

CHINA'S APPROACH TO MIDDLE POWERS' HEDGING STRATEGIES IN ASIA-PACIFIC

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As the importance of Asia-Pacific regional developments grows daily in the paradigm of US-China rivalry, the strategies employed by regional states to combat the possible negative impacts of great power competition vary considerably, depending on the coherence of multiple factors. Nevertheless, the growing trend amongst middle powers to reduce the probability of diminishing returns is the adoption of a hedging strategy. As regional leaders and decision-makers, middle powers face particular challenges to adjust their foreign policy strategy, while maintaining priorities, balancing economic and security considerations and enhancing their leverage. Moreover, as “middle power” is growing to be a new defining category in state classification, and this research paper attempts to answer the question of how China addresses the challenge of middle power hedging and what methods Beijing employs to ensure a continuous support or a status quo preservation amidst the geopolitical instability in the Asia-Pacific and cooperation efforts of the regional middle powers and the US.

The paper argues that the normative categories for China's cooperation approach with the hedging middle powers can be conceptualized into a framework with two critical categories: effort management and the primary driver of the strategy. As such, opportunism-driven strategy applied by China to cooperate with South Korea and Thailand, official US allies, is distinct from the one applied to Vietnam and Indonesia, namely pragmatism-driven strategy. Simultaneously, the effort optimization approach to engage South Korea and Vietnam, which face was sovereignty challenges, will differ significantly from the effort conformity strategy applied to Thailand and Indonesia, which share common interest and values for the regional development with China.

Key words: middle power, hedging, security strategy.

ПІДХІД КИТАЮ ДО СТРАТЕГІЙ ХЕДЖУВАННЯ СЕРЕДНІХ СИЛ В АЗІАТСЬКО-ТИХООКЕАНСЬКОМУ РЕГІОНІ

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Оскільки важливість подій в Азіатсько-Тихоокеанському регіоні щодня зростає в парадигмі американсько-китайського суперництва, стратегії, що застосовуються державами регіону для запобігання можливим негативним наслідкам конкуренції великих держав, значно відрізняються залежно від багатьох факторів. А втім, зростаюча тенденція серед середніх сил полягає у застосуванні стратегії хеджування. Як лідери регіону, середні сили зобов'язані коригувати свою зовнішньополітичну стратегію, зберігаючи пріоритети, збалансовуючи економічні та безпекові фактори й посилюючи свій вплив. Крім того, оскільки «середня сила» – це вже нова визначальна категорія в класифікації держав, тому це дослідження спробує відповісти на питання про те, як Китай впливає на стратегії хеджування середніх сил та які методи використовує Пекін, щоб забезпечити безперервну підтримку або принаймні збереження статус-кво на тлі геополітичної нестабільності в Азіатсько-Тихоокеанському регіоні та співпраці регіональних держав і США.

У дослідженні йдеться про те, що нормативні категорії для підходів Китаю до співпраці з хеджуючими середніми силами можна концептуалізувати як дві категорії: управління зусиллями й основний рушій стратегії. Таким чином, підхід до оптимізації зусиль для залучення Південної Кореї та В'єтнаму, які відчувають виклики своєму суверенітету, суттєво відрізнятиметься від стратегії узгодження зусиль, застосованої до Таїланду та Індонезії, які мають спільні інтереси та цінності щодо регіонального розвитку з Китаєм. Водночас опортуністична стратегія, застосована Китаєм для співпраці з Південною Кореєю і Таїландом, офіційними союзниками США, відрізняється від застосованої щодо В'єтнаму й Індонезії, а саме стратегії, керованої прагматизмом.

Ключові слова: середня сила, хеджування, стратегія безпеки.

Introduction. The concept of middle power security strategies receives progressively more scientific attention, especially in the Asia-Pacific region, where the great power competition is intensifying. This study will introduce the concept of China's approach to middle power engagement in the security realm, while specifically focusing on the hedging middle powers, as opposed to the balancing and bandwagoning states. Therefore, the relevance of this study is considerable, especially for enhancing the current understanding of China's approach and improve the current analysis from the paradigm of big power strategies.

