

Gravitating towards cooperation: Middle Powers and the structure of the International System

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Abstract:

Since the late 1980s, middle power states have been viewed by scholars as countries with a particular tendency towards cooperation, especially coalition building and multilateral engagement. After all, while most middle powers are too small to individually change the international system, their combined weight could, theoretically, outweigh the larger powers. Why then, are there so few examples of significant middle power cooperation? This paper investigates the lack of middle power cooperation, with reference to two self-identifying Asia-Pacific middle powers, Australia and South Korea.

This paper argues that the behaviour of middle power states is directly related to the structure of the International System. Cooperation between middle powers will therefore be lower in bipolar structures, and greater in multipolar structures. If the Asia-Pacific region continues to move towards a multipolar environment we should expect to see increasing levels of cooperation between middle powers like Australia and South Korea, with new avenues such as maritime security opening up. On the other hand, if there is a hardening of the bipolar competition between the US and China, this would reduce overall levels of middle power cooperation. Middle powers should therefore work to encourage a multipolar order in Asia to increase their long term influence, and thus capacity to secure their interests and security.

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Introduction

The term 'middle power' has become synonymous with a cooperative approach to international politics. Policy makers regularly claim middle powers can work together to solve some of the world's most pressing challenges. Liberal scholars suggested middle size states could usher in a cosmopolitan and multilateral era for world politics. Even realists have suggested that middle powers could form a rival balancing coalition to bring the great powers into line and restore order and peace. However, thus far, the evidence for substantial middle power cooperation, in ways that affects the wider system or key global norms is still limited and partial.

The overblown claims that middle powers can join together to change the world did much to consign the term to the analytical dustbin over the last decade. Were these claims simply wrong? Did scholars let their national sentiments or normative ideals overwhelm their critical judgement when analysing middle powers? Critics have suggested this is the case with the more liberal idealist scholars (D. Cooper 2011:321), but then how to explain the even weaker evidence to support the claims of so-called 'hard-headed' realists like Waltz (1964:892)? Is there perhaps some other factor at work that helps explain why the potential and inclination for cooperation by middle powers, as embraced by liberal and realist scholars alike, might still be a valid assessment of the nature and potential impact of these states? In short, why do we still have so many bickering Lilliputs when scholars of many persuasions believe they could work together to constrain the Gullivers of the world?

This paper examines the concept of middle powers and argues that what has been too often overlooked is the inherently relative nature of these states. The power of middle powers is intimately connected with the structure of the international system. It argues that judgements about middle powers must be made within the regional and global power structures these states are found in. These include unipolar, bipolar and multipolar systems. Each of these systems may operate at defined geographic limits, from a regional hegemon, to a 'multi-multipolarity' (Friedberg 1993) or a global bipolar contest. These structures may also be defined by the nature of the key great-power

relationships. Are the dominant powers in competitive or co-operative engagements, or some mixture of the two? What type of international system is dominant has significant implications for our understanding and analysis of the role of middle powers in the past, present and into the future.

If, as expected, the Asia-Pacific moves towards a multipolar environment, and likely one defined by the current mix of co-operative and competitive great power relationships, then the capacity of the middle powers to cooperate, balance and constrain the great powers may finally be demonstrated.

Of course, this assessment, that the structure of the international system is integral to the behaviour and influence of the middle powers also carries with it a warning. If a mixed multipolar environment is the most inviting for middle power capacity, then systemic shifts could see an emerging 'middle power moment' (Beeson 2011:563) quickly disappear. Meanwhile, if Asia's middle powers are seen to be largely irrelevant over the next few decades, despite the promising conditions then the relevance and importance of the term 'middle power' must be called into question.

The concept of identifying states by their relative size and assigning an analytical importance to these differences in sizes traces back at least 500 years (Wight 1995:298). Yet as encouraging as this early identification of 'middle sized' states may be to scholars who use the term, it should also encourage a degree of scepticism. If so much about the international system has changed since the term's creation, how comfortable should we be using this concept in a relatively static manner? This is especially so when at heart the term is centred on an adjective 'middle'. Middle of what we must ask? As every school student comes to understand when doing introductory statistics, terms like 'middle' and 'average' can be used to mean radically different things. If you examine the literature on middle powers, no one uses the term to describe those countries seen to rank 80th or 90th out of the 190-odd countries that make up the current international system. Instead, scholars and policy makers' focus on countries positioned around 6th to 6th in terms of power, capacity, population etc. If how we identify middle powers is used in a very specific and relative way, might not our

understanding of what middle powers can do, such as when they cooperate, also be highly conditional?

