

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Is anyone a middle power? The case for historicization

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## Abstract

What should happen to a concept as it loses real-world application? The concept of ‘middle power’ rose to prominence in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, establishing an influential practitioner–scholarly nexus over the next several decades. This prestigious history came at a cost, embedding three core assumptions into the concept: that middle powers are *International* in focus, *Multilateral* in method, and *Good Citizens* in conduct. While there have been significant attempts by scholars to reform the concept, middle power theory has proven inseparable from these assumptions. In this paper, we examine six middle power states (Canada, Australia, South Korea, Indonesia, Turkey, and Mexico) and show middle power theory no longer helps us distinguish or interpret these states. Changes in the international environment suggest this finding will endure. As such, we argue for the historicization of the concept of ‘middle power’. We conclude by identifying a series of analytical puzzles which researchers will need to address to develop an appropriate conceptual lexicon for theorizing this type of state in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Keywords:** good international citizenship; historicization; internationalist; middle power; multilateralism; theory

## Introduction

What should happen to a concept as it loses real-world application? The concept of ‘middle power’ rose to prominence in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, establishing an influential practitioner–scholarly nexus over the next several decades. This prestigious history came at a cost, embedding three core assumptions into the concept: that middle powers are *International* in focus, *Multilateral* in method, and *Good Citizens* in conduct. While there have been significant attempts by scholars to reform the concept, middle power theory has proven inseparable from these assumptions.

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In this paper, we examine six middle power states (Canada, Australia, South Korea, Indonesia, Turkey, and Mexico). Each of these states self-identifies as a middle power, and is widely recognized as such by scholars. Examining these cases over the last two decades, we show middle power theory no longer helps us distinguish or interpret these states. Changes in the international environment, especially the weakening of the US-led international order, suggest this finding will endure. As such, we argue for the historicization of the concept of ‘middle power’.

We conclude by identifying a series of analytical puzzles which should be addressed to enable an appropriate conceptual lexicon for theorizing this type of state in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There is clearly strong academic interest in the study of these states, but a new wave of theorization, freed from the weight of a prestigious history is necessary for the development of a more theoretically dynamic and empirically robust conceptual framework.

As the study of international political theory matures, historicization has become a recognized and increasingly important process. Historicization reflects historical contingency, highlighting how terms are conditioned by past use, decreasing their efficacy as conditions change.<sup>1</sup> Geographic terms which had scholarly prominence several decades ago such as Occident, Orient, East India, West India, or Eastern Bloc are now recognized as having passed their utility. So too have scholars put to rest many sovereign entity descriptors, such as mandate, dependency, or international settlement. When used today, such terms either lack descriptive capacity or relevance to contemporary affairs.

Historicization presents obvious challenges to scholars working on concepts that come under its eye. Historicization may involve critique of the historical applicability of the concept (e.g. ‘the Orient’), but this is not automatic. It is worth teasing out the specific difference here. Given the prominence of the middle power concept, criticism of it has been common.<sup>2</sup> These arguments typically questioned the universal conceptual validity of the middle power concept. The argument for historicization in this paper is premised on a different claim. The middle power concept had analytical utility within the post-war 20<sup>th</sup> century international structure, but in the emerging 21<sup>st</sup> century international structure it does not and most likely will not. As such, we make an original contribution by arguing for its historicization.

Historicization can be better understood as a future-tense project. As Owen argues, historicization, ‘is not – and should not be – independent of larger theoretical projects’.<sup>3</sup> The passage of time and moments of structural and normative change, as we are in today, should engender regular cases of historicization for scholarly concepts. In the 2020s, the study of international politics is undertaking substantive theoretical revision and transition.

In light of the decline of US hegemony and the rise of new technology, scholars are revising their interpretation of state power and the structure of the international system.<sup>4</sup> With changes in power come shifts in practice, with the institutions,

<sup>1</sup>Hobson 2009, 633.

<sup>2</sup>Ravenhill 1998; Chapnick 2005; Buzan and Waever 2009, 34–35.

<sup>3</sup>Owens 2016, 454.

<sup>4</sup>Cooley and Nexon 2020, 10–12; Acharya 2014.

norms, and behaviour of contemporary states adapting.<sup>5</sup> Traditional pathways to influence for non-great powers are narrowed, while countries that once worked to strengthen the order are now openly willing to weaken it.<sup>6</sup> The scope of these changes has brought into question the international political order, with the 20<sup>th</sup> century US-led liberal structure widely accepted to be in ‘crisis’ amid serious questions whether it ‘has the resilience to endure’.<sup>7</sup>

These changes have particular significance for middle-sized states. Unlike great power states who are order-providers (in that their world views and behaviour set the regional and global frameworks for political order), middle-sized states require much greater effort to influence the international political order from within. To be effective, middle-sized states must respond to, and evolve with the nature of the system they operate in. Conceptually therefore, the middle power concept ‘is not a fixed universal but something that has to be rethought continually in the context of the changing state of the international system’.<sup>8</sup> Cox’s view, expressed at the end of the Cold War, represented an optimism that middle powers theory had an analytical fungibility and utility that would endure as the international order evolved. However, this has not eventuated.

This paper’s case for the historicization of the middle power concept is based on two central arguments. First, we review the development of middle power theory and show the concept has proven inseparable from its mid-20<sup>th</sup> century origins. Even as new definitions and methods were developed, we argue that three assumptions about middle powers remained embedded in the concept: as states who are *International*, *Multilateral*, and *Good Citizens*.

Second, we test these assumptions against six contemporary ‘middle powers’, both classic and emerging, and located across the world. We find that while there is some variation, middle power theory can no longer help us distinguish or interpret these states. As such, we conclude the middle power concept should be historicized.

Case selection for the six states reviewed was based on the principles of consensus, hard cases, and breadth. First, we looked for states which are identified by both scholars and policymakers as middle powers. Second, from that list we selected two archetypal middle power states, Canada<sup>9</sup> and Australia.<sup>10</sup> If the middle power concept no longer provided analytical utility for these states, it would represent two ‘hard cases’ for our argument.<sup>11</sup> Third, we tried to also select cases based on width. The middle power concept has experienced remarkable spread across geographic and cultural regions over recent decades which must be reflected in any assessment of contemporary middle power theory. To this end, we selected four additional countries which scholars treat as middle powers and whose policymakers have, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, explicitly embraced the concept. These are Mexico,<sup>12</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Prantl and Goh 2022.

<sup>6</sup>Aydin 2021, 1393.

<sup>7</sup>Ikenberry 2018, 7; Kornprobst and Paul 2021, 1306.

<sup>8</sup>Cox 1989, 825.

<sup>9</sup>Hayes 1997; Michaud and Belanger 2000.

