Rethinking Middle Powers in the Asian Century

The term “middle power” is conceptually fragile. Some scholars have even argued for abandoning it. This book argues that the concept needs to be analysed more profoundly and that new analytical tools need to be developed to better understand the phenomenon. The traditional approach, based on Western states, is insufficient and has become increasingly irrelevant in a transformed global environment. Instead of drawing from a single theory of international relations, the contributors have chosen to build upon a wide range of theories in a deliberate demonstration of analytic eclecticism. A pluralistic approach provides stronger explanations while remaining analytically and intellectually rigorous. Many of the theory contributions are reconsidering how the largely “Western” bases of such theorising need revising in light of the “emerging middle powers”, many of which are in Asia.

Presenting a strong argument for studying middle powers, this book explores both the theory and empirical applications of the concept by rethinking the definition and characteristics of middle powers using a range of case studies. It examines changes in the study of middle powers over the last decade, proposing to look at the concept of middle powers in a coherent and inclusive manner. Finally, it aims to further the discussion on the evolution of the international system and provides sound conclusions about the theoretical usefulness and empirical evolution of middle powers today.

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Rethinking Middle Powers in the Asian Century
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Introduction

David Walton and Thomas S. Wilkins

The rise of middle powers

As the historical dominance of the Western powers ebbs away in the face of an Asian resurgence, commentators have begun to contemplate what the international system will look like in the so-called “Asian Century” (Rachman, 2016; Auslin, 2017). At the heart of the systemic transformation we are experiencing is the competition for power and influence across the “Indo-Pacific” (defined below) between the United States and the People’s Republic of China (PRC: henceforth: “China”). Analysts are deeply divided over how the power transition will evolve and what its implications will be for the pivotal Indo-Pacific region, and globally (Walton & Kavalski, 2017; White, 2017). Although the rise of Asia has undoubtedly brought great advancements in development and prosperity to the region, it remains home to a wide range of potential conflicts and other sources of instability (Tipton, 1998; Mahbubani, 2008). Tensions on the Korean Peninsula, the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea are but the most prolific geopolitical hotspots in a region marked by diverse territorial disputes and simmering historical grievances. Added to this are an array of Non-Traditional Security (NTS) challenges – environmental, financial, demographic and encompassing transnational criminal organisations, terrorists and other sub-state antagonists (Caballero-Anthony, 2016).

Scholars and analysts have naturally focused their attention upon the relations between the great powers in the region, particularly the United States and China, as their emerging rivalry will define the strategic context within which other states will operate (Friedberg, 2011; Allison, 2017). But they will not be the only actors that need to address both the grand strategic issues and the complex nexus of NTS challenges indicted earlier. The Indo-Pacific is also home to a range of secondary powers that not only have stakes in the evolving regional order, but also significant capabilities to respond to, and potentially shape their strategic environment. These states are frequently referred to as middle powers – and while they do not possess the full range of power resources at the disposal of the world’s handful of truly great powers, they can be distinguished from the majority of small or minor powers who lack any capacity to meaningfully influence the international system. As has been repeatedly noted by scholars and analysts,
these states are ranked second only to the great powers, usually considered to qualify among the top 20–30 most powerful countries in the world, and should in no way be misconstrued as being ranked literally in the “middle” of the power hierarchy of over 200 nations (Gilley & O’Neil, 2014). Instead, as the material category of states qualifying as middle powers expands, and these states individually and collectively grow in strength and confidence, commentators have started to speak of a “rise of the middle powers” (Gilley, 2012; Kinzer, 2011). The consequence, as Adam Balcer attests, is that “in the coming decades the role of the middle powers in the international arena is most probably going to increase substantially” (Balcer, 2012, p. 1).

Thus, we need to consider in what ways middle powers individually and collectively impact upon the regional order. Second, we need to reflect on how bipolar Sino-American rivalry/power transition is further illuminated by examining the foreign policy behaviours of these secondary states. Indeed, David Scott et al. have gone as far as to argue that “a newly emerging middle is changing the global balance of power.” (Scott, Hau & Hulme, 2010, p. 3). We need to consider whether typical middle power diplomacy – engaging in mediation, norm entrepreneurship and coalition-building – will assist in managing the international system and contributing to global governance in an age of renewed great power rivalry (Carr, 2014). To achieve this, a fundamental rethinking of what it means to be a middle power in the Asian Century is required. Although the term middle power has a long pedigree in both the policy and academic worlds (Holbraad, 1984; Cooper et al., 1993; Robertson, 2007), its definition and conceptualisation remain contested, and these issues will be duly investigated in the course of this volume (Chapnick, 2000; Welsh, 2004). Quibbling about the appropriateness of the label middle power per se however, does not alter the fact that the role of these middle-stratum states in a rapidly transforming international system deserves greater attention in the IR literature than it presently receives.

