

Squeezed Between Hegemons: How Strategic Position Between Competing Great Powers Shapes Middle Power Autonomy Strategies Within the U.S. Alliance System

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Abstract: This article examines how a middle power's strategic position between competing hegemonic powers shapes the comprehensiveness and character of its pursuit of strategic autonomy within the U.S. alliance system. Drawing on comparative case study analysis of Japan, South Korea, and Australia — three U.S. allies that face the shared challenge of China's rising military power but occupy distinctly different strategic positions relative to that challenge — the article introduces the concept of "hegemonic squeeze" to describe the condition of being positioned between competing great powers in ways that create simultaneous, multidirectional, and inescapable pressures. While related concepts such as "omni-enmeshment" (Goh, 2005) and "strategic hedging" (Goh, 2007) have addressed aspects of middle power management between great powers in non-allied contexts, this article argues that hegemonic squeeze specifically captures the condition of formal U.S. allies caught between their hegemonic patron and a hegemonic rival — a condition that drives more comprehensive and multidimensional autonomy strategies than those facing unidirectional great power pressure. Japan and South Korea, positioned between the competing influences of the United States and China, pursue simultaneously vertical binding, horizontal binding, hedging, and military modernization as interlocking components of their autonomy strategies (Simón & Klose, 2025; Sims & Chinfulli, 2025). Australia, facing great power pressure in a less immediate and less multidirectional form, pursues a more focused autonomy strategy centered primarily on military self-reliance through AUKUS (PIR Center, 2025). The article concludes by acknowledging an important limitation: whether the number of simultaneous security threats, rather than hegemonic squeeze specifically, independently drives comprehensive autonomy strategies remains an important question for future comparative research.

Keywords: Hegemonic squeeze, strategic autonomy, middle power, U.S. alliance system, Japan, South Korea, Australia, omni-enmeshment, great power competition, Indo-Pacific.

Introduction: The existing literature on middle power strategic autonomy has focused primarily on the bilateral relationship between junior allies and their great power patron — examining how states like Japan, South Korea, and Australia manage their dependence on the United States while seeking greater independent agency (Simón & Klose, 2025). Less attention has been paid to how the strategic environment on the other side of the equation — the nature, intensity, and directionality of threats from rising powers — shapes the character and comprehensiveness of autonomy strategies. This article addresses that gap by asking a deceptively

simple question: Does it matter whether a middle power is squeezed between two competing hegemons, or whether it faces pressure primarily from one direction?

The existing literature offers important partial answers to this question. Goh's (2005) pioneering work on "omni-enmeshment" showed how Southeast Asian states actively weave major powers into shared regional mechanisms simultaneously to constrain unilateral behavior and gain diplomatic leverage. Goh (2007) further demonstrated that states in great power competition environments adopt "strategic hedging" as an intermediate zone between balancing and

bandwagoning, cultivating multiple policy options rather than making either-or choices. These foundational frameworks established the theoretical basis for understanding how weaker states pursue autonomy by engaging multiple great powers simultaneously. However, Goh's frameworks were developed primarily for non-allied states in Southeast Asia that maintained deliberate distance from formal alliance commitments. This article extends the logic of these frameworks to the specific context of formal U.S. allies that are simultaneously embedded in a hegemonic alliance relationship and exposed to a competing hegemonic rival — a condition that creates more intense and more inescapable versions of the strategic dilemmas Goh identified.

This article introduces the concept of “hegemonic squeeze” to describe this condition and tests its implications through structured comparison of Japan, South Korea, and Australia. The central argument is that middle powers experiencing hegemonic squeeze — being positioned between competing hegemonic powers in ways that create simultaneous, multidirectional, and inescapable pressures — develop more comprehensive and multidimensional autonomy strategies than those facing great power pressure in a less intense and less multidirectional form.

