Is Australia a middle power? A systemic impact approach

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This article examines whether Australia is a middle power. It identifies the three most popular approaches to defining a middle power: by a country's position, behaviour and identity. The article tests each definition against Australia, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of each. Highlighting an earlier systemic approach to defining states, an alternative 'systemic impact' definition for middle powers is proposed. This approach, it is argued, provides a more comprehensive manner for identifying whether a country like Australia is a middle power, along with the implications for international security.

Is Australia a middle power? This seems a simple question, given the extensive scholarship identifying Australia as a middle power, along with the historical claims of policy makers going back to the 1940s. In recent years, there has been a range of studies which describe Australia as a middle power (Beeson 2011; Cotton and Ravenhill 2012; Gilley 2011; Manicom and O'Neil 2012; Tow and Rigby 2011), as do policy makers, especially the former prime minister, Kevin Rudd (2008, 2012), and the former Minister for Foreign Affairs, Bob Carr (2012). Upon what are these judgements based? And what does it mean for Australia to be a middle power? This article identifies the three main approaches used to define middle powers and applies them to Australia. It examines what each approach implies about middle powers and what predictive or analytical tools each definition offers for improving our understanding of Australia, if we determine it is a middle power. On this count, the three analysed definitions are consistent in identifying Australia as a middle power, yet there is a highly contentious debate within the literature over which of these approaches is most appropriate.

All three of the popular approaches to defining middle powers are controversial. The extent of the debate has led some scholars to question the utility of the term 'middle power' (Frühling 2007, 149; Stairs 1998, 275) or wonder whether it should be left in the analytical dustbin (Ravenhill 1998, 310). The debate over defining middle powers is currently considered to be at an 'impasse

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… mired, and without a clear path forward' (D. Cooper 2011, 323). In response, this article highlights an earlier tradition and proposes a systemic impact approach which focuses on the capacity of these states to affect the international system. The new definition is again tested against Australia to examine the advantages and drawbacks of the proposed approach. Finally, the article discusses the implications for future research.

In his classic text *Politics among Nations*, Hans Morgenthau (1961, 441) noted that: 'the distinction between great and small powers … is of course one of the elemental experiences of international politics'. From this observation springs the recognition that there are some 'states weaker than the great powers in the system but significantly stronger than the minor powers and small states' (Holbraad 1984, 4). These states are typically identified as middle powers. The first references to this middle class of states have been traced back at least 500 years to the works of Thomas Aquinas, Giovanni Botero and Hugo Grotius (Ravenhill 1998, 309; Wight 1995, 298). Yet, moving beyond determining what middle powers are not (neither big nor small), to identify what they are, has proven difficult. Some of the key definitions of the concept lack explanatory power, or simply dissolve into tautology. Therefore, despite the long history of the term, Ping's (2005, 3) claim that 'no commonly accepted definition or method of definition of middle powers exists' still holds true.

Arguments over definitions might be a never-ending staple of academic life, one often seen as far removed from the realities faced by policy makers, but there is a particular importance when it comes to clearly understanding the term 'middle power'. First, many policy makers in both developed and developing countries use the term in their public rhetoric, seeing political resonance and geopolitical significance in it. This is especially true in Australia, where the term 'middle power' is seen as 'one of the most enduring themes in Australian foreign policy discourse for over sixty years' (Ungerer 2007, 551). Second, the term 'middle power' represents an important caution to studies of international relations which are too tightly focused on great power politics. Because of realism's 'indeterminacy about the behaviour of secondary or small states' (Goh 2007, 116), many scholars have elected to sideline smaller states in their analysis. Or they have been turned off by the overblown claims of middle power influence and idealism by policy makers and scholars, especially those suggesting that these states possess a form of 'moral superiority' (Wood 1988, 20), which is an 'empirically discreditable' argument (D. Cooper 2011, 321). This demonstrates the significance of the question 'Is Australia a middle power?' In order to answer it, the article will now test the three main approaches which define middle powers. These are by their *position*, their *behaviour* and their *identity*.

