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Is a Stable Middle Power Order Possible?

Europe's Role in an Alternative Future



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The Day of Reckoning

The disruption of the liberal international order has been unwelcome news for Europe. The continent had championed the order and become its principal beneficiary, resulting in a period of peace and affluence—an experiment that was perhaps the closest approximation of the neoliberal ideal depicted by Francis Fukuyama in *The End of History*.¹

The liberal order has periodically faced significant challenges, and many in the Global South have been permanently discontented with its selective application and inequality. But the United States, with its power and dominance, was always there to protect the order. Such was Europe's total faith in the project, and in the US anchor that offered it apparent permanence, that it had stopped planning for the day of reckoning: a day when America's commitment to the transatlantic partnership would be called into question.

But now that day has arrived, courtesy of US president Donald Trump who has acted as a catalyst for the rupture of the system. And Europe has been caught woefully unprepared. Although Europe is still the world's third-largest economy (by purchasing power parity), its most vibrant trading bloc, and home to two nuclear weapon states, the shock has been severe enough to raise an existential question about its future. Will Europe be able to continue as a united entity or will it begin to unravel along historical ethnolinguistic and geographical lines?

Naturally, European leaders are still hoping for something as close as possible to the old order to be preserved. The best-case scenario for Europe would be to revert to traditional transatlantic relations, while continuing along the current trajectory of seeking strategic autonomy, the latter now inevitable given Europe's current experience with the US. In this scenario, the US returns to its previous role as the provider of global security but partners with a Europe that is no longer entirely dependent on its military capabilities and is prepared to do some of the heavy lifting.

This was essentially the message from Germany's chancellor Friedrich Merz at the recent Munich Security Conference. Merz acknowledged Europe's excessive reliance on and rift with the US. However, he also argued

that NATO was still a shared competitive advantage for both sides, and called for transatlantic trust to be repaired and revived.²

The problem is that this scenario is largely dependent on how President Trump chooses to position himself vis-à-vis Europe. It would require Trump to continue viewing the West as a united bloc, abandoning claims on any NATO member territories, remaining in lockstep with Europe on Ukraine, and refraining from undermining his allies by meddling in their politics or using trade wars as a tool to get his way. Europe can no longer bank on this under the present circumstances.

The current trajectory seems to suggest a bleaker future with transatlantic relations remaining troubled as long as Trump is in office. Apart from Europe's resentment toward American officials for continuing to talk *at* rather than *to* them, there are also growing differences between the transatlantic partners over a range of global and policy issues: immigration, respect for the United Nations (UN) and international institutions, climate, tariffs, protectionist trade policies, use of Hobbesian geoeconomics, and the notion of the partnership being rooted in a shared Christian faith, to name but a few. Even during what was a largely conciliatory speech at the Munich Security Conference, US secretary of state Marco Rubio's only offer was a shared vision based on "white, Christian, MAGA terms," as *The Guardian* put it.³ Acquiescing to this would spell the end of post-World War II Europe as we know it. But for Europe to resist the US on its own would require an accelerated push toward strategic autonomy, including the ability to defend Europe without NATO, a scenario that is unlikely to come about in the immediate future.

So, where does this leave Europe? Can it preserve whatever is left of the liberal agenda—human rights, nuclear nonproliferation, the responsibility to protect, women, peace, and security—while retaining its economic prowess even when dealing with the United States, China, and Russia in a decidedly Hobbesian world?

Terra incognita

When Canada's prime minister Mark Carney took the podium at Davos on January 20 this year, he presented an alternative vision for US allies.⁴

1 Fukuyama, Francis, "The End of History?" *The National Interest* 16 (1989): 3–18.

2 "US and Europe Must 'Repair and Revive Transatlantic Ties': Germany's Merz," *Al Jazeera*, February 13, 2026.

3 Jon Henley, "Rubio's Munich speech was an offer of friendship – but on white, Christian, Maga terms," *The Guardian*, February 18, 2026.

