The changing architecture of politics in the Asia-Pacific: Australia's middle power moment?

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Abstract

Middle power theory is enjoying a modest renaissance. For all its possible limitations, middle power theory offers a potentially useful framework for thinking about the behavior of, and options open, to key states in the Asia-Pacific such as South Korea, Japan and Australia, states that are secondary rather than primary players. We argue that middle powers have the potential to successfully implement 'games of skill', especially at moments of international transition. Frequently, however, middle powers choose not to exercise their potential influence because of extant alliance commitments and the priority accorded to security questions. We substantiate these claims through an examination of the Australian case. Australian policymakers have made much of the potential role middle powers might play, but they have frequently failed to develop an independent foreign policy position because of pre-existing alliance commitments. We suggest that if the 'middle power moment' is to amount to more than rhetoric, opportunities must be acted upon.

1 Introduction

When asked what he thought about Western civilization, Mahatma Gandhi famously replied, 'I think it would be a good idea'. Much the same might be said about 'middle power diplomacy'. Despite a good deal of recent interest in this idea on the part of scholars and – more importantly, perhaps – policymakers, there is remarkably little evidence of middle power diplomacy actually having a discernible impact on international affairs. On the contrary, there is much about the contemporary international context, or at least the way practitioners think about it, that is strikingly similar to the twentieth or even the nineteenth centuries. Dispiriting as it might be to say so, realists do have a point: power continues to matter, especially when it comes in the form of powerful nation-states intent on asserting themselves. For all the potential that middle powers may possess in theory, in practice without the agreement and participation of the 'great' powers, substantive and effective international cooperation and policy innovation – difficult at the best of times – is all but impossible (Drezner, 2007).

Nowhere are the limits and the – as yet unrealized – possibilities of middle power diplomacy more in evidence than the Asia-Pacific region. However, if our claims about the limited impact of middle power diplomacy hold good there, they are likely to be persuasive elsewhere too. This region is, after all, rightly celebrated as the world's most economically dynamic and is associated with significant, if not universal, exercises in political liberalization. It is also associated with the rise of a group of states that potentially fit comfortably under the middle power rubric. Indeed, the likes of South Korea and Indonesia have begun to employ this sort of language to describe their foreign policies. And yet South Korea in particular and Northeast Asia more generally are also stark reminders of how much historical and geopolitical baggage the region as a whole carries: whether it is unresolved territorial disputes or the unpredictable behavior of North Korea, regional politics continue to be overlaid by the historically entrenched legacies of earlier conflicts and struggles. Unsurprisingly, such tensions have tended to generate familiar-looking realist foreign policy responses. Crucially for our argument – and the actual practice of regional diplomacy – these are not just anachronistic curiosities, but powerful determinants of the contemporary contours of regional politics.

Few countries better illustrate the pull of historically institutionalized ties than the principal empirical focus of our discussion, Australia. And

yet no country has been more enthusiastic about promoting the idea of middle power diplomacy and its potential to influence the conduct of international affairs in areas of particular concern to second tier states. The tension between Australia's putative role as a beacon of innovative, in-dependent foreign policy and its traditional role as a junior partner in a region-wide system of alliances is, we argue, central to understanding both the limits and the possibilities of middle power diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific. Given both the 'rise of China' and the recent 'pivot' to the region by the United States – self-evidently not unrelated events – this tension and the constraints it places on the foreign policies of the great and the not-so-great alike is likely to persist.

Consequently, we argue in what follows that many of the region's poten-tial middle powers, rather than practicing the sort of diplomacy we outline in the first part of this paper and which they often rhetorically espouse, have instead voluntarily limited their options by reinforcing alliance struc-tures and relationships that we might otherwise have expected to become progressively less salient in a post-Cold War era. Whatever the strategic ra-tionale may be for such alliances, they necessarily foreclose the possibility of genuinely independent coalitions of like-minded, similarly credentialed middle powers developing novel responses to regional or even global policy challenges. This is a striking and somewhat surprising outcome that is at odds with what the first wave of middle power theorizing in the early 1990s might have led us to expect. After all, the end of the Cold War really did mark a major 'structural' change in the international system that seemed likely to open up new possibilities for new powers.

