

The launch of the ASEAN Regional Forum resonated with the ideas of comprehensive security enshrined in ASEAN processes and the new ideas of co-operative security developed in Europe in the late 1980s.

That fusion, what might be called 'Co-operative Security 1.0,' has been an integral part of a system that has enjoyed peace for a generation. But it is no longer enough to address increasing nationalism and the tensions produced as the rise of China challenges the predominance of the US. It's time to develop "Co-operative Security 2.0."

**Recasting
the East Asian
Security Order**

**Co-operative
Security 2.0**

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Middle Powerism in the 21st Century: Mission Impossible?

By Paul Evans

Being a middle power in today's world is far different than it was when the concept was ascendant in the 1990s. The dream of an inclusive multilateral world has stalled and great power politics have reemerged in the Asia-Pacific region, writes Paul Evans.

Drawing on the national debate in Canada, he asks if it is possible for middle powers to reassert themselves as balancing forces.

THE IDEAL OF the middle power as diplomatic ambition, national identity and regional tonic has roiled discussions in countries around the Pacific for 30 years. In Australia, Canada and New Zealand, it has been part of mainstream thinking for half a century. Its reach now extends to South Korean academic and policy communities as well as intellectual circles in Japan, Indonesia and occasionally Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand.

The high point of middle power activism was in the 1990s when a shifting coalition of countries helped catalyze a creative period of inclusive multilateralism on economic and security matters. The Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation forum (APEC), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and a variety of sub-regional mechanisms, including the concept of Track 2 diplomacy, are the most significant markers of success. The era of co-operative security experimentation was not created by middle powers alone but probably could not have been launched without their individual and co-ordinated prodding and leadership.

The role and purpose of the middle power today look rather different. The institutions that middle powers helped create have been less effective than imagined, as inclusive multilateralism has been eclipsed by great power leadership in trade agreements (e.g. TPP and RCEP), alliances have stronger gravitational pull, security tensions and uncertainties are rising and, above all, a shifting balance of power has brought geopolitical competition to the fore. Further, in several national capitals, the middle power brand is a tough sell. The fortuitous circumstances — including great power forbearance — which combined to produce the

¹ Robert W. Cox, "Middlepowermanship, Japan and Future World Order," *International Journal* XLIV, Autumn 1989, pp. 241-42 and p. 250.

special middle power moment in the aftermath of the Cold War are gone.

So what is the middle power role in this new setting? What can it contribute in managing specific conflicts, building an institutional architecture and designing a new regional order? Using Canada as an example, what sustains the interest, capacity, imagination and determination to play a middle power role that is hard to pursue in the region and that has a growing list of detractors and skeptics at home?

Defining the Middle Power

The middle power is most often described by its attributes, a country of mid-range capabilities, comparative wealth, significant diplomatic capacity and reputation, at least some hard power assets, domestic stability, surplus diplomatic energy, no region to dominate, and, likely, a strong relationship with the United States.

It is lauded as an idea innovator, builder and defender of international organizations, promoter of a rule-based system and international law, creator of transnational networks, situation stabilizer, shock absorber in great power conflicts, mediator and conciliator in disputes, norm entrepreneur, provider of public goods, champion of openness and connectedness, good international citizen, honest broker, helpful fixer, moral actor, consensus seeker, moderate in outlook and promoter of acceptable rules of conduct for great and small alike.

It is the "middle" part that is most demanding and where the role fuses with an "ism." This does not merely refer to capabilities, but to an attitude, a state of mind about national identity and global positioning. In its narrowest sense, it means playing a role *in between* conflicting parties in mediating disputes, offering good offices, building common ground and working with and through international organizations like the UN in peacekeeping and peacebuilding operations.

In its wider ambition, it means keeping a certain distance from direct involvement in major conflicts. It does not mean non-alignment but it does involve preserving a self-imposed degree of autonomy in relation to major powers. It requires a commitment to orderly change and building bridges not just between conflicting parties but across major political and ideological divides with the intention of curtailing risk and reducing conflict.

The most demanding criterion is being a harbinger of a more orderly world and being able to see across immediate national interests and pursuits. It involves the search for regularity and predictability with a semblance of order and tranquility. And it requires a demanding blend of nationalism and cosmopolitanism, self-criticism and self-confidence, tough judgment and empathy.

Accordingly, the middle power role, writes Robert Cox, "is not a fixed universal but something that has to be rethought continuously in the context of the changing state of the international system."¹ The relationship to world order is its defining element. Some states try to serve the community of nations by a readiness to assist in the adjustment of conflicts.

This is not utopianism or unbounded altruism but a realpolitik position of states that cannot and do not aspire to dominance. The primary national interest of the middle power is, in Cox's words, "an order and predictable world environment that embodies some limits to the ambitions and reach of dominant powers." In building a rule-based order, their generally preferred tool is international institutions.

In conditions of system change, or what some have called hegemonic transition, they face a very special challenge: "They have one foot mired in the past while the other tries to test out the ground of the future." This is being in the Middle with a capital "M": aspiring to be simultaneously the glue that holds a regional security order together and the grease that lubricates its transition. In a period of power transition, power diffusion and messy multi-centrism,

That common values can help unify particular groups of states in Asia is unmistakable. But in wider regional terms, they can also be divisive. Any focus on the political values of open societies, especially in domestic affairs but also on some aspects of international conduct draws attention to rising China's very different views on these matters.



it demands seeing across and bridging competing visions of regional and world order.

Some portray the middle power as the instrument of a liberal international order.² In the setting of the Cold War and right after, this was largely true. But in the era of a rising Asia, with China a global presence and the principal regional power challenging US primacy, middle-powerism is considerably more complicated. It slices the comfort zone of those generally satisfied with a US-anchored system, but who are also skeptical that it can be sustained.

