



## **NEO-MIDDLE POWER DIPLOMACY IN THE AGE OF POWER TRANSITION**

**Date:** August 24th, 2023

*Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented by the speaker and does not exclusively represent the views of the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.*

### **KEY EVENTS**

On April 24, 2023, the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies Vancouver hosted its monthly Digital Roundtable with Dr. Stephen Nagy, Professor of Politics and International Relations at the International Christian University of Tokyo, who spoke on Canada's middle power diplomacy in the modern era of strategic competition between international powers. Dr. Nagy defined what it means to be a middle power, neo-middle power diplomacy in theory and practice, Canada's role in international relations, and provided policy suggestions.

### **NATURE OF DISCUSSION**

Dr. Nagy's presentation sought to analyse the importance of great power rivalry in relation to Indo-Pacific development, the resulting impact on middle powers, and extended a focus on institutionalisation of middle power diplomacy. The presentation addressed China's and the United States' roles and relationship as great powers as well as the vulnerability of middle powers within a power transition. Canada's position as a middle power and specific areas for policy revision, such as the need to promote domestic interests within policymaking, were highlighted as necessary to adapt to changing dynamics through neo middle power diplomacy. A multi-spectrum approach that incorporates multiple areas of cooperation may be utilised as a form of security and to act in citizens' best interests.

### **BACKGROUND**

The presentation primarily sought to question the role of middle powers within the great power rivalry between China and the U.S, the evolution of middle power diplomacy, and the institutionalization of middle power diplomacy. Dr. Nagy began by defining critical areas of concern within neo-middle power diplomacy, including the rise of China and its implications on regional security structures, the growth of Sino-U.S. strategic competition, the implications of U.S presence and leadership in the region, and the vulnerability of middle powers in various areas of diplomacy. He additionally

defined features of a middle-power state with reference to the Indo-Pacific region and its development, stating that middle power states are self-defined and comprise functions, behaviours and hierarchy.

Secondly, Dr. Nagy closely examined the effects of strategic competition between China and the U.S and the resulting implications for middle powers, who resultantly witnessed an evolution in neo-middle power diplomacy. Viewed through a geopolitical lens, the implications of the prominent leadership exerted by the U.S raises concerns on the spillover effects experienced by middle powers and seen within neo-middle power diplomacy.

Next, Dr. Nagy described neo-middle power diplomacy in theory, stating that they typically comprise a niche diplomacy and as of recently, a movement beyond multilateral organizations as a new area of policy focus. Dr. Nagy additionally identified key areas of neo-middle power diplomacy in practice as being maritime security, economic cooperation, digital economy, and infrastructure and connectivity, each encompassing a distinct set of challenges, implications, and solutions. Each of these sectors comprise specific challenges, implications, and proposed solutions as to avoid destabilizing behaviour in the global arena. Dr. Nagy described the vulnerability of middle powers in these regards, forecasting risks such as barriers to meaningful institution building, a dilution of material and diplomatic resources, and more. Thus, proactive foreign policy by middle powers that incorporate compatible actions across nations is necessary to shape regional order.

Dr. Nagy then described policy suggestions for middle powers, such as securing a trade-safety net agreement and focusing on multilateral cooperation both within and outside the Indo-Chinese region, based on a convergence of national interests.

Dr. Nagy concluded by summarizing the worsening geopolitical environment between the U.S. and China with relation to its effects on middle powers. He emphasized that shifting dynamics in neo-middle power diplomacy are transforming the practices of middle powers. Ultimately, the status and organization of neo-middle power diplomacy will depend on the nature of U.S. leadership regionally and globally. Canada specifically may redesign its middle-power diplomacy by incorporating an outcome-based approach to problem solving with a focus on citizens' wants and needs, as well as building resilience and establishing further dominance in the Indo-Pacific region. As a traditional middle power with notable economic cooperation with the US, Canada comprises a unique position and may be advised to move away from

a normative policy approach to prioritizing the production of public goods and the correlation between economic and national security.

