

THE (MIDDLE) POWER OF ‘NO’

Yvonne Chiu

Published: 26 March 2025

Unlike Goldilocks’ happy medium, middle powers’ places in the international hierarchy are often not ‘just right’: they possess sufficient material and/or political capacity to be consequential entities in their own right but [can neither resist nor impose systemic change in the international order](#).

How else can middle powers wield their national power? They can say ‘no’. While they may not be able to dictate the direction of the international order, they can use denial and refusal to leverage their positions.

Essential geography

Some middle powers have been blessed—and simultaneously cursed—by the geographic lottery, e.g., key points in the First Island Chain that are also enticing for conquest, such as Taiwan and the Philippines. Freedom of navigation accounts for [much of post-WWII global economic prosperity](#), as [80–85% of the world’s trade](#) and about [60% of oil](#) and gas are transported on the oceans. Thus, the ability to interdict sea lines of communication is consequential not just for military endeavors but also for economic ones. Countries that are geographically vital to maintaining or interdicting maritime transport can wield out-sized ‘middle’ power through their geographic position—directly, with their military capabilities; or indirectly, by granting or denying other countries various authorities to operate from their territory.

Essential economy

In a globalized economy, middle powers can also position themselves as essential nodes in critical supply chains. Taiwan is currently testing the geopolitical value of this strategy, with a ‘silicon shield’ around its critical manufacturing node in an equally critical global semiconductor supply chain. While China produces more chips overall, its industry is several generations behind the cutting edge. Taiwan leads global advanced chip manufacturing, producing [69% of the world’s <10nm](#) chips in 2022 and about 90% of the most advanced ones.

A global chip shortage from an invasion of Taiwan would have far greater economic fallout than that from COVID-19, which severely impacted the price and availability of ‘Internet of Things’ devices, electronics, cars, weaponry, and other goods. The US CHIPS and Science Act (2022) attempts to reduce this dependence. However, even with increased American production (TSMC’s [Arizona plant](#) and [other investments](#)) and global competition, Taiwan’s portion of global chip production is expected to stay steady through to 2032. The [US must rely on Taiwan for the foreseeable future](#) because of [its own limitations, the semiconductor industry’s supply chain structure](#), and [Taiwanese plants remaining at least one generation](#)

[ahead of its overseas ones](#). Furthermore, [TSMC and ASML reportedly have kill switches to remotely disable EUV machines](#) if necessary.

The threat of denial

Since economic interdependence has not reliably prevented war historically, is the threat of economic denial a viable strategy? Whether semiconductor supply alone can deter China or spur the US or others to defend Taiwan against China will depend in part on the nature of the international order at the time. For example, a diminished US of its own making may be less conducive to this strategy. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine shattered a widespread belief that major nations will ultimately prioritize peace and economic prosperity over glory, honor, revenge, or expansion via warfare.

The power of 'no'

When threats of denial fail, middle powers can resort to saying 'no'. In fact, they must be prepared to do so for their original threats to be credible. Despite great power pressures, middle powers have more latitude than they often believe. Even [client states have agency](#) and tend to exercise it at times inconvenient for the great power. For example, the Korean War was extended in part because South Korea's leader resisted pressure from his great power patron, while the USSR, PRC, and DPRK's nested patron-client relations amplified their disagreements on how to resolve POW exchange. Around the same time, Tito split Yugoslavia from Stalin's Soviet orbit, and Yugoslavia and India spawned what became the Non-Aligned Movement, which still reverberates today.

Their limitations notwithstanding, middle powers can exercise the option of refusal, whether it is Ukraine recently [scuttling the US' minerals deal](#) despite its difficult and perhaps unwinnable situation or Taiwan deterring war by limiting the technological expertise it shares. Middle powers may not be able to command the arena, but they can deny control of the arena for specific activities and/or at specific times.

Whence the liberal international order?

