

# Interdependence of Small State and Middle Power: A Case Study on Malaysia–Australia Bilateral Relationship in the Indo-Pacific

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## Abstract

Security plays a pivotal role in the phenomenon of small state–middle power interactions. Given this paradox of the long-standing bilateral relationship between Malaysia and Australia in the broader Indo-Pacific, the security interdependence is nevertheless often overlooked. Primarily, this paper aims to discuss and analyse the interplay between small state and middle power in securitising the existential and emerging conventional and unconventional issues that pose to their national security. To locate the research objective, Regional Security Complex Theory is utilised as theoretical framework. Multiple qualitative research methods are used to arrive the findings, include collection of primary and secondary data, in-depth interviews with purposive sampling of informants, and analysis of data by using thematic analysis approach. The findings of this paper argue that both Malaysia–Australia bilateral relationship is fundamentally motivated by security interdependence since both states posit within the same regional complex in the broader Indo-Pacific. The security issues are associated with conventional and unconventional security threats. The small state–middle power security interdependence emanated from the historical development of both states. Hence, an ‘agreement’ is formed by both securitising actors in addressing their security concerns in the military, political, economic and societal sectors.

**Keywords:** Malaysia, Australia, Threats, Security Interdependence, Regional Security Complex

## Introduction

This paper discusses the interplay between small state and middle power from the microscopic perspectives of International Relations. With the introductory discussion, this paper lays out the research gap, objectives, research methodology, theoretical framework, as well as definitions of small state and middle power and their historical development. Further, this paper thoroughly proffers an analysis with a case study on Malaysia and Australia bilateral relationship before a concluding remark.

The puzzle of this paper is drawn from the small state–middle power interactions in the case of the long-standing Malaysia and Australia bilateral relationship. Giving the context of the strategic location in the broader Indo-Pacific, both states are often embroiled into major power geostrategic competition in light of emergence of uncertain multi-polar structure in the region. The major power competition is often manifested in various patterns, among others, China’s Belt and Road Initiative (here after ‘BRI’), militarisation of the South China Sea, as well as the United States’ Indo-Pacific Strategy and geopolitical dominance in the region. Nevertheless, the potential geopolitical influence as the result of the relationship between small state and middle power is arguably a missing piece in the midst of ever changing regional structure, in this case refers to Malaysia and Australia.

With the puzzle as discussed above, this paper endeavours to achieve a fundamental objective in which to discuss the interdependence between small state and middle power in the context of global politics. In order to further analyse the paper, it is important to present case study in view of the discussion. To serve this purpose, a case study on interaction between Malaysia as a small state and Australia as a middle power in the Indo-Pacific region would arguably be a useful example to fill the academic gap.

### **Research Methodology**

Multiple qualitative research methods are subscribed to arrive at the finding of this paper. The data collection process is double-folded which include primary and secondary data. Primary data is obtained rudimentarily through official documents as well as in-depth interviews with selection of informants via purposive sampling method (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam, 1998). Secondary data is gathered via scholarly databases for the purpose of documentary analysis. Relevant research ethics are observed under the National Defence University of Malaysia and United Nations research guidelines, with particular attention paid to honouring the privacy of the informants. The interview data is then managed by using the *Nvivo 12 Pro* application, transcribed and triangulated. For the purposes of data analysis, themes are established by using the thematic analysis approach.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The interdependence of middle power and small state, in this paper, is well-discussed through the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). As the theoretical framework, RSCT informs this study on a broad spectrum of analysis on Malaysia–Australia bilateral relationship in the Southeast Asia and further extended to the Indo–Pacific. In this relation, both Malaysia and Australia are among the nations located in the Southeast Asian subcomplex, as alleged by Buzan and Wæver (2003a). The Copenhagen school of thought takes a comprehensive approach to blend the ideas of bounded territoriality from the neorealist approach and the distribution of power from the constructivist approach, and resulting in relevant analysis for this paper (Buzan & Wæver, 2003b).

The fundamental analysis lies in the rationale that security interdependence is of great significance for the threat perception for Malaysia and Australia. Since security threats, both conventional and non-conventional in nature, migrate within the regional proximity (known as security complex) and this phenomenon has inevitably led to rising considerations on national and regional security (Buzan & Wæver, 2003b). As security is the integral element of state’s survival, Malaysia and Australia (as the securitising actors) has reached the consensus to adopt extraordinary means and act ‘above politics’ in addressing the existential and emerging security concerns. Related to this, an ‘amity–enmity patterns’ of security interaction

has been established despite the fact that the relevant interactions within a distant adjacency is comparably lower than an immediate adjacency (Buzan & Wæver, 2003b; Walt, 1987). Security interaction within the security complex could be impacted by ideological, territorial, ethnic lines and historical precedents factors, as evidenced by Malaysia–Australia bilateral relationship.

