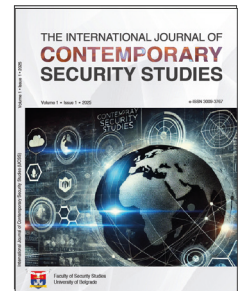




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Article

Conditional Hybrid Organization in Constrained Multipolarity: Middle Powers and System Stabilization in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

This article develops the concept of Conditional Hybrid Agency to analyze middle-power agency within a composite system of constrained multipolarity that entails simultaneous great-power rivalry and economic interdependence. Approaches to structural realism, liberal institutionalism, and hedging theory help explain middle-power behavior; however, they insufficiently address the enablers and constraints of agency across strategic contexts. To fill this void, the article proposes a formal analytical model in which middle-power agency (A) is a function of the interplay between institutional embeddedness (I) and structural constraints (C). In contrast, system stability (S) is modeled as a function of great-power rivalry (R). The study utilized a qualitative comparative analysis design, informed by analytical modeling and a most-similar systems logic. It analyzed the selected case studies of Japan, Australia, Canada, and South Korea. The study shows that middle-power agency is not predetermined and is equally available across all policy areas. Rather, it is contingent, fragmented, and at its most powerful when institutionalized coordination and multilateral platforms can counterbalance structural weaknesses stemming from reliance on major powers. The results also suggest that middle powers can have the greatest impact on system stability in an environment conducive to promoting cooperation and managing tensions, with strong institutionalization. Increased competition, on the other hand, restricts agency and limits middle powers' ability to play stabilizing roles. The article develops a new theoretical synthesis that reconciles competing schools of thought in international relations theory by articulating the connection among institutional embeddedness, structural constraints, and systemic outcomes. It engages with the literature on middle-power diplomacy by outlining the mutually constitutive relationship between state-level agency and system-level stability in contemporary multipolar orders.

KEYWORDS

Conditional Hybrid Agency; middle powers; constrained multipolarity; institutional embeddedness; structural constraints; system stability; great-power rivalry; international relations theory.

1. Introduction

The modern international system is best described as “constraining multipolarity,” in which a handful of great powers hold disproportionate influence over matters of security, economic governance, technological innovation, and institutional rule-making, while coexisting with several other



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powerful states. Broader security and risk-governance scholarship has also emphasized the importance of institutional capacity, technological governance, critical infrastructure resilience, systemic vulnerability, and comparative risk-management systems in addressing complex contemporary security challenges (Cvetković, Andrić, & Ivanov, 2023; Cvetković, Lipovac, Renner, Stanarević, & Raonić, 2025; Cvetković, Renner, Aleksova, & Lukić, 2024; Cvetković, Tanasić, Renner, Rokvić, & Beriša, 2024; Hanspal, Cvetković, Lipovac, & Popović, 2026; Vidović, Cvetković, & Beriša, 2024). The unipolarity of the post-Cold War period has visibly given way to strategic competition, economic interdependence, technological fragmentation, and great-power geopolitical rivalry, which is re-emerging in the international system (Allison, 2017; Beckley, 2018). These trends have led to a revival of scholarly interest in the middle power, particularly its ability to shape international outcomes when operating within a structure primarily constructed by the more powerful states.

The conceptualization of middle powers has also evolved from traditional accounts of diplomatic activism and multilateral statecraft toward more differentiated understandings of middle-power identity, role performance, strategic autonomy, institutional influence, and issue-specific agency (Chapnick, 1999; Cooper, Higgott, & Nossal, 1993; Jordaan, 2003; Nye, 2011; Patrick, 2023; Ping, 2005; Robertson, 2017; Ruggie, 1998).

