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Middle power identities of Australia and South Korea: comparing the Kevin Rudd/Julia Gillard and Lee Myung-bak administrations

Sarah Teo¹

Abstract

This paper explores the middle power identities of Australia and South Korea during the Kevin Rudd/Julia Gillard (2007–2013) and Lee Myung-bak (2008–2013) administrations. Considering the problems in the existing position, behaviour, impact and identity-based definitions of middle powers, examining how self-identified middle powers have constructed such an identity would offer useful insights into the middle power concept. Relying on a framework that captures an identity's content and contestation, this paper argues that while Australia and South Korea have assumed a middle power identity, their visualisations of this identity are slightly different. Australia has understood its middle power identity in both economic and security terms, whereas South Korea appears to have connected such an identity more with the economic dimension. These differences affect how they envision their respective middle power roles in international affairs.

Keywords: middle powers; identity; constructivism; Australia; South Korea

Introduction

While the study of middle powers has in recent times regained an important place in the international relations literature, defining middle powers continues to be a challenge (see Emmers & Teo, 2015; Shin, 2016). In the extant literature, there are four non-mutually exclusive approaches of defining a middle power. The positional approach involves ranking states by indicators of material capabilities, and then extracting a category of states that qualify as 'middle' powers. The behaviour approach argues that only countries that employ a certain type of foreign policy could be called middle powers. The impact approach claims that only countries that are able to project a certain level or type of influence could be defined as middle powers. Last but not least, the identity approach defines as middle powers those countries that see themselves or are seen by others as such. This paper acknowledges that all four definitional approaches face challenges, but makes the case for identity as the most appropriate starting point to understanding the middle power concept.

The argument here is based on the constructivist assumption that identity provides the foundation upon which interests and behaviour are shaped. Given the difficulty in pinning down a common set of objective material attributes or a common type of foreign policy behaviour among the diverse group of states that call themselves middle powers, Hurrell (2000) notes that the identity approach is 'potentially promising' for the middle power concept (p. 1). In this view, the concept 'becomes an embedded guiding narrative, a particular foreign policy ideology that can be traced historically, that is rooted within and around particular parts of the bureaucracy, and that can be perhaps related to broader trends or tendencies in the domestic politics of the country' (Hurrell, 2000, p. 1). While identity has

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been one of the four common approaches to defining middle powers, the elements of middle power identity remain understudied. Most authors use the concept implicitly or superficially, usually observing that a certain country calls itself a middle power, but without delving into what the constituent features of this identity are.

This paper thus offers a deeper look into what comprises middle power identity by exploring the middle power identities that have been constructed by two prominent middle powers in the Asia Pacific – Australia and South Korea. It focuses specifically on the middle power identities framed by the Kevin Rudd/Julia Gillard administrations (2007–2013) and Lee Myung-bak government (2008–2013). I argue that while both countries have assumed a middle power identity, their visualisations of this identity vary slightly due to their different experiences associated with their adoption of the identity and respective geostrategic environments. Australia has understood its middle power identity in both economic and security terms, whereas South Korea appears to have connected such an identity more with the economic dimension. This affects how they envision their roles as middle powers in regional and international affairs. The paper contributes to the literature in two ways. First, the middle power literature has yet to focus on middle power identity in a comprehensive way. This paper aims to address that using the social identity framework formulated by Abdelal, Herrera, Johnston, and McDermott (2009) to explore middle power identity. Second, there has yet to be a detailed comparative analysis of the middle power identities of Australia and South Korea. The comparative dimension is important because it offers insight into how and why so-called middle powers envision this identity similarly or differently, and what this means for their foreign policies.

The regional focus has been deliberate – by being located in comparable geostrategic environments, Australia and South Korea have to navigate similar dynamics that could shape their conceptualisations of their middle power identities. Moreover, in the Asia Pacific region, no other country has been as consistent in recent times about projecting a middle power identity. To be sure, Australia has taken on this identity since the end of the Second World War, while South Korea first started describing itself as a middle power in the early 1990s (Shin, 2016; Ungerer, 2007). Nevertheless, my focus on the Rudd/Gillard and Lee administrations is due to several reasons. The overarching rationale has a temporal dimension. The financial crisis of 2007–2008 had important consequences for global economic governance, one of which was the elevation of the G20 to a leaders' summit. The G20's rise presented middle powers with 'opportunities in terms of access to the "high table" at the apex of power' (Cooper, 2013, p. 978) – notwithstanding criticisms that G20 meetings have rarely resulted in significant achievements (see Frum, 2011). From 2013 to 2014, both countries were also non-permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). This was a development that culminated from a period of campaigning – suggesting a careful calibration of messages to an international audience that would highlight their contributions to global security. In terms of rhetoric and image projection, the late 2000s to early 2010s thus offer a useful context for the study of middle power identity. This coincides with the Rudd/Gillard and Lee governments in Australia and South Korea.

