FROM ASIA-PACIFIC TO INDO-PACIFIC

# WHAT'S A MIDDLE POWER TO DO?

PAUL EVANS

# From Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific

What's a Middle Power to Do?

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# From Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific: What's a Middle Power to Do?

### Abstract

It's something of an understatement to say that we live in fraught, uncertain, and dangerous times. A series of inter-connected crises have set the stage for great power competition as the global balance of power shifts. US-China relations are descending quickly into a multi-dimensional confrontation including moves toward technological and supply chain decoupling.

The new framing of the region as the "Indo-Pacific" reflects this new geo-political moment and is eclipsing the older frame of Asia-Pacific. The two differ in mood, trade policies, security philosophies, preferred regional institutions, and approach to China.

Comparing the contrasting responses of Canada and Malaysia to this changing environment, the key observation is that while both have elements of a Middle Power tradition, Canada is departing from it by increasing alignment with the United States while Malaysia is pursuing a course far closer to the Asia-Pacific frame of the past thirty years. Despite these differences there are several areas whether the two countries can contribute together to regional dialogue and cooperation.

### Dari Asia-Pasifik ke Indo-Pasifik: Apakah Harus Kuasa Pertengahan Lakukan?

### Abstrak

Adalah sesuatu kenyataan lemah untuk mengatakan bahawa kita hidup dalam waktu yang tegang, tidak menentu dan berbahaya. Siri krisis yang saling berkaitan telah mewujudkan pentas untuk persaingan kuasa-kuasa besar sementara kesimbangan kuasa global berubah. Hubungan Amerika Syarikat-China terjerumus dengan cepat menuju konfrontasi pelbagai dimensi yang merangkumi langkah-langkah ke arah penyahgandingan teknologi dan rantaian bekalan.

Perangkaan baharu rantau ini sebagai "Indo-Pasifik" mencerminkan detik geo-politik baharu ini dan mengatasi kerangka lama Asia-Pasifik. Kedua-duanya berbeza dalam mood, dasar perdagangan, falsafah keselamatan, institusi serantau pilihan, dan pendekatan terhadap China.

Membandingkan tindak balas yang berbeza antara Kanada dan Malaysia terhadap persekitaran baharu ini, pemerhatian utama yang dapat dibuat ialah meskipun kedua-duanya mempunyai unsur-unsur tradisi Kuasa Pertengahan, Kanada menyimpang daripadanya dengan meningkatkan penjajaran dengan Amerika Syarikat manakala Malaysia mengikuti jalan yang jauh lebih dekat dengan rangka Asia-Pasifik pada tiga puluh tahun yang lalu. Di sebalik perbezaan ini terdapat beberapa bidang di mana kedua-dua negara boleh menyumbang bersama kepada dialog dan kerjasama serantau.

The Honourable Vice Chancellor,
The Honourable Deputy Vice Chancellors,
Fellow Deans and Directors,
Fellow Professors, Associate Professors and Lecturers,
Fellow Students,
And Respected audience.

### I. Introit

Let me begin by thanking the individuals and organizations who have provided me a splendid opportunity to spend four months in Malaysia and to be with you this morning.

First, the Pok Rafeah Foundation which has sponsored the Chair over 27 years. I'm the seventh holder and honoured to be the first Canadian.

Second, the Institute for Malaysian and International Studies here at UKM which has hosted me so hospitably. My specific thanks to the Director, Professor Sufian Jusoh and his staff and colleagues, especially Professor Kuik Cheng-Chwee my guide and companion throughout.

Third, the more than eighty academics, officials, politicians, journalists and members of Royal families who have shared thoughts and *makan* with me. Several are in the audience this morning. They can be the judge of whether I have asked the right questions and understood correctly their insights and answers.

And thank you all for coming this morning. This is a wonderful assembly.

Today I'm aiming at two audiences—one academic and the other in the policy world. Pulling the two together is a tough challenge.

