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# Middle powers amid Sino-U.S. rivalry: assessing the ‘good regional citizenship’ of Australia and Indonesia

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## ABSTRACT

This paper argues that amid intensifying Sino-U.S. rivalry, middle powers in East Asia have contributed towards regional peaceful change through the exercise of good regional citizenship, a concept which draws on and modifies from the more commonly known good international citizenship which is closely associated with middle powers. Specifically, good regional citizenship involves proactively strengthening inclusive multilateralism, enhancing the rules-based order, and contributing to bridging efforts in East Asia. The paper examines the good regional citizenship of two middle powers, namely Australia and Indonesia. It finds that while both countries have exercised good regional citizenship, their specific strategies or the outcomes of their initiatives on regional dynamics have varied as a result of their relations with the respective major powers and their general foreign policy approaches. Australia’s good regional citizenship has supported the preservation of U.S. leadership in East Asia vis-à-vis the rise of other regional powers, while Indonesia’s good regional citizenship has helped to narrow the gaps among regional actors through mechanisms led by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

**KEYWORDS** ASEAN; Australia; Indonesia; good regional citizenship; middle powers; multilateralism

## Introduction

How have middle powers in East Asia contributed towards regional peaceful change amid intensifying Sino-U.S. rivalry? As a result of being in the ‘Goldilocks Zone’ of ‘having not too much power but power enough’, middle powers have been known to rely on foreign policy strategies involving multilateralism and institutions, hedging, as well as coalition building

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(Gilley, 2016, p. 651). Such strategies are attributed to their inability to take unilateral action and lack of coercive strength on the one hand, but also their intellectual and technical capabilities and deft diplomatic skills on the other (Cooper, Higgott, & Nossal, 1993). Although strategies of middlepowermanship offer insight into how these countries have navigated the impact of Sino-U.S. rivalry, most of the related research have put the emphasis more on explaining what drives a middle power to adopt these strategies and how they serve the middle power's own interests. Even as several scholars have underscored the importance for middle powers to have the ability to influence their external environment, there remains a gap in terms of explaining how such strategies help to sustain peaceful change amid the current regional order transition (Carr, 2014; Wilkins, 2017, pp. 121–122).

This paper suggests that a way to bridge this gap and add to the current literature on middle powers in East Asia would be through the concept of 'good regional citizenship', drawing on the well-documented concept of 'good international citizenship' that has been closely associated with middle powers (Abbondanza, 2021; Youde & Slagter, 2013). Like its international-level cousin, good regional citizenship tempers realist power politics that could lead to war, by focusing on norms and rules, but it does not blindly hold on to idealist aspirations that may not necessarily align with facts on the (East Asian) ground (Wheeler & Dunne, 1998, p. 854). This paper proposes to alter the concept of good regional citizenship from good international citizenship in two ways: first, to (re)emphasise the link between national interests and the pursuit of such a strategy; and second, to stress the regional focus that considers characteristics which are particular to East Asia. Specifically, good regional citizenship involves proactively supporting inclusive multilateralism and strengthening the rules-based regime in the region, as well as bridging between conflicting parties, in particular the major powers. Focusing on the good regional citizenship of middle powers allows us to go beyond a discussion of what drives middle powers to employ certain foreign policy strategies, to look at how these countries have actually contributed towards regional peaceful change.

Within the context of worsening Sino-U.S. competition, the paper examines the good regional citizenship of two middle powers, namely Australia and Indonesia. Based on the current definitional approaches, both countries are regarded to qualify as middle powers. Their economies are ranked fairly high up in the world, they have projected a middle power identity and have had this identity reaffirmed by others, and in accordance with expectations about middle power behaviour, both countries have been active in institution and architecture building in East Asia. Australia and Indonesia are certainly not the only regional countries to fulfil such middle power

criteria, but these are the two middle powers that have been the most proactive among their peers. Compared to Australia and Indonesia, another conventionally acknowledged middle power in the region – South Korea (which is examined in Pempel's article in this issue) – has not demonstrated as much leadership in the broader regional architecture for the period under study. One might also challenge the inclusion of Australia in an 'East Asian' region, but it would be useful to recall that regional boundaries are often fluid. Both Australia and Indonesia, for example, are founding members of the East Asia Summit (EAS) and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, and have also been relatively early adopters of the Indo-Pacific concept. In terms of such a region, loosely defined, the contributions of Canberra and Jakarta to the institutional architecture are evident, as we will see later in this paper. However, there are also differences between both middle powers that have shaped their approaches towards the region.

This paper aims to make a modest but constructive contribution to the literature on the role of middle powers caught amid Sino-U.S. strategic competition in East Asia. Theoretically, the paper introduces the notion of good regional citizenship by modifying from the concept of good international citizenship, and looks at how it characterises the contributions of middle powers towards peaceful change in East Asia. Empirically, the paper compares and contrasts the good regional citizenship of two different types of middle powers in the region, namely Australia and Indonesia. Given the context of Sino-U.S. rivalry, it would be useful to assess the extent to which the impact of the good regional citizenship of these two middle powers – with their different foreign policy orientations and relations with the major powers – are similar or different. The paper finds that while both middle powers have exercised strategies of good regional citizenship to contribute towards peaceful change in East Asia since the late 2000s, the effectiveness or outcomes of their initiatives have varied. Australia's good regional citizenship has supported the preservation of U.S. hegemony, or at least leadership, in the region vis-à-vis the rise of other regional powers, while Indonesia's good regional citizenship has helped to narrow the gaps between diverging visions for the region through mechanisms led by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The paper is organised as follows. Following this introduction, the second section briefly relates the good regional citizenship of middle powers to the theme of peaceful change in East Asia, and explains how the concept builds on but is distinct from good international citizenship. The third section identifies the three dimensions of the good regional citizenship framework and discusses some of the key assumptions. This framework is then applied to Australia and Indonesia's strategies in light of Sino-U.S. competition. The paper concludes with some implications for the contributions of middle powers towards peaceful change in East Asia.

