

The Strategic Options of Middle Powers in the Asia-Pacific

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1 Introduction

Chiung-Chiu Huang and Chien-wen Kou

While the Peloponnesian War remains a popular analogy in academia and public opinion to describe the current rivalry between China and the United States, relatively less attention has been paid to the responses of regional actors in the Asia Pacific. While the election of the Biden administration appeared to hint at an end to antagonism between the two great powers at the end of 2020, this great power rivalry has only intensified ever since then. Biden's China policy has been markedly different from Trump's in terms of strategic style, but it has continued the antagonism between the two sides. While Trump touted unilateralism, emphasized "America First" and weakened conventional alliances between Washington and its Western allies, Biden has returned to multilateralism and chosen to strengthen traditional security communities in diverse regions that have been led by the United States, intending to employ these multilateral settings to contain China and suppress its increasing influence. These changes in U.S. foreign policy have placed more challenges on regional actors in the Asia Pacific.

The importance of the great power rivalry is well recognized and widely discussed today, and its influences have been noted by observers and experts in International Relations (IR). Yet, relatively less attention has been paid to the receiving side of these influences. Investigating and analyzing the responses of other actors in the Asia Pacific will help researchers and policy makers further evaluate the impact and future direction of this great power competition. In this series, we have proposed that greater attention be paid to the repositioning of lesser powers in the Asia Pacific region in response to this rivalry. The policies and strategies of middle powers are particularly crucial as they shoulder the responsibility of stabilizing the international order. Therefore, understanding the strategic thinking of middle powers in the Asia Pacific should help us predict the evolution of the international system in this era of great power rivalry.

The competition between the United States and China today differs greatly from the confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. While the Cold War was defined by a clash between opposing ideologies and antithetical designs for the international order, the current rivalry is not so much a conflict between political ideologies, but a

competition for dominance over the international system and its leadership. After its reform and opening up policies in 1978, China has been the key beneficiary of the current international regime. Existing international regulations and regimes were designed by Western powers at the end of the Cold War and dominated by them ever since, and China after its rise remains profoundly entangled with and heavily reliant on this order. At the same time, this rising great power needs to revise its regulations in order to gain further benefits from the system and acquire greater legitimacy and respect from the international community. Yet, if this divergence between the United States and China intensifies, there remains the potential for this rivalry to develop into a competition between rival ideologies and dominance in the global order.

On the other hand, Cold War competition occurred in the realm of science and technology but was largely military in nature, and its effects did not relate as directly to technological development in non-military spheres. The current U.S.–China rivalry, however, is deeply shaped by the power of globalization, a high degree of interdependence and the division of labor. At best, it is possible that the deep entanglement of both great powers with the global market and supply chains may serve to limit the intensifying antagonism between them, though certain diplomatic and military conflicts have the potential to outweigh their concern for the well-being of technological development and the global financial and trading system. Continued rivalry might further lead to the decline or even collapse of certain global high tech and traditional industries, a possibility for which we can find no precedent in the rivalry of the Cold War.

After gradually becoming acquainted with the current global market system over decades and in response to its rapid rise in the global political arena, China has built its own international regimes. Among these, the Belt and Road Initiative (the BRI) has been the most representative and significant. Nevertheless, the BRI is still utterly reliant on the existing multilateral setting that includes regional and global international organizations and institutions (Tuidong gongjian sichouzhilu jingjidai he 21 shiji haishang sichouzhilu de yuanjing yu xingdong [推動共建絲綢之路經濟帶和 21 世紀海上絲綢之路的願景與行動, Vision and actions on jointly building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road, 2017). This fact serves to illustrate the nature of the current rivalry, which is one of both confrontation and sustained high-level interdependence. It is also likely that it will continue in this form for some time (Huang & Kou, 2020). Unlike a Cold War alliance, the BRI is not a formal pact that targets specific actors, groups, or organizations. Both Washington and Beijing have not built official alliances with precise goals that are targeted toward one another, albeit the United States, with its Free and Open Indo-Pacific and QUAD initiatives, is indeed prolonging and strengthening its strategy of containment that targets China and its military deployment.

