

Ben Horton and Reg Pula
February 2026

Middle power moves

*Foreign policy lessons for
the United Kingdom and Germany*

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Foreword

The UK and Germany face a world in which the foundations of their foreign policy are being fundamentally challenged. The desire to face this challenge together was what spurred our countries to sign the landmark Kensington Treaty in July 2025. The Treaty recognises that in a world increasingly fragmented and threatened by the arbitrary action of ‘great powers’, collaboration between like-minded allies and close friends is vital.

While we rightly deepen our ties with our closest friends, our countries must also broaden our cooperation with a larger network of partners in both the western and non-western world. As this paper shows, this approach can be seen around the world in many ‘middle powers’ — nations who, like the UK and Germany, hold significant power and wealth, but are unable to wield global influence alone. In their attempts to adapt to geopolitical and geoeconomic fragmentation, these countries have begun acting in tandem on specific issues, often on a case-by-case basis, seeking to gradually shift the international system to their mutual advantage. Such an approach embraces the ‘multiplex’ nature of global order today, and presents the opportunity to pose a counterweight to the great powers. In charting our own course through this more turbulent and transactional world, the UK and Germany can learn from these countries’ approaches.

For both of our countries to succeed, we must diversify our diplomacy. Our increasing need to pursue our own distinct place on the international stage will require us to build trust and cooperation with a wide range of partners. Learning from our experiences leading the Coalition of the Willing in support of Ukraine, for example, the UK and Germany could help build similar groupings concerned with trade, technology, climate, international development, and other

issues of global concern. By focusing our international efforts on building consensus and action among middle powers on particular issues and policy areas, the UK and Germany would, as the paper argues, be “well-placed not just to survive, but to influence the course of events in their favour”.

Adaptiveness, pragmatism, and a willingness to cooperate with a varying set of partners will become all the more crucial in the months and years ahead. Building a more flexible, outward-looking approach will require an intelligent and confident use of our numerous strengths and advantages in both hard and soft power. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council with significant financial and cultural reach and a well-established global network in the Commonwealth, and a preeminent EU member-state, third-largest global exporter and fourth-largest contributor to the UN budget, the UK and Germany are well-placed to help build a broad coalition of other middle-power friends and partners. But to succeed, we will also need a dose of humility, recognising our need to work together with many other countries to achieve our goals.

By embracing the lessons outlined in this paper, the UK and Germany will have an opportunity to play a key role in a global silent majority which, together, can begin the work of refashioning an international order in which states can pursue their interests peacefully in partnership with others.

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Sebastian Roloff MdB, Chair, UK-German Friendship Group, Bundestag

Introduction

International relations are in a state of flux. The liberal rules-based order designed by western countries in the wake of the Second World War faces increasing challenges to its viability.¹ Norms and principles which have guided international cooperation for much of the past 80 years are being challenged or altogether discarded, and the institutions responsible for resolving conflicts and delivering vital humanitarian assistance are under severe strain. From Ukraine to Gaza and Sudan, sovereignty and human rights are contravened with seeming impunity.² At the same time, the traditional guardians of the old order are pulling back from their international commitments as they grapple with the rise of right-wing nationalist sentiment at home. The multilateral institutions of the former order are unlikely to disappear any time soon, but their ability to influence the course of major geopolitical questions is under serious strain, while parallel institutions are emerging.³ Instead, bilateral deal-making, transactionalism, and power politics have returned to the fore, with the United States under President Donald Trump a leading proponent of this shift. In a world which is increasingly fragmenting, how can the UK and Germany find a way to advance their interests and priorities? The answer to this question cannot be found through introspection alone; it also lies in the study of other countries which, through various tactics, are seeking to chart their own course as a new order slowly emerges. Of

particular interest, given the position the UK and Germany occupy in 2025, are the so-called ‘middle powers’; states lacking the heft of great powers like China or the United States but which still exert some collective influence on the course of international relations.

To explore the strategies middle powers are adopting to manage geopolitical fragmentation, we conducted a series of interviews with former officials and policy experts with deep knowledge of a range of middle power states. These conversations encompassed case studies from Brazil, France, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, South Africa and Türkiye - analysing various approaches and geopolitical contexts. In what follows we set out some of the key behaviours these middle powers display, and reflect on implications for the UK and Germany. We find that despite the current geopolitical turbulence, there remain many opportunities for middle powers to shape the course of events. Through a combination of pragmatic deal-making, flexible manoeuvring through formal multilateral institutions and looser coalitions, harnessing economic leverage and soft power, and building long-term relationships with non-aligned countries through long-term strategic engagement, the UK and Germany would be well-placed not just to survive but to influence the course of events in their favour.

¹ G. John Ikenberry, ‘The end of liberal international order?’ *International Affairs* 94:1 (2018), 7-23.

