

Middle Power Diplomacy in an Age of US-China Tensions

Over the past four years, while the Trump administration doubled down on its “America First” foreign policy and Sino-American tensions continued to sharpen, another trend has been equally pertinent: the growing relevance of middle power diplomacy. A loose collection of like-minded, mid-sized players who also are traditional US democratic allies—including Europe (i.e., Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and the EU itself), Canada, Japan, and Australia—have reinforced partnerships with one another and increasingly taken it upon themselves to press forward with multilateral solutions to various regional and global challenges in the absence of leadership from Washington. Underpinning their efforts is a shared concern about the unraveling of international order as the United States abdicated its traditional leadership role under President Trump and China’s assertiveness has grown, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the pandemic outbreak in 2020, as the Trump administration further withdrew Washington from multilateral frameworks and as US-China tensions continued to deteriorate, middle powers increasingly saw themselves as confronting an uncomfortable reality in which they could not really depend on either the United States or China to address pressing challenges like COVID-19 and climate change. Reluctant to pick sides in the increasingly zero-sum competition between Washington and Beijing, they therefore had a stronger rationale to band together more closely—though this is far from straightforward in practice. Whether teaming up on specific initiatives like an international vaccine

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Middle powers have sought to defend existing multilateral agreements and launch new ones

pledge drive, pushing for an inquiry into the World Health Organization's (WHO) handling of the initial outbreak, or leveraging multilateral bodies to coordinate an international public health response, middle powers have demonstrated a firm willingness to help fill some of the current global leadership vacuum during the pandemic. They have done so even as Washington and Beijing were both busy trading insults, blaming each other for the virus, and doubling down on economic decoupling.

Yet so far, these efforts have neither managed to remedy the world's looming G-Zero vacuum of global leadership,¹ nor funda-

mentally change the calculations of either Washington or Beijing. Hence, three relevant questions must be examined: can middle power diplomacy move beyond occasional joint statements and low-hanging diplomatic wins or band-aid solutions? Can escalating US-China tensions be channeled by middle powers into a more robust and sustained defense of effective multilateralism in a post-pandemic landscape? And how will the Biden administration's foreign policy agenda affect both the calculus of middle power capitals and the willingness of Washington to more actively engage in, and sometimes lead, these initiatives?

The Evolving Role of Middle Powers

Although the notion of middle powers has been around in both academic and foreign policy practitioner circles for decades, it is still a fuzzy concept. The term generally refers to non-great powers that can influence international affairs in specific instances, shaping their regional environment in significant ways, and resisting the demands of great powers.² Countries that have either identified themselves as middle powers or that have been referred to as such include Canada, Australia, South Korea, Japan, India, and European powers like the UK, Germany, and France. Other countries like Mexico, Indonesia, and/or Turkey are sometimes also mentioned in this context but are not the focus of this essay.³

Middle power diplomacy then refers to regional and global initiatives launched by middle powers without the assistance of great powers.⁴ Oft-cited early examples of middle power diplomacy are Canada's work with Norway to establish the Human Security Network two decades ago, an initiative that helped advance

the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, the International Criminal Court, and the concept of “Responsibility to Protect.”⁵

The debate around middle power diplomacy has evolved significantly since the early 2000s. Back then, the main question was how Washington’s allies in Europe and Asia should navigate US unipolarity by hedging against it after the 2003 Iraq War. More recently, with a fraying international order and worsening US-China competition during the Trump administration, middle power diplomacy took on a new meaning: shoring up the rules-based order and multilateralism independently of the United States and China.⁶

Middle power diplomacy has focused on shoring up the rules-based order and multilateralism

Though a diverse group, middle powers who are traditional US allies such as Canada, the EU, the UK, Japan, South Korea, and Australia all share a basic commitment to and preference for a rules-based order and multilateralism as the organizing principles of international affairs. The presence of strong international rules, norms, and institutions help provide international stability and practicability, ensure free and open global commerce, and protect smaller countries from being coerced by their bigger neighbors. This reality is precisely why most small and mid-sized powers in Europe and Asia fear a transition away from a rules-based order toward a more zero-sum, power-based one wherein strong authoritarian regimes like Russia and China can establish spheres of influence or violate international law with impunity.⁷

Middle Power Diplomacy in an Age of “America First”

Under former president Barack Obama’s administration, Washington and its traditional allies in Europe and Asia were broadly in sync over major multilateral initiatives like the Iran nuclear deal, the wider nuclear arms control agenda, the Paris climate accord, and the pursuit of major, new regional free trade agreements like the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). These areas of cooperation subsequently vanished, as President Trump unilaterally withdrew the United States from these and other international agreements and institutions.

