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SHAPERS OF THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

Middle Powers and Their Role in Global Politics

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the role middle powers play in the international system. Existing approaches define middle powers according to capabilities, behavior, motivations, or relationships with other powers. However, despite their differences, each points toward the same underlying phenomenon: middle powers perform the systemic role of ‘shapers’ i.e., states that modify, manage, or direct the operation of the international system without creating, dominating, or fundamentally reconstructing it. Accordingly, the thesis advances a synthetic approach to middle powerhood and introduces the RAM (Role, Auxiliary Role, Method) Model of Role Performance, linking the shaper role to the auxiliary roles of administrator, aggregator, and adjuster. Using a structured, focused comparative case study of Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Armenia, the thesis assesses whether states perform the role of shaper and thereby qualify as middle powers. The findings demonstrate that Turkey and Azerbaijan successfully perform the shaper role across all three auxiliary roles, whereas Armenia does not. Consequently, Azerbaijan's role performance more closely resembles that of a conventional middle power than a conventional small state. These findings support a role-based conception of middle powerhood and a broader understanding of the international system as a distribution of roles rather than capabilities alone.

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*“It’s a world of uppity middle powers...
that aren’t going to be taking directions from Washington.”*

— Fareed Zakaria

INTRODUCTION

Who makes the international system? For established International Relations (IR) scholars like Kenneth Waltz, the answer is quite simple: the system is “defined, as ever, by the situation of the great powers” and, to that end, its “...politics is written in terms of the great powers of an era.” (Waltz 1979, 145). Great powers—amidst a sea of small powers, interactions, wars, and globalizing forces—are therefore all that is needed to understand the conditions of the international system. However, emerging scholarship on non-great powers suggests that this picture is incomplete. Middle powers—defined as those that “cannot act alone effectively but may be able to have a systematic impact in a small group or through an international institution”—are essential to the operation of the system, a fact made plain by many of the major geopolitical crises of the past decade (Keohane 1969, 296).

Take, for instance, three middle powers that helped to stabilize the Russo-Ukrainian War. Germany coordinated EU sanctions and built consensus around the European response (Fuhrop 2023). Turkey mediated, brokered agreements, and hosted talks between the warring parties (Ulas 2024, 425–445). India balanced the US and Russia by supporting the US-led Quadrilateral Security Dialogue all while providing Russia with a revenue stream through its purchase of oil (Liberherr 2022). Without these middle powers, the defining conflict of the era would not have unfolded in the same way.

Middle powers can also destabilize the balance of power. During the US–Iran War, Iran single-handedly disrupted global oil, gas, and fertilizer markets through its closure of the Strait of Hormuz and, despite the efforts of other middle powers such as Pakistan to mediate a ceasefire, compelled the US to reestablish a substantial military presence in the Middle East (Ratner et. al. 2026, 1; Lasani 2026, 5). The result was a systemic reversal of a decades-long American effort to

reduce its regional footprint. Indeed, great powers alone could not explain the defining events of 2025–2026.

Middle powers' varying systemic effects are abundantly clear: from upholding to upending the status quo, from facilitating diplomatic cooperation to disrupting global supply chains. This enigmatic behavior and 'middle powerhood' therefore begs a central question: what role do middle powers play in the international system?

This paper seeks to address this question as the 'middle power' rises in both theory and practice. The so-called "Rise of the Rest," popularized by Fareed Zakaria, prompted greater attention to the behavior and strategies unique to non–great powers (Zakaria 2009). Yet even within this "Rest," further distinctions and gradations emerge and therefore require greater clarification. At their core, middle powers occupy a structurally distinct position within the international system: one defined not by dominance or submission, but by intermediacy. Unlike great powers, they lack the capacity to unilaterally impose outcomes; unlike small powers, they are not confined to reacting to external pressure. Instead, middle powers exercise agency by conditioning the environment in which the other powers operate.

Thus, this paper argues that the role of middle powers in the international system is that of a *shaper* i.e., a state that modifies, manages, or directs the operation of the international system without possessing the capacity to create, dominate, or fundamentally reconstruct that system. They transform the international system from a static arena of hierarchical control into a dynamic web of negotiated relations, where influence is derived not only from material capability, but also from positional advantage. It is precisely this capacity—to bridge, balance, and mediate—that renders the "middle condition," as Aristotle once hailed, not a position of weakness, but one of strategic indispensability (Aristotle 1999, 13).

In answering this question, the paper develops a synthetic approach to defining middle powerhood, working from the ground up through the existing literature to arrive at the defining characteristic of this type of power—shaping. Drawing directly upon and extending role theorist Cameron G. Thies, this approach contends that there is a clear systemic ontology to middle powers. However, the specific assertion that middle powers are “shapers” builds upon terminology from *Shaper Nations*, which examines such powers in their “neighborhood” levels (Hitchcock et al. 2016).

The thesis proceeds in five sections. First, it explores the existing literature on middle powers, specifically the debate over what constitutes a middle power and the criteria by which it should be defined. Second, it introduces the theoretical framework—the synthetic approach—which arrives at the shaper role and then formalizes it through the RAM Framework for Role Performance as a pyramidal model of roles, auxiliary roles, and methods. Third, it presents the methodology, a structured, focused comparison. Fourth, it provides an in-depth analysis of three West Asian states: Turkey (a conventional middle power), Armenia (a conventional small power), and Azerbaijan, the latter acting as a contender middle power based on its fulfillment of the shaper role. Finally, the findings conclude that Azerbaijan does indeed fulfill the shaper role and, therefore, achieves middle powerhood, upon which systemic, analytical, and strategic reconceptions are advanced.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Before arriving at the middle power role, it is important first to define what a middle power is, what constitutes one, and how one is recognized. Debates over the concept of middle powers have largely unfolded across three paradigms, which this paper refers to as the ‘essentialist,’ ‘actionist,’ and ‘externalist’ approaches. Essentialists—the earlier and more traditional body of scholarship—view middle powers as possessing an underlying ‘essence’ that defines what they *are*; actionists, in turn, define them by what they *do*; and externalists, the latest perspective, define them *in relation to* other powers. The literature review proceeds accordingly, culminating in this paper’s synthetic, role-based approach as the latest development, filling the gap for a more dynamic understanding of middle powers.

I. ESSENTIALIST PARADIGM

Broadly, the essentialist paradigm defines middle powers identified by intrinsic attributes. Within this paradigm, different thinkers rely on varying identifying factors.

The most basic factor is material, defining middle powers by their power, capabilities, and survivability. This material approach dates to the post-Westphalian thinker Giovanni Botero—the first to conceive of the middle power (Schweller 2017, 1). He defined them by their survivability, i.e., their ability to wield “force and authority sufficient to maintain itself without the need of the help of another,” considering them the “most lasting” because they embody pure moderation (Botero 1956). However, material diversity produces terminological stretching—for example, India’s much larger population than Germany’s, or Turkey’s much smaller territory than India’s.

Later, Robert Keohane redefined this materiality in terms of power capability, arguing that so-called “secondary powers”—commonly grouped with middle powers—are states that “can exercise some impact, although never in itself decisive, on that system” (Keohane 1969, 269). At the

outset, this paper adopts Keohane's definition because it depends neither on what states are nor what they do, but on what they *can* do—a neutral, capability-based model linking middle powerhood to a state's ability to affect change in the international system.

Out of this emerges a criterial approach, defining middle powers by predetermined capabilities and standards. A nineteenth-century list by James Lorimer classifies middle powers according to four factors: material composition, state quality, state formation, and regime type (Lorimer 2001). Regarding size, two common criteria are population and economic output, placing middle powers between the statistical extremes regardless of time period (Pölitiz 2018).

John Ravenhill, while citing other scholars, reconciles the material and criterial approaches by folding capabilities into five “Cs”: 1) capacity—possessing greater influence than small powers (Cooper et al., 1993); 2) concentration—pursuing “niche” diplomacy compared to great powers’ broad objectives (Grant and Evans 1991); 3) creativity—producing intellectual capital through expert negotiation (Ibid., 281-308); 4) coalition-building—forming groups of “like-minded states” and leading multilateral institutions (Ibid., 323); and (5) credibility—being perceived as influential, but not dominant, while remaining politically consistent (Ravenhill 1998, 310–313).

