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## ***Middle Powers in the Agency-Structure Debate***

Federica de Pantz

### **Introduction**

As highlighted by Walton and Wilkins in the introduction to this volume, existing literature displays a general consensus about the necessity to provide the concept of Middle Power with a degree of dynamism able to maintain its analytical power in face of the fluidity of international reality. The relational nature of the Middle Power as an analytical tool utilised to investigate the sources and the effects of the foreign policies of states that are neither Great nor Small Powers, motivates this requirement and is linked to two interrelated reasons. Firstly, is the categorisation issue: since the set of countries suitable to be included in this class fluctuates over time, the concept needs to be adapted to slight changes in the foreign policy style that newcomers may display. This issue has been tackled by both Cooper and Dal's theorisation of waves of Middle Powers (Cooper and Dal 2016) and Jordaan's (2003) distinction between traditional and emerging Middle Powers. A second problem relates to the fact that an analysis of the sources and consequences of foreign policy patterns should take into account changes originating from both the domestic and the systemic level. Although this latter issue has been widely acknowledged, this chapter argues that a conceptualisation of Middle Power that systematically organises variables from both levels in a coherent model is still missing.

The positional and behavioural approach, that constitute the core debate about Middle Powers which developed throughout the 1980's and 1990's, have provided two different yet equally limited definitions that continue informing emerging literature on the topic. This chapter argues that both perspectives have fallen into the problems of causal reductionism, labelled by Margaret Archer as downward and upward conflation, primary indicator of which is a narrow variable selection that privileges structural (in the positional case) or domestic (in the behavioural approach) factors in

explanations of foreign policy outcomes. The crucial consequence of such reductionism consists in that neither of the two approaches has been able to account for the relational nature of the concept of Middle Power, which in turn has generated a number of analytical shortcomings that will be illustrated further throughout the chapter. Role Theory appears to provide promising avenues for the analysis of the sources and consequences of these countries' international actions, since it lends itself to the type of multivariable analysis needed to avoid the causal reductionism origin of the problem here identified.

The next section will provide a brief overview of the Agency-Structure Problem and apply Margaret Archer's interpretation of the solutions adopted by positional and behavioural conceptualisations of Middle Power. The following section will introduce Archer's alternative paradigm and show how its complementarity with Holsti's Role Theory make the latter a valuable model for the solution of current definitional and analytical issues related to Middle Powers.

## **Middle Powers in the Agency-Structure Debate**

### ***The Agency-Structure Problem: a brief overview***

The Agency-Structure problem (ASP) is a thorny issue in social sciences at large, as it concerns the way in which an analysis conceptualises and treats the causal relationship between actors and social structures. The "solution" to this problem can take three forms: the researcher assumes either 1) that actors create structures, and thus that social phenomena (for instance, foreign policy outcomes) can be explained solely in terms of the properties of the actor involved (in this example, domestic attributes); or 2) that structures are responsible for the actions carried out by the actor, which are then explained in terms of structural factors; or 3) that both structure and agents influence each other, and that investigations of social phenomena need to be conducted attributing the role of independent variables to factors belonging to both levels. This section is dedicated to a discussion of the first two alternatives, and to an assessment of their presence in the core definition of Middle Power that emerged in the 1980's and 1990's, which continues to inform emerging literature on the topic. The third approach to the ASP will be explored in the following section and its complementarity with Role Theory will be highlighted to provide a solution to the identified conceptual and analytical issues of Middle Power.

Margaret Archer (among other scholars, Archer 1988) highlights that the first two options, by denying causal efficacy to one of the two entities, lead the analysis to ignore the interplay that occurs between them and, hence, to be unable to account for the dynamism that characterises social reality. In what she calls "downward conflation" structures are assumed as primitive entities and agents are denied any causal power over these, with the consequence that the theory is unable to envision and explain how structural changes can derive from individual action, or changes in the attributes of the actor. The structure is thus reified, because its properties are assumed to remain unchanged under any condition. Typical cases of this approach are structuralist theories of International Relations, such as Marxism and Waltz's Neorealism (Carlsnaes 1992, Wight 2006: 74). On the other hand, "upward conflation" occurs when agential properties are assumed as the only source of social outcomes, within a given context. The structure is denied independent causal power, and the active constraints that it may impose on social action are neglected a priori. Rather, these constraints are construed as contextual factors that are internalised by the actor in its calculations to deploy action, and thus become internal determinants of the action itself. This approach is characteristic of much Foreign Policy Analysis studies, both within variants that apply rational choice theory and others that develop cognitive and psychological theories for the explanation of state behaviour.<sup>1</sup>

