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# **Middle Powers**

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# The Powers in the International System: Theoretical, Technical, and Methodological Challenges for Their Study



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## 1. Introduction

The analysis of powers within the international system has historically been dominated by a focus on the so-called “great powers,” resulting in limited visibility and understanding of other, less prominent or less influential powers. However, in the 1980s, Carsten Holbraad published *Middle Powers in International Politics* (1984), which significantly impacted the field of International Relations by broadening the scope of study to include mid-range powers.

Holbraad’s primary goal was “to examine the actual conduct and determine the typical roles of middle powers in international politics” (Holbraad 1984, p. 4). He explored the historical origins of the concept, developed a methodology for identifying middle powers within the international hierarchy, and analyzed their performance at three key historical junctures: 1815, following the Napoleonic Wars; 1919, after World War I; and 1945, in the post-World War II context. He later updated the concept to reflect the historical context of the Cold War and theorized their roles within four types of international systems: unifocal, dualist, triangular, and multiple. Through this comprehensive approach, Holbraad produced the most significant study on middle powers.

Despite the strengths of his work, Holbraad’s conceptualization remained somewhat imprecise, as he himself acknowledged: “Middle powers, it seems, can best

be distinguished in terms of the strength they possess and the power they command” (1984, p. 76), which left room for ambiguity. This issue persisted in the subsequent decades, as the concept of middle powers was applied to countries ranked below the great powers of the time (the United States and the Soviet Union) but above smaller states. As a result, the term encompassed a highly heterogeneous group of countries with diverse historical trajectories, no evident common interests, and generally lacking significant cohesion among themselves.

Empirically, the problem was even more pronounced, as the middle powers identified by Holbraad encompassed 18 countries with widely varying power and roles, including Japan, the Federal Republic of Germany, the People’s Republic of China, France, the United Kingdom, Canada, Italy, Brazil, Spain, Poland, India, Australia, Mexico, Iran, Argentina, South Africa, Indonesia, and Nigeria.

The concept of middle powers continues to generate confusion in the current global context, making it increasingly urgent to establish a more precise classification in a world marked by growing multipolarity. Inaccurate categorizations not only distort theoretical understandings of power and the international positioning of states but can also negatively affect the formulation of foreign policy strategies and compromise the effectiveness of global governance.

This paper delves into the theoretical, technical, and methodological challenges involved in studying powers within the international system. Through this analysis, it aims to provide a more precise and comprehensive understanding of the classification and roles of global, middle, regional, and subregional powers in the current international geostructure.

## 2. Challenges in the Classification of Powers

The challenges of classifying powers in today’s international context can be grouped into three main levels: theoretical, technical, and methodological. Each of these levels presents significant hurdles that must be addressed to ensure a coherent and accurate understanding of power in the international system.

In Latin America, several scholars have made strides in articulating the most relevant paradigms of international relations, developing a trans-structural perspective to understand national power and the positioning of states within the international geostructure (Rocha & Morales 2010; Morales, Rocha & Durán 2016; Iñiguez 2017; Palacios, Tzili & Briceño 2023; Morales & Rocha 2024). This article aligns with line of analysis, focusing on the challenges related to identifying and characterizing powers within the international system.

At the theoretical level, the central challenge lies in defining what constitutes national power. Different interpretations of power stem from the ontological foundations of various theories in international relations. For realism/neorealism, power is rooted in military and economic capabilities, which determine a state’s strength, or *hard power*, in the international system, expressed through material capacities. In contrast, liberalism/neoliberal institutionalism associates power with a state’s ability to generate influence through culture, values, and institutions, defining a country’s *soft power* and relying on immaterial capabilities. Meanwhile,

neo-Marxism/world-systems theory connects power primarily to levels of prosperity and economic well-being, factors directly tied to wealth—what is proposed here as boost power—and whose source lies in semi-material capacities. According to the perspective presented here, “*the national–international power of a state is the product of the multi-dimensional, dynamic, and recursive combination of its specific capabilities and is expressed in a determined historical moment of the development of the international system*” (Morales & Rocha, 2024, p. 20). In other words, this view conceptualizes national power as a fusion of material, semi-material, and immaterial capabilities, all of which are essential for understanding a state’s projection, roles, and positioning within the international geostructure.