Material and criterial theories can certainly provide physical, attainable conditions along with neat checklists, but they still present theoretical, practical, and historical concerns. First, and most problematic, are the arbitrary boundaries placed upon middle powerhood. Herein lies the issue with the middle: defining the center becomes more difficult when the extremes constantly change. Thresholds and measures such as GDP and military size do not provide objective cutoffs and instead rely on historical or present conditions. Likewise, both theories lead to reductionism, thereby missing other features such as recognition and self-identity (Karim 2018, 343–363).

Second, models dependent on a single material condition include some powers while excluding others. Again, Turkey and Germany may be considered middle powers by their

comparable populations, yet they possess vastly different economic outputs. This is what the paper terms the “Goldilocks Trap.” On one hand, classifying middle powers through materiality can lead to over-inclusion, as changing thresholds extend the definition to too many powers. This is why Kim Nossal concludes that “everyone is a middle power now,” as too many states materially fit the middle (Nossal 2025, 14–22). On the other hand, these approaches can also produce under-exclusion, as states that act like middle powers (e.g., influencing world economics, mediating peace, brokering regional affairs) may be excluded by finite material thresholds.

Historically, these arbitrary thresholds excluded identifiable middle powers from global governance; for instance, Spain, the Netherlands, and Poland’s exclusion from the 1998 G20 Summit despite being “emerging European economies with systemic importance” (Jokela 2011, 21). For these reasons, essentialist approaches struggle to find a definition that is ‘just right.’ (Cooper and Mo 2023, 4).

II. ACTIONIST PARADIGM

A parallel strain of theories focuses instead on what middle powers do—that is, what functions they serve and how they behave in the international system. The functionalist approach, popularized by John Holmes, concretized “middlepowermanship,” as the hardening of the middle power into a distinct functional entity within a class hierarchy (Holmes 1970, 1).

However, this approach splits into three factors: manipulation, behavior, and motivation. The first dominated earlier periods when lesser powers’ agency was understudied, reducing them to instruments of imperial strategy. In the sixteenth century, Gabriel Bonnot de Mably identified three purposes of middle powers: (1) mediators—arbitrating “between powers of the first rank”; (2) balancers—putting “a curb on that of the superior powers”; and (3) substitutes—taking “charge of the affairs of Europe” when great powers are incapacitated (Mably 1794, 74–84). Clausewitz takes an

even more mechanistic approach, defining a middle power as one simply “able to fill the part of a barrier state”—a buffer state (Clausewitz 1922, 229–230). These theories laid the groundwork for the classic middle power myth: “defenders of the balance of power and providers of peace and order” (Holbraad 1984, 41).

This gave way to a second factor focused on observable behavior and inductive reasoning rather than imposed function. Generally, this logic defines middle powerhood through an outward willingness to: (1) join consultations and international forums to hold states accountable (Ravenhill 1998, 310–313); (2) stabilize international order, appear as more “natural and universal” actors, and do the “right thing” (Jordaan 2003, 165–181); and (3) solve problems through multilateralism with a “tendency” toward compromise (Ibid., 166; Paris 2019, 2). What began as the poster-child for “global citizenship” or “good international citizenship” evolved into more defined middle power functions: mediating, catalyzing, facilitating, and peacemaking (Nossal 2025, 17).

The last factor suggests that function is derived from intentions and motives—that is, what states want to do. Being in the middle—often between vertical and horizontal conflicts—motivates these states to position themselves as balancers, hedgers, and kingmakers, playing one side against the other to their advantage (Schweller 2017, 3–4). Underlying this game is autonomy-maximization, as these powers balance between alliances to achieve greater independence (Ibid., 4). The key feature of middle powerhood, therefore, is their motivation to be exactly that: in the middle. Some scholars describe this as a “willingness” to accept responsibility as a just arbiter and maintain “ethical values and ‘humane internationalism’” (Riddell 1948), or an unwillingness to remain idle amid injustice (Nossal 2025, 16). Accordingly, middle powerhood is a “self-created identity,” one motivated by autonomy, responsibility, and “moral superiority” (Holbraad 1984, 58; Glazebrook 1947).

At first glance, the actionist approach follows the growing agency-centric strain of IR that emphasizes state effectiveness rather than structural weakness. However, major issues remain with

the three logics. For manipulation and behavior, their greatest crutch is equifinality: how actors across the international system—whether small powers, NGOs, or great powers—can pursue the same ends as middle powers. Coalition-building, mediation, and multilateralism are specializations that non-middle powers have also excelled at and pursued, e.g., Malta leading the ten elected members of the UNSC to pass Resolution 2712 (Lupel et al. 2024, 4; Ungerer 2007). Behavior, in particular, suffers from tautology, wherein middle power behaviors define middle powerhood and vice versa.

Although motivation addresses what other approaches rarely shed light on—norms, self-identity, and intentions—its arguments remain underdeveloped. Many scholars intertwine middle powerhood with the ‘right thing,’ superior morality, and other normative descriptors without defining these concepts. Measures of ‘good international citizenship’ or ‘moral commitment’ remain incomplete. Motivation also relies heavily on Western-centric moral biases, limiting generalizability. Most case studies focus on Canada, Australia, or the Nordic states which—although conventional middle powers—act as self-proclaimed moral bodies. This ignores middle powers that do not always act morally, prioritize value-based cooperation, or belong to the West; such as Turkey, given its assertive and rent-seeking intervention in North Africa (Wódka 2023, 3). That is to say, states may be moved by good citizenship, but this does not preclude power maximization.

III. EXTERNALIST PARADIGM

Standard approaches to middle powerhood vary from “statistical criteria” and “ranking of states” to “international performance” and “the power they actually command”—all with drawbacks (Holbraad 1984, 43). Due to these deficiencies, newer scholars link middle powerhood to a particular role or position within the international system. The externalist paradigm defines them by their

location within a structured system of power and interaction, where extrinsic boundaries shape middle powerhood through two logics: relativity and relationality.

Relativity argues that middle powers are defined relative to other powers, often through material comparison. What distinguishes this approach is that middle powerhood is not defined *ex nihilo*, but emerges from the existence of other powers. It is not simply what middle powers are, but what they are relative to others. According to Adam Chapnick, a middle power is “equidistant from extremes,” and identifying one requires first identifying those extremes—implying a system of more than two power classes (Chapnick 1999, 73). As with material and criterial approaches, the relativist approach can classify states differently, where “middle powers in one model are small powers in another” due to varying measurements (Ibid.).

In like fashion, middle powers can be defined by relationality: not just what they do, but what they do in relation to other powers. As Holbraad suggests, middle powerhood is “conditioned by the form and state of the international system,” while both the concept and identity of middle powers exist “with reference to other classes” (Holbraad 1984, 42). The word-choice of “with” stresses a constant conversation—perhaps a triologue—between the three power classes.

Robert Cox offers the most robust reconceptualization of relationality, arguing that the international system is a “process, not a finality,” of reproductive and emergent interactions, and that middle powers support this process by “building a more orderly world system” (Cox 1989, 826–827). Building off Holmes’ usage of “lapidary”—the shaping of a gem—Cox suggests that middle powers’ roles are gradually defined through interaction with great and small powers (Ibid.). As powers relate, interact, and learn from each other’s capabilities and actions, they reflexively shape their role i.e., order-building (Ibid., 828).

Hereafter, two developments arise: (1) middle powers are defined in relation to other powers; and (2) a global system of interaction encompasses these relationships. The latter, however, leaves

uncertainty and raises questions: How do they relate? How many relationships exist? Do they have different functions? Are these functions singular or multiple?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Middle powers can be defined by what they are, what they do, and what they do in relation to the broader international system. Each paradigm possesses strengths and weaknesses. But, as with any evolving body of scholarship, it is necessary to revisit previous approaches and ask whether a common thread runs through them all.

I. CENTRAL ARGUMENT

This article advances a synthetic approach to what constitutes a middle power. A review of the literature reveals that, despite their differences, these approaches describe a common phenomenon: middle powers shape the international system without determining it.

Essentialists, such as Keohane's capability theory, define middle powers by their ability to "impact" the international system, though not decisively (Keohane 1969, 296). They may not fundamentally alter the system's structure, but they can modify the distribution of power within it. If the balance of power were a clay vessel, great powers determine its size and shape, while middle powers shape its essential features—the handle, the spout, and so forth—which do not redefine the vessel but alter its character and use.

