## CONCLUSION

This chapter has sought to underscore the major redirection of Australian foreign policy towards a focus on the region, after starting unpromisingly by focusing on concepts of Empire and alliance. Regional diplomacy is based on substantial regional economic connections and regional strategic perceptions. These factors have propelled an extraordinary activism on the part of Australia since the end of the cold war. Australia's regional diplomacy has contributed substantially to the creation of APEC and to ARF, although Australia has not yet been put to the test on issues in which a regional consensus on a particular issue is in conflict with United States policy. The main question we must ask is whether the hype has exceeded the realities, and in particular, whether ideas of regional community are presented in coherent, substantial, and sufficiently well-defined form.

# 5   Australia as a Middle Power

## INTRODUCTION

The shift in focus from 'alliance' to 'region' illustrates part of the dramatic change in Australian foreign policy that has taken place since the end of the cold war. Yet the idea of 'Australia's region' is ambiguous, being redefined to accommodate the foreign-policy agendas — military, economic, and cultural — that are seen to be the most important at any particular time. The more general shift in foreign policy can be described as a shift from alliance to *multilateralism*. Australia's great power alliance relationships have, in most respects, been *bilateral* relationships between Australia and Britain, or Australia and the USA. 'Multilateralism' refers to diplomacy based on multiple relationships and coalitions, and the development and utilisation of international organisations. It is not necessarily connected to events in Australia's region or regions.

## MIDDLE POWERS AND MULTILATERALISM

Multilateralism has been a major characteristic of Australian foreign policy at times of great power realignment and alliance uncertainty; it is not just a feature of the end of the cold war. The other notable periods of multilateralism were the end of the Second World War, with the diplomacy of Evatt, and the cold war *détente* that coincided with the Whitlam years.

Australia's multilateralism is linked to the idea that Australia is a middle power. In discussing the issues to which Australia's foreign policy will have to respond to into the twenty-first century, Gareth Evans and Bruce Grant argue that Australia already possesses a strong asset in 'our status as a middle power, with the *capacity that implies for effective*

*action and influence*' (1995, p. 343, emphasis added). The former Australian foreign minister deploys the term 'middle power' frequently and points to examples in which previous Australian governments have used the concept similarly. What *is* a middle power, and what *are* the capacities that it brings to international relations? Is the term 'middle power' quantifiable in any objective and meaningful way?

Intuitively the idea of a 'middle power' makes some sense. Australia is clearly not a great power, nor is it an insignificant power. For Evans, determining a middle-power status is a 'matter of balancing out GDP and population size, and perhaps military capacity and physical size as well, then having regard to the perceptions of others' (Evans & Grant 1995, p. 344). Evans and Grant draw on the work of Carsten Holbraad (1984). Holbraad's formulation, like other attempts to rank states according to particular groupings, embraced formalistic economic measurement — using GDP as the determining yardstick in calculating middle-power status.

Measured in terms of GDP, population, military capacity, or other such criteria, the concept suffers from the all-too-obvious problem of oversimplification. The criticism here is that it is not necessarily the level of GDP but the *composition* of the GDP that is the important consideration. Two states with similar levels of GDP will pursue very different foreign, economic, and political policies if one is dependent on agricultural production for revenue and the other on the export of manufactures. Different states have different patterns of historical, ecological, demographic, cultural, economic, political, and social development. And it is these elements, which underpin the GDP equation, that are important factors in determining a nation-state's capacity and willingness to act on particular foreign-policy issues.

A more systematic definition of middle power is offered by Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal. These scholars locate their analysis of two 'middle powers' — Canada and Australia — within the context of a changed international political and economic environment. They observe that since the mid-1980s the 'more traditional foreign policy concerns of a military-strategic nature were increasingly replaced by a mounting concern over the future of the international economic system' (Cooper et al. 1993, p. 4). Eschewing 'traditional definitions' of middle-power behaviour — size, population, power, or geographical location — Cooper et al. define their notion of middle power as 'based on the technical and entrepreneurial capacities of states' that provide

'initiative-oriented sources of leadership' (1993, p. 7). Kim Nossal (1993) takes up this 'Initiative' aspect as one element among five that could be deployed to enhance the task of defining what characteristics a middle power may possess. Nossal argues that of

> special importance to the activist style of middle power statecraft is the diplomatic initiative (usually with a capital 'I'). Typically, the Initiative will involve the middle power making a concerted effort to think through an international problem; generating a plan of action, often based on technical expertise; gathering support for its ideas from as many like-minded states as possible; and then presenting the great powers with a suggested set of solutions, or with a process that might lead to a political solution.
>
> (1993, p. 214)

This type of 'activist style', Nossal claims, propels the middle power towards operating within multilateral forums, which 'provide a legitimate entrée for smaller states into the affairs of the international community as a whole, a voice that would otherwise be denied them' (1993, p. 215).