Middle powers have a distinctive role in the international system. While they lack the material capacity to dominate world politics, they often possess considerable diplomatic, economic, institutional, and normative capabilities that enable them to influence the global system beyond the limits of their relative power. Countries such as Japan, Australia, Canada, and South Korea have demonstrated significant influence in shaping regional and global governance through coalition-building, multilateral diplomacy, norm entrepreneurship, and institutional engagement. However, the circumstances under which middle powers can act effectively remain poorly understood. Recent scholarship has also addressed middle-power repositioning, Indo-Pacific security cooperation, NATO-related strategic change, and the institutional dimensions of contemporary security governance, all of which are relevant for understanding how secondary and middle actors navigate constrained international environments (Ahmed, 2025; Ali, 2025; Farag, 2025; Lamminparras, 2025; Petrović, 2025).

The analysis was supported by comparative macroeconomic, trade, institutional, security, and development data from major international datasets and yearbooks (International Monetary Fund, 2024; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2024; United Nations, 2024; World Bank, 2024; World Trade Organization, 2024).

Theoretical explanations of middle-power behavior in contemporary International Relations are thus informative but not without shortcomings. Hedging theory centers on strategic flexibility and the capacity of states to manage uncertainty by adopting cooperative and balancing postures towards the competing great powers simultaneously (Kuik, 2010; Goh, 2016). Neorealist accounts emphasize the constraining effects of the distribution of power and system-wide pressures, positing that weak states have little freedom in the face of great-power competition (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2014). Conversely, liberal institutionalist accounts emphasize the usefulness of international institutions and rules in making cooperation more feasible and in increasing prospects for state power (Keohane & Nye, 2012; Ikenberry, 2018). Each of these perspectives successfully accounts for certain elements of middle-power behavior, but none sufficiently explains why agency differs across issues, policy areas, and shifting geopolitical contexts.

A significant divide thus exists in the literatures on structure and institutions regarding how structural constraints, institutional opportunities, and varying degrees of great-power rivalry interact. Existing analyses generally treat these factors as separable, providing limited insights into how middle powers maneuver in complex environments of simultaneous constraint and opportunity. Thus, there remains a gap to be filled by a more holistic framework that can explain not only when and how middle powers can exert significant influence, but also how such conduct affects broader patterns of international stability.

The article contributes to this gap and advances what is termed Conditional Hybrid Agency. This construct takes into account the ability of middle powers to act as dependent on the interplay between structural constraints and institutional embeddedness amid conditions of constrained

multipolarity. The paper aims to address the following research question: When and how can middle powers become effective agents, and what are the implications of such agency for the stability of the international system?

The article has three aims. It lies in the development of a coherent theoretical frame that integrates the structural- and institution-based accounts of middle-power behavior. Second, it considers how systemic rivalry patterns affect middle-power agency. Third, it investigates the link between middle-power agency and wider system stability patterns. To guide the analysis, the study proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: Middle-power agency increases when institutional embeddedness exceeds structural constraints.

H2: The effectiveness of middle-power agency varies across policy sectors and strategic contexts.

H3: Middle powers contribute most effectively to system stability under conditions of moderate rather than extreme great-power rivalry.

The article contributes to debates on the international order, middle-power diplomacy, and the future of global governance. It provides a conceptual lens through which to explore how states situated between the poles of great power and minnow can influence systemic outcomes in an increasingly competitive international milieu.

2. Methods

2.1. Research Design

This research adopts a qualitative comparative case study design, using analytical formal models, to investigate how middle powers act in a constrained form of multipolarity. The research adopts a theory-building logic in which the Conditional Hybrid Agency is first constructed in theoretical terms, then tested through structured comparative analysis. This design is suitable, as the research seeks to elucidate intricate relationships among structural imperatives, institutional embeddedness, and interstate rivalry, which are not easily captured by a single quantitative parameter. Integrating formal theorization and qualitative comparison improves both theoretical specificity and empirical realism in a manner appropriate to well-established methodologies in comparative politics and international relations (George & Bennett, 2005; Yin, 2018).

The research covers a period between 2015 and 2025, a ten-year span during which United States–China strategic competition, technology decoupling, supply-chain reorganization, and geopolitical bifurcation are all embedded in ever-intensifying dynamics. This period offers an appropriate setting to examine changes in middle-power conduct in a context of limited multipolarity.

