

Theory and Australian Foreign Policy

CHAPTER

1

BACKGROUND

The various theories of international relations comprise a range of conceptual frameworks for understanding global politics and the foreign policy of states. These include realism, liberalism, Marxism and the English School. Of the choices available, two prominent perspectives which have been influential in explaining how states conceive their national interests are realism and the English School.

Although sometimes regarded as branches from the same theoretical tree, realism and the English School have different conceptions of the national interest and the factors that influence the foreign policies of states. The former stresses the importance of power as precaution against the insecurities of global politics. The latter emphasises factors beyond the projection of military power, which contribute to the maintenance of international order.

One of the concepts frequently used to provide guidance is that of ‘middle power diplomacy’. According to the mythology of this phrase, Australia holds a mediating position between the powerful and the weak, and the bridge between them consists of international law and the international institutions that underpin the notion of an ordered international society. Hence Australia proclaims support for multilateralism and for building coalitions with others, and of course, was delighted to be elected to the United Nations Security Council as a non-permanent member from 2013 to 2015.

For realists, international relations are based on power struggles between states. The struggle for power may be tamed or disguised, but it cannot be ended. Non-realists may agree that realism can be an appropriate theoretical tool for understanding the foreign policy of states with a comparative advantage in military power; they will hold, however, that it is not clear that this is also the case for middle powers such as Australia.

DEBATE POINT:

Should realism guide Australia's national interests?

■ **SCOTT BURCHILL—NO**

Although superficially realism as a theory of international relations can help us to understand the ways in which Australia pursues its national interests, the approach of the English School is a more accurate and detailed explanation of the options available to middle and small powers. States in the second tier cannot expect to achieve their foreign policy goals by simply relying on the projection of military force as great powers can. They must make use of various provisions of international society as compensation. Only the English School describes the features of international society and adequately explains how middle powers such as Australia conduct their international relations.

■ **MARTIN GRIFFITHS—YES**

What is realism, and in what sense can and should it 'guide' the definition and pursuit of Australia's national interests? For all its weaknesses as a potential theory of international relations, realism is indispensable in reminding us of certain unpleasant features of the world that remain potent sources of conflict and insecurity, and that cannot be eradicated by the kinds of things that opponents of realism like to think of as forces of progress in world affairs (particularly trade, democratisation and international organisation). To the extent that our policy makers act on the basis that realism is obsolescent in a globalising world, they are deluded. To the extent that they try to distance themselves from realism and promote the main alternative perspective on Australian foreign policy, which I will call 'middle power liberal internationalism', they are likely to weaken Australia and promote a dangerous complacency about foreign policy.

AUTHOR BIO

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■ The English School and Australia's national interests

SCOTT BURCHILL

Realism seeks to describe the political world as it is rather than how we would like it to be. Realists are not interested in how to make the world a better, more peaceful place or how history will unfold. Their focus is on the realities of the present and why progress and change are slow and difficult. As a theory of international relations, realism stresses the insecure nature of international politics, a self-help world where anarchy—the absence of world government or a structure regulating the behaviour of states—is the system's defining characteristic (Donnelly 2000; 2013).

As a consequence of its anarchical character, the international domain is dangerous, insecure and endemically violent: states, which are the highest political authorities in this world, have no guarantees of survival. As the examples of Timor Leste, Southern Sudan, the USSR and Yugoslavia recently demonstrate, in such a system it is normal for states to come into and go out of existence. Realists believe the international system is almost immutable and impervious to structural change, even if the political borders of states rarely remain fixed.

There are always states who believe their grievances can only be addressed by recourse to war. Simply wishing for peace, or imagining every state has a shared interest in the status quo, is utopian, naive and dangerously idealistic. According to realists such as E H Carr, the folly of such a liberal approach set the conditions in which the Second World War erupted within a single generation of the first global conflagration (see Carr 1946).

