

*Routledge Studies on the Asia-Pacific Region*

# **ASIA-PACIFIC SECONDARY STATES AS KINGMAKERS**

**ALIGNMENT ROLES IN THE CHINA-US  
STRATEGIC COMPETITION**

Richard J. Cook, Maximilian Ohle and Zhaoying Han



# Asia-Pacific Secondary States as Kingmakers

Focusing on the Asia-Pacific region, Cook, Ohle and Han investigate the escalating strategic competition between China and the US. They explore the dynamics of key regional secondary states caught in the middle, namely Japan, South Korea, the Philippines and Vietnam, emphasising their crucial role as potential kingmakers in the shifting balance of power.

China and the US are competing to win influence over these regional linchpins to advance their geopolitical ambitions and ultimately win the strategic competition. Elucidating a “power of the weak paradox”, this contribution examines the challenging choices faced by these secondary states as they navigate alignment pressures, which influence the trajectory of the great power strategic competition. Drawing upon a range of first-hand government sources and regional perspectives, the authors take the temperature of the China-US strategic competition, revealing the intricate influencing dynamics and perilous choices linchpins are being pushed to make that will determine the fate of the Asia-Pacific.

This is a timely resource for researchers, students, scholars and politicians navigating the complex realm of international relations by providing a profound exploration of power struggles, strategic choices and the often-overlooked role of secondary states.

**Richard J. Cook**, PhD, is an Associate Professor at the Department of International Relations, Zhou Enlai School of Government, Nankai University, China. His research interests include China-US Relations, International Relations of the Asia-Pacific, Hierarchy in International Relations and International Security.

**Maximilian Ohle** is a PhD Candidate at the Institute of Political Science, Eberhard Karls University of Tübingen, Germany. His research interests include China-Russia Relations, Russian Foreign Policy, Territorial Integrity and Secessionism in the post-Soviet Space, Hierarchy in International Relations and International Security in East Asia.

**Zhaoying Han**, PhD, is a Professor at the Department of International Relations, Zhou Enlai School of Government, Nankai University, China. His research interests include China-US Relations, Chinese Foreign Policy and International Relations Theory.

## **Routledge Studies on the Asia-Pacific Region**

### **Diversity and Inclusion in Japan**

Issues in Business and Higher Education

*Edited by Lailani Alcantara and Yoshiki Shinohara*

### **Pandemic, States and Societies in the Asia-Pacific, 2020-2021**

Responding to COVID

*Edited by Charles Hawksley and Nichole Georgeou*

### **Climate Change and Conflict in the Pacific**

Challenges and Responses

*Edited by Ria Shibata, Seforosa Carroll, and Volker Boege*

### **Japan's Rise as a Regional and Global Power, 2013-2023**

A Momentous Decade

*Edited by Gilbert Rozman and Brad Glosserman*

### **Philippines-Japan Relations in the Twenty-First Century**

Change and Direction

*Edited by Dennis D. Trinidad and Karl Ian Uy Cheng Chua*

### **Security Order and Strategic Alignment in Europe and the Asia-Pacific**

Times of Global Power Shifts

*Edited by Elena Atanassova-Cornelis, Yoichiro Sato and Tom Sauer*

### **Asia-Pacific Secondary States as Kingmakers**

Alignment Roles in the China-US Strategic Competition

*Richard J. Cook, Maximilian Ohle and Zhaoying Han*

# **Asia-Pacific Secondary States as Kingmakers**

Alignment Roles in the China-US  
Strategic Competition

**Richard J. Cook, Maximilian Ohle  
and Zhaoying Han**

First published 2025  
by Routledge  
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge  
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

© 2025 Richard J. Cook, Maximilian Ohle and Zhaoying Han

The right of Richard J. Cook, Maximilian Ohle and Zhaoying Han to be identified as authors of this work has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

*Trademark notice:* Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Cook, Richard J., Ph.D., author. | Ohle, Maximilian, author. | Han, Zhaoying, author.

Title: Asia Pacific secondary states as kingmakers : alignment roles in the China-US strategic competition / Richard J. Cook, Maximilian Ohle and Zhaoying Han.

