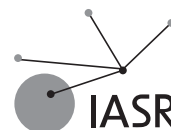




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Article

Governing the Ungovernable: Strategic Infrastructure, Emerging Security, and the Middle Power Moment

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Abstract

Why are the infrastructures most essential to contemporary security—undersea communication cables foremost among them—governed by the weakest international arrangements, and which actors could close the gap? Regime theory can describe the cable domain's hostile bargaining configuration but cannot explain why a domain of near-universal shared interest generates and reproduces it; weaponized interdependence shows how chokepoints become instruments of coercion but not whether they come to be regulated; platform-authority scholarship identifies firms as de facto rule-makers without connecting that authority to regime formation; and middle power scholarship tends to assume the neutrality its governance claims require. Integrating these literatures into a technology-power framework, this article locates the governance deficit in a structural mismatch between rapidly evolving, dual-use, largely privately owned infrastructure and slower-moving, state-centric institutions. Great power entanglement leaves middle powers as the only candidates for institutional architecture; the article converts that candidacy into a falsifiable conditional claim. A structured, focused comparison of four diverse cases—South Korea, Japan, France, and Norway—read against three constraint hypotheses, finds that middle power credibility is audience-relative and revocable, and that every initiative in the record examined has operated within, not across, bloc lines; middle-power-led regime-building is therefore a conditional possibility, not a prediction.

Keywords

International cooperation theory, Undersea cable governance, Geopolitical competition, Middle power diplomacy, Critical infrastructure security

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Introduction

In the early hours of October 8, 2023, the Baltic connector gas pipeline linking Finland and Estonia was ruptured beneath the Gulf of Finland, and two undersea telecommunications cables—one connecting Estonia to Finland, the other Estonia to Sweden—were damaged at almost the same time. Finnish investigators later named a Chinese container vessel that had dragged its anchor across the seabed as the prime suspect, though no state attribution was established (Al Jazeera, 2023; Centre for Eastern Studies, 2023). Within days, Finnish, Estonian, and Swedish authorities opened investigations, and NATO pledged support; the episode crystallized a long-building anxiety that the infrastructure carrying more than 95% of intercontinental internet traffic was alarmingly exposed, governed by a patchwork of inadequate rules, and increasingly entangled in geopolitical confrontation (Bueger & Liebetrau, 2021; Wall & Morcos, 2021). The cables were repaired within weeks, but the pipeline took half a year. The governance gap exposed by the episode remains unaddressed.

That gap matters: cables carry the private communications, financial transactions, and military coordination on which the contemporary international order depends, so their vulnerability is a structural feature of global politics rather than a technical inconvenience (Starosielski, 2015). Moreover, the fact that it persists despite the shared interest of virtually all states in reliable connectivity and despite decades of institution-building in adjacent domains is puzzling. The puzzle, stated precisely, is not that satisfied cooperation conditions have failed to produce cooperation—Section 3 shows the conditions are hostile—but that a domain of near-universal shared interest exhibits the worst available cooperation configuration, and that this configuration is self-reinforcing in ways regime theory can describe but not explain.

Explaining this failure requires engaging three literatures rarely brought into sustained conversation: (i) regime theory, the most developed account of how states construct cooperative institutions under anarchy (Keohane, 1984; Krasner, 1983; Oye, 1986); (ii) scholarship on weaponized interdependence and infrastructural power, which examines how global networks create dependencies that dominant actors exploit for coercive leverage (Bratton, 2016; DeNardis, 2014; Farrell & Newman, 2019); and (iii) the literature on middle power statecraft, which analyzes how states positioned between the great powers and the margins have carved out governance roles disproportionate to their capabilities (Cooper et al., 1993; Jordaan, 2003; Ravenhill, 1998).

Together, these literatures support an argument none can carry alone. Regime theory explains what is missing, but not why it has not emerged. The answer lies in the properties of emerging infrastructure domains—civil-military ambiguity that makes attribution systematically difficult, technological change that shortens the shadow of the future, and private actors exercising quasi-sovereign authority—which jointly undermine the conditions for cooperation and produce what this article terms a structural governance deficit.

Two terms carry distinct referents throughout: (i) the *governance gap* names the explanandum, meaning the observable absence of a protective regime despite shared interests; (ii) the *structural governance deficit* names the explanation, that is, the gap is produced by durable structural properties of the domain and will not close on its own. The United States and China, each treating cable infrastructure as terrain of advantage, cannot serve as architects, as both have resisted rules that constrain their operational freedom and have leveraged infrastructure dependencies against third states (Jones & Hameiri, 2020; Lindsay, 2015). Their elimination leaves middle powers as the only remaining candidates for institutional architecture—a candidacy treated here as a hypothesis to be disciplined, since it rests on a premise of neutrality that the article makes explicit and interrogates.

Sections 2 and 3 map the governance gap and its implications for regime theory. Section 4 develops the technology-power framework. Section 5 states and examines the credibility premise underlying middle power agency and specifies three constraint hypotheses: structural symmetry, embedded alignment, and domain salience. Section 6 reads the South Korean, Japanese, French, and Norwegian cases against the three hypotheses. Sections 7 and 8 develop a middle power regime-building model, extend it to the private infrastructure layer, and derive a research and policy agenda. Section 9 concludes.

Two scope conditions apply: the article treats undersea cables as a paradigmatic case of a broader class of emerging security challenges--artificial intelligence governance, digital supply chains, space-based assets--to which the theory is intended to apply, and it focuses on traditional middle powers with advanced industrial capacity, because technical credibility is a prerequisite for the roles examined. The contribution is threefold: theoretically, a framework integrating infrastructure's role in constituting power; empirically, among the first systematic comparisons of middle power agency in cable governance, documenting both its mechanisms and its structural limits; and practically, a theoretically grounded template for reducing strategic vulnerability in the absence of active great power cooperation though not, as the conclusion makes explicit, in the absence of great power acquiescence.

The Governance Gap in Emerging Security Domains

Traditional security regimes were built for state actors, attributable threats, and demarcated military and civilian domains. Today's most consequential threats are defined by ambiguity: unattributed attacks, infrastructure that is simultaneously commercial and strategic, and threat actors ranging from militaries to technology corporations to criminal networks. Undersea cables illustrate the mismatch with particular force. More than 95% of intercontinental internet traffic flows through roughly 570 cables in service worldwide (TeleGeography, 2026; Wall & Morcos, 2021), yet no comprehensive international regime governs their protection. Suspected sabotage incidents targeting cables and adjacent seabed infrastructure have increased since 2022, though attribution often remains unresolved (Bueger & Liebetrau, 2021; European Commission, 2024).

