

# MIDDLE POWERS AND GREAT POWERS THROUGH HISTORY: THE CONCEPT FROM ANCIENT TIMES TO THE PRESENT DAY

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**Abstract:** The lack of universally-shared definitions for middle powers and great powers is a common issue in international relations theory, as invariably outlined by the relevant literature. This research argues that this theoretical uncertainty is not due to an inherent limit of such definitions, but rather to their insufficient adaptation to an ever-changing international system. With a historical determinist approach, this essay aims to demonstrate that primal forms of middle and great powerdom can be traced back to two and a half millennia ago, and it therefore examines three broad historical periods in which this occurred: antiquity, post-classical and early modern times, and 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present time. By tracing the ancient origins of the two concepts, it seeks to expand and refine middle power theory and great power theory, while clarifying the reasons of their current definitional confusion.

**Key-words:** middle power, great power, minor power, power hierarchy, international relations, IR theory, international system

## Introduction

Philosophical discourses concerning power are among the oldest in the political field, having engaged political thinkers, envoys, and military officials alike since ancient times. Consequently, power hierarchies have been important elements of political theory for just as long, though gaining a higher standing in political debates in the modern era, particularly after the establishment of Westphalian sovereignty. As a result of the latter, the subfield of comparative politics – both national and international – became more often employed by scholars, who resorted to international hierarchies to advance their arguments concerning better forms of government for sovereign states or confederations. The Congress of Vienna of 1814-1815, moreover, legitimised such hierarchies to a wider extent, openly subdividing European nations beyond the simplistic winners-losers paradigm and laying the ground for the Concert of Europe that guided continental relations until the eve of World War I.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> R.B. Elrod, 'The concert of Europe: a fresh look at an international system', *World Politics*, 28 (1976), pp. 159-174.

Power hierarchies eventually became common elements in academic, political, and diplomatic terminology, reaching everyday discussions as our familiarity with terms such as ‘great power’ or ‘superpower’ attests. Such concepts have proved to be useful descriptors of the state of the international system, framing it according to a vertical ranking that aims to offer a schematic representation of the power order characterising the international community. Traditionally, international relations (IR) theory has addressed this necessity by providing a fivefold configuration, with the superpower(s) at the apex, great powers underneath, middle powers just below the latter, regional powers at a lower level, and, lastly, lesser states at the bottom, accounting for the vast majority of nations.<sup>2</sup> This superstructure has endured decades of tumultuous international affairs, although, with the end of the Cold War and the beginning of Huntington’s multipolar century,<sup>3</sup> it didn’t adapt to the ever-changing nature of the international system, thus posing a tangible problem to IR theory. Further, as often happens with many ideas pertaining to the political sphere, there is no fully-shared definition of what some of these concepts are or ought to be, therefore adding to the perplexity that is now commonly felt by theorists.

In this respect, Prys stated that powerhood varies depending on the level of analysis, and by doing so suggested that currently-available concepts fail to accurately describe the present state of the international system.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Patience noted that ‘discussions of middle powers in international relations scholarship are hampered by a lack of clarity about what the term ‘middle power’ actually means’, adding that this has not prevented a number of states from claiming such status.<sup>5</sup> Further, Beeson underlined the complexity of current global affairs for great powers and middle powers alike, concurrently pointing at incomplete definitional frameworks for both of them,<sup>6</sup> while Cooper examined the intersections between regional and middle powerdom, arguing for ‘niche’ powerdom as a better descriptor in some cases.<sup>7</sup> Also, more recently, Robertson aptly summarised this excess of theoretical zeal and this definitional uncertainty by stating that ‘confusion reigns supreme’, and by observing that ‘there are no authoritative academic works specifically focused on the definition of middle powers. However, scholars writing on middle

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<sup>2</sup> E. Fels, *Shifting Power in Asia-Pacific?: The Rise of China, Sino-US Competition and Regional Middle Power Allegiance* (Berlin, 2016), pp. 195-199.

<sup>3</sup> S.P. Huntington, ‘The lonely superpower’, *Foreign Affairs*, 78 (1999), pp. 35-49.

<sup>4</sup> M. Prys, *Redefining Regional Power in International Relations: Indian and South African perspectives* (London, 2012), pp. 1-8.

<sup>5</sup> A. Patience, ‘Imagining middle powers’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 68 (2014), pp. 210-224.

<sup>6</sup> M. Beeson, ‘Can Australia save the world? The limits and possibilities of middle power diplomacy’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 65 (2011), pp. 563-577.

<sup>7</sup> A.F. Cooper, ‘Testing middle power’s collective action in a world of diffuse power’, *International Journal*, 71 (2016), pp. 529-544.

powers invariably devote a section of their article to definition. These works first note the lack of agreement, then categorise and criticise existing definitions, before providing their own'.<sup>8</sup>

In consideration of the importance of power hierarchies for a simplified and schematic interpretation of the international system and the status of nations within it, and due to the theoretical and definitional limitations discussed above, this essay aims to provide a wider and clearer understanding of this branch of IR theory, by applying a historical determinist approach.<sup>9</sup> Instead of simply emphasising the lack of conceptual clarity and providing yet another – likely contested – definition for the concepts under discussion, the objective of this study is to trace the historical origins of the two oldest and most widely employed categories, that is middle powers and great powers, which are commonly thought to have been first conceived in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Such research thus also seeks to contribute to middle power theory (MPT) and great power theory (GPT), branches of IR theory concerned with the theoretical identification and the analytical study of both entities in the international system. In this respect, it is arguable that the current definitional uncertainty is not due to some inherent limitation of the definitions at hand, but rather to their failure to adapt to an international system that is not 'a fixed universal', as Holmes (cited by Cox) stated.<sup>10</sup> In other words, global affairs change and evolve much more rapidly than the theory that ought to frame them, an operational conundrum that, once applied to the aforementioned lack of conceptual clarity, is able to explain more deeply its causes.

In the light of the above, this essay provides a chronological review of the ancient roots of middle and great powerdom, retrieving their forgotten origins and investigating the context in which nations were defined as middle or great powers in different historical periods, thus seeking to outline a novel 'proto-theory' for them. With the identification of different definitional elements, according to equally different moments of global history, it is possible to detect a direct link between historical context and power hierarchies' definitions, as the latter inescapably depend on the former. This complex and dynamic relation would therefore suggest that the time has come for a reassessment of the state of the theory, since we seem to be witnessing a momentous transition in international relations that has not yet been followed by a consequent theoretical debate. By applying an inductive approach and employing sources from a variety of countries, written in Latin, Early Italian, Early Modern French, English, and others translated from Hindi and Chinese, this

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<sup>8</sup> J. Robertson, 'Middle-power definitions: confusion reigns supreme', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 71 (2017), pp. 355-370.

