

**MIDDLE POWER DIPLOMACY IN THE 21st CENTURY- AN ASIA-
PACIFIC PERSPECTIVE**

By

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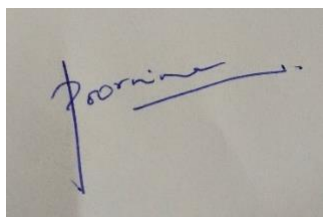
Thank you, and I hope you have an interesting read.

Poornima Ravindra Vijaya

DECLARATION

I, hereby, declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma of the University or other institute of higher learning, except where due acknowledgement has been made in the text.

Signature:

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Poornima', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right and a vertical line crossing it.

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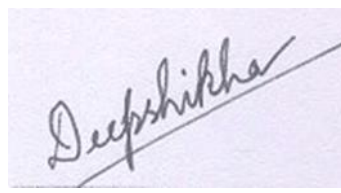
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This is to certify that the thesis entitled “Middle Power Diplomacy in the 21st Century- An Asia-Pacific Perspective”, is being submitted by Poornima Ravindra Vijaya, in fulfilment for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in International Affairs, to O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonapat. The thesis has been corrected as per the evaluation reports and all the necessary changes/modifications have been inserted/incorporated in the thesis.

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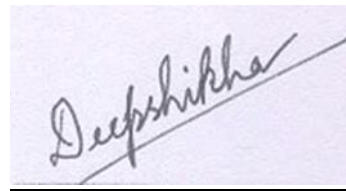
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This is to certify that the thesis on “Middle Power Diplomacy in the 21st Century- An Asia-Pacific Perspective”, submitted by Poornima Ravindra Vijaya in partial completion of the requirements for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Jindal School of International Affairs, O.P. Jindal Global University, is an original work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance. It is certified that the work has not been submitted anywhere else for the award of any other diploma or degree of this or any other University.

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ANNEXURE B

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

1MDB - 1Malaysia Development Berhad

2S3F – Scope, Style, Focus, Form, Forum

ADB – Asian Development Bank

ADMM+ - ASEAN Defence Ministerial Meetings

AOIP – ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific

ARF – ASEAN Regional Forum

ASEAN – Association of Southeast Asian Nations

ASEAN+ - ASEAN+ Australia, China, Japan, India, New Zealand, Russia, ROK or South Korea, and the US.

AUKUS – Australia, the UK, and US Trilateral Defense Agreement

BRI – Belt and Road Initiative

CPTPP – Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership

CPV – Communist Party of Vietnam

EAS – East Asia Summit

EAEG – East Asia Economic Grouping

EAEC – East Asian Economic Caucus

EU – European Union

FM – Foreign Minister

FOIP – Free and Open Indo-Pacific

FTA – Free-Trade Agreement

G20 – Group of twenty

GDI – Global Development Initiative

HIT – History of International Thought

HPT – History of Political Thought

IBSA – India, Brazil, and South Africa

IMF – International Monetary Fund

IR – International Relations

MDA- Maritime Domain Awareness

MITKA – Mexico, Indonesia, Turkey, ROK or South Korea, and Australia

MoU – Memorandum of Understanding

MUSST- Malaysia-US Strategic Talks

NAM – Non- aligned Movement

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization

N- 11 or NEXT 11 – Includes Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, ROK or South Korea, Turkey, and Vietnam

OECD – Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development

OIC – Organization of Islamic Cooperation

PM – Prime Minister

QUAD – The Quadrilateral security cooperation between Australia, Japan, India, and the US

RCEP – Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership

SCS – South China Sea

SCS-COC – South China Sea Code of Conduct

TPP – Trans-Pacific Partnership

UN – United Nations

UNDP – UN Development Program

UN ECOSOC – UN Economic and Social Council

UNFPA – United Nations Population Fund

UMNO – United Malays National Organization

UNSC – UN Security Council

WTO – World Trade Organization

ZOPHAN – Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality

THESIS ABSTRACT

Middle power discourse has long been Western-centric with a greater focus on capacity, positionality, liberal behaviour, identity and regionalism, wherein states like Australia and Canada were prominent in these studies. With the Asian Century on the rise, middle powers in the Asia-Pacific are back in debates on International Relations (IR). The emerging multipolarity reveals the problems of globalization, the weaknesses of multilateral institutions and the growing limitations of systemic powers such as the US and China. These factors have simultaneously led the Asia-Pacific's middle powers, including Indonesia, Malaysia, ROK or South Korea, and Vietnam, to take more significant roles, diversify relations, and shape the normative security for long-term peace and stability. This thesis argues for broadening middle power theory to include non-Western 'Global IR' frameworks for a holistic understanding of the role of national identities and the complexities of deep pluralism in the politics of the Asia-Pacific region. Using comparative case study research design, this thesis aims to explore the history of ideas, norms and beliefs, national identities, historical endurances, principles, values and modern state interests of Malaysia, Indonesia, ROK or South Korea, and Vietnam in determining their indigenous middle power strategies and foreign policy imperatives. Amidst competition in their geopolitical theatre, there is little to no indication of these states picking any sides. Moreover, the overemphasis on balancing, soft power, and hedging does not entirely capture the security pluralism and normative diffusion in the Asia-Pacific region. Multi-alignment, informality, and complex interdependence have caused a decentralization of the international system. In this regard, middle powers in Asia-Pacific present new opportunities to pursue transcendental institutionalism, globality, and principled and normative diplomacy in the era of complex security pluralism. Further research can be pursued on the securitizing geopolitical risks, globality and plurality, considering the need to constantly re-examine middle powerism in the changing international system and order.

KEYWORDS: Middle Powers, Non-Western 'Global IR', Multipolarity, Complex Security Pluralism, Asia-Pacific region.

THESIS SUMMARY

The emergence of a supposed Asian-Century in the 21st century has reshaped the debates on the role and relevance of middle powers in International Relations (IR). The complexities in the dynamism of international power and system since the 1950s have blurred traditional binary distinctions between ‘the great and the small’, considering the proliferation of ‘medium or middle’ powers over the past five decades. Trends of like-minded groupings stimulated new ideas on the nature and roles of small states (recently decolonized states) and middle powers (based on the ‘functional and behavioural ideas’ by including states such as Australia and Canada) in a bipolar world order during the 1960s.

Great powers continually shape the international order. Kenneth Waltz, a neo-realist theorist, has defined international structures in terms of their units in an anarchical society that fluctuates substantially with the number and influence of great powers. In this context, middle powers are perceived to be passively caught in power dynamics and rivalries. Despite such pessimism, middle powers possess substantial political significance, thereby shaping an inextricable part of the emerging world order. The concept of middle powers is, hence, discussed as an ideology, a myth, a role, a doctrine, a guide, and a theoretical construct in IR discourses.

Countries such as Australia and Canada have shaped most of the contemporary debates on middle powers since the end of the Cold War. These debates, however, lack definitional consensus and clarity, causing complexity in proposing a definitive middle power conceptualization. Nonetheless, the middle power discourses have been classified mainly in terms of their capability (medium-sized capacity), identity (normative and independent approaches), functions (problem solvers), and behaviour (like-mindedness). Therefore, the material capacity, geo-strategic importance, moral strength, distinctive, independent, and proactive diplomatic approaches help middle powers uniquely respond to regional and international complexities. The end of the Cold war and the eventual advent of multipolarity led scholars such as Nolte (2010) to reconsider the classifications in the middle power theorizations as emerging middle powers or regional powers in Asia and other parts of the world began to use the middle power rhetoric to justify their unique positions in the international system in the 21st century.

As a result, there is a need to re-examine the middle power approaches, dilemmas, and diplomacy, considering their rising relevance and influence in the era of multipolarity of the 21st century with the decline in US reliability, an aggressive China in the Asia-Pacific neighbourhood, and growing mistrust in the international system. The dual order, i.e., security gains from the US and economic dependency on China, has undoubtedly constituted a dilemma for the middle powers in the Asia-Pacific region. However, the region must not be reduced to power rivalries and bipolarity, thereby discounting the strategic calculations of middle powers in the region to navigate such dilemmas. With a multi-faceted, eclectic, yet distinctive national interest and identity, Asian middle powers have a myriad of options for ensuring regional peace and stability.

An increasing number of references have made middle powers central to emerging discourses in IR due to their strong economy, stable military development, strong civil society being courted by the East and the West, penchant for multilateralism, like-minded coalition building, good international citizenship, and brokers of peace, have thus increased the middle power ability to play a pivotal role at regional and international levels. In this context, several, including Daalder & Lindsay (2018), call for a ‘committee to save the world order’ providing middle powers across the world exciting opportunities to pursue pro-active policies as counter-hegemonic forces in this moment of transitioning world order.

Today, the concept of middle powers has expanded to include several emerging and established pro-active Asian players, including Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Singapore, the Philippines, ROK or South Korea, Japan, India, and others. However, such studies fail to consider the distinctive and indigenous historical and social values, interests, and identities driving their policies and strategies. For this reason, several studies on Asian middle power diplomacy have been criticized for its Western-centric ‘Westphalian straitjacket’ by giving greater emphasis to realist, neo-realist, liberal, and critical perspectives in their arguments on material capabilities, international order, free-trade, international cooperation, and the evolving nature of middle power roles.

In this respect, scholars, including Acharya and Buzan (1997), have called for broadening theoretical and discursive IR to include a wide range of ideas from histories, experiences, knowledge claims, and indigenous schools of thought. Drawing on the gaps of realist/neo-realist

centric and overall, Western-centric understanding of Asian middle powers in IR, this thesis calls for diversity and pluralism by analyzing the eclecticism in Asian middle power moment, in this regard, considering several factors such as history, politics, society, culture, folklores, rhetoric and forms of engagements for a holistic understanding of middle powers in the Asia-Pacific region. The region's sheer diversity, uniqueness, and vastness cannot be covered in one thesis project; therefore, this thesis follows a comparative case-study research design in exploring the history of ideas of four countries: Malaysia, Indonesia, ROK (South Korea), and Vietnam.

Indonesia, the largest in the archipelago, carries substantial material, normative, and influential middle power status and non-Western pluralist ideas. ROK or South Korea is in a unique middle power position displaying potential for principled national identity and policy; however, it often gets misrepresented in IR discourses due to its alliance with the United States. Vietnam, home to ninety million and Malaysia, with a population of 30 million, are emerging in the middle power discourses due to their new market potentials, independent and active foreign policy, and ideological moderation, thus gaining attention in middle power and non-Western discourses. Hence, this thesis aims to broaden the understanding of middle powers by studying the region through the Asia-Pacific lenses, thereby addressing the distinctiveness in the domestic and international approaches in these countries and, overall, their middle power influence in reshaping the emerging multipolar world order.

Rationalizing accordingly and analyzing the aesthetic, ideational, political, and other normative factors influencing their middle power roles, behaviour, and status is the need of the hour and, thus, is a crucial objective of this research. Additionally, investigating the careful manoeuvring of these middle powers in the era of heightened geostrategic power competition and rivalry between the US and China remains crucial in geopolitical flux.

The influence of the great power competition cannot be disregarded as it creates complex dilemmas for middle powers in establishing regional peace, security cooperations, and navigating the international system to maintain their maximum benefit policies. In resolving such crises, several studies reflect balancing, bandwagoning, or hedging tendencies amongst the middle powers in the region. However, exploring their national policy imperatives, identities, and knowledge presents

different indigenous approaches to scepticism in international competition and strategies for peaceful co-engagement in the 21st century multipolar world order.

In Malaysia, for instance, the policies legislated by the Malay elite were tailored toward political survival, whereby political, economic, and security decisions were directed at regime legitimization. Secondly, the regime legitimization of the political elite is attributed to their perpetual need to be perceived as just, moderate, respectable, independent, and confident. The concept of recognition is prevalent in the Malay historical idea of "*Kerajaan*" (political unit), focusing on the benevolent nature of administration and inter-raja relations within the political unit. This is, however, even how Malay rulers practised inter-raja relations in the past to the subsequent administrations until the present, thereby describing the scope of Malaysian foreign policy as "principled and pragmatist". The most common and repetitive narrative in the modern practice of Malaysian diplomacy is to be "friendly to everyone," and for Malaysia to be "respected in the international world order."

The quest for loyal subjects is one of the most persistent themes, portraying a people-centric focus in its middlepowermanship, which is evident in Malay texts. Textual evidence also suggests that rulers sought to gain wealth, and such revered rulers attracted traders, thus adding to their *Nama* or fame. Modern Malaysia appears to have gained its prestige through population growth. Mahathir emphasized the hope of being millions of Malaysians by focusing on building a people-centric nation. The free flow of people amid ease of migration has propelled the ongoing sanguine perception of rapid population growth and suggests a degree of nonchalance regarding territoriality. A long history of movement of the Sulu people from the Southern Philippines indicates the Malaysian principle of tolerance in matters of borders, thus giving an impression of accepting porous borders. Modern Malaysia resonates with pre-modern tolerance, visible through a lack of definitional territoriality. During his term, Razak emphasized similar ideas of people-centrism and pursuing neutrality as their foreign policy strategy in ensuring peace in the regional order.

On the other hand, Indonesian foreign policy upheld national considerations by reflecting on its historical experiences, cultural relations, and political endurances. Indonesian pragmatism is drawn from its weak territoriality, internal upheavals, colonialism, and historical and societal

experiences to ensure benevolent kingdoms, justice, law, and order; in this regard, the Javanese thought from the 16th century reflects the duty of the kings or the political elite to provide peace, prosperity and justice, additionally, uphold the values, culture and traits of the land. Such principles indicate an interplay of realist, liberal and constructivist elements elucidating its worldview based on power struggles and normative ideas that regulated the broader political behaviour and norm diffusion. Since its independence from the Dutch in 1948, such indigenous experiences reflected in their foundational characteristics of *anti-kolonialisme* (anti-colonialism) and maintaining *politik luar negeri* (independent or free) and *bebas-aktif* (active) foreign policy.

Indonesia in the 21st century certainly follows an eclectic foreign policy approach towards its national security, regional uncertainty, the rise of China, and growing unreliability in the international systemic powers, leading Indonesian scholars like Anwar (2022) to suggest an amalgamation of realist and constructivist elements to guide Indonesia through uncertain times. National interest, with importance to territorial sovereignty, non-interference, regional autonomy, regional norms, values, peaceful coexistence, and long cooperation habits, improves Indonesia's opportunities to pursue an independent, active, non-aligned policy through omnidirectional nexus. Interestingly, despite its pragmatism to normalize relations with China for economic reasons, they have also displayed limited bandwagoning to maintain return-maximization and risk management. Therefore, hedging as a strategy lacks definitional consensus and does not encompass these value-based imperatives, leading us to argue a hedging plus of risk management, normative institutionalism, and dynamic equilibrium approach driving Indonesia's middle power moment. By diversifying bilateral relations, upholding multilateralism, embracing informal minilateralism, emphasizing ASEAN centrality, unity, and consensus through consultation-based approaches, and displaying effective national and regional leadership, Indonesia, therefore, is a crucial middle power to consider in the time of transitioning international order.

The Republic of Korea (South Korea) poses similar importance as their middle power imaginings were realized by their self-identifying status to rationalize their greater involvement and agency at the global level since the 1990s. Considering their history of humiliation under Japanese imperial rule, alliance politics in the post-independence era, contemporary great power politics have collectively led Korean policy makers to create impetus for its evolving middle power identity to achieve its desired international status and clout. Korean foreign policy considerations are privy

to the ideological differences between the various liberal and conservative governments. Liberals like Kim Dae-Jung, Roh Moo-hyun, and Moon Jae-in have pursued active approaches to peace in regional affairs, especially in tackling the North Korean nuclear problem; however, on the contrary, Lee Myung-bak and Park Guen-hye's conservative governments paid greater attention to global issues, thereby pursuing key policies impacting the global Korea image.

ROK or South Korea, like any other middle power in the region, faces a similar dilemma of maximizing gains with a minimal adversarial cost from China and its alliance partner, the US, respectively. In this regard, strategic ambiguity as a strategy is dominating the Korean discourses, to which some sceptics regard the need for clarity given the wariness of ambiguity. However, many, including the author, posit the strategic sense in maintaining ambiguity. However, combined with principled diplomatic rhetoric, beyond ideological considerations, will help sustain Korean middlepowermanship in the foreseeable future. Principled middle power advocates values and principles to uphold the liberal international order, thereby giving Korea greater agency, policy consistency, and predictability in its identity and positions. Korean principles can potentially be reinforced through its multilateral institutionalism, consequently providing opportunities for active participation to deepen its global relations and diversify its niche diplomatic practices. ROK or South Korea is well networked through international, multilateral, minilateral, and issue-based relations stretching from Central Asia, EU, and Pacific Island nations, apart from its closeness with neighbouring Southeast Asia and other partners like India in South Asia. The 21st century era, informed by institutional informality, fluidity, flexibility, multiplexity, and multipolarity, encourages their valuable contributions by expanding Korean discourses through groupings such as MITKA- plus and Quad-plus for its rejuvenated middle power status.

Vietnam, on the other hand, situated strategically in the Asia-Pacific region, has been emerging as an essential middle power with new market potential and a growing economy. Vietnamese foreign policy is primarily construed through its vast history of invasions, skirmishes, and feudal state systems, thereby suggesting rich traditions of legends, determination, and adaption to preserve its national independence. The period of disintegration of the Soviet Union in the 1980s led a Soviet-dependent Communist Vietnam to adopt the policy of '*Doi Moi*' or renovation to highlight the need to pursue a constructive and active foreign policy at diverse multilateral levels with Western and non-Western powers for economic growth and development. Doi Moi is essential for domestic

reforms, of which foreign policy is considered an extension of their national interests and domestic agenda. Therefore, foreign policy in Vietnam has evolved through several phases since the 1980s in correspondence to the developments and challenges in the domestic conditions. The implementation and the strengthening of resolutions under such a policy expanded their interests, aided in diversifying its strategic relations, and highlighted the importance of multilateralism, thereby bringing a pragmatic shift in Vietnamese foreign policy discourse in the 21st century.

Despite the Communist Party of Vietnam's (CPV) primary objective to make more friends and fewer enemies, their policy rhetoric has always reflected firm principles, interests, and values of mutual benefits, maintaining equal sovereignty and national independence, peaceful co-existence, fostering diverse relations, national and global development. Overall, upholding them has helped CPV expand its crucial interests beyond ideological considerations, becoming a desirable middle power willing to promote peace, cooperation, autonomy, and development. Vietnam has also valued its non-alignment policies through a strict 'four no's principles': no military alliances, no operations of foreign bases, no pure balancing or complete bandwagoning with or against an adversarial state and no use of force or threatening to use force in international relations. In this regard, Vietnam has forged strategic partnerships with several countries across the globe, including the US, China, India, and Australia, among many others. Additionally, as a member of ASEAN, Vietnam adheres to the ASEAN values of centrality, consensus-building, unity, regional peace, and security. In this manner, the past three decades have proven transformational in their outlook, policies, reforms, principles, and interests in maintaining their principled pragmatism in navigating international affairs, reiterating the importance of the Vietnamese school of thought and their middle power moment.

Comparing the above case studies presents us with a different picture of diverse and pluralistic security strategies pursued by different states in the Asia-Pacific region. However, several studies in IR discourses are quick to attribute 'a one-approach-fits-all to respond' to the rise of China to position the US as an external and offshore balancer. In this context, the *de facto* expression emphasises the need for middle powers to balance the rise of an assertive China in their backyard by choosing to balance China with the US. Expressions of soft balancing have also emerged in order to maintain regional peace and order. Such studies fail to consider that the Asia-Pacific states are not experiencing stark choices in a multipolar/multiplex world order. Similarly, Hedging has

dominated the studies on Asia-Pacific security, considering the broader approaches of soft or indirect balancing, engagement, and cooperation amongst regional powers to maintain status-quo in the liberal international order.

Nonetheless, the hedging concept lacks consensus and definitional clarity and remains contested in IR mainstream literature. Several scholars such as Roy (2005), Goh (2005), Ciorciari (2008) and others have referred to hedging conceptualization as partial differentiation from the balancing concepts, while others like Kuik (2008) and Hormung (2014) regard hedging behaviour as an extension of balancing behaviour. By considering hedging as balancing or balancing plus, the distinctions between the concepts are blurred in some existing works. Additionally, hedging, largely referred to as a financial economic term, premises its basis on risks, thereby emphasizing potential regional conflicts, uncertainty, and the risks emerging from such geopolitical shifts. In this regard, discourse evolved to include risk assessment and management strategies in various Asia-Pacific states, elucidating the importance of insurance-seeking behaviours in circumstances of high stakes and uncertainty. However, despite the varied characterization of hedging in IR literature, it fails to take into account the indigenous political, societal, and cultural diversity and shared historical heritage. These non-Western factors describe the sheer diversity and pluralism in the security strategies and reveal a mixed bag of distinctive indigenous strategies in the Asia-Pacific region.

Despite similarities in patterns of diplomatic behaviour such as scepticism, diversification, and peaceful resolutions, middle powers in the region indicate various approaches to the securitization of risk, threats and other factors causing policy uncertainties. Malaysia, Indonesia, ROK or South Korea, and Vietnam pursue distinctive normative security strategies in this plurilateral, informal, flexible, dynamic, yet volatile multipolar world. Middle power agency is therefore growing with western or traditional middle powers, established or evolved middle powers, and emerging or performing middle powers from the Global South, whereby western middle powers demonstrate conformism, and on the contrary, vital non-western middle powers are reformist through their value-based normative security strategies in the international order. To some extent, non-western 'Global IR' can help bridge the dichotomy by shaping distinctive approaches to middle power internationalism. Therefore, studying the region from their lenses becomes imperative for scholars

and policymakers to develop a holistic understanding of their national, regional, and international affairs, especially in such a dynamic and changing world order.

Briefly, this thesis:

- Aims to explore alternative perspectives and contribute to the non-western ‘Global IR’ understanding of middle power diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region.
- Argues that one approach of balancing and hedging does not fit the needs, national interests, identity, polity and cultures of the different states in the region. No clear indications on picking sides amidst the geopolitical competition between the US and China has led middle powers in the region, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and ROK or South Korea, to diversify their strategic relationships, defence partnerships, development initiatives, supply chains, and other dialogue avenues by pursuing indigenous principled and pragmatic approaches to middle powerism thereby, engaging in informality and decentralization of the international system in a multipolar world order.
- From a non-western ‘Global IR’ perspective, this thesis explores explanatory elements such as foreign policy imperatives, historical experiences, cultural norms, history of ideas, knowledge claims, and school of thoughts, national and policy rhetoric, national interests and identity in developing a holistic understanding to middle powers in the non-western setting, thereby extending the scope of middle power studies beyond behaviour, capacity, networks and roles.
- Discovers that non-western discourse describing distinctive approaches to middle power agencies can bridge the debates of conformity vis-à-vis reformism in middle power diplomacy.
- Concludes with the eclecticism, dynamic institutionalism, and complex security pluralism determining their penchant for creative, collaborative and comprehensive solutions to the issues of the Asia-Pacific region in the multipolar world order of the 21st century.

In this regard, the structure of this thesis is as follows:

The first chapter sets a background to middle power conceptualization by discussing the definitions, demarcations, and evolution of the middle power discourse, highlighting the middle power dilemma amidst the geopolitical competition of the 21st century and the need to re-examine the studies on middle powers in the Asia-Pacific region.

Chapter two of the thesis discusses the methodological consideration, research objectives, central questions, research design that helps best explore the evolving and eclectic ideas, and the further need for such non-western studies to study Asian diplomacy.

The third chapter elucidates the theory of middle powers. This chapter disaggregates the existing theoretical debates from different perspectives: realist/neo-realist, liberal and constructivist notions of middle power debates. However, the existing theorizations fall short of building inclusive discourses, thereby presenting the need to include non-western values guiding middle power internationalism in the Asia-Pacific region.

The next section of case studies explores the ideational, aesthetic, and normative factors in some states of the Asia-Pacific region. In this regard, chapter four details Malaysian Middlepowermanship in the 21st century, which has pioneered efforts towards regional integration. In their pursuit of a solid, emotive, and activist foreign policy, moderatism and neutrality have guided the manoeuvring of its relations with major and regional powers.

The next chapter reflects uniquely on the national considerations of Indonesian foreign policy and their rise as a prominent middle power in world affairs today. As the largest economy in the region, Indonesia has sought memberships in several multilateral, minilateral, and informal institutions, thereby improving opportunities for their independent and pro-active middle power diplomacy. Additionally, their socio-political pluralism, scepticism concerning binary choices, and undertaking broad-ranging roles in regional and international affairs have led to its characterization of '*negara sedang*' or middlepowerness in the 21st century.

Chapter Six discusses the ROK or South Korean middle power image under successive governments and the underlying ideological differences in their approach to regional and global Korea. As a geo-strategically crucial nation with powerful neighbours, its national role conception, penchant for multilateralism, and entrepreneurial leadership have shaped its middle power rhetoric,

displaying its potential for recalibrating principled middle power diplomacy from a Korean perspective.

The seventh chapter examines the interplay of national interests, identity, and normative considerations in the Vietnamese middle power moment in the 21st century. Its principled yet pragmatic approach to internationalism has proven to be distinctive in dealing with nationalism, assertive Chinese presence, and other regional and international uncertainties, thereby leading scholars to consider the evolutions in Vietnamese foreign policy in the middle power theorizations.

Finally, Chapter Eight centres on a comparative analysis of the case studies, revealing their distinctive middle power approaches despite some similarities in diplomatic behaviour and regional perceptions. The era of emerging multipolarity is premised on normative security pluralism in the region, paving avenues for strengthened multilateralism and flexible, informal, issue-based minilateral coalitions through distinctive middle power rhetoric. Non-western ‘Global IR’ can help bridge the various natures of middle power internationalism. In the last section, chapter nine concludes by expanding the scope for further such studies across the globe.

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CHAPTER- 1

DEFINITIONS, DEMARCATIONS, AND EVOLUTION OF THE MIDDLE POWER CONCEPT IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC

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” (Dollar, 2007, pp. 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, 2017). 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 decolonized powers) and middle powers (based on the ‘functional’ idea and ‘behaviour’ such as Canada, Australia, Germany, etc.) in the bipolar world order (Cooper, 2013).

Throughout history, several scholars 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.

1.1. DEFINITIONS

Middle powers are discussed as an ideology, a myth, a doctrine, a role, a guide (Gecelovsky, 2009), or a theoretical construct (Cotton 2013) that describes the middle powers as possessing substantial

political consequences. The usage of the term, middle powers, is significantly higher among the policymakers of several developing nations. By using the term in their public rhetoric, they are geopolitically resonant and perceived to be of geostrategic significance. In this context, the usage and affiliation towards middle power diplomacy are used to gain influence in the international system (Behringer, 2013; Carr, 2014; Chapnick, 1999; Patience, 2014). However, one rarely hears states like France or Germany discuss the concept of middle powers due to the fear of the nations' being forced to admit that they are no longer 'great' powers.

The contemporary debates on middle powers originated during the end of the Second World War by analyzing the foreign policy approaches of Australia and Canada (Cooper, 2011). The post-World War II literature on middle powers identifies definitive approaches such as positional, behavioural, and identity, and lately, functional and systemic approaches have been added to theorize middle powers (Carr, 2014). While some authors may not use the same labels, they use the same attributes when operationalizing the middle powers framework (Urbanovska et al., 2019).

The lack of definitive clarity on the middle powers has caused complexity in proposing a defining middle power concept. Despite the lack of unanimity and consensus over defining a middle power, the prevailing literature typically categorizes them under three defining factors that divulge the middle powers in a power competition (Shin, 2015).

Firstly, middle powers are classified as states with capability. According to Holbraad, middle-powers are states comprising medium-sized capabilities yet exert influence greater than many (Holbraad, 1984). Middle powers are distinguished and assessed as powers that have 'the ability to alter or affect specific elements of the international system' (Carr, 2014). Secondly, middle powers are differentiated from others based on identity (Teo, 2022). They strive to pursue independent and proactive roles in matters related to regional and global affairs. Middle powers are inclined to view themselves as moral actors using normative or soft power to exemplify their predilection for multilateral arrangements (Gilley, 2011). They are identified based on their diplomatic relations, proclivity towards economic and security multilateralism, and as members serving as intermediaries between great or major powers and their proxies (Nagy, 2020). Thirdly, middle powers are demarcated with regard to their behaviour (Efsthopoulos, 2018). They are dynamic and proactive in trade, security, and global governance. The behaviour pattern suggests

that like-minded states will likely form alliances to expand their influence in the international system (Stanzel, 2018). As the above factors mark the cornerstone of the middle power theory, its diplomacy and activism are a fitting depiction of their intentions and actions in the international system.

Although middle powers gravitate towards avoiding direct confrontational wars, they must not be perceived as pushovers. Mindful of their material capacity, strategic importance, and moral strength, the assertiveness of middle powers adds to the complexities in the regional dynamics.

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 timbre. 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. Justifying a special position in the international system using the middle power rhetoric represents a very important similarity between the set of traditional and emerging middle powers” (Nolte, 2010).

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 so-called new Cold War between the US and China (Chinoy & Panda, 2020). Indeed, examining the 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, Holme, & Hau 2010, pp, 3). The reconstitution of the traditional conceptualizations of middle powers has led to new ideational, relational, and behavioural analysis models; thus, the roles such states play are evolving with rapid geopolitical developments in regions worldwide.

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, pp. 49-50)

The prevailing works of literature lacking clear definitions agree on the dynamism in the concept and the fluidity in the international system for states to ingress and egress from the systemic distinctions. Robert Cox asserts that the middle power category of states/units “is not a fixed universal but something that has to be rethought continuously in the context of the changing state of the international system” (Cox, 1989, pp.825).

Scholars have identified three chronological waves of middlepowerdom discourses (Cooper & Dal, 2016, pp. 517; Chapnick, 2000, pp. 196; Evans, 2016, pp. 50). These states progressively assumed new roles, leading to the adoption of different conceptualizations- greater emphasis was laid upon new discourses in middle power conceptualization, gradually shifting from positional/capacity, behavioural to identity and history of ideas (Stanzel, 2017; Teo, 2022).

The first wave of middle power theory emerged after the end of the Second World War in the “post-1945 era”, with prominence given to western middle powers such as Australia, Canada, Belgium, Norway, and other Western European powers (Cooper, 1997). The change in basic assumptions during the onset of the Cold War era is defined by the creation of the institutions, amongst many other defining factors. Therefore, western middle powers, or traditionally considered middle powers, “had a vital stake in the international status quo” (Cooper, 2016), thus unfolding new expectations from these states as they began to feather the roles of “system supporter” (Thies & Sari, 2018)

Consequently, the second wave transpired swiftly in the Post-Cold War era. Middlepowerdom underwent a categorical refinement as the clusters revamped with the appendage of their “ideational and entrepreneurial roles” (Cooper & Dal, 2016). The emerging powers, namely, ROK or South Korea, Indonesia, South Africa... in the international system during the post-Cold War era joined the traditional middle powers proactively preserving their forerunner roles. European middle powers assumed the identity of a “Middle Power Agency” by creating the EU as an integrated international actor in the system. “This second wave, rather than being antagonistic to the global order as it stood, wanted to stretch and refine that order” (Cooper & Dal, 2016, pp. 518). Middle power activism, both individually and collectively, embedded in the *modus operandi* of

niche diplomacy has contributed to critical issues such as peacekeeping, stability of international trade, environment, and arms control tendencies, thus giving these middle powers moral assertiveness, ethical responsibilities, tasking conflict management, respecting existing international frameworks of participation, humanitarian intervention, and peacekeeping (Bennis, 2020).

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, 2014). With the incorporation of middle powers into the system through multilateral mechanisms such as G20, this wave is characterized by the diversity in the composition of the middle powers (Lee & Park, 2017). The traditional middle powers in the international system are presently matched, to an extent, even outnumbered by the emerging middle powers, scholarly also referred to as the NEXT 11¹ (Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, Turkey, ROK or South Korea, and Vietnam) (Scott et al., 2010; Cooper & Mo, 2013), making the “previous category-defining middle powers like Canada and Australia may now appear as aberrant (Gilley et al., 2014, pp. 12). Therefore, the third 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. The crucial question driving the middle power discourse in the 21st century is understanding the degrees of middle power engagement, both individually and collectively, in bridging, mediating, and coalition-building between these rivals normatively through institutional, regional, or international forums. 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 in the system structures ranging from unipolarity to bipolarity to multipolarity.

“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, pp. 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 reiterating that the study of middle power agency is at a crucial juncture with significant influence to shape the international systems.

The resurgence of middle power discourse in recent years has witnessed a revival of this concept as a popular approach to theorizing the traditional middle powers and the emerging non-Western powers influencing the multipolar world order of the 21st century. The rise of the global south with leading multicultural societies, pluralistic diplomacy and trends of emerging economies is expanding the traditional middle power category to include internationalism from the non-Western powers (Efsthathopoulos, 2011; Do, 2022). The rise in exclusive mini-lateral groupings such as IBSA (India, Brazil, South Africa), BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), MITKA (Mexico, Indonesia, Republic of Korea, Turkey, and Australia) and such on, have emanated to harbour the interests of both Western and growing middle powers seeking to expand their systemic influence through new forms of coalition-building (PTI, 2022).

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 (Efsthathopoulos, 2018). 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 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 (Cooper, 1997; Patience, 2014, Efsthathopoulos, 2018, Teo, 2022).

The developments in the post-Cold War era strengthened the behaviour model. The inception of G20 provided these middle powers greater access to actively mobilize, participate in critical global issues, and simultaneously undertake responsible roles adjacently to realise their ideational roles beyond their material and strategic roles (Cooper, 2013; Stanzel, 2017). Overall, middle power behaviouralism has been defined in terms of internationalism, heavily discounting the domestic pressures on leadership. The middle power behaviour model proposed extends on characteristics reviewed in the already existing pool of literature.

1.2. DEMARCATIONS

Middle powers are classified as good international citizens contributing to the overall welfare of the international community (Efstathopoulos, 2018). These normative motivations differentiate middle powers' novel intentions from the egotistical states in the power system (Chai, 2000; Beeson & Higgott, 2014). Such humane internationalism is often analogous with Nordic powers, continually since history presented socio-economic values of welfare, freedom, human rights, repatriation, dispensation, and development in the international setting, therefore identifying national interests over cosmopolitanism, therefore advancing universal welfare, prosperity, and justice (Xiang, 2014). The interpretation of peace credentials demonstrated by otherwise small states like Denmark and Norway has expanded the definitional scope of middle power politics. Such altruism today is a struggle for states to retain moral-political values amidst an increasingly plurilateral world order with competing forms of good international citizenship (Cox, 1989; Cooper, 1997; Jordaan, 2010).

“Achieving a good citizen reputation is a major interest of middle powers since it allows them to enjoy an international status as credible actors and expect reciprocity from other states” (Evans, 2011).

Notwithstanding, good international citizenship remains a crucial criterion that necessitates a principal degree of altruism in middle power foreign policy behaviour, identity, and approach.

“The key is the voluntary nature of the activity: in other words, one's self-interest would still be served if one chose not to engage in the acts of good international citizenship that are the hallmark of internationalism” (Higgott & Nossal, 1998, pp. 100)

Altruism, to the dismay of pluralism in discourses, is continually interpreted in terms of 'Western Liberal Internationalism' (Chu & Zheng, 2020). The existing pool of literature on middle power altruism highlights several gaps in the definitional nature of altruism, thus calling attention to the need to reflect on non-Western values, ideas, and influences to include the non-Western audience in the mainstream discourses on state behaviour (Acharya & Buzan, 2010). Notions on good international citizenship are heavily weighed on Western solidaristic ideas of collective action and human rights, altogether discounting the subliminal influence of pluralist non-Western values of non-interference, non-alignment, sovereignty, and non-intervention (Dunne, 2008, pp. 25). These forms of pluralism espouse the international society to alternative theories of reformations in global governance analysis models.

Middle powers display a strong preference for multilateral institutional solutions to global problems. The penchant for multilateral activism empowers the middle powers to overcome their limitations of bargaining power capacity at unilateral and bilateral levels, thus granting legality, legitimacy, and moral assertiveness to pursue their Middlepowermanship initiatives (Lee & Park, 2015). Multilateral frameworks provide the middle powers with a broad platform to promote their ideas, values, cultures, norms, and discourses, suggesting that such powers are committed to consensus-building mechanisms, cooperation, critical regional complexes, and normative discourses (Moreland, 2019).

However, systemic hegemonic influences derail and limit their influence. The multilateral system promulgating the great powers' core interests continues to dominate most of their undertakings (Kirsch, 2005). While such limitations give rise to alternate approaches, such as plurilateral institutions, sans the great powers, to protect their interests and promote and alter specific elements in the international systems (Capling & Ravenhill, 2011; Nakatomi, 2013). Groupings such as MITKA, IBSA, and others emerged as institutions determined to assess middle power influence, but the degree of such influence continues to remain vague and ambiguous (Flemes, 2013).

Middle power states possess good leadership qualities, most crucially in crisis management (Efsthathopoulos, 2018). Such leadership strongly values multilateral panacea for all the systemic ills, voicing out cooperative mechanisms in times of crisis and concerns of hegemonic influence in their economic, social, political, and security infrastructures, and so on. Middle power leaders

are perceived as normative peace brokers, assuming conflict resolution initiatives, thus favouring their enhancement of the humanitarian status and politics (Cooley & Nexon, 2020).

However, such humaneness is not all vested in altruism but also a certain ambit of status-seeking behaviour and politics. Critical Approaches to the behaviour model have provided such arguments to suggest that “assuming crisis management initiatives reflects a worldview that middle powers favour a peaceful global order and stability” (Cox, 1989; Neufeld, 1995). “Middle powers are understood to promote crisis management and systemic stability because of their inability to engage in systemic revisionism like major powers” (Roussel and David, 1988, p 135). Thus, their status-seeking behaviour is limited to ‘preferences’ rather than ‘actual influence or crisis management in the system’ (Dal, 2019). Hence, the effectiveness of mediation is more pivotal for a middle power than merely showing a preference for such a strategy in crisis management.

Middle powers trademark niche diplomacy (Cooper, 1997). They secure their influence in the system by concentrating their resources on specific areas and specialising in such to generate the best returns apropos to covering a wide array of spheres (Evans, 2011). However, niche diplomacy conceals their lack of skills and resources to spread their engagements in vast sectors, paving the way to redefine broader types of selective engagement. Despite dominating specific niches, great powers or major powers could still rely on these middle powers to resolve conflicts, deadlocks and mediate effectively, thus necessitating bids for neutrality in the international system (Henrikson, 2007, pp. 67). Crucial sectors must be engaged in selective diplomacy but must not be limited to a single area. Therefore, selective diplomacy entails wider spheres of engagement through multilateralism, though it is essential for these spheres to target critical sectors of influence instead of bidding in the peripheral areas of global governance (Efstathopolous, 2018).

Middle powers are critical to providing intellectual and entrepreneurial leadership that enables such states to negotiate favourable outcomes through innovative bargaining skills, thus overcoming deadlocks and building consensus (Young, 1991; Efstathopolous, 2018). Such leadership acts as catalysts, mediators, bridge-builders, and facilitators in the international system (Cooper et al., 1993, pp. 23-25). Subsequently, it offers a broader sense of ‘directional leadership’ persuading states to adopt specific negotiating positioning and eventually evolve into setting examples for other states in the international power spectrum to follow (Kanie, 2003, pp. 341-

343). However, middle power leadership does not go short of its limitations. The lack of material capabilities to engage with active diplomatic skills remains a constraint in the capacity model of studies on middle power behaviour. However, despite a somewhat steady mix of material and ideational elements, middle power forms of ‘norm entrepreneurial’ leadership have largely been limited to great power politics (Behringer, 2012; Emmers & Toe, 2015). Effective strategies of leadership and mediation should not be limited to great power politics but also include strategies for effectively securing the core interests of the region and its neighbourhoods.

Middle powers are inclined towards forming like-minded coalitions (Acharya, 2011; Das, 2021). Considering the resource constraints in case of unilateral or bilateral action. Despite the dangers of such coalitions led by other states, especially more influential players in the system, the forms of coalitions are distinctive from bandwagoning and counterbalancing strategies (Snyder, 1991; Walt, 2009). Considering the nature of core interests, Middlepowermanship explores the shifting nature of identities using other foreign policy behaviour choices of informal alliances and the convergence of strategic interests influencing the high and low politics of Asia-Pacific. ASEAN and ASEAN plus endure their indispensability in order to promote its high politics through converged strategic hedging through constructive engagement, in pursuant of its multilateral, minilateral and plurilateral tendencies on the chessboard of low politics, including trade production, supply chain, public health, infrastructural development, technology and resource cooperation. Nevertheless, despite its pragmatism and cautious partnerships, hedging is not short of its dangers of caution (Grzywacz, 2021).

Middle power foreign policy behaviour choices are very diverse, choosing from an array of-neutrality, strategic hedging, balancing, bandwagoning, and formal and informal alliance formations in this multipolar world (Koga, 2017).

1.3. MIDDLE POWERS IN THE ASIA PACIFIC: THEN VS NOW

Then, the structural requisites for middle powers to rise have been evident in the two waves of middle power activism, firstly during the formation of the Bretton Woods System and the UN and then in the aftermath of the Cold War in the Asian theatre (Gilley, 2011). They have been described as periods of benign strategic atmosphere with middle powers – mutually accepted boundaries and little competition between major powers. Consequentially, with the US as a hegemonic power in

the 1990s, all middle powers in the Asia-Pacific region shared an embedded liberal consensus establishing bilateral and multilateral organizations (Foot & Walter, 1999; Ikenberry, 2001). The interactions and the vision of a strong Asia-Pacific entity were shared by all, thus giving this period space and scope for middle power activism.

Circumstances changed, firstly with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and then with the explosive rise of China; the end of the 1990s and early 2000s marked a period of heightened concerns over the cohesive regional security architecture. The US orchestrated an intricately complex regional order through an economic-security nexus, thus providing assurances through a hub and spokes architecture. Australia, ROK or South Korea, and Japan found themselves deeply involved in a dependent middle power model (Nanto, 2008). This led to proactivity employed by middle powers through both official and unofficial channels of communication to design and form multilateral institutions, security arrangements, non-traditional security dialogues, and open markets (Capie and Evans, 2007). The Balance of Power in the Asia-Pacific region began to change despite the Pivot to Asia in 2011 (Clinton, 2011) as China became the largest trading partner for most states. As the Asia Pacific countries became increasingly dependent on China for trade and investment, Chinese military modernizations and innovations brought further concerns in the maritime sphere (Chhabra et al., 2020). Middle powers conformed to Hedging strategies (Goh, 2006) to evade all likely pressures to side with either China or the US.

