

# Whither the Indo-Pacific?

## Middle power strategies from Australia, South Korea and Indonesia

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The international system is currently undergoing momentous structural change, spurred by a tumultuous power shift of global proportions which fosters multiple regional and international frictions, further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup> This continuing process inevitably reinforces both old and new forms of instability and intraregional competition, many of which fall within the flexible geographical scope of the Indo-Pacific.<sup>2</sup> Rather than producing a single new international order to replace the old one, this volatile multipolarity brings about a new set of parallel and at times conflicting regional and global orders, interconnected and simultaneously operating along the lines of Acharya's 'multiplex' analogy.<sup>3</sup> Scholars routinely emphasize that the Indo-Pacific epitomizes a new form of geopolitical and geo-economic competition caused by US–China superpower rivalries:<sup>4</sup> a potential Thucydides' trap involving not only Washington and Beijing, but numerous major and minor actors both inside and outside the Indo-Pacific;<sup>5</sup> and two colliding grand strategies potentially leading to a 'New Cold War'.<sup>6</sup> Given the global ramifications of this heightened competition, and the region's growing divide between the realms of security and trade, academics and policy-makers have so far focused on US and Chinese perspectives,<sup>7</sup> on the

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<sup>1</sup> Hal Brands and Francis J. Gavin, eds, *COVID-19 and world order: the future of conflict, competition, and cooperation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> See Richard Javad Heydarian, *The Indo-Pacific: Trump, China, and the new struggle for global mastery* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Acharya argued for a 'multiplex' rather than a multipolar order; however, his analogy remains entirely applicable, despite different ideas on the nature of the emerging global order. See Amitav Acharya, 'After liberal hegemony: the advent of a multiplex world order', *Ethics and International Affairs* 31: 3, 2017, pp. 271–85.

<sup>4</sup> Mingjiang Li, 'The Belt and Road Initiative: geo-economics and Indo-Pacific security competition', *International Affairs* 96: 1, 2020, pp. 169–87.

<sup>5</sup> Kai He and Mingjiang Li, 'Understanding the dynamics of the Indo-Pacific: US–China strategic competition, regional actors, and beyond', *International Affairs* 96: 1, 2020, pp. 1–7.

<sup>6</sup> For competing views on this notion, see Minghao Zhao, 'Is a new Cold War inevitable? Chinese perspectives on US–China strategic competition', *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 12: 3, 2019, pp. 371–94, and Odd Arne Westad, 'The sources of Chinese conduct: are Washington and Beijing fighting a new Cold War?', *Foreign Affairs* 98: 5, 2019, pp. 86–95.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Scobell, 'Constructing a US–China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific and beyond', *Journal of Contemporary China* 30: 127, 2021, pp. 69–84.

posture of relevant institutions such as ASEAN,<sup>8</sup> and on the foreign policy implications of these developments for countries in the region.<sup>9</sup>

However, while the extant scholarship is increasingly mindful of the viewpoints of smaller powers—states embedded in the region and therefore inevitably affected by Sino-American rivalry—scant attention has been paid to their distinct status, role and behaviour as middle powers. While the difficult position of smaller states that are caught between the two competing superpowers has been acknowledged in the literature, and some country-specific analyses are mentioned below, these countries' predicament among rising regional tensions has not been sufficiently explored through the middle power lens, a shortcoming that this article seeks to address. The article also aims to investigate whether middle powers can embody an alternative, cooperative vision for the Indo-Pacific beyond the ongoing US–China power-play, with the goal of contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the unfolding tensions in the Indo-Pacific. The available literature provides few contributions relevant to this aim, and those that do exist do not seem to reach a consensus on the role or goals of middle powers in navigating the region's troubled waters.

Wilkins and Kim assess how some of the region's actors have reacted to the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy, and conclude that the latter is a 'polarising concept [that] will likely contribute to further sharpening of strategic mistrust and geopolitical competition'.<sup>10</sup> For their part, Jung, Lee and Lee write that the US failure to recruit more states to its coalition is mainly due to its perceived 'weakened commitment to a liberal international order',<sup>11</sup> suggesting that the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy is not considered sufficiently steadfast in the region. Struyve de Swielande, meanwhile, places great faith in middle powers' capacity to stabilize the Indo-Pacific, writing that:

Middle powers, by counterbalancing the United States and China and exploiting their rivalry, can be a driving force for the future of the international system ... In the end, it is the powers standing in the middle that will guarantee or break the status quo.<sup>12</sup>

Yet Emmers judges that rising tensions in the region 'make it much harder for middle powers to influence the regional security environment through the promotion of a rules-based order',<sup>13</sup> while Jeong and Lee suggest that 'middle powers are in a position to either foster cooperation among major powers or exacerbate tensions between them', although they also note that 'this is a complicated

<sup>8</sup> Dewi Fortuna Anwar, 'Indonesia and the ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific', *International Affairs* 96: 1, 2020, pp. 111–29.

<sup>9</sup> See Seng Tan, 'Consigned to hedge: south-east Asia and America's "free and open Indo-Pacific" strategy', *International Affairs* 96: 1, 2020, pp. 131–48.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Wilkins and Jiye Kim, 'Adoption, accommodation or opposition? Regional powers respond to American-led Indo-Pacific strategy', *Pacific Review*, 2020, pp. 1–31 at p. 1, doi: 10.1080/09512748.2020.1825516.

<sup>11</sup> Sung Chul Jung, Jaehyon Lee and Ji-Yong Lee, 'The Indo-Pacific strategy and US alliance network expandability: Asian middle powers' positions on Sino-US geostrategic competition in Indo-Pacific region', *Journal of Contemporary China* 30: 127, 2021, pp. 53–68 at p. 53.

<sup>12</sup> Tanguy Struyve de Swielande, 'Middle powers in the Indo-Pacific: potential pacifiers guaranteeing stability in the Indo-Pacific?', *Asian Politics and Policy* 11: 2, 2019, pp. 190–207 at pp. 203–204.

<sup>13</sup> Ralf Emmers, 'The role of middle powers in Asian multilateralism', *Asia Policy* 25: 4, 2018, pp. 42–7 at p. 47.

issue since middle powers are highly interdependent with both great powers'.<sup>14</sup> To further complicate matters, Doyle and Rumley argue that both the Indo-Pacific's superpowers and great powers are exerting constant pressure on the region's middle powers to align with them, the result of which is a proliferation of regional strategies supported by an increasing multipolarity.<sup>15</sup>

Thus there is no consensus on middle powers' ability to shape the region's trajectory, let alone provide an alternative regional vision, or even consensus on whether they can increase regional cooperation or are sought-after pawns manoeuvred by the two superpowers. Accordingly, research specifically dealing with middle powers' roles in the Indo-Pacific is small in extent and provides an unclear verdict. Moreover, since such states are generally described as pursuing cooperative foreign policies,<sup>16</sup> and thriving in multipolar contexts,<sup>17</sup> this article's focus on a cross-section of middle powers as a collective category is particularly significant in consideration of the increasingly volatile and multipolar strategic landscape of this region. Against this backdrop, the article seeks to address this gap in the literature on middle powers and the Indo-Pacific, while shedding light on the complex mechanisms driving the region's strategic competition. In order to do so, it aims to clarify middle powers' visions and related strategies for the Indo-Pacific beyond a restrictive view of narrow Sino-American competition.

