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Introduction: a critical analysis of Australian foreign, defence and strategic policy

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Over the last decade, the scholarship and practice of international relations in Australia has become increasingly preoccupied with ‘great power competition’ between its long-term ally, the United States, and its biggest trading partner, the People’s Republic of China. New books and articles regularly pronounce the demise of the US-led ‘liberal international order’, reflecting the increasing power of authoritarian states and widespread concerns over American leadership and staying power. In Asia, contestation between the US and the PRC also pertains to the nature, form and purposes of the regional security order and the types of rules and institutions that support it. For Australia, the US-led order appears to be fraying, with implications for Canberra’s national interests, policies and relationships. In this context, ‘traditional’ *realpolitik* concerns about great power politics have re-emerged as the key determinants of Australian foreign, defence and strategic policy. Yet, at the same time, non-traditional security issues such as civil conflict, climate change and people movement continue to confound policy-makers. Domestic political dynamics drive the foreign policy orientations of Australia, as well its key partners in the United States and the United Kingdom, among others. While political leaders espouse liberal values, democracy and a ‘rules-based order’, international norms and law in key areas exist in tension with nationalist sentiments about Australia’s security and prosperity. How does a middle-sized state like Australia cope with emergent global challenges, and balance its interests, values and domestic priorities?

This special issue offers critical perspectives on Australian foreign, defence and strategic policy. It is the outcome of a research workshop held in June 2019 at the Australian Institute of International Affairs, Victoria.¹ The workshop brought together early- and mid-career experts on international relations, security studies and international law to discuss key issues that often exist at the margins of ‘mainstream’ approaches to international relations scholarship, including the ways in which certain terms and concepts are used (often uncritically) and shape both scholarly thought and policy, the treatment of refugees, domestic terrorism, the roles of civil society in shaping narratives of international affairs, and feminist approaches to foreign policy. The purpose of that workshop and this resultant special issue is to address underlying assumptions and contradictions inherent in concepts such as ‘security’, ‘order’, ‘rules’ and ‘strategic planning’ that inform foreign, defence and strategic policy planning in Australia. While the contributors use different conceptual and theoretical tools to analyse diverse issues, their articles each

seek to critically interrogate the language and norms of Australian foreign, defence and strategic policy; in other words, they evaluate whether the rhetoric of Australian governments and other integral organisations match their deeds.

The other thing that these articles have in common is that they have all been authored by women. At a time when there is growing recognition of the importance of diversity and inclusion in public and scholarly fora, it is remarkable that women remain underrepresented, or sometimes entirely absent from publications, panel discussions, policy processes and various media aspects of Australia's international affairs. This special issue seeks to showcase the important and impressive scholarship that women in Australian universities are producing on critical questions of importance related to Australian foreign policy, some of which pushes the discipline beyond what might be considered its established boundaries.

There is a well-established and growing body of research that considers questions of diversity in the disciplines and vocations of international relations and international security. This literature provides a useful picture of the extent to which women's voices are reflected in international affairs across a variety of metrics, and why finding greater gender balance in academic, public and policy conversations matters for international relations practices. While there have been invaluable studies on specific issues of women's participation in Australian foreign policy-making, scholarly research that reviews the representation and participation of women in the Australian context has been scant, particularly concerning women working in the academy. The first article in this issue, which we authored, provides a 'state of the field' review of women's participation and representation in Australian international affairs with a focus on three sectors: the media, the civil service and the academy. We used a range of metrics to understand the extent of and challenges facing women's participation, including original data on enrolments by women and girls in secondary and tertiary studies related to international affairs, the gender balance of academic staff in Australian universities in this field, and gendered authorship patterns and citation practices in key Australian journals. We found that despite women in Australia being interested and engaged in international affairs in almost equal measure to their male counterparts, there remain serious structural challenges that undermine their equitable representation in key fora and their career progression. Participation matters in terms of who influences and shape the agenda in Australian foreign policy, and there is significant work still to be done in academia, the media and the civil service to ensure that we redress historical imbalance and underrepresentation.

We see critical analysis of foreign, defence and strategic policy as requiring the interrogation of rhetoric, discourses and narratives in Australian international affairs: how and why are particular concepts and phrases used, and what implications does this hold for the conduct of Australian policy? Sheryn Lee's novel approach to the question of Australian strategic policy begins with an attempt to find a coherent definition for the very term 'strategic policy'. She demonstrates that while 'strategic policy' is a term that has assumed meaning, it has only recently become in vogue in Australian defence discourses. Often used as a synonym for other terms such as 'defence policy', 'strategic guidance' or to simply describe Australia's strategic environment, Lee's history of the term demonstrates how its meaning is ambiguous and unclear. She argues that the notion of 'strategic policy'

has become dissociated from the specific understanding of policy for the use of military force, with implications for the formulation and execution of both ‘strategy’ and ‘policy’.