Whether or not middle powers must be ['good' global citizens](#), they can shape norms, especially in a [shifting international order](#). One Taiwanese strategy has been to present itself as liberal, democratic, rule-of-law abiding, and internationally responsible (unlike its aggressive neighbor) and that therefore, the international community should value Taiwan's survival. As right-wing populism [rises](#) and becomes [more successful electorally](#), including in post-WWII liberal democratic stalwarts ([US](#), [France](#), [Germany](#)), could [middle powers sustain liberal international norms in turbulent times](#) without the organizing presence of a like-minded superpower?

That Taiwan [liberalized and democratized](#) of its own accord despite threats from an authoritarian neighbor, highlights the need for middle powers to shoulder more of this responsibility in today's international environment. While middle powers cannot dictate the shape of the international order, they can reject specific structures and terms in order to sustain the international viability of liberal democratic values. For example, European middle

powers are rebuffing US President Trump's strategy by [coalescing](#) to bolster Ukrainian resistance against Russia.

In the past three-quarters century, geopolitical domination by opposing superpowers has constrained middle powers but also eased their decision-making. A flatter geopolitical landscape without great power epicenters allows more choice but is harder to navigate and increases the difficulty of sustaining coordinated blocs of rival middle powers.

They would have to commit more resources and be more assertive militarily in order to take over some responsibilities of the retreating liberal democratic superpower, especially in enforcing open seas and defending territorial claims. [Germany, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand](#) have all recently conducted FONOPS through the Taiwan Strait—in some cases their first. Middle powers have free-riden on the military cover of great powers—[which the great powers have wanted in order to maintain control](#)—but exercising more military heft will also make their economic threats more credible and augment their diplomatic influence.

History is written mostly about 'great men' and 'great powers', but it is not driven merely by them. As the liberal democratic great power epicenter evolves, middle powers have the capacity—and responsibility—to uphold liberal democratic values. Middle powers do not have to simply receive norms: they, too, can shape the international order by saying 'no' when great powers are wrong.

[Yvonne Chiu](#) is Jeane Kirkpatrick Fellow, American Enterprise Institute and Associate Professor of Strategy and Policy, U.S. Naval War College. Views are her own and do not represent anyone else's.

REFERENCE LIST

- Baazil, Diederik, Cagan Koc, and Jordan Robertson. 2024. "ASML and TSMC Can Disable Chip Machines If China Invades Taiwan". Bloomberg, May 21.
<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-05-21/asml-tsmc-can-disable-chip-machines-if-china-invades-taiwan>
- Blake, Aaron. 2025. "4 takeaways from the Trump-Zelensky meeting that devolved into a shouting match". The Washington Post, February 28.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2025/02/28/trump-zelensky-meeting-takeaways/>
- Bloch, Matthew, Keith Collins, et al. 2024. "Election Results Show a Red Shift Across the U.S. in 2024". The New York Times, December 17.
<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/11/06/us/politics/presidential-election-2024-red-shift.html>
- Chiu, Yvonne. 2018. "China wants it both ways on North Korea. Here's why it can't". CNN, May 10. <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/05/09/opinions/china-north-korea-intl/index.html>