Simultaneously, accountability mechanisms remain fragmented across the International Telecommunication Union, the International Maritime Organization, bilateral agreements, and domestic law (Bueger & Liebetrau, 2021). As Starosielski (2015) demonstrated, the cable network has always been entangled with imperial power and commercial interest; what is new is the scale of strategic exposure and the absence of commensurate governance.

The pattern is not unique to cables. In artificial intelligence, digital supply chains, and space assets, the international community has proven equally unable to construct durable frameworks. A common structural logic connects these failures: each domain combines civil-military ambiguity with rapid technological change, non-attributability, and asymmetric vulnerability. These features jointly undermine the conditions under which regime theory predicts cooperation, shifting governance from collective problem-solving to fragmentation and strategic competition.

Why Existing Theory Falls Short

Regime theory offers powerful tools but inadequate answers. Krasner (1983) defined regimes as principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which expectations converge, capturing the architecture that has historically structured cooperation. In addition, Keohane's

(1984) account of how regimes reduce transaction costs extends the theory into domains where self-interest might otherwise preclude collective action. Both were designed for conditions that no longer fully apply. Oye's (1986) three variables--payoff structure, the shadow of the future, and the number of actors--each tell a discouraging story in the cable domain.

The payoff structure is asymmetric: protection costs are diffuse and long-term, whereas the benefits of defection or of exploiting a rival's vulnerability are concentrated and immediate (Axelrod & Keohane, 1985). The shadow of the future is shortened by technological change that outpaces institutional adaptation. Furthermore, the number of relevant actors has exploded beyond state-centric assumptions. Technology companies own significant portions of the infrastructure, intelligence agencies operate alongside commercial operators, and international bodies with overlapping mandates compete rather than coordinate. Regime theory can register this configuration; it cannot explain why it arises in domains of this kind, persists, and resists remedy--the explanatory work the next section takes up.

The implication is significant. State-centric regime theory was not designed for an environment in which firms exercise quasi-sovereign authority over critical infrastructure (Bratton, 2016), where the line between sabotage and acts of war is deliberately obscured (Rid, 2013), and where the most consequential governance decisions are made in boardrooms and procurement offices rather than treaty negotiations (DeNardis, 2014). The growing ownership of transoceanic systems by Google, Meta, and Amazon (TeleGeography, 2026) exemplifies the blurring. These firms are simultaneously commercial actors, regulatory subjects, and *de facto* infrastructure governors. The regime-building model developed below treats them as governance participants whose infrastructure power can be enlisted.

Toward a Technology-Power Framework

What is needed is an expanded framework that integrates regime theory with a rigorous account of how infrastructure shapes power. The technology-power framework treats critical infrastructure--undersea cables foremost--not as a technical system to be managed but as a medium through which international power is constituted, exercised, and contested. It rests on three propositions. First, governance outcomes are shaped by a structural mismatch between rapidly evolving, dual-use technologies and slower-moving, state-centric institutions. This proposition draws on regime theory. Second, ownership and control of infrastructure generate asymmetric dependencies and chokepoints that translate into coercive leverage (Farrell & Newman, 2019). The decisive question is whether those chokepoints are regulated, contested, or left ungoverned at the multilateral level. This proposition extends the logic of weaponized interdependence. Third, in these domains, ownership is governance: the most consequential rules are set in corporate boardrooms, procurement offices, and standard-setting bodies rather than treaty negotiations (Bratton, 2016; DeNardis, 2014). This proposition incorporates analyses of private platform authority. Together, the propositions specify both why structural governance deficits persist and where openings exist for actors--notably middle powers combining technical credibility with cross-bloc legitimacy--to construct new regimes (Nye, 2011).

Farrell and Newman's (2019) weaponized interdependence supplies one building block: global networks create chokepoints through which dominant states coerce dependent ones. Applied to cables, it sheds light on how the concentration of ownership among American technology firms and the reach of Chinese state-linked suppliers such as HMN Tech create dependencies that translate into geopolitical leverage. The framework extends the analysis beyond bilateral coercion to the multilateral dynamics that determine whether chokepoints are regulated at all. DeNardis's

(2014) scholarship on internet governance offers a complementary insight: the dispersal of governance authority among technical bodies, corporations, and states does not preclude governance but systematically biases its outcomes toward powerful incumbents. In the cable domain, the question is not whether governance will occur but whose interests it will serve.

Each component alone leaves the puzzle intact; only their integration yields two distinctive claims. First, governance deficits will be deepest and most resistant to great power remedy where rapid dual-use change, infrastructure-mediated dependency, and substantial private ownership co-occur, because each property disables a different pillar of the classical cooperation architecture. Second, precisely in such domains, the diplomatic opening for institutional architecture shifts toward actors outside the central dyad--an opening confined, as Section 5 insists, to the domain's diplomatic structure, its material structure remaining inhospitable--because the powers best resourced to build regimes are those most invested in the leverage that regimes would constrain.

Restated as analytical machinery, each proposition names a mechanism with observable implications, summarized in Table 1. The mismatch proposition operates through *institutional lag*, meaning that dual-use technologies evolve faster than institutions can adapt, thereby shortening the expected lifetime of any negotiated arrangement and, with it, the shadow of the future. Governance activity should therefore cluster in soft-law instruments and technical venues while treaty-based regimes stall. The chokepoint proposition operates through *leverage retention*: actors occupying chokepoints rationally resist rules that would fetter their use; proposals should founder on attribution, accountability, and enforcement while advancing on technical coordination.

The ownership proposition operates through *venue displacement*, in which infrastructure is privately owned and consequential rule making migrates to procurement, licensing, and standard-setting; the most binding constraints should appear in landing licenses and consortium agreements rather than in international law. The constraint hypotheses of Section 5 are the middle-power corollaries of these mechanisms, so that the case studies test the framework's implications rather than merely illustrate its vocabulary.

The framework travels, but not without limits: it applies to domains that jointly exhibit rapid dual-use change, dependency-generating infrastructure, and substantial private ownership. Artificial intelligence, digital supply chains, and space assets satisfy all three conditions; conventional arms control and most trade in goods do not. Where only some conditions hold, only the corresponding mechanisms should operate--a partial applicability that is itself an observable implication rather than a concession.