The position approach

Position definitions of middle powers focus on quantifiable factors, such as gross domestic product (GDP), population, military size and defence spending,

to develop an 'objective' ranking of state size. One advantage of this approach is that the data for applying this definition to Australia is widely available, though this is not true for all countries.[1] Quantitative approaches are also well suited to dealing with an essentially quantitative concept such as the 'middle' of a set, although, as Holbraad (1984, 4) makes clear, the term 'middle' in middle powers is used in a deliberate, restricted manner, capturing those states which are neither in the vast majority of small states nor in the small minority of large states. In the modern system, with 193 sovereign states recognised by the United Nations (2013), middle powers are expected to be found within the first 20 states when ranked on significant quantitative measures, with no significance attended to the states which end up at the median point, ranked at 80–90 on a listing of GDP, military strength or population.

Applying this approach to Australia, Thomson (2005, 10) examined Australia's economy, population, military size and proportion of GDP spent on defence to conclude that: 'from a military perspective we're [Australia is] a middle power behaving like a middle power'. Only when it comes to population (and, relatedly, the number of troops in its Defence Force) is Australia substantially outside of the field (Thomson 2005, 4). On all the major criteria, Thomson's judgement holds up over time. Australia has moved up to the twelfth largest economy in the world (Swan 2012) and had the thirteenth highest global military spending in 2011 (SIPRI 2011),[2] which was the fifth largest amongst Asian countries (IISS 2012). Australian scholars have generally preferred the position definition, as it suits their often 'intensive focus on the particularities of Australia's international position—size, isolation, wealth, population' (Wesley 2009, 326).

While a position indicator of state power is relatively easy to develop, it is intellectually unsatisfying as a definition. The position approach has 'proved to be of almost no value in predicting or explaining the behaviour of those states classed as middle powers' (Ravenhill 1998, 323). Countries are compared, but what the similarities or differences mean is left untouched. This effectively leaves the term useless, given that the inference that power is 'the fundamental determinant' of a state's behaviour is central to the concept of middle powers (Stairs 1998, 270). The position approach can also cause scholars to end up 'thinking in terms of averages, rather than the country's strategic situation', when countries have multiple 'strategic "personalities"' that shape their defence and foreign policy needs (Frühling 2007, 150). Australia's military spending accounts for 9.41 percent of all military spending in all of Asia, but 92.45 percent of military spending in its immediate neighbourhood of the South Pacific (IISS 2012). A position definition cannot tell us what this means. It swaps what we can count for what we want to know. As Fey (quoted in Baldwin 2002, 178) has argued: 'the escape through redefining power to be a property, though seductive, warps the very essence of what interests us'. While position approaches offer useful analytical certainty, giving scholars a strong sense of what constitutes 'the middle', they depend on a flawed conception of

power. This suggests that an alternative approach to defining middle powers must begin with an alternative conception of power.

One variation of the position approach that expands the concept is to include a state's geography as part of the assessment of its power. There are three types of geographic indicators used to claim middle power status. First, some use geographic size as an indicator of power. Alexander Downer (2003), Australia's longest-serving foreign minister (1996–2007), has argued that Australia's sheer landmass (the sixth largest) entitles it to status as a 'considerable power', his equivalent term for middle power. Second, the Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz suggested that some states might qualify as middle powers if they held a key geographic position which separated two great power states and could contribute to the defence of either power (Holbraad 1984, 22–23). As an island nation, Australia does not physically 'separate' any great power countries, though it maintains a defence alliance with at least one great power—the USA— suggesting that others see value in its military contribution. Finally, and most significantly for Australia, there has been recognition of the relative nature of power and the importance of proximity for power projection. There are some states which are 'powerful within their geographic regions' (Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal 1993, 17–18) but not able to express similar power globally. Regional power is one of the 'longest-established and most widely recognised middle power role[s] in the international system' (Wood 1988, 19–20), but it is not an absolute guide, depending on the location and size of nearby countries (Cox and Sinclair 1996, 245; Daniel, Southall, and Lutchman 2005, 350). Australia certainly has differing regional and global influence, though somewhat paradoxically (much like Canada) has tended to make its pitch for middle power status based on global rather than regional reach, especially in the early post-war years (Watt 1967, 104). Focusing on a specific regional role helps avoid the averages problem, but does not bring scholars significantly closer to understanding what being a middle power means for Australia. Position indicators are a useful step towards indicating the 'middle' in middle power, but can only ever be a necessary and not sufficient definition of middle powers.

