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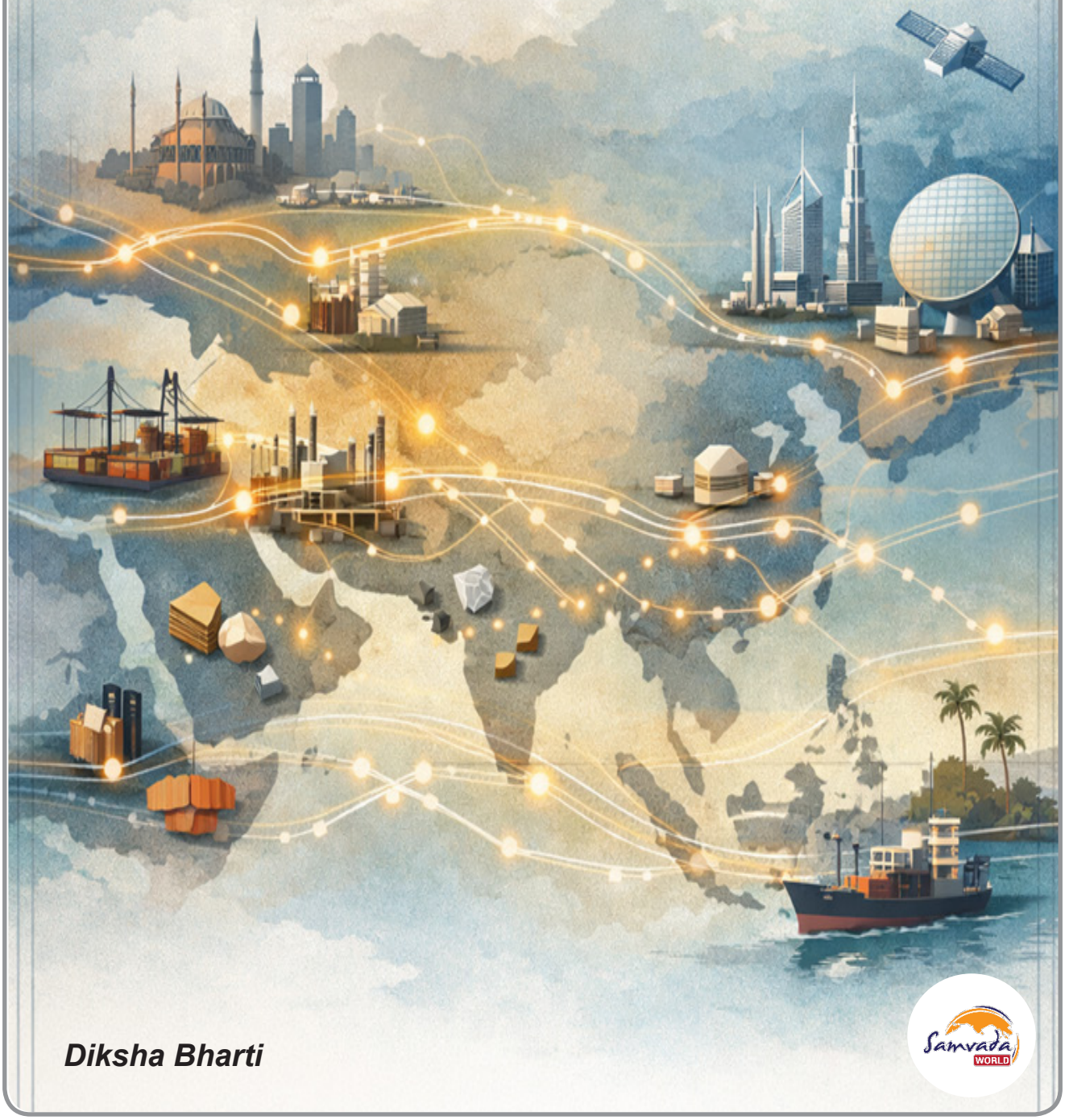
The Age of Middle Powers 2.0

Why Policy, Not Power Blocs, Now Shapes Global Order



Diksha Bharti

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Key Takeaways

- **A new generation of middle powers led by India, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, the UAE and South Koreais** moving from being **"swing states" to policy creators** in trade, technology and security.
- **They are transforming the supply chains (semiconductors, rare earths, AI inputs)** and self-sufficiency in the defence industry has brought these countries a power that is not entirely accounted for by the classical great-power measurements.
- **The development is breaking up the previous alliances:** instead of being divided into two opposing groups, the world order is turning into a multi-polar one in which strong states in different regions will lead, form alliances and be versatile.
- **"Middle Powers 2.0" are no longer in-between actors but capability-building states** shaping outcomes in a polycentric, issue-driven world—forcing policymakers and firms to abandon binary alliances and plan sector-by-sector partnerships aligned to real industrial, financial, and military power.
- **Today's middle powers follow the same logic as the historical commercial empires,** substituting fleets and sea lanes with data corridors, manufacturing chokepoints, critical minerals, and defence niches, where disruption imposes system-wide costs.
- **Policy implication: external actors must recognise differentiated centre-of-gravity** levers like market access, investment, technology partnership and defence exports rather than assuming influence is fungible or zero-sum.

Executive Summary

The past decade has witnessed a qualitative change in the position and agency of what scholars and policymakers call "middle powers." No longer just passive followers of a superpower-dominated order, a lot of countries have put their money on three interconnected capabilities:

A. Industry & tech potential (specifically in semiconductors, AI ecosystems, and crucial minerals),

B. Defence-industrial self-reliance (home design, production, and selling), and

C. The means of trade and finance (sovereign investments, trade corridors and diplomacy).

Taken together, these investments allow middle powers to shape policy agendas regionally and issue-by-issue without needing to commit to permanent alignments. This "Middle Powers 2.0" model is fragmenting global influence by diffusing agenda-setting power across a broader set of states. The piece that follows maps how six representative states are exercising this agency across trade, tech and defence; it then explores the systemic consequences and offers pragmatic policy recommendations for governments, businesses and civil society.

Introduction: Why "Middle Powers 2.0" Matters

Traditional IR literature treated "middle powers" as norm entrepreneurs or mediators: countries large enough to matter regionally but too small to determine global outcomes on their own. The new wave, call it Middle Powers 2.0, still operates through norms and coalition-building, but does so with hard tools: industrial policy budgets, sovereign wealth deployments, targeted export industries (defence, semiconductors), and strategic resource plays in critical minerals. These are not merely economic strategies; they are instruments of geopolitical autonomy that enable these states to be policy designers on issues that matter to the global economy, from semiconductors and AI ethics to defence procurement and regional security architectures. Recent policy analyses and country-level developments document this shift and its consequences.

