

The Middle Power Dynamic in the Indo-Pacific

Unpacking How Vietnam and Indonesia Can Shape Regional Security and Economic Issues

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In his seminal essay on middle powers, former United Nations officer and Canadian political scholar Robert Cox agreed with fellow Canadian and former Minister of Foreign Affairs John Holms that the “middle power role is not a fixed universal but something that has to be rethought continually in the context of the changing state of the international system.”¹ This observation holds significant merit today, with the current stage of international affairs undergoing a shift in its geopolitical order and hierarchy. Nowhere is this more pressing today than in the Indo-Pacific.

With China finalizing its global great-power rise and *de facto* regional hegemony, the Indo-Pacific and its peripheries—East Asia, the Western Pacific, and Southeast Asia—have become *the* geopolitical arena of power. To reflect the seriousness of China’s unchallenged hegemony over the region, the United States and its major power allies—the United Kingdom, France, Australia, and Japan—have

pivoted and shifted their national security and defense strategies to prevent China from attaining unchecked and uncontested authority and power in the Indo-Pacific. Shifts from these Western liberal-oriented powers are due to Asia having 60 percent of the world's population and its rise as the global economic engine of the emerging multipolar rules-based order.² To maintain its influence and power in the Indo-Pacific, the United States is doubling down on its hub-and-spoke system of alliances and heightening its great-power competition with China.

However, deepening Sino-US great-power competition in the region is beginning to impact middle, minor, and small powers that have used the relatively peaceful and stable post-Cold War era to build and integrate their economies and national interests within a regional context with China at the center of any policy. To complicate matters further, China's ever-growing hegemonic assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific has forced these regional middle- and lower-tier powers to reassess their close economic and diplomatic connections with China.

With multipolarity reemerging as the predominant format of international affairs, significant interest in middle powers has returned, with particular emphasis on their strategic function in power politics and great-power competition. However, for middle powers to be used effectively, reflecting the Indo-Pacific's history, regional hierarchy, and a system of states, middle power concepts need to be updated and applied to the region with specific concern for how these middle-tier state actors will pursue their national interests and their strategic autonomy in an increasingly competitive and contested rules-based order.

This article reexamines middle power concepts, bringing forward an updated definition that reflects the environment of international affairs and the various levels of state power that exist today. From there, it assesses the Indo-Pacific's regional order, stressing its hierarchical nature and the multitiered characteristics it places on the region's state actors.

The article places Indonesia and Vietnam as regional middle powers by updating the scope and scale of middle power definitions and presenting more clarity to the Indo-Pacific's regional order. The article aims to demonstrate their likely capabilities in shaping regional security and economic resiliency to China and Sino-US great-power competition. Moreover, the article seeks to show how Vietnam and Indonesia should use middle power roles, namely those of *bridger* and *legitimazer*, to attain their national interests while maintaining strategic autonomy. Collectively, the article will illustrate the middle power tactics that Vietnam and Indonesia can use to preserve and promote a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific that focuses primarily on geosecurity and geoeconomic interests. Lastly, it will place the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as the optimal

middle power institution to project and enhance their strategic autonomy and power in the Indo-Pacific.

What Is a Middle Power?

Throughout history, state actors have used their international environment to support a grand expansion strategy, consolidate their power, and develop notions of rivalries, partnerships, and alliances. To clarify their status among their neighbors—both friend and foe—state actors have used orders, polarity, and hierarchical positioning as informative tools in developing definitions of *powerhood*. During the Cold War, these environmental tools were used to inform new powerhoods of states. It is from this period that modern concepts of middle powers arrive.