Actionists further refine what this 'impact' entails. Middle powers are impactful insofar as they: (1) mediate and balance between great powers, (2) defend the balance of power, (3) act as goodwill actors, and (4) leverage multilateralism and coalition-building to stabilize their regions. Using another analogy, middle powers are like consultants: they stand between the company (the international system) and its executives (the great powers), seeking to improve operations through restructuring, innovation, and efficiency. Their role is not to upend the company entirely, but to improve its performance and ensure its functioning.

Even among externalists, Cox's concept of lapidary requires a third, intermediary class of powers. Each classes' role and norms are shaped through a conversation that is inherently a trialogue, not a dialogue. The shaping of the 'gem' therefore requires a shaper: the middle power. They enrich the conversation, mediate competing perspectives, and shape the identities, expectations, and conduct of small and great powers alike.

So, after more than a century of debate over the elusive middle power, it can be synthesized according to its most fundamental role: the shaper. A middle power, therefore, is best understood as a state that modifies, manages, or directs the operation of the international system without possessing the capacity to create, dominate, or fundamentally reconstruct that system.

II. ROLE THEORY IN MIDDLE POWERHOOD

Role theory remains underutilized within IR and even less applied to middle powers. Nevertheless, this article continues the work of contemporary role theorist Cameron G. Thies, particularly his article "A Role Theory Approach to Middle Powers." Thies defines middle powerhood through a "relational, social identity," applying the sociological concept of "auxiliary roles," including "supporting multilateralism and the existing international order, and being a good international citizen" (Thies and Sari 2018, 397–404). This paper adopts Thies's definition of roles as "positions' in an organized group and socially recognized categories of actors" which—unlike functions devised *ex nihilo*—are cultivated through relationality and exchange among powers (Thies 2017, 6336).

Yet Thies and Sari's approach raises an important question. On one hand, they emphasize roles that are "necessary and sufficient conditions" of middle powerhood (Thies and Sari 2018, 402); on the other, the literature identifies a variety of possible middle power roles, including facilitator, maintainer of peace and order, coalition-builder, peacekeeper, and regional collaborator (Ibid.,

403-404). The question, therefore, is whether these roles are distinct and independent, or manifestations of a more fundamental role underlying middle power behavior—the shaper.

To organize and stratify the auxiliary roles identified by previous role theorists, and further elaborate how shaping occurs in practice, this article advances the RAM (Role, Auxiliary Role, Method) Model of Role Performance. If the middle power's role is that of a shaper, the question becomes how shaping is performed. The RAM Model answers this by organizing existing roles into a hierarchical framework of systemic role, auxiliary roles, and methods, moving from the abstract identity of the shaper to the concrete processes of shaping.

III. RAM MODEL OF ROLE PERFORMANCE

In brief, the RAM Model is divided into three levels: (1) the Role, the overarching systemic role performed by a category of power; (2) Auxiliary Roles, the supplemental pathways through which that role operates; and (3) Methods, the concrete diplomatic behaviors identified in the literature. The methods below are not exhaustive, but represent common ways middle powers perform their shaping role, whether by stabilizing, disrupting, managing, or pacifying aspects of the international system.

Table 1: RAM Model of Role Performance — Middle Powers

Middle Powerhood									
Role:	Shaper								
Auxillary Roles:	Administrator			Aggregator			Adjuster		
Methods:	Connection	Management	Stabilization	Coalition-building	Agenda-Setting	Group-reformation	Amplification	Attenuation	Neutralization

Table 1 summarizes the RAM Model advanced in this article and clarifies that, to qualify as a shaper, a state must successfully perform at least one method within each auxiliary role. By progressing through each level, the following section formalizes middle powers' systemic role performance and addresses the conceptual ambiguity that has long characterized the literature.

A. ROLE

The first level is the role. Rather than describing it within a specific region, issue area, or moment in time, the role captures the overarching manner through which an actor fulfills its social identity. For middle powers in the international system, this role is the shaper.

A review of the literature reveals that middle powers are frequently described as “shaping” international politics (Erskine 2022, 6–9; Subacchi 2008). The 2025 report *Shaping a New World? Middle Powers and Global Governance* argues that middle powers “will be central to shaping this era of transition,” yet stops short of defining shaping as their systemic role (Tagliapietra and Casarões 2025, 2). *Shaper Nations* comes closest, classifying Turkey, India, and Germany as shapers while extending the category to states beyond the conventional middle power spectrum, including Israel and the United States. It argues that shapers “are already having a significant effect” on their regions and the global system (Hitchcock et al. 2016, 2). This article therefore explains what this ‘effect’ consists of and how middle powers shape the international system.

B. AUXILIARY ROLES

The model hence introduces a secondary level of auxiliary roles, which connect the systemic role of systemic shaping to observable diplomatic methods. They function as explanatory categories of how middle powers convert discrete actions into structured influence.

The model identifies three auxiliary roles central to this paper and not clearly articulated in previous studies: (1) administrator—the management of relationships, events, and processes to preserve order, facilitate cooperation, or reduce friction among actors; (2) aggregator—the

consolidation of actors, interests, resources, or governance into collective forms of influence capable of affecting systemic outcomes; and (3) adjuster—the modification of power relationships, alignments, and spheres of influence to alter actors’ behavior, leverage, or relative position. These mechanisms systematize the following nine existing methods identified in existing scholarship.

C. METHODS

1. CONNECTION, MANAGEMENT, AND STABILIZATION

First, within the administrator role are connecting, managing, and stabilizing. Connecting refers to the physical and metaphorical linking of regions and strategic routes by acting as hubs of connectivity, interregional cooperation, and development. As a result, middle powers are often described as “bridges,” “hubs,” or “connectors” that utilize their—often natural and geographically determined—strategic locations to promote trade and position themselves as essential nodes within these routes (Maqsood 2025, 116–135; Cooper and Schulz 2023, 1083–1101; Greminger 2026a; Patrick 2026, 9). Kazakhstan’s development of the Middle Corridor as a “Eurasian Land Bridge” illustrates this dynamic (Neafie 2023, 269–289).

Managing refers to how middle powers stabilize conflict and promote peace by mediating between state actors, facilitating dialogue and talks, and fostering multilateralism. The literature uses various labels for this role—“manager,” “facilitator,” “mediator,” and “broker”—because they share the same function: managing conflict and bridging warring parties (Süsler and Alden 2026; Jones 2019, 119–134; Henrikson 1997; Park 2022, 131–57; Pinfari 2020). Australia and Indonesia, for instance, demonstrate “good regional citizenship” by strengthening ASEAN as a means of “facilitating a peaceful order transition” between the US and China (Teo 2022, 1135–1161; Abbodanza 2022, 404).

Stabilizing refers to how middle powers are often among the first actors to respond to international crises, pacify conflicts, and mitigate disasters. Their commitment to ‘good international

citizenship' is reflected in support for activities such as United Nations peacekeeping, earning them roles as "stabilizers," "peacebuilders," and "crisis managers" (Holbraad 1984, 125–126; Goldin and Khatoon 2026, 7; Al-Ketbi 2026, 12-14; Baydag 2021, 440-441; Lachica 2021; Xiao 2025). A prominent example is India, which since 1945 participated in the United Nations Emergency Force during the Suez Crisis, contributed to missions in the Congo, and remains one of the largest contributors to UN peacekeeping operations (Holbraad 1984, 293–304; Gidh 2022).

2. COALITION-BUILDING, AGENDA-SETTING, AND GROUP-REFORMATION

Positioned between great and small powers, and characterized by geographic diversity, regional polarity, and multilateralism, middle powers are effective at aggregation through three methods: coalition-building, agenda-setting, and institutionalizing.

Coalition-building is likely the most important and common role, entailing the assembly of states into groupings within their regions or among middle power counterparts. From the Cairns Group, anchored by Australia and including small island states, to the G20, a forum of mostly middle powers, they are described as "facilitators," "catalysts," and "builders" of regional and niche coalitions (Higgott and Cooper 1990, 589–632; Flesmes 2009, 401–21; Öniş and Kutlay 2017, 164–83; Kim 2019, 6). A prime example is Mexico-Indonesia-South Korea-Turkey-Australia (MIKTA), a coalition of middle powers across the globe seeking to protect "public goods" and "global governance" (Schiavon and Domínguez 2016, 500).