Theoretical Framework: From Omni-Enmeshment to Hegemonic Squeeze

1 Foundational Literature: Goh's Omni-Enmeshment and Strategic Hedging

The theoretical foundations for understanding how weaker states pursue autonomy between competing great powers were established by Goh (2005, 2007). Goh's (2005) concept of “omni-enmeshment” describes how Southeast Asian states deliberately work to weave all major powers into shared regional mechanisms simultaneously, thereby creating multiple relationships that constrain unilateral behavior and provide weaker states with diplomatic leverage. Rather than choosing between the United States and China, omni-enmeshment involves engaging both simultaneously through overlapping institutional frameworks, economic partnerships, and diplomatic initiatives.

Goh (2007) developed this into a broader framework of “strategic hedging,” arguing that states in Southeast Asia pursue an intermediate zone between clear-cut balancing against a threat and bandwagoning with a dominant power. Hedging, in Goh's (2007) formulation, involves cultivating opposite or offsetting measures simultaneously — maintaining security ties with one power while building economic and diplomatic relationships with another — in order to keep fallback

positions open and avoid the costs of premature alignment. Goh (2007) argues that this hedging strategy is not merely passive fence-sitting but an active strategy of managing uncertainty by preserving multiple options.

These foundational frameworks make an important contribution to understanding Japan, South Korea, and Australia: they establish that the logic of engaging multiple great powers simultaneously is a recognized and theoretically grounded strategy for weaker states. However, they also have important limitations when applied to formal U.S. allies. Goh's (2005, 2007) frameworks were developed for non-allied states — ASEAN members that explicitly maintained non-alignment as a strategic principle. Formal alliance membership with the United States creates both greater security benefits and more complex constraints on autonomous action than non-aligned hedging: it commits states to specific military obligations, creates path dependencies in defense procurement and command structures, and makes the “fallback positions” that Goh's (2007) hedging aims to preserve more difficult to maintain. This article therefore builds on Goh's foundational insights while extending them to the distinct context of formal alliance membership.

2 Alliance-Specific Frameworks: Binding Theory and Middle Power Typologies

To address the specific dynamics of autonomy-seeking within formal alliance structures, this article draws on three additional theoretical frameworks. Simón and Klose (2025) develop a network theory of secondary state behavior within alliances built around vertical binding — deepening direct ties with the great power patron to increase strategic indispensability — and horizontal binding — building partnerships with other middle powers to diversify strategic relationships. Unlike Goh's (2005) omni-enmeshment, which emphasizes engaging all major powers including rivals, Simón and Klose's (2025) horizontal binding emphasizes engaging like-minded partners aligned with the patron's strategic vision — a distinction that reflects the different strategic contexts of non-allied Southeast Asian states and formal U.S. allies.

Sims and Chinfulli (2025) contribute the concept of hedging as applied to states within conditions of hegemonic dominance, identifying three prerequisites for successful hedging: strong state capacity, political stability, and healthy macroeconomic fundamentals. States that possess these conditions can maintain beneficial relationships with competing great powers without becoming excessively dependent on either. Harijanto (2023) provides a two-dimensional typological framework distinguishing Status Quoist

from Reformist middle powers, and Lockean from Kantian strategic approaches, that helps explain why different middle powers pursue autonomy through different combinations of instruments.

3 Introducing Hegemonic Squeeze

Building on these theoretical foundations, this article introduces the concept of “hegemonic squeeze” to describe the specific condition faced by formal U.S. allies that are simultaneously exposed to competitive pressure from a hegemonic rival. While Goh’s (2005) omni-enmeshment describes how non-allied states voluntarily engage multiple great powers to gain leverage, and Goh’s (2007) strategic hedging describes how states maintain flexibility between competing powers, hegemonic squeeze describes a more constrained condition: being formally committed to one hegemonic power’s alliance system while simultaneously exposed to unavoidable pressures from a competing hegemonic power.

Hegemonic squeeze has three defining characteristics that distinguish it from the strategic situations addressed by Goh’s (2005, 2007) frameworks. First, simultaneity: the pressures from the patron and the rival are felt at the same time and cannot be managed sequentially. Second, multidirectionality: the challenges come from multiple dimensions — security, economic, diplomatic — rather than from a single domain. Third, inescapability: unlike the Southeast Asian states in Goh’s (2005) analysis that could adjust their level of engagement with different great powers relatively freely, formal U.S. allies in hegemonic squeeze cannot resolve their strategic dilemma by simply choosing one side without imposing unacceptable costs in the other relationship.