In 1971, Carsten Holbraad analyzed middle power concepts from before its post-1945 conception. Drawing upon early nineteenth-century German writings, Holbraad examined the German notion of *Mittelmacht*—a middle geographical state which occupied an intermediate position in the European Concert of Power—as supportive testimony in designing his definition.³ For Holbraad, middle powers are defined as using geographical and material positioning or their positional and marginal status to cooperate or competitively balance the region's great powers.⁴

Building upon Holbraad's positional and material characteristics, Robert Cox defines middle powers through their ability to encompass a medial-ground response to international conflicts, leading to them possessing middle-range capabilities that curtail risks in managing power competition. Moreover, Cox contends that middle powers should have sufficient autonomy in their foreign strategies and association with hegemonic and great powers. Additionally, he argues that middle powers do not enact balancing strategies but rather perform as key actors that support the hegemony of significant states and the structural order of a geopolitical system.⁵

More recently, Andrew Cooper has continued the traditional approach to defining middle powers but has attempted to rejuvenate the concept to reflect the modern diplomatic and social realities of international affairs. Through this process, Cooper developed four new traits for defining middle powers:

1. Geographical trait—representing a middle geopolitical actor.
2. Positional trait—the most commonly used trait to assess whether a state is or is not a middle power that integrates a state's middle point in a range of bigness to smallness that references quantifiable attributes. These attributes can range from a state's geographical area, population size, complexity, and strengthened capability of its economy and military.

3. Normative trait—identifying middle powers as wiser and more virtuous actors within a structured system.
4. Behavioral trait—designating a middle power’s national strategy in operating and pursuing its national interests. It is argued that through this feature, middle powers are poised to solve and react to conflicts and strategic problems through multilateral solutions that do not shy away from compromises and, as a result, this argument has steered to the notion of middle powers being “good international citizens.”⁶

For Cooper, these traits reflect middle powers as responsible managers for a rules-based order, increasing their temperament as trustworthy partners.

Problems with Traditional Middle Power Concepts

With these central elements of middle power characteristics being universally agreed upon and frequently recycled in scholarship and strategic analysis, middle power concepts have welcomed numerous and varying state actors into the middle-tier of power classification. As a result, middle power concepts have constantly undermined the scope and scale of states that practically represent the middle of a hierarchical system. Traditional middle powers such as Canada, Australia, Germany, Japan, South Korea, and New Zealand are commonly identified. Recently, however, Matthew Stephen has argued that in addition to the states mentioned above, new middle powers such as Russia, Brazil, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia would shape the post-2013 global order.⁷

However, as the above classification and identification of middle powers indicates, there are ongoing problems with traditional middle power definitions. These misgivings arise from contemporary international relations scholarship and previous grand strategy models placing prominent attention to the political spheres and foreign policies of great powers as well as their interpretation of weaker states. This perspective often identifies great powers at the top and small powers at the very bottom. As can be seen, this perspective leaves a vast vacuum in the middle for any state actor that does not match the military, diplomatic, and economic might of a great power.

Most often than not, this vacuum area causes middle powers to be labeled as nothing more than free riders who exploit great-power rivalries by bandwagoning their foreign policies onto a regional or global hegemon, thereby having limited legitimacy and authority in shaping geosecurity policy.⁸ More importantly, the middle tier is often used in international relations as a bridging point for emerging or revisionist state actors to ease their strategic pathway toward higher global statuses of power and authority without directly challenging the rules-based

structure or contesting a great power. All in all, these misgivings have made the concept of middle powers meaningless.

Middle powers are also generally observed through a globalist context that transcends their regional geopolitical location, capabilities, and behavior. For instance, Australia, Japan, and South Korea as global middle powers are often classified as regional middle powers in the Indo-Pacific. However, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) between Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, and the trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (AUKUS) showcase Japan and Australia becoming more engaged and assertive in their roles in defending their national interests and their willingness to control the region's rules-based order by directly contesting and balancing China.

These examples illustrate how Australia and Japan are major regional powers—a fact that is not reflected by the characteristics listed in Holbraad, Cox, and Cooper. It is important to reiterate that a global middle power may not be a middle power regionally—and vice-versa. To delve into the Indo-Pacific and observe how middle powers can impact geosecurity issues and geoeconomic resiliency, it is vital to exclude states that are not regional middle powers to focus on the states that are.

Updating Middle Power Concepts

Adopting a blend of Holbraad, Cox, and Cooper, the article defines middle powers through four complex and universal traits. By updating the theoretical framework, the article's definition of middle powers consists of specific attributes and factors that must be attained or possessed before a state actor can declare middle power status and cement the existence of a recognizable and legitimate middle-tier of power.

