

# **Middle Power alignment in the Indo-Pacific: Securing agency through Neo-middle Power Diplomacy**

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Peer-reviewed Conference Paper

2019 U.S. Naval War College and East Asia Security Centre Conference

Between Scylla and Charybdis: Is there a Middle Path for Middle Powers in the Indo-Pacific Region?

<https://easc.scholasticahq.com/>

Published Version August 2020

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**Abstract:** Middle powers in the Indo-Pacific are faced with a trifecta of pressures including China's re-emergence as central pole in the region, deepening Sino-U.S. strategic competition, and questions related to U.S. leadership in the region. Specific concerns related to China include maritime security, the openness of the emerging digital economy, and the practice of coercive economic behavior, to which middle powers are vulnerable. To respond to these pressures some middle powers are adapting to these changing dynamics and transforming their middle power diplomacy towards what the author coins as *neo-middle power diplomacy*. This new type of diplomacy proactively engages in behavior which includes lobbying, insulating, and rulemaking in the realms of security, trade and international law, and aims to ensure that middle powers' interests are not affected by the Sino-U.S. strategic competition.

**Keywords:** Middle Powers, diplomacy, great power relations, Indo-Pacific

## I. INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

In the 1990s, scholars such as Soeya (2005) argued that “[m]iddle [p]ower does not just mean a state’s size or military or economic power. Rather, ‘middle power diplomacy’ is defined by the issue area where a state invests its resources and knowledge.” This functional approach contrasted the normative character of middle powers such as Australia, Canada and arguably Japan in buttressing international institutions that focused on human rights, environmental issues and even arms regulations (Behringer, 2005). These roles were facilitated by a predictable, United States-led international rules-based order.

Fast forward to the 2010s, the international system looks very different. The change in the balance of power related to China’s rise is, for middle powers, aggravated by their deepening concerns about the United States’ (US) leadership in the region. Perceived and real unilateralism by the US under the most recent banner of America First makes continuance of their post-1940s sustained stabilizing presence in the region questionable (White, 2013). Furthermore, China is now recognized as a strategic rival by the US itself (DoD, 2019). China is thus successfully challenging the US’ decades long security architecture in what is now known as the Indo-Pacific (Goh, 2019). Specific challenges include maritime security, openness of the emerging digital economy, and a practiced China-state behavior of economic coercion (Nagy, 2020).

Middle powers allied or partnered with the US are thus vulnerable in all three areas as their relationship with the US is ripe to be exploited by China. In fact, increasingly powerful and revisionist China is actively attempting to weaken their support for US foreign policies by targeting them. Recent examples include economic coercion against South Korea after the US sponsored THAAD missile system was installed in the fall of 2017 (Yang, 2019). China also employed similar punitive economic tactics against Canada, in 2018, but additionally added the illegal practice of hostage diplomacy, by arbitrarily detaining Canadians Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor after the legal arrest for extradition to the US of Huawei executive Meng Wangzhou (Inkster, 2019).

Thus, China’s threats and aggressive *imperial* policies signal a new form of middle power diplomacy may be required. Indeed, when combined with the increasing fluidity of middle powers relative to each other and compared to the great power capacity and the behavior of the US and China, a new middle power diplomacy is desperately needed! What arguably needs to emerge during the 2020s, as the damaging consequences of US-China strategic rivalry mount principally in the Indo-Pacific, is a form of middle powers diplomacy which retains relevance and provides greater agency.

Indeed, middle powers are already aligning to adapt to these changing dynamics. With that in mind, the conundrum that this paper aims to explore includes why middle powers are transforming their middle power diplomacy and what are concrete manifestations of that transformation. Key lines of inquiry to delve into this puzzle include: 1) How do middle powers understand the relationship between great power rivalry and its impact on the development of the Indo-Pacific?; 2) In what ways are they transforming their middle power diplomacy; and 3) Is their formal or informal institutionalization of middle power diplomacy?

