

Middle Powers and the Global South: Strategic Autonomy in Contemporary Global Politics

Iqbal Reza Satria¹

¹Department of Government, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Padjadjaran, Indonesia
E-mail correspondence: iqbal25003@mail.unpad.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Contemporary global politics is increasingly shaped by a more complex distribution of power in which middle powers and actors from the Global South play more visible roles in diplomacy, governance, and order negotiation. At the same time, intensifying geopolitical rivalry and institutional fragmentation have made strategic autonomy a central concern for states seeking flexibility without full alignment. Strategic autonomy is examined here as a key framework for understanding how middle powers and the Global South navigate hierarchy, dependence, and competing centers of power. The article uses a qualitative research design based on document analysis and is guided by an analytical framework that combines middle-power theory, Global South perspectives, and an order-based understanding of agency and constraint. Data are drawn from official foreign policy statements, diplomatic speeches, summit declarations, international organization records, policy reports, and scholarly works relevant to strategic autonomy and contemporary global order. The analysis focuses on diversified partnerships, structural dependency, institutional engagement, alignment flexibility, and the relationship between autonomy and fragmented international politics. Strategic autonomy emerges as a relational and flexible strategy through which states seek to preserve room for maneuver while operating within unequal global structures. Contemporary autonomy is best understood not as absolute independence, but as a negotiated practice of managing interdependence, hierarchy, and geopolitical pressure. The article contributes to the field by bringing middle-power analysis and Global South perspectives into a more coherent conceptual dialogue on agency, order negotiation, and strategic flexibility in world politics.

Keywords: Strategic Autonomy, Middle Powers, Global South, Global Politics

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary global politics is increasingly shaped by a more complex distribution of power, influence, and diplomatic agency than earlier bipolar or unipolar models suggested. In this changing environment, middle powers and actors from the Global South have gained greater visibility in debates about international order, development, security, and governance (Eun et al., 2021). Their growing presence reflects not only shifts in material capabilities, but also dissatisfaction with hierarchical forms of global rule and unequal patterns of representation. Strategic autonomy has therefore emerged as an important concept for understanding how these states position themselves amid intensifying rivalry among major powers. Rather than aligning fully with dominant blocs, many states seek to preserve room for maneuver, diversify partnerships, and advance issue-based interests across multiple arenas. This behavior is especially significant in a period marked by geopolitical fragmentation, economic uncertainty, and contested institutional authority (Helwig, 2022). The politics of strategic autonomy is thus closely tied to wider transformations in global order and the search for more flexible forms of statecraft. In this setting, middle powers and the Global South are not merely reactive actors, but participants in the active negotiation of contemporary international politics.

The central problem lies in how to understand the political meaning and practical limits of strategic autonomy under present global conditions (Smith, 2018). Strategic autonomy is often invoked in policy discourse to describe independent foreign policy behavior, but its actual content varies across states,

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regions, and issue areas. Some governments use it to reduce dependence on great powers, while others frame it as a way to increase bargaining power without rejecting cooperation (Jeong, 2024). This variation creates analytical difficulty because the concept may refer to non-alignment, hedging, diversification, regionalism, or selective engagement, depending on context. The issue has strong real-world relevance because middle powers and Global South actors increasingly shape responses to war, trade conflict, climate governance, development finance, and institutional reform. Their choices affect coalition-building, diplomatic mediation, and the future balance between hierarchy and pluralism in world politics. At the same time, pressures from major-power rivalry make it harder to sustain autonomy without facing political, economic, or strategic constraints. The problem is therefore not simply whether these actors seek autonomy, but how autonomy is pursued, interpreted, and limited in an increasingly contested international system (Helwig, 2023).

A substantial body of scholarship already explains that middle powers have long played important roles in mediation, coalition-building, norm entrepreneurship, and institutional diplomacy. Research on the Global South also shows that many postcolonial and developing states have sought greater policy independence, fairer representation, and more equitable forms of international cooperation (Nesadurai, 2025). Earlier traditions such as non-alignment, South-South cooperation, and developmental multilateralism remain important reference points for understanding current debates. More recent scholarship has extended these discussions by emphasizing hedging behavior, diversified alignments, issue-based partnerships, and the pursuit of flexible diplomacy under uncertainty. Existing work also indicates that strategic autonomy has become more attractive in a world where major-power competition intensifies but does not fully determine all international outcomes. This literature clarifies that many states do not wish to be passive followers of dominant powers and instead attempt to maximize diplomatic and economic space. What is already known, then, is that middle powers and Global South actors possess agency, and that autonomy is increasingly central to how they navigate contemporary global politics (Acharya, 2018).