First, a state actor with middle-range *positional* traits—medial political positioning, economic standards, and diplomatic proficiency in a geopolitical order's hierarchical structure—constitutes middle power status. These three components sway the *positional* trait away from the traditional material power structure to a criterion of multiplex units that showcases the dynamic apex of force middle powers possess in a hierarchical order.⁹

Second, a middle power must inhabit a geographical space that has a clear and distinct asymmetric level of power disparity. This geographical space will allow a middle power to harness its resources and capabilities to better reflect its capabilities to posture with and engage among neighboring state actors and extraregional powers, along with rooting its orientation to its geopolitical zone.¹⁰

Third, and perhaps most importantly, a middle power must be *content* with its ranking within its situated hierarchical order. Despite having a limited ability to project hard power or high capacities for political, economic, and diplomatic pressures, middle powers best serve their national interests when they occupy their rank as contentedly as possible. For one, a middle power that is *content* in its rank will be accredited with being concerned with and caring for the geopolitical order's construct and hierarchy. This normative belief will project middle powers as representative actors that aim to maintain the order's integrity and prosperity as it provides a "common advantage" for all members in advancing their national interests.¹¹ Second, it limits the prospect of being identified as a belligerent power aiming to increase its status and stature by challenging hegemonic powers. Instead, this trait showcases the assertiveness and prudent strategic orientation of a middle power in maintaining and advancing a fixed and legitimate structure of power politics.

Lastly, a middle power must employ a foreign policy that builds upon the normative essence of *liberal-realism* that shapes the middle powers into *stewards* of the hierarchical order, thereby legitimizing and bridging the system's governance to top-tier and lower-tier powers. By establishing stewardship elements in their foreign policies, middle powers will affix their historical tendencies with the new realities of multipolarity, power politics, and great-power competition.

By *liberal-realism*, it is implied that middle powers comprise a realist perspective that emphasizes states as the principal actor in the hierarchical structure that informs and shapes the rules, behaviors, and interactions of the region's geopolitical community. In particular, the realist element stresses the existence of state sovereignty as the principal pillar that consists of a state's ability to act and govern independently to determine its internal structure, its ability to control its territorial borders, and any resources that flow within—including but not limited to ideas, goods, and peoples. Lastly, the realist element requires all state actors to recognize the order's preference for autonomy, thereby representing a sense of interstate inclusion and full-fledged membership.¹² It also refers to how middle powers use liberal institutionalism to create mechanisms that establish norms of responsibility and a rules-based structure that guides particular areas of interest over economic, political, and military affairs.¹³

The Indo-Pacific's Regional Order

As mentioned previously, all middle powers require a *geographic trait* that showcases a power disparity within a geopolitical space. To that end, there is a need to examine the Indo-Pacific's regional order to explore the type of power disparity and the varying levels of its hierarchical nature. By analyzing the Indo-

Pacific's regional order, it will be more plausible to distinguish middle powers, along with unveiling the region's complex hierarchical structure and its relationship with middle powers in reworking the Indo-Pacific to endure deepening power politics and great-power pressures from Sino-US strategic competition.¹⁴

Taking inspiration from IR scholar Hedley Bull's concept of *international society*, the article proposes that a geopolitical space encompasses a *system of states*, implying an environment that exists when a group of state actors—conscious of common interests and values—form a system to bind a common set of rules that regulate their diplomatic relations, behavior, and power with one another. Through this concept the existence of different tiers of independent powers emerges. However, unlike Bull, who argues that an *international society* contributes to a desirable order of peace and harmony, the article's *system of states* produces an order that state actors regularly observe through commonly recognized regional statuses.¹⁵ More specifically, this type of order is one where the rules, norms, and behaviors arrive from the legitimacy and ratification of a state's power status among all members inhabiting the *system of states*.¹⁶

The Indo-Pacific's power disparity is unique in that its hierarchical structure varies among the top-tier powers within the *system of states*. China argues that the region is heading toward unipolarity, which will be guided and governed by Chinese hegemony. Reflecting a desire to return to the "Middle Kingdom" period of Chinese hegemony, a China-led geopolitical system would undoubtedly situate China as the keystone of all aspects of intra- and extraregional affairs, integration, and engagement.¹⁷ In contrast, the United States and its likeminded partners contend that the region orbits around a bipolar structure that observes two distinct blocs of power—status quo and revisionist powers—governing and guiding Indo-Pacific affairs. Under a US-led hub-and-spoke system that coordinates and cooperates with major Asian and Pacific powers such as Australia, India, Japan, and South Korea, this system would reinforce, balance, and counter belligerent actions from state actors that undermine and threaten the endurance of a liberal rules-based order.