2.2. Study Setting and Data Sources

The analysis focuses on how four middle powers — Japan, Australia, Canada and South Korea — manage their relations within the now well-established international system. The data were obtained entirely from secondary sources (International Monetary Fund, 2024; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2024; United Nations, 2024; World Bank, 2024; World Trade Organization, 2024). These were reports and datasets from international bodies such as the United Nations, the World Bank, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization, as well as defense reports, government policy papers, strategic analyses, and peer-reviewed academic literature. Additional evidence was drawn from publicly available data sources on trade dependence, alliance obligations, institutional legitimacy, technological capabilities, and security cooperation. Employing different sources enabled triangulation of the evidence and strengthened the validity of the results.

2.3. Sampling Strategy and Case Selection

The research utilized purposive case selection and applied a most-similar systems design. The population of interest comprised present-day middle powers embedded in the United States-led international order yet engaged in significant economic relations with China.

Cases were selected according to four criteria: 1) the recognition in the literature as a middle power; 2) an industrialized economy; 3) a democratic political system under the rule of law; and 4) active participation in regional and global regimes. Japan, Australia, Canada, and South Korea met these criteria and were thus selected for study.

These cases have several important structural similarities: all are allies of the United States, are substantially integrated into the global economy, and are members in good standing of international institutions. However, they differ significantly in security dependence, economic exposure, technological vulnerability, and institutional participation, to the extent that they can be systematically compared along the dimensions identified in the Conditional Hybrid Agency model.

2.4. Data Collection Procedures

Data collection consisted of a systematic document analysis. The search for pertinent documents was conducted via academic databases and the repositories of international organizations, governmental bodies, and policy research institutions. Documents were reviewed for relevance to the study variables and selected for their trustworthiness, institutional authority, and alignment with the study's objectives.

For each case, data were extracted using a uniform coding scheme. Data were gathered on the following six analytical dimensions: the intensity of rivalry, security dependence, economic exposure, technological vulnerability, coalition depth, and rule density. To ensure comparability, each variable was operationalized using a set of predefined indicators drawn from the existing International Relations literature. Wherever possible, cross-source checks were performed to mitigate measurement error and increase reliability.

2.5. Variable Operationalization

The Conditional Hybrid Agency model has two core explanatory dimensions: structural constraints and institutional embeddedness.

Structural constraints comprise four variables:

Rivalry Intensity (R): alliance polarization, military rivalry, sanctions between opposing powers, and strategic rivalry between major powers.

Security Dependence (Sd): a country's alliance commitments, defense cooperation agreements with other countries, as well as the degree of security dependence on other actors.

Economic Exposure (Ee): Trade concentration, foreign investment dependence, and a country's degree of integration in global supply chains.

Technological Vulnerability (Tv): a variable that can be measured by a country's dependence on foreign technology providers, strategic imports of technology, and a country's technological supply-chain exposure.

Institutional embeddedness involves two main things:

Coalition Depth (Cd): This is how deeply a group or country participates in formal alliances, strategic partnerships, smaller international groups, and issue-specific coalitions.

Rule Density (Rd): This measures their involvement with international organizations, the number of treaties they have signed, and their adherence to rule-based governance systems.

The analysis was based on each variable, and data were gathered from various sources and carefully compared across cases.

2.6. Data Processing and Analysis

Analysis took place in four stages. First, the documentary material was gathered and compiled on a case-by-case basis. Second, qualitative coding was conducted using the predefined variables of the Conditional Hybrid Agency model described above. Third, a structured, focused comparison was applied to cross-check the coded evidence across cases/units. Fourth, results were analyzed using the model to examine the interplay among structural constraints, institutional embeddedness, and middle-power agency.

The formal model is treated as an analytical heuristic rather than a predictive tool with statistical implications. Agency is formulated to differ as a function of the degree of institutional embeddedness and structural constraints, and system stability is said to be dependent upon levels of great-power rivalry. Comparative analysis enabled the authors to discern patterns of agency expansion, agency contraction, and system-stabilizing behavior across cases.

The qualitative data were processed and coded manually using structured analytical matrices. The focus was on theoretical coherence, clarity of interpretation, and comparability across cases, not on statistical generalization.

