

# Demi Julia Donninger

## „Japan, South Korea, and Shifting Power Positions in Southeast Asia“

### Topic and Research Question

The research question of this thesis is as follows: “Are Japan and South Korea pursuing a Middle Power position in Southeast Asia?”. This research question, and its concluding answer, is of relevance to a range of different actors. All these actors will be affected by the power positions that South Korea and Japan will take up in the near future, and therefore knowing whether they are pursuing to become middle powers is of great significance. These actors are first of all the regional states that are in “weaker power positions”, as they can benefit from having middle powers with similar interests by their sides. Secondly, it is relevant to regional organisations such as ASEAN to know which states will take up a middle power position in the region and in their organisation. Thirdly, it will be of great relevance to the two subjects, Japan and South Korea, as it gives more clarity on what their future role and regional influence is will most likely look like. Additionally, the comparative element in the conclusion of this work provides more insights in the manner in which the future positions of the states could impact their relationship in the future. Fourthly, it is not only of relevance to the mentioned states, but also to the overall global order, given that what happens to power relations on a regional level will also impact the global scope. Lastly, the answer to the research question will also be of value to the academic field of International Relations. It provides new insights in the relation between a state’s background, the contexts a state acts in, and the manner in which both factors influence the power pursuit of a state. From a theoretical perspective, this provides new contributions to the academic discussion, and can trigger follow-up research in the future.

### State of the Art

In 1971, Holbraad became the founding scholar of middle power theorisation, as he was the first in the field to go more in-depth on middle powers. He stated that they were unique in the way they use their position and resources to cooperate with other states in the system, and create a power balance to counter the great powers in the regional state system. At first, the realist scholars were the most dominant voices in defining middle power states, building on Holbraad’s definition. However, the liberalist interpretation of middle power states quickly gained more traction and took the overhand. Liberalist scholars such as Cooper (2011) and Howe and Park (2019) are three core academics defining the variables

that indicate whether a state is a middle power or not. These characteristics are an active search for stronger multilateral ties, a commitment to improving a region’s welfare and stability, and conducting niche diplomacy. In this regard, liberalist scholars such as Cooper and Howe and Park focus on the behaviour of states and national interests. Criticism on the liberalist interpretation followed, and targeted the element of subjectivity and inconsistency of said theorisation. Therefore, Jeong (2019) proposed a new “critical realist” approach to the middle power categorisation. This approach built on the liberalist theory, yet would avoid typical epistemic fallacies and circular reasoning and allow for more constructive research. Jeong proposed to focus not only on how a state behaves, but also on a state’s rhetoric and the manner in which a state leadership expresses itself in relation to its middle power aspirations. This leads to a combination between liberalist characteristics that focus on state actions, and the critical realist focus on state rhetoric. This manner of approaching middle power research and categorisation is a fresh, and improved manner to go about this research.

### Methodology and Approach

The criteria at the basis of the analytical framework are based on the characteristics brought forward by the liberalist approach to middle power categorisation, and the importance put on state rhetoric by the critical realist approach. The complementary approach of combining characteristics coined by both schools of thought will help overcoming potential fallacies, and broaden the scope to take in consideration both state rhetoric and state actions, instead of solely one of the two. The analytical criteria are the following: promotion of multilateralism, contribution to regional welfare and stability, niche diplomacy, and expressed bigger power aspirations. The first three will be analysed in the framework of both the state actions as well as state rhetoric. Niche diplomacy will only be applied to the state action analysis considering its practical nature. The expression of bigger power aspirations will only be analysed in the state rhetoric as it revolves around the state leadership expressing middle power related aspirations in speech. These criteria and their application will consider and compare middle power characteristics from both the rhetorical and the behavioural perspective. The final comparison between both nations will show if their preliminary seemingly similar approach and interests have also resulted similar (middle) power politics towards the region.

### Main Facts

Throughout the time period observed, the Japanese government has almost continuously put emphasis on the peaceful manner in which they wish to establish cooperation with the Southeast Asian region, referring to the “heart-to-heart” principle, and “heartfelt commitments to the fellow Asians”. The leadership repeatedly expressed how it encourages regional cooperation and harmony in a peaceful and manner. South Korea’s leadership mainly held security as motivation for multilateral cooperation. In this, there was no active search for multilateralism expressed in the state rhetoric. However, both nations presented an interest in regional affairs and improving Southeast Asian welfare and development in the state rhetoric. Both also showed rhetoric considering bigger power aspiration, yet this was only visible within a limited timeframe and not predominant. In the case of both nations, there has been active behaviour regarding the creation of closer relations with ASEAN, and improving the level of multilateralism in the region, plus their role in these organisations. Japan and South Korea have identified their own niche areas in which they exceed and have obtained a special position in said niche areas. For Japan, this is their exemplary maritime capabilities and role in maritime security of Southeast Asia. South Korea has found this niche in Green Growth and cyber security.

### Results

As shown in the final table on the right, South Korea and Japan portray similar characteristics in their state behaviour. The leaderships of both nations have, throughout the years, been active in their contribution to regional welfare and stability, as well as actively participating in niche diplomacy. In these criterion, the states are therefore *similar*. In relation to the promotion of multilateralism, only South Korea seems to have been truly active, whereas Japan has found to be much less involved in encouraging multilateralism. This leads to the conclusion that in this criterion the two states are *dissimilar*. Even though, the state rhetoric of both nations shows characteristics of middle power politics, neither of the states speaks out about having such aspirations in their state rhetoric. In this, they are *similar*. Both South Korea and Japan have shown to fulfil two out of the three “rhetoric criteria”, which implies that they are both active in middle power state rhetoric.

Additionally, South Korea has presented all three identified middle power characteristics in the nation’s

state actions. In the case of Japan, there has been no activity in regard to the promotion of multilateralism. In this, the nations are *dissimilar*. However, the country still presents two out of three characteristics in the state actions. It can therefore be concluded that both South Korea and Japan are active in middle power activities.

In conclusion, it can be said that South Korea and Japan both show middle power characteristics in the state actions as well as their state rhetoric throughout the time period observed. Overall, the nations have been found to be similar in their pursuit of a middle power position. This leads to the answer of the research question “Are Japan and South Korea pursuing a Middle Power position in Southeast Asia?”, which is yes, Japan and South Korea are pursuing a middle power position in Southeast Asia.

State Middle Power Rhetoric		Japan	South Korea	Comparison
Criterion 1	Promotion of Multilateralism	Yes	Yes	Dissimilar
Criterion 2	Contribution to Regional Welfare and Stability	Yes	Yes	Similar
Criterion 3	Expression of Bigger Power Aspirations	No	No	Similar
State Middle Power Actions				
Criterion 1	Promotion of Multilateralism	No	Yes	Dissimilar
Criterion 2	Contribution to Regional Welfare and Stability	Yes	Yes	Similar
Criterion 4	Niche Diplomacy	Yes	Yes	Similar
Conclusion	Pursuing a Middle Power Position?	Yes	Yes	Similar

### References

All references can be found in the full version of the MA thesis available at [< link yet to be created >](#)

### About the Author

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