

The Japanese middle power approach to maintaining the Asian security order: promoting a common understanding

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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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Abstract: The current Asian regional order is contested by China which has increasing military and economic influence. It is widely discussed that middle powers may utilize hedging strategies to secure their national interests in response to the changing security environment. However, a middle power approach that promotes a common understanding may be advantageous and helpful in sustaining a security order. This article examines, by investigating Japan's approach, why the middle power approach is helpful in maintaining a security order and how this is done. The article then concludes that a common understanding is being shaped gradually due to Japan's middle power approach.

Keywords: Asia, BRI, China, FOIP, Japan, middle power, regional order, regional security, UNCLOS, US

Introduction

Asia appears to be in a transitional period. China has established military facilities on reclaimed land in the South China Sea, most of which it claims. Recognizing China's contestation, the existing literature, which mainly features realist to liberal views, examines the maritime security situation in Asia by focusing primarily on the competition between the United States of America (US) and China.¹ The basic assumption is that great powers such as China and the US shape the regional order. Regional states other than the US and China "balance," "hedge," or "bandwagon" in response to the changing dynamics.² For instance, the purpose of Japan's proactive engagement in the region, which is symbolized by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's "proactive contributor to peace" thesis, is to balance China's assertiveness to defend the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea.³ These states other than the US and China are only interested in securing their interests by taking a middle path between Scylla and Charybdis.⁴ However, it is arguable whether these states are merely responsive, or trying to chart a middle path in order to secure their national interests. These states may try to shape the regional order by employing their diplomatic capacities.

By investigating Japan's approach, this article examines why the middle power approach is helpful in maintaining a security order and how this is done. It can be argued that Japan is too powerful to be categorized as a middle power.⁵ Certainly, Japan's economic strength ranks third after the US and China, and the country has been the largest donor to most Asian states. In material terms, Japan is not a middle power but rather a regional power. However, in addition to Japan's aggressive past during the Second World War, Article 9 of the Constitution, which prohibits the use of force, greatly constrains its freedom of action in international security and severely limits its scope of action in the security field. Moreover, the alliance with the US has allowed Japan to depend on the US for its national security. Therefore, despite Japan possessing the third largest economy in the world and reasonable military capability, its diplomacy is reduced to that of a middle power.⁶

¹ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York, W.W. Norton, 2001); G John Ikenberry, "The Future of the Liberal World Order: Internationalism after America," *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 90, No. 3 (2011): 345; Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-First Century: China's Rise and the Fate of America's Global Position," *International Security* Vol. 40, No. 3 (2016): 7-53.

² Cheng Chwee Kuik, "How Do Weaker States Hedge? Unpacking ASEAN States' Alignment Behavior Towards China," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 25, No. 100 (2016): 500-14; Kai He, "Contested Regional Orders and Institutional Balancing in the Asia-Pacific," *International Politics* Vol. 52, No. 2 (2015): 208-22.

³ Paul Midford, "Japan's Approach to Maritime Security in the South China Sea," *Asian Survey* Vol. 55, No. 3 (2015): 547.

⁴ Charlie Edel, "Narrow Path for Asia's Middle Powers," US Studies Centre, (2019) <https://www.usssc.edu.au/analysis/a-narrow-path-for-asias-middle-powers>, accessed December 1, 2019

⁵ Jonathan Ping, *Middle power statecraft: Indonesia, Malaysia and the Asia-Pacific*, (London: Taylor and Francis 2017), 103; Lowy Institute, "Asia Power Index," Lowy Institute, (October 2020). <https://power.lowyinstitute.org/countries/japan/>

⁶ Yoshihide Soeya, "Prospects for Japan as a Middle Power," *East Asia Forum*, (2013) <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2013/07/29/prospects-for-japan-as-a-middle-power>, (accessed June 3, 2018)

The first section of this article discusses the nature of middle power diplomacy. The second section explains why the middle power approach is helpful in shaping and sustaining the current regional order. Third, the article investigates Japan's middle power approach, which seeks to shape and consolidate perceptions of a preferable regional order among states. The article concludes by arguing that Japan is attempting to shape a regional maritime order by proposing a new conceptualization and that such attempts promote a common view of a preferable order among some of the regional states.

What is middle power diplomacy?

Middle powers by definition do not have sufficient material power resources to coerce others.⁷ A segment of the middle power scholars therefore highlights middle powers' normative and diplomatic capacities in building or maintaining rules in multilateral settings.⁸ Middle powers' capacities to shape or set an agenda are illustrated by their successful attempts in areas such as human security, climate change, and dealing with land mines. For instance, the European Union member states have played a prominent role in promoting human rights and environmental norms.⁹ Australia and Japan have succeeded in playing a leading role in creating multilateral frameworks such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation to promote free trade and open regionalism.¹⁰ Thus, middle power diplomacy may contribute to building rules or developing institutions by taking diplomatic initiatives or being entrepreneurial in a niche area.