Bipolar, Multipolar and Middle powers

There is a strong tendency in the scholarship on middle powers to take the scholars current international environment as providing a long term fixed basis for assessing the nature and behaviour of these fundamentally relative states. To put it another way, most scholarly 'understanding of middle power has been bound to the historical context in which the scholars found themselves' (Ping 2005:56). This recognition is not to assert that past research is wrong, after-all it is often an accurate identification and description of each era, but instead it suggests we must be cautious about research's long term applicability. One of the best scholars of smaller states, David Vital fell afoul of the tendency towards fixed qualifiers in the 1960s when he identified middle powers as those possessed of a population around 15 million when economically advanced and 30 million when under-developed (Vital 1967:8). While today this almost fits Australia (population 23 million), it is useless for South Korea (population 49 million), Brazil (population 196 million) or Indonesia (population 242 million). Yet Vital's approach has been the mainstream approach for identifying small and middle powers, using their quantified position (in terms of GDP, population, military size etc.) in hierarchical lists as a proxy for power. The tension between producing accurate numbers today and projecting status in the future is thus unavoidable. Likewise, the rightly acclaimed effort by Andrew Cooper, Richard Higgott and Kim Nossal (1993:19) to define middle powers by their 'tendency to pursue multilateral solutions to international problems' also seems to be fixed to a particular post-cold war moment —if not also a small group of western states (Jordaan 2003:172).

Neither definition is wrong, they might just be limited in either time, geography or more fundamentally, tied to a particular international structure. To properly understand middle powers we need to step back and examine their 'broader relationship to the system or structure of the state's system' (Ping 2005:56). As Robert Cox compellingly 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' (Cox 1989:825). It is therefore necessary to explore the relationship between the nature of the international system and the behaviour and impact of middle powers. This is a link well known by the policy makers of middle power countries who know that they 'must pay more attention to this context [of power change] because it affects their international power more than their own deliberate policy choices' (Gilley 2011:251). This paper's focus on international structure will naturally draw on NeoRealist ideas, but how structures are conceived by the states is also important. Therefore constructivist insights will also be drawn on to help offer some policy guides for middle powers. This paper will now examine the impact of the 20th centuries' bipolar and unipolar systems on middle powers, before turning to examine how alternate international systems might enable different levels of middle power cooperation and impact.

The most clearly defined and stable international order for the twentieth century was a global bipolar system. Power was balanced between two 'superpowers', the United States of America (US) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). While the nature of the bipolar era, changed over time, it was generally defined by a competitive relationship, short of war, which has come to be known as the 'Cold War'. Most notably the Cold War's bipolar system saw a significant gap between the resources and capabilities of the two dominant states and the resources and capabilities of the middle powers. In other bipolar eras, the gap between the middle and largest powers might be smaller and therefore give middle powers more scope to act, but it is still unlikely given the self-reinforcing exclusionary nature of bipolar systems.

Competitive Bipolar systems discourage and restrict middle power behaviour because they force middle powers into a binary choice (Holbraad 1984:119). Middle powers can either join one of the two major states and so be limited by both their allies' control and the opposing states' hostility, or they can stay unaligned and risk irrelevance or great power meddling. Neither is a particularly attractive option, with both choices closing off a number of avenues for influence and impact for

middle powers. Joining one side in a formal alliance or informal but identifiable alignment can split in half the number of cooperative partners which the middle powers can work with. If the bipolar era is marked by an ideological divide or open hostility, as the 20th centuries' Cold War was, the restrictions on diplomatic cooperation can be particularly acute. While realist theory and common sense suggest that middle powers could be powerful if several states combined their weight towards achieving a specific goal, putting this into practice in a bipolar environment is an extremely difficult task. Middle powers need to find other middle powers with similar interests as them, this is normally difficult enough, but the ideological divide can mean that many countries are not available as partners. Likewise they may find that the great powers will actively discourage cooperation across ideological divides.