In South Korea, the Lee administration implemented a 'Global Korea' strategy to enhance the country's international prestige. It was also, rhetorically, a strong advocate of the country's middle power status, with officials persistently advocating this identity at regional and international platforms. This marked a break with the past, where even if South Korean governments conducted foreign policy that adhered to principles of middle power diplomacy, the rhetorical aspect was not as strong. Likewise in Australia, Rudd promoted the country as a 'creative middle power' once he took office as prime minister in 2007, a characterisation which continued through the Gillard government from 2010 to 2013. The confluence of these developments thus presents opportunity not only for analysing the middle power identities of

Australia and South Korea during this time, but also to comparatively examine if there are fundamental similarities and differences in their respective conceptions of such an identity.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews the literature on middle power approaches. While I survey all the four approaches mentioned above, I pay particular attention to works that have taken middle power identity to be a central focus, and consider their strengths and gaps. The third section outlines the framework of social identity established by Abdelal et al. (2009), comprising the dimensions of content and contestation. Using this framework, I then turn to a discussion of how the middle power identities of Australia and South Korea were constructed under the Rudd/Gillard and Lee administrations respectively. Finally, the paper concludes by analysing the differences and similarities in the middle power identities of both countries, and suggests broader implications for the middle power concept.

Approaches to middle powers

This section reviews the literature on middle power approaches. I will first briefly discuss and highlight the challenges of the positional, behavioural and impact approaches. The section then examines in detail the identity approach, arguing that a more rigorous way of understanding middle power identity is needed.

The positional approach focuses on ranking countries by their material capabilities. Based on these rankings, a tier of countries – typically those coming in just below the great or major powers – are identified to be middle powers. This approach provides an important basis for identifying middle powers because material capabilities ‘are the necessary condition for middle powers [...] to have sufficiently broad sets of interests at stake; and for their initiatives to be credible and thus feasible’ (Gilley & O’Neil, 2014, p. 4). The sizes of a country’s economy, territory, population and military have been popular indicators under this approach. The identification of the middle power category could be done at the researcher’s discretion or with a statistical technique known as cluster analysis (see Emmers & Teo, 2015; Gilley & O’Neil, 2014).

One criticism of the positional approach is the ‘arbitrary’ nature by which the indicators have been chosen, as well as the placement of upper and lower boundaries in the rankings (Chapnick, 1999, p. 77). This means, for instance, that a ranking based solely on economic size and a ranking that gives more weight to other type of indicators could produce middle power groupings that comprise different states. Moreover, different authors have different ways of separating the great, middle and smaller powers, and there is a chance that preconceived notions of which state should or should not be a middle power could sway the final outcome (see Holbraad, 1984). Another challenge to the positional approach is that the exercise of power goes beyond material attributes, to include its ‘social and contextual nature’ (Carr, 2015, p. 26). The perceived objectivity of the positional approach, then, is perhaps ironically its biggest failing. Material capabilities might provide the foundations for action, but without the intent to act or the action itself, the power potential of those capabilities would remain unfulfilled.

In contrast, the behavioural and impact approaches focus on what a middle power actually does or is able to achieve. The behavioural approach, as its name suggests, defines as middle powers countries that adopt a particular style of foreign policy behaviour. Behringer (2013) provides a concise summary of ‘middlepowermanship’, which he argues consists of three core elements. First, due to their limited resources, middle powers would only be able to ‘exercis[e] effective leadership’ in specific areas of international affairs (Behringer, 2013, p. 14; see also Cooper, 1997). Second, because middle powers are unable to wield much influence individually, they depend greatly on multilateral processes to shape outcomes

favourable to themselves (Behringer, 2013; Nossal & Stubbs, 1997). Third, given their limited hard power resources, middle powers deploy soft power tactics that build on their diplomatic or persuasive skills, reputation, as well as technical and intellectual leadership (Behringer, 2013; Cooper, Higgott, & Nossal, 1993).

While the behavioural approach looks at the conduct of middle power diplomacy, the impact approach defines middle powers by the outcomes or influence of such diplomacy. In this sense, the behavioural and impact approaches are two sides of the same coin. Using 'systemic impact' to define middle powers, Carr (2014) argues that middle powers must be able to fulfil two criteria. First, they 'must have some reasonable capacity to protect their core interests' (Carr, 2014, p. 79). Second, they must be able to 'alter a specific element of the international order through formalised structures, such as international treaties and institutions, and informal means, such as norms or balances of power' (Carr, 2014, p. 80; see also Keohane, 1969).

The issue with both the behavioural and impact approaches, however, is that while they are based on the assumption that there is something unique about middle power diplomacy or middle power influence, this distinctiveness is rarely satisfactorily clarified. Most of the literature in these approaches has examined the foreign policy behaviour or impact of states that are presumably middle powers, but it is less clear how these countries are, in the first place, 'middle powers'. For instance, one could make the argument that a small country could also practice 'middlepowermanship' involving selectivity, multilateralism and institutions, as well as soft power. Likewise, it is unclear what makes the impact definition unique to middle powers. Great powers, for example, could certainly be able to 'protect their core interests' and 'alter a specific element of the international order' (Carr, 2014, p. 79). The definitional elements of neither the behavioural nor impact approaches, then, are specific to middle powers. The key question of what a middle power is would perhaps be better answered through an identity approach.

