‘Power and Ideas in Australian Foreign Policy’

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Why do ‘soft’ threats such as asylum-seeking and whaling appear to dominate the domestic content of foreign policy discourse in Australia, rather than potentially higher order security threats such as China and Indonesia? In this paper I argue that these soft threats are prioritized by political elites as part of a strategy that enables Australia to pursue a rational foreign policy in the national interest, without undue interference from domestic audiences. To make this case, I develop a neoclassical realist framework as a way to understand this process within the Australian setting. Using this framework I identify three strategies that have emerged to deal with this dilemma since the end of the Cold War. The first is the inflation of issues such as whaling and illegal migration. This strategy gives domestic audiences a connection to foreign policy debates without intruding into higher order strategic concerns. The second is deflection, where issues important to national security concerns are treated with bipartisanship and effectively downplayed in internal debates. The final strategy is dilution, where vexing ideas elevated by domestic political actors are subsumed and diluted by established actors closer to the centre of power. Taken together, these mitigate potentially problematic domestic policy contests by pulling some norm entrepreneurs towards the centre of debates, and marginalizing others, depending on the issue involved.

Australia’s Security Environment

Australia faces many external pressures given its position in a geostrategically important region. The rise of China is a dominant theme in current international affairs scholarship and Australia straddles a difficult chasm between its growing economic links to China and its security relationship with the US. But a number of supplementary issues complicate Australia’s security picture. Here, one can consider Indonesia, with whom Australia has stable diplomatic relations, but where potentially problematic Indonesian domestic forces are injected into debates. For instance, a Lowy Institute study by Fergus Hanson found that a third of Indonesians believe Australia ‘poses a threat to the security of Indonesia’ and that 12% were in favour of encouraging ‘militant groups to attack Australia’.  

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1 Fergus Hanson, Lowy Institute Indonesia Poll 2012: Shattering Stereotypes (The Lowy Institute, 2012), 11.
Likewise, in Papua New Guinea (PNG), relations have been strained by the Michael Somare and Julian Moti affairs, while PNG itself faces stability issues as a result of controversies such as the Sanderline Affair and the 2011 constitutional crisis. This is juxtaposed against a relatively strong economy with consistent growth at 8% and predictions of 15-20% with the fruition of the PNG Liquid Natural Gas project.² East Timor also presents challenges after angering Australian elites by purchasing boats from China to be manned by Chinese sailors.³ After Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão proclaimed the ‘Timorese must unite to stop Australia stealing their wealth as it did in 1989’ East Timor has engaged with China in regard to access to its oil and gas reserves, in an effort to diversify the dependent relationship fostered by the contentious Timor Gap treaty.⁴ All three neighbours are susceptible to instability and their threat perceptions of Australia can be amplified by loosely managed ideas penetrating their domestic debates.

While Australia’s three closest neighbours are relatively weak, the regional powers also present concerns, with the Indian relationship particularly troublesome. India made little more than a tepid response to Kevin Rudd’s suggestion of a trilateral security pact with the US and India.⁵ And while the uranium deal signed in 2011 helped to heal problems caused by hate crimes against Indian students in Melbourne (and subsequent Indian media coverage which resulted in a 46% drop in the number of Indian student visas issued in 2009)⁶, US-India relations have been deepening while Australia-India relations remain lukewarm at best. This is despite both Kevin Rudd and Stephen Smith undertaking ‘goodwill’ visits to shore up the relationship in an attempt to overcome what Rory Medcalf claims is a perception of Australia as an “afterthought in Asia”⁷.

Australia-Chinese relations are for the most part stable, but certain troubling issues make appearances. Of note was the Stern Hu affair, which some viewed as a rebuke to the Foreign Investment Review Board’s (FIRB) rejection of the Chinalco-Rio Tinto deal and the bullish 2009 Defence White Paper.⁸ Similarly, Chinese officials expressed concern over the deployment of a permanent US marine presence in the Northern territory, with the state news outlet The People’s Daily warning that ‘if

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⁴ Ibid.
Australia uses its military bases to help the US harm Chinese interests, then Australia itself will be caught in the crossfire.  

