

# The power politics of multi-lateral engagement

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## The power politics of multi-lateral engagement

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ANON, JAN 16 2012

**Super-powers can be selective in their multi-lateral engagements. That is their problem.  
Middle-ranking powers cannot, that it is theirs.**

Middle powers and super power face drastically different obstacles in the face of multilateralism. Under their allocated circumstances, middle powers must modify their multilateral approaches in order to appease the states both below and above them. On the other hand, super powers should find it essential to bind themselves to following their own policy if they are ever to gain international credibility. Due to the controversial and consequential nature of the term, this paper will first explain and also adapt the definition of 'multilateralism' according to John Ruggie. Afterwards the study will give meaning to the idea of 'Middle Power States,' with the ultimate intention of showing that a state must choose and create its own 'middlepowership' and that it cannot originally be tasked by others to perform as a middle power. Since it will be clarified that all 'Middle Power States' are all quite dissimilar in the nature of their foreign policies, the study will examine two examples of middle powers and the problems they face while in their respective positions in the international arena. Canada and its origin as a middle power state will first be reviewed. With its status as a 'classic' and industrialised middle power, this paper will aim to elaborate on the faults associated with Canada's history of attachment to multilateral institutions as well as its tendency to bend to the will of greater powers as a result of the foreign policy the country has incorporated. The study will then shift focus to post-Apartheid South Africa as a case that represents the issues facing 'emerging' middle powers. Accordingly, the issues of hegemonic influence and the inability to appease both regional and domestic interests will each be elucidated upon and analysed. Afterwards the United States and the problems of its own position as the modern day hegemonic power will then be evaluated. The study will proceed to focus on the country's history and policy of 'exemptionalism' and will also reveal the inconsistency of American foreign policy simply because of its hegemonic status. Lastly, the study will conclude by showing the repercussions the U.S. must face when it enters and/or coerces self-legitimising multilateral campaigns. The paper will ultimately aim to show the weaknesses facing the multilateral behaviour of each power.

### I. Defining Multilateralism and the Post-Cold War 'Middle Power State'

#### i. Multilateralism

In accordance with the view of political scientist Dr James Caporaso, 'definitions of multilateralism are not neutral; they have consequences.'<sup>[1]</sup> Thus, before the study proceeds to examine certain middle powers, superpowers, and the obstacles they face within the international arena, the concept of 'multilateralism' must be defined. Caporaso suggests that the common understanding of 'multilateralism' entails the cooperation and coordination between 'many actors from a minimum of three to a maximum of all.'<sup>[2]</sup> He points out that this definition fails to accurately address that not all cooperation is necessarily multilateral and power relations that maintain the ability to influence what may appear to be cooperative activities. Considering that this study aims to expose and evaluate the problems facing the interconnected intergovernmental and institutional actions of both middle power and superpower states, it is vital to consider power relations. In order to allow for a more open evaluation, this study will borrow John Ruggie's definition of multilateralism, which outlines the concept as 'an institutional form that coordinates relations among three or more states on the basis of generalised principles of conduct.'<sup>[3]</sup> Hence, this definition of multilateralism means to distinguish consensual interstate actions from those that are forced.

# The power politics of multi-lateral engagement

Written by anon

## ii. 'Middle Power States'

While former Foreign Minister Gareth Evans equates middle power behaviour with 'the foreign policy of boy scout good deeds,[4] there are in fact no widely accepted definitions of what constitutes a 'Middle Power.' Historically speaking, the concept of a 'Middle Power State' originated at the 1944 Dumbarton Oaks Conference where Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King called for the creation of a special position in the United Nations Charter for smaller, developed states.[5] Having the proposal rejected, Canada and other smaller Western states created their own middle power roles during the Cold War Era. These states defined themselves as middle powers through their staunch support of international institutions, their ability to mediate, and their limited relative power.