The objective of this study is to analyze China's approach towards engaging hedging middle powers in the Asia-Pacific amidst global power competition.

The tasks of this study are to:

- Clarify middle power categorization in the Asia-Pacific region
- Define middle power security strategies and outline hedging middle powers
- Create a normative framework for China's engagement with middle powers in the Asia-Pacific
- Conduct extensive case studies on China's cooperation strategy with hedging middle powers
- Establish future areas of research for middle power security approaches in the Asia-Pacific

This study employs comparative analysis, case study method, content analysis and statistical analysis to create viable conclusions. The comparative analysis is applied for the clarification of the distinction in China's approach towards distinct middle powers. The case study method is leveraged to further analyze China's cooperation strategy towards each particular hedging middle power. Content analysis alongside statistical analysis is used to evaluate the middle powers' stances on their security strategies regarding China-US competition, as well as further analyze their response to China's cooperation approach.

Middle power in Asia-Pacific definition. Nowadays, the diversity of definitions of middle powers has led to significant confusion in the international relations scientific community, undermining the possibility of development of research projects with high analytical value and failing to produce practical policy recommendations to guide the behavior of emerging middle powers [Robertson 2017, 355].

Different schools of thought in international relations would emphasize different definitions for the "middle power" category. Functionalists employ national identity, realists – national strength, constructivists – identity and liberalists – behavior as a primary category for "middle power" analysis [Robertson 2017]. The prevailing

consensus is, nevertheless, that, contrary to prior assumptions, democracy is not a prerequisite to be classified as a middle power anymore, given the increasing number of emerging state that contest Western democratic values.

When trying to identify middle powers this paper will employ a combination of characteristics based on Sandal's and Jordaans working definitions, according to which, middle powers are countries with significant material capabilities and substantial influence, which actively seek to cooperate with similar nations and aspire to play a leading role in developing and enhancing regional governance institutions [Jordaan 2003; Sandal 2014, 696].

Based on the current literature overview and the aforementioned definition of middle powers, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Australia can be considered as middle powers in the Asia-Pacific region [Beeson and Higgot 2013; Emmers and Teo 2014]. To implement a structured categorization framework, Japan, South Korea, Australia can be grouped as high-income developed economies with a high value of human development index (HDI), clear value-oriented approach and political ties to the Western democratic partners. Whereas, Thailand, Vietnam, and Indonesia together form another ideational category, being developing economies and sharing a lower level of HDI, while adopting economy-oriented approach.

Such difference will be crucial to determine the hedging approaches of these two state categories and China's respective response. The categorization additionally influences the strategy and tactics to respond to the regional competition between the US and China, which saw its inception since early 2010s, after the US president Barack Obama's declaration of "Pivot to Asia" policy and the strengthening of efforts to enhance formal alliances [Nedić 2022, 100].

Hedging as a conscious choice of middle states in Asia-Pacific. Wang's definition expounds on the topic of hedging in international relations, stating that hedging is "a diplomatic strategy adopted by small states in the face of order uncertainty caused by the rise of great powers in the international system, in hopes that the risk of taking the wrong side from a premature choice of balancing or bandwagoning will be avoided or reduced and the decision of choosing sides between great powers can be delayed" [Yuzhu Wang 2022, 14]. Therefore, this understanding of hedging incorporates two main elements: lack of system certainty posed by the great power rivalry and risk avoidance, rather than risk cancellation, while opting for delaying the strategic choice for either balancing or bandwagoning. An important distinction should be made that risks usually entail hedging strategies endorsement, while threats would demand more resolute measures, such as the implementation of balancing or bandwagoning strategies [Haacke and Ciorciari 2022, 8].