Other titles: Alignment roles in the China-US strategic competition

Description: London ; New York, NY : Routledge, 2025. |

Series: Routledge studies on the Asia-Pacific Region |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024062268 (print) | LCCN 2024062269 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781032843056 (hbk) | ISBN 9781032843063 (pbk) |

ISBN 9781003512165 (ebk)

Subjects: LCSH: Geopolitics--Pacific Area. | United States--Foreign relations--Pacific Area. | Pacific Area--Foreign relations--United States. | Pacific Area--Foreign relations--China. | China--Foreign relations--Pacific Area. | United States--Foreign relations--China. | China--Foreign relations--United States.

Classification: LCC JZ1980 .C65 2025 (print) |

LCC JZ1980 (ebook) | DDC 327.51073--dc23/eng/20250226

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2024062268>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2024062269>

ISBN: 978-1-032-84305-6 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-84306-3 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-51216-5 (ebk)

DOI: [10.4324/9781003512165](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003512165)

Typeset in Times New Roman  
by KnowledgeWorks Global Ltd.

# Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>vi</i>
<i>Foreword</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>Abbreviations</i>	<i>ix</i>
1 Introduction	1
2 Status Quo of Instability, the China-US Strategic Competition and China's Challenge to the Status Quo	21
3 Geostrategic Linchpins and Kingmaking	54
4 Japan: Supplementing the Balance as Washington's Cornerstone	69
5 South Korea: Facing up to the Kingmaker's Role as Northeast Asia's Linchpin	88
6 The Philippines: Dodging the Kingmaker's Role as Southeast Asia's Oscillating Linchpin	112
7 Vietnam: Maintaining Space to Hedge and Resisting the Kingmaker's Role with Stopgaps	133
8 Conclusion	156
<i>Index</i>	<i>168</i>

# Figures

4.1	Japan's Imports and Exports with China and the US (OEC 2024)	81
5.1	South Korea's Imports and Exports with China and the US (OEC 2024)	91
6.1	The Philippines's Imports and Exports with China and the US (OEC 2024)	124
7.1	Vietnam's Imports and Exports with China and the US (OEC 2024)	149

# Foreword

We owe a great deal of gratitude to those who participated in and attended the International Studies Association 2024 Annual Conference, particularly those involved in Panel FA63: Rethinking the Great Power Rivalry: The Role of Regional Powers in US-China Relations. Here, special thanks go to Kari Roberts, Saira Bano, Alexander Korolev and Mary McCarthy. The panel provided an invaluable opportunity for contributors to the book *The Ascendancy of Regional Powers in Contemporary US-China Relations: Rethinking the Great Power Rivalry*, organised and edited by Kari Roberts and Saira Bano, to engage in rewarding academic discussions. Our contribution to this edited book inspired the idea to establish a research project on “Kingmakers”, which ultimately led to the creation of this present work. Additionally, we would like to thank those who participated in the Tianjin Forum 2023, held by Nankai University. Our panel, which included Robert O’Brien, Shaun Breslin, Liu Feng, Alexander Korolev and Zhang Falin, proved uniquely fruitful in polishing our initial ideas and focus for what would become the proposal for this work. We are especially grateful to Alexander Korolev, whose highly insightful discussions, unique suggestions and guidance have been instrumental in shaping our work. At this forum, we presented a paper that would eventually be published in the *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, which represented the next stage of the project on Kingmakers and also weighed into the writing of this book.

At our academic homes, the Department of International Relations at the Zhou Enlai School of Government, Nankai University (Richard J. Cook and Zhaoying Han) and the Eberhard Karls University of Tübingen (Maximilian Ohle), we have benefited tremendously from the support and collaboration of a dedicated group of hardworking and diligent scholars, whom we are proud to call friends and colleagues. We extend our sincere gratitude to Zhang Falin, Huang Haitao, Wang Cuiwen, Yang Na, Huang Zhaolong, Li Shengda, Wang Yaohui, Li Yuan, Liu Jin and Mateus Bilhar (Nankai University) and Thomas Diez, Andreas Hasenclever, Roman Krtsch, Zorana Radovanovic, Rüya Özkaya, Ümit Aras, Lea Augenstein, Cengiz Gunes, Mark Amaliya Anyorikeya, Rocio Bravo and Joann Picard (Eberhard Karls University of Tübingen). Their invaluable contributions to academic discussions, insightful queries, suggestions and unwavering support throughout the development of this book project have been instrumental. Additionally, we extend our heartfelt thanks to our students, whose enthusiasm and curiosity have been a

constant source of inspiration. As educators, we deeply value the engagement of young aspiring scholars in academic debate and discussion. Throughout the writing of this book, we frequently shared our process with our students, seeking their insights and perspectives on the topic. Their thoughtful contributions and questions have enriched our work and underscored the importance of fostering an environment where emerging scholars can actively participate in scholarly discourse.

