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Canada as a Middle Power: Conceptual Limits and Promises

Abstract

This article seeks to investigate the concept of middle power and examines Canada's middle-powerness. After an analysis of the constitutive parts of the term "middle power", it focuses on three predominant models used in the study of middle powers. The third section tests Canada's status as a middle power by examining the dynamics that led to the adoption of a total ban on landmines; the main focus is on the middle-power role Canada assumed in this issue. Finally, the article offers a constructivist lens to look at middle powers, one that transcends the logic based on material capabilities and tangible resources.

Résumé

Cet article cherche à explorer le concept de la puissance moyenne et il examine le statut du Canada par rapport à ce concept. Après une analyse des parties constituantes de la notion de la puissance moyenne nous nous concentrons sur les trois modèles prédominants qu'on utilise pour étudier les puissances moyennes. La troisième partie questionne ce statut du Canada à travers la dynamique qui a mené à une interdiction totale des mines terrestres; l'accent principal est mis sur le rôle du Canada en tant que puissance moyenne dans cette question. Finalement, l'article propose un regard constructiviste sur les puissances moyennes, qui transcend la logique reposant sur les capacités matérielles ou les ressources concrètes.

Introduction

In the case of Canada, the concept of "middle power" has gained support of all types.[1] It has frequently been used by politicians, mass media, the public and last but not least scholars studying Canada's foreign policy. It has been a popular view that Canada possesses a distinct middle-power tradition. This image is so deeply embedded that the term "middle power" is used interchangeably with the name of the country. The prevailing explanations have been connected to Canada's role, behaviour and practices in the international system (Cooper, Higgot and Nossal, 1993; Nossal, 1997; Melakopides, 1998; Bélanger and Mace, 1999; Chapnick, 1999; Neack, 2003).

Why should we study middle powers? How can we conceptualize and define this frequently used but still rather ambiguous term? What are the factors that

determine, or at least influence, the possession of middle power identity? What are the reasons that explain the existence of strong ties between Canadian statehood and the concept of middle power? This article seeks to investigate the concept of middle power and examines Canada's middlepowerness. It is argued that Canada's conduct of foreign policy has shown a robust and deeply rooted middle-power identity throughout its post-WW2 history. The article starts with the analysis of the constitutive parts of the term "middle power"- i.e. the words "middle" and "power". The second section focuses on approaches to the study of middle powers and three predominant models are presented. The third section is designed as a case study to test Canada's middle-powerness. The objective of this section is to elucidate the dynamics that led to the adoption of a total ban of landmines and the main focus will be on the middle-power role Canada assumed in this issue. In conclusion, the author of this article challenges underlying rationalist logic and offers a constructivist lens to look at middle powers thus transcending the logic based on material capabilities and tangible resources.

1. Does "middle" and "power" equal "middle power"?

To fulfil initial conceptual clarity, one needs to understand exactly what the words "middle" and "power" signify. The word "power" refers to the state, i.e. the most important type of actor in the arena of international relations. As far as international law is concerned, states are the only *primary subjects* endowed with the right of signing international treaties. This particular feature distinguishes them from other actors and generates their exclusive role in the international system, even in the era of ever-growing transnational relations (for this phenomenon, see Keohane and Nye, 1971).

Nevertheless, the state-centric concept (states as "powers") used in this context goes beyond Robert Dahl's (1969) pattern of "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do" and Steven Lukes's (1974, 27) "A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B's interests." The word "middle", as will be demonstrated in the following text, is an even more elusive and slippery one. "Middle" suggests a central position and is therefore a relative term: it implies two other types of powers, great and small. "To find the middle one must be able to identify extremes" (Chapnick, 1999, 73).

The Penguin Dictionary of International Relations (1998, 323) defines *middle powers* as "states which are generally regarded as secondary only to the great powers." The dictionary section on middle powers continues with Martin Wight's classical definition which asserts that

> [a middle power is] a power with such military strength, resources and strategic positions that in peacetime, the great power bid for its support, and in wartime, while it has no hopes of winning a war against a great power, it can hope to inflict costs on a great power out of proportion to what the great power can hope to gain by attacking it. (Wight, 1978; quoted in Evans and Newham, 1998, 323)