The identity approach looks at how a state has constructed its image as a middle power, how this self-perception has been projected in its foreign policy behaviour, and if other actors view the state as a middle power. Here, the middle power concept is treated as a 'foreign policy ideology' that is entrenched in the country's history, institutions and politics (Hurrell, 2000, p. 1). While many works on middle powers have taken identity as one of the starting points, they typically merely mention that a particular country has adopted a middle power identity and go on to discuss its behaviour or influence, without unpacking what such an identity entails (see Beeson, 2011; Cooper, 1997). For those that take a closer look at identity, the focus has generally been on how identity is a causal variable for behaviour. Gecelovsky (2009), for instance, explains how 'the emergence, adoption and embedment of middle power as the ideational framework' guided Canadian policy-makers in shaping the country's foreign policy (p. 77). Patience (2014) proposes three middle power 'imaginings', arguing that middle powers could respectively assume the roles of a junior partner, regional institutional leader, or a functional activist. Meanwhile, Lee, Chun, Suh, and Thomsen (2015) argue that middle powers could take on four 'identities', namely those of an 'early mover', 'bridge', 'coalition coordinator' and 'norm diffuser' (p. 5). The role of identity in these works is more of prescribing or regulating behaviour, and less of unpacking the elements of middle power identity.

Some authors have attempted to draw out the constituent features of a middle power identity. Son (2014) explores the 'identity norms' of 'dependency' and 'activism' that 'constitute and reproduce Japan and South Korea as bona fide middle powers' (p. 94). The selection of Japan as a middle power case study, however, raises questions. For Son (2014), Japan has to be a case study given that he investigates the reluctance of Japan and South Korea to establish a bilateral alliance. However, given the lack of official sources claiming a

middle power identity for Japan, it is uncertain if the country even views itself as a middle power. Meanwhile, Sohn (2015) asserts that South Korea's relations with the United States are a 'critical factor' shaping the Northeast Asian country's identity as a middle power (p. 3). Beyond making that point, however, Sohn (2015) unfortunately does not continue to pursue this line of argument.

Relying on a framework of self-conceptualisation, self-identification and intersubjectivity, Shin (2016) examines how the Roh Moo-hyun and Lee administrations in South Korea 'materialised the [middle power] concept' (p. 188). Shin's (2016) approach is promising, although it eventually falls short for exploring middle power identity. One reason is that Shin (2016) appears to analyse more South Korea's foreign policy identity within the context of a supposed middlepowermanship, rather than its middle power identity. This is an important distinction. The first formulation examines, as Shin (2016) does, South Korea's foreign policy identity, which may or may not include, specifically, middle power identity. In contrast, this paper's concern is with the second formulation, namely the elements that comprise South Korea's middle power identity. Moreover, while Shin (2016) defines self-conceptualisation, self-identification and intersubjectivity in setting out her framework, it is less clear in the empirical analysis how the three aspects differ from one another. There is thus a need for an alternative framework to capture the elements of this identity.

This section has reviewed the literature on middle power approaches, and discussed their strengths and weaknesses. Given the challenges facing middle power definitions, an identity-based approach might proffer some insight into what so-called middle powers mean when they describe themselves as such. However, a deeper analysis, which goes beyond how identity has typically been treated in the middle power literature, is needed. The next section outlines the framework for exploring the elements of middle power identity.

A framework for middle power identity

Given this paper's emphasis on identity, a constructivist approach is appropriate for investigating the research question. It is important to note that constructivism is not a substantive theory; rather, it provides a method of studying politics (Barnett, 2011; Hopf, 1998). According to Wendt (1999), the two core principles of constructivism are: '(1) that the structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces, and (2) that the identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by these shared ideas rather than given by nature' (p. 1). He adds that 'brute material forces' do influence outcomes, but 'it is only because of their interaction with ideas that material forces have the effects that they do' (Wendt, 1999, p. 111; see also Ruggie, 1998). It is thus necessary to consider the interaction of both material and ideational factors that shape a state's identity and interests.

Defined as 'relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about self', identities are a relational and social phenomenon (Wendt, 1992, p. 397). A state's identity is formed through elements such as its history, domestic political culture, as well as interactions with other actors that help to create intersubjective understandings (Hurrell, 2000; Kowert, 2010). Constructivism argues that identities shape interests, which in turn affects behaviour (Hopf, 1998; Wendt, 1992). At the same time, interests and behaviour also have an effect on identities – a relationship described as mutually constitutive. For a state, identity provides a useful lens for understanding its own role, as well as the roles of others, in the international system.

In their edited volume, Abdelal et al. (2009) formulate a comprehensive framework for 'social identities' (p. 19), which I will use to explore middle power identity. They argue that there are two dimensions to an identity – content and contestation (Abdelal et al., 2009).

