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Squeezed or revitalised? Middle powers, the G20 and the evolution of global governance

ANDREW F COOPER

Abstract If global affairs are, indeed, moving towards a multipolar system, in which power coalesces around a small number of dominant poles (USA/EU/BRICS in the global South), then middle powers may well find themselves relegated to a subordinate role. Yet, at odds with this expectation, the role of particular traditional and non-traditional middle powers has become revitalised. This is in large part because of the nature of the global order after unipolarity under US dominance. Unlike past moments of transition, the current reconfiguration has not been made explicit by violent disruption. Moreover, unlike past concerts of powers, select middle powers have gained access to the G20, the hub site of transition in global governance. Membership in the G20 facilitates agency in terms of issue-specific forms of policy leadership, although the mode of operation by middle powers in utilising this space differs from country to country, as illustrated by the cases of Canada and South Korea.

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. In a world that privileges scaling up across the spectrum, from big emerging countries to an overarching concert of powers with an extended scope of regulatory authority and elaborate and well resourced public–private transnational networks, secondary players could well be marginalised. However, the middle power model exhibits an impressive, albeit not unchallenged, capacity for revitalisation, as in past eras of transition, with a shift away from a unipolar locus of power. Moreover, there is strong evidence that this trajectory of relocation moves towards an extension as opposed to contraction, beyond the model of traditional middle powers. What can be described as an extended ‘rising middle’, encompassing both established and non-traditional middle powers, if still structurally constrained in many ways, exhibits a capacity for innovation as both receptor and agent of change.

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Conceptual analysis of the global order after unipolarity

As laid out in a rich body of literature, the global hierarchy in state-centric terms is being reshaped in the 21st century. The ascent of China, India and Brazil, the big three rising powers, has served to address imbalances in the globalisation process, one which up until now has mainly reflected the greater influence of long-standing powerful states in the core regions of the ‘trilateral world’: North America, Europe and Japan. Yet it is not only at the top layer of the global system that there are signs that a fundamental transition is underway. In an unanticipated fashion a number of secondary states possess considerable ability to influence the global situation on an issue-specific basis.

Such a transformation has many positive attributes for global political and economic life. It reverses the historically weak mechanisms of collective action associated with forums such as the Group of 77 and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), and it counteracts the splintering effects of the ‘policy competition’ that has been associated with the diplomatic behaviour of developing states. Furthermore, it allows greater latitude to these rising powers to forge lessons learned for overcoming developmental vulnerability.

At both the systemic and national level these dynamics are commonly depicted as game-changers. This presumption, however, leaves moot what the motivation, site and means of this game are about in the first place. The global financial crisis of 2008 has systematically enhanced the position of selective multilateralism as the global main game, with some momentum towards thicker, albeit still domain-restricted, modes of governance. Nonetheless, a serious interrogation must be conducted around questions about why, how and to what degree countries from both the old trilateral core states and the cluster of rising powers are committed to this form of reconfigured multilateralism.

The image of shift changing for middle powers is accentuated by two other important factors. In a world of diminished US hegemony it is much harder for middle powers to take on a repertoire of familiar activities beyond mediation. At the end of the Cold War middle powers could relocate themselves as both supporters of and occasional counterfoils to the dominant power. Within some basic boundaries and guidelines middle powers held key roles both as loyalists and issue-specific dissenters. The pathway forward appeared to contain dualistic and even paradoxical components, although both had functional features. On the one hand, in a unipolar world middle powers were pushed to play the role of followers, whether in the core security domain (the first Gulf war), the economic arena (the move from the GATT to the World Trade Organization (WTO)) or on social issues (human rights, democratisation). On the other hand, in select niches middle powers had considerable space and incentive to form coalitions that took on the USA, whether on land mines, the International Criminal Court (ICC) or child soldiers.

In the post-2008 environment the USA remains uncomfortable with any fundamental shift that reinforces multipolarity, but there is an enhanced recognition that its position of hegemonic power is eroding and quite possibly over. Power—particularly political and economic aspects of power—is more widely diffused. If the USA is to continue to exert authority in an issue-specific
fashion, it will have to do so with more partners and a more explicit set of institutional bargains that share governance authority and the burdens of providing global public goods.6

Along with the renewed controversy about the USA’s ‘ownership’ of the system,7 a debate has opened up about the extent to which big emerging powers buy into the rules of the system. One school of thought, epitomised by John Ikenberry, argues that this category of countries may be competing over the leadership of the international system, ie over who has authority over what, but they are not contesting the basic rules of the system, namely openness, multilateralism and the rule of law.8 Such an argument is supported by the fact that China and other members of the BRICS, rather than rejecting the principles and practices of the liberal international order, have joined and thoroughly engaged major multilateral organisations including the international financial institutions, the WTO, and the G20. While some features of international liberal order such as the concept of sovereign independence may change, and elements of pluralism at the top tier of the international system are introduced, the international system as a whole is not challenged or polarised.9

Other commentators privilege contestation, a sober view based on far lower expectations about the ability of the old establishment and emerging powers to reach agreement when they hold such different views about the role of government, as well as about the importance of political freedom in the economy.10 Kagan is particularly robust, arguing that it would be naïve to expect countries like China to maintain the international system that the USA built in its own image.11 Charles Grant embellishes this point further, by maintaining that China as well as Russia is instinctively suspicious of the very notion of global governance as a self-serving Western concept. As such, these countries are still strongly resistant to international interference in internal affairs, with a preference for informal gatherings of big powers and regional institutions over formal multilateral machinery.12 The other BRICS share for the most part the sentiments on global governance being essentially unequal and unfair, and on the importance of non-interference in internal affairs.

