Australia as a Middle Power: Ambiguities of Role and Identity

by David Scott

Alongside analyses on the role of the Great Powers, there has been great interest shown in recent years on what has been called "the rise of the Middle Powers" in the international system. At various levels Australia and Australians have adopted the term Middle Power, where it becomes a question of role and indeed of identity for Australia. This position and role is captured with comments like "Australians see themselves, and are seen by others, as a middle power."

In such a vein, this article looks at Australia's strategic discourse in and around government on Australia as a Middle Power. It asks how significant a player Australia is on the world stage, how far it has carved out distinctive normative middle power diplomacy? This article asks what recognition there is at the global level of Australia's economic importance and political clout, and analyzes its role in international and regional organizations? At the regional level, as power balances shift in the Asia-Pacific, the article asks what role is Australia to play as a Middle Power; and how from this Middle Power position point does it conduct its affairs with its two larger Great Power neighbors in the Asia-Pacific, namely the United States and China? *The New York Times* talked about the rise of the Middle Powers but the article considers whether Australia is faced with a fall from Middle Power status?

Its argument is two-fold. Firstly that in the debate between defining Middle Power in quantitative-power or qualitative-normative terms, Australia should be meaningfully analysed as a Middle Power in quantitative-power terms, despite the qualitative-normative language actually used by its government. Second, the article finds that Australia is faced with Middle Power decline, thereby illustrating in international trends and processes.

Middle Power is by definition something of a comparative term. The title literally means a power (state) that in terms of its power, defined as covering quantitative assets and qualitative influence, lies between big powers and small powers in state rankings. If "power" is an asset, then it can be quantified and ranked in terms of tangible "hard power" aspects of military and economic power. This position that power involves quantity ranking, championed by traditional voices like Carsten Holbraad and Martin Wight, retains its validity. It was in this straightforward

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quantitative comparative sense that the then Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd argued in 2011 that "as the 12th largest economy in the world and 4th largest in Asia, Australia is by definition a middle power." Hard power military strength can also be used as a criteria. In hard power military terms, White used two benchmarks when arguing that "militarily, no country can count as a middle power" unless "it can fend off a major-power attack on its territory, and make a substantial contribution to a regional coalition with allies and friends." If we use such quantifiable hard power economic and military criteria, then in the Asia-Pacific, China and the US are examples of Big Powers while Papua New Guinea and East Timor are examples of Small Powers. Australia is in the middle of this spectrum, with Middle Power weight.

On the one hand, this means Australia is big enough to enable its choice of advocating multilateralism, and norm-rule setting behavior or regional exertions to

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have greater impact than would be the case for smaller powers. Luxembourg and East Timor ENOUGH TO ENABLE ITS may have similar values and behaviour to Australia, yet size makes their voices rarely heard. In his essay "Power Shift" Hugh White argued that Middle Power weight enables a degree of independence, "being a middle power means being able to do things that a great power doesn't agree with, or even opposes, without the backing of another great power."7 In contrast to small powers, "Middle powers have enough weight to influence what happens around them so as to protect their interests. They can negotiate with great powers, not simply obey them" while "small powers just take what happens.8 Equally

well, Australia's Middle Power weight means that its choice to have close securitymilitary cooperation with the United States has a greater impact than would be the case for a smaller power. In other words, "middle power band-wagoning." Australia is more valuable to the US as a partner than is New Zealand precisely because Australia is a bigger power than New Zealand. On the other hand this means that Australia is less of a potential threat to others than are Great Powers precisely because it is not too big. Australia has less weight than them to throw around, which ironically may mean its voice experiences less of a backlash concerning power dominance. With this, Middle Powers tend to antagonise less than Great Powers.

While Middle Power seems like a straight forward term, there are imprecise boundary lines between the three-fold categories of big-middle-small powers. Moreover some powers like Japan are declining from Great Power to Middle Power status, and others like Indonesia are rising from Middle Power to Great Power status. This question of shifting Middle Power status is something returned to at the end of this article. Moreover, while the stance that power involves quantity ranking remains true, any definition of power should also include the effects of soft power credibility

on hard power capability.

