I. Introduction

The task assigned to us is more complex than the elegant simplicity of the title might suggest. This might not have been so were we in a different era, one defined by clear balance-of-power politics, for instance, or one where concerts of states managed world affairs. In those periods, analyses focussed on the classic variables that together made up the core determinants of international relations – power and interests. Although we now often discount such simplicity of analysis, for those in power, just as for those less prominent or even marginalized, such academic explanations easily rang true. Within this sort of perceived world of realist politics, notably in the decades immediately following the Second World War, it became relatively easy to assign those less capable of exerting hard power but still having sufficient state capacity to exert influence within the boundaries defined by the most powerful, the label of middle power. Middle powers did not often initiate but rather, existing within the protection of the most or more powerful or at least carrying out policies that would not contest the interests of such dominant states, carefully found ways to service the interests of both the hegemon and often also the mutually-desired goal of relative stability within the larger international system.

Throughout the 1960s and ‘70s, middle power analysis was a favoured approach to accounting for the place of states other than the post-1945 superpowers and the remnants of the pre-1945 great powers. The middle power was inevitably western, usually northern, always “developed”, and well ensconced within the post-1945 United Nations and Bretton Woods systems. Rarely does the literature apply the term to countries within the former Soviet Union, for instance, and almost never to countries, even large states, identified as developing or less developed. Middle powers were noted as such not just in terms of their military and economic indicators, but also in terms of their expected roles within the international community. These states were seen to be the facilitators, mediators and interlocutors; and perhaps most importantly, they were seen to work not only in tandem with their preferred patrons but to do so also within the preferred environment of the emergent multilateral system, itself a creature of immediate post-war politics.
Middle powers analysis was focused on issues related to peace and war, to conflict and its management if not resolution; in other words, to security defined within the traditional understanding of inter-state defence and security. While it drew on state capabilities—especially the standard realist and neorealist criteria of military capacity, economic depth and resilience, demographics, industrial might and technological leadership—in identifying those who belonged to this category, its behavioural focus was limited primarily to issues of security, and even here rather narrowly defined in terms of the embedded laws of inter-state relations. In so doing, this implied that security as a goal was not merely to be achieved through military means, but as a composite of qualities that together defined the hierarchical status of the state. Middle power analysis was an approach to the international; to how and, implied, even why certain kinds of states acted in ways that were argued to contribute to the security of a stable international order. On reflection, middle powers were states that could, and under certain rules, would project their power across to parts of the globe well beyond their normal contiguous areas, doing so under the banner of international institutions which, in turn, reflected norms and principles ensconced in the Charter of the United Nations and codified in international law.

By the 1980s, scholars had proposed an increasingly sophisticated and nuanced assessment of these countries. No longer were middle powers merely those states not quite at the top tier on the classic realist rankings of power and interests, but now it was evident that along with roles which often were derivative of the middle power’s relationship with its super and great power partners or allies, one had to enquire into a larger set of phenomena that might explain why states acted in particular ways. Rank within the international hierarchy of capabilities would be buttressed by analyzing: the various types of behaviours available when engaging other actors (amount of interactions, variety of interactions, diffusion of interactions); the associations within which these interactions occur (initiative vs reactive, the degree of commitment, the focus or importance placed on these); and the government’s approach to world order (degree of institutionalization, scope of commitment by member states across a range of issues, the degree of support for transformative or foundational changes). Moreover, the analyst would be interested in understanding the weighting of an hypothesized set of determinants of international behaviour: external factors; societal factors; and governmental or regime factors.

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2 This foreshadows what we will later argue: that in the post-cold war world, middle powers challenge such traditional definitions of both security and inter-state law, leading to what emerges as the currently contested notion of the “responsibility to protect” as found in the Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (International Development Research Centre, Ottawa: December 2001).

3 Here one begins to envision the attractiveness of either neo-Gramsian or constructivist approaches to better understanding the how, why, and wherefore of middle powers in post-1945 world politics.

4 For example, a Canadian contribution to this was David Dewitt and John Kirton, *Canada as a Principal Power* (John Wiley & Sons, 1983). This study provides an overview and assessment of that literature both in terms of its application to Canadian foreign policy but also in terms of its location within the international relations literature. This was the first comprehensive study that brought theory and evidence together in an effort to propose a theoretical structure that would explain the changing nature of Canadian foreign policy. A more updated and critical view of Canada and middle powers can be found in Adam Chapnick, “The Canadian middle power myth,” *International Journal* (Spring 2000): 55-2.

5 A number of studies emerged that considered whether states such as Nigeria, South Africa, India, and Indonesia could be considered middle powers.

6 Dewitt and Kirton, chapter One.
By this time, the question of whether a state could be thought of as a middle power was really merely a precursor to the more significant issue: what difference did that make? Why should scholars investigate whether such a cluster of countries could be labelled this way? Who cared and why? The answer, in retrospect, was both practical and academic. For the policy analyst, middle power states had capacity as well as flexibility to service both the demands of the dominant actors influencing the bi-polar security architecture of the cold war and the capabilities and normative concerns to address the changing needs of the emerging states that fell outside the simple bi-polar architecture. For the theorist of international affairs, middle powers and, somewhat differently, middlepowermanship, enticed one to explore why countries would undertake commitments that often did not seem to rely on a narrow, realist-inspired definition of interests. Within this analytic exploration, the harsher tones of realism became modified if not superceded by not just the neo-realists but by the liberal-internationalists who saw opportunity for stability and managed change in the promise of institutions as the material expression of a set of norms and principles which codified the rule of law, the politics of diplomatic negotiation, and the preference of bargaining to threat. Here one finds the articulation of middle power diplomacy in terms of an effort to fortify the role of international law and the place of the UN system as the early phases of an unstable dénouement of the cold war intruded.7

If the Soviets and the Americans were defining the fundamental issue of global survival both materially and ideologically, and if their most important allies were providing significant assets to support this binary world politics, then those other developed countries of means, those with regional and extra-regional if not global interests and at least partial reach, were in search of both supporting roles and normative answers. The increasingly complex web of international institutions, held out as the answer to the avoidance of both deterioration and escalation, was where such middle power states could serve as proxies as well as facilitators and interlocutors. The opportunistic compromises which led to the ad hoc creation of UN peacekeeping operations in the 1950s and became a primary symbol of robust multilateral middle power diplomacy really gained its primacy in the shadow of the protracted proxy wars fought by the Soviets and the Americans in various parts of the developing world. It was then that both the role of middle powers and the importance of multilateralism seemed to concentrate the mind, to suggest alternative approaches to security that worked better than the interventionist efforts of the superpowers.

Mediation also was a much needed skill, and this cluster of middle power states, increasingly including a few of the regional leaders of the global south, seemed both well positioned and quite capable of pursuing interests that were at once both institutionally constructive and usually supportive of their own as well as their hegemon’s preferred outcome. The strong preference to work within a multilateral framework also allowed them to attempt to constrain unilateral tendencies of the most powerful. Normatively, this was a compatible position, generally avoiding confrontation with allies, finding political space to exert a limited form of leadership, securing participation from both equivalent and lesser states, and ensuring a place at the table, while all the time being loyal to one’s side. Hence, the middle power label, and the analysis it implied, confirmed a presence that allowed a country to exert influence often beyond what realists would expect. Moreover, it reified the centrality of international institutions and the politics of multilateralism, providing a context in which states that often were subservient in their  

most important bilateral relations could have an acknowledged presence in a meaningful political context. The UN system enabled those states not among the P-5 standing to set agendas in their areas of functional specialization; this extended as far as occasional leadership roles in particular forms of enforcement actions, including creating new and flexible mechanisms within the constraints offered by UN Chapters VI and VII to avoid superpower confrontation and interstate escalation.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, scholarship once again followed events. Important contributions were made by scholars who sought to relocate the place of middle powers and their specialized “niche” diplomacy, exploring their increasingly important roles in areas of trade and commerce, rule creation, regime construction and institution building, in addition to peace and security. Arguments between the traditional neo-realist and mainstream liberal-institutionalists were being countered by constructivists, those who analyzed state actions in terms also of identity and the construction of perception which informed policy. The protracted process which culminated in the dismemberment of the Soviet Union led conservative American commentators to announce the so-called “unipolar moment.” These proponents also anticipated a “more level playing field” for much of the rest of the world as the United States was seen to exert a stabilizing influence. For those who saw this as a new era for progress and opportunity, a more diffuse international system led by the United States was expected to enable many more countries to reap the benefits of the much anticipated peace dividend.

For a period of time in the late 1990s, middle powers were no longer part of the lexicon of international relations and foreign policy scholarship, or for that matter of the policy community, and middlepowermanship became something one might find outside of the UN system. Other concepts entered into the lexicon of foreign policy and security studies, and were used by the dominant foreign policy actors to describe the functioning of the international system. The focus was rather on “pivotal states” and “rogue states” – labels organized around intent and behaviour, real or anticipated – joined with all others in the shadow of the USA and, on occasion, the P-5. As China became the focal point of interest as either a strategic asset, partner or competitor, and as uncertainty surrounded the future of Russia, the language of a hierarchy of states - of small, medium, and great powers - was soon replaced by the language of context and behaviour.

