

A Critical Review of the Concept of Middle Power

Written by Dong-min Shin

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DONG-MIN SHIN, DEC 4 2015

Giovanni Botero, a mayor of Milan in the 15th century, defined a “middle power” as an actor with sufficient strength and authority to stand on its own without the need for help from others. Since then, the concept of middle powers has been consistently mentioned in the field of international relations (Wight 1978: 298). The “grading” of state actors first became a subject of diplomatic debates at the peace settlement of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815. It was then that a class of middle powers was formally recognized, among them the states of Germany (Wight 1978: 63).

The concept of middle powers received serious examination in the final stages of World War II (WWII) in relation to Canada and Australia. The two countries tried to find ways of enhancing their influence based on their contributions to the Allies. At the early stages of the establishment of the United Nations (UN), Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King insisted that middle power countries should co-operate with each other, with an eye to securing their influence in international society, suggesting the concept of ‘Middlepowerhood’ in 1944 (Holbraad 1984: 57-67). In Australia, Minister for External Affairs Herbert Evatt discussed the concept of middle powers with a view to secure his country’s national interest in a new world order after WWII (Ungerer 2007: 538-51). Since then, the concept of middle power has become a trademark of the two countries’ foreign policy (Hurst 2007).

In the East Asian context since the late 1990s governments as well as academics in the ROK and Japan have tended to view these countries’ foreign policy and affairs with the middle power concept in mind, and this trend has become stronger in recent years (Shin 2012; Soeya 2009).

Theoretical Trends in Approaches to Middle Powers

Normally, established IR theories such as neo-realism assume a dichotomy in terms of classifying states, such as great powers and others (Waltz 1979 : 131). From this dichotomous view of types of states, middle powers and weak states are qualitatively the same: they are sub-structural units which are considered as a mere object shaped by power politics among great powers.

However, international politics has witnessed a different reality. Some states change the behavior of great powers, but others even fail to defend their own position. Accordingly, from the perspective of this article, the simple dichotomy, states who have a structural level of influence versus states who do not, leads to an oversimplified explanation of international politics. In this respect, the concept of middle power, as a category distinct from great power and weak state, can be a perspective to examine international relations beyond the limitation of the dichotomy. Specifically, middle power discourses are based on second-image analysis. By “bringing the state back in” (Hobson 2000: 45), middle power theory naturally allows more space for agency. In this context, it is possible to say that middle power discourses can broaden the areas which IR theory covers by providing a frame to read and analyze the foreign affairs of a group of countries such as middle powers in a subjective manner.

While there has been little agreement on what constitutes the features of a middle power within the field of IR theory, the largely accepted theoretical approaches to the subject are classified into three perspectives: functional, behavioral and hierarchical (Chapnick 1999: 73-82). The functional perspective argues that a country able to influence certain areas and functions in international affairs is considered a middle power. For example, in 1942, Canadian diplomat Hume Wrong emphasized that international society should respect Canada’s role as a middle

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power in three functional criteria: extent of involvement, interest, and ability (Foreign Affairs 2013). The behavioral perspective holds the view that a country is a middle power if it plays certain roles considered as those of a middle power or if it identifies itself as such. Cooper and his colleagues (1993: 19) proposed that pursuing multilateral solutions to international problems, preferring compromise positions in international disputes and embracing notions of good international citizenship constitute the typical behavior of a middle power.

The third approach is the hierarchical perspective. This approach ranks and categorizes states by applying standards relating to their capabilities. Countries with medium-range capabilities are grouped as middle powers, and great powers and weak powers can be categorized in the same manner. Kim (2009: 19) noted that the hierarchical perspective tends to use statistical indices for categorizing countries such as size of territory, GDP, the volume of trade and foreign currency reserves, population, and number of soldiers.

The Theoretical Limitations of Existing Perspectives

However, the existing perspectives, functional, behavioral and hierarchical, have several theoretical weaknesses. First, the existing perspectives cover limited aspects and issues of international relations. These perspectives have been elaborated in the liberal-leaning political contexts of western countries, which postulate that the chances of building cooperation among states are high and, accordingly, seek to find the roles of middle powers in this context. For example, the typical behaviors of middle powers identified by the behavioral perspective are catalyst (triggering diplomatic initiatives), facilitator (forming collaborative activities) and manager (building institutions; Cooper et al 1993: 24-5). In other words, “realist” issues such as survival, security and conflict are not considered as decisive factors in defining the concept of middle power by the functionalistic and behavioral perspectives.

Second, although functional, behavioral and hierarchical perspectives approach the notion of middle power in different ways, they all postulate that the main determinants of such power are individual state-level factors: a country’s performance in certain functional areas, its behavior and capabilities calculated in a quantitative way. In other words, the established middle power perspectives presuppose that individual-level features of a country are the first judge of whether or not it meets the criteria of a middle power.