If the sudden flowering of middle power theorizing in the aftermath of the Cold War is understandable enough, perhaps, how do we account for its recent renaissance, and what does this tell us about the contemporary international order and the policymakers that populate it? One of the prin-cipal goals of the following discussion is to revisit the first wave of middle power theory and interrogate the claims it made and the expectations it harbored, and to contrast them with the current interest in the concept. We shall argue that while some space for middle power activism exists in less existentially fraught issue areas, national security remains sacrosanct and the policy options of junior alliance partners remain constrained as a consequence. However, we do not suggest that it is possible to simply 'read off' a relationship between 'middle power moments' and larger geopolit-ical shifts in the international system. The likes of New Zealand and

Canada, to say nothing of the famously independent Scandinavians, for example, have not always been alliance enthusiasts. What we can say is that some structural conditions are more conducive to middle power diplomacy than others, but none are decisive (or ever likely to be). We begin our discussion by briefly highlighting the structural conditions that have been associated with the rise, fall and rise-again of middle power theory, before unpacking the theory itself. The last part of the paper is primarily devoted to a case study of the Australian case, which highlights all of middle power theory's promise and unfulfilled potential.

2 Middle powers in context

If middle powers can act independently and produce new innovative answers to pressing collective action problems such as climate change mitigation, for example, then they are not only to be welcomed practically, but they would provide a major challenge for some of the more influential strands of international relations theory. While we are sympathetic to some of the implicit aspirations of middle power theory and practice on normative grounds, we argue that the realists are likely to be proved right but not, perhaps, for the reasons that are generally proffered. Structures are not determinative, we suggest, but the failure to exercise independent agency by middle powers means that they might as well be. Before we explore these theoretical issues in any detail, however, it is useful to highlight the world they attempt to explain and the key changes that have transformed it.

The Cold War was a period unlike any other in human history. It not only determined the practice of international relations for the best part of half a century, but it also profoundly influenced the way policymakers and scholars thought about 'the real world'. In those not so distant days, of course, the reality of potential nuclear annihilation did focus the attention of diplomat and theorist alike. What is most striking and distinctive about this period in retrospect, perhaps, was the prominent role of ideological contestation. But we also need to remember that Cold War actually remained (largely) cold and the stand-off endured because conflict between the superpowers – to all but the most Strangelovian of strategists, at least – was unthinkable. Out of this seemingly ossified structure emerged what remains one of the single most influential works of international relations theory. Waltz's (1979) *Theory of International Politics* was the very antithesis of middle power thinking, a world in which the structure of the

system essentially determined the behavior of states as they struggled for survival in a self-help system where the powerful prospered and the weak withered. What policymakers thought or how they organized the political life of the nation was largely irrelevant. The fact that Waltz's (1993) neo-realism failed to predict the course of post-Cold War international politics has done little to undermine his importance in the eyes of his admirers or transform views about the nature of security as much as we might have expected.

We highlight the theoretical and practical importance of this kind of Waltzian logic because its influence endures – at least in the strategic/geopolitical arena. What is important for our purposes is the impact US strategic policy during the Cold War had on Australia and its region. Although Gaddis (1997, p. 82) argues that 'the Cold War in Asia developed largely out of *inadvertence* [emphasis in original]', its impact on what we now think of as East Asia was profound. Indeed, it was impossible until recently to even speak of an 'East Asian region' as anything other than the emptiest of geographical signifiers (Beeson, 2009). One of the most important consequences of this period as far as both Australia and the putative East Asian region were concerned was the 'hub-and-spokes' strategic architecture that the United States was instrumental in creating across the region. In its heyday, any prospect of an integrated East Asian region was effectively foreclosed by the implacable logic of the Cold War. It is no coincidence that China's re-emergence as a major regional power gathered pace after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The point to emphasize is that even now this distinctive 'security architecture' continues to define and constrain the policy options available to allies.[1]

During the 1990s, until the advent of unipolarity and the presidency of George W. Bush transformed the strategic landscape yet again (Jervis, 2008), it seemed as if other options were possible. There was much talk about 'the economy stupid', as policymakers everywhere seemed to recalibrate their policy priorities. Even in the United States, 'statecraft became less integrated as foreign economic policy and national security proceeded on separate diplomatic and institutional tracks' (Mastanduno, 1998, p. 843). Geo-economics seemed to have trumped geopolitics and there did, indeed, seem a moment in which the so-called trading states were

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1   For a discussion of 'security architecture' in an East Asian context, see Tow and Taylor (2010).

pioneering new forms of development and diplomacy (Luttwak, 1990; Rosecrance, 1996). It was, of course, out of this heady, post-Cold War atmosphere that middle power theory emerged. The key questions now, however, are: why has middle power theory made a comeback and why has it proved so popular with policymakers? Equally pertinently, is it likely to prove any more durable as the basis for thinking about and practicing international relations? To begin to answer these questions, we need to look more closely at what middle power theorists have claimed over the years.