Table 1. The technology-power framework: propositions, mechanisms, and observable implications

Proposition	Mechanism	Observable implication	Applied in
Structural mismatch (regime theory)	Institutional lag: dual-use technological change outpaces state-centric institutional adaptation, shortening the shadow of the future	Governance activity clusters in soft-law instruments and technical venues; treaty-based regimes stall	Sections 2–3; structural symmetry (Section 5)
Chokepoints as leverage (weaponized interdependence)	Leverage retention: actors holding chokepoint positions resist rules that would constrain their use	Proposals founder on attribution, accountability, and enforcement while advancing technical coordination	Sections 5–6; domain salience and embedded alignment
Ownership is governance (private platform authority)	Venue displacement: consequential rule making migrates to procurement, licensing, and standard-setting	Binding constraints appear in landing licenses and consortium agreements, not international law	Sections 7–8 (jurisdiction, ownership, orchestration)

The Middle Power Opening

The structural nature of the gap raises the question of agency. Washington relies on hyperscale firms that control an increasing share of transoceanic systems. In contrast, Beijing extends its reach through HMN Tech and the Digital Silk Road (Jones & Hameiri, 2020). Because cables carry sensitive military and diplomatic traffic, neither can credibly commit to rules constraining its own intelligence operations (Lindsay, 2015); any framework championed by either side would be rejected as an instrument of dominance (Ikenberry, 2011). This impasse creates a distinctive opening for middle powers--states that characteristically pursue multilateral solutions, embrace compromise, and practice good international citizenship (Cooper et al., 1993)—and specifically for traditional middle powers (Jordaan, 2003) with advanced industrial capacity in undersea infrastructure: South Korea, Japan, France, and Norway.

The inference is an argument by elimination, and eliminations are only as strong as the candidate set they canvass; two rival architects that the evidence itself elevates must be confronted. The first is industry self-governance. Cable owners and operators already coordinate through the International Cable Protection Committee (ICPC), whose recommendations on routing, burial standards, and fault repair constitute the domain's most functional standing institution (Bueger & Liebetrau, 2021) and if ownership is governance, the incumbent governors are the owners. This explanation is nevertheless incomplete.

The ICPC exemplifies the governance gap rather than filling it. As a voluntary technical association, it has authority only over the conduct of its members, including matters such as anchor drags, fishing gear, charting, and repair logistics. By contrast, the central problem defining the domain since 2022 has been state-adjacent sabotage, attribution, and accountability--issues that an operator body can neither investigate nor sanction. Industry self-governance, therefore, enters this framework not as a rival architect but as an object of orchestration within a hybrid arrangement (Abbott et al., 2015; Keohane & Victor, 2011), a role Section 7 specifies.

The second candidate is weightier, because the most consequential regulatory activity in the empirical record assembled here--the 2024 Recommendation on secure and resilient submarine cable infrastructures and the 2025 Action Plan on cable security (European Commission, 2024)--issues not from any middle power's diplomacy but from the European Union (EU). A skeptic might conclude that the effective institutional architect here is a regulatory bloc. The answer depends on the nature of the governance gap.

The Union's instruments operate through the mechanism Bradford (2020) described: market access disciplines firms, so Brussels can condition landing and licensing and impose resilience standards on any operator that values European customers. What no market-access instrument can supply is the unsupplied core identified in Sections 2 through 4: attribution machinery, accountability norms, and restraint commitments. Their necessary addressees are rival states and their intelligence services, actors beyond the reach of EU regulation. Nor does the Union's cable-security agenda carry greater cross-bloc credibility than other Western instruments, which have run parallel to Washington's rather than across the divide. EU agency is accordingly a datum for the framework rather than a displacement of it.

It confirms, at bloc scale, the jurisdictional mechanism of Section 7--regulatory aggregation converting individually escapable landing leverage into unavoidable market-access conditions—while incorporating the strong reading of embedded alignment developed below, in which institutional energy flows into intra-bloc resilience work rather than cross-divide regime-building. The two candidacies thus resolve the same way: each supplies a component the regime complex requires, but neither can supply the cross-bloc element whose absence defines the gap. Should the inclusive formats of Section 7 never be attempted, the Union's instruments preview the resulting

architecture--a cable regime written by a regulatory bloc, the middle power moment naming one bloc's division of labor. The opening, however, is only half of the structural picture, and an argument built on it alone would be wishful institutionalism. This section, therefore, proceeds in two steps: it first states, and critically examines the credibility premise on which the opening rests, then specifies three constraint hypotheses that explain why the opening has not yet been seized.

The Credibility Premise

The argument to this point trades on an assumption pervasive in the middle power literature and, until now, implicit here: that middle powers are relatively neutral actors whose distance from hegemonic ambition renders them credible architects of rules the great powers cannot supply. The premise is twice as vulnerable. It courts definitional circularity, because the behavioral definition classifies states as middle powers partly by their pursuit of compromise and good citizenship (Cooper et al., 1993).

As a result, attributing credibility to them risks restating the definition rather than reporting a finding--a criticism Chapnick (1999) levels against the behavioral approach. Moreover, it mistakes a reputation for a property. Neutrality is not something a state has but something particular audiences ascribe, on criteria of their own choosing, and can withdraw. The honest-broker image was itself a deliberate artifact of Canadian and Australian statecraft--cultivated national branding that served concrete interests in institutional access (Higgott & Cooper, 1990; Ravenhill, 1998)--and there is no reason to expect its cable-era analogs to be less strategic.

Disaggregating audiences dissolves any unitary notion of middle power credibility. Credibility with Washington is conferred by alliance reliability; with Beijing, by demonstrated independence from Washington; with developing coastal states, by connectivity provision without conditionality; with hyperscale owners, by regulatory predictability. These criteria are partly incompatible: the alliance behavior that earns trust in one capital forfeits it in another, and Beijing's post-Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) coercion of Seoul (Snyder, 2018) shows the second audience applying its test punitively. Nor does absence of hegemonic ambition entail absence of interests: each of the four states fields a national champion that profits from the securitized status quo, and three carry alliance commitments binding them to one side of the rivalry. "Not a hegemon" and "neutral" are different claims, and only the first is established by the category itself.

Credibility must therefore enter the framework as a variable rather than a premise: relational, audience-specific, endogenous to the initiatives it is invoked to explain, and unevenly distributed across the cases. The constraint hypotheses below specify where the premise fails; the case studies ask what evidence would demonstrate that credibility is earned rather than asserted; and the regime-building model of Section 7 must, audience by audience, manufacture the credibility the opening argument would otherwise presuppose.