To summarize, for Archer, both types of conflation operate by reducing the sources of the phenomenon under study to the properties of the selected entity, denying the possibility for structures and agents to mutually affect each other, and producing a fictional separation between them, which in turn hinders thorough and encompassing explanations. It is noteworthy that the variable selection operated in the analysis becomes a clear indicator of the "solution" that the researcher gives to the ASP: even in cases whereby both structures and agents are, in principle, recognized the ability to generate the social or political outcome unit of the analysis, explanations derived solely in terms of the properties of one entity incorporate the methodological shortcomings of the abovementioned confluations. Positional and behavioural definitions of Middle Power have incurred precisely in such problems when answering their two main questions: whether and how

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<sup>1</sup> For a thorough discussion of this kind of causal reductionism in Foreign Policy Analysis, see Carlsnaes 1992, especially pp.250-253.

can Middle Powers achieve a systemic impact on international relations? It is to the analysis of these two approaches in light of the ASP that this section now turns.

### ***Structuralism in the Positional Approach***

The inherent structuralist stance of the positional approach is evident since the definition of Middle Power it provides. In Holbraad's (1984) seminal study "Middle Powers in International Politics" these countries are defined as medium-ranked states, or those that occupy the intermediate category of the international hierarchy of hard power measured in terms of gross national product. Middle Powers are not, thus, defined by the absolute measurement of the amount of material resources that they command, but in terms of where these resources position them in relation to other members of the international system. In this sense, their "middlepowerness" is a structural, rather than a domestic, property.<sup>2</sup> This particular understanding of Middle Powers has obviously important implications for Holbraad's analysis of these countries' foreign policy. Here, the question about the possibility for Middle Powers to achieve a systemic impact is evaluated in terms of whether these countries can modify the primary characteristic of the international structure: the number of Great Powers and the nature of the relationship among them (Holbraad 1984: 5). Through a comparative study on different typologies of international systems (based on combinations of these two structural characteristics), Holbraad finds that Middle Powers can, at most, achieve regional leadership in multipolar systems, on issues that do not constitute a primary interest for the Great Powers, and where the relations among these are characterised by a mix of cooperation and rivalry. Middle Powers' impact on the system is thus null, because they do not possess sufficient hard power to modify the two identifying properties of the structure. The presence of mightier actors is discovered to be the main reason for this inability, whilst the relations among the Great Powers is an intervening variable that produces different degrees of Middle Power influence at the sub-systemic level.

Read under the lens of Archer's downward conflation, however, these findings appear to be the inevitable consequence of Holbraad's methodological choices. Although he recognises a potential

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<sup>2</sup> For a thorough discussion of this interpretation of Structuralism in International Relations Theory, see Wight 2006.

for domestic factors to have causal effects on foreign policy outcomes (Holbraad 1984: 97, 105, 120-121, 202), since his definitions of Middle Powers is based on a structural property, he selects his independent variables only from the structural level and the analysis so conducted is a priori unable to envision the possibility for Middle Powers to change the properties of the structure. The number of Great Powers in the system operates only as a constraint for Middle Powers' international action because, since domestic factors are excluded from the beginning, the theory cannot trace whether changes in the domestic hard power equipment would allow Middle Powers to rise to the rank of Great Powers, and thus change the distinctive feature of the structure. In Archer's terms, this theory cannot envision that changes in the structure can be caused by changes in the properties of the agents. These agents are denied causal power over the structure in the first instance, and the fictional separation between the two entities that this generates, implies that Middle Powers' system ineffectuality is de facto an assumption, rather than a finding of this theory. This limitation is even reinforced by the separation operated between the regional and the international level, which is a function of the conceptualisation of the distribution of capabilities among states as the only feature of the structure. Although claiming that the role that Middle Powers can achieve at the regional level might in turn change the distribution of capabilities in the system (1984: 212), Holbraad does not investigate further into this scenario.

