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2021

Teo, S. (2021). Toward a differentiation-based framework for middle power behavior. International Theory. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1752971920000688>

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/153496>

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971920000688>

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TOWARDS A DIFFERENTIATION-BASED FRAMEWORK FOR MIDDLE POWER BEHAVIOR

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Published online in *International Theory* on 13 January 2021

[\(Link to published version\)](#)

Abstract

Differentiation is a foundational premise in the study of middle powers, as evident in the way that the relevant literature distinguishes these states from the great powers and smaller states. Despite the underlying assumption of differentiation, the middle power literature has rarely engaged theoretically with the concept. This paper seeks to make more explicit this basis of differentiation in the study of middle powers, by advancing a new framework for middle power behavior that draws on differentiation theory. The framework makes the case that it is the differentiated structure in international politics – a departure from the dominant neorealist understanding of structure – that enables the behavior of middle powers. The effects of this differentiated structure are activated by the relative, relational, and social power politics that middle powers engage in, in a particular time and place. Through this process, middle powers are able to leverage their ‘middlepowerness’ in international politics by weakening stratification particularly where the great powers are concerned, and strengthening functional differentiation through taking on key and distinctive roles. By putting differentiation at the core of a framework for middle power behavior, the paper strives to make a constructive contribution to the theorizing of middle powers.

Keywords: differentiation; middle powers; multilateralism; power politics; structure

Introduction

Debates about middle powers have often revolved around the distinctiveness and usefulness of such a category. For neorealists in particular, the middle power concept is of little value. The

world's states are divided into great powers and the rest, and it is the former's actions that determine the trajectory of international politics.¹ For others, institutional liberalism and constructivism offer a much broader scope for middle power action and initiative in global affairs.² These latter schools of thought have, unsurprisingly, formed the premise of many works on middle power theory. A related question to these debates concerns the uniqueness of middle power behavior: specifically, how are middle powers able to set themselves apart from the great powers and smaller states through their behavior? Popular responses to this question have generally revolved around the argument that middle powers, with their 'middling' resources or identity, are driven towards multilateralism, niche diplomacy and soft power in their foreign policies. In contrast, great powers are less inclined to such behavioral strategies due to their ability for unilateralism or coercive strength, while smaller states are unlikely to extract a similar level of returns as middle powers through these strategies given their lack of influence over other stakeholders. This paper contributes to this body of work by advancing a new framework for middle power behavior that emphasizes the role of structural differentiation. It is not just about empirical differences in material capabilities or identity, but also equally importantly, about how overall dynamics in the social structure of international politics form the basis for middle power behavior. It is this differentiated structure that creates the context for middle powers to adopt certain behavioral strategies.

Differentiation is a core idea in the study of middle powers. The three most common approaches to defining middle powers – position, identity and behavior – assume that such states have, respectively, a different level of material capabilities, a different type of identity or different foreign policy strategies, as compared to other categories of states. This differentiation of middle powers, however, has mostly been implied or taken for granted in the extant literature, without detailed examination of what it entails. A theoretical perspective to middle power differentiation is important because it addresses one of the key aspects that middle power theory is premised on, which is, what makes these states different and what such difference means in the broader theorizing about middle powers. My framework thus seeks to make more explicit this basis of differentiation, by using differentiation theory as a heuristic to explain middle power behavior.³ It draws on the analyses of scholars including Mathias Albert, Barry Buzan and Michael Zürn, as well as Jack Donnelly, who make the case that social

¹ Waltz 1979, 73.

² See, for example, Cooper et al. 1993; Shin 2016.

³ I am grateful to anonymous reviewers that suggested this approach.

structure comprises three primary forms of differentiation, namely, segmentation (or unit differentiation), stratification (or vertical stratification), and functional differentiation.⁴ While these terms may not be commonly seen in the International Relations (IR) literature, the concepts behind them are not unfamiliar to the field. Segmentation denotes the idea of individual states as actors in the international system; stratification suggests some form of hierarchy among the actors; and, functional differentiation refers to the separation of different sectors within the international system (for instance, global economic governance or international law) as well as the notion that certain countries could take on specific roles in international affairs.⁵ As the reference system for this framework is the system of states, the segmentation of sovereign units is regarded to remain as largely unchanged. Instead, the paper's framework focuses more on explaining middle power behavior through the dynamics of stratification and functional differentiation.

The value of differentiation for middle power theory lies in its ability to offer an analytical lens that situates the typically acknowledged strands of middle power behavior within a theoretically cohesive account. In current theories of middle power behavior, structure is often regarded as a constraint that middle powers have to overcome in order to exercise their agency. Reframing social structure through the lens of differentiation, however, opens up the prospect that middle powers are at the same time able to leverage their structural positions to capitalize on their 'middlepowerness' in international politics. In this regard, the framework treats differentiation as being constitutive of the international political structure. All social activity presupposes the existence of social structure, and this social structure is in turn (re)produced and transformed by social activity.⁶ Ideas about 'great', 'middle' and 'small' powers in themselves suggest the presence of pre-existing concepts and relations that, in the first place, enables discussion of these differentiated categorizations. While developments at the level of structure are unobservable, it is possible to study the visible demonstrations of middle power behavior that would help to trace the processes at the structural level.⁷ The broad expectation of the framework here is that middle powers would seek to weaken stratification where the great powers are concerned, and strengthen functional differentiation by taking on

⁴ Albert et al. 2013; Buzan and Albert 2010; Donnelly 2009; Donnelly 2013.

⁵ Albert et al. 2013, 1–2, 6; Buzan and Albert 2010, 318; Donnelly 2009, 55–75; Donnelly 2013, 99.

⁶ Sayer 2010, 93–6; Wight 2006, 114–15.

⁷ Danermark et al. 2002, 88.

key roles in international politics. By doing so, these states aim to ensure that they remain distinctively relevant in global affairs.

These possibilities for middle power behavior are enabled by the contingencies of the differentiated structure, but the specific behavioral outcomes would be activated through the process of power politics that middle powers engage in, in a particular time and place. To a large extent, analyses about middle power behavior in international affairs are unavoidably an examination of power politics, that is, how middle powers are able to achieve their interests vis-à-vis other states. Power is, moreover, the chief variable in the international political sector.⁸ The inclusion of power politics into the framework would thus strengthen its utility in explaining middle power behavior in international politics. Here, I follow the classical realist treatment that conceptualizes power politics as social, relative and relational. The social dimension of power means ascribing state power to social institutions; relative power refers to the notion that power is meaningful only when compared against another actor; and, relational power reflects the idea that the type of power required depends on the particular situation.⁹ Consequently, while the differentiated structure generates the potential for middle power behavior, its effects would only be actualized according to how middle powers navigate the social, relative and relational power politics in a particular situation.