Starting from these premises, the article first traces the theoretical and analytical boundaries of this research, outlining the different understandings of the Indo-Pacific construct and reviewing middle power theory. Second, it identifies Australia, South Korea and Indonesia as the region's key middle powers, before exploring their goals and roles through a comparative framework. With the goal of capturing the main drivers behind these states' regional policies, it encompasses their middle power typology (potentially affecting their foreign policy); how economically and strategically close they are to the two superpowers (a factor that partially explains their degree of willingness/reluctance to adopt an explicit regional posture); what they envisage for the wider region (the conceptual basis for their policies); how they plan to achieve this (their actual Indo-Pacific policies); and whether they are capable of implementing it (and if so, under what conditions). Thus the five lines of enquiry are: (1) middle power *categorization*; (2) *inter-connectedness* with the two superpowers; (3) *vision* for the Indo-Pacific; (4) resulting *regional posture*; and (5) *capacity* to implement the country's goals. As can be seen, these are not entirely discrete criteria, since countries' middle power typology may have an impact on their preferred goals and means, the degree of interrelation with the United States and China is likely to exert a strong influence throughout,

<sup>14</sup> Bora Jeong and Hoon Lee, 'US–China commercial rivalry, great war and middle powers', *International Area Studies Review* 24: 2, 2021, pp. 135–48 at pp. 144–5.

<sup>15</sup> Timothy Doyle and Dennis Rumley, *The rise and return of the Indo-Pacific* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 110–42.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew F. Cooper, Richard A. Higgott and Kim R. Nossal, *Relocating middle powers: Australia and Canada in a changing world order* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1993).

<sup>17</sup> See Ümut Aydin, 'Emerging middle powers and the liberal international order', *International Affairs* 97: 5, 2021, pp. 1377–94, and Carsten Holbraad, *Middle powers in international politics* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 205–13.

their regional vision informs their actual posture, and their capacity to pursue goals acts as a counterweight to their aspirations. Subsequently, this comparative case-study analysis is conducted in three distinct sections focusing respectively on Australia, South Korea and Indonesia.<sup>18</sup> Third, the article assesses the implications of this research for the region's evolving strategic landscape, also addressing the abovementioned gaps in the literature, before presenting its conclusions.

It finds that Australia has replaced its convenient 'strategic ambiguity' with 'strategic alignment' with Washington, as epitomized by the Quad<sup>19</sup> and AUKUS, in order to shape the region according to a rules-based (and US-led) vision. South Korea emphasizes the importance of multilateralism and economic prosperity, and has recently agreed to increase non-military cooperation with both the United States and ASEAN, although it might use these concessions to protract its 'strategic ambiguity'. Indonesia, on the other hand, depending on one's interpretation, either is not hedging at all against the two superpowers, attempting instead to create a 'third way' with ASEAN, or is hedging against both—with the goal of underpinning the region's 'strategic autonomy' and economic prosperity—although several doubts linger over its capacity to achieve this ambitious goal. Finally, the region's middle powers could theoretically provide an alternative platform for the region's future direction, not only because of their combined potential, but also on account of the cooperative approach typical of this class of states. However, they seem unlikely to do so in the near future owing to internal divisions caused by the very Sino-American rivalry that most of them are trying to offset. The implications of this are significant, as the Indo-Pacific is now shaped by a series of interdependent frictions and partnerships, spurring its middle powers to adopt one of three strategies: balancing against China, hedging against both the United States and China,<sup>20</sup> or attempting to create a 'third pole'. By systematically exploring these issues, this article fills a gap in the extant literature and reveals the potential as well as the limitations of middle powers' different Indo-Pacific strategies.

## The Indo-Pacific and its middle powers

Like many other ideas in the realm of International Relations, the concepts of the Indo-Pacific and of middle powers have been the subject of much scrutiny, to such an extent that their definitions are often contested, for a variety of reasons. Starting with the former, the Indo-Pacific has progressively replaced the Asia-Pacific in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, aided by the concept's remarkably deep roots in history.<sup>21</sup> In more recent times, Japan was the first to

<sup>18</sup> For methodological considerations on the comparative case-study, see Lesley Bartlett and Frances Vavrus, *Rethinking case study research: a comparative approach* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>19</sup> The Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) is a strategic security dialogue between Australia, India, Japan and the United States.

<sup>20</sup> For the definition of hedging adopted in this research, see Darren J. Lim and Zack Cooper, 'Reassessing hedging: the logic of alignment in east Asia', *Security Studies* 24: 4, 2015, pp. 696–727.

<sup>21</sup> Rory Medcalf, 'In defence of the Indo-Pacific: Australia's new strategic map', *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 68: 4, 2014, pp. 470–83. For a full account of the concept's development, see Doyle and Rumley, *The rise and return of the Indo-Pacific*.

put forward a new iteration of the Indo-Pacific concept by referring in 2007 to the ‘confluence of two seas’ and the ‘arc of stability and prosperity’—encompassing Europe to the west and the United States and Canada to the east—an idea that was reconfigured as the ‘free and open Indo-Pacific’ (FOIP) nine years later.<sup>22</sup> In the following years, more countries would acknowledge this evolving concept, though with significant variations and their own nomenclature. In 2013 both the United States and Australia started using the ‘Indo-Pacific’ in official statements and documents, and readily attached a strategic connotation to the term,<sup>23</sup> while China sought to eschew this conception and envisaged the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ as an economic platform joining the two oceans.<sup>24</sup> In the same period, India more solidly compounded its ‘look west/east/north/south’ policies, thus providing a flexible vision of the Indo-Pacific stretching to eastern Africa;<sup>25</sup> and Indonesia emphasized its role as a ‘global maritime fulcrum’ embedded between the Indian and the Pacific oceans.<sup>26</sup> Even South Korea, for all its cautiousness towards super-power rivalry, came to accept its reliance on strategic and economic developments unfolding across this macro-region, and in 2017 announced it would start coordinating its ‘new southern policy’ (NSP) with the US FOIP strategy.<sup>27</sup>

At the onset of the 2020s, both the theoretical and the strategic implications of this complex landscape are profound. In conceptual terms, Wilkins and Kim write that today the Indo-Pacific can be understood as ‘(i) a formulation of new “mental maps”, through (ii) political/ideological drivers, to arrive at (iii) a vision of regional security order’.<sup>28</sup> Also adopting a tripartite approach, He refracts the Indo-Pacific through the prism of IR theory and posits that realism explains its geopolitical construct (balancing against China), liberalism outlines an institutional framework fostering cooperation between relevant countries, and constructivism reveals an ideational construct conceived to promote regional values and norms.<sup>29</sup>

Linking conceptual notions to practical policy considerations reveals the sheer complexity of the strategic environment of the Indo-Pacific. Rossiter and Cannon argue that the Indo-Pacific is either rejected as a concept and dismissed as a ‘discursive construction’ (in Beijing), or ‘imagined and subsequently evoked to provide a concept around which a strategic response to China’s rise can be organized’ (among the Quad countries).<sup>30</sup> Medcalf advances the idea that states are

<sup>22</sup> Kei Koga, ‘Japan’s “free and open Indo-Pacific” strategy’, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41: 2, 2019, pp. 286–313.

<sup>23</sup> Medcalf, ‘In defence of the Indo-Pacific’. With specific reference to the US, the country’s somewhat contradictory practices should be noted when discussing the FOIP concept, since Washington has not ratified the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), nor, at the time of writing, has it reappointed WTO appellate judges.

<sup>24</sup> Li, ‘The Belt and Road Initiative’.

<sup>25</sup> David Scott, ‘India and the Indo-Pacific discourse’, in Harsh V. Pant, ed., *New directions in India’s foreign policy: theory and praxis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 195–214.

