of the U.S. security network, the Japanese strategic culture encouraged a far more flexible approach to geopolitics rooted in its maritime geographic advantages. From the Meiji Restoration period on through the Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902, and arguably even into the 1920s before the rise of martial Japan, the state’s chief concern was to preserve the

sovereignty and distinctive form of life of Japan, and avoid vassalage to another dominant power in Asia. In the words of early modernization proponent Fukuzawa Yukichi, to be distinct, Japan would have to “Leave Asia” for its own course.³⁵

During this first phase of modern Japanese history, Japanese leaders saw Russia as that existential threat, a concern which shaped Japanese policy towards Korea, China, and other nations. The his-

35 Aaron Pickering and Fukuzawa Yukichi, “Lesson Plan: “On Leaving Asia” Primary Source Document,” *Association for Asian Studies*, April 2016: <https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/ea/archives/lesson-plan-on-leaving-asia-primary-source-document/>.



torian S.C.M. Paine has even made the case that fear of Russia rather than simple desire for conquest was the true impetus for the initial expansion of the Japanese Empire.³⁶ After its defeat in World War II and in the height of the Cold War, suspicion of Russia (as USSR or Communism) became once again—and this time with U.S. blessing—Tokyo’s strategic lodestar.³⁷ With the fall of the Soviet Union, Japan’s offshore-balancing-Lite approach would gradually be reoriented towards China on which it remains focused today.

Japan is the third-largest economy in the world and a nexus of international finance and industrial exports. By some accounts, it is the third most powerful state on the planet. Yet, its close geographic proximity to China—chief great power rival of the U.S.—and reliance on U.S. defense guarantees significantly limits its strategic freedom or fully autonomous action. This, in part, should be expected for an SMP. Having endured through the Cold War playing a subordinate role to U.S. security objectives and keeping military spending very low to focus on postwar reconstruction and development, Tokyo appears to be playing a successor strategy to that role today, though with some important modifications geared at increasing its autonomy (as much as possible) within the SMP framework.

When Japan deployed its naval and ground forces in logistical support roles during the height of the Iraq War, it skirted its pacifist constitution, likely hoping to acquire experience for overseas deployments after generations of keeping the military firmly at home: the results were inconsequential to the U.S. war effort and extremely mixed.³⁸

36 S. C. M. Paine, *The Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895*, Cambridge University Press (2010).

37 Kenneth B. Pyle, *The Making of Modern Japan*, Harvard University Press (2015).

38 “Ten Years Ago, Japan Went to Iraq and Learned Nothing”, *War*

Tokyo, however, used the event to signal to Washington that it was open to revising and expanding its position in a U.S.-led security umbrella. Japan’s willingness to be a lynchpin for the American-led security bloc in East Asia was also reflected by its recent move to publicly acknowledge—despite it officially upholding the one-China policy—its shared security concerns with Taiwan.³⁹ Such a turn also implies that the prospect of Japan allowing the U.S. to use its air and sea space to defend the island, in case of an invasion, is now real enough a factor that Beijing cannot afford to ignore. This coupled with the likelihood that Tokyo would provide material and logistical support to the United States in case of a war, thus greatly aiding an attempted U.S. defense of Taiwan, makes Japan vital to any U.S. military campaign in Asia.⁴⁰

Could this more assertive role be considered a “fourth foreign policy revolution” in Japan’s modern history?⁴¹ A certain strategic ambiguity might be the aim here. Both Washington and Beijing know that Japan contains untapped potential as a country capable of wielding power on the international stage, but coming out directly into the great power game on one side could also hinder its potential future avenues of action. In eschewing Washington’s binary New Cold War framework for competition with Beijing, Tokyo balances its unofficial strategic partnership with Taiwan (which includes pledged maritime cooperation regarding

Is Boring: <https://medium.com/war-is-boring/ten-years-ago-japan-went-to-iraq-and-learned-nothing-b7f3c702dd1f>.

39 Pamela Kennedy, “Parsing Japan’s Support for Taiwan,” *The Diplomat*, September 2021: <https://thediplomat.com/2021/09/parsing-japans-support-for-taiwan/>.

40 Ryan Ashley, “Japan’s Revolution on Taiwan Affairs,” *War on the Rocks*, November 23, 2021: <https://warontherocks.com/2021/11/japan-revolution-on-taiwan-affairs/>.

41 Hal Brands “Japan, a Sleeping Giant of Global Affairs, Is Waking Up,” *Bloomberg*, October 5, 2021: <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-10-05/worried-about-china-and-the-u-s-japan-is-again-becoming-a-world-power>.



issues related to search and rescue, fisheries, and coast guard relations)⁴² with its unwillingness to “decouple” from economic ties with China.⁴³ This posture reflects a general view in the Japanese establishment supporting a peaceful Pacific, where trade and economic relations are affirmed across the region regardless of states’ geopolitical rivalries. Japan remains committed to open seas in and around the Pacific but has begun to increase defense investment into amphibious and anti-submarine forces.⁴⁴ Being part of both the RCEP regional trade treaty as well as “The Quad” alliance also exhibits its fundamental pragmatism in foreign affairs.⁴⁵

Japan’s position towards the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February of 2022 has been in line with this general positioning of being a more assertive but fundamentally conventional status quo middle power. Prime Minister Fumio Kishida declared that “The Russian attack shakes the foundation of international order that never tolerates unilateral change to the status quo by force, and we strongly condemn Russia.”⁴⁶ This was followed by Tokyo’s support for many of the proposed sanctions targeting Moscow, including joining the sanctions on

Russia’s central banking system.⁴⁷ These policies are a departure from the more lenient response of Tokyo to Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea, having imposed only minimal sanctions on Moscow previously.

In more normal times, Japan courts Russia as a resource-rich country with which it has a long-running territorial dispute over the southern Kuril Islands, recognizing the usefulness of having open diplomatic channels. In lockstep with the West, starting on March 8th 2022, Japan expanded its strong sanctions regime to include Russia’s ally Belarus, announcing an export ban on oil refining and dual use products. Additionally, the Belarusian military and some semiconductor companies were also targeted by the new round of sanctions.⁴⁸ While the current change in policy may appear to be in the direction of greater self-assertion, it is still in defense of the overall international status quo and its liberal norms—even limiting Japan’s autonomy to a degree and tying its pragmatic hand.