**Middle powers in the Asian Century**

A renewed scholarly investigation into the status, composition and characteristics of the middle power is therefore warranted by the dynamic nature of the concept. Momentous changes can be discerned in both the material and ideational bases of this type of state, within a systemic context. At the crux of the matter is the issue of what it means to be a middle power in the Asian Century. To investigate this first requires us to revisit and revaluate conventional positional and “behavioural” approaches towards middle power, and to go beyond them, to determine how their very identity can be constituted (or re-constituted).

First, the whole concept is dynamic since it is widely recognised that the collection of states said to materially qualify in the positional category of middle powers at any given moment is constantly changing. Bruce Gilley and Andrew O’Neil testify that “given its relational and material nature, the set of middle powers will fluctuate over time. Indeed, the category itself is no longer defined
mainly by the traditional Western middle powers” (Gilley & O’Neil, 2014, p. 7). In the early 21st century, as the (surviving) traditional middle powers persevere, they are joined by aspirant middle powers (some on a “way station” to potential great power, such as India and Brazil), and by nominally great powers, such as Japan, for example, which may have begun a descent to the rank of middle power. These trends indicate that the physical stratum of middling states in the international system is expanding, but that the positional approach is required as a point of departure for determining which countries enjoy the requisite material capabilities to fall into the category of empirical enquiry, quite apart from their “type” (traditional or emerging).

Because of the expansion and reconstitution of the material category of middle power, the ideational or behavioural make-up of such states is altered and thus the roles they play are mutating. Paul Evans identifies that:

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. (Evans, 2016, pp. 49–50)

This raises questions as to the changed nature and role of both the so-called traditional (or classical; sometimes: first wave) middle powers such as Australia and Canada, as well as the so-called emerging (or new; second wave) middle powers such as India or Indonesia. How have traditional middle power roles changed, and how do the emerging middle powers, which have increasingly come to proliferate in this stratum of the international hierarchy, differ in their capabilities and policy preferences?

In a way, a re-examination of the well-established positional and behavioural facets of middle power form the necessary bases to arrive at an understanding of the third identity aspect. Which countries embrace the term to describe themselves and their foreign policies? And do others identify them as such? Have the bases for identifying as a middle power changed?

By seeking to examine the state of middle power theorising in IR at this important juncture, this book investigates both how we theorise middle power, and examines the evidence of new case studies to shed new light on our understanding of the concept in the Asian Century. The book not only seeks to reevaluate and add to our current array of conceptual tools, but also to reconsider familiar cases such as Australia and Canada, alongside well-known problematic cases such as Japan and India, plus more novel cases including Pakistan, the DPRK and Singapore. Through these theoretical and empirical explorations, we seek to make a comprehensive contribution to the corpus of conceptual and practical knowledge of middle powers in IR.
The “third wave” of middle powers

As noted, the literature on middle power is agreed on the dynamism of the concept as well as the fluidity with which states enter or exit this stratum of the international hierarchy. Robert Cox claims that the category of middle power “is not a fixed universal but something that has to be rethought continuously in the context of the changing state of the international system” (Cox, 1989, p. 825). To this end, Andrew Cooper and Emer Dal identify three chronological waves of middle powerdom. Yet it must be noted that these waves are best thought of not only progressively but also in accumulative terms, both in regard to the additional roles that middle powers have adopted historically, and in relation to how these three phases chime with different emphasis in conceptualising these states (i.e. the accompanying scholarship: with the emphasis shifting from positional, to behavioural, to identity-based conceptions, as discussed below).

The first of these waves originated in the “immediate post-1945 era when a cluster of secondary powers, notably Canada and Australia, alongside a range of Western European states [e.g. Belgium, Norway], attempted to carve out a new, upgraded position based on a functional logic” (Cooper & Dal, 2017, p. 517). Championed at this time by Canadian Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent, and Australian Minister for External Affairs Herbert Evatt respectively: “With an active presence—and voice capabilities—at the creation of the post-1945 institutions, the traditional middle powers had a vital stake in the institutional status quo” (Cooper, 2016, p. 533). Indeed, as the Cold War unfolded these powers would set the paradigm of a so-called “traditional middle power” characterised by “system supporter role” (Cooper, 2016, p. 533), “followership” in the American alliance system, active diplomacy towards the provision of global public goods, and niche diplomacy. As Cooper and Dal observe “the first wave middle powers tend to play a legitimising role as the intermediary in the global political-economic structure, partly due to the benefits this can generate” (Cooper & Dal, 2016, p. 520). What elements of this paradigm remain, and how they have coped and adapted with a radically changed international structure, are key foci of this study in the chapters that follow.