Conditions of Middle Power Failure

The structural opening generates an obligation of symmetry. If the gap's persistence despite shared great power interests is a puzzle, the absence of middle power regime-building despite the opening is a puzzle of the same form. The four states have possessed the requisite stakes, positioning, and track records for well over a decade, yet no middle-power-led cable governance framework exists; the initiatives documented below are achievements in adjacent domains. This nonevent is evidence, and three constraint hypotheses account for it.

The first is *structural symmetry*: the properties that undermine great power cooperation bind middle powers equally. Nothing in Sections 2 and 3 is dyad-specific: Oye's (1986) variables apply to any prospective architect, and attribution does not become any more tractable because the proposing state is Seoul rather than Washington. Most consequentially, the concentration of ownership among American hyperscale firms confronts middle powers with a leverage deficit even more severe than Washington's, as those firms fall under American jurisdiction (Bratton, 2016; Musiani et al., 2016). The opening is an opening in the domain's *diplomatic* structure; the *material* structure remains as inhospitable to middle powers as to everyone else.

The second is *embedded alignment*: the four states are woven into the rivalry they would bridge. Three are formal U.S. allies dependent on security guarantees from a provider that has resisted inclusive cable governance (Lindsay, 2015). South Korea's balancing framework has already buckled once under Chinese economic coercion (Snyder, 2018). Japan's cable diplomacy operates within the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) framework, which, in practice, displaces Chinese suppliers from contested corridors (Hosoya, 2019; Shen, 2018). The commercial dimension compounds the diplomatic. NEC, Alcatel Submarine Networks, and LS Cable & System benefit directly from HMN Tech's exclusion, giving these states a revealed interest in preserving the securitized *status quo*. At the same time, the prospective coalition faces its own collective action problem, as its members compete for the same contracts. From Beijing's vantage point, an initiative convened by three American allies and a NATO member may be indistinguishable from the Washington-led frameworks it predictably rejects (Ikenberry, 2011).

Embedded alignment admits a weak and a strong reading, and intellectual honesty requires stating the strong one. The weak reading treats alignment as a constraint on bridging actors who bear alliance costs to convene across the divide. The strong reading denies the bridging characterization altogether: middle powers are not positioned between the blocs but are constituents of one of them, their cable diplomacy an intra-bloc division of labor that supplies Washington's strategy with a multilateral form. Alliance dependence gives this reading structural teeth: Seoul and Tokyo shelter under American extended deterrence, which is not fungible across domains (Snyder, 2018); Japan's security normalization has deepened rather than loosened alliance integration (Hughes, 2015); and France's return to NATO's integrated command has narrowed the Gaullist exception in operational practice (Irondele & Mérand, 2010).

On the strong reading, the record of Section 6 is bloc agency functioning as designed--the Palau and East Micronesia cables were co-financed with Washington against a Chinese bid, and the Quad partnership institutionalizes supplier exclusion (U.S. Department of State, 2020; White House, 2023). The readings are nonetheless discriminable. The weak reading predicts alliance friction in pursuit of inclusive formats: initiatives Washington resists, invitations to Chinese operators, licensing rules that do not mirror American exclusion lists. The strong reading predicts only initiatives that track allied priorities. The record matches the strong reading's predictions--no cable initiative pursued over Washington's opposition, none incorporating Chinese participation, none deviating from the exclusionary procurement line. This, however, cannot count as adjudication. Domain salience predicts an identical null record, because an actor that rationally anticipates great power vetoes never attempts inclusive formats that would generate observable friction. The evidence is consistent with the strong reading without discriminating it from a weak reading operating under anticipated futility. The regime-building model of Section 7 must accordingly be read in a double register: as a specification of what the weak reading would require middle powers to do, and as a diagnostic that, so far, no case satisfies.

The third is *domain salience*: middle power activism succeeds where great powers acquiesce, and great powers acquiesce where core security interests are not engaged. The paradigmatic cases--the Cairns Group in agricultural trade (Higgott & Cooper, 1990) and the coalitions analyzed by

Efstathiopoulos (2018) and Narlikar (2010)—operated in domains the great powers regarded as negotiable. The Ottawa Convention is the exception that proves the rule: the landmines campaign prevailed in a domain the major military powers treated as peripheral to core deterrence; the states whose interests were most engaged declined to join rather than block (Price, 1998). Cables are not such a domain: they sit adjacent to signals intelligence, and both Washington and Beijing have clear operational reasons to veto attribution and accountability norms (Lindsay, 2015; Rid, 2013). Ravenhill (1998), moreover, is a theorist of the activist window's closure: the deepening rivalry that creates demand for middle power leadership may simultaneously be destroying the permissive conditions for its supply.

These constraints structure what follows. Each case is read against the constraint that has most visibly limited it. The constraints yield observable implications: (i) if structural symmetry is decisive, middle power initiatives should stall where great power efforts do—attribution and enforcement while succeeding on technical coordination; (ii) if embedded alignment is decisive, initiatives should attract Western-aligned participants and be rebuffed by China, reproducing the two-track system; (iii) if domain salience is decisive, gains should cluster in the least intelligence-sensitive corners—repair coordination, resilience standards, developing-state connectivity.

Case Selection

Four criteria govern selection: (i) traditional middle power status in Jordaan's (2003) sense; (ii) a material stake in the cable ecosystem substantial enough to generate both a direct interest in governance outcomes and technical credibility; (iii) a claim to cross-bloc diplomatic positioning that is, conduct not confined to a single alliance system which, consistent with the credibility premise, is treated as an attribute each case must demonstrate rather than assumed by virtue of selection; and (iv) a documented record of multilateral initiative in digital or infrastructure governance so that agency can be observed rather than posited.

France is the boundary case: a permanent Security Council member and nuclear power, it exceeds the middle tier on positional criteria. Its inclusion follows the behavioral approach on which the literature has largely converged (Cooper et al., 1993) and the domain-relative character of power (Nye, 2011). In a domain whose hierarchy is defined by hyperscale ownership, supplier ecosystems, and global intelligence access, a veto and a deterrent are largely non-fungible, and France occupies a functionally intermediate position—too substantial to be a rule-taker, unable to set rules unilaterally, and therefore reliant on precisely the multilateral strategies the literature describes.