At the technical level, one of the main challenges has been developing a tool to measure the power of states. Over the years, various indices have been created for this purpose (Berkowitz 2008, pp. 53–93; Höhn 2011; Morales 2024, pp. 46–52). While these indices are useful, they present significant limitations: some focus exclusively on material aspects of power, overlooking other dimensions; others lack sufficient data for a broad range of countries; and some provide data only for limited time periods. In this context, the World Power Index (WPI) stands out as a more effective tool due to its solid theoretical foundation, broad temporal scope, and extensive country coverage. Additionally, the WPI is methodologically more robust, as it not only tracks the evolution of national power across various dimensions (captured through sub-indices for material, semi-material, and immaterial capabilities) but also adapts to the analysis of the international geostructure— an area where other indices have shown deficiencies.

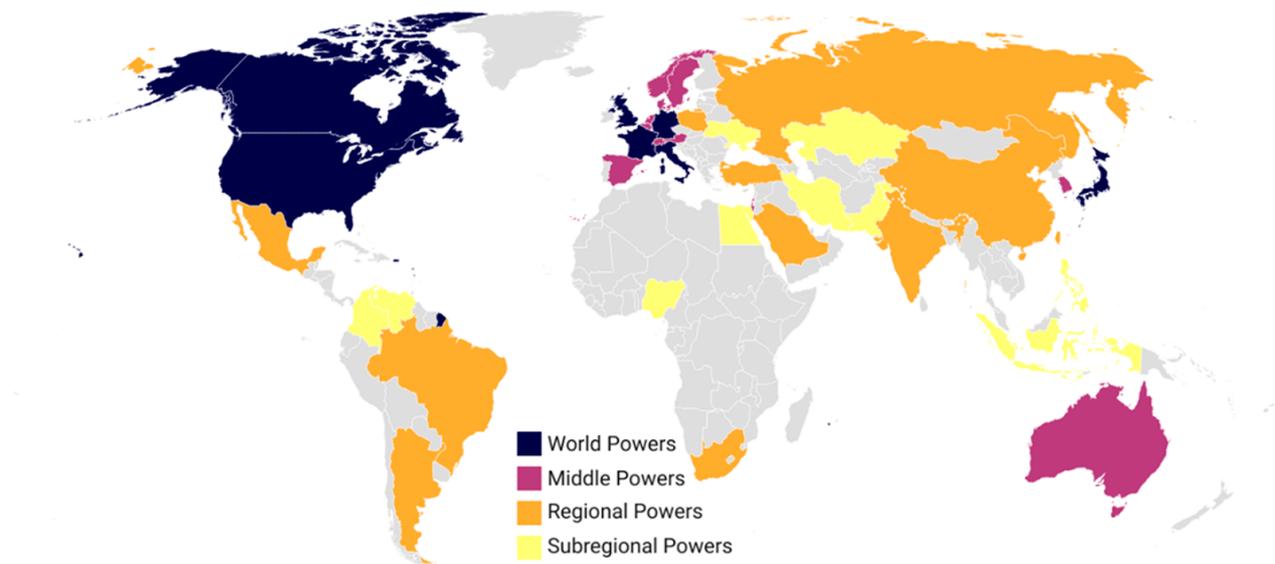
At the methodological level, the challenge lies in how to organize and classify states into categories that accurately reflect their position within the international geostructure. As previously mentioned, Holbraad identified 18 countries as *middle powers* based solely on two indicators: GDP and population, distributing them into six continental tables (one per continent, except for the Americas, which was divided into two). However, this selection process was arbitrary, as it did not clearly justify why certain countries were classified as *middle powers* while others with similar figures were not. Despite these significant methodological flaws, the concept of *middle power* remained in use for decades, creating challenges for the field of International Relations. A solid methodology must act as a bridge between theory and technique, linking theoretical concepts with measurement tools to ensure that data is interpreted consistently within a theoretical framework. In this case, it involves not only considering a state’s absolute power but also its relationship with other actors in the international system. The notion of the international geostructure provides clear categories that reflect both the distribution of national power and the positioning, roles, and trends of each state.

