



ARE MIDDLE POWERS SLAVES OF THE INTERNATIONAL STRUCTURE?

BY REI KOGA

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Photo: Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim takes the stage at the 37th APR dialogue in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Thursday, June 6, 2024. Source: Jeff Otto

During the 37th Asia Pacific Roundtable (APR) from June 4th to 7th, I participated in a side event hosted by the Asia New Zealand Foundation. It was a 2.0 track event involving next-generation thinkers, leading scholars and practitioners. Here is a theme that I think is worth discussing.

While a wide variety of topics ranging from the rule-based order, middle power diplomacy, and AI regulation, one interesting topic that best symbolized

this uncertain period is the discussion on middle power agency. The increasingly complicated international system and intensifying great power rivalry seem to have shrunk the agency of middle power countries. The discussion at the APR conference made me question, "Are middle powers slaves to the international structure?" We explore this through the perspective of a Pacific regional middle power: New Zealand.

New Zealand's foreign policy, which relies on its traditional security partners, is a good starting point. It navigates the great power rivalry cautiously, balancing between states involved in unilateral security cooperation frameworks and those outside of them. It is sandwiched between its security partners, the US and Australia, and its largest trading partner, China. In particular, New Zealand has shown a generally cautious attitude towards the emerging new security architecture in the Indo-Pacific, whereas the current government has adopted a more proactive stance. This provokes the question of, what is the driving force for New Zealand foreign policy change. More precisely, asking whether it is changes in the structural condition in international politics or changes in its foreign policy preference underpinned by its agency. To explore this point, we examine the New Zealand government's attitude with a focus on New Zealand's strategic culture.

Strategic culture refers to a shared understanding within a state that constrains policy options by influencing policy-makers' perception.¹ Decision-makers operate within a cultural framework which affects how they interpret situations and decide on their course of action. Examining strategic culture is important since it offers the outsider to estimate the scope of actions a government can take in a given situation.

New Zealand's strategic culture is often described as having a similar sense of vulnerability to that of Australia, but less intense, resulting in a reduced realist tone.² Its strategic culture is in large part shaped by two elements: traditional nuclear-free policy and focus on nearby South Pacific islands.³ These two elements provide us with an understanding of the background of New Zealand's cautious attitude

towards the AUKUS program. Firstly, New Zealand's nuclear-free stance explains its reservations against AUKUS's first pillar, which is to deliver nuclear-powered submarines to Australia. Secondly, New Zealand's traditional focus on South Pacific islands may be why certain New Zealand politicians argue that joining AUKUS will shift the national focus away from its traditional areas of responsibility.⁴ However, New Zealand's stance on the second pillar of AUKUS changed last year under the current Luxon government, which began in November 2023. Foreign Minister Peters in a joint statement with his US counterpart mentioned that New Zealand "see powerful reasons for New Zealand engaging practically with them."⁵ This is a step up from Prime Minister Ardern's 2022 joint statement with the U.S. entitled "A 21st-Century Partnership for the Pacific, the Indo-Pacific, and the World," which noted the "shared commitment between New Zealand and AUKUS partners."⁶ It reflects New Zealand's shifting understanding of the regional security environment, though it is still unlikely to participate in Pillar I.

The question now is, can this be considered a true change in New Zealand's strategic culture? It can be indeed in transition from a broadly liberalist to a more realist one while one cannot rule out future backtracking through political change. While strategic culture is the product of certain set conditions such as geography, it is certainly not unchanging.⁷ The most important deciding factor for the role of strategic culture in a state is its agency in its policy. The more freedom a state has in choosing its foreign policy, the more influence its strategic culture has on its choice of outcome. On the contrary, when a state's agency is limited due to external factors such as being forced to choose a side in a great power rivalry, room for strategic culture to affect its foreign policy is likewise limited.

New Zealand published its first national security strategy document in August 2023, where its threat assessment of the neighboring region appeared remarkably different from statements only a few years prior. At the press conference, then Defence Minister

Andrew Little said "In 2023 we do not live in a benign strategic environment...New Zealand is facing more geographical strategic challenges...we thought was protected by its remoteness," most likely referring to increasing tension between the US and China as well as the erosion of New Zealand's psychological and geographical distance from such clashes. The remark can be considered at odds with the liberal stance of the Labour Party. What it means to issue strategic documents for the first time in its national history means that not only the bureaucracy felt the urgent need to do so but also the majority of political elites.

Not everyone agrees with this course of action. Former prime minister Helen Clark (New Zealand Labour Party) warned that New Zealand's cooperation with AUKUS would undermine the country's independent foreign policy.⁸ New Zealand's stance in the long term will be dependent on to what extent the bureaucracy and political sides are in tandem, cultivating a more realist strategic culture. In this field, through virtue of its role of policy implementation, the bureaucracy generally holds more continuity and inertia than politicians, which means that for at least a few years, New Zealand's lean towards greater security cooperation with the US and Australia is highly likely. In terms of strategic culture, as discussed above, while it may still be malleable for a while, the change in agency and its outcome of the national security strategy document means that it most likely will form a new set of strategic culture.

Disclaimer: All opinions in this article are solely those of the author and do not represent any organization.

¹ Morin, J.F. and Paquin, J., 2018. *Foreign policy analysis: A toolbox*. Springer, McCraw, D., 2007. The Defence Debate in Australia and New Zealand. *Defence Studies*, 7(1), pp.90-110.

² McCraw, D., 2011. Change and continuity in strategic culture: the cases of Australia and New Zealand. *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 65(2), pp.167-184.

³ Wallis, J. and Powles, A. Burden-sharing: the US, Australia and New Zealand alliances in the Pacific islands, *International Affairs*, 97 (4) pp.1045-1065, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiab081>

⁴ Fish, T. “New Zealand in AUKUS? The political Kiwi conundrum over Pillar 2 membership,” *Breaking Defense Indo-Pacific*, June 2nd, 2023, <https://breakingdefense.com/2023/06/new-zealand-in-aukus-the-political-kiwi-conundrum-over-pillar-2-membership/>

⁵ The official website of the New Zealand Government, Joint US and NZ declaration, April 12th, 2024, <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/joint-us-and-nz-declaration>

⁶ The White House, United States – Aotearoa New Zealand Joint Statement, May 31st, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/31/united-states-aotearoa-new-zealand-joint-statement/>

⁷ Lantis, J.S., 2016. “Strategic cultures and security policies in the Asia-Pacific” In *Strategic Cultures and Security Policies in the Asia-Pacific*, pp. 1-21). London: Routledge.

⁸ Craymer, L. “New Zealand not close to decision on joining AUKUS pact, ministers say,” Reuters, May 1st, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/new-zealand-not-close-decision-joining-aukus-pact-minister-says-2024-05-01/>