
UNIT 2 APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF AUSTRALIA'S FOREIGN POLICY

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2.1 INTRODUCTION

Of the many, at least three approaches to the study of Australian foreign policy (AFP) are prominent. Each one gives a different image and dimension of Australia's role in international affairs. Also, while some of the approaches were more popular in the three decades following the end of Second World War or others are more commonly discussed since the end of Cold War.

It seems as if Australia is missing the comfort of the Cold War period when security issues dominated Australian foreign policy and the country was comfortably placed in the Western alliance with its security guaranteed by the US. The end of Cold War of course created its own uncertainties for the country; but more important since the 1990s has been the task of coming to terms with an economically globalising world. Then there is a new paradigm to AFP since the 11 September 2001, which is a closer relationship with United States.

There are opportunities but there are pitfalls and constraints as well in this evolving international order. Old approaches of studying AFP have been recalibrated to the situation obtaining after the end of Cold War and to the exigencies of economic globalisation; and of late to the US 'war on terrorism' and its intent to fashion the entire world in a new world order.

2.2 OBJECTIVES

After reading the unit, you should be able to understand:

- various approaches to the study of Australian Foreign Policy;
- the status of Australia in the international power system in the framework of a **Principal Power**, a power which was in the process of becoming a major power;
- how, Australia began to abandon its European antecedents and started considering itself as an Asian power with Asian identities.
- Australian foreign policy in the Middle Power framework, which was in vogue after World War II, 1970s' and even in 1990's. A middle power supportive of multi-literalism, collective diplomacy, champion of international institutions and a reformist and not a revolutionary power; and
- Australia in the international system and order.

2.3 THE PRINCIPAL POWER FRAMEWORK

This has been a tendency that became more commonplace in the 1970s as many scholars showed declining interest in the Middle Power framework. Many scholars were of the view that Australia is not as yet a major power but they were at the same time loathsome to regard it as a small country. Hence, they coined the expression principal power to describe a country which is in the process of becoming a major power. The approach has been largely in disuse but often political economists still take recourse to it to describe the growth rates, international competitiveness of large Australian firms and the foreign direct investments its companies are making in other, particularly Asian, economies.

The Principal Power framework had gained some popularity in the 1970s. It was argued that several international developments are propitious for Australia. These included the decline in the intensity of Cold War; the beginning of détente and the confidence-building including arms reduction agreements between the two super powers; the rise of economic multipolarity marked by the ascendance of Germany and Japan; and the gradual normalisation of relations between US and China. These developments were considered as marking significant structural 'transformations' in international relations which have opened up new opportunities for Australia to 'graduate' higher in the international hierarchy of powers. Especially, the rise of Japan, Asian 'Tiger' economies and China marked the great geo-strategic transformations which, it was believed, have catapulted Australia as a principal power in Asia-Pacific region. Australia had everything going for it – large size and geographic location; immense and vital natural resources; a strong manufacturing base and technological prowess; military capabilities; and developed human resources – making a 'foremost' or a 'principal' power. The economic and technological dynamism of East, and later Southeast, Asia convinced many Australians of the larger geo-strategic space for a 'foremost' role in the region.

As you read other Units in this course, it is from the 1970s that Australia began abandoning its historical European antecedents and consider itself as an Asian power with an Asian identity.

A number of quantitative studies dating to the 1970s and reappearing in the 1990s have looked into the relative power assessment based on military, economic, resource, and diplomatic capabilities to conclude that Australia ranks in the upper echelon of international standings. These studies interpret Australia as being part of a small elite grouping of countries that has 'emerged' as principal powers and are capable of influencing events at least in their own larger region. Memberships in APEC, OECD and ANZUS are cited as proof, if any required, of principal power status. Ability to act independently in the international system in pursuit of its own 'national interest' and influencing developments in at least Asia-Pacific region, principally in the 'arc of instability,' are the two principal arguments in favour of Australia as a principal power framework.

It is important to note that the principal power framework has somehow not been very popular among experts on AFP; notwithstanding the behaviour of post-Second World War Australian governments when they entertained notions either to 'discipline' Asia as a member of the Western alliance or project itself as an Asian power with an Asian 'identity.' One may even make a controversial argument that the 'deputy sheriff' syndrome that has shaped AFP under the conservative government of John Howard (1996—) is very close to the self-perception of Australia as a 'principal' power in the Asia-Pacific region.

Critics of the principal power status describe it generally as a hubris which cannot distract attention from the fact of Australian dependence on the Western alliance for its security; the gap that exists between East Asian economies and Australia and the latter's continued status as resource supplier in the international economy. Critics also point out Australia's role as a faithful 'first follower' of US during the Gulf war of 1991 and its joining the US 'war on terrorism' including invasion of Iraq in 2003 as a member of the 'coalition of the willing' countries as proof that the country can at most play second fiddle to the leader of the Western alliance in the hope of securing some security and economic benefits for itself. In both these military involvements, Australia's role was tangibly limited, if not symbolic, and was meant to arouse more domestic passion than international participation. If anything, such adventurist foreign policy has brought the threats of international terrorism to Australian door-steps, as was evidenced in the terrorist bombing in Bali in 2002.

