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Are we a top 20 nation or a middle power? Views on Australia's position in the world

Introduction

Nothing fans the flames of a debate on *The Strategist* quite like a post that makes assertions about Australia's place in the world and the role it should have on the international stage. ASPI director Peter Jennings' recent post on Australia as a 'top 20' defence player and deputy director Anthony Bergin's post on the 'middle power label' last year both sparked debates about Australia's power, position and influence and how it could or should be using it.

In the 'top 20' debate, the contributors emerged as regionalists or globalists, with different perceptions of the balance between Australia's global and regional imperatives, its strategic interests and its international responsibilities. There was a broad acceptance that Australia has global interests, but a divergence on how much and what sort of effort it should devote to protecting them. Unsurprisingly, there was also a debate over what it meant to be a 'top 20' power, how readily power could be translated into positive outcomes, and where and when we could spend our power to best effect.



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In the ‘middle power’ debate, the discussion revolved around the meaning and utility of the term itself, and whether Australia should embrace or reject it as a label. Much like the ‘top 20’ debate however, the argument came down to Australia’s strategic interests, its influence, and its international role and responsibilities.

We present both debates here together in the hope that they’ll provoke further discussion in the defence, national security and foreign policy community about Australia’s place and role in the world and how that informs its strategic policy.

Australia as a top 20 power debate

Being a top 20 defence player

Peter Jennings

The Australian Institute of International Affairs ran a high-quality conference in Canberra yesterday around the theme of ‘Foreign Policy for a Top 20 Nation’. It’s an intriguing theme, obviously informed by the G20 leaders’ meeting commencing soon in Brisbane. I participated in a panel on strengthening Australia’s security. My starting point was to suggest that there’s a surprising gap between the reality of our top 20 status and how we think of Australia’s security role in the world.

In terms of defence spending Australia is well up the top 20 ladder. *The Economist* rated Australia as the world’s 12th biggest defence spending in US dollars in 2012. At US\$25.1 billion we ranked ahead of Iran on US\$23.9 billion and behind a more immediately threatened South Korea on US\$29 bn. In per-capita terms, Australia is 8th on *The Economist*’s list on US\$1,140, ahead of the UK on \$1,016.

The dollars show that Australia is indeed a global player on defence and security, but psychologically we tend to undersell the capability and shaping capacity of the Australian Defence Force and other contributing elements of national security.

Since the time of the 1999 East Timor operation, Australia has played a consequential role in regional and global security. In some respects we’re the victims of our operational success. A slightly uncomfortable realisation is dawning, which is that other countries expect us to play a larger security role. We’re expected to lead in maintaining stability in our nearer region. We’re expected to make a significantly better than symbolic contribution to Coalition operations in the Middle East. We’re expected to have views that matter in the United Nations Security Council, North Asia, the Indian Ocean Region, and as a NATO ‘enhanced partner’.

Several times this year foreign colleagues I’ve spoken to observe that Australia needs to stand up and acknowledge that reality. We may be a top 20 nation, but quite a few of us don’t think we are—or don’t want us to be that—and consequences flow for how we act on the international stage.

If we accept that our top 20 status reflects how Australia should behave internationally, then we’ll need every cent of the 2% Gross National Product to be spent on Defence by the early 2020s. There’s currently bipartisan support for that level of spending. Being a consequential power means we’ll need forces able to project military power; we’ll need to develop deeper defence relations with key friends; we’ll need to step up our involvement in peacekeeping; and we’ll need to accept the risks of deploying combat forces in Coalition operations.

If we choose not to live the reality of being a top 20 power, there are consequences too—including that we’ll lose credibility as an ally of the US and as a partner of strategic choice for defence cooperation by others in the region. We’ll lose the capacity to underpin our diplomatic position with effective military capability. We’ll become much less effective in promoting our strategic interests in the Asia-Pacific, where strategic competition is heating up and risk levels are rising.

There are a few areas where—as a credible top 20 nation—we’d need to invest more thinking, attention and resources if we hope to strengthen Australia’s security.

First, we need to take new, big steps to build a real strategic relationship with Indonesia. That means going beyond the comfortable and confined defence relationship we currently have to look at much deeper engagement that strengthens Indonesian defence capabilities. We need to think more in joint terms about what our defence forces should and could do together.

Second, we need to get serious about the extent of our interests beyond our immediate region. Defence-of-Australia thinking has effectively expanded in its scope. Think of it now as ‘Defence of Australia Plus’, the plus reflecting a need to engage in the broader security concerns of the Indo-Pacific.

Third, we’ll have to address Australia’s capacity to protect our strategic interests in a much more competitive and risky region. In a military sense, that goes to the requirement to sustain force-projection capabilities that deliver meaningful military capacity. More often than not, that’ll be in an alliance or coalition context.

Finally we need to make sure we’re investing in the level of intelligence gathering and analytical capabilities needed to help us understand our region. We can’t afford to take a part-time interest in places like Africa and the Middle East, devoting effort there only when operations require us to do so.

In other words, in defence as in foreign policy, a top 20 nation needs to think of Australian interests as they really are—shaped by global events and not just regional ones. That will require some significant adjustments of attitude and thinking in coming years.

Learning to act like a major power—Australia as a top 20 nation

Andrew Carr

Just a few years ago a number of books were released that celebrated an ‘[Australia moment](#)’, where the nation was in ‘[The Sweet Spot](#)’. Today’s book titles, however, seem to run the other way, with one describing ‘[how a great nation lost its way](#)’. So let me therefore commend the ambition of Peter Jennings’ recent post on being a ‘[top 20 defence player](#)’.

While I strongly agree with the desire for a much more confident role for Australia, I have to wonder about the source of inspiration for Peter’s view. In Peter’s take, being a top 20 nation seems to mean doing the same things we currently do, but with more resources. It could also be read as trying to emulate the US, but on a smaller scale. Hence the exhortations to take more of a global view and not to take our eyes off remote parts of the world lest we need to jump back in.

Yet it’s not clear that’s the right strategy for Australia. After all, why should access to more resources mean that we automatically seek to expand our horizons of involvement? It wasn’t a lack of resources but a lack of specific threats that led to the Defence of Australia policy and that environmental assessment still hasn’t fundamentally changed.

Second, even if we decide being a top 20 nation places upon Australia a higher burden of responsibility, why does that necessarily translate into taking a sustained interest in Europe, Africa, the Middle East and across the vast Indo-Pacific? As Peter notes, we’d need every dollar of that 2% pledge to be able to do that, and it’s not clear what we’d get in return. Would significantly larger Australian deployments in Afghanistan, Iraq or even Ukraine change the likely outcome of those conflicts? Putting it in terms of naked self-interest, if we sent twice as many troops to those conflicts, would the US be twice as willing to protect Australia in a future Asian conflict? I suspect the answer to both questions is no.

Finally, if being a top 20 nation means anything, it should mean having an ability to direct, if not dictate, the security environment of your immediate geography. Australia now has a lot more resources, but we still have to make major trade-offs. We’ll always be a [middle power](#) in comparison to those at the top of the charts. Does it make sense for us to move from our past experience of an influence spread thinly across the Asia-Pacific to an influence spread thinly across the Indo-Pacific (or beyond) for twice the price? Why not use being a top 20 nation to consolidate our ability to contribute close by?

That’s why I suspect Peter’s inspiration is our friends in Washington. The US really is an exceptional nation. After the demise of the colonial empires of the 19th century and USSR in the 20th, the US is the only country that truly brings global security issues into its

defence planning. That produces an outcome for which Australia should be—and is—thankful, but I don't know it's wise for us to emulate that process.