This capability of middle powers to set an agenda or pursue shared understandings among states is advantageous as well as useful not only in niche areas but also in the security arena. This is because an international order may be *sustained* by international law, common understandings, and norms.¹¹ A state that has overwhelming power may be able to establish a regional or even international order by setting up an institution or forcing other states to accept its rules and decisions. However, without support from other states, *consent*, it is difficult to maintain such an order for a long period. Even a hegemon needs to try to nurture a shared view of an order *with* follower states. That is why China is eager to cultivate a benign image of itself by providing public goods in addition to economic assistance. Given the importance of shaping a shared understanding, the middle power approach, which aims

⁷ Jonathan Ping, "Middle Power Hybridisation and China," in *Rethinking Middle Powers in the Asia Century: New theories, new cases*, ed. Tanguy Struye de Swielande; Dorothee Vandamme; David Walton; Thomas Wilkins, (Milton: Routledge, 2019).

⁸ Bruce Gilley and Andrew O'Neil, eds. *Middle Powers and the Rise of China*, (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014); Thomas Wilkins, "Australia and Middle Power Approaches to Asia Pacific Regionalism," *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (2017):120.

⁹ Ian Manners, "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?" *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (2002): 235-58.

¹⁰ Mark Beeson and Richard Higgott, "The Changing Architecture of Politics in the Asia Pacific: Australia's Middle Power Moment?" *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2002): 221; Yoichiro, Funabashi, *Asia-Pacific Fusion: Japan's Role in APEC*, (Washington, DC., Peterson Institute for International Economics, 1995); Andrew F. Cooper, Richard Higgott, and R Nossal Kim, *Relocating Middle Powers: Australia and Canada in a Changing World Order* (Melbourne, UBC Press, 1993).

¹¹ Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1977).

to encourage common understandings among states, should be effective in shaping and sustaining a regional order.

Analyzing the Asian regional order

The current Asian maritime order has been supported by two factors: US primacy, and the framework of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which provides guiding legal principles for states' behavior in the maritime domain. By concluding bilateral alliances with regional states, the US has long supported the Asia's security order. However, due to China's ascendance to great power status, the power gap between the US and China is shrinking, in particular in the economic realm. While the US accounted for about 40% of world GDP in 1960, this declined to 22.5% in 2014.¹² In contrast, China has emerged as an economic powerhouse, accounting for 13.4% of world GDP and providing economic assistance and investment to regional states. This shrinking power gap between China and the US provides China with a capacity to challenge US primacy in the region.

Moreover, while UNCLOS provides guiding principles for appropriate state behavior, the convention is ambiguous, allowing states to make various interpretations. When China harassed the US surveillance ship *Impeccable* operating in the South China Sea in 2009, it justified its behavior by presenting a different interpretation of UNCLOS. China also established military bases after reclaiming land in the South China Sea by invoking its historic rights despite its claim being struck down by a 2016 International Tribunal's ruling. By acting in such a manner, China contests the tacit common understanding held by regional states—implying peaceful settlement of disputes, compliance with law, no use of force or coercion to drive one's claims—that has underpinned the regional order.

Such Chinese unilateral claims imply that contestation occurs due to a lack of a shared view among regional states as to what kind of security order is preferable. Given the lack of common understanding, middle power diplomacy, which highlights the promotion of shared views, should be instrumental in shaping and maintaining a regional order. Yet the efficacy of middle power diplomacy is limited due to the lack of hard power resources. Therefore, by obtaining support from other states, the middle power approach should be able to embody its views as policy or rule without causing explicit confrontation.

Japan's middle power approach

The 2006 speech made by Foreign Minister Taro Aso under the first Shinzo Abe administration was the first time Japan explicitly emphasized the importance of liberal values such as freedom, the rule of law, human rights, democracy, and the market economy.

¹² Mike Patton, "U.S. Role in Global Economy Declines Nearly 50%," (2016).
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/mikepatton/2016/02/29/u-s-role-in-global-economy-declines-nearly-50/#365da1265e9e> (accessed November 1, 2019)

Aso's speech on the "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity," which outlined a loose grouping of democracies including India, Australia, and the European states made a clear contrast to its past posture, which focused on economic affairs. Then in 2007, Japan stepped up its initiatives by holding a quadrilateral meeting (Quad) of Japan, India, the US, and Australia in a working level meeting on the sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum. However, Japan's values-based diplomacy, which highlighted the importance of liberal values and cooperation among like-minded states, received a lukewarm response. China exhibited strong apprehension of what it saw as a containment strategy. Even the US was cautious about supporting Japan's strategic initiative, which it saw as likely to invite regional tensions. Then US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice avoided confronting China while the US was engaged in its "war on terrorism" in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹³ Wary of China's criticism, Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd left the group. Both the Arc of Freedom and Prosperity and the Quad initiatives failed to gain support.