Long-standing US allies were alarmed about Trump’s “America First” foreign policy, with its strong emphasis on sovereignty rather than multilateralism and on transactional relationships over strong alliances. As a result, they sought to hedge by increasing their own autonomy and diversifying their partnerships by investing

more in ties with one another. This approach was intended both to send a message to Washington and to try to uphold multilateralism at a time when the United States was at best skeptical and at times even hostile to the notion, while China actively sought to undermine it in many respects. Underpinning recent middle power initiatives are four main areas: a) uphold multilateralism, b) diversify security partnerships, c) manage US-China tensions, and d) respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Uphold Multilateralism

Trump's repeated assaults on multilateralism warranted new middle power initiatives to try to strengthen the fibers of a safety net for global cooperation and coordination on issues like trade, climate change, economics, and nonproliferation. For example, after the United States pulled out of the Paris climate accords, several middle powers sought to redouble their own climate commitments and strengthen cooperation among themselves to make up for the loss of US engagement. Similarly, France, Germany, the UK, and the EU sought to uphold the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear agreement with Iran after Trump's unilateral withdrawal and repeated efforts to undermine it. Meanwhile, after Trump pulled the United States out of the TPP, Japan quickly spearheaded an initiative to salvage the agreement with the remaining ten countries in the form of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), which was agreed upon in early 2018.

The Trump administration's economic nationalist agenda also served as an impetus for middle powers to defend the multilateral trading system. To shore up the World Trade Organization (WTO), which was under heavy pressure from both China and the United States,⁸ Canada promoted the so-called Ottawa Group with a small number of actors including Australia, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and the EU (but not the United States) to propose practical reform ideas.⁹ Since the pandemic, this group has expanded its work on WTO reforms in the areas of public health, transparency, and the digital realm.¹⁰ Moreover, in response to US efforts to block appointments of judges to the WTO appellate court, another group of countries including EU members, Japan, and Australia also sought to work around the United States by setting up a stop-gap dispute settlement mechanism in July 2020, which even managed to get the endorsement of China.¹¹

Outside of the WTO, growing trade ties between individual middle powers are also apparent. In particular, the EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement, which entered into force on February 1, 2019, created the world's largest free trade zone encompassing almost a third of global GDP. Two crucial drivers for completing these negotiations were Trump's unilateral tariffs against both the

EU and Japan, as well as his administration's withdrawal from the TTIP and TPP negotiations.¹² The EU has also stepped up its efforts to forge new bilateral and plurilateral trade agreements with other partners, completing trade deals with Canada, Mexico, and the Mercosur trade bloc in Latin America, Singapore, and Vietnam (possibly paving the way for an eventual EU-ASEAN bloc-to-bloc megadeal), and Australia and New Zealand since June 2018.

Other middle power diplomatic initiatives have attempted to forge more common approaches to emerging technology-related issues. For instance, France and Canada jointly initiated the Global Partnership for AI (artificial intelligence) during the 2019 G7 meeting in Biarritz to promote the responsible use of AI grounded in respect for human rights.¹³ Despite being the only G7 member not participating in the initiative, the United States eventually announced its support in May 2020.¹⁴ The partnership was formally launched on June 15, 2020 and also includes Australia, Canada, Mexico, and Singapore.¹⁵ Moreover, at the 2019 G20 meeting in Osaka, Japan launched the Free Trade and Data Free Flow with Trust initiative to promote global governance on cross-border data flows,¹⁶ a topic it has engaged on with the EU, among others.¹⁷ Finally, France has promoted the "Paris call" for global cooperation on cybersecurity, which has so far been signed by 78 countries (though not the United States or China) and roughly 650 companies.¹⁸