Along with this impulse was also the growing attractiveness of a neo-Gramscian approach to the study of world order and state relations, perhaps best exemplified by the work of Robert Cox. In a brief

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8 See John W. Holmes, The Shaping of Peace: Canada and the Search for World Order, Vol. 1 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), who saw clearly the reality of an emerging international system being shaped by the new forces of global powers, but being constrained by the presence of the norms and principles which had given rise to the multilateral system of the United Nations along with the increasingly complex web of bilateral relations within which middle power states not only could pursue their varied interests, but in so doing could also entangle the major powers in ways that would constrain excessive or impulsive unilateralism.


analysis of Japan which was at least partially based on his important earlier contributions to the critical study of international political economy and world order, Cox revisited the ideas of middle power and middlepowermanship as developed by his longtime friend, Canadian diplomat-scholar John Holmes.11 Drawing from his earlier work much influenced by Antonio Gramsci, Cox proposed an assessment that relied heavily on a much more complex and nuanced presentation of hegemon, one in which influence was pervasive as a result of the transference of norms and principles that would define much of the preference structure of lesser actors, if not an entire system of state interaction.12 Harkening back to the earliest impulse of those who wrote about middle powers, neo-functionalism continued as an underlying assumption, although by then it was concerned not only with issues of interstate violence and conflict, but also with a variety of diplomatic and state relations which included economic, commercial, and trade concerns. Niche diplomacy had emerged for some as a shorthand that indicated the capacity of middle powers to act in meaningful ways in some areas but not in all, and usually implied a reliance on a functionalist approach to marshalling ones capabilities to focus on particular issues, knowing that, as a Gramscian would argue, ones interests in all those other areas were taken care of within the (sub-) system with which one identified.

The emergence of regional security, as distinct from either the defence of the state or concerns of global systemic issues, is a non-trivial concept. As will become evident further into this paper, while the American-centred “unipolar moment” might be one way to capture the years immediately following the end of the Cold War, an alternative perspective is one that focusses on a much more diffuse international system, with fewer singularly dominant actors, with a much more varied set of possible partners as well as spoilers without the constraints of a bi-polar system, and where therefore others can, if they have sufficient capacity (both aspects of hard and soft power) and political will, make a difference in ways previously reserved for relatively few countries counted from among the homogenous west. In other words, a key hypothesis is that the past fifteen years or so have provided sufficient political space to afford a range of countries to take on those forms of behaviour that traditionally have been assumed as representative of middle powers. We also can hypothesize that countries which “objectively” are middle powers, have sufficient political space to selectively direct their commitments to those areas of particular interest, concern, or benefit. Moreover, given the dramatic changes which have been occurring in global security politics as well as in the process of economic and cultural globalization, traditional and emerging middle powers now face both opportunity and pressure to become more active in those issues which concern the security and prosperity of their own regions.13

In a single paper we are unable to explore all of the complexities and facets of the changing nature of middle powers and security. Our intent in this draft will be first to provide an overview of the academic literature and some reference to empirical examples. This initial review of the middle power literature, while not comprehensive, will illustrate the ways in which middle power activities, and the analysis of it, has changed substantially over the past half-century. We will then offer an alternative understanding of middle powers that is informed by both the functional literature on middle power

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12 Ibid. 827-36.

activities, and by the work of Robert Cox. We will argue for a broad understanding of middle powers that sees them seeking to fulfil particular roles in the international environment. We will argue in turn that the ways and means of middle power action can, and indeed does, change according to the broader historical context within which they act. In this way we will show, in line with Cox’s discussion of process, that “middle powers” is not a static concept or structure but agency that engages and is dependent upon context and that middlepowermanship is process, responding to context. This will be illustrated in part by an examination of how middle powers have acted both globally and regionally. We will therefore pose some ideas about the conjunction of middle powers and regional security, raising more questions than we have answers.

This paper is being written at a time when Canada and other traditional middle power states have begun to engage in international politics in new ways, eschewing past patterns of international relations. The issues on which middle powers focused their attention during the cold war and then in the immediate “unipolar” moment aftermath are no longer seen as the most pressing international concerns, nor are their methods seen as helpful. We are therefore writing at a new moment where the usefulness of “middle power” politics is being called into question. Rather than seeking to merely understand the decline of traditional forms of middlepowermanship, we believe that the world has an enduring need for such activity. What this means in capacity and action, and which countries can fulfil these needs are some of the questions worthy of examination.

II. A Return to an Interest in Middle Powers

The end of the Cold War did not bring the much anticipated “peace dividend.” The domestic and inter-state violence that ensued, for whatever reasons, challenged the very fabric of our international institutions and any sanguine belief in the ability of the lone-remaining superpower to quell such extreme acts of state and civil violence. The international community has had to confront an even greater intensity in the politics of international violence over the past five years. The repercussions of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington DC have continued to reverberate across the globe. One of the more enduring effects has been the American reliance on military force to secure its peoples and territory. The resolution of conflict moved away from multilateralism towards more unilateral action by the United States, and narrowly focused, US-led, coalitions of the willing.14 But the United States did not embark on this path alone. The calls for its friends and allies to support the initial American efforts in Afghanistan have led to a number of states, such as Canada, Norway, Denmark and Australia, to turn away in part from their traditional roles as middle powers.15

The subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq represent the end of the brief era of international relations dominated by the issues – landmines, human security, environment, illicit migration, human rights, development, disease management, small arms reductions, cultural security, trade barrier reforms, etc – that were either led, managed, or coordinated by middle powers. Though this may only be part of

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14 The coalitions of the willing fall well short of multilateralism. They are led by the dominant players and have been initiated for a narrowly conceived American interest.

15 By traditional middle power we are referring here to the way the term is used both in the dominant western academic and policy literature and in common parlance. This is the idea of the middle power as being the ‘helpful fixer’.
the story, the other part may well be the as yet unclear but nevertheless unfolding role that a new type of middle power may play in regional security. The so-called traditional middle powers of the North and West appear to be either more focussed on niche diplomacy and on working in ad hoc arrangements with coalitions of the willing and the likeminded, or by seeking more self-interested roles. However, an emerging new generation of middle powers may be prepared both to service the security needs within the UN system and take a prominent, if not leadership role, in managing the peace and security of its own contiguous and proximate community. This leadership tended to be more regional in character as states chose to focus their attention on resolving conflicts within their immediate geographic sphere.

This paper is responding to this new international dynamic, and is seeking to understand whether middlepowermanship is still relevant in a post-9/11 world, and if so which countries are situated to fill such a role. This will require that we commence with an overview of the approaches to understanding middle power behaviour. We will argue in favour of a theory that accounts for both the changing nature of international politics and the role of middle powers within this dynamic. Middle powers have had a unique vision of international relations, have filled a crucial space in international system, and have engaged in trying to transform the system to make it more representative of broader interests and more inclusive of the variety of concerns of peoples across the globe. As such they have played a crucial role in international relations. They have helped stabilize the security environment while expanding the meaning of security to better represent the needs of the whole global community rather than those of particular dominant states.

We are now in a situation where a second generation of middle powers may be emerging, which could help shape the dynamics of international relations and provide leadership on a range of issues.

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16 It is worth noting that Canada’s International Policy Statement (2005) states that Canada is no longer a middle power, and that to think of Canada as such constrains policy makers - presumably by limiting Canada’s use of force on the international stage.

17 It is important to acknowledge that there have been states from outside the standard OECD category which have, at various times and for various sectors, acted as middle powers. Most notably Mexico, Argentina, Algeria, Nigeria, India, Indonesia and the former Yugoslavia contributed significantly throughout the latter years of the cold war to regional and to global affairs, including nuclear non-proliferation, trade, and agricultural efforts, as well as local and regional inter-state security concerns. Nevertheless, these countries were not usually considered “typical” of the middle power category. While they were able to mediate conflicts and provide narrow niche leadership, the broad public perception did not accord these states middle power status.

18 In this way our new approach to middle powers is in keeping with the spirit of much of the writing of middle powers while separate from approaches that seek to claim to be merely descriptive.

