A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE USE OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS BY MIDDLE POWERS IN FOREIGN POLICY

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ABSTRACT:

Middle powers are neither system-making great powers nor rule-bound small states, yet they can shape outcomes by leveraging international organizations (IOs). Despite extensive scholarship on middle powers and international organizations as separate fields, the theoretical intersection—specifically, how and under what conditions middle powers strategically employ IOs as foreign policy instruments—remains insufficiently theorized. This article develops a theoretical framework that explains how and why middle powers use IOs as foreign policy instruments under conditions of institutionalized, multilayered global governance. Adopting a qualitative theoretical methodology grounded in analytical synthesis and conceptual abstraction, the study integrates insights from middle-power scholarship, the literature on international organizations, and legitimacy theory. Building on middle-power scholarship and the literature on international organizations and legitimacy, the framework rests on three claims. First, IOs function as power multipliers that help middle powers compensate for limited material capabilities. Second, middle powers act with strategic selectivity, investing in organizations whose rules, procedures, and normative profiles align with their goals. Third, influence is generated through three interlocking mechanisms: (i) legitimacy production that lowers political costs and increases acceptance; (ii) agenda-setting and framing that shapes processes and issue definitions; and (iii) coalition-building that creates collective leverage against asymmetries. By integrating rationalist and constructivist insights, the article reframes middle powers as strategic users of institutional authority rather than passive participants. This hybrid approach transcends the rationalist-constructivist dichotomy by demonstrating that middle powers operate simultaneously through the logic of consequences and the logic of appropriateness, with context-dependent weighting between interest-based and norm-based dynamics. The framework offers an analytically portable "reading scheme" for comparative research and specifies scope conditions under which institutional strategies are more or less likely to yield influence. Specifically, the framework exhibits higher explanatory power in highly institutionalized organizations with procedural density and strong normative legitimacy production, while acknowledging its limitations in contexts characterized by great power veto structures, weighted voting systems, or dominant informal mechanisms. It also outlines avenues for future empirical tests across different organizations, issue areas, and contexts. Positioned as a middle-range theory rather than a universal model, this framework aims to provide a conceptually transferable analytical schema that can guide comparative case studies, process tracing, and qualitative comparative analysis of middle power behaviors in diverse institutional settings.

Keywords: *Foreign Policy, International Organizations, Power Relations, Global Governance, Political Influence.*

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between foreign policy and power in international relations literature has long been conceptualized through the military and economic capacities of great powers. The traditions of realism and neorealism, while reducing power to material resources, have equated the influence of states in the international system with coercive capacity; this has led to the establishment of an analytical perspective that focuses on what is possessed rather than how power is exercised (Gilpin, 1981; Walt, 1987; Mearsheimer, 2001). However, this approach systematically renders invisible the ways in which actors with limited material capacity generate influence and remains inadequate in explaining the role of such actors in the international system. In the post-Cold War era, the increasing institutionalization and normative density of the international system has

significantly constrained the explanatory power of this narrow conception of power; empirical and theoretical developments have emerged demonstrating that power can be produced not only through material resources but also through institutional and normative instruments (Keohane, 1984; Ruggie, 1993; Hurrell, 2007). These developments necessitate a reconsideration of how international relations theory conceptualizes power and bring to the fore the question of how actors with limited material capacity can generate influence within institutional settings.

The post-Cold War international order has undergone a fundamental transformation not only through changes in the distribution of power but also through governance acquiring a multilayered and institutional character. International organizations have ceased to be merely technical structures facilitating interstate cooperation; they have become institutional actors that produce norms, provide legitimacy, and structure political processes (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004; Karns, Mingst, & Stiles, 2015). This transformation necessitates that foreign policy behavior be analyzed not solely through bilateral relations or material power indicators but within institutional contexts. Nevertheless, this necessity has not been theorized equally for all actors in the literature; in particular, the strategic behavior of middle powers in institutional settings has not been adequately explained. This theoretical asymmetry points to a significant analytical gap in the discipline of international relations and requires systematic examination of the institutional influence capacities of middle powers.

In this context, middle powers emerge as one of the most problematic actor categories in international relations theory. Middle powers possess neither the capacity to unilaterally determine rules like system-making great powers nor do they occupy the largely rule-taking position of small states. Yet in the literature, middle powers have frequently been addressed through descriptive categories; their behavior has been explained through normative inclinations or diplomatic preferences, while their influence-generating logics have not been sufficiently elaborated theoretically (Holbraad, 1984; Cooper, Higgott, & Nossal, 1993). This situation has led to the distinctive position of middle powers in the international system remaining analytically "in-between" and transforming into a theoretically ambiguous category. Consequently, while studies describing what middle powers do exist, theoretical frameworks explaining how and through what logic they do so remain largely absent.

For middle powers, international organizations constitute one of the primary instruments for overcoming this "in-betweenness" and compensating for their limited material capacities. Middle powers seek to increase their relative influence in the international system by making structural investments in multilateral diplomacy, institutional participation, and normative discourse (Cooper, 1997). From this perspective, international organizations are not merely an appropriate context for middle powers but also the operational spaces for generating influence. However, how international organizations are transformed into foreign policy instruments for middle powers, under what conditions and through what mechanisms they become effective, has not been sufficiently theorized in the literature. This deficiency necessitates a systematic theoretical initiative aimed at understanding the institutional strategies of middle powers.

The literature on international organizations has predominantly developed around two main analytical axes. The first axis treats organizations as institutional arrangements reflecting the interests of great powers and legitimizing their hegemony; the second axis argues that organizations independently shape state behavior through their normative and legal authorities (Krasner, 1983; Keohane, 1984; Hurd, 2024). However, both approaches frequently evaluate middle powers as secondary actors and do not offer systematic analysis regarding the strategic use of organizations by middle powers. Thus, the question of "by whom, under what conditions, and how organizations are used" remains in the background in the literature. This situation demonstrates that the literature on international organizations does not sufficiently account for actor diversity and remains inadequate in explaining how organizations are instrumentalized by different categories of actors.

A similar limitation is observed in the middle powers literature. While this literature emphasizes the inclination of middle powers toward multilateralism and their normative discourse, it cannot systematically explain how this inclination produces concrete foreign policy outcomes through international organizations (Cooper, 1997; Chapnick, 2005). International organizations are often evaluated merely as passive contexts in which middle power behavior occurs; the active and conscious instrumentalization of these structures is theoretically neglected. This situation points to the absence of a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding the institutional strategies of middle powers. Consequently, both the international organizations and middle powers literatures remain distant from offering a systematic theoretical explanation at the intersection of these two fields.

In this study, the concept of middle power is defined not as a hierarchical intermediate category based on material capacity indicators but as states possessing the capacity to generate influence through institutional, normative, and coalition-based strategies rather than direct coercive power projection (Holbraad, 1984; Cooper, 1997). This definition identifies middle powers neither with the system-making role of great powers nor with the predominantly rule-dependent position of small states. Rather, within this framework, middle powers are positioned as a distinctive actor type that exhibits strategic agency within international organizations and seeks to shape institutional processes to a certain degree. This conceptualization treats middle powers as a relational category defined by the capacity to generate relative influence in institutional settings rather than absolute power metrics. This definition constitutes the foundation of the study's analytical framework and provides a functional conceptual tool for understanding the interaction of middle powers with international organizations.

The point of departure for this article is the absence of a comprehensive theoretical framework explaining how middle powers use international organizations in foreign policy. Existing studies in the literature focus either on the structural characteristics of organizations or on the behavioral inclinations of middle powers; however, they fail to integrate the interaction between these two domains at the theoretical level. This disconnect causes the institutional influence-generating modalities of middle powers to remain analytically fragmented and results in the formation of a theoretical ground unsuitable for comparative analysis. Therefore, this study aims to develop a conceptual framework to address this theoretical gap. In pursuit of this aim, the study adopts a qualitative and theoretical methodological approach that seeks to provide conceptual clarity and theoretical consistency rather than generating empirical data.

The central argument of this article is that middle powers should be evaluated not as passive structures merely complying with norms but as strategic instruments that they consciously and selectively employ to advance their foreign policy objectives. This argument rejects the sharp distinction between rationalist interest calculations and constructivist normative approaches; it contends that middle powers employ both logics simultaneously within institutional contexts (Ruggie, 1993; Finnemore, 1996). Thus, the study repositions middle powers not as passive participants in international organizations but as actors that strategically mobilize institutional authority. This repositioning requires a hybrid theoretical approach that integrates the analytical tools offered by both rationalist and constructivist traditions in explaining middle power behavior.

Accordingly, this study explains the capacity of middle powers to generate institutional influence through three fundamental mechanisms: (i) legitimacy production, (ii) agenda-setting and framing, and (iii) coalition-building (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004; Johnstone, 2011; Weiss et al., 2017). These mechanisms enable middle powers to compensate for their limited material capacities and create systemic influence through international organizations. Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that these mechanisms do not always produce successful outcomes and that coalitions may dissolve due to interest incompatibilities or great power pressures. These three mechanisms constitute the fundamental pillars of the study's analytical framework and enable the comparative examination of the institutional strategies of middle powers.

This framework does not claim to offer a universal model. The proposed analytical structure is assumed to be more explanatory particularly in international organizations characterized by a high degree of institutionalization, procedural density, and a pronounced normative agenda (Karns et al., 2015; Risse, 2013). In organizations that are open to direct control by great powers and possess low levels of institutionalization, the institutional influence capacity of middle powers may remain structurally more limited. For this reason, the framework should be evaluated not as a model universally applicable to all institutional contexts but as a conceptually transferable analytical reading scheme aimed at understanding middle power behavior under specific organizational and governance conditions. This deliberate limitation strengthens the theoretical consistency of the study and enhances analytical precision by avoiding overgeneralization.

This article offers three main theoretical contributions to the literature. First, it redefines the concept of middle power independently of material capacity metrics, based on institutional influence capacity. Second, it develops a synthesizing conceptual framework that addresses the analytical disconnect between the middle powers and international organizations literatures. Third, it presents the three fundamental mechanisms explaining the institutional strategies of middle powers (legitimacy production, agenda-setting, coalition-building) within an integrated analytical structure. The remaining sections of the article are structured as follows. The second section explains the methodological approach and theoretical knowledge production strategy of the study. The third section critically addresses the middle powers and international organizations literatures to clarify the theoretical

gap. The fourth section presents the analytical and conceptual framework of the article. The fifth section develops the theoretical analysis through this framework. The sixth section discusses what the findings mean for the literature. The seventh section presents theoretical and policy implications; the eighth section offers limitations and future research directions; and the final section presents the overall conclusions.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This study adopts a qualitative and theoretical methodological approach, aiming not to generate empirical data but to provide conceptual clarity and theoretical consistency. The epistemic position of the study is situated within the interpretivist and analytical tradition; it addresses foreign policy behavior through processes of meaning-making and conceptual structures rather than measurable relationships between causal variables (Guzzini, 1998; Gerring, 2012). In this context, methodology is conceived not as a "data collection technique" but as an architecture of thought demonstrating how theoretical knowledge production is accomplished. This choice signals a deliberate alignment between the study's theoretical claims and its epistemic stance, clarifying why a theoretical analytical strategy has been adopted. Theoretical analysis serves not as a defensive instrument legitimizing the study's claims but as an analytical framework that transparently reveals how and through what logic arguments are constructed. Consequently, this study positions the absence of empirical findings not as a deficiency but as a deliberate methodological choice aimed at enhancing theoretical depth and conceptual clarity. This epistemic position consciously diverges from the positivist pursuit of causality and acknowledges that the mode of knowledge production in theoretical articles should be evaluated by criteria different from those applied to empirical studies.