Instead we need to develop our own strategy. When it comes to issues closer to home, Peter and I are in much greater agreement. I strongly agree that Indonesia must be our central focus—and I'd endorse Peter's [excellent suggestion](#) to give ANZAC-class frigates to Indonesia. Moreover, we should seek the capacity to substantially shape the security environment of the South Pacific and Southeast Asia. But that should be about it. That doesn't mean abandoning the dynamics of wider East Asia, but rather playing a role where it can matter. So, to take a hard case, if we decide supporting the US and Japan against China is the right thing to do in the future then something like creating a '[distant blockade](#)' would make sense. Seeking the capacity to '[rip an arm off](#)' Beijing wouldn't.

A constrained regional focus doesn't mean a slothful one. We could take on some of the provision of public goods in Southeast Asia—which would help lessen the burden on an overstretched US. That'd not only contribute to our security, it'd ensure we're spending only enough to cover specific tasks and not [indulging abstract funding targets](#). The currency of military strength in the 21st century is still currency. Wealth is the foundation of Australia's claim to top 20 status and the more we spend on defence the less we can spend on improving prosperity at home and in our immediate region.

If being a top 20 nation means anything, it should mean taking this moment to re-think the major assumptions about how we seek national security. If scarcity drove past defence thinking, then let's not use this moment of largesse simply to do the same thing but slightly further afield or with slightly more resources. Let's instead think about a fresh approach—like truly becoming a Southeast Asian power, or developing enough capacity that a potential coup in PNG doesn't keep us up at night. And let's remember that of the 20 top defence spenders, those in positions 2–20 are almost entirely focused on their immediate shores and neighbours. So while I admire the confidence that drives Peter's ideas, we should also adopt the wisdom and strength of geographic restraint.

Near or far? The choices of a top 20 defence nation

Rod Lyon

As the wire fences go up in Brisbane for the approaching G20 meeting, I'd like to revisit the topic canvassed by a couple of recent blog posts on what it means for Australia, in defence terms, to be a 'top 20 nation'. Both Peter Jennings and Andrew Carr have outlined competing visions ([here](#) and [here](#)) of what it means for Australia to be a top 20 defence player. Both accept our status on the list. But they differ on what that means for our defence and strategic policy. The principal difference between them turns on the extent to which Australia should look out to—and engage with—the wider regional and global strategic environment. Peter's in favour of doing that; Andrew isn't. Andrew wants Australia to behave like most other top 20 powers: focusing on its near neighbourhood, and its local, geographic priorities.

Let's start by clarifying 'top 20'. Neither Peter nor Andrew define the term, so I'm going to propose two definitions, both of which lead us to a pretty similar group of countries. First, we could simply go with G20 membership. Alternatively, we could go with the top 20 global economies by GDP (as assessed by purchasing power parity). The table below shows the countries in each group in alphabetical order, plus the European Union (EU), which qualifies on both counts. Seventeen countries and the EU are common to both lists; Argentina and South Africa also feature as G20 members; Iran and Spain feature on the economic-size list.

G20 members	Top 20 by GDP
Argentina	
Australia	Australia
Brazil	Brazil
Canada	Canada
China	China
France	France
Germany	Germany
India	India
Indonesia	Indonesia
	Iran
Italy	Italy
Japan	Japan
Mexico	Mexico
Russia	Russia
Saudi Arabia	Saudi Arabia
South Africa	
South Korea	South Korea
	Spain
Turkey	Turkey
United Kingdom	United Kingdom
United States	United States
European Union	European Union

Whichever list we go with, it's clear that most of those countries already live in contested strategic environments. Halford Mackinder once said that [Eurasia was the World Island](#), and that [whoever ruled the World Island ruled the world](#). Over half of the 17 countries common to both lists live either on the World Island or on the rimlands around it: those powers don't need to cast their strategic vision far in order to find their strategic priorities.

Who are the remainder? Well, from the 17, just six more: the US, Canada, Brazil, Mexico, Indonesia and Australia. The US and Canada already tie themselves to the strategic balance within Eurasia and along its rimlands. Brazil, Mexico and Indonesia don't. That leaves Australia. So, are our strategic interests more like those of the majority of top 20 states whose fate is determined by the World Island, or are they more like the strategic interests of Brazil, Mexico and Indonesia? Personally, I think our strategic interests aren't much like Mexico's or Brazil's, though I must admit I've never sat down to do a side-by-side comparison. By contrast, we do share an important overlap of strategic interests with Indonesia, because we're the two biggest players in Southeast Asia. Still, that overlap certainly doesn't define the totality of our interests.

Andrew argues that our greatest constraint is geography. If that's true, we don't need to worry much about whether we're a top 20 player or not, since our geography doesn't change in response to that. But, in a strategic sense, our immediate neighbourhood isn't 'world shaping'. And, frankly, it never was. That certainly doesn't mean it's irrelevant—indeed, Southeast Asia's becoming more relevant with each passing year. Nor does it mean we shouldn't be putting more effort into Southeast Asia. But the world—more particularly Eurasia, the World Island—can still go to hell in a hand-basket while we're building our patterns of strategic cooperation in Southeast Asia. And that's not something we want to happen. We, like other strategic players don't want a world where Eurasia falls under the domination of a coercive great power.

In short, we're globalists because it's in our strategic interests to be so. Actually, we'd remain globalists even if we weren't a top 20 nation—even if, say, more developing countries leap ahead of us on the economic-size list. Still, being on the list means we have the resources to be able to make a difference on the global and regional stage. True, by ourselves, we can't shape the world: we can often make *a* difference, not *the* difference. Few countries can, even among the great powers. But we should see ourselves among the players, and not among the observers.

A G20 power 'down under': getting the balance right

John Blaxland

The debate about Australia's place in the global geostrategic equation, as reflected in the different posts of Peter Jennings, Andrew Carr and Rod Lyon, is a fascinating and important one. Peter and Rod are right that Australia has a vested interest in a rules-based global order and that interest sometimes demands military contributions beyond Australia's immediate neighbourhood. My sense though is that the criticism levelled at Andrew's stance misses the point.

Most readers of *The Strategist*, I presume, understand the significance of Australia playing a prominent role as a good international citizen. Indeed, Australian Defence White Papers (DWPs) have repeatedly made clear that—to paraphrase—Australia's primary responsibility is to protect itself, then its neighbourhood and finally, where possible, contribute to global coalitions further afield.

Australian prime ministers have tended to have a clear understanding of what that meant. Malcolm Fraser saw it allowing a niche engineer contribution to a UN force in Namibia. Bob Hawke followed through on Fraser's plans for Namibia when the Cold War thawed in 1989. Paul Keating and his Defence Minister, Kim Beazley, responded to calls for intervention in Somalia and Rwanda. As Foreign Minister, Gareth Evans led the charge in seeking a peace agreement to break the impasse in Cambodia in 1993. But those interventions all took place when Australia's neighbourhood was remarkably stable.

Thereafter John Howard endorsed Australia's intervention in the late 1990s and beyond alongside New Zealand in Bougainville, Solomon Islands and East Timor. In each case Australia's contribution was well defined with a clear end-state in mind. Interestingly, the closer to Australia's shores, the more resources and attention were devoted to making a meaningful contribution. Further afield, Australian governments, since the Suez crisis of 1956 if not before, have tended to be more circumspect.

Even in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, when the imperatives to contribute to the so-called Global War on Terror were at a height, Howard sought to demarcate tightly the size, scope and time-frame of Australia's military contributions, conscious of the need to keep his powder dry for the 'arc of instability', as the neighbourhood was sometimes described.

