In the Era of Uncertainties: Middle Power Politics in a Multipolar World

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Abstract

The Asia-Pacific region has transformed from a colonial past to an emerging economic power hub, thus bringing fluidity to its definition. The Asia Pacific region is a powerhouse of economic, technological, demographic, and social growth, drawing the attention of several scholars to the distinctive hotbed of great power competition and the emergence of a multipolar world order. The article studies the rise of middle powers by understanding the nature of their foreign policy behaviour by re-examining the regional security complexes of the Asia-Pacific region. In trying to bridge the imbalance of power and regionality, the author argues that the geopolitical flux in the security environment has severe implications for regional integration and cooperation. Countries in the Asia-Pacific region intend to constructively engage in widening their multi track diplomacy through multi-layered alignments with numerous formal and informal agencies and thus create multiple centres of power, influence, and order. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and ASEAN-plus continue to present themselves as indispensable in order to promote converged strategic hedging, scilicet, pursuing bilateral, minilateral, and multilateral efforts on the chessboard of geostrategic competition of-Low Politics, including supply chains, trade production, cooperation on public health, and infrastructure development; and High Politics, implying defence partnerships and military modernisation agreements. Nonetheless, strategic hedging is not a preferred option for competing powers as it provides these middle power agencies (in bilateral, minilateral, and multilateral) with space, a platform, and channels for pragmatic, cooperative, yet cautious partnerships. However, the region has a myriad of options for tackling the complex nature of ASEAN consensus and self-help governance, thus overlooking its functions of regional security diplomacy and aptitudes of prioritising and advancing the member states internationally.

Keywords: *Middle Power Diplomacy, Asian Century, Multipolarity, ASEAN Centrality, Regionality*

Introduction

The historical dominance of western discourses on the hegemonic power system ebbs away with the Asian resurgence, presenting commentators and scholars ample opportunities to contemplate the ideational, structural, social, institutional, and domestic changes in the international system with the emergence of the so-called 'Asian Century' (David 2007, 1). Most of the national histories encompassed the history of its kings, the two World Wars, the great economic depression, proxy wars, the Cold War, and such in the past century narrowed its scope to realist studies; thus, world history suffered. It is popular to evaluate the interstate

relations of the world system in which the superpowers compete and cooperate, rarely with each other than the rest (Griveaud 2011; White 2013; Allison 2018). As debates around the complexities of power and system developed, the traditional distinction between 'the great and the small' bawled for the re-examination of the concepts in international relations, thus blurring the binaries with the unprecedented proliferation of 'middle' or 'medium' states in the past five decades (Cooper 2013, 964). Trends of like-minded groupings in the past century stimulated new ideas in the early 1960s on the nature and role of small states (recently decolonised powers) and middle powers (based on the 'functional' idea and 'behaviour' such as Canada, Australia, Germany, etc.) in the bipolar world order (Cooper 2013, 978).

Throughout history, several scholars have remained divided on their definitions of the concept of middle powers. Middle powers have shaped an inextricable part of the new world order. Great powers continually shape the international world order. Kenneth Waltz, a neo-realist theorist, reasoned that international structures are defined in terms of their units in an anarchical realm and fluctuate with substantial changes in the number and influence of great powers (Waltz 1990). In this context, middle powers are perceived to be caught passively amidst the power rivalries. There are clear patterns of discourses in middle power theory indicating a greater prominence to realist, neo-realist, and the security studies camp, thereby concentrating their arguments on material capability, possible alignments, free trade, and cooperation in a hubs and spokes system (Shin 2015). This reiterates that most of the scholarship in International Relations (IR) has been centred around the realist understanding of interest and behaviour (Acharya 1997). Mainstream international relations theories discount countries outside the core of the West, thus making such discourses a mere abstraction of the Westphalian straitjacket. Furthermore, international relations continue to parochially defend, promote, and celebrate the vested interests of the West as more minor and middle powers seek to uphold such governance models as its 'ideal normative referent' on the world stage (Cooper 2013, 980; Chapnick 1999; Nolte 2010; Patience 2014; Efstathopoulos 2018; Goh 2020). Against this backdrop, this article re-examines the role of middle and small powers amidst the multipolarity of the 21st century.

