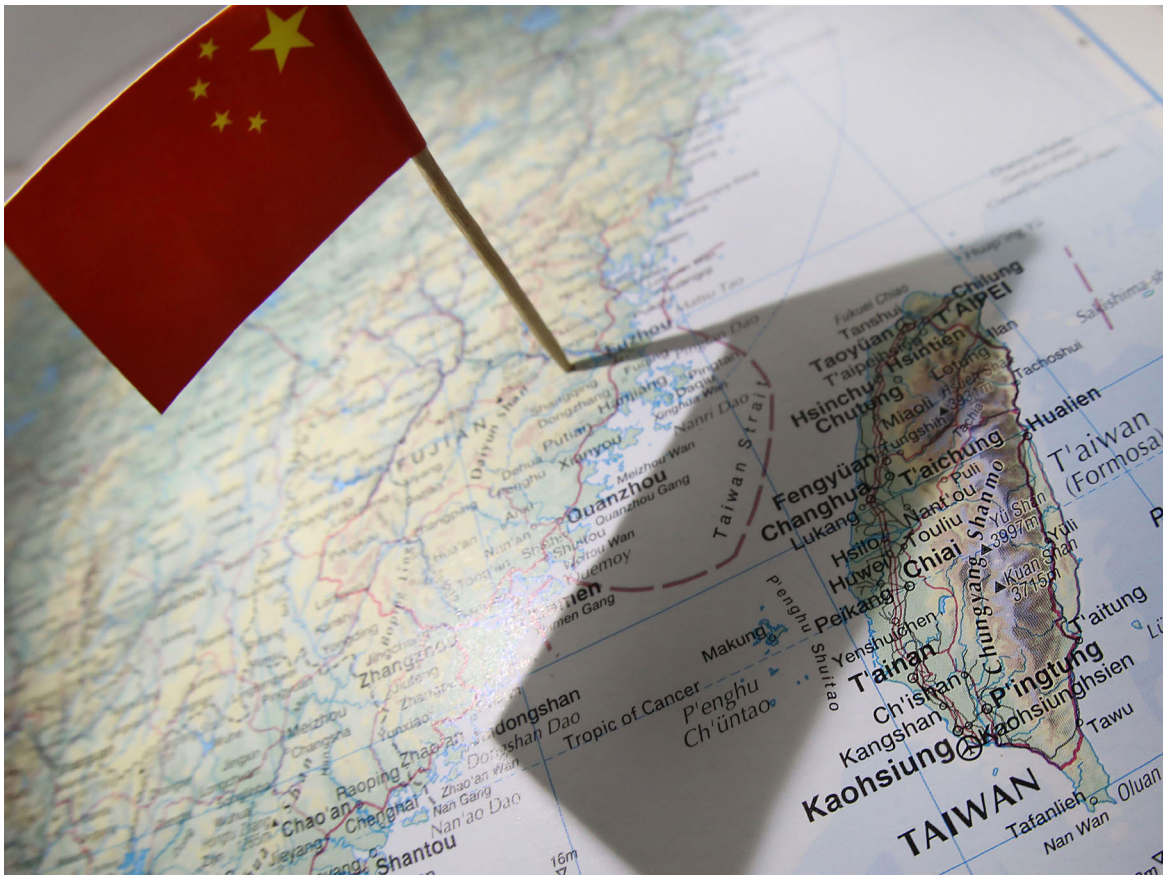


Middle-Power Equities in a Cross-Strait Conflict



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About This Report

An armed conflict between China and Taiwan in the Taiwan Strait is likely to affect the rest of Asia and other nations across the world. Above all, such a conflict could draw the United States into a great-power conflict with China. Such a war could also draw several middle powers into conflict and certainly affect the political, economic, and security interests of these states. Middle-power countries lack the size and influence to disrupt the global order significantly on their own. At the same time, middle powers might possess the capability and willingness to play substantial roles in shaping global events in pursuit of their own interests.

In this report, we explore the equities of four middle powers—Australia, Canada, Japan, and the United Kingdom—and the roles that they might play in deterring or limiting conflict between China and Taiwan. We analyze these four countries as representative of middle powers according to various factors, including their relative power on existing country-power rankings lists, their bilateral defense agreements with the United States or China; their lack of a preexisting risk of direct conflict with China, the United States, or allies of either; and their possible willingness to play a mediating role in a cross-Strait conflict. We also summarize insights that we gleaned from interviews with analysts and policymakers from these four middle-power nations. We expect these insights will be useful to policymakers in Taiwan, the United States, and middle powers with a stake in the Asia-Pacific region.

RAND National Security Research Division

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Summary

In this report, we assess the equities among middle powers that could play a role in a conflict between China and Taiwan in the Taiwan Strait. A country's equities are its long-term interests as they apply to a scenario being played out, which is a cross-Strait conflict in this report. Such a conflict would involve the United States and could also involve several middle-power countries. Middle powers are nations that are not small but lack the sheer size and influence to significantly disrupt the global order. At the same time, middle powers could possess the capability and willingness to play substantial roles in shaping global events. Middle-power countries usually influence international affairs through mediation and institution-building to improve global order and development. Middle powers might also play a balancing role between adversarial great powers.

Throughout this report, we explore the equities of four middle powers—Australia, Canada, Japan, and the United Kingdom—and the roles that they might play in deterring or limiting conflict between China and Taiwan. We used several criteria to identify these middle powers for analysis. First, we identified those nations listed among the top 100 most powerful nations in existing rankings of power. Second, we subsetting to those states with bilateral defense agreements with the United States or China. Third, we excluded states that have a preexisting risk of direct conflict with China, the United States, or allies of either. Fourth, we limited our analysis to nations that may be willing to play a mediating role in a cross-Strait conflict. The resulting list of four countries—Australia, Canada, Japan, and the United Kingdom—fulfilled all these requirements and others noted in the report. We found that these four middle-power countries offer a representative set of perspectives through which we can explore potential middle-power equities in a cross-Strait conflict.

We conducted one-on-one discussions with analysts and policymakers from each of these four nations. Our discussions covered several topics, including whether these nations would support Taiwan in a cross-Strait conflict, threats that China might perceive from these nations, and whether the respondents think that China would initiate a conflict with Taiwan. We supplemented these discussions with an open-source literature review to support our analysis. We conclude this report by offering several recommendations that draw on our insights from the interviews and our analysis.

Key Findings

Our key findings focus on potential middle-power support for Taiwan, China's perceptions of middle powers, and middle-power perceptions of the threat posed by China toward Taiwan and their overall influence vis-à-vis the great powers of China and the United States. Our key findings are summarized below.

Middle-Power Support for Taiwan Would Be Limited to Diplomacy and Sanctions

In the event of a cross-Strait conflict, the interests and equities of the middle powers analyzed in this report would involve supporting Taiwan and deterring China. Middle-power support for Taiwan would be confined to diplomatic support for Taiwan and endorsement of likely U.S. sanctions on China. Any support that they would offer to a U.S.-led military response would likely be limited to logistics and materiel support. Middle powers' military support would be limited because of their own weak military capabilities to resist retaliation by China, uncertainty about domestic political support of Taiwan in a conflict with China, and prioritization of other regions in their foreign policies. The views of our respondents from the four middle powers differed from those of several influential U.S. analysts on some of these topics.

China Does Not See Asia-Pacific Middle-Power Capabilities as a Threat

Our respondents thought that China views the four middle powers as too weak militarily to take on China, either alone or in coalition. Our respondents suggested that China views the countries of Southeast Asia as being even weaker militarily. The respondents also suggested that China sees no risk from South Asia because India has been hobbled by China's incursions on their shared border. Our respondents contended that, in East Asia and Oceania, China is only concerned about Japan's military power but thought that Japan would not prevail in a conflict with China.

China Is Unlikely to Initiate a Conflict with Taiwan

Several respondents emphasized their view that China's main goal is to legitimize its current domestic political system (i.e., the rule of the Chinese Communist Party). To accomplish this goal, China must be seen internally as a great power, preeminent in Asia, and able to achieve high economic growth. An invasion of Taiwan would jeopardize such perceptions and thus be deemed an unacceptable risk relative to the status quo. Regarding a potential China-initiated conflict, the views of our respondents from the middle powers differed from those of U.S. policymakers, who are more likely to think that China will be aggressive in asserting its One China policy and is more likely to invade Taiwan.

Middle-Power Influence Is Localized and Diminished

Overall, the middle powers share remarkably common equities in the event of a cross-Strait conflict. These equities include widespread political support for Taiwan, a low likelihood of active military involvement in a cross-Strait conflict, and a limited ability to deter or de-escalate a conflict (although these middle powers perceive China as unlikely to initiate such a conflict). This commonality of views offers some insight into current middle-power perceptions of influence, including a greater regionalized focus on having influence close to home, a sense of declining influence

of middle powers overall relative to the post–Cold War unipolar period, and a sense of a loss of strategic autonomy among allied middle powers.

Recommendations

Mediation Should Be Pursued by Middle Powers Only as a Long-Term Objective

China, Taiwan, the United States, and our four selected middle powers all have interests in preventing a conflict, albeit for differing reasons. Such convergence of interests might suggest a mediating role for the middle powers in the event of a cross-Straits conflict between China and Taiwan. Indeed, middle powers might be the only ones that can mediate such a conflict. However, as of this report's writing, no middle power has enough influence over both China and the United States to play such a role, even in coalition with others. Long-term military and economic improvements by the middle powers could improve their capabilities to exercise influence over the great powers and to resolve a cross-Straits conflict.

Middle Powers Should Develop a Trade Sanctions Plan

One way that these middle powers could develop influence over China would be to collaboratively formulate trade sanctions that would be imposed on China in the event of a cross-Straits conflict. If such a plan could also obtain the participation of the United States, its allies, and their close partners, which collectively buy over half of China's exports, trade sanctions could serve as a substantial deterrent to China's action against Taiwan.

Middle Powers Should Convene a Track 1.5 or 2 Dialogue with the United States for Common Understanding

Dialogue between these middle powers and the United States could enhance understanding of the positions and understandings of each regarding China and resolve any actual or perceived differences in outlooks regarding the threat posed by China to shared regional and global interests. In particular, we recommend a Track 1.5 dialogue among a mix of policy analysts and government officials participating in a nonofficial capacity in addition to a Track 2 dialogue among policy analysts on each side. Such dialogues should cover two topics for which there appear to be wide gaps between middle power and U.S. assessments and focus specifically on reaching a common understanding on the following.

Understanding China's Goals, Diplomacy, One China Policy, and Views Toward Taiwan

The assessments of China by the middle-power analysts from all four countries differed significantly from those by U.S. analysts. The main areas of difference included China's goals, China's

approach to multilateralism and diplomacy, definitions of the One China policy, and the likelihood of an invasion of Taiwan.

We found that our respondents from the four middle powers regard the Chinese state's goal as being limited to preserving the Chinese Communist Party's domestic legitimacy. To accomplish this goal, China needs to be seen internally as a major power in the Asia-Pacific region and to deliver sustained economic growth. Both instruments would be irretrievably jeopardized by an invasion of Taiwan. This led to the conclusion that the likelihood of a unilateral invasion of Taiwan by China is very low. In contrast, U.S. policymakers and analysts commonly take the view that China will take over Taiwan as part of its global plan to be a great power to rival or displace the United States.

Understanding Middle Powers' Assessments of Their Own Influence and Concerns

The middle-power analysts' assessments of their own countries' influence suggest that these nations' focus have become increasingly localized and that concerns have grown over their diminished capacities to exert influence in the larger U.S.-China competition. It is unclear as to the extent to which these perceptions are fully understood by U.S. or Chinese policymakers. Potential variances that were highlighted by our respondents focused on such topics as domestic politics, the changing importance of national security to policymakers, views on getting involved in a cross-Straits conflict, and concerns about retaliation by China. Reconciling these potential variances and developing a better mutual understanding could improve U.S. policymakers' ability to develop joint initiatives regarding Taiwan and related issues.

Middle Powers Should Increase Their Foreign Policy Capabilities

To build credibility with both great powers, the four middle powers that we analyzed should bolster their strategic autonomy, material power, and commitment to the Asia-Pacific region. Because their strategic autonomy is constrained by their alliance with a great power, their immediate focus should be on increasing their material and diplomatic power. Strategic autonomy from their great-power ally might be easier to attain if their military and diplomatic power increased sufficiently to be credible mediators between China and the United States. Their own national security would also be better achieved if they attained enough power to balance against China's power.

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Introduction

China and Taiwan have had the potential for conflict in the Taiwan Strait for a long time. Such a conflict could have military, political, and socioeconomic consequences that reverberate across Asia and the world (*The Economist*, 2021; Grant, 2019). One reason that such a conflict could have such broad consequences is the geopolitical rivalry between China and the United States. The initiation of any armed conflict by China against Taiwan would likely trigger stringent economic sanctions on China by the United States. This response could be followed by direct U.S. involvement in the conflict.

U.S. sanctions, which are known for their extensive global reach and efficacy, make the aftermath of an invasion an unappealing prospect for China, whose economy relies heavily on global trade and investment. Nevertheless, because the unification of Taiwan with mainland China is a core interest for China, an extreme provocation, such as a declaration of independence by Taiwan's government, could cause conflict.¹ Lesser provocations, such as stringent U.S. controls on China's imports of technology from Taiwan or the continued arming of Taiwan by the United States, could also trigger tensions that could escalate into a conflict that consequently involves the United States.² There is also the real possibility of unintended escalation from gray-zone activities to full-scale war.³

Some nations might support U.S. actions in response to potential war over Taiwan because of treaty obligations, concerns for their own national security, or a commitment to restoring international order (Gordon, Mullen, and Sacks, 2023). A *bandwagon effect* might also occur, in which some nations follow the examples of others in developing their policies regarding China and Taiwan. Overall, the countries that are most likely to influence China on Taiwanese issues are the ten states that belong to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Australia, the 27 European Union (EU) states, India, Japan, South Korea, and the United Kingdom (UK)—a total of 42 countries (Tellis, 2005).

For these countries, the involvement of the United States in a cross-Strait conflict holds paramount significance. Being a great power and Taiwan's primary global supporter, the United States

¹ Although Taiwanese independence is not a priority in the foreign policies of Taiwan or the United States, the issue occasionally gains prominence in Taiwanese politics. Many Democratic Progressive Party politicians in Taiwan, including Lai Ching-te, who was elected president in January 2024, have asserted Taiwan's status as an independent and sovereign country, and many U.S. policymakers also have asserted the same (Sher, 2023; Weber and Wang, 2023). However, after the recent Taiwanese election, Taiwan's top diplomat in the United States, Tah Ray-Yui, stated, "We want the status quo. We want the way it is — neither unification, neither independence. The way it is is the way we want to live right now," (Tang and the Associated Press, 2024).

² China has so far chosen not to retaliate to what it perceives as the provocative action of increased arms sales to Taiwan by the United States. This lack of response might suggest that U.S. strategy has so far deterred China and improved Taiwan's ability to defend itself.

³ The term *gray-zone activities* refers to coercive acts that are designed to stay below the threshold of traditional forms of armed conflict between states but are more hostile and potentially more kinetic than routine forms of peaceful competition.

can profoundly shape international reactions by strategically managing the timing, approach, and extent of its responses to the conflict, including coordinated efforts with partners and allies (Lin, 2021). At the same time, if China were to initiate cross-Strait military action, China might anticipate that it could weather the economic and reputational fallouts, which it did in the period of global disapproval that followed the Tiananmen Square massacre (Lopez, 2022; Yang, 2023).

International responses to the Russian invasion of Ukraine provide some insights into the pragmatism that could determine such reactions to a cross-Strait conflict. Although many countries, including China, complied with U.S. sanctions against Russia, few countries outside Europe imposed their own sanctions on Russia. In Asia, only Japan and Singapore imposed their own sanctions. As of this report's writing, there is increasing disinterest outside Europe in the Russo-Ukrainian war because it has become clear that global economies are largely unaffected.

This response suggests that U.S. sanctions are effective to the extent that countries fear U.S. retaliation and not because other countries wish to take a principled stand. Some countries that have maintained close ties with Russia, such as India, prioritize these ties in determining whether to comply with sanctions (Tellis, 2022). In a cross-Strait conflict, India might behave similarly and seek to avoid aggravating its relations with China particularly because of concerns over economic ties and retaliation by China along their 2,500-mile border.