2.7. Ethics and Research Compliance

This research was based solely on secondary data and document analysis available in the public domain. There were no human subjects, interviews, surveys, or personal data used. Therefore, the study was exempt from formal ethical review and from the requirement for informed consent, in accordance with institutional guidelines for research ethics. The analysis, however, adhered to established guidelines for academic integrity, transparency, source checking, and the public good regarding the use of information in the public domain.

2.8. Limitations

Some limitations need to be noted. First, this research uses secondary data, which means the quality of the analysis is influenced by the quality and availability of existing data. Second, the small number of cases analyzed does not permit generalization beyond the selected middle powers. Third, the Conditional Hybrid Agency model is used qualitatively rather than statistically, and thus its predictive validity has yet to be examined in quantitative research. Future research can build on the framework by employing Large-N data, process tracing, mixed-methods research designs, or by constructing a quantitative agency index.

3. Results

3.1. Formal Specification of the Conditional Hybrid Agency Model

The Conditional Hybrid Agency model is defined through four relationships:

$$C = \alpha R + \beta S_d + \gamma E_e + \delta T_v$$

$$I = \theta C_d + \lambda R_d$$

$$A = I - C$$

$$S = A(1 - R)$$

Where:

C = Structural constraint

I = Institutional embeddedness

A = Agency

S = System stability

The variable structure in Table 1 represents the Conditional Hybrid Agency model, an extension of the theoretical level expressed as analytical indicators. The framework shows that middle-power behavior is not simply a function of material capabilities, but rather an outcome of the interaction between structural constraints (R, Sd, Ee, Tv) and institutional enablers (Cd, Rd).

First, structural variables collectively reflect systemic constraints on agency. The intensity of rivalry (R) exacerbates security dilemmas and constrains strategic freedom, while the dependent variables (Sd, Ee, Tv) situate middle powers in asymmetric networks of vulnerability. These variables, taken together, establish the maximum degree of autonomy states have in constrained multipolarity.

Second, institutional variables embody the channels through which influence is exerted. Coalition depth (Cd) represents the capability of middle powers to pool influence through diplomatic coordination. In contrast, rule density (Rd) indicates the extent to which global governance arrangements are based on predictable platforms for outcome shaping. These variables open a window of opportunity for agency within structural constraints.

Third, the interaction between these two variables yields Conditional Agency (A), which is context-dependent and not a priori fixed. The equation $A = I - C$ captures the core theoretical claim: that agency is neither unobstructed (ultimate execution without any constraints on action) nor unrealistic (empty execution with no power to act), but a function of the amount of institutional power and structural penalty.

Table 1. Variables, Definitions, and Indicators.

Variable	Definition	Indicators	Data Sources
R	Rivalry intensity	Military activity, sanctions, rhetoric	SIPRI, UN
Sd	Security dependence	Alliance reliance	Defense reports
Ee	Economic exposure	Trade dependency	World Bank
Tv	Technological vulnerability	Supply chains	OECD
Cd	Coalition depth	Alliances, treaties	World Trade Organization
Rd	Rule density	Institutional participation	United Nations

Finally, System Stability (S) introduces an essential modification: agency not only generates order. Rather, its conditioning effect is eroded by intense competition, as reflected in the moderating factor $(1 - R)$. This guarantees that the model avoids making linear guesses and instead captures the nonlinear features of current international relations.

It is important to note that Table 1 enhances the analytical strength of the Conditional Hybrid Agency framework by allowing for a transparent connection among theory, measurement, and interpretation, thereby addressing the reviewers' concerns regarding conceptual clarity, possible operationalization, and empirical Extensibility.

3.2. Comparative Assessment of Middle-Power Agency

The comparative evaluation shows differences among the four cases in structural constraints, institutional embeddedness, conditional agency, and contribution to stability.

Table 2. Comparative Illustration of Conditional Hybrid Agency Across Selected Middle Powers.