The article argues that hegemonic squeeze, rather than geographic proximity alone, is the primary driver of comprehensive autonomy-seeking among U.S. allies. This distinguishes the article’s argument from a simpler geographic hypothesis: it is not merely being near China that drives comprehensive autonomy strategies, but being caught between the competing demands and pressures of both patron and rival in ways that make single-dimensional responses inadequate.

Three Cases: Japan, South Korea, and Australia

1 Japan: Maximum Hegemonic Squeeze, Maximum Comprehensiveness

Japan represents the clearest case of hegemonic squeeze among the three states examined in this article. Japan is simultaneously deeply dependent on the United States for its security — relying on American extended deterrence and the mutual defense commitment of the U.S.–Japan Security Treaty — and

deeply exposed to Chinese power through territorial disputes, economic interdependence with bilateral trade regularly exceeding 300 billion U.S. dollars annually, and geographic proximity to the Taiwan Strait (CSIS, 2026). China’s official military budget now exceeds approximately 230 billion U.S. dollars annually — several times larger than Japan’s own defense budget even after Tokyo’s historic increases (IISS, 2026).

This condition of maximum hegemonic squeeze has produced the most comprehensive autonomy strategy among the three cases. As documented by IISS (2026) and The Diplomat (2025), Japan is simultaneously pursuing vertical binding through dramatic defense spending increases — reaching 2% of GDP in fiscal year 2025, backed by a 43 trillion yen five-year Defense Buildup Program — and the acquisition of counterstrike capabilities including Type-12 missiles with a 1,000 kilometer range and 400 Tomahawk cruise missiles (IISS, 2026); horizontal binding through the Quad, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision, and expanding bilateral security partnerships (Simón & Klose, 2025); hedging through maintained economic engagement with China despite growing security competition (Sims & Chinfulli, 2025); and institutional reform through the establishment of a new Joint Operations Command (CSIS, 2026). This approach closely parallels the multidirectional engagement logic of Goh’s (2005) omni-enmeshment, applied within the constraints of formal alliance membership.

The comprehensiveness of Japan’s autonomy strategy reflects the multidimensionality of its hegemonic squeeze. Japan cannot rely exclusively on vertical binding because military integration with the United States does not address its economic vulnerability to Chinese pressure. It cannot rely exclusively on horizontal binding because regional partnerships do not provide the deterrence capabilities necessary to address direct Chinese military threats. It cannot rely exclusively on hedging because economic engagement with China does not resolve the security dilemma created by Chinese military modernization (CSIS, 2026). Only a strategy that simultaneously pursues all these mechanisms — echoing the simultaneous, multidimensional logic of Goh’s (2005) omni-enmeshment within an alliance framework — can adequately address Japan’s hegemonic squeeze.

2 South Korea: Hegemonic Squeeze with Additional Complications

South Korea presents a case of hegemonic squeeze with distinctive additional complications that produce a similarly comprehensive but differently configured autonomy strategy. Like Japan, South Korea is

positioned between the competing influences of the United States and China, with deep economic interdependence with Beijing — China is South Korea's largest trading partner — and reliance on the U.S.–South Korea alliance and American extended deterrence for protection against both Chinese military power and the more immediate threat of North Korea's nuclear programs (CRS, 2026).

According to the Congressional Research Service (2026) and the Stimson Center (2026), South Korea's autonomy strategy centers on three simultaneous elements that reflect its hegemonic squeeze: the pursuit of wartime operational control (OPCON) transfer as a form of operational sovereignty within the alliance; the maintenance of strategic ambiguity in its relationships between Washington and Beijing; and the development of an increasingly independent defense industrial capacity. Research published in the *International Journal of Social Sciences Perspectives* (2026) describes this as a “Composite Equilibrium Model” that treats alliance maintenance and hedging as complementary rather than mutually exclusive — precisely the kind of simultaneous, multidimensional approach that the concept of hegemonic squeeze predicts.