Robert Cox extends this focus on the middle power's predilection for operating within a multilateralist framework:

> In modern times, the middle-power role … has become linked to the development of international organization. International organization is a process, not a finality, and international law is one of its most important products. The middle power's interest is to support this process, whether in the context of a hegemonic order or (even more vitally) in the absence of hegemony. Commitment to the process of building a more orderly world system is quite different from seeking to impose an ideologically preconceived vision of the ideal world order.

Reinforcing the point about the middle-power need for *order*, Cox claims that such states exhibit 'a commitment to orderliness and security in interstate relations and to the facilitation of orderly change in the world system [and that these] are the critical elements for the fulfilment of the middle-power role' (Cox 1989, pp. 826–7).

What distinguishes Cox's conceptualisation from other discussions of the middle-power thesis is his recognition that the interests of the middle powers are tightly bound to international order. It is, therefore, in these states' interests to promote normative interstate behaviour through the framework of international law that seeks to facilitate

cooperation and conflict resolution — the rationship agenda. As Cox notes, this behaviour is likely to increase during times of transition — for example, during the breakdown of hegemony. This important insight goes some way in explaining why states like Australia involve themselves in the multilateral processes.

## MULTILATERALISM: CONTEXT AND SETTING

Australia's position in the international system is on the fringe rather than at its core. Australia does have the capacity to influence some external events, but only in particular contexts. Generally Australia has little unilateral influence at the international level. Australia is also particularly vulnerable to sudden changes in the international system.

In considering the ability of Australia to shape the structure of the interstate system, the realist perspective — with its focus on pursuing interests through military power — is perhaps less relevant than the rationalist perspective, which seeks order by way of institutionalised conflict-resolution and negotiation. From the rationalist perspective, states who lack the power to exercise unilateral influence can still play a multilateral role. But what are the avenues that are available for it to protect and further its interests within a specific context of international relations?

In those periods when a strong alliance structure has existed, Australia has often pursued a decidedly realist foreign policy. Sometimes this ultra-realist position has placed Australia at the outer extreme of its principal ally's foreign policy, making Australian foreign policy even more conservative than that of the USA (Leaver 1990, p. 22). Australia's political leaders have sometimes asserted that they have acted as a brake on their principal ally during episodes of escalating confrontation. Where alliances either have not existed or have been poorly defined, Australia's foreign policy has tended to emphasise a strong moderating role by fostering multilateral solutions to issues of conflict. On these occasions it is possible to argue that Australia's foreign policy has been informed by the rationalist perspective. The particular global political context, issue, and level of perceived interest involved have determined whether Australia's foreign policy has been guided by realist or rationalist assumptions about the foreign-policy options that are most appropriate for the enhancement and protection Australia's interests (Indyk 1985).

During periods when a dominant state has been able to establish global control through military and ideological coercion — periods of hegemonic order — 'acceptable' rules and patterns of interstate behaviour have been defined, articulated, and often brutally enforced. For example, taking the period from the postwar years through to the early 1970s as the generally accepted period of United States hegemony, it is clear that the international political economy, international political institutions, and Western military–security alliance networks were developed to support the interests of the USA (Ruggie 1994).

Within that political, economic, and military framework, Australia was able to operate its foreign policy with some assurance that, if attacked, assistance could be sought from the alliance partner. Whether a suitable response would be forthcoming was never certain, and foreign policy was preoccupied with the payment of premiums on the alliance 'insurance policy'. Since the early 1970s there has been a qualitative and quantitative diminution of United States hegemony. In response to these changes, Australian policy-makers have sought, wherever and whenever possible, the promotion of a predictable and orderly international political system.

In an effort to halt, slow, or manage its decline, the waning hegemonic state, with its diminished ability to exercise military or economic leverage, may attempt to reinvigorate the rule- and norm-generating international political institutions and structures that were created at the height of its power. To secure its interests with diminished resources, the declining power may attempt to incorporate other states into 'power-sharing' arrangements that it would not have countenanced previously. Such 'power-sharing', as Richard Leaver (1993) has noted, can often turn out to be little more than 'burden-sharing'. Sharing the former hegemon's burden places allied states in a difficult position.