² Comfort Ero and Richard Atwood, ‘Ten conflicts to watch in 2025’, *International Crisis Group*, 1 January 2025, accessed 29 November 2025, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/10-conflicts-watch-2025>.

³ Stefan Theil, ‘The alliances that matter now’, *Foreign Policy*, 11 September 2023, accessed 29 November 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/11/russia-china-us-alliances-multilateralism-united-nations-nato-g7-minilateral/>

What do we mean by ‘middle power’?

Scholars have written many words in the attempt to define what a middle power is. In political philosophy such a concept may be found as far back as the writings of Thomas Aquinas.⁴ Modern conceptions of the term seem to have arisen from policy debates in the likes of Australia and Canada in the aftermath of the Second World War.⁵ While it might be tempting to try to identify middle powers by their innate characteristics or assets (for example, ranking them on GDP or military capabilities), it has proven more useful to think about middle powers in terms of how they act. The American political scientist Robert Keohane was one of the early proponents of the middle power concept in IR theory, drawing the distinction between small, middle and great powers in terms of the role they played in relation to the wider international system. While the likes of the United States and Russia (at the height of the Cold War) had the power to unilaterally ‘determine’ or shape the system, middle powers had to work through collaboration within international or regional institutions to ‘affect’ the system without the hope of changing it as a lone actor.⁶ Later critics have questioned how useful it is to see middle powers as a homogenous bloc of countries, for instance by highlighting the differing incentives and roles of traditional and emerging middle powers.⁷

But across the various academic debates that continue over the middle power concept, a set of common behaviours can be found which get us as close to a working definition as anything. Middle powers typically seek to build partnerships with other countries based on shared interests, or sometimes (where possible) values. They pursue in-

fluence within existing international institutions, or attempt to play shaping roles for new groupings and alliances such as the BRICS or the CPTPP.⁸ At this multilateral level, they may focus efforts on particular issues or policy areas rather than seeking broader systemic change or fighting on many fronts at once.⁹ Where they have a unique asset or advantage - for example access to a sought-after natural resource or a track record for successful conflict mediation - they may try to leverage that to become more relevant or useful to stronger powers.¹⁰ If circumstances allow, they may focus on building a leadership role at the regional level, where the opportunities to shape events may be more forthcoming than the global level, and the potential benefits in security and prosperity more immediate.¹¹ Above all, where possible, middle powers try to avoid the obligation to uniformly align with one great power or other. Instead they seek pragmatic and productive relations with each power if achievable, though the space for this may be shrinking as US-China competition intensifies.¹²

In the current geopolitical context, there have been calls for middle powers to step into the vacuum left by the great powers as the rules-based order comes under strain, and reimagine international cooperation without them.¹³ The flexibility and adaptiveness of middle powers has been shown to be a valuable asset when navigating previous disruptions to the order.¹⁴ In a less peaceful world, there may still be a constructive role that developed and emerging middle powers could play by cooperating with one another to uphold elements of the international system that still

4 Carsten Holbraad, *Middle powers in international politics*, London: Macmillan (1984).

5 Jeffrey Robertson, ‘Middle-power definitions: confusion reigns supreme’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 71:4 (2017): 355-370.

6 Robert Keohane, ‘Lilliputians’ dilemmas: small states in international politics’, *International Organization* 23:2 (1969): 296.

7 Eduard Jordaan, ‘The concept of a middle power in international relations: distinguishing between emerging and traditional middle powers’, *Politikon: South African Journal of International Studies* 30:1 (2003): 165-181.

8 For an example of middle power activism through the G20, see Christian Downie, ‘One in 20: the G20, middle powers and global governance reform’, *Third World Quarterly* 38:7 (2017): 1493-1510.

9 John Ravenhill, ‘Cycles of middle power activism: Constraint and choice in Australian and Canadian foreign policies.’ *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 52:3 (1998): 309-327.

10 Tom Long, ‘Small states, great power? Gaining influence through intrinsic, derivative, and collective power’, *International Studies Review* 19:2 (2017): 185-205.

11 Andrew Hurrell, ‘Hegemony, liberalism and global order: what space for would-be powers?’ *International Affairs* 82:1 (2006): 8.

12 Miras Zhiyenbayev, ‘Strategic autonomy of middle powers under US-China rivalry’, *Modern Diplomacy*, 30 May 2025, accessed 29 November 2025, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2025/05/30/strategic-autonomy-of-middle-powers-under-us-china-rivalry/>.

13 Charalampos Efstathopoulos, ‘Global IR and the middle power concept: exploring different paths to agency’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 77:2 (2023): 213-232.