The above definitions appear to indicate two things: firstly, they both contain the idea of ranking states based on their (military) capabilities; secondly, they distinguish between *secondary* and *middle* powers. As far as the former is concerned, Wight's definition is much too bound with military capabilities and the realist school of thought. In contemporary international politics the ability to use force and war as an instrument of foreign policy is somewhat limited (Nossal, 1997, 90). This is particularly true for middle power cases. As far as an attempt to draw a line between middle powers and secondary powers is concerned, Neack (2003, 154) claims that "secondary states ... are the ones that occupy a middle range between superpowers and the smallest powers... we can include great powers in this category. Secondary powers also include what we might call regional powers and middle powers." Neack (2003, 155) concludes that "middle powers are secondary powers whose primary foreign policy behaviours are aimed at maintaining international order ... Middle powers follow the relevant great powers, but they do so willingly and with alacrity." Apart from the fact that middle powers are in Neack's definition subsumed under the broader category of secondary powers, the important distinction is based on the function of middle powers, namely the maintenance of international order.

2. Approaches to the study of middle powers

Various authors use different "labels" for similar – or even the same – approaches to the study of middle powers. Critical reading and an assessment of the available literature concerning this theme show that the distinction between a *hierarchical* model, a *behavioural* model and a *functional* model appears to be the most appropriate for the purposes of this article. (This division draws on Chapnick, 1999; for an alternative typology, see Cooper, Higgott and Nossal, 1993, 16-27; for a different theoretical perspective, see Neack, 2003, 163-183.) They correspond with Bélanger and Mace's (1999, 152-158) "positional", "behavioural" and "relational" criteria for the analysis of middle powers. If one applies these three models to the same states, the results will be in some cases significantly different. This is largely due to the fact that these models are theoretical constructs, or Weberian ideal types, which highlight different aspects of the phenomenon.

A. Determining rank by "scientific" criteria: the hierarchical model

The hierarchical model is based on the comparison of states' relational positions. Middle powers are assessed on the basis of quantifiable attributes such as area, population, size, complexity and strength of the economy, military capability and other comparable factors (Cooper, Higgot and Nossal, 1993, 17). This model (most frequently) distinguishes between three categories of states: small powers, middle powers and great powers. The foremost propagator of this model was David Mitrany, who generally contended that the international community consisted of two ranks of states, great and small powers. However, in order to avoid stationariness in his concept, Mitrany (1933, 107) proposed a scheme of gradation to recognize that some small powers can become middle powers.

The most significant event to demonstrate the basic logic and feasibility of the hierarchical model was the negotiations for the creation of the United Nations.

Canada was advocating the preservation of peace, international order and security and mutual cooperation and collaboration among states. As far as the foundational San Francisco Conference is concerned, Canada took a leading position among a group of so-called middle powers and attempted to prevent the great powers from gaining too much influence at this platform (Melakopides, 1998, 39). However, the key strategy to contain great powers, i.e. the demand for the incorporation of a passage recognising middle powers as a distinct category of states in the UN Charter, was unsuccessful.[2]

The questionability of a scientific, "objective" approach for determining middle powers is related to the use of various sets of criteria and methodologies. To mention but two examples, Carsten Holbraad (1984, 90, 221-223, fn. 29) selected eighteen middle powers on the basis of a combination of GNP, population and armed force levels.[3] Laura Neack (1993) pushed this quest for "objectivity" even further: she (more or less arbitrarily) chose five indicators and carried out cluster analysis to determine the category in which Canada sits. Neack's outcome, unlike Holbraad's middle-power conclusion, was that Canada ranks among the great powers. It seems clear, however, that the countries on such lists cannot be regarded as being middle powers in the strict sense of the word. "The heterogeneity and differing self-perceptions [of these groups] demonstrate nicely the pitfalls of trying to establish middle power by statistical means" (Nossal, 1997, 90, fn. 67). Both Holbraad's and Neack's analyses suffer from a lack of emphasis on the issues of intersubjectivity and the social construction of reality. This point will be tackled in the conclusion.

