

In Between Angry Rivals: 2017 Prospects for Middle Powers Amidst US-China Relations

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Abstract

Donald Trump's electoral victory was an unexpected outcome in the 2016 US Presidential Election, and one that now places many members of the international community in a state of uncertainty over the future of US foreign and security policy. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the context of the Asia Pacific region, which now faces the prospect of an increasingly assertive, nationalistic China. Given Trump's repeated statements indicating his willingness to confront China over issues such as unfair trading practices and the status of Taiwan, there are growing regional concerns that US-China relations under the Trump Administration will be characterized by tension and hostility. Such circumstances place middle powers in the Asia Pacific region in a particularly difficult quandary, given their preference for maintaining good relations with both superpowers whilst simultaneously avoiding conflict in the region and safeguarding their national security. The archetype middle powers in the Asia Pacific facing this conundrum are the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Singapore, and this study will examine the policy options that both countries, as middle powers in the Asia Pacific region, may attempt to exercise in seeking to balance their relations within the context of US-China superpower rivalry.

Keywords: Trump Administration, Sino-American relations, Republic of Korea, Singapore

Introduction

With the election of Donald J. Trump as the 45th President of the United States on the Republican Party ticket, the year 2017 is set to be characterized by uncertainty over the prospective direction of US foreign and security policy. Trump's upset electoral victory based on a populist platform has brought with it pressing questions as to the extent to which his campaign rhetoric accurately reflects his worldview. Whilst it is necessary to avoid superfluous extrapolation, some notion of Trump's prospective foreign policy may be gleaned from a review of the domestic constituents that brought Trump to power as well as his ongoing selection of likely cabinet officials. Based on these developments, it is probable that the new White House will be one characterized by a high level of unilateralism, particularly insofar as US security and diplomatic interests are concerned; a certain level of trade protectionism against China is also likely.

This analysis will be outlined in the following four sections. First, it will be necessary to consider the domestic factors that fueled Trump's electoral triumph, both during the Republican primaries as well as in the general election. By surveying the populist, anti-establishment forces that Trump had tapped into during his election campaign, it may be possible to envision the likely directions that we may expect from the White House from January 2017 onwards. At the same time, however, given the extent of the debates within the Republican Party concerning the policy priorities of the post-Obama White House, it will be necessary to consider the best as well as worst case scenarios for the East Asian region in the era of the Trump Administration. This will be followed by a second section that examines the prospective implications of a Trump administration for Sino-US relations. In so discussing the overall likely trajectory of US-China relations in the Trump White House, this author aims to set the stage for examining the challenges that will likely be faced by middle powers in the Asia Pacific region.¹ The third section of this article proceeds to examine the best and worst case scenarios that may characterize Sino-US relations under the Trump Administration. In light of this discussion of the likely direction of Trump's foreign and security policies, this paper will conclude by considering the geostrategic implications for South Korea and Singapore as middle powers in the East Asian region.

Understanding the Rise of Trump

By most accounts, Trump's electoral victory has been a shocking development. At no point in his life had Trump ever sought political office, military service, or even a career in academia or law – these occupational fields being the most common backgrounds of most previous US presidents. In addition, Trump's track record of sexist, bigoted and xenophobic statements would have been deeply disqualifying for a White House run in past presidential elections. Whilst much has been made of Hillary Clinton's supposed untrustworthiness, such a reputation for dishonesty pales in comparison to Trump's. Yet, although most national polls favoured Clinton's prospects for the White House, the election's disquieting outcome resulted

¹ Due to constraints of space, it will not be possible to examine the foreign and security policies of every middle power in the Asia Pacific region. Rather, this author will focus on the middle rank powers that face the difficulty of maintaining close security and economic relations with the United States, whilst simultaneously balancing between commercial relations with China without being entrapped by China's increasingly assertive foreign policy posture in the East and South China Seas. In this regard, the Republic of Korea and Singapore form the most fruitful studies. Both countries are located in the Pacific rim and thus have concerns over China's growing assertiveness; both maintain high levels of security cooperation with the US to hedge against the possibility of an aggressive China, and yet (unlike Japan) have expressed reservations about the possibility of alliance entanglement in the event of a Sino-US clash of arms.

from the Electoral College system's weighted structure. The latter gave increased influence to voters in rural states and the so-called 'Rust Belt' region (states with manufacturing sectors made redundant by the onset of economic globalization). Thus, although Clinton won the popular vote due to her being favoured by younger, educated urban elites in the east and west coasts of the nation, Trump won by 304 electoral votes to Clinton's 227. In the period following Trump's electoral win, analysts and commentators have identified two broadly overlapping, general factors that have led to this outcome. Both factors originate in rapid globalization and the extent to which it has impacted on world populations, and they are 1) the economic aspect of globalization, and 2) the socio-demographic impact on the cultural identity of working class White Americans in the Rust Belt.