Its anomalous aggregate rank supplies a hard case, though a bounded one. In the convening register, France is pushed toward reframing, coalition-building, and norm entrepreneurship, strengthening the inference that these mechanisms reflect structural position rather than material weakness. However, Section 6 shows Paris exiting the middle-power repertoire toward ownership, precisely where its endowments permit, so the hard case confirms the mechanisms only where France actually lacks great power options. The framework is applied specifically to France's conduct in the cable domain, with no claim that France is a middle power *tout court*.

The set's composition is deliberate. Japan and France host two of the three firms—NEC and Alcatel Submarine Networks that, with the American supplier SubCom, dominate global cable production and installation (Wall & Morcos, 2021). South Korea contributes a rising manufacturer, LS Cable & System (TeleGeography, 2026), and the most delicate cross-bloc balancing act of any U.S. ally (Snyder, 2018). Norway supplies geography, maritime institutional expertise, and a mediation tradition rather than industrial scale (Rottem, 2014), thereby guarding against the inference that industrial capacity is the only route to agency. Together, the four span

the range of leverage types: Japan combines an incumbent manufacturer with the principal trans-Pacific landing hub; France pairs an incumbent manufacturer with direct state ownership—of Alcatel Submarine Networks and, through Orange, of carrier and repair capacity—and the Mediterranean gateway at Marseille; South Korea contributes a rising manufacturer and a regional landing hub without incumbent dominance; and Norway holds geographic position and institutional expertise without industrial scale.

Methodologically, the set is a diverse case selection (Seawright & Gerring, 2008), holding constant middle power status and a substantial cable-domain stake while maximizing variation in region, alliance configuration, threat vector, and source of leverage. The comparison is structured and focused (George & Bennett, 2005) through five standardized questions: (i) What material stake does the state hold in the cable ecosystem—manufacturing, landing geography, repair capacity, or carrier ownership? (ii) What is its diplomatic positioning relative to the U.S.–China dyad, and how has that positioning been tested? (iii) What documented record of multilateral initiative exists in digital or infrastructure governance, and in which venues? (iv) Which of the three constraints has most visibly limited cable-specific action, and through what observable mechanism? (v) What evidence, if any, shows credibility being earned with audiences beyond the Western alliance rather than asserted?

Answers are drawn from official documents, initiative records, and secondary scholarship; the case narratives report them in this order. If the Section 7 mechanisms recur across cases whose material foundations differ this sharply, they likely derive from shared structural position; if they cluster only in the industrially endowed cases, the framework's claims narrow accordingly. The argument itself excludes the United States and China; the United Kingdom fails the cross-bloc positioning criterion; Australia and Canada, though paradigmatic traditional middle powers (Cooper et al., 1993), lack indigenous manufacturing at global scale; and emerging middle powers fall outside on Jordaan's (2003) grounds. Because cases were selected on capability criteria rather than outcomes, the analysis avoids selecting on the dependent variable though a four-case comparison remains a theory-developing plausibility probe, not a definitive causal test.

Case Studies in Middle Power Cable Diplomacy

South Korea

South Korea occupies a distinctive position. LS Cable & System is a major Korean cable manufacturer with growing investments in submarine and Indo-Pacific markets (TeleGeography, 2026)—an industrial stake that yields commercial interest and technical credibility. Seoul's candidacy also rests on a claimed capacity to maintain working relationships across the U.S.–China divide (Snyder, 2018), a claim the record permits us to assess. That capacity is reflected in several concrete initiatives: Seoul hosted the third global Conference on Cyberspace in 2013 and brokered the Seoul Framework for and Commitment to Open and Secure Cyberspace, endorsed by Western and non-Western delegations alike (Seoul Conference on Cyberspace, 2013); Korea hosted the 2014 ITU Plenipotentiary Conference in Busan (International Telecommunication Union, 2014); and Korean experts have served on successive UN Groups of Governmental Experts while the Korea Internet & Security Agency institutionalized cybersecurity capacity-building (Kim, 2014).

Each instance carries the signature the model predicts—convening, framework drafting, capacity-building—and Korea's cable-specific footprint reinforces this: Busan is a major landing hub, and KT Submarine operates cable-laying and repair vessels servicing East Asian

maintenance arrangements (TeleGeography, 2026). Whether this capacity has been directed at cable governance is a separate question. The record contains no such initiative--a gap consistent with the constraints of Section 5.

The case also displays embedded alignment at its sharpest. Chinese retaliation after the 2017 THAAD deployment demonstrated both Beijing's willingness to weaponize interdependence against a bridging state and the limits of Seoul's capacity to absorb the costs (Farrell & Newman, 2019; Snyder, 2018)--punishment administered not for choosing the American side but for failing to refuse it. Seoul's response--framing cable security as technical and commercial rather than military--is a strategy for exercising agency within the constraint, not evidence of overcoming it. It also starkly illustrates the audience-relativity of credibility: the convening record that certifies Seoul's neutrality before technical and multilateral audiences carries no weight in Beijing once an initiative is coded as alliance behavior. The constraint has hard security foundations that no diplomatic framing can dissolve: dependence on American extended deterrence renders Seoul's alignment structurally nonnegotiable in any crisis that matters--precisely when cable governance commitments would be tested. A bridging posture sustainable only in peacetime and in domains Washington has not yet securitized is a far narrower asset than "cross-bloc credibility" suggests.

Japan

Japan's case is particularly instructive. NEC is among the world's oldest and most sophisticated cable manufacturers, and Japan is the critical trans-Pacific hub (TeleGeography, 2026; Wall & Morcos, 2021); its constitutionally constrained security posture has cultivated a reputation for noncoercive statecraft that enhances the palatability of Japanese-led initiatives (Hughes, 2015). The Data Free Flow with Trust (DFFT) initiative, launched at the 2019 G20 Osaka Summit, displays both the reach and the limits of Japanese norm entrepreneurship. It attracted roughly two dozen signatories, but India, Indonesia, and South Africa declined, objecting that the plurilateral format circumvented multilateral channels (Dale & Aizawa, 2024; G20, 2019).

The concept proved durable: Japan co-convened the WTO e-commerce Joint Statement Initiative and under its 2023 G7 presidency, secured an institutional arrangement housed at the OECD (G7, 2023), demonstrating concept origination, coalition assembly, and institutional embedding. However, the coalition was drawn overwhelmingly from OECD-aligned states, and the developing-state abstentions prefigure the credibility problem a cable initiative would confront in sharper form.