Given this context, the Malaysia–Australia security complex is associated with the mutual security issues of the past, notably the Japanese invasion of Malaya during WWII, the spread of Communism in the Southeast Asian region and the decline of the UK as a global power post-WWII. As a middle power, Australia defended Malaysia's territory according to the spirit of Commonwealth nations and prevented the threats from further deteriorating Australia's soil. In the contemporary era, Australia continues its efforts to provide security umbrella to small neighbouring states, include Malaysia, as one of the measurements in the 'Forward Defence' military and security posture.

Thus, RSCT allows analysis of the paper on security issues, among others the threats and vulnerabilities, which are securitised by the two states. The justification is that both states share common security concerns that travel within their geographical areas. Further, RSCT is critical in analysing the mutual national interests submerged in the five sectors of security: military, security, political, societal and environmental contexts. RSCT also provides a prominent foundation for discussion and analysis of the interactions between the two countries and further explain the collaboration and accommodating of existential policies.

### **Interaction of Middle Power and Small States: History Development**

The historical development of middle power and small states has its roots in the international politics. Both concepts evolved in the European state system approximately the era of the Peace of Westphalia of 1648. The concept of middle power was first initiated by Italian political philosopher, Giovanni Botero, during the Renaissance era. He divided the world system into three types of states: *grandissime* (empires), *mezano* (middle powers), and *piccioli* (small powers) (Botero, 1956). Botero asserted that middle power is resilient enough to stand on its own due to sufficient strength and authority and power, hence assistance from other parties is not necessary (Botero, 1956). On the contrary, small states or small powers emerged at the Napoleonic Wars era (1803–1815) since beginning of the French Revolutionary War. The great powers (United Kingdom and French) had the perception that the small states were vulnerable in their military capacity and hence they were not able to be turned into as guardian of peace agreements and international order. It was particularly noticeable during the Westphalia era.

The middle power–small states interaction was at divergence during the Great War phases. The perception gradually erupted when the League of Nations (1920) established in the post-World War I era. It acted as an institutional platform for the smaller states (middle power and small states) and proffered the opportunity for their voice to be heard and exercise of influence within the international political construct. The League was later relocated as the United Nations after the Second World War in 1945. During the Cold War era, middle power and small states were diverted into two directions. Middle powers, such as Australia, continued to commit to their host countries (the United Kingdom, United States) despite the bipolar tension between the USSR and the United States. Whereas, small powers gained little attention from the International Relations scholars due to declining influence and power, particularly engagement in proxy war and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs).

The emergence of new sovereign states has drawn a new map of reinforcing middle power–small states interactions in world politics. By end of the Cold War era, focus was revived on the small states which centered on the survival strategy and alignment policies in the midst of power tension between the two major powers, i.e. the United States and USSR (Edström, Gyllensporre, & Westberg, 2019). Moreover, the decolonisation process had resulted independence of new nations to which majority were of small states. The changing strategic environment would be potentially deteriorated and destabilised by regional conflicts, as seen in the case of Indonesia–Malaysia *Konfrontasi*. The post-Cold War era further observed security interdependency and economic cooperation, particularly in the 1980s and the early 1990s. Middle power and small states are related to the concept of interdependence and involvement in international organisations. Further, there were new forms of security concerns that posed threats to national security as the result of globalisation process and regional integration. The existential and emerging security threats are of conventional and unconventional in nature, include global terrorism and extremism, cyber security threats, pandemic, environmental issues, and scarcity of natural resources. All these involve acts of both state actors and non-state actors to which required new approaches in addressing those considerations. In this sense, the roles played by middle powers and small states has revived due to the fact that collective measure is needed to securitising the threats which are transborder in nature (Buzan & Wæver, 2003a). Hence, middle powers and small powers would exercise influence and power in determining those security concerns for the purposes of state survival.

### **Small States in the Perspectives of International Relations**

To begin with the discussion, it is necessary first to define small states. In the literature of IR, the definition of ‘small states’ has been remained as elusive and not universally well-defined. On the contrary, there are several terminologies as agreed by IR scholars, among others are ‘small powers’, ‘weak powers’, and ‘weak states’ (Edström, Gyllensporre, & Westberg, 2019; Long, 2022). Despite the fact that the definition of small states is multi-faceted, generally the international community has accepted the existence of small states and they are ‘empirically relevant polity with IR discipline’ (Maass, 2009).