How The Toolbox Changed: Trade, Tech, Defence And Minerals

The new toolkit in the middle-power toolbox clusters around:

1. **Industrial policy with a focus on specific sectors:** Measures like production-linked incentives, initiatives around semiconductors, and funding for deep technology are giving rise to local capacities as well as attractive negotiation points. (For example, India's Semiconductor/ ISM project aimed at luring fabs and developing encapsulation/ testing ecosystems.)

2. **Defence-industrial expansion:** Indigenous platforms, export-oriented companies and flexible

procurement reduce dependency and create diplomatic leverage through arms exports and joint production. (Türkiye's drone industry and rising defence exports are emblematic.)

3. **Critical minerals and energy pivoting:** Gulf states and others are moving beyond hydrocarbons to rare earths, renewables and mining investments to diversify revenue and control inputs for tech chains.

4. **Sovereign investment & finance:** PIF-style funds, development banks, and bilateral trade-finance facilities are used to underwrite projects and influence standards.

These are not isolated tactics; they create mutually reinforcing capabilities that make middle powers indispensable partners or competitors in global value chains.

Country Profiles: Agency, Appetite And Sectors

India— scale, statecraft and semiconductors

Where India is strong: market size, state-directed industrial incentives, diplomatic reach (G20/BRICS) and a growing domestic deep-tech scene.

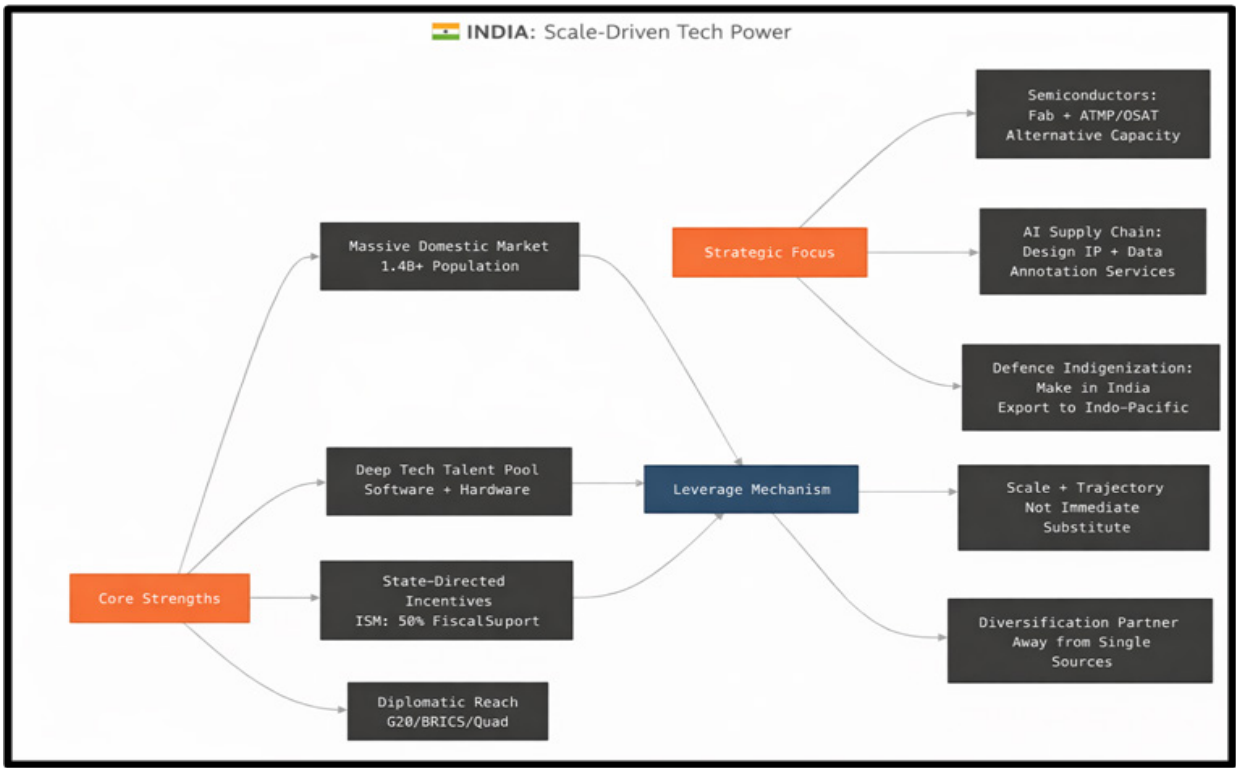
Semiconductors & tech: India's Semiconductor ecosystem has moved from policy announcements to concrete projects under the India Semiconductor Mission (ISM) and associated schemes. ISM's fab scheme and incentives (including up to ~50% fiscal support for approved fab projects) are intended to plug India into the wafer-fabrication and packaging/testing segments. Multiple projects, joint ventures and investments have been announced, and some greenfield fabs and ATMP/OSAT projects are being fast-tracked with expected commercial timelines

in the latter part of the decade. These initiatives give India leverage in the global semiconductor conversation not by instantly becoming the smallest-node supplier to the world, but by offering alternative capacity, design ecosystems, and demand-side scale.

AI supply chains & talent: India's strengths in software and services give it a natural role in AI model development, data annotation and chip-design IP, while the government and private sector are investing in AI startups and talent pipelines. On the other hand, for India to gain the full proprietary rights to semiconductors, it must first possess the upstream hardware (fabs, test & packaging) capacity. The hiring trends, along with the government policies, are showing that there is already a large and quickly growing domestic talent pool for hardware and AI engineering.

Defence independence: India has always followed the path of defence indigenisation (Make in India, Defence Procurement Procedure reforms) in its defence sector. The country's huge military requirements, along with the partnerships (joint ventures, FDI into defence), can make an industrial base that is capable of serving not only the domestic market but also exporting to niche markets in the medium run. India's enormous internal demand, coupled with the slowly increasing export capability, allows it to wield diplomatic power, especially in the Indo-Pacific region and with the developing countries looking for alternative suppliers.

Implication: India's policy mix, large home market, along with targeted industrial subsidies and talent density, allows it to be a structural partner for states and firms seeking diversification away from single-source suppliers. Its influence rests on scale and trajectory rather than being an immediate substitute for East Asian fabs.