To begin, a little personal history. Before assuming the Chair last year, I'd visited Malaysia on a dozen or so occasions starting in 1991. These were always for short stays of a few days and often tied to participation in the Asia-Pacific Roundtable hosted by ISIS Malaysia and ASEAN ISIS.

These earlier visits had a big impact on me coinciding with the ending of the Cold War and the blooming of the Asia-Pacific era in this region. I was introduced to some dynamic thought leaders including Noordin Sopiee and Jawhar Hassan from Malaysia, Jusuf Wanandi and Hadi Soeastro from Indonesia, and others from across Southeast Asia who were generating ideas, a spirit and an approach very different from my experience of international affairs in Northeast Asia and North America.

It was also a creative time when Malaysian and Canadian diplomats and academics had a great deal in common and were working together.

That earlier era, the Asia-Pacific era, was considerably different than the one we live in now, commonly framed as "Indo-Pacific."

My aim today in this presentation is to do three things: (1) to describe the turbulent moment we are living in; (2) to assess the options confronting two countries in particular, Canada and Malaysia, positioning themselves in a situation of major power contestation; and (3) to offer some ideas about capturing and updating elements of the creative thinking and fruitful multilateral doings of an earlier period.

### **II.** The Current Setting

It's something of an understatement to say that we live in fraught, uncertain, and dangerous times.

The world is still coping with the most serious pandemic in a century, with health and economic consequences that will be with us for years to come especially in the developing world.

The war in Ukraine is shaking sacrosanct norms of sovereignty and non-aggression, uniting Europe, revitalizing alliances, and having an enormous economic and human toll. The response to the war is also revealing major gaps between Western liberal democracies and "The Rest of the World" in what is now clearly a contested and fragmented world order.

The institutions of global governance—for example the United Nations and the World Trade Organization—are faltering. Progress on the great existential challenges – climate change, bio-diversity, and weapons of mass destruction – is very hard to find.

Virtually all of the liberal democracies are facing challenges to their core institutions, political and economic polarization, and various forms of extremism.

Above all, great power competition is in full display as the balance of power shifts. A more assertive China is looking to expand its global presence and influence; while the United States is seeking to maintain regional and global dominance against a state it defines as its near-peer competitor.

Anxiety is increasing about competing superpowers and the prospects of armed conflict in the South China Sea and Taiwan. One American observer, Henry Paulson, a former Secretary of the Treasury, has described this situation as "a head long descent from a competitive but sometimes cooperative relationship to one that is confrontational in nearly every respect."

Is this a new Cold War? The term is not exactly right. But isn't wrong either. It's a mindset of enmity, multi-dimensional conflict across interests and values, a division into competing blocs, and pressure for others to take sides. Unlike the Soviet-American rivalry, the American and Chinese economy are inter-connected by trade, human flows, and integrated global value chains. Some describe this as competition within one system rather than a competition between systems

This may be true but the trend lines are not encouraging as China doubles down on dual circulation and the US institutes measures to decouple from important parts of the Chinese economy.

The fact that the volume of trade has not been much disrupted –and in fact continues to increase -- hides the fact that its composition is changing. American efforts to restrict Huawei and other Chinese companies have been expanding. A tipping point may have been reached on October 7<sup>th</sup> when Washington took drastic measures to halt Chinese access to advanced semi-conductors in the name of national security. The tech war is widening and getting more intense.

Indeed, it is a time of geo-economics and techno-nationalism in the cutting edge sectors of the Fourth Industrial revolution related to

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Henry Paulson, "America's China Policy is Not Working: The Dangers of a Broad Decoupling," *Foreign Affairs*, 26 January 2023.

Artificial Intelligence, quantum computing and Big Data and a host of other sectors.

While there remain elements of interdependence including in finance, investment and trade, the connecting points are growing thinner and more fragile as the areas considered matters of national security grow

Cold War or something even more dangerous, the era of globalization from which Asia has so benefited, is cracking.

### III. The Indo-Pacific Era—What's in a Name

Some of this is captured in the phrase "Indo-Pacific."