In addition, small states are commonly defined according to size of geographical presence, i.e.: total land size and population. Physical variable (as in size of land area) is often used as a ‘yardstick’ in classification of small statehood due to two factors (Neemia-Mackenzie, 1995). First, this approach provides a preliminary estimation of domestic market and as an indication of human capital of a small state. Secondly, the definition is simply accepted as in preceding literature (Crowards, 2002). In term of population size, Commonwealth Secretariat and World Bank define small states with the same metric as those countries with a population of 1.5 million or below (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2020; World Bank, 2020). The Commonwealth Secretariat has identified itself as the ‘champion of small states’. Within the measurement, there are around 45 small states in the world to which inclusive of larger states, i.e.: Jamaica and Namibia. Further, *Forum of Small States* (FOSS) defines small states with a population of 10 million or below. As of the mid-2010s, 105 states were FOSS members that fall within the metric of population size (Súilleabháin, 2014). These numbers suggest that the international structure is largely made out of small states as political units. Beyond the two above-mentioned criteria, the smallness of a states could be possible defined by other single variable, *inter alia*, gross domestic product (GDP) and military expenditure. Nevertheless, these could plausibly draw to bias in analysis.

Small states could be viewed from three fundamental perspectives of international relations: structural realism (neorealism), liberalism and constructivism.

From the lenses of structural realists, small states are able to assert geopolitical influence in an anarchic international structure in order to pursue survival of state. As first characterised by Waltz (1979), power is the most significant determinant of a state in asserting influence or ordering principle in an international system where there is no dominant authority in play. It is usually implemented by great powers in competition to 'obtain, possess, and exercise power' (Long, 2022). Within such undesirable security precondition, often small states form alliances in adjacency of great powers due to the fact that 'Small Powers are something more than or different than Great Powers writ small' (Rothstein, 1968). The integral intention of small states to take such measure is to preserve state survival in a threatening political environment (Handel, 1981). Among the alliances formed of small states include Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) established in 1967. The phenomenon is coherent during the World War II and Cold War era, particularly when decolonialisation process took place.

From the liberalism lexicon, small states at certain decree would be able to demonstrate geopolitical power within the international construct. Keohane (1971) highlighted that substantial influence of small alliances would be manifested when small states seek specific goals by optimising resources and economic interdependence. In other words, with participation into international organisations, such as World Trade Organisation (WTO), World Bank and Group of 77 (G77) not only allow small states to create opportunities and international norms, but also being the voice in economic integration. The emergence of influence led by this approach not only enables small states to pursue respective national interests, but also ensure survival of state in the midst of hegemon geopolitical competition in the post-Cold War era. Thus, national security has become the motivation for small states' pursuance of multilateral organisation membership as they proffer sense of security and peaceful resolution in time of conflicts. During the China–United States Trade War, smaller states (ASEAN member states, Australia, Canada and Latin America) asserted their influence to urge WTO in regulating economic order and promote economic cooperation despite the violation of the core principle of non-discrimination in trade led by the two giants.

In the constructivism discourse, greater varieties of small states are seen playing increasing roles with their nuanced form of power and influence. Since proponents of constructivists conceptualise the relationships between actors or agents and structures, the relationships between small states and the international politics structure are of great consideration (Baylis, Smith & Owens, 2023). As Wendt (1992) underscored that 'anarchy is what states make of it, small states embrace Hobbesian logic on the anarchic international structure where self-help and survival of state depend on military power. In this pursuit, small states are concerned of executing certain rules and norms in attempting to rationally maximise fixed preferences although adhering to sets of limitations. In addition, small states too could involve in strategic social construction as the result of attempt of modifying the rules and norms (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). This would eventually guide and constitute different national identities and interests. Within the constructivist framework, ASEAN offers the paradigm which small states are able to exercise influence and power in the geopolitical and economic perspectives.