Only reluctantly did the government agree to return to Afghanistan and Iraq and then, once again, with a tightly-defined mandate, in support of its main ally, and with a clear and identifiable end-state. Contributions there were focused primarily on alliance management and secondly on global security. Making a meaningful contribution locally also gradually increased in importance as vindication, at least, for the sacrifice of those who died or were injured pursuing those objectives.

Even then, Australian policymakers found themselves so distracted by the Middle East they missed the brewing troubles in East Timor that precipitated another military intervention there in May 2006. A force was cobbled together and sent, but with little idea initially as to what the problem was or how it could be resolved. Ever since 1942, events in our region have tended to flare up while we've been preoccupied with second- or third-tier priorities (using DWP metrics as a guide) in places like the Middle East.

Australians subsequently left Iraq and scaled back markedly in Afghanistan, only to be dragged back in to assist in Iraq—and this time into an even murkier set of circumstances. Today the coalition is dealing with a strange set of bed-fellows. Its so-called strategy is little more than an operational plan. And in the absence of a grand bargain between Saudi Arabia and Iran over how to split the spoils between the Shia and Sunni worlds in and around Iraq, Australia and the coalition are spending enormous financial and material resources to strike at one head of a regional hydra—that is, the latest manifestation of militant jihadist Islamism.

Today the Global War on Terror looks tired—and devoid of good ideas about how to make a meaningful contribution to the long-term future of the Middle East. It's not even clear why the West feels the need to lead the charge again, particularly when the adjoining states have a greater vested interest in resolving the crises and when the drain on US resources leaves it vulnerable elsewhere.

In the meantime, the geostrategic equation in East Asia has changed markedly. The rise of China and the competition between the great powers of Asia—including Russia, Japan and India—point to pressing concerns closer to Australia that should be, more than ever, the focus of attention. It's in the closer parts of the Indo-Pacific region that Australia has traditionally been able to make a meaningful contribution to security and stability. It's in this region that Australia's Defence Cooperation Plan has focused its investment in resources and relationships for generations.

Yet today's ADF is staffed by people with little knowledge of or experience in the region. Critics might say we can walk and chew gum—participate in an open-ended war in Iraq and be prepared for contingencies closer to home—while keeping up the growing regional defence engagement priorities. The jury's out on that. Experience in May 2006, let alone 1942, suggests we shouldn't be so cocky about reaching too far beyond our neighbourhood.

Time for a grown-up discussion about national strategy

Peter Jennings

I'm grateful to Andrew Carr, Rod Lyon and John Blaxland for taking up the debate about Australia's role as a 'top 20' global power. It's obvious we disagree on some fundamental points about designing the best strategy to keep Australia secure in a more risky and competitive world. There are echoes of this discussion around Julia Gillard's optimistic *Asian Century White Paper*; Kevin Rudd's apparently increasingly pessimistic view of regional security; the 'China choice' confection; and Tony Abbott's instinctive globalism—notwithstanding his pre-election 'more Jakarta and less Geneva' slogan. Discomforting and novel as it may be, Australia urgently needs to have a grown-up discussion about strategy.

As my [first blog post](#) made clear, I take the view that Australia should reshape its defence and foreign policy around promoting a set of broadly-defined global interests. This would force a break with a regional policy priority that has shaped strategic thinking since the end of the Vietnam War. That focus started quite narrowly—in the 1980s defining Australian interests around the 'inner arc' of the Indonesian archipelago. Driven outward by crises, our definition of what constitutes our essential region has progressively widened to include Timor and the Pacific, a wider swathe of Southeast Asia and now—for some at least—the Indian Ocean and North Asia.

Even while Australia's default definition of 'the region' has widened, the debate naturally invites the tag of 'Globalists versus Regionalists'. Readers should, however, demand more than labels. Here I set out some key elements that distinguish my (and Rod Lyon's) 'globalist' view from a more strongly 'regionalist' Andrew Carr and John Blaxland.

Australia's 'top 20' position draws on our G20 membership, itself a product of the size of the economy. Our economic and defence spending weight is a reality of where we stand relative to around 180 sovereign countries in the world. Calling Australia a top 20 country is a statement of fact, not policy intent. We don't have a choice to opt out of this club. Andrew Carr argues that my view of Australia's relative economic and strategic weight made us seem more like a globally-minded US than other G20 countries which, he contends, have more regionally-focused strategic policies.

That simply doesn't ring true. The UK, France, and Germany—or any of the top 20 European states—certainly don't argue that their strategic interests stop at the Atlantic. And it's clear that Russia, China and Japan pursue strategic interests that keep them deeply invested in Africa, Latin America and the Middle East. Australia is distinctively the only one of the G20 countries that invests so much time in debating how it should *narrow* its interests. This is the geopolitical version of Australia's much-derided cultural cringe. It's high time we got over that self-limiting hurdle.

Part of the geopolitical cringe perspective insists that Australia can't possibly have real strategic interests in regions beyond its immediate neighbourhood. According to this view if we deploy forces in the Middle East it must be because of the US alliance. But Australia has as much stake as any top 20 nation in preventing the spread of terrorism and in halting a sectarian descent into chaos in the Middle East. That could end in nuclear proliferation and major conventional wars. Far from being dragged into the current Iraq crisis by the US, it's clear that Australia and a number of like-minded countries have seen it in their interests to encourage a reluctant President Obama to engage.

On this scale, the Middle East isn't a second- or third-order priority as John Blaxland suggests. If only it were. But no amount of street violence in Dili has the potential to ruin Australia's day as thoroughly as any of half a dozen trouble spots brewing in the Middle East. John's quite right to worry that the international community has yet to develop a workable strategy to deal with ISIL, or Iraq, or Syria. But that's a result of the enormity of the problem—and the likely scale of the solution.

A similar 'regionalist' argument holds that it's somehow possible for Australia to be economically dependent on North Asia while having no interest or role in North Asian security. Such a view may have been sustainable in the 1970s when Japan was our biggest market and China had yet to begin economic reform. But strategic interest follows money as surely as bees follow pollen. Having global interests doesn't mean that our regional interests are less important. Geography still matters—but it's the connections rather than the barriers between regions that drive strategic change.

The hard reality is that Australia doesn't have an option to opt out from the world's biggest security concerns. Our engagement is driven by the weight of our direct interests. There's no exit strategy from being a responsible global power. Being a good international citizen entails more than just being a casually benevolent player. Smaller countries (shall we say the smallest 150 of the 180) may claim that incapacity or disinterest makes them optional players in some strategic situations. But for the top 20 countries, including Australia, size confers an obligation to make meaningful contributions to the global order.

Region or world? Australia as a 'top 20' player

Nic Stuart

One of the most compelling passages in Thucydides' detailed narrative of the Peloponnesian War doesn't involve slaughter or killing. It comes instead when the ambassadors of Athens—the brilliant, cultural, democracy that has always been a paragon of virtue in the ancient world—travel to the little island of Melos, in the southern Aegean. The islanders were trying to do things their own way and had rejected an alliance with Athens.

After some brief verbal to-ing and fro-ing between the representatives, an (unnamed) Athenian cuts to the chase and tells the Melians how things are:

The strong do as they choose, and the weak do as they must.

The Melians put all sorts of intelligent reasons to the Athenians as to why they should just be left to live in peace. Their arguments (that Melos is neutral, and the use of force would be against Athens' own long-term interests) are dismissed as irrelevant. It's one of the clearest articulations of realist political theory, even though it's 2,500 years old.