<sup>10</sup>Cooper *et al.* 1993; Ungerer 2007.

<sup>11</sup>Leuffen 2007, 152.

<sup>12</sup>Mares 1998; Gilley and O’Neil 2014, 5.

Indonesia,<sup>13</sup> South Korea,<sup>14</sup> and Turkey.<sup>15</sup> With over 30 states identified as middle powers, an article of this length cannot hope to be comprehensive, though we believe the resulting six cases provide a strong analytical foundation for our arguments.

To conclude our paper, we examine what the historicization of the middle power concept means for future scholarship on these kinds of states. In blunt terms, the middle power concept does not capture anything substantive about the behaviour of mid-sized states. It should therefore not be used by scholars any further. We identify five analytical puzzles that will determine the future conceptual framework for this field. As researchers who have widely published on the concept of middle power, the findings of this paper took some time to come to terms with. Yet we came to see that the process of historicization provides intellectual opportunities as well, opening space for new forms of theorizing that can connect disparate fields of academic study in compelling ways.

### **Argument 1: the middle power concept is unable to shed its 20<sup>th</sup> century historical legacy**

The concept of a ‘middle’ class of states is a common-sense category, given the prominence of hierarchical categorization within social and scientific analysis.<sup>16</sup> Yet the grounds for distinguishing states within this middle band has proven challenging. As the doyen of middle power studies Carlsten Holbraad complained, ‘nobody has quite overcome the serious difficulties of providing an entirely satisfactory definition of the type of power that is neither great nor small’.<sup>17</sup> This critique reflects two unusual features of the middle power concept compared to many other concepts in international political theory. First, it rose to prominence in the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the work of policymakers. Second, it has always been easy to identify ‘who’ was a middle power, but hard to pin down ‘what’ a middle power was.

Many historical accounts of the international system from antiquity to the 19<sup>th</sup> century feature secondary states under a variety of labels.<sup>18</sup> This pluralism changed in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century with the emergence of the ‘middle power’ concept. As the Second World War drew to a close, two western states, Canada and Australia, desired a role in post-war decision making. Their officials argued that states with a ‘functional’ role that contributed to the maintenance of peace, security, economic, and social stability, deserved institutional recognition as the ‘moderately powerful’ compared to the ‘utterly powerless’.<sup>19</sup> During negotiations for the United Nations, Canadian officials put forward a new concept, ‘middle power’ to represent this international and institutional role.<sup>20</sup> Canada and Australia’s bid for representation in the United Nations Security Council ultimately failed, however their effort

<sup>13</sup>Ping 2005; Teo 2022.

<sup>14</sup>Yoon 2006; Robertson 2006; Mo 2016.

<sup>15</sup>Müftüleri and Yüksel 1997; Öniş and Kutlay 2017.

<sup>16</sup>Lake 2011, 63–92.

<sup>17</sup>Holbraad 1984, 2.

<sup>18</sup>Abbondanza 2020.

<sup>19</sup>Chapnick 2005, 5.

<sup>20</sup>Robertson 2017, 3.

galvanized an emerging identity for a distinct group of western states which scholars soon embraced.

During these years, from the 1940s to early 1960s, scholars focused on the nature and meaning of the middle power role in the multilateral environment and promoted their contribution to the maintenance of peace and order.<sup>21</sup> Empirically, research concentrated on Western liberal states, predominantly Canada. A practitioner–scholarly nexus developed during these years, which proved mutually beneficial to both sides. This period saw the emergence of the functional definition, as an effort by policymakers and scholars to argue these states could contribute to international, multilateral forums to address common problems. Implicit within this distinction was a willingness to uphold the post-war order under American leadership, through institutions such as the United Nations.<sup>22</sup> Who could be a middle power was thus, from the start, less about a dispassionate identification of the hierarchical position or power of states, and instead reflected their alignment with the emerging US-led liberal order. Variations of the functional definition have continued to emerge over the years, such as in the work of Cooper<sup>23</sup> and Teo,<sup>24</sup> all emphasizing a distinct role for middle powers in support of multilateral institutions.

From the late 1960s until the early 1980s, scholars revised their methodological framework, embracing new quantitative research methods to measure and define the middle power concept under a hierarchical definition. These scholars sought to embed the study of middle powers into realist and liberal theoretical frameworks, and modestly increased geographic coverage and subject matter. Though still largely endorsing Eurocentric notions of *who* fit the concept.<sup>25</sup>

The hierarchical definition of middle powers should, in principle, have the clearest objectivity via quantitative rankings of material capabilities. Yet most scholars who have used this approach demonstrate an implicit selection process in their work. For a start there is nothing ‘middle’ about the ranking of the middle powers. Canada and Australia, the classic middle powers, generally appear between 8<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> in various global lists of economic size or military capacity. This could not be classified as the ‘middle’ in a world of 143 states in 1960 and makes less sense in 2023 with 195 states. Second, even within an ‘upper second tier’ of states there are consistent exclusions in the middle power literature on non-quantitative grounds. States which appear very close to Australia and Canada in hierarchical rankings, for example Russia, Brazil, or Iran – the 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, and 18<sup>th</sup> largest economies, respectively, in 2022 – have almost never been seen by policymakers or most academics as middle powers. Similarly states with a strong quantitative claim in one important area, such as Saudi Arabia (ninth in military spending) or Pakistan and Nigeria (fifth and seventh largest in population) are also commonly excluded.

As Holbraad<sup>26</sup> observed during the 1980s, hierarchical methodologies produced a ‘highly heterogenous group in almost every significant respect’. Some decades

<sup>21</sup>Gelber 1946; Glazebrook 1947; Anglin 1962; Holmes 1963a, 1963b; Soward 1963.

<sup>22</sup>Jordaan 2003, 169.

<sup>23</sup>Cooper 1997.

<sup>24</sup>Teo 2022.

<sup>25</sup>Clarkson 1966; Sethi 1969; Walter Goldstein 1970; Holbraad 1984; Holmes 1984.

<sup>26</sup>Holbraad 1984, 91.

later, Ping<sup>27</sup> also highlighted the ‘discordance between the realities of the hierarchical states system’ and the predictions of middle power theory, a discordance due in part to the ‘domination of the scholarship by Western interpretations’. While Ping’s work, centred on political-economy offers a rare systematic counter-example, the use of the hierarchical definition of middle powers in the literature has consistently been shaped by a series of implicit normative selection choices, reflective of the ideals of late 20<sup>th</sup> century western liberalism.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, as the Cold War wound down, scholars were now willing to make explicit what had been implicit in the earlier literature – middle powers were defined by their adherence to a set of characteristic western, liberal behaviours.<sup>28</sup> Declining great power competition and the apparent victory of liberal internationalism, it was argued, had re-opened space for the middle powers and re-enforced the strong normative presumption with which the field began. In a rightly acclaimed work in 1993, Andrew Cooper, Richard Higgott, and Kim Richard Nossal proposed the ‘behavioural’ definition of middle powers, which brought the three embedded assumptions directly to the surface and celebrated the normative contribution of these characteristics.<sup>29</sup> The behavioural definition was quickly established as the most popular approach to identifying middle powers and remains so to this day.