For states, the keys to longevity are clear. Only the accumulation of military power—directly and often within an alliance framework—improves their prospects of survival. That is why even the most geostrategically secure states in both the northern hemisphere (Iceland) and southern hemisphere (New Zealand) not only have military forces of their own, but enhance their sense of security by joining military alliances (NATO, ANZUS).

The discipline of an anarchical international environment has a homogenising effect on the foreign policy of political communities: anarchy requires states to deal first and foremost with their inherent insecurity, regardless of whether they are strong or weak, democratic or theocratic. The national interest of states is therefore defined in the same way: the pursuit of security via the accumulation of power.

Stressing the importance of systemic exogenous factors, realists argue that a balance of power in the international system is the best way of minimising, though not eliminating, the incidence of violence. Since the collapse of Soviet communism in the early 1990s, no such equilibrium exists. Unlike liberals who celebrated the forward march of democracy across Europe, realists believe the world is a more dangerous place since the collapse of bipolarity. Unipolar systems are both less stable

and short lived because the rest of the world feels threatened by an unconstrained preponderant power. Who will now act as a counterweight to the dominance of the United States?

Global politics is volatile and unpredictable, so political ambitions should not extend beyond making the existing international system work as well as possible. Strategic prudence—often described as a state’s national interest—demands that states do what they can with limited resources to maximise their military capabilities. Simply hoping for peace is both futile and reckless (Burchill 2005).

Realists acknowledge that states have other concerns, including the importance of democratic rule, respect for human rights, relief from poverty and a wide range of additional ethical ambitions. However, though undoubtedly important and desirable, these are secondary considerations because they can only be meaningfully pursued when a state feels secure. All states, regardless of size and power, must therefore be egoistic and define their self-interest—their national interest—in narrow strategic terms.

REALISM IN TEN POINTS

- 1 Anarchy exists in world politics.
- 2 States are sovereign.
- 3 States are rational unitary actors.
- 4 National security requires self-help.
- 5 One nation’s security can mean another nation’s insecurity.
- 6 War is always possible.
- 7 The road to order lies through a balance of power.
- 8 Power trumps justice.
- 9 World politics is not primarily about good and evil.
- 10 The possibility of cooperation and change is limited.

Realism and international relations

Superficially at least, realism can explain Australia’s strategic posture. Australia has the twenty-sixth largest military forces in the world if measured by firepower and the fourteenth largest if measured by expenditure (around 1.9% of GDP). In the South-West Pacific, Australia is a major military power and a significant player in the Asia–Pacific more generally.

For a combination of reasons including demographic size, geographical expanse and cultural exceptionalism, Australia has always assumed that it is incapable of self-defence, regardless of whether it actually faces an obvious enemy or even a likely regional threat. Verging at times on paranoia—not an unknown feature of strategic planning in many states—Australia’s insecurity has required it to seek reassurance within an alliance framework led by the United States since the Second World War, an approach formalised in the ANZUS treaty (with New Zealand signing on in 1951).

To the extent that ANZUS is seen as a form of strategic insurance—though its terms do not ineluctably bind the US to Australia's defence—Australia has regularly paid premiums in the form of military contributions to American wars since the 1950s. Intelligence sharing, technology transfers and access to key US decision-makers are also cited as benefits of the alliance (Burchill 1994).

Australia has behaved as a quintessentially insecure state, responding to what realists have termed the 'security dilemma' in predictable and consistent ways. It has sought to maximise both its deterrent and war fighting capacities by purchasing high technology weaponry to achieve a degree of strategic independence, but within an alliance framework provided by a great and powerful friend (US). The extent to which self-reliance is achieved will always be debated and never entirely settled. Significantly, ANZUS has only been invoked once (by Australia), following the terrorist attacks launched against the United States on 11 September, 2001.

Reflecting the need for greater economic engagement with East Asia, since the 1980s Australia's strategic focus has nominally shifted to the region where its most important economic partners are now located. From a trading point of view, China and Japan provide Australia with its most critical export markets—primarily natural resources—and it is no exaggeration to say that the country's economic future and prosperity are tied to East Asia.