This article argues that choosing between defining "Middle Power" in power quantity or behavior qualitative-normative terms is a false dichotomy. This article does not accept that "relocating", or redefining, what we mean by Middle Power by taking it to mean that Middle Powers are recognizable (definable) through their "behavior" and multilateral norm-based rule setting rather than through their quantifiable "attributes." ¹⁰ Instead, the article argues that such norm behavior is not the exclusive preserve of Middle Powers, since Great Powers or Small Powers may also operate in such behavior ways. Consequently, the argument here is that Australia is primarily a Middle Power by virtue of its hard, and soft, power ranking, its attributes. It may choose to use such power in a normative behavior fashion but that is its middle Power choice, not its Middle Power definition

The organization of this article now looks at Australia's Middle Power position through consideration of its strategic discourse, ranking, global interests, regional interests before concluding with consideration of future challenges to Australia's present Middle Power position.

STRATEGIC DISCOURSE

Consideration of Australia's power, and with it identity and role, are an important feature in Australian strategic discourse. Various Australian leaders have identified themselves with a Middle Power stance and position. Herbert Evatt, Labor Minister for Foreign Affairs, first used the label Middle Power for Australia at the San Francisco Conference in 1945. Evatt argued that Middle Powers like Australia were those states "who by reason of their resources and geographical position, will prove to be of key importance for the maintenance of security in different parts of the world." He also argued in a critique of Great Power hegemonism that "one of the outstanding features of the conference was the part played by smaller nations, particularly 'the middle powers;" their part being "a continuous struggle by the middle and lesser powers for the settlement of international problems by democratic methods." 12

More recently, Australian official emphasis on Middle Power opportunities, "Middle Power dreaming" for some, have been prominent in the Labor Party administrations of Bob Hawke (1983–1991), Kevin Rudd (2007–2010,2013) and Julia Gillard (2010–2013). As Minister for Foreign Affairs from 1988–1996, Gareth Evans emphasized that "the kind of foreign policy we have been crafting and implementing in recent years" was "middle power diplomacy with an Asia Pacific orientation;" in which "the characteristic method of middle power diplomacy is coalition building with 'like-minded' countries." On reflection, he noted how "the term is most commonly used to describe the kind of diplomacy typically practised by a relatively small and distinctive group of states: Australia, Canada and the Scandinavians typically listed among them." He argued that through such Middle Power diplomacy, "by definition, middle powers are not powerful enough in most circumstances to impose their will," but "they may be persuasive enough to have like-

minded others see their point of view, and to act accordingly."¹⁶ Keeping Great Powers at a distance through multilateralism, rather than multipolar band-wagoning or balancing with them, was recommended, "middle powers ... by definition may need to find comfort in collective responses and rule-based international systems."¹⁷

Kevin Rudd, as Prime Minister in 2008, picked up this theme again with his call for "creative middle power diplomacy" by Australia. This was a normative view of Middle Power status, like Gareth Evans earlier. Three years later, as Minister for Foreign Affairs in the Gillard administration, Rudd emphasized the "new opportunities for what I call creative middle power diplomacy" in which "creative middle powers are well placed in bringing together major, regional and small powers to shape and implement solutions." Thus for Rudd, "Australia sees itself as a middle power with global and regional interests;" in which it "looked to enhance the rules-based order through the agency of creative middle power diplomacy." Rudd's sense of Middle Power opportunities was precisely because Australia was not a Great Power. He argued that "Middle powers know that on their own, their input will not be decisive. They cannot shape the world around us"; which meant that "Middle Powers are nimble in working the 'in-between' of international diplomacy," and in working with other Middle Powers "creative middle powers have an interest in pooling their economic and political standing."