The second wave of middle powerdom occurred in the immediate post-Cold War period. Here Cooper and Dal argue that “using the space available in the post-Cold War period, a refined cluster of middle powers upgraded the intensity of their ideational and entrepreneurial roles” (Cooper & Dal, 2016, p. 518). At this stage the category of middle power looked rather different, though Canada and Australia took a proactive role in spearheading this wave (for example, under Foreign Ministers Lloyd Axworthy and Gareth Evans respectively), they were now joined by other arrivals to the category, so-called “emerging middle powers” such as South Korea, and later South Africa and Indonesia. Western European middle powers effectively fell out of the category as they were subsumed into the larger entity of the EU as a more unified international actor. According to Cooper and Dal, “this second wave, rather than being antagonistic to the global order as it stood, wanted to stretch and refine that order” (Cooper & Dal, 2016, p. 518). This was the heyday of middle power activism as reflected in “niche diplomacy”
where they individually and in combination contributed to issues such as arms control, the environment, and peacekeeping. This typical role was defined, according to Daniel Baldino et al. as giving “greater weight to items like ethical responsibility or moral assertiveness, conflict management, peacekeeping, humanitarian intervention, respect for international legal standards and participating in international organisations” (Baldino et al., 2011, p. 118). As Carsten Holbraad famously remarked, “this tendency to assume a degree of moral superiority was to become an even more noticeable feature of some Canadian thinking about the nature and role of middle powers” (Holbraad, 1984, p. 58).

The current third wave of middle powerdom, looks quite different in many respects from its antecedents. Evans contends that “the fortuitous circumstances – including great power forbearance – which combined to produce the special middle power moment in the aftermath of the Cold War are gone” (Evans, 2016, p. 49). The circumstances in which a radically reshuffled category of middle power states find themselves has led towards a more complex make-up of middlepowerdom. In the post-financial crisis era, Cooper and Dal argue: “The third wave defines middle powers more explicitly by their inclusion in the G20” (Cooper & Dal, 2016, p. 518). This has substantially raised the profile of these selected powers as “for the first time in global governance, middle powers have been brought to the ‘high table’ with an equivalency of bigger states” (Cooper & Dal, 2016, p. 522). However, the category of middle powers in the G20 (and outside of it) is markedly more diverse than the initial wave. The traditional middle powers typified by Canada and Australia are now matched, or even outnumbered by the emerging middle powers, whilst a “next wave” of rising middle powers waits in the wings (sometimes referred to as the NEXT 11), few of which share the basic foreign policy settings of the traditional paradigm. In this sense, Gilley and O’Neil argue that “previous category-defining middle powers like Canada and Australia may now appear as aberrant” (Gilley & O’Neil, 2014, p. 12). For Cooper and Dal: “More than the first and second wave, it is the contradictions of the third wave about middle powers that stand out” (Cooper & Dal, 2016, p. 522). It is these shifting roles/identities and contradictions that this book will seek to probe and explain.

There are three contexts or characteristics that frame the debate of the “third wave” of middle powerdom, and its accompanying scholarship, that we wish to emphasise here, and reflect upon throughout the chapters that follow. First, the third wave is clearly the product of an international (and regional system) in transformation. Laura Neack attests that:

The configuration of system structure—multipolar, bipolar, unipolar (hegemonic)—defined by the number and relationships among the “great powers” of the moment dictates the context of constraints and opportunities in which the remaining states in the system must function. They constantly confront the security dilemmas created by their global and regional relationships to the major powers and must determine their alliance stances accordingly.

(Neack, 2000, pp. 14–18)
The realignment of the international system toward a more diffuse, heterogeneous and multipolar structure is catalysing middle power strategies (Haass, 2017; Macaes, 2018). As a result Cooper argues: “The reshaping of the global system requires a fundamental rethinking of what middle powers need to do to navigate the fast-shifting global geometry of power” (Cooper, 2013, p. 963). This creates opportunities for middle power states, because, as Downie argues:

In the transition to a multipolar environment, power is more diffuse and the attributes traditionally associated with these nations – such as convening, agenda setting, and coalition building – could, if mobilised, provide them with significant power to shape the international system.