The first section of the article discusses the rise of middle powers in multilateral institutions. The following section revisits the regional security complexes of the Asia-Pacific region attempting to bridge the imbalance of power and regionality. Finally, the author argues that the exceptional flux in the security environment accounts for severe implications for regional integration and cooperation. The Asia-Pacific nations intend to constructively broaden their multi track diplomacy through multi-layered alliances with numerous formal and informal agencies, creating multiple centres of power, influence, and order. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and ASEAN-plus continue to present themselves as indispensable in promoting converged strategic hedging, scilicet, and pursuing bilateral, minilateral, and multilateral efforts on the chessboard of geostrategic competition of- Low Politics, implying supply chains, trade production, public health cooperation, and infrastructure development; and, High Politics, implying defence partnerships and military modernisation agreements (Vijaya 2023). Nonetheless, strategic hedging is not a preferred option for competing powers as it provides these agencies with space, a platform, and channels for pragmatic, cooperative, yet cautious partnerships. However, ASEAN is ever so often dismissed for the complex nature of 'ASEAN Consensus', thus, overlooking its functions of regional security diplomacy and aptitudes of prioritising and promoting the member states internationally (Baviera and Maramis 2017, 3,4; Connelly 2022).

The Rise of Middle Powers

Asia-Pacific, as a region, transformed from a colonial past to an emerging economic power hub, thus bringing fluidity to its definition. Unlike flying geese, the region is like an earthbound amoeba with economic, technological, demographic, and social growth, drawing the attention of several scholars to the distinctive and dynamic nature of this region for great power competition and the emergence of multipolar world order. The contemporary debates in new and emerging middle powers echo an objective of some nations for a middle power repute, as this label has a status in the social order and is of geopolitical resonance (Jordaan 2003). As Nolte elucidates,

> *"While traditional middle powers are, first and foremost, defined by their role in international politics, the new middle powers are, first of all, regional powers (or regional leaders) and, in addition, middle powers (with regard to their power resources) on a global scale. For a better discrimination between middle powers and regional powers it makes sense to differentiate between a leading power, which is defined by means of its power resources, self-conception, and leadership. Leadership refers to political influence in diplomatic forums, which could be exercised by middle powers. Regional powers usually combine leadership and power over resources"* (Nolte 2010, 890).

Therefore, the need to consider the growing impact of middle powers, both individually and collectively, in the regional systemic order has increased tremendously, even more so with the emerging bipolarity amidst the signs of a new Cold War between the US and China. Indeed, examining foreign policy behaviours and exploring the uniqueness of the middle power identity of the secondary states in the international system. 'A newly emerging middle is changing the global balance of power' (Scott, Hulme and Hau 2010, 3). The reconstitution of the traditional conceptualisations of middle powers has led to new ideational, relational, and behavioural models of analysis; thus, the roles such states play are evolving with rapid geopolitical developments in regions around the world.

> *"The role and purpose of the middle power today look rather different. The institutions that middle powers create have been less effective than imagined, as inclusive multilateralism has been eclipsed by great power leadership in trade agreements (e.g., TPP and RECP), alliances have a stronger gravitational pull, security tensions, and uncertainties are rising and above all, a shifting balance of power has brought geopolitical competition to the fore"* (Evans 2016, 49,50).

Middle power research accelerated with the end of the Cold War. Several works laid new foundations to deconstruct middle power behaviour, making significant contributions to delineating the middle power concept through the thoroughfare of diplomatic behavioural patterns, therefore constantly engaging in 'Middlepowermanship' (Cox 1989, 824; Efstathopoulos 2018). Literature on middle powers has predominantly focused its discourses on positional and behavioural models, thus producing relative novelty in the ideational aspects of middle-power diplomacy. The former identifies middle powers through material capacity and activism in diplomatic behaviour, respectively. At the same time, the latter amasses questions on domestic politics, history, multicultural societies, and public discourse, driving their present Middlepowermanship (Cox 1989, 824) along with other crucial criteria such as good international citizenship through normative policy approaches, penchant for multilateralism/exclusive minilateralism, effective domestic and international leadership assuming roles such as facilitators and bridge-builders, perform niche diplomacy to secure

systemic influence, catalysts of cooperation building like-minded coalitions, providing intellectual and innovative diplomacy shaping bargaining skills and negotiating outcomes and finally, their perceived status in the systemic levels (Holbraad 1984; Carr 2014; Nolte 2010, Cox 1989; Efstathopoulos 2018).