Outside of posturing and perceptions, and within military spending and GDP, Australia is in relative decline in the region. For example, while Australia’s military budget has tripled since 1995, the Chinese budget has increased tenfold. Australian military spending grew from USD$13.1bn in 1989 to USD$22.9bn in 2009, but China’s expanded from USD$16.6 in 1989 to USD$116bn in 2009. Furthermore, despite Australia’s excellent economic outlook (it has outperformed all OECD countries in the aftermath of the global financial crisis), Australia’s total relative GDP stayed steady at around 8% of that of China, Japan, India and Indonesia combined. In comparison, while Indonesia’s economy has been temporarily halted by the GFC, it has averaged 5.8% growth over the past decade, while India and China have grown at an average rate of 8.2% and 11.4% respectively compared to Australia’s 3.2% over the same period. Figures A and B demonstrate Australia’s relative position in relation to Australia’s key strategic competitors across military spending and total GDP in USD.

![Fig A. Relative Military Spending of Australia’s key strategic competitors ($USD)](image-url)

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12 Ibid.

13 “SIPRI Military Expenditure Database.”
While this pessimistic outlook might infer a set of hostile and fearful ideas emerging as the domestic population responds to these pressures, especially in regards to Indonesia and China, the evidence does not suggest this. In general, Australian citizens do not exhibit fear about issues directly related to the prospects for conflict in the region. Indeed, 90% of respondents said they feel ‘safe’ from global events in a 2009 Lowy Institute poll conducted to reveal a cross-section of views across the Australian population.  

This perception of safety amongst the Australian populace is combined with a preference for focusing on threats that are far and distant. Most notably, the perceived threat from asylum-seekers is a continuing theme at the domestic level, with 76% of respondents in the same Lowy report stating they were concerned about asylum-seekers entering Australia via boat. Similarly, Media Monitors analytic services ranked asylum-seekers, along with climate change and Australia’s involvement in Afghanistan as the most mentioned foreign policy issues of 2009. At the same time only 40% of people polled viewed China as a threat despite 90% perceiving China as the leading power in the region. These numbers have little correlation with the position of asylum-seekers in the hierarchy of threats. Here, only 2,726 people arrived by boats in 2009 (up from 161 in 2008) compared to 53,900 overstaying their visas. Australian immigration numbers are on the whole comparable to other

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16 Ibid., 1.
Western countries. For instance, in 2008, the UK inflow of asylum-seekers was 31,315, while France took in 35,404 people.\textsuperscript{21} Those numbers only account for a small percentage of the total of 203,874 migrants on permanent visas that entered Australia in 2008.\textsuperscript{22}

Similarly, a niche concern such as anti-whaling activism is indicative of soft issues with heightened foreign policy implications for the domestic audience. For example, one of Foreign Minister Bob Carr’s first major ‘victories’ as newly appointed foreign minister was his engagement with South Korea, where he questioned Seoul’s ability to be a ‘global green superpower’ if its planned scientific whaling program had been pursued.\textsuperscript{23} Correspondingly, Japanese whaling has been a consistently elevated domestic theme to the extent that the Australian government has failed to formally criticise hostile Sea Shepherd actions such as ramming boats, preferring loosely worded condemnations like that of Julia Gillard who stated that they should ‘conduct themselves appropriately so everybody is kept safe’.\textsuperscript{24} The debate was prominent enough for newly appointed Environment Minister Peter Garrett to initially lobby the Cabinet to use Australia’s naval capability to pressure Japan to stop whaling activities, although this was later downgraded to a customs ship.\textsuperscript{25} We might assume that this was the result of the Australian government realising that whaling does not trump the economic relationship with Australia’s second biggest trading partner, and key strategic ally in North-East Asia, and that while domestically useful, it was not something to be projected into foreign policy outputs.