We assume that the drivers of a country's equities in a cross-Strait conflict are multidimensional. A country's equities are its long-term interests as they apply to a scenario being played out, such as a cross-Strait conflict. These equities hinge on a country's political, economic, and military relations with the United States, China, and Taiwan; the weight of liberal values in its foreign policy; its perception of China's interests; its own capabilities and ambitions; concerns about its own national security; and potential effects of its response on China.

Among the countries with a potential stake in a cross-Strait conflict are nations that the literature identifies as *middle powers*. We note the varying definitions of middle powers in the next section. Here, we note that middle powers are not great powers but are not so small that they have no influence on the course of international relations and outcomes. Historically, middle powers have sometimes played successful roles in resolving regional conflicts, either individually or in concert with other middle powers.

Many middle powers will have a stake in a potential cross-Strait conflict, and many of those countries have existing defense relationships with the United States or China, as well as political or economic relationships with both. Such powers could not influence the outcome of a cross-Strait conflict by themselves or even in an alliance that lacks a great power. However, they could help mediate such a conflict, support efforts to deter such a conflict, or provide critical support that helps one side or another prevail. In other words, whether China can proceed with an invasion of Taiwan without significant global consequences could depend on the equities and strategies of these middle powers. This report seeks to document those equities and strategies, as well as the views of analysts and policymakers from four middle powers that have varying stakes in a cross-Strait conflict.

In this report, we seek to answer the following questions:

1. What are the diplomatic, socioeconomic, and national security interests that would determine middle powers' positions in a China-Taiwan conflict?

2. How do these interests manifest as strategies employed by middle powers to deter or respond to a China-Taiwan conflict?
3. What is the likely effectiveness of these strategies during a China-Taiwan conflict?
4. What future strategies should middle powers pursue to better prepare for a China-Taiwan conflict?

To answer these questions, we sought insights from structured interactions with policymakers and policy analysts from middle powers. We first reviewed open-source literature to assess the origins, sources of power, and roles of middle powers over time. Second, we formulated a theory of change to explain how middle powers leverage their resources to exert influence on international affairs, which is described in Chapter 2. Third, to better understand specific middle-power equities and responses in a cross-Strait conflict, we selected four countries for a focused analysis: Australia, Canada, Japan, and the UK. We deemed these countries to be pivotal middle powers in a cross-Strait conflict according to objective criteria. Chapter 3 provides our analysis of these four countries, and Appendix A provides more details on our country selection procedure. We used our findings from the literature review and theory of change to interview analysts and policymakers from these countries and elicit their insights. Finally, we compared our key findings for the four middle powers and used these as a basis for general recommendations to policymakers in the United States, Taiwan, and middle-power countries. Chapter 4 presents our key findings, and Chapter 5 concludes with our recommendations.

Three appendixes supplement our work. In Appendix A, we explain the objective criteria we used to select middle powers for analysis. In Appendix B, we describe how we selected policymakers and policy analysts to interview and the profile of our respondents. In Appendix C, we present a literature review on historical approaches to defining middle powers.

Middle Powers: Origins, Sources of Power, and Roles

The term *middle powers* refers to nations that are not small but lack the size and influence to substantially disrupt the global order. At the same time, middle powers can play substantial roles in shaping global events and are willing to do so (Jeong, 2019). In this chapter, we discuss how middle powers can be distinguished from other states, and we develop a theory of change for how middle powers assert their influence and pursue their interests. Therefore, this chapter serves as a theoretical foundation for our country-specific analysis of four middle powers in the remainder of the report. In Appendix C, we discuss the history of the concept of middle powers and their influence in greater detail.

Defining Middle Powers

Holbraad (1971) suggests that middle powers are distinguished based “only on the grounds of the strength they possess and the power they wield”—i.e., their capabilities (a measure of output) and influence (a measure of outcome). On this basis, Holbraad distinguishes between two types of middle powers: an upper category consisting of well-established, wealthy countries, such as France (which are termed *secondary powers*), and those in an emerging category, such as Brazil (which are termed *middle powers*).

More nuanced definitions for middle powers might consider inputs, outputs, and outcomes as a means of understanding the determinants of middle-power status for a country (inputs), the resulting contributions of these middle powers (outputs), and their relative influence (outcomes). Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal (1993) defines these factors as follows:

- **geographic positioning (input)**, such as the country’s physical position between two larger adversarial powers
- **mediation capacity (output)**, such as how capable the country would be in mediating between two larger powers by facilitating diplomatic dialogue and resolution
- **global development contribution (output)**, such as how much the country contributes significantly to global development institutions, which reflects its ability and willingness to participate in shaping global development initiatives and providing resources for them
- **regional influence (outcome)**, such as the country’s capacity to influence smaller states in its region.

A widely used taxonomy for understanding state power from Keohane (1969) relies primarily on influence—a measure of outcome—to define middle powers. Keohane classifies all states into the following four mutually exclusive categories.

- **System-determining states** play a critical role in shaping the international system. These countries correspond to the *great powers* as defined by Holbraad (1971).
- **System-influencing states** do not dominate the international system but wield substantial influence because of some exclusive capacity. These states correspond to the *secondary powers* as defined by Holbraad (1971) or *Tier 1 middle powers* as defined by Chapnick (2000). This category includes strategically positioned states and trusted mediators.
- **System-affecting states** cannot individually influence the international system but might influence its workings through concerted efforts with groups of similar states. These countries correspond to the *middle powers* as defined by Holbraad (1971) or *Tier 2 middle powers* as defined by Chapnick (2000). This category includes regional powers and contributors to institution-building.
- **System-ineffectual states** have minimal influence on system-wide forces unless acting in large groups. These countries correspond to the *small powers* as defined in Holbraad (1971).

Theory of Change for Middle Powers

To develop a theory of change for how middle powers can assert influence in a larger strategic environment, we first seek to understand how countries translate specific assets or strengths into broader regional or global influence. Countries can possess “positional” assets (Holbraad, 1971) and “behavioral” assets (Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal, 1993). On the one hand, *positional* assets, such as military power or technological superiority, are called positional because they influence the position that a country takes in its international relations. In addition to tangible assets, such as military resources, positional assets include intangible assets, such as population skills. On the other hand, *behavioral* assets guide the use of positional assets. Behavioral assets include values and ambitions, from which countries derive their norms and ideologies. A country that highly values human rights might build that value into its norms for dealing with other countries. The following box lists examples of positional assets and behavioral assets that a country might possess.

Types of Assets

Positional

- Tangible assets
 - Harmonious relations with all great powers
 - Proximity to conflict
 - Regional prominence
 - Natural resources
 - Wealth
 - Military resources
- Intangible assets
 - Population skills
 - Partnerships and alliances
 - Privileged diplomatic positions
 - Trusted ally

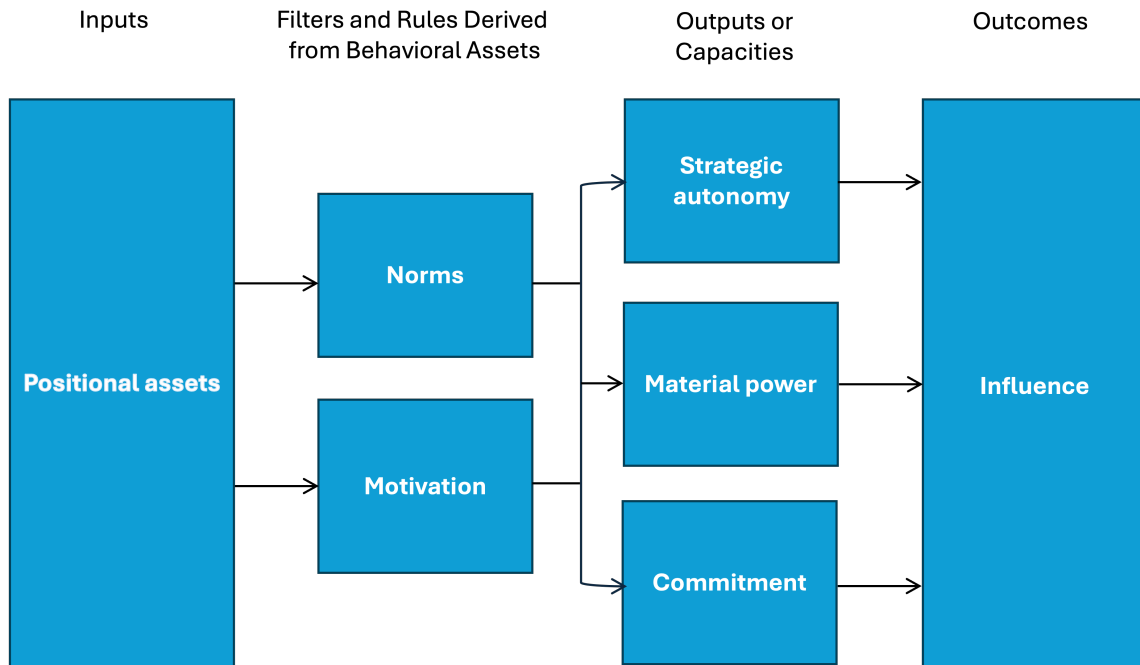
Behavioral

- Domestic values
 - Human rights
 - Media freedom
 - Free and fair elections
 - Independent judiciary
- International values
 - Derivations from domestic values
 - Ideologies regarding internationalism
- Ambitions
 - Desired position in the order of nations
 - Constraints imposed by international context

SOURCES: Adapted from Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal, 1993; Holbraad, 1971.

Ideologies regarding a country's commitment to internationalism might motivate the use of positional assets to assert influence in certain ways. Ideologies can help determine the capacities or capabilities that a country will seek to build using its positional assets, particularly for those countries that seek to assert middle-power status. For example, a country with an ideology of high commitment to internationalism is likely to develop capabilities in international diplomacy and participate in international forums. Countries with a high commitment to regionalism might seek to develop the attributes of a regional power, such as providing regional security. Countries with no commitment to either internationalism or regionalism are likely to commit their resources to their national security. Overall, the resulting influence exerted by a middle power begins with the nation's endowment of positional and behavioral assets, this influence is exerted through a series of capacities for influence, which produce outputs that translate into ensuing influence. Figure 2.1 further illustrates this theory of change for how middle powers assert their influence through various assets.

Figure 2.1. Theory of Change: How Assets Translate to Influence



Historical Evolution of Middle-Power Influence

In this section, we discuss how this theory of change has played out in an historical context and focus specifically on how middle-power influence as a concept might affect our analysis of potential middle-power equities in a cross-Strait conflict between Taiwan and China that involves the United States.

What middle powers can accomplish under their particular circumstances varies with their historical context. In the 19th century, nations that were located between two larger adversarial powers—and powerful enough to be secure from an invasion by either—played the role of a balancing power. During the Cold War, ambitious middle powers would seek to play a balancing act between the United States and the Soviet Union, while pursuing their own internationalist initiatives, such as peacekeeping. Other middle powers allied with the United States or Soviet Union because of shared values and promoted those values through internationalist initiatives.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to a 15-year period in which the United States was the sole great power. Traditional middle powers of the Cold War era, such as Canada and the UK, were mostly allied with the United States but continued to pursue internationalist initiatives, albeit with somewhat lower autonomy. They coexisted with new emerging middle powers, such as Malaysia and Turkey, that operated regionally and opposed hegemony.

The concept of a middle power and its approach to exerting influence evolved again with China's ascension to great-power status around 2005. Being rivals, China and the United States are deploying capabilities that middle powers cannot match and reshaping the influence-building activities of middle powers to suit their own objectives (Campbell, 2023). Middle powers have largely regionalized their activities in response partly because of being crowded-out of the international sphere by these two

great powers (Robertson and Carr, 2023). Middle powers have also increased their defense spending to gain greater influence in their regions and to protect themselves against intrusion by great powers (Kumar, 2023).

As a result, the earlier distinction between traditional and emerging middle powers at the end of the Cold War appears to have narrowed substantially in terms of middle powers' respective areas of operation, capabilities, and influence. Some nations, such as Brazil and South Africa, seek regional eminence and are counterhegemonic but claim to have domestic values that match those of the United States. Other states, such as India, have attributes similar to those of Brazil and South Africa *and* are important partners of the United States. Furthermore, a few states, such as Japan, have the attributes of traditional middle powers *and* seek regional eminence. Therefore, the classifications of these states do not fit neatly into earlier categories of traditional or emerging middle powers.

Cooper and Yoshihara (2014) discuss the challenges of attempting to define types of middle powers according to their degrees of internationalism, domestic values, and polarity. They argue that power hierarchies using these criteria are of little importance relative to other factors, such as alliances and close strategic partnerships, regional security dynamics, and location. This alternative approach broadens our understanding of how middle powers are likely to operate within a particular region in helpful ways, particularly middle-power equities in the Asia-Pacific region.

Therefore, middle-power approaches are likely to vary according to their level of independence from a great power and their location external to or within the region in question. Middle powers that are independent of a great power are typically among the best endowed with assets in the region and seek to dominate their region; these countries are typically located within the region in question. They may or may not abide by strong domestic values, but they do not accept unipolarity.

By contrast, regional powers whose influence primarily derives from their relationship with a great power might struggle to exert influence because they are more likely to be located external to the region and exert their influence primarily through the more global reach of the great power. Therefore, such allied, dependent middle powers could favor unipolarity and work closely with and be supported by a great power.

Table 2.1 summarizes how the polarity, assets, and attributes for middle powers have evolved over time across various eras.

Table 2.1. Trends in the Attributes and Assets of Middle Powers

Period	Global Polarity	Attribute	Examples of Assets	
19th century	Multipolar		For all middle powers:	
		Positional assets	• Military power and location	
		Ambition(s)	• Global balancing power	
		Capacities	• Strategic autonomy	• Material power and commitment
		Influence	• System-influencing	
Cold War (1945–1990)	Bipolar		For all middle powers:	
		Positional assets	• Diplomatic and economic power	
		Ambition(s)	• Mediator between small powers	• Global institution builder
		Capacities	• Material power and commitment	
		Influence	• System-influencing	
Post–Cold War, Phase 1 (1991–2005)	Unipolar		For emerging middle powers:	For traditional middle powers:
		Positional assets	• Military, diplomatic, and economic power, as well as location	• Diplomatic and economic power
		Ambition(s)	• Regional dominance	• Global institution builder
		Capacities	• Strategic autonomy	• Material power and commitment
		Influence	• System-ineffectual (small power)	• System-influencing
Post–Cold War, Phase 2 (2005–Present)	Bipolar		For independent middle powers:	For allied middle powers:
		Positional assets	• Military, diplomatic, and economic power, as well as location	• Military, diplomatic, and economic power, and, in some cases, location
		Ambition(s)	• Regional dominance	• Regional institution supporter
		Capacities	• Strategic autonomy	• Material power and commitment
		Influence	• System-influencing	• Without locational asset: system-affecting • With location: system-influencing

NOTE: The term *allied middle power* includes nontreaty allies and strategic partners of a great power if unique to one great power.

Looking across these various eras and ahead to how middle powers might approach exerting their influence in a potential cross-Strait conflict over Taiwan, it is clear that different types of middle powers have relative advantages, disadvantages, and probabilities of survival in dealing with great powers. Several key themes emerge, which we use to conclude this discussion.

First, an alliance with a great power reduces the middle power's autonomy to set goals but improves its chances of survival. Independence from great powers increases autonomy but reduces chances of survival.

Second, both allied (including close strategic partners) and independent middle powers can still exercise influence, although in different ways. The influence of allied middle powers will derive from the power of their great-power ally to a significant extent. Middle powers located within a region of interest might be expected to have greater influence than those outside it if all other equities were similar or equal. Traditional middle powers outside a region of interest, such as Canada and the UK, would see a decline in their influence relative to middle powers located in the region.

Finally, middle powers that survive on their ability to balance great-power interests and fend off the efforts of allied middle powers to join such an alliance might become globally important, particularly if their region happens to be of interest to great powers. Such a role of middle powers today in the Asia-Pacific region is almost identical to that played by middle powers of the 19th century.

Analysis of Four Middle-Power Countries

Having reviewed the changing role of middle powers over time, we now analyze the equities of four middle powers in a potential cross-Strait conflict over Taiwan. We have selected four middle powers for analysis: Australia, Canada, Japan, and the UK. For each of these four countries, we discuss the country's background as a middle power, its views on China's interests in a cross-Strait conflict, and its views on its own role in a cross-Strait conflict.