<sup>9</sup> A preliminary attempt, though investigating narrower time frames and cases, and not including great powers, has been published in an edited volume. See G. Abbondanza, 'The historical determination of the middle power concept', in *Rethinking Middle Powers in the Asian Century: New Theories, New Cases*, eds. T.S. de Swielande, D. Vandamme, D. Walton, and T.S. Wilkins (London, 2019), pp. 32-44.

<sup>10</sup> R.W. Cox, 'Middlepowermanship, Japan, and Future World Order', *International Journal*, 44 (1989), pp. 823-862.

study examines three broad historical periods in which it is possible to identify states that could be deemed as primordial middle and great powers. The three periods are: antiquity, with brief reviews of Greek *poleis*, Chinese and Indian fiefdoms, and Roman levels of government; post-classical and early modern times, examining pre-unification Italy and other European royal and imperial estates; and 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present time, with many present-day countries and modern international organisations. As a result of the above, this politico-historical investigation aims to shed new light on power hierarchies that existed well before the time frame currently outlined by the available scholarship, and by doing so it seeks to provide both a theoretical and a historical contribution to middle power theory and great power theory.

## I Antiquity

IR theorists specialising in middle power and great power theory often state that the roots of both are to be found in medieval Italy, specifically in the works of Botero and, to a certain extent, Thomas Aquinas well before him, as Wight's<sup>11</sup> and Holbraad's<sup>12</sup> seminal books show. On the one hand, it is undeniable that Italian political thinkers have distinguished themselves for their acumen in this field, on the other, however, it seems unlikely that similar notions were not conceived in previous times, especially when complex and well-rooted forms of government were in place, a logical premise that inspired this research's endeavour. As a corollary consideration, scholars should be aware that vastly different societies require equally different parameters, so that a greater theoretical flexibility is needed in order to ascertain the existence of power hierarchies in ancient times, though once accepted the above, it is possible to detect embryonic power subdivisions dating back two and a half millennia.

In chronological order, 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE China provides the oldest elements relating to power hierarchies. The first instance in which such ranking took shape is the result of Chinese theology, whose principles can be traced back to the Shang Dynasty. They were eventually recodified and integrated by Confucius, whose philosophy emphasised justice, morality, righteousness, and, with regards to what is discussed here, a strong relationship between the sacred and the human dimension. The latter, according to Confucianism, needs to reflect the former, as the Book of Documents states that 'Heaven, for the help of the inferior people, made for them rulers, and made

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<sup>11</sup> M. Wight, *Power Politics*, edited by H. Bull and C. Holbraad (New York, 1978), pp. 295-296.

<sup>12</sup> C. Holbraad, *Middle Powers in International Politics* (Basingstoke, 1984), pp. 10-11.

for them instructors’, hence denoting a clear hierarchical characterisation of Chinese tradition.<sup>13</sup> Importantly, as Li observes, the above is ‘integrated into the hierarchy administered by the state’, thus providing a direct link between celestial matters and reason of state.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, as Han and Zhang reported, Confucian philosophy required each individual to be embedded in society according to a specific role, all of which led to a fivefold social hierarchy, constituted by Tian Zi (son of heaven), Zhu Hou (duke), Da Fu (senior official), Shi (scholar), and Min (common person).<sup>15</sup> Another relevant form of social ranking is to be found in the required devotion to one’s ancestors, parents and older siblings, in that specific order (孝, xiào, or filial piety), that is, in other words, the respect of familial hierarchies. Confucianism’s ideal state, therefore, needed to reflect both heavenly precepts and righteous family devotion, two dimensions that were bound to uphold the state structure and were needed in the ‘exercise of government’, as explicitly argued at the end of the second book of the Analects of Confucius.<sup>16</sup>

These primordial notions of social ranking, however interesting and relevant for the purpose of this research, wouldn’t be sufficient to prove the existence of an ancient Chinese power hierarchy, although they paved the way for one that was conceived by the second best-known Confucian philosopher. Living in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Mencius emphasized the innate goodness of individuals, the importance of education, the substantial role of common citizens and, crucially, the need to apply Confucian principles in the society. He had such a fame that many of his disciples eventually became feudal lords, thus supporting a wider application of his principles at different levels of government. His most important contribution to what is being discussed here is the tripartite ranking of Chinese fiefdoms, the first of its kind. Using the Chinese mile (里, li), then equivalent to about 416 metres,<sup>17</sup> Mencius proposed that a great fiefdom needed to have around 100 square miles of territory, a medium one about 70, and a small one, an ‘attached’ or ‘dependant’ state, had to be smaller than 50 square li.<sup>18</sup> This threefold configuration, to the best of the author’s knowledge, is the first power hierarchy denoting great and middle powers, according to parameters which we can relate to today.

The second case employed in this section is Ancient Greece, which provides both a conceptual and an analytical contribution to the history of middle and great power theory, by focusing on its

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<sup>13</sup> X. Zhuo, ‘Theories of Religion in Contemporary China’, in *Marxism and Religion*, eds. L. Daji, and G. Xuezheng (Leiden, 2014), pp. 62-64.

<sup>14</sup> X. Li, ‘The Social Dimension of Religion and Its Representation: a Fundamental Thesis of Chinese Sociology of Religion’, in *Marxism and Religion*, eds. L. Daji, and G. Xuezheng (Leiden, 2014), p. 104.

<sup>15</sup> Z. Han and W. Zhang, *Contemporary Value Systems in China* (Berlin, 2018), p. 32.

<sup>16</sup> J. Legge, *The Life and Teachings of Confucius. With Explanatory Notes* (London, 1869), p. 126.

<sup>17</sup> J. Wenren, *Ancient Chinese Encyclopedia of Technology. Translation and Annotation of Kaogong Ji, The Artificers’ Record* (London, 2013), pp. 128-131.

<sup>18</sup> E. Luard, *Types of international society* (New York, 1976), pp. 203-205.