Perhaps the envoys were tired. After all, the long conflict between Athens and Sparta had been going on for 15 years by this stage, and perhaps the city-state's patience had evaporated. For whatever reason, the sensible words cut no ice with the great democracy, and the Athenians decided to teach the Melians a lesson. The siege came to an end when traitors guided the Athenian hoplites into the city. And what did the democrats do once they were inside the walls? Forgive their enemies? Give them a chance to be good and make amends? No. Every man in the city was killed; the women and children were taken as slaves. There was no pity; no mercy. Power was everything.

It still is.

And that's the thing that confuses me about the current discussion *The Strategist* has been having about Australia's membership of the 'top 20'. Top 20 what, exactly?

Well yes, we do currently possess one of the 20 [largest economies](#) in the world. Hooray! But that's nothing. We're [number six](#) in terms of land area. Shouldn't that deserve a permanent seat on the UN Security Council? We're [14th by per capita income](#) (although Qatar and Luxembourg are numbers one and two on that list, so you do sort of wonder, don't you?). By population though, we're [number 50](#), and perhaps that's more relevant?

But the more I search for hard definitions of our importance, the more confused I become. We're number 35, for example, in terms of foreign exchange reserves, being beaten by Switzerland, Thailand, Turkey, Indonesia, Iraq, etc, etc.

The problem is, of course, that one can use statistics to make any argument you choose. Because I'm a journalist, I began looking up other important numbers (like, for example, the number of reporters per head of population and the amount of money in their pay packets), but I soon realised that was pointless. Measuring the quality and quantity of articles produced compared to the salary journalists are receiving doesn't really tell you anything. And it's the same, I think, with the idea that belonging to some nebulous grouping means we've acquired particular responsibilities.

The important thing is to behave as a responsible stakeholder in the international system. For that reason I happen to agree with both [Peter Jennings](#) as well as [John Blaxland](#). This isn't an either/or choice, and shouldn't be posed as such.

In my opinion, John's absolutely right—where our region's concerned, there's a shocking dearth of understanding. That's a significant strategic weakness, one day likely to be exploited to our disadvantage. That *must* be addressed urgently. Forget China; it's Indonesia, the giant on our doorstep, we need to work with. And now, not later.

And how about the Pacific? That's an area where we should be making a positive contribution, and yet the tragic reality of this fragile region is that it could, at any moment, spiral out of control. It faces so many threats—environmental, social and economic—and yet we're doing nothing to assist our neighbours.

But it's incorrect to posit this choice as some sort of dichotomy. We need to recognise we aren't getting more powerful. Every year, other nations are catching up. The choice mustn't be Asia, or the Pacific, or the Middle East—it needs to be all of those, and then some. If it doesn't seem as if we've got enough money, then we need to find some other way of addressing the issue. We need to both engage with our region as well as contribute to the stability of the world.

As the Melians found, opting out isn't an answer.

Defending 'the region'

John Blaxland

I write to make a further contribution to the ongoing debate about Australia's strategic place as a Top 20 power. In Peter's latest response he implies that regionalists are less 'grown up' than globalists. I beg to differ.

Peter talks about defending a broadly-defined set of global interests. But those interests are ill-defined: how broad is broad enough? And, if it's appropriate, how much should we contribute to the fight in Iraq and Syria in order to win, rather than just to keep the fight going. Contemplating an approach involving piling on with more is frightening, with dark consequences.

Piling on got us nowhere in Vietnam. Piling on in Iraq from 2006 to 2008 provided only a temporary reprieve—once we left, there was little to show for our presence. The jury's still out on our contributions in Afghanistan but the signs are ominous.

A concern Peter doesn't address adequately is whether the current plan for Iraq and Syria is even viable or likely to be remotely successful. There are a number of indicators that would suggest it's not going to end well for the people of Iraq and the neighbourhood (as I've argued [here](#) and [here](#)). There's no evidence we have a viable end point in sight or even in conception. I'm all

for contributing to global coalitions that have clearly defined and achievable objectives and that don't undermine our position or that of the US in East Asia. But where are the clear and achievable objectives for this one?

Peter verbals me saying the Middle East isn't a second- or third-order priority. Yet I was merely citing the order of priority from successive Defence White Papers. What's the point of having tiered DWP priorities if the lowest priority (global issues) is treated the same as the highest (DoA)?

Peter suggests Middle Eastern hot spots can ruin Australia's day more thoroughly than events closer to home in places like Dili. Really? On what measure? To be sure, returning vigilantes from the Middle East are a problem, but plans are already in place to address those concerns.

Does East Asia matter more to Australia than the Middle East? If so, why? If not, why not? Economically, the Middle East used to matter a lot. Nowadays our economic interests are overwhelmingly linked to East Asia, Southeast Asia and South Asia. The visits of Xi and Modi bear testament to that fact. Having said that, I agree we have a stake in preventing the spread of terrorism and halting the descent into sectarian violence. But are we following a viable path toward that objective? The past decade or so of intervention suggests not.

Peter refers to a G20 benchmark of international contributions to the war in Iraq and Syria. He cites NATO countries, but most are former imperial powers with residual influence in places like Africa. They also have genuine obligations to the security of the periphery of NATO—including the borders of Turkey. That's a direct and understandable connection. But it's not ours.

Also if there's a G20 benchmark then why have other Asian G20 countries been quite circumspect in staying out of the game there? He seems to overlook China, Japan, ROK, Indonesia, India, Brazil, and Mexico. Peter says we don't have a choice to opt out of the club, but those countries appear to have done so with no untoward effects.

Why not ask our Muslim neighbours why they aren't buying in more and perhaps what insights they might have to share with us as to why more people are going to the war in Iraq/Syria from Australia than from Indonesia or Malaysia—even though there are many more Muslims in those states? Perhaps it says something about Australia needling the hornet's nest in the Middle East unnecessarily.

Peter talks about overcoming our geopolitical cringe and accepting that Australia can have real strategic interests beyond its neighbourhood. Of course it can. I recognise Australia has real interests in the Middle East. They're just lesser ones than with our immediate neighbours and principal trading partners in East Asia and Southeast Asia. As I've argued [elsewhere](#), events from Whitlam to Howard and beyond demonstrate Australia has always taken a carefully calibrated approach to contributions far afield. Those imperatives haven't changed.

Peter paints what I perceive to be a false dichotomy of opting in or out from the world's biggest security concerns. I'm not for opting out. But we should only opt in where it's viable, achievable and commensurate with the risks and potential rewards.

Peter closes by saying Australia's size confers an obligation to make meaningful contributions to the global order. That's true. But the question is where best to do so and how? In our neighbourhood, no one else can be relied on to pick up the slack. Back in 1999, for instance, Australia had to coax the US to be involved in INTERFET. Similarly in Bougainville and Solomon Islands, Australia, along with New Zealand had to take the lead. Let's not kid ourselves that by making niche contributions in the Middle East we somehow guarantee reciprocal commitments in our neighbourhood.

Australia and the illusion of being a G20 power

Peter Dean

Peter Jennings is right. Australia is a G20 power and has global interests. But those facts must be set alongside others, not so encouraging, that relate to Australia's position on the global stage. In all likelihood Australia has reached its economic peak when

it comes to the league tables of global economic weight. Coming in at number 12 in 2014, Australia's performance to reach those lofty heights has been nothing short of exceptional. That position and its corresponding economic clout make Australia a major world economic player. Australia's high wages and high standard of living, its extensive social safety-net, world-class health and education systems, strong financial sector and dependable economic performance make it the envy of many in the world.