In addition to defending existing multilateral agreements and institutions, middle powers have also sought to launch new diplomatic initiatives. A notable such example is the Alliance for Multilateralism, launched jointly by France and Germany in April 2019 during the UN General Assembly as a call to form an effective rules-based multilateral order encompassing humanitarian concerns, cybersecurity, climate change, and other transnational issues.¹⁹ The alliance's most tangible impact so far is helping to establish an international legal convention to regulate the use of lethal autonomous weapons.²⁰ The grouping also promotes strengthening international humanitarian law, fighting impunity for human rights violators, and promoting global public health cooperation during the pandemic. Nearly 60 countries plus the EU are active in the format, which Germany and France interpret as a testament to their convening power and shared interests with other small and medium-sized states.²¹ However, the lack of participation from the United States, Russia, and China is notable. While not intended to be an anti-Trump alliance, the format was explicitly created to help make up for the lack of US international leadership at the time.²²

Diversify Security Partnerships

The risk of waning US security commitments to its allies under Trump amid growing security concerns has worried middle powers in Europe and Asia.

Some of them have responded by trying to balance encouraging US engagement through burden-sharing with gaining more self-sufficiency by diversifying their security relationships. US allies in Europe and Canada have stepped up their leadership efforts within NATO in recent years.²³ At the same time, security and defense cooperation outside of the NATO framework has accelerated both within the EU with initiatives like Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defense Fund, as well as between groups of individual European states like the French-led European Intervention Initiative, which is an informal club of the most “able and willing” European militaries. Not intended to serve as an alternative to NATO, these efforts are designed to cultivate stronger European strategic autonomy and reduce one-sided dependence on Washington.²⁴

In the Indo-Pacific, bilateral and trilateral ties among countries such as Australia, Japan, and India are also evolving independently of Washington,²⁵ prompting some observers to view middle powers as occupying an increasingly central role in the region’s evolving security architecture.²⁶ For instance, India and Australia in June 2020 upgraded their bilateral security partnership both in terms of high-level ministerial meetings and expanded naval cooperation,²⁷ Australia and Japan in November 2020 signed a reciprocal access agreement to allow troop visits in each other’s countries and conduct joint trainings and operations,²⁸ and India and Japan signed in September 2020 a military logistics agreement with one another and recently conducted joint naval exercises.²⁹

Trilateral cooperation between Australia, India, and Japan that dates back to 2015 is also receiving greater attention.³⁰ These growing regional ties are certainly not intended to replace the United States (in fact, the United States is mostly encouraging of them) nor to team up to contain China, but rather to supplement relations with Washington in order to uphold the rules-based order and promote a more multidimensional regional order in the Indo-Pacific less defined by US-China competition. They occur alongside growing bilateral and minilateral regional security cooperation with the United States in recent years, for instance as part of a growing Quadrilateral framework between the United States, Australia, India, and Japan.

In addition to such intraregional partnerships, there are also examples of burgeoning security relationships between like-minded European and Asian middle powers. The UK and France have stepped up their respective security roles in the Indo-Pacific. France has expanded its security ambitions in the region,³¹ including by upgrading its defense partnerships with Japan, Australia, and India;³² Macron has even touted a new Canberra-New Delhi-Paris axis on regional security issues in the Indo-Pacific.³³ The UK, too, has invested in building out its

strategic ties in the region post-Brexit, especially with Australia and Japan. Other European countries such as Germany and the Netherlands are also showing interest in upgrading their presence in the Indo-Pacific,³⁴ while the EU is also trying to bolster its own security and diplomatic role in Asia.³⁵

Manage US-China Tensions

Like-minded US democratic allies in Europe and Asia increasingly share similar concerns about China's rise and the export of its authoritarian governance and state capitalist economic model. Conversely, these countries have also been concerned about the rising US-China tensions in recent years and were not fully on board with the Trump administration's confrontational agenda toward Beijing and its emphasis on "decoupling" from China. In response, they have sought to engage both the United States and China where possible while simultaneously seeking to take new initiatives to deepen multilateral cooperation and jointly address challenges stemming from China's global rise.