<sup>26</sup> Anwar, ‘Indonesia and the ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific’.

<sup>27</sup> Jaehyon Lee, ‘South Korea’s new southern policy and the US FOIP: convergence or competition?’, in Kyle Springer, ed., *Embracing the Indo-Pacific? South Korea’s progress towards a regional strategy* (Perth: USAsia Centre, 2020), pp. 26–35.

<sup>28</sup> Wilkins and Kim, ‘Adoption, accommodation or opposition?’, p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> Kai He, ‘Three faces of the Indo-Pacific: understanding the “Indo-Pacific” from an IR theory perspective’, *East Asia* 35: 2, 2018, pp. 149–61.

<sup>30</sup> Ash Rossiter and Brendon J. Cannon, ‘Conflict and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: new geopolitical realities’, in Ash Rossiter and Brendon J. Cannon, eds, *Conflict and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: new geopolitical realities* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), pp. 1–11 at p. 1.

faced with the question: 'How can other countries respond to a strong and often coercive China without resorting to capitulation or conflict?'<sup>31</sup> Kapur traces three potentially parallel developments for this region, respectively following the 'West' and international law, China's own views of legitimate actions, and ASEAN's consensus-building attempts.<sup>32</sup> To this, He and Feng add that the Quad, bringing together the United States, Japan, India and Australia, is the closest embodiment of the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy, as well as a platform through which to counter the strategic repercussions of China's 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI). Yet they conclude that its success is only partial, since it is a minilateral rather than a truly multilateral initiative.<sup>33</sup>

It is amid this complex, volatile and fractured context that the middle power notion gains salience, as these types of states are often thought to conduct their foreign policy judiciously. This strand of IR theory has been the subject of increasingly sustained debates since the end of the Cold War, and while all middle power research regularly begins with notes of caution, stating that 'confusion reigns supreme' in definitional terms,<sup>34</sup> it is still possible to encapsulate its main features, and to justify its role in this article. To begin with, middle powers and great powers—much like the Indo-Pacific itself—are hardly a recent addition to the political lexicon, since these categories of states stretch back to ancient times and have been evolving along with an ever-changing international system.<sup>35</sup> Second, by virtue of their neither large nor negligible capabilities, such states stand a better chance of exerting their influence in a multipolar system, where globalization and power diffusion (rather than concentration) do not inhibit their initiatives.<sup>36</sup> In this respect, the Indo-Pacific represents an ideal context in which to assess middle powers' own regional vision and their capacity and willingness to pursue it.

On the other hand, the question of how to define and identify such states represents a sizeable portion of middle power theory, and the key points should be briefly discussed here. The most often cited definitional framework comprises four approaches: geographic (interposition between larger powers), positional (material capabilities below those of the great powers but above those of regional and lesser powers), normative (adherence to—and support for—international law) and behavioural (multilateralism and pursuit of 'middle power diplomacy').<sup>37</sup> Further nuancing this framework, middle power status can also be investigated through the '5Cs': capacity, concentration, creativity, coalition-building and

<sup>31</sup> Rory Medcalf, *Contest for the Indo-Pacific: why China won't map the future* (Carlton: La Trobe University Press, 2020), p. 3.

<sup>32</sup> Ashok Kapur, *Geopolitics and the Indo-Pacific region* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), p. 179.

<sup>33</sup> Kai He and Huiyun Feng, 'The institutionalization of the Indo-Pacific: problems and prospects', *International Affairs* 96: 1, 2020, pp. 149–68.

<sup>34</sup> Jeffrey Robertson, 'Middle-power definitions: confusion reigns supreme', *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 71: 4, 2017, pp. 355–70.

<sup>35</sup> Gabriele Abbondanza, 'Middle powers and great powers through history: the concept from ancient times to the present day', *History of Political Thought* 41: 3, 2020, pp. 397–418.

<sup>36</sup> See Aydin, 'Emerging middle powers and the liberal international order'; Holbraad, *Middle powers in international politics*, pp. 205–13.

<sup>37</sup> Cooper et al., *Relocating middle powers*, pp. 17–19.

credibility.<sup>38</sup> More recently, scholars have rediscovered older notions of states' identities, according to which middle powers are also states that self-identify—and thus come to behave—as such.<sup>39</sup> In the past few years, the criterion of 'systemic impact' has been added to middle power theory, focusing on the outcomes of middle powers' policies contrasted with their original goals.<sup>40</sup> Admittedly there is much more to say about this lively strand of IR theory; but further exploration here would dilute this article's focus on the attitudes of the Indo-Pacific's middle powers, and it is therefore appropriate to refer to research specifically on middle power theory for further reading.<sup>41</sup>

As is to be expected, such definitional complexity makes it difficult to reach an agreement on which states constitute the region's middle powers. Starting from the bottom of the potential list, a straightforward positional perspective could include countries with second-tier but above-average (regional top 15, global top 40) material capabilities. Among these are Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore (all ASEAN member states), and indeed they are occasionally regarded as such.<sup>42</sup> However, these countries fall short of middle power theory's non-quantitative requirements (chiefly behaviour and identity), so they are not considered by this article for reasons of parsimony and analytical focus.<sup>43</sup> At the top of the list, on the other hand, are states that have been deemed middle powers in the past, although their great power-like capabilities—and behaviour, owing to heightened tensions in the region—warrant their exclusion from the middle power class. These are Japan and India, both of which are generally considered great powers placed below the two contending superpowers.<sup>44</sup> This process of elimination leaves three countries whose middle power status is widely recognized in the region: Australia, South Korea and Indonesia.<sup>45</sup> To ascertain what role they have and seek to play in the Indo-Pacific, the following three sections examine them in turn according to the five abovementioned criteria, namely: (1) middle power *categorization*; (2) *interconnectedness* with the two superpowers; (3) *vision* for the Indo-Pacific; (4) resulting regional *posture*; and (5) *capacity* to implement the country's goals (see table 1 for a summary of the comparative analysis).

<sup>38</sup> John Ravenhill, 'Cycles of middle power activism: constraint and choice in Australian and Canadian foreign policies', *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 52: 3, 1998, pp. 309–27.

<sup>39</sup> Sarah Teo, 'Middle power identities of Australia and South Korea: comparing the Kevin Rudd/Julia Gillard and Lee Myung-Bak administrations', *Pacific Review* 31: 2, 2018, pp. 221–39.

<sup>40</sup> Andrew Carr, 'Is Australia a middle power? A systemic impact approach', *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 68: 1, 2014, pp. 70–84.

<sup>41</sup> Among the several recent volumes, see Gabriele Abbondanza and Thomas Wilkins, eds, *Awkward powers: escaping traditional great and middle power theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021); Tanguy Struye de Swielande, Dorothée Vandamme, David Walton and Thomas Wilkins, eds, *Rethinking middle powers in the Asian century: new theories, new cases* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019); Ralf Emmers and Sarah Teo, *Security strategies of middle powers in the Asia Pacific* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2018).

<sup>42</sup> See Jonathan H. Ping, *Middle power statecraft: Indonesia, Malaysia and the Asia-Pacific* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2005); Doyle and Rumley, *The rise and return of the Indo-Pacific*, pp. 110–42.

<sup>43</sup> These states nevertheless play a significant role in what could potentially be an alternative regional vision based on cooperation and mutual advantages, as outlined earlier in this article.

<sup>44</sup> See Doyle and Rumley, *The rise and return of the Indo-Pacific*, p. 46.