However, long-standing political, cultural and strategic relationships reassert themselves during times of global crises. Military commitments to wars against Iraq (1990, 2003) and Afghanistan (2001) were undertaken with minimal, if any, regional consultation. This suggests two things: that regional engagement is largely confined to the economic realm, and that Australia's default strategic posture is still largely shaped by trans-Pacific ties.

This bifurcation of economic and strategic interests, between a growing economic dependence on China and an ongoing solidarity with Western military ambitions, has become and will remain Australia's most important foreign and defence policy challenge. In broad terms, Australia's economic interests and strategic posture are pulling in opposite directions. The Chinese are going to test the sincerity of Australia's commitment to regional integration by wedging Canberra away from Washington's strategic embrace. The United States, on the other hand, considers Australia to be an integral component of its strategic dominance in East Asia, an alliance system which to Beijing increasingly resembles an attempt to contain China's legitimate military rise.

Realism has always emphasised the precarious nature of international politics and therefore placed greater weight on the lengths states must go to in order to achieve a level of security within an environment they can do little or nothing to change. This has encouraged a narrow, zero-sum approach to the national interest, defined largely in terms of strategic security. For small and medium size states, the efficacy of realism is limited.

The English School

A group of scholars, known as the English School, accepts the broad principles of realism, including the importance of anarchy, but substantially qualifies them by arguing that realist accounts reveal only one aspect of international politics, ignoring other significant dimensions (Linklater & Suganami 2006; Linklater 2013).

These theorists argue that anarchy is not the only significant feature of the international system and that realists miss factors which substantially moderate its impact. An analogy is the difference between an X-ray and an MRI scan of the human body. The X-ray (realist position) reveals the skeletal structure of the international system (its anarchical condition) but does not show soft tissue, muscle or the circulatory system (international society). To complete the picture an MRI scan (English School approach) is required. This doesn't mean the realist position is invalid, but that it is only part of a story which must be significantly supplemented.

The English School is struck by the high degree of order that exists within the international system despite its anarchical condition. How can such order exist in an ungoverned environment? Why is there not more conflict given the lack of formal constraints upon state behaviour?

Their answer is that states have constructed among themselves a voluntary yet important international society, comprising customs, treaties, conventions, laws, institutions and organisations, which significantly mitigate the violent tendencies within anarchical environments—an 'anarchical society'.

States recognise the perils inherent within the international system, and act as if they are bound by this informal network of rules in the interests of mutual survival. International society is organic and self-regulating. In the absence of world government, it has been developed as a collection of voluntary yet binding constraints and guidelines that help to preserve and enhance order within the international system. Order in the system is, after all, precarious and cannot be taken for granted. For the English School, order and justice are symbiotic pursuits. International society brings greater certainty and predictability to international life, conditions that realism cannot adequately explain with a power-based analysis.

The English School argues that states recognise that cooperation and compromise can lead to wider benefits for all players. Unlike realists, they don't see international politics as a zero-sum game but instead believe that a narrow self-interested approach by states should yield to 'enlightened self-interest' which considers the interests and perspectives of other states, and the impact of their behaviour upon others. As with the philosophical principle of ethics, this approach encourages states to place themselves in the position of others, to look at things from their point of view as well. States do not only behave egoistically.

Accordingly, the way states conceive their 'national interests' is considerably broader than realists would have us believe. They actually share a range of 'common interests' and even universal values in the form of obligations to humanity which may, on occasion, take priority over national interests. This is not something realists could abide.

For the English School there are four broad components to international society:

- ethical benchmarks that states regard as binding or having the force of law even though they technically do not (for example, human rights, environmental agreements, the resettlement of refugees, aid to the developing world, and considerations of justice)
- stabilising agreements that preserve order and limit international violence (for example, arms control and disarmament agreements, seabed boundary agreements, the diplomatic system)
- the sanctity of contracts and agreements (for example, international law, treaties, respect for sovereignty, equality of states)
- international organisations (for example, the United Nations, World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund, World Bank).

