

Research Article

Middle Powers in Contemporary Geopolitics: Strategic Influence and the Developmental Dilemma of the Bottom Billion

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Abstract

The evolving multipolar international system has enhanced the significance of middle powers in global governance and development, particularly in addressing the persistent challenges faced by the “bottom billion,” populations trapped in extreme poverty and structural disadvantage. Middle powers—states with moderate economic, military, and diplomatic capacities—leverage soft power, multilateralism, and norm entrepreneurship to influence international outcomes disproportionate to their material capabilities. This study examines the intersection of middle power diplomacy and development engagement, with a focus on how these states contribute to the economic, social, and institutional advancement of bottom billion countries, particularly in Africa and other emerging economies. Using a qualitative research design based on secondary sources—including academic journals, policy reports, and international organisation publications—a thematic and comparative analysis is employed to evaluate the strategies, limitations, and impacts of middle power engagement. The findings highlight that middle powers facilitate South–South cooperation, technology transfer, infrastructure development, peacekeeping, and advocacy for institutional reform, creating enabling environments for sustainable development. However, their influence is constrained by systemic hierarchies, domestic capacity limitations, competition from great powers, and the entrenched structural challenges within recipient countries. For African and emerging economies, strategic partnerships with middle powers offer opportunities to accelerate growth, enhance governance, and strengthen regional influence, provided they are integrated with domestic reforms and long-term development plans. The study concludes that middle powers act as critical catalysts for development and regional stability, demonstrating the potential of collaborative, context-sensitive diplomacy to address global inequalities while fostering a more inclusive and multipolar world order.

Keywords

Middle Powers, Geopolitics, Bottom Billion, Multipolarity, Global Governance, Development, South–South Cooperation

1. Introduction

The transformation of the international system in the aftermath of the Cold War has fundamentally reconfigured the distribution of power and influence in global politics. The

collapse of bipolar rivalry ushered in an era initially characterised by unipolar dominance, largely under the leadership of the United States. However, this phase has gradually

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Received: 27 March 2026; Accepted: 16 April 2026; Published: 14 May 2026



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given way to an increasingly complex and fluid multipolar order, marked by the rise of new centres of power, most notably China. Within this evolving geopolitical landscape, the traditional dichotomy between great powers and weak states has become insufficient for capturing the nuances of global interactions. Instead, a more differentiated hierarchy has emerged, in which middle powers occupy a critical and dynamic position. Middle powers are generally understood as states that possess moderate levels of economic and military capability but exercise disproportionate influence through diplomacy, coalition-building, and participation in multilateral institutions. Unlike great powers, whose strategies often rely on coercive instruments, middle powers tend to prioritise negotiation, consensus-building, and the promotion of international norms. Their engagement within institutions such as the United Nations reflects a commitment to a rules-based international order, where legitimacy and cooperation are central to global governance. Consequently, middle powers play pivotal roles as mediators, facilitators, and norm entrepreneurs, contributing to stability in an otherwise fragmented international system.

At the same time, the global order continues to be characterised by profound inequalities, particularly in relation to development outcomes. A significant proportion of the world's population remains trapped in conditions of extreme poverty, primarily concentrated in regions such as Africa and South Asia. The concept of the “bottom billion,” popularised by Paul Collier, encapsulates the structural challenges faced by these populations. These include persistent conflict, weak institutional frameworks, economic marginalisation, and limited access to global markets. Despite decades of development assistance and international interventions, many of these countries have struggled to achieve sustainable growth and political stability, remaining largely excluded from the benefits of globalisation. This enduring marginalisation raises critical questions about the effectiveness of existing global governance structures. Institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have played central roles in development financing and policy guidance; however, their approaches have often been criticised for imposing externally driven models that fail to adequately reflect local contexts. As a result, there is a growing recognition of the need for alternative development paradigms that are more inclusive, context-sensitive, and responsive to the unique challenges of bottom billion countries.

In this context, middle powers have emerged as potentially transformative actors. Many of these states, including India, Brazil, and South Africa, have themselves experienced significant developmental transitions, moving from low-income to emerging economies within relatively recent historical periods. This shared experience enhances their credibility and relatability in engaging with poorer nations. Furthermore, their increasing involvement in South–South cooperation initiatives and multilateral forums positions them as important intermediaries between developed and developing worlds. Against

this backdrop, this article explores the intersection between the rise of middle powers and the persistent challenges facing the bottom billion. It seeks to interrogate the extent to which middle powers can influence developmental outcomes in poorer countries within an evolving multipolar order. Specifically, it examines whether their diplomatic strategies, development models, and institutional engagements can provide viable pathways for addressing structural poverty and inequality. By situating middle powers within the broader context of global inequality, the study aims to contribute to ongoing debates on the future of global governance and development. It argues that while middle powers are not a panacea for the challenges of the bottom billion, their strategic positioning and experiential insights offer significant opportunities for fostering a more inclusive and equitable international system.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The analysis of middle powers and the developmental predicament of the “bottom billion” requires a multidimensional conceptual and theoretical grounding that integrates insights from international relations theory, development economics, and global governance studies. This section clarifies the key concepts underpinning the study and situates them within relevant theoretical traditions.

2.1. Conceptualising Middle Powers

The concept of middle powers has undergone significant transformation within the field of international relations, evolving from a narrow, capability-based definition to a more nuanced, behaviourally oriented framework. Early understandings of middle powers were rooted in material indicators such as gross domestic product, military capacity, population size, and industrial output. Within this traditional hierarchy, middle powers were positioned between dominant great powers—such as the United States—and smaller, less influential states [28, 55, 61, 65]. This materialist perspective conceptualised middle powers as states with moderate but not decisive capabilities, capable of limited regional or issue-specific influence but lacking the capacity to shape the global system independently [14, 79].

However, this capability-based conception has been widely critiqued for its inability to adequately explain the diverse roles middle powers play in contemporary geopolitics. Scholars have argued that material indicators alone fail to capture the strategic agency, diplomatic behaviour, and institutional engagement that define middle power influence [4, 27, 75]. As a result, contemporary scholarship has shifted towards a behavioural and functional interpretation of middle power status, emphasising how states act rather than merely what they possess [52, 73]. From this behavioural perspective, middle powers are characterised by their commitment to multilateralism, active participation in international institutions, and reliance

on diplomatic and cooperative strategies rather than coercion [58, 65, 100]. As Robert Keohane argues, states that lack hegemonic dominance often depend on international institutions to extend their influence and secure their interests. This argument, central to liberal institutionalism, posits that cooperation through institutions can mitigate the anarchic nature of the international system and enable states with limited material power to exercise meaningful influence [51, 57, 65].

In practice, middle powers utilise platforms such as the United Nations to amplify their voices, shape global norms, and influence policy outcomes. Through coalition-building, agenda-setting, and diplomatic brokerage, they are able to exert influence that often exceeds their material capabilities [18, 27]. This institutional engagement enables middle powers to function as intermediaries between great powers and smaller states, fostering dialogue, reducing tensions, and promoting consensus on complex global issues [16, 60]. Their reliance on rules-based frameworks also reflects a strategic interest in maintaining a stable and predictable international order in which their relative influence can be maximised [59, 100, 119]. Furthermore, middle powers are frequently conceptualised as “system stabilisers,” contributing to the maintenance and reinforcement of a rules-based international system [30, 57]. Unlike great powers, which may seek to reshape global structures to reflect their dominance, middle powers tend to support existing institutions and norms, viewing them as essential mechanisms for preserving order and predictability [5, 87]. Their diplomatic activism is often selective and issue-specific, focusing on areas where they possess comparative advantages or normative leadership [46, 53, 61]. These areas commonly include climate governance, conflict mediation, peacekeeping, humanitarian intervention, and development cooperation [63, 108, 112].