Japan's cable diplomacy is similarly documentable: Tokyo joined Washington and Canberra in financing a cable spur to Palau in 2020, funded the East Micronesia system directly after a development-bank tender collapsed over security objections to an HMN Tech bid (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2023; U.S. Department of State, 2020), and the Quad's 2023 cable connectivity and resilience partnership extends the pattern into a standing framework (White House, 2023). These episodes establish capacity for coordinated infrastructure finance, but they also show how deeply Japanese cable diplomacy is embedded in one side of the rivalry.

FOIP's infrastructure components operate as instruments of supplier competition, displacing Chinese bids (Hosoya, 2019; Shen, 2018), whereas NEC profits directly from the securitized procurement environment that an inclusive regime would relax. Read through the strong version of embedded alignment, the record admits a more austere interpretation--not a bridging actor constrained by its alliance but the alliance's most capable infrastructure arm, whose norm entrepreneurship supplies multilateral form to an exclusionary strategy authored elsewhere. The case evidence cannot yet reject that interpretation; only an initiative that cost Tokyo something in Washington could.

France

France's position derives from two sources of leverage: Alcatel Submarine Networks, a global leader in cable production and installation (Wall & Morcos, 2021), and an independent posture within NATO that makes Paris appear less reflexively aligned with Washington than other allies. The 2018 Paris Call for Trust and Security in Cyberspace illustrates the resulting ambitions: it grew to more than 1,000 signatories, among them more than 80 states and companies, including Microsoft and Google, and the United States, absent at launch, joined in 2021 (Paris Call, 2018, 2021)--a middle-power-convened platform can outlast great power indifference and eventually recruit a great power itself. On the material side, the state has moved from influence toward ownership: the 2022 seabed strategy designated the ocean floor, cables included, a domain of strategic competition (Ministère des Armées, 2022), and in 2024, the state agreed to acquire a controlling stake in Alcatel Submarine Networks from Nokia (Nokia, 2024). Together with Orange Marine's repair fleet, Paris holds the most complete tool-set in the sample--assembled, however, under an explicitly sovereignty-first rationale.

France thus exhibits the commercial face of embedded alignment: Alcatel Submarine Networks competes directly with HMN Tech, aligning Paris's interests with the exclusionary procurement of the Western bloc even as its diplomacy gestures beyond it. The Paris Call's coalition did not initially include any of the actors whose conduct its norms were meant to govern. Convening power and constraining power are not the same thing. The Gaullist reputation, moreover, is precisely the kind of asset the credibility premise warns against treating as property: an image Paris actively cultivates and monetizes, now in visible tension with a sovereignty-first industrial policy that, from outside the Western bloc, reads like a third national bid for infrastructure power.

The acquisition also marks the boundary of the hard-case inference drawn in Section 5: where material endowments permit ownership, Paris takes it, and the middle power repertoire describes only the remainder of French conduct. Nor is the French exception self-evidently an exit from bloc structure. Because Paris rejoined NATO's integrated command in 2009, its independence has operated inside allied planning (Irondele & Mérand, 2010), and the EU instruments that multiply French jurisdictional weight (Bradford, 2020; European Commission, 2024) consolidate a regulatory bloc whose cable-security agenda has run parallel to Washington's rather than across the divide. Strategic autonomy in the European register may, in this domain, amount to a third pole of bloc competition rather than a bridge over it. Whether French cable diplomacy can build coalitions that constrain rather than merely convene is the operative question for the model below.

Norway

Norway's relevance derives from geography, tradition, and institutional expertise rather than industrial scale. It occupies a strategically vital position along Arctic and North Atlantic corridors. Its most distinctive asset is a record of maritime cooperation durable under geopolitical stress. Norwegian actors have long participated in the ICPC's operator-level coordination (Bueger & Liebetrau, 2021). More significantly, the 2010 delimitation treaty with Russia resolved a four-decade Barents Sea dispute, and the Joint Norwegian-Russian Fisheries Commission has functioned continuously since the mid-1970s through every downturn in East-West relations, including the post-2014 sanctions period (Østhagen, 2016). Durability under stress, not convening alone, is the Norwegian signature--precisely the attribute a cable framework spanning rival blocs would require.

Two incidents have demonstrated Norway's stake: in January 2022, one of the two fiber connections linking Svalbard to the mainland was damaged, and, the preceding year, sections

of the Lofoten–Vesterålen ocean observatory’s cable network were severed and removed from the seabed (The Barents Observer, 2022). Neither episode produced public attribution; both exemplify, at the scale of a single state’s infrastructure, the accountability vacuum theorized in Section 2.

Oslo’s response was institutional in exactly the manner the model predicts--Norway, jointly with Germany, pressed for a dedicated NATO role in protecting critical undersea infrastructure. This initiative fed the alliance’s establishment of coordination machinery for that task (Norwegian Ministry of Defence, 2024). However, the episode cuts both ways: it demonstrates agenda-setting under direct provocation, yet the venue chosen was the Western alliance itself, confirmation of the embedded-alignment constraint rather than an exception to it. Norway’s limiting constraint is marginality to the central dyad: commanding no supplier, no hyperscale customer, and no procurement market of consequence, Oslo cannot alter the incentives of Washington or Beijing. Its Arctic achievements were built with Russia in domains the great powers treated as peripheral, and deteriorating Western–Russian relations have narrowed even that space. The Norwegian case thus poses domain salience most directly: mediation is valuable only where the parties wish to be mediated, and nothing in the cable domain suggests that they do.

The Middle Power Regime-Building Model

This comparative analysis can be synthesized into a regime-building model resting on three mechanisms--reframing, coalition-building, and norm entrepreneurship--each addressed to one of the constraints, though the pairings are not equally strong. Reframing targets *domain salience*: recasting cables as global public good infrastructure (Kaul et al., 1999) shifts the issue from the intelligence-adjacent core, where great power vetoes operate, toward the resilience periphery, where middle power activism has historically been tolerated. This is an institutional and rhetorical move, as public goods entail broad multilateral venues (Keohane & Victor, 2011).

Coalition-building targets *embedded alignment*: assembling participants beyond the Western alliance system--particularly developing states dependent on connectivity--is the only available answer to the perception that middle power initiatives are Washington’s frameworks in multilateral dress (Efsthathopoulos, 2018; Narlikar, 2010). The pairing carries an untested premise: broad Southern participation satisfies the developing-state audience’s credibility criterion, but it moves Beijing’s criterion only if Beijing reads the breadth of participation as evidence about the conveners themselves--a premise that the Osaka Track G20’s data-governance initiative abstentions do not encourage.