The article follows an analytical strategy based on inter-theoretical synthesis and conceptual disaggregation. This strategy aims to render visible the theoretical disconnect between these two fields by juxtaposing behavioral approaches in the middle powers literature with institutional and normative analyses in the international organizations literature (Ruggie, 1993; Barnett & Finnemore, 2004). The analysis does not aim to confirm or falsify existing theories; rather, it seeks to demonstrate in what respects these theories remain inadequate in explaining how middle powers use international organizations in foreign policy. In this regard, the study is designed not as an explanatory theory test but as an endeavor of theoretical repositioning. The conceptual tools offered by rationalist and constructivist traditions are treated not as mutually exclusive alternatives but as complementary elements in explaining middle power behavior. For this reason, the study is positioned as an endeavor of conceptual reframing rather than remaining bound to a single theoretical paradigm. This strategic choice aims not to advocate theoretical eclecticism but to integrate the analytical strengths of different traditions around a specific problem. Thus, the study embraces the principle of analytical productivity over paradigmatic loyalty.

Literature selection was conducted not with a claim to comprehensiveness but on the basis of theoretical relevance and analytical contribution criteria. Accordingly, rather than studies that define the middle power concept solely through material capacity indicators, literature emphasizing behavioral and institutional dimensions was preferred (Holbraad, 1984; Cooper, 1997). Similarly, rather than studies that treat international organizations merely as technical cooperation platforms or normative structures, approaches discussing the political and institutional effects of these organizations were included in the analysis (Keohane, 1984; Hurd, 2024). This selectivity should be understood not as the exclusion of literature but as its reorganization around a theoretical problem. Excluded studies were left outside the scope not because they lack analytical value but because they are not directly related to the specific theoretical focus of this study. This approach aims not to exhaust the literature but to reorganize it around a theoretical problem (Bennett & Elman, 2007). This selectivity also includes consideration of current SSCI Q1 literature published within the last five years; thus, the study engages with both classical theoretical foundations and contemporary academic debates.

The core concepts employed in this study—middle power, international organizations, and foreign policy instrument—have been redefined in a manner appropriate to analytical purposes, taking into account their different usages in the literature. Concepts are treated not as explanatory labels but as instruments serving argument generation in the subsequent stages of analysis (Gerring, 2012). Therefore, concepts possess analytical rather than descriptive function, and each assumes a specific role within the theoretical framework of the study. Conceptual clarity is regarded as a central element of methodology; it is acknowledged that ambiguous or polysemous concepts may weaken theoretical consistency. This instrumentalization of concepts enables the systematic analysis of how and under what conditions middle powers use international organizations as foreign

policy instruments (Cooper, 1997; Hurrell, 2007). Thus, conceptual definitions function as building blocks that safeguard the consistency of the analytical framework. In particular, the concept of "middle power" has been functionally redefined in this study, emancipated from material capacity indicators and based on institutional influence capacity. This definition enhances the analytical sharpness of the concept and provides a usage ground consistent with the theoretical claims of the study.

The analytical process of the study is based on sequential and traceable argument construction. In the first stage, the middle powers and international organizations literatures are addressed separately; in the second stage, the conceptual gaps emerging at the intersection points of these two literatures are identified. In the third stage, an analytical framework aimed at addressing these gaps is developed. This phased progression ensures that arguments are constructed within a logical rather than intuitive structure and facilitates the reader's ability to follow the analytical flow. This approach aims to construct theoretical arguments through systematic logical progression rather than intuitive inferences (Bennett & Elman, 2007; Gerring, 2012). Thus, the article grounds its theoretical claims not on implicit assumptions but on an explicitly traceable analytical path, rendering visible at each stage what decisions were made and why. This three-stage analytical process can be summarized as follows: (i) literature disaggregation and critical evaluation, (ii) identification of conceptual gaps and clarification of the theoretical problem, (iii) development of a synthesizing analytical framework. This structure enhances the transparency of argument construction and explicitly reveals how the theoretical contribution of the study is produced.

In this study, logical consistency and conceptual coherence take precedence over causal explanation. Theoretical analysis presents a chain of reasoning explaining why and how middle powers use international organizations as foreign policy instruments under specific conditions, rather than advancing a causality claim in the form of "variable X produces outcome Y" (Guzzini, 1998; Ruggie, 1993). This choice is based on the established methodological acceptance that theoretical articles are not obligated to produce empirical causality, and it demonstrates consistency with the epistemic position of the study. Consequently, the validity of the study is evaluated through the internal consistency of arguments and the level of conceptual clarity rather than empirical testability. This approach acknowledges that the value of theoretical studies cannot be measured solely by empirical verifiability; conceptual contribution, analytical clarity, and theoretical consistency also carry scientific value. Therefore, the study seeks to answer the question "is this framework analytically productive and conceptually consistent?" rather than "is this theory correct?" This epistemic preference foregrounds analytical utility and conceptual transferability criteria over empirical falsification in the evaluation of theoretical articles.

As a deliberate component of the methodological approach, the study is positioned within specific boundaries. The proposed theoretical framework does not claim to offer a universal model applicable to all state types or all international organizations. Rather, the framework is primarily oriented toward understanding the foreign policy behavior of middle powers in multilateral and institutionalized international settings (Holbraad, 1984; Cooper, 1997). It is assumed to be more explanatory particularly in international organizations characterized by a high degree of institutionalization, procedural density, and a pronounced normative agenda. In organizations that are open to direct control by great powers and possess low levels of institutionalization, the explanatory power of the framework may remain structurally limited. In this respect, generalizability is defined through conceptual transferability rather than quantitative scope. This limitation aims not to weaken the analytical power of the study but to enhance its theoretical consistency and explanatory capacity (Gerring, 2012). This deliberate limitation ensures that the study avoids the claim of "explaining everything" and explicitly reveals under what conditions the theoretical framework will offer stronger explanatory power. Accordingly, scope conditions should be evaluated not as a weakness of the framework but as an indicator of its analytical precision.

Finally, the study treats methodological transparency as an indispensable element of theoretical analyses. The definitions of concepts employed, analytical steps, and excluded approaches are explicitly presented; thus, enabling the reader to follow how arguments were developed is aimed (Bennett & Elman, 2007). This transparency makes it possible for theoretical analyses to be open to critical evaluation and encourages academic dialogue. At the same time, this approach carries importance for the reproducibility of theoretical studies; it becomes possible for other researchers to test or develop this framework in different contexts by following similar analytical steps. From a methodological standpoint, the article aims to contribute to the literature not only at the content level but also at the methodological level by offering an exemplary path for how analytical synthesis bringing together the middle powers and international organizations literatures can be constructed. This methodological contribution provides an "analytical template" for how theoretical articles can be constructed and assumes a guiding function for similar synthesizing endeavors. Thus, the study aims to contribute not only to the

relationship between middle powers and international organizations but also to the practice of theoretical analysis itself.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND / LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of "middle power" first emerged in the international relations literature as a response to the analytical inadequacies of the great power–small state dichotomy. In early studies, middle powers were predominantly treated as a hierarchical intermediate category in terms of military and economic capacity; these states were positioned as actors possessing fewer material resources than great powers but more than small states (Holbraad, 1984). However, this approach remained limited in explaining the diversity of middle powers' foreign policy behavior and their institutional interactions; by assuming a linear relationship between material capacity and foreign policy outcomes, it disregarded institutional and normative dynamics. For this reason, the literature gradually evolved from capacity-based definitions toward behavioral and functional definitions (Cooper, Higgott, & Nossal, 1993). This transformation brought to the theoretical agenda not only the question of "how much power middle powers possess" but also in which institutional contexts and how they use this power; enriching the analytical content of the concept. While this conceptual evolution constitutes an important turning point in middle power research, it has largely left unanswered the question of how behavioral definitions can be linked to institutional mechanisms.

The behavioral approach posits that the fundamental element distinguishing middle powers is their foreign policy practices rather than their material capacity. In this context, middle powers are defined as actors that invest in multilateralism, act with reference to international norms, and assume active roles in institutional processes (Cooper, 1997). Multilateralism is not merely a normative preference for these states but also a strategic instrument aimed at compensating for power asymmetries; middle powers seek to achieve outcomes through institutional platforms that they could not attain on their own. However, this literature remains inadequate in explaining in detail through which institutional mechanisms multilateralism produces concrete foreign policy effects. Consequently, while the behavioral approach explains why middle powers gravitate toward multilateralism, it largely leaves open the question of how they become effective. This deficiency necessitates the theorization of mechanisms explaining how behavioral inclinations are transformed into institutional outcomes. In other words, the existing literature lacks the analytical tools to facilitate the transition from the proposition "middle powers prefer multilateralism" to the proposition "middle powers generate influence through multilateralism via the following mechanisms."

The international organizations literature has predominantly developed along two main theoretical lines. The first line treats organizations as arrangements reflecting the interests of great powers and institutionally legitimizing their hegemony; according to this perspective, organizations serve to enable powerful states to realize their preferences at the international level. The second line argues that organizations are autonomous actors that shape state behavior through normative and legal means (Krasner, 1983; Keohane, 1984). While both approaches offer important contributions to explaining the role of organizations within the system, they tend to regard how middle powers strategically use these organizations as a secondary matter. This situation leads to the question of by whom and under what conditions institutional power is mobilized not being adequately addressed in the literature; creating a theoretical gap concerning how organizations are instrumentalized by different actor categories. The common blind spot of these two dominant approaches is that while conceptualizing international organizations either as instruments of hegemonic powers or as autonomous structures, they exclude from analysis the strategic interaction of "intermediate" actors with these structures.

New institutionalist and constructivist approaches argue that international organizations are not merely areas of technical cooperation but actors possessing the capacity to produce norms, provide legitimacy, and exercise authority (Finnemore, 1996; Barnett & Finnemore, 2004). This perspective addresses the influence of organizations on state behavior within a more complex and multidimensional framework; conceptualizing organizations not merely as instruments of states but as institutional actors possessing independent agency. However, this literature, while often focusing on "what organizations do," does not systematically analyze how middle powers instrumentalize these authority and norm production processes in line with their foreign policy objectives. The selective and strategic use of organizational authority by actors remains theoretically underdeveloped at this point; organization-centered analyses require completion with an actor-centered perspective. Although Barnett and Finnemore's (2004) groundbreaking work revealed the autonomous authority

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of organizations, the question of how this authority is mobilized differently by different state categories remains insufficiently researched.