*poleis*. The former contribution stems from Aristotle's *Politics*, in which the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE philosopher outlined two threefold subdivisions. The first one is purely political and relates to the different types of constitutions that city-states should adopt depending on the number of rulers they had (one, few, or many);<sup>19</sup> the second one is both social and political and delves into the social structures the *poleis* ought to have, since they were constituted, in ascending order, by single households or clans (γέννη, gene), tribes (φυλή, phyle), and villages or neighbourhoods within the *polis* (κώμη, kome), thus laying an internal ranking for the city-states, inside which the kome would be the greatest hierarchical element and the phyle would be the middle one.<sup>20</sup>

Scholars of classical demography and archaeology, moreover, provide us with even more parameters for the hierarchical subdivision of city-states in classical Greece. Hansen subdivided them under demographic and geographic criteria, thus offering a substantial contribution to the research of ancient power hierarchies. He attested that minor ones had less than 0.1 km<sup>2</sup> of land and had less than 1 thousand inhabitants, medium ones ranged between 0.1 km<sup>2</sup> and 1 km<sup>2</sup> and had up to 10 thousand inhabitants, whereas great ones such as Athens and Syracuse could cover larger areas and had larger populations.<sup>21</sup> In addition to these valuable quantitative parameters, further, Frederiksen employed more qualitative ones such as importance and wealth, to be identified with the presence and number of theatres and the number of magistrates (δημοουργοί), which effectively differentiated the *poleis* on a socio-economic and political basis.<sup>22</sup> Luard, too, agreed on the importance on such qualitative parameters, although his interpretation of great and middle city-states was slightly different as he relegated wealthy ones, such as Corinth, Argos, Corcyra, Thessaly, and even Syracuse, to the middle-class category.<sup>23</sup>

Fourth century BCE India is the third case included in this section investigating primordial middle and great powers in ancient times. The country's administrative divisions provide yet another demonstration that theories relating to power hierarchies need to be interpreted with a historian's mind, as they are inherently dependent on specific, if not unique, historical contexts. The most relevant discussion of India's fiefdoms reaches us through the work generally attributed to Chanakya (identified as Kauṭilya), traditionally credited as the author of the *Arthashastra*. In his political treatise, the Indian philosopher examined the ideal structure of the Maurya Empire, and with it provided a political hierarchy which is remarkably important for the goals of this essay. He

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<sup>19</sup> Wight, *Power Politics*, p. 296.

<sup>20</sup> C. Lord, 'Aristotle's Anthropology', in *Essays on the Foundations of Aristotelian Political Science*, eds. C. Lord and D.K. O'Connor (Berkeley, 1991), pp. 49-73.

<sup>21</sup> M.H. Hansen, *Polis: an Introduction to the Ancient Greek City-State* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 73-76.

<sup>22</sup> R. Frederiksen, 'The Greek Theatre. A Typical Building in the Urban Centre of the Poleis?', in *Even More Studies in the Ancient Greek Polis*, ed. T.H. Nielsen (Stuttgart, 2002), pp. 65-124.

<sup>23</sup> Luard, *Types of international society*, p. 206.

argued that the basic units of government should be villages, comprising up to 500 farming families and having a perimeter of no more than the equivalent of 4 kilometres.<sup>24</sup>

He further explored the ideal administrative divisions of the empire by asserting that a larger village, a *sangrahana*, ought to be instituted every 10 villages, a *khárvátika* should be established at the centre of 200 villages, a *drónamukha* in the middle of 400 of them, and lastly the largest centre of all, a *stháníya*, a fortified city that needed to be built every 800 villages.<sup>25</sup> Within the Indian fiefdoms system, as a result, the polities that could be deemed middle powers are mid-level administrative units such as the *khárvátika* and the *drónamukha*, while the *stháníya*, the fortified polity at the apex of this system, is to be identified as the great power. Such a hierarchical subdivision of administrative units, interestingly, is still somewhat mirrored in contemporary India, in which another fivefold administrative division is in place, comprising in ascending order small *gram panchayats* (village councils), mid-sized *tehsils* (also called *talukas* or *mandals*), districts (*zilla*), divisions, and states or territories.<sup>26</sup>

The fourth and last demonstration of the existence of power hierarchies in antiquity is exemplified by ancient Rome, which has been the object of substantial research through the years, whose findings, however, have never been linked to middle or great power theory. Rome's power system had changed much throughout its existence, therefore the connotation of relevant administrative concepts has evolved accordingly, but, with this definitional caveat in mind, it is possible to grade Roman administrative units in order of importance and find a clear connection with modern MPT and GPT. The smallest one was represented by *pagus* and *vicus* (village and neighbourhood), followed by the *civitas* (a foreign city under Roman rule), of which there were three categories, *civitas stipendiaria* (tributary city), *civitas libera* (free city), and *civitas foederata* (allied city). Next came the *municipium* (city-state), which was granted self-governance on a number of matters, and enjoyed a partial process of synoecism into Rome, followed by the *colonia* which originally indicated any city founded by settlers, whether Romans or not, but in time came to represent the highest status of Roman cities. At the apex of the power chain stood the *provincia*, the largest and most important administrative division outside the Italian peninsula, with its own governor and higher levels of autonomy.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to these predominantly quantitative parameters, other criteria, more qualitative in their nature, upheld the Roman power hierarchy. One in particular was so fundamental in Roman

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<sup>24</sup> Kautilya, *Arthashastra* (reprinted Milton Keynes, 2016), p. 35.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> P.R. Sharma and R.P. Joshi, 'Dimension of Decentralization: a View from States', in *Dynamics of New Panchayati Raj System in India: Select States*, ed. G. Palanithurai (New Delhi, 2004), pp. 125-194.

<sup>27</sup> B.T.R. Dicks, 'Network Analysis and Historical Geography', *Area*, 4 (1972), pp. 4-9.

society that many others resulted from it: the concept of citizenship. Without entering into lengthy discussions, which would not be pertinent to this essay, it should suffice to write that Roman citizenship added substantial rights to the many duties that were bestowed upon whoever was under Roman rule, and therefore reflected the true nature of the relationship between Roman territories and Rome itself. Broadly simplified, there were four distinct categories of citizenship that existed in Roman history, which granted full or partial rights: *Cives Romani* (full Roman citizens, under *ius civile*), *Latini* (Latins), *Socii* (citizens of states which had treaty obligations with Rome) and *Provinciales* (people under Roman influence, with only the *ius gentium*).<sup>28</sup> In a complex and effective display of rights, duties, and consequential levels of prestige, Roman citizenship was a further layer that was concurrently applied to the geographic administrative subdivision presented above. As a result of all of these elements, it is possible to argue that the *municipia* were the middle powers of the time, since they were mid-ranking polities enjoying partial freedoms, whereas the *provinciae* intuitively represented the great powers within Rome's empire, as they were the largest and most important administrative blocks, with a higher degree of self-government.