But those strengths are tempered by its small—and ageing—population (less than one-third of the UK's, about one-fifth of the Philippines', approximately one-quarter of Vietnam's and less than one-tenth of Indonesia's), its limited infrastructure, budget deficits and political division over a reform agenda. While Australia avoided the worst of the GFC it has [poor productivity](#) and its [global competitiveness](#) has been slipping since 2009. Its relative position vis-a-vis 'rising' countries in the region and around the globe means Australia's economic standing will only come under more pressure in the future. Time is also not on our side.

Indonesia is projected to have the 10th largest economy in the world by 2030 (some even argue [7th largest](#)), when its GDP will be twice Australia's. Those vying for Australia's position on the economic league tables also include the Republic of Korea, Spain, Mexico, and Turkey. Moreover, there's little likelihood that Australia will be clawing its way up the G20 rankings. There's a big difference between being in the bottom half of the G20 and being in the G8, the G4 or the G2. The G2's combined economic clout is equal to the [next nine largest economies](#) in the world in 2014. So while Australia will remain a major economic player for some years to come—and potentially for much longer given the difficulties of managing sustained growth in emerging economies—in the end we're a middle power, with some small-power pretensions.

So our G20 status needs to be kept in perspective and we need to recognise that in coming decades it's highly probable our weight, significance and power both globally and regionally will decline. That's hardly a strong platform for carving out a strategy of global focus and reach.

Still, Peter's right to claim that Australia has global interests—in this highly-interconnected world most countries do. In order to promote and protect those interests Australia should continue to have a global edge to its foreign policy. It should continue to use its diplomatic skills and weight through multilateral institutions, bilateral relations, its alliance with the United States and its security partnerships in the region and beyond to further its interests.

But no country in the G20, beyond the US, is truly a global power. Like Australia, the rest pursue global interests but prioritise their strategic policy on areas much closer to home. While as Peter states 'the UK, France, and Germany ... don't argue that their strategic interests stop at the Atlantic', they also don't structure their forces for operations in the East or South China Seas. I [don't see Brazil flying fighters in Iraq](#) or putting 'boots on the ground' in the fight against ISIS, [and while Japan is in the process of reinterpreting its constitution](#) to allow the Japanese Self-Defense Forces to work alongside other militaries that's hardly because its focus is on Africa or the Middle East.

A regional focus to Australia's strategic policy is hardly an indicator of a 'geopolitical cringe perspective'. Rather it's a practical recognition of the difference between Australia's fundamental strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific, especially in the South Pacific and Southeast Asia, and issues of strategic concern such as global terrorism, Iraq and the Middle East. Such an approach is also a reflection of the difference between Australia's ability to use diplomacy on the global stage on one hand, and, on the other, the limits on its ability to use armed force in international affairs to achieve its strategic objectives. As the [2013 White Paper](#) states, Australia must be cognisant in relation to its support for global security of the 'limits of our capacity, given the priority of our other tasks'.

As I've noted elsewhere on [The Strategist](#), that's not to deny that Australia has interests in places outside the immediate region. But throughout its history Australia's commitment of military force to regions such as the Middle East has always been dependent on a stable Asia-Pacific, one largely devoid of tension and major strategic competition—and that's clearly no longer the case.

If it's time, as Peter claims, for a 'grown up' discussion of Australia's foreign and defence policy then surely one of our first calculations must be the limit of our power and reach. Otherwise Australia will end up with a strategic policy where it's living well beyond both its means and capabilities.

The US and Australian strategy

Andrew Smith

The recent debate in these pages on how Australia should think and act as a power in the international system is important and timely. The thoughtful contributions of Peter Jennings, Andrew Carr, Rod Lyon, John Blaxland, Nic Stuart and Peter Dean argue well the emerging regionalist and globalist schools of strategic thought. A true historian, [John](#) rightly points out the wise regionalist continuities in our strategic policy, traceable through Defence White Papers and actual commitments since the 1970s. But another important continuity is the centrality of the US alliance to Australia's defence policy. This is timely, because the US is struggling now to determine how it will play its accustomed global power role going forward. Whatever it decides, it's clear that the hard power that has made the US an effective steward of that system since the Second World War is no longer guaranteed. To the extent that Australia's strategy relies on US power, that should concern us.

Peter Jennings has earlier discussed the value of [hard power in general](#) and of [US hard power, judiciously applied](#), in particular. [Andrew Carr](#) acknowledges the importance of that power to Australia. But a health check on American military power, including recent messages from the US national security community, renders a worrying prognosis.

Recent traffic in Washington suggests that the greatest challenge to US military power in the future is the uncertain defence budgetary situation. That's driven by a fiscal and political environment best exemplified by the bizarre 2011 Budget Control Act, which imposed heavy government spending cuts compounded by 'sequestration'—additional, mandatory, across-the-board cuts triggered by Congressional failure to find alternative savings, which has been inevitable in Washington's current political environment.

The calamitous impact of sequestration and the urgent need to end it are the loudest, most consistent and most bipartisan message coming from the national security elite, usefully articulated last week by [Deputy Secretary of Defense Bob Work](#). But although sequestration is unanimously condemned in national security circles, there's little optimism in Washington that the necessary budgetary conditions will return soon. Many expect DoD to be operating under sequestration for years. Consequently, '[affordability](#)' is now the driving mantra of US defence capability.

That situation has not emerged suddenly, and DoD has been working 'to do more without more'. For example, Under-Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology and Logistics, Frank Kendall, has been steadily implementing his [Better Buying Power](#) initiative to reform a clunky US defence acquisition apparatus that some consider a national security threat in its own right. Many ideas are common sense, but some foreshadow a new reality in which the US has less military power available at short notice: for example, a proposal to buy and build fewer major platforms (such as ships and aircraft) up-front and to rely on rapid manufacture to produce more quickly when needed; and to keep new technology and designs 'on the shelf' until the strategic situation justifies their acquisition.

Science and technology investment is also emphasising affordability, deliberately [swinging away from traditional 'monolithic' platform-based approaches](#) and towards [experimentation and information-based solutions](#) to reduce development costs and accelerate capability upgrades. Sustaining S&T investment is a key challenge for Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, who [recently announced a contemporary version of the 'Technological Offset' campaign](#) by which the US overcame Soviet numerical superiority from the 1970s.

But these measures bring second-order risks, not least that of a shrinking and less busy defence industrial base. For example, recently there've been [warnings of a loss of naval shipyards](#) under current funding plans, while the uncertainty of defence business may be making industry both less competitive and less interested in supplying DoD. While the protective power of pork-barrelling in US politics shouldn't be underestimated, lost industrial capacity is a real possibility that'd make just-in-time purchases both riskier and pricier. And in areas where DoD would prefer to save money, such as by reducing personnel costs or shedding surplus infrastructure, Congress sometimes prevents it from doing so.

DoD faces many other challenges in meeting America's defence needs. While it seems to understand the totality of the problem, a solution isn't guaranteed in the current political environment. There's a real possibility that, soon, the US will be facing its global responsibilities with considerably less military capacity on hand.

That's an issue for Australia as long as the US alliance is a key pillar of our defence strategy. And that's unlikely to change soon, whether that strategy is regionalist or globalist. As Rod Lyon points out, we have strategic interests that we alone haven't the means to secure and must work with others to do so. For the foreseeable future, the US will be the principal 'other' and we must factor that into our strategy, and help America where we can.

Australia as a 'top 20' power: balance, interests and responsibilities

Rod Lyon

In wrapping up the *Strategist* debate on Australia as a 'top 20' defence power, I'd like to thank the other contributors for a fascinating exchange. Peter Jennings' initial contribution drew a thoughtful response from Andrew Carr, and the series unfolded from there. Contributions from John Blaxland, Nic Stuart, Peter Dean, and Andrew Smith subsequently helped to illuminate the shape of the battlefield. Looking back over the contributions, the core difference that emerges is the one between regionalists and globalists. Carr, Blaxland and Dean are regionalists. Jennings and I are globalists. I think Smith's a globalist by virtue of alliance. And Stuart's got a foot in both camps.

