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Efstathopoulos, Charalampos

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tel: +44 1970 62 2400
email: is@aber.ac.uk

Southern middle powers and the liberal international order: The options for Brazil and South Africa

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Charalampos Efstathopoulos 

Aberystwyth University, Aberystwyth, UK

Abstract

The current challenges facing the liberal international order suggest there is greater need for reassessing the roles that different categories of states may perform in support of this order. Middle powers appear as leading candidates for a supportive role to the liberal order due to their historical commitment to internationalism, coalition building with like-minded democracies and activism within multilateral institutions. Such orientation, however, is questionable for Southern middle powers that often appear ambivalent in their foreign policies, restricted in their collaboration with other democracies and selective in their multilateral initiatives. This article discusses the cases of Brazil and South Africa to examine the current options for Southern middle powers and concludes that despite certain limitations, South Africa is, overall, closer to assuming a supportive stance towards the liberal international order and its institutions.

Keywords

middle powers, internationalism, liberal international order, Brazil, South Africa

Reassessing the systemic role of Southern middle powers is imperative in light of recent developments. As certain Western democracies face the challenge of populism, and as

Corresponding author:

Charalampos Efstathopoulos, Department of International Politics, Aberystwyth University, Penglais, Ceredigion, Wales, Aberystwyth SY23 3FL, UK.

Email: che15@aber.ac.uk

certain Southern powers project their authoritarian credentials, the middle powers of the Global South face the critical question of whether, and to what extent, they can engage with the liberal international order. Despite the structural and material constraints they face, middle powers can, in theory, forge autonomous paths to international order and exert meaningful agency in alleviating the challenges this order faces. They have some capacity to pursue internationalisms that promote collective responses to global challenges, to coordinate coalitions of like-minded actors and to sustain the operation of existing multilateral institutions. Such orientation, however, is currently more of an open question as states that have historically displayed the capabilities and behaviours of middle powers are now reluctant to assume a clearer position in response to global challenges like climate change and COVID-19.

In the academic literature, the middle power role has been extensively examined in recent years, with emphasis placed on middle power leadership and internationalism, and how such attributes allow for some meaningful degree of influence in international politics. Middle power agency is understood as being conditioned by the constraints imposed by great powers, but also working beyond balance of power politics to pursue some vision of international order through diplomatic initiatives that can contribute to the collective management of that order.¹ While certain works discuss the “systemic impact” of middle powers,² this article seeks to reconsider the current systemic trajectories of Southern middle powers as these states now face the option of either undertaking a more definitive stance as democracies that can help resolve global challenges, or moving towards policymaking choices that effectively dissolve any adherence towards liberal internationalism and the liberal order itself.

Seeking to provide an answer, this article accordingly enquires: to what extent is the current role of Southern middle powers supportive of the liberal international order? The analysis addresses this question by focussing on Brazil and South Africa, two middle powers of the post–Cold War period that have now entered a prolonged phase of ambivalence and face the critical choice of whether to regain a firm course of internationalism or shift to other forms of foreign policy. Brazil is often understood as striving to emerge as a major actor on the global stage, but today remains confined to a middle power position due to the domestic and international

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1. Youngmi Choi, “A middle power’s trade policy under U.S.-China FTA competition: South Korea’s double hedging FTA diplomacy,” *Contemporary Politics* 24, no. 2 (2018): 233–249; Håkan Edström and Jacob Westberg, “The Defense Strategies of Middle Powers: Competing for security, influence and status in an era of unipolar demise,” *Comparative Strategy* 39, no. 2 (2020): 171–190; Monica S. Jeong, “What kind of “real world” makes South Korea’s middle power categorization necessary?” *Pacific Focus* 35, no. 2 (2020): 250–277; Emel Parlar Dal, “Profiling middle powers in global governance and the Turkish case: An introduction,” in Emel Parlar Dal, ed., *Middle Powers in Global Governance: The Rise of Turkey* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 1–31.
 2. Andrew Carr, “Is Australia a middle power? A systemic impact approach,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 68, no. 1 (2014): 70–84.

constraints it faces in its power projection.³ In comparison, South Africa is pursuing middle power policies with greater consistency, which has been evident since its post-apartheid transition in 1994,⁴ even though its commitment to some aspects of a middle power orientation, such as human rights, has been questioned in recent years.

To examine the systemic role of these Southern middle powers, this article first provides a three-fold typology that delineates three major options that middle powers currently face with regards to (i) ambivalent internationalism, (ii) restricted like-mindedness and (iii) selective multilateralism. The article then proceeds to examine how contemporary Brazilian and South African foreign policies encounter these options. The main argument is that the ability of Brazil and South Africa to resolve these options by committing to definitive forms of internationalism, like-minded coalitions and multilateralism, amounts to a systemic role that is supportive of the liberal order. Conversely, the weakening of internationalism, the declining engagement with like-minded coalitions and the withdrawal from multilateral arrangements serve as key indicators that these states are retreating from a supportive role. The discussion shows that South Africa is, overall, more inclined under the Cyril Ramaphosa administration (2018–) to commit to internationalism, like-mindedness, and multilateralism, and to follow a middle power approach to international affairs to regain the international standing of its post-apartheid period. In contrast, Brazil's foreign policy under the Jair Bolsonaro administration (2019–) has witnessed a substantial weakening of all the three dimensions identified above, opting for a form of anti-globalism that severely undermines Brazil's position as a middle power.

Ambivalent internationalism

Internationalism has historically been a defining attribute of middle powers, and constitutes the willingness and capacity of middle powers to pursue distinct roles, strategies and interests at the international level.⁵ Western middle powers mostly pursue variants of liberal internationalism (with cases such as the Nordic model) to project their humanitarian credentials and support a rules-based order.⁶ Such internationalism

3. Guilherme Casarões, "Leaving the club without slamming the door: Brazil's return to middle-power status," in Paulo Esteves, Maria Gabrielsen Jumbert, and Benjamin de Carvalho, eds., *Status and the Rise of Brazil: Global Ambitions, Humanitarian Engagement and International Challenges* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 89–110; Dawisson Belém Lopes, Guilherme Casarões, and Carlos Frederico Gama, "A tragedy of middle power politics: Traps in Brazil's quest for institutional revisionism," in Esteves et al., *Status and the Rise of Brazil*, 51–69.

4. Christopher Williams and Mihaela Papa, "Rethinking 'alliances': The case of South Africa as a rising power," *African Security* 13, no. 4 (2020): 325–352.

5. Cranford Pratt, "Middle Power internationalism and global poverty," in Cranford Pratt, ed., *Middle Power Internationalism: The North–South Dimension* (Kingston, Montreal, London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), 3–24.