Taken together, these events imply that Japan is fully committed to its long and beneficial alliance with the United States. As an SMP, Tokyo sees its fate wedded to the LIO (which it feels it needs to balance against a proximate great power China), but it continues to show its independence in the economic domain. From a realist perspective, Tokyo’s central objective is to strengthen its position in relation to Beijing, while also retaining as much strategic ambiguity as possible about what it might do in the future to keep China guessing. In

42 Jeffrey W. Hornung, “Strong but constrained Japan-Taiwan ties,” *Brookings*, March 13, 2018: <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/strong-but-constrained-japan-taiwan-ties/>.

43 Richard C. Bush, et. al., “The stress test: Japan in an era of great power competition,” *Brookings*, October 2019: <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-stress-test-japan-in-an-era-of-great-power-competition/>.

44 Kishi Nobuo, “2021: Defense of Japan,” *Japanese Ministry of Defense*, 2021: https://www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w_paper/wp2021/DOJ2021_EN_Full.pdf.

45 Christopher Mott, “The Increasing Prominence of RCEP and its Security Implications for The QUAD,” *Institute for Peace & Diplomacy*, June 28, 2021: <https://peacediplomacy.org/2021/06/28/the-quad-and-rcep-overlap-and-contradictions/>.

46 Japan condemns Russian attack on Ukraine as shaking int’l order,” *Kyodo News*, February 24, 2022: <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2022/02/9cf5c8f99a31-japan-to-consider-natl-interest-in-shaping-ukraine-response-kishida.html>.

47 Tetsuji Kajimoto and Kantaro Komiya, “Japan joins sanctions on Russian central bank, says “Japan is with Ukraine,” *Reuters*, February 28, 2022: <https://www.reuters.com/business/japan-govt-cbank-executives-meet-ukraine-crisis-jolts-markets-2022-02-28/>.

48 “Japan imposes more sanctions on Russia, Belarus,” *Japan Today*, March 8, 2022: <https://japantoday.com/category/politics/update1-japan-imposes-more-sanctions-on-russia-belarus-over-ukraine-invasion>.



this way, Japan shows the importance of a middle power's agency even when sandwiched between the diverging interests of two global superpowers intruding into its region as part of their global contest. It serves as a keystone state to the balance of power in East Asia, something it is only now beginning to leverage as it looks to build regional alternatives to China's Belt and Road.⁴⁹

Germany

The German state and society have a postwar relationship with patriotism and hard power that is even more restrained than that of the Japanese foreign policy establishment. Where once this middle position in Europe was seen as necessitating military expansion and domination of immediate neighbors, now it is more effectively leveraged as the navel of economic and diplomatic influence, which renders Germany the most prominent single state in the EU.⁵⁰

However, Germany's extremely strong position within the E.U. and economic influence as the fourth-largest economy in the world does not translate to large diplomatic sway outside of its region. That it is firmly grounded in continental Europe and not a significant factor in the global balance of power calculations by non-European powers goes to show Berlin's status as a middle power. As a status quo middle power, its focus on economic and regional political influence, in turn, is tied to several security guarantees like its membership in NATO, effectively meaning that Germany's geopolitical niche is held under the secur-

ity umbrella of the United States.⁵¹

Berlin is much more willing than, for example, Tokyo, to play the role of ideological cheerleader for the U.S. alliance system. This most often comes about through official statements castigating Russian influence in Eastern Europe as destabilizing but not willing to take a strongly counter-Moscow position until extremely recently, with the notable exception of the intra-EU unity on sanctions that it has underwritten since the 2013-14 Ukraine crisis.⁵² Unlike Japan, which values an engaged U.S. diplomacy and forward military presence in East Asia but does not wish to antagonize China unnecessarily or divide its region along binary ideological lines, postwar German foreign policy has by necessity become attuned to the concerns of Central and Eastern European states and therefore has robustly defended NATO as the central pillar of regional security, despite occasional nods to bolstering the EU's strategic autonomy.

Recently, the utility of this position has come under question for its failure to create an inclusive security architecture and develop a shared EU policy on Russia.⁵³ The Russian invasion of Ukraine further empowering German Atlanticists and Germany's new three-party coalition, with competing partisan interests, will render it difficult for Chancellor Olaf Scholz to produce a fundamental shift in Berlin's foreign policy posture. Moreover, the sine qua non of Germany's European policy is to preserve the integrity of the European Union and its single

49 Tobias Harris, "Quality Infrastructure: Japan's Robust Challenge to China's Belt and Road," *War on the Rocks*, April 9, 2019: <https://warontherocks.com/2019/04/quality-infrastructure-japans-robust-challenge-to-chinas-belt-and-road/>.

50 "Germany is Now the Sole Dominant Economic Power in Europe," GEFIRA: <https://gefira.org/en/2016/05/19/germany-has-become-the-most-dominant-country-in-europe/>.

51 Ulrich Speck, "Foundations of German Power," *Carnegie Europe*, March 14, 2014: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2014/03/14/foundations-of-german-power-pub-54955>.

52 "Germany and Russian Federation: Bilateral relations," *Federal Foreign Office*, January 10, 2021: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/laenderinformationen/russischefoederation-node/russianfederation/218616>.

53 Frank Hofmann and Vladimir Espimov, "Germany's conflict with Russia remains," *DW News*, September 21, 2021: <https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-conflict-with-russia-remains/a-58954360>.