I want to use this final post to talk about three things that seem to me to underpin the debate: the notion of 'balance' in our global and regional imperatives; Australia's strategic interests; and the concept of international responsibility. Rolled together those factors become something like an exploration of Australian strategic identity.

Several contributors mentioned the need for Australia to strike a balance between its global and regional roles. I think that's an important point. But I don't think past Defence White Papers have been good at setting the balance between the near and the far in Australian strategic thinking. The layered concentric-circles model is structurally biased, because the circles lead ever downhill, emphasising a supposed declining interest in the more distant 'issues of strategic concern'—to use Peter Dean's phrase—and a strategic prioritisation on 'fundamental issues' close to home. The concentric-circles model doesn't help us strike a balance; indeed, it doesn't even pretend to be interested in the concept of balance. If we want to do some balancing between near and far, then we need a different way to think about Australian strategy.

As I wrote in an earlier post, I think geopolitics should be seen as the key imperative in our more distant commitments: we don't live on the Eurasian continent or along its rimlands, and that's where the core of world order is set. We could be strong in our own neighbourhood, and there's some merit in doing that: academic studies of war show that good relations with neighbours are an excellent starting point for a peaceful life. But we'd rule in the sandpit, and not play on the beach.

So I want to use the remainder of this post to talk about interests and responsibilities—because either factor might underpin a stronger notion of balance than mere geography does. If we ask ourselves where we have strategic interests and responsibilities in the world, then it strikes me that we can answer that question differently at different times. We can't answer a question about geography differently at different times. In both world wars, for example, we had interests in not sitting out a global struggle that could determine the fate of democracies, even when those struggles were a long way away. Similarly, we might say we had a responsibility not to sit them out.

So, interests. Where do our strategic interests begin? I think all our contributors accept that Australia has global interests; where they differ is over how much and what sort of effort they think we should devote to protecting them. Peter Dean argues that we should pursue them primarily via diplomacy. I've argued before that we should make better use of the political arm of policy and not think about strategy in exclusively military terms. And, in fact, Australians are much more accustomed to globally-active foreign ministers than globally-active defence ministers. But diplomacy only gets us so far; I don't think parachuting Julie Bishop into Iraq is going to solve that problem for us.

John Blaxland thinks we should make niche contributions to distant engagements, à la previous DWPs, and not be sucked into a Middle-Eastern vortex of ill-defined objectives. Again, there's something to be said for a calibrated deployment to a distant battlefield—but only if it gives you what you want. For too long what we've wanted is Washington's attention, not military victory. G20 countries shouldn't fawn to get attention. Peter Jennings favours our fronting up to global problems, including with appropriate levels of military engagement. Some will ask 'what's the appropriate level?' Good question—it certainly isn't self-defining. Wars against revisionist great powers fall into a unique category, but we can and should debate our other commitments—in terms of our interests and responsibilities.

Finally, a few words on responsibilities. Do powerful countries have greater responsibilities than weaker ones? Well, hegemons typically have responsibility for the orders they create. But the push for Australia to do more isn't just coming from Washington. If we look at the recent statements by Abe, Cameron, Xi, Obama, and Modi, several of the bigger G20 players seem to be asking us to do more. I don't believe a benighted world awaits the Aussie enlightenment. But I do think with power comes responsibility, and our responsibilities run wider than being the big fish in a small pond.

Middle power debate

Is Australia a pivotal power?

Anthony Bergin

My former ASPI colleague Carl Ungerer has pointed out that [Doc Evatt first used the term 'middle power'](#) at the San Francisco conference that established the United Nations in April 1945. In a recent op-ed I [questioned](#) the accuracy and utility of this label for Australia. My thoughts were prompted by a new international grouping launched last month known as MIKTA on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly by a meeting of foreign ministers of 'middle-power' countries. But you'll have to go the foreign ministry websites of South Korea and Turkey to find out about it, because there's nothing on the DFAT or the Australian Foreign Minister's websites.

'MIKTA' is an acronym for an informal collaboration platform between Mexico, Indonesia, the Republic of Korea, Turkey and Australia. According to South Korea's foreign ministry:

[a]t the meeting, the five foreign ministers shared the view that in the current situation where challenges facing the international community are becoming more diverse and complex, middle-power countries, which have the willingness and capabilities to contribute to the development of the international community, need to create a cooperation mechanism to address the challenges. They agreed to hold the meeting of middle-power countries' foreign ministers on a regular basis.

In terms of function, it was decided that MIKTA wouldn't be a new exclusive bloc, but would function as an 'unofficial consultation to freely exchange opinions on major global issues'. Mexico serves as a coordinator of MIKTA for a year from 2013.

According to South Korea, MIKTA is expected to:

... serve as a useful forum to discuss a variety of global and regional issues and to explore ways to help resolve them, while maintaining transparency and flexibility... The launch of a new mechanism among middle-power countries, which have a certain level of political and economic status and capabilities, as well as the willingness to contribute to creating a new world order, is expected to help resolve issues facing the international community and maintain world peace.

Turkey [pointed out](#) that MIKTA countries are members of the G-20, with open economies and enjoying democratic pluralistic systems. Council of Foreign Relations' Korean analyst Scott Snyder suggests that MIKTA [might be able to play a helpful role within the G-20](#).

Yet I'd argue that putting the 'middle power' label to the forefront of the MIKTA grouping isn't helpful to Australia. Instead, I'd agree with former foreign minister Alexander Downer, who described Australia as a 'considerable' power and a 'significant' country.

In the South Pacific (a quarter of the earth's surface) we're a superpower, and we're a major player in the Indian Ocean (Australia has the largest area of maritime jurisdiction in the Indian Ocean region) and in Southeast Asia. In fact, we're a top tier player in the southern hemisphere.

When Australia's claim to the Antarctic landmass is included, Australia becomes the country with the largest jurisdictional claim to an area of the earth's surface—around 27.2 million km², of which about half is over ocean or sea.

We're 12th largest economy (in GDP terms, thus the 12th largest contributor to the United Nations), the 5th wealthiest nation (GDP per capita, current US dollars) and 51(out of 214) in population. We've got the 12th largest defence budget and 10th largest defence expenditure as percentage of GDP from OECD countries.

We're the eighth largest aid donor country. In a world where economics and strategic issues rule, values and soft power still have a crucial role to play in international relations, especially for a country like Australia. The significance of what influence our aid program buys us in in particular places and at particular times, (and the way it's perceived by Australia's OECD colleagues), is very much under-rated.

So I'd suggest that we're at the very least an 'upper middle' country, and certainly not 'lower upper middle' (to adapt a nice line on Britain's class system). But a better label for Australia might be pivotal.

As characterised by global analysis company Oxford Analytica, pivotal powers are those countries that by virtue of their strategic location, size of population, economic potential, policy preferences and political weighting, are destined to shape the contours of geopolitics in key regions of the world as well as constitute important nodes of global economic growth. We shouldn't limit our ambition by resting comfortably under the 'middle power' label.

Reader response: is Australia a pivotal power?

Damien Kingsbury

Judging by his output, ASPI's Anthony Bergin likes nothing more than to test ideas in relation to Australia's strategic positioning. His recent proposition that Australia isn't so much a 'middle power' but a 'pivotal power' is a case in point.