4 World Economic Forum, "Davos 2026: Special Address by Mark Carney, Prime Minister of Canada," January 2026.

Carney's warning was stark. The post-World War II global order is no more. Instead the world is seeing "the beginning of a harsh reality where geopolitics [...] is submitted to no limits, no constraints." Carney's advice for the middle powers (including Europe) was to band together: "When we negotiate bilaterally with a hegemon, we negotiate from weakness. We accept what's offered. We compete with each other to be the most accommodating." Going it alone "is not sovereignty. It's the performance of sovereignty while accepting subordination." Given the "great power rivalry, the countries in between have a choice – compete with each other for favor, or combine to create a third path with impact."

Carney's conception of the future is not necessarily new or unique. The increasingly important role of middle powers has been talked about for some time. But the realization among Western leaders that they can no longer live the "pleasant fiction" of the liberal order that allowed them to reap the benefits of American hegemony, often at the cost of the Global South, is new. As is Carney's explicit recognition that middle powers of the Global North cannot chart this "third path" alone.

Writing in *Foreign Affairs*, Finnish president Alexander Stubb clearly set the bar for European states: "The global South will decide whether geopolitics in the next era leans toward cooperation, fragmentation, or domination." He asserted that "this is the last chance for Western countries to convince the rest of the world that they are capable of dialogue rather than monologue."⁵ For the Global South, this recognition evokes a sense of *schadenfreude*. For Europe, it must bring home the reality that it needs a far wider and more diverse set of partners if it is to have any chance of charting a successful alternative vision for the evolving world.

Achieving this will not be easy. It will require Europe to change the way it sees global powers like China and Russia, on the one hand, and how it treats the Global South, on the other. Europe must deal with the two global powers while forging, in Carney's words, "different coalitions for different issues based on common values and interests." Success in this endeavor may lead to, as Stubb puts it, "a new symmetry of power among the global West, East, and South [that] would produce a rebalanced world order in which countries could deal with the most pressing global challenges through cooperation and dialogue among equals."

Europe as the alternative path

The conversation about the transformation of the global order is currently centered on three possible scenarios: continued US leadership role and Sino-US rivalry leads to Cold War 2.0 with bounded systems; creation of new spheres of influence results in big power hegemony in each sphere; descent into fragmentation. But there is an alternative, "fourth" path that is rarely discussed—one in which Europe and a coalition of capable middle powers beyond its borders provide a stabilizing framework, with both Washington and Beijing supporting orderly multipolarity instead of pursuing hegemonic dominance. Such a path deserves serious examination, not because it is the most likely outcome, but because it may represent the most desirable alternative to the camp politics or chaos that otherwise lie ahead.

What would distinguish such an arrangement from other alternatives? Unlike a US-led order, it would not assume Western institutional dominance or the universal applicability of liberal norms. Unlike a China-led order, it would not rest on authoritarian capitalism or hierarchical relationships centered on Beijing. And unlike fragmentation, it could preserve meaningful multilateral cooperation and a more equitable, yet still rules-based, framework.

The distinctive character of this scenario lies in its consociational nature—multiple centers of initiative coordinating around shared issue-based interests without demanding ideological conformity or permanent alignment. Europe brings institutional capacity, normative commitment (however battered), and economic weight. Middle powers of the Global South, best defined as "countries that are geographically, strategically, economically, or geopolitically important and cannot be ignored by either the United States or China, but are seeking to pursue their interests—and geopolitical influence overall—without getting trampled in the U.S.-China competition,"⁶ bring geographic diversity, demographic heft, and the legitimacy that comes from representing Global South perspectives. Together, they could potentially construct "workable arrangements" that address specific challenges without having to wait for great power consensus. In fact, in an ideal scenario, they would develop consensus positions on global issues that mitigate great power contestation and nudge the US and China to support these middle power initiatives.

⁵ Alexander Stubb, "The West's Last Chance. How to Build a New Global Order Before It's Too Late," *Foreign Affairs*, December 2, 2025.

⁶ "About the Project on Middle Powers: Vision," Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, available at: <https://www.belfercenter.org/programs/middle-powers/middle-powers-about#:~:text=This%20project%20stems%20from%20a,tackle%20challenges%20in%20these%20domains?> One can imagine countries such as Indonesia, Vietnam, India, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, Brazil, and others as being relevant here.