We begin this chapter with a discussion of our methodology for case-study selection and analysis of each country through literature and interviews. Then, we discuss each country's perspectives individually by drawing heavily on our interviews with relevant policymakers and analysts in each country. We conclude this chapter with a comparative discussion of each nation's perspectives by drawing on quantitative survey results from our respondents.

Case-Study Methodology

To identify a representative set of middle power nations likely to play pivotal roles in a potential cross-Strait conflict for further analysis, we first identified which nations are listed among the top 100 most powerful nations in existing global power rankings. Second, we subsetting the results to only states with bilateral defense agreements with the United States or China, which focuses our analysis on those states with the potential to influence either great power before or during a conflict. Third, we chose the states that lack a preexisting risk of direct conflict with China, the United States, or allies of either, which focuses our analysis on primarily the equities of middle-power states in a larger bipolar security environment. Fourth, we chose nations that may be willing to play a mediating role in a cross-Strait conflict. The resulting list of four countries—Australia, Canada, Japan, and the UK—fulfilled all these requirements, and we think that these four nations offer a representative set of perspectives through which we can explore potential middle-power equities in a cross-Strait conflict. In Appendix A, we describe our country selection criteria and process in more detail.

It is worth noting upfront that all four countries we selected for analysis are allies of the United States. In part, this is because more powerful countries tend to be wealthier countries, which, in turn, tend to be U.S. allies. As a result, there is an inherent tension and instability to China's relations with these countries, which becomes most noticeable when strategic and economic interests do not coincide and is similar to the instability that has characterized U.S.-China relations (Yan, 2010). Such tension might prevent these middle powers from mediating between China and the United States. Although all four countries are U.S. allies, they all also have China as their first- or second-largest trading

partner. As a result, our discussion with analysts and policymakers in these countries centered on the economic importance of China to these middle powers rather than Taiwan.⁴

Our research approach for analyzing these four countries began with a review of open-source literature on their backgrounds as middle powers, as well as potential views of and roles in a cross-Strait conflict. We then used insights from this review to formulate a semistructured questionnaire for interviewing a selection of analysts and policymakers from each middle-power country. In our interviews, we sought to gain insights on the likelihood of China initiating a cross-Strait conflict, the capabilities of the middle power to deter or de-escalate a conflict, and the likelihood and form of middle-power involvement in such a conflict. Appendix B provides an overview of our research protocol and respondent profile.

Australia

Australia's population and leadership are strong supporters of the country's alliance with the United States. Australia has been among the most consistent supporters of U.S. global security initiatives. Its troops participated in the Korean War, the first Gulf War, the Iraq War, and U.S.-led military actions in Afghanistan.

Australia has been a self-professed middle power since the end of the Cold War. Its public commitment to middle-power diplomacy has been more marked when the Labor Party has been in power (Evans and Grant, 1995), but its build-up of middle-power capabilities, particularly its military capabilities, has not differed among administrations (Gilley and O'Neil, 2014). In 2024, Australia ranked 17th in the world in U.S. News and World Report's Power Rankings (U.S. News and World Report, undated). Australia's commitment to middle-power diplomacy was most notable when Gareth Evans was foreign minister from 1988 to 1996. In the 1990s, Australia was a promoter of the ASEAN Regional Forum, which is a platform for socioeconomic, political and security discussions (Emmers and Tan, 2011). Australia's involvement was mostly limited to economic issues, such as strengthening the World Trade Organization (WTO), according to Beeson and Higgott (2014).

Australia's relations with China reached a high point from 2007 to 2013 under the Labor administration, particularly following Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's proposal for an "Asia-Pacific Century" and an Asia-Pacific Union (Asia Society, 2008). Rudd's envoy for this initiative, Richard Woolcott, noted that the initiative "fits neatly into the concept of greater middle-power diplomacy. If the US, China, Japan, or some other big power were to suggest it, other nations might be apprehensive and back away" (Franklin, 2008). To China, Rudd offered an Australia that would be a "true friend . . . a partner who sees beyond immediate benefit to the broader and firm basis for continuing, profound and sincere friendship . . . a true friendship which offers unflinching advice and counsels restraint to engage in principled dialogue about matters of contention" (The Australia-China Story, undated).

The relationship reached its peak when the two nations agreed to a strategic partnership under Prime Minister Julia Gillard in 2013. This partnership was widely seen as a win for Australia in

⁴ In addition, the China-Taiwan supply chain is interdependent, making it difficult to identify how trade with China or Taiwan individually would affect each of the middle powers we analyzed. Hence, we did not discuss trade extensively in our interviews.

gaining better access to China's leadership (Kenny, 2013). Australian leadership saw Australia's future as being economically aligned with China while maintaining strategic alignment with the United States. Manicom and O'Neil (2010, p. 33) even note there is some evidence that "Australia has sought to distance itself from U.S. and Japanese security policy in response to concerns from Beijing."

Australia's long-term commitment to global and regional multilateral institutions, including the G20, has also influenced its relations with China. One of its aims in such commitments is to mold China into a "responsible stakeholder" by tying it to international norms (Wilkins, 2014, p. 159). Wilkins (2014, p. 159) argues that Australia seeks to "create systemic conditions that avoid hegemony or bipolarity, even if [the outcomes] are not truly 'multipolar.'" At the same time, Wilkins (2014) notes that the rapid growth of China's military power was changing the regional security landscape against Australia's interests.

Australia-China relations declined under the Liberal government from 2013 to 2022. This tension was a result of bilateral trade frictions and Australia's support for the Indo-Pacific alliance. In the early 21st century, tensions have risen over Australia's concerns regarding China's espionage and tampering with Australian political and educational institutions and processes. Australia's hard line toward China continued following the return of a Labor administration in 2022. This stance reflected a shift from internationalism to a regional focus, greater defense spending, and stronger security relationships with the United States, India, and Japan, even while Australia's economic interdependence with China continued to increase. A foreign policy white paper issued by the Australian government acknowledged Australia's concerns about China's growing power while it also praised China's ability to support regional security (Government of Australia, Department of Foreign Affairs, 2017). Furthermore, in February 2024, Foreign Minister Penny Wong noted that Indo-Pacific countries "face China's rapid military build-up without the transparency and reassurance that the region looks for from great powers" (Dziedzic, 2024).

Views on China's Interests in a Cross-Strait Conflict

Our respondents from Australia perceive China's foreign policy to prioritize the primacy of the Chinese Communist Party. This priority includes emphasizing self-sufficiency, control, and legitimization of its status as a great power. As a result, our respondents from Australia said that an important objective of China is to prevent U.S. hegemony, particularly in Asia.

A respondent from the diplomatic corps noted that China gives a premium to bilateral rather than multilateral relations because it is easier for China to control bilateral relationships. In this light, China's multilateralism, which is evident in its efforts in the Pacific Islands, focuses more on excluding the United States and its allies than on building relationships. A respondent from academia claimed that "for China, multilateralism is more of an instrumental relationship rather than one of principle."⁵

In the event of a war, our respondents from Australia suggested that China will be prepared to manage by itself. A respondent from a think tank noted that China thinks it can manage the spillover effects of a war, claiming that "China's interpretation is that if it initiated an invasion, it would certainly suffer a huge penalty in terms of trade, but it would then ultimately recover because other

⁵ All direct quotations in this chapter come from semistructured interviews with various subject-matter experts and the authors between March and October 2023.

countries need to trade with China.” Another respondent from a think tank speculated on the aftermath of China’s victory over Taiwan and noted that China’s “occupation” of Taiwan would be a difficult one because of the likely effects on migration and economic retaliation by the West.

According to a respondent from academia, China’s focus on ensuring the primacy of the Chinese Communist Party implies that

China is not all about being a hegemon itself. It just doesn’t want the United States to be the hegemon. So, it’s quite comfortable with a multipolar multilateral order because it knows in that sort of order, it’s going to carry a lot of weight simply because of its size.

The same respondent added, “Beijing probably thinks that, if America doesn’t like us, honestly, it is no big deal as long as they don’t start shooting us over Taiwan.” Another respondent from academia said,

China takes a hierarchical view of Asia, with itself on top, but at the same time it needs Asia to be in its hierarchical order, because otherwise the Chinese don’t actually have any outlets for economic purposes, so I think [Asia is] fairly important for China.

This view of China as a self-absorbed power means that even such initiatives as the Belt and Road Initiative, which is widely viewed in the West as a soft-power exercise for the nations that receive China’s investment, are really about China’s economy, according to a third respondent from academia.

In summary, our respondents from Australia see China as a country with high strategic autonomy and material power that arises from its economic and military strength. Its commitment to be a great power seems to be compromised by its self-absorption in the domestic legitimization of its current governance structure.

Views on Australia’s Role as a Middle Power in a Cross-Strait Conflict

Our respondents from Australia perceive Australia’s importance as a middle power in a cross-strait conflict as limited, and its role would primarily be expressing support for Taiwan. There are several reasons for Australia’s constrained role. First, our respondents suggest that although Australia’s stance would align with its senior alliance partner, the United States, its actions might also be influenced by perceived threats to its own security because of its economic ties and proximity to China.

Second, our respondents largely felt that Australia views its alliance with the United States only in the context of serving its own national security interests. Indeed, the treaty establishing the alliance noted that its purpose was solely to respond to an “armed attack in the Pacific area on any of the Parties” (Security Treaty Between Australia, New Zealand and the United States of America, 1951). Australia’s involvement in a cross-strait conflict would be subject to that condition. This distinction marks a shift in its diplomatic priorities from values-based internationalism to its own national security.

Third, our respondents noted that Australia’s involvement in a cross-strait conflict would likely be constrained by a weakening of Australia’s military and diplomatic skills in the 2010s. Our

respondents attributed this weakening to restricted funding for defense, diplomacy, and foreign aid to increase resources for maintaining economic growth. Such weakening has reduced Australia's leverage over other middle and small powers. A respondent from a think tank that focuses on Australia's international relations noted that Australia's "disinvestment in its Department of Foreign Affairs over the last ten years or so has had a massive impact on its ability to undertake diplomacy throughout the region."

Fourth, several respondents noted that Australia's economic leverage over China relies on its iron ore and coal exports, for which China has no immediate alternative. Australia's leverage over China is limited to these two items and does not include sophisticated technology products. According to one analyst respondent from academia, Australia "does not have any technology. We just dig up Australia and ship it to China."

Australia could face a conflict between its alliance interests and its economic interests in the event of a cross-Strait conflict. Our respondents largely agreed that Australia's actions would be guided by its own interests and those of the United States rather than any strategic or moral values regarding Taiwan. One respondent from a think tank reiterated that although Australia would unhesitatingly join a U.S.-led coalition against China, its scope of support would be limited to logistics and providing materiel supplies.

Our respondents claimed that Australia would not likely join an anti-China coalition if it were not led by the United States. Even with U.S. leadership of such a coalition, a respondent from academia who studies Australia-China relations said that any significant involvement "would be hotly debated within Australia." Another respondent from a university-based think tank similarly said that "if there is conflict in the Taiwan Strait, it would trigger tremendous political division in Australia. And I think that's a domestic political factor that is not well understood."

Division over Australia's involvement in a cross-Strait conflict might reflect division between national security concerns and the importance of trade to Australia's economy, especially trade with China. Another respondent from academia observed that this prospect of political polarization explains the apparent contradiction between Australia having "been involved in all the major conflicts driven by America . . . for about a century now" and its likely reluctance to get too involved in a cross-Strait conflict. This respondent explained,

Australia is a middle power in the sense that it's obviously got some autonomy . . . when it comes to . . . international relations. [Its alliance with the United States means that it is] limited in the decisions to make, but . . . depending on the issue, it will make decisions independent of the . . . United States.

This respondent further added, "There are certain things that Australia has actually done historically before the United States, and I think maybe in some way, it is actually Australia that might [first] see the direction [that the current situation is] going."

Most respondents from Australia claimed that the United States would intervene in the event of a cross-Strait conflict and would do so through a coalition, largely for diplomatic reasons. One respondent who studies Australia-United States relations noted that a coalition is essential for the United States, claiming that "while a coalition cannot succeed without the U.S., neither can the U.S. succeed without a coalition."

Who would join such a coalition? One respondent from a university-based think tank noted that India and Indonesia would be unlikely to do so because they “would not suddenly regard China as a threat to their interests if there was a Taiwan Strait contingency.” This respondent felt that the coalition would not have any surprises in terms of participants. Instead, it would be a quickly made up “coalition of everyone [the United States] knows [well]” to most likely include Australia, Japan, Korea, and New Zealand, in addition the United States itself. The respondent added, “But then beyond that progress stalls. . . . That’s a situation China can live with.”

Our respondents suggested that the form of retaliation against an attack by China would depend on the nature of the attack. We asked respondents to consider three actions by China against Taiwan: (1) a blockade, (2) punitive action, and (3) a full-scale invasion. Several respondents see a blockade as being the most serious economic action because it would lead to a counter-blockade by the United States in the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Pacific Ocean. This blockade would devastate China’s economy and presumably also the rest of Southeast and East Asia. However, our respondents did not think that this response would necessarily lead to armed conflict. If armed conflict did break out, either through punitive action or a full-scale invasion, our respondents thought it would be unlikely to spread to other countries.

Even though most analysts among our respondents stressed the pragmatic nature of Australia’s likely responses to such a conflict, a respondent from academia noted that Australia retains a strong attachment to a rules-based order and formal multilateralism. One respondent attributed this stance to Australia being geographically isolated from its closest allies—the United States and the UK. This physical distance has some important implications. One such implication is that the minilaterals that the United States is enthusiastically creating do not always resonate in Australia.⁶ This sentiment seems to match the mixed opinions that Australians have historically held toward the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue that was initiated among Australia, India, Japan, and the United States in 2007. Yet, the respondent who noted Australia’s geographic isolation from its closest allies also claimed that Australia is putting more effort into its relations with Japan and India with U.S. encouragement. If Australia gets involved in a conflict with China, this respondent noted that “there’s no replacement for the United States.”

In summary, our respondents perceive Australia as having weakened military power because of declines in military spending as a result of a relative emphasis on diplomacy and internationalism by its policymakers in the 21st century. A rising and assertive China confirms Australia’s decision to be a closer U.S. ally. This decision comes at a cost to Australia’s strategic autonomy because of Australia’s different objectives relative to the United States in such a conflict. Australia’s motives are entirely to protect its national security. Its participation in a cross-Strait conflict would be limited to doing the minimum that U.S. demands put on it, and even a limited amount of participation would be hotly debated beforehand. Intrinsically, Australians value internationalism, which has made regionalization a difficult task.

It is worth noting that our respondents’ views do differ from official Australian foreign policy. It would not be reasonable to expect the foreign office of any country to acknowledge weaknesses in defense or its own preoccupation with national security. However, the rising official criticism of China

⁶ The term *minilaterals* refers to small groups of countries aligned informally in pursuit of specific shared interests.

as an aggressive power in the Asia-Pacific region, particularly the view that China puts smaller countries at risk, is at odds with our respondents' views that Australia's security interests alone are not intrinsically likely to drive Australia's participation in a cross-Strait conflict.

Canada

Being the world's second-largest nation by total area, Canada identifies as both an Atlantic and a Pacific state. Canada is a U.S. ally, and its economy is closely tethered to the U.S. economy. As a result of Canada's dependence on the United States, one might infer that Canada would be unlikely to chart its own course and play a substantial role in shaping global events. Yet, Canada is often celebrated as one of the most successful middle powers of the 20th century.

During the early years of the United Nations (UN), Canada actively promoted universality in new member addition and maintained its middle-power status by independently investing in defense, foreign aid, and diplomacy (Chapnick, 2013). For instance, Canada was the leader in international peacekeeping and aided every UN mission that took place during the Cold War, such as playing a significant role in the formation of the UN Emergency Force and leading its deployment to Egypt to oversee the withdrawal of Israeli, French, and British troops after the Suez Crisis in 1956 (Buckley, 2023).