European Regional Security Complex

Great Powers Middle Powers Anglosphere Insulators Conflict Zone

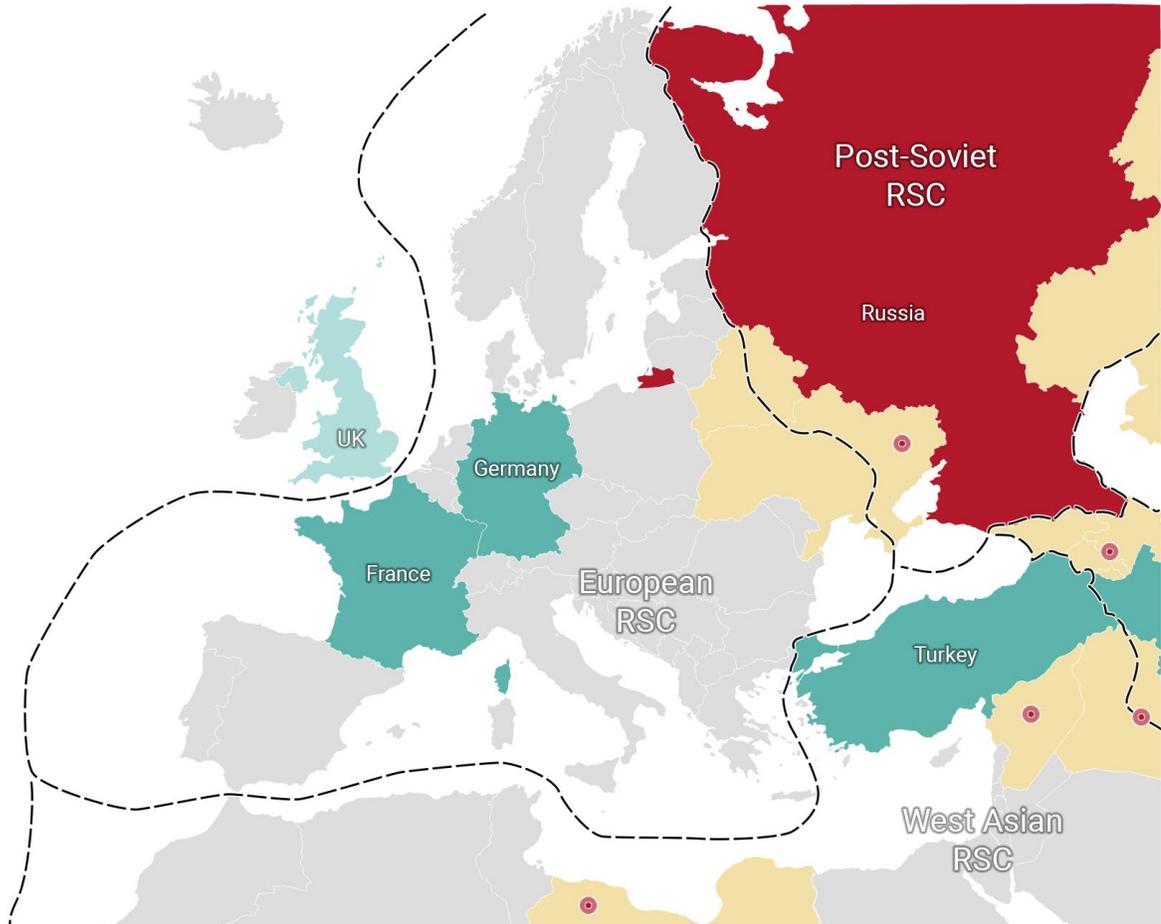


Figure 6. The European regional security complex and its borders and frictions with neighbors.

market. In terms of European defense integration through initiatives such as PESCO, this has manifested itself through Berlin’s insistence on making the process as inclusive of all EU member states as possible, contrasting with Paris’s approach which has called for more flexible coalitions as a means of strengthening European autonomy more rapidly. When combined with Germany’s postwar skepticism of geopolitics, these factors slow the process toward Brussels emerging as a pole in today’s multipolar world and therefore preserve Washington and Moscow’s roles as the pre-eminent security actors in Europe.

In the future, it is highly unlikely that Germany will make any bold breaks with past foreign policy making, but rather will continue to work cautiously to ensure a stable and business-friendly environment in Europe, putting its economic interests first and helping to maintain global trade networks for its imports and exports. Upsets caused by revisionist powers are the biggest threat to this arrangement and thus policies are likely to favor a more status quo positioning for the foreseeable future.

How viable this status quo posture will remain is another question altogether. Germany’s relative



weight and influence in Europe makes profound shifts in EU foreign policy difficult to envisage without Berlin's consent. This has already led to a rift in Franco-German relations—traditionally seen as the engine of European integration — under President Emmanuel Macron, on issues ranging from the purpose of NATO to eurozone integration.⁵⁴

In light of the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, Germany almost immediately doubled down on its status quo middle power position by taking several strong actions in defense of the NATO alliance. Although it has so far resisted embargoing Russian oil and gas,⁵⁵ Berlin officially suspended (and likely canceled) NS2, committed to at least temporarily doubling its defense budget through a special fund,⁵⁶ joined the barrage of U.S.-led international sanctions (including agreeing to kicking Russia off of SWIFT), and reversed a previous ban on sending weapons to Ukraine.⁵⁷ All these measures and the manner in which Berlin closed ranks with Washington strengthened the case for its position as an SMP.

It is highly questionable whether Russia is a great power. All indications are that it is a revisionist middle power, and one that has so far struggled

to secure Ukraine's capitulation in what is fast devolving into a war of attrition. The highly-charged coverage of the tragic war notwithstanding, it is clear that Putinist Russia is not an ideological empire intent on world domination in the mold of the Soviet Union, nor does it have the material strength to back up such threats or even be a formidable foe.⁵⁸ Moscow is a much diminished—albeit cornered—power. Europe alone could have risen to handle the challenge.

In fact, the Ukraine crisis provided European middle powers, namely France and Germany, with a unique opportunity to chart a different course from the U.S. and reduce their dependence on postwar security arrangements like NATO—a chance to affirm their strategic autonomy, publicly shut NATO's open door policy, and act as peacemakers to the war. By seizing this moment, they could have ushered in a new inclusive security architecture that would encompass the entire continent, joining both the EU and the Russian zones. The result could have been a new polar power to match the U.S. and China. Instead what we have seen so far is the abrogation of the common European defense idea, the customary outsourcing of European security to the United States, and a reinvigoration of NATO, ensuring that Germany in particular and Europe at large (especially as the EU) will remain under the shadow of Washington's strategic posture for the foreseeable future.

54 “Emmanuel Macron warns Europe: NATO is becoming brain-dead,” *The Economist*, November 7, 2019: <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-warns-europe-nato-is-becoming-brain-dead>.

55 Ingrid Melander and Sabine Siebold, “EU Split on Russia Oil Sanctions, Mulls Other Steps”, *Reuters*, March 21, 2022: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-mull-russian-oil-embargo-with-biden-set-join-talks-2022-03-21/>.

56 Michael Birnbaum and Rick Noak, “Germany abandoned muted approach to aid for Ukraine, sending weapons and greenlighting sanctions,” *The Washington Post*, February 26, 2022: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/26/germany-weapons-swift-russia-ukraine/>.

57 Damien McGuinness, “Germany to send weapons directly to Ukraine,” *BBC*, February 27, 2022: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60541752>.

58 Arta Moeini, “How Western Elites Exploit Ukraine”, *UnHerd*, March 5th, 2022: <https://unherd.com/2022/03/how-western-elites-exploit-ukraine/>.