Türkiye— strategic autonomy through defence exports

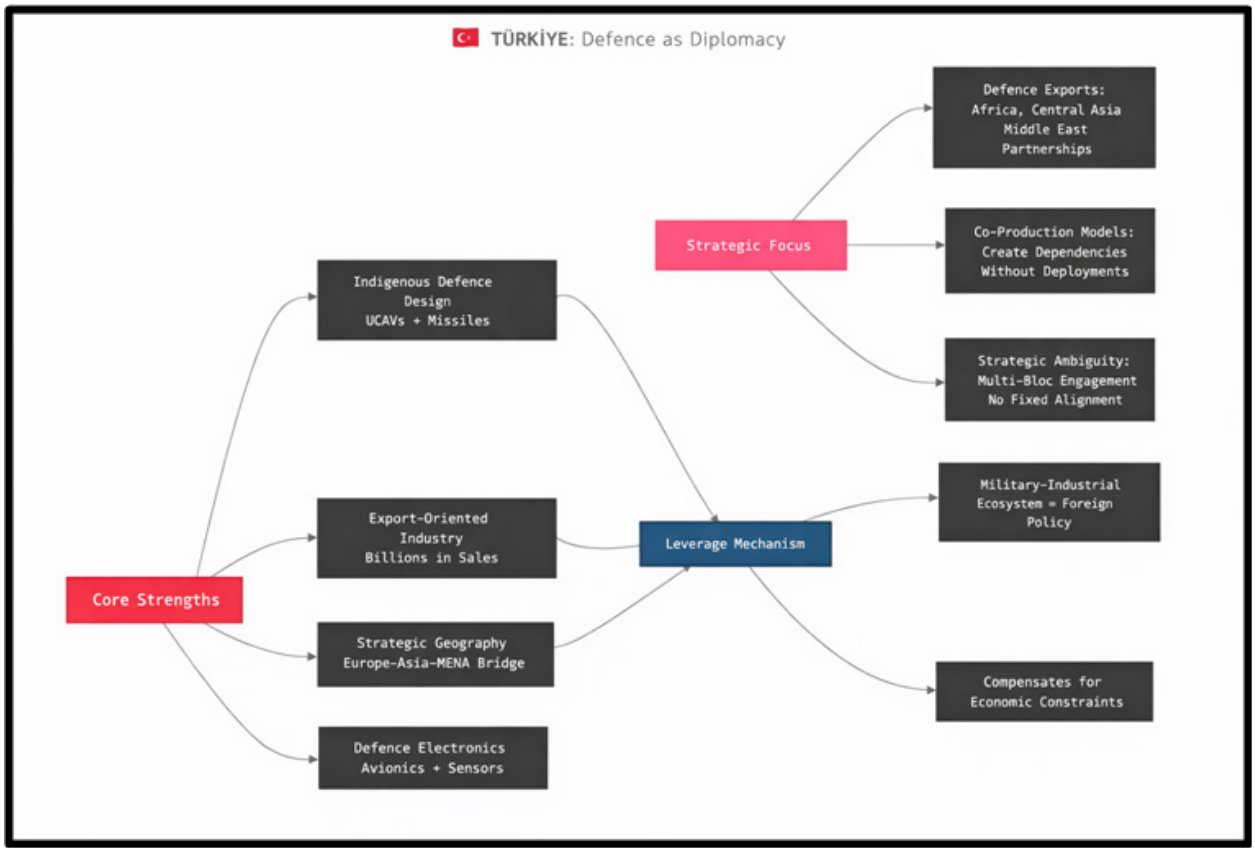
Where Türkiye is strong: indigenous defence design, export-oriented defence industry, strategic geographic location linking Europe, Asia and the Middle East.

Defence as diplomacy: Türkiye's defence industry is a textbook case of industrial diplomacy. Over the early 2020s, Turkish defence exports surged; the country's UCAVs, missiles and naval systems have become visible diplomatic tools used to cement partnerships across Africa, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Reports show Turkish defence exports have risen into the billions, signalling both technological maturation and diplomatic ambition.

Technology & semiconductors: Türkiye's tech ambitions are primarily in defence electronics, aerospace subsystems, and increasingly in satellite and space capabilities. While it's not a semiconductor powerhouse, it has built relevant domestic capabilities in sensors, avionics and drone tech, which reduce dependence on external suppliers for critical defence components.

Trade & geo-economic posture: Turkey's location and wide-ranging partnerships (EU, Russia, Central Asia, MENA) enable it to play the role of a trading hub; its industrial diplomacy is carefully designed to reap economic rewards and, at the same time, seek strategic independence.

Implication: Turkey illustrates the point that defence industrialisation can play the role of diplomacy: exports bring friends, co-production creates dependencies, and domestic capabilities eliminate external vetoes.



Saudi Arabia— from oil rents to tech & critical minerals

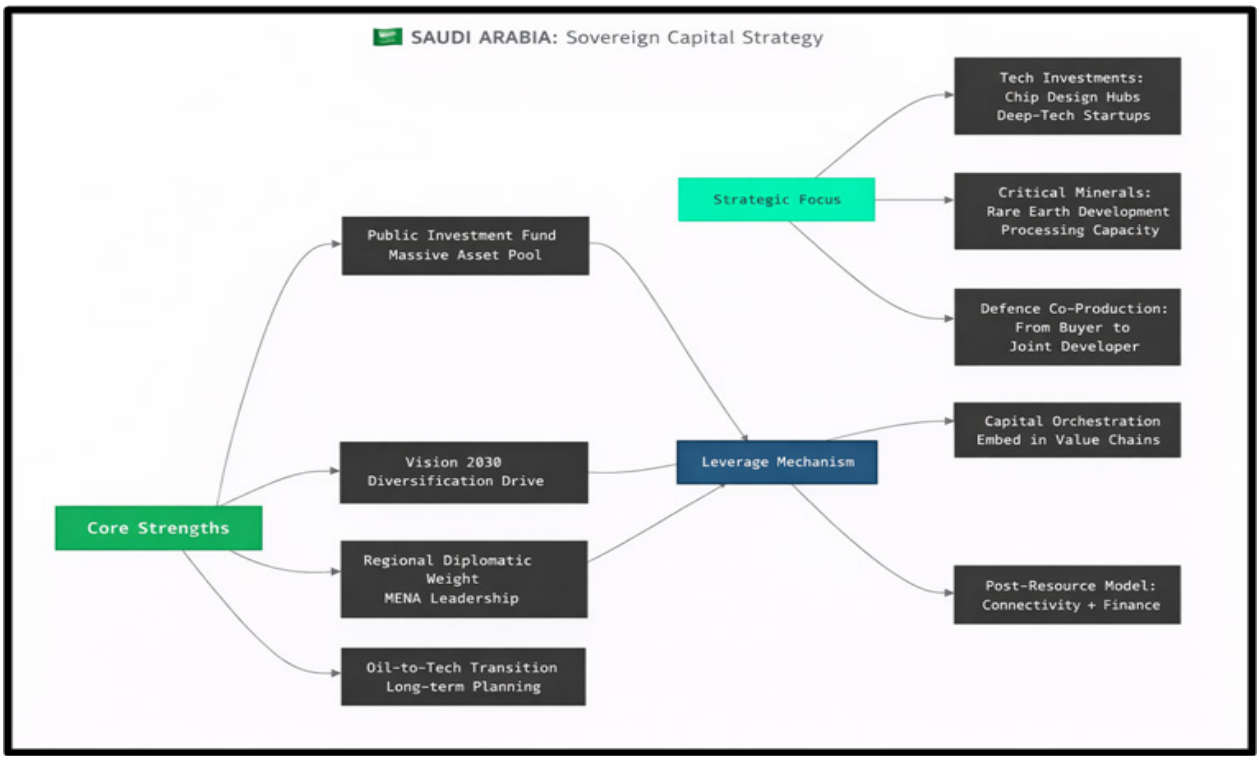
Where Saudi Arabia is strong: money (through PIF), major investments, and being a diplomat in MENA and even more places.

