



Australia the ‘good international citizen’? The limits of a traditional middle power

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ABSTRACT

Australia is often described as a ‘good international citizen’ (GIC), which is intertwined to its status of ‘quintessential’ middle power. However, a number of elements might undermine both notions. This research reviews the concept of GIC and contributes to this niche of IR theory by providing a dedicated definitional framework, which consists of: i) the respect of the international law; ii) multilateralism; iii) the pursuing of humanitarian and idealist objectives; iv) an active support for the rules-based order; and v) a congruous identity matched by consistent domestic policies. After assessing the country’s foreign and domestic policies against this, it finds that Australia has damaged its GIC credentials due to a number of reasons, including: the hard-line policies against seaborne asylum seekers; the participation in missions that are not sanctioned by the UN; the transformation of its global multilateralism into a selective regionalism; the budget cuts to foreign aid; a controversial attitude towards climate change mitigation; and a preference for the US-led global order over a rules-based international society. Far from criticising the country’s foreign policy in its entirety, it argues that in the 21st century Australia behaves as a ‘neutral international citizen’, and a traditional but not ‘quintessential’ middle power.

KEYWORDS

Australian foreign policy;
good international citizen;
middle power; international
law; multilateralism

Introduction

An ‘international society’, rather than a simple ‘international system’, traditionally requires states to conceive themselves as bound by shared norms and collective institutions (Buzan 1993). As logic dictates, if a state’s society consists of citizens, each with formal rights and duties, then it follows that an international society comprises international citizens, whose membership can be defined in a comparable manner. At a basic level, as it requires some degree of supranational sovereignty, international citizenship is generally equated with membership to the United Nations (UN), which enshrines a number of ideals that have been instrumental in the development of the contemporary society of states, therefore representing an institutionalised (if imperfect) version of it (Shattell 2008, 137–158). The notion of ‘good international citizen’ (GIC) stems from these considerations, and, despite lacking a universal definition, not unlike many other concepts in international relations, it is commonly employed to describe

law-abiding and cooperative nations (Pert 2014, 4–16). An additional concept—older in its conception, though bearing a similar definitional ambiguity—is that of middle powers, a term that may be used to represent a country with considerable but second-tier material capabilities, a nation displaying normative and multilateral attitudes, a state that self-identifies with this status and behaves accordingly, or, in rarer cases, a combination of all of the above (Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal 1993, 17–19).

These two concepts are here presented together for two reasons: first, as they are inter-related; and second, because they apply equally to Australia. With regards to the first motivation, middle power theory (MPT) defines middle powers according to a range of criteria, and of these definitional parameters, at least two reflect the notion of ‘good international citizen’. As per the second point, Australia has often been depicted, either implicitly or explicitly, as a GIC by a wide range of people, including politicians, academics, lawyers, and journalists. Among them, the most emphatic voice has been that of Evans, who has been the first to publicly link such a concept to Australia in 1988 (Evans 1989a, 9). As a result, the significance of ‘good international citizenship’ for Australian political discourses is easily discernible thanks to the presence of a number of publications dedicated to it (Bell 1997; Horner and Connor 2014; Pert 2014, among the many). The country’s association with middle powerdom, on the other hand, is much older, and it was established thanks to Evatt’s intense diplomatic work during the preparation of the 1945 San Francisco Conference (Holbraad 1984, 60–64). In a similar fashion to ‘good international citizenship’, but to a much larger scale, Australia as a middle power has been the object of abundant scholarly research, to such an extent that it is generally considered an ‘archetypal’, ‘ideal’, or ‘quintessential’ middle power, (Efsthathopoulos 2015, 54; Wilkins 2019).

And yet, despite the country’s considerable and long-standing association with such concepts, part of the current scholarship focusing on either Australian domestic or foreign policy highlights a number of elements that undermine the very notion of Australia as a ‘good international citizen’, and, consequently, that of an ‘exemplary’ middle power as well. The extant literature identifies some key issue areas, including the securitisation of maritime immigration and the severe attitude towards asylum seekers (Kampmark 2017), a controversial approach to climate change (Tangney 2019), a meagre record in terms of rights of Indigenous peoples (Synot 2019), and an awkward international posture, torn between the support for the rules-based order on the one hand, and that to the US—often resorting to unilateralism—on the other (Raymond 2019). This ongoing and increasingly-heated debate has long transcended the country’s borders, and has sparked numerous international discussions on Australia’s track record in the above areas, most notably at (though not limited to) the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2020).