The behavioural approach

In response to the many criticisms of the position definition, a group of predominantly Canadian and Australian scholars in the late 1980s and early 1990s developed an alternative definition that focused on how middle powers act. This 'behavioural' definition soon became popular for identifying and understanding middle power states (Flemes 2007, 8). The landmark study of the behavioural approach is by Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal (1993, 19), who identified middle powers by 'their tendency to pursue multilateral solutions to international problems, their tendency to embrace compromise positions in international disputes and their tendency to embrace notions of "good international citizenship" to guide their diplomacy'. Two countries embodied

their understanding of middle power behaviour, as well as constituting their case studies for demonstrating this approach: Canada and Australia. The new behavioural approach was timely for demonstrating the growing engagement of small to mid-sized countries in multilateral organisations during the optimistic post-cold war period (Ruggie 1994, 554). The behavioural approach also provided useful insight into how Australia maximised and wielded its power in multilateral forums, particularly coalition-building to support trade liberalisation (Higgott and Cooper 1990), niche diplomacy for human rights and environmental goals (A. Cooper 1997, 135–137), and leadership on nonproliferation (Hanson and Ungerer 2001).

Applying the behavioural definition to Australia, we unsurprisingly find that Australia is a middle power. However, the claim is less strong today than it was in the early 1990s. Australia's activism in multilateral forums dropped off significantly during the Howard government years (1996–2007), though they were far from inactive or without diplomatic innovation (see D. Cooper 2011, 323; Wesley 2007, 28). The election of Kevin Rudd's government in 2007 saw a return to multilateral activism, though it failed to live up to expectations, in part from too many poorly planned or sustained efforts (Carr and Roberts 2010, 245). As was noted by scholars, especially Ravenhill (1998, 315), the behavioural definition's focus on multilateralism suggests a 'cyclical' nature to middle power status, in turn suggesting that the label is less about power than identity. Though useful in spurring a range of studies of the engagement of middle power countries with multilateral institutions, the behavioural definition has also been criticised from a number of angles.

For some scholars, the behavioural definition is tautological, identifying middle power states as those states which act like middle powers (Ungerer 2008, 265). According to these critics, Australia and Canada were not tested against a distinct standard of middle powers, but seemingly established as the standard, which they then, unsurprisingly, met. In fairness to Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal (1993), the behavioural definition can be viewed as an effort to produce a Weberian ideal type of middle power, though one tied closely to their case studies. This has struck some scholars as exclusionary and tied to a particular liberal, internationalist ideology. In an important article from South Africa, Jordaan (2003, 172) argued that there were two types of middle powers— 'traditional' and 'emerging'—echoing a growing range of scholarship which highlighted the rise of new middle powers, such as India, Brazil, Malaysia and South Africa (Nossal and Stubbs 1997, 147; Van Der Westhuizen 1998, 451). This group of emerging middle powers was seen to have different attitudes towards democracy, different roles in the global economy and a preferred focus on regionalism, rather than the global, multilateral focus of Western middle powers. The introduction of the qualifier 'emerging' has been used for some profitable research on non-Western middle power states as a 'neglected component of the changing economic balance of power' (Scott, Hau, and Hulme 2010, 24). It also helps demonstrate that the supposed middle power

idealism of Australia and Canada under the behavioural definition could also be viewed as a commitment to the status quo by these countries (Jordaan 2003, 166–167). Yet, there is also a fundamental problem with this step, as the addition of any qualifier to a key term ultimately weakens the meaning and importance of the original term. If middle power status means different things for countries of different cultural or economic perspectives, then the term would be of little merit. While there is a need to give greater scope to non-Western middle power states, the move to include additional qualifiers so as to sustain the behavioural definition of middle powers can be taken as clear evidence of the limitations of the behavioural approach.