Vision & sovereign capital: The Saudi Vision 2030 and the Public Investment Fund (PIF) led to a transformation in the country's economy from relying on oil to that of the sovereign-investment-driven diversification. PIF also has a large asset pool, which makes it possible for the kingdom to invest in tech ecosystems, clean energy, and critical minerals, thus giving it the power to set the industrial map beyond the oil and gas regions.

Semiconductors & rare earths: The kingdom has openly declared its aim to develop capabilities in the semiconductor industry (design hubs, funds for chip startups) and is looking to find rare-earth/critical-mineral opportunities in the country and outside. There are reports about a Saudi rare-earth market springing up and funds being directed towards semiconductor design and deep-tech startups, making the kingdom a possible new location for some upstream inputs of the tech value chain.

Defence & dual-use tech: Historically, Saudi procurement has been partner-reliant, but the kingdom is now going for domestic defence industrialisation and joint ventures, which, along with sovereign capital, could support regional policy influence and security partnerships.

Implication: Saudi Arabia is the perfect example of how sovereign capital and state-led industrialisation can buy agency in the tech and resource areas; its path will be very influential for supply-chain geopolitics if it manages to cluster rare-earth and chip-design together.



Indonesia— demographic weight and resource leverage

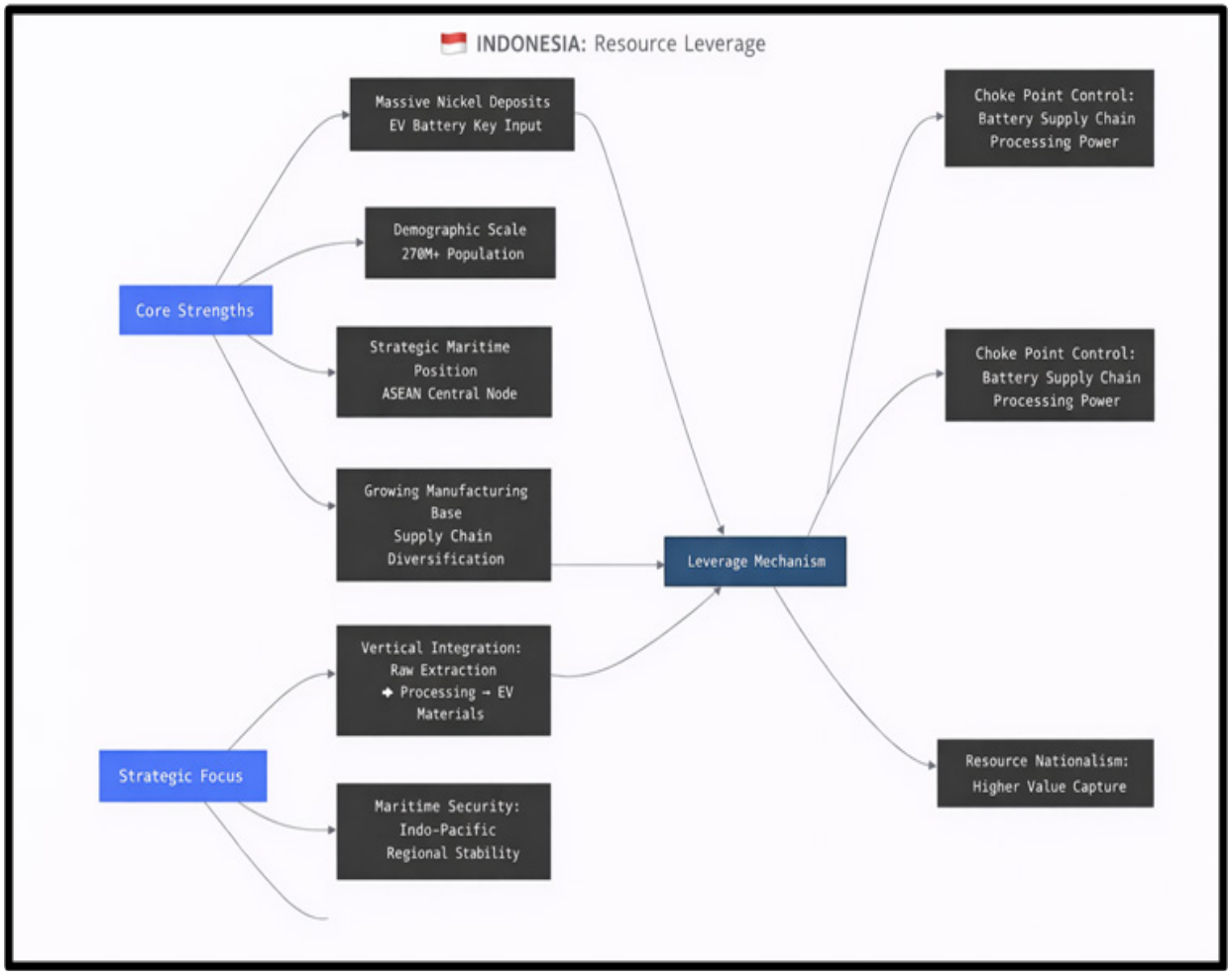
Where Indonesia is strong: demographic scale, mineral wealth, strategic maritime position in Southeast Asia.

Critical minerals & batteries: Indonesia controls substantial nickel deposits, a key input for EV batteries and is using export rules, mineral processing requirements and strategic partnerships to capture higher value from its resources. This vertically integrated approach (from raw extraction to processing/EV materials) demonstrates how resource-rich middle powers can control choke points in new tech supply chains. (This pattern is replicated in other resource-rich middle powers.)

