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# One in 20: the G20, middle powers and global governance reform

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## ABSTRACT

There is a growing consensus that the international system needs to be reformed to reflect the changing distribution of power with the rise of the Brazil, Russia, India and China (BRICs). The Group of Twenty (G20) has been at the centre of these discussions. Within the G20, emphasis has been on great powers or rising powers and their capacity to drive reform. Less attention has been given to the preferences and strategies of middle powers in the G20 and their capacity to shape global governance reform. Drawing on interviews with G20 officials, this paper considers the role of Australia as president of the G20 in 2014. Australia's presidency presents a unique opportunity to examine the behaviour of a middle power as it balances the competing global governance claims of the USA and the BRICs.

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## Introduction

The Group of Twenty (G20) is synonymous with calls for global governance reform. Since the first G20 leaders' summit in Washington DC in 2008, the G20 has emerged as the premier forum for reform of the global financial architecture, and increasingly other areas of global governance as well. While there is much debate about the concept of global governance and what effective reform might look like,<sup>1</sup> there is a general consensus that the existing international architecture across a range of policy domains is outdated because it does not reflect the changing distribution of power in the international system.<sup>2</sup> The G20 leaders themselves have acknowledged that international organisations, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and International Energy Agency (IEA), need to be reformed to reflect the rise of Brazil, Russia, India and China (BRICs), among other nations.

There are two strands within the literature. First, in international relations scholarship there is an extensive debate about 'the question of American decline.'<sup>3</sup> Often couched in realist terms, the rise of China is viewed as the principal challenger to a unipolar world dominated by the USA. A second strand focuses on the emerging economies of the BRICs.<sup>4</sup> There is a widely accepted view that these nations have the potential to re-shape the international system. While some scholars have raised concerns about potential rivalries with the West,<sup>5</sup> others have focussed on what the BRICs mean for global governance – for example, global economic governance and global energy governance.<sup>6</sup>

However, in the on-going discussion about the changing distribution of power in the international system, less attention has been paid to middle powers in the G20. Most of the emphasis has been on great powers or rising powers and their assumed capacity to drive global governance reform. The assumption has been that other G20 members, such as Australia, Mexico and South Korea, have very limited power to affect international outcomes. In international relations such actors have been variously referred to as 'middle powers', 'entrepreneurial powers' or 'regional powers'.<sup>7</sup> While there have been endless debates over the categories of such nations, what distinguishes these debates from traditional realist conceptions of international politics is that these states have the instrumental potential to influence international outcomes.<sup>8</sup>

The changing distribution of power has also led some scholars to suggest that there are new spaces for these states to influence outcomes.<sup>9</sup> In the transition to a multipolar environment, power is more diffuse and the attributes traditionally associated with these nations – such as convening, agenda setting, and coalition building – could, if mobilised, provide them with significant power to shape the international system.<sup>10</sup> In the context of the G20, these powers could prove crucial for global governance reform on everything from finance and trade to energy and the environment; not just to broker agreements between the USA and China, but to achieve outcomes that incorporate the rising power of BRICs.

With global governance reform now on the international agenda and the G20 at the centre of discussions, this article examines the behaviour of one such power, Australia, during its presidency of the G20 in 2014. In doing so, it reflects on the behaviour of two other middle powers, Mexico and South Korea, which hosted the G20 in 2010 and 2012, respectively. Drawing on interviews with G20 officials from Australia as well as supplementary interviews with other nations, along with the observations of the author, a past delegate to the G20 negotiations, it considers Australia's preferences and strategies, and, importantly, it identifies the limits of these strategies. It not only draws attention to the role of smaller states in the G20, but also has implications for the literature on the relationship between the USA and the emerging economies of the BRICs.

The next section canvasses the middle power literature and its understanding of middle power preferences and strategies. The section thereafter provides a short overview of the G20 and Australia's role as president in 2014. The remainder of the paper examines Australia's preferences and strategies, and considers the implications for middle powers in the G20.

## Middle powers in the G20

Theorising about international negotiations, such as the G20, is dominated by state-centred approaches.<sup>11</sup> As noted, most of the literature has focussed on great powers, such as the USA, or rising powers, such as the BRICs. In international relations scholarship, one of the most prominent strands of inquiry to consider the role of nations such as Australia has been middle power theory. While definitions of middle powers abound, one popular approach, especially among policymakers, has been to consider the position or capabilities of nations based on quantifiable factors including gross domestic product (GDP), population and military spending, among others.<sup>12</sup> According to this approach, a nation can be identified as a middle power if it ranks close to the world's great powers on these measures. Hence, Australia, which has the twelfth largest economy in the world and the thirteenth highest military

spending, is generally considered a middle power, although there remains some domestic debate.<sup>13</sup>

