

# Role Conception of the Asia-Pacific Middle Powers: Comparative Analysis of Indonesia, South Korea, Australia and Vietnam

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## Abstract

This article examines the variety of roles enacted by Asia-Pacific middle powers in response to the rise of China. This article identifies two factors determining such variety, especially in the security realm: alignment pattern and geopolitical constraints. We argue that the differences in level of alignment with the United States and the risk of geopolitical tension with China affect the role conception taken by the middle powers. We assert that the combination of a high-level of alignment and high geopolitical risk tends to cause them to take a bridging role, a low-level of alignment and low geopolitical risk drive them to take the role of regional leader, a high-level of alignment and low geopolitical risk allow them to become faithful allies, and a low-level of alignment and high geopolitical risk enable them to take an active independent role. We illustrate this framework through the comparative analysis of Indonesia, South Korea, Australia and Vietnam.

## Keywords

Role conception, middle power, alignment politics, Asia-Pacific, the rise of China

## Introduction

Since implementing significant economic reforms in 1978, China has risen to a position of a global power. As part of its new-found role, China has become more assertive in demonstrating its power and now represents a strategic challenge to

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the United States (US) and its Western allies (Kim, 2015b). At the time when major economic powers, such as the US, Europe, and Japan began to experience a decline due to the 2008 financial crisis, China instead succeeded in boosting its economy and positioning itself as the new world economic power (Hadi, 2012).

However, there continues an ongoing debate about how other states are responding to the rise of China, especially in Asia (Gloria, 2021). Some scholars argue that Asia-Pacific states tend to bandwagon with China (Kang, 2003), while others argue that those states try to balance China's impact by siding with the US (Acharya, 2003). Most scholars, though, agree that Asia-Pacific states generally prefer to mobilise a hedging strategy instead of choosing between balancing and band wagoning (Cheng-Chwee, 2008; Goh, 2008, 2011; Karim & Chairil, 2016). A hedging strategy is defined as a sort of behaviour that assists states in dealing with the specific types of uncertainty that are expected in anticipating rising powers (Tessman & Wolfe, 2011). In short, hedging is an alternative concept that seems to effectively explain the opportunistic behaviour of a group of states, where they undertake a counteracting policy—preparing for military conflict while bolstering economic cooperation and diplomatic relationship at the same time—in order to avoid a confrontation with great powers (Koga, 2018).

This article aims to shift the debate regarding Asia-Pacific states' response towards a rising China by framing the issues through the notions of middle powers and role conception. Due to their capabilities, behaviours and self-identification, many states in the Asia-Pacific region are categorised as middle powers, such as South Korea, Indonesia, Vietnam and Australia (Beeson & Lee, 2015; Emmers & Teo, 2015; Karim, 2018; Kim, 2015b). In general, the concept of middle power is used for countries whose power, resources, and abilities are not as large as those of superpowers but are nevertheless sufficient to support said countries to stand on their own (Jordaan, 2003). Given their lack of power and resources, middle powers often take on distinctive roles in order to leverage their 'middle-powerhood' in international politics. As a result, their enactment of key roles in responding to China's rise also varies.

This article then examines the relations between the role conception enacted by middle powers in the Asia-Pacific region and how they have responded to the rise of China. The framework used in this article retrieves data from 2003 to 2017. Although there has been substantial research analysing the response of Asia-Pacific countries to the rise of China, there are few studies that analyse the link between middle powers' role conception and their strategic responses towards China. To illustrate this discussion, this article focuses on South Korea, Indonesia, Australia and Vietnam as examples of middle powers in the Asia-Pacific. The four countries are interesting to compare: all face a major economic opportunity but also a strategic challenge. In addition to the fact that they are considered as middle powers, they also have complex relations with China and the US.

South Korea, Indonesia, Australia and Vietnam, all have established economic relations with China that have developed steadily from year to year. For instance, South Korea's merchandise exports to China rose from US\$1.3 billion to US\$136 billion between 1989 and 2019, while China's merchandise export to South Korea grew from US\$472 million to US\$108 billion over the same period ( Observatory

of Economic Complexity [OEC], 2019). China is also Australia's largest trading partner and (World Bank, 2019), according to Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in 2020, China was the second largest foreign investor in Indonesia, with US\$4.8 billion worth of investment in the country (Kemlu, 2021). Meanwhile for Vietnam, China is the nation's largest trading partner and a leading foreign investor, with trade value of more than US\$100 billion in 2020 (D. Nguyen, 2020).

However, these four countries also face significant challenges. In Indonesia, anti-Chinese sentiment dates back to the rise of the New Order regime in 1966 following what was portrayed as a communist-led coup. Following the fall of President Suharto in 1998, Indonesia's ethnic Chinese communities were somewhat 'embraced' by the government, but even now, studies show that they are still the target of discrimination and harassment, making it hard for the Indonesian government to deepen its ties with China through people-to-people contact (Hamilton-Hart & McRae, 2016). In mainland Southeast Asia, Vietnam shares both land and water borders with China, and the two countries have engaged in several border conflicts, resulting most notably in the Sino-Vietnamese War in 1979. These border conflicts continue to this day, particularly in the South China Sea. Meanwhile, Australia supports the US in assisting the government of Taiwan and has increasingly moved away from the 'one China policy' (Symonds, 2021), building up tension with China (Crossley & Needham, 2021), while the ongoing issue of South Korea and North Korea continues to shadow Sino-Korea relationship.