14 Andrew F. Cooper and Daniel Flesmes, ‘Foreign policy strategies of emerging middle powers: definitions, concepts and cases’, *Third World Quarterly*, 34:6 (2013): 947-962.

hold value.¹⁵ As Ngaire Woods notes, the return to ad hoc deal-making suits the strongest far better than the rest.¹⁶ Middle powers could join forces to develop more influential blocs of countries in the interests of protecting themselves in future trade or territorial disputes with larger powers.¹⁷ In a more positive frame, others have argued that the flux created by the rewriting of rules offers opportunities for agile middle powers to shape what comes next.¹⁸ This may be particularly true for those countries in the so-called global South which were prevented from influencing the forging of the previous order.¹⁹ In the struggle between the United States and China for primacy, there is space for other countries to act as 'swing states' which influence the greater powers to deliver public goods in exchange for loyalty or cooperation.²⁰

Amidst the opportunities middle powers could seize, however, there are many examples of the limitations of their influence. The sorts of ad hoc multilateral coalitions which middle powers are apt to broker can lack the same sense of binding commitment that formal institutions do, limiting their ability to achieve complicated security or diplomatic objectives over the longer term.²¹ As South Korea has found, the need to balance relations with great powers such as the United States and China can limit the extent to which middle powers are able to stand up for norms and principles within the international system.²² At the same time, the pursuit of strategic autonomy as a middle power can lead to difficult trade-offs. As Türkiye has found, challenging the strictures of the western-led rules-based order can lead to an uncomfortable choice between isolation or over-dependence on authoritarian states like China and Russia.²³

15 Stewart Patrick, 'What Happened to "the West"? As America drifts away from its allies, a less peaceful world awaits', *Foreign Affairs*, 18 September 2025, accessed 15 November 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/what-happened-west>.

16 Ngaire Woods, 'Order without America: how the international system can survive a hostile Washington', *Foreign Affairs*, 22 April 2025, accessed 15 November 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/donald-trump-order-without-america-ngaire-woods>.

17 Stacie E. Goddard, 'The rise and fall of great-power competition: Trump's new spheres of influence', *Foreign Affairs*, 22 April 2025, accessed 7 November 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/trump-rise-and-fall-great-power-competition>.

18 Amitav Acharya, Antoni Estevadeordal and Louis W. Goodman, 'Multipolar or multiplex? Interaction capacity, global cooperation and world order', *International Affairs* 99:6 (2023): 2339-2365.

19 Matias Spektor, 'Rise of the nonaligned: who wins in a multipolar world?' *Foreign Affairs*, 7 January 2025, accessed 7 November 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/rise-nonaligned-multipolar-world-matias-spektor>.

20 G. John Ikenberry, 'Three worlds: the West, East and South and the competition to shape global order', *International Affairs* 100:1 (2024): 121-138.

21 Rory Miller and Sarah Cardaun, 'Multinational security coalitions and the limits of middle power activism in the Middle East: the Saudi case', *International Affairs* 96:6 (2020): 1509-1525.

22 Yongwook Ryu, 'South Korea's role conceptions and the liberal international order', *International Affairs* 99:4 (2023): 1439-1458.

23 Mustafa Kutlay and Ziya Öniş, 'Turkish foreign policy in a post-western order: strategic autonomy or new forms of dependence?' *International Affairs* 97:4 (2021): 1085-1104.

Middle power strategies in a fragmenting world

Across the nine interviews conducted for this project, we explored how different countries are adapting to a fluctuating geopolitical context. The countries we considered vary significantly, representing the broad spectrum of states that are assigned the label of middle power, from former colonial states with deep political and economic investment in the postwar order like France, to aspiring regional hegemony like Saudi Arabia or leaders of the developing world like South Africa. Despite this variation, a number of common behaviours strategies emerged which are worth reflecting on.

1. Pragmatic, interest-based engagement

Middle powers such as Brazil, Mexico, and Türkiye approach foreign relations in issue-specific, transactional ways rather than adhering rigidly to blocs or values. They manage links with both Western and non-Western actors, tailoring partnerships to the relevant context and to specific opportunities for collaboration, for example on trade, energy, migration, or technology.

For countries that do not possess great power or superpower status, the existence of an international system that ultimately seeks to limit the power of greater powers, ensuring stability and reliability in the operation of international affairs, ultimately serves their interest. However, given the decline of the liberal international order and rise of the multiplex world order described above, middle powers are increasingly finding that flexibility is king.

While many of the middle powers we assessed benefit from and remain part of key institutions of the liberal international order, such as the UN, the World Trade Organisation and the World Bank, they nevertheless have hedged their bets, in different ways, on developing parallel institutions - for instance, those largely influenced by China. Türkiye is part of the Belt and Road Initiative; Brazil, a founding member of the BRICS. Saudi Arabia and Mexico have steadily increased trade and investment ties with China, though the Gulf state has so far resisted joining the BRICS, owing to concerns that it may upset the Trump Administration as it seeks further US investment as part of its Vision

2030²⁴. France is a core architect of the liberal international order, and though it does not politically align with China-influenced parallel institutions, it was nevertheless the only major Western European nation that Xi Jinping visited on a recent European trip, as France pursues strategic autonomy independently and through the EU. This behaviour from a variety of middle powers points to a diversification strategy, affording them greater autonomy to shape global and regional affairs in ways that align with their interests.