19 Acknowledging that in the literature one finds reference to an earlier variant of non-western middle powers (Algeria, Mexico, Nigeria, Brazil, Argentina, Indonesia, Yugoslavia, and India), their roles were severely constrained by the cold war architecture and thus had limited place and recognition. The more diffuse international system of the post-cold war era alters that, providing greater political space for a larger contingent of “second generation” middle power countries. We have adopted this position in part as a way to argue that states like Brazil and South Africa can, and indeed should, strive to take leadership roles in international politics beyond their own respective regions. This leadership comes from a desire for change, and from being perceived as being motivated in part by a desire to help other states and societies - which is quite separate from ‘self-help’ notions. Our thinking on this comes in part from the ‘principal power’ literature (Dewitt and Kirton, 1983), and also draws on Kenneth E. Boulding, *Three Faces of Power*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1989, which introduced notions of ‘integrative power’ as well as Nye’s ‘soft power’. The difference is that while we respect their observations that
What capabilities they need to accomplish these goals remains to be considered. Moreover, we must also wonder about the implications of the changing structure of global affairs and of the place of regions in the politics of peace and security. To those ends we must inquire about the capacities—political and material—of these newly emerging second generation middle powers to accomplish challenges which are local, bilateral, regional as well as international. For if some of those second generation middle powers are themselves still in the midst of their own political and socioeconomic evolution, then the implications of their actions and degrees of freedom available to their elites to make choices may be much more constrained than existed in the Cold War era of the first generation middle powers.

III. Evolution of Conceptions of Middle Powers

The use of the language of ‘middle powers’ is complicated by the multiple ways that it has been deployed by a range of academics and policy makers. It is used both in a more classically descriptive sense by those trying to capture the way particular states act, or more rarely in a normative fashion advocating particular orientations to foreign policy behaviour for moral and ethical reasons. While any typology is inherently problematic, as it forces the analyses into categories for the sake of parsimony, we have chosen to characterize the literature in a way that will allow us to identify the main trends of analysis. For this reason we break the literature on middle powers and middlepowermanship into three main categories: realism and neorealism; liberalism; and critical. This typology is based on the notion of the international system that the analysts and policy makers have, and the extent to which they see the middle powers as acting out of self-interest or capable of expressing an interest in issues with a broad trans-state character. It would be unfair to argue that the preponderance of literature on middle powers is agnostic about theory. While some authors have lamented the relative lack of theorizing about middle power states, we should not be surprised by this apparent absence. In fact a closer look at the literature shows that most of the writing has an identifiable set of assumptions that allows us to determine what their broad theoretical claims are. This is true of the policy literature as well as the more academic writing. The analysis of middle powers is embedded within broader conceptions of the nature of international relations and security. The typology thus reflects the views of the policy makers and academics on the foundational questions of whether the international system is inherently static or malleable, and whether long-term cooperation between international actors is plausible or desirable.

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20 Cooper et al (1993) is representative of the classically descriptive approaches. For examples of the normative use of middle power refer to Cox (1989), and John Holmes (1979). The typology we have developed is as problematic as any. However, in reading the literature there is a pattern in how middle powers are studied. While there is broad acceptance that there is such a thing called ‘middle power’ activity, authors differ in how to understand it. We hold the realists/neo-realists as trying to explain state behaviour simply by the amount of power a state wields, and thus by their position in the international system. Additionally they do not see middle powers as being able to lead to long term cooperation or the development of international norms. In contrast the liberals look at power as having more normative elements, but ultimately being used for self-interest, though that can coincide over the medium and long term with other states’ needs. Liberals (including liberal-institutionalists) have views that see state action as potentially being driven not only out of ‘self interest’, but that it can and should also be ethically and normatively grounded to change the nature of international politics in a more equitable fashion.

21 For an example of this argument refer to the work of Ronald M. Behringer (2005).
Clearly there has been a range of states and other actors that have been active in world politics while not being one of the core great powers. These states, which can be seen as falling within a moderate power position, have at times conducted themselves as middle powers. In looking back further into history for examples of states that have behaved in a fashion similar to middle powers of the Cold War, Robert Cox (1989) drew parallels with the ways that the Catalans and Netherlands (in the 14th and 17th centuries respectively), opted to support norms of regulative international law rather than relying on military and economic might. In the same way, other authors have looked at the role of smaller powers during the interwar period under the League of Nations. While such studies are intriguing, in the way that they challenge realist and neo-realist notions of international relations, they do not provide the basis for understanding how some forms of state action have emerged since WWII. The dynamics of interstate relations took on a unique character during the Cold War as the great powers entered into a protracted struggle over the ideology that would dominate the state system. The relative detente between the Soviet Union and the United States provided an opportunity for a number of smaller states to take on a leadership role on a variety of issues. It is within this context that the modern understanding of middlepowermanship began to emerge.

IV. The Cold War and the Emergence of Middle Powers

Current understandings of what are middle powers, the types of issues they champion and the means they choose to pursue their goals, are tied to the behaviour of middle powers during the early to mid-Cold War. The states that were to become identified with, and to self-identify, as middle powers during this period were predominately European or Anglophone states, and were all either aligned with the US, or in the cases of Austria and Sweden, were non-aligned but friendly with the West. These states represent the “traditional” or “first generation” of middle powers, while there is debate about which countries should be on this list, Canada, Australia, Norway, Sweden, Austria, and New Zealand, are the most commonly identified. An examination of the middle powers during the cold war allows us to identify a set of shared characteristics: these states all had a history of stable democratic governance; had undergone a smooth process of independence; did not have a history of external/foreign colonization; and had the resources to actively engage in international politics. In addition we find that these states were within the American sphere of influence. The latter point should not be taken to mean that only liberal democratic states could fill middle power roles, but rather that during the Cold War the Soviet Union did not provide the space for independent foreign policy.22

The nature of the Cold War, and the dominance of international relations by a relatively small number of great powers, effectively constrained the activities of middle power states. The states were most able to lead on issues when there was a tacit acceptance of this role by at least one of the system’s dominant actors. For example, the emergence of peacekeeping as a means of resolving inter-state conflict, which was to become a hallmark of middlepowermanship, was enabled by the support of the United States and the Soviet Union for Lester B. Pearson’s initiatives to resolve the Suez crisis. At the same time as the middle powers were constrained by the interests of the great powers, the deadlock between the two sides of the Iron Curtain provided opportunities for the first generation middle powers to act as brokers between different sides of the debates, and to push agendas that might otherwise of been ignored. Our understanding of middle power activity was shaped during this era, and we now associate

22 The case of Yugoslavia is complicated as the country straddled the East/West divide in a unique way. As such it enjoyed a freedom to set its own foreign policy in a way other members of the Warsaw Pact did not experience.
middle powers with the forms of behaviour that were adapted to that particular historic context. In this regard we must bare in mind the dynamics of the nuclear standoff between the superpowers to appreciate the extent to which stabilizing the international system was seen as being an overarching security concern. Within this context multilateralism was seen a particularly useful means to avoid great power confrontation, and as a way to ensure that smaller states were able to feel that they had a say in the working of international policy. The choices that were made by middle powers must then be examined with respect to the particularities of the international system at the time.

The states that were to self-identify as middle powers began to assert themselves in international relations during this period, but what is crucial to our understanding of their evolution is that they chose to act in a way that was qualitatively different from the diplomacy of strength that the great powers were exercising. Rather than engaging in realpolitik these states opted to work through multilateral institutions, to seek consensus building, and to work on issues that were of interest to a broad constituency of states. These states both saw themselves and were thought of as acting, not just out of a sense of self-interest, but also out of a concern for systemic stability and equity. This is not to say that the states were uninterested in transformative change. The middle power states were clearly driven by a desire to change the norms of international politics away from that of a self-help system.

The first generation of middle power states were of a kind, some even sharing a common history of development. Their populations could identify with similar or overlapping points of European origin and, for some, similar immigrant experiences. The political systems shared liberal democratic values and representative forms of government. Their economic capacities were based on free market principles with varying degrees of state regulation, increasingly liberal labour laws, and policies favouring investments in science and technology. Norms and laws were well institutionalized, public education was foundational since before the turn of the century, and a sense of national identity tempered by the Second World War had forged a sense of the need to find ways to cooperate locally and act responsibly in the affairs of state both at home and abroad. The lessons of the failures of Versailles and the League of Nations were traumatic, lending strength and credibility to the perceived necessity of ensuring that the United Nations worked. By the 1950s, any security threats that these states were responding to were not internal but rather linked primarily to the bilateralism of the emerging west-east ideological and political divide. Although European states found themselves on one of the principal fault lines of the global security architecture, their own defence forces and security postures were defined primarily by the NATO-WTO confrontation. Canada was similarly connected with NATO in terms of trans-Atlantic commitments and NORAD in terms of continental and polar. Even Australia, though watchful of the unfolding conflicts in Asia, through ANZUS tied itself to part of this global security architecture.

Of note is that these first generation middle power countries did not dominate the political or economic security affairs of their respective regions. With the notable exception of Australia’s relative isolation south of Asia and Canada’s unique location along side the United States, middle powers shared

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23 This argument runs throughout all of the middle power literature which has focussed largely on these states’ use of multilateralism, regardless of whether the analysis is realist, liberal or critical in character.