In consideration of the importance of both the GIC and the middle power notions for Australian domestic and foreign policy, and since the above issues warrant more specific and up-to-date research, this article aims to ascertain Australia’s actual status, examining whether it can still be defined a ‘good international citizen’. This notion is a precondition for the status of ‘quintessential’, ‘archetypal’, or ‘exemplary’ middle power. Such labels are interchangeably employed in the literature to illustrate the same idea: states displaying the entirety of quantitative (capabilities, impact) and qualitative (behaviour, identity) attributes conventionally ascribed to middle powers. Accordingly, scholars have framed

countries like Canada, Australia and South Korea as exemplary types of the middle power class (Bellamy 2020; Gilley and O'Neil 2014;), which warrants the question of whether this elevated image *still* applies to Australia. After all, as Robertson (2017) argues, any state can potentially be deemed a middle power, as long as it meets specific criteria. To this end, it is useful to distinguish between the above labels, which are explicitly theory-driven, and 'traditional' middle powers, which are here understood from a semantic viewpoint, as states that have been *traditionally* (that is, for a long time) described as such, without necessarily satisfying all of the relevant criteria. Focusing on the understudied theoretical implications, this article seeks to reinterpret Australia's international image with an emphasis on greater conceptual clarity and accurate definitions, whose importance for the discipline of IR has been aptly argued for by scholars of this field (Robertson 2017).

To effect this, the following section explores these two concepts and draws the main inclusion criteria from them, prior to examining the country's main policies against the five literature-derived parameters of international law; multilateralism; humanitarianism and idealism; activism; and congruous identity and domestic policies. This study finds that, from a theoretical standpoint, Australia is not a GIC anymore and therefore no longer an 'exemplary' middle power, but rather a 'neutral international citizen' and, consequently, a traditional but not 'quintessential' middle power, as per the above distinction. It is worth noting that this article does not seek to embark on a criticism of the country's foreign policy, since it specifically pursues a clear assessment of the theoretical implications arising from the ongoing debates that concern it.

Good international citizenship and middle power theory

'Good international citizenship' is not a contested concept in international relations, although, like many others, it is interpreted through multifarious approaches. While former Canadian Prime Minister Lester Pearson is sometimes credited with being the first to have used such term in the mid-1960s (Lawler 1995, 39), it was former Governor General of Canada Daniel Michener that publicly adopted this expression for the first time, in a speech he made in 1967 (Michener 1967). About two decades later, it was the turn of former Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs Gareth Evans to employ this idea, this time with Australia as the state in question. Since then, a small but active strand of the literature has begun to develop, providing increasingly-numerous inclusion criteria concerning what a country ought to do in order to be considered a 'good international citizen'. With the aim of drawing useful theoretical implications from this study, it is apt to review what they are.

Evans himself was the first to formulate a structured definition, comprising a combination of 'enlightened self-interest',¹ humanitarianism, and the projection of cosmopolitanist values and ideals (Evans 1989b). Shortly afterwards, Lawler (1992) described GICs as 'global do-gooders'; and Linklater (1992) built upon Bull's (1977) interpretation of the international society, listing his own criteria, namely the respect of states' sovereignty, the respect of international law, and the necessity to rely on diplomacy and wide consensus. Goldsworthy (1995) then provided yet another understanding of this concept, which required 'honouring treaty obligations', an active approach to global citizenship—including the implementation of peace support operations and the intake of

refugees—and a multilateral attitude. Wheeler and Dunne (1998), took into account the presence of interdependent security, the respect of the international order and law, and the protection of human rights. Later research did not seem to have moved too far away from the original scholarship. Dunne (2008) argued that a GIC needs to benefit from mutual recognition in the international society, uphold global rules, cooperate with international institutions, hold ‘a belief that progress is possible’, and actively promote human rights. Graham (2008) included the preservation of the global society, the independence of states, an active approach towards the maintenance of peace, and the respect of shared norms. It was then two former Australian politicians, Stephen Smith and Bob McMullan, who provided another understanding of the concept, this time by associating the latter to the steady provision of substantial foreign aid (Smith and McMullan 2009).

More recently, the notion of GIC seems to have attracted more frequent scholarly efforts. Petermann (2013, 132–133) equated it with a moral and ethical approach to foreign policy; and Youde and Slagter (2013) provided an alternative image, which required social democratic domestic policies, a social democratic identity, and multilateralism. In her helpful and meticulous study, Pert (2014) identified five attributes, including compliance with the international law, support for multilateralism, willingness to ‘pitch in’ to international tasks, ‘international good deeds’, and leadership. Siniver and Cabrera (2015) built on Evans’ initial parameters and argued that such a concept ‘provides a means of holding foreign policy actors to moral account in the system they currently inhabit’; while Souter (2016) adhered to previous definitions and argued for a combination of human rights and activism in pursuing them, multilateralism, and respect of the international law. Lastly, Shapcott (2019) discussed the threefold responsibilities of GICs, which comprise democratic identity and structure, respect of the international law, and humanitarianism.

What emerges from this review of the definitions of ‘good international citizenship’ is that there is a clear consistency within them, with recurrent criteria as well as ancillary ones. The former are of considerable import for the aims of the present study, as they allow the formulation of an archetypal GIC image that reflects the numerous efforts of the extant literature, which in turn is necessary to test Australia’s foreign policy against it. In consideration of the above discussion, this article identifies five criteria for ‘good international citizenship’: (i) the respect of the international law; (ii) a multilateral attitude to international relations; (iii) the pursuing of humanitarian and idealist objectives; (iv) an active approach towards the maintenance of the rules-based order; and (v) a congruous identity supported by consistent domestic policies. Auxiliary parameters, on the other hand, are represented by the idea of ‘enlightened self-interest’ (though not *national* interest), non-interventionism, interdependence, and morality and ethics in foreign policy, although the underlying rationale behind them frequently overlaps with the main criteria that have just been listed.