We are also grateful to Professor Aki Lehtinen of the University of Helsinki for his valuable support throughout the development of this book. His assistance and input have been greatly appreciated. We are also heavily indebted to Professor Alaric Searle of the Faculty of Philosophy, Institute of History at the University of Potsdam for his ever-present advice and guidance on all things academic, including the production of this book. His insightful feedback, unwavering support and wealth of knowledge have been instrumental in shaping our work and ensuring its academic rigour. Additionally, we extend our heartfelt gratitude to Igor Sevenard for his invaluable feedback, which played a crucial role in refining and polishing this book. Also, we would like to thank Clarissa Lim and Khadijah Ebrahim, as well as the team of editors and administration staff of Routledge Taylor and Francis for their fantastic support throughout the process of planning, writing and assembling this book. It was truly a pleasant experience, thanks to their professionalism and top-tier work.

In the pages ahead, you will encounter the product of three minds brought together not only by professional collaboration but also by a shared commitment to inquiry and understanding. This book reflects the intersection of our diverse perspectives, collective expertise and countless hours of discussion and debate. It stands as a testament to the value of collaboration and the enduring bonds forged through years of close partnership.

Finally, we dedicate this book project to our families and our loved ones, Han Ningning 韩宁宁 (wife of Richard J. Cook), Ye Jilin 叶继琳 (wife of Maximilian Ohle) and Sun Yingli 孙英丽 (wife of Zhaoying Han), whose unwavering support and encouragement have been invaluable throughout this academic excursion. Their patience, understanding and belief in our work have made this endeavour possible.

# Abbreviations

<b>AIIB</b>	Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank
<b>AMTI</b>	Asian Maritime Transparency Initiative
<b>APEC</b>	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
<b>ARF</b>	ASEAN Regional Forum
<b>ASEAN</b>	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
<b>AUKUS</b>	Australia, United Kingdom, United States Indo-Pacific Trilateral Security Pact
<b>BRI</b>	Belt and Road Initiative
<b>BRICS</b>	Acronym for a grouping of emerging economies (originally Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, yet now includes Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia and the United Arab Emirates)
<b>CCP</b>	Chinese Communist Party (term often utilised by non-Chinese scholars)
<b>COC</b>	Code of Conduct
<b>COVID-19</b>	Coronavirus Disease 2019
<b>CPC</b>	Communist Party of China (official abbreviated term)
<b>DMZ</b>	Demilitarised Zone (Korean Peninsula)
<b>DOC-SCS</b>	Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea
<b>DPRK</b>	Democratic People’s Republic of Korea
<b>EAI</b>	East Asia Initiative (South Korea)
<b>EDCA</b>	Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement
<b>EEZ</b>	Exclusive Economic Zone
<b>FDI</b>	Foreign Direct Investment
<b>FOIP</b>	Free and Open Indo-Pacific
<b>FONOP</b>	Freedom of Navigation Operation
<b>GDP</b>	Gross Domestic Product
<b>IAEA</b>	International Atomic Energy Agency
<b>IR</b>	International Relations
<b>LIO</b>	Liberal International Order
<b>LGFV</b>	Local Government Financing Vehicle (China)
<b>MDT</b>	Mutual Defense Treaty
<b>MSR</b>	Maritime Silk Road
<b>NNP</b>	New Northern Policy (South Korea)

<b>NSP</b>	New Southern Policy (South Korea)
<b>PCA</b>	Permanent Court of Arbitration
<b>PLA</b>	People's Liberation Army (China)
<b>PLAN</b>	People's Liberation Army Navy (China)
<b>QUAD</b>	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue
<b>RIMPAC</b>	Rim of the Pacific (Biannual US-led Multinational Military Training Exercise)
<b>RIO</b>	Rules-Based International Order
<b>ROK</b>	Republic of Korea
<b>SCS</b>	South China Sea
<b>SIAF</b>	Solomon Islands International Assistance Force
<b>THAAD</b>	Terminal High Altitude Area Defense
<b>TPP</b>	Trans-Pacific Partnership
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNGA</b>	United Nations General Assembly
<b>UNSC</b>	United Nations Security Council
<b>US</b>	United States of America
<b>VFA</b>	Visiting Forces Agreement
<b>WMD</b>	Weapons of Mass Destruction
<b>WTO</b>	World Trade Organization

