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‘The changing architecture of politics in the Asia-Pacific: Another (lost) middle power moment?’

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First Draft

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Introduction

When asked what he thought about Western civilization, Mahatma Gandhi famously replied, ‘I think it would be a good idea’. Much the same might be said about ‘middle power diplomacy’. Despite a good deal of recent interest in this idea on the part of scholars and—more importantly, perhaps—policymakers, there is remarkably little evidence of middle power diplomacy actually having an impact on international affairs. On the contrary, there is much about the contemporary international context, or at least the way practitioners think about it, that is strikingly similar to the twentieth or even the nineteenth centuries. Dispiriting as it might be to say so, realists do have a point: power continues to matter, especially when it comes in the form of powerful nation-states intent on asserting themselves. For all the potential that middle powers may possess in theory, in practice ‘great’ powers engaging in the stuff of great power politics, continue to call the shots - notwithstanding the late 20th early 21st century tendency to resort, more than in the past, to a discourse imbued with the warming metaphorical sentiments of ethics, interdependence and responsibility.

Nowhere are these slightly deflating possibilities more in evidence than the Asia-Pacific region. And yet if our claims about the limited impact of middle power diplomacy hold good there, they are likely to be persuasive elsewhere too. This region is, after all, rightly celebrated as the world’s most economically dynamic, and is associated with significant, if not universal, exercises in political liberalization. Indeed, the recent history of South Korea is a dramatic and profoundly encouraging example of the ‘East Asian miracle’ in action. And yet South Korea in particular and Northeast Asia more generally are also stark reminders of how much historical and geopolitical baggage the region as a whole carries: whether it is unresolved territorial disputes or the unpredictable behavior of North Korea, regional politics continue to be overlaid by the historically entrenched legacies of earlier conflicts and struggles and not unsurprisingly, realist foreign policy responses. Crucially for our argument—and the actual practice of regional diplomacy—these are not just anachronistic curiosities, but powerful determinants of the contemporary contours of regional politics.

The most consequential expression of this possibility has been the recent ‘pivot’ to the region by the US. America’s ‘rediscovery’ of East Asia has been triggered primarily
by the ‘rise of China’. Whatever one thinks about the merits, wisdom or efficacy of
either American or Chinese foreign policy, for our purposes they are very tangible
reminders that, whether we call them ‘superpowers’ or merely ‘great’ ones, the
region’s fate continues to be largely determined by its most strategically dominant
members. There is nothing surprising nor novel in this claim but it is important to
recognize that, of necessity, it circumscribes the options of the less powerful.

Indeed, we argue in what follows that many of the region’s potential ‘middle powers’,
rather than practice the middle power diplomacy we outline in the first part of this
paper and that they often rhetorically espouse, have instead voluntarily limited their
options by reinforcing alliance structures and relationships that we might otherwise
have expected to become progressively less salient in a post-Cold War era. Our point
is that, whatever the strategic rationale may be for such alliances, they necessarily
foreclose the possibility of genuinely independent coalitions of like-minded,
similarly-credentialed middle powers developing novel responses to regional or even
global policy challenges.

We develop this argument in the following way. First we put the growing middle
power literature in perspective: the recent enthusiasm for the concept notwithstanding,
we have been here before at various stages in the international history of the post-
World War II era. Indeed, middle power theory waxes and wanes and it is far from
obvious that this present iteration will prove any more substantial than some of the
previous ones. Second, we link this theoretical oscillation to specific historical
contexts with a focus on several ‘quintessential’ middle powers—notably, Australia
and Canada. We are at pains to emphasize, however, that it is not possible to simply
‘read off’ a relationship between ‘middle power moments’ and larger geopolitical
shifts in the international system. What we can say is that some structural conditions
are more conducive to middle power diplomacy than others, but none are decisive (or
ever likely to be). Finally, we look more closely and the Asia-Pacific region as a
laboratory for middle power experimentation.

