

MIDDLE POWERS AS MEDIATORS: THE ROLE OF TÜRKIYE AND BRAZIL IN THE JCPOA, THE UKRAINIAN GRAIN DEAL, AND FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS IN THE WAR IN UKRAINE

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Abstract: *Characterized by their ability to impact the world order without having superpower status, middle powers contribute significantly to maintaining global stability and fostering notable advancements. The notion of middle powers is longstanding in international relations, with its roots traceable in the writings of the Italian 16th century thinker Giovanni Botero. The literature concerning middle powers is full of debates and considerations about their definitions, characteristics, and objectives. Türkiye and Brazil have been chosen as primary subjects of this study to exemplify the growing role of middle powers as mediators due to their involvement in international negotiations.*

Keywords: *Middle Powers; Great Powers; the Grain Deal; JCPOA; diplomatic negotiations; mediation.*

The recent developments in the Ukraine and Gaza conflicts have highlighted the growing significance of middle powers. Middle powers are regarded as states that lack superpower status but possess enough influence to impact global affairs.¹ It can only be expected that these states do not find themselves in the driver seat of the current world order, but rather in the front passenger seat, where they can seize the benefits of upholding the current status quo or align with superpowers capable of reshaping the current international system.

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¹ Meltem Müftüler Baç, "Middle power", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 19 March 2024 [<https://www.britannica.com/topic/middle-power>], 29 May 2024.

The notion of middle powers was introduced by the Italian thinker Giovanni Botero, who originally portrayed them as entities possessing the necessary strength and autonomy needed to operate independently, without relying on external support.² The 16th century term gained notable recognition during World War II, particularly in the cases of Canada and Australia, and resurfaced in the 1990s, highlighting the roles of Japan and South Korea.

The term brings in a Pandora's Box of arguments concerning the existing definitions and the criteria required to categorize a state as a middle power. Debates often revolve around factors such as the size of the state, military might, geographical position, economic power, and resources.³ The efforts in comprising an accurate list of middle powers can be underscored by the changing dynamic of international relations, for example the articles and studies conducted in the 1990s or early 2000s would be regarded as a milestone in this regard, but also viewed as being outdated – some of the states ticking the boxes for middle powers after the end of the Cold War are no longer in that category, either they have made the jump to great powers or have faded in the background due to the developments made by other states.

Author Hasan Basri Yalçın emphasizes that while a country may possess the capabilities and independence necessary to impact international relations, it must also cultivate the awareness of being a middle power,⁴ this involves acting with the goal of attaining an autonomous position in relation to the great powers.

Recently, authors such as Mykhailo Minakov and Oliver Turner have addressed the importance of middle powers in relation to the developments of the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza. According to Minakov, middle powers gain a stronger say in global affairs when a prolonged period of peace ends and great powers find themselves in increasingly antagonistic dynamics: "In extended periods of peace and cooperation, the non-great states have little chance to shape the global or regional political agenda. However, when the

² Dong-Min Shin, "A Critical Review of the Concept of Middle Power" in *E-International Relations*, 6 December 2015 [www.e-ir.info/2015/12/04/a-critical-review-of-the-concept-of-middle-power], 23 December 2023.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ Yalçın Hasan Basri, "The Concept of 'Middle Power' and the Recent Turkish Foreign Policy Activism" in *Afro Eurasian Studies*, Vol. 1, Issue 1, Spring 2012, p. 196.

great powers enter into antagonistic relations, the middle powers gain a footing to amplify their sovereign stature and influence relations between the states in their region or, sporadically, globally.”⁵ In author Oliver Turner’s view, the middle powers are stepping in the current conflicts in order to play a role traditionally attributed to superpowers, the one of the mediator, and preserver of peace and international order. Türkiye has been identified as a middle power actively involved in the Ukraine conflict by both authors and they have also stressed the past decades mediating roles the state has assumed, aiming to position itself neutrally amid antagonistic conflicts among great powers.