## Good regional citizenship for a 'mini-max' peaceful change

This study focuses on the time period after the global financial crisis in the late 2000s, when academic and policy discussions about a rising China and relatively declining United States became more prominent (see, for example, Beeson & Gilson, 2010; Layne, 2009). The intricacies of Sino-U.S. rivalry are well documented in the relevant literature (including in the other articles in this special issue) and need not be repeated here. Suffice to note that although such debates have generally concurred that some form of structural change is occurring, views have been divided on whether such change would result in instability or if there is potential for a peaceful transition (see, for example, Ikenberry, 2018; Mearsheimer, 2010). The possibility of peaceful change has typically been dismissed by realists and embraced more by liberals and constructivists. Building on these debates, T. V. Paul conceptualises peaceful change based on a continuum. A minimalist definition of peaceful change would be 'change in international relations and foreign policies of states, including territorial or sovereignty agreements that take place without violence or coercive use of force', while a maximalist definition would be 'transformational change that takes place non-violently at the global, regional, interstate, and societal levels due to various material, normative and institutional factors, leading to deep peace among states, higher levels of prosperity and justice for all irrespective of nationality, race or gender' (Paul, 2020, p. 4; see also Paul in this issue).

In between the two extremes is a 'mini-max' definition that adopts the formulation by Karl Deutsch and collaborators, which is 'the resolution of social problems mutually by institutionalized procedures without resort to largescale physical force' (as cited in Paul, 2020, p. 4). Given that the conditions for 'deep peace' remain largely elusive in East Asia on the one hand, and that regional institutions have been rather entrenched on the other, this paper's argument is premised on the 'mini-max' definition of peaceful change. In particular, the objective is to examine how middle powers have contributed towards 'mini-max' peaceful change amid intensifying Sino-U.S. rivalry. This adds to the extant middle power literature that focuses on how such countries could shape their external environment and contribute towards regional stability, despite not being major powers (Carr, 2014; Wilkins, 2017, pp. 121–122). Through the exercise of good regional citizenship, middle powers help to facilitate and institutionalise the peaceful management of regional dynamics. While not yet reaching the level of 'transformational change' and 'deep peace' promulgated by a maximalist understanding of peaceful change, such efforts go beyond a minimalist peaceful change and are expected to regulate positive changes in foreign policy behaviour via multilateral and institutional channels (Paul, 2020, p. 4).

The good regional citizenship framework advanced in this paper draws on the concept of good international citizenship, which has been closely related with the study of middle powers (Abbondanza, 2021; Youde & Slagter, 2013). While the notion of international citizenship typically incorporates assumptions about its constitutive nature, the focus here is on its foreign policy behavioural dimensions. The origins of the good international citizenship concept date back to at least the 1960s, when Canada's Governor-General Daniel Roland Michener (1967) said in a speech reflecting on the country's international standing:

Our record as a middle power, independent and influential but not decisive in world affairs, our freedom from the much echoed taint of imperialism, our role in peacekeeping operations under the United Nations, our devotion to the just settlement of international differences, and our substantial aid to developing countries, have combined to win us friendship and respect. ... We are a good international citizen worthy of trust and capable of leadership.

About 20 years later, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Australia's Foreign Minister Gareth Evans identified good international citizenship as one of the major priorities in Canberra's foreign policy (Evans, 1989, pp. 12–13). For Evans, being a good international citizen means 'being willing to engage in cooperative international action to advance global public goods ... those which are by their nature beyond the capacity of any one state, however great and powerful, to individually solve' (Evans, 2017, pp. 109–110). These include issues such as the environment, pandemics, and transnational crime. Over time, this conceptualisation of good international citizenship has gained widespread acceptance in the literature. Similar to Canada, Australia's pursuit of good international citizenship during Evans' tenure as foreign minister was also part of efforts to position the country as a proactive and credible middle power.

While the criteria for good international citizenship may vary slightly across those who have promoted or theorised the concept, there are several common strands that most accounts are in agreement on. For example, Nicholas Wheeler and Tim Dunne characterise good international citizenship as 'a mutual interdependence between the provision of national security, the strengthening of international order and the promotion of human rights', Suzanne Graham defines the concept as a 'willing[ess] to place international society's welfare ahead of the incessant pursuit of its national interests', and Jeremy R. Youde and Tracy Hoffmann Slagter suggest the connotations of morality and responsibility associated with the concept (Graham, 2008, p. 88; Wheeler & Dunne, 1998, p. 854; Youde & Slagter, 2013, p. 124). In a study of Australia's good international citizenship, Alison Pert sets out five attributes of this profile, namely compliance with

international law, support for multilateralism, willingness to ‘pitch in’ to international tasks, displays of morality or ethics, as well as demonstration of leadership (Pert, 2012, p. 96). More recently, Gabriele Abbondanza also identifies five dimensions of good international citizenship, specifically respect for international law, promotion of multilateralism, pursuit of humanitarian and idealist goals, advocacy of international law and the rules-based order, and an alignment of domestic and foreign policies (Abbondanza, 2021). This paper’s conceptual framework draws on these existing elements of good international citizenship, but – acknowledging that such ideas have typically been associated with the behaviour of Western-oriented middle powers at the global level – modifies it slightly towards an alternative ‘good regional citizenship’ that may be better suited to examine the contributions of middle powers towards peaceful change in East Asia in light of Sino-U.S. rivalry.

The first modification involves (re)emphasising the link between national interests and the pursuit of good regional citizenship. A big part of the literature on good international citizenship has been heavily linked to humanitarian issues and notions of morality tied to Western liberal internationalism (Abbondanza, 2021, pp. 187–188; Efstathopoulos, 2018, p. 54). Evans himself asserted that ‘[o]f all the strands of good international citizenship, we give special emphasis to human rights’ (Evans, 1989, p. 13). As others have pointed out, however, the good international citizenship of Australia and Canada – generally treated as the exemplar middle powers of the post-World War II period – have been called into question on several occasions. For example, Abbondanza points to Australia’s controversial off-shore processing of seaborne asylum seekers and its ‘tolerance towards illegal US interrogation and detention practices’ in the ‘War on Terror’, while P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Andrew F. Cooper explain that Canada’s self-image as a good international citizen on human rights is challenged by ‘the flaws in its own record’ on Indigenous issues (Abbondanza, 2021, p. 185; Lackenbauer & Cooper, 2007, p. 99). These suggest that the path towards good international citizenship is often tied to domestic politics and crucial external relations.