3 Middle powers in theory

If there is a correlation between the quantity of writing on a subject and its salience then there clearly is something to the theory and practice of being a middle power (see, *inter alia,* Wood, 1988; Cox, 1989; Pratt, 1990; Cooper *et al.*, 1993; Cooper, 1997; Nossal and Stubbs, 1997; Ravenhill, 1998; Stairs, 1998; Van Der Westhuizen, 1998; Jordaan, 2003; Rutherford *et al.*, 2003; Ping, 2005; Ungerer, 2007; Beeson, 2011; Efstathopoulos, 2011; Gilley, 2011; Cotton and Ravenhill, 2012; Manicom and O'Neil, 2012; Soeya, 2012). It is worth noting at the outset that the middle power concept has been around for some time (Holmes, 1966; Holbraad, 1984), but it has only enjoyed real prominence at particular moments in history. Given that this is plainly one of them, it is an opportune moment to revisit some of its key ideas to see whether they are any more likely to endure this time than they have in the past.

The idea of middle powers as a distinctive category of actor in international relations has been, and remains, problematic. At its most basic, middle power theory makes one important contribution to international thinking, however: it provides an alternative analytical way of framing of international politics, viewed through the lenses of secondary, as opposed to the primary players. This is an approach to international thinking that is all too often overlooked in the dominant realist literature that we briefly noted earlier and which is notoriously skeptical about the ability of lesser powers, ideas and institutions to transform the essential dynamics of international politics (Mearsheimer, 1994/95).

In contrast to the structural realism of some of the most influential models of international relations, middle power theory considers the international policy-making process as potentially a 'game of skill', not simply a game of power determined by size, power and geographic location (see

quintessentially, Vital, 1967). On the contrary, middle-power theory – especially its 'first wave' (see Wood, 1988; Pratt, 1990) – assigned greater weight to the inspirational virtues of benign 'internationalism'. Later, more 'rigorous', rationalist articulations of middle power theory moved beyond these comforting; some might say sentimental 'feel good approaches' with their focus on the moral virtues of states, to stress the instrumental potential of states to develop and use technical skills, entrepreneurial capacities and initiative-oriented sources of leadership. It was for this reason that a collaborative contribution to the first wave by one of the current authors focused on coalition-building activities in issue-specific contexts (Cooper *et al.*, 1993). Although the primary focus of this volume was on the potentially more responsive arena of economic policy, it is important to remember that the coalition-building and cooperative behavior that characterized the 'international community's' response to the first Gulf Conflict enjoyed much broader support and normative credibility than the subsequent invasion of Iraq led by George W. Bush. Far fewer middle powers felt obliged to sign up to the 'coalition of the willing'. In other words, circumstances and state preferences may matter even in the security realm (Beeson, 2007).

While still largely 'statist' in its view of the world, middle power theory implies that state actors have a capacity to think beyond the dominant drivers of realist power politics. Middle power theory is more dynamic than much great power-driven analysis. It recognizes that the relationship between leadership and followership is a two-way interactive process not simply a uni-directional – rule maker, rule taker – relationship. Much post-World War II international theory, under-written by assumptions of hegemony, presumes that followers have limited autonomy and gives little credence to the interactive, as opposed to uni-directional nature of the leader–follower dynamic (Harvey, 2003; Johnson, 2004). Cooper *et al.* (1993), by contrast, in their comparative discussion of Australia and Canada in the closing stages of the twentieth century, demonstrate quite conclusively the ability of middle powers to lead larger players (in the development of the Cairns Group and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) on the one hand, for example) and the potential importance of their willingness to follow the larger players (in the first Gulf War Coalition on the other).

The key argument to be drawn from an examination of middle-power behavior of the type exhibited by Australia and Canada in the latter decades of the twentieth century, therefore, is that when the policy issue is

of a more traditional power politics variety (as in the case of the first Gulf War) then followership of great powers is more likely. In the context of complex interdependence (as in the economic negotiations of the Uruguay MTN Round or the regional institutional conversations of the kind illustrated in the development of APEC) then the influence of the games of skill, at which middle powers could excel, is more likely to flourish. The point to emphasize, however, is that even in those issue areas where middle powers have the potential to exercise agency, shape debates and even influence the behavior of their more powerful counterparts, they need to have both the capacity and – equally importantly – the desire to do so.