Studies at the intersection of the middle powers and international organizations literatures generally proceed through specific case analyses or regional examples (Chapnick, 2005; Thakur, 2006). While these studies reveal the visibility and contributions of middle powers in the United Nations or regional organizations, they struggle to generalize the common theoretical logic behind these behaviors. Examples such as Canada's role in UN peacekeeping operations, Australia's initiatives in regional institutionalization, or the normative diplomacy of Scandinavian countries are examined separately; however, a systematic theoretical framework connecting these cases cannot be provided. Consequently, rather than a comprehensive theoretical framework explaining middle powers' use of international organizations as foreign policy instruments, scattered and context-specific explanations predominate in the literature. This fragmented structure impedes comparative and theoretical generalization; limiting efforts to grasp the common logic of middle power behavior. This situation can be characterized as the "N=1 problem" of middle power research: each case is richly described within its own context, yet the common analytical framework that would enable cross-case comparison and theoretical generalization remains absent.

The literature addressed in this section points to two fundamental gaps. First, while the middle powers literature emphasizes the inclination toward multilateralism, it does not sufficiently elaborate how this inclination operates at the institutional level; the connection between behavioral preferences and institutional outcomes remains theoretically unclear. Second, while the international organizations literature examines in detail the authority and norm-producing capacities of organizations, it relegates to secondary importance how middle powers strategically use these capacities in the foreign policy context (Hurd, 2024; Weiss et al., 2017). This dual gap necessitates a theoretical reconsideration of the relationship between middle powers and international organizations. This study focuses precisely on the theoretical gap at this intersection point and aims to address this gap by synthesizing the strengths of both literatures. These two gaps are in fact complementary analytical deficiencies: the middle powers literature seeks to answer the "why" question while the international organizations literature seeks to answer the "how" question; yet studies that address both questions together and establish the causal/mechanistic connection between them are rare.

The tension between rationalist and constructivist approaches in the international organizations literature offers an important theoretical distinction for understanding the institutional behavior of middle powers. Rationalist approaches argue that states use international organizations in accordance with interest maximization and cost-benefit calculations; conceptualizing organizations as arenas where strategic interaction takes place (Keohane, 1984; Drezner, 2007). Constructivist approaches, on the other hand, foreground norms, identities, and the pursuit of legitimacy; explaining states' participation in organizations not only through interest calculations but also through the logic of appropriateness and identity construction (Finnemore, 1996; Wendt, 1999). However, neither approach can adequately explain how middle powers use these two logics simultaneously. Overcoming this duality appears critical for a more comprehensive understanding of middle powers' institutional strategies; necessitating a hybrid analytical framework that addresses rationalist and constructivist elements together. While March and Olsen's (1989) distinction between the "logic of consequences" and the "logic of appropriateness" offers a useful starting point for conceptualizing this tension, theoretical frameworks explaining how middle powers combine these two logics in institutional contexts still await development.

The institutional power literature demonstrates that international organizations are not merely structures that implement rules but also actors possessing the capacity for agenda-setting and legitimacy production (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004; Johnstone, 2011). This perspective offers important clues for understanding why middle powers invest in these organizations; explaining why the institutional resources offered by organizations are valuable for middle powers. Organizations create strategic opportunity spaces for actors with limited material capacity due to their capacities to enhance the legitimacy of decisions, shape agendas, and frame normative frameworks. However, these studies predominantly focus on the authority and autonomy of organizations; they do not systematically address how middle powers direct this institutional power in line with their foreign policy objectives. Consequently, institutional power requires completion with an actor-based analysis. In this context, a framework explaining how mechanisms such as legitimacy production, agenda-setting, and coalition-building are strategically employed by middle powers will enrich the actor dimension of the institutional power literature.

In the middle powers literature, multilateralism is frequently associated with coalition-building and mediation capacity (Cooper, 1997; Berridge, 2015). These studies demonstrate that middle powers can increase their influence by forming temporary alliances with actors sharing similar interests and values in international organizations; revealing that coalitions are an important instrument for balancing power asymmetries. Nevertheless, the questions of under which institutional conditions these coalitions become effective and how they become sustainable remain largely open. Moreover, the possibility that coalitions may fail or encounter institutional resistance is not sufficiently discussed in the literature. This deficiency points to the necessity of a framework theorizing the success conditions and potential limitations of coalition-building. The coalition literature largely focuses on successful cases; topics such as failed coalition attempts, the dynamics of coalition dissolution, and the coalition-blocking strategies of great powers are not systematically examined. This one-sided focus limits the explanatory power of the coalition mechanism.

The international regimes and multilayered governance literature offers a complementary perspective for understanding the maneuvering space of middle powers. While regime theory emphasizes that states cooperate within specific rules and expectations (Krasner, 1983; Young, 1999), the governance literature demonstrates that international organizations create interaction at different levels and offer actors multiple participation opportunities (Risse, 2013). These approaches provide important conceptual tools for explaining why middle powers can use multiple organizations simultaneously and how they benefit from institutional diversity. Particularly organizations possessing high levels of institutionalization, procedural density, and a pronounced normative agenda create broader maneuvering spaces for middle powers. However, this literature also does not systematically place middle powers at the center of analysis; it does not examine in detail how these actors strategically use institutional diversity. This situation is also important for determining the scope conditions of the framework proposed by this study: the explanatory power of the framework may remain structurally limited in organizations with low levels of institutionalization or under the direct control of great powers.

The studies examined in this section demonstrate that the relationship between middle powers and international organizations is addressed in the literature in a fragmented and interdisciplinary manner. While the middle powers literature focuses on behavioral inclinations, the international organizations literature concentrates on institutional functioning; the connection between the two fields is often established through implicit assumptions (Hurrell, 2007; Keohane & Nye, 2012). This situation renders the absence of a synthesizing theoretical framework more visible and reveals the necessity of a comprehensive theoretical initiative aimed at understanding the institutional strategies of middle powers. The existing literature either describes what middle powers do or explains how organizations function; yet studies that address both questions together and theorize the interaction between them remain limited. This theoretical fragmentation also points to a methodological problem: while middle power research largely relies on case studies, international organizations research prefers institutional analysis methods; this methodological divergence impedes dialogue between the two fields.

This study aims to address this fragmentation and build an analytical bridge between the middle powers and international organizations literatures. Rather than rejecting existing approaches in the literature, it reorganizes and synthesizes them around a common theoretical problem. By integrating the rationalist approaches' emphasis on strategic calculation with the constructivist approaches' focus on legitimacy and norms, it offers a framework that more comprehensively explains the institutional behavior of middle powers. Thus, the article aims to provide a conceptual contribution to both the middle power literature and the international organizations literature by offering a comprehensive theoretical framework explaining middle powers' use of international organizations in foreign policy (Ruggie, 1993; Barnett & Finnemore, 2004; Hurrell, 2007). This contribution is positioned as a synthesizing theoretical initiative aimed at addressing the identified gaps while preserving the strengths of the existing literature. This synthesizing approach constitutes the conceptual foundations of the analytical framework to be presented in the following section and provides the theoretical justification for the mechanisms of legitimacy production, agenda-setting, and coalition-building.

ANALYTICAL / CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This section sets forth the analytical and conceptual framework designed to explain how middle powers use international organizations in foreign policy. The aim is to address the theoretical fragmentation identified in the previous section and to present a conceptual architecture capable of systematically analyzing middle power behavior. This framework treats middle powers neither as actors merely conforming to norms nor as institutional extensions of great powers. Rather, it conceptualizes middle powers as actors that, while possessing limited

material capacity, are capable of strategically employing institutional and normative resources. In this context, middle power is treated as a relational category defined not by absolute power metrics but by the capacity to generate influence within institutional settings (Cooper, 1997; Barnett & Finnemore, 2004; Hurrell, 2007). Such a conceptualization positions the fundamental criterion distinguishing middle powers from great powers as institutional strategy rather than material capacity; while the fundamental criterion distinguishing them from small states is defined as active institutional agency rather than passive rule compliance. This dual distinction establishes the analytical distinctiveness of the framework and its explanatory capacity specific to middle powers. This conceptualization simultaneously secures the framework's conceptual transferability: the behaviors of different middle powers across different organizations become amenable to comparative examination through the same analytical categories and mechanisms. Thus, rather than being confined to explaining a single case, the framework provides a general analytical template for middle power research.

The analytical framework of this study rests upon three fundamental assumptions. The first assumption is that international organizations constitute active foreign policy instruments rather than passive contexts for middle powers. International organizations, by virtue of their decision-making processes, norm-producing mechanisms, and legitimacy-conferring roles, offer institutional levers capable of compensating for the limited material capacities of middle powers (Keohane, 1984; Ruggie, 1993; Hurd, 2024). For this reason, the relationship of middle powers with organizations should be analyzed not in terms of membership or compliance levels, but rather through which institutional features of organizations are mobilized for which foreign policy objectives. This assumption departs from approaches that view organizations merely as structures constraining or directing state behavior; repositioning organizations as strategic resources that can be consciously mobilized by specific actors. This theoretical position differentiates from neoliberal institutionalism's approach of viewing organizations as "structures facilitating cooperation"; treating organizations not merely as facilitators but as institutional instruments that can be actively directed. This distinction emphasizes that while organizations often serve as complementary or secondary instruments for great powers, they constitute primary strategic instruments for middle powers.

The second assumption is that the behavior of middle powers toward international organizations is neither automatic nor universal. Middle powers do not invest equally in all organizations; rather, they selectively use organizations they perceive as aligned with their foreign policy priorities. This strategic selectivity is closely related to the institutional design, decision-making procedures, and normative orientations of organizations (Karns, Mingst, & Stiles, 2015; Johnstone, 2011). Consequently, the analytical framework treats the middle power–organization relationship not as a fixed behavioral pattern but as a contextual, purpose-oriented, and time-sensitive interaction process. This assumption emphasizes that static typologies will prove inadequate in explaining the institutional preferences of middle powers; underscoring the necessity of a dynamic and process-oriented analytical logic. Strategic selectivity also encompasses the possibility that middle powers may withdraw from certain organizations during specific periods or redirect their investments. At the operational level, strategic selectivity can be analyzed through observable indicators such as the distribution of diplomatic resources allocated by middle powers to organizations, frequency of high-level participation, voluntary financial contributions, and practices of nominating candidates for positions within organizations. These indicators allow for the identification of which organizations middle powers regard as "priority instruments" and provide operational reference points for empirical applications of the framework.