It can be argued then, that in the context of US-China rivalry, middle powers, hedge against different perceived risks: some against changing regional order risks, some against status quo risks. However, as these risks turn into tangible threats – whether perceived or actual – states are likely to engage with more assertive strategic measures, either by balancing against the threats or by bandwagoning to secure additional support. Naturally, balancing or bandwagoning are likely to provoke stronger responses from the major powers, thereby limiting their strategic maneuver choices in case of a shifting status quo.

Determining which middle powers in Asia-Pacific region engage in hedging has posed significant challenges to the researches in the field of strategic choice.

According to Haacke, key authors differ significantly on the approaches middle powers adopted to react to the status quo change [Haacke 2019]. Nevertheless, this paper will assert, that countries that in their strategic documents define China in a “threat” term framework cannot be defined as “hedging”, while the ones clearly engaging with both states – the US and China – in military sense, are exercising hedging strategy.

One important notion to consider is that China considering various aspects, that were codified in the “non-alignment policy”, does not accord military alliances or treaties, so a normative military engagement with regional countries is limited.

The table below summarizes Asia-Pacific region middle powers security strategy by assessing white papers” and national strategy documents” negative connotations towards status quo change, which would entail more assertive military activity of China, military engagement strategies with the US and China, consisting of treaties signed, membership in the US regional security organizations and joint military trainings and exercises during 2022-2023, according to the data of the Lowy Institute Asia Power Index [Lowy Institute Asia Power Index 2024].

The Figure 1 below additionally compares the military engagement of Asia-Pacific middle powers with the United States and China from 2022 to 2023, based on two main criteria: defense dialogues and military trainings [Lowy Institute Asia Power Index 2024]. While US long-standing allies, such as Japan, Australia and South Korea show significant disparity in their military engagement with the US and China, Vietnam is clearly an outlier, engaging less with the US than with China.

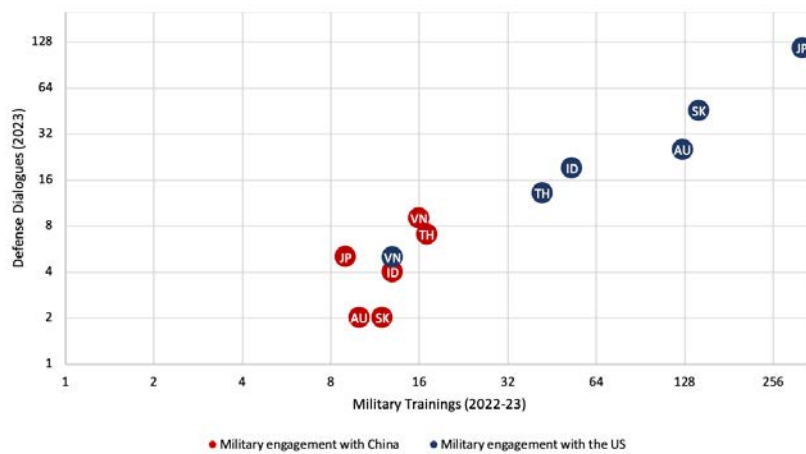


Fig. 1. Middle powers military engagement with the US and China (2022–2023)

Source: Compiled by author based on data from Lowy Institute Asia Power Index 2024.

Therefore, Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia can be considered as hedging states against the adverse effects of the US-China rivalry, while Japan and Australia, having established long-term commitments with the US and, having accepted the role of an official ally, are rather balancing in a security sense of the term. As for the South Korea, it is yet to be disputed whether the state employs hedging or a form of covert balancing strategy, however, drawing on the findings of multiple recent

