Cycles of middle power activism: Constraint and choice in Australian and Canadian foreign policies

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JOHN RAVENHILL*

(Department of International Relations, The Australian National University)

During the Hawke and Keating Labor governments, it became popular, both in official discourse and in academic studies, to consider Australian foreign policy as an example of middle power statecraft. Two books published in the first half of the 1990s, Cooper *et al.*'s (1993) *Relocating Middle Powers*, and Evans and Grant (1991) *Australia's Foreign Relations*, place the concept of middle power at the centre of their analysis of Australian foreign policy.[1] This article considers whether a strong case exists for resurrecting and redefining the concept of middle power, and how useful it is in explaining and predicting foreign policy behaviour.

Australian foreign policy makers may have recently discovered the idea of middle power behaviour. In Canada, however, it has been the centre of analysis of the country's foreign policy for most of the post-war period. Immediately after the war, Ottawa used the idea to justify its claim that countries should be accorded a role in international organisations proportionate to their capacity to contribute resources and expertise. The Canadian government might not have aspired to the privileged position given to the superpowers on the United Nations Security Council, but argued that the country deserved to be treated differently to less developed states. Claims to middle power status subsequently became central to the establishment of a sense of Canadian national identity in foreign affairs. It was a means of locating Canada between the polar extremes of Moscow and Washington, and (later) North and South, and of distinguishing Canadian liberal internationalism from the foreign policies of its powerful Southern neighbour (Molot 1990). Canadian writings on the role that middle powers might play not only adopted a self-congratulatory tone on occasion, but also embraced a categorical imperative: middle powers were perceived to have an obligation to be policy entrepreneurs in pursuit of ethical outcomes in the international arena.

Attempts to classify countries according to their power capabilities have a much longer history, having figured in writing on international relations for several centuries. Martin Wight (1978) notes that Thomas Aquinas was one of the first authors to attempt to categorise states according to their power, and that the first author to use the idea of middle or medium power was the sixteenth century archbishop of Milan, Giovanni Botero (Wight 1978:298).[2] The modern idea of a middle power, however, Holmes suggests, has its origins in Jan Smuts' 1918 publication, *The League of Nations: A Practical Suggestion* (Holmes 1982:37). It was, however, only the persistent Canadian claims to middle power status after 1945 that popularised the concept.

How useful is the typical typology that suggests three categories of state power—super-

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[1] For a critical appraisal of the middle power activism of the Labor governments from 1983 to 1996, see Leaver and Cox (1997).

[2] For further discussion of the history of the concept, see Holbraad (1984).

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powers, middle powers and small powers? Over the years, it has not fared well in the hands of critical analysts. Of the three categories, only that of superpower has been relatively uncontested. Even here, commentators have disputed whether, in an era when economic issues are high on the international agenda, a distinction should be made between economic and military superpowers. Generally, Waltz's argument that a superpower is distinguished by its superiority in all three domains—economic, military and technological—has carried the day (Waltz 1979). In the post-Cold War era, following the break-up of the Soviet Union and pending China's acquisition of sophisticated power projection capabilities, analysts employing the traditional tripartite typology face the problem that only one country meets the criteria for superpower status. This leaves them the task of separating the remaining 180 plus countries in the contemporary system into merely two categories.

Where countries are placed into these two categories may be of more concern to the governments of the countries concerned—no doubt many would view placement in the small power group as an insult—than of any analytical consequence. With candidates for middle power status ranging from Australia to France, Canada to China, intra-category variation on indicators such as economic strength, geographical location, size and capabilities of the diplomatic and military establishments, or cultural heritage are likely to vitiate the utility of the category for making any predictions about the states' likely foreign policy behaviours. Even the addition of a category of 'major' power—to encompass the non-superpower permanent members of the UN Security Council, and aspirants to this status such as Germany, India and Japan—would still leave an enormous number and variety of countries vying for middle power status.[3]

What case exists for attempting to retrieve the category of middle power from the analytical dustbin, to which many believe that it, like the category of small power, should be confined?[4] In *Relocating Middle Powers*, Cooper, Higgott and Nossal (CHN) make a detailed and theoretically sophisticated argument for revisiting the concept. CHN suggest that changes in the international system, especially the increased fluidity introduced by the ending of the Cold War and the erosion of United States hegemony, provided the context for a new diplomatic activism by the two middle powers that they study—Australia and Canada. Within a few years of the publication of their study, however, both of these countries had retreated from the activism that had characterised their diplomacy in (part of) the 1980s. Where then does this leave the new interpretation of middle power status offered by CHN and, more generally, the middle power concept itself?

The argument revisited

CHN eschew those conventional definitions of middle power status that rest on physical attributes such as geographical area, geographical location and population size, on capabilities such as the size of military forces and of gross domestic product, or on the normative content of foreign policy. Instead, they identify middle powers by what such countries do in their diplomacy and the manner in which they pursue their foreign policy objectives. Drawing on CHN, Evans and Grant, and other literature on middle powers, a definition of middle power status can be encapsulated in five 'Cs': capacity, concentration, creativity, coalition-building, and credibility.

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[3] Such diversity is seen in The 'Group of 16', a grouping of self-styled 'middle powers' first convened by Swedish Prime Minister, Carlsson, in June 1995. Its members are Australia, Brazil, Canada, Cote d'Ivoire, Czech Republic, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Jamaica, Japan, Mexico, the Netherlands, South Africa, South Korea and Sweden (*Korea Herald* 12 August 1997).

[4] For the case that the concept of small power has little utility, see Thakur (1991:241–87).

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Capacity

The role of the middle power of the late 1980s was less dependent on physical and military capabilities than on its diplomatic capacity. The attributes of the country's foreign ministry and diplomatic service are the critical variable in this definition of a middle power. Middle powers, unlike their small power counterparts, possess foreign services with high levels of analytical skills. These are coupled with effective intelligence gathering and communication networks. Moreover, again in contrast to small powers, middle powers have a sufficient number of diplomatic missions that they can effectively disseminate their ideas and attempt to convince others of their utility. CHN (Cooper *et al.* 1993:chapter 2) note how both Australia (1987) and Canada (1982) merged their respective departments of foreign (external) affairs and trade (in Canada, the trade promotion units of the Department of Industry, Trade and Commerce), so as to increase both their analytical capabilities and better pursue national economic objectives in an increasingly complex global economy.