	<b>Middle powers</b>	<b>Great powers</b>
<b>China</b>	Fiefdoms with around 30 square kilometres of territory	Fiefdoms with around 40 square kilometres of territory
<b>Greece</b>	<i>Poleis</i> with 0.1-1 square kilometres of territory and up to 10 thousand inhabitants	<i>Poleis</i> with more than 1 square kilometre of territory and more than 10 thousand inhabitants
<b>India</b>	<i>Khárvátika</i> and <i>drónamukha</i> , established every 200-400 villages	<i>Sthániya</i> , fortified city established every 800 villages
<b>Rome</b>	<i>Municipia</i> , city-states with partial self-governance, potentially inhabited by Roman citizens (first order <i>municipium</i> )	<i>Provinciae</i> , the largest and most important administrative blocks, with a higher degree of autonomy

*Table 1. Middle power and great power entities in ancient times*

## II

### Post-classical and early modern times

Unlike the previous section, the present and the following ones do not venture in completely uncharted waters, as Martin Wight gave an embryonic outline of the grading of powers through history in 1946, and Carsten Holbraad advanced the idea in 1984. The former, however, candidly

<sup>28</sup> M.T. Cicero, *Orationes. With a Commentary by George Long. Volume I* (London, 1862), p. 13.

admitted the limitations of his work in this specific respect, when he wrote ‘But I have not found anybody before Botero who develops the international grading of powers’,<sup>29</sup> while the latter, despite remarkable and widely-acknowledged contributions to this particular branch of IR theory, could not trace the roots of middle and great power theory further back than the 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>30</sup> Starting from these preliminary considerations, this part of the essay builds on these scholars’ work, and aims to expand the knowledge of post-classical power hierarchies. Minor contributions made by political thinkers who merely mentioned the grading of powers are not included here, as they do not add new elements to the search for the ancient roots of middle and great power theory.<sup>31</sup>

In this historical era, Italian theologian and jurist Thomas Aquinas is indeed the first to provide a rudimentary formulation of small, middle, and great powers in his 1267 treatise, in which he named *civitas* (city, or community), *provincia* (province, or region), and kingdom. Aquinas bestows moral and behavioural characteristics to these three polities, as he attests that:

‘In one’s home, there is indeed a certain sufficiency of things for life, in so far as the basic acts of nourishment, the generation of offspring, and so on; moreover, in a village these things relate as much to a family as to one’s own trade. Surely also in a city, which is a perfect community, providing all things necessary for one’s life, but even more so in a province, given the need to fight together and to provide common support against enemies. Therefore, he who rules a perfect community, that is a city or a province, is called a king, while he who rules a household is not called a king, but a father of the family instead’.<sup>32</sup>

In this case, the middle power is clearly the *provincia*, which embodies a federation of small and ‘perfect’ communities, and the great power is the kingdom itself, ruled by a just and father-like *rex*.

Less than a century later, Italian jurist Bartolus de Saxoferrato further developed the idea, and identified small powers as city-states, middle powers as states, and great powers as wider nations. He also associated all three categories with specific forms of government, so that the former ought to be governed by the majority of their people, the second by oligarchy, and the latter by a monarch, in an inverse relationship between size and right to vote and rule. Moreover, he included clear examples to which the reader could relate to, therefore listing smaller cities such as Perugia and

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<sup>29</sup> Wight, *Power Politics*, p. 298.

<sup>30</sup> Holbraad, *Middle Powers in International Politics*, p. 10.

<sup>31</sup> For those who are interested, the authors that have not been discussed here are Rousseau, Moser, von Martens, von Chemnitz, and von Bülow, among the others.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Habetur siquidem aliqua vitae sufficientia in una familia domus unius, quantum scilicet ad naturales actus nutritionis, et prolis generandae, et aliorum huiusmodi; in uno autem vico, quantum ad ea quae ad unum artificium pertinent; in civitate vero, quae est perfecta communitas, quantum ad omnia necessaria vitae; sed adhuc magis in provincia una propter necessitatem compugnationis et mutui auxilii contra hostes. Unde qui perfectam communitatem regit, id est civitatem vel provinciam, antonomastice rex vocatur; qui autem domum regit, non rex, sed pater familias, dicitur.’ T. Aquinas, *De regimine principum ad regem Cypri et De regimine iudearum ad ducissam Brabantiae politica opuscula duo* (Rome, 1948), p. 3. Author’s translation.

Pisa as minor powers, mid-ranking polities like Venice or Florence<sup>33</sup> as the middle powers, and the Roman Empire as an example of a true great power, ideally incorporating the other two entities.<sup>34</sup>

The next elements are not the work of a scholar, but rather the practical application of power divisions. The Holy Roman Empire, especially between the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 16<sup>th</sup> century, offers an important insight to the study of power hierarchies, since its very functioning relied on them. The imperial diet, the *Reichstag*, comprised three distinct estates, the free cities (*Reichsstädtekollegium*), the college of imperial princes (*Reichsfürstenstand*), and the prince-electors (*Kurfürstenkollegium*). The first estate, representing minor powers, counted 86 free cities, which had important levels of self-government and enjoyed a certain autonomy from the empire; the second estate, the middle power class, had similar numbers (83)<sup>35</sup> and boasted a strong influence – they had sovereign rights over a fief directly under (‘immediate’) imperial authority, a direct vote (*votum virile*) as well as a seat in the Diet – though it was often divided; and the third estate, the empire’s great powers, counted 7 prince-electors who held great prerogatives and prestige, since they had the right to vote the Emperor himself and possessed significant fiefs.<sup>36</sup>

A not entirely different system, moreover, can be traced in a number of medieval and early modern European societies, particularly those with a social structure comprising estates and with dependent territories. Without entering into lengthy discussions that would diverge from the aims of this work, it is apt to mention that the grading of powers was in such cases employed in order to make a distinction between conquered lands and the mainland, with the latter providing limited autonomy to and requiring allegiance from the former, in a wide time frame generally originating from the European exploration of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>37</sup> By way of example, the Duchy of Finland, under Swedish rule from the 14<sup>th</sup> century until Russian domination, was gradually granted minor levels of autonomy and had its own estates, while the subsequent Grand Duchy of Finland<sup>38</sup> had a higher degree of autonomy and its own diet (*Suomen maapäivät*).<sup>39</sup> Finland was, therefore, a middle power within both the Swedish and the Russian empires, though in the latter case this condition acquired a more precise form. Further instances, broadly comparable to this one, can be found in other contemporary colonial empires requiring power hierarchies in order to be administered, hence

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<sup>33</sup> Both were oligarchic republics at the time, with a population of 120-200,000 each.