Table 1

The assessment of middle powers security strategies

	Negative connotations of “China’s rise” in the national strategy	Military engagement – the US	Military engagement – China	Hedging
Japan	Yes. “China’s current external stance, military activities, and other activities have become a matter of serious concern for Japan and the international community, and present an unprecedented and the greatest strategic challenge in ensuring the peace and security of Japan.” [<i>National Security Strategy of Japan</i> 2022, 9]	Regional treaty ally QUAD member <i>Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security (1960)</i> 332 joint exercises with the US (2022-23)	9 joint exercises with China (2022–2023)	No
Australia	Yes. “China has employed coercive tactics in pursuit of its strategic objectives, including forceful handling of territorial disputes and unsafe intercepts of vessels and aircraft operating in international waters and airspace in accordance with international law.” [<i>National Defense Strategy</i> 2024, 12]	Regional treaty ally AUKUS member QUAD member “Five Eyes” Alliance ANZUS member 126 joint exercises with the US (2022–2023)	10 joint exercises with China (2022–2023)	No
South Korea	No. “We aim to foster a healthier and more mature relationship with China built on mutual respect and reciprocity.” [<i>The Yoon Suk Yeol Administration</i> 2023]	Regional treaty ally <i>Mutual Defense Treaty (1953)</i> 143 joint exercises with the US	12 joint exercises with China (2022–2023)	Yes
Indonesia	No. “China is a strategic partner that is organized in the context of Indonesian national interests to build defense capability and the handling of common security issues.” [<i>Defence White Paper</i> 2015, 83]	<i>Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2023)</i> <i>Defense Cooperation Agreement (2023)</i> 53 joint exercises with the US (2022-23)	12 joint exercises with China (2022–2023)	Yes
Thailand	No mention.	Regional treaty ally <i>Major non-NATO ally (2003)</i> <i>Southeast Asian Collective Defense Treaty (1954)</i> 42 joint exercises with the US (2022-23)	17 joint exercises with China (2022–2023)	Yes
Vietnam	No. “Divergences between Viet Nam and China regarding sovereignty in the East Sea are of historical existence, which need to be settled with precaution, avoiding negative impacts on general peace, friendship, and cooperation for development between the two countries.” [Thunh and Dung 2019, 16]	<i>Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2023)</i> 13 joint exercises with the US (2022-23)	16 joint exercises with China (2022–2023)	Yes

Source: Compiled by author based on data from Lowy Institute Asia Power Index 2024

studies, hedging has almost uniformly been identified as a coping strategy for Seoul [Kuik 2021, 10; Meijer and Simón, 2021, 467].

As a security strategy, hedging ensures strengthening the bargaining leverage, when cooperating with great powers, allowing middle powers, which naturally possess more influence and power projection capabilities, to avoid bandwagoning, which is an exemplary strategy for small powers, and prevent large-scale economic and political conflicts [Thao 2023, 434]. Therefore, Beijing in its strategy examines closely these considerations of the middle powers, tackling the needs and fears to achieve strategic parity.

China’s cooperation approach with the regional hedging states. Having defined the middle power states that employ hedging strategy, it is crucial to identify China’s strategy and cooperation patterns aimed at engaging these countries. As any international security theoretical framework, China’s response to middle power’s hedging is undoubtedly multifactorial, potentially including the following elements: security cooperation, economic engagement, soft power influence, coalition-building, risk management and diplomatic efforts. It is also important to consider, that even though, this research defines “hedging” in purely military and defense terms, as the risks faced by the states are considered to have negative impact specifically for the sovereignty and military aspects, official Beijing strives to shift the perspective using various approaches, not uniquely defense and military, considering the interconnectedness of factors, which define alignment strategies.

As such, Beijing’s policy of middle power engagement can be outlined by two main sets of criteria: (1) effort application: effort conformity or effort optimization and (2) strategy driver: pragmatism or opportunism. Table 2 below summarizes China’s engagement strategy directed at middle powers.

Table 2

China’s engagement strategy towards hedging middle powers in Asia Pacific

	Effort Conformity	Effort Optimization
Pragmatism-driven strategy	Indonesia	Vietnam
Opportunism-driven strategy	Thailand	South Korea

Source: Compiled by author.