However, it is questionable whether defining middle powers without considering interaction with other political entities is appropriate. This is because the concept of “power”, which is the sole criterion determining where countries fit on the great, middle and weak spectrum, is a relational notion, particularly from the perspective of classical realism. Hans Morgenthau (1965: 30) defined power as “anything that establishes and maintains the control of man over man”. As power is a phenomenon with respect to “man over man”, without the existence of other actors and interactions with them, the concept cannot be established. In this respect, this article argues that if this dimension of the nature of power is not considered, the features of middle powers cannot be well reflected and accordingly differentiated from others.

An Alternative Theoretical Perspective: Classical Realism

As mentioned above, the concept of middle power serves as a useful tool for examining IR phenomena, although the existing theoretical trends in middle power approaches are limited in their explanatory capacity. Accordingly, this article argues that an alternative theoretical perspective for studying the concept of middle power is needed. This article proposes a theoretical alternative originating from classical realism, the school represented by Morgenthau, Carr et al. The reasons are as follows.

First, the theoretical viewpoint of classical realism fits well into the assumptions which the concept of middle power presupposes. As partly mentioned above, the discussions focusing on the independent realm of middle powers naturally assume: 1) more space for agency in terms of level of analysis 2) contrary to the monolithic nature of the state which neo-realism assumes, a different nature and performance of each state-level agent (a middle power is different from a great power and a weak state). According to Hobson (2000: 17), classical realism argues that all states have sufficient levels of international agential power to shape the inter-state system. For example, Morgenthau focused on the “intelligence” of a state, the capability of a country to identify a rival state’s foreign policies as

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“imperial”, “status quo”, “prestige” driven and to counter these different types of foreign policy in a proper manner with “containment” or “appeasement”. Therefore, classical realism assumes the capability and performance of each state can be differentiated (Hobson 2000: 48; Morgenthau 1965: 6, 70).

Second, classical realism brings security affairs into the center of the investigation of the nature of middle power. Given the fact that the existing middle power literatures leans towards liberalism, middle power discussions based on classical realism expand the boundaries which the concept covers. In other words, the concept of middle power can be applied to the analysis of countries whose foreign policies are centered on security affairs.

Third, while maintaining the centrality of security issues, classical realism can be compatible with the existing middle power literature. Classical realism argues that along with material strength, immaterial aspects also constitute sources of power. Morgenthau (1965: 9) stated that power reaches from physical violence to the most subtle psychological ties by which one mind controls another. For Morgenthau (1965: 186), the most important material aspect of power are armed forces, but even more significant is a nation’s character, morale and quality of governance. In this way, it is possible to say that classical realism does not exclude the roles of middle power in liberal-leaning theories by taking into account sources of power on a broad spectrum. Lee Geun (et al 2001: 181) added that classical realism has something in common with constructivist theory as both consider the ideational factors such as norms, equivalence and identity.

Based on classical realism, this article proposes a tentative working definition of middle power as follows:

A middle power is a state actor which has limited influence on deciding the distribution of power in a given regional system, but is capable of deploying a variety of sources of power to change the position of great powers and defend its own position on matters related to national or regional security that directly affect it (Shin 2012).

Middle power as a relational concept exists on the continuum of other state groups such as weak state and great power. Accordingly, to compare middle powers with other types of states helps to make distinctive the nature of middle powers. Elements of the working definition are:

A middle power’s “*limited influence on deciding the distribution of power in a given regional system*”: How is a middle power different from a great power? Discussing various ways of defining a great power, Wight argued that the most satisfactory definition is that great powers are powers with general interests as wide as the states-system itself (Wight 1978 : 50). Putting Wight’s definition of “great power” in Walt’s terms (1979: 97), outcomes in the international system are determined by relations among great powers as a group of countries having enough resources to decide the distribution of power of a regional or international political system. In this respect, it is natural to view states which are not great powers, such as middle powers, as having limitations in injecting their power into regional and global scales.

A middle power can “*change the position of great powers and defend its own position on matters related to national or regional security that directly affect it*”: how is a middle power different from a weak state? As mentioned above, in reality, some states change behaviors of great powers but others even fail to defend their own position. This fact proves that applying the simple dichotomy, states who have structural level of influence and states who do not, to reality has limitations. The working definition argues that this limitation offers a watershed, separating a middle power from a weak state.

Conclusion

This article began with a short history and an overview of theoretical trends in middle power discussions in the field of IR, pointing out that the existing trends of middle power study are limited in their explanatory capacity due to a tendency towards liberalist criteria and a lack of considerations of interactions with other political entities. As a way to overcome this limitation, this article focused on the theoretical relevance of classical realism. Approaches to middle powers based on classical realism can help to broaden the areas which the concept of middle power covers by

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bringing security affairs into the center of investigation.

(This article is largely based on the author's PhD thesis and published article.)

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