More than simple confrontation, the current great power rivalry requires a balancing between political competition and the continuity of

interdependence and the division of labor in the global economic system. This has never been easy for state actors in the Asia Pacific, and increasing uncertainty in the international system is only adding to the challenge. Decades of globalization have profoundly shaped the behaviors of a majority of states. States in the Asia-Pacific region have been accustomed to relying on Washington's support in the military and security aspects of their national interests while maintaining their dependence (or even over-dependence) on China's markets and economic benefits. This has greatly shaped the responses and strategies of Asia-Pacific states toward great power rivalry.

Middle powers are understood to be tasked with assisting great powers in the maintenance of the international order while acting as mediators between them and small states. As such, an analysis of the diverse responses of middle powers toward great power rivalry has the potential to uncover certain revelations that deepen our understanding of the direction of international politics and may even predict the direction of interstate antagonism. As middle powers in the Asia Pacific face an involvement in asymmetrical power relations with two rivaling great powers, analyzing their strategies and responses will also help us to better understand the effects suffered by each, including developments in technology and the expansion of markets, global trade, and economic power.

In the hopes of reaching the abovementioned goals and providing an overarching destination for its research, this book proposes two research questions which shall be analyzed from diverse perspectives in the following chapters: How are middle powers in the Asia Pacific responding to this competition between China and the United States? How do they define or redefine their status in the region under the context of this great power rivalry? The authors of this book have presented diverse and unique viewpoints to answer these questions. As such, we have not put forth a synchronized definition for the term *middle power*, as this would place limitations on our authors as they conduct their case studies and formulate their arguments. At the same time, we do acknowledge that a precise definition for middle powers is essential, and the following section shall be concerned with discussing and debating the meaning of the concept and its necessity in the analysis of responses toward great power rivalry in the Asia Pacific.

The Concept of Middle Powers and Its Implications in the Asia Pacific

This volume has been devised to present a picture of the diverse perspectives of middle powers in the Asia Pacific as they face great power rivalry in an unprecedented form. The contributors of each chapter either present the dilemmas and risks faced by these middle powers or propose potential solutions which differ from conventional approaches. As an overwhelming majority of our contributors are based in the Asia-Pacific region, this work is a reflection of the concerns and perspectives of local communities. However diverse,

these concerns have shared rationales and expectations, as each are offered on the behalf of states that seek a solution to the impasse of great power rivalry. The application of their identities as middle powers has therefore concatenated the analyses found in each chapter. While we do not intend to provide a coherent definition of the term for the cases included in this book, all contributors in this series have understood middle powers to be key actors in this great power competition. While their actions in response to great power rivalry are understood to be a symptom of current developments in international politics, middle powers, acting together, are clearly capable of influencing the perspectives and attitudes of the international community, however limited these influences may be when compared with those of great powers.

The use of the term “middle power” has become prevalent in the discipline of IR since the post-Cold War era. Nevertheless, there continues to be controversy regarding both the definition of the term and the criteria for evaluating whether a state qualifies as one. As Robertson (2017, p. 356, 366) points out, a single agreed upon definition of the term is still elusive, however popular some may be. Robertson argues that debates regarding the definition of a middle power are not about discovering “the meaning of a word” or “the nature of a thing;” rather, they have evolved into a competition between academic schools of thought, political competition for the control of foreign policy narratives, and competition for prestige between states.

Regardless of how the concept has been socially constructed, middle powers have still been defined in a variety of ways. Parlar Dal (2018, pp. 5–8) has observed that middle powers are most often characterized according to functional, positional, and behavioral attributions. For instance, functional definitions of a middle power have often rested on a state’s relative political and economic capacity, which are wholly imprecise. Likewise, capacity-based (or positional) definitions are also problematic due to the inherent incomprehensiveness of certain power-measuring indicators. Also flawed are behavior-based definitions of middle powers, as the selection of cases (of behaviors) are frequently biased due to the personal preferences of researchers (Robertson, 2017, pp. 362–363).