Drawing from the three fundamental IR perspectives, New Zealand is arguably a small state which demonstrates 'smallness with influences' in the international arena, particularly in the broader Indo-Pacific region. The Land of the Long White Cloud (*Aotearoa* in Maori language) possess 'only' half of million of population with total land size of 267,710 km<sup>2</sup> (World Data,

2023). New Zealand has a large gross domestic products (GDP) of US\$ 249.89 billion in 2021 for its relatively small population and it is the 51<sup>st</sup> largest global national economy (World Bank, 2021). Defence budget of New Zealand gradually increasing and has reached USD3.8 billion for fiscal year 2022–23, except 2019 (Grevatt & MacDonald, 2022). New Zealand's small state paradigm is evidenced with the winning of a non-permanent seat in the United Nation Security Council in end of 2014. New Zealand's former Prime Minister John Key pronounced it as 'a victory for the small states that make up over half the United Nations membership' and hence it is seen as the determination to 'represent the perspective of small states at the Security Council' (Key, 2014). Hence, it is reasonable to anticipate that New Zealand (along with Australia) could be the small state with geopolitical power in the Pacific region, particularly at the broader Indo-Pacific architecture. As Baker (2015) pinpointed that, In the same awkward position of being major aid donors to the other members of the Pacific Islands Forum, of having the resources and capacity to dominate regional meetings, and of being a hindrance to the forum's credibility and utility as a vehicle for south–south cooperation. (Baker, 2015)

In spite of the backdrop, small states exhibit several significant attributes regardless of their 'smallness' in geographical and population size as discussed above. The attributes of small states are manifested in their foreign policies in addressing asymmetrical relationships with big powers and middle powers (Long, 2022). The attributes as demonstrated in small states is there-folded: use of smart power strategy in foreign policy, multilateralism and bilateralism, as well as play active and significant roles.

First, often times, the foreign policies formulated by the small states aimed at optimising smart power. Smart power embraces both combination of hard power and soft power approaches (Long, 2022; Nye, 2009). The use of smart power as a pragmatic strategy is presented in the case of Timor-Leste when dealing with big power (China) and middle power (Australia and Indonesia). As a newly-independent nation, Timor-Leste understands its potential influence and power lay in its natural resources (oil and gas sectors) and geostrategic value in the broader Indo-Pacific region. With this in mind, Timor-Leste adopts an economic hedging strategy towards China and Australia in order to promote its economic growth (Cardoso, 2022; Strangio, 2022). Timor-Leste has signed several mega infrastructure projects with China under the auspices of Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) as well as oil and gas joint venture project at the Timor Sea with Australia. On the other hand, a strategy of security hedge is subscribed towards Australia and Indonesia at large decree to preserve its national security in the region (Abigail, 2011). By turning vulnerabilities into strengths, small states are plausibly able to shaping agendas or petitioning for special resources (Long, 2022).

Second, small powers incorporate multilateralism and bilateralism in the interaction with major powers and middle powers. Understanding that state survival in the self-help system is fundamentally put in own hands, small states adopt both multilateralism and bilateralism approach in the asymmetrical relationships with the regional and supra-regional players. In the Southeast Asia region, Malaysia forges long-standing and cordial bilateral relationship with China and the United States (major powers) and Australia, India, and Indonesia (middle powers). Further, Malaysia too engages in multilateral relationships within the scope of ASEAN and Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) as these alliances complement the existing bilateral relationships of most small states in the region. This paper hence argues that both multilateralism and bilateralism "coexist peacefully" and could be "complementary" to

each other (Katzenstein & Okawara, 2001/2002; Tow & Taylor, 2013). These elements are of great importance for small states in addressing security concerns.

Third, small states play active and significant roles in various aspects. The leading roles played small states suggest their increasing geopolitical importance in both the regional and international arenas (Long, 2022). The roles could be discussed in accordance with three fundamental sectors in the military-security, economic, and political realms. In the military-security sector, small states would likely participate in international negotiation process and peacekeeping mission (Edström, Gyllensporre, & Westberg, 2019). It is seen through Malaysia played essential role in facilitating peace talks in the Southern Thailand region in 2023. The economic sector anticipates small states as effective builders and members of institutions, such as Denmark and Norway in the European Union. From the political aspect, small states would talk part in environmental talks by promoting international norms. Further, small states have shaped events at the highest tables of world politics as seen in nuclear disarmament and the laws of war (Long, 2022). Small islands would be the maritime influences by using their ocean territory and niche knowledge to enhance influence, as the case of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore in the Southeast Asian region. In this regard, the active and essential roles played by are aimed at preserve respective national interests and national security, in parallel with asserting influence and power.