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction to the Topic and Research Question

The gauntlet has been thrown down. Competition is here. Engagement is over. China's rise is challenging the *Pax Americana*, and the US is mobilising to preserve its hegemony. Now that the dawn of the China-US great power competition has broken, we face the prospect of another tragedy of great power politics (National Security Strategy of the United States 2017; [US Department of State 2020](#); [The White House 2022a](#); [Buzan and Cox 2013](#); [Mearsheimer 2001, 2014](#); [Johnston 2019](#); [Liff and Ikenberry 2014](#); [Kissinger 2011](#)). At its crux, we have returned to a substratum of geopolitical competition and tension not seen since the onset of the Cold War. While the geopolitical dynamics of the competition retain central significance, they have been further magnified by rising Chinese nationalism, the return of the ideologues, Covid-19, decoupling/de-risking or economic securitisation, regional militarisation and wider instabilities triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The intensification and proliferation of distrust between Beijing and Washington have, therefore, set them on a collision course, ushering in a "status quo of instability" ([Cook et al. 2022](#)). United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has flagged concerns over this evolving clash, remarking "the great fracture: the world splitting into two, with the two largest economies on earth creating two separate and competing worlds" ([Guterres 2019](#)). While not necessarily in a new Cold War or Cold War II yet – we are in the early days of the competition and still in the descent – Beijing and Washington are certainly in the midst of a "Scold War" wherein the trajectory of China-US relations could bring on the triggering of a "Thucydides Trap" *ad nauseum*, sooner rather than later ([Cook et al. 2022](#); [Wang 2020](#); [Allison 2017](#)).

Nowhere is more critical to the China-US strategic competition than the Asia-Pacific region, as it is acknowledged as the "epicenter of twenty first century geopolitics" ([The White House 2022b](#)). As the primary arena for the competition, the Asia-Pacific possesses three fundamental powder kegs or geopolitical triggers for a crisis slide that could result in Beijing and Washington coming to blows, being the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan Strait and South China Sea (SCS) ([Cook et al. 2023](#): 91–92; [Goldstein 2013](#)). Each of these fraught contention points equally finds itself not merely at the epicentre of Northeast, East and Southeast Asia but

## 2 Asia-Pacific Secondary States as Kingmakers

rather on the geopolitical fault line between China and the US. Importantly, the region is also home to the largest sustained military build-up in history, with the “longest uninterrupted streak of military expenditure increases” with both China and the US as the hubs for combined-military exercises (Lopes da Silva, Tian, Béraud-Sudreau, Marksteiner and Liang 2022; Laksmana, Fraioli, Nouwens and Hackett 2024: 16). By and large, the region is home to the bulk of the global population and roughly 60 per cent of the world’s GDP with crucial global trade routes. A total of 25 per cent of all maritime trade passes through the Strait of Malacca, the region’s most significant maritime chokepoint. For many states in the region, China and the US are their largest trade and financing partners, pulling the region in opposite directions. Yet, the interplay between security and economics is more nuanced. As Feigenbaum and Manning put it:

Two Asias, wholly incompatible, have emerged in stark relief. There is “Economic Asia”, the Dr. Jekyll [...]. And then there is “Security Asia”, the veritable Mr. Hyde [...]. In the one domain, Asian economies have come in recent years to depend increasingly on China—and one another—for trade, investment, and markets [...] all major Asian states, though their economies are increasingly integrated within Asia, are tacking hard across the Pacific toward the United States for their security.

(Feigenbaum and Manning 2012)

It is a complex, sensitive, fluid and hierarchical region, with an overlap of security and economic relations beset by economic interdependence and a heightened security environment where the juxtaposition of these *throes* is found in the region’s secondary states (Foot and Goh 2018).<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the competition is assuming regional bipolar conditions, as China and the US are now balancing against one another, thus representing the source of system-level pressure (Zhao 2022).