Dal (2018, pp. 5–8) further points out that little attention in IR has been paid to the regional–global power nexus in middle power diplomacy. He notes that middle powers are often trapped between the pursuit of global status and the need to remain regionally focused, which poses both opportunities and challenges. At the same time, middle powers stand to benefit from acting as a bridge between global and regional political arenas. As these goals are often in conflict, middle powers can feel constrained by regional issues in their attempts to expand their scope of influence and enhance their status on the global stage. In our series, we acknowledge that the current regional–global power nexus has become entangled due to the intensified great power rivalry. If their strategies work well, middle powers in the Asia Pacific can even increase their importance in the global arena by attending to matters at the regional level.

In terms of the number of middle powers in the contemporary international arena, Abbondanza (2020, pp. 415–416) observes that roughly 20 states fit the criteria, and these states are among the top 30 nations in economic terms. He further notes that a growing number of middle powers have emerged along with the relative decline of the Western great powers and the rapid and steady rise of Asian ones. Abbondanza also recognizes the diversities and controversies regarding the criteria for defining a middle power. Still, most researchers and experts tend to define middle powers based on their own preferences and their unique understanding of the characteristics of middle power. For instance, Efstathopoulos (2018, p. 48) emphasizes that the positional and behavioral aspects of a state are the essential criteria for defining it as a middle power. The positional aspect depends on a state's material capabilities; and the behavioral aspect means that a middle power should follow certain distinct patterns in its diplomatic performance.

No matter how researchers prefer to define middle powers, most of their analyses present specific expectations for a middle power's patterns of behavior. For example, a middle power state is frequently assumed to take the role of a good international citizen which devotes itself to the welfare of the international community. In addition, a middle power is expected to demonstrate a strong preference for multilateralism and engage in multilateral activism in its foreign policy. Meanwhile, a middle power can be expected to take the lead in crisis management and actively mediate in international disputes and conflicts. More importantly, a middle power is assumed to conduct niche diplomacy and secure its influence in international regimes. It will be looked to provide intellectual and entrepreneurial leadership, allying with other like-minded states. Hence, middle powers are “not only those middle-ranking states that advance distinct preferences and deploy distinct diplomatic methods, but also as those states that display both influence and effectiveness in realizing their objectives at the international level” (Efstathopoulos, 2018, pp. 48–59).

A middle power's ideational influence and entrepreneurial effectiveness can be recognized by defining it as an “international stabilizer” (Jordaan, 2017). The role of an international stabilizer is different from the so-named emerging Southern or non-traditional middle powers, which seek to counter or destabilize U.S. hegemony. As Jordaan (2017, p. 404) argues, some middle powers like Australia, Canada, and South Korea have actively supported and benefited from the liberal international order led by Washington. Jordaan suggests removing adjectives such as “emerging” or “Southern” when referring to middle powers in order to avoid mistakenly classifying some mid-range states with counter-hegemonic tendencies.

Overall, the positional approach of defining middle powers is so far the most popular one. This approach relies on quantifiable indicators such as the power asymmetries between states and recognizes that differences that include population size, military expenditure, and gross domestic product (GDP) do offer meaningful measurements for identifying similarities and

differences among middle powers. Power asymmetries can substantially distinguish middle powers from both great powers and small states. Hence, middle powers usually adopt diverse strategies and attitudes in managing different states. It is certainly possible that middle powers are themselves adopting a “great-power strategy” in managing their relations with smaller states in the regional system (Edström & Westberg, 2020, p. 175).