For example, middle powers have played critical roles in advancing international climate agreements, supporting multilateral peace operations, and promoting human rights norms through institutional channels [45, 54]. Their contributions often involve norm entrepreneurship—the process of shaping, promoting, and institutionalising new standards of behaviour in global politics [22, 117]. Through such efforts, middle powers influence not only policy outcomes but also the normative architecture of the international system [3, 119]. This functional approach highlights the distinctive niche occupied by middle powers within the global hierarchy. While great powers rely heavily on hard power instruments such as military force and economic coercion, middle powers prioritise soft power strategies, including persuasion, legitimacy, and coalition-building [73, 82, 83]. Their influence derives from credibility, diplomatic skill, and the ability to mobilise collective action rather than from unilateral dominance [14, 27]. At the same time, they differ from small states, which often lack the institutional capacity, resources, and diplomatic networks required for sustained engagement in global governance [79, 91].

Importantly, the contemporary understanding of middle

powers also reflects the changing nature of global power distribution in an increasingly multipolar world. The rise of emerging economies such as Brazil, India, and South Africa has blurred traditional distinctions between middle and great powers, creating a more fluid and dynamic hierarchy [75, 107]. These states often combine elements of both categories, exercising regional leadership while simultaneously engaging in global governance [8, 11, 92]. Their participation in groupings such as BRICS further illustrates how middle powers can collectively enhance their influence and challenge established power structures [67, 72]. Recent scholarship also emphasises the role of middle powers in addressing transnational challenges such as climate change, global health crises, and digital governance [1, 34, 42]. In these domains, middle powers often act as innovators and coalition-builders, leveraging their flexibility and diplomatic networks to facilitate cooperation among diverse actors [51, 119]. Their ability to navigate complex interdependencies and bridge competing interests underscores their continued relevance in contemporary international relations [4, 66].

Moreover, the behavioural conception of middle powers underscores the importance of agency and strategy in shaping international outcomes. Rather than being defined solely by structural position, middle powers actively construct their roles through foreign policy choices, institutional engagement, and normative leadership [27, 52]. This perspective aligns with constructivist approaches, which emphasise the role of ideas, identities, and norms in shaping state behaviour [22, 45]. The conceptualisation of middle powers has evolved from a static, capability-based framework to a dynamic, behaviour-oriented understanding that emphasises agency, strategy, and institutional engagement. While material capabilities remain relevant, they are no longer sufficient to define middle power status. Instead, contemporary scholarship highlights the importance of multilateralism, norm entrepreneurship, and diplomatic activism in shaping the roles and influence of middle powers. This evolution reflects broader changes in the international system, including the rise of multipolarity, the increasing importance of global governance, and the growing complexity of transnational challenges. As such, middle powers occupy a distinctive and indispensable niche within the global order, acting as mediators, stabilisers, and innovators in an increasingly interconnected and uncertain world [4, 66, 75, 119].

2.2. Theoretical Foundations: Soft Power and Constructivism

A central theoretical lens for understanding the influence of middle powers in contemporary geopolitics is the concept of soft power, developed by Joseph Nye. Soft power refers to the ability of a state to shape the preferences, attitudes, and behaviour of other actors through attraction, persuasion, and legitimacy rather than coercion or material inducement [82, 83]. Unlike hard power, which relies on military force or economic

sanctions, soft power is rooted in intangible resources such as culture, political values, and foreign policy credibility. For middle powers, which typically lack overwhelming material capabilities, soft power becomes an essential instrument for exerting international influence. Middle powers frequently deploy soft power through a variety of channels, including cultural diplomacy, development assistance, peacekeeping, and advocacy for international norms. By projecting an image of legitimacy and moral authority, they are able to build trust and foster cooperation among diverse actors. For example, their commitment to multilateralism and international law enhances their credibility within global institutions, enabling them to influence policy outcomes beyond what their material power alone would permit [27, 73]. In this sense, soft power serves as both a strategic resource and a compensatory mechanism, allowing middle powers to navigate a system dominated by larger states.

Closely related to the concept of soft power is the constructivist perspective in international relations, which emphasises the role of ideas, norms, identities, and social interactions in shaping state behaviour. Constructivism challenges the assumptions of purely materialist theories, such as realism, by arguing that the international system is socially constructed rather than objectively given. Scholars such as Alexander Wendt assert that “anarchy is what states make of it,” highlighting the importance of shared meanings and collective understandings in determining how states interact [115, 116]. From a constructivist standpoint, middle powers are not merely passive actors constrained by their material limitations; rather, they actively participate in shaping the normative structure of the international system. Through sustained engagement in multilateral institutions, they contribute to the creation, diffusion, and institutionalisation of global norms, particularly in areas such as human rights, environmental governance, and sustainable development [45]. Their influence is therefore exercised not only through policy outcomes but also through the framing of global agendas and the establishment of acceptable standards of behaviour.

In this regard, institutions such as the World Trade Organization and the United Nations function as more than mere arenas for negotiation. They serve as critical sites for norm creation, socialisation, and reinforcement. Middle powers utilise these platforms to advocate for rules-based governance, promote equitable policies, and build coalitions around shared values. By doing so, they are able to project influence that is disproportionate to their material capabilities, reinforcing their role as norm entrepreneurs and facilitators of international cooperation [4, 100]. Moreover, the interplay between soft power and constructivist dynamics underscores the importance of legitimacy in global politics. Middle powers often derive their influence from being perceived as impartial, cooperative, and committed to collective goods. This perception enhances their ability to mediate conflicts, broker agreements, and shape international discourse. It also distinguishes them

from great powers, whose actions may be viewed with suspicion due to their strategic interests and coercive capabilities. In sum, the integration of soft power theory and constructivist insights provides a robust framework for understanding the unique role of middle powers in global politics. By leveraging attraction, legitimacy, and normative influence, middle powers are able to transcend their material constraints and contribute meaningfully to the governance and evolution of the international system.

2.3. The Bottom Billion: A Developmental Framework

The concept of the “bottom billion,” popularised by Paul Collier, identifies a group of countries where extreme poverty and development failure are persistent rather than transitory phenomena [25]. This framework foregrounds the structural and self-reinforcing nature of underdevelopment, arguing that simply increasing economic growth is insufficient without addressing systemic constraints (Collier, 2007; Sachs, 2005). According to Collier, roughly one billion people live in states trapped in cycles of conflict, weak governance, and economic stagnation. Collier’s model identifies four principal “traps” that impede progress: the conflict trap, the natural resource trap, the landlocked with bad neighbours trap, and the bad governance trap [25, 26]. The conflict trap describes the mutually reinforcing relationship between poverty and civil war, where low income increases the likelihood of war, and conflict undermines institutions and investment [26, 44]. The natural resource trap—often termed the resource curse—suggests that resource dependence generates rent-seeking, corruption, and volatility that hinder diversified development [12, 99, 102]. The landlocked trap highlights the persistent disadvantages of geographically isolated economies burdened by transport costs and reliance on neighbours with weak infrastructure or governance [48]. Finally, the bad governance trap underscores how weak institutions, corruption, and political instability systematically reduce economic incentives and social trust [2, 38, 80].

From a theoretical perspective, the bottom billion framework aligns with structuralist interpretations of development, emphasising how global economic structures and power relations shape opportunities for peripheral economies [21, 90]. Structuralism posits that unequal exchange and global market hierarchies systematically disadvantage producers in the periphery, limiting their capacity for autonomous growth (Frank, 1967; Amin, 1974). This view is echoed by Rodney Walter, who critiques the historical legacy of colonialism in embedding patterns of economic dependency [92]. In addition, dependency theorists argue that the integration of the bottom billion into global markets often reinforces inequality rather than eroding it [21, 31]. Here, global capitalism is seen as a system where core states accumulate surplus at the expense of the periphery, making peripheral countries vulnerable to external shocks [41, 114].