Middle Eastern Regional Security Complex

■ Great Powers ■ Middle Powers ■ Insulators ● Conflict Zone

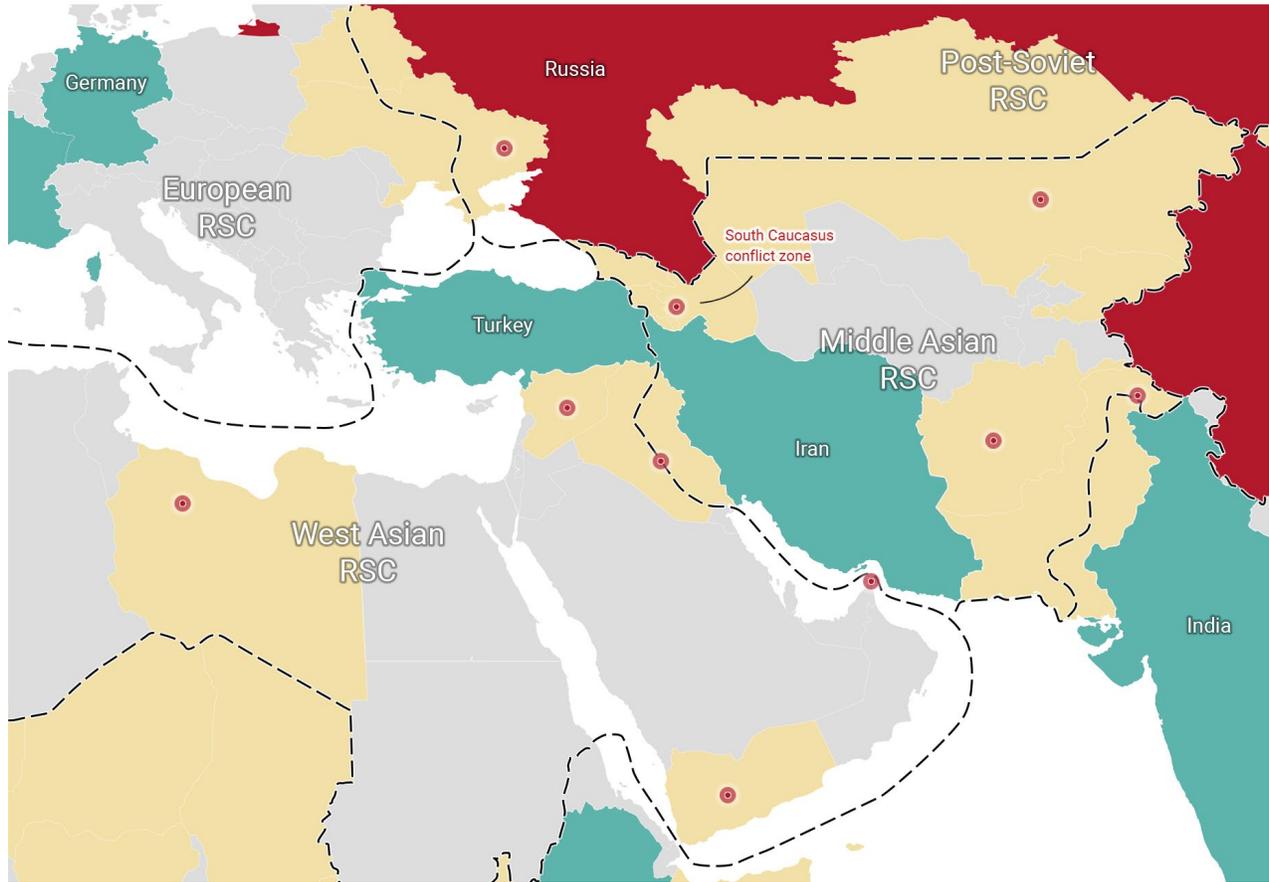


Figure 7. The regional security complexes of the Middle East and various conflict zones.

Revisionist Middle Powers: The Cases of Iran and Turkey

Turkey and Iran (or rather states in Anatolia and the Iranian Plateau) both have a long history of attempting or having spheres of influence in their surrounding areas and have fought wars and clashed regularly over disputed territories. The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 was the watershed event that elevated Iran and Turkey—who share a border and have overlapping/competing interests—allowing them to capitalize on their civilizational influence and middle power status to reprise their roles as centripetal forces in the Near

and Middle East regions.⁵⁹ While their aspirations for glory and recognition might have found opportune expression amid the instability unleashed by decades of American forever wars in the region, they are culturally and historically rooted.

Historically, states based in Anatolia and the Iranian plateau have been competitors dating back to the Roman and Parthian states carving up the old Seleucid Empire, not to mention their successors in Byzantium and Sassanid Iran. Later, in the Islamic period, the Ottoman and Safavid Empires

⁵⁹ Heather Stephenson, “How Iran Won Our Iraq War,” *TuftsNow*, March 26, 2019: <https://now.tufts.edu/articles/how-iran-won-our-iraq-war>.



would enter into a centuries-old contest along similar geographic lines. This dynamic appears to be reasserting itself since America's gradual retrenchment from the greater Middle East in the aftermath of its disastrous and costly military misadventures and lofty nation-building projects. The later outbreak of the "Arab Spring" in 2010-11 also helped accelerate this trend.⁶⁰ In fact, in Syria, the Arab Spring triggered a brutal civil war which soon spiraled into a regional, if not international, proxy war where both Iran and Turkey would come to exercise their newfound regional confidence—on opposite sides.

From the start of the Syrian civil war, Turkey was the outside power most invested in supporting the Syrian rebels with arms and logistical assistance. It remains the primary outside actor on the pro-rebel side to this day. Its troops and especially its proxies have been operating within the borders of Syria for years, and it has set itself up as the defender of the last large outpost of rebels as of 2021, based around Idlib province.⁶¹ Iran, on the other hand, came to the defense of its long-standing Arab ally, Bashar Al-Assad, by supporting the Syrian government against the rebels.⁶² By using its regional proxies and allies like Hezbollah in Lebanon, Iran-affiliated Iraqi militia, as well as deploying its own IRGC special forces, Iran became the primary supporter of Damascus before the start of major Russian operations in 2015 and

60 Simon Mabon, "Arab Spring: after a decade of conflict, the same old problems remain," *The Conversation*, February 10, 2021: <https://theconversation.com/arab-spring-after-a-decade-of-conflict-the-same-old-problems-remain-154314>.