6. Rita Abrahamsen, "Introduction: Making liberal internationalism great again?" *International Journal* 74, no. 1 (2019): 5–14.

establishes the role of these states as agents of Western values and institutions, and allows them to address systemic challenges such as global poverty.⁷ While the systemic role of Western middle powers can be considered historically consistent, albeit with fluctuations in the capabilities of these states, the emerging middle powers of the Global South pursue internationalism that entails less clearly-defined attributes.⁸ Their reformist internationalism entails a dual process of, first, an emergence within the liberal order through an increase of their (primarily economic) material capabilities, and second, an ideational shift that leads to dismantling their transformative potential and their counter-hegemony of Third Worldism.⁹ Such a dual process causes emerging middle powers to increasingly act as stabilisers and legitimisers of the liberal order, promoting some degree of change from within, such as the reallocation of decision-making influence in different institutions, without challenging the core norms of the liberal order, such as privatisation, deregulation and liberalisation.¹⁰

The diplomatic behaviour of middle powers, however, during periods of emergence does not fully conform to reformism as a result of international and domestic contradictions.¹¹ The trajectory of emerging middle powers since the end of the Cold War is illustrative of such contradictions. The reformist initiatives of states such as Brazil and South Africa failed to reconfigure the hierarchical decision-making processes of global governance, even though such states assumed more prominent roles in institutions such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Domestic divisions also propelled states like South Africa to strive to balance between exercising leadership of the Global South through anti-imperialist rhetoric, and maintaining beneficial trade and investment relationships with key Western economies.¹² Reform internationalism was also questioned by administrations attempting to use national material capabilities to overcome what was perceived as a limited middle power role. Brazil's proactive diplomacy under Lula da Silva (2003–2011), including efforts to resolve the issue of Iran's nuclear programme against Western reservations, signalled the rejection of the 'middle power' label by Brazil's foreign policy establishment.¹³ Turkey's launch of a

7. Olav Stokke, ed., *Western Middle Powers and Global Poverty: The Determinants of the Aid Policies of Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden* (Uppsala: The Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 1989).

8. Andrew C. Cooper and Emel Parlar Dal, "Positioning the third wave of middle power diplomacy," *International Journal* 71, no. 4 (2016): 516–528.

9. Eduard Jordaan, "The concept of a middle power in international relations: Distinguishing between emerging and traditional middle powers," *Politikon* 30, no. 1 (2003): 165–181.

10. Chris Alden and Marco Antonio Vieira, "The new diplomacy of the South: South Africa, Brazil, India and trilateralism," *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 7 (2005): 1077–1095; Jordaan, "The concept of a middle power in international relations."

11. David R. Black and David J. Hornsby, "South Africa's bilateral relationships in the evolving foreign policy of an emerging middle power," *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 54, no. 2 (2016): 151–160.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Sean Burges, "Mistaking Brazil for a middle power," *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research* 19, no. 2 (2013): 286–302.

regional hegemonic policy under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) signalled a departure from earlier doctrines of bridge-building diplomacy, and has been evident in areas like energy.¹⁴ For such states, greater assertiveness meant abandoning reformism and assuming a more combative approach towards the liberal order that did not amount to outright revisionism but was sufficient to disrupt its smooth operation.¹⁵ Questions also emerged on these states' responsibilities, with Southern democracies espousing a doctrine of a pluralist international society that challenged Western expectations, as evident in issues like humanitarian intervention and the reform of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).¹⁶

Such conditions suggest that the term 'Southern middle powers' is preferable for understanding the current trajectory of states such as Brazil and South Africa for three reasons. First, emerging economies display different degrees of resilience to crises, such as the 2008 financial shock and COVID-19, and register varying rates of economic growth that suggest that the condition of emergence is not sustainable for many states due to factors such as debt, depopulation, lack of domestic reforms and fluctuating commodity prices.¹⁷ The very idea of emerging middle powers can be questioned since the various socioeconomic problems that these states face cause the collapse of the 'hype' surrounding the 'rise of the rest' as it becomes apparent that it is premature to expect development and democratisation to lead to the emergence of key partners for the West.¹⁸ Second, for the middle powers outside of the West, their foreign policies remain focused on the Global South and are significantly affected by the imperative of fostering regional and South–South cooperation, even though each middle power may prioritise such relations to a different degree.¹⁹ Third, the project of reformism now seems exhausted as China's mega-projects, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), overshadow the initiatives of middle powers, while groups that include middle powers, such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and

14. Mary Keogh, *Energy and Regional Power in Advanced Developing States: A Turkish Case Study*, doctoral thesis, Aberystwyth University, 2018.

15. Kristen Hopewell, *Breaking the WTO: How Emerging Powers Disrupted the Neoliberal Project* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).

16. Jamie Gaskarth, "Rising powers, responsibility, and international society," *Ethics and International Affairs* 31, no. 3 (2017): 287–311.

17. Tatiana Lysenko and Elijah Oliveros-Rosen, "Economic outlook emerging markets q2 2021: Tailwinds from stronger global growth, but several challenges on the radar," 30 March 2021, <https://www.spglobal.com/ratings/en/research/articles/210330-economic-outlook-emerging-markets-q2-2021-tailwinds-from-stronger-global-growth-but-several-challenges-on-t-11897263#ContactInfo> (accessed 27 July 2021); Ruchir Sharma, "The resurgence of the rest: Can emerging markets find new paths to growth?" *Foreign Affairs* 100, no. 3 (2021).

18. Ayşe Zarakol, "'Rise of the rest': As hype and reality," *International Relations* 33, no. 2 (2019): 213–228.

19. Nqophisa Diko and Norman Sempijja, "Does participation in BRICS foster South-South cooperation? Brazil, South Africa, and the Global South," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 39, no. 1 (2021): 151–167; Rafael Mesquita and Jia Huei Chien, "Do regional powers prioritise their regions? Comparing Brazil, South Africa and Turkey," *Third World Quarterly*, online first (2021).

South Africa), remain divided on the degree of reform that is needed to address global challenges like climate change and COVID-19.²⁰

Facing such constraints, Southern middle powers are brought closer to a position of ambivalent internationalism, where they retain some middle power roles like mediator or facilitator while being selective in how these roles are operationalised.²¹ The constraints discussed above force middle powers such as Brazil to scale back their foreign policies through ‘status downgrading’ and display a preference for pragmatism over international leadership.²² The selectivity with which middle powers deploy their resources suggests that the earlier expectations of these states acting as legitimisers and stabilisers of the existing order can now be questioned.²³ This observation echoes Cox’s earlier statement that ‘the middle-power role is not a fixed universal but something that has to be rethought continually in the context of the changing state of the international system’.²⁴

Ambivalent internationalism therefore entails a critical option about the paths to international order that Southern middle powers can follow, as it allows these states to either adopt a more solid and meaningful level of commitment to the liberal order or increasingly withdraw from diplomatic initiatives that involve concrete support for this order. If middle powers opt for a more definitive internationalism, which can be evident in their foreign policy direction across both political and economic issues (such as immigration and trade), and show greater consistency in adopting internationalist policy options, then Southern middle powers can play a more central role in supporting the liberal order.