Still others highlight the salience of inexactness in the multilateral components of the system, with the tendency of the big emerging countries to wait and see, buy time and hedge within the system. These features can be illustrated through the dynamics of the G20 in economic governance. Schirm highlights the degree of fluidity within the summit process, whereby the G20 exhibits variability among the national units that comprise the forum. Lines of division are not rigid and do not adhere to traditional North–South alliance formations, with the G20 process featuring a myriad of cross-cutting cleavages on issues relating to modes of financial regulation, stimulus versus fiscal restraint, bank levies, exchange rate and monetary policy, and global imbalances.13 Brazil, Canada, Japan, China, Mexico, South Africa and others opposed the French, German and US proposal for a banking levy which aimed to make banks contribute to a rescue fund for bail-outs in future crises. In a second illustration Germany, the EU Commission and Brazil aligned in their criticism of US and Chinese exchange rate and monetary policy. China, Japan and Germany put themselves
in the same camp with their criticism of ‘global imbalances’ and vigorously opposed US demands for political intervention against trade surpluses.

At the same time it must be noted that the big rising powers have not taken on a comprehensive role as managers in reshaping the global system. Rather, a selective approach has been adopted: going along with some G20 initiatives in some issue-specific domains but resisting in other areas on grounds of national interest. Flexibility of choice is enhanced by the support given to alternative institutional arrangements via BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China), BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and/or IBSA Dialogue Forum (India, Brazil, South Africa) and through other forums including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.14 Such an approach is consistent with the contention of Barma et al that the big rising states do seem to be willing to work within key multilateral mechanisms as a means of status-enhancement, but that they see these efforts primarily as aimed at protecting their sovereignty and building global and regional institutions in which they have more autonomy.15

The problematique of the middle power model

The focus of this article is on a re-examination of the diplomatic styles and impact of secondary or intermediate powers in a world of diminished hegemony and leadership. In doing this, it will move beyond the emphasis on the ‘rise of the rest’ in global affairs.16 Such a kaleidoscopic perspective, if valuable as an antidote to the retention of US-centrism in so much of the literature, misses the degree to which a new form of hierarchical differentiation has reappeared in the 21st century. The ‘rise of the rest’ does not create uniformity; instead, it creates variegated layers on the global scene, each of which deserves careful scrutiny.

In an era in which there is an obsession with the new global geometry of power, it is easy to downplay or even dismiss completely a distinctive middle segment of countries separate from potential great powers either in the traditional (the EU-4 of Germany, France, Italy and the UK) or non-traditional (China, India and Brazil) group.17 One reason for this ‘missing middle’ is the heavy weight in the literature on geopolitical competition at the apex of power. The context and contours we have before us in the first decade of the 21st century, however, are very different from the image of a single challenger to the status quo.

Instead of one emerging power there are several countries that can be deemed emerging powers.18 Moving from one to a cluster of countries, however, does not mean that there is any precision in determining which countries are in ascendancy. This puzzle jumps out in the popular acronyms used to showcase the emerging powers—whether BRICS, IBSA or BRICSAM (the M standing for Mexico).

Even if the exact composition of the cluster cannot be precisely pinned down, what a broadening out nonetheless does to an extended ‘rising middle’ is to turn the focus towards the form of the diplomatic activities associated with emerging powers. If the first distinct characteristic of the current phenomenon of ascendancy relates to numbers, the second deals with the manner of their diplomatic behaviour usually via multilateral means.
The need to extend the mapping of who or what is rising is reinforced by the tendency to over-emphasise the degree of concentration in the shift of global affairs. Through a liberal internationalist framework the focus is placed on the ability of the international system to adapt through the formation of new constellations or coalitions. The main focus of this stream is how the West needs to strengthen the Western liberal alliance, on the one hand, while simultaneously ‘bringing-in’ China and other rising powers, on the other. A considerable amount of attention is placed on the attributes of like-mindedness; and alternatively on the need for institutional management or socialisation.

In terms of contestation the basic criticism of both the realist and liberal institutionalist frameworks is the normative and policy-related assumptions behind them. If the realist analyses are limited by a top-down, state-centric perspective premised on the inevitability of conflict in power transitions, the liberal institutionalist framework can be criticised for prioritising the liberal order, an order that has long been contested on normative as well as power politics grounds. It also forces imprecision by requiring a definition of participation in the order via binary terms, whereas in reality the rising states can be seen as joining some established institutions but possessing a different set of norms and values that guide its participation in these and other institutions. In responding to a question on whether the G7 should be expanded to include developing countries, the US treasury secretary Henry Paulson stated: ‘If you look at the global financial architecture, I don’t think it reflects the global economy today. It’s a big world, and it’s a lot bigger than the G7’, he added.19

The then British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and several other G7 leaders supported the idea. They called for a major global meeting to redesign the world’s finance system and rewrite the rulebook of global capitalism. Brown argued that, while the ‘old postwar international financial institutions are out of date…the same sort of visionary internationalism is needed to resolve the crises and challenges of a different age’ as had been demonstrated at Bretton Woods. He warned that: ‘We are in the first financial crisis of the new global age…We need to recognize that if risks are globalized, then responsibilities have to be globalized as well.’20

Notwithstanding (or because of) this partial embrace, some close observers have argued that some emerging states have remained aloof from the reform process directed at international institutions.21 As noted above, while engaging with the central pillars of the established system, big emerging powers have certainly increasingly worked through other institutions (including BRICS) to advance a ‘parallel system’ to the established set of clubs, a system with its own distinctive set of rules, institutions and ways of doing things—and its own alternative currencies of power.22

At odds with this image of concentration, whether in parallel or integrated construct, however, is the relatively large number of countries involved. Beyond the core of Brazil, Russia, India and China, other putative ‘emerging’ powers need to be factored in. On a trip to China with 13 cabinet members and a delegation of 370 business people South Africa’s President Jacob Zuma said South Africa wanted to be considered for membership, advocating that its participation ‘would mean that an entire continent that has a population of over...
1 billion people is represented. Reports in 2010 suggested that the BRIC group was considering bringing in not only South Africa but Indonesia and Mexico. In 2011 South Africa was formally welcomed into the group, changing BRIC to BRICS, but, at least not yet, no other country has joined.