Lately, the region's changing geo-strategic, geo-political and geo-economic atmosphere has been fraught with uncertainty and instability. The Sino-US power rivalry has become a crucial factor with the relative decline of the US that led to hegemonic transitions and the perils of a Thucydides Trap (Allison, 2017). China, illiberal, authoritarian, assertive, revisionist, and predatory, has moved to become a strategic competitor and a contender for regional hegemony. The overall consequence of US anti-multilateralism, isolationism and Chinese assertiveness has led to the decoupling of the economy and security, creating a dual order (deLisle & Goldstein, 2020). The Asia-Pacific nations are confronted with contradictory and confusing challenges- while becoming heavily dependent on China for economic growth and the US for security guarantees. These challenges share diminutive consensus, inadequate consistency, and little harmony to foster resolutions to global and regional complications, at least those that are driven by power rivalry.

1.4. THE MIDDLE POWER DILEMMA IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC

The Asia-Pacific region is commonly described as a dual order, positioning the middle powers to reckon with the United States for security arrangements and China for economic benefits (He, 2008; Paal, 2019; Campbell, 2023). The conventional understanding states that the power rivalry between the US and China would constitute a dilemma for the middle powers (Art, 2010; Medcalf & Mohan, 2016; Lee, 2022). Apprehensive of choosing sides, these countries cannot isolate themselves from either power. The Asia-Pacific region must not be discounted as rivalries between a great power hegemon and a rising power. The strategic calculations by the middle powers have provided them with a ground to navigate between China and the US (Lemahieu, 2019; De Castro, 2021; Erskine, 2022).

With a multi-faceted approach, middle powers with greater potential balance the rivalries, while some choose to hedge with China to reap economic gains alongside bandwagoning with the US to contain the rising influence of China in the region (Ryu, 2013). Instead of dreading entrapment alliances with the US, the middle powers have been playing a crucial role in manoeuvring the rivalry to advance their interests in the region. They constructively manage relations between the US and China by largely acting as balancers 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, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (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 an equilibrium balance of power in the region, the middle powers are stepping up and in some aspects need to step up to - Expand coordination on shared interests through new deals and creation of ad hoc institutions; Strengthening economic resilience by inoculating themselves from economic pressures and weaponizing economic interdependency; 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 recognize 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; 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 (Goh, 2005, Acharya, 2011; Cooper & Dal, 2016; Emmers & Teo, 2018; Teo, 2022).

Middle powers are now refurbishing their strategy from vying for the balance of influence to contending for the balance of power (Neack, 2000). The security dynamics began to change in 2009 when China, on the one hand, and middle powers like Vietnam and the Philippines, on the other, were broiled in intensive territorial disputes with each other in the South China Sea (Swaine, 2013). Despite being engaged in intensive economic relations, the states in Asia-Pacific, such as Vietnam and the Philippines, ensure utmost caution and have been vociferously critical of Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea (Burgess, 2020). 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 (Yamazaki & Osawa, 2021). Vietnam, on the other hand, intensified its bilateral security ties with the US under the US-Vietnam defence memorandum of Understanding (MOU) (Crisis Group, 2021). Australia and Indonesia, despite their policy of Total Defense, have increased their defence budgets up to 60 per cent to secure the regional security infrastructure amidst the rising dichotomous rivalry between the US and China (Rajagopalan, 2021).

Middle powers are back in debates today as they are viewed to be increasingly relevant. From a geostrategic perspective, the evolving relations between the US and China have a weighted impact on the middle powers' ability to exert their influence and establish a determinative balance between the power rivals and the emerging middle powers (Baker, 2020). In the wake of this change, the creation of a coalition between the middle powers along the lines stated by Ivo Daalder and Jaome -and therein, James Lindsay to call it a "Committee to Save the World Order", can help to gradient the global balance of power (Daalder & Lindsay, 2018). For middle powers in the Asia-Pacific, the evolving global order provides a platform of exciting opportunities for assertive policy. In particular, countries with strong economic growth rates, stable military development and strong civil society can find themselves being courted by East and West, thus increasing their ability to play a pivotal role at the international level (Sweijts et al., 2014).

What is significant to note is that by estrangement with the unreliable US, or rather, by espousing a position of deliberate ambiguity towards the declining hegemon, middle powers in the region do not wish to hew close to China. While middle powers have established strong economic ties with Beijing, there are aspects of hostility such as territorial and maritime disputes, economic manipulations, the assertive rise of China and its revisionist behaviour that prevent these countries from bandwagon or allying with China. States, such as Indonesia and Vietnam, are deliberately keeping China at arm's length for as long as is probable. Middle powers benefit from multipolarity since it inherently permits them the freedom to manoeuvre between the great powers and established powers (Peral et al., 2009; Hoehn et al., 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 balance between competing great powers, or 3) playing as 'counter-hegemonic' forces, or 'spoilers'. In this transitioning world order, the G20 platform provides opportunities for middle powers of different hues to cooperate (Buzan & Goh, 2020). For instance, with concerns over the South China Sea dispute, the study submits that as middle powers, Australia, ROK or South Korea, and Indonesia 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). It is predicted that middle powers in the Asia-Pacific are committed to multilateralism and work collectively to take responsibility for regional and global security (Cooper, 2011). A world order that is in the phase of transition provides several challenges to middle power countries. Their response to the global shift in influence and power of the US and China remains a key challenge. Therefore, middle powers in the region face a dilemma between defending the status quo, adapting to the changing circumstances, or actively shaping a new world order.

The shift in the power dynamics and the prominent Sino-US power competition has made the region disposed to instability. Although the world order is continually unipolar, the new balance of power has created trails towards an emerging multipolar world order. This multipolarity is earmarked with new security alignments, multilateral architecture, and minilateral re-alignments amongst the middle powers in the region. Instead of being hapless victims, middle powers have a foremost role to play in the power rivalry. When China and the US are gridlocked in hostility, the efforts of the next rung, i.e., middle powers, will constitute a considerable difference.

1.5. THE NEED TO RE-EXAMINE THE THEORIES IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC

As a result of these changes in the past decade, the definition of the Asia Pacific has also become much more flexible. In terms of its boundaries, it can be likened not to flying geese (Kojima 2000) but the much more earthbound amoeba, with a nucleus and a surrounding body in constant motion. After an early mention of the Asia Pacific as a “new concept” by Japanese foreign minister Miki in 1963 (Eades & Cooper, 2010), the volume of literature being published on Asia and the Pacific increased exponentially over the next four decades, but in spatial focus, it kept changing. The nucleus has always been Northeast and Southeast Asia (China, Korea, Japan and the ten countries of ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations), but the periphery has changed more easily (Devare, 2005)

There is clear evidence in the patterns of discourses of middle power theory to be Western-centric with greater emphasis on the realist, neo-realist and critical perspectives, thereby focusing their arguments heavily on capacity or material capabilities, free-trade, cooperation and evolving nature of the middle power roles with the onset of a multipolar world order. IR scholarship has long been Western-centric by understanding the nature of middle power behaviour through the lens of great power politics. While most IR theories marginalize the countries outside the core countries of the West (Acharya, 2014; pp. 647), IR, as a discipline, has focused on answering middle power questions in the context of their relation and influence with great power of the Euro-centric Westphalia system (Thickner; 2016. Pp. 158), thus making mainstream theories of understanding IR and power theories as simply an abstraction of Western history (Buzan, 2016. Pp. 156). Furthermore, IR continues to seek to parochially celebrate, defend or promote the interest of the West as the proactive subject that seeks all states as its highest ideal normative referent in world politics (Hobson, 2012; Lake, 2016; Ling, 2013; Tickner, 2013).

Against this background, some significant works have been shaping efforts to ascertain the theorization of Non-Western ‘Global IR’ in Asia, Latin America, Africa, and other regions. According to Acharya and Buzan (2007; 2010; 2017), these Non-Western projects ‘stimulate historical, cultural, and intellectual resources into theoretical debates about IR’ (Acharya & Buzan, 2007, pp 286). Accordingly, these new theorizations are expected to somehow alter the balance of power reigning the discipline, thereby changing the ‘priorities, perspectives, and interests’

embodying IR traditions (Buzan & Acharya, 2007, pp 437). The skewing due to mainstream IR theories emphasizing Western voices and interests demands certification to include a wider range of voices (Buzan & Acharya, 2007, pp 437). Similarly, Tickner and Waever (2009) posit the need for field research by IR scholars to shape new scholarly activities by examining geo-cultural, social, and political environments in emerging discourses.

Sceptics remain wary of non-Western contributions, both epistemologically and normatively. Epistemologically, they note the unscientific nature of considering indigenous culture and politics as theories, as a legitimate scientific theory seeks generality and universality (Xinning, 2001; Choi, 2008). Normative criticisms build on the power-knowledge nexus that commonly problematizes Western theorizations. By saying so, they consider non-Western discourses to entail a similar hierarchical, exclusionary knowledge production in their attempts to highlight national and regional thought. To illustrate this, Callahan (2008, pp. 729) suspects the applicability of the concept of *Tianxia*, which obfuscates conceptual and theoretical boundaries between nationalism and cosmopolitanism, the Chinese empire and globalism. Such philosophical foundations serve as foundations for China's hierarchical governance models for the 21st Century, impeding a smooth transition to a post-hegemonic world.

Similarly, Chen acknowledges the responsibility of non-Western perspectives and scholars to make the study and paradigms of world politics 'more democratic' and pluralistic to overcome the risks of nativism. (Chen, 2012, pp. 3; Chen, 2011)). Additionally, attempts at generating greater pluralism can lead to inwardness in national and regional outlooks, thereby challenging the ethnocentrism in emerging discourses (Hurrell, 2016). Recent studies, therefore, have called for a pluralistic understanding of 'globality' despite the wariness of cultural exceptionalism (Katzenstein, 2016, pp 151-152). In this context, the emergence of global IR debates promotes inclusivity and universality consciousness of multiple foundations in the disciplines (Acharya, 2014, pp 247). Echoing a similar view, Acharya in 2016 states,

"The challenge is to demonstrate that concepts and theories derived from non-Western or Global South contexts can also apply beyond that specific national or regional context from which they are initially derived" (Acharya, 2016, pp 15).

In approaching these divisions of West and non-West, therefore broadening the study of IR, pursuing active dialogue across the discursive and spatial divides to render inclusivity and broadening to reflect experiences and voices outside the West, fully and holistically (Eun, 2018; 2019). Acharya, in 2014, stated that one cannot displace the overwhelming existing theories, as future theories may originate from Western influences in national thought; therefore, one must seek dialogue and discovery to build alternative theories originating from Southern discourses (Acharya, 2014, pp. 620, Acharya, 2016, pp. 14). Diversity and inclusivity of IR cannot be conversations amongst the like-minded as it fails to draw a broader pool of scholars, including Western thinkers. Therefore, the discipline necessitates a 'two-way dialogue' between the West and non-Western distinctions for a global discipline without fragmentation (Acharya, 2017, pp. 822; Acharya & Buzan, 2017).

Dialogue is not without its caveats. Merely, it is a scripted or staged encounter or an exchange, as in the case of positivists, and can be construed as a 'piece of rhetorical bullying' (Hutchings, 2011, pp. 645). The tug of war in such dialogue impedes progress, hence, in this regard, Lake (2013) suggests pursuing 'dialogue within-paradigms rather than working-across-paradigms' (Lake 2013, pp. 580). Without dismissing dialogue per se, ideas from across cultures and their active engagements broaden the reflectivist discourse of IR theories. Encouraging dialogue across competing paradigms through 'integrative pluralism' (Dunne et al., 2013) or foregrounding 'unlike elements into dialogue with one another without fusing them into a specious synthesis' through engaged pluralism (Jackson, 2016) are ways to advance dialogue in IR. Eun (2018), in a related vein, calls for an instrumentalist approach to dialogue, underscoring the beginning with Western literature as a point of contact, thereby moving into different interweaving non-Western experiences, generating dialogue and mutual learning.

However, studying middle power in Asia-Pacific brings to the fore the exhaustive literature on the traditional and conventional understanding of hierarchical power models or realism, behavioural power models or liberalism, and ideational or constructivist models. The complex links between interest, powers, function, and norms defy analytical approaches from merely one paradigm. Therefore, it necessitates an eclectic approach to dialogue to determine the non-Western influences in such diplomacy by drawing selectively from different paradigms, which is analytical eclecticism and not parsimony (Katzenstein, 2001).

In this context, the need to re-examine and the approaches to re-examining have ascertained the intersectional historical, political, cultural, economic, and social factors to shape the national identity discourses shaping the emerging plurilateral international world order.

CHAPTER- 2

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES, QUESTIONS, AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

2.1. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The research objectives of this thesis are- to analyze the ideational, aesthetic, political and other normative factors influencing middle power foreign policy behaviour. In furtherance, other objectives include understanding the role of middle powers amid a power rivalry between the US and China and in the creation of a multipolar world, evaluating the evolution and transformation of middle power diplomacy, and assessing the importance of their cooperation. The advent of a multipolar world has influenced normativity and advanced security pluralism in a complex, interdependent, and multiplex world, starkly different from the Western conceptual understandings of balance, power, and threat.

2.2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This thesis aims at exploring the puzzling questions such as:

- What are the nature and influences of Asian-Pacific middle power diplomacy?
- What is the eclecticism in their middle power discourse?
- What is shaping the emerging normative security pluralism in the 21st century middle power diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific?

In this regard, the core argument of this thesis is that the middle powers in the Asia-Pacific have been largely Western-centric in their theoretical, conceptual, and practical understanding, with greater emphasis on good international citizenship, roles, human rights, and other liberal international values. However, this does not fully capture the sheer diversity in thoughts, knowledge claims, ideas, principles and middle powerism values in their pursuit of active middle power diplomacy. Various and diverse middle power agencies in the region, through multi-alignment, diversification of strategic relationships, coalitions, and informal alliances, have caused decentralization of the international system with the emergence of the multipolar world order. Therefore, by bridging the gaps of existing mainstream literature through non-Western historical

experiences, cultural norms, and political culture, this thesis argues that the middle powers in the region are eclectic in their interests, values, priorities, and strategies. Consequently, the dichotomous imaginings of conformism and reformism in middle power diplomacy can be bridged through non-western Global IR, taking into account the distinctiveness of middle power agencies.

2.3. METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS: EMPLOYING HISTORY OF IDEAS

History is all around us through social traditions, holidays, education, religious and cultural beliefs, legal, social and political systems, and even popular cultural references. The history of Ideas or the ‘history of international thoughts (HIT) has emerged over the past two decades as a significant subfield of International Relations (IR)’ (Hall, 2017, 241). The interest in such studies is indeed increasing amongst many scholars in IR. The history of ideas in national and international thoughts has adopted contextualist approaches or the ‘Cambridge School’ in the methodological understanding of the history of political thought (HPT). Cambridge School exerted its influence since the 1970s as its foremost scholar, Skinner (1969), disagreed with the conventional notions of anachronistic study of history, suggesting a contextualized mode of interpretation into the inquiry of history. Contextualists posit that scholars must approach the historical texts by analyzing arguments of the past thinkers in the ‘context of political languages available at the time such texts were written.’ Subsequently, the intentions of these past authors can be authenticated through the meaning of the texts, thereby establishing conventional interpretations of the historical political language. Contextualism is, in fact, an influential and powerful methodology in generating significant studies in HPT and, lately, increasingly in HIT. In politics and IR, the methodological prescriptions for text interpretations have wedged historians and political theorists to either side of the discourse table. Although academics in HPT sometimes mockingly sneer at the emerging HIT scholarship, understanding IR’s intellectual history has reshaped and influenced discourses.

Discourse on Intellectual History has evolved tremendously since the inter-war periods with so-called ‘idealist’ thinkers emphasizing internationalist approaches to peace. However, the rise of realist thought influenced the ‘First Great Debate’ in the 1940s. Additionally, mid-century American realists influenced traditional rational politics, while European ideas influenced these realists and their understanding of behaviouralism. Furthermore, HIT developed from an Oxbridge club contributed to the theoretical traditions of the English School and the continuity and discontinuity in European ideas, which also became evident. The discourse continues to emphasize

the major texts of the nineteenth and twentieth-century paradigms with revisionist explanations of classical thinkers from Thucydides to Hobbes to John Stuart Mill and many after that in recent works. Additionally, progress in chronicling and assessing marginalized ideas and contributions by female thinkers, sociologists, and activists produce diversity in historical discourse, now extended by Non-Western Global IR Scholars promoting indigenous ideas and exposing euro-centric understanding of international politics.

A methodological study of HPT and HIT debunks the skewed, corrupted, biased understandings of the past by bringing the underlying subjectivity, complexity, and socialization of human societies to the fore. Furthermore, methodological studies contradict the generalizations, myths, nostalgia, and romanticism of noble savages belonging to small communities possessing idealistic mentalities through chronically methodological interpretations of political text to determine the meaning of ideas and contextual descriptions in contemporary political discourse.

2.3.1. APPROACH TO INTERPRETATION AND CONTEXTUALIZATION IN THE HISTORY OF IDEAS

Alternative to interpreting and comprehending abstract historical and philosophical debates, authentic methodological approaches emphasise the meaning, vocabulary, and time the historical texts were written to construct political arguments to discern thinkers' intentions. They may vary in present meanings, considering the limited availability of politico-linguistic resources. However, such methodological approaches also help determine the meaning and evolution of historical ideas in letters, transcripts from the king's court in ancient times, published and unpublished texts, national archives, and secondary articles in contemporary political language, thereby establishing context. In this regard, by contextualizing historical text, the interpretation of the meaning and importance of such ideas can be understood.

This thesis considers a self-conscious approach to the history of ideas, which have played a crucial role in the distinctive underpinnings of national role conception and further principles of regionality to understand the nature of security pluralism in the emerging world order of the 21st century.

2.3.2. LIMITATIONS OF THE METHODOLOGY

Contextualism has been criticised since it was initially proposed in HPT in the 1960s. Some have criticized historicist fundamentalism of contextualism - the belief that the past is fundamentally different from the present and that the meaning and intention of texts can only be properly understood in terms of the politico-linguistic context in which they were written - as well as the ramifications of this doctrine for how scholars and practitioners should consider the political ideas expressed in past texts. The vastness of historical texts limits the observations to crucial, consequential, widely recognized thinkers and ideas.

Some also reckon that presentism is detrimental. We must not turn to past events for solutions to current challenges. However, 'ideas' are consistent in nations' formal and informal discourses. Therefore, studying the aspects determining continuity in ideas can lead us to understand historical and cultural normativity in distinctive national role conceptions (role, responsibility, identity, and values to uphold in the international multipolar order).

2.4. RESEARCH DESIGN

This research employs a comparative case study design to explore the various facets and distinctiveness of middle power diplomacy in Asia-Pacific: Malaysia, Indonesia, ROK or South Korea, and Vietnam. By analyzing the ongoing trends or patterns, middle power rhetoric and their understanding of norms, values, principles and order, this research can contribute to the overall debates surrounding non-Western IR/Global IR. Distinctiveness amongst these Asian players in their international engagements, policy priorities, local histories and cultures can be best examined in traditional case study models; in doing so, comparing such case studies additionally helps us arrive at conclusive patterns of middle power behaviour in the emerging international order; diversification of relations, sceptical of power dynamics, consensus/consultation based approaches, and creative diplomacy to maximize gains along with maintaining autonomy, independence, non-alignment, peaceful co-existence. Therefore, through comparative case study research, this research can posit the distinctiveness in the indigenous studies of these Asia-Pacific states and their policies despite similar patterns of middle power behaviour employed by the middle powers. A common analysis framework, in this case, the 2S3F model introduced by Nossal

& Stubbs (1997), presents us with five interrelated frameworks (Scope, Style, Focus, Form and Forum) to analyze middlepowermanship. Moreover, a common reference frame helps in establishing validity to one's claims, thereby also exploring the missing elements in such studies, in this case, the indigenous history, culture, polity, and IR in determining the dynamics of their middlepowermanship and approaches to engaging various powers in the emerging international order.

Therefore, a comparative case study design is advantageous in determining the different variables at play at national, regional and international levels in the multiplexity and multipolarity of the world order characterized by plurilateral, informal, and flexible normative security. However, diving deeper to explore indigenous, localized ideas beyond the variables of the comparative study of middle power strategies is the limitation of this research design in this thesis.

CHAPTER- 3

THEORY OF MIDDLE POWERS IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD ORDER

3.1. INTRODUCTION

Middle powers have taken the fore in emerging International Relations (IR) debates in recent years. The growing limits of the systemic powers today, namely, the US and China, are continually shaping emerging strategic and economic dilemmas (Hang, 2017). The middle powers in developing countries are taking larger roles in influencing global relations amid the numerous domestic and international challenges plaguing the two major powers. Literature on power politics does not ignore the growing importance of states that are neither superpowers nor diminishing in their potential (Holbraad, 1984; Schweller, 1996; Tang, 2009). Studies on the middle power process and diplomacy were, for a long, pioneered by observations on Australian foreign policy and its closest neighbours in the Asia-Pacific region, but remained ignored or limited in studies on middle power politics (Beeson, 2011; Carr, 2014). Therefore, it is an opportune time to revisit these studies on middle power theory and praxis to elucidate some aspects of middle power politics and the nature of its diplomacy in the region.

The realist paradigm reigns supreme in international relations theory. This is due to its essential features, which have broad appeal outside of academia: explanatory parsimony and ahistoricity in Structural Realism (Donnelly, 2000). Realists evaluate Europe's experience in the politics of great powers, and theorists such as Waltz (1990), Mearsheimer (2001), and White (2010) consistently assert that 'secondary powers' enjoy little agency in the anarchic nature of the international system. Great powers shape the decisions in such power politics while secondary, or middle powers have limited choice but to comply.

However, the geopolitical script of the twenty-first century does not appear to reflect the same realist template. Although the Sino-US intensity of rivalry and competition for regional influence has spread over the region, creating a security conundrum, there is little indication of the imperatives to pick sides felt by the region's middle powers (Acharya, 2018, Buzan & Wæver, 2003, Mazarr, 2022). It offers these non-great powers several possibilities for pursuing different strategies appropriate to the nature and characteristics of their history, society, culture, and foreign

policy. Such indications are unlikely to undergo drastic changes in the immediate future; therefore, these powers are at a pivotal leapfrog moment towards an agency-centric framework of middle power diplomacy in such dynamic times (Panke & Rüländ, 2022).

Despite the deep economic and security interdependency on the US and China, Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia have resisted choosing sides (Stromseth, 2019). Indonesia has been increasingly described as a significant middle power in the region (Shekhar, 2018). Equally significant, though the phrase "middle power diplomacy" is not frequently employed, Indonesia has been experimenting with some of its features in its foreign policy mechanisms. Former Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa's remark that "in any international forum, including ASEAN and the G-20, Indonesia will bridge different visions between nation-states and demonstrate Indonesia's moderate and strong views" captures the priority of middle powers for internationalism and playing roles that great powers, for all their apparent strengths, may not be able to play (Karim, 2021).

The two Koreas are adopting extensive yet unique hedging techniques. Closer politico-strategic relations have evolved from Seoul's tight economic ties with China, although there are a few indicators that Seoul is jeopardizing its alliance ties with Washington. For its part, Pyongyang has asserted its independence from China through engagement with Japan, thereby disregarding China's warnings concerning the need for restraint (Jin, 2020).

Japan's recent move to rewrite Article 9 of its constitution was prompted mostly by unilateral intentions rather than by Washington's persuasion. Japan's strategic repositioning is less associated with strengthening its alliance with the US in Asia than it does with encouraging more autonomy for Tokyo to operate independently in the future (Hughes, 2022). Many Japanese nationalists remain wary of the United States and anticipate that Washington would refrain from aggressive acts if Tokyo were mired in military conflict with China (Tamaki, 2020). The fear that the US and China would reach a solution, leaving Japan estranged, should not be overlooked for force majeure in Japanese thought.

Firstly, no state (with the possible exception of Cambodia) has chosen to align with China, and there is a minimal indication that most Asian governments are receptive to anything other than maintaining the status quo (Chanborey, 2015). While Beijing has realized that the new great power

game is more difficult than previously imagined, many Western experts continue to believe that China's growth would be linear (Sullivan & Brands, 2020; Schuman, 2021).

Secondly, there is little evidence of systemic balancing (as distinguished from hedging, which governments in the region resort to mostly) against China. While Australia has adopted what might be described as balancing measures against China (marines in Darwin, F-35 acquisitions), they have been hesitant (Chan, 2020). To the extent that Australia has balanced against China, it has done so entirely through rhetoric. Dressing down ambassadors for Chinese territorial claims and expressing engagement and support for Tokyo in its altercations with Beijing does not occlude the fact that Canberra's defence budget remains unchanged (Thayer, 2020). This may change in the future, but there is little impetus for radical change, and Australia will continue to benefit to the greatest extent possible from the US alliance while exerting every effort to expand economic ties with China (Dollar & Hass, 2021).

In the 21st century, defined largely by its multipolarity, numerous states are increasingly vying or have ambitions for the middle power status in global affairs today (Mazarr, 2022). States such as Canada, Argentina, Mexico, South Africa, Indonesia, Turkey, and ROK or South Korea are in the company of others like Australia, Vietnam, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, India, and the European Union (EU), all or most of whom, scholars today describe as middle powers. The construct of middle powers has received mounting theoretical considerations from scholars, students, academicians, and experts in international relations. The middle powers, strategically positioned amid great and small powers, have become vociferous over numerous global issues ranging from security challenges to economic cooperation to environmental issues. Scholars such as Carsten Holbraad (1984) emphasize classifying the middle powers and the power capability in order to accomplish security challenges. Taking on from arguments posited by Robert Cox, some other scholars, like Cooper, Higgot, and Nossal (1993), claim that the middle powers advance niche diplomatic practices, thus enhancing good international citizenship. Some scholars such as Teo (2018), Efstathiopoulos (2018), and Emmers (2015; 2018), claim that the middle powers, despite their middle-ranked status in a hierarchy of power distribution, have a full potential to be active players in the world policies partly because they are not struggling to become a top player in the system and partially also because they can play a pivotal “bridging role” or practice “brokerage diplomacy.” Middle powers in the Asia Pacific have become crucial to understanding the changing

geo-political dynamics. They are vociferously challenging the aggressive rise and are hedging with caution for the conduct of economic trade with China (Goh, 2005). Amitav Acharya (2009) reasons that the economic and strategic dilemma presently experienced by the US and China suggests numerous opportunities for non-great powers with non-Western experiences to impact international affairs. Undeniably, there is increasing importance, and literature emphasises the role played by those states that are neither superpowers nor are failing but are states that are seeking to play a more prominent role in shaping the world order amidst a New Cold War (Beeson and Li, 2015).

However, the middle power concept lacks clarity in its definitions, demarcations, and theories due to the evolution of the polarities in the international system. Kang (2003) posits that the existing theories hold validity in understanding the role of middle powers; however, they fail to capture the distinctiveness and uniqueness of the different experiences shaping the Asia-Pacific compared to the European or Western experiences (Acharya, 2009; Johnson, 2012). ‘Imagining’ of middle power states is relatively more pronounced, even more so, contested than states with stagnancy in their international status. This era of multipolarity, defined by ‘pluralism,’ ‘collective identity,’ ‘co-engagement,’ and the development of indigenous hedging models, call for newer studies on the emerging roles and patterns of middle power diplomacy. This chapter aims to develop a critical understanding of the middle power theory and past models of analysis and explore the defining characteristics of such diplomacy in a non-Western setting of a multipolar world order by answering crucial questions: What is the nature of middle power diplomacy in the 21st century? What roles do middle powers play in shaping the global order? What are the complexities in the emerging plurilateral multipolar world order?

3.2. CAPACITY, BEHAVIOUR, AND IDENTITY: CONTESTATIONS IN MIDDLE POWER THEORY

An objective analysis of the term ‘middle power’ would necessitate a sophisticated analysis of the fundamental tenets of such states. The idea of the middle must not be construed with equidistance but as states which are neither failing powers nor superpowers. Therefore, this term is relative in its theorization and refers to understanding the extremes in the international system (Guzzini, 1994).

Scholars and practitioners have long thought that the definition of middle power is self-evident. A survey of the literature reveals three unique middle power models: positional, behavioural, and ideational. These three models of studies emphasize varying IR traditions under realism, liberalism, and states, which are categorized as intermediate powers in one paradigm and are regarded as minor powers in another model. This obscures the notion and denies a coherent definition in current research, which makes evaluating the meaning of middle power status challenging.

3.2.1. REALIST MODEL OF CAPACITY

The concept of middle powers did not gain its significance in studies of international relations until the publication of Mitrany's work on the progress of international government in 1933. His works proposed a functional analysis providing actors to successfully operate in non-political issues, thus enabling their strength through the scheme of gradation. These works disseminated the two tiers of the international community, great and small powers, and reintroduced new ideas of hierarchical divisions in the international system.

Early authors dating back their studies of middle powers to Thomas Aquinas, scholars elucidated, "middle power or its synonyms, has been a relational concept, in the sense that it has been defined or described with reference to other classes of the system, especially that of the principal powers" (Holbraad, 1984; p 42). The international system is described by Dewitt and Kirton (1983) hierarchical and stratified with its recognized status, asserted position and objective capacity, all coalesced produces a hierarchy of states. These classes of states were the great, middle, and small powers. In 1947, Glazebrook reasoned that the middle powers, through the United Nations Framework, could exercise a certain magnitude of strength and influence, which is missing in small power capability. By labelling the Netherlands, Poland, Brazil, India, Mexico, Australia, Poland, Argentina, and Canada as middle powers, he distinguished three factors determining middle power statehood, namely, growing propensity for collective action, opposition to excessive control exerted by great powers, and influence-wielding capacity, individually. Middle powers may have demonstrated concerns, sometimes even agitation, both collectively and individually, but there is a lack of consistency in such actions. The influence-wielding capacity is arguably questionable and, to most extent, also negligible (Wood, 1987). Holbraad expresses his pessimism:

“But it is normally only at the end of general wars that great powers set about recognizing international society and introducing changes in the states system of the kind that conceivably could include the establishment of a new class of powers. The conclusion suggesting itself is that, as long as two or more great powers dominate the states system, middle powers are unlikely to receive legal recognition and gain international status—whatever the nature of the roles they may perform and whatever the degree of influence they may command, in non-post-war situations of international politics.” (Holbraad 1984, pp 66).

However, Holbraad’s pessimism brews in the shadow of cold war politics. Therefore, the end of the cold war and the emergence of a multipolar world order presented middle powers with wider opportunities to achieve greater influence and salience compared to the period of Holbraad’s writing. Stairs (1998), in his works, underestimates middle power potentials by regarding their engagement as disingenuous in United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions.

The origins of these modern imaginings of the construct are firmly rooted in the Hobbesian idea of anarchy that favours the bigger powers in society (Markey, 1999). The centrality of power in realism wielded by states underscores the relative weakness or powerlessness of smaller states vulnerable to great power politics stressors. However, as Bull (1995, pp 222) describes, ‘junior partners’ or secondary powers of significance can be persuaded to join the bigger powers to avoid tensions with their adversaries. Basking on the glory of such great power politics, these secondary states seek greater security advantages in their association with superpowers of the international system (Mearsheimer, 2001). Illustrating through the case of Concert of Europe, small power strategies ally with the bigger partners came at a profound price to pay. “All European states were involved in the order, albeit, with passive roles to these lesser powers”, posits Soutou (2000, pp 131), thereby ensuring stability in the political and social order of these states (Mowat, 1971). Although, it witnessed an enduring balance of power until militarism plagued the international structures with the First World War.

By closely examining European Affairs in the 19th century, the junior, secondary, or middle powers were intent on seeking their roles to accrue greater influence- even ‘reflected’ power- under the security umbrella through great power partnerships (Patience 2013, pp 218). Under the circumstances of alliance networks, secondary powers such as Japan in the post-war era conformed to the political and economic restructuring, bearing the costs of controversial clauses of pacifism

written newly into its constitution (Jain, 2022). While Canada's objectives for middle-power status may be obscured and even warped by its proximity to the United States (Painchaud, 1966), it is also apparent (perhaps paradoxically) that such aspirations are often accomplished as a result of its proximity to the United States (Cooper, 1997). Such predicaments hint at the cost of alignment with greater powers, although it endures certain payoffs. Australian middle power conceptualization is deeply rooted in the culture of alliance-making and building. The deep entrenchment of the hierarchical alliance network, first with the United Kingdom and later with the US, influenced pioneering studies on Australian foreign policies and middle power diplomacy. China's contingent and detrimental rise presents new pressures to the middle powers today. "If China keeps growing, and it probably will, Asia will change. For Australia, foreign affairs and defence policy are getting serious again," notes a pragmatic White (2010, pp 71).

The emphasis placed by realists on the concept of the balance of power serves as the justification for understanding how dynamic international relations are, particularly in the Asia Pacific area. Realists regard the balance of power as the major constituent in forming the Asia Pacific region, with the United States serving as the primary actor in balancing regional influence (Ciorciari, 2009; Paul, Wirtz, & Fortmann, 2004). Lee Kuan Yew, a former Singaporean leader, favours this approach, claiming that the US presence within the region has greatly aided in protecting the territories from Chinese and Russian power expansion, in addition to developing healthy economic and political stability in these nations (Acharya & Tan, 2005). The end of the cold war demonstrated a power vacuum supported by a rising China moment founded on its attempts to spread its sphere of influence and establish its hegemonic rule in the region (Doshi, 2021). Realists claimed that Asia's multipolar order would experience the emergence of China as a rising power and military competition with Japan and India. Realists contend that perhaps a conflict between the US, as the status quo forces, and China, as an emergent force, is inevitable. Survival anxiety causes nations, both powerful and not, to pursue expansionism (Vasquez, 2002). History has witnessed successive eras of hegemons, with one succeeding another through a series of hegemonic wars (Gilpin, 1981). The merits of this school, notably in the concept of the regional balance of power, may be regarded as essential both within the studies of the region and in systemic politics. The latest strands of realism introduced through the lens of neo-classical realism in the late 1990s sought to widen the realist understanding of states by including unit and sub-unit level variables of domestic politics, state leadership, and strategic culture, determining the state's

strategic and foreign policy choices based on their relative material capability (Schweller, 2014). Studies on resource extraction of states are prudent for shaping internal balancing strategies in response to heightened external vulnerability (Taliaferro, 2006). Nevertheless, this tool of foreign policy analysis draws the core tenets of a skewed distribution of power, shifts in the balance of power, instability in the multipolar world order, and low levels of institutional and regional integration from structural realism (Christensen, 1999), thus neglecting heterogeneity in non-Western experiences (Katzenstein, 1997; Acharya, 2003). Despite valuable contributions to the centrality of power, hegemonic stability, security dilemma, and external and internal balancing, they have undermined the middle power identity driven by social constructivist notions of co-engagement and collective identity driven by norms, values and ideational influence in understanding middle power politics.

3.2.2. LIBERAL BEHAVIOURAL NOTIONS OF MIDDLE POWER DIPLOMACY

Conversely, the liberal notions of middle power theory influenced the second wave of its studies by profoundly focusing on issues of international political economy and multilateralism, human rights, and ‘just’ international order instead of security and power (Efsthopoulos, 2018). By emphasizing observable behaviour, middle powers in this approach weigh on normative impulses of niche diplomacy to support and maintain stability and international order. Cooper (1997b, pp 21) posits that middle powers in the post-cold War era had substantial opportunities and a considerable need to ‘act skilfully and rapidly with a broad-ranging set of institutions and actors, in an integrated approach, by suggesting;

“The classification of middle powers as a separate class of countries in the hierarchy of nations stands or falls not in their subjective identification but on the fact that this category of actors engages in some kind of distinctive form of activity” (Cooper, 1997a, pp7)

In similar resonance, it is therefore foregrounded on the activities of middle power states from their positional vantage point in the international order. With the potential for independent agencies (Beeson & Higgot, 2013), middle power states offer managerial support to maintain order and stability, therefore bearing strong normative regard for international justice. Holbraad reckons;

“This was the essence of the case that Canada took to the San Francisco Conference. It pointed towards graded representation and rested in the first place on war efforts of countries such as Canada and Australia. But behind the arguments was the assumption, not

always tacit, that middle powers could be trusted to exercise their diplomatic influence and military power in the interest of the international society, that they were capable of being less selfish than the great powers and more responsible than the small states” (Holbraad, 1984, pp 58).

According to Lovbraek (1990, pp 32-33), the neo-Kantian approach identifies middle powers with ‘like-mindedness’ in seeking to generate international support for policies, particularly solving human security issues in the developing world. An image is thus created of ‘good international citizenship, applicable both regionally and globally’ (Evans, 2012, pp 3). Based on the changing definitions of the middle powers, scholars have observed distinct features of their foreign policy behaviour. Cooper and his colleagues, subsequently, after a detailed analysis of middle powers’ diplomatic conduct, assert that they have revealed a solid inclination to pursue multilateral solutions to international issues, to uphold a position on compromises in international disputes, and to embrace the concept of good international citizenship (Cooper, Higgot, and Nossal, 1993). Most of their diplomatic manoeuvres, if not all, are calibrated to assist in providing international public goods, through soft power mechanisms, instead of the use of coercive force (Nye, 2004; 2011). According to Beeson & Higgot, such mechanisms are a ‘game of skill’ and not a ‘game of will,’ as insisted on in mechanisms of *realpolitik*. The emphasis on middle power imaginings additionally lies in garnering international regard for corresponding postulations of soft, or in a related sense, smart powers seeking influence by pursuing cooperation with like-minded nations. Soft power refers to the use of non-threatening means of state diplomacy through culture or public diplomacy, intended to garner support in joint diplomatic ventures (Nye, 2011).

The post-cold War era stretched the parameters to include their roles and responsibilities on other global issues besides security, thus providing middle powers with opportunities to practice and specialize in particular issues. This functionalist foundation of niche building also supports multilateral solutions, displaying a penchant for managerial roles and entrepreneurial effectiveness to ensure the smooth working of multilateral frameworks in an age of globalization and interdependence (Cooper, 1997). Therefore, advancing on such notions, Canadian diplomacy, in its so-called ‘golden age’ between 1945 and 1957, sought to improve room for middle power action through niche diplomatic endeavours (Melakopides 1998, pp 50). Canada’s diplomatic practices gained international regard for its achievements in the Ottawa Process that resulted in the UN ban on landmines in 1997, spearheading the International Commission on Intervention and State

Sovereignty, additionally to activism in humanitarian and peacekeeping operations in the world (Bátora, 2010). Correspondingly, one could also examine Norway, despite its small population and material strength, posits to actively condemn human rights abuses in China, South Africa, Vietnam, and others, even extending to maintain contacts with Palestine despite Western criticisms, consequently reinforcing Norway's aspirations for neo-Kantian middle power in the 21st century (Egeland, 1989).

Moreover, middle power discourses witnessed a greater tendency to depict their mediatory activities instead of referencing relative power capacities (Holbraad, 1984). Cox (1989, pp 834) observes that by acting like 'norm enforcers', they 'affirm adherence to acceptable rules of international conduct by all states.' Hence, they repeatedly play the role of 'intermediary powers.' Middle powers serve in 'bridge-building roles' to counterbalance major powers. The connotation of bridge-building is considered better suited than leading alliances to mitigate conflicts between great powers or their proxy conflicts (Holbraad, 1984).

As mentioned earlier, considering their relative diplomatic clout, their concerted efforts and activities are well calibrated towards expressing niche diplomatic middlepowermanship in 'issue-specific' or 'functional' areas (Cooper, 1997). They exercise their entrepreneurial and technical effectiveness through financial resources, relative military strength, and strong bureaucratic willingness towards regional and global initiatives (Efstathopoulos, 2018). Therefore, they are apt to assume leadership roles in non-traditional security issues relating to human security; this helps middle powers engage in non-militaristic 'low politics' of climate action and economic integration as opposed to 'high politics' in areas such as arms control (Spero, 2007, pp 148). Middle powers have displayed greater resolve as active coalition builders (Cooper, 1993, pp 117). This is substantiated by the rise of communities such as APEC, MITKA, and the Cairns Group (Wilkins, 2017). Recent studies have also highlighted regionalization driving their activeness to enhance their influence and status in the region, compared to great powers (He & Inoguchi, 2011). An active civil society substantially influences middle power politics and diplomacy. Thus, van der Westhuizen (1998, pp 436) notes that 'the middle power orientations denote an external facet of domestic political considerations.'

However, such studies carry certain challenges. Liberal notions of middle power behaviour, though not definitively, have been criticized with the rise of illiberal or moderately liberal democracies

seeming to have little to no problem with authoritarian behaviour in international society. Thus, they lack the political will to uphold the normative order, practise niche diplomacy, or support regional and global initiatives for public goods. The tag of ‘good international citizenship’ may appear less assuring amidst transitions in polarities in the emerging order for the middle powers in the region.

3.2.3. A CONSTRUCTIVIST IMAGE OF REGIONALISM

The constructivist understanding of middle power states draws from where liberalism leaves off by bringing in discourses on ideational facets constituting middlepowermanship status as a social category in states’ foreign policy (Wendt, 1995; Katzenstein, 1996; Acharya, 1997; Kahl, 2007). Shambaugh (2013, pp 313) notes, “the formation, socialization, and the transmission of individual and national identities are important processes for the constructivist school of thought.” Dissimilar to the imaginings mentioned above, the constructivist theoretical construct emphasizes its ‘value-neutral’ take on middle power affairs by highlighting the ‘state of ideas’ instead of a positional or a behavioural approach (Gecelovsky, 2009, pp 77). Ideational factors in state policy facilitate middle powers’ identity to either define themselves or for others to define them. While examining various facets of the constructivist image, ‘identity’ is rudimentary in envisaging middle powers today. A state self-conceptualizes itself as belonging to a ‘social category’ of middle powers among other states. Therefore, “a state’s understanding of their history (who they are), culture (what they practice) and ideals (what they stand for) constitutes a crucial component of identity” (Shin, 2015, pp 7). National and state policies of states perceiving themselves as a middle power will undergo filtration and take formidable shape underlining beliefs in their roles (largely practised through liberal notions of ‘good international citizenship’) (Linklater, 2007). Hence, liberal behavioural images are crucial ends serving middlepowermanship and functionalist underpinning in middle powers’ self-construction of its identity (Efsthopoulos, 2018). “To be certain, many of the constructivist norms are rooted in liberal elements, thus explaining the overlapping of ideas and norms in their discourses” Shambaugh (2013). Consequently, recognizing such behavioural attributes will contribute to ‘perceptions of potency, neutrality, and authority’ in creating a prestigious middle power identity (Henrikson, 1997, pp 61). Conforming or not conforming to such reified symbolic identity subsequently acts as a norm to measure middle power credentials.

Secondly, following the process of self-identification, a state's chosen identity is confirmed and realized through its political discourses and rhetoric. Middlepowermanship is 'embedded as a guiding narrative of their foreign policy and ideology' (Hurrell, 2000, pp 1). Gilley & O'Neil referred to these guiding narratives as "national role conception",- defining which they state is "self-identification among a country's intellectual and foreign policy elites as a middle power" (Gilley & O'Neil, 2014, pp 15). Indeed, foreign policymakers promote such 'aspirant self-branding, which in its very nature, driven politically' (Shin 2015). The middle power model of identity not only brings policies to conform to middle power ideals but also guides policymakers in justifying their actions and roles in relation to their middle power identities. "Ideational frameworks of middlepowermanship within which the Canadian foreign policy was crafted continue to act like a prism lens for Canadians to view world affairs," notes Gecelovsky (2009, pp 89). The resulting rhetoric is deeply embedded in its foreign policy and national discourses, which Cooper et al (1993, pp 7) referred to as an 'exhortatory approach in middle power politics.'