Part 1: Is There Something We Might Call Middle Power Theory?
If there is a correlation between the quantity of writing on a subject and its salience then there clearly is something to the theory and practice of being a middle power (see *inter alia*: Beeson, 2011; Cooper, Higgott and Nossal, 1993; Cooper, 1997; Cotton, and Ravenhill, 2012; Cox, 1989; Efstathopoulos, 2011; Gilley, 2011; Holbraad, 1984; Holmes, 1966; Jordan, 2003; King-Gordon, 1966; Manicom and O’Neil, 2012; Nossal and Stubbs, 1997; Ping, 2005; Pratt, 1990; Ravenhill, 1998; Rutherford, 2010; Soeya, 2012; Stairs, 1998; Van Der Westenhuizen, 1998; Ungerer, 2007; Wood, 1988). But the idea of middle powers as a distinctive category of actor in international relations has been, and remains, problematic. At its most basic, middle power theory makes one important contribution to international thinking; it provides an alternative analytical way of framing of international politics, viewed through the lenses of secondary, as opposed to the primary players. This is an approach to international thinking that is all too often overlooked in the dominant realist literature.

Moreover, middle power theory looks at the international policy making process as a ‘game of skill’, not simply a game of power anchored in definitions drawing on size, power and geographic location (see quintessentially, Vital, 1967). On the contrary, middle-power theory assigns greater weight, initially in its traditional guise, to inspirational, celebratory and exhortatory virtues associated with benign ‘internationalism’ (see Pratt, 1990; Wood, 1988). Later, more precise, rationalist articulations of middle power theory moved beyond these comforting, some might say sentimental ‘feel good approaches’ with their focus on the moral virtues of states, such as Canada for example, to stress the instrumental potential of states to develop and use technical skills, entrepreneurial capacities and initiative-oriented sources of leadership; particularly coalition building activities in issue specific contexts of the kind exhibited in various phases of Australian policy (this is the thrust of the argument advanced in Cooper, Higgott and Nossal, 1993).

While still largely ‘statist’ in its view of the world, middle power theory requires state actors to think beyond the dominant drivers of realist power politics. Middle power theory is more dynamic than much great power driven analysis. It recognizes that the relationship between leadership and followership is a two way interactive process not simply a uni-directional—rule maker, rule taker—relationship. Much post World War II international theory, under-written by assumptions of hegemony, that denies
little or no autonomy of action to followers, gives little credence to the interactive, as opposed to uni-directional nature of the leader-follower dynamic. Cooper, Higgott and Nossal (1993) in their comparative discussion of Australia and Canada in the closing stages of the twentieth century, demonstrate quite conclusively the ability of middle powers in key policy areas to lead larger players (in the development of the Cairns Group and APEC on the one hand for example) and the importance of their willingness to follow the larger players (in the first Gulf War Coalition on the other).

The key argument to be drawn from an examination of middle-power behavior of the type exhibited by Australia and Canada in the latter decades of the twentieth century is that when the policy issue is of a more traditional power politics variety (as in the case of the first Gulf War) then followership of great powers is more likely. In the context of complex interdependence (as in the economic negotiations of the Uruguay MTN Round or the regional institutional conversations of the kind illustrated in the development of APEC) then the influence of the games of skill, at which middle powers can/may excel, is more likely to flourish.

So what is middle power theory? Is it simply a form of leadership distinct from that traditionally understood in much international relations scholarship of the realist persuasion? Where does it sit, if anywhere, in the contemporary scholarly debates in international relations that range across the theoretical spectrum from realism to constructivism? These are the questions scholars (and PhD students especially) like to ask, but which find less interest in the domains inhabited by the contemporary foreign policy maker. Our take in this paper is to address such theoretical questions, interesting as they are, only indirectly. For if middle power theory is to have any purchase in the real world of politics and in an evolving regional context of East Asia and the Pacific in the early 21st century in particular, then it must, frankly, speak more to the corridors of power than to seminar rooms of the academy.