The picture emerging, then, is that ‘soft’ or distant threats are being elevated in the domestic discourse. Here, Geoffrey Garrett has commented that ‘foreign policy has played virtually no role in Australia’s race to the [2010] polls on 21 August beyond the domestic hot button issues of asylum-seekers and immigration’.\textsuperscript{26} Within the international relations community, constructivist assessments tend to assign these issues to history and culture. Anthony Burke, who has equated Australia’s security stance with a cultural history of fear, typifies this approach. He locates the source of ‘fear’ in a racial tendency in the Australian psyche, acting as a motivating factor behind Australia’s perceived xenophobia and desire to homogenise.\textsuperscript{27}

But if xenophobia is a driving force behind Australia’s security agenda, why is this being constructed around asylum-seekers from distant countries such as Afghanistan or Sri Lanka rather than more immediate strategic threats such as China or Indonesia? Why is there an absence of anti-Chinese sentiment given they now constitute

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{27} Anthony Burke, Fear of Security: Australia’s Invasion Anxiety, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 8.
Australia’s largest non-European ethnic group and account for the majority of immigrants, both legal and illegal? In a similar manner, Richard Devetak and Jacqui True almost entirely attribute Australia’s recent behaviour in international affairs to reactionary ideational factors, claiming that Australia pursues a path of ‘gay abandon’ in foreign policy. This includes self-defeating aspects such as stricter immigration controls based on ‘different governmental worldviews and conceptions of state identity’. This approach suggests that elites ability to create foreign policy is driven first and foremost by the domestic audience and that foreign policy outputs are simply expressions of these ideas. But as shown so far, an unmanaged populist foreign policy has real potential to alter the balance of threat from other states. Moreover, there is little evidence that domestic foreign policy outputs have acted contrary to our national security goals when looking at the broader foreign policy trajectory over the past twenty years.

Older theoretical approaches have problems dealing with these conundrums too. Kenneth Waltz’s structural realism has little scope for dealing with the role of perception both inside and outside of the state, given its fetishization of the levels of analysis problem. Stephen Walt’s balance of threat explains the dangers of what might happen if Australia’s domestic ideas are misperceived by other states as offensive intentions. This could result in states in the region balancing against Australia, but at the same time this does not attempt to locate the source of those intentions. Robert Jervis’ ideas on spiral theory also stress that states build images of other states, leading to misperception and an overestimation of the hostility of states towards one another, but also fails to identify the genesis of the threats. This is in direct contrast to constructivist scholarship that tends to insist on a ‘bottom-up’ model (with the exception of Wendtian structurationism). Most often such studies link these to history and culture instead of exploring whether international level processes contribute to the emergence of these ideas. In order to explore these contradictions in the Australian case this is critical, because as this first section has shown, Australia’s foreign policy issues that are of importance to the domestic audience are often in stark contrast to the realities of the material environment.

Neoclassical Realism – Linking Ideas and Incentives

Neoclassical realism can help solve this puzzle. It has the advantage of using a structural approach to assess foreign policy outputs, but also locates the source of ideas as the external environment. This is advantageous when approaching Australia as we can contrast the actual foreign policy outputs with the expected behaviour in order to view the role of domestic issues as an intervening variable. So while the structure of the international system is seen as the source of threats, it is the domestic elites that actualise them. This was first articulated as a coherent theoretical approach by Gideon Rose in a 1998 World Politics article which reviewed works from four scholars with realist tendencies, all of whom tried to reconcile domestic level ideas

with international systemic logic. The common thread between these works was that material capabilities are the main determinant of state behaviour, but the translation from pressure to action must be filtered through elites who are beholden to domestic audiences. Thus elites’ perceptions of power and behaviour when deciding when to act on those restraints are critical. According to Rose, these pressures can linger as the ‘the translation of capabilities into national behaviour is often rough and capricious over the short and medium term’. Following this logic through, we can view elites as balancing both the most practical and basic instincts of realist theory (survival and self-help) against the counterpoint of domestic ideas.