The policy–scholarly nexus around the middle power concept was reinvigorated during this period. There was co-evolutionary conceptual development and a common advocacy by scholars and practitioners for the international significance of middle power countries.<sup>30</sup> The behavioural definition’s conceptual honesty, making explicit what earlier definitions had kept implicit came with a cost. The behavioural definition has also been the most heavily attacked by scholars on the grounds of its empirical utility.<sup>31</sup>

By the early 2000s optimism for middle power contributions had begun to fade, and scholarly dissatisfaction with the concept rose. Again, policymakers seemed to take the lead, helping push forward the application of the middle power concept on the grounds of the self-identification of states. States around the world increasingly claimed middle power status seeking association with its ‘prestigious’ status and history.<sup>32</sup> Accelerating through the 1990s and into the 2000s, this pattern brought a welcome geographic and cultural diversity to the use of the middle power concept by both policymakers and scholars. Exemplifying this trend was the creation in 2013 of MIKTA, a handful of G-20 states that, after being excluded from the G8 and BRIC groupings, embraced the ‘middle power’ identity. Their foreign ministers characterized this identity as reflecting a ‘common interest in strengthening multi-lateralism, supporting global efforts for stability and prosperity [and] facilitating pragmatic and creative solutions to regional and global challenges’.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>27</sup>Ping 2005, 4.

<sup>28</sup>Higgott and Cooper 1990; Cooper 1997; Ravenhill 1998; Chapnick 1999; Neack 2000.

<sup>29</sup>Cooper *et al.* 1993.

<sup>30</sup>See Evans and Grant 1995.

<sup>31</sup>Ravenhill 1998; Chapnick 2005; Cooper 2011.

<sup>32</sup>Larson and Shevchenko 2019, 1190.

<sup>33</sup>Ahmet *et al.* 2014.

While scholars have accepted the ‘identity’ definition as one of the four main definitions – alongside functional, hierarchical, and behavioural – take up remains light.<sup>34</sup> Instead, the academic literature in the 2000s and 2010s reflected a curious mix of boosterism and anxiety. Where some spoke ambitiously of new coalitions and a ‘renaissance’ of the middle power concept,<sup>35</sup> other scholars proposed significant reforms in an attempt to revive middle power theory.<sup>36</sup> These reforms however have proven ill-fated. While well cited and debated, few have been taken up in a significant manner across the literature.

The most insightful efforts of middle power scholarship in recent years have largely sidelined questions of defining and theorizing middle power status. Instead, it explores the policy adaptations to the evolving international structure of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century,<sup>37</sup> or applies concepts from related fields, such as the insightful use of role conception in foreign policy formulation.<sup>38</sup> While many works in this era retain an optimism about the potential of these states, the lack of consensus and proliferation of new frameworks demonstrates a common anxiety about the theoretical utility of the middle power concept. This is seen most clearly in the diversity of proposals and concerns within edited volumes such as Gilley and O’Neil<sup>39</sup> and Struye de Swielande *et al.*<sup>40</sup> One notable example comes from two leading middle power scholars, Gabriele Abbondanza and Thomas Stow Wilkins who suggest the middle power concept applies ‘only’ to Canada and Australia.<sup>41</sup> In its place, they propose a category of ‘awkward powers’ to capture the range of states which are somewhat ‘in the middle’ powerwise, but for whom the middle power label, with its associated western liberal baggage is not appropriate (such as Brazil, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia). This is a useful and thoughtful contribution, but by narrowing the middle power label to such a tiny category of states, its long-term utility must be significantly questioned.

### Three consistent assumptions

Across this rich history we see two features emerge. First, the middle power concept has a significant policy–scholarly nexus which directly shapes how the concept is understood. This is a co-evolutionary relationship, with policymakers putting forth ideas scholars explore, starting with the concept’s creation by Canadian officials. Scholars in turn have sought to influence policy by encouraging the adoption of the middle power label and applauding its normative implications.<sup>42</sup>

Second, scholars, while exploring a variety of ways of interpreting the concept, have sustained and embedded three consistent assumptions about the concept,

<sup>34</sup>Robertson 2017.

<sup>35</sup>Beeson and Higgott 2014; Medcalf and Mohan 2014.

<sup>36</sup>Jordaan 2003, 2017; Carr 2014; Patience 2014; Manicom and Reeves 2014; Robertson 2017; Struye de Swielande *et al.* 2019.

<sup>37</sup>Emmers and Teo 2018.

<sup>38</sup>Lee 2019; Karim 2018.

<sup>39</sup>Gilley and O’Neil 2014.

<sup>40</sup>Struye de Swielande *et al.* 2019.

<sup>41</sup>Abbondanza and Wilkins 2022, 24.

<sup>42</sup>See Soeya 2005.

regardless of their preferred definition. First, middle powers are *internationalists*. Middle powers required close relations to the United States, obvious diplomatic capacity, and a desire to exert influence into global affairs.<sup>43</sup> It was the 1940s creation of the United Nations which created the first middle powers in Canada and Australia, and ever since ‘the middle power role has been closely associated with the development of international organisation’.<sup>44</sup> The issues middle powers became associated with in the 1990s, such as disarmament, arms control, human rights, and trade liberalization all required international solutions.<sup>45</sup> So too the arguments in the 2010s for a renaissance of middle powers, centred on global concerns such as climate change or US–China competition.<sup>46</sup> David Cooper notes that ‘middlepowerness is intrinsically a global positional concept’,<sup>47</sup> with a similar interpretation held by Buzan and Waever.<sup>48</sup>

Second, middle powers are *multilateralists*. They believe that by acting together within formal organizational structures, they could make a difference. In one of the earliest academic articles on middle powers, G. Glazebrook argued that it was in the United Nations that middle powers had secured ‘an authority related to their place in the world’.<sup>49</sup> Multilateralism provided the space for middle powers to impose constraints on those above and establish order on those below. They claimed to be more nimble than powerful states, while still being able to afford the professional foreign ministries needed to participate fully.<sup>50</sup> Sarah Teo’s innovative ‘differentiation theory’ work reaffirms the centrality of this assumption in contemporary middle power theory.<sup>51</sup>

Third, middle powers are ‘*Good Citizens*’. This is the claim middle powers play a positive and constructive role in international society. Gabriele Abbondanza notes that ‘middle power theory defines middle powers according to a range of criteria, and of these definitional parameters, at least two reflect the notion of “good international citizen”’.<sup>52</sup> The idealism of middle powers as not only supporting, but normatively improving the liberal order was integral to the pitch of middle power policymakers at the founding of the United Nations. Ever since the concept has had an embedded presumption of ‘moral superiority’.<sup>53</sup>

This historical and literature review is necessarily brief. Yet while there is great diversity in the scholarship of middle powers, three core assumptions remain embedded within almost every use of the concept, by officials and scholars. To test whether middle power theory, with these assumptions embedded, still has real-world analytical utility we now turn to our case studies of six contemporary ‘middle power’ states.