Bergin's argument is that the common strategic descriptor for Australia as a 'middle power' doesn't accurately reflect its military size or capability, the size of its economy or its strategic reach. In each of these he's correct.

However, the term 'pivotal power' is complex and has some existing meaning. One understanding has it meaning more than just being relatively strategically strong. One such approach defines it not as a quantitative assessment of strategic power but as being a geographic arbiter.

Australia's relativity to Turkey, as Bergin notes, classifies them both as middle powers. But Turkey's role with its neighbours, particularly Syria, Iraq and Israel, also mark it as a key regional actor and so it's also considered to be a pivotal power. Closer to home, Indonesia occupies an arbitrating role in the ASEAN regions as well as in relations with Timor-Leste and Australia.

By comparison, Australia is a regional strategic power in the Southwest Pacific, but perhaps less so than it has been. In part this is due to the increasing sense of independence of some of the Pacific island states. In part it's also due to the more active soft power role being played by China in the region, which in turn buttresses this sense of independence—at least from Australia.

Timor-Leste, though geographically close to Australia and a major recipient of Australian aid and, at times, military assistance, has carved an increasingly independent path. Timor-Leste's foreign policy, is one of having a number of strong friends, so that it remains cosseted by some should relations with one turn sour.

Australia's status in Timor-Leste has diminished, while that of Indonesia has increased. Timor-Leste's police now train with Indonesian police, and there's an agreement that their armed forces also train together. Australia provides training to, but it doesn't train with, Timor-Leste's defence force.

Given Australia's active participation in recent multilateral conflicts and being a preferred site for training by regional military officers, Australia's strategic status is, on balance, perhaps slightly stronger—or perceived as such—than it has been. It's not surprising that the perceptions of Australia's status have shifted; in a strategic environment always in a state of flux, the precise status of any state will remain variable and, more to the point, interpretable.

But if Australia was to suddenly disappear from the strategic stage, the question is the extent to which it might matter. If the imagined effect is profound, then Bergin would be correct and Australia is indeed a pivotal state, if in its own peculiar way.

But perhaps, too, sitting on the edge of a region rapidly growing in importance, Australia's task might be less to assert its significance and, one might suggest, more to work at ensuring what significance it has is more fully appreciated. In this, Bergin gives us much to ponder.

Reader response: Australia is more and less than a middle power

Benjamin Reilly

Anthony Bergin is [surely right](#) when he channels his inner Alexander Downer to make the case that Australia is more (but also, I think, sometimes less) than a middle power in international affairs. Any real estate agent can tell you why: location, location, location. As the regional hegemon across a huge but underpopulated oceanic expanse at the fringes of Pacific, Indian and Southern Oceans, Australia is the superpower of a region that most of the world never thinks about.

But in some ways we're less than a middle power too. The well-worn foreign affairs boilerplates of Australia being a 'clear-eyed' power that 'punches above its weight' are of diminishing utility. Yes we're a generous aid spender and a good international citizen, but we sometimes use those qualities to avoid rather than embrace the challenges of leadership. On the tough issues that matter—such as making contributions commensurate with our interests to global public goods like freedom of the high seas or addressing climate change—we often prefer to free-ride rather than lead.

We're indeed important to the relatively small number of people that call our region home. And as an energy powerhouse and US ally we have a relevance to Asia that has grown steadily in recent decades. But we have also developed a timidity in our approach to many regional issues that stands in stark contrast to the more activist and creative policies of earlier decades.

Anthony's mention of Australia as 'pivotal' sent me back to *The Pivotal States*, a book edited by Robert Chase, Emily Hill, and Paul Kennedy over a decade ago. They used the term to discuss nine states that were 'decisive to the fate of their regions' and to crosscutting issues such as population growth, environmental degradation, ethnic conflict, human rights, and economics: Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Turkey, Egypt, South Africa, Brazil, Algeria, and Mexico. No Australia on that list, but then no China either!

Reader response: size, the elusive variable

Carl Ungerer

Ramesh Thakur once said that size is an elusive variable. So I commend Anthony Bergin for [re-opening the debate about Australia's middle power status and position on the world stage](#).

As I've written [elsewhere](#), the 'middle power' label has waxed and waned in Australian foreign policy discussions for over 60 years. But this is still a debate worth having, because although the academic world has largely moved on from talking about middle

powers in the international system, countries such as South Korea, Indonesia, Turkey and Mexico are now engaged actively in discussions about how second-tier states can and should respond to the shifts in global power relativities.

And there are new steps being taken to formalise the role of the middle powers in international forums. For Anthony, the establishment of the MITKA grouping in the margins of the UN General Assembly as a coordinating mechanism for middle powers undersells Australia's key economic and political strengths and therefore diminishes our potential diplomatic clout as a more significant 'pivotal' power.

National role conceptions such as 'middle power' or 'pivotal power' can be an important guide to understanding the overall orientation and direction of foreign policy behaviour. But labels have their limitations. At the end of the day, foreign policy is about the pursuit of national interests. And, since 1945, governments of both political persuasions have found that, in the absence of what Gareth Evans called 'clout' in the international system, Australia's national interests were best served through the application of persuasion, cooperation and institution building. Think APEC, the Cairns Group, the Australia Group etc.

In fact, middle powers and pivotal powers aren't mutually exclusive concepts. In some cases, a state could be considered both. But regardless of the label, the diffusion of power and prosperity across the world will mean that these second-tier states will hold increasingly strategic positions, making them capable of shaping the politics, economics and security of their regions.

The key question is this: should Australia avoid these emerging middle power groupings because the label seems clumsy or old fashioned?

I think not. There's clear value in closer cooperation between the five middle powers of Australia, Indonesia, the Republic of Korea, Mexico and Turkey. Not all national interests align, but these countries share a number of common characteristics that make them natural partners, including open, democratic governments, open economies and a creative, practical approach to the conduct of international relations.

Australia has nothing to lose from regular, informal cooperation with other middle powers in the margins of global meetings, and may, in fact, have a great deal to gain in terms of shaping the new institutional architecture in ways that foster our interests in a rules-based international order.

It's only words

Andrew Davies

In the proud tradition of ASPI not having a house view on issues, I feel compelled to buy into the 'pivotal power' discussion [kicked off here by Anthony Bergin](#). [Thanks to Damien Kingsbury](#), I now know that 'pivotal' is an adjective that already has its own associated meaning in these matters. But ultimately I subscribe to the [Humpty Dumpty school of thought](#); words mean what we want them to mean. So really I don't think it matters how we characterise ourselves. What matters, as [Carl Ungerer pointed out yesterday](#), is how successful we are in shaping our foreign policy to achieve outcomes that support our national interests.

But I'm rather taken by Damien's suggested 'thought experiment' of imagining what would happen if Australia was to disappear—that's a very neat way of structuring the exercise of evaluating Australia's influence. And it serves the purpose of quickly illuminating where our real influence lies.

For a start, there'd be an impact on world commodity prices, and the resource-hungry industries of China in particular would have to source their inputs elsewhere. Other suppliers would fill in some of the market gaps, and there'd be increased market incentives to develop other latent resources to increase supply. Over time the impact mightn't be as large as we might think—but our absence would at least be noticed.

The United States would miss us too—Australia provides considerable geographical utility as a site for intelligence, communications and military training and garrisoning. We're 'a suitable piece of real estate' as [Des Ball](#) once pointed out. We also do a pretty fair job of burden sharing in the world of intelligence gathering, having a good handle on our part of the world.