With a general, inclusive definition of a GIC addressed, it is possible to approach middle power theory in order to better understand why and to what degree the two are interrelated. The middle power idea has been the object of innumerable debates both inside and outside academia, to such an extent that it would not be feasible nor useful to embark on a full account of its definitions here. Moreover, given the vast scholarship on middle powers, and the more modest one on ‘good international citizenship’, this study focuses its theoretical efforts on the latter. But thanks to the ‘theoretical

renaissance' that is usually mentioned when discussing this strand of IR theory (Beeson and Higgott 2014), it is possible to at least refer to the main frame of reference without neglecting the whole scholarship. While middle powers can be traced back to antiquity, scholars agree that the multipolarity of the post-Cold War period has proven to be the most fertile ground for middle power theorising, which explains the larger number of relevant publications since the 1990s (Abbondanza 2019; Abbondanza 2020).

Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal (1993, 17–19), in their seminal work, provided the most widely-employed definition, arguing that middle powers can be assessed through four approaches: geographic (interposition between great powers), normative (respect of the international law, diplomatic means), positional (substantial but secondary capabilities), and behavioural (multilateralism and 'middle power diplomacy'). Subsequent research consistently relied on this definition, and gradually refined it so that the geographic criterion has been progressively abandoned, while states' self-identification with the middle power status (Teo 2018), and the concrete outcomes ('systemic impact') of their foreign policies (Carr 2014) are now invariably taken into account when determining a state's potential middle powerdom. For completeness' sake, it is apt to note that there is much more to be said about middle powers' definitions—the nearly-defunct functional criterion, focusing on peace efforts (Chapnick 1999), and middle powers' 'niche diplomacy' (Cooper 1997) are good examples—and there are countless case studies in which countries' foreign policies have been examined with the middle power lens (for recent examples, see Emmers and Teo 2018; Saouli 2020; Struye de Swielande *et al.* 2019; Spero 2019). In essence, the complexities of middle power theory are many and commonly-felt by both theorists and country specialists (Abbondanza 2020), to such an extent that Robertson (2017) famously epitomised this situation by stating that 'confusion reigns supreme'.

Unsurprisingly, such definitional efforts appear to be firmly embedded with the broader paradigmatic theories of IR, since the measurement of national capabilities draws from the realist tradition, the respect of shared norms and the pursuing of multilateral approaches correlates with liberalism, and the role of identity in global affairs follows constructivism's tenets. More to the point of this article, middle power theory and 'good international citizenship' share a notable part of their conceptual foundations, as the qualitative connotations of the former (that is, everything except the positional criterion focusing on states' capabilities) essentially equate with the requisites of the latter. Specifically, the normative and behavioural criteria—favouring the respect of the international law and multilateralism—display remarkable analogies with the image of GIC that has been discussed above, and it could be argued that the identity criterion, too, leans towards this direction, as it implies a self-identification with the image of a law-abiding and cooperative nation embedded in the international society.

As explained above, while the two concepts are not synonyms since 'enlightened self-interest' is not explicitly embraced by middle power scholars, the relevant literature supports this conceptual linkage. Specifically, IR and middle power theorists have argued that good international citizenship is key to middle power behaviour (Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal 1993, 19), is central to the 'conventional method of looking at middle powers' (Cooper 1997, 6), leads to a 'classic middle power role' (Lightfoot 2006, 457), adds to middle powers' global reputation (Youde and Slagter 2013), defines 'middle power diplomacy' (Neack 2014, 183–184), is 'often associated with

traditional middle powers' (Abbondanza 2019), and underpins 'the Liberal dimension of middlepowermanship' (Wilkins 2019, 54). With these premises, it shouldn't surprise that the two countries that have contributed the most to both GIC and middle power theorising—Canada and Australia—are recurrent candidates for the former and are often considered 'archetypal' examples of the latter (Wilkins 2019).

Yet, as with the discussion on 'good international citizenship', the aim of this article is not to provide a comprehensive account of all the numerous definitions that have been provided over the years, but rather to contextualise the logic and the theory with which Australia has been deemed to be a 'quintessential' middle power, implying that it satisfied all of the above criteria. Whether this is still the case or not is thus interrelated with the main goal of this article, which is to ascertain Australia's alleged status of GIC in the twenty-first century. After all, as Pert (2014, 11–12) has aptly attested, the potential status of states in this particular field of IR is more nuanced, as they can be 'bad', 'neutral', or 'good international citizens'. Consequently, the next sections examine the country's policies against the five main criteria of 'good international citizenship' that have been identified earlier.