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my sincere thanks to the US Naval War College and the East Asia Security Centre for their generous support enabling my participation in the conference “Between Scylla and Charybdis: Is there a Middle Path for Middle Powers in the Indo-Pacific Region?” Co-sponsored by the US Naval War College and the East Asia Security Centre, Bond University. October 3-5th, 2019.

To achieve this objective, this paper explores how traditional definitions of middle power diplomacy that focus on a normative, functional and hierarchical approach are transforming. A more proactive diplomacy, or what I term – *neo-middle power diplomacy* – that engages in behavior that could be categorized as lobbying, insulating, and rule-making in the realms of security, trade and international law is emerging.

While still normative in nature and committed to buttressing international law, what distinguishes neo-middle power diplomacy from the traditional form is that middle powers align to ensure that their national interests are not deleteriously effected by the deepening strategic competition between the great powers US and China. Middle powers actively balance against both China and the US and their diplomacy migrates beyond advocating for human rights, human security and other so-called “soft” international issues to a diplomacy that cultivates a critical mass of capabilities in order to constrain, lobby, and advocate for their collective middle powers national interests. This is a systemic shift which changes the behavior of, in particular US allied or partnered middle powers, who will at times align with the US, but germanely at times in not.

This paper has four sections. The first section serves to introduce the concerns of middle powers in the Indo-Pacific. The second section then briefly discusses middle power diplomacy theory to build upon middle power theory. The central purpose of this section is to articulate for what the I call *neo-middle power diplomacy*. The third section will then look at examples in which neo-middle power diplomacy is being practiced: 1) maritime security; 2) the digital economy; and 3) economic cooperation. These three cases are not meant to be an exhaustive list of neo-middle power diplomacy but contemporaneous examples that indeed demonstrate that middle powers are transforming their diplomacy to meet the challenges and opportunities in the Indo-Pacific that is becoming increasingly framed by the strategic competition between the US and China. The fourth section will close this paper and propose four areas that middle powers should focus on to create a sustainable and consequential middle power alignment.

## II. MIDDLE POWER TO NEO-MIDDLE POWER DIPLOMACY

The distinction between great powers, middle powers and small powers has become more pronounced. During the Cold-War the US and Soviet Union were understood as superpowers competing for global dominance. Their comprehensive power as economic, ideological and military strength far surpassed all other states accounting for their central roles in the organization of the international system at the time. During this period, traditional middle powers such as Australia, Canada and other European states pursued normative-based policies focusing on human rights, human security, the advocacy of disarmament, and the banning of landmines (Behringer, 2005). As middle powers, their limited capacities required them to focus on issues that were tolerated by the superpowers. Importantly, their relationship with the globally engaged US allowed middle powers to carve out a role on “soft” issues, a relationship that is being challenged (Paltiel, 2019).

The diplomacy engaged in by middle powers during the Cold War is not explained by scholars that stress power, hierarchy, and order in their analysis of the international system. Most scholars focus on great powers and others states as sub-structural units (Waltz, 2010). This view reflects traditional views of international relations with survival, self-help and a statist view of international affairs being the core logic behind the behavior of states. Important as they are to understanding the logic behind state behavior, this line of thinking

does not give us insight into what the role of states that find themselves in the middle of the power continuum between great/superpowers such as the US and China, and small powers such as Nepal, Greece or Cambodia.

Scholars such as Robertson (2017: p.355) argue that scholars and practitioners assumed the term ‘middle power’ to be self-defined. He argues that “the diversity of middle-power definitions and their use to describe all manner of states leads to substantial confusion”. Hence defining a middle power is a challenge to students, scholars and practitioners. Others view middle powers through the lens of functional capabilities, that is states that participate in multilateral and peacekeeping affairs; and states with moderate international influence are referred as ‘middle power’ states (Chapnick 1999: 74).