Given these complex and interrelated interests, it is useful to also recall Evans’ clarification that good international citizenship ‘is not the foreign policy equivalent of boy scout good deeds’ (Evans, 1989, p. 12). Rather, it should be treated as ‘an exercise in enlightened self-interest’ based on the acknowledgement of international interdependence and how that relates to a state’s primary national interests (Evans, 1989, p. 13). The concept of good regional citizenship formulated here puts this notion at its core, and departs from traditional – and often controversial – associations of good international citizenship with humanitarian issues. Distancing good regional

citizenship from assumptions about morality and ethics allows us to move past debates about whether middle powers are more virtuous than major powers, or whether countries that do not engage in humanitarian activism could be described as middle powers. Rather, the emphasis is on how middle powers have served as good regional citizens in more strategic terms, particularly in terms of their contributions towards facilitating a peaceful order transition in the region.

Accepting that a state's good regional citizenship is premised on its national interests also aligns with one of the key elements of middle power behaviour, namely, niche diplomacy. While the idea of 'niche diplomacy' harks back to discussions on Canadian foreign policy in the late 1940s, Cooper and Evans have been instrumental in relating it to middle power behaviour in the post-Cold War period (Cooper, 1997; Evans, 2011). The claim is that due to their limited resources, middle powers should direct their 'resources in specific areas best able to generate returns worth having' (Evans, 2011). Cooper adds that according to the premises of niche diplomacy, a state's 'standing with respect to specific forums of decision-making rested on specialized interests and task-related experience' (Cooper, 1997, p. 4). A middle power should thus limit its involvement to issues in which it could presumably wield the most influence, depending on its resources and reputation. While the specific issues of concerns would depend on the interests, specialised skills and other-perceptions of each middle power, for middle powers in East Asia dealing with the effects of Sino-U.S. rivalry, we can reasonably expect a focus on reinforcing behavioural norms and rules especially via multilateralism and institutions (see, for example, Emmers & Teo, 2018; Gilley & O'Neil, 2014).

The second modification that distinguishes good regional citizenship from good international citizenship involves, as their names suggest, the level of analytical focus. This draws on arguments that dynamics within a specific region are neither completely identical to global-level nor other regions' dynamics, and thus should be studied as 'a *distinct* level of analysis' (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 27). Examples of such works in the East Asian context would include Christopher Hemmer and Peter Katzenstein's examination of the different development of security multilateralism in Europe and Asia during the Cold War years, as well as Evelyn Goh's study on the normative and social underpinnings of the post-Cold War East Asian order (Goh, 2013; Hemmer & Katzenstein, 2002). This argument for treating the region as a distinct level of analysis certainly does not preclude global-level dynamics shaping regional developments; in fact, regional and international developments are often interlinked (Hurrell, 2007, p. 130). Nevertheless, my focus on how regional middle powers have contributed to peaceful change in East Asia necessitates a narrowing down of the good international

citizenship concept in a way that would take into account characteristics particular to the region. Consequently, although issues of morality and human rights have been a crucial dimension of good international citizenship, they are not a primary feature in this paper's good regional citizenship framework. This more targeted scope allows us to focus on the elements that contribute specifically towards peaceful change in East Asia amid major power rivalry.

### **Three dimensions of good regional citizenship**

Let us now proceed to identify three central attributes of good regional citizenship within the context of Sino-U.S. rivalry in East Asia. These three attributes are not mutually exclusive, and as we will see, overlap with each other in various ways.

First, good regional citizenship would involve strengthening inclusive multilateralism in the region. This reasoning is based on the recognition of interdependence and acknowledgement that multilateral efforts are required to work towards a sustainable resolution of regional challenges (Abbondanza, 2021, pp. 185–186; Evans, 1990). On the part of middle powers, their preference for multilateralism emerges from the perception that these platforms encourage a more equal and legitimate decision-making process, and could help to restrain major powers from imposing their preferences on middle powers and the smaller states (Emmers & Teo, 2018, pp. 28–33). Ideally, power and influence would thus be more diffused and not concentrated solely in the hands of Washington and/or Beijing. Moreover, between middle powers that 'tend to have more opportunities for leadership' in such areas and smaller states that are generally unable to lead in these efforts, it is also important for the former to facilitate the inclusion of the latter in multilateral decision making (Gilley & O'Neil, 2014, p. 12). Inclusivity is thus important in this facet of good regional citizenship, as a way to ensure that the smaller states get a say too.

Second, good regional citizenship in the context of Sino-U.S. rivalry would involve reinforcing the regional rules-based order (Abbondanza, 2021, pp. 188–189). This dimension is important because it sets out the rules and norms that govern state behaviour and interstate conflict, regardless of the economic sizes or military capabilities of the parties involved. It is therefore not so much the rejection of Sino-U.S. competition, but that the competition occurs 'within the framework of international law [rather than] through corruption, interference or coercion' (Turnbull, 2017). For middle powers, an order based on rules and norms is viewed to work more to their advantage than one based on (material) power where they would mostly come up short against the major powers. Similar to multilateralism, a rules-

based order thus offers middle powers a way to protect themselves and smaller states against the unilateral or unpredictable tendencies of the major powers. In this sense, by promoting and encouraging other regional states to comply with regional rules and standards, middle powers could contribute towards more stable regional dynamics.

Last but not least, good regional citizenship amid Sino-U.S. rivalry would involve bridging efforts (Efstathopoulos, 2018, pp. 56–57; Spero, 2009). Specifically with regard to Beijing and Washington, this means that middle powers could attempt to offer acceptable solutions to both parties or serve as a mediator during disagreements or disputes. Beyond the two major powers, middle powers could also assume bridge-building roles to narrow differences between other parties with diverging interests or with different perspectives (Mo, 2016, pp. 591–592). Such efforts are aimed towards ensuring that the region does not become deeply divided as a result of Sino-U.S. competition.