Pragmatism and opportunism serve as two drivers for Chinese strategy, when engaging middle powers in Asia Pacific which rely on hedging as their primary security strategy. In this paper, pragmatism-driven strategy is an approach that China employs with the states that have similar political tradition, guided by shared political ideology and non-alignment principle, and are not officially allied with the US, which constitutes itself in the expansion of the effort to engage the states economically and politically in a more direct way.

Conversely, opportunism-driven strategy is an approach used by China to cooperate with the states that are formally allied with the US and may experience more frequent political shifts, which constitutes itself in leveraging both long-term and short-term crisis and political change to seize the opportunity to try to align their policies with China’s strategic goals.

Engagement with the US major non-NATO allies, South Korea and Thailand, through an opportunism-driven approach is aimed at countering their existing

alliance relations with the US, whereas for the non-aligned states, such as Vietnam and Indonesia, China employs pragmatism-driven approach, formulating a framework for the regional order and reshaping the politics in Asia-Pacific. As such, China's strategy differs greatly, informed by the needs assessment and strategic option of each of the aforementioned states.

Effort management strategy is employed based on the hedging state perception of its sovereignty reliance on the resolution of a particular challenge. If the perception is strong, China must employ effort optimization strategy, ensuring it is offering the support and assistance needed to provide security framework useful for the state and eliminate such challenge. For South Korea, China's primarily responsibility as a great power should be seeking a resolution to the enduring conflict on the Korean Peninsula, whereas Vietnam faces tensions in the South China Sea, an area where China asserts its dominance. Therefore, this research argues, China's main goal in cooperation with Vietnam and South Korea is to optimize its efforts to "win over" these states, offering the incentives to avoid openly taking sides in the Asia-Pacific great power competition or, at least, minimizing the adverse effects of their possible choice not in China's favor.

Conversely, effort conformity is a strategy employed when the state faces no immediate challenge from another state, which results in more leeway for bilateral cooperation on a myriad of issues. As such, both Thailand and Indonesia seemingly exhibit the possibility for China to apply effort conformity strategy, given the context of the new pro-China Indonesian administration and Sino-Thai amicable cooperation model, and taking into account strong sovereignty rights not challenged beyond the state.

A better comprehension of China's efforts in engaging these middle powers can be gained by looking at each particular case. It is important to note that the complexity of engaging middle powers by Beijing manifests itself in the strategic partnership strategy, which regional middle powers, such as Thailand, Vietnam and Indonesia, has established with both China and the US [Kradiuk 2023, 259]. Another obstacle is Chinese dedication to non-alliance policy since 1982, which hinders any efforts to establish closer military cooperation with regional middle powers, but serves as an extension of its "anti-colonial" campaign leadership [Küçükdeğirmenci 2021, 112].

Indonesia. As an ASEAN leader and a fellow state in a non-alignment movement, there are multiple ways for China to effectively cooperate with Indonesia, while shifting the possibility of Indonesia bandwagoning with the US.

Effort conformity is characterized by Sino-Indonesian conformity in the strategic vision of the future of Indo-Pacific, which does not require large concessions on either side to align on key regional issues. This can be explained by few factors: non-alignment movement coherence, prioritization of economic gains, large Chinese influence over the diaspora and infrastructure projects and cultural ties over the historical ties.

Prabowo administration seems to already agree to a set of territorial concessions for China's sake. As such, during his visit to Beijing, in a joint statement with Xi Jinping, both parties state their common understanding to "joint development in areas of overlapping claims", which signifies Indonesia's tacit agreement to Chinese nine-dash line policy [Supriyanto 2024]. After the joint statement release, Prabowo Subianto did reiterate that he will support territorial integrity of his state,

however, it was made in a unilateral way. Another sign of effort conformity with China is that Prabowo administration held the first ever maritime drills with Russia, China's partner of strategic coordination, in the Java Sea, despite Russian aggression against Ukraine and Indonesia's previous statements of neutrality [Saha 2024].