To this list of bureaucratic capacity, Evans and Grant (1991:324) add 'energy and stamina'. Many good ideas that are capable of implementation, they suggest, 'fall by the wayside in international affairs simply because institutions, or the individuals who constitute them, tire'. Although this proposition is intuitively plausible, any attempt empirically to demonstrate 'energy and stamina' would face obvious formidable difficulties.

Concentration

In elements of their diplomatic capacity, middle powers are not distinguishable from superpowers or major powers. What differentiates them is their inability to apply their high level skills across many areas of the foreign policy agenda at the same time. Whereas the superpower may play simultaneously on multiple chessboards, the middle power inevitably is limited in the number of objectives that it can pursue at any given time. Gareth Evans summed up the middle power's approach as 'niche' diplomacy. Limitations on the middle power's resources force a prioritisation of objectives, and concentration in those areas perceived as most likely to produce desired results. Even when Australia, in the late 1980s, generated such a number of new foreign policy proposals that its foreign service and neighbouring states alike were said to be suffering from 'initiative fatigue' (Mediansky 1992:15–29), clear patterns of concentration were evident. In the economic sphere, the priorities were the establishment and development of the Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) grouping and, within the context of the Uruguay Round of GATT negotiations, the promotion of Australia's agricultural interests through the activities of the Cairns Group. Other initiatives focused on regional conflicts, most notably Cambodia, and on issues, such as the Antarctica Convention, that impinged directly on Australian interests.

Creativity

For CHN and Evans and Grant alike, the essence of middle power diplomacy is the provision of intellectual leadership and brokerage. CHN rely heavily on Young's typology of leadership (Young 1991:281–308). Young suggests that the capacity to provide leadership rests on several distinct attributes. To the familiar form of structural leadership, which occurs when a party is able to use its dominant material resources in a particular issue area to dictate terms to its partners, must be added entrepreneurial and intellectual leadership. The entrepreneurial leader 'relies on negotiating skill to frame issues in ways that foster integrative bargaining and to put together deals that would otherwise elude participants'; in other words, the entrepreneurial leader is a broker (Young 1991:293). The intellectual leader, in contrast, 'produces intellectual capital or generative systems of thought that shape the perspectives of those who participate in institutional bargaining' (Young 1991:298). CHN and Evans and

Grant agree with Young that the growth of interdependence coupled with a waning of US structural power opened the way for other actors in the system in the 1980s to provide entrepreneurial and intellectual leadership. The ability of middle powers to offer such leadership in turn relies on their bureaucratic capacity discussed previously.

Evans and Grant (1991:325) argue that it is creativity that enables middle powers to lead—'if not by force of authority, then at least by force of ideas'.[5] While they acknowledge that middle powers do not monopolise creativity and that no assumption can be made that middle powers will *necessarily* act creatively on any issue, they suggest that 'quick and thoughtful diplomatic footwork' can compensate for a middle power's relative economic, military or political weakness.

Coalition-building

The creativity—embodied in entrepreneurial and intellectual leadership—of middle powers is directed towards the construction of coalitions of 'like-minded' states. Again, Evans and Grant (1991:323) make the argument succinctly: 'by definition, middle powers are not powerful enough in most circumstances to impose their will, but they may be persuasive enough to have like-minded others see their point of view, and to act accordingly'. The composition of coalitions will shift depending on the issue and the forum—it may encompass other 'middle powers', small states (as, for instance, some of the members of the Cairns Group) or even the superpower. The emphasis on coalition-building points to both the weakness and strength of the middle power: coalitions may be essential for it to realise its goals; such pro-reform coalitions in the international system may not otherwise materialise in the absence of the brokerage and intellectual leadership provided by the middle power. In other words, the contribution of the middle power is essential if the collective good of co-operation is to be realised.[6] The necessity of relying on coalition-building points to another facet of middle power diplomacy: it is often conducted within multilateral institutions.[7]

Credibility

Middle powers are able to play a constructive role in the international system, paradoxically, not just because of their strengths—in diplomatic capacity—but because of their relative weakness. Initiatives—whether in the form of brokering solutions or intellectual leadership—

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[5] Fox (1980:193–203) had earlier emphasized a 'spillover between knowledge and influence'.

[6] Lest it be assumed that middle powers will always be inclined towards creative and responsible behaviour in the international system, consider Annette Baker Fox's warning that not only do middle powers have greater freedom to act than their great power counterparts, as their actions do not have the same global impact, but that this latitude also affords them the opportunity to act irresponsibly (1980:193). Compare Rousseau's cynical assessment of medium powers: 'Toute grande nation est incapable de discipline; un Etat trop petit n'a point de consistance; la médiocrité même ne fait quelquefois qu'unir les deux défauts' (quoted in Holbraad 1984:17).

[7] Keating (1993) argues that a strong and persistent commitment to multilateralism has been the defining characteristic of post-war Canadian foreign policy—and has prevailed even when governments, e.g. in the Trudeau foreign policy review of 1969 and again in the early 1980s, signalled an intention to place greater emphasis on bilateralism. Holmes (1982) emphasises that the Canadian crusade for middle power status in the 1940s was focused on securing seats on the councils of the UN and other international bodies. A senior member of Canada's Department of External Affairs, R.G. Riddell, in a speech in 1948, asserted that as a reliance on international organisations was critical for middle powers, they could be depended upon to play a large role in the work of such bodies (quoted in Holbraad 1984:69).

may be more acceptable (or, at least, regarded with less suspicion) if they come from a country that, while undoubtedly acting in pursuit of its own interests, is unlikely to be in a position to be the single largest beneficiary of a negotiated outcome. This external dimension of credibility depends on the middle power not being perceived to be a stalking horse for a more weighty actor. For Australia and Canada, one of the keys to post-war middle power activism often lay in the differentiation of their positions from those adopted by the US.

A second dimension of credibility is also important, i.e. the need for consistency in the policies advocated and pursued by middle powers—both domestically and internationally— perhaps more so than for their superpower or small power counterparts. In particular, the Australian and Canadian push for trade liberalisation—both through APEC and in the GATT through the Cairns Group—in the 1980s was made more credible by their adoption domestically of policies of deregulation and liberalisation. Earlier Australian efforts to promote agricultural trade liberalisation, in the Fraser years, for instance, were vulnerable to criticisms that Australia failed to practise what it preached by maintaining high levels of tariffs on manufactured goods (Ravenhill 1998:267–89).

