
Is the international context better understood in terms of the domestic politics of the great powers rather than concepts like the ‘International Community’ or ‘International Society’?

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During the Cold War, international politics was shaped largely by the rivalry between the two superpowers. Domestic issues were normally relegated to secondary importance and generally in Western democracies there was bipartisan support for their foreign policies. Presently the world of international politics is in transition. Globalisation has penetrated nearly all facets of states undermining their sovereignty. States are increasingly interdependent especially in the domain of economics. International institutions have proliferated and exist to regulate the behaviour of states. ‘International Community’ is a notion that a ‘society of states’ exists which is bounded by a common set of rules for interaction. However, there are many scholars who disagree upon the existence of such a society but claim that there is need of more integration, before it can be termed as a ‘community’.¹ Politics is not tangible and it is shaped by many influences like political framework, leaders, public opinion, interest groups, elites, military strength and economy. Shocks or crises whenever they occur have their own influence on politics. The events of 9-11 can be characterised as monumental crises for domestic politics of the sole superpower and its effect on the international society. In this complicated contemporary world it’s difficult to assess the role of domestic politics of the powerful states on international politics.

Effect of crisis and impact of 9-11

Crisis conditions create unusual decision making procedures. Generally in times of crisis there is no referral to the public with more emphasis on quick decisions by elites. After 9-11 some powerful individuals wanted an immediate attack on Iraq, this was opposed and the decision was to go after Al Qaida first as it was perceived to be the focus of the American people.² The terrorist attack rallied the American public fully behind the government. There was a public outcry for total elimination of terrorism at any cost. It was determined, the sooner military action was taken in Afghanistan more public support would be available in case of collateral damage.³ American casualties became somewhat acceptable to the public. Americans public mood was one of outrage, which became coupled with lack of domestic debate and requirement of speedy military action. There was unprecedented bipartisan support as well as international support for the American administration in whatever it chose to do to fight terrorism. An elite of Neo Conservatives who were in US administration seized this opportunity to promote their own ideas about the conduct of American power in the international arena.⁴ The Bush Doctrine of pre-emption was born. Use of American military without the blessing of UN became possible. Russia in Chechenya and Israel in Palestine soon emulated the conduct of US doctrine of pre-emption. Domestic support in the US created a change in the international political system and the Westphalian concept of sovereignty of the state as inviolable. This concept which had evolved over centuries was hitherto no more taboo. Those countries that aligned with the US were rewarded. In an attempt to gain access to military support as well as bases, Human Rights violations by tyrannical regimes were ignored. Another international value and the Human Rights framework,

which has been painstakingly made, has come under threat. Many 'regimes' have benefited from this US policy and laxity in international politics on Human Rights issues.

Role of leaders

In the context of the domestic political framework, leaders are very important in shaping of political issues especially so in an undemocratic system. A leader leads public opinion and is able to sense the mood of the populace. Ability to sell unpalatable decisions is part of the qualities of a leader. At times leaders are biased, wrong or influenced in their decisions. All leaders have certain notions of the national interest, which at times may be wrong. Vietnam was such a case.⁵ Australia's decision to go to war in Iraq was unpopular with a large section of the population but the Howard Government persisted, saying that it was in Australia's national interest. It was able to rally public opinion by appealing to 'middle Australia' on the theme of cultural unity with the US and Britain.⁶ The media was deftly exploited by many personal appearances on television and radio talk shows. The domestic linkage of joining a coalition of the willing was stated by Howard to be his initiative for an Australian-US free trade agreement which he believed could underpin Australia's economic prospects for the next 50 years.⁷ The leaders thus shape domestic politics practically at will.

Role of democratic framework

Democratic theory presupposes that citizens will make informed choices about the issues of the day.⁸ However, Kennedy thought that public opinion is often erratic, inconsistent and unreasonable. Democracies are inefficient in formulation and conduct of foreign policy. The reason for this some say is the intrusion of domestic politics into foreign policy, with a constant need to respond to public opinion.⁹ The power of the people is not a myth. However, the public does not forcefully rally behind issues easily. New Zealand's decision to bar nuclear armed ships weakened the ANZUS alliance but was recognised by the government as the abhorrence of their public for nuclear testing. Unfortunately, notwithstanding the strong rhetoric of democratic norms there is empirical evidence that the public is generally excluded from any influence in making of the policies.¹⁰ On the other hand, the concentration of power and the lack of public scrutiny give centralised political systems decisive advantages in foreign affairs. Globalisation is ushering in a new era and even in China opinion polls increasingly aid the leadership in taking decisions.