It is also important to note that in order to be regarded as a good regional citizen, a middle power ‘must do more than merely fulfil its minimum ... obligations’ (Pert, 2012, p. 96). The crux of ‘good’ regional citizenship, vis-à-vis ‘average’ regional citizenship, is some form of leadership or initiative in the listed dimensions above (Pert, 2012, p. 97). It is insufficient to simply participate in multilateralism or comply with international law; middle powers have to take proactive steps to strengthen these institutions. Likewise, middle powers have to take the initiative in bridge building in the region. Effective good regional citizenship ‘moderates the realist struggle for power’ amid structural transitions (Wheeler & Dunne, 1998, p. 854). Proactive efforts by middle powers towards bolstering inclusive multilateralism, supporting a rules-based regional order and bridge building among conflicting parties would reinforce the rules, norms and practices that underlie regional diplomacy, in support of peaceful change. There is undeniably an element of liberal bias in the three strategies of good regional citizenship identified here. The middle powers surveyed in this paper, Australia and Indonesia, being democratic and free-market states, are likely to approach ‘good’ regional citizenship differently from other middle powers with different political and economic attributes. In this sense, the good regional citizenship formulated here is expected to facilitate a regional context that is largely favourable to democratic capitalist states, but the conduciveness of this approach may not necessarily be viewed in the same way across the board.

As a related point, it should be acknowledged that the outcomes of these strategies of good regional citizenship are also subjected to the responses of others. Middle powers might seek to conduct good regional citizenship, but whether their initiatives are recognised and accepted as

'good' is ultimately a social act. As Hurrell (2000, pp. 2–3) rightly points out in the context of 'Great Power' status:

You can claim Great Power status but membership of the club of Great Powers is a social category that depends on recognition by others – by your peers in the club, but also by smaller and weaker states willing to accept the legitimacy and authority of those at the top of the international hierarchy.

Similarly, the success or effectiveness of a middle power in achieving its objectives is contingent on whether it is able to persuade its counterparts to support its initiatives, which, to some extent, depends on whether its efforts are perceived by others to be 'good'. This speaks to broader debates regarding intersubjective understandings about behaviour and identity. To use an oft-cited example from Alexander Wendt contrasting the differing U.S. threat perceptions towards the possession of nuclear weapons by the United Kingdom and North Korea respectively, what is considered 'threatening' to Washington is not shaped merely by the material, but also by shared understandings about amity and enmity (Wendt, 1995, p. 73). In this vein, the outcomes of what a middle power may consider 'good' regional citizenship are also dependent on general perceptions of the middle power, its relations with regional counterparts, and its past behaviour. Such perceptions affect the responses of others towards the middle power's exercise of good regional citizenship, and consequently shape outcomes.

A brief note about how middle powers have been defined in this paper would be relevant here. Although there is no consensus within International Relations on what a middle power is, the literature suggests three primary ways – by material capabilities, identity and behaviour – to approach the concept. The details of these approaches are well captured in the extant middle power literature (see, for example, Carr, 2014, pp. 71–77); suffice to highlight that both the countries of focus for this paper, Australia and Indonesia, fulfil all three aspects of 'middlepowerness' to a large extent. In terms of material capabilities – following Bruce Gilley and Andrew O'Neil's observation that those countries 'with a ranking roughly in the tenth to thirtieth range' qualify as potential middle powers – Australia and Indonesia certainly fit the quantitative criteria of being a middle power (Gilley & O'Neil, 2014, p. 5). Since 2010, the former has ranked between the 12th and 14th spots in global GDP rankings, while the latter has hovered around the 16th to 19th places (The World Bank, 2021). Australia and Indonesia have also both projected a middle power identity, although it should be acknowledged that there are domestic contestations over this status (Teo, 2018, p. 229; Teo, 2022, pp. 155–157). Last but not least, Australia and Indonesia have demonstrated behavioural features of middle-powermanship. Both countries have advocated the benefits of

multilateralism, and have undertaken institution-building efforts in the region. Jakarta is often considered 'first among equals' in ASEAN based not only on its population and economic size but also its historical leadership role in regional institutions, while Australia's initiatives in regional multilateralism – APEC and the Asia Pacific Community (APC) come to mind – have likewise been reflective of its proactive approach. As middle powers in a region characterised by ongoing transitions and some uncertainty, both Australia and Indonesia have arguably pursued strategies for a 'mini-max' formulation of peaceful change.

In the next two sections, we turn our attention to the good regional citizenship of Australia and Indonesia. As we will see, while Canberra and Jakarta have worked towards strengthening inclusive multilateralism, supporting the rules-based order, and contributing to bridging efforts in the region, the specific details of their initiatives have played out slightly differently. This is mainly due to their different relations with the major powers, as well as the differences in perceptions of their place in the region which affect the reception of their initiatives. Australia is a formal U.S. ally while Indonesia relies on a free and active foreign policy centred on non-alignment and the rejection of military alliances. Australia has also struggled with its belonging in East Asia, whereas Indonesia's central place in the region has generally not been questioned due to its leadership role in ASEAN and Southeast Asia. As a result, Jakarta has leveraged its role in ASEAN as a way to assert its middle power influence in East Asia, while Canberra – despite engaging with ASEAN-led platforms – has been more inclined to initiate mechanisms outside the ASEAN framework that preserve U.S. primacy in the region.

### **Australia's good regional citizenship**

This section surveys Australia's good regional citizenship against the three dimensions identified in the preceding section. Despite the debates surrounding its status as an Asian country, Australia has been an active promoter of regional multilateralism and institution building since the end of the Cold War. Many of its initiatives have been based on inclusiveness and norms promotion, but have nevertheless also prioritised ensuring U.S. presence in the regional architecture which would in turn secure Canberra's own place in the region. From Australia's perspective, strong U.S. engagement with East Asia would create a regional climate that is conducive for its own interests. Consequently, Australia's good regional citizenship has contributed towards a regional order that continues to be led by the United States and accords important roles to U.S. allies and partners vis-à-vis other non-like-minded countries. This has also meant that while

Canberra has been relatively proactive in supporting regional multilateralism and strengthening the rules-based framework, it has either displayed less initiative or seen less success in bridging between Beijing and Washington.