The contribution of this paper is primarily theoretical. It incorporates middle power theory with elements of differentiation – a concept that, although implied in many analyses of middle powers, has thus far escaped the theoretical spotlight in the literature. Reframing middle power behavior through the analytical lens of differentiation helps to facilitate an understanding not simply of what middle powers could or could not do in international politics, but also of the underlying processes that make those behavioral strategies and outcomes possible. The contents of the behavioral strategies anticipated by the framework here – weakening stratification and strengthening functional differentiation – are certainly not new to middle power theory. What the framework does, nevertheless, is to draw together these various features of middle power behavior under the overarching premise of differentiation, which is a foundational assumption in the study of middle powers. The paper thus aims to make a small but useful contribution to the study of middle powers, by providing a theoretical perspective on middle power differentiation.

⁸ Albert et al. 2013, 10; Morgenthau 2006, 29.

⁹ Barkin 2010, 18–20.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section reviews the extant literature on middle powers and their behavior, and highlights the gap arising from the characterization of the relationship between middle power behavior and structure. This is followed in the third section by a discussion of differentiation theory as it relates to the international political structure. I outline the three main forms of differentiation – segmentation, stratification, and functional differentiation – and illustrate how they constitute the social structure of international politics. The fourth section examines the process by which the possibilities for middle power behavior generated by the differentiated structure could be actualized through social, relative and relational power politics. As an example, I apply the framework to briefly explain Australia’s behavior in the establishment of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in the late 1980s. Finally, in the conclusion, I reiterate the overall argument and address potential counter-arguments.

The study of middle powers and their behavior

There is no consensus within IR on what a middle power is, although the literature suggests three primary ways – position, identity and behavior – to approach the concept. The position approach involves ranking states by indicators of material capabilities, and then extracting a category of states that qualify as ‘middle’ powers. The identity approach typically defines as middle powers those countries that see themselves and are regarded by others as such. The behavior approach argues that only countries which adopt a certain type of foreign policy or diplomatic style could be called middle powers. These approaches are not mutually exclusive; rather, as we will see below, their respective elements are interlinked. While definitional weaknesses remain the biggest challenge for middle power theory building, the strengths of each approach are nevertheless useful in helping to collectively ascertain a group of countries that could be considered as middle powers. Consequently, the working definition of a middle power in this paper refers to a state that quantitatively ranks below the great and rising powers, but above a majority of the rest of the states; identifies and is regarded by others as a middle power; and, employs behavioral strategies such as investing in multilateralism and relying on persuasive or soft power.

This section will first briefly discuss the position and identity approaches, before delving into the behavior approach – the key focus of this paper – in more detail.

Middle powers by position and identity

The position approach focuses on ranking countries by their material capabilities, including gross domestic product, military expenditure, population, and/or territorial size. Based on these rankings, a tier of countries – usually those coming in just below the great and rising powers – are identified to be middle powers. The possession of material capabilities in the measurement of power is important; without the requisite resources, it would be challenging for a country to back up its claims to middle power standing. In general, those using this approach could be divided into two groups. The first group stresses the utility of economic size as the primary defining characteristic of power,¹⁰ while the second group argues that composite indices spanning the economic, military, and/or social sectors would offer a more comprehensive determination of which states are middle powers.¹¹ Following the ranking of states based on selected indicators, parameters are placed to distinguish middle powers from the other categories of countries. Typically, those countries ‘with a ranking roughly in the tenth to thirtieth range across a range of capability indicators’ at the global level are considered to be middle powers.¹² Nevertheless, the lack of standardized parameters and indicators, as well as the fact that this approach does not incorporate the ideational and social dimensions of power, reinforces the need to supplement it with other approaches that facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of middle powers.

The identity approach involves examining if a country has described itself as a middle power, and if others have acknowledged and recognized this identity. This approach is closely related to the concept of status, defined as ‘collective beliefs about a given state’s ranking on valued attributes’ such as economic size, military capabilities and diplomatic clout.¹³ Many works on middle powers have taken identity and status as a starting point, regardless of whether they explicitly state so.¹⁴ A common theme in this literature is that there is a distinct difference between the identities and status of great powers, middle powers, and small states, even if it is not always clear what this difference is. This point is often implicit, such as when David Scott points out that former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s ‘sense of Middle Power opportunities was precisely because Australia was not a Great Power’, or when Paul Gecelovsky highlights the case of post-World War II Canada seeking a position that was

¹⁰ See, for example, Holbraad 1984, 78–9; Wood 1987, 5.

¹¹ See, for example, Gilley and O’Neil 2014, 5–6; Ping 2005, 66–70.

¹² Gilley and O’Neil 2014, 5.

¹³ Larson et al. 2014, 7.

¹⁴ See, for example, Easley 2012; Karim 2018.

‘between the “riffraff” and the great powers’.¹⁵ Consequently, socially constructed ‘hierarchies of status’ and status markers would help to facilitate the recognition of middle powers as such.¹⁶

However, unlike great and smaller powers in which their ‘greatness’ or ‘smallness’ is often assumed to be a given, middle powers are argued to suffer from ‘status anxieties’ because ‘they have a lot to lose’ if their status is not recognized by others.¹⁷ Karim adds, moreover, that in contrast to the great powers, ‘middle-power status does not come with certain special rights and duties’; this is why self-identification as middle powers are important for such states.¹⁸ It has also been pointed out that while policymakers may utilize the middle power concept to rationalize their countries’ foreign policy strategies, elements of the concept are not necessarily an objective assessment of those strategies.¹⁹ One way to plug this gap in the literature would be, as some scholars have done, to link status to roles.²⁰ It is through the enactment and social recognition of particular roles that states come to be regarded as being of middle power status. To examine what these roles are, let us now turn to the behavior approach towards middle powers, which is also the analytical focus of my framework.

Middle power behavior

Conventional theories about middle power behavior postulate that, given their limited material capabilities and diplomatic influence vis-à-vis the great powers, middle powers rely heavily on multilateral institutions, niche diplomacy, and soft power tactics to preserve their interests in global agendas. Described as ‘middlepowermanship’, the assumption is that middle power behavior is unique and distinct from the behavior of other types of states. While it is debatable if such strategies are applicable only to middle powers, such arguments have formed the bulk of theory-building attempts in the field as scholars focus on explaining the foreign policy behavior of these states. In many of these theories, structure is inherently regarded as something to be overcome by middle power behavior. Such a view, however, limits the understanding of the relationship between middle powers and the structural context they operate in. Before

¹⁵ Gecelovsky 2009, 83; Scott 2013, 114.

¹⁶ Larson et al. 2014, 17.

¹⁷ Patience 2014, 211.

¹⁸ Karim 2018, 350.

¹⁹ Manicom and Reeves 2014, 33.

²⁰ Karim 2018; Thies and Sari 2018.

arriving at the gap in the literature that this paper seeks to address, I will first review the key points in existing theories on middle power behavior.