In the post-Cold War era, there has been a struggle to define these 'Middle Power States.' For example, The Middle Powers Initiative describes 'Middle Powers' as states that are 'politically and economically significant.' [6] The issue with this definition is determining what constitutes being 'significant.' Jan Van Der Westhuizen defines middle power multilateralism, or 'middlepowerism' as withholding the ability to stand a certain distance from direct involvement in major conflicts, having sufficient degree of autonomy in relation to major powers, a commitment to orderliness and security in interstate relations, and being able to facilitate orderly change in the world system.[7] These presumptuous and widespread generalisations of Middle Power States are refuted. The reality is that middle power states behave in all sorts of different ways and the roles that have often been associated with them are in fact performed by all sorts of countries.[8] In summary, it should be stressed that particular actions alone do not define a 'Middle Power State.'

In this particular study, a more flexible conceptualisation of 'Middle Power States' will be taken from Andrew Cooper, Richard Higgott, and Kim Nossal. The three make the assertion that 'countries have to act as middle powers.' [9] In other words, the essence of being a 'Middle Power State' is the *raison d'état* for the respective government. Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal proceed to give specific attributes of those who identify themselves to be 'Middle Power States' as more passive on issues such as security. Middle powers instead place emphasis on second agenda items, such as economic issues, and third agenda items, like environmental issues and human rights. Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal clarify that a state is not restricted in its foreign policy by being classified as a middle power.[10] However, once a state is self-categorised as a middle power, it is prone to certain behaviour arising from the international community. While middle powers can exert leadership on the world state in the Post-Cold War era, they are still nonetheless conceived as actors inferior to great powers.

## II. Canada

### i. Enduring Attachment to International Organisations

To clarify, middle powers do not act the same and are by no means a homogeneous group of states. Countries that choose to act as a middle power have different reasons for doing so. In the case of Canada, it was the lack of recognition of its war efforts by the United Kingdom and United States that led its government to find a leadership role in international institutions. Tom Keating states that 'these [multilateral] institutions provided a venue in which the government could distinguish its own place in the world, separate from Britain and the U.S., relevant to the major issues of world politics, and supportive of a progressive view of international order.' [11] Not to mention, participation in these institutions gave the Canadian people a new identity for themselves. Since the creation of Bretton Woods Institutions and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) at the beginning of the Cold War era, Canadian governments have looked upon multilateralism as a vital instrument for supporting global order that would provide for peace, security, and prosperity.[12] However in the end, the determination to play as effective a role as was possible for a middle power was based on a very hardheaded calculation of national interest.

The fact that Canada's middlepowerism has been engrained into its history and identity has not allowed the country to expand its international outreach. Canada's ability to utilise unilateral action for domestic as well as second and third agenda priorities of its own has been dramatically hindered by its involved multilateral institutional membership. It has been estimated that since the 1970s, the number of international treaties has tripled and the number of institutions have increased by two thirds since 1985. This alone poses strains for governments such as Canada that

## The power politics of multi-lateral engagement

Written by anon

seek to maintain internationalist credentials by both signing these agreements and encouraging their domestic and international implementation. Thus with memberships to the Commonwealth, Organisation of American States, la Francophonie, and other resource demanding organisations leaves the Canadian government overextended, especially in straining fiscal periods. In addition, as a result of its founder status and long-term commitment to security-based multilateral institutions, such as NATO, Canada holds an obligation to participate alongside fellow members. At the same time, Tom Keating emphasises that Canada's preference as a middle power is to see a consensus be drawn between all involved parties, despite this process being slower and the eventual result being less satisfying.[13] In the case of the Gulf War, Canada had its own desire to wait out the UN sanctions imposed on Iraq before intervening. However, the U.S. and NATO as its multilateral instrument desired a quick solution to the invasion to Kuwait and coerced its members into the war. This is also exemplified in Canada's own attempt to revive focus in the UN during the post-Cold War 1990s, yet sent its resources and military through NATO in Bosnia and Kosovo due to American coercion.[14] With the intention of finding equality within an international institution, it can be concluded that Canada and others have found these only to be instruments of the more powerful.