### ***Strengthening inclusive multilateralism***

Australia's contributions towards inclusive multilateralism in the region are well documented. These are exemplified by its leadership role in the formation of APEC in the late 1980s, as well as its advocacy for a region-wide multilateral security dialogue in the early 1990s prior to the formation of the ASEAN Regional Forum. As a pragmatic supporter of ASEAN-led mechanisms that include both China and the United States, Australia has continued to be proactive in bolstering inclusive multilateralism in the region since the late 2000s. Canberra is the only one of ASEAN's dialogue partners to have co-chaired an Experts' Working Group in all four three-year cycles of the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus work plan thus far. The inaugural ASEAN-Australia Summit in 2018, as well as the first ASEAN-Australia Defence Ministers' Informal Meeting in 2020, also reflect Canberra's support of the open ASEAN-led multilateral architecture in the region. This is despite its wariness of and problems with a more assertive China.

Australia's acknowledgment of the need to 'accommodate China's rise in the region' is also demonstrated in former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's APC (He, 2011, p. 273). Although ill-fated, the APC embodied Australia's efforts to facilitate regional engagement of China as a rising power even as it pursued stronger U.S. commitment to the region. Rudd announced the APC initiative in June 2008, with administration officials observing that while there were, at that point, several multilateral institutions that underpinned the regional architecture, there were gaps that needed to be addressed. Most significantly from Australia's perspective, APEC did not include India and the EAS did not include the United States at the time (Official Committee Hansard, Commonwealth of Australia, 2010, p. 105). As a regional institution that would span 'the entire Asia-Pacific region' – including China, India, Indonesia, Japan and the United States – the APC aimed to address these gaps and 'encourage the development of a genuine and comprehensive sense of community whose habitual operating principle is cooperation' (Rudd, 2008). In leaked diplomatic cables on the APC, officials explained that Australia wanted to avoid having Chinese dominance and U.S. absence in the regional architecture – a scenario that would be detrimental to Australia's own place in the region (Australia Canberra, 2009; Secretary of State, 2009). Admittedly, the APC drew criticism for its potential threat to

ASEAN centrality in the regional architecture and ultimately failed to obtain widespread regional support. The idea itself eventually faded, although some have subtly suggested that the subsequent U.S. entry into the EAS – prized for its annual convening of the leaders of 18 regional countries – could be associated with the momentum generated by Australia’s initiative (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore, 2010; Natalegawa, 2018, p. 98).

### ***Supporting the rules-based order***

Australia has also been vocal in championing the rules-based order in the region, which it regards as essential for ensuring that ‘the sovereignty of all states, large and small, is respected’ (Reynolds, 2020). As Sino-U.S. competition has extended across more areas, such as technology, economics, and even in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, Australia has expressed active support for international institutions such as laws and treaties. For instance, it has been at the forefront of calls for a ‘robust, independent and comprehensive’ inquiry on early responses to the COVID-19 pandemic – much to Beijing’s ire (Hurst, 2020). On the South China Sea, Canberra submitted a note verbale to the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General in July 2020 stating its position on the issue. This has been regarded as a shift from its neutral position on the territorial disputes, to a stronger stance ‘reject[ing] any claims by China that are inconsistent with the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea’ (Permanent Mission of the Commonwealth of Australia to the United Nations, 2020; see also Thayer, 2020). Additionally, when the United States withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in 2017, it was Australia – along with Japan and New Zealand – that led the charge towards concluding a TPP-11, otherwise known as the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) (‘Japan, Australia’, 2017). Australia’s then Minister for Trade, Tourism and Investment, Steven Ciobo, described the signing of the CPTPP as ‘a significant moment for open markets, free trade and the rules-based international system’ (Ciobo, 2018).

In recent times, Australia has also sought to bolster the rules-based order through smaller groupings of like-minded partners. These include the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD, also known as the Quad) involving Australia, India, Japan and the United States, the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) security arrangement, as well as other unilateral channels such as the Australia-India-Japan and Australia-India-France dialogues. To some extent, Canberra’s interest in such unilateral cooperation has been driven by what it sees as the failure of broader multilateral institutions in the region to adequately address strategic and traditional security issues (Wallis, 2020, p. 14). At first glance, the exclusiveness inherent in

minilateralism may seem to pose a challenge to inclusive multilateralism in the region. Given the differences in the processes and agendas of multilateralism and minilateralism, however, it is arguable that both forms of cooperation are firstly, not mutually exclusive, and secondly, serve to fulfil different but equally necessary functions towards regional stability. Australia's cooperation with India and Japan to achieve supply chain resilience in the region, even as it has signed on to larger multilateral trade deals such as the CPTPP and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership – the latter which includes China – reflect an example of the dual strategies. Nevertheless, Australia's proactiveness in promoting a rules-based regime with like-minded partners has conceivably helped to move the region towards a stronger commitment to established rules and norms in the face of major power unilateralism. It is moreover interesting to note that, while participating in a collective movement to support the rules-based order would be considered an act of 'good' regional citizenship from the perspective of the United States and some regional countries, others – most obviously China – have not responded well to Australia's attempts in this field. This has affected Canberra's ability to bridge major power relations, as we will see in the next sub-section.

### ***Bridging***

When it comes to bridging, one could make the case that the options for Australia here have narrowed since the late 2010s as its relations with China have progressively worsened. The fallout from the row over foreign interference in Australia, Canberra's call for a global investigation into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic, and Beijing's trade sanctions on Australia have arguably destroyed the notion of any kind of bridging role that the middle power could potentially assume between China and the United States. Prior to this downturn in relations, some of Australia's leaders and diplomats had appeared partial to the idea of being an honest broker between the two major powers. During his tenure as prime minister, for example, Rudd indicated that Australia could serve as a bridge between China and the United States or the West in issues such as climate change and nuclear arms reductions (Banham, 2007; Reuters Staff, 2007). Similarly, Bob Carr, in an interview in 2011 before being appointed as foreign minister, underscored Australia's interests in facilitating peaceful Sino-U.S. relations (Clark & Kerin, 2012).