To enhance the cooperation efforts, China employs economic and institutional mechanisms of influence. As state-signatory of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Indonesia receives Chinese investments and infrastructure programs the most out of all states in South-East Asia [*South-East Asia Learns* 2024]. Drawing on the domestic-political theories of international relations, politicians inside the country, as demonstrated by the cases of Joko Widodo and Prabowo Subianto's administrations, employ Chinese financial resources and investments to promote their own political agendas and raise public support. As China has been Indonesia's biggest trade partner since 2005, Beijing also engages in multiple BRI projects, contributing to Indonesia's economic growth, while creating a unique economic engagement element not seen in the Indo-Pacific strategy of the US [Fitriani 2022].

On the other hand, the Sino-Indonesian cooperation is aimed more at pragmatic results and establishing cooperation through institutions, as Indonesia, informal ASEAN leader, embraces neutrality as a core principle for the organization, which, can be argued, leads to an evident ambiguity of resolving regional issues. Another point of contact for Indonesia and China is the desire to protect ASEAN's leading role in the region, which might be substituted by a web of strategic partnerships created by the US and its allies [Kai He and Mingjiang Li 2020, 5]. The Indo-Pacific Strategy, introduced by the US threatens to replace the consensus-building aspect of ASEAN and substitute it with "rules-based order" values in a Western sense, which do not necessarily align with the institutional vision of Indonesia [Koga 2020, 50]. Instead, China cooperates with Indonesia on the grounds of seeking multilateral approach in South-East Asia and the institutionalization of the great-power relations, which cannot be accomplished in case of bandwagoning with either China or the US [Emmers 2018, 46].

In general, Chinese approach to influencing Indonesia's decision-making for its foreign policy is to employ strategic goals of the political leaders inside the state and rely on the existing political neutrality principles. In order to strengthen these efforts, China employs economic measures, investments and large infrastructure projects as incentives for the cooperation and staying neutral in the China-US regional rivalry.

Vietnam. Vietnam is a state towards which China employs pragmatic-driven cooperation and effort optimization practices. This strategic choice is dictated by the specific features of Vietnam's foreign policy, which include longstanding historical and cultural ties with China, communist orientation of the state, "four no's" policy and "bamboo diplomacy" principle, which relies on flexibility and independence of Vietnam's strategic choices. Vietnam can also be seen as a representative of the mainland South-East Asia and an active advocate for the South China Sea (SCS) disputes resolution, which exemplifies his role as a valuable cooperation partner for China [*The Indo-Pacific Strategy* 2020, 5].

As for the effort optimization, such strategy is chosen by Beijing in accordance to the territorial disputes in SCS, which present significant challenge for two of the somewhat contradicting main strategies of China: nationalist sentiment

enhancement and multilateral approach. Thus, Vietnam's recent efforts to expand its strategic partnerships with the US and Russia pose a challenge to Chinese plans of engaging the state to secure its amicable relations and preferential treatment in case of a great power competition [Butcher 2024]. Moreover, there are views that a significant possibility exists of Vietnam becoming a fifth QUAD member, alongside Japan, India, Australia and the US [*From Quad to Quint* 2024]. All of this, creates obstacles for China's direct involvement as a part of Vietnam's security strategy, so effort optimization is employed to target particularly the South China Sea conflict, while focusing on economic gains.

As such, Vietnam has become a key state in the BRI project, and as a fellow communist state issued a joint statement with China to promote the "community of common destiny" in December 2023 [*Vietnam Boosts China Ties* 2023]. In addition, China and Vietnam are large trade partners. The aforementioned political moves alongside the economic engagement on the Chinese part are a representation of Beijing's effort to engage Vietnam in a more strategic way. Vietnam's political system, which is shared with China and is stable, compared to the other regional states, constitutes a favorable foundation for a pragmatism-driven approach, employed by China.