<sup>43</sup>Struye de Swielande *et al.* 2019, 52.

<sup>44</sup>Janis van der Westhuizen quoted in Struye de Swielande *et al.* 2019, 52.

<sup>45</sup>Cooper *et al.* 1993, 19.

<sup>46</sup>Beeson and Higgott 2014; Medcalf and Mohan 2014.

<sup>47</sup>Cooper 2013, 24.

<sup>48</sup>Buzan and Waever 2003, 34.

<sup>49</sup>Glazebrook 1947, 314.

<sup>50</sup>Michaud and Belanger 2000, 99–102; Behringer 2005, 306.

<sup>51</sup>Teo 2022.

<sup>52</sup>Abbondanza 2021, 179.

<sup>53</sup>Wood 1988, 20.

## Argument 2: contemporary states no longer reflect the core theoretical propositions of the middle power concept

In this section, we develop our second argument, that contemporary states no longer reflect the core theoretical propositions of the middle power concept, as *internationalist*, *multilateralist*, and *good citizens*. Through our case selection principles of consensus, hard cases, and breadth, our contemporary cases are, in alphabetical order, Australia, Canada, Indonesia, Mexico, South Korea, and Turkey.

### **No longer internationalists**

To be a middle power is to have an international focus. In their classic definition, Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal consistently locate middle power behaviour at a global level: ‘the tendency to pursue multilateral solutions to *international* problems, the tendency to embrace compromise positions in *international* disputes and the tendency to embrace notions of good *international* citizenship’ (emphasis added).<sup>54</sup>

We observe that the six case study states are today either reducing their global focus or operating at a modest level of interest and concern with international affairs compared to the predictions of middle power theory. Indonesia, which is on track to be the largest economy among the six remains an inwardly focused nation. In 2014 both presidential candidates ‘trashed the globalist internationalism of the outgoing President’, and though the more internationally popular candidate Joko Widodo won, his administration was for many years largely uninterested in many global meetings and global concerns.<sup>55</sup> Indonesian attitudes remain diverse. In 2018 Jakarta successfully bid for a 2-year term on the United Nations Security Council, and it remains an active contributor of peace keeping forces. In a telling re-formulation, Sarah Teo<sup>56</sup> has put forward the concept of ‘good regional citizenship’ to capture Indonesia’s approach, not only reflecting a turn away from global concerns, but also a ‘distancing’ from the ‘assumptions about morality and ethics’ typically embedded in middle power theory. Teo notably also identifies Australia with this new regional focus.

Turkey over the last decade has slowly turned away from visions as a cross-regional mediator between Europe and the Middle East, between East and West. Lars Haugom writes ‘the notion of Turkey as a regional leader, facilitator, and political-cultural model for other Muslim nations has been toned down in favour of more narrowly defined national interests, often couched in security terms’.<sup>57</sup> Sucu *et al.*<sup>58</sup> argue that the decline of US hegemony, and regional events such as the Arab Spring have lead Turkey into a ‘revisionist’ posture, centred on regional influence. They argue that the structural changes of the 21<sup>st</sup> century make an illiberal, regional, and often unilateral approach a ‘viable strategy’ and one that other middle powers may later pursue.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>54</sup>Cooper *et al.* 1993, 19.

<sup>55</sup>Harding and Merchant 2016; Weatherbee 2017, 163–64.

<sup>56</sup>Teo 2022, 1140–41.

<sup>57</sup>Haugom 2019, 215.

<sup>58</sup>Sucu *et al.* 2021, 316.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*

Canadian foreign policy in the 2020s is far removed from its celebrated history as a middle power. As early as 1998, the eminent scholar Kim Richard Nossal observed that ‘profound changes ... are occurring’ in Canada’s foreign policy, ‘instead of such flattering notions as “niche diplomacy”, what has occurred over the course of the 1990s is pinchpenny diplomacy, marked by a meanness of spirit that delegitimizes the voluntaristic acts of “good international citizenship” that are essential components of internationalism.’<sup>60</sup> The government of Stephen Harper (2006–2015) entrenched this shift towards a ‘narrow’ approach to the international arena, ‘while often disparaging global structures’.<sup>61</sup> In 2015, a new Prime Minister Justin Trudeau promised that ‘Canada was back’, however scholars assess that his government has ‘largely failed [in its] efforts to return Canada to its former international standing’ and the transition was ‘a difference primarily of tone’, in part due to emerging structural changes which limit opportunity for international middle power initiatives.<sup>62</sup>

A similar pattern can be seen in the case of Australia. Since the mid-2000s, Australia has undertaken its own ‘pivot’ towards Asia,<sup>63</sup> putting an end to an uninterrupted run of deployments to the Middle East since 1948. Defence planning has a ‘tight focus’ on ‘our immediate region [covering the South Pacific and Maritime Southeast Asia].’<sup>64</sup> Aid and Development spending has been considerably reduced and is almost exclusively focused on Southeast Asia and the South Pacific.<sup>65</sup> There are some partisan differences. In 2013 a conservative government was elected promising ‘less Geneva and more Jakarta’.<sup>66</sup> In 2022, a progressive government replaced it, yet its diplomatic travel pattern remains heavily focused on the South Pacific and Southeast Asia. As the Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs Tim Watts<sup>67</sup> explained 6 months into the role, ‘It’s unsurprising that our strategic interests mean that we will naturally prioritize our resources and our attention in our immediate region’.

Changes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are likely to strengthen the centrifugal forces keeping these six countries close to home. While in the 1940s and 1990s it was possible to dream of a genuine and cohesive international order, this vision has not emerged.<sup>68</sup> By the early 2000s, scholars such as Peter J. Katzenstein, Barry Buzan, and Ole Waever provided strong evidence of an increasing regionalization of security and political trends, which in the eyes of the latter scholars brought into question the ‘idea of middle powers’.<sup>69</sup> Though middle powers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century dreamed of a global impact, scholars assess there is either ‘meagre’ or ‘remarkably little evidence of middle power diplomacy actually having a discernible impact on international affairs’.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>60</sup>Nossal 1998, 89.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 259.