Grassroots Opposition to Globalization

The twin trends of the ongoing Information Revolution and globalization have resulted in the fundamental, continuing transformation of the social and economic structure of the developed world. Whilst the emergence of a highly interconnected global economy has facilitated greater movement of commerce and people, the effects of globalization have also outpaced the ability of older, unskilled American workers to maintain job security. Trump's electoral victory was enabled by large sections of working class Americans from 'Rust Belt' states such as Pennsylvania and Michigan. Such communities were courted by Trump's claims that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) had contributed to the closure of smokestack industries. The Trump campaign was able to exploit such sentiment by portraying Hillary Clinton as a symbol of an out-of-touch establishment dominated by Wall Street billionaires and politicians with little concern for the woes of working-class Americans. More recently, in line with his administration's 'Pivot to Asia', outgoing President Barack Obama had previously announced his intention for the US to enter into the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP). Such a move would have facilitated a significantly increased volume of free trade within the Pacific Rim, whilst enabling the US to dominate and set the rules of regional commerce in the Asia Pacific region (Sen, 2016).

The expansion of free trade agreements in the globalized world is based on sound logic from the perspective of economists as well as diplomatic internationalists (both in the US and among US allies), people committed to ensuring Washington's continued global role in world affairs in view of China's growing assertiveness. Similarly, the Obama Administration's commitment to developing renewable energy had the potential to highlight the US role as a world leader in economic innovation. Yet, from the perspective of working class communities long dependent on smokestack industries, the onset of globalization presents an existential challenge to an existing way of life, a challenge that such communities are ill-prepared to handle. Fanciful language concerning environment-friendly policies and free trade are of little comfort when unskilled workers face the prospect of job redundancy. It is thus hardly surprising that communities that had previously been Democratic strongholds voted for Trump as a rejection of the job insecurity that Clinton's policies were believed to represent (Chen, 2016).

Ethnic Identity Politics

Globalization has also resulted in an increased flow of human beings across borders, and this, too, has given sections of American society – again, concentrated in less-educated, working class communities in the 'Rust Belt' and mid-West – the impression that an existing way of life is facing an existential threat. Such communities are largely dominated by Caucasian

populations with little past history of interaction with communities from different cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds.

Whilst cultural, ethnic and religious homogeneity has insulated such communities in the past, they now face increasing challenges due to a culture shock resulting from the increased flow of peoples across borders. This has been further exacerbated by the vastly increased, uninterrupted availability of information on the internet, one which Trump was able to exploit by presenting a distorted image of the demographic future facing the United States. Particularly salient has been the extent to which the global news cycle of the past year and a half has been dominated by increasingly high-profile lone wolf terrorist actions instigated by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). This has convinced more than a few segments of American society that the country faces an existential security threat posed by the increased movement of people that the process of globalization has fostered. The result is that many such communities fear that the existing socio-demographic order they have been used to is now threatened by a more multi-cultural, ethnically and religiously pluralistic society.

Here again, the extent to which the Trump campaign has been able to peddle falsehoods and conspiracy theories is epitomized by the electoral divide between the Democratic and Republican camps. The urban strongholds of the West and East coasts, dominated by well-educated liberals, saw through the falsehoods peddled by the Trump campaign, whereas such falsehoods were taken as gospel in the rural Midwest and Rust Belt states. Such a phenomenon is all the more apparent given that not one major newspaper endorsed the Trump campaign – a situation which would have doomed most Presidential candidates in past election cycles. Whilst the mainstream media's repeated condemnations of Trump doubtless fed the numerous polls that predicted a Clinton win, it is apparent that a significant segment of the working-class population that voted for Trump chose to do so based on their reading of dubious news sources and conspiracy theories espoused by such controversial entities as the far-right Breitbart News.

