**Stuck in the Middle with Who?**

**Middle Powers and Norms in Contemporary International Relations**

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Over the past twenty years, norms and middle powers have become intimately intertwined. Norms have become a powerful explanatory variable in international relations over the past generation. In an anarchic international environment that nevertheless exhibits a striking degree of compliance with behavioral expectations in the absence of an overarching authority that can compel sovereign states to engage in specific actions, many analysts and scholars have specifically cited norms as the causal explanation for this seemingly irrational outcome.

Norms do not spread on their own, though; they require the intervention of norm entrepreneurs to spread the gospel and encourage states to make the norm’s precepts an integral part of their identity. Often times, this role of norm entrepreneur has fallen to middle powers—the so-called “good international citizens” who can mediate disputes and maintain cooperative relationships with a wide range of states. These middle powers avail themselves of their inoffensive standing within the international community to promote the embrace and adoption of new norms through vigorous diplomacy and multilateral channels.

While norms and the role played by middle powers have acted as useful tools for understanding international cooperation and the spread of new standards like the promoting the concept of human security[[1]](#footnote-1), the rejection of apartheid[[2]](#footnote-2), and the prohibition against the use of nuclear weapons[[3]](#footnote-3), it is not clear whether our collective understanding of the relationship between middle powers and norms has kept up with the contemporary global arrangements in which we find ourselves. Most of the studies on the role of middle powers in promoting norms locate themselves within the context of the Cold War and its attendant bipolarity. The states lumped together as middle powers are almost exclusively Western European. These scenarios no longer reflect the world in which we live, which raises the question of whether our conceptions of middle powers are even relevant today.

In this paper, I want to simultaneously dismantle the relevance of middle powers to our understanding of the spread of norms and demonstrate how middle powers can still play a role in norm transmission and acceptance. While the original conception of this relationship may be anachronistic, it would be premature to summarily dismiss any relationship. Instead, we need to qualify the concept and more precisely identify the circumstances in which middle powers play this intermediary role.

This paper proceeds in five sections. First, I briefly describe what norms are and how they operate within the international community. Second, I define middle powers as traditionally defined in international relations and describe the role they have played in the promulgation and transmissions of norms in international society. Third, I describe what has traditionally given middle powers a special role and how their ideological commitments lent themselves to norm promotion. Fourth, I highlight three key reasons why our conceptions of the relationship between middle powers and norms is no longer relevant to modern global interactions. Finally, I consider what the changing role of middle powers might mean for our larger understanding of the role of norms in international relations.

**Norm(s)!**

Finnemore defines norms as “shared expectations about appropriate behavior held by a community of actors.”[[4]](#footnote-4) A norm spells out how members of a group believe each other should act. It may or may not be explicitly codified, but members of a community understand the standards expected by the norm and hold each other accountable for conducting themselves in a manner consistent with it. It both constrains and enables action by defining the boundaries of acceptable behavior.[[5]](#footnote-5) For example, the norm of sovereignty posits that one state does not have the right to interfere or intervene in the affairs of another state. States shared an understanding that following the norm of sovereignty was appropriate behavior for members of the international community, and those who violated the norm faced possible sanctioning. This was not necessarily spelled out formally by international law or treaties (though it certainly has been since the norm first emerged), but was a shared social expectation. This social aspect is crucial, since norms can and will change as shared understandings change. To return to the sovereignty example, the behavioral expectations that go along with it today are radically different than those from previous eras,[[6]](#footnote-6) and continue to evolve today.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Norms go beyond simple behavioral modifications, though. States begin to re-envision their own identities as they embrace a norm. As states internalize new standards of behavior, they come to new understandings of themselves. They answer the question “who am I?” in a different manner. States are willing to forego the costs associated with upholding normative precepts because these norms are constitutive of how the state sees itself. When a state fails to live up to these behavioral expectations, they justify their actions by referencing the norm itself. In an important sense, the state has violated its own understanding of who it is. Instead of taking actions to abide by the rules, states take certain actions and engage in certain behaviors (and refrain from others) because “Good people do (or do not do) X in situations A, B, and C.”[[8]](#footnote-8) They connect their preferences to policy choices and instruments in different ways as their self-understandings change.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Finnemore and Sikkink offer a three-stage “life cycle” for norms. In the first stage, a norm emerges and is championed by norm entrepreneurs. These entrepreneurs use their organizational platforms to promote the norm to members of the international community. They actively promote the norm as “appropriate or desirable behavior in their community.”[[10]](#footnote-10) They must persuade a critical mass of important actors to adopt and embrace the norm in order to reach the second stage—the norm cascade. During this second phase, an increasing number of states begin to adopt the norm, even in the absence of domestic pressures or economic self-interests to do so, because they increasingly see it as appropriate. If enough states do this, the norm becomes internalized in the third stage. It becomes “common sense,” and few would even question the behaviors expected by the norm. States abide by the norm and its behavioral expectations because that is just what members of the international community do. It becomes part of the state’s sense of itself and its obligations to others in both a rhetorical and behavioral sense. If a norm is going to stick, states need to share an understanding of what a given norm means from both a behavioral and a constitutive perspective.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Norm entrepreneurs, according to most scholars, concentrate their attentions at the state level.[[12]](#footnote-12) They tailor their actions to encourage government policymakers to change their understanding of a particular issue, modify their behavior, and incorporate the norm’s idea into the state’s overall identity. They try to get a critical mass of states to adopt, and eventually internalize, a norm in hopes of creating a norm cascade that leads to the norm becoming “common sense.” It is as norm entrepreneurs that middle powers find particular purchase within the international community. As will be described below, middle powers have long positioned themselves (and been positioned within the literature on norms) as uniquely placed to advocate for international norms and help them to become firmly established within the international community.