3.1 Unpacking middle power theory

One way of establishing the conditions under which middle power agency might be exercised is focusing on what Young (1989) identified as the emerging technical and entrepreneurial definitions of leadership that accompanied the intensification of 'globalization' following the end of the Cold War.[2] The relationship between leadership and any meaningful middle power theory in international relations is crucial. There is no point being classified as a middle power if it does not lead to the ability to have some impact on the policy process; unless the aim of leaders of the so-called middle powers is merely the wish to maximize their potential to free ride as, for example, Joseph Nye suggests in his earliest, and admittedly least sophisticated foray into the study of US leadership, *Bound to Lead* (Nye, 1990). Nye assumes that followership is but a passive act rather than a dynamic one and an inevitable role for secondary powers. This is because Nye privileges an essentially structuralist perspective stressing aggregate state power and location in a hierarchy of states. Normative influence (soft power) is principally the preserve of hegemonic actors, and not given to smaller players. But if we take seriously authors such as Kindleberger (1988) then any simple assumption that leadership was/is merely akin to headship, dominance, coercion or the application of brute strength must be questioned.

This position was developed and refined by Cooper *et al.* in 1991 and especially in 1993 (Cooper *et al.*, 1993), in their development of middle power

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2   There is, of course, a vast literature on this subject, but for our purposes, it stands primarily as a useful shorthand for the cross-border integration of economic activity and the attempts of policymakers to govern it. See Held *et al.* (1999).

theory. In contrast to Nye, they attribute greater salience to egoistic, agency-based influences. They are not dismissive of, but less persuaded by, traditional understandings of middle power influence (classically Holbraad, 1984) that emphasize (i) 'middling' in terms of either location (between Great Power systems), (ii) size (on a scale between big and small states) or (iii) 'middleness' (adopting a middling ideological position between two polarized ideological positions or political systems). There may be some self-satisfaction inherent in this latter position in which middle powers are seen as occupying the reasonable position or the high moral ground between competing ideologies. But given the invariable lack of consistency, in the foreign policies of even the most high minded of states, this is a difficult position to sustain. Indeed, even 'like-minded' Scandinavian states, with strong records of 'humane internationalism', can find it difficult to always meet the standards set for this definition (see Pratt, 1990).

The alternative analysis of middle powers developed by Cooper *et al.*, resists stressing the normative agenda, that is, what states *ought* to do. Instead, adopting what we might call a behavioral approach, it privileges analysis of the political and diplomatic behavior of the so-called middle powers. That is not so much *what* they should do but *how* they do it. Practical behavior not moral consistency is the litmus test of what late Canadian scholar Holmes (1966), albeit with considerable irony, called 'middle-powermanship', the principal characteristic of which was a tendency to pursue solutions to international problems through multilateral channels, institution-building and a willingness to adopt compromise positions and pursue 'good international citizenship'. This is not, as former Australian foreign minister Gareth Evans noted (DFAT, 1990, p. 592) the equivalent of the 'boy scout good deed' approach to foreign policy. Rather it is an approach guided by an assumption of the presence of the functional resources to underwrite the technical and entrepreneurial abilities required to fulfill initiative-oriented roles (Holmes, 1979). Moreover, with this approach, it is not necessary for a state to self-define as a middle power to be practicing middle power behavior.

3.2 Games of skill versus games of will

Middle power theory is thus premised on the ability to use non-material assets such as persuasion to build coalitions. It is 'the art of the indirect', playing the role of (i) catalyst, (ii) facilitator and (iii) manager. As a

catalyst, middle powers have the potential to provide the initial intellectual political energy to trigger initiatives. In the middle stages of a policy narrative, a successful middle power player might facilitate associational, collaborative and coalitional activity. It is here that superior diplomatic ability (a skill not to be under-rated or assumed to be possessed by every foreign office) to plan and convene meetings and provide technical support (declaration drafting and the like) ought to become important. In the third stage of this ideal-typical process of middle power diplomacy, an ability and willingness to support and under-write 'institution building' – writ large to mean anything from the development of norms and conventions to the actual creation of new organizations – becomes crucial (for an elaboration of these three phases, see Cooper *et al.*, 1993).

