

***Middle Powers in Asia Pacific Multilateralism: A Differential Framework.* By Sarah Teo. Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press, 2023. Hardcover: 203pp.**

Sarah Teo provides a valuable contribution to an underexamined and undertheorized area of International Relations: what are middle powers and what makes them successful or influential within multilateral institutions? She approaches this question by setting out an original “differentiation” framework that focuses on what makes middle powers distinct from other states in the international system as well as on the strategies they adopt to “maintain their relevance and importance in international politics” (p. 4). The case studies are Australia, Indonesia and South Korea and their respective roles within the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum and the East Asia Summit (EAS). For a definition, Teo contends that middle powers are states that “quantitatively rank below the major powers” but above other states, that identify and are regarded by others as middle powers and that employ strategies such as “investing in multilateralism” and relying on “soft power” to advance their goals (p. 29).

“Differentiation”, as a theoretical approach, tries to explain what makes middle powers “different” from other states by focusing on “the mechanisms and processes that make it possible for middle powers to employ certain behavioural strategies” (p. 5) within multilateral institutions. The existing international system is “differentiated” by the distinct capabilities of the states and the distinct roles they play. Within a “segmented”, “stratified” and “functionally differentiated” international system, middle powers are “enabled” by multilateral platforms to reinforce or transform their roles (p. 39). The book demonstrates, for instance, how Australia took a leading role in the formation of APEC precisely because it was not a great power. Indonesia used its middle power capabilities to ensure a prominent position for ASEAN within APEC so that the new organization did not overshadow the established one. South Korea, meanwhile, helped to facilitate APEC’s expansion to include China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. The EAS proceeded from ideas first advanced by South Korea, while Indonesia played a leading role in evolving it into a more inclusive body and Australia was instrumental in bringing the United States into the EAS to

help counterbalance China's growing regional multilateral presence (p. 119).

Teo notes similarities and differences between how the three middle powers approach key issues, which often reflect their own interests and perspectives, and they can be instrumental in bending the multilateral institutions towards their own concerns. For example, Australia's identity as a "Western country" helps to explain why it promotes the involvement of the United States in the region. Other states may support this, but for distinct reasons. Teo notes how material success and relative wealth, especially in the cases of Australia and South Korea, were instrumental in improving their "middle power" influence. However, the main impact of middle powers within multilateral institutions appears to be ideational. Indonesia, while an economically important state, was less developed in terms like per capita income during the periods examined and its influence was more explicitly about ideas and concepts. Indonesia also strongly equated its own interests with those of maintaining ASEAN's regional influence.

The book is well-written and presents comprehensive descriptions of the case studies. It also offers an interesting and functional theoretical framework through which to examine how middle powers exercise influence multilaterally. Indeed, its most relevant contribution is not the history it recounts but its practical insights into the operation of middle powers in the present and future, especially in the Indo-Pacific region where tensions are escalating between the United States and China, the world's two superpowers. Under these circumstances, the role of middle powers in the region may be enormously enhanced. After all, Teo's theoretical framework suggests that middle powers are motivated to resist the "stratification" of the international system and their less prominent roles within it by developing and enhancing multilateral responses.

So far, however, the actual situation in the Indo-Pacific appears to be at odds with this theory. Many of the regional multilateral institutions, which helped maintain peace and promote economic interaction over the past three decades, are increasingly under pressure to pick sides. The United States is creating numerous initiatives, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and AUKUS, that are designed to contain China. Rather than being cooperative regional multilateral institutions, they are military and political arrangements directed against a specific state. Australia's

participation in them suggests that its regional interests may be incongruent with those of some of the Indo-Pacific's other middle powers. In the case studies that Teo analyses, the actions of the middle powers are largely complementary and strengthen the emerging institutions. What happens to multilateral institutions when middle powers' goals are not complementary or even at odds? How does this affect the institution and the approach to multilateralism that, Teo asserts, is so valuable to middle powers? The differential approach can be further refined to consider these less cooperative, and even competitive, possibilities.

Middle powers in the region may, increasingly, find themselves at odds with each other as a "New Cold War" develops and ideational tensions are played out within multilateral institutions, complicating the fate of these institutions. Will middle powers rally to save them or will they participate in their decline towards becoming merely arenas of regional competition? *Middle Powers in Asia Pacific Multilateralism: A Differential Framework* may be particularly useful as a starting point for scholars who wish to examine and theorize the role of middle powers in an emerging regional landscape. The book's theoretical framework suggests that, amid a changing geopolitical landscape, middle powers should be more active in the Indo-Pacific than they are, but this could change over time. If it does not, the book's insights will need a second look.

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