<sup>62</sup>Gillies and Narine 2020, 258; Nossal 1998, 32.

<sup>63</sup>O’Neil 2015.

<sup>64</sup>Department of Defence 2020.

<sup>65</sup>Development Policy Centre 2023.

<sup>66</sup>O’Neil 2015.

<sup>67</sup>Watts 2022.

<sup>68</sup>Cooley and Nexon 2020, 32.

<sup>69</sup>Katzenstein 2005, 31; Buzan and Waever 2003, 34.

<sup>70</sup>Carr 2015, 269; Beeson and Higgott 2014, 216.

The international focus of the middle powers was a product of their role as legitimizers and supporters of the US-led system over the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Australian policy officials in the 1990s were acutely conscious their achievements at forums such as the 1995 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, were enabled by the United States.<sup>71</sup> By contrast states with equivalent levels of material capacity who challenged the ‘hegemonic orthodoxy’ were consistently excluded from international influence and recognition as middle powers.<sup>72</sup> With the ‘end’ or at least ‘unravelling’ of the American led order, there is no longer the space for hegemonic legitimizers to operate.<sup>73</sup> The USA will of course need partners, perhaps more so than in the past, but the tasks asked of these states are changing, with the action occurring in regional settings such as alliance frameworks. The Biden Administration’s policy of ‘integrated deterrence’ asks allies such as Australia for much higher levels of force contribution, and independent military operations for the purpose of deterrence, than was the case in the Cold War. Similarly, the wider audience of states will likely not grant these states the same prestigious status and identity now that they are no longer members of the hegemon’s court.

We do not argue that these six states have no interest in international affairs. Instead, our argument is that their international efforts are, like the majority of states, likely to be in response to particular circumstances and opportunities, rather than reflecting an inherent characteristic of these states around which a scholarly theory can be established. The specific historical and cultural context that gave relevance to the *internationalist* middle power has now passed.

### **No longer multilateralists**

Just as middle powers are assumed to maintain an international outlook, they are also assumed to pursue *multilateral* solutions to problems. Middle powers were born in 20<sup>th</sup> century multilateralism. For some states such as Australia, multilateralism was so prevalent it became a ‘band-aid’, applied to every problem.<sup>74</sup> The study and promotion of ‘niche’ middle power diplomacy centred on the use of multilateralism as the foundation for identifying issues, building coalitions, and achieving results.<sup>75</sup>

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the case study states are far less enthusiastic about multilateralism, especially institutions with global or broad memberships. South Korea presents a particularly interesting case. Since 2003, successive administrations have identified as a middle power. However, in application this has wavered between a globalist interpretation and a literal interpretation. The globalist interpretation invokes policies to position South Korea as a pivot within the global multilateral framework. The literal interpretation interprets ‘middle’ as meaning between East/West, developed/developing, and invokes policies to remain positioned in the middle space between China and the USA. In recent years, South Korea has demonstrated a cautious approach to multilateralism – a member of the Regional

<sup>71</sup>Carr 2015, 156.

<sup>72</sup>Jordaan 2003, 167.

<sup>73</sup>Acharya 2014.

<sup>74</sup>Wesley 2011, 169.

<sup>75</sup>Cooper 1997.

Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, but not the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership; a member of the NATO 'Asia-Pacific Four' partners (Australia, Japan, New Zealand, Korea), but not a member of the Quad (Australia, India, Japan, United States), a supporter of Ukraine, but not a supplier of lethal weapons. In early 2023 South Korean leaders publicly raised the potential of abandoning the Non-Proliferation Treaty to acquire nuclear weapons for its defence.<sup>76</sup>

Meanwhile in Southeast Asia there is recurring talk of Indonesia 'outgrowing' ASEAN and officials have argued it should assert its regional leadership in a far more unitary and direct fashion.<sup>77</sup> Rosyidin and Pattipeilohy,<sup>78</sup> argue Indonesia has 'neglected' ASEAN, as the Jokowi government, 'champions a bilateral over multilateral approach in the pursuit of national interests'. Wicaksan and Wardhana<sup>79</sup> similarly observe that Indonesia's President 'would only come to multilateral events which directly benefitted the Indonesian people... [while] nationalist discourses a la Sukarno were re-introduced in the strategic vision of Indonesia's diplomacy'. As we discuss in the final section, if the middle power concept emerged within the US hegemonic order from 1945, the recent approach of South Korea and Indonesia suggests non-great powers are reformulating their policies and outlook within an emerging Chinese-dominated order in Asia. Many practices such as multilateralism will remain, but within a different situational and pragmatic cast.

Turkey's changes are remarkable. It has been a member of NATO for six decades, yet the relationship seems to be 'crumbling'.<sup>80</sup> Diplomatic disputes and critiques have grown, and Turkey has increasingly sought to veto multilateral activity, creating a 'persistent headache for EU-NATO security relations'.<sup>81</sup> Mexico's case is less extreme, though a clear shift can also be traced away from multilateralism. Aydin<sup>82</sup> has charted that in recent years, both Turkey and Mexico have 'retreated from active roles within international organizations...and have put pressure on the stability of the liberal international order'. Both countries had peaks of activity within international multilateral forums in the 2000s, though each has retreated in the face of domestic and regional challenges.

Australia has been increasingly willing to operate outside multilateral structures to pursue its aims, signing 13 bilateral trade agreements, and supporting the 2003 invasion of Iraq without UN sanction. Australian leaders have explicitly questioned and challenged the legitimacy of international institutions, ignoring rulings (such as on human rights or climate change) and warned of the costs to sovereignty.<sup>83</sup> There is a modest partisan difference, with Labor party governments (2007–2013, 2022–) more willing to rhetorically defend multilateralism. Though as Ravenhill<sup>84</sup> warned,

<sup>76</sup>Bandow 2023.

<sup>77</sup>Desker 2011; Tan 2015.

<sup>78</sup>Rosyidin and Pattipeilohy 2020, 149.

<sup>79</sup>Wicaksana and Wardhana 2021, 415.

<sup>80</sup>Defence Connect 2021.

<sup>81</sup>Dursun-Özkanca 2019, 71.

<sup>82</sup>Aydin 2021, 1378.

<sup>83</sup>Morrison 2019.

<sup>84</sup>Ravenhill 1998.

it would significantly undermine the utility of the middle power concept, if its function was primarily to capture domestic partisan alignments.