The power disparity in the Indo-Pacific is more complex than is usually thought. Although the region bears witness to traditional disparities in how power is distributed among its state actors, leading to a vertical hierarchical structure, the Indo-Pacific's regional hierarchy contains multiple power classifications.¹⁸ For instance, in a traditional hierarchical order that is structurally vertical, great powers hold the uppermost pole of power, with middle powers holding a medial pole and small powers representing the bottom pole.

This traditional observation lumps together all other state actors that are superior to small powers but positionally, materially, or geographically unequal to

China and the United States within the middle-tier. By enlarging and broadening the medial pole, middle powers became too numerous for efficient strategic engagement in intra- and extraregional affairs. What is more, the overwhelming scope and scale of this category displaces any strategic autonomy in shaping and coordinating their national interests with overarching geosecurity and geoeconomic dynamics as a result of accepting revisionist, declining, and emerging state actors that prefer strategic moderation or restraint into the titular tier of middle power strategy.¹⁹

To resolve this issue, the Indo-Pacific's regional order should be observed through a five-tier hierarchical system. Like the traditional three-tier system, this hierarchical order maintains notions of great powers holding the uppermost pole, middle powers holding a medial pole, and small powers beholding the bottom pole. However, to showcase the complexity of the power disparity in the Indo-Pacific, this new system argues for a more expansive multipolar setting by inserting two new poles—minor and major powers.

Minor powers occupy the pole between small and middle powers as they have limited tools and tactics to project their power and influence onto the regional order and are deemed inconsequential to regional power dynamics. States that encompass this pole of power would be New Zealand, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and the Philippines. Meanwhile, major powers occupy the pole between great powers and middle powers. These major powers have profound multidisciplinary tools and strategies to project hard and soft power onto the regional order. Moreover, they are complemented with an ability to steer intra- and extraregional state actors to support their normative and positional primacy over specific regional power dynamics. These major powers are often perceived as traditional middle powers—Australia, India, Japan, South Korea—and include antagonistic powers such as North Korea and Russia.

Including these two new poles of power in the Indo-Pacific's hierarchy lessens the congestion of states with middle power characteristics and capabilities. From here, a compact and consequential list of middle powers can be formulated, thereby bestowing more sweeping opportunities for them to shape geosecurity and geoeconomic issues in the Indo-Pacific while making the overall hierarchical system more durable as more poles of power expand the number of stakeholders and shaping channels.²⁰

Indo-Pacific Middle Powers: Vietnam and Indonesia

Despite the Indo-Pacific possessing multiple middle powers such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand, the article signals Vietnam and Indonesia as significant regional middle powers due to their strategic experiences, insights, and outlook.

The assessment below evaluates the article's claim of Vietnam and Indonesia as constituting middle power status. To reflect the definition formulated previously, the article examines the state actors' *positional*, *geographic*, and *normative* traits to consolidate their regional middle power claim.

Positional Trait

Vietnam has solid middle-range political positioning, economic standards, and diplomatic proficiency. According to the Lowy Institute Asia Power Index (LI-API), Vietnam's economic capability is ranked thirteenth, with its economic size and technological capabilities driving its rise in 2020. Its military and defense positioning are ranked thirteenth, with regional defense diplomacy, arms procurement, and defense dialogue emphasizing its growing voice over protecting its national security and influencing the region's geosecurity structure. Vietnam's diplomatic proficiency is ranked ninth, with diplomatic networking, multilateral and cultural power providing the middle power with significant influence in establishing political dialogues and back and front door tactics that proactively engage with the region's great and major powers.²¹