These five attributes of middle power diplomacy—capacity, concentration, creativity, coalition-building, and credibility—provide a plausible means of distinguishing middle powers from both small powers and superpowers. While none of the attributes may be unique to middle powers, it is the combination of expertise, the constraints on resources that necessitate concentration, and the credibility that stems from not being a major player that conditions and distinguishes middle power diplomacy. The discussion of middle power diplomacy in CHN, and in Evans and Grant, has thus moved the debate on middle powers forward. What they have identified, however, is a set of permissive factors (necessary prerequisites) and behavioural traits associated with middle power status. Nothing in this list of attributes explains why any middle power government at a particular time will utilise its capacity to pursue an activist foreign policy agenda—or the goals towards which such activism may be directed. Similarly, nothing in the list of attributes suggests that middle power diplomacy may be unique to a particular era. Indeed, Australia and Canada have a long history of activist diplomacy—certainly dating back to the early post-war period—in which they have used their diplomatic capacity to build pro-reform coalitions on various issues including institution-building, disarmament, resources and the environment. For an understanding of *when* middle powers have used their capacity for activist diplomacy, we have to turn to three other 'Cs'—'context', 'content' and 'choice'.

Context

Why did Australia and Canada, as middle powers, allegedly enter a more activist phase in their middle power diplomacy in the second half of the 1980s, and why was such diplomacy successful? I emphasise 'allegedly' for, as we will see, the evidence in support of this proposition is far stronger for Australia than for Canada. For CHN, four factors were central to an understanding of this activist period of middle power diplomacy: the changing international agenda; declining superpower tensions; declining US hegemony; and the increased interest of domestic groups in 'new' issues in foreign policy.

The changing international agenda. It is commonplace to observe that a radical transform- ation in the international agenda occurred from the early 1970s onwards. The demise of the Bretton Woods monetary regime, quickly followed by the instability induced by the first round of oil price rises and demands for a new international economic order, elevated economic issues to a prominent position on the global agenda. They were joined in the 1980s by new concerns about a potential global tragedy of the commons as states continued to treat the environment as an inexhaustible good, and by increasing demands for the promotion of

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democracy and human rights. With a significantly enlarged international agenda, the distinction between domestic and foreign policies was increasingly blurred.

The literature on the changing international agenda has long recognised that the elements of national power and instruments of statecraft that were prominent in the security sphere were not necessarily appropriate for the pursuit of foreign policy goals on new agenda items (see Keohane and Nye 1977). Of greater relevance were the attributes allegedly possessed by middle powers: analytical capacity, and the ability to provide intellectual leadership and to build pro-reform coalitions.

In the second half of the 1980s, the international economic agenda was dominated by the Uruguay Round of GATT talks. Slow progress in the talks, coupled with the establishment and/or deepening of regional arrangements in Europe and North America, prompted fears that the global economy would fragment into rival regional trading blocs (for an alarmist account, see Thurow 1993). Such a development, a possible movement away from a rules-based multilateral trading system, posed a particular threat to smaller economies—especially those such as Australia that were not obvious candidates for membership in any of the likely regional blocs. Australia and Canada were still dependent to a significant extent on earnings from agricultural and commodity exports. Their concerns about the global economy were exacerbated by the collapse of commodity prices in the first half of the 1980s (in Australia, prompting then Treasurer, Paul Keating, to warn of the danger of Australia's becoming a 'banana republic'), and by the subsidy war in agricultural exports between the European Community and the US.

In the second half of the 1980s, therefore, Australia and Canada not only appeared to be well-equipped to pursue more activist policies on new agenda items, but to have—especially in the economic sphere—compelling reasons to do so. Middle power activism was said to be aided by a second development in the international system.

Declining tension between the superpowers From the mid-1980s onwards, tensions between the US and the Soviet Union declined, culminating in the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Not only did this critical transformation of the global system affect the hierarchy of issues on the international agenda, with concerns about the central strategic balance diminishing in importance, but it also offered new freedom for middle powers to pursue activist policies. CHN (Cooper *et al.* 1993:5–6) borrow from Stanley Hoffmann in suggesting that the transformation of the global system would lead to 'games of skill', for which middle powers were well-equipped, becoming more prominent whereas 'tests of will' would become less so.

Declining US hegemony The question of whether US relative power has declined has been a hotly contested issue in the international relations literature. Perhaps of greater importance for foreign policy behaviours than indicators of whether or not such a relative decline has occurred, are the perceptions of other governments in the system of the changing US role—in particular, of its continued willingness to play a leadership role in underwriting the collective good of an open global economy. And here, the evidence is unequivocal. The fiscal irresponsibility of the Reagan administration coupled with growing protectionist actions in Congress (including expansion of the Export Enhancement Program for US agriculture) caused even Washington's close allies, such as Australia and Canada, to doubt whether the US had either the capacity or will to provide leadership in the global economy in the second half of the 1980s. Middle powers appeared well placed to fill the leadership vacuum.

The growing foreign policy interests of domestic groups In part, the new foreign policy concerns of interest groups stemmed from the blurring, noted earlier, of the boundaries between domestic and foreign policies. Trade liberalisation, high on the international agenda from the mid-1980s, is a classic example where decisions in the foreign policy arena have very direct domestic repercussions. In addition, however, the 'new agenda' issues, such as the

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environment, human rights and democratisation, attracted the interest of domestic actors, particularly non-governmental organisations. CHN note (1993:23), for instance, how societal forces in Canada pushed the government to a more active response to the Ethiopian famine in 1984–85. Similarly, public opposition in Australia to President Jacques Chirac's announcement of the resumption of French nuclear testing in the Pacific in June 1995, prodded the government towards adopting a harder line response than it originally announced. Pratt notes the proliferation of interest groups in Canada from the mid-1960s onwards that opposed elements of Canadian foreign policy on ethical grounds, and the breakdown of the post-war consensus on foreign policy objectives (Pratt 1983–84:99–135; Nossal 1983–84:1–22). In both Australia and Canada, the 1980s was a decade when disarmament and environmental movements attracted substantial political support. In Australia, the Greens held the balance of power in Tasmania following the 1989 state election; the election, in 1993 and 1996, of members of the Greens Party to the Commonwealth Senate gave them, at least in theory, the balance of power. Increased public interest in international relations led to calls in Canada for the 'democratisation' of foreign policy, calls that have yet to be echoed in Australia (Cameron and Appel 1995).

Few commentators would dissent from this discussion of the evolution of the global system over the last quarter of a century, and especially from the mid-1980s, and its relationship to foreign policy making. To the factors listed by CHN, we might add 'the rise of East Asia'—which prompted a redirection of foreign policies in both Canberra and Ottawa, and new efforts at institution-building in the Asia–Pacific region. But how well do these developments explain the evolution of middle power activism by Australia and Canada from the mid-1980s? To what extent was there a qualitative or quantitative change in either of the countries' diplomacy in this period? The case is clearly far stronger for Australia than for Canada.