Middle powers have not been fully on board with decoupling from China

For example, to provide an alternative to the Trump administration's efforts to undermine the WTO, the EU and Japan jointly engaged in a trilateral format with the Trump administration to address Chinese industrial subsidies that contravene WTO provisions. However, their approach clearly differed from the US one in that they sought to build coalitions of countries to fix problems in the WTO rather than to bully China or threaten to walk away unilaterally.³⁶

Another example is their approach to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): whereas the United States has developed a negative view of the BRI, Europe and Japan have taken a more pragmatic approach, seeking to shape global connectivity norms, provide alternative investments, and even work with China on a case-by-case basis on joint projects.³⁷ For instance, China's Pelješac bridge project in Croatia was supported by EU Cohesion Funds.

In September 2019, the EU and Japan (which is keen to have international partners back its vision for a set of global principles for infrastructure investments³⁸) also signed the world's first ever connectivity partnership as part of an effort to coordinate more on large-scale infrastructure investments to better compete with China's BRI in third countries.³⁹ Together with Australia, Japan has also worked with the United States on its Blue Dot Network, which provides principles for quality infrastructure investment.⁴⁰ The EU and ASEAN have also signed a joint statement to enhance cooperation on infrastructure connectivity.⁴¹

During the Trump administration, both the EU and Japan combined efforts to cooperate with the United States on addressing shared economic and security concerns stemming from China (such as on 5G security and screening of foreign investments) while engaging Beijing on trade. In December 2020, the EU reached agreement with China on a Comprehensive Agreement on Investments after seven years of negotiations, ignoring a request for consultations from the incoming Biden national security team.⁴² Japan, South Korea, and Australia, along with a number of other nations, also entered into Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) with China in November 2020.

Respond to the COVID-19 Pandemic

The track record of pandemic-era middle power diplomacy so far is noteworthy. Shortly after Trump's April 2020 threat to halt US funding to the WHO amid the ongoing pandemic, the EU initiated a call to action. In an act of global leadership that would have been virtually unthinkable a decade ago, the European Commission convened a pledging conference on May 4, 2020, raising 7.4 billion euros toward the development of a coronavirus vaccine.⁴³ The commission organized this event together with the UK, Canada, Japan, and others, but without the United States and with only very marginal Chinese involvement. Strikingly, both public and private healthcare-focused actors including the WHO and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation were involved as part of an innovative, multi-lateral approach. The commission hosted another pledging event to promote universal access to COVID-19 treatment on June 27, 2020 together with the international advocacy organization Global Citizen.⁴⁴ This event raised nearly 6.2 billion euros, out of which 4.9 billion came from the EU itself.⁴⁵ These initiatives stand out for their innovative diplomatic approaches and also reflect the European Commission's desire to be more "geopolitical."⁴⁶

Separately, the UK also hosted an international vaccine summit on June 4, 2020, that helped raise US\$8.8 billion toward Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance.⁴⁷

Middle powers
have helped ensure
a global response to
COVID

Germany and France have also announced increased support for the WHO, as have several other middle powers in response to the pandemic and the US decision to halt funding to the organization.⁴⁸ In November 2020, the EU also announced it would contribute an additional 100 million euros toward the COVAX Facility to secure access to the future COVID-19 vaccine in low-income countries, making the EU's total support half a billion euros.⁴⁹ The United States was one of the few countries not to join in the WHO-linked effort, which even

China eventually joined.⁵⁰ These various initiatives illustrate middle powers' commitment to help ensure a global response during the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, when both the United States and China abdicated from these responsibilities.

Another notable initiative is the Australian call for a global inquiry into the origins of the pandemic and China's handling of the initial coronavirus outbreak.⁵¹ The call was specifically designed to serve as an alternative to the inflammatory language from the Trump administration about the "Wuhan virus," and Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison played a crucial diplomatic role behind the scenes building support for the effort together with the EU.⁵² Though initially reluctant, the EU eventually threw its weight behind a modified version of the initiative calling for an independent investigation of the WHO's pandemic response.⁵³ Eventually adopted by the World Health Assembly on May 19, 2020 with 155 co-sponsors despite opposition from both the United States and China, the resolution was a clear testament to the efficacy of middle power diplomacy in quickly assembling a global coalition on a pressing issue amid US-China bickering.⁵⁴ In a separate but somewhat related effort, New Zealand also took a bold step in early May by voicing strong support for allowing Taiwan to join the WHO, despite strong Chinese opposition to such a move.⁵⁵