At the same time, the bottom billion thesis resonates with

institutionalist perspectives that underscore the centrality of governance and political structures in shaping development outcomes [2, 80]. Weak institutions—not merely weak markets—are increasingly recognised as core impediments in fragile states (Kufour, 2000; Doner et al., 2005). Corruption reduces the effectiveness of public investment, undermines rule of law, and erodes trust in the state [88, 89, 99]. Political instability limits long-term planning and investment, reinforcing cycles of poverty and exclusion [26, 50]. The bottom billion framework also intersects with geopolitical and historical political economy critiques. As Rupert Smith and Anthony Dowden argue, the legacy of conflict, colonialism, and foreign intervention deeply shapes state capacity and patterns of development in Africa and parts of Asia [32]. Dowden’s work highlights how the colonial extraction model left enduring institutional distortions that continue to disadvantage many bottom billion states [32]. Similarly, Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson emphasise that institutional inclusivity is a necessary condition for sustainable economic development [2].

Importantly, the bottom billion framework underscores that development is not simply an economic variable but a political process shaped by internal and external governance environments (Sen, 1999; Easterly, 2006). Public policy choices—such as investment in health, education, and infrastructure—are mediated by political institutions, social coalitions, and fiscal capacity (Rodrik, 2007; Collier, 2007). External structures matter as well. International financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have sought to address these traps through lending and conditionality, but critics argue that standardised policy prescriptions often overlook local contexts and governance realities [37, 106]. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala emphasises that without internally driven reforms—such as strengthening domestic accountability, tax systems, and institutional transparency—external support alone cannot overcome development impediments [84, 85].

Moreover, scholars such as Amartya Sen argue that capabilities—freedom to participate in economic and political life—are as important as income in defining development [104]. This aligns with human-centred approaches that stress education, health, and human rights as integral to long-term growth (UNDP, 1990; Nussbaum, 2011). In sum, the bottom billion framework integrates structuralist, institutionalist, historical, and human development perspectives to explain why poverty persists in specific populations despite global economic growth. Understanding these traps is essential for designing development strategies that address both external constraints and internal governance deficits—an understanding that informs the role that middle powers might play in supporting inclusive development in the world’s most vulnerable regions.

2.4. Linking Middle Powers to Development Theory

The intersection between middle power theory and develop-

ment studies has become increasingly salient in contemporary international relations, particularly in the context of shifting global economic power and the emergence of alternative development paradigms. Middle powers—states that possess moderate material capabilities but exert disproportionate influence through diplomacy, coalition-building, and norm entrepreneurship—occupy a strategic position within the global development architecture [55, 61, 92, 93]. Their hybrid status enables them to function simultaneously as recipients and providers of development assistance, thereby creating a unique bridge between the Global North and the Global South [27, 78]. This dual identity aligns closely with the principles of development theory, particularly dependency theory and post-development approaches, which critique the hierarchical nature of traditional North–South relations [39]. Middle powers challenge these asymmetries by promoting horizontal partnerships through South–South cooperation frameworks. Such cooperation emphasizes mutual benefit, respect for sovereignty, and context-specific development strategies, diverging from the conditionalities often associated with Western-led aid regimes [24, 72].

A prominent manifestation of this dynamic is seen in multilateral groupings such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), which exemplify the growing agency of emerging economies in reshaping global development discourse [92, 107]. Through initiatives such as the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA), BRICS countries have created alternative financial mechanisms that challenge the dominance of Bretton Woods institutions [49, 56]. These institutions prioritize infrastructure development, sustainable financing, and reduced dependency on Western capital markets, thereby offering new pathways for economic transformation in developing countries [23, 47].

Middle powers’ involvement in such frameworks reflects a broader shift toward multipolarity in global governance. Unlike traditional great powers, middle powers often emphasize inclusive multilateralism and norm-based diplomacy, advocating for reforms that enhance the representation of developing countries in international institutions [29, 75]. For instance, countries such as India, Brazil, and South Africa have consistently called for restructuring voting rights within the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank to better reflect contemporary economic realities [111, 118]. These efforts align with development theories that emphasize equity, participation, and institutional legitimacy [104, 106]. Furthermore, middle powers play a critical role in advancing the concept of “developmental diplomacy,” which integrates foreign policy objectives with development goals [52]. This approach is particularly evident in their engagement with the “bottom billion”—a term popularized by Collier to describe the world’s poorest populations trapped in cycles of poverty, conflict, and weak governance. Middle powers leverage their diplomatic networks, technical expertise, and regional influence to support capacity-building initiatives, infrastructure projects, and policy reforms tailored to the needs of these vulnerable

states [6, 25, 105].

In addition, middle powers contribute to knowledge transfer and innovation diffusion, which are central to endogenous development theory [9, 97]. Countries such as South Korea and Brazil have shared their development experiences through technical cooperation programs, offering lessons on industrialization, agricultural modernization, and social policy design [68, 69]. This peer-to-peer learning model contrasts with the top-down approaches traditionally associated with Western aid, reinforcing the importance of local ownership and contextual adaptation [10, 38]. The rise of middle powers also intersects with the concept of “emerging donors,” which challenges the conventional dichotomy between donors and recipients [71]. Emerging donors often prioritize pragmatic cooperation over ideological alignment, focusing on sectors such as infrastructure, energy, and technology [20, 33]. While critics argue that such engagements may lack transparency or reinforce new dependencies, proponents contend that they provide much-needed alternatives for developing countries seeking to diversify their partnerships [41, 98].

Moreover, middle powers are increasingly active in global governance reform, advocating for a more democratic and representative international order. Their efforts are evident in forums such as the G20, where they have pushed for coordinated responses to global economic crises and greater inclusion of developing economies in decision-making processes [29, 67]. This aligns with the principles of global public goods theory, which emphasizes collective action and shared responsibility in addressing transnational challenges such as climate change, pandemics, and financial instability [15, 64]. Recent scholarship further highlights the evolving role of middle powers in promoting sustainable development and climate governance. Countries such as Indonesia, Mexico, and South Africa have emerged as key actors in climate negotiations, balancing economic growth with environmental sustainability [13, 54]. Their engagement underscores the integration of development theory with sustainability paradigms, particularly the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which emphasize inclusive and equitable growth [103, 109].

The linkage between middle power theory and development studies reveals a transformative shift in the global development landscape. Middle powers, through their hybrid identities and strategic positioning, are redefining the norms and practices of international development. By promoting South-South cooperation, advocating institutional reform, and fostering alternative development pathways, they contribute to a more inclusive and multipolar global order. This evolving role not only challenges traditional hierarchies but also offers new opportunities for addressing the complex development challenges facing the bottom billion in the 21st century.

2.5. Synthesis and Analytical Implications

The analysis of middle powers and the bottom billion highlights the intricate interplay between global power structures,

state behaviour, and development outcomes. Conceptually, middle powers are defined less by their raw capabilities and more by their behaviour, multilateral engagement, and normative influence [28, 65]. They act as system stabilisers, leveraging soft power and institutional platforms to influence global norms and policies in areas ranging from conflict resolution to sustainable development [73, 82]. By contrast, bottom billion countries are trapped in cycles of underdevelopment caused by structural constraints, resource dependence, geographical disadvantages, and weak governance [25, 32, 84]. Integrating these two conceptual threads reveals a critical insight: middle powers can serve as catalysts for positive development outcomes, but their effectiveness depends on their ability to navigate complex political, economic, and institutional landscapes. Through active participation in multilateral institutions such as the United Nations, World Trade Organization, and regional organisations like African Union, middle powers can project influence disproportionate to their material capabilities, shaping norms and policies that directly or indirectly affect bottom billion countries [4, 27, 100].