Norm entrepreneurship targets *structural symmetry*, and this is the model’s most vulnerable joint: standard-setting can lengthen the shadow of the future at the margins (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998) but cannot by itself alter payoffs, bind hyperscale owners, or render attribution tractable. The model’s plausibility, therefore, rests on sequencing--on whether gains from reframing and coalition-building can accumulate into conditions under which norm entrepreneurship becomes effective rather than declaratory.

Each mechanism can be specified. Reframing shifts the interpretive framework within which an issue is understood (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998) by repositioning cables from national security assets to global public good infrastructure whose reliability benefits all states, regardless of alignment. Coalition-building assembles durable groups around shared governance interests: Korea’s convening record, Japan’s noncoercive multilateralism, France’s independent posture, and Norway’s Arctic engagement supply complementary assets to bring together states with shared infrastructure vulnerabilities--including developing nations dependent on cable connectivity--

into a bloc capable of sustained pressure for reform. Norm entrepreneurship promotes specific principles through sustained institutional engagement: attribution standards, accountability mechanisms with deterrent effect, and coordinated response protocols for disruption events, with Japan, through NEC, and France, through Alcatel Submarine Networks, the natural leaders of the technical standard-setting on which such norms depend.

Running beneath all three pairings is the recast credibility premise: none of the mechanisms deploys neutrality as an existing endowment. Reframing earns credibility with great power audiences by demonstrating that intelligence equities are not in play; coalition-building earns it with non-Western audiences by ceding real agenda control; and every gain is audience-specific and revocable--a corporate-heavy platform that wins hyperscale participation may, for that reason, deepen Beijing's suspicion. The model's currency is credibility under construction, not credibility possessed.

The strong reading of embedded alignment, moreover, sets the bar the model must clear. If middle power cable diplomacy is an intra-bloc division of labor, reframing and coalition-building will not be permitted to run where the model requires: alliance managers will channel middle power energy into resilience work inside the bloc--NATO coordination cells, Quad partnerships, EU recommendations--whereas the inclusive formats prescribed here remain unattempted. The mechanisms are therefore also diagnostics, each prescribing an action that is cheap under the weak reading and prohibitively costly under the strong one: a cable-security dialogue with Chinese operator participation, a landing license conditioned on standards that Washington has not endorsed, connectivity finance without supplier exclusion. Until one such action is observed, the claim that middle powers can build regimes across the divide, rather than administer one side of it, rests on theory.

Engaging the Private Infrastructure Layer

The model, as elaborated, shares a limitation with the regime theory it moves beyond: its mechanisms are exercised by states upon states, through interstate forums. In this domain, however, ownership is governance--a purely interstate regime would govern the map, not the territory. The object of regime-building must therefore be a hybrid arrangement within a broader regime complex (Keohane & Victor, 2011), in which interstate elements coexist with orchestrated public-private platforms that enlist infrastructure owners as intermediaries rather than regulating them solely as objects (Abbott et al., 2015). Middle powers possess three levers for constructing such an arrangement.

The first is jurisdictional. Cables are transnational, but landing points are not: landing licenses, permitting regimes, and cable protection zones are where sovereignty bites on privately owned assets, and the four states control disproportionately valuable landing geography--Japan as the principal trans-Pacific hub, Marseille as the Mediterranean gateway, Korea for Northeast Asia, and Norway for prospective Arctic routes. Licensing conditions can embed resilience standards, incident-reporting requirements, and route-diversity obligations without state ownership of a single kilometer of fiber. Landing geography is a *distributed* chokepoint (Farrell & Newman, 2019), and middle powers occupy some of its most valuable nodes.

The second is ownership, where the clean state-private division dissolves on inspection. France retains a substantial stake in Orange, Norway a majority holding in Telenor, and global repair capacity--concentrated in a few dozen specialized vessels--resides partly in state-linked firms such as Orange Marine and KT Submarine. At the same time, hyperscale owners co-invest with regional carriers, giving middle power firms seats in cable consortia.

The third is orchestration. The Paris Call demonstrates that hyperscale owners will join

middle-power-convened platforms under some conditions. A bargain space exists because interests partially align--owners want resilience, predictable permitting, and insulation from the two-track procurement conflict (Shen, 2018); middle powers can offer streamlined licensing and repair access in exchange for transparency and participation in standards development.

The countervailing force is asymmetric exit: hyperscale owners can route around any single jurisdiction, and no single middle power can regulate Google. The constraint converts coordination from an option into a necessary condition--a harmonized landing-license framework among the principal middle power landing states would be individually ignorable but collectively unavoidable--and the record shows that condition met, so far, in exactly one region. Nor must coordination be conjured from nothing. France's weight is multiplied by EU membership, whose market scale raises the cost of regulatory exit for even the largest platform firms (Bradford, 2020). The Union has begun governing submarine infrastructure directly through its 2024 Recommendation and 2025 Action Plan (European Commission, 2024)--regulatory aggregation that converts individually escapable landing leverage into bloc-scale market-access conditions, and marks the analog, thus far unrealized, that Tokyo-Seoul coordination would supply.

That absence is itself overdetermined, because the two states' supplier rivalry makes the coalition's internal collective action problem hardest exactly where its jurisdictional leverage would be greatest. The orchestration channel yields an observable implication: if viable, hyperscale participation in middle power platforms should recur beyond the Paris Call; if asymmetric exit dominates, the record will show landing-state defection and regulatory arbitrage.

Toward a Research and Policy Agenda

This analysis does not, first, point to a dedicated international framework for cable protection--though it ends there. Existing arrangements--UNCLOS provisions, the ICPC's voluntary guidelines, scattered bilateral agreements--constitute a patchwork rather than a regime (United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 2023), and a complete framework would require attribution norms, accountability mechanisms with deterrent effect, coordinated response protocols, and monitoring and enforcement capacity. However, Sections 5 through 7 establish that precisely these elements are the ones the great powers have affirmative operational reasons to veto, and a framework proposed ahead of its preconditions would be rejected as one bloc's instrument. The agenda that follows is therefore keyed to the diagnostics already specified: what researchers should observe, and what the governments examined here should do first.