The US has three broad aims: (1) to curb China’s economic and political influence in the Asia-Pacific, (2) to enlist Asia-Pacific states in a counter-balancing coalition to manage China’s rise and (3) to geopolitically contain China in order to win the great power competition. These goals would protect the US-led regional order (RIO), its regional leadership and ultimately its hegemony. China, by contrast, appears to have the goals of (1) expanding its economic and political influence in the Asia-Pacific, (2) thwarting a counter-balancing coalition and (3) precluding geopolitical containment in order to achieve national rejuvenation (*minzu fuxing*) and the Chinese Dream (*Zhongguo meng*), and thus position China as the principal great power in the region. As such, China needs to build good relations with its peripheral neighbours (Xie 2020; Callahan 2016). At its crux, China, under President Xi Jinping, is essentially pushing for a regional constellation “by Asians for Asians”, implying a region free from US alliances and influence (Heiduk 2022). Simultaneously, China seeks to position itself at the centre of regional economics and promote a multipolar world, which could enable it to carve out a niche for its values and practices without the constraints of the US (Tagaki 2014; Sutter 2020: 212;

Owen 2021). Doing so would provide China the desired strategic space to achieve a plethora of national interests, such as protecting the One China principle and seeking reunification with Taiwan, as well as ensuring further territorial questions are answered in its favour *vis-à-vis* littoral states over the SCS and in East Asia. Equally, China would be better positioned to project power and thus protect its vital trade routes in order to protect its interests to maintain export-led growth as well as energy security, which in turn equates to domestic stability at home and ensuring the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC). China, therefore, sees the US as an obstacle to its economic and political rise and a threat to internal stability (Nathan and Scobell 2014). The US, nevertheless, is starting the strategic competition from a position of strength, given its long-established and robust regional alliance and partnership system, nominally termed the hub-and-spokes system or San Francisco system, and the majority of Asian states conforming to LIO (or RIO)<sup>2</sup> principles and values (Cha 2010; Cook et al. 2024a: 5; Goh 2019: 4). Despite the discord generated by the Trump administration, the Biden administration has prioritised “friend-shoring” with like-minded states and is well positioned to counter Chinese ambition (US Department of the Treasury 2022; Brooks, Ikenberry and Wohlforth 2012: 22). Consequentially, the great drama of the 21st century ensues (Ikenberry 2008: 23) as their respective visions for the region are incompatible (Friedberg 2018). The game’s afoot.

The competition, in all its forms, is not solely about these *leviathans*; its breadth and scope are much more encompassing. The integral part of this competition is the contest for power and influence, *ergo* winning influence over the small and medium states in the Asia-Pacific (Mazarr et al. 2021). Whereas realist approaches often conflate power and influence, reducing both to material capabilities (Reich and Lebow 2014: 31–35), power is better regarded as “the ability of A to make B do something it would otherwise not do” (Dahl 1957). The exercise of power results in influence, as influence is the actualisation of power (Zimmerling 2005). As such, Beijing and Washington seek to orchestrate power and influence over the region’s secondary states as a powerplay in order to achieve their aims (Cha 2010). Here, they can, therefore, win over geopolitical “force multipliers” (US Department of State 2021; Bano and Roberts; 2023: 2), which allow them to achieve greater outcomes by being able to effectively project capabilities *vis-à-vis* the geopolitical contender via the territory of the influenced secondary state. Nevertheless, international relations maintain a problematic tendency to theoretically minimise the small and middle states and their impact on the geopolitical dynamics of great power competition. The relevant point to acknowledge is that despite the rise and fall of great powers, small and middle states have important fulcrum roles “at moments of international transition” due to them being prioritised for influencing projects by the great powers (Beeson and Higgott 2014: 215; Kupchan 2023). Retrospectively speaking, the previous great power competition between the US and the Soviet Union was about winning influence since “the guiding principle for the Cold War was alignments” (Valeriano 2013: 135; Wested 2005). The superseding theme of bygone great power competitions was similarly about winning influence over small and middle actors, be it through *de facto* empires, hegemonies, suzerainty,

#### 4 *Asia-Pacific Secondary States as Kingmakers*

protectorates or coalitions (Watson 1992). Therefore, it can be extrapolated that the China-US strategic competition will likewise gravitate around maximising power and orchestrating influence over others in order to achieve their ambitions. This in turn validates the importance of systemically studying small and middle states that find themselves geopolitically ensnared in great power competitions, as well as how to conceptualise their respective roles relative to great power strategic competition.