24 With the exception of Austria and Norway, all first generation middle powers had experienced many years of stable governments. Austria and Norway both experienced regime changes as a result of the Second World War.
borders or regions, along with their histories, with other middle powers. 25 The final shared characteristics was that by the start of the Cold War none of these states had any lingering colonial interests. This lack of a legacy made it far easier for these states to claim to speak on behalf of the South, providing a degree of moral legitimacy to their arguments to represent the interests both of the newly emerging post-colonial states and of the international system as a whole.

It was within the context of the struggle between East and West, and of international politics defined by the threat of interstate war and of hard state power that the behaviour of middle powers was first studied. Consequently, the first body of literature on middle powers is rooted within the American traditions of realism and subsequently neo-realism. These two approaches have largely dominated American security and international studies since WWII, and have framed much of the analysis of middle power states. At the core of this body of literature is the view that middle power status is determined by the state’s position in the international community.26 This should not be taken as meaning that such theories are unconcerned with the roles of states like Canada, Norway and Australia, but rather that their roles are determined by their relative power, measured in terms of economic and military indicators.27 Middle powers act as they do, not out of some normative desire, but out of a calculated decision to limit the influence of larger powers on their foreign policies. Multilateralism and other activities associated with their place in the hierarchy of states are then interpreted as ways to maximize their voice. Such approaches continue to enjoy some support; George Perkovich, for example, used a neo-realist approach to assess South Africa’s position in the current international environment. He set out to determine where the country fit into the international system of power, and to do so went about describing the various indicators of South African power.

The material well-being and productivity of a society sets the conditions for its international power. A poor, conflicted society will lack global muscle or respect. A prospering one will command resources and authority to make others pay its heed.28

From this stand point, as Perkovich notes, GDP becomes an important indicator. “Simply put, states with low per capita GDP struggle to translate their aggregate productivity into effective international power.”29 Other authors have focussed more on questions of military capacity.

Regardless of the chosen indicators, the core assumption is that the measured relative power of states can then be used to describe and predict states’ foreign policy choices. Middle power states are then said to have specific orientations to foreign policy because of their shared position in the international system, and because of common security requirements and power capabilities. That such

25 Indeed, among pundits of Canadian foreign policy, there is a well-known aphorism, often attributed to the late scholar-diplomat, John Holmes: “Canada is a regional power without a region.”

26 We consider the works David Mares and George Perkovich as falling within the neo-realist framework.

27 This does not mean that we need to ignore indicators, we should not; rather that indicators are not in themselves sufficient to determine middlepowermanship.


29 Ibid.
states may choose to favour multilateralism and international law is then interpreted as a rational means to protect their position in the self-help universe, and as a means of mitigating the influence of the dominant system powers. Much of the US literature has been particularly concerned, unsurprisingly, with the role of middle powers when such states impact on US foreign policy.  

One of the limitations of these approaches is that they do not see a possibility of significant change in the nature of international politics. Though they accept that the distribution of power within the system may change, there is little room to consider how the nature of power may change over time. Middle powers are thus to be expected to act in the same way because of their position in the balance of states. The recent return to the politics of violence in the post-9/11 world can be interpreted as proof that middle power politics will always be subordinate to politics of a hard-nosed traditional formation of security. However, as we will show, we believe this is an untenable position in terms of its lack of descriptive power.

The realist and neorealism literature leaves no room for an appreciation of why some states opt for a particular orientation to world politics and others do not. These approaches cannot take into consideration the policy choices that the state and the society may choose. The issue of agency is ignored, with decision makers either being reduced to cold calculating state-machinery, or removed entirely from consideration. There is no room within such analysis for the domestic influences on state decisions, nor for the decisions of particular decision makers. Additionally, these frameworks are unable to account for the changing nature of world politics. While it is recognized that the balance of power may change, and indeed does change, these theories are uninterested in how such dynamics take place. One of the many downfalls then is that changes in the norms of interstate behaviour are obscured.

The second body of literature on middle powers is also rooted within the Cold War, but emerged in the later 1970s and early 1980s. The stability of the Cold War was recognized at this time, as was the emergence of a number of international institutions and regimes. The perceived ability of states to cooperate over the short, medium and long term resulted in new studies that put aside the assumption that states were unable or unwilling to work towards collective interests. The studies of middle powers were illustrative of the broader trend in international studies and were embedded within a broadly liberal-internationalist perspective. While there is considerable disagreement amongst these authors on the best way to understand middle power behaviour, they do still share some common views of the nature of international politics. In particular the image of interstate relations is generally positive as the analysts see at least the potential for international cooperation, collective action and mutual gains. Growing out of this vision they are optimistic about the potential of states’ promotion of international law, human rights, multilateralism and other norms of inter-state behaviour.

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31 This may well be a contested assertion, but we do argue that the public discourse of US policy makers under the current Bush Administration represents a rejection of significant aspects of the principles and the intent of multilateralism, of ‘soft power’ and other forms of behaviour traditionally associated with middle powers.

32 This represents the bulk of writing that has emerged on middle powers as seen in the work of: Stokke, 1989; Cooper et al., 1993; Cooper 1997; Andrew Hurrell, “Hegemony, liberalism and global order: what space for would-be great powers?” International Affairs 82:1 (2006): 1-19; Cranford Pratt, Ed, Middle Power Internationalism: The North-South Dimension, (Montreal: McGill, 1990); Gerald K. Helleiner, Ed. The Other side of international development policy : the non-aid economic relations with developing countries of Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).
Despite the fact that middle powers “elected” themselves to this post (and thus presumably could just as easily deny the label), the middle powers have internationalized their self-assumed responsibility for preserving the international order. They take on certain international roles because the roles are seen to be those of a middle power.\(^{33}\)

This is possible because the system is not seen as being governed only by a short term self-interest on the part of states, but rather the view is that these interests can coincide in the short and long-term.

As with the realist/neo-realist image of middle power behaviour, this body of literature also foregrounds state capacity and their relative power, though power is conceived much more broadly than within realism and neo-realism.\(^{34}\) This position believes in the potential of governments to act on the international stage in a liberal manner and to work towards a more equitable and stable international environment dominated by liberal democratic and economic norms. Middle powers are then seen as those states with a capacity to act in the international environment, and which have a vision of politics that favours the liberal norms. While such states are not seen as being able to force change, because of their lack of dominant power status, they are able to lead on specific issues, referred to sometimes as niche diplomacy. Furthermore, these states are also able to draw upon their status to advocate on behalf of countries in the South, and to act as intermediaries between conflicting factions in the international system.\(^{35}\)

The third dominant strand of writing about middle powers, and notably about middlepowermanship, has developed from the work of Robert Cox(1989).\(^{36}\) His research, rooted within

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\(^{33}\) Laura Neack, *The New Foreign Policy: US and Comparative Foreign Policy in the 21st Century*, *Lanham*, (MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003). Laura Neack is representative of the literature which is seeking to explain foreign policy behaviour, and as such straddles the line between international relations and comparative politics. She is an advocate for a ‘nested game’ approach. She also argues that what in part drives middle power behaviour is an “idealist imperative” that middle powers perceive. Also refer to the following work: Laura Neack, “Linking State Type with Foreign Policy Behavior,” *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Neack, Hey and Haney, eds., (NJ: Prentice Hall 1995).

\(^{34}\) The notions of power here begin to include Nye’s ‘soft-power’, and Boulding’s (1989) ‘integrative power’. The value of such an expansion of the nature of power, or of advocating for its use, is attacked by those who see it as ‘obscuring’ the true nature of international politics. I am thinking here of the ‘Pulpit Diplomacy’ retorts of Hampson and Oliver (Fen Osler Hampson and Dean F. Oliver, “Pulpit Diplomacy: A Critical Assessment of the Axworthy Doctrine,” *International Journal*, (Summer 1998): 379-406). Drawing on Kim Nossal, they put forth that Axworthy and his soft-power disregards the use of hard power. This of course was written before Axworthy’s aggressive stance in regards to Bosnia and Zaire. “...[W]e find news of the demise of military force to be greatly exaggerated.”(Hampson and Oliver 1998, 393) They also do not address the issue of the fungability of power.

\(^{35}\) This then returns us to the debate over the nature of the exercise of power. Is power only used for state’s self-interest, can there be a coinciding of interests amongst states of different positions in the international system, or can we see states taking ethical positions to support other states interests so long as it does not unduly effect one’s own needs?

\(^{36}\) The literature which draws on Robert Cox’s notions of middlepowermanship includes: Maxi Schoeman (2000); and Janis Van Der Wethuizen (1998). Interestingly these articles are both on South Africa’s role in the world. This may indicate a predilection to Cox’s views amongst emerging states. Their desire to change the distribution of resources amongst the system, to make it more equitable for societies in the ‘South’ would fit more readily into this model. Janis Van Der Wethuizen,”South Africa’s Emergence as a Middle Power” in *Third World...
critical studies, is both concerned with historicity and with the role of the international political economy in shaping international relations and state policies. He sees the middle power today as being interested in supporting the development of international law and international organization, often in support of the liberal economic order. The middle powers furthermore seek to establish such an order through bottom-up processes; not through the top-down imposition of a particular order. In this regard he shares a common conception of middle power activity with the liberals. However, his understanding of middle powers differs substantially when we put such states into the context of the international political-economic system within which they are embedded.