61 Khayrallah al-Hilu, "The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies," *European University Institute*, January 2021: <https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/69657/Khayrallah%20al-Hilu%20-%20The%20Turkish%20Intervention%20in%20Northern%20Syria%20One%20Strategy%20Discrepant%20Policies.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

62 Francesco Belcastro, *Syrian Foreign Policy: The Alliances of a Regional Power*, Routledge (2019).

remains the second-most important Syrian ally to this day.⁶³

Turkey

Turkey's unique position at the nexus of the Mediterranean and Black Seas as well as Europe and western Asia puts it in a central location for expanding its options towards its near-abroad while also being geographically defensible due to the mountainous terrain of much of the country. With the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of the Republic of Turkey in 1922, Turkey was the first of the defeated peoples in the First World War to unilaterally revise most of the conditions imposed on it by the victorious allied powers.⁶⁴ Despite this start as the first modern Middle Eastern revisionist power, the precarious situation of the republic led it to exercise caution in the Interwar and Second World War periods, before coming to its own as a strong Western-aligned status quo state post-WWII due to the threat of Soviet hegemony.⁶⁵ But with the end of the Cold War, Ankara began to adopt a more revisionist position, initially by looking for expanded trade links and connections with the newly independent Central Asian republics.

Ankara's geopolitical moves in recent years show how easy it can be for a middle power to pivot from status quo to revisionist as well as to change the direction of its strategic focus. Having spent the entirety of the Cold War as a major NATO bulwark against Soviet influence in the Caucasus and the

63 Karim Sadjadpour, "Iran's Unwavering Support to Assad's Syria," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*: <https://ctc.usma.edu/irans-unwavering-support-to-assads-syria/>.

64 Philip Marshall Brown, "From Sevres to Lausanne," *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 18, No. 1., 1924, pp. 113-116: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2189228>.

65 Boris Egorov, "Stalin's blunder that made Turkey a NATO member," *Russia Beyond*, October 11, 2021: <https://www.rbth.com/history/334285-stalins-blunder-made-turkey-nato>.



Turkey's Geopolitical Vectors

■ Historic Rival, Important Economic Partner
 ■ Possible Instability Concerns
 ■ Allies but Tense Relations
 ■ Major Security Concern
■ New Military Ally
 ■ New Entente Partner
 ■ Neighbors, Historic Partners

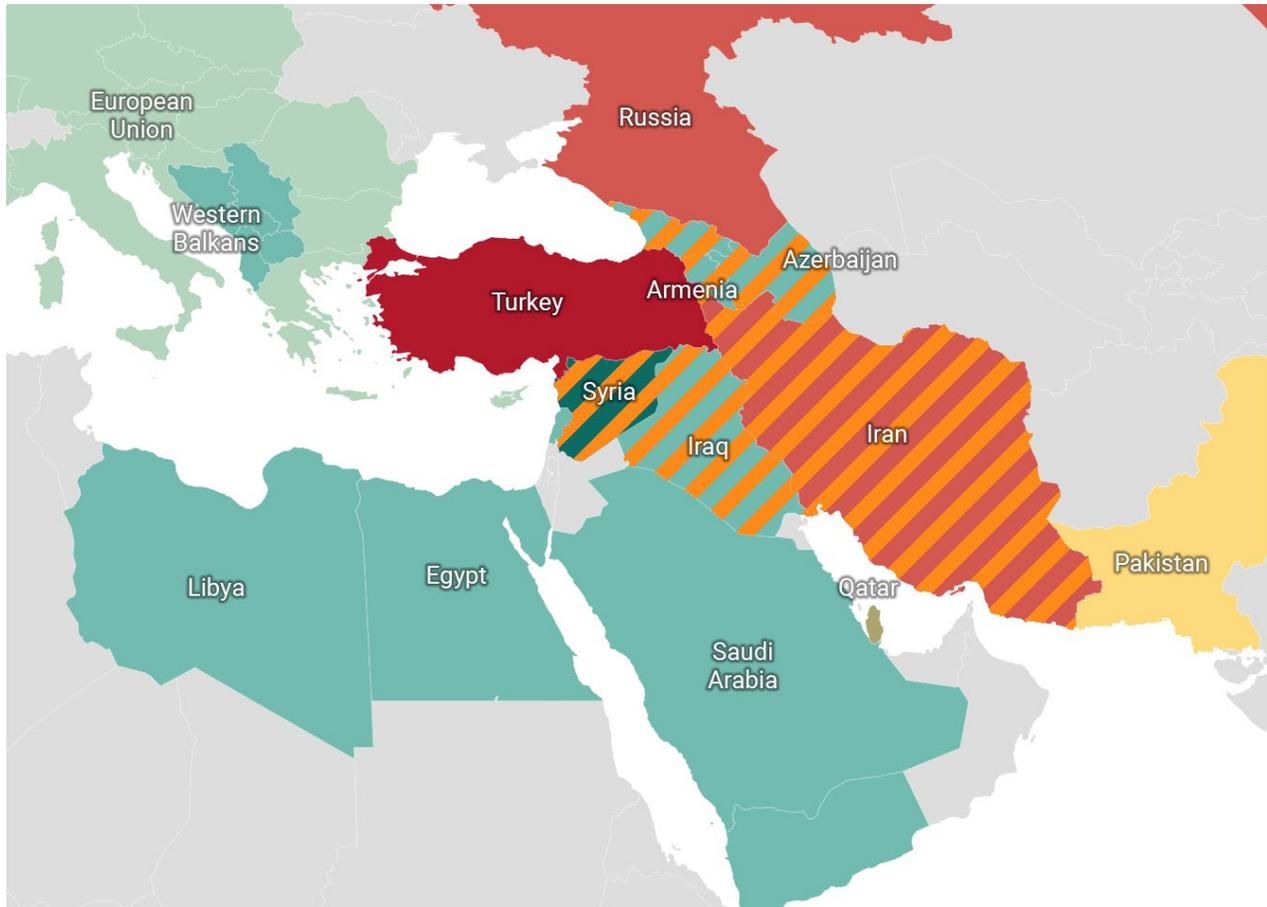


Figure 8. Turkey's neighboring relations. Adapted from *Geopolitical Intelligence Services*.