### ii. Yielding to Greater Powers

For the sake of its own belief in the UN and internationalism, the country had to force itself to yield to greater powers. Former Prime Minister Louis St Laurent reaffirmed this in stating, 'No society of nations can prosper if it does not have the support of those who hold the major share of the world's military and economic power.'[15] St Laurent's assertion was reflected in Canada's acceptance of the veto power for the five permanent members of the Security Council during the San Francisco Conference, the country's encouragement for Soviet participation within the UN during the Cold War, and the adaptation of a nuclear strategy within NATO, although it was an adhering party to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).[16] As a result, the Canadian government revealed its foreign policy's malleable capability when it came to appeasing senior powers.

In the post-Cold War era, the Canadian government has had to learn to effectively parallelise its agenda as a middle power with that of the American hegemonic order. The geopolitical relationship Canada has had to share with a superpower has severely limited its actions in the international community. For example, Canada's traditional neoliberal fiscal restraint as a middle power prevents major military expenditures and thus forces Canada to confront the United States from a seat in a multilateral institution on security issues. Jonathon Kay clarifies, 'It is precisely because [Canada's] military is so weak that we are such doctrinaire adherents to multilateralism.'[17] It is important to note, that while much of Canadian foreign policy has revolved around multilateral institutions, these institutions have never encompassed the entirety of Canada's foreign policy. In the case of Canada and many other middle powers, commitment to multilateral institutions runs the risk of being influenced by greater powers, which are also party to institutions. Combined with being overstretched and endowed with limited resources, Canada and other middle power states have to also adapt at times, whether it's in their best interest or not, to the will of the more powerful.

### III. South Africa

#### i. Succumbing to Hegemonic Pressure

At the end of apartheid in 1994, the South African government adapted multilateralism as the cornerstone of its foreign policy; and since then the country joined, re-joined, or acceded to around forty-five intergovernmental organisations and multilateral treaties. It committed itself heavily to the reform of the UN, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank.[18] Philip Nel, Ian Taylor, and Janis van der Westhuizen define South Africa as a reformative, or emerging middle power due to its position as a leader in a developing region. They further assert that those who come into this position will end serving the interests of greater powers.

'Because of its own societal interests, national goals, reformist ambitions, or desire to achieve credibility among its peers, the emerging middle power sometimes finds it necessary to oppose the hegemon. Sometimes the hegemon welcomes such independent behaviour, because it increases the legitimacy of the emerging middle power, which is a resource the hegemon can call on when it wants to use the middle power to implement...hegemonic system norms.

## The power politics of multi-lateral engagement

Written by anon

What limits the middle power, or in this case South Africa, from being on call to the hegemon is its status as a regionally dominant power in the developing world. Thus this status includes regional involvement and representation for smaller developing countries.’[19]

The 1995 “NPT Review and Extension Conference” provides an excellent example of the dilemmas facing a leading middle power from the developing world. The United States called for an indefinite extension of the NPT sans conditions, with the intent to bolster its own hegemony and augment the political and economic interests of the UK and France.[20] The former British and French colonies were strongly opposed to the latter and aired their concerns in Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which at the time have *de facto* leading representation to South Africa. Pretoria ended in supporting the nuclear powers position ‘without any preconditions or linkages to other nuclear measures.’[21] However, according to the Washington Post, the U.S. Ambassador delivered a demarche stating that any refusal to the proposal would ‘undermine “mutual interests” and affect Washington’s view of South Africa’s non-proliferation credentials.’[22] This resulted in enraging many countries in the developing world that accused South Africa of bending to will of the hegemonic order.

In another case when Nigerian ruler Sani Abacha executed nine environmental activists in 1995, South Africa called for the country’s immediate expulsion from the Commonwealth and ordered a boycott on Nigerian oil.[23] When it retracted its high commissioner from Nigeria before any other state, South Africa was ridiculed for its solidarity with the West instead of with African neighbours. As shown in these examples, middle powers such as South Africa in the developing world are convenient for Western powers, since they are usually responsible and to a point, ‘agents of conscience.’ In the end, the major issue with this is revealed through the extreme criticism South Africa received by its regional and institutional constituencies for following hegemonic orders.