In the second half of the 1980s, Australia embarked on a programme of diplomatic activism that was probably unprecedented in its history. Under the energetic stewardship of Senator Gareth Evans, Minister for Foreign Affairs from September 1988 until the March 1996 election, the government launched initiatives on issues that included Cambodia, Antarctica, a renewal of the comprehensive ban on nuclear testing, APEC, and a ban on chemical weapons (Cotton and Ravenhill, 1997). Such activism built on initiatives taken earlier by the Labor Party government that came to power in 1983. These included the establishment of the Cairns Group, an earlier attempt to resolve the Cambodian imbroglio, the promotion of the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone, and the merger of the Department of Foreign Affairs with the Department of Trade to reshape the foreign affairs bureaucracy with the objective of more effectively promoting Australia's economic interests.

The contextual factors that CHN list, do appear to have played a significant role in Australia's middle power diplomacy in the years of Labor Party government. In particular, the Australian government was gravely concerned in the late 1980s that the global economy might fragment into rival regional trading blocs. The Australian economy would not necessarily be a natural or welcome member (unlike its Canadian counterpart) in any of the predicted Asian, European and North American groupings. Meanwhile, European and American programmes of agricultural subsidies not only were driving down world market prices of major Australian exports, but also displacing these exports from their traditional markets. The Labor Party government was under significant domestic pressure to pursue an activist foreign policy agenda, not only from its own Left wing, which traditionally had taken an active interest in foreign policy issues such as disarmament and human rights, but also from a substantial public nuclear disarmament movement and a growing environmental movement. The Nuclear Disarmament Party elected to the Senate at the 1984 election, a candidate whose vote was of some significance in a chamber in which the ALP government was in a minority.

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If the argument that CHN make about the changing international and domestic contexts offering both scope and incentives for middle power activism fits reasonably well for Australia (until the election of the Liberal/National Party coalition in 1996, which rejected what it saw as an excessive emphasis in Labor's policies on multilateralism), it does so far less for Canada. Indeed, a striking feature of *Relocating Middle Powers* is the extent to which its examples of Canadian middle power activism are drawn not from the period beginning in the middle of the 1980s, but from earlier years—in large part, from the era of Pierre Trudeau's premiership, which ended in June 1984. Under the Conservative administration of Brian Mulroney, Canadian diplomacy focused increasingly on its relationship with its powerful southern neighbour. As CHN acknowledge, Canada was at best a lukewarm follower in both of the major Australian economic initiatives in the 1980s—the Cairns Group and APEC. CHN note (Cooper *et al.* 1993:106) that Canada 'exhibited an ambiguity towards both enterprises' and that in the Cairns Group, 'Australia assumed the pivotal intellectual and leadership position in the process of coalition-building and maintenance' whereas Canadian attitudes to the Group were 'markedly nuanced and, at times, positively ambivalent' (Cooper *et al.* 1993:62).

If the Canadian government was an unenthusiastic participant in these two prime examples of middle power coalition-building in the second half of the 1980s, are there counterbalancing instances of Canadian middle power activism in this period? Perhaps the principal candidates are the Canadian initiatives on international environmental matters that led to its hosting of international conferences on the ozone level and on the atmosphere in 1987 and 1988, respectively. The other significant example of Canadian activism in these years was the leading role that the Mulroney government took within the Commonwealth in pressing for political change in South Africa (Nossal 1994; Wood 1990:280–90). On other issues, such as development and human rights issues, the Canadian government was responsive to increased activism by domestic groups but mainly through minor amendment to its existing policies (Cooper *et al.* 1993:160–2). In summary, little evidence exists that Canada pursued a markedly more activist policy of middle power coalition-building in the second half of the 1980s than at other times in the post-war period. Indeed, many see the 'Golden Age' of Canadian diplomacy as the years from 1947 to 1957, under the premiership of Louis St Laurent and the foreign policy stewardship of Lester Pearson.[8]

If the context for middle power activism was more favourable following the decline in superpower tension and eventual ending of the Cold War, how can this be reconciled with an apparent decline in Canadian middle power activism in the late 1980s and the rejection of such activism by an Australian government in the mid-1990s? Four sets of arguments about context might be advanced: first, that the most important developments in the external context did not occur in the 1980s but at another time; second, that the positive contextual developments for middle power activism in the 1980s were offset by other, less favourable, changes; third, that the domestic context has changed since the mid-1980s; and fourth, that the changing systemic context had a differential impact on individual middle powers.

Holbraad's analysis of middle powers makes the first argument. The decisive change in the systemic context in which middle powers have to operate, he argues, came with the growing détente between the superpowers following the Cuban missile crisis. A more co-operative relationship between the great powers in the system opened the way for middle powers to play a more active role in mediation (Holbraad 1984:140 ff.) Sarty's study of how Soviet leaders viewed Canada provides some support for this argument—it was not until an improvement in relations between the superpowers, that Moscow viewed Canada as anything more than an 'economic and political vassal' of the US (Sarty 1991:554–74). Both the

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[8] I return to this argument later in this article, in considering the role of 'choice' in middle power activism.

Trudeau and Whitlam governments exploited the improved relations between the US and the Soviet Union to recognise the People's Republic of China before Washington did so. And the turbulence in the global economy in the 1970s, reflected in demands for a New International Economic Order, offered new scope for middle power activism and mediation—an opportunity seized by the Canadian government in the leading role that it took in the Law of the Sea negotiations. Certainly, a plausible case can be made that the changes in the systemic context in the 1980s were not so much a dramatic break with the past, especially in their implications for middle power activism, but an incremental shift. Add to this a second argument that some of the positive changes in systemic context were offset by less favourable developments for middle power activism.

Kim Nossal, one of the authors of *Relocating Middle Powers*, is, ironically, one of the sources of this argument. He suggests that the circumstances that facilitated traditional middle power activism disappeared with the end of the Cold War. David and Roussel elaborate on the argument that the Cold War was a crucial factor in the capacity of middle powers to play roles as mediators and peacekeepers. They suggest that developments such as a new Concert of Powers (G7 plus one), great power intervention in regional conflicts, the changing nature of security issues (especially the growing prominence of intra-state issues), and the growing importance of multilateral institutions and missions for the great powers have all contributed to a decrease in the opportunities for middle powers to play a constructive role on security matters in the international system (David and Roussel 1996–97:41). To be sure, as David and Roussel acknowledge, other authors have made exactly the opposite argument about the prospects for middle power activism on security issues in the post-Cold War era; the jury must still be out on this issue, given the relatively small number of cases on which to make a judgement.[9]

Another possible explanation for the decline in middle power activism in Canada in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the downplaying of multilateralism in Australia following the election of the Coalition government in 1996, is the changing domestic context. Of particular significance are the deteriorating economic circumstances in which both countries found themselves. Economic difficulties, epitomised by large federal budgetary deficits and persistently high rates of unemployment, affected the domestic context in two principal ways.