On another front, scholars have criticised the behavioural definition for succumbing to a strand of normative idealism which has plagued the middle power literature. From the first identifications of the term 'middle power', scholars, and especially policy makers within these states, have championed these states as having 'constructive attributes … [and] sometimes even a measure of moral superiority' (Wood 1988, 20). Perhaps for this reason, Australian policy makers in the early 1990s embraced the behavioural approach (Evans and Grant 1995, 347), coining terms to describe their diplomatic efforts that soon found their way into the scholarly literature—especially 'good international citizenship'. While Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal (1993, 18) attack normative claims as possessing 'a certain smugness … [and] often difficult to substantiate', they too argue that: 'middle power behaviour … is defined as an approach to diplomacy geared to mitigating conflict and building consensus and cooperation … this kind of activity can be an important antidote to the rigidity of the international system in the face of major power inertia' (Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal 1993, 173–174).

Despite these scholars' great care, behavioural approaches tend to lead back to normative endorsements. That middle powers could help encourage cooperation and prevent conflict is an unobjectionable wish, but one that has been championed too often and with too little historical evidence to justify it (Holbraad 1984, 205). Because of this tendency for behavioural approaches to either verge into normative idealism or be used by others as the basis for a normative assessment of middle powers, some have rejected the argument that there is a meaningful difference between normative and behavioural approaches, labelling both as part of a 'revisionist' approach (D. Cooper 2011, 321). While the work of Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal (1993) was a significant advance in scholarship at the time, the behavioural approach, like the position-based definition before it, offers an insightful but again not sufficient understanding of middle powers.

The identity approach

While far less popular than the position or behavioural approaches, some scholars have suggested that middle power status is best understood as a

deliberately constructed 'political category', developed by policy makers (Hynek 2007, 140), which is 'rich (by design) with positive associations' (Rutherford, Brem, and Matthew 2003, 10). This approach takes seriously the claims of policy makers when they assert middle power status for their country (Beeson 2011, 564). Claiming middle power status has a long tradition in Australia, with many of its ministers for foreign affairs—including Herbert 'Doc' Evatt (1941–9), Sir Garfield Barwick (1961–4), Gareth Evans (1988–96), Alexander Downer (1996–2007), Stephen Smith (2007–10), Kevin Rudd (2010–12) and Bob Carr (2012–2013)—using the concept of middle power in their descriptions of Australia and its foreign policy. While the identity approach has been associated with constructivism, an early version can be found in the work of Robert Keohane (1969, 295), who argued that: 'instead of focusing on perceptions of whether security can be maintained primarily with one's own resources we should focus on the systemic role that states' leaders see their countries playing'. This approach not only offers an easy way of identification, but also tells us about the foreign policy approach that is likely to be pursued, giving some predictive power to the approach. As the scholars Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink (2001, 399) noted: 'knowing about a state's perception of its identity (both type and role) should help us to understand how the state will act'. Using the identity approach, scholars also have a reliable means to track over time (at least since the term gained common usage) which countries are middle powers. Turning to Australia, Reus-Smit (1995, 24–25) has argued that the foreign policy behaviour of the Hawke and Keating govern-ments is best understood in light of the identity they had for the nation. Evidence for the link between the adoption of a middle power identity and state behaviour also appears in the 'cyclical' nature of Australian and Canadian foreign policy in the late twentieth century (Ravenhill 1998, 317–318). Yet, this regular change also demonstrates the instability of an identity-based definition of middle powers. When the Australian or Canadian government stopped using the label 'middle power', did these countries stop being middle powers? To put it another way, did their shift in language result in any meaningful shift in their nation's power? An identity approach could leave scholars adding and removing countries from the middle power status with every election. It also risks falling into the normative trap of the behavioural approach, with 'middle power' status awarded to typically left/liberal governments and denied to right/conservative governments, which have tended to be less endeared with the term. Finally, this approach has no good way of guarding the boundaries of the term. If the claims of policy makers are the basis, then minnows in the international arena (such as the micro-nations of the South Pacific) could conceivably claim middle power status on a par with Canada. Equally, there are regular examples of large countries finding refuge in claiming middle power status, with both Japan and India sometimes suiting the term (Efstathopoulos 2011; Soeya 2012). Identity is important in determining how certain countries act, but a sustainable

definition of middle powers requires a more stable ground than self-identification by policy makers can provide.