The constructivist notions, additionally, cultivated regional groupings to respond to mounting pressures emerging from increasing globalization, thus improving trade networks and addressing renewed security concerns. Regional partnerships have become especially pronounced in the last few years. In the 21st century, the Asia-Pacific region is enduring new developments in its security environment and the international system, thus challenging its presently existing security architectures (Acharya, 2007). The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is illustrious of such regional grouping, adding to which Khong and Nesadurai in 2007 reason;

"A 'if we don't hang together, we will hang separately' syndrome operates to prompt the adoption of relatively (for ASEAN) more intrusive institutional mechanisms in order to deliver the collaboration needed to counter developments construed as threatening to economic growth. Unsurprisingly, it is in regional economic cooperation and integration that we see a significant shift in institutional design away from the "ASEAN Way" toward stronger rules and relatively more centralization" (Khong & Nesadurai, 2007, pp. 36).

Through regional agreements, middle powers in the region acquire, or at least hope to acquire, greater access to power and influence beyond their individual capabilities to represent the role of responsible powers in a disorderly multipolar international system. Globalization has transformed both state relations and relations across people in the world. It is an era of a 'globalized economy'

overshadowing locally isolated and closed economies. Furthermore, increasing internationalization has introduced mounting pressures on numerous fronts of state sovereignty as boundaries between ‘domestic and international’ are becoming narrower and blurred (Fawcett & Hurrell, 1981, pp. 3). In response to such pressures, regional organisations seek to maximize gains from the globalized world and minimize its disadvantages, ensuring effectiveness in manoeuvring their relations with both the great and small powers. The strategy of regionalism, in response to globalization and other transnational threats such as climate change, natural disasters, pandemics, terrorism, migration and refugee mobility, sets the course for internal and external middle power imaginings (Dupont, 2001).

The closing decades of the 20th century witnessed collaborative efforts from Australia and Japan with US encouragement towards the creation of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), which is exemplary of, albeit self-identified middle powers, permitted and enabled to lead such networks which otherwise would have been criticized or opposed if piloted by the great powers in the international system. Ravenhill reckons;

“The final push for APEC should come from Australia is not surprising given Australia’s association with Japan in earlier initiatives for Pacific regionalism and the perception that it was tactically preferable for the lead not to be taken by either, Washington or Tokyo”
(Ravenhill, 2001, pp. 82)

Despite its failures, Australia’s initiative for stability in regional security by convening Asia-Pacific Security Initiative is indicative of efforts to enhance the Asia-Pacific Union. Kevin Rudd, former PM of Australia, constantly emphasized forging crucial Asia-Pacific Community, and such speech acts (through campaigning) serve as rhetorical endorsements to the imaginings of middlepowermanship (Rudd, 2008). This, additionally, parallels the discourses on ‘the use of speech acts to justify existing and new security threats (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998).

The element of inter-subjectivity is an essential understanding of collectivism in its identity, discourse, routines, and institutions. Anderson posits that the usefulness of the constructivist approach lies in ‘demonstrating imagined communities culminating from an eclectic yet genuine mix of ideological influence, mass media, education, administrative regulations and so forth, therefore cogently linking power, time and fraternity’ (Anderson, 1983; 2006). Thus, Patience (2013, pp. 211) analyses “...in modern democracies, people tend to absorb and reproduce their

state's imaginings, therefore conserve, reform, and adapt to such imaginings through the agencies of individuals, civil societies and political parties". Moreover, endorsement of middle power rhetoric by external powers further reinforces such premises, consequently providing enhanced legitimacy to the approach and discourses on middlepowermanship. In this regard, Gilley & O'Neil's national role conception is an essential principle for policymakers in their conception of middle power identity and determining the international image of such a state (Gilley & O'Neil, 2014).

Cox (1989) re-emphasizes the need for a continual rethinking of middle powers with changing international systems. He notes, "the middle power role is not a fixed universal but something that has to be rethought continually in the context of the changing states in the international system" (Cox, 1989, pp. 825). The ongoing debates of Japan, India, and other emerging players reinventing their middlepowermanship indicate rethinking their political branding (Sonya, 2008). The resurgence of middle powers with emerging players in Asia and around also calls to question the ability of such states to adopt the roles, responsibilities, and labels of middle power status despite the requisite material strength. Furthermore, some states welcome middle power labels, such as Seoul, whereas such terminologies elicit negative discussions and protests in places like Brazil (Burges, 2013). Adopting such diplomacy as a simple instrument to conduct international affairs varies in different governments, with progressive parties favouring such approaches as compared to the conservatives around the globe. The Constructivist analysis considers such issues in questioning its constitutive elements and inter-subjective basis of middlepowermanship and its related concepts.

Lastly, collective identities play an essential role in understanding IR amidst dynamism in the region. Constructivist scholars such as Katzenstein (1997) and Hemmer (2002) attempted to analyse a NATO's non-existence in Asia through a comparative analysis of American relations with Europe and Asia. By considering European allies as important in the post-war period, Asia was inferior in the post-war era for American interests. The greater priority drew closer partnerships with Europe than Asia; thus, creating NATO in Europe was deemed desirable (Acharya, 2005). The factors causing the emergence of 'Regionalism in Asia' are different when compared to other regions. The nature and characteristics of Western regionalism were bureaucratic, formal, and legalistic. Conversely, the emergence of Asian regionalism is considered

to be informal, consensual and process-centric in its approach; thus, it is improper to assess such distinct regionalism through Western experiences and knowledge (Katzenstein, 2007).

According to Constructivist scholars, this regionalism is different as it reflects norms, values, and beliefs of the Asian culture; thus, such a collective identity helps the Asian states strive towards establishing their regional and national autonomy (Acharya, 1997). The evolution and establishment of ASEAN are driven by shared norms, beliefs, values, and ideas between its members and not by the perception of the threat of a common adversary as contended by realists or for strong interdependence, as the liberals argue. Therefore, shared norms, common beliefs and principles of non-intervention, non-cooperation on military alliances, and equality among all member states shape the distinctiveness in the ASEAN Way of Asian regionalism (Acharya & Stubbs, 2007).

In Summary;

Figure 3:1- Middle Power Theoretical Summary

IR Paradigms/Traditions	Realist Approach	Liberal Approach	Constructivist Approach
<i>Definitional Focus</i>	Capacity, Quantitative Ranking, Positional	Functionalist, Operational, Behavioural	Inter-subjectivity, Collective Identity, Ideational
<i>Epistemological Genesis</i>	Rationalism	Rationalism	Reflectivity
<i>Ontological Emphasis/Explanatory Drivers</i>	Anarchy, Structural International System	Globalization, State Interdependence, State-Agency Network Mechanisms	Identity, rhetorical endorsements, Perceiving Self and Other, Collective Identity
<i>Orientation/Approach</i>	Material Strength & Order	Normative, Justice- oriented	Constitutive with Neutral undertones
<i>Core Tenets</i>	Power, Hegemony, Bipolarity, Balance of Power/Threat, Alliances	Multilateralism, Norm Enforcers, Entrepreneurial Effectiveness, Coalition-Building	Norm Diffusers, Self/Other Constructed Identity, Inter- Subjectivity, Rhetoric & Norms.
<i>Prominent Scholars</i>	Carsten Holbraad, Denis Stairs, G.D. Glazebrook	Andrew Cooper, Richard Higgot, Paul Evans, Joseph Nye	Peter Katzenstein, John Ravenhill, Amitav Acharya, Barry Buzan, Nicolas Busse

(Source; See also Wilkins et al., 2019)

3.3. NEW IMAGININGS

A search for alternative approaches to Western-centrism in humanities and social sciences originated out of criticisms of such conventional historical and political studies and is considered as a wider resistance to the dominance of imperial paradigms of knowledge dissemination (Sachsenmaier, 2006). These criticisms from scholars in Asia and other regions have progressed the methodological and epistemological debates in IR, including area studies. Critiques of Euro-centrism or Western-centrism gained momentum in recent decades by mainly criticizing the universal applicability of their restricted worldview. As a result, theories and their applications remained limited. Such criticisms are considered valid for empirical and normative reasons; the usage of terminology such as Western-centrism echoes the differences and, to some extent, even competition between academic and political discourse between ‘the West and the Rest’ (Acharya, 1997; 2004; Buzan & Acharya 2009; 2017; Mahbubani, 1992; 2019; Milner 2017; Eun, 2020).

Acharya & Buzan assert that the non-Western discourses could help “provide an alternative understanding to IR based on its historical, societal and cultural theories towards an understanding of the regions’ (Acharya & Buzan, 2017, pp. 356). Whilst indigenous histories, cultural imaginings, ideas, norms, and agencies are complex, they are not autonomous entities devoid of interactions (Acharya & Buzan, 2017, pp. 356). However, such complexities led to the perceptions of the foundational essence of Western thinking shared by all, thus leading some scholars to avoid using terms like West and non-West (Acharya & Buzan, 2009; Qin, 2007).

Acknowledging such problems driven by the Western-centric models of analysis in social, political and IR theories, this thesis situates to contribute to the evolving debates by shifting the focal questions from hegemony to local historical and political worldviews driving the norms-based order in an emerging multipolar world of the 21st century. Scholars have also observed the shifts towards informality, such as Acharya and Johnson (2007) attribute the shifts to factors such as shared history and regional cultures. By analyzing formal institutions in Europe and comparing models of institutions in Asia, an increasing number of observations by the above-mentioned scholars note the functioning of such institutions, such as ASEAN, established with an aim to aid cooperation and dialogue on political, social, cultural and economic issues in Asia, with less formality. ASEAN and its members pursue quiet diplomacy without taking adversarial positions in dialogue and negotiations. Their study posits the influence of Asian norms in organizing groups

like ASEAN using ‘formal informality’ compared to the ‘formal formality’ evident in the working of other regions, especially the West (Acharya & Johnson, 2007, pp. 246). The ASEAN Way, labelled through soft institutionalism, has emphasized the seemingly distinct institutions in Asia eschew formal mechanisms and legalistic procedures of decision-making in favour of *mufakat* (consensus) and *musyawarah* (consultation) instead of confronting and bargaining to achieve their collective goals (Acharya, 1997; 2012, pp. 206-207). The shift towards informality is widespread and can also be explained by the timing, expansion, and formalization of international institutionalization in the world and less in the Asia-Pacific.

Multilateralism in Asia was followed at different rates and different patterns, particularly in Southeast Asia. Some institutions rose to prominence under the ASEAN label forums, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meetings. (ADMM). The emergence of other organizations, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2001, and forums, such as the Conference on Interactions and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) in 2002, expanded avenues for dialogue on regional issues. Beyond the regional border, institutions such as the APEC, Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) and the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which eventually, after the American withdrawal became Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) are concerted efforts to “establish trans-continental integration gateways by bringing together states from the Americas, Europe, Oceania, and Asia, around the same table” (Caouette & Côté, 2011, pp. 6).

However, the dynamics of institutionalization and regional cooperation have transformed, in some sense, and have accelerated in the 21st century. Some scholars have posited the extent of such changes to have been rather radical in nature and have attributed this new dynamism to crucial factors such as the rise of China, variations of trust and mistrust in the international system, and a decline in American reliability (Stanzel, 2017). Furthermore, a preference for cooperation for interactions between actors, soft multilateral balancing, and greater dialogue initiative on regional and international security matters through a proliferation of informal agencies has played a crucial role in shaping the new order in the Asia-Pacific (Parks, 2018; Cannon, 2022). The complexities in the Asia-Pacific regional order are additionally propelled by several emerging players in a multipolar world seeking multi-alignments, thus incentivizing the emergence of small, issue-

specific minilateralism, simultaneously also posing challenges to maintaining ASEAN unity and centrality (Cooper, 2023).

The world moving away from the era of American-led unipolar order has been evident in the last few years. There are many reasons for this, including structural, associated with the rise of the rest through economic development and population explosion, mainly attributed to the rising importance of players such as China, India, and others. Other reasons indicating the decline are concerning credibility and decreasing reliability of the power, which have cumulatively caused what many now call the end of the American unipolar world order (Katzenstein, 2022). Many scholars continue to debate the likely order to emerge from the transition period, defining the world's predicaments today. China and the US hold half of the total global wealth, therefore leading some scholars to predict the emergence of a bipolar world order, with two competing blocs under Washington and Beijing, respective, similar, yet in many ways different to the system during the Cold War. This has led to terminologies such as 'The New Cold War' or 'Cold War 2.0' (Chang, 2007; Ferguson, 2011; Allison, 2017). However, these traps seem unlikely now. Both the US and China have become increasingly inward-focused and unpredictable, thus encouraging emerging poles of powers and compelling power centres towards creating a multipolar world order (Varisco, 2013; Burrows, 2017; Chinoy & Panda, 2020; Cooper, 2023). Many view the US as an erratic superpower with heightened bipartisanship; Obama and Biden embrace alliances while Trump is against them (Wright, 2020). Once a champion of free trade, he has been increasingly protectionist in his trade policies.

Meanwhile, the health of American democratic institutions has been in question in recent years, thus undermining the US standing worldwide. These challenges have resulted in a decline in trust, even among some allies who rely entirely on the US to determine their future. China was a key player to benefit from such challenges and the erosion of trust in the American-led order, but Beijing has been decreasing in its global standing in recent years (Shambaugh, 2004; Anonymous, 2021). Their mismanagement of finances and economic resources in creating debt traps leaves many pondering on its economic growth engine. Additionally, Xi Jinping's model of governance through the centralization of power has led to the creation of brittle political systems. Furthermore, China's wolf-warrior diplomacy has already damaged its diplomatic dialogue with several players

inside and outside the region, from Australia to ROK or South Korea to Lithuania and India (Huang, 2022).

In short, the regional international systems during the past decade indicated trends of many countries in the Asia-Pacific region that looked to the US for security gains and leaned towards China for economic needs and investments (Goh, 2007). Nevertheless, the growing mistrust has been seeking new security arrangements and lateral sources of economic growth. While analysts suggest the supposed New Cold War Order, many, including us, reject such simplistic conclusions of states choosing to balance or bandwagon with either side (Christensen, 2006; Teo, 2018; Lin, 2020). Instead, the world seems more nuanced, with many states seeking greater autonomy, with patterns of multi-alignments with countries beyond the competing superpowers. The emerging multipolar order is viewed to be far more dynamic and complex due to the presence of multiple power centres (Emmers, 2005). In these, India is a prominent player carving its influence through its unique history, strategic culture, and value-based diplomacy. Among others, the EU and some of its key members are proactive, and in a similar sense, countries such as Indonesia, Brazil, Nigeria, and Vietnam are increasingly growing in importance in their regions and outside. The complexities arising from the emergence of the multipolar order demand newer approaches and strategies to overcome for international stability.

Several works have discussed the various facets of the international global order beyond bipolarity and power-centric theorizations. Initially, regionalism and its importance were discussed in the early non-Western works of Panikkar (1946), arguing for alternative concepts to the *lebensraum* in regional organizations proposed;

“The conditions of different regions in the world differ so much that the promotion of higher standards of living for example has a different meaning in relation to the people of Southeast Asia to what it has in European countries. The programme of any action to give effect to this object has to be worked out in terms of particular regions... Besides, from the point of view of standard of living, social and economic progress, and the observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms, it is the regions further away from Europe and America that require urgent attention” (Panikkar, 1946, pp. 123)

These initial discourses highlighted the need for regionalism to address pressing issues by developing a world away from Western influence and additionally conveyed the intrinsic

diversities in social, political, economic and other spheres within the regions. Van Langenhove (2016; 2019; Selleslaghs & Van Langenhove, 2019) provides one theoretical and conceptual framework for the different processes and concepts of regionalism, regional governance, and regional integration. By regarding regionalization as a political response to globalization, regionalization of the world order, he regards, is a broader social transformation process to the Westphalian straitjacket. New multilateral frameworks that were less state-centric led to these transformations, thereby advancing the conceptualization by introducing multilateralism 2.0 as a metaphor to grasp the complex, networked systems of global governance where states operate with non-state actors such as regions in multilateral theatres, therefore advocating global governance in a multipolar world. Similar theorizations of the nature and the complexities of the emerging world order discoursed multiplexity marked by a multiplicity of powers, states, institutions, non-governmental organizations, corporations, social movements, terrorist groups, rebels and so on (Acharya, 2017).

Acharya's conceptualization of a multiplex world order relays the increasing density of economic interdependence, creating a situation of dependence for the rest of the world on Western or other economic empires. Additionally, the challenges to stability and order have grown substantially from conventional inter-state conflicts to include other domestic and transnational challenges, from terrorism, pandemic, drugs and human trafficking to climate change, migration, food and energy security challenges straining the 21st century progress and stability. In this regard, contrary to the notions of a singular world order, the multiplex world order, not multipolar, is a complex cross-cutting of international orders in a world of interconnectedness, interdependence and globalism. Some elements from the old liberal international order will continue to thrive despite the US decline in capacity to create rules to dominate institutions of global governance when compared to the manner of influence it wielded in the post-Second World War era. In characterizing the multiplex world order, Acharya (2017) notes;

“A multiplex world is a G-Plus world, featuring established and emerging powers, global and regional institutions and actors, states, social movements, corporations, private foundations, and various kinds of partnerships among them” (Acharya, 2017, pp. 280).

Therefore, the shift towards an emerging new multiplex order must accommodate newer actors, approaches and discourses to recalibrate power, principles, formalities and institutionalization.

This shift also indicates fluidity and flexibility, thus facilitating changes from alliances to alignment strategies (Cooper, 2023). Alliances are highly formal, laborious, legalistic, and rigid in their negotiation process, thus attracting flexibility in their international arrangements and shifting from issue to issue. Alliances have broadened their focus from merely military cooperation to include technological, economic, diplomatic and social components, thus often representing the whole government or at least crucial sectors of member states in an alliance (Cha, 2009). The shift to pursue multi-alignment invites measures of informality and consensus-building in issue-specific areas, therefore widening the scope to pursue different alignment strategies to tackle different issues while maintaining greater strategic autonomy and independent approaches to military, economic and technological issues (Emmers, 2017; Stanzel, 2017; Muraviev et al., 2021; Tirkey, 2021; Cooper, 2023).

However, implications of such newer models' subsets collapse or dissolve old and existing alliances with weak foundations or tensions. For instance, the most feared collapse is the eroding alliance partnership between the Americans and the Thais. The cause behind such consequences is attributed to the dissimilarity in its threat perceptions; on the one hand, the US labels China as its biggest competitor and adversary, and on the other hand, emerging middle powers such as Thailand seek comfortable economic partnership with Beijing (Abuza, 2020; Lee, 2022). Despite signs of a multi-alignment approach to foreign policies, old and new alignments will co-exist with some alliance networks, therefore complicating the degrees of regional and global cooperation.

The form of international engagement employed by countries will change with the emergence of multipolarity and flexibility in alignment strategies. Multilateral groupings of large sizes, consisting of many states, seeking varied goals and interests will be seemingly difficult to manage in such an international system. Hence, smaller groupings tackling issue-specific challenges offer greater progress towards achieving such specific objectives. In brief, minilateral grouping will replace multilateralism, offering a higher return on investment and speedy governance (Rajagopalan, 2021; Stewart, 2023). Such groupings are considered rather appealing for several reasons, such as the tendency to have well-defined issues or objectives tailor-made to achieve progress on particular issues. Since these groupings have fewer member countries, they welcome like-mindedness in leadership, objectives and agenda. Minilaterals are spontaneous and flexible as they are formed and evolved through challenges and demanded by specific demands affecting the

member states (Wright, 2017; Malamud & Viola, 2020). As compared to multilateral forums with predetermined meetings, a rigid negotiation process and a slow-moving instrument make forging newer security arrangements easier to implement necessary initiatives in regional and global settings. Some have referred to the ensuing hub-and-spoke, web, or latticework-like architecture of minilateral and multilateral organizations (Cooper, 2023). The approach that new minilateral systems will be placed on pre-existing multilateral groups is well depicted by these kinds of network ideas. Instead of a single order dominated by a single hegemon or a pair of antagonistic blocs, the outcome will be a far more complex system of interlocking arrangements, with many coalitions cooperating to promote goals on various subjects.

How would such an order function? The increasing flexibility in issue-oriented minilateral brings an era of uncertainty for the US. For a long time, this region benefited from many multilateral forums and alliance partnerships centred mainly around US gains (Stewart, 2023). However, the emerging multipolar order is propelling the American transition into a hub amongst many, therefore limiting the US from dictating its terms (Fukuyama, 2021). Due to trust corrosion, the US has to invest in forging common ground and consensus with critical allies and coalition partners. Amicable coalitions with like-minded states can reinforce the US liberal objectives, but the degree of US control in such coalitions will be minimized to ensure a level playing equal playgrounds. Such a construct is likely to be regarded with scepticism by the US, with Nichols (2020), Smith (2020), and others contending against the uncertainty in such mechanisms and instead envision a single large coalition with a unified goal to balance China on numerous issue-fronts. However, the emergence of such a coalition is unlikely in the present or the future due to varying interests. Such coalitions present new opportunities for Beijing and Moscow to seek like-minded partnerships. The success of such will be defined less by rejection and antagonism of the West and, in contrast, more by their ability to provide public goods. States already present in alliance networks with the US, such as Japan, ROK or South Korea, Australia, and NATO members, will maintain their alignment strategies in areas that suit them. However, the emerging order presents such states with greater autonomy to pursue independent policies in other areas. Such states also seek greater integration within themselves in the event of worsening relations with the US (Kupchan, 2000). For instance, Japan has enhanced its cooperation through a joint operation with states like Australia, the UK, France, India and states in Southeast Asia.

This new order presents many opportunities and benefits for the non-aligned powers with no clear indication of leaning towards any of the blocs. With the growth of countries such as India, Indonesia, Brazil, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and others, rising to prominence on the world stage will make multipolarity more visible and apparent. They emerge as crucial heavyweights in the new international order, vying to create regional networks. By not considering formal alliances, these nations seek to present greater opportunities to win support and cooperation through flexible arrangements, therefore ensuring that significant autonomy rests within their decision-making processes (Knowles et al., 2014).

However, the emerging order is not without its challenges. The smaller countries will find the new alignment and coalition era difficult to manoeuvre as they face impediments to joining newer security, economic, and social arrangements (Tellis & Mirski, 2013). Building new coalitions is neither easy nor natural for some countries, such as ROK or South Korea and the Philippines, considering their longstanding path dependency on their ally. States such as Switzerland will continue to advance neutrality and non-alignment strategies due to their geopolitical and historical reasoning. Existing multilateral institutions constrain the ability for smaller and more flexible constructs in Southeast Asia, thus introducing us to ASEAN's dilemma in the 21st century multipolar world.

A multipolar world without competing blocs would rather seem ideal for many in the Southeast Asian region, but the challenges and difficulties surfacing are apparent. Upholding ASEAN unity and centrality in the era of emerging issue-specific arrangements changes the emphasis and response altogether on a different set of principles adapting to changing conditions (Chong, 2018). Although ASEAN members will seek to retain maximum benefits from the membership with minimum constraints, few crucial states in the region will emerge as proactive, thus conferred with incentives to join these emerging powers in addressing regional and global challenges (Cooper, 2023). Therefore, ASEAN's dilemma includes difficult strategic choices: to risk ASEAN unity by adapting to new principles and to endanger ASEAN centrality through newer arrangements.

3.4. MISSING IN THE DEBATES

Constructivist IR debates grasp the essence and inter-subjective nature of Asia-Pacific politics through greater emphasis on identity, nationalism, values, norms and roles to comprehend state foreign policy (Busse, 1999). For illustration, let us consider ROK or South Korean behaviour vis-

à-vis DPRK or North Korea and Japan. Despite facing the direct threat of nuclear weapons from DPRK or North Korea, ROK or South Korea reacted aggressively and firmly to Japanese history books rather than to the nuclear weapons program in North Korea (Sneider, 2022). This may seem puzzling as one can argue that the need to curtail such programs will require concerted and coordinated efforts of regional states, including Japan. However, existing IR paradigms, in specific constructivism, can provide explanatory drivers causing the shift of analytical focus from material interests and power politics to identity politics. However, the theoretical perspectives of the constructivist school are derived from Western philosophies, history, and knowledge, therefore lacking in key explanations on when, how and in what ways national identities determined their policy actions.

Therefore, indigenous knowledge emerging from the local history of ideas enriches the overall understanding of constructivism in IR (Eun, 2022; Qin, 2022). Using the same illustration, indigenous discourses can demonstrate the longstanding perspectives of the Japanese as the ‘immutable other’. Since Japanese imperialism in the early 20th century, ‘the ideas of Japan’s othering have built social coherence and national solidarity amongst the South Koreans. Such perceptions continue to persist in post-colonial Korean societies as Japan remains a political object for South Koreans to attach negative emotional bonds, in collective. During the Korean War, the two Koreas adopted starkly different political identities affected by multiple variables. However, to date, ethnic identity is the most fundamentally rigid of almost all the political and strategic variables shaping its foreign policy. Strong ideas of mythic, historical Korean nation persist in South Korea (Kim, 2016; Eun, 2022). In Korean discourses, race, ethnicity and identity are commonly used interchangeably. In this regard, the governments of both, North and South Korea consider the division as a temporary circumstance, thus continuing to emphasize the crucial reunification as a key completion towards nation-state building (Eun, 2022). Visible in the policy discourses of both governments, despite their political leanings, have often elicited Korean terminologies such as ‘*han minjok*’ or ‘*danil minjok*’, translating to ‘a nation of one clan’ (Eun, 2020). In this light, ROK or South Korean behaviour towards the Japanese is therefore justified through discourses of national identity, thus providing an overall understanding of constructivism with plural constitutive elements, further contributing to indigenous discourses of polity and foreign affairs.

In the non-Westphalian understanding of the Malay world, a big priority is given to solid and emotive foreign policy relations, indicated through what many scholars called "Moral Balance-Neutrality vis-à-vis competing for hegemonic powers- not overemphasizing power balancing or hedging (Alatas, 2021). Malaysian foreign policy, throughout history, has operated on the principles of neutrality by instituting links between "the aesthetics" and "the moral" balance (Milner, 2019): balancing woodcarving, poetry, and textile design in the 18th Century, the establishment of the Global Movement of Moderates in 2010, formed on the grounded in the doctrines of "morally or justly balanced," underlining the importance of "comprehensive strategic partnerships with both, the US (in 2014) and China (in 2013), simultaneously, and embedding the term, "principled" as Malay foreign policy identity, often reflected in their website and official statements.

Therefore, national identities, deep pluralism with political and cultural differentiation, multi-alignment, and complex interdependence have caused decentralization of the international system. Long-standing discussions on the elevated role of middle powers in the Asia-Pacific region and their interlinkages with global and regional governance have come to the forefront as a result of the shifting global order, which is characterized by a redistribution of power, diversification of actors, increased pluralism, national and regional identities. The COVID-19 pandemic has created an increasingly fragmented and polarized international order that demands creative, collaborative and comprehensive solutions for effectiveness in the regional-global nexus (Anderson, 2021). Middle powers in a decentralized, multipolar and plural order can deepen institutionalization, maintain norms-based identity, and act as responsible entrepreneurs, thus developing a plural system of ethics, principles, and values through dialogue between different traditions (Lee, 2012). The emerging order is rendering recognition to moral, ethical, and normative claims for regional governance, further legitimized by multilateral, minilateral and informal coalitions building cohesive regional integration (Telò, 2013; 2022).

Indeed, ASEAN members have played instrumental roles in setting and recognizing its norms and principles to guide its regional diplomacy. The cohesion and unity of ASEAN have maintained efficacy and principles in the ASEAN process but require constant efforts, especially in these divided times today. Although their normative discourses and diplomacy in engaging the major powers of today continue to hold their value, the evolving new geopolitical theatre in the Asia-

Pacific necessitates creative, normative, innovative, and strategic approaches. Strategic approaches imply overarching steadiness and durability in preserving its autonomy from geopolitical competition. The Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPHAN) constituted ASEAN's response to the old Cold War geopolitics (Saravanamuttu, 1984). Its reiterations and reaffirmations for ZOPHAN 2.0 for upholding regional order raise serious challenges; however, it should not limit ASEAN from thriving to develop transparency and confidence-building measures to monitor military deployments in the region (Southgate, 2021). Amidst such dynamism with plural actors, discourses, threats, challenges and vulnerabilities, by developing the norm of responsibility to consult, the ASEAN states can ensure accountability and stability in their decision-making mechanisms in the emerging order, thus further enhancing their ASEAN centrality, scepticism, neutrality, and unity through security pluralism.

Therefore, complex security pluralism in the Asia-Pacific rests its importance on- interdependence characterized by its broad, multidimensional and informal networks, long-term equilibrium through defensive military doctrines and strategic restraint, normative institutionalism for co-operative security to moderate great power competition and, history of regional ideas underscoring the relevant factors such as tolerance, multicultural values, norm diffusion, accommodation and co-engagement¹. Given the polyethnic set of indigenous historical ideologies, the region's pluralism offers diversity and decentralization, subsequently discouraging hegemony and fostering regional identity, cooperation, balance and stability in the emerging multipolar world order.

Promoting plurality in a non-hegemonic world order contributes to new regional studies by revisiting their social, political, cultural, and economic diversity. In tackling its credibility challenge, ASEAN must exchange constructive ideas through critical multi-level dialogues to strengthen unity, inclusiveness, tolerance, equality, justice, and other foundations of its pluralism. Its quest for transcendental institutionalism is a valid guide to minimising conflicts and creating prosperity, peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific world.

¹ See also, Acharya (2016) in which he discusses co-operative security pluralism.

CHAPTER-4

MALAYSIAN MIDDLEPOWERMANSHIP- AN ANALYSIS OF MALAYSIAN FOREIGN POLICY DILEMMA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

4.1. INTRODUCTION

As a nation-state at the heart of maritime Southeast Asia, the new and united Malaya in 1957 negotiated with the British colonial powers to determine their constitutional structures for independence. However, the new Malaya of 1957 was important and remained tied to Britain in economic spheres and defence through the Anglo-Malayan Defense Agreement. Many accounts observe the Anglo-orientations of the first government under Tunku Abdul Rahman in the post-Merdeka period. The creation of Malaysia in 1963 necessitated intensive diplomacy with Singapore and several Borneo groups with elaborate international responses to Sukarno's 'Confrontation' campaigns (Milner, 2015).

First, Malaya, and then, Malaysia under the Tunku Administration, further began to promote ideas of regional collaboration such as 'linking between nations within our ethnological and geographical group' (Tarling, 2006, pp 101; Milner, 2014, pp 3). Malaysia, though cautious, joined the ASEAN as a grouping of 'historical ties of race and culture' (Saravanamuttu, 2010, pp, 107). During its early years, Malaysia adamantly refused to join the US-led Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) as it was designed to oppose communism. Instead, the Malaysian government within ASEAN sought to pursue long-term goals of ensuring the neutrality of the region from major power politics during the Cold War. In the case of neutrality, Malay elites hoped that Malaysia, along with other Southeast Asian nations, could maintain 'equidistance with respect to major competing powers' (Kuik, 2023). In 1971, in order to advance the cause, Malaysia persuaded other ASEAN members to support the idea of the Southeast Asian region as a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPHAN), implying the region is 'free from any form or manner of interference from outside powers' (Saravanamuttu, 2010, pp 120). Furthermore, in the same decade, Malaysia further urged strong steps towards regionalism by supporting the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) aimed at promoting security cooperation and regional peacekeeping measures. Then PM of Malaysia, Hussein Onn, referred to the treaty as 'the first

wholly indigenous multilateral treaty in the entire history of Southeast Asia' (Saravanamuttu, 2010. Pp. 170).

The contemporary debates on middle powers originated during the end of the Second World War by analyzing the foreign policy approaches of Australia and Canada. However, such studies on the developing South remained limited. In the 1990s, eyeballs swung to the Asian Tigers (Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and ROK or South Korea) undergoing rapid industrialization, thus achieving high economic momentum. With the emergent Developing South (Asian Diplomacy) and their positionality on the crossroads of a New Cold War or Cold War 2.0, studies to theorize the foreign policy choices of Malaysia and other states such as Singapore, Vietnam, and Indonesia, etc., have thus, become imperative.

Studies on Malaysian middlepowermanship have emphasized balancing and hedging approaches (Lee, 2006; Cheng-Chwee, 2008; Gerstl, 2020) and some studies also conclude on bandwagoning towards China (Kuik, 2008; Carpenter, 2016); however, these past studies have overlooked their approaches of moral balance, moderatism, notions of good international citizenship, values of respect and friendliness to all, and ensuring neutrality in order to prevent great or major powers from 'unbalancing Malaysia' (Milner, 2019; Atalas, 2021; Lopez, 2023).

Pre-modern beliefs on foreign relations have been neglected in the studies of Malaysian foreign policy. Many steadfast perspectives from the pre-modern period are relevant today by influencing modern inter-polity relations (Alatas, 2021). Therefore, scholarship on these non-Westphalian understanding of Malaysian polity and foreign policy is crucial for an in-depth understanding of the country and the region.

Since Malaysian independence in 1957, its foreign policy has been divided into numerous stages. Popularly, researchers are inclined towards classifying their phases, mainly upon the tenure of the Prime Ministers. To illustrate, the epochs of Tunku Abdul Rahman (1957-1970), Tun Abdul Razak (1970-1976), Tun Hussein Onn (1976-1981), Tun Mahathir Mohamad (1981-2003), Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (2003-2009), Datuk Seri Najib Razak (2009-2018), Tun Mahathir Mohamad (2018-2020), Muhyiddin Yassin (2020 to 2021), Ismail Sabri Yaakob (2021-2022), and Anwar Ibrahim (2022-present). Under all the prime ministers, Malaysian foreign policy progressed from the focus on 'nation building' in the early years to a tunnel focus on economic growth and

development through foreign investments and trade ties (Khalid, 2011). Subsequently, regional and national defence featuring security concerns calls attention to regional integration and security, which is perennial today as an essential strategy.

4.2. EVOLUTION OF MALAYSIA'S MIDDLE POWER IDENTITY

With a population of over 30 million (including many large migrant minorities such as Sino-Malay and Indo-Malay) and one of Southeast Asia's strongest growing economies, Malaysia has been increasingly proactive in global and Asian diplomatic affairs. An indication of patterns of continuity in governance by boosting trade to a GDP ratio estimated higher than many high-trade nations and maintaining porous borders with Indonesia and the Philippines, thus allowing large-scale irregular immigrants, time after time (Milner and Kasim, 2018).

In the non-Westphalian understanding of the Malay world, a big priority is given to solid and emotive foreign policy relations, indicated through what many scholars called "Moral Balance-Neutrality vis-à-vis competing for hegemonic powers- not overemphasizing power balancing or hedging (Alatas, 2021). Malaysian foreign policy, throughout history, has operated on the principles of neutrality by instituting links between "the aesthetics" and "the moral" balance (Milner, 2019): balancing woodcarving, poetry, and textile design in the 18th Century, the establishment of the Global Movement of Moderates in 2010, formed on the grounded in the doctrines of "morally or justly balanced," underlining the importance of "comprehensive strategic partnerships with both, the US (in 2014) and China (in 2013), simultaneously, and embedding the term, "principled" as Malay foreign policy identity, often reflected in their website and official statements.

In the 16th and 17th Century texts illustrating *Kerajaan*, subjects could enrich their "*Nama*" (prestige, reputation...) by offering their services to the ruler. *Nama* is considered to have deep-rooted significance in the way of life, the afterlife, and in unravelling the world's complexities. Acquiring subjects or popular support improves their *Nama* for a leader or a ruler. A great ruler has many subjects (Ahmad, 1975). The strength of a ruler is determined by his material capabilities of conquering other polities or making rational decisions in the circumstances that necessitate the avoidance of war.

Name and Shame, appearing in binaries, seem to influence inter-polity relations between *rajas*. It was crucial to deliberate if any proposed arrangements entail *Nama* or "*Aib*"- Shame (Teeuw and Wyatt, 1970). The same imperative can be observed in the exchanges of royal letters. The quest for loyal subjects is one of the most persistent themes, portraying a people-centric focus in its Middlepowermanship, which is evident in Malay texts. Textual evidence also suggests that rulers sought to gain wealth, and such revered rulers attracted traders, thus adding to their *Nama* or fame (Borchberg, 2015). Lavish ceremonies and bestowing of expensive gifts were considered an instrument of loyalty. Regarding the notions of prosperous, flourishing kingdoms or nations, a leader or a *raja* combines the most effective doctrines of prosperity and populism.

Western studies tend to normalize discourses on powers by differentiating power in material and military capabilities- big or great, medium or middle, and minor or small powers, therefore giving the impression that "one conceptual approach or understanding fits all." However, the legacies of historical, pre-colonial polity, which often is neglected in studies, further enrich our understanding of non-Western Malay thinking amidst the current geopolitical flux driven by the intensifying rivalry between the US and China, thus dictating the Southeast Asian geostrategic theatre (Alatas, 2021).

Modern Malaysia has been pioneering efforts towards regional integration, alongside studying the new developments in ASEAN's relationship with China and the US. It can be observed that there has been a continuity in the strategies of successive Malaysian governments in declaring their determination to remain "an equidistant country" from the major powers (Murphy, 2017).

Former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's pragmatic approach to referring to Malaysia, despite being a middle power, as a small power for strategic advantage is captured in his interview presided by John Bussey with the Council of Foreign Relations (CFR) in 2018:

"Whether we like it or not, China is there and China is going to play a bigger role in world affairs. So, one has to learn how to live with China. Malaysia has lived with China for two thousand years and we know a little bit about them, and we have survived. Small little Malaysian states have survived many centuries being with neighbours which are more powerful, including China" (CFR,2018)

"Historically, small countries on the peripheries of a big and powerful state have always had reason to be wary. In this connection, we welcome the many assurances that China will never seek hegemony and will not do anything to harm us... I ask you to understand us if, despite these assurances, some concerns linger on, for... trust does not come easily to us in the view of our past experience" (Storey, 2013)

Rising powers are considered status quo to be accommodated into the existing international world order; however, those perceived to be revisionist will be subjected to whether the Chinese developments threaten their national interests. The extent of the importance of the US and China in the Asia-Pacific is simultaneously characterized by cooperation and conflict. As Limaye and Tow (2016) elucidated, "the Sino-American friendship is a central element to determining how the Asia-Pacific regional security and order-building will unfold."

In the evolution of Malaysia's active profile in the international community, the government under Mahathir projected Malaysia's diplomatic interests well outside the country's traditional ring of regional and international friends. The focus of Malaysia's new middle-power leadership role was fundamentally on the countries of the developing and emerging South. Mahathir was involved in the culmination of the South-South Commission on non-alignment. Initiatives undertaken by Malaysia have repeatedly pioneered regional identity and integration, thus emphatically pushing the idea of ASEAN Centrality and Consensus (Nishchalke, 2000).

Apart from the Group of 15 comprising developing nations, streamlined caucus for the South. Furthermore, the Malaysian government under Mahathir's administration proposed an East Asian Economic Grouping (EAEG), later renamed the East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC), to include Japan, ROK or South Korea, Taiwan, China, Hong Kong, and the ASEAN nations into this regional economic forum. It was purposely designed to counterweight the existing trading blocs forming in Europe and North America (Murphy, 2017). Mahathir's government actively portraying Malaysian activism in the international forum was hugely concerned with the lack of voices from Malaysia and the other ASEAN states in international negotiations.

Malaysia was additionally involved in ASEAN initiatives to lessen tensions and build confidence in the region. Numerous forums are fervent on issues linked with conflict resolution, thus necessitating regional stability. Simultaneously, Malaysia incorporated a framework for stability

in the ASEAN and Asia-Pacific regions by actively engaging in conflict reduction by providing peacekeeping forces to various United Nations missions. Malaysia contributed forces to the peacekeeping forces in Cambodia, along with Malaysia as one of the first Islamic countries to send a UN peacekeeping force to Bosnia (Cook, 2017). This is yet another example of Malaysia's rising enthusiasm to act as a middle power in a world with the buoyancy and resources to syndicate with others to a world safer and more stable.

Malaysia has also displayed its penchant for multilateral institutional negotiations to achieve its larger strategic goals in the region and beyond. This form of diplomacy takes its roots from Malayan involvements in creating numerous multilateral institutional forums over the years, notably ASEAN, the Non-Aligned Movement, the Global Movement of Moderates, and the Islamic Conference Organization (Ramcharan, 2000; Izzuddin, 2014).

With this evolving activism in Malayan foreign policy over a range of global issues, the Mahathir government and the subsequent administrations emphasized issues in the international liberal order and North-South issues, thus securing the ranks of a middle power in the region with a "good international citizenship" (Cooper, 2011).

The world was witnessing a transition in the late 2000s. The so-called "peaceful rise of China," the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, the rise of authoritarianism with military coup d'état, the state of emergencies in the neighbourhood, natural disasters, and Obama's Pacific Pivot are some of the significant events in 2009, thus posing its decision-makers several challenges, along with domestic challenges of political party-ship, ethnonationalism, and communism leaving Malaysian elites in a dilemma navigating crucial stages in world politics.

4.3. MALAYSIA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

For decades, Malaysia has demonstrated how a relatively small country can disproportionately influence regional and international affairs by punching above its weight. As mentioned above, the two decades of Mahathir's administration from 1983 to 2003 laid emphasis on several aspects of South-South Cooperation, as well as championing several causes such as human rights, environment, and United Nations peace-keeping missions. However, successive administrations under Abdullah Badawi (2003-2009) and Najib Razak (2009-2018) face different and dynamic

challenges, especially with the rise of China and the relative decline of Japan in its influence and economy during the first decade of this century (Tang, 2009).

The end of the 1990s and the 2000s witnessed regional power shifts between China and Japan. Following the 1985 Plaza Accord on the value of the dollar, Japan played a critical role in Malaysia's economic development and expansion through foreign direct investment, aid, and the issuance of loans at competitive interest rates. Mahathir's "Look East" program strengthened the country's connections with Japan. By the early 1990s, however, the Japanese economic juggernaut appeared to have lost steam. As a result, Japan was no longer the leader in the region. Decades of stagnation and political malaise had negatively impacted Japan's worldwide reputation and influence. To be sure, Japan is and will be an important regional actor, but its influence will be limited by China's seemingly unstoppable economic colossus. The impact of the Sino-Japanese power transfer is plainly visible in the two countries' trading patterns with Malaysia. In 2000, Malaysia's imports from Japan outpaced those from China by 17% (JETRO White Paper, 2001). By 2007, the value of Chinese imports into Malaysia had risen to parity with Japanese imports, with the two nations accounting for 13% of Malaysia's total. Similarly, by 2007, both Japan and China accounted for the same share of Malaysia's exports (Yusuf & Nabeshima, 2009). While bilateral trade between Japan and Malaysia has remained constant, China's trade with Malaysia has greatly increased. In 2000, Chinese imports accounted for 4 percent of Malaysia's overall imports, but by 2007, the amount had risen to 13 percent (Marukawa, 2021).