Middle powers have also lobbied for the international community to make better use of existing multilateral channels to coordinate the initial international pandemic response. French President Emmanuel Macron has been particularly active in promoting a stronger G7 and G20 role.⁵⁶ Working with Tunisia, France was also instrumental in proposing a symbolic resolution in the UN Security Council calling for a global ceasefire to existing conflicts during the pandemic, which was eventually passed on July 1, 2020 after months of deliberation.⁵⁷

Outside of these formal bodies, a group of 13 countries—including Canada, France, Germany, South Korea, and the UK—signed a joint declaration in the early stages of the pandemic in April 2020 calling for a coordinated global response as part of the Ministerial Coordination Group on COVID-19.⁵⁸ Another grouping called the Alliance for Multilateralism, led by Germany and France, issued a similar joint statement in the same month together with 22 other countries.⁵⁹ Some of the language contained in this joint statement, such as a reference to a coronavirus vaccine as a "global public good," eventually made its way into the resolution passed by the World Health Assembly. Going forward, the grouping plans to discuss cooperation on WHO reform, supply chain issues, and fair and just distribution of the vaccine, bringing together not just foreign ministers but also health ministers, economic ministers, and other relevant national officials.⁶⁰

Together, these various examples suggest a gravitational pull among middle powers to do more to collectively defend multilateral solutions during the coronavirus pandemic at a time when neither the United States nor China provided any such leadership. Moreover, while the United States continues to struggle with managing the virus at home, several countries in Europe and Asia—including Germany, South Korea, and New Zealand—have generally fared far better, giving them additional international credibility to lead during the global public health crisis.

A Verdict of Middle Power Diplomacy during Trump

The convergence of interests between like-minded democratic middle powers has underpinned their efforts to bolster multilateralism and take international responsibility often independently of the United States, particularly during the coronavirus pandemic and amid rising US-China tensions. Yet despite some meaningful achievements, the track record of middle power diplomacy is mixed, and any talk of a middle power moment is thus premature. Expectations for future middle power diplomacy should be kept modest unless these growing partnerships and networks can manage to overcome key challenges and obstacles.

Challenges to Middle Power Diplomacy

The first challenge is that, though middle powers generally share similar international outlooks, there are limits to their like-mindedness. Even among a group of democratic countries similarly inclined to multilateralism like Canada, Germany, France, Australia, Japan, and South Korea, crucial differences are apparent, for instance when it comes to how they view China. The recent hardening of European views on China might help narrow the gap with more hawkish countries like Australia.⁶¹ Climate change is another divisive issue. In particular, Australia's lack of commitment to the Paris agreement stands in sharp contrast to the high priority that Europeans are attaching to the issue.⁶² Weak bilateral relations or even tensions between individual middle states like Japan and South Korea—or colonial legacies such as between the UK and India—can also complicate interactions between such potential partners.

Second, middle power diplomacy is still mostly ad hoc and lacks regular discussion formats and coordination mechanisms. While loose issue-based coalitions allow for flexibility, recent initiatives tend to be mostly reactive to international events. Existing platforms where middle powers can pursue multilateral coordination, such as the G7, exclude key players like Australia, South Korea, and India—Japan has even suggested it would oppose formally bringing South Korea into the G7 following a British proposal to establish a D10 format.⁶³

Rather than taking a small-tent approach, middle powers should actively reach out more to regional swing states such as Indonesia, Mexico, and Brazil and democratic members of the G77 to form agile and nimble issue-specific coalitions with other states and nonstate partners. The nascent Alliance for Multilateralism has potential, but it is still largely driven by Berlin and Paris with only lukewarm interest from others. In the absence of more formal working methods and regular convening formats (including between working-level officials and policy planners), middle power diplomacy will remain mostly impromptu and reactive.