Reinforcing the notion of differentiation from the past is the relatively large number of countries involved in the G20, both from the late 1990s with the establishment of the G20 Finance and in the elevated G20 at the leader level. In 1814–15 the concert was made up of five core countries—Britain, Prussia, Russia and Austria plus France. Although other countries participated, unlike at the G20, there was no illusion of equality. The same basic formula was utilised at the 1919 Paris Treaty negotiations, where there was a big four, or arguably a Big Three with the UK, the USA and France. Moreover, in similar fashion, there was a Big Three at Yalta and Potsdam, although of course five countries received permanent veto-bearing seats at the UN.

By way of contrast the members of the G20 are quite diverse. There is neither the image of allies/victors in war nor is there the sense of ideological uniformity or anti-revolutionary ethos. In the G20, as the hub of the new order, there are countries from every quadrant of the globe plus some implicit regional representation. Under such conditions there is space for different—although perhaps not mutually exclusive—components within the ambit of the G20 at the leader level.

The second obsession in the literature is about bigness per se. Indeed, the influence of BRICS is attributed to the privileging of bigness, that is to say the sheer magnitude or scale in rates of growth, foreign direct investment inflows, size of populations, etc. This view has to be taken seriously. As pointed out above, all the core big rising states—Brazil, Russia, India and China—have their annual GDP over $1 trillion dollars each.

This focus on bigness extends as well to the means of achieving such success. China’s success has been interpreted within the broader developmental state framework, although this has not gone uncontested. China as a model for a generalised path to development has also attracted some considerable examination. This has led to speculation, for example on the creation of a ‘Beijing Consensus’.

India’s pluralism, most recently accompanied by rapid economic growth and adaptation to the information economy, has given it a development status that had previously eluded it. In the case of both Brazil and South Africa it is more their regional roles which place them at the forefront of development agendas. Brazil is central because of its role in the broader Latin American search for an alternative model of development in a continent with arguably the most advanced development debate. On the African continent it is South Africa that has had both the capacity and policy autonomy to spearhead development policy debate, notwithstanding the magnitude of its own internal inequalities in terms of race, class and gender.

The gap between the largest of BRICS and middle powers comes out clearly in terms of GDP. As compiled by the IMF the comparative data for 2010 put China’s economy at US$5.878 trillion, highest among BRICS, followed by Brazil at $2.090 trillion, and India at $1.631. By way of comparison traditional middle
powers (Canada and Australia, as well as some European Union states) and a cluster of non-traditional powers (Mexico, Republic of Korea, Indonesia and Turkey) lag behind. Canada’s GDP is calculated to be $1577 trillion, Australia’s $1237 trillion, Mexico’s $1034 trillion, Korea’s $1014 trillion, Turkey’s $735 billion and Indonesia’s $706 billion.

Yet, consistent with the critique of the ‘rise of the rest’, some middle powers have a combination of resources, diplomatic opportunities and skills that mark them out as a privileged cluster. In structural terms GDP is not the only salient quantitative indicator of a country’s standing. As China’s political leaders continue to declare, China is not only a rising country but a poor country. In terms of GDP at purchasing power parity (PPP) per capita, China falls behind not only other members of the G7/8 in the World Bank’s 2010 list but also behind a variety of traditional and non-traditional middle powers, including Canada, Australia, Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey and even Argentina.

Although China, India and Brazil are the leading countries, there has been a steadily rising share of world product and trade among the 11 non-G8 members of the G20 as a whole. Between 1980 and 2008, while the G8’s combined GDP grew by 470%, comprising 54.6% of world growth in GDP, that of the G11 grew by 722%, accounting for 21.8% of total world growth. With respect to trade over the same period, the G8 grew by 621% and the G11 by 1387%, accounting for 37.8% and 21.6% shares of growth in world trade, respectively. In other words, 1) the G20 accounted for 76.4% of world economic output and 59.4% of world trade growth; and 2) even though their share of growth is smaller, the G11 have strongly outpaced the G8 both in GDP and trade growth. Moreover, the imbalance of economic performance between the G8 and G11 has grown more marked in the past few years since the global financial crisis.

With a focus on current and projected economic attributes, several reports have pointed to the appearance of an ‘emerging middle’ in the global economy. Goldman Sachs has conceptualised a ‘Next 11’ list of countries (including Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Korea, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, Turkey and Vietnam) that in its estimation have the economic trajectories necessary for entrance into this category. Other analysts from the investment industry have also tweaked this concept of a new middle, either as CIVETS (Colombia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Egypt, Turkey and South Africa) or MIKT (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea and Turkey).

Estimates of economic size, nonetheless, do not translate into either a middle power identity or a mode of operation. The Next 11 and other similar constellations reinforce the ‘rise of the rest’ in global affairs as a significant but largely undifferentiated cluster of countries. What is missing is either a domestic-animated sense of middle power identity, or some exhibition of behaviour consistent with an updated middle power model.

This article will now attempt to tease out the content, meaning and symbolic status of being a middle power vis-à-vis a smaller set of countries, each of which belongs to the G20 or makes a serious claim for membership. Special attention will be made to an identity dilemma each of these countries possesses, relating to how middle power status is contested from a variety of alternative positions. The debate about middle power identity is most visible
(and contested) in two traditional middle powers: Canada and Australia. The Harper government has embraced the middle power model, albeit with a variant approach that puts the emphasis on instrumental delivery as opposed to declaratory statements. The Gillard/Rudd government has revitalised the notion of Australia as a ‘creative’ middle state. There is also evidence of a conceptually sophisticated and policy-relevant engagement with the middle power model among a wider cluster of states, most concertedly in South Korea, and to some extent in Indonesia, Turkey, South Africa, Mexico, Spain and The Netherlands.

Middle power identity is enhanced by domestic political incentives to both elevate and nuance their location in the global system. At the same time, however, this middle power identity is projected over other forms of alternative identities by membership in the G20, as witnessed by the robust reconfiguration of Korea’s identity in the context of the G20. Alternatively, those countries such as Spain and The Netherlands, which make a claim for membership but have gained only partial access to the forum, have not undertaken a similar process of reorientation.