The Canadian Turn

Since the Suez Crisis in 1956, many have seen Canada as the quintessential middle power. While being a close ally of the US, it has been a persistent and often effective champion of multilateral institutions and a supporter of dozens of ad hoc initiatives on a global scale. Regionally, it was an early and consistent supporter of ASEAN and later APEC and the ARF. It was an early (1970) mover of diplomatic relations with China and engagement aimed at bringing China into the international system. It was the funder and intellectual resource for scores of capacity-building and dialogue activities on co-operative security at the governmental, Track 2 and civil society levels focused on specific areas of tension including the South China Sea. It promoted norms and mechanisms in the areas of human security through the International Criminal Court, the anti-personnel landmines convention and the Responsibility to Protect.

Stephen Harper's Conservative government elected in 2006 took a very different course.

The term "middle power" was banned from official statements, along with terms like "human security" and "the responsibility to protect." It was no longer enough "to go along to get along." Multilateral institutions were to be used as instruments for promoting specific Canadian interests. Short-term, measurable achievements were to be valued. Canada did not withdraw from many international

3 Guy Lawson, "Trudeau's Canada, Again," *The New York Times Magazine*, Dec. 8, 2015.

4 Hugh White, *The China Choice* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

The man to remould a middle power? New Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau with two Chinese friends from Toronto Zoo. He has called Canada the first "post-nationalist state" and seems set to move the country back to an more internationalist, middle-power path.

Photo: Government of Canada



organizations but reduced its role in almost all. In Asia, it kept a low-level commitment to the institutions of which it was a part and made soft efforts to gain entry to those in which it wasn't a member, including the East Asia Summit and Asian Defence Ministers Plus meetings. It did not launch a single major regional security initiative in its decade in power.

The Liberals' return to power in October 2015 has produced another reversal. The instincts of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's new government are internationalist and cosmopolitan, its inclinations multilateralist, activist and pro-engagement. One of its first acts was to rename the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development as "Global Affairs Canada." Interviewed in his first week in office by *The New York Times*, Trudeau described Canada as the first "post-national state," a country with no core identity, no mainstream but the shared values of openness, respect, compassion, hard work and the search for equality and justice.³

As instincts and inclinations are translated into policy and priorities, the term "middle power" may not find favor in Canada. It is seen by many close to the

government as something stodgy, too associated with governments of the past and baggage from the Cold War in Europe, and too tied to particular institutions like the UN that are cumbersome and dysfunctional. Some prefer "constructive internationalist" to suggest a more nimble and efficient approach.

Yet the core aspirations are readily evident and may signal a restoration of middle-powerism, this time in overdrive and with a new focus.

Looking at the Asia-Pacific world, there are expectations that Canada will be more proactive, engaged and ambitious. With only a limited military capacity, the initiatives may well come on climate change, sustainable fisheries and other non-traditional security areas. Ottawa may well make new investments in supporting ASEAN and the ARF and looking for common cause with other regional Middle Powers, especially South Korea. And here the agenda can be global in scope including climate-change mitigation and adaptation and the strengthening of global processes including the UN and the G-20.

The question that emerges is: will other countries be receptive to a middle power surge?

Middle Power Dilemmas

Whether Canada acts alone or in partnership with others, the middle power agenda in Asia-Pacific faces five substantial challenges.

First, who are those middle power partners? There is a hard choice in deciding whether the objective is a united front with like-minded democracies with close security arrangements with the US or partnerships with countries with varied political institutions and economic systems. Coalitional activity in strengthening alliances is different than working across national and civilizational divides. What is the right balance?

Second, what exactly can be done to boost the effectiveness of existing regional institutions? The ARF has not moved beyond regional confidence building into preventive diplomacy and conflict resolution. The Six-Party talks are comatose. The East Asia Summit is only beginning to take shape and may encounter the same limitations as APEC and the ARF. Is there a middle-power role in institutional redesign, or is that now a matter for great powers to decide, concert style, as Hugh White and others have argued?⁴

Third, recognizing a common commitment to a rules-based system, whose rules apply? What rules and laws need to be defended and where is there room for flexibility? What is negotiable and what is immutable? In areas like the South China Sea, who will define precisely what freedom of navigation means in an era of vastly increased Chinese naval power? Are claims of historical rights and inter-temporal law acceptable, or is the UN Law on the Sea supreme?

Fourth, can middle powers influence China? Great powers including the US have mixed feelings about middle power agendas. Chinese strategists acknowledge the importance of middle power roles but this support may only extend to situations in which they strengthen immediate Chinese claims and interests. As difficult as it is to characterize

China as a revisionist or status quo power that is assertive, aggressive or accommodating in pursuing its interests, it is clear that China has become a rule maker and institutional builder, simultaneously supporting most existing institutions and rules while undercutting others and incubating new ones. With regional anxiety growing about China's long-term intentions, should it be contained, countered, or more deeply engaged?

Fifth, can middle powers mitigate or dampen Sino-US competition and mistrust? Is it a fool's errand to stand between the two? Like others, middle powers are treading a careful line, uncomfortable at the thought of making a decisive choice. Can they encourage the mutual accommodation that will be necessary to forestall a major clash in a region that fears America can't let go of primacy and China will demand too much or go its own way? This becomes even more difficult due to the failure of the liberal narrative that assumes that economic growth and social opening will produce political liberalization in China. To the contrary, China is not liberalizing and the US and other Western democracies face the prospect of living with a China that will have a different political system and economy than their own and is not likely to converge in the long run. Can the US and China be nudged in the direction of deeper mutual understanding and accommodation of each other's core interests?

Working across the clash of national interests and bridging international orders is not going to be easy. It is the middle power's curse and mission to try. Will many volunteer for a mission impossible?

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