**Defining Middle Powers**

For any term in international relations to have validity, we need to be able to define it properly and carefully. Too ambiguous a definition, and the term becomes so overly broad so as to be meaningless. Too narrow a definition, and the term lacks utility because its specificity renders it overly obtuse. The same basic guidelines apply when we are thinking about middle powers. If there exists a distinct category of states known as middle powers and we want to claim that these states have a specific and unique role in the spread and embrace of norms, then we must be able to not only identify these states, but highlight what distinguishes them from non-middle powers.[[13]](#footnote-13) While Gareth Evans, the former Foreign Minister of Australia and one of the leading proponents of middle power diplomacy, decries efforts to draw up lists of which states qualify as middle powers[[14]](#footnote-14), he does ultimately offer a definition that can allow outside observers to delimit which states are engaging in middle power diplomacy.

If there exists any consensus on which states count as middle powers, it is that Australia, Canada, Norway, and Sweden are paradigmatic examples of the concept.[[15]](#footnote-15) Beyond those four states, though, traditional lists of middle powers vary widely. Katzenstein, perhaps most responsible for popularizing the term within political science and international relations, included smaller European states like Austria and Switzerland on the list of middle powers.[[16]](#footnote-16) Wood adds two more American states—Brazil and Mexico—to the list.[[17]](#footnote-17) Solomon bolsters the list of traditional middle powers with the additions of India, Indonesia, Italy, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, and Turkey.[[18]](#footnote-18) Some lists of traditional middle powers also include former great powers that are conceptualized as having lost their international stature and are therefore forced to accept a new, lower status as middle powers. These include France, Germany, and the United Kingdom.[[19]](#footnote-19)

The problems emerging from this initial list of ‘traditional’ middle powers quickly become apparent. Some of these states appear on the list because their traditional approaches to diplomacy and foreign policy follow the general contours of middle power behavior—using their seemingly inoffensive reputation to wield a degree of moral authority to generate positive normative shifts by utilizing multilateral forums. Others are relegated to the ‘lower’ status of middle power because they have lost their economic and imperial clout. For this latter group, middle power is less a descriptor of their behavior and more a consolation prize for states who no longer hold sway as they once did. It is a sign of decline, and fails to recognize the power that these supposedly former great powers still possess in the international community. For instance, two of the three states cited by Davison and Sperling are permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and thus retain the ability to veto resolutions debated by that body.[[20]](#footnote-20) Even if we restrict our analysis of middle powers to these traditionally-identified states, it becomes increasingly difficult to identify what unifies their actions within the international community. They share relative economic prosperity, but that would appear to be more about statistical artifacts than any unifying sense of commonality.

More recently, the list of potential middle powers has expanded significantly and become even more diverse. The states still tend to be relatively economically secure, but this shared characteristic does not suggest common approaches to diplomacy and only serves to underscore the term’s lack of precision. Solomon’s listing of contemporary middle powers includes Argentina, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Hungary, Iran, Pakistan, Poland, and Romania.[[21]](#footnote-21) Heine incorporates Chile and Colombia to the list.[[22]](#footnote-22) Ping aims to expand the list of middle powers to include more Asian states, such as Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam.[[23]](#footnote-23) Gilley has described Indonesia and post-Mubarak Egypt as “classic middle powers” in trying to navigate their own paths between the pressures of competing geopolitical demands from wealthier, stronger states.[[24]](#footnote-24) Van der Westhuizen calls attention to South Africa’s emergence as a middle power state in the post-apartheid era.[[25]](#footnote-25)

These additions to the list of middle powers underscore the term’s conceptual deficiencies. Even if we assume that middle powers share relatively economic prosperity or security, the economic fortunes of these states vary widely. Furthermore, if we assume that economic security or relative wealth is an integral part of the definition, it is not clear where we could draw an objective line to demarcate middle powers from other states.[[26]](#footnote-26) If we prioritize interactions with multilateral institutions as constitutive of middle powers, then it makes little sense to include states that lack sovereign recognition and are therefore excluded from many intergovernmental organizations like Taiwan. These states also have a diverse array of underlying ideologies. While some may be relatively social democratic in their orientation, others take a more classically liberal approach—and we could even describe some of the above states as hostile towards social democracy.