Although there is increasing speculation of its eventual rise as a regional great power due to its growing economic power and emerging influence among ASEAN members, Indonesia's current *positional* trait reinforces its middle power status.²² Enhancing Indonesia's middle-tier position is its economic capability being ranked tenth, with its economic size accounting for 40 percent of the total GDP of ASEAN, its technological capabilities driving its soft power rise, and its ability to leverage international investments. Indonesia's military and defense is ranked thirteenth, with the size of its armed forces, military geographic posture, and defense spending contributing to the archipelagic state's significance for middle power projection. Lastly, Indonesia's diplomatic proficiency is ranked tenth, represented through extensive diplomatic networking with neighboring and extraregional powers, regional institutions, and its multilateral power to influence and participate in regional investiture and trade agreements with China, Japan, Singapore, and fellow ASEAN members.²³

Geographic Trait

The geopolitical location of Vietnam and Indonesia showcase that strategic competition and power politics contribute to the region's power disparity, showcasing varying levels in its hierarchical structure.

Content

Vietnam's middle power status is fully committed to the Indo-Pacific and observes Vietnam utilizing its capabilities and tactics to build extensive relationships with neighboring and extraregional powers in the region's hierarchy to establish its strategic autonomy, avoidance of entrapment, and the endurance of the rules-based order.²⁴ Indonesia's middle power status has illustrated its desire to maintain its position in the region's hierarchy as the order's structure benefits Indonesia by making it an indisputable leader for Southeast Asian resiliency, mediating intraregional conflicts, and conducting diplomatic relations with extraregional powers.²⁵

Stewardship

Vietnam has employed *liberal-realism* traits of stewardship in its foreign policy that aims to benefit the Indo-Pacific's institutional framework, its rules-based structure, and promote state sovereignty and territorial integrity as indisputable facts. For instance, Vietnam is heavily engaged in resisting China's military presence in the South China Sea (SCS), attempting to regionalize territorial disputes through ASEAN and its institutional mechanisms—particularly the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus. Moreover, Vietnam has discouraged small, minor, and fellow middle powers from seeking bilateral arrangements with China over settling alternative solutions to territorial disputes, thereby undermining the region's rules-based and multilateral structure to intraregional conflicts.²⁶

Indonesia is perhaps the foremost middle power to have used *liberal-realism* traits in its foreign policy due to its history with European colonization and a struggle for independence. Indonesia has reflected this experience through “Aktif dan Bebas,” or “Active and Independent” diplomacy that emphasizes the importance of state and territorial sovereignty and centrality to the drawbacks of power politics from great powers.²⁷ What is more, Indonesia's *stewardship* experience was exhibited when ASEAN leaders approached it to develop an Indo-Pacific concept. Through this outreach of ASEAN members, Indonesia demonstrated its ability to deploy multilateral tactics that reflected the needs and perspectives of the organization's members.²⁸

As the exhibited examples correspond with the article's *traits* of middle powerhood, it is clear that Indonesia and Vietnam both possess middle power status in the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, the assessment highlights their outlook on middle power opportunities to shape geosecurity issues and geoeconomic resiliency in the Indo-Pacific.

Vietnam and Indonesia: Legitimizers and Bridgers of a Rules-Based Order

In contemporary IR, the most vital and indispensable middle powers are the states that can project a titular role for their status as a middle-tier power. Traditionally this has persuaded middle powers, in the global sense, to be well-suited managers, bridge-builders, and peacekeepers. However, no matter how influential these middle power roles were during the Cold War and post-Cold War periods, they illustrate a genuine lack of coherent acclaim for how impactful middle powers can be in shaping geosecurity issues and geoeconomic resiliency—especially in a period of multipolarity.