The idea of capturing multiple levels of the political stage is not in itself new. Robert Putnam’s writing on two-level ‘games’ was highly influential in 1988 and useful in a game-theory setting, but often became something of a deus ex machina for constructivists. For example, Peter Christoff employs this in the Australian setting as a central framework for exploring climate change policy, but in doing so invokes an epistemologically problematic set of variables travelling in both directions between levels, including the role of water restrictions and the habitat of native fauna. It is therefore unsurprising that he concludes pejoratively that John Howard’s term was an “unexamined’ realist, or neorealist, view of the world”. Here, the ‘win-win set’ (to borrow Putnam’s terminology) of Howard’s pragmatism is portrayed as at odds with the ideas constructed from the ground up by the Australian population. Thus it was Howard whom created a belligerent attitude towards soft issues such as global warming and immigration. While analytically interesting, this approach serves mainly to further detach the two levels, and paints political elites as isolated from the internal political experience and ultimately beholden to their domestic constituents.

A more interesting question is how we can investigate ‘win-lose’ sets: or how leaders seek to ameliorate potential threats from these two-level games that are not in the interests of elites, but are critical to issues concerning the security and survival of the state. To do so I use the neo-classical model presented by William Wohlforth and Stephen Brooks in a 2001 International Security article as my starting point. Their approach is essentially a re-evaluation of Putnam’s idea of two-level games, with the critical difference being that the transmission between the two levels occurs in one direction. To them, changing material incentives are the instigators of new ideas, and not vice-versa, as a constructivist would argue. In Wohlforth’s and Brooks’ case, the focus of analysis was the Soviet Union and how external pressures necessitated a new set of ideas to be constructed by elites in order to sell political change. The appearance of concepts such as Perestroika and Glasnost were mechanisms for leaders to enable new ideas, which in turn enabled the state to respond to the material realities of the Soviet economy. Without elites making those dramatic changes, state survival was threatened.

33 Ibid., 158.
But unlike Wohlforth and Brooks, here I am not so much interested in foreign policy outputs as I am in the conduit of ideas from the elites to the domestic audience. Australia does not seem to need to sell major internal changes to its domestic audience, despite the structural changes currently occurring in its region. Indeed, it is here where the value of the neoclassical approach lies. Australia has had a predominantly consistent foreign policy across a range of ideologically different governing parties, despite clear and present external pressures over the past century. Despite a robust internal discourse, certain ideas, including militarisation and nationalism, have been promoted and then demoted, and further obfuscated by dilution with other more distant and ‘soft’ issues such as supposed threats from terrorists, whaling and asylum-seekers.

The pitfalls and benefits of elevating different ideas in domestic debates

As a result, a neoclassical approach can be used to show how elites in the Australian setting undertake strategic behaviour that internally prioritizes soft foreign policy ideas and deflects others. Without the benefit of the strong and often dramatic external pressures exhibited at the great power level, this elite/domestic conduit becomes critical, but making such claims is difficult due to the literature deficit in neoclassical literature on middle powers. Nonetheless, we can elicit certain patterns from existing scholarship, such as from Randall Schweller, who views the conduit between levels in highly democratic states as more nuanced that those in authoritarian systems. To this end, Schweller claims that neoclassical realism also has the potential to explore policy adaption within the state rather than simply the resultant foreign policy outputs. Not only is this applicable in the Australian case, but it also highlights why threat perceptions can be so precarious for Australia’s neighbours that are in transitional democratic frameworks.