From a development perspective, bottom billion countries require interventions that address both structural and institutional deficits. Structuralist analyses highlight the global inequities that limit peripheral countries’ integration into the world economy, including trade imbalances, resource dependency, and historical legacies of colonialism [90, 95, 114]. Institutional perspectives emphasise governance quality, transparency, and political stability as determinants of sustainable development [2, 80, 87]. Middle powers, therefore, can be effective partners in facilitating reforms that strengthen domestic institutions while advocating for more equitable global economic arrangements. Moreover, the integration of soft power and constructivist theory underscores the normative dimension of middle power influence. By promoting global norms such as human rights, environmental sustainability, and good governance, middle powers can create enabling conditions for bottom billion countries to escape poverty traps [4, 45, 85]. These states can act as brokers, linking external resources with internal reform efforts, mediating conflicts, and shaping multilateral agendas to prioritise inclusive development.

However, the analytical implications also suggest limits to middle power influence. Structural constraints in the global system, combined with persistent domestic governance challenges, mean that middle powers cannot unilaterally transform bottom billion outcomes [25, 32, 101]. Effective engagement requires coordinated multilateral action, long-term commitment, and context-sensitive strategies that respect local agency while leveraging external expertise and resources. In synthesising the literature, it becomes evident that a comprehensive approach to global poverty reduction must recognise the interdependence between global governance, middle power diplomacy, and domestic institutional reform. Middle powers possess unique capacities to influence international norms, provide technical assistance, and mobilise coalitions,

but their impact is maximised when aligned with domestic efforts in bottom billion countries to enhance governance, reduce conflict, and implement sustainable development policies [85, 96, 106]. Ultimately, this synthesis suggests a conceptual model in which middle powers operate as norm entrepreneurs and development facilitators within a multipolar global system. By leveraging soft power, multilateral engagement, and coalition-building, they can help mitigate the structural and institutional traps that constrain the bottom billion. This framework provides a robust analytical lens for understanding the intersection between global power dynamics and persistent poverty, highlighting both opportunities and limitations for international development policy.

3. Methodology and Analytical Approach

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the intersection between middle power diplomacy and the developmental outcomes of bottom billion countries. A qualitative approach is appropriate given the complex, multi-dimensional nature of the research questions, which focus on understanding patterns of influence, normative engagement, and institutional strategies rather than measuring numerical outcomes (Creswell, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). By emphasising rich, contextually grounded evidence, the study seeks to capture both the behavioural and functional dimensions of middle power activity and its implications for persistent poverty in marginalised regions. The primary sources of data are secondary in nature, comprising peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy briefs, and reports from international organisations such as the United Nations, World Bank, and International Monetary Fund. These sources provide insights into both the normative and material strategies employed by middle powers, as well as empirical evidence on the structural constraints faced by bottom billion countries (Collier, 2007; Okonjo-Iweala, 2007; Dowden, 2008).

A thematic analysis framework is employed to systematically identify recurring patterns, themes, and strategies in middle power engagement. This method allows for the classification of actions into categories such as soft power projection, multilateral coalition-building, norm entrepreneurship, and development assistance, which are then analysed for their effectiveness in shaping outcomes in bottom billion contexts [19]. For example, the role of Brazil in South-South cooperation or India's technical assistance programmes in sub-Saharan Africa is examined to illustrate how middle powers operationalise normative influence in concrete policy domains (Cooper, 2011; Acharya, 2014).

In addition, the study utilises a comparative analytical framework to assess the strategies and outcomes of selected middle powers—specifically India, Brazil, and South Africa—in regions characterised by high concentrations of the

bottom billion. This comparative lens facilitates the identification of both common patterns and context-specific variations, such as the differing approaches to development finance, peacekeeping, and trade diplomacy [43, 57]. By analysing these cases, the study highlights how middle powers adapt strategies to diverse regional challenges while maintaining a broader commitment to multilateralism and normative engagement.

Case-based insights complement the thematic and comparative analyses. Each case provides illustrative examples of middle power diplomacy in action, demonstrating how these states influence governance, development policies, and normative agendas despite material constraints. For instance, South Africa's participation in peacekeeping missions in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Brazil's agricultural technical assistance to African nations, and India's training programmes in IT and healthcare exemplify targeted interventions that leverage institutional and normative tools [5, 27, 85]. These cases also underscore the limits of influence, highlighting how structural poverty, governance deficits, and global inequities constrain middle powers' capacity to effect transformative change unilaterally.

The analytical strategy integrates these layers of evidence into a cohesive understanding of middle power influence on the bottom billion. By combining thematic coding, comparative assessment, and illustrative case studies, the study draws robust conclusions about the mechanisms, effectiveness, and limitations of middle power engagement. This methodology allows for nuanced insights into the intersection of power, norms, and development, contributing both to the theoretical understanding of middle powers and the practical policy discourse on global poverty reduction.

4. The Strategic Role of Middle Powers in Geopolitics

Middle powers occupy a distinctive and increasingly consequential position in the contemporary international system, situated between great powers and smaller, less influential states. Their strategic relevance derives not primarily from overwhelming material capabilities, but from behavioural attributes such as coalition-building, diplomatic activism, and norm entrepreneurship [28, 61, 65]. As global politics transitions toward a more fluid and multipolar order, middle powers have demonstrated an enhanced capacity to shape outcomes through strategic engagement, institutional participation, and ideational influence (Narlikar, 2013; Acharya, 2014; Ikenberry, 2018).

One of the most prominent roles played by middle powers is that of conflict mediation and diplomatic brokerage. Due to their relative neutrality and credibility, they are often perceived as less threatening than great powers, enabling them to facilitate dialogue in contentious geopolitical environments [27, 52, 73]. A classic example is Norway's mediation of the

Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation, which underscores how middle powers can leverage trust and discretion to advance peace processes [16, 113]. Similarly, countries such as Canada and Sweden have long histories of engagement in peacekeeping and post-conflict reconstruction, contributing troops, resources, and diplomatic expertise to United Nations missions [35, 63, 86]. More recently, states like Qatar and Turkey have emerged as mediators in regional conflicts, reflecting the diversification of middle power diplomacy in the 21st century [62].

Middle powers are also central advocates of multilateralism, viewing international institutions as platforms through which they can amplify their influence and shape global governance [57, 66, 100]. Their commitment to rules-based international order is particularly significant in an era marked by great power rivalry and institutional contestation [5, 59]. Through active participation in organisations such as the United Nations, the G20, the World Trade Organization, and regional bodies like the African Union and ASEAN, middle powers promote collective responses to transnational challenges including climate change, pandemics, terrorism, and financial instability [42, 51]. Their advocacy reinforces institutional legitimacy and helps sustain cooperative norms even in the face of geopolitical fragmentation (Zürn, 2018; Patrick, 2017).

Another critical dimension of middle power influence lies in norm entrepreneurship—the process by which states shape, promote, and institutionalise international norms [4, 45]. Middle powers often act as “norm catalysts,” advancing agendas related to human rights, environmental sustainability, gender equality, and development cooperation [18, 60]. For instance, Germany and Japan have played pivotal roles in advancing global climate governance and development assistance frameworks, leveraging financial resources, technological expertise, and diplomatic networks to influence international standards [17, 77, 83]. Likewise, countries such as Canada and Norway have championed humanitarian norms, including the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and international humanitarian law [40, 108]. Through such efforts, middle powers extend their influence beyond traditional metrics of power, shaping global behaviour in ways that reflect both strategic interests and normative commitments [22, 117].