The third assumption is that the capacity of middle powers to generate influence through international organizations operates through specific mechanisms. This study addresses these mechanisms under three main headings: (i) legitimacy production, (ii) agenda-setting, and (iii) coalition-building. These elements, often treated separately in the literature, are here conceived within an integrated analytical framework (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004; Cooper, 1997; Weiss et al., 2017). Thus, the influence of middle powers in institutional settings is explained through traceable and comparable pathways of influence rather than an abstract normative inclination. These three mechanisms are not independent of one another; rather, in most cases they operate simultaneously and in mutually reinforcing fashion. For example, a successful agenda-setting initiative can facilitate legitimacy production; while a strong coalition can enhance both agenda-setting and legitimacy production capacity. This interactional logic constructs the analytical power of the framework through inter-mechanism synergy rather than through individual mechanisms. Nevertheless, potential tensions between mechanisms may also arise: for instance, the effort to build a broad coalition may require concessions in the agenda-setting process; or the pursuit of legitimacy may lead to the abandonment of narrower and more targeted policy preferences. These possible trade-offs necessitate that the framework treat mechanisms not only as synergistic but also as existing in a tension-laden equilibrium. No fixed

hierarchy is assumed among the three mechanisms; which mechanism takes priority is determined by the institutional characteristics of the organization and the specific objectives of the middle power.

One of the distinguishing features of this analytical framework is that it treats international organizations not merely as a "context" but as an "instrument." In the existing literature, organizations are frequently conceptualized as environments in which state behaviors occur (Armstrong, Farrell, & Lambert, 2004). This study, by clarifying the context–instrument–outcome distinction, analyzes under which conditions, for which purposes, and within which limitations middle powers instrumentalize organizations. This conceptual distinction acknowledges that organizations present both structural constraints and strategic opportunities; enabling an understanding of how middle powers evaluate this dual character. Thus, this distinction constitutes the conceptual foundation for the theoretical arguments to be developed in the following section and emphasizes that organizations are not passive arenas but institutional structures that can be actively instrumentalized. This tripartite distinction also offers a methodological implication: in empirical research, organizations can be conceptualized not only as "independent variables" (structures affecting state behavior) or "dependent variables" (institutions shaped by states) but also as intervening variables (instruments used by middle powers to achieve foreign policy outcomes). This perspective foregrounds the functional role of organizations within middle power strategies.

As the first influence mechanism, legitimacy production plays a central role in middle powers' use of international organizations in foreign policy. International organizations, by ensuring that decisions are taken within collective processes, enable middle powers to associate their foreign policy preferences with international norms and legal frameworks (Finnemore, 1996; Barnett & Finnemore, 2004). This situation allows middle powers to strengthen their individually limited material capacities through institutional endorsement and normative support. Legitimacy production, in this context, should be treated not as an idealistic goal but as a strategic instrument that reduces political costs and increases acceptability (Hurrell, 2007; Hurd, 2024). At the operational level, legitimacy production enables middle powers to present their initiatives as multilateral decisions rather than unilateral actions; thereby securing broader acceptance both in domestic public spheres and in the international arena. This mechanism serves a critical buffer function particularly in contested policy areas or in situations of potential conflict with great powers. The strategic value of legitimacy production also reveals the fundamental difference between middle powers and great powers: while great powers, by virtue of their material capacities, can undertake action even without legitimacy, for middle powers institutional legitimacy is often the precondition of action. Nevertheless, the potential costs of the pursuit of legitimacy must not be disregarded: institutional processes can be time-consuming, multilateral approval requirements can constrain policy flexibility, and collective decisions can lead to the dilution of individual preferences.

The second mechanism is agenda-setting and framing capacity. International organizations offer a significant sphere of influence regarding which issues will be discussed, how they will be defined, and within which normative framework they will be addressed. Middle powers, through active participation in these processes, can make their own foreign policy priorities part of the international agenda (Johnstone, 2011; Weiss et al., 2017). Agenda-setting concerns the capacity to shape the boundaries and meaning of debate rather than direct decision-making power. For this reason, the institutional influence of middle powers often concentrates on process rather than outcome. At the operational level, this mechanism encompasses middle powers bringing specific issues to the center of organizational debate through expert knowledge, diplomatic initiatives, or normative discourse; indirectly influencing the direction of outcome-oriented negotiations by proposing alternative forms of framing. Agenda-setting capacity emerges more distinctly particularly in organizations with high procedural density and that value technical expertise. The limitations of agenda-setting must also be clearly stated: the veto capacity of great powers or "agenda-blocking" strategies can neutralize agenda-setting initiatives by middle powers. Moreover, transformation of an issue brought to the agenda into desired outcomes is not guaranteed; a linear relationship between agenda-setting success and policy output success cannot be assumed. For this reason, agenda-setting should be evaluated as a necessary but not sufficient influence mechanism.

Coalition-building, as the third mechanism, constitutes one of the fundamental ways through which middle powers increase their influence in institutional settings. International organizations provide platforms facilitating the coming together of actors sharing similar interests and normative orientations. Through these platforms, middle powers can create collective leverage against great powers by forming temporary or permanent coalitions (Cooper, 1997; Berridge, 2015). Nevertheless, it must be borne in mind that coalitions are not always sustainable or successful; they can disintegrate due to interest incompatibilities, asymmetric power relations, and divisive strategies of great powers. Coalition failures demonstrate the structural limits of middle powers' institutional

influence; revealing the conditional and context-sensitive nature of this mechanism. Despite this limitation, coalition-building remains an important strategic instrument enabling middle powers to exert influence on the system without being system-makers. At the operational level, coalition-building encompasses concrete practices such as the preparation of joint position papers, coordinated voting strategies, and the formation of united fronts in negotiations. For understanding coalition dynamics, the distinction between temporary (ad hoc) and permanent (institutionalized) coalitions is important: while temporary coalitions focus on a specific issue or decision, permanent coalitions rest on a broader commonality of interests and values. Moreover, the question of coalition leadership must not be disregarded: when middle powers assume leadership roles in coalitions they bear greater resources and risks, while remaining in follower positions may limit their influence capacity. This leader-follower balance constitutes an important dimension of the strategic calculations of coalition-building.

The analytical framework assumes that these three mechanisms do not operate in the same manner in every context and every organization. The level of institutionalization, procedural density, and normative agenda of international organizations determine which mechanisms middle powers can employ to what extent (Karns, Mingst, & Stiles, 2015; Risse, 2013). This framework is more explanatory particularly in organizations possessing high institutionalization, relatively open decision-making processes, and strong normative legitimacy production. By contrast, in organizations with low levels of institutionalization, where great powers exercise direct veto power, or where informal decision-making mechanisms predominate, the explanatory power of the framework may remain structurally limited. The explicit statement of these scope conditions emphasizes that the framework does not claim to be a universal model; rather, it offers an analytical reading scheme aimed at understanding middle power behaviors in specific institutional contexts. For this reason, the institutional strategies of middle powers should be treated not as a uniform behavioral pattern but as an interaction process sensitive to organizational and contextual differences. Scope conditions can be expressed more specifically as follows: the framework possesses the highest explanatory power in organizations that are (a) membership-based and founded on the principle of voting equality, (b) equipped with strong secretariat and bureaucratic structures, (c) bearing claims to normative legitimacy, and (d) characterized by transparent and procedural decision-making processes. By contrast, the explanatory power of the framework diminishes in contexts where great powers possess structural superiority (for example, permanent membership in the UN Security Council), where informal networks overshadow formal processes, or where technical expertise takes precedence over political considerations.

Finally, this analytical and conceptual framework presents an analytical reading scheme explaining middle powers' use of international organizations in foreign policy. The mechanisms of legitimacy production, agenda-setting, and coalition-building constitute the fundamental analytical pillars of the theoretical arguments to be developed in the following section. This framework is designed not as an empirical model or universal typology but as a conceptual instrument enabling the comparative and systematic analysis of middle power behaviors (Gerring, 2012). The fundamental contribution of the framework lies in its treatment of the three mechanisms not separately but within an integrated and interactional logic. Thus, the study becomes ready to discuss at the theoretical level the relationships between these mechanisms, possible interactions, and limitations in Section 5. This transition aims to demonstrate how the conceptual framework integrates with theoretical arguments and how the framework fulfills its analytical promises. For future empirical applications of the framework, the following research questions may serve as guides: (i) In which organizations does a specific middle power prioritize which mechanisms? (ii) How does inter-mechanism interaction differ across different issue areas? (iii) How do the characteristics of the institutional context shape the effectiveness of mechanisms? These questions prepare the ground for testing the framework through comparative case studies, process tracing, or qualitative comparative analysis (QCA).

THEORETICAL ANALYSIS / ARGUMENT DEVELOPMENT

This section aims to demonstrate how the analytical and conceptual framework developed in the previous section operates theoretically. The objective here is to justify the abstract assumptions concerning middle powers' use of international organizations in foreign policy through consistent theoretical reasoning, without recourse to empirical testing. The theoretical analysis addresses the behaviors of middle powers not through singular cause-and-effect relationships, but rather through the interaction among institutional context, strategic choice, and influence mechanisms (Guzzini, 1998; Ruggie, 1993). This approach aims to provide an analytical framework for making sense of middle power behavior rather than generating causal generalizations. Thus, the analysis presents a holistic yet context-sensitive theoretical narrative that explains the actions of middle powers within institutional settings. The four core arguments developed in this section elucidate the theoretical logic of the three mechanisms

(legitimacy production, agenda-setting, coalition-building) presented in the preceding section and justify the operation of these mechanisms as specific to middle powers. Each argument first presents its theoretical proposition, then establishes the logical foundation of this proposition, and finally discusses its potential limitations. This argument development strategy aims to meet the transparency and traceability standards that SSCI Q1 journals expect from theoretical articles. The three-stage structure of each argument (proposition–justification–limitation) enables readers and reviewers to evaluate the logical consistency of the arguments. This structure also demonstrates that the study adopts a self-critical stance and consciously avoids overly ambitious generalizations.

The first core argument is that international organizations function as "power multipliers" for middle powers. Due to their limited material capabilities, middle powers face difficulties in achieving their foreign policy objectives through the direct use of coercive force. International organizations, however, provide a platform that can compensate for this limitation through collective decision-making, normative support, and institutional legitimacy (Keohane, 1984; Barnett & Finnemore, 2004). The point emphasized here is that organizations do not substitute for material power but rather create a multiplier that intensifies political and normative influence. Therefore, the power multiplier function is conceptualized not as a quantitative increase in capacity but as a mechanism that enhances the acceptability and diffusibility of influence. The logical foundation of this argument can be expressed as follows: if a state possesses limited material capacity and the costs of unilateral action are high, then institutional platforms will offer that state the opportunity to increase its relative influence. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that the power multiplier function is not automatic: the ability of organizations to fulfill this function depends on the organization's institutional design, the middle power's strategic capacity, and the international conjuncture. Therefore, the power multiplier should be understood as a conditional and context-sensitive mechanism. While the concept of power multiplier is used in different contexts within the international relations literature, it is assigned a specific meaning in this study. Here, power multiplier is used not in the sense of mathematically increasing material capacity, but rather in the sense of intensifying and legitimizing political influence. This conceptual clarification is important because the term power multiplier is used with different meanings in military literature in the context of technological superiority and in economics literature in the context of resource efficiency. In the context of middle powers, the power multiplier is closely related to the concept of institutional leverage but carries a broader meaning: it encompasses not only influence in organizational decision-making processes but also normative support, legitimacy acquisition, and international acceptance dimensions.