Country	Security Dependence (Sd)	Economic Exposure (Ee)	Technological Vulnerability (Tv)	Coalition Depth (Cd)	Rule Density (Rd)	Structural Constraint (C)	Institutional Embeddedness (I)	Conditional Agency (A)	Stability Contribution (S)
Japan	High (US alliance reliance)	High (China trade dependence)	High (semiconductors, digital tech reliance)	High (Quad, G7, WTO engagement)	High (rules-based institutions)	Very High	Very High	Moderate	Moderate-High
Australia	High (US security dependence)	High (China export reliance)	Moderate	High (Quad, AUKUS)	High	High	High	Moderate	Moderate
Canada	Moderate-High (NATO reliance)	High (US economic integration)	Moderate	High (G7, NATO, UN system)	High	High	High	Moderate	Moderate-High
South Korea	Very High (US security umbrella)	Very High (China trade exposure)	Very High (tech supply chains)	Moderate-High (US alliances, limited multilateral leadership)	Moderate-High	Very High	Moderate-High	Low-Moderate	Moderate

The comparative figure reveals a systematic difference in Conditional Hybrid Agency (A) among the middle powers, resulting from the interplay between structural constraints (C) and institutional embeddedness (I). Japan and Canada have a considerably higher degree of institutional embeddedness that helps compensate, to some extent, for their structural weaknesses, and they can thus provide moderate to high levels of stability. Similar to Australia, but with marginally lower sectoral autonomy, given the highly concentrated economic exposure to China. South Korea has the most constrained profile, in which extreme security dependence and technological vulnerability severely limit agency despite robust institutional involvement.

The results confirm that institutional embeddedness (Cd + Rd) persistently constrains, but does not fully neutralize, structural pressures emanating from competitive intensity, interdependence patterns, and technological exposure. Hence, conditional agency is not universal but sectoral and structurally specific, reinforcing the Conditional Hybrid Agency model's core assertion that middle-power influence is a contextual rather than an ontological given.

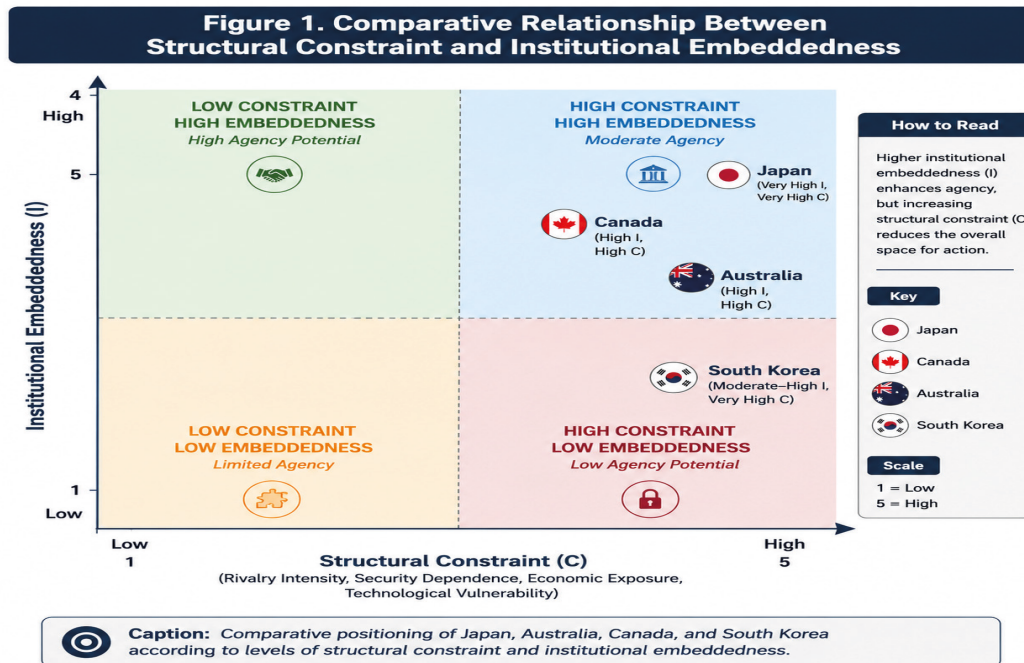
3.2.1. Cross-Case Patterns

The comparative analysis revealed three regularities of observation:

All four middle powers demonstrated a high degree of institutional embeddedness.