<sup>45</sup> See, among many others, Struye de Swielande, 'Middle powers in the Indo-Pacific'; Emmers and Teo, *Security strategies of middle powers in the Asia Pacific*.

## Australia: the committed middle power

Australia is considered a ‘traditional’ middle power, whose long-held status has its roots in the preparation of the 1945 San Francisco conference. More recently, scholars have pointed to a number of trends in the country’s foreign policy which increasingly prioritize security and trade over globalist and multilateralist values, thus *categorizing* it as a pragmatic middle power.<sup>46</sup> Epithets aside, Australia is an influential middle power on the global stage, and a significant, if contested, actor in the Indo-Pacific. The difficulty in properly locating it in its region derives from the country’s oft-cited ‘liminality’, or the peculiar condition of perceiving itself—and being perceived by others—as being neither inside nor outside the Indo-Pacific.<sup>47</sup>

This predicament is closely related to this article’s understanding of *interconnectedness* with the two competing superpowers. On the one hand, its strategic orientation is unequivocal, by virtue of its status as a formal (if dependent) ally of the United States through the 1951 ANZUS Treaty. On the other, this is at odds with Australia’s massive economic links with China. The latter is by far Canberra’s largest two-way trading partner (worth US\$175 billion in 2020, a third of Australia’s global trade), and a country with which it has had a free trade agreement since 2015.<sup>48</sup> The country’s security–trade divide, split between Washington and Beijing respectively, is proving difficult for Australia to manage amid recent bilateral and regional tensions, and the COVID-19 pandemic has further strained diplomatic relations to such an extent that they now pose a significant challenge to its middle power diplomacy.<sup>49</sup>

In open contrast with the country’s *rapprochement* with China and the ‘laissez-faire’ attitudes of the 2007–10 Rudd government, the recent tensions in the Indo-Pacific have led Canberra to become more ‘committed’ to Washington’s goals and pursue a more resolute *vision* for the region. This vision is presented with an emphasis on normative elements and a multilateralist attitude, although it concurrently aims to reinforce the existing balance of power through a set of interconnected alliances and minilateral initiatives revolving around Washington.<sup>50</sup> Formal agreements take the form of either defence treaties or fully fledged alliances between the United States and a number of key Indo-Pacific states, including Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Pakistan and Taiwan.<sup>51</sup> Minilateral initiatives are mainly represented by the Quad with the United States, Japan and India, and the recently

<sup>46</sup> Gabriele Abbondanza, ‘Australia the “good international citizen”? The limits of a traditional middle power’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 75: 2, 2021, pp. 178–96; Brendan Taylor, ‘Is Australia’s Indo-Pacific strategy an illusion?’, *International Affairs* 96: 1, 2020, pp. 95–109.

<sup>47</sup> Richard A. Higgott and Kim R. Nossal, ‘The international politics of liminality: relocating Australia in the Asia Pacific’, *Australian Journal of Political Science* 32: 2, 1997, pp. 169–86.

<sup>48</sup> Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *China country brief* (Canberra, 2021), <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/china/china-country-brief>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 26 Nov. 2021.)

<sup>49</sup> Guangyi Pan and Alexander Korolev, ‘The struggle for certainty: ontological security, the rise of nationalism, and Australia–China tensions after COVID-19’, *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 26: 1, 2021, pp. 115–38.

<sup>50</sup> Australian Department of Defence, *2020 defence strategic update* (Canberra, 2020), pp. 5–7.

<sup>51</sup> Robert Sutter, ‘The Obama administration and US policy in Asia’, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 31: 2, 2009, pp. 189–216.

launched enhanced trilateral partnership with the UK and US (AUKUS), both of which embody a security-orientated vision for the Indo-Pacific.<sup>52</sup> Australia plays a major role in both these agreements and multilateral platforms, and is therefore a staunch supporter of the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy.

The resulting regional *posture*—somewhat hesitant until 2017, more steadfast thereafter—shows that Canberra has abandoned its previous policy of ‘strategic ambiguity’, which was useful in bolstering its middle power diplomacy,<sup>53</sup> and is pursuing a new and unequivocal ‘strategic alignment’ with the United States. As its national interests increasingly align with those of the US, Australia’s regional vision upholds the policy mantra of the ‘rules-based order’, which sits well with the US and Japanese FOIP strategies. This is clearly seen in its 2020 Defence Strategic Update, in which Canberra acknowledged that ‘the Indo-Pacific is at the centre of greater strategic competition, making the region more contested’, and which was underpinned by ‘a focus on strengthened international engagement, particularly with the United States, Japan, India, ASEAN and other allies and partners’,<sup>54</sup> with ‘China’s more active pursuit of greater influence in the Indo-Pacific’ as one of the core strategic concerns.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, despite the nominal increase in Australian exports to China throughout the pandemic,<sup>56</sup> a closer look reveals that instances of economic coercion from Beijing have been abundant and growing since 2017,<sup>57</sup> which has arguably made it easier for Canberra to abandon its cherished strategic ambiguity and complete its shift in terms of regional posture. This shift, in turn, represents more than a stumbling block for the idea of a ‘middle power coalition’ in the Indo-Pacific, since sceptics and critics are likely to be reinforced in their perception of Canberra as a platform for US power projection.<sup>58</sup>

This progressive adjustment to an evolving regional landscape represents both an asset for Australia’s middle power diplomacy and a limitation of the country’s *capacity* to pursue its goals. On the one hand, Canberra has successfully coordinated the new course of its foreign policy with Quad partners from 2017 and AUKUS partners since 2021.<sup>59</sup> Additionally, it actively supports the rotating or ad hoc addition of South Korea, Vietnam and New Zealand to the so-called ‘Quad Plus’.<sup>60</sup> This signals the intention of fostering a multilateral and

<sup>52</sup> See Prime Minister of Australia, *Joint leaders statement on AUKUS*, Canberra, 2021, <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/joint-leaders-statement-aukus>.

<sup>53</sup> Although it should be noted that Australia was firmly on the US side from a defence and military viewpoint throughout its ‘strategic ambiguity phase’: see Mark Beeson and Richard Higgott, ‘The changing architecture of politics in the Asia-Pacific: Australia’s middle power moment?’, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 14: 2, 2014, pp. 215–37.

<sup>54</sup> Australian Department of Defence, *2020 defence strategic update*, p. 3.

<sup>55</sup> Australian Department of Defence, *2020 defence strategic update*, p. 15.

<sup>56</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, *International merchandise trade, preliminary, Australia*, Canberra, 2021, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/international-trade/international-merchandise-trade-preliminary-australia/latest-release>.

<sup>57</sup> Fergus Hanson, Emilia Currey and Tracy Beattie, *The Chinese Communist Party’s coercive diplomacy* (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2020), pp. 4–23.

<sup>58</sup> This is hardly a new challenge for Australian foreign policy-makers: see William Tow, ‘Deputy sheriff or independent ally? Evolving Australian–American ties in an ambiguous world order’, *Pacific Review* 17: 2, 2004, pp. 271–90.

<sup>59</sup> The revived ‘Quad 2.0’ was launched in 2017.

<sup>60</sup> Ashok Sharma, *The first summit Quad meeting reaffirms a free, open, and secure Indo-Pacific*, Australian Institute

normative approach with like-minded regional partners, following Australia's pragmatic middle power tradition,<sup>61</sup> and this expanding network of alignments shows that Australia is attempting to harness the region's multipolarity in order to pursue its regional interests, which take the form of a rules-based—and US-led—vision for the Indo-Pacific. Nonetheless, given its limited capabilities and its strategic reliance on the United States, Australia's capacity to enact this vision clearly rests on the continuing containment policies of Quad (Plus) and AUKUS countries.