First, the agenda of domestic politics changed noticeably. With the public preoccupied with increasing uncertainties in the labour market, less attention was given to foreign policy issues such as international environmental concerns. Indeed, in both countries, evidence abounds of the willingness of at least some communities to sacrifice elements of a liberal internationalist agenda, for example, promotion of human rights and preservation of the environment, when these were perceived to conflict with the imperatives of job creation and maintenance. While concerns over employment undermined some environmental groups, other elements that had sustained domestic interest in foreign policy issues largely disappeared with the end of the Cold War. This was true to a considerable extent of the nuclear disarmament issue; moreover, the French decision in 1996 to terminate nuclear testing, removed the proximate cause of this particular source of political mobilisation in Australia. Similarly, the advent of majority rule in South Africa eliminated another *cause célèbre* of domestic interest groups. Public support for the provision of peacekeeping forces, long identified as a significant component of Canada's middle power tradition, faded as the forces

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[9] Similarly, authors put forward alternative, intuitively plausible, views on the likely effect of declining US hegemony on the scope for middle power activism. Dewitt and Kirton (1983) suggest that the decline in US hegemony (and accompanying rise of several 'principal powers') led the Canadian government towards a more assertive economic nationalism, and a favouring of bilateral over multilateral approaches.

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became entangled in the seemingly intractable internal conflicts of Somalia and Bosnia.[10] In Canada, the constitutional imbroglio further distracted the public from taking an active interest in foreign affairs. In the 1990s, the foreign policy agenda in Australia and Canada alike held far less interest for the general public than it had a decade before.[11]

Second, deteriorating economic conditions and governments' preoccupation with elimi- nating budgetary deficits were reflected in cutbacks in the budgets of the foreign affairs bureaucracies, and in overseas development assistance programmes. In both countries, the budgetary allocations for 1997–98 were below those for the previous year. Moreover, in Canada (but not Australia where the Defence budget was exempted from the Coalition's expenditure cuts), the military budget was substantially reduced, putting Canadian contribu- tions to peacekeeping at risk (Martin and Fortmann 1995:387). Canada's planned expendi- tures on 'international security and cooperation' in 1997–98 were more than 10 per cent below the previous year's level.[12] Both countries cut back on the number and size of their overseas missions, with a new emphasis placed on concentration on significant economic partners. The overall size of the foreign service in both countries was reduced substantially. Moreover, governments also cut foreign assistance budgets, reducing their capacity to use another tool of foreign policy influence. The ratio of aid to gross national product (GNP) in Australia, which stood at close to 0.5 per cent in the early 1980s, had fallen to 0.27 per cent by the 1997–98 fiscal year. The budget for that year represented a cut in real terms of more than 12 per cent compared with that of 1995–96.[13] By 1998–99, Canada's aid to GNP ratio was projected to be the same as that of Australia, the lowest level since the mid-1960s; the aid budget was to be cut by 29 per cent over a 2-year period (Potter 1996–97:29). If limited resources were constraining middle power activism to 'niche diplomacy', budget cuts in Australia and Canada were further reducing the number of niches that these middle powers might occupy.

These cuts undoubtedly further constrained the diplomatic capacity of both countries. But such constraints alone are not a sufficient explanation for the decline in middle power activism.[14] Much depends on what governments choose to do with their scarce resources. Also, while the deteriorating economic climate explains an increasing preoccupation in both countries with the promotion of trade, it cannot account, for instance, for an apparent renewal of middle power activism in Canada in the mid-1990s; in particular, its sponsorship of the 'Ottawa Process' in support of a ban on landmines.

The fourth reason why changing systemic context may not provide a very satisfactory explanation for middle power behaviour in the 1980s, is that the context has a different impact on middle powers depending on their location and the alternatives available to them. Again, one of the authors of *Relocating Middle Powers*, Andrew Fenton Cooper has provided a useful discussion of this issue (Cooper 1992:349–79; a truncated treatment of the topic appears in Cooper *et al.* 1993:64–5). Cooper argues that Australia and Canada differ on three critical dimensions: their production and trade profiles; their range of foreign economic

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[10] Although perhaps not as much as some observers would have anticipated. See the opinion poll data in Martin and Fortmann (1995:370–400).

[11] But note that the Canadian government's sponsorship of the 'Ottawa Process' that resulted in the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction enjoyed overwhelming public support. See English (1998).

[12] Government of Canada, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 'Department Plan' [http://www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/english/infoweb/estimates/chap2%2De.htm].

[13] AusAid, *Australia's Overseas Aid Program* [http://www.ausaid.gov.au/budget97/b9705.html].

[14] As a referee for this paper pointed out, the cutbacks in Australia's overseas development assistance programme began during the period when middle power activism was at its height. Their onset did not coincide with a decline in middle power activism.

policy choices; and their psychological/cognitive assessments of their position in the global economy. For Canada, possible solutions to the growth of US protectionism and unilateralism in the mid-1980s were quite different from those available to Australia—and had very different consequences for the country's middle power activism and coalition building.

At a time when the US was expressing increasing interest in regional co-operation as a means of exerting leverage over both the European Community and Japan in trade negotiations, the obvious solution for Canada was to seek a regional trade pact with its southern neighbour. Such a solution required a 'continentalisation' of Canadian foreign policy, a new emphasis on bilateral ties as opposed to attempting to construct coalitions at the multilateral level. Australia, however, had no such alternative. Although the idea of Australia joining a North American trade grouping surfaced on several occasions during the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Australian government did not take it seriously (the suggestion by a former chairman of the Liberal Party that Australia should seek to join the European Community attracted even less interest). Australia's only 'natural' region is in Oceania—where it already had trade agreements with New Zealand (through the Australia–New Zealand Closer Economic Relations Trade Agreement) and with the South Pacific Forum (through the South Pacific Regional Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreement). The Hawke government did flirt with the idea of constructing a Western Pacific (East Asia plus Oceania) trade grouping (Hawke's list of potential member economies in his initial APEC proposal did not include Canada or the US) but soon retreated from this idea. Not only was the government concerned that such a proposal would encourage the fragmentation of the world economy, but it also feared that the grouping could easily be transformed into one defined as exclusively Asian—as Malaysia's Prime Minister, Mahathir bin Muhammad, had suggested in his proposal for an East Asian Economic Group. For Australia, then, no viable alternative to multilateralism appeared to be available.