<sup>34</sup> B. de Saxoferrato and D. Quaglioni, *Politica e diritto nel Trecento italiano. Il ‘De tyranno’ di Bartolo da Sassoferrato (1314–1357) con l’edizione critica dei trattati ‘De guelphis et gebellinis’, ‘De regimine civitatis’ e ‘De tyranno’* (Florence, 1983), pp. 149-170.

<sup>35</sup> These numbers are correct as of 1521, they have changed many times since.

<sup>36</sup> Abbondanza, ‘The historical determination of the middle power concept’, pp. 32-44.

<sup>37</sup> R.S. Love, *Maritime Exploration in the Age of Discovery, 1415-1800* (Westport, 2006), pp. 1-8.

<sup>38</sup> Under Russian rule from 1809 to 1917.

<sup>39</sup> O. Jussila, S. Hentilä, and J. Nevakivi, *From Grand Duchy to a Modern State: A Political History of Finland Since 1809* (London: 1999), pp. 3-6 and 34-38.

outlining middle and great powers in the same power system, with the former usually representing a dependency with a form of self-government, and the latter being the main colonial power.

A further consideration on power hierarchies can be drawn from the works of a modern-day scholar, whose contribution to this subfield of IR theory is likely to be more fully appreciated in the years to come. When discussing the concept of ‘stratification’ as a key factor in the international society, Luard examined 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe as a whole, providing two elements that are relevant to the present discussion. First, he argued that the international status of states, kingdoms, and empires of that age did not depend exclusively on their size, wealth and military success, but also on the marriages that upheld the dynastic principles of the time. In his words, ‘many states were simply married out of existence’,<sup>40</sup> an interesting viewpoint that altered contemporary politics in a significant and often unpredictable manner. His second contribution to the debate of states’ rankings was more direct, as he provided a tripartition of European powers. He listed the Spanish Empire as the apical great power of the time, the kingdoms of France, England, Poland, Lithuania, Hungary, and Bohemia as middle powers presented in descending order, and Portugal, Denmark, Norway, Venice, Milan, Brandenburg, and Burgundy as minor powers.<sup>41</sup>

As a last illustration of the existence of power hierarchies in the post-classical era, it is inconceivable to prescind from Giovanni Botero. The Italian political thinker and diplomat is often cited as the first scholar to have provided a thorough discussion on the grading of powers, a merit that is not overshadowed by the much older origins of this subfield of international relations theory, as the discussion above has outlined. In his 1589 *Della Ragion di Stato* (‘The Reason of State’), Botero investigated the size, influence, and behaviour of a variety of polities, and cemented their threefold categories. He classified them as *piccioli* (minor powers), *mezano* or *mediocri* (middle powers), and *grandissimi* (great powers). Further, he provided practical examples to support this tripartition, and included the republics of Lucca and Ragusa in the first category, the Republic of Venice, the Kingdom of Bohemia, the Duchy of Milan, and the County of Flanders in the second, and the Byzantine Empire and the State of the Church in the third.<sup>42</sup> To Botero’s credit, he also explored whether one category was more suited than the others to resist the test of time, and came to identify the middle power as the most resilient entity:

It is a certain thing, that middle states are the most suitable to maintain their position, because the small ones, due to their weaknesses, are easily exposed to the might and the abuse of great states [...] Bigger states produce jealousy and suspect in their neighbours, which often make them league

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<sup>40</sup> E. Luard, *Types of international society* (New York, 1976), p. 211.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> G. Botero, *Della Ragion di Stato* (Venice, 1589), pp. 1-10.

together, and many who are united can do what one can't do alone. But they are also more subject to the intrinsic causes of ruination, because wealth grows with size, and along with it come vices [...] Furthermore, power brings confidence in one's own strength, and confidence is open to negligence, idleness, despise of one's own subjects and enemies, so that such states often base themselves more on the reputation of past things than on present values or foundations.<sup>43</sup>

	<b>Middle powers</b>	<b>Great powers</b>
<b>Aquinas</b>	<i>Provincia</i>	Kingdom
<b>de Saxoferrato</b>	States (Venice or Florence)	Wider nations (Roman Empire)
<b>Holy Roman Empire</b>	Princely fiefs (imperial princes)	Princely fiefs (prince-electors)
<b>Early colonial empires</b>	Semi-autonomous dependencies (Duchy/Grand Duchy of Finland)	Main colonial power
<b>Luard</b>	Kingdoms of France, England, Poland, Lithuania, Hungary, and Bohemia	Spanish Empire
<b>Botero</b>	<i>Mezani</i> or <i>mediocri</i> (Republic of Venice, Kingdom of Bohemia, Duchy of Milan, and County of Flanders)	<i>Grandissimi</i> (Byzantine Empire and the State of the Church)

Table 2. Middle power and great power entities in post-classical and early modern times

### III

#### **Eighteenth century to the present times**

The next power hierarchy worthy of notice is to be found nearly two centuries later, thanks to the work of another philosopher, who lived under the kingdom of Louis XV of France. Gabriel Bonnot de Mably was a prolific writer, but the most significant writings for the scope of this research are those included in the fifth volume of his 1794-95 *Collection complète*. de Mably provided a

<sup>43</sup> 'Egli è cosa certa, che sono più atti a mantenerli li mezani; perché i piccioli per la debolezza loro sono facilmente esposti alle forze, e all'ingiurie de' grandi [...] Gli Stati grandi mettono in gelosia, e in sospetto i vicini; il che spesse volte gl'induce a collegarsi insieme, e molti uniti fanno quello, che non può far un solo. Ma sono anche molto più soggetti alle cause intrinseche delle rovine; perché con la grandezza crescono le ricchezze; e con questi i vitii [...] Oltre a ciò, la grandezza porta seco confidenza delle sue forze, e la confidenza, negligenza, otio, disprezzo, e de' sudditi, e de' nemici: si che simili Stati si mantengono spesse volte più per la riputatione delle cose passate, che per valore, o per fondamento presente.' Botero, *Della Ragion di Stato*, p. 4. Author's translation.