Subsequently, in recent times, middle power definitions enveloped a complex composition of global governance, thus bringing the middle powers to the 'high table with an equivalency of bigger states' (Cooper and Dal 2016, 523). With the incorporation of middle powers into the system through multilateral mechanisms such as G20, this wave is characterised by the diversity in the composition of the middle powers. The traditional middle powers in the international system are presently matched and, to a certain extent, even outnumbered by the emerging middle powers, also referred to as the NEXT 11 (Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, Turkey, South Korea, and Vietnam). This is, thus, making the 'previous category defining middle powers like Canada and Australia may now appear as aberrant' (Gilley 2011, 254). The new wave of Middlepowermanship and the accompanying scholarships is a product of transformations in the regional subsystems and the international order.

The competition for dominance between the US and China has resulted in the emergence of middle power agencies as the arena for their geostrategic rivalry (Hass 2021). The crucial question driving the middle power discourse in the 21st century is to understand the degrees of middle power engagement, individually and collectively, in bridging, mediating, and coalition-building between these rivals normatively through institutional, regional, or international forums. Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, former Indonesian president, stated that the middle and small powers in the international system could help lock these powers in a durable architecture through a multiplicity of instruments creating scope for evolutions of polarities in the system structures ranging from unipolarity to bipolarity to multipolarity (Varisco 2013).

> "*The configuration of system structure- multipolar, bipolar, unipolar (hegemonic)- defined by the number and relationships among the "great powers" of the moment dictates the context of constraints and opportunity in which the remaining states in the system must function. They constantly confront the security dilemmas created by their global and regional relationships to the major powers and must determine their alliance stances accordingly*" (Neack 2000, 14).

The reshaping of the world order towards diffused, heterogeneous, plurilateral, and multipolar necessitates the fundamental rethinking of their autonomous dynamics and the need to navigate the changing geometry of power. Therefore, it is reiterating that the study of middle power agencies is at a crucial juncture with significant influence on shaping the international systems. The Chinese rise to revisionist status and de facto regional hegemony in the Asia-Pacific and its peripheries- Southeast Asia, East Asia, and the Western Pacific, has transformed these regions into geopolitical theatres of instability (Goh 2005). The US and its major allies – the UK, France, Japan, and Australia, have pivoted their defence and national security strategies towards preventing uncontested and unchecked Chinese power from rising further in Asia and the Indo-Pacific (Heydarian 2019; Vučetić 2021). The region's economic success created the emerging multipolar world order, in which, to maintain its influence, the US is presently doubling down on the hubs-and-spokes system of network alliances and intensifying its competition with China (Ford and Goldgeier 2021).

More than three decades ago, the US emerged as the world's superpower; however, it is also important for us to note discourses on the looming hegemonic decline of the US over the last

two decades. The advent of non-traditional security threats since 9/11 has continually exposed the deep-rooted problems in American security. The Biden administration, which ordered the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and turned away from the world, has cast horrifying images of desperate Afghan civilians attempting to flee authoritarian rule after the West-backed government in Afghanistan collapsed in August 2021 (Fukuyama 2021). Growing accusations of isolationism, unreliability and domestic fissures in American weakness contributed to the fading influence of American unipolarity. The gift of hegemony brought by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 was misread, as the Americans pursued endless wars, interventions, and pressure campaigns, resulting in expensive divisions in popular support within America. During this crucial transitional period, the world witnessed the Russian military's reaffirmations and the Chinese economic and technological prowess. America must re-evaluate its strategies for preserving its primacy in an evolving world. However, as much has been written about great powers, discourses on the changing role of middle powers are comparatively very few, especially in the multipolar world order that aptitudes describe the rest of the 21st Century (Mazarr 2018).

One Region, Many Choices

With a multi-faceted approach, middle powers with greater potential balance the rivalries. In contrast, some choose to hedge with China in order to reap economic gains alongside bandwagoning with the US to contain the rising influence of China in the region. Others choose from a range of options such as neutrality to constructive engagements, appeasements to informal regional alliance systems. Instead of dreading entrapment alliances with the US, middle powers have played a crucial role in manoeuvring the rivalry to advance their regional interests (Ikenberry 2014). They constructively manage relations between the US and China by essentially acting as diffusers to enmesh China and the US in regional security. Middle powers in the region are proactive at engaging with each other to augment their influence in regional concerns. Despite the criticisms and inadequacies, ASEAN had been insisting on centrality in its pursuit of regional leadership (Acharya 1997).