As with the other approaches, Robert Cox also considers the material capabilities of middle power states. He argues that such states must have a degree of control over their own foreign policy, and the ability to act independently.

Possessing middle-range capability (military and economic) is a necessary condition of the ability to play this role, but it is not an adequate predictor of a disposition to play it. An ability to stand a certain distance from direct involvement in major conflicts, a sufficient degree of autonomy in relation to major powers, a commitment to orderliness and security in interstate relations and to the facilitation of orderly change in the world system are the critical elements for the fulfilment of the middle power role.37

The way that this role is filled is the crucial part of Cox’s argument, and the point where he diverges considerably from the liberal and realist approaches. Relying on Antonio Gramsci’s discussions of hegemonic order, and the way that most powerful actors are able to dominate politics and define what does and does not count as being a valid political issue, he sees middle powers as having the potential to either support and reinforce this order, or to challenge it and work for its transformation.38 Middle powers are then able to either play a supporting role in an hegemonic order or can work to alter it profoundly.

Though speaking from a political economy perspective which is not strictly reductionist to structuralism, Cox nevertheless sees the economic order as providing an opportunity for middle powers to shape the system’s development.39 Schoeman, drawing from Cox, has argued that in discussing traditional middle powers that “[a]lthough their position or rank was determined by the structure of the international system, their role and functions were not. Structure gave them the room or opportunity to


38 One of the intriguing aspects of Gramsci’s arguments, despite the obvious limitations of his structural historicism, is his inclusion of civil society into his analysis. Middle power activities have over the past 50 years appealed to civil society, at times directly. This is an issue that ought to be further explored at a later date. We are curious how the emerging states will integrate the views of civil society into their foreign policy. Indian civil society is quite strong and has long engaged government, as has South Africa’s, but we are less certain about the role of civil society in Malaysia and other “stronger” states.

take up a certain role.”40 The determining nature of the system is the source of one of our core difficulties with Cox’s formulation; we do not see a state’s identity as being dependent upon or reducible merely to the particular economic order. Such reductions fail to account for divergent notions of middle power action that are present in the dominant economic orders, nor does it allow us to understand why some states opt for a middle power role when others of similar capability do not. However, his call for ethically grounded state behaviour does resonate with us.

VI. Post Cold-War Middle Powers

It was with the end of the Cold War that the traditional middle powers were able to begin to extend their influence over a broad range of issues and take a significant leadership role in international relations. This golden-era of middlepowermanship lasted roughly from 1989 through to the mid to late 1990s. The end of the dominant security dynamic provided an opportunity for states to begin to look at a host of other issues and to begin expanding the discourse of security beyond a strict state-centric and militarist model. Barry Buzan et al have discussed this process at length.41 At the same time as there was a broadening of the concept of security, there was also a shift in the nature of international relations. The United Nations and other multilateral institutions were seen in the early 1990s as being freed from the restraints of the cold war and were taking leadership roles in addressing a broad range of issues.

The end of the cold war also provided opportunities to address some of the enduring civil conflicts which had been either suppressed or supported by one or another of the major powers, or had been ignored because the issue had not been perceived to be as pressing as other crises. In turning to the resolution of civil conflict the international community opted for peacebuilding not only to cease hostilities, but to also resolve the enduring root causes of the conflict.42 The middle powers took


41 Buzan et al. enlivened a debate about the nature of security, which had been ongoing since at least the mid 1980s. Our belief is that Buzan’s piece came along at precisely the right time, in the post-cold war era, to reverberate in the field. However, we need to recognize that there is an older debate about whether the nature of ‘security’ favours the established powers. For samples of this literature refer to the work of Pinar Bilgin (2003); Thomas and Saravanamutu 1989; and Caroline Thomas (1987). We also have discussions emerging in the early 1990s about the need to move away from a state centric security model to one that is more human-centred. The work of Booth (1991), later picked up by Mohamed Ayoob (1995), is representative of the desire to include emancipation into the discourse of security. Mohammed.Ayoob, The Third World Security Predicament: State Making, Regional Conflict, and the International System, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1995); Mohammed, Ayoob, “India as regional hegemon: external opportunities and internal constraints,” International Journal, 46:3 (Summer 1991): 420-449; Pinar Bilgin, “Individual and Society Dimensions of Security,” International Studies Review, Vol. 5 (2003): 203-222; Barry Buzan, People, States, and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era, (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991); Caroline Thomas, In Search of Security: The Third World in International Relations, Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1987; Caroline Thomas and Pai Kiassothy Saravanamutu, eds. Conflict and Consensus in North/South Security, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

42 The Agenda for Peace released in January 1992 by the then UN Secretary General Boutrous-Boutrous Ghali, introduced the differentiation between peacekeeping, peace enforcement, and peacebuilding. It moved the focus of UN intervention from the main options of Chapter VI pacific settlement of disputes through “VI.5” version of traditional peacekeeping into VII of active military engagement into the new area of focussing on root causes and prevention, and thereafter post-conflict reconstruction. Although fraught with difficulties, this was a major shift not
leadership roles in these processes in Mozambique, Cambodia, Haiti, Somalia, Rwanda and East Timor. While not all of these were successful, and in some instances such as Somalia and Rwanda were disastrous, they nevertheless point to the confidence of middle power politics and a sense in the international community that the type of international politics they had advocated since the 1970s was valid. The international community became increasingly concerned with the discourse of rescuing failed states, of protecting the rights of communities, and revising the norms of international law to recognize that interventions would occasionally be justified. The first generation of middle powers were at the fore of these deployments, advocating for them and often providing the military and political leadership necessary for their implementation.

In addition to the broadening of the traditional notion of peacekeeping to include peace-enforcement and peacebuilding under the term peace-support operations, middle powers also pushed a series of other issues during this period. Behringer (2005), in discussing middle power leadership on human security, laid out a set of issues around which the first generation middle powers exerted direct control over this period. 43 He included in his list the Ottawa Process to ban anti-personnel landmines, the International Criminal Court, and the attempted movement on a convention to ban small arms. In terms of economic issues the middle powers were also active during this period; Higgot and Cooper have also argued that middle powers led the Uruguay Round of trade negotiations, which while functionally in the late cold-war, pertained to issues of trade liberalization that are now more closely associated with the post-Cold War era. During this period Canada and Australia pursued free trade agreements to further reinforce the norms of neoliberal economics. The middle powers were generally successful in these endeavours, with a few notable exceptions such as the small-arms convention. This represents a broad recognition in the international community that such issues were legitimately on the table for diplomatic discussions, and that the countries advancing these matters were supported in the process by the range of international actors, including the most powerful state actors.

Thus, examining middle power activity during this era we can point to a broad range of issues that were advanced by the first generation states, and the methods of doing so achieved broad acceptance in the international system. This indicates that the middle power states were successful in changing the fabric of international relations, defining in part which issues were to be of concern to the international community, and defining the nature of concepts such as ‘security’. 44 The middle powers thus possessed the capacity to act, the will to do so, and were accepted in that role by the broader international community. However, while this represents the apex of the first generation middle power states, in retrospect we can see that there were some dynamics being put in place at this time that would begin to erode their role. In effect there were two dynamics, both internal and international. The first was, ironically, the end of the cold war and the expected peace dividend. The entrenchment of neoliberalism

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44 Traces of this can be seen in the various UNSG reports beginning with *Agenda for Peace*, the various cooperative efforts to provide guidance in both Human Security and Human Rights, and the Canadian-sponsored International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty which produced the report entitled, *Responsibility to Protect* (Ottawa: IDRC, 2001). For an early discussion of a post-cold war reconsideration of how to approach multilateral security, see David B. Dewitt, “Common, Comprehensive and Cooperative Security in the Asia Pacific” *The Pacific Review* 7:1 (1994).
reinforced calls for balanced budgets and fiscal restraint, which required governments to substantially reduce expenditures while also reducing taxation which was perceived as an impediment to economic growth. One area that was seen as being ripe for realizing savings was in the militaries of the middle powers. While international interventions in failed and failing states were becoming more acceptable, the capacity of the first generation of middle powers to participate in such actions was declining. The United Nations had to rely increasingly on the manpower of developing states to ensure that missions in countries like Cambodia and Rwanda were met. At the same time the diplomatic corps of these states also experienced cut-backs, resulting in further reductions of middle powers’ capacity to lead on issues that they saw as a concern. This does not mean that these countries were reduced to inactivity, but rather that their capacity for leadership was being eroded, even though the desire for to maintain a middle power status was largely unchanged. This dynamic was particularly evident in the increasing focus on niche diplomacy.45