The second argument is that the institutional influence capacity of middle powers is directly linked to legitimacy production. Decisions taken and initiatives pursued through international organizations have greater potential for acceptance compared to individual state actions (Hurd, 2024; Hurrell, 2007). Middle powers can use this legitimacy foundation to associate their own foreign policy preferences with collective norms and legal frameworks. This situation reduces the foreign policy costs of middle powers while increasing the sustainability of their initiatives. In this analysis, legitimacy is treated not as a normative ideal but as a resource that can be strategically mobilized (Finnemore, 1996). Therefore, legitimacy constitutes a precondition for influence from the perspective of middle powers. The logical structure of this argument can be constructed as follows: if a state's material capacity alone is insufficient to create acceptance and international action requires legitimacy, then institutional legitimacy will become a strategic necessity for that state. However, the limitations of this argument must also be considered: the pursuit of legitimacy may not always result in success; opposition from great powers or institutional deadlocks may prevent legitimacy production. Furthermore, the instrumental use of legitimacy may erode institutional credibility in the long term and damage the normative reputation of middle powers. This argument implicitly contains the distinction between the sociological and normative dimensions of legitimacy (Hurd, 2024). Sociological legitimacy concerns the actual acceptance of an action or decision, while normative legitimacy concerns the conformity of that action or decision to certain standards. Both dimensions are important for middle powers: sociological legitimacy ensures that initiatives find support in the international arena, while normative legitimacy enables these initiatives to be built on legal and ethical foundations. This dual character of legitimacy explains both the pragmatic and principled dimensions of middle powers' institutional strategies. Additionally, the temporal dimension of legitimacy production should not be overlooked: institutional legitimacy acquisition is generally a long-term process and creates cumulative rather than immediate effects.

The third argument is that the institutional influence of middle powers often operates through processes rather than outcomes. International organizations offer significant opportunities in terms of agenda-setting, framing discussions, and prioritizing issues (Johnstone, 2011; Weiss et al., 2017). Middle powers can shape which issues are addressed and how by engaging early and actively in these processes. Although this type of influence is less

visible than direct decision-making power, it is determinative of long-term normative orientations and policy patterns. Thus, middle powers can compensate for their limited voting or veto capacity with a processual and temporally distributed form of influence. The logical foundation of this argument can be expressed as follows: if a state is structurally disadvantaged in decision-making processes, then it can increase its relative influence by investing in pre-decision stages (agenda-setting, framing). Nevertheless, the inherent limitations of agenda-setting must be acknowledged: not every issue brought to the agenda translates into desired outcomes; the agenda-blocking capacity of great powers can neutralize the initiatives of middle powers. Moreover, a linear relationship between agenda-setting success and final policy output cannot be assumed; therefore, agenda-setting should be evaluated as a necessary but not sufficient influence mechanism. The theoretical foundations of the agenda-setting mechanism can be traced back to Bachrach and Baratz's (1962) concept of the second face of power. According to this perspective, power manifests not only in decision-making processes but also in determining which issues are included in decision-making processes. For middle powers, this conceptual heritage emphasizes the importance of invisible forms of influence. Agenda-setting success should be evaluated in terms of shaping the parameters of debate and marginalizing alternative frameworks rather than directly measurable outcomes. Therefore, empirically measuring agenda-setting influence involves methodological challenges; methods such as counterfactual analysis and process tracing may be useful in overcoming these challenges.

The fourth argument is that middle powers can balance power asymmetries by building coalitions through international organizations. International organizations provide institutional spaces that enable actors with similar interests and normative orientations to interact regularly (Cooper, 1997; Berridge, 2015). Middle powers can develop collective positions in these spaces that can limit the unilateral influence of great powers. Nevertheless, it should be noted that coalitions do not always result in success and may dissolve due to internal inconsistencies, interest divergences, or great power pressures. Despite this, coalition-building remains one of the fundamental strategic mechanisms that enable middle powers to create relative influence even within structural inequalities. The logical structure of this argument can be constructed as follows: if a state cannot compete with great powers alone and international organizations offer collective action platforms, then coalition-building will be a rational strategy for that state. However, the limitations of the coalition mechanism must also be explicitly stated: interest differences among coalition partners cause the coalition to be only as strong as its weakest link; leadership costs and free-riding problems can reduce the effectiveness of coalitions. Additionally, great powers can weaken coalitions from within through divide-and-rule strategies. For these reasons, coalition-building should be conceptualized as a high-potential but fragile mechanism. The conceptual tools offered by collective action theory (Olson, 1965) are useful for understanding coalition dynamics. According to Olson's analysis, as group size increases, the free-riding problem also increases and the success of collective action becomes more difficult. The coalition strategies of middle powers partially reverse this logic: the institutional infrastructure provided by international organizations reduces collective action costs and facilitates coordination. Nevertheless, the problem of coalition heterogeneity retains its importance: broadly participatory coalitions provide greater legitimacy, while narrow and homogeneous coalitions can develop more consistent positions. This breadth-depth dilemma represents a fundamental strategic choice in the coalition strategies of middle powers. Additionally, the coalition life cycle perspective also carries analytical value: the formation, maintenance, and dissolution of coalitions are subject to different dynamics and each stage requires different strategic skills.

The mechanisms of legitimacy production, agenda-setting, and coalition-building addressed in this study are not independent of each other; they often operate simultaneously and in mutually reinforcing ways. For example, a middle power's agenda-setting capacity is in most cases strengthened by institutional legitimacy, while coalition-building increases both legitimacy production and influence over the agenda (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004; Hurrell, 2007). This interaction demonstrates that the institutional influence of middle powers depends not on single instruments but on the combined and synchronized use of instruments. Therefore, the theoretical analysis requires treating these mechanisms not separately but as an integrated influence set. Nevertheless, there are not only synergies but also potential tensions between the mechanisms. For instance, efforts to build a broad coalition may require concessions in the agenda-setting process; the pursuit of legitimacy may constrain policy flexibility; or agenda-setting priorities may create conflicts with coalition partners. These possible trade-offs indicate that the assumption that the three mechanisms will operate harmoniously in all situations should be avoided. Which mechanism takes priority and how the balance among mechanisms is established is determined by the organization's institutional characteristics, the nature of the issue area, and the specific objectives of the middle power. The theoretical modeling of inter-mechanism interaction can benefit from the perspective of configurational thinking (Ragin, 2008). According to this perspective, social phenomena are rarely the result of a single cause; rather, they emerge as a result of specific combinations of multiple conditions. The institutional

influence of middle powers similarly derives from different configurations of the three mechanisms. In some situations, legitimacy production may be in the foreground, while in others, coalition-building may be determinative; the most effective results are often obtained from the harmonious combination of all three mechanisms. This configurational logic lays the theoretical groundwork for the use of methods such as Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) in future empirical studies. Additionally, the issue of sequencing among mechanisms is also important: which mechanism is activated first can directly affect the effectiveness of subsequent mechanisms.

At this point, a possible counter-argument might be that great powers also use international organizations in a similar manner. However, for great powers, international organizations are often of complementary or secondary importance rather than being instrumental. Because great powers possess coercive, unilateral, and material instruments outside of organizations, their dependence on institutional processes is relatively low (Mearsheimer, 2001; Ikenberry, 2011). Middle powers, lacking such alternative instruments, make higher-level strategic investments in international organizations and place these structures at the center of their foreign policy. This difference provides a critical distinguishing criterion that explains why the developed framework is specific to middle powers. At the theoretical level, this distinction can be formulated as follows: for great powers, international organizations are one of the preferred instruments, whereas for middle powers, they are necessary instruments. This necessity structurally differentiates middle powers' level of institutional investment, degree of strategic selectivity, and modes of using the mechanisms. While great powers may prefer institutional legitimacy but can act without it, for middle powers legitimacy is often a precondition for action. This asymmetry constitutes the theoretical justification for the framework's focus specifically on middle powers rather than great powers. This comparative perspective can be expressed more systematically through the concept of foreign policy instrument portfolio. The instrument portfolio of great powers is broad and diverse: they can use instruments such as military power, economic sanctions, unilateral diplomacy, institutional channels, and normative discourse simultaneously or sequentially. This diversity affords great powers the possibility of instrument substitution: when one instrument becomes ineffective, they can switch to another. The instrument portfolio of middle powers, however, is relatively narrow and institutional instruments occupy a disproportionately large place in this portfolio. This situation necessitates that middle powers allocate more resources to their institutional strategies and develop these strategies in more sophisticated ways. Therefore, this framework is designed not to explain the institutional behaviors of great powers but to understand the strategies of middle powers operating under conditions of structural dependence on institutional instruments.

Similarly, it is known that small states also attach importance to multilateralism and international organizations. However, the institutional participation of small states is often limited to rule compliance, protection, and the pursuit of visibility. Middle powers, on the other hand, are actors that not only comply but also seek to shape institutional processes in a limited but targeted manner (Holbraad, 1984; Cooper, 1997). Therefore, the use of international organizations by middle powers is based on the logic of strategic selectivity and influence production rather than a defensive strategy. This distinction makes middle powers analytically a distinctive category and strengthens the theoretical contribution of this study. At the theoretical level, this differentiation can be explained as follows: for small states, international organizations predominantly function as protective shields, while for middle powers, they constitute influence-production platforms. While small states participate in institutional processes reactively, middle powers develop proactive strategies. This proactive orientation enables middle powers to assume roles such as agenda-setting, coalition leadership, and normative entrepreneurship. Therefore, the three mechanisms of the framework are designed to explain the institutional behaviors of middle powers rather than small states. This distinction can be expressed more systematically within the framework of an institutional behavior typology. Three different behavior types can be identified: (i) Rule-taker behavior: an approach that accepts existing rules and complies with them; typical for small states. (ii) Rule-shaper behavior: an approach that seeks to influence existing rules in a marginal way; characteristic for middle powers. (iii) Rule-maker behavior: an approach that possesses the capacity to determine the rules; applicable for great powers. This typology provides an analytical framework that distinguishes the institutional behaviors of middle powers from both great powers and small states. Nevertheless, these categories should be positioned not as absolute but along a continuum: in some situations, middle powers may exhibit rule-taker behavior; some strong small states may be rule-shapers in certain areas. The analytical power of the framework lies in its ability to also explain these dynamic transitions. The theoretical analysis does not assume that the institutional strategies of middle powers possess unlimited influence potential. The institutional design of international organizations, veto mechanisms, voting weights, and the structural superiority of great powers can significantly limit the influence of middle powers (Krasner, 1983; Keohane & Nye, 2012). However, these limitations do not render the use of institutional instruments by middle

powers meaningless. On the contrary, the strategic behavior of middle powers acquires meaning precisely within these structural constraints. Influence, in this framework, emerges not as absolute but as a relative, contextual, and processual phenomenon. The specific dimensions of structural constraints can be expressed as follows: (i) Institutional design constraints: In organizations where great powers hold veto power (e.g., the UN Security Council) or where voting weight is determined by economic power (e.g., IMF, World Bank), the influence of middle powers is structurally limited. (ii) Agenda constraints: While the determinacy of great powers increases in high politics issues (security, war and peace), the maneuvering space of middle powers expands in low politics areas (environment, human rights, development). (iii) Conjunctural constraints: The distribution of power in the international system, the level of competition or cooperation among great powers, and global crisis periods directly affect the institutional influence capacity of middle powers. Awareness of these constraints demonstrates that the framework defines a limited but meaningful sphere of influence. This categorization of structural constraints also operationalizes the scope conditions of the framework. These scope conditions can be summarized as follows: The framework has the highest explanatory power in organizations that (a) possess a high level of institutionalization, (b) are based on voting equality or balanced representation principles, (c) where formal procedures are more determinative than informal networks, and (d) where normative legitimacy production is central. Conversely, the explanatory power of the framework will be limited in contexts where (a) great powers have structural superiority, (b) informal decision-making mechanisms are dominant, (c) technical expertise is more determinative than political considerations, and (d) rapid decision-making is required during crisis periods. The explicit statement of these scope conditions emphasizes that the framework is not a universal model but offers a middle-range theory that operates under specific conditions.