Trade & manufacturing: Indonesia's growing manufacturing base, sizable domestic market, and strategic placement in ASEAN make it an important node for supply-chain diversification in Southeast Asia.

Defence & regional posture: Indonesia is more security-conservative than some peers but is investing in maritime security and selective defence modernisation, enough to shape regional security dynamics in the Indo-Pacific.

Implication: Resource control plus processing rules give Indonesia bargaining power in battery and EV value chains; its demographic and geographic weight make it a strategic partner for both regional and extra-regional players.



United Arab Emirates (UAE)—nimble finance, logistics and tech hubs

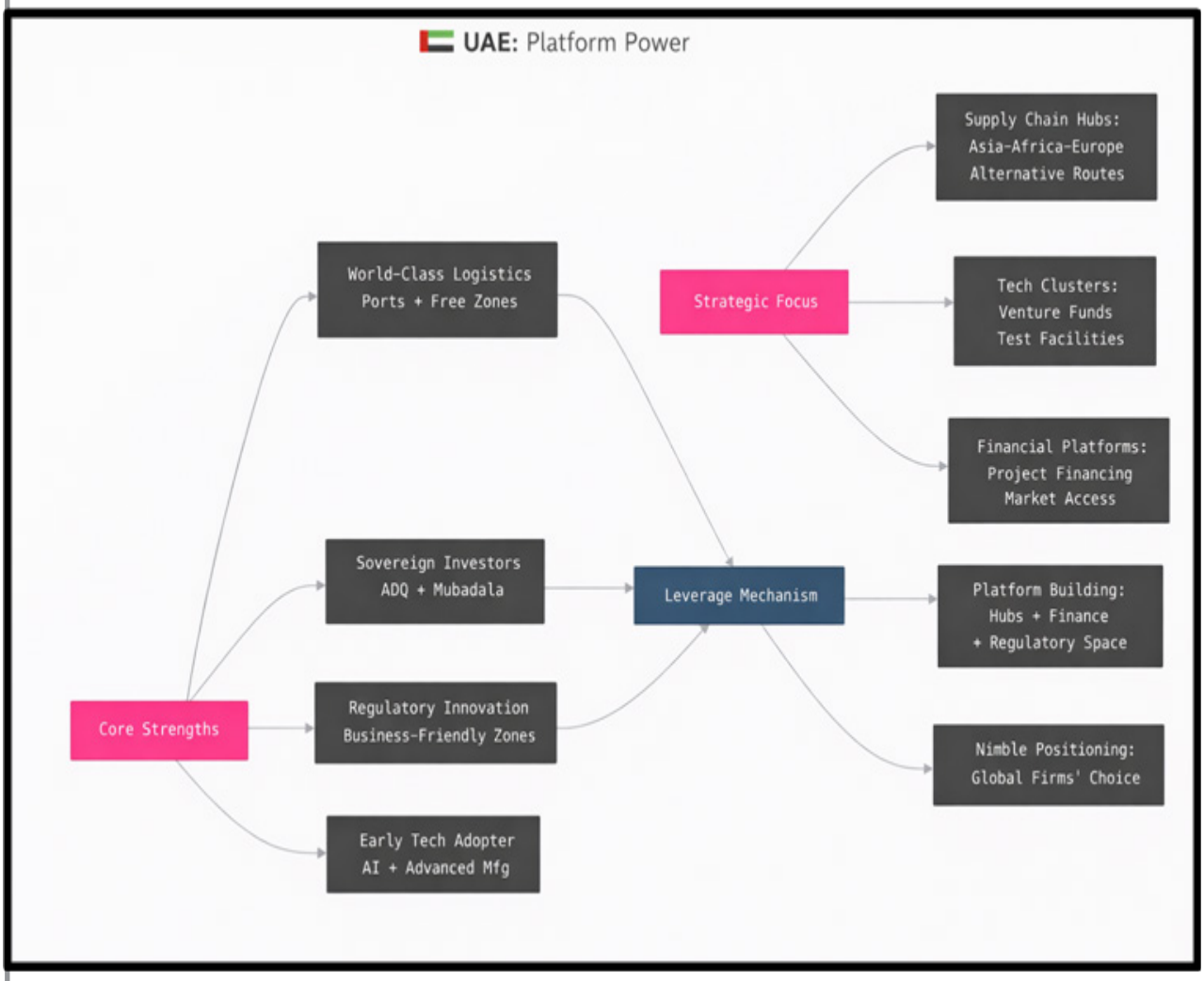
Where the UAE is strong: logistics, sovereign capital (ADQ/Mubadala), regulatory experiments (free zones), and willingness to host global firms.

Trade & supply chains: The UAE's ports, free zones and logistics infrastructure make it a natural hub for alternative supply-chain nodes linking Asia, Africa and Europe. Its sovereign investors also back industrial projects abroad.

Tech & semiconductors: The UAE has been building tech clusters, venture funds, and strategic partnerships in AI and advanced manufacturing; while not a major fab location, it offers financing, test facilities and market access that global firms find attractive.

Defence & dual-use tech: The UAE has been an early adopter of new military technologies and partners on co-production projects; combined with its investment capacity, this makes the country a pragmatic middle-power with policy influence in the Gulf and Africa.

Implication: The UAE's comparative advantage is platform-building, like hubs, finance, and regulatory space that global firms and states use to diversify their operations.