I – International law

The respect of internationally-shared norms is perhaps the most important criterion to examine, since it is almost invariably mentioned in research involving the GIC concept. Australia has a long and substantial track record in this sense, which developed from the mid-twentieth century. Fighting the Axis Powers in the Second World War, contributing to the creation of the post-war liberal order, playing a remarkable role with Canada in the establishment of the middle power notion at the UN (which resulted in articles 23 and 44 of the UN Charter), consequently advancing UN goals and means as a whole, and participating in a number of UN-sanctioned peace support operations, are just the main examples of how Australia has complied with—and has even fostered the development of—modern international law. However, at the turn of the century, increasingly-assertive measures adopted by Canberra, often prolonged and made more severe by successive governments, hampered Australia's compliance to such norms.

Unsurprisingly, the most controversial and debated issue is the country's policy towards seaborne asylum seekers. Australia's first offshore processing policies date back to the 1960s, although the first tangible migration wave started in 1976 as a result of the end of the Vietnam War. Crucially, in 1992 the Keating government introduced mandatory detention of indefinite duration for all those who sought to reach the country without a valid visa, a severe policy that was implemented only by Australia in those years, as well as one that was labelled 'the Western world's worst practice' (Sawer, Abjorensen, and Larkin 2009, 66). In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, with the political debate shifting towards national security, the Howard governments securitised the Australian debate on refugees, in a process that paved the way for the highly-polarising Pacific Solution, which involved the offshore processing of all seaborne asylum seekers (Kampmark 2017). It is not within the scope of this article to provide a full account of Australia's controversial maritime migration policies (including the many subsequent variations of the Pacific Solution), nor it would support this article's search for theoretical

implications, but it is apt to remind that such policies have sparked a myriad of condemnations, both nationally and internationally.

As mentioned earlier, the UNHCR (2020) has been the most vocal institution in this sense, almost equally matched by global NGOs such as Amnesty International, while internal protests rose from local NGOs, refugee advocates, the Green Party, and, only during the years of the first Rudd government (2007–2010), the Labour Party. The main point of contention is Australia's compliance with the international law, specifically its obligations to the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees of 1951 and its 1967 Protocol. To be specific, the Convention's article 31 states that 'The Contracting States shall not impose penalties, on account of their illegal entry or presence, on refugees [...] The Contracting States shall not apply restrictions to the movements of such refugees', and article 33 states that 'No Contracting State shall expel or return a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened' (United Nations 1951). Put simply, Australia does not comply with article 31 due to the fact that unauthorised entry is prohibited on any grounds, and it violates article 33 and its non-refoulement principle because of the country's 'boat turnback' policy, which started in 2013 with Operation Sovereign Borders. Such a measure involves the forcible transfer of asylum seekers' boats to the external boundary of the territorial seas of the country of departure (in most cases Indonesia, a country that has not signed the Refugee Convention).

The problems that all of this brings to Australia's image of GIC are conspicuous, and as such they have been discussed in the literature. Souter (2016, 796) directly links 'good international citizenship' to the granting of asylum to refugees and to a fair treatment for them, concluding that the Australian GIC credentials have sat 'uneasily with its draconian asylum policies'. Kampmark (2017) highlights that this approach is openly bipartisan, which further complicates the situation. de Leeuw and van Wichelen (2019) argue that it represents an attempt to 'un-sign Geneva', therefore seeing Australia at odds with the world's pre-eminent source of international law. Missbach and Palmer (2020) even advanced the idea that the 'boat turnback' policy could indeed be seen as people smuggling perpetrated by Canberra itself, which clearly doesn't help the country's increasingly-contested status of GIC. And Dawson (2020, 1) investigates the harm done by these policies to queer asylum seekers, since they 'perpetuate colonial and homophobic relations with states such as Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, and Nauru to meet Australia's border security priorities', concluding that they 'represent a clear contradiction to Australia's claimed liberal human rights diplomatic position'.

Furthermore, although Australia's maritime migration policies may well be the single most important obstacle to its image of GIC, they are not the only ones. The country's participation in international missions that are not sanctioned by the UN are a further source of friction with the international law, and, as a result, with the wider notion of 'good international citizenship'. Tago (2007, 187) reminds us that 'formal authorisation by the UN Security Council (UNSC) has the most powerful legitimacy', and yet the Australian involvement in the 'War on Terror' alongside the US and the UK lacked that fundamental element. The military operations carried out in Afghanistan and Iraq were not expressly authorised by resolutions of the UNSC, but relied instead on the extended, tri-lateral 'special relationship' between the three countries, their resulting security alignment (Holland 2013, 5), and a subsequent alternative form of legitimacy that was

purposely created by them (Holland 2010). As Gyngell (2017, 287) attests, the Labour-Coalition dichotomy in Australian domestic politics may result in diverging targets in the country's foreign policy, respectively focusing on liberal values and national interests. And yet, the fact remains that the military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq did not follow specific UNSC resolutions and lacked UN approval, thus not complying to the international law and representing a 'lost opportunity' in terms of the latter's role and efficacy in contemporary IR (Gleeson 2016, 32).

