



The Recalibration of Middle Powers under Conditions of Stress and Opportunity

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Countries' modes of diplomatic engagement are changing in a world that is increasingly multipolar. Today's global environment puts pressure on the so-called middle-power countries to project their identity and national interests. While some middle powers have found an international platform in the G-20 grouping, others have chosen to reinforce their identification with middle-power status. Whichever platform a middle power opts for, the forms of diplomatic engagement adopted by middle-power countries will reflect their strategic national interests.

Canada's changing forms of international diplomacy provide a case in point. Canada's diplomatic trajectory has changed over the years from its association with multiple like-minded ad hoc coalitions to more recently focusing on core issues with a small coterie of strategic Western allies.

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MIDDLE POWERS AND MULTILATERAL FORUMS: A RECALIBRATION OF NATIONAL INTERESTS

Many of the familiar forms of institutional engagement are coming under stress in the 21st century. For example, the US is uncomfortable with any fundamental shift that reinforces multipolarity, even if it recognises that its status as a hegemonic power is diminishing or over. Rather than laying down the law in a disciplinary manner, the US has found itself in a position where it must negotiate and bargain, cobbling together ad hoc coalitions.¹

For their part, the members of the BRICS grouping (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) have shown a willingness to work within other multilateral institutions, notably the Group of Twenty forum (G-20), as a means of status enhancement. However, it is unclear to what extent the BRICS members want to embrace this multilateral approach, as opposed to favouring national self-insurance or seeking other global and regional institutional forums in which they have more autonomy. Put another way, it is unclear whether the preference of the BRICS member states is to work through the G-20 as a core club or forum, or to take advantage of other parallel forms of international co-ordination, including the standalone BRICS leaders' summit, established in 2009.

Today's multipolar global environment puts serious stress on the category of so-called middle-power countries. And the question of which countries can lay some claim to fall in the category of middle powers has been widely debated. Yet in some contexts, the middle powers have also found opportunities. Unlike with the G-7 and G-8 groupings (forums for the world's most industrialised nations), a number of middle powers have found a platform in the G-20. Since this forum was elevated to the leaders' level amid the global financial crisis in 2008, four middle powers have been named as G-20 hosts. South Africa, notwithstanding some misgivings within the investment-banking community about its suitability for membership, has opted to embrace BRICS.²

Other countries have chosen to reinforce their identification with middle-power status, as witnessed by the creation of the Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey and Australia grouping (MIKTA). Although this is still a low-key forum at the foreign ministers' level, the MIKTA members nevertheless are afforded a valuable diplomatic outlet through the grouping.

Whichever platform a middle power opts for, one of the motives behind choosing a particular forum is to signal a recalibrated position in terms of both global and regional status. South Africa, for example, sees its status as being enhanced globally by being part of BRICS. The MIKTA countries, for their part, embrace these new connections because they are caught between BRICS and the G-7 – the 'missing middle'.³

CANADA'S INTERNATIONAL DIPLOMACY: FROM LIKE-MINDEDNESS TO CONSOLIDATION

There is also another option. A country might choose to consolidate on its core international engagements, as witnessed by the trajectory of Canada's diplomatic approach over the decades.

Throughout the era following the Second World War, Canada's diplomatic refrain was not only to belong to, but also to play an active part in as many international organisations as possible.⁴ A constant principle of Canadian statecraft has been that the country can do little by standing alone on the sidelines. The notion was that the only way that Canada could influence the international agenda was through constructive engagement with other actors at the heart of the action. At one level, therefore, Canadian diplomacy has had a considerable degree of continuity built into it. However, although it exhibits a pattern of recognisable features, the form of Canadian diplomacy, as conceptualised and put into practice under the government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper (2006 to present), has undergone great changes. Although a comprehensive review of the shift in Canadian foreign policy is beyond the scope of this paper, the theme of like-mindedness is one of the key ingredients in this process of continuity and evolution.