Why then are some issues ‘elevated’? In terms of pinpointing causes, Norman Ripsman’s work is instructive. In the defining volume on neoclassical realism, he stated that access to public opinion, as the key conduit for the intervening variable in structural affairs, was directed through the media. In the Australian setting this is especially pertinent due to the concentration of media amongst relatively few major players. For example, in the newspaper market, two companies - Fairfax and News Limited - enjoy an 86% market share. In comparison, the top owner of US papers controls only 15% of the market.

Before I describe the certain strategies of the elite, some definitions are required. Whom and what are the elites? In this analysis they are simply Federal politicians. There are others, such as the financial elite, who have great sway in debates, as well as the media when viewed as an actor itself, but I have deliberately set them aside. For similar reasons of scope and epistemology, I view the media not as part of the elite, but as the primary conduit to connect with the domestic. Furthermore, while the Internet is changing the nature of the ‘conduit’ between elites and the domestic

38 Norrin Ripsman, “Neoclassical realism and domestic interest groups,” in Neoclassical realism, the state, and foreign policy, ed. Steven Lobell, Norrin Ripsman, and Jeffrey Taliaferro (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 171.
audience, I believe that this area is too diffused and embryonic to elicit useful information at present.

To demonstrate the value of the intervening variable (or conduit), it is worth considering the expected results in its absence. Here, we might reasonably expect a 1:1 transfer of external pressures into foreign policy outputs and subsequent state behaviour. At the same time, neoclassical theory predicts that states will ultimately behave according to systemic pressures, but that these outputs will be varied according to the amount of discourse being input through the intervening domestic variable. In the Australian case, we can view these broad responses occurring. Australia increased defence spending over the Rudd administration with Rudd committing to real annual spending increases of 3% starting in 2008 through to 2018. Additionally, the 2009 Defence White Paper outlines the need for force modernization in response to a change in the balance of power with the rise of China whom it clearly defines as a threat. US troops have also been invited to form a permanent American presence on Australia’s Northern front. Security changes through the economic lens are also arising more frequently, with the Foreign Investment Review Board (FIRB) proactive in preventing investments in Australia’s resource sector potentially harmful to Australia’s national interest, such as the takeover of the ASX by the Singapore Exchange, and the proposed Rio-Chinalco and China Minmetals Non-ferrous Metals and OZ Minerals asset acquisition attempts in 2009.

So Australia is behaving as expected. But what might stop it from behaving according to the neoclassical approach? Essentially if the intervening variable of domestic politics becomes too powerful, this has the potential to delay or upset the natural adaptation to external pressures. We can look to other states for examples of why the intersection between ideas and foreign policy outputs can upset wider strategic goals. For example, in China, leaders often order and dictate the ideas that are fed down to the domestic audience in line with neoclassical thought. But often these ideas are misapplied. Fareed Zakaria has described this as sometimes dangerous, with regards to its use of nationalism, where elites stoke the flames and then panic when reactions get out of control. More specifically, the CCP has used ‘pragmatic nationalism’ and patriotic education as ways to mobilize opinion against Japan, which resulted in events such as the anti-Japanese riots in Beijing in 2005. These in turn created not only higher-level diplomatic incidents and greater levels of threat perception, but also

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put pressure on Japanese leaders to create responses in order to legitimise their political authority. Thus despite the size and differences in the Australian and Chinese polity, we can see that poorly delivered ideas can be dangerous, and for a state in Australia’s vulnerable position, problematic execution of this process would be amplified in an Australian setting because of its relatively weak position.

**Identifying Three Types of Elite Strategies**

So while we have established some trends linking recent rhetoric and the invocation of ideas to external pressures, how can this be linked to larger themes? I have identified three prominent strategies apparent in the Australian setting over the past twenty years.

