
Realism and Liberalism: How policy makers use both frameworks simultaneously to meet national interests

Group Captain Mark Gower, Australia – Air Force

Introduction

The proliferation of bilateral and multilateral arrangements between states, growing reliance on globalisation economic practices for national survival/development and the rising occurrence of non-state actor organisations in the international system, all combine to make successful policy making complex and challenging. A wide number of theoretical frameworks have been developed to assist policy makers in determining policies for furthering their national objectives and interests. The variety of theoretical frameworks to explain the behaviour and relationships within the international system demonstrates that probably no single framework can successfully explain the increasingly complex international system. Indeed to look at the international system through only one framework may give a very biased explanation of the system and therefore the options for policymaking to successfully address national interests. This paper will develop a working understanding of two theoretical international policy making frameworks, realism and liberalism and then, using a contemporary foreign policy example, demonstrate how policy makers have simultaneously exercised aspects of these frameworks to meet national interests.

National interests

For the purposes of this paper national interest is defined in its broadest sense to incorporate a state's view of what is important to that state. All aspects of national economic, cultural and security concerns are generally viewed as national interest concerns. Key to this definition is that national interest varies between states and indeed is subject to constant review and revision by the policy makers.

Realism

Realism as a policy making framework relies on the concept of maintaining a balance of power between states and is principally concerned with the struggle for power as displayed by various state players in the international system. Central to this theory is the concept that in the absence of centralised control over the international system (anarchy) states will act out of self interest and with power as the balancing force. As Walt has stated realism, '... depicts international affairs as a struggle for power among self-interested states and is generally pessimistic about the prospects for eliminating conflict and war.'¹ Realism is a useful tool to policy makers as it offers the opportunity to focus on interests rather than ideology, to seek peace and order through strength and to maximise the interests of the state in a potentially hostile or competitive environment.²

Liberalism

Liberalism as an alternate framework for policy makers proposes the notion of providing order and justice to the international system through the establishment and use of institutions. Central to the liberalists' approach is the preservation and protection of the individual or human rights in modern terms. Liberalists see the state and governments as key institutions for protecting individuals and that

through cooperation and multilateral organisations it is possible to bring security and equality to the international system. The formation of the League of Nations and the United Nations are examples of institutions that are designed to help overcome potentially selfish short-term state behaviour for the greater benefits of enduring international cooperation and the betterment of human rights.³

Use of realism and liberalism frameworks by states

Realism has been arguably the dominant theoretical framework for explaining policy actions within the international system for at least the last half of the 20th century. The Cold War policies of the US and USSR in regional balance of power contests such as those of Indo–China and Europe where ideological alliances and wars were used to further national interests. These policies typified the realist struggle between the super powers for power dominance, or at least to prevent dominance of alternate ideologies in specific regions. Australia exhibited similar realist international relations behaviour since the Second World War with its firm commitment to the West. Australia's participation and support to the US in Vietnam during the Cold War and active bilateral defence arrangements with Western nations, most notably with the United States (ANZUS), are clear examples of the practical application of this realism policy.

However, also during this period the world has witnessed significant progress in the influence of traditional liberalism structures such as the United Nations, in maintaining world order and stability. Particularly since the end of the Cold War the United Nations, by most measures, has had a profound and significant influence on peace and security within the international system. Post-World War Two international organisations such as the International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organisation have remained effective vehicles for the furthering of many states' interests within a framework of liberalism and international cooperation. The World Trade Organisation in particular is an example where a multilateral, liberalist framework has had a significant impact on promoting economic interdependence and cooperation between states.⁴ Australia has been an active supporter of these liberalist organisations. The United Nations and the World Trade Organisation and its predecessor GATT have been particularly important pieces of Australia's international relations policy structure in recent times.

Contemporary Australian use of theoretical frameworks

Looking at Australian international policy practice in recent years, evidence exists that the trend indicated in the preceding paragraphs of using elements of both the realist and liberalist frameworks to develop policy options to further national interests has been the Australian experience.

To illustrate, contemporary Australian interests were defined in the government's Foreign Affairs White Paper issued in 1997 and updated in 2003. Central to the 1997 paper were the primary national interest concerns of 'globalisation' and the 'continuing central economic role of East Asia to Australia's future'.⁵ With near neighbours in the region, such as Indonesia, experiencing long-standing internal security or succession concerns, Australia steadfastly maintained a policy focus on traditional realist areas of power development such as trade, economic and security arrangements. Australia's position on separatist movements within Indonesian provinces of Timor, Aceh and Irian Jaya had been to support Indonesia in exercising its sovereignty and to manage its internal affairs as a matter of state. Australia's foreign policy approach to Indonesia was in terms of improving Australia's national interests (globalisation and economic development) by engaging in trade and similar interstate agreements that benefited Australia. While expressing concerns on human rights, Australia had a policy of supporting the rules of sovereignty and allowing countries to manage their own affairs.