The disintegration of the 'old' order effectively opens up the multilateral processes and allows lesser powers an opportunity to play a role in managing the international system. The costs of being involved may, however, far exceed the potential benefits. Commitments may not match expectations, and particularly where interests do not overlap, there is likely to be strong resistance to becoming involved in situations thought to be peripheral to the core interests of either state. Indeed, former allies may find themselves at loggerheads on particular issues as the diminution of power and resources constricts the available

room to manoeuvre. Relations between former allies thus becomes additionally complicated during periods of hegemonic decline.

Against this backdrop, Australian policy-makers have been presented with a stark choice. Three policy options are available. They can adopt an isolationist foreign policy, knowing that, if there is the threat of conflict, there will be little chance of assistance from their former ally. The second option is to remain loyal to the 'bitter end'. While this option has some rhetorical value in the initial phase of transition, it tends to lose its saliency over the longer term as interests diverge more acutely and resources become targeted more narrowly. The third policy option is to assist in managing the transition period by facilitating cooperation within multilateral forums. In the post-cold war political environment of the 1990s, where there is a perception that the UN has been 'liberated' from bipolar rigidities, this latter option has become the focal point of Australia's foreign relations (Chater 1995, p. 157).

Unlike the relative stability and consistency of the cold war years, this current period of international relations has created a variety of issues to which Australian policy-makers must now respond. Managing foreign policy under these circumstances requires (perhaps demands) a deft hand on the tiller. It is within this wider context that Australia's current foreign policy can be best understood. With the international system now in a period of transition, Australia can, arguably, do little other than respond to the political changes occurring at the global level. This structural requirement to act is nevertheless influenced by policy-makers' decisions. Which particular options are pursued, how the state formulates its foreign policy, and what perceptions and theoretical perspectives inform the selection of particular policy choices over others are based on value judgements made by policy-makers.

The Australian Foreign Minister from 1988 to 1996, Gareth Evans, sought to develop his own particular brand of foreign policy. When first articulating what was to become an important feature of Australia's foreign policy under his guidance — the principle of 'good international citizenship' (GIC) — he was quick to make the qualification: 'Good international citizenship is perhaps best described, not least for the cynical, as an exercise in enlightened self-interest: an expression of idealistic pragmatism' (Evans 1989b, p. 13). But how much does the GIC idea differ from Gough Whitlam's 1973 comment that Australia needed to play an 'enlightened role in world affairs'? (House of Representatives, *Debates*, 24 May 1973, p. 2645).

Similarly, there are clear resonances between Evans's GIC and Bill Hayden's location of Australian foreign policy within 'a global moral consensus' (House of Representatives, *Debates*, 26 November 1985, p. 3665). How should we interpret such statements? Are they positive reflections of a developing maturity and independence in Australia's foreign policy approach since the early 1970s (Bell 1988)? Or are they just the recent manifestations of the politics of threat and fear (Pettman 1992)?

## HISTORICAL PATTERNS: THREE PERIODS OF TRANSITION

One method of conceptualising history, in this case the historical development of Australian foreign policy, is to sort significant parts of that history into periods by marking out events that appear to separate or divide. The difficulty is knowing precisely where to draw the line of demarcation. After all, history does not come neatly packaged into digestible sections; history is fluid. Yet there are periods that, in relatively compact time frames, force the revision and reformulation of foreign policy, often as the result of structural change. These are periods of transition. Identifying such episodic nodes is not too difficult. In some cases, these transitions occur when the state is confronted with the failure of its foreign policy — a time of intense crisis. The threat of military invasion, and with it the loss of territorial and political sovereignty, is an extreme example.

In Australia's recent history, there has only been one such case. Prime Minister John Curtin's December 1941 address, in which he appealed to the USA for military assistance 'without fear or favour', has often be seen as the point at which Australia's foreign policy shifted from its reliance on Britain as Australia's 'protector' to dependence on its new Pacific ally. Curtin's address needs to be viewed in the context of Britain's wartime military commitments and constraints. The USA was the only power with the resources to push back the Japanese military. It also needs to be remembered that the USA entered the war because of the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor. In that sense, the war in the Pacific was predominantly the USA's concern, and United States military strategy required secure bases and supplies. Australia provided these. United States assistance to Australia during the war was, therefore, bound up in mutual or overlapping interests.