In addition to their global roles, middle powers provide stabilising leadership within their respective regions. They often function as regional anchors, fostering integration, managing conflicts, and promoting economic development [46, 57]. South Africa in Southern Africa, Brazil in Latin America, and India in South Asia exemplify middle powers that exert regional influence through infrastructure development, peacekeeping initiatives, and diplomatic engagement [7, 70]. Indonesia and Nigeria have similarly played leadership roles within ASEAN and ECOWAS respectively, contributing to regional security and governance frameworks [3, 6]. These states often act as intermediaries between global and regional systems, translating global norms into regional practices and

ensuring policy coherence across different levels of governance [79, 91].

Furthermore, middle powers are increasingly important actors in addressing global public goods and transnational challenges. Their participation in climate negotiations, global health governance, and sustainable development initiatives underscores their growing influence in shaping collective responses to complex global issues [51, 64, 103]. Countries such as South Korea, Mexico, and Indonesia have demonstrated leadership in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and climate commitments under the Paris Agreement [54, 112]. Their ability to bridge developed and developing country perspectives enhances their effectiveness in negotiating consensus and fostering inclusive solutions [36, 94].

Recent scholarship also highlights the evolving role of middle powers in digital governance, economic diplomacy, and global supply chain restructuring. As technological competition intensifies, middle powers such as the Netherlands, Singapore, and South Korea are leveraging innovation and regulatory frameworks to shape emerging domains such as cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, and data governance [1, 42]. These developments illustrate how middle powers are adapting to new geopolitical realities, expanding their influence into non-traditional arenas of global governance [14, 34].

In sum, the strategic role of middle powers in geopolitics is multifaceted and dynamic. Through conflict mediation, multilateral engagement, norm entrepreneurship, and regional leadership, they exert influence that often exceeds their material capabilities. Their emphasis on soft power, coalition-building, and institutional participation enables them to navigate the complexities of a multipolar world while contributing to global stability and cooperation (Nye, 2004; Cooper, 2011; Acharya, 2014). As the international system continues to evolve, middle powers are likely to remain pivotal actors in shaping both global governance and regional order, bridging divides between great powers and smaller states while advancing inclusive and sustainable development agendas (Ikenberry, 2018; Narlikar, 2021).

5. The Bottom Billion: Challenges and Constraints

The bottom billion, as conceptualised by Paul Collier, represent populations trapped in chronic poverty and underdevelopment despite decades of global economic growth [25]. These countries are characterised by persistent structural constraints that limit their ability to achieve sustainable development. Political instability is a pervasive challenge; fragile states frequently experience weak governance, corruption, and frequent changes in leadership, which undermine policy continuity and the implementation of development programmes [2, 25, 85]. Civil conflict, insurgency, and ethnic violence create a self-reinforcing cycle in which insecurity prevents investment and economic activity, while poverty and exclusion

increase the likelihood of political unrest [26, 32, 44].

Weak institutional capacity compounds these challenges. Bottom billion countries often suffer from ineffective bureaucracies, poor regulatory frameworks, and inadequate public service delivery, which inhibit the mobilisation of resources for development and the enforcement of the rule of law [80, 85, 99]. The prevalence of extractive institutions, where political elites capture economic rents for personal gain, further erodes state legitimacy and reduces incentives for inclusive growth [2, 38]. Weak institutions also limit these countries' capacity to respond to external shocks, including commodity price volatility, climate-related disasters, and global economic crises, leaving them particularly vulnerable in a highly interconnected global economy [25, 101, 106].

Geographical and economic constraints exacerbate these institutional weaknesses. Many bottom billion countries are landlocked, limiting access to global markets and increasing transportation costs for trade [48]. Others are heavily dependent on primary commodities, making their economies vulnerable to external price fluctuations and reducing opportunities for industrial diversification [12, 98, 102]. The "resource curse" demonstrates how resource wealth, rather than guaranteeing prosperity, can incentivise rent-seeking, corruption, and authoritarian governance, further limiting long-term development prospects [12, 25, 98].

External interventions by global institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, have attempted to alleviate these constraints through loans, technical assistance, and structural adjustment programmes. While these interventions have provided critical financial and technical support, they have often been criticised for failing to adequately reflect local contexts or institutional realities [36, 85, 106]. Standardised policy prescriptions—such as rapid trade liberalisation or fiscal austerity—have sometimes exacerbated inequalities, weakened public service delivery, and generated

social unrest, illustrating the limits of externally driven development strategies [25, 32, 96].

Furthermore, historical and structural legacies play a significant role in perpetuating underdevelopment. Colonialism, imposed economic dependency, and patterns of unequal trade have left enduring institutional and economic distortions that continue to disadvantage bottom billion countries [90, 95, 114]. These legacies intersect with contemporary global governance structures, where rules and norms often reflect the interests of more powerful states, limiting the agency of poorer nations to influence international economic and political decision-making [21, 57].

Social and human development deficits also present critical constraints. Education, healthcare, and infrastructure in bottom billion countries are frequently inadequate, limiting human capital development and the population's capacity to participate in economic and political life [81, 104, 110]. High fertility rates, youth unemployment, and urbanisation pressures exacerbate social and economic vulnerabilities, creating demographic and developmental pressures that governments struggle to address [25, 32, 85].

Bottom billion countries face a multifaceted set of challenges and constraints encompassing political, institutional, economic, and social dimensions. Persistent instability, weak governance, geographic disadvantages, dependence on primary commodities, and historical structural inequalities combine to trap these countries in cycles of underdevelopment. While global institutions provide support, the effectiveness of such interventions is contingent upon alignment with domestic realities, institutional reforms, and context-sensitive strategies. Understanding these constraints is essential for evaluating how middle powers, through diplomacy, development assistance, and normative engagement, can influence the trajectory of development in these countries.

Table 1. Key Poverty Indicators in Selected Bottom Billion Countries.

Indicator	Description	Africa Average	South Asia Average	Source
GDP per capita (current US\$)	Average economic output per person	1,625	1,965	World Bank, 2023
Poverty headcount ratio (% of population below \$2.15/day)	Share of population living in extreme poverty	44%	27%	World Bank, 2023
Life expectancy at birth (years)	Average expected lifespan	64	70	UNDP, 2022
Adult literacy rate (%)	Percentage of population aged 15+ who can read/write	63%	72%	UNESCO, 2022
Access to electricity (%)	Percentage of population with electricity	48%	80%	IEA, 2022
Infant mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)	Deaths of children under 1 year	55	32	WHO, 2022
Governance effectiveness index	Measures quality of public services,	-0.65	-0.12	World Bank, 2023

Indicator	Description	Africa Average	South Asia Average	Source
	policy formulation, and implementation (-2.5 to +2.5)			
Human Development Index (HDI)	Composite index of life expectancy, education, and income (0–1)	0.534	0.623	UNDP, 2022

Source: Compiled by the writer with information from World Bank (2023), UNDP (2022), UNESCO (2022), IEA (2022), WHO (2022).

Table 1 highlights critical socio-economic and developmental indicators for countries within the bottom billion, illustrating the persistent structural challenges they face. GDP per capita figures show extremely low income levels in Sub-Saharan Africa (US\$1,625) and South Asia (US\$1,965), reflecting limited economic opportunities and low productivity (World Bank, 2023). The poverty headcount ratio indicates that a significant portion of the population lives below the \$2.15/day extreme poverty threshold, with Sub-Saharan Africa particularly affected at 44% (World Bank, 2023). Human development indicators, including life expectancy and literacy rates, remain below global averages, demonstrating deficits in health, education, and human capital (UNDP, 2022; UNESCO, 2022). Infrastructure access is similarly constrained, with less than half of the African population having electricity, while infant mortality rates remain alarmingly high (IEA, 2022; WHO, 2022). Governance effectiveness and HDI scores further underline institutional weaknesses and systemic vulnerabilities. Collectively, these indicators provide a comprehensive snapshot of the persistent socio-economic and governance constraints limiting development in bottom billion countries, setting the context for middle power engagement.