While a capabilities approach is useful in that it draws attention to power in middle power theory, as others have pointed out, it is less useful at predicting or explaining the behaviour of middle power nations.<sup>14</sup> As a result, in the scholarly literature the most common conception defines middle powers by their behaviour – that is, their tendency to pursue multilateral solutions to international problems, to broker compromise positions in international disputes, and to embrace notions of ‘good international citizenship’ in their diplomacy.<sup>15</sup> By virtue of their relative weaker position in the international system, middle powers tend to focus on soft power techniques, such as their technical skills and entrepreneurial capacities.<sup>16</sup> It is also expected that they are likely to follow the lead of great powers, such as the USA, or concentrate their resources on a small number of multilateral efforts.<sup>17</sup>

With this focus on behaviour, scholars in this tradition are concerned not with the normative question of how such states *should* behave, but rather with how they *do* behave. This has led to empirical inquiries into the strategies middle powers employ to influence international outcomes. Cooper, Higgott and Nossal identify a pattern of middle power behaviour over time.<sup>18</sup> First, they argue that entrepreneurial middle powers can act as a catalyst to trigger diplomatic initiatives. Second, middle powers can become facilitators of initiatives, setting the agenda and building issue-specific coalitions to support them – as, for example, Australia did to support trade liberalisation in the 1990s.<sup>19</sup> These strategies are central to middle powers, which do not have the structural sources of power that great powers do. Third, such states may become managers helping to build institutions, be they formal organisations and regimes or the development of norms and conventions.

Most of these strategies were identified in empirical studies at the end of the Cold War long before the G20 existed. In this era, with the USA as the dominant power, middle powers could position themselves both as supporters of the USA in mainstream economic and security areas, and also as dissenters in select niche areas, such as land mines. However, with the rising power of the BRICs it seems plausible that middle powers could find their influence in international affairs wane. Yet the rise of the G20 has seen Australia, along with several other, smaller nations, such as Mexico, South Korea and Turkey, gain a seat at the table for many of the most important discussions around global governance reform.

In recent years, several works have considered the behaviour of middle powers in the context of a changing distribution of power in the international system.<sup>20</sup> While some of these studies have considered the role of middle powers in the G20 and improved our understanding of their behaviour, there remains a lack of empirical work.<sup>21</sup> More needs to be done to consider how well our understanding of middle power behaviour stacks up against the actions of such countries in the G20. As the newest and premier international forum to include members such as Australia alongside the USA and the emerging economies of the BRICs, the G20 provides a perfect greenfield site to not only understand the behaviour of Australia as chair of the G20, but also to examine its preferences and strategies as it attempted to manage the competing global governance claims of existing and rising powers.

## The G20 and Australia

Over the last two decades, the G20 has emerged as the most dramatic example of the shifting balance of power in the international system. Elevated from a forum for finance ministers and central bank governors to a leaders' summit in 2008, it comprises the Group of Eight (G8), as well as Argentina, Australia, Brazil, China, the European Union, India, Indonesia, Korea, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, South Africa and Turkey.<sup>22</sup> While the rise of the G20 has naturally led to questions about its legitimacy,<sup>23</sup> its broad membership and roles, especially as a crisis committee during the global financial crisis, have provided a foundation for legitimacy that arguably supersedes that of the G8.

Unlike formal organisations such as the United Nations (UN), the G20 has no founding documents, buildings, or permanent staff.<sup>24</sup> As such, it has no permanent secretariat, and the host of the G20, which rotates each year, fulfils the secretariat functions. While this raises some questions about continuity, these are partly addressed by the troika arrangement, which serves to ease the transition between G20 presidents. For example, in 2014, the troika comprised Russia as the previous chair, Australia as current chair and Turkey as the future chair. Ahead of the leaders' summit the work of the G20 is divided into two tracks: the sherpa track, in which each sherpa represents their leader, and the finance track, in which finance deputies represent their finance ministers.

On 1 December 2013, Australia officially assumed the presidency of the G20 from Russia. As the Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott declared at the time, 'the G20 will be the most important meeting of world leaders Australia has ever hosted.'<sup>25</sup> The Australian government had been determined to ensure that Australia was at the table when the G20 was elevated to a leaders' summit in 2008, and the government was equally determined to make its presidency a success in 2014.<sup>26</sup>

Along with a focus on 'jobs and growth', Australian policymakers from the outset recognised the role of the G20 in global governance reform. In the so-called concept paper that has become something of a tradition for nations to release upon assuming the presidency, 'reforming global institutions' was listed as a priority. Australian officials made clear their desire to improve the representation of emerging economies in the international institutional architecture.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Australia's presidency marked a unique opportunity for Australia, a self-proclaimed middle power, to influence debates about global governance reform in the context of a changing distribution of power.

As an aside, while successive Australian governments have advocated a middle power role, there has been a partisan divide over the label. For example, under former Labour Prime Ministers Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, Australia embraced the middle power term, whereas the conservative side of politics, including under Prime Minister Tony Abbott, has often claimed that the term middle power sells the country short in terms of its pivotal status in international affairs.<sup>28</sup> That said, the divisions are more of terminology than behaviour, as we will see.