Although times of intense crisis do trigger significant reassessment, these periods are, in a sense, artificial, with the immediate threat taking on an all-consuming importance. It is only when the crisis has ebbed and the intensity has diminished that the policy-makers can turn their minds to reconstructing a foreign policy that will protect against a repetition of the past events. Thus it is not at the times of immediate and intense crisis that the student of foreign policy can find patterns or themes that reveal ongoing constraints and opportunities to reformulate foreign policy. Crisis may well generate change, but there is a lag between the time of crisis and the reformulation of policy.

The important phases occur when Australia's policy-makers are forced to consider foreign-policy options in situations in which Australia and its primary ally have no overlapping interests. This does not entirely invalidate notions such as 'protector', or a 'great and powerful friend' or 'patron'. In the world of states, interests are always dynamic and often highly divergent, even between states who are able to genuinely profess a special relationship. There is nothing in the state system that can guarantee protection from aggression. Friendly states may condemn an attack, but unless their interests are threatened, it is unlikely that they will intervene to support the victim.

Bearing this discussion in mind, three periods of transition in the postwar system can be discerned. Again it is important here to note the lack of a clear definition. The first phase can be identified as a five-year period in which several important events occurred 1945–50. The second phase began in the late 1960s and early 1970s and lasted through to the mid-1970s. The final period is closely aligned with the end of the cold war: from 1990 to the present. To underscore the point once more, these are periods in which Australian policy-makers found themselves having to respond to major changes occurring at the system level.

## TRANSITION 1: FROM EVATT TO ANZUS

In the period between the end of the Second World War and the early 1950s, Australia's political leaders were confronted by the immediate problem of how to formulate a foreign policy that would offer the highest level of security. Sandwiched between the wartime military commitment and the tenuous, but nonetheless real, ratification of the ANZUS treaty, this half-decade contained some important indicators of the nature of Australian foreign policy.

One possible reading of this period is that Australia's political leaders simply recognised the reality of the moment. British power had all but collapsed, and thus the logical position was to find another 'protector'. Moving from the scant protection offered by the defoliated 'oak' to the shelter of the sturdy 'redwood' is a captivating but inadequate metaphor for this phase. The transition was not that simple and did not fully take root until the 1960s. Although the USA held the atomic monopoly, it was only a matter of time before others would obtain a similar capacity. Atomic arms racing was a strong possibility. And as was the case at the end of the First World War, by the close of the Second World War many felt that the system of power politics and interlocking alliances that had been such a prominent feature, if not the catalyst, of both wars should not be allowed to reassert itself.

In the immediate postwar period, Australia's political leaders believed that participation at the UN would enhance their ability to secure what they perceived to be Australia's interests. This participation was never promoted as an alternative to engaging in alliance politics with the USA, Britain, or both. The image that emerges, therefore, is one in which Australia's political leaders were using all possible levers in an attempt to secure perceived interests and operating to insure against any unexpected contingency that might arise. At times, as Carl Bridge notes, this process unleashed contradictions, but these were never allowed to undermine the fundamental importance of the overarching alliance structure (1991, p. 6).

Having faithfully served the allied cause during the Second World War, the ALP's wartime foreign minister, Dr Herbert Vere Evatt, believed that Australia had earned a special place in the postwar order. 'In the Pacific', Evatt had argued, 'we fight not for ourselves alone but as trustees for the United Nations, particularly for the British Commonwealth of Nations' (Evatt 1945, p. 130). As Evatt readily acknowledged, Australia was 'vitally concerned in the establishment of a successful peace and world security system' because of its 'vulnerable position' (Evatt 1945, p. 210).

Furthermore, stressing the important function that states such as Australia could perform within this new order, Evatt argued, 'It must be remembered that a so-called small Power may in certain areas and in special circumstances possess great, if not decisive influence' (Evatt 1945, p. 212). It was hardly surprising, therefore, that the Australian–New

Zealand ANZAC Agreement (Canberra Pact) was situated within this broader context. Evatt argued:

> It would be wrong to contend that Australia and New Zealand can have an exclusive concern with the future of any part of the Pacific region. In particular, without the continued interest and active participation of the United States (as well as the United Kingdom) in arrangements for welfare and security, there is no hope of stability and harmonious development in this area.
>
> (House of Representatives, *Debates*, 30 November 1944, p. 2536)

In guiding Australia's foreign policy, Evatt chose a course that he perceived would enhance Australia's security, not through a simple alliance agreement with any particular 'great power' — Britain's inability and the USA's unwillingness left few options — but within a layered system. This policy approach found expression in both Evatt's support of multilateralism and in his desire for a strong regional alliance. Although Evatt's multilateralism was focused on the UN, this was not to the exclusion of the British Commonwealth. Nor was it the case, in Evatt's mind, that multilateralism and alliances were mutually exclusive policies.