The core objective of the article is to analyse how such middle powers are situated and operate in the pluralistic space located in the world order. Middle powers face the reality that their voices may be diluted as leadership groups in international organisations enlarge their membership and expand their inclusive consultation mechanisms. As already mooted, however, a counter-argument can be made that the process of transition offers significant opportunities for the advancement of the foreign policy of middle powers if they can apply their national strengths, such as diversity, innovation, openness and connectedness, to specific global problems. While the impact of BRICS has to be taken seriously, the rise of these big countries does not close space completely for alternatively forms of leadership from an entrepreneurial and technical perspective. Put another way, power now is a more diffuse, smarter and asymmetric concept.29

In conceptual terms there continues to be a host of puzzles associated with the middle power concept. As Gareth Evans, the former Australian foreign minister, noted in a recent address:

trying to define middle powers with any precision, and coming up with a list of, say, twenty or thirty or maybe more countries that would command universal acceptance as such, is an exercise fraught with peril. Objective criteria like GDP, population size, physical size and military capability can be no more than starting points. For example, Australia, which would be on everyone’s list, ranks only 50th in the world on population size, although it is 13th on GDP.30

As noted, others in this category are Indonesia, Turkey, Mexico and possibly South Africa (notwithstanding its shift to BRICS), and Argentina.

Recognition concerning the resilience of the middle power model therefore requires a reformulation that highlights some elements of innovation. A push along these lines fits neatly with the notion pace Robert Cox introduced: ‘the middle-power role is not a fixed universal’ but a concept and set of practices that continually evolve in search of different forms of actorness.31 Rather than
being a mode of conceptualisation that reinforces the sense of continuity in global politics, the middle power model provides a porous and accessible window of change.

The G20 as the hub of transformation in global governance

Middle power activism has been relocated by the transformation of global governance in the context of the G20. As rehearsed above, unlike classic forms of concert diplomacy the G20 allows space for another layer of states beyond the established elite and one or a small number of new rising powers.

One of the major changes has been a diminution of one of the key features of earlier waves of middle power activism: a strong sense of like-mindedness based on shared attitudes. This commonality of purpose is best captured in reference to the high profile initiatives of the 1990s on anti-personnel land mines, and the International Criminal Court (ICC). In these examples campaigns animated by middle power norm building stood in contrast to the resistant behaviour of major powers in the global hierarchy.

The institutional context for the projection of middle power behaviour is also sharply different. In the initiatives of the 1990s middle powers worked either to go around established institutions (the land mines campaign) or to build new institutions (the ICC). In the case of the G20 a cluster of middle powers was accorded equality of club membership in the original institutional design. This common and equitable site of activity provides a valuable benchmark for a mapping exercise vis-à-vis middle power diplomacy.

To be sure, the G20 can be seen as consistent with traditional middle power ends, with the onus on reinforcing collective behaviour in support of the international system. Indeed, the point that Keohane made in the late 1960s remains valid in the context of the G20: ‘A middle-power is a state whose leaders consider that it cannot act alone effectively, but may be able to have a systemic impact in a small group or through an international institution’.

However, in terms of means, membership in the G20 provides a catalyst for a more intense stylistic differentiation in the projection of middle power diplomacy. G20 dynamics reveal the practical application of intellectual/technical and entrepreneurial leadership.

Although most of the media attention is focused on the countries at the core of a purported emerging multipolar world, it is middle powers that are the biggest champions of the G20 and strive the hardest in the background to make it work. In structural terms the stakes are high for middle powers in terms of operational efficiency in that they strongly support the rules of the international order. Even beyond BRICS, moreover, the G20 offers middle states immense status enhancement as members of a self-selected and exclusive top-tier club at the apex of the global hierarchy.

The methods of support have been sharply dichotomised, a split that can be located especially in the divergence between a key traditional middle power (Canada) and a key non-traditional middle power (Korea). Using a template from a previous era of transition (in the post-cold war period), Canada relied on
some issues-specific forms of technical/routine leadership. Korea, by way of contrast, pushed forward with a more robust form of entrepreneurial style.

Canada’s technical orientation

Canada is the only country defined as a middle power that is a member of both the G8 and G20. There are potential weaknesses associated with this duality. Nevertheless, under current conditions it also provides Canada expanded diplomatic space for initiatives at odds with the image of being relegated to marginal status.

At the ideational stage it is the entrepreneurial role of Canada that stands out. Indeed, the concept of the G20 itself originates in Canada. It was Paul Martin, the Canadian finance minister in 1998, who persuaded the USA and other G7 countries to form a new group, the finance G20, to invite leaders of developing countries to participate in international economic decision-making processes. Paul Martin was also the first major politician to call for the elevation of the G20 Finance Ministers’ group to the G20 Leaders’ group in 2005.33 Without Canadian leadership the G20 might never have existed in its current form. In more recent years, under Prime Minister Stephen Harper, it is technical leadership that comes to the fore. The Harper government has embraced the middle power model, albeit through a variant approach that puts the emphasis on instrumental delivery as opposed to declaratory statements.34

The reluctance of Canada to get involved in entrepreneurial leadership through the G20 is exacerbated by the institutional hold of the G8. Much of the ambitious initiatives in Canadian diplomacy are routed through this older ‘like-minded’ vehicle. This legacy was witnessed via Canada’s strong support for the L’Aquila food security initiative. Canada, along with the USA and Japan, is credited at L’Aquila with meeting, if not exceeding, its 2005 commitments to double aid to Africa. Prime Minister Harper showcased this issue as one that confirmed the need for accountability: ‘Countries who have not been living up to their commitments are going to face increasing heat as we go forward’.35

Even on the G8, however, there were severe limitations. Prime Minister Harper’s end of summit press conference at L’Aquila offered the primary entry point for the Canadian public into the G8 process. There he placed the emphasis on not over-promising but on delivering and stated that Canada would do a better job of hosting the G8 in 2010—the Muskoka Summit—by going back to basics. The sentiment that the G8 should be a forum of delivery not of over-promising came out forcefully. Acknowledging that the summit process had a credibility gap, ‘sapping the G8’s moral authority’, the prime minister argued that the response should not be to abandon the G8, but to make it work more effectively. The problem, in his view, has stemmed from countries that ‘make commitments and ... don’t fulfill them’.36

Such a restrictive approach was strongly criticised by many close observers. In the lead-up to the summit one former Canadian ambassador wrote a scathing article that the G8 was ‘a throwback to an era that has faded from the scene’. Canada risked ‘running with the dinosaurs’ by resisting the opening up of the process to emerging states.37
In contradistinction to the G8 as ‘sideshow’, a prominent Canadian journalist argued that the real action would take place at the G20 in Pittsburgh, which ‘should be more disciplined and decisive and it is there that new regimes to manage international finance, coordinate the global economy and deal with the timing and strategies for exiting from the current stimulus programs will be negotiated’. Extending this critique in the aftermath of the L’Aquila Summit, another columnist contended that the Muskoka Summit would be more of the same: ‘big, wordy and grotesquely expensive’. Faced with the effective competition of the G20, which had the advantage of having a more balanced membership, the G8 was deemed to be no longer the main event.