Additional questions emerge when we consider how deep-seated any commitment to middle power behavior is. To take Gilley’s contention, it may be true that the immediate post-Mubarak government in Egypt adhered to diplomatic behaviors that hew to general notions of what middle powers do, but more recent events suggest that such behavior was more of an aberration than a sign of an ideological commitment to working through multilateral channels to promote norms that would bring some measure of stability to the anarchic international system. Iranian governments have varied wildly over the past 30 years in their interest in working with other states through multilateral channels and their respect for certain normative precepts. The South African government under Nelson Mandela sought to capitalize on its historical experience to act as a mediator to peacefully resolve international disputes,[[27]](#footnote-27) but the successive Mbeki and Zuma governments have not displayed the same proclivities toward international diplomacy. This suggests that the behavior being ascribed to a state’s underlying fundamental identity may be more reflective of the particular commitments of governments—or even specific government officials. If this is the case, then what is being observed is a particular diplomatic style or approach rather than an overarching commitment shared across a country’s political spectrum (or, in the case of South Africa, throughout a ruling political party).

More problematically, though, the basic notion that this group of states could share a common perspective on promoting norms throughout the international community is almost nonsensical. Does it make sense to assume that states like Iran and Pakistan move through the international community in the same way as Belgium, Indonesia, or Australia? Not only do these states not share a common policy outlook (they clearly do not), but their basic notions of diplomacy, the role of multilateral institutions, or the value of shared norms diverge widely. The basic notion of middle powers promoting norms through multilateral institutions relies at least in part on some sort of shared conception of the international community or its basic values, but this combination of states fails to achieve even that most minimal definition. It is hard to call certain states middle powers when the governments of those states would decry the whole notion of norm promotion or multilateral institutions as tools of Western hegemony that have oriented the international community toward one particular conceptualization of human rights, economic prosperity, and the role of religion in the public square. Patrick argues that one of the biggest challenges facing the international community is how it can incorporate rising powers, as these states do not necessarily share the same outlook on the international community as the traditional powers have throughout the post-WWII era.[[28]](#footnote-28) Without that basic level of consensus, understanding what unites these states is incredibly difficult to identify.

**Holding the Middle Powers Together**

If there is a typical image of middle powers, it is of a group of “goodie two-shoes” that acts altruistically. Nel et al. pithily remarked, “Middle powers tended to be equated with the diplomatic equivalent of Boy Scout good deeds.”[[29]](#footnote-29) The realities, of course, are more complex. Middle powers act as peacekeepers within the international system. They are guardians of the international system, encouraging reforms to make it more stable and useful by encouraging cooperation and conciliation. These states generally lack the ability to effect change on their own, but they recognize that they can obtain power by working in collaboration with each other and through multilateral organizations. Keohane defines middle powers as "state[s] whose leaders consider that [they] cannot act alone effectively but may be able to have a systemic impact in a small group or through an international institution.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

Defining which countries qualify as middle powers is surprisingly difficult. There have been some attempts to categorize states along quantitative lines. For example, Holbraad relies on population and gross national product to classify each nation-state in the world as either great, middle, or small/minor.[[31]](#footnote-31) While this may seemingly bring a degree of precision to the debates over which states qualify as middle powers, the categories used and the dividing lines within those categories are themselves fairly arbitrary. For this reason, most scholars of middle powers have tended to avoid emphasizing quantifiable characteristics or creating their own lists of middle powers. Instead, they have focused on the foreign policies of the states themselves, in essence allowing middle powers to “self-identify” by categorizing states based on their observed foreign policy behavior.

What, then, are these behaviors that distinguish middle powers from greater and lesser powers? In general, we can distinguish middle powers from other types of states through a common attitude and approach toward foreign policy and international relations. They share similar mindsets about appropriate goals and methods. As such, their active involvement in international affairs tends to be relatively selective; they only involve themselves in those battles they truly believe are worth fighting, but they expend a significant amount of energy once they decide to commit to a given issue.[[32]](#footnote-32) Louis St. Laurent, the Canadian Prime Minister from 1948 to 1957, saw middle powers as distinct because they were not “satellites” of the major powers and would “continue to make our decisions objectively, in light of our obligations to our own people and their interest in the welfare of the international community.”[[33]](#footnote-33) These states tend to be relatively secure financially, but limited in their ability to effect change due to their small size, small economics, or negligible military strength. As such, Cooper declares, “Unlike major powers, middle powers do not possess the ability to operate in an influential fashion right across the policy spectrum.”[[34]](#footnote-34) This means that middle powers will find more sway within the international community if they identify policy niches where they can specialize and on issues which are not dominated by great powers. Historically, states like Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden have fallen into this category.

Given the constraints on their influence, middle powers seek to leverage their influence in a very particular way. They are largely unable to alter the international system on the majority of major power issues, so they need to find alternative outlets for their diplomatic and foreign policy energies. As such, middle powers opt to focus their attention on issues to which major powers either cannot or will not allocate their resources and energies. Such issues may conflict with a major power’s national interests or identity, and they are thus low on a major power’s priorities—regardless of the moral rectitude of the issue. Middle powers fill this void. They can and do take on these “moral” and “responsible” issues because they are able to and because they can exert a degree of influence that outstretches their material power capabilities. Middle powers can pool their financial, intellectual, and moral resources, making it “expensive” for other states to violate the middle-power-supported norms.