An identity's content is embodied through four aspects, namely constitutive norms, social purposes, relational comparisons and cognitive models. Each of the four aspects that comprises the identity's content emerges out of a process of contestation (Abdelal et al., 2009). This framework is best suited to adduce the construction of middle power identity because of its 'multidimensional conceptualisation' of identity (Seawright, 2011, p. 454). Certainly, a constructivist approach includes not only identity, but also other ideational elements such as norms and culture. While this paper treats identity as 'the most proximate causes of choices, preferences and action', it also acknowledges that 'identities cannot be understood without a simultaneous account of normative, cultural, and institutional context' (Hopf, 1998, p. 174). In this context, Abdelal et al.'s (2009) multifaceted framework is the most useful for our task here, because it allows identity to be the central variable but at the same time considers the other ideational and social dimensions of an identity.

Contestation is defined as 'the degree of agreement within a group over the content of the shared identity' (Abdelal et al., 2009, p. 20). Explicit contestation happens when actors consciously debate the identity's meaning, while implicit contestation arises when actors unintentionally alter the identity (Abdelal et al., 2009). Contestation is undoubtedly important for understanding the dynamic nature of identity, and ideally there should be an explanation of the contestation that occurs within each of the four elements that comprises the identity's content. Due to space limitations, however, I will look broadly at how the middle power identity has been contested overall in Australia and South Korea, before delving into the specific elements that make up the content of that identity. This approach builds on the assumption that there are times when an identity's content – reflecting the outcome of contestation – is 'stable enough that [it] can be treated as if fixed' (Abdelal et al., 2009, p. 28). This paper thus seeks to take a snapshot of a particular middle power identity at a particular point in time, although it in no way claims the immutability and one-dimensionality of identities. Additionally, the analysis relies on official speeches and statements, which conceivably reflects the content that decision-makers have decided to project to the outside world. Let's now turn to the four elements comprising an identity's content – constitutive norms, social purposes, relational comparisons and cognitive models (Abdelal et al., 2009).

Constitutive norms are 'the formal and informal rules that define group membership' (Abdelal et al., 2009, p. 19). By establishing definitional boundaries and practices, constitutive norms allow the recognition of a particular identity and characterise the relations between that identity and other identities. Constitutive rules are seen as the 'institutional foundation of all social life', in the sense that they go beyond specifying how an actor should behave, to create the very possibility that allows for such behaviour (Ruggie, 1998, p. 873). For example, the constitutive norm of sovereignty not only sets out state functions and behaviour, but more importantly 'make possible the very idea of a sovereign state' (Barnett, 2011, p. 152). In this sense, constitutive norms of identity help to (re)produce certain states as 'middle powers'.

Social purposes are 'the goals that are shared by members of a group' (Abdelal et al., 2009, p. 19). Social purposes differ from constitutive norms, in the sense that the former involves 'engag[ing] in practices that reconstitute the group' while the latter means 'enagag[ing] in practices that make the group's achievement of a set of goals more likely' (Abdelal et al., 2009, p. 22). This linking of the group's specific goals to its identity stems from the notion that interests (that is, what actors want) are shaped by who actors think they are (Wendt, 1999). As a collective form, a group of states might thus pursue certain objectives depending on how they see themselves as a group and their place among the international community of states.

Relational comparisons involve 'defining an identity group by what it is not – that is, the way it views other identity groups' (Abdelal et al., 2009, p. 19). Identities are formed vis-

à-vis an Other. As Neumann and Welsh (1991) conclude in their study on European self-identity, Europe's interactions with its 'Other' are not limited to foreign relations, but instead are 'intricately linked up with the question of what it is to be European' (p. 347). Distinguishing the 'Other' from the self thus reaffirms the latter's identity. This act of differentiation also highlights the relational aspect of identity as it is shaped by interactions with others. Moreover, as Abdelal et al. (2009) point out, the same issue could be seen in different perspectives by different identity groups. How a group sees itself against other groups is thus important for what it thinks should be its priorities.

Finally, cognitive models are 'the worldviews or understandings of political and material conditions and interests' (Abdelal et al., 2009, p. 19). A cognitive model offers a framework for interpreting the social world, and could be influenced by elements including race, ethnicity, nationality and culture, among others (Abdelal et al., 2009). For states, cognitive models could be shaped by factors such as their place in the international hierarchy as well as their culture and history. Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein (1996) point out that 'cultural environments' influence state identity in three ways: by affecting their 'prospects for survival as entities', by altering the ways that states are created and sustained, and by varying the 'character of statehood within a given international system' (p. 33). Cognitive models thus form an important part of an identity's content, and would consequently affect the actor's perceptions of, for instance, international politics and security, interstate relations and economic cooperation.

The model conceptualised by Abdelal et al. (2009) allows for a thorough investigation of middle power identity, in terms of contestation and content. The framework encompasses not only the social and relational aspects of identity, but also puts the focus on what shapes, at a fundamental level, a particular identity. While acknowledging the importance of the contestation process, this paper concentrates more on the identity's content, for reasons outlined above. The analytical focus will thus be on the constitutive norms, social purposes, relational comparisons and cognitive models that comprise the content of middle power identity. The next section examines the middle power identities of Australia and South Korea according to this framework.