Scilicet, middle powers have a myriad of options to strike a balance in the Sino-US strategic rivalry. In order to create stability and maintain status-quo in the region, the middle powers are stepping up and in some aspects need to work towards- expanding coordination on shared interests through new deals and creation of ad hoc institutions; strengthening economic resilience by inoculating themselves from economic pressures and weaponising economic interdependence; retorting to acts of coercion collectively against Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea; signalling their resolve for defence partnerships as the middle powers in the Asia-Pacific region recognise that cheap security is over; refraining from zero-sum competition whilst competition in the international order is inevitable, if balanced with the objective of cooperation will reduce the vulnerability; Striding against the orotundity of with us or against us debates, as it looks like today, neither side will win in the contest for primacy in Asia Pacific and finally, making efforts towards bridging the US and China competition into rules, that will promote plurilateral strategies and a preferred stability along with an equilibrium balance of power (Medcalf 2019; Vijaya 2021; 2023).

Middle powers are now refurbishing their strategy from vying for the balance of influence instead of contending for power. The security dynamics began to change in 2009 when China, on one hand, and middle powers like Vietnam and the Philippines, on the other, was broiled in intensive territorial disputes with each other in the South China Sea. Despite engaging in

intensive economic relations, Asian-Pacific states, such as Vietnam and the Philippines, have been cautious and have been vociferously critical of Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea. To balance the security domain in this area, the Philippines sought reassurance to strengthen its defence ties with the US and reprimand Chinese claims in the South China Sea at the International Arbitration Tribunal. Conversely, Vietnam intensified its bilateral security ties with the US under the US-Vietnam Defence Memorandum of Understanding (Lemahieu 2019). Australia, Singapore, and Indonesia, despite their policy of Total Defence, are increasing their defence budgets since 2018 up to 60 per cent to secure the regional security infrastructure amidst the rising dichotomous rivalry between the US and China (Salerno-Garthwaite 2022). Hence, it would be wrong to assume middle powers have little to no influence in the regional and world order. While these powers are vulnerable to systemic shocks, they have large stakes in the international system. Unlike small powers with no vested interests or stakes, middle powers, on the contrary, are attempting to seek relative advantages from both revisionist powers, like China, and status-quo powers, like the US. While such arguments emphasise material capability and hedging as a preferred modus operandi, nevertheless, such discourses fail to take into consideration the normative influences, cultural distinctiveness, and social practices influencing foreign policy behaviours echoing similar dilemmas faced by middle and small powers in Asia-Pacific (Friedberg 2018; Goh 2020). The region is witnessing emergent signs of limited cooperation and long-term rivalry between China and the US, thus generating increased uncertainty in domestic and international affairs (Fels 2017). Such dilemmas deepen competition in both military and non-military spheres, intensifying high and low politics and presenting the smaller and middle powers with opportunities but equal challenges to endure (Stanzel 2018). However, reflecting on the pluralistic nature of foreign policy behaviours indicates several approaches of neutrality, autonomy, appeasement, and constructive engagements. Strategic autonomy for middle powers like Malaysia and Vietnam is imperative in bilateralism, regionalism, and internationalism. A neutral Malaysia is vital to preserving long-term prosperity and stability in Asia. It is in the region's best interest, its integration, and the hegemonic powers, namely the US and China, thus remaining reluctant to choose sides in this rivalry actively (Milner 2017).

In the longer run, middle powers are not limited to mediating or arbiter roles but develop in three ways: 1) Assuring the liberal-democratic order; 2) seeking to preserve the order between competing great powers; or 3) playing as 'counter-hegemonic' forces, or 'spoilers' (Buzan and Goh 2020, 295). In this transitioning world order, the G20 platform allows middle powers of different hues to cooperate. For instance, with concerns over the South China Sea dispute, the study submits that as middle powers, Australia, South Korea, and Indonesia, Vietnam can join their resources so that they 'can develop and deepen spoke-to-spoke networks and decrease the scope for hub countries to shape the regional order unilaterally' (Baldwin 2009, 6). It is predicted that middle powers in the Asia-Pacific are committed to multilateralism and will work collectively to take responsibility for regional and global security (Cooper 2011). A world order in a transition phase provides several challenges to middle power countries. Their response to global shifts in the influence and power of the US and China remains a crucial challenge. Therefore, middle powers in the region face a constant dilemma between whether to defend the status quo, adapt to the changing circumstances, or actively shape a new world order.