Why might it work?

Robbin Laird and Kenneth Maxwell have argued that the Sino-US competition is qualitatively different from “self-contained imperial systems [since] both powers are deeply embedded within global networks of production, finance, and trade.” They believe that “after thirty years of intensive globalization, the world’s major powers find themselves more enmeshed in global networks than in control of them.”⁷ While President Trump’s policies resulted in a 36-percent drop in US imports from China in 2025, the areas of manufacturing and supply chain integration are simply too numerous to imagine a divorce.

These powers also face constraints that limit their ability to impose hegemonic orders on a large scale, even as Trump continues to talk about hemispheric dominance, his corollary of the Monroe Doctrine. The US faces domestic polarization, fiscal limitations, and a weary public. China faces economic slowdown, demographic challenges, and growing resistance to its assertiveness from neighboring countries, despite its posturing in favor of multilateral cooperation for peace and economic prosperity as espoused by President Xi’s “Community with a Shared Future for Mankind.” But most importantly, neither of them can simply withdraw from global governance without incurring costs. Climate change, pandemic prevention, financial stability, nuclear nonproliferation, and even the unknowns of the future technological revolution require cooperation that transcends rivalry. In this context, both might find it beneficial to let Europe and middle powers maintain functional frameworks on issues where a US-China agreement proves impossible. This is not altruism but enlightened self-interest—permitting others to manage problems that would otherwise escalate and eventually demand the attention of great powers under less favorable conditions.

How might it work?

For this scenario to function, Europe and non-European middle powers would need to assume distinct but complementary roles. Europe could leverage its expe-

rience in constructing multilateral frameworks, but with some crucial differences from past practice. Institutions would need to be more flexible, less bureaucratic, and genuinely open to non-Western input. Middle powers could contribute by ensuring that this institutional approach also reflects their regional realities and is not just a European import. This implies that the traditional Western monopoly on defining global priorities would need to end. Middle powers would likely bring issues like debt restructuring, climate justice, and technology transfer to the forefront, while Europe would need to ensure these agendas remained connected to broader stability concerns. The arrangement would also require the distribution of financial and operational responsibilities across a wider range of state actors. Europe could continue to contribute, as it currently does, but there could be greater burden-sharing as middle powers work toward increasing their capacities.

The viability of this scenario, however, depends critically on Europe remaining a unitary actor and middle powers moving beyond rhetorical opposition to the old order and assuming concrete responsibilities. This would require, foremost, three types of commitment: security, economic, and political.

Top of this list is the *security* commitment. Regional conflicts would increasingly be handled by regional coalitions, with Europe providing support rather than leadership. Middle powers such as Indonesia, Brazil, or South Africa could take primary responsibility for crises in their neighborhoods, with Europe providing backing in the form of diplomatic support, financing, and/or specialized capabilities. This is nothing new. During the 1956 Suez Crisis, for instance, Canadian diplomat Lester Pearson proposed the first United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) to resolve the conflict between the then major powers (Britain, France, Russia, and the US).⁸ In 2022, Türkiye mediated between Russia and Ukraine to broker a deal ensuring safe grain exports.⁹ Türkiye, the UAE, and Qatar have also facilitated prisoner swaps between Russia and Ukraine.¹⁰ Canada and Norway led efforts to establish a global norm against landmines (Ottawa Treaty).¹¹ Pakistan played a pivotal role in bringing the US and China together in 1970. And this list is far from exhaustive.

⁷ Robbin Laird and Kenneth Maxwell, “Beyond Great Power Competition: The Rise of Middle Powers in a Globalized World,” *SLDInfo*, July 23, 2025.

⁸ United Nations Peacekeeping, “First United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF I): Background,” United Nations.

⁹ “Russia, Ukraine Seal Grain Deal in Istanbul,” *Le Monde*, July 22, 2022.

¹⁰ “Rural Prosperity Initiative Backs Women, Youth in Türkiye Farming,” *Daily Sabah*, February 23, 2026.

¹¹ “The Treaty,” Canadian Landmine Foundation.