Even when there is ideological overlap, geography, national interests and the identity of states can work to prevent middle power cooperation. This is a common challenge regardless of the international system, but one made particularly acute in a hostile bipolar situation. Middle powers looking for partners need to find other states with capacity in similar and complementary areas to their own. Like two jigsaw pieces, the fact the pieces are the same size doesn't mean they form into a coherent larger piece. As Stephan Fruehling (2007:150) has noted, concepts like 'middle power' can mislead us through an averaging out of the overall capacity of a state, rather than recognising the 'strategic personalities' that each state has, and the various resources and effort each state puts into their different geographic, diplomatic, defence, or normative capacity. For this reason, cooperation between Australia and France will always be lower than might be viable, given their significantly different regional focuses and defence and diplomatic approaches. National interest is thus a significant part of explaining why middle powers seem to under-achieve their theorised cooperative capacity. However the international system also acts as a foundation for what state leaders believe is possible or plausible when looking for ways to achieve their national interests. Should a middle power state seek to be unaligned in a competitive bipolar system (as states like Indonesia and India did in the 1960s), they may find the larger states take no account of their views

or actively interfere in their region and internal affairs. Neither trusted enough to be useful partners or mediators, nor powerful enough to gain real independence, middle powers struggle during competitive bipolar eras to gain relevance.

Cooperative bipolar systems, from irregular, informal engagement through to a mutually supportive condominium, offer, if anything, a worse situation for middle powers. Despite the greater prospect of peace, middle powers may find themselves carved up to feed the giants, or simply ignored and excluded as unnecessary. A cooperative bipolar structure renders 'mediating' or 'bridge building' roles, — beloved of middle power advocates — irrelevant. It also restricts more disruptive behaviour including playing off the two large powers for benefits — such as foreign aid — a tactic of Egypt and India during the Cold War. For these reasons, both the restrictions and risk of being the playthings of the larger powers we should expect the middle powers to be cautious if not outright hostile towards movements towards a 'Concert of Asia' system. As Paul Dibb (1995:8) notes 'today's middle powers - and certainly the middle powers of Asia - do not wish to be concerted against as happened to smaller powers in the concert of Europe'. Middle power avenues for cooperation are therefore significantly curtailed under a cooperative bipolar system.

The one exception to the exclusion of middle powers in bipolar systems is in a weakly structured system, such as in the emerging or concluding years of the structure when a formal order has yet to be established. In these periods, such as during the early post Second World War years, and during the late 1980s and into the 1990s, middle powers enjoyed a larger scope for influence and thus also greater status. Not surprisingly this was a period where discussion and scholarship of middle powers also boomed. While weakly formed systems might still see the great powers trying to exclude the middle powers, the smaller states have more avenues in these times of flux to influence the great powers, including raising sensitive topics like arms control and trade barriers, or proposing new institutions. At the end of the Cold War, the US displayed a distinct willingness to let its allied and associated middle powers pursue a range of initiatives across a number of fields from economic to

security. The US wasn't supportive of all initiatives, but neither did its allied middle powers seek to confront or challenge the interests of the US either. The landmark scholarly contribution by A. Cooper et. al (1993) catalogued (and to a degree championed) the behaviour of a few US-allied middle powers during this period. With an international structure shifting from weak-bipolar to an indulgent unipolar international structure after the collapse of the USSR, the middle power countries found their scope for initiative and effectiveness significantly expanded.

Most notably for understanding A. Cooper et. al's (1993) contribution, the period's quasi-unipolar international system served to funnel middle powers towards multilateralism. These forums were the best way for middle and smaller states to build the moral and political weight to encourage the unipolar power to willingly accept restrictions on its behaviour. Notable examples during this period include Canada's work on confidence-building and arms control in Europe and the Middle East, Australia's work on the Chemical Weapons Treaty, and the Japanese and Australian initiative for the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum. Reflecting the dominant international structure of the time, many of these initiatives were also global rather than regional in focus, which is comparatively rare for middle powers. These were all 'niche' areas where the US and other great powers had clear interests, but were willing to at least engage the ideas of middle powers and some initiatives were successfully implemented.