The kiwis might miss us most of all—although of course they'd never admit it. We're the nearest culturally similar country, and our much larger population and location makes Australia a natural destination for New Zealander's looking for economically richer pastures, and also we provide a handy security barrier. With '[0% Air Force](#)' (not true, but funny), Australia serves a useful purpose in providing high-end air and maritime capability to this part of the world. Of course, if Australia wasn't there, it'd require considerable power projection capability for anyone to threaten New Zealand, so it's questionable how much value that security blanket adds.

More seriously, Australia's ability to lead local stabilisation missions does count. The ADF would be missed when our near neighbours get into strife.

But elsewhere the impact mightn't be so significant. For example, I think that ASEAN would continue to tick along in its own inimitable fashion—so much for our power in Southeast Asia. And the impressive array of statistics provided doesn't sway me. Australia might be the 12th largest economy in the world, but it constitutes [just a tad over 2% of the world total](#). The top five countries add up to 50%, with the next five contributing just 15% between them. Incidentally, the 'middle powers' in terms of mid-placed ranking on the world GDP ladder are Tanzania (92) and Bolivia (93). Being above the middle in that table isn't setting the bar very high.

Germany, however, has a serious claim to being a 'pivotal country'. But that's as much because of how it's situated as the powerhouse of an otherwise fairly shaky European economy as it is with its 4th place ranking and 4.7% of world GDP. The world would most certainly notice if Germany disappeared overnight—and the results wouldn't be pretty. As far as the broader world economy goes, Australia's absence would be noticed, but not very much, and possibly not for long.

So I'm sorry Anthony, but I'm not buying it. We live in a very handy place ('location, location, location' as [Ben Reilly put it](#)) and we're an important—but not pivotal—producer of energy and other resources. But overall I think we're really pretty middling.

Not that there's anything wrong with that. We are what we are, and we're pretty good at playing the hand we were dealt (and have continued to shape by ourselves)—and that's actually what matters.

Australia's conceit

Andrew O'Neil

The term 'middle power' has traditionally received a bad wrap among Australian international affairs experts. The term has been lampooned as boosterism on the part of those who are insecure about Australia's world role, and is often linked to the much derided, almost certainly overused, phrase 'punching above our weight'. More thoughtful commentators have pinpointed what they see as the amorphous attributes of middle power status and dismissed it as little more than a Goldilocks formula for conducting foreign policy.

Despite this, Australian policymakers and senior public servants are consistently attracted to the middle power moniker. It's one of those rare occasions where those in government are more comfortable than academic types in employing woolly rhetoric to describe Australia's foreign policy capabilities and behaviour.

Anthony Bergin's thoughtful post raises the long standing question of whether it's appropriate for Australian governments to embrace a national role conception—to use [Kal Holsti's typology](#) (PDF)—that incorporates a middle power identity. Anthony is concerned that Australia is selling itself short by signing up for the MIKTA initiative with fellow travellers Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, and Turkey, and argues that it's more appropriate to think of Australia as a 'considerable' power and a 'significant' country.

The strong implication is that we shouldn't use the term middle power to describe who we are or how we operate as a country in the international system.

National role conceptions matter not just for the policymakers doing the conceiving, but also for how they want their country to be seen internationally. Alexander Downer may well have occasionally employed 'considerable' and 'significant' as prefixes to 'power', but this was largely a product differentiation device aimed at distinguishing the Howard government's foreign policy from that of its Labor predecessors. Downer used 'middle power' more frequently in his speeches on the world stage between 1996–2007. This was very much in the tradition of Tony Street, Andrew Peacock, and Garfield Barwick, who themselves strongly embedded the middle power descriptor in Coalition foreign policy.

Conceiving and framing Australia as a middle power has a high degree of bipartisanship, and general appeal domestically. Australians tend to be a bit conceited at times, but even our politicians don't pretend we're a major or great power. And we're certainly not a small power (think New Zealand), so where else is there to go?

Middle powers are those states—roughly around 20–25 of them—that possess the material capabilities to make a difference in global governance when acting in concert with like-minded states. An important point to emphasise is that middle powers exhibit distinctive traits, most notably a preference for multipolarity, rules and institutions, and peace-building, as well as ideational traits underpinning their claim to be good international citizens. As Bruce Gilley and I argue in [our book](#) on middle powers and China, this fundamentally means adhering to liberal-internationalist ideals. It's pretty tough to argue that Australia somehow lies outside this definition of middle powers.

In light of Tony Abbott's recent emphasis on mending election-damaged fences with the neighbours, it's hard to see what could be gained by eschewing the middle power national role conception—with all of its favourable connotations for diplomacy—in favour of a term (think 'considerable power') that risks reinforcing the view in some quarters that Australia really does have an inflated view of its own importance in the world.

Middle power magic

Andrew Carr

As an Australian scholar who writes on 'middle powers', I was worried the end of the Rudd government was going to usher in a barren few years. Yet with [Tony Abbott embracing the term](#) and now Anthony Bergin's [excellent post](#) I'm starting to think it's situation normal.

Only, as Anthony points out, it probably shouldn't be. The term middle power is somewhat discredited and no one should unthinkingly keep repeating it. Under the Rudd government it seemed like a spell whose magic had long gone. Middle power 'niche' or 'creative' diplomacy had bewitched scholars and policymakers in the 1980s and 1990s, but today seemed without spark or purpose. What exactly the term meant was never explained by Rudd; it was simply an invocation of the Evans/Keating model, but with all the appeal of a re-heated microwave meal. No wonder Bergin suggests replacing it. But I'd urge the Abbott government to stick with the term 'middle power' to describe Australia, for three reasons.

First, as Anthony has noted, other similar sized countries (especially non-Anglo-Saxon ones) are embracing the term. That means it has much more currency than it used to when the middle power club was basically just us and Canada. As we try to think afresh about Australia's influence, status and achieving our national interests, it'd be foolish to rashly abandon a potential common thread with other significant countries around the world.

Second, there are no strong alternatives. While Alexander Downer occasionally used the term 'pivotal power', this was driven more by partisanship than an effort to re-think what Australia's place in the world was. Pivotal power risks sounding arrogant to some audiences, and it implies a desire to be shifting and pushing regional and global affairs, which may not suit a conservative approach to foreign policy. It's also a term that suggests a focus on being the hero, being 'the decider', when what we really need is less dashing off to insert ourselves into the latest international crisis (as Rudd did) and more focus on deliberate steady progression towards long-term goals.

Finally, I think the term middle power has a significance we shouldn't lightly abandon. Scholars have found early versions of the middle power concept in use over 500 years ago. And the extensive literature on the topic, while often not shedding much light, at least suggests there's an enduring interest in those states which are neither strong enough to dictate terms, nor too weak to matter. What's needed is a better way to begin understanding the capacity of these states. In an article in the *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, I lay out an argument for a 'systemic' definition. I'll avoid repeating the argument, lest I put readers of this blog to sleep at their desks, but in short, I think being a middle power means two things. First you can credibly defend yourself, at the very least imposing significant costs on any great power that might consider attacking you. Second, middle powers can shape parts of the international system. They mightn't be able to overhaul the system, but they can refine it.

Currently Australia meets both of these tests, though sustaining this will require not only spending more on diplomacy and defence, but also re-thinking how we go about achieving influence. Instead of the band-aid of multilateralism a focus on minilateralism (such as the Proliferation Security Initiative and tri/quadrilateral exercises) might be a better way to go, and more suited to the new government's temperament. All governments want to find a new language from their predecessors, and certainly Rudd's tired and banal phrase 'creative middle power diplomacy' is in need of a refresh. But the Coalition should follow its conservative instinct for tradition and history and re-embrace the term middle power. It has served us well, and with an effort to think clearly about Australia's place in the world, can be re-fashioned into useful rhetorical service for many years to come.

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