different kind of threefold power division, listing dominant power (*puissance dominante*), second-order states (*puissances du second ordre*), of which he outlined an upper and a lower class, and third-order states (*puissances du troisième ordre*). In this more polarised hierarchy, he identified the Roman Empire as a quintessential dominant power,<sup>44</sup> while he accorded behavioural as well as positional characteristics to second-order polities. The upper ones, he argued, possessed such capabilities and ambitions that were bound to pursue hegemonic ambitions: ‘The more they are substantial, the more they have to behave according to the principles that granted fortunes to the dominant powers’.<sup>45</sup> In the same section of his work, de Mably listed Austria, Russia, Spain, and Denmark as countries falling under this category, nations that, in terms of capabilities and behaviour, could be included in the group of contemporary great powers. The lower class of his secondary powers, on the other hand, resembled much more the modern concept of middle powers, since such states had appreciable capabilities, but, more importantly, also behaved in a restrained, moderate way, slowly expanding their power, curbing the influence of superior nations, and patiently waiting to take advantage of the disputes between them. He examined the Duchy of Savoy in north-western Italy as an exemplary instance of the above.<sup>46</sup> Lastly, he regarded the smaller states in Italy and Germany as third-ranking powers.<sup>47</sup>

Soon afterwards, Napoleon’s imperialism – and his final defeat in 1815 – represented one of the greatest challenges to the international system of the time, as well as a very relevant case in point for this essay’s objectives. The subsequent 1814-15 Congress of Vienna is justifiably considered a crucial moment in European history, as it sought to reinstate the status quo that had been shattered by the Napoleonic Wars.<sup>48</sup> In doing so, the Congress’ proceedings delineated in a formal and public manner a tripartite power hierarchy in contemporary continental politics, which reflected the level of participation and involvement in congressional matters, which in turn was the result of military and political efforts. At the apex of post-Napoleonic Europe lied the great powers: Austria, Britain, Prussia, and Russia – who had signed the 1814 Treaty of Chaumont – plus defeated France. Below them stood those states that had not been part of the Chaumont agreement, but had been signatories of the 1814 Treaty of Paris. Such countries – Spain, Portugal, and Sweden – had limited access to the informal discussions held by the delegates of the great powers (which caused much discontent), and therefore amounted to a second-order ranking, that of middle

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<sup>44</sup> G. Bonnot de Mably, *Collection complète des œuvres de l'abbé de Mably, Volume 5* (Paris, 1794-95), p. 37.

<sup>45</sup> ‘Plus elles sont considérables, plus elles doivent se conduire par les principes qui assurent seuls la fortune des puissances dominantes’ *Ibid.*, p. 75. Author’s translation.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 80-82.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>48</sup> B.E. Vick, *The Congress of Vienna* (Cambridge, MA, 2014), pp. 1-20.

powers.<sup>49</sup> Lesser middle powers and minor powers – who had not contributed to either the Chaumont or the Paris treaties, by virtue of their peripheral involvement during those tumultuous years – also had a delegation each, though they mattered less than the other two categories.

The next example of distinct power hierarchies stems as a direct consequence of the above. Article 6 of the 1814 Treaty of Paris and Act IX of the 1814-15 Congress of Vienna had formally paved the way for the establishment of the German Confederation, which was conceived as a weaker replacement for the Holy Roman Empire, dissolved in 1806. With a number of states joining in the following years, the Confederation eventually comprised 39 states, whose status within it was the result of their material capabilities and political influence. The largest and most powerful members were the Austrian Empire and the Kingdom of Prussia, which amassed almost two thirds of the Confederation's total population in 1816 (18.4 million people, over a total of 30.4 million) and had one vote each in the federal assembly. Below these great powers, there were three states that were ruled by foreign monarchs,<sup>50</sup> and six states that represented the middle powers of the confederate system: the Kingdom of Bavaria, the Kingdom of Saxony, the Kingdom of Württemberg, the Electorate of Hesse, the Grand Duchy of Baden, and the Grand Duchy of Hesse. These six states could cast one vote each and had a combined population of slightly more than one fourth of the total population (8.4 million inhabitants). Next stood the minor powers of this complex system – the four free cities of Bremen, Frankfurt, Hamburg and Lübeck – which were able to share a single vote, followed by the 23 remaining polities, who had five votes between all of them and comprised the rest of the confederate people.<sup>51</sup>

A few decades later, during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the British Empire provided a further demonstration of the increasingly common power hierarchies, as it slowly began to evolve from within with the goal of bestowing more rights and more duties to its most developed colonies. Modern-day Canada was a precursor in this sense, since Nova Scotia and the Province of Canada were the first with the right to establish a 'responsible government', which gave them the capacity to control a number of aspects within their domestic affairs.<sup>52</sup> This status was initially conceived as limited and precisely-defined, though, with the federation of British colonies in Canada in 1867, it paved the way for the creation of new entities, the dominions. The Canadian Confederation was thus the first dominion of the empire, possessing a greater level of autonomy with regards to

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<sup>49</sup> Holbraad, *Middle Powers in International Politics*, pp. 19-21.

<sup>50</sup> They were the Duchy of Holstein, the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg and the Kingdom of Hanover, respectively ruled by the King of Denmark, the King of the Netherlands and the King of the United Kingdom.

<sup>51</sup> Abbondanza, 'The historical determination of the middle power concept', pp. 32-44.

<sup>52</sup> M.M. Lewis, 'The International Status of the British Self-Governing Dominions', *British Year Book of International Law*, 3 (1922-23), pp. 21-41.

domestic affairs and, for the first time, some limited control over its foreign affairs.<sup>53</sup> The Australian colonies, which federated in 1901, were the second imperial entity to be granted the status of dominion, here too developed after years of responsible governments formed throughout the 1850s. A comparable path was also undertaken by New Zealand, Newfoundland, South Africa, and the Irish Free State.<sup>54</sup> The British Empire therefore displayed a broad tripartite power hierarchy, with the United Kingdom as the apical great power, the dominions as semi-autonomous middle powers, and the other colonies without such extensive forms of self-government as the minor powers within this power system.

The fifth case included in this section is embedded in one of the most complex times of recent history, the interwar period. Immediately after the end of World War I, the international community sought to establish an international governing body that would avoid future horrors arising from global conflict. When drafting the Charter of the League of Nations, political leaders faced the issue of how to represent very different groups of countries. South African Prime Minister Jan Smuts then proposed to differentiate more effectively between great powers and lesser states by creating a third category, initially labelled ‘intermediate’ and later ‘middle powers’, an idea that was accepted by US President Wilson and thus implemented. Concurrently, at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, countries were given delegates in accordance to their international status and role in the war. Great powers<sup>55</sup> had five each, middle powers<sup>56</sup> two to three, and minor or marginal powers only one. As a result of the new international system created by the peace conference, the newly-formed Council of the League of Nations – which acted as an executive body – had four permanent members (United Kingdom, France, Italy, and Japan,<sup>57</sup> the great powers), and four non-permanent members that held a seat for a three-year term, thus pointing at middle powerdom when this condition was repeated more often in comparison to minor powers.<sup>58</sup>

However commendable for its principles, the League was a glaring failure as it was incapable of curbing the expansionist thrusts of a number of countries, a condition that eventually led to World War II. With its end in 1945, victorious nations sought once again to create an international organisation that would include the majority of sovereign states and prevent further conflicts between them, thus paving the way for the United Nations. In this instance, too, a power hierarchy is detectable, with the main victorious nations cementing their status of great powers through a

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<sup>53</sup> R. MacGregor Dawson, *Development of Dominion Status: 1900-1936* (London, 2013), pp. 3-6.