Flexibility is not limited to forum or institution-shopping. Middle powers do not appear to engage solely or even predominantly with countries that are ideologically aligned, and forum shopping is just one element of this behaviour. France and Saudi Arabia have several points of disagreement, particularly on human rights, however, they have deepened ties through a new strategic partnership signed in 2014 and their partnership was pivotal to furthering recognition of a Palestinian state. In Saudi Arabia, France sees economic opportunity and a partner to further interests in the Middle East independently. In France, Saudi Arabia sees a gateway to the European Union, a key investment partner and one that allows it to further reduce its reliance on the United States²⁵. That is not to say that neither country is ideological. Instead, like many other middle powers, they recognise that ideology can only be pursued with power, at the centre of which lie core national interests.

2. Leverage convening and coalition-building

Middle powers play a quietly transformative role in global and regional governance by acting as conveners and coalition builders. Unlike great powers - whose agendas often polarize debates - middle powers are frequently viewed as more neutral, pragmatic, and solutions-oriented. This image provides middle powers with the opportunity to set the agenda and leverage convening and coalition-building roles in ways that align with their own interests. By doing so, and through the effective utilisation of international institutions, middle powers also amplify their power.

Brazil, for instance, has sought to increase its global influence and autonomy historically through multilateralism,

²⁴ Peshya Magid, Maha El Dahan and Manya Saini, 'Saudi Arabia sits on fence over BRICS with eye on vital ties with US', *Reuters*, 8 May 2025, accessed 29 November 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-sits-fence-over-brics-with-eye-vital-ties-with-us-2025-05-08/>

²⁵ Giorgio Cafiero, 'What's driving France and Saudi Arabia's deepening ties?' *The New Arab*, 20 June 2023, accessed 29 November 2025, <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/whats-driving-france-and-saudi-arabias-deepening-ties>.

utilising the agenda-setting influence that comes from acting as a convenor at international forums, building cross-regional coalitions for reform²⁶. Brazil has sought to present itself as an influential representative of developing countries, benefitting from this image through hosting COP30 and presiding over the G20 and BRICS summits in recent years. Through such fora, Brazil has pushed for multilateral reforms, become a champion for climate diplomacy and developed anti-global hunger initiatives. By doing so, it has created a global role for itself in ways that further its national interests, from attempts to mitigate climate challenges facing the Amazon to general power projection globally and regionally. Another recent example of a middle power using international bodies as a power amplifier is the case of Indonesia using its membership of the World Trade Organisation, a quasi-legal international body, to seek to strike down biodiesel duties placed on it by the EU, a much larger economy²⁷.

France provides another example of the effective advancement of national interest through multilateral bodies. Through the EU's official adoption of "strategic autonomy", ultimately focused on the bloc reducing its overreliance on the US, France has managed to Europeanise the concept, contributing to a "power multiplier" for France's core security interests.²⁸

3. Focus on credibility and consistency over grand reform

Middle powers derive influence less from revolutionary proposals (e.g. reform to the UN Security Council) and more from long-term reliability and sustained engagement. Their impact comes from a recognised and consistent role, both internally and externally, demonstrating competence, and cultivating trust with a wide range of partners. The advantage lies in persistence with a long-term, strategic mindset: by sticking to a clear set of roles and executing them over time, middle powers accumulate trust and a reputation for effectiveness that allows them to shape agendas subtly but meaningfully. For instance, Mexico's activity on climate change globally increased in the mid-2000s, eventually

hosting a successful COP16 in 2010 following the failure of COP15 in Copenhagen, where it demonstrated steady, constructive and inclusive diplomatic engagement which led to the Cancun Agreements.²⁹ Elsewhere, Qatar's investment over a long period of time in peacebuilding and mediation has earned a significant level of recognition and leverage to further their foreign policy aims.³⁰

4. Economic and geo-economic foundations matter

A common theme emerging from the interviews for this project was the need for countries to address the state of their economies in order to build influence and relevance abroad. Economic influence gives states the material capability and strategic relevance to shape regional or global affairs - but some states risk falling into the middle-income trap, which can stall their rise. According to the World Bank, there are over 100 countries stuck in the middle-income trap, including Türkiye and Brazil, while South Korea and Saudi Arabia have successfully managed to avoid this and developed into high-income economies - though for different reasons³¹. South Korea pursued industrialisation and exports-led growth, while Saudi Arabia benefitted from oil rents which supported its transition to a high-income economy³².