Even so, important questions remain insufficiently developed. Much of the literature examines middle powers and the Global South separately, even though their political strategies often overlap in meaningful ways under current global conditions (Helwig & Sinkkonen, 2022). There is still limited conceptual clarity on whether strategic autonomy should be treated as a stable doctrine, a flexible diplomatic practice, or a condition shaped by structural opportunity and constraint. In many accounts, autonomy is described in broad normative terms without enough attention to the political mechanisms that enable or restrict it in practice. The relationship between autonomy and hierarchy also remains underexamined, particularly in a world where dependence can persist even alongside visible diplomatic flexibility. In addition, not enough work explains how strategic autonomy changes when states operate across multiple issue areas such as security, trade, energy, development, and institutional reform at the same time. This leaves uncertainty about whether contemporary autonomy marks a revival of older Global South traditions or a new form of adaptation to fragmented order (Mehmetcik, 2018). What remains unknown, therefore, is how to conceptualize strategic autonomy as a political strategy linking middle-power behavior, Global South agency, and wider transformations in international structure.

This gap becomes more visible when the issue is approached through a theoretical perspective centered on agency, hierarchy, and order negotiation (Baydag, 2020). Within such a framework, strategic autonomy can be understood not as absolute independence, but as a relational effort to preserve

decision-making space within unequal and contested structures of global power. The research gap lies in the weak synthesis between middle-power theory, Global South perspectives, and broader approaches to fragmented international order (Jordaan, 2017). One strand explains how middle powers use diplomacy, institutions, and coalition-building to shape outcomes beyond their material size. Another highlights how Global South actors challenge unequal representation, resist dependency, and seek more plural forms of global governance (Artner & Yin, 2023). Fewer studies bring these strands together into a single conceptual argument about how strategic autonomy functions under contemporary geopolitical fragmentation. A stronger synthesis is necessary because current state behavior cannot be fully explained through older binaries of alignment and non-alignment alone. The article therefore treats strategic autonomy as the point where agency, hierarchy, and order contestation intersect most clearly in present global politics (Haug et al., 2021).

Filling this gap is theoretically justified because strategic autonomy is often used descriptively without sufficient conceptual discipline. A theory-driven approach is needed to explain why some states can pursue autonomy more effectively than others, how autonomy operates across different issue areas, and under what structural conditions it becomes more difficult to sustain (Mo, 2016). This matters because autonomy is not simply a foreign policy preference, but a political response to asymmetry, vulnerability, and contested leadership in the international system. A coherent framework also helps avoid treating all forms of non-alignment or diversified diplomacy as identical. Some forms of autonomy may reflect bargaining strategy, some may express normative resistance, and others may arise from the practical need to navigate overlapping dependencies. Theoretical clarity is especially important in a fragmented world where states often cooperate with competing partners at the same time without fully committing to any single geopolitical project (Womack, 2024). By linking autonomy to hierarchy and order, the article can better explain why these strategies have become more visible and more politically significant in current international affairs. The justification therefore rests on the need to interpret strategic autonomy as a structured form of agency rather than as a vague claim of independence.

From this basis, the article is guided by several interconnected research questions. How do middle powers and Global South actors pursue strategic autonomy in contemporary global politics? In what ways does strategic autonomy function as a response to hierarchy, dependency, and intensifying great-power rivalry? How do these actors balance diversified partnerships, institutional engagement, and issue-based cooperation without surrendering policy flexibility? To what extent does strategic autonomy represent continuity with earlier traditions of non-alignment and South-South solidarity, and to what extent does it reflect new adaptations to fragmented order? How can a synthesis of middle-power theory and Global South perspectives improve understanding of agency in an unequal international system? What broader implications do these strategies have for multilateralism, coalition politics, and the future organization of global governance? These questions direct attention to the political logic of autonomy rather than to isolated diplomatic episodes or narrow policy choices (Vieira, 2025).