Content

If it is difficult to sustain the case that Canada experienced a *quantitative* change in its middle power diplomacy in the second half of the 1980s, what evidence is there of a qualitative change in middle power activism in these years? The idea that middle power diplomacy in the last decade and a half was significantly different in its style from that of previous decades is difficult to sustain. Australia and Canada have always relied on their relatively sophisticated foreign affairs bureaucracies in their advocacy. They have always had to build coalitions with others if their reform efforts were to have any chance of success. Multilateral arrangements have always figured prominently in their plans.

Cooper *et al.* (1993:20–1) suggest, however, that middle power activism in the mid-1980s was different from that of the Cold War era. Middle powers were increasingly proactive in responding to a rapidly changing external environment. CHN (*loc. cit.*) contrast this leadership with previous middle power behaviour, which they term 'first followership': 'a form of activity in which those actors loyally support the norms and rules of the international system and perform certain tasks to maintain and strengthen that system'. In another study of Australian and Canadian activism, Nossal suggests that the distinguishing characteristic of such activism in the late 1980s was the willingness of both countries 'to openly cross the major powers in their efforts to contribute to the building of an Asia–Pacific order' (Nossal 1993:223).

Nossal acknowledges, however, that post-Cold War Australian and Canadian statecraft in the Asia–Pacific region 'strongly suggests classic middle power behaviour at work' (Nossal 1993:222). It is, indeed, difficult to discern a marked difference between recent activism and that of the Cold War era. The promotion of APEC and its principles of open regionalism, and the attempts to extend (and, indeed, increase the legitimacy of) GATT by improving its

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provisions for trade in agricultural products through sponsorship of the Cairns Group surely qualify as behaviours that 'loyally support the norms and rules of the international system', and as actions that were designed to strengthen that system. Similarly, the initiatives by Gareth Evans and his Canadian counterpart, Joe Clark, to establish multilateral mechanisms for the discussion of security issues in the Asia–Pacific region again seem to be very much in the spirit of strengthening the international system. Whether or not Australian and Canadian governments in the late 1980s were more willing than their predecessors (Whitlam and Trudeau come immediately to mind) to cross the major powers, is a fine judgement. If a change in middle power activism did take place in the 1980s, it was a matter of degree rather than a clearly defined qualitative change in behaviour.

Middle power activism as choice

In both Australia and Canada, the recent *overall trend* has been towards a retreat from middle power activism.[15] It is also not easy to sustain a case that middle power activism, as seen in the foreign policy behaviours of Australia and Canada, has changed markedly in qualitative terms in recent years. The decline in middle power activism is not easy to explain from a systemic perspective. Changes in systemic context, especially the ending of the Cold War, to a considerable extent had offsetting effects on the opportunities for middle power activism. Rather than context, the change in middle power activism is better attributed to choice by the governments of the day.

The Liberal/National Party Coalition government elected in March 1996 in Australia placed a new emphasis on bilateral relations in pursuit of Australian national interests. Its Foreign Policy White Paper of August 1997, the first ever issued in Australia, declared that bilateral relations were the essential 'building block' for other foreign policy strategies. It continued:

> Australia must be realistic about what multilateral institutions such as the United Nations system can deliver. International organisations can only accomplish what their member states enable them to accomplish. If the reach of the UN system is not to exceed its grasp, it must focus on practical outcomes which match its aspirations with its capability. (Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 1997:paragraph 6)

In Australian government circles, the term 'middle power' appeared to become taboo after the defeat of the Labor Government and the exit from office of Gareth Evans, with whom the term had become so closely associated. A search of the web site of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) located only one reference to the idea of 'middle power' in the documents produced since the 1996 election—and that was a comment by a senior DFAT official on Korea's standing as a middle power. It is difficult to sustain an argument that systemic changes drove this switch in policy.

In Canada, the demise of middle power activism has variously been dated to the election of the Diefenbaker government in 1957 (Andrew 1993), to Trudeau's 1970 paper, *Foreign Policy for Canadians*, and to Mulroney's preoccupation with 'continentalism' and Canadian economic interests. Images of a secular decline in Canadian middle power activism from the 'golden years' of 1947–57 compete with those that suggest a cyclical variation, in which the nature of the party in power had a significant influence on activism. Despite the current economic problems that the country faces, and the government's preoccupation with reducing the budgetary deficit, the government of Jean Chrétien has revived Canada's middle power

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[15] Prominent exceptions are Australian sponsorship of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and Canadian sponsorship of the Ottawa Process on the banning of landmines.

activism. The government's first Foreign Affairs Minister, André Ouellet, in announcing a review of Canada's foreign policies, made explicit reference to Canada's role as a middle power (Neufeld 1995:28–9, footnote 49). Not only does the term middle power appear in the speeches of the Foreign and Prime Ministers of the current Liberal government, but Canada has launched several characteristic middle power initiatives in recent years, most notably on landmines and for the development of a UN rapid reaction capability (Fergusson and Levesque 1996–97:118–41).[16]

Clearly, foreign policy behaviours of 'middle powers' are constrained not only by their resources but also by the systemic context and by the balance of domestic interests. But, within these constraints, choice is available. And it is choice that explains the cycles of middle power activism observed in the foreign policies of Australia and Canada. What determines the choice that governments make?

Partisanship and choice

One obvious candidate is partisanship in domestic politics. In Australia, the post-war record is quite clear (although the sample is small). Labor Party governments have been far more inclined to take foreign policy initiatives and to act through multilateral institutions than have their Coalition counterparts (Alley and Ravenhill 1996:70–91). In part, such activism might be attributed to the Labor Party's structure—the prominent role accorded to trade unions and to other interest groups in its party conferences generally ensures that foreign policy issues receive an airing and that an internationalist approach is adopted. The Labor Party's left wing has long been outspoken on a range of foreign policy issues including the alliance with the US, nuclear disarmament, human rights and the treatment of foreign investment. Although it has seldom succeeded in persuading the party in government to adopt its agenda, the very presence of a faction vocal on foreign policy issues has often forced the government to make conciliatory gestures.