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

This position is developed and refined by Cooper, Higgott and Nossal (1991 and especially 1993, from which the following discussion is drawn) in their development of middle power theory. In contrast to Nye they attribute greater salience to egoistic, agency based influences. They are not dismissive of, but less persuaded by traditional understandings of middle power (classically Holbraad, 1984) that emphasize (i) ‘middling’ in terms of either location (between Great Power systems) although the idea of middle powers as (metaphorical) bridges or linchpins has some purchase; (ii) size (on a scale between big and small states) or (iii) ‘middleness’ (adopting a middling ideological position between two polarized ideological positions or political systems). There can be some smugness inherent in this latter position in which middle powers are seen as occupying the reasonable position or the high moral ground between competing ideologies. But given the invariable lack of consistency, even in the foreign policies of the most high minded of states, this is a difficult argument to sustain. Indeed, even with ‘like-minded’ Scandinavian states, with strong records of ‘humane internationalism’, can find it difficult to always meet the standards set for this definition (see Pratt, et al. 1990).

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

Games of Skill versus Games of Will: Middle power theory is thus premised on being not a giant but a good dancer skilled in persuasion, coalition building and ‘the art of the indirect’ playing the role of (i) catalyst, (ii) facilitator and (iii) manager. As catalyst the middle power provides the initial intellectual political energy to trigger an initiative. In the middle stages of a policy narrative a successful middle power player would facilitate associational, collaborative and coalitional activity. It is here that superior diplomatic ability (a skill not to be under-rated or assumed to be possessed by every foreign office) to plan and convene meetings and provide technical support (declaration drafting and the like) becomes important. In the third stage of the process, the management of the initiative, an ability and willingness to support and under-write ‘institution building’—writ large to mean anything from the development of norms and conventions to actual organization creation—becomes crucial (for an elaboration of these 3 phases see Cooper et al, 1993).

Requiring expertise and dedicated core experienced officials, these highly specialized activities are, of course not simply (or sometimes even) the preserve of the polities and bureaucracies of (some) middle powers. Great powers are often as well if not better equipped but, given contexts may, for political reasons, be less free to use them. And these skills are not learned over night or available for use across the policy spectrum. Australian and Canadian trade officials, for example, took many years to learn them before they could bring them successfully to bear in the development of
one quite specific policy initiative the Cairns Group in the Uruguay Round of Multilateral Trade Negotiations (see Higgott and Cooper, 1990)—a classic example of what has come to be known as ‘niche diplomacy’. Similarly, the development of APEC was predicated on many years of prior intellectual expertise building in the domain of regional economic cooperation across the Asia Pacific (see Drysdale, 1988).

In short, the foreign policy establishment of a state, aspiring to middle power standing, cannot simply just switch to a middle power foreign policy approach. A principal characteristic of assumptions of middle power theorizing in practice is that, as the discussion of Australia in the next section suggests, it goes in cycles and is very much tied to the identity that a particular government chooses to assign to their country. To this extent then the normative self-assignment of a particular identity by a country’s leadership is a major element of middle power thinking and practice (see the excellent discussion of this relationship in Carr, 2013 forthcoming). Moreover assignment of a particular identity is not without material or emotional cost or, as in democracies, party political contest. Considerable bureaucratic learning is required. This was the case in Australia in the late 1980s with some success (see Cooper et al, 1993) but, as in the case of South Korea a decade or so later, such learning is not axiomatically guaranteed success (see Shinn, 2009.)