Evatt's assessment was developed as a way of protecting what he perceived to be Australian interests in the postwar global context. His discussion of United Nations Trusteeship — Australian political control of Papua New Guinea — was as much about 'forward defence' and the 'strategy of denial' as it was about transmitting positive messages to a wider audience that Australia was willing to assist in the decolonisation process and to accept its responsibilities as a regional power. Similarly, his successful promotion of the domestic jurisdiction principle in the UN Charter was bound up in a recognition that it would not be in Australia's interests to have its human rights record discussed openly within the UN, particularly when Australia was attempting to establish durable relations with neighbouring states for which the issue of race had a specific poignancy.

Evatt's decision to reformulate Australia's foreign policy in the five years after the end of the Second World War was rapidly overtaken by events beyond Australia's control. The cold war became entrenched, and East–West tensions shaped the 1950s and 1960s. Australia's foreign-policy-makers did not withdraw totally from multilateralism to alliance politics as ANZUS stamped its mark on foreign policy. But

gone was the earlier sense of urgency in using these multilateral forums as rule-governing institutions of interstate behaviour. Expectations generated by the all-too-brief multilateral moment of the mid- to late 1940s soon dissipated as the UN Security Council became yet another arena of superpower rivalry.

## TRANSITION 2: FROM WHITLAM TO FRASER

In the period between the late 1960s and the early 1970s, the international system again underwent fundamental change. Beneath the political *détente* in United States–Soviet relations and a *rapprochement* between the USA and China, there was a growing awareness that the postwar international system was beginning to crumble. In addition, rising global inflation, a by-product of the war in Vietnam (Riddell 1989), further undermined confidence in the economic power of the USA; this economic pessimism was accompanied by the all-too-obvious looming military defeat in Vietnam.

President Nixon's Guam Doctrine, announced in July 1969, aimed to substantially reduce the USA's military commitment in the Asia-Pacific region — Korea excepted. The USA's unilateral action ending the Bretton Woods international monetary system in 1971 — the foundation of the international economy since the late 1940s — pointed to the deepening crisis in the United States economy. United States hegemony was clearly declining (Mack 1986; Foster 1985; Strange 1988). For a nation like Australia, which had been inextricably woven into the fabric of *pax Americana*, the new realities were deeply disturbing.

Coupled with the British 'East of Suez' policy some two years before, the Guam Doctrine articulated what was essentially a 'West of Hawaii' policy. This signalled a reassessment of 'great power' military involvement in Australia's region (Harper 1976). Since this region had always been of primary strategic importance to Australia, the reduced military commitment of the USA and Britain required Australia to reconfigure its relations with the surrounding states. In contrast to the principally strategic interest of the 1950s and 1960s, the relationship between the region and Australia was now moving towards one of greater political and economic involvement (Camilleri 1973). This was the new political environment in which the Whitlam government would have to refashion Australia's foreign policy (Mediansky 1972; Miller 1974a; Miller 1974b).

Multilateralism offered the Whitlam government an opportunity to adjust its foreign policy to accommodate the new regional and global realities without moving too far away from the established and familiar political institutions, which still reflected the values and politics of the 'old order' (Albinski 1977, pp. 248–51). Whitlam's success in redirecting Australia's foreign policy was, however, largely a matter of timing. As he later acknowledged, 'had we come to power in 1969, all our initiatives in foreign policy would have been much more difficult to achieve and much more violently opposed than they were' (Whitlam 1985, p. 26). The changes wrought by Whitlam were based on a *realpolitik* assessment of the changing international order (Bull 1975a; 1975b). Regional issues were important within that process.

The acknowledgment that Australia's future was increasingly bound to the region required not only the formulation of sound foreign policy, but also a serious reassessment of Australia's domestic policy (Hastings 1977). Rather than moving to initiate significant change, Whitlam adopted a middle-course strategy. He sought to maintain existing security and economic ties with Australia's traditional partners, while at the same time cautiously building diplomatic and economic links in the region. In order to accomplish this, Whitlam sought to recast Australia's image. An attack upon racism was an important part of this strategy.