South Korea's hegemonic squeeze is complicated by two factors that distinguish it from Japan's situation and create an important potential confound for the article's central argument. First, the North Korean threat adds a third dimension of pressure beyond the U.S.–China rivalry that further constrains South Korea's strategic options (CRS, 2026). Second, South Korea's economic dependence on China is proportionally greater than Japan's, making the costs of complete alignment with American China policy particularly severe. These complications make it difficult to isolate whether South Korea's comprehensive autonomy strategy reflects hegemonic squeeze or simply the multiplicity of threats it faces — an ambiguity that the article acknowledges as an important limitation and direction for future research.

3 Australia: Reduced Hegemonic Squeeze, More Focused Strategy

Australia presents a striking contrast to both Japan and South Korea that supports the article's central argument. Australia faces the same structural challenge of China's rising military power and the same uncertainty of alliance management under the Trump administration (Second Line of Defense, 2025). However, Australia's strategic position differs in ways that reduce the intensity of its hegemonic squeeze and produce a more focused rather than comprehensive autonomy strategy.

Australia's hegemonic squeeze is less intense for several reasons. Geographically, Australia is significantly more distant from China's immediate military reach, without the territorial disputes and daily security incidents that characterize Japan's and South Korea's relationships with Beijing. Economically, while China is Australia's largest trading partner, Australia has demonstrated greater willingness to absorb the economic costs of firm positions on security issues, as evidenced by its resilience to Chinese economic coercion following its call for a COVID-19 inquiry. This lower economic vulnerability reduces the inescapability of hegemonic squeeze: Australia has more room to maneuver between U.S. and Chinese pressures than Japan or South Korea, because the costs of firm alignment with the United States are lower.

In response to its less intense hegemonic squeeze, Australia has pursued a more focused autonomy strategy centered primarily on military self-reliance through AUKUS. According to PIR Center (2025), AUKUS — the security partnership among Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States for the provision of nuclear-powered submarine technology — reflects Australia's “fear of abandonment” and its determination to acquire military capabilities that give it genuine operational reach independent of immediate American support. USSC (2026) reports that 59% of Australians support a more independent foreign policy. Yet despite this public sentiment, Australia's autonomy strategy remains more focused than Japan's or South Korea's: centered on a single major capability acquisition rather than on simultaneously pursuing vertical binding, horizontal binding, hedging, and military modernization across multiple dimensions. Unlike Japan's comprehensive engagement of multiple partners and China simultaneously — which echoes Goh's (2005) omni-enmeshment logic — Australia's strategy is more narrowly focused on a single alliance-deepening initiative.

Comparative Analysis: Hegemonic Squeeze and Autonomy Comprehensiveness

The three cases reveal a clear pattern supporting the article's central argument. Japan, experiencing maximum hegemonic squeeze, pursues the most comprehensive autonomy strategy: simultaneously combining vertical binding, horizontal binding, hedging, and institutional reform across military, diplomatic, and economic dimensions (Simón & Klose, 2025; Sims & Chinfulli, 2025; IISS, 2026; CSIS, 2026). South Korea, experiencing similarly intense but differently configured hegemonic squeeze complicated by North Korea, pursues a comprehensive strategy combining OPCON transfer, strategic ambiguity, and independent defense capacity development (CRS,

2026; Stimson Center, 2026). Australia, experiencing hegemonic squeeze in a less intense and less multidirectional form, pursues a more focused strategy centered primarily on military self-reliance through AUKUS (PIR Center, 2025; USSC, 2026).

This pattern suggests that the key variable driving autonomy comprehensiveness is not geographic proximity to China per se, but the condition of hegemonic squeeze that proximity often — but not always — produces. What matters is whether a state faces simultaneous, multidirectional, and inescapable pressures from both its hegemonic patron and its hegemonic rival. This finding extends the logic of Goh's (2005) omni-enmeshment to formal alliance contexts: just as non-allied Southeast Asian states engaged multiple great powers simultaneously to manage uncertainty (Goh, 2005), formal U.S. allies experiencing hegemonic squeeze pursue multiple autonomy strategies simultaneously for analogous reasons. The key difference is that hegemonic squeeze — unlike the relatively voluntary omni-enmeshment of ASEAN states — is a more constrained and inescapable condition that intensifies the pressure toward multidimensional responses.