### Australia's preferences: 'setting the mood music'

In studies of international negotiations, scholars typically distinguish between the preferences of actors and the strategies and tactics they use in negotiations.<sup>29</sup> As discussed, it is generally assumed that middle powers have a preference for multilateral solutions and

norm-building, for compromise in the face of international disputes and for notions of good international citizenship. Building on these assumptions and the empirical data, in what follows, three preferences are identified that Australia appears to have held as president of the G20. These can be broadly distinguished as a systemic preference, capability preference and reputational preference. Of course, in reality these preferences overlap and reinforce each other.

First, middle power theory assumes that nations like Australia tend to have what might be termed a systemic preference – that is, a preference towards an open, peaceful, liberal international order with transparent rules and institutions. This was certainly the case for Australia in the G20, as it was for other middle powers such as Mexico and South Korea.<sup>30</sup> For example, in a speech in 2012, former Australian Sherpa Gordon de Brouwer argued that:

As a mid-sized and open economy, Australia has long seen the value of rules, norms and standards and of the institutions that apply and defend them: rules provide predictability and certainty and underpin coordination and cooperation; they provide some defence against arbitrary action....<sup>31</sup>

This systemic preference materialised in Australia's desire to ensure that the USA and China cooperated in the G20 and that the BRICs were brought into the existing international order. Interviews with G20 officials indicate that Australia had a clear preference to use its position as chair of the G20 to strengthen cooperation between the USA and China – or, as one official put it, 'to help build the norms of future collaboration'.<sup>32</sup> Australia has important strategic relationships with both countries, and, as another official argued, it is vital that these countries have a 'way of resolving their differences in an orderly fashion, so that there is a stable global environment in which we can prosper'.<sup>33</sup> After all, China is Australia's largest trading partner and since World War II the USA has been Australia's most important security partner, and remains a key trading partner as well.

Very much related, Australia wanted to bring the BRICs 'into the mainstream' in order to ensure that they 'sign up to the existing international order'.<sup>34</sup> This preference is not only consistent with what middle power theorists would expect, but it is also consistent with the realist view in the literature that nations such as China are often unwilling to take on the responsibilities of participating in the existing international order.<sup>35</sup> For example, US officials, echoing this view, have long urged China in particular to become a responsible stakeholder in the international system.<sup>36</sup> Whether or not they are responsible stakeholders is another question, but it is clear from interviews with Australian G20 officials that finding ways to 'build new habits of cooperation' so that the rising powers are part of the system and are much less 'apprehensive about taking on international commitments' was a clear goal of Australia's presidency.<sup>37</sup>

Second, the empirical data also indicates that Australia had what might be termed a capability preference – that is, a preference to have the capability to set global norms as part of the G20. This is consistent with the view in the literature that middle powers engage in norm building. In this context, Australia wanted to ensure that the G20 remained an effective and legitimate forum for global governance negotiations. For middle powers like Australia, access to the G20 and the potential influence that comes from that may be just as important as the content of G20 agreements. Indeed, the assessment from Australian officials was that it would not be a member of any 'G8 plus' -type forum.<sup>38</sup> In other words, there is no guarantee that Australia would have access to an alternative forum should the G20 fail. As a result, one of Australia's main goals was to ensure that the G20 delivered tangible results. This included

the preference that the G20 should transition from its role as a crisis committee to a steering committee for global governance reform.<sup>39</sup> As a middle power, Australia was not alone. Both South Korea and Mexico had also used their host years of the G20 to shift the focus from simply the global financial crisis to broader global governance issues, such as international development.<sup>40</sup>

This distinguishes these nations from great powers, such as the USA, which do not have the same consternation. Whereas Australia, for example, was sensitive to criticisms of the forum, for the USA the success of the G20 was not as crucial. On several issues, US officials took a dim view of the forum: 'The G20 is really a creature of circumstance; it had a number of windows where it has operated effectively on economic issues... but it has not done as well in other circumstances.'<sup>41</sup>

This led to occasions where senior US officials were not especially engaged and, for example, were not inclined to send senior personnel to G20 working group meetings. As one put it, 'my secretary was "blah" about me coming to this meeting, it is not his focus.'<sup>42</sup>

Finally, Australia also had a reputational preference. Consistent with earlier middle power studies, Australia wanted to maintain its reputation as a 'builder within the international system.'<sup>43</sup> G20 officials wanted to ensure that as chair of the G20, Australia maintained this reputation. As one official put it, 'what is important is that Australia is a doer not a talker.'<sup>44</sup> While these attributes are to some extent intangible, Australian officials nevertheless wanted Australia to be viewed in the G20 as a trusted, independent, action-orientated actor which could get things done. The belief was that with such a reputation Australia would be more influential in setting the 'mood music' for discussions around the reform of international organisations like the IMF and the World Trade Organization. For a country like Australia to be part of those discussions, it has to be a member of the G20.<sup>45</sup>

While the aim of this article is not to consider the origins of Australia's preferences, but rather to identify Australia's preferences and examine the strategies the government used to realise them, it is nonetheless worth noting the seeming independence of these preferences from realignments in domestic politics. While liberal scholars, in particular, argue that the state acts as the 'transmission belt' by which the preferences of individuals and groups are translated into foreign policy, in the case of Australia at least, it would appear that despite significant domestic realignments the transmission belt remained rather steady.<sup>46</sup> To be sure, between mid-2013 and November 2014, Australia had three prime ministers; two from the Labour Party and one from the Liberal Party, the conservative party of Australian politics. Despite large ideological differences between the Labour and Liberal prime ministers, especially on issues such as climate change, as will be discussed, the underlying systemic, capability and reputational preferences did not change.