## South Korea: the cautious middle power

South Korea makes for a highly representative case-study in this article, as its delicate position is emblematic of the difficulties that many other emerging middle powers are facing. On the one hand, South Korea has been *categorized* as a 'complete' middle power since the early 1990s, in the light of its capabilities, behaviour and self-identification with the middle power class.<sup>62</sup> On the other, its high-threat strategic environment—more volatile than Australia's—has had a significant impact on how Seoul has chosen to manoeuvre between Washington and Beijing; the country's resulting middle power behaviour has been remarkably 'cautious' and, at times, ambiguous. Green writes that 'Korea cannot bridge the United States and China or Japan and China without considerable risk to its core interests', and that this strategic impasse is the reason for the country's timid efforts in terms of regional security architectures.<sup>63</sup> Easley and Park argue that South Korea displays 'mismatched' middle power behaviour, chiefly as a result of its 'strategy of isolating and pressuring Tokyo, while behaving like a smaller power showing deference to Beijing'.<sup>64</sup> Teo, Singh and Tan help to 'close the circle' by reviewing south-east Asian perspectives on Seoul's middle power status, concluding that while the latter is acknowledged, it is 'confined to economics and capacity building'.<sup>65</sup>

This somewhat conflicted middle power status is a direct consequence of the country's *interconnectedness* with the competing superpowers. Much like Australia, but even more markedly, South Korea displays a trade—security divide that significantly shapes its foreign policy. In economic terms, China is by a long way the country's main trade partner: a free trade agreement has been in place since 2015, and Seoul has shown an active interest in China's BRI. Two-way trade amounted

<sup>61</sup> of International Affairs, 19 March 2021, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/the-first-summit-quad-meeting-reaffirms-a-free-open-and-secure-indo-pacific>.

<sup>62</sup> Taylor, 'Is Australia's Indo-Pacific strategy an illusion?'

<sup>63</sup> Emmers and Teo, *Security strategies of middle powers in the Asia Pacific*, pp. 77–107.

<sup>64</sup> Michael J. Green, 'Korean middle power diplomacy and Asia's emerging multilateral architecture', in Victor Cha and Marie DuMond, eds, *The Korean pivot: the study of South Korea as a global power* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2017), pp. 17–34 at p. 34. Moreover, Beijing's influence over Pyongyang is an additional source of strategic insecurity for Seoul.

<sup>65</sup> Leif-Eric Easley and Kyuri Park, 'South Korea's mismatched diplomacy in Asia: middle power identity, interests, and foreign policy', *International Politics* 55: 2, 2018, pp. 242–63 at p. 242.

<sup>66</sup> Sarah Teo, Bhubhindar Singh and See Seng Tan, 'Southeast Asian perspectives on South Korea's middle power engagement initiatives', *Asian Survey* 56: 3, 2016, pp. 555–80 at p. 555.

to US\$240 billion in 2020—a quarter of South Korea’s global trade—with almost a third of the country’s imports pertaining to the energy sector,<sup>66</sup> reflecting a remarkable dependence on maritime trade routes surrounding China for its energy needs. In security terms, however, Seoul is a formal ally of the United States through the 1953 Mutual Defence Treaty, and it currently hosts around 28,000 US troops under the 1966 Status of Forces Agreement.<sup>67</sup>

Inevitably, this uncomfortable condition has affected Seoul’s *vision* for the Indo-Pacific, and what it is prepared to do (or not to do) to fulfil it. Notably, unlike the other key regional actors considered here, South Korea joined the Indo-Pacific discourse very late, and was therefore not able to shape it significantly. Lee argues that ‘the emergence of the concept caught South Korea by surprise ... the South Korean government and society alike was not prepared to make a response either supporting or rejecting the idea’ in 2017.<sup>68</sup> This delayed recognition is mainly due to the country’s position ‘torn’ between the United States and China, a strategic dilemma that has inhibited Seoul’s capacity to adapt to a changing security environment. This is hardly a new problem; it was true even 15 years ago, when Chung aptly described such a dilemma in these terms:

Should China become a friendly, benign power, Sino-American relations will cause less of a strategic problem for South Korea, which has to maintain good relationships with both. On the other hand, if China should become an aggressive and imposing challenger to the status quo, Washington–Beijing dynamics will no doubt constitute an extremely intricate problem for Seoul.<sup>69</sup>

Consequently, for a number of years South Korea has opted for a cautious *posture* of ‘strategic ambiguity’, exercising its middle power status only through non-confrontational approaches. Arguably, in trying to accommodate the rise of China, this has been the safest and most effective foreign policy posture for Seoul, allowing it to showcase its bridge-building capacity and hard-won experience in de-escalating regional tensions, drawing on decades of bellicose relations with Pyongyang.<sup>70</sup> Since 2017, however, mounting pressure from the US and its allies in the region resulted in the formulation of a hurried and somewhat reluctant South Korean strategy for the Indo-Pacific. Seoul has sent seemingly ambiguous signals to Washington, participating in the ‘Quad Plus’ pandemic talks in March 2020, then opting to avoid talks about the Quad during official meetings with the Indian defence minister, only to ‘hit the reset button’ after South Korean President Moon and US President Biden met in May 2021, hence renewing cooperation between Seoul and Washington with a new emphasis on technology

<sup>66</sup> UN International Trade Statistics Database, *UN Comtrade database* (New York, 2021), <https://dit-trade-vis.azurewebsites.net/?reporter=410&partner=156&type=C&year=2020&flow=2>.

<sup>67</sup> Hyonhee Shin and Joyce Lee, ‘Factbox: US and South Korea’s security arrangement, cost of troops’, Reuters, 8 March 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southkorea-usa-alliance-idUSKBN2AZoSo>.

<sup>68</sup> Lee, ‘South Korea’s new southern policy and the US FOIP’, p. 30.

<sup>69</sup> Jae Ho Chung, *Between ally and partner: Korea–China relations and the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 109.

<sup>70</sup> Sukjoon Yoon, ‘South Korea and the South China Sea: a middle-power model for practical policies?’, in Gordon Houlden and Scott Romaniuk, eds, *Security, strategy, and military dynamics in the South China Sea: cross-national perspectives* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2021), pp. 349–70.

exchange.<sup>71</sup> This could fit well with the country's recent 'new southern policy plus' (NSP Plus) strategy presented by President Moon in 2020, which aims to strengthen underdeveloped relations with ASEAN states to harness the region's growing multipolarity, and therefore shows some promise for the idea of a collective and cooperative middle power vision for the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, the policy's focus is on health and environmental security, deliberately avoiding conventional security concerns.<sup>72</sup> This is emblematic of Seoul's traditional caution in approaching regional affairs, representing one of the many factors undermining the unrealized middle power vision alluded to earlier.

This leaves more than a few doubts on the country's *capacity* to navigate in such difficult waters, and specifically about how, in practical terms, South Korea will coordinate its NSP/NSP Plus policy with the US FOIP strategy, as announced in 2017.<sup>73</sup> Huynh offers a clarification of the conundrum of South Korea's vision for the Indo-Pacific, writing that Seoul could continue to pursue a balancing strategy, increase cooperation with the region's middle powers and strengthen Korean-ASEAN relations with the goal of accommodating 'Seoul's interests and concerns amid the US-China strategic competition'.<sup>74</sup> In other words, Seoul might seek to continue pursuing its 'strategic ambiguity' until it is no longer an option, while concurrently enhancing non-military cooperation with the United States and the other Quad countries as a concession to Washington.