During his time in office from 2003 to 2009, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi opted to continue Mahathir Mohamad's foreign policy. He also used a more 'middle-ground' style, which was neither provocative nor confrontational. During his term, Malaysia and China increased their collaboration in educational and sociocultural spheres and with government-linked corporations (GLCs), something that had not occurred previously (Dosch, 2014). When Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, also known as Pak Lah, took over the leadership from Mahathir in 2003 until 2009, he chose to retain Mahathir's policies. Due to these considerations, Abdullah is regarded as having had no substantial impact, particularly on Malaysia's foreign policy toward China, similar to Tun Hussein Onn, who continued Tun Razak's approach. Despite this, there have been consistent changes and advancements in bilateral relations and collaboration, including diplomatic, economic, political, and sociocultural synergies as compared to past administrations (Ismail & Hamid, 2013). In the

international political arena, he supported a multilateral binding strategy with the contending big powers, especially the United States and China. The two countries reached 26 Memoranda of Understanding and 6 Memoranda of Agreements for economic cooperation. For the first time, Malaysia has replaced Singapore as China's primary partner for trade. Abdullah's modest nature and commitment to deliberations gave Wisma Putra fresh hope in influencing Malaysia's foreign policy (Ridzuan & Ma'dan, 2023).

Najib Razak succeeded Abdullah Badawi to power in 2009 as the sixth prime minister, notable for his deepened policies to cater to the changing international order and shift in the hegemonic status quo. His foreign policies were directed at restoring bilateral relations with China and Singapore. His emphasis on building linkages between domestic governance and foreign policy emerged in his announcement of "1Malaysia: People First, Performance Now", a concept that exemplifies Malaysian values of people centralism, pragmatism, moderate and balanced (Kuik, 2013).

Contrastingly, Najib's relationship with his father, Abdul Razak, is primarily construed as an emotional attachment, thus bearing little to no semblance to his legacy; however, unlike Abdullah, he is not vulnerable to the "Mahathirist" perception, despite mirroring the 22-year long governance pattern- such which is expected from Najib Razak's brand of leadership (Khalid, 2011).

Najib Razak is prevalently referred to as a protégé of his mentor, Mahathir Mohamad. Despite little to no similitude in their personal demeanour, their outlook toward political style and policies, however, bears an intense resemblance. Reminiscing Mahathir's mega projects, Najib's penchant for infrastructure and an investment-driven economy can also be observed. Indicative in Najib's proposal for a 100-story Heritage Tower in the heart of Kuala Lumpur, he advocated "his intent to continue Mahathir's successes and his conscious efforts towards the ensuring legacy of the prior development programs under Mahathir's government" (Kuik, 2012)

Najib's statecraft was juggling with upholding natural, political, and biological legacy as an heir of the second, Abdul Razak, correspondingly, understanding the public perception of his anointed descendant of the fourth Mahathir. Apart from acknowledging his readmission into the party, United Malay National Organization (UMNO), Najib has perhaps maintained his distinctiveness by disentangling the weight of his political outlook from Mahathir as his protégé and his father.

However, Najib's enduring proclivity for an infrastructure-driven economy and his concrete policies are scholarly referred to as a "Nominal Mahathirist" (Khalid, 2011).

Najib's privileged conditions demonstrated decisiveness in his long political career. As the son of the second Prime Minister, Abdul Razak, he belonged to a political elite, educated, and intellectual family. He was educated at the University of Nottingham and graduated in industrial economics. His origins and early political career positioned him in eminence to rise to the echelons of power.

A prescient thinker and a visionary with grandiose ideas, Najib attempted to apply the foundational principles of Malaysian philosophy and the Malay heritage of ideas while considering foreign policy as one of the domains under political philosophy. With his appointment as the sixth prime minister, he introduced "Malaysia, People First, Performance Now." In his maiden keynote address- "Malaysian Foreign Policy: Future Direction for 2009-2013", delivered in June 2009, he reiterated:

"When I became Prime Minister two months ago, I said our government would focus on performance for the people, and I spoke of my hope that our nation would move forward under the theme of "1Malaysia, People First, Performance Now". I have emphasized these principles at home, and they are also the principles that will shape our foreign policy. Just as we depend on each other to create a strong and united Malaysia, so, in this interconnected world, every country depends on each other to create a prosperous and harmonious planet" (The Star, 2009).

"We must maintain Malaysia's political stability, economic vibrancy, and social harmony. But we must also reshape and adjust our domestic and foreign policy priorities to meet the changing world order... [We] cannot proceed without vision. My own begins with recognition of our interconnectedness and with opening up to the world. I mean opening up to the dynamism, the diversity, and the differences that exist both within our borders and among the global community. Opening up to the changing world order, new ideas, and the opportunities they present. Opening up to the movement of skills and talents around the world as well as opening up to the free movement of goods, capital, and services"(The Star, 2009).

A closer investigation of the excerpts from his crucial keynote address represents a pattern of content in adapting to the existing world order instead of anticipating the ways in which Malaysia

can influence the changing international order. Conservative temperament, reflected in his policies and personality, is grounded in his experience and family legacy. His father, Abdul Razak's premature death, created a void Najib was, consciously and unconsciously, attempting to fill, thus linking his premiership to his father's.

The peculiarity in Malayan Foreign Policy is, albeit, shaped by two precise reasons. Firstly, the necessity to balance the tensions between various communities of the domestic socio-political echelons of Malayan multi-ethnic and cultural demography, thereby establishing that Najib's style of middle power diplomacy was broadly consistent with his predecessors. Foreign Policy choices are primarily determined by the majority Malay ethnic community and the ruling elite, thus holding power since independence. The ethnic minorities comprising Chinese, Indians, Kadazan, Murut, Dusun, Dayak, and many more have been engulfed in inter-religious sectarian tensions, and most parts of history with "tense balance" (Izzuddin, 2014; Alatas, 2021) Malaysia also witnessed abysmal incidents amid the Sino-Malay groups that eventually implemented a two-year state-long emergency.

Consequently, the policies legislated by the Malay elite were tailored toward political survival, whereby political, economic, and security decisions were directed at regime legitimization. Secondly, the regime legitimization of the political elite is attributed to their perpetual need to be perceived as just, moderate, respectable, independent, and confident. The concept of recognition is prevalent in the Malay historical idea of "*Kerajaan*" (political unit), focusing on the benevolent nature of administration and inter-raja relations within the political unit (see Omar, 1993). This is, however, even how Malay rulers practised inter-raja relations in the past to the subsequent administrations until the present, thereby describing the scope of Malaysian foreign policy as "principled and pragmatist" (Milner, 2017). The most common and repetitive narrative in the modern practice of Malaysian diplomacy is to be "friendly to everyone," projecting its "good international citizenship" and for Malaysia to be "respected in the international world order."

Modern Malaysia appears to have gained its prestige through population growth. Mahathir emphasized the hope of being millions of Malaysians through his focus on building a people-centric nation. The free flow of people amid ease of migration has propelled the ongoing sanguine perception of rapid population growth and suggests a degree of nonchalance regarding territoriality

(Milner, 2019). A long history of movement of the Sulu people from the Southern Philippines indicates the Malaysian principle of tolerance in matters of borders, thus giving an impression of accepting porous borders. Modern Malaysia resonates with pre-modern tolerance, visible through a lack of definitional territoriality (Milner, 2019). Najib was voted out of power in the light of corruption and other anti-incumbency sentiments, thereby voting out Malaysia's Barisan Nasional (BN) party after nearly six decades of rule. The change in 2018 with a new coalition party, Pakatan Harapan (PH), was widely observed as 'Malaysia Baharu', meaning New Malaysia, as Mahathir Mohammad ascended to power once again (Nadzri, 2018). Given that Pakatan Harapan was a peculiar coalition of parties and interests that had allegedly been taken aback by its own election victory, there was much speculation regarding the policies that may be implemented under the new administration. There were additional concerns about the extent to which policies would change, considering he had governed the country for more than two decades as prime minister and influenced much of its orientation. Noor, in this regard, remarks, "Reviewing the history and trajectory of Malaysia's foreign policy in the post-colonial era, it uncovers strong threads of continuity in the revamped Mahathir administration's policy, affirmed most recently with the release of the Foreign Policy Framework of the New Malaysia (Framework) in 2018— aptly titled Change in Continuity" (Noor, 2019).

Mahathir's first term as Prime Minister charted the foreign policy outlook with key policies such as Looking East that were driven by domestic considerations such as developmental needs and public disdain for countries wielding the big stick. Further, he expressed solidarity with the global South, thereby railing against inequity, indignities, and disproportionality perpetuated by the global institutions of finance and governance (Nambiar, 2018). As he returned to power in 2018, there were early indications of continuity in the foreign policy of the country. His speech in June 2018 in Tokyo elucidated that despite the change in government, their policies towards other countries remain unchanged and consistent (Sim, 2018). In this regard, in his speech in 2018 on the theme of keeping Asia open, he stated,

"We want to be friendly with all the countries of the world irrespective of ideologies, and we want to ensure that we can keep on trading and have access to all the markets of the world [...] because we depend on trade in order to grow our country" (As cited in Noor, 2019).

Amidst broad calls and speculations of Malaysia tilting towards any major powers, Mahathir's message reiterated that its policy continues to maintain friendly relations with all in order to facilitate their development, trade, and economic growth. His framework also highlights increased inter-agency coordination, empowering its public officials, and increasing public participation in making their foreign policy. However, domestic considerations remain essential, thereby ensuring that foreign policy outlines its national interests- security, economic well-being, and identity. Malaysia is a land of multicultural, multi-ethnic people for whom the concept of respect for all despite differences is crucial to ensure peace. Similar arguments can explain their approach towards the major powers of the region. He appears to have rekindled his Look East policy by choosing to visit Japan as his first trip since assuming office. Malaysia's relations with Japan are stable and substantive; the enthusiasm for the Look East Policy in his administration has helped Malaysia firmly put Japan on its political, economic, and strategic radar, additionally giving Tokyo some opportunities to regain some initiatives under Shinzo Abe's twin policy of 'proactive contribution to peace, and 'free and open Indo-Pacific' (Tong, 2023).

Throughout his campaign, Mahathir repeatedly criticised Najib for increasing Chinese FDI in the economy. This led many scholars and academics to believe that since voting to power, Mahathir's new administration may alter or take a hardline approach towards China. Instead, the Look East policy under the PH government broadened to include China, given its economic and geopolitical significance. In 2023, Malaysia-China trade amounted to USD 96 bn. Following the Ministry of Finance's recent disclosure of illicit financial agreements between Malaysian and Chinese enterprises, Chinese economic activity has come under scrutiny. Mahathir also approached Abe about Japanese loans to assist in lowering Malaysia's national debt, which has grown to support mega projects granted to Chinese-linked corporations (Mun, 2018). At the Nikkei Conference dinner, Abe said that Japan will create a USD 50 bn fund to encourage infrastructure development in the Indo-Pacific region. However, Mahathir was also cautious not to overplay the Japan factor by reaffirming friendly ties with China (Abe, 2018). Mahathir's approach to China has evolved with his suggestion of a new EAEC including ASEAN, Japan, China, Korea, India and some Central Asian countries to enable internal balancing in order to prevent the rise of hegemony in the region.

Anwar Ibrahim acceded to power soon after echoing similar approaches and continuity of principles; however, seek to restore its reputation in advocating international issues, and ensure proactive diplomacy in international affairs. Soon, the new government introduced ‘Malaysia Madani’ as its slogan, aspiring for a civil and inclusive nation (Lemière, 2023). In the foreign policy arena, it implied the necessary need to pursue Malaysian national interests and principles abroad. His foreign policy has emphasised ASEAN, major power relations, and the Middle East region (Tan, 2023). Firstly, he visited all the ASEAN states (except Myanmar) in the first year of assuming office. He has additionally been vocal in expressing concerns for the Myanmar issue, especially the rising humanitarian crisis, and has expressed his disappointment in the lack of progress in the Five-Point Consensus. He famously argued,

“Today, decision-making by consensus continues to be a central tenet of ASEAN. This, however, does not mean that ASEAN should remain silent over developments in member states that affect the wider region or particularly egregious violations of the ASEAN Charter by its own members. In all honesty, I believe that non-interference is not a license for indifference” (Anwar, 2023).

“Hence, when I mentioned in Bangkok recently about the need to temporarily carve out Myanmar, on account of the blatant human rights violations, it was said in the larger context of the imperative to stay true to one of the key ideals of ASEAN, which is nothing less than to stand for the cause of justice and the rule of law” (Anwar, 2023).

In this regard, Anwar has insisted that ASEAN leaders hold the military junta in Myanmar responsible for the human rights violations and has raised this issue repeatedly in his meetings with leaders of Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

Subsequently, the countries in the Middle East witnessed the most visits by the PM of Malaysia as his official trips covered Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE, and he attended meetings at different forums, including the ASEAN- GCC summit and the emergency meeting of OIC in October 2023, primarily discussing the Israel-Gaza War. The engagements in the Middle East region were originally aimed at strengthening economic and cultural relations with the Muslim world, however, the Israel-Gaza conflict took the forefront of these discussions. Since October 7, 2023, in the wake of the conflict, Anwar has issued a fiery stance on the conflict by emerging as one of the most vocal critics of Israel. This is of no surprise as the PM has consistently supported

the Palestinian cause as a student activist in the 1970s. Within a month, Anwar took up this issue at the OIC meeting, ASEAN-GCC summit, and APEC summit and held bilateral discussions with leaders of Egypt, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. His diplomatic vigour has helped bolster his image in the region and Malaysian proactive diplomacy on the global stage (Tan, 2023).

Finally, the current administration has elucidated and maintained the long-standing principles of Malaysian foreign policy concerning the US and China. In his maiden press conference, he stressed that Malaysia would remain neutral and non-aligned, thereby avoiding getting entangled in geopolitical competitions. However, the last year has seen a strengthening of relations with China, raising questions about Malaysia's geopolitical direction. Anwar has met with various high-ranking Chinese leaders, including President Xi Jinping. He visited China twice this year, in March and September. His travels to China culminated in the signing of multiple memoranda of understanding worth billions of dollars in investment, a result that Malaysians consider as constructive and advantageous to the local economy. Anwar has also publicly issued three invites for Xi to visit Malaysia. On the other side, the prime minister has not met with senior US officials. While ties between Malaysia and the United States are essentially stable, they are lukewarm at best (Khaliq, 2022).

In comparison, Malaysia-China relations are far more vibrant. The absence of diplomatic efforts with Washington surprises some analysts, who expected Anwar to be more pro-West given the assistance he got from the United States while detained. With global tensions rising, the US and its allies are concerned that Anwar's administration is more China-leaning than expected. Anwar has defended his government's China policy, claiming that the closeness in bilateral relations originates from geographical proximity, strong cultural links, and the fact that Beijing has been Malaysia's largest trading nation for the past 14 years. Furthermore, the year 2024 marks the 50th anniversary of Malaysia-China diplomatic relations, which is expected to spark further attempts to strengthen ties (The Star, 2024). Similarly, Washington has not been as open with Malaysia as expected. Malaysia has been neglected by US officials during recent tours to Southeast Asia, with other nations such as Vietnam receiving priority. The latest top US official to visit Malaysia was Secretary of State Antony Blinken in December 2021, a year before Anwar's administration took power. The absence of diplomatic warmth appears reciprocal, implying that both parties have other priorities (Tan, 2023).

In summary,

Figure 4:1- Middle Power Approaches of Malaysia

Malaysian Leadership	Middle Power Focus	Policy Initiatives
Mahathir Mohammad (1983-2003)	Regionalism, Global South Cooperation, Anti-Western Rhetoric	Look East Policy, East Asia Economic Group, ASEAN FTA, ASEAN +3 Regional Forum
Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (2003-2009)	Continuity in Malaysian Principled diplomacy with a middle-ground approach which was neither provocative nor confrontational	Government-linked international corporations, partnerships in sociocultural spheres such as education, travel, and infrastructure, and enhancing agreements for economic cooperation.
Najib Razak (2009-2018)	People-centrism, moderatism, pragmatic, neutral, and balanced Malaysia	Infrastructure-driven economy, 1MDB, BRI investments, TPP, and other economic free trade agreements.
Mahathir Mohammad 2.0 (2018-2020)	Change in Continuity indicates the change in the domestic political scene due to corruption in the previous regime; however, continuity in maintaining Malaysian principles of respect and friendliness to all, thereby, projecting its good international citizenship.	Achieving normative principles in ensuring security, economic growth, and security highlighted some changes to strengthen approaches on issues such as the South China Sea, irregular movements of people, cyber security and terrorism.
Anwar Ibrahim (2022-Present)	Principled and Neutral Malaysia with a focus on Regionslism, Islam, and unbalancing Malaysia from geopolitical competition	Enhancing cooperation and talks with ASEAN and East Asian Countries, participation in OIC, FDI and economic growth.

Despite these challenges, the Malaysian administration has maintained its rhetoric of neutrality. Foreign Minister Zambry Abdul Kadi, in June 2023, stated that it is in Malaysia's interest to remain neutral, and the vital element of neutrality is to prevent major powers from 'unbalancing Malaysia'. He elaborated that Malaysia, by not veering to either side, will positively impact Malaysian image in regional affairs of the larger Indo-Pacific region. He additionally said, "While we may not be a superpower, we must not be seen as too small a power (thus the middle power approach)" is necessary for its proactive diplomacy "The Star, 2022).

The middle power activism in its political systems enables her to distance herself from rivalry, resulting in several political choices for middle power diplomacy (Worman, 2021). Malaysian foreign policy is vested in building regional identity through ASEAN Centrality, with Malaysia pioneering in self-help and other-help phenomena, thus establishing that Malaysia is a middle power with its distinctive characteristics. Alliance of like-minded powers in the Asia-Pacific has become crucial, thus indicating a desire to pursue independent and balanced foreign policies. (Vijaya, 2021).

4.4 NAVIGATING THROUGH THE DECLINE OF AMERICA AND THE RISE OF CHINA

The overriding emphasis on Realism in construing Malaysian foreign policy limits analysing structural agencies such as humans, private organizations, domestic considerations, classified documents, diplomatic signs between the elite and top leaders, etc. A former economic advisor in Mahathir 2.0 administration (2018-2020) cautioned (sic with the authors cited) that the recent spurts of hedging-based discourses have led to a forlorn 'blind spot' in understanding Malaysian foreign policy, thus criticizing researchers of international relations "obsessing over China, the US, however not on the Future of Malaysia" (Khalid and Azman, 2021)

Historically, the folklores of the 15th and 16th Centuries often reflected on Malaysia's small power status, referring to "Mousedeer Diplomacy"- a term with its contemporary relevance deep-rooted in Malaysia's political lexicon (Milner, 2019). The inter-raja hierarchical relations that pre-modern Malay recognizes relations between China and Malaysia as small animals (Malaysia) challenging big animals (China) to gain necessary benefits by using skills, instincts, and intelligence. The pre-modern Malay folklore provides us with several instances of such diplomacy; however, it holds contemporary relevance. During his visit to China, Mahathir's recent behaviour

in 2018 described Malaysia as a "small country" and referred to China as "big and powerful" to renegotiate large-scale economic projects. These projects, agreed to by his predecessor, Najib, were believed to damage Malaysian economic infrastructure (Abuza, 2020). Mahathir mellowed his criticisms of Chinese activities in the South China Sea on a conciliatory note. In the practice of Mousedeer Diplomacy, Mahathir expressed his optimism in Chinese efforts towards maintaining peace in the region, in parallel expressing concerns on some specific projects, thus respecting the regional hegemonic norms in the region (Milner, 2017).

His visit to China (June 2009) to celebrate the 35th anniversary of Sino-Malay relations is evidence of Najib's profound interest in preserving and stabilizing relations with China, extending his father's legacy of recognizing one China. Najib's Malaysia sought to elevate its relations with China due to its ascendancy to power (Khalid, 2011).

Malaysian geopolitical and security dilemmas categorized China as a threat; despite revisionist concerns, the bilateral relations between the two nations normalized because of communist insurgencies and the need to delegitimize them. Political relations between the leaders deepened under Najib as cooperation on free markets and state capitalism intensified. China became the leading trading partner for Malaysia in 2013 (Kuik, 2013). Subsequently, Najib's form of pursuing his middle power diplomacy involved patronage networks between Malaysian domestic associations, lobby groups, civil servants, informal diplomatic exchanges, informal business exchanges, and people-to-people ties, especially amongst the elite concerted to play an essential role in boosting such friendly relations (Khalid and Azman, 2021).

The appointment of a Special Envoy to China indicated that the Malaysian administration recognized the focal significance of maintaining steady domestic, informal, business, and political ties with their Chinese counterparts. Despite the cautions to execute counter-hegemonic roles, The Najib government pervasively increased its dependency on several Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI), therefore hindering Malaysian capability to bargain and negotiate better deals, simultaneously pressuring to deliver delayed or joint official statements against Chinese aggressive behaviour in South China and East China Seas (Chin, 2020).

The Sino-Malaysian relationship progressed from visible hostilities during the Cold War to China being recognized as a reliable economic partner. This change in roles, perceptions, and

dependencies makes it imperative to comprehend the nature of these changes in business interests, forcing an influx of political and economic influences. Najib's ability to establish closer ties between Beijing and Kuala Lumpur boosted public confidence, thus transcending his father's political legacy (Abuza 2020).

Scilicet, the United States, and Malaysia have enduring, long-standing, cooperation-based, institutionalized partnerships in several areas ranging from security and defence, trade linkages, education, political, social, cultural, and informal ties, etc. Najib's administration underlined the importance of institutionalized forums to mediate, arbitrate, and cooperate regionally and globally (Kuik, 2013). Their relations advanced into a comprehensive partnership under the Najib Administration during President Obama's momentous visit to Malaysia in 2014. The vibrant association with several convergent interests albeit endures certain ambiguities. Although the US and Malaysian partnership is painted with several key attributes, their bilateral relationship is not a formal alliance with a military partnership primarily based on mutual obligations, top-level consultative course of interactions, and the benefits of collaborations spilling to multiple domains as opposed to a single domain (Abuza, 2020). Such aspects differentiate their bilateral relationship with little institutionalism and reduced strategic intensity. In May 2002, Najib Razak, then-Defense Minister in Mahathir's government, described their defence collaborations as an "untold" yet "a solid success story" (Razak, 2002).

Malaysian Defense Papers has continually labelled its military ties with the US as "long-standing and comprehensive." Undeniably, the cooperation stretched to many areas, including Malaysia-US Strategic Talks (MUSST), maritime security, counterterrorism, cybersecurity, disaster relief, humanitarian assistance, intelligence, and information sharing (Musa and Zulkifli, 2022).

Since Najib assumed power, Malaysian armed forces have been intensely engaged in the "Building Partner Capacity Program" with American security forces, furthermore offering USD 218 billion to Malaysia for maritime domain awareness (MDA), counterterrorism measures, and addressing some other areas of shared concerns such as supply chain cooperation, economic partnership, and democratic resilience (Fact Sheet, 2021). The US Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, in its Integrated Country Strategy document, notes: "Malaysia's geographical location makes it strategically significant for the US commercial and security interests."

However, the ambiguity in these enduring relations manifests from its calculated low profile, selective foreign policy (as domestic considerations are driven mainly by Islam), sometimes contradictory (as ties strengthened with adversaries), and ambivalent in their bilateral outlook (as vocal criticism on Western hypocrisy), ascended in popular discourses (Khalid, 2011). Titling his May 2002 Speech "Malaysia-U.S. Defense Cooperation: The Untold Story," he reasoned that;

"The reason is that for many years, US and Malaysian forces have cooperated on a wide range of missions with virtually no fanfare or public acknowledgement. The consecutive ruling elites did not want the US-Malay defence cooperation publicized, hence preferring to opt to ensure that their alignment is kept low-key amongst the Malay masses" (Razak, 2002)

The opacity in this relationship seemingly contradicts its defence alignment with its middle power selectivity. Accordingly, Malaysia's enthusiasm and activism in improving its security partnerships with the US translated into strong collaborations under MUSST, elevating from an observer to a participant in the Cobra Gold exercises and building refined cooperation on MDA and counterterrorism measures, though contrastingly, silencing itself from sensitive 'red-line' matters on sovereignty, strategic autonomy, and maritime freedom (Fact Sheet, 2021).

At this juncture, the Thucydides Trap phenomenon illuminates today's rising debates in the IR Community. The circumstances describe the growing power proportionality that threatens to displace the US, the existing hegemon—with Pax-Pacifica, widely propagated after the Second World War, provided the world with global economic and security frameworks for development (Allison, 2012). However, the rise of China is aimed at displacing the already existing peaceful, progressive, and productive world order, thereby seeking to revise the rules and regulations governing the institutional framework of the region today. Thucydides Trap suggests the perils of a rising China disrupting the international world order, thus stimulating a strategic need for a US Reset, thus furthering the scope of conflicts between the US and China. Today, the central question is whether the Trap Analysis is considered viable in understanding the changing dynamics of power. While this analysis is primarily considered inadequate to answer, the security dilemma in the region as the culture of war evolved and the possession of nuclear warheads prompted a cautious behavioural strategy.

This trap analysis is also short of analysis as the provisions for dialogue and cooperation through multilateral institutional frameworks such as ASEAN are discounted in such zero-sum game theories. A trap suggests that the region is challenged with the inevitability of an outbreak of war, leaving states with no choice instead to accept the material and strategic channels controlled by the big powers. However, this, furthermore, overlooks the historical avenues of cultural, social, religious, and institutional cooperation (Busse, 2000; Rother, 2012; Atalas, 2021).

These geopolitical dynamics are not distinct to Malaysia. However, they echo similar dilemmas faced by middle and small powers in the Asia-Pacific region, 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. "Strategic autonomy" for Malaysia, like others, is imperative in bilateralism, regionalism, and internationalism. A neutral Malaysia is vital to preserving long-term prosperity and stability in Asia and is in the region's best interest, its integration, and the hegemonic powers, namely the US and China.

Contradictory acts indicating ambiguity are theoretically justified as Malaysian attempt to maintain equidistance in their foreign policy. For instance, Malaysia permitted the US Navy to land aircraft in their dock vessels and airstrips. They also allowed USS Lassen to heath at its Sepanggar Naval Base in Kota Kinabalu near the South China Sea. The three-day port visit came before a US guided-missile destroyer carried out freedom of navigation operations close to the Chinese artificial islands in the contested waters (Graham, 2016). Nevertheless, shortly a month later, Malaysia gave Chinese naval ships permits to dock at the same port. Whereas to many, such episodes underscore strategic ambiguity in hedging the two adversaries, such approaches also signify Malaysian interest in sustaining equidistant, neutral, non-aligned, and morally balanced approaches to elude the impressions of orienting with any significant power, principally at a time of growing studies on the New Cold War. For a long time, Malaysia has persistently engaged in a moderate stance vis-à-vis China and the US, with its neutrality, therefore broadening its security ties and instantaneously developing prudent partnerships with regional and global powers (Girling, 1972).

4.5. CONNECTING EAST: APPLYING COMPLEX RELATIONSHIPS TO CRITICAL GEOPOLITICS

Malaysia has displayed openness to all countries irrespective of their social systems, political systems, ideologies, and regimes. This portrayal of openness demonstrates good leadership and the continuity of historical practices of upholding moral balance in Malay tradition. "*Adil*," referring to justness or fairness, has principally guided Malaysian Moderate Islamism- through the establishment of the Global Movement of Moderates, balancing religious values and the war on terror by sending their medically trained military to provide relief and medical assistance to the wounded, Organization of Islamic Countries, ASEAN etc. are defined as justly balanced or morally balanced (Milner 2019). Moral balance also helps in detecting patterns of governance such as Malaysia's desire to maintain equidistance in relations with foreign relations, refusal to join alliances, the principle of non-interference, non-alignment, establishing comprehensive partnerships through clever diplomacy by engaging in rivalry in a balanced and nuanced manner, thus preferring neutrality vis-à-vis competing powers (Jones and Jenne, 2022).

Malaysia warmed its relations with neighbouring powers. Bilateral and institutional meetings increased, as Najib indicated with his visit to Brunei, as relations between the two nations were severed due to territorial disagreements. Additionally, he signed the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Financial and Labor Issues. Subsequently, meetings between Indonesia and Malaysia over the issues of discrimination and tensions faced by Indonesian labour in Malaysia. Relations with Singapore in 2009 hinted at the desire to improve as the two nations were mired in land-reclamation disputes (Johnson, 2010). Similarly, relations with Myanmar remained peaceful as Malaysia welcomed by granting asylums to Rohingya refugees who fled the distressing human rights abuses committed by the junta. Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak stated that ASEAN, by acting as a broker in assisting Myanmar in the aftermath of the humanitarian crisis caused by cyclone Nargis, has widened Malaysia's space and pace of political reforms in Myanmar (Sigit, 2020). Malaysia during Najib's period also faced neighbourhood challenges, especially those emanating from Thailand and Indonesia. Displeasures flared as accusations were raised by Thailand, asserting that Malaysia was a training facility and ground for insurgents operating from the Deep South of Thailand. Furthermore, he had mixed feelings as maritime tensions originated

from Indonesia concerning oil exploration rights and the deployment of naval vessels near Sulawesi (Sigit, 2020).

Malaysia, under Najib, displayed middle power activism by envisaging a people-centred ASEAN, which is predominantly reflected in its theme: "Our People, Our Community, and Our Vision." ASEAN has been disparaged for its elitist and state-centric ontological nature of the projects (Nischalke, 2000). Despite such criticisms, Malaysia has been promoting inclusivity through community-building initiatives by practising effectiveness, accountability, transparency, and responsiveness in ASEAN governance. Malaysian Chairmanship under the Najib Administration in 2015 pursued soft issues apropos of strengthening ASEAN's institutional frameworks, mechanisms of dispute settlements, environment and climate change, ease of market access, and empowering women and small businesses. As people interact, the region integrates, thus propelling greater prosperity (Busse, 1999).

However, besides the neighbourhood disputes, Malaysia also faces critical challenges in its efforts to fulfil the AEC- Common Market initiative. Malaysia is simultaneously manoeuvring its verve towards what they consider common pillars of the ASEAN community- relevant and time-bound, realistic, and attainable, and measurable (Xianbai, 2014). Hence, close monitoring of the pending tasks continues to be crucial today. Balancing regional and national interests over territorial disputes raised by an assertive China in the neighbourhood remains a crucial challenge afflicting Malaysia before 2015, during their ASEAN leadership in 2015, and after. Pessimists denounce ASEAN for using weak institutional frameworks, ongoing disputations with a lack of coherent resolution, and heterogeneity in regional security and economic strategies (Credo, 2015). The challenge to accelerate progress towards regional integration is equally essential while manifesting the road map for community building and people-centralism. Najib's policy towards the immediate neighbourhood was principled by his aspirations for cooperation, ease of business, regional integration, and diminished regional disputes.

Malaysia desired to endure its predecessors' Look East Policy by supporting increased engagement in key spheres such as security and social and economic ties. Surveys reveal that Japan is still viewed positively (Kuik, 2013). However, there have been rising concerns with the growing domestic political fragility, reimagining of security and economic rhetoric, economic stagnation,

Japan's inability to reconcile its historical differences with its Northeast Asian neighbours, and ageing demographics (Murphy, 2017). Malaysian Look East Policy used an institutional form of diplomacy by drafting on using Japanese alliances to alleviate support, engage and strengthen its relations with Japan, diplomatically, both bilaterally, trilaterally with the United States, and multilaterally with ASEAN (Nischalke, 2000; Chin, 2021).

Malaysian leadership of ASEAN in 2015, under the premiership of Najib, endorsed a people-centric ASEAN Policy. In addition to the regional integration in economics, they highlighted that the critical objective of ASEAN nations must be to integrate socially and culturally across the region. A similar locus can be identified in a comparative investigation of pre-modern Malaysia that suggests that free movement for people across borders facilitated complex yet interdependent relations culturally, politically, socially, and economically concomitantly. The familiarity in Malaysian historical traditions is contextualized frequently as *Nama*, referring to reputation derived from hierarchical relations of complex power structures between the *rajas* (Ahmad, 1975; Milner 2017).

The overlapping claims of territorial sovereignty between China, Malaysia, and other nations such as the Philippines, Brunei, Vietnam, and Taiwan prevail as sources of strategic anxiety, fueling the region's geostrategic instability. Despite having a concomitant relationship with China, Malaysia views the so-called peaceful rise of China as a threat by acknowledging a steady build-up, thus aiding a security calamity. Patterns of such political decision-making can be seen in the pre-modern Malay under their *Rajas* did not refrain from engaging in the display of military might as a means to increase his own *Nama* (Ahmad, 1975).

A pathway to identity formation in Southeast Asia was unlike the Americans or Europeans, experiences of violence and bloody nationalism. Nationalism in Southeast Asia is a byproduct of shared external threats, thus prompting the need for a regional identity. Despite sporadic strains in relations among the nations (Thai-Cambodia, Singapore-Malaysia, Thai-Myanmar), its cataclysmic impact as an agent of regional destabilization is, however, exaggerated (Blank et al., 1993; Atalas, 2021). Interests of external powers such as the US and its dynamic relations with China, as well as navigation perturbations in the South China Sea, among others, are, consequently, pushing the impression of uncertainty and flux in the region (Vijaya, 2021). ASEAN's largely

considered security philosophy- Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Navigation (ZOPFAN), maintains non-interference from big powers as a grounding principle. Such neutrality weighs the successes of the ASEAN agency in conflict resolution- therefore playing the role of a "power broker" for the region. Despite the fact that the middle power activism implied through distinctiveness in relationship building, one must not exaggerate strategic hedging, the balance of power, security dilemma, the Thucydides Trap for Malaysia, comprehensive partnerships with the US and China and their reluctance to assess different political systems, ideologies, and economies that are prevailing in countries across the world, from time to time, conveying honesty and morality in maintaining equidistant foreign policy vis-à-vis the big powers.

4.6. MALAYSIA TODAY

In conclusion, Malaysian foreign policy has shown consistent signs of continuity since its inception as a modern state. Evidently, some of the pre-modern traditions, ideas and traditions of the Malay land have continued and reflected through many ideas and policies implemented in a people-centric approach of a modern Malaysian state since 1957. The continuity can be observed in approaches to managing ties with the region, major powers such as the US and China, and in developing its middle power identity in the global international system. Following the ousting of Najib Razak in 2018 and the shocking results introducing Pakatan Harapan under the leadership of Mahathir Mohammad was believed to have witnessed some new changes and key contours in thinking and rhetoric. In this period, Malaysia released its defence white paper and new foreign policy frameworks that largely highlighted the change in continuity. However, the fall of the PH administration in 2020, as well as the brief periods of Muhyiddin Yassin and Ismail Sabri prior to Anwar Ibrahim's win in the elections last year, have left the country consumed by domestic political movements amid changes in its external environment.

Najib's tenure heralded liberal politics and open market systems, therefore scaling back Sino-Malay ethnic tensions by cheering Chinese market leaders. However, he soon came under wilted pressure as dependency mounted on China, drawing criticisms as Najib used the state development fund, 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB), to dispense resources across the party apparatus, spurring corruption scandal to tackle (Latiff and Sipalan, 2019). Pressures magnified as the Muslim lobby groups scrutinized the dependency amidst raising accusations of human rights violations against Uighur Muslims, indicating solidarity in its approach.

Anwar's determined diplomacy to enhance connections, particularly with ASEAN member nations, is remarkable considering the rising divides within the group. It reflects Malaysia's rising importance in strengthening and stabilizing regional ties. Second, the emphasis on investments and economic prospects is consistent with the government's goal of stimulating the economy. Third, the greater emphasis on human rights indicates the moral character of the society that Anwar aspires to develop, which aligns with Malaysia Madani's idea of a "civil nation." Taken together, Anwar's foreign policy unquestionably supports Malaysian national interests. In addition, the prime minister has been more outspoken and active in diplomacy. Moving forward, Anwar's administration should not rely solely on rhetoric to advance its foreign policy objectives. Malaysia must effectively use its voice in order to become more visible in international politics, as seen by recent events. To be a relevant power, Anwar must also conduct a proactive foreign policy, one that plays a larger role in world events. Foreign policy must be based on "doing" rather than simply "saying." Between now and the conclusion of his tenure in 2027, the prime minister has the potential to transform Malaysia into one of the region's most strategic actors, and his ability to mobilize support within ASEAN will be a critical test of his leadership. This momentum will be essential as Malaysia prepares to assume ASEAN chairmanship in 2025.

The fundamentals of Malaysian foreign policy have endured reasonable stability in different periods of history, contributing to consistency in its conception of national identity. Malaysia today prevails in its non-alignment tendencies with friendly relations with all countries except Israel (Singh, 1995). The author believes that the ideational, material, strategic, aesthetic, and historical fundamentals driving their foreign policy are unlikely to witness changes in the near future. Additionally, the element of Islam in Malaysian foreign policy sustains its importance regardless of the evolution of domestic political considerations, indicative of its invariable Muslim-world orientation. Despite mellowed squeaks on the South China Sea dispute, maritime security lingers as a security concern, echoing its national maritime sentiments. The author strongly gathers that Malaysia will continue to further economic diplomacy in ASEAN, display activism in the international forums, mediate regional disputes, endure strategic autonomy, and exhibit dynamism in its middle power identity despite the present-day divisions in its political landscape.

CHAPTER-5

THE SHIFTING NATURE OF BALANCE OF POWER - INDONESIAN MIDDLE POWER CHALLENGES IN THE ERA OF DYNAMIC EQUILIBRIUM.

5.1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's foreign policy began with national considerations reflecting uniquely upon its historicity, cultural relations, and various political endurances, thus shaping the onset of Indonesian foreign policy and revealing itself as a part of its national policy (Nguitragool, 2012). Despite wide-ranging cultural, ideological, and political differences, a combination of national interests, core principles, values, and norms commonly shared by all Indonesians sets the premise for its foreign policy (Hatta, 1953). However, Indonesia is a unique case for a study on middle power behaviour and foreign policy analysis due to its foundational characteristics such as *anti-kolonialisme* (anti-colonialism), *politik luar negeri* (independent), and *bebas-aktif* (active), governing its foreign policy (Sukma, 1995). Along with frequent domestic political upheavals since independence, the course of Indonesia's foreign policy may have undergone several changes. However, fundamentally, such changes have always been conceived and justified within the core principles of anti-colonial tendencies and maintaining independent and active foreign policy (Sukma, 1995).

From the presidency of Soekarno to the Soeharto era, the mainstream perspectives of political realism primarily influenced the Indonesian worldview (Nguitragool, 2012). Largely built on attitudes of distrust, defensiveness, suspicion, and inward-looking, Indonesia perceived international politics as anarchic and aggressive, potentially threatening their national interest and, dangerously, their existence (Dornan, 2017). As a result, Indonesia's foreign policy orientation and practices were based on traditional or narrow nationalism and anti-colonialism, preserving Indonesia's independence and protecting sovereignty (territorial, economic, political, and ideological) from any external danger (Smith, 2000; Indonesian Defense White Paper, 2008). During the times of independence and post-independence, slogans like *merdeka atau mati* (independent or die), *kami cinta perdamaian tapi lebih cinta kemerdekaan* (we love peace but love more independence), were popular expressions of nationalism in Indonesia (Karsano, 2013). Such

orientations in populist sentiments and foreign policy considerations emerged out of their bitter experiences under colonialism under both Dutch colonialism and Japanese imperialism (Redfern, 2010). It was also impacted by the world political and security constellation during the Cold War era, which included tensions between major powers (the United States and the Soviet Union) and wars in the Korean Peninsula, Vietnam, and Cambodia, among other things (Goh, 2007).

As a result, Indonesia firmly resisted (at least rhetorically) joining Cold War blocs and chose to pursue a so-called independent and active foreign policy (Indonesian Embassy in the US, 2018). Indonesia felt more compelled to join groups that had previously been culturally, historically, and socially closed to it, such as the Non-Alignment Movement, the Islamic Conference Organization (ICO), and ASEAN. Joining such organizations provided Indonesia with security and greater space for it to play a more prominent role in the international arena.

This thesis selected Indonesia as a case study due to its historical, aesthetic, material, political, and cultural diversity, influencing its status of middle power today. Despite an opulent amalgamation of cultures involving local theological practices, Hatta (1981) analyses unique principles of the state's *Pancasila* (five principles): God, national unity, social justice, democracy, and humanitarianism as five principles of one Indonesian belief serves as significant premises in Indonesian foreign policy. Additionally, Indonesian foreign policy should safeguard national interests. These national interests mentioned in their constitution would be in the best interests to pursue an independent and active policy enacted pragmatically in consonance with situations and facts it has face to face (Hatta, 1981, pp. 446; Sukma, 1995, pp. 308). Such a unique, pragmatic, and independent nature of Indonesian foreign policy seeks a closer examination into factors such as these influencing international relations, thereby lacking in prominent realist models. Thus, recent studies on distinctiveness in non-Western political culture are influencing the emergence of new discourses in global international relations.

Political realism has been a prominent paradigm in analyzing interstate relations in the region; however, the extent of *realpolitik* as a widespread practice remains unclear (Fozouni, 1995). Weak territorial claims, internal upheavals, military innovations, and narrow interests in cash crops led some scholars to believe the pessimistic and anarchic nature of state polity prior to the 16th century (Korab-Karpowicz, 2010). A closer examination into the written and oral history presents us with

Nagarakṛtāgama, also known as *Désawarnana* - a unique poetic account by Mpu Prapanca on life, justice, culture, and law, written in 1365 under King Rajasanagara's reign (Prapanca translated by Robson, 1995). Describing conquests, the defeat of kingdoms in mainland and maritime terrains, and the glorification of monarchs reflects an expansionist geopolitical strategy (Robson, 1983; Hall, 2005). Canto 41 of the poem suggests ideas like the concentration of power in the ruler's hands (Robson, 1983). The Buddhist poet believed that the ruler at the apex of social, economic, and political institutions is necessary to avoid societal chaos ((Prapanca translated by Robson, 1995). The Javanese king, in several verses, is chronicled as a mighty warrior, conqueror and divine figure, thus emphasizing upon realist paradigms of power, hegemonic stability and interest. Contrastingly, the enormous influence of Hinduism and Buddhism led to the underlying philosophies of culture and identity and *Dharma* (way of life) in such writings (Ramage, 2001). Indian epics and mythology, such as *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, popularized by the royal courts, inspired ideas of duty and just rule. It is considered as the duty of the ruler to provide peace, stability, prosperity, and justice to its citizens. An upholder of norms, values, and culture, a ruler is kind gentle and possesses traits of a great warrior. The unification of realms under the rule of the King will ensure stability, peace, and prosperity (Macdonell, 1917; Robson, 1983).