To summarize, the positional approach analyses Middle Powers through a structuralist perspective of International Relations. It defines these states only in terms of the structural characteristic of the distribution of capabilities in the system and looks solely at structural sources of foreign policy outcomes. By doing this, this theory falls into downward conflation and is unable to provide a satisfactory account of the consequences of Middle Powers' foreign policy.

### ***Individualism in the Behavioural Approach***

Starting from these shortcomings, the behavioural approach has analysed Middle Powers' international conduct starting from a Foreign Policy Analysis perspective to demonstrate the impact of states that are not Great Powers on the international system. The first difference from the structuralist approach pertains to the definition of Middle Power itself, here understood as the sub-group of medium-ranked states that opt for a particular type of statecraft, named Middlepowermanship (Holmes 1966). This is a “*tendency to pursue multilateral solutions to*

*international problems; to embrace compromise positions in international disputes; to embrace notions of 'Good International Citizenship' to guide [...] diplomacy'* (Cooper, Higgott, Nossal 1993: 15). Since, compared to other actors, Middle Powers suffer from a disadvantage in terms of hard power, they opt for concentrating their international action within multilateral institutions, which offer several empowerment opportunities. Firstly, they constrain, through rules and procedures, the will of the Great Powers; secondly, they provide a space to bid for political support and to, thirdly, build coalitions around particular interests (Hurrell 2000). Within these institutions, Middle Powers implement the so-called “niche-diplomacy” (Cooper, Higgott, Nossal 1993), “*concentrating resources in specific areas best able to generate returns worth having, rather than trying to cover the field*” (Cooper 1997: 5). These issues usually belong to the realms of economic security, environmental problems and human rights, and Middle Powers select the ones in which they have a comparative advantage due to a particular expertise or previous experience (Cooper, Higgott, Nossal 1993). Their action on such issues revolves around coalition building, institution building, trust building, agenda setting and policy development.<sup>3</sup> Middle Powers’ leadership is thus achieved indirectly, through multilateral institutions and the exploitation of particular advantages. This form of statecraft distinguishes them from other typologies of states, like the Great and Small Powers, but also other medium-ranked states that opt for different strategies.

Behaviouralist approaches, hence, differ from Holbraad’s accounts also in terms of their broader conceptualisation of the international structure. Firstly, whilst they do not contest the centrality of the distribution of material capabilities (which is reaffirmed by the primacy attributed to the role of the Great Powers in driving Middle Powers to concentrate their actions on secondary issues), they also attach equivalent importance to other structural properties, such as international institutions. It is through these and on these that Middle Powers can impact on the international system, leading and directing the policy-making process and thus modifying the norms and institutions that characterise the structure of international relations. This structure is understood as having properties that both constrain and enable state action, which leads us to a third difference with structuralist accounts, one that pertains to the identification of the most relevant sources of power as influence. Whilst for Holbraad influence is a function of the amount of material capabilities a state commands, for behaviouralists it can also derive from leadership: it is in fact the assumption of entrepreneurial, managerial and technical leadership that allows some medium-ranked state to lead the global policy-making process.

From these conceptualisations of power, the international system and the very definition of Middle Power, the behavioural approach seems to provide a valuable alternative to the problems of the structuralist perspective, but also to be avoiding the opposite problem of upwards conflation: the fact that Middle Powers are defined both in terms of their position in the structure and their agency offers potential to overcome analytical shortcomings that derive from reduction solution to the ASP. However, if we look at the location of explanation selected in these studies, it appears clear that such interconnection between structural and agential variables is merely relegated to definitional purposes and that the behavioural approach falls into methodological individualism. This stance is explicitly adopted by Cooper, Higgott and Nossal (1993: 55-56) when they state: “*we start with the assumption that the sources of leadership in global politics are both systemic and domestic. However, while systemic strain may prompt policy responses or initiatives, domestic actors are the primary source of such initiatives or responses*”. As an implication, independent variables of Middle Powers’ foreign policy have been selected only from the domestic level. These can be of various nature, such as particular individuals that hold key positions in the foreign policymaking process (Prime Ministers Trudeau and Hawke in the case of Canada and Australia’s development of the Middle Power behaviour, in Cooper, Higgott, Nossal 1993: 36, 45); a political organisation (such the Australian Labor Party in the implementation of the initiatives that led to the formulation of the Cairns Group, *ibid.* 65); or, as in other studies, a national imperative to act as good international citizens (Wood 1988; Pratt 1990). As such, the structure of the international system is present in the analysis merely as a context for action, but its properties are assumed as incapable of impacting on state behaviour externally, because they are brought into the equation only as internalised by the state actor.