Second, and perhaps most synonymous with middle powerhood, is agenda-setting. Agenda-setting refers to their ability to define the priorities and missions of coalitions while promoting new norms. The terms most associated with this role are "agenda-setter," "enforcer," and "entrepreneur," as middle powers often assume responsibility for creating, advancing, and applying norms where others do not (Baxter and Bishop 1998; Lee 2016, 40–57; Cooper 2018, 598–608; Fitzler et al. 2025; Lee 2016). The BRICS group, when most members were middle powers,

illustrates this through its “2030 Agenda” for South-South cooperation and prioritization of food security in G20 rounds (Wang and Long 2024, 43-46; Duggan 2015).

A final method is what this paper terms “group-reforming,” whereby middle powers alter the character, structure, or institutionalization of coalitions and organizations. Some scholars note that regional integration often depends on middle powers’ willingness to institutionalize cooperation (De Zamaróczy 2023, 68). Others describe how middle powers join existing organizations to improve effectiveness, reshape structures, or alter orientations while preserving strategic autonomy (Wood 1987, 17; Greminger 2026b; Zhiyenbayev 2024, 3). Australia exemplifies this through its leadership in ASEAN and the Pacific, producing the ASEAN–Australia–New Zealand Free Trade Area and expanding ASEAN’s Southeast Asian focus into a transregional framework (Aamer and Chanlett-Avery 2026, 10).

3. AMPLIFICATION, ATTENUATION, AND NEUTRALIZATION

Although great powers ultimately determine the polarity and overall balance of the international system, middle powers can nonetheless shape how that balance is distributed. Often promoted by older instrumentalist traditions of IR, adjustment includes amplifying, attenuating, and neutralizing the influence of great powers.

Amplifying refers to the enhancement and extension of a great power’s influence, capabilities, or strategic reach. During conflict, middle powers function as the “supporters or lieutenants of the alliance leader” i.e., regional allies and force multipliers (Holbraad 1984, 125). Unlike small powers, which often play this role passively, middle powers occupy a “rank of their own” by actively advancing their patron’s interests (Ibid., 126). They are therefore frequently described as “regional powers” and associated with alliance “burden-sharing” (Gilley and O’Neil 2014, 5-7; Buzan and Weaver 2012). Since 1989, Poland has championed Atlanticism in Central and Eastern Europe through NATO accession, military modernization, and advocacy for a strong

Western response to Russian revanchism, leading some scholars to characterize it as “America’s protégé” (Zaborowski and Longhurst 2003, 1009–1028; Jureńczyk 2025, 117–29; Mix 2025).

The inverse is attenuation, which refers to the reduction or deterrence of a great power’s influence. Just as middle powers can amplify, they may also act as regional “balancers” against encroaching powers (Kertcher and Hitman 2025, 120–133; Edström and Westberg 2020, 171–190). Such balancing need not require military build-up, but may instead rely on diplomacy and economic statecraft (Aggarwal and Kennedy 2023, 75). The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) illustrate this by seeking to deter a rising China in the South China Sea (Petrone 2025; Rossiter and Cannon 2023).

Neutralization is the offsetting of competing great power influences to prevent either from obtaining disproportionate leverage. Many middle powers may seek strategic autonomy for themselves and their region, a regional order in which multiple great powers can operate, or even more great power competition which increases their own importance. Accordingly, they may try to “hedge” between great powers, become “regional powers” in their own right, or—often alongside connecting and mediating—remain relatively “aloof” from great power conflicts (Korolev 2016, 377–378; Acharya 2020, 151; Holbraad 1984, 127). During the Cold War, middle powers established the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) to preserve autonomy amid bipolar conflict, a tradition India and Indonesia continue to draw upon today (Dalay 2025; Vieira 2026).

IV. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

At this point, the article’s theoretical framework should make three implications clear. First, and most importantly, the many diplomatic methods associated with middle powers derive from the same overarching role of shaper. Middle powers neither allow the international system to unfold

passively nor possess the capacity to fundamentally alter it. Instead, they continually modify, manage, and maintain its operation.

Second, each auxiliary role shapes how middle powers relate to the international system by fostering relationships with its various actors. Administrators entwine themselves with other middle powers in maintaining systemic stability. Aggregators position themselves as regional leaders and shepherds of smaller powers. Adjusters enable themselves to modify, mediate, and redistribute great power influence.

Lastly, and perhaps most controversially, this broader range of methods shows that middle powers are not inherently 'good international citizens.' Rather, they may act quite amorally in pursuit of strategic autonomy, regional influence, or national interests. Their defining characteristic is therefore not benevolence, but shaping.

METHODOLOGY

Prior approaches to middle powerhood have largely fallen victim to the Goldilocks Trap, resulting in both over- and under-inclusion. This article extends what Cameron G. Thies describes as a middle power “status”—bestowed through the performance of roles “achieved by the state”—beyond material capabilities and behavioral checklists toward systemic outcomes (Thies and Sari 2018, 402). It thus advances a role-based conception of middle powerhood in which to be a middle power is to be a shaper, and to shape systemically is to be a middle power.

I. RESEARCH DESIGN

The study employs a structured, focused comparative (SFC) case study using a hybrid methodology. It compares three states—a conventional middle power, a conventional small powers, and a conventional small power contender—to assess whether the latter, according to the RAM Model, fulfills the role of shaper and thereby achieves middle powerhood. Using a most-similar systems design, the within-region cases share similar characteristics but differ in their recognized systemic power type and levels of system-shaping effectiveness. Theory-guided process tracing identifies the methods through which these states generate regional and systemic effects. The dependent variable is successful system-shaping, measured through the RAM Model by whether a state demonstrates the three auxiliary roles of shaping—administrator, aggregator, and adjuster—and produces observable transregional, institutional, or systemic outcomes. Successful system-shaping requires a state to fulfill at least one method from each auxiliary role. The analysis addresses two questions: (1) Do states widely understood as middle powers exhibit the role of shaper? And (2) can states conventionally outside the middle power class also exhibit it?

II. CASE SELECTION

With more than twenty states commonly classified as middle powers and hundreds of small powers, the study does not employ a broad transregional comparison to avoid variable confounding. The study uses an in-region comparison of West Asia, providing an interesting area to study, given its mix of middle powers, small powers, sustained involvement by external great powers, along with a long history of intervention, instability, humanitarian crises, and regionalization attempts.

Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Armenia were selected for three reasons. Methodologically, the three cases are not only located within the same sub-region but are neighboring states operating between overlapping spheres of influence. Analytically, IR scholarship has consistently classified Turkey as a middle power, while Azerbaijan and Armenia have traditionally been treated as small powers. More recently, however, Azerbaijan has been described as a middle power, creating a useful opportunity for theoretical re-evaluation. To establish the baseline classification of each case, this paper draws upon existing middle power and small power scholarship. Appendix A provides a review of how each selected case has been categorized in the literature. And strategically, middle power literature is gradually expanding beyond its current focus on the Indo-Pacific and the Global North toward greater engagement with the Middle East, including cases such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran.

Another parameter of the study is periodization. All events analyzed are drawn from the post-2020 international order, a period in which the “rise of the Rest” has become more pronounced and scholarship on middle powers has expanded. More importantly, 2020 serves as an inflection point for all three cases, marking a period in which their ability not only to survive systemic shocks but also to project power and shape their regional environments was directly tested.

III. DATA AND EVIDENCE

The study sources primarily from journal articles, analytical reports, and news reportage concerning the events discussed. However, what constitutes evidence is not merely the passive outcome of policy, but the strategies and projects actively pursued by the three cases to alter their power position or regional environment. As mentioned, to be considered a shaper, a state must successfully fulfill one method within each of the three auxiliary roles. While these actions may produce immediate regional effects, they must ultimately generate trans-regional, international, or institutional effects that extend beyond national borders. As such, the analysis will use the following gradations or levels of system effectiveness.

Table 2: Levels of System Shaping

Levels of System Shaping	
Strong	State action produces durable and externally consequential changes to transregional or systemic conditions by creating new mechanisms of stability, reorganizing patterns of actor cooperation, or altering the distribution of power.
Moderate	State action produces meaningful regional or institutional effects but does not create durable changes to the broader organization, stability, or power distribution of the system.
Weak	State action produces observable but limited effects that remain issue-specific, temporary, or dependent on external actors and therefore do not significantly alter regional or systemic conditions.
Failed	State action does not produce observable changes in regional or systemic conditions, resulting primarily in symbolic initiatives, unsuccessful proposals, or diplomatic activity without measurable effects.