Role of economics on politics

International politics is intertwined with domestic issues in many domains particularly that of economics. Globalisation has increased the interdependence of states. Politically a powerful lobby in the US sees rising China as a strategic competitor and wants to contain it.¹¹ Since hundreds of thousands of American jobs are dependent on the Chinese economy, the interest of multinational corporations has to be factored in by the US administration before taking any political measures against China.¹² Similarly, China also does not question US military presence in the region. There is economic coexistence between China and the US despite the provocative rhetoric by President Bush. The politician is in the business of winning elections. Politicians also fear electoral backlash. Therefore politicians are extremely sensitive to public opinion in an election year. Clinton's remarks, now infamous: 'Its the economy stupid', say it all. Despite massive risk by the Howard government in joining the coalition of the willing the American politicians are thought to be unmovable in providing access to their domestic agriculture market. During election years foreign issues take a back seat and there is a rediscovery of a pressing agenda in employment, health, education and investment.¹³

Values and domestic support for international issues

The political culture of a state refers to a set of ideals held by the public. Specifically in America, this concept aligns an important domestic source of 'values to be exported' as a basis of foreign policy.¹⁴ The Americans therefore have an idealist agenda in shaping the world as the mirror image of their interpretation of democracy. The whole world is treated to this simplistic notion that if American values are adopted all problems will be solved. Another main driver in foreign policy of a power is the domestic support for an international issue. For instance American Israeli Public Affairs Committee is widely believed to be controlling the American Middle East policy. The considerable vote bank of evangelists and their support for the Jewish State ensures that American administrations consistently have pro Israel policies. Foreign policy decisions are also guided by the reactions they provoke at home.¹⁵ International chemical weapons treaty is the most intrusive international treaty. The impetus for this treaty was provided by the general public in many Western countries outraged by Saddam's use of Chemical weapons against the Kurds.¹⁶

Conclusion

The concept of international society is under challenge. The changes occurring in international politics has many drivers. The system of international politics is skewed in favour of the most powerful with other states having to make a choice 'either you are with us or against us'. The all out supportive voice of the public of the great powers gives their governments immense strength. But the political elite to fulfil their own international agenda may hijack the peoples' support. A non-supportive public constrains the government's action and its legitimacy in the international arena. The globalisation factor acts as restraint to the use of unbridled power in international politics. Globalisation has created multilayers where states can now be engaged simultaneously in cooperative as well as adversarial relations. The leaders have the ability to influence the public. All sorts of political ideas are marketable. But it is mandatory for a power to seek or develop domestic support especially in democracy before changes can be forced on the international society.

Endnotes

1. See definition of international society in *The Penguin Dictionary of International Relations*, p. 276.
2. Bob Woodward, *Bush at War*, Simon and Schuster, Rockefeller Center, New York, 2002, p. 49.
3. *ibid.*, p. 32.
4. Various speakers at CDSS conference held on 1 Aug 2003 at the Hyatt in Canberra on the subject of 'American Grand Strategy'.
5. Woodward, *Bush at War*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.
6. <http://www.theaustraliannews.com.au/images>
7. 'All the world's a stage for Howard', *Weekend Australian*, 5 Jul 2003.
8. Charles W Kegley Jr & Eugene R Wiltkopf, *American Foreign Policy*, St Martins Press, New York, 4th ed., 1991, p. 280.
9. G Evans and Jeffery Newnham, *The Penguin Dictionary of International Relations*, Clays Ltd, St Ives, England, 1998 p. 120.
10. Evans and Newnham, *The Penguin Dictionary of International Relations*, *op. cit.*, p. 455.
11. Steven I Levine, 'Sino American relations: Practicing damage control', Samuel S Kim (ed.), *China and the world*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 1998, p. 91–92.
12. John Wiseman, Dr, Class notes, CDSS, March 11, 2003.
13. E Robert Hunter, 'Starting at zero: US foreign policy for the 1990s', *US Foreign policy—after the cold war*, Brad Roberts(ed.), MIT press, Cambridge, p. 3.
14. Kegley and Wiltkopf, *American Foreign Policy*, *op. cit.*, p. 248.
15. Kegley and Wiltkopf, *American Foreign Policy*, *op. cit.*, p. 244.
16. Evans and Newnham, *The Penguin Dictionary of International Relations*, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

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