The approaches to understanding middle power theory set out above has a number of advantages over earlier understandings. By focusing less on positional attributes and more on tasks performed in issue-specific policy areas, a less arbitrary assessment of the range of middle power leadership activities can be achieved. Rather than concentrating on a narrow group of ‘like-minded’ countries we can instead open up the study of a wider range of middle sized countries—that is countries that act as middle powers identified by virtue of their diplomatic behavior. But a behavioural-cum-normative approach is itself not without criticism. As with some of the other approaches it can be seen to have a cyclical, time bound quality to it. Moreover, the proof of the pudding, as we might say, is in the eating and as Carr (forthcoming) suggests, the ultimate test of middle power behavior is ‘systemic impact’. In the next section of the paper, looking through the lenses of various approaches to middle power theory we analyze their utility in a contemporary Asia Pacific context.
Part 2: Middle powers in the Asia-Pacific

The remarkable economic development that has occurred over the last three or four decades in East Asia means that the region is a good geographical context in which to gauge the efficacy of middle power theory. After all, even if we restrict our gaze to East Asia (rather than the more expansive but ill-defined ‘Asia-Pacific), there is a growing number of potential middle powers and some extant evidence of their ability—and inability—to act cooperatively. Not only is there a collection of prominent states, such as South Korea, Indonesia, and especially Australia, that have self-consciously adopted the rhetoric of middle power diplomacy, but the region also contains the most durable organization—ASEAN—to have emerged from what was once rather patronizingly known as the ‘developing world’.

For all ASEAN’s frequently noted weaknesses and its limited mandate, it provides an interesting example of nascent middle power cooperation, albeit within constrained geopolitical circumstances. Our other principal case study—Australia—provides an even more compelling, contemporary illustration of state behavior in the post-Cold War world. When seen through the framework of middle power theory, the Australian case illustrates the dialectical nature of leadership and international policymaking in the early 21st century.

Understanding ASEAN: ASEAN is important for a number of reasons, not the least of which is its remarkable longevity. It is worth remembering that ASEAN was a defensive response to both the Cold War in particular and the more generalized challenges confronting comparatively new independent states. Despite a good deal of lofty, no doubt well-intentioned rhetoric about economic, social, cultural, technical, and educational cooperation, in reality the founding members of ASEAN came together to resolve intramural tensions and to achieve a greater collective presence on the international stage. In other words, the pursuit of internal and external security was the overwhelming driver of cooperation among similarly positioned states.

For ASEAN skeptics, and scholars of a realist disposition, this looks like a familiar tale: weak states are driven to cooperate as a consequence of the actions of more
powerful actors. While there is plainly something in this—geopolitical constraints and material considerations did place ‘structural’ constraints on the Southeast Asian states freedom of action—it does not tell the complete story. When seen through the lens of middle power theory a more complex and nuanced drama comes into view. The precise nature of ASEAN’s *modus operandi*—the so-called ‘ASEAN Way’ of consultation, consensus and voluntarism—may have been encouraged by a threatening external strategic environment, but its specific practices are nevertheless reflective of pre-existing social relations (Haacke 2003). It is also reflective of some characteristics we identified in part one of this paper; notably a commitment (at the level of rhetoric if not always practice) to multilateral problem solving.

In other words, even though the rationale for the very distinctive diplomatic practices associated with the ASEAN Way may be entirely instrumental and self-serving, the important theoretical point about the ASEAN Way is that it is not the product of externally-imposed ‘leadership’. On the contrary, whatever we may think of the effectiveness and rationale for Southeast Asian diplomacy, it is largely a creation of Southeast Asian elites attempting to play ‘games of skill’ rather than ‘games of will’.

Amitav Acharya has done more than most to explain the ‘how’ of the foreign policy process and style in Southeast Asia. For Acharya (2004: 241), ‘foreign norms’ undergo a process of ‘localization’ in which they are subtly reconfigured by contingent indigenous factors and actors. Acharya argues that the ASEAN grouping remained at the centre of new forms of regional security cooperation, despite the fact that these were exogenously-driven. For all the criticisms that have been leveled at the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) that emerged from these processes in the 1990s, the key point when seen through the lens of middle power theory is that modestly credentialed states acting in coalition were able to influence policy outcomes in ways that reflected their interests, rather than those of their more powerful interlocutors.

