



AUSTRALIA: FROM FOLLOWER TO PEER LEADER?

TANGUY STRUYE

*Professor of International Relations
 Université catholique de Louvain*

This paper argues that Australia has the opportunity to develop a more autonomous policy by encouraging collaborations among middle powers and by acting as peer leader. By following this path, Canberra would ensure the continuity of its influence towards the US and China, ultimately reinforcing its role in the region.

Australia is currently undergoing a political debate regarding its place in the Asian century and the policies it should adopt towards China and the United States. Indeed, while Canberra has sided with Washington for decades, some as White (2010, 2012) or Carr (2017) for example, are now questioning this relationship. This interrogation stems, on the one hand, from America's relative decline, and on the other hand, from the assertion of China as a regional power in the Indo-Pacific region. In addition, Australia depends on both the United States and China, respectively regarding security matters and economic issues. Moreover, geostrategic uncertainty shadows the region – partially due to a potential American disengagement stemming from President Trump's unpredictability and the 'America First' policy. As Foreign Minister Bishop mentioned in March 2017, many regional nations 'are in a strategic holding pattern and

waiting to see whether the United States and its security allies and partners can continue to play the robust and constructive role that they have for many decades in preserving the peace' (Murphy 2017). Additionally, Australia has to manage its constant oscillation between its common history with the United States and Europe and the reality of its Asian environment (Howard, 1995).

For Canberra, the issue is not whether to choose between Washington and Beijing, but rather how to gain influence over both great powers without endangering Australian's economic and security interests. Naturally, Australia's leeway will depend 'to a large extent on the form and state of the international system to which it belong' (Holbraad 1984, 212-213). States operate in dynamic processes and relationships, consequently, 'each type of situation created by the dynamics of this interaction – determined by the number of great powers and the level of their relations – presents to a range of theoretically possible roles to middle powers in the system' (Holbraad 1984, 8). If during the Cold War, the role of middle powers appeared as limited and restrained (bipolar world and closed alliances), transitional dynamics (volatile and loose alliances) coupled to a favourable conjuncture in the cur-

rent and transitioning world opens a window of opportunities. Now that the system is in transition, the role of middle powers has the potential to expend. For Australia's former Prime Minister K. Rudd, middle powers have to be creative: 'creative middle powers are uniquely placed to bring together major, regional and smaller powers alike to inform and shape solutions, since their strength comes from the good offices they bring to bear on regional and global problems and the persuasiveness of their arguments and the coalitions they are capable of building, not the assertion of direct power' (in Scott 2013, 6).

Australia has the opportunity to develop a more autonomous policy by encouraging collaborations among middle powers (Australia, South Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam) and also with secondary powers (Japan and India) through peer leadership. Thus, before being able to influence the two great powers, the first step is to enhance lateral peer cooperation as confirmed by the Turnbull government in its Foreign Policy White Paper of 2017: to reinforce its interactions with 'likeminded' middle powers, in particular Indonesia, Japan, India and South Korea (Foreign Policy White Paper, 2017: 4). Yet Canberra's strategy must remain subtle as its two main security and prosperi-

ty partners – United States and China – both represent the most important protagonists of the contemporary international system and the greatest rival geopolitical powers. Here, success is linked to flexibility and adaptation.

AUSTRALIA AS INITIATOR OF COOPERATION

The current distribution of power grants middle powers as Australia the occasion to advance their political, economic and security goals – so long as they work collectively, in a network-centric oriented way. By networks, we understand structures linking nodes (States) that share a common interest on specific issues (Hafner-Burton & Montgomery 2006; Hafner-Burton, Kahler & Montgomery 2009; Kahler 2009; Maoz 2010). Networks are meant to facilitate agenda setting, implementation, policy formulation, collective action and cooperation, and exercise influence. A well-managed network provides broader opportunities to a middle power, if it acts in a proactive and adaptive fashion, diversifies networks and strategically positions itself. Middle powers have the opportunity to re-position themselves, relying on strong influence skills, networks, and resources. However, since they have fewer capacities and means than great powers, middle powers must put greater emphasis on relations and processes. This is especially so because, as Hafner-Burton, Kahler and Montgomery emphasize, great powers such as the United States and increasingly China are powerful not only because of their capacities but also because of the weakness of network ties among the nodes on the periphery (Hafner-Burton, Kahler, Montgomery 2009, 572).

Therefore, if middle powers wish to be influential they need to cooperate by reinforcing ties between the nodes and develop lateral strategies (Landsberger 1961, 300). Lateral organization describes side-by-side relations and horizontal processes (coordination and consultation) among actors of a same level within a hier-

archy (power, status) sharing similar or common interests, goals and objectives. These elements can foster the development of a set of mutually reinforcing and interrelated policies and practices to achieve a common goal rather than operating as separate and distinct entities. For lateral cooperation to succeed, it is important to plan how to manage the interactions: 'The key to collaboration is initiating processes leading to shared understanding' (Khül, Schnelle, and Tillmann 2005, 180). Hence, lateral cooperation is characterized by the division of labour, and it is only possible if there is some degree of trust. The latter can be initially obtained by 'utilizing secondary theatres of engagement' (186) if necessary or by logrolling – trading of favours, or quid pro quo. A state that is socially powerful and central in a network 'may not only allow a node to access benefits from other network members, it may also let that node shape the flow of information among nodes and alter common understandings of relative capabilities, common interests or norms' (Hafner-Burton, Kahler, Montgomery 2009, 570).