6. Middle Powers and Developmental Engagement

Middle powers play an increasingly significant role in supporting the development of bottom billion countries through a combination of diplomatic, economic, and normative strategies. Their engagement is characterised by the use of soft power, multilateralism, and institutional influence, which enables them to exert an impact disproportionate to their material capabilities [28, 65, 82]. These states leverage historical experience, technical expertise, and regional influence to address the structural constraints faced by bottom billion countries, including weak governance, economic dependence, and social underdevelopment [25, 32, 85].

One of the primary mechanisms through which middle powers engage with developing countries is South–South cooperation. This framework promotes collaboration among developing states to share knowledge, coordinate policy, and mobilise resources without relying solely on traditional Western-led aid channels [43,57,4]. Institutions such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) exemplify this

approach, providing platforms for infrastructure investment, technical assistance, and financial cooperation tailored to the needs of the Global South [11,27,107]. Such initiatives enable middle powers to act as brokers of development, facilitating partnerships that enhance economic diversification, human capital formation, and institutional strengthening in bottom billion countries [43, 84, 85].

In addition to institutional cooperation, middle powers provide development assistance and technology transfer that draws on their own experiences of rapid industrialisation and socio-economic transformation. South Korea, for instance, has shared its strategies for export-oriented growth, education reform, and technology adoption with African and Asian countries, offering practical lessons that are adaptable to local conditions [4, 57]. Similarly, Brazil’s agricultural and health initiatives in sub-Saharan Africa demonstrate how middle powers can tailor development programmes to context-specific needs while promoting knowledge transfer and capacity building [27, 107]. This approach combines normative leadership with tangible technical support, strengthening both human and institutional capacities in target countries [45, 75].

Middle powers also contribute significantly to peacekeeping and security support, recognising that stability is a prerequisite for development. Countries such as India, South Africa, and Canada have consistently provided troops, logistical support, and strategic expertise to United Nations missions in fragile states, including regions of Africa and the Middle East [4, 27, 57]. By stabilising conflict-affected areas, middle powers create conditions conducive to investment, infrastructure development, and social service delivery, helping break cycles of violence and underdevelopment that trap the bottom billion [25, 32, 57]. Peacekeeping engagement also allows middle powers to exercise normative influence, advocating for respect for human rights, rule of law, and inclusive governance in host countries [43, 85].

Furthermore, middle powers are active advocates for institutional reform in global governance structures, seeking to increase the representation and voice of developing countries in international decision-making. They push for changes in organisations such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank to create more inclusive, equitable mechanisms for global economic and political governance [4, 57, 106]. By promoting reforms that enhance transparency, accountability, and participation, middle powers

strengthen the capacity of bottom billion countries to influence the rules and norms that govern trade, finance, and development assistance [84, 96]. This advocacy aligns with constructivist and soft power perspectives, wherein middle powers seek to shape global norms and institutional frameworks to create enabling environments for sustainable development [45, 73, 82].

Despite their contributions, middle powers face structural limitations. Their influence is constrained by global power hierarchies, resource limitations, and the domestic challenges of target countries, including governance deficits, conflict, and entrenched poverty (Collier, 2007; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; North, 1990). Effective engagement requires long-term commitment, coordinated multilateral action, and context-sensitive strategies that combine diplomacy, technical assistance, and capacity-building efforts (Okonjo-Iweala & Osafo-Kwaako, 2007; Sachs, 2005; Stiglitz, 2002). By strategically navigating these constraints, middle powers can operate as

norm entrepreneurs, development facilitators, and regional stabilisers, contributing to both international stability and the alleviation of extreme poverty.

Middle powers employ a multifaceted strategy in supporting bottom billion countries. Through South–South cooperation, development assistance and technology transfer, peacekeeping, and advocacy for institutional reform, they leverage soft power, multilateral engagement, and normative influence to promote sustainable development. Their approach combines practical interventions with normative leadership, addressing structural and institutional constraints while fostering conditions for long-term stability and growth. This underscores the strategic significance of middle powers in shaping developmental trajectories for the world's most vulnerable populations and demonstrates the potential for a more inclusive and multipolar global governance system (Keohane, 1984; Cooper, 2011; Acharya, 2014; Okonjo-Iweala, 2007; Dowden, 2008; Hurrell, 2006).

Table 2. Middle Powers' Engagement in Bottom Billion Countries (Selected Indicators, 2022–2023).

Middle Power	Development Assistance (US\$ billion)	South–South Cooperation Projects	UN Peacekeeping Contributions	Technology Transfer / Capacity-Building Programs	Source
India	1.2	45 projects in Africa & South Asia	3,200 personnel	ICT, renewable energy, healthcare training	OECD-DAC, 2023; UN, 2023; Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 2023
Brazil	0.8	28 projects (mainly Latin America & Africa)	1,050 personnel	Agricultural innovation, bio-energy, tropical medicine	OECD-DAC, 2023; UN, 2023; Itamaraty, 2023
South Africa	0.6	22 projects (mainly Southern Africa)	1,400 personnel	Mining technology, renewable energy, governance capacity-building	OECD-DAC, 2023; UN, 2023; South African Department of International Relations, 2023

Notes:

Development assistance includes both bilateral aid and contributions to multilateral funds.

South–South cooperation projects include infrastructure, education, healthcare, and capacity-building initiatives.

UN Peacekeeping contributions include both military and police personnel deployed in fragile states.

Sources: Compiled by the writer with information from OECD-DAC (2023), UN (2023), Indian Ministry of External Affairs (2023), Itamaraty (Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023), South African Department of International Relations and Cooperation (2023).

Table 2 presents a comparative overview of how selected middle powers—India, Brazil, and South Africa—engage with bottom billion countries through development assistance, South–South cooperation, peacekeeping contributions, and technology transfer initiatives. India provides the largest financial assistance, supporting 45 projects across Africa and South Asia, including ICT, renewable energy, and healthcare training, reflecting its dual focus on economic development and capacity-building (OECD-DAC, 2023; Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 2023). Brazil emphasizes agricultural innovation, bioenergy, and tropical medicine, primarily targeting

Latin America and African nations, while also contributing personnel to UN peacekeeping operations (OECD-DAC, 2023; Itamaraty, 2023). South Africa's engagement focuses on regional development, governance support, and renewable energy projects in Southern Africa, with a notable presence in UN peacekeeping missions (South African Department of International Relations, 2023). Collectively, the table demonstrates that middle powers leverage financial resources, technical expertise, and normative influence to assist bottom billion countries, highlighting the multifaceted and complementary nature of their developmental diplomacy.

7. Limitations of Middle Power Influence

Despite their active engagement and strategic initiatives, middle powers face significant limitations in their capacity to influence global politics and developmental outcomes, particularly in bottom billion countries. These constraints are deeply embedded in the structural hierarchies of the international system, where great powers continue to dominate security, economic, and normative domains. Middle powers lack the coercive, financial, and technological capabilities necessary to unilaterally enforce policy agendas, making their effectiveness contingent upon cooperation with stronger states and multilateral institutions [27, 57, 59, 65, 119]. Even when middle powers such as Brazil, India, or South Africa advocate reforms in global governance, their proposals often require endorsement by dominant actors within institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank [76, 106, 111, 118]. This structural dependence limits their autonomy and constrains their ability to reshape global rules in line with their preferences [4, 87].

Another critical limitation arises from domestic capacity constraints within middle powers themselves. Although more capable than smaller states, middle powers frequently contend with internal economic pressures, governance challenges, and political volatility that restrict sustained international engagement [4, 28, 79]. Fiscal limitations often constrain foreign aid budgets and development assistance commitments, particularly during periods of economic downturn or domestic crisis [34, 72]. Political transitions and leadership changes may also disrupt foreign policy continuity, leading to inconsistencies in diplomatic engagement and development initiatives [34, 43, 75]. For instance, shifts in Brazil's or South Africa's domestic priorities have periodically reduced their external activism, illustrating how internal dynamics can shape the scope and durability of middle power influence [7].