These sorts of processes are subtle, often too subtle, for those of a realist mindset and methodology to accommodate. But they contribute to debates about the relative effectiveness and power of ASEAN as a collective international actor (Eaton and Stubbs 2006). While there is little doubt that the more Cartesian formalist and legalistically-minded, non-Asian members of groupings such as the ARF might be
frustrated by the non-binding nature of ASEAN-style diplomacy and the difficulty of dealing with contentious issues (Kahler 2010), this is in a counterfactual way strong testimony to the impact of Southeast Asian states on these policy-making processes.

Institutional innovation The potentially illuminating point of an analysis grounded in middle power theory is not about the normative content and progressive nature of any given policy process, but about the ability of less powerful states to have a hand in determining policy outcomes. In this context, some of the cruder criticisms of ASEAN are misconceived (Jones and Smith 2007): it is precisely the goal of deflecting or deferring unwanted policy proposals that is part of ASEAN’s collective strength. As such, the polite fiction that ‘ASEAN is in the driving seat’ is not without some substance (Beeson 2009).

The price for keeping the Southeast Asian states on board and maintaining a semblance of regional cohesion, coverage and inclusivity in various policy domains may be adopting what some have rather disparagingly described as the politics of the lowest common denominator, but this is testimony to the interactive, even dialectical nature of ‘leadership’ in an era when geopolitical constraints are comparatively relaxed (Nabers 2010). To the extent that ASEAN states, by virtue of their limited or constrained positional assets, are individually likely to be rule takers rather than rule makers in the global economic and political orders, then their ability to collectively mitigate the rules they are forced to take, is the real significance of ASEAN.

Seen in a more positive light then, the ASEAN story is instructive because of both its own internal logic, and also because of its impact on the wider region. When seen through the prism of a suitably revamped middle power theory, it is evident that coalitions of like-minded states can have an impact on policy-making processes, even where these involve more powerful actors. This may involve a fortunate coming together of great and middle power interests—as the celebrated resolution of the Cambodian crisis demonstrates—but it may not. Even if the great powers may prefer a different outcome, smaller states may be able to exploit the diplomatic spaces created by great power stand-offs or leadership failures—if, of course, they are skillful enough. Middle powers may even be able to create the sort of institutional architecture that can actually constrain the behavior of their more powerful
counterparts. It is worth remembering that it was precisely the possibility that hegemonic powers might voluntarily choose to entangle themselves in institutionalized constraints, that was thought by many to be the hallmark of America’s postwar pre-eminence (Ikenberry 1998).

Ikenberry’s analytical trope might be somewhat tempered by the history of the post Cold War era, but such possibilities could be thought to be currently on display in the ‘Asia-Pacific’. For many years the East Asian region in particular was synonymous with institutional under-development (especially when compared with Europe), but there is now a super-abundance of regional initiatives (see Beeson and Stubbs, 2012) that given their different hue to those in Europe at the present time, seem less anodyne and even more ‘realistic’. Perhaps the key point to make about institutional development in the region is that there is nothing inevitable about the form that regionalism may take (see Higgott, 2012).

One further thing is clear, however: during the Cold War, it was simply not possible to establish genuinely region-wide institutions when key states such as China were on the ‘wrong’ side of the ideological divide. However, in periods of what Andrew Hurrell (2006: 12) calls ‘hegemonic decompression’ the possibility that a range of states could play a role in helping to define a system in flux are potentially greater. International institutions are important manifestations of the contest to define the boundaries and purposes of nascent organizations even if features of the flurry of institution-building that occurred in the East Asian region suddenly freed of the structural constraints of Cold War super power confrontation, is that such initiatives continue to bear the imprint of great as well as middle, power politics.