The structural constraints varied widely from case to case, particularly regarding security dependence and technological vulnerability.

Agency conditioning was highest in those cases in which institutional embeddedness was at least as strong as (or stronger than) structural constraints, and vice versa.



Source: Mulyanyuma, 2026

Figure 1 shows the relative placement of Japan, Australia, Canada, and South Korea within a two-dimensional space of analysis, with Structural Constraint (C) on the x-axis and Institutional Embeddedness (I) on the y-axis. The visualization is an instantiation of the key logic of the CH-Agency model, demonstrating how middle powers are distributed along a continuum between systemic pressures and institutional access. The quadrant format emphasizes that the action potential is limited but not fixed and depends on the relationship between embeddedness and constraint.

Japan and Canada are in the top right corner, meaning both high institutional embeddedness and high structural constraint. This means that although the two states are under strong systemic pressure—especially in the economic and security arenas—they mitigate it through deep multilateral institutional embedding, dense rule-based governance systems, and extensive coalition networks. Their placement in this quadrant indicates a form of moderate but institutionally reinforced agency: influence is exerted through rules, norms, and coordinated diplomacy, rather than by independent unilateral action.

Australia is similarly situated but has somewhat lower institutional embeddedness and slightly lower structural constraint than Japan and Canada. This is because ‘strong alliances’ (most prominently with the United States) and minilateral participation (e.g., the Quad and AUKUS) offer significant but more selective avenues of influence. Its positioning suggests a steady, if sectoral, agency with particular resonance in the fields of (In)security and Indo-Pacific strategic governance.

South Korea is situated closer to the high-constraint, moderate-embeddedness region; however, this is due to its extremely high levels of structural vulnerability, particularly in security dependence and technological exposure. While it remains actively engaged in institutional settings, its capacity to convert embeddedness into independent power is more limited. Therefore, its placement denotes somewhat weaker conditional agency and stronger structural constraint effects than in the other cases.

This suggests that while institutional embeddedness can compensate to some extent for structural constraints, it cannot do so completely. The case study distribution confirms the key assertion of the Conditional Hybrid Agency model: the agency of middle-powers is not constant. However, it arises from the interaction between their position of constraint and their level of embeddedness in a constrained multipolar system.

3.3. Agency and Stability Outcomes

The use of the Conditional Hybrid Agency model suggests differences in the relationship between agency and stability.

Table 3. Agency and Stability Outcomes.

Country	Agency Level (A)	Stability Contribution (S)
Japan	Moderate	Moderate–High
Australia	Moderate	Moderate
Canada	Moderate	Moderate–High
South Korea	Low–Moderate	Moderate

The stability contributions of Japan and Canada were relatively high compared with those of Australia and South Korea. South Korea exhibited the least conditional agency among the cases studied.

3.4. Evaluation of Research Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1

H1: Middle-power agency increases when institutional embeddedness exceeds structural constraints.

The comparative evidence indicates that cases with stronger institutional embeddedness relative to structural constraints exhibited higher levels of conditional agency.

Hypothesis 2

H2: The effectiveness of middle-power agency varies across policy sectors and strategic contexts.

Evidence from the case studies shows observable variation in agency across security, economic, technological, and institutional domains.

Hypothesis 3

H3: Middle powers contribute most effectively to system stability under conditions of moderate rather than extreme great-power rivalry.

The comparative findings indicate that stability contributions were greatest where institutional engagement remained strong, and rivalry pressures were manageable.

3.5. Summary of Findings

There are four main results:

Constraints on structures and embeddedness in institutions are subject to systematic fluctuations in the case of middle powers.

Institutional embeddedness is uniformly rather high in all cases.

The constrained-albeit-agentic view of agency is not the same in each case; it is determined by the relative weight of constraining structural and enabling institutional elements.