Chapnick also conceptualizes middle powers in terms of function, behavior and hierarchy (Chapnick 1999: 73-82). For Chapnick, at the functional level a state that can influence areas and functions in international relations is considered a middle power. The same is true for behavior. If a country plays a role thought to be of a middle power or if it identifies itself as such. Lastly, at a hierarchical level a state can be determined a middle power if we rank and categorizes states related to their capabilities. Based on Chapnick’s model, states such as Australia, Canada, Japan, India and South Korea are middle powers as their behavior reflect “the tendency to pursue multilateral solutions to international problems, the tendency to embrace compromise positions in international disputes, the tendency to embrace notions of ‘good international citizenship’ to guide...diplomacy” (Neack 2000: 2; Cooper 1993: 19).

The functional approach that Chapnick argues contrast with scholars such as Ping who argues that power is provided by strategic territory, military and economic resources, ideology and level of economic development (Ping, 2017). Ping puts forward the idea that there is no designed formula or model to identify middle power and identification rather rests on the ability of the definer. Therefore, the source of power and identification of the middle position is significant (Ping 2017:12).

Neack asserts that middle powers help to maintain international order through coalition building, serving as mediators and “go-betweens,” as well as through international conflict management and conflict resolution activities such as United Nations peacekeeping (Neack 2000). She argues that there is an imperative that middle powers have “a moral responsibility and collective ability to protect the international order” from those who would threaten it; and this is the rationale behind middle powers performing these internationalist activities (Neack 2000: 2).

States such as India, Japan and Australia, based on the rank of their capabilities within the Indo-Pacific region are generally identified as either major powers in the case of India and Japan or a middle power as in the case of Australia. Interestingly, according to the Lowy Institute’s 2018 Power Index, these states are closer in relative power to each other compared with the difference between China and US, the identified great powers. Thus, for this paper Australia, Japan and India that will be considered collectively as middle powers of the Indo-Pacific.

Borrowing from my paper on middle power cooperation in the maritime domain of the Indo-Pacific:

[N]eo-middle power diplomacy is understood as proactive foreign policy by middle powers that actively aims to shape regional order through aligning collective capabilities and capacities. What distinguishes neo-middle power diplomacy from so-called traditional middle power diplomacy is that neo-middle power diplomacy moves beyond the focus of buttressing existing international institutions and focusing on normative or issue-based advocacy such as human security, human rights or the abolition of land mines, to contributing to regional/global public goods through cooperation, and at times in opposition to, the middle powers' traditional partner, the US. Areas of cooperation [may include] ... maritime security, surveillance, HADR, joint transits, amongst others (Nagy, 2020).

Presently, little has been written about middle powers in the Indo-Pacific and their potential role in shaping the region's development.

### **III. NEO-MIDDLE POWER DIPLOMACY IN PRACTICE**

When examining the changing nature of middle power diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific that is occurring in backdrop of the deepening strategic competition between the US and China, it is useful to peer into three areas of burgeoning cooperation: 1) maritime security; 2) the digital economy; and 3) economic cooperation. These are not meant to be representative of the kind of cooperation that is occurring, rather they are meant to highlight the breath of cooperation. Furthermore, these three examples are put forth as they illustrate the changing nature of middle power diplomacy to be neo-middle power diplomacy that proactively engages in behavior that could be categorized as lobbying, insulating, and rule-making in the realms of security, trade and international law.

#### **3.1 Maritime security: Supporting a rules-based maritime order**

China's rejection of the July 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration's decision and its building and militarizing of islands in the South China Sea (SCS) has raised serious concern among middle powers (Dinh, 2016). They question the future of an international rules-based order when the rising state flagrantly disregards existing institutions and breaks tête-a-tête promises at the leadership level (JIIA, 2019).

Under the defacto-leadership of Japan, a rules-based maritime order is being promoted through the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) Vision (MOFA, 2018). Focusing on a rules-based maritime order, middle powers are working to create a critical mass that will be appealing to stakeholders in the region. Part of that has been an evolution of FOIP to include two main pillars, a rules-based maritime order based on inclusivity and ASEAN centrality (Hosoya, 2019).