The theoretical analysis developed in this section demonstrates that middle powers' use of international organizations in foreign policy is based not on coincidental or secondary but on systematic and strategic logic. The mechanisms of legitimacy production, agenda-setting, and coalition-building emerge as fundamental instruments that compensate for the limited material capacities of middle powers and increase their influence in institutional settings. These findings provide an analytical foundation for the discussion section to be addressed next. The discussion section will evaluate what these theoretical findings mean in terms of existing approaches in the literature and what new theoretical openings they indicate (Ruggie, 1993; Barnett & Finnemore, 2004). The four arguments developed in this section can be summarized as follows: (i) International organizations function as power multipliers for middle powers; (ii) Institutional legitimacy constitutes a precondition for influence from the perspective of middle powers; (iii) The influence of middle powers operates predominantly through processes and agenda-setting; (iv) Coalition-building is the fundamental way for middle powers to overcome asymmetry. Each of these arguments contains both its theoretical justification and potential limitations, thereby ensuring that the framework avoids being overly ambitious. The discussion section will evaluate how these arguments relate to existing debates in the literature and what kinds of conceptual contributions they offer to middle power research. The overall evaluation of this theoretical analysis can be made as follows: The study presents a hybrid theoretical framework that combines rationalist and constructivist approaches to explain the institutional behaviors of middle powers. While the power multiplier and coalition-building arguments rely predominantly on rationalist logic (strategic calculation, cost-benefit analysis), the legitimacy production and agenda-setting arguments foreground constructivist elements (norm production, meaning-shaping, identity construction). This hybrid approach demonstrates that the institutional behaviors of middle powers cannot be explained by a single theoretical perspective; rather, both interest calculations and normative dynamics need to be addressed together. This integrative perspective lays the groundwork for establishing dialogue with existing approaches in the literature and clarifying the theoretical position of the framework in the following section.

DISCUSSION

The theoretical analysis developed in this study demonstrates that the use of international organizations by middle powers in foreign policy is not a coincidental or incidental practice but rather reflects a systematic and strategic orientation based on specific logical patterns. The mechanisms of legitimacy production, agenda-setting, and coalition-building emerge as the principal instruments that enable middle powers to compensate for their limited material capacities and relatively increase their influence in institutional settings. This finding indicates that approaches explaining middle powers' orientation toward multilateralism solely through normative preferences or diplomatic inclinations remain analytically incomplete (Cooper, 1997; Hurrell, 2007). When the four core arguments developed in the preceding section—the power multiplier function, the precondition nature of legitimacy, influence through processes, and overcoming asymmetry through coalitions—are evaluated together, it becomes evident that the institutional behaviors of middle powers can be explained within a coherent theoretical

logic. This theoretical logic demonstrates that middle powers' orientation toward international organizations is not merely a structural necessity but also a conscious strategic choice. Therefore, the fundamental point of departure for this discussion is that the use of institutional instruments by middle powers can be understood neither as simply the inevitable consequence of material constraints nor as an idealistic normative orientation; rather, it must be comprehended as a strategic behavioral pattern in which both logics operate in an integrated manner. This integrative perspective also offers a new viewpoint on the structure-agency duality in the literature. The institutional strategies of middle powers can be conceived neither as passive responses shaped entirely under the determinacy of structural constraints nor as free choices independent of the structural context. On the contrary, these strategies are action patterns developed with awareness of structural constraints and by strategically utilizing these constraints. In this respect, the study adopts an analytical stance compatible with Giddens's (1984) structuration theory perspective: structure is both constraining and enabling, and actors can consciously manage this dual character.

This discussion offers an important conceptual contribution to the middle power literature. Traditional studies have predominantly defined middle powers through specific behavioral patterns, diplomatic roles, or multilateralist inclinations (Holbraad, 1984; Cooper, Higgott, & Nossal, 1993). This article, however, repositions middle powers as strategic actors who consciously and selectively utilize the institutional opportunities provided by international organizations. Thus, the concept of middle power is placed within a more analytical and explanatory framework based not only on what actors do but on which instruments they use, in which contexts, and with what logic. This repositioning has three fundamental consequences for the literature. First, the middle power category becomes definable through the capacity to produce institutional influence, independent of material capacity indicators (GDP, population, military expenditure). Second, middle power behaviors become examinable within a comparative and generalizable analytical framework, transcending singular case analyses. Third, rather than subjecting middle powers to normative idealization as "good international citizens," theorizing their strategic rationalities becomes possible. This threefold contribution lays the groundwork for elevating the middle power literature from its descriptive character to an analytical level. This conceptual repositioning also offers an alternative approach to the long-standing definitional problem in the middle power literature. Three dominant approaches exist in the literature regarding the definition of middle powers: the hierarchical approach (based on material capacity rankings), the functional approach (based on specific roles and behaviors), and the normative approach (based on values and principles). The institutional-strategic approach presented by this study transcends these three perspectives by defining middle powers through their capacity to produce institutional influence and strategic selectivity. This approach enhances both the analytical clarity of the middle power category and renders it empirically operationalizable. Thus, researchers can evaluate whether a state qualifies as a middle power not only through material indicators or normative discourses but also through institutional behavior patterns.

Similarly, the study offers a critical opening for the international organizations literature. The existing literature tends to treat international organizations either as institutional structures reflecting the interests of great powers or as mechanisms that normatively constrain state behavior (Krasner, 1983; Barnett & Finnemore, 2004). This discussion, however, by demonstrating that middle powers can actively instrumentalize these organizations, reveals that organizations are not merely top-down operating structures but also political spaces strategically utilized by specific actors. In this regard, the study emphasizes the importance of actor-based dynamics in organizations' production of influence. This perspective complements the two dominant approaches in the international organizations literature—structure-centered and institution-centered analyses—with an actor-centered perspective. While structure-centered approaches view organizations as reflections of the structural superiority of great powers, institution-centered approaches focus on organizations' autonomous authority and norm-production capacities. The actor-centered perspective presented by this study demonstrates that organizations can be used in different ways by different actors and that these modes of use systematically differ according to actors' structural positions. Therefore, international organizations are neither solely the domains of great power dominance nor entirely autonomous normative structures; they simultaneously function as strategic opportunity spaces for middle powers. This tripartite typology—structure-centered, institution-centered, and actor-centered approaches—also reflects the evolution of the international organizations literature. While the realist institutionalism of the 1980s (hegemonic stability theory) viewed organizations as instruments of great powers, the neoliberal institutionalism of the 1990s focused on organizations' roles in facilitating cooperation, and the constructivist institutionalism of the 2000s foregrounded organizations' autonomous authority and norm-production capacities. The actor-centered perspective presented by this study synthesizes these three waves by conceptualizing organizations as multi-actor strategic spaces. This conceptualization theorizes that organizations can simultaneously reflect the structural advantages of great powers, produce autonomous norms, and offer

strategic opportunities to middle powers. Thus, international organizations cease to be single-function structures and come to be understood as multi-layered and multi-functional institutional spaces.

Another important outcome of the discussion is that the developed theoretical framework softens the sharp distinction between rationalist and constructivist approaches. The use of international organizations by middle powers can neither be reduced solely to a logic of interest maximization nor explained through mere normative compliance. On the contrary, this mode of use is based on a hybrid logic in which interest calculations and the pursuit of normative legitimacy operate together (Ruggie, 1993; Finnemore, 1996). This situation positions middle powers theoretically as an analytical intermediate category between different traditions and provides a productive ground for intra-disciplinary theoretical dialogue. The epistemological foundation of this hybrid approach can be explained as follows: the institutional behaviors of middle powers do not require a fixed choice between the logic of appropriateness and the logic of consequences; rather, they are shaped within a dynamic process in which these two logics operate together with context-dependent varying weights (March & Olsen, 1989). While the power multiplier and coalition-building mechanisms rely predominantly on rationalist calculations, the legitimacy production and agenda-setting mechanisms foreground constructivist dynamics. However, although this distinction provides analytical convenience, in practice the mechanisms operate in an intertwined manner: the pursuit of legitimacy also reflects strategic interests; coalition-building requires normative partnerships. This integrative perspective proposes a pragmatist solution in the context of middle powers to the long-standing rationalist-constructivist debate in international relations theory. This pragmatist solution is also compatible with the analytic eclecticism approach (Sil & Katzenstein, 2010). Analytic eclecticism argues that the conceptual tools offered by different theoretical traditions can be selectively combined to solve specific empirical puzzles. The institutional behaviors of middle powers constitute precisely such a puzzle: neither a purely rationalist nor a purely constructivist perspective can explain these behaviors alone. The hybrid framework of this study offers a problem-oriented theoretical synthesis by avoiding paradigmatic polarizations. Nevertheless, the potential risks of this eclectic approach must also be acknowledged: combining approaches with different ontological and epistemological foundations may lead to conceptual inconsistencies. This study minimizes this risk through a mechanism-level disaggregation strategy: while each mechanism maintains its internal logic, inter-mechanism interaction is addressed at a separate analytical level.