The Liberal/National Party Coalition has no equivalent faction with a pronounced interest in foreign policy issues. The Liberal Party has always favoured bilateral over multilateral approaches, being particularly concerned with maintaining Australia's relationships with its 'great and powerful friends'. In the two decades of Coalition government in the 1950s and 1960s, under Robert Menzies and his successors, Australia's foreign policy was, in Holbraad's terms, that of the 'faithful ally' (Holbraad 1984:122).[17] The Fraser government from 1975–83 was more activist than previous Coalition governments—but more selective in its activism than the preceding Whitlam ALP government. The Howard government's antipathy towards multilateralism, and its inclinations to retreat from middle power activism, were undoubtedly reinforced by its failure to secure one of the five non-permanent member vacancies on the UN Security Council in October 1996, an initiative it inherited from the former Labor government. Had Australia been elected, then the government would have been forced to devote attention to a wider range of issues than has subsequently been the case.[18]

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[16] Unlike the Australian case, the term 'middle power' continues to appear in Canadian government statements. A search of the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade web site generates more than 20 documents in which reference is made to the term 'middle power'.

[17] Evans and Grant (1991:322) note that the Whitlam ALP government marked a *revival* of middle power activism in Australia in the 1970s that had been associated with the Labor government of the immediate post-war period.

[18] As Rawdon Dalrymple, a former Australian diplomat who served as ambassador to Japan and to the US, notes: 'Indeed, after the shock of the size of the defeat in circumstances where our representatives had been confident of victory, the government began to see the pluses of not being on a Security Council which would be largely immersed in the problems of Europe, Africa and the Middle East. Better to keep our resources and influence for the regional focus and other matters of more direct national interest' (1997:251).

The relationship between partisan alignment and middle power activism in Canadian foreign policies is less straightforward. Initially, the relationship appeared clear-cut. The middle power activism of the Pearson era stood in marked contrast to the policies of its successor, the Progressive Conservative government. Andrew notes the hostility Prime Minister Diefenbaker displayed towards the Department of External Affairs, which he saw as a limb of the Liberal Party staffed by 'Pearsonalities' (Andrew 1993:48). Pearson's return to office, this time as Prime Minister of a Liberal Party government, maintained the partisan pattern in middle power activism. His replacement as Liberal Party leader by Pierre Trudeau, however, appears to undermine the closeness of fit of the relationship. *Foreign Policy for Canadians* seemed to be a frontal assault on Canada's tradition of middle power activism and its role as 'helpful fixer' in the international system. By the time Trudeau left office, however, *Foreign Policy for Canadians* appeared to be more about posturing than substance. As Nossal points out, Trudeau discovered 'by turns, the utility of Canada's military alignments, the usefulness of peacekeeping, and the helpfulness of helpful fixing' (Nossal 1989:167). As the authors of the Canadian Institute of International Affairs' history of the foreign policy of the Trudeau era, appropriately titled *Pirouette*, argue: 'the Prime Minister who in 1968 had attacked Lester Pearson's style and role was, by 1983-84, trying to don the Pearsonian mantle—and probably with less success than the original' (Granatstein and Bothwell 1990:376). By the end of his period in office, Trudeau had thus reverted to an activist foreign policy typical of previous post-war Liberal administrations. To the extent that the Liberal Party government of Jean Chrétien has revived Canada's middle power activism, following a downturn in multilateral activity under the Progressive Conservative administration of Brian Mulroney, a correlation between Canada's middle power activism and the nature of the party in office has been maintained.

Personal interests and choice

Political alignment provides only a partial explanation for variation in middle power activism. Some leaders from the conservative side of politics have pursued policies typical of middle power activism on certain issues; for example, the leading role that both Malcolm Fraser and Brian Mulroney played, at different times, within the Commonwealth in opposing apartheid in South Africa. At least one leader, Pierre Trudeau, from the other side of politics, at one stage denounced traditional ideas of the role that a middle power might play.

Clearly, the personal interests, beliefs, personality, ambitions, energy and skills of prime ministers and foreign ministers affect the extent to which, and the issues on which, their governments play activist roles in foreign policy. In Australia, especially during ALP governments, individual foreign ministers have played an important part in shaping foreign policies. Evatt's commitment to multilateralism heavily influenced the policies of the ALP government in the early post-war years. The transition from Bill Hayden to Gareth Evans in 1988 marked a significant step up in Australia's middle power activism (although Hayden himself had been no slouch in this role). Indeed, the Evans period can be seen as the 'golden years' of Australian middle power activism. Consideration of the Hawke/Keating governments and the contrast with their Liberal/National Coalition successor also points to the importance of the relationship between Prime Minister and Foreign Minister as a factor in foreign policy activism, and to the overall standing of the minister for foreign affairs with cabinet colleagues.

At other times, Prime Ministers have played a dominant role in Australian foreign policy activism (Bell 1988).[19] This was certainly true of the Whitlam years. And Fraser's deep

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[19] Coral Bell emphasizes the importance in Australian foreign policy of the assumptions and personality of the Prime Minister.

dislike of the apartheid regime drove the foreign policies of his government in a direction that that most other Liberal politicians would not have taken. Keating championed engagement with Asia, whereas John Howard has generally appeared uninterested and uncomfortable with foreign affairs.

In Canada, the role of the Prime Minister in shaping foreign policy has been even more striking (Nossal 1989)—although some ministers for external affairs, such as Lester Pearson, also indisputably have played a major role in determining how activist was the government of the day. The current minister of foreign affairs, Lloyd Axworthy, is very much in the Pearson tradition. As in Australia, the particular interests of some Prime Ministers have driven policy activism—with Mulroney's opposition to apartheid being a prime example (Nossal 1983–84; Wood 1990). But beyond the personal interests of ministers, another factor appears to have been at work: a desire to establish a new policy direction for their governments from that pursued by their predecessors.

Differentiation and choice

Governments, for electoral reasons as well as to satisfy the personal vanity of their leadership, usually desire to emphasise the originality of their contribution to public policy. Rivalries—and, indeed, hatred—between individuals on opposite sides of politics (and sometimes within the same party) also are expressed in a search for differentiation. In foreign affairs, however, especially since the end of the Vietnam war and the decline in superpower tensions, governments have not found it easy to demarcate their policies clearly from those of their predecessors. On many issues of foreign policy, bipartisanship has been evident for many years (for the Australian case, see Matthews and Ravenhill 1989:9–20). And when a new prime minister takes over the reins of foreign policy from another member of the same party, such differentiation may seem even more difficult.