It's important to note that this 'niche' middle power activism should not be confused with 'dogoodism' (Holmes 1984:369) as it sometimes has been. Despite applying labels such as 'Good International Citizenship' to their behaviour, policy makers in middle power countries are quick to point out that they were focused primarily on pursuing their nation's interests (Evans and Grant 1995:344). These leaders saw the development of new forums, institutions and norms as a way to expand their voice and ability to contribute and seek influence. The middle powers' policy makers also knew that seeking 'negative' or nakedly self-interested goals would have put their states at odds with the dominant power. For example, during the Uruguay trade round, the US didn't try to prevent

Canada and Australia establishing forums and coalitions for encouraging free trade (notably APEC and the Cairns Group). It would not have been so indulgent were these states pursuing a protectionist or mercantilist agenda that could have harmed its interests or ran counter to its ideology.

This example re-enforces the importance of understanding the connection between the international system and the nature of middle power states. Not only what these states can do, but how they go about doing it, is significantly affected by the structure of the international system. During the late 1980s and early 1990s the weak bipolar and then indulgent unipolar system worked to push middle power behaviour towards a certain normative character. As those eras pass from sight, and as we see a rise of new middle power states, we should expect to see a weakening of the connection between multilateral idealism and middle power statecraft. As Jordaan (2003:172) argues, by the early 2000's there was already a distinct difference between the actions of middle power countries such as Canada and Australia and emerging mid-sized states such as Brazil and South Africa who had different approaches to regionalism, the global economic order and to multilateralism. Even Canada and Australia seem to have shifted away from their heavy multilateral activism, even if some of their political class still embrace the approach. A decade after it started, the scholarly path of defining middle powers by their tendency towards global multilateralism (A. Cooper et al. 1993:19) has been largely abandoned. Not because it was wrong, but rather its applicability seems diminished. As the structure of the international system changes, most likely towards a multipolar system in Asia, so must our understanding of middle powers.

The exact nature of the future structure of the Asia-Pacific and global international system is of course unknown. But what has been long predicted (Barnett 1970:73; Layne 1993:8; Waltz 1993:66) and now seems an emerging conclusion (Layne 2006:41; Stuart 1997:229; Tan 2012:310) is that a multipolar environment is emerging in Asia. It seems implausible that the US would be able to re-assert a unipolar position, while an intense bipolar competition between the US and China is still

unlikely. This is not only because of these states' economic interconnectedness, geographic distance, and vastly different military capacity, but also the influence of Asia's other great powers such as Russia, Japan and India. In short, the next few decades look set for an era of a multipolar international system, at least in Asia if not also globally¹. The current regional order seems defined by a mix of cooperative and competitive great power relationships (Mahnken 2012:5) and this should also continue rather than becoming purely competitive or purely cooperative.

A multipolar Asia would be good news for a middle power seeking greater influence. In such an order, especially if defined by both cooperation and competition, middle powers would have extensive flexibility to influence the calculations and behaviours of the larger powers. As power is more diffused in a multipolar system, the entry barriers for middle powers to meaningfully affect any specific great power or even the wider system would be significantly reduced. This influence may occur through shifts in alliances or pledges of support, where decisions by one or two middle powers could have a substantial effect on the political and military calculations of the great powers. With the increased number of leading powers, middle powers also have a greater range of cooperative partners to work with, potentially shifting support between the great powers as suits their interests, ambitions and initiatives. Put another way, where a bipolar era offers two large mountains for smaller nations to either hang off or slip into the irrelevant valleys in-between, multipolar eras offer smaller peaks and higher plateaus, giving much more room for smaller nations to play a significant role.