Looking at such complex relations, a question arises: What roles do middle powers in Asia-Pacific enact in response to the rise of China? In this article, we examine the drive for such role enactment. We assert that the roles enacted by middle powers in Asia-Pacific in responding to China stem from two main factors: the degree of alignment with the US and the risk of geopolitical tension with China. Based on these two factors, we identify four different types of role conception enacted by middle powers toward China. The combination of a high level of alignment and high geopolitical risk results in South Korea taking on a bridging role, a low level of alignment and low geopolitical risk drive Indonesia to adopt the role of regional leader, a high level of alignment and low risk of geopolitical tension allows Australia to become the US' faithful ally, and a low level of alignment and high risk of geopolitical tension enables Vietnam to take an active but independent role.

This article provides several insights to the growing literature on middle powers. First, it aims to assess the behaviour of middle powers towards the rise of China by comparing different role conceptions. Second, it aims to understand how role conception is driven by patterns of alignment and geopolitical tension. This article is situated within a growing literature on Asia-Pacific middle powers by linking the discussion of role conception with the literature on alignment and geopolitics.

This article is organised as follows. The second section provides a systematic literature review focusing on how middle powers have responded to the rise of China. In the third section, we examine factors contributing to how middle powers have enacted their role conceptions. The fourth section discusses data and methods, in which we explain how we collected and processed the data to support

this research. In the fifth section, we examine the relations between role conception and how South Korea, Indonesia, Vietnam and Australia as middle powers have responded to China's rise. The last section is a conclusion as well as suggestions for further research.

## **Middle Power and Role Conception**

The notion of middle power has been popularised in Organski's power transition theory in which he conceptualises a four-tier international hierarchy consisting of dominant powers, great powers, middle powers and small powers (Organski, 1968). Although Organski primarily focuses on great powers as the main players in international system, a growing number of the literature see the merit of understanding the role of middle powers in shaping global affairs. While it should be highlighted right away that there is no universally accepted definition of middle power, the concept has been used to define positional, material, normative and behavioural characteristics of a diverse set of middle-ranking states (Holbraad, 1971; Ungerer, 2007). With the growing number of middle power outside of Western countries after the end of the Cold War, Jordaan (2003) conceptualises two types of middle powers: traditional and emerging. The main difference between them is that traditional middle powers are more likely to have stable social democracies, while democracy in emerging middle powers is frequently far from solidified, and in many cases has just recently been formed, with undemocratic behaviours still prevalent.

Building upon the previous literature of middle power, recent studies have established three approaches to understand the behaviour of middle powers: positional, behavioural-impact and identity approaches (Teo, 2017). The positional approach focuses on the size of a country's economy, territory, population and military to identify middle powers. Meanwhile the behavioural and impact approach identifies middle powers by looking at their foreign policy behaviour and multilateral processes. The difference is that while the behavioural approach looks at the action of middle power diplomacy, the impact approach determines the effects or influence of said diplomacy. Lastly, the identity approach depends on a state's image and whether others perceive that state as a middle power.

A growing amount of the literature has also tried to incorporate the notion of role conception in order to understand middle power behaviour (Agastia, 2020; Karim, 2018; Thies & Sari, 2018). Karim (2018) argues that the variations in emerging middle power foreign policy, as well as its determinants, can best be understood by incorporating the growing literature on role theory in international relations. This endeavour is particularly important in understanding how middle powers react to the rise of China, since middle powers are generally known and expected to conduct a hedging strategy towards a rising power to maintain security and balance in the international system (Ciorciari & Haacke, 2019). However, the way they enacted their roles to engage in such a strategy varies.

Role theory first appeared in international relation studies in the 1970s, when scholars began to investigate the behavioural patterns of states in the bipolar Cold

War structure. The approach was mainly used to analyse the foreign policy behaviour of states (Holsti, 1970). Holsti further elaborates that role conception is how a country positions its behaviour based on its own perceptions; this is also known as self-defined national role conception. Generally speaking, the role conception of a country shapes policymakers' decisions regarding particular foreign policy issues. Holsti explains that a country's role conception is derived from several sources, such as locations, capabilities, socio-economic needs, national values, traditional roles, public opinion and personalities. These sources can be used to distinguish the form of role conception that each country takes, which are many in type. As the social structure of international relations developed, role theorists asserted the existence of an increasing number of social roles, including leader, mediator, initiator and so on (Wendt, 1999).

In this article, building upon Holsti (1970), we identify four main role conceptions that Asia-Pacific middle powers can adopt in responding to the rise of China: regional leader, faithful ally, active independent and bridging. Regional leader refers to the role or obligation that a state sees for itself in relation to other states in the region. Faithful ally refers to the role of a state in which its government makes a clear statement to pledge and support the policies of another foreign government. Active independent refers to the role of a state in which its government focuses their foreign policy to serve national interests rather than other states' interests, driving the state to shun permanent military or ideological commitments. Finally, bridging refers to the role of states as communicators, conveying messages and information between different states. To understand the variety of middle power role conceptions, we propose that the role that middle powers adopt in response to the rise of China depends on their level of alignment with the US and their risk of geographical tension with China.

As suggested by Goh (2013), East Asia's regional order cannot be separated from the discussion on the US hegemony in the region. As the current superpower, the US has a profound influence on the international order. At the beginning of the Cold War, the US established an alliance system in the Asia-Pacific region due to the importance of the region on the US' security strategy. This American-centred network, known as the San Francisco System, was designed for the US to develop bilateral security relationships with its Asia-Pacific allies, and it continues to function as the region's security architecture into the twenty-first century (Zhou, 2016). This hub-and-spoke system is arguably able to deter China's assertiveness in Asia-Pacific (Zhang, 2012). Although the US government has repeatedly insisted that, since the end of the Cold War, the system is not specifically aimed at any particular states, the accelerated rise of China has been the clear stimulus for the US' effort to utilise the system to restrain China (Tow & Kasim, 2020). Arguably, the preservation of US hegemony in East Asia is driven by the continuation of US alliances and the acceptance of countries in the region toward the US role (Goh & Sahashi, 2020).