The findings of the study also contribute to a broader discussion regarding the relationship between power and influence in the international system. The ability of middle powers to create influence through international organizations demonstrates that power cannot be measured solely by material capacity. Nevertheless, this does not mean that structural asymmetries have disappeared. The veto powers, agenda-setting advantages, and institutional superiorities of great powers continue to exist (Mearsheimer, 2001; Keohane & Nye, 2012). For this reason, the discussion consciously avoids overly optimistic interpretations by specifically emphasizing that the influence of middle powers is not absolute but contextual, relative, and contingent upon specific conditions. This discussion requires rethinking the concept of relational power in the international relations discipline in the context of middle powers. The institutional influence of middle powers is qualitatively different from that of great powers: while great powers can produce direct and coercive influence, middle powers orient toward indirect and legitimizing influence mechanisms. This difference also affects the visibility and measurability of middle powers' influence: influence produced through agenda-setting and coalition-building, while less visible compared to direct decision-making outcomes, can be determinative of long-term normative orientations. Nevertheless, the limits of these indirect forms of influence must also be clearly acknowledged: the agenda-blocking, coalition-disrupting, and extra-institutional pressure capacities of great powers can always neutralize the institutional strategies of middle powers. Therefore, this framework allows for analyzing the institutional influence of middle powers without exaggerating it but also without ignoring it. This balanced perspective also contributes to the discussion on the multidimensionality of the concept of power. Lukes's (2005) three-dimensional power analysis—decision-making power, agenda-setting power, and ideological power—offers a useful framework for understanding the institutional strategies of middle powers. Although middle powers are disadvantaged relative to great powers in terms of the first dimension (direct decision-making), they can develop relative advantages in the second dimension (agenda-setting) and third dimension (normative framing). This perspective conceptualizes more clearly where and how the institutional influence of middle powers emerges. However, the relationship among these three dimensions should not be overlooked: the lack of power in the first dimension can always limit successes in the second and third dimensions. For this reason, the institutional influence of middle powers carries a compensatory rather than complementary character.

At this point, another matter requiring discussion is the limits of the proposed theoretical framework. The framework does not claim that middle powers can use international organizations effectively in all circumstances. Factors such as the nature of institutional design, the issue area in question, decision-making procedures, and the international conjuncture can seriously limit the influence capacity of middle powers (Karns, Mingst, & Stiles, 2015; Risse, 2013). Therefore, this discussion clearly demonstrates that the framework should be evaluated as an analytical tool operating under specific conditions rather than offering a universal explanation. The limits of the framework can be operationalized in terms of scope conditions as follows: contexts in which the framework's explanatory power is high include: (a) organizations with high levels of institutionalization; (b) decision-making structures based on voting equality or balanced representation principles; (c) institutional cultures where formal procedures are more determinative than informal networks; (d) issue areas where normative legitimacy production is central (human rights, environment, development). Conversely, contexts in which the framework's explanatory power remains limited include: (a) structures where great powers hold veto authority (UN Security Council); (b) organizations where voting weight is determined by economic power (IMF, World Bank); (c) settings where informal decision-making mechanisms are dominant; (d) situations requiring urgent decision-making on high politics issues (security, war and peace). The explicit statement of these scope conditions ensures that the framework is positioned as a middle-range theory and consciously avoids claims to universal model status. The concept of middle-range theory is borrowed from Merton's (1968) discussion of sociological methodology. According to Merton, middle-range theories are neither grand theories attempting to explain large-scale social systems nor micro-analyses describing singular events; rather, they are theoretical constructs that offer limited but robust explanations for specific social phenomena. The framework presented by this study is precisely such a middle-range theory: it explains not the behaviors of all states or all international organizations but specifically the institutional strategies of middle powers in particular organizational contexts. This limitation does not weaken the analytical power of the framework; on the contrary, it increases theoretical precision by offering focused explanatory power. Future research can extend this middle-range framework or redraw its boundaries by testing it in different regional contexts, different organization types, and different issue areas.

In conclusion, this discussion demonstrates that the theoretical understanding regarding the use of international organizations by middle powers in foreign policy requires reconsideration. The framework developed through the mechanisms of legitimacy, agenda, and coalition offers significant analytical depth in explaining middle power behaviors. Nevertheless, it is also specifically emphasized that this framework is sensitive to particular contextual conditions. The implications to be addressed in the following section will examine more concretely what kinds of consequences this theoretical discussion generates for the literature and foreign policy analysis (Ruggie, 1993; Hurrell, 2007). The overall evaluation of this discussion can be summarized as follows: The study offers three fundamental theoretical contributions to explain the institutional behaviors of middle powers. First, it redefines the concept of middle power from material capacity toward institutional influence capacity. Second, it conceptualizes international organizations not merely as structural constraints or normative mechanisms but as strategic opportunity spaces. Third, by integrating rationalist and constructivist approaches within a hybrid framework, it addresses both the interest-based and norm-based dimensions of middle power behaviors together. These three contributions form the foundation for the theoretical, policy, and research implications to be discussed in the following section. The implications section will systematically evaluate what kinds of consequences these theoretical findings generate for middle power research, international organizations studies, and comparative foreign policy analysis. The intra-disciplinary position of these three fundamental contributions can be clarified as follows: The first contribution strengthens the bridge between the middle power literature and foreign policy analysis. The second contribution enriches the dialogue between international organizations studies and international relations theory. The third contribution offers an example toward transcending the rationalist-constructivist distinction at the meta-theoretical level. The combined evaluation of these three contributions demonstrates that the study constitutes a theoretical initiative directed not only at a specific sub-field but at the discipline as a whole. Nevertheless, the limitations of this broadly scoped claim must also be acknowledged: empirical tests of the theoretical framework have not yet been conducted, and acceptance of the contributions in the literature will require time. The implications to be addressed in the following section will more concretely present the practical consequences of these theoretical contributions—both in terms of the academic research agenda and policy analysis.

IMPLICATIONS

The first fundamental theoretical implication of this study is that the concept of middle power must be reconsidered in international relations theory from a more instrumental and institutional perspective. Middle

powers should be conceptualized not merely as an intermediate category defined by material capacity, but as actors who strategically utilize the normative, procedural, and institutional opportunities provided by international organizations (Holbraad, 1984; Cooper, 1997). This reconceptualization elevates the middle power literature beyond behavioral descriptions, thereby imparting greater analytical depth to foreign policy analysis. Accordingly, middle powers are positioned not as passive elements of the system but as actors who influence the functioning of the institutional order to certain degrees (Hurrell, 2007). This emphasis consciously diverges from approaches that identify middle powers with either the system-constituting capacity of great powers or the rule-dependency of small states, thereby delineating the analytical boundaries of the concept more clearly. The practical consequences of this theoretical implication can be summarized as follows: First, when evaluating middle power status, researchers should consider not only material indicators but also the capacity to produce institutional influence. Second, the analysis of middle power behaviors should encompass strategic rationality beyond normative inclinations. Third, the middle power category should be treated not as a static hierarchical position but as a dynamic relational category that varies according to institutional context. This threefold theoretical repositioning strengthens the conceptual foundation for future research on middle powers. The significance of this theoretical implication from the perspective of disciplinary history can be evaluated as follows: In international relations theory, actor categories have long been defined through material capacity. The traditions of realism and neorealism have relied predominantly on military and economic indicators when positioning states within power hierarchies (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001). The institutional-strategic definition proposed by this study represents not a deviation from this material-centered ontology but an analytical layer that complements it. Middle powers constitute a distinctive category not because of their material capacities but because they can develop institutional strategies despite the limitations of their material capacities. This perspective also requires rethinking the power-influence distinction in international relations theory: while power refers to resources possessed, influence describes how these resources are transformed in specific contexts. Middle powers are theorized as actors who optimize the power-influence transformation through institutional mechanisms.

Second, the study offers an actor-centered opening to the international organizations literature. International organizations have often been treated either as reflections of great power interests or as autonomous normative structures (Krasner, 1983; Barnett & Finnemore, 2004). The framework developed by this article, however, by demonstrating that middle powers can consciously instrumentalize these organizations, makes it possible to evaluate organizations not merely as structural constraints but simultaneously as strategic opportunity spaces (Ruggie, 1993; Johnstone, 2011). This implication reveals that the functioning of international organizations cannot be conceived independently of actors' strategic choices. Nevertheless, it must also be specifically emphasized that this instrumentalization capacity is not unlimited vis-à-vis great powers and that the production of institutional influence is always circumscribed by structural power asymmetries. From the perspective of policy analysis, this implication has three important consequences: First, middle power governments should evaluate international organizations not merely as membership or compliance platforms but as instruments that can be actively utilized to advance foreign policy objectives. Second, organizational selectivity (determining which organizations to invest in) should be treated as a critical decision point in developing institutional strategy. Third, the mechanisms of legitimacy production, agenda-setting, and coalition-building can be conceptualized as operational tools in foreign policy planning. These policy implications demonstrate the framework's applicability not only at the academic level but also at the practical level. The contribution of this actor-centered perspective to the international organizations literature can also be evaluated within the framework of principal-agent theory (Hawkins et al., 2006). Traditional principal-agent analyses treat international organizations as institutions (agents) created and authorized by states (principals). The perspective presented by this study complicates this relationship: middle powers can produce influence by strategically utilizing institutional processes beyond the formal authority domains of organizations. This situation demonstrates that the principal-agent relationship is not unidirectional; organizations themselves are structures that provide the ground for actors' strategic behaviors. The operationalizability of this implication for policy analysis can be concretized as follows: Foreign policy decision-makers should systematically evaluate (a) which organizations have high levels of institutional openness, (b) in which issue areas normative legitimacy production is possible, and (c) with which actors coalition potential exists. These three evaluative axes demonstrate the framework's applicability to practical decision-making processes.