Following Ronald M. Behringer, ‘middlepowermanship’ consists of three core elements that are interrelated.²¹ First, middle powers depend greatly on multilateral processes to shape outcomes favorable to themselves.²² This preference is ‘a function of the size and capacity of these states’, as they are unable to individually influence global negotiations.²³ As such, they rely on building ‘like-minded’ coalitions to include their concerns on global agendas and ensure that their interests are protected. The middle power dependence on multilateral platforms is due to the perception that these platforms facilitate the institutionalization of rules and norms that apply to all their participants, regardless of economic size or military capability.²⁴ Such platforms are also expected to help restrain great powers from completely imposing their preferences on weaker countries.²⁵ Compared to other states, middle powers are regarded as being better suited for multilateralism. In a study on the unilateralism of the USA at the United Nations (UN) tellingly titled ‘Why Great Powers Do Not Make Great Multilateralists’, for example, Steven Holloway concludes that ‘[g]reat powers relied on their own power advantage; minor powers relied on law and international organization’.²⁶ For middle powers, multilateral platforms thus help to ‘to lessen their power disadvantage by binding the great powers to legal, alliance, and other multilateral institutions’.²⁷ On the other side of the coin, smaller states are considered unlikely to be able to play a significant role in global affairs, regardless of whether they are acting alone or in a small group.²⁸

Second, middle powers deploy soft power tactics to influence the actions of other stakeholders. These include diplomatic or persuasive skills, a credible reputation, as well as technical and intellectual capabilities.²⁹ As Andrew F. Cooper, Richard A. Higgott and Kim Richard Nossal found in their study of middle powers, Australia and Canada possess ‘technical and entrepreneurial capacities ... to provide complementary or alternative initiative-oriented

²¹ Behringer 2013, 14–20; see also Cox 1989.

²² Behringer 2013, 16; Cooper et al. 1993, 19.

²³ Nossal and Stubbs 1997, 151.

²⁴ Evans and Grant 1995, 345–6; Wilkins 2019, 52–3.

²⁵ Finnemore 2005, 196.

²⁶ Holloway 2000, 364.

²⁷ Holloway 2000, 364.

²⁸ Keohane 1969, 296.

²⁹ Behringer 2013, 18; Ravenhill 1998, 311–13.

sources of leadership and enhanced coalition-building in issue-specific contexts'.³⁰ Such capabilities enable middle powers to be a 'catalyst' of initiatives, a 'facilitator' of agendas, and/or a 'manager' of institutions.³¹ 'Great powers clearly have these capacities, too – often in significantly greater quantities', write Mark Beeson and Higgott, but they may be less willing to use them.³² The premise here is that because middle powers lack the coercive or hard power assets of the great powers, they have to rely more on soft power capabilities to protect their interests and maintain their relevance in global affairs. At the same time, middle powers are arguably more equipped and better placed than the smaller powers to leverage their soft power strategies. Bruce Gilley and Andrew O'Neil observe, for instance, that while both middle powers and smaller states share the vision of building a rules-based order, such efforts are 'not one that smaller states can generally lead' and leadership here is more likely to be assumed by middle powers.³³

The third element of middlepowermanship is niche diplomacy. Martin Wight eloquently argues that '[g]reat powers are powers with general interests, i.e. whose interests are as wide as the states-system itself', while non-great powers are those powers that have 'limited interests'.³⁴ Due to their limited resources, middle powers are only capable of 'exercising effective leadership' in specific areas of international affairs.³⁵ Cooper focuses on the idea of issue-specificity in an edited volume on niche diplomacy, explaining that 'standing with respect to specific forums of decision-making rested on specialized interests and task-related experience' of the middle power.³⁶ This means that a middle power would need to limit its international involvement to issues in which it could presumably wield the most influence, depending on the resources it has. Great powers do not need to specialize, while smaller powers are 'thought to lack the wherewithal to exert global influence even through specializing'.³⁷ To a large extent, the overall claim that sets middle power behavior apart from the behavior of others thus rests on assumptions that smaller powers do not possess the necessary resources, diplomatic clout and/or political willingness to take on roles that middle powers typically

³⁰ Cooper et al. 1993, 7.

³¹ Cooper et al. 1993, 24–5.

³² Beeson and Higgott 2014, 224.

³³ Gilley and O'Neil 2014, 12.

³⁴ Wight 1995, 50.

³⁵ Behringer 2013, 14; see also Cooper 1997, 6.

³⁶ Cooper 1997, 4.

³⁷ Cooper 2011, 321.

assume, while great powers could dismiss these strategies because their coercive strength allows them to unilaterally impose their preferences on others. Consequently, middle powers are acknowledged as adopting a particular type of foreign policy statecraft – middlepowermanship – that distinguishes them from the great powers and smaller countries.

Nevertheless, some scholars have questioned if such behavioral strategies are truly distinct to middle powers. For instance, Beeson and Higgott make the claim that there is ‘nothing inevitable about putative middle powers coming together in like-minded coalitions’, while Adam Chapnick highlights the blurring of lines between middle and smaller powers based on their use of niche diplomacy.³⁸ Similarly, Laura Neack argues that multilateralism has been ‘ubiquitous’ in the foreign policy of all states since the end of World War II, with the exception of North Korea.³⁹ She adds that coalition building is ‘not the exclusive domain of middle powers but is an oft-used method of politicking in an international order based on multilateralism’.⁴⁰ To some extent, these arguments are spot on. Even for North Korea, one could make the case that it has, at the very least, participated regularly in the annual Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum – a platform for security dialog in the Asia Pacific that involves 27 participants. Others have pointed out that the proclivity of so-called middle powers towards multilateralism and coalition building fluctuates according to domestic political changes.⁴¹ From this perspective, there is thus little that is unique or persistent about the participation of middle powers in multilateralism, or their use of soft power tactics and niche diplomacy.

Such a line of reasoning, taken to its extreme, casts doubts on the existence of ‘middle powers’ as defined by the behavior approach and calls attention to a gap in the current theorizing of middle power behavior. Specifically, how do the commonly acknowledged middle power behavioral traits reinforce the concept of ‘middle powers’? I suggest that as a starting point to answer this question, there is a need to examine the way that the social structure of the international system is conceptualized, and the way that this social structure makes the behavior of ‘middle powers’ possible. Examining the role that social structure plays in generating middle power behavior is important because structure provides the context for action, which in turn (re)produces or transforms the structure. Currently, however, the literature

³⁸ Beeson and Higgott 2014, 230; Chapnick 1999, 74–5.

³⁹ Neack 2017.

⁴⁰ Neack 2017.

⁴¹ Carr 2014, 74; Ravenhill 1998, 316.

on middle power behavior is premised on an understanding of structure that limits the understanding of the mechanisms which generate middle power behavior.