Chapnick (2013) argues that Canada's motives in pursuing middle-power status were not entirely to do good (see also Duerr, 2013). Instead, Canada sought primarily to prevent being labeled as a significantly junior partner of the United States by promoting international linkages to such organizations as the Commonwealth of Nations and by directly providing public goods to poor countries for social welfare and development. This diplomatic approach enabled Canada to undertake activities, such as arms-control negotiations, that the great powers would have preferred to retain among themselves.

Canada's interest in middle-power status began to decline in the mid-1960s. By 2023, it was contributing only 47 personnel to UN peacekeeping compared with more than 3,000 personnel in 1992 for the Balkan crisis at that time (UN Peacekeeping, 2023). From 1948 to 1988, Canadians accounted for 10 percent of the UN peacekeeping force (Canadian War Museum, undated). Canadian allocations for foreign aid have also declined significantly in the 21st century, while regional affiliations have become more attractive (Nossal, 1999). For instance, Canada joined the Organization of American States in 1990 and the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994.

Canada's diplomatic corps and its military budget were also depleted with the end of the Cold War and the rise of a unipolar era (Nossal, 1999). When the unipolar era of the 1990s reduced Canada's desire to be a global citizen, Canada became more regionally focused and followed U.S. policy more closely, shunning some of the internationalist features of its foreign policy. Canada also decided that it could spend less on the trappings of internationalism, including foreign aid, without significant effects on its international relations, which led to a "pinchpenny" diplomacy that implies not only frugality but also a meanness of spirit (Nossal, 1999).

The Conservative government that was elected in 2006 continued these trends, and Prime Minister Stephen Harper moved Canada further away from internationalism. For example, in 2011, Canada withdrew from the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change's Kyoto Protocol—the

first signatory to do so. The Liberal government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau that was elected in 2015 promised to take Canada back to the international stage but has largely struggled to do so (Robertson and Carr, 2023).

Self-interest has driven Canada to prioritize its regional interests over liberal internationalism and to yield its preference for working through international institutions toward a closer relationship with the United States. According to one respondent,

We cannot guarantee our own security in a dangerous world as our military is discouragingly weak. We survive, in security terms, by being linked with major powers, formerly Great Britain, and, since 1941, the United States, and that is how we how we manage things.

There might be additional reasons for Canadian regionalism that respondents did not raise. The declining influence of multilateral bodies, particularly the UN and its agencies, might be driving influence-seeking middle powers to regionalize in the hope of greater effectiveness. Some analysts have called for Canada to reorient its foreign policy toward North America, including a greater security focus on the defense of Arctic North America and greater economic cooperation with Mexico (e.g., see Paikin et al., 2023).

Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy describes China as an "increasingly disruptive global power" that was "enabled by the same international rules and norms that it now increasingly disregards" and that "is looking to shape the international order into a more permissive environment for interests and values that increasingly depart from [Canada's]" (Government of Canada, 2022). At the same time, Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy notes that cooperation with China is a necessity in such areas as global health and trade. Unsurprisingly, the strategy was not well-received in China (*Global Times*, 2022).

Canada is increasing its stake in Taiwan, including through a bilateral investment deal signed in December 2023 (Government of Canada, 2024). Canada has maintained its defense budget in the 21st century at about 1.2 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) and has committed to raise this to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) standard—2 percent of GDP—by 2030, although some analysts consider that target to be unrealistic. By contrast, its foreign aid is equal to 0.37 percent of its GDP, which is on par with other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries but below the OECD-recommended target of 0.7 percent.

Views on China's Interests in a Cross-Strait Conflict

Several of our respondents from Canada expressed skepticism about China initiating a conflict with Taiwan. According to a former diplomat, China seeks influence but is not predisposed to war. This respondent claimed that if a war were to happen, Canada should be against isolating China because such methods would not achieve their aims. A respondent from the Canadian Parliament noted that economic sanctions are often hard to implement despite their global reach, which has been demonstrated by such sanctions on Russia after its invasion of Ukraine. According to this respondent, it has been hard to trace the beneficial owners of investments subject to sanction.

Our respondents from Canada felt that if a war were to occur, China would probably "go it alone" without any partners. Another respondent from the Canadian Parliament agreed that China would indeed be alone but that Canada should respond. This respondent noted that China's multilateral

tendencies are weak and more aligned with demonstrating leadership (e.g., in climate change). The Canadian Parliament respondent added that China does not see the rest of Asia as a significant security threat unless more Asian countries link up with the United States, which China views as unlikely. Therefore, according to this respondent, this is exactly what the rest of Asia should do, and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), of which Canada is a member, could be a vehicle for doing so. Discussing the risks of inaction, this respondent noted,

The nations that are part of the CPTPP may actually see it in their best interest to be far more confrontational with China [on Taiwan]. . . . If the Chinese took over [Taiwan], it would push the U.S. Seventh Fleet out into the middle of the Pacific. The U.S. would close off the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. That would have massive implications particularly for South Korea, China, and Japan. This is getting to be extraordinarily serious for the world economy.

In summary, most of our respondents from Canada felt that China would act alone in a cross-Strait conflict but is not actively seeking a war. The view of China as disinterested in relationship-building through global affairs differs from the official Canadian government view that regards China as an “increasingly disruptive global power.”

Views on Canada’s Role as a Middle Power in a Cross-Strait Conflict

Our respondents from Canada suggested that Canada’s role in a cross-Strait conflict would be influenced by perceptions of the threat to its own national security, its alliance with the United States, and its geographical remoteness from the conflict. The geographic distance from China reduces the existential threat and makes Canada potentially more willing to support the United States in conflicts farther from its shores. Our respondents added that Canada joining a U.S.-led coalition to defend Taiwan would not matter to China because Canada is unimportant to China. A former diplomat respondent said, “Xi Jinping doesn’t wake up every morning asking for a quick briefing on the status of Canada.”

Canada’s ailing military capabilities suggest that China might be right in essentially ignoring Canada. A respondent from academia noted that the United States has been pressing Canada to increase its defense spending and get more involved in global security. This respondent argued that it is possible that a crisis in the Taiwan Strait would cause Canada to change its views. At the same time, this respondent claimed that Canada would not start any conflicts within the Asia-Pacific region and does not see itself as more than a marginal player in the region. Therefore, according to this respondent, Canada would not send troops to Taiwan. Another respondent added that Canada does not have the capacity to support Taiwan militarily, either through troops or naval support. This view was echoed by a respondent from academia who said that “the Canadian Navy is really not strong enough to make much of an impact.”

A policymaker respondent cautioned that “China can retaliate against Canada if the United States decided to impose a blockade on China.” This respondent claimed that Canada is “probably in the first line in terms of Chinese retaliation” and noted that when the chief financial officer of Huawei Technologies Co., Ltd., a leading Chinese communications company, was detained in Canada at the

request of the United States under their mutual extradition agreement, China immediately retaliated. The respondent argued that “smaller countries could be used as examples to indicate Chinese displeasure and to send a message to the United States. We are in the frontline here, I think. Australia to some degree is as well.”

China’s retaliation against Canada would be enabled by Canada’s dependence on China’s purchases of food and other primary goods from Canada, according to the policymaker respondent. A respondent from academia added that “on the economic side, China is a big investor in Canadian minerals. A cross-Strait conflict could hurt Canada’s economy.” However, a media commentator respondent noted that China buys only 3.7 percent of Canada’s exports, which does not impose much risk on Canada.

In summary, these economic views reveal some differences about Canada’s economic power and independence vis-à-vis China. Regarding diplomacy and defense, our respondents viewed Canada as a weak country because of decades of underinvestment in diplomatic and military assets. The result has been a disinterest or lack of motivation that has resulted in low material power and commitment to exercise influence. In a cross-Strait conflict, Canada would be a marginal player.

Japan

Japan was a great power until its defeat in World War II. Since then, its economy has performed remarkably well. Japan currently has the third-largest GDP in the world, and its military capability is growing, making it a regional power (Hatakeyama, 2020). Yet, several characteristics limit Japan to being no more than a middle power, as of this report’s writing. Its geographic limitations—Japan is an island nation in close proximity to rivals China and North Korea—mean that it will always be at a disadvantage against adversaries with greater strategic depth. Japan’s alliance with the United States is crucial for its national security, leading to its acceptance of U.S. leadership in the region. Article 9 of its constitution and a public orientation toward pacifism also limit Japan’s military projection.

Japan has sought to regain some trappings of great-power status through trade, investment, and foreign aid–based diplomacy in the latter half of the 20th century and early 21st century. The formation of the Asian Development Bank in 1966 arguably marked an apex in such efforts. These efforts are noteworthy because it is rare to find that economic power and diplomatic skills help a country that does not have military power become a great power. Drifte (1996) argues that Japan’s great-power strategy was to achieve greater global visibility through diplomacy in the late 21st century. Because it lacked military capability, Japan planned to leverage its alliance with the United States. Drifte (2019, p. 1) notes that Japan was looking at going beyond its postwar stance of “passive diplomacy” and “maximally utilizing the international order supported by the United States” to a new stance. Drifte (2019, p. 1) cites a vice foreign minister who stated in 1989 that “Japan’s diplomacy should transform itself from that of medium and small countries into that of a big country.”

However, Japan’s source of economic power—its export-led growth—has not proven to be a reliable source of power. May (1993/1994) argues that any initiative relying on exports to become a great power is unlikely to succeed because Japan’s export-led growth made it vulnerable to influence from its trade partners, notably the United States, which might not approve of its ambitions. May (1993/1994, p. 184) notes that trade surpluses “are of little value and may in fact become liabilities

when political relations turn sour.” This view became evident when Japan’s attempts to bolster its exports were rebuffed by the United States, which culminated in the Plaza Accord in 1985 to depreciate the U.S. dollar against the Japanese yen and other currencies; this contributed to Japan’s descent into multidecade economic stagnation (Hamada and Okada, 2009; Obstfeld, 2009). Japan has not sought great-power status since then but has remained an active middle power.

As a middle power, Japan has chosen to be a facilitator and intermediary of multilateralism and compromise (Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal, 1993). For instance, Japan promoted the establishment of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) jointly with Australia in 1989. Japan has also been a consistent supporter of the WTO since 1995 and helped smaller states to meet the conditions of WTO membership.

Similar to Australia and Canada, Japan shifted its international activities in the early years of the 21st century to reflect national security concerns more than other considerations; this resulted in a narrower focus on the Asia-Pacific region. Unlike Australia and Canada, Japan has been more willing to contest China’s power in the region, particularly following the 2006 election of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Abe stressed adherence to the rule of law, human rights, and the market economy in international relations. This values-based stance was a change from Japan’s earlier approach of building relations that considered market opportunities more than values, particularly in China. Foreseeing a long-term threat to Japan’s national security from China, Abe also proposed building an alliance of democracies in the region and organized the first meeting of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue minilateral group in 2007.

Abe left the prime minister’s office in 2007 but, upon returning to power in 2012, initiated the so-called Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP). This strategy sought to promote the rule of law, freedom of navigation, and economic prosperity, and it further intensified the regional focus of Japan’s foreign policy (Government of Japan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019). By downplaying human rights and democracy, Abe sought to appeal to Asian states, such as Singapore, that were not democratic or lacked high regard for human rights (Hatakeyama, 2020). This strategy also sharpened Japan’s focus on China. The United States under the Trump administration readily adopted FOIP, and some countries in the Indo-Pacific region also have, including Australia and South Korea (which both have a stated commitment to U.S. leadership of FOIP) and, less formally, India (within a multipolar framework).

Prior to Abe’s tenure as prime minister, Japan increased its military activities (Hughes, 2009). For example, the administration of Koizumi Junichiro provided logistical support through the Maritime Self-Defense Force during the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. From 2004 onward, Japan dispatched its Ground Self-Defense Force and Air Self-Defense Force to provide noncombat reconstruction support during the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Japan’s 2006 Defense Policy Review opened the door toward greater integration of U.S. forces with Japan’s Self-Defense Forces, as well as toward an agreement that the United States could use Japan’s bases to project power globally.

Views on China’s Interests in a Cross-Strait Conflict

A respondent from the defense sector noted that a U.S.-China war would be the likely result of a cross-Strait conflict. According to this respondent, this war would end “with China being completely

destroyed.” The respondent argued that China is aware of this outcome, which makes the prospect of a cross-Straits conflict very low.

Although a U.S.-China war seemed unlikely to our respondents from Japan, several felt that public opinion in China would support such a conflict. A retired diplomat claimed that U.S. policymakers misjudge how the Chinese population think about China. According to this respondent, the Chinese people are “very proud of their country and . . . [think] that Taiwan . . . ultimately needs to be reintegrated into China.” This respondent added that the Chinese people are proud of “China’s becoming a superpower, that it has all this technological might: going into space and doing all these amazing things.”

Our respondents from Japan argued that China would try to keep the scope of conflict as small as possible and ideally restricted to only Taiwan. Still, a respondent from the business sector doubted that, in a wider conflict, countries other than Japan and the United States would be targeted. According to this respondent, China anticipates that Japan would join the war actively and is prepared for it. The same respondent stated that China does not care much about Europe because it is not afraid Europe would come in and “make trouble” if China were to invade Taiwan. Our respondents from Japan noted a similar disinterest among China’s leaders in engagement with other countries. Although China has praised multilateralism and participated actively in multilateral initiatives, many respondents thought that multilateralism is a framework that China uses for its convenience rather than because of its importance. This view echoes the views of our respondents from other countries.

Our respondents’ views suggest that China would take an approach to international relations that might be more complex and nuanced than those from either side of the U.S.-China rivalry fully appreciate. According to one respondent, this makes understanding China’s perspectives important, adding,

The Chinese believe that the Americans’ commitment to the one-China policy is set in stone. The American interpretation is that the United States agreed to the one China policy because China agreed not to use military power to invade Taiwan. But if China breaks that promise, or perceived promise, then the United States need not maintain the One China policy anymore.

This respondent also recommended that the United States consult Japan closely on “what’s most effective in engaging China, because the Japanese foreign ministry has a high degree of sophistication and understanding of what’s happening in China.”

In summary, our respondents from Japan felt that China would try to minimize the spread of its conflict with Taiwan to reduce the cost to its economy despite the high quality of China’s economic and military assets. According to our respondents, China’s values derive from its leaders’ desire for continued legitimacy of the current system rather than from multilateralism or other internationalist values. Our respondents concluded that China is prepared for a breakdown in relations with Japan if a cross-Straits conflict was to occur.

Views on Japan’s Role as a Middle Power in a Cross-Straits Conflict

A respondent from academia argued that Japan’s turn away from internationalism has reduced its ability to be a middle power that could mediate between China and the United States. Japan’s

proximity to the Taiwan Strait, its hosting of U.S. bases, and its trade relations with China make Japan similar to Australia in many ways and raise the same questions of willingness to confront China militarily, according to this respondent. A respondent from the business sector claimed that public opinion of China in Japan was at a low in October 2023. As a result, the respondent claimed that China's investment in Japan, particularly in sensitive areas, such as the technology industry, would not be welcome. Nevertheless, the respondent claimed that China has benefited from Japan's technology; for example, when Japan privatized its National Railway, when many of the technology personnel who had worked on the railway went to China and worked on improving its high-speed rail technology.

Japan's potential for survival in a war with China would be a key determinant in Japan's stance regarding war with China. A respondent from the business sector noted that most Japanese citizens do not think Japan should fight China, even if China were to attack Japan. According to this respondent, Japan is not ready to fight and die for the defense of Taiwan.

A retired diplomat respondent said a U.S.-led coalition would form if China were to invade Taiwan, but that Japan would not send troops to such a conflict or even its navy to remove a blockade. Although Abe reinterpreted the Japanese constitution in 2014 to allow for troop movement if Japan's survival is threatened, this respondent stressed that such movement would occur only in exceptional circumstances. The respondent said, "If it's a matter of the survival of Japan, we can undertake collective self-defense. That is the new interpretation introduced by Abe in 2014. So, we can do it, but it's really only in very exceptional cases." The respondent added, "I think China will say to Japan that, if you try to do that, we will take military action against Japan as well. And I think will be very difficult for Japan, as we will be sandwiched between United States and China."

Reinforcing this view and echoing a view heard among our respondents from Australia, another retired diplomat respondent noted that China cares more about U.S. power than Japanese power and that China thinks there are limits to how much suffering Japan can endure in the event of a conflict. This respondent also noted that China does not invest much in its relationship with Japan. A respondent from the business sector said that

China sees Japan in two ways: a place to acquire technology and as a U.S. satellite. If a war with Taiwan occurs, the breakdown in economic relations with Japan is a given, so there is no need [for China] to build strong relations with Japan.