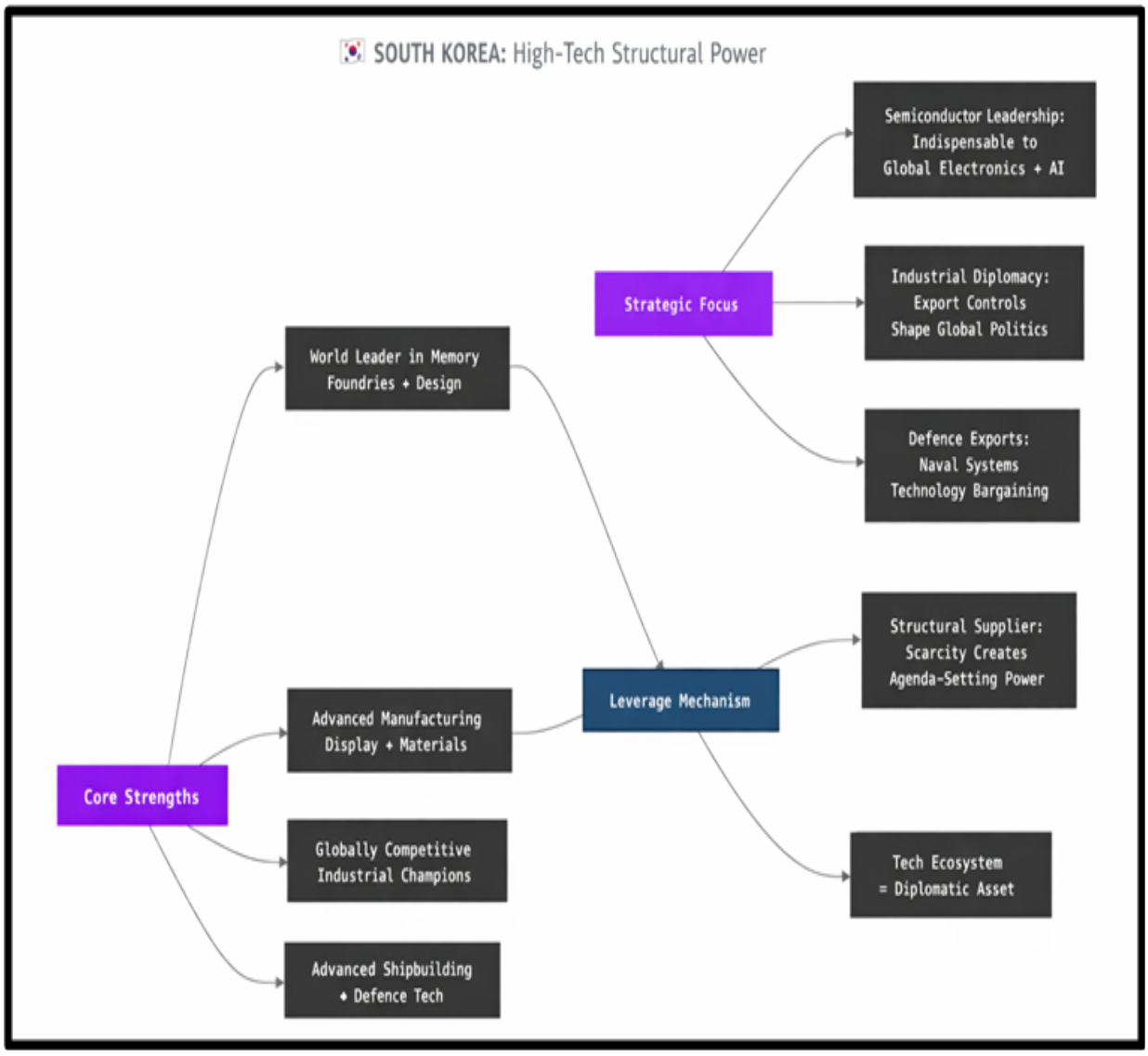
South Korea— the high-tech middle power that punches above its weight

Where South Korea is strong: proven high-tech industrial base (semiconductors, display, materials), advanced shipbuilding and compact, globally competitive defence and industrial champions.

Semiconductors & tech supply chains: South Korea is a world leader in chips (memory especially) and advanced manufacturing. Its firms (foundries & design houses) remain indispensable to global electronics and AI hardware ecosystems. Seoul's industrial diplomacy, from export controls to incentives, shapes global semiconductor politics.

Defence & dual-use tech: South Korea combines advanced indigenous military tech with robust exports in naval systems and other platforms. It also leverages its technology ecosystem to sharpen bargaining power with partners.

Implication: South Korea exemplifies how a middle power can be a structural supplier: its industrial capacity directly gives it agenda-setting power in sectors where tech inputs are scarce.



Cross-Cutting Themes: What Unites These Middle Powers

1. **Industrial sovereignty as leverage.** Whether through fabs (India), drones (Türkiye), sovereign funds (Saudi, UAE) or mining controls (Indonesia), industrial capabilities provide tangible levers for policy influence. These are not soft-power tricks: they create dependencies and alternative options that shift bargaining dynamics.

2. **Flexible coalition-building.** Middle Powers 2.0 prefer issue-based coalitions over fixed alliances. A country may align with the EU on climate issues, with China on trade projects, and with the US on certain security matters, depending on the issue and domestic priorities. This reduces the effectiveness of binary blocs.

3. **Sovereign capital as a policy instrument.** PIF-style funds, sovereign wealth deployment, and state-backed funds underwrite strategic projects from chip hubs to port infrastructure, giving these states outsized influence on who gets market access and under what terms.

4. **Tech and defence have blurred boundaries.** Dual-use technologies (AI, sensors, satellite communications, drones) mean that commercial partnerships have immediate geopolitical implications. Countries that combine commercial scale with defence industrialisation can weaponise their commercial success into diplomatic leverage.

Middle Powers As Inheritors Of "Commercial Empires," Not Territorial Ones

A useful but rarely invoked historical parallel for understanding Middle Powers 2.0 lies not in the age of territorial empires, but in the era of commercial empires. Actors like Venice, the Dutch Republic, and later imperial Japan before 1941, whose power did not stem from vast land control but from mastery over trade routes, finance, logistics, and production nodes. These entities were not the largest military powers of their time, yet they exercised outsized influence by embedding themselves into the circulatory systems of the global economy.

Today's middle powers are replicating this logic under radically different conditions. Instead of controlling sea lanes through fleets, they control data corridors, manufacturing chokepoints, energy transition inputs, and defence production niches. Like historical commercial empires, their strength lies not in conquest but in indispensability, the ability to make disruption costly for everyone else. This analogy reframes Middle Powers 2.0 not as anomalies in a superpower-driven system, but as structurally familiar actors operating in a new technological context, where commerce, production, and connectivity once again determine geopolitical relevance.

Learning From The Failures Of 'Over-Centralised Power' In Past Orders

Another overlooked historical lesson comes from moments when dominant powers over-centralised control and inadvertently accelerated the rise of secondary actors. In the late Cold War, the rigid bloc logic of the US–Soviet system created blind spots: it underestimated the agency of states like China post-1978, or non-aligned industrialising economies that quietly accumulated capacity while great powers focused on ideological competition. A similar dynamic is unfolding today. As the United States and China concentrate resources on strategic rivalry, semiconductors, military modernisation, and technological decoupling, they risk neglecting the diffuse spaces where power is quietly being accumulated by others. Middle Powers 2.0 are exploiting this distraction, investing patiently in industrial ecosystems, defence manufacturing, and cross-regional partnerships that do not attract immediate attention but generate long-term leverage. History suggests that systemic shifts rarely come from confrontation; they emerge from misallocated attention. In that sense, the rise of Middle Powers 2.0 is not a disruption of the global order, but a consequence of its largest actors looking elsewhere.