At present, it may be possible to break down Trump's prospective cabinet into four distinct groups based on their ideological underpinnings, which this author has labelled as:

- i) 'Heartlanders', based on their ability to connect (politically, as well as in jobs creation) with the domestic constituents behind Trump's victory. This group includes Trump himself, and is further reflected in the nomination of Breitbart CEO Stephen Bannon as Trump's White House Counselor and Myron Ebell as Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency. Such a cabinet composition is largely concerned with connecting with a conservative domestic base, whilst having little long-term strategic vision for the increasingly urbanized, multi-cultural demographic makeup of the United States. Taken to an extreme, it is possible that such perspectives may advocate a return to the kind of isolationism adopted by the US during the 1920s and 1930s.
- ii) 'Security hawks', based on their militaristic perspective on national security. This group includes the nomination of General Michael Flynn as National Security Advisor (NSA), and General James Mattis as Secretary of Defense.
- iii) 'Trade Protectionists', based on a willingness to take a more assertive stance against unfair Chinese trade practices such as currency manipulation. This group includes the nomination of Peter Navarro to lead the newly created White House National Trade Council (*BBC*, 2016).

- iv) ‘Bridge-builders’, based on their position of political moderation and willingness to mend fences, both within Washington and with the international community. This group includes the nomination of Reince Priebus as White House Chief of Staff and Nikki Haley as Ambassador to the United Nations.

While it remains premature definitively to identify the policy directions that Trump’s White House will take, it may be possible to identify a number of cornerstone assumptions that would likely steer the Administration’s policies along definable trajectories:

Assumption 1: Trump’s Presumed Military Priorities

Based on a track record of aggressive statements targeted at ISIS and the appointment of the hawkish Flynn, it is likely that Trump will escalate US military involvement in the Middle East.

Assumption 2: Trump and US Alliance Relations

During the campaign trail, Trump made numerous statements accusing US allies in Asia and Europe of free-riding on the US security commitment. Particular ire was directed at Japan and South Korea over their supposed undercutting of US jobs through lower labor costs that, in Trump’s words, had come at the expense of US workers.

Assumption 3: Trump as a Foreign Policy Novice

During the election campaign itself, Trump’s statements pointed to a startling lack of understanding of world affairs, as reflected in his confusing September 2016 media statement supporting nuclear proliferation among US allies as a means of reducing the global US security burden (Windrem and Arkin, 2016). In the aftermath of the 2016 election, Trump has gone on to further demonstrate his foreign policy inexperience, speaking in gushing terms of congratulatory phone calls from the leaders of Pakistan and Taiwan. Such an action was particularly reckless, given both countries’ strained relations with emerging superpowers, India and China, respectively (Landler, 2016). It is apparent that Trump has no understanding of the fact that the direction of White House foreign policy has a significant impact on how US rivals as well as allies (along with middle ranking powers in the world) view their own relations with Washington.

Likely Developments in Sino-US Relations

The period following Trump’s electoral victory does not bode well for Sino-US relations. On 2 December 2016, Trump accepted a congratulatory phone call from President Tsai Ing-Wen of Taiwan, thus upending the longstanding ‘One China’ policy that has formed the bedrock of Sino-US relations since the normalization of Washington-Beijing ties in 1979. China has long regarded Taiwan as a breakaway province, and regards any challenge to its territorial integrity as anathema to Chinese interests; it should be remembered that China undertook large-scale military amphibious military exercises in the Taiwan Strait in 1995–96 as a signal of Beijing’s willingness to launch an invasion to prevent the island’s independence (Bader, 2016).

While the media initially cast Trump’s acceptance of Tsai’s call as the action of a political novice, further news suggests that Trump’s action was deliberate and had been thought out in advance; it has been reported that 1996 Republican Presidential candidate Bob Dole (a Trump supporter) had been involved in lobbying the Trump campaign to strengthen US ties with Taiwan (Davis and Lipton, 2016). In light of Trump’s concurrent bones of contention

with the People's Republic of China (PRC) over accusations of Chinese currency manipulation and unfair trade protectionism at the expense of American workers, it is possible that Trump intends to use Taiwan's status as a bargaining chip against Beijing. Such a backdrop of Sino-US tensions explains China's seizure of a US Navy surveillance drone in the South China Sea on 15 December; a clear signal of Beijing's displeasure with Trump's apparent willingness to intrude on China's core interests.