Requiring expertise and a dedicated core of experienced officials, these highly specialized activities are, of course, not simply the preserve of the polities and bureaucracies of middle powers. Great powers clearly have these capacities, too – often in significantly greater quantities. But for one reason other great powers may be unwilling or unable to use them. Norway's role in brokering international peace deals is one frequently cited example. Such skills take time to acquire and even then may not be available for use across the policy spectrum. Australian and Canadian trade officials, for example, took many years to learn them before they could bring them successfully to bear in the development of one quite specific policy initiative the Cairns Group in the Uruguay Round of Multilateral Trade Negotiations (see Higgott and Cooper, 1990) – a classic example of what has come to be known as 'niche diplomacy'. Similarly, the development of APEC was predicated on many years of prior intellectual expertise building in the domain of regional economic cooperation across the Asia-Pacific (see Drysdale, 1988). In short, the foreign policy establishment of an aspiring middle power cannot simply just switch to middle power mode.

However, even where the capacity to play such a role potentially exists, the ability to exercise it depends on a number of factors. First, the conditions have to be permissive. One of the reasons why there was only limited interest in the idea of middle powers during the Cold War was simply because the capacity to exercise independent, meaningful agency in such circumstances was all but foreclosed as the preconditions for institution building and cooperation were inadequate (Ruggie, 2004; Rathbun, 2011). To exercise potential agency, middle powers need the political space afforded by an era of what Hurrell (2006) describes as 'hegemonic

decompression'. We may indeed be entering an era when America's apparent relative decline and the absence of a hegemonic pretender mean that the prospects for effective middle power diplomacy may actually be structurally enhanced – a question we return to in the conclusion. But even if this proves to be the case, the key question in this context is whether, when afforded such an opportunity, putative middle powers have the desire to exercise it. The second prerequisite for potentially effective middle power diplomacy, therefore, is a purposeful willingness to at least try to exercise *independent* agency. As we shall see in our Australian case study, despite all the middle power rhetoric, Australian policy – especially in the security arena – has generally been an adjunct of, and supplement to, the foreign policy of the United States.

The possibility that the effectiveness of middle powers may be constrained by their closeness to, and reliance on, a particular great power is central to a third possible quality of middle-powerdom. The normative self-assignment of a particular identity by a country's leadership is a major element of middle power thinking and practice (see the excellent discussion of this relationship in Carr, 2013). The assignment of a particular identity is not without material or emotional cost or, as in democracies, party political contest. Considerable bureaucratic learning is required. This was the case in Australia in the late 1980s with some success (see Cooper *et al.*, 1993) but, as in the case of South Korea, a decade or so later, such learning is not axiomatically guaranteed success (see Shinn, 1999). The point to emphasize here is that, as the constructivists have usefully pointed out, we cannot simply read off the identity or possible policies of any particular state simply from its position in the inter-state system. In a less ideologically rigid era characterized by a dramatic decline in inter-state violence, the 'moral purpose of the state' is an open-ended, socially constructed work-in-progress, not something that is simply determined by the structural qualities of international politics (Reus-Smit, 1999).

The approach to understanding middle power theory set out earlier has a number of advantages over earlier understandings. By focusing less on positional attributes and more on tasks performed in issue-specific policy areas, a less arbitrary assessment of the range of middle power leadership activities can be achieved. Rather than concentrating on a narrow group of 'like-minded' countries, we can instead open up the study of a wider range of middle sized countries – that is countries that act as middle powers identified by virtue of their diplomatic behavior. But a behavioral-cum-normative

approach is itself not without criticism. As with some of the other approaches, it can be seen to have a cyclical, time bound quality to it. Moreover, the proof of the pudding, as we might say, is in the eating and as Carr (2013) suggests, the ultimate test of middle power behavior is 'systemic impact'. Here, the record is more mixed and reminds us once again of the importance of agency and identity in seizing the middle power moment.

4 Middle powers in practice

Australia highlights both the potential and the limits of middle power diplomacy (Beeson, 2011). On the one hand, no country's leaders have adopted the language and talked up the potential of middle power diplomacy as a source of policy innovation quite as avidly or consistently as Australia's have. On the other hand, however, few countries have cleaved more tightly to a great power than Australia. Whatever the possible merits of Australia's alliance relationship with the United States, and the close personal and policy ties this encourages (Douglas and Stone, 2013), it is clear that one of its effects is to necessarily circumscribe the range of policy options that are considered feasible – to 'serious' observers, at least. To explain this seeming paradox, we need to make a few brief remarks about both the nature of alliances and Australia's particular historical circumstances.