The inclination of middle powers towards multilateralism, niche diplomacy and soft power techniques is generally read as a means for these states to overcome structural (or material) constraints. Beeson and Higgott underscore the basis of middle power theory as ‘the ability to use non-material assets’; Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal juxtapose the ‘non-structural forms of power and influence’ that middle powers leverage against the ‘structural leadership’ of the USA; and, Gilley and O’Neil distinguish middle power theory from ‘more structurally determinative theories of great powers and secondary states’.⁴² In these statements, structure refers to the influential neorealist formulation, which overwhelmingly prioritizes material capabilities and consequently has little regard for the agency of non-great powers in the international system – ‘the very antithesis of middle power thinking’.⁴³ Neorealism’s founding father, Kenneth Waltz, advocates for a three-part conceptualization of the international structure based on the (anarchical) ordering principle, functional (un)differentiation, and distribution of capabilities across the state units.⁴⁴ Given that all states are ‘like units’ in terms of their functions, any difference among them is thus purely a difference of material capability.⁴⁵ Structural change occurs when the distribution of capabilities among the great powers changes, and the polarity of the system evolves. Consequently, a theory of international politics has to be necessarily based on the great powers – ‘the states that make the most difference’ as measured by the distribution of capabilities.⁴⁶

However, as Donnelly explains, structure is not represented solely by its most powerful constituents:

The class structure of a society is not defined by its ruling class. An army’s structure is not a matter of the number of generals and their relations to one another. We cannot discern the structure of a slave system by attending solely to the large slave-owners. In addition to the privileged we must also consider the deprived (and those in between). Ranking, being relative, cannot be understood by looking only at those at the top of a hierarchy. ... That some, many,

⁴² Beeson and Higgott 2014, 223; Cooper et al. 1993, 23; Gilley and O’Neil 2014, 18; see also de Pantz 2019, 77–8.

⁴³ Beeson and Higgott 2014, 218.

⁴⁴ Waltz 1979, 88–99.

⁴⁵ Waltz 1979, 96–7.

⁴⁶ Waltz 1979, 73.

or most have relatively few capabilities is essential to any adequate understanding of the distribution of capabilities. Ignoring the weak is a radically inappropriate way to understand relations of coordination and superordination, and thus the structure (arrangement of the parts) of international systems.⁴⁷

While the environment within which middle powers operate may be shaped by the number of great powers in the system and their relations, the concept of structure – defined as the arrangement of the parts of a system – would also need to take into account the presence and actions of the non-great powers.⁴⁸ For such a task, the neorealist understanding of structure is thus inadequate as it privileges great powers at the expense of other actors, and overemphasizes material capabilities at the expense of the ideational/social dimensions. In studying middle power behavior, however, it is necessary to take into account both the material and ideational/social dimensions in order to fully reflect the intricacies built into this level of power.⁴⁹ Even though the capabilities of middle powers lag behind those of the great powers, they still tend to be materially better equipped than most of the other states in the international system. The ideational and social aspects are equally important because (intersubjective) ideas and beliefs about the middle power's interests and behavior would determine how its actions are received by others. A multidimensional account of social structure would thus help to better explain the opportunities for middle power behavior and how these impact back on the structure of international politics.

Interestingly, there are a number of inconsistencies in Waltz's formulation that lead to this alternative account of structure.⁵⁰ For one, while Waltz frames (international) anarchy and (domestic) hierarchy as oppositions, his argument that states are differentiated by capability suggests that some form of hierarchy is present in the international system. Indeed, critics of Waltz's formulation of structure have also highlighted that the presence of hierarchy and anarchy are not mutually exclusive.⁵¹ Moreover, Waltz acknowledges that great powers shoulder 'special responsibilities' in international politics.⁵² Although these 'special

⁴⁷ Donnelly 2009, 56.

⁴⁸ Waltz 1979, 81; see also Holbraad 1984, 5.

⁴⁹ See, for example, Holbraad 1984, 121, 126; Manicom and Reeves 2014, 33; Struye de Swielande 2019, 20–1.

⁵⁰ Donnelly 2012, 154–5; Donnelly 2015, 408.

⁵¹ See Donnelly 2015, 408; Mcconaughey et al. 2018, 184.

⁵² Waltz 1979, 198.

responsibilities' are attributed to the presence of 'units that are functionally similar but of different capability', the identification of specific tasks that great powers have both the incentive and ability to undertake chips away at the assertion that states are functionally undifferentiated.⁵³ By recognizing that hierarchy is an element of the international structure and accepting that great powers serve distinct functions, this line of reasoning opens up the possibility that middle powers could exist as a distinct category in the international system of states and also fulfil certain functions in international politics that the other states are unable or unwilling to.

The existence of middle powers and the acknowledgement that they have a distinct form of behavior (that is, middlepowermanship) underscore the concept of differentiation. Middle powers and their behavior are expected to be different from that of non-middle powers, but the notion of such differentiation has yet to be theoretically examined. By addressing this gap in the literature, the paper aims to facilitate a better understanding about what makes middle power behavior fundamentally different from that of the other states. This should not be limited to variations in resources or status. It is not that these factors are not important; certainly, middle powers would not be able to effectively conduct their foreign policies without the necessary resources or recognition from other actors. The point is that it is equally important to acknowledge the differentiation that is present in the social structure – these are the underlying conditions that help to generate middle power behavior in international politics. The next section explores the concept of differentiation in detail and makes the case for it being constitutive of the international political structure.

The social structure of differentiation in international politics

Differentiation 'creates and fills the positions that comprise structures', and differentiation theory throws light on 'how to distinguish and analyse the components that make up any social whole'.⁵⁴ Given the underlying notion of differentiation that characterizes middle power theory, reframing social structure through the lens of differentiation would provide a better elucidation of the mechanisms and processes that condition middle power behavior in international politics. Partly in response to the abovementioned shortcomings and inconsistencies in the neorealist formulation of structure, leading theorists making the case for

⁵³ Waltz 1979, 198, 210.

⁵⁴ Buzan and Albert 2010, 316; Donnelly 2013, 91.

a differentiated structure have – building on earlier works of sociologists such as Niklas Luhmann and Talcott Parsons⁵⁵ – identified three main forms of differentiation in the international structure. These are, namely, segmentation (or unit differentiation), stratification (or vertical differentiation), and functional differentiation.⁵⁶ All three forms of differentiation are simultaneously present in the international system, and interact with each other without following a zero-sum logic.⁵⁷ They are also shaped by material and ideational content that, for example, result in the recognition of ‘great powers’ with their concomitant obligations, or, in this paper’s case, ‘middle powers’ with a different set of behavioral expectations.⁵⁸ In this sense, it is the relationship and interactions between the various forms of differentiation that explain how and why social structure provides the context for middle powers to behave in particular ways. I will now proceed to examine how segmentation, stratification and functional differentiation constitute the international political structure.