### **Australia's strategies: manager, advocate, and builder**

In the absence of a G20 secretariat, Australia had considerable potential to influence negotiations as chair of the G20. Since the G20 became a leaders' summit, 2014 arguably represented Australia's best chance to use its position in the forum to realise its preferences. Yet what strategies did Australia employ? In the context of a transition towards a multipolar world in which power is more diffuse, did Australia rely on the strategies traditionally employed by middle powers? In other words, did Australia act as a catalyst and trigger initiatives? Did it act as facilitator and set agendas, build issue-based coalitions? And, did it act

as a manager to build formal institutions, norms and specialised bureaucracies or secretariats? In what follows, four principal strategies are identified that Australia used as chair of the G20. To a large extent these are consistent with what middle power scholarship would expect, and there is evidence to suggest that South Korea and Mexico used similar strategies at times, but the empirical data also shows that there are subtle differences, especially in the management of the rising powers.

### *Great power manager*

In the 1980s, Australia invested considerable energy in attempting to restrict the growth of economic conflict between major powers, such as the USA and Japan or the USA and the EU. For example, on trade Australia was a strong proponent of an open multilateral trading system bound by agreed principles and rules.<sup>47</sup> By 2014, the focus had shifted to limiting potential conflicts between the USA and China, but it appears Australia's preference remained the same. In pursuit of its systemic preference for a peaceful, liberal international order, Australia used its position as chair of the G20 to strengthen cooperation between the USA and China. In essence, its strategy combined a careful bilateral approach towards both countries that was sensitive to their strategic interests, with a multilateral approach that identified issues that the USA and China could cooperate on in the G20.

First, in recent decades Australia has been forced to balance its traditionally close security ties with the USA alongside its ever-growing economic relationship with China. In the lead-up to the G20, Australia was careful to ensure it did not make any statements that would disrupt this balance. For example, as one senior official noted, a decision was made not to make any announcements regarding its security relationship with the USA, which could raise Chinese eyebrows, as had, for example, the announcement in 2011 that the USA would station marines in Australia's north.<sup>48</sup> Similar pressures were present for South Korea in 2010 when it 'walked a tightrope' to manage tensions between the two powers over currency exchange rates.<sup>49</sup>

Second, stable bilateral relationships enabled Australia to exploit the multilateral space provided by the G20 and its power as the chair to 'actively look for opportunities where the USA and China could work together on issues'.<sup>50</sup> A case in point was global energy governance reform, including reform of the IEA.<sup>51</sup> Australian officials had surmised that this was one area where both powers had an interest. As one official argued:

The US grasps global energy governance .... They also know China cares about IEA reform and given that China will be G20 president in 2016, the US would want to be part of the conversation and shape the reforms with China.<sup>52</sup>

Consistent with what middle power theorists might expect, Australia acted as both a 'catalyst' and 'facilitator' for the announcement at the Brisbane summit in November 2014 that G20 leaders would endorse a set of 'principles on energy collaboration'.<sup>53</sup> As chair of the G20, Australia put global energy governance reform on the G20 agenda and pushed for it to be a priority in 2014. Indeed the Brisbane summit was the first time leaders held a dedicated discussion about global energy governance. While Australia by no means led the discussions, by identifying an issue that the USA and China had an interest in and coordinating their input into the draft principles, Australia was able to facilitate cooperation between the major powers.<sup>54</sup> This also worked to Australia's advantage because global energy governance



reform was one area where it wanted progress, and getting the USA and China on board would clearly make this more likely.

However, the capacity of Australia to manage these great powers was limited. On the one hand, Australia's ability to act as a facilitator, and set the agenda, for example, was dependent on not encountering direct opposition from the USA or China. While Australia's overall preferences did not change following the change of government in Australia in 2013, it did precipitate a change in the position on some issues, notably climate change, that undermined Australia's traditional desire to be viewed as a good international citizen, as for that matter did Australian statements suggesting Russian President Vladimir Putin should not be invited to the Brisbane Summit.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, the decision by new Prime Minister Tony Abbott to restrict discussions on climate change in the G20 met strong opposition from the US, among others, who ultimately succeeded in 'pushing Australia much further than it wanted to go on climate change.'<sup>56</sup> Speaking on the morning before the summit, US President Obama gave a televised address at the University of Queensland in Brisbane calling on Australia to do more on climate change.<sup>57</sup>

On the other hand, Australia was also subject to what might be termed 'great power manipulation'. As one G20 official from another nation observed,

having the US as an ally can be a burden because although they allow you to get stuff done they can also be a bully because it is hard to say no to them. So it depends on how they wield their power.<sup>58</sup>

