The ‘Middle Power’ Approach: Useful Theory, Unpopular Rhetoric

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Introduction

There is no firm consensus on what the ‘middle power’ approach means theoretically or entails empirically. Nonetheless, it is a popular way to frame Canadian foreign policy among academics in international relations (IR). Canadian politicians, however, rarely refer to the country as a ‘middle power’.

This paper sets out to understand this paradox: why has the middle power approach been so prevalent a conceptual tool among Canadian foreign policy theorists, despite its usage not having migrated into the political arena? First, it will be argued that the middle power approach is popular in academia because it is a malleable framework that can be claimed by and defined from multiple theoretical standpoints to explain how and why Canada, a country with relatively small material capabilities (e.g., armed forces, foreign aid budget, etc.), makes foreign policy decisions to participate actively in international areas of ‘general interest’. To evidence the theoretical popularity of the middle power concept I will engage with the traditionalist liberal internationalism of the Pearson years and the more recent ‘national interests’ framework advanced by Cooper, Higgott and Nossal (1993). Second, this paper will contend that domestic pressures surrounding partisanship, economic interests and national identity are some of the reasons why Canadian politicians avoid describing their actions as part of a middle power approach. Furthermore, I will attempt to show that ‘middle power’ is not necessarily a taboo term for all politicians; rather, its use also depends on an individual’s time in office – who preceded them and how they seek to distinguish their leadership.

This argument will be laid out by summarizing the debate over the definition of ‘middle power’, then by engaging with the two theoretical perspectives on middle power, and finally by discussing the domestic pressures that make political references to Canada as a middle power allowable in some cases, while in others, totally taboo.

Defining the ‘Middle Power’ Approach

No one seems to agree on when the middle power approach first emerged or exactly what the term means. One explanation emphasizes objective definition of the concept in terms of locating Canada’s rank of power in the international system. Its proponents contend that the concept dates back to the writings of Thomas Aquinas or Italian Renaissance philosopher Giovanni Botero (Welsh, 2004: 585). The term was then institutionalized in the Canadian context during
the 1930s with the writing of David Mitrany on world government (Chapnick, 1999: 76-77).

Others argue that the term first appeared in 1926 when Germany was admitted to the League of Nations and was then made common after World War II with the organization of the United Nations and the other international financial institutions (Donneur and Alain, 1997: 225). This definition focuses on the importance of classic middle power actions, such as participating in international organizations, and when they were first observed.

On a basic level, it appears that conceptualizing Canada as a middle power, regardless of the theoretical perspective, does have something to do with comparison. IR theorists have constructed the ‘middlepowermanship’ of Canada in opposition to less powerful countries (mostly small developing countries) and larger, more powerful ones like the United States and Britain (Molot, 2007: 63).

But is a hierarchical ranking really that useful? All it shows is that Canada is less powerful than some and more powerful than others. This is a rather shallow definition that begs a more nuanced description. Neufeld approaches middle power as an ‘essentially contested concept’ (1995: 97), whose ambiguity allows the term to be adopted by various theoretical perspectives, resulting in richer, more varied explanations. While Chapnick begins with the most obvious premise, that a middle power ‘is a state which is neither a great power nor a small power’ (1999: 73), Neufeld expands on this, arguing that it means much more as a descriptor for Canada’s rank in the international system. Middle power, in his view, is ‘framed in terms of dominant class interest and in tune with a hegemonic global order’ (1995: 100).

As one can see, the debate over definition is wide-ranging. That said, there are a few elements of middlepowermanship that most scholars in the foreign policy field would agree on to some degree. Ravenhill summarizes it well when he describes the definition of middle power status as encapsulated in five ‘Cs’: capacity, concentration, creativity, coalition-building, and credibility (Ravenhill, 1998: 310).

As already explained, middle powers can be partially defined as those that lie between small and big powers. On most counts this means they have an average (as opposed to low or high) material capacity in terms of armed forces or foreign aid budget but an above average diplomatic capacity to engage in international activities.