Third, domestic politics can put a damper on middle powers' interest in playing or ability to play the role of influential norm entrepreneurs on the international stage. For example, countries like Italy and Australia have both faced short-lived government coalitions and domestic political turbulence in recent years. And the coronavirus pandemic threatens to make countries more inward-oriented or distracted. To the extent that the pandemic also involves a prolonged economic recession or triggers a rise in nationalism and protectionism, the leadership potential of these middle powers could further erode.

Finally, while the rise in unrestrained great power rivalry has served as a rallying cry for middle power action, it risks making dealings between countries more transactional and less norms-based. This mentality could reduce the space for like-minded middle powers to effectively pursue diplomatic initiatives with other global partners if not handled deftly.

Overcoming the Challenges

As seen during the pandemic, the notion that middle powers can somehow fill the US-China leadership void is still fairly remote, especially if the United States seeks to directly undermine middle power efforts. In response, middle powers must continue to innovate, promoting creative niche diplomatic approaches. The inclusion of nongovernmental and private sector actors should be actively encouraged. The EU's global vaccine conference was a particularly good example of this type of cooperation. Middle powers should seek to further build on their already successful response to the coronavirus pandemic by stepping up additional efforts to lead on global public health.⁶⁴ Their relative success with handling the coronavirus pandemic at home can also serve as a model for others and provide additional international legitimacy at a time when the United States is struggling to handle its own domestic outbreak.

To be successful more generally, however, middle power diplomacy must evolve from rhetoric to action. Besides run-of-the-mill diplomatic statements, the best way to demonstrate the benefits of multilateral cooperation is by producing tangible results, not just abstract values. Middle powers must be ready to adopt more transactional approaches when pursuing cooperation with other

potential global partners, lest their influence in a more competitive world should diminish. These approaches include teaming up on harder security issues such as joint maritime security and freedom of navigation efforts in the Indo-Pacific or supporting each another when one partner is being economically coerced by China.

To be more successful, middle power diplomacy must evolve from rhetoric to action

Similarly, rather than merely defending the status quo, middle powers must be clear-eyed about the need to address shortcomings and modernize the multilateral system to ensure greater transparency, accountability, and effectiveness of multilateral institutions. Recent European efforts to engage with the United States on reforming the WHO indicate a more realistic assessment of multilateralism than in the past.⁶⁵ By forcefully defending

rules-based multilateralism, middle powers have the potential to provide a diplomatic alternative to the US-China global competition paradigm that can also be attractive to other international players. But doing so requires building effective coalitions and reaching out to other partners on particular issues such as cybersecurity, standard-setting for emerging technologies like AI, human rights, supply chain diversification, climate change, and global health security. Therefore, middle powers must more *systematically* figure out what commonalities they actually share, explore where there are significant overlaps and key differences, and focus on how to better mobilize political, diplomatic, economic, and military tools toward shared strategic ends.⁶⁶ One tangible way to promote such discussions would be to have an annual policy planners' dialogue between multiple relevant capitals to share strategic outlooks, threat perceptions, and strategic approaches.

Promoting greater solidarity and unity between middle powers is necessary for diplomacy with China and is especially pertinent given Beijing's growing penchant for resorting to political pressure campaigns, intimidation, and threats of economic retaliation against certain positions taken by individual countries. For instance, China imprisoned two Canadian citizens,⁶⁷ made threats of economic retaliation against Australian beef and wine exporters for Canberra's WHO inquiry proposal,⁶⁸ and recently imposed high tariffs on Australian wine exports after a diplomatic row between the two countries,⁶⁹ all of which demanded a more forceful collective condemnation from other middle power partners. As China is becoming a shared challenge for all of them, doing more to strengthen collective resilience by heightening coordination on issues such as managing technology and supply chain risks, countering influence operations and foreign interference, and investing in competitive advantages is all the more

necessary. Canada's coalition of countries condemning "hostage diplomacy," which has attracted 59 signatories, is a very useful recent initiative in this regard.⁷⁰ Other opportunities to demonstrate middle power action when it comes to pushing back against China's growing authoritarian behavior could be to explore timely joint diplomatic initiatives such as supporting Taiwan's participation in the WHO or more forcefully defending the rights of Hong Kong citizens in a more coordinated way.