One area where there is evidence to suggest this may have occurred is that of energy efficiency. The agreed energy principles call for a focus on the 'promotion of cost effective energy efficiency, renewables and clean energy' and a 'phase out of inefficient fossil fuel subsidies'.<sup>59</sup> In the absence of a desire to propose any action on climate change or fossil fuel subsidies, Australia as chair sought to develop an agenda on energy efficiency. However, Australia's capacity to do so was limited by the USA, which pushed strongly for a focus on the emissions performance of heavy duty vehicles.<sup>60</sup> Again, this experience mirrored that faced by other middle powers, such as South Korea, which had its efforts to get G20 agreement on key economic issues derailed by resistance from China, among others.<sup>61</sup>

### *Emerging power advocate*

With the rising power of the BRICs, Australia adopted a strategy that is not typically identified in middle power studies undertaken during the period in which the USA was the sole dominant power: that of an emerging power advocate. As discussed, Australia's systemic preference included a desire for the BRICs to be incorporated into the existing international order as responsible stakeholders. In order to do so, Australia's strategy was to advocate on behalf of the BRICs and pursue issues in the G20 that appealed to these states. Australia understood that should the G20 fail to recognise the rising power of these countries, the BRICs, unlike Australia, would have the resources to change the system themselves and establish alternative global institutions, such as the BRICS Development Bank which was agreed upon at the BRICS summit in New Delhi in 2012.<sup>62</sup>

The most obvious issue to pursue was global governance reform. After all, the BRICs had already pushed for global governance reforms. For example, in 2012 BRIC leaders declared a desire for the 'strengthened representation of emerging and developing countries in the institutions of global governance.'<sup>63</sup> Australian officials had also spoken publicly prior to

assuming the G20 presidency about the need for further global governance reform which did not simply reflect the wishes of the Group of Seven (G7).<sup>64</sup> Accordingly, as one G20 official stated, 'we asked ourselves do we have the right global institutions with the right people in place ... the answer is clearly no.'<sup>65</sup> Recognising the 'sense of frustration' among the BRICs, Australia made a decision to address global governance reform: 'This is why for example we pushed so hard on addressing the underrepresentation of some countries in international institutions .... By doing so we are helping to achieve this aim to have them sign on to the international order.'<sup>66</sup>

IMF reform is a case in point. As has been documented elsewhere, following the global financial crisis in 2008, the BRICs used their increased bargaining power to question the legitimacy of the global financial institutions, namely the IMF and World Bank. In return for agreeing to provide increased financial resources to the IMF, the BRICs advocated for a series of quota and governance reforms of the IMF to increase their voting power.<sup>67</sup> However, the quota and governance reforms that were agreed to in 2010 were still yet to be implemented in 2014, largely due to the failure of the US Congress to ratify the reforms. Accordingly, with an eye to the BRICs, which had made their views known, Australia pursued this issue. For example, in April 2014, the Australian Treasurer on a visit to Washington called on the USA to act, arguing that 'the United States Congress is now the biggest impediment to that reform being delivered' and that the reforms were critical to ensuring that IMF remained 'legitimate, effective and central.'<sup>68</sup> And in the G20 meetings that followed, Australia, along with other countries, pushed the US administration to ratify the reforms. In fact, in February 2014 the G20 finance ministers for the first time expressly called on the USA to act.<sup>69</sup>

Australia's attempts to pursue issues that were in the interests of the BRICs were equally evident in the case of energy. As noted above, global energy governance reform was one area where Australia targeted USA and China cooperation, but it was also an area where the other BRIC countries had an interest. After all, the most prominent of the existing energy institutions, the IEA, which was established in the 1970s to address oil shocks, today does not include four of the top 10 energy consuming nations with 40 per cent of the world's population: China, India, Brazil and Russia.<sup>70</sup> Aware of this global governance gap and that some members of the BRICs, such as Brazil, were not always engaged on energy, Australia worked to put global energy governance reform on the G20 agenda, as part of their efforts to incorporate the BRICs into the international order.<sup>71</sup>

### *Issue coalition builder*

As chair of the G20, Australia also took on a more traditional middle power role of building issue-based coalitions. This reflected its reputational preference to be seen as a 'doer not a talker'. Australia worked to build issue-based coalitions on everything from IMF reform and energy governance to growth and infrastructure. As multiple G20 officials argued, 'we wanted to find issues we could build coalitions around', or as another official put it, 'we need to build coalitions to be seen as a constructive player because we are not powerful enough to swing it ourselves.'<sup>72</sup> Energy was one example, but officials also pointed to the collection of states that Australia managed to gather in support of the two per cent growth target announced at the G20 finance ministers' meeting in September 2014, despite strong opposition from some powerful European countries. The agreement to reduce the gap in participation rates between men and women by 25 per cent by 2025 was another.<sup>73</sup>