But while we need to make a distinction between the rhetoric and reality associated with particular institutions, when seen through the prism of middle power theory, what is of greatest significance is the fact that middle powers have actually played a significant entrepreneurial role in bringing about institutional change. Like ASEAN, the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum may have been subject to some well-deserved criticism at times, but it is important to remember that it was Japan and Australia that played the key role in bringing APEC into existence (Funabashi 1995). They acted as both catalysts and facilitators. Ironically, the
activities of this ‘epistemic community’ of economists and ‘track two’ representatives who added momentum to the APEC initiative may have given APEC too restrictive an agenda, but the idea that some sort of regional organization that encompassed the region’s great and middle powers was firmly planted by them (see Higgott, 1994).

The precise way regional institutional development plays out is not just the preserve of middle powers. On the contrary, a defining feature of regional development in the ‘Asia-Pacific’ region over recent years has been the contest to decide precisely what the contours of any region should look like. China’s championing of the ASEAN plus Three (APT) grouping is clearly designed to minimize and constrain American influence in the more narrowly conceived East Asian region (Terada 2012). Significantly, for our argument, the success of this endeavor will depend on China’s ability to maintain good relations with the all-important ASEAN states. We have already seen the lengths to which China has been prepared to go in ‘charming’ its neighbors: the China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement and the favorable (for ASEAN) terms upon which this was maxed are striking evidence of this possibility. The point to emphasize here is that, once again, great power rivalry offered the ASEAN states an opportunity to shape agendas and press their interests.

The ‘rise of China’ and its increased material presence in the region are clearly developments of long-term historical significance. While we would not want to understate China’s importance nor would we want to overestimate what David Shambaugh (2013) calls the limitations of a still ‘partial’ power rather than a great one. Indeed, in a situation where, following Shambaugh, China’s spread of interests is currently deemed greater than its depth of influence, then responding to the ‘China challenge’, even at the level of economic competition, does not leave suitably motivated and organized middle powers entirely without options. This is also true in a strategic context: not only have a number of Asian states sought to ‘hedge’ against the possible consequences of China’s military modernization and foreign policy assertiveness (Medeiros 2005-06), but at least one middle power may have played a significant role in redefining the institutional response of the major powers, too. Some observers of regional politics claim that the US’s much-discussed recent ‘pivot’ to the region, and the sudden interest in the hitherto rather superfluous-looking East Asia Summit (EAS), has come about—in part, at least—at the urging of former
Australian prime minister Kevin Rudd (Sheridan 2010 and Rudd, 2013). If so, it continues a long tradition of middle power policy activism by Australia; offering an example of such opportunities and constraints for similarly-positioned states. Indeed, as we suggest below, no country can claim to have been a more enthusiastic advocate for middle power diplomacy than Australia.

**The Antipodean exemplar:** Since the days of former Foreign Minister Gareth Evans—who actually put his name to a book on the topic (Evans and Grant 1995)—middle power diplomacy has been a prominent idea in Australian foreign policy circles; or it has on the Labor side of politics, at least. Evans was a prominent figure in the first major iteration of middle power foreign policy activism in Australia, with ministries under his jurisdiction playing a key role in establishing lobby groups of agricultural producers such as the Cairns Group (Higgott and Cooper 1990) and paving the way for the creation of the ARF (Caballero-Anthony 2005).

But supporting our assertions of the cyclical nature of middle power theory and practice, subsequent conservative governments in Australia, especially under the leadership of former Liberal Prime Minister John Howard, studiously eschewed the label and avoided multilateral ties whenever possible. Howard preferred to base foreign policy on what he described as a form ‘practical realism’, which reflected his belief that Australia had little natural cultural affinity with the region of which it was part. And then again, by contrast with the Howard era of relative pragmatism and traditionalism, the Labor government of Kevin Rudd marked a return to and the recent high point of enthusiasm for middle power diplomacy and Australia’s potential to play a leading role in world affairs (Beeson 2011).