Japan's emphasis on norms was taken up by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government that started in 2009, albeit in a slightly different way. Leaving aside liberal values, the DPJ government underlined norms such as the rule of law and freedom of navigation. The DPJ introduced no catchy concepts but made quiet efforts to consolidate support by strengthening security relationships with littoral countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam.

Japan's diplomacy in pursuit of shared views among regional states was reinforced when Prime Minister Abe returned to the center of the political stage in December 2012. Although bluntly criticizing China's attempts to alter the status quo in the South China Sea in his "Asia's Democratic Security Diamond" essay, he later ostensibly dropped criticism toward China and instead underlined the rule of law norm in both bilateral and multilateral settings. Japan's middle power approach then culminated in the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP)," which aims to promote the rule of law, freedom of navigation, and economic prosperity. FOIP is remarkable in two ways. First, unlike the 2007 "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity" thesis, the Indo-Pacific concept does not highlight liberal values such as human rights or democracy, but instead emphasizes economic prosperity, the rule of law and capacity building for maritime law enforcement. Given that Asian states are not necessarily democratic and have different views on human rights, the emphasis on liberal values in the approach may elicit negative responses from some of these states. Moreover, such emphasis appears to be specifically targeting China.

Second, the approach emphasizes economic prosperity and capacity building, which should be beneficial to all states and thereby diluting the confrontational element. Although capacity building is not a novel approach, it is more effective than simply providing financial assistance because capacity building necessarily involves communication and interaction between a donor and recipient states. For Japan, such routinized action makes it

¹³ *Yomiuri Shimbun* (2007) August 10.

easier to convey its views on the importance of law enforcement and thus install a normative structure in the recipient country.¹⁴

One may wonder if Japan's FOIP aims to balance China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and help maintain a US-centered order. However, the concept is neither exclusive nor inclusive. The Abe government has clarified that Japan was ready to cooperate with China for the promotion of the BRI as long as procurement is transparent and fair and projects are economically viable and adequately financed.¹⁵ Japan's message is clear: Japan is ready to support China's BRI as long as China respects the rule of law and that procedures for projects are not arbitrary. A prosperous and cooperative China is welcome, but Japan does not welcome a China that tries to change the status quo by force. To weaken the exclusive connotation of FOIP, the term "strategy," with its connotation of containment, was replaced by the term "vision."

Japan's FOIP, which promotes regional economic prosperity and the rule of law, provides a framework for regional states to reexamine a preferable regional order and a way for them to create and maintain that order. Japan's emphasis on a rule-of-law norm has been echoed by other states such as the US, India, Australia, and ASEAN countries, which showed their support for the vision, allowing for minor differences in their degree of support. For instance, Australia has been an active supporter of a rules-based order, the importance of which is repeatedly emphasized in Australian defense and foreign policy papers. Japan's FOIP has also received strong support from the Donald Trump administration even though the US takes a more confrontational approach to China. Then, in 2018, Indonesia's Prime Minister Joko Widodo announced its Indo-Pacific concept, which underlines ASEAN's centrality, transparency, and inclusiveness of states such as China. Responding to the move, ASEAN then announced its own "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific," which also emphasized ASEAN centrality, peaceful settlement of disputes, and inclusiveness of the regional architecture. This range of terms and the different degrees of emphasis they imply indicate that Japan's conceptualization does not necessarily consolidate other states' position. However, Japan's middle power approach has arguably inspired other states' views regarding a preferable regional order and contributed to discussions on how states may promote a common understanding of the regional order.

Conclusion

The current regional security order is being disputed by China who is increasing its military and economic influence. However, the reality is not a simple power competition between the US and China. China contests the current regional order by presenting different

¹⁴ Kyoko Hatakeyama, "A Middle Power's Roles in Shaping [the] East Asian Security Order: Analysis of Japan's Engagement from a Normative Perspective," *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 65, No. 3 (2019): 466-81.

¹⁵ Cabinet Office, "Asia's Dream: Linking the Pacific and Eurasia," Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Banquet of the 23rd International Conference on The Future of Asia, (2017), June 5.

interpretations. Given that the regional order is underpinned by a common understanding, a middle power approach that aims to promote such an understanding plays a role in shaping and maintaining a regional order even though it may not produce immediate or tangible results.

The examination of Japan's engagement clearly buttresses the hypothesis that a middle power approach aims to shape a regional order by promoting a common understanding. To promote a common understanding across the region, Japan presented a new concept—FOIP—which emphasizes the rule-of-law norm. Unlike its first attempt in 2006, this catchy concept was echoed by other states that held a similar view. The very ambiguity of the concept, which is neither exclusive nor inclusive, galvanized the debate among regional states that also had a concern over China's assertiveness. While articulating a view does not directly shape the regional order, similar proposals and emphasis by regional states imply that a common understanding is being gradually shaped.