This study takes upon the observations of the aforementioned authors and seeks to expand on the role of middle powers as mediators in the global arena, particularly in scenarios where great powers face difficulties in resolving crises or conflicts. Türkiye and Brazil have been chosen as the focus of this case study due to their involvement in the negotiation process for JCPOA, and the war in Ukraine. The paper will take the form of a comparative analysis but due to the short format, three main aspects will be addressed:

1. What prompts middle powers to take on the role of mediator in international negotiations?
2. How did the involvement of Türkiye and Brazil as mediators influenced the negotiation process for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action?
3. What is the significance of the Grain Deal for Türkiye as a mediator, and what are the implications of the war in Ukraine for Brazil?

The primary sources for this study are books and legal documents, while secondary sources encompass articles, press releases, videos, and other relevant materials. The scope of the paper involves drawing up a set of reflections on the involvement of Türkiye and Brazil in international negotiations and emphasizing the growing significance of middle powers in the role of mediators. This paper will be further developed in the future in a more elaborated format, but for the time being the three main aspects will be tackled.

⁵ Mykhailo Minakov, “Ukraine and the Rise of the Middle Powers”, Wilson Center [<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/ukraine-and-rise-middle-powers>], 23 December 2023.

What prompts Middle Powers to take on the role of mediator in international negotiations?

As mentioned prior, middle powers hold a distinct position on the global stage as they are not preoccupied with the perceived threat of being overthrown compared to great powers and have enough room for asserting their objectives in contrast to weaker states. In this in-between scenario, they can draw upon their good bilateral relations with great powers to implement their objectives, seek to wield greater influence in multilateral formats, where the power of voting and lobbying can shape future policies, agreements, sanctions etc. or a combination of the two. Due to their placement in global affairs, acting unilaterally would generate limited results since their endeavors can be overshadowed by the ambitions of great powers.

There is a misconception about middle powers, regarding them as having second-rank status in world politics⁶ - it is worth mentioning that while these states do not have the far-reaching impact that great powers do in conflicts or crises, they typically do not aspire to a global influence in their foreign policy pursuits. Middle powers usually face a localized focus – often centered around a specific region or a particular ideal within the international realm, in Carsten Holbraad's book *Middle Powers in International Politics* published in 1984, he presents the context as follows: "Middle powers have no such obvious shared interests to defend against challenges from smaller powers. In extreme situations of joint oppression by great powers, as we see in later chapters, they may move closer to each other in defense of the rights of lesser powers, and on particular issues of great and general importance to middle-ranking powers they, or some of them, may take a joint stand."⁷

Russia's invasion of Ukraine marked an important step in bringing these states to the forefront, especially due to the Western call for a united front against Russia – the extent of commitment to this Western demand has

⁶ Willem Oosterveld, Bianca Torossian, "A Balancing Act: The Role of Middle Powers in Contemporary Diplomacy" in *Strategic Monitor 2018-2019*, The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies [https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2018/strategic-monitor-2018-2019/a-balancing-act/], December 23, 2023.

⁷ Carsten Holbraad, *Middle Powers in International Politics*, Palgrave Macmillan UK eBooks [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-06865-4], p. 76.

notably waned, either due to dependence on Russian gas, the prevalence of Russian bilateral ties, other conflicts coming to the forefront or by simply by being on the outskirts of the epicenter of the Russian - Ukrainian conflict.

Middle powers have regarded the conflict from a different angle, mainly pertaining to the establishment of alternative communication channels and seeking to alleviate tensions, especially when great powers struggle to engage with the others and show limited willingness to make concessions. In this respect, it is crucial to distinguish between the role of a mediator and an arbitrator - the former voluntarily facilitates negotiations to help advance to the next stages, while the latter, an appointed and qualified actor, holds the authority to provide a solution to the involved parties. Author Alan K. Henrikson discusses the importance of mediatory diplomacy, especially highlighting its common occurrence within the realm of international organizations, where middle powers have a greater impact. Through initiatives and lobbying, middle powers often serve as mediators without fully engaging in the negotiation process, as complete involvement might lead to taking sides and jeopardize their neutrality.⁸ This approach enables them to avoid displaying a clear bias and maintains their impartiality on the subject under consideration.

