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National
University

Middle Powers: An Australian Perspective

John Ravenhill

Australian National University

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Australia as a Middle Power

Longstanding Theme in Australian Foreign Policy since 1945

emphasis has varied according to
which party/coalition in power

Does the Middle Power Concept Have Any Analytical Utility?

- Vagueness: Definition by what it is not—not superpower (or great power?), not small power
- Sufficient commonalities among countries of a certain diplomatic ranking both in their capabilities and *how they define and pursue their national interests* in the international system >> worthwhile analytical category



MP Definition and Pursuit of National Interests

- Deserve & Require a “Seat at the Table”
- Commitment to Liberal Internationalism
 - Commitment to Multilateralism (Global and Regional)



Middle Power Activism as Choice

- Capabilities as Permissive
 - No automatic correspondence between possession of capabilities and their utilization



The Six “Cs” of Middle Power Status

- Capacity
- Concentration
- Commitment
- Creativity
- Coalition-Building
- Credibility



Capacity

- sufficient high quality bureaucratic resources devoted to tasks



Concentration of Diplomatic Activities

- Inevitably must focus on more limited range of issues than superpowers (capacity constraints)
 - “Niche Diplomacy”

Commitment

- Not mere possession of resources but their use—foreign policy activism: “punching above their weight”.
- Often dependent on personality/interests of Prime Minister and/or Foreign Minister



Creativity

- Capacity to broker agreements



Coalition-Building

- Success dependent on obtaining backing from others
 - Often facilitated by personal contacts among leaders or foreign ministers, e.g., Evans-Ali Alitas

Credibility

“Australia brought to the task a unique combination of sufficient policy interest in the problem to want to be involved, but sufficient disinterest in the modalities of that outcome to be accepted by the principal parties as an honest broker”

Gyngell and Wesley on Cambodian Peace Settlement

Credibility and Alliance Management

- Capacity to play role of honest broker depended on maintaining sufficient distance from US. But alliance also an advantage in that had created a basis for trust between Washington & Canberra even where priorities differed.
[negative example: “Deputy Sheriff” comments]

Some Success Stories (Cambodia, APEC, Chemical Weapons Convention, Cairns Group)

- A significant issue on the international agenda
- Often **not** launched after detailed study within bureaucracy—conversations with others, e.g., Evans-Solarz on Cambodia
- Extensive Consultations with Other Parties
- Detailed Preparatory Work across Government Departments
- Not Perceived to be closely aligned with one of major interests
- Persistence



Some Failures

- Hayden's 1984 Disarmament Initiative
 - Aus too close to US to be seen as honest broker by USSR
- Rudd's Asia-Pacific Community concept
 - Failure to consult key players
 - A Solution in Search of a Problem

Retreat from Middle Power Aspirations

“To say Australia is a middle power implies we are merely similar to a multitude of other countries, a mediocre power defined only by the size of our population...I do not accept Australia as merely a middle power. Rather, I believe Australia is a ‘pivotal’ power.”

Alexander Downer, “Australia much more than a middle power”, speech 8 Feb 1996.

Howard Government

- Partisan Re-Definition of Foreign Policy Objectives
- Emphasis on Key Bilateral Relations
- Downplaying of Multilateralism (Global and Regional Institutions)
- Cutting of Funding to Multilateralism sections of DFAT
- Perceived as Too Close to the US to be an honest broker



Current Government

- Renewed Middle Power Rhetoric
- But does Australia have the resources (further cuts to DFAT budget)
 - Or the commitment?

The Last Word

“Most exercises in middle power diplomacy will not produce especially spectacular results. Most of the time, trying to achieve progress on problems of the global commons and securing other global public goods like free trade – with all the free-rider, weak-link, sovereign-preference and other constraints on collective action that they involve – involves very slow boring through very hard boards. But the cooperative internationalist approach that is at the heart of middle power diplomacy is, in the kind of world in which we now live, the only way to solve the world’s problems. And in generating acceptable solutions, countries not of major power status are as well equipped as anyone else, and in a number of cases better equipped, to deliver the goods.”

Gareth Evans, “Middle Power Diplomacy”, Chile Pacific Foundation, June 2011