Finally, Canada, like Australia, has seen strong partisan swings shape its approach to multilateralism. The Harper government distrusted multilateralism and significantly reduced Canadian engagement, a change the Trudeau government has attempted but not successfully reversed.<sup>85</sup> Jocelyn Coulon,<sup>86</sup> a former adviser to Trudeau argues that ‘in practice, the Liberal foreign policy agenda does not represent a break with Conservative policies, but a continuation’. A similar judgement is reached by Copeland.<sup>87</sup>

The trend away from multilateralism among our six case study states is widely reflected among powers large and small on the international stage.<sup>88</sup> Scholars have offered multiple explanations for the growing problems of multilateralism, including: the need to deal with more issues, to deal with issues of greater complexity, sharper degrees of developmental/cultural difference, overly bureaucratic processes, ineffectiveness, and increased state competition, all of which erode the effectiveness and legitimacy of multilateral structures.<sup>89</sup>

These trends will worsen if predictions of a ‘new Cold War’ between the China and the United States are realized. As Holbraad noted in his classic study, bipolar structures prevent middle powers from influencing the core system dynamics ‘in any significant way’.<sup>90</sup> It is no coincidence that the heyday of middle power multilateralism, in the mid-1940s and early-1990s were periods of either unipolarity or tempered great power rivalry within multilateral forums. The most active forums today are regional, smallest common-denominator groups, such as minilateral structures. This implies a quite different conception of the role for institutional cooperation than predicted by middle power theory (which emphasizes the identification of niches, the focus on global challenges, the use of large coalition building to offset power asymmetries, etc.).

Our argument is not that these six states will not seek or benefit from multilateralism in the present or future. They, like most states large and small, participate daily in hundreds of institutions. Rather, we argue that scholars should not see their involvement as inimical to the nature of these states and the means by which scholars can both distinguish and interpret them. The specific historical and cultural context of 20<sup>th</sup> century multilateralism that situated the middle power in the midst of global governance has now passed.

### **No longer good citizens**

No theme is more unique to the concept of middle powers than the perception of them as ‘good citizens’. This feature was how Canada and Australia helped distinguish their contribution throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as states not merely out for self-interest, but genuinely contributing to international institutions for the

<sup>85</sup>Gillies and Narine 2020, 259.

<sup>86</sup>Coulon 2019, 7.

<sup>87</sup>Copeland 2021, 29.

<sup>88</sup>Ikenberry 2003; van Oudenaren 2005; Muzaka and Bishop 2015; Weiss 2018.

<sup>89</sup>Bello 2021.

<sup>90</sup>Holbraad 1984, 124.

common interest. As Abbondanza argued in a recent paper on middle powers as good citizens, ‘there cannot be a “quintessential” middle power that is not a good international citizen at the same time’.<sup>91</sup>

While being a ‘good citizen’ remains an attractive label of public diplomacy, it is notable that the six case study states rarely use such language anymore, nor attempt to follow it in deed. Australia since 1996, across both parties, has dropped the ‘good international citizen’ language of the former Foreign Minister Gareth Evans.<sup>92</sup> Australia has been as self-interested as any state and often shapes or breaks rules in order to support its interests. In the South Pacific Australia is a hegemon and often acts like it on issues of security and the environment.<sup>93</sup> It has adopted US style ‘exemptionalism’ enabling authoritarianism and undermining democracy promotion and international law when it suits national interests.<sup>94</sup> It has recently been accused of undermining global norms on nuclear proliferation by seeking to acquire nuclear-powered submarines. In light of these changes Abbondanza<sup>95</sup> argues Australia is at best a ‘neutral international citizen’, which ‘consequently’ calls into question its status as an ‘exemplary middle power’.

Mexico was a founding member of the UN and a prominent early supporter of its social and economic activities. Limitations on democracy prevented active claiming to be a good citizen until the late 1980s. Outside a brief push for an activist foreign policy in the early 2000s, its capacity to do so has ever since been limited by issues concerning human rights, immigration, the environment, and the rule of law.<sup>96</sup> Indonesia similarly was an authoritarian state with a colony in East Timor until 1999. Indonesia’s leaders continue to repress West Papuan activists to prevent further claims of independence. Though Indonesia’s democratic reforms were widely heralded, scholars today identify an illiberal turn in Indonesian politics and society along with ‘democratic deconsolidation’.<sup>97</sup> As with the *internationalist* and *multilateral* assumptions, the evidence from Indonesia is not all one-way. In early 2023, Indonesia’s President Joko Widodo took the significant step of publicly admitting to ‘gross human rights violations’ in Indonesia’s past, though this remains an internally focused shift.

While South Korea has led short single administration normative campaigns on green energy, its policies on a range of issues from gender discrimination, treatment of refugees, and corruption are highlighted as ‘significant human rights issues’ by US officials.<sup>98</sup> South Korea has deliberately limited its promotion of values to avoid impinging on major power interests.<sup>99</sup> Canada, as Nossal<sup>100</sup> observed, had begun to lose its claim to this status as far back as 1998. While the Trudeau government has rhetorically pitched the return of this identity, and undertaken some initiatives,

<sup>91</sup>Abbondanza 2021, 191.

<sup>92</sup>Evans 1989.

<sup>93</sup>Wallis 2017; Schultz 2014.

<sup>94</sup>Strating 2020.

<sup>95</sup>Abbondanza 2021, 178–79.

<sup>96</sup>Aydin 2021, 1391–92.

<sup>97</sup>Mietzner 2018.

<sup>98</sup>Department of State 2021.

<sup>99</sup>Easley and Park 2018, 250–51.

<sup>100</sup>Nossal 1998, 89.

such as around the issue of ‘hostage diplomacy’ many scholars discount the significance of the change.<sup>101</sup> A common assessment is that the Trudeau government has been rhetorically strong, but often avoided the political and financial costs requisite for a sustained policy of good citizenship.<sup>102</sup>

Finally, Turkey has undertaken a ‘radical authoritarian shift’ and is currently ‘exiting the most basic provisions of a democratic regime’.<sup>103</sup> Sucu *et al.*<sup>104</sup> observe that ‘since 2011 Turkey has largely abandoned benign foreign policy (good international citizenship, conflict mediation, multilateralism) in favour of a more revisionist one. This manifested in unilateral military interventions [and] aspirations for regional hegemony’.

Though the highly normative image of ‘good citizens’ has suited the ambitions of policymakers and ideals of many scholars, it is ‘empirically discreditable’ as an explanation of the behaviour of these countries.<sup>105</sup> Critics of the middle power concept have particularly focused on this claim as the most troubling feature of the concept.<sup>106</sup> They charge that the underlying normative presumption has distorted the theory of middle powers, turning the literature’s focus away from notions of either ‘middle’ or ‘power’. As John W. Holmes wrote in 1984, ‘it is unfortunate that the role of the middle power had become confused with “do-goodism”’.<sup>107</sup>

More troublingly, the notion of ‘good citizenship’ was integrally tied to the interests and outlooks of western, liberal, and overwhelmingly white states.<sup>108</sup> Any comprehensive study of non-great power states would have to examine how countries such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Brazil, and Iran have achieved notable influence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by *challenging* elements of the liberal order. This includes acting as ‘alternative patrons’, enabling others to ‘exit’ the order and thus hastening the rate of change.<sup>109</sup> Yet as these states and practices do not fit the Western image of ‘good citizens’, they have been largely excluded from the middle power literature.