Focusing economic efforts is one way that middle powers have been able to assert influence. France, for example, has managed to carve out a position as the second largest global exporter of arms through a combination of supporting state-owned enterprises and pragmatic deal-making with a wide range of states.³³ South Korea's economic model, meanwhile, has seen the country develop world-leading sovereign technology capabilities - especially in semiconductors, automotive and smartphone sectors. This advantage has drawn attention globally and, alongside significant contributions in international development assistance and peacekeeping operations³⁴, has given it the leverage to proactively engage in tech diplomacy while balancing relations between the US and China.³⁵

26 Oliver Stuenkel, *Multi-Alignment as strategy: how Brazil navigates between Washington, Beijing, and the global south*, Belfer Center, 20 November 2025, accessed 29 November 2025, <https://www.belfercenter.org/research-analysis/multi-alignment-strategy-how-brazil-navigates-between-washington-beijing-and>.

27 Reuters, *Indonesia regrets EU's move to appeal on WTO biodiesel ruling*, 2 October 2025, accessed via Yahoo Finance 14 December 2025, <https://uk.finance.yahoo.com/news/indonesia-regrets-eus-move-appeal-111554809.html>

28 Gesine Weber, 'It's not enough for France to be right about strategic autonomy', *War on the Rocks*, 14 May 2025, accessed 29 November 2025, <https://warontherocks.com/2025/05/its-not-enough-for-france-to-be-right-about-strategic-autonomy/>.

29 Gustavo Sosa-Nunez and Simone Lucatello, 'Analysing political discourse: Mexico's climate change policy', *L'Europe en Formation* 380 (2016): 71-89.

30 Mirdef Alqashouti, 'Qatar mediation: from soft diplomacy to foreign policy,' in M. Zweiri and F. Al Qawasmī (eds.), *Contemporary Qatar*, Springer: Singapore (2021), 73-92.

31 Spencer Feingold, 'The 'middle-income trap' is holding back over 100 countries. Here's how to overcome it', *World Economic Forum*, 4 September 2024, accessed 29 November 2025, <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2024/09/middle-income-trap-world-bank-economic-development/>.

32 Allianz Research, *The middle income trap: inequality across countries after COVID-19*, accessed 14 December 2025. https://www.allianz.com/content/dam/onemarketing/azcom/Allianz_com/economic-research/publications/specials/en/2021/november/2021_11_17_Middle-Income-Trap.pdf

33 Jean-Michel Bezat, 'France consolidates its position as the world's second-largest arms exporter', *Le Monde*, 9 March 2025, accessed 14 December 2025, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/economy/article/2025/03/09/france-consolidates-its-position-as-the-world-s-second-largest-arms-exporter_6738982_19.html.

34 Terence Roehrig, 'South Korea, Foreign Aid, and UN Peacekeeping: Contributing to International Peace and Security as a Middle Power', *Korea Observer* (Belfer Center), Winter 2013, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/south-korea-foreign-aid-and-un-peacekeeping-contributing-international-peace-and>

35 Kayla T. Orta, 'How South Korea advanced its trade and technology agenda at the APEC summit', *New Atlanticist*, 6 November 2025, accessed 29 November 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/how-south-korea-advanced-its-trade-and-technology-agenda-at-the-apec-summit/>.

Economics can also be a major source of weakness for middle powers also, however. Brazil's interlinked economic and political crises saw it lose its status as an emerging power from 2016 until a recent resurgence.³⁶³⁷ Türkiye was also highlighted in several of our interviews as an example of a middle power's geopolitical ambitions being hampered by a persistently embattled economy. Ultimately, the more functional a country's economy, the more others listen to it, and the more influence it wields.

5. Reinvest in soft power and a sustained presence

Another common theme in many of the interviews for this project was that soft power remained an influential asset for middle powers to draw upon. Far from being seen as the last resort of those lacking the hard power to coerce foreign states, there are many examples of soft power strategies garnering powerful results when countries prioritise them. South Korea's mobilization of K-pop and other elements of its popular culture is one.³⁸ South Africa's upholding of international legal norms around the conflict in Gaza, informed by its own historic experience of apartheid, could be another. Other examples cited in the interviews included the use of sports diplomacy by the Gulf states. We found that enduring influence comes from cultural engagement, educational exchange, and leading by example rather than tokenistic gestures. Effective middle powers commit to long-term, small-scale investments that can be scaled when the need arises.

³⁶ Helio Caetano Farias and Leonardo Pace Alves, 'The decline in Brazil's international influence: from an emerging country to an inward-looking state', *Austral: Brazilian Journal of Strategy & International Relations* 9:17 (2020): 14-37.