The most crucial question when researching middle powers is: Do middle powers in the same region develop similar alignments and military strategies if they are located in the same geographic region? According to Edström and Westberg (2020, pp. 172–173), middle powers that belong to similar regional security complexes (RSC) tend to adopt relatively similar defense strategies and vice versa. Different regional contexts do affect the military strategies of middle powers. According to the authors, states that are located in comparably peaceful regions tend to develop hedging strategies and have greater opportunities to focus on expeditionary warfare. States in conflict-ridden regions, on the other hand, tend to pursue collective balance of power strategies and develop military capacities for the purpose of national defense.

For Asia-Pacific states, the concept of middle powers has been popular for analyzing the foreign policy making of certain regional actors. The most evident case is South Korea’s management of its regional and global relations. For example, Easley and Park (2018, pp. 242–243) focus on the positional attributes of middle powers and assume that the status of a middle power is defined by the state’s geographical location, level of economic development, military capabilities, and non-material capabilities. When a state is regarded as a middle power, it can be expected to pursue middle power diplomacy, including leveraging in its networks, building and defending international institutions, and strengthening international norms. While South Korea does qualify as a middle power in Easley and Park’s analysis, its recent policies have failed to meet the expectations of middle power diplomacy. These include its increasing antagonism toward Japan and displays of deference toward China. At the same time, the authors point out that an anti-Japan identity and the pursuit of unification of the Korean peninsula have been key factors shaping South Korea’s practice of middle power diplomacy. Chapter 7 of this book provides a case study of how South Korea’s policies are being shaped in response to the current great power rivalry.

Indonesia’s status as a middle power in Southeast Asia is another key example. Through observing how Indonesia has actively performed the roles of a good international citizen being a supporter of international order and multilateralism, Thies and Sari (2018, pp. 404–413) identify Indonesia’s qualifications as a middle power state. Karim (2018, p. 354) specifically indicates that Indonesia is an emerging middle power and that its “middlepowermanship” is presented through Indonesia’s acting as a regional leader. Indonesia has also pursued secondary roles as a voice for developing countries, an advocate for democracy, and a bridge-builder. Its performance as a regional leader can be expected to increase the middle power leverage globally. While Indonesia’s

case is not included in this book, Karim's analysis and understanding of this global and regional dichotomy correspond with the themes of the following chapters and case studies in this book. In Chapter 10, we provide another case of Southeast Asian emerging middle power: Vietnam. Vietnam's capacity has made it the target of co-optation for both great powers. While gradually identifying itself as a middle power, Hanoi has adopted the tactic of strategic position-taking to manage the dilemma and crises caused by the great power rivalry.

Excepting South Korea and Indonesia, the Asia-Pacific middle powers have received a wealth of attention. The empirical case studies of states such as Australia, Canada, India, Pakistan, and Singapore have all identified China's rise and U.S.–China competition as the main factors shaping their behaviors and strategic orientations (Struye de Swielande et al., 2019), falling squarely within the theme of our volume. While this book has benefitted greatly from analytical approaches and related experiences shared by previous studies of Asia-Pacific middle powers, we have chosen to adopt a new starting point that is more empirical, more policy-oriented, and focuses more on current affairs. We do not specifically propose a synchronized definition for middle powers, nor do we attempt to set restrictions on the authors' preferences and conceptualizations, yet it appears that a consistency has nevertheless formed and a majority of our chapters have chosen to adopt the positional and behavioral approaches. As such, this book presents the diverse strategies of the Asia-Pacific middle powers in the era of China's rise and great power rivalry.

Main Arguments and Case Selection

Our case studies of Asia-Pacific middle powers do benefit from the existing literature. While several chapters in our book cover cases that have been previously studied in some form, cases such as Vietnam, Taiwan, and Japan have been paid relatively less attention in the past. In addition, this series provides analytical angles such as “new economic statecraft” (Chapter 6), “reluctant hedging” (Chapter 7), and “strategic position-taking” (Chapter 10) that are innovative in their investigation of the responses and strategic thinking of these states in the face of great power rivalry. Meanwhile, this series distinguishes itself from the existing literature through the diverse backgrounds of its contributors. As our team is composed of authors who largely hail from the Asia-Pacific region and particularly East Asia, this has empowered the book to present local perspectives.