Secondary states in the Asia-Pacific region have attracted scrutiny in academic circles with many assessing how they are coping with the intensification of the China-US strategic competition, akin to unit-level responses to systemic pressure. While secondary states are framed as being caught in the middle and it has become “a political cliché for leaders of secondary states to publicly claim that it is not in their countries’ interests to pick sides”, the bulk of Asia-Pacific scholarship on this matter identifies hedging as the go-to unit-level behavioural response (He and Feng 2023: 7; Goh 2005; Kuik 2016; Medeiros 2005; Gerstl 2022). Hedging is prefaced on structural uncertainty and system permissiveness (Jackson 2014; Kuik 2016; Koga 2018; Ciorciari 2019; Haacke 2019; Smith 2020). The goal of hedging behaviour by secondary states is to mitigate risk while coping with uncertainty (Haacke 2019; Kuik 2016). Nevertheless, despite being habitually recognised as an elastic coping behaviour suitable for regional secondary states, hedging has limitations. Pivotaly, as system pressure from the great power balancing amid their competition increases, the space to hedge decreases or shrinks (Korolev 2019: 420; Korolev 2023a; Korolev 2023b; Cook et al. 2022; Cook et al. 2023). As such, great power balancing intensity is inversely related to the space available for secondary states to engage in hedging behaviour. Hedging, therefore, becomes “difficult, if not impossible”, to maintain as the balancing great powers will seek to tip the scales in their favour and compete to influence secondary states to make a “choice, sooner or later” as the “great powers may demand a clear commitment” (He and Feng 2023: 7; Gerstl 2022: 19). Here we can lend from Korolev’s discussion of Arnold Wolfers’s “House on Fire” metaphor (Korolev 2019: 425; Wolfers 1962: 13), wherein individuals (units) find themselves in a house (system) on fire (system pressure). Those in the house are responsive to the risk, and ultimately the threat, the fire poses and thus rush to the exit for safety. While this metaphor emphasises system pressure as the primary factor and downplays the responses of those experiencing it – who would intuitively run for the exit – a better way to grasp the metaphor would be to ask which exit they would choose: the front or the back door? This choice delineates the importance of a choice or the unit-level response, in face of system pressure. Do they choose the exit offered by China or the one offered by the US? Hedging is also inherently related to the secondary state’s leadership being competent at playing a political “game of skill” in order to extrapolate and maintain a “middle” position between the opposing great powers (Beeson and Higgott 2014: 223). In such a context, one could think of Ukraine as a case of failed hedging and the deadly costs of getting hedging wrong (Smith 2020). As such, as the space comes to a head, “tipping points” will be reached, and a difficult choice will beckon (He and Feng 2023: 7). Considering the context of

the China-US strategic competition in the Asia-Pacific and the shrinking space to hedge, we are particularly interested in these tipping points and the difficult choices they present, specifically how secondary states approach them. On the face of it, the choices have the potential to pull, if not rip, the region apart.

### *1.1.1 Anomaly and Puzzle*

Considering the context as described above, this book focuses on an anomaly from which we construct the following research puzzle: traditional international relations theory tends to posit that great powers hold the balance of power, following the Thucydidesian maxim that “right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must”.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, in intense great power strategic competitions over regional influence, strategically significant secondary states or linchpins can instead gain a hold over the balance of power. Thus, they are able to tip the balance in favour of one of the competing great powers, depending on their alignment choices, as our first hypothesis indicates:

*H<sub>1</sub>: Regional linchpins in the Asia-Pacific hold the balance of power and, thus, determine the outcome of the China-US geostrategic competition.*

The competing great powers need to win influence over the linchpins, in order to trigger an alignment choice and gain the upper hand in the competition. This circumstance leads the linchpins to become kingmakers and thereby undertake a kingmaker’s role and will eventually face a kingmaker’s conundrum. We term this anomaly the “power of the weak paradox”, given that, while linchpins lack the power capacities to become a great power themselves, they may endorse the great power whose interests are concordant with its own strategic objectives, thereby granting the latter a geostrategic advantage in the great power competition.<sup>4</sup>