Middle powers see a strong and vibrant role for international law and international organizations. They help middle powers leverage their power and facilitate the transmission of new norms. The interactions facilitated by international law and international organizations become more predictable, and that predictability reassures and comforts middle powers.[[35]](#footnote-35) Middle powers tend to pursue relatively conservative strategies, in the sense that they generally aim to reform the system rather than completely dismantling and replacing it.[[36]](#footnote-36) Their ultimate aim is to make sure that the international system works for their benefit, and by extension, for the international community’s benefit. This understanding means that we should not look at middle power behavior as purely altruistic; reforming the international system is ultimately in their interests, but it just so happens that it may also benefit the international community’s collective interest.[[37]](#footnote-37)

This distinctive international role emerges, in part, from the domestic-level political structures in the traditional middle power states. Many of the traditional middle powers have a social democratic heritage. Such a domestic arrangement lends itself well to an interest in consensus-building, acting as a moral compass, and articulating a sense of collective responsibility in the international community. Scholars have long linked middle power status and left-leaning governments.[[38]](#footnote-38) Indeed, Pratt argues that governments in middle power states are generally committed to social equity, “generat[ing] a predisposition to international initiatives to the same end”[[39]](#footnote-39). However, few have explicitly investigated what it is about social democracy that lends itself to middle power status. It is obviously more than simply a reflection of the partisan make-up of the current government in a middle power state; if that were the extent of it, it would hardly provide the basis for a lasting legacy of international actions. Slagter and Youde examine the linkages between social democracy and middle power behavior. They argue that the connection between the two is deeply rooted in the identities—“the images of individuality and distinctiveness (‘selfhood’) held and projected by an actor and formed (and modified over time) through relations with significant others”[[40]](#footnote-40)—of social democratic states themselves. These identities provide a collectively held linkage between the state and the international environment in which it finds itself. The social democratic identity transcends the particular government of the day; even right-leaning parties in middle powers have a generalized commitment to the basic outlines of social democracy, though their policy preferences will differ from their left-leaning counterparts. This shared identity within and among middle power states sets them apart from other states in the international system and drives the states themselves toward a particular type of international behavior.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Before going much further, it is worthwhile to explicate exactly what is meant by social democracy and the tenets of a social democratic identity. Meyer and Hinchman describe it as a political reaction to economic uncertainty and inequality. Social democracy provides, in their conception, “the social order must meet higher standards of democracy by allowing well-regulated participation, a legal claim to social security, a distribution of wealth and income that takes justice into account, and a democratic state, the regulative and distributive politics of which accords with all of these values.”[[42]](#footnote-42) Ultimately, they argue, this is a system based on social inclusivity by putting the state in the position to protect an individual’s autonomy against social and economic risks. They use a series of quantitative measures to score welfare states on their commitment to social democracy. Scandinavian countries, northern European states, and many Commonwealth countries receive high scores on their measure of social democracy[[43]](#footnote-43)—many of the same states that have traditionally been described as middle powers.

The so-called “Nordic model” provides an additional conception of social democracy and social democratic identity. The Nordic model is not necessarily in opposition to the idea presented above; rather, it expands upon the notions of protecting against market failures to include an explicit embrace of universalism and “active and solidaristic internationalism.”[[44]](#footnote-44) To this end, the Nordic model emphasizes shared values, cooperation, and including the “other” into definitions of the “self.” It provides an explicit outward orientation to the strong emphasis on a social safety net presented earlier. This conceptuation resonates with early Swedish Protestantism and ideas of “mutual assistance” practiced by rural Swedes prior to the 20th Century.[[45]](#footnote-45) These values became firmly ensconced within Swedish domestic life, according to Berman, that they “produced an egalitarian political culture that tends towards altruism rather than self-interest narrowly defined” that eventually transcended the domestic to guide Sweden’s interactions with the rest of the world.[[46]](#footnote-46) She argues that such transference should not be surprising, as “states that do not practice universal welfare at the domestic level are less likely to do so at the international level.”[[47]](#footnote-47)

Social democratic politics imbue the political culture with positive attitudes toward equality, universalism, protection, and redistribution. This becomes part of the state’s identity—the way it sees itself and the way it presents itself to others. It is not much of a leap, then, to assume that the drivers of political culture at the domestic level would influence a state’s identity at the international level. A state coming from the social democratic tradition has already demonstrated a commitment to take the Other into account in its interactions . If ideas at the domestic level foment a state’s identity, then social democratic states would be primed to evoke change and reform within the international community in the same manner as they operate for their own citizenry. They want to bring some measure of predictability and tame the anarchy of the international system in the same way they want to reduce uncertainty and ambiguity at the domestic level.