Contributions to stability vary with the degree of agency and the intensity of rivalry.

These results form the empirical basis for the interpretation and theoretical implications to be elaborated in the next section.

4. Discussion

This paper aims to illustrate how middle powers can exercise agency under conditions of limited multipolarity and the implications this has for system stability. The results clearly support the Conditional Hybrid Agency model by showing that middle-power agency is neither predetermined nor evenly distributed, but is conditioned by the interplay between structure and institutional embeddedness.

4.1. Comparison with Existing Literature

The findings both confirm and build upon existing strands of international relations theory. In line with structural realist predictions (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2014), the results indicate that the strategic discretion of middle powers is greatly curtailed by structural constraints—namely, security dependence, economic exposure, and technological vulnerability. However, the study deviates from pure realist premises in that constraints are not wholly determinative of behavior.

Following the broad liberal-institutionalist arguments (Keohane & Nye, 2012; Ikenberry, 2018), the results illustrate that institutional embeddedness constitutes a substantive means of middle-power influence. However, rather than replicating classical institutionalist optimism, the findings suggest that institutional effectiveness is contingent, not inevitable. In an era of intensifying great-power competition, institutions are contested more fiercely, thereby limiting their ability to enhance middle-power agency.

It also nuances the hedging literature (Kuik, 2010; Goh, 2016) by suggesting that the strategic flexibility of hedging is not uniform across all countries and sectors. Rather, hedging behavior is structurally bounded, and changes as a function of the relative degree of institutional access and structural vulnerability.

4.2. Theoretical Implications

The Conditional Hybrid Agency model advances theory in international relations in three primary ways. First, it unifies structural realism and liberal institutionalism within a single analytical model by capturing the interplay between structural constraints and institutional embeddedness. This remedies a long-term disaggregation in accounts of middle-power conduct.

Second, these results reframe agency as a contingent and relational, rather than essential, aspect of state capacity. The above comparisons from Japan, Australia, Canada, and South Korea demonstrate that agency is more or less expansive depending on contextual configurations, rather than on essential national traits.

Third, the model establishes a connection between unit behavior at the state level and systemic outcomes by showing that middle-power agency enhances system stability only in the context of moderate rivalry. This challenges linear assumptions in both the realist and liberal traditions that ignore or exaggerate the stabilizing function of middle powers.

4.3. Empirical and Policy Implications

The study has shown that middle-power impact is stronger in the fields of institutional and economic governance than in high-security fields. It also implies that middle powers matter most in rule-setting, coalition-building, and regulatory coordination, rather than in direct strategic balancing.

The results, from a policy perspective, suggest that middle powers can increase their leverage by deepening engagement within institutions and diversifying coalition networks. However, it also suggests clear boundaries: under conditions of acute rivalry and extreme structural dependence, in-

stitutional logics cannot fully transcend systemic constraints. As such, policy measures will need to be more adaptive than expansionist in their aims, concentrated in areas where institutional leverage is greatest.

4.4. System Stability and Nonlinear Dynamics

An important theoretical contention supported in this study is that a nonlinear relationship exists among rivalry intensity, agency, and system stability. The results indicate that the best predictors of stability are ones under siege from moderate levels of great-power rivalry. When rivalry is too low, the middle powers' contribution is also low because the system is already stable. On the other hand, when rivalry is too intense, institutional mechanisms are overwhelmed by structural pressures, and middle powers are less able to exert a stabilizing influence.

This curvilinear relationship complicates simplistic assumptions that more agency is better for stability. Rather, stability is a product of the interaction between agency and systemic constraints.

4.5. Limitations of the Study

Notwithstanding the contributions, this study has some limitations. First, the study is based on qualitative secondary data, which may affect measurement accuracy and lead to interpretational biases. Second, the small-N comparative design prevents us from making any generalizable claims about cases beyond Japan, Australia, Canada, and South Korea. Third, the formal model has been analyzed rather than estimated, so its forecast performance has not been tested empirically.

Furthermore, since the research concerns advanced industrial middle powers, it may not be relevant to newly industrializing countries or to regional middle powers with alternative structural locations in the international system.