(Downie, 2017, p. 1494)

The potential for effective middle power agency at such a critical juncture therefore appears high.

On the one hand, as the United States’ presence in the region and the world more generally has diminished – an outcome accelerated under the “only America first” presidency of Donald Trump (Wesley, 2018). Washington has become less able and willing to shoulder the burdens of global governance and upholding the liberal world order (Ikenberry, 2011, pp. 56–68; Ikenberry, 2018, pp. 7–23). Cooper and Dal contend that “in many ways this structural change opened up advantages for the middle powers. Rather than being able to ‘lay down the law’ as it has done throughout the post-1945 era, the United States had to negotiate and bargain” (Cooper & Dal, 2016). Notwithstanding residual material commitment to its prior “rebalance” policy toward Asia (now: “Indo-Pacific”), so far President Trump’s erratic actions, in particular his abrogation of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), have unilaterally knocked away one of the supporting props in the overall rules-based regional order that the traditional middle powers at least defined themselves by upholding.

On the other hand, the rise of China has shifted the terrain upon which middle powers have traditionally operated in the first and second waves, presenting new challenges and opportunities. Gilley and O’Neil argue: “As influential agents in international politics, they have the potential to reshape and redirect the way in which China’s ascent evolves” as well as acting as a “bellwether for charting the Rise of China” (Gilley & O’Neil, 2014, p. 3). With the United States leaving a geo-economic vacuum in the Pacific Basin, China has in contrast been extraordinarily proactive in establishing a suite of initiatives such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), One Belt One Road (OBOR) and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) that have attracted middle powers towards Beijing’s orbit (Mingfu, 2015).

Indeed, in an emerging bipolar contest for dominance and allegiance between Washington and Beijing has resulted in “middle powers... emerging as a new arena of rivalry for Sino-US relations” (Gilley & O’Neil, 2014, p. 3). Martin Wight notes: “A middle power is a power with such military strength, resources and strategic position that in peacetime the great powers bid for its support”
Presently, Beijing seeks to identify certain middle powers (Zhongdeng guojia) as potential “swing states” that can be prized from the American orbit and co-opted into a Sino-centric order. Indeed, Gilley speculates that “the shifting allegiance of traditional middle powers like Canada may be one of the best indicators of a power transition in the international system” (Gilley, 2011, p. 247). To what degree middle powers individually – or more likely collectively – can engage in bridging and mediation between these rivals through norm setting in regional forums is open to question. Former Indonesian President Yudhoyono claimed that, “middle and small powers can help lock these powers into a durable architecture through a variety of instruments” (Saragih, 2012). This remains to be seen, since while ASEAN retains a degree of centrality, it is now Beijing that is most actively engaged in building regional institutional architecture, and thus likely to set the agenda.

Second, as a corollary; the challenges faced in responding to this transformation of the international system, especially in the Indo-Pacific, are particularly acute for the remaining traditional (or classical) middle powers. Indeed, “the core attribute of the classic middle powers was to provide first followership to the hegemon of the global system, the United States” (Cooper & Dal, 2016, p. 520). Yet relative decline of the United States, which has until now acted as a lodestar for classical middle power followers has undermined their position and threatens them with declining relevance if they do not find a way to recalibrate their polices accordingly. As Cooper warns:

structural constraints have come into play that downgrade the traditional middle powers’ capabilities. In the post-1945 era, middle powers possessed a privileged position, with little competition from the “Rest” in the global system. A world with BRICS demanding a great say in the running of the global system is very different to the relationship between the United States and middle powers has fundamentally altered.

(Cooper, 2016)