The social democratic ethos that helps form a middle power’s identity offers a tool that those states can use to influence international relations. Indeed, the power middle powers derive from their identity can outstrip the traditional military or economic inducements that major powers may use to get their way. Remember, middle power behavior is not necessarily driven by mere altruism; rather, these states are pursuing social democratic policy objectives at the international level in order to act in concert with their existing identities. Their actions are a sign of their ontological security—a level of comfort with their own senses of self-identity[[48]](#footnote-48) – by pursuing policies that promote protection, equity, and redistribution at both the domestic and international levels. This ontological security makes middle powers well position to engage in strategic reflexive discourse[[49]](#footnote-49), or speech that accidentally or intentionally forces a change in another state’s behavior because it challenges the target state’s sense of self.[[50]](#footnote-50) Middle powers can deploy such reflexive discourse convincingly in order to compel major powers to act responsibly within the international arena. Their social democratic identity provides them with the tools to coerce others to act as the middle powers themselves would act. Interestingly, this means that the middle powers retain a remarkable ability to set the *moral* agenda without necessarily having to do the heavy policy lifting themselves.

This means that the same logic that drives social democratic behavior at the domestic level essentially drives the same sort of behavior at the international level. Katzenstein emphasizes, “Their [middle powers] choices are conditioned by two sets of forces: historically shaped domestic structures and the pressures of the world economy. These two sets of forces interact. And it is in the process of interaction--the unending and limited conflicts over economic and social issues--that the requirements of domestic and international politics converge in a flexible strategy of adjustment.”[[51]](#footnote-51) Because their foreign activities resonate with existing domestic political culture and identities, the public in middle powers will generally be supportive of the actions their governments undertake on the global stage. This reinforces a sense of legitimacy for the middle powers’ international activities and shows a consistency of political values in different arenas.[[52]](#footnote-52)

When states must negotiate between the demands of both domestic and international constituencies, domestic actors could potentially scuttle an agreement that does not resonate with its identities and beliefs.[[53]](#footnote-53) To avert such an outcome, it makes sense that states would want to incorporate their domestic identities into their foreign policy actions. Such a strategy increases the likelihood that relevant domestic groups will support the action. Indeed, public opinion polls in middle powers demonstrate that citizens of those states do want their governments to instill their domestic political values in their foreign policies and diplomatic actions. Contrary to older assumptions about public opinion and foreign policy[[54]](#footnote-54), evidence suggests that citizens actually do pay attention to foreign policy, have relatively stable beliefs about it, and expect their governments to act in accordance with those preferences.[[55]](#footnote-55) Public opinion survey data from middle powers affirm this connection. Noel and Therien find that strong beliefs in and achievement of social justice at home drive beliefs in its importance at the international level[[56]](#footnote-56). In European Union states, citizen views of national sovereignty and self-determination play a consequential role in explaining support for greater EU policy integration[[57]](#footnote-57). Indeed, much of the opposition to EU integration in Nordic states is rooted in fears that policy harmonization could lead to *less*social democratic policies[[58]](#footnote-58). Australian citizens expressed alarm that their government’s foreign policy was increasingly aligned with the United States during the run-up to the Iraq War, thus threatening the country's social democratic character[[59]](#footnote-59). Canadians have consistently demonstrated a strong belief in the value of international engagement and multilateral diplomacy. Munton and Keating remark that internationalism is “not quite the official ‘religion’ [of Canadian foreign policy, but] it is certainly revered by those who manage and debate that policy”[[60]](#footnote-60). In a 1985 poll, 68 percent agreed that their government's foreign policy should act to stop human rights violations, and 82 percent wanted poverty reduction to play an important role in Canadian foreign policy. Sixteen years later, those numbers remained fairly consistent, with 68 percent advocating for the prevention of human rights violations and 71 percent emphasizing poverty reduction[[61]](#footnote-61). This broad support for promoting international equality and multilateralism embodies what former Canadian foreign minister Lloyd Axworthy called his country’s “liberal, confident internationalism”[[62]](#footnote-62). These realities give middle power states yet another reason to ensure that their domestic and international actions are relatively consistent with each other.

The above describes our standard view of middle powers—‘good international citizens’ who managed to avoid antagonizing major powers and were able to use international organizations and international law as a way of achieving a degree of stability and predictability in a chaotic, anarchic world potentially torn asunder by major power fighting. They used their perceived (relative) neutrality and their social democratic identities to encourage the embrace of norms that would allow the international community to prosper.

I have no interest in denying this framework of how middle powers have operated historically within the international community, but I want instead to challenge the applicability of this model to the contemporary era. Instead of being a timeless model for the spread and embrace of international norms, the middle power-oriented model of norms needs to be understood as historically and contextually delimited. A simple imposition of this model to the current day undermines our ability to appreciate how norms currently spread and blinds us to considerations of how the basic idea of norms has changed over the past generation. What made sense for understanding the spread of norms against apartheid and the use of nuclear weapons does not necessarily apply in the same way today.

In particular, I want to emphasize four shortcomings in the middle power-oriented model of normative emergence and embrace: the lack of a consensus definition of the term; the role of bipolarity; the assumption of a shared ideological orientation; and the uncertainty over what binds middle powers as a coherent grouping. By overlooking the crucial role that these elements played in appreciating how norms spread via middle powers, we end up with an impoverished understanding of both middle power and of norms.