Despite Rudd’s enthusiasm for the idea of middle power diplomacy, however, it is important to recognize that it contained contradictions that made its application problematic. Rudd’s foreign policy was based on ‘three pillars’, only two of which—Asian engagement and a commitment to multilateralism—were easily congruent with the idea of the sort of independent approach we might expect from an aspirant middle

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1 Australian politics is dominated by the notionally ‘left wing’ Australian Labor Party (ALP) and coalition governments formed by the ideologically conservative Liberal Party and the rurally-based National Party.
power. The other pillar—maintaining a strategic alliance with the United States—necessarily had, and indeed still has, the potential to constrain the policy options available to strategically dependent allies. Alliance politics are not the subject of much debate in Australia, and this is revealing in itself. There is generally an unquestioning bipartisan agreement about the primacy of the US alliance and about the need to do whatever is necessary to maintain it. As we suggested earlier, approaches to foreign policy under-written by traditional power politics assumptions are more likely to produce followership than policy innovation.

While there are signs of a shift in the content of the foreign policy debate in Australia,² at this stage the mainstream view remains overwhelming that Australia must do whatever it takes to shore-up the Alliance. Most recently, this has meant establishing a permanent American troop presence in Darwin as part of the ‘pivot’, despite the unhappiness evinced by China, now Australia’s most important trade partner (Flitton 2012). Our argument here is not about the merits of this policy, but about its impact on the policy autonomy of notionally independent states. Not only has Australian played an active role in entrenching its alliance relationship and supporting the US institutionalized presence in the region, but other states have behaved in quite different ways when presented with apparently similar sets of international circumstances. It is revealing, for example, that other middle powers such as Canada and New Zealand (or South Korea, for that matter) chose not to become involved in the ‘coalition of the willing’ that invaded Iraq (Beeson 2007). The point to emphasize, therefore, is that the precise nature of any bilateral relationship between great and middle powers, or leaders and followers, is negotiated and not predetermined.

The politics of middle power cooperation: The strategic choices middle powers make have consequences and may circumscribe the options that might otherwise be open to them. It is noteworthy, for example, that Indonesia sees Australia’s enthusiasm for its alliance relationship, with its concomitant emphasis on military power, in altogether different light than do the Australians (McDonald and Brown 2012). Given that

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² The most important contribution in this context has been Hugh White’s (2010) suggestion that the region develop a ‘concert of powers’ to manage strategic relations, in which states such as Australia accommodate China’s rise.
Indonesia is Australia’s closest neighbor, a potentially vital security partner, and widely thought to be among the world’s most important ‘rising powers’ (Laksmana 2011), this is an especially consequential, or should be, in ordering of policy priorities on Australia’s part. But there is nothing inevitable about putative middle powers coming together in like-minded coalitions. On the contrary, Indonesia’s growing disenchantment with the ASEAN grouping reminds us that shifts in the relative standing of even similarly positioned states may generate new alignments and priorities (Rulan 2009). In Indonesia’s case this means contemplating the prospect of becoming a world, rather than simply a regional power.

If middle power theory can account for how state behavior has the potential to recognize and account for such changes in emphasis, as well as the importance of a wider array of issue-based and interest-based concerns that transcend regional cultural affinities, then it clearly has insights to offer. It is striking that as Indonesia has become more deeply integrated into, and a more substantial part of, the international economy, the effects of interdependence have become more apparent and pressing. Indonesia’s accession to the G20—currently the middle power venue of choice and mark of status—has plainly caused a recalibration of its foreign policy priorities.

Although the US may remain first among notional equals in the G20, countries like Australia and Indonesia, albeit from their different vantage points, do have the potential to raise issues and propose policies too (Beeson and Bell 2009). The problem for the G20 is that it was largely created as a response to an economic crisis which shows no sign of definitively ending. As Wade (2011: 368) amongst many others has observed, ‘Whether at the level of finance ministers or of heads of government, the G20 has yet to demonstrate that it can graduate from crisis committee to steering committee.’