For the supporters of the established G8, however, the way forward was not a shift away, but closer attention to the core strengths of the summit process. What was needed was greater accountability and attention to core details. Leading into the summit, Canadian officials were seen as defending the credibility of the G8 as it exists. A top foreign policy advisor is quoted anonymously as saying that there was a strong interest in ‘maintaining the G8 as sort of the core group of countries that can provide … leadership … and forceful leadership’. In this vein, one sympathetic op-ed termed Prime Minister Harper’s G8 performance a ‘hat trick’, providing personal and group leadership on climate, stimulus and international aid.

The Canadian approach at the Pittsburgh Summit of G20 leaders followed in some of the same trajectory. Where the Harper government devoted most of its attention was on getting the balance right between continuing the recession-fighting stimulus packages and implementing a collective exit strategy when the recovery was ensured. But it was made quite clear that the time was not yet right to move from the one stage to the next. Harper stated: ‘While we are seeing signs of recovery, the gains are at best fragile. We must stay on course.’

Despite the limitations of the Canadian approach, Mr Harper lauded the G20’s substantive achievements as ‘historic’. He noted that a year previously stock markets had been falling at a precipitous rate and financial institutions were collapsing in ways not seen since the 1930s, and ‘now we are seeing signs of growth’. In his view the G20 has worked well as a crisis committee. If it had not been possible, for the first time in history, to get the leaders of the major economies in one room together to put their minds to the collective interest of humanity and coordinate their policies, the result could have been very different.

In terms of Canada’s diplomatic status the debate centred on whether or not Canada’s international role was strengthened or weakened by the accession of the G20 as the hub of global economic governance and the G8 concentrating on security issues. Harper acknowledged that Canada’s voice in the world on economic issues could become watered down. He explicitly stated: ‘Will Canada’s role and Canada’s voice be diluted [in the G20]? Well, look, it would be crazy for me to deny that in some degree. Obviously if you are one of 20 instead of one of eight it is a different dynamic.’

The positive assessments concluded that Harper and the Canadian government were left with some considerable diplomatic strength even amid this transformation. Canada as the co-host of the G20 with South Korea in June 2010 could reinforce its credentials as a country with solid diplomatic and economic
strengths. But as the host of the Muskoka G8 summit, Canada could not only shape the agenda in the way it wanted but do so in a way that reinforced the G8’s like-minded ethos.

At the same time, however, Harper reiterated that the G8 would not disappear. While it would no longer be the premier body on economic issues, he noted that the G8 had taken an active role in other areas like development and international peace and security: ‘We view it important that these kinds of discussions continue’.44

Canada enjoyed a relatively low-key Seoul G20 summit in November 2010. Amid all the public frictions about surplus and deficit, trade and current accounts and accusations of currency manipulation, Canada stood in the background. Freed from the hosting duties that he assumed at the June 2010 Toronto G20, Prime Minister Harper was not highly visible in the hectic diplomacy key to the summit. Nevertheless, avoiding the spotlight did not mean avoiding taking stances on the issues at the centre of controversy. Harper explicitly took sides on the currency issue, saying that he understood why the USA was injecting money into its monetary system and that he supported Washington’s position that China must let its currency rise.

Nor, continuing the restrictionist theme, did the Canadian prime minister suggest that the G20 summit would be entirely successful. In his initial comments at the forum Harper made it clear that he was not entirely confident that G20 leaders would be able to come to a resolution on trade imbalances and currencies—the two key issues surfacing at the Seoul summit. In laying out his priorities, Harper emphasised that these issues needed ‘to be addressed’. But he added: ‘Will they be addressed at this conference? I’m not so sure’.45

There is an emphasis at both the declaratory and operational levels on coordination: ensuring that the G20 lives up to the obligations made at all three summits but especially at Pittsburgh; maintaining the stimulus as recovery is still fragile and unpredictable; and ‘finishing the job’ before embarking on an exit strategy. But Canada places limits on the G20’s aspirations, as it has rejected an intrusive ‘one size fits all’ strategy. The preference is for a pragmatic approach that allows for local strengths and competitive advantage, not regulatory arbitrage through the creation of an uneven playing field.

Ample room was kept for differentiated treatment among the G20 members, albeit with a review process via a peer review mechanism. Such an approach highlighted Canada’s own strengths in national regulation, with its history of encouraging banks to maintain high levels of reserves (leverage requirements) as solid safety cushions. In doing so the Canadian government was willing to resist pressure from banks, which increasingly wanted greater flexibility on capital levels to either pay increased dividends to shareholders or move into new acquisitions.46

The Canadian government wanted to avoid any additional form of bank taxes or levies at all costs. Finance Minister Jim Flaherty repeated on many occasions the mantra that Canada was ‘not about to impose new taxes on financial institutions in this country’.47 The government also played down other ‘micromanagement’ issues such as executive compensation or the possible ‘banning’ of specific forms of trading.
Overall these positions are used to showcase how well Canada has come through the crisis—with much of its public diplomacy branding Canada as a safe country in which to do business—and its support for rule making. In general terms Canadian officials have continued to put out a very positive line about how successfully Canada’s prudential framework had performed, as well as the resilience of Canadian banks. More specifically Bank of Canada Governor Mark Carney has emphasised that the Canadian banking regulation system will form part of international standards via the Basel Committee.48

Again Canada showed a willingness to talk about sensitive issues such as exchange rates and particularly the value of the Chinese currency. As the finance minister put it: ‘We have some significant global imbalances and there’s no point in sweeping significant issues under the rug’.49 The trade-off was that the G20 needed at the same time to wage ‘a continued, persistent fight against protectionism’.