B. Carving out the middle power role: the behavioural model

Proponents of this model argue that since there is no clearly accepted definition of middle power, one needs to deduce states falling into this category from their will and capacity to conform to the behavioural model associated with this category. Therefore the behaviour of middle power is driven by role conception resting on the notion of a "distinctive mode of statecraft", i.e. good international citizenship, multilateralism, coalition building and mediation (Bélanger and Mace, 1999, 153-158; Chapnick, 1999, 75). The best account of the behavioural model is articulated by Cooper, Higgot and Nossal in their book *Relocating Middle Powers*:

> [i]n our view, a more nuanced approach would begin by recognising the importance of middle powers in international politics ... Our reformulated perspective on middle power behaviour eschews traditional definitions anchored in criteria of size, power and geographic location.[4] Rather, we develop *an approach based on the technical and entrepreneurial capacities of states* like Canada and Australia to provide complementary or alternative initiative-oriented sources of leadership and enhanced coalition building in issue-specific context. We use this approach to examine what Australia and Canada *actually do* in contemporary international politics rather than to examine the empirical question of what characteristics they exhibit or the normative question of what they should be doing ... "good international citizenship" is

> not the foreign policy equivalent of boy scout good deeds. (Cooper, Higgot and Nossal, 1993, 7, 19)

Nevertheless, the very logic of the behavioural model is far from being unproblematic. This is largely due to the use of circular and therefore tautological reasoning: it describes middle power behaviour as the actions of states it already assumes to be middle powers (Chapnick, 1999, 73-74). Every country can thus "behave" as a middle power regardless of its own capabilities. This factor accounts for the high popularity of this model among practitioners of foreign policy. It enables them to act in a more important manner than their country's capabilities would suggest.

C. Middle-powerhood and the functional principle: the birth of the functional model

The distinctive tradition of Canada's foreign policy is inextricably bound up with the functional principle. The functional principle was devised by the Canadian diplomat Hume Wrong in 1942. It was based on the three following criteria: 1) the extent of Canada's involvement in international affairs; 2) the pursuit of Canada's interests; 3) Canada's ability to contribute to the situation in question. Subsequently, Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King connected Wrong's principle to his own concept of middle-powerhood (Chapnick, 1999, 74). The link between functional capabilities and middle power status was described by Lionel Gelber (1945, 280-281) as follows: "[s]ince major powers are differentiated by their greater functions from the rest, the middle powers ask that they be distinguished from the lesser ones by the same criteria. A voice in decisions should correspond with strength in enforcement."

In order to understand the emergence of functionalism in Canada's post-WW2 foreign policy, one needs to look at its roots. It is well known that during the interwar period Canada opted for an isolationist foreign policy. Jack Granatstein asserts that the origin of the image of Canada as the world's "helpful fixer" stems from the fact that

> many in the early Canadian diplomatic corps (1930s-1940s) were the children of missionaries or clergy and had been born abroad ... Probably the idea emerged out of the missionary strain in Canadian Protestantism and Roman Catholicism that saw Canadian men and women go abroad in substantial numbers ... the "do-good" impulse that they represented was a powerful one, and it had its strong resonances in the Department of External Affairs.[5] (Granatstein, 1992, 223-225)

The functional principle was consolidated between 1945 and 1957; these years became widely known as the Golden St Laurent-Pearson Era. During this period, the country's key diplomatic principles as well as the imperative of active engagement in world affairs were introduced. Considerable effort went into attempts to expand the role and significance of multilateral institutions, defuse major crises, enhance stability and peace, forge manifold links with individual states and groups of states, provide foreign aid and establish solid credentials as a mediating force (Melakopides, 1998, 38-39, 50). It is noteworthy that such

diplomatic practices have remained valid and continued to be cherished up until now.

The functional model can be associated with the recently widely used concept of "niche diplomacy", whereby states concentrate resources in the specific areas that offer the best returns (Cooper, 1997). Despite the attractiveness and good explanatory potential of the functional model, however, middle powers constructed on its basis run the danger of being charged with the "arrogance of no power", as recent critiques of Canada's foreign policy suggest (see Cooper, Higgot and Nossal, 1993, 18; Chapnick, 1999, 75). One particular attempt to overcome such charges is represented by the designation of a homogenous group of like-minded states to the middle-power category.

3. Testing Canada's middle-powerness: the new diplomacy of the Ottawa Process

In the early 1990s, the growing landmine crisis attracted media attention after being neglected during the 1980s. The shift was due largely to ICRC surgeons and NGOs participating in medical assistance programs and de-mining operations. By 1995, more than 350 NGOs had joined a global advocacy movement and helped to establish a coalition called the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL). In 1993 the ICBL had managed to secure the assent of French political leaders to a formal request for a review of the 1980 Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW), which regulates, amongst other weapons, antipersonnel landmines. The reconvened 1995-6 Review Conference held under the auspices of the UN, however, was hostile to more radical proposals and this led to a deadlock.