The urgency of this research lies in the increasing importance of states that refuse simple alignment in a world of sharpening geopolitical competition. Middle powers and Global South actors now play visible roles in debates over war, sanctions, development finance, climate negotiation, energy security, and institutional reform (Park, 2022). Their choices matter because they can influence diplomatic outcomes, reshape bargaining coalitions, and challenge the assumption that major powers alone determine the structure of international politics. This makes the issue especially important at a time

when many states seek flexibility without isolation and cooperation without subordination. The article contributes by providing a clearer conceptual account of strategic autonomy as a relational and structured form of political agency (Bull & Banik, 2025). It also contributes by bringing middle-power analysis and Global South perspectives into closer dialogue within a broader theory of fragmented order. In doing so, the discussion offers a more coherent way to understand how contemporary international politics is being shaped by actors positioned between dependence and influence. Such a perspective helps explain why the future of global order will depend not only on the strategies of great powers, but also on how middle powers and the Global South negotiate autonomy within an unequal and contested world.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine how middle powers and actors in the Global South pursue strategic autonomy in contemporary global politics. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research addresses agency, hierarchy, diplomatic flexibility, and order negotiation, all of which require interpretive analysis rather than numerical measurement alone. The analytical framework combines middle-power theory, Global South perspectives, and an order-based understanding of strategic autonomy as a relational practice shaped by asymmetry and geopolitical fragmentation (Bradley, 1993). This framework makes it possible to connect foreign policy behavior with broader structures of dependency, rivalry, and institutional contestation.

The design is suitable for this research because the main objective is to explain how strategic autonomy is understood and practiced across different political contexts rather than to test a fixed causal relationship. It also works well because autonomy is not a single measurable variable, but a complex political strategy expressed through discourse, alignment choices, institutional engagement, and diversified partnerships. Qualitative analysis allows the study to capture variation, nuance, and context in the ways states seek room for maneuver under unequal global conditions (Colorafi & Evans, 2016). For these reasons, a qualitative design provides the most coherent basis for a theory-informed analysis of strategic autonomy among middle powers and the Global South.

The study relies on qualitative secondary data drawn from official foreign policy statements, diplomatic speeches, government strategy documents, summit declarations, international organization records, policy reports, and scholarly publications relevant to middle powers, the Global South, and strategic autonomy (Dieteren et al., 2022). Data collection was conducted through purposive selection of documents that directly address non-alignment, hedging, coalition-building, institutional participation, diversified partnerships, and responses to great-power rivalry. The units of analysis are state discourses, diplomatic practices, and policy orientations through which strategic autonomy is articulated and pursued in contemporary international politics.

The main analytical instrument is a document analysis matrix used to classify and compare recurring themes across the selected materials. The principal analytical dimensions include agency, dependency, alignment flexibility, institutional engagement, issue-based cooperation, and implications for global order. Validity was strengthened by aligning these dimensions closely with the research questions and theoretical framework, while reliability was supported through transparent source selection, consistent coding procedures, and systematic documentation of the analytical process (Johnson & Vindrola-Padros, 2017). Trustworthiness was further ensured through source triangulation and the use of credible, publicly accessible, and institutionally authoritative materials to improve credibility and dependability. Ethical considerations were maintained by accurately representing all sources, respecting intellectual ownership, and, because the research did not involve direct

human participants, informed consent and confidentiality were not required in a conventional sense, although all documentary materials were handled with academic integrity and due care (Leplaa et al., 2025).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Results and Discussion section examines how middle powers and actors in the Global South pursue strategic autonomy within a fragmented and unequal international system. The material analyzed indicates that strategic autonomy is not expressed as absolute independence from external power, but as an effort to preserve political flexibility under conditions of hierarchy, rivalry, and institutional uncertainty. This shifts the concept away from a rigid doctrine of detachment and toward a relational practice of managing dependence without surrendering agency. In contemporary global politics, autonomy is increasingly exercised through calibrated engagement rather than isolation. Such a pattern reflects the broader transformation of international order, where states are compelled to navigate multiple centers of influence without clear guarantees of stability or protection. Strategic autonomy thus becomes a way of negotiating complexity rather than escaping it (Gajula, 2025). This interpretation aligns with the introduction by emphasizing that middle powers and Global South actors are neither passive recipients of great-power pressure nor fully unconstrained agents. Their behavior reflects an active attempt to shape room for maneuver within a contested global environment.