The comparative analysis also confirms Harijanto's (2023) typological framework. All three cases are Status Quoist — seeking to preserve the U.S.-led regional order — but differ in their process orientations. Japan is transitioning from Kantian to Lockean (Harijanto, 2023), combining diplomatic multilateralism with growing military assertiveness. South Korea occupies a more ambivalent position, combining Lockean alliance management with Kantian diplomatic hedging toward China (CRS, 2026). Australia represents the most consistently Lockean approach, prioritizing military capability and alliance deepening over diplomatic flexibility (PIR Center, 2025). These differences in process orientation are themselves products of different intensities of hegemonic squeeze: the more intense the squeeze, the more states are driven to combine Lockean and Kantian approaches simultaneously rather than relying on one or the other.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This article's argument must be qualified by an important limitation that simultaneously identifies a productive direction for future research. The analysis cannot definitively establish that hegemonic squeeze — rather than the simple number of simultaneous security threats — is the primary driver of comprehensive autonomy strategies. South Korea's case complicates this distinction: South Korea faces not only hegemonic squeeze between the United States and China, but also the additional North Korean threat,

making it difficult to isolate whether its comprehensive autonomy strategy reflects its position between two hegemonies or simply the multiplicity of threats it faces (CRS, 2026).

Future research should examine cases that allow for cleaner separation of these two variables. Middle powers that face multiple security threats without being positioned between two hegemonic powers — such as Israel, which faces multiple regional threats but operates in a less clearly bipolar great power environment — could provide important comparative evidence. Similarly, middle powers that are geographically proximate to China but do not experience hegemonic squeeze in the same way — such as Vietnam, which maintains significant distance from both American and Chinese alliance systems, reflecting the non-allied hedging strategy analyzed by Goh (2005, 2007) — could illuminate the extent to which hegemonic squeeze, rather than geographic proximity or threat multiplicity, drives autonomy comprehensiveness.

Additionally, future research should examine the temporal dimension of hegemonic squeeze. This article has analyzed autonomy strategies at a particular moment — the period of Trump's second administration and China's accelerating military modernization in 2025–2026. Whether the patterns identified here persist across different political contexts, and whether changes in the intensity of U.S.–China competition alter the relationship between hegemonic squeeze and autonomy comprehensiveness, remains an important open question.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that middle powers squeezed between two competing hegemonic powers develop more comprehensive and multidimensional autonomy strategies than those facing unidirectional great power pressure. Through comparative analysis of Japan, South Korea, and Australia, the article has shown that the condition of hegemonic squeeze — characterized by simultaneous, multidirectional, and inescapable pressures from both patron and rival — drives states toward the comprehensive integration of vertical binding, horizontal binding, hedging, and military modernization that characterizes Japan's and South Korea's contemporary autonomy strategies (Simón & Klose, 2025; Sims & Chinfulli, 2025; IISS, 2026; CSIS, 2026).

The article's central theoretical contribution is the concept of hegemonic squeeze. While building on the foundational insights of Goh's (2005) omni-enmeshment and Goh's (2007) strategic hedging —

which established that weaker states pursue autonomy through simultaneous engagement of multiple great powers — the concept of hegemonic squeeze extends this logic to the specific and more constrained context of formal U.S. allies facing unavoidable pressures from a competing hegemonic power. Where Goh's (2005) omni-enmeshment describes a relatively voluntary strategy of simultaneous great power engagement, hegemonic squeeze describes a more inescapable condition that intensifies and compels multidimensional responses. By introducing this concept, the article opens a productive new line of inquiry into the determinants of middle power behavior in the contemporary era of U.S.–China strategic competition.

For policymakers in states experiencing hegemonic squeeze, the article's findings suggest that comprehensive, multidimensional autonomy strategies are not merely desirable but structurally necessary: single-dimensional approaches are insufficient to address the full complexity of their strategic situation. For policymakers in the United States, the findings suggest that allies experiencing hegemonic squeeze will inevitably pursue complex and sometimes ambivalent strategic postures, and that effective alliance management requires understanding and accommodating the structural pressures that drive their behavior.

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