2.4 SATELLITE OR DEPENDENCY FRAMEWORK

The framework was and remains popular mainly among political economists and political scientists. Such an approach highlights constraints in the AFP behaviour. Two dimensions of these constraints are prominent.

These constraints are historical dependence on Western security umbrella - first, on Great Britain and since the 1940s, on US - which makes it play the role of a junior military partner of the US. Australia cannot defend itself against an outside invasion and has altered its security perception between 'forward' defence and 'defence-in-depth' approaches. During the major Asian military flashpoints, be it the war in Korean peninsula, Indo-China, 1991 Gulf war and 2003 invasion of Iraq, Australia is either an eager 'chore boy' of US or looks opportunistically for a 'free-riding' role. No matter how discomforting to nationalist sentiments or burdensome to the exchequer, Australia's ability to escape from such 'loyal junior partner' role is not easy. Australia is too closely tied to institutional security arrangements with the US and the Western alliance.

Dependency perspective has highlighted the weaknesses of Australia in terms of its dependent position and role in the international political economy. Aspects like resource export dependence, dependence on access to the markets of developed economies for its agricultural and mineral exports, dependence on foreign direct investment for industrialisation, low level of competitiveness of Australian manufactures and their decline in its international trade profile, technological lag and low levels of domestic R&D, which reflected itself in the decline of export of elaborately transformed manufactures (ETMs), are cited as critical elements reinforcing the dependency syndrome. On critical international trade matters, Australia is seen in the ranks of the countries in the South than the North. Particularly in the 1980s, as US economy became increasingly protectionist and discriminatory and European Community raced towards integration, Australia, like a typical dependent economy, became particularly susceptible to international economic forces. It was to face the rising international economic hardships that Australia restructured in 1987 its foreign and trade ministries so as to emphasise on the economic dimensions of its foreign policy. It was to ward itself off the potential trade rivalries between US, EC and Japan that Australia was insisting throughout the 1980s on the need for a multilateral trading arrangement bound by rules and regulations; and towards that goal, it initiated the formation of Cairns group of agricultural product-exporting countries.

Within the political economy perspective, there are however views that do not look at Australia as a typical dependent economy. Given the depth and spread of its industrialisation particularly with the successful 'rationalisation' of its economy, its international competitiveness in niche areas like mining, telecommunication, tertiary sector like higher education, and Australia's search for free trade agreement with US and others, it may be regarded as a 'peri-metrical' economy. In other words, Australia is on the perimeter of the core economies and can be categorised as a developed economy.

2.5 MIDDLE POWER FRAMEWORK

It was a predominant way of looking at AFP after Second World War. In the 1970s and 1980s, it underwent some decline as a preferred model of studying AFP but in the 1990s, it made a strong come back. Compared to the other two, middle power framework has proved to be more durable and has often been referred to by policy-making circles and foreign policy documents in Australia.

The framework had begun evolving after the Second World War as Australia began taking stock of its relations, particularly with Asia, and role in the international organisations. It has proved highly resilient; and notwithstanding the vicissitudes of AFP has survived very strongly. The middle power framework had gained particular prominence during the Labour governments in the 1970s and more so during the Paul Keating government in the early 1990s. Under National-Conservative governments, notwithstanding rhetoric to the contrary, AFP has many a time run on peculiarly middle power discourse. The idea of a middle power as an 'in-between' country gives a larger comfort zone to Australia and allows it to take a more pragmatic and modest assessment of what it can or cannot do in the international system. To be in the middle is to be cautious; the country is neither a push-over, nor it is exposed to the harsh power realities of the international relations.

The framework confers a distinctive world-view and associates AFP with a set of practices. At its core, the concept of middle power diplomacy signifies a certain *type* and a certain *content* of AFP. Foremost, the very idea of middle power associates Australia as a supporter of multilateralism, that is a champion of international institutions and collective diplomacy. A middle power knows that it cannot act alone but can certainly influence and impact international relations through the working of international institutions such as UN or through a small group of 'like-minded' countries on specific issues. A middle power cannot change the international system but it can make some meaningful difference in its functioning through its own distinctive approach. Middle powers do not rely on their power aggregates, which any way are modest, but on their skills as credible 'go-between,' arbiter and peace-keeper. They may not have the strength of a giant; they certainly have the skills of a dancer who can waltz around the corridors of international power and make the ultimate difference in matters of international peace and security through its unique skills and capabilities.

Middle powers are not revolutionaries; they are reformists of the international order. Not wholesale transformation, only incremental piecemeal reform can bring more enduring changes in the international equations. Middle powers thus claim that they are the right kind of interlocutors between the North and the South on global economic issues. Middle powers support the idea of transfer of resources and technology from the North for the development of South for gaining equity in the international economy.