## Indonesia: the sceptic middle power

Indonesia is a remarkably influential variable in the Indo-Pacific's middle power 'equation', and its conceptual *categorization* is the subject of an ongoing debate among both scholars and policy-makers, for four main reasons. First, its material capabilities are impressive—it has the 16th largest economy and the fourth-largest population in the world—and keep growing at a steady pace, so much so that the country could become the world's fifth-largest economy by 2030.<sup>75</sup> Second, despite a range of socio-economic fragilities, Indonesia displays clear great power (*negara besar*) ambitions, which are tempered by the country's more moderate world-views, characteristic of a middle power (*negara sedang*).<sup>76</sup> Third, while the country pursues a number of policies that are typical of middle powers, it eschews the idea of siding with either the United States or China, and can therefore be labelled as a 'sceptic' middle power with reference to this binary choice. Fourth, Jakarta is the informal leader of ASEAN, which not only makes it representa-

<sup>71</sup> Chung Min Lee, *Is South Korea going global? New possibilities together with the Biden administration* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2021).

<sup>72</sup> 'Opening remarks by President Moon Jae-in at the 21st ASEAN-ROK summit', Office of the President of the Republic of Korea, 12 Nov. 2020, <http://english1.president.go.kr/BriefingSpeeches/Speeches/905>.

<sup>73</sup> Lee, 'South Korea's new southern policy and the US FOIP'.

<sup>74</sup> Tam-Sang Huynh, 'Bolstering middle power standing: South Korea's response to US Indo-Pacific strategy from Trump to Biden', *Pacific Review*, 2021, pp. 1–29, doi: 10.1080/09512748.2021.1928737.

<sup>75</sup> Vibhanshu Shekhar, *Indonesia's foreign policy and grand strategy in the 21st century: rise of an Indo-Pacific power* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), p. 181.

<sup>76</sup> Shekhar, *Indonesia's foreign policy and grand strategy in the 21st century*, p. 234.

tive of a potential ‘third pole’ within the Indo-Pacific, but can help to shed light on the posture of several ASEAN countries that are not included in this article for reasons of parsimony and space. Definitional difficulties notwithstanding, Indonesia is (at least for the time being) still regarded as a rising middle power in view of its material capabilities, G20 membership, ASEAN leadership and middle power diplomacy.<sup>77</sup>

Like many other Indo-Pacific states, Jakarta is torn by the US–China superpower rivalry given its significant *interconnectedness* with both, with a regional stance that appears less strained than Seoul’s but more complicated than Canberra’s. In economic terms, China is Indonesia’s (and ASEAN’s) main trading partner, supported by the ASEAN–China free trade area agreement signed in 2002 and by a bilateral comprehensive strategic partnership signed in 2013. Two-way trade was worth US\$70 billion in 2020, almost a quarter of Indonesia’s global trade,<sup>78</sup> and Jakarta is also involved in China’s BRI, under which the country’s first high-speed railway is currently being built by a state-owned Chinese company.<sup>79</sup> However, while Indonesia is economically entangled with China, it is not bound by a defence pact with either the United States or its allies. This does not imply a lack of shared concerns or common goals—Washington and Jakarta entered a strategic partnership in 2015 and hold joint military exercises—rather, it reflects Indonesia’s long-held ‘free and active foreign policy’ (*politik luar negeri bebas-aktif*) not only in respect of its emphasis on independence and non-interventionism amid external rivalries, but also in respect of its preventing Jakarta from establishing formal alliances as one of its key tenets.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, Jakarta’s foreign policy is also conducted through (and has impacts on) ASEAN. ASEAN itself cooperates with the United States through a partnership framework—including maritime cooperation and non-traditional security<sup>81</sup>—and with Australia and Japan by means of the ASEAN Regional Forum, the ASEAN Plus Six platform and the East Asia Summit. These broader forms of cooperation cannot (and do not aim to) match a defence treaty, but provide a clear indication that Indonesia seeks to maintain its independent and multifaceted foreign policy.

In this context, the strategic implications of Jakarta’s regional posture are significant for its own *vision* for the Indo-Pacific. Anwar emphasizes the country’s desire for strategic autonomy and non-alignment—for itself and for south-east Asia in general—and sheds light on the understudied fact that US–China rivalry ‘has been the permanent backdrop for Indonesia’s foreign policy since the early days of independence and has informed much of it’.<sup>82</sup> Shekhar reviews the many

<sup>77</sup> Mark Beeson, Alan Bloomfield and Wahyu Wicaksana, ‘Unlikely allies? Australia, Indonesia and the strategic cultures of middle powers’, *Asian Security* 17: 2, 2020, pp. 178–194.

<sup>78</sup> UN International Trade Statistics Database, *UN Comtrade database*, <https://dit-trade-vis.azurewebsites.net/?reporter=360&partner=156&type=C&year=2020&flow=2>.

<sup>79</sup> David M. Lampton, Selina Ho and Cheng-Chwee Kuik, *Rivers of iron: railroads and Chinese power in southeast Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020), pp. 151–81.

<sup>80</sup> Mohamad Rosyidin, ‘Foreign policy in changing global politics: Indonesia’s foreign policy and the quest for major power status in the Asian century’, *South East Asia Research* 25: 2, 2017, pp. 175–91.

<sup>81</sup> United States Mission to ASEAN, *History of the US and ASEAN relations*, Jakarta, 2021, <https://asean.usmission.gov/our-relationship/policy-history/usasean>.

<sup>82</sup> Dewi Fortuna Anwar, ‘Indonesia’s vision of regional order in east Asia amid US–China rivalry: continuity

intertwined elements that have spurred Jakarta to accept and then promote the Indo-Pacific as its new sphere of influence and interest, ‘guided by its sense of geopolitical entitlement and a claim for regional leadership’.<sup>83</sup> Agastia and Perwita underline the significance of the country’s ‘maritime axis’, not just in situating Indonesia as the main actor between the Indian and the Pacific oceans while maintaining ASEAN centrality, but also as a concept around which to support a new sea-focused direction for the country’s armed forces.<sup>84</sup>

Consequently, Indonesia’s regional *posture* openly attempts to create a ‘third way’ stressing ASEAN’s centrality, its own ‘strategic autonomy’ and non-alignment, as well as regional economic prosperity, while reinforcing the country’s *primus inter pares* status in south-east Asia. The intention is to offer an alternative to Sino-American bipolarity in the Indo-Pacific for all those states that do not wish to get enmeshed in it. Such a regional posture is clearly outlined in the 2019 ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)—owing much to Jakarta’s state-craft—which delineates the organization’s conceptualization of the Indo-Pacific according to these very principles.<sup>85</sup> In turn, Jakarta’s regional vision and posture symbolize more than anything else the potential of middle powers to create an alternative and cooperative vision for the Indo-Pacific. This arises from both the nature of the country’s goal (the ‘third way’) and the combined weight of the ASEAN countries it informally represents (ten states, 650 million people and a combined GDP of US\$3.4 trillion).<sup>86</sup> However, as discussed below, Jakarta also embodies the weaknesses that are rooted in this idea.