Given Rudd's personal emphasis, it is not surprising that the 2009 *Defence White Paper* was sprinkled with references to Australia's general "middle power role" and "middle power influence." Significantly though, Australia's own military assets were large enough as a Middle Power to be flagged in its talk of Australia's network of alliances and varied defense relationships which "underpin our credibility as a middle power which is active in promoting security," and which facilitated Australia's "responsibility as a capable middle power that is able to contribute to global and regional security, including by way of military means." This was hard power underpinning soft power creative Middle Power diplomacy.

RANKING

Australia's Middle Power status reflects the amount of "power" it has in comparison to other countries, and points to relative rankings. On the one hand, Australia is clearly outranked in measurable hard power military and economic measurements by the Great Powers like the United States, China, Japan, Russia, India, and the European Union. On the other hand, it also outranks in measurable hard power military and economic measurements the "Small Powers" like Belgium, Jordan, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Nepal and New Zealand.²⁴

Various measurements can be made, in terms of size, population, economy and military forces. In terms of size, Australia is a substantial middle power, indeed a continent. Australia's size of around 7,692,024 square kilometers (2,969,907 square miles) ranking it as the sixth largest out of the current 193 United Nations (UN) member states; behind Russia, Canada, the United States, China and Brazil, but ahead of France, Germany and the United Kingdom. However this on its own gives a

misleading portrait since most of Australia is relatively barren desert, consequently with a low population figure for its size. If we look at current population figures, rounded to the nearest million, Australia's population of 22 million people gives it a rank of fifty-fifth in the world, in between Cote d'Ivoire and Romania; which comes well behind population figures for countries like China of 1,350 million, India of 1.221 million, the United States of 317 million, and indeed Australia's neighbour Indonesia with a population of 251 million.²⁵ The significance of population for power is that the bigger the population, the bigger the economic workforce and the bigger the military recruitment pool.

The Australian economy can be measured in various ways. The International Monetary Fund Gross Domestic Produce (GDP) figures for 2012 from its *World Economic Outlook Database* (WEOD) are indicative. The WEOD ranked Australia as twelfth in size, out of 184 economies. Australia's GDP of \$US 1,541.797 billion was significantly higher than its small power neighbour New Zealand figure of \$US 169.680 billion; though behind the greater power economies of the US (\$US 15,684.750 billion), China (\$US 8,227.037 billion) and Japan (\$US 5,963.969 billion). When adjusted for Price Purchasing Parity (PPP), costs of living give the Australian economy a slightly lower position, ranking eighteenth between Iran and Poland. When Australia's economy is measured against its population, its GDP per capita PPP-adjusted figure placed it higher up at tenth. The IMF designated the Australian economy as an Advanced Economy (AE) but not Major Advanced Economy (MAE). This is the reason why Australia is a member of the G20, but not of the more elite G8.

One aspect of Australia's economy that gives it greater impact is its large mineral resources. In 2012, Australia was the world's leading producer of bauxite and alumina, the second largest producer of uranium, lead, and zinc, the third largest producer of iron ore, nickel, manganese ores, and gold, and the fourth largest producer of black coal, silver, and copper. This boosts Australia's general Middle Power economic clout an extra resource power clout, although leaving it potentially dependent on overseas buyers' markets.

Such profiling of Australia's assets raises the question of where Australia deploys its Middle Power weight. This can be followed at two levels, reflecting Rudd's twofold distinction that "Australia is a middle power with regional and global interests." ²⁷

GLOBAL INTERESTS

Rudd has asserted that "Australia is a middle power with global interests" in issues like combating terrorism, nuclear non-proliferation, arms control, disarmament, climate change, human rights, humanitarian assistance and development. He felt that through "creative middle power diplomacy ...with likeminded middle powers" Australia's voice could be better heard. These are the domains of multilateralism, international organizations and regional organizations through which Middle Power "niche diplomacy" can operate. Such forums often

deal with much socio-economic questions, the relatively undramatic technical issues that quite often go unreported. However, despite the rhetoric, Australia's record on climate change negotiations has not been very cooperative.

