NEXT IAS

DAILY EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

TOPIC

‘MIDDLE POWER MOMENT’: SHAPING WORLD ORDER

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Context

- Recent Davos address by Canadian PM Mark Carney renewed debate on middle powers, highlighting their growing role amid great-power rivalry and weakening multilateral institutions.

Understanding Middle Powers

- Middle powers sit between the great powers and smaller states. They are usually defined by:
  - **A strong regional presence:** they matter in their own neighbourhood.
  - **Growing economic capability and wide diplomatic networks.**
  - **Political will to act beyond their region** as they seek a say in global affairs rather than staying on the sidelines.
- They do not constitute a unified bloc. Their interests, capabilities and geopolitical priorities differ considerably.

Key Characteristics

- **Economic Capabilities:** Possess significant economic strength, technological capabilities and trade networks.
- **Regional Influence:** Exercise considerable political and strategic influence in their neighbourhood.
- **Diplomatic Flexibility:** Maintain relations with competing power centres.
- **Strategic Autonomy:** Avoid excessive dependence on any single great power.
- **Normative Ambition:** Advocate reforms in global governance, development, climate justice and equitable trade.
- **Coalition Building:** Influence international decisions through multilateral platforms and issue-based partnerships.
  - **Examples:** India, Brazil, South Africa, Indonesia, Japan, Germany, Canada, Türkiye, Egypt and Mexico.

Current Moment and Status

- **Declining Effectiveness of Multilateral Institutions:** The UN Security Council (UNSC) continues to reflect the geopolitical realities of 1945, with inadequate representation of contemporary powers.
- **Intensifying Great Power Rivalry:** Strategic competition between the US, China and Russia has weakened international consensus on several global challenges.
- **Changing Economic Geography:** The growing economic and technological capabilities of emerging economies have dispersed global influence.
- **Uncertainty in US Global Leadership:** Changing American priorities have raised questions about the continuity of the post-war international order.
- **Growing Global South Aspirations:** Developing countries increasingly demand greater representation in international decision-making.
- Consequently, the international system is moving towards a more **multipolar and interconnected order**, creating opportunities for middle powers to exercise greater influence.

Opportunities and Emerging Roles of Middle Powers

- The weakening of traditional global leadership has created opportunities for middle powers to contribute to international stability.
  - **Global Governance:** Advocate reforms in the UN, IMF and World Bank.
  - **Conflict Resolution:** Facilitate dialogue and mediation between conflicting parties.
  - **Climate Diplomacy:** Promote climate finance, climate justice and technology transfer.
  - **Economic Cooperation**: Strengthen supply-chain resilience and diversify trade partnerships.
  - **Digital Governance:** Promote inclusive and responsible technological development.
  - **Global Health:** Improve access to vaccines, medicines and healthcare technologies.
  - **Regional Stability:** Address regional conflicts and strengthen cooperative security arrangements.

- **Examples:**
  - **India:** G20 Presidency in 2023 placed development priorities and Global South concerns at the centre of international discussions.
  - **Brazil:** It has played an important role in climate diplomacy and environmental negotiations.
  - **South Africa:** It advocates equitable access to healthcare and greater representation of developing countries.
  - **Germany:** It contributes to European security and strengthens engagement with the Indo-Pacific.
  - **Indonesia:** It promotes ASEAN centrality and an inclusive regional security architecture.
- These examples demonstrate that middle powers can shape international agendas even without possessing superpower capabilities.

Challenges and Limitations

- **Economic Vulnerabilities:** Dependence on global markets, external capital and supply chains makes them susceptible to economic shocks.
- **Great Power Pressure:** Strategic competition often forces them to navigate conflicting demands from powerful countries.
- **Institutional Limitations:** Their influence remains restricted by unequal representation in international institutions.
- **Divergent Interests:** Differences in political systems, economic priorities and security concerns prevent middle powers from acting as a unified group.
- **Limited Hard Power:** Most lack the military and financial resources required to independently enforce international decisions.
- **Diplomatic Credibility:** Maintaining strategic autonomy requires balancing competing partnerships without compromising national interests.
  - Thus, middle powers can influence the international system but cannot independently replace the leadership of great powers.

India's Role and Efforts as an Emerging Middle Power

- **Strategic Autonomy:** India's multi-alignment approach enables engagement with competing power centres, including the US, Russia and Europe.
- **G20 Presidency (2023):** Secured the African Union's permanent membership in the G20 and highlighted development concerns.
- **Global South Leadership:** The Voice of Global South Summits have provided a platform for developing countries to articulate common concerns.
- **Climate Leadership:** Initiatives such as the International Solar Alliance and Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure promote international cooperation.
- **Security Partnerships:** Engagement through the Quad, BRICS and SCO strengthens India's diplomatic reach.
- **Connectivity Initiatives:** IMEC and the International North-South Transport Corridor seek to improve regional and international connectivity.
- **Development Partnerships:** India's development assistance, digital public infrastructure and vaccine diplomacy strengthen its international standing.

India's Limitations

- India's middle-power ambitions face certain constraints:
  - Persistent border tensions and strategic competition with China.
  - Dependence on external sources for critical technologies and energy.
  - Developmental challenges, including poverty, unemployment and infrastructure gaps.
  - Limited capacity to translate diplomatic influence into sustained global outcomes.

Way Forward

- To translate the middle power moment into meaningful global influence, the following measures are necessary:
  - **Strengthen Multilateralism:** Pursue comprehensive reforms of the UNSC, IMF and World Bank to reflect contemporary geopolitical realities.
  - **Build Issue Based Coalitions:** Develop flexible partnerships around climate change, public health, digital governance and maritime security.
  - **Enhance Economic Resilience:** Strengthen domestic manufacturing, technological innovation and diversified supply chains.
  - **Promote Global South Cooperation:** Coordinate positions on debt sustainability, development finance, food security and equitable technology access.
  - **Maintain Strategic Autonomy:** Pursue diversified partnerships without becoming excessively dependent on competing power blocs.
  - **Strengthen Regional Institutions:** Promote cooperation through ASEAN, BIMSTEC, the African Union and other regional platforms.
  - **Bridge Geopolitical Divisions:** Encourage dialogue between developed and developing countries to preserve international cooperation.

Conclusion

- The middle power moment is not about replacing superpowers but about **redistributing responsibility in global governance**. For India, it presents an opportunity to transform its economic potential, diplomatic credibility and Global South leadership into sustained international influence.
- Its success will depend on strategic autonomy, domestic capacity-building and partnerships that promote a more representative, inclusive and rules-based international order.

Source: TH

Daily Mains Practice Question

[Q] What are middle powers? Examine their growing significance in shaping the emerging multipolar world order. Discuss India's role as an emerging middle power.