The English School road map

The projection of power regardless of its consequences for lesser players is a luxury only great powers can afford. In 2003 the United States initially sought UN legitimacy for its decision to invade and occupy Iraq, but when that wasn't forthcoming Washington proceeded with the intervention anyway knowing its unmatched strategic power would be ultimately decisive.

The same freedom of action is not available to small and medium-sized states. They cannot necessarily achieve their foreign policy objectives by simply projecting their strategic power. They must find other forms of leverage and influence. For a state that rightfully practices middle-power diplomacy, Australia is disproportionately dependent on both the multilateral institutions and normative rules of international society.

The multilateral institutions, whether they be the United Nations, the G20 or the World Trade Organization, give Australia an international platform and profile that it would not otherwise have as an individual player with power that puts it in the second division of states. Membership of these institutions gives Canberra a seat at the table where key decisions affecting trade, finance and global peace are discussed and taken. Middle ranking states often struggle to get their voice heard above the cosy chatter of the great and powerful. These forums help to level the playing field.

A number of international institutions such as the UN, the ASEAN Regional Forum and the South Pacific Forum, help to mitigate the violent tendencies of the anarchical international environment. Forums where grievances can be aired and disputes negotiated and settled benefit middle powers such as Australia who may not be able to muster the power to force another state with which it has a dispute to back-down or compromise. In this way, international society introduces a safety net that protects those who may not be able to 'punch above their weight'.

The rules and norms of international society—whether they be as fundamental as the sovereign independence and equality of states, the diplomatic system, access to the International Court of Justice or the protections of international law—assist Australia to secure its diplomatic goals without relying on raw military power. The Law of the

Sea Convention, for example, protects the fishing, resources and maritime rights of the world's largest island continent regardless of the size of the Royal Australian Navy.

The principle of reciprocity, which underwrites so much of international society, is crucial in maintaining the integrity of agreements, treaties and international law. It has the inestimable benefit to countries such as Australia of removing the issues of power and status from determining the success of negotiated outcomes.

Realism cannot explain Australian foreign policy in a number of areas: development assistance (aid) to Papua New Guinea, the environmental protection of the Antarctic Treaty System, the expression of human rights concerns in China, or support for various arms control and disarmament agreements. None of these policy areas can be properly explained by realism, which stresses the primacy of maximising power. Only a broader definition of Australia's national interests, which encompass a much wider obligation to humanity as a whole, can do this.

The English School provides a more comprehensive account of how Australia conceives and pursues its national interests than realism.

■ Realism and the national interest

MARTIN GRIFFITHS

Realism is a general approach to international politics, not a single theory. It is often portrayed as a tradition of thought that dates back as far as Thucydides, the chronicler of the ancient Peloponnesian wars, who wrote, ‘The strong do what they have the power to do, the weak accept what they have to accept’ (Thucydides 1978: 402). Today, realism remains one of the dominant approaches to the study of international relations, although revised versions and competing approaches have emerged, which attempt to provide better explanations for a complex and rapidly changing world. Whatever their differences, all realists share three basic assumptions about international relations. These are, first, that states are the main actors; second, that international relations take place in an anarchical environment; and, third, that the struggle for power among states is an eradicable feature of that environment.

The principal reason realism continues to be popular among scholars and students of global politics is the persistent existence of and allegiance to the political unit that realists argue has been and will remain the principal actor in global politics: the territorial state, which pursues its national interest in terms of power. As Robert Gilpin bluntly puts it, ‘the essence of all social reality is the group. The building blocks and ultimate units of social and political life are not the individuals of liberal thought nor the classes of Marxism ... realism, as I interpret it, holds that the foundation of political life [is] conflict groups’ (Gilpin 1986: 304–5).

In addition, all realists focus on geostrategic and military issues, or issues of high politics, which often seem to dominate global politics, especially in situations of international tension. Finally, realists believe that peace in the world can be maintained only by a balance of power between the most powerful states in the international system, although there is no consensus among them regarding the costs and benefits of particular configurations of that balance in the twenty-first century (usually debated in terms of multipolarity, bipolarity, or the perpetuation of American unipolarity).