The second dynamic that began to affect the middle powers was a turn to non-United Nations led military missions. While multilateralism was in some regards validated during the post-Cold War era, the UN was also coming under sustained critique by the United States for its bloated bureaucracy. It was seen as being unable to adequately respond to complex security problems in failed states. In response, regional actors were encouraged to take ever greater roles in dealing with security problems throughout the third world. For Canada and the European states this meant a move away from UN missions towards the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which ironically was finally engaged in combat operations after the end of the Cold War. This process of movement away from UN-led missions was initiated with the first Gulf War, and was followed by coalition actions in the Balkans, and in Haiti; all of these were under the direct control of either the United States or NATO. The United Nations was not seen as having the capacity to provide operational control of such large complex missions, and while the international community authorized these activities, it did not control them. The backing of this process by the first generation of middle powers represents a start of a turn away from international multilateralism, to the support of smaller and inherently less inclusive organizations. The second way in which this represents a change of middlepowermanship is the way in which these deployments were to tie up substantial portions of the middle power states resources. These deployments required substantial military contributions on the part of Canada, Norway and other middle powers in the Western Hemisphere, leaving only Australia as the first generation middle power. Australia was also becoming engaged in East Timor and took the leadership of that mission, acting largely alone; therefore we must see this period as representing a shift in the policy choices of the first generation of middle power states.

In addition to representing a turn away from multilateralism, this also harkened in a return to regionalism. Problems were increasingly seen as requiring local solutions, and regional powers and institutions were encouraged to take on increasing responsibilities in their geographic areas. While a turn to regionalism reduced the influence of the first generation of middle powers in conflict resolution in some parts of the globe, it also served to increase the role of the second generation of states. However, the downside of this dynamic is that it may constrain the new middle powers to operating primarily within their regions, limiting their ability to exert influence on the broader international stage.

This shift of policy was not connected to a change in the public diplomacy of these states. The middle power governments continued to use the language of being internationally engaged, and of promoting the traditional set of middle power issues. Yet the actions and capabilities of these states became increasingly disconnected with the discourse of middlepowermanship. The international stature

45 For an overview of niche diplomacy of middle power states refer to Cooper (1997).
of these states was then affected by this perceived gap between public diplomacy and the capabilities and policy choices of such states. At the same time as there was a decline in the middle power role of the first generation of states, the post-cold war period saw the emergence of several states in the South.

Throughout the post-cold war period a number of states were emerging as regional leaders and were achieving sufficient economic and political stability to enable them to take a more active role in international politics. This grouping of countries includes: Poland, Brazil, Argentina, India, South Africa, and Malaysia. In addition states such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Indonesia and Nigeria were also experiencing a growing capacity and willingness for international participation. Most of the Southeast Asian states were affected by the Asian fiscal crisis of the early 1990s which eroded their capacity for international action.

VII. Understanding the Construction of Middle Powers

The analysis of middle powers that emerged during the Cold War all defined middle power activity in a similar way, though obviously their explanations of such behaviour varied considerably. In the post-cold war era we had to come to terms with a new international environment which underwent dramatic changes over the period of a decade. During this time the behaviour of the middle power states also underwent substantial change, with their policies being picked up by the broader international community and a subsequent elevation in their capacity to lead and set agendas. The simultaneous movement away from large multilateral institutions to smaller regional frameworks began to change middle power activity in other complex ways. We feel that theories of middle power activity that had emerged were not up to the task of allowing us to understand the changing role of middle powers. Rather than deriving explanations strictly from each state’s relative position in the international community, or from an assessment of its military or economic capabilities, we believe we need to pay greater attention to the role that the states and their societies perceive themselves as filling. This means we need to pay attention to the question of state identity.

Here we can turn to some of the constructivist literature for an idea about how to proceed in an analysis of middle power foreign policy.\textsuperscript{46} At the heart of this literature is the belief that neither state identity, nor the international environment are natural or ahistoric. Rather the two are mutually dependent, both able to exert influence and affect change on the other. Now this does not mean that this is a balanced equation. The international system itself, as history has shown, is exceedingly difficult to change and has a significant amount of inertia. However, the opening is still there for states and societies to affect change through long-term effort. We believe middle powers have been able to do so, and that indeed they should continue to do so. Within this framework we then turn to a definition of middle powers that is neither structural nor strictly behavioural; rather, the emphasis has to be on the perception of middlepowermanship.

Our working definition is that middle powers are those agents which are able to provide leadership on the international stage by putting issues on the table and shaping the way such matters will be understood. The agenda makers will do this through persuasion and enticement rather than coercion,

which implies a normative element to middle power status.47 Such countries have actively worked to reshape the international environment, seeking to introduce issues of interest to a broad constituency which are beyond a strict national self-interest calculation. Issues such as environmental protection and the convention to ban anti-personnel landmines are some examples of how middle powers are willing to expend political and financial effort on topics that might not be of immediate concern to the system’s main powers.48 Furthermore, middle powers are those who continue to engage those issues, deploying scarce resources in an effort to manage outcomes.

This is not merely a descriptive exercise, rather our constructivist standpoint has a strong normative element which sees a value in the role of middle power states. In this respect our approach shares much in common with Robert Cox in arguing that the role of middle power states is potentially transformative. We see their role as being crucial to providing a voice to the security concerns of the broader international community and to prevent a single dominant voice from determining the security dynamics of the entire system.49 The issue to which we must return is what place middle powers have in addressing regional peace and security concerns? It is not self-evident how states that use their skills and capabilities within the UN and other multilateral forums on issues of global engagement as partners with other middle powers, as well as with lesser and greater powers, are able to transform that into an effective regional instrument for peace and security of states and peoples within the middle power’s own contiguous arena. Finally, a close reading of the definition that we are proposing reveals a separation of the role of middle power action and the issues that middle powers have pursued. We are in effect arguing that the issues of concern to middle powers, such as bans on small arms, the promotion of norms of international law through the development of the International Criminal Court (ICC), and other initiatives are contextual. In addition, the policies that middle powers put in place depend on the specific issues being addressed and the broader international environment within which they are acting.

As we have offered a partial definition of middle power activity grounded in a nominally constructivist understanding of international relations, we can now turn to the question of identifying middle power states. It is interesting that this exercise seems to have dominated much of the public dialogue on middlepowermanship, determining which states should or should not fit into such a category.50 In part this is a reflection of structural thinking which sees the foreign policy of states depending entirely on their position in the system. In this regard determining which markers are best able to identify who does and does not fall into the ‘middle’ range of the international system is important. For us the question of capabilities is important, but not nearly as crucial as it is for the more neorealist

47 The thinking here is that the states are making a choice to use non-coercive forms of power. By extension then the states we are considering may have the ability to be forceful if they desire. Dewitt and Kirton (1983) made much the same point when attempting to differentiate what some might now call “pivotal states” and they called “principal power” states from the traditional middle powers.

48 It has been argued that middle power states do these things out of self-interest. That the development of norms of international behaviour constrain the great powers and thus increases the influence of those states in the middle of the international system. I reject this simplistic view as it fails to understand how some states choose this route while others do not. It also removes the issue of state agency and occludes issues of state identity.

49 This point could also be argued from a functionalist perspective. This would see the inherent need within a system for states that perform middlepowermanship.

traditions. Capabilities, after all, can tell us much about how effective particular states are likely to be in the pursuit of various interests, and may indicate which states are, because of a severe lack of development, unlikely to be focused on broad international issues. But, we need to remember that what counts as capacity may change with time, and that capability must be linked with intent.

Clearly states that are able to fill the middle power role must have a certain degree of capacity, though the nature of this capacity can change dramatically according to the international context. Japan, for example, has a considerable military capacity but due to its Constitution and dominant societal norms is proscribed and constrained from any overseas or forward projected deployment. Japan relies on its financial and economic power to contribute to many issues that have been advanced by middle powers. New Zealand and Norway have relatively modest financial and military capabilities yet have also actively participated in ways that we might classify as middlepowermanship. At the other side of the spectrum there are numerous states, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran (and perhaps Indonesia), that have substantial military and economic capacity, that while not in the top echelon of international power, nevertheless do not comport themselves in a middle power fashion. This brings us to the question of how to describe capacity. Without directly answering the question, for the answer will clearly depend on the historic moment, we can say that the state must have the ability to sustain a professional diplomatic corps and to be able to provide leadership and backing to a number of international initiatives.