Australia has placed great emphasis on the importance the United Nations as a

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global setting arena. As Minister for Foreign ALTOGETHER, AUSTRALIA Affairs, Gareth Evans argued that "it is a logical corollary of Australia's status as middle power that we should always have been strongly committed to effective MORE THAN FIFTY UN AND multilateral institutions-especially the United Nations, the only fully empowered body with membership that we have."31 global According to its Minister for Foreign Affairs BETWEEN Bob Carr, Australia's successful quest for a UN Security Council seat in 2013-2014 was 1947 AND 2012. OF THESE, "as a creative middle power, we will be an effective voice for the small and medium UN countries of the world."32 Certainly, Australia has been a supporter and evident contributor to UN operations. Between 1947 and 2012, Australian forces have been used for UN operations in Kashmir, Israel and Syria, Congo, Western New Guinea, Yemen, Cyprus, Sinai, Lebanon, Iran and Iraq,

Afghanistan and Pakistan, Western Sahara, Cambodia, Somalia, Former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Mozambique, Guatemala, Ethiopia/Eritrea, and Sudan. Altogether, Australia has provided more than 65,000 personnel to more than fifty UN and other multilateral peace and security operations between 1947 and 2012. Of these, over 30,000 have participated in UN peace operations and more than 20,000 in UNmandated operations. In such profiling of its involvement, the Australian government points out that at the founding of the UN, Evatt's time in 1944, "we argued against allowing permanent [Great power] members a veto power"; and continues to stress that the UN should be reformed so as "to ensure it is accessible to small and middle-sized countries."33

REGIONAL INTERESTS

Middle Powers by definition do not have global enforcement reach because that is the domain of the Great Powers. However, Middle Powers have more reach than minor and small powers because they have some real passive-defensive and assertiveoffensive capabilities in their more immediate regions. As Rudd noted in 2010, Australia was a "middle power with profound regional interests" to be gained, maintained and if necessary defended diplomatically and militarily.³⁴ Given a degree of military power and independent power deployment, a Middle Power becomes a

useful ally for Great Powers to have, augmenting their own (military) hard power with tangible regional concentration. Under the administrations of John Menzies (1949-66) and Robert Howard (1996-2007), Australia's firm identification with the United States brought useful Australian augmentation to the US military force in the Asia-Pacific.

Australia has shown a regional presence in various ways. Australia's involvement in the Korean War of 1950-1953 included the deployment of the 77th Squadron of the RAAF and the 3rd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (3 RAR), both of which were stationed in Japan at the time as part of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force.³⁵ A second battalion, 1 RAR, joined the Commonwealth Division in 1952. Australia's contribution of land and air force units in the Vietnam War from 1962-1973 was more substantial, rising to a peak of 7,672 by 1967.³⁶

Australia has also played a support role in combat across the Indian Ocean, where its forces have been engaged in operations in Iraq and Afghanistan for this past decade. During the invasion of Iraq in 2003, under Operation Falconer, Australia deployed three Royal Australian Navy ships, 500 Special Forces soldiers, P-3 Orion maritime patrol aircraft, C-130 Hercules transport aircraft and No. 75 Squadron RAAF which included 14 F/A-18 Hornet fighter jets. Although these forces were withdrawn within a year, additional Australian forces were deployed in Iraq from 2005-2009 under Operation Catalyst. Another overlapping deployment has been Operation Slipper, the deployment of Australian forces into Afghanistan. By 2011, Australia had contributed 1550 military personnel which included a Special Operations Task Group, a Reconstruction Task Force in Oruzgan Province, an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Detachment from the 20th Surveillance and Target Acquisition Regiment, a Rotary Wing Group operating two CH-47 Chinook helicopters from the 5th Aviation Regiment, an Air Force Control and Reporting Centre at Kandahar International Airport, a Force Level Logistic Asset in Kandahar; with further support by two detachments of three C-130 Hercules and two AP-3C Orion aircraft, and HMAS Warramunga based in the Gulf.