These three levels of challenges are interdependent and must be addressed collectively. A consistent and robust classification can only be achieved through the coherent integration of a theory of power, a precise technical tool like the WPI, and a methodology that accurately reflects a state’s position in relation to others, as demonstrated by the trans-structural approach.

### 3. Characteristics and Roles of Powers in the International Geostructure

With the theoretical, technical, and methodological foundations established, we can now proceed with a detailed analysis of the specific characteristics and roles that powers play within the international geostructure. To facilitate this analysis, the following map has been created, offering a visual representation of the four categories of powers that will be discussed: global, middle, regional, and subregional.

Map. Types of Powers in the International Geostructure



Prepared by: Daniel Morales Ruvalcaba.  
Source: Morales & Rocha, 2024

It is important to highlight that, from the perspective developed here, geography significantly influences the configuration and reach of national power, meaning that the categories of powers are intrinsically linked to a spatial dimension. However, the international geostructure is dynamic, allowing states to rise, maintain, or even lose their position over time.

### 4. Global Powers

Global powers have historically held the highest and most privileged position within the geostructure of international power (Pulleiro & Patiño, 2024).

Their national power configuration is exceptional, with a very high Material Capabilities Index (MCI), a very high Semi-material Capabilities Index (SCI), and an equally elevated Immaterial Capabilities Index (ICI). This indicates that *global powers* excel in terms of *hard power*, possessing the largest economies and financial markets, along with the most advanced militaries. They are situated at the core of the global economy, with high levels of well-being for their citizens in areas such as income, education, health, and consumption. Additionally, their cultural and communicative influence positions them not only at the forefront of the international stage but also as dominant states in norm generation (Lake, 2009, pp.

93-137). According to the map, the *global powers* with this configuration of power and positioning include Germany, Canada, the United States, France, Italy, Japan, and the United Kingdom.

Although traditionally referred to as “great powers” in the literature (Farr, 1856; Wight, 1978, pp. 41-53; Berridge & Young, 1988; Bull, 1995, pp. 194-222; Mearsheimer, 2001; Fels, 2016, pp. 200-207; O’Dell, 2019), this analysis identifies them as *global powers*, due to their ability to influence international affairs on a global scale and across multiple regions.

As key actors within the Global North, *global powers* have solidified their status since the second half of the 20th century as the primary players in shaping the international agenda and leading global governance. Their main objective has been to preserve the *status quo* established after the end of the Cold War. In this context, they play a leading role in forums such as the G7 or G20, hold permanent or “semi-permanent” positions on the UN Security Council, and play pivotal roles in organizations such as the IMF, the World Bank, the WTO, and NATO, positioning themselves as defenders of the international order they have helped to create.

## 5. Middle Powers

Following the *global powers*, a group of states occupies the second tier in the international power geostructure, traditionally referred to as middle powers (Glazebrook, 1947; Wight, 1978, pp. 63-65; Holbraad, 1984; Cox, 1996; Cooper, 1997; Patience, 2014). However, it is crucial to emphasize that the concept of *middle power* presented here applies to a specific set of states with a distinct configuration of national power and a defined geostructural position. This differentiation is essential for distinguishing middle powers from other types of powers (Jordaan, 2003; Rocha & Morales, 2010; Pulleiro & Patiño, 2024).

While *global powers* excel in all areas, middle powers are characterized by very high semi-material capabilities (very high SCI), but with material and immaterial capabilities that, although elevated, do not reach the level of *global powers* (high MCI and ICI). This means that middle powers, while also central and developed states with high levels of wealth and well-being (in some cases, even surpassing those of *global powers*), possess more limited *hard power*, which positions them as secondary powers. Additionally, their *soft power* is less pronounced, positioning them as dominant actors, but with a primarily regional reach. This configuration of power, with less pronounced material and immaterial capabilities, limits their ability to project influence on a global scale.

Although the term *middle power* has been broadly applied to various nations, the perspective outlined here identifies 11 countries with a unique configuration of national power and a distinct geostructural position. These middle powers, as shown on the map, are: Australia, Austria, Belgium, South Korea, Denmark, Spain, Israel, Norway, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Switzerland.