This is not to say that Sino-US relations are on an unavoidable trajectory for conflict. While the PRC leadership has made clear its willingness to adopt a more assertive foreign policy posture in the western Pacific commensurate with its self-identification as an emerging superpower, Beijing is doubtless cognizant of the real damage to Chinese interests that will result from a clash of arms with the US. Aware of the danger of a nuclear exchange, China is not likely to seek a direct confrontation with the US, but rather undertake coercive actions against the littoral states of the South China Sea. Such actions will presumably center on a continuing pattern of land reclamation in disputed maritime features so as to present regional states with the *fait accompli* of Chinese sovereignty.

Best and Worst Case Scenarios for International Relations in East Asia

Set against this backdrop of growing Sino-US geostrategic rivalry, what scenarios might middle powers in the Asia Pacific region expect? Without the benefit of hindsight, the extent of the rhetorical flip-flopping that has characterized Trump's policy statements on the campaign trail leads to an entire range of possible policy platforms that may reflect his administration's policies. Rather than offer a singular interpretation of the likely foreign policy that will characterize the Trump Administration, the author instead proposes to consider the best and worst case scenarios that may characterize Sino-US relations in the era of the Trump Administration.

Best Case Scenario

While much has been said of the Trump's unpredictability, based on his many inconsistencies during the 2016 election campaign, it is possible that, with input from skilled policy advisors and technocrats, the Trump White House may shift towards a more pragmatic foreign and security policy in the Asia Pacific region. Set against the rise of China as an emerging superpower, this would likely take the form of a continuation, however adapted, of the Obama-initiated 'Pivot to Asia', with a continued emphasis on ensuring US primacy in the Western Pacific. The Obama Administration had supported the TPP as a means of ensuring US diplomatic dominance and leadership in the Asia Pacific region, and as effective counterweight against China's rising power. While Trump has denounced the TPP as a threat to the job security of Americans, he is likely to endorse bilateral Free Trade Agreements that grant favourable terms to the US export market. Furthermore, recognizing the importance of regional alliances in the Asia Pacific, the best-case scenario envisages continued affirmation of US cooperative security arrangements with Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK), as well as continued security cooperation with Singapore.² Given the likely strains on the US military arising from its concurrent operations in the Middle East and a tight defence

² Japan, the ROK and Australia are longstanding US allies. Although Thailand and the Philippines are also treaty allies with the US, the current state of uncertainty in both countries complicates attempts to provide a clear overview of their relations with the US for the foreseeable future. Although Singapore is not formally an ally of the United States, the city-state undertakes a high level of security cooperation with the US, and as such can upgrade its relations with Washington to an alliance if it so chooses.

budget, however, it is likely that Trump will, like the Nixon Doctrine of 1969, call on regional US allies to take on a higher share of the burden for their own defence.

Worst Case Scenario

At the same time, a ‘worst case scenario’ can also be foreseen for the Trump Administration. If Trump’s campaign speeches are to be taken at face value, it is possible that his administration’s escalation in military operations against ISIS may entail a shift in US attention from East Asia to the Middle East at a time of regional unease over China’s geostrategic ambitions. Such an outcome would also be consistent with Trump’s controversial statements calling for the downgrading of US security commitments to regional allies such as the ROK and Japan. More ominously, Trump had indicated that the aforementioned US client-states should develop independent nuclear arsenals, rather than continue to free-ride on the US security commitment (Gerzhoy and Miller, 2016). Such a situation may have the effect of dividing the Asian Pacific into regional spheres of influence, leaving a power vacuum in Southeast as well as in Northeast Asia; this could present Beijing with a geostrategic opportunity to position itself as the preeminent power in the Asia Pacific region.

Implications for Middle Powers in East Asia

Faced with such geostrategic challenges, it will be necessary for middle powers in the Asia Pacific region to maintain a nuanced balance between the application of hard power and soft power axioms. The notion that power has hard as well as soft forms was first explored by Joseph Nye, who defined hard power as the ability of states to utilize such material indices of power such as military strength and economic clout in order to achieve national objectives on the world stage. This stands in contrast with the notion of soft power, which Nye defined as the ability of states to achieve a disproportionate level of influence through skilled diplomacy and the capacity to shape the choices of other states; they effectively project themselves as regional leaders by establishing paradigms for norms of conduct in international relations. This distinction is important given that, whilst hard power remains the domain of the superpowers in international relations, soft power is an instrument of national strength that can also be utilized by middle ranking powers in international relations. Amidst the prospect of uncertainty over the directions of US-China relations under the incoming Trump White House, it may be argued that the present moment is an opportunity for middle powers in the Asia Pacific to utilize a combination of hard as well as soft power in promoting regional stability as a hedge against superpower rivalry.