This book offers three major arguments. First, the structure of the international system, which is now mainly defined by rivalry and competition between the United States and China, was never the sole determinant of the strategic thinking and patterns of foreign policy making among middle powers in the Asia Pacific, albeit the external environment does have a significant influence on their behavior. The domestic conditions of Asia-Pacific middle

powers and the respective ties they share with either great power have driven these countries to develop diverse strategies. The chapters concerned with South Korea, Japan, Australia, and Taiwan have all addressed the domestic conditions and concerns of policy makers in these states. By so doing, the analyses include multiple dimensions and offer readers a comprehensive understanding of their strategic thinking and styles of policy making.

Second, these states are concerned with a potential new global order under U.S.–China rivalry. The evolving international structure is reshaping and redefining the roles and functions of all regional states, middle powers included. Most case studies provided in our series point out this dilemma. Like other relatively weaker states in the region, middle powers have tried to avoid being forced to choose sides. While Australia and other states have acknowledged that there are certain benefits to be gained from this rivalry, the majority prefer the resumption of a stable and predictable international environment.

Third, a new form of Asia-centered regionalism has been proposed and supported by the Asia-Pacific middle powers to manage the great power rivalry. This is particularly evident regarding regional economics, notably with the formation of institutions such as CPTPP, RECP, and the Japan–ASEAN FTA. The rationale is that an Asia-centered approach is beneficial and even necessary because it aims at prioritizing both the individual and collective interests of regional actors. It also strengthens their status as mediators and bridges between the great powers and smaller states. In our series, each of the states studied refer to this logic in some form as they design their strategies.

In the selection of their cases, the authors of this book have adhered to mainstream definitions of middle powers and adopted a positional approach which emphasizes the capacity and status of the state. These two aspects have been foundational in the criteria used to measure and analyze middle powers. As such, the cases chosen in this book are widely recognized middle powers in the Asia Pacific such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, and India, though it is mentioned only in part. Meanwhile, certain contributors have opted for the behavioral approach and focused on cases such as Taiwan (see Chapters 8 and 12) and Vietnam (see Chapter 10), which have not traditionally been seen as regional middle powers. The cases selected in this series have all acted as mediators and either assisted or planned to assist the great powers in maintaining the regional and even global orders.

However the authors define middle powers and from whichever angle they begin their analyses, they all aim to answer the two abovementioned research questions through the studies provided in the following chapters. Cases selected in this book are intended to present diverse responses of these states to U.S.–China rivalry. In addition, they also shoulder the mission of revealing how these states perceive and interpret their status in the region under these circumstances. This book should be of particular use to readers particularly concerned with the local perspectives of Asia-Pacific nations.

The Structure of the Book

The analyses in the following chapters begin by discussing the background of the rivalry between the United States and China with a special focus on the competition between the grand strategies and trans-regional projects promoted by each. After analyzing this competition and investigating the BRI, the Indo-Pacific Strategy, and the QUAD, we then move to examine the struggles and responses of Asia-Pacific middle powers. The authors look behind the scenes and reveal an emerging regionalism embedded in the coping strategies of these states. Other than the conventional approach which emphasizes a state's political and economic needs in conducting its foreign policy, the analytical angles adopted by the authors also include the application of the competition in economic statecraft building pursued by both great and middle powers and the redefinition of hedging policies.

The first section of the book describes the evolution of this new great power rivalry and its impact on middle powers in the Asia Pacific, and the chapters contributed by **T. J. Pempel** and **Brian L. Job** devote particular focus to its origin. Both chapters follow the thread of historical analyses and depict the challenges and dilemmas that Asia-Pacific middle powers have faced under the current great power rivalry. **Pempel** pays greater attention to the impact of the policies of Washington and Beijing on middle powers and points out potential changes that may take place under the Biden administration. In contrast, **Job's** chapter emphasizes the perspectives and responses of middle powers as they deal with this great power rivalry.