Balkans, Erdogan's Turkey increasingly prioritized the Middle East and North Africa while keeping the old Caucasus focus. Yet, even as Turkey completes a pivot back towards the Middle East, it has continued its close ties with Ukraine, a customer for many of its weapons exports—most notably, in light of the Russian invasion in February 2022, in the form of the Bayraktar TB2 combat drone. This weapons system was already in Ukrainian use since 2019 and weeks before the full-scale war broke out in the country, Ukraine and Turkey announced a co-production agreement that would allow Ukraine to manufacture its own domestic

units.⁶⁶ The performance of this drone, as well as prior models in the same line during the 2020 Karabakh War, is being noted by much of the world. Less expensive than U.S. drones, but more capable than most mass-produced cheaper models, the Bayraktar TB2 will likely expand its already growing international markets and further raise Turkish profile owing to the combat footage and

⁶⁶ Burak Egi Bekdil, "Turkey and Ukraine to coproduce TB2 drones," *Defense News*, February 4, 2022: <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2022/02/04/turkey-and-ukraine-to-coproduce-tb2-drones/>.



reports coming out of Ukraine.⁶⁷

Having tried and failed in the 1990s to consolidate the newly independent states of Central Asia through Pan-Turkism,⁶⁸ Ankara, with the rise of the AKP party in the early 2000s, settled on reclaiming its old Ottoman heritage to reinvent itself as a kind of flagship Sunni state.⁶⁹ Now that Turkish designs in Libya and Syria have reached a strategic stalemate, it once again seems to be moving back in the direction of putting **Central Asia** at the top of its priority list.⁷⁰

Meanwhile, Turkey has calibrated its role as both a regional power and the second-most important member of NATO by military size.⁷¹ Though Turkey's commitment to Allied aims has become questionable in recent years, its ability to project power both within and without the alliance is undeniable. Outside of the comprehensive quagmire that is the Syrian Civil War, this was most readily apparent in the Second Karabakh War of 2020.⁷² Turkish military advisors, mercenary support from proxies recruited in Syria and Libya, and above all drone technology had an impact in mak-

ing that conflict a decisive Azerbaijani victory up until Russia imposed a ceasefire.⁷³ Turkey's influence in the South Caucasus and with its friends in Azerbaijan and Georgia has only grown as a direct consequence.⁷⁴

Having made inroads in Europe, the Middle East, and the Caucasus combined with its proven ability to pivot on short notice between each of these theaters, Turkey has leveraged its location and comparative might well as an RMP. It has also worked to keep other RSCs and their middle powers preoccupied, acting as a limited offshore balancer of sorts. Ankara has even begun to grow its influence outside of these traditional pivot points and, in more recent years, seems to be consciously attempting to expand the scope of its relations with countries throughout the African continent with a pace comparable to that of G8 nations.⁷⁵

In February of 2022, with the unfolding of the Russo-Ukrainian War, Turkey began reassuming its historical role as the steward of the Bosphorus Straits. Turkish foreign minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu stated that the escalation of the ongoing conflict into a war had triggered the 1936 Montreux Convention, enabling Ankara to close the critical straits of the Black Sea to most foreign warships during a time of war. The practical effect of this move was to separate the Russian fleet at the Tartus base in Syria from those in the Black Sea. It

67 Billy Perrigo, "Ukraine's Secret Weapon Against Russia: Turkish Drones," *Time*, March 1, 2022: <https://time.com/6153197/ukraine-russia-turkish-drones-bayraktar/>.

68 Zeeshan Fida, "Central Asia's Place in Turkey's Foreign Policy," *Policy Perspectives*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2018), pp. 113-125: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/10.13169/polipers.15.1.0113.pdf>.

69 Nick Danforth, "Turkey's New Maps Are Reclaiming the Ottoman Empire," *Foreign Policy*, October 23, 2016: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/10/23/turkeys-religious-nationalists-want-ottoman-borders-iraq-erdogan/>.

70 Stefan Hedlund, "Turkey aims to enhance its influence in Central Asia", *Geopolitical Intelligence Services AG*, April 2021: <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/t/turkey-central-asia/>.

71 Süleyman Uzunköprü, "Turkey's Geopolitical Position," *ResearchGate*, October 2019: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Turkeys-Geopolitical-Position_fig2_336679879.

72 Haldun Yalçınkaya, "Turkey's Overlooked Role in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War," *The German Marshall Fund of the United States*: <https://www.gmfus.org/news/turkeys-overlooked-role-second-nagorno-karabakh-war>.

73 Robyn Dixon, "Azerbaijan's drones owned the battlefield in Nagorno-Karabakh — and showed future of warfare," *Washington Post*, November 11, 2020: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/nagorno-karabakh-drones-azerbaijan-aremenia/2020/11/11/441b-cbd2-193d-11eb-8bda-814ca56e138b_story.html.

74 Paul Goble, "Turkish Pipeline to Nakhchivan Shakes up Power Relations in South Caucasus," *The Jamestown Foundation*, August 10, 2021: <https://jamestown.org/program/turkish-pipeline-to-nakhchivan-shakes-up-power-relations-in-south-caucasus/>.

75 Kenan Torpak, "Turkey's return to Africa and its implications," *Observer Research Foundation*, June 25, 2021: <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/turkeys-return-to-africa-and-its-implications/>.



also can, theoretically, deny access to any warships operating in the area, not only those of Russia.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, in keeping with its RMP posture, as of March 2022, Turkey has refused to join the Western sanctions on Moscow, breaking with the rest of NATO and showing its ability to chart a far more pragmatic and autonomous course through the crisis.⁷⁷

While no one would claim that Turkey is one of the great powers of the world, its status as a middle power whose intentions must be taken seriously by even the established great powers when dealing with Turkey's neighboring regions cannot be ignored. Leveraging its ability to pivot from being a primary factor in one region to another (without necessarily being able to be the prime mover in all of them at once), Turkey has the potential to pull disproportionate, though uneven, influence in the international system, not least of which is through its development of highly desirable weapons systems for export abroad.

Iran

The anchoring culture-complex in the Middle Asian RSC and a Caesaropapist Shia state, Iran pursues its geopolitical interests as an RMP. While the country is defined by its mountains, serving as defensive barriers against foreign invaders, Iran has historically moved beyond these frontiers to consolidate its sphere of influence and protect its geographical core.

At the same time, centuries of foreign interventions have exacerbated Iran's geographical chal-

lenge and contributed to Iran's sense of strategic solitude. From losing large swaths of its territory in the 19th century—namely western Afghanistan and Azerbaijan—to losing its sovereignty to foreign powers throughout much of the 20th century, the country has been subject to consistent intrusions by regional competitors and interventions by great powers, including Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States over the past 200 years. These historic humiliations are prevailing themes in the Iranian strategic culture, propelling Tehran to pursue a revisionist policy aimed at ensuring its survival, favorable balance of power, and centrality in the Middle Asia security complex and across Western Asia.

As a civilizational state, Iran's modern strategic culture can be traced back to the Safavid dynasty, which lasted from 1501 to 1736. Following centuries of foreign invasions, namely by the Arabs and the Mongols, the Safavid Empire established Twelver Shi'ism as the nation's state religion and effectively formed a unified national consciousness among Iran's diverse ethnic and religious society.⁷⁸ In doing so, the dynasty further differentiated the Iranian identity from the neighboring Arab and Sunni populations — a revisionist identity that served to re-affirm and secure Iran's position as a core regional power.