Furthermore, bureaucratic inefficiencies and institutional fragmentation within middle powers can undermine policy implementation. Weak coordination among government agencies, limited technical expertise, and competing domestic priorities may reduce the effectiveness of international initiatives [10, 41, 80]. As a result, middle power strategies are often episodic and reactive rather than sustained and strategic, diminishing their long-term impact on global governance and development outcomes [29, 52].

The structural and institutional conditions within bottom billion countries themselves present another major constraint. Persistent conflict, weak governance, corruption, and limited administrative capacity significantly reduce the effectiveness of external interventions [2, 25, 32, 98]. Even well-designed development programs may fail to achieve intended outcomes due to poor implementation, elite capture, or lack of local ownership [10, 38, 85]. Fragile states often lack the institutional frameworks necessary to absorb and utilise external assistance effectively, thereby limiting the transformative potential of middle power engagement (Fukuyama, 2011; Besley &

Persson, 2011).

Socioeconomic and cultural factors further complicate development efforts. High levels of poverty, inequality, low human capital, and social fragmentation create complex environments where external interventions face significant barriers [81, 102, 104]. In such contexts, development challenges are multidimensional and deeply entrenched, requiring long-term, coordinated efforts that exceed the capacity of individual middle powers [96]. Consequently, middle power initiatives often produce incremental rather than transformative outcomes, highlighting the limitations of external assistance in addressing structural development deficits [25, 74].

Geopolitical competition from great powers further constrains middle power agency. In strategically significant regions, the presence of dominant actors such as the United States, China, and the European Union can overshadow or conflict with middle power initiatives [57, 59]. Competing geopolitical interests may limit the space for middle powers to pursue independent agendas, forcing them to align with or adapt to the priorities of larger powers [14, 83]. For example, China's extensive infrastructure investments in Africa through the Belt and Road Initiative have reshaped development dynamics, often eclipsing the contributions of traditional and emerging middle powers [20, 47]. This competitive environment reduces the relative influence of middle powers and complicates coordination efforts [34, 42].

In addition, middle powers face constraints in global governance due to limited resources and capabilities. While they excel in diplomacy, coalition-building, and norm promotion, they lack the financial scale, military reach, and technological dominance of great powers [27, 73, 82]. As a result, their role is often confined to facilitative or catalytic functions rather than direct enforcement of policies or structural reforms [51, 108]. Their influence depends heavily on the willingness of other actors to adopt and implement the norms and policies they advocate [22, 45].

Moreover, institutional inertia within global governance structures poses a significant barrier. Established institutions such as the IMF and World Bank are often resistant to reform, reflecting the entrenched interests of dominant states [111, 118]. Efforts by middle powers to democratize these institutions or enhance representation for developing countries frequently encounter political resistance and slow progress [76, 119]. This limits the extent to which middle powers can influence global decision-making processes and implement meaningful reforms [87].

Finally, long-term structural traps affecting bottom billion countries—including geographic disadvantages, resource dependence, and historical legacies of colonialism—further constrain the impact of middle power engagement [90, 95, 102]. Resource-rich countries often experience governance challenges and economic volatility, commonly referred to as the “resource curse,” which undermines development efforts [12, 98]. Geographic isolation, poor infrastructure, and vulnerability to climate change also exacerbate development challenges,

limiting the effectiveness of external interventions (Gallup, Sachs, & Mellinger, 1999; UNDP, 2020). These structural factors require systemic and multilateral solutions that go beyond the capabilities of individual middle powers [64, 103].

The limitations of middle power influence are multifaceted, arising from systemic, domestic, and contextual factors. Structural hierarchies in global politics, domestic capacity constraints, fragile institutions in recipient countries, geopolitical competition, and entrenched development challenges collectively restrict the effectiveness of middle power strategies. While middle powers remain important actors in promoting multilateralism, norm diffusion, and development cooperation, their influence is inherently constrained and dependent on broader systemic conditions. Achieving meaningful developmental and geopolitical outcomes therefore requires coordinated multilateral action, sustained engagement, and structural reforms that address the underlying causes of inequality and underdevelopment [4, 15, 25, 76, 119].

8. Implications for Africa and Emerging Economies

Middle power engagement carries significant implications for Africa and emerging economies, presenting both opportunities for development and challenges that require strategic navigation. For countries such as Nigeria, which is a regional power in Sub-Saharan Africa, partnerships with middle powers offer avenues to strengthen economic, political, and institutional capacities while enhancing regional influence. By collaborating with states like India, Brazil, South Africa, and South Korea, Nigeria can access technical expertise, development finance, and knowledge transfer models that have been successfully applied in similar emerging economy contexts (Acharya, 2014; Cooper, 2011; Okonjo-Iweala, 2007).

In the African context, middle power engagement has the potential to catalyse infrastructure development, including transport networks, energy projects, and digital connectivity, which are critical for economic diversification and integration into global value chains (Fawcett, 2015; Hurrell, 2006; Stuenkel, 2016). For example, India's technical assistance in ICT and healthcare, Brazil's agricultural development programmes, and South Africa's regional industrial initiatives demonstrate how collaborative development models can complement domestic policies to address structural constraints and accelerate growth (Cooper, 2011; Okonjo-Iweala & Osafo-Kwaako, 2007; Melissen, 2005).

Middle power partnerships can also strengthen governance and institutional capacity. By promoting normative frameworks, transparency, and rule-of-law principles, middle powers contribute to stabilising political environments and improving policy effectiveness in bottom billion countries (Collier, 2007; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Dowden, 2008). In Nigeria, engagement with middle powers can support anti-corruption initiatives, public sector reforms, and capacity-

building in critical institutions, reducing governance deficits that have historically hindered development (Okonjo-Iweala, 2007; Stiglitz, 2002; Hurrell, 2006).

Peace and security constitute another area where middle power engagement is impactful. Middle powers often participate in regional peacekeeping missions and conflict mediation, creating conditions for economic activity and long-term development. In conflict-prone areas of Sub-Saharan Africa, including Nigeria's northern and central regions, partnerships with middle powers in peacebuilding, security assistance, and crisis management can stabilise communities and facilitate developmental interventions (Acharya, 2014; Cooper, 2011; Melissen, 2005). Such support reinforces regional resilience and enhances the capacity of African states to participate meaningfully in continental and global governance structures.

However, the engagement of middle powers also presents challenges. African and emerging economies must navigate potential dependencies, ensuring that partnerships do not undermine domestic agency or create overreliance on external actors (Hurrell, 2006; Collier, 2007). Resource limitations and geopolitical competition can constrain middle powers, meaning that African countries like Nigeria need to strategically prioritise collaborations that align with national development plans and long-term objectives (Fawcett, 2015; Stuenkel, 2016; Okonjo-Iweala & Osafo-Kwaako, 2007). Additionally, structural challenges within bottom billion countries—including institutional weaknesses, social inequalities, and regional disparities—may limit the transformative impact of middle power interventions unless complemented by domestic reforms and inclusive policy frameworks (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Collier, 2007; Rodney, 1972).

Overall, the implications of middle power engagement for Africa and emerging economies are profound. For countries like Nigeria, strategic partnerships offer pathways to accelerate infrastructure development, improve governance, and foster economic diversification, while simultaneously enhancing regional and global influence. Effective engagement requires careful alignment with domestic priorities, a focus on capacity-building, and leveraging normative and technical resources offered by middle powers. By adopting a proactive and strategic approach, African nations can maximise the benefits of middle power collaboration, translating diplomatic engagement into tangible developmental outcomes and contributing to a more multipolar and inclusive global order (Acharya, 2014; Cooper, 2011; Okonjo-Iweala, 2007; Fawcett, 2015; Hurrell, 2006; Dowden, 2008).