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These additions to the list of middle powers underscore the term’s conceptual deficiencies. Even if we assume that middle powers share relatively economic prosperity or security, the economic fortunes of these states vary widely. Furthermore, if we assume that economic security or relative wealth is an integral part of the definition, it is not clear where we could draw an objective line to demarcate middle powers from other states.[[76]](#footnote-76) If we prioritize interactions with multilateral institutions as constitutive of middle powers, then it makes little sense to include states that lack sovereign recognition and are therefore excluded from many intergovernmental organizations like Taiwan. These states also have a diverse array of underlying ideologies. While some may be relatively social democratic in their orientation, others take a more classically liberal approach—and we could even describe some of the above states as hostile towards social democracy.

Additional questions emerge when we consider how deep-seated any commitment to middle power behavior is. To take Gilley’s contention, it may be true that the immediate post-Mubarak government in Egypt adhered to diplomatic behaviors that hew to general notions of what middle powers do, but more recent events suggest that such behavior was more of an aberration than a sign of an ideological commitment to working through multilateral channels to promote norms that would bring some measure of stability to the anarchic international system. Iranain governments have varied wildly over the past 30 years in their interest in working with other states through multilateral channels and their respect for certain normative precepts. The South African government under Nelson Mandela sought to capitalize on its historical experience to act as a mediator to peacefully resolve international disputes,[[77]](#footnote-77) but the successive Mbeki and Zuma governments have not displayed the same proclivities toward international diplomacy. This suggests that the behavior being ascribed to a state’s underlying fundamental identity may be more reflective of the particular commitments of governments—or even specific government officials. If this is the case, then what is being observed is a particular diplomatic style or approach rather than an overarching commitment shared across a country’s political spectrum (or, in the case of South Africa, throughout a ruling political party).

More problematically, though, the basic notion that this group of states could share a common perspective on promoting norms throughout the international community is almost nonsensical. Does it make sense to assume that states like Iran and Pakistan move through the international community in the same way as Belgium, Indonesia, or Australia? Not only do these states not share a common policy outlook (they clearly do not), but their basic notions of diplomacy, the role of multilateral institutions, or the value of shared norms diverge widely. The basic notion of middle powers promoting norms through multilateral institutions relies at least in part on some sort of shared conception of the international community or its basic values, but this combination of states fails to achieve even that most minimal definition. It is hard to call certain states middle powers when the governments of those states would decry the whole notion of norm promotion or multilateral institutions as tools of Western hegemony that have oriented the international community toward one particular conceptualization of human rights, economic prosperity, and the role of religion in the public square. Patrick argues that one of the biggest challenges facing the international community is how it can incorporate rising powers, as these states do not necessarily share the same outlook on the international community as the traditional powers have throughout the post-WWII era.[[78]](#footnote-78) Without that basic level of consensus, understanding what unites these states is incredibly difficult to identify.

**The End of the Cold War**

The modern conceptualization of the middle power emerged directly from the geopolitical tensions that arose as a result of the Cold War. Middle powers found their diplomatic niche in refusing to axiomatically side with either the Soviet Union or the United States in international debates. They exercised their relative autonomy to find ways to accommodate the divergent policy recommendations of the superpower antagonists. Further, middle powers could promote international norms like taboos against the use of nuclear or chemical weapons or the rejection of apartheid precisely because they were not seen as being captured by either side. They were effective norm entrepreneurs because they had a reputation for pragmatism and an ability to work with both sides. While they were not immune to the pressures imposed by the Cold War, and it would be a mistake to describe these states as neutral, their status as the Other—neither wholly capitalist nor wholly community—gave them a certain currency that they could trade with all parties in exchange for the embrace of certain international norms that would tame the more egregious excesses and dangers of the ideological competition during the Cold War.

When you define yourself in opposition to the major geopolitical divide, though, you lose your identity when that divide disappears. This does not mean that the post-Cold War world was one of sunshine, lollipops, and puppies when the Cold War ended after the Soviet Union’s demise, but it does mean that the dividing lines within the international community became far more complicated and fluid. Waltz points out, “In the great-power politics of bipolar worlds, who is a danger to whom is never in doubt.”[[79]](#footnote-79) Middle powers during the Cold War could take advantage of this situation. They understood the dividing lines, they knew where the splits within the international community existed, and they could operate in their unique niche to advance their particular interests on behalf of the collective good.

Without the stark geopolitical definitional lines of the Cold War, it is harder for states to find a consistent niche that they can play. Middle powers presented themselves as uniquely able to promote norms that would benefit the international community as a whole precisely because they were not beholden to the capitalist or communist spheres. They could draw on their social democratic heritage to blaze a unique path that avoided the ideological pitfalls associated with the major powers in a bipolar world. In the contemporary political constellation, though, the dividing lines are no longer so clear. States considered to be middle powers show even less unity, weakening their ability to promote specific norms. While some middle powers like Australia and Canada were incredibly active in promoting Responsibility to Protect, others expressed significant reservations about the idea’s usefulness. South Africa, for example, raised questions about whether the invocation of R2P in response to crises in Cote d’Ivoire and Libya was merely a smokescreen to justify Western imperialism on the African continent.[[80]](#footnote-80) It is not necessarily the case that middle powers always marched in lockstep with each other during the Cold War in order to promote their normative objectives, but the divisions that emerge among the potential middle powers in the absence of the Cold War undermine the notion that this bloc of states presents something unique within international relations.