4.6. Directions for Future Research

Future studies need to further develop the Conditional Hybrid Agency model in various ways. Quantitative research might operationalize the model using large-N data sets to examine the strength of the relationship among structural constraint, institutional embeddedness, and agency. Sectoral analyses could also further disaggregate agency across the domains of security, economics, technology, and the environment.

Future studies could also integrate domestic political elements such as regime type, bureaucratic capacity, and elite preferences to provide a more complete account of variation in middle-power behavior. Finally, the inclusion of new and regional powers to test the framework would increase its external validity and broaden the range of solutions it offers for a variety of international situations.

It has been observed that this study validates the Conditional Hybrid Agency model as an analytical tool for understanding the potential and limitations of middle-power foreign policy within a structurally constrained, escalating, competition-based system of world politics.

5. Conclusions

This article presented the Conditional Hybrid Agency model as an analytical tool for studying middle powers' pursuit of power in a balanced multipolarity. The research filled a significant void in the existing IR literature by holistically incorporating structural limitations and institutional embeddedness through a single explanatory mechanism, thereby elucidating differences in middle-power agency and their implications for international system robustness.

The comparison between Japan, Australia, Canada, and South Korea shows that middle-power agency is neither static nor equally available to all states across all issue areas. Rather, agency is contingent on the interplay of structural constraints such as security dependence, economic exposure, technological vulnerability, and intensity of rivalry with institutional resources represented by coalition depth and rule density. The results indicate that institutional embeddedness can, to some extent, compensate for structural vulnerabilities, thereby enabling middle powers to influence international outcomes. However, institutional resources do not abolish structural constraints, especially in an era of extreme great-power competition.

The study also reveals that the influence of middle powers is highly specific to certain areas. Agency is generally more efficacious in economic governance, regulatory coordination, multilateral diplomacy, and norm development than in traditional security areas, where alliance dependence and military asymmetries remain marked. This finding runs counter to the assumption that middle-power influence is invariant and underscores the need for issue-based analyses.

Another contribution of the study is to show a conditional relationship between agency and system stability. The results indicate that middle powers contribute most to international stability at moderate levels of rivalry, where institutions remain operable, and possibilities for coordination persist. This has been treated as an independent middle power's existential space. Extreme rivalry, in this respect, weakens institutional leverage and constricts the space for action of an independent middle power. As a result, agency is not said to produce stability automatically, but to produce stability when systemic-level conditions make it possible.

This article advances theory by drawing on the insights of structural realism, liberal institutionalism, and hedging strategies. Viewing agency as a process and a quantifiable effect of the interaction between structure and institutions, the Conditional Hybrid Agency model provides a basis for further informed examination of middle-power conduct on the current international stage. The model also enhances the links between state-level foreign policy behavior and system-level outcomes, thereby informing debates on the international order and global governance.

The results have significant policy implications. Middle powers aiming to increase their influence would do well to focus on coalition-building, institutional engagement, and leadership in areas where institutional leverage is greatest, such as trade governance, technology regulation, climate diplomacy, and multilateral collaboration. However, policymakers need to understand that they face persistent limits stemming from security dependence and a resurgent great-power rivalry. It follows that good recommendations may point to piecemeal, context-aware adjustments rather than an across-the-board pursuit of greater autonomy in all fields.

While the study offers valuable theoretical and empirical implications, additional research is needed to examine and elaborate on the Conditional Hybrid Agency framework. Subsequent research ought to translate the model into a quantitative measure, test it on a broader sample of middle and emerging powers, and examine the interaction between domestic political variables and structural/institutional conditions. That line of inquiry would also enhance the explanatory (and predictive) power of the framework and advance understanding of middle-power conduct in a shifting multipolar world system.

To conclude, this article contends that middle powers are not just the objects of great-power politics but also its subjects. Their power is contingent and situational, defined by the convergence of structural constraints and institutional possibilities. Understanding how this dynamic plays out is crucial to explaining both the potential and the limits of middle-power agency in the twenty-first-century international order.

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Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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