IV. ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE

Each case study analysis proceeds through three steps: identifying the episode of shaping, tracing the diplomatic processes and policies employed, and evaluating the effectiveness of the method. The section concludes with a comparative summary and evaluation of each case's shaping.

V. LIMITATIONS

However, assessing 'systemic' outcomes presents limitations. First is causal attribution, given confounding variables and outside actors. Cases where a state single-handedly shapes the international system are rare. Therefore, the article focuses on crises and instability, where state action is most visible and its effects most consequential—specifically, whether a state was indispensable to managing, resolving, or stabilizing the issue.

Second is scope. Although the role advanced is systemic, outcomes may not always be. The paper therefore examines regional, institutional, and systemic outcomes, emphasizing those that are transregional and extend beyond regional borders.

ANALYSIS

West Asia, and more specifically the South Caucasus, is a region at the convergence of Russian, Turkish, and Iranian spheres of influence, making it an ideal testing ground for cross-regional and cross-actor interactions. Within it, Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Armenia have each sought to redefine their regional positions: Turkey as a regional security guarantor (Sharova and Cohen 2026, 263–310), Azerbaijan through an unprecedented degree of strategic autonomy (Alisoy 2026, 63–77), and Armenia as a hub for connectivity (European Commission and Government of Armenia 2026).

No case, however, has generated as much analytical uncertainty as Azerbaijan. Since 2020, its military and diplomatic successes have prompted a growing number of scholars to ask whether Azerbaijan is a middle power. The first study to address this explicitly was Esmira Jafarova's 2020 report, *Is Azerbaijan a Middle Power?* (Jafarova 2020), followed by many others.

Despite retaining quintessential small power features—from its population and GDP to exclusion from groups like the G20—the question remains. This study assesses whether Azerbaijan qualifies as a middle power by fulfilling the systemic role of shaper under the RAM Model, comparing it with Turkey, a conventional middle power, and Armenia, a conventional small powers. If Azerbaijan's pattern of role performance more closely resembles the former than the latter, the study advances a role-based conception of middle powerhood beyond the material and instrumentalist limitations that have traditionally constrained the classification of states capable of shaping the international system.

I. TURKEY: THE CONVENTIONAL MIDDLE POWER

A. ADMINISTRATOR: MEDIATION OF THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR

Turkey has made mediation synonymous with its foreign policy, most notably through the Finland-partnered Friends of Mediation platform in 2010 (Sofos 2022). Since then, it has mediated conflicts ranging from Bosnia to Nagorno-Karabakh. As Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu argues, because Turkey is "located right at the center of all the political conflicts," mediation constitutes its international identity (Davutoğlu 2023, 83), leading some policymakers to describe it as a "natural born mediator" (Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm 2011, 190).

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Turkey quickly positioned itself as mediator, hosting the first high-level meeting between the parties' foreign ministers at the Antalya Diplomacy Forum before facilitating direct negotiations under the 'Istanbul Framework.' Its mediation rested on three complementary methods.

First was neutrality—or what Eleonora Ambrosetti terms *tarafsız* ("sidelessness")—which required balancing Turkey's NATO membership with its economic ties to both Russia and Ukraine (Ambrosetti 2024). This "diplomatic balancing act" of "equidistance" (Wódka 2023, 227; Riboua 2025) meant refusing to sanction Russia while maintaining direct access to Putin, yet simultaneously supplying Ukraine with Bayraktar drones and condemning the invasion. Second was sustained communication with both parties (Güler 2026, 23). Erdoğan acted as a direct message-carrier between Zelensky and Putin, bypassing slower bureaucratic channels during repeated last-ditch negotiations (Yazici and Cengiz 2022). Third, Turkey shifted to "functional mediation" when a comprehensive settlement proved unattainable, focusing instead on resolving the food blockade through the Black Sea Grain Initiative (Nadirah and Akbar 2025, 808).

Notwithstanding the Grain Initiative, Turkey's early mediation came close to bringing the conflict to a halt, with Germany's former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder even claiming that a peace agreement was close to being finalized in Istanbul (Aris 2023). Turkey's effectiveness was perhaps quashed by British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's unwillingness to support the negotiations

(Ashford 2024), but what remained of the mediation—the Grain Initiative—proved system-shaping. By ensuring a safe maritime corridor through Turkey's monitoring (Pedrozo 2023, 432), it enabled approximately 28.8 million tons of Ukrainian agricultural exports, stabilized global food markets and lowered food prices (Caprile et al. 2022), and, according to the United Nations, prevented some 100 million people from falling into extreme poverty (“UN Chief 'Deeply Concerned' by Stalled Black Sea Grain Initiative” 2022). Turkey's mediation was therefore system-shaping: although it neither ended the war nor prevented the revision of Europe's post-Cold War security order, it altered the trajectory of global humanitarian and economic outcomes.

B. AGGREGATOR: ORGANIZATION-REFORMATION OF THE TURKIC WORLD

Turkey practically seeks to be part of every major international grouping, from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the European Union to consultation with the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) (Özgen 2014, 30–31). As a rising middle power, it does so because of its ambition to shape global governance, reflected in its 2015 G20 Presidency. Accordingly, Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan has described Turkey's ambition as becoming a “system-transformer actor” by institutionalizing policies of “peace, stability, and prosperity” (Fidan 2023, 14).

Turkey attempted to do exactly this in an organization it helped establish in its own backyard: the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). Founded as the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States, the organization began as a loose consultative body focused on cultural and linguistic solidarity. Turkey's objective, however, was “to institutionalize” the Turkic World concept, exercising regional leadership while promoting its national interests abroad (Lee 2025, 537). Having maintained a “big brother” (Isachenko 2025, 6) posture toward Central Asia through the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) and the International Organization of Turkic Culture (TURKSOY), Turkey used this credibility to become the “driving force behind the integration movement” (Donghui 2024, 411) following the Second Karabakh War (Kocatepe 2025,

6). From 2021 onward, as the OTS attracted the ire of Russia and China and the intrigue of the international community, Turkey “proactively set agendas, pursue[d] them, and manage[d] these processes” (Lee 2025, 552).

Turkey's paternalism and institutional leadership expanded the breadth and depth of the OTS, transforming it from a loose cooperation mechanism into “a fully-fledged international organization” (Demir 2022, 39) and from a cultural body into one encompassing political, military, and economic cooperation (Avdaliani 2026). At the outset, institutionalization positively affected inter-regional bilateral trade among member states (Cetinkaya and Demirel 2024, 4). It also produced the *Turkic World Vision 2040*, cooperation across more than thirty-five fields, and an integrated trans-Caspian bloc centered on the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway, the Trans-Anatolian gas pipeline, and the Middle Corridor (Cornell 2025; Purtaş 2025, 125). The OTS, in turn, acts as a stop-gap for China's Belt and Road Initiative and an emerging actor in Eurasian trade between China and the West.

C. ADJUSTER: NEUTRALIZATION OF THE MIDDLE EAST

The relative contraction of U.S. involvement in the Middle East since the Global War on Terror has led many middle powers to become more active in their foreign affairs. Turkey, especially, has embraced “strategic autonomy” (Aran et al. 2026) to “carve out a more autonomous space from its traditional Western allies,” build relations with non-Western great powers, and assert its own regional sphere of influence (Aydin-Düzgüt 2025, 2). If its previous role was to amplify the American and Atlanticist sphere (Günay 2021, 473), its current goal is to neutralize it.

This process, framed as cross-border counterterrorism, began with concrete actions: the occupation of areas of Syria since 2016, operations against Kurdish fighters in Syria and Iraq, and continued military presence in northern Iraq (Zanotti and Thomas 2023). Initially conducted in consultation with NATO, Turkey began dealing “with all relevant state actors, including Russia and

Iran,” while promoting the Development Path Project to transform military influence into long-term regional integration (Ibid., 46). For the United States and its allies, the decision “to share the burden” ultimately produced the reverse effect (Gao and Durdu 2024, 138;).

From 2011 to 2025, Turkey expanded its influence from the Levant into Africa, establishing a military base in Libya, pursuing additional bases in Chad, and brokering the 2024 Ankara Declaration between Ethiopia and Somalia. This trajectory has led scholars to describe its foreign policy as “Neo-Ottomanism”—a strategy of becoming the central country and security guarantor of the Islamic world (Kunz Saponoro and Luigi 2025; Adamczyk and Ilik 2019).