Going forward, Europe and middle powers would need to go beyond diplomacy to contribute meaningfully to peace operations, maritime security, and ensuring strategic stability and counterterrorism in their regions. This would mean not only financial contributions but also troop deployments, intelligence sharing, nuclear arms control, and operational coordination between European and other partners.

The Iran war has exposed the practical challenges of Europe looking beyond its traditional alignments and interests and coalescing around peace along with middle powers from the Global South willing to take such a position. With the exception of Spain, European powers have not opposed the war outright. Most have been partisan towards the US and Israel, with some, like the UK, also allowing the use of their military bases. While this aligns with the Arab middle powers in the Gulf who have been under attack from Iran, it remains a one-sided agenda that fails to offer a realistic path to a negotiated end to the conflict. Simultaneously, however, regional actors such as Oman, Pakistan, Egypt, and Türkiye have reportedly been trying to mediate a ceasefire behind the scenes, again pursuing their own self-interest to avoid a more widespread regional breakdown. This is the kind of fluidity the envisioned alternative path will have to deal with on a regular basis. However, Europe will have to decide whether it is willing to take the lead as a peacemaker to prevent or end conflicts, or remain wedded to its old alignment on key issues, which regardless of its merits, will not allow it to garner respect and support from the majority of the Global South.

The one other area that will retain critical importance in the evolving world order is nuclear nonproliferation. Reducing nuclear dangers through dialog, confidence-building measures, and arms control could become an important feature of security cooperation between Europe and middle powers. As the current global security environment stands, not only are arms control mechanisms between the US and Russia suspended, important nuclear-armed middle powers such as India and Pakistan have also frozen all dialog, leaving this crisis-prone region on edge. In these contexts, Europe will have to consider assuming the mediatory and crisis management roles that the US has performed to date if it is to emerge as a meaningful player. Broader nonproliferation challenges are also set to grow as multiple middle powers, both US allies (South Korea, Japan) and foes (Iran) demonstrate renewed interest in acquiring nuclear weapons. This is driven both by their fast-eroding faith in US extended deterrence and the recognition that nuclear weapons appear to be the only way of preventing war against a country in the crosshairs of global geopolitics. Will Europe be able to retain its strong position on nuclear non-

proliferation and keep the US, China, Russia, and some of its own members, such as France, focused on the larger nonproliferation agenda even as these countries seek to justify bolstering their own capabilities?

Economic commitments would require opening markets and harmonizing regulations. This is essential to neutralize the impact of Hobbesian geoeconomics that seeks to disrupt supply chains and build walls to keep others out. Instead, “cooperative geoeconomics,” which aims to recreate positive economic interdependence among multiple countries through co-investments and stakes in supply chains, will have to be pursued even as the efficacy of the global trading regime under the liberal international order dwindles. Europe already has solid institutional frameworks for trade and business. Middle powers would need to demonstrate that they can provide the predictability businesses and investors require within their own countries. Without formal rules, procedures, and norms, economic cooperation would remain superficial.

There is already concern that the EU’s search for new trading partners is diluting value-based approaches to secure economic relationships. This is also true of bilateral relations between China and a whole range of other countries including the UK, France, and Germany. While understandable as a short-term response to geopolitical pressures, critics argue that this erosion of principles in pursuit of partnerships represents a net negative for the global order. It suggests that even the remaining champions of liberal norms may sacrifice them on the altar of geoeconomic necessity, accelerating rather than curbing the order’s dissolution.

Instead, released from the imperative of slavishly following US leadership and needing genuine partnership with middle powers, Europe should fundamentally rethink how it engages on development, climate, and trade. Europe’s current approach is based on its internal standards, policies, and values. Without abandoning existing norms, it would need to be more accommodating to the context in which countries of the Global South operate. It would also need to go beyond bilateral trading arrangements and towards trade groupings with a maximum number of countries, including those who may not be fully politically aligned with Europe or may not get along with each other. This is vital to avoid isolating important middle powers who may seek to create countervailing blocs if they feel excluded because of their differences with Europe or their middle power rivals who happen to have better relations with European countries.

