



Contribution ID: 298

Type: **Paper Abstract (Closed Panels)**

Competitive Cyber Statecraft of the Middle-Ground: A Neoclassical Realist Model

Thursday 26 June 2025 10:20 (20 minutes)

As cyberspace becomes a central arena for geopolitical competition, middle-ground countries —those neither strictly aligned with Western nor Eastern spheres of influence —play a growing role in shaping cyber governance (Gartzke and Lindsay, 2015; Nye, 2022). Traditional neorealist frameworks, which emphasize balancing and bandwagoning, fail to explain the diversity of cyber sovereignty approaches among these states. This paper applies neoclassical realism (NCR) to analyze how elite perceptions, economic dependencies, and security considerations mediate systemic pressures, leading to varied models of cyber statecraft (Rose, 1998; Kitchen and Tirosh, 2021).

The study identifies four distinct cyber sovereignty approaches: strategic alignment, where middle-ground and other smaller states integrate into dominant digital ecosystems for economic benefits (e.g., Ireland, Luxembourg); sovereignty assertion, where states impose digital restrictions based on nationalist or security concerns (e.g., India, Indonesia); selective engagement, where states participate in norm-setting while hedging between major blocs (e.g., ASEAN, South Africa); and pragmatism, where states adopt fluid digital partnerships to maximize flexibility (e.g., Brazil, UAE) (Mueller, 2017; Segal, 2018).

By examining the domestic political drivers behind these choices, this paper challenges the liberal assumption that states will internalize global cyber norms through multilateral institutions (Drezner, 2004; DeNardis, 2020). Instead, it argues that economic fragmentation and regional coalitions are shaping the future of cyber governance, with middle-ground states acting as key decision-makers rather than passive rule-takers (Gopinath et al., 2025), contributing to de-centering international relations (IR) (Zambrano Márquez, 2020).

The policy implications suggest that major powers and international organizations must engage middle-ground countries as strategic cyber actors rather than treating them as peripheral players. Supporting regional digital coalitions and offering flexible, case-sensitive partnerships will be critical to ensuring a stable, multipolar cyber order. As cyberspace governance fragments, understanding the agency of middle-ground states is essential to shaping the future of international cyber politics.

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Author: Dr LAUDRAIN, Arthur (King's College London - Department of War Studies)

Co-author: Dr DEVANNY, Joe (King's College London - Department of War Studies)

Presenter: Dr LAUDRAIN, Arthur (King's College London - Department of War Studies)

Session Classification: Cybersecurity and digital technologies in international security, strategy, and global power relations

Track Classification: Closed Panels: Cybersecurity and digital technologies in international security, strategy, and global power relations