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Between Scylla and Charybdis: Is there a Middle Path for Middle Powers in the
Indo-Pacific Region?
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Paper Title: Mapping Malaysian Middlepowership: Domestic and Structural Sources of Small-State Activism

Synopsis: Attempts to define middlepowership mostly focus on three attributes: the relative size, capability, and impact of a sovereign state. We contend that a more important attribute in distinguishing a middle power from typical small states is activism, i.e. a persistent and concerted effort to put forward, promote, and institutionalize an actionable initiative – or a series of initiatives – into an international outcome involving other state(s) as partner(s). The greater the impact and sustainability of the outcome (e.g. an institutionalized cooperation with a growing number of partnering states, and widening scope of collaboration), the greater the middlepowership. This essay unpacks Malaysia's middlepowership – as an instance of Lilliputian survival strategy – by tracing the state's activism in promoting an array of diplomatic, development, and defence initiatives around – and beyond – Southeast Asia over the past decades. We offer a Neoclassical Realist explanation, arguing that the multi-layered features of Malaysian middlepowership are attributable to both structural and domestic factors. As the growing U.S.-China rivalry fuels the competition between Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative and the Quad's Indo-Pacific strategies, such systemic pressures and opportunities are filtered selectively by the ruling elite's domestic political needs since the country's unprecedented government change in May 2018, with effects deepening Malaysia's middlepowership and its hedging posture.

Keywords: Malaysia, Southeast Asia, Neoclassical Realism, Activism, survival