In the last six years some 15 countries including Japan, Australia, the UK, France, India, South Korea and the US and at least one intergovernmental organizations, the European Union, have embraced the term "Indo-Pacific." ASEAN has referred to the term with its own "Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" though framing it in a distinctively different way I will explain later.

The various Indo-Pacific strategies differ in several ways. Behind each of them, however, lies a judgment that the regional balance of power is shifting and that a rising China and Sino-American competition is fundamentally reshaping the regional and global orders.

To put Indo-Pacific into perspective it's useful to compare the concept of Asia-Pacific that was so commonly used from the late 1980s through 2015 or so. To be sure Asia-Pacific was as much an aspiration as a reality, but it was an aspiration that mattered.

-on mood, it was an era of optimism about the prospect of mitigating great power tensions and, for some, the prospect of building an Asia Pacific community

-on trade, it was the era of open regionalism, reduction of transborder restrictions, the dream of market liberalization and even a Free Trade Area of the Asia Pacific in which growing economic interdependence was viewed as a pathway to prosperity and peace. -on multilateralism, it was the era of inclusive institution building regardless of regime type. It was the heyday of ASEAN-led initiatives including ASEAN Plus Three, the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit as well as Southeast-Asian promoted processes including APEC and the negotiations begun in 2014 that led to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership.

-on security concepts, it was the era of comprehensive, cooperative and common security, the idea of building security with other states rather than against them, the expansion of interest in non-traditional or human security issues, and the push for confidence building measures and the foray into preventive diplomacy.

-on China, it was the era of engagement, inviting China in and betting that it could be induced into a constructive regional and global role.

### Compare to the Indo-Pacific framing:

- on mood it is an era of apprehension, tension, and alarm
- on trade -- it is an era of increasing protectionism, economic nationalism, subsidies, weaponization of trade, and at least partial de-globalization. Trade is increasingly viewed through a geo-political lens and specific calculations about new vulnerabilities and dependencies.
- on multilateralism while existing multilateral institutions remain in place, there is a new layer of minilateralism. This refers to problem specific clubs of the like-minded clubs aimed, explicitly or implicitly, at a third party. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, AUKUS and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework are prime examples getting the lion's share of 24/7 media attention.
- on security, discussion of cooperative security has been replaced by an emphasis on military deterrence, defence buildup, increased defence expenditures, and cyber capabilities

- and finally on China, there is a rising but not unanimous view that engagement of Xi Jinping's China has not worked and that China represents a growing threat to regional peace and security and something defined as "the Rules Based International Order". For an increasing number of countries China is to be constrained, countered, even contained.

When the next lexicon of Indo-Pacific security terms is written it will include entries on poly-crisis, the like-minded, democracies vs. autocracies, minilateralism, decoupling, friend-shoring, near-shoring, supply chain resilience, ring-fencing and, above all, *the* or *a* Rule-Based International Order. <sup>2</sup>

Naming regions reflects reality but also shapes reality. It structures the definition of what is possible and what is desirable within them.

To be sure, Asia-Pacific was as much an aspiration and dream as a reality. It rested on the American alliance system, witnessed a steady increase in military spending, did not solve or resolve very many interstate and intra-state tensions. But it did support a wide variety of initiatives that mitigated great power conflict and made war less likely in an increasingly integrated system. And several of its concrete applications in the areas of confidence building and preventive diplomacy continue to bear fruit even amidst great power tension.

### IV. Canada-Malaysia and Middle Power Roles

In the midst of these regional shifts, every country in the region faces difficult choices in positioning itself in a new context of geo-political tension and deepening great power rivalry.

Canada and Malaysia are useful comparators. It is worth remembering that the two countries worked well together in promoting some of the constructive initiatives of the Asia-Pacific era including successful efforts to bring China into regional processes and less successful ones to engage North Korea.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> For a study of 35 frequently used terms in the Asia Pacific era, see David Capie and Paul Evans, *The Asia-Pacific Security Lexicon* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002 and 2007).

Similar in population and each living in the immediate neighborhood of a great power in whose economy they are deeply entwined, they have something in common.