A central pattern concerns the use of diversified engagement as a practical expression of autonomy. Middle powers and Global South actors frequently avoid exclusive alignment and instead cultivate multiple partnerships across economic, diplomatic, and institutional domains. This strategy enables them to reduce overdependence on any single external actor while maintaining access to resources, markets, and political support (Efsthopoulos, 2023). Diversification is therefore not merely a matter of expanding foreign relations, but a deliberate political effort to preserve bargaining capacity. Strategic autonomy in this sense depends on the ability to move across overlapping networks of cooperation without being absorbed into a fixed geopolitical bloc. The political value of such flexibility is especially visible in moments of crisis, when states seek to maintain dialogue with competing actors while protecting domestic priorities. Autonomy is thus performed through selective openness rather than through distance alone. This makes diversified engagement one of the main operational forms through which autonomy acquires practical meaning in contemporary world politics.

At the same time, autonomy remains constrained by structural conditions that states cannot fully control. Unequal access to capital, technology, security guarantees, trade routes, and institutional influence shapes the extent to which flexibility can be sustained. Dependence on external markets or strategic partnerships often limits the room available for policy independence, even where rhetorical commitment to autonomy remains strong. This indicates that autonomy should not be understood as a possession that states simply hold or lose. It is a variable political space conditioned by hierarchy, vulnerability, and shifting external pressure. In many cases, states are able to diversify relationships in one policy domain while remaining deeply dependent in another. Such asymmetry is analytically important because it reveals the partial and uneven character of autonomy under fragmented order. Strategic autonomy therefore operates within limits set by the very structures that states seek to navigate.

The discussion also indicates that contemporary autonomy reflects both continuity and adaptation. Earlier traditions of non-alignment, South-South cooperation, and developmental diplomacy

remain important reference points for many states seeking to avoid subordination within global politics. These traditions continue to inform claims for policy independence, institutional reform, and more equitable participation in world affairs. Yet the current environment differs from earlier periods because fragmentation is more diffuse, issue areas are more interconnected, and dependence is increasingly embedded in finance, technology, infrastructure, and global regulation. Strategic autonomy today therefore cannot be reduced to a simple revival of past doctrines. It is better understood as a modified response to a more complex landscape in which states must manage simultaneous pressures from security competition, economic interdependence, and institutional contestation. This continuity with adaptation gives the concept both historical depth and contemporary relevance. The present form of autonomy retains older aspirations for space and dignity while adjusting to new patterns of global constraint.

Variation across states is another important pattern in the discussion. Not all middle powers and Global South actors pursue autonomy in the same way, nor do they possess equal capacity to make such strategies effective. Differences in material capability, regional position, diplomatic networks, institutional access, and domestic policy priorities generate distinct forms of autonomous behavior. Some states rely heavily on coalition-building and multilateral activism, while others privilege bilateral diversification or issue-specific balancing among stronger powers. Resource endowments and market size may expand bargaining capacity for some, while debt exposure or security dependence narrows policy options for others. This variation demonstrates that strategic autonomy is not a uniform category but a differentiated political practice. Its meaning and effectiveness depend on the position states occupy within broader structures of power. The concept therefore gains analytical precision when understood as a spectrum of strategies rather than a single diplomatic posture.

To clarify the main dimensions of this discussion, Table 1 summarizes how strategic autonomy operates across key analytical areas relevant to middle powers and the Global South.

Table 1. Strategic Autonomy among Middle Powers and
the Global South in Contemporary Global Politics

Analytical Dimension	Observed Pattern	Implication for Global Politics
Diversified partnerships	States avoid exclusive alignment and cultivate multiple external ties	Diplomatic flexibility and bargaining space increase
Structural dependency	External economic, technological, and security constraints remain significant	Autonomy is conditional rather than absolute
Institutional engagement	Multilateral and regional forums are used to preserve voice and influence	Agency is exercised through procedural and coalition-based politics
Historical continuity	Non-alignment and South-South traditions remain influential	Contemporary autonomy has deeper political roots
Fragmented order	Multiple power centers create both opportunity and pressure	Agency expands, but strategic constraint persists
Uneven capacity	States differ in resources, leverage, and diplomatic reach	Autonomy is differentiated across actors and contexts