As others note, however, these aspirations to serve as a neutral intermediary were 'seriously at odds' with Australia's U.S. alliance (Manicom & O'Neil, 2010, p. 35). Despite the rhetoric of not wanting to choose between China and the United States, John Lee, who was adviser to former

Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, underscores that 'Australia has chosen to be in the US's camp' (Lee, 2012). The potential value of Rudd's overtures to serve as a mediator between the two major powers, for instance, quickly faded as the Sino-Australian relationship took an unpleasant turn around 2009 as a result of claims in Australia's Defence White Paper that China's military modernisation had 'the potential to give its neighbours cause for concern', the controversy over Rio Tinto, as well as the dispute over Australia's granting of a visa to Uighur leader Rebiya Kadeer (Department of Defence, Australian Government, 2009, p. 34). Then Foreign Minister Stephen Smith asserted that Australia 'will not compromise on [its] values and virtues' despite positive relations with China (House of Representatives, Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p. 12285). Such differences have subsequently become characteristic of Sino-Australian ties, arguably inhibiting any of Canberra's aspirations to mediate between Beijing and Washington. Australia's participation in the U.S.-backed Quad and AUKUS have further narrowed the space for it to be regarded as an honest broker between the major powers. Amid worsening Sino-Australian relations since 2020, China-based sources have also been vocal in criticising Australia for being a 'puppet' of the United States (see, for example, Wang, 2020). Given this context, any attempts by Canberra to conduct good regional citizenship by bridging Sino-U.S. relations would be unlikely to have been well received by China. It is thus not surprising that in practical terms, Australia has neither been proactive nor seen much success in terms of bridging Sino-U.S. relations.

Overall, while Canberra's efforts have propped up inclusive multilateralism and the rules-based order in the region, it has been less effective in bridging between Beijing and Washington. The extent to which Australia's good regional citizenship has helped to facilitate peaceful change amid Sino-U.S. competition has therefore been mixed. As a middle power, Australia has relied on its credibility, initiative and resources to strengthen multilateralism and the rules-based framework in the region, but its own problems with China, alongside its status as a U.S. ally, has circumscribed its role as an honest broker.

### **Indonesia's good regional citizenship**

Traditionally regarded as the leader of Southeast Asia and ASEAN, Indonesia has proactively worked towards strengthening inclusive multilateralism, promoting a rules-based order, and contributing to bridging efforts in the region. Jakarta's greatest contributions to regional institution building has been through the ASEAN platform, which it has utilised to commit larger regional powers – including China and the United States – to peace

in Southeast Asia and the broader region. Although Indonesia has encountered disinterest or resistance from some ASEAN member states towards several of its initiatives that has led it to look beyond ASEAN in recent times, the organisation remains one of the key pillars of its foreign policy. As we will see below, Indonesia has been relatively effective in all three features of good regional citizenship, thus highlighting its contributions towards regional peaceful change amid worsening Sino-U.S. competition.

### ***Strengthening inclusive multilateralism***

Indonesia's leadership of ASEAN has been instrumental in reinforcing an inclusive multilateral architecture. To a certain extent, this has been a natural extension of the country's 'free and active' foreign policy which prioritises non-alignment and rejects military alliances. Indonesia hosted the inaugural ASEAN Summit in 1976 and has played a formative role in shaping the organisation. Additionally, Jakarta was a crucial driver of the ASEAN community-building process from the early 2000s, especially in terms of forming a security community aimed at shaping 'a regional architecture that is open, transparent and inclusive, while remaining actively engaged, forward-looking and non-discriminatory' (ASEAN Secretariat, 2009, p. 2). Similarly, Indonesia's advocacy of the Indo-Pacific has been based on a regional architecture that would be 'open, transparent and inclusive, promoting the habit of dialogue, promoting cooperation and friendship, and upholding international law' (Septiari, 2018). Jakarta has nevertheless faced challenges in gathering regional support for its Indo-Pacific vision, as reflected in Singapore's reported hesitancy in endorsing Indonesia's proposal of an ASEAN position on the Indo-Pacific (Septiari, 2019). This relates to the earlier point about how a middle power's perceptions of and approach towards its good regional citizenship may not always align with the views and responses of the others.

Amid rising Sino-U.S. rivalry, Indonesia has sought to engage with and commit various regional powers to stability in Southeast Asia, and by extension, the broader East Asian region. During discussions to form the EAS in the mid-2000s, for example, Indonesia – alongside others such as Japan and Singapore – pushed for the new mechanism to include Australia, India and New Zealand. This was in contrast to the preferences of Malaysia and China for a more exclusive 'East Asian' grouping comprising only the ASEAN member states, as well as China, Japan and South Korea. Former Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa recalls that Indonesia's case to include Australia, India and New Zealand was based on considerations of "dilut[ing]" ... the increasing influence of any particular state' and establishing behavioural norms among its participants (Natalegawa, 2018, p. 90).

Later, amid talks to invite Russia and the United States to join the EAS, Natalegawa developed his concept of ‘dynamic equilibrium’ that would be achieved ‘through the management of the exercise of power and the promotion of predictability of interstate behaviour’ (Natalegawa, 2018, p. 101). As ASEAN Chair in 2011, Indonesia became the first country to host the expanded 18-member EAS. By promoting inclusive multilateralism, Jakarta helped to ensure that power and influence were more diffused among participants, and that collective decision making would be more equal. The vision of a more equal partnership between ASEAN and its dialogue partners has also been underscored in Indonesia’s *Strategic Plan 2015–2019* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2015, p. 6).