To further complicate matters, the Australian involvement with the 'War on Terror' has allegedly included a degree of tolerance towards illegal US interrogation and detention practices. In Barnes (2019, 474) words: 'Australia failed to condemn, and in some instances, condoned US torture and detention programs'. Needless to say, the torture of war prisoners is against a plethora of international treaties, including article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations 1948), and article 10 of the UN Convention Against Torture (United Nations 1984), which explicitly mentions military personnel. For the purposes of this article, it should be emphasised that the mere participation in the UN-unsanctioned 'coalition of the willing' was deemed enough by Stephenson (2018, 255) to conclude that it had 'compromised [New Zealand's] reputation as a good international citizen', which may warrant a similar logic with regards to Australia. To be sure, this sobering context by no means produces an image of Australia as a country that fares badly with the international law *in general*—it would be inane to even embark on such a hypothesis—yet its implications for the theoretical concepts that are often attached to the country's international status are substantial, and they are further investigated in the following sections.

II – Multilateralism

As discussed previously, a multilateral approach to international affairs is another essential component of the GIC formulation. Australia has been historically active in this sense, and has been at the forefront of Indo-Pacific multilateralism for a number of years—at times perhaps too 'enthusiastically', as Rudd's stillborn Asia-Pacific Community has demonstrated—with a self-perceived role in terms of multilateralism that is strong and well-rooted. Indeed, Australia has considerable strategic ties with its region, whose main elements are represented by the alliance with the US and New Zealand (ANZUS), the strategic partnership with Japan, and, to a limited extent, the tepid strategic relationship with India. From a trade perspective, the country's two-way trade is worth 662 billion dollars, and all of its main partners are significant regional players as well as APEC members, with the exception of India. Politically speaking, Australia is a member of numerous international organisations, including many regional ones that it has either (co)founded or actively supported. To name but a few, MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, the Republic of Korea, Turkey, Australia) is a widely-acknowledged forum for middle powers, and APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation), ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), EAS (East Asia Summit), PIF (Pacific Island Forum), and IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association) all indicate a regional power role achieved through soft power. In short, all of this has required considerable efforts that have been the result of a marked multilateral approach to global affairs in general, and to regional affairs more specifically.

However, there is a tangible trend that increasingly distances Australia from traditional multilateral paths, one that has the potential to undermine its hard-won multilateralist credentials. First of all, the undeniable prevalence of regional organisations over global ones indicates that Australia favours policies that relate to where its perceived economic and strategic interests lie. While this process has been largely successful in linking Australia's regionalism with its middle power foreign policy (Wilkins 2017), it has also implied a distancing from the previous international (i.e. UN-related) engagement that had been the trademark of Australian foreign policy until the end of the last century. Rimmer (2016) attests that this is due to two intertwined reasons. On the one hand, the diverging attitudes of the country's main political forces are highly influential, as the Labour party has a known attitude toward following UN motions, whereas the Coalition prefers a solid security relationship with the US, while engaging in economic diplomacy with the rest of the region and disregarding global phenomena that do not directly affect the country's initiatives. On the other, there is a widespread dissatisfaction with global governance, of which the UN is the prime example. In the case of Australia, all of this has meant that 'the policy agenda has shifted away from multilateralism' (Rimmer 2016, 634).

A second case in point concerns the inescapable issue of maritime migration and asylum seekers. In terms of multilateralism in migration policy, Australia and Indonesia co-chair the Bali Process, an international forum with over fifty participating countries, whose goal is to promote awareness of, and solutions to, people smuggling, human trafficking, and related crimes. As can be inferred from the previous discussion on these matters, Australia's maritime migration policies—severe and non-cooperative—do not support such objectives, but rather they undermine them in a number of ways. According to Curley and Vandyk (2017), this is due to the 'reactive nature' of the response, the failure to meet the Bali Process' core principles as a result of the securitisation of immigrants, the continuous tensions with Indonesia, and the external (regional) perception of Australia as an uncooperative and individualist player.

Which brings us to a third, more general consideration concerning Australia's relation with the wider Indo-Pacific region, since the former does not consider itself as a fully 'Asian nation', nor it is accepted by the latter as one. Such 'liminality' is frequently discussed by the extant literature (Patience 2018, 1–16), and cannot but hamper Australia's multilateralism, which is consequently characterised by an increasing amount of bilateral and minilateral initiatives that are gradually replacing it. In all fairness, this is also partially due to the complexity of the wider region, as well as to the challenges it poses to Australia, which should not be downplayed when assessing the country's role in it. Indeed, its most proximate neighbours have displayed political instability and occasional balkanisation impetus in recent years (Ayson 2007). Moreover, the double-edged relationship with China rests on profoundly different national characteristics that are heavily moderated by huge economic gains, a complex context that paved the way for the (seemingly) schizophrenic strategic ambiguity that makes Australia torn between China and the US in a number of areas (van Nieuwenhuizen 2019). And yet, even if the regional context partially excuses Australia for its highly-selective approach to regional engagement, it does not alter the fact that alternative forms of regional relations are being increasingly established at the detriment of conventional multilateralism.