A contemporary analysis of the Javanese political thought indicates an interplay of realist, liberal and constructivist elements elucidating its worldview based on power struggles and normative ideas that regulated the wider political behaviour and norms diffusion (Adhyanggono, 2019). Despite the emergence of new ideas in subsequent times, Javanese culture's evolving normative structure cannot dismiss long-standing legacies of history.

Since Indonesia received its independence in 1948, it has sought to pursue a 'free and active' role in world affairs. Such interests displayed during the momentous Bandung Asia-Africa Conference, hosted by Indonesia in April 1955, led to the foundations of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) (Anwar, 1994; Lumumba-Kasongo, 2015). The country's peace orientation is more visible in its membership and prominent role in the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM), as well as the Indonesian government's efforts to contribute to the resolution of problems in the Middle East, the Korean Peninsula, and between the West and Islam (Anwar, 1994). More notably, despite some border conflicts, military tensions during the conflict with Malaysia between 1963 and 1966, and the occupation of East Timor between 1975 and 1999, Indonesia has never declared war on any

country since its independence (Acharya, 2004). The Asian Financial Crisis in 1997, overthrowing of Soeharto in 1998 led to political turmoil and inward-looking tendencies. Yudhoyono succeeded to power in 2004, after a series of weak presidencies, with a vision to gradually rebuild and restore its role and leadership in the Asia-Pacific region (Rabasa & Chalk, 2001).

Yudhoyono's era was a period of extraordinary political stability and economic growth. As a result, Jakarta has gained the competence and ability to engage in active foreign policy. During Yudhoyono's tenure, Indonesia not only reclaimed its position as *primus inter pares* in ASEAN but additionally assumed the leadership role in organizations such as the G20 and the United Nations (Aspinall, Mietzner, & Tomsa, 2015). It pursued active and independent roles on key issues spanning from the Syrian conflict to climate action. Indeed, Jakarta's rising prominence has prompted some to label it a "middle power" employing active diplomacy with a global vision, including both the developed and developing world. Yudhoyono in 2005 delivered his first foreign policy speech at the Indonesian Council on World Affairs, highlighting the need to stretch beyond the traditional 'free and active' approach of political realism to adopting a more constructive policy to engage actors- regional and global, to function as bridges, peacemakers, and problem-solvers (Alexandra, 2017). Regionally, he advanced the idea of 'dynamic equilibrium,' as opposed to its earlier balance of power as a framework for ASEAN members to work towards mechanisms of systemic resilience through regional forums such as ARF, ADMM, EAS, and others, where major and regional powers are included to build mutually favourable partnerships, thus leading towards such powers working towards common security, despite trust deficiencies and power rivalries (Parks et al., 2018).

Indonesia founded the Bali Democracy Forum in December 2008 with a central focus on promoting democracy, inclusive dialogue, and sharing of best practices in the Asia-Pacific region by welcoming different states and government models to foster greater governance, equality, and mutual respect (Mulakala, 2018). Jakarta, however, had actively supported ASEAN's development, as evidenced by Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa's July 2012 visits between Southeast Asian nations to bridge divisions and repurpose a six-point consensus on the South China Sea issue following the organization's unprecedented failings to issue a joint statement at its summit (Hellendorff & Kellner, 2014). Internationally, Indonesia also served as a significant actor in various international forums. Jakarta has offered efforts at the G20 in a variety of sectors,

including multilateral development bank restructuring and support for emerging nations to achieve growth during global crises (G20 Bali Leaders' Declaration, 2022). Yudhoyono, as one of the co-chairs of a United Nations High-Level Panel on the Post-2015 Global Development Agenda, emphasized the significance of poverty reduction and long-term prosperity (UN News, 2013). In the realm of climate action, Indonesia, the world's fourth-largest greenhouse gas emitter, has positioned itself as a leader, unilaterally proclaiming in 2009 an aggressive target of 26 per cent (or 41 per cent with international support) reduction in CO₂ emissions by 2020 (Thamrin, 2011). Evidently, Yudhoyono's decade of proactive diplomacy and international engagement laid the foundations of Indonesian Middlepowermanship, further advanced by his successor, Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo.

5.2. A 21ST CENTURY INDONESIAN MIDDLE POWER MOMENT

Indonesian proactive diplomacy has taken swift turns in the 21st century and recently under the Jokowi government. Indeed, much of the political elite have referred to these assertions as Indonesia's rise as a middle power in world affairs (Thies & Sari, 2018). The APEC summit held in November 2014 witnessed Jokowi's insistence to be seated between Obama, Putin and Xi, despite the request by summit organizers for him to be seated in a corner or the end. To this, Jokowi remarked on the rise of Indonesia as a *negarabesar* or a 'big nation' and thus, as a president of such a nation, marginalizing the importance of Indonesia bears a heavy cost (Chin, 2014). Indonesian leadership has rarely sought to pursue overt policies since its independence, under Soeharto's New Order Government (1966-1998) and in the post-Soeharto Reformasi era, therefore functioning as agenda-setters, seldomly (Hadiz, 2000). Punching below its weight, Indonesia primarily defined its international posture through its membership and participation in ASEAN and its matters (Fealy & White, 2016).

However, present-day affairs and Indonesian participation have been shaping the nature and features of the regional environment of the Asia-Pacific region. Its conceptual categorization of middle power status and the equation has risen to recent debates with Indonesia's growing influence in Asia-Pacific affairs. The crucial reasons attested are: firstly, Indonesia is the largest economy in the region with its membership forums such as the G20, therefore implying that its measurable indicators on materials and economics are growing at a steady pace; secondly, despite wide-ranging sociology-political fragility due to its pluralistic societal nature, it tempered its world

views in moderation to characterize its *negara sedang* or ‘middlepowerness’ in world affairs; thirdly, Indonesia eschews from picking sides in the Sino-US rivalry indicative of this scepticism with regard to binary choices; fourthly, its informal leadership in ASEAN matters is representative of its role in regional and international affairs. Thus, there are domestic and international factors critical for the rise of *negara sedang* imaginings in Indonesian foreign policy rhetoric (Wicaksana & Karim, 2020).

Defying many expectations of a leader engrossed in domestic and national affairs, Jokowi launched *poros maritim dunia* or ‘Global Maritime Fulcrum’ (GMF), remarking on his foreign policy objectives for regional affairs (Sriyanto, 2018). By pledging to raise defence spending and seek international assistance in military modernization, Indonesia has strengthened its economic and security partnerships with the US, China, Japan, and regional players such as Singapore (Saraginh et al., 2018). Rosyidin (2017) and Shekhar (2018) note that Indonesia's efforts to recalibrate its regional leadership status through GMF are reflective of its grand strategy ambitions.

Jokowi, unlike his predecessors, did not rise to power through military ranks or party ranks. He was, instead, recruited by his fellow entrepreneurs to run for mayor in his hometown in Central Java. Jokowi, during his presidential campaign, remarked, “I exported furniture for 24 years. I may look like someone who hails from a village, but I possess an international brain.” Contrary to his predecessors, his face of the village with an international brain represented novel models of political advancement in Indonesia.

Some scholars, such as Connelly (2014), suggest that Jokowi perceives himself as a domestic reformer, primarily and not an international statesman. Therefore, his foreign policy interests only insofar allow him to advance his domestic political agenda. His unconventional political ascent is devoid of past diplomatic practice or strong views on paradigmatic concepts of balance of power in regional security architecture. Such is reflected in his quick rejection of Yudhoyono’s ceremonious summit diplomacy to seek ‘*diplomasi membumi*’ or bringing diplomacy back to earth (Octavian, 2017). By ordering so, Indonesian diplomacy took a pragmatic turn to serve Indonesian citizens domestically and abroad in practical ways, such as marketing Indonesian products by diplomats abroad and establishing consular assistance for their overseas migrant workers (Maulana & Abadi, 2022).

At the heart of his vision for Indonesia's development is his vision of its archipelagic identity and prosperity closely linked to its insular waters. Jokowi's conviction of his nation's dignity and stability lies in its ability to defend itself from multifarious attacks to weaken its maritime ability within and outside. Such assumptions take real form in Jokowi's foreign policy rhetoric on maritime nexus and assertively defending their national sovereignty (Connelly, 2015). The same is seemingly evident in Jokowi's '*visi-misi*', translating to his vision-mission, highlighting the top issues facing the country's degradation as firstly, the failure to eradicate corruption, secondly, increasing cases of human rights abuses, thirdly, its inability to manage and mitigate social conflicts, and lastly, failure to detect sovereign or territorial threats. The promises of 'bringing back the state and commitments to 'rejecting the weak state paradigm' have also been interpreted as an inclination to strengthen the rule of law in Indonesia (Dimiyati et al., 2021).

President Jokowi appears to be pursuing an internationalist approach to building Indonesia's ties as well as his new maritime strategic doctrine. This is consistent with Indonesia's expanding foreign policy, which gained traction under his Yudhoyono. Therefore, the formalization of the same under GMF led to confidence and enthusiasm amongst many Indonesian policy practitioners and scholars (Kurlantzick, 2014; CSIS Commentary, 2019; Bland, 2019; Nauvarian & Pramudia, 2022). The commodities boom fuelled Indonesia's economic expansion, but it also reflected optimism about the country's young labour population, rising consumer demand, and investment possibilities. Indonesia's overall effectiveness with democratization in a complex, pluralistic, multi-ethnic archipelago with a Muslim majority gained international credibility (Drake, 1989, version, 2019).

To date, the clearest sign is Jokowi's strategic vision of Indonesia as a global maritime fulcrum. The objective, according to Rizal Sukma, Jokowi's top advisor on foreign policy matters, is to develop Indonesia into;

“A fulcrum, or a place where the ‘burden of the confluence of the two seas rests. Therefore, emphasizes Indonesia's geographic, geostrategic and geoeconomic realities upon which its future will depend, and simultaneously influences the dynamics in the Indian and Pacific Oceans” (Sukma, 2015).

This is especially significant given that Jokowi's maritime fulcrum vision is consistently broader in implying developmental and civilizational implications beyond the discourses on regional powers. In this regard, Jokowi's vision appears to be more in accord with the Chinese notion of a "21st century maritime silk route," which has garnered popularity in recent years. This is a broad concept supported by President Xi Jinping that underpins China's Western extension of influence by establishing economic, sociocultural, political, and strategic marine linkages from Southeast Asia to the Indian Ocean extending to the Persian Gulf (Ali & Sulistiyono, 2020).

Beyond its rhetorical flourishes, this new strategic thought serves as a rallying cry to combine numerous vital national security goals, pursue much-needed military reforms and procurements, and affirm Indonesia's expanding strategic domain. The proposal of a "global maritime fulcrum" assists Jokowi in achieving certain critical domestic objectives by improving connections among the major islands of this vast archipelago, particularly by enhancing port infrastructure. Linking these areas will improve their integration into the national economy while also assisting in the resolution of local insurgent concerns, particularly in remote regions such as the Maluku islands (Connelly, 2015).

Ultimately, strengthening marine infrastructure throughout the archipelago will improve Indonesia's capacity to maximize international trade, lower exorbitant costs of domestic commerce, combat piracy, and expand control over ocean resources such as fisheries. Jokowi has also articulated a strategic vision to mobilize local and international support for security development through this linchpin. The goal here is less to make Indonesia into a maritime powerhouse and more to guarantee that their naval and air forces are sufficiently modernized to meet threats both internally and externally and to preserve marine assets, territories, and SLOCS. The latter has become increasingly critical in light of China's aggression in South China Sea territorial disputes since 2010 (Chapsos, 2017).

The notion of a fulcrum" consolidates the growing importance of the Indian Ocean in modern Indonesian strategic thinking. Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa emphasized the need to establish stability in the Indian Ocean area by naming the region encompassed by Japan, Australia, and India as critical to Indonesia. Their idea paralleled the security focus of the 'Indo-Pacific

strategic arc,' referenced in the 2013 Australian Defense White Paper and emphasized Indonesia's geostrategic positioning between the two seas (Scott, 2019). In summary,

Figure 5:1- Indonesian Middle Power Initiatives

Indonesian Leadership in the 21st Century	Middle Power Focus	Middle Power Policy Orientation
Megawati Sukarnoputri (2001-2004)	Regionalist emphasizing on economic stability, political stability, and regional autonomy.	FDI and private investments, Free trade agreements, reorienting Indonesian foreign policy to the 21 st century to promote international cooperation and boost its global image.
Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004-2014)	Regionalist highlighting economic stability, political stability, and regional security.	Free, active, and independent foreign policy to promote Indonesian interests, values, identity, moderatism, modernity, confident, and outward-looking. Promoted Pacific Islands Forum and ASEAN +3 Strengthen bilateral, sub-regional, regional, and international organizations and their functionalities for greater economic cooperation.
Joko Widodo (2014-2024)	Mix of Regionalist and Globalist outlook	Global Maritime Fulcrum to facilitate defense cooperation with comprehensive strategic partners, military modernization, and regional security, ensuring economic expansion and investments, and enhancing maritime security to detect sovereign or territorial threats.

However, one must note that Indonesian foreign policy is not without its tensions. Much of the dictum is focused on *bebas-aktif* (independent and active), stridently serving their anti-communist and anti-imperialist tendencies fiercely undertaken by Sukarno and all his successors till present, is now therefore, a generally accepted foundation for Indonesian foreign policy (Anwar, 2019). Constraints to this phenomenon arise from the limited economic and military resource availability, consequently making Indonesian officials depend on its close ties with the US, China, and middle powers such as Australia and Japan to overcome such limitations (Campbell, 2023). Nevertheless, Indonesian policymakers, including many scholars, remain wary of attempts at coalitions due to the fear of compromising its independence and autonomy in foreign and domestic policy matters. Furthermore, Indonesian influence in world politics is largely derived from its distinctive moral authority, and a non-aligned voice could be tainted by pursuing closer ties with the competing hegemons or other partners in the region (Connelly, 2015).

5.3. INDONESIAN FOREIGN POLICY IMPERATIVES IN THE COMPLEX ERA OF COMPETING HEGEMONS

The existing literature on ‘hedging’ has little to no agreement on its definition (Goh, 2005). The validity of the same will be examined in the concluding chapters of the thesis. However, noting that these concepts are not fixed, further explaining the directions of foreign policy behaviours through hedging policy is contentious (Jürgen, 2011). About Indonesia, its foreign policy practices and regional strategies are rather puzzling to merely categorize it as hedging (Wicaksana, 2021). Indonesian policies are directed at building approaches to the complex regional order, thus indicating eclectic elements of threat, multiple domain engagements and shared polycentric leadership roles (Wicaksana, 2021). Defense Minister Ryacudu in 2015 noted that Indonesia's critical and unique positioning between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, surrounded by the sea and land domains of its ten neighbours, exposes it to security concerns (Indonesian Defence White Paper, 2015). As a result, the Indonesian government emphasizes what has transpired and continues to occur in its security and defence programs rather than speculating on future eventualities. In his words;

“Strategic environment dynamics can bring changes to a complex spectrum of threats that have implications for national defence. The complexity of threats is multi-dimensional, military, non-military, and hybrid, which can be classified as factual and non-factual. In

consequence, Indonesia's National Defence requires an integrated military and non-military approach which strives to build a strong and respected national defence with a high deterrence capability" (Indonesian Defence White Paper, 2015)

The emphasis on threat received trans-sectoral approval when the Indonesian Foreign Affairs Ministry revealed similar strategic planning concepts of the state's security environment. The defining contestations in the region, including the Sino-US rivalry, are influenced by its concepts of threat (Kim, 2015). Indonesian officials see China's military incursions into the Natuna Islands as a threat to their national sovereignty (Meyer et al., 2019). The impression is moulded not only by recent issues but also by the six-decade-long Sino-Indonesia relations, which have been beset by different political difficulties. On the contrary side, Indonesian elites are more willing to engage in security cooperation with the US and do not consider the presence of the US military in the South China Sea war zone as a threat to the region, albeit it is also not regarded as reliable to protect (Novotny, 2010). Despite fostering economic ties with both sides, Indonesian scholars such as Laksmana (2017) illustrate pragmatic equidistance in their great power management approach. It combines features of domestic and regional hedging with indirect balancing (Laksmana, 2017). To respond to the rising power's aggressive conduct, Indonesia's middle power development requires thorough internal-external hedging, which must be combined with indirect balancing. This is congruent with the image of Indonesian nationalist leaders as taking an active and independent role in the global arena (Laksmana, 2017; Wicaksana, 2021).

Will Indonesian foreign policy be inclined to pick sides between the US and China? Certainly, Indonesia's approach remains eclectic towards the rise of China, intensifying rivalry and growing regional uncertainty, leading some like Anwar (2022) to suggest a combination of realist perspectives with constructivist normative ideas, norms, values, principles such as cooperation and peaceful co-existence defining Indonesian hedging plus strategy (Anwar, 2022). Wendt (1999) posits that ideas in a constructivist strategy propel long cooperation habits, fostering peaceful change.

Indonesia's perception of itself and its ties with the world is coloured by historical experiences that occurred during or soon after Indonesia's independence in 1948. The onset of the Cold War led to the adoption of a policy that should attempt to *mendayung antara dua karang*, meaning 'row between two reefs' by the first Indonesian Vice President Hatta (Weiss, 2010). Although rivalries

continued, the end of the Cold War brought the ideological divisions to some close, subsequently improving possibilities for Indonesia to truly pursue its active and independent policy principle in an omnidirectional nexus (Smith, 2000). Yudhoyono, during his decade-long rule constantly emphasized the premise of ‘having one million friends and zero enemies’ (Piccone & Yusman, 2014). Indonesian Defense Minister in 2021 at the IISS Manama Dialogue reckoned with such principles by stating;

“There is an ancient proverb that says a thousand friends are too few; one enemy is too many. What does that mean for Indonesia? First of all, we offer respect for all powers. We recognize the interests of the US as one of the pre-eminent powers ranging across the hemispheres. But we also have stood very long by a One China policy. We recognize Beijing’s legitimate core interests, and we support and respect Beijing’s rightful place as a great world power. For us acknowledging both of these realities is not a zero-sum game. We seek understanding and cooperation with both” (Subianto, 2021).

Chinese economic modernization led to the development of close bilateral in the Sino-Indonesian partnership, blossoming rapidly, especially in the economic and financial sectors. Their signing of strategic partnership in 2005 was elevated to the status of a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2013 (Anwar, 2022). However, despite such developments, Indonesia continues to hold deep-rooted ambivalence towards China, therefore harbouring reservations in closely identified ties (Goh 2005). If not a direct threat, China is still perceived as both an opportunity and a challenge (Harlijanto, 2017; Yeremia, 2020). Chinese assertiveness in the region has raised pertinent questions on its peaceful nature, additionally also undermining ASEAN Unity through its influence on smaller yet crucial players such as Cambodia. Maritime incursions in the Natuna Islands conducted by Chinese coast guards have raised Indonesian threat perception on matters of sovereignty and territoriality (Shoji, 2020). Consistent refuting the Chinese claims of the nine-dash line as unlawful under the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS) and baseless underscores the impinges to the Indonesian exclusive economic zone (EEZ) (Marek, 2021).

The State of Southeast Asia survey conducted by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (Yusof Ishak Institute) indicates persistent trends in maintaining important economic partnerships with China (ISEAS Survey, 2021). The 2021 survey results show that 70.5 per cent of Indonesians

consider China as a crucial economic power influencing the Southeast Asian region. Comparing the same to 2020 indicates the same question measuring at 77 per cent, evidencing a decline, but however gradual in its nature. A similar decline can be observed in the measures attested to the US indicating 7.4 per cent of Indonesians regarding the US as a crucial partner, and 6.2 per cent in the furthering year. Up until 2020, the US scored fairly well in its strategic influence in the region, with close to 40 per cent of Indonesians regarding them as a crucial political and strategic partner. Gradual declines can be observed in these measures as it plummets down to 28 per cent in 2021. Similarly, growing concerns about Chinese economic influence have indicated a rise in numbers. Sixty-five per cent of Indonesians in 2021 feel mistrustful of Chinese goodwill and intention, thus growing incrementally from the previous annual measures standing at 50-60 per cent, showing signs of growing mistrust, unreliability, and dilemmas in engaging the powers (ISEAS Survey, 2021).

The intricate and delicate mix of engaging closely, in addition to the mounting concerns in Chinese behaviour, has led Jakarta, like many in the ASEAN region, to pursue hedging policies. Originally used in terms of finances, hedging in international relations theory has been used increasingly to describe strategies followed by states when definite choices such as balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality are not feasible to pursue as foreign policy imperatives (Kuik, 2021). Hedging as behaviour is situated in the middle of the choice's spectrum with balancing strategies on one end assumed on its rejection of certain power and bandwagoning on the other end based on its acceptance and acquiescence to power, subsequently manifesting limited resistance, selective engagements and partial deference to the complex nature of regional and global politics (Madeiros, 2002; Goh, 2005; Kuik, 2016, 2020; Wicaksana, 2022; Anwar, 2023). However, despite the frequent reference to hedging, it remains a contentious and widely misconstrued concept (Connelly, 2015; Lim & Cooper, 2015; Haacke, 2019). Critics of hedging behaviour refer to their passive policy as indecisive or fence-sitting, while countries in ASEAN employing such strategies describe their embedded values of neutrality, non-alignment, and equidistance (Kuik, 2021) or as foreign Minister Natalegawa referred to Indonesian choice as dynamic equilibrium (Natalegawa, 2010).

Many Southeast Asian scholars have illustrated hedging policies of the countries in the region responding to the intensifying rivalry propelled by the Chinese rise and aggressiveness. Construed

mostly as pragmatic or logical strategies, countries would incline towards hedging when faced with difficult choices. However, contentions emerge when such policies are, albeit, far from indecisiveness or passivity, Indonesians like many are pursuant to active, purposeful, and value-oriented foreign policy imperatives (Kuik, 2016; 2020; Marston & Bruce, 2020).

Economic pragmatism has undeniably driven Indonesian normalization of its relations with China since the 1990s in order to benefit from its economic modernization. The flourishing of relations, trade and tourism led to China replacing Japan as Indonesia's largest trading partner, and second-largest investor (Umagapi, 2017). Looking for Chinese investments in infrastructural projects such as building roads, railroads, bridges and power plants, Indonesia received massive funding in 2003 for its Suramadu bridge project (5438 m long bridge connecting East Java to the Islands of Madura) from a Chinese state-owned construction company, China Communication Construction Group. Indonesia also established formal bilateral and regional engagements with China (Zeeshan, 2021). At the bilateral level, as mentioned earlier, their strategic partnership in 2005 was enhanced to the level of comprehensive strategic partnership by 2013. At the regional engagement levels, Indonesia, along with other ASEAN countries, included China in various ASEAN-led multilateral regional dialogue mechanisms (Ha, 2021).

However, as part of its return maximization, Indonesia has engaged in limited bandwagoning vis-a-vis China in its foreign policy. On one hand, they have engaged with China on its ambitious infrastructural projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), expressed support for Global Development Initiative (GDI) launched by Xi in 2021, and joined the Asian Infrastructural Investment Bank for its development needs (Ao, 2019). However, on the other hand, Indonesian equivocality on the matter of the South China Sea (SCS) has displayed a strong need for patrolling its EEZs to reduce the vacuum for exploitation. Furthermore, demonstrated strong support to other claimants such as the Philippines during its Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling against China to uphold the international law of the sea. Despite the Chinese refusal to accept the ruling in this case, regional support did not go unnoticed (Simões, 2022).

For risk contingency and management, Indonesian limited balancing, both internal and external led to its sufficient deterrence capability (Arif & Kurniawan, 2017). Until the early 2000s, Indonesian defence was dominating under the New Order Government with heavily inward-

looking tendencies. However, outward-looking maritime security interests are driving weapons modernization with special attention to air and naval defences to build a 'Minimum Essential Force' in 2009. By 2021, the largest allocation of their budget was given to air (Rp. 8.1 trillion), naval (Rp. 8 trillion) and land (3.8 trillion) defences for enhancing capacity and modernizing equipment (Arif & Kurniawan, 2017). By establishing a Joint Regional Defense Command in the Natuna island region in 2019, Indonesia has displayed their determination to protect its maritime security interests, and sovereignty matters in the disputed SCS region. Furthermore, increasing Chinese Coastguards and their aggressiveness has provided Indonesia with the added impetus to secure its own '*bakamla*' or maritime agencies to become coastguards in a full-fledged manner (Sari, 2021). Nevertheless, Indonesian defence capability needs considerable improvement for sufficient deterrence.

Simultaneously, Indonesia has increasingly enhanced their joint defence cooperation with the US through joint military exercises. Indonesian and the US armies jointly carried out their largest exercise, Garuda Shield XV, involving over 3000 soldiers in August 2021 (Reuters, 2021). Garuda Shield exercises expanded the next year with the joining of Indian, French, Japanese, Australian and British forces alongside Indonesia and the US. Additionally, the US has initiated measures for the construction of maritime training centres, strategically located close to the Straits of Malacca (Nakamura, 2022). Nonetheless, Indonesia has been keen on maintaining its independent and active policy imperatives despite demonstrating limited balancing against China and developing security and defence cooperation. Coherence in Indonesian rhetoric on its free and active, non-aligned positioning has led to the denial to accept the dominance of any single actor in the region (Mitra, 2009). Indonesia in its strategic choices has for the most part avoided overdependence on any one country, especially in matters of military procurements and economic development, therefore eluding systemic pressures and embargoes by diversifying its economic and security resources (Octavian, 2017). Indonesian infrastructural development projects also invite investments from other comprehensive strategic partners in the region such as Japan, India, and Australia, in order to reduce the dominance of Chinese or American investments (Saha, 2022). Such comprehensive strategic partnership with key regional and global players serves Indonesia in maintaining its omni-enmeshments through pragmatic equidistance or dynamic equilibrium in the politic of the international system. Acharya (2018) reckons;

“But the Indonesian story suggests a different pathway to emerging power status than that of other nations. This pathway is based not so much on military and/or economic capabilities. Rather, it lies in the ability of a country to develop a positive, virtuous, correlation among three factors- democracy, development, and stability- while pursuing a foreign policy of restraint towards the neighbours and active engagement with the world at large” (Acharya, 2018, pp. 1-2).

In regional dynamics, Indonesian leadership has ensured the prominence of dynamic equilibrium politics by widening the regional East Asia Summits (EAS) to include key regional players such as New Zealand, Australia, and India in order to limit the influence of China, the US and Russia in this dialogue (Medcalf, 2019). Indonesia has promoted an inclusive regional order in the light of increasing mistrust and decreasing reliability on China and the US.

5.4. INDONESIAN MIDDLEPOWERMANSHIP IN ITS REGIONAL DYNAMICS- PROMOTING REGIONAL INCLUSIVITY

Besides its pragmatic yet normative approach vis-a-vis the major powers in the system, Indonesia's role, and status of its middlepowermanship can also be derived from its hedging plus policy towards the regional dynamics. Indonesia as the world's largest archipelago with the fourth largest population and economy that qualifies for its G20 membership are preliminary signs of its middle power identity. Shekhar (2020) notes Indonesia's great power ambitions in the region. However, many leading scholars posit their observations on Indonesian middle power status not merely through its rankings in indexes such as the Lowy Institute Asia Power Index cogently indicating Indonesia is categorized under middle power, but also by examining their behaviour, functioning and identity in the system. Debates and contentions continue with regard to middle power definitions, components of middlepowermanship primarily based on functional and behavioural models of analysis through mediation, coalition-building and norm entrepreneurship (Efsthopoulos, 2018; Walton & Wilkins, 2019). However, this research does not claim that all middle powers with middle power capabilities conduct such diplomacy or possess normative rhetoric that helps in identifying themselves as or in other nations recognizing middle powers. Despite mounting similarities in resource availability, and diplomatic pragmatism, every middle power possesses plural, normative, historical, and social elements innately at play in their national and international practices, therefore demanding nuanced, and detailed studies for a holistic

understanding of middle power politics, diplomacy, and identity in the region. Middle powers, for de Swielande (2019, pp. 21), are realized through the relations or access to major powers in addition to regional expertise and influence on smaller powers, thus operating in an up-and-down system of hierarchy. Therefore, in this regard, Indonesian ascent is observed by its political stability, normative activism, democratic institutional credentials, and its renewed economic growth. Indonesian middle power diplomacy, especially in regional dynamics is heavily pursuant of its normative strategies in promoting values and principles crucial to building strong institutional institutions (Roberts et al., 2015; Anwar, 2022). Additionally, they practice facilitator or mediator or bridge-building functions in regional and global conflicts. One can also observe the need to distinguish between the different security strategies compounding to the functionalist and behavioural middle power typologies.

“A functional strategy would be one in which the middle power targets its resources to address a specific security issue, while a normative strategy would see the middle power relying primarily on multilateralism and institutions to promote broad behavioural norms and rules, as well as all-round positive inter-state relations at the regional level” (Emmers & Teo, 2018, pp. 74).

Indonesia is generally considered as a natural leader as it is the largest country in the region greatly influencing the establishment and development of norms, principles and values within ASEAN by playing a pivotal role in promoting both multilateralism and values crucial to the prevailing international order. As its long-term objective, Indonesia is striving to ensure a truly autonomous regional order, keenly reconceptualizing the concepts such as regional security, responsibility to protect, and ZOPHAN in accordance with the changing nature of the international system and middle power politics for regional resilience (Acharya, 2018). To build such resilience and relative stability, Indonesia has been foremost in advancing norms such as *musyawarah-mufakat* or consensus-based decision-making, territorial integrity and respect for sovereignty, simultaneously stressing on values such as non-interference, regional autonomy with no foreign military presence, while promoting inclusive regional solutions for regional challenges (Nischalke, 2010; Heng 2014; Anwar, 2023).

Security Community in the ASEAN introduced by Karl Deutsch (1957), further developed by Acharya (2009), Bulling (2016) and others elucidate in several ways that ASEAN values, norms,

and principles, contributed to the ASEAN Way of seeking peaceful resolutions without the use of force. Based on such strong constructivist foundations, Indonesian middle power diplomacy encourages peaceful changes through practices of cooperation and dialogue, largely on non-sensitive matters of low politics in the region. The diverse nature of ASEAN membership policies, systems and outlooks embed its regional stability on values such as inclusivity. The original five-member ASEAN nations (Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines) expanded with the inclusion of communist states such as Vietnam and Laos during the Cold War (ASEAN, 2023). The end of the Cold War introduced new prioritizations and consolidation measures to engage all eleven members of the region, including Timor-Leste. By engaging with all the countries in the wider region, Indonesia has created relevant regional architecture through ASEAN (Anwar, 2022). Torch-bearing the Bandung spirit, Indonesia through ASEAN has espoused principles of peaceful coexistence to promote an inclusive regional order with all, old and new members (Tambunan, 2021). As ASEAN chair, President Megawati in 2003 proposed the establishment of an ASEAN Security Community (ASC), thus proving a sense of purpose amidst rising security challenges in addressing urgent needs to enhance regional security (ASEAN, 2012). Later conceptualized as ASEAN Political and Security Community emphasizes the ASEAN values of non-interference and peaceful coexistence with undertones of rule of law, and democratic institutionalism (Indonesian Foreign Ministry, 2015). The APSC 2025 blueprint envisages a safe, harmonious, secure, and tolerant society for the ASEAN people, united, resilient and inclusive to uphold fundamental principles, shared values and norms of ASEAN to effectively drive its broader regional architecture, thus additionally safeguarding its centrality in policy and rhetoric (ASEAN, 2016). In September 2020, Foreign Minister Marsudi in an interview with Reuters News Agency stated the ‘readiness of Indonesia and ASEAN to be a partner in order to evade entrapment in the intensifying rivalry’ (Allard & Widiyanto, 2020). Subsequently, expressing similar concerns at the 54th ASEAN Anniversary in August 2021, Foreign Minister Marsudi stated the importance of maintaining ASEAN centrality shaping the regional dynamics, stability, peace, unity, and resilience by taking the driving seat (ASEAN, 2021).

Lately, geostrategic, and geopolitical discussions have encompassed the wider Indo-Pacific construct to broaden the focus of the region. The idea of the Indo-Pacific is discussed as; a geographical phenomenon covering the vast areas from the Americas to Asia through the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and geo-strategically through the narrower grouping, namely the Quad with

Australia, Japan, India, and the US as its members. Reflecting on different perspectives demands cooperation and dialogue on the varied nature of the problems affecting the region. The growing polarization and concerns on the intensity of the Sino-US competition are mounting pressures on smaller and middle powers to pick sides, subsequently the possible marginalization of ASEAN centrality under the existing regional mechanisms (Antony, 2022). As a response to the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy employed by the Quad nations, the ASEAN Summit of June 2019 released the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP) emphasizing normative regional strategies to promote inclusivity, transparency and a rules-based order by promoting dialogue and cooperation on matters of connectivity, economic cooperation, supply chain diversification, public health diplomacy, maritime security, sustainable development goals, emerging digital technologies, and other areas of low politics in order to avoid the zero-sum approach to regional and international politics (Anwar, 2020).

5.5. CONCLUSION

This chapter aims at shifting the rigid nature of middle power behavioural studies with specific alternative approaches of normative security to understand the role, importance, influence, and status of middle powers such as Indonesia in the Asia-Pacific region. The widening geopolitical and geostrategic canvas invites new partners, new potentials, and new possibilities for cooperation in line with Jokowi's intentions of making Indonesia a Global Maritime Fulcrum. Ideas of 'Pragmatism, Non-alignment and Inclusivity' have historical resonance in Indonesia, from the 14th century Javanese political thought to its post-independent identity thus contributing to the Global IR studies by examining non-Western experiences in a non-Western setting.

The most recent victory of Prabowo Subianto in the general elections of Indonesia of 2024, succeeding Jokowi as the new president of Indonesia is not merely a domestic issue. It also indicates the rise of nationalist leaders in the world and can play a significant role as it seeks to emerge as one of Asia's leading powers. It will be interesting to see if a more nationalistic and hawkish leader will help Indonesia become a relevant and leading middle power contributing to global commons and a multipolar environment. The important question is- will the return of the old political elite maintain the momentum of change and continuity in their policy and implementation? Subianto administration must deliver on two important fronts- economic growth and foreign policy. His policies should maintain high growth rates. While the average growth rate

under the previous administration was around five percent, Subianto has promised to maintain a higher growth rate of about seven percent to empower and increase the middle class in their economy. Policy directions aimed at economic growth, development, and the inflow of investments are crucial in order to avoid the middle-income trap.

On the foreign policy front, Indonesia in many ways, in the last few years failed to emerge as the de facto ASEAN leader. ASEAN as a grouping is facing internal and stagnant issues, thus leading many sceptics to brand it as an ineffective grouping. Similarly, Indonesia's G20 presidency in 2022 was tainted by the Russia-Ukraine war, thereby revealing cracks in the consensus of an already divided world. This also led to a failure to produce a joint communique under their presidency. Considering these failures, Jokowi's legacy in the realm of foreign policy is mixed. During his presidential campaigns, Subianto emphasised his intentions to improve Indonesian foreign policy and leverage its leading middle power diplomacy. Additionally, his presidency is likely to be a mixed bag of continuity and change. Some of Jokowi's policies such as foreign investments in infrastructure and downstream of commodities are likely to continue especially after some controversial political manoeuvring to make Jokowi's son the vice president. Yet, some aspects can change. Subianto, unlike his predecessor, has more interest in geopolitics. As a temperamental, off-the-cuff president with a nationalistic bent, Subianto does not shy away from controversial topics. In the recent past, he proposed a peace initiative in the Russia-Ukraine war, as well as criticised the West for its ban on palm oil commodities. In an address in November 2023 at the CSIS, Indonesia, he said, 'We [Indonesia] don't really need the European Union anymore' stressing on the double standards of Western economies. At the same forum, he emphasised his foreign policy orientation directed through good neighbour policy and regional economic prosperity.

Under the new administration, new opportunities for intensive ties between Indonesia and the US are likely to emerge in several sectors ranging from semiconductors, cyber, space, economy, and defence. However, it is not without its challenges. A nationalistic leader who was previously banned from visiting the US due to human rights violations can complicate ties with the US and its allies. Additionally, economic dependence on China complicates its strategic relations with the US. While this may lead many to speculate that Indonesia is a swing state amid the US-China strategic competition, the new administration will engage both powers to maximize benefits for its

national interests. Once a fierce critic of China in the past, he has stressed on the need to maintain good relations with all, including China. China is Indonesia's largest trading partner, largest investment partner, and a key participant of the BRI for large infrastructural projects. Due to the intense economic ties, many believe that the relationship is not likely to experience dramatic shifts. However, one can expect Subianto and his administration to be more vocal on sensitive issues such as violations of sovereignty in the SCS, pollution, and worker safety issues in Chinese investments. Subianto Administration, therefore, is likely to focus on economic growth, but become more pragmatic and vocal in matters of geopolitics and foreign policy. For this, Jakarta must reduce its economic dependence on China and instead diversify its ties for enhanced cooperation amongst its regional and global partners. Indonesia's strategic location and proactive middle power diplomacy would not only benefit Southeast Asia but also other regions across the world.

Indonesian success in maintaining its assembling role in establishing the ASEAN Way of building consensus in decision making, informality in approach, flexibility in operational institutionalism, centrality to ensure regional solutions for regional issues, as well as reaffirming rules-based democratic order has concordantly furthered Indonesian middle power identity, status, and overall influence. Indonesian response of embracing tensions instead of avoiding them is demonstrated across its forums, from global G20 to regional ASEAN multilateralism.

'Today's era must not be of war' by the Indian Prime Minister, Modi mediated the G20 Bali communique, thus pursuing various paths for peace through normative pluralism in Indonesia's language. Besides merely the size, geo-strategic location, economy, population and other metric indicators, the nature of Indonesian politics lingers around their history of ideas as a nation exercising tolerance, moderation, unity in diversity, and active and independent politics. Emerging pluralism is undeniably driving Indonesian strategic, economic, political, and social dynamics, highlighting enhanced middlepowermanship as a need to tackle the challenges of the 21st century.

CHAPTER- 6

ROK OR SOUTH KOREA'S MIDDLEPOWERMANSHIP NARRATIVES: RECALIBRATING PRINCIPLED DIPLOMACY BY REVISITING KOREAN DISCOURSES

6.1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of middle power gained prominence as a framework for the Republic of Korea (ROK) or South Korean (henceforth Korea) foreign policy objectives and strategy under successive governments in the 21st century (Kim, 2016). However, the middle power imaginings, intentions and narrative emphasis in their discourses are varied in nature. The basic understanding in such discourses on middle power assesses its foreign policy behaviour and its aspirations to influence global affairs (Cooper, 2011). Emanating from its growing confidence, aspirations for an enhanced international status, economic growth, and success, Seoul seeks middle power approaches to differentiate itself from other powers in the international system (Mo, 2016).

As an advanced nation in the post-Cold War period, Korea articulated its policy position through middle power conceptual underpinnings to legitimize its proactive diplomacy. Attributing such a status has described its diplomatic behaviour as a hub, a balancer, or a hedger, but most certainly, a middle power (Bradford et al., 2015). Rhetorically, such initiatives have reflected the policy discourses of all the consecutive governments in the 21st century, Roh Moo-Hyun (2003-08), Lee Myung-Bak (2008- 13), Park Geun-Hye (2013-17), Moon Jae-In (2017-22), and Yoon Suk Yeol (2022-present) (Bradford et al., 2015; Kim, 2016).

As a nation sandwiched between a giant China and an influential Japan, ROK was traditionally overlooked in discourses of power and influence in the Asia-Pacific as traditional middle powers such as Australia, and Canada commonly received attention to its middle power tendencies (Teo et al., 2013). However, Korea's emerging importance in recent years has shaped the evolving security architecture of East Asian politics. An advanced economy influencing several niche innovations in areas like trade, foreign aid, investments, tourism, and technology has played a pivotal role in managing traditional and non-traditional security challenges affecting the politics of East Asia and the larger Asia-Pacific region. ROK's security alliance with the US anchors military cooperation, modernization, and security in the region (Khanna, 2020). Therefore,

observing several domestic, regional, and international factors influencing Seoul's reputation has led many scholars to consider the middle power status of Korean diplomacy by classifying it with other countries such as Australia, Indonesia, and Malaysia (Lee, 2012; Ban, 2020; Botto, 2021; Lee, 2022).

Seoul's middle power identity charts its foreign policy strategies in the global arena since the early 1990s when Holsti described strong directions in Korean foreign policy derived through its 'national role conception' (Hermann, 2013, pp. 56; Robertson, 2013). Such studies emerged through an upsurge in medium or middle powers, established and emerging, seeking greater institutional impact through proactive diplomatic efforts at influencing multilateral solutions. Nevertheless, ROK's policy discourses expanded as the security environment deteriorated at a regional level (Sohn, 2016). Despite success in indicators such as influence and national power, Seoul's Northeast Asian security concerns lingered over a nuclear Democratic People's Republic of North Korea (DPRK) or North Korea, a growing China, and Japanese strategic assertiveness (Kim & Cha, 2016). ROK's global aspirations have flourished in spite of mounting challenges at the regional level. One may consider the contrary. Finite resources and the unstable nature of regional affairs can lead to less global aspirations. Nevertheless, their deepened participation, and entrepreneurial leadership on concrete issues such as defence, economic integration, communications and emerging technologies, further attracted international support to tackle continual challenges impacting the region and the nation, such as managing/facilitating the unification of the Korean Peninsula in the future (Noland, 2000; ESCAP, 2017, Aum et al., 2020).

Armstrong-Williams (2017) notes Korean middle power imagery consequently reflected in Former Foreign Minister Hong Soon-Young's speech asserting, Korea must stand as an Asian and a middle power with a clear sense of potential, limitations and opportunities of middlepowermanship considering their strategic location between powerful nations, thereby additionally emphasizing the challenges to the regional and global order in the 21st century. Kim Sung-han (2013), Former Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, furthermore, indicated the 'complexity' in the state of international relations necessitating 'a more proactive role' of middle powers like Korea in the international system.

The 21st century, especially the period after the 2007-08 financial crisis, shaped a paradigm shift in Korean foreign policy discourses. The shifting outlook featured an underlying emphasis on a

Global Korea, referring to assimilating their growing interest to its openness, and enterprising spirit on the global stage. Since the strategic vision laid by Korean President, Lee Myung-bak, they have proven activism and enthusiasm in seizing opportunities that assist in improving their national, regional, and international influence (Snyder, 2008; Laurence, 2010). The Global Korean strategy reveals the underlying *junggyun guk* middle power roles in defining its policies *junggyun-guk aegyo* or middle power diplomacy (Shin-wha, 2015).

6.2. ROK OR SOUTH KOREAN MIDDLE POWER RHETORIC

Korean middle power imaginings were realized by self-identifying status to justify and understand their greater involvement at the global level since the early 1990s when policymakers such as President Roh Tae-woo described the Korean middle power identity to underscore its aspirations of global status. History is witness to Korean humiliation under Japanese imperialism and its alliance politics in post-independence great power rivalry, thus, creating an impetus for growing middle power identity has proven prominent in their thinking to achieve international status and clout (Robertson, 2013, Karim, 2018; Ayhan, 2019)).