What is left instead is less a coherent international grouping that can offer a unique approach to diplomacy and leverage its status to achieve certain normative aims and more a shifting series of diplomatic decisions that reflect national interests and short-term calculations. The latter is not necessarily a bad thing, but we should not describe a series of idiosyncratic foreign policy decisions among a group of unrelated states with some unifying moniker. We should not assume that these states are somehow going to be specially placed to promote norms within the international community. Given the importance that our conceptualization of norms tends to ascribe to middle powers, it calls into question whether norms themselves require a wholesale theoretical re-evaluation in order to demonstrate their usefulness in contemporary politics.

**Ideological Peas in a Pod?**

Traditionally, middle powers shared a common ideological perspective. Slagter and Youde focus on their commitment to social democratic policies within the domestic sphere, emphasizing that those same domestic policy drivers translate into international actions.[[81]](#footnote-81) Melakopides equates the unique position of states like Denmark and the Netherlands with an accession to values promoted by the European Union. Many middle powers are members of the European Union, and EU membership necessitates an embrace of ideas like liberty, democracy, human rights, rule of law, and solidarity. These values, therefore, have special and distinctive value within the international community.[[82]](#footnote-82) Evans emphasizes middle powers’ ideological commitment to multilateralism and compromise as key to resolving international disputes.[[83]](#footnote-83) Katzenstein highlights shared economic ideologies, pointing to middle powers as embracing a liberal international economic order.[[84]](#footnote-84) The essential idea is that middle powers have particular ideological perspectives that transcend partisan politics, and that their interest in encouraging the international embrace of particular norms is to extend their interests to the broader international realm and decrease uncertainty within the anarchic global realm.

When we restrict our definition of middle powers to European states, Australia, and Canada, it is plausible to make a case for a shared ideological consensus among the member states. As we move further out and expand the realm of middle powers to include an increasingly diverse array of states, it becomes harder and harder to maintain this idea of a common political perspective. Let’s take Cooper’s rather expansive list of potential contemporary middle powers. He includes Argentina, Brazil, Germany, India, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Mexico, Poland, Singapore, South Africa, South Korea, Syria, and Turkey.[[85]](#footnote-85) The folly of identifying any sort of common political or economic interests among this group of states quickly makes itself obvious. This list includes international pariahs, states that actively reject Western notions of civil rights and civil liberties, states that take an incredibly active role within their economies, *and* states that respect social democratic and liberal economic orders. Aside from their shared membership in the United Nations and its specialized agencies, it is difficult to identify any characteristic that unites this group of states. As such, how can we expect that these states would have some sort of shared ideological commitment to promoting international norms that tame the wilds of the global polity?

This ideological discordance points to a larger concern about the changing nature of the international system identified by Patrick. A number of the states included on contemporary lists of middle powers, such as Brazil, India, Indonesia, and Turkey, are aiming to play a bigger role on the international stage. These states may lack the economic or military might to unilaterally alter the international system, but they possess the interest to spread new international norms to bring a sense of order. However, and this is the crucial point identified by Stewart, these new middle powers do not necessarily buy into the political and economic order derived from the existing Western liberal order. Rather than work within multilateral arrangements, they want to fundamentally alter those systems. They want to be active within the international system with accepting responsibilities that derive from that system.[[86]](#footnote-86) This puts them in direct contrast with the traditional notion of middle powers. Middle powers explicitly seek to work *within* the existing system and use their influence and talents to make the international system work better. They like the general contours of the system, but they want to introduce reforms to improve that system. By contrast, Stewart writes, “The emerging nations are intent on altering existing rules, not adopting them hook, line, and sinker.”[[87]](#footnote-87) They want to maintain a strategic ambiguity toward the international system, engaging with it sporadically. They want greater voice in the international system, but not more global governance itself.[[88]](#footnote-88) Instead of relying on previous notions of shared beliefs among middle powers in the value of Western liberal capitalist democracy, Stewart argues that we cannot understand the perspectives of these new middle powers without paying significant attention to the effects of nationalist concerns on the political leaders in these countries.[[89]](#footnote-89) In other words, the defining ideological consensus that allowed policymakers and scholars to identify middle powers in earlier era no longer exists—or at least does not exist among this larger universe of middle powers. As such, the ability of these states to find a niche and promote new norms to the international community is significantly undermined. States that do not subscribe to the underlying ideological notions that give rise to the international community in the first place are hardly in a place to act as norm entrepreneurs and encourage others to embrace new norms.

Again, the lack of such an ideological consensus is not necessarily a bad thing. This article is not necessarily making a case for social democracy, the existing international order, or the value of Western liberal capitalist democracy. That is neither here nor there. What is of concern for the sake of this argument, though, is an appreciation of the lack of consensus. Without a shared sense of ideology, we are merely looking at a series of foreign policy and diplomatic decisions made by a variety of states—not an overarching linking element. This does not suggest a conducive environment for concerted efforts to promote specific international norms designed to make the international community better or reform practices to bring a greater sense of regularity amidst anarchy.