### ***Supporting the rules-based order***

Indonesia has also taken the lead to strengthen the rules-based order in the region, although its efforts have either lacked consistency or been met with resistance. Jakarta played a significant role in negotiations for the ASEAN Charter in the 2000s and was reportedly ‘behind much of the wording’ of the final document (Heiduk, 2016, p. 12). As a document targeted at ‘codif[ying] ASEAN norms, rules and values’ and ‘present[ing] accountability and compliance’, the ASEAN Charter is intended to bolster the rules-based regime in the region (ASEAN Secretariat, 2020). However, Jakarta was disappointed by the resistance from some of its fellow ASEAN member states towards its attempt to incorporate human rights and democratic principles in the charter, which led to a watered-down final document (Emmers, 2019). Its suggestion in 2004 to establish an ASEAN peacekeeping force was also opposed by some of the other member states in light of complex domestic politics and the view that peacekeeping was not among ASEAN’s primary functions. Another proposal to bolster the rules-based order that did not generate sufficient regional interest involved Natalegawa’s suggestion for an ‘Indo-Pacific wide treaty of friendship and cooperation’ in 2013. Building on the EAS’ adoption of the ‘Bali Principles’ for mutually beneficial relations under Indonesia’s chairmanship in 2011, Natalegawa reasoned that a treaty signed by the EAS participants – among which existed several ‘trust-deficit[s]’ and territorial disputes – would serve as a commitment to build confidence, solve disagreements peacefully, and regard security as a common good (Natalegawa, 2013). This idea eventually ‘disappeared into the black hole of ASEAN bureaucracy’ (Weatherbee, 2019, p. 3).

Under President Joko Widodo, Indonesia has appeared to attach less importance to ASEAN in its rules-promotion efforts, arguably as a consequence of the above-mentioned resistance that Jakarta encountered in the past. An example of this shift is illustrated through Indonesia’s approach

towards the South China Sea issue. Under former President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, Indonesia sought to make progress on the long-stalled negotiations between ASEAN and China for a Code of Conduct (COC) on the South China Sea. Natalegawa drew up a 'zero draft COC' that was presented to the ASEAN foreign ministers in 2012 and 'doggedly pressed Beijing to come to the diplomatic table to complete a [COC] agreement' (Thayer, 2013; Weatherbee, 2016a, p. 8). In contrast, the Widodo administration has approached the COC in 'an almost pro forma fashion' with 'no Indonesian actions or initiatives to drive the process forward' (Weatherbee, 2016b, p. 61). Jakarta's reaction to the arbitral tribunal ruling on the maritime territorial dispute between China and the Philippines in 2016 has been described by as 'bland' and 'lacklustre', with an accompanying lack of interest by Indonesia to drive a collective ASEAN response towards the ruling (Laksmana, 2016, p. 382; see also Almuttaqi, 2020, pp. 43–44). An alternative argument here is that, far from giving in to violations of the rules-based order in the South China Sea, Jakarta has continued its advocacy for rules but has preferred to 'go it alone' (Connelly, 2016, p. 10; see also Weatherbee, 2016b, p. 66). It has certainly not shied away from taking a hardline stance, as evidenced by its sinking of foreign vessels – including from China and Vietnam – found illegally fishing in Indonesian waters. As Ahmad Ibrahim Almuttaqi observes, 'President Widodo would only get involved when Indonesia's sovereignty was directly threatened. Otherwise, he was happy to withdraw himself' (Almuttaqi, 2020, p. 44). This would arguably cast a shadow on the good regional citizenship of the Southeast Asian middle power.

### ***Bridging***

Last but not least, Indonesia has exercised leadership in bridging – not so much between China and the United States, but rather, among conflicting parties in the region. Continuing with the example on the South China Sea, Indonesia has since the 1990s established 'track two' workshops to encourage multilateral dialogue, develop technical cooperation, and enhance peaceful management of the disputes (Laksmana, 2018, p. 163). Natalegawa's brokerage efforts in 2012 following the ASEAN foreign ministers' failure to issue a joint communiqué also reflects the influential role that Indonesia has played in helping to narrow divergences. Although the 'Six-Point Principles on the South China Sea' that was produced following Natalegawa's 36-hour shuttle diplomacy was 'essentially a restatement of the [Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea]' and the positive effects of the South China Sea workshops have been debated, Indonesia's efforts in this matter have demonstrably contributed towards a

better climate for stability, especially from an ASEAN-level perspective (Weatherbee, 2016b, p. 61; see also Laksmana, 2018, p. 163). Under the Yudhoyono administration, Indonesia also set its sights on becoming a bridge-builder in the context of democracy promotion by establishing the Bali Democracy Forum (BDF) in 2008. In contrast to the U.S.-led Asia-Pacific Democracy Partnership that emerged around the same time and only included states with democratic political systems, the BDF embraced non-democratic countries in its membership. This has led to criticisms of the BDF's weak legitimacy and effectiveness. Yet, Jakarta has regarded the BDF's non-exclusionary membership as necessary for bridge-building and sharing best practices towards democratisation (Karim, 2017, pp. 394–397). The continuing interest in the BDF and its growing membership bear testament to Indonesia's bridge-building role.

A more recent example would be Indonesia's bridging efforts in formulating the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). Amid the 'free and open' Indo-Pacific strategies promoted by Japan and the United States since the late 2010s that have resulted in concern from several ASEAN member states about the potential sidelining of the association, Indonesia has sought to put forth an ASEAN vision of the Indo-Pacific that would retain ASEAN centrality in the region and narrow the gaps among various regional countries towards the Indo-Pacific concept. Beijing, moreover, has been a vocal critic of the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific strategy given its aim of counterbalancing China's influence in the region. In contrast to the more exclusive U.S. vision, Jakarta called for an inclusive Indo-Pacific – in line with ASEAN's principles – and circulated a draft vision document to its fellow ASEAN member states in August 2018. Despite initially 'underwhelming' and lukewarm responses from other regional countries, the AOIP was eventually issued in June 2019 (Weatherbee, 2019, p. 5). Subsequently, the leaders-led EAS – which includes China and the United States – 'noted' ASEAN's adoption of the AOIP and said it 'looked forward' to further discussions and collaboration in the areas identified in the document (ASEAN, 2019, pp. 8–9). While some critics have charged that the AOIP offers little in terms of clear and concrete measures, the issuance of the AOIP suggests the success of Indonesia in overcoming initial resistance and brokering among the differing interests (Chong, 2019; Sothirak, 2019). This has, in turn, helped to create a more conducive regional environment for cooperation amid competing visions of the region.

In the context of Sino-U.S. rivalry, Indonesia has contributed towards enhancing inclusive multilateralism, maintaining a rules-based order, as well as narrowing differences through its bridging initiatives. Jakarta has made use of its good offices and non-aligned profile to exercise leadership in the regional architecture, especially in terms of ensuring that the region

does not become split between two opposing camps led respectively by China and the United States. Although there is not always uniform acceptance of Indonesia's leadership in ASEAN and Southeast Asia, its good regional citizenship has been relatively effective at ensuring regional peaceful change and facilitating positive relations among regional countries.