The extra space to operate which a multipolar environment offers might well be just the space needed to make both liberal and realist scholarly expectations of middle power cooperation to be realised. This is not certain or guaranteed, but certainly much more plausible and realistic. At an ideational level, multipolar environments offer a greater proliferation of concepts and debates about

¹ The extent to which Asia's system becomes global will probably depend on the global ambitions of China and India. Currently neither possesses global power projection (Shambaugh 2013). Likewise the EU may or may not live up to its ambitions of playing a strategically significant military role over the coming century.

the nature of the international order. This is part of what also makes them more unstable, but this space for discussion also gives middle powers, as states highly attracted to ideational factors, much more scope for influence. Particularly of interest for liberal scholars, middle powers in multipolar environments have a much greater chance to raise, promote and see the cascade and adoption of particular norms in multipolar environments. By playing the great powers off each other, using their collective insecurity and fears of isolation or counter-alignment, along with there simply being more great powers to direct socialisation efforts towards, middle powers will have a greater ideational capacity in a multipolar environment. It may be that the 'tendency' towards middle power multilateral cooperation Cooper et al. (1993) identified might return in a far more substantive form in a multipolar environment.

At the material level, middle powers will also find some comfort in a multipolar environment as the material gap between the great powers and middle powers will usually be lower. This is currently the case in the Asia-Pacific environment where the great powers are more focused on economic competition and economic balancing than the size of their armed forces. Even should this switch to an arms race as some fear (Bitzinger 2010; Till 2012), the middle powers may find the competitive arms spending makes their relative contribution more valuable. Where bipolar systems tend towards internal balancing, multipolar ones make allies far more wanted (Waltz 1993:73). If the US is looking to maintain its military advantage compared to peers like China or Russia, the military spending of South Korea at 1/3 of China's or Australia at just under 1/2 of Russia's, becomes more important. Suggestions by realists about middle power states forming a power balancing coalition thus take on an air of reality which they didn't have in the Cold War bipolar era. More importantly for the middle powers, should the worst befall them and they face a threat of invasion or attack by a great power, the range of possible great power allies and defensive support in a multipolar environment is larger. Rather than having their interests sacrificed for the stability or spheres of influence of a bipolar system, a multipolar system gives middle powers a greater chance to lure in a great power protector. One motivated either by a desire to prevent a peer competitor gaining the

resources or capacity of the middle power, or one looking to inflict a defeat on their great power competitor. It should be noted that when I use the term middle power here, I do so on the assumption, following scholars such as Martin Wight(1995:65) and Paul Dibb (1995:58-59) that middle powers require a significant capacity for self-defence. Not necessary to defeat an attacking great power, but at least to significantly raise the costs. This is certainly true of the two middle powers I am discussing here, South Korea and Australia. This paper will now turn to the implications of an emerging multipolar Asia for these two countries.

Compelled to cooperate: South Korea and Australia in a multipolar environment

If Asia's future is a multipolar environment, what are the implications for middle power cooperation between South Korea and Australia? First and most obviously South Korea and Australia will find such an environment much more hospitable to their efforts to seek influence individually as well as cooperate. This is not an argument that they will do so, but rather that there will be greater potential for meaningful cooperation to occur and an increased likelihood this cooperation will be successful. This provides an incentive to move from easy bickering to the more difficult task of acting together. Whether these states are influential however, will be a question of the ideational and material capacity of these states and of their capacity to apply this in an efficient and effective manner.

It is now plausible to see significant middle power cooperation occurring between South Korea and Australia. For most of the Cold War, save the Korean War itself, there was neither the interest, viability or significance for South Korea and Australia to cooperate. Different political and cultural systems obviously had an effect, but they also had few overlapping concerns. Both states found themselves within hub and spoke relationships with the United States that worked to keep them far from key issues and debates in the bipolar structure. Both South Korea and Australia enjoyed strong economic growth across the second half of the twentieth century, but they were concerned about very different markets and industries, and limitations in technology in the pre-globalisation period,

such as in shipping and telecommunications also restricted the possibility of useful engagement. The impact of the Cold War divide between the USA and USSR, with China an influential third force had a much more significant role in affecting South Korea's diplomatic freedom. Australia meanwhile found the bipolar system re-enforced its hesitancy to engage with Asia. It did not see significant opportunity to influence the region, providing little more than politically symbolic contributions to the proxy conflicts of the Cold War and free-riding on its great power ally rather than developing a diplomatic or defensive capacity to try and alter the environment. Likewise South Korea, which was more dependent upon the United States for its security, and more concerned about its regional security environment, especially with North Korea and China falling on an alternate side of the bipolar system's ideological divide, saw little benefit in cooperation with Australia during the Cold War.