The realist focus on high politics and military power derives from the anarchical condition of international relations. There is no overarching power or state capable of controlling all the units (sovereign states) in the international system. Anarchy accounts for the inherent insecurity of states. As a consequence, the domain of international relations is a self-help environment in which states must provide for their own security, either by themselves or in alliance with other states. Perhaps the most appropriate context in which to frame evaluations of realism is to identify its core beliefs not in terms of empirical assumptions about anarchy and competition, but in terms of political theory.

Fundamentally, realism is ‘a conservative approach to international relations ... that places a primacy on the maintenance of order and the preservation of tradition, and is skeptical about universal claims or the possibilities for progress in the international

system' (Welsh 2003: 174). In this context, realism is not to be understood (and thereby rendered potentially obsolescent) solely on its ability to generate testable empirical theories of international relations, but as a manifestation of a venerable tradition of conservative thought (Haslam 2002; Lebow 2003). If realism is understood in minimal terms as an approach that reminds us of the enduring tragedies of power politics arising out of a historically contingent connection between sovereignty, territory and statehood in differentiating humanity politically, it can be argued that despite its deficiencies as a basis for testable theory, it is difficult to dismiss.

Realism and Australian foreign policy

In an important recent interpretation of the study of international relations in Australia, Michael Wesley argues that one can distil an Australian version of realism which is quite distinct from its Anglo-American versions. As he puts it, 'it is not concerned with how to use power, but with what do with powerlessness. It is concerned not with Realpolitik, the unshackling of the reasoning of the state from normative restraints, but with prudence, the careful weighing of ends and the calibration of the means to those ends. It is not so much concerned with security as a condition that can be built, as with instability as a condition that must be avoided' (Wesley 2009: 327). Australian realism, he concludes, is experiential rather than predictive, pessimistic, and unrelentingly pragmatic in orientation.

If that is the case with Australian observers of international relations, it is also the case that those responsible for the conduct of Australian foreign policy share this broad outlook. To be sure, there are some differences between the two main political parties, but these are at the margins of foreign affairs. In the main, realism has and continues to be the framework according to which threats are identified and interests are pursued. If Australian foreign policy is viewed with a realist lens, certain features of its place in the world and the three main challenges it faces become clear. These challenges are demographic, institutional, and geopolitical in nature. I should add that while none of them is particularly novel, each of them is likely to become more salient in the years ahead.

First, despite all the rhetoric about Australia as a 'middle power', it is a country of just 23 million people in an East Asia that will, for the foreseeable future, be dominated by the United States, China, and Japan. Demographically, the structural trend is clear—over time our population and our GDP will diminish in relative terms within this region. Whilst there is no direct relationship between population and power, a number of observers have argued that in the coming decades OECD states will divide into two camps—most with declining and ageing populations facing the risk of economic stagnation and a small number led by the United States that take the path of population growth and immigration. For Australia it is between the option of staying relatively young and the European twilight of decline. This challenge has so far been met by the economic bounty of Australia's commodity export boom. That source of growth is not sustainable in the longer term, however. Just to underline our comparative position in East Asia, if Australia was a city, it would have fewer people

than Tokyo, or Guangzhou, or Jakarta, or Seoul, or Shanghai. Australia is a small player on the world stage, and must conduct itself accordingly.

Second, Australia is geopolitically anomalous. Unlike the situation facing other so-called ‘middle’ powers (such as Canada or certain states in Western Europe), there is no political or regional economic union for Australia to join. Australia will not join the European Union, unlike for example, Italy or the Netherlands. It will not become a state of the USA. It will never become merely an extension of the US economy nor share a US land border like Canada. On the other hand, it will not be accepted as a fully fledged Asian member into any future East Asia union. In short, it will not find safety or prosperity in numbers. Moreover, Asia is diverse and does not provide Australia with a single identity or set of interests with which to ‘engage’. Efforts to embed East Asia’s powers into a stable regional order have to overcome an imposing set of obstacles. The most acute of the structural and historical obstacles involves the major powers in the region—China and Japan—which are potential rivals whose relations both with each other and with other countries in the region are tainted by lingering historical animosities (see Heazle and Knight 2007).