Unlike the hegemonic United States, which can keep its fingers in multiple pots, Canada’s middle power status means it concentrates on several key foreign policy issues at a time. In the 1980s this was apartheid in South Africa and continental free trade and in the 1990s issues like the treaty to ban landmines.

In terms of creativity, the middle power approach is characterized by innovative solutions to international dilemmas. This leadership is of the ‘entrepreneurial’ type and implemented through ‘technical diplomacy’ (Cooper, Higgott and Nossal, 1993: 33).

Closely linked are the last two ‘Cs’, coalition-building and credibility, both linked under one aspect of Canada’s identity: its sense of internationalism. This includes participation in multilateral institutions, seeking relationships with like-
minded states, and the belief that acting in the ‘general interest’ can be healthy for national interests. Furthermore, when acting in the general interest middle powers can be more easily trusted because the outcomes of such multilateral activities will rarely benefit one disproportionately more than another (Ravenhill, 1998: 312-13).

Popularity of the Middle Power Approach in Academic Discourse

Having discussed some shared ideas about the meaning of middlepowermanship, this paper now sets out to show why the concept is popular and how it has been used by different theorists to explain Canadian foreign policy. Specifically, we will see how traditional liberal internationalists use it to explain how Canada acts altruistically in the general interest while later theorists use it to explain how foreign policy acts in the national interest.

Liberal internationalism is perhaps most commonly associated with middlepowermanship among the general Canadian public, even if Canadians don’t refer to it as such. A common reference to this foreign policy approach as that of a ‘helpful fixer’. This theory emerged out of the post-war context and remained dominant into the late 1960s, formally retreating with the entrance of Trudeau but arguably remaining in the Canadian identity for many more decades as it filtered into most elementary and secondary school history textbooks, having a hand in the education of generations of young Canadians.

John W. Holmes, a proponent of liberal internationalism during this period, identified two key factors behind the use of the middle power approach: (a) Canada found it could have the most impact on international affairs by working in conjunction with other countries and organizations like the United Nations, the Commonwealth and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization; and (b) following the starvation of the 1930s and the great loss of young Canadians in World War II, a middle power could protect the existence of a world in which Canada could prosper (1984: 10-11). This approach gave Canada and other countries middle power status for several objective reasons, some exhibiting only one characteristic while others multiple: middle powers were those that had contributed (but not led) to the Allied victory in World War II, had played a role as colonial powers or had regional or geostrategic importance (Donneur and Alain, 1997: 226).

The 1950s are often referred to as the ‘golden decade of middle power’ (Holmes, 1984: 10). In addition to scholars like Holmes, Wrong and Reid, it was well-known politicians like Lester Pearson that advanced the internationalist perspective. As Minister of External Affairs (1948-1957) and then Prime Minister (1963-1968) Pearson sought not only to advance Canadian interests through its foreign policy but the interests of the entire world (Hawes, 1984: 3). This desire manifested itself in his actions during the 1956 Suez Crisis when he created a peacekeeping plan that would later serve as the model for future peacekeeping, not just by Canada but by many other countries as well (Donneur and Alain, 1997: 226).
Liberal internationalism was the first cohesive theory of Canadian foreign policy that was based on the middle power approach. Not only did it set a precedent for the evolution of the middle power concept, but in many ways its tenets cannot be isolated from later theories. As Holmes aptly put it, these ‘early successes of Canada as a middle power were attributable to our skill in producing sound ideas for the general rather than just the Canadian interest’ (Holmes, 2007: 17). Later experts, however, would argue that the altruistic tone of liberal internationalism no longer held sufficient analytical vigour and needed to be replaced by a stronger focus on national interests.

The middle power’s focus began to shift in the Trudeau years and was firmly changed by the late 1980s. Canadian national interests, it was argued, not only became the prime focus of foreign policy, but were placed, normatively, as having higher priority than any other international considerations. This showed that power and national interest could not be ignored and the altruism of the ‘golden decade’ was not really the main driver of middle power foreign policy.