Restricted like-mindedness

Middle powers are traditionally expected to form and lead coalitions of like-minded states that share an interest in pursuing internationalism, multilateralism and good international citizenship.²⁵ Because such coalitions can include a broad membership of middle powers and small states, they can develop the collective bargaining capacity to

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20. Bas Hooijmaaijers, “China, the BRICS, and the limitations of reshaping global economic governance,” *The Pacific Review* 34, no. 1 (2021): 29–55; Francesco Petrone, “The future of global governance after the pandemic crisis: What challenges will the BRICS face?” *International Politics*, online first (2021).
 21. The concept can also be used to describe ambivalence within specific organisations—see Benjamin Siegel, “The claims of Asia and the Far East’: India and the FAO in the age of ambivalent internationalism,” *The International History Review* 41, no. 2 (2019): 427–450.
 22. Casarões, “Leaving the club without slamming the door”.
 23. Thomas S. Wilkins, “Defining middle powers through IR theory: Three images,” in Tanguy Struye de Swielande, Dorothee Vandamme, David Walton et al., eds., *Rethinking Middle Powers in the Asian Century: New Theories, New Cases* (London: Routledge, 2018), 51.
 24. Cox’s statement builds upon John W. Holmes’s assessment of Canada’s role as a middle power—see Robert W. Cox, “Middlepowermanship, Japan, and future world order,” *International Journal* 44, no. 4 (1989): 825.
 25. Asbjorn Lovbraek, “International reform and the like-minded countries in the North-South dialogue 1975–1985,” in Pratt, *Middle Power Internationalism*, 25–68.

support the institutions of the liberal order. The notion of like-mindedness in such coalitions is driven by a shared world-view of good international citizenship, but also by an instrumental objective of ‘mutual empowerment’ in a competitive multipolar world.²⁶ Because of such a flexible notion of like-mindedness, such coalitions can include both Western and Southern middle powers,²⁷ with the emergence of the latter further contributing to the capacity and legitimacy of coalitions in shaping issues of global governance. Issue-based coalitions in particular can generate a substantial convergence of interests when the outbreak of a crisis, such as COVID-19, propels different middle powers to align their strategic priorities and respond to an emerging threat, especially when existing institutions or alliances do not adequately address such a threat.²⁸

The question today is whether middle powers can form like-minded coalitions that can effectively tackle major global challenges like authoritarianism and COVID-19, and whether Southern middle powers can play a leading role in this endeavour. With regards to the former aspect, there seems to be consensus that informal and issue-based coalitions are more effective. Informal alliances of developed democracies (such as Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Japan and the United Kingdom) can provide leadership to counter the unilateralism of China, Russia and the United States, defend the rules-based international order, and create new institutions upholding liberal values.²⁹ Issue-based coalitions of like-minded democracies can tackle different areas, such as climate change and WTO reform, through a coordinated campaign of plurilateralism that contributes to protecting the liberal order.³⁰ Such groups can avoid the limitations of formalised ‘static’ alliances by allowing other actors, such as legislatures, to address ‘democracy-adjacent issues’ such as anti-corruption, injustice, discrimination and economic recovery.³¹ Versions of this approach include Japan’s call for an Arc of Democracies, Germany’s call for an Alliance for Multilateralism and the UK’s recent call for a D-10 Summit of Democracies.

While informal and issue-based mobilisation appears promising, the role of Southern middle powers in this process remains uncertain. Like-mindedness can facilitate concerted or ad hoc action across different middle powers, but in many instances shared world-views are shaped along North–South lines where historical divides

26. Paul Soyez, *Australia and France’s Mutual Empowerment: Middle Powers’ Strategies for Pacific and Global Challenges* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

27. Examples include the Cairns Group in agricultural trade, the human security agenda, and the process of UNSC reform.

28. Mark Beeson, Alan Bloomfield, and Wahyu Wicaksana, “Unlikely allies? Australia, Indonesia and the strategic cultures of middle powers,” *Asian Security*, online first (2020).

29. Giedon Rachman, “Mid-sized powers must unite to preserve the world order,” *Financial Times*, 28 May 2018.

30. Roland Paris, “Can middle powers save the liberal world order?” 2019, Chatham House Briefing, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/can-middle-powers-save-liberal-world-order> (accessed 29 July 2019).

31. Rachel Kleinfeld, Thomas Carothers, Steven Feldstein et al., “How middle power democracies can help renovate global democracy support,” Washington DC, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2021, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Kleinfeld_etal_Middle_Powers.pdf (accessed 17 May 2021).

persist. The liberal order can potentially be revitalised by coalitions involving non-Western democracies, and by a process of reallocating rights and responsibilities in order to grant these states greater authority.³² For example, such coalitions could revitalise the human rights regime by endorsing a new agenda based on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), while putting forward proposals to reform UN treaties and UN bodies like the Human Rights Council.³³ While participation by Southern middle powers enhances the representativeness and legitimacy of a global cluster of democracies, it also dilutes the like-mindedness of such concert as these states maintain different understandings of issues such as democracy-promotion.³⁴ States like Brazil, India and South Africa can act as democratic models in their own regions, but some of their current domestic policies suggest, from the perspective of the West, that they are not as solid agents of democracy as their Western counterparts.³⁵

The preoccupation with resisting major power pressures also distracts middle powers from engaging in like-minded partnerships. Southern middle powers are constrained by the emerging US-China ‘dual hierarchy’, striving to avoid becoming dependent on either of them while seeking to exploit bargaining opportunities from US-China competition.³⁶ They remain reluctant to join a US-led concert of democracies in order to retain access to China’s trade and investment flows, while making strategic choices, like engagement and hedging, in their attempts to stabilise the dual hierarchy.³⁷ In the Indo-Pacific, for example, the Quad alliance (Australia, India, Japan and the US) has provided the platform for Asian middle powers to engage China’s rise, but certain middle powers, such as South Korea and Indonesia, strive to retain their autonomy and develop their own policy options for engaging with the liberal order.³⁸

The potential for an autonomous coalition of Southern middle powers is also uncertain. The IBSA (India, Brazil and South Africa) group often references democracy as the pillar for resolving conflicts (especially in declarations throughout 2003–2011), but the group is now subsumed by the BRICS, and is hesitant to question Russia and China’s authoritarianism and unable to deploy its democratic credentials to support democracy-promotion.³⁹ Another similar group, MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, South

32. G. John Ikenberry, “The end of the liberal international order?” *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (2018): 23.

33. David Petrasek, “Not dead yet: Human rights in an illiberal world order,” *International Journal* 74, no. 1 (2019): 103–118.