Redefining Regional Security Complexes in a Multipolar World

As previously alluded, power in international politics is relative, and hence, any scrutiny of middle power conceptualisations begins with considerations of great powers as well as the comparative advantage of middle powers in their local regions relative to other, smaller powers in their respective geographic spheres. Understanding 'regional security complexes' (RSCs) and their specific dynamics, as introduced by Buzan and Waever (2003, 40), is critical to a proper conceptualisation of middle powers from regional perspectives:

> *"Processes of securitization and thus the degree of security interdependence are more intense between the actors inside such complexes than they are between actors inside the complex and those outside it. Security complexes may well be extensively penetrated by the global powers, but their regional dynamics nonetheless have a substantial degree of autonomy from the patterns set by the global powers. To paint a proper portrait of global security, one needs to understand both of these levels independently, as well as the interaction between them"* (Buzan and Waever 2003, 4).

The region of Asia-Pacific has grappled with several elements driving the strategic landscape over the last few years, witnessing a rekindling of great power competition, power transitions, and the resurgence of different political regimes in the neighbourhood. Policymakers have been preoccupied with the US-China trade war since 2018, further mounting the new strategic environment with routine power plays in the South China Sea, troubled regions like Iran, fresh forms of political interference in others' domestic polity, and issues in common development (Atlantic Council, 2021). Scholars' and policymakers' debates constantly define and redefine systemic uncertainties. Primarily, 'the new age of uncertainties' is defined through heightened pluralism (Acharya, 1997, 320). In the simplest words, it implies multiple actors, multiple power centres, multiple vectors, and multiple factors with traditional and non-traditional insecurities (Stanzel, 2018, Goh, 2020). Identifying threats such as terrorism, cyber or extremists, and a growing range of traditional security actors is as crucial as it is to increasingly recognise the regional security complexes augmented by non-traditional issues like poverty, migration, ageing demographic, pandemics, social alienation, climate change, food insecurity, energy crisis, and so on (Buzan and Waever, 2003). Additionally, The American withdrawal and the Chinese rise have opened a pandora's box consisting of dilemma, unreliability, and instability.

The end of US primacy in the Asia-Pacific has generated a greater resort for self-help with a do-it-yourself attitude (Goh 2020). This is best exemplified in the Republic of Korea's (ROK) President Moon Jae-in's pursuit of détente with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in 2018-2019. Such pursuits were expedited by systemic vulnerabilities surrounding President Obama's fractional pivot to Asia and President Trump's erratic engagements in the Asia-Pacific, thus bearing greater costs of uncertainty and unreliability amongst US allies. South Korea faced a blowback from the Trump administration in the form of cancellations of military drills and trade rifts; however, the resolve towards inter-Korean peace and stability in relations constitutes a stronger drive for a self-help model in the new multipolar world order (Kim and Jo 2018). Correspondingly, Japan's quick resolve despite the US withdrawal from the TPP and growing suspicions of US commitments in regional institutional frameworks have resulted in intellectual and entrepreneurial leadership in spearheading the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) with the remaining member states sans the US (Solis and Mason 2018). Such systemic uncertainties for allies like Japan have compelled the late Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and other consecutive leaders to

pursue rapprochement with hostile neighbours such as China, despite historical and territorial conflicts. The two leaders revived bilateral summits to promote free and fair-trade practices (Perlez 2018).

Self-help governance and models of constructive engagement are evident in the interaction of the 'spokes' in the network system by creating mutually beneficial relationships in the regional satellite, contrary to sustaining through an alliance system (Stanzel 2018). Such foreign policy and governance models are met with a plethora of minilateral and multilateral cooperation. A lesser-known, Australia-Singapore military engagement has contributed to a broader strategic security partnership to help Singapore construct new training facilities and increase the size and rotations of troops between the two nations (Graham 2016). Some academics and political commentators have further suggested that self-help and minilateralism, increasingly practised by US allies and partners, have attempted to restructure their other security relations with great powers in the system (Wilkins 2011; Behringer 2013; Rajagopalan 2021).

Lastly, the growing importance of regional dynamics as the United States' systemic dominance is increasingly challenged. Not only do we have competing regional imaginaries, but also, competing great powers. Geopolitics is a way of looking at the world that considers the connections and interplay between political power, geography, social systems, and cultural diversity (Goh 2020). Thus, geopolitical competition simmers down to determining the imaginaries of collectivism, and community is the most important. There are three competing imagined Asia-Pacific today: 'Asia-Pacific, (continental) Belt and (maritime) Road, and Indo-Pacific' (Goh 2020, 6). There are other subs, trans, and regional projects, but these remain the most important imageries due to the resources committed to them.