This strikes at the heart of what it means to be a first wave/traditional middle power in the Asian Century, and exposes the need for such countries to reorient or even reinvent themselves to match the prevailing global/regional order. Yet Cooper and Dal posit that “rather than simply accepting a logic of decline, opportunities from this shifting environment must be acknowledged as well” (Cooper & Dal, 2016, p. 522). In Paul Evans’ words: “In a period of power transition, power diffusion and messy multi-centrism, it demands seeing across and bridging competing visions of regional and world order” (Evans, 2016, p. 50). For these traditional powers, it may be an opportune moment, for another round of “relocating” – as was undertaken in the post-Cold War period (Cooper, Higgot & Nossal, 1993). Indeed, this volume goes further to open the question of whether and in what way the differentiation between traditional and emerging middle power paradigms are meaningful and useful to our analysis.
Third, we are seeing the new alignments of middle powers. While scholars and analysts have pointed to the great potential for combinations of middle power states in the international system, examples have been slow to appear. According to the writings of Robert Keohane, middle powers will acquire additional agency when acting in concert and/or through institutions (Keohane, 1969, pp. 291–310). Indeed, coalition-building has typically been seen as an integral part of middle power diplomacy – for example single-issue coalitions such as the Cairns Group and the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). Though pundits, taking BRICS as their inspiration, have been quick to fabricate a number of catchy acronyms for such putative groupings such as IBSA, CIVETS, MINT, MIST and MIKTA, at this point it needs to be questioned exactly how meaningful and effective inventive-sounding formations might be. Nevertheless, the emergence of these institutions, often forged among middle powers, indicates how such powers are creating and championing new platforms for governance on their own terms. On this basis Cooper and Dal conclude that “in terms of institutionalized agency, opportunities have become available as never before” (Cooper & Dal, 2016, p. 522).

Defining our parameters for study

Before outlining the overall contents of the volume, it is necessary to set a certain number of parameters by which the book will nominally be bounded. First, of course is a word on the definition of the term “middle power”. According to a dedicated study by Jeffrey Robertson: “There are no authoritative academic works specifically focused on the definition of middle powers. However, scholars writing on middle powers invariably devote a section of their article to definition” (Robertson, 2017, p. 359). There is no overcoming this inherent problem as Robertson notes: “All middle-power definitions suffer from clearly identifiable weaknesses and thus have never been fully accepted in the conceptual scheme of political science and international relations” (Robertson, 2017, p. 362). These issues are duly noted. While this introduction does not seek to provide an authoritative definition, several of the chapters in the first half of the book do probe the definitional issue directly, whilst others add layers to the debates around how we categorise a middle power. The emphasis in the volume is rather to explore its nature and usage of the term in multiple contexts and often from a critical perspective.

A second core related concept is regional power, which must also be registered here. As Detlef Nolte observes “there is still the problem of making a clear-cut distinction between regional powers and middle powers” (Nolte, 2010, p. 889). This applies both theoretically and empirically “since many regional powers currently utilise strategies which are attributed to traditional middle powers” (Nolte, 2010, p. 891). Space precludes citing one of the many lengthy lists that serve to define regional powers, suffice to say here that “the label ‘regional power’ refers to countries which are influential and powerful in certain geographic regions or sub-regions [and that] The same states could be middle powers or great powers
in the global context” (Nolte, 2010, p. 893). Indeed this crossover is apparent in that some global middle powers are also regional powers (Australia) whilst others are not (Canada). Conversely, Cooper and Dal state that “the emerging middle powers in MIKTA, while trying to reduce their involvement with the regional crises, tend toward the global to maintain their functional position in the global order” (Cooper & Dal, 2016, p. 526). Nevertheless, middle power theorising can be profitably applied to the concept of regional power and there are evidently valuable interconnections between these descriptors as well as potential for confusion/conflation we should be alert to (Cooper, 2013). There are some obvious intersections both conceptually and empirically with middle power, as recent scholarship on regionalism has shown (Wilkins, 2017, pp. 110–125).

Though the phenomenon of middlepowerdom is global, in this volume we concentrate our attention upon the Indo-Pacific region, which likewise raises thorny definitional issues (see Beeson, 2018). As noted by Rory Medcalf, the Indo-Pacific encompasses an “emerging Asian strategic system that encompasses both the Pacific and Indian Oceans, defined in part by the geographically expanding interests and reach of China and India, and the continued strategic role and presence of the United States in both” (Medcalf, 2012). In addition to the Indo-Pacific forming the title theme for the series in which this volume appears, it also better reflects the overall geographical locus of the majority of case studies considered here. By including subcontinental (and Central Asian) case-study states – India, Pakistan, in addition to familiar Asia-Pacific/Pacific cases such as Australia and Canada – this represents a judicious relocation towards this area as an emerging fulcrum of geopolitical power. Thus it forms part of a structural trend toward “Easternisation” identified by Gideon Rachman (though, as we note, this empirically represents a partial westward shift away from the Pacific towards the Indian Ocean) (Rachman, 2016). Writing from Australia, we witness a contest between the familiar Asia-Pacific appellation traditionally favoured by policymakers (e.g. PM Kevin Rudd’s “Asia Pacific Century”) and recent attempts to recognise and reassign geopolitical/strategic priority to the intersection of the Indian and Pacific Oceans which Australia straddles (Australian Government, 2016). Furthermore, this emphasis is championed by advocates of greater future cooperation with a rising India in Australia, Japan, the United States and elsewhere. As Andrew Phillips states: “the Indo-Pacific idea foregrounds themes of pan-regional integration and aggregates two theatres (the Asia–Pacific and the Indian Ocean region) that have historically constituted radically distinct regional security orders” (Phillips, 2016, p. 12). In our case, the choice to spread cases studies from the Eastern and Western Pacific across Central Asia to the Indian Ocean/subcontinent does not represent an endorsement of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic concept, but rather a reflection of the broader coverage gained with respect to a region of rising importance.