Though the middle power label is no longer exclusively for racially white nations, it is still typically reserved for states that support the US-led order.<sup>110</sup> In the 21<sup>st</sup> century where the racial structures of international order are explicitly recognized, and non-western states are achieving a greater say in what defines norms and standards for states, retaining a 20<sup>th</sup> century Eurocentric ‘good citizen’ logic leaves the middle power concept unreflective of contemporary state practices and attitudes.<sup>111</sup>

<sup>101</sup>Nossal 2018; Gillies and Narine 2020.

<sup>102</sup>Jones 2019, 121.

<sup>103</sup>Öktem and Akkoyunlu 2018, 469.

<sup>104</sup>Sucu *et al.* 2021, 312.

<sup>105</sup>Cooper 2011, 321.

<sup>106</sup>Ravenhill 1998, 309–27; Stairs 1998; Chapnick 2000.

<sup>107</sup>Holmes 1984, 369.

<sup>108</sup>Jordaan 2003, 167.

<sup>109</sup>Cooley and Nexon 2020, 11–12.

<sup>110</sup>Jordaan 2017.

<sup>111</sup>Acharya 2022, 42–43; Acharya and Buzan 2019, 218–60.

## Findings

The evidence from our six case studies is not universal, but clear trend lines and patterns can be observed. As the 21<sup>st</sup> century has worn on, these states have all been less internationally focused, less supportive and active in multilateral forums, and shown sparse evidence of being ‘good citizens’. There are some variations, with the identities of particular leaders playing an important role in these divergences as the middle power role conception literature has observed.<sup>112</sup> These examples, for instance Indonesia’s role at the United Nations, or Canada’s claim to be ‘back’ under Justin Trudeau are important for understanding these countries at specific moments. Yet they do not justify the broader predictions of middle power theory that we can distinguish a specific group of states, and interpret their behaviour through the assumptions of middle power theory. Further, the structural changes of the international system, as widely observed by scholars in recent years, strongly suggest the strengthening of these trends away from the predictions of middle power theory.

In light of this finding, we argue for the historicization of the middle power concept. Scholars (and officials) should no longer use the concept of ‘middle powers’. Just as we have moved on from terms such as ‘the orient’ or ‘Occident’, so too we argue we should no longer use the concept of middle powers. The middle power is dead, and the theory must be consigned to history.

Two objections to this argument should be addressed. First, some critics will ask why not take the argument further, in line with say the proposals of Ravenhill<sup>113</sup> and Chapnick<sup>114</sup> and argue the concept never had value. We disagree. The three core assumptions of middle power theory of states as *international* in focus, *multilateral* in method, and *good citizens* in conduct had clear analytical utility during periods of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, exemplified by a prominent practitioner–scholarly nexus during this period. We lose more than we gain through such a wholesale dismissal and revisionism.

The alternate objection is that the middle power concept simply awaits reform to fit the conditions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This was the expectation of Cox<sup>115</sup> three decades earlier. While we remain open to the potential, we note that many scholars have tried over the last two decades with limited success. There has been an absence of convergence, or even significant adoption of a leading approach. Take the case of Eduard Jordaan. In 2003 he provided a highly influential effort that distinguished between ‘emerging’ and ‘traditional’ middle powers. This formulation began to gain a reasonable foothold in the field. Yet by 2017, Jordaan returned to assess the state of the literature, and concluded that the push for reform had clearly failed and as such scholars should ‘restrict the middle power term to mid-range states that actively support the liberal hegemonic project’.<sup>116</sup> Many others have similarly tried to propose reforms, adding or redefining terms, often in narrower and narrower ways to try and keep the theoretical sand from slipping between our

<sup>112</sup>Lee 2019.

<sup>113</sup>Ravenhill 1998.

<sup>114</sup>Chapnick 2005.

<sup>115</sup>Cox 1989, 825.

<sup>116</sup>Jordaan 2017, 405.

fingers.<sup>117</sup> While often generating debate, they have achieved very little cut through in a literature which continues to overwhelmingly embrace – and celebrate – the view that middle powers are *internationalist*, *multilateralist*, and *good citizens*.

Historicization offers a third approach between these two poles. It helps recognize the good both intellectually and politically from the earlier eras of scholarship on the middle power concept. As we enter a period that is marked by increased competition, a remembrance of the possibilities of middle power cooperation that produced initiatives such as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the Antarctic Treaty, and the Ottawa Treaty deserves to be made.

As a future-oriented concept, historicization reflects that we are in a moment of systemic change, which necessarily must influence the conceptual lexicon of international political theory. And finally, it helps create the space for the refreshment of the scholarly lexicon by recognizing that new conceptual frameworks are necessary. Scholarship progressed when efforts to save concepts such as ‘the Orient’ and ‘mandate’ passed from use and alternate theories took their place. What a new conceptual lexicon should look like, and the steps needed to achieve it, are the subject of our final section.

### Future research puzzles

So far we have presented two arguments in this paper. First, that the middle power concept, due to its prestigious history with an interwoven policy–scholarly nexus, has embedded three core assumptions into these states, as *international* in focus, *multilateral* in method, and *good citizens* in conduct. Second, we have reviewed six case study countries (Canada, Australia, Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, and Turkey) and argued that their power, status, and actions are not reflected within the conceptual framework of middle power theory. As such, and given the struggles of scholars to reform the concept, we conclude that the middle power concept should be historicized.

We do not propose to offer a direct replacement term here. Nor do we believe that such a proposal can be provided at this current moment. Instead, in this section we argue there needs to be a range of conceptual work undertaken to establish new theoretical foundations for the study of non-great power states. Large parts of this work is already underway, other elements require further analysis by scholars. This effort will first need to identify *if* there should be a distinct class of states between Great Powers and Small States and then on what grounds they should be distinguished.

We identify the five research puzzles for scholars which strike us as the most pressing and fruitful for establishing the foundation of a new conceptual lexicon to replace ‘middle power’. These questions go to the relationship between this sub-field and the wider study of international relations (IR), the nature of the boundaries for distinguishing these countries, and the impact of 21<sup>st</sup> century changes (growing regionalization, new technology, etc.) for our analytical frameworks. Each of these five areas offers rich potential for scholars to explore. By clarifying

<sup>117</sup>Jordaan 2003, 2017; Carr 2014; Manicom and Reeves 2014; Patience 2014; Struye de Swielande *et al.* 2019; Abbondanza and Wilkins 2022, 24.

these foundational questions, we believe the path towards a new conceptual framework can begin to be established.