### ii. Attempting to Balance Regional and Self-Interests

South Africa’s position as a regional power on the African continent was given its lustre through the investment of resources by not only industrialised states, but also by its developing regional neighbour-states. As previously stated, South Africa’s status as an emerging middle power and leader on the African continent comes with numerous high expectations from across the spectrum. The issue at hand is whether South Africa as an emerging middle power can be a regional leader while promoting its own self interests. Mzukisi Qobo contends that South Africa has had to be remarkably sensitive to charges that its policies are hegemonic or have designs on regional leadership, even if it is *de facto*. [24]

In a realist view, Fred Ahwireng-Obeng and Pat McGowen contend that South Africa benefits very little through multilateralism on the regional level given its material preponderance.[25] South Africa nonetheless sees investment into Southern Africa as being vital to the area’s sustainability, as evidenced in its assertions in the Reconstruction and Development Programme of 1994. ‘In the long run, sustainable development in South Africa requires sustainable reconstruction and the development in Southern Africa as a whole.’[26] As a middle power that can represent interests for the region on the international stage, the seemingly benevolent actions of South Africa can be easily mistaken for hegemonic influence in the region. Ian Taylor notes that South Africa has a wide range investments ranging from mining in Zambia and the DR Congo, breweries in Zambia and Zimbabwe, and rail infrastructural developments.[27] These actions to express clear linkages between a state’s interests in enhancing political relations and stability on the one hand and the logic of specific economic interests in society on the other.

The predicament of demonstrating loyalty to regional neighbours without coming off as imperialistic is present on all levels of multilateralism. As stated earlier in this study, the reaction of South Africa to the Nigerian executions in 1995 was seen as a betrayal to African solidarity within the Commonwealth. President Nelson Mandela advanced South Africa’s involvement in international human rights treaties and while the situation was a clear violation of human rights, African countries within the Commonwealth accused South Africa of appealing to the ‘White Man’s Commonwealth.’[28] This stands a large predicament that faces emerging middle powers, which act as leaders in developing regions. Whether it is Brazil, India, or South Africa, middle power diplomacy results frequently in a limited and bounded by an intricate balancing act.[29] Hence it is clear that when emerging middle powers must choose between the interests of those whose interests they represent as regional leaders and those that wield more

# The power politics of multi-lateral engagement

Written by anon

influence, the means of compromise will result in the end of sacrificing self-interests.

## IV. America's Issues as a Superpower

### i. Exemptionalism and Lack of Credibility

From the beginning of the post-World War II era and the U.S.-led creation of Bretton Woods Institutions, such as the UN, America has sought to insulate itself from 'the domestic blowback of some of the multilateral instruments it created, especially in the area of human rights and on the question of international jurisdiction.'<sup>[30]</sup> John Ruggie defines this as American 'exemptionalism.' The U.S. legislative branch has customarily promoted the concept exemptionalism and has used it as measure to protect the sovereignty of its Constitution.<sup>[31]</sup> Advocates during the 1950s proposed a series of legislative amendments, also known as the Bricker Amendment, asserting that the UN human rights conventions then being negotiated would violate states rights, undermine the separation of powers and diminish the basic rights of Americans by lowering them to international standards.<sup>[32]</sup> Moreover, it was claimed, international treaties would infringe on domestic jurisdiction, subject citizens to trials abroad and promote world government. The use of exemptionalism still continues to this day. As of June 2003 the International Labour Organisation had concluded 7,147 legal conventions on labour practices and concluded that 1,205 of these conventions should be deemed as 'fundamental.' The U.S. Senate had ratified a mere 14, of which just two fell into the 'fundamental' category.<sup>[33]</sup> In short, the Senate can hardly be accused of inundating the domestic legal system with large numbers of unconditionally ratified international treaty instruments.