### Question and Answer

*Some are saying we are in a “second cold war” between the US and China, how is “neo-middle power diplomacy” different from the approaches taken by the middle powers taken during the first cold war?*

Different middle powers see diplomacy in different ways and operate uniquely in their relation to the US or China, shared diplomatic priorities, and the like. He noted that it is more difficult for middle powers to shape China’s behaviour and send a strong message, given that competition can be harmful for friends and neighbours, so other tools of diplomacy must be used when engaging in security competition. Furthermore, US politics is highly divided, and this could impact their reliability as partners. As a middle power, Canada must work to influence the US and support its policies when positive, but also push back when they are not positive. Canada must demonstrate that it is a reliable and principled actor on the international stage

*How do we encourage multilateralism (or minilateralism) and diplomacy in an age of increasing nationalism and partisan divide in domestic politics?*

The importance of having strong working partnerships, noting that large multilateral organisations cannot be the answer to each objective. In some cases, small groupings of countries with targeted objectives can be highly effective and impactful.

*Does regionalism present a solution or a hindrance to collective security issues facing the international community?*

Economic integration doesn't deal with all security challenges, and that historical factors still play a significant role. Regionalism and economic integration is important but states need to invest in multi-spectrum approaches to build institutions in order to cooperate in the face of collective crises, for example pandemics.

*China is one of the few countries that allegedly have institutionalised and industrialised espionage, whether through individual operators and/or forced information extraction. Do you see a continuation of this behaviour? How do you see it evolving?*

This is a challenge, given the centrality of security to the China Communist Party in conjunction with competition with the US. Security and strength

through citizen mobilisation has come to the forefront, and this has made it difficult for a variety of views to develop in the population. In response, states need to develop systems that protect the most vulnerable members of society, including new immigrants, diaspora, and the elderly. There is an intense need to protect citizens from espionage, and this is an area middle powers must improve on and develop new ways to cooperate.

*What do you see being Canada's role within the shifts in great power dynamics? Is this an opportunity Canada should use to its favour to assert itself as a world leader?*

Canada has limits of power and needs to have an assessment of its credibility in the region and what it can provide. These issues of credibility have been raised, and allies in the region see Canada's role as inconsistent, with some partners not viewing Canada the same way that Canada sees itself on the world stage. There are positives, for example the Canadian training of Ukrainian soldiers and providing aid in the form of funds. Mr. Nagy suggested that Canada seek out areas where it can sustain engagement and provide long term help in order to build credibility, such as the role of Canada as energy and mineral power.

#### KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- As a middle power, Canada needs to transform to be pragmatic, realism-based, and regionally focused to have meaningful and sustainable policies promoting our national interests. It is necessary for Canada to implement an interest-based approach rather than a normative approach.
- Some challenges include China's destabilising behaviour in the South China Sea and East China Sea, as well as regional states wary of the securitization of Indo-pacific maritime cooperation as a distinct "anti-China" posturing.
- Canada needs to implement policy in a disciplined manner that distinguishes between domestic values and our international interests.
- Multiple areas of cooperation exist between middle powers to avoid destabilising behaviour in the global arena. These can include responses include multilateral, high-standard free trade agreements to diversify trade portfolios.
- A multi-spectrum approach that unities countries is needed to as a form of security/ to protect citizens.

### FURTHER READING

- Nagy, S.R. (2021). Canada Asia–Pacific Relations: Transforming into a Middle Power Indo-Pacific Stakeholder. In: Murray, R.W., Gecelovsky, P. (eds.) *The Palgrave Handbook of Canada in International Affairs*. Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-67770-1\\_29](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-67770-1_29)
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- Nagy, S.R. (2020). Middle Power alignment in the Indo-Pacific: Securing agency through Neo-middle Power Diplomacy. *East Asia Security Centre, 1*, pp.1-14. <https://easc.scholasticahq.com/article/14413-middle-power-alignment-in-the-indo-pacific-securing-agency-through-neo-middle-power-diplomacy>



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