**Inflation**

In the introduction I laid out some of the most prominent foreign policy discourses in Australia and a disconnection between higher order security concerns and lower ones. This inflation strategy occurs where elites take issues that are relatively unimportant to security and promote them as key issues. Quite often these become a main cleavage in the domestic political debate and a way of differentiating broad ideological approaches without invoking more critical security dialogues. The results of this approach can be seen in metrics such as Channel Nine’s election coverage of the 2001 election. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and the Tampa incident, news time spent on terrorism and asylum-seeker issues was more than all other election issues combined.48 A similar survey in the lead up to the 2010 election found that refugees and asylum-seekers were an ‘important issue’ to 75% voters, and while only 5.5% saw it as the single most important issue, this was higher than the resources tax, industrial relations, the environment and unemployment.49 An insight into the realities of this process was shown in a leaked cable that outlined how a senior liberal strategist informed a US diplomat that the issue of asylum-seekers was ‘fantastic’ for the Coalition and that ‘the more boats that come the better’.50

In contrast, while the Labor party externally painted itself as the more centrist and compassionate party, any actual foreign policy changes on these issues were minimal. On the surface Labor ended the Pacific Solution and abolished temporary protection visas, but in practice it retained the Migration Zone set up by the Howard government, which included the mandatory detention of all people entering illegally by sea.51 Furthermore, despite the fanfare surrounding the end of the Pacific Solution, Labor moved to setup a ‘regional processing centre’ first in Timor and then again in Malaysia, both of which had many similarities with the Howard policies. In short, rhetoric was the main difference, with each party appeasing a certain domestic bloc and framing their policies to suit.

In practical terms, evidence-based pragmatism, free of overt party interference, guided asylum-seeker policy. So, for example, the national security element of

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48 David Denemark, “Information flow and voter decision-making in the 2001 Australian federal election:” (presented at the Australasian Political Studies Association, Australian National University, 2002).
immigration was transferred to ASIO via the Security Referral Service (SRS). Processes that addressed the central claim in the asylum debate – that illegal immigrants are a threat to Australia’s national security – were handled in a way that was deliberately detached from the public debate. Furthermore, in the case of the SRS, the scheme had transitional government support, being initiated by the Howard government in mid-2007 and continued by the Rudd government.

Therefore rhetoric fulfils a different function in engaging domestic audiences in debates, while allowing the underlying state mechanisms to work and respond to threats as expected. It allows the domestic audience to ‘own’ a national security issue without it actually changing the foreign policy that addresses empirical national security pressures. Thus the key reason for inflating these ‘soft’ issues is that those parts of Australian policy pertinent to national security can become dangerous if too keenly politicised. In this circumstance, there can be a ‘win-loss’ where an internal political party can ‘win’ on a politicised issue, but this can spill over and affect the states’ threat perception. So, for example, Tony Abbott or Julia Gillard could notionally increase their electoral chances by politicizing the US relationship, or by overstating China’s military and economic threats. Yet neither does so because this has great implications for higher-level games where critical issues such as state survival dominate. Indeed, Abbott’s recent visit to China was perceived by many as a chance to project a consistent foreign policy attitude to a home audience rather than an international one.

In fact, the superficiality of asylum-seekers as a debate is demonstrated by the fact that China is the top source of people seeking asylum in Australia. However, this is largely unknown because they arrive predominantly by plane, while Afghani and Iraqi refugees are the dominant groups featured in media coverage. Within the strategy of inflation, I have focused on asylum-seekers, but this is equally applicable to the anti-whaling rhetoric, terrorism and climate change, in that they allow a connection with the domestic population. These all allow people within a pluralistic society to be represented via soft issues, ultimately stopping more sensitive matters relating to national security from intervening too dramatically at the international level.

**Deflection**

The strategy of deflection sits diametrically opposed to inflation. This is where key strategic issues are marginalised in the debate because if politicised they have the

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potential to become too great of an intervening variable at the international level. Deflection is typified by higher levels of bipartisan support between major parties. The military and economic arenas dominate here, with military issues deflected and downplayed, and economic matters of national interest deflected by cloaking them in more generic ideational themes.