Acknowledging a racist history and speaking out against racism as practised in other states became an important, if not a fundamental, part of the Whitlam government's foreign policy (Altman 1973, pp. 101, 105–6; Lonie 1971, p. 66). His argument that support for racism abroad was tantamount to acceptance of racism domestically galvanised Australian foreign and domestic policy (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 November 1972). Condemning racism in southern Africa offered the most appropriate vehicle for Australia's new diplomacy. It would be too simplistic to suggest that Whitlam targeted southern Africa because it was an area of diminishing importance for Australia and one that was far removed from Australia's immediate region. At the time, the White, minority-ruled state of Rhodesia was the subject of UN Security Council sanctions (Polakas 1980). Supporting multilateral sanctions against Rhodesia allowed the Whitlam government to express its abhorrence of racism, as well as to be seen to fulfil its international obligations (Goldsworthy 1975, pp. 1–5; Clark 1973; Clark 1974), simultaneously legitimating and reinforcing the processes of multilateralism — processes that were becoming increasingly important in the international system.

Significantly, Australia shared a common heritage with Rhodesia and South Africa: all three were White settler colonial states with a similar imperial connection. By openly condemning the political structure of these White, minority-ruled states, Whitlam was able not only to establish credibility by attacking 'kith and kin', but also clearly placed these states beyond the pale of international standards, so overcoming what John Miller once termed the problem of 'choice and association' (1971, p. 134). Local racism, whether in Australia or in the region, was of a lesser degree than the particular variant of racism to be found in southern Africa.

Promoting an anti-racist policy in this manner, Whitlam sought to realign Australia's foreign policy with the new realities of a changing international environment (Willesee 1975, p. 7). Here domestic and foreign policies presented themselves as two sides of the same coin. Whitlam's apparent success stemmed not from the abandonment of traditional methods of statecraft, but rather from a clear and accurate appraisal of what was perceived to be in Australia's national interests and how best to achieve these goals (Camilleri 1973, pp. 11–13). Against the backdrop of Australia's muted support for White, minority-ruled states during the 1960s (Menzies 1967, p. 192; Howson 1984 p. 176), Whitlam's redirection of policy did appear to be a 'leap' rather than the 'twist' that it really was (Mackie 1976).

When Malcolm Fraser was elected prime minister in 1975, he continued with many of his predecessor's foreign policies. In some areas, the Fraser Liberal-led coalition government strengthened and extended the foreign policy of the Whitlam era. In particular, Fraser played an important role in the negotiations that eventually led to the creation of the independent African state of Zimbabwe (Neuhaus 1988; Ingram 1979, pp. 275–83). The Fraser government appeared to view the Commonwealth as the most appropriate multilateral institution to further Australia's interests (Higgott 1981, p. 228). Perhaps, like the ALP's wartime prime minister, John Curtin, Fraser also thought that 'Australia was a bigger fish in the Commonwealth pond than it could ever aspire to be in either the American or the United Nations ponds' (Day 1991, p. 68). Perhaps, too, Fraser was less concerned that the Commonwealth was, as Martin Wight once asserted, 'a ruminant, not a carnivore, in the international jungle' (1978, p. 123).

The area in which the Fraser government did diverge sharply from the foreign policies it had inherited was in relation to the USSR. Fraser's preoccupation with a perceived Soviet naval build-up in the Indian Ocean generated significant difficulties with a number of regional states. Fraser's warnings to United States President Jimmy Carter about the need for the USA to reassert its regional dominance not only offended many of Australia's neighbours, but it also failed to elicit the sort of response Fraser had originally sought (Girling 1977; Cheeseman 1993, pp. 9–12).

## TRANSITION 3: END OF THE COLD WAR — INITIATIVE-TAKING AND COALITION-BUILDING

During the Hawke–Keating period, patterns of multilateralism continued and strengthened. Multilateral initiatives under the ALP's foreign ministers in this period, Bill Hayden (March 1983–August 1988) and Gareth Evans (September 1988–February 1996), reached new levels. These political leaders sought ways of legitimating and rationalising their chosen foreign-policy directions. Not surprisingly, the ALP made much of the 'Evatt tradition' (specifically his role as one of the architects and founders of the UN) and used the middle-power terminology with ever-increasing frequency. However, the international system has undergone substantial changes since the early 1980s, when the ALP first came to office.

It was not until the mid-1980s that the Hawke government began to fully engage in multilateral processes. During the Reagan presidency, the USA actively blocked any substantial movement within the UN and in any other international forums in which it carried influence. There was little incentive for the Australian Labor government to continue pushing for policy change at the international level, where the USA considered that its interests would be undermined by any multilateral agreements not tightly bound to its preferred policy outcomes. Nevertheless, the Hawke government persisted with multilateral initiatives. In so doing, the government consciously attempted to pursue its multilateral objectives without alienating its powerful ally.