We identify two variants of alignment with the US in the Asia-Pacific region: high-level and low-level alignments. A high-level alignment with the US refers to a situation where a middle power has a formal alliance with the US. As the world's superpower, the US is considered by many countries to be their top ally; many of

them are also dependent on US military power to ensure their country's security. The majority of US allies are Western countries that are members of NATO or countries that have formal security agreements with the US (Wesley, 2017). These reciprocal relationships primarily started during the Cold War, when allied countries requested the US for help to ward off the spread of communism. These alliances largely continue today and remain highly influential on the foreign policy decisions of the allied countries. This is because US interests become an important consideration in allies' decision-making, especially regarding decisions related to military and security aspects, and particularly in countries with US military bases.

On the other hand, a low-level alignment with the US refers to a situation where a middle power is not part of a formal alliance with the US but may still have a strategic partnership with them. As not all countries depend on the US for their security, they may not consider the US as an ally. Given that a high level of alignment might incur a high cost, middle powers from the Asia-Pacific may limit their alignment with the US. It is important to understand that being a US ally is not the same as having only a strategic partnership agreement with the US. While middle powers may seek some external security aid from great powers, there is little incentive for them to forge strong defence pacts with great powers. As a result, many middle powers have no specific security treaty identifying the US as their strategic partner, although this does not mean ruling out joint military training.

Geopolitical tension because of territorial disputes is a key challenge in the Asia-Pacific region. For decades, China has made claims over the South China Sea territory, starting in 1951 when China declared sovereignty over the Spratly and Paracel Islands (Fravel, 2011), two archipelagos that also lie off the coasts of the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam and Taiwan. Since then, China has repeatedly reaffirmed its claim over the archipelagos. In 1992, China passed the Law on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone of the People's Republic of China under the National People's Congress (NPC). Then in 1998, it passed the Law on the Exclusive Economic Zone and the Continental Shelf of the People's Republic of China. By combining those two laws, China argues it has provided a basis for claiming maritime rights in the South China Sea (Fravel, 2011).

Due to the availability of oil, gas and other resources in the South China Sea, as well as soaring demand for global energy (Zhao, 2008), China and the ASEAN countries involved in the dispute have been assertive in defending their claims. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) does not support China's claim (Hossain, 2013), which goes beyond the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and is based on historical rights. However, this has not prevented China from occupying the Paracel Islands. Many Southeast Asian countries involved in this dispute are doing so due to the high potential for energy resources. For instance, Vietnam's state-owned oil company, PetroVietnam, currently produces 22–23 million tons of oil from three fields in the South China Sea, contributing 20% of the country's total gross domestic product (GDP; Pearson & Torode, 2018). Vietnam is undertaking efforts to expand its oil fields in the South China Sea, so there is a significant possibility that they will clash with China

(ANT Consulting, 2019; Buszynski, 2012). Both countries have several times captured the other countries' ships following alleged breaches of their respective territorial seas.

With the rise of China and its emergence in the international economy, Beijing has successfully modernised its naval capabilities to increase their ability to defend territorial claims and deter others from confrontation (Fravel, 2011; Sinaga, 2020). We identify two conditions of geopolitical tension: high risk and low risk.

High-risk geopolitical tension refers to a situation where a middle power has many official territorial disputes. Countries involved as claimants in the South China Sea dispute are considered as countries with a high risk of geopolitical tension with China. Many countries directly bordering China have previously been or are currently involved in conflict over territories with China. It is important to note that not all countries feel disadvantaged because of their close geographical proximity with China. One country that has knowingly benefited from this situation is North Korea.

Meanwhile, low-risk geopolitical tension refers to a situation where a middle power does not have any official territorial disputes. Countries that do not directly share any borders with China are usually less involved in conflict over territories, thus keeping them from any geopolitical tension. For example, countries not involved as claimants in the South China Sea have a relatively low risk of geopolitical tension with China. While there may be the occasional territorial skirmish, such as the growing deployment of warships and submarines, in general, as long as there is recognition of sovereignty over the relevant territory, a country is still considered as having a low risk of geopolitical tension.

Alignment with the US is expected to determine how far the middle power countries are able to contest China's rise, while their geopolitical situation with regard to China is expected to affect their ability to secure their interests. We argue that a middle power with low-level alignment with the US and a low risk of geopolitical tension with China is more likely to adopt the role of regional leader as their hedging strategy to respond to China's rise, while a middle power with high-level alignment with the US and a high-risk of geopolitical tension with China is more likely to adopt a bridging role. This is because a middle power with low-level alignment with the US does not possess a strong relationship with the current superpower, so that they have no obligation to remain completely loyal to the US, enabling them to freely interact with China.

On the other hand, a middle power with high-level alignment with the US tends to act more carefully in their interaction with China in the hope they will not offend the US, while a middle power facing a low risk of geopolitical tension is likely to be more concerned about other security issues, such as piracy, rather than focusing solely on the geopolitical situation with China. On the contrary, a middle power with a high risk of geopolitical tension is more likely to focus on their critical geopolitical situation with China.

Middle powers that have high-level alignment with the US and a low risk of geopolitical tension with China are likely to adopt the role of faithful ally. This is because their low-risk geopolitical tension does not constrain them to be close to

**Table 1.** Role Conception of Middle Powers in Response to China's Rise

	Low Level of Alignment with the US	High Level of Alignment with the US
Low risk of geopolitical tension	Regional leader (Indonesia)	Faithful ally (Australia)
High risk of geopolitical tension	Active independent (Vietnam)	Bridge (South Korea)

**Source:** The authors.

the US. Meanwhile, countries with low-level alignment with the US and a high risk of geopolitical tension with China are likely to become active independents. This is because the conditions place middle powers in a risky situation in the event of increased geopolitical tension. Being independent but active enables the state to offset the critical geopolitical situation by cultivating relations with as many states as possible (See Table 1).

