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Being a Middle Power

By Marty Natalegawa

SYNOPSIS

There are different ways to understand what a “middle power” is in international politics and relations. Coming from a particular state acknowledged or described by others as a middle power or declaring oneself to be one has varied implications for the prevailing world order and considerable impact on the state concerned.

COMMENTARY

What to make of the often-cited notion of “middle power”?

Significantly, the usage of the term has varied.

In some instances, it suggests a country's coming to prominence moment; an “elevated” status in the rank of international power, an occasion to be celebrated. In others, it refers to a country's – or a group of countries' – foreign policy orientation, being in the “middle” or equidistant in the deepening and widening geopolitical divide between the “major” or “great” powers. Such usage is sometime associated with other terms that refer to groups of countries such as “the Global South” and “emerging powers”, though without much regard to the fact that this risk oversimplifying the complex dynamics that exist between countries with varying interests and concerns. It is also sometimes juxtaposed with “neutrality”, or a foreign policy orientation described as “hedging”.

The notion of middle power deserves a more critical analysis.

Perhaps one of its most egregious features is that it is inherently inconsistent with one of the most fundamental principles of interstate relations, as enshrined in Article 2.1 of the United Nations Charter, namely that of “sovereign equality” of states. One of the bedrock principles in multilateral cooperation with emphasis on cooperative

partnership between states, and of mutual respect and mutual benefit. It took decades of efforts – including by countries emerging from colonial occupation – to ensure that this sacrosanct principle of international relations is not dismissed as mere legal formality unfounded by *realpolitik*.

However, the usage of term such as “middle power” and the concurrent notion of large, major or great powers risk creating self-fulfilling dynamic, that of a stratified international order. That some powers – solidified most vividly and formally by the existence of permanent, non-elected members of the United Nations Security Council – shoulder special responsibilities and possesses special rights. That outside these powers, the great majority of states, should merely await – brace themselves even – the results of the big powers’ deliberations. Middle powers are to be seated around the proverbial international decision-making table only at the invitation of the big powers; and is expected be grateful for the opportunity afforded.

In emphasising the notion of middle powers, are we thus not simply codifying and giving credence to the idea of big powers? That might make right? And, indeed, should countries, like Indonesia, by no means insignificant in terms of traditional indices of power, such as geographic size, its population and economy, cap its future potential as being “middle” power?

Closely related, the notion of middle power seems an anathema when linked to the reality that power – understood here as a state’s capacity to effect change – is not static and constant. It is dynamic, ever-changing and most often issue-dependent and situation-specific. Rather than seeing states in the world as being ranked from the most powerful to the least powerful – with the so-called “middle powers” presumably occupying the middle cluster in this list – it seems important to recognise that each international issue brings with it its own power “dynamics” and constellation. A country may well be a significant and minor “player” all at the same time dependent on the issues at hand: political-security, the economy, socio-culture, and global common issues such as climate crisis and the environment, public health and technology.

Further still, the applicable currencies for power and influence are determined by the issues faced. That most obvious indices for power – a country’s military might and size of the economy – may not matter much in enabling countries to influence outcome when, for instance, the most vital ingredient is “trust” and, to borrow ASEAN’s parlance, “comfort level”. Thus, ASEAN’s past capacity to effect change and outcome – its “centrality” so to speak, was not necessarily derived from its Member States’ “power” in the quantifiable sense, rather from the trust and confidence it enjoys from its interlocutors to initiate and manage the wider region’s architecture.

What of middle power as foreign policy orientation? Clearly for some countries it may be a fitting description if it chooses to remain simply in the “middle” – equidistant – in the face of ever deepening geopolitical competition. Here, middle power foreign policy orientation can perhaps be equated with neutrality. A preference not to be forced to choose between contending geopolitical foes; to be left alone. It certainly does not fit the description of countries such as Indonesia whose “*bebas dan aktif*” or independent and active foreign policy orientation eschews passive neutrality. Instead, here “independent” refers to a capacity for independent and sovereign decision-making,

specific to the issue at hand. “Active” suggests a readiness to weigh in on various issues and contrasts to a passive stance which neutrality suggest.

Being described as a middle power deserves more greater scrutiny.

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