<sup>54</sup> India, Pakistan, and Ceylon also gained dominion status, in the late 1940s.

<sup>55</sup> The USA, the UK, France, Italy, and Japan.

<sup>56</sup> Belgium, Brazil, and Serbia had three delegates, whereas China, India, Canada, Australia, South Africa, Czechoslovakia, Greece, Poland, Portugal, and Romania had two delegates.

<sup>57</sup> The USA never actually joined the League.

<sup>58</sup> Holbraad, *Middle Powers in International Politics*, pp. 48-51.

permanent seat at the UN Security Council (informally labelled ‘P5s’),<sup>59</sup> while the great powers that had lost the war – Germany, Italy, and Japan – were clearly left out of it. When drafting the UN Charter, moreover, the largest middle powers of the time – Canada and Australia – distinguished themselves due to their forthright championing of middle powers’ rights.

The former, in particular, advocated a formal acknowledgement for states who had fought the Axis Powers with efforts second only to those of the great powers, thus advancing the ‘functional criterion’ that would be associated with Canada and Canadian policymakers – Prime Minister Mackenzie King above all – ever since. Canada further explored the issue of representation within the UN by demanding that states militarily and financially involved in UN missions had to be consulted.<sup>60</sup> Such requests eventually came to fruition with the introduction of the first paragraph of article 23, as well as article 44 of the UN Charter. Australia, too, was a determined supporter of middle powers’ rights in the immediate post-war years. Instead of a recognition of peace efforts, however, it advanced the idea of an equitable geographic representation at the UN Security Council for non-permanent members, thus requesting that all global regions, irrespective of other parameters, were to be represented at a certain point. This request eventually resulted in the introduction of very last sentence of the first paragraph of article 23 of the Charter, thanks to the diplomatic efforts of Australian Foreign Minister Herbert Vere Evatt and British mediation.<sup>61</sup> Apart from these results, however, the middle powers of the time, comprising not only Canada and Australia, but also Brazil, Mexico, and the Netherlands,<sup>62</sup> were unable to act unitedly in order to pursue a firmer acknowledgment of middle powers, one that wouldn’t be so dependent on the political contingencies of any given moment.

In the same years, another crucial phase of history was unfolding, one that would affect power hierarchies in very different ways.<sup>63</sup> With the beginning of the Cold War, almost half a century of bipolarised international relations dictated the shape and direction of global power relations, generally benefitting the two superpowers – the USA and the USSR – and a small group of great powers. Middle powers<sup>64</sup> could not thrive in such an international system, and therefore had to specialise their foreign relations according to their specific skills, a concept that Cooper aptly

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<sup>59</sup> The USA, the USSR (Russia, after 1991), China, the UK, and France.

<sup>60</sup> A. Chapnick, *The Middle Power Project: Canada and the Founding of the United Nations* (Vancouver, 2014), p. 23.

<sup>61</sup> H.V. Evatt, *The United Nations* (Oxford, 1946), p. 22.

<sup>62</sup> All five countries took part in the Coordination Committee discussing the Charter, which clearly distinguished them from minor or defeated nations.

<sup>63</sup> The post-WWII period is more concisely described, as it has been investigated much more often by middle and great power theorists.

<sup>64</sup> ‘Traditional’ middle powers of this period, as identified by the relevant literature, are Canada, Australia, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden. See Abbondanza, ‘The historical determination of the middle power concept’, pp. 32-44.

labelled ‘niche diplomacy’.<sup>65</sup> Eventually, thanks to the ‘economic miracles’ experienced by Italy, Germany, and Japan, all three nations could recover their great power status,<sup>66</sup> as their top-10 economic, military, political, and cultural influence attests, coupled with their membership to the G7/G8.<sup>67</sup> With the pacific collapse of the Soviet Union, and the end of the Cold War in 1991, the inhibition of the bipolar system ceased to exist, thus allowing secondary states – middle powers in particular – to grow and increase their influence more rapidly than before.

After a brief moment of US-led unipolarity, the subsequent fragmentation of power<sup>68</sup> – due to the relative decline of Western powers and the rapid and steady rise of Asian ones – brought a new multipolarity, characterised by one superpower, less than ten great powers, and a growing number of middle powers,<sup>69</sup> defined not only by their capabilities (positional/hierarchical criterion) – second only to those of the great powers – but also by their multilateral attitude with respect to international issues (behavioural criterion), adherence of international norms (normative criterion), self-identification as a significant second-tier country (identity criterion), or actual international influence (systemic impact criterion).<sup>70</sup> Due to this myriad of definitional criteria, the current middle power group comprises about 20 countries, which can, however, conveniently be found among the top-30 nations in economic terms, sitting just below the great powers. It appears clear that, as a result of this fragmentation of power, the post-Cold War era keeps posing a significant challenge to both middle power theory and great power theory, since, as stated at the beginning of this work, the theoretical frameworks currently available struggle to match the pace of the current structure of the international system, which evolves with unprecedented rapidity.

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<sup>65</sup> A.F. Cooper, ‘Niche Diplomacy: a Conceptual Overview’, in *Niche Diplomacy. Middle Powers after the Cold War*, ed. A.F. Cooper (Basingstoke, 1997), pp. 1-24.

<sup>66</sup> The post-WWII great powers are the P5s minus the US, plus Germany, Italy, and Japan. From the 21<sup>st</sup> century onwards, India is also considered a great power by virtue of its economic, demographic, military, and politico-diplomatic capabilities. For the same reasons, Brazil is sometimes defined as one.

<sup>67</sup> R.E.J. Penttilä, *The Role of the G8 in International Peace and Security* (London, 2013), pp. 17-32.

<sup>68</sup> Huntington, ‘The lonely superpower’, pp. 35-49.