Applying the three most popular approaches to defining middle powers returns three positive identifications of Australia as a middle power, but widespread disagreement over what this means. The position definition struggles with what regions this applies to, or implications for foreign policy behaviour. The behavioural definition seems to be less a definition than a model built around Australia, while the identity definition seems to suggest that middle power status changes with the government. All three approaches may help us answer the question of whether Australia is a middle power, but not why this term is of significant merit or how to think about the role of middle powers. This suggests that a new definition is needed. One place to start is by revisiting our understanding of power. While the behavioural and identity definitions largely sidestep the question of power, the position definition is founded on an understanding of power as a resource or property. But this is not the only way to think about power.

A systemic impact approach?

Adopting an alternative understanding of power might offer insight into a new way of defining middle powers. Instead of identifying power as a property, Baldwin (2002, 178) highlights a tradition which understands power as a relationship where 'the behaviour of actor A at least partially causes a change in the behaviour of actor B'. Power is therefore an 'actual or potential relationship between two or more actors (persons, states, groups etc.) rather than a property of any one of them' (ibid.). In order to undertake a relational power analysis, instead of examining and counting the various resources of an actor, power within a given relationship of actors is examined by reference to 'its scope (the objectives of an attempt to gain influence; influence over which issue), its domain (the target of the influence attempt), its weight (the quantity of resources), and its cost (opportunity costs of forgoing a relation)' (Guzzini 1993, 453–454). The relational approach to power is particularly suited to an analysis of the distribution of power (and so concepts such as 'middle power') because of its focus on power 'within specified issue-areas and … specified regions' (Baldwin 2002, 188). This better recognises the difficulty that states face in transferring their power from one issue-area to another, or from one resource base to another, in order to sustain the different 'strategic personalities' (Frühling 2007, 150) they must credibly perform. A relational approach to power can help explain why great power states might not always triumph over their military opponents (such as the USA in Vietnam or Afghanistan), and why smaller powers, within particular circumstances, are able to have substantive impact. Finally, a contextually driven understanding of power is much more suitable for understanding middle powers, given the role is one that regularly changes, depending on how the international system is organised. As Cox

([1989](#), 825) argued: 'the middle-power role is not a fixed universal but something that has to be rethought continually in the context of the changing state of the international system'. While there is insufficient space to trace the full implications of this argument here—see Holbraad ([1984](#)) for the most detailed attempt to explore this idea—Cox's claim is a reminder that any assessment of middle power status must be heavily driven by the context, as a relational understanding of power encourages. By moving to a different understanding of power, an alternative approach to defining middle powers becomes viable. This is a definition which fits with some of the earliest research on the concept, but which is more often found in the work of scholars who were not explicitly focused on middle powers, but rather seeking a hierarchy and understanding of state power in the international system. It is an approach best understood as a 'systemic impact' definition.

Writing in 1589, Giovanni Botero made an important early contribution to the study of middle powers. Rather than simply counting the capacity that small, middle or large powers possessed, Botero examined what they could achieve with it, both defending themselves as well as affecting the wider political order (Holbraad [1984](#), 12–13). Botero's approach is echoed in the writings of Robert Keohane ([1969](#), 296), who sought to focus on the impact of states on the international system. Keohane proposed a four-level hierarchy, defining a middle power as 'a state whose leaders consider that it cannot act alone effectively but may be able to have a systemic impact in a small group or through an international institution' (ibid.). This is slightly different from the behavioural approach, as it focuses on the effect of these states' cooperative behaviour, rather than their tendency towards cooperative behaviour. As noted above, Keohane also included state identity in his assessments of power, but again focusing on capacity and outcome, rather than labels. He also included 'the caveat that in all cases statesmen's attitudes must have considerable basis in reality' (ibid).