Such rhetoric gained traction in the subsequent governments of the late 1990s under President Kim Dae-jung seeking to enhance Korean regional engagement following their economic success in recovering from the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 (Cha, 2000; Baker, 2014). In order to build regional influence, he proposed the institutionalizing of the East Asian cooperation process with the establishment of the East Asian Vision Group in 1998 and ASEAN plus three meetings. Fundamental emphasis of the presidency was directed at regional politics visible in the initiation of the Sunshine Policy towards accommodating North Korea in its foreign policy (Severino, 1999; Solingen, 2004). Continuing to pursue seeking middle power status in their policy objectives, Roh Moo-hyun Presidency paid closer attention to playing enhanced roles in regional politics (Robertson, 2012; Sohn, 2016). Viewed in most aspects as a continuation of the middle power visions of the previous administration, Kim's presidency stressed on building regional narratives espousing 'East Asian Regionalism', while in deviation, Roh's presidency narrowed the scope of regional issues to address the rising political and security issues driven by crucial underlying factors- A re-militarization of Japan, nuclear North Korea and an uncertain rising China (Chun, 2014; Sohn, 2016; Tylec, 2016). Therefore, a need for an enhanced regional focus is prominent in their articulations of *gyunhyungja-ron* or regional balancer premised to ensure South Korean

regionality in the economics and politics of Northeast Asia. Such objectives additionally necessitated the need to seek greater autonomy from the US and strengthen relations with China (Sheen, 2008). Such political debates were also fuelled by diffusion and decentralization in the Korean governmental structures thus resulting in democratization and the rise of interest groups established to address the grievances due to the US-ROK alliances (Cho & Park, 2013; Pollack, 2016).

ROK or South Korea, furthermore, adopted bridge-building roles and behaviours to mediate strategic distrust over the North Korean nuclear problem and a rising China in the region (Cho, 2015). South Korea's long history of alliance with the US is embraced as one of their faithful allies by taking less revisionist positions in the US-led international order (Cha, 2009). However, the adoption of regional balancing through bridge-building roles was considered a departure from the all-embracing hub and spoke systems. Therefore, such enactments in its foreign policy agenda were unsettling for the US. South Korea's refusal to join the Proliferation Security Initiative, led by the US for missile defence systems clear indication of the ongoing departure and strategic ambiguity (Yoo, 2012). Given such role enactment is incompatible with their historical alliances, such middle power imaginings have also raised contentions both internationally and domestically as the opposition, Grand National Party contend that such behaviours would jeopardize its alliance network with the US.

Unlike neutral countries in the region, sceptics posit ROK or South Korea's role as a regional balancer lacks impetus (Moon, 2015; Kim 2016). The US does not appreciate the enactment of such behaviours in the Korean foreign policy agenda considering that they assess the changes as not merely a departure from strong alliance networks, but also as a move in the direction to develop better and closer ties with China (Sohn, 2016). Given these contestations both domestically and internationally, the successive government under President Lee Myung-bak preferred the undertones and enactments of responsible middle power roles in the global geopolitical arena (Kim, 2016; Ayhan, 2019). In advancing their middle power rhetoric, President Lee, at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in 2009 stated, "We are striving to become a Global Korea by harmonizing our interest with others and making our well-being also contribute to the prosperity of humanity" (Myung-bak, 2009). Additionally, their focus on global engagements to reduce conflicts took greater shape during their G20 presidency in 2010. Korea was host to a series of

global initiatives; G20 leaders meeting in 2010, Fourth-High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in 2011, and the Nuclear Security Summit in 2012, thereby emphasizing the need to reduce conflicts to ensure regional and global stability (Ali, 2011).

Their formulation of the national security strategy underscored security interests and challenges consistent with efforts to ‘forge and disseminate consensus on freedom and democracy, humanitarian values and market economy’ by the global communities (Lee, 2016). His experiences and background as a businessman, therefore reflected in his ideas to network with global leadership, thus emphasizing his creative pragmatism. In the interest of upholding the liberal-international order, he insisted on a shared need to address the diverse functional challenges, for example, environmental issues, nuclear proliferation, economic downfalls, and extreme nationalism among others, thus grappling with complex global challenges (Mo, 2016). Lee embraced the narratives of giving back to the international community, acknowledging the assistance Korea received in the aftermath of the Korean War, hence, by espousing a sense of duty and pride in their national achievements, his notion of contributing diplomacy set Korea on the course of a leading responsible nation of the liberal international order (Lee, 2012).

Park Geun-hye's succession to the office at a crucial time in 2012 fuels her assessment of Korea's security environment in what she described as ‘Asia's Paradox (Brazinsky, 2013; Snyder, 2018, pp. 19, 170-172). Such a paradox in Korean theory underlined the underlying cracks and vulnerabilities in economic growth emphasized by; a lacking of trust-based institutionalism, territorial, prospects setting of arms races in Northeast Asia, and Japan's inability to reckon with its imperialist history (Liao, 2014). Despite identifying crucial problems, reaching effective and conclusive solutions seemed frustrating. Regional rivalries and the Chinese aggressiveness under Xi rapidly contributed to the deteriorating security architecture, ultimately causing obstacles in deliberating and implementing effective solutions (Lee, 2016). However, her political scandal in 2016 due to coerciveness and abuse of power extended a political paralysis in domestic politics, further leading to her impeachment. These domestic uncertainties and weak leadership undermined Korea's capacity to further its global influence in maintaining the liberal international order (Doucette, 2017).

Park's administration endured significant challenges in addressing the central issues under Asia's Paradox (Snyder, 2018, pp. 178-187). Each of these issues required unique and creative diplomacy

in order to achieve progress. Additionally, their willingness to cooperate on their terms of taking responsibility reflected principled approaches to conducting foreign policy despite overconfidence in their ability to influence regional affairs. Engaging in trust-based relationships with a nuclear North Korea, seeking Japanese historical responsibility for the grand reconciliation of history between Japan, China, and Korea (Stanzel, 2017). In the Diplomatic White Papers, measures were initiated to tackle the paradox, and additionally, further Korean security objectives to maintain peace and stability in the region's architecture (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015). Trustpolitik, applicable generally in the international system, and specifically to North Korea, Eurasia Initiative seeking to expand energy cooperation by building transit networks, and finally, Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation to enmesh and integrate North Korea into the Northeast Asian economic frameworks (Taehwan, 2015). Her pursuit of improving relations with Beijing is a sign of leverage on deepening ties with North Korea, however, also maintained their firm roots in expanding the US-ROK alliance. Failures to successfully address these challenges, even more so, the administration's historical reconciliation with Japan on the issue of comfort women (used as sex slaves during Japanese imperialism) also resulted in scandals, and further her impeachment in March 2017 (Wong, 2020).

The human rights lawyer and politician, Moon Jae-in rose to presidential power in 2017 and soon after declared his optimism by moving his office from Cheong Wa Dae (Blue House) to *Gwanghwamun*, a district in Seoul to symbolize a cleaner era of politics (Lee, 2022). He said, "I will get rid of the authoritarian culture of past leaders and will start a new era of the *Gwanghwamun* president" (Khatouki, 2021). Despite the initial optimism, his presidency witnessed a complex assemblage of relative successes and failures in battling global issues, pandemic, and regional issues, such as North Korea (Botto, 2021).

The surge of enthusiasm and optimism was intended for a scandal-free period. However, the entire administration was brought to scrutiny during Justice Minister, Cho Guk's alleged abuse of power and other revelations of probing over ninety politicians, including members of the ruling Democratic Party, over illegal real estate transactions (Shin & Park, 2023). This surely does not indicate a plague of personal corruption in his presidency, especially considering the enactment of institutional reforms to steadily improve transparency and accountability in Korean conglomerates. Successfully implementing progressive policies such as decreasing the minimum

weekly hours, increasing minimum wages, reducing bureaucratic delays and others have certainly called for relative success, therefore regarding his democratic legacy has proven mixed in results at best (Botto, 2021, Downer et al., 2022). Moon Jae-in, additionally grappled with the immense health, economic, social, and political challenges due to the pandemic. Despite creative measures such as a medical phone booth to reduce the spread of the virus, slow rollout of vaccines, slowing of the economy, and lack of government support to small business owners fuelled the mixed results of his presidency (Snyder, 2020). A multi-billion-dollar New Deal policies; Green New Deal and Digital New Deal, contributes to his economic policy of increasing investments and human resources, thus eventually expanding their social safety net. The proposed \$135 billion brought expansion and investments in green technologies such as smart grids, wind turbines, solar panels, and electric vehicles (Feffer, 2021; Pardo, 2022).

Moon Jae-in's reconciliation process with North Korea began at a provocative time determined by North Korean weapon tests, and the US dispatch of a US Navy Carrier Group, under President Trump in response to these tests in the region. Trump additionally took a threatening stance of 'fire and fury' with a 'big red button' as mentioned by him on Twitter against Kim Jong-Un's nuclear weapons enhancement and testing programs (Lee & Botto, 2018; Campbell, 2021; Khatouki, 2022). Amidst such dire and testing events, Moon Jae-in sought reconciliation to the most visible extent in the Korean peninsula, therefore indicating the most decline in tensions since the end of the War. Beginning with an invitation to the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympics, Moon Jae-in's pursuit to embolden peace was followed by a series of talks, and summits ramping up diplomacy. However, as tensions began to escalate again in 2022, North Korea continued express displeasure with US-ROK military exercises in the peninsula as the paramount reason amongst others for the increase in power projections. Moon Jae-in's efforts to push for reconciliation and his legacy of maintaining peace in the regional order remain mixed in results (Levkowitz, 2017; Oh, 2022).

Yoon Suk-yeol, with a background in Law, rose to ranks from the Prosecutor General to become the 13th South Korean president in May 2022 with a determination to transform Korea into a pivotal middle power (Cho & Callahan, 2022; Pardo, 2022; Snyder, 2022; Kim, 2022). In his first speech in September 2022 at the UN General Assembly, he elucidated the call for action from middle powers such as ROK or South Korea in forging stepped-up, active cooperation and advocating enhanced multilateral efforts to address global concerns (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). By

identifying crucial global challenges to international peace and security such as health, climate, wars of aggression, increasing risks of nuclear weapons, and the endangerment of human rights, he advocated for collective action and solidarity in response to such growing issues (Snyder, 2022; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). Yoon Suk-yeol's leadership at the UN additionally displayed the growing resources capacity of Korea to bolster and safeguard existing norms and active political leadership to bring to the international table. Professor Park Cheol-hee, Seoul National University and a close aide of the newest president remarked that Korea is in an influential period and possesses smart statesmanship to put principles, ideas and actions to the test in order to win international respect and national confidence (Kan, 2022). Despite the rhetoric of multilateralism and collective action, he additionally faces growing Chinese and North Korean assertiveness, implications of the Ukraine war on food and energy security, economic slowdown due to the pandemic, and strategic ambiguity towards the intensifying US-China competition in the Asia-Pacific neighbourhood (Timmer, 2023).

Evident also from the above foreign policy focus and comparisons are the underlying ideological differences between the conservatives and the liberals in their approaches to regional and global Korea (see also, Kim, 2021). Liberal Presidents, Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, and Moon Jae-in shaped their foreign policy focus at regional levels by pursuing Sunshine Policy, Prosperity for Northeast Asia, and roles such as mediator in the North Korean nuclear problem. On the other hand, conservative governments led by Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye pursued key policies impacting the Korean image in a global environment. Although the regional focus was prevalent in dealing with nuclear security and green growth, the larger emphasis placed on the middle power narratives was set on global issues. However, given the variance in its active middle power diplomacy in a wide range of domains, a vital criticism in their rhetoric is the lack of a clear blueprint in the usage of this terminology. Middle power rhetoric has been abundantly associated as an accessory or a modifier in a broad range of their activities.

In summary;

Figure 6:1- South Korean Middle Power Narratives

21ST CENTURY PRESIDENTS	FOCUS OF MIDDLE POWER NARRATIVES	DISPLAY OF MIDDLE POWER POLICY NARRATIVES
KIM DAE-JUNG (1998-2003)	Regional Peace	Sunshine Policy and UN Peacekeeping
ROH MOO-HYUN (2003-08)	Regional peace and prosperity	Peace and Prosperity in Northeast Asia, Support for the US in Iraq
LEE MYUNG-BAK (2008-13)	International development, Issue-specific initiatives	Free-Trade Agreements, Official Development Assistance (ODA), Nuclear Security and Green Growth
PARK GEUN-HYE (2013-17)	International engagement, Issue-specific memberships	Mexico, Indonesia, Korea, Turkey, and Australia (MIKTA Grouping), ODA, The Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI)
MOON JAE-IN (2017-22)	Regional reconciliation, international investments, issue-specific participation	Northeast Asia Plus Community of Responsibility (NAPCOR), Minilateral summits, Green New Deal
YOON SUK-YEOL (2022-PRESENT)	International, multilateral, solidarity-based action	Commercial Diplomacy for strategic and defence products such as nuclear powers and arms manufacturing with the Middle East and Europe, so far.

(See also, Kim, 2021)

6.3. RECALIBRATING PRINCIPLED DIPLOMACY

Strategic Ambiguity in Korean discourses signifies the complexity in navigating relations with the US, a vital ally, and China, the largest trade partner with high adversarial risks. The bifurcated strategy in seeking US security gains and cooperation with China on trade presents new realities for allies such as ROK or South Korea (Kim, 2022). The increasing Chinese aggression in the region, and the Trump administration's undermining of the liberal international multilateral order made such to the fore, Korean middle power interests as the rivalry grows more competitive, intensive, intertwined, and confrontational (Cha, 2019). This, therefore, presents rational reasonings in the Korean pursuit of strategic ambiguity. Concerns for many scholars include the lack of resolution in return from this ambiguity, additionally the undermining of liberal international order by excluding China in their criticisms (Shin, 2012, Shin, 2015; Alexandroff & Cooper, 2010). Given the wariness of such an ambiguous stance, many expect clarity in its position. Such wariness accumulates to vulnerability in the South Korean stance, making it a potential weak link in the US-ROK alliance (Whyte, 2015; Pinkston & Work, 2015). To tackle such ambiguous discourse, principled diplomatic rhetoric can help sustain Korean middlepowermanship in the foreseeable future (Lee, 2016; Mo, 2017; Kim, 2021).

Principled middle power advocates roles and duties in accordance with values and a set of principles guiding its diplomacy in upholding the liberal international order. In the Korean diplomatic discourse, describing ROK or South Korea as a middle power has frequent mentions. It has been described as a geographical 'middle' situated in the middle of two areas, namely Asia and America, as well as found increasing mentions through roles such as bridge-builders between the developed and the developing world, especially in international organizations (Sohn, 2015; Kim 2021). However, given the limitations of strategic ambiguity and inconsistency in ideological positions in the past and present administrations, principled middle power diplomacy is preferable to fill the gaps of ambiguity (Goddard, 2009; Kim 2014; Heo, 2020; Kim 2021). Principle diplomacy allows greater agency and provides some predictability in its behaviour, identity, and position. Principles embedded as philosophical foundations would thereby recognize greater policy consistency, as part of the Korean middle power narrative from successive administrations, irrespective of party politics (Sohn, 2015; Kim, 2016; Roberson, 2019; Kim 2021).

Principled middle power diplomacy in Korea can be reinforced by some through a recommitment to multilateral institutionalism. In times of great power tensions, multilateral frameworks prevent the risks of losing diplomatic manoeuvring by enhancing the importance of middle powers in upholding liberal international norms such as free trade, human rights, and the rule of law (Lee, 2012; Shin-wha, 2015; Kim, 2015). Multilateralism, additionally, allows for greater active participation to deepen relations and diversify niche diplomacy. The advantages of multilateral network approaches have been discussed by several academics. The intertwined state relations in multilateral order facilitate coalition-building processes and multi-nodal networks improves their positionality to perform brokerage diplomacy (Derviş, 2020; Tyler, 2022). ROK or South Korea is, in fact, well-networked through a series of institutional frameworks at regional, issue-specific, and international levels with relations stretching to central Asia, the European Union and Pacific Island nations. Such discourses encourage expansion through MIKTA-plus or Quad-plus for Korea to improve their middle power status through valuable contributions (Kim, 2021; Cannon & Rossiter, 2022; Mantong & Kharisma 2022).

Amidst such literature, middle power references in Korean diplomacy lack consistency in the various administrations, approaches, and their ideologies. The narratives of diplomacy built by Korea blur fundamental differences in the approaches adopted by Western middle power identity and roles; therefore, many remain sceptical of the utility of the concept lacking traditional Western-middle power rhetoric highlighting Korean uniqueness and adaptation of such concepts, indicating a crucial gap in academic research. Western middle powers such as Canada, Norway, Australia, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, and others are attributed with typical, Western middle power characteristics that tend to employ mediation, bridging, and conciliatory strategies between small and great powers (Jordaan, 2003). In such actions, these middle powers as altruistic foreign aid donors act with moral and ethical considerations to promote the liberal institutional order of peace and stability (Beeson, 2011). Korean middle power rhetoric follows parallel with the Western models of middle power analysis through networked, multilateral, role-based diplomacy (Ayhan, 2019; Ban, 2020). Nevertheless, considering the complexity of regional dynamics in the Korean peninsula and Northeast Asia, middle power references in Korean discourse lacked focus on regional issues such as the nationalist rivalries or North Korean nuclear weapons program and testing (Town & Ragnone, 2022; Edmonston, 2022). Additionally, operating on Western concepts seems inadequate in the context of Korean history, culture, society, business, and polity. Some

scholars such as Shin (2015) attempted a working definition to describe elusive Korean middlepowermanship in determining their status and influence by seeking theoretical clarity, but actual policy narratives under such a lens lack conceptual, analytical, and sophisticated rigour.

Moreover, the proliferation of novel yet short-lived catchphrases and strategic vision have caused tumultuous confusion, scepticism, and fatigue in analytical discussions. Successive leaders have been reluctant to advance the past and existing initiatives, and in addition, seek novel concepts with hopes to improve influence and carve a new legacy (see also, Kim, 2021). Such hopes are detrimental to states with limited diplomatic capacity pressured to generate new documents and measures unique to the administration. Employing new concepts every five years is expensive and inconvenient, considering the limited time for these new initiatives to take effect. It is, indeed, critical for policymakers to build coherence and consistency in the policies of various successive governments.

The hierarchical model of analysis in Korean middlepowermanship is heavily restricted to the context of the hub-and-spoke model and constraints of power vis-a-vis stronger and influential regional powers. Therefore, a fluid, flexible, identity-based middle power narrative can manoeuvre entrapments and strategic dilemmas in testing times of intensifying rivalry and mistrust (Kim, 2014; Milani, Fiori & Dian, 2019; Kim, 2021).

The emphasis and rhetoric of middlepowermanship are necessary. Yet, in order to address the shortcomings of Western influence on Korean discourse, they could additionally consider creative or constructive or cultured diplomatic roles to effectively utilize its soft power potential and resources (Hjalmarsson, 2013; CSIS Korea Chair Conference, 2021; Kim, 2022). Korea continues to emphasize military and economics in its middle power narratives. However, these approaches are inconsistent as governments change in Korea (Park, 2011; Lee, 2020; Kim, 2021), therefore, to address the inconsistencies, Korea could shift to a doctrine-based strategy by establishing principled and value-based diplomacy by incorporating identity, culture, and uniqueness in the indigenous problems. Despite limitations and criticisms of its strategic ambiguity in managing hegemonic tensions and rivalries, embracing such ambiguity in the policy rhetoric can serve as a viable strategy (Koga, 2017; Nilsson-Wright & Jie, 2021; Work, 2022). However, there is a need for careful introspection in their principles, implications of power competition, and addressing limits of its strategic flexibility to premise the advantages of ambiguity and flexibility. Kim (2016)

in her Chatham House publication finds from her interviewee, ‘ambiguity can be considered as a strategy given the fluid regional dynamics, therefore in such instances, declaring its stances can cause troubles’ (Kim, 2016).

The recalibration of Korean middle power political discourse is not without constraints. Inter-Korean problems and deadlocks in the reunification process have limited their diplomatic space, consequently causing hindrances in the implementation of meaningful, effective, principled middle power diplomacy (O’Neil, 2015; Lee & Teo, 2022). Additionally, these reunification talks must consider the political ramifications of conservatives perceiving the economically disadvantaged North Korea as a threat to its survival, and so must pursue talks unilaterally (Goodby, 2003; Ho, 2014; Lee, 2020). Unilateral talks are short-lived and inconsequential for peace. Therefore, by adopting a carefully mandated, systemic and cautious strategic approach, it is imperative to accelerate these talks to ameliorate inter-Korean relations.

6.4. RETHINKING KOREAN DISCOURSE

Constructivist IR debates grasp the essence and intersubjective nature of Asia-Pacific politics by emphasizing identity, nationalism, values, norms, and roles in order to comprehend national foreign policy (Busse, 1999). Consider South Korean behaviour in comparison to North Korea and Japan. Despite the direct threat of nuclear weapons from North Korea, South Koreans react more aggressively and firmly to Japanese history books than to North Korea's nuclear weapons program (Sneider, 2022; 2023). This may appear perplexing, as one can argue that reducing such programs will necessitate concerted and coordinated efforts by regional states, including Japan. Existing IR paradigms, particularly constructivism, can provide explanatory drivers for shifting the analytical focus from material interests and power politics to identity politics. However, since the constructivist school's theoretical perspectives are inferred from Western philosophies, history, and knowledge, they lack key explanations on when, how, and in what ways national identities influenced policy actions (Eun, 2020; Buzan, 2020).

As a result, indigenous knowledge derived from local histories of ideas contributes to a better understanding of constructivism in IR (Eun, 2020; Qin, 2020). Using the same example, indigenous discourses can demonstrate the Japanese as the ‘immutable other’ longstanding perspectives. Since the early twentieth century, ‘the ideas of Japan's othering have built social coherence and national solidarity among South Koreans. Such perceptions persist in post-colonial

Korean societies, as Japan remains a political object to which South Koreans collectively attach negative emotional bonds. During the Korean War, the two Koreas developed starkly different political identities, influenced by a variety of factors. However, ethnic identity remains the most fundamentally rigid of almost all of the political and strategic variables influencing its foreign policy. South Korea preserves strong mythic and historical notions of the Korean nation (Kim, 2016; Eun 2019; 2020). Race, ethnicity, and identity are frequently used interchangeably in Korean discourse. In this regard, the governments of North and South Korea regard the division as a temporary circumstance, and thus continue to emphasize the importance of reunification as a critical step towards nation-state building (Eun, 2022). Despite their political leanings, both governments' policy discourses have frequently elicited Korean terminologies such as '*han minjok*' or '*danil minjok*,' which translates to 'a nation of one clan' (Eun, 2016; 2020) In this light, South Korean behaviour towards the Japanese is thus justified through discourses of national identity, providing an overall understanding to constructivism with plural constitutive elements while also contributing to indigenous discourses of polity and foreign affairs. Step by step; knowledge about historical experiences influencing the history and continuity of ideas can be securitized as an effective policy through rhetorical speech acts demonstrating culture, principles, and historical legacy in foreign policy. Such knowledge is necessary to examine the various facets constituting national identities and to establish rigidity-flexibility of the same.

In the case of ROK or South Korea, these national identities, the political ideologies, and its location, along with many other factors contribute to social cohesion and building solidarity in the nation, thereby distinctively polishing notions of 'us' and 'them.' National identities in Korea have aspects of superiority derived from the bitter traumatic experiences of colonialism, imperialism, and war; distinguishable characteristics of 'self' and 'other' are crucial for national identity, discourse, solidarity and dialogue (Dae-Gyeong, 2010; Koudela, 2015; Eun, 2016; Draudt, 2017; Eun, 2020; 2022). Korean discourses, with principled, indigenous, and locally contexted narrative building provide foundational consistency and distinctiveness in its middle power rhetoric.

6.5. CONCLUSION

The region remains volatile. Intensive rivalries, strategic mistrust, and dependencies for critical sectors on the US and China have put Korea in a strategic ambiguity. Indeed, strategic ambiguity can be a viable strategy to fluctuate and maintain vested interests in competing adversaries. Many

are quick to dismiss ambiguity as diplomatic posturing. However, in the case of Korea, policymakers must be cautious and careful in wording their policies and slogans. Furthermore, the US-ROK alliance will succumb to shortcomings as a weak link. Therefore, establishing principled middle power rhetoric; advocating multilateralism and upholding the rules-based liberal international order seems preferable to carry out active roles of mediation, facilitation, bridge-building and norm enforcement. Shared overlapping of roles and responsibilities in maintaining the liberal international order would draw closer cooperation between the US and South Korea, therefore, strengthening the US-ROK alliance. This is, in fact, partially convincing.

Korean middle power diplomacy is a search for novel conceptual breakthroughs by different administrations to increase their regional and global proactiveness. Several policymakers debated the regional and global Korea as middle power conceptual underpinning, however falling short to inconsistencies and ideological differences in the rhetoric of successive administrations, therefore lacking far-sightedness, durability, and distinctiveness in their approaches.

Missing also in the existing and emerging literature is the need to reevaluate the Korean middle power rhetoric and discourse bearing greater similarity with the Western middle power debates. As many scholars have posited the need to investigate indigenous historical-cultural perspectives leaves less scope for misinterpretation in foreign policy narratives. Hence, calling for an inclusive, broader, and holistic understanding of Korean discourse, distinguishable experiences invoke self and other, consequently bringing distinctiveness in its foreign policy rhetoric and solidarity in its national role conception. Such recalibrations allow Seoul greater agency to respond to developments, irrespective of longevity, intensity or regionality in order to re-emphasize its regional/global middle power scholarship.

CHAPTER-7

THE VIETNAM WAY: NAVIGATING POWER AND IDENTITY IN THEIR FOREIGN POLICY DISCOURSE

7.1. INTRODUCTION

Vietnam emerged as an important actor in the recent decades of the 21st century middle power imaginings. Situated strategically in the Asia-Pacific region, it is home to 97 million people with an emerging, promising economy with an average annual economic growth rate of 7 per cent, thereby becoming a hub for new markets (Ahn, 2010). Since the late 1980s, Vietnam adopted the '*Doi Moi*' or renovation as a policy primarily an economic policy but however is aimed to pursue a constructive and active foreign policy directive at diverse and multilateral levels with their neighbours and other external powers (Dosch & Tuan, 2004). In seeking deeper international engagement and economic integration, Vietnam grew from once considered a pariah state to endeavour a greater political role in order to engage the international community and build a peaceful, prosperous, and stable regional order (Hiep, 2012).

Such a policy served as a crucial tool for the Communist Party in Vietnam (CPV) to implement domestic reforms of which foreign policy is considered as an extension to the domestic agenda (Thu, 2018). The party has consistently pursued engagements and external relations with domestic agendas such as prosperity, enhancing national security, and ultimately enforcing and strengthening the party's rule (Hiep, 2018). Therefore, to understand Vietnamese foreign policy, it is also crucial to examine the effectiveness and transformations of Vietnam's *Doi Moi* Policy since its adoption.

7.2. VIETNAMESE FOREIGN POLICY- AN EVOLUTION

The long and fascinating history of Vietnam suggests rich traditions of legends, determination, and adaptation. Primarily construed through the struggles for national independence and preservation of freedoms, their history is vast with rulers dating back to four thousand years ago (Salemick, 2001). The state of Vietnam, initially Van Lang, was ruled by the Hung Kings, more than four thousand years ago. Long under direct Chinese rule, the 938 AD battle of Bach Dang victory against the southern Chinese Han paved paths for an independent feudal state of Vietnam (Vuong,

2011). For much of history until 1858, Vietnam functioned under various dynasties, with wars and skirmishes with China in periods in several periods, including a twenty-year war in 1407-1427 (Womack, 2006). French Naval forces in 1858 began to change from feudal structures to semi-feudal structures under the pretext of a protectorate system (Woodruff, 2002). Despite various efforts to resist French rule, the Japanese coup d'état for the establishment of new bases helped oust the French by 1940 (Smith, 1978). The August Revolution or '*Tổng khởi-nghĩa giành chính-quyền tháng Tám*' translating to the total uprising to seize power in August 1945 enabled the Vietnamese to mobilize support to expel all foreign invaders, thereby declaring its independence by September the same year (Minh, 1973).

Foreign Policy in Vietnam evolved through several different phases that correspond to the development and challenges in their domestic conditions (Vuving, 2023). Foreign policy objectives in Vietnam reflects domestic goals. Since the declaration of independence in 1945, initial foreign policy objectives for Vietnam included seeking diplomatic recognition and preventing France from re-colonizing the country (Yun, 2019). Additionally, during the French Indochina Wars initially against France till 1954 and later with the US till 1975, Vietnamese foreign policy and diplomacy focused largely on mobilizing international support in their war efforts to unify and re-establish peace in the country (Gardner & Gittiner, 2004). Since 1975, foreign policy initiatives shifted to mobilizing international resources to assist and enable the 'building of Socialism' across the country, thereby aimed at ending economic embargoes and international isolation, especially after Vietnam sent its troops to Cambodia in late 1978, to unseat the Khmer Rouge regime and establish their puppet government (Hai, 2021).

However, since 1986, under the chairmanship of Trường Chinh from 1981-87, CPV adopted and formalized market-based economic reforms under the banner of *Doi Moi*, demonstrating swift decisiveness in the Party's outlook at seeking to attract foreign resources, investments, and favourable external environment for the cause under *Doi Moi* or renovation- economic, social, and political conditions, additionally, country's international status (Arkadie & Mallon, 2004). However, these pragmatic shifts proved to be lengthy and onerous as they required the Party to reform its outlook towards openness and progress. The party until 1986 had shaped its worldview through ideological prisms (Hiep & Tsvetov, 2018). Though the pragmatic turn occurred during their sixth national congress in 1986, some ideological considerations remained foundational in

their political report since 1986 (Dinh, 2000). In other words, despite the pragmatism, CPV's sixth national congress considered historical foundations; in their relationship with the Soviet Union is a key cornerstone in their foreign policy, due to their strong support in the struggle of the people and the working class; subsequently also expressing solidarity and sympathy with national liberation movements in Latin America, Africa and other parts of the world (Vietnam News Agency, 2006).

CPV's ideological positioning was detrimental to their national interests until the adoption of *Doi Moi*. During the Cold War, Vietnam spent most of its efforts, emphasizing its relations with the Communist blocs, thereby narrowing engagements with Western and non-communist nations (Tuan, 2009; Hutt, 2023). At the same time, their prolonged engagement with Cambodia since the 1970s was based on the desire to establish a friendly communist government in the neighbouring state with the understating of 'the international duty towards Cambodian for Vietnam, however, turned out to be harmful to the economy of a war-torn Vietnam, as well as the international isolation that followed disrupted the revival of its declining economy (Shivakumar, 1996). Therefore, until the late 1980s, Vietnam's dependency on socialist countries, especially the Soviet Union for economic development and trade was high, in figures, accounting for 83 per cent of imports from and 67 per cent of exports to the Soviet Union in 1986, before the adoption of *Doi Moi* (Than, 1993, pp 214-215). This heavy dependence exposed serious risks in their economic model as their ability to accelerate development and growth turnover remained limited. The disintegration of the Soviet Union by 1991 additionally shrunk their trade measures, thereby forcing Vietnam to establish relations with non-communist governments within and beyond the region (Thùy, 2006). In this regard, the primary objective for the CPV by the late 1980s reflected in the adoption of *Doi Moi* aimed at demonstrating opening and diversifying foreign relations to gain benefits from markets, technology, capital, investments, and other resources for Vietnam's economic growth.

Marking this period as a pragmatic shift in its foreign policy discourse, Vietnam began to display efforts at multilateralization and diversification of its foreign relations beyond ideological orientations. Evident through the CPV Politburo Resolution No. 32 passed on July 9th, 1986, it articulates the necessary and pragmatic changes in its foreign policy rhetoric. Party members and other officials regarded this as a means to 'combine the strength of the nation with that of the time;

take advantage of the nation; and proactively create a stable environment to focus on economic development' (Nam, 2006, pp. 26 as cited in Hiep, 2018, pp. 9). Despite such measures, the initial period since the adoption of the policy witnessed no major advances or relations largely due to Vietnamese engagements in Cambodia and the Cold War environment. In this context, the CPV Politburo adopted a subsequent resolution in 1987 aimed at radical and strategic adjustments in their external security and foreign policy, additionally also withdrawing all its troops from Laos and Cambodia, reducing their standing army and saving/redistributing resources for economic development initiatives (CPV, 1987; Mio 1992; Quang & Thanh, 2003). Subsequent Resolution No 13 in 1988 on 'tasks and foreign policy in a new situation' emphasized the importance to assist in the stabilization of their domestic politics and in facilitating their economic renovation by making '*thêm bạn bớt thù*' translating to 'more friends, fewer enemies' in the international system, thus underscoring the importance of and need to diversify relations CPV, 1987; 1991). The resolution is principled on equal sovereignty, mutual benefits, and national independence, besides the emphasis on diplomatic normalization and foreign relations with several regional and global players such as the US, China, Japan, ASEAN members-states and other Western countries (CPV, 1991; 1996; 2001a). Therefore, this resolution marked a landmark reform in the party's thinking, outlook, and discourse on foreign policy. Thereby also laying the foundations for successive leaders and their governments.

By 1991, reiterating the renewed pragmatic objectives of maintaining peace, advancing development, and fostering diverse foreign relations, it additionally emphasized Vietnam's willingness to join multilateral organizations and economic institutions (CPV, 1991; 1992; Thayer, 1984; Elliott, 1999; 2012). The Resolution No. 3 of 1992 marked its remarkable importance to the present foundation of Vietnamese foreign policy thinking as the shift from their traditional ideological leaning was prominent in its principled yet pragmatic statements noting 'Vietnam's desire to be a friend with all countries in the world community' (CPV, 2010, pp. 403) and with that 'seek mutually beneficial cooperation with all nations irrespective of their socio-political regimes based on grounding principle of peaceful coexistence amongst all' (CPV, 2010, pp. 351). These principled pragmatist stances were further developed in the subsequent years. By the ninth congress in 2001, the officials upheld Vietnamese willingness to cooperate, be a friend and a reliable partner in striving for development, independence, and peace in the international community (CPV, 2001a; 2001b; Vuving, 2004; Acharya & Stubbs, 2006).

7.3. VIETNAM'S FOREIGN POLICY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Unlike the democratic governments and multi-party system, Vietnam's domestic and foreign policy has maintained its stability and continuity with a one-party system. Vietnam's foreign policy is dictated by the CPV, as 'the force leading the state and the society' (Duong & Lam, 2021). Such singlehandedness on the one hand certainly adds credits to Vietnamese stability, and predictability, therefore making the international community confident its engagements with the country. However, on the other hand, the convergence of all national interests at the hands of the CPV renders disaggregating actual weightages and critical interests almost impossible to ascertain in its conduct of foreign policy. In many ways, CPV's ideological considerations and regime security impede its foreign policy dictates, thereby obfuscating national interests and party interests.

Therefore, balancing regime interests and national interests underscoring regional peace and security remains a crucial challenge for the party in both its conduct of foreign policy and domestic developments since its inception, however, the display of pragmatist considerations in national interests has been shaping their foreign policy rhetoric in the recent decades (Nguyen, 2012). In other words, while their ideological considerations matter, the party has, in recent decades, shifted away from making of the Vietnamese foreign policy to a shift to implement when *Doi Moi* accelerated in the 1990s, eventually becoming more pronounced in the early 2000s. Such pragmatism is evident in the Vietnamese hardened positioning towards China over the disputes in the South China Sea, as well as the policy of rapprochement with the US, since its relative decline in recent years (Cho & Park, 2013; Sang & An, 2021). Hence, Vietnam's foreign policy pragmatically seeks diversification in its bilateral and multilateral engagements. In this context, The CPV at the Twelfth National Congress in 2016 stated:

"Vietnam is seeking to carry out a foreign policy of independence, sovereignty, multilateralization and diversification of relations, proactive and active international integration; to firmly maintain a peaceful and stable environment, create favourable conditions for national construction and defence; to elevate Vietnam's status and prestige in the region and the world" (CPV, 2015).

Evident from this is that the pragmatic shift in their foreign policy is conducted on firm principles of independence, peace, cooperation, autonomy, international law, equality, and mutual benefit in development (Frost, 1993). Additionally, Vietnam has a long-standing principle of maintaining non-alignment, embodied under their so-called ‘four no’s principle;’ no to military alliances, no to foreign base operations, no to pure balancing or complete bandwagoning tendencies with or against a particular adversarial state and, no use of force or threaten to use force in international relations (Thu, 2018; Phuong, 2019; Ha, 2022).

Pragmatism in Vietnam's Doi Moi Policy reflecting its economic focus has promoted key economic integration through international economic cooperation by the period of the eighth Congress in 1996 and the ninth Congress in 2001, which adopted the shift from political diplomacy to politico-economic diplomacy (CPV, 1996; 2001a; 2001b). In this regard, the party embraced its doctrines emphasizing Vietnam’s adoption of ‘building an open economy which is integrated with the region and the world’ by ‘accelerating the economic integration process’ (Herr et al., 2016; Tien et al., 2021) However, the earlier mentioned principles such as independence, sovereignty, diversification, and multilateralism remain foundational to the subsequent congresses despite the rhetoric of acceleration in economics and integration (Embassy of Vietnam in the US, n.d.).

By the tenth and eleventh Congress in 2006 and 2011, respectively, recognizing the importance of national interest became imperative (CPV, 2006; 2011). By 2011, CPV’s official documents referred to raising and accelerating economic integration in the international arena for the sake of national interest, thereby adopting proactive integration models. The eleventh party congress additionally emphasized the crucial tasks on the foreign policy aspects of their national interests in ‘securing the peaceful environment, favourable to accelerate industrialization, modernization and economic integration, by doing so, also safeguarding their independence, unification, sovereignty and territorial integrity’ (VietNamNet Global, 2011). By 2013, landmark Resolution No. 22 issued by the politburo established comprehensive integration, indicating the need to expand integration in political, national, defence, societal and cultural spheres, in this manner establishing comprehensive integration beyond the economic realm (Thayer, 2018). By the twelfth Congress in 2016, emphasis was additionally added to the South China Sea dispute in which Vietnam is a claimant member, in this regard, suggesting the ‘firm need to safeguard their homeland and secure a peaceful and stable environment’ in the region (Abuza & Anh, 2016).

In the 21st century, Vietnam established its comprehensive strategic partnership with six major countries namely, China in 2008, Russia in 2012, India in 2016, ROK or South Korea in 2022, the US, and Japan in 2023. The elevated relationships underlined Vietnam's growing strategic position as a vital link in global supply chains amid trade tensions between China and the West, which is attracting international investment as some corporations shift operations from China. The strengthening of ties with Japan came after Vietnam's historic improvement in relations with the United States in September, when the erstwhile adversaries inked several cooperation agreements, including those on semiconductors and critical minerals (Damond, 2023). Vietnam has set a remarkable example of openness to establishing trust and trade by facilitating trade and reforming its economic system over the last two decades, more than doubling its GDP.

The past three decades since the adoption of Doi Moi policies indication a swift renovation in Vietnamese thinking, outlook, policies, reforms, principles, and interests. 'From an outpost of the Socialist camps,' Vietnamese transformation in international politics is visible in its advocacy of active and responsible member of the international community, based on its guiding principles of independence, peace, cooperation, development, and self-reliance (CPV, 2016; 2021; Embassy of Vietnam in the US, n.d.). Policy transformations led to economic transformations, improving the economic landscape with a dynamic economy and a vibrant middle-class population. Overture of comprehensive integration changes the international isolationism experienced in the 1980s, thereby widening and diversifying Vietnamese foreign policy discourse with the spirit of middlepowermanship (Le, 2019; Do, 2022; Dung, 2022). At present, Vietnam has established ties with major powers, middle powers, and regional and other international organizations in advancing their interests and strengthening their principles to maintain consistency, autonomy, and mutual benefits.

7.4. NATIONAL INTERESTS IN VIETNAMESE DISCOURSE

The evolution of national interests in Vietnamese discourse was shaped in recent decades with the inclusion of phrases and terminologies such as '*loi ich dan toc*' or national interest, '*loi ich quoc gia*' translating to state interest; and similarly, '*loi ich quoc gia-dan toc*' meaning nation-state interest in their political and media discourse, furthermore, in increased and high frequency (Ngo, 2020; Grossman, 2020).

The CPV's notions on national interest rhetoric unfurled since the adoption of the *Doi Moi* policy as national interests took precedence in guiding Vietnamese foreign policy beyond ideological considerations. The Vietnamese terminology denoting interest did not appear in the mainstream discourse until 1988, thereby signalling a change in their political outlook with the end of the Cold War. The conceptualizations were shaped through expressions such as '*loi ich cao nhat cua dan toc ta*' meaning in the best interest of our people, in this manner stating that; it is in the best interest of the party and its people to consolidate and firmly maintain peace to concentrate strength for building up and developing the economy (Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, 2003; Tung & Nguyen, 2011; Son & Bailey, 2017). Once a cornerstone of their foreign policy, the Soviet disintegration in 1991 led many in the politburo to reconsider their foreign policy imperatives, consequently realizing the importance of national interests in the context of peace and development serving their best interests and goals (Van, 2013). By 2003, the party had incorporated goals aimed at safeguarding its national interests, additionally regarding its sovereignty and independence as closely attached to both socialism and the nation-state interests. The national interests elucidated in their political discourse additionally highlighted the need, implementation, and stability of socio-economic development through processes such as rapid industrialization, accelerated economic integration and modernization with socialist characteristics.

By 2006, CPV reiterated its goals by maintaining Vietnam's foreign policy and its engagement for the sake of state interests. Pham Binh Minh, former Deputy Prime Minister of Vietnam in 2011 noted the crucial and growing importance of national interests in the discourses. In this regard he describes the reasons for this growing importance in his book, *Dinh huong chien luoc doi ngoai Viet Nam den 2020* (Vietnam's foreign policy orientation to 2020), by stating; firstly, national interests' formulations and implementations ensure compliance with principles rather than foreign acts impacted by ideological orientations; secondly, national interests act as efficient consensus-building measures between the party and its people; thirdly, national interests are consistent with rhetoric in the international system; lastly; emphasizing on national interests will help blur ideological differences in its bilateral and multilateral relations (Minh, 2010, pp. 62). By 2016, the party's rhetoric on national interests reflected fundamental principles such as equality, international law, mutual benefits, and interests, thereby striving to be broad-minded and inclusive in the emerging world order (Do, 2022).

Supporting these observations, several scholars have perceived and discussed the matters of national interest and goals in Vietnamese Foreign policy. Khoan (1995) posits the main attributes of national interests and goals to sub-goals of security, development and building external influence. In this regard he notes;

“[All] nation’s external activities are to serve three main goals: (i) to secure sovereignty, national security and territorial integrity (the security goal); (ii) to take advantage of international conditions to build up and develop the nation (developmental goal); and (iii) to bring into play its influence in the international arena (influential goal)” (Khoan, 1995, pp. 205-206).