An intensified competition for regional predominance between these two countries has the potential to unravel the gains made to date in terms of East Asia community building. Political obstacles to community building efforts are equally pressing, ranging from the difficulty in finding effective leadership for any regional collaborative project to the region’s diversity in terms of political systems (Jones and Smith 2006: 221). ASEAN needs to be in the driver’s seat for any regional effort because neither China nor Japan can accede to the other’s leadership. But internal dynamics in ASEAN itself make this challenging (Haacke 2003). Moreover, visionary personal leadership is lacking. The region has not produced the equivalent of a Monnet or a Schuman, who so successfully advocated the creation of a European community.

Nor can socioeconomic obstacles be overlooked, especially since they are connected to the structural and political obstacles. The stark differences within the region in levels of economic development (for example, between Japan and Laos) are much wider than any seen in Western Europe when it started to build a regional community. Every state in East Asia is highly sensitive to issues involving national sovereignty, even though regional cooperation is urgently needed, not only in terms of economics but also to meet the region’s growing security challenges—running the gamut from communicable disease and environmental degradation to terrorism and transnational crime (Burke and McDonald 2007).

Third, we live in a region of the world where dislocation is on the rise. The region must cope with the rise of China, the division on the Korean peninsula as well as internal tensions within a number of states including Indonesia, the world’s largest Muslim country. Nearer to home, the South Pacific is beset by state failure—witness recent crises in Fiji and Solomon Islands, and alarm about systemic decline in Papua New Guinea. The future of East Timor remains problematic.

Given this overall strategic environment, how should Australia pursue its core interests of security and economic prosperity? From what I have argued so far,

it is clear that Australia should not rely on the allegedly benign forces of economic interdependence, democratisation and international organisation, the three main elements of ‘middle power multilateralism’ so often proclaimed as the main alternative to realism. From a realist perspective, economic interdependence as well as democratisation can only thrive in a condition of geopolitical stability. Similarly, while international organisations may mute the effect of anarchy among states, they may also become sites of contestation as the balance of power shifts among the great powers. This is worth remembering in the context of Australia’s successful bid to become a temporary member of the United Nations’ Security Council in 2013. From a realist point of view, were US–China relations to deteriorate significantly over the next two years, Australia may have elected to put itself in a difficult diplomatic position, possibly having to choose between the United States and China.

Realism is too broad an approach to be able to guide the pursuit of Australian national interests with a great deal of specificity. On two issues that I discuss below, however, realism is fairly clear about how Australia should conduct itself abroad. The first issue is how to navigate the triangular relationship between Australia, the United States and China. The second is the relationship between domestic and foreign policy in Australia.

CONTENDING INTERPRETATIONS IN FOREIGN POLICY

Hugh White, 2012a. *The China Choice* (Collingwood, Victoria: Black Inc.).

White argues that the balance of power is shifting from US unipolarity to bipolarity between the US and China. He claims that the rise of China must be accommodated by the US, not contained. For the transition from unipolarity to bipolarity to be peaceful, the US must accept that its relative power is in decline, and that China must be treated as an equal partner in international diplomacy. White argues that Australia should use its influence to help persuade its main ally to adapt to the inevitable, and that Australia should refrain from criticising China’s domestic political system.

Altman, D, Camilleri, J, Eckersley, R and Hoffstaedter, G (eds) 2012. *Why Human Security Matters: Rethinking Australian Foreign Policy* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin).

The contributors to this book argue that in a world characterised by complex interdependence, Australia’s foreign policy needs to treat the ‘soft’ issues of security more seriously than the ‘hard’ realities of military defence, and to focus on issues that transcend the traditional distinction between the domestic and the international, such as civil war, political upheaval, terrorism or piracy. Australia needs to do this first and foremost in our region, but also in relation to the unresolved regional and global security issues as we confront an increasingly uncertain and turbulent world.