In summary, Japan has had more inflection points in its foreign policy than most other middle powers. From 1960 to 1985, it sought great-power status through its economic progress and diplomatic skills. In the unipolar period after the Cold War, Japan moved toward values-based internationalism. Since China's rise in the early 2000s, Japan has turned away from internationalism and directed its positional assets toward regional eminence, investing in defense and diplomacy to supplement its economic assets. To these ends, Japan is supported by its ally, the United States. Still, despite its military power, commitment to the region, and U.S. backing, Japanese pacifism (both popular and constitutional) and the fear of a retaliatory attack by China are likely to limit Japan's military support for Taiwan, perhaps only to logistics and supplies.

Official Japanese government views of China and Taiwan do not reflect any of these tensions. Japanese politicians visit Taiwan occasionally—to China's displeasure—but without the performative politics on either side that characterize the interactions between China and the United States over Taiwan.

The United Kingdom

The UK, similar to Japan, was a great power until the end of World War II. Although the UK recovered economically from the war, it never recovered its great-power status. Nevertheless, as of this report's writing, it had the sixth-largest GDP in the world and permanent membership in the UN Security Council. The UK also leads the Commonwealth of Nations. In short, the UK is a middle power with global ambitions.

The first indication of decline in UK power was the independence of India in 1947, which was the result of an internal movement that was facilitated by the United States (Banerjee, 1968).⁷ The UK's ability to resist such pressure was weakened by its increasing reliance on U.S. capital after World War II ended.

Indian independence left the UK with colonial interests in Africa and the Middle East. These areas also came under pressure from anticolonial movements in subsequent years, which both the United States and the Soviet Union usually supported.⁸ UK influence further declined following the Suez Crisis in 1956 (Smith, 2007). The withdrawal under diplomatic pressure of a force comprising the UK, France, and Israel led to a further decline of UK prestige and even the resignation of Prime Minister Anthony Eden.

The importance of Middle Eastern oil for the postwar European economy later became a shared interest of the UK and the United States, resulting in the UK often supporting U.S. initiatives in the region. The UK also continued to expand its operations of its companies in the Gulf and to maintain special treaty relations with Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. The Gulf War (1990–1991) ended some of these nations' dependence on the UK, but their security relationships largely persisted. The Middle East offers a rare example of successful superpower–middle power cooperation.

UK interests in the Middle East today are closely linked to those of the United States. Indeed, the Gulf War showed that the UK was the only genuine follower of U.S. leadership (Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal, 1993). When the United States changed its objectives from protecting Kuwait to

⁷ Banerjee (1968, p. 312) cites Cordell Hull, who served as U.S. Secretary of State from 1933 to 1944, as saying, "While for the sake of good relations with Britain, we could not tell the country what we were saying privately, we were saying everything that the most enthusiastic supporter of India's freedom could have expected, and we were convinced that the American people were with us." Similarly, Banerjee (1968, p. 316) notes that in 1941, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt told UK Prime Minister Winston Churchill,

I cannot believe that we can fight the war against Fascist slavery and at the same time not work to free people all over the world from a backward colonial policy. The peace cannot include any continued despotism. The structure of the peace demands and will get the equality of peoples.

In 1943, Roosevelt stated, as cited in Banerjee (1968, p. 324),

When we have won the war, I will work with all my might . . . to see to it that the United States is not wheedled into a position of accepting any plan that will further France's imperialist ambitions, or, that will aid and abet the British Empire in its imperial ambitions . . . We are not going to sit by, after we have won the war, and watch their systems stultify the growth of every country in Asia.

⁸ The mood of the U.S. population was perhaps best captured in an open letter from the editors of *Life* magazine in June 1943:

We Americans may have some disagreement among ourselves as to what we are fighting for, but one thing we are sure that we are not fighting for is to hold the British Empire together. We do not want you to have any illusions . . . if you cling to the Empire at the expense of a United Nations victory, you will lose the war. Because you will lose us (Banerjee, 1968, p. 330).

destroying the Iraqi army's capabilities, only the UK unquestioningly accepted the new goal and robustly opposed compromises being proposed by others. The UK commitment of 40,000 troops was exceeded on a per capita basis by only that of the United States. UK support for the war was bipartisan and popular.

The UK lost its last significant territorial interest in the Asia-Pacific region with the transfer of Hong Kong to China in 1997. Although UK resolve to support the United States in an Asia-Pacific theater of action has yet to be tested, its decision to expand its security role in the Asia-Pacific region is unambiguous. The UK has stated its commitment to the Indo-Pacific vision of the United States, joined the CPTPP, partnered with the United States and Australia in a U.S.-led security pact known as AUKUS, and partnered with Japan and Italy to develop a new fighter jet; these actions were promoted by then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson in 2021.

UK actions in the Asia-Pacific region demonstrate a somewhat higher degree of strategic autonomy from the United States than the other three countries in our case study appear to demonstrate. The government of Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has stressed the importance of engagement with China but also criticized China's increasing use of authoritarian force at home and its assertiveness abroad. Nevertheless, in response to U.S. requests, the UK has imposed sanctions on semiconductor exports from China and blocked foreign direct investment from China in sophisticated technology items. UK actions vis-à-vis China also differ from other middle powers in that they demonstrate a willingness to engage globally outside of its own immediate periphery, i.e. in the Asia-Pacific region and not limited to Europe.

Views on China's Interests in a Cross-Strait Conflict

Our respondents from the UK generally felt that the chances of a cross-Strait conflict are low. According to a respondent from academia, the driving force for all of China's policies is maintaining its current political system. The respondent added that this goal is only possible through economic growth and many more years of globalization by China. This respondent concluded that as a result, China's actions should be viewed in the framework of its leadership seeking outcomes that are consistent with a globalized economy.

Some respondents disagreed with this conclusion. One respondent from a university-based think tank said that Xi Jinping is poorly informed because no one within China has the courage to tell him the facts. This misinformation could lead to poor decisionmaking, such as starting a cross-Strait conflict. However, another respondent from a think tank did not accept that Xi Jinping would make irrational decisions that go against China's interests because of his near-absolute power; this respondent contended that there was enough strength in the Chinese Communist Party system to rein in Xi Jinping if he were to become irrational. This respondent claimed that as a result, China's actions should be seen as deliberate and rational—and that China's leaders would move to de-escalate an unexpected incident, such as a collision between ships, because they recognize that a conflict would lead to economic disaster, regardless of the cause.

Expanding on the role of trade in any potential conflict, a respondent from academia said, "Trade is very important to China. I do think that trade is something that . . . can potentially deter the Chinese government from using force if they are convinced that it will mean the collapse of trade with

all its major trading partners.” This respondent concluded that China is aware that the United States could get most of China’s trading partners to accept a ban on economic transactions with China and that such economic sanctions would deter a cross-Strait conflict. This respondent also noted that the UK would support a U.S. blockade of the South and East China Seas.

We asked our respondents whether there is a desire for Chinese primacy in Asia that might drive China’s actions and, if so, how it would affect the prospects of a cross-Strait conflict. One respondent noted that China does indeed want to be the strongest power in the Asia-Pacific region but does not want to take a leading role in Asia-Pacific affairs that do not directly concern China. This respondent claimed that China values noninterference and nonintervention principles, which is similar to the values of most Asian nations. For example, this respondent noted while European nations might pursue multilateralism through currency, trade, and border issues, Asian nations generally do not focus on issues other than trade.

A respondent from academia noted that “China has this desire to be autonomous rather than engage with [others] in the region.” As a consequence, a former diplomat said,

China doesn’t really have good security relations with the rest of Asia with the exception perhaps of Cambodia. It’s got a difficult relationship with India and with Vietnam. Relations with Japan and [South] Korea go up and down. If one speaks privately to senior South Korean figures, I think they don’t have confidence in China, and see it as potentially a big security threat. So, from that point of view, if there is a conflict in the Taiwan Strait, given that China’s security relations are already bad, it’s not actually going to make a big difference to them.

If China has so little desire to engage beyond trade, what explains its active participation in multilateral forums and in trade bodies, such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership? One respondent suggested, “Multilateralism is only important to China if they have a lead role.” Another respondent added,

If you look at the South China Sea, China says that it wants multilateralism with Southeast Asia but not when it comes to something like the South China Sea. Then, they only believe in bilateral dialogue. They won’t discuss the South China Sea at the ASEAN Regional Forum, for example. They’ll only do it directly with Vietnam or the Philippines. . . . I don’t think Southeast Asia is very important to China. They think it’s a weak area. It is fragmented, they can do what they want there. And they’re probably right.

Our respondents from the UK generally agreed that China had taken a long-term interest in the Global South, but according to one respondent, this interest is because China needs support from the Global South in the UN.⁹ Although China provides support for health care and other sociocultural support in the Global South, its main motive in this region is its development model that is focused primarily on financing infrastructure spending, according to a respondent from academia. A former diplomat claimed,

⁹ The term *Global South* broadly refers to the developing countries of the world. The term encompasses the countries in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia (excluding Israel, Japan, and South Korea), and Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand).

China does not do soft power well. . . . China's approach to other countries in Asia and Africa is well-captured by [a statement from] China's foreign minister at the time, Yang Jiechi, made in 2010 at the Shangri-La dialogue. He had then said, in regard to Southeast Asian countries that "China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact."

This respondent added that "there is a lot of wariness about China in Asia. China needs to overcome its limited interest in soft power." Another respondent claimed,

China's disinterest in multilateralism has opened space for the US to build up its own version of multilateralism and for India as well. The evidence is that China's agreements with ASEAN were always based on China's own values and China's own principles. So, in effect, ASEAN signed up to China's version of multilateralism, and it wasn't the other way around, as people tend to think.

Respondents largely agree that if the UK were to support Taiwan in a cross-Straits conflict, the chances of China initiating a direct conflict with the UK would be low. One defense analyst noted that China has so far "been very nice to the UK" compared with its relations with Australia. Another respondent suggested that the reasons are that China does not consider the UK to be a strong force and that the nation is far from China. The respondents suggested that China's biggest worry about the UK is whether the UK would supply weaponry to Taiwan in advance of a conflict.

Our respondents from the UK agreed that China's victory over Taiwan would have significant effects on the region. One respondent noted that such an outcome would cause the United States to lose credibility in the region and lead other countries in Asia to submit to China's hegemony or develop nuclear weaponry. A political analyst told us,

We can see potentially countries in Europe and in the wider West seeking to build coalitions of action against China during or after a contingency. China's immediate priority is to try and disrupt that. So, Asia is going to be incredibly important also for rebuilding relations after a contingency of Taiwan.

The same respondent added that "telling by current conversations in Asia, there's . . . zero appetite for sanctions, for actually penalizing China economically for a conflict over Taiwan."

In summary, our respondents from the UK felt that the dominant goal that is driving China's policy is maintaining the domestic legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party, which requires economic growth. Hence, our respondents concluded that the chances of China initiating conflict with Taiwan are low. Our respondents from the UK thought that China is disinterested in the region other than to counter the United States.

Views on the United Kingdom's Role as a Middle Power in a Cross-Straits Conflict

Our respondents from the UK agreed that the from the UK's close ties with the United States rule it out from being a trusted mediator by China in a cross-Straits conflict. Instead, the UK's physical geography (i.e., its distance from Taiwan) suggests that it may be more willing than Australia or Japan

to join the United States in an aggressive response to an invasion by China, according to our respondents.

The UK's independent interest in a conflict with China is low, according to a respondent from a think tank. Domestic issues dominate political thinking in the UK, and the EU and the United States are more important economic partners to the UK than China. As another respondent who studies China at a think-tank noted, the UK will most likely condemn an invasion of Taiwan to demonstrate to the UK public that the government has taken a stance, but the chance of this middle power initiating a conflict with China over Taiwan "is zero." A geostrategist respondent added that "China is just so important to the international system that I think that any British government would not be supportive of a measure like removing China from international forums."

A respondent from the diplomatic service noted that, to the prime minister, the question of whether the UK should defend Taiwan militarily is "not nearly as important as the National Health Service or the economy or unemployment or whatever. International relations do not come high on his agenda." A respondent from academia added, "In 1961, U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk said that Britain has lost an empire but hasn't found a role to play. I think it still hasn't." This respondent added,

There's misunderstanding in the UK over whether we really believe that Taiwan is part of China or not, and the U.S. and EU stances. If you combine that with the economic problems we have here and the need for us to do more business with China and the pressure from businesses on the government, then I think the reaction to the crisis over Taiwan wouldn't be so strong now as it would have been last year. China might well be getting to a situation both with the UK, possibly with some European countries like France and Germany, where it thinks it's winning the diplomatic war, and that if it took military action against Taiwan or a blockade, then the reaction from Europe and the UK would actually be quite limited.

Another respondent from academia agreed, noting that the UK government's main focus is on Europe and Russia, not on China. At the same time, another respondent from academia agreed that the UK would not send troops to Taiwan but thought that it would send the Royal Navy to help clear a blockade. Another respondent from academia disagreed, noting that the UK sending in the Royal Navy to clear a blockade on its own was unthinkable, asking, "What are the one [British] aircraft carrier or maybe two that are in the Indo-Pacific able to do?" Other respondents thought that a blockade by China could be effective. According to one respondent, unlike an attack, a blockade is "not time limited. It's a waiting game. It gives other actors who are keen not to get involved an opt-out clause in terms of continuing to do trade with China." Still, this respondent and several others agreed the UK would join the U.S. side. The same respondent argued that if that were to happen, a conflict between China and the UK would be inevitable.

Most respondents felt that UK actions would have no effect on China's behavior. One respondent said, "We're such a small player that China wouldn't consider this an issue." A former diplomat added, "If the UK was to stop doing business with China, it's not going to have a huge impact on China. They will shrug their shoulders and carry on."

A full-scale invasion or punitive strikes would be more concerning than a blockade. A respondent with extensive experience on China's external relations argued that, if China won a war, "everyone in

South and Southeast Asia will shut up,” Japan will want to rearm, and South Korea will want to develop nuclear weaponry. This chain of reactions would certainly weaken U.S. power and influence in the region as a result, particularly in relation to its current allies of South Korea and Japan.

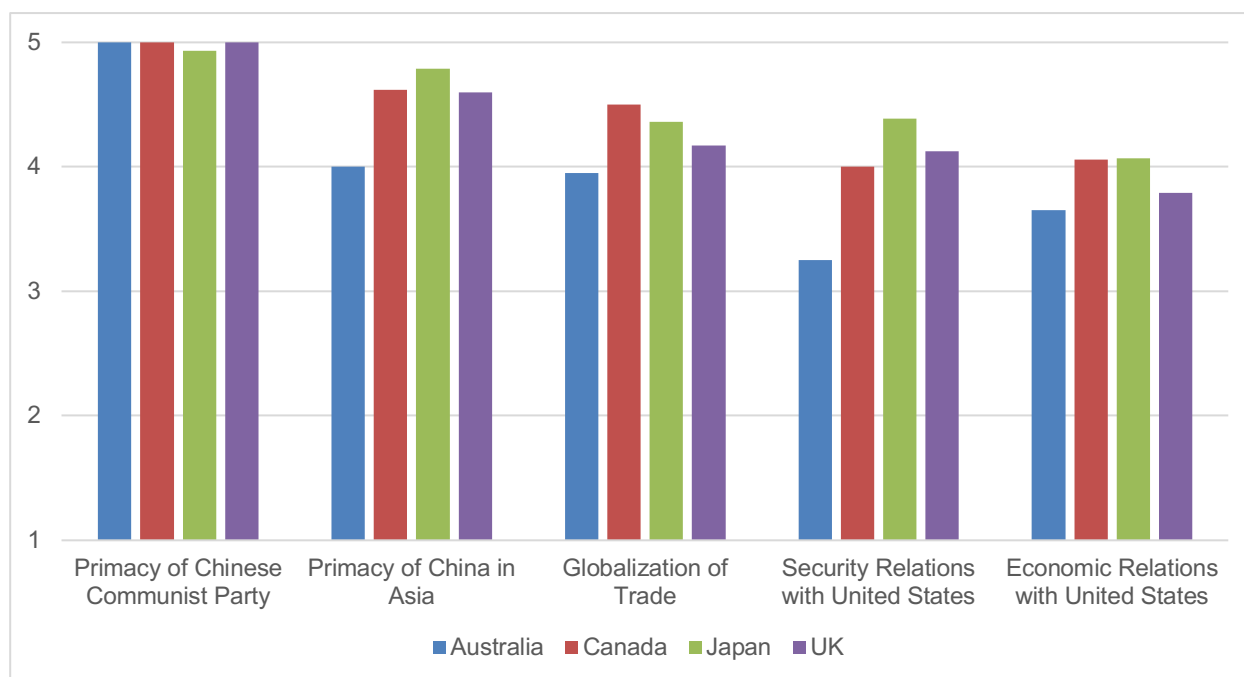
In summary, our respondents thought that the UK and China view each other as peripheral to their core interests. The UK’s distant location and weak military assets, in addition to its trade dependence on China, lead to limited UK interest in defending Taiwan militarily.