The most forthright statement by Harper on the G20 at this stage came in his speech at Davos for the World Economic Forum in January 2010, in which he laid out the need for countries to embrace ‘enlightened sovereignty’. At the same time, however, he suggested that the G20 had still not proven its lasting merits. Having come together in a ‘fellowship of the lifeboat’ it now had to follow through on promised reforms, in order to avert future crises.

The G20 co-hosting role continued to be complicated by the determination of the Canadian government to showcase (and hold onto) the embedded role of the G8. From a defensive perspective Prime Minister Harper once more voiced the opinion that Canada’s voice could be diluted in a larger group. And media reports highlighted the fact that Canada has been working hard to gain support from other members to maintain the role of the G8.50 From a more assertive position the concept of like-mindedness is showcased as the fundamental vehicle by which Canadian diplomacy should be projected.

The balancing act was extended to the agenda of the G8—which Canada has attempted to turn away from economic issues (allowing a basic differentiation between the G8 and G20). In keeping with the traditional G7/8 geopolitical concerns Canada placed a heavy onus on security issues—with a focus especially on Iran, nuclear proliferation and ‘dirty bomb’ terrorism. The unanticipated area of the refocusing approach was the tilt towards a concentration on ‘human welfare’ generally, and on the Millennium Development Goals and maternal health specifically.

Such a focus had considerable NGO support: activists had made a challenge to Harper in November 2009 that he ‘change lives of women and girls around the world’ by making their concerns a priority at both the G8 and G20 summits.

But the surprise has been the robustness with which the Harper government initially pushed these initiatives—both through a rare op-ed (in the Toronto Star, a newspaper that traditionally supports the Liberals in Canada) and in his Davos speech. What was also novel was the degree to which the Canadian government consulted the NGO community—through interaction with CARE Canada, World Vision, Save the Children and others.

Although initially winning a great deal of applause, the Harper government put this support in jeopardy when the maternal health issue became highly
politicised over the limits of this approach in terms of abortion and contraception rights—controversies that dominated media stories about the G8.51

Attention was thus inevitably focused on the differentiation between the two forums, as well as on the G8’s role in the G20 era. Harper’s maternal health initiative, the Muskoka Initiative, drew some criticism but was presented as a means of reinforcing the position of the G8 in the global institutional architecture. Canada’s ability to influence the agenda for international cooperation was also examined through a positive lens.52

From a Canadian perspective the European crisis dominating the Cannes G20 Summit reinforced the need for limitations within the G20. Harper took a hard line at the outset, forcefully indicating that Greece might have to leave the eurozone if there was no acceptance of the bailout package. The constructive focus was in specific areas. The first of these was in the G20’s adoption of the Cannes Action Plan for Growth and Jobs, which emerged from a working group co-chaired by Canada and India. Canada was able to put its own brand on this work, as the name of the plan was very similar to the title of the Conservative government’s 2011 budget. The overall tone of the Action Plan reflected Canada’s concern with the need for discipline, especially with regard to the debt and deficit targets of European countries. Most notably it extracted the pledge from Italy that it would move ‘close to a balanced budget’ by 2013.

The other tangible diplomatic success was the appointment of Mark Carney, the governor of the Bank of Canada, as the new head of a revamped Financial Stability Board (FSB). This result—taken to be a move justified not only by Carney’s impressive personal reputation, but as a reflection of the high quality of Canadian financial regulations—was amplified by the attention the FSB received both in the report by British Prime Minister David Cameron on global governance and in the Cannes final declaration.

The summit hosted by Mexico, at Los Cabos in June 2012, showcased how embedded the focused and technically oriented Canadian diplomatic repertoire had become in the G20 context. In a similar vein to the USA Harper stuck to the position that Europeans should not be looking outside the continent for financial help to deal with the ongoing banking crisis: ‘What European countries need to do—and what we will be looking to see—are clear commitments that they are prepared to take all of the necessary actions that are within their capacity to deal with these problems’.53 Although there were signs of considerable enthusiasm for this approach in Canada,54 Harper’s style attracted some critical public attention among European participants, triggered by a question from a Canadian journalist who asked why North Americans should ‘risk their assets to help Europe’ at a joint press conference with EU Commission President José Manuel Barroso and EU Council President Herman van Rompuy.55 Canada and North America became the focal point of a counterattack by Barroso amid accusations that Europe was being lectured to, with Barroso saying that ‘we are certainly not coming here to receive lessons’, especially when ‘the crisis originated in North America’. Barroso added that, in terms of comparative actions, Europe stood as a model as the biggest contributor to the IMF for its programmes—‘bigger than the United States, certainly much, much, much bigger than Canada’.56
Although Canada’s finance minister reinforced Prime Minister Harper’s views (that the EU should create a ‘genuine’ financial union), Jim Flaherty went into some of the technical details of this approach in a speech before the summit with support for the proposal for a fund to guarantee bank deposits in the eurozone. Again reference was made to US analogies, with Flaherty saying that European leaders should be guided by the USA’s big moves in 2008 in order to ‘overwhelm’ a financial crisis: ‘You’re not going to have economic growth unless there’s market confidence. You’re not going to have market confidence unless you have a solid fiscal plan that’s credible and believable by the markets. And that’s where we have been encouraging our European colleagues to go’, he said.

Canada’s Central Bank Governor and head of the FSB, Mark Carney, also showed a determination to stay the course in terms of capital rules for the world’s biggest banks. At the conclusion of the G20 in Los Cabos, Carney was adamant that such new rules would help, not hinder, global recovery: ‘Credit growth has resumed in those countries where financial institutions have decisively strengthened their balance sheets. Banks that have raised capital are reaping the benefits of greater access to and lower costs of market funding’.