The U.S. is still able to apply exemptionalism even when it has played a crucial role in the creation of multilateral institutions such as the Covenant of the League of Nations, the Kellogg-Briand Pact, the United Nations Charter, Non-Proliferation Treaty, and the Human Rights Covenants. As the histories of the League Covenant, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and Havana Charter on the International Trade Organisation suggest, the United States has recoiled from adhering to the far-reaching obligations of those multilateral treaties.<sup>[34]</sup> However, the continued use of exemptionalism, especially within popular multilateral engagements, can be detrimental to a country's stance credibility.

Credibility is the critical ingredient in soft power diplomacy and negotiations. The significance behind credibility arises from the writings of Joseph Nye and Robert Keohane on complex interdependence and the fragility of diplomacy. States can improve their position if they pursue policies that are attractive to others.<sup>[35]</sup> Nye asserts that 'credibility is the crucial resource, and asymmetrical credibility is a key source of power.' However it does not arise solely from possession of militaristic, or hard power resources. Using international law selectively in the pursuit of state goals or advocating policies or actions abroad that are ignored domestically can detract from the credibility a state enjoys. For example, David Malone goes onto suggest that since this tradition of exemptionalism is practiced across a range of issues, the U.S. as a superpower severely weakens its role as world leader. Treaties that the U.S. does choose to ratify, such as the Genocide Convention and the Convention Against Torture, it does so with enough reservations in order to make the treaty limiting and negating domestic legal obligations.<sup>[36]</sup> As seen in its inaction during the Rwandan Genocide or its condoning tone towards the waterboarding torture technique, international treaties are not considered binding to the U.S. As a result, when it came to gathering supportive countries for the 1996 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, Canadian Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy stated afterwards, 'We desired U.S. participation, but not at the price of watering down the draft convention.'<sup>[37]</sup> Hence, encouraging exemptionalism as a policy is ultimately weakening to a superpower's authority and further gives the country an unattractive reputation as a multilateral partner.

### ii. Inconsistency with Policy

The choice of a superpower to participate in multilateralism may be a one-shot response to special circumstances with no likelihood of setting a precedent, or it may represent an attempt to create a new rule. It may occur on an issue that is deeply institutionalised or one where relatively few strong institutions exist. In regards to the case of the U.S., the superpower has a history of leading the international community to believe a precedent will be set on a certain issue when it is certainly not the case. The U.S. and its role in the International Campaign to Ban Landmines displays

## The power politics of multi-lateral engagement

Written by anon

a perfect example where a superpower does not keep its consistency with its own policy towards a multilateral issue. In 1992, The U.S. unilaterally banned the export of its anti-personnel landmines and formalised the ban when Congress passed the moratorium as public law. In 1994, President Bill Clinton became the first world leader to address the issue and end of landmines in front of the United Nations. When nations and Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) convened in Ottawa in 1997, the U.S. and Cuba were the only two countries in the western hemisphere not to sign the Ban of Anti-Personnel Landmines Convention.[38] The U.S., as a proclaimed global leader, acts irresponsibly when a radical about-face is taken on an extremely prevalent human rights issue.

The responsibility to give clout and legitimacy to multilateral organisations also falls onto the shoulders of the U.S. as a global leader. After September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, UN Resolution 1368 was passed, which recognised America's right to self-defence and placed the mission in the hands of NATO. The event fundamentally displayed America's ability to obtain a UN Resolution for unilateral action. UN Observer Mats Berdal, noted that the occupying powers realised the requirement for UN involvement and found the institution's backing helped to overcome the difficulties created by the occupation's lack of legitimacy and public support.[39] Thus this scenario where a superpower utilises an institution for legitimacy also proves to be irresponsible of a global leader. As Lisa Martin argues:

