

Student Feature - Middle Powers in International Relations

Written by Allan Patience

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2017/05/08/student-feature-middle-powers-in-international-relations/>

ALLAN PATIENCE, MAY 8 2017

Realism's theoretical dominance in International Relations (IR) – especially its focus on the power of superpowers and its state-centric view of international society – has been challenged by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the global transformations characterising the post-Cold War era. One of those transformations is the way in which “states neither great nor small” are gaining increased recognition amid the disruptive multi-polarity of the current global disorder. Scholars such as Martin Wight and Carsten Holbraad, whose earlier writings about middle powers were overlooked in mainstream IR, are now acknowledged for their scholarly prescience. Bringing middle powers back into mainstream IR theorising is obviously overdue. There are two problems in the theorising of middle powers in contemporary IR scholarship that obscure their positioning and potential in post-Cold War international politics: (1) its intellectual history has been neglected; (2) “middle power” itself is a vague concept.

The neglected intellectual history of middle powers

The ranking of states hierarchically (big, small, middle sized) is by no means a modern (or even post-modern) invention. In ancient China and classical Greece the organisation of political communities and their status relative to each other was of great interest to thinkers as diverse as the Chinese sage Mencius (?372-289 BCE or ?385-303 BCE), and the Athenian philosopher Socrates (469-399 BCE).

Mencius ranked the various fiefdoms within the Middle Kingdom into three categories: big, middle-sized and small. Amidst an era of attenuated conflict between competing warlords within the Middle Kingdom, Mencius believed that middle-sized fiefdoms would have the moral authority to initiate what he called “punitive expeditions” to restrain tyrannical rulers and initiate what today would perhaps be seen as humanitarian interventions, to halt human rights abuses and mass atrocities.

The polis system of classical Greece also acknowledged a hierarchy of big “magnates” (Sparta, Athens, Thebes and Persia), middle-sized city-states (Corinth, Argos, Corcyra, Thessaly and Syracuse), and small, weak city-states (Ionia, Sicily). While status was measured in part by military and economic might, the cultural superiority of Athens over Sparta in areas such as philosophy, architecture, and governance was widely acknowledged. As in ancient China, the middle-sized city-states in classical Greece were seen having a vital role in mediating between the big magnates and assisting the smaller city-states. See [here](#).

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Meanwhile in Europe in the fourteenth century, Bartolus de Saxaferrato (1313-1357) categorized states according to their size: (i) city-states (which he called democracies); (ii) countries (governed by “aristocracies”); and (iii) empires that would require the unifying power of a monarch. He approved of countries governed by aristocracies because he believed they were capable of exercising a ‘chivalrous’ or moderating influence in international affairs. In the sixteenth century Botero (1544-1617) divided his world into three grades of states: *grandissime* (empires), *mezano* (middle powers) and *piccioli* (small powers). Like Mencius and Bartolus he was a firm believer in moral authority possessed by “middle-sized states.” In the eighteenth century L’Abbé de Mably (1709-1785) proposed a tripartite hierarchy of world powers (*puissances*): powers of the first-order (or great or dominant powers), powers of the second-order (or middle powers; and powers of the third-order or smaller powers). He believed that the more ambitious of the second-order powers would be eager to curry favour with first-order powers: “Their moderation makes them trustworthy, and their love of justice often makes them arbiters – or peacemakers – between the first-order powers.”

What is a middle power?

Within the relevant IR literature there is little agreement among scholars about the concept of “middle power.” Nor is there a consensus about which states can be accurately identified as middle powers. While Canada and Australia are often nominated as being typical middle powers (most frequently by scholars within those countries), others crop up with increasing frequency. For example, do some (or all) of the BRIC states (Brazil, Russia, India and China) exhibit features that point to middle power status? Are some of the growing Asian economies (South Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia) likely to be the basis for those states achieving middle power status in the near

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future? Can Japan be described as a middle power? As Britain exits from the European Union, is it likely to be categorised as a middle power, or did its membership of the EU confer on it middle power status?

A survey of the literature – diversely scattered and unsystematic though it is – suggests that we can usefully identify three kinds of middle powers: (a) Dependent middle powers; (b) Regional middle powers; and (c) Middle powers as global citizens.

(a) Dependent middle powers

These are states that are treated warily by partners and contenders alike because of their alliances with great powers. Without a great power ally a dependent middle power would normally have little or no influence in regional and global affairs. Australia is a proto-type of a dependent middle power because of its close alliance with the United States (defined by the so-called ANZUS treaty – originally inclusive of Australia, New Zealand and the United States, although New Zealand is no longer a treaty member). The treaty was officially signed in 1952. Its specific purpose was to reassure the Australians and New Zealanders still fearful of a remilitarized Japan, that the United States would come to their aid should Japan threaten their security again. Subsequently the treaty was interpreted more broadly as a guarantee of American protection throughout the Cold War and also against real and imagined threats from an expansionist China.

Dependent middle powers will generally be expected to align their policies with their great power ally's foreign, international trade, and security policies. For example, Australia has felt obliged to participate in all of America's wars since (and including) the Pacific War (World War II in the Asia Pacific). So aspects of the sovereignty of dependent middle powers will necessarily be compromised because of demands on the dependent middle power by its great power ally. For Australia, this means its procurement of defence technologies is influenced by the compatibility of those technologies with US defence technologies. Moreover, the USA maintains high-level secret surveillance bases on Australian territory over whose activities (mostly intelligence gathering and communications with American air and drone power in Asia) Australia has little (and sometimes no) control.

(b) Regional middle powers

These are members of regional organisations like the European Union (EU). Most of the member states of the EU lack substantial influence outside the Union (a reality that may come home to roost for the British as Brexit gathers speed). However, as members of an integrated grouping of states, in which all the member states surrender degrees of their sovereignty in order to cooperate on a wide range of measures, they attain a collective influence and status in regional and global affairs – i.e., they become regional middle powers.

For example, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) contains small states that on their own lack influence or power, either in Southeast Asia itself, in the larger East Asian region, or more widely in global affairs. This is especially the case for Brunei, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia that on their own are barely noticed in the region or on the world stage, but within the ASEAN collective they acquire enhanced recognition, even respect. Myanmar (Burma) has become less of a pariah state since it joined ASEAN.

(c) Middle powers as global citizens

There are some states that do not pose no real military threat to neighbouring states or regionally, yet they have the respect of, and are able to influence, states in their region and globally. They provide positive leadership in the United Nations and other multilateral organisations on issues such as human rights, climate change, and nuclear non-proliferation. They are internationally respected for the ethical stances and leadership they provide in regional and international matters. This is reinforced by what is widely viewed as the integrity of these states' domestic politics or "good governance" (e.g., high living standards, democratic governance, excellent public education and health services, minimal socio-economic inequality). Some Scandinavian states clearly exemplify the concept of a middle

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powers as global citizens. For example, Norway whose leadership on human rights, its role in encouraging democratic political change in Myanmar, and its commitment to nuclear non-proliferation mark it out as an influential global citizen – the most historically grounded version of a middle power.

Middle power theorising can draw on a long and important intellectual history, emphasising the potential for states desiring middle power recognition to become good global citizens in a globalizing world. And clarifying the middle power concept will provide a clearer picture of the authenticity (or otherwise) of the real identities of states claiming (or arrogating) middle power status for themselves, in their regions and in the world.

About the author:

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