34. Paris, “Can middle powers save the liberal world order?”

35. Kleinfeld et al., “How middle power democracies can help renovate global democracy support,” 8–9.

36. G. John Ikenberry, “Between the eagle and the dragon: America, China, and middle state strategies in East Asia,” *Political Science Quarterly* 131, no. 1 (2016): 9–43.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Sung Chul Jung, Jaehyon Lee, and Ji-Yong Lee, “The Indo-Pacific strategy and US alliance network expandability: Asian middle powers’ positions on Sino-US geostrategic competition in Indo-Pacific region,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 30, no. 127 (2021): 53–68.

39. Obert Hodzi, “‘Empty bravado or hopeful illusions’: Rising democratic powers and reordering of the international system,” *International Politics* 56, no. 4 (2019): 444–456; Ziya Öniş and Alper Şükrü Gençer, “Democratic BRICS as role models in a shifting global order: Inherent dilemmas and the challenges ahead,” *Third World Quarterly* 39, no. 9 (2018): 1791–1811.

Korea, Turkey and Australia), aspires to benefit from the rise of ‘informal multilateralism’ that has been evident since the 2008 economic crisis, but organisational deficiencies prohibit the group from projecting its democratic credentials and acting as interlocutor between North and South.⁴⁰

Overall, Southern middle powers now appear to be in a position of restricted like-mindedness where they face the options of either mobilising the resources required for coordinating their diplomacy with like-minded democracies to address global challenges or focussing on bilateral strategic partnerships that instrumentally aim at narrow national interests. If they prioritise the first option to promote a greater degree of like-mindedness and provide leadership of coalitions that include Southern and Western middle powers and other smaller states, then Southern middle powers can foster coalitions with memberships that are capable of exerting a broader and systemic role in sustaining the liberal order.

Selective multilateralism

Adherence to multilateralism is traditionally a central attribute of middle power internationalism. Middle powers typically perceive multilateral institutions as the ideal framework for resolving global challenges, but also utilise multilateral arrangements for enhancing their bargaining capacity and projecting their authority as good international citizens.⁴¹ Such strategy necessitates consistent multilateral activism that can translate into concrete contributions to existing multilateral arrangements or the creation of new ones. While the inclusion of middle powers in the G20 leaders summitry post-2008 shows how membership in multilateral fora can help resolve the crises of the liberal order,⁴² the weakened state of multilateralism today raises questions about whether Southern middle powers can help revitalise organisations like the UN and the WTO.

The major challenge for middle powers committing to multilateralism is whether they can supplement major power leadership. The renewal of the liberal order requires pragmatism and compromise, and middle powers can, in principle, sustain a rules-based order that does not depend on major power leadership.⁴³ For Louise Riis Andersen, ‘such a revision—if it is to come—is most likely to emerge from middle powers who have the strength and authority to act independently of the great powers,

40. Gonca Oğuz Gök and Radiye Funda Karadeniz, “Emerging middle powers (MIKTA) in global political economy: Preferences, capabilities, and their limitations,” in Emel Parlar Dal, ed., *Turkey's Political Economy in the 21st Century* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 163–194.

41. Alan K. Henrikson, “Middle powers as managers: International mediation within, across and outside institutions,” in Andrew F. Cooper, ed., *Niche Diplomacy: Middle Powers after the Cold War* (London: Macmillan Press, 1997), 46–72.

42. Andrew F. Cooper, “Squeezed or revitalised? Middle powers, the G20 and the evolution of global governance,” *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 6 (2013): 963–984.

43. Louise Riis Andersen, “Curb your enthusiasm: Middle-power liberal internationalism and the future of the United Nations,” *International Journal* 74, no. 1 (2019): 47–64.

yet whose limited capabilities and inability to dictate outcomes or decisions makes them prone to favour negotiated solutions over the use of force'.⁴⁴ Middle powers can provide leadership in managing rules-based regimes that constrain the unilateralism of major powers during power transitions, even if such contributions are limited to operationalising existing frameworks, such as the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).⁴⁵ For example, Asia-Pacific middle powers such as Australia, Indonesia and South Korea have cooperated to preserve the Trans-Pacific Partnership now that the US has withdrawn. Another option is for middle powers to build communities of like-minded states (for example, through "open regionalism") and then create institutions to formalise such communities, even though such initiatives may rival existing institutions and may not be successful in creating a new governance architecture if middle power leadership is perceived as self-centred and unilateral.⁴⁶

Southern middle powers, however, also face additional limitations in performing such multilateralist roles. Instead of acting as rule-makers in multilateral institutions, they may strategically opt to act as rule-promoters in their own regions (for example, in economic areas like competition law and policy) in order to avoid opposing the preferences of major powers.⁴⁷ At the same time, Southern middle powers are open to joining alternative development institutions, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the BRICS-led New Development Bank, that are positioned outside the liberal order and potentially allow these states to pursue more interventionist strategies of state capitalism.⁴⁸ If the like-minded coalitions discussed above are also a prerequisite for effective action, then divisions between middle powers may hinder their prospects as leading multilateralists. Southern middle powers often prioritise status-seeking strategies, and status competition takes precedence over multilateral commitments, such as their compliance with, and fulfilment of, G20 targets.⁴⁹ The potential to support the liberal order exists, with states such as Indonesia and South Korea establishing like-minded 'communities of practice' through bilateral partnerships that cover defence and security policies, but greater coordination and commitment is needed for such initiatives to become multilateralised and have a systemic effect.⁵⁰ Overall, unified and coordinated action by states such as Brazil, Mexico, South

44. Ibid., 48.

45. Kyoko Hatakeyama, "A middle power's roles in shaping East Asian security order: Analysis of Japan's engagement from a normative perspective," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 65, no. 3 (2019): 466–481.

46. Thomas Wilkins, "Australia and middle power approaches to Asia Pacific regionalism," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 1 (2017): 110–125.

47. Umüt Aydin, "Rule-takers, rule-makers, or rule-promoters? Turkey and Mexico's role as rising middle powers in global economic governance," *Regulation and Governance*, online first (2019).

48. Mustafa Kutlay, "The politics of state capitalism in a post-liberal international order: The case of Turkey," *Third World Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (2020): 683–706.

49. Emel Parlak Dal, "Status-seeking policies of middle powers in status clubs: The case of Turkey in the G20," *Contemporary Politics* 25, no. 5 (2019): 586–602.

50. Tanguy Struye De Swielande, "Middle powers in the Indo-Pacific: Potential pacifiers guaranteeing stability in the Indo-Pacific?" *Asian Politics & Policy* 11, no. 2 (2019): 190–207.

Africa, South Korea and Turkey has mostly been driven by selective multilateralism and has not yet reached the level required for supporting and revitalising multilateralism.

For Southern middle powers, selective multilateralism therefore entails the options of either practicing niche diplomacy in order to play a catalyst role in sustaining and revitalising key regimes of the liberal order at critical junctures, or selectively engaging with only those types of multilateral regimes, such as trade and investment, that are important for their own status and national interests. If Southern middle powers opt for the former approach and mobilise their diplomatic resources to provide intellectual and entrepreneurial leadership across different issues, and advance negotiating agendas that contribute to resolving the challenges that multilateralism faces today, then these states can be understood as performing a pivotal role in sustaining the institutions of the liberal order.