Initial momentum suggests that a version of FOIP is garnering buy-in from many middle powers. Importantly, the US' Department of Defense Indo-Pacific Strategy Report (DOD, 2019) fortifies the middle power efforts. Notwithstanding, ASEAN states are reticent to securitize Indo-Pacific maritime cooperation. India is also cautious in "not committing themselves to any initiative that is construed as a distinct 'anti-China' posturing" (Palit and Sano, 2018).

Prime Minister Lee of Singapore exemplified this concern by stressing in his speech at the 2019 Shangri-La Dialogue, that ASEAN countries do not want to choose between the US and

China when it comes to the Indo-Pacific's maritime challenges (Prime Minister's Office, 2019). This sentiment was further echoed in *The State of Southeast 2019 Asia Survey Report*, which questions the "US' reliability as a strategic partner and provider of regional security support the general trend of the region's downcast view of the US" (Tang et al. 2019, p. 17) and has "the majority view that China will be a revisionist power" (Tang et al. 2019, p. 18). Both are stressing ASEAN states.

While maintaining open Sea Lanes of Communication remains paramount, middle powers apart from ASEAN states, have been buttressing rules-based behavior in other ways in the Indo-Pacific through monitoring and surveillance activities since 2018. A Japanese example is using aircraft based in Kadena Air Base against illicit maritime activities, including ship-to-ship transfers with North Korean-flagged vessels as prohibited by United Nations Security Council Resolution (MOFA, 2019b). Formulizing and expanding the number of middle power states involved in these types of activities may stem weapons proliferation in the Indo-Pacific region.

Getting ASEAN states, India and other middle powers such as Canada, South Korea and the United Kingdom to participate in maritime security cooperation and supporting a rules-based maritime order will require middle powers that are driving the Indo-Pacific vision such as Australia and Japan to continue to place ASEAN centrality and inclusivity as the center of their policies. The former refers to any FOIP-based maritime security and support for rules-based maritime order as being supporting of ASEAN as an institution, but also to stakeholders within ASEAN. This will necessarily require all activities to be not tangentially directed at China.

This kind of maritime security cooperation and support for the rules-based maritime order would also be acceptable to India who priorities cordial economic relations with China and shuns security related organizations such as the QUAD evolving towards a more substantive and elevated institution with secretarial representation.

With these conditionalities in mind, maritime security cooperation and support for the rules-based maritime order may still transpire, but it will likely develop into areas that are seen as regional public goods that *may* have dual purpose such as search and rescue activities, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and other areas that fall under the rubric of non-traditional security cooperation.

### **3.2 Digital economy: Free Trade and Data Free Flow with Trust (DFFT)**

Current trends suggest that competition between the two great powers is leading towards a bifurcation of digital systems, a closed system led by China and an open system led by the US (Nagy, 2019a). The impact of this divergence of digital economies would require businesses two duplicate and then localize their business platforms for each digital economy (Eurasia Group, 2020). This would have the effect of increasing costs for businesses by shortening supply chains.

Thus, digital connectivity is another area where aligned middle powers are working synergistically to promote shared standards, rules and good governance. It is an example of normative middle power diplomacy in that it focuses on rule making. Working closely with Japan and other middle powers to realize the Free Trade and Data Free Flow with Trust

(DFFT) (Kantei, 2019) will be crucial in keeping the global production network and existing supply chains intact.