Whether or not this role truly represents a revival, Turkey has nevertheless emerged as a regional power amid the United States' “decreased appetite for regional security commitments” (Dalay 2024, 2). It shares the burden, but does so on its own terms, making the region its immediate sphere of influence. U.S. Ambassador to Turkey Tom Barrack thanked President Erdoğan for his “support for diplomacy and regional de-escalation,” (Dincel 2026) while regional leaders Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud explicitly praised Turkey's “leadership during difficult times in Somalia” after signing a ten-year defense cooperation deal with the middle power (Keskinilic et al. 2025). Turkey, nevertheless, could not reverse decades of US intervention or retrenchment, but it carved out an independent regional leadership role that reshaped the distribution of influence among great powers.

D. FINAL ASSESSMENT

For over half a century, Turkey has been a well-studied and conventional middle power whose influence has continued to grow both globally and regionally. Turkey has proven to be an exemplary shaper through: (1) its near-essential mediation of the Russo-Ukrainian War, which helped prevent a wider humanitarian food crisis through the Black Sea Grain Initiative (Administration: strong); (2) its transformation of a largely consultative Turkic grouping into an emerging geopolitical

bloc with the potential to reshape Eurasian trade (Aggregation: strong); and (3) its neutralization of U.S. influence in much of the Middle East by evolving from a regional security partner into a security guarantor with its own sphere of influence (Adjustment: strong).

II. ARMENIA: THE CONVENTIONAL SMALL POWER

A. ADMINISTRATOR: CONNECTION THROUGH THE CROSSROADS OF PEACE INITIATIVE

Armenia's connectivity ambitions were, for decades, constrained by a simple reality: it was a “landlocked country with two closed borders” with Azerbaijan and Turkey (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development 2023). Trans-regional infrastructure such as the Middle Corridor and Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway remained “not accessible for Armenian shipments,” leaving Georgia as the preferred transit route while Armenia endured “enforced isolation,” dependent on Iran and Russia (Safaryan 2026, 29). These missed opportunities compelled Armenian policymakers to envision themselves as part of a “reconnecting Eurasia,” within which they hoped to become a vital hub (Kuchins 2016).

In this process, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan unveiled the Crossroads of Peace initiative in 2023, presenting Armenia as “situated at the crossroads of Europe and Asia” and proposing new “logistical pathways” connected to the Middle Corridor (Papoyan and Hayrapetyan 2025). Following peace negotiations with Azerbaijan and normalization efforts with Turkey, Armenia proposed reopening borders, restoring railway connections, and reconstructing the North–South Highway (Ibid.). Although Azerbaijan had already laid much of the groundwork for regional connectivity, PM Pashinyan argued that “the Crossroads of Peace can become a part of the Middle Corridor,” making Armenia a necessary transit route across the South Caucasus (“Crossroads of Peace project can become part of Middle Corridor” 2024).

Beyond the marketing, however, the initiative has not met its intended goals. Following Armenia's "crushing defeat," the project largely amounted to concessions to a stronger Azerbaijan, with some analysts arguing that it could even "advance Russo-Azeri interests" (Institute for Security and Analysis 2024). Armenia therefore connects passively rather than through an active connector role. The Gyumri Dry Port project, intended to attract Middle Corridor trade, has remained "largely on paper," despite \$37 million in investment (Stepanyan 2024). Even the TRIPP Route—one of the most promising proposals—illustrates that Armenia's connectivity depended on external mediation and U.S. guarantees rather than its own shaping capacity (Fernández Aparicio 2026).

There remains potential for a highway connecting the European Union to Azerbaijan through Armenia, which Pashinyan argues is "very easy to implement. All that is needed is a political agreement" (Khudiyev 2026). Yet given its record, Armenia's ability to actively perform the role of connector remains underdetermined.

B. AGGREGATOR: COALITION-BUILDING DURING THE SECOND KARABAKH WAR

Armenia compensates for its small power status with a large and influential diaspora, particularly in the West. Described as "strong and well-organized," the Armenian diaspora was essential in supporting Armenia's war effort during the First Nagorno-Karabakh War (Shain and Barth 2003, 471). Famously, the Armenian National Committee of America and other Armenian-American lobbying organizations persuaded Congress to "pass and sustain" Section 907 of the SUPPORT Act, prohibiting U.S. assistance to Azerbaijan during and after the conflict (Ibid.).

In the 2020 war, Armenia expanded this strategy beyond lobbying into coalition-building, seeking to assemble a broader anti-Azerbaijan coalition centered on the United States, the European Union, and France. This began with narrative-making, as diaspora organizations used Armenia's post-2018 democratic image to present it as "the sole democratic pole in an otherwise authoritarian neighborhood," framing a defense of Armenia as a defense against "authoritarian aggression"

(Freeman and DerSimonian 2023, 20-21). According to Dmitry Chernobrov, this constituted a “war of information” and exercise in “infopolitics” (Chernobrov 2022, 632).

The second step was diasporic mobilization. Armenian communities across Luxembourg, Belgium, France, the United States, and Russia organized demonstrations and campaigns framing Azerbaijan and Turkey as an adversarial bloc, while Armenian officials encouraged participation by declaring: “In this war we are all soldiers and all have an important role to play” (Féron and Baser 2023, 393).

The campaign produced some results. In 2023, the European Union established the EU Mission in Armenia, serving as a “soft security deterrent” following the war (Tatikyan 2023, 5). The European Parliament later adopted a resolution calling for closer EU–Armenia relations while describing Azerbaijan’s tantamount to ethnic cleansing (European Parliament 2024). In the United States, however, efforts to restrict military assistance to Azerbaijan “had not gained traction” and resulted in “no sanction[s] ... issued against Azerbaijan” (Freeman and DerSimonian 2023, 24).

Coalition-building peaked with the 2024 Joint EU–US–Armenia High-Level Meeting, which produced the €270 million Resilience and Growth Plan for Armenia (European Commission 2024). Armenia therefore demonstrated an ability to shape international narratives and mobilize external support, but not the regional balance of power. Its activism “helped raise awareness” yet ultimately “had little influence” on regional outcomes following Azerbaijan’s emergence as a regional power (Barseghyan 2020).

C. ADJUSTER: AMPLIFICATION OF THE EUROPEAN UNION IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

Of the three South Caucasus states, none has been as “strategically attached to Russia” as Armenia (Margaryan 2025, 14). Its membership in the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), alongside Russian FSB border guards, a military base in Gyumri, and substantial investment, entrenched this dependence. Attempts

to diversify its strategic orientation were previously abandoned, most notably when Armenia withdrew from the EU Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) in 2013 in favor of the Russian-led Customs Union (Vasilyan 2026, 2).

Russia's invasion of Ukraine catalyzed Armenia's reconsideration of its strategic orientation, as it sought not only to become more Euro-oriented but also to bring Europe into the South Caucasus. Armenia and the European Union deepened the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), promoting institutional reform, regulatory alignment, mobility, and trade. It also welcomed the European Union Mission in Armenia (EUMA) in 2023, bringing "the EU's first physical presence in Armenia's security space" (Margaryan 2025, 17). The Mission sought to establish Brussels as a mediator and stabilizer while serving as a "purely soft deterrent," described as "unprecedented" in Russia's near abroad (Fenkart 2025).

By March 2025, Armenia had approved legislation launching the process toward EU accession. Vice President of the European Commission Kaja Kallas remarked that the EU and Armenia had "never been as close as now," while Brussels extended the EUMA's mandate and expanded military aid through the European Peace Facility (Vardanyan 2025).

Meanwhile, much like its reliance on the EU during the 2020 war, Armenia's strategic reorientation has remained largely symbolic (Frappi 2022, 467; Giragosian 2024, 4). The CEPA provides no "binding security guarantees" and, from Brussels' perspective, Armenia remains a "reform partner rather than a strategic ally"—whereas Azerbaijan secured both security guarantees and a formal alliance with a NATO member (Margaryan 2025, 21). Russia continues to dominate key sectors of Armenia's economy, creating continued "political dependence" (Sukiasyan 2024). In practice, Armenia is not actively amplifying Europe's sphere of influence, but rather hedging through closer relations with the EU as part of its national security strategy as a precarious small power (Vasliyan 2026).