In a multipolar environment in Asia, South Korean and Australian cooperation will be more plausible —though far from certain— across a range of issues. Some of the ideological vestiges of the Cold War still linger (such as their common democratic, capitalist systems) as do some of the threats (particularly North Korea and the unresolved border tension). Cooperation between the two countries is already growing. Recent initiatives have included signing a defence cooperation memorandum of understanding, an agreement on sharing intelligence, and more regular meetings, such as 2+2 meetings involving the Foreign and Defence ministers from both countries. It's notable that much of this cooperation has already been phrased in terms of working 'as middle powers with regional and global interests and leverage ... to enhance regional and global stability and prosperity' (Carr 2013). Still, these are early steps. More important is the shift in scope of what this relationship could seek to achieve. What was implausible during the bipolar Cold War environment, is now much more viable in a multipolar environment. What forms and sort of cooperation between South Korea and Australia is thus possible? What might they most profitably seek to pursue, and what are the upper limits to this cooperation?

One viable area of traditional security cooperation between Australian and South Korea in a multipolar Asia would be maritime security. Both Australia and South Korea have an interest in vibrant global capitalism. Both countries have liberalised their economies and sought to specialise in particular profitable industries. While both South Korea and Australia could restore some domestic manufacturing and food production in a conflict situation —unlike say Singapore—, this would come at a heavy cost to Canberra and Seoul's economic wellbeing. Thus the maintenance of trade is significant. Here, the defence spending plans of both South Korea and Australia show significant potential overlap. Australia's investment in 12 new submarines, ones that will be designed to operate for long periods, far from home (read in Northeast Asia) will provide it the capacity to help manage and maintain open trading lanes. Likewise South Korea will want to keep the trading routes to its south, through not only the South China Sea, but especially the Straits of Malacca and to India open, in case trade routes become more contested or dangerous to its north. Maintaining these trading routes will require significantly increased military capacity to prove seriousness, undertake operations and maintain a presence. In a worst case scenario it will also require war fighting skills. Most of the heavy-lifting however will be in an ideational form via the diplomatic cooperation of South Korea and Australia. One option could be to act as first movers, negotiating and signing an agreed code of conduct that these two countries will follow. A sort of two-party unilateral move. Or they could negotiate with one of the great powers to develop a code of conduct for maritime freedom and present it as a *fait-accomplie* to the world, as Australia did with the US in negotiating the Chemical Weapons Convention in the 1990s (D. Cooper 2002:160-161; McCormack 1993:159).

In the diplomatic and ideational sphere, Australian and South Korean maritime initiatives should find it relatively easy to obtain the support of the United States. Even if Washington finds budget pressures force it to somewhat retreat from the region, it will continue to support the open trading system it established after the Second World War. As with the promotion of trade liberalisation in the 1980s and 1990s, Australia and South Korea might be more effective advocates of a new maritime code of conduct than the USA could. Great power proposals are often treated in a highly

suspicious manner, by countries both large and small who wonder what the ulterior motives are. For instance, in the 1980s Japan found it better to work through Australia to propose an Asia-Pacific economic zone (what became APEC) rather than propose it alone, given regional memories of Imperial Japan's 'Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere' which has been enforced at bayonet point. The point here is not to argue what Australia and South Korea should be doing, though maritime cooperation is an attractive possibility. Rather it is to argue that the changing structure of the international system, if it is moving in a multipolar fashion, will be much more amenable to middle power cooperation and middle power initiatives in fields such as maritime security. In the past few decades, any small states in Asia seeking cooperation on the security front have looked to non-traditional security issues as the only plausible and realistic avenue for their initiatives. For the middle powers this might not be the case anymore.

Some areas of security cooperation are less plausible. An alliance relationship between South Korea and Australia should not be expected. Not only do multipolar environments tend to discourage formal, fixed alliance relationships (Ross 2006:360), but other than the case of North Korea restarting the Korean war, Australia is still too remote and stands to gain far too little from being involved in a security conflict in Northeast Asia on behalf of South Korea. Still, as noted above, growing bonds through traditional security area cooperation may change the relationship, as might the shifting nature of the multipolar environment. A substantially weaker United States might lead Australia to seek new partners such as South Korea or Japan, though more probably it would see Australia retreat behind the safety umbrella of Indonesia's archipelagos.