The behavioural approach thus falls prey of upward conflation: Middle Powers’ actions are subtracted from the context in which they take place and, although some degree of influence of such action on the structure is assumed, in remains inevitably uninterrogated. As a consequence, these theories cannot elucidate what use will Middle Powers do of the increased influence they gain through their strategies, nor how the international system changes as a consequence of their actions.

From this reading of the literature, it appears clear that neither the positional nor the behavioural approach are able to provide an encompassing analysis of the sources of Middle Powers' foreign



policy. Understanding these states as either a class of material power or a category of behaviour is associated with reductionist methodologies that hinder the kind of dynamism necessary to the concept of Middle Power. The primary consequence of these issues is that both theories are unable to elucidate the consequences of Middle Powers' actions on the international system. This lack of clarity becomes significantly critical in this particular historical juncture, where vertical and horizontal power shifts require the scholarship to develop sound analytical frameworks under which to analyse the current role and the future trajectories of countries with the potential for a major impact on international relations.

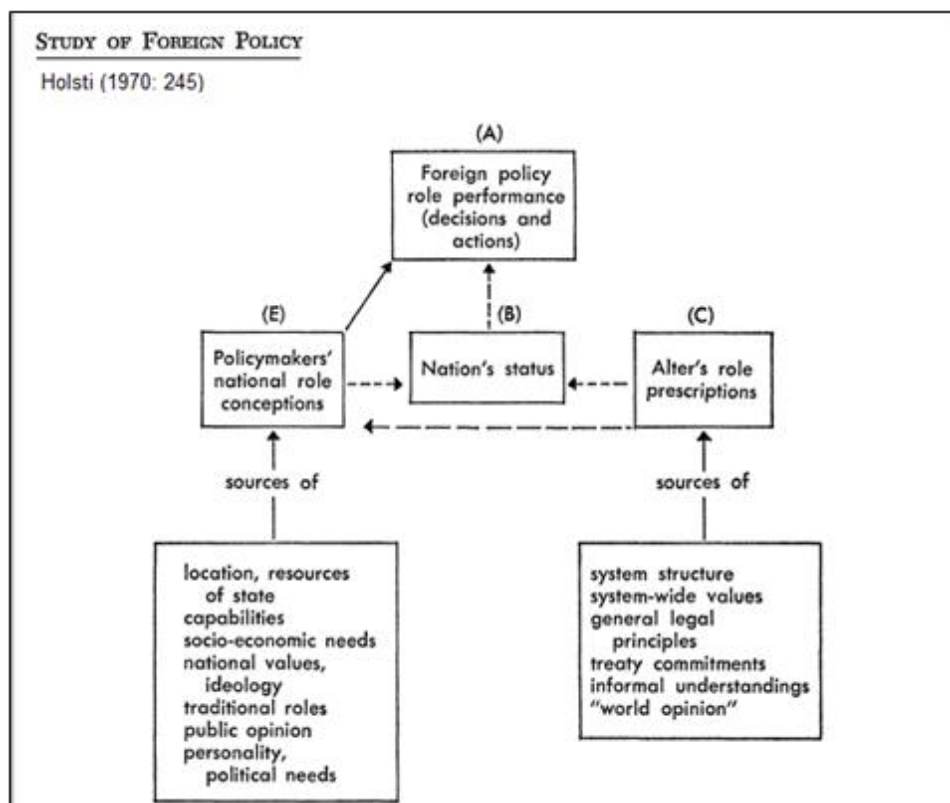
However, the descriptive accuracy of the behavioural model, offers us the possibility to maintain a working definition of Middle Power as a medium-sized state that adopts Middlepowermanship, on the basis of which we can investigate the factors that have led to that particular pattern of international conduct, expanding the analysis to a number of new cases and thus updating the concept to changed conditions whilst at the same time avoiding the flaws of original studies. Role Theory provides a useful model to conduct this kind of analysis, but before turning to its applicability to the concept of Middle Power, it is necessary to elucidate how it can overcome causal reductionism, and to do so we need to turn once again to the ASP.