## Conclusion

Amid intensifying Sino-U.S. competition, this paper has examined the contributions of Australia and Indonesia towards peaceful change in East Asia. Viewed through the lens of good regional citizenship, middle powers are expected to facilitate peaceful change by strengthening inclusive multilateralism, bolstering the rules-based order, as well as bridging among diverse interests or diverging parties in the region. This is a result of their 'middling' capabilities and profiles on the international stage, but more importantly, suggests the ability of middle powers to shape regional dynamics. Based on the above discussion, the good regional citizenship of Australia and Indonesia have broadly contributed towards a conducive climate for regional stability in the face of Sino-U.S. rivalry but the specific details of their strategies and consequent outcomes have differed slightly. These differences arguably boil down to their relations with the respective major powers and general foreign policy approaches.

Australia's good regional citizenship has focused primarily on strengthening inclusive multilateralism and upholding the rules-based order, with less success in bridging between China and the United States. Its status as a U.S. treaty ally, as well as its history as a founding member of various international institutions such as the UN, explain why Canberra has collaborated closely with like-minded partners to ensure a regional order based on rules and to support U.S. presence in East Asia – as a counterbalance against what it regards as rising Chinese assertiveness and challenge to the regional status quo. As a result, this has also meant that, despite occasional indications of its willingness to serve as an intermediary between Beijing and Washington, Canberra has not found much success in such a role. Meanwhile, Indonesia's good regional citizenship has been shaped by its free and active foreign policy and its longstanding status as *de facto* leader of Southeast Asia and ASEAN. Through the latter, Jakarta has thus sought to maintain the inclusivity of the regional multilateral architecture and ensure a rules-based order. Due to resistance Indonesia has faced from some ASEAN member states regarding its initiatives, however, the Widodo government has – in contrast to its predecessor – appeared to prefer a more unilateral advancement of regional rules. This contrasts with typical middle power behaviour, which tends to prioritise cooperation and

collaboration. Nevertheless, Indonesia has also relied on ASEAN as a platform to narrow the divergences between China and other regional actors, as evident in its advocacy of the AOIP and its efforts in managing South China Sea tensions.

The paper has contributed to the literature on the stabilising role of middle powers amid major power competition in two main ways. First, it has introduced the concept of good regional citizenship, by modifying from the concept of good international citizenship. Unlike the latter, good regional citizenship in this context takes on a more strategic dimension – reinforcing the link between such a strategy and national interests – and takes into account the characteristics particular to the region. In this context, the good regional citizenship of Australia and Indonesia serve both their respective interests through shaping a more peaceful regional environment amid Sino-U.S. competition. The strategies and outcomes of their good regional citizenship have also been affected by what the two middle powers, as well as other regional countries, regard as appropriate within East Asia. Second, the paper has juxtaposed the good regional citizenship of two different middle powers and found that, as a result of their different foreign policy orientations and relations with the major powers, their attempts at ‘good’ regional citizenship and the responses to their initiatives have differed as well.

Following from this, this paper concludes with two implications for the contributions of middle powers in terms of facilitating peaceful change in East Asia. First, given the dynamics and relations within East Asia, it seems that there is a potential clash between efforts to advocate for a rules-based order and bridging. To an extent, this is presumably because calls for a rules-based order have been typically associated with Western or U.S.-led attempts to chastise China and constrain its influence. Consequently, if a middle power is a strong advocate for rules in the context of Sino-U.S. rivalry, it is unlikely to be able to take up the role as a neutral intermediary between the conflicting major powers. This is reflected in the case of Australia, which has pursued like-minded coalitions with other U.S. allies and partners and has sought to consistently ensure that the United States remains the preeminent power in the region. In contrast, Indonesia has mostly tried to reinforce a rules-based regime through ASEAN, which is regarded as less threatening. While Indonesia’s promotion of a rules-based regime has not drawn too much concern from the larger regional powers, the downside is that Indonesia’s efforts here have often encountered resistance or disinterest from others in the region. Nevertheless, Jakarta’s non-aligned profile has allowed it to assume bridging roles without much controversy.

For middle powers in general, this suggests that attempts to exercise good regional citizenship will have to be carefully calibrated. A middle

power that seeks an accepted bridging role may have to be slightly more circumspect in its advocacy of a rules-based order – especially one that is perceived to preserve existing power hierarchies and limit the rise of new powers. Meanwhile, a middle power pursuing a greater commitment to rules in the region may have to contend with the fact that it is likely to meet with resistance or disinterest from others which may affect its broader foreign relations. Certainly, middle powers which are among the United States' strongest allies may find it challenging to serve as a bridge between Beijing and Washington, especially as major power rivalry worsens. Although this ineffectiveness at bridging may appear to weaken the middle power's role in facilitating peaceful change, it is also key to note that the efforts towards good regional citizenship should be evaluated as a whole across the three dimensions, rather than individually in isolation.

This leads us to the second implication of the paper's analysis, which is that middle powers have the ability to shape the regional climate, even if they lack the (hard) power resources of the major powers. As the study of Australia and Indonesia has shown, middle powers do possess some diplomatic clout to shape regional cooperation and developments. This, combined with the view that such countries are more likely than the major powers to align with the positions of smaller states, offer middle powers the opportunity to exercise their initiative in promoting peaceful change. Certainly, the outcomes of good regional citizenship are rarely attributed to unilateral actions. Middle powers would have to convince, persuade, and coax their regional counterparts to support their proposals. As highlighted above, the efforts of Australia and Indonesia did not always succeed as other actors on occasion withheld their support. For middle powers in East Asia seeking to play an instrumental role in facilitating a peaceful region that could withstand the uncertainty arising from Sino-U.S. relations, it would thus be useful to have a clear sense of their comparative advantage(s) vis-à-vis other regional countries. This would aid them in garnering support for their initiatives and enhance their contributions to peaceful change in East Asia.

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