In short, the rising activism of middle powers during the pandemic is notable and likely to prove durable, but it will not translate into a meaningful middle power moment until fundamental challenges are effectively resolved or overcome, which seems unlikely in the near term.

Enter Biden: A Middle Power Base for US Foreign Policy?

Much of the future trajectory of middle power diplomacy ultimately depends on what approach the new US administration takes. Under the Biden administration, middle power cooperation could serve a very different purpose than it has during the past four years under Trump. Allies and partners expect that the Biden administration will seek to repair US alliances, return the country to the multilateral fold, and look for ways to avoid zero-sum competition with China. In this scenario, middle powers expect Washington to once again seek to be a reliable partner and strong leader on issues like climate change, nonproliferation, trade, and multilateral institutional reforms.

Much of the future of middle power diplomacy ultimately depends on the new US administration

Instead of forming a bloc to hedge against uncertain US leadership, the principal role of middle powers under the Biden administration would then instead be to try to serve as contingent of partnerships for the United States to diplomatically engage with, plug into, and lead. Biden's "free world" agenda and his vision for a global summit for democracies could be very relevant in this regard, as might the idea of establishing a D10 format for multilateral cooperation.⁷¹ Such coalitions of like-minded states, rather than broad-based multilateralism like the UN or the G20, could also help overcome the residual skepticism in the United States about slow and ineffective multilateralism that was evident even during the Obama years.

At the same time, given the lack of a clear landslide victory for Joe Biden in the November 2020 presidential election and the post-election instability, continued middle power ties may serve as a useful hedge should Trump's "America

First” US foreign policy return post-Biden. Moreover, trust in the United States is low after the turbulent Trump presidency, and middle power partners will remain watchful of possible US attempts to use them as mere instruments in its own competition against China, albeit with a more tactful diplomatic approach under the Biden administration. It is only natural, therefore, that some will seek to maintain a certain degree of independence from Washington. This is certainly the case for the EU, which has doubled down on “strategic autonomy” even after the presidential transition from Trump to Biden. European leaders such as Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Emmanuel Macron have both recently indicated skepticism about choosing sides with the United States against China.⁷² At the same time, some Asian middle power partners such as Australia and Japan might be more keen to join a US-led coalition to counter China, thus giving rise to new internal splits among those middle powers openly siding with the United States and those keeping a bit more distance.

Although the Biden administration should take the lead on trying to forge effective coalitions with like-minded global partners on certain key issues such as technology, supply chains, and reform of multilateral institutions,⁷³ this initiative does not necessarily mean that the United States always has to be in the driver’s seat or that US leadership alone is sufficient. In fact, taking a step back by letting others take the lead could actually serve the United States well if doing so were to encourage greater burden sharing among allies and make it easier for other global partners to sign onto diplomatic initiatives. This might also serve a domestic political purpose in the United States as the divided American electorate remains less enthusiastic about leading internationally if the burden falls on the United States primarily. However, rather than “leading from behind,” the true value of middle power diplomacy could therefore be as both an enabler of US global leadership and as an opportunity to bring together and leverage collective strengths in ways that previous administrations have somewhat underperformed on.

As opposed to leading from behind under Obama, or not leading at all under Trump, the Biden administration has the potential to lead *together* with America’s traditional allies and partners in Europe as well as Asia and serve as a catalyst for collective action with others. In other words, the United States may no longer be the unipolar power, but it could well be the essential power in a group of like-minded networked partners. The Biden administration should appreciate that its traditional allies and partners in Europe and Asia took on additional responsibilities for providing global public goods during the Trump era and should seek to tap into and lead these initiatives. But it should also be wary of promoting something akin to an anti-China alliance and must seek to understand middle powers’ legitimate concerns and be willing to accept a higher degree of autonomy.

While the return of a more multilateral US foreign policy under the Biden administration means that like-minded democratic middle power capitals in Europe and Asia will want to partner more with Washington and will be able to accomplish more, it should not preclude continued middle power cooperation without the United States. In fact, legitimate concerns about the Biden administration coercing a coalition of democracies require that middle power capitals figure out among themselves how to best jointly engage with Biden, recognizing that while US rallying power and leadership is necessary, it is hardly sufficient anymore.

Notes

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