Thang (2003) in ‘*Quan He Quoc Te – Cac Phuong Phap Tiep Can*’ (Various approaches in International Relations) echoed the essence of national goals and interests in Vietnamese foreign policy, additionally stating that they represent the ‘needs of the state’ that resonates both domestically amongst its population and internationally amongst various actors and organizations. Concurring with Thang’s analysis, Huan (2020) posits that national interests act as an effective criterion to assess Vietnam’s foreign policy. Nam (2006) took studies to clarify that national interests are crucial to Vietnam in its consideration of the conduct of external relations and foreign affairs.

As evident from the above-mentioned observations the *Doi Moi* policy in Vietnam has played a crucial role in replacing primary ideological instruments with diplomacy. Their penchant for diplomatic instruments is reflective of their national values, principles, and in this manner, it is contributing to Vietnamese middle power identity, in ways informing their practices, beliefs and diplomatic interests.

7.5. WHAT CONSTITUTES VIETNAM’S IDENTITY IN MIDDLE POWER POLITICS?

In order to distinguish national identities in Vietnamese foreign policy, it is crucial to examine the values and principles constituting their national goals and interests. Scholars in such examinations have rationalized their assessments of the national goals, threat perceptions and interests as reflections of their identities in the international power structures. In this regard, Baldwin (1997) notes,

“Individuals, states, and other social actors have many values. These may include physical safety, economic welfare, autonomy, psychological well-being, and so on. The concept of national security has traditionally included political independence and territorial integrity as values to be protected; but other values are sometimes added... Failure to specify which values are included in a concept of national security often generates confusion” (Baldwin, 1997, 14-15)

The end of the Cold War era witnessed the emergence of strategic national goals grounded on national values, norms, national preferences and other ideational influences and identities. Construction of their national identities since the end of the cold war was demonstrated through the adoption and continuing emphasis of the Doi Moi policy (Tuan, 2009). As a continuum to this policy, modern Vietnamese diplomacy since the end of the Cold War has sustained its identities such as renovated socialism or principled pragmatism, active regionalism in Southeast Asia, ethno-culturalism, and nationalism (General Secretary Trong, 2021; Booth & Trood, 1999; Ngoc, 1995; 2002). Ethno-cultural elements in the Vietnamese school of thought are described as an association with feudal suzerainty, thereby characterizing ethnocultural nationalism from a point of common suffering and patriotic resistance against foreign invaders or dominance (Văn, 1994; Pham, 2011; Tran, 2013). At the core of Vietnamese thinking, values such as nationalism, territorial integrity, state sovereignty and national independence take precedence (Duong, 2010; Thuy & Ngoc, 2013; Tinh & Tu, 2021). Khoan (1993), during the period of hội nhập (integration), indicates at the Vietnamese school of diplomacy consists of invariable goals and specific values. In this regard he said;

“Over the thousands of years of history, especially the last half of a century, the Vietnamese school of diplomacy has taken shape with distinct traditions and identities. [...] This school has as contents the quintessence of “the modern, the ancient, the orient, and the occidental.” It can be said that Vietnam’s modern diplomacy is a development and creative application of the diplomatic genius of our predecessors, a combination of the traditions of the Orient with the extracted diplomatic experience of the Occident, thus constituting its distinct philosophy” (Khoan, 1995, 428-429)

Vietnamese diplomacy actively pursues its national goals thereby driving the renovation of the social, political, cultural, and ethnic life of people through efforts to realize their dreams of a peaceful, prosperous, strong, and just as a society (Khoan, 1995, 429)

These ideas have been refined and adjusted to the modern-day renovated socialism in Vietnamese foreign policy. In the post-Cold War era, Vietnam reconceptualized and adapted its national goals to interlink security and development in its discourse. In this regard, consider the below paragraph from '*Tư tưởng ngoại giao Hồ Chí Minh*' (Ho Chi Minh's Diplomatic Thought) by Nguyễn Dy Niên, former minister of foreign affairs in 2008;

“The foreign policy line of our Party and State for the period of renovation, accelerated industrialization and modernization, and proactive international integration is formulated and implemented as part of the strategy of national construction, development and defence, acting as a bridge linking our country with the world, [and] associating the cause of our entire nation with the mainstream of development and progress of the times. The contents of Hồ Chí Minh's thinking about national independence linked with socialism, about self-reliance and self-resilience linked with international unity and cooperation, and about combining the strength of the nation with that of the times are integrated into the policy of multilateralization and diversification of external relations, and into the policy guideline of building an independent economy along the socialist orientation in the process of proactive integration into the world economy” (Niên, 2008, pp. 309).

Such dimensions of socialism from their past leaders, mixed with the national goals since the *Doi Moi* policy has served as important components in the individual and regional identity of a 21st century Vietnam. The *Doi Moi* policy additionally instilled a sense of regionality in its identity, though it remained nascent at the end of the cold war era (Sharp, 2002). Since the settlement of the Cambodian conflicts, Vietnam adapted and integrated to become a member of the ASEAN, thereby identifying with the regional norms and principles associated with the ASEAN way of international affairs (Trường, 1979). Vietnam in the conduct of its external activities, identifies with the actors in the region and other important players in the international system on the basis of its attachment to its regional identity through shared norms and principles (Chalermphanupap, 1999). The shared regional identity absorbed in the Vietnamese school of thought suggests the regions' common values resulting in convergences on shared goals, similar threat perceptions,

common needs, and joint policies. Despite the prevalence of nationalism in these Asia-Pacific states, shared identity produces common interests and collectivist values embedded in the region's approaches to peace, prosperity, development, and security. Vietnamese scholars such as Pham (2010) in this context, posit;

“The stronger the development of each individual and human is, which is linked to that of the national community, the higher the identity quest the nation pursues. This is because state sovereignty and equality meet the need of an essential nature of the human: the nationalist one. [...] The lesson most learnt from the development of regional countries is that the process of international integration must parallel that of the quest for national identity; and these two processes are linked to the high development of each individual in the national community” (Pham, 2010, pp. 195)

In summary,

Figure 7:1- Middle Power Outlook of Vietnam

<i>Vietnamese Prime Ministers of the 21st Century</i>	<i>Middle Power Focus</i>	<i>Narratives and Outlooks</i>
<i>Phan Van Khai (1997-2006)</i>	Foreign policy reform to change anti-western perceptions, propagated economic integration and enhanced regional and international partnerships.	Visiting the US, Continuing and strengthening open door policy and international integration, increasing exports, boosting macro-economic growth agenda.
<i>Nyugen Tan Dung (2006- 2016)</i>	More friends and fewer enemies, Doi Moi, recognising the importance of national interest through economic development and integration.	Securing a peaceful environment, favourable to accelerate industrialization, modernization and economic integration, safeguarding independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity.
<i>Nyugen Xuan Phuc (2016-2021)</i>	Multidirectional foreign policy, Regional values	Economic integration, enhancing relations to a strategic partnership with the US, improving ties with Russia and India, bilateral defence cooperation with East Asian countries, displaying sub-regional leadership and elevated traditional friendships to great friendships with neighbours, Laos and Cambodia.

Pham Minh Chinh
(2021-Present)

Multi/Omni-Directional
Foreign Policy

Maintaining a consistent
stance on the foreign policy
of independence, self-
reliance, multilateralism and
diversification of external
ties, being a trusted friend,
reliable partner and
responsible member of the
international community,
developing green and smart
economy using
technological advancements

In upholding these values, Vietnam strongly adheres to the principles of the ASEAN Charter in; maintaining its purpose to strengthen peace-oriented values in the region's stability; and, respecting fundamental norms of sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity, equality, and national identities amongst all states in the region (Ramachandran, 2000; ASEAN, 2008; Heng, 2014). In this manner, Vietnam's regionalist identity through the incorporation of regional values has emphasized peace, prosperity, security, and sovereignty at regional and national levels.

7.6. PRINCIPLED AND PRAGMATIC MIDDLE POWER DIPLOMACY- THE VIETNAMESE WAY

The pragmatist direction in the Vietnamese school of thought was first set out in the report of the Central Committee of the Fifth Congress in 1982 elucidating the striking characteristics similar to the present geopolitical flux. The document reasoned the collusion between the chieftains of domination/imperialism and expansionism/hegemonic tendencies namely between the US and China (CPV, 1982). Vietnam additionally recognized the importance to preserve its sovereignty and independence, by alluding to the cornerstones in its foreign policy during the 1980s, centred on its 'solidarity and overall cooperation with the Soviet Union and socialist nations, alongside maintaining strategically close relations with the people of Laos and Kampuchea (Cambodia) and members of the Non-aligned Movement (NAM)' (Đức, 2012). During the period, Vietnam

launched its strategy of ‘peace offensive’ and thereby through this measure, sought to isolate China from ASEAN and play to the differences in the Association on the issue of Cambodia, with this, undermining pressures from ASEAN to withdraw troops from their neighbouring countries (SarDesai, 1969). In all the efforts under the peace offensive strategy, Vietnam sought to convince the region and other members of the international community on China was a prime cause of instability in the Indochina region, thereby reasoning the need to maintain their military troops despite demonstrating governance of the people’s republic of Kampuchea (Van Der Kroef, 1983; Thayer, 1987). In this regard, Vietnam signalled firm control in the Heng Samrin government (People’s Republic of Kampuchea) but simultaneously expressed that isolation of bleed Vietnam were not working or serving as a viable strategy. The impetus to pursue such a strategy of peace offensive was derived from their distinct goals underscoring the summit between the Indochina leaders and the then Soviet leader, Brezhnev, ASEAN’s normative diplomacy and CPV’s hinting of statements in conflicts over issues such as Chinese presence in Cambodia (Simon, 1992).

Concerns about Chinese maritime assertiveness in the SCS have caused diversification in relations with the inclusion of the US and its allies as strategic partners of Vietnam (Burgess, 2020). Vietnam’s strategic location facing the South China Sea has helped integrate Vietnam into major policy frameworks and constructs such as the US-led ‘Pivot to Asia’ or Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), Indian Look/Act East Policy, Japan’s Indo-Pacific Security Framework and ambitions for normal statehood, Australia’s Southbound Policy, Chinese BRI, and Quad initiatives (Do, 2022; Vuving 2023). Despite Vietnamese interests in these wide-ranging policies to check and deter Chinese territorial or sovereignty claims based on historical reasoning, Vietnam has continued to be sceptical of demonstrating its intentions of joining any power blocs or balance against the aggressor (Shoji, 2012). Instead, Vietnam has vocally advocated the importance of internalization of such regional disputes within the ASEAN model, thereby promoting regional frameworks for regional issues while leaving the doors for bilateral negotiations open at the same time (Menon & Lee, 2019). Vietnam’s association with ASEAN in enhancing ASEAN centrality has put regional middle powers in a unique position in forging a concerted ASEAN outlook on Indo-Pacific and BRI, additionally recognizing ASEAN’s voice in addressing the non-traditional security issues in the evolving security architecture of the region (Acharya & Stubbs, 2006; Ha & Le, 2021). Vietnam has additionally forged crucial partnerships with middle powers such as Indonesia, Australia, Malaysia, and ROK or South Korea to build preventive diplomacy and confidence-

building measures in ensuring maritime security, upholding international law, freedom of navigation, and adhering to a code of conduct in the SCS (Aziz & Basir, 2022).

The omni-directional foreign policy pursued by Vietnam has helped in advancing and promoting their national interests alongside securing Hanoi a place in the regional order (Do, 2022). The increasing proactiveness and their successful chairmanship of ASEAN in 2020 has raised Vietnamese proactiveness in regional affairs, and in this manner also join the core leadership voices of ASEAN and ASEAN-led forums of cooperation and dialogue such as ADMM+, ARF and EAS (Turner, 2014). Kurt Cambell, Indo-Pacific strategist in the Obama administration alludes to the increasing relevance and importance of players such as India and Vietnam in shaping the regional and global order, furthering the same, he believes Vietnam to be a critical swing state in the Indo-Pacific affairs, not merely strategically, but also economically, technologically, and financially and geo-politically by bridging Maritime and Mainland Southeast Asia; and Northeast and Southeast Asia (Nikkei Asia). In this way, Vietnam is a supporter of multilateral approaches, additionally incorporating the UN in its central thesis to promote niche diplomatic efforts in peacekeeping and diversification of strategic relations (VietNam News). Since joining the UN, Vietnam's proactiveness and comprehensive contributions to the organization have made Hanoi an integral part of UN-led forums (Duong, 2021). Consequently, through its membership in UNSC, UN Development Program (UNDP), UN Population Fund (UNFPA), UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), Human Rights Council and other relations through ASEAN, Francophones and NAM counties, Vietnam has become a crucial middle power in the region (Le, 2019; Duong, 2021; Do, 2022; Vuving, 2023). Vietnam, today has established diplomatic relations with 189 countries and economic relations with over 230 countries and territories, forging strategic and comprehensive partnerships with 30 countries, recognizing 71 favourable market economies, party to over 500 multilateral agreements and 17 Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) (Vietnam Plus, 2012). In focusing on building a self-reliant Vietnam, it has today, become one of the most open and outward-looking countries with an extensive network of security and non-traditional security cooperation, trade, and other economic linkages through niche diplomacy (Do, 2022).

Vietnam expresses its keen intent in niche diplomatic practices, even though the policy papers of policy rhetoric have not adopted or referred to such terminologies (Trung, 2022). However, by raising critical issues such as climate change, gender equality, water security, plastic pollution, and

regional and global peacebuilding at various forums has relatively raised Vietnamese normative influence through activeness and informality in consultation-based approaches (Do, 2022). Vietnam has, in this regard, specifically pursued an active voice in the fight against climate change by engaging in critical environmental and human security issues through dialogue on important topics like sea level rise, additionally also promoting climate action in human rights-related issues (Nam, 2015). Recently, in November 2021, Pham Minh Chinh, the current PM of Vietnam raised the issues of fairness and climate justice, alongside proposing the need for financial investments to create a green, inclusive, circular, and sustainable humane economy (CSIS, 2022). Additionally, Vietnam also declared its net-zero goals set to be achieved by 2050. Vietnam is advancing further efforts in this sphere through joint global initiatives in sectors such as energy transition, support to local communities susceptible to climate adversaries, methane mitigation and forest protection (EU Press Release, 2022).

Furthermore, peace-building initiatives constitute another crucial niche in Vietnamese middle power diplomacy, evident in their demonstrations of humanitarian aid to the recent upheavals in the Rakhine province and brokering peace as an 'honest broker' to the peace process in the extended neighbourhood by offering good offices for the US-DPRK or North Korean peace summit in 2019, thereby creating a favourable environment for peace and dialogue between the adversaries (Pradhan, 2022). Additionally, through its ASEAN chairmanship, Hanoi actively pursued working on crucial partnerships including the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), alongside promoting the necessary need for regional cooperation, security, and stability in the sub-Mekong region plagued with regional conflicts such as the South China Sea (SCS) (Thu, 2022). Mainstream and popular media are also beginning to recognize the unique repositioning of Vietnamese Middle power foreign policy and diplomacy by seeking effective and evolving roles of mediation, peacebuilding, confidence-building, and consensus-building in key regional and global conflicts both between giants and between other strategic middle powers in the region.

7.7. RELEVANCE OF THE HO CHI MINH THOUGHT IN VIETNAM TODAY

As demonstrated earlier, Vietnam's diplomatic efforts in existing literature described their penchant for multilateralism and international integration to gain international status and influence. Although Vietnam has not fully incorporated the middle power terminology in their foreign policy

or discourse, several scholars have however concluded Vietnam is an important middle power in the region with glowing influential clout (Do, 2022; Vuving, 2023). However, until the end of the 20th century, the Vietnamese school of thought was predominantly influenced by Marxist-Leninist ideologies as its guiding doctrine in the conduct of its international relations (Palmujoki, 2016). Though communist ideology exists in Vietnam even today, the focus in their approach to regional and international affairs, especially with the rise of China and the implication of Sino-US competition to spill over in the neighbourhood has led Vietnam to reconceptualize their foreign policy approach since the end of the Cold War, thereby seeking diversification and multilateralism in building its middle power influence today (Kristensen, 2019). However, in doing so, their core principles of protecting national interests, self-resilience, national independence, sovereignty, mutual benefits, friendliness and openness to all regimes have transformed the nature of Vietnamese diplomacy in order to evolve with the changing dynamics of the international system (Embassy of Vietnam in the United States of America, n.d.; Khoan, 1995; Nam, 2006; Nguyen, 2012; Thayer, 2018; Hiep, 2018; Do, 2022).

Although Vietnam enhanced its international status through multilateral approaches and international integration displaying its potential for proactive middle power diplomacy, their IR and foreign policy studies do not merely apply Western conceptual notions of like-mindedness or Chinese approaches of *Tianxia* (associated with the middle kingdom concept) (Eun, Acharya & Thalang, 2022; Efstathopoulos, 2023). Instead, Vietnamese IR scholars such as Do (2021; 2022), Tinh & Ngan (2021), Nguyen (2021), Hoang (2020) and many such have sought to provide Vietnamese perspectives on the evolving issues in global affairs, today. Additionally, funding for such theoretical projects is supported by the Central Council of Theoretical Studies in Vietnam, operating as an agency in advising the party, and advancing Marxist-Leninist ideology, Ho Chi Minh thought, and socialism with Vietnamese characteristics by reconceptualizing international approaches to multilateralism and integration from Vietnamese perspective (Trong, 2021). In this regard, Ho Chi Minh's school of thought predominantly emphasises; a) the need for a better understanding of the new developments in the system, global power politics, and changing nature of the rise and fall of states, thereby also understanding Vietnam's weaknesses, to ultimately build self-resilience (*ngũ tri*); b) the importance of upholding the independence, national interests, and self-resilience in order to enhance its national strength along with the developing trends in international politics (*kết hợp sức mạnh dân tộc và sức mạnh thế giới*); c) the realization of

Vietnam's diplomatic approaches are imprinted on its salient feature to remain firm in principles, myriad in the application (*dĩ bất biến ứng vạn biến*); and, d) the determination in upholding national interest, self-reliance and independence in Vietnamese foreign policy can be flexible in strategy and tactics (*linh hoạt trong chiến lược và chiến thuật*) (Niên, 2009; Hoan, 2016).

Unlike Thailand's bamboo diplomacy (bending in the direction the wind blows), Vietnam's bamboo diplomacy is broadly described using the imagery of bamboo with 'strong roots, stout trunk, and flexible branches' (Chongkittavorn, 2023). The consistency, stability, and unanimity in Vietnamese foreign policy account for profound influences from such historical ideas, in this manner, serving as a cornerstone in modern 21st century Vietnam's foreign policy. In this regard, Nguyen Phu Trong, the current party chief alludes:

“Over the past 90 years, under the leadership of the Party and President Ho Chi Minh, on the basis of creatively applying the fundamental principles of Marxism–Leninism, inheriting and building on the traditions and national character of foreign relations, diplomacy and culture, and selectively learning from the quintessence of world culture and the progressive philosophies of the times, we have built an outstanding and unique school of foreign relations and diplomacy of the Ho Chi Minh era, bearing the character of the Vietnamese bamboo”. (NhanDan, 2021a)

“Like bamboo with strong roots, solid stems and flexible branches, Vietnamese diplomacy is soft and clever but still persistent and resolute; flexible and creative but consistent, valiant and resilient against all challenges and difficulties for the national independence and people's happiness; united and humanitarian but resolute, persistent and patient in safeguarding the national interests.” (NhanDan, 2021b)

In the 21st century, Vietnam has emerged as an important middle power in the Asia-Pacific. Its strategic importance, penchant for multilateralism, fervent support for regionalism, and clever diplomatic approaches towards great powers helped establish Vietnam as a distinctive middle power despite lacking some quantitative and functional criteria in traditional Western studies. Vietnam's increasing vitality has generated conditions for Vietnamese IR academia to perform comprehensive studies on a variety of strategic issues essential to the country's progress and international influence (Thu, 2014). It has additionally created significant interest among Vietnamese intellectuals in establishing a Vietnamese School of Diplomacy based on Ho Chi

Minh's ideas and Vietnam's foreign policy approaches such as "bamboo diplomacy". Vietnam's transition from a nation devastated by war and a victim of great power politics to an emerging middle power with growing agency is a shining example as it is one of the few post-colonial and socialist states that has successfully assimilated into the current international system while preserving its independence and identity (Tokmak, 2023).

7.8. NGUYEN PHU TRONG'S SCHOOL OF THOUGHT- ON VIETNAMESE VALUES AND PATH TO SOCIALISM

A notable Marxist theorist, Nguyen Phu Trong, was born in 1944 in Hanoi. He was a student of philosophy in his university days and subsequently joined the VCP in 1967. Trong thereafter spent several years working for the Communist Review journal, eventually rising to become editor-in-chief. Trong was appointed to the Politburo in 1997, then to the head of parliament in 2006, before moving to the position of general secretary of the party in 2011 (Tran, 2021). Trong ascended the ranks despite an uncertain economic outlook. Vietnam experienced a dramatic economic slowdown due to the 2008 global financial crisis. Since the Doi Moi (renovation) economic reform strategy was implemented in 1986, socioeconomic success has emerged as the key basis of legitimacy for the VCP. Economic growth and rising citizen incomes are more essential than other concerns like corruption. However, as bad debts and slowing growth rates threatened to derail remained challenges to combat this, Trong felt compelled to accelerate the fight against corruption to boost public confidence and popular support for the party (Hutt, 2018). Trong's first big appeal came in early 2012, when he urged the Party to approve Resolution No. 12 seeking authorities to set an example and be held accountable for corruption and waste. Soon after, VCP removed the Central Steering Committee on Anti-Corruption from the government's portfolio and placed it directly under the authority of the Politburo (Campbell, 2018).

His book 'Theoretical and Practical Issues in Socialism and path to advancing socialism in Vietnam' highlights the history of development across the world as well as in revolutions in Vietnam to pursue socialism as a crucial path to development. On this, he elucidates that the Vietnamese people have endured long revolutionary struggles to defend their national independence and sovereignty (Ha, 2023). For him, its national independence is closely lined with advancing socialism in order to achieve the happiness, freedom, and prosperity of the Vietnamese people. He alludes in his book;

“The socialist society that the Vietnamese people are striving to build is a society of the rich people, the powerful, democratic, equal and civilized country; with the people being the masters; with the highly developed economy, based on the modern productive force and the suitable, progressive production relationship; with the advanced culture, richly imbued with the national identity; with the people having a prosperous, free and happy life, with the conditions for comprehensive development, with the ethnicities in the Vietnamese community enjoying equality, unity, respect and help for mutual development; with the socialist rule-of-law State of the people, by the people, for the people led by the Communist Party; with the friendly relationship and cooperation with the countries in the world” (Ha, 2023).

On the occasion of the 94th founding anniversary of the CPV, Trong’s article titled, 'Proud and confident under the Party’s glorious flag, determined to build a Vietnam more prosperous, powerful, civilised, heroic with a fine and long-lasting culture' gained popularity and inspired people’s pride in the party (NhanDan, 2024). In this article, Trong recounts the CPV’s historical developments, socialist principles, economic integration, social progress, cultural pride, social justice, progressiveness, and humane values. He further encouraged party officials to foster public confidence, and promote patriotism, and determination to make Vietnam a prosperous, heroic, civilized and culturally rich country (Phuc, 2022). Bui Cong Bein, Secretary to the party underscores, “During nearly 40 years of renewal, the Party has inherited and promoted the national identity, roots and traditions, selectively absorbed the world's quintessence and progressive ideas of the era, developed the theoretical foundation of Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh ideology, formed a very special and unique school of diplomacy imbued with the identity of Vietnamese bamboo” (Vaswani, 2023). ‘Vietnamese Bamboo Diplomacy’ was coined in 2016 by Trong as a diplomatic approach to navigate global tensions. Exemplifying a carefully balanced strategy, this diplomatic approach was actively pursued in 2021 sharing concerns over growing Chinese assertiveness, especially in the South China Sea as well as retaining significant economic links with China (Bespalov, 2023).

Xi Jinping’s visit to Hanoi at the end of 2023, after elevating its partnerships with the US and Japan, led to various cooperation agreements on infrastructure, security, and trade (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, 2023). Thayer, a prominent academic in Southeast Asian affairs remarked the declaration as a window dressing as these agreements signed incurred very little to no cost to Vietnam, he further stated that the communique served as a lip service to Chinese ideas

such as the BRI and community for shared future, offering the ‘impression that they are supporting, or at least, not opposing Chinese investments’ (Nguyen, 2024). Trade is certainly a significant element of Vietnam’s pragmatic balancing strategy (Dung, 2022). The US is one of the largest export markets and China is its largest importing country, thereby increasingly becoming a crucial strategic player in the global supply chains, today. In an address during the National Congress of External Relations in 2021, Trong explains;

“Vietnam’s diplomacy is described as soft and wise, yet persistent and resolute. It is characterized by being flexible and creative in the face of all struggles and challenges that stand in the way of national independence and people’s happiness. At the same time, it remains consistent, courageous, resilient, united, and humane. The diplomacy is committed to protecting national interests while demonstrating determination and patience” (Vietnam Government News, 2022)

In this context, Vietnam's foreign policy is determined by its principled and pragmatic approach to pursuing national interests, regardless of ideological approaches. Indeed, Vietnam has strong ties with the US, the Western allies, and China (Vietnam News Agency, 2021). Furthermore, Vietnam prioritizes its economic ties with both sides. Finally, Vietnam's foreign policy reflects a balanced approach formed by the notion of ‘Bamboo Diplomacy.’ Vietnam, using by this philosophy, takes a flexible attitude beyond national interests and refrains from taking sides in disputes between other actors (Sang, 2021). In the context of US-China rivalry, Vietnam adopts this approach to find peaceful solutions to disputes with both sides and strive to improve relations with both nations.

CHAPTER- 8

COMPARING CASE STUDIES: CONTESTED HEDGING AND THE NEED FOR PLURILATERAL STRATEGIES IN MIDDLE POWER SECURITY DISCOURSE

8.1. INTRODUCTION

The beginning of 21st century Asia-Pacific witnessed ASEAN's heavy promotion of trade, investments, and regional engagements to integrate China into the rules-based trading order (Green & Goodman, 2016). Traditional allies and friends in the region, additionally recognize the US presence in the region as a determinant of stability and security guarantor (Goh, 2005). The rise in regional uncertainties asserted with potential dangers from the Chinese rise led some scholars to position the US as a critical balancer in regional security, political and economic spheres (Goh, 2005; 2008; Park, 2011). Furthermore, such analysis assumes China's systemic power transitions, thereby concluding the dual order dilemma facing the region to choose between an incumbent hegemon and a rising power (Goh, 2005; 2019; Foot & Goh, 2018). In this context, the de-facto expectation from middle powers in the region is to balance the threatening rise of China by choosing the US as their lead balancer. For some scholars, middle powers in the region have adopted 'deep engagements' with China on one hand and alternatively, pursue 'soft balancing' strategies against Chinese assertiveness disrupting status-quo (He, 2009; McDougall, 2011; Paul, 2018). Such strategies reflect both, attempts to keep the US involved, and undertaking military modernization to counterweigh Chinese hegemonic tendencies. However, the regional complexities despite, Chinese aggressiveness, does not reflect their compulsions for stark choices of either 'balancing against or bandwagoning with' China in the middle power foreign policy discourse (Acharya, 1997; Kawasaki, 2009; Simon, 2017).

In the complex post-Cold War multipolar/multiplex world order, the realist notions of balancing and bandwagoning cannot be the most appropriate understanding of the states' responses to shifting capabilities and power superiorities. Similarly, 'hedging' in middle power security discourse has received greater attention through several works of the past decade. However, hedging is not without its shortcomings. Against this backdrop, this chapter, using a comparative case study design aims to analyze the diverse, plurilateral, and mixed approaches pursued by

Indonesia, Malaysia, ROK or South Korea, and Vietnam, and briefly by overall states in the region vis-a-vis China and the US.

8.2. HEDGING AND ITS CONTESTATIONS

Hedging strategy or behaviour is defined as a set of strategies aimed at contingency planning or avoiding circumstances during which states cannot exercise straightforward positions of balancing, neutrality or bandwagoning (Goh, 2005; Koga, 2017; Murphy, 2017). The states prefer cultivating a middle ground rather than choosing an option at the expense of another as foreign policy strategies are in their best interests. Hedging behaviour in the existing literature characterizes the strategy comprises basic elements such as soft or indirect balancing, cooperation, engagements, and omni-enmeshment of regional powers to maintain status-quo (Goh, 2005; 2007; 2008; Haacke, 2019). However, the concept of hedging in mainstream literature remains contentious following the lack of consensus on its definitional clarity (Haacke, 2019).

Prominent scholars, such as Ciorciari (2008) define hedging as a strategy employed by developing states to manage their great power interests and relations, limiting political commitments or alignments, in order to ‘minimize the risks, and maximize rewards’ in bilateral security engagements (Ciorciari, 2008, pp. 168). Additionally, his hedging studies on ASEAN states like Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, correspond to limited hedging behaviour in the region, whilst the other states such as Vietnam remained non-aligned in their approach (Ciorciari, 2008). Ciorciari (2019), in his recent works, maintains his evaluations on hedging in the region, despite its relative failure due to rising uncertainty and unreliability in US commitment. Interestingly, hedging, popularly a finance-related terminology, emerged in the literature recognizing risk. In this effect, Roy (2005) posits the difference in mainstream paradigms of balancing and hedging conceptually distinguishes risks from threats. In his definition (Roy, 2005, pp. 312), he elucidates the need for balancing for perceived threats; low intensity balancing in case the perception of threat is low and hedging as a positioning strategy against the possible emergence of future threats. Furthermore, the Asia-Pacific states’ financial hedging success is credited to the well-established regional risk management during the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 (Heng, 2006)

Despite these distinctions, some scholars have nevertheless defined hedging behaviour through conventional notions of security such as balancing and bandwagoning. Goh (2005) in her works fuses balancing with hedging with partial differentiation between the two depending on whether or not balancing is further accompanied by tactics of reassurances and engagements. In this regard, she notes;

“... it is possible to generalize that the greater the room for manoeuvre that a state perceives itself to have in terms of being less dependent on one or both of these major powers (the United States and China) and more able to influence the regional security environment, the stronger a hedger it tends to be and the more complex its hedging strategy becomes. A strong hedger is a state that is able to establish and maintain close strategic relations with both the United States and China at the same time” (Goh, 2005, pp. 4).

In emphasizing balancing alongside hedging, she views balancing as a promotion of a certain kind of order that maintains US preponderance in the region. She explains;

“States here neither balance against the preponderant power of the United States, nor do they obviously balance against the potentially bigger perceived threat of China. Instead, Southeast Asia is pursuing indirect balancing strategies against China that rely upon sustaining U.S. dominance in the region, and thus aim to maintain the existing imbalance or preponderance of power in favour of the United States” (Goh, 2007/8, pp. 131-132).

The concept of indirect balancing in hedging is considerably different from Nye (1990) and Pape (2005) discoursing soft power and balancing, taking into account indirect balancing in mainstream literature emphasizes ‘indirect military balancing by the states and complex balancing in the region to balance of influence beyond military spheres’ (Goh, 2007/8, pp. 132). In this context, such scholars refer to indirect balancing for facilitating US presence, thereby espousing its corresponding capabilities for power projections as a general deterrent against regional aggressions, balancing not merely power but also the threats. (Walt, 1987). Kuik (2008) draws on indirect balancing as a part of hedging, however, disagrees with the objectives of such tactics to be centred to maintain US presence and preponderance. Instead, military efforts in order to diffuse uncertainties constitute indirect balancing, thereby associating such balancing with military hedging premised to forge and upgrade defence cooperation and capabilities. These further blurs the distinctions between hedging and conventional hard balancing in existing works (Kuik, 2008;

Hornung, 2014) while some construe hedging as a balancing plus strategy, characterizing hedging as an extension of balancing strategies (Goh, 2005; Tessman & Wolfe, 2011). Notably, in such arguments, the distinctions between hedging and balancing concepts obfuscate and deviate from the primary conceptualization of hedging on the basis of risks emerging from potential conflicts in the future, furthermore, causing confusion in establishing distinct criteria to establish and evaluate hedging strategies.

Some scholars have linked hedging discourses with risks emerging from uncertainty due to the geopolitical shifts in the international order. Kuik (2016) expanded and operationalized hedging as ‘an insurance-seeking behaviour under situations of high stakes and uncertainty’ (Kuik, 2016, pp. 5). In this context he explains;

“Hedging is... where a sovereign actor pursues a bundle of opposite and deliberately ambiguous policies vis-à-vis competing powers to prepare a fallback position should circumstances change. The aim of these contradictory acts is to acquire as many returns from different powers as possible when relations are positive, while simultaneously seeking to offset longer-term risks that might arise in worst-case scenarios” (Kuik, 2016, pp. 5).

Therefore, choosing a side to align through bandwagoning or balancing seems risky and detrimental to a state’s domestic and international objectives, in this regard, suggesting the effectiveness of hedging through a range of pragmatic engagements on varied spheres such as social, economic, diplomatic, military etc. In operationalizing hedging strategies underscoring security and geo-political risks, Kuik (2016) elucidates such strategies necessitating certain elements; middle powers must not pick sides against competing powers, adopting responsive and counteracting strategies, and employing measures for maximizing gains simultaneously to prepare for contingencies. A successful hedging strategy should fulfil the above necessities, failing which will cause middle powers in the region to fall into camps of either complete bandwagoning or pure balancing (Kuik, 2016; 2017). Using these operational elements, scholars are quick to ascertain ASEAN states’ hedging behaviour in the region given their return maximizing strategies vis-a-vis China and diversifying relations with crucial regional players such as Australia, Japan, India, and the US (Paul, 2018; Koga, 2018).

Emerging studies on the resurgence of high politics in the Asia-Pacific security lexicon over the past emphasis on low politics contend the need to sharpen and expand the definition and discourses on hedging. The resurgence in such studies is attributed to the unpredictable, sudden, and assertive rise of China in the region. Against this backdrop, Lim, and Cooper (2015) problematize hedging strategies as middle power behaviour lying on a large spectrum between pure balancing and complete bandwagoning, in which case, its all-embracing economic, political, security and other engagements obfuscate the security lexicon and pluralism in dialogue. In this all-embracing sense, scholars and academics have generally described middle powers in the region, except South Korea, as hedgers towards China. However, the focus on security aspects of strategic relations serves as a crucial reason to revise the conceptualization of all-embracing hedging definitions. In this regard, Lim, and Cooper (2015) describe hedging as ‘an alignment choice involving the signalling of ambiguity over the extent of shared security interests with great powers’ (Lim & Cooper, 2015, pp 698). The security-oriented conceptualization further necessitates fundamental indicators such as; increased defence expenditure and strengthened military capabilities without declaring adversarial intent by middle powers, voluntary, instead of formal, institutional, bilateral, and multilateral engagements, improved equidistance thereby displaying reluctance to complete bandwagoning or pure balancing in the region (Jackson, 2014, pp. 333). By proposing these indicators, Jackson (2014) upholds the importance of hedging despite the US unreliability and Chinese rise.

Criticizing such combinative and multi-domain approaches, Ciorciari and Haacke (2019) reinforces hedging as primarily a risk assessment and management strategy. Risk here, implies the probability of the occurrence of certain events, to the developments in manners that cause dangers of actual harm, thereby underscoring the need to mitigate risks through hedging, and utilizing action-reactionary balancing and bandwagoning as strategies to cope with threats, as opposed to risks, which under hedging are characterized as proactive and anticipatory in its nature. In furtherance, Haacke (2019) proposes empirical indicators to identify and reinforce hedging in discourse; a) purposive risk mitigatory statements from leaders and other government officials indicating the challenges posed by other powers are not affecting the national security interests, yet; b) enhancing military program and defence spending, however, is not directed at meeting the capabilities of a rising challenging state; c) demonstrating strategic autonomy and ambiguity by not hinting at tight alignments with either of the contesting powers. Through such indicators,

Haacke reinforces hedging as a preventive, not a reactionary measure used by states to ensure regional stability and autonomy.

Contrary to prior Waltzian understanding of hedging, Jones and Jenne (2021) disagree with the prevailing conceptualization to describe the middle and secondary states' behaviour through a classical realist lens and diplomatic history showcasing ASEAN's unique Strategic pragmatism in its response to China in the region. As evident from the above descriptions, hedging remains a contested concept with no fixed definitions.

The Asia-Pacific regional order has expanded to include geopolitical and geostrategic constructs of the Indo-Pacific, subsequently bringing a multitude of powers such as India, the US, China, Japan, and Russia and the regional middle powers to the fore of diverse security debates on both, emerging traditional and non-traditional security challenges in the region (Karim, 2018a; Heiduk & Wacker, 2020). History of conflicts in the region amounts to mutual suspicion between major players, the US vis-a-vis China, or China vis-a-vis Japan, thereby making cooperation and collaboration between them challenging in the region (Huang, 2017). Bitterness in Southeast Asian history of Western colonialism, Japanese imperialism and Chinese interventions have led to scepticism and unwillingness to cede ASEAN's regionality and centrality in regional and global affairs. ASEAN as a primary regional convener garnered support for its desire for an inclusive and engaging regional order in order to avoid the dominance of one major power and the exclusion of its adversaries is unsustainable as it may lead to hot conflicts (Acharya, 2007; Murphy, 2017; Marston, 2023). In this measure, as a regional convener, ASEAN-led multilateral forums have endorsed ASEAN centrality. Much to ASEAN's criticisms of weak institutionalism, process-driven, heterogeneity and difficulty in consensus-building, the regional organization serves as a viable option to maintain, open, transparent, inclusive, collaborative, and principled diplomacy, thereby maintaining strategic autonomy, non-alignment, normative security and multipolar world order (Suh et al., 2004).

The intensifying nature of the US-China competition and the mounting geostrategic, geopolitical, geoeconomic, social, and regional uncertainties are eclectic in their theoretical considerations. Therefore, combining risk strategies with its normative middle power diplomacy is crucial to disaggregating eclecticism through constructivist discourses of ASEAN ideas, rhetoric, norms,

values, and principles such as non-interference, peaceful coexistence, cooperation and engagement to foster the peaceful transition of the global and regional order.

8.3. COMPARING CASE STUDIES- A DIFFERENT PICTURE EMERGES

Evident from the above differences towards balancing, bandwagoning and hedging in the region, the Asia-Pacific region maintains little to no indication to pick sides with either China or the US, thereby offering these crucial middle powers greater opportunities to pursue unique, and distinctive approaches that best suits their foreign policy imperatives. Apparent also from the above analysis is that one country or one approach cannot spearhead regional developments, therefore, the region remains an eclectic mix of actors and factors to take into account while theorizing the conceptual understanding of middle powers in this region. The extent of diversity and pluralism leads us to consider their societal structures, political values, national culture and norms, historical memories, national role conception, regional dynamics, and responses to international development for effective understanding of middle powers in a non-Western setting. In this regard, non-Western experiences of middle powers in the region can produce holistic understanding on their foreign policy imperatives on the Sino-US question and its individual and collective agency in shaping the evolving middle power discourses.

Middle powers are evaluated from various perspectives based on their behaviour in international affairs therefore lacks definitional consensus (Roberson, 2017). Middle powers in realist paradigm pays closer attention to the ‘in-between’ group, sandwiched between the great and the small, ranked amongst the top twenty to thirty based on quantitative measures on population, military, economy and overall influence (Holbraad, 1984; Ping, 2017; Abbondanza, 2022). Neorealists or the Waltzian thought (1990) on the other hand posit middle powers limited influencing behaviours in a system largely controlled and influenced by great power dynamics. Liberals such as Keohane (1969) argue the middle power collective agency in ‘providing a normative or contractual means to constrain and legitimize unequal powers’ by acquiring additional agency through institutional approaches. In this regard, many focussed on mediation, or coalition-building middle power roles.

The constructivist approach broadens the middle power imaginings through self-identity and inter-subjectivity in their conceptualization, thereby emphasizing on the need to continually rethink middle power in the changing and dynamic international order (Cox, 1989). Constructivist middle

power scholarship grasps the essence of collective identity, inter-subjectivity, nationalism, values, norms and the changing roles (Adler, 1997; Busse, 1999; Wilkins, 2016; Karim 2018a) , however, constructivism, derived from Western philosophical roots fails to explain when, how and in what ways national identities have played a key role in their policy and strategic actions (Eun, 2019). Additionally, major studies of middle powers in non-West have examined aspects such as Scope, Style, Focus, Forms, and Forums of engagements in several network-based policy and behavioural analysis (Nossal & Stubbs, 1997), but such studies lack holistic and nuanced understandings of their non-Western experiences driving their international relations.

In this context, non-Western discourses play an important role in producing indigenous knowledge centres and schools of thoughts taking into consideration history, culture, and other native factors. The Asian Century (Dollar, 2007) is gaining stronger resonance amidst the transitioning of the world order into a multipolar/multiplex world order (Acharya, 2017), thereby proving essential to consider non-Western discourses in better explaining the middle power roles, imperatives, and behaviours in the Asia-Pacific region.

For instance, in Malaysia, their foreign policy scope explains their penchant for regional diplomacy, and economic diversification. Their activism in international affairs has pushed Malaysia take up several middle power roles of mediator, and bridge-builders in their focus for conflict-resolution through peaceful means (Nossal & Stubbs). Their institutional strength is derived by its multilateral, bilateral and other organizational means, through its memberships in several crucial forums such as the UN, ASEAN, Global Movement of Moderates, Islamic Conference, and others (Kuik, 2008; Parameswaran, 2015). However, pre-modern beliefs hold their relevance in a Modern Malaysian, thus extending the theoretical and conceptual scope of such studies to include ideational, aesthetic, normative and historical factors can further explain Malaysian middlepowermanship and their foreign policy dilemma in the 21st century (Milner, 2017).

In this regard, the non-Westphalian understanding of Malay politics reveals big priorities given to its solid and emotive foreign policy through people-centrism from the inter-*raja* period to Malaysia today in their emphasis of one Malaysia- people first and performance now (Milner & Kasim, 2018). Its historical practices of moral balance referring to justness or fairness in upholding

balanced religious values has helped additionally shape a neutral, equidistant, non-aligned image of Malaysia in world affairs. Principled in their scope, Malaysia continues to seek respect in the international order by displaying friendliness and openness to all irrespective of social and political systems (Murphy, 2017). Policies of the Malay elite were tailored to regime legitimization and political survival, thereby is attributed to recognizing their moderate, independent, respectable, confident and neutral in their middle power behavior (Noor, 2017).

Malaysia in the 1960s marked its transition from a pro-Western position to pursuing neutrality in its diplomatic ties. Beginning to establish ties with communist governments in the Balkan state of Yugoslavia, Malaysia began its earnest efforts at steering a middle course in its diplomatic endeavours (Mitsuomi, 2015). Central governmental figures favoured neutrality, in this regard, the former PM of Malaysia, Tunku Abdul Rahman stated that ‘neutrality is something worth giving a thought to’ (Parliament Debate, Federation of Malaysia, 27th Jan 1968 as cited in Hänggi, 1991, pp. 13; Mitsuomi, 2015, pp. 77; Tarling 2016, pp.190). In the next decades, key plans towards regional neutralization of Southeast Asia were initiated by Malaysia through ASEAN in order to maintain peaceful co-existence, inclusivity, neutrality, and stability of the nation and the region as a whole (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia, 2018). Such policy rhetoric resonates with the 21st century Malaysia as they continue to engage with world powers such as the US, China, Russia, and diversify its relations with key regional and inter-regional players in this inclusive and plural multipolar world order.