Though this book is primarily focused upon the Indo-Pacific region, several qualifications are in order. First, it does not claim to offer any form of Indo-Pacific (or “Asian”) theory of middle power. Since middle power theorising, and indeed the discipline of IR in general, is largely grounded in Western intellectual
traditions, there is little value to be had in attempt to rebuild this distinguished body of thinking from scratch (Acharya & Buzan, 2007; 2017). Instead, the volume seeks to add to and revise/critique such theorising using a multitude of perspectives from Asia and beyond (since for theory to be useful it must be capable of being universally applied – hence we include discussion about emerging middle powers that are not in Asia to make our theorising more inclusive and complete). Second, we cannot give comprehensive coverage of all potential middle powers in the Indo-Pacific region, but rather supply selected cases studies – some of them familiar – but in need of “rethinking” such as Australia and Canada and others less well investigated (but also problematic) such as India, Pakistan and Singapore. This is not to say that Asian perspectives will in any way be neglected – two chapters are dedicated to Chinese thinking, and the openness and exposure to such perspectives is a running theme throughout the book.

Organisation of the book

The book is divided into two parts. Part I (“Theoretical approaches”) examines the conceptualisation of middle power and how it is theorised. It places a specific emphasis on whether our extant theoretical apparatus (principally grounded in the so-called traditional middle powers) is adequate to meet the task of dealing with the advent of emerging middle powers and how our theoretical repertoire may be added to through the application of more critically orientated IR perspectives. Interestingly, middle power theorising itself has come in scholarly waves somewhat mirroring the three periods of heightened empirical middlepowerism that Cooper and Dal identified earlier. The chapters that follow explore and traverse these waves of scholarship, seeking to crest the third of these by applying a range of critical approaches.

The first group of three chapters probes the various milieu in which the middle power concept exists by interrogating the definitional, historical and theoretical contexts. In Chapter 1 Tanguy Struye de Swielande reminds us that the development of a second and third wave of theorising about middle powers has implications on what we construe to be normative assumptions. He contends that current definitions of middle power that focus on function, capabilities, norms and behaviour are ethnocentric and too simplistic. Struye de Swielande moreover, argues that an analytically eclectic approach with variables examining the systemic impact, geopolitical realities, domestic characteristics and status of nation states has more universal applicability. Such a pluralistic framework, he maintains, is valid for both traditional (Western) and non-tradition or emerging (non-Western) middle powers. In Chapter 2 Gabriele Abbondanza applies a big picture historical overview and historical determinist approach to the middle power construct. His work highlights the evolution of conceptual thinking about middle powers from antiquity (Greek and Roman, but significantly also Chinese and Indian); post-classical era (Medieval Italy); and Cold War period, bringing us up to the contemporary era. By doing so, Abbondanza argues that the current lack of conceptual clarity and shared definitions needs to be understood as a
product of the historical determination of the middle power concept; a condition that calls for newer research in the light of the ever-changing nature of IR. In Chapter 3 Thomas S. Wilkins seeks to consolidate and refine the existing range of theoretical literature on the concept of middle power into an accessible analytical framework that incorporates Realist, Liberalist and Constructivist images of middle power, which can potentially be applied to any selected case study. Wilkins seeks to reconcile the so-called “positional”, “behavioural” and “ideational” strains of middle power theorising with their broader intellectual homes in IR theory, and to clearly disaggregate the third Constructivist (ideational) image from the preceding Liberalist (Behavioural) image. Moreover, in the process he illustrates how each of these three “images” sheds further light on how the very definition of middle power is constituted.