For example, the announcement of the stationing of US marines in Darwin caused little concern at the domestic level mainly because of the fact it was met with bipartisan support. Indeed, Tony Abbott’s main complaint was that 2,500 troops were not enough and that the Coalition ‘would be happy to see the establishment of another joint facility so that these arrangements could become more permanent’. At the external level, the US is to deploy 60% of its Navy by 2020 in the Pacific to focus on Asia with an emphasis on India and China, including six aircraft carrier strike groups. This signals a larger strategic rebalancing of its forces and at the highest level Australia must respond. Indeed, the 2011 Australian Defence Review seemed to substantiate this, noting that most of Australia’s weaknesses are relative to its ability to ‘support current and future abilities […] in Australia’s North and West’ and to sustain operation into ‘the wider Asia-Pacific region’. Despite this major military reorientation, there was little public opposition, despite the assessment of Hugh White that this was a ‘potentially very risky move for Australia’. It also looks unlikely to be a core issue at the next Federal election, in contrast to the question of illegal immigration, which again has become a focus after the deaths of approximately ninety refugees when a boat capsized near Christmas Island in June 2012.

Similarly, at the economic level, the Rio-Tinto and Chinalco deal is known predominantly because of the involvement of the Foreign Investment Review Board. And yet this fails to resonate deeply outside financial circles regardless of their strategic importance. While Australians are concerned with Chinese investment (with 78% opposed to China trying to buy a major stake in a controlling company) this has failed to become a central issue in domestic political debates. Thus while outspoken members of the Coalition such as Barnaby Joyce have criticised the FIRB, Abbott has used highly diplomatic language to pacify dissent and stop politicization, stating that any criticism was constructive, and was ‘not [meant] to be critical of any of the current members of the FIRB’.

The importance of deflecting these matters away from the more volatile public debate was demonstrated by the Stern Hu affair. Here, criticism of Chinese actions was framed in terms of softer human rights concerns, rather than in hard actions such as reform in investment laws. Rudd specifically used ideational language, claiming that China had ‘missed an opportunity to demonstrate to the world at large transparency that would be consistent with its emerging global role’. Indeed, the role of economic approaches to national security has been proven by the fact the FIRB still exists, with John Howard’s 1988 ‘future direction’ policy wanting to abolish the FIRB. Yet, on entering parliament in 1996, the FIRB was kept, and indeed became more aggressive, with a 20% increase in rejected proposals in Howard’s first year in office. In fact, more generally, economic matters — most notably the liberalisation of the economy under Hawke, Keating and then Howard were not subject to polarizing internal debates because they were viewed as critical matters in national security. A strong and independent Australia was necessary to secure Australia’s interests in a changing international environment, thus the deflection of ‘hard’ issues away from polarizing debate was necessary.

Dilution

Dilution is the third strategy elites use in relation to domestic debates. This occurs when a niche or more radical party that does not or has not been exposed to the realities of governing and the associated external pressures hijacks the debate. This is potentially dangerous for foreign policy as these ideas can be potent (and popular). If forced onto the agenda they can affect the ability of the state to act appropriately to external pressures. Here, established parties attempt to dilute to rogue messengers attempts to elevate dangerous ideas by hijacking and diverting the debate.

The clearest example in the Australian setting was the anti-immigration and foreign investment stance of the One Nation party during the 1990s. This populist movement had little sophistication and risked harming Australia’s broader strategic position because it lacked an appreciation of the need to balance international and domestic concerns, potentially resulting in a net loss to Australia’s security. The party rose to prominence after Pauline Hanson’s maiden speech, where she stated that ‘I believe we are in danger of being swamped by Asians’ and continued with the pronouncement that ‘Japan, India, Burma, Ceylon and every new African nation are fiercely anti-white and anti-one another. Do we want or need any of these people here?’ The process of dilution is described by Pauline Hanson herself, who complained that she was ‘castigated as a racist by the media and major politic parties’, but viewed this as hypocritical as the ‘same policies […] advocated back then are now almost populist policy, being advocated today by the federal government’.  