However, the vote for independence in East Timor in late 1998 saw a fundamental change in Australia's policy. No longer were the realist ideals of national state sovereignty foremost, the crisis in this province caused the realist approach to be amended by the liberalist view that protection of the individual, human rights, and the development of democracy exceeded sovereignty rights. The balance had been tipped and human rights now outweighed sovereignty in Australian–Indonesian relations. Australian policy makers switched in their international relations policy from realist balance of power policies to classic liberalist policies that act for preservation of human rights as the overriding priority.⁶ The resulting multinational intervention force illustrates that policy makers in Australia can use multiple frameworks for viewing the international system and can adjust policies to meet the changing national interest needs.⁷

This phenomena of tailoring policy and using the appropriate 'tool' from available frameworks in response to changing national interests, is highlighted further in the updated Foreign Affairs White Paper released in 2003. The new 2003 White Paper reflects the effects of the Asian financial crisis of 1998, independence in East Timor in 1999, the terrorist attacks in the US on 11 September 2001 and the Bali bombing on 12 October 2002 in updating the government's 1997 priorities on national interests. The renewed national interest areas in the wake of these events for Australia include 'security threats' and 'globalisation' as the two central areas of interest.⁸ Specifically, the 2003 White Paper identifies Australian national interest as '...the security and prosperity of Australia and Australians.'⁹ In the wake of this update we now see Australia again using both realist and liberalist approaches simultaneously to meet these national interests.

The government has a stated policy of 'responsibility and responsiveness'. The Foreign Minister in speeches leading to the release of the new White Paper has outlined the importance of 'strong security and economic ties with the United States' through realist measures such as ANZUS and the recently signed Free Trade Agreement. He has also stated great support for the use of the liberalism framework of the United Nations to meet 'transnational issues such as ...human rights, environmental, health, energy, drug trafficking, people smuggling issues'.¹⁰ Clearly this latest national foreign policy reflects a need to use both realist and liberalist policies to achieve renewed Australian national interests.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined the two widely accepted frameworks used to understand the international systems, realism and liberalism. Both frameworks provide policy makers with theoretical perspectives for furthering national interests. Examples exist of the widespread use of both frameworks in the international system and using Australia as a specific example the paper argued that both operated simultaneously to meet national interests. The crisis in East Timor was used as a clear example where human rights outweighed other balance of power/sovereignty issues and as a result there was a fundamental shift from realist to liberalist to meet national interests. The conclusion is that policy makers are pragmatic and are not blinded by one framework when determining policy to meet national interests. The changing nature of the national interest requires policy makers to use a mix of options from various frameworks to suit the changing international situation.

Endnotes

1. S. Walt, 'International Relations: One World Many Theories', *Foreign Policy Journal*, Spring 1998, p. 31.
2. J. Baylis & S. Smith, *The Globalisation of World Politics*, Oxford, New York, 2nd Ed., 2001 p. 142.
3. Walt, 'International Relations: One World Many Theories', p. 32.
4. R. Wolfe, 'The World Trade Organisation', in B. Hocking, and S. McGuire (eds), *Trade Politics International, Domestic and Regional Perspectives*, Routledge, London and New York, 1999, pp. 208–22.
5. F. Frost, 'National Interests Global Concerns: The 2003 Foreign Affairs and Trade White Paper', Current Issues Brief 23 2002/03, Department of the Parliamentary Library, 24 March 2003, pp. 1–12.
6. B. Burton, *Asia Times*, 'Australian Stand on Timor Marks Policy U-Turn', <<http://www.atimes.com/oceania/ai09ah01.html>>.
7. J. Baylis & S. Smith S., *The Globalisation of World Politics*, p. 174.
8. F. Frost, 'National Interests Global Concerns: The 2003 Foreign Affairs and Trade White Paper', Current Issues Brief 23 2002/03, Department of the Parliamentary Library, 24 March 2003, pp. 1–12.
9. Foreign Affairs and Trade White Paper, 2003, Internet, p. 1.
10. A. Downer 'Advancing the National Interest: Australia's Foreign Policy Challenge' Speech National Press Club Canberra, 7 May 2002.

Bibliography

- Australian Government, 2003, Foreign Affairs and Trade White Paper, <http://www.dfat.gov.au/ani/chapter_2.html>.
- Burchill, S, 'Liberal Internationalism' in S. Burchill and A. Linklater (eds), *Theories of International Relations*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1996.
- Burchill, Scott, et al., 'Introduction', *Theories of International Relations*, Palgrave, London, 2001, 2nd ed., 2001.
- Burton, B., *Asia Times*, 'Australian Stand on Timor Marks Policy U-Turn', <<http://www.atimes.com/oceania/ai09ah01.html>>.
- Downer, A., 'Advancing the National Interest: Australia's Foreign Policy Challenge' Speech National Press Club Canberra 7 May 2002, < http://www.foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/2002/020507_fa_whitepaper.html>.
- Frost, F., National Interests Global Concerns: The 2003 Foreign Affairs and Trade White Paper, Current Issues Brief 23 2002/03, Department of the Parliamentary Library, 24 March 2003.
- Gaddis, J.L., 'In Defense of Particular Generalization: Rewriting Cold War History, Rethinking International Relations Theory' in Elman C. and Elman M.F., *Bridges and Boundaries*, MIT Press Cambridge Massachusetts, 2001.
- Walt, S., 'International Relations: One World Many Theories', *Foreign Policy Journal*, Spring 1998.
- Wolfe, R. 'The World Trade Organisation', in Hocking, B. and McGuire, S. (eds), *Trade Politics International, Domestic and Regional Perspectives*, Routledge, London and New York, 1999.