D. FINAL ASSESSMENT

A conventional small power that attempted to punch above its weight, Armenia struggled to carve out the autonomy and influence necessary to do so. From failing to assert itself within trans-regional trade and infrastructure to galvanizing a limited coalition of larger powers in support of its campaign against Azerbaijan, Armenia was ultimately unable to shape: (1) it failed to integrate itself into the Middle Corridor or implement new trans-regional infrastructure (Administration: weak); (2) it prompted the United States and Europe to more harshly criticize Azerbaijan, but without producing broader regional or systemic effects (Aggregation: failed); and (3) although it increased Europe's presence in the South Caucasus, continued economic change and Russian dependence prevented it from truly amplifying Brussels' sphere of influence (Adjustment: weak).

III. AZERBAIJAN: THE MIDDLE POWER CONTENDER

A. ADMINISTRATOR: CONNECTION THROUGH THE MIDDLE CORRIDOR

At the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, Azerbaijan possesses a natural advantage for connecting. Its government has voiced this new role: from “Eurasia's Transit Hub” (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan 2025) to a “transit hub between North–South, East and West” (Ministry of Digital Development and Transport of the Republic of Azerbaijan 2025). While connectivity remained largely confined to energy, Azerbaijan has expanded hydrocarbons into trans-regional supply-chain networks, seeking to play a “pivotal role in shaping the future of international transport” (Ibid., 2).

Nowhere is this connector role more evident than in the Middle Corridor, which evolved “from a conceptual framework to a significant logistical network” (Cutler 2024, 19). Following China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Azerbaijan's 2015 Memorandum of Understanding with Beijing, the project entered a “new stage” (Tekir 2022, 57). Azerbaijan not only facilitated the

Corridor's passage through its territory but independently developed the infrastructure necessary to support it, including the Baku International Sea Trade Port, the Alat Free Economic Zone—described as “the Jebel Ali of Baku”—and the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway (Ibid., 58). Baku actively seized the opportunity to shape Eurasian trade.

Following the first continuous freight movement in 2020, Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR) cargo volume increased by 2.5 times, reaching 3.3 million tons, while container shipping between Asia and Europe grew by “6.2 times” between 2017 and 2024 (Nurseit 2026, 168). By 2023, transportation along the Middle Corridor reached 4.3 million tons, a 65 percent increase over the previous year (Rafi 2024, 3). The Corridor became a “safer and faster freight transport” route between China and Europe while reducing dependence on routes through Russia (Nurseit 2026, 168).

Without Azerbaijan's support, there would be no continuous trans-regional corridor linking China, Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and the European Union—a modern Silk Road (Claessen 2026). By becoming a connector and a “power of logistical control,” Azerbaijan has been able to “punch significantly above its weight” (Molchanov and Lopez-Alves 2025, 545).

B. AGGREGATOR: AGENDA-SETTING IN THE NON-ALIGNED MOVEMENT

Azerbaijan, like Turkey, uses multilateralism to “project influence and safeguard its national interests” (Tüfekçi 2025, 105). At the same time, Azerbaijan framed this leadership in more altruistic terms. As Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov claims, Azerbaijan seeks to “promote international solidarity and multilateralism” (Bayramov 2023, 2).

However, Azerbaijan combined national and global interests as an agenda-setter most notably through its chairmanship of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) from 2019 to 2024. Largely inactive before Azerbaijan assumed the chair, the organization was revitalized through Baku's funding and institutional reforms, transforming it into an “international player” that more

loudly expressed the voice of its 120 member states (Huseynov 2022). Azerbaijan established new bodies, including the NAM Parliamentary Network and Youth Network, while proposing a permanent Support Office. Its stewardship during the COVID-19 pandemic was so influential that member states unanimously extended its chairmanship (Avraham 2025).

Under this expanded mandate, Azerbaijan advanced an agenda centered on sovereignty, territorial integrity, and anti-colonialism (Maliki-Aliyev 2021). The latter became particularly useful in rallying Global South support against France, one of Azerbaijan's most vocal critics over Nagorno-Karabakh (Asgarov 2024, 258; (Hasanoğlu and Süleymanlı 2024, 3979).

Azerbaijan's agenda-setting capacity was most evident during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War. When France, alongside the United States and Russia, attempted to secure a UN Security Council Presidential Statement condemning Azerbaijan ("Nagorno-Karabakh Consultations" 2020), Baku leveraged its NAM network to prevent consensus through the "preliminary work and negotiations of the Azerbaijani side with the [120] member states of the NAM" ("Azerbaijan — The Non-Aligned Movement" 2025). A small South Caucasian state had frustrated an initiative backed by two great powers through institutional agenda-setting.

Its anti-colonial rhetoric similarly internationalized criticism of France, with French Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin acknowledging after protests in New Caledonia that "the Caledonian pro-independence leaders have made a deal with Azerbaijan. It's indisputable" ("This Isn't a Fantasy" 2024). Again, a conventional small power projected its agenda into a dispute involving a major power on the other side of the world.

C. ADJUSTER: NEUTRALIZATION OF THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

After its victory in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, Azerbaijan emerged as more than a passive small power. Its military success showcased rising defense capabilities and regional clout, enabled in part by its strategic partnership—and later formal alliance—with Turkey (Gurbanov

2025, 3001). Propelled by its brotherly state, Azerbaijan reshaped the regional balance of power with armed forces operating at “NATO standards” (“Azerbaijan Is Transitioning to NATO Standards” 2025).

Azerbaijan flexed its strategic autonomy to attenuate Russia’s sphere of influence in the South Caucasus. Much like its famous salami-slicing tactics in Karabakh—slow, incremental, yet irreversible gains—it reduced Russian paternalism through a step-by-step process. First, the 2021 Shusha Declaration upgraded Azerbaijan-Turkey relations into an alliance, with military exercises signaling “power projection and geopolitical signalling vis-à-vis Yerevan, Moscow, and Tehran” (Von Essen 2023, 9). As Russia became preoccupied with Ukraine, the Turkish-Azerbaijani security partnership became a “powerful deterrent” (Chechelashvili et al. 2025, 22). Second, Azerbaijan challenged the legitimacy of Russian peacekeepers by accusing them of failing to fulfill their Nagorno-Karabakh mandate (Huseynov and Muradov 2024). Third, by 2025, Azerbaijan effectively usurped Russia’s traditional role as regional security guarantor by turning to US President Donald Trump to broker a peace agreement with Armenia, sidelining Russian long-term oversight (Von Essen 2025).

These strategies proved effective. Russian peacekeepers withdrew from Nagorno-Karabakh, marking the collapse of Moscow’s principal remaining instrument of influence in Azerbaijan, while Baku restored its territorial integrity after thirty years (Chernikov 2025; Huseynov 2024). With Turkish forces replacing Russia’s presence, the Russian unipolar regional security complex became bipolar (Siribiladze 2024). Turkey emerged as “a regional pole on par with Russia” (Sukiasyan and Davtyan 2025, 131). Azerbaijan further attenuated Russian influence by supporting the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity, a US-administered route connecting Armenia and Azerbaijan that bypasses Russia’s traditional regional trade routes (Ohanyan 2026).

D. FINAL ASSESSMENT

Having been independent for just over thirty years and as one of the smaller post-Soviet states by size, Azerbaijan has clearly defied conventional definitions of the ‘small power.’ From becoming essential to trans-regional energy and transport networks to rolling back Russia’s influence in Nagorno-Karabakh, it has demonstrated the capacity to shape by: (1) connecting Europe to Asia through the Middle Corridor and reshaping Eurasian supply chains (Administration: strong); (2) setting an agenda within the Non-Aligned Movement that mobilized much of the Global South, negated great power impositions, and disrupted regions beyond its own (Aggregation: strong); and (3) attenuating Russia’s influence in the South Caucasus through the removal of Moscow’s military presence, all while introducing Turkey as a new security guarantor (Adjustment: strong).

CONCLUSION

Who, then, shapes the international system? This thesis has argued that the answer lies with the middle powers. While great powers possess the capacity to establish, reconstruct, or dismantle the broader architecture of international order, and small powers are more often compelled to adapt to the conditions created by others, middle powers occupy the space in between. They administer crises, aggregate actors, and adjust balances of power. Their contribution is therefore neither one of creation nor submission, but of shaping. Through these continual processes, middle powers transform the international system from a static hierarchy into a dynamic web of interaction.