To assume leadership of this “fourth path,” the European model of conditional lending and policy prescriptiveness will also need to give way to greater respect for recipient

country priorities. European development banks might cofinance with Chinese, Brazilian, or South African institutions, creating hybrid approaches that combine European standards with local knowledge.

Europe would need to promote comprehensive debt restructuring mechanisms that treat sovereign debt crises as systemic problems requiring collective solutions rather than bilateral negotiations that create a divide between creditors and debtors. Over the last two to three decades, the global creditor landscape has changed significantly. The rise of new lenders such as China and a number of Gulf countries, along with the expanding role of multilateral development banks and private financial institutions, has diversified the sources of sovereign lending away from the Paris Club. Apart from having lost its primacy and effectiveness in coordinating debt restructuring, the Club is also seen with suspicion in much of the Global South. A more systematic and transparent restructuring mechanism is essential. A broader and more representative international forum, potentially under the auspices of the UN, which Europe could take the lead on, could help coordinate restructuring among diverse creditors while establishing clearer rules on transparency, comparability of treatment, and conditional structural reforms. Europe has extensive experience in providing aid and debt restructuring within the Eurozone through the *European Stability Mechanism* and the proposed *European Sovereign Debt Restructuring Mechanism*. These could be used as starting points to create an architecture that can be applied beyond Europe, in cooperation with existing multilateral arrangements, such as BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, African Union, etc., and placed under the aegis of an international body such as the UN.

With the US playing an unhelpful role in this area, Europe will also have to take on more responsibility for maintaining momentum in international climate governance and ensure that negotiated targets translate into concrete action. Forums such as the Conference of the Parties (COP) under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) continue to provide mechanisms for coordination and review. The biggest challenge is not the absence of plans but the degree of political commitment, focus, and sustained attention that developed countries are willing to devote to the crisis.

Europe must continue to call for all states to honor their existing pledges to strengthen technology transfer, as well as provide financial and institutional support to vulnerable developing countries facing disproportionate climate risks. This also implies that Europe itself cannot backtrack despite its own challenges. But it would have to remain flexible in its approach. For in-

stance, rather than imposing European green standards (the Green Deal has its detractors within Europe, too), it would need to support multiple pathways to decarbonization that take different national circumstances into account. This means funding adaptation as much as mitigation, and accepting that Chinese clean technology will often be the most affordable option for developing countries. Even in terms of lending, debt-for-development or climate-debt swaps should become a permanent feature of the lending frameworks that Europe is part of.

Technology transfer would be another vital component of such an arrangement. Europe would need to move beyond intellectual property protectionism toward genuine technology sharing. This would entail recognizing and acknowledging that digital divides perpetuate global inequality and that European prosperity ultimately depends on global purchasing power.

Fulfilling *political* commitments will be even more difficult. Europe would have to accept the variety of political systems across the different partner countries involved. At the same time, Europe and middle power partners would need to embrace the principle that global order requires restraint when it comes to national ambitions.

One of the biggest challenges for these countries and Europe would be whether they can actually manage disputes and wars themselves. This is a role that has largely been played by the US, whose approach has, for the most part, been dictated by its own interests or institutional memory. In 1950, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 377 (V) (the Uniting for Peace resolution), which declared that if the Council failed to discharge its responsibility because of a lack of unanimity among its permanent members, the Assembly could convene an “emergency special session” and recommend collective measures, including “the use of armed force when necessary.” Since then, there have been 11 emergency special sessions, the latest being in 2022 on the Russia-Ukraine war. None of these has resulted in the non-permanent members coming together to actually deal with the situation. Fear of antagonizing the big powers, international financial institutions’ lack of control (the US can impose sanctions because the dollar is the main reserve currency and can be weaponized), and limited military capabilities have meant that the Uniting for Peace resolution remains a force on paper only.