The following three chapters expand the debate on conceptualising middle powers, each taking up a related theme that layers, expands and rethinks our understanding. In Chapter 4 Allan Patience and Chiraag Roy assesses “types” of middle power. They contend that there are three essential types; (i) dependent middle powers, (ii) regional middle powers and (iii) middle powers as global citizens. Patience and Roy’s core argument is that clarification of the specific middle power identity that a state claims for itself helps that state to maximise the efficacy of its foreign and security policymaking. Dependent and regional middle powers, according to this argument, rarely exercise influence in global politics. In effect, they are faux middle powers. However, states in the third category of middle powers (e.g. Norway) achieve influence in global affairs by mediating in conflicts and successfully advocating on issues like human rights or nuclear weapons non-proliferation. Federica de Pantz (Chapter 5) then focuses on the connection between different traditions of IR theory and foreign policy analysis. She examines the structure-agency debate as its appertains to middle power theorising and exposes the limitations of structural and behavioural approaches. She then proposes that a sounder alternative to these two perspectives is to conceptualise the middle power as a role that some medium-ranked states adopt, and which expresses itself in the foreign policy style of middlepowermanship. She concludes that Holsti’s role theory can provide a means to capture such dynamics more effectively. Joan Deas (Chapter 6) by contrast, analyses the rise of third wave middle powers and questions the lack of theoretical distinction between middle powers and rising powers. Her chapter highlights the characteristics of both types of states and suggests that the differences between third wave middle powers and rising powers are enough to allow for the creation of distinct, albeit close and related, categories.

The final three chapters in Part I reflect on the behaviour of middle powers. In Chapter 7 Catherine Jones continues the examination of what actually constitutes middle power behaviour, which at present revolves around imprecise notions of good citizenship, norm entrepreneurship and institutional engagement. Instead, she focuses on actual empirical observations of this behaviour. She adopts an international practice approach within the context of the UN to explore what middle powers behaviour in international institutions looks like
and how this behaviour may demonstrate the scope of their agency. Eduard Jordaan (Chapter 8) returns to the central question of the distinction between traditional and emerging middle powers. The problem with the traditional-emerging middle power distinction, according to Jordaan, is that non-traditional middle powers display highly varied international behaviour. More specifically, some are supporters of the liberal hegemonic order while others are opponents. Consequently, many emerging middle powers do not behave as middle powers and so renders the emerging middle power category meaningless. For Jordaan, the only viable solution is to reserve the middle power term for those states that behave the way we associate with traditional middle powers, that is, as stabilisers of the international system. The last author in Part I, Andriy Tyushka (Chapter 9), challenges the mainstream perception of middle powers as cooperative (positive) actors in the international system. He argues that assertiveness by middle powers means that their behaviour can also be confrontational (negative); that they can be “bad international citizens” through actions such as soft balancing, balking, veto and spoiler politics. Tyushka’s view is that both cooperative (niche diplomacy, bridging and norm and idea entrepreneurship) and confrontational elements are evident in what he refers to as middlepowermanship strategies. He then assesses four dimensions of middle-power assertiveness analysis in Pakistan, India, Australia, Canada, South Korea and Japan to outline the current shift from middlepowerhood to middlepowermanship in IR theory and practice.

Part II refracts many aspects of this “new thinking” by offering a range of “new cases” drawn from the pivotal Indo-Pacific region. This adds further emphasis on how the category of middle power has shifted from its initial Western-bound conception and roles to an Eastern (i.e. Asian) perspective. In this collection of case studies, we have sought to include a combination of traditional middle powers (Australia and Canada) a problematic case (India) and less-well investigated cases such as Pakistan and Singapore. This part opens with a generalistic appraisal of how regional middle powers are responding to the seismic changes brought about by the advent of an Asian Century and how both traditional and emerging middle powers have sought to adjust to an era of Sino-American rivalry. The issue of adaptive roles for traditional middle powers during power shifts is analysed by David Walton (Chapter 10). He examines the rise of China and what it represents for Australian foreign policy and relations with China and Japan as well as Australia’s overall regional diplomacy. He argues that Australia as a traditional middle power has welcomed the enhanced Chinese role in the Indo-Pacific, but has, in recent years, begun to question Chinese motives. Four key themes are discussed in the context of the rise of China: the twin objectives in Australian foreign policy, alignment with the United States, security upgrades with Japan and finally an assessment of Australia’s middle power options and capacity to continue to successfully juggle relations between China and Japan. Jeremy Paltiel and Kim Richard Nossal (Chapter 11) ponder on the future of middle power diplomacy. In an insightful analysis of contemporary issues and conundrums, Paltiel and Nossal note that all traditional middle powers in the immediate post-Cold War period have been strong allies of the United States. In a post-Brexit,
Trumpian world that has been marked by a populist and nationalist retreat from liberal internationalism, and a realignment of the great powers all of this is now in a state of flux. What, they ponder, are the new ground rules for middle power diplomacy? And importantly, can middle powers pursue norm-building and institution building strategies in close partnership with great powers with which they share only a partial list of common values and objectives against a background of remaining disagreement and value differences?