It might be objected that if middle powers cannot influence debates about, much less policy outcomes in, the less existentially fraught area of economic policy and reform when the need is painfully apparent (Higgott 2013), how much less likely is it that they will be able to influence geo-political strategic outcomes? There is plainly something in this, but this only raises more generalized questions about global governance. For some observers we are witnessing a redistribution of global power in
which a range of new actors such as middle powers and indeed powerful non-state actors are becoming more important parts of governance networks (van Langenhove 2010). For others, the ‘explosion of so-called global governance institutions has increased the chaos, randomness, fragmentation, ambiguity and impenetrable complexity of international politics (Schweller 2010). It is too soon to say which of these perspectives is likely to prove more accurate. Indeed, they are not really mutually exclusive (see Stone, 2013). But in either context we can make a number of modest claims about the way we might understand the role of middle powers.

First, different issue areas may account for significant differences in behavior and possible coalitions of actors—and it should be noted both state and non-state alike—without necessarily being determinative. At the level of states, Australia has always been an enthusiastic supporter of one great power or another, but there is nothing inevitable about the nature of strategic ties. Second, some issues may simply be resistant to resolution either because of powerful vested interests, or the inherent complexity of the problem—or both. Reforming global finance or achieving meaningful climate change policies are sobering examples of such possibilities. The point to emphasize here is that simply because middle powers may prove incapable of solving some of the world’s most pressing problems, this does not mean they cannot play a significant role in deciding how they are managed.

**Conclusion: Lessons for aspiring middle powers**

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

This is why the ASEAN exemplar is also potentially illuminating. It may be true that ASEAN has been a conservative organization and synonymous with authoritarian rule, in its early days at least. But it is also a reminder of what a coalition of states with limited capacities can achieve—if only in fending off unwanted intrusions into their national sovereignty and autonomy. The lesson of the ASEAN experience, therefore, is that groups of like-minded states acting together can make a difference, and possibly even influence the behavior their ‘great’ counterparts, even if it is only at the margins when the stakes are not too existentially fraught. This is a particularly timely lesson given the deteriorating security environment in the East Asian region.

South Korea, like Australia and—yes, even Japan—are quintessentially middle powers with no capacity to definitely influence the overall geopolitical context within which they are embedded, much less the outcome of any actual regional conflict. They at least have similar positions in the international system in common. But this is a very limited conception of middle powers. If the term is to amount to something more substantive, it must be as the basis for a definitive change in state behavior; active coalition-building in pursuit of mutually-determined objectives in essential, as opposed to trivial, policy contexts. Crucially, they have a role to play alongside and possibly even beyond the great powers in the Asia Pacific if they, China and the US, are not to become paralyzed by the same stultifying logic that produced the Cold War stalemate. In such circumstances, the right role for middle powers is not to take sides and bolster them in their obduracy, but rather to encourage them to put into practice the creative diplomacy and behavior that is the theoretical hallmark of middle power behaviour. It is clearly a big ask but not an impossible one, nor one that should be eschewed because of the degree of difficulty.

As in practice then so in theory, we need to be pluralist in how we judge the utility of theorizing about middle power behavior. As in much scholarly judgment, we can apply tests across a spectrum from soft to hard. We have gently tried to suggest in this paper that we should perhaps judge middle power theory at the soft end of the
scale—focusing on the behavioral characteristics of middle powers and asking how middle powers do what they do, rather than interrogating their capacity to definitively ‘save the world’—a test all international theory fails. A hard test would precisely ask such a question about what Carr (2013) calls ‘systemic impact’. On that basis middle power theory would not score well; although as we have suggested, it would score.

So we end with the softer question. If not how middle power theory might definitively ‘save the world’ at least how might it, advancing a defensible normative aspiration, contribute to making it a better place?

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