Comparing Perspectives Across Middle Powers

In addition to the qualitative insights gleaned from interviews, we also asked our respondents from all four middle powers to provide rankings from 1 (low) to 5 (high) of different potential drivers of cross-Strait conflict. These rankings included assessments of China’s interests; their country’s military participation in such a conflict; diplomatic and economic support for Taiwan in a conflict; and overall effects of a cross-Strait conflict on each country and China.

Figure 3.1 covers China’s interests. It shows mean respondent ratings by middle-power country of China’s five top-ranked priorities in the event of a cross-Strait conflict.

Figure 3.1. Assessments of China’s Priorities, by Middle-Power Country



NOTE: Ranks range from unimportant (1) to very important (5).

Our respondents from all four middle powers rank China’s desire to maintain the primacy of the Chinese Communist Party as the most important factor driving China’s priorities. This priority was followed by China’s desire to seek primacy in Asia, pursue the globalization of trade (i.e., free flow of

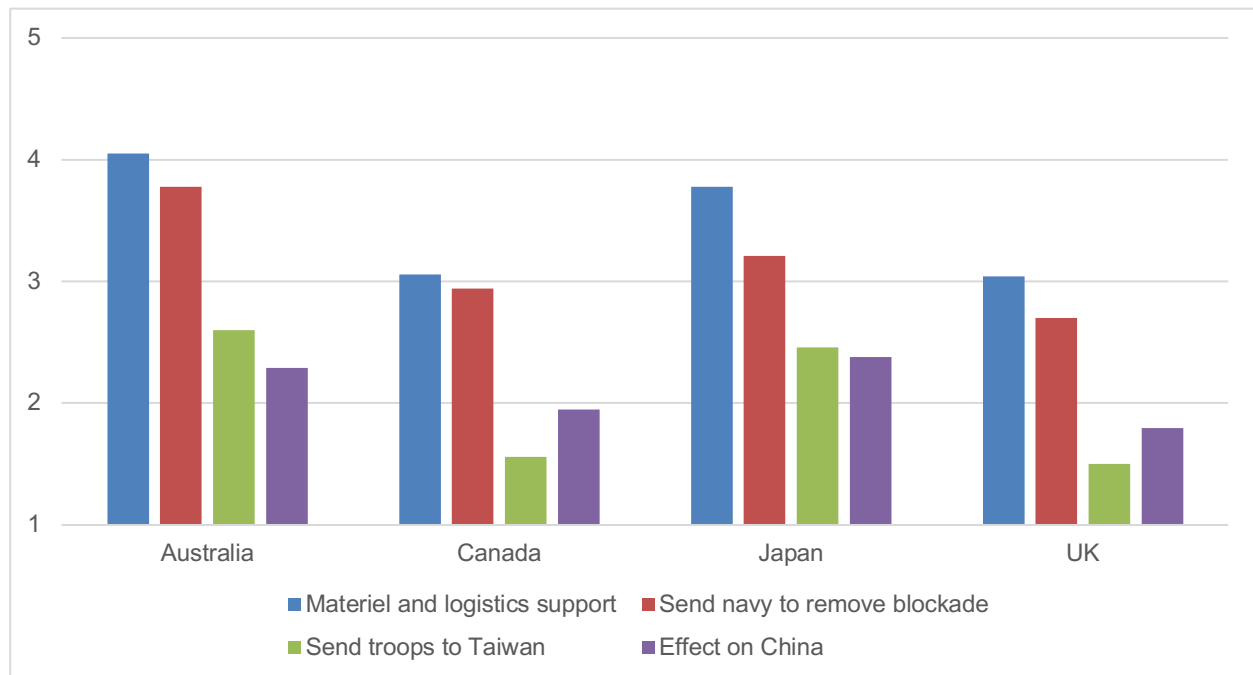
trade around the globe), build stable security relations with the United States, and build stable economic relations with the United States.

The common assessment of our respondents, both in these results and throughout our broader interviews, is that the clear priority of China's leaders is to maintain its current political system. Thus, its other priorities, such as maintaining the primacy of China in Asia, multilateralism, and economic growth, are strategic instruments for the maintenance of the current political system. This assessment does not mean that its other goals are unimportant; they are important but only to the extent that they support the primary goal of maintaining the current political system.

Our respondents suggested that China is uninterested in shaping the affairs of other countries that do not contribute to efforts to maintain its current political system. The single-minded focus on maintaining the primacy of the Chinese Communist Party led respondents to conclude that China is not interested in being a great power or even a regional hegemon.

Figures 3.2 and 3.3 summarize our respondents' mean ratings of the importance their country is likely to give to different responses if a cross-Strait conflict were to break out and the United States were to lead a coalition in response. Figure 3.2 deals with defense support and shows that respondents from all middle-power countries view providing materiel and logistics support as among the most important actions that their countries could take in such a conflict, with mean rank scores between 3 (somewhat important) and 4 (important). Australia and Japan, which are geographically closer to China than Canada or the UK, rank defense support as more important than the more-distant countries. Sending the navy to remove a blockade ranks lower on average across the middle powers and clusters around a rank of 3 (somewhat important). Again, Australia and Japan's rankings are higher than Canada and the UK. Our respondents view sending troops as being of the lowest priority to their country in a conflict, ranking between 2 (mostly unimportant) and 3 (somewhat important) for respondents in Australia and Japan and between 1 (unimportant) and 2 (mostly unimportant) for Canada and the UK.

Figure 3.2. Assessments of Military Participation in a Conflict and Effect on China, by Middle-Power Country

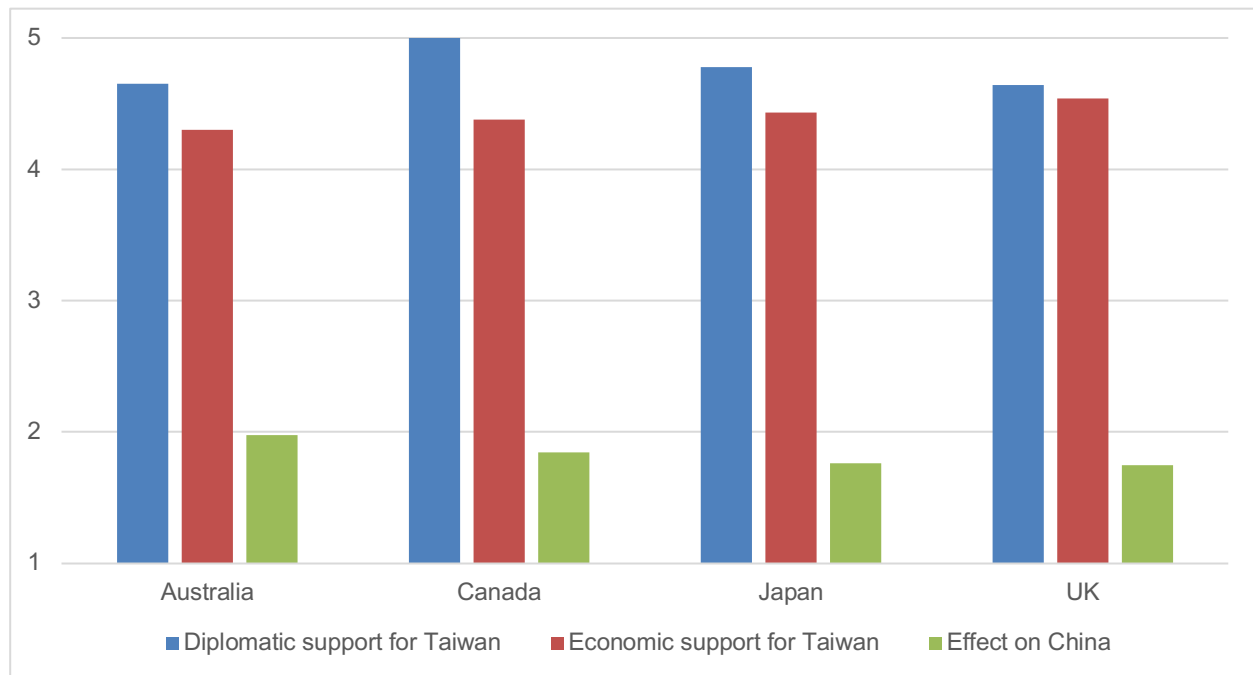


NOTE: Ranks range from unimportant (1) to very important (5) for the three types of military participation. Ranks range from very low or no effect (1) to very strong effect (5) for the likely effect of these actions on China's behavior.

Altogether, our respondents thought that these military actions would not have much effect on changing China's behavior. Figure 3.2 shows that respondents across these countries gave the three actions shown an average combined rating of about 2 (low effect) on changing China's behavior.

Figure 3.3 shows the importance that respondents gave to diplomatic support of Taiwan in a cross-Strait conflict, as measured by readiness to condemn China for its actions in the UN or other forums and economic support of Taiwan, as measured by support for trade sanctions.

Figure 3.3. Assessments of Diplomatic and Economic Support to Taiwan in a Conflict and Effect on China, by Middle-Power Country

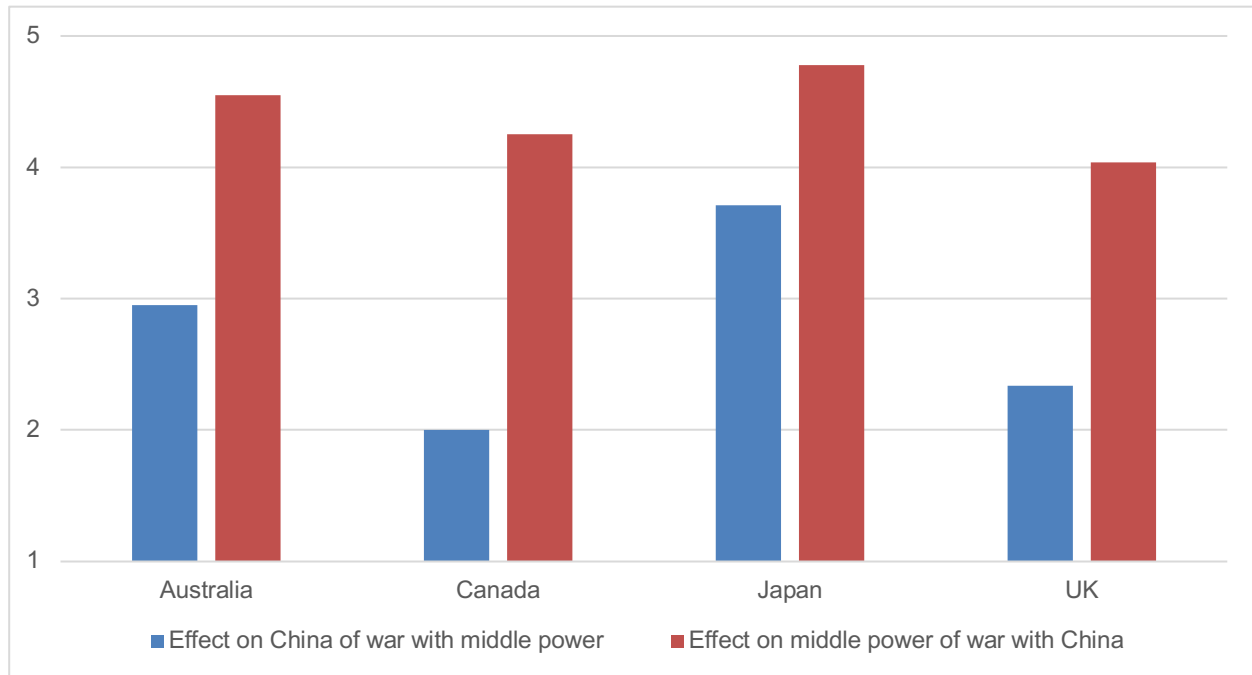


NOTE: Ranks range from unimportant (1) to very important (5) regarding diplomatic support for Taiwan and economic support for Taiwan. Ranks range from very low or no effect (1) to very strong effect (5) for the likely effect of these actions on China's behavior.

The ranks for diplomatic and economy support are significantly higher than those for military support. Across all four middle powers, our respondents gave diplomatic support for Taiwan in a cross-Strait conflict an average rank of at least 4.5 (between important and very important). The importance of economic support for Taiwan in a cross-Strait conflict ranks lower among our respondents, but average scores for it still exceed 4 (important) across the four middle powers. Our respondents do not think that diplomatic or economy support would have an effect on China, giving them an average score of about 2 (low effect).

Figure 3.4 shows respondents' assessments about the effects of a war with China on their own country and China.

Figure 3.4. Assessments of China and Middle Powers' Concerns About a China–Middle Power War



NOTE: Ranks range from very low or no effect (1) to very strong effect (5).

Our respondents across all four middle powers felt that a war with China would have between a strong effect (rank of 4) and a very strong effect (rank of 5) on their country. Our respondents in each middle power viewed war with China as having a less strong effect on China. Respondents from Japan ranked war with China as having just below a strong effect (rank of 4) on China, while those from Australia ranked it just below having some effect (rank of 3). Those from the more-distant countries of Canada and the UK estimated war with their countries and China would have only a low effect (average rank of 2) on China.

Key Findings

The four countries we used as case studies—Australia, Canada, Japan, and the UK—show a few common trends and a few divergences among middle powers, some of which might be expected. Official policy and our respondents' views also show common thinking and divergences. We discuss key findings derived from our analysis in this chapter.

Middle-Power Support for Taiwan Would Be Limited to Diplomacy and Sanctions

In the event of a cross-Strait conflict, the interests and equities of the four middle powers we discussed would involve supporting Taiwan and deterring China. Such support would likely focus on diplomatic support for Taiwan and endorsement of U.S. sanctions on China. Military actions might include logistics and materiel support of a U.S.-led response.

There are four reasons for this constrained response. First, the ability of these countries to survive military retaliation by China is low. If China were to retaliate against them, they would need U.S. involvement to survive. Second, they have limited diplomatic capacity to de-escalate a conflict. Third, there is limited domestic political support in these countries for sending troops to Taiwan. Fourth, their interests have become more regionally focused and might not prioritize defending Taiwan.

China Does Not See Asia-Pacific Middle-Power Capabilities as a Threat

Our respondents thought that China views these four middle-power countries as too weak militarily to take on China on their own and as marginal players in a U.S.-led coalition. Our respondents also claimed that China perceives the countries of Southeast Asia as even weaker and that China sees no risk from South Asia because India has been hobbled by China's incursions on their shared border. Our respondents contended that in East Asia and Oceania, China is only concerned about Japan's military power but thought that Japan would not prevail in a conflict with China.

China Is Unlikely to Initiate a Conflict with Taiwan

According to our respondents, China's main goal is to legitimize its current domestic political system (i.e., the rule of the Chinese Communist Party). To accomplish this goal, China must be seen within as a great power, preeminent in Asia, and able to achieve high economic growth. An invasion of Taiwan would jeopardize such perceptions and thus be deemed an unacceptable risk relative to the

status quo. Our respondents contended that China is uninterested in shaping the affairs of other countries except for efforts that legitimize party rule. The single-minded focus on maintaining party primacy led our respondents to conclude that China is not interested in being a great power or even a regional hegemon.

As a result of its focus on party primacy, our respondents claimed that China's diplomatic capabilities are limited. Its main foreign policy concern is to counter U.S. influence in China's regions of interest. According to our respondents, China would not be deterred from invasion by the prospect of a challenge from a middle power or even a coalition that excludes the United States. Our respondents from middle powers also claimed that China views their countries as committed to the United States. As a result, China does not invest much in its diplomatic relationship with these middle powers, which means that the prospects of these middle powers deterring a cross-Strait conflict is low.