In Relocating Middle Powers, Cooper, Higgott and Nossal (1993) analyze this shift away from the liberal internationalist analysis of middle power states in terms of size, capacity and geographical location to a focus on their efforts at diplomacy and the way they pursue their foreign policy objectives. Another important distinction in this more recent approach is their rejection of the traditionalists’ ‘celebratory rather than […] analytical tenor’ (172). They argue that the middle power’s new approach to foreign policy in the 1980s was marked by the use of specialized ‘entrepreneurial and technical diplomacy’ and a pursuit of multilateralism (33).

This view reflected the economic problems faced by Canada in the 1980s, including large federal budgetary deficits and skyrocketing unemployment figures. It was apparent that the public was willing to sacrifice foreign policy initiatives such as protecting human rights and upholding environmental standards, common under liberal internationalism, for those that ensured employment (Ravenhill, 1998: 317).

These national interests were pursued through the use of a bureaucracy skilled at diplomacy—and hence ‘active doers’—as well as adept at knowing when to be effective ‘joiners’, particularly in the case of the Gulf coalition in 1990 (Cooper, Higgott and Nossal, 1993: 117-119). Canada, as well as middle power Australia, made this decision in the interest of maintaining a peaceful world order where the principle of territorial sovereignty is upheld (Cooper, Higgott and Nossal, 1993: 136). It is in these ways, academics argue, that foreign policy is better understood as serving the national, as opposed to the directly international, interest. Interestingly, both the liberal internationalists and this more recent approach have been able to take ‘middle power’ as their framework, showing that while there are a few common elements of middlepowermanship, described in Ravenhill’s five ‘Cs’, the middle power approach can be used to explain different behaviours in Canadian foreign policy.
‘Middle Power’ – A Taboo Term?

Why is it that so many academic experts on Canadian foreign policy readily use the ‘middle power’ framework to analyze the country’s international behaviour yet so few politicians choose this for their rhetoric? It appears that the decision of whether to use the term ‘middle power’ depends largely on domestic pressures such as: (a) partisanship; (b) economic situation; (c) the prime ministerial need to differentiate their tenure and (d) American influence. It is important to keep in mind, however, that there are exceptions to all of these factors. They are merely being offered as possibilities rather than well-established indicators, and indeed some are quickly contradicted by particular cases.

Many argue that open use of the term ‘middle power’ by Canadian politicians was most prominent during the ‘golden decade’ of international activity under the Liberal tenures of Louis St. Laurent and Lester Pearson. ‘The middle powers’, Pearson said, ‘are and will remain the backbone of the collective effort to keep the peace’ (Keating, 2002: 100). This ‘golden’ description could also refer to the economic boom in the same period.

Use of the term started to decline following the 1957 election of Diefenbaker’s Conservative government (Ravenhill, 1998: 320). The reference then became almost taboo with the 1970 publishing of Trudeau’s white paper on foreign policy. Trudeau staunchly rebuked the concept of Canada as a middle power because he associated it with a foreign policy that was based on ‘an assumption that Canada can be cast as the helpful fixer in international affairs’ (Wood, 1990). By framing the liberal internationalism of that period as not focused on the ‘national interest’, Trudeau could both carve a new image for his tenure and attract support from the Canadian people who were being told that their country’s foreign policy was now being used more carefully to further their own prosperity and interests (Ravenhill, 1998: 323). While this would appear to destroy the partisanship correlation, it has much more to do with the choices of an individual politician attempting to define his time at the helm and garner political support. In fact, many have argued that by the end of his tenure, Trudeau was trying to don ‘the Pearsonian mantle’ albeit with ‘less success than the original’ (Granatstein and Bothwell 1990: 376).

Conservative Mulroney preferred calling his foreign policy ‘continentalism’, in line with his economic interests in North American free trade. The economic downturn of this period could also have influenced his choice to downplay the middle power approach. This is mirrored in the mid-1990s Australian context where, after the exit of the Labor Government in 1996, a conservative emphasis was placed on bilateral relations to specifically support national economic interests (Ravenhill, 1998: 320).