Australia, the United States and China

With regard to the United States, Australia's interests are clear—we want a strong America that displays prudence, wisdom and sound judgment. However, we also need an America that operates as a constructive global leader to improve economic and social conditions, and when it resorts to military force, that it seeks to maximise the legitimacy of such action. Our interest is an America that stays engaged in the world rather than retreats into a sullen introspection after its withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan. The alliance with the United States is essential to this country. Moreover, we cannot choose between our strategic dependence on the United States and our growing economic dependence on China. From a realist point of view, however, this situation is not as dire as many commentators believe.

First, China's challenge to US primacy has a way to go before we can really say that the international system is no longer unipolar (see, in particular, Brooks and Wohlforth 2008). Despite its growing economy, over the next two decades China will remain a relatively poor country compared to the United States.

Second, insofar as the international system does evolve toward bipolarity between the United States and China, most realists claim that it is unlikely to reproduce the antagonisms of the Cold War. Quite apart from the role of nuclear weapons in constituting a structural force for peace, in East Asia, China dominates the mainland and the United States dominates maritime East Asia (see Beeson 2009: 95–112). American interests in East Asia are twofold. First, the United States wants to ensure a sufficient strategic presence for it to be able to balance possible efforts by China to dominate the region. Second, it wants to secure access for itself and its allies to regional markets and to strategic resources, including oil in South-East Asia and the Middle East. To accomplish these objectives, the US needs cooperation from strategically located regional states (such as Australia) that will provide US forces with the facilities needed for maintaining a forward presence. For an extra-regional maritime power like the United States, cooperation with offshore second-rank powers is appropriate, for capabilities are complementary and the regional allies can provide the distant power with forward yet relatively secure naval facilities. Making use of its economic influence and maritime primacy in East Asia, the US has consolidated strategic alignments with all of the littoral states. It has arrangements for naval access to facilities in Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, and Brunei. The combination of these arrangements and its bases and access to facilities in Japan allows the United States to carry out a naval encirclement of China.

In short, the United States is an East Asian maritime power with no strategic need for influence on the mainland. The status quo permits it to secure its power interests and its shipping lanes through a maritime containment strategy. This enhances great power stability in the region. Besides, US attempts to penetrate the East Asian mainland would meet with serious difficulties—despite American military superiority. Local geography sets limits to the efficacy of its capabilities. The American military experience in Vietnam and Korea made clear enough how difficult it is to use maritime power to project air and land power onto the East Asian terrain.

Just as the United States has secured vital East Asian maritime interests, China has secured its vital continental interests as it now has secure borders on its entire land periphery. The main question regarding East Asian stability in this century is whether China, having secured its continental interests, will try to develop maritime power-projection capabilities, thus challenging US interests and bipolarity. Such a development is not very likely. Two thousand years of continental expansion and of threats from neighbouring land powers have created a Chinese bias toward the development of land power. Although culture is not immutable and national interests may change, especially now that China has secure land borders, a continental strategy continues to serve its particular vital interests: borders secure from great power penetration. Fourteen countries share borders with China. It would have to anticipate a long-term status quo on its land borders to free substantial resources for the development of naval power.

Even if China would decide to do so, its navy could never become a match for US naval power. The burden to a land power seeking to develop maritime power is insurmountable in this century, when the financial and technological requirements include construction of aircraft carriers with their special and expensive aircraft together with the support vessels and advanced technologies needed to protect the carriers. Therefore, while having to maintain funding for its land forces, by 2025 China could at best develop a luxury fleet similar to that developed by the Soviet Union in the latter stage of the Cold War. Lacking compelling maritime interests, China's continental interests and US maritime capabilities should deter China from making naval power a priority.