From this time onwards, the ICBL focused on lobbying the governments of "critical states" with the purpose of securing their support for an alternative negotiation format concerning landmines. These critical states were a group of like-minded states who imposed unilateral moratoria on the export, sale and transfer of landmines and in some cases even eliminated their stockpiles. The group included Canada, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Ireland, Mexico, Norway and Switzerland. Most of the countries in this group are regarded, on the basis of their particular diplomatic activities, as being middle powers. As the example of Canada, the informal leader of the pro-ban states, shows, states may be critical because they possess high moral credit and therefore are more trustworthy than others. This explanation has been inferred from content and discourse analysis in documents on Canada's involvement in this issue, produced by both NGOs and states.

Dissatisfaction with the lowest-common-denominator-style outcome of the Review Conference led eight pro-ban states and the ICBL to the conclusion that the only way to ban landmines was to promote a new, alternative negotiating forum. By May 1996 the number of states supporting the ban soared from the initial eight to sixty. The fact that the norm of the non-use of landmines cascaded through the international system can be understood as the result of successful peer pressure exerted upon other states by Canada. I suggest that the socialization of other states by "norm leaders" (pro-ban states lead by Canada) can be critically read as the "Self's" attempt to impose a hegemonic discourse upon the "Other".

The "Other" was deemed to be any state breaking the emerging norm. The rationale was to "ensure" that all states would embark upon what was discursively referred to as a "civilized society of states".

In May 1996, Canada resorted to an unprecedented diplomatic step and presented a proposal for an alternative negotiation format concerning landmines; this became known as the Ottawa Process. The importance of the proposal lay in the fact that it enabled the pro-ban states to sign a convention without the threat of this being blocked by the other states' vetoes (Brem and Rutherford 2001, 171). The October 1996 Ottawa conference was the first outside-the-UN-system meeting, appositely entitled "Towards a Global Ban on Anti-Personnel Landmines". The decisive moment of the conference was the concluding speech by Canada's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lloyd Axworthy, who called upon the international community to return to Ottawa to sign the ban on landmines by the end of 1997. The Ottawa Process culminated in the December 1997 Ottawa conference where 122 states signed the Ottawa Convention, in spite of the refusal of three major actors, the US, Russia and China, to sign the Convention.

The landmine case possesses a distinctive and unprecedented feature, epitomised by the existence of the "coalition of equals", which comprised both pro-ban states and NGOs. Such a process signalises a departure from multilateralism to plurilateralism or polylateralism and clearly represents a new way of achieving arms limitation. This explanation challenges James Rosenau's notion of the "bifurcation of macro global structure based on 'the two worlds of world politics': state and non-state" (Rosenau, 1990, 5). Since the ICBL and the group of pro-ban states led by Canada were members of the same winning "coalition of equals", the two allegedly separate worlds in fact amalgamated. The "old" multilateralism, embodied by highly ineffective CCW conferences, was in this case superseded by a model for which Geoffrey Wiseman has coined the term polylateralism. This model is based on the notion that official entities can be joined by non-state entities in pursuing a common interest without the involvement of "mutual recognition as sovereign entities" (Wiseman, 1999, 10-11). All the features of polylateralism can be found in the speech by Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien that marked the occasion of the signing of the Ottawa Treaty banning antipersonnel landmines:

> For the first time, the majority of nations of the world will agree to ban a weapon which has been in military use by almost every country in the world. For the first time, a global partnership of governments, international institutions and non-governmental groups has come together – with remarkable speed and spirit – to draft the treaty we will sign today. For the first time, those who fear to walk in their fields, those who cannot till their lands, those who cannot return to their own homes – all because of landmines – once again can begin to hope. (Chrétien, 1997)

An interesting point concerns the creation of disciplinary discourse. As the above account shows, the humanitarian master framework underlying disciplinary discourse was not devised and pushed ahead by a hegemonic superpower, as one might expect, but by Canadian scholars and activists connected to the Establishment. Their aim was nothing less than a demand for a radical overhaul

of the international structure/hierarchy after the Cold War. The power of such a constellation is supported by the fact that even though the two major actors (the USA and Russia) have not signed the Ottawa Convention, they have both implicitly recognised an emerging norm by a shift in their practices: the United States no longer manufactures antipersonnel landmines covered by the Convention and Russia slashed its production by 90 per cent. The above explanation thus clearly manifests a macrostructural change caused by a strategic partnership between the group of like-minded countries, in which Canada assumed leadership, and non-governmental organizations.