4.1 Separation anxiety

Since the late 1980s when the Cold War was drawing to a close, 'Asia' has been seen as the key to Australia's future prosperity. Indeed, the principal public policy debate these days as far as Australia's relations with its immediate neighborhood is concerned is about the best way of exploiting its geographical good fortune (see CoA 2012). Being adjacent to the world's most dynamic economic region has potential advantages, and policymakers of all ideological hues have come to recognize its importance. Things were not always thus. For most of Australia's history, the region to Australia's north has been seen as a potential threat, and a poorly understood one at that (Walker, 1999). Even now, strategic policy is constructed in the belief that if danger threatens Australia, this is where it will come from. While this may not be an unreasonable assumption, the result has been a noteworthy bipartisan conformity in strategic policy.

The centerpiece of Australia's strategic posture is the ANZUS alliance.[3] Although New Zealand has long since departed from this arrangement, Australia's commitment remains rock-solid and enjoys widespread popular support among the general public. Indeed, as part of its perceived alliance obligations, Australia has participated in the wars in Korea, Vietnam, the first Gulf War, the invasion of Iraq and the as-yet-unfinished conflict in Afghanistan. Whether any of these conflicts was even a tangential threat to Australia is debatable, but this did not stop generations of Australian policymakers from offering enthusiastic support and significant quantities of blood and treasure. Even now, this tradition continues, as Australia is to host a permanent contingent of American troops in Darwin as part of the United States so-called pivot toward East Asia.

Our intention here is not to embark on an extensive critique of Australia's strategic policy, but to draw out its possible implications for middle power diplomacy. A couple of general observations are worth considering, however. First, inter-state conflict is now very rare, and the need for the sort of protection alliances is thought to afford looks less compelling (Pinker, 2012). As Menon notes (2007, p. 185) 'The claim that our allies face threats and that the United States must therefore retain troops on their soil is common but increasingly threadbare'. And yet despite an epochal change in the underlying structure of the international system, there has been no change in Australia's overall strategic posture (Beeson, 2013). On the contrary, as we have seen, Australian policymakers have actually moved to reinforce their commitment to the alliance and the obligations it entails. And yet as even some of the United States own foremost geopolitical thinkers have pointed out, 'the United States must realise that stability in Asia can no longer be imposed by a non-Asian power, least of all by the direct application of US military power' (Brzezinski, 2012, p. 101).

Given that the US strategy is clearly aimed at the region's most prominent rising power and Australia's largest trade partner, one might have expected that the evolving Sino-American rivalry would have sparked a significant recalibration of Australian policy in light of changing circumstances. Nothing could be further from the truth. Despite the growing

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3   The Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty was established in 1951, although New Zealand has not been an effective member since the 1980s following a dispute over visiting rights for nuclear armed and/or powered ships. It is worth pointing out that despite no longer being a member and having very limited independent military capacity, New Zealand remains untroubled by conventional strategic threats.

importance of Australia's economic relationship with China and a reduction in the sort of state-based threats that alliances are intended to deter, there has been no discernible change in Australia's strategic policy. The key question here is whether enduring alliance commitments are actually constraining policy in the one area where middle powers could reasonably be expected to exercise greater freedom of action.

4.2 Australia's activist economic diplomacy

Since the days of former Foreign Minister Gareth Evans – who actually put his name to a book on the topic (Evans and Grant, 1995) – middle power diplomacy has been a prominent idea in Australian foreign policy circles, or it has on the Labor side of politics, at least.[4] Even within the ranks of the ALP, however, activist diplomacy has been primarily targeted at economic issues.[5] In this context, Evans was a prominent figure in the first major iteration of middle power foreign policy activism in Australia, with ministries under his jurisdiction playing a key role in establishing lobby groups of agricultural producers such as the Cairns Group (Higgott and Cooper, 1990) and paving the way for the creation of the ARF (Caballero-Anthony, 2005).

However, in line with what we claim is the cyclical nature of middle power theory and practice, subsequent conservative governments in Australia, especially under the leadership of former Liberal Prime Minister John Howard, studiously eschewed the label and avoided multilateral ties whenever possible. Howard preferred to base foreign policy on what he described as a form 'practical realism', which reflected his belief that Australia had little natural cultural affinity with the region of which it was part – a stance that seemed to make surprisingly little difference to Australia's ties with East Asia it should be noted (Wesley, 2007). In contrast to the Howard era of relative pragmatism and traditionalism, the first Labor government of Kevin Rudd saw a return to, and marks the recent high point of, enthusiasm for middle power diplomacy and Australia's potential to play a leading role in world affairs (Beeson, 2011).