Canada is heavily reliant on the US as its principal trading partner and security ally and Malaysia treads carefully in its relationship with China which it views as a primary and long term presence. Both habitually look for institutions and processes to diversify their partnerships even in situations of undeniable dependence. Canada attempts this on the global stage, Malaysia primarily in its East Asian neighborhood.

I'll make the argument that both can be referred to as Middle Powers. I don't just mean that each is of middling size and capabilities and is caught "in the middle" of US-China tensions, though they certainly are.

There are four further ingredients that make for a Middle Power: (1) it has ideas about how to advance system-wide improvement beyond IT'S immediate self-interest; (2) it has a commitment to build institutions not just solve specific problems; (3) it needs to work with others to get things done; and (4) it has the ability and commitment to work across regime types with players who do not share it's values or political system.

During the latter part of the Cold War and through the 1990s - in the halcyon days of Asia Pacific - Canada was the quintessential Middle Power. It had a special interest in and capacity for mediation, working across differences, building multilateral institutions, and when possible dampening great power tensions. It had an active strategy for engaging China. It promoted ideas related to cooperative security and human security and the creation of track one and track two processes for dialogue and confidence building.

Malaysia too fits the description. It was critical in the creation of ASEAN dating back to the Tunku's Association of Southeast Asia in the 1950s. It was an early mover of the idea of East Asia-wide cooperation and integration in the 1990s. Its attempt to establish an East Asia Economic Grouping failed, but subsequent efforts to institutionalize ASEAN Plus Three and EAS succeeded in 1997 and 2005, respectively, when Malaysia was the chair of ASEAN.

Former Prime Ministers and Wisma Putra diplomats occasionally have used the term and recently it has been promoted by several political

leaders, senior officials, and academics. Some are in the room today including Tan Sri Syed Hamid Albar and YB Liew Chin Tong.

Malaysia's distinctive pre-modern and national history lay the attitudinal foundations for a Middle Power role. Anthony Milner a former holder of the Pok Rafeah Chair, has done a deep dive into the longer tradition of Malay and Malaysian foreign affairs, the international personality and the identity that lay beneath it.

In a marvelous article published in 2015 he looked at *Nama*, a tradition of recognition rather than sovereignty, community building, region building, "moral balance", and "berkampung" (togetherness). Taken together and in operational terms these suggest to him an aspiration toward "inclusive, principled and balanced engagement."<sup>3</sup>

Despite differences in political systems and ideology, Malaysia established diplomatic relations with Soviet and socialist countries in Europe in the 1960s and was the first country in ASEAN to open diplomatic relations with the PRC in 1974.

In a country famous for balancing, hedging, keeping options open, nonalignment and multi-alignment, there is something more than opportunistic calculation. In one interesting example, Professor Milner describes how as a matter of principle rather than expediency the Malaysian leadership handled the downing of MH17 and the 2014 war in Ukraine over Crimea. Cultivating relationships with everyone, and not being "beholden to any country" was certainly consistent with a centuries-old inclination towards moral balance.

More recently it is useful to keep in mind Malaysia's support for the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, a document far closer to the earlier Asia-Pacific framing than to the mainstream Indo-Pacific one. It emphasizes "inclusivity" and other ASEAN norms, while reiterating the importance of using ASEAN-led mechanisms as the main platform for cooperation among countries in the "Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions or the Indo-Pacific". ASEAN states view these two ocean regions as distinct but connected; and the ordering ("Asia Pacific" is

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Anthony Milner, "Nama, Group Building and Moral Balance: Themes and Origins of Malaysian Foreign Policy," The Tun Hussein Onn Chair in International Studies Lecture 2014, ISIS Malaysia 2015. https://isis.org.my/wpcontent/uploads/2015/09/attachments e-books Milner Monograph 2015.pdf

mentioned before Indian Ocean") deliberately emphasizing Asia-Pacific as the more vital.