### **Middle Power in the Perspectives of International Relations**

In the international politics, most IR thinkers categorised middle power in line with geographical determinant. For political thinker Rousseau (1762), middle powers were generally grouped into three categories based on size of a state and forms of government: democratic government is best for little states; aristocratic for middle states, and monarchical for big states (Holbraad, 1984). Similarly, Botero (1956) categorised states according to size of states. For him, middle powers were determined by their prerequisite in providing external support and security assistance at the regional and global proximities. He highlighted that,

[S]ome dominions are small, others large, others medium; and these are not absolute but comparative, and with respect to their neighbours... A medium one is that which has force or authority sufficient to maintain itself without the need of the help of another, as the Dominion of the Signory of Venice, the Kingdom of Bohemia, the Dutchy of Milan and the County of Flanders. (Botero, 1956)

Further, Botero's idea on middle power is associated with endurance. The endurance of middle states is closely related to the leadership. Botero revealed that,

Middle-sized states are the most lasting, since they are exposed neither to violence by their weakness nor to envy by their greatness, and their wealth and power being moderate, passions are less violent, ambition finds less support and licence less provocation than in large states. (Botero 1956)

Due to the geopolitical factors, middle power in this relation, demonstrates strategic, geographical and political interests to great power, as underscored by Clausewitz (1831). The strategic proximity which neighbouring great power allows a middle power plays an important role as a 'buffer zone' that offers geostrategic values in mitigating tensions between great powers. Traditional middle powers that fit into this role, among others are Australia, Canada, India, Japan, and South Korea. With such context, middle power is powerful enough to deter any potential security threats (such as great power geostrategic rivalry), but deliberately downplay territorial concern to its great power allies (Ping, 2018). To be classified

as middle powers, the security capability of a states should be at satisfactory level. In other words, middle powers are able to maintain its level of security without seeking assistance from neighbouring nations (Ping, 2018). Among the middle powers, Australia and Canada have long positioned themselves as ones based on geographic identities (total land size, population), economic power, military power, as well as geopolitical roles played in the regional and international stability. Hence, middle powers are defined by their intent and activities in the designated regional security environments, as well as the relative resource constraints (Moeini, *et. al.*, 2022).

Similarly, middle power could also be analysed through three fundamental lenses of IR: neorealism, liberalism, and Constructivism. In comparison, neorealists view middle powers as of little value than great powers and small states due its “middle-ness” characteristics. Liberalism and constructivism, however, offer middle powers broader potential in exercising power and influence in global politics.

In the neorealist paradigm, the behaviour of middle powers is influenced by the anarchic international structure. This structure has led to the activation by the relative, relational, and social power politics that middle powers engage in, at the specific time zone and place (Teo, 2022). Hence, middle powers are able to act as a balancing tool by weakening stratification which is of concerns of the great powers. Further, functions of the middle powers are also strengthened through playing importance roles in the global politics. In the Asia’s geopolitical order of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the power and influence of middle powers (Australia, India) are increasing in shaping geopolitics in the region.

Liberalism and constructivism, on the other hand, provide broader scope for middle powers in dissemination of power and influence. In the post-Cold War era, middle powers actively engaged in international organisations in addressing broader economic integration and humanitarian assistance in conflict zones; The programmes included conflict mediation, HADR, promotion of human rights as well as spread of democracy and market reforms (Aydin, 2021; Ping, 2018). By doing so, middle powers contributed to the regional peace and stability.

### **Case Study: Malaysia–Australia Bilateral Relationship**

For the purposes of analysis on small state–middle power interaction, this paper presents a case study as exhibited in the bilateral relationship between Malaysia and Australia. Traditionally, Australia has been playing an active role as a middle power in the Indo-Pacific, particularly the Southeast Asia region. Whist Malaysia although is considered as a ‘rising’ middle power, its geographical size, military and security power, as well as economic power remain as asymmetric in comparison with Australia. Hence, Malaysia is placed as a small state for the purpose of analysis for this paper.

As a traditional middle power in the Southeast Asian region, Australia has been Malaysia’s long-standing security provider throughout the history. Australia provided security blanket in defending Malaysia as Australia’s involvement began with the Battle of Penang in 1914 prior to the landing of the Japanese forces via in Kelantan. Later, Operation Matador, Malayan Campaign, Malayan Emergency, Indonesia’s Confrontation with Malaysia and the establishment of Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement (AMDA) in 1957, laid the foundation for bilateral relationships. The formation of Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) further complemented the cordial relations between the two nations.

The small state and middle power interactions became ‘comprehensive’ with initiation of China’s BRI and the United States’ Indo-Pacific Strategy in the Indo-Pacific. Giving the context of the strategic location in the broader Indo-Pacific, both states are often embroiled into



major power competition in light of emergence of uncertain multi-polar structure in the region. The major power competition is often manifested in various forms, among others, BRI, China's maritime claim of the South China Sea, as well as the United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy and geopolitical dominance in the region.