The subjects of this study reflect the variety of interests found among middle powers ranging from seeking regional influence and upholding the status quo, to increasingly autonomous and independent foreign policies that often put a spin in the work for great powers. Türkiye has long been loosely associated with the concept of a middle power, despite its foreign policy often evoking a revival of Ottoman heritage. In recent decades, Türkiye has diverged from the measures taken by the current proponents of the world order. On the other hand, Brazil's economic advancements in the early 2000s and the promise of becoming a regional role model has flattered due to political turmoil, economic straining, and incidents such as the rainforest fires. Neither of these states embodies a flawless example of a middle power upholding the current world order, as their development – promoting policies have been overshadowed or proven to be inconsistent due

⁸ Alan K. Henrikson, "Middle Powers as Managers: International Mediation within, across, and outside Institutions", in Andrew F. Cooper (ed.), *Niche Diplomacy: Middle Powers after the Cold War*, Studies in Diplomacy, General Editor: G. R. Berridge, Centre for the Study of Diplomacy, University of Leicester, 1994, p. 47.

to domestic challenges. Despite the evident lack of concrete results, a consistent theme prevailed: their aspiration to be involved in negotiations with great powers, especially in scenarios where complex and difficult deals become stumbling blocks and generate global concerns.

The two states depart from established middle powers such as Canada, Australia or South Korea which have been placed in this box during the Cold War; these states are regarded as being emergent middle powers – while they possess material capabilities their desire to participate in international politics carries a complex interweb of interests that does not solely carry out the greater vision of the establishers of the current world order, as author Umut Aydin suggests: “These countries are middle powers in the sense that they possess mid-range material capabilities and their foreign policies have tended towards coalition-building, with a preference for multilateralism and niche diplomacy.”⁹ An example of this type of coalition-building is the establishment of the G-20, which emerged from Brazil’s heightened involvement in WTO negotiations, specifically in services and agriculture with Türkiye being involved in this platform as well.

Türkiye possesses the necessary capabilities for middle power status, but there are contradictions between these capabilities and the discourse articulated by Turkish leadership, Türkiye aspires to transcend the status of a mere middle power: “It seems that Turkey is holding enough material capabilities to characterize it as a middle power. Beyond that, perhaps more importantly, new Turkish activism in foreign affairs illustrates that Turkey is increasingly playing the role of a middle power even though the Turkish leadership would desire even more than that.”¹⁰ Türkiye aims to assert itself as a regional hegemon, which can lead to actions that seem contradictory to its partners as the state often prioritizes national interests over bilateral or multilateral ties.

Brazil’s foreign policy aligns more with the idea of upholding the status quo and gaining influence via investing in multilateral platforms, as authors Dawisson Belém Lopes, Guilherme Casarões, and Carlos Frederico Gama stress: “In the absence of abundant material capabilities, a country will rely on reputational goods and well-established legal frameworks as a means

⁹ Umut Aydin, “Emerging Middle Powers and the Liberal International Order” in *International Affairs*, Volume 97, Issue 5, September 2021, p. 1379

[<https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaab090>].

¹⁰ Yalçın, *art. cit.*

to reach the best outcomes in international relations.”¹¹ The perception of Brazil as the gentle giant is the result of the country’s pursuit of relations with medium and small countries, while taking part in initiatives such as BRICS, where Brazil sought to cultivate closer ties with emerging powers but was reluctant to pursue closer ties with great powers such as Russia and China, mainly seeking to maintain bilateral trade agreements.