## **Role Conception of Asia-Pacific Middle Powers in Response to the Rise of China**

This section aims to apply the framework in analysing the role conception enacted by Asia-Pacific middle powers as a response to the rise of China. We examine the four Asia-Pacific middle powers—Indonesia, South Korea, Australia and Vietnam—as case studies to illustrate the roles of regional leader, bridge, faithful ally and active independent.

Much of the literature has shown that Indonesia is an emerging middle power because of its capability, diplomatic posture and growing international reputation as an emerging power especially during Yudhoyono's presidency (2004–2014; Acharya, 2014; Fitriani, 2015; Karim, 2021). During his presidency, it appears that Indonesia tried its best to improve its standing in the international system—one of its many efforts is by exploiting Indonesia's status as the world's largest Muslim-majority country by repositioning itself to the status while sticking to secular democratic norms that are at the heart of Western civilisation (Karim, 2021).

South Korea has been regarded as an active player in the global level as a middle power (Karim, 2018; Kim, 2014; Kim, 2015b; Teo, 2017). The country possesses one of the most powerful military capabilities in the region, it also has the third largest economy in the region and the 13th largest in the world. South Korea, as a pivotal middle power, may have a significant impact on the regional balance of power by either improving its military alliance ties with great power or militarily assisting the great power to maintain the status quo in order to safeguard its own interests (Kim, 2015a).

Australia's status as a middle power has been well established in several of the literatures (Beeson & Higgott, 2014; Carr, 2014; Ungerer, 2007). Australia's

ability to provide its own defence and demonstrated diplomatic leadership at the global level illustrate its position as a middle power country. Australia has no capability of dominating other nations, as great powers are, but is having a discernible potential to influence the international system, particularly around its main interests (Carr, 2014).

Given its economic rise, Vietnam has been seen one of the Southeast Asian rising middle powers (Emmers & Teo, 2015; Tinh, 2021). It has been transformed into Southeast Asia's investment destination. During the 13th Party Congress in early 2021, Vietnam has set a target to become a developed nation with modern industry and upper-middle-income levels in 2030. Recently, Vietnam has evolved into a more active regional player, and it is expected to play a larger role in regional affairs and ASEAN, particularly at a time when other members—primarily Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand—are dealing with domestic challenges (Tinh, 2021).

## *Indonesia*

### *Low Level of Alignment with the United States*

The US was one of the first countries to establish diplomatic ties with Indonesia. Since the beginning, Indonesia has adhered to a policy of non-alignment towards great powers. Despite Indonesia being of strategic importance to the US, the country chose not to align themselves with the US during the Cold War. After the collapse of Suharto's authoritarian regime in 1998, Indonesia has transformed into a middle power after years of growth and stability (Karim, 2021). Indonesia is now the world's third biggest democracy, the largest Muslim-majority country, the leader of ASEAN and a member of the G-20.

Indonesia has retained a policy of avoiding a formal security alliance between itself and the US. Nonetheless, the two countries have managed to maintain cooperative relations throughout the decades, relying on shared common goals in maintaining world stability and peace, especially in relation to terrorism and the stability of the Asia-Pacific region. Both the US and Indonesia have clearly demonstrated a strong commitment to carrying out this strategic partnership and have vowed to undertake more cooperation in the future (Santosa, 2020). Consequently, Indonesia is seen as a middle power with a low level of alignment with the US. The closest Indonesia and the US has to a formal security alliance is the 2015 formation of the US-Indonesia Strategic Partnership, which followed the success of the Comprehensive Partnership in 2010, covering several aspects such as strengthening a long-term partnership, maritime cooperation, defence cooperation, economic growth and development, energy cooperation, and increasing cooperation on global and regional issues. The US also provides economic and security assistance to Indonesia under the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

### *Low Risk of Geopolitical Tension*

Indonesia is the largest archipelago in the world. It lies between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, and it is strategically located near the Malacca Strait and

Sunda Strait—two of the most important shipping lanes in the world. Unlike some countries in the Asia-Pacific region, Indonesia is not directly adjacent to China; they share neither land nor maritime borders. However, part of China's Nine-Dash Line area slightly overlaps Indonesia's EEZ in the Natuna Islands. In recent years, military activity has intensified on the islands and Indonesia has not hesitated to criticise and act, even detaining and sinking Chinese fishing vessels illegally entering the EEZ (Parameswaran, 2016). The Chinese government claimed that they have no disputes in the South China Sea with Indonesia (Siow, 2021), while Indonesia stated that they will never recognise the legitimacy of China's Nine-Dash Line map claims and will only continue to recognise the basis of UNCLOS (Rakhmat, 2020; Siow, 2021).

Unlike the Philippines, which brought the South China Sea dispute to the Permanent Court of Arbitration, Indonesia prefers to resolve the situation through dialogue and other diplomatic approaches. This is appropriate, given the fact that Indonesia is a non-claimant in the South China Sea dispute. Indonesia's efforts to use out diplomatic approaches are also supported by the Chinese government, which says it is open to negotiation with the countries involved in the dispute. According to Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, China will continuously support the peaceful settlement of the South China Sea issue through friendly consultation with ASEAN countries especially on the Code of Conduct (Hoang, 2020).