While Indonesia’s Indo-Pacific strategy is now fully conceptualized, several questions about its *capacity* to implement it persist. Scott casts doubts upon the country’s maritime credentials, arguing that weak naval capabilities undermine its ‘maritime nexus’ policy and increase the risks arising from Sino-American super-power rivalry.<sup>87</sup> Chacko and Willis show that Indonesia’s caution and domestic priorities inhibit regional integration in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>88</sup> A similar conclusion is also shared by Acharya with reference to ASEAN as a whole, which he argues could be ‘doomed by dialogue’ amid increasing regional tensions (and the existence of the Quad and AUKUS arguably suggests that the risk of increasing irrelevance is real).<sup>89</sup> Shekhar is even more unequivocal, writing that ‘emerging Indonesia is economically rising, militarily weak, technologically deficient, institutionally uncoordinated, socially vulnerable and politically dysfunctional’ and

and change’, *Asia Policy* 25: 2, 2018, pp. 57–63.

<sup>83</sup> Shekhar, *Indonesia’s foreign policy and grand strategy in the 21st century*, p. 119.

<sup>84</sup> I. Gusti Bagus Dharma Agastia and Anak Agung Banyu Perwita, ‘Jokowi’s maritime axis: change and continuity of Indonesia’s role in Indo-Pacific’, *Journal of ASEAN Studies* 3: 1, 2015, pp. 32–41.

<sup>85</sup> ASEAN, *ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific* (Bangkok, 2019), <https://asean2019.go.th/en/news/asean-outlook-on-the-indo-pacific>.

<sup>86</sup> ASEAN StatsDataPortal, Indicators, <https://data.aseanstats.org>.

<sup>87</sup> David Scott, ‘Indonesia grapples with the Indo-Pacific: outreach, strategic discourse, and diplomacy’, *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 38: 2, 2019, pp. 194–217.

<sup>88</sup> Priya Chacko and David Willis, ‘Pivoting to Indo-Pacific? The limits of Indian and Indonesian integration’, *East Asia* 35: 2, 2018, pp. 133–48.

<sup>89</sup> Amitav Acharya, ‘Doomed by dialogue: will ASEAN survive great power rivalry in Asia?’, in Gilbert Rozman and Joseph Chinyong Liow, eds, *International relations and Asia’s southern tier: ASEAN, Australia, and India* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 77–91.

concluding that Jakarta needs to tackle these significant fragilities if it wishes to achieve its ambitious foreign policy goals.<sup>90</sup> Lastly, Anwar effectively reconciles these positions. On the one hand, she argues that the country's role in the AOIP formulation cements its informal leadership within ASEAN, boosts its 'global middle power' credentials and provides a 'third way' to offset superpower politics; on the other, she reminds us that ASEAN has very troubled waters to navigate, and that pressure is mounting on Indonesia to hold the organization together and guide it effectively.<sup>91</sup>

**Table 1: Australia, South Korea and Indonesia as middle powers in the Indo-Pacific**

Criterion	Australia	South Korea	Indonesia
Middle power categorization	Pragmatic, prioritizing security and trade relations over globalism and multilateralism	Economy-driven, seeking to bridge (and hedge) between the two superpowers	Rising, regionalism-driven; informal leader of other rising middle powers
Interconnectedness with the US and China	Formal US ally; China is the main trading partner	Formal US ally; China is the main trading partner	Non-military cooperation with the US through ASEAN; China is the main trading partner
Indo-Pacific vision	Security-orientated, framed with normative and multilateral elements	Economy-orientated, open, non-confrontational	Norms-orientated, multilateral, independent
Strategic posture	Strategic alignment with the US; steadily committed since 2017	Strategic ambiguity, recent concessions to US cooperation; nominally more committed since 2017	Strategic autonomy for itself and ASEAN; committed since 2019 through ASEAN
Capacity to implement	Potentially, but only with Quad (Plus) and AUKUS partners	Unclear	Potentially, but only with full ASEAN support

<sup>90</sup> Shekhar, *Indonesia's foreign policy and grand strategy in the 21st century*, p. 239.

<sup>91</sup> Anwar, 'Indonesia and the ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific'.

## Whither the Indo-Pacific? Implications for the region's strategic landscape

This article's triad of middle power case-studies and related goals and strategies allow for a number of observations that directly address the gaps in the literature mentioned above. First, not only is the Indo-Pacific a contested concept, it is emblematic of the long-discussed correlation between multipolarity and increasing tensions.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, the region's middle powers exemplify another twenty-first-century trend: the growing divide between states' strategic and economic alignments, corresponding to the bifurcation of geopolitics and geo-economics.<sup>93</sup> More specifically, the Indo-Pacific's strategic landscape could now be schematically conceptualized through the notion of the 'strategic triangle',<sup>94</sup> whose three sides are represented by China, the United States and each state (great, middle, regional or minor power) affected by superpower rivalry. However, since these trilateral interactions are not occurring in a compartmentalized fashion, but are mutually influencing one another, it might be more accurate to portray the Indo-Pacific as a whole set of interdependent strategic triangles (or a 'latticework of alliances and partnerships', according to the US).<sup>95</sup> This more nuanced image takes into account both Acharya's 'multiplex' argument of 'crosscutting, if not competing, international orders and globalisms' and Buzan's analysis of multiple Asian security complexes amid superpower rivalry, to provide a generalizable representation of the Indo-Pacific's complicated strategic context.<sup>96</sup>

Second, this article's case-studies display three distinct strategies that contribute to the existing literature and exemplify what other states might do to adjust to increasing levels of Sino-American competition. After years of ostensible strategic ambiguity, Australia is now pursuing a clear strategic alignment with the United States in implementing the FOIP strategy and supporting its embodiment in the Quad and AUKUS. This conclusion provides a valuable contribution to the relevant literature, since recent publications are indecisive about Australia's actual regional posture and argue that Canberra may still 'face the strategic dilemma of picking sides between the United States and China'.<sup>97</sup> South Korea is affected even more by the US-China security–trade dichotomy, which makes its position more challenging. In stressing multilateralism with its NSP Plus strategy and economic prosperity through a fragile equidistance, Seoul clings to its strategic ambiguity as much as possible while enhancing non-military cooperation with the United States and the other Quad countries. Although this seems to validate its foreign policy tradition, Seoul's multi-domain military modernization (pursued with

<sup>92</sup> See Barry Posen, 'Emerging multipolarity: why should we care?', *Current History* 108: 721, 2009, pp. 347–52.

<sup>93</sup> See, among many others, Mikael Wigell, Sören Scholvin and Mika Aaltola, eds, *Geo-economics and power politics in the 21st century: the revival of economic statecraft* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018); Priya Chacko, ed., *New regional geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific: drivers, dynamics and consequences* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>94</sup> Lowell Dittmer, 'The strategic triangle: an elementary game-theoretical analysis', *World Politics* 33: 4, 1981, pp. 485–515.

<sup>95</sup> Jake Sullivan, '2021 Lowy lecture by Jake Sullivan', Lowy Institute, 11 Nov. 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/2021-lowy-lecture-jake-sullivan>.

<sup>96</sup> Acharya, 'After liberal hegemony', p. 277; Barry Buzan, 'The southeast Asian security complex', *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 10: 1, 1988, pp. 1–16.

<sup>97</sup> He and Li, 'Understanding the dynamics of the Indo-Pacific', p. 4.