³⁷ Mark Barnes and Alex Nae, 'Brazil's realignment: From economic stagnation to strategic relevance', *London Stock Exchange Group*, 15 August 2025, accessed 29 November 2025, <https://www.lseg.com/en/insights/ftse-russell/brazils-realignment-from-economic-stagnation-to-strategic-relevance>.

³⁸ Brandon Valeriano and Aleydis Nissen, 'This Is South Korea's K-pop Soft Power Moment', *The Diplomat*, 16 February 2022, accessed 29 November 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/02/this-is-south-koreas-k-pop-soft-power-moment/>.

Implications for the United Kingdom and Germany

The UK and Germany encounter the world of 2025 as developed middle powers with the capacity to influence the direction of specific policy questions, but lacking the heft to unilaterally shift the dial on key challenges like the war in Ukraine or the climate crisis. To effectively navigate the changing geopolitical landscape, both countries would do well to move past their respective psychological mind-blocks - whether delusions of grandeur or fearful paralysis - and instead adopt elements of the pragmatic, interest-based approach seen in many of the other countries in similar positions, in ways that most suit their own geopolitical circumstances.

Germany's foreign policy approach in recent years could be viewed as classic middle power activism, seeking to form coalitions of the willing to further shared interests and objectives.³⁹ The historical baggage it carries from the two World Wars has seen later policymakers pursue a 'civilian' role in its international relations, and its orientation towards dialogue and convening make it well-placed to navigate a world based more on transactions than monolithic institutions. As the third largest economy in the world, it has significant leverage on trade and investment, and its industrial and engineering prowess is renowned. Its position as one of the leading states within the European Union gives it a clear regional role to play. Recent survey work from the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung also suggests that the German public is supportive of the role Germany seeks to play on the international stage.⁴⁰

Faced with a changing geopolitical outlook, however, successive governments have until relatively recently been reluctant to do the work of radically reimagining German foreign policy - relying on the security blanket of a previously aligned liberal hegemon (the United States) and the beneficial norms and rules of the European Union to avoid facing a changing world beyond. Some critics have characterised this as paralysis based on fear⁴¹ Others have noted a

growing unease among Berlin foreign policy elites as assumptions about the longevity of the comfortable post-Cold War order they benefited from are increasingly challenged by events.⁴² The much-vaunted 'zeitenwende' instigated by Olaf Scholz's administration in 2022 hinted that a mindset shift was underway, supported the next year by the publication of a new National Security Strategy and accompanying China Strategy.⁴³ The coalition government under Friedrich Merz which emerged after the 2025 elections has maintained a sense of urgency in rethinking Germany's role in Europe and beyond, although it may be too early to judge the results. The assets, capabilities and regional positioning are all there for Germany to be an influential middle power, but translating this mindset shift into tangible policy action remains a work in progress. German policymakers will also need to remain attuned to the mood of their public as this transformation plays out. The survey data noted earlier indicated a broad satisfaction with German foreign policy, but if drastic changes are made - will this support be sustained?

The UK, on the other hand, has been increasingly forced to confront the realities of declining global influence which undermine conventional rhetoric surrounding the role it would like to play in the world. For all the talk from successive governments of the UK acting as a global leader with the capacity to write the rules of the international system, it has been consistently hampered by economic stagnation since the Global Financial Crisis in 2008 and domestic political divisions (over Brexit, migration and climate to name but a few).⁴⁴ The expectations of the electorate regarding Britain's agency in international affairs have been consistently raised, all while its real-terms influence has reduced. Despite this trajectory, the UK retains many assets with which to pursue its interests internationally. It is the 7th largest economy in the world, and a nuclear-armed power with significant intelligence capabilities. It holds a seat on the UN Security Council, along with membership of key

39 Jens-Uwe Wunderlich and Chih-Mei Luo, 'Germany's evolving role in global affairs: Positioning as a middle power in the Indo-Pacific region', *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 65:3 (2024): 416-429.

40 Christos Katsioulis et al, *Security radar 2025: Europe - lost in geopolitics*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Vienna, 2025, accessed 15 November 2025, <https://uk.fes.de/e/de-fault-7e1e8df98aa7416dd3acf05939b823d1.html>.

41 Sam Denney, 'Fear itself: What stands between Germany and a better foreign policy', *Lawfare*, 20 March 2025, accessed 29 November 2025, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/fear-itself--what-stands-between-germany-and-a-better-foreign-policy>.

42 Jörg Lau, 'Germany's foreign policy unease', *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, accessed 29 November 2025, <https://ip-quarterly.com/en/germanys-foreign-policy-unease>.

43 Find the National Security Strategy here: <https://www.nationalesicherheitsstrategie.de/en.html>; and China Strategy here: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/resource/blob/2608578/810fdade376b1467f20bdb697b2acd58/china-strategie-data.pdf>.