Segmentary or unit differentiation ‘generates social actors and distributes them across positions’.⁵⁹ This involves knowing which units are central to the international system. In the case of international politics, this would refer to the partitioning of territorial states within an anarchic – defined as the absence of government rather than the absence of hierarchy – international system.⁶⁰ For most IR theories, segmentation forms the basis of differentiation, with stratification and functional differentiation then taking place across the individual segments of states. The rise of transnational actors, economic interdependence, and globalization may have appeared to diminish the significance of the territorial state, but it is important to note that this is not simply about the irrelevance of segmentation. As Zürn, Albert and Buzan observe, ‘the responses to both the global war on terror since 2001, and the

⁵⁵ See, for example, Luhmann 1982; Parsons 1967.

⁵⁶ Albert et al. 2013; Buzan and Albert 2010; Donnelly 2009; Donnelly 2013. It should be acknowledged that divergences exist between what Donnelly characterizes as the ‘type’ and ‘dimension’ approaches towards differentiation, in which he argues that the former regards segmentation, stratification and functional differentiation as ‘idealized representations of forms of social order’ and the latter adopts an ‘open-ended approach to the relationship between [multiple] dimensions of differentiation’ (Donnelly 2013, 95, 109). It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into this debate; suffice to note that both approaches agree that on the simultaneous presence and interlinkages among segmentation, stratification and functional differentiation in the international system, and concur that these forms of differentiation are affected by various considerations including power and norms.

⁵⁷ Zürn et al. 2013, 233.

⁵⁸ Donnelly 2012, 154.

⁵⁹ Donnelly 2013, 99.

⁶⁰ Albert et al. 2013, 6; Waltz 1979, 88.

economic crisis since 2008 [illustrate that] the state can seize back control over areas' that non-state actors were dominant in.⁶¹ Given that middle powers are very much state actors, the segmentation of units into sovereign states is assumed to remain as the basis of other forms of differentiation. The analytical focus of this paper's framework for middle power behavior thus concerns chiefly stratification and functional differentiation.

Stratificatory or vertical differentiation is 'where some persons or groups raise themselves above others, creating a hierarchical social order' and establishing relations of superordination and subordination.⁶² The idea of a stratified system of states, layering on top of segmentation, has been advanced in several IR theories. As mentioned above, this is evident in neorealism, which advocates for some sort of capability or resource ranking among states.⁶³ Such a stratification of states is also reflected in the composition and operations of the UN Security Council (UNSC), in which the power to veto collective decisions is held only by the five permanent members – China, France, Russia, the UK, and the USA. English School theorists have also stressed the hierarchical features within the anarchic international structure, although in contrast to neorealism, this paradigm considers the social elements and processes that shape perspectives of authority and legitimacy.⁶⁴ The notion of a stratified international system fits well with a study on middle powers, as it implies the presence of countries above and below this category of 'middle' powers. It is anticipated that middle powers would seek to weaken stratificatory forces, with power and authority diffusing away from the great powers and down the hierarchy of states. This weakening of stratification, however, would only be to the extent that middle powers are still able to preserve their material and ideational advantages over the rest of the non-great powers. Gilley and O'Neil point out that it is in the interest of middle powers to have an international system framed around a multipolar 'G20' rather than a bipolar 'G2'.⁶⁵ Equally, it would also be in the interest of middle powers to have an international system framed around a 'G20' rather than a 'G100' where their own influence may be diluted.

The third form of differentiation – functional – could be further subdivided into two types. The first is 'where the subsystems are defined by the coherence of particular types of

⁶¹ Zürn et al. 2013, 237.

⁶² Albert et al. 2013, 2; see also Donnelly 2009, 55.

⁶³ Waltz 1979, 131.

⁶⁴ See, for example, Dunne 2003; Goh 2013.

⁶⁵ Gilley and O'Neil 2014, 13.

activity and their differentiation from other types of activity'.⁶⁶ This refers to the idea that the international system could be broken down into different subsystems or sectors that each has their own institutions, actors and 'logic'.⁶⁷ For example, the political system operates according to power, the economic system according to wealth, and the legal system according to law.⁶⁸ While sociology generally views functional differentiation as the 'essential characteristic of modernity' that displaces other types of differentiation, in most areas of IR theory such a view has yet to take a strong hold.⁶⁹ As mentioned in the discussion of segmentary differentiation above, the political sector continues to hold sway over other sectors of the international system. Additionally, the concept of middle powers is essentially about a category of power – the core variable in international politics.⁷⁰ For these reasons, the framework for middle power behavior in this paper will focus in particular on the international political sector.

My emphasis is more on the second type of functional differentiation that Albert, Buzan and Zürn put forth. This refers to the 'more narrow sense of role differentiation' which involves, for instance, some countries 'serving as leaders or providers of collective goods, others as followers or neutral states' and so on.⁷¹ This is different from niche diplomacy as explained above, which puts the focus more on individual state initiative to take up certain tasks. Agency certainly plays a part, although in functional differentiation, as Donnelly explains, the definition and allocation of social functions to actors 'is a feature ... of the system, the structure of which is characterized by *however* functions are defined and distributed across social positions'.⁷² Here, however, mainstream IR literature has tended to put the spotlight more on the roles of great powers – thus linking functional differentiation with stratification – rather than the rest of the states. As mentioned above, Waltz's claim of states in the international system being functionally undifferentiated is challenged by his own assertion that great powers 'undertake tasks that other states have neither the incentive nor the ability to perform' due to their 'extraordinary positions in the system'.⁷³ These tasks are: 'the transforming or maintaining of the system, the preservation of peace, and the management of

⁶⁶ Albert et al. 2013, 2.

⁶⁷ Albert et al. 2013, 5; see also Buzan and Albert 2010, 318; Donnelly 2013, 100.

⁶⁸ Albert et al. 2013, 10.

⁶⁹ Buzan and Albert 2010, 318.

⁷⁰ Albert et al. 2013, 10; Morgenthau 2006, 29.

⁷¹ Albert et al. 2013, 6.

⁷² Donnelly 2013, 100.