A desire for differentiation seems to have been a major factor in the two episodes in the post-war era where governments in Australia and Canada have most directly repudiated the middle power activism of their predecessors. Trudeau's *Foreign Policy for Canadians* decried previous policies in which Canada played the role of helpful fixer, arguing instead for a more direct pursuit of Canada's national interests. Canada, he argued, should be an 'effective power' rather than a middle power. 'Canada should not be content', Trudeau (and Ivan Head) asserted, 'to accept a typecast role based upon past experience or previous self-image' (Head and Trudeau 1995:310). Foreign policy was to be 'the extension abroad of national policies'. The principal objective would be the promotion of economic growth; a new emphasis would be given to sovereignty and independence, and on social justice and the quality of life. Canada would no longer automatically commit forces to UN peacekeeping activities, but would assess each request individually on the grounds of the mission's viability and its relevance to Canadian national interests (Granatstein and Bothwell 1990:chapter 1).

Trudeau's task in criticising previous Canadian middle power activism was made easier by the manner in which such policies had been sold to the public. Governments had often stressed altruistic motives for their foreign policies, and their commitment to idealistic goals, even when their policies were in direct pursuit of the Canadian national interest (Dobell 1972:146). Middle power activism and the preference for multilateralism were essentially soft targets. Canada's enlightened self-interest in multilateralism, in the legitimisation and sustaining of the post-war economic and security systems, and in peacekeeping activities that kept conflicts far away from its borders, was easily overlooked.[20]

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[20] As was Pearson's complaint (quoted in Wood 1990:283) that: 'I naturally take exception to the suggestion that our policy in those years was that of the helpful fixer with the unflattering implication that we were overly concerned with a desire to be regarded as good fellows pushing ourselves forward with some other purpose in mind than the national interest'.

A similar concern for differentiation influenced the Coalition government's move away from middle power activism in Australia following the 1996 election. In recent years, in opposition, the Coalition found little in the ALP's overall approach to foreign affairs to criticise. What was very evident, however, at the 1996 election was that the Labor government had failed to sell its foreign policy vision, 'the big picture' as Prime Minister Keating termed it, to the Australian electorate. Although Keating himself and Foreign Minister Evans had been careful to assert that Australia's own interests were being advanced by its ambitious foreign policies,[21] the commitment of Australian resources to projects such as the extension of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, and the negotiation of a comprehensive test ban treaty, appeared to have little immediate relevance to a population preoccupied with the country's economic problems. The government even had great difficulty in convincing a sceptical public of the value of its APEC initiative. Although foreign policies, as usual, played little role in influencing the vote at the 1996 election (McAllister and Ravenhill 1998:119–41), the Coalition struck a positive note with the public with its emphasis on the need to put Australia's national interests first.

The theme of the government's foreign policy white paper, *In the National Interest*, mirrors that of Trudeau's *Foreign Policy for Canadians*. Economic interests are to be paramount in Australia's future policies. Implicit in the paper's scepticism about the value of the UN, its insistence on the pursuit of 'effective' policies, rather than grandstanding and posturing, and its emphasis on bilateralism are criticisms of the middle power activism of the ALP governments of Hawke and Keating. Whether the white paper will be primarily a 'repackaging' exercise or lead to major substantive changes in policy remains to be seen.

Conclusion

International relations theorising has long been divided between those who see position in the international system as the dominant factor in state behaviour, and those who believe that domestic sources are more important determinants of foreign policies. Stronger versions of systemic determinism appear only moderately helpful in explaining the behaviour of middle powers. Certainly, systemic structure constrains the options available to such states, and a change in structure (for example, from bipolarity to the present unipolar moment) affects the options available. But even within such constraints, states enjoy a considerable element of choice. Systemic structure is a constraining and permissive factor; the position of states within the system and changes in the structure itself, however, do not compel particular foreign policy behaviours.

Variations in the foreign policy activism of Australian and Canadian governments in the post-war period cannot easily be explained by reference to systemic factors. The incidence of Canadian activism varied considerably during the Cold War period. As the Cold War wound down, Canadian middle power internationalism first declined under the Mulroney government and then enjoyed a revival under the current Chrétien administration. Yet, at the same time that Ottawa was rediscovering middle power diplomacy, the newly elected Howard government in Australia was largely turning its back on it. Rather than systemic factors, partisanship appears a better explanation of variation in the two countries' middle

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[21] Compare Evans and Grant (1991:322): 'middle power diplomacy is ultimately no less self-interested than any other kind ... Australia, like most other countries, has a self-interested preference for the peaceful resolution of conflict, acceptance of international law, protection of the weak against the strong, and the free exchange of ideas, people and goods'.

power activism, particularly if supplemented by a focus on the interests and personalities of prime ministers and foreign ministers.

Relocating Middle Powers (Cooper *et al.* 1993) usefully moves the debate on middle power behaviour beyond a preoccupation with the physical attributes of these states— whether it be size, level of gross domestic product, or regional location. Such indicators have proved to be of almost no value in predicting or explaining the behaviour of those states classed as middle powers. For instance, in his summary of the North–South Institute's project on middle powers, Wood acknowledges that 'the pattern is still very far from any perception of common ranking among these states, let alone of widely shared interests or the potential for common action' (Wood 1988:25).[22] The firmest generalisation about middle power behaviour from this project was that states in this category rely heavily on multilateralism in foreign policy activism—but, as an inability to act unilaterally is one of the defining characteristics of middle power status, this proposition is little more than a tautology.

An emphasis on diplomatic capabilities and the capacity to provide intellectual leadership is a useful starting point in attempting to define the core characteristics of middle powers.[23] The recent record of 'like-minded' states such as Australia and Canada demonstrates, however, that other factors—such as the policy alternatives available to states by virtue of their geographical location—often override any commonalities arising from putative middle power characteristics. The possession of a capacity for foreign policy activism may open up opportunities for middle powers that are lacking for smaller states. But when, and on what issues, middle powers pursue activist policies reflects choice as much as constraint and opportunity. If capacities do not predict actions, then capacities alone are not a useful definition of a middle power. To identify middle powers primarily by reference to the activities they choose to pursue, however, is again to risk reducing the concept to little more than a tautology.

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[22] Similarly, Jock Findlayson (1988:51), in studying middle power behaviour in the NIEO (New International Economic Order) debate on commodities, concluded that their 'economic and policy interests [were] no less divergent than those that separate states more generally in international relations'.

[23] This emphasis, however, is most relevant to situations where relative military and economic strength is not useful in establishing regional dominance or building coalitions. These more traditional characteristics of state power may still be relevant in establishing the dominance of a state within its own region.

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