According to officials, the changing distribution of power created new spaces for Australia to operate in, which may not have been available when there are only 'two main blocks fighting it out'.<sup>74</sup> For example, as G20 officials from different countries noted, Australia is not a member of the G7 or the BRICs – the main formal groupings in the G20 – yet it is unique because it can connect countries from both groups by virtue of its close ties to the G7, such as via Canada, and its close ties to the BRICs because of its location in Asia and close economic relationship with China.<sup>75</sup> For example, Australia and Canada worked closely throughout 2014 and there was a close relationship between the Australian Sherpa Heather Smith and the Canadian Sherpa Simon Kennedy. The fact that both countries had very similar domestic political mandates also aided this relationship.<sup>76</sup>

Further, Australia's capacity to build coalitions is enhanced by its existing reputational attributes. As one G20 official from another nation pointed out,

One of the benefits for Australia is that Australia does not have the type of historical baggage that other countries have. There is not an adverse response to Australia's position like there is to the US or the UK. Australia is nimble and has a reputation for getting stuff done. People do not begrudge Australia.<sup>77</sup>

Because of its ties to other G20 members, Australia was able not only to build issue-based coalitions, but to use its prerogative as chair to limit the bargaining power of established coalitions or blocs in the negotiations, namely the G7 and the BRICs. While the BRICs in particular do not always act as a formal coalition, the G7 has previously sought to direct G20 outcomes. For example, in the past the G7 finance process has prepared an agreed text on an issue and then expected the G20 to endorse the text.<sup>78</sup> While the G20 process has changed, senior G20 officials did recall occasions when they were forced to use the position as chair to prevent G7 views dominating:

We were very firm to the blocs that we will not accept views from a bloc. If we received a view for example from the G7 on a particular issue, we would go back to them and say we want each individual country's view: 'You are in the G20 now; this is not the G7'.<sup>79</sup>

The reason is simple: any intrusion of power-based blocs, or regional blocs, limits the capacity to establish issue-based coalitions, one of Australia's principal strategies to influence G20 outcomes. However, this strategy naturally limits Australia's capacity to participate in similar groupings, such as MIKTA, which comprises Mexico, Indonesia, Korea, Turkey and Australia and was formed on the margins of the UN General Assembly in 2013.<sup>80</sup> In reality, it is an informal grouping of foreign ministers, which has not yet determined whether it wants to explicitly coordinate its activities. And, although it is not directly related to the G20 at this stage, its presence has caused discomfort within some parts of the Australian government because it has the capacity to undermine the credibility of Australian calls for other countries to coalesce around issues and not power-based blocs.

### **Technical manager**

In October 2013 at the final sherpa meeting in Moscow under the Russian presidency, Australian Sherpa Heather Smith outlined Australia's priorities for its presidency. While much of the presentation focussed on the issues that Australia wanted to pursue, Australia also made clear its desire to strengthen G20 processes.<sup>81</sup> This was consistent with the behaviour of previous middle power hosts, such as Mexico. For example, in 2012 Mexico had been

especially diligent in preparing for the summit and enhancing the legitimacy of the G20 by, among other measures, improving the outreach to non-state actors.<sup>82</sup>

With a view to both realising its preferences for the G20 to remain an effective forum and reinforcing its reputation as a builder in the international system, Australia took very seriously the secretariat functions that came with chairing the G20. Consistent with what middle power theory would expect, Australia sought to act as a technical manager that would improve the functioning of the G20. Interestingly, however, Australia made no attempt to use its position to push for a formal secretariat, which may have been expected by middle power scholarship, especially given that was the approach taken by South Korea in 2010 when it supported an earlier proposal for a secretariat.<sup>83</sup> Instead, Australia saw benefit in members having control of the secretariat function. In particular, there was a view that maintaining control of the G20 would make the forum more relevant for leaders.<sup>84</sup>

From the outset, as many G20 officials noted, 'there was pressure on Australia to reinvigorate the G20' and 'show that it could pull off the G20'.<sup>85</sup> Prior to assuming the presidency, Australia identified a series of technical reforms that it believed would strengthen the G20. Australia has often sought to demonstrate leadership via its technical competence, and it had taken similar steps in 2006 when it hosted the G20 finance ministers' meetings. In essence, there were two sets of reforms. The first set aimed to improve the day-to-day functioning of the G20, while the second focussed on improving the internal governance structures of the G20. First, in the months that followed the meeting in Moscow, Australia relayed to G20 members several specific steps it would take to improve G20 processes. These included limiting the G20 leaders' communiqué to three pages, circulating briefing materials – so-called 'issue notes' – at least 10 days prior to negotiations, and chairing engaging and dynamic meetings.<sup>86</sup> Second, alongside these measures, Australia also saw an opportunity to improve G20 governance by improving the coordination between the sherpa track, which represented leaders, and the finance track, which represented finance ministers and central bank governors. It also aimed to strengthen the troika arrangements, which in the absence of a secretariat meant that the G20 often lacked continuity. For instance, two officials from the Turkish government were placed in the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and, following the Brisbane summit, Australia provided Turkey with briefing notes and other technical assistance in preparation for its presidency.<sup>87</sup> In part, these measures also reflected the 'back to basics' approach of Prime Minister Tony Abbott, who pointed out, in language critical of his predecessor, that he did not want the G20 to be simply 'just another international talkfest'.<sup>88</sup> This was also the strategy pursued by Mexico in 2012 when it used the same catchphrase – back to basics – as it worked to streamline the G20 agenda ahead of the Los Cabos Summit.<sup>89</sup>

