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Title:

Middle Powers and Limited Differentiation: A Study of Australia, Malaysia and South Korea in APEC and EAS

Abstract:

The term “middle power” has often been used as a self-descriptor by states that possess a certain level of material capabilities and/or the ability to influence specific aspects of regional or international affairs. My project seeks to argue that there is also an underlying structural element to the concept of middle powers, and it is this aspect that allows middle powers to (re)produce themselves in the Asia Pacific. Drawing on differentiation theory, I contend that the differentiation mechanism constitutes the social structure in the Asia Pacific. When middle powers trigger this differentiation mechanism they undergo a process of “limited differentiation”, defined as the process that allows middle powers to emerge and contribute to the regional architecture. This process manifests itself at two levels. The first level is when medium-ranking states assume and project the middle power identity to distinguish themselves from the rest of the major and non-major powers, while the second level involves the seemingly contradictory behaviour of preserving major power dominance and promoting power diffusion in the regional architecture. To substantiate my argument, I examine the contributions and responses of Australia, South Korea and Malaysia in the formation of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum and the East Asia Summit (EAS).