Despite occupying a lower hierarchical position than *global powers* and not having experienced significant increases in national power in recent decades, their relevance within the international geostructure remains intact. Their high level of

wealth, combined with considerable strength and influence, afford them a unique position. As part of the Global North, their most prominent role lies in their active willingness to collaborate with *global powers*.

Middle powers play a crucial role in international governance by fostering global cooperation (Ravenhill, 2008; Wang & French, 2013; Efstathopoulos, 2017), driven by the desire to ensure their own survival and maintain the *status quo*, as they face greater risks than *global powers* or semi-peripheral and peripheral states in conflict situations. For these reasons, they act as valuable allies and key contributors to *global powers*, actively supporting various international organizations. In this context, some middle powers have strategically chosen to specialize in what is known as “niche diplomacy” (Cooper, 1997; Henrikson, 2005).

It is worth noting that, unlike the decline seen in some *global powers* or the rise of certain regional and subregional powers in recent decades, middle powers appear to have stagnated in their position. While this stagnation may reflect stability, it also represents a relative loss of primacy compared to other states.

## 6. Regional Powers

Amid the decline and stagnation of middle powers in the 21st century, several developing states have emerged as powers due to the rapid increase in their national power (Cooper & Antkiewicz, 2008; Barbé, 2010; Hart & Jones, 2010; Schweller, 2011; Stuenkel, 2016; Stephen, 2017). However, while global and middle powers are characterized as central states with very high semi-material capabilities, these other “emerging” powers stand out for having achieved very high material capabilities (very high MCI), but relatively lower semi-material (high SCI) and immaterial capabilities (high ICI). This distinctive configuration reflects their semi-peripheral position in the world system (Wallerstein, 1976; Frank, 1979; Arrighi & Drangel, 1986; Terlouw, 1993; Martinez & Cairó, 2014; Apango, Tzili, Rocha, & Vargas, 2024).

Thus, while these powers are secondary in terms of material power (with some exceptions like China and increasingly India), their semi-material power—measured by wealth and well-being levels—is still developing and remains significantly lower than that of core powers (global and middle powers). In terms of immaterial power, they can be considered dominant actors only at the regional level. For this reason, since the 2010s, these emerging powers have been differentiated and labeled as regional powers (Nolte, 2010; Flandes, 2010; Destradi, 2010; Godehardt & Nabers, 2011; Morales Ruvalcaba, Rocha, & Vargas, 2013; Ebert & Flandes, 2018). Examples, as shown on the map, include Saudi Arabia, Argentina, Brazil, China, India, Mexico, Poland, Russia, South Africa, and Turkey, with the BRICS being the most prominent among them.

It is important to clarify that middle and regional powers display similar accumulations of power—a phenomenon clearly illustrated by the WPI—leading to their frequent conflation throughout history. However, as noted earlier, their national power configurations are significantly different. Regional powers notably lack the highly elevated semi-material capabilities that characterize middle powers. This difference directly impacts their global projections: while middle powers are more

integrated into globalization processes, with an average KOF Globalisation Index score of 86 in 2021 (ETH Zürich, 2024), regional powers lag behind, averaging just 69 in the same year. Moreover, since the beginning of the 21st century, middle powers have faced stagnation and struggled to increase their power, whereas regional powers have shown upward momentum, gradually expanding all aspects of their national capabilities. These differences have resulted in divergent behaviors and interests, both globally and regionally.

Regional powers aim to consolidate their influence and leadership through active participation in shaping the regional agenda and promoting integration systems, underlining their commitment to regional governance. Globally, as emerging and developing powers, they adopt critical stances toward the *status quo* on various issues in the international agenda and challenge institutions dominated by global and middle powers. In this regard, regional powers not only seek collaboration with other regional powers but also engage in cooperative foreign policies with peripheral states, acting as intermediaries between these states and the powers of the Global North. This positions them as revisionist actors, advocates of multipolarity, and proponents of a more prominent role in global governance.

Due to their “upward mobility,” clearly reflected in the various WPI sub-indices, regional powers focus on advancing their national development, positioning themselves as core contenders, and ultimately aspiring to attain the status and geostructural positioning of new *global powers*.