South Korea’s entrepreneurial leadership

Nevertheless, a core theme of this article is that the mapping of middle powers needs to be broadened beyond the orientation of established states such as Canada (with its technical and restricted bias). To a considerable extent the mantra of middle state diplomacy has been passed over to non-traditional states such as South Korea willing to take on robust forms of entrepreneurial leadership. In taking on these new responsibilities, the unique and generic qualities of Korea’s diplomatic repertoire must be placed in comparative context not only with traditional middle power such as Canada and Australia but also with non-traditional middle powers within the G20, such as Mexico.

As with traditional middle powers of past eras South Korea identifies itself as a bridge in global affairs. Unlike other middle powers, however, Korea did not have the ability to act in this fashion before the creation of the G20. Mexico, by way of contrast, could do so in a number of ways. Mexico most notably assumed a very active bridging position in the Heiligendamm process. As a member of the OECD and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) Mexico had shed its developing-country identity in the mid-1990s. Nevertheless, skilful diplomacy, leveraged by a Mexican Secretary-General of the OECD, rather than leadership based on merit, has facilitated the role of Mexico as a convener of the outreach Five (O5) with respect to the so-called Heiligendamm process. This form of G8 plus 5 dialogue (with Mexico included together with China, India, Brazil, and South Africa) was an opportunity for Mexico to realign its foreign policy more with the South and try to push migration as a major topic for debate within the G8 and O5. It was also another avenue for Mexico to try to go around unsuccessful regional attempts at bridging the North and South American continents that had significantly damaged its relationship with Brazil. In similar fashion the O5 provided Mexico with a good venue for mending its
strained relationships with China and India, given their direct competition in US markets.

The creation of the G20 provided Korea with new possibilities in terms of diplomatic activity, especially in terms of convening power. Notwithstanding a structural weight below that not only of China but also of Japan and India, Korea raced ahead to grab the right to host the first G20 outside the ‘Anglo’ world. In doing so it played up its ‘bridging’ role with respect to its evolution from a developing country to a developed (OECD) state. Although not alone in its ambitions, Korea’s unique brand is important here (punctuated by the close relationship between the Korean state and corporate giants such as Samsung). As President Lee Myung-bak stated, ‘The world can be split into two groups: One group sets global rules, the other follows. South Korea has successfully transformed itself from a passive follower into an active agenda-setter.’

Unlike with BRICS there was no sense of aloofness or hedging by Korea. Nor were there any explicit recriminations about the causes of the crisis that led to the creation of the G20. President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva went so far as to say that the global financial crisis, ‘was created by white men with blue eyes’. BRICS also blamed US ‘aggressive policy actions’ to stabilise their domestic economies that had spilled over into emerging market economies by generating ‘excessive liquidity’ and fostered ‘excessive capital flows and commodity prices’. South Korea, in contradistinction, used the familiar repertoire of traditional middle power statecraft, with a heavy reliance on quiet diplomacy and issue-specific mediation. Before the Seoul summit, for instance, Korean officials steered the G20 debate towards boosting domestic demand in China, which achieved buy-in because it did not demand that China revalue its currency.

For the rising middle powers the G20 did not present challenges in terms of being ‘responsible stakeholders’ but opportunities in terms of access to the ‘high table’ at the apex of power. Nor did Korea have the contradiction facing BRICS of being rising state powers at the same time as continuing to have embedded within them a massive degree of societal inequality.

Stylistically South Korea demonstrated its capability to play on the world stage even under the stress of emerging policy tensions such as those on issues around currency and imbalances. Substantively South Korea showcased how a middle power could be a valuable complement to ascendant powers: pushing a new development agenda and the notion of safety nets during financial crises. Such a success makes it more likely that there will be space for a blend of countries in any informal multilateral groups dealing with functional issues.

As the host of the November 2010 G20 summit, South Korea emphasised in some detail the need for the forum to move to the stage where ‘global leaders aggressively coordinate their exit plans’. Beyond this, however, Seoul also sent a number of signals that it was contemplating stretching out the agenda for the G20 when it hosted the forum. In his various ‘outreach’ efforts Changyong Rhee, South Korea’s Secretary-General of the Presidential Committee for the G20 Summit, placed high emphasis on efforts to solidify the G20’s role not only as the ‘premier forum’ for crisis management but also for beyond-crisis economic cooperation. On top of follow-ups to Pittsburgh on recovery and exit
strategies, a framework for sustainable and balanced growth, and the reform of international financial institutions, other issues such as trade, food and energy security, and climate financing were highlighted.67

More generally the support for the G20 among middle powers was consolidated. Australia will host the summit in 2014 and Turkey in 2015. Some considerable credit for sustaining the G20 momentum after the April 2009 London Summit should go to South Korea and Australia. Both countries worked hard after the London Summit to institutionalise the G20. An op-ed column that the leaders of Korea and Australia, Lee Myong-bak and Kevin Rudd, contributed to the Financial Times urging the G20 leaders to agree on a framework for macro-economic policy coordination in Pittsburgh was one of the highlights of their joint action.68 Both countries felt that their efforts paid off when G20 leaders in Pittsburgh decided to designate the G20 as the premier forum for international economic cooperation and to make it an annual meeting.

Attending her first G20 summit at Seoul, Prime Minister Julia Gillard promised to continue the ‘Australian Labor tradition of creative middle-power diplomacy’. She said Australia had been a driving force on reform of the IMF, played an active role in the creation of new international banking rules and had been active in putting the issue of development on to the agenda, supporting the initiative of the president of Korea. She also indicated support for an expanded agenda encompassing a jobs strategy and climate change.69

The idea of the financial safety net attracted strong interest from emerging market economies that are vulnerable to sudden changes in international capital flows. Before the 2008 crisis emerging markets in need did not want to turn to the IMF for help because an IMF bailout brought stigma, destroying the credibility of borrowers. What they needed in the IMF was a pre-crisis prevention insurer, not just a post-crisis bailout fund. During the Seoul Summit the G20 decided to strengthen the IMF’s crisis prevention role by expanding its Flexible Credit Line and introducing a new Precautionary Credit Line. G20 leaders hoped that these new sources of funding would reduce the need for emerging countries to accumulate foreign reserves as self-insurance against volatile global capital flows. South Korea also sought ways for the IMF lending facilities to link up with various regional arrangements such as the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI) in Asia.