Bill Hayden sought to articulate this difficult position:

We are part of a discernible community of nations with the flexibility and independence to refuse to be limited by what the super-powers and their

conservative followers might insist is the iron logic of a purely bipolar world system … This is why we involve ourselves in the great international social issues.

This is why we set ourselves the continuing task of building bridges between groups, particularly in the critical area of disarmament. This is why we sought membership of the Security Council and have offered our strong support for multilateral solutions to the urgent issues of our time.

(House of Representatives, *Debates*, 26 November 1985, p. 3666)

Hayden chose his words carefully. His criticism of the 'super-powers' avoids any direct reference to the USA at a time when President Reagan's cold war rhetoric had reached its zenith — to the extent that is was threatening global instability. Moreover, he highlighted the role that Australia could play in these difficult times by 'building bridges' and emphasised Australia's support for 'multilateral solutions'.

Faced with United States intransigence at the UN, the Hawke government pursued its policy within other international and regional political forums — the Commonwealth and the South Pacific Forum. Nonetheless, where these forums articulated policy that was perceived by the Reagan presidency as counter to United States interests, the government moved quickly to avoid possible conflict with the USA. The turning-point came in 1986. When Reagan and Gorbachev met to begin talks aimed at restricting the further production of nuclear weapons and reducing existing stockpiles, the Hawke government embarked on a range of initiatives designed to facilitate the disarmament process.

Casting itself in the role of 'honest broker', the Hawke government quickly set about the process of coalition-building. The government launched a series of international initiatives that it perceived to be important to Australia's interests. Among the list of initiatives that the Labor government claimed to be significant were the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), the Madrid Protocol (to the Antarctic Treaty), the Australian peace proposal on Cambodia; and the Cairns Group (agricultural reform of the GATT agreements). Gareth Evans would argue that these are policy initiatives that distinguish a middle power (Evans & Grant 1995, p. 346).

Evans acknowledged that these foreign-policy initiatives were in response to international changes. Moreover, he was keenly aware that the pace of reform is likely to be unrelenting:

We will not be able to linger on past achievements; nor will we have the luxury of stepping back from the flow of events. We need now to build on our achievements, develop the capabilities we have established, and have the stamina to pursue favourable outcomes to the many courses of action already initiated, and the many new activities which the future holds. And we need to do this in a way which is sensitive to the particular currents and nuances of our region.

(Evans & Grant 1995, p. 355)

## THE LIMITATIONS OF MULTILATERALISM

Australia's current foreign policy draws upon a strong tradition of multilateralism. This tradition is not necessarily a Labor tradition, but Labor governments have been in office at times when multilateral diplomacy has been encouraged by external events. The Liberal-led coalition has nevertheless articulated a multilateralist approach during its recent period in the wilderness. Multilateralism has been very much a part of the rationalist approach at times when the international system has been in a period of transition. When there has been a higher degree of stability within the system, the tendency has been to revert to alliance politics.

There can be little doubt that the end of the cold war brings opportunities for states such as Australia to take a more global approach in their foreign relations. However, the historical analysis presented here, particularly the focus on the three transition phases, signals that current foreign policy, while rating high on the activism scorecard, is yet to show a significant swing away from traditional methods of statecraft.

An international institution is a power structure, whether it be the UN, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), or its replacement institution, the World Trade Organisation (WTO). As such, these institutions are not forums based on the equality of their member states. Within these political institutions, key states have the power to shape and determine policy outcomes.

A case in point is the UN. Effective action undertaken by this body is determined by the permanent members of the Security Council. Suffice to say that these states take positions determined principally by their own interests. Therefore, middle-power influence is highly contingent on the interests of the great powers. Where interests between

great and middle powers diverge, it is hardly surprising that the interests of the former take precedence over the interests of the latter. Gareth Evans's attempt to generate a program of reform of the UN was set out in his book *Cooperating for Peace* (1993); the program comprised a raft of reforms that he argued would strengthen the institution and make multilateralism work more efficiently (Lawson 1995).

The ability to pursue these initiatives effectively is dependent upon the relative openness of the multilateral process. However, there are dangers for Australia in looking to the UN as the mainstay in its foreign-policy initiatives. While the re-emergence of cold war politics is highly unlikely, there is a strong possibility that the UN will yet again become emasculated by the politics of its major benefactor. As Evans notes, the Republican victory in the 1995 congressional elections in the USA means that 'the bottom has fallen out of the UN reform market'. Has Australia placed too much emphasis on multilateralism and yet again missed the opportunity to establish strong and durable bilateral relations (other than those it has attempted to form with traditional allies)?