The unique position in which Australia finds itself in its relations with the two great powers creates both an opportunity and an incentive for Canberra to assert itself as peer leader. Indeed, Australia has the opportunity to adopt a profile of 'initiator', 'role model' or 'mentor' of a peer-to-peer network with equal authority, power and responsibility (Baker 2014), to guide and facilitate a rapprochement among equals within a diverse group without behaving as a leader – a status that would not be granted in any case by the other middle or secondary powers. Thus, as peer leader, Canberra would be relationship-oriented, driven to serve rather than to lead first, by sharing information, building a common vision, learning from mistakes, listening to the other members and encouraging creative input from the members (Greenleaf 1977). In order to succeed, Australia needs to create a we-feeling, a we-ness among middle powers, defending a collective interest joined together in shared endeavour (Haslam, Reicher, and Platow 2011, 46 & 68).

To achieve this objective, Australia needs to behave as a peer prototypical leader, 'influential because of [its] position and the depersonalization process that assimilates members' behaviour to the prototype. [Australia] and [its] suggestions [would thus be] intrinsically persuasive because [it would be] embody the norms of the group; [it would] have referent power, or position power, and therefore [would] not need to exercise personal power' (Hogg 2001, 194). To achieve this role, Haslam, Reicher, and Platow recommend the three 'R's of identity leadership: Reflecting, Representing, and Realizing (2011, 205). Reflecting refers to understand the other middle and secondary powers (their history, culture, priorities...). Representing involves ensuring that actions and initiatives reflect the position of the other middle and secondary powers. Finally, realizing includes delivering, acting and achieving results. The best way for Australia to achieve this would be through interconnecting these powers in a 'stable network of patterned interactions' (Astley and Sachdeva 1984, 104).

THE WAY FORWARD

The recent cooperations (FTA's, military exercises, ...) between Australia and other middle and secondary powers (Japan, India, South Korea, Malaysia, Vietnam and Indonesia) demonstrates the potential motivation of these states to share the burden and to take greater responsibilities in their region. Yet, this fact also shows their desire for more autonomy, or even independence, from the United States and China. They do not want to be passive bystanders. On the contrary, they wish to be active stakeholders, that is, security-makers instead of mere security takers.

As a result, this new situation could turn the geographical location of Australia into an advantage rather than a weakness, thus reversing fundamental Australian strategic thinking. More than down under, Australia stands in the middle of the regional

geostrategic scene, a crucial condition to conduct its middle power diplomacy. Australia has to start to grasp the importance of strengthening its regional relations because 'a state that has many links with regional neighbours that are not well-connected themselves may be less likely to possess social power than a state that is part of a network with many other high-centrality members' (Hafner-Burton, Kahler, Montgomery 2009, 571). Finally, in the long term, Australia will probably face hardships to sustain its middle power status – especially when comparing its limited population and military budget to the region's overall growth in military spending and, to a lesser extent, to the rise of new middle powers on the regional and international scene (e.g. Indonesia). Thus, Australia's 'immersion in multiple interdependencies (would make it) functionally indispensable' (Cooper 1997, 106): the more Canberra will form a node within a network, the more it will gain power.

For the network to be efficient, Australia will have to take the initiative and lead, accelerate interactions between actors of the network, and adapt the institutional characteristics (or structure) of the network (Klijn, Steijn, and Edelenbos 2010). Such 'intraorganizational power', namely network centrality derives from the position of the state in a network rather than from its control of resources. Australia's power and ability to influence world affairs would thus be attached to its structural position within a network of middle powers and not only on 'resource dependencies within specific exchange relations' (Astley, Sachdeva 1984, 106). It's all about connectedness.

Thus, peer leadership is more about influence than control; it is also a more indirect than direct form of leadership, requiring leaders to create a work environment based on autonomy, empowerment, trust, sharing and collaboration' ('Rise of the Network Leader' 2014, 11). Consequently, if Canberra wishes to keep its influence in future international affairs, it must become the node and peer leader of the network.

Once the network becomes strong enough it could operate as 'geese' do. As a first step, Australia has to take the lead, as geese form a V-shape flying pattern with one goose in the lead and the others trailing behind. But as with geese, when the lead goose in the front gets tired, it rotates back into the formation and another goose takes the leadership position; after a while leadership rotates, empowering others to lead as well. Furthermore, by flying together they reduce air resistance and consequently go further than if they flew alone. By flying together, they are more visible and fly towards a common direction with the same goals. Naturally, this path would require a very active diplomatic policy of mediation and facilitation on behalf of Canberra. As Goldsmith and Eggers (2004, 157) observe '...network managers must possess at least some degree of aptitude in negotiation, mediation, risk analysis, trust building, collaboration, and project management...needing to be more like symphony conductors than drill sergeants'.