However, policymakers in Jakarta sense that Indonesia–China relations are asymmetrical, with China being superior in both economic and military aspects. China shows its dominance through its long-term foreign direct investment (FDI), but it also shows that Beijing has a special interest in Jakarta. It is clear from the attitude that China has taken in the South China Sea that Beijing wants to avoid any direct conflicts with Jakarta. Jakarta might take an aggressive stance in dealing with Beijing, but the aggressiveness falls short due to Indonesia's dependency on China. Even when Jakarta pinned the name North Natuna Sea on the northeast part of the Natunas in 2017, Beijing did not challenge Indonesia's sovereignty over the waters (Siow, 2021). In fact, since the early 1990s, Indonesia has urged China to define its interests in the Natunas, but no clarification has been forthcoming. It is likely that China will not take any action that can spark conflict with Indonesia, a country that has great influence and growing geopolitical importance in the Southeast Asia region, especially with increasingly tense rivalry between China and the US.

#### *Indonesia's Role Conception in Response to the Rise of China*

Given Indonesia's low-level alignment with the US and its relatively low risk of geographical tension with China, we argue that such factors shape Indonesia's becoming a regional leader in its approach towards rising powers in the region. The role of regional leader is translated into Indonesia's foreign policy, aiming to engage China through regional institutions and processes, especially under the auspices of ASEAN. Indonesia has traditionally been seen as the leader of ASEAN (Anwar, 1994; Jemadu & Lantang, 2021; Leifer, 1989), stretching back to the founding of the organisation in 1967. Ever since its creation, ASEAN has held an importance and centrality in Indonesia's foreign policy, which focuses mainly on making sure the region is free from great power intervention (Karim, 2021).

During the presidency of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004–2014), Indonesia's foreign policy was based on the 'thousands of friends and zero enemies' and 'dynamic equilibrium' doctrines (Krisna & Pratamasari, 2018). Both doctrines provide opportunities for China and the US to forge relations with not only Indonesia but also other ASEAN countries. According to the 2015 Indonesia Defence White Paper, the desire to design and shape regional order would allow Indonesia to lead ASEAN by promoting and expanding regional cooperation as an organisation to achieve regional integration. For example, Indonesia's chairmanship of ASEAN in 2003–2004 was instrumental in advancing the institutionalisation of military ties in the Asia-Pacific, which culminated in the creation of the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) in 2006 (Capie, 2013).

Indonesia continues to place ASEAN at the centre of its foreign policy to maintain its position as *de facto* leader. Now, in the midst of a growing Sino–US rivalry, Indonesian leadership in ASEAN is beginning to face bigger challenges. China's regional standing has improved significantly in recent years, as has its power projection and military capabilities in Southeast Asia, particularly in the South China Sea (Emmers, 2014; Karim & Chairil, 2016). Both China and the US are competing to expand their spheres of influence in Asia-Pacific. In 2002, China's willingness to sign the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea as part of their 'peaceful rise' aided the improvement of Indonesia–China bilateral ties, and when the strategic partnership agreement was signed in 2005, the relationship between the two countries reached its peak so far.

To maintain regional stability in Southeast Asia, Indonesia has demonstrated its ability to lead ASEAN nations by emphasising the 'independent and active' (*bebas aktif*) principle. Another example of Indonesian leadership in ASEAN was during its chairmanship in 2011, when Jakarta offered to settle a Thai–Cambodian border dispute surrounding the Preah Vihear Temple area and contributed to the implementation of new regulations for the disputed areas of the South China Sea (Emmers & Teo, 2015). After the 2012 ADMM in Phnom Penh failed to publish a joint communique, owing to disagreements over the territorial dispute, Indonesia also increased its formal engagement in the South China Sea conflict by increasing its military presence in Indonesia's EEZ (Puy, 2012).

## South Korea

### *High Level of Alignment with the United States*

South Korea is one of the US' closest allies and their relationship goes way back to the beginning of Cold War. The US has been a key ally of South Korea, also known as the Republic of Korea (ROK), especially during the invasion of North Korea in June 1950—an event that eventually led to the start of the Korean War (Han, 1980). The constant threat from North Korea is one of the reasons why the US, even after the end of the Korean War, has continued to invest its military power in the Korean Peninsula (Lee, 2020). The strategic alliance between the US and South Korea was formalised in a treaty named Mutual Defense Treaty Between the US and the ROK 1953, which allows the US to maintain a military presence in South Korea.

Most of the challenges facing the US–South Korea alliance originate from the Asia-Pacific dynamics, which have begun to shift as China’s presence in the region has grown. Under the Obama administration (2009–2017), the US reaffirmed their stance on dealing with China’s rise and their desire to maintain stability in the Asia-Pacific region through the Pivot to Asia strategy (Davidson, 2014). In the wake of growing tension, the South Korean-US alliance was expected to deepen further, and indeed it did. The US and South Korea are committed to continuing to approach North Korea through negotiations in order to achieve complete denuclearisation and to build economic incentives for cooperation to counter China’s growing influence in Asia-Pacific (Congressional Research Service, 2021). In this respect, we can see South Korea is a middle power with high level of alignment with the US.

#### *High Risk of Geopolitical Tension*

While South Korea has a high level of alignment with the US, it also has a high risk of geopolitical tension with China, given its geographical proximity. The issue of North Korea has overshadowed South Korean relations with China. After the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War, China became the only patron of North Korea. North Korea’s existence, with its missiles and nuclear weapon tests, threatened the stability of Asia-Pacific region, particularly South Korea.