The perceptions of our respondents that China has limited interests in being a great power are contrary to those of U.S. policymakers. For example, a former senior adviser to the Biden administration contends that China has sought to displace the United States from regional and global order (Doshi, 2021, p. 32). Similarly, other Biden administration officials and foreign policy advisers have contended that China has "two paths" in its efforts to become the global superpower—by either (1) pursuing an Indo-Pacific regional strategy focused on military hegemony "as a springboard to global power" or by (2) alternatively "outflanking the U.S. alliance system and force presence in that region by developing China's economic, diplomatic, and political influence on a global scale" (Brands and Sullivan, 2020).

Either vision for China's path to global superpower status contrasts significantly with the views of middle powers regarding China's true military ambitions over Taiwan, China's concept of what it means to be a great power, and China's practical ability to leverage diplomatic and political influence on a global or even regional scale. Such differences between the United States and its allies in their views regarding China's ambitions could have profound implications for what each nation is willing to do to deter a conflict or war if one develops.

Along similar lines, it is also worth noting how current perceptions of China as a global power and potential threat contrast sharply with analogous assessments made in the 2010s regarding China's own potential for more-modest regional ambitions similar to a middle power. Writing in 2014, Gilley and O'Neil note that, after beginning to distance itself from the Soviet Union in 1958, China played the role of a middle power that is committed to multilateralism, sovereign equality, and nonalignment. Even though it lost leadership of the nonaligned movement when it reconciled with the United States in 1972, China has "never stopped thinking of itself as a counterhegemonic power with middle power sensibilities" (Gilley and O'Neil, 2014, pp. 53–54). Gilley and O'Neil (2014, p. 57) conclude,

On many of the issues that China may wish to engage middle powers, it has shown a willingness to be socialized into cooperative norms. These include the use of multilateral (rather than bilateral) approaches to resolve territorial claims; the acceptance of limited doctrines of humanitarian intervention and human rights promotion; the rejection of state subsidies in international trade; and the indispensable leadership role of the United States in global security.

Shambaugh (2004) notes that China has engaged with Asia after the 1997 Asian financial crisis, especially with Southeast Asia, through ASEAN. Shambaugh (2004, p. 64) documents the “remarkably adept” quality of China’s diplomacy in the region, noting that “most nations in the region now see China as a good neighbor, a constructive partner, a careful listener, and a nonthreatening regional power.” (Shambaugh, 2004, p. 64) adds that, across the various shades of opinion regarding China, “this regional perspective is striking, given that just a few years ago, many of China’s neighbors voiced growing concerns about the possibility of China becoming a domineering regional hegemon and powerful military threat.” This assessment seems consistent with the views of China scholars of the time, who largely assume, as Gilley and O’Neil note, that China had no intention of asserting global leadership. Instead, China arguably sought out opportunities to work with emerging middle powers, which Gilley and O’Neil saw as increasingly focused on their own regions, as a way of simplifying its developing country diplomacy.

Middle-Power Influence Is Localized and Diminished

Overall, the middle powers shared remarkably common equities in the event of a cross-Strait conflict. These equities include widespread political support for Taiwan, a low likelihood of active military involvement in a cross-Strait conflict, and a limited ability to deter or de-escalate a conflict (although these middle powers perceive China as unlikely to initiate such a conflict). This commonality of views is remarkable and offers some insight into the nature of middle-power influence in the Asia-Pacific region and globally.

In our earlier discussion of the theoretical and historical evolution of middle-power equities, we argued that middle powers would fall into two types, allied or independent, and that independent middle powers would find survival difficult. The four middle powers in this report are all allied with the United States. For these middle powers, our discussion predicted a high survival rate and a shift to regionalization as a means of asserting influence. Further, this discussion predicted that each middle power would likely build up their military, diplomatic, and economic power. These trends are supported across our various case studies in several ways.

First, in terms of regionalization, we find clear evidence that for each of these countries, their regions of priority are close to home. Although Australia and Japan remain concerned with the Asia-Pacific region, the UK’s primary region of focus is Europe and Russia, and Canada’s focus is North America. Such regionalization is also evident in the views of our respondents regarding limited participation in U.S. initiatives in the Asia-Pacific region, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or the Indo Pacific Economic Framework.

A second finding, which affirms our theoretical discussion in Chapter 2, is that the influence of traditional (allied) middle powers has declined from the prior (unipolar) period. This is evident from the case studies, in which respondents tacitly acknowledge that their ability to deter or de-escalate conflict is likely to be very low. This contrasts with middle powers’ system-influencing roles as institution builders and mediators in earlier periods of history. This could be because the requirements of a middle power to survive in today’s security environment at present are different and require different assets, such as more defense capabilities, to be effective.

Third, we see clear evidence of a loss of strategic autonomy among allied middle powers since the brief period of unipolarity in the 1990s. All four middle powers have lost influence in the 21st century. Canada and Australia had previously pursued internationalist initiatives with some autonomy from the United States, but this era now seems to be over. Of the four middle powers, Australia, Canada, and the UK had favored internationalist approaches until recently, and Japan had done so earlier. In part, this foreign policy was because they could retain significant strategic autonomy despite their alliances with the United States. Any internationalist values that these regionally focused middle powers hold might create unexpected tensions in their foreign policies vis-à-vis other regional and great powers.

It is unclear the extent to which these trends are fully understood by U.S. and Chinese policymakers in their approaches to engagement with these middle powers. For the United States and specifically its approach to engagement with these middle powers vis-à-vis China, it will become increasingly important to acknowledge these trends in addition to the potentially divergent views on the threat posed by China that we discussed previously.

Recommendations

The key findings from our analysis suggest four recommendations, which we detail in this chapter. We expect that these recommendations will be useful to policymakers in Taiwan, the United States, and middle powers with a stake in the Asia-Pacific region.

Mediation Should Be Pursued by Middle Powers Only as a Long-Term Objective

The apparent overlap of interests among China and the middle powers in preventing a cross-Strait conflict matches the overlap of interests between Taiwan and the United States. At some point, this overlap might enable the middle powers to play a mediating role in such a conflict. Indeed, middle powers might be the only ones that can play a mediating role in such a conflict if tensions between the great powers were to escalate. However, as of this report's writing, no middle power has enough influence over both great powers to play such a role, even in coalition with other middle powers. To play a mediating role, middle powers would need to improve their capabilities over the long term to exercise influence over the great powers along these lines.

Middle Powers Should Develop a Trade Sanctions Plan

One approach to improving middle-power capabilities and influence to deter a cross-Strait conflict could be economic and build upon the fact that all four middle powers we analyzed have significant economic interests with both China and the United States. Therefore, the four middle powers should collaboratively formulate trade sanctions to be imposed on China in the event of a conflict. If such a plan could obtain the participation of the United States, its allies, and its close partners, which collectively buy over half of China's exports, trade sanctions could serve as a substantial deterrent to China's action against Taiwan.

Middle Powers Should Convene a Track 1.5 or 2 Dialogue with the United States for Common Understanding

Dialogue between these middle powers and the United States could enhance understanding of the positions and understandings of each regarding China and resolve any actual or perceived differences in outlook regarding the threat posed by China to shared regional and global interests. In particular, we recommend a Track 1.5 dialogue among a mix of policy analysts and government officials participating in a nonofficial capacity in addition to a Track 2 dialogue among policy analysts on each

side. Such dialogues should cover two topics about which there appear to be wide gaps between middle power and U.S. assessments and focus specifically on reaching a common understanding on the following.

Understanding China's Goals, Diplomacy, One China Policy, and Views Toward Taiwan

The assessments of China by the middle-power analysts from all four countries have more in common with one another than they do with U.S. assessments of China. The main areas of different views included such topics as China's goals, its approach to multilateralism and diplomacy, definitions of the One China policy, and the likelihood of an invasion of Taiwan. The middle powers and the United States might both benefit from discussion of these differences and efforts to reach a common understanding. Analysts from Australia and Japan also noted that the United States is not as close to the situation in China as they are; hence they could have a better understanding of China than the United States has and be less likely to misjudge how the Chinese people think about China. A respondent from Japan noted that the United States should consult Japan closely on what is most effective for engaging China because "the Japanese foreign ministry has a high degree of sophistication and understanding of what's happening in China."¹⁰

Middle Powers' Assessments of Their Own Influence and Concerns

The middle-power analysts' assessments of their own countries' influence suggest an increasingly localized focus, and concerns over their diminished capacities to exert influence in the larger U.S.-China competition. It is unclear the extent to which these perceptions are fully understood by U.S. or Chinese policymakers. Potential variances highlighted by respondents focused on such topics as domestic politics, the changing importance of national security to policymakers, the views on getting involved in a cross-Straits conflict, and concern about retaliation by China. Reconciling potential differences and developing a better mutual understanding could improve U.S. policymakers' ability to develop joint initiatives regarding Taiwan and related issues.

Middle Powers Should Increase Their Foreign Policy Capabilities

To build credibility with both great powers, the four middle powers need to rebuild and bolster their strategic autonomy, material power, and commitment to the Asia-Pacific region. Because their strategic autonomy is constrained by their alliance with a great power, their immediate focus should be on increasing their material and diplomatic power. To accomplish this goal, middle powers should carefully examine their positional and behavioral assets. Adding positional assets alone might not help if their values are compromised. For instance, Japan's diplomatic stance has seen frequent backtracking for pragmatic considerations (Koji, 2023). A strong shift toward values would likely help Japan be a more effective partner to the United States in responding to a cross-Straits conflict.

¹⁰ Respondent from Japan, interview with the authors, May 2023.

Strategic autonomy from their great-power ally might be easier for middle powers to attain if their material and diplomatic power increased sufficiently to be credible mediators between China and the United States. Their own national security would also be better achieved if they attained enough power to balance against China's power.

Country Selection Criteria and Process

To select the countries that are the most important middle powers in a cross-Strait conflict, we began by using the top 100 countries ranked according to level of power from U.S. News and World Report for 2024 (U.S. News and World Report, undated). These power rankings are determined using a composite index of economic, military, and diplomatic strengths, including measures of global leadership, economic capability and relationships, geopolitical influence, international alliances, and military strength. Such rankings thus capture key elements of material power, strategic autonomy, and commitment.

We used the following process to select the four countries in our case studies.

First, we included all Asia-Pacific countries that were in the top quartile of the U.S. News and World Report power rankings. There are five such countries, in order of ranking: South Korea, Japan, India, Australia, and Singapore. To validate the selection, we compared this list with the 2023 edition of the “Asia Power Index” from the Lowy Institute; its top-five countries in the region were, in order, Japan, India, Australia, South Korea, and Singapore (Lowy Institute, undated).

Next, we added countries outside the Asia-Pacific region that are both in the top quartile of the U.S. News and World Report power rankings *and* have bilateral defense agreements with the United States or China.

Third, we excluded countries from the shortlist that face a preexisting risk of direct conflict with either great power or its allies. For such countries, the risk of retaliation by the great power or its ally is high and thereby reduces their interest in cross-Strait conflict involvement. We also excluded India and South Korea because those countries have declared that they will not play a mediating role in a cross-Strait conflict (Roy, 2023).

This process of elimination left five countries under consideration: Australia, Canada, Japan, Singapore, and the UK. Of these, for compactness, we excluded Singapore because it ranks lowest of these countries in indexes of power (U.S. News and World Report, undated). The final list consisted of Australia, Canada, Japan, and the UK.

As a cross-check to validate the representatives of these countries as middle powers, we reviewed the expenditures of these four states on defense and foreign aid, which are two key elements of middle-power capacity. Table A.1 presents our results.

Table A.1. Middle Power Spending on Defense and Aid, 2023

	OECD Average	Australia	Canada	Japan	UK
Defense % of GDP (NATO Target = 2%)	2.37	1.9	1.2	1.1	2.2
Annual growth rate, 2022–2013 (%)	N/A	6.1	6.3	0.8	3.1
Foreign aid % of GDP (UN target = 0.7%)	0.37	0.19	0.37	0.39	0.51

SOURCES: OECD, 2023; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, undated.

NOTE: Annual growth rate is calculated as the geometric mean according to local currency. N/A = not applicable.

The table shows that the selected middle powers are below the OECD average in defense spending as measured by percent of GDP. However, the OECD average is biased upward because it includes U.S. spending, which accounts for about two-thirds of the OECD total and is about 3 percent of U.S. GDP. Compared with the NATO target of 2 percent, the UK spends more, Australia is almost at the target, while Canada and Japan lag significantly.

In foreign aid, although the UK leads, none of the selected middle powers meet the UN target of 0.7 percent of foreign aid as a percentage of GDP. However, all four middle powers—except Australia—are at or above the OECD average.

Even though we sought to select the countries in our case study objectively, we recognize that power is related to wealth, wealth to the state of liberal democracy, and liberal democracy to closeness to the United States. In other words, our selected middle powers are all wealthy, liberal democracies allied to the United States, or countries that China trusts the least. Although this might be a concern in efforts to identify possible mediators between China and the United States, China has shown a willingness to discuss geopolitical issues with some of these powers in the past because they are among the leading powers of their region. Furthermore, the middle powers that China might trust, such as Indonesia and Singapore, are no longer trusted by the United States, in large part because they are perceived to be close to China.

Despite the closeness of these four countries to the United States from a political and security lens, they all exhibit close economic ties to both the United States and China that support their usefulness as representative cases to analyze as potential middle powers in a cross-Strait conflict.

Taiwan is an important hub for the contract semiconductor industry (via foundries) and the contract personal computer manufacturing industry. Taiwan delivers 80 percent of the world's personal computers, 90 percent of its servers, 60 percent of its semiconductors, and 80 percent of its video-game devices (Nakamura, 2023). Most of this business—except the very high-end of it—is contracted out to China, demonstrating the interdependence of these economies. A war between China and Taiwan would disrupt these industries, along with several other industries. Nevertheless, a conflict would not directly or specifically affect middle powers. Over two-thirds of the sales of the leading foundry, Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company Limited (TSMC), are to U.S. companies, with Chinese and other Taiwanese firms accounting for most of the rest. Among the four middle powers, Japan has two firms, Sony Group Corporation and Renesas Electronics Corporation,

that are significant clients of TSMC, accounting for 1.1 percent and 0.4 percent of TSMC's revenue, respectively; the rest are U.S. firms (Kundojjala, 2023). In the personal computer manufacturing industry, the top six companies are Chinese, U.S., and Taiwanese companies, which together account for over 85 percent of the industry's market share (NextPCB, undated). Hence, direct middle-power interest as a client or vendor to the Taiwanese high-technology industry is relatively small.

Although the direct effects of such disruption are likely small, the global and downstream effects on middle-power economies could be significantly greater. The primary potential economic concern for middle powers is that the Taiwan Strait is an important trade route through which 88 percent of the world's largest ships, by tonnage, pass annually (Xiaojun, 2022). If China were to impose a naval blockade in the Taiwan Strait, the ports most affected in Taiwan would be those on its western seaboard, including its largest, Kaohsiung City. Taiwan's second- and third-largest ports, Keelung City and Suao Port, are on its eastern seaboard and might be less affected, although China would most likely also block access to those. Several of China's own ports on its eastern seaboard, such as Xiamen would also be affected by closure of the Taiwan Strait. Still other ports might be affected by reaction from the United States and other powers to closure of the strait. Nevertheless, the effects of such disruption for middle powers might be limited because ships can avoid the Taiwan Strait entirely and use the East China Sea and the Philippine Sea, which adds two or three additional days of shipping time.

Data Collection Protocol and Respondent Profile

Our data collection protocol consisted of two main steps. First, we conducted a critical literature review of the changing roles and influences of middle powers, and the causes for these changes. The findings were preparatory for the second step, in which we interviewed policymakers and policy analysts from four middle powers—Australia, Canada, Japan, and the UK—regarding their countries interests and strategies in the event of a cross-Strait conflict.

Interviews: Sampling and Enrollment Methods

The interviews took place between March and October 2023. We sought subject-matter experts who were (1) at the senior level from the diplomatic, defense, or policy analyst communities and (2) residents of the country being studied. We made a few exceptions to these criteria to include subject-matter experts from the media sector or who are diplomats serving overseas.