### **The Concept of Emergence and the Role of Middle Power**

According to Archer (1995), a more valuable stance on the ASP, able to avoid the problematics of downward and upward conflation, is the morphogenetic approach. If we assume that structures and agents have causal power over each other, although this power is wielded at different times, it is possible to maintain an analytical separation between the two entities, and to investigate the interplay between them over time (Archer 1995: 76). Moreover, Archer assumes that the interaction between structures and agents generates properties of its own, that are not reducible to either of the two entities, but rather to their relationship. These emergent properties have causal power over the phenomenon under study, and only the morphogenetic approach is able to account for them, given the limitations of structuralist and individualist methodologies. This approach, thus, suggests that an encompassing analysis of social phenomena should consider, not only domestic and structural factors, but also how these have interacted with each other over time, because relational factors have causal power of their own.

From our previous review of positional and behavioural approaches to Middle Powers, it appears clear that neither of the two enables the kind of analysis proposed by Archer. However, the descriptive accuracy of the behavioural approach and the encompassing nature of its definition of Middle Power provides some potential for expanding the analysis in Archer's direction. The suggestion of this chapter is that the Middle Power, as a medium-ranked state that adopts Middlepowermanship, should be construed as a role, rather than as a class of behaviour. The concept of role lends itself to be interpreted as the locus for interaction between structural and agential variables in the generation of foreign policy outcomes, and as such is able to incorporate the emergent properties that structuralism and individualism are incapable to account for. Consequently, this approach would allow us to avoid the reductionism of downward and upward conflation, and to conduct the kind of thorough analysis of the sources of Middlepowermanship that is still missing. Role Theory provides us with important tools for this task.

Role Theory was first imported from sociology to Foreign Policy Analysis by Holsti (1970) in his seminal article "National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy" to identify patterns of international behaviours (or role performances) across a number of cases and to identify the key sources of such conducts. His model encompasses both domestic and systemic determinants of foreign policy and interrelations among them. On the domestic side are the national role conceptions held by foreign policy-makers, which are determined primarily by ideational and material national factors (Box E in the figure). Structural factors derive from the "alter's role prescriptions" (Box C) and include legal, material and ideational components. Factors on the domestic and systemic side are assumed as interrelating in the generation of foreign policy outcomes, in two main ways: firstly, the external environment influences the role conceptions held by national policymakers; secondly, because both these and role prescriptions concur to generate the national status, "*a rough estimate of a state's ranking in the international system*" (Holsti 1970: 244), which in turn impacts on the country's role performance.



Although Holsti's study focussed on the identification of regularities in the international behaviour of states, and on the relationship between such regularities and the role conceptions help by foreign policymakers, the systematized analytical infrastructure of his model offers wide room for different research objectives, and provides a useful framework for the study of any relation among the variables it includes. For this reason, a prolific literature aimed at establishing the sources of foreign policy under the Role Theory framework and on a variety of cases has flourished throughout the years. Whilst some of these studies have concentrated on national role conceptions and role prescriptions as sources of international roles (see, for example, Chafetz, Abramson and Grillot 1996; Le Prestre 1997; Shih 1988; Wish 1980), others have explored different independent variables, among which the presence of third parties on the actor's performance of its role (Walker 1979) and role location (which Thies 1999 equates with socialisation) or the selection of particular role conceptions by policymakers. However, to the knowledge of the author of this chapter, none of these studies has conducted a multivariable analysis of the sources of international roles that would encompass structural, domestic and emergent properties.

Nonetheless, Role Theory offers several advantages as an analytical framework for the analysis of the role that Middle Powers play in the international system that avoids the causal reductionism operated by existing perspectives. Firstly, it allows us to conceptualise (and treat) the international structure as an entity that possesses both constraining and enabling properties for Middle Power influence, thus overcoming the major flaw of positional and behavioural definitions. Secondly, it permits to incorporate material (resources of state, capabilities) and ideational (for instance, ideology, system-wide values) dimensions of power, which are particularly relevant in the case of Middle Powers, since these countries rely on entrepreneurial, managerial and technical leadership as sources of influence. Finally, it allows us to conduct a thorough investigation of the sources of the Middle Power role (and related Middlepowermanship policies), the consequences of this role for the international system and the interrelations between the two levels.