Priya Chacko and Monika Barthwal-Datta also seek to understand common narratives used in international relations. Their paper focuses on the emergent ‘Indo-Pacific’ concept that has become a centrepiece of Australian foreign policy as well as that of other regional partners including the United States, Japan and India. Using a novel methodology that combines narrative analysis with a Cultural Political Economy (CPE) approach, they argue that while the Indo-Pacific can be analysed in a number of different ways—including as rhetoric, a normative vision, a strategy, a geopolitical tool or simply a geographical description—in recent years, these states have developed the concept as a ‘strategic narrative’ to promote their preferred conceptions of regional order. Focusing on Australia and India, their paper highlights how and why states have constructed different Indo-Pacific regional order narratives by looking beyond governments to also include influential actors such as think tanks, academics and businesses. Their paper highlights the risks of taking foreign policy narratives at face value; while common terms associated with the Indo-Pacific include ‘rules-based order’ and ‘inclusivity’, the same phrases can mean different things to different actors, with potential consequences for building closer bilateral and multilateral relations.

Danielle Chubb’s paper also uses rhetorical analysis to investigate the relationship between foreign policy-making and public opinion by examining responses to terrorism in Australia. A key theme that cuts across this special issue is the identification, articulation and ranking of national priorities in declaratory and operational policy; in other words, the problem of what gets included (and what gets left out) of foreign and defence policy planning. Importantly, this article demonstrates the grey areas between ‘international’ and ‘domestic’ when it comes to security, which can be overlooked in conventional realist thinking. Conversations about foreign policy and security continue to be dominated by perceptions of the terrorist threat, which consistently ranks among the highest threat, indeed frequently as the most critical, in the Australian public’s imagination. Chubb’s paper considers public discourse around domestic and transnational terrorism during three critical junctures in order to understand the variety of factors that interact in the contest over meaning. Ultimately, her paper demonstrates how these discourses and debates over time have contributed to the creeping restrictions on citizenry freedoms in the name of community safety.

As pieces of declaratory policy, defence and foreign policy white papers serve an important function of signalling to domestic and international audiences the interests, values and priorities of the state. Yet there tends to be little scholarly engagement with the purpose of white papers in foreign policy. In their article, Chris Agius and Anu Mundkhar critically examine the construction and content of the Australian 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper. Their contribution argues that the White Paper takes a fragmented approach in analysing and describing national and global security challenges. To achieve the outcomes articulated in the White Paper, the Australian government needs to pay greater attention to conflict prevention and achieving sustainable peace, which are key tenets of the United Nation’s Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. Borrowing from conflict prevention approaches, their article focuses on structural and systemic prevention, drawing on these two dimensions to map a theory of change to monitor progress on Australia’s stated foreign policy commitments as they relate to gender and security.

Articles in this special issue have also sought to examine how Australia seeks to carve out exemptions for itself when it comes to enacting its international responsibilities and abiding by international law. Like Chubb's article, these papers demonstrate the challenges Australian governments face in balancing international and domestic politics. Climate change, for example, is a significant game changer in how security and defence issues are prioritised in Australia. The final two papers assess this domestic/international policy dilemma through the lens of Australia's refugee policy. Rebecca Strating's article examines Australia's refugee policy, focusing on the effect it has on Australia's role as a regional 'democracy promoter' and the challenges of upholding international values when they clash with domestic imperatives. As with other articles in this issue, the paper interrogates dominant foreign policy language that seeks to project a particular Australian identity on the world stage—in this case as a democratic 'rules preservationist' state—while simultaneously undermining its purported values when it suits other political objectives. It argues that Australia has, at times, engaged in practices and activities that have enabled authoritarianism, in contrast to its self-image as a democracy promoter. Nauru is used as a case study to show how successive Australian governments have not only been prepared to turn a blind eye to democratic decline in order to advance their own electoral interests, but have played a more active role in facilitating deviation from democratic norms through Australia's asylum seeker policy funding. Strating ultimately argues that formal democratic processes within Australia have produced undemocratic outcomes in foreign policy, which reflects its own form of organised hypocrisy stemming from the failure to reconcile the 'two-level' game of domestic and international politics.

The final paper also examines Australia's attempts to carve out exemptions from the UN Refugee Convention, but through the lens of lesbian, gay, bisexual transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) rights. Jaz Dawson develops a queer International Relations framework for examining human rights issues related to asylum seekers. Her article provides an overview of the use of co-operative non-entrée agreements in the Pacific and Southeast Asia—in particular, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and Nauru—in Australia's refugee policy externalisation and highlights the specific vulnerabilities and human rights issues faced by LGBTIQ refugees. Her paper finds that the Australian government is liable of 'homonationalist' approaches to respecting LGBTIQ rights in which Australian citizens are prioritised over those without citizenship status and those within the refugee status determination process.

Together, this collection of articles offers new insights into Australia's international affairs, in particular, its foreign, defence and strategic policies. The articles remind us that the 'domestic' and 'international' spheres are not separate spheres of engagement, and reinforce the need to critically engage with the use of language and discourse as they structure norms and meanings that shape Australian politics and the ways it seeks to engage with the wider world. In so doing, the articles in this special issue provide a complex and nuanced picture of how Australia has sought to cope with contemporary global challenges, and balance its interests, values and domestic priorities.

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