Korea’s presidency of the G20 also presented an opportunity to bring development issues to the table. With its vivid memories of both development successes and failures, Korea pushed for a development agenda and multi-year action plan, including a pledge for duty-free, quota-free market access for low-income countries. The initiatives could make the G20 Summit a much more inclusive and relevant event for the entire world, as it can bring more than 173 non-member countries into the G20’s sphere of influence.

The Seoul Summit also aimed to achieve macroeconomic coordination with detailed policy recommendations for each individual member country to develop the Framework for Strong, Sustainable and Balanced Growth. The uneven and slowing global economic recovery sparked a currency war, with the USA, China and Japan beefing up the battle to grow through exports. China’s currency policy in particular was the target of major concern among its trading partners.
Believing that the Chinese government keeps its currency undervalued, the USA and others called for the appreciation of the Chinese yuan at the Seoul Summit. Identification and correction of macroeconomic imbalances were another thorny issue. The USA wanted to set numerical targets on current account surpluses and deficits but major surplus countries such as Germany and China strongly opposed proposals to quantify limits on them. In the end no breakthrough on currency and imbalance issues was reached at the Seoul Summit. But, as noted above, South Korea managed to broker significant agreements. On currency levels the leaders agreed to move towards market-determined exchange systems and on macroeconomic imbalances they set the deadline of June 2011 for coming up with ‘indicative guidelines’ of what constitutes an over-the-top deficit or surplus. Media reports suggest that President Lee threatened not to end the meeting until China and other opponents had agreed to the deadline.

Another key agenda item was to overhaul the IMF, especially the shift of 6% in quota to underrepresented members from the over-represented countries. As the chair, Korea worked hard to hammer out agreements on most of the controversial issues by the November 2010 Summit. Most agree that pushing towards reform of IMF governance counts among the G20’s greatest achievements so far.

In addition to agenda setting and coordination, the Korean government in Seoul demonstrated its commitment to effective consensus building and global communication in the run-up to the G20 Seoul Summit. It hosted the World Bank and IMF conferences alongside the meetings of finance ministers and central bank governors and invited most top government officials from Africa to hear their opinions about the G20 agenda and build up a consensus on the development issue. It also organised a gathering of more than 100 chief executives from Fortune 250 companies during the Seoul Summit, in a bid to reflect private-sector views while political leaders were discussing global issues and concerns. The ‘business summit’ may become a regular sideline event of the annual G20 Summit as France, the next chair, is to host a similar meeting.

The future of middle power leadership at the G20 and beyond

The shift in power from the traditional developed to the developing world places middle powers in strategic and pivotal positions. The G20 itself was created to accommodate the rise of emerging markets in the world economy; it provides an open stage where major emerging and advanced nations discuss pressing global issues on an equal footing, unlike international organisations with either a two-tiered arrangement or weighted voting system. In an international system increasingly divided between large developed and large developing countries, middle powers are likely to hold casting votes to break frequent deadlocks in multilateral negotiations. The emphasis of middle power diplomacy is more technical in nature, as befitting its economic focus. There is a mediation component but it is informal and highly contingent.

From a governance point of view the G20 is far from the ideal solution, as it is vulnerable to gridlock on a wide and deep set of technical issues. Therefore the success of the G20 largely depends on the foresight and leadership of
leading countries in both developed and developing country blocs. It also helps if there are brokers or arbiters between the two groups. There are only a few countries that can take the role as a middle power belonging to neither of the two camps of large developed and large developing countries, notably Korea and Australia, or a country that is in a straddling position, such as Canada.

Although, as Joe Nye notes, power transition describes the central tension in contemporary international politics, power diffusion and diversification are more interesting processes, creating and driving new forms of power such as soft power and network power. Power diffusion refers to the diffusion of power to non-state actors (such as NGOs) and private actors; in today’s information age so many decisions are made outside the control of even the most powerful states. Power diffusion also widens the scope of coalition building. Leaders must win the support not only of other states but also of a whole range of non-state actors including the media, NGOs and businesses.

Even within the G20 the conflict between traditionally developed and developing countries is not the only source of disagreement. Rachman sees the presence of at least seven major cleavages that divide the member countries: current account surplus versus deficit countries, currency manipulators versus the manipulated, fiscal expansionists versus conservatives, democracies versus autocracies, West versus the rest, interventionists versus souverainists, and member versus non-member countries. The effects of the emergence of cross-cutting cleavages among G20 member states do not have to be negative, as many supporters of like-minded groups such as the G7 fear.

In the past eras of strong states and inter-state rivalry the role of middle powers was, pace Gareth Evans, essentially that of a

good international citizenship, within the utility, and necessity, of acting cooperatively with others in solving international problems, particularly those problems which by their nature cannot be solved by any country acting alone, however big and powerful. The crucial point to appreciate about good international citizenship is that this is not something separate and distinct from the pursuit of national interests...On the contrary “being, and being seen to be, a good international citizen” should itself be seen as a third category of national interest, right up there alongside the traditional duo of security and economic interests.

In the present world, if middle powers want to bring outcomes close to their preferences and/or robust aspirations, they must do so with the support of strong and diverse networks. The willingness and capacity of middle powers to meet these challenges in the context of the G20 is highly salient both in terms of interests and identity. However, the need to recognise the implications of the central role of middle states in the G20 goes beyond questions of agency to ones of structure. At the systemic level, in the transition from unipolarity to multipolarity, the missing middle is commonly left out. Amid the focus on jockeying between the USA, BRICS and the EU, relocation of middle powers continues to remain below the radar in academic circles, with the scholarly ambit stuck in 19th and 20th century terms. Inter alia, the G20 allows an
opening up of the lens about the nature of hierarchical multilateralism. Instead of optional extras the middle powers stand at the core of changing complexities of inter-state cooperation and the transnational regulatory structures in the 21st century. As such this constellation of actors deserves deeper and sustained research.

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