How did the involvement of Türkiye and Brazil as mediators influenced the negotiation process for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action?

The negotiations for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), commonly known as the Iran Nuclear Deal marked a challenging process for the involved parties - Iran and the P5+1, which includes China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Germany, as moments of tensions and heavily implied misunderstandings between the parties were causing distress concerning the actual possibility of having the deal in function.

The primary objective of the Iran Nuclear Deal was a reciprocal arrangement, wherein Iran committed to limit its nuclear activities, permit international inspections, and decrease its enriched uranium stockpile, the remaining parties would provide relief from economic sanctions. As with any other diplomatic negotiations, there were three separate stages to the process: the pre-negotiations, the formula, and the details stage; the process was a lengthy one, comprising almost 20 months of negotiations in which the initial interim agreement – the Joint Plan of Action came into force in 2014, received two extensions in 2014 and 2015, and finally leading up to the Iran nuclear deal framework to be reached in April 2015 and the deal to be signed in July same year.

The initial signals concerning the existence of a deadlock in relation to Iran’s nuclear activity were pointed out prior to the Joint Plan of Action. The involvement of Türkiye and Brazil had been foreseen ever since Javier Solana, the European Union’s High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), and Ali Larijani, Iran’s chief negotiator on

¹¹ Dawisson Belém Lopes, Guilherme Casarões & Carlos Frederico Gama, “A Tragedy of Middle Power Politics: Traps in Brazil’s Quest for Institutional Revisionism”, in Paulo Esteves, Maria Gabrielsen Jumbert, Benjamin de Carvalho (eds.), *Status and the Rise of Brazil: Global Ambitions, Humanitarian Engagement and International Challenges*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, p. 53.

nuclear matters, visited Ankara in 2007 at the invitation of Abdullah Gül, who was then the foreign minister. Brazil started to show interest in having a nuclear activity reduction deal with Iran around the same time, an initiative supported by Brazil's long history with nuclear issues as well as its considerable reserve of uranium.

This main concern pertaining to this intricate web of interactions and exchanges was that sanctions became overdue with no clarity on the horizon and diplomatic efforts being increasingly sidelined. In a final attempt, President Obama reached out to the Brazilian and Turkish leadership to intervene and seek consensus with Iran in 2010. This effort led to an unexpected outcome as the Turkish delegation successfully brought Iran closer to the idea of using its territory for the requested kilograms of Low Enriched Uranium (LEU).

On 17 May 2010, the representatives of Türkiye, Iran and Brazil have signed the Tehran Declaration have re-emphasizing their commitment to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and provided the following solution for the other parties to the agreement: "When the Vienna Group declares its commitment to this provision, then both parties would commit themselves to the implementation of the agreement mentioned in item 6. Islamic Republic of Iran expressed its readiness to deposit its LEU (1200 kg) within one month. On the basis of the same agreement the Vienna Group should deliver 120 kg of fuel required for TRR in no later than one year."¹² In the declaration, Iran's position towards the Turkish and Brazil's efforts has been emphasized as well: "Turkey and Brazil appreciated Iran's commitment to the NPT and its constructive role in pursuing the realization of nuclear rights of its member states. The Islamic Republic of Iran likewise appreciated the constructive efforts of the friendly countries Türkiye and Brazil in creating the conducive environment for realization of Iran's nuclear rights."¹³ In the Tehran declaration, the stationing of the LEU on the territory of Türkiye would not affect Iran's property of these resources, therefore ensuring a successful exchange without any part losing leverage.

However, the string of miscommunication and bad timing between the US and Iran persisted. The day after the Tehran declaration, the US

¹² Julian Borger, "Text of the Iran-Brazil-Turkey Deal" in the *Guardian.com*, 17 May 2010 [<https://www.theguardian.com/world/julian-borger-global-security-blog/2010/may/17/iran-brazil-turkey-nuclear>], December 24, 2023.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

imposed sanctions. The US's choice not only eroded the trust of Iran, Brazil, and Türkiye but also of the EU, active participants in the process even more than any domestic lobby. The sanctions coupled with the US's decisions reignited discourse about the inherent conflict between the US and Iran, tracing the development of events back to their origin.