III – Humanitarianism and idealism

Humanitarian and idealist rationales are an inherent component of ‘good international citizenship’, drawing from altruist, pluralist, and solidarist understandings of the global society that are reflected in the aforementioned GIC definitional parameters. The most immediate form of foreign policy under such terms is foreign aid, which consists of a combination of humanitarian and development aid. As with many topics that have been discussed in the previous sections, here too Australia can boast an impressive track record in terms of financial commitments, starting in the 1960s and increasing with a fluctuating trend until 2012 (OECD 2020). As can be expected, such a long-term presence of aid in the country’s foreign policy has left a wider mark on the Australian society, one that is closely-related to a self-constructed image of Australians as global philanthropists. In Corbett’s (2017, 204) words ‘Australians [...] want to see themselves as good international citizens who pull their weight globally. And, for the most part, they believe that the government aid program represents this side of their self-image to the world’.

However, the other side of the coin reveals that such an image is increasingly undermined by domestic political attitudes, to such an extent that Australia’s official development assistance (ODA) in 2018 was comparable to that provided ten years before in nominal terms (OECD 2020), due to successive budget cuts started by Coalition governments in 2013. Widening the time frame, the ODA/GNI (gross national income) ratio was 0.47 in 1974–1975, but was less than half of that in 2018–2019, at an all-time low of 0.21. This is a far cry from the 0.7 recommended by the UN, and the only positive note is that the Pacific macro-region has been excluded from the constant budget cuts, in consideration of its strategic value for Australia (Lowy Institute 2020). Research shows that Labour governments display a tendency to adhere to UN recommendations (though not quite satisfying them), while Coalition governments—traditionally more careful about public expenditure—are stricter in the ODA they provide, with a downward trend that has continued to develop through the consecutive Abbott, Turnbull, and Morrison governments. Reviewing the above in the conclusion of his book, Corbett (2017, 209) therefore cautioned against the risk that Australian aid might ‘always be a hostage to political fortunes’.

On a different subject matter, there cannot be a discussion on intertwined globalist, idealist, and humanitarian understandings of Australian foreign policy without mentioning climate change. Unlike aid, this is a controversial issue when referred to Australia, as the latter has a historical wariness of domestic and international policies that might affect its comparative advantage in non-renewable energy production and raw materials’ export. A few years ago, Beeson (2011, 567) examined the goals of the first Rudd government (2007–2010), arguing that it had allowed Australia ‘to take its role as a good international citizen seriously’, but concluding that it had failed to leave a mark on both the mitigation of climate change and a reform of global economic policies. Pert (2014, 183–205) provided a more benign representation of the GIC credentials of the (first) Rudd and Gillard governments (2007–2013), in consideration of their multilateral approach in international fora discussing climate change. More recently, a review of all the available peer-reviewed literature on climate change adaptation in Australia has revealed that some progress is being made inside the country, especially in coastal and agricultural areas (Pearce *et al.* 2018).

On the international scene, however, Australia is still a much-debated actor, as the polemic on its attitude towards the 2016 Paris Agreement and the 2019 Pacific Island Forum in Tuvalu demonstrates. Examining Canberra's latest environmental policies, Maraseni and Reardon-Smith (2019, 1) found that 'The current Australian government continues to undermine its commitment to mitigation and the integrity and credibility of its own emissions reductions policy [...] Such strategies undoubtedly serve the short-term political and economic interests'. At the same time, while climate change continues to be one of Australia's most polarising issues, 'fossil fuel-intensive industries and their conservative allies have repeatedly blocked progress', which in turn is impaired by the 'inability of expert knowledge to resolve environmental controversy' (Tangney 2019, 131). In essence, despite the fact that Australia is not alone on this path—the US stands out, among the many—its attitude to climate change mitigation could very well be a serious impediment to its status of 'good international citizen'.

IV – Activism

Of all the theoretical discussions on what a 'good international citizen' should be, more than half explicitly cite the need for an active approach towards the promotion—and, in particular cases, the enforcement—of the international law, embodied by the UN. In a similar fashion to almost all the GIC criteria that have been discussed so far, the willingness to 'pitch in' to international tasks is another element that has often characterised Australian foreign policy over the years. To begin with, the country is a party to all the principal non-proliferation and international export control treaties, and its role in the advancement of both is substantial and well-established (Nuclear Threat Initiative 2020). There are, however, some frictions between Australia's hard-won credentials in this field and its actual posture in the global arena. In a recent interview, the Director of the Centre for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament, Ramesh Thakur, stated that Australia has 'downgraded its stance towards non-proliferation and disarmament of nuclear weapons since the change of government in 2013' (Australian Institute of International Affairs 2017). A similar criticism is voiced by Warren (2019), who went even further and, while discussing the extended nuclear deterrence that the US provides to Australia, argued that the latter 'has become a paradoxical player in which it adheres to its US alliance obligations while clinging to the waning vestiges of its position as a good global citizen'. Whether we are staring at 'vestiges' or simply at 'troubled times' in Australia's position of GIC remains to be seen, although the country's uranium exports to India, who never signed the non-proliferation treaty, pose some evident credibility problems.