Into the 1990s, Canada saw several instances of a return to the use of middle power rhetoric under Chretien’s Liberals. This is evidenced by Andre Ouellet in 1993 when he verbally stated that “It’s clear Canada’s foreign policy must be reviewed in the context of […] Canada’s capacity, as a middle power, to play an important role at the United Nations” (Neufeld, 1995: 102, footnote 49).
Politicians in Chretien’s government were also more open to using the term when discussing initiatives like the ban on landmines and the development of a UN rapid reaction capability (Ravenhill, 1998: 321). Once again, as was the case with Trudeau, Chretien was arguably trying to differentiate himself from his Conservative predecessor, an actor who was focused on ‘continentalism’ rather than ‘internationalism’. Thus the differentiation argument can be used in the reverse as well – anti-middlepowermanship back to pro.

Post-Chretien, use of ‘middle power’ has been relatively absent from Canadian political rhetoric until a speech made recently by Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper: ‘Middle powers [are those] who are willing to assume responsibilities, seek practical, doable solutions to problems and who have a voice and influence in global affairs because they lead, not by lecturing, but by example’ (Hurst, 2007). This throws a wrench in the partisanship and desire for differentiation arguments, calling both into question.

The economic factor has some intuitive strength. Politicians can speak more freely about ‘altruistic’ actions when there are not pressing budgetary issues at home. When unemployment is high the last thing the public wants to hear about is the latest foreign policy decision to spend money in another country. Because the term ‘middle power’ is so closely associated with liberal internationalism and these international activities, politicians distance themselves from such activities by avoiding the phrase.

Middle power is also a tricky concept to use because of Canada’s relationship with the United States. Invoking this terminology can, on the one hand, overtly place Canada ‘beneath’ the larger power in terms of national identity. Conversely, Canadian politicians do not want to distance themselves too far from the Americans. Middlepowermanship, because of its ‘active’ and ‘progressive’ connotations might suggest that Canada, due to its superior diplomatic capabilities, will seek international agreements (read: Kyoto Accord under Chretien) that the U.S. does not agree with. Of course Harper’s recent airing of the term while he jumps into the new American-friendly climate change agreement would seem to contradict this argument.

Finally, one last possible reason why use of the middle power term has declined since the Pearson years is that the country’s material dedication to international activities has also declined. As Welsh describes, Canada ‘has less ‘meat’ to put on the international table’ and if reference to middlepowermanship implies internationalist activities politicians might be afraid that they’ll be caught out in a sense, failing to ‘walk their talk’. The decline in capabilities is shown by the deterioration of the Canadian military, the decreasing aid budget (from 0.53% of GDP in 1975 to 0.28% in 2004) and peacekeeping failures like Somalia (2004: 584).

Conclusion

In an apparent paradox, the ‘middle power’ approach is very common in academic literature on Canadian foreign policy but is relatively absent in
politicians’ rhetoric. It is clear that the academic preference for the concept lies in its malleability and proven ability to frame some common, perhaps timeless, elements of Canadian foreign policy but also adapt to changes in policy focus. On the other side of the fence, politicians tend to avoid the terminology, likely for a number of interrelated reasons. Partisanship seems to exhibit some influence on the use of the phrase, while economic health, the desire of prime ministers to differentiate their tenure, U.S.-Canada relations and declining material capabilities also seem to have an effect.

Some IR theorists argue that the field must go beyond the middle power framework that has been so popular for the last half century to a new way of conceptualizing Canada’s place in the international community (Welsh, 2004). Perhaps Canadian politicians also need to find a new word to define their country’s relative position in the international community. Regardless of whether a new term is found, ‘middle power’ is an enduring concept and will certainly influence both future foreign policy analysis and political behaviour for years to come.
Works Cited


Hurst, Lynda. 29 Sept. 2007. ‘The PM touted Canada's `middle power' status this week. What, exactly, was he talking about?' The Star <http://www.thestar.com/columnists/article/261324>.