The options for Brazil and South Africa

The three-fold typology outlined above allows for assessing whether two Southern middle powers, Brazil and South Africa, perform a systemic role that is supportive of the liberal order. The parallel trajectory of the two countries has been evident since the turn of the millennium when both countries embarked on their most successful eras of diplomatic activism.⁵¹ Brazil's diplomacy under the Lula administration (2003–2011) and South Africa's diplomacy under the Mbeki administration (1999–2008) were credited with elevating the status of the two countries to leaders of the Global South. More recent administrations, however, have struggled to maintain this status. The presidencies of Dilma Rousseff (2011–2016) and Michel Temer (2016–2018) were marked by diplomatic withdrawal and a weakening of Brazil's internationalism, while the current presidency of Jair Bolsonaro is highly controversial, having drawn criticism from the international community on multiple occasions. South Africa's presidency under Jacob Zuma (2009–2018) was also characterised by an ambivalent foreign policy as South Africa's entry into the BRICS raised scepticism about the country's alignment with Russia and China. However, the current Cyril Ramaphosa administration has sought to restore South Africa's image as a progressive state. The two middle powers today face a critical choice between returning to previous and more consistent forms of internationalism and shifting further towards a rupture with liberal norms. The following discussion examines whether, and to what degree, the two states currently display a commitment to internationalism, like-mindedness and multilateralism, or whether they are disengaging from such aspects of middle power diplomacy.

The extent to which Brazil and South Africa have committed to internationalism has been indicative of the stances of the two states in the liberal order. In the case of Brazil, the current government of Jair Bolsonaro has adopted a conservative and anti-globalist

51. Casarões, "Leaving the club without slamming the door"; Williams and Papa, "Rethinking 'alliances.'"

stance, projected through a combative and populist rhetoric that includes ideas such as a commitment to the military as guarantor of political stability. Bolsonaro's policies have been seen to undermine Brazil's position as a liberal democracy, including a strict anti-immigration stance evident in facilitating expedited deportations and treating migrants as a threat to public order.⁵² Such policies have further accentuated the problem of xenophobia and hate crimes, which intensified markedly during the 2018 elections, generating a discourse of racism and separatism that sought to place Brazil on a different standing from countries portrayed as cases of 'backwardness' and 'laziness' like Cuba and Venezuela.⁵³ Xenophobia has also been linked to the limitations of pre-existing state policies, such as the 2017 Immigration Law, which failed to reform public policy in order to address the rising number of xenophobic incidents against nationals of Angola, Cuba, Haiti, Senegal and Venezuela.⁵⁴

While populist rhetoric and policy has placed Bolsonaro alongside populist leaders like Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán, Bolsonaro's brand of conservatism and nationalism has echoed existing political discourses in Brazil (such as trust in the military), and has not constituted a rupture with Brazil's history.⁵⁵ It has rather added to an already complex mosaic of Brazil's foreign policy roles, which have included those of middle power and regional leader, and which have co-existed and allowed for Brazil to maintain its identity as both a Western and a Latin American state.⁵⁶ Bolsonaro's rhetoric has failed to unite competing intra-government factions, such as the anti-globalist, the neoliberal and the moderate wings of the administration.⁵⁷ The latter group, led by Vice President Hamilton Mourão has moderated the president's choices, but Brazil's foreign policy has remained disorderly and has lacked coordination. The dogma of 'Brazil first' has not translated into concrete policy practice as government members have represented a range of conflicting interests (e.g. globalists, nationalists, free traders and protectionists), while the move toward global disengagement has relegated Brazil's status to that of a bystander lacking leadership or any decisive foreign policy approach, whether that is aiming towards pragmatism or reformism.⁵⁸

52. Felipe A. Filomeno and Thomas J. Vicino, "The evolution of authoritarianism and restrictionism in Brazilian immigration policy: Jair Bolsonaro in historical perspective," *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, online first (2020).

53. Rodrigo Serrao, "Racializing region: Internal Orientalism, social media, and the perpetuation of stereotypes and prejudice against Brazilian *Nordestinos*," *Latin American Perspectives*, online first (2020).

54. Roberto Rodolfo Georg Uebel, "Brazilian foreign policy for immigrants and refugees: New concepts and ethical issues," *Revista Brasileira de Sociologia* 8, no. 19 (2020): 80–97.

55. Brian Winter, "Messiah complex: How Brazil made Bolsonaro," *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 5 (2020): 119–131.

56. Feliciano De Sá Guimarães, "The uneasy 'well-placed' state: Brazil within Latin America and the West," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 33, no. 4 (2020): 603–619.

57. Oliver Stuenkel, "How Bolsonaro's rivalry with his vice president is shaping Brazilian politics," *America's Quarterly*, 18 April 2019, <https://www.americasquarterly.org/content/how-bolsonaros-rivalry-his-vice-president-shaping-brazilian-politics> (accessed 5 June 2019).

58. Kai Enno Lehmann, "'Brazil First' simply won't work," Chatham House, 2019, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/twt/brazil-first-simply-won-t-work> (accessed 31 May 2019)

Internationalism has therefore been undermined, and while aspects of it are still in place, Brazil today has moved away from attaining a degree of internationalist diplomatic engagement that would constitute any meaningful support for the liberal order.

In contrast to Brazil's anti-globalism, South Africa's foreign policy under President Cyril Ramaphosa has sought to restore the country's standing as a supporter of liberal values, with a renewed commitment to justice, democracy and human rights that reconnects with Nelson Mandela's humanitarian internationalism (1994–1999). This approach has exemplified the continuities in South Africa's foreign policy, including its sense of exceptionalism and its propensity to act as mediator, bridge-builder and leader of Africa.⁵⁹ The approach has, however, been constrained by anti-Western factions within the African National Congress (ANC); the need to prioritise economic reforms (like increasing wages and employment); and the realities of maintaining South Africa's position in institutions such as African Union (AU), the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the BRICS, none of which have endorsed human rights.⁶⁰ The country's image has also been tarnished by xenophobia, triggering condemnation by African states and the AU's Peace and Security Council, while forcing South African diplomats to admit that South Africa has lacked the capacity to contain this problem.⁶¹ Xenophobia has also exposed South Africa's economic problems. High unemployment rates have triggered xenophobic perceptions that immigrants are taking jobs by accepting low wages, while limited access to social services has often meant that immigrants are blamed for straining social services and therefore hindering the access of South Africans to these services.⁶² Local state officials and political leaders have also targeted immigrants in order to distract attention from state failures in addressing chronic poverty and inequality.⁶³

The socioeconomic implications of xenophobia have affected South Africa's foreign policy. President Ramaphosa has sought to exercise leadership to address this problem by sending envoys to other African countries to show solidarity, steering South Africa's public diplomacy towards restoring the country's historic role as a progressive force in Africa, and mobilising the country's economic diplomacy towards promoting the

59. Janis Van der Westhuizen, "From hard to soft misplacement: South Africa's ambivalent African identity," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 33, no. 4 (2020): 588–602.