Focusing on the non-alignment nature of Vietnamese politics, it becomes progressively easier to anticipate the next step of administration in Hanoi and prevent the escalation of the conflict, as in the case of SCS, and the economic dependence is another building stone in strengthening the cooperation. As, for example, unlike the Philippines, which stations the US troops and openly challenges China's nine-dash policy, Vietnam as an adjacent country to China is obliged to maintain a strategic balance. This is extremely favorable for China's strategy of pragmatism-driven engagement, which offers incentives, such as economic support and investment, to soften the official tone of Vietnam's claims in the South China Sea case and to obtain more leverage to possibly influence Vietnam's stance on the territorial dispute. So, pragmatism-driven approach is adopted by Beijing to increase growing economic interdependence between China and Vietnam and allow for more concessions in times of a possible military conflict.

Nevertheless, Vietnam's participation in US lead military drills in 2018 and subsequent visits of senior officials to Hanoi marked a significant challenge for Chinese efforts to continue tackling security issues via economic means [Raghupathy 2024, 367]. Another challenge for China's engagement is Vietnam's military being the second strongest in South-East Asia, which might not allow China to openly advocate for its territorial claims in the South China Sea [Tahir and Askari 2021, 123].

Thailand. As a major non-NATO ally country in Asia Pacific, Thailand constitutes an interesting case of a hedging middle power. Subsequently, China employs opportunism-driven strategy, while aims for effort conformity.

The China's opportunism-driven strategy has manifested itself most clearly in the aftermath of the coup in 2014, after Washington downgraded the military relations and reduced the aid to Thailand, creating strategic space for China to become largest source of FDI and to initiate more infrastructure projects, while enhancing military cooperation [Jones and Jenne 2021, 11]. In general, the turmoil in the US-Thai relations in the time period from 2006 to 2018, caused by the political instability of the both states, created a pivotal opportunity for China to engage Thailand and streamline its strategy to take into account China's rising global power [Tahir

and Huda 2023, 1479]. The cooperation with China during these vital years, can be argued, led to Thailand, an official US treaty ally, to proclaim “neutral” or “non-aligned” status facing the challenges of China-US rivalry [Kuik 2022, 21]. China vocal criticism of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy is a contributing factor to the precaution with which Bangkok opts for the participation in the US-led regional initiatives.

On the other hand, as for the effort conformity, Beijing does not have to use excessive incentive tactics to align Thailand on the main goals for the region, besides applying economic measures. The rationale behind this is that China poses no threat to Thailand’s sovereignty. As Thailand has no territorial disputes with China, it is widely regarded as “the closest nation” to China in the South-East Asia [Busbarat 2022, 103]. Another reason is that, following the coup in 2014, Thailand is generally regarded as an authoritarian state, and, as a general practice, China does not place emphasis on the governance practices employed by the state with which it cooperates, unlike western states, including the US [Pongsudhirak 2020, 8]. Conversely, China’s approach to cooperating with partner states is based on the economic merit and usually disregards the political dimension, despite the instances when state policy posed a threat to China’s interest or the cases which involve cases of a failed state.

Therefore, China opts for effort conformity partnership strategy with Thailand, as the US influence is limited due to ideological restrictions. Despite having no defined timeline for the Thailand’s current regime, the efforts that Beijing officials undertake now, such as increasing the trade volume, Chinese investment flow, influencing through the diaspora and initiatives, such as Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIB) and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) all created a momentum for China-Thai economic cooperation to become a defining factor for Thai regional strategy of hedging [Prasirtsuk 2017, 126].

South Korea. China’s strategy towards South Korea can be described as opportunism-driven and effort optimizing. As one of the US strongest partners in Asia, South Korea constitutes an interesting case of China’s leveraging its conflict resolution role to advance its own interests.

The opportunism-driven dimension of China’s strategy towards South Korea can be described through an ongoing conflict between north and South Korea. As China is the biggest trading partner of North Korea and a country which essentially has an immense impact on national and international policies of North Korea, it is crucial for South Korea government to engage Beijing for constructive talks and peace discussions regarding the matter. Hence, it is precisely in Seoul’s authorities’ interest to engage as many parties as possible to the solution of the “Korean problem”. Another explanation for South Korean government to create a momentum in cooperation with China, which derives from a liberal school of international relations, is the large trade volume and the subsequent dependence on economic and financial relations between the two states [Kuik and Rozman 2015, 8].