Similarly, Indonesian case presents us with their notions of middle power diplomacy displaying strong national considerations in its pursuit for a free, independent, and active foreign policy (Azra, 2015; Karim, 2018b). Indonesian middle power scope extends to its capacity to engage key players through its assumed leadership roles in several forums such as the G20, and the ASEAN in order to function as peacemakers or problem-solvers. Bali Democracy Forum reiterated their focus of promoting democracy, inclusive dialogue and sharing of best practices amongst different governments and its models to foster greater regional governance in the Asia-Pacific region (Hidayatullah, 2017). Key multilateral and bilateral agendas reflecting developmental security issues of climate change, banking, poverty reduction, migration, and maritime security have formatively help engage Indonesia with key institutions and players in and beyond the region (Nauvarian, 2022).

Beyond the popular understanding, a combination of other and indigenous elements including historical endurances, national interests, principles and norms shared largely by all Indonesians sets the premise of its foreign policy and the nature of international engagements (Thies & Sari, 2018). Like any other nation, Indonesian foreign policy has evolved through the decades from slogans of anti-colonialism to non-alignment, but interestingly, these changes have been justified with the core principles they continue to uphold, such as national and regional autonomy, independent foreign policy, dynamic equilibrium in the international arena, and consultation and consensus-based approaches for peaceful coexistence of all (Rüland, 2017). Evidently so, interplay of strategic, pragmatist and normative paradigms are unique to understand their role in shaping the Indonesian discourse.

Indonesian concentric circles consist of geographical proximity as primary region of importance encompassing the Southeast Asian region, secondarily, the larger East Asian neighbourhood is crucial of overall regional stability and development, and finally, the wider Asia-Pacific region involving external and off-shore powerplay (Anwar, 2014). Such independent ideas help preserve Indonesian autonomy, compelling concrete foreign policy measures benefiting its national and international prestige (Poling, 2013). Indonesia, hence, espouses dynamic equilibrium in opening doors for all relevant actors, such that no one country dominates the politics of the region. Its strategic and comprehensive partnerships, and the onset of a pluralistic democracy with the end of the Cold War has led to befriending diverse players, and greater flexibility in navigating the systemic risks especially with the Sino-US contending interests in the Asia-Pacific region (Sebastian, 2014; Anwar, 2022). In this regard, hedging-plus as a concept emphasizes the interplay of *realpolitik* and *trustpolitik* in minimizing its risks and maximizing its gains in the multipolar world order.

Middle power mentions in ROK or South Korean foreign policy, on the other hand, evolved under successive governments in the 1990s and the 21st century. As a country located between influential powers such as Japan and China, their middle power imaginings were commonly perceived through its alliance with the US in a hubs-and-spokes system laying greater emphasis on military cooperation, participation in multilateral institutions, and upholding the liberal international order (Shin-Wha, 2015; Lee, 2019, Moriyasu, 2022). Beyond these traditional notions, South Korean foreign policy has directed numerous efforts in securing the region from the North Korean nuclear

threat by attempting Korean reunification and seeking strategic ambiguity vis-à-vis the great power competition, thereby diversifying its international relations beyond the security giant, namely the US and their economic partner, China to include actors from and beyond the region such as Indonesia, Australia, Vietnam, Mexico and others (Chung, 2012; Cho, 2016). In seeking an active policy under the ‘Regional Korea’, or ‘Global Korea’ strategies, alternatively under different government, their middle power engagements have sought bilateral, multilateral and other informal institutional forums in their middle power diplomacy (Mo, 2016).

A vital criticism to the given variance in strategy between the conservatives and the liberal governments, is the absence of a clear blueprint in their usage of the terminology. More-often used as an accessory or a modifier, the constant variations in their middle power focus causes inconsistencies in their middle power rhetoric undermining their overall status. Thus, in this regard, a suggestion to revitalizing principled diplomacy from the Korean context resonates with the emerging non-Western scholarship (Kim 2016).

Principled middle power diplomacy, in studies, however, has largely encompassed South Korean roles and duties towards upholding the liberal international order. Described as a geographical middle between Asia and America, ROK or South Korea provide bridge-building opportunities between the developed and the developing world (Kim, 2021). Such principled diplomacy can be reinforced through its multilateral and institutional commitments, in this manner prevent the loss of diplomatic ability in issues such as free trade, human rights, and other liberal norms (Stanzel, 2018). Such analysis additionally calls for broadening of South Korean discourse in order to recalibrate principled middle power conceptualizations by including their idea of nationalism, identity, and values derived from their crucial indigenous non-Western experiences (Eun, 2019). Therefore, re-evaluating Korean diplomatic initiatives beyond the Western consideration to also include national identities, political ideologies, geographical proximity, together contributes to building social cohesion, in this manner polishing the distinguishable notions of us and them in rethinking their principled middle power diplomacy. On that note, such principled middle power diplomacy can help fill the gaps arising from their strategic ambiguity in manoeuvring the 21st century geopolitical competition.

Vietnamese foreign policy, finally, has evolved through its long history of rich traditions of legends, determination, and adaptation. Vietnam foreign policy is limitedly explored, largely in the matters of South China Sea dispute. Nonetheless, Vietnamese foreign policy has evolved through different phases in correspondence with the development needs and their domestic challenges (Chongkittavorn, 2023). During the 1970s, their efforts were largely focussed on enabling and building socialism aimed at mobilizing international support to end their embargoes and international isolation during Vietnamese intervention of Cambodia. However, the end of the Cold War era led to a swift turn in the focus of Vietnamese foreign policy in adopting and implementing the policy of *Doi Moi* or renovation to include diversifying relation beyond communist states for economic developmental needs, active participation in multilateralism, and deep economic integration as scope for its diplomatic initiatives (Tuan, 2009). Several further reforms and resolutions in the 1990s and 2000s reinforce and implement market-based reforms thereby, improving the country's overall international status by displaying openness and friendliness to all.

Marking the period of pragmatic shift in their policy rhetoric, Vietnam emphasized on its participation in multilateral cooperation and seek diversification of its foreign relations beyond ideological considerations (Do, 2022). Such proactive economic and inclusive developments help build a stable regional and international order. However, national interests, norms, identity and other considerations remain foundational, despite the evolution and shifts in their foreign policy. Vietnam continues to remain firm on their guiding principles of maintaining independence, peace, cooperation, upholding international law, national and regional autonomy, equality, and mutual benefit of development (Thu, 2019). In addition to this, Vietnam continues to also uphold its long-standing 'four no's principle' emphasizing their military non-alignment, no foreign military bases operations, no bandwagon or balancing measures with competing powers and, no use of force or threaten to use of force in international relations. This rhetoric helped in realizing the importance of national interests in maintaining peace, security, development and independence of the region (Murray, 2019). Through the adoption of *Doi Moi* and their principled pragmatic rhetoric, Vietnam is considered as an emerging or an evolving middle power crucial to the regional and international politics of the 21st century.

Therefore, Vietnamese school of thought, despite recognizing the geopolitical flux caused by the US-China rivalry in the Asia-Pacific, alludes to preserving its sovereignty and independence as cornerstones to its foreign policy. In the past, during the Cold War rivalry, Vietnam steered the policy of peace offensive in seeking to isolate China, play to the differences in ASEAN and through this undermine the pressures on the issue of Cambodia (Chubb et al, 2018). However, the evolution in Vietnamese foreign policy displays the need to seek diverse relations and remains sceptical of joining blocs against an aggressor, despite Chinese maritime assertiveness in the SCS (Thuy, 2018). Instead, Vietnam upholding its principled pragmatist approach has advocated for importance of internalization of such disputes with the ASEAN frameworks, thereby pursuing regional issues within regional frameworks for effective and long-lasting conflict resolution. This omni-directional nexus has helped Vietnam secure its national interests alongside playing peace, consensus and confidence-builders in regional measures (Thu, 2018).

As mentioned earlier Vietnam's efforts at multilateralization and international integration has helped gain its middle power influence and status in IR scholarship, though Vietnam has not incorporated such terminologies in their discourse. The national institutes promoting Vietnamese school of thought have sought to advance Marxist-Leninist ideology, Ho Chi Minh school of thought, and discourse on socialism with Vietnamese characteristics at maintaining firm principles of upholding its national interests, independence, sovereignty, pragmatic diplomacy, with myriad of options in application of the same in the 21st century informal and multipolar world order (Do, 2022).

Therefore, the perspectives, knowledge claims, political and cultural norms of these states become imperative to consider due to the distinctive characteristics of this multi-cultural, and multi-ethnic region. The ideals of middle power behaviour cantered on diplomatic ambitions and identity of the Asia-Pacific region has stirred discussions for the past three decades. However, evident from the emphasis laid on liberal values, states such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand constitute a greater proportion in the studies of middle power behaviour. However, greater numbers of studies on other states of in the Asia-Pacific, such as ROK or South Korea, Indonesia, Japan, and occasionally, Singapore and Malaysia emerged into the discourse since their middle power activism largely due to ASEAN Regional Forums promoting inclusive multilateralism in the 1990s.

However, the determinants, and purpose of middle powerism in the 21st century looks rather different. The evolving and transcendental nature of institutionalism has help middle powers in the region to pursue active form of diplomacy. However, this middle power activism is distinctive to each in the Pacific. For instance, Vietnam emphasizes economic integration and development in promoting active middle power diplomacy when resolving national issues, on the other hand, Indonesia prioritizes inclusive dialogue in its form of free, active, and independent middle power diplomacy. Multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Malaysia considers moderatism as the moral balance in a land principled to seek respect in the international system through other-help, friendliness, and openness to all as part of their middle power activism. In this regard, the relativity of middle power activism is attributed to its national role conception, considerations, and changing nature of institutional engagements. Indonesia, and South Korea have demonstrated creative middle power diplomatic engagements through minilateral, issue-based coalitions, thereby seeking innovative means to diversify relations beyond the framework of great powers.

Evident also from above, despite showing similar middle power behavioural patterns of diversification of relations, institutional and normative order, scepticism towards great power competition, the Asia- Pacific region continues to remain eclectic, pluralistic, and diverse in their discourse to typecast under traditional paradigms, therefore, revealing the need for non-Western ‘Global IR’ to fill the gap in the holistic understanding of the Asia-Pacific middle powers in the 21st century.

In Summary;

Figure 8:1- Middle Power Conceptual Summary

Foreign Policy Analysis Framework	Malaysia	Indonesia	South Korea	Vietnam
SCOPE	Regional Diplomacy, ASEAN Centrality and Consensus, Regional Security, Economic Diversification	Protecting all forms of sovereignty from all external dangers.	Regional security, Korean reunification, US-ROK alliance, diversifying partnerships	Doi Moi Policy, Recognising national interests, identity, sovereignty, and independence
STYLE	Activism	Free and Active	Ideologies of the Administration	Proactive
FOCUS	Conflict Resolution	Inclusive Dialogue, ASEAN Principles, Regional Partnerships, Maritime Security	Varies from Regional Korea to Global Korea. Recently, pivotal middle power diplomacy to uphold the liberal order	Economic Development, Territorial Sovereignty, Industrialization, Modernization, Economic Integration
FORM	Multilateral, Bilateral, Organizational	Multilateral, Minilateral, Bilateral, Organizational, Democratic Institutionalism	Alliance, Multilateral, Bilateral, Organizational Institutionalism	Multilateral, Bilateral, Diversification
FORUM	ASEAN, UN, the Non-Aligned Movement, Global Movement of Moderates, and the Islamic Conference Organization	ASEAN, UN, OIC, G20, MITKA,	UN, ASEAN-plus, East Asia Summit (EAS), G20, Organization of economic cooperation and Development (OECD)	UN, ASEAN, World Trade Organization (WTO), International Monetary Fund (IMF), Asian Development Bank (ADB)

Figure 8:2- Missing in the debates on Asian Middle Power Diplomacy

Theoretical/ Conceptual Scope	Malaysia	Indonesia	South Korea	Vietnam
ASIAN VALUES	People-centrism, moderatism, moral balance,	Inclusivity, non-interference, regional autonomy, consultation and consensus-based approaches, peaceful co-existence.	Identity, Nationalism	Diplomatic Normalization after Cold War, mutual benefits, openness and friendliness, non-alignment, regional security, prosperity, and peaceful coexistence for all
INDIGENOUS MIDDLE POWER STRATEGIES	Neutrality	Hedging-plus	Strategic Ambiguity	Principled Pragmatism

Malaysia is continuing to adhere to its principles of neutrality, Vietnam, and Indonesia continues to remain principled and pragmatic, upholding their long-stranding principles of non-alignment, wherein Vietnam's principle of non-alignment seeks omni-directional relations with great and other non-great powers. However, Indonesia's non-alignment principle displays wariness to great powers and its influence. South Korean strategic ambiguity prioritizes its concerns arising from the Sino-US competition, supply chains, and other new regional security threats. Strategic ambiguity additionally opens newer doorways for Korea to diversify its relations beyond its alliance partner in seeking its national interests. As a global pivotal state, South Korea is determined to contribute to peace, freedom and prosperity of the region by seeking and strengthening proactive middle power diplomatic measures to respond to new and emerging security threats in the region.

Therefore, the region is diverse and plural in its economic, security and other spheres of middle power proactivism, this leading to distinctive and plural strategies and approaches to peace and

stability. The volatility of the region is attributed to the presence of many players, yet the region has remained relatively stable despite the complex reality. Further engagements on approaches to challenges in the region must reflect this complex reality rather than leading unilaterally,

In this manner, the dynamic nature of middle powers in the Asia-Pacific requires continual rethinking from national, regional and international perspectives, thus broadening the existing IR literature with newer and nuanced approaches to study the region in the 21st century changing international order.

8.4. NORMATIVE SECURITY STRATEGIES IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

Clearly, from the above contestations within the major middle power strategies in the existing literature, and the comparisons from alternate perspectives on distinctive, indigenous, and different strategies pursued by the middle power in the Asia-Pacific region, leads us to understand that one approach cannot fit the national considerations, and thereby necessitates newer studies, especially in the emerging multipolar world order defined with the rising relevance of Asian and other non-Western powers.

The new world order reveals informal, flexible, and multi-aligned behavioural tendencies, presenting traditional or Western, established or evolved, emerging or performing middle powers across the globe with a myriad of opportunities to pursue their unique foreign policies, reflective of their national self-goals, values, cultural and behavioural norms, amongst many other considerations (Ng Eng Hen, 2015; 2018). Such dynamism and the changing nature of the concept, therefore, makes each case study distinctive to study in IR and other applicable fields.

Exploring the eclecticism in middlepowermanship in Western and non-Western ‘Global IR’ perspectives in the region has helped enhance dialogue between various schools of thought, thereby promoting inclusivity and greater pluralism in the middle power discourse (Efsthopoulos, 2023). In the mainstream literature on middle power agency, roles, and behaviour, the Western schools of thought focus on the good international citizenship, multilateralism, nuclear proliferation, international cooperation maintains a monolithic and one-dimensional approach largely viewed as conformists in their positioning towards the preservation of the liberal

international order (Paul, 2004; Cooper & Dal, 2016). The voices of the global South due to their proactive diplomacy, are mostly seen to work with a reformist agenda (Jordaan, 2003). Such binaries, however, fail to consider the innate national role conception fuelling a wide array of diverse, informal, fluid and flexible nature of constantly evolving middle power agency and diplomatic behaviour in a multipolar setting (Anderson, 2019; Efstathopoulos, 2023).

In this manner, the dichotomous bifurcation through narrow lenses presents additional problems, thereby demonstrating the need for comprehensive and nuanced study of the non-Western region. The non-Western 'Global IR' analytical frameworks provides avenues for rethinking of middle power theorization, furthermore, also recognise the dynamics of Western and non-Western experiences in a broad and comprehensive analysis of the concept (Zhao, 2013; Eun et al, 2022). Such studies allow diverse regional and national schools of thought in IR along with diverse criteria and considerations, transcending the niche set of middle power behavioural standards. Moreover, these broad studies reveal the cleavages of rigid discourses as Western and non-Western middle powers exhibit both converging and divergent patterns of behaviour in their interactions with multipolar powers. Perhaps the narrow and established middle power concepts in IR can mature by accommodating the pluralistic voices of the other. Some call the broader intellectual exercise to constitute 'pluralistic universalism' in order to enhance the diversity of voices, thereby forging common grounds between different perspectives (Acharya, 2014). Although similar internationalism, risk management, and multilateral interests exists, the modernity, experiences, national considerations, history, cultural norms, values, and normative behaviour requires revising of existing understanding for broader debates fostering greater knowledge, mutual learning and dialogue, especially with the rising relevance of Asian powers in the emerging multipolar/multiplex/multi-aligned order of the 21st century.

As the world is moving towards this informal arrangement in the global order, several region, including the Asia-Pacific and the broader Indo-Pacific, is witnessing an increasing development of issue-based minilaterals hosting a variety of shifting, flexible and informal partnerships. The dynamics of institutionalization and regionalization have transformed, in some sense, accelerating in the 21st century international politics (Cooper, 2023). For instance, consider the long, complicated and intensifying dispute in the SCS that has created tensions in regional stability, and peace, causing strains within and outside the region. This dispute is concerning to the parties

involved for multiple reasons; essentially, the dispute serves as a prominent flashpoint impeding regional peace, further obstructing deepening ties between China and the ASEAN; additionally, the global Sino-US strategic rivalry can potentially spill over to the Southeast Asian region (Thomson & Chong, 2022), if mishandled, therefore, calling to question ASEAN's effectiveness, relevance, centrality and unity in regional affairs (Hu, 2023).

Both sceptics and optimists have evaluated ASEAN's effectiveness and ineffectiveness, in doing so, the critics contend differences of interests, inability to manoeuvre great power competition, continuing turmoil in Myanmar, and the long impasse on SCS resolutions negotiations demonstrates fundamental weaknesses in their operations (Luo, 2022). Organizationally, ASEAN's overly process-oriented decision mechanisms are impacting timeliness, effectiveness, and consensus on critical sovereignty issues in the region (Baviera & Maramis, 2017). However, is the glass, in fact, half-empty? Many scholars also observe that the grouping must be credited for the ASEAN Way of normative institutional practices- decision making through consensus building, non-confrontation, informality, and consultation-based resolutions to ensure social progressiveness, economic growth, peace, and relative stability in its regional order (Emmerson, 2012; Acharya, 2014; Lohman, 2015). ASEAN is key to building shared identity or as Acharya (1997; 2014) describes as the 'we-feeling' through shared historical heritage and common goals in contemporary times anchored by regionalism, pluralism, norms, institutional informality in the modes of engagement and common development needs (IMF report on ASEAN leaders' gathering, 2018). Yet, regional security architectural goals top the need to bolster cooperation. As a grouping established to promote and maintain peace and regional stability, ASEAN states, including the claimant states are inclined to ASEAN-led regional approaches to manage dispute resolution on SCS (Koga, 2022). Moreover, seeking ASEAN's help will help small claimant countries to avoid bilateral negotiations with an unequal giant China (Wen & Xiaochen, 2016). Besides, non-claimant states are keenly endorsing ASEAN-led approaches to discuss the SCS dispute considering the adversity caused by the conflicts at sea on the overall region. Despite internal disagreements on the nature of internalization of the SCS conflict the ASEAN interests remain shared on the evolving Sino-US power play in the region (Severino, 2004).

However, ASEAN's strategies of dispute resolution are not without criticisms and challenges. Mostly, such criticisms are centred on its lack of consistency and incapability to create effective

coherent response to Chinese aggressive actions, thus widening divergences and miscalculations in the ASEAN Way (Li, 2017). Most cited illustration is Cambodian veto on matters of SCS dispute under Chinese influence, further revealing disunity and varying interests in responding to Chinese heavy-handedness (Hu, 2023). Moreover, ASEAN's long process-oriented approach has exposed challenges to consensus-building mechanism leaving Southeast Asian claimant states to seek arbitration or bilateral negotiations under mounting pressures to settle grievances with China. Despite such revivals to the long prevailing impasse on dispute resolution, Chinese rapid military build-up in the islands of the SCS has hastened policies to boost naval expenditure with multi-billion-dollar purchases of fighter jets (42 Rafale and 36 F-15 fighter jets) (Jaknanihan, 2022). Indonesia has also enhanced its regional defence cooperation with Singapore, Philippines, Japan, Australia, ROK or South Korea, and India among others to adopt a robust response to Chinese behaviour in the sea (Piri, 2022). However, one could ask does this whisper the making of a "coalition of the willing" with Maritime Southeast Asia in today's middle power moment?

Indonesia has opened the space to resurrect historically proposed the making of a coalition of the willing for maritime Southeast Asia, thereby convening a 2021 special meeting of maritime security officials of Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam to strengthen maritime security ties. In responding to Chinese assertiveness, these maritime countries are signalling intent to cooperate by building coordinated approaches among ASEAN coast guards (RFA, 2021). Furthermore, preference for cooperation for interactions between actors, soft multilateral balancing, greater dialogue initiative on regional and international security matters through a proliferation of informal agencies has played a crucial role in shaping the new order in the Asia-Pacific (Teo, 2023).

With multi-faceted approached, middle power, today are displaying unique potential to preserve peace and stability amidst the ongoing Sino-US rivalry. Some Western have greater potential to balance the rivalries, while some other allies are choosing to hedge and manage the risks with China in order to win economic advantages alongside bandwagoning with the US to contain the overall Chinese influence in the region. Other rising Asian powers are choosing from a wide range of options from appeasement, neutrality, constructive engagements, principled yet pragmatic diplomacy, to also include informal regional cooperation, therefore, instead of apprehensiveness

of entrapments, middle powers in the 21st century are pivotal to advance their national and regional interests in navigating through the rivalry politics.

IR scholarship has constantly defined and redefined systemic uncertainties. The present age of uncertainties largely insists on heightened pluralism in global affairs. In simple words, it implies multiple actors, multiple power centres, multiple vectors, multiple factors, and multi-layered engagements on traditional and non-traditional securities, thereby recognizing security pluralism in regional security complex of the Asia-Pacific. Multi-layered and multiplayer arena describes different models of constructive engagements retrospective of the interaction of ‘spokes’, thereby creating a mutually beneficial platform through a plethora of multilateral, minilateral, and informal cooperation in ensuring self-help governance amongst middle powers in the region today. In this regard, MITKA-plus and Quad-plus in the larger Indo-Pacific construct empowers enhanced middle power cooperation on critical issues, despite some systemic challenges.

The compounding reality adds several layers to the issues ranging from military presence, geo-economics, plural, and normative behaviour, thus shaping the complexities and cooperation in middle power diplomacy of the 21st century in the Asia-Pacific region.

CHAPTER- 9

CONCLUSION

9.1. EFFECTIVENESS AND INEFFECTIVENESS OF MIDDLE POWER STRATEGIES

In the long run, one of the major trends in international politics is the growing desire of middle powers for more control in shaping the global order and seeking greater influence over specific issues and outcomes. It is evident in Turkey's regional ambitions for influence and voice, as well as increasing its military presence, abroad. Brazil is another important middle power setting the vision for a multipolar world and strategic autonomy with greater representational voices from the global south (Tyler, 2023). Karen House has compared leaders such as Mohammad Bin Salman and Xi Jinping perceived as leaders with grand ambitions and symbolizing proud ancient civilizations superior to Western values, thereby, suggesting that some middle powers possess a sense of exceptionalism parallel to great power exceptionalism (House, 2022).

Recent months have highlighted growing middle-power activism. Saudi Arabia's resistance to the Biden administration's efforts to reduce oil prices, Turkey's extended blockade of Sweden's NATO membership bid, Indonesia's declining to bar the Russian delegation to the G20 summit in Bali, and India's continual expansion of economic and military ties with Russia all indicate the proliferation of middle power activism (Echols, 2022). Such events have revealed the challenges to the US-led order in which middle powers are moulding a substantially significant geopolitical space to occupy in world politics.

The optimistic ideas of an 'Asia-Pacific Century' involving increased economic integration, multilateral cooperation and institution building, coalesced with their smoother recovery from the global financial crisis in 2008 facilitated in fostering interest in the middle powers of the region in the 2000s. Simultaneously, endeavours of Western middle power ranging from Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's proposal for an Asia-Pacific Community to the development of MIKTA, a middle power minilateral organization including Mexico, Indonesia, Korea, Turkey, and Australia. Such efforts fueled that middle powers had the ability and willingness to reorganize the international system, like the strategy used by non-western middle power minilateral conferences such as BRICS and IBSA in the early 2000s (Kyoung, 2023). However, some ideas and strategies

failed to gain popularity. Rudd's Asia-Pacific Community never got off the ground, and MIKTA has failed to make an impact in international politics.

Nonetheless, influential middle powers such as Australia, South Korea, and Indonesia continue to identify in this way while pursuing adapted, modified, and updated and renewed forms of 'classic or traditional' middle power diplomacy through coalition-building, multilateralism, and norms entrepreneurship (Hynd & Wilkins, 2024). Crucially, in retrospect, the middle power initiatives, and diplomatic strategies of the early 2010s seem insufficiently focused on the role of power, with a foggy agenda that frequently lacked clear and precise objectives. However, as the regional context continues to shift toward intense power rivalry, middle power strategies are evolving (Swejis & Mazarr, 2023).

Studies of balancing, bandwagoning, and hedging fail to encompass the many strategic options available and pursued by the middle powers in the Asia-Pacific region. Many observers continue to hold the view that the time has arrived for the region to choose sides between Washington and Beijing while the region is becoming a strategic theatre of power competition. However, this view is rather mistaken as such binaries are what the countries in the region are aiming to resist, instead are hoping to develop creative arrangements that involve the major powers and, in some cases even transcend their involvement. The various states in the Asia-Pacific region are embracing various strategies including neutrality, non-alignment, multi-alignment, assimilation, hedging, strategic ambiguity, and diversifying relations among others. Some are pursued simultaneously are not mutually exclusive. Their desired order is inclusive, multi-layered, and multipolar, with no single dominant power (Abbondanza, 2022). It is embodied in ASEAN and ASEAN-led institutional mechanisms. The East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) are the only multilateral bodies that comprise the region's competing nations and all major stakeholders. These and other small-state-led forums, including the 27-member ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the 13-member ASEAN Plus Three (APT), serve as the foundation for a multilayered discourse. Their overlapping structures may look fragmented, yet these institutional traits encourage boosting cooperation, maximizing benefits, and reducing uncertainty (Daniel, 2020).

Looking closely through the case studies in this thesis suggests Malaysia, despite being referred as the small country in comparison to China and Southeast Asian nations, has been pursuing active regional diplomacy. Long-standing and pragmatic, Malaysia's small-state agency has been grounded in non-alignment, neutrality, and equidistant diplomacy. Malaysia, a multiethnic, middle-income nation, has continued to pursue this policy amid increasing external uncertainties, despite facing significant internal political challenges and uncertainties as well as historic leadership transitions. Following the historic 2018 general elections, which brought an end to the United Malays National Organization-led coalition's six-decade rule, four governments came and went between 2018 and 2023. Neutrality for Malaysia refers to consciously upholding a neutral, impartial approach while pursuing constructive, cooperative relationships and pragmatic solutions with all nations, inclusively and consensually. The inclusive and neutral architecture is not only present in developmental or economic spheres such as embracing Chinese BRI projects, and the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, but also in defence, security, and diplomatic affairs (Lopez, 2023).

However, the neutrality and non-alignment must not be understood in the South China Sea context as Malaysia is a claimant state. Therefore, on this matter, Malaysian political elites have stressed the independence and sovereignty of the nation. These security issues appear to have been exacerbated by US-China competition. Beyond this, the rivalry has spilled over to several domains including technology, supply-chain resilience, globalization, and connectivity. Growing tensions on Taiwan and the growing agency of European middle powers in Indo-Pacific affairs has made the region a crowded strategic ground. The intensifying rivalry is presenting Malaysia with opportunities to pursue middle power agency through ASEAN, moderate Islam, and respecting all nations, additionally benefit from the rivalry through relocating multinational corporations, and institutional balancing in the short run (Aziz, 2024). Nevertheless, long-term risks of growing uncertainty, mismanagement, stagnancy in resolving the SCS dispute, conflict over Taiwan, and increasing Chinese maritime aggressions can cause major obstacles in maintaining the middle power moment, activism, and agency.

On the other hand, Indonesian middle power rhetoric is strong on its national considerations to pursue an active, independent, and free foreign policy, thereby engaging key players through its leadership roles in organizations and forums such as G20 and ASEAN in order to play the role of

norm entrepreneur, problem-solver and consensus-builder. Their reiterations on promoting inclusivity have been reflected in its key initiatives such as regional security, maritime security, defence equipment procurements, climate change, developmental issues, financial cooperation, and economic integration. However, the region remains vulnerable to Chinese aggression in the SCS, thereby demanding determined approaches to confronting China's grey-zone tactics through closer collaboration and building maritime resilience. As a leading voice and a significant middle power, Indonesia has been a proponent of strengthening regional maritime security ties, to the extent that it called for building coordination among ASEAN coastguards. As the world is becoming more multipolar, Indonesia is keen on developing creative solutions through issue-based minilaterals, or 'maritime coalition of the willing' involving the claimant states (Vijaya, 2023). Despite some advantages to such approaches, challenges of internal constraints, and varying degrees of responses can potentially limit their achievements.

South Korea is another crucial case study as it is, like many other middle powers, also facing similar difficulties. The high-threat strategic environment has led to ROK carefully manoeuvring between China and the US, resulting in remarkably cautious behaviour or sometimes even ambiguous. This is largely a result of their economic interconnectedness with China and security dependence on the US. China is a free trade partner and the trade between the two countries USD 240 bn in 2020. Their trade witnessed a sharp decline of 18.8 percent in 2023, hence amounting to USD 162 bn. Despite the decrease, Seoul recorded its first trade deficit with China in the past three decades (Hosakawa, 2024). On security, Korea remains a formal ally of the US. Additionally, South Korea took too long to join the discourse on the Indo-Pacific and, therefore, was unable to shape the framework significantly. Lee notes that the Korean government were caught by surprise and, hence, was not prepared to either support or reject the concept in 2017. The delayed acknowledgement is also indicative of the strategic dilemma of the country, torn in its position between the US and China.

Subsequently, South Korea, for the past few years, has opted for strategic ambiguity in order to thread carefully between the two competing powers, as well as diversify strategic relations with other middle powers through policies such as 'new Southern policy plus or NSP Plus' aimed at strengthening underdeveloped relations with ASEAN nations. Thus, they are harnessing the increasing multipolarity, as well as creating pathways for a collective, cooperative middle power

vision for the region's security. Under the new President, Yoon Suk Yeol, South Korea has made a strong case for changing strategic ambiguity with "strategic clarity" that aims to achieve security and stability on the Korean Peninsula through a deeper trilateral partnership with Washington and Tokyo as well as a robust alliance between South Korea and the US. Additionally, he has consistently emphasized the need for Seoul to adopt an approach towards a global pivotal state with liberal values, promoting increased ties with like-minded nations through value diplomacy (Kyoung, 2023). Nonetheless, regional security, North Korean nuclear proliferation and testing, managing relations with China, and inter-Korean stalemate will remain major obstacles for South Korea to find creative and like-minded resolutions.

Vietnam, on the other hand, has witnessed consistent economic growth since its Doi Moi (innovation) reforms aimed at multi-sector economic integration. Since joining ASEAN in 1995, Vietnam's foreign policy has been particularly active and multidirectional/omnidirectional in its efforts to break its long-standing isolation. Vietnam has swiftly normalised relations with erstwhile adversaries and forged diplomatic relations with new friends. When Vietnam joined ASEAN, it also normalised relations with the US. The last two decades have been the most significant phase of national rejuvenation and overall progress in Vietnam's internal and foreign development. Nguyen Phu Trong developed the term 'Vietnamese Bamboo Diplomacy' in 2016 to describe diplomatic strategies for navigating international tensions. This diplomatic approach was vigorously pursued in 2021, demonstrating a carefully balanced posture that shared worries about rising Chinese aggression, particularly in the South China Sea, while still maintaining strong economic ties with China (Giang, 2023). Vietnam's foreign policy is guided by a principled and pragmatic approach to promoting national interests, regardless of ideology. Indeed, Vietnam maintains close connections with the US, its Western allies, and China. Furthermore, Vietnam promotes economic relations with both parties. Finally, Vietnam's foreign policy exhibits a balanced approach founded on the concept of bamboo diplomacy by ensuring flexible strategy without taking sides to find peaceful and long-lasting solutions to global rivalry (Jain, 2021). Nevertheless, increasing Chinese presence in SCS has been a consistent challenge. Vietnam has been seeking to ramp up its security and defence capacity. In this regard, Vietnam has increased cooperation with ASEAN countries, and other regional powers, including India, and South Korea, to purchase defence equipment (The Hindu, 2024). Vietnam has sought to improve cooperation between coastguards of ASEAN countries, recently in January 2024 signed between Vietnam and

the Philippines. It has additionally initiated plans to increase military presence through the expansion of the Spratly Islands (Reuters, 2023).

Thus, considering the challenges and security complexities of the Asia-Pacific region, the middle powers have reinvented their strategies in three distinctive ways. As the world is becoming more multipolar, middle powers in the region are seeking flexible partnerships, creative issue-specific minilateral arrangements, like-minded coalitions, and value-based diplomacy to preserve peace and stability in the region.

9.2. TOWARDS BROADENING THE UNDERSTANDING OF MIDDLE POWERS

The Asia-Pacific, as a region, has evolved from its colonial past to become an emerging influential power hub, thus bringing fluidity to its definitions. Unlike flying geese, the region is like an earthbound amoeba with economic, technological, demographic, and social growth, drawing the attention of several scholars and policymakers to the distinctive, and dynamic nature of this region amidst great power competition and the emerging multipolarity. Their emergence has, in many ways, reshaped the ongoing debates on the role, responsibilities, and relevance of middle power in IR studies. The proliferation of middle power agency in Asia amongst several powers such as Indonesia, South Korea, Vietnam, Mexico, Brazil, South Africa, India, Japan and many more since the past five decades has stimulated new ideas on their diplomatic practices beyond the traditional, niche, Western powers such as Australia and Canada.

However, the existing literature lacks consensus and clarity on defining the middle power concept, thereby causing complexities in further studies. Nonetheless, the middle power conceptualization, largely categorizes their diplomatic behaviour through capacity (medium-sized capabilities), behavioural and functional analysis (like-mindedness, problem-solving, arbitrage and brokerage), and identity (normativity and inter-subjectivity). In this manner, the material capabilities, geostrategic location, cooperative behaviour, are crucial, however, along with it are also the factors driving their moral and normative sense through independent and proactive diplomatic approaches. The end of Cold War and the and the eventual advent of multipolarity led some scholars to recalibrate these classifications as rising, relevant, emerging middle powers or regional powers in Asia and other parts of the world actuated the middle power rhetoric to justify their unique positions in the international order of the 21st century.

Due to their robust economies, steady military development, strong civil societies that are courted by both the East and the West, tendencies for multilateralism, ability to form like-minded coalitions, good international citizenship, and willingness to act as peace brokers, middle powers have become increasingly essential to emerging discourses in IR. This has increased their capacity to play a crucial role at both the regional and global levels. Some have suggested creating a "committee to save the world order" in this scenario, giving middle powers around the globe an avenue to pursue proactive policies as counter-hegemonic forces at an era of transitioning order.

The idea of middle powers has now been expanded to include several active and emerging Asian nations. However, these studies overlook the unique and indigenous historical and social values, interests, and identities that underpin their strategies and policies. Because of this, a number of studies on Asian middle power diplomacy have lately come within scrutiny for their Western-centric "Westphalian straitjacket" by laying more emphasis on realist, neo-realist, liberal, and critical perspectives in their discussions of material capabilities, world order, free trade, international cooperation, and the changing nature of middle power roles.

Therefore, there is a need to rethink these discourses by taking into consideration several factors, such as, the ideational, aesthetic and normative factors defined through societal structures, political values, national culture and norms, historical memories, national role conception, regional dynamics, and responses to international development for effective understanding of middle powers in a non-Western setting. Such intellectual exercises lead to pluralism and broadening of discourses by including indigenous history of ideas and several emerging players in the region, such as Indonesia, South Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, the Philippines, Japan, India, amongst others, spearheading the broadening of theoretical and discursive IR through non-Western 'Global IR' experiences.

This thesis considers four pivotal middle powers in the Asia-Pacific region as case studies, namely Malaysia, Indonesia, South Korea, and Vietnam, due to their unique historical heritages, continuing ideas, experiences, and normative behaviour in their middle power rhetoric.

Malaysian foreign policy has reflected its distinctive scope of pursuing friendliness, openness, and moderatism in their outlook to regional and international politics. The mainstream literature focuses on Malaysian ability for regional diplomacy, their penchant for multilateralism, and their

consensus building efforts for regional peace and stability; however, there are additional endurances based on their indigenous thought driving their people-centrism in gaining national and international respect, porous borders, moderate political outlook and neutrality in international politics, thereby promoting inclusivity, diversity in engagement, and peaceful coexistence of different states and political regimes in the region.

The study Indonesian foreign policy, similarly, reveals an evolution in interests and, in some sense, a continuity of their pragmatism. Their strong national considerations are upheld on the basis of their historical experiences, political endurances, and national needs, therefore considering a free, independent, and active as cornerstones of their foreign policy. Their growing middle power influence is largely observed through their multilateral initiatives, entrepreneurial leadership, robust economy, social mobility. Moreover, their normative diffusion, consensus and consultation-based problem-solving approaches, dynamic institutionalism, nationalism, their increasing capacity and relevance has facilitated in maintaining its dynamic equilibrium. Indonesia is, hence, pursuing hedging-plus strategies to protect their national interests and to demonstrate normative institutionalism in the multipolar world order.

South Korean politics, unlike Indonesia, is scrutinized for its instability due to influence of ideological considerations in foreign policy under different liberal and conservative governments. Liberals like Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyun, and Moon Jae-in have actively pursued approaches to peace in regional affairs, particularly in addressing the North Korean nuclear problem. In contrast, Lee Myung-bak and Park Guen-hye's conservative governments have paid more attention to global issues and have enacted important policies that have a bearing on the international perception of Korea. Like other middle powers in the region, South Korea must maximise its advantages while incurring the fewest possible costs from China and its ally, the US. In this regard, the Korean discourses are dominated by a strategy of strategic ambiguity, to which some sceptics attribute the need for clarity given the fear of ambiguity. However, if their practices are combined with principled diplomatic rhetoric, it will help sustain Korean middlepowermanship in the foreseeable future, beyond ideological considerations.

The final case study on Vietnamese foreign policy has witnessed pragmatic changes to strengthen domestic reforms, as their foreign policy imperatives are considered as an extension of national

interests and self-goals. In this regard, their foreign policy evolved during the end of the Cold War with the adoption of '*Doi Moi*' or renovation aimed at seeking constructive and active engagements at diverse and multilateral levels with both Western and non-Western powers for economic growth and development. Successive governments of the CPV have strengthened multiples reforms and resolutions under the banner of renovation, thereby maintaining consistency and stability in their discourses. Despite seeking economic advantages through pragmatic considerations, Vietnam has additionally maintained its firm principles of national independence, territorial sovereignty, non-alignment, maritime security, and peaceful co-existence of all in the region. Although their rhetoric may not use the middle power terminologies, Vietnam, located strategically, is emerging as a crucial middle power with an increasing potential for new markets and economic cooperation.

There is a need to broaden the existing narrow understanding of middle power from alternative perspectives that presents us with a wide range of ideas, contestations, knowledge claims and indigenous schools of thoughts driving the analytical eclecticism of middle powers in theoretical and discursive IR. Therefore, exploring aesthetic, ideational, and normative non-Western influences in middle power roles, behaviour, and status is the need of the hour, furthermore, demonstrates the distinctiveness in national approaches and the region, as a whole.

The impact of great power competition cannot be overlooked due to the complex nature of dilemmas affecting middle power relations with major players around the world, furthermore causing strains in creating a peaceful and stable order. Middle powers in the region are sceptical of the presence of major powers such as the US and an assertive China. By pursuing co-engagement strategies, the middle powers are additionally seeking diversification in bilateral, multilateral, minilateral and informal coalitions shaping the dynamic institutionalization and normative diffusion in the transitioning era towards a multipolar world order.

In this context, this thesis posits the need for diversity and pluralism in middle power discourse by taking into consideration crucial non-Western experiences, values, principles and norms shaping the informal, multiplex, and multipolar order in the 21st century. Indeed, the ASEAN states and nations in the larger Asia-Pacific region have been instrumental in setting, recognizing and implementing these non-Western principles in guiding their regional diplomatic initiatives.

However, it requires constant efforts in order to engage the major powers today. The challenges posed by such geopolitical competition necessitate creative, normative, emotive, yet strategic approaches for the overarching stability and durability in preserving regional autonomy from geopolitical contestations.

The ASEAN states can ensure accountability and stability in their decision-making mechanisms in the emerging order by developing the norm of responsibility to consult, further enhancing their ASEAN centrality, neutrality, and unity through security pluralism in the midst of such dynamism with plural actors, discourses, threats, challenges, and vulnerabilities. Several informal, coalition-based minilateral fanfares are gaining momentum for increased cooperation. In this regard, MITKA-plus and Quad-plus, with the inclusion of regional middle powers, provide avenues to enhance and strengthen middle power engagement. Reiterations of ZOPHAN 2.0 to maintain regional peace raises serious challenges, however, it should not restrict states from thriving to develop accountability, transparency and confidence to monitor military deployments harming regional interests.

Therefore, in the 21st century, complex security pluralism in the Asia-Pacific region rests on a) interdependence described by the multidimensional, omnidirectional, broad, long-term stability through informal networks, b) defensive military doctrines, defence partnerships, strategic restraint, and normative institutionalism for cooperative security to moderate great power contestations, and finally, c) the evolution of the history of ideas emphasizing their driving principles including tolerance, co-engagement, multiculturalism, accommodation, and norm diffusion. The region's plurality offers diversity and decentralisation ascribing to the polyethnic collection of indigenous historical ideologies, thus discouraging hegemony by fostering regional identity, unity, cooperation, balance, and stability in the evolving multipolar world order.

The buck does not stop here. The constantly changing nature of middle power politics in the region demonstrates further avenues for research on the varied nature of securitization of risks in middle power politics, additionally taking into account their non-Western texts for a creative understanding of these nations and their identities. Additionally, studies on pluralism in the multipolar order require newer, alternate, and indigenous voices to broaden the ongoing debates

on reflexivity and intersubjectivity. More studies on complexity, globality, and plurality will indeed attempt to broaden the existing middle power discourses in IR.

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