Together, the contrasting interests of maritime and continental powers, the strategic features of the regional status quo, and the geography of East Asia make for a prospect of relatively low-level great power tension in this century. Since each power has a defensive advantage in its own theatre, there is no need for either one to respond in kind to the other's military acquisitions. Each increase in China's land-power capabilities does not create a corresponding decline of US security in maritime East Asia. Likewise, enhanced US maritime presence in the South China Sea, for example, does not create an equivalent decrease in Chinese security on the mainland. As a result the bipolar pressures for an escalating arms race are minimised. In short, the prospects for peace and stability in East Asia are promising because geography minimises the probability of a power transition and because stable bipolarity stimulates timely balancing and great power ability and interest to bring about order. Furthermore, geography will enhance regional order by neutralising the bipolar systems' tendency to intensify tension between great powers.

Despite these benign predictions by most realists, they also acknowledge that as the United States and China are the two great powers of East Asia, they cannot be strategic partners. Rather, they will be strategic rivals engaged in a regional balancing act for security and influence. In this context, Australia has little choice but to continue its present policy of 'hedging', maintaining its alliance with the United States, and actively engaging with China (see Dittmer 2012).

Foreign policy and domestic politics

The second issue of great concern to realists is the relationship between foreign policy and domestic politics. An enduring feature of Australian public opinion is its ambiguity when it comes to foreign affairs. As consistently revealed through the polls conducted by the Lowy Institute, Australians want close ties with the United States, but we do not want to fight its wars. We want close economic ties with the Chinese, but we do not trust them and we do not welcome their foreign investment. On the other hand, we value our relationship with Japan but we want our government to stop Japan killing whales. In this context, to follow public opinion in foreign policy is to wander into a quagmire. Realism has always been suspicious of liberal democracies when it comes to the running of foreign policy, and it provides a sound warning to democratic leaders who may be tempted to flaunt their leadership on the world stage and to exploit public opinion for electoral success at home (see Kane and Patapan 2012: 127–50). From a realist point of view, however, prudent foreign policy making should be based on long-term planning, and may involve decisions that are best not exposed to public debate.

This lesson was learned very quickly by the prime minister, Tony Abbott, after his election in September 2013. One of the key elements of his election promises was to ‘stop the boats’ and to end the process of illegal ‘people smuggling’ that had increased during the tenure of the Labor government over the preceding three years. When asked how exactly his government would succeed in stopping asylum seekers from undertaking the hazardous journey from Indonesia to Australia, Abbott and his ministers suggested that the boats could be turned back under supervision by Australian naval forces, and that the new government would buy the boats from Indonesian fishermen. Following his election, however, the prime minister beat a hasty retreat from his earlier rhetoric. Confronted by warnings from Indonesia that it would not tolerate any unilateral attempts by Australia to undermine Indonesia’s sovereignty, the Australian government bent over backwards to assure the Indonesians that it would do no such thing, and that the relationship should be based on long-term common interests in expanding trade and understanding between the two countries.

Conclusion

Despite all the talk of change in world affairs, some things remain the same. Globalisation, terrorism, the Arab Spring, the Global Financial Crisis and the rise of China obviously attract a good deal of academic attention, as they should. But these phenomena do not presage radical systems change in international relations, such as the shift from a medieval world to the modern system of sovereign states. And in the absence of such a shift, realism remains a potent source of insight into the basic dynamics of politics among states. To be sure, realism is hardly an inspirational outlook. It is often attacked as an archaic defence of the status quo, blind not only to forces of change but also hostile to universal liberal ideals of progress and reason. For a country in the position of Australia, however, it is hard to see what other perspective could replace realism in shaping our international outlook.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 How useful is theory in understanding Australian foreign policy?
- 2 Is Australia a 'middle power'? What is middle power diplomacy?
- 3 What do realists identify as the main features of international relations?
- 4 What, according to realists, are the main challenges to Australia in the coming decades?
- 5 What is distinctive about realism in Australia?
- 6 Why is realism such a popular theoretical explanation for the behaviour of great powers?
- 7 How does the approach of the English School differ from realism?
- 8 What features of international society provide benefits for middle powers such as Australia?

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