The Republic of Korea

With the success of the ROK’s economy, its democratic transition from military rule in 1987 and high profile symbolic successes such as its hosting of the 1988 Summer Olympics, the ROK has come to recognize its status as a middle power in the Asia Pacific region. At the same time, however, the ROK’s efforts to promote itself as a middle power have been constrained by its dependence on the US security alliance in countering the North Korean threat, as well as Seoul’s recognition that Chinese goodwill is necessary if there is to be any unification with North Korea. Since taking office, ROK President Park Geun Hye has initiated and promoted the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI). Park’s inspiration was Finland’s promotion of the Helsinki Accords in seeking to prevent the US-Soviet Cold War from escalating. More recently, however, the ROK angered China by agreeing to the US deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD)

system to the Korean Peninsula in response to North Korea's pattern of missile and nuclear tests. Although the ROK justified the THAAD deployment as a defensive measure against North Korea, Beijing is aware that THAAD assets based in the ROK can also be used to protect key military bases in Northeast Asia that the US would utilize in order to deploy air and naval reinforcements to the western Pacific in the event of a crisis in the Taiwan Strait.

Set against this context, Trump's electoral victory is a matter of concern for the ROK's ambitions as a middle power. At the time of writing, President Park Geun Hye has been impeached, following revelations that she had granted a shaman and confidante, Choi Soon-Sil, unprecedented access to state secrets, as well as influencing the prestigious Ewha Women's University into accepting Choi's daughter's enrollment, despite lacking the necessary academic qualifications. Such developments pose a worrying scenario for the ROK's middle power aspirations. Apart from the damage to the reputation and credibility of the ROK Government, Park's successor will likely face a post-Obama White House that calls on US allies to shoulder more of their own defence burden. Although the ROK fields a considerable military force, it is still dependent on the US for satellite-based intelligence gathering as well as for acquiring conventional armaments. Given Trump's repeated accusations of Japan and ROK as free-riding on the US security commitments whilst allegedly undercutting US manufacturers in the global export market, the ROK greatly fears the possibility of a Trump White House that downgrades the US security commitment. Moreover, whilst the ROK is, at present, reluctant to develop an independent nuclear arsenal to defend itself against North Korea for fear of sparking off a regional nuclear arms race, the prospect of US alliance abandonment is almost certain to shift public as well as official sentiment in favour of a South Korean nuclear weapons program – it should be noted that, during the 1970s, ROK President Park Chung Hee responded to the US downsizing of its military presence in Korea by seeking to pursue an independent nuclear weapons program.

Singapore

Singapore's vision of itself as a middle power has been marked by efforts to strike a balance between the scenario of being entangled in unnecessary confrontation with China on the one hand, and of a return to US isolationism on the other. Particularly during the Cold War and into the 1990s, Singapore had promoted itself as a facilitator of strategic dialogue between the US and China. In coping with these challenges, Singapore had focused on underscoring the mutual interests that both the US and China have in maintaining peace and security in the Asia Pacific region. This involved the city-state's promotion of itself as a neutral diplomatic hub of value to both the US and China. Moreover, Singapore has led the way in promoting diplomatic and security relations between ASEAN members and other key states in the Asia Pacific region through regional institutionalism, particularly through the Singaporean Government's promotion of the Shangri-La Dialogue.

At the same time, however, and over the last two years, the Singapore Government miscalculated in assuming that Hillary Clinton would win the 2016 Presidential Election. Between 2015-16, and in response to China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea, Singapore moved forward in increasing the extent of its security cooperation with the US. This began with the signing of an Enhanced Defense Cooperation in 2015 that, while envisaging collaboration on issues such as cybersecurity, also granted the US Navy increased access to Singaporean air and naval bases for the purpose of undertaking Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea. This same period saw Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong visit Washington DC (in August 2016) to drum up support

for the US ratification of the TPP.³ Such a course of action clearly reflected Singapore's departure from its previous posture of non-alignment between Washington and Beijing towards alignment with the US. Predictably, the visit enraged Chinese public opinion.