Linchpins are of particular significance for the forthcoming analysis, as they retain considerable state capacities to bargain with great powers without becoming a hegemon themselves. For long, while the systemic pressures were low, regional linchpins could adopt hedging as the principal strategic calculus to engage with both great powers, primarily economic engagement with China and security cooperation with the US as constituents of its Transpacific security architecture. Low systemic pressures indicate the low intensity of great power competition, thereby strengthening the position of regional linchpins to pursue their interests amid a wider space to hedge. This is suggested by our second hypothesis:

*H<sub>2</sub>: Regional linchpins in the Asia-Pacific engage in hedging when systemic pressures are low.*

However, when systemic pressures intensify, the space for regional linchpins begins to shrink, pushing them into making alignment choices. They do not do so passively; instead, by adopting the role of a kingmaker, they actively embrace the

## 6 *Asia-Pacific Secondary States as Kingmakers*

great power with which they seek alignment to secure necessary benefits that may partially offset the retaliatory measures enacted by the opposing great power. Their choice grants a geostrategic advantage to the preferred great power, enhancing its power orchestration relative to its competitor. As our empirical analysis demonstrates, regional linchpins in the Asia-Pacific – despite case-specific disputes with Washington – will ultimately opt for alignment with the US due to their increasing security concerns and geostrategic anxieties towards China, as suggested by our third hypothesis:

*H<sub>3</sub>: Regional linchpins in the Asia-Pacific opt for an alignment with the US when the space to hedge shrinks, and they are eventually coerced into a final choice.*

Accordingly, this book focuses on the following questions: under what conditions does the power of the weak paradox manifest itself in the Asia-Pacific? How are the regional linchpins approaching the kingmaker's conundrum? And how do they navigate their respective kingmaker's role?

### **1.1.2 Methodology**

This book proposes a comparative case study of four potential kingmakers in the Asia-Pacific (i.e., Japan, South Korea, the Philippines and Vietnam) in terms of how they cope with intensifying systemic pressures stemming from the China-US geostrategic competition. As the empirical analysis demonstrates, there are significant variations between the cases, despite all of them being in the immediate crosshairs of the competition. While some have already indicated an alignment preference (most significantly Japan, but also South Korea and the Philippines), others such as Vietnam have so far refrained from doing so. In order to grapple with these variations as well as the case-specific peculiarities, we employ a process-tracing overlaid by a time series analysis.<sup>5</sup>

By employing process-tracing overlaid by a time series analysis, the framework of the book aims to reconstruct and trace the fluctuant changes of the status quo. The status quo is essentially dependent on the intensity of the great power competition, which correspondingly impacts the secondary states' space to hedge. When the intensity of the great power competition is low, secondary states have more space for political manoeuvres to engage in hedging, given the lack of significant systemic pressures influencing their foreign policy choices detrimentally. However, when the intensity of the great power competition is increasing, the secondary states' space to hedge is constantly becoming more constrained, directly impacting their unit-level behaviour and, thus, their alignment choices. The time series analysis aids us to identify certain constitutional moments having triggered a decrease or increase in systemic pressures, resulting in a shrinking or widening space to hedge. *Ergo*, it enables us to detect changes in secondary states' alignment preferences, considering their specific coping mechanisms with intensifying systemic

pressures, which in turn allows us to ultimately take the temperature of the ongoing China-US strategic competition in a way that provides sought-after scholarly contextualisation.

The book takes a recourse to the neo-classical realist framework, given that its analytical structure is able to distinguish between system and unit levels of analysis. Such a framework provides added value by acknowledging systemic pressures resulting from the balancing behaviour of great powers and the unit-level responses of secondary states. These responses, manifested through strategic and foreign policy changes, are influenced by domestic factors, including decision-makers' considerations and public perceptions.

Moreover, the analysis is designed to decipher and scrutinise signals that each potential kingmaker emits when engaging with both the US and China, specifically during moments when the status quo changes. Secondary states engage in signalling to either indicate an alignment preference or refrain from making a choice. Following the definition set out by [Gartzke et al. \(2017: 5\)](#), we refer to signalling as “the purposive and strategic revealing of information about intent, resolve, and/or capabilities by an actor A to alter the decisions of another actor B to improve the changes that an outcome desired by A is reached when the desired outcomes of A and B are dissimilar”. The projection and, correspondingly, the perception of signals that states send and receive, are particularly sensitive in regions beset by instability, most prominently the contemporary Asia-Pacific region. Any misperception or concealment of information may have grave consequences for the China-US geostrategic competition, as the other side could misinterpret certain signals as an act of aggression (such as troop movements, deployment of vessels or missiles, or specific treaties, which are arguably directed against the other). The subsequent strategic readjustments can, therefore, further aggravate the instabilities, intensifying the systemic pressures imposed on the secondary states caught in the middle.