## 7. Subregional Powers

Parallel to the rising prominence of the BRICS and other regional powers during the first decade of the 21st century, there was a marked interest among academics and international consultancies in identifying the next wave of emerging powers. This led to labels such as the Next-11 (Wilson & Stupnytska, 2007; O’Neill, 2018), MIKT or MIST (Roughneen, 2011; Harari, 2014), EAGLEs (García-Herrero, 2011; García-Herrero & Nigrinis, 2011), and CIVETS (Guerra Barón, 2014; Vadra, 2018), among others. However, many of these terms proved to be imprecise or even arbitrary, as they often forced the identification of “emerging” characteristics without a solid theoretical basis.

Beyond these categorizations, the sub-indices of the WPI allow us to identify several countries that, while having moderate levels of semi-material (medium SCI) and immaterial capabilities (medium ICI), have historically stood out for their significant material capacities (high MCI), making them comparable to some regional powers. In other words, these are countries that, due to their limited semi-material power, remain within the periphery rather than the semi-periphery; and, because of their immaterial power, have not managed to exert significant influence globally or regionally, rendering them more subordinate in nature. Nevertheless, their substantial material capacities—particularly from a realist/neorealist perspective—have often earned them the designation of powers. The countries that stand out in this group, as indicated on the map, include Colombia, Egypt, the Philippines, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Nigeria, Pakistan, Ukraine, and Venezue-

la, although the latter two have experienced significant declines in their national power due to various factors.

While some studies have classified these states as secondary regional powers (Ardila, 2012; Wehner, 2015; Dalponte, 2019), it is more precise to designate them as subregional powers to clearly differentiate them from “primary” regional powers and to give them distinct meaning, characteristics, and specificity (Morales, Rocha, & Durán, 2016; Iñiguez, 2017; Tzili, Briceño, Ramos, & Franco, 2024, pp. 244-250).

Subregional powers play a crucial role in the international system, though their influence is more localized and geographically constrained. Their activities are mainly concentrated within subregional spaces, where they stand out for their ability to exert political, social, and economic influence. Unlike regional powers, these states struggle to consolidate identities, projects, or agendas with broader regional or pan-regional reach. However, they can lead subregional integration processes, albeit with more limited goals and often involving a smaller set of participants. Despite their active role in these processes, their behavior is shaped by broader regional dynamics, where the interests of other powers exert substantial influence.

On the global stage, subregional powers have a secondary impact on international dynamics. While their position within the international geostructure does not enable them to alter global trends, their relative power can be instrumental in governing specific geographic areas or targeted issues. In this context, subregional powers are often regarded by other powers as pivotal states, playing a key role in extending influence into strategic regions.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this text, it has been demonstrated that the traditional notion of middle powers is insufficient to capture the complexities and nuances of the contemporary international system. The critical analysis underscores the need for a comprehensive reassessment—not only of this concept, but also of the theoretical understanding of national power, the tools used to measure it, and the methodologies applied to classify powers.

In this context, the trans-structural approach emerges as a robust and versatile framework for analyzing international power. The WPI, a key element of this approach, integrates the material, semi-material, and immaterial dimensions of power, enabling a more precise and comprehensive assessment of states’ positions within the international geostructure.

The analysis of different categories of powers has shown that each possesses distinct capabilities, which define their scope or limitations in fulfilling specific roles within the international system. Unlike other approaches and indices that focus on isolated variables or lack a broad historical perspective, the WPI offers a holistic view that contributes to a more accurate classification of powers. This differentiation not only facilitates a deeper understanding of the nature of their power and their roles on the international stage but also provides insights into their future trajectories. This is crucial for avoiding analytical confusion in Inter-

national Relations and preventing potential errors that could adversely affect foreign policy formulation.

Finally, the analytical perspective proposed here sets forth an agenda that extends beyond merely identifying powers. It calls for deeper exploration into states not considered in this study: semi-core, secondary semi-peripheral, minor peripheral, and sub-peripheral states, which have traditionally been marginalized in analyses. This challenge should be taken up by International Relations academics in the Global South, particularly in Latin America.

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