## CONCLUSION: 'MIDDLE POWER' — AN UNDER-DEVELOPED CONCEPT

A difficulty with the orthodox concept of 'middle power' is that it posits a range of static and particular interests that are supposed to shape the policy-formulation process. Questions about how these interests conflict with the interests of other states, particularly allies, or how they might assume a specific importance in a changing international political environment, are left unexplored. A similar problem exists with the recent literature on multilateralism. Much of this work has been particularly narrow in scope. Overall, most of this scholarship could be loosely categorised as dealing with the multilateralism of United States interests (Keohane & Nye 1985; Keohane 1990; Ruggie 1993; Karns & Mingst 1990). Absent is any strong sense of a structural explanation that can account for the changing nature of interests.

At the descriptive level, the idea of 'middle power', as a measure of capacity, holds little value. Attempts to precisely measure or quantify what defines a middle power soon collapse into subjective claims about a state's level of foreign-policy activism. Similarly, at the prescriptive level, it has been shown that, while states pursue particular

interests, which on occasion may overlap with others, there is no determining logic of 'middle-powerness' that will bring these states' interests into conformity. States' interests more often diverge than coincide. Why, then, does the idea of 'middle power' hold sway within policy-making elites?

The appeal and utility of the middle-power concept for policy-makers is its durability. As a general, although poorly defined and specified, descriptive term, 'middle power' offers policy-makers a constant yet suitably mutable explanatory framework to rationalise and legitimate their policy choices. The concept of 'middle power' overlays the realist-versus-rationalist discourse. Conceptually, the middle-power thesis slides easily between alliance and multilateralism.

Where an alliance structure dominates, for instance, the middle power concept can be deployed by political leaders and policy-makers to explain the prevailing international power structure and Australia's role within it. Australia can be a 'middle-power ally'. Here notions of regional policing as part of a greater alliance structure dominate. Yet when the system changes, the image of a middle power is transformed into that of a multilateral actor. While the form is elastic — thus providing flexibility for the policy-makers — the label remains the same, and as such, this maintains the all-important appearance of policy consistency and continuity.

Both realist and rationalist conceptualisations of the middle power offer policy-makers a role to play. Policy-makers need to legitimate their existence, particularly in liberal-democratic states, as much as they need to rationalise their policy perceptions and choices to domestic and international audiences. In that sense, the idea of a middle power is as much about the relationship between the policy-makers and the population as it is about making foreign policy. Policy legitimation is thus an important aspect of foreign policy. In foreign policy there is a strong requirement to establish a high degree of consistency across time and contexts, and between changes in government. The 'middle-power' idea thus becomes a useful explanatory framework that allows policy-makers room to manoeuvre. Devoid of a specific form, and not bound strictly by context, the idea of 'middle power' is used to 'sell' foreign-policy decisions.

Domestic consensus becomes particularly necessary during periods of transition, when the population will be required to bear the costs of foreign economic and political policies that generate significant forms

of domestic economic restructuring. Policy-makers are required to cooperate, collaborate, and more importantly, compete with other states. Policy-makers who recognise the limits of their state's unilateral power are reduced to trying to build coalitions of overlapping interests. It is at the level of international policy-making elites that the middle-power thesis finds its real niche. Policy-making elites can use the 'idea' of shared interests as a way of communicating across borders in an effort to build coalitions of like-minded states and to encourage commonality of action.

This political utility comes at the cost of analytical and conceptual utility. The ambiguity of the 'middle-power' idea — between a realist/alliance-oriented idea and a rationalist/international order-oriented idea — may inhibit Australia from developing a more strategic coherence in its multilateral diplomacy. Evans's concept of 'Good International Citizenship' (GIC) seems to reflect these limitations.

On the one hand, the statements about GIC can be seen as part of the rationalist discourse in which cooperation, mediation, and an ability to play a constructive role in international affairs are vital components of the multilateralist agenda. On the other hand, these statements can also be viewed as being little more than legitimating rhetoric for a foreign policy that is still overly reliant on realist perceptions (based on threats to sovereignty) and prescriptions (self-reliance). For example, despite the promotion of human rights as an important feature of today's foreign policy, critics of GIC would argue that these concerns fade when the hard issue of commerce intervenes (Goldsworthy 1994). The fact that Evans lists GIC third in his summary of Australia's national interests seems to indicate that these issues are accorded a relatively low priority, rather than the commitment to a thoroughgoing rationalist, multilateral agenda that the concept appears to imply, and that the post-cold war (dis)order may require.