Australia and South Korea cooperation may also be compelled by a multipolar system. While there is an extensive debate about the issue, it seems fair to acknowledge as Friedberg (1993:9) puts it 'all other things being equal, multipolar systems are intrinsically unstable'. Of course Friedberg goes on to note 'in the real world however, everything else is not equal, and non-structural factors can serve either to exacerbate or to mitigate the tendencies that are inherent in a system's structure'

(Friedberg 1993:9). Dobb(1995:69) and Waltz (1993:74) agree that the tendency for war under multipolar systems increases, and see a balance of power as the best way to prevent this. Although Dobb also points to the presence of multilateral institutions and Waltz to the role of nuclear weapons as stabilising factors in modern multipolar systems. Other scholars such as Karl Deutsch (1964:391) argue that multipolar systems are inherently more stable given the wider range of interactions and opportunities for each of the major actors.

Middle powers should therefore give one cheer, not two for an emerging multipolar environment. On balance I argue a multipolar environment is worth the risk, particularly as middle powers will have greater capacity to shape it, but the risk of conflict is there. Australia and South Korea may therefore find a multipolar environment compels their cooperation in response to a great power war. For example, a clash between China and Japan would directly threaten the interests of both Australia and South Korea and require the significant involvement of their key security benefactor the United States. A Japan-Russia clash or India-China clash would be less dangerous to these middle powers, but might equally draw them in.

The cycles of history: Lilliputs in a spin?

This article is not seeking to argue that where the past denied middle powers influence, the future will inevitably be brighter. This is not a theological or whiggish article about history bending in the direction of the middle powers. It seems fair to suggest that thanks to the relative stability of the last half-century today's middle powers are more developed and secure in their territory and identity than their 19th century predecessors. Likewise new technologies for communication, surveillance and strike force are helping strengthen the military capacity of middle powers. However, ultimately it is the ideas of the great powers, rather than the material capacity of the smaller powers which is more fundamental in determining middle power influence. That is, the fundamental unwillingness of the great powers to engage with the smaller states has done more to exclude them from effect than their absence of material capacity. International systems are socially constructed, like most things in international politics. There is no single trigger or material level at which the world is seen

to now be operating in a different international system. These systems cannot be unrelated to the material capacity of states. In the Cold War for instance, the USA and USSR really were the two largest and strongest states, and by a considerable margin. But arguably the USSR began envisaging and acting as if it was in a bipolar environment during the Second World War. Stalin sought to sideline Great Britain, a move which the USA did not substantially protest. If the US and China also decide they are locked into a long term bipolar structure, there is little the middle powers could do to challenge that.

Given this, it's also worth considering Australia and South Korean interactions should Asia spin back towards a bipolar environment. In such a system whatever buds of cooperation are beginning to appear, would likely be quickly squashed. Australia and South Korea should be conscious therefore that the more time the USA and China spend focused on each other, such as the 'shirtsleeves summit' held in June 2013 between the US and Chinese Presidents, the greater likelihood these states will come to conceive of Asia in a bipolar fashion. This could occur irrespective of the relative material capacity of other major states. This warning also applies to the middle powers, and here Australia and South Korea need to be aware that any efforts to encourage the US and China to cooperate towards peace today at the start of this century, could lead to their exclusion from power and influence for the rest of the century. A bipolar environment may arguably be more stable (Mearsheimer 2001:335; Waltz 1964:883), but it is certainly far less favourable to the interests of middle and smaller powers and their opportunities for influence.

