

Why Middle Power Coalition Strategies Fail Against Great Powers

Stephen Nagy and Jonathan Ping

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A coalition of middle powers to achieve a state's foreign policy goals has been theorized as an option for countries such as Canada and Australia for decades. This has been built from the [Behavioral Approach](#), which advocates that middle powers should pursue international relations through coalition building. A notable success was the 1980s [Cairns Group](#), which emerged amid problematic agricultural market manipulation by the great powers. However, the successes have been few, limited, and arguably, a result of the changed behavior of the great powers that gave the appearance of coalition success. The most recent example of the failed coalition-of-middle-powers policy is [MIKTA](#) (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey and Australia).

The Trump administration's reorganization of the United States' (U.S.) trade and other international policies has created a reactionary wave of concern from [middle powers](#). This has reignited the calls for coalition building by presentist commentators. A recent example has promoted a ['Fab Four' coalition](#), including Japan (often noted as a great power), Australia, Canada, and South Korea (to be called JACK) to coordinate responses to Trump's trade and tariff pressures.

The middle-power coalition proposal for [JACK](#) argues that this quartet should work with the European Union and against the Trump administration "... until and unless the U.S. comes to its senses and recovers its true values." This line of thought exemplifies well-intentioned but ultimately futile thinking about middle-power cooperation. While correctly identifying the shared challenges these states face from Trump's economic nationalism, the prescription fails to grapple with the structural power asymmetries that doom such efforts from the start.

The failure of coordinated resistance to Trump's tariff threats illustrates a classic multi-player [prisoner's dilemma](#). Each state faces the same choice to cooperate with others to resist collectively, or defect to seek individual accommodation with Trump's White House. While a JACK coalition envisions these four democracies presenting a united front, the incentive structure overwhelmingly favors defection. In reality, they are first in competition with each other.

Consider the [attempted coordination](#) in early 2025 against threatened U.S. automotive tariffs. Japan initially proposed a unified response, but the coalition collapsed before materializing. South Korea, facing pressure over semiconductor exports and burden-sharing for U.S. forces, [pursued bilateral discussions](#). Australia, concerned about critical minerals agreements, sought [separate accommodation](#). Canada, despite United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement membership, faced energy export threats that [compelled individual negotiations](#).

Each defection was rational and unpleasant for each U.S. ally. The Trump administration's demonstrated willingness to offer selective exemptions while punishing holdouts created a divide-and-conquer dynamic. The potential gains from a successful collective action paled against certain losses from being singled out for retaliation.

The obstacle lies in the structural realities that a proposed JACK coalition underestimates or neglects. American leverage operates across multiple compounding dimensions. Economic dependencies tell only part of the story. Japan's security reliance on the U.S.–Japan alliance amid Chinese military modernization and assertive behavior in Tokyo's backyard far outweighs potential tariff losses. South Korea cannot risk the 28,500 American troops that guarantee its security against North Korea for the sake of trade disputes.

Australia's AUKUS submarine program represents a generational bet on American partnership that transcends normal alliance relationships. Canada's continental integration, which includes a [monthly average](#) in 2025 of 75.9% of exports flowing southward, creates vulnerabilities no middle-power coalition can offset. When security, technology, intelligence, and economic dependencies align, the notion of meaningful resistance becomes fantastical.

The JACK proposal acknowledges but also understates why the People's Republic of China (PRC) cannot serve as an alternative pole for these states. In the case of the U.S. and PRC, they are using their buying power to extract concessions from their vendors. Both employ their economic power to benefit themselves at the expense of their trading partners, albeit with different end goals. Beijing's [economic statecraft aims](#) at strategic subordination, not mutual benefit. South Korea's THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) crisis (2016–2017) and Australia's COVID-19 investigation sanctions (2020–2021) demonstrated the PRC's willingness to [weaponize trade for coercive purposes](#).

Fundamentally, the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) [core interests](#), including party supremacy, territorial revision, and regional hegemony, directly threaten the security of America's democratic allies. Trade diversification toward the PRC exchanges short-term economic relief for long-term strategic vulnerability.

Understanding U.S. behavior requires recognizing the underlying logic beneath tactical and diplomatic ruthlessness. Facing the PRC's rise, Washington seeks to reconstitute economic relationships to [preserve technological and industrial leadership](#). Extracting [maximum concessions](#) from allies with limited alternatives accumulates resources for long-term competition.

This approach, while imposing hardships, ensures allied prosperity remains contingent on American success, which is for middle powers a feature, not a bug, of hegemonic order. The focus on binary choices prevents allies from hedging in ways that might benefit the PRC.

However severe, this clarity serves the strategic purpose of constructing an unambiguous coalition against authoritarian revision.

Based on this reality, what options remain?

Selective compliance with strategic bargaining may be a way forward. While not a panacea, accepting American fundamental frameworks while negotiating implementation details may work. Japan's approach to semiconductor export controls—accepting principles while securing specific exemptions—provides a model. Thus, while theorized grand coalition building fails, issue-specific, outcomes oriented, focus on technical cooperation through middle power working groups may succeed when framed as supporting rather than resisting Make America Great Again objectives. Supply chain resilience initiatives demonstrate viable cooperation pathways.

Another option is deepening existing alliance structures to raise the costs of American unilateralism. Quad expansion, AUKUS development, and enhanced Japan–South Korea cooperation would create stakeholders invested in stability without directly challenging American leadership through institutional thickening. In hegemonic systems, the hegemon's ability to extract rents isn't aberrational but structural. For democratic allies, accepting American economic nationalism as the price of security guarantees represents the least bad option.

The task isn't to resist through futile coalitions but to manage reality, including minimizing disruption while supporting competition against authoritarian alternatives. The Trump administration's approach serves a strategic purpose in forcing unambiguous choices that construct a coalition capable of sustained competition with the PRC.

That this process is confronting is undeniable and a conformity that middle powers must recognize for their own benefit. However, it may be necessary for maintaining a liberal international order that ensures democracy, human rights, rule of law and a modicum of protection from authoritarianism and great power war. In the anarchic states system, power logic supersedes justice logic. Understanding this immediate reality, rather than pursuing chimeric coalitions, is the basis of strategic wisdom and an opportunity for functional statecraft.

[Stephen R. Naqy](#) is a professor of politics and international studies at the International Christian University in Tokyo and concurrently a visiting fellow for the Hungarian Institute for International Affairs (HIIA) and a Distinguished Fellow at the Corvinus Institute for Advanced Studies (CIAS).

[Jonathan Ping](#) is a political economist who specializes in the study of statecraft. He is an Associate Professor at Bond University, Founder and a Director of the East Asia Security Centre, and Editor of the Journal of East Asia Security.

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