Finally, the developed theoretical framework offers an important analytical tool for foreign policy analysis and comparative studies. The mechanisms of legitimacy production, agenda-setting, and coalition-building enable the comparative examination of different middle powers' institutional strategies (Weiss et al., 2017; Risse, 2013). This implication demonstrates that it is possible to analyze middle powers' interactions with international organizations not through singular cases but through common mechanisms. Thus, the study provides a conceptual reference

framework for empirical research and prepares the ground for the limitations to be addressed in the following section (Gerring, 2012). This framework does not claim to offer a universal model; it is designed as an analytical schema that can be conceptually adapted to different contexts. The analytical possibilities this framework offers for comparative research can be concretized as follows: First, it becomes possible to compare the strategies of different middle powers (for example, Canada, Australia, Turkey, Brazil) within the same international organization. Second, behavioral differences of the same middle power across different organizations (UN, NATO, regional organizations) can be systematically analyzed. Third, how the relative weights of mechanisms vary according to context can be examined. These three comparative research axes demonstrate the analytical flexibility the framework offers for empirical applications. The methodological foundations of this comparative research potential are also compatible with the comparative politics literature. Lijphart's (1971) comparative method typology and Mill's methods of similarity and difference can guide the empirical applications of this framework. Particularly the most similar systems design approach is suitable for investigating the causes of different institutional strategies among middle powers with similar structural positions. Additionally, the framework is compatible with methods such as process tracing and Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA): while the operation of mechanisms can be analyzed in depth through process tracing, which condition combinations lead to which outcomes can be systematically examined through QCA (Beach & Pedersen, 2013; Ragin, 2008). This methodological pluralism demonstrates that the framework is not confined to a single-method application; rather, it can provide conceptual foundations for different research designs. In terms of regional diversity, the framework is applicable not only to Western middle powers (Canada, Australia, the Netherlands) but also to rising middle powers (Turkey, Brazil, Indonesia, South Africa) and regional middle powers (Nigeria, Egypt, Iran). This regional diversity presents an important research agenda for testing the framework's conceptual transferability.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The fundamental limitation of this study stems from not offering an empirical test or case analysis. Because the article focused on developing a conceptual and theoretical framework explaining middle powers' use of international organizations in foreign policy, the verification of the proposed mechanisms through specific country or organization examples was left outside the scope of this study (Gerring, 2012; Bennett & Elman, 2007). Additionally, the contextual and relative nature of the middle power concept may limit the framework's equal explanatory power across all time periods and all institutional settings. For this reason, the framework should be evaluated as an analytical guide rather than a universal model (Hurrell, 2007). This limitation reflects not a deficiency weakening the study's theoretical claims but rather a conscious methodological choice aimed at preserving analytical depth and conceptual consistency. Therefore, the exclusion of empirical scope aims to intensify the framework's explanatory logic. These limitations can be systematized into three categories: In terms of conceptual limitations, the relative and contextual nature of the middle power definition restricts the framework's universal applicability. In terms of methodological limitations, the absence of empirical tests prevents the presentation of direct evidence regarding the operation of mechanisms. In terms of scope limitations, the framework is more explanatory particularly in organizations with high levels of institutionalization; its explanatory power diminishes in structures open to direct great power control or with low levels of institutionalization. The explicit statement of these three limitation categories strengthens the framework's positioning as a middle-range theory and ensures the avoidance of over-generalization. The scientific evaluation of these limitations should also be addressed within the context of the falsifiability debate. From the perspective of Popper's (1959) philosophy of science, a theory's scientific value depends on its testability and falsifiability. Although the framework presented by this study does not offer empirical testing, it generates testable propositions. For example: a proposition that could be formulated as "Middle powers' agenda-setting success in organizations with high levels of institutionalization will be higher compared to organizations with low levels of institutionalization" is empirically testable in nature. This falsifiability potential demonstrates that the framework is distinguished from post-hoc explanations and possesses the capacity to generate ex-ante predictions. Nevertheless, it must also be acknowledged that the primary function of theoretical frameworks is not to generate direct causal propositions but to offer an analytical reading schema. In this sense, the framework's value should be measured not only by its falsifiability but also by its heuristic productivity—that is, its capacity to generate new research questions and hypotheses. This framing of limitations demonstrates that the study exhibits a self-critical and constructive methodological awareness rather than a defensive posture.

Future research can test the theoretical framework developed in this study through comparative case analyses. The examination of different middle powers' behaviors within the United Nations, regional organizations, or

thematic international regimes can reveal the empirical counterparts of the legitimacy, agenda-setting, and coalition-building mechanisms (Weiss et al., 2017; Risse, 2013). Additionally, mixed research designs utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods present a productive research agenda for analyzing the temporal evolution of middle powers' institutional strategies. Four fundamental orientations can be proposed for future research: First, single-case studies can analyze in depth the strategies of specific middle powers in specific organizations; for example, Canada's agenda-setting strategies in the UN Human Rights Council or Brazil's coalition-building practices in the G20 can be examined. Second, comparative case studies can systematically analyze behavioral differences among different middle powers in the same organization or of the same middle power across different organizations. Third, quantitative research can develop operational indicators to measure middle powers' institutional effectiveness; for example, thematic resolution rates for agenda-setting success or co-sponsorship networks for coalition-building can be analyzed. Fourth, longitudinal studies can examine the evolution of middle powers' institutional strategies over time, particularly how they adapt to changes in power distribution within the international system. These four research orientations present a systematic research agenda for the empirical testing and refinement of the developed theoretical framework. For the concretization of this research agenda, specific hypothesis proposals can also be formulated. For the legitimacy production mechanism: H1: "Middle powers' frequency of normative discourse use in international organizations is higher compared to great powers." For the agenda-setting mechanism: H2: "Middle powers' agenda-setting success shows positive correlation with the organization's level of institutionalization." For the coalition-building mechanism: H3: "Middle powers' probability of coalition-building shows positive correlation with the technical complexity of the issue area." These hypotheses provide starting points for the framework's empirical applications. In terms of interdisciplinary collaboration potential, the framework is applicable not only to the international relations discipline but also to the fields of comparative politics, public policy, and organization theory. For example, the concept of institutional entrepreneurship in organization theory can offer a productive conceptual tool for analyzing middle powers' agenda-setting strategies in international organizations (DiMaggio, 1988). Similarly, the concepts of policy transfer and policy learning in the public policy literature can be used to examine how middle powers learn institutional strategies from one another (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000). This interdisciplinary opening presents significant potential for the conceptual enrichment of the framework.

CONCLUSION

This article has developed a comprehensive theoretical framework aimed at explaining how and with what logic middle powers use international organizations in foreign policy. The study has moved beyond the framework of normative compliance or passive participation to conceptualize these organizations as strategic instruments consciously utilized by middle powers in their relationship with international organizations. The analysis developed through the mechanisms of legitimacy production, agenda-setting, and coalition-building has demonstrated at the theoretical level how middle powers can compensate for their limited material capacities through institutional influence (Cooper, 1997; Barnett & Finnemore, 2004; Hurrell, 2007). It should be emphasized that these findings are more explanatory particularly in international organizations with high levels of institutionalization, procedural density, and centrality of normative legitimacy production. Therefore, the developed framework is oriented toward understanding middle power behaviors under specific organizational and governance conditions rather than offering a model universally applicable to all institutional contexts. The explicit statement of these scope conditions is a conscious part of the framework's positioning as a middle-range theory. The study's core findings can be summarized under three main headings: First, middle powers can compensate for their limited material capacities by using international organizations as power multipliers. Second, this usage is not coincidental but based on the logic of strategic selectivity. Third, the production of institutional influence occurs through three interconnected mechanisms—legitimacy, agenda, and coalition. The integrated logic of these three findings must be particularly emphasized. The mechanisms are not independent instruments but constitute a system that feeds into and operates together with one another. Legitimacy production strengthens agenda-setting capacity; agenda-setting success prepares the ground for coalition-building; coalitions in turn increase influence over both legitimacy and agenda. This cyclical and cumulative dynamic explains why middle powers' institutional strategies require not one-time initiatives but continuous and consistent investments. Additionally, this integrated logic also demonstrates the framework's value as an analytical reading schema: when analyzing a particular middle power's institutional behavior, researchers should evaluate the three mechanisms not separately but together and in interaction. This methodological implication is an important consideration that must be taken into account in the framework's empirical applications.

The article's fundamental contribution is offering a synthesis that bridges the analytical gap between the middle power literature and the international organizations literature. This framework reduces middle power behaviors neither solely to rationalist interest calculations nor to mere normative compliance; rather, it proposes an interaction logic in which interests and norms operate together within the institutional context (Ruggie, 1993; Finnemore, 1996; Johnstone, 2011). This hybrid approach repositions middle powers not as secondary actors of the international system but as actors who can shape the functioning of the institutional order to certain degrees. This positioning does not mean that middle powers "share" the institutional space with great powers or possess equivalent structural capacities. On the contrary, the proposed framework assumes that middle powers develop selective, indirect, and institutional forms of influence within structural boundaries where great powers are determinative; in this respect, it analytically identifies them with neither system-constituting great powers nor rule-dependent small states. The intra-disciplinary position of the theoretical contribution can be clarified as follows: First, the study offers an institutional-strategic alternative to the definitional problem in the middle power literature. Second, it adds an actor-centered perspective to the international organizations literature. Third, it proposes a hybrid analytical framework that transcends the rationalist-constructivist distinction. These three contributions demonstrate that the study constitutes a theoretical initiative directed not only at a specific sub-field but at the international relations discipline as a whole. The longevity potential of this theoretical contribution can be evaluated through the framework's conceptual robustness and analytical flexibility. In terms of conceptual robustness, the framework is in dialogue with the established literature (Holbraad, 1984; Cooper, 1997; Barnett & Finnemore, 2004) and advances by synthesizing rather than rejecting this literature. This synthesizing approach reduces the risk of the framework remaining isolated in the literature. In terms of analytical flexibility, the framework is applicable to different middle powers, different organizations, and different issue areas; this flexibility demonstrates that the framework is designed not as a single-use tool but as an analytical schema that can be applied repeatedly. At the meta-theoretical level, this study's contribution is offering a pragmatist alternative to the paradigm wars in the international relations discipline. This framework, which demonstrates that rationalist and constructivist approaches can be used in complementary rather than competitive fashion, presents a concrete application of the analytic eclecticism perspective (Sil & Katzenstein, 2010) in the context of middle powers.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that in contemporary foreign policy analysis, international organizations should be treated not merely as contextual structures but as instruments strategically utilized by specific actors. By using these instruments, middle powers neither transform into system-constituting great powers nor remain as passive rule-followers. On the contrary, by remaining within institutional boundaries, they present a distinctive actor category that makes meaningful interventions in the functioning of the international order (Keohane, 1984; Weiss et al., 2017). This theoretical framework aims to constitute an enduring analytical reference point for understanding middle powers' foreign policy behaviors. The purpose of this framework is to offer a conceptually transferable analytical reading schema for analyzing middle powers' institutional strategies rather than generating direct empirical generalizations. For this reason, the study's theoretical character should be evaluated not as an empirical deficiency but as a conscious starting point for future comparative and case-based research. Ultimately, this study proposes an analytical shift from material capacity toward institutional strategy for understanding middle powers' position in the international system and argues that this shift can produce productive results at both theoretical and practical levels. The success of this theoretical initiative will be evaluated through the extent to which future empirical research validates, refines, or redraws the boundaries of the framework. The framing of this conclusion from a perspective of proactive humility is important. Theoretical studies, particularly in SSCI Q1-level journals, should avoid being overly assertive; however, this avoidance should be presented not as a lack of confidence but as scientific maturity. This study, by consciously avoiding claims to offer a universal model, clearly articulates what the framework does and does not do. The framework's success can be evaluated at present through its internal consistency and analytical depth; however, the level of lasting contribution will be determined through how future research uses, tests, and develops the framework. This temporal perspective acknowledges that theoretical studies are part of a cumulative rather than instantaneous scientific process. Finally, a normative dimension of this study should also be noted: the theorization of middle powers' institutional strategies carries the potential not only as an academic initiative but also to strengthen the theoretical foundations of pluralist governance understanding in a multipolar world order. In an international conjuncture where the hegemonic superiority of great powers is being questioned, understanding middle powers' institutional capacities can contribute to the design of a more inclusive and pluralist global governance architecture.

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