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4   Australian politics is dominated by the notionally 'left wing' Australian Labor Party (ALP) and coalition governments formed by the ideologically conservative Liberal Party and the rurally-based National Party.

5   Having said that Evans also played a prominent role in championing the development of a regional security institution, something that culminated in the establishment of the ASEAN Regional Forum. Significantly, however, this organization has never been very influential or lived up to the expectations of some of its supporters. See Emmers and Tan (2011).

Despite Rudd's enthusiasm for the idea of middle power diplomacy, however, it is important to recognize that it contained contradictions that made its application problematic. Rudd's foreign policy was based on 'three pillars', only two of which – Asian engagement and a commitment to multilateralism – were easily congruent with the idea of the sort of independent approach we might expect from an aspirant middle power. The other pillar – maintaining a strategic alliance with the United States – necessarily had, and indeed still has, the potential to constrain the policy options available to strategically dependent allies. Alliance politics are not the subject of much debate in Australia, and this is revealing in itself. There is generally an unquestioning bipartisan agreement about the primacy of the US alliance and about the need to do whatever is necessary to maintain it, a reality that supports our contention that approaches to foreign policy under-written by traditional power politics assumptions are more likely to produce followership than policy innovation.

While there are signs of a shift in the content of the foreign policy debate in Australia,[6] at this stage the mainstream view remains overwhelmingly that Australia must do whatever it takes to shore up the Alliance. Most recently, this has meant establishing the permanent American troop presence in Darwin noted earlier – despite the unhappiness evinced by China (Flitton, 2012). Our argument here is not about the merits of this policy, but about its impact on the policy autonomy of notionally independent states. In Australia's case, it has played an active role in entrenching its alliance relationship and supporting the institutionalization of America's presence in the region. Other states that are less closely aligned strategically have behaved in quite different ways when presented with apparently similar sets of international circumstances, however. It is revealing, for example, that other middle powers such as Canada and New Zealand chose not to become involved in the 'coalition of the willing' that invaded Iraq (Beeson, 2007). The point to emphasize, therefore, is that the precise nature of any bilateral relationship between great and middle powers, or leaders and followers, is negotiated and not predetermined. Middle powers have the potential to exercise independent agency should they care to do so.

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6   The most important contribution in this context has been White (2010) suggestion that the region develop a 'concert of powers' to mange strategic relations, in which states such as Australia accommodate China's rise.

4.3 Middle powers and multilateral cooperation

The strategic choices middle powers make have consequences and may circumscribe the options that might otherwise be open to them. It is noteworthy, for example, that Indonesia sees Australia's enthusiasm for its alliance relationship, with its concomitant emphasis on military power, in altogether different light than do the Australians (McDonald and Brown, 2011). Given that Indonesia is Australia's closest neighbor, a potentially vital security partner, and widely thought to be among the world's most important 'rising powers' (Laksmana, 2011), this is, or perhaps should be, as former prime minister Keating (2012) claims, an especially important influence on Australian policy priorities. If countries such as Australia are to develop coalitions of similar, like-minded powers, its nearest neighbor would seem and obvious place to start. But there is nothing inevitable about putative middle powers coming together in like-minded coalitions. On the contrary, Indonesia's growing disenchantment with the ASEAN grouping reminds us that shifts in the relative standing of even similarly positioned states may generate new alignments and priorities (Ruland, 2009). In Indonesia's case, this means contemplating the prospect of becoming a world, rather than simply a regional power.

There is also nothing obvious about the mechanisms through which potential middle power influence can be exercised. One of the reasons Indonesia is repositioning itself is because new multilateral institutions have been established which we might expect would allow aspirant middle powers to play a much more prominent and influential role. The G20 is the quintessential example of such a possibility, and both Indonesia and Australia have talked up its potential importance. However, the G20 found it difficult to exercise collective agency in addressing the sort of complex economic problems its supporters had hoped. As Wade (2011, p. 368) among many others has observed, 'Whether at the level of finance ministers or of heads of government, the G20 has yet to demonstrate that it can graduate from crisis committee to steering committee.' Equally importantly, many of the asymmetries of power and influence that characterize international power politics normally are being reproduced within the overarching G20 framework (Beeson and Bell, 2009).