First, *is there still analytical utility in identify a ‘middle’ band between great powers and small states?* In recent years theorists of small states have emphasized and demonstrated the considerable agency of even the smallest states within the international system.<sup>118</sup> This significantly reduces the theoretical distinctiveness of middle-sized states. As noted earlier both policymakers and scholars have argued since the 1940s that what distinguished middle powers was their capacity as the ‘moderately powerful’ compared to the ‘utterly powerless’.<sup>119</sup> Is that still valid?

The appropriate foundation for distinguishing a particular class of state ‘in the middle’ is not easily resolved. The concept of power remains ‘the defining concept of the discipline’ of IR<sup>120</sup> and so should be front and centre of this question. How then to operationalize it? Should scholars look to the possession of particular kinds of material power? Such as nuclear weapons? Or to particular kinds of outcomes from that power? How do rapid advances in technology transform this? Perhaps, in line with the literature on Great Powers, status in the eyes of other key states should play a decisive role? *If there is a distinctive ‘middle’ band of states, and what analytical frameworks can be used to distinguish it are first-order questions.*

Second, *what is the right relationship between hierarchical concepts (such as Great Power, Secondary state, etc.) and structural interpretations of international society?* The concept of ‘middle power’ is a hierarchical concept yet it has often been rejected by scholars of hierarchy and order.<sup>121</sup> More broadly, the study of middle powers has often remained a self-referential field of study, concerned primarily with its internal conversations rather than a contributing element to the wider IR controversies. Should a future conceptual lexicon be established and sustained in explicit alignment with the broader field (akin to the concept of ‘great powers’), or is there analytical utility in the study of these states being modestly independent and hence able to pursue greater nuance and creativity?

Third, *what is the relationship between regional and global status?* The distinction between ‘middle power’ and ‘regional power’ has long been unclear as David A. Cooper<sup>122</sup> has eloquently demonstrated. This question is related to the first question, though with significant ramifications. If, as scholars such as Buzan and Waever,<sup>123</sup> Acharya,<sup>124</sup> Katzenstein,<sup>125</sup> and others argue that we are entering a ‘world of regions’, will the space for an internationally focused non-great power state disappear? If it ever was valid in the first place? This question is complicated by the spread of new technology (especially for communications), which as scholars of small states have shown, allows for a ‘voice’, if less so a claim to ‘power’ at the

<sup>118</sup>Long 2016; Efremova 2019.

<sup>119</sup>Chapnick 2005, 5.

<sup>120</sup>Drezner 2021, 29.

<sup>121</sup>Buzan and Waever 2003; Goh 2013.

<sup>122</sup>Cooper 2013.

<sup>123</sup>Buzan and Waever 2003, 34.

<sup>124</sup>Acharya 2014.

<sup>125</sup>Katzenstein 2005.

global level.<sup>126</sup> Should we simply have Great Powers (who may seek a global focus) and regional powers (or smaller) who cannot?

Fourth, *if the US hegemonic order produced the concept of 'middle power', what does a (potential) Chinese hegemonic order in Asia mean for non-great power states?* This question has the largest and richest literature so far, thanks to the work of scholars of China's historical systems.<sup>127</sup> Their histories and theoretical explorations have however received insufficient engagement by scholars of international political theory, and only passing recognition by scholars of middle powers. Yet the implications could fundamentally shape the type of non-great power state that thrives in the new order. Indonesian scholars such as Wicaksana<sup>128</sup> have argued Jakarta's behaviour in recent years demonstrates the need for a new era of Global IR that 'rethinks' the conceptual frameworks by moving away from models of western states in earlier western-dominated era.

Fifth, *what is the role of normative theory within middle power theory?* Perhaps the most controversial aspect of the middle power concept has been the presumption of normative 'goodness' within the field. This is reflected in the assumption of a 'good citizenship', though also reflected racial and cultural alignment with the dominant hegemonic order. This assumption was crucial for the establishment of the policy-scholarly nexus and in turn the prominence of the middle power concept in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Is there any justification, in theory or empirically, for sustaining in the 21<sup>st</sup> century a normative basis for distinguishing a class of states?

As international structures change so too will the power, status, and actions of non-great power states. The changes occurring today are removing the foundations upon which the middle power concept was explicitly created, as supporters and legitimizers of the US-led liberal international order. This prominent history brought the concept into widespread use across policy and scholarly circles, but came with a hidden cost, and embedded three core assumptions into the understanding of the term. That middle powers are *internationalist*, *multilateralist*, and *good citizens*. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, despite the efforts of many excellent scholars to grapple with the growing empirical misalignment of these three features, it does not appear that efforts to re-establish the concept of 'middle powers' on new analytical grounds can escape the gravitational pull of the concept's origins. Historicizing the middle power concept enables us to approach with fresh eyes the role, significance, power, and nature of secondary states.

Marking the passing of the middle power concept is not intended as a criticism of those who have done so much to breathe life into the concept over so many years. There are two critical strands of work here, both honourable and important which we want to conclude by paying recognition to. The first was an analytical attempt to understand secondary states. For much of the 1940s, 1980s, and 1990s, the term middle power really did capture something important about how a number of states acted and thought. The scholarship of these eras is a rich historical record. Further, the concept helped encourage scholars to expand their gaze beyond the great powers and try to better capture the diversity of international affairs.

<sup>126</sup>Petersson 2021, 595–96.

<sup>127</sup>Zhang 2015; Zarakol 2022.

<sup>128</sup>Wicaksana 2022.

The second notable strand was the hope that by promoting states who had an occasional tendency towards peaceful and cooperative approaches, scholars might help nudge the behaviour of other states and the broader system towards a more just and equitable approach. The work of Professor Yoshihide Soeya urging Japan to act as a middle power exemplifies this humane and thoughtful tradition.<sup>129</sup> It is with some regret that we face an international order where many states do not seem to hold such a normative ideal as the standard for their actions. We believe we can best honour these two legacies by historicizing the label ‘middle power’ as an identifier of these two approaches over the era of roughly 1945–2015.

Through this conceptual shift, we can recognize the value of the policy choices and scholarship of earlier eras, and provide the intellectual clear ground for analysing a broader, inclusive category of secondary states we encounter in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Through these changes we hope not only to better understand today’s states analytically, but perhaps to find ways to once more help encourage them towards higher standards, within a language and theoretical framework that makes sense in the new era.

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<sup>129</sup>Soeya 2005.

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