The two countries’ geographical proximity has also led to territorial disputes. Socotra Rock is the subject of a maritime dispute between China and South Korea, both of which believe it lies within their respective EEZ (Fox, 2018). The geopolitical tension became especially tense in 2017 when South Korea agreed to the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system. China was the country most opposed to the placement of THAAD in South Korea. Their main concern was that they believed the radar is actually deployed to track missiles originating from China, given the geographical proximity with South Korea (Swaine, 2017). Even though the US military repeatedly stressed that THAAD radars will be used solely to ward off North Korean missiles and will not interfere with China’s interests, Beijing nonetheless barred South Korean goods and services from entering its market in a variety of sectors including entertainment, consumer products and tourism (Meick & Salidjanova, 2017). The ban remains in place as of 2021.

Overall, bilateral ties between South Korea and China have shown ups and downs. South Korea is aware that China’s growing military presence in the Asia-Pacific will inevitably have a major impact on their foreign policy decisions. The closeness of China to North Korea continues to become a point of emphasis for South Korea to take a stand, because a minor miscalculation may alter the dynamics of relations between these East Asian countries. In this regard, South Korea is seen as a middle power with a high risk of geopolitical tension with China.

#### *South Korea’s Role Conception in Response to the Rise of China*

Given South Korea’s high-level alignment with the US and high risk of geopolitical tension with China, our model predicts that South Korea will adopt a bridging

role. We argue that South Korea's middle power response to the rise of China aims to ease tension between China and the US. China continues to boost its economic support to North Korea, strengthening Pyongyang's reliance on Beijing. This also places China as South Korea's primary asset in dealing with North Korea. Seoul's desire to nurture good relations with China had led to China becoming South Korea's largest trading partner in 2013, although this situation has changed since 2017, as mentioned earlier. South Korea's constructive engagement approach toward China may also help China to keep its positive reputation in the eyes of the international community by demonstrating that China can work effectively with middle powers.

Although South Korea has worked hard to improve bilateral relations with China, Seoul must also consider its closest ally, the US, when making foreign policy decisions. The issue with North Korea has pushed Seoul to remain reliant on the US and China for both security and economic reasons (Yoo, 2014). South Korean policymakers, understandably, do not want to be forced to choose between the US and China, therefore, as a middle power, South Korea tends to position itself in the middle, bridging the connection between the two great powers. South Korea's efforts to act as a bridge were first seen in Seoul's initiatives in encouraging Beijing to align itself with the international community as China underwent economic reforms in an effort to draw China away from North Korea (Kim, 2014; Spero, 2009).

Another example of South Korea's bridging is through its participation in multilateral talks. In 2003, North Korea decided to withdraw from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (commonly known as the Non-Proliferation Treaty or NPT), and South Korea willingly join the six-party talks along with the US, China, Russia, Japan and North Korea (Buszynski, 2013). Unfortunately, the talks were ineffective since there was a lack of trust between the participating countries. While South Korea worked hard to mediate between North Korea and the US, the US was suspicious of North Korea's commitment to cease its nuclear missile development and testing, and the North was sceptical of the US' willingness to enhance their bilateral relations (Choo, 2005).

South Korea is aware that maintaining their alliance with the US is important to deter the rising China. On the other hand, due to China's geographic proximity, a too-close relationship with the US and an unfriendly relationship with China is considerably dangerous. While the US may forsake South Korea in the future, China will always be close by (Ross, 1999). This has led to South Korea exploring other forms of cooperation within the region. For example, South Korea has been an active member of ASEAN Plus Three since 1997. In the forum, South Korea leverages its advantages as a middle power to bridge China with the rest of the world by, together with ASEAN and Japan, creating regional cooperation institutional frameworks (Kim, 2014).

South Korea's 'middle-powerhood' allows China to strengthen cooperation with Seoul in dealing with the North Korean nuclear weapons and missiles issues. China has realised that if the situation is not handled well, it will likely eventually push South Korea, Japan and Taiwan to develop their own nuclear weapons. If that happens, it will disrupt the regional stability of the entire Asia-Pacific region,

harming China's interests in the process. In the South Korea 2010 Defence White Paper, both South Korea and China repeatedly reaffirmed their common interests and promised to cooperate closely in the resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue. Such efforts can be seen in 2009 during the Korean Minister of National Defence's visit to China, and again in the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) in 2010. South Korea's other attempt to act as a bridge with China has been through conducting exchanges between regional command headquarters, such as, according to South Korea Defence White Paper (2008), between the 3rd ROK Field Army and the PLA Jinan Military District. South Korea's decision to pursue advanced military cooperation with China indicates that, as a middle power, it has sufficient power to not rely only on the US military and is now daring enough to develop good ties even with countries that the US considers as threats (Sohn, 2019).

## *Australia*

### *High Level of Alignment with the United States*

Australia is one middle power considered to be one of the US' closest non-NATO ally. Both countries share common historical and cultural roots as Anglosphere countries; Australia is currently part of the Commonwealth, while the US was formerly part of the British Empire (Bennett, 2007). The core for the strategic partnership between Australia and the US was formalised through the Australia, New Zealand and United States Security Treaty (ANZUS Treaty) in 1951. The treaty was formed in order for the US to ensure military stability in the Asia-Pacific region, as Australia and New Zealand felt threatened by the communist victory in the Chinese Civil War in 1949 (McIntyre, 1995). Nowadays, the relationship forms part of the US' Pivot to Asia foreign policy (Beeson & Higgott, 2014).

Although New Zealand has been partially suspended from ANZUS after initiating a nuclear-free zone in 1986, it has had no impact on the relationship between Australia and the US. In fact, the two countries are becoming closer, as proven by the signing of Australia–United States Free Trade Agreement in 2005. As a result of this close relationship, Australia has become involved in US military ventures several times, ranging from the Korean War to the invasion of Afghanistan after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. In this respect, Australia is seen as a middle power with high level of alliance with the US.