With respect to the origins of U.S.–China rivalry, **Ray Ou-Yang** and **Yooneui Kim** in Chapter 4 evaluate whether or not China's increasing capabilities for FDI have alienated the White House and made certain traditional allies of Washington in the Asia-Pacific side with Beijing. They find that when Washington wavers in its resolve to confront Beijing, the results can be negative. The authors point out that security-related concerns in response to U.S.–China rivalry have made China's FDI less attractive to these states. Together with **Pempel's** and **Job's** chapters, this chapter offers a thorough depiction of the origin of this great power rivalry and its impact on the Asia-Pacific middle powers, forming the first section of the book.

The second section proposes new analytical approaches and concepts to further understand how the new great power rivalry is shaping the foreign policy orientations of middle powers in the Asia Pacific. **Yoshihide Soeya** proposes in Chapter 5 that the Asia-Pacific middle powers are following a redefined "Asian-centered" approach by incorporating more external players into the circle. By so doing, they have the potential to cooperate in new ways to more effectively manage the risks caused by great power rivalry. **Aggarwal** and **Reddie** in Chapter 6 utilize the concept of "economic statecraft" to compare and analyze the strategic designs of great and middle

powers in response to today's unstable international environment. They specifically focus on the cases of Japan and South Korea while at the same time paying great attention to China's economic statecraft.

Florence W. Yang in Chapter 7 proposes the idea of a "reluctant hedging policy" and focuses on investigating South Korea's strategic logic in the process of deploying the THAAD system. At the same time, **Hsin-Hsien Wang**, **Shinn-Shyr Wang**, and **Wei-Feng Tzeng** pave a new approach in Chapter 8 by analyzing differences in the trade dependence of middle powers in the Asia Pacific on the United States and China and the differences in their choices to vote alongside either power in the United Nations. Based on the results of their investigation, the authors further examine the rationales and diverse outcomes for the strategies of middle powers.

More empirical analyses and new case studies are offered in the third section. **Michael Clarke** in Chapter 9 analyzes Australia's strategy in the face of U.S.–China rivalry. Clarke indicates that the dilemma Australia has faced is mainly whether it should continue to be the "hesitant hedger" that confronts either great power or maintain the role of a "principled balancer" that allies with Washington regardless of a dependency on its trading relationship with China and their deep economic ties. In Chapter 10, **Nguyen Cong Tung** analyzes Vietnam's emerging status in the region and Hanoi's adopting strategic position-taking for managing the challenges and potential risks imposed by escalating U.S.–China rivalry.

Rumi Aoyama's work in Chapter 11 observes the long-term phenomenon of "hot economics and cold politics" between Japan and China and argues for the necessity to examine China's security and foreign investment strategies and see how they have shaped Sino-Japanese relations. **Guan-yi Leu** in Chapter 12 analyzes why Taiwan ended its strategy of hedging between the United States and China after Tsai Ing-wen won the presidential election in 2016. **Leu's** chapter aims to provide an explanation by investigating the interactive process between great and lesser powers and evaluating how the interaction between external and domestic conditions affects Taiwan's options in its coping with great power rivalry.

In sum, this book presents the diverse perspectives of the Asia-Pacific middle powers and the logic of their strategic choices in the face of this new great power rivalry. Each chapter either discusses the dilemmas and risks encountered by these states or proposes better strategies as a solution. Quite a few non-conventional approaches have been provided in our series with the goal to encourage readers to think outside the box when it comes to matters of great power rivalry. Finally, this book presents the main concerns of academics residing in the Asia-Pacific region. While these concerns are as diverse as they have been presented in our work, they share one common goal: To seek a better and more predicable international order and find an effective and efficient way to cope with the current rivalry between China and the United States.

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