- Chiu, Yvonne. 2022. "Strategic Ambiguity Out of Balance: Updating an Outdated Taiwan Policy". The Strategy Bridge, November 9. <https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2022/11/9/strategic-ambiguity-out-of-balance-updating-an-outdated-taiwan-policy>
- DeAeth, Duncan. 2024. "Germany navy transits Taiwan Strait for the first time in 22 years". Taiwan News, September 13. <https://taiwannews.com.tw/news/5935877>
- Donnelly, Giselle. 2025. "European Defense Without America". The Bulwark, February 20. <https://www.thebulwark.com/p/european-defense-without-united-states-america-trump-ukraine-russia>
- Ebel, Francesca. 2025. "Washington now 'largely aligns' with Moscow's vision, Kremlin says". The Washington Post, March 2. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/03/02/russia-ukraine-trump-zelensky-clash/>
- Economist. 2025. "The trouble with MAGA's chipmaking dreams". The Economist, February 26. <https://www.economist.com/business/2025/02/26/the-trouble-with-magas-chipmaking-dreams>
- Economist. 2025. "Hard-right parties are now Europe's most popular". The Economist, February 28. <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2025/02/28/hard-right-parties-are-now-europes-most-popular>
- Economist. 2025. "Who will control the National Assembly". The Economist, March 21. <https://www.economist.com/interactive/france-elections-2024-polls-macron-le-pen>
- Everington, Keoni. 2024. "Australian, New Zealand naval vessels pass through Taiwan Strait". Taiwan News, September 26. <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/news/5942288>
- Jones, Bruce. 2021. *To Rule the Waves: How Control of the World's Oceans Shapes the Fate of the Superpowers*. Scribner.
- Jones, C., Bullock, S., Ap Dafydd Tomos, B., Freer, M., Welfle, A., and Larkin, A. 2022. Shipping's role in the global energy transition. A report for the International Chamber of Shipping. Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research, University of Manchester. <https://tyndall.ac.uk/news/new-shipping-emissions-report/>
- Landler, Mark. 2025. "An Unexpected Trump Bump for the World's Centrists". The New York Times, March 12. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/12/world/europe/trump-starmer-europe-centrists.html>
- Mickie, Trip. 2025. "TSMC, the Chip Giant, Is to Spend \$100 Billion in U.S. Over the Next 4 Years". The New York Times, March 3. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/03/technology/tsmc-investment-trump.html>

- Michaels, Daniel. 2025. "How Europe's Military Stacks Up Against Russia Without U.S. Support". The Wall Street Journal, March 13.
<https://www.wsj.com/world/europe/europe-military-compared-russia-without-us-1ccd751b>
- Nagy, Stephen and Jonathan Ping. 2023. "The End of the Normative Middle Power Ship". Australian Institute of International Affairs, March 14.
<https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/the-end-of-the-normative-middle-power-ship/>
- Ping, Jonathan. 2005. *Middle Power Statecraft: Indonesia, Malaysia and the Asia-Pacific*. Routledge, p. 226.
- Schorlemer, Lena. 2025. "Germany's Far-right AfD Doubles Vote Share and Reshapes Germany's Political Landscape". Wilson Center, February 25.
<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/germanys-far-right-afd-doubles-vote-share-and-reshapes-germanys-political-landscape>
- Shepardson, David. 2025. "TSMC begins producing 4-nanometer chips in Arizona, Raimondo says". Reuters, January 11. <https://www.reuters.com/technology/tsmc-begins-producing-4-nanometer-chips-arizona-raimondo-says-2025-01-10/>.
- Taipei Times. 2025. "Japanese ship makes first solo trip through the Strait". March 2.
<https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2025/03/02/2003832733>
- Tharoor, Ishaan. 2025. "Trump and the end of the geopolitical 'West'". The Washington Post, March 2. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/03/02/trump-end-geopolitical-west-zelensky/>
- United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). 2021. *Review of Maritime Transport, 2021*. United Nations Publications.
https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/rmt2021_en_0.pdf#page=98
- Varadarajan, Raj, Iacob Koch-Weser, et al. 2024. *Emerging Resilience in the Semiconductor Supply Chain*. Boston Consulting Group & Semiconductor Industry Association.
- Verschuur, Jasper, Elco E. Koks, and Jim W. Hall. 2022. Ports' criticality in international trade and global supply-chains. *Nature Communications* 13, 4351.
<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-022-32070-0>
- Wang, Lisa. 2024. "TSMC cannot make 2nm chips abroad now: MOEA". Taipei Times, November 8.
<https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/biz/archives/2024/11/08/2003826545>
- Wike, Richard, Moira Fagan and Laura Clancy. 2024. "Global Elections in 2024: What We Learned in a Year of Political Disruption". Pew Research Center, December 11.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/12/11/global-elections-in-2024-what->

we-learned-in-a-year-of-political-disruption/#the-staying-power-of-right-wing-populism