44 Olivia O'Sullivan and Bronwen Maddox, *Three foreign policy priorities for the next UK government*, Chatham House, 14 May 2024, accessed 29 November 2025, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/05/three-foreign-policy-priorities-next-uk-government/01-introduction-need-realistic-ambition>.

multilateral institutions including NATO, the G20 and the CPTPP. Its tech sector is the largest tech ecosystem in Europe and third largest worldwide, with particular advantages in quantum, AI and biotechnology.⁴⁵ Its universities and cultural institutions are admired across the world, and its diplomatic reach remains wide despite cuts to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the aid budget in recent years.

Following the example of the case studies explored above, we recommend that the UK and Germany pursue the following actions:

- Recognise their developed middle power status and act accordingly, moving beyond short-term crisis management to define their expected roles in the evolving international order and pursue sustained pathways toward them.
- Prioritise patient and pragmatic engagement with non-likeminded states while upholding core principles; building influence through presence and practical cooperation in the national interest rather than asserting moral distance.
- Adopt functional, action-oriented and consistent diplomacy across regions and policy issues. Cooperate selectively on climate, trade, technology without assuming every partnership must be accompanied by a shared worldview.
- Ground foreign policy in a coherent economic strategy, investing in diplomatic capabilities that enable industrial cooperation and trade ties, and bolster economic security as the underpinnings of international influence.
- Diversify institutional engagement, avoiding over-dependence on traditional western forums. Pursue smaller 'issue coalitions' built around concrete outcomes. Of the traditional forums, decide what can be preserved, and focus on achieving that.
- Restore investment in diplomatic networks, cultural institutions and other sources of soft power to renew long-term relationships, especially with regions that might feel neglected by recent cuts to humanitarian aid.
- Rebuild reputation as a dependable partner by honouring our commitments on climate finance, humanitarian aid, and defence.
- Use convening capacity to lead on practical initiatives such as crisis response, while also effectively recognising

the value of international organisations as power multipliers in the pursuit of national interests.

There are many near-term opportunities for the UK and Germany to begin implementing these tactics. The ongoing war in Ukraine is one of the closest to home, as Europe confronts the urgency of supporting the Ukrainian war effort against an attempted full-scale invasion by Russia. By thinking in the mode of other middle powers, the UK and Germany could broker the solutions to unresolved issues such as the use of frozen Russian assets or the specific nature of European security guarantees in the event of a ceasefire or peace deal.

The significant progress made between both countries under the framework of the Trinity House agreement and the utilisation of the E3, alongside France, vis-a-vis Ukraine (leading to the formation of a 30 nation strong 'Coalition of the Willing' in support of Ukraine) could also be the basis for a more creative approach to wider European security⁴⁶, as the US pivots away from its accustomed position as the security blanket of Europe. The now defunct Western European Union, sitting within NATO, could be a useful model to return to, even if it requires refreshing and revamping. Since the turn of 2025, many fine words have been spoken across the continent but the speed of action in Europe is yet to meet the moment - especially following the US' recently published National Security Strategy, which reinforces the view from DC that Europe's security is primarily its responsibility. The UK, as one of Europe's two nuclear-armed powers, and Germany, as the potential engine of Europe's defence industrial base, both have critical roles to play in bolstering Europe's ability to defend itself, all the while complementing the growth in defence industrial mechanisms at the EU level and the ultimate US security backstop through NATO.

One potential flashpoint requiring further attention from those concerned with European security questions can be found in the Western Balkans - an historical conflict hotspot. With US and EU attention divided, a leadership vacuum in the region has opened up possibilities for malign external actors. As the New Diplomacy Project argued elsewhere, the UK and Germany both have roles to play in stabilising dynamics within the region and resisting the disruptive influences of Russia and China.⁴⁷ The UK and Germany could continue their engagement on this issue and spearhead a coalition of the willing to take forward the Berlin Process, advance conversations over NATO membership for Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, while pursuing transitional bilateral security agreements with both. This thinking would very much align with the pursuit of long-term deterrence strategies, ensuring that a second

⁴⁵ UK Department for Business and Trade, 'The UK tech ecosystem is supercharging the next wave of digital leaders' *CNN* [sponsored article], accessed 29 November 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/sponsor/edition/uk-dbt/digital-and-technology>

⁴⁶ Full text of the UK-Germany Trinity House Agreement is available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-germany-trinity-house-agreement-on-defence>.

⁴⁷ Jasmin Mujanovic, Reg Pula, Ian Bond, Jade McGlynn, Aidan Hehir, Ade Clewlow, Sam Goodman, Philippe Lefevre, *Restoring British leadership in the Western Balkans*, New Diplomacy Project, 21 October 2025, accessed 15 November 2025, <https://www.newdiplomacy.uk/briefings/u5bq4k6uk5kozjgh4bh0civkko4u84>.

front in Europe is not opened, playing into Putin's hands.