⁷³ Waltz 1979, 199.

common economic and other problems'.⁷⁴ Meanwhile, Hedley Bull claims that great powers serve two primary functions in the international order, namely, 'managing their relations with one another' and 'exploiting their preponderance in such a way as to impart a degree of central direction to the affairs of international society'.⁷⁵ Unlike Waltz, however, Bull recognizes the role of socially negotiated processes in the formulation of great power functions.⁷⁶

Turning to an analysis that includes the non-great powers, Paul Schroeder contends that strategies for state survival throughout the Westphalian era have comprised not only balancing or bandwagoning, but also 'specializing'. This involves '[q]uestions of how functions and roles were assigned to individual actors within the international system, whether these roles were necessary and justified, and how well the actors were fulfilling them'.⁷⁷ States that are successful in specializing within the international system would be able to 'exist and prosper long after they were unable or unwilling to defend themselves, while states that failed to specialize ... might be destroyed'.⁷⁸ The success or failure of states to specialize could thus affect broad outcomes in the international system.⁷⁹ The discussion here also further emphasizes the connections between functional differentiation and stratification.⁸⁰ For instance, the development of functional differentiation could deepen forces of stratification as some states come to be regarded as leaders in certain areas of global affairs. The allocation of functions and roles, as well as the ability of states to carry out these functions and roles effectively, thus hold important consequences for international politics.

In putting forward a new framework for middle power behavior in international politics, an important first step is to recognize that differentiation constitutes social structure. Differentiation theory thus offers a heuristic to explain middle power behavior. As this section has demonstrated, all three forms of differentiation – segmentary, stratificatory, and functional – are present in the international political structure. It is this differentiated structure that enables the emergence of middle power behavior. Given that segmented states are regarded to remain as the primary actors in international politics, the analytical focus here is on stratification and functional differentiation. It is important to note, however, that structure conditions, rather than

⁷⁴ Waltz 1979, 199.

⁷⁵ Bull 1977, 207.

⁷⁶ Bull 1977, 202.

⁷⁷ Schroeder 1994, 125.

⁷⁸ Schroeder 1994, 125.

⁷⁹ Schroeder 1994, 125.

⁸⁰ See also Zürn et al. 2013, 233–4.

determines, middle power behavior. Moreover, developments at the structural level are typically unobservable. Thus, the final piece in my framework for middle power behavior involves the process of power politics that middle powers engage with, under particular circumstances. This process ultimately determines the outcomes of middle power behavior within a specific context and allows for the observation of empirical effects that would highlight the presence of the differentiated structure in international politics. This will be the focus of the next section.

Explaining middle power behavior through differentiation

Based on the insights offered by differentiation, the framework proposed here anticipates that middle powers would seek to weaken stratification particularly where the great powers are concerned, and strengthen functional differentiation by taking on distinctive and key roles in international politics. These are the observable empirical outcomes that would suggest the effects of the differentiated structure on middle power behavior. The claim that middle powers seek to weaken stratificatory forces emerges from the notion that given their limited material capabilities and diplomatic clout vis-à-vis the great powers, middle powers would pursue ways to ensure that great powers are not the sole authority in collective decision making. Meanwhile, the claim that middle powers seek to strengthen functional differentiation is built on the premise that these states, in order to set themselves apart from the rest of the non-great powers and highlight their unique value and relevance to global affairs, would take on roles that no other country could perform as effectively. While such behavior may be made possible by the differentiated structure of international politics, their outcomes are activated by a process of power politics that middle powers engage with. The emphasis on power politics follows from the notion that power is the key variable in the international political sector.⁸¹ This section first considers how processes of power politics could be examined, before linking it up with the differentiation-based framework for middle powers.

Power politics is a central concept of realism. Unlike the neorealist account which focuses exclusively on the material elements of power, however, the treatment of power politics here aligns more closely with the classical realist formulation which incorporates both the material and ideational/social dimensions of power.⁸² This inclusive approach is important for

⁸¹ Albert et al. 2013, 10; Morgenthau 2006, 29.

⁸² See, for example, Ashley 1984, 271–3; Barkin 2010; Williams 2004.

a study on middle powers, because their actions and consequent outcomes could not be attributed solely to either dimension. Rather, explanations would likely involve a mix of elements including economic and diplomatic resources, normative expectations, political will, as well as opportunistic circumstances. For classical realists such as Hans J. Morgenthau and E. H. Carr, politics refer to those activities that involve or affect the power of an actor in relation to others.⁸³ This concept of power, as defined by Morgenthau, denotes ‘man’s control over the minds and actions of other men’.⁸⁴ Extracting it to the level of international politics, this would refer to a state’s ability to shape the policy preferences and behavior of other states. For a framework that explains how middle powers are able to differentiate themselves from other states and strengthen their ‘power’ in the international system, it thus makes sense to rely on classical realist insights about power politics.

In particular, I follow Barkin’s concise encapsulation of classical realist power politics as ‘relative, relational, and social’.⁸⁵ First, the social aspect means treating the state as a ‘corporate actor’ and ascribing state power to social institutions.⁸⁶ This means that a state, amid pursuit of its objectives, possesses the ability or capacity to act as a collective whole through its political leaders, officials and diplomats. Morgenthau points out that these are the individuals who represent the state at the global level: ‘[t]hey speak for it, negotiate treaties in its name, define its objectives, choose the means for achieving them, and try to maintain, increase, and demonstrate its power’.⁸⁷ In essence, they ‘wield the power and pursue the policies of their nation’.⁸⁸ It follows from this that, to examine power politics between states, it would be necessary to pay attention not only to rhetoric and actions, but also to the shared meanings and discourses among these actors that shed light on the possibilities for a state’s behavior.

Second, relative power politics refers to the idea that the power of an actor is meaningful only when compared against another actor.⁸⁹ This could involve an assessment of both material resources such as economic size and military capabilities, as well as common ideas regarding the ranking of states, and the framing of certain countries as stronger or weaker than others. As

⁸³ Carr 2001, 97; Morgenthau 2006, 29–30.

⁸⁴ Morgenthau 2006, 30.

⁸⁵ Barkin 2010, 18.

⁸⁶ Barkin 2010, 20.

⁸⁷ Morgenthau 2006, 114.

⁸⁸ Morgenthau 2006, 114.

⁸⁹ Barkin 2010, 18; Morgenthau 2006, 166–8.

Carr remarks, to understand a ‘political’ issue, it is essential to know not merely the content of the issue, but also ‘between whom it has arisen’ because that will have implications for how the issue develops.⁹⁰ Certainly, a conflict between China and the USA is likely to play out very differently from a similar conflict between, for example, China and Vietnam.

Last but not least, power politics is also relational, which for Barkin refers to the idea that power involves ‘getting other actors to do what you want them to do’.⁹¹ ‘In any context in which ends cannot reasonably be achieved by physically destroying an adversary’, he writes, ‘political power is ultimately about persuasion, about convincing rather than forcing’.⁹² Morgenthau calls out the ‘misunderstanding of the central element of power ... to be equated with material strength, especially of a military nature’. Rather, he contends that the ‘immaterial aspects, especially in the form of charismatic power ... [and] political ideologies’ are critical if one wants to understand the nature and process of power politics.⁹³ Carr similarly identifies ‘the art of persuasion’ and propaganda as a form of power.⁹⁴ This characterization about relational power politics is applicable to the roles that most middle powers, with their limited coercive capabilities and emphasis on like-minded coalitions, find themselves carrying out in international politics. Examining the relational aspect of power politics thus involves understanding the dynamics that frame the context and relations among actors, including the kinds of capabilities and behavior that are regarded as appropriate and relevant for the circumstances.