4. Conclusion: towards a new understanding of middle-powerhood

As far as the case study on landmines is concerned, it encompasses elements of all three models. However, my interpretation does not stop there and goes beyond these approaches. I argue that all three previously examined models have one common flaw: their underlying structure is purely material. This shortcoming stems from the fact that the models rest on rather unstable rationalist premises with predetermined and exogenously given preferences that are methodologically treated as independent variables. At the same time, all three models neglect the most important factor determining whether Canada can be considered a middle power: intersubjective recognition by other states. Where do we go from here?

First of all, one needs to abandon the "objective" and utility-maximising rationalist logic that characterises neo-realist and utilitarian-liberal analyses of foreign policy. Secondly, a constructivist theory of foreign policy based on the logic of appropriateness needs to be brought into focus. Thus interest-driven explanations are superseded by social understanding in which norms and identities play an important – and perhaps central – role in the genesis of political action. "A sane person is one who is 'in touch with identity' in the sense of maintaining consistency between behaviour and a conception of *self in a social role*" (March and Olsen, 1989, 160, emphasis added).

The key element of socially constructed middle-powerhood is the concept of reputation. Constructivists hold that middle powers endeavour to preserve and consolidate their reputation as legitimate members of the international community, or word polity (see Boekle, Rittberger and Wagner, 1999). Due to the political success of the concept of middle power, Canada has seemed more credible and trustworthy than other states. Canada derives its "advantageous" position from the fact that it has been repeatedly successful in (re)constructing and (re)producing its external identity as a middle power. Such practices are maintained and further cultivated through symbolic interactions and social/political (re)constructions of the meaning. Canada's ongoing (re)construction of middle power identity clearly corresponds with Alexander Wendt's (1994) concept of "collective identity formation". He argues that "social identities and interests are always in process during interaction" (Wendt, 1994, 386). Canada's middle-powerness can thus be viewed as a strategically constructed identity, which is subsequently used for the purpose of reshaping the international society of states.

As the presented landmine case revealed, the middle-power concept has no fixed content or meaning. This case has also shown that there is not necessarily only

one meaning of middle-powerness at any given time. In fact, in the campaign to ban landmines, two different meanings of Canada's middle-powerness were juxtaposed: first, as the leader of pro-ban middle powers the country exerted peer pressure to make other states comply with a non-use norm; second, the concept of middle power was frequently invoked and referred to while a strategic partnership between Canada and non-governmental organizations was being forged. I would like to conclude by asserting that all approaches attempting to anchor the meaning of middle-powerhood are doomed to failure, or as the Canadian political scientist Robert Cox puts it, "The middle power is *a role in search of an actor*" (Cox, 1989, 827, emphasis added).

Endnotes

1. I would like to thank Christopher Gatenby for his critical comments and helpful suggestions regarding the final revision of this article. Any mistakes are my own.

2. The Great Powers (the US, USSR/Russia, China, France and Great Britain; also called the Permanent Five) are the states that have held veto power at the UN Security Council. Small powers are all other states, regardless of the differences among them. According to Canada's original proposal, middle powers would have to be accorded lesser, but still distinct, powers at the Security Council. "They would have to receive preferential treatment in the selection of non-permanent members. Unfortunately for these smaller states, while Article XXIII of the UN Charter recognized state capabilities as a factor in selection for membership on the Security Council, it also recognized geographical location, thereby eliminating any objective distinction between non-great states" (Chapnick, 1999, 77).

3. In descending order of middleness, these states are Japan, (West) Germany, China, France, Britain, Canada, Italy, Brazil, Spain, Poland, India, Australia, Mexico, Iran, Argentina, South Africa, Indonesia and Nigeria (Holbraad, 1984, quoted in Nossal, 1997, 90, fn. 67).

4. These criteria usually form the basic features of the hierarchical model.

5. Contemporary sociology applies the term "transcultural children" to the children of diplomats and humanitarian workers living abroad.

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