For Europe and the middle powers to take on this role, Europe would need to recognize that just as a war on European soil represents a major threat, so too do wars

everywhere else. The rules cannot be lopsided. The wars the US and NATO allies have participated in under US leadership have resulted in a lot of death and destruction. The hypocrisy of Europe's outcry over Ukraine while it turns a blind eye to the horrors of Gaza and, fails to play a constructive role in seeking off-ramps in the war in Iran has further damaged Europe's credibility in the Global South. Europe can offer a mea culpa by ensuring that its normative standards for wars are no longer selective. This would mean accepting that sovereignty has limits—not just in the interventionist sense that marked the US-led neoliberal order at its worst, but in the sense that regional stability requires neighbors' interests to be respected and agreed rules to be observed.

What might hold it back?

The incentives for the US and China to support this alternative path are real. For Washington, a Europe-middle power framework would preserve Western influence without requiring it to bear the main costs. It would maintain access to global markets and institutions while allowing a focus on the Indo-Pacific. For Beijing, such an arrangement would prevent the consolidation of a US-led bloc against China while providing access to European technology and the markets of the Global South. Recent visits to Beijing by various European leaders signal that this has been recognized. This approach would also allow Beijing to claim that the spirit of President Xi Jinping's "Community with a Shared Future for Mankind" is preserved in this framework.

That said, the limits of great power support for the envisioned alternative path are equally clear. The United States will not accept arrangements that exclude it from Europe or that empower actors aligned with China to undermine American interests. A case in point is Trump's outburst after the recent visits to Beijing by Carney and British prime minister Keir Starmer. For its part, China will not accept frameworks that lock in Western institutional advantages or that constrain its behavior in ways it considers unacceptable. The space for the Europe-middle power coalition lies precisely in the gap between these red lines.

Most fundamentally, the scenario assumes that great powers will tolerate autonomous initiative. The dawn of a global "technology-curtain" alone could divide the world into great power camps. More broadly, a US administration determined to reassert hegemony, or a China convinced that it cannot reach a trade and tech deal with Europe or accept Europe's security and regulatory benchmarks, could also act to reduce the space for middle power agency. Europe already has a trade problem

with China. The growing trade deficit is unsustainable, and Europe has determined that it has been caused by a massive surge of heavily subsidized Chinese imports—particularly electric vehicles, solar panels, and steel—flooding the EU market. The EU has also accused China of restricting European firms' access to its markets. It is unclear whether the EU can find an accommodation with China rather than pursuing trade defense tools, including tariffs.

Europe also has its weaknesses in this context. Its capacity to anchor such an order has clear limits. Europe's internal divisions, particularly between Atlanticist and autonomist forces, and its cumbersome procedures to achieve consensus could prevent coherent action. European military power, while significant in aggregate, remains fragmented and dependent on US strategic enablers. European demographic decline constrains long-term dynamism. European attachment to values, however diluted in practice, complicates relationships with powers that reject those values. And European proximity to a revisionist Russia means that the continent's attention will primarily be drawn eastward, limiting strategic focus elsewhere. The outcome of the Ukraine war remains uncertain, but how it ends will determine the size of the "Russia problem" moving forward. The bigger it is, the less Europe will be able to play the critical role envisioned for it in pursuit of the Europe-middle power scenario.

And then there is the question of Europe's own political future. The rise in various countries of far-right parties that have ideological affinities with the MAGA movement in the US not only threatens Europe's current integrative efforts, but could also lead the continent's far-right forces to actively oppose the very values the EU stands for and is trying to protect.

Far-right parties such as Germany's Alternative for Germany (AfD), France's National Rally, and Hungary's Fidesz aim to reverse European integration, returning power from Brussels back to national governments. These parties generally reject further political federalization of the EU. While some previously pushed for their countries to leave the EU, the current trend is to transform it into a purely economic, intergovernmental body. Across the board, however, they oppose the EU's climate agenda (Green Deal) and call for strict immigration policies and the promotion of traditional, nationalist, or conservative values.