69 Pauline Hanson, Untamed & Unashamed (Jojo Publishing, 2007).
The Coalition successfully moved to diluted One Nation’s message after their success in the 1998 Federal election where they obtained 8.4% of the House of Representatives vote. This process began with Philip Ruddock’s claim in 1999 that the issue of asylum-seekers was a ‘national emergency’ and an ‘assault on our borders’, thereby capturing the attention of this domestic bloc. The Tampa affair in 2001 further allowed the Coalition to consume the immigration debate, with John Howard proclaiming that ‘we decide who comes into this country and the circumstances in which they come’. As a result, One Nation’s vote was halved to 4.3% at the 2001 election, while the Liberal Party’s primary vote increased 3.19%. In essence this validates Wohlforth’s claim that ‘a crisis creates a window of opportunity by discrediting old policies and the ideas associated with them’. In the process, the Coalition shifted the conjuncture of foreign policy issues to emotive, yet relatively minor security implications, with only Norway being overt in criticizing the Federal government over the Tampa incident, accusing it of abandoning its commitments to international law.

On the left wing of Australian politics similar processes can be observed. Here, early Green party policy was problematic in the foreign policy realm from a strategic position. The Greens role as the third party has been accompanied by a softening of their foreign policy attitudes. Some of these are vague and unlikely to cause any dangers to national security, such as the claim that ‘climate change represents the greatest threat to world peace and security’, but others such as their early call to ‘restrict co-operation with governing regimes that violate human rights’ would have a direct impact on the Chinese relationship if actualized. This disappeared from their policy statements in 2001, alongside the election of the second senator Kerry Nettle, as their federal vote increased from 4.96%, up from 1.86% in 1993. Thus, when political parties gain access to power, they are exposed to the realities of the effect of their policy outputs on security. In the case of the Greens, foreign policy platforms have diluted as a matter of pragmatism, while One Nation’s position meant dilution via hijacking and marginalization.

Conclusions

The literature on Australia’s role in the international system has rarely been satisfying when approaching the levels of analysis question. In applying a neoclassical realist
approach, I have aimed to create a framework that moves away from a simple argument between ideational and structural models. Instead, I hope to have provided one that helps to reconcile the role of the uncertain regional environment that characterises Australia’s geopolitical position with the role of ideas in the domestic discourse. In the process, this paper has demonstrated that Australian elites must manage an inevitable relative decline in the region that is fraught with dangers. This management has come in the form of elite strategies that ameliorate the potential for poorly elevated ideas to dominate the domestic discourse and thereby intervening strongly in foreign policy outputs.

The evidence suggests that there is a preference for the elevation of ‘soft’ issues in the domestic discourse, such as whaling and illegal migration because these have minimal effect on the most pertinent security concerns to Australia. These provide a way for parties to operate and represent along their respective ideological cleavages without this interfering with higher order state security issues. At the same time, when ideas appear that do have the potential to impact strongly on foreign policy outputs, these are deflected by political actors close to the centre of power. These include are military and defence matters, with parties inclined to act in a bipartisan manner, because these issues are critical to state survival and ‘above’ domestic politics. In more extreme cases, political entrepreneurs from the fringes of the debate can overinflate ideas with broader strategic implications for Australia. In this instance, elites attempt to mitigate the effect of these ideas through dilution. This occurs by subsuming them and redirecting the most problematic ideas into less threatening ones, such as the Coalition’s hijacking of the One Nation agenda, which redirected broader anti-immigration sentiment towards the less critical asylum-seeker debate. In conclusion, it is the exogenous international environment that drives the hierarchy of foreign policy ideas at the domestic level. Thus, contentious ideas, such as the role of illegal immigration in the domestic debate, can be viewed as stemming from external pressures rather than being forced up and onto political elites because of reasons of history and culture.
Bibliography