US interoperability in mind) might suggest the potential for a policy shift, to be enacted in the event of deteriorating relations with Beijing.<sup>98</sup> This possibility contributes to nuance South Korea's evolving Indo-Pacific posture, whose direction is still under debate in the literature. Lastly, depending on one's interpretation, Indonesia is either not hedging at all against the two superpowers—since it is attempting to create a 'third way'—or it is hedging against both along with ASEAN,<sup>99</sup> with the goal of underpinning the region's 'strategic autonomy' and economic prosperity (although the two strategies might not be mutually exclusive). While this ambitious goal has attracted the attention of policy-makers and scholars alike, Jakarta's frail policy integration with non-ASEAN Indo-Pacific powers threatens its success, and arguably leaves it less prepared to address superpower rivalry.<sup>100</sup>

Third, this analysis points at what middle powers can and cannot do in the context of twenty-first-century multipolar frictions in the Indo-Pacific. On the one hand, they can inform the debate on the region's future and its security–trade divide; they can reinforce (or weaken) superpowers' grand strategies; and they could even conjure up a third pole in the region, if they act in unison and persistently, since this would—at least in theory—harness the combined weight of what are numerous secondary states in the region as well as the region's trends towards multipolarity. On the other hand, however, middle powers cannot 'make or break' superpowers' grand strategies; the potential damage to their more fragile national interests renders them cautious and wary of outspoken positions (limiting their actual impact); and they seem to be doomed to act 'disunitedly', both because regional issues have become divisive and because growing 'postcolonial nationalism' increases the 'variability of regional state responses'.<sup>101</sup> In essence, as demonstrated throughout this article, middle powers do have the potential to represent an alternative regional vision, one fostering cooperation and eschewing confrontation. Yet the many divisions among them—sharpened by the very superpower rivalry most of them seek to offset—currently prevent the fulfilment of this promise. These elements help to clarify some questions that linger in the extant literature, since the level of influence that middle powers can exert in the Indo-Pacific is still strongly debated.

Fourth, these conclusions draw an even more complex picture of the Indo-Pacific, once middle powers' regional strategies are added to the equation (see table 1). Superpowers are undeniably the foremost actors in the Indo-Pacific, but an evolving multipolarity restricts the means by which they can seek to realize their goals, and indeed the fact that they persistently court lesser powers denies a narrow

<sup>98</sup> See Gordon Flake, 'South Korea's security beyond the peninsula', in Tim Huxley and Lynn Kuok, eds, *Asia-Pacific regional security assessment 2021: key developments and trends* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2021), pp. 45–60.

<sup>99</sup> Cheng-Chwee Kuik, 'Hedging in post-pandemic Asia: what, how, and why?', *ASAN Forum*, 6 June 2020, <https://theasanforum.org/hedging-in-post-pandemic-asia-what-how-and-why>.

<sup>100</sup> See Chacko and Willis, 'Pivoting to Indo-Pacific?'

<sup>101</sup> See Andrew F. Cooper and Emel Parlar Dal, 'Positioning the third wave of middle power diplomacy: institutional elevation, practice limitations', *International Journal* 71: 4, 2016, pp. 516–28; Doyle and Rumley, *The rise and return of the Indo-Pacific*, p. 46.

bipolarity for the region.<sup>102</sup> Moreover, the region's great powers—Japan, India and Russia—also appear to adopt some of the abovementioned middle power strategies. Japan is a developed and democratic country that balances against China and is strategically aligned with the United States (like Australia).<sup>103</sup> India seeks to promote a free, economically prosperous and rules-based regional order, although it is gradually abandoning its previous policy of equidistance as it shares few but significant objectives with the United States (reminiscent of recent developments in South Korean foreign policy).<sup>104</sup> Russia seeks to maintain strategic autonomy as much as possible amid superpower competition—as does, to an extent, Indonesia, both for itself and for ASEAN.<sup>105</sup>

The region's middle powers are significant actors not least because they are more numerous than larger powers and engage effectively in middle power diplomacy. The strategic adjustment of Indo-Pacific states shows that middle powers can indeed increase both regional (through ASEAN and other relevant forums) and extraregional (through the Quad and AUKUS) cooperation, thus addressing another unanswered question on their influence in the Indo-Pacific, although the discordance of their objectives and strategies adds to the growing levels of confusion pertaining to the region's future. To that end, a new focus on ASEAN Plus Six and the languishing KIA (Korea–Indonesia–Australia) grouping could provide a viable platform for cooperation between middle powers that are actively involved in shaping the region's trajectory.<sup>106</sup>

## Conclusion

This article's premise was that the Indo-Pacific is widely acknowledged as the world's foremost illustration of twenty-first-century multipolarity and the ensuing strategic tensions, and that middle powers are generally thought to thrive and exert greater influence in multipolar contexts that do not hinder their initiatives. Prior to ascertaining how such states envisage their specific conceptualizations of the Indo-Pacific—an underexamined aspect in the extant literature—and whether they can together provide an alternative regional vision, the article has presented the many facets of the Indo-Pacific scholarly debate and has outlined the main elements of middle power theory, thus justifying the selection of its three case-studies. Starting from these analytical and theoretical premises, it has introduced and then explored five lines of enquiry in three distinct sections, focusing in turn on Australian, South Korean and Indonesian middle power statuses; their level of economic and strategic interdependence with the two competing super-

<sup>102</sup> He and Li, 'Understanding the dynamics of the Indo-Pacific'.

<sup>103</sup> Kei Koga, 'Japan's "Indo-Pacific" question: countering China or shaping a new regional order?', *International Affairs* 96: 1, 2020, pp. 49–73.

<sup>104</sup> Rajesh Rajagopalan, 'Evasive balancing: India's unviable Indo-Pacific strategy', *International Affairs* 96: 1, 2020, pp. 75–93.

<sup>105</sup> See Igor Denisov, Oleg Paramonov, Ekaterina Arapova and Ivan Safranchuk, 'Russia, China, and the concept of Indo-Pacific', *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 12: 1, 2021, pp. 72–85.

<sup>106</sup> For a rare joint effort within KIA, see Ian Watson, 'Middle powers and climate change: the role of KIA', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 15: 3, 2015, pp. 505–36.

powers; their own visions for the Indo-Pacific; their resulting regional postures; and their capacity to pursue these goals.

It finds that Canberra has now completed a foreign policy shift towards an unequivocal ‘strategic alignment’ with Washington to balance against China through the Quad and AUKUS; that Seoul has recently made some concessions to US pressure, although potentially with the goal of protracting its ‘strategic ambiguity’ as much as possible; and that Jakarta has placed an ambitious but risky bet, the goal of which is to assert ‘strategic autonomy’ for itself and ASEAN while creating a ‘third pole’ in the region. Consequently, four major implications for the region’s strategic landscape can be drawn. First, the Indo-Pacific is emblematic of the rising tensions that permeate the twenty-first century’s fractured multipolarity—further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic—and is also representative of the growing security–trade divide epitomized by the bifurcation of geopolitics and geo-economics. Second, the article’s cross-section of middle powers as a collective category reveals three distinct strategies—balancing, hedging and pursuing an alternative path—that other states affected by Sino-American superpower rivalry could potentially adopt. Third, such strategies show that middle powers can aspire to wield a significant amount of influence in a multipolar world, although they cannot hope to shape superpowers’ grand strategies by themselves. To reiterate the point, despite their potential they seem unlikely to provide an alternative platform for the region’s direction in the near future, owing to internal divisions caused by the very Sino-American rivalry that most of them are trying to offset. Fourth, many significant actors dwell in the Indo-Pacific of the twenty-first century, which means that to study only the apex of this ecosystem is an anachronistic approach. Such findings directly address the gaps that have been identified in the literature and provide a valuable contribution to the study of middle powers and the Indo-Pacific’s strategic landscape, thus contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the unfolding competition in this pivotal region.