The second matter of capability, which is largely underdeveloped within the literature, is the extent to which particular states are able to draw on the support of other actors in the international system. It is not sufficient to argue that particular countries are willing and able to speak on behalf of less privileged societies. Leadership by definition implies followership, which is to say that other countries in the international system need to lend tacit support to the programs of middle powers. Middle power activity then requires on the one hand the capacity to be active in international relations, but also a desire to behave in a particular way and, as importantly, to be perceived in such a role by other states in the international system. To push this argument further, if the United States were to assert that it was acting in the interests of the global community, and in particular in favour of lesser developed states, it is unlikely that the broader international community would accept this position. While they may nevertheless follow American leadership it would unlikely be the result of a sense that the United States was representative of international issues. This is indicative of how moral leadership does not necessarily coincide with state power. Middle powers may or may not have the ability to coerce states, directly or indirectly, but they must be able to lead through what has been referred to elsewhere as moralsuasion.

We are thus able to speak of middle power state capability with respect to a country’s material capability on the one hand, and with respect to the state’s ability to claim to speak on behalf of other countries. As we have seen, the capability of states changes with time, as does the ability of speak on behalf of the broader international community. Middle powers have had to alter their role in the international system according to the particular historic dynamics. The emergence of the traditional middle powers in the 1950s and ‘60s was shaped by the Cold War. At the same time they were able to alter the nature of international relations and directly contributed to the dynamics of politics in the post-Cold War era. In the 1990s, the international system underwent a dramatic shift as the issues promoted by middle powers were broadly adopted by the global community, and yet the capability of these states began to wane. This transformation of the security dynamic was, and remains, important as it brought about a move away from conflict management to conflict resolution. Middle powers have the potential to bring about positive change for the international system, and to help represent issues that are of interest not just to themselves, but to the international system broadly, and also to states in the South. As the following discussion will show, the current political and security environment is substantially different from both the Cold War when middlepowermanship emerged as a foreign policy orientation, and from the
post-Cold War. This is having profound effects on middle power activity, but the need for a next generation of states to ascribe to such policies remains great.

VII. Post 9-11

The security environment changed dramatically on 11 September 2001 as the United States changed its defensive posture. The rhetoric that was introduced of ‘with us or against us’ led to a number of middle powers opting to move away from their adopted roles as intermediaries in the international system, and to align themselves more deliberately with the United States. Whether due to outrage at the attacks themselves, or out of a sense of duty to come to the defence of the United States, a number of traditional middle power states made the decision to participate in part or in full in the American-led war on terror. The initial response was to look at the immediate source of the attacks and to seek to eliminate the state’s support of the terrorist agents. The war in Afghanistan saw the participation of a number of first-generation middle powers, including Canada and Australia. The subsequent NATO mission to stabilize and redevelop the failed state enjoyed even broader European support. The war against terrorism soon expanded to include Russian claims that its conflict in Chechnya was a part of this dynamic, Australia became directly involved as a result of the Bali bombing, and Spain was attacked apparently due to its participation in the second Iraq War. All of these instances provided further evidence to many academics and policy makers that the war on terrorism was becoming the defining characteristic of international security, and that the defeat of terrorists was the central security concern.

The Cold War was defined by an ideological divide between the proponents of market capitalism and liberal democracy on one side, and of Marxist economics and communist politics on the other. In contrast the 1990s saw the near universal adoption of liberal economics, and increased codification of international law and norms of liberal democratic governance. However, the process of democratization and liberalization did not yield global peace and stability. Today the dynamic is shaped by a divide between radical Islam on the one hand and both secularism and other faiths on the other. This has played out in the calls on the part of the United States to introduce secular liberal democratic order in the Middle East and Central Asia. The traditional middle power states are ill-equipped to help bridge these opposing visions of the international system. Indeed, this raises the question of whether middle powers are of continuing relevance in the context of the new war on terrorism. Rather than attempting to mediate the dispute, Canada and Australia, even with significant portions of their respective populations questioning this policy, chose a side in this war. Instead of acting as an intermediary between the Euro-American bloc and Islamic societies, Canada and Australia both opted to fully support the American position.

Canada’s present leadership in Afghanistan can be taken as evidence of the extent to which it is committed to an American vision of state-building and reconstruction that sees regime change and secularization as the best guarantee of international security.

The traditional middle power states that participated in aspects of the war on terror began to shift their own internal discourse of state identity and in turn, through their actions, to undermine their ability

51 This dynamic is described by Fen Osler Hampson (2002), though with the intent of showing that middle power politics is always weak and subservient to great power activities.

52 Canada made an explicit movement away from middle power activity with the publication of its new security and international policy statement, Canada’s International Policy Statement: A Role of Pride and Influence in the World. Government of Canada, 2004.
Many of the decolonizing states had limited domestic expertise in foreign diplomacy. The colonial governments generally conducted foreign relations on behalf of their dependencies. There were a number of states in the South that were able to lead on particular issues, such as nuclear-free zones, etc. At the same time there was some consideration given to the inclusion of states such as Mexico, Brazil, India, and South Africa as middle powers at various points during the Cold War.

VIII. The Emergence of a New Generation of Middle Powers

We have so far focussed our conversation on the first generation of middle power states; we have tracked their rise and described what may be their current decline. At the same time we also have stated that we see an important role for middle power states, and have left the door open for the emergence of new actors that could aspire to this leadership position. During the early to mid-Cold War the South was not, generally speaking, in a position to provide leadership on a range of issues. This was an era, first, of decolonization, particularly in Africa and Asia, which meant that most governments were preoccupied with state-building and internal security matters. The limited resources that developing states were able to assign to external relations were not sufficient to provide leadership on international issues. The second dynamic was that there was no apparent recognition within the developing world about who amongst them would lead. Third, the cold war was largely played out at the expense of the peripheral states as the United States and the Soviet Union struggled for influence, often abetted by the local politics. The developing world was not isolated from international relations; the existence of the United Nations and a myriad of other international organizations provided opportunities for the South to engage in debates about major themes in international politics. This enabled, and likely sped up, the development of professional diplomatic corps in much of the South. These diplomats by necessity were involved in achieving the regional security and the economic assistance necessary for the continued development of the southern states. All this was in addition to the assertive stance taken by a cohort of developing country leaders, including those from the Non-Aligned Movement as well as from the traditional regional powers, along with others involved in the emergent regional organizations.

With the relative decline of the traditional middle power states, what of other actors that wish to step up into the role of international mediator, stabilizer and a voice on broader issues of security? Here we again return to the question of identifying middle powers, looking for instances where there is a convergence of internal state identity, international perception of the state and the material capability to sustain leadership on international security issues. The 1990s saw the steady economic development of a number of states in the ‘South’. Seen from an economic standpoint these states were beginning to achieve economic sustainability and had achieved sufficient financial resources to fund an internationally engaged diplomatic corps and a military capable of engagement in multilateral activities. Ironically, as the first generation middle powers were increasingly shifting their efforts to NATO and US based coalition
military endeavours, states from the South were becoming increasingly engaged in UN led missions.

This expansion of the roles of many of the more capable non-OECD states began in the late post-Cold War era. The focus of the NATO countries on the Balkans, combined with a growing sense that regional crisis should have regional solutions resulted in a number of states being encouraged to take up a greater role within their particular geographic regions.

Emerging middle powers seem to play or are expected to play the role of regional peacemakers and police; they have the responsibility for keeping their backyard neat and orderly with a measure of support from the big powers. These powers, at the regional level, seem to be expected to support and promote acceptable rules and norms in terms of which international politics and relations are conducted.  

As the states have been able to resolve their regional security dilemmas and to acquire a degree of internal stability, they have been able to turn increasingly to international politics. Some governments have in turn sought out roles in the international environment that are in keeping with middlepowermanship. This self-identity is crucial, but not in itself sufficient; states will also have to show a capability and commitment to middle power activities.

This capability must meet the two criteria discussed earlier: the state must have the material resources and expertise to be active in leading the agendas that are perceived as being of interest to the broader international community and it must be able to hold the attention and support of others. This means a combination of economic stability, military capacity and adequate knowledge base to initiate, lead and follow-up on policy agendas. The emerging states also need to have the broader support for their role from other states in the international system. This means that the South has to find the confidence to follow the lead of these states. It is likely this final aspect of achieving middle power status – the recognition of their role by other states in the international system – will be the most difficult to achieve. Unfortunately it is this final aspect that is also the most difficult to measure empirically, as it represents a set of attitudes on the part of foreign diplomats and governments.

The fact that many of the larger and more developed states in the South were encouraged to take up leadership in conflict resolution and peace support operations internationally beyond their own contiguous regions also identifies a challenging dynamic to the emergence of new middle powers. States such as India, South Africa, and Brazil, and perhaps also Nigeria and Indonesia have the capacity to dominate the politics of their regions to an extent that first generation middle powers were unable to achieve. This represents an obstacle, though likely not an insurmountable one, to the emerging states’ achieving the cooperation of other countries within their regions. India, for example, is able to dominate politics on the Asian sub-continent, which may actually restrict its ability to claim moral leadership within South Asia. However, at the same time, more research needs to be conducted on how states may dominate politics regionally and might nevertheless be able to claim middle power status in the broader international political environment.