Already middle powers are proactively working to avoid this bifurcation of technological systems. At one level, we see Japan proactively working with the US in the form of the US-Japan Policy Cooperation Dialogue on the Internet Economy. This discussion has resulted in the US-Japan Digital Trade Agreement which “establishing enforceable rules that will support digitally-enabled suppliers from every sector of their economies to innovate and prosper, and in setting standards for other economies to emulate (Oustr, 2019).” This agreement according to the Officer of the United States Trade Representative “parallels the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement as the most comprehensive and high-standard trade agreement addressing digital trade barriers ever negotiated.” (Oustr, 2019)

At a broader level, Japan and other middle powers such as Australia and Canada have joined the Comprehensive Progressive Transpacific Partnership (CPTPP/TPP 11) which further builds on the objective of creating a critical mass of states that share the same digital trade norms (as outlined in chapter 14 on Electronic commerce (e-commerce) in the TPP 11) (GoC, 2019). Middle powers have also engaged in digital cooperation with other middle powers. For example, there is the Japan-India Digital Partnership (METI, 2018) and the Digital Economic Partnership Agreement (NZFAT, 2019) between New Zealand, Singapore and Chile. These bilateral and multilateral middle power digital arrangements both with and without the US are further buttress efforts led by the US for cooperation with middle power institutions such as the US-ASEAN Cyber Policy Dialogue, the US-ASEAN Connect: Digital Economy Series, and the US-ASEAN Smart City Partnership.

These partnerships are meant to be a comprehensive model of cooperation at the bilateral and trilateral level which is important in building the digital infrastructure and human capital for promoting a shared vision of the digital economy. This existing network of bilateral digital agreements between the US and middle powers and between middle powers themselves is evidence that a consensus between Indo-Pacific stakeholders is emerging in terms of norms on the digital economy. Linking the digital agreements and then enlarging the stakeholders involved may create a critical mass of states with shared digital economy norms that can be utilized to either encourage China to adopt shared digital norms or at least negotiate shared digital norms with an existing group of states that share the same understandings and norms related to the digital economy.

### **3.3 Economic cooperation: Defending against economic coercion**

Growing economic entanglement with China has led to many cases of economic coercion to change the behavior of states. The most recent cases of economic coercion by China include but are not exclusive to the nationalization of the Senkaku Islands in 2012 (Nagy 2013), the THAAD instalment in South Korea in 2017 (Juan 2017) and the arrest of Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou (Cardwell 2019).

In each case, China responded to decisions made in Tokyo, Seoul, and Ottawa respectively by deploying both formal and informal punitive economic measures to change the decisions taken in each capital (Heydarian 2020). The result of Chinese economic coercion included reduced tourists, increased inspections of each respective states’ businesses in China, a decrease in purchases of agricultural products (as well as other exports) with the associated negative economic consequences. As a response, middle powers are enmeshing themselves



into multilateral trade agreements. This enables them to receive the benefits of free trade but also ensure that their respective trade portfolios are diverse enough to protect themselves against economic coercion by larger states.

The Comprehensive and Progressive Transpacific Partnership (CPTPP) serves middle powers well in this regard. Expanding the agreement to include South Korea, Thailand, and the post-Brexit UK would enhance middle powers ability to defend themselves against economic coercion, by Beijing or other powers including the US. A serious case should be made to advocate for Taiwanese membership. Here, middle powers should make the case for Taiwan to be an associate member based on China's own Belt Road Initiative's (BRI) practice of having sub-state actors join the BRI without their national government joining. This is not a panacea for resisting coercive economic tactics. Notwithstanding, an expansion of CPTPP stakeholders could act as a middle power firewall against economic coercion, the weaponization of trade and tourism.

The Japan-European Union (EU) Economic Partnership also serves to partly insulate its participants from coercive economic tactics through the investment in multilateral trade (MOFA, 2019a). With its focus on trade in services, investment, e-commerce, rules that limit subsidies for state owned enterprises, protection of intellectual property rights, and regulatory cooperation, the Japan- EU Economic Partnership aids participating middle powers in insulating themselves from economic coercion through cooperation in the form of a high quality agreement.

Finally, Australia, Canada, the EU, Japan and South Korea now, to varying degrees, see themselves as casualties of US trade policy under President Trump and are actively seeking new strategies to buttress the multilateral trading system. Increasingly, this multilateralization of high-quality trade agreements is seen as a means to insulate middle powers from the America First trade policy (Terada, 2019).