As South Korea is a key US ally in the region, China optimizes its efforts to persuade South Korea to shift its policy to less heavy hedging. This is particularly true in the case of the dichotomy, which appears on the periphery of economic and security interest of South Korea [Abbondanza 2022, 412]. So, the approach employed by China is to encourage the current level of engagement of South Korea

and the United States, ensuring their ties do not deepen further, as their cooperation model has not been officially upgraded to any new level since 1990s [Bong 2017, 49]. Nevertheless, such approach to addressing South Korean foreign policy appears to be challenging for China for a few reasons: a recent deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) to the peninsula, lack of progress in peace building and condemnation of the nuclear efforts of North Korea, shifting of perspectives of newly elected South Korean administrations and possible integration to the QUAD framework.

A key point of convergence for China and South Korea lies in the Japanese war crimes and wartime claims. While the US is hesitant to step forward in the discussions that address both of its key allies as opponents, China openly challenges Japanese apologetic believes and is a fellow state for South Korea in terms of the shared historical memory [Sato 2023, 337].

Overall, South Korean dependency on the great power competition as a resource to solve conflict with North Korea serves China's purpose of driving the US ally further away from the hub-and-spoke architecture, employed by the US in the Asia-Pacific. Nevertheless, dealing with a Western-style democracy, Beijing implements effort optimization strategy, focusing on the areas it can leverage, such as North Korea, and increasing the support in the areas of priority for South Korea, such as its economy.

Conclusion. This research paper attempted to look into detail and classify the ways China approaches the cooperation with hedging middle powers in the Asia-Pacific. Hedging, as a security strategy itself, is based on the risk perception, rather than threat response. Therefore, Beijing leverages methods to “de-riskify” the perception of its behavior in the region and convey the idea of the peaceful rise for the benefit of the community of shared future for mankind not only in the Asia-Pacific, but everywhere in the world.

Specific measures employed by China's authorities to influence strategic choices of defined hedging middle powers, such as Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand and South Korea, can be divided into two normative categories. The first focuses on effort management (effort optimization vs effort conformity), while the second focuses on primary driver (opportunism vs pragmatism). The research concludes that in the cases of Indonesia and Vietnam, which do not have official security ties with the US, pragmatism and continuity of foreign relations is the approach employed by China and supported by the peculiarities of political systems of both states and historical preconditions. Nevertheless, as for the cases of South Korea and Thailand, opportunism is a way for China to seize the momentum of cooperation with these states without igniting excessive controversy over their cooperation with the rising power.

On the other hand, effort optimization is employed to collaborate with both Vietnam and South Korea, which face challenges to their sovereignty, and is defined as a strategy, which establishes new frameworks to assure China's support and presence for the resolution of such conflicts. Effort conformity strategy, which is utilized in cooperation with Indonesia and Thailand, builds upon already existing security considerations and regional institutions, such as ASEAN.

It must be noted, that the analysis in this research must be applied thoroughly to each particular case, as there is a high level of political volatility in most of these cases. Only during last century, all of the aforementioned countries experienced

severe political changes, which varied from revolutions to wars, and resulted in a continuous change of a myriad of political regimes in the Asia-Pacific. The case of Thailand only proves that even most seemingly stable democratic regimes allied with great powers, might experience backlash in their ideologies.

Therefore, more future analysis should focus on crystallizing the definition of hedging and identifying countries in the Asia-Pacific, which employ such strategy, according to the common definition. Future research should answer the questions of whether the economic incentives can substitute security incentives for middle powers, and if yes to which extent and in which cases. Replying to the aforementioned inquiries would significantly increase the analytical level of research in the “middle power” area and create conditions to predict future developments in the region and beyond.

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