In terms of the selection of signals, our analysis is based mostly on political statements and press releases addressing the respective case studies' relations with China and the US with explicit references to security and economic interests. These sources signal either contention or cooperation with either great power and, coupled with concrete actions, reveal specific behavioural modes as to whether they seek alignment with the respective great power or avoidance of an alignment choice through hedging. The utilisation of first-hand empirical evidence from official government documentation provides the analysis with authentic and tangible sources to elucidate on how our case studies grapple with the emergence of the kingmaker's conundrum and their respective kingmaker's role. Accordingly, commitments and promises, as well as dissatisfaction, risks and threats that secondary states direct towards great powers primarily in political statements and press releases, are analysed as strategic moves rather than mere communication. Secondary states utilise these signals to achieve specific strategic objectives to cope with the intensifying systemic pressures ([Pu 2019: 90](#); [Schelling 1960: 117](#)).

## 1.2 What Makes a Kingmaker?

History is full of different forms of kingmakers and historiography often places great reverence on their roles amid rivalries. Perhaps the most notable would be English nobleman Richard Neville of the House of Neville (1428–1471), XVI Earl of Warwick. Richard played an instrumental role in the Wars of the Roses (1455–1487). While not being powerful enough to claim the English throne himself – despite having a loose claim through distant royal blood – he was able to throw his political weight behind a preferred claimant as a linchpin in order to tip the balance of power. In short, due to his geopolitical positioning, wealth and political connections, he gained strategic importance and was thus able to depose of King Henry VI, which made way for the ascension of King Edward IV. Later, he would unseat Edward IV and restore Henry VI to the throne. Richard was later killed in battle as Edward IV again took power. Nevertheless, his role in the rivalry between the Yorkist and Lancastrian factions in the Wars of the Roses, being able to essentially choose the king via an alignment choice, led to the coining of the epithet “kingmaker” in the English language. Richard Neville is now remembered in history as “Warwick the Kingmaker”. Derived from the historical events of Richard Neville, the board game *Kingmaker*, designed to emulate the Wars of the Roses, allows players to control factions of nobles vying to place their chosen heirs on the throne. This gameplay effectively captures the concept in play. Through strategic alliances, betrayals and power struggles, players can align and re-align to balance their interests in order to dominate the political landscape. The game encapsulates the role of a kingmaker, highlighting the intricate and often precarious nature of political manoeuvring to control the monarchy. Another important historical case for a kingmaker can be found in Chinese history is that of Cao Cao (曹操) (155–220 AD). The famed Cao Cao played an instrumental role in the power struggles during the decline and fall of the Han dynasty. While he never claimed the throne himself, he amassed significant power, which he used to position his son, Cao Pi (曹丕), for succession. This ultimately led to the establishment of the state of Wei in 220 AD. Dorgon (多尔衮) (1612–1650), a Manchu prince and regent of the early Qing Empire (大清) can be considered another kingmaker. Following the death of Hong Taiji, the founder of the Qing Dynasty, Dorgon supported the young Fulin to become the Shunzhi Emperor (顺治皇帝), thereby embodying a kingmaker (造王者). Within Chinese popular culture, the television show *zao wangzhe* (造王者), anglicised as *King Maker* and filmed and produced in Hong Kong SAR in 2012, is a historical-fiction drama series set in the Song Dynasty that effectively puts this concept to good use.

In the contemporary realm of politics, particularly in democratic systems, kingmakers are similarly important figures. Perhaps one of the best accounts of kingmaking can be found in the 2010 British General Election, wherein a hung parliament gave rise to a kingmaker scenario for Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg. Neither Gordon Brown’s Labour Party nor David Cameron’s Conservative Party won a majority in the House of Commons and were thus unable to form a government. This situation left Nick Clegg with the ability to essentially crown a king by