In charting a course of policy that was based on the assumption that the post-Obama White House would remain committed to an internationalist foreign policy, Singapore presupposed that the foreign policy of the post-Obama White House would be characterized by a continuation of Washington's established track record, that is to say, managing the balance between deterrence of China's provocative behavior on the one hand, and provoking Beijing into unnecessary conflict on the other. Instead, by dismissing the possibility of Trump's electoral win, Singapore has found itself boxed in by a particularly unfavorable scenario. In November 2016, angered by Singapore's alignment with the US, Beijing seized a number of Singapore Army Terrex Infantry Fighting Vehicles in Hong Kong that were *en route* to Taiwan for a military exercise in a clear signal of the PRC's displeasure (Hunt, 2016). At the same time, given Trump's confrontational style and apparent willingness to align the US closer to Taiwan, Singapore now has to contend with the possibility of being dragged into a Sino-US conflict not of its own choosing.

The Way Forward for East Asian Middle Powers

In coping with the challenge of navigating international relations amidst the growing US-China rivalry, it will be necessary for middle powers such as the ROK and Singapore to learn from the mistakes of the past two years and to return to a deft balance between diplomatic soft power and military hard power. Middle powers in the Asia Pacific region are in a position to leverage their reputation for credible diplomatic even-handedness so as to enable them to function as mediators between the great powers and thus avert the prospect of a great power clash of interests. Such an exercise of influence would be most effectively exercised through international institutions and regional forums such as NAPCI, the ASEAN Regional Forum, APEC and the Shangri La Dialogue. Through a consistent record of good governance, middle power activism and diplomatic trustworthiness, it may be possible for middle powers to promote shared norms of conduct. In this sense, it will be necessary for the post-Park Geun Hye Seoul to press ahead with the NAPCI in underlining the interests that both the US and China have in avoiding a conflict in the Asia Pacific region. In a similar light, Singapore faces an uphill task in mending its relations with the PRC. Given that such forums as the Shangri La Dialogue and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting have a deck of cards stacked against Chinese interests, such forums are unlikely to prove workable for the city-state to seek a rapprochement with Beijing. Rather, it will be necessary for Singapore to focus its diplomatic efforts on Chinese economic interests, particularly on the fact that the maritime lines of communication on which the PRC depends for its continued prosperity run through Singapore's territorial waters; such an approach calls attention to the shared interests of all parties in avoiding conflict.

Nevertheless, it will be necessary for the ROK and Singapore to combine this exercise in diplomatic soft power with concurrent efforts to increase security cooperation, not only with the US, but also with other middle powers. Such a posture would enable middle powers to strengthen their own defence posture while reducing their dependence on the US, lowering as well the likelihood of alliance entanglement in the event of a US-China clash of arms. Increased security cooperation between middle powers in the Asia Pacific may take the form

³ Singapore, along with Brunei, New Zealand and Chile, was one of the founding members of the trade pact.

of increasing aggregate military strength as well as of geostrategic networking to counter China's military preponderance. Although none of the middle powers in the Asia Pacific has the strength to face off against China directly, regional pooling of military and diplomatic resources would enable the middle powers of the Asia Pacific region to make clear to Beijing that the prospective costs to Chinese interests would be considerable should its rise as a superpower be marked by aggressive nationalism at the expense of its neighbours. Further afield, increased security cooperation may involve collaboration in the research, design and production of high-end weapons platforms such as submarines, stealth warships and fighter aircraft.

Conclusion

The increasing research and design costs of such weaponry – key weapons in a geostrategic arena that is set to see increasing Chinese assertiveness – have made it difficult for most middle powers to develop these military capabilities indigenously. It is possible for middle powers in the Asia Pacific region to take a page from European collaboration that enabled the success of the Eurofighter project. Through the sharing of research and design costs and investments, it may be possible for middle powers in the Asia Pacific similarly to achieve economies of scale, or even profit, whilst devising and generating such expensive weapons platforms as are necessary for national security. Herein, the successful forays of Japan, the Republic of Korea, Australia and Singapore in undertaking various indigenous weapons platforms may function as a starting point for successful collaboration and cooperation between middle powers in the Asia Pacific region. These various middle powers have common concerns in fearing a future scenario characterised by US recklessness or neo-isolationism taking place concurrently with the growth of China's geostrategic footprint in the East Asian region. In view of the circumstances, increased levels of security cooperation among middle powers in East Asia will offer a certain level of mutual security assurance; such safeguards are especially important in an era of growing regional uncertainty regarding the future direction of US-China relations.

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