Keohane's approach shifts the emphasis from understanding middle powers through the possession, tendency or claims to power, and instead defines them by the effects of their power, as measured through their 'systemic impact'. Through this definition, scholars direct their considerations towards what middle power states might seek to do or be able to do—that is, a systemic approach more directly captures the significance of a state's 'power' and develops this understanding via comparison with other states, providing a clearer sense of what a 'middle power' state does in the international system. Not all state power, however, is evidenced through action, as sometimes the lack of action is also evidence of capability or effect on other states' behaviour. While Keohane, like the behavioural approach, focuses on the more common example of *power through action*, many strategic scholars have also highlighted the ways that middle powers demonstrate *power by avoiding action*—namely, in their capacity for self-defence and changing the behaviour of would-be aggressors. Though middle powers might prefer to act within coalitions when it comes to military affairs, this is an area where such states must be capable of

some unilateral strength. A capacity for self-preservation, or at least significantly increasing the costs for any great power aggressor, is also in many ways the most fundamental means by which middle powers impact the international system they find themselves in, through preserving their role within it and decreasing the likelihood of conflict in their immediate region. The capacity for self-defence is therefore a common theme in writings about middle powers. Botero, in the sixteenth century, noted that 'a medium one is that which has force and authority sufficient to maintain itself without the need of the help of another' (Holbraad 1984, 12–13), while much more recently Dibb (1995, 58) has argued that 'one of the defining characteristics of a middle (or medium) power … is that it will seek to have a credible minimum of defence autonomy or self-reliance'. In a similar vein, White (2009) claims that a middle power is 'a state that can shape how the international system works to protect its interests, even in the face of competing interests of a major power'. White's formulation is slightly more expansive, covering core interests rather than just self-defence, but it is also a more useful way of thinking about modern uses of military power. In short, where Thucydides famously said that the strong do what they want and the weak suffer what they must, middle powers seem to be those states with the capacity to avoid suffering at the hands of the strong, though without necessarily being capable of coercing others.

A systemic impact approach that takes these considerations into account provides a new way to define middle powers. Rather than seeking to define these states through their average position on a list, or their multilateral behaviour or rhetoric, a systemic impact approach defines middle powers through their ability to alter or affect specific elements of the international system in which they find themselves. This approach defines middle powers through the outcome, rather than the intention, of their actions. This includes both their military capacity for self-defence, as well as their diplomatic capacity for effecting specific international changes. This approach, as a definition, offers a predictive power which the position definition is unable to (Ravenhill 1998, 19), while avoiding falling into the trap of tautology and normative idealism, as the behavioural approach risks (Ungerer 2008, 265). It also gives a firmer ground for judgement than simply accepting the words of policy makers, as the identity approach struggles with. Building on Keohane's work, an updated systemic impact approach could thus define middle powers as:

> states that can protect their core interests and initiate or lead a change in a specific aspect of the existing international order

This proposed new definition comprises two main elements, which will be demonstrated with reference to Australia. First, these states must have some reasonable capacity to protect their core interests, including through military conflict—not necessarily to be able to defeat a great power, but certainly to raise the costs such as to provide a significant discouragement to attacks on

themselves or their core interests. The Australian government defines these interests in its 2009 White Paper as:

> the defence of Australia against direct armed attack. This includes armed attacks by other states and by non-state actors with the capacity to employ strategic capabilities. This means that we have a fundamental interest in controlling the air and sea approaches to our continent (DOD 2009, 41).

Australia enjoys remote geography, has some of the highest defence spending in its region and possesses a highly professional and well-regarded military. Because of these factors, Australia has long regarded itself as one of the safest countries in the world (Dibb 1986, 1; DOD 2009, 49)—a situation which is not expected to change over the short to medium term. Yet, these judgements were made within the context of an Australian alliance with a great power (the USA). If acting alone, Australia still seems to possess sufficient capacity to challenge or significantly raise the costs for a great power opponent which would challenge Australia's core interests. Australia's defence budget is currently around 30 percent of that of the largest Asian great power, China (US$27 billion versus US$89 billion), and nearly half the size of the Japanese defence budget (US$58 billion). As noted in the above discussion of position definitions, quantitative measures can be misleading, but they provide a baseline for supporting the Australian government's view that 'the enduring reality of our strategic outlook is that Australia will most likely remain, by virtue of our geostrategic location, a secure country over the period to 2030' (DOD 2009, 49).