Today, Iran utilizes its revisionist (state) identity and foreign policy doctrine as a challenger to the Western hegemony in an attempt to re-establish its control over its traditional sphere of influence and to reintegrate modern periphery states into its regional security complex. More importantly, since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and increasing tensions between Iran and the United States, Iran has relied on its revisionist doctrine to counterbalance America's regional allies in the

⁷⁶ Reuters, "Turkey to implement pact limiting Russian warships to Black Sea," February 2022: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-implement-international-pact-access-shipping-straits-due-ukraine-war-2022-02-27/>.

⁷⁷ Connect the World, "Turkey says its not planning any sanctions against Russia," CNN, March 3, 2022: <https://www.cnn.com/videos/tv/2022/03/02/turkey-russia-ukraine-kalin-ctw-intl.cnn>.

⁷⁸ "Safavid dynasty," Britannica: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Safavid-dynasty>.



Persian Gulf and create active deterrence against growing U.S. military presence in West Asia. In this effort, similar to the Safavids, modern Iran employs Shiite Islam as a soft power instrument to complement the Islamic Republic's active deterrence strategy in the region.

During the Iran-Iraq War, with the help of the Syrian government, the Islamic Republic helped form Hezbollah in Lebanon—a Shiite militant group that fought to expel Israeli and American troops from that country. Decades later, Iran and Hezbollah would come to the aid of the Assad government amid the Syrian civil war—a joint intervention aimed at preserving the land corridor that connects Tehran, Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut, and thereby securing Tehran's path to the Mediterranean. This security belt, which serves as the backbone of Iran's active deterrence strategy, allows Iran to contain Israel, deter U.S. bases surrounding its territorial borders, and keep at bay its old regional competitors (including Turkey and Persian Gulf Arab states).

Among the most notable successes of Iranian revisionism was exploiting the mayhem of the U.S. invasion of Iraq to turn Iraq into a satellite state that could never again be used as a platform from which to invade Iran. Taking advantage of the chaos, Iran built up its support with militias operating out of the Shiite majority population to not only make life miserable for the U.S., but also eliminate the old Saddam loyalists in the Sunni elite. The long game by Tehran saw Iran end up with the largest share of influence in Iraq. Moreover, regional balancers to Iran such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have regularly accused the Houthi rebels in Yemen of being an Iranian proxy, blaming Tehran for their quagmire there. Although Iran has an established relationship with the Houthis, it is doubtful that Iran has any direct control over this group. Nevertheless,

Tehran is employing a similar playbook to that in Iraq and likely provides the Houthi militia with arms and backing to keep its pro-status quo rivals occupied in the conflict.

In the long run, as Washington further disengages from the greater Middle East to focus on what it deems the more important strategic theaters in East Asia, the South China Sea, and Europe, the Iranian (Shiite) "axis of resistance" stretching to Lebanon and Syria will serve as a lever to keep Turkey occupied in its own regional security complex and prevent it from challenging Tehran in the contested South Caucasus and the Central Asia insulates. Believing revanchist Turkish nationalism and neo-Ottoman foreign policy to have a potentially destabilizing effect for Iran's territorial integrity and regional ambitions, Tehran will continue to use Shi'ism as a shield—bolstering Shia enclaves from Central Asia to the Eastern Mediterranean to hedge against the thrust of Turkish nationalism and Muslim Brotherhood ideology promoted by Ankara.

Beyond the strategic (deterrent) value of Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria in preventing a neighboring middle power such as Turkey or a great power such as the U.S. from establishing regional hegemony in West Asia, Iran has vital strategic interests in Azerbaijan and Afghanistan as part of its regional security complex. Iran has deep cultural, historical, and religious ties with Azerbaijan—a territory it lost to tsarist Russia in 1813 following the Russo-Persian Wars—and around 15 to 18 million (around 20%) of Iran's population are Azeri-speaking mostly living in the country's northwestern provinces. For some perspective, the entire population of the country of Azerbaijan is 9 million inhabitants, some of whom are actually Iranian-speaking Tat and Talysh (whose number has been systematically undercounted and misrepresented for dec-



ades)⁷⁹ and 85 percent Shia (although many are non-practicing). Iran, therefore, has core interests in Azerbaijan both out of domestic concerns and as a gateway and trade route to the greater Caucasus and Russia.

On the other hand, having the second-highest concentration of Shias by percentage after Iran, the Aliyev regime remains worried about the Islamic Republic's Shia propaganda gaining a foothold among its population and causing popular unrest against the state. As Azeri President Ilham Aliyev looks to both Turkey and Israel to balance against Russia and Iran, Tehran will continue to develop its special relationship with the Christian nation of Armenia—further fomenting distrust and a climate of perpetual crisis between Azerbaijan and Iran. Any rapprochement between Baku and Tehran is unlikely until Iran is confident of its own ability to thwart Turkish and Israeli designs in the South Caucasus.

While Iran had long wanted the United States out of Afghanistan, Tehran is apprehensive about a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan that serves as a proxy for Pakistani security forces and espouses a Salafi version of Islam that many Iranian clerics consider heretical. So far, Iran has opted for strategic patience in dealing with new facts on the ground in Afghanistan, adopting a wait and see approach with the Taliban as it concludes the long-running nuclear negotiations with the West⁸⁰ and refusing to aid the rebels in Panjshir, whom it had assisted in the 80s and 90s against both the Soviets and the first advent of the Taliban. Never-

79 Arthur Tsutsiev, "Appendix 3: Ethnic Composition of the Caucasus: Historical Population Statistics", *Atlas of the Ethno-Political History of the Caucasus*, Yale University Press, 2014, p. 189.

80 Lawrence Norman, "Iran Nuclear Deal Final Hurdle Is Lifting Terrorism Sanctions on Revolutionary Guards", *Wall Street Journal*, March, 21, 2022: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-nuclear-deals-final-hurdle-is-lifting-terrorism-sanctions-on-revolutionary-guards-11647864073>.

theless, recent armed clashes at the border⁸¹ and the ongoing diplomatic tensions on display during Tehran talks, with Iran dithering about officially recognizing the Taliban-led government it calls "not inclusive", underscore Iran's desire to secure its eastern borders and, most notably, preserve the east-west corridor that connects Iran to China.⁸²

Iran's current revisionist strategy is not exclusive to the Islamic Republic. In fact, despite the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which overthrew the Pahlavi dynasty and gave rise to the Islamic Republic, there exists a degree of strategic continuity in Tehran's foreign policy calculations.⁸³ Since the Pahlavi era, Iran has had to intervene in Afghanistan at different times to keep external powers like the USSR from establishing an imperial outpost, while also keeping an eye over extremist militant groups that have proliferated there. Interestingly, the Pahlavi government, despite its general friendliness toward the West and the LIO, had concerns about an Israeli-Arab rapprochement as does the Islamic Republic today—fearing an Arab-Israeli partnership that worked in tandem with Washington to balance against Iran's geopolitical interests. In this light, the Islamic Republic today staunchly opposes the Abraham Accords, seeing the agreement as a security pact designed to further isolate and obstruct Iran from reviving its former sphere of influence.