60. James Hamill, "The reality of South Africa's foreign policy under Ramaphosa," International Institute for Strategic Studies, 8 February 2019, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2019/02/south-africa-foreign-policy-ramaphosa> (accessed 5 January 2020)

61. Liesl Louw-Vaudran and Mohamed M. Diatta, "Can South Africa repair its image damaged by xenophobia?" Institute for Security Studies, 16 September 2019, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-09-16-can-south-africa-repair-its-image-damaged-by-xenophobia/> (accessed 13 January 2020).

62. John C. Mubangizi, "Xenophobia in the labour market: A South African legal and human rights perspective," *International Journal of Discrimination and the Law*, online first (2021): 4–5.

63. Alexandra Hiropoulos, "South Africa, migration and xenophobia: Deconstructing the perceived migration crisis and its influence on the xenophobic reception of migrants," *Contemporary Justice Review* 23, no. 1 (2020): 104–121.

African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA).⁶⁴ The problem of xenophobia, however, has been persistent and has illustrated how South Africa's self-proclaimed exceptionalism has been reflected in the country's responses to international criticisms, and has entailed divisive notions where South Africa's constitution, its rule of law and law enforcement, its proactive stance and its historic struggle for liberation, have all been treated as qualities that distinguish the country from other African nations.⁶⁵ Overall, South Africa's current trajectory can be understood as re-embracing middle power internationalism and resolving the country's previous ambivalence with respect to areas like human rights, but international and domestic obstacles remain.

Brazil and South Africa's participation in coalitions of like-minded democracies has also provided an important indication of their current roles in the liberal order. Bolsonaro's administration has committed to collaborating with conservative right-wing democracies since the major threats to regional peace have emerged from 'non-democratic regimes that export crime, instability and oppression' such as Cuba and Venezuela.⁶⁶ Brazil has withdrawn from the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) to join the new Forum for the Progress of South America (PROSUR), which has brought together the right-wing leaders of the region in a bid to promote democracy and human rights. Such orientation has reflected a shift in Brazilian foreign policy from prioritising autonomy as leader of the Global South to seeking a civilisational role as a Christian-Western state in close alignment with the US.⁶⁷ Rapprochement with the US has also largely shaped Bolsonaro's policies, with the Trump administration designating Brazil as a 'major non-NATO ally' and supporting its Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) candidacy. The US policy towards Brazil in areas like trade and investment has also contributed to Brazil's distancing from China as the US has identified Brazil as the BRICS member that may be easier to co-opt.⁶⁸

Alignment with the US has therefore been intertwined with Bolsonaro's hostile stance towards China and his condemnation of the exposure of Brazil's economy to Chinese influence. The anti-globalist wing of Brazil's administration has favoured partnerships with Asian democracies, such as Japan and South Korea, expecting to gain

64. Klaus Kotze, "South Africa: Attempts at continental diplomacy," *Global Risk Insights*, 10 October 2019, <https://globalriskinsights.com/2019/10/south-africa-attempts-at-continental-diplomacy/> (accessed 15 January 2020).

65. Aretha Oluwakemi Asakitikpi and Joana Gadzikwa, "A critical discourse analysis of online YouTube news coverage of South African discourses on xenophobia in democratic South Africa," *Politikon* 47, no. 4 (2020): 479–493.

66. Ernesto Araújo, "Bolsonaro was not elected to take Brazil as he found it," *Bloomberg*, 7 January 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2019-01-07/brazil-s-bolsonaro-brings-foreign-policy-revolution-says-araujo> (accessed 3 June 2019).

67. Sergio Caballero and Diego Crescentino, "From the quest for autonomy to the dual break: Structural and agential changes in Brazil's foreign policy during the 21st century," *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional* 63, no. 1 (2020): e011.

68. Alexander Zhebit, "The BRICS: Wither Brazil?" *Strategic Analysis* 43, no. 6 (2019): 571–584.

greater leverage against China.⁶⁹ The neoliberal and the moderate wings, however, have favoured economic pragmatism, given the multiple trade and investment links with China. Vice President Mourão's trip to China in 2019 appeared to convince the Chinese leadership that Brazil remains open to Huawei's 5G investment and the Belt and Road Initiative.⁷⁰ This has been reaffirmed as China has continued to provide diplomatic and economic support to Brazil in key sectors like oil and agriculture, while refraining from criticising Bolsonaro's rhetoric.⁷¹ All these developments suggest that Bolsonaro's government has sought to participate in coalitions of like-minded democracies, but the preference for alliances with conservative democracies, and the imperative of economic pragmatism, suggest that Brazil has not fully committed to a broad-based coalition building of like-minded democracies that can act in support of the liberal order.

In South Africa's case, relations with Western democracies have been ambivalent in recent years. In 2019, the Pretoria embassies of Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, the UK and the US sent a joint confidential memorandum to President Ramaphosa, where the five countries (accounting for 75% of foreign direct investment [FDI] to South Africa) urged the president to protect the rule of law and ethical business practice in order for these countries to continue investing in South Africa.⁷² Ambivalence towards the West has also been linked to South Africa's proximity to China. South Africa was China's top exporting destination amongst African countries in 2018, while South Africa was also China's top importer from Africa in the same year.⁷³ The Zuma and the Ramaphosa administrations both considered South Africa's development and industrialisation, and its position as Africa's economic gateway, as facilitated by flows of Chinese international development assistance (IDA) and FDI.⁷⁴ Within Southern Africa, however, states such as Angola, Mozambique and Zimbabwe have also used their own investment partnerships with China in order to decrease their economic dependence on South Africa, and contest and soft-balance Pretoria's leverage in regional institutions like the SADC.⁷⁵

69. Richard Lapper, "Bolsonaro took aim at China. Then reality struck," *Americas Quarterly*, 23 April 2019, <https://www.americasquarterly.org/content/china-brazil-trade> (accessed 31 May 2019).

70. *Financial Times*, "Brazil's Mourao seeks to repair ties with China," 29 May 2019.

71. Oliver Stuenkel, "In spite of Bolsonaro, China quietly deepens its influence in Brazil," *Americas Quarterly*, 12 November 2019, <https://www.americasquarterly.org/content/spite-bolsonaro-china-quietly-deepens-its-influence-brazil> (accessed 10 March 2020).

72. Ranjeni Munusamy, "World powers warn SA to act on graft," *The Sunday Times*, 3 February 2019, <https://www.timeslive.co.za/sunday-times/news/2019-02-03-world-powers-warn-sa-to-act-on-graft/> (accessed 28 January 2020).