The framework proposed by this paper expects middle powers to weaken stratification and strengthen functional differentiation. While the differentiated structure makes such behavior possible, the specific outcomes would depend on how middle powers navigate the social, relative and relational power politics in a particular situation. The surrounding ‘political and cultural context’ is important for the assessment of power politics because it governs what is considered appropriate and relevant types of power among the key stakeholders.⁹⁵ For instance, contemporary expectations of what middle powers are, and how they behave in global affairs, would be at least slightly different compared to, say, the sixteenth century, given the dissimilar circumstances of international politics. Likewise, a middle power seeking to play a

⁹⁰ Carr 2001, 97.

⁹¹ Barkin 2010, 19.

⁹² Barkin 2010, 19.

⁹³ As cited in Williams 2005, 110.

⁹⁴ Carr 2001, 120.

⁹⁵ Morgenthau 2006, 11.

role on the international stage would face different dynamics from a middle power seeking to play a role within its own region. Context would thus contribute towards shaping the power politics that middle powers have to navigate. Subsequently, this process of power politics activates the differentiated structure to produce specific behavioral outcomes for middle powers (see Figure 1). The extent to which a middle power would seek to weaken stratification and functional differentiation, and the extent to which it would be successful, thus depends on how power politics plays out in a particular time and place. For instance, if a middle power attempts to dilute the influence of great powers in collective decision making and enhance its own voice, its success would be contingent on which actors it is working with or against as well as whether it possesses the necessary persuasive skills or diplomatic clout to secure its aims in negotiations.

<Figure 1 to be placed here>

Empirical example: Australia and APEC

To briefly outline how this framework would apply empirically, I offer an illustrative example of middle power behavior in the Asia Pacific. Recalling the working definition of a middle power above – that it is a state which quantitatively ranks below the great and rising powers, but above a majority of the rest of the countries; identifies and is regarded by others as a middle power; and, employs behavioral strategies such as investing in multilateralism and relying on persuasive or soft power – Australia is a suitable case to demonstrate my theoretical claims. I will focus specifically on Australia's behavior in APEC given that Canberra's success in the establishment of this forum in 1989 has been widely regarded as an example of its initiative and a reflection of its capabilities as a middle power.

Australia's leadership role in the formation of APEC was a result of several factors, including Canberra's concerns about its own economic vulnerability, its embrace of middle power activism in its foreign policy during that time, as well as the regional aversion towards any great power leadership in the initiative. In terms of social power politics, Australia's leaders and diplomats in the late 1980s and early 1990s certainly saw their country as a middle power or medium-sized country and sought to project this identity in its foreign policy, differentiating it from countries such as Japan and the USA – the two largest economies in the

world at the time.⁹⁶ As then Foreign Minister Gareth Evans asserted, Australia was ‘manifestly not a great or even major power; nor, however ... are we small or insignificant’.⁹⁷ There was also awareness that the middle power status brought with it a set of advantages and disadvantages for Australian foreign policy. Unlike the great powers, Australia would not have unilateral influence on important global issues, but it could, on the other hand, rely on its non-threatening profile to build like-minded coalitions that would help to advance its interests. In this sense, multilateralism and institution building were crucial elements of Australia’s middle power diplomacy that would help it to strengthen its place in the hierarchy of states.⁹⁸ More importantly, Australia saw a window of opportunity for non-major powers to take the lead in regional multilateral initiatives amid the “extraordinarily fluid international environment” in the late 1980s, which saw the USA emerge as the sole superpower on the global stage as the Cold War wound down, the rising salience of regional economic cooperation (thanks in part to the rapid economic growth and development of Japan – then the second largest economy in the world), as well as the formation of extra-regional trade blocs that excluded Australia.⁹⁹ In this environment, the foundations of stratification and functional differentiation were thus present.

During a speech to Korean business associations in Seoul on 31 January 1989, Australia’s Prime Minister Bob Hawke called for ‘a more formal intergovernmental vehicle of regional co-operation’ in economics and trade.¹⁰⁰ As an ‘econom[y] of medium size’, Australia was vulnerable to the fluctuations in the international trading system and was without the ability to unilaterally shape events to its own advantage.¹⁰¹ From Australia’s perspective, it was thus imperative to strengthen the multilateral trading system, through which the stratification of the great powers could be weakened. Although both Japan and the USA were also considering, separately, the convening of government-level forums to strengthen economic and trade cooperation in the Asia Pacific, fears of having the two largest economies in the world ‘dominate any transpacific regional organisation’ – coupled with the fact that they were embroiled in trade disputes – meant that neither of them could take the lead on the APEC initiative.¹⁰² Evans surmised that ‘each side may have feared the worse of the other, and the

⁹⁶ See, for example, Evans 1993a; Hawke 1987, 13; Keating 1992.

⁹⁷ Evans 1993b.

⁹⁸ Evans 1993a; Hawke 1987, 13; Hawke 1989b.

⁹⁹ Evans 1989a, 6.

¹⁰⁰ Hawke 1989a.

¹⁰¹ Hawke 1987, 16.

¹⁰² Dent 2016, 120; see also Funabashi 1995, 58–9.

smaller powers may well have felt that their own interests were at risk'.¹⁰³ As a non-great power, Australia did not appear threatening to its regional neighbors. It was thus considered diplomatically practical for Australia, which had also been considering similar ideas for regionalism, to be the public face of the initiative if it were to succeed.¹⁰⁴

At the same time, as a middle power, Australia had sufficient material resources and political weight to garner support from other countries and get the initiative off the ground.¹⁰⁵ To be sure, Australia's proposal was still, initially, received with some doubts particularly from the ASEAN countries, with concerns that APEC might relegate the Southeast Asian organization to the sidelines in regional multilateral cooperation. In response, Australian officials were quick to reassure ASEAN that the country had been 'a steadfast supporter of ASEAN from its earliest days', and committed to having ASEAN be at the core of the APEC process.¹⁰⁶ In terms of such relational and relative power politics, Australia was able to leverage its non-threatening status, technical competency, and diplomatic adeptness to pursue its goals. These functionally differentiated it from the other states. Following numerous rounds of negotiations among the regional countries, the inaugural APEC ministerial meeting was convened on 6 November 1989 in Canberra, with the participation of economic and foreign ministers from the six ASEAN countries (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore), Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, and the USA.