9. Conclusion

This study has examined the strategic role of middle powers in geopolitics and their engagement with bottom billion countries, highlighting both opportunities and constraints within the contemporary multipolar system. Middle powers, defined not solely by their material capacities but by their behavioural strategies, diplomatic engagement, and normative influence,

occupy a critical position in global governance. Through mediation, coalition-building, norm entrepreneurship, and regional leadership, middle powers can shape outcomes disproportionate to their economic and military capabilities, providing stabilising influence in both global and regional contexts (Keohane, 1984; Cooper, 2011; Acharya, 2014; Nye, 2004).

The persistent challenges facing bottom billion countries—including weak governance, conflict, resource dependency, and structural inequality—underscore the complexity of promoting development in the most vulnerable regions (Collier, 2007; Dowden, 2008; Okonjo-Iweala, 2007). These structural constraints, rooted in historical legacies and contemporary global inequalities, limit the effectiveness of external interventions and necessitate nuanced, context-sensitive approaches. Middle powers, by leveraging soft power, multilateral institutions, and knowledge transfer, provide alternative mechanisms for engagement that are often more adaptable and locally relevant than traditional great power strategies (Fawcett, 2015; Hurrell, 2006; Melissen, 2005).

Middle powers facilitate development through mechanisms such as South–South cooperation, technical assistance, peacekeeping, and advocacy for institutional reform. Their initiatives in knowledge sharing, technology transfer, and regional stability have shown tangible benefits in bottom billion regions, contributing to infrastructure development, human capital formation, and governance improvement (Stuenkel, 2016; Okonjo-Iweala & Osafo-Kwaako, 2007; Cooper, 2011). Examples from India, Brazil, South Korea, and South Africa illustrate how middle powers can combine normative leadership with practical interventions to enhance development outcomes (Acharya, 2014; Hurrell, 2006; Okonjo-Iweala, 2007).

However, middle power influence is not without limitations. Structural hierarchies in the international system, domestic capacity constraints, competition from great powers, and the entrenched weaknesses of bottom billion countries reduce the scope and sustainability of their impact (Keohane, 1984; Collier, 2007; Dowden, 2008). Middle powers often operate within the constraints of global institutions and are required to navigate complex geopolitical dynamics to achieve their objectives, highlighting the importance of multilateral coordination and long-term engagement.

For Africa and other emerging economies, middle power engagement presents both opportunities and strategic challenges. Countries like Nigeria can leverage partnerships with middle powers to accelerate infrastructure development, improve governance, foster economic diversification, and enhance regional and global influence (Acharya, 2014; Cooper, 2011; Okonjo-Iweala, 2007). Yet, effective utilisation of these partnerships requires strategic planning, alignment with domestic priorities, and complementary reforms to maximise the developmental benefits while avoiding dependency or overreliance on external actors (Fawcett, 2015; Stuenkel, 2016; Hurrell, 2006).

Middle powers constitute an indispensable component of contemporary global governance. By deploying soft power,

advancing normative agendas, and engaging in practical development initiatives, they provide critical support to bottom billion countries while contributing to regional stability and global multipolarity. Their effectiveness, however, is contingent upon careful coordination, domestic capacity, and the ability to navigate structural constraints in both the global system and recipient countries. For Africa and emerging economies, strategic engagement with middle powers offers a pathway to enhance development, promote good governance, and strengthen regional influence, illustrating the transformative potential of middle power diplomacy in a complex and unequal international order.

Recommendations and Policy Implications

Building on the analysis of middle powers and bottom billion engagement, several recommendations and policy implications emerge for both middle powers themselves and emerging economies, particularly in Africa. These focus on maximising developmental impact, enhancing governance, and promoting sustainable, inclusive growth in line with global multipolarity.

First, middle powers should adopt strategically tailored development interventions that align with the specific needs and capacities of bottom billion countries. While multilateral frameworks like BRICS, G20, and regional initiatives provide important platforms, development strategies must account for local institutional contexts, governance structures, and socioeconomic realities (Okonjo-Iweala, 2007; Collier, 2007; Fawcett, 2015). For instance, technical assistance and technology transfer programs should be coupled with capacity-building initiatives to ensure that local institutions can implement and sustain development projects effectively (Hurrell, 2006; Stuenkel, 2016).

Second, middle powers should continue to strengthen institutional and normative engagement by advocating reforms that enhance the representation and voice of developing countries in global governance institutions such as the United Nations, IMF, and World Bank (Acharya, 2014; Hurrell, 2006; Stiglitz, 2002). Greater inclusivity in decision-making ensures that development policies are contextually appropriate and reflects the priorities of bottom billion populations, thus increasing legitimacy and effectiveness (Cooper, 2011; Nye, 2011; Melissen, 2005).

Third, middle powers should leverage peacebuilding and security interventions as integral components of development. Sustained stability is a prerequisite for economic growth, social progress, and institutional reform (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Dowden, 2008; Acharya, 2014). In regions prone to conflict, coordinated peacekeeping, conflict resolution, and mediation efforts can create enabling environments for infrastructure development, investment, and human capital formation. African states, such as Nigeria, can benefit from such engagements by integrating regional security strategies with domestic development priorities.

Fourth, emerging economies and bottom billion countries should proactively engage middle powers as partners rather

than passive recipients. Countries like Nigeria can strategically select partnerships that complement national development plans, prioritising projects that enhance infrastructure, diversify the economy, strengthen institutions, and address socio-economic inequalities (Okonjo-Iweala & Osafo-Kwaako, 2007; Fawcett, 2015; Hurrell, 2006). This requires robust domestic governance, transparent policy frameworks, and institutional capacity to manage foreign partnerships effectively, ensuring accountability and sustainability.

Fifth, both middle powers and emerging economies should emphasise South–South cooperation and knowledge sharing, which provides development solutions that are contextually relevant and culturally resonant (Stuenkel, 2016; Cooper, 2011; Acharya, 2014). By exchanging experiences in industrialisation, healthcare, agriculture, and technology adoption, countries can avoid the pitfalls of one-size-fits-all policy prescriptions and promote endogenous development that builds local capacity.

Lastly, the policy focus should incorporate long-term, multipronged strategies that combine economic, social, and normative interventions. Middle powers should continue to champion soft power tools—norm promotion, coalition-building, and advocacy for human rights and sustainable development—while providing tangible technical and financial support (Nye, 2004; Melissen, 2005; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Simultaneously, bottom billion countries must implement domestic reforms to strengthen institutions, reduce corruption, and create an environment conducive to investment and human development (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Collier, 2007; Okonjo-Iweala, 2007).

In essence, the policy implications underscore a strategic partnership model: middle powers act as facilitators, norm entrepreneurs, and development catalysts, while bottom billion countries actively harness these opportunities to advance their developmental objectives. For Africa and emerging economies, this model offers a pathway to accelerate infrastructure development, improve governance, enhance human capital, foster economic diversification, and strengthen regional and global influence. Coordinated, context-sensitive, and long-term engagement is key to translating diplomatic and development initiatives into sustainable socio-economic transformation (Hurrell, 2006; Cooper, 2011; Acharya, 2014; Fawcett, 2015; Dowden, 2008).

Abbreviations

UNDP	United Nation Development Corporation
UN	United Nations
IMF	International Monetary Fund
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa
R2P	Responsibility to Protect
HDI	Human Development Index
WHO	World Trade Organization

Author Contributions

Ukpong Uwem Johnson: Conceptualization, Resources

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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