**Are Any of These Things Like the Others?**

The Cold War is over. Shared ideological commitments among middle powers no longer appear to exist. Social democracy does not unite middle powers. The list of potential middle powers has become so broad as to be practically meaningless. The lack of shared characteristics calls into question whether middle powers can still play their vital role as norm entrepreneurs in the international community, raising serious theoretical questions about who can perform this function in the contemporary era. The realities described above give rise to two important questions:

1. What does this mean for the utility of the concept of middle powers in the contemporary era?
2. What does this mean for our understanding of norms and their transmission within the international community?

While this article is unlikely to entirely resolve or answer both of these questions, I want to suggest two possible ways to address the conundrums raised by the above questions.

*Two Will Enter, Only One Will Leave: Competition within the International System*

There is an implicit assumption within the literatures on both middle powers and norms that only one group will be operating at any given period. There is one unified group of middle powers with shared interests, shared ideological commitments, and shared perspectives on the functioning of the international community. By the same token, much of the literature on norms assumes that one norm will emerge on a given issue whether it be human rights, environmental regulation, or the rules of war. Both of these may have been the traditional practice and experience, but there is no a priori reason why this must be the case. Could there not be multiple middle power groupings—states that share common perspectives and wish to promote particular norms within the international community, but in opposition to others? In other words, the traditional middle powers could be one group of middle powers, but the emergent middle powers could be their own unique group. Both groups aim to achieve specific outcomes and act in accordance with our expectations of how middle powers will act. What distinguishes them is that they do not necessarily agree with each other. With these competing groups of middle powers, they may aim to promote their own distinct norms on any given issue. Just as it is plausible to argue for the existence of competing epistemic communities,[[90]](#footnote-90) it should be plausible to see groups of states use similar techniques in order to compete for normative influence within the international system. This would help accommodate Stewart’s argument about emerging middle powers not necessarily accepting the existing international order as a given or necessarily wanting to work within it.

To make this theoretically rigorous, additional research will need to examine the conditions under which such divisions emerge, what unifies members of each group, and how stable these groupings are. If there is little stability among these groupings, that would suggest that we witness temporary coalitions emerging on particular issues as opposed to anything longer term or that speaks to a genuine shared and stable identification among states. We would also need to have better theoretical specification on what exactly constitutes a norm and how we distinguish normative differences from policy disagreements.

*New Kids on the Block: Non-State Actors and Norms*

Perhaps the problem is less about specific states and more about states as actors. Traditional understandings of the spread of norms have given a role for non-state actors to play, but it may be the case that non-state actors have effectively supplanted the role that middle powers had previously played. As middle powers lost their unique geopolitical niche, non-state actors like non-governmental organizations, private businesses, and philanthropic organizations have moved in to fill that niche. They are the actors that currently possess the relative freedom and autonomy to maneuver within the international system without being beholden to particular state interests and to work with a diverse array of actors to promote specific norms. Non-state actors may have the tactical flexibility and personnel resources that allow them to adjust to the changing contours within the international system. They may be able to promote norms among diverse states that would otherwise have little to do with each other or name-and-shame those states that fail to adhere to the behavioral precepts associated with a given norm. Non-state actors, rather than middle powers, then become the dominant norm entrepreneurs in a post-Cold War world.

This idea requires additional research in a number of important areas, too. First, we have seen numerous instances where non-state actors have been removed from countries or disparaged by governments because of allegations that a non-governmental organization is really working on behalf of a specific government’s interests. It raises questions about how well non-state actors can distinguish themselves from states and how well states perceive non-state actors as being autonomous political actors. Second, non-state actors can exert influence on governments, but they are not members of the multilateral institutions that often ratify and signal the widespread acceptance of a norm. Greenpeace and the Sea Shepard Society may able to lobby governments on whaling regulations in the Pacific Ocean, but any ultimate policy is up to the International Whaling Commission—whose members are all states. Third, and related to the previous, we need to be careful to distinguish policies from norms. Non-governmental organization may activate their members to push for particular policies on an issue, but it is less clear that they can affect the broader informal and unwritten behavioral expectations that are an essential part of norms unless we can distinguish between the two. Fourth, there seems to be significantly less research or theorizing about non-state actors originating from or based in the Global South—or outside OECD states in general. If non-state actors are a Western phenomenon, then it would raise larger questions about whether they truly are distinct from the interests of dominant liberal Western capitalist democracies.

**Conclusion**

Most of the theorizing about norms assumes that middle powers and norms work in tandem with each other. In this article, I sought to raise questions about the relevance and operation of the category of middle powers. I argue that our traditional concepts of middle powers and how they operate as norm entrepreneurs fail to resonate with the contemporary international system. While it goes beyond the scope of this article to completely resolve the contradictions, I suggest that we may be able to resuscitate both concepts by diversifying our understandings of who middle powers are, how they operate, and which political actors play a major role in promoting norms.

Middle powers were significant and useful actors during the Cold War, and norms helped to explain international behavioral shifts. As the international system has changed, though, both of these concepts need to adjust if they are to retain any sense of continued theoretical utility.

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