Lastly, middle powers' diverse interests and rivalries (India-Pakistan, Brazil-Argentina, Nigeria-South Africa, Saudi Arabia-UAE) could preclude coalition formation. Middle powers of the Global South have longed for a

seat at the big table, but they have little experience in managing a world in chaos. The conduct of many of these countries in their own regions—UAE and Saudi Arabia in East Africa or India in South Asia, for instance—has mirrored the very hegemonic tendencies they criticize the West for. Rather than forming broader alliance blocs, middle powers will have to learn to operate in fluid partnership groupings based on their convergence on particular global or regional issues. They may be cooperating with a friendly country on one particular issue but may also need to accept the presence of a foe in the same group. On other issues, allies may be in opposing camps. It will be crucial for Europe to navigate this middle power fluidity while remaining focused on the ultimate objective of pursuing cooperative multilateralism—in as broad a sense as possible in an otherwise highly contested world—to offer some semblance of global stability.

So, what exactly is this “fourth” path?

The world envisioned in this framework will not be a unified camp working as a global coalition of the willing under a unitary rules-based order acceptable to all. It will be a world where various middle powers, European and otherwise, come together for issue-based cooperation. In aggregate, it may resemble a single, synergistic power that seeks to create a world order that limits Hobbesian tendencies, allows these countries to use their collective weight to temper the intensity of great power rivalry, and pursues a positive global economic agenda with fairer resource distribution.

A global order anchored in a Europe-middle power arrangement is not inevitable, nor even likely in the short term. But as the old order fragments and the alternatives of bipolar rivalry or chaos grow more menacing, it becomes increasingly worth pursuing. The conditions for its realization are demanding: European strategic coherence, middle power willingness to assume responsibilities, great power tolerance for autonomous initiative, and avoidance of the tech curtain.

Yet, the difficulty of meeting these conditions should not obscure the fundamental point: the future is not predetermined. The forces of change will shape the next phase of global geopolitics. Whether that is conflictual or cooperative depends on choices made not only by the great powers but also by Europe and the middle powers of the Global South. In that sense, the Europe-middle power scenario is not merely an analytical construct but a call to action—an invitation to imagine and then build a global order primarily in service of human needs rather than great power ambitions.

About the authors

Dr. Moeed Yusuf is President/Vice Chancellor of Beaconhouse National University, Pakistan's first not-for-profit liberal arts institution, and a senior fellow at Harvard's Belfer Center. He previously served as Pakistan's national security adviser, leading the country's first National Security Policy and engaging in strategic dialogs worldwide. Before entering government service, Yusuf was Associate Vice President at the U.S. Institute of Peace's Asia Center, and held fellowships at Boston University's Pardee Center and Harvard Kennedy School's Mossavar-Rahmani Center. He has advised and consulted for organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Asian Development Bank (ADB), and the World Bank. An experienced educator, Yusuf has taught at universities in Pakistan and the US, including Boston University, George Washington University, Lahore University of Management Sciences, and Quaid-e-Azam University. He has various publications to his name including his seminal work on crisis management, *Brokering Peace in Nuclear Environments*. He holds an MA in International Relations and a PhD in Political Science from Boston University. Yusuf is part of FES' North South Futures Forum network.

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Is a Stable Middle Power Order Possible?

As the post-Cold War liberal international order weakens and great power rivalry intensifies, global governance is often framed as a choice between continued US leadership, a China-centered order, or fragmentation into competing blocs. This paper considers a fourth scenario: a global order anchored on Europe and a coalition of capable middle powers, with the United States and China supporting its stability without seeking hegemonic dominance.

In such an alternative framework, Europe would contribute institutional experience, economic weight, and multilateral capacity, while middle powers from the Global South would bring regional influence, demographic heft, and greater legitimacy in shaping global priorities. Together, they could form flexible, issue-based coalitions to address global challenges—from conflict mediation and economic cooperation to debt relief, climate transition, and technology access—particularly where great power consensus proves difficult to achieve.

The viability of this scenario would require significant commitment. Europe would need greater strategic coherence and a more equitable approach to partnerships with the Global South, while middle powers would have to assume stronger roles in regional security, economic governance, and global agenda setting. At the same time, both the United States and China may have the incentive to tolerate such an arrangement if it helps sustain global stability without requiring direct great power leadership.

While far from guaranteed, a global order anchored in a Europe-middle power arrangement offers a potentially stabilizing alternative to bipolar confrontation or geopolitical fragmentation—and deserves greater attention as the international system enters a new multipolar era.

Further information on the topic can be found here:

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