A key to the Malaysian approach has been an emphasis on "ASEAN-led" mechanisms. This focuses first on norms as fundamental rather than "rules" that are a function of power. And it rests on the view that liberal democratic countries have neither the moral high-ground nor monopoly over "rules" and a "rules-based order" that is primarily a scorecard for big power competition.<sup>4</sup>

There is clearly a skepticism in the Malaysian foreign policy community about describing their country as s a Middle Power. This skepticism is not normally based on the *desirability* of a Middle Power role but rather the *capacity* of Malaysia to play it in the face of political instability, lack of foreign policy leadership, and an under-performing economy.

Supporters of the concept argue that each of these limitations may be lifting.

Turning to Canada, Ottawa's new Indo-Pacific Strategy marks a significant shift away from its Middle Power inclinations in the Asia-Pacific era.<sup>5</sup>

Southeast Asians will appreciate the new resources committed in the document to deepening economic and people to people connections with this region. And it affirms the importance of ASEAN Centrality in matters of regional architecture as Ottawa develops it strategic partnership with ASEAN and seeks membership in the East Asia Summit process.

What has changed is the approach to China. Describing China as "an increasingly disruptive global power" frequently operating contrary to the Rules Based International Order, it outlines multiple Chinese threats to Canadian values, interests and institutions. It underlines Chinese disrespect for sovereignty, its unilateral claims and its use of economic coercion. It speaks frequently of Canada's alignment with like-minded friends and allies who share similar commitment to universal values

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "Malaysian Conceptions of International Order: Paradoxes of Small-State Pragmatism", *International Affairs*, forthcoming.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Canada's Indo Pacific Strategy, November 2022, https://www.international.gc.ca/transparency-transparence/assets/pdfs/indo-pacific-indo-pacifique/indo-pacific-indo-pacifique-en.pdf.

including human rights and democracy. It expands Canadian military naval capabilities in the region.

To be sure, the strategy is not a complete departure from earlier Middle Power positioning. It supports continuing cooperation with China on global issues like climate change. It does not call for economic decoupling from China or friend shoring, though it does speak of the virtues of commercial diversification within and away from China and at least two senior ministers have championed friend shoring with the US. It does not use the phrase "democracies vs. autocracies" though again some senior Canadian Ministers do.

But Canada has clearly leaned to one side. Framed baldly, our Foreign Minister stated, "We will challenge China when we ought to. We will cooperate with China when we must."

Positioning on the war in Ukraine is a clear example of the different approaches in Ottawa and Kuala Lumpur. Ottawa's has been a full gauge supporter of Ukraine – diplomatically, politically and militarily – implementing strong sanctions against Russia, planning for increased military spending, and deepening collaborations with its NATO allies. It is frequently, and popularly, framed as the battle-ground not just between states but as the single most geopolitical issue in the world today and a vital test in a Manichean struggle between democracy and autocracy.

Compare this to the widespread resistance of most countries in Southeast Asia, including Malaysia, to take sides in the conflict, to support Western understandings of its cause, or to participate in sanctions. Even if they abhor the invasion and the violation of international norms, they are staying closer to the traditional roles of hedging, non-alignment and multi-alignment, rather than locking in with one great power. This is seen as a prudent and pragmatic insurance-seeking policy in a situation of high-stakes and high-uncertainty.

China policy is another emerging difference. Both Canada and Malaysia were early diplomatic engagers of the People's Republic of China in the early 1970s. 50 years later they are taking divergent paths in responding to Xi Jinping's China even as each government is aware of the growing global influence and presence of China and its increasing assertiveness in its maritime periphery, its influence and interference operations, and ITS human rights violations in places including Xinjiang.

Malaysia's preference is for private rather than public confrontation with China, continuing mutual respect, avoiding firm lines between friends and enemies, seeing China as a "staying power" rather than a transient one, and above all refusing to buy into the Rules Based International Order defined in Western liberal terms as the ultimate standard for judgment.

Where Canada now sees China as a growing threat to Canadian values, institutions, and interests that must be countered, Malaysia sees China posing risks that need to be managed.