Middle power identities of Australia and South Korea

Before delving into the empirical data, it would be useful to reiterate why Australia and South Korea make good case studies for middle power identity. Australia has assumed a middle power identity for over 70 years, while South Korea has adopted such an identity for almost three decades. At the broad level, using two case studies located in the same region could be important because identity is often dependent on and specific to context. For a comparative analysis of middle power identity, then, it makes sense to choose middle powers that are in comparable geostrategic environments, facing similar – although not exactly the same – challenges and opportunities. Amid external dynamics, understanding the middle power identities of states such as Australia and South Korea would help us gain a better insight into what drives these states as middle powers and how they view their roles in the international system.

This paper thus asks the question: what comprises the middle power identities of Australia and South Korea? Certainly, the 'middle power' label has been frequently employed by their leaders and policy-makers, but exactly what is meant by such a label? Additionally, are there any key differences and similarities in the way that Australia and South Korea have couched their middle power identities? As mentioned in the introduction, this paper narrows in on the Rudd/Gillard administrations and Lee government for several reasons. This period covers the rise of the G20 in the late 2000s, as well as the lead-up to the

UNSC election in 2012 for non-permanent seats. This provides a useful opportunity to examine how Australia and South Korea presented themselves as middle powers that could make important contributions to global affairs. The Rudd/Gillard governments pronounced Australia as a 'creative middle power', while the Lee administration conceived of a 'Global Korea' vision and strategy. Considering both the international context and the self-descriptions as middle powers, it would be useful to examine how Australian and South Korean leaders understood such an identity during that time.

Using Abdelal et al.'s (2009) model of identity, the next two sub-sections will explore the middle power identities of Australia and South Korea. I first discuss briefly how the middle power identity has been contested within each country, before delving into its content. In this task, I rely on data from official speeches, statements from government officials, as well as defence and foreign policy white papers.

Australia's middle power identity (2007–2013)

This sub-section focuses on Australia's middle power identity during the Rudd/Gillard administrations from 2007 to 2013. The data here is based on speeches and statements from the online archives of transcripts and media releases from Australian prime ministers (<http://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au>) and foreign ministers (<http://foreignminister.gov.au/Pages/default.aspx>), as well as the Parliament of Australia website (<http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au>). Information from defence and diplomatic white papers were also used. I will first discuss how Australia's middle power identity has been contested domestically, before turning to its content.

The framing of Australia as a middle power is characterised by 'a high degree of bipartisanship' between its two major political parties – Labor and Liberal/Coalition (O'Neil, 2014, p. 19). Labor governments have typically actively promoted Australia's middle power identity, while Liberal/Coalition politicians have appeared to dismiss the notion of Australia as a middle power. The latter's rejection of the middle power identity stems from the view that 'middle power' connotes insignificance, as well as scepticism over international rules and institutions (Beeson & Lee, 2015; Downer, 2003). Nevertheless, even among Labor politicians there are also differences in their views of Australia's middle power identity. Compared to Rudd's forceful championing, for instance, Gillard appeared a more moderate proponent of Australia as a middle power. While Australia has in recent times engaged in a debate about whether it is time to move beyond its 'middle power' label, this concept remains 'one of the most durable and consistent elements' in Australian foreign policy (Ungerer, 2007, p. 538; see also 'Are we a top 20 nation', 2014). For example, regardless of the different levels of intensity in promoting the middle power identity, the Rudd and Gillard administrations conveyed in the international sphere a relatively consistent narrative about Australia's middle power identity. It is to the content of this identity that we now turn, with the analysis structured according to the four elements in Abdelal et al.'s (2009) framework.

First, the constitutive norms in Australia's middle power identity are in large part shaped by material capabilities, particularly in terms of economic and military indicators. Australian officials on multiple occasions defined the country's middle power identity based on its status as one of the top 15 economies and defence spenders in the world, as well as its relatively high living standards. Rudd, for example, asserted as foreign minister in 2011 that 'as the 12th largest economy in the world and fourth largest in Asia, Australia is by definition a middle power' (Rudd, 2011b). Additionally, then defence minister Stephen Smith highlighted Australia's place among the 'top 15 [d]efence spenders' as being a defining characteristic of its 'middle-sized power' (Smith, 2012, p. 3). Evidently, Australia's definition of a middle power is a state that possesses 'credible military and economic

strength', meaning that it ranks among the top 10 per cent in the world, more or less, in terms of military and economic resources (Gillard, 2013). Another constituent feature in Australia's middle power identity is democracy. Along with comments of Australia's military and economic power were often mentions of Australia as 'one of the oldest continuing democracies in the world' (Rudd, 2011c; see also Rudd, 2011b; Smith, 2008a). In addition, Australia's status as a 'founding member' of international and regional institutions such as the UN, G20 and East Asia Summit (Rudd, 2011c) were also used as a basis for Australia's claim to middle power status. Drawing from the above data, then, Australia viewed the constitutive norms of a 'middle power' as being able to sustain its economic size and defence expenditure among the top 15 in the world, govern through democratic principles, and having an instrumental role in the formation of international and regional organisations. Through these norms, Australia is (re)produced as a middle power.