Beyond hard security issues, both the UK and Germany have a shared interest in ensuring that the United States and China do not develop a total monopoly on AI models and other emerging technologies which will drive the economy of the future. Germany has a long history of engineering excellence and technological innovation, while the UK has become the European country with the largest number of AI jobs and a world-leading AI security institute. As Europe struggles to avoid being left behind in the era of AI, both countries could work practically together to nurture the conditions for a sovereign European AI ecosystem.

Another pressing concern both countries have a stake in solving within their region is the migration crisis. The politics of this particular issue are challenging, and the ripple effects are already being felt in elections in both the UK and Germany. With progressive centre-left parties in government in the UK and Germany, both countries should be able to encourage policies to deal with migration that ensure European countries do not abandon humanitarian principles, while balancing the need to protect the wages of workers and the capacity of public services in their respective countries. Germany has been dealing with this issue far more acutely than the UK and for far longer. This is an example where the SPD could help advise its sister party in the UK.

Both Germany and the UK recognise the need to build a coalition to provide an alternative development offer to parts of the so-called 'Global South', countering the malign influence of Russian security actors in the Sahel or the extractive elements of China's 'New Silk Road'. While no middle power has the resources alone to offer an alternative, coordination together based on where respective countries have relationships and ties could provide that alternative. The UK could leverage its Commonwealth ties to engage with smaller, developing countries and understand the support they need, while Germany could harness the strong reputation of the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit* (GIZ) to offer impactful capacity-building programmes and development partnerships.

The emergence of new institutions and multilateral fora is providing a novel site for the power struggle between democracies and autocracies to play out. The BRICS, for example, increasingly sees contestation between the likes of Russia and China on the one hand, and India and South Africa on the other, as the grouping moves to develop more formal structures.⁴⁸ While sitting outside this particular multilateral institution, the UK and Germany should reflect on what they could do to bolster the standing of like-minded countries on the inside, and cultivate stronger relations with them based on mutual interests.

⁴⁸ Alexander Gabuev and Oliver Stuenkel, 'The battle for the BRICS: why the future of the bloc will shape global order', *Foreign Affairs*, 24 September 2024, accessed 15 November 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russia/battle-brics>.

Conclusion

In July 2025, the UK and Germany signed the ‘Treaty on Friendship and Bilateral Cooperation’ (Kensington Treaty), setting out a wide range of areas for future collaboration, including some of the opportunities explored above.⁴⁹ The aims of this agreement are laudable, and they provide a basis for effective cooperation between two of Europe’s strongest powers. To fully realise the potential of this framework, however, and effectively pursue their mutual interests in an era of geopolitical fragmentation and power politics, UK and German policymakers would do well to follow the example of middle powers in other parts of the world. By taking a pragmatic, adaptive approach to partnerships, building issue-specific coalitions of like-minded or ‘like-interested’ states to augment bargaining power with the superpowers, and utilising the most useful elements of international institutions, the UK and Germany can protect

the elements of the international system they most wish to preserve. By focusing on domestic sources of strength, including economic and cultural assets, and by identifying policy areas where they can make the most tangible contribution, both countries can demonstrate their usefulness to other countries and translate that utility into leverage. And by clearly communicating their intended international roles and aspirations to the rest of the world, and sticking to the commitments that follow, they can cultivate a sense of reliability and seriousness that encourages others to engage with them. Under the current governments of both countries we see signs that a seriousness of purpose has returned. It remains to be seen whether this can evolve into seriousness of deed as the geopolitical fragmentation of the current moment deepens.

⁴⁹ British Embassy Berlin, ‘Friendship and bilateral cooperation treaty: the 17 projects the UK and Germany will deliver together’, *GOV.UK*, 17 July 2025, accessed 29 November 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/friendship-and-bilateral-cooperation-treaty-the-17-projects-the-uk-and-germany-will-deliver-together>.

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Middle power moves



International relations in 2025 have taken a sharp turn away from multilateral cooperation within the framework of a rules-based international system. Instead, bilateral deal-making, transactionalism, and power politics have returned to the fore, with the United States of America (USA) under President Donald Trump leading this shift. Norms and principles which have guided international cooperation since the end of the Second World War are being challenged or altogether discarded, and the institutions responsible for resolving conflicts and delivering vital humanitarian assistance are under severe strain.



Meanwhile, potentially existential transformations from climate change to the rise of new technologies require global coordination and attention. In a world which is increasingly fragmenting, can likeminded middle powers such as the UK and Germany find a way to advance their interests and priorities, while also bolstering the weakened international system? This paper explores examples of middle power agency (within Europe and beyond), and suggests ways in which the UK and Germany can work together with other middle powers to navigate the uncertain present.

Further information on this topic can be found here:

➔ fes.de