While Malaysia is trying to avoid being forced to choose between China and the United States, Canada has chosen.

### V. Where to From Here in Middle Power Collaboration?

I seem to have made a very good case that whatever the commonalities and joint efforts in past, Malaysia and Canada are two different kinds of Middle Powers in an Indo-Pacific era.

Yet there is considerable common ground based on similar interests and similar fears.

Both countries remain committed to the ASEAN-centred regional architecture created in the Asia Pacific era.

Both are members of the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership. Here it will be important to watch where each positions itself on the matter of potential Chinese membership. Will China be excluded on political grounds? How far would it need to alter its economic practices to fit with the rules and standards of the Partnership?

Both have an interest in maintaining a rules-based multilateral trading system. Some players in each country see immediate advantages in heightened geo-political tensions. In Malaysia this includes an inflow of investment from companies exiting China because of American pressure and encouragement. In Canada there are potential advantages in several sectors, to "friend-shoring" with the US, for example in critical minerals and electronic vehicles, as economic decoupling with China proceeds.

But in the long term, both countries need an open trading system and leaders are aware of the enormous costs that would come with decoupling and supply chain fracture.

Although conditions may not be right at this moment for a bilateral strategic dialogue between our two governments, there are several topics that need to be explored in track-two and other non-governmental settings where Canadian and Malaysian views can be discussed.

Here universities and think tanks as well as officials have a role to play.

### Topics for discussion include:

- -How to identify the points of complementarity and tension between the ASEAN-led and existing Asia Pacific processes and the new minilateral institutional arrangements including the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, AUKUS and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity?
- -How to evaluate the prospects for regional leadership that proceeds *without* the participation of both the United States and China? What are the lessons from the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership and Digital Economy Partnership Agreement?
- How to identify the precise elements of the current Rules Based International Order that need to be refined or altered to accommodate the concerns and interests of those who feel dissatisfied with it?
- -How to make progress on specific issue including the environment, cyber security, economic coercion, hostage diplomacy, multilateral trade rules, migration, infrastructure-building, supply chain cooperation, high tech restrictions or cooperation, arms control? And where to encourage new initiatives that can gather wider Middle Power support, and that might be capable of bridging Sino-American differences?
- How to manage relations with a China that is increasingly assertive, repressive and omni-present?
- -How to manage relations with a United States that is stepping back from inclusive multilateral institutions, feeling the effects of domestic polarization, and doubling down on its confrontation with China?

-Above all, what more can Middle Powers do to dampen and defuse great power tensions? Can they assist in defining the guard rails to prevent crisis escalation? Is there any way to blunt growing technonationalism and the weaponization of trade and supply chains?

For three decades ASEAN-anchored processes and norms have worked on confidence building and preventive diplomacy measures. Is it time for new norms around great power restraint and reassurance mechanisms?

To conclude, if our objective to bend the regional trajectory back from Cold War in the direction of Asia Pacific 2.0, one of the most useful tools for more than a quarter of a century has been based here in Kuala Lumpur. The Asia Pacific Roundtable hosted by ISIS Malaysia and ASEAN ISIS has continued to convene a broad, diverse and inclusive gathering with firmly rooted in an agenda of common and cooperative security and open regionalism.

Finding ways to give it intellectual support and boost its celebrity to equal that of the Shangri-La Dialogue, the forerunner and epitome of the Indo-Pacific philosophy, is a task for us all.

At this moment of overlap between Asia Pacific and Indo-Pacific orders, it may be that Canada has one foot in both formulations and Malaysia has two feet firmly planted in the Asia Pacific version it has done so much to create.

That very difference might make them a creative pairing for generating some new ideas as it did thirty years ago.

My argument today is that watching, waiting and adjusting is not enough. We need to rekindle an Asia Pacific spirit that is far from dead and rejects the idea that an Indo-Pacific Cold War is irreversible and inevitable.

This Asia Pacific spirit lies in the Middle Power DNA shared by Canada and Malaysia, even if each occasionally falters.

Thank you.

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