

Two Limits on Middle Power Activism in the Indo-Pacific

By Kanti Bajpai

One of the great security worries of small and medium powers (SMPs) in the Indo-Pacific is the rivalry between China and the US – how it could lead to a kinetic conflagration over (say) Taiwan, and how it could increase pressures to take sides between the two great powers, thereby reducing SMP agency. The region also faces other security dangers, including non-traditional security challenges. The focus of this essay, however, is the China-US rivalry on the SMPs.

A standard view is that, among SMPs, the middle powers are particularly adept diplomatically. Like the middle classes in a society, they can influence the more powerful and the weaker. They are good communicators and persuaders, and they are practised in working international institutions to protect themselves and smaller states from the great powers.

This view presents a rather rosy picture of what the Indo-Pacific middle powers can do to shape a more stable and cooperative environment amidst China-US rivalry. For at least two reasons, the Indo-Pacific middle powers will find it difficult to calm the region and promote collective action. The middle powers in question are the larger ASEAN member states, namely, Indonesia, Malaysia,



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the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, Vietnam, as well as Australia, India, Japan, and the Republic of Korea (ROK).

The first constraint on the activism of the regional middle powers is that they are a disparate group, with different geographical locations and histories. They therefore have different strategic interests. These differences impair their ability to respond collectively to the China-US rivalry.

For reasons of geography and/or history, Japan, ROK, and the Philippines are US allies, as is Australia. Others for the same reason are more neutralist, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. India, by geography and history, is even more neutralist. Strikingly, though, whether the middle powers are formal allies of the US or are more neutralist, they are all closer to the US on security because of their concerns about the nearby behemoth, China. All of

them have defence arrangements with the US. Some have military agreements with China as well, but even those middle powers are closer to the US on security in the sense that they look to the US as a “backstop.”

At the same time, except for Australia, Japan, and ROK, the Indo-Pacific middle powers are more convergent with China on various global norms and institutions.

The Indian case is illustrative. India, like China, rejects US and other Western criticism of its domestic politics (e.g. human rights violations, treatment of minorities, etc.). In common with China, it supports hard sovereignty on issues such as social media regulation, internet governance, and humanitarian intervention. In addition, both countries, as developing economies, want exceptional treatment on global economic norms and global climate change. Finally, together with China, India argues for reform of international institutions to give greater voice not just to Beijing and New Delhi but also others of the Global South.

It bears saying that India and other middle powers are not closer to the US on security because the Americans have bullied them; nor are they closer to China on international norms and institutions because Beijing has twisted their arms. They converge with the two great powers, in different realms, because of their own histories, political systems, economic imperatives, and cultures.

The second constraint on the ability of middle powers to shape norms and institutions in the Indo-Pacific is the existence of enduring bilateral tensions and rivalries within the group. For instance, Japan and ROK continue to differ over Japan’s role in the Korean Peninsula from the late 19th Century to the end of World War II and the Dokdo/Takeshima territorial dispute.

Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore have become closer over the decades, but bilateral differences and tensions remain, especially Indonesia-Malaysia and Malaysia-Singapore. Singapore was once dismissively referred to as the “little red dot” by former Indonesian president, B.J. Habibie. Malaysia and the Philippines have never quite resolved their competing claims over Sabah. Thailand is wary of Malaysian attitudes to the treatment of Thai Muslims in its southern provinces. And Indonesia and Australia continue to harbour strategic mistrust of each other.

India has historic ties to Southeast Asia and does not have core disputes with the middle powers in the region (e.g. over territory). But in the second half of the Cold War, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Australia viewed the expanding Indian Navy with increasing suspicion. Jakarta even now is watchful of New Delhi’s pretensions to leadership in the Indo-Pacific. With Kuala Lumpur, there have been quarrels over Malaysia’s stance on India-Pakistan territorial disputes, its public comments on the treatment of Indian Muslims, and issues surrounding the treatment of its Indian minority.

On the economic front, Southeast Asians are still upset by India's last-minute withdrawal from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and feel that New Delhi does not prioritise ties with the region. For its part, India insists that the trade agreement with ASEAN needs revision and that some Southeast Asians act like China's "B-team" (in the widely reported words of Piyush Goyal, India's Minister of Commerce and Industry).

All of this is not to say that the middle powers are irrelevant to the future of the Indo-Pacific and are fated to be mute spectators to the China-US rivalry. But it is to say that for all the interest in middle power activism to help manage the consequences of great power conflict, their effectiveness will be limited by differences amongst themselves, differences that both China and the US will be tempted to deepen and exploit.

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