In terms of Australia's role in regional and international organizations, its Middle Power position gives it advantages as well as limitations. Australia has been a member of the Five Power Defence Forces Agreement (FPDFA), since its foundation in 1971. This is a modest, yet effective ongoing framework for middle power cooperation.³⁷ The FPDFA brings Australia together with New Zealand, Singapore, Malaysia and the UK. More specifically, it provides for Australia's continuing access and presence in Malaysia at RMAF Butterworth. Whereas Malaysia and Singapore would be averse to military arrangements with any of the Great Powers, sensitivities are eased when it involves other Middle Powers like Australia. From Australia's point of view, it gives the country direct access beyond its coast into Southeast Asia.

Middle Power ranking can make diplomacy easier. In the former vein, this was why Kevin Rudd argued that "we are seeking to apply the craft of creative middle power diplomacy to build institutions in our region." Australia played a leading role

in the formation of the Asia-Pacific Economic Community (APEC) in 1989.³⁹ With regard to its formation, Gareth Evans argued that "Middle Powers, simply because they are of less than great or major power status, can occasionally do what great and major powers cannot;" a Middle Power advantage in which he felt that "APEC would have had much more difficulty in getting off the ground if the United States or Japan had been its instigator," since each of those bigger powers "may have feared the worse of the other, and the smaller powers may well have felt that their own interests were at risk."⁴⁰

While Australia is overshadowed in its wider Asia-Pacific region by bigger more powerful states like the US and China, within its sub-region of the South Pacific it has greater scope as the sub-regional giant. This build on from its Hence Tony Abbot's comments that "we are an influential middle power and, whether we quite appreciate it or not, the big power of the South Pacific."41 At the institutional level, in the sub-regional framework of the Pacific Island Forum (PIF), Australia is the biggest member by a long way. Aid diplomacy has been one tool used by middle power leadership as a way to guarantee Australian long-term access to Pacific micro states, while excluding or limiting external influences that could be perceived as threatening.⁴² However, sub-regional instability has been an ongoing concern for Australia.⁴³ This has led to "Australia's new interventionism"; what it describes as contributing "personnel, resources and leadership to a number of peace operations in the Asia–Pacific."⁴⁴

Under Operation Bel Isi, an Australian-led Peace Monitoring Group was deployed to Bougainville in Papua New Guinea from May 1998 to August 2003, involving over 3,5000 Australian Defence Force personnel. Even as such manpower was being wound down, Australia took the lead in July 2003 in organizing and heading the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) under its Operation Anode deployment of Australian troops and police.⁴⁵ Following the 2006 riots in Tonga, Australia sent police officers at Tonga's request to help stabilize the situation in the kingdom. However, Australian Middle Power limitations were apparent in the Fijian crisis of 2006 when neither Australian military intervention nor economic sanctions were forthcoming despite Australian condemnation of the illegal coup and of the Bainimaram government, and despite an overt presence of Australian warships in Fijian waters.⁴⁶ Greater influence from the Great Powers overrode Australia's Middle Power clout as the US refused to underpin stronger Australian action, and China offered alternative support to the Fijian regime. Fiji secured a \$150 million soft loan from China following the coup, softening the economic pressure exerted by Australia.

After ignoring Indonesia's occupation of the former Portuguese colony in 1976, East Timor has seen successive Australian involvement. The government initially disregarded the issue, albeit simultaneously talking about how "our status as a regional power" with "an interest and status in the affairs of the neighbouring region." Australia eventually exerted its interest from 1999-2000, where as leader of the UN multinational International Force for East Timor (INTERFET), Australia

formed the majority of the troops by contributing 5,570 soldiers.⁴⁸ Australian troops again formed the majority of forces in the following United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) arrangements made from 2000-2002. Later, under Operation Astute, around 650 Australian troops were deployed alongside New Zealanders to East Timor as stabilization force from 2006-2012.