The Fragmentation Dynamic— Why This Matters For Global Order

The rise of these middle powers fragments the old bipolar or unipolar patterns in several ways:

- Multiplying nodal points of rule-making. Standards, norms and supply-chain rules are no longer decided solely in Washington, Beijing or Brussels; middle powers can convene coalitions (e.g., tech standard initiatives, regional defence partnerships) that effectively create parallel rule-books.
- Decentralised supply chains. Firms and states increasingly adopt "friendshoring plus diversification" strategies that create multiple reliable hubs. The consequence is a more resilient but also more fragmented global market structure where political risk is managed by spreading activity across many states.
- Issue-by-issue alignments. Expect transactional alignments: middle powers will cooperate with different great powers on different issues, for example, trade with one, defence with another, and climate with a third. This variability reduces the potency of bloc-based sanctions or pressures.
- Regionalisation of governance. Regional blocs and middle-power-led forums (G20, regional development banks, ad-hoc security coalitions) will increasingly set agendas that used to be decided by superpowers.

Implications For Specific Domains

Semiconductors & AI supply chains

- Competition for onshore capacity will intensify: India's ISM and other national programs create alternative nodes. While building a full-fledged foundry base at advanced nodes is long and expensive, targeted investments in packaging, testing and design can capture more value and create negotiating leverage.
- Design & software stack advantage (AI models, IP) will let software-heavy middle powers (e.g., India, Korea) extract value even if they don't yet master the most advanced node manufacturing.
- Critical minerals (rare earths, battery metals) will become chess pieces; states that control processing/refining will be able to dictate terms to firms and countries dependent on them. Saudi Arabia and Indonesia's move on minerals illustrates this trajectory.

Defence & security

- Arms exports and co-production (Türkiye, South Korea) create dependencies and diplomatic leverage. Countries buying systems often prefer local co-production and training, creating

political grit points that suppliers can use to influence policy.

- Dual-use tech diffusion (satellites, drones, AI-enabled ISR) heightens the risk that commercial cooperation becomes securitised; export controls will be harder to enforce when many capable producers exist outside traditional producer clubs.

Trade & finance

- Sovereign investment and bilateral trade corridors (Gulf–Asia, Indo-Pacific routes) will shift bargaining power away from old maritime chokepoints. Funding conditionality (or lack thereof) will be a soft power instrument.

Risks and downsides

1. Fragmentation can be disorderly. More nodes mean more coordination failures, standards divergence, and regulatory arbitrage, which can complicate global cooperation on climate, pandemic preparedness, and digital governance.
2. Resource nationalism and protectionism. Vertical capture strategies (local processing requirements, export curbs) may provoke trade friction or accelerate parallel supply chains that fragment markets and raise costs.
3. Arms diffusion and regional instability. Increased arms exports from middle powers could exacerbate regional tensions or spur arms races if not matched with confidence-building measures.
4. Geoeconomic competition intensifies. PIF-style investment and sovereign capital chasing projects globally can crowd out private actors, create political dependence, or produce local backlash.

The Politics Of Standards, Regulation, And "Invisible Power"

One of the most underestimated arenas where Middle Powers 2.0 are quietly reshaping global influence is the politics of standards, regulation, and rule-setting, the realm of invisible power. While superpowers continue to dominate agenda-setting through hard power and scale, middle powers are increasingly shaping the rules that govern emerging domains: digital public infrastructure, data governance, fintech interoperability, climate reporting norms, supply-chain compliance, and even AI ethics frameworks. These regulatory architectures travel faster and last longer than military deployments, embedding influence into the everyday functioning of global systems. By exporting standards rather than ideology, middle powers insert themselves into the operating logic of other states' economies and institutions. This form of power is subtle but durable: once adopted, standards create path dependency, lock-in effects, and institutional habits that are difficult to reverse. In

a fragmented world where consensus among great powers is elusive, the ability to design "workable rules", not universal ones, is becoming a decisive source of influence, and middle powers are disproportionately well-positioned to do so.

Strategic Irreversibility AndThe Power Of Being 'Too Costly To Exclude'

Another critical nuance often overlooked is how Middle Powers 2.0 are deliberately positioning themselves to become strategically irreversible actors that global systems cannot easily exclude without incurring high costs. Unlike traditional power accumulation, which seeks dominance, this strategy seeks indispensability. By embedding themselves across logistics corridors, technology supply chains, energy transitions, financial flows, and regional security architectures, middle powers raise the price of marginalisation for all major actors. This form of power does not rely on coercion but on systemic entanglement. The more fragmented the global order becomes, the more valuable such nodes of connectivity are and the harder they are to bypass. In effect, these states transform vulnerability into leverage: geopolitical pressure becomes less effective when disengagement itself is destabilising. This marks a fundamental shift from influence through alignment to influence through integration, where power flows not from commanding blocs but from anchoring systems.

Policy Recommendations (For Governments, Firms And Multilateral Actors)

For democratic governments in the West and Asia

- Engage, don't ostracise. Recognise middle powers as partners in co-creating resilient supply chains and standards. Offer joint ventures, technical exchange, and co-financing rather than only unilateral sanctions.
- Design flexible partnership models. Issue-based, reversible partnerships (e.g., co-investment in fabs, shared R&D on AI safety) will be more durable than fixed alliance templates.
- Invest in interoperability and standards. Work with middle powers early to set interoperable standards for AI governance, supply-chain transparency, and defence exports.

For middle powers

- Leverage comparative advantage honestly. Build specialisations (design, packaging, mineral processing) where you can realistically compete and use these as bargaining chips to attract complementary investment.
- Balance openness and sovereignty. Use sovereign capital judiciously; avoid nationalisation reflexes that scare off partners. Pursue talent and institutional

capacity alongside industrial incentives.

- Champion regional governance mechanisms. Middle powers are well-placed to convene regional norms and markets that stabilise fragmentation.

For firms

- Diversify suppliers while creating deep partnerships with middle-power hubs (investment, training and co-development). Treat such hubs as strategic partners rather than short-term offshoring destinations.
- Localise value capture. Help host countries build capabilities (training, IP-sharing), so they have an interest in sustaining partnerships.

For multilateral bodies

- Create coalition frameworks where middle powers participate in standards-setting (e.g., semiconductor resilience forums, AI safety coalitions). This reduces the incentive for competing rulebooks and manages fragmentation constructively.