In the APEC initiative, the interplay of power politics and differentiation thus resulted in Australia's actions weakening stratification of the great powers and strengthening functional differentiation in Asia Pacific multilateralism. Given its limited material capabilities and influence vis-à-vis the great powers, Australia unsurprisingly sought to dilute such forces of stratification. Certainly, it was not that Australia was seeking to remove the USA from the regional equation; it was, after all, an ally of the great power and took the view that Washington's participation in regional multilateralism would be beneficial to its own interests. To be fair, the success of Australia's efforts in the launch of APEC was also, in part, a result of the support from the great powers. Without their support – or at least, tacit acceptance – of Australia's actions, establishing APEC might have been a more challenging process. In this sense, it was more about ensuring that the unilateral tendencies of the USA and other great

¹⁰³ Evans 1993b.

¹⁰⁴ Dent 2016, 120; Funabashi 1995, 60.

¹⁰⁵ Evans 1993b; Ravenhill 2001, 88–9.

¹⁰⁶ Evans 1989b; see also Milne and Mauzy 1999, 128–9; Pitty 2003, 27.

powers would be dampened and diluted by drawing them into a cooperative platform that was meant to operate based on rules rather than pure hard power. While multilateralism offered Australia the opportunity to diffuse power away from the great powers, it also allowed it to assert some influence over the rest of the smaller countries. This is because Australia still had a higher level of capabilities and diplomatic clout than a majority of the rest of the states. In this sense, the weakening of stratification was only to the extent that Australia could retain some kind of advantage compared to most of the other countries.

In terms of functional differentiation, the convenor role in APEC was allocated to and taken up by Australia. This differentiation highlighted Australia's relevance and importance among regional states, including in relation to the great powers. This was due not only to its non-threatening profile, but also its possession of the requisite material resources and persuasive skills – a collective set of characteristics which the other states lacked. Whereas the great powers had the capacity to impose their preferences on others relatively easily, middle powers such as Australia would have to rely on other, more diplomatic tools, to garner support for its agenda. This meant some form of give-and-take on Australia's part, and its acquiescing to at least some demands of others, even if these other states were comparably smaller and/or weaker. Canberra was cognizant of the fact that if it wanted to achieve its goals regarding APEC, it would be necessary to get other regional states on its side. Australia's ability to build on its advantage in relational and relative power politics reinforced the image of Australia as a credible convenor.

The presence and pursuit of stratificatory and functional differentiation thus establishes the possibility for middle powers to maximize their relative position and diplomatic attributes vis-à-vis other states in the navigation of power politics, and to capitalize on their 'middlepowerness' in the international political structure. Middle powers occupy the proverbial 'Goldilocks Zone', which is explained succinctly by Gilley as being 'weak enough to not threaten anyone or to carry much historical baggage but strong enough to have the means and interests to engage' effectively.¹⁰⁷ This is a result of the differentiated structure in international politics, and the behavior of middle powers in turn (re)produces or transforms such differentiation. As Georg Sørensen reasons, '[w]hen states are "unlike units" it becomes necessary to further analyse the kind of differentiation that has taken place in the state system'.¹⁰⁸ This is what the framework proposed here seeks to do, in relation to middle powers.

¹⁰⁷ Gilley 2016, 651.

¹⁰⁸ Sørensen 2008, 16.

Moreover, the behavior of these ‘unlike units’ creates ‘a different (material and social) structure which redefines the context for interaction’.¹⁰⁹ The anticipated middle power behavior in terms of weakening stratification and strengthening functional differentiation in international politics reflects this line of argument.

Conclusion

This paper has advanced a new differentiation-based theoretical framework to explain the behavior of middle powers in international politics. Although the idea that middle powers are different from other types of states are implied extensively in the current literature, the notion of differentiation and what this implies for middle power theory has yet to be comprehensively examined. Understanding such differentiation is important because it contributes to better knowledge about one of the fundamental tenets of middle power theory, that is, how and why middle powers could be considered a distinct category of states in the international system. The framework here thus aims to address this gap in the middle power literature. It builds on existing observations about middle power behavior – particularly in terms of their reliance on multilateralism, niche diplomacy, and soft power – and demonstrates how an analytical lens of differentiation could value add to the understanding of this topic. In this regard, acknowledging the constitutive presence of segmentary, stratificatory and functional differentiation in the international political structure is a valuable starting point to study middle power behavior. When activated by the process of power politics within a specific context, the effects of this differentiated structure produce middle power behavior. While the specific behavioral outcomes would depend on the particular circumstances of the day and time, this framework overall anticipates that middle powers would pursue weakening stratification particularly where the great powers are concerned, and strengthening functional differentiation as they assume distinctive and key roles in international politics.

Two main counter-arguments to this framework could be raised, which I will briefly respond to. First, the expectation that middle powers work to weaken stratification may, at first glance, seem contrary to the behavior of middle powers that are also allies of the USA, such as Australia. While it may be true that allies of the USA would seek to reinforce the great power’s position in international politics to their own benefit, past examples have shown that this is not mutually exclusive with weakening stratification. For instance, Australia did not ultimately

¹⁰⁹ Sørensen 2008, 24.

seek to exclude the USA in APEC, but it also desired the participation of other regional countries such as China, Japan and Indonesia. The point is that middle powers strive to avoid a situation where power and influence is overwhelmingly concentrated in the hands of the great powers, because such a situation significantly narrows their foreign policy options. In this regard, middle powers that are also allies of the USA could still pursue a weakening of stratification of the great powers as a whole, even as they attempt to ensure their ally's relevance across various issues.

The second criticism would be that it is impossible to conclusively prove the causal existence of differentiation in the international political structure. In an open social world with a multitude of mechanisms operating simultaneously at any one time, there could indeed be other processes that are responsible for the respective behavior of various middle powers. One reading of the intensifying competition between China and the USA, for example, could be that it has narrowed the space available to Australia to weaken stratification and strengthen functional differentiation. The middle power's strategic loyalties to the USA and economic dependence on China suggest that, while Australia may continue to try and maximize its position in a differentiated structure, the outcomes and responses it seeks may be much more challenging to achieve as power politics become increasingly premised on hard or coercive power. An alternative reading may suggest that the options for middle powers to leverage their structural position have actually expanded given that there is more incentive for non-great powers to work together amid Sino-USA rivalry. The differentiation-based framework would thus require further empirical testing and research. Nevertheless, this approach towards middle power behavior remains useful as it theorizes a crucial but understudied element of the middle power concept. By putting differentiation at the heart of the analysis, the framework contributes towards explanations about how middle powers are able to anchor their distinct 'middlepowerness' vis-à-vis the great powers and smaller states, and how this 'middlepowerness' interacts with structural conditions to produce certain behavioral outcomes.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Colin Wight, Andrew Carr, Catherine Jones, and Andrew O'Neil, for their insightful comments on earlier versions of the middle power behavior framework advanced in this paper. I would also like to thank the journal's anonymous reviewers for their constructive and thoughtful feedback.

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Figure 1: How middle power behavior is generated.