<sup>69</sup> In broad terms, the current structure of the international system comprises one superpower (the USA), one ‘future superpower’ (China), seven great powers (the UK, France, Germany, Japan, Italy, India, and Brazil), and about twenty middle powers, according to the several criteria outlined above. The core of the middle power group is easily identifiable as the G20 minus the G8, China, India, and Brazil, with the exception of Canada, which is considered a middle power. For a list of contemporary great powers and middle powers, refer to G. Abbondanza, ‘Il concetto di media potenza dal XIII secolo ai giorni nostri’, *Rivista di Politica*, 4 (2017), pp. 147-161.

R.B. Elrod, ‘The concert of Europe: a fresh look at an international system’, *World Politics*, 28 (1976), pp. 159-174.

<sup>70</sup> T.S. Wilkins, ‘Defining middle powers through IR theory: Three images’, in *Rethinking Middle Powers in the Asian Century: New Theories, New Cases*, eds. T.S. de Swiellande, D. Vandamme, D. Walton, and T.S. Wilkins (London, 2019), pp. 45-51.

	<b>Middle powers</b>	<b>Great powers</b>
<b>de Mably</b>	Lower <i>puissances du second ordre</i> (Duchy of Savoy)	Upper <i>puissances du second ordre</i> (Austria, Russia, Spain, and Denmark)
<b>Congress of Vienna</b>	Nations that had signed the Paris treaty (Spain, Portugal, and Sweden)	Victorious nations that had signed both the Chaumont and the Paris treaties (Austria, Britain, Prussia, Russia, plus defeated France)
<b>German Confederation</b>	Second-tier states with one vote each (the Kingdom of Bavaria, the Kingdom of Saxony, the Kingdom of Württemberg, the Electorate of Hesse, the Grand Duchy of Baden, and the Grand Duchy of Hesse)	Largest and most powerful members, with one vote each (Austrian Empire and the Kingdom of Prussia)
<b>British Empire</b>	Semi-autonomous dominions (Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Newfoundland, South Africa, the Irish Free State, India, Pakistan, and Ceylon)	Main colonial power (United Kingdom)
<b>League of Nations</b>	Countries with 2-3 delegates at the Paris peace conference (Belgium, Brazil, Serbia, China, India, Canada, Australia, South Africa, Czechoslovakia, Greece, Poland, Portugal, and Romania), and countries that were elected more often as non- permanent members of the League's Council	Main victorious nations (the USA, the UK, France, Italy, and Japan) that, with the exclusion of the USA, also had a permanent seat at the League's Council
<b>United Nations</b>	Countries that took part in the Coordination Committee discussing the UN Charter, advancing the interests of secondary states (Canada, Australia, Brazil, Mexico, and the	Nations with a permanent seat at the UN Security Council (the 'P5s': the USA, the USSR, China, the UK, and France)

	Netherlands)	
<b>Cold War</b>	‘Traditional’ middle powers (Canada, Australia, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden)	G7 nations minus the USA and Canada (respectively a superpower and a middle power) (the UK, France, Germany, Japan, Italy), as well as China
<b>Present day</b>	About 20 nations, under many definitional parameters (top-30 nations in economic terms, below the great powers)	Top-10 nations in economic, military and political terms (P5 and G7 nations, minus the USA and Canada – as per above – as well as China, India, and Brazil)

*Table 3. Middle power and great power entities from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present day*

### **Middle powers and great powers through history: final considerations**

Middle powers and great powers are key concepts of IR theory, increasingly employed even outside the academic, political, and diplomatic fields, although a precise definition of them, which is broadly accepted by the relevant scholarship, is still missing. This essay has contended that further definitional efforts would not support the search for a higher level of theoretical clarity, unless the causes of this conceptual confusion are addressed first. Drawing from these preliminary considerations, this research has therefore argued that the aforementioned uncertainty is not caused by an inherent limitation of the conceptual definitions that the current literature provides, but rather by their insufficient level of adaption to an ever-changing international system. In other words, predetermined and rigid definitions are intuitively unable to represent something that is constantly evolving. Stemming from this logical premise, the present work has advanced the idea that a historical determinist approach could shed new light on the mechanism described above, and thus sought to search for past relationships between middle and great powers’ definitions and the historical context in which they were defined so.

Judging that complex and solid societies of the past necessarily had to employ power hierarchies for their functioning, it has traced the forgotten roots of both entities through history, and by doing so it has provided a twofold contribution to IR theory and history. On the one hand, it has shown that, just as the international system they are embedded in, middle powers and great powers are not a ‘fixed universal’, and as such need to be interpreted and identified according to the specific system they are a part of. On the other, it has demonstrated with numerous and varied sources that both concepts date back to two and a half millennia ago, thus expanding and refining

middle power and great power theory. Moreover, four corollary considerations can be added as a result of the ‘proto-theories’ of middle and great powerdom presented here, produced by this wide-scope inductive work. First, the characteristics of middle and great powers vary considerably not only due to historical reasons, but also to geographic ones. By way of example, in 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE China and Greece, the dimensions and therefore the inhabitants of middle and great powers were entirely different; in the former they measured respectively 30 and 40 square kilometres, whereas in the latter, a much smaller territory, they measured respectively 0.1-1 and 1 square kilometres.

Second, even in ancient times quantitative parameters were sometimes complemented by qualitative ones when denoting power hierarchies. In this sense, Greek city-states were not only distinguished by their size, but also by the presence and number of theatres and the number of magistrates; and Rome’s administrative units were differentiated not only due to their material capabilities, but also due to their levels of autonomy and citizenship status. This is a sign of theoretical eclecticism that finds a direct parallel in contemporary MPT and GPT. Third, it is occasionally possible to detect more nuanced representations of middle- and great-powerdom, particularly since the post-classical era. Aquinas, for instance, is the first to bestow moral and behavioural characteristics to small, medium, and large polities, an idea that is admirably developed by Botero, who depicted great powers as aggressive, destabilising, and war-prone, while portraying middle powers as restrained, virtuous, and therefore more resilient. Nearly two centuries later, de Mably clearly concurred with the idea. The apparent dichotomy that has just been described is remarkably in line with modern-day characterisations of great and middle powers.<sup>71</sup> Fourth, and last, this essay makes no pretence to comprehensiveness, nor it can hope to do so. On the contrary, the expanse of history which has been traced in available records is vast, a condition which, supported by the findings of this work, warrants new scholarly efforts and research on these remarkably significant and yet understudied elements of IR theoretical history.

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<sup>71</sup> For further discussions on the traditional nature of middle powers and great powers, see A. Patience, *Australian foreign policy in Asia: middle power or awkward partner?* (Basingstoke, 2018), and J.J. Mearsheimer, *The tragedy of great power politics* (New York, 2001).