'Reputations can be squandered quickly, and the reputation for multilateralism surely has been. Turning to multilateral organisations only under duress and when it appears convenient demonstrates a lack of commitment, even explicit rejection, of the principles of multilateralism. This in turn leads other states to expect the United States to renege on agreements or operate outside the constraints of multilateral organisations when it is convenient to do so.'[40]

Coupled with the invasion of Iraq, the overwhelmingly unilateral decision, rather than action, of entering into Afghanistan raised the important question; will non-immanent threats warrant unilateral action? With the ability to circumvent and manipulate the international system in which it operates, a superpower delegitimises and further confuses the system when multilateral instruments are abused and *ad hoc* precedents are set.[41]

### iii. The Losing Battle Against Majority

In the realm of multilateralism, a superpower will be the most proactive defender of the international status quo. However, a superpower's inability to bind its involvement from unpopular engagements, whether or not they do defend the status quo, will result in power balancing from the international community. 'The more that a powerful state is capable of dominating or abandoning weaker states, the more the weaker states will care about constraints on the leading state's policy autonomy.'[42] In the case of the Iraq War instigated under George W. Bush, American and British forces invaded the country on claims that the country held Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs). Despite the absence of a Security Council Resolution and presence of International Atomic Energy Agency reports showing that Iraq was cooperating with the inspections regime, the U.S. continued on a ragingly unpopular engagement with a coalition of smaller countries.[43]

Much of the issue ostensibly had hinged on whether or not the UN Security Council would put its multilateral imprimatur on a U.S.-led invasion. As John Ruggie claims, 'one state can amass force, but only others can endow its deployment with legitimacy.'[44] Three of the permanent members of the Security Council opposed the draft resolution that called for multilateral action due 'their different interests, different views of war, different assessments of any threat posed by Iraq, and their stated concern about U.S. dominance.'[45] In addition, Germany's early and adamant opposition, especially as a loyal American ally, was crucial in propelling other states' resistance to U.S. policy. The key was that Germany's Gerhard Schroeder made it clear he would work against an invasion whether the Security Council approved it or not. After all, very few democratically elected leaders will risk siding with the United States when two-thirds of more voters in their countries oppose U.S. policy.[46] In the end, unilateral actions in and of themselves are no substitute for a viable multilateral action. Ultimately, this unpopular engagement proved that while a superpower is formidable enough to go to war and to succeed in major combat operations that adhere to the status quo, unilateralism is not strong enough to compel others states to join missions that blatantly lack legitimacy by international standards.

# The power politics of multi-lateral engagement

Written by anon

## Conclusion

The multilateral challenges facing both Canada and South Africa are symbolic and representative in their very nature. While this paper has not examined all self-proclaimed 'Middle Power States,' it has found the weaknesses facing two of the most engaged states in the international system. The history of Canada and its identity based on the idea of acting as a middle power has clearly hindered its ability to stray from the multilateral institutions that it has devoted to itself; thus showing that it must work within its self-built system in order to make an attempt at countering larger and hegemonic powers. On the other hand, South Africa's status as a regional leader in the developing world and as an emerging middle power is clearly testing its ability to find middle ground between hegemonic, regional, and domestic pressure. With these two cases in mind, it can be concluded that the self-designating middle power position hinders a state's ability to operate unilaterally at its own will. Looking at the U.S. as the modern day superpower has clearly shown the importance of credibility, consistency, and legitimacy when it comes to multilateral behaviour. While the U.S. holds the ability to coerce and manipulate states, especially within institutions it helped design, the inability to restrain itself from persistent unilateral action ultimately damages the country's reputation and ability to be trusted. As the leading protector of the status quo in the international system, it is clear that the leading super power of the 21<sup>st</sup> century should learn to better cooperate with the aforementioned middle powers et al, or it will otherwise face retaliation in the form of disobedience and a weakened hegemonic order.

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# The power politics of multi-lateral engagement

Written by anon

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## The power politics of multi-lateral engagement

Written by anon

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

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[10] Andrew Cooper, Richard Higgott, Kim Nossal, *Relocating Middle Powers*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press 1993)

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