Under such geopolitical turbulence, Malaysia–Australia bilateral relationship is of great significant in addressing the existential and potential security threats. These threats pose imminent concerns and vulnerabilities not only to Malaysia and Australia, and also the regional stability, particularly the Indo-Pacific (Attinà, 2016; *Australia's Defence Strategic Update*, 2020; Baylis et al., 2023; Dibb, 2018; Fruhling, 2003; Medcalf, 2020). In this aggregate, the findings of the research show that at the conventional front, the security concerns were associated with interstate disputes and encroachments, include national security, unmanned combat aerial system, and the proliferation of missiles as through air threats. The unconventional issues are associated with the marine environment, economic development, human security as in unconventional maritime security, as well as cyber security.

The bilateral relationship between the two nations is reciprocal. For Australia, the strategic location of Malaysia serves as the linchpin for greater connectivity in the Indo-Pacific. It suggests that Malaysia exercises small state power as a 'bridge' for Australia to further exercise its smart power and influence in the region. It also indicates that Malaysia as the 'deterrence factor' to intimidate security threats from migrating to Australia as evidenced in the Red Back Operations. On the contrary, Malaysia sees Australia as a long-standing security partner in the midst of major power strategic competition at its backyard. The spill-over impacts of the great power rivalries have become a threat posed to Malaysia's national security. With Malaysia's foreign policy on maintaining equidistant and neutrality principles with all the regional players, the relatively small state pursues a security hedging approach in such a low-key manner. Further, the comprehensive relationship between the two states also seen in the reciprocal engagements in the area of military and defence cooperation, include training and education, joint military and security exercises, as well as sharing experiences and expertise.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has achieved the main objective in discuss and analyse middle powers and small states from three fundamental distinctions of IR: structural realism, liberalism, and constructivism. This paper also has discussed the evolution of both the middle powers and small states.

The development of middle power and small states has its roots in the historical evolution of international politics. Both concepts evolved in the European state system approximately the era of the Peace of Westphalia of 1648. These concepts were developed during the Napoleonic Wars and French Revolutionary War eras. Then, the post-World War I era provided a platform for middle power and small states for their voice to be heard and exercise of influence. During the Cold War era, middle powers and small states were diverted into two directions. Middle powers continued to give commitment to their larger alliances. Whereas, small powers gained little attention from the IR scholars. The post-Cold War era saw the interdependency and economic cooperation, to which allowed middle power and small states are related to the concept of interdependence and involvement in international organisations.

From the IR perspectives, structural realism sees middle powers and small states to assert geopolitical influence in an anarchic international structure in order to pursue survival of

state. It is done with different approaches: middle powers form alliances with major powers while maintaining self-reliance; small states form alliances among each other. Liberalism perspectives underscores that both powers in demonstrating geopolitical power in the international construct by optimising resources and economic interdependence. Constructivists offers greater varieties for middle powers and small states' involvement in strategic social construction as the result of attempt of modifying the rules and norms.

Middle power and small state interactions in the case of the long-standing Australia-Malaysia bilateral relationship has provided a clear evidence. Giving the context of the strategic location in the broader Indo-Pacific, both states are often embroiled into major power competition in light of emergence of uncertain multi-polar structure in the region. The major power competition is often manifested in various forms, among others, China's BRI, maritime claim of the South China Sea, as well as the United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy and geopolitical dominance in the region. In this sense, both Australia and Malaysia are in the benign bilateral relationship in addressing the existential and emerging security concerns that plausibly pose threat to national security of both states.

This research has provided a coherent account on the theoretical and contextual contribution. The theoretical significance has contributed to the RSCT literature by focusing on defence and security cooperation between Malaysia and Australia in the broader Indo-Pacific. Hence, this paper has added to the RSC insights into the understanding of the elements of cooperation and stability among both states, which are nurtured by geographical proximity, shared history and common regional, interregional and global threats. The interactions could be in the amity-enmity formula. At the contextual front, this study contributes to the professional body of knowledge by adding new perspectives on and approaches to addressing conventional and unconventional threats that could be useful for Malaysian and Australian security practitioners and scholars. Looking ahead, the interplay of Malaysia–Australia would continue to be perceived through the security interdependence prism, crucial to which is the domestic political situation and, most importantly, the preservation of national interests and security, as well as regional stability

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