73. China Africa Research Initiative, "Data: China-Africa Trade," 2019, <http://www.sais-cari.org/data-china-africa-trade> (accessed 9 January 2020).

74. Lisa Thompson, "Alternative South-South development collaboration? The role of China in the Coega Special Economic Zone in South Africa," *Public Administration and Development* 39, no. 4-5 (2019): 193-202.

75. Louis L. Schenoni, "The Southern African unipolarity," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 36, no. 2 (2018): 207-228.

Given such limitations, South Africa has faced the necessity of cooperating with other democratic middle powers (such as Australia, Brazil, Mexico, Turkey and Indonesia) that have developed similar material capabilities, have shared a commitment to democracy and human rights and have maintained strong trade links with South Africa (with bilateral trade above US\$200 million per year).⁷⁶ Germany in particular has emerged as a key Western partner since its call for an Alliance for Multilateralism in 2019. Germany and South Africa have held similar positions on key issues (including the reform of the UNSC and the role of EU-AU collaboration on regional crises like Libya), have voted the same way as UNSC non-permanent members (with opposing votes only on Venezuela) and have maintained common positions in the G20 (for example, in the G20 Compact with Africa).⁷⁷ South Africa has also mobilised alliances with UNSC like-minded states, such as the E10 (the group of incoming, current and outgoing ten non-permanent members that has convened regularly in Pretoria and New York) and Germany, with the two countries having collaborated in climate change, gender-based violence, and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda.⁷⁸ The potential has therefore existed for South Africa to take a more assertive stance in collaborating with other democratic middle powers, but this has been conditional on further institutionalising and consolidating these forms of middle power partnerships.

The third aspect of Brazil and South Africa's systemic role in the liberal order has concerned the degree to which they have been confined to selective multilateralism or have displayed a more comprehensive commitment to multilateral processes. The Bolsonaro administration has shown hostility towards multilateralism, targeting institutions such as the UN and the UN Human Rights Committee (UNHRC) since these have been regarded as fora of globalism that threaten to dismantle Brazil's traditional values on religion, the nation and the family.⁷⁹ Brazil has withdrawn from the UN Global Compact on International Migration, while domestic reforms have targeted the Ministry of Human Rights and Brazil's Mission to the UNHRC, and have sought to replace bureaucrats and diplomats who had previously been advocates of international human rights norms.⁸⁰ There has also been a sharp decline in Brazilian development

76. Jakkie Cilliers, "New middle-power Country partners for South Africa?" Institute for Security Studies, 14 May 2018, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/new-middle-power-country-partners-for-south-africa> (accessed 30 January 2020).

77. Richard Calland and Melanie Müller, "How South Africa and Germany can help the world," *Mail & Guardian*, 30 January 2020, <https://mg.co.za/opinion/2020-01-30-how-south-africa-and-germany-can-help-the-world/> (accessed 19 February 2020).

78. Sithembile Mbete, "South Africa's successes in forming alliances for multilateralism in the United Nations Security Council," Berlin: Heinrich Böll Foundation, 21 January 2020, <https://www.boell.de/en/2020/01/21/south-africas-successes-forming-alliances-multilateralism-united-nations-security> (accessed 9 March 2020).

79. Guilherme Casarões and Daniel Flesmes, "Brazil First, Climate Last: Bolsonaro's foreign policy," *GIGA Focus Lateinamerika*, 5, 2019, Hamburg, GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, <https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/64011> (accessed 28 February 2020).

80. Michelle Morais De Sá e Silva, "Once upon a time, a human rights ally: The state and its bureaucracy in right-wing populist Brazil," *Human Rights Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (2020): 646–666.

assistance towards South–South cooperation in areas like environmental governance.⁸¹ More recently, the government’s handling of the COVID-19 pandemic has been seen as catastrophic and lacking any meaningful leadership because of Bolsonaro’s denialism and refusal to disrupt the functioning of open markets.⁸² Economic pragmatism, however, has also worked to constrain Bolsonaro’s anti-globalism as Brazilian diplomacy has promoted policymaking norms in fora like the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP) and the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO),⁸³ and the current government has faced the need to defend the economic gains made in such areas, especially if these have been understood to align with Brazil’s exporting and importing food policies.

Climate change has been a central issue shaping Brazil’s multilateralism. The Bolsonaro administration reduced the budget of the Ministry of the Environment and removed environmental regulations on livestock farming, the sector causing most of deforestation and green house gas emissions, in order to support the agri-business sector.⁸⁴ The government also cancelled Brazil’s hosting of the 2019 UN climate change conference and declared its intention to withdraw from the 2015 Paris climate accord, which triggered the EU response that concluding the EU-Mercosur trade pact would only be possible if Brazil respected the Amazon reforestation targets agreed at Paris.⁸⁵ Brazil’s image has suffered as deforestation has proceeded rapidly, while extensive wildfires during August 2019 drew criticisms from states like France, Germany and Norway. President Bolsonaro claimed that the Amazon is part of Brazil’s sovereignty, but more recently, the formation of the Amazon Council has been tasked with re-evaluating agriculture and conservation policies in the Amazon, reflecting the realisation that Brazil needs to reap the economic benefits of trading with other low-carbon economies.⁸⁶

Economic pragmatism has also informed South Africa’s multilateralism, which, however, has demonstrated greater consistency compared to Brazil. In 2019, the

81. Kathryn Hochstetler and Cristina Yumie Aoki Inoue, “South–South Relations and global environmental governance: Brazilian international development cooperation,” *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional* 62, no. 2 (2019): e004, 10.

82. Francisco Ortega and Michael Orsini, “Governing COVID-19 without government in Brazil: Ignorance, neoliberal authoritarianism, and the collapse of public health leadership,” *Global Public Health* 15, no. 9 (2020): 1257–1277.

83. Carolina Milhorange, “Diffusion of Brazil’s food policies in international organisations: Assessing the processes of knowledge framing,” *Policy and Society* 39, no. 1 (2020): 36–52.

84. Eder Johnson de Area Leão Pereira, Luiz Carlos de Santana Ribeiro, and Lúcio Flávio da Silva Freitas et al., “Brazilian policy and agribusiness damage the Amazon rainforest,” *Land Use Policy* 92, no. 104491 (2020).

85. *Climate Home News*, “Trade deal binds Brazil to Paris Agreement, says top EU official,” 16 July 2019, <https://www.climatechangenews.com/2019/07/16/mercosur-trade-deal-binds-brazil-paris-agreement-says-top-eu-official/> (accessed 4 September 2019).

86. Natalie Unterstell, “Bolsonaro’s Amazon plan has actual reasons for hope,” *Americas Quarterly*, 7 February 2020, <https://www.americasquarterly.org/content/how-weigh-bolsonaros-play-environmental-redemption> (accessed 6 March 2020).