The Future of Asia-Pacific in the New World Order

Binary choices or strategic hedging appears, evidently, as the simplest options, given the numbing statistic of the sheer size of the American and the Chinese economy. However, the region's complex security reality, with the inclusion of multiple middle powers, tells a different compelling story. Working together in various institutional frameworks and engaged in multi track diplomacy, middle powers such as Japan, India, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam can affect the regional balance, with some allies assuming a diminished role for the preservation of the western liberal order (Emmers and Teo 2015). Supposed or potential informal alliances between such nations statistically reassert the new regional complexities.

> *"Consider, for instance, the possibility of a different quadrilateral: Japan, India, Indonesia, and Australia. All four have serious differences with China and reasonable (and generally growing) convergences with each other when it comes to their national security. They happen to be champions of an emerging Indo-Pacific worldview. And they are hardly passive or lightweight nations. In 2018, the four had a combined population of 1.75 billion, a combined gross domestic product (or GDP, measured by purchasing power parity, or PPP, terms) of US$21 trillion and combined defence expenditures of US$147 billion. By contrast, the US has a population of 327.4 million, a GDP of US$20.49 trillion and defence spending of US$649 billion. For its part, China's population is 1.39 billion, it has a US$25 trillion economy, and its defence budget is US$250 billion"* (Medcalf 2019).

After all, speculation about the rise of Asia-Pacific middle players in future power-balancing arrangements is just that, albeit extrapolated from existing numbers and projected trends. It is one thing to say that various Asia-Pacific alliances could balance China if they all work together. In reality, breakthroughs in leadership, foresight, and diplomacy are required for coalitions to harden into any kind of resembling formal alliances: arrangements requiring reciprocal obligations among stakeholders bolstered by a willingness to take risks for one another (Zhang and Lebow 2020). Furthermore, it is challenging to determine how loosely affiliated, plural political systems can compete with authoritative China's ability to mobilise resources.

Despite the absence of consensus on ASEAN's Centrality, the multilateral forum is debated as an efficient organisation to settle the territorial and maritime disputes in the South China Sea. Lee and his colleagues have spent time observing the diplomatic behaviour of middle powers. Drawing on the thought of 'bridging,' 'arbitrage,' and 'brokerage' demonstrated that middle powers (Lee, Chun, Shu and Thomsen 2015 4; Pramono et al. 2018), especially Mexico, Indonesia, Korea (ROK), Turkey, and Australia (MIKTA), is serving as bridge amid great power and small powers as to the issues of climate change, security challenges, economic constraints and so on. (Lee, Chun, Shu and Thomsen 2015, 4).

The lack of consensus within ASEAN should not be astounding. It reflects the very essence of Southeast Asia, consisting of countries with diverse and, at times, varying strategic interests; as a result, the ten-member bloc's approaches to regional geopolitics are hardly monolithic (Koh 2021). While all ASEAN member states would encourage the prospects for regional economic integration and close ties with China in sectors such as trade, investment, and connectivity, this does not indicate that these states view Beijing from a similar perspective.

Multi-player, Multilayer

States are interacting in a complex game with various stakeholders and components in the contemporary Asia-Pacific. The expansion of China's economic, military, and diplomatic activity in the Pacific and Indian Ocean has led to the further emergence of an Asia-Pacific strategic security complex, in which the actions and interests of one powerful state in one part of the region affect the interests and actions of others (Paskal 2021). The interests of at least four major countries — China, India, Japan, and the United States — as well as many other players, including Australia, Indonesia and other Southeast Asian nations, South Korea, and more distant stakeholders, intersect in the Asia-Pacific regional power narrative. Hence, the Asia-Pacific is a multipolar system within which the predicaments of regional order, or disorder, will be ascertained by the interests and agency of many, as opposed to by one or perhaps even two powers — the United States and China. The region's most imperative strategic challenges may be centred on China; however, the region is not in itself.

The compounding reality in the region adds many layers with more players to the complexity of a multipolar region. Geo-economics, military presence, diplomacy, and a clash of regional narratives are four elements which stand out, thus shaping the future by blending patterns of broad competition with elements of cooperation.

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