The second element of the proposed definition identifies middle power states by their ability to alter a specific element of the international order through formalised structures, such as international treaties and institutions, and informal means, such as norms or balances of power. This goes to the heart of the 'systemic impact' of middle powers. Here, as highlighted by the scholarship conducted under the behaviour definition, Australia's record is significant. Over the last 20 years, it has 'carved out a unique role in nuclear policy … a global champion of non-proliferation' (Lantis 2008, 22), as well as reducing the availability of chemical weapons (Findlay 1991; McCormack 1993) and taking a leadership role in the Proliferation Security Initiative (D. Cooper 2011, 328). It also led a change in South-East Asian norms towards irregular migration (A. Carr 2012, 282; Wesley 2007, 198), and made a major contribution in the fields of economics and trade liberalisation (Capling 2001, 145), including helping to create and elevate the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum and the Group of 20. The record has been less successful in recent years, although there does not appear to be a substantial reduction in capacity. Notably, none of these diplomatic efforts substantially challenged the primary Asia-Pacific power, the USA, lending support to Jordaan's (2003, 167) claim—echoing Cox (1989, 826)—that 'middle powers do not challenge or threaten the global status quo'.

Together, the Australian state's ability to credibly provide for its own defence (or at least substantially raise the risks and costs to an aggressor), along with demonstrated diplomatic leadership, suggests a middle power country—not one able to dominate other countries, like great powers, or at the mercy of others, like smaller powers, but with a definable ability to affect the international system, especially around its core interests. In sum, applying the proposed systemic impact definition gives us a finding that Australia is a middle power. While the three alternative approaches—position, behaviour and identity—all came to a similar conclusion, the systemic impact approach includes a much wider range of requirements, and therefore a better understanding of the implications of this finding.

Looking to the long term, the Australian government's claim to middle power status is increasingly under threat, given the lack of recent demonstration of capacity to influence specific elements of the international system. This may be due to external factors, such as the rise of additional powers with regional and global influence, along with the weakening of multilateral structures. It may also be due to internal factors, such as a downturn in entrepreneurial leadership and innovation—for example, under John Howard or Julia Gillard—or perhaps poorly executed leadership initiatives—especially under Kevin Rudd—leading to a lack of public support for initiatives. Second, although it is in no real danger of invasion, the Australian government's defence budget cuts could, over the long term, imperil its ability to provide for its own defence or significantly contribute to a regional conflict. The significant rise of military spending in Asia, which is seen as approaching arms race levels (Till 2012, 11), places additional pressure on Australia to keep up or risk losing middle power status.

Conclusion

While the three most popular definitions of a middle power have produced good research, a systemic impact approach seems more suited for our times. As the international system shifts in polarity, so too must our view of which states are middle powers. The significance of these states will shift with their ability to influence the emerging system. A systemic impact approach links the popular appeal of middle powers to what is important (that is, power to effect change), rather than simply what is measurable or ideologically praiseworthy. It has drawbacks, such as requiring more space to justify (hence why only one country's claim is explored in this article), but also a stronger basis for making middle power claims. Like Keohane's approach, it also fits in well with a developed hierarchy, potentially enabling a revisiting of how we understand and define great powers and small powers in our era. Finally, by helping scholars get over the current definitional 'impasse', a systemic impact definition of middle powers might help enable scholars to move on to focus on the important empirical debates over what roles middle powers are playing and how it is affecting regional and global security in this century.

Notes

1. Some countries are still difficult to report accurate figures from, either due to under-development or deliberate obfuscation of true military spending, especially by authoritarian regimes.
2. Defence budget cuts by the Australian government in 2012 may have reduced this position slightly, though the 2013 National Security Strategy has committed the Australian government to keeping its defence spending in the top 15 globally.

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