Author Esmail Esfandiary relates on the inconsistencies in the US's actions towards Iran at the time as follows: "As noted above, the problem was that the U.S. had already moved to the sanctions track against Iran – holding talks with Russia and China to persuade them to agree to specific actions against Iran – anticipating that the deal would not go through. In fact, the BTI deal was not a real proposal in the first place – only another proof showing Iran's defiance."¹⁴ Therefore, the Brazil and Türkiye negotiation was regarded as a bet made on a losing dog which surprisingly emerged as a significant oversight in the sanctions strategy of the US, Russia, and China—the Iranian administration felt betrayed, leading to a resumption of nuclear activities amidst escalating sanctions.

The Wilson Centre hosted a subsequent event gathering specialists in Iranian and Brazilian foreign policy to provide their insights on the negotiation process and its outcomes. Brazil managed to demonstrate an acute interest in disarmament and has expressed concerns about the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) on the global stage, specifically in relation to the perceived discriminatory aspects of the treaty and the emphasis on the necessity of continuous advancements in disarmament. Professor Monica Herz, the Director of the International Relations Institute at the Catholic University in Rio de Janeiro, highlighted that Brazil's position revolves around the pivotal notion of complete denuclearization. The country firmly rejects any efforts to associate nonproliferation with restricting access to nuclear technology.¹⁵ Another panelist, Ambassador Craig Kelly highlighted that the U.S. stance was never to discourage Brazil or Türkiye from exerting influence on this issue;¹⁶ instead, the increased globalization of countries, driven by a

¹⁴ Esmail Esfandiary, "How the New York Times Portrayed the 2010 Brazil-Turkey-Iran Nuclear Deal: A Critical Discourse Analysis" in *Journal of Contemporary Eastern Asia*, Volume 14, No. 2, p. 59 [<http://dx.doi.org/10.17477/jcea.2015.14.2.057>].

¹⁵ Wilson Center, "A Reflection on the May 2010 Brazil-Turkey Nuclear Initiative Toward Iran", February 11, 2011 [www.wilsoncenter.org/event/reflection-the-may-2010-brazil-turkey-nuclear-initiative-toward-iran], 23 December 2023.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

strong conviction that greater internationalization is profoundly in the U.S. interest, was welcomed.

In summary, the efforts of Brazil and Türkiye in the negotiation process for JCPOA have been undermined due to the complicated dynamic between Iran and the U.S. at the time, but marked a reminder that the involvement of middle powers in international negotiations is an alternative to the deadlocks met in cooperation with broader frameworks such as the UN or EU, since they have the possibility of providing a neutral ground for discussions, carry out the talks and even get involved in the deal.

The conflict in Ukraine and the importance of the Grain Deal

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the transit of Ukrainian grains posed significant disruptions and implied severe consequences for the states that are dependent on these imports. Türkiye had been the most vocal actor in the negotiations of the deal, and currently regards it as an achievement from the standpoint of Turkish mediation.

In order to track the progress and difficulties that emerged in keeping this deal in place, it is crucial to highlight the negotiation stages: in the pre-negotiation phase, global concern arose as the transportation of grains from Ukraine became pivotal for numerous Asian and African states dependent on these imports, prompting the necessity for negotiations. EU, Moldova, and Türkiye, stepped in the process to facilitate an understanding between Russian and Ukrainian representatives in relation to this pressing matter. From July 2022 to July 2023, an agreement involving the United Nations, Türkiye, and Russia facilitated exports through a secure maritime humanitarian corridor in the Black Sea, known as the Black Sea Grain Initiative, thus allowing the grains to cross through three ports in the Black Sea.