In terms of social purposes, the official Australian rhetoric often stressed that as a middle power, the country possessed – and should continue to have – 'global and regional interests' (Australian Government, 2012, p. 234; Rudd, 2009). In light of these global and regional interests, officials highlighted the importance of responsibility in Australia's foreign policy. Rudd, for instance, said that '[a]s a middle power, which has long-exercised global responsibilities, it is appropriate that Australia [...] play[s] its part rather than freeloading on the international system', and that Australia aimed to 'make a difference in the world' (Rudd, 2010b, 2012). Smith, as foreign affairs minister, asserted likewise that Australia wanted to be a 'responsible nation' regionally and globally (Smith, 2008a). Responsibility was tied to the notion that Australia adopted principles of 'good international citizenship' in its foreign policy. This essentially meant that it was 'committed to the development and sustenance of a regional and international rules-based order, premised on stability, fairness and justice' as well as multilateralism (Rudd, 2011e; see also Carr, 2012a; Gillard, 2011; Smith, 2008b). In this regard, Australia as a middle power had an interest in strengthening global governance institutions (Rudd, 2010a). Finally, Australian officials also saw the country's international role as being 'a voice for small and medium nations' (Carr, 2013; see also Rudd, 2011c). By addressing and reducing the 'marginalis[ation]' and 'powerless[ness]' of these countries (Carr, 2013), Australia's actions would contribute to its goal of being a responsible middle power that practiced good international citizenship.

In framing Australia as a middle power, rhetoric from leaders and policy-makers made a distinction between 'middle' and other powers. Bob Carr, who was Australia's foreign minister from 2012 to 2013, highlighted in a press conference that while Australia was 'not America' and 'not Europe', it was nevertheless a 'creative middle power' that 'punches above its weight' (Carr, 2012b). Similarly, Smith asserted that Australia was neither a 'powerhouse' nor 'super power', but rather a 'middle sized power' and a 'significant and considerable' country (Smith, 2008b, 2008c). These statements set Australia apart from other states in two ways. First, Australia was clearly not in the same league as the United States, Europe, or other major powers. Yet, as a middle power, Australia was – to put it bluntly – more important in the international system than other, smaller states. This would consequently influence Australia's initiative-taking, as Rudd pointed out that '[a]s a middle power, [Australia] can propose ideas that other larger powers might have trouble taking the lead on' (Rudd, 2008).

Last but not least, Australia's cognitive model was shaped by various factors, including its place in the international hierarchy of states, its apparent belief that the international order was becoming more multipolar and threats were evolving to be more transnational, as well as its commitment to democratic values. Rudd, for instance, contended that given its limited resources, Australia individually might neither be able to 'drive outcomes' nor 'shape the world', but if it cooperated with other like-minded powers, as a

group they could ‘be more agile than the great powers’ (Rudd, 2011a). Having less hard power capabilities than the great powers, Australia’s choices in the international sphere were also seen as a result of ‘good offices’, ‘persuasiveness’ and coalition building, and ‘not the assertion of direct power’ (Rudd, 2011b). Moreover, given that global problems could no longer be resolved by great powers alone, it was necessary for Australia, as a ‘creative [and] constructive’ middle power, to assume ‘special responsibilities’ in international affairs (Rudd, 2011a; see also Fitzgibbon, 2009). Last but not least, Australia’s commitment to democratic values also shaped its worldview, not only in the sense that power was becoming more diffuse, but also that its middle power agenda appeared to be driven by ‘deep values of freedom and a fair go for all’ (Rudd, 2011d). While it might be debatable if Australia’s actions actually reflected those principles, suffice to say that such a worldview was tied closely to the country’s identity as a responsible and constructive middle power with limited but nevertheless significant resources.

In sum, Australia constructed a middle power identity that clearly distinguished it from the great and smaller powers in terms of capabilities and influence. Its claim to middle power status lay in its top 15 economic size and defence expenditure, democratic nature of governance, as well as its importance in the formative years of several multilateral institutions. As a middle power, Australia’s interests go beyond the national level, extending to global responsibilities particularly in terms of ensuring that international decision-making is a more equitable process and sustaining a rules-based order. Let us now turn to the middle power identity of South Korea during the Lee administration.

South Korea’s middle power identity (2008–2013)

This sub-section examines South Korea’s middle power identity during the Lee administration, from 2008 to 2013. Data was obtained mainly from defence and diplomatic white papers, the online archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website (<http://mofa.go.kr/>), Korea.net website run by the Korean Culture and Information Service (<http://korea.net/index.jsp>), as well as the presidential archives (<http://www.pa.go.kr>). I will first discuss the domestic contestation of South Korea’s middle power identity before examining its content.