Middle powers want the international system to be based on 'rule of law' and to keen to 'predictability' in international relations, as unpredictable and sudden behaviour of 'great' often harms them more and results in loss of prestige and influence. They realise that 'great' powers have the propensity to become arbitrary and resort to the use of force; the best that can be done is to bind them by international norms and institutions. Particularly, in international trade, they want to have a rule-based system as vulnerability and fluctuations in the demand and price of their raw material exports can hurt their own economic prosperity and the standards of living of their population.

Middle powers have their distinctive ways of doing things by building consensus and compromises in international relations. Their higher level of credibility and prestige in the international relations particularly enables them to play the roles of mediator, arbiter and consensus-builder. In short, middle powers are considered equally by the small and the big powers as 'good international citizens.' They are essentially 'internationalist' countries; who define their own 'national interest' not in narrow but in broader international terms. Their own 'national interest' lies in collective security and international peace enforced by the international norms and institutions. Because of this aspect, some times middle powers claim themselves to be guided by the lofty ideals of altruism and philanthropy.

Of course, not all middle powers behave similarly. They are not 'good international citizens' all the time. So often, middle powers behave as opportunists in international relations. As seen above, they are often criticised as 'first followers' of the great powers, as 'fence-sitters' who jump onto the band-wagon of great powers in times of international crisis. They are being charged with practising hypocrisy and self-deception. Australia has been so enthusiastic to militarily intervene in East Timor, Solomon Islands and other small countries in its 'arc of instability.' In fact, this excessive meddling in the neighbouring countries, which a middle power Australia would call 'helpful fixing' or 'boy-scouting', has been driven by the hegemonic desire to either completely rewrite these island societies or capture their vital natural resources; for instance, oil in Timor Gap.

2.6 SECONDARY FRAMEWORKS

There are several secondary tier concepts which have also been used in studying AFP. They have all enjoyed comparatively less influence. There are scholarly writings which have used Bureaucratic Politics approach to understand how foreign policy decisions are arrived at and how influence is exerted by various interested parties on the making and conduct of foreign policy. Then there are studies which rely on game theory, inter-dependence, and 'realism.' You may leave these secondary frameworks for a later day study of AFP at a more sophisticated level.

2.7 AN ASSESSMENT

There is one thing common in all the three above-described approaches. They are all concerned primarily where as to Australia sits in the international order; and whether there is some quantifiable basis for its status as a principal power, peripheral power and middle power. Depending on how one defines Australia's status and location, one begins identifying the attributes of its foreign policy.

Also, one can argue that the middle power attributes are not uniformly shared by all the self-perceived middle powers. Besides, attributes like mediation and peace-keeping could as well be the characteristic foreign policy behaviour of small countries. The aspect of middle powers as 'good international citizens' has been heavily criticised. Australia's participation in Vietnam war and several other US-led military campaigns do not make one believe Australia's image as a 'good international citizens.' One doubts whether the government of John Howard has even cared to project such an image in the past ten years.

Critics, especially those writing from the dependency perspective, also argue that membership in OECD etc. single out Australia (and may be Canada too) as principally the commodity producing and exporting countries. Membership in such bodies are less a privilege and more a drag on the nation.

2.8 SUMMARY

This unit is concerned with how to study Australia's foreign policy. It discusses the main approaches that define the foreign policy concerns of the country which have been changing over the years especially after the Cold War years and since September 11, 2001.

There are three main approaches or frameworks that are considered important. These are Principal Power framework, Dependency framework and the Middle Power framework. The Principal Power framework became commonplace in the 1970s with a decline in the Middle Power framework as many were of the view that Australia was on its way to become a major power. This was because of the decline in the intensity of Cold War; the beginning of détente and the confidence-building including arms reduction agreements between the two super powers; the rise of economic multipolarity marked by the ascendance of Germany and Japan; and the gradual normalisation of relations between US and China. With the change in power equations and the rise of countries in Asia, for the first time Australia began abandoning its historical European antecedents and consider itself as having an Asian identity, capable of influencing events in their own larger region. Critics, however, point towards Australian dependence on the Western alliance for its security and its role as a faithful 'first follower' of US which limits Australia's role. The Dependency framework highlights the constraints in Australia's foreign policy and its dependence on Western security umbrella which makes it play this dependent role on the US thus making it difficult for it to escape the role of a 'junior partner'. As US economy became increasingly protectionist and discriminatory and European Community raced towards integration in the 1980s some viewed Australia like a typical dependent economy, being particularly susceptible to international economic forces. However not all agree that Australia is a typically dependent economy. They feel that it can be categorised as a developed economy. The Middle Power framework which evolved after the Second World War became very popular again during the 1990s and has been more durable. The idea of a middle power as an 'in-between' country gives a more cautious and larger comfort zone to Australia and allows it to take a more pragmatic and modest assessment of what it can or cannot do in the international system. It also associates Australia as a supporter