Australia will have to navigate through adversity: it will be confronted to the adoption of competing roles stemming from conflict of interests and pressure. In view of these conflicting and changing demands and roles, it will be difficult for Australia to reach consistent patterns of behaviour: to satisfy the requirements of one set of relationships, it may have to reduce its effectiveness in the management of another. Certainly, Canberra's success will come from balancing all these roles. Sometimes it will require trade-offs (Uyterhoeven 1989). In addition, role balancing will be influenced by the demands, expectations, and abilities of the United States and China. But concerning these two great powers, Australia has a central or privileged position compared to for example India, Japan or South Korea: it is positively connected with Washington and Beijing and can gain influence as credible broker; 'social capital can be turned into social power by a node that bridges structural holes in the network. A node that acts as a bridge or broker can gain influence through its centrality (defined as betweenness), because it

may provide the only link to the larger network' (Hafner-Burton, Kahler, Montgomery 2009, 571-572).

In fine, if Australia traditionally used to bandwagon – first with Great Britain, then with the United States –, the new economic, political and military realities of the Indo-Pacific are forcing Canberra into a period of adjustment. Australia has an opportunity to initiate a common vision and value system among middle and secondary powers and put into place a network reinforcing this vision through peer leadership

REFERENCES

- Astley, G. and Sachdeva, P. (1984) 'Structural Sources of Intraorganizational Power: A Theoretical Synthesis', *The Academy of Management Review*, 9 (1): 104-113.
- Baker, M. (2014) *Peer to Peer Leadership: Why the Network is the Leader*, San Francisco, Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Carr, B. (2017) 'If Australia listened to our hawks on China, we'd have been hung out to dry', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, May 24.
- Cooper, A. (1997) *Niche Diplomacy: Middle Powers after the Cold War*, London, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cooper, A. (2013) 'Middle Power Leadership and the evolution of the G20', *Global Summitry Journal*, 1 (1): 1-14.
- Cooper, A., Higgott, R., and Nossal K. (1996) *Relocating Middle Powers: Australia and Canada in a Changing World Order*, Vancouver, UBC Press.
- Goldsmith, S. and Eggers W. (2004), *Governing by network: The new shape of the public sector*, Washington DC, Brookings Institution Press.
- Greenleaf, R. (1977) *The Servant as Leader*, Indianapolis, Paulist Press.
- Hafner-Burton, E., and Montgomery, A. (2006). 'Power Positions: International Organizations, Social Networks, and Conflict', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 50(1): 3-27.

- Hafner-Burton, E., Kahler, M., & Montgomery, A. (2009) 'Network Analysis for International Relations', *International Organization*, 63 (3): 559-592.
- Haslam, A., Reicher, S. and Platow, M. (ed.) (2011) *The New Psychology of Leadership Identity, Influence, and Power*, New York, Psychology Press (Taylor&Francis Group).
- Hogg, M. (2001) 'A Social Identity Theory of Leadership'. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 5(3): 184-200.
- Holbraad, C. (1984) *Middle powers in International Politics*, New York, St Martin Press.
- Howard, J. (1995) *Australia's Links with Asia*, Discourse, April 12.
- John, J. (2014) 'Becoming and Being a Middle Power: Exploring a New Dimension of South Korea's Foreign Policy', *China Report*, 50 (4): 325-341.
- Klijin, E.-H., and Edelenbos, J. (2007) 'Meta-governance as Network Management' in E. Sørensen and J. Torfing (ed.) *Theories of Democratic Network Governance*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 199-214.
- Klijin, E.-H., B. Steijn and J. Edelenbos (2010) 'The Impact of Network Management on Outcomes in Governance Networks', *Public Administration*, 88(4): 1063-1082.
- Kühl, S., Schnelle, T. and Tillmann, F.-J. (2005) 'Lateral Leadership: An Organizational Approach to Change', *Journal of Change Management*, 5(2): 177-189.
- Landsberger, H. (1961) 'The Horizontal Dimension in Bureaucracy', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 6 (3): 299-332.
- Kahler, M. (ed.) (2009) *Networked politics: agency, power, and governance*, Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press.
- Maoz, Z. (2010) *Networks of nations: The evolution, structure, and impact of international networks, 1816–2001*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Murphy, K. (2017) 'Julie Bishop asks Trump administration to increase engagement in Indo-Pacific', *The Guardian*, March 14.
- Scott, D. (2013) 'Australia as a Middle Power: Ambiguities of Role and Identity', *Whitehead Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations*, Summer/Fall, 111-122.
- Uyterhoeven, H. (1989) 'General Managers in the Middle', *Harvard Business Review*, 67 (5): 136-145.
- White, H. (2010), 'Power Shift: Australia's Future Between Washington and Beijing', *Quarterly Essay*, 39: 1-74.
- White, H. (2012) *The China Choice: Why America Should Share Power*, Melbourne, Black Inc.