Contestation over middle power identity in South Korea, unlike in Australia, does not seem to occur as much along political party lines. Both conservatives and progressives – the two main ideologies in South Korea – have seemed happy to embrace the middle power identity at varying levels. In 1991, President Roh Tae-woo became the first South Korean president to describe the country as a ‘middle power’ (Shin, 2016). This self-identity continued to be vocalised occasionally through the subsequent administrations, but it was only during the Lee government that the concept became more prevalent in South Korea’s rhetoric and policy-making (Teo, Singh, & Tan, 2016). The identity’s emergence was also a result of efforts by South Korean research institutes and media during this time. Contestation over the middle power identity thus occurs more between this elite level and the masses. The ‘symbolic perpetuation of “Great Han” in [South Korea’s] official moniker’, for instance, suggests the ‘great power aspirations’ that majority of South Koreans harbour for their country (Hwang, 2017; Mo, 2016, p. 602). Given this, it is debatable if citizens have accepted South Korea’s identity as a middle power (Hwang, 2017). Nevertheless, it is clear that at the international level, Lee administration officials made a collective effort to frame their country as a middle power. Let us now proceed to examine the content of this identity according to the four elements in Abdelal et al.’s (2009) framework.

Beginning with constitutive norms, South Korea’s middle power identity was often associated with the idea that South Korea had evolved into a ‘central’/‘centre’, ‘advanced’ or

‘leading’ country (Lee, 2009b, 2011a, 2012b). This suggests that part of the reason for South Korea’s (re)production as a middle power was that it had risen in importance at the global level. For South Korea, being a middle power meant being at the centre of the world stage, where it could have significant influence on the course of international affairs. Another constituent feature that allowed South Korea to become a middle power was its economic growth. On separate occasions, Lee described South Korea as becoming ‘one of the top dozen leading economic powerhouses’ and ‘one of a dozen or so strongest economies’ in the world (Lee, 2008a, 2009b). In various speeches, Lee also highlighted that among the countries with more than 50 million people, South Korea was one of the seven to have a per capita income surpassing US\$20,000 (Lee, 2011c, 2012a). Unlike the Australian rhetoric, South Korean officials rarely appeared to allude to their country’s military strength. One exception was when Lee – at an event commemorating relations with Australia – referred to both South Korea and Australia as ‘responsible middle-power countries in the fields of economy and security’ (Lee, 2011d). Beyond that, South Korea’s middle power identity seemed to be constituted mainly by economic strength, rather than – as the Australian case includes – military power. Qualitative elements such as ‘free democracy’, ‘sound politics’ and ‘universal values’ were also viewed to define South Korea as a middle power (Lee, 2009a, 2010a, 2012c).

In terms of social purposes, the rhetoric from South Korea’s leaders and policy-makers revealed that with its enhanced status, the country should contribute toward bridging between the developed and developing economies, shaping the international order, as well as coming up with solutions to global challenges. Both Lee and his Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Kim Sung-hwan, asserted that South Korea could play a bridging role between developed and developing countries given its own ‘successful experience as a developing economy and as a newly emerging economic powerhouse’ (Lee, 2009b; see also Kim, 2011b). The value of South Korea’s bridging to address global problems had been most visibly demonstrated during its hosting of the G20 Summit in 2010 (Kim, 2011a; Lee, 2009b). On South Korea’s G20 chairmanship, Lee stated that the country was ‘well positioned’ to discuss and resolve global economic challenges because it was a ‘middle power nation that has successfully risen from being one of the poorest countries in the world’ (Lee, 2010b). In this regard, South Korea also viewed its middle power role as one that involved making the rules of the international order rather than merely following paths laid out by others (Lee, 2011a, 2012b). In addition to South Korea’s G20 chairmanship, its hosting of the Second Nuclear Security Summit in 2012 was also flagged as evidence of its ‘global leadership’ (Lee, 2012b). South Korea’s rising status was moreover associated with an increase in its international responsibilities. To South Korea, being an ‘advanced nation’ thus meant ‘support[ing] and contribu[ting] to the cause of the international community’ rather than ‘simply pursuing [its] own interest’ (Lee, 2009b, 2010e). In this sense, a middle power identity for South Korea meant corresponding obligations of international activism and leadership in managing global issues.

Moving on to relational comparisons, it was clear that South Korea viewed itself to be a less ‘advanced’ state than the United States, Japan and the European countries (Lee, 2008b, 2011e). On the other hand, South Korea presumably held more significance than the smaller states. Certainly, in 2010, Lee stated that South Korea belonged to the group of ‘newly emerging economies’ along with China, India and Brazil (Lee, 2010d). This illustrates South Korea’s perception of itself vis-à-vis other states – while not as powerful or influential as the major powers, it nevertheless viewed itself to be in the same league as countries that are often considered rising powers. It is interesting to note also that relational comparisons were mostly within an economic context (Lee, 2008b, 2010d).