Department of International Relations and Cooperation reviewed its 126 foreign missions to identify those where allocated expenditure did not match the expected returns in terms of trade, investment and security gains.⁸⁷ South Africa has also been a selective multilateralist with its strategy of ‘norm shopping’ in institutions like the WTO and the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), in order to take advantage of gaps in the global investment regime and simultaneously justify its partial divergence from existing investment protection and liberalisation norms.⁸⁸ However, the ongoing COVID-19 crisis and its impact on South Africa’s economic growth and debt sustainability has re-emphasised the need for multilateralism, as South Africa’s rapid response has gained legitimacy by the endorsement of the World Health Organization (WHO) as an example of good governance, while the government’s relief package of R500bn was partly sponsored by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).⁸⁹ Even in the case of the International Criminal Court, where South Africa’s approach has been more critical, it has been argued that South Africa has strived to re-shape liberal norms like transitional justice by promoting restorative and reparative approaches to accountability.⁹⁰

The Ramaphosa administration’s multilateral orientation has also been evident in South Africa’s recent term as non-permanent UNSC member (2019–2020). Using the experience gained from previous terms, South Africa strived to provide leadership against great power pressures, aligning neither with the P3 (the US, UK and France) nor with the P2 (China and Russia), but rather retaining autonomy as the leader of the A3 (the three African non-permanent members).⁹¹ South Africa’s chairmanship of the Council (October–November 2019) encountered obstacles as the AU’s Peace and Security Council opposed South Africa’s attempts to promote a draft resolution on the financing of AU-led peace operations, while the US, Russia and China resisted South Africa’s resolution on the WPS agenda.⁹² The latter resolution was eventually unanimously voted for, contributing to South Africa’s long-term efforts at supporting

87. Xolisa Phillip, “Cost-cutting hits South Africa’s diplomatic portfolio,” *The Africa Report*, 19 November 2019, <https://www.theafricareport.com/20360/cost-cutting-hits-south-africas-diplomatic-portfolio/> (accessed 13 January 2020).

88. Peg Murray-Evans, “Rising powers in complex regimes: South African norm shopping in the governance of cross-border investment,” *New Political Economy* 25, no. 5 (2020): 773–790.

89. Charl De Villiers, Dannielle Cerbone, and Wayne van Zijl, “The South African government’s response to COVID-19,” *Journal of Public Budgeting, Accounting & Financial Management* 32, no. 5 (2020): 797–811.

90. Alexander Beresford and Daniel Wand, “Understanding bricolage in norm development: South Africa, the International Criminal Court, and the contested politics of transitional justice,” *Review of International Studies* 46, no. 4 (2020): 534–554.

91. Gustavo De Carvalho, “South Africa proves its mettle on the UN Security Council,” 19 July 2019, Institute for Security Studies, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/south-africa-proves-its-mettle-on-the-un-security-council> (accessed 3 February 2020).

92. Gustavo De Carvalho and Priyal Singh, “SA ends its first big act on the UN Security Council,” 29 October 2019, Institute for Security Studies, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/sa-ends-its-first-big-act-on-the-un-security-council> (accessed 7 February 2020).

pro-gender justice norms, such as promoting women's participation in peace and security global governance through the training of African women as mediators.⁹³ Despite the need for economic pragmatism, the Ramaphosa administration has taken initiatives to scale up South Africa's role in multilateral fora and use its extensive post-apartheid experience to carve out a position in global governance that allows the country to have a visible impact on the functioning of key institutions of the liberal order.

Conclusion

The cases of Brazil and South Africa reveal three insights regarding the changing role of Southern middle powers in the current historical juncture and their ability to overcome ambivalence and engage more decisively with the liberal order. First, for middle powers like Brazil and South Africa, internationalism has constituted a significant framework and practice of foreign policy as the previous forms of middle power diplomacy practiced by these states have created path dependencies that current administrations continue to encounter. For Brazil, the anti-globalist stance of the Bolsonaro administration has certainly led to a substantial weakening of core aspects of Brazil's internationalism, such as human rights, and has undermined Brazil's economic development and global diplomatic prestige. For South Africa, the Ramaphosa administration has striven to regain the country's humanitarian credentials, seeking to combat xenophobia and economic problems at home while actively promoting cooperation across Africa through projection of its regional leadership. This discussion has shown that South Africa, overall, has been more inclined at resolving the ambivalence surrounding its foreign policy and re-launching a form of internationalism that can elevate South Africa's agency in international affairs and reconfigure its foreign policy firmly within a middle power framework.

Second, middle powers like Brazil and South Africa have retained coalitions with like-minded democracies and have remained sceptical of the prospect of a Chinese-led order of authoritarian capitalism, within which their own positions as democracies would be uncertain. Both states have valued their collaboration with leading Western democracies like Germany and the US, and have taken initiatives towards upgrading such relationships into strategic partnerships. For Brazil, such an approach has not been sufficient to form broad-based and like-minded coalitions, as the Bolsonaro administration has been confined to cultivating partnerships with conservative governments, which are unlikely to generate support for the liberal order given the illiberal policymaking choices of such states. In contrast, South Africa's multiple collaborations with like-minded Western and Southern middle powers, as in the context of the UNSC, have allowed South Africa to garner support for its foreign policy agenda and therefore

93. Toni Haastrup, "Gendering South Africa's foreign policy: Toward a feminist approach?" *Foreign Policy Analysis* 16, no. 2 (2020): 199–216.

assume a role in contributing to collective responses that aim to address the global challenges that the liberal order faces today.

Third, the current foreign policies of Brazil and South Africa have illustrated how the use of selective multilateralism by Southern middle powers allows these states to follow a flexible approach where they access key regimes, especially economic ones, but remain bystanders in areas that are not deemed critical for national interests. Brazil has, overall, shown a preference towards greater withdrawal, as evident in areas like migration and climate change, and has encountered the adverse economic effects of such an approach as it has alienated potential economic partners and created disorder in the country's developmental policies. South Africa has also projected a policy of multilateralism filtered by economic pragmatism, but has mobilised its diplomatic resources to act as norm entrepreneur and provide leadership in specific issue-areas like the WPS agenda. Such niche diplomacy has propelled South Africa to act as facilitator and manager within multilateral institutions, and resume its post-apartheid orientation in seeking a primary role in support of the liberal order and its values. All three insights derived from this article's discussion are potentially applicable to different Southern middle powers and can contribute to the broader research agenda of understanding the current trajectory of the liberal international order and the role that different states may perform in the shaping of this trajectory.

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ORCID iD

Charalampos Efstathopoulos  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9822-2239>

Author biography

Charalampos Efstathopoulos is Lecturer in International Politics at Aberystwyth University, Wales, UK. He is the author of *Middle Powers in World Trade Diplomacy: India, South Africa and the Doha Development Agenda* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). His research focuses on Southern middle powers and economic diplomacy, and has been published in *Global Society*, *International Politics*, *Politikon* and *Third World Quarterly*.