### *Low Risk of Geographical Tension*

After the Chinese Civil War ended, Australia became one of the Western countries who continued to support and recognise the existence of the Republic of China (Taiwan). However, Australia later also recognised the People's Republic of China in 1972. While both China and Australia are located in the Asia-Pacific region, they do not share any land or maritime borders. Australia's geographic location also places the country far away from any potential threat of Chinese missiles. Despite this, Australia has previously shown an interest in resolving issues in the South China Sea, and has even rejected China's historical claims over

the area (BBC, 2020). However, it is unlikely that the tension between Canberra and Beijing over the South China Sea will escalate because Australia is a non-claimant state. With the long distance between the two, China is technically not being considered as Australia's geographical threat.

#### *Australia's Role Conception in Response to the Rise of China*

Given Australia's high level of alignment with the US and relatively low risk of geographical tension with China, we argue that Australia will adopt the role conception of faithful ally. Reading the Defence White Paper (2013 and 2016), it is clear that Australia wants to be a faithful ally of the US. A faithful ally is a role conception in which a country expresses specific and unambiguous commitment to support another country's foreign policy where it expects security guarantees in return. In the case of Australia, the other country is the US. The two countries maintain a strong relationship based on common interests, shared history and democratic values.

Ever since the 2009 White Paper, Australia has frequently reaffirmed the vital role of the US–China relationship in determining Australia's strategic environment for the next decades. This point is even included in the six key drivers that will shape the development of Australia's security environment to 2035 as stated in the 2016 White Paper. This can be seen in how Canberra underlines the US as Australia's most important strategic partner and how it recognises the US' power and influence as the core of regional stability (Schreer, 2019). The ANZUS treaty and US nuclear and military force provide adequate deterrence against the prospect of conflict, and all contributes to Australia's security.

Since the Obama administration introduced the Pivot to Asia strategy in 2012 as a response to China's continued rise as world's major power, the US has been trying to rebalance the Asia-Pacific region by strengthening security alliances. Australia is one of the countries that strongly supports the US rebalance strategy. Such support can be seen in Australia's endorsement of the United States Force Posture Initiatives under the Force Posture Agreement, signed at the 2014 Australia–United States Ministerial Meeting, which comprised of the Marine Rotational Force–Darwin (MRF-D) and the Enhanced Air Cooperation (EAC). The initiatives' goals are to increase cooperation between Australian and US military forces, promote regional stability, create chances to interact with Indo-Pacific countries, and better position both countries to respond to regional crises such as humanitarian aid and disaster relief (Department of Defence, n.d.). In short, the initiative gives the US military forces the freedom to operate in Australia, and it provides protection and security assurance for both Australia and the US without compromising either's sovereignty.

Despite Australia's reassurances that they will continue to enhance their work with the US under ANZUS to support US strategy to rebalance power in the Indo-Pacific region, Australia also acknowledges the major impact of China's policies and actions on regional stability. Australia also welcomes China's growing participation in the United Nations, including through peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief and anti-piracy operations. Under the Kevin Rudd administration (2007–2010), the relationship between the two countries was

actively nurtured, not only because Rudd was the first Australian Prime Minister to speak fluent Mandarin but also because his government established a more proactive and diversified foreign policy under the 'creative middle power diplomacy' approach (Baba & Kaya, 2014).

Australia sees its alliance with the US as the most effective way to maintain regional stability in the Asia-Pacific, where regional security and prosperity have become one of the country's primary concerns. Unlike South Korea, Australia does not have geographical proximity with China, nor is it threatened with the presence of neighbouring countries like North Korea. This allows Canberra to take a stronger stance against Beijing and remain completely faithful to the US. This shows that Australia is able to adopt the positional and behavioural approaches of a middle power because it benefits them to take up the position of faithful ally to the US.

## *Vietnam*

### *Low Level of Alignment with the United States*

After the end of the Vietnam War, during which the US propped up the anti-communist South Vietnam and fought in a years-long conflict, the US began to pay attention to Vietnam again when the reunified country's economy began to improve and the nation re-entered the international world after several years of isolation (Manyin, 2010). In the twenty-first century, Vietnam also began establishing itself on the regional scene, serving as the head of ASEAN in 2010. China's growing influence in the Asia-Pacific pushed Vietnamese officials to work to improve their relationship with the US (Dunst, 2021). Vietnam and the US signed a bilateral trade agreement in 2000 and a more advanced bilateral framework called the US–Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership was signed in 2013. In 2016, the US lifted its ban on the export of deadly weapons to Vietnam and continues to offer maritime security assistance in relation to the South China Sea dispute (Spetalnick, 2016).

Like Indonesia, Vietnam does not have an official alliance with the US. Despite its historical enmity with the US due to the Vietnam War, Vietnam is now regarded as a potential partner of the US (Corr, 2019), particularly in the geopolitical context of China's rise and disputes in the South China Sea. In recent decades, the US has continuously assisted Vietnam on economic development, climate change and the promotion of good governance (US Department of State, 2021). The US is also Vietnam's second largest trading partner, just below China, with bilateral trade between Vietnam and the US increasing from US\$451 million in 1995 to more than US\$90 billion by 2020 (US Department of State, 2021). In 2020, US goods exported to Vietnam were valued at more than US\$10 billion, while US imports were worth approximately US\$79.6 billion.

Although their bilateral ties have improved, the US and Vietnam remain wary of one another, primarily because the US is the world's second largest democracy while Vietnam is a socialist country. Although Vietnam's economic practices have become increasingly capitalist, its governing ideology remains devoted to socialism. As the result, Vietnam remains focused in forging strong economic

cooperation with China (Hai, 2021). In this sense, Vietnam is considered as a middle power with a low level of alignment with the US.