We conducted our interviews with respondents either in person or by video call. We also asked respondents to complete a questionnaire on the fundamental drivers of a country's equities in a cross-Strait conflict. Some of the questions required a quantitative ranking in addition to a qualitative discussion. The questions covered their country's perception of China's interests, its own capabilities and ambitions regarding support for Taiwan, concerns about its own national security, and effects of its response on China. We covered such topics as the country's political, economic, and military relations with the United States, China, and Taiwan, and the values that drive its foreign policy by discussing them without assigning rankings.

We used several methods to contact respondents, in addition to the authors' networks. RAND Australia helped us identify respondents in Australia, and RAND Europe helped us identify respondents in the UK. RAND researcher networks in Canada helped us obtain interviews with individuals from that nation. In addition, we received introductions from embassies and consulates to research contacts in their home countries.

We interviewed 49 people with expertise in our four selected countries. Table B.1 summarizes our number of contacts by expertise and location.

Table B.1. Respondent Profile

	Australia	Canada	Japan	UK	Total	Senior Respondents
Diplomats	1	1	4	2	8	8
Defense sector officials	1	0	3	0	4	2
Policy analysts	9	3	5	12	29	26
Business executives	0	1	2	0	3	3
Media	0	1	0	0	1	1
Legislators	0	4	0	0	4	4
Total	11	10	14	14	49	44
Located in country	10	10	12	13	45	

NOTE: A respondent is considered senior if the person's experience in the field is at least ten years.

We designed a semistructured questionnaire to guide the interviews. The questionnaire asks respondents from the selected middle powers about their countries' equities under different scenarios of conflict. The cross-Strait conflict scenarios all assume initiation by China of one of three types: an air and naval blockade, a punitive strike, or an all-out invasion (Wood and Ferguson, 2021).

We obtained both qualitative and ordinal responses to our questions. The questions, which were derived from our literature review, covered conceptions of their own country as a middle power at the present time and how it has evolved over time, as well as the process by which assets shape interests and strategies (see Figure 2.1).

The questionnaire covered the following topic areas:

- What are China's interests in a cross-Strait conflict?
- Which of these interests will be affected by reactions to a cross-Strait conflict?
- What are their country's interests and scope of action?
- What do their country's actions mean for China and the United States?
- What will their country's actions mean for their own countries?
- Which actions are they most likely to select and under what conditions?

Definitions of Middle Powers over Time

In this appendix, we provide an overview of how middle powers have been historically distinguished from great powers. We also survey the historical and current approaches for defining middle powers to supplement our discussion in the main report.

Definitions of Middle Powers in the Past

The first historical comparative rankings of states as powers were determined according to their political systems; states deemed as empires were considered to be more powerful than those deemed as republics (Holbraad, 1971). By the 19th century, middle-power capability was predominantly viewed through military and geographic lenses. Nations located strategically between two larger adversarial powers—and powerful enough to be secure from an invasion by either—could play the role of a balancing power. They could align with either adversary or mediate between them; thus, they could alter the global power equilibrium.

By the beginning of World War II, the Industrial Revolution and maritime prowess had solidified the status of major powers and diminished both the influence and number of middle powers. More than 90 percent of the world's territory at that time was under the control of seven great powers: France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Soviet Union, the UK, and the emergent power, the United States (Hoffman, 2015; Myers and Peattie, 1984).

The multipolar world designed by the winners of World War II and embodied by the UN soon transformed into a bipolar world, and many small powers came under the influence of one or the other great power. Middle powers re-emerged and initially, consisted of prewar great powers and their allies. Some of these middle powers, such as Canada, France, and the UK, helped the great powers set up multilateral institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund and various UN agencies.

Their capacity to do so was determined by their hard assets, particularly economic power (Holbraad, 1971; Holbraad, 1984).¹¹ These hard assets enabled some middle powers to also play

¹¹ Several writers use wealth, population, military capacity, and other assets as measures of power (Holbraad, 1971; Jeong, 2019; Ogden, 2019). Strictly speaking, this is incomplete. Power depends on the willingness to use an asset, not only its stored value. Therefore, military spending as a percentage of GDP, which is the use of an asset, is a valid measure of power. However, a country's record of international engagement is an asset that suggests that country likely engages in international activities but is not proof of current use. Canada had a stellar record of international engagement following World War II but has been much less active in the 21st century (Gecelovsky, 2009). Likewise, a country's population is an asset that is indicative of a resource that can be used. China and India are countries that have large populations which did not contribute to their power until the 21st century for China and the 2020s for India.

influential roles in mediation between weaker states, marking them as Tier 1 middle powers.¹² Yet, even in this mediating role, middle-power engagement was within limits set by the great powers (Ungerer, 2007).¹³ Hence, middle powers during the Cold War were defined by their diplomatic and economic influence over small states and their support for a great power's (mostly U.S.) institution-building. Their roles, although modest compared with those of a middle power of the 19th century, could still be influential. For example, Canada's pioneering of peacekeeping by the UN was of system-influencing dimensions (Nossal, 1999).

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 ushered in an era in which the United States was the sole great power. This period lasted until China's rise around 2005. During this time, new middle powers—India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mexico, South Africa, and Turkey—emerged and were characterized by their stable political systems and robust economic growth (Aydin, 2021). The traditional middle powers (e.g., Canada, France, the UK) continued with their internationalist agenda; focus on institution-building; support of the norms of the UN Declaration of Human Rights; and, to a much more limited extent, mediation in support of U.S. objectives (Holbraad, 1984; Jordaan, 2003; Lyan and Tomlin, 1979). Their influence weakened but was not extinguished.

In contrast, the emerging middle powers, such as Malaysia and Turkey, operated regionally and were driven by a desire to create and dominate regional structures, which often challenged the existing hegemonic global order in favor of multipolarity; they also expended vast resources to build their economic, diplomatic, and military capabilities (Buzan and Wæver, 2003; Katzenstein, 2005). Their success in many important regions of the world, such as India's influence in South Asia and Indonesia's in Southeast Asia, made them system-influencing.

The differences between traditional and emerging middle powers raised the question of whether there might validly exist two types of middle powers. Some scholars asserted that only values-based middle powers could play system-influencing roles that reflect "a particular style of behavior in international politics," whereby they tend "to pursue multilateralism in international disputes, . . . to embrace compromise, . . . and to embrace notions of 'good international citizenship'" (Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal, 1993, p. 19).

Other scholars criticized this definition for its circular reasoning (Black, 1997; Jeong, 2019).¹⁴ Jordaan (2003) recognizes the circularity in the definition presented by Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal

¹² The middle powers did face pressure on their internationalist initiatives following the formation of regional development institutions sponsored by a great power that sought to boost growth in its sphere of influence and exclude the other power from it. Examples include the formation of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance in 1949, the European Economic Community in 1957, and ASEAN in 1967. Rapid globalization of the world economy in the 1960s and subsequent decades further eroded the status of middle powers.

¹³ As Ungerer (2007, p. 393) notes, "the structural constraints imposed by strict bipolarity—particularly during the early stages of the Cold War—limited the room for diplomatic maneuver by the small and medium-sized states. . . . Nonetheless, a number of efforts were made by leading middle powers such as Australia and Canada to progress the cause of arms control and significant policy ideas were at least canvassed during this time. The historical evidence shows that the middle powers were not innocent bystanders in the Cold War arms control debates, but whatever influence they had was ultimately subordinate to the overwhelming structural power of Washington and Moscow."

¹⁴ Black (1997, p. 102) notes that the definition introduced the "unavoidably tautological element in the identification of middle powers; namely, that middle powers are identified by their foreign policy behavior, which leads to the identification of similarities in the constitutive features of middle-power states, from whence the circle is completed by explaining middle-power foreign policy as shaped by these compositional features." Jeong (2019, p. 242) states that, under such a definition, "a country's middle

(1993) but notes that traditional and emerging middle powers still differed fundamentally in their influence. Traditional middle powers were long-standing democracies that were wealthy enough to be at the “core of the world economy” and had a foreign policy agenda that was internationalist (and often even antiregionalist), egalitarian, generous with foreign aid, and democracy-promoting (Jordaan, 2003, p. 172). Emerging middle powers were nonegalitarian, regionalist, and often authoritarian; favored multipolarity; and tended to operate at the periphery of the world economy. Yet, despite the many differences between traditional and emerging middle powers, they shared a common end goal. Jordaan (2003, p. 169) notes that both types of middle powers “are committed to ‘orderliness and security in the world system’ realized through foreign policy niches of their choice.” Both types of middle powers were committed to neutrality between smaller states, which enabled them to play a mediating role in conflicts. However, such neutrality arose from two different sources. For traditional middle powers, the source of neutrality was regional ambivalence. For emerging middle powers, it was the desire to prevent involvement by a great power. Overall, Jordaan (2003) concludes that traditional middle powers had greater influence globally, while emerging middle powers were more influential in their region.

Definitions of Middle Powers at the Present Time

The concept of a middle power is likely to evolve even further with China’s ascension to great-power status. China’s ascension occurred in a geopolitical landscape that developed in 2001 after the end of the Asian financial crisis in 2001 and matured with the Great Recession of 2007–2008 because China played a prominent role in resolving both crises. Initially, the United States sought cooperation with China, but their relationship became increasingly adversarial, particularly after China asserted its claims in disputed areas, such as the Senkaku Islands and the rock features of the South China Sea (Dossani and Harold, 2018). In 2017, the Trump administration declared China to be a strategic rival (White House, 2017), which officially recognized what was already a winner-take-all rivalry for global influence.

China’s strategy in this rivalry has been to leverage well-established multilateral and regional institutions and initiatives (in which it had deep roots), its global economic ties, and its leadership of the Global South (Dossani, Hu, and Curriden, 2021b).¹⁵ The United States, which had stronger alliances and security-based partnerships, revitalized existing alliances and formed new alliances and partnerships that excluded China and sometimes explicitly targeted it. The United States also used its alliance relationships, in which it was the senior partner, to persuade otherwise reluctant countries, such as South Korea, to participate in economic actions aimed at countering China, such as the Indo Pacific Economic Framework.

power status is determined by middle power behaviors, and middle power behaviors by middle power status. This creates a self-confirming loop.”

¹⁵ The Soviet Union was largely shunned or kept out of international institutions that included the United States and its allies and was kept from trading with these countries through sanctions or other means. For example, although Russia applied for membership in the WTO as a founding member in 1993, it was not until 2010 that the United States agreed to support its bid, which enabled Russia to join the WTO 2012.

China and the United States are deploying capabilities that middle powers cannot match and reshaping the influence-building activities of middle powers to suit their own objectives (Campbell, 2023). Both traditional and emerging middle powers have been affected. Both Buzan and Wæver (2003) and Katzenstein (2005) provide evidence of an increasing regionalization of security and political trends, because traditional middle powers are being crowded out of the international sphere (see also Robertson and Carr, 2023). Poonkham (2022) further argues that traditional middle powers regionalize by focusing on a rules-based order in their regions and by becoming advocates for their regions in international forums (see also Gottlieb, 1991; and Richardson, 2011).

When traditional middle powers adopt a more regionalized focus, they are likely to encounter emerging middle powers that are already established in the region and their ally's great-power adversary. This proximity raises the risk to their territorial and economic security, for instance, if they were to antagonize China (Græger, 2019). For example, Australia has placed an increased emphasis on relations with various South Pacific islands because countering China in this region has become a U.S. strategic imperative. The risk is partly offset by U.S. backing, but Australia is still stepping up defense spending in recognition of an increased risk of antagonizing China (Murakami, 2023). This example also shows that traditional middle powers that are in partnership with a great power should expect that their strategic autonomy will be limited and that their activities directed in the service of their great-power ally, as Ungerer (2007) argued.

Emerging middle powers, which face risks of retaliation if they were to oppose either China or the United States, have pursued a balancing act between both great powers in some cases and partnered with one of them in other cases (Riyanto, Djumala, and Tan, 2023). Emerging middle powers have also substantially increased their defense capabilities and sought self-reliance in defense to protect their regional leadership roles (Kumar, 2023). For example, He (2023) cites the case of ASEAN to argue that the increased intrusiveness of China and the United States in regional structures has reshaped the dynamics for independent-minded emerging middle powers, which has affected their regional leadership roles.

Noting this problem, Jordaan (2017, p. 395) argued that emerging middle powers view themselves as "international stabilisers. The difficulty with this . . . conception is that new middle powers exhibit a counter-hegemonic streak and a preference for multipolarity. Both of these are destabilizing." Jordaan (2017, p. 405) proposed that in the interests of clarity "to altogether stop classifying middling states with counter-hegemonic tendencies as middle powers." Instead, Jordaan (2017, p. 405) proposed that the definition should "restrict the middle power term to mid-range states that provide active support to the liberal international order."

This ranking of middle powers by preference for hegemony is similar to the definition of Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal (1993) and might be criticized for the same circularity of reasoning that applies to many behavioral definitions; a middle power is one that supports the liberal international order because only middle powers support the liberal international order.

Such definitions also raise the question of how China could have become a great power when it was never a middle power under Jordaan's definition. Nevertheless, as Jordaan (2017) explains, there is an important underlying motive for his definition: to find a common definition of middle powers as being countries that do not disrupt the existing global system. Keohane (1969) had also attempted to accomplish this goal, albeit using influence (i.e., a measure of outcome) as his variable, whereas

Jordaan used values (i.e., a measure of assets). Therefore, Jordaan's definition required a way of comparing value-systems across countries. Because the current international order was led by the United States, Jordaan argued that a middle power should be defined by adherence to this value.

In contrast to those searching for a time-invariant definition, Robertson and Carr (2023, p. 381) argue that unlike "great power states who are order-providers (in that their world views and behavior set the regional and global frameworks for political order), middle-sized states require much greater effort to influence the international political order from within. To be effective, middle-sized states must respond to, and evolve with the nature of the system they operate in." Citing Cox (1989, p. 825), Robertson and Carr (2023, p. 381) note that a middle power conceptually "is not a fixed universal but something that has to be rethought continually in the context of the changing state of the international system."¹⁶

It is tempting to argue that a common, objective definition of middle power should exist, rather than the time-and-system-dependent definitions that have developed. The definition in Keohane (1969), which is determined by influence, is interesting because it is free of what went into creating that influence and indicates exactly what most analysts want to know, which is influence. However, similar to most measures of outcome, it is too general to be used alone (Tinkler, 2014). It needs to be combined with an understanding of the underlying context, resources, and ambitions that go into the making of a middle power.

¹⁶ Unexpectedly, Robertson and Carr (2023, p. 395) conclude that the concept of middle power needs to be updated even though the literature "continues to overwhelmingly embrace—and celebrate—the view that middle powers are *internationalist*, *multilateralist*, and *good citizens*." This also restricts the definition of a middle power to the traditional one. However, we have argued that a definition that requires liberal values does not fit the environment of the unipolar period and brings us back to the problem that Jordaan (2017) was trying to solve.

Abbreviations

APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nation
AUKUS	Trilateral Security Partnership for the Asia-Pacific Region between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States
CPTPP	Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership
EU	European Union
FOIP	Free and Open Indo-Pacific
GDP	gross domestic product
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
WTO	World Trade Organization

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In this report, the authors explore the equities of four middle powers—Australia, Canada, Japan, and the United Kingdom—and the roles that they might play in deterring or limiting conflict between China and Taiwan over the Taiwan Strait. A country's equities are its long-term interests in a scenario, such as a cross-Strait conflict. Middle powers are nations that are not small but lack the sheer size and influence to significantly disrupt the global order. However, middle-power countries can influence international affairs through mediation and institution-building, and middle powers can also play a balancing role between adversarial great powers.

The authors use four countries to conduct a case-study analysis on how middle powers perceive China's interests and their own nations' interests in a cross-Strait conflict. The authors held discussions with analysts and policymakers from each middle-power nation on such topics as whether these nations would support Taiwan in a cross-Strait conflict, the threats that China might perceive from these nations, and whether the respondents think that China would initiate a conflict with Taiwan. The authors supplemented these discussions with an open-source literature review on how middle powers have been defined historically to support their analysis of each middle power's equities in a potential cross-Strait conflict. Finally, the authors offer several recommendations for future middle-power strategies that might be useful to policymakers in Taiwan, the United States, and middle powers with a stake in the Asia-Pacific region.

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