Observing the Diagnostics

The three constraint hypotheses yield a monitoring program rather than a verdict. Each new initiative in the domain should be coded on three dimensions: where it stalls (on attribution and enforcement, as structural symmetry predicts, or elsewhere), whom it attracts (Western-aligned participants only, as embedded alignment predicts, or partners across the divide), and where its gains cluster (in repair coordination, resilience standards, and developing-state connectivity, as domain salience predicts, or in intelligence-adjacent territory). A decade of initiatives coded on these dimensions would show which constraint binds hardest--information no single case can supply. The weak and strong readings of embedded alignment require a standing observational protocol built on the three discriminating actions of Section 5: any documented instance falsifies the strong reading; continued absence accumulates support for it, or for a weak reading operating under anticipated futility.

The private-layer extension yields its own observables. If orchestration is viable, hyperscale participation in middle-power-convened platforms should recur beyond the Paris Call; if asymmetric exit dominates, the record will show landing-state defection and regulatory arbitrage--outcomes trackable through consortium composition, landing-license registries, and route filings (TeleGeography, 2026). The Union's 2024 Recommendation and 2025 Action Plan supply the first compliance test of bloc-scale landing leverage: whether hyperscale owners adjust routing, reporting, and security practices, or route around the European market, will indicate whether the Brussels-effect mechanism (Bradford, 2020) extends from data regulation to physical infrastructure. Three theoretical tasks frame these observations: the relationship between infrastructure vulnerability and coercive leverage remains undertheorized (Farrell & Newman, 2019); when hyperscale firms collectively own substantial cable capacity, the governance question is whether the relevant actors are states at all (Musiani et al., 2016); and how states define the threshold between criminal damage, hybrid attack, and act of war remains open (Rid, 2013). Comparative analysis of how states translate infrastructure dependencies into advantage would serve all three, and the cable domain offers rich material given documented sabotage and the Digital Silk Road literature (Jones & Hameiri, 2020).

Sequencing the Policy Tasks

For governments, the model's sequencing rule--intelligence equities quarantined, resilience before standards, standards before anything touching attribution--translates into differentiated first moves. Norway's comparative advantage lies where domain salience permits gains: operator-level and technical venues, through ICPC-anchored incident-notification and repair-access protocols that extend its maritime cooperation record into cable-specific machinery (Bueger & Liebetrau, 2021). Japan and South Korea hold the unrealized jurisdictional analogue to European aggregation: a harmonized Northeast Asian landing-license framework covering resilience standards, incident reporting, and route-diversity obligations. Because their supplier rivalry makes contract allocation the hardest issue between them, the first instruments should be supplier-neutral, testing whether the coalition's internal collective action problem can be sequenced around. France's task is to extend European regulatory aggregation beyond bloc parallelism: implementing the 2024 Recommendation and 2025 Action Plan (European Commission, 2024) in forms open to third-country operators, and directing the Paris Call's demonstrated convening capacity toward one genuinely inclusive format.

One task belongs to whichever government moves first. Of the three discriminating actions, connectivity finance without supplier exclusion is the least costly: it engages no intelligence equity, requires no Chinese operator at any table, and produces a development good regardless of its diagnostic yield. A middle power financing a developing-state cable on open tender would simultaneously supply the connectivity the two-track system withholds and the single observation this literature most needs. The dedicated framework then re-enters as horizon rather than starting point: attribution norms, accountability mechanisms, and coordinated response protocols remain the terminal requirements of a genuine regime, but they become negotiable only if the resilience gains above are banked, the quarantine holds, and at least one diagnostic action shows a middle power acting across the divide. Proposed today, such a framework would be vetoed--and the identity of its proposer read as evidence of whose instrument it was. Proposed after the sequence, it would arrive as the codification of practice rather than of aspiration.

Conclusion

The governance of strategic infrastructure is among the central unsolved challenges of contemporary international politics, and it is growing more urgent. When Baltic Sea cables and pipelines were damaged in 2023, the episode exposed not merely a physical vulnerability but an institutional one: decades of deepening interdependence had produced no commensurate architecture of protection, accountability, or coordinated response. The technology-power framework advanced here extends regime theory rather than replacing it, incorporating the agency of private infrastructure actors, the structural effects of technological change on cooperation incentives, and the opportunities available to states combining technical credibility with cross-bloc legitimacy--a legitimacy treated throughout as audience-relative, contestable, and earned rather than an attribute of the middle power category.

The comparative analysis demonstrates that middle powers hold assets that could make them not merely objects of great power competition (Snyder, 2018) but architects of governance frameworks that will shape the international order (Ikenberry, 2011), while establishing, with equal clarity, that every deployment of those assets documented here has occurred within one bloc rather than across the divide. Each case contributes a distinct asset and exposes its distinct limit: South Korea's convening record certifies a cross-bloc credibility that proved revocable under pressure and remains untested in the cable domain; Japan's norm entrepreneurship, grounded in unrivaled industrial capacity, has assembled coalitions almost entirely from the bloc it would need to reach beyond; France holds the most complete tool set yet has demonstrated convening rather than constraining power across alliance boundaries; and Norway alone has sustained cooperation with a rival under stress in domains the great powers treated as peripheral, a description the cable domain does not fit. Great power rivalry has not merely failed to produce cooperative governance; it has actively impeded it. The cases document the raw material for seizing the structural opening; they do not yet document its seizure.

History offers precedents: the Ottawa Process on landmines, the coalition diplomacy behind the International Criminal Court, and middle power engagement in the nonproliferation architecture all show that states without hegemonic power can reshape the institutional landscape (Price, 1998). Cable governance is more contested than any of these precedents, but the structural logic applies with equal force. The cables on the ocean floor are the physical substrate of the contemporary international order and among its most vulnerable points, their importance invisible precisely because they function reliably. The question is not whether they will be governed, but by whom, according to what principles, and in whose interests. That capacity is real but bounded, and the boundaries have been specified rather than conceded. The claim advanced here is conditional: middle power regime-building can close the governance gap to the extent that great power intelligence equities are quarantined from the resilience agenda, presupposing great power acquiescence rather than active cooperation, the distinction on which the Ottawa precedent turned, that coalitions extend beyond the Western alliance system, that standard-setting is sequenced behind those gains, and that hyperscale owners are enlisted as intermediaries rather than bypassed as obstacles.

The same decade that tests these propositions will adjudicate between the weak and strong readings of embedded alignment: if middle power cable diplomacy never diverges from allied strategy, the correct conclusion will be not that the model failed but that its would-be agents were never in the middle to begin with. The window identified by Ravenhill (1998) may be open now, but the same analysis implies it is narrowing as competition consolidates into incompatible governance spheres. The diagnostics specified here will, within the decade, show whether the middle power moment names a governance opening or one bloc's division of labor.

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