To arrive at this conclusion, the thesis sought to reconcile more than a century of scholarship on middle powers. Existing approaches have variously defined middle powers according to their material capabilities, behavioral tendencies, motivations, or relationships with other powers. But, despite their differences, each pointed toward the same underlying phenomenon: middle powers exert influence by shaping the operation of the international system. The principal theoretical contribution of this thesis is the advancement of a synthetic approach to middle powerhood. Rather than viewing the existing literature as competing explanations, it demonstrates that these traditions converge upon a common systemic role. By applying role theory, the thesis reframes middle powerhood not simply as a category of states, but as a social role performed within the international system.

To operationalize this role, the thesis introduced the RAM Model of Role Performance, linking an abstract systemic role to observable diplomatic behavior. The model identifies administrator, aggregator, and adjuster as the principal auxiliary roles through which shaping occurs, while their respective methods provide observable indicators of middle power role performance.

Table 3: Comparative Effectiveness of Shaper Role Performance

Comparative Effectiveness of Shaper Role Performance			
Auxiliary Roles	Turkey	Azerbaijan	Armenia
Administrator	Method: Mediation Effectiveness: Strong	Method: Connection Effectiveness: Strong	Methods: Connection Effectiveness: Weak
Aggregator	Method: Group-reformation Effectiveness: Strong	Method: Agenda-setting Effectiveness: Strong	Method: Coalition-building Effectiveness: Weak
Adjuster	Method: Neutralization Effectiveness: Strong	Method: Neutralization Effectiveness: Strong	Method: Amplification Effectiveness: Weak

The empirical analysis likewise lends support to the proposed framework (see Table 3). Turkey consistently demonstrated strong performance across all three auxiliary roles. More importantly, Azerbaijan displayed a remarkably similar pattern of role performance, successfully administering regional processes, aggregating states and institutions, and adjusting regional balances of influence across multiple episodes since 2020. Armenia, by contrast, exhibited weak performance across all auxiliary roles, remaining constrained by structural dependence, limited regional leverage, and an incomplete strategic reorientation. Consequently, Azerbaijan's overall pattern of role performance more closely resembles that of Turkey than Armenia, providing further evidence that Azerbaijan should be understood as a middle power under a role-based conception of middle powerhood.

Perhaps the broader implication of this paper extends beyond middle powers altogether. If middle powers possess a distinct systemic role as shapers, then there is little reason to assume that the remaining power classes do not likewise possess their own systemic roles. Great powers may be understood as the makers of the international system, constructing and reconstructing its overarching architecture. Middle powers, in turn, shape that architecture through continual administration, aggregation, and adjustment. Small powers, meanwhile, may occupy the role of takers, adapting to, reproducing, and operating within the systemic conditions established by larger

actors. The international system, therefore, is perhaps best understood not simply as a distribution of capabilities, but as a distribution of roles.

APPENDIX

This appendix provides an overview of how the three selected cases—Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Armenia—have been characterized within existing scholarship. Because this thesis examines whether a small power contender can achieve middle powerhood through systemic role performance, establishing the existing scholarly categorization of each case provides the baseline for comparative analysis. The classifications below reflect prevailing interpretations within the literature rather than fixed categories.

Table A.1: Existing Classifications of Selected Cases

Cases	Regional Context	Existing Classification	Basis of Classification
Turkey	West Asia (Anatolia)	Middle Power	G20 membership; defense-industrial base; historical precedence
Azerbaijan	West Asia (South Caucasus)	Small Power (Middle Power Contender)	Great power deterrence; regional leadership; connectivity
Armenia	West Asia (South Caucasus)	Small Power	Political/economic resources; small size; domestic-focused policy

I. CONVENTIONAL MIDDLE POWER: TURKEY

With the longest history of independence among the three cases, Turkey has a storied history of categorization and ambiguity, with many scholars describing its identity as ‘ambiguous’ since the end of the First World War. In its previous form, the Ottoman Empire, John Westlake argued that it did not occupy an “intermediate” (Holland 1898, 148) position, but rather oscillated between one extreme and the other, and indeed other scholars recounting that for much of its early history it was considered a lesser great power to the Europeans (Westlake 1904, 325). This perception changed following Turkey's entry into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). It became “fully

accepted by the western nations on equal terms”—that is, as an ally and regional power alongside the established Western middle powers—at which point it sought greater regional autonomy and a more independent foreign policy (Delvoie 2005, 3).

From the post-Cold War era onward, Turkey was solidly considered a middle power by many scholars, or at the very least a regional power. Several criteria pointed to this: its Gross National Product (GNP) by 1994 rivaled other European powers, its military capability allowed it to stabilize many of the region’s conflict (Hale 1992, 679-692); and it became more economically active in the Balkans, Middle East, and Caucasus, as exemplified by the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Accord (BSECA) (Müftüler and Yüksel 1997, 192-194). As Turkey’s alignment became “non-exclusive” during the so-called “post-post-Cold War” (2008 onward), its ability to project regionally and globally using its hard and soft power was noticed by many analysts especially after 2020 and the ostensible crumbling of the Liberal International Order (LIO), making it, all in all, a ‘household’ middle power (Öztürk 2026; Yalçın 2012, 202)

II. CONVENTIONAL SMALL POWER: ARMENIA

Armenia, the smallest of the three states, serves as an example of how conventional small powers maximize their influence. By virtually every material metric, it has consistently been regarded as a small power, from its inability to ensure its own security—requiring it to “shelter” under Russian protection and membership in Russian-led institutions—to its limited resources, population, and economic precarity, despite possessing a highly influential diaspora (Aberg and Terzyan 2018; Kasim 2012; Tsaturyan and Duarte 2026; Ter-Matevosyan and Mkrtchyan 2021, 203-206). Armenian leaders and analysts recognize these constraints and have accordingly argued that the country's foreign policy should prioritize neutrality, economic diversification, and domestic reform rather than outward projection (Qatrani 2026, 6). Be that as it may, former Armenian President Armen

Sarkissian famously authored *The Small States Club*, in which he not only identifies Armenia as a quintessential small power, but argues that “smallness is often regarded as a weakness; it can be a strength” (Sarkissian 2023, 14). Thus, with what few conventional capabilities it possesses, Armenia has sought to compensate by excelling in more dynamic fields.

III. MIDDLE POWER CONTENDER: AZERBAIJAN

A small territory in the shadow of three larger powers—Turkey, Russia, and Iran—and independent only since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan is, at face value, unquestionably a small power. If one were to apply common criteria for small power it would undoubtedly be one. According to Baldur Thorhallsson’s four criteria (i.e., population, territory, gross domestic product [GDP], and military capacity) it is a small power by every metric (Thorhallsson 2006, 7; “World Factbook: Azerbaijan” 2025). Moreover, using Keohane’s definition of a state that can “never, acting alone or in a small group, make a significant impact on the system,” Azerbaijan for much of its recent history would likewise fit the category (Keohane 1969, 296). Mired in conflict with Armenia, managing a post-Soviet petrochemical economy, and aspiring—but failing—to formally join the Euro-Atlantic bloc, its systemic trajectory appeared limited, despite its growing importance as a “key energy supplier” in Eurasia (Tadevosyan 2024, 36).

Over the 2000s and 2010s, this all changed. The Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline made Azerbaijan central to Western energy security; its soft power and international visibility increased through hosting the European Games, Formula One, and a growing tourism sector during the 2010s oil boom; and, most famously, the decade culminated in its military victory in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020. Overrunning Armenia’s military following a decade-long military buildup supported by Turkish and Israeli arms sales and training, Azerbaijan captivated and surprised analysts, particularly as further successes followed (Erickson 2021, 3-4). Becoming the first

post-Soviet state to dispel the myth that “the Russians never leave” by forcing Russian peacekeepers out of Karabakh, it became increasingly clear that Azerbaijan could no longer be blindly classified as a small power (Shumunov 2025, 5).

It is here that Esmira Jafarova's report, *“Is Azerbaijan a Middle Power?”*, enters the discussion, along with a growing body of scholarship arguing that Azerbaijan has become a middle power (Oztarsu and Kim 2026; Oztarsu and Ibrahimov 2026; Mammadova 2026; Cornell 2024) by consistently punching above its supposed weight class. The question has since spread beyond the academic literature, from leading Azerbaijani IR scholars gathering for a conference titled *“Azerbaijan as a Middle Power”* to Hikmet Hajiyev, Assistant to the President, who described Azerbaijan's growing leadership in “middle power” diplomacy (“Hikmet Hajiyev” 2026).

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