## V. SUSTAINABLE NEO-MIDDLE POWER DIPLOMACY

Cohesive, effective and sustainable middle power alignment in these three domains cannot and should not occur in a vacuum. Middle powers should take ownership and elicit the cooperation of the US and like-minded states in the following specific ways (Nagy, 2019b):

*Actively seek out alignment partners* in and out of the region based on a convergence of interests. US involvement is preferred but not a prerequisite for alignment and cooperation.

*Focus on cooperation in key areas based on synergy of respective comparative advantages that stress contributions based on capabilities brought to the table not capacities.* Examples include, regularized humanitarian disaster relief activities in the SCS, East China Sea, Taiwan straits and Indian Ocean, joint transits in parts of the Indo-Pacific that are being challenged in terms of their international nature, and regularized middle power diplomacy on North Korea but also other issues in the region such as rules-based maritime law in the SCS and Indian Ocean, militarization of the region should be proactively sponsored to forge consensus on issues in the Indo-Pacific.

*Prioritize a digital economy based on Free Trade and Data Free Flow with Trust (DFFT). Provide economic incentives to emerging states in the region who practice DFFT.*

*Secure trade-safety net agreement (think Chiangmai Initiative) amongst middle powers that they will support each other when subject to economic coercion.*

When considering middle power alignment in the Indo-Pacific region, what is clear is that middle powers are facing an increasingly challenging geopolitical environment stemming from great power strategic competition between the US and China. Arguably, the US' biggest strategic advantage is its global alliances, partnerships and friendships as well as the regional and global institutions which both support and tether the security of middle powers. Thus, middle powers aligned with the US are natural strategic targets for China to weaken the US. For China, targeting middle powers does not unleash the negative consequences that would follow if China engaged in the same punitive economic and coercive tactics against the U.S. Concurrently, for middle powers the Trump administration's America First approach to diplomacy and trade further exacerbate this vulnerability.

The strategic competition between the US and China, the asymmetry of power between China and the middle powers, and China's interest in creating a wedge between the US and its allies are structural features of the Indo-Pacific for the foreseeable future. Less certain is how a change in leadership in Washington would affect the middle powers and how they are transforming their diplomacy to secure agency in the Indo-Pacific through neo-middle power diplomacy.

The question of whether this neo-middle power diplomacy will be sustained is self-evident as the structural forces mentioned above are likely a long-term feature of the international order for the decades to come. Where uncertainty arises is with regard to the question of the nature of US leadership regionally and globally. More specifically, is the America First Trumpian diplomacy the "new normal" for US diplomacy or is it an aberration with a return to more orthodox diplomacy upon President Trump's departure?

In the case of the former, middle powers that have longstanding relationships with the US have been deeply troubled by President Trump's time in office. They have serious and tangible concerns about the damage that has been brought to their bilateral relationship and international institutions under the Trump administration. If this is the "new normal" for American diplomacy, expect neo-middle power diplomacy to become more pro-active filling the vacuum left by the US. At times this will act alongside the US, in opposition to the US, and even aligned with China in cases in which the US endeavors to engage in diplomacy that is deemed not in favor of the middle powers.

Theoretically it could be argued that a post-Trump return to more orthodox diplomacy by the US would also see middle powers return to their traditional normative approach to "soft" issues, mediated through behavioural-approach-style middle power diplomacy. A sustained demonstration of orthodox diplomacy may overcome present alienation, however, the US under President Trump has most likely irreparably damaged confidence in the US to the extent that middle powers, as noted above, have already begun investing in international and regional institutions that do not include the US. This does not mean that neo-middle power diplomacy will exclude the US. Rather middle powers will take a case-by-case approach to cooperation with the US to further their own goals. Through increased middle power agency,

neo-middle power diplomacy seeks primarily to avoid the Indo-Pacific region being characterised purely by great power strategic competition. By proactively engaging Indo-Pacific middle powers will align, secure agency and shape their region.

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