Should a bipolar situation emerge in Asia, South Korea and Australia would find that the bipolar orientation of the region would overwhelm all other considerations for their initiatives. Any proposal from small scale ground defence engagements to high level multilateral summits would be viewed in Washington and Beijing almost exclusively in terms of their relationship. Zero-sum calculations will tend to become the default approach of both bigger players, leaving the smaller players faced with the almost impossible task of selling an initiative in a way that convinces each great power they

would be the primary if not sole benefiter of the proposal. While a China-US bipolar system will not have the same degree of ideological divide as the US-USSR conflict did, nor will it necessarily move into a purely competitive (let alone purely cooperative) format, there are significant enough differences, including around issues of culture and race, which could work to keep China and the US apart. And potentially put South Korea and Australia on opposing sides of regional debates. For example, any US decision to allow a Chinese 'sphere of influence' would be much more in Australia's interest than South Korea's. Meanwhile any decision by China to focus on building an economic trade zone in Northeast Asia would be of benefit to South Korea, but feed Australian fears about exclusion from Asia and economic strangulation. Finally, while a bipolar environment provided significant stability during the Cold War, the transition period may involve a significantly increased risk of war. A US which increasingly fears the end of its easy hegemony, and which rejects moving to encourage a multipolar environment, may decide it must fight to retain primacy (Layne 2006:41; White 2012:106). The reverse might also be true of a China looking to secure its ascendancy or make use of American reticence about another Cold War to carve out a sphere of influence. While China currently lacks substantial regional let alone global power projection capacity (Shambaugh 2013) continued economic growth and domestic stability could enable it to do so in coming decades.

Thus, while South Korea and Australia can anticipate closer and more profitable avenues for cooperation and middle power meddling should a multipolar environment occur, they should both also pay attention to ways to prevent a bipolar system arising in Asia. Not that they could do this alone, but encouraging the US and China away from an exclusionary relationship and expanding the role of India, Japan and Russia in the region, as uncomfortable as that may be for both Australia and South Korea in the interim, may provide far more long term economic and security benefits. This therefore suggests that profitable South Korean and Australian cooperation should not merely wait for the opportunities of a multipolar system, but actively work now towards encouraging it. The middle powers should encourage the calls by China, Russia and India for a multipolar environment (Ambrosio 2005:397), while working to re-assure their American ally that a multipolar system in a

currently prosperous and peaceful 21st century Asia, is far better than risking another Cold War by overly focusing on China.

Conclusion – Free to keep bickering?

This paper has begun to flesh out the argument that the influence of middle powers, and thus the likelihood of meaningful cooperation between Australia and South Korea, is dependent upon the emergence of a multipolar international system, and that any shift back to a bipolar environment would see middle power activism curtailed. This idea is not new, credit must go to Carsten Holbraad whose seminal work *Middle Powers in International Politics* in 1984, first helped to identify this connection, likewise Dibb in 1995 noted on middle powers and the changing structure in Asia. But it's an argument that is too often overlooked, by proponents and critics of middle powers. For proponents, the idea that the international system is more important takes away from the agency of small and middle sized states. It suggests that the celebrations of niche diplomacy and good international citizenship were more a-historic and situational than they might otherwise have seemed. And while proponents are beginning to suggest that a middle power moment is emerging (perhaps rightly), it also demonstrates that the length and nature of this moment will not be something the middle powers can substantially affect. For critics of the middle power concept, the idea suggests the fallacy of only focusing on the great powers, to the exclusion of all else. It also means that the way states think about the international system (do they see it as unipolar, bipolar, multipolar etc.) can have a fundamental effect on the nature of the international system that is not in ratio to material capacity (though certainly not fundamentally distinct from it). And more so, it means that middle powers really may matter, though they have tended not to in the past.

Australia and South Korea are less bickering lilliputs than somewhat estranged cousins. There's not much love but no hate either. There simply hasn't been that much to bring the two nations together, whether to protect or promote a vision of the world that suits their common interests and identities. This is beginning to change, and we will see substantially more flights between Seoul and Canberra, along with workshops, papers and books about the relationship. If the thesis of this paper is correct

that the international system substantially affects the capacity for meaningful cooperation between smaller states, then the future of Australia-South Korea relations could be either very bright (if a mixed-multipolar environment emerges) or very dim (if a bipolar system reasserts). That takes away from some of the agency we might like to grant these states, but it does offer policy makers some questions to guide their thinking. What kinds of policies can they implement to help encourage a multipolar world to improve future influence? Is the increased risk of a multipolar world worth extra influence? Finally, what areas of influence might be viable that are not currently, such as maritime security cooperation? As the world shifts, so must our basic concepts and ideas about how the world works, who matters and where.

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