For Australia the overall aim of these measures was to ensure that the G20 'is mean and lean', and 'interesting enough that leaders keep coming back'.<sup>90</sup> In other words, Australia took on the role of technical manager to ensure that leaders invested their time and resources in a multilateral forum to which Australia belonged and one in which they viewed Australia as a valuable member. Or as one G20 official stated, 'there are also reputational gains from running a well-functioning G20'.<sup>91</sup> Whether or not Australia was successful it is arguably too early to assess, and none of the reforms amounted to a significant reconfiguration of G20 processes. It is clear, however, that technical competence remained a strategy that Australia employed, as middle power theory would predict.

## Conclusion

The existence of the G20 is testament to the shifting distribution of power in the international system. Yet to the extent that the G20 has been examined in international relations, the focus has been on the questions of the decline of the USA and the rise of the BRICs. While these countries will no doubt shape the future of global governance, the assumption has been that middle powers in the G20, such as Australia, have very limited capacity to influence international outcomes.

This article suggests otherwise. It argues that, as chair of the G20 negotiations in 2014, Australia behaved as a middle power as it worked to shape discussions and manage the global governance claims of the USA alongside the rising powers of the BRICs. The empirical data indicates that Australia had systemic, capability and reputational preferences which are broadly consistent with the expectations of middle power scholarship. Most importantly, Australia's systemic preference for an open, peaceful, liberal international order meant that Australia used its position as chair to strengthen cooperation between the USA and China and ensure that the G20 negotiations helped to bring the BRICs into the existing international order.

While Australia's preferences remained more or less consistent with the existing literature on middle powers, its strategies varied in response to a changing distribution of power in the international system. On the one hand, as would be expected, Australia acted as a great power manager, identifying issues where the USA and China would be willing to cooperate, such as on global energy governance reform, in much the same way as it tried to restrict economic conflict between the USA and Japan in the 1980s. Australia also sought to find issues to build coalitions around, and it worked as a technical manager to strengthen the effectiveness of the G20 by making small changes to the internal governance structure of the G20, such as the troika arrangements. This was consistent with the approach that South Korea and Mexico had taken as middle power hosts in 2010 and 2012. On the other hand, Australia employed strategies that have not previously been identified with middle powers, namely as an emerging power advocate. Acknowledging that the BRICS were underrepresented in international institutions, it pushed for the reform of organisations such as the IMF and the IEA, with an explicit desire to ensure that these countries signed up to the international order.

However, the strategies Australia employed had limits. Australia's capacity to manage the USA and China was dependent on not encountering direct opposition from either of these great powers. It was also bounded by the capacity of these states to manipulate Australia's role as chair for their own ends. As one official put it, an ally like the USA can also be a bully. Australia's strategy to build issue-based coalitions was also restrained by the capacity of blocs like the G7 or the BRICs to take common positions across the agenda, which clearly impede issue-based coalitions. Yet this also constrains Australia's capacity to participate in groupings or coalitions that are not based around issues, such as MIKTA. One way to address this would be for MIKTA to identify a single global issue that binds the members.

In this context, middle power strategies cannot be understood in the absence of a changing distribution of power in the international system. The case of Australia in the G20 suggests that though middle powers may maintain many of the same preferences, they will need to think creatively about the strategies they use to address the global governance claims of the rising powers. While acting as an advocate for these nations on some issues appears a

good starting point, one refrain from several G20 officials was that Australia was overly cautious.<sup>92</sup> It did not use its role as chair to take ambitious positions, such as on global energy governance reform, and marshal the resources to prosecute them. Nor did it actively consider more fundamental changes to the internal structure of the G20, which may have improved the effectiveness of the forum.

Future research should test these conclusions across other middle powers in the G20. Of course, the capacity to employ these strategies is likely to be more limited when the nation in question is not in the chair's seat at the G20 table. The fact that Australia was G20 president in 2014 is a unique opportunity to examine the role of a middle power when it is likely to be most active and its preferences and strategies are revealed. Turkey's position as chair in 2015 could provide a similar opportunity. A better understanding of the role of middle powers in the G20 will not only help to advance our knowledge about these nations, but, critically, it could lead to new insights about the competing global governance claims of the existing powers as well as of the rising powers of the BRICs, which these countries are so often trying to manage.

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### Notes

1. Weiss and Wilkinson, "Rethinking Global Governance?"; and Finnemore, "Dynamics of Global Governance."
2. Cooper and Alexandroff, "Introduction."
3. Nye, *Future of Power*, chap. 6.
4. Stephen, "Rising Powers, Global Capitalism."
5. Stewart, "Irresponsible Stakeholders?"