The table supports the overall argument by showing that strategic autonomy is shaped by the interaction of opportunity and constraint rather than by sovereignty alone. Diversified partnerships and institutional engagement suggest that agency remains meaningful, yet structural dependency and uneven capacity indicate that such agency is always conditioned by broader hierarchies. This dual character is

central to understanding why autonomy cannot be equated either with full neutrality or with simple resistance to great powers. The table also clarifies that fragmented order has an ambivalent effect. It creates additional diplomatic openings for some states, but it also intensifies pressure by multiplying sites of dependence and competition. Historical continuity further reinforces the point that present strategies draw on established political traditions while responding to new geopolitical realities. The analytical value of the table lies in its ability to condense the relational nature of autonomy into a structured form. It therefore strengthens the article's central claim that strategic autonomy is a negotiated and uneven practice of order management.

The discussion resonates with existing scholarship on middle powers, particularly its emphasis on coalition-building, mediation, and institutional activism as forms of influence beyond raw material power. That literature remains useful because it explains how states of intermediate capability can shape outcomes through diplomacy, norm promotion, and selective leadership. Yet a middle-power perspective alone does not fully capture the historical and political significance of autonomy claims emerging from the Global South. What becomes more visible here is that strategic autonomy is not only a technique of influence, but also a response to unequal structures of order and representation. This expands the analytical scope of middle-power theory by connecting agency to hierarchy more explicitly. Diplomatic flexibility is not exercised in a neutral environment, but within a system marked by asymmetrical power and contested legitimacy. Such a perspective helps explain why autonomy is framed not merely as strategic choice, but as a necessary condition for preserving policy space and political dignity.

The discussion also extends debates on the Global South by moving beyond purely normative readings of solidarity or resistance. Much of the relevant scholarship has emphasized historical marginalization, postcolonial inequality, and demands for institutional reform, all of which remain important. However, the present analysis indicates that Global South agency is increasingly practiced through pragmatic and selective engagement rather than through oppositional positioning alone. Cooperation with multiple power centers may coexist with critique of existing hierarchies. Issue-based alignment may occur without full geopolitical alignment. This demonstrates that autonomy is often pursued through flexible participation in global governance rather than through withdrawal from it. The result is a more dynamic understanding of Global South politics, one that combines normative aspiration with strategic adaptation. Strategic autonomy thus appears as a practical mode of navigating global inequality rather than a purely declaratory political stance.

The theoretical implications are significant for the study of agency, hierarchy, and global order. A combined perspective drawn from middle-power theory and Global South analysis offers a stronger framework for understanding how states negotiate space within unequal structures. Strategic autonomy emerges here as a relational strategy of order management, not a fixed status or a universal doctrine. This means that autonomy should be analyzed through the interaction between diplomatic practice and structural constraint. Such a framework also helps explain why fragmentation does not simply weaken weaker states. Under some conditions, it creates openings for bargaining, diversification, and institutional leverage. Under other conditions, it deepens dependency and raises the costs of independent action. The concept becomes analytically valuable precisely because it captures this tension between possibility and limitation. Strategic autonomy therefore provides a useful entry point for examining how contemporary order is contested and negotiated beyond the behavior of great powers alone.

An unexpected complexity in the discussion concerns the extent to which autonomy may be reinforced through cooperation rather than distance. Conventional interpretations often assume that autonomy is strongest where states minimize entanglement and preserve maximal separation from competing power centers. Yet many of the patterns considered here suggest the opposite. States often expand autonomy by multiplying cooperative ties, participating in institutions, and engaging rival actors simultaneously. This does not eliminate dependence, but it can redistribute it in ways that improve bargaining position and reduce vulnerability to singular pressure. Such a pattern complicates simplistic oppositions between autonomy and interdependence. It suggests that strategic autonomy in the present era may depend less on detachment than on the careful management of embeddedness. This insight is important because it reframes autonomy as a strategy of selective connection rather than simple non-alignment. The politics of autonomy is therefore inseparable from the politics of managing interdependence.