During the formula stage of this negotiation, the involved parties have remained focused on the specific issue of grain transport, avoiding broader political discussions due to the evolving nature of the conflict.

In the final stage of negotiations, the details stage, numerous concerns emerged regarding the countries facilitating the transport—Romania, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and Bulgaria. Farmers from these states organized protests due to the fact that the local industry resisted purchasing their own grains at the initially agreed-upon price and instead sought to obtain Ukrainian grains or advocated for a reduction in the price of their domestic product. In response to the protests, the EU attempted to address the farmers'

claims and offered them financial support to ensure the continuity of the corridor.

On July 17, 2023, Russia officially declared its departure from the Black Sea Grain Initiative, attributing this decision to the contention that Western allies had not fulfilled their commitments regarding the imposed sanctions on Russia. The Russian withdrawal from the grain deal mirrors the United States' exit from the JCPOA, certainly at a different scale.

There are similarities in relation to JCPOA and the Ukraine grain deal as both posed challenges in negotiations due to their confrontational dynamics, the abruptness of communication, with the emergence of alternative channels of communication appearing once mediators stepped in and another unfortunate similarity comes from the fact that both deals eventually unraveled within a few years of their implementation.

Türkiye 's contradictory stance regarding the Ukrainian crisis serves as the driving force behind its mediation efforts; while condemning the bloodshed, it refrained from implementing sanctions. The country sided with the West in supporting Ukrainians, even providing Turkish drones, all the while maintaining a robust and continuous channel of communication with Russia. Türkiye sought to portray itself as a reliable player in the conflict, letting the West know that Ankara could be an important center for complex talks on world issues. It concurrently aimed to preserve goodwill with the Russian authorities by presenting a chance to loosen sanctions.

Brazil remained on the outskirts of this negotiation process considering it involved a localized concern and Türkiye was undoubtedly the closer middle power. Concerning Brazil and Ukraine, what's intriguing is that President Lula has pushed for peace negotiations prior, with the initiatives proposed by Brazil being regarded by Washington as counterproductive and naive. The Brazilian administration attempted to pursue several peace projects at the UN level. In February 2023, the Brazilian President emphasized the nation's determination to stay out of the conflict by announcing during a press conference in Washington that Brazil has no intention of sending arms or ammunition to Ukraine and by reiterating Brazil's commitment to finding a solution through diplomatic efforts.

Notably, Brazil declined to join the alliance formed by the United States against Russia. Lula, on the other hand, actively worked to establish a "peace club" made up of neutral countries with the goal of mediating talks between Russia and Ukraine. Brazilian diplomats publicly introduced this

peace initiative to approximately twenty-five country delegations at the Munich Security Conference. President Lula's remarks on the potential of a conflict resolution through the cession of Crimea incited fury within the Ukrainian administration; his remarks are seen as evidence of Brazil's support for Russia. The Ukrainian foreign ministry spokesman commented on President Lula's proposition as follows: "Ukraine appreciates the efforts of the Brazilian president to find a solution to stop Russian aggression,"¹⁷ and "At the same time, we have to clearly note: Ukraine does not trade its territories."¹⁸

The topic of the war in Ukraine is a rather unifying factor in Brazil's foreign policy objectives across the political spectrum: the need for neutrality has been stressed, in fact it was the only issue on which Bolsonaro and Lula agreed during the 2022 election campaign.

In summary, the participation of middle powers in challenging negotiations among great powers is on the rise, despite varying motivations. These nations engage in debates not only to uphold the existing order but also to advocate for the values endorsed by the current global order's proponents. Examining emerging middle powers like Brazil and Türkiye reveals that their status as middle powers is not due to material capabilities, rather it requires a deliberate intention on their part in assuming this role. The instances discussed illustrate that these states willingly step in to facilitate negotiations when primary parties encounter obstacles and express doubt about the continuation of the process or the likelihood of reaching an agreement.

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