To develop middle power roles, a state actor must compare and assess its national interests, values, and strategic attitudes with the behavioral prescriptions arriving from its rank and position in the region's hierarchical order.²⁹ Due to the power disparity of a five-tier hierarchical order, middle powers have limited roles in influencing and shaping regional diplomatic areas of interest. This shortcoming prohibits middle powers from attaining roles as enforcers, hedgers, and balancers. On the other hand, the power disparity does confirm opportunities to form niche roles. It is recommended that from this, middle powers choose the roles of *legitimizers* and *bridgers*.³⁰

In the context of middle power diplomacy, a *legitimizing* role refers to the ability of a middle power to affirm and oblige top-tier and lower-tier powers of the legitimacy of niche areas of interest in the regional order. The precedent from this role traces the fixed nature and legitimacy of the rules-based and hierarchical structures of the regional order to exhibit the importance of socializing and engaging all state actors. Moreover, it will project power to be primarily concerned with preserving, protecting, and promoting stability and prosperity to the region without reverting to strategies of hedging, countering, or balancing from the middle. If exerted successfully, middle powers can decrease their security and economic vulnerability toward a higher reward-to-cost ratio. Lastly, the *legitimizing* role is not driven by an altruistic sense of good international citizenship. Instead, it is rooted in an apprehension of strategic power that observes great and major powers pursuing militaristic and divisive strategies to preserve their hierarchical ranking at the cost of the region's stability and prosperity.

Meanwhile, the role of the *bridger* in middle power diplomacy refers to the ability of middle-tier powers to diplomatically pursue, link, and galvanize niche areas of interest to both top-tier and lower-tier powers through a collective and multilateral mechanism. The precedent from this role affixes the functionality and multipolarity of the region's domains of power while cementing a consensus on

core interests and values recognized as universal and that cannot be infringed. If exerted successfully, middle powers can gain considerable strategies to influence from the middle, prompting top-tier and lower-tier powers to engage with middle powers through avenues that do not support or empower hegemonic struggles.

In assessing the national units of measurements—*positional*, *geographic*, and *normative* traits—for Vietnam and Indonesia, it is clear that they reflect a middle-range inclination to the overall regional hierarchy. With that said, their behavioral prescriptions differ as a result of their middle power experience. Vietnam, for instance, has extensive experiences in dealing with territorial disputes in the SCS, mitigating foreign policies that directly hedge China's growing hegemonic clout, and its firsthand involvement of being a pawn in great-power competition during the Cold War. Together, these experiences position Vietnam to project more attention to geosecurity issues, thereby making the country a viable *legitimizing* and *bridger* for shaping geosecurity issues that reflect the rules-based order's functionality to preserve strategic autonomy for state sovereignty and territorial integrity.³¹ Meanwhile, Indonesia's middle power experience in economic and multilateral leadership makes it an ideal candidate for legitimizing and bridging economic resiliency to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and extraregional infrastructure strategies that seek to polarize the region into geopolitical blocs.³²

In implementing a *bridger* role onto its foreign policy, Vietnam is encouraged to approach ASEAN to bridge its experiences in dealing with an assertive and, at times, revisionist China as the dominant geosecurity concern for the intergovernmental organization. Such action will signal to Chinese-aligned ASEAN members—particularly Cambodia and Laos—that China's growing interests in the SCS and beyond are a permanent and prerequisite objective for regional hegemony, thereby making clear that centrality and impartiality will not deter or balance China from threatening their territorial or national sovereignty.

Presenting this strategic clarity will encourage ASEAN members to realize the extent of the issue and make them feel more comfortable in discussing and participating in cooperative security and military-military dialogues, confidence-building programs, and institutional mechanisms that can incentivize sweeping diplomatic cooperation that will oblige Southeast Asian states to protect a rules-based order.³³ Lastly, it will serve Vietnam's national interest of ensuring ASEAN's functionality as a peripheral and middle power institution that will not work against them and other middle-range powers on behalf of China.³⁴

For Indonesia, their *bridger* role needs to pursue, link, and galvanize ASEAN members to base their economic resiliency on the principles of openness, inclusivity, transparency, and stability toward official development aid and foreign investments.³⁵ Indonesia should bridge the ASEAN Economic Community to emerg-

ing and new multilateral trade agreements similar to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Japan-EU Economic Partnership Agreement to diversify their economies, broaden their resilience to Chinese economic coercion.