Several strengths and limitations emerge from this discussion. A major strength lies in the capacity of the analytical framework to connect state agency with larger structures of hierarchy and fragmentation. This makes it possible to interpret strategic autonomy as more than a rhetorical preference or descriptive label. It also allows the discussion to capture the diversity of practices through which autonomy is pursued across diplomatic, institutional, and economic domains. At the same time, the concept remains difficult to standardize because states employ it in varied ways and under distinct regional and historical conditions. A document-based analysis can identify recurring patterns of discourse and practice, but it cannot exhaust the full empirical range of autonomy strategies across all issue areas. Moreover, the rapidly changing character of geopolitical rivalry means that the meaning of autonomy may continue to evolve. These limitations indicate the need for continued comparative and theoretically grounded work rather than undermining the central argument.

The broader relevance of the discussion lies in its implications for diplomacy, coalition politics, and the future of global governance. States that seek strategic autonomy are likely to remain influential in shaping multilateral bargaining, regional alignments, development partnerships, and responses to great-power competition. Their political significance will depend not only on material size, but also on their ability to navigate fragmentation while preserving room for independent judgment. This has practical importance for policymakers trying to balance flexibility, influence, and resilience in a contested international system. Future research would benefit from closer comparison across regions, issue areas, and categories of states to clarify how autonomy is differently institutionalized and constrained. Additional work is also needed on the relationship between autonomy and reform agendas in trade, finance, technology, and climate governance. The present discussion establishes the conceptual basis for that agenda by demonstrating that strategic autonomy is neither a residual posture nor a temporary diplomatic slogan. It has become a central mode through which middle powers and the Global South negotiate their place in contemporary global politics.

CONCLUSION

Strategic autonomy has become a central feature of how middle powers and actors in the Global South navigate a fragmented and unequal international system. The discussion has emphasized that autonomy is not best understood as absolute independence or permanent distance from major powers, but as a relational effort to preserve policy flexibility under conditions of hierarchy, dependence, and geopolitical competition. Its practical

expression lies in diversified partnerships, selective institutional engagement, issue-based cooperation, and calibrated forms of alignment that avoid rigid bloc attachment. At the same time, the capacity to pursue autonomy remains uneven because states differ in material capability, external vulnerability, diplomatic reach, and access to institutional influence.

Contemporary autonomy therefore combines continuity with earlier traditions of non-alignment and South-South cooperation while adapting to a more complex environment marked by overlapping crises and multiple centers of power. The broader significance of this argument lies in showing that middle powers and the Global South are not peripheral to current order transformation, but actively shape how flexibility, hierarchy, and participation are negotiated in global politics.

The article contributes to the field by bringing middle-power analysis and Global South perspectives into a more coherent conversation around strategic autonomy, agency, and order negotiation. Existing scholarship has often treated these traditions separately or has described autonomy in broad diplomatic terms without sufficient conceptual precision. By framing strategic autonomy as a structured and relational form of agency, the discussion clarifies how states seek room for maneuver within an international system defined by asymmetry rather than equality.

This perspective also strengthens theoretical debates on global order by showing that agency below the level of great powers is neither marginal nor uniform, but differentiated across political, institutional, and economic settings. Strategic autonomy emerges as a useful concept not because it captures complete freedom of action, but because it explains how states manage interdependence, resist subordination, and expand bargaining space under constraint. Such an approach contributes to international relations, global governance, and Global South studies by offering a more precise account of how contemporary order is shaped beyond major-power rivalry alone.

Future research should examine more closely the comparative conditions under which strategic autonomy becomes more effective, more symbolic, or more vulnerable to external pressure across different regions and issue areas. Greater attention is needed to how middle powers and Global South actors pursue autonomy in trade, finance, security, technology, climate governance, and institutional reform, since the opportunities and limits of autonomy are unlikely to be uniform across sectors. Comparative studies of regional settings would also deepen understanding of how local power structures, neighborhood dynamics, and institutional arrangements shape the exercise of autonomous diplomacy.

Another important direction concerns the relationship between strategic autonomy and interdependence, particularly how states convert embeddedness in global networks into bargaining leverage rather than pure dependence. Research on coalition formation, reform agendas, and issue-based partnerships would further clarify how these actors influence the changing structure of global governance. Continued inquiry remains necessary because strategic autonomy is likely to remain a major feature of contemporary world politics as fragmentation intensifies and more states seek flexibility without surrendering influence.

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