The next few chapters consider countries not normally considered middle powers: India, Pakistan and Singapore. Emilian Kavalski (Chapter 12) focuses on India’s relations with Afghanistan and post-Soviet countries in Central Asia. According to Kavalski, India claims that its interactions with Central Eurasia demonstrate the country’s emergence as a great power. The comparative analysis of New Delhi’s relations with both Afghanistan and Central Asian countries however, uncovers an underlying puzzle in India’s international outreach both in Central Eurasia and globally – namely, its inability to overcome its middle power constraints. Dorothée Vandamme (Chapter 13) highlights the case for Pakistan as a middle power. Pakistan hardly fits into the current classification(s) of middlepowermanship due to its poor economic and development performance. Nonetheless, it is a nuclear state and is – at least – in the top 20 military powers of the world. According to Vandamme, Pakistan has used diplomatic tools that typically characterise middle powers, such as mediation or niche diplomacy. Vandamme’s chapter aims at answering two questions: (i) can middle power theory bring some light on Pakistan’s positioning in world politics? (ii) Alternatively, what does the case of Pakistan tell us about the (ir)relevance of middle power theory? The central role of Singapore in Southeast Asian affairs is undisputed, but does the city state have middle power credentials? Lam Peng Er (Chapter 14) contests that despite the small population (5.6 million) Singapore is one of the richest countries in the world (with huge financial reserves) and a key financial, maritime and aerial hub. It has a hi-tech military which has performed very well in anti-piracy measures in East Africa, United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKO) and humanitarian disaster relief operations. Singapore also has soft power being a model of economic development for China and India. As Lam notes, however, its status as a middle power is contested regionally by a rising China and domestically by Singaporeans who argue that it is more prudent in international affairs for a “small state to behave like a small state”.

The last two chapters look at middle power agency in action with respect to the Korean peninsula, and the rise of China, respectively. First, Virginie Grzelczyk (Chapter 15) analyses the Korean conflict and the role of middle powers in dispute resolution. She argues that there are three types of middle powers that have been engaged in the past few decades with the Korean conflict: (i) traditional middle powers promoting good international citizenship, (ii) new and emerging middle powers seeking a platform to demonstrate their worth to the international community to validate their status and (iii) opportunistic powers seeking economic gains and political positioning within the region. Jonathan H. Ping (Chapter 16) discusses the all-important question appertaining to the relationship between
China and middle powers within its region. The chapter explores how middle power hybridisation theory may be utilised to direct China’s relations with its neighbouring middle powers and how these middle powers may best take advantage of China as a great power to achieve their own goals. China’s relations with the US are also considered within this context. Cooperation between the two great powers, Ping argues, is necessary to restrict the self-motivated capacity of middle powers to disrupt their relationship.

The overarching message of this book is that work on middle power theorising has not stood still since the first wave of middle power literature. The arrival of a “third wave” of middle power theorising reflecting back upon and rethinking the assumptions and conclusions of earlier scholarship comes at a critical juncture in our transition toward an Asian Century. In an Indo-Pacific region where territorial disputes, geopolitical tensions and challenges to regional order building are becoming increasingly apparent, middle powers will, arguably, play an increasingly critical role. The question is “what kind of role will this be, and how will it differ from the traditional precepts of middle powerdom”? With a diverse array of scholars from Europe, Africa, Asia, North America and Australasia, this volume seeks to explore how academics need to rethink notions of middle power in the Asian Century, and how such powers themselves are remaking the international system through shifting roles and transformed identities. In an era marked by increased prosperity and power, but marked by distrust and instability, such debates are therefore of paramount importance for both the academics and policymakers.

Notes
1 It is arguable that middle powers were first identified in the post-WWI period in the League of Nations, but no dedicated conceptual literature emerged at that time.
2 IBSA (India, Brazil, South Africa), CIVETS (Colombia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Egypt, Turkey and South Africa), MINT (Mexico, Indonesia, Nigeria and Turkey), MIST (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, and Turkey), MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey and Australia).

References
Introduction


Part I

Theoretical approaches