6. Kahler, "Rising Powers and Global Governance"; and Downie, "Global Energy Governance."
7. Cooper et al., *Relocating Middle Powers*; and Kirton and Kulik, "Systemically Significant Entrepreneurship."
8. Carr, "Is Australia a Middle Power?"
9. Cooper and Flandes, "Foreign Policy Strategies."
10. Cooper, "Squeezed or Revitalised?"
11. Lake, "State and International Relations."
12. Carr, "Is Australia a Middle Power?"; and Wesley, "Rich Tradition of Australian Realism."
13. Carr, "Is Australia a Middle Power?," 72; and Wilkins, "Australia: A Traditional Middle Power."
14. Ravenhill, "Cycles of Middle Power Activism," 323.
15. Cooper et al., *Relocating Middle Powers*, 19; and Cooper, "Challenging Contemporary Notions."
16. Nye, *Soft Power*.
17. Cooper et al., *Relocating Middle Powers*.
18. Ibid.
19. Higgott and Cooper, "Middle Power Leadership."
20. Gilley and Brown, *Middle Powers*; Cooper, "MIKTA and the Global Projection"; and Saxer, "Capabilities and Aspirations."
21. Mo, *Middle Powers and G20 Governance*; Cooper and Thakur, *Group of Twenty (G20)*; and Cooper, "Squeezed or Revitalised?"
22. Hajnal, *G20: Evolution, Interrelationships, Documentation*; and Kirton, *G20 Governance for a Globalised World*.
23. Slaughter, "Debating the International Legitimacy."
24. Alexandroff and Cooper, "Conclusion," 296.
25. Australian Government, *G20 2014: Overview of Australia's Presidency*.
26. Interview 18.
27. Australian Government, *G20 2014: Overview of Australia's Presidency*.
28. Wilkins, "Australia: A Traditional Middle Power," 151; and Cooper, "MIKTA and the Global Projection," 110.
29. See, for example, Sebenius, "Negotiation Analysis"; and Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously."
30. See, for example, Ikenberry and Mo, *Rise of Korean Leadership*.
31. de Brouwer, "Asian Century."
32. Interview 4.
33. Interview 11.
34. Interviews 3 and 11.
35. Stewart, "Irresponsible Stakeholders?"
36. Zoellick, "Whither China."
37. Interviews 3 and 17.
38. Interviews 11 and 17.
39. Interview 17.
40. Cooper, "MIKTA and the Global Projection," 100.
41. Interview 19.
42. Interview 20.
43. Higgott and Cooper, "Middle Power Leadership," 615.
44. Interview 12.
45. Interviews 1 and 18.
46. Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously."
47. Cooper et al., *Relocating Middle Powers*, 5.
48. Interview 1. In 2011, Obama announced that 2500 US marines would be permanently stationed in Darwin in northern Australia, a move that was questioned by Chinese officials and analysts; see Hartcher, "Obama to Announce US Marine Base in Darwin"; and McDonnell and Brown, "China, Indonesia Wary of US Troops."
49. Saxer, "Capabilities and Aspirations," 408.
50. Interview 11.
51. Downie, "Global Energy Governance."

52. Interview 3.
53. G20, *G20 Principles on Energy Collaboration*.
54. Interviews 3, 5 and 6.
55. Callaghan, "Banning Putin from the G20."
56. Kehoe, "Heat on Abbott."
57. Bourke, "G20 summit: Barack Obama."
58. Interview 9.
59. G20, *G20 Principles on Energy Collaboration*.
60. "Remarks by President Obama at G20 Press Conference."
61. Saxer, "Capabilities and Aspirations," 408.
62. Interview 7.
63. BRICS, *BRICS Partnership for Global Stability*.
64. de Brouwer, "The Asian century and the G20."
65. Interview 16.
66. Interview 11.
67. Stuenkel, "Financial Crisis, Contested Legitimacy."
68. "Joe Hockey blasts US."
69. The finance ministers' communiqué stated, 'We deeply regret that the IMF quota and governance reforms agreed to in 2010 have not yet become effective and that the 15th General Review of Quotas was not completed by January 2014. Our highest priority remains ratifying the 2010 reforms, and we urge the US to do so before our next meeting in April'. See G20 Finance Ministers.
70. Downie, "Global Energy Governance."
71. Interview 5.
72. Interviews 14, 15 and 19.
73. G20, *G20 Leaders' Communiqué*; G20 Finance Ministers.
74. Interview 11.
75. Interview 7.
76. Interview 12.
77. Interview 9.
78. de Brouwer, "Asian century and the G20."
79. Interview 14.
80. "Press Release Regarding the MIKTA Initiative."
81. "Concluding G20 Sherpas' Meeting."
82. Cooper and Thakur, *Group of Twenty (G20)*, 113.
83. Saxer, "Capabilities and Aspirations," 407.
84. Interviews.
85. Interviews 6 and 9.
86. Interviews 11, 13 and 14. In January 2014, Prime Minister Abbott stated that 'Australia's aim is a communiqué just three pages long'; see "Address to the World Economic Forum."
87. Interview 15.
88. "Tony Abbott Warns G20."
89. Callaghan, "Relaunching the G20."
90. Interview 17.
91. Interview 12.
92. Interviews.

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