#### *High Risk of Geographical Tension*

Just like South and North Korean relations with China, Vietnam–China relations are mainly shaped by their close geographical proximity, which is the source of several geopolitical conflicts. The dynamic of the Sino-Vietnam relationship first faced significant obstacles during the Cold War, when Vietnam failed to maintain balance in their relationships with both China and the Soviet Union, causing China to cut off aid to Vietnam and forcing Vietnam to rely on assistance from the Soviet Union alone (Guan, 1998).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, China and Vietnam began to rebuild the broken relationship by formally normalising their relations. Competing territorial claims were some of the first issues to be settled after the normalisation. Two concerns, which were primarily bilateral in nature, concerned the delineation of the China–Vietnam land boundary and the Tonkin Gulf. The third issue, which is ongoing, is the bilateral Parcel Islands dispute, while the fourth conflict is the Spratly Islands dispute in the South China Sea (Guan, 1998).

Although efforts have been made to resolve these territorial claims, tension remains high, especially in relation to the South China Sea. The Chinese and Vietnamese military have repeatedly held military exercises in the South China Sea, specifically around the Spratly Islands (Huang, 2020; P. Nguyen, 2020). The two countries have also repeatedly attacked each other's fishing vessels in disputed areas of the South China Sea, increasing the possibility of further military skirmishes (Vu, 2020).

#### *Vietnam's Role Conception in Response to the Rise of China*

Given Vietnam's low-level alignment with the US and high-risk geographical tension with China, we can conclude that Vietnam will adopt an active independent role conception in dealing with the rise of China. We argue that Vietnam continues to prioritise its independence and self-reliance over Chinese national interests; this is reflected in Vietnam's current foreign policy, which is based on these principles as well as cooperation. In 2007, Vietnam's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Pham Gia Khiem (Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in The United States of America, 2008) affirmed that Vietnam's diplomatic services have made significant contributions to the country's overall prosperity, especially in FDI, official development assistance, tourism, trade, and labour export.

Although Sino-Vietnamese ties have improved in recent decades, the South China Sea remains a source of concern for both countries. The South China Sea has been repeatedly identified as a key component of Vietnam's national interests on both socioeconomic and geostrategic levels (Tonnesson, 2000). Forecasts indicate that by 2020, the marine sector would contribute up to 55% of Vietnam's GDP and be responsible for 55%–60% of its export (Thayer, 2008). On the other hand, the South China Sea's geostrategic position increases the country's significance in its foreign policy, as it provides Vietnam with vital strategic weight in dealing with external powers interested in the area (Tran et al., 2013). Thus, it is not a surprise that Vietnam is desperately defending its claims over the Parcel

and Spratly Islands in order to protect its national interests, especially after China deployed an oil rig in a disputed South China Sea area in 2014.

In its 2009 National Defence White Paper, the Communist Party of Vietnam continued to affirm the nature of self-reliance of Vietnam's national defence. Vietnam also acknowledged that they have reached an agreement with China to resolve the Gulf of Tonkin issue by signing the Vietnam–China Agreement on Maritime Boundary Demarcation of the Gulf of Tonkin and the Vietnam–China Agreement on Fishery Cooperation in the Gulf of Tonkin in 2009. Vietnam also acknowledges that the South China Sea dispute is based on historical claims rather than on UNCLOS or the desire to achieve regional stability. Furthermore, the Vietnam government is also aware that geopolitical rivalry between the US and China has grown more intense, occasionally turning the South China Sea into a flash point that might lead to serious conflict.

As an active independent, Vietnam does not commit to military alliances with any major power. Vietnam's national defence strategy aims to firmly ensure independence, sovereignty, political stability and peaceful environment for socialist-oriented national development. The 2009 National Defence White Paper also reaffirms Vietnam's efforts in not permitting other countries to set up military bases on Vietnamese territory or to use its territory to conduct military operations against other countries. Vietnam will only consider building military relations with other countries if it is determined to be important to Vietnam's national interests. For instance, once they observed that the rise of China can disrupt Vietnam's national integrity, the Communist Party of Vietnam has been seeking to strengthen US–Vietnam ties and deepen their strategic partnership (Xia & Chen, 2021).

This demonstrates that Vietnam is willing to establish military relations with the US to protect its national interests, although ideologically and historically, Vietnam is more closely connected to China. China's recent rise and growing assertiveness in the South China Sea has ultimately pushed the Communist Party of Vietnam to seek support from the US.

## **Conclusion**

This article has established that (a) a middle power like Indonesia with relatively low level of alignment with the US and a low risk of geopolitical tension with China is likely to adopt a regional leader role conception; (b) a middle power like South Korea with relatively high level of alignment with the US and a high risk of geopolitical tension with China is more likely to adopt a bridge role conception; (c) a middle power like Australia with relatively high level of alignment with the US and a low risk of geopolitical tension with China will adopt a faithful ally role conception; and (d) a middle power like Vietnam with relatively low level alignment with the US and high risk of geopolitical tension with China will adopt an active independent role conception.

Although the literature on Asia-Pacific middle powers indicates that most middle powers prefer to hedge in response to the rise of China, this article shows that different middle powers might adopt distinct role conceptions, based on their

alignment pattern with the US and their geopolitical tensions with China. This article has limitations in analysing the role conception of the middle powers in response to the rise of China. This article has used alignment and geopolitical constraints as the main factors that determine the role conceptions of middle powers. Future research may expand the study by looking into other important causal variables such as identity and economic relations to better capture the causal drivers of middle powers' role conception toward China.

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