The idea of continuity in Canada's choice of diplomatic partners is expressed through its associations and joint activities with the US and the other pivotal members in the Western Alliance and the industrialised world. The ties established through NATO have traditionally positioned Canada as a loyal – if junior – institutional partner of these states. These strategic ties are reinforced by Canada's membership of several mainstream economic forums, such as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, the World Trade Organization, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the G-7. But, at the same time, Canada has attempted to extend its forms of engagement. By adopting functional roles, such as bridge-building, mediation and peacekeeping, Canada has reinforced the notion that there is considerable value in the ability to extend the concept of like-mindedness.

The low-key manner in which former Canadian prime minister Lester Pearson applied this principle in the 1950s and 1960s went hand in hand with his preference for quiet diplomacy and behind-the-scenes problem solving.⁵ In his bid to launch a more active form of like-mindedness in the 1990s, Lloyd Axworthy, Canada's former minister of foreign affairs, adopted an approach that was firmly embedded in this older architecture. His best-known case features a coalition of like-minded states at the core of a campaign to ban anti-personnel landmines.

This accentuated form of middle-power diplomacy was not without its critics, however. Rather than raising Canada's position on the world stage, some viewed ad hoc coalitions of the willing as a threat to Canada's status in international

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affairs. The position taken today by the Conservative government of Stephen Harper has been to eschew middle-power impulses. Snapshots of the evolution of Canadian diplomacy, such as Canada's approach to the combined Western intervention in Libya and the G-20, confirm some basic themes: Canada has made a turn away from its former ad hoc like-minded coalitions that it had favoured in the 1990s to concentrate more on core issues and key allies.

For example, stepping back from its diverse associations, Canada has more recently reverted to a more focused diplomatic approach – mainly concentrating on the US and other strategic NATO and G-7 partners. Such an emphasis risks isolation, as evidenced by Canada's failure to win a seat on the UN Security Council in 2010. However, from the perspective of the Harper government, these are worthwhile risks, in that it shifts attention away from diplomatic style to substance as the new mode of Canadian diplomacy focuses more effectively on delivery in a few central domains with partners that make a difference.

In the end, the forms of diplomatic engagement adopted by middle-power countries (as with other categories of countries, for that matter) will reflect a blend of national interest. Such choices also reflect a sense of identity about the country's strategic partners. The MIKTA countries, for instance, have embraced ties with a new set of countries that reinforce their middle-power status. By joining BRICS, South Africa jettisoned its middle-power image for that of an ascendant country that could project itself more robustly both regionally and globally.

CONCLUSION

In this process of recalibration, Canada has shown a degree of confidence about its core engagements. Unlike the case with the MIKTA countries, Canada's approach plays down its middle-power identity. But, unlike South Africa in BRICS, Canada has not chosen to embrace new partners. Instead, Canada's main strategy has been to turn back to its older core connections and partnerships.

In policy terms, the impact of these choices is highly salient. For MIKTA, the key will be to move from just talk to some form of collective niche activity. For South Africa, the important thing will be to highlight the benefits of engaging with BRICS without any detrimental economic or reputational damage. For Canada, it will be to demonstrate that the highly instrumental diplomatic approach is consistent with its image as a global player.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Stedman SJ, Jones B & C Pascual, *Power and Responsibility: Building International Order in an Era of Transnational Threats*. Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2009.
- 2 *Mail & Guardian*, "South Africa's presence "drags down Brics"", 23 March 2012, <http://mg.co.za/article/2012-03-23-sa-presence-drags-down-brics>.

- 3 Cooper A & J Mo, 'Middle power leadership and the evolution of the G20', *Global Summitry Journal*, 1, 1, 2013.
- 4 Cooper A, *Canadian Foreign Policy: Old Habits and New Directions*. Scarborough ON: Prentice Hall Canada, 1997.
- 5 Andrew A, *The Rise and Fall of a Middle Power: Canadian Diplomacy from King to Mulroney*. Toronto: James Lorimer, 1993.

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