For what concerns the first issue, Role Theory would allow us to trace the conditions under which a state becomes a Middle Power. For instance, when did a country with a medium size economy start adopting Middlepowermanship as its distinctive type of statecraft? Are democratic values a necessary requirement for a state to be a Middle Power? Is a state that is closely dependent on a major ally able to be a Middle Power? When do countries abandon the Middle Power role? Are changes in domestic material resources a necessary and sufficient condition for a country to adopt and/or abandon the Middle Power role? How have national values interrelated with system-wide values or general legal principles in different cases, where a medium-size state did and did not adopt Middlepowermanship? Such research would also allow us to test whether the assumptions according to which Middle Powers aim at being good international citizens and have the intention to sustain the international order, were actually present in the traditional cases on which the definition has been developed, but also to test whether these are applicable to new, or emerging Middle Powers. For what concerns the study of the consequences of Middle Powers' foreign policy, Role Theory enables us to establish whether and how specific policies conducted under the framework of Middlepowermanship have produced changes in the properties of the international system. For instance, has a particular action moved by the personal political needs of

a key figure in the foreign policy-making establishment, manage to alter some general legal principle? Or also, have national values produced policies capable of changing treaty commitments with other partners? Role Theory allows us to assess how domestic characteristics have produced changes in the international system through the adoption of foreign policies that are specific to the Middle Power role, but also to assess, subsequently, how these new characteristics have influenced further actions or produced changes in the domestic environment. A particularly interesting case to analyse would be whether the consequences of some foreign policies have then fed back into some domestic characteristics and reinforced, through the international level, the national components of the Middle Power role. This would shed light on whether Middle Powers may actually represent a stable, sui generis category in the international system or if they just represent a phase in the cycle of rise and fall of the Great Powers.

To summarise, Holsti's model of Role Theory would allow us to produce systematic investigations of the sources of Middle Powers' foreign policies, but also to assess the impact of these on the international sphere. For what concerns the former issue, it is firstly necessary to adopt an understanding the Middle Power as a role, that underlies the performance of Middlepowermanship, and that is generated by the structural and domestic variables identified in the model, but also by the properties that emerge by the interrelations among these. Applied to traditional and new case studies of countries that display a strong tendency to adopt Middlepowermanship-like leadership within multilateral contexts, this type of analysis could improve our understanding of the phenomenon Middle Power in specific cases. Moreover, systematic comparisons between new cases and between these and traditional ones could help us test whether the original category of Middle Power is still applicable to new cases, or if, on the contrary, the research agenda should expand in the direction of the refinement of the distinction between traditional VS emerging Middle Power, which has been recently contested (Jordaan 2017). Finally, the analysis of the emergent properties that derive from the interaction between domestic and structural factors could show that some additional properties, so far unacknowledged, are actually necessary to the display of the Middle Power role. This would have important implications for our definition of

Middle Power, since it would require us to expand it to include additional definitional criteria so to provide it with analytical precision.

## **Conclusions**

This chapter has argued that, in order to provide the concept of Middle Power with the dynamism needed by its relational nature and thus with renewed explanatory ability, it is firstly necessary to tackle some conceptual and methodological issues affecting original approaches. Margaret Archer's discussion of the Agency-Structure Problem, and the problematics related to solutions that adopt causal reductionism, has allowed us to identify the sources of some shortcomings in the positional and behavioural approach. A sounder alternative to these two perspectives and the related definitions, is to conceptualise the Middle Power as a role that some medium-ranked states adopt, that expresses itself in the foreign policy style of Middlepowermanship, and that rests on sources deriving from the domestic and the systemic level, and the properties that emerge from the interrelations among these. Holsti's Role Theory represents a useful model to conduct investigations based on these premises, as it allows for multivariable analyses of the development of the Middle Power role and to evaluate how these dimensions have influenced each other over time and have impacted on the adoption of the Middlepowermanship in specific countries. Moreover, it offers the possibility to assess the impact that the policies to it associated have had on the properties of the international structure. The combined result of a research agenda of this kind conducted on different contemporary cases, would be to shed light on the present conditions and the future trajectories of some of the actors better positioned to bring about change in the international system, and to assess the type of contribution that they will make to the international order.

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