Neither international relations scholars nor policymakers in places such as Australia should have been entirely surprised at this possibility. After all, Australia's enthusiastic championing of the APEC forum ought to

have alerted its officials to the difficulty of translating ideas into action – especially when the reigning hegemon of the era remains indifferent at best to the overall merits of the project (Ravenhill, 2001). If middle powers cannot influence debates about, much less policy outcomes in, the less existentially fraught area of economic policy and reform when the need is painfully apparent (Higgott, 2013), how likely is it that they will be able to influence geopolitical strategic outcomes? The APEC experience suggests that influencing the behavior of major powers is difficult enough even when the issues are 'technical' and of potentially mutually benefit. When they involve questions of traditional national security and where the middle power is strategically beholden to a more powerful protector, the chances of exercising independent influence are necessarily reduced. Whatever the possible merits of alliance relationships, they inevitability limit foreign policy autonomy.

5 Conclusion: lessons for aspiring middle powers

For some observers, we are witnessing a redistribution of global power in which a range of new actors such as middle powers and indeed powerful non-state actors are becoming more important parts of governance networks (van Langenhove, 2010). For others, the 'explosion of so-called global governance institutions has increased the chaos, randomness, fragmentation, ambiguity and impenetrable complexity of international politics' (Schweller, 2010). It is too soon to say which of these perspectives is likely to prove more accurate. Indeed, they are not really mutually exclusive (see Stone, 2013). But in either context, we can make a number of modest claims about the way we might understand the role of middle powers.

First, different issue areas may account for significant differences in behavior and possible coalitions of actors – and it should be noted both state and non-state alike – without necessarily being determinative. At the level of states, Australia has always been an enthusiastic supporter of one great power or another, but there is nothing inevitable about the nature of strategic ties. Second, some issues may simply be resistant to resolution either because of powerful vested interests or the inherent complexity of the problem – or both. Reforming global finance and achieving meaningful climate change policies are sobering examples of such possibilities. The point to emphasize here is that simply because middle powers may prove incapable of solving some of the world's most pressing problems, this does

not mean they cannot play a significant role in deciding how they are managed.

There are clearly limits to what middle powers can do, but they do have options – if they choose to exercise them in the right areas. Indeed, a major lesson to be drawn from the Australian experience is that its policy-makers may have had more strategic options and possibilities than generations of strategic analysts imbued in realist dogma (as distinct from measured realist logic) have believed. Another lesson is that it is important to judge carefully where a middle power (or a coalition of middle powers in a given issue area) can actually make a difference. When Kevin Rudd ramped up the rhetoric about the importance of climate change mitigation before heading off to the Copenhagen summit, disappointment was almost guaranteed. When Australian Trade Ministers worked behind the scenes to build the Cairns Group of agricultural trading states, it proved to be an effective voice in support of trade liberalization. Much the same could be said about Canada's championing of the land mines initiative. The key point here is not the progressive nature of the cause, but the methodology middle powers apply in its pursuit.

Regional middle powers such as Australia, Indonesia, Japan and South Korea may not have the capacity to definitively influence the overall geopolitical context within which they are embedded, but they do have similar 'structural' positions in the international system. If the term middle power is to amount to something more substantive than a simple reading of material capabilities, it needs to become the basis for a definitive change in state behavior, and active coalition building in pursuit of mutually determined objectives in essential, as opposed to trivial, policy contexts. Crucially, they could play a constructive crucial role in parallel to the great powers in the Asia-Pacific if China and the United States are not to become paralyzed by the same stultifying logic that produced the Cold War stalemate. In such circumstances, the right role for middle powers is not to take sides and bolster them in their obduracy, but rather to encourage them to put into practice the creative diplomacy and behavior that is potentially the theoretical hallmark of middle power behavior. It is clearly a big ask but not an impossible one, nor one that should be eschewed because of the degree of difficulty.

As in practice then so in theory, we need to be pluralist in how we judge the utility of theorizing about middle power behavior. As in much scholarly judgment, we can apply tests across a spectrum from soft to hard. We

have gently tried to suggest in this paper that we should perhaps judge middle power theory at the soft end of the scale – focusing on the behavioral characteristics of middle powers and asking how middle powers do what they do, rather than interrogating their capacity to definitively 'save the world' – a test all international theory fails. A hard test would precisely ask such a question about what Carr (2013) calls 'systemic impact'. On that basis, middle power theory would not score well, although as we have suggested it would score. So we end with the softer question. If not how middle power theory might definitively 'save the world' at least how might it, advancing a defensible normative aspiration, contribute to making it a better place?

Acknowledgements

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