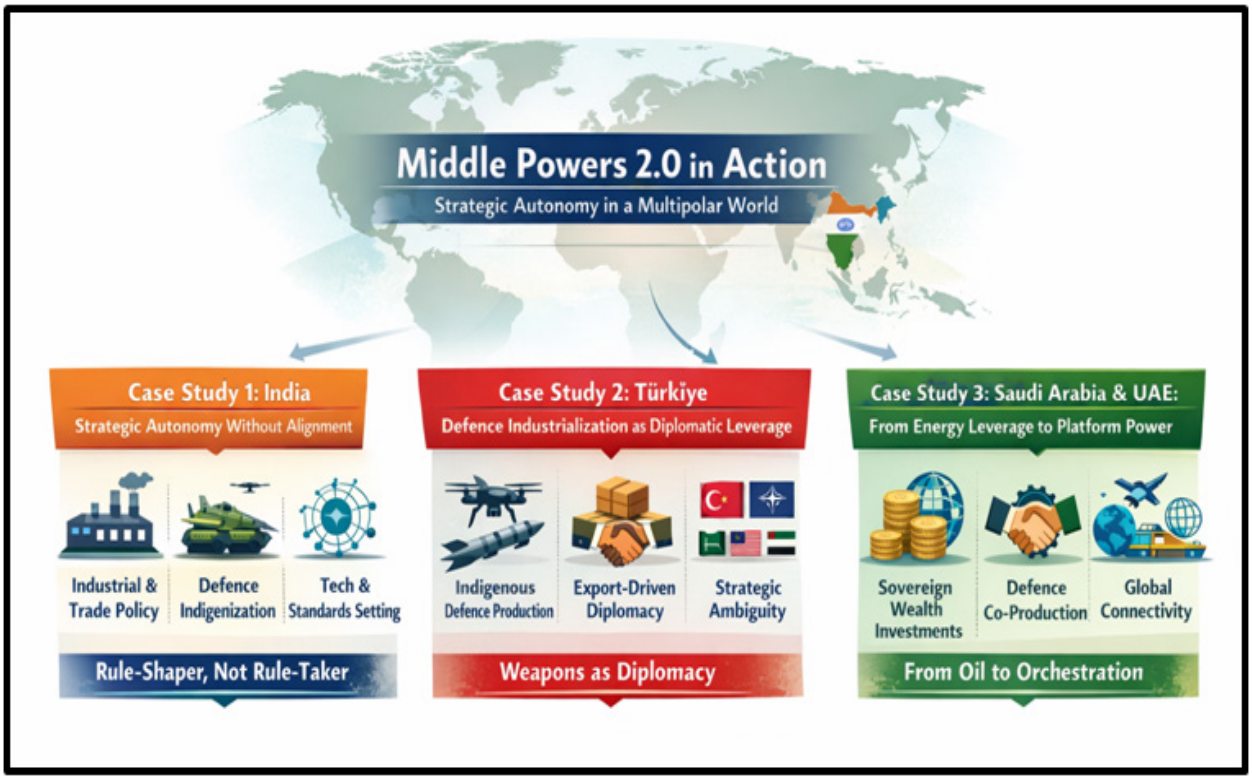
Prominent Case Studies

CASE STUDY 1

India: Strategic Autonomy Without Strategic Isolation

Core analytical question: How has India managed to expand its global influence without formally aligning with any power bloc, while simultaneously deepening partnerships across rival camps?

Why this case matters intellectually: India disproves the assumption that non-alignment is indecision. Instead, it demonstrates how strategic autonomy can be institutionalised



through trade diversification, defence indigenisation, and selective technological integration.

Key analytical pillars

- Trade & industrial policy:India's shift from tariff-based protectionism to targeted industrial policy (semiconductors, electronics manufacturing, defence corridors) reflects a move toward productive sovereignty rather than autarky.
- Defence autonomy:Indigenous platforms, co-development models, and diversified sourcing have reduced vulnerability to single-supplier pressure while preserving operational flexibility.
- Tech & standards-setting:India's role in digital public infrastructure (DPI) exports illustrates how middle powers can shape norms rather than merely adopt them.

Strategic insight

India functions as a rule-shaper without rule-enforcement power, a hallmark of Middle Powers 2.0. Its influence comes not from coercion, but from being indispensable across multiple systems.

CASE STUDY 2

Türkiye: Defence Industrialisation as Diplomatic Leverage

Core analytical question: How can a country with constrained economic fundamentals still emerge as a decisive geopolitical actor?

Why this case matters intellectually? Türkiye demonstrates that defence capability can compensate for economic and diplomatic constraints, allowing a middle power to punch above its weight in multiple theatres.

Key analytical pillars

- Indigenous defence production:Türkiye's success in unmanned systems and precision platforms shows how focused technological bets can yield asymmetric influence.
- Export-driven diplomacy:Defence exports are embedded within Türkiye's regional engagement, creating long-term security dependencies without permanent deployments.
- Strategic ambiguity:Türkiye maintains operational ties with competing blocs, using defence autonomy to resist alignment pressure.

Strategic insight

Türkiye exemplifies how military-industrial ecosystems can function as foreign policy instruments, enabling policy independence even amid economic volatility.

CASE STUDY 3

Saudi Arabia & the UAE: From Energy Leverage to Platform Power

(Treated as a combined analytical case, not twin profiles)

Core analytical question: How are Gulf middle powers converting resource wealth into long-term strategic autonomy in a post-oil global order?

Why this case matters intellectually? The Gulf's transformation is not about diversification alone. It is about repositioning from resource suppliers to system enablers across finance, logistics, tech, and defence.

Key analytical pillars

- Sovereign capital as strategy:Strategic investments are used to embed Gulf states into critical global value chains rather than passive asset accumulation.
- Defence co-production and technology transfer:Moving from arms buyers to co-developers increases strategic agency and reduces long-term dependence.
- Geopolitical hedging:By avoiding exclusive alignments, Gulf states preserve autonomy while remaining indispensable to multiple actors.

Strategic insight

Saudi Arabia and the UAE illustrate a post-resource middle power model, where influence flows from connectivity and capital orchestration, not ideology or military projection alone.

Some quick reads

- India's Semicon push: the India Semiconductor Mission and Semicon India initiatives outline incentives for fabs, packaging/testing and design. These programs are already attracting major investment and show how a large market can convert scale into policy influence.
- Türkiye's defence exports: Turkish defence exports (notably drones) have risen sharply, translating industrial success into diplomatic outreach across multiple regions.
- Saudi strategic capital: Vision 2030 and PIF enable Riyadh to underwrite big-ticket tech and mining projects, positioning the kingdom as a future node in critical-mineral and tech supply chains.

Conclusion: An Updated Mental Map

"Middle Powers 2.0" are not simply residual actors caught between superpowers. They possess and are actively building hard capabilities: industrial, financial and military that let them shape policy and economic outcomes in tangible ways. The resulting global map is not neatly bipolar; it is polycentric, issue-specific and dynamic. For policymakers and firms, the practical lesson is to stop thinking in binary alignments and start planning for a world of many influential nodes, where partnerships must be calibrated to sectoral realities (chips, minerals, defence tech) rather than to inherited alliance templates.

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