A second element, recurrent in Australian political debates, is the respect of and support for the rules-based order. Indeed, in the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper expressions such as 'rules' and 'rules-based order' are employed 85 times, while in the list of the country's international priorities 'shaping and protecting rules and norms' sits in *first* place (Australian Government 2017, 79). This attitude is invariably mentioned in every official document, and is actively pursued in numerous international fora, spanning through a variety of issues. It can be seen chiefly in international trade meetings, where the Australian support for shared norms approved by the World Trade Organisation is widely acknowledged. It is also clearly detectable in terms of enforcement of

international laws, most prominently in the South China Sea, a contested area in which Australia routinely performs freedom of overflight and freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in conjunction with the US (Beckman and Phan 2019). More recently, it has been evidenced by Australia's motion calling for an inquiry into the origins of the COVID-19 outbreak, which gained full consensus at the World Health Organisation (Nonnenmacher 2020). In this sense, Australia's 'activism' in the international society of states is tangible (albeit rather selective, as denoted by its controversial stance on maritime immigration and climate change).

A further topic worthy of discussion is that of peace support operations (PSOs). Torn between criticisms relating to the 'forceful maintenance of the status quo' and claims that they are a 'panacea' for conflict zones (Lidén 2009), they are often associated with the UN, since the Security Council provides the highest form of legitimacy for them (Tago 2007). As Londey (2014) reminds us, the Australian commitment to peace support sets its long roots in 1947, and it owes much to Evatt's considerable activities in the early days of the UN. What he also noted, however, is that the country's relation to it is heavily affected by the government in charge, as Labour governments have historically been more enthusiastic about it, and conservative governments warier of it. While Australia's past role was that of staunch supporter of UN peacekeeping operations, its current contribution is negligible, amounting to a meagre 35 soldiers (United Nations Peacekeeping 2020). Additionally, missions such as INTERFET in Timor-Leste, RAMSI in the Solomon Islands, the truce monitoring and peace monitoring groups (TMG/PMG) in Bougainville, and the deployment of police and soldiers in Tonga in 2006 are all examples of Australian missions that had not been sanctioned by the UN. All of the above, alongside the previously-mentioned war involvements with the US in Afghanistan and Iraq, represents a conspicuous deviation from the path set by the world's pre-eminent international institution, and as such may further weaken Australia's long-standing image of GIC.

V – Congruous identity and domestic policies

The extant literature on 'good international citizenship' often emphasises the importance of domestic policies and a national identity that broadly reflect GIC values, and indeed it would be reasonable to expect a high degree of consistency between what is preached internationally and what actually happens domestically. With reference to the country's domestic context, Australia can rightly claim to be one of the world's most developed nations, under a variety of measurable criteria. The UN employs its own Human Development Index (HDI) which takes into account three main parameters: 'long and healthy life', 'knowledge', and 'a decent standard of living', thus assessing both social and economic variables. With a value of 0.938, Australia ranks 5th globally and sits in the higher portion of the 'very high' band (United Nations Development Program 2019, 300). The OECD, on the other hand, utilises its Better Life Index (BLI), which has similar aims but a greater number of variables, which take into account a variety of indicators pertaining to social and economic development.² The latest BLI places Australia in 2nd place (OECD 2017). Such remarkable rankings arguably provide the image of a society in which citizens' rights are not only respected, but held in high regard, whenever it is feasible to measure these social variables.

As far as Australian identity is concerned, however, the usefulness of metrics is more limited and the resulting image is therefore blurred. Cass (2013, 24) showed how the Australian identity as a GIC is ‘hurt by aggressive diplomatic manoeuvring’ displayed by conservative governments, while detecting an additional problem in the country’s alignment ‘with the US to manage its international identity’. McDonald (2011, 125–26) also shared this position, and underlined that climate change mitigation is one of the most contested topics, one in which Australia attempts to ‘shape the climate-change regime to better represent growing concerns about economic costs without the government being seen as a ‘bad’ international citizen’. Moreover, Teo (2018) aptly summarised the dichotomy between centre-left and centre-right governments, with the former actively fostering Australia’s internationalist identity, and the latter being more sceptic about it. Pert (2014, 217–18) too investigated the ‘intangible effect that a nation’s leaders can have on its population’, which further complicates the notion of a solid Australian national identity in relation to polarising issues pertaining to ‘good international citizenship’, such as the intake of asylum seekers, climate change mitigation, and international human rights.