Moreover, as a leading Indo-Pacific institutionalist and rules-based stabilizer, Indonesia should encourage more intraregional infrastructure initiatives that can increase regional unity, solidarity, partnership, and institutional capacity to provide alternatives to China's BRI. Indonesia should bridge Vietnam's recent foreign investments in Cambodia and Laos to its global maritime fulcrum program that leverages its geopolitical location with more regionally based maritime connectivity and infrastructure investments.³⁶ Such initiatives will make Indonesia and ASEAN more transparent and sustainable in their economic resiliency to China while maintaining a distinctly Southeast Asian outlook that does not unbalance the region's conventional economic practices.

For the *legitimizing* role, Vietnam and Indonesia are encouraged to lead an ASEAN and member-orientated vision of a "free and open Indo-Pacific" that will shape geosecurity and geoeconomic issues going forward. Although Indonesia led the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), there were varying disagreements between the organization's members. These disagreements resulted in the AOIP lacking details on how ASEAN can engage the region's pivotal state actors while maintaining their strategic autonomy to disputes in the SCS, China's maritime expansionism, and the respect of states to follow international law to settle territorial disputes peacefully, along with reducing the threat of Sino-US great-power competition.³⁷

As *legitimizers*, Vietnam and Indonesia need to emphasize to ASEAN members that any vision of the region needs to include a regionally distinct outlook and voice on the Indo-Pacific's rules-based order, along with a united position that will ensure the region's equilibrium in an era of strategic competition and deepening power politics.³⁸ Vietnam, in particular, must push forward the notion that as Chinese hegemonic ambition grows against the backdrop of a US-led balancing strategy, ASEAN and its members cannot restrict their strategic autonomy, involvement, and interference in Indo-Pacific affairs.³⁹

Vietnam should use its *legitimizing* role to highlight the failing nature of ASEAN's conventional strategic thinking toward impartiality and centrality. Vietnam also needs to emphasize that remaining impartial to Chinese regional hegemony will result in an overly assertive China expressing unchecked expansionism and revisionism with evidence that the Indo-Pacific's middle and lower-tier powers support its regional hegemony or lack the strategic conviction to resist its claim and revisionism. Moreover, Vietnam needs to reinforce that centrality—or find-

ing a middle path—to Sino-US great-power competition will result in a bipolarization of regional affairs, thereby creating spheres of influence that will dictate diplomatic, military, and economic areas of interest to middle and lower-tier powers and remove any strategic autonomy in shaping key regional issues.

Indonesia can support this perspective by using its *legitimizer* role to balance a distinct anti-Chinese outlook with traditional ASEAN diplomatic thinking. Reinforcing its designed check to the QUAD in the AOIP, Indonesia should suggest that an ASEAN Indo-Pacific vision is focused on enhancing intramember cooperation that acts to harmonize its engagement to ensure the endurance of a rules-based order that adheres to prominent ASEAN principles. Overall, Indonesia should press ASEAN to refute dictated strategic concepts and outright declare the need for all state actors to follow the explicit principles of national and territorial sovereignty, noninterference, and maintaining Open Sea Lines of Communications found in the UN Charter.⁴⁰

Conclusion

It is often reported that middle powers have no significant ability to project their interests onto critical geopolitical issues. In contemporary IR literature, they are the by-product of the liberal rules-based order, and as such, have developed managerial, bridge-building, and peacekeeping roles. However, through analyzing middle powers through an updated perspective—limiting middle power knock-offs—and their correspondence to the regional structure of the Indo-Pacific’s geopolitical order and two foreign policy roles, the article has shown how extensive middle power diplomacy can be in shaping and impacting key geopolitical issues.

Unlike conventional scholarship that focuses on Australia, Japan, and South Korea, the article’s emphasis on Vietnam and Indonesia reflects the growing power disparity of the geopolitical landscape and offers a distinctly Southeast Asian outlook to engaging the Indo-Pacific strategically. Moreover, by showcasing how Vietnam and Indonesia can use a *bridger* and *legitimizer* role in their foreign policy and enlisting ASEAN and its members, the article has placed greater importance on middle power engagement in shaping geosecurity and geo-economic issues during an era of contest and competition. 🌟

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