81 Maziar Motamedi, "Iran and Taliban forces clash in border area," *Al-Jazeera*, December 2021: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/1/iran-and-taliban-forces-clash-in-border-areas>.

82 Maziar Motamedi, "Iran says won't officially recognise Taliban after Tehran talks," *Al-Jazeera*, January 2022: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/10/iran-says-wont-officially-recognise-taliban-after-tehran-talks>.

83 Bijan Ahmadi, Younes Zangiabadi, Arta Moeini, "The West Must Expect Strategic Continuity from Ebrahim Raisi's Iran," *The National Interest*, June 2021: <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/west-must-expect-strategic-continuity-ebrahim-raisi%E2%80%99s-iran-189790>.



Conclusion

Given the advent of multipolarity, the decentering of great powers, and the revival of regionalism and regional autonomy, the role of middle powers as core regional actors, policing entities, and anchors to RSCs is perhaps of greater importance now than in the past. Additionally, the danger to the world posed by hot war between great powers grants immense leverage to middle powers who can act as go-betweens and reduce system-wide instability. In short, the multipolar world will greatly increase the geopolitical relevance of regions and enhance the ability of middle powers to lead them, with great powers less inclined to intervene from “above”.

At the same time, revisionist middle powers are more emboldened to assert their will, raising the likelihood of inter-civilizational conflict at the fault line states between RSCs. Ever since the dispute between Corinth and Corcyra spiraled into the Peloponnesian War, we have seen how the decisions of middle powers can have outsized, systemic geopolitical consequences. Even when they are not the catalysts for major conflicts, their choices can be sufficiently impactful that one cannot comprehend the full scope of major events without taking middle powers into account.

Ultimately, middle powers are better defined by their geographic rootedness and enduring regional presence, historical and cultural pedigree as civilizational states, considerable economic and military capacity relative to neighbors, and the regional extent of their ambitions — they seek not world domination but a sphere of influence in their near abroad matching their historical expanses. Due to both necessity and their position as culture-complexes, they resist ideological and imperial temptation, because their interests are fundamentally limited to their own spheres; in theory, they stand in natural opposition to ideo-

logical empires all else being equal, although, in practice, they can decide to partner them, especially in times of global flux and transition, if it means preserving, enhancing, or altogether regaining primacy in their RSC.

At the time of this writing, the world is watching in horror the unfolding of the war in Ukraine—a classic fault line conflict between the Russian and continental European RSCs. Without the mitigating role of prudent diplomacy, this conflict was fully expected by cultural realist theory. In the meantime, Russia’s intentions for its “near abroad” and the United States’ mustering of a classic liberal internationalist response seem to be putting the regional-global dichotomy at loggerheads. And yet, the effort to bring the conflict to an end and save innocent civilian lives seems dependent on the diplomatic initiative of middle powers like Germany, France, and Turkey more than ever before.⁸⁴ There can be no end to hostilities until Moscow is somehow reassured that its core is safeguarded. This can be achieved diplomatically tomorrow or established later through much senseless violence. As rooted civilizational states, middle powers are best positioned to understand and mediate these facts.

That said, middle powers are deserving of greater attention even in their own right, and we have much to learn about international politics by their closer study. In contrast to great powers, whose behavior under multipolarity could be even more unpredictable, middle powers are more stable and consistent in their actions and goals. Indeed, the logic of classical *realpolitik* applies better in a regional dynamic than in the unitary ‘international’ system, especially given the convention-

84 Michael Rose and Pavel Polityuk, “France’s Macron calls for calm to resolve Ukraine crisis,” *Reuters*, February 2022: <https://www.reuters.com/world/kremlin-denies-putin-promised-not-hold-manoeuves-near-ukraine-2022-02-08/>.



al nature of conflict within and around a regional security complex.

What is more, the enduring bonds of middle powers to a distinctive culture and a specific geography within the bounds of a historical state provide it key advantages, regional clout, and strategic leverage—a fact that is often overlooked in much of mainstream international relations analysis. Overlooking this durability effect can have dire consequences, such as the Bush Administration's inability to understand that whereas the United States was never going to have a permanent presence in Iraq, Iran would remain a permanent neighbor to that same country.

Certainly, none of what has been expounded here should be viewed as the last word on the subject of middle powers in international politics. Indeed, given how little has been written on them, relative to their real-world significance, this effort is closer to the first word. One hopes that this scholarship will be only the beginning of a more wide-ranging conversation about middle powers, especially as ongoing shifts toward multipolarity promise to elevate their status in the years to come.

Lastly, understanding the role of the middle powers and regional balancers also has significant repercussions for alliances, particularly in the case of the U.S. given its extensive alliance networks. Middle powers are the dominant actors in RSCs, and their primacy in their respective regions is largely and structurally secure. As such, weaker powers within RSCs that wish to challenge that primacy often do so by aligning with great powers in order to bring them into their spheres to disrupt the natural balance of power and achieve a stronger position in relation to the neighboring middle powers: in Eastern Europe, Poland and Lithuania are heavily dependent on NATO to balance against Russia, and want the great power guarantor of the alliance, the U.S., to be actively

involved in European affairs; yet, even SMPs like France and Germany are far more reluctant about this fact, for it will be mostly their autonomy that will have to be ceded. Alternatively, in the Middle East, Israel and Saudi Arabia attempt regularly to entice the United States into the region, exploiting U.S. presence in the region to challenge Iranian regional primacy.

It is obviously in the interest of the smaller powers to spur a distant great power to be engaged in their regions—the latter's active involvement allows these peripheral states to coordinate their strategy and act as 'regional balancers' against one or more proximate middle powers. It is debatable, however, whether it is actually in the interest of great powers to interpose themselves into distant RSCs or if such commitments would overextend, tie down, and weaken them over time. This is a question worthy of future study as it could illuminate the complex dynamics behind these asymmetrical partnerships between great powers and regional balancers that are such a prevalent type in global alliances, but whose practical long-term effect is the decentering and diminishing of middle powers.

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