Building on this, and with specific reference to citizens’ rights, it is apt to remind that Australia has made impressive advancements in the last few decades, many of which are implicitly reflected in the highly-positive rankings mentioned above. After all, as Gelber (2019, 317) summarised, it is undeniable that human rights today are better protected in Australia compared to the twentieth century, especially with reference to ‘marriage equality, anti-discrimination laws, sexual harassment laws, women’s advancement in the workforce, the National Disability Insurance Scheme, and so on’. However, scholars have cautioned against an excessive *laissez-faire* attitude in this field. Women’s rights, though experiencing a positive trend over the years, have many issues that the Australian governments don’t seem to be willing to tackle, including a missing alignment with UN-dictated best practices, the proportionally-higher violence experienced by Indigenous Australian women, and gender equality more in general (Suthanthiraraj 2019). A second note of caution concerns the rights of Indigenous Australians, whose demand for constitutional recognition and basic levels of sovereignty represents a divisive subject of debate in Australia, one that remains largely unsatisfied (Abbondanza 2018). A further issue relates to children’s rights, a seemingly-uncontested topic in which, however, the Australian engagement seems to be essentially nominal, due to the fact that there is no ‘further commitment to uphold or promote the implementation of the [UN Human Rights Council] and its principles’, apart from the mere membership to the main international treaties (Lee-Koo 2019, 328). Put simply, while the positive trend in human rights’ protection is evident, there are some reasons for concern that might affect Australia’s GIC status, if left unchecked.

Conclusion

In order to ascertain whether Australia is still a good international citizen, this article has provided a dedicated definitional framework for the GIC concept—thus contributing to this niche of IR theory—and has assessed Australian policies against it. Although this has implied a discussion of debated policies and practices that represent a limitation to the country’s status of both GIC and ‘exemplary’ middle power, it is apt to recall that this

research did not seek to embark on a systematic criticism of Australia's domestic and foreign policy. However, it did have to engage with the most challenging illustrations of them, in order to draw theoretical conclusions that are able to address the relevant gaps in the literature. What emerges from this analysis is a varied and heterogeneous image of Australia, one that does not seem to justify neither the use of 'good' nor that of 'bad' international citizenship. As Pert (2014, 11–12) attested, the reality of IR is plainly more complicated and nuanced, which brings us to the conclusion that the Australian status in the first part of the twenty-first century is that of a 'neutral international citizen'. This is indicative of the increasing distance between Canberra's current goals and the global values it pursued in the past. Whether this is beneficial for the actual effectiveness of the country's foreign policy—or not—is open for discussion. However, the implications of neutral international citizenship for middle power theorising are quite evident. This article has argued that there cannot be a 'quintessential' middle power that is not a good international citizen at the same time, as the former needs to display all attributes that are conventionally ascribed to middle powers, GIC included. In the light of the above, Australia can be considered a traditional but not 'quintessential' or 'archetypal' middle power, since it is traditionally (conventionally) included in middle power theory without necessarily satisfying all of the relevant criteria anymore.

Theory aside, the empirical analysis has showed that, for a remarkably-long time, Australia has not just complied with the international law, but has also fostered its continuous development. Yet, at the turn of the twenty-first century, it has adopted a number of measures—chiefly the hard-line policies against seaborne asylum seekers, and the participation in missions that are not sanctioned by the UN—that seriously undermine its credentials in this area. Second, Australia's well-known multilateralism, once a trademark of its middle power foreign policy, is slowly turning into a restrictive regionalism, in the shape of a selective minilateralism, at the detriment of the country's engagement with wider, global issues. Third, its image of 'enlightened global citizen'—encouraged and well-deserved for many years—is eroded by the constant budget cuts to development and humanitarian aid, as well as by the country's controversial attitude towards climate change mitigation. Fourth, despite the positive contribution in terms of trade negotiations and the South China Sea dispute, Australia is favouring a US-led global order, which has often deviated from the path set by the UN and the rules-based order. Lastly, despite the undeniable advancements in terms of respect of citizens' rights in Australia in the last few decades, the current scholarship has called attention to few but substantial concerns.

There is also some additional quantitative evidence to support this article's rationale and conclusion, which is evidenced by the Commitment to Development Index (CDI), an indicator measuring countries' 'positive contribution' to global society. It is calculated through hundreds of indicators, in turn relating to many socio-economic criteria that pertain to 'good international citizenship', as well as to the normative and behavioural criteria of middle power theory.³ The trend is quite clear: in the CDI's first year of publication—2003—Australia ranked 3rd globally, today it ranks 14th (Center for Global Development 2019, 6). This rapid descent in the index's rankings appears to reflect the findings of this research, which in essence are the country's selective compliance with the international law; its deviation from global multilateralism, humanitarian engagement, and activism towards the maintenance of a rules-based international society;

and a domestic society that doesn't fully reflect these GIC values, despite the progress made over the years. In conclusion, Australia's status as a neutral international citizen, and a traditional but not quintessential middle power, is not necessarily detrimental to an effective foreign policy, but further research and more time are necessary in order to establish whether Canberra's new direction is preferable to the old one.

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Notes

1. Evans' (1989a, 1989b) description of enlightened self-interest was framed in terms of reputation and 'national self-respect'. Distanced from the idea of being 'the foreign policy equivalent of boy scout good deeds', it was rooted in the need to address human rights, respect the international law and UN values, maintain a credible foreign aid program, and address climate change as well as refugee care and resettlement. Distinct from a realist view of *national* interest, it was conceived as 'an expression of idealistic pragmatism' in an interdependent world.
2. The BLI's variables are housing, income, jobs, community, education, environment, civic engagement, health, life satisfaction, safety, and work-life balance.
3. The CDI's main parameters are aid, climate, finance, migration, security, technology, and trade.

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