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54 Schoeman (2000)

55 Note also that some countries which might well be on such a list were realist-type criteria solely determinant, either are facing severe internal socio-economic and political challenges or have positioned themselves as spoilers within their regions (e.g., Egypt, Iran, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, North Korea).
Finally, in the context of the post-11 September world the ability of states to bridge the divide between the major antagonists is less than clear. Few states are able to claim to speak with any legitimacy on behalf of one side of the debate and to be listened to by the other. In this respect Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan and India, and possibly Egypt, are best located for demographic reasons, though today only Malaysia would be accepted within the Islamic world as providing moral leadership on the debate over the war on terror.\footnote{Nossal and Stubbs (1997) have written about Malaysia’s potential middle power status. Kim Richard Nossal and Richard Stubbs. “Mahathir’s Malaysia: An Emerging MP?” in Niche Diplomacy: Middle Powers after the Cold War, ed. Cooper, Andrew. (New York: Macmillan Press, 1997).} At the same time international relations is not limited to the war on terror, even though the politics and focus of much of the North is on this very issue. The other way in which a potential second generation of middle powers could make a substantial contribution would be in reinvigorating debate on issues that were silenced through the politics either of the Cold War or of the P-5, as well as bringing in new concerns that have been obscured for the past half-decade of “the war on terrorism”.

The policies of the first generation of middle powers reflected the dynamics of a particular period in history and the capabilities of these states. As the context during the War on Terror is substantively different in terms of the accepted security practices, and the new divisions in the international system, the appropriateness of traditional middle power activity must now be re-examined. This is not to say that all of their policies and issues are now irrelevant, but rather that they must be studied with respect to how they might be of use in the current security climate. Perhaps more importantly, we need to ask how new middle powers might pursue their policy agendas, what these issues may be and how they might be framed.

IX. Middle Powers and Regional Security: Some Tentative Thoughts

Middle powers have been studied from a broad range of perspectives. However, these studies focussed their attention on the behaviour of states during the cold war and to much more limited extent the immediate post-cold war era. Middle powers in such frameworks are seen as acting alike, and of having similar orientations to international politics. They are defined by their relative position in the international system, the tools of diplomacy that they choose to utilize, and the issues that they choose to pursue. In contrast we opt here for a more historically nuanced approach which recognizes that context makes a difference. This commences with the idea that middle powers are those that choose and are seen to act not out of narrow self interest but rather out of a broader commitment to improving the international system, including as necessary representing the needs of smaller as well as less developed states. Opportunity or necessity compels such commitments. From this perspective middle powers must be studied within particular historical moments. While some sense of self-interest must be assumed as part of the decision-making calculus, our argument here is that it is tempered, at times even overridden, by a commitment to normative principles or to operational procedures which are embedded within international law and multilateral institutions and seen as providing a transnational public good. Middle powers then play an important role in the international system, one that we view as both necessary and desirable.

As hypothesized at the outset of this paper, the end of the Cold War brought at one and the same time the emergence of a dominating American presence along with an increasingly diffuse international system. As authors have noted, the American presumption of pre-eminence that eventually saw
expression in unilateral preferences, was in fact flawed. The market-driven phenomenon of globalization coupled with the emergence of local political demands and identities, thwarted any continuation of the unipolar moment. Well before September 2001, a new international system involving governments, the private sector, transnational civil society, multilateral institutions, globalized capital and internationalized labour began to reposition the place of the state and its definition of security. The dramatic intrusion of the American-defined “war on terrorism” partially halted or at least slowed down these processes. Borders, even in the globalized world, once again mattered, and the powerful became increasingly focussed on security, especially security understood to mean control over both entry and exit, whether of people, things (weapons, disease, money), or ideas (technology, philosophy, belief systems, ethics).

The “war on terror” translates into policies of prevention through intervention – domestic, transnational, and global. It is doubtful that middle powers or middlepowermanship as we have defined these terms, whether among the traditional OECD-based middle powers or those of the emerging South, can easily pursue the roles normally expected of such countries in actions focussed on the war on terror. However, this leaves an enormous agenda where middle power countries and middlepowermanship are needed. Not all security politics are residuals of the war on terror, though much terror – whether threatened or operationalized – may indeed be part of the actions which need to be prevented or stopped, and after which peace building and reconstruction must occur.

Most of the first generation middle powers use their security-relevant capabilities (military, police, judicial system, development assistance, etc) well beyond their own contiguous regions. We hypothesize that second generation and emerging middle powers face the transitional challenge of both using their excess capacities regionally as well as beyond. More often than not, these countries exist in regions of varying instability requiring constant attention and engagement, yet this is fraught with “blow back” into their own communities. Moreover, credibility and legitimacy, often coupled with side-payments – including financing, favourable bilateral agreements, access to advanced technologies and training – pulls such regionally important countries to commit to multilateral operations in diverse parts of the globe.

But then there are those countries that don’t easily fit such characterization. India and Brazil, and possibly South Africa, are but three which have varying degrees of considerable capacity to engage and to lead. They are not of the OECD, but they also have moved or are on a trajectory that will move them well beyond many of those often identified as candidate second generation middle power states. These countries straddle categories, and thus also are compelled to address regional security issues (whether as a regional hegemon or merely a dominant state) but also act responsibly on the global stage. Whether they, like so many of the first generation leading middle powers (“principal powers” or “pivotal states”) will choose niche functionalism as a way to marshal their security capabilities in order to make a difference is yet to be seen.

First generation middle power countries, while continuing to assume aspects of their earlier roles, also now are constrained by the altered context and their own realignment. They likely will continue to have specialized skills and capabilities, as well as discretionary resources, that can be allocated to some of the classic middle power tasks. But they now are joined, and may well be superceded, by the second generation middle power countries who often come from the very regions where middle power skills and knowledge and multilateral assistance is required. What remains uncertain is whether these emerging potential second-tier actors can sustain commitments and, if so, how regional needs will be balanced by global challenges? Unlike their predecessors, the second generation must still address issues within their own contiguous regions. Furthermore, these regions are themselves in the midst of profound change.
First generation middle powers were called upon initially to contribute to the management of conflict, and then to its resolution. They also were at the forefront of the various initiatives for economic change include trade liberalization and international regulation, And they promoted multilateral institutions to manage global as well as regional affairs. In Cox’s terms, they played a transformative role in post-war international politics. These privileged countries pursued interests which both enhanced their own well-being and security while also attempting to create a global network which constrained superpower unilateralism and created political space for others. But as Cox would argue, all this was possible because rarely did it intrude into or challenge the preferences of hegemonic interests. In one way or another, first generation middle powers acted in concert with the dominant state actors. Hence, their role in contributing to peace and security was seen as cumulative, positive, and only occasionally problematic.

Second generation middle powers are much different, just as the context for all middle powers today – first or second generation – is different. Prevention and pre-emption are now part of the calculus of the security doctrine, not simply the already challenging roles of management and resolution. Peace building and post-conflict reconstruction now are anticipated to be part of the demands placed upon the international security community. Ethnic and faith-based violence now compels intervention, and non-state actors threaten states. Democratic peace theory offers rationales in support of enforced regime change. Human security discourse has liberated the idea that security is defined solely in terms of the state, so now the measure of insecurity leading to action can be based on human suffering. Concomitant with that is the corollary: that the international community has a “responsibility to protect” where the responsible government is unable or unwilling to fulfil those obligations.

Ironically, just as second generation middle powers are seeking opportunities to pursue their interests and to serve the international community, they also face security threats which may pose some very difficult political challenges. Both human security and responsibility to protect are first generation middle power initiatives, and may impose considerable local political and cultural difficulties within the very regions home to second generation middle powers. Ethnic and other identity-based conflicts may resonate throughout a region, placing constraints on the ability of second generation middle power countries to act within their region. Moreover, protracted regional conflicts can impede the ability of regional leaders to act in conformity with middle power expectations, thereby also constraining their ability to convert status and credibility from regional to global levels of politics and diplomacy. Thus, avoiding regional entanglements may be the preferred option, although the cost to the region may be significant.

As we are in a new era of international relations, we are also at a crossroads for middle power activity. It is one where some among the first generation have seen their capacities erode while others have chosen to focus on niche areas of commitment. This provides an opportunity for other states to emerge into middle power status, though whether this will happen, and the way in which it might unfold, is as yet unclear. This initial study of middle powers in the post 11 September 2001 world has raised many questions, including:

- Can a country act as a middle power globally and a major power regionally, and what does that do?
- Can middle powers negotiate across the ideological divides that the war on terror reveals?
- Who are the emerging (2nd generation) middle powers?
• Must middle powers be market capitalist and liberal democratic?

• What issues are middle powers likely to promote in the next decade, and what means will be available for them to pursue their foreign policy agendas?

This is obviously only a partial list of possible questions, but it serves to highlight the potential for old and new middle powers, as well as the complexities facing them in the years to come. We remain confident that so long as states continue to press for change in the international system middle powers will have an important voice in world politics.
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