FUTURE: CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE?

Australia's Middle Power future is problematic for various reasons. Firstly, Australia faces an uncomfortable situation in the Asia-Pacific, where its strong economic links with China are uncomfortably juxtaposed with equally close security links with the US. Australia sits in the middle of these two giants, a big enough power to make tilting towards either side of some significance. However, even as Australia has strengthened its defense ties with the US, some Australians have argued that that this weakens Australia's own independence of operation. In his essay Power Shift, White asked the question "are we really a middle power today?," to which his answer was doubtful since "no one should forget that our big successes - such as East Timor in 1999 – were only possible because we were backed by American power" and that "it is hard to remember when we last tried to make anything important happen internationally without America's support or at least its acquiescence – and that doesn't count."49 In a similar vein Nicholas Stuart's argument that "Australia is

no longer a Middle Power" was demonstrated by how "we don't want to put up the ante to play in the big league. And that's what inviting US AUSTRALIA'S Marines to Darwin is all about. We've accepted **POWER** we're a minor player."50 Too overt an PARTLY identification with the US as a Great Power protector perhaps undermines Australia's ALSO influence among other Middle Powers and Small CHALLENGE, THROUGH Powers?

Meanwhile, secondly, Australia's own relative quantitative ranking may be difficult to maintain. In Australia, Hugh White raised the EMERGING question of Australia's decline from Middle CENTURY POINTS AWAY Power to Small Power status. As he noted in his widely-discussed essay Power Shift, difference we see between ourselves and New

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Zealand is that we are a middle power and they are a small power;" a comparison of relevance for the future since "the big strategic question for Australia today is whether we will make the effort to remain a middle power in the Asian century or resign ourselves to becoming a small power" like New Zealand.⁵¹ He unhappily asked elsewhere, "are we happy to follow New Zealand's lead and relegate ourselves to the ranks of the small powers?"52

Australia's Middle Power position is partly defined, but also under challenge,

through hard power economic terms. Talk of an emerging Asian century points away from Australia. Hence White's warning that "we cannot take being a middle power for granted as we slide inexorably down Asia's economic league table. We will have to work at it."⁵³ Australia's Middle Power in military terms may also be difficult to maintain, partly because of other powers increasing their own military spending more than Australia, but also because of Australia reducing its own spending. Hence the sense in the wake of spending retrenchment that the Gillard administration "has abandoned any pretence that Australia can ever again be a 'middle power.' The reason is simple: we're not prepared to pay for it ... We've become like New Zealand."⁵⁴ In the light of cutbacks in 2012, over submarines and strike aircraft, Nicolas Stuart argued that "these weapons systems are absolutely critical to Kevin Rudd's vision of Australia as an 'independent middle-power.' That idea's now been jettisoned."⁵⁵

The 2013 Defence White Paper ambiguities over defence spending and force projection led some Australian commentators to argue that "through rhetoric the paper is trying to hold onto an image as a 'middle power'; in reality it is signaling to the region, particularly Asean, that Australia will be no power at all."⁵⁶

Thirdly, structurally and finally, while Australia like Canada has long been considered one of the relatively select Traditional Middle Powers (TMP), their ranks are now being swelled by the so-called Emerging Middle Powers (EMP) or New Middle Powers (NMP).⁵⁷ The Traditional Middle Power grouping was a relatively small club which enabled Australia's presence to be more felt in the international system. The rise of the New Middle Powers means a watering down of Australia's previous Middle Power impact. This is why Balcer's study on *The Golden Age of Middle Powers?* profiled a range of New Middle Power actors that would have growing impact over the next few decades, yet throughout failed to mention Australia.⁵⁸ Paul Kennedy's magisterial study in 1989 on *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers* may be echoed in the rise and fall of Australia as a leading Middle Power at the start of the twenty-first century?

Notes

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- ¹⁷ Evans, "Australia's Middle Power Diplomacy."
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