Finally, South Korea's middle power identity has been shaped by a cognitive model that highlights its historical 'experience of desperate poverty and miraculous emergence out of it' through 'democratization and industrialization' (Lee, 2009b, 2010c). As Lee declared in 2011, South Korea has been 'the only country in the world to join the ranks of advanced nations after being one of the poorest nations in just the span of a generation following the end of the [Korean] War' (Lee, 2012d). South Korea's development trajectory is also emphasised as 'unique', particularly in terms of the short time it took to achieve socioeconomic success (Kim, 2011b). The fact that it was not too long ago mired in poverty means that it could empathise with 'the humiliation developing nations feel while asking for assistance' – an empathy that is framed to be lacking in other 'advanced' countries (Lee, 2011b). This experience has rationalised, in particular, its role as a bridge between developed and emerging economies. Moreover, South Korea's cognitive model further highlights its past exclusion – akin to a 'marginal person' (Lee, 2009b) – from international decision-making. The G7, for instance, was described as 'an exclusive gathering of rich countries where only those [...] with power were given the right to decide major issues' (Lee, 2011c). Given that South Korea was not a member of the G7, it was not accorded a seat at the table. Nevertheless, the rise of the G20, which includes South Korea, is seen as a more equitable mechanism to deal with global issues (Lee, 2011c). Accordingly, the G20 offers an opportunity for South Korea to assume more important roles at the international level.

Overall, South Korea's middle power identity could be said to have arisen mainly from its economic strength. Due to its swift and unique socioeconomic development experience, South Korea associates its middle power role closely with being a bridge between developed and developing economies. It is well placed for such a role precisely because it was an underdeveloped country a mere six decades ago, and while it has achieved considerable economic success, it is not a great power – meaning that it could possibly empathise with the emerging economies. South Korea also believes that given its enhanced status, it should assume more responsibilities and contribute towards global decision-making.

Middle power identity: implications for the middle power concept

Based on the above analyses of Australia and South Korea, this paper makes two contributions to the middle power literature. First, to address the gaps in the extant middle power literature, the paper takes identity as a starting point to understand how self-declared middle powers view such an identity. Relying on Abdelal et al.'s (2009) framework, I have unpacked the middle power identities of Australia and South Korea during the Rudd/Gillard administrations and Lee government. The second contribution is empirical – through a comparison of the official rhetoric of Australia and South Korea, the paper reveals that while both countries have assumed a middle power identity, their visualisations of the concept are slightly different.

Australia defines itself as a middle power in terms of its economic and military power, democratic political system, as well as contributions towards the post-Second World War international order. While South Korea also defines itself as a middle power based on its economic strength and democratisation process, it has highlighted less its military capabilities. One reason for this could be because South Korea continues to face a security threat from North Korea, and much of its military resources are understandably directed towards this issue (Lee, 2012). Thus, even if South Korea has surpassed Australia in military expenditure for the past 20 years (SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, 2015), the former is presumably more careful in asserting that it could play a significant role in international security matters. Moreover, Australia's middle power identity was formed in the immediate

post-Second World War period based on its military contributions to the war effort. It is no surprise, then, that Australia continues to see its middle power role also in the security field. In contrast, South Korea was never a formative actor in the security institutions of today's liberal order – and consequently this element is missing from its middle power definition. In this sense, the middle power identities of both countries have been shaped by their histories and geostrategic environments.

This difference spills over to the roles that Australia and South Korea think a middle power should undertake. Certainly, the leadership of both countries asserted that middle powers should assume the responsibility that comes with the status and contribute towards shaping the international order. However, while Australian leaders spoke broadly of being committed to a rules-based order, South Korea appeared to place more emphasis on being a bridge between the developed and developing economies. This arguably boils down to their respective trajectories of how they came to self-identify as middle powers. Australia's middle power identity was first pronounced within the context of establishing the UN – a world organisation intended to institutionalise behavioural rules to preserve peace and stability following two world wars. In contrast, South Korea's middle power identity emerged following its evolution from a poor and underdeveloped country to one of the four 'Asian Tiger' economies between the 1960s and 1990s, and its transition from being an aid receiver to aid donor. This experience rationalises its bridging role.

Given these differences, one might question the value of the concept of middle power identity; if, as this paper has shown, countries shape their middle power identities according to their own historical experience and geostrategic environment, then what does it say about the utility of a collective identity for middle powers? Admittedly, identity is a product of time and space. Historical and geostrategic contexts cannot be ignored. This means that we have to allow for variations in the middle power identities of different countries. To be sure, the meanings of middle power identity are constantly contested even at the domestic level, either between political parties (as in the case of Australia) or between the elites and masses (as in the case of South Korea). That said, common strands still exist between the middle power identities of Australia and South Korea. These include the presence of democratic political systems, the perception of rising multipolarity which creates suitable conditions for the emergence of middle powers and their leadership, as well as the notion that middle powers have special responsibilities and functions to play in the international system. These elements, together with their country-specific characteristics, have (re)produced Australia and South Korea as middle powers.

The roles of non-great power states have often been dismissed in structural analyses of international relations. The existence of a middle power identity creates the potential for states that are not as powerful as the great powers to still be seen as important in international affairs. Of course, this potential would have to be backed up with hard and soft power resources – which middle powers do have, just not as much as the great powers in certain aspects. Ultimately, assuming and projecting a middle power identity is arguably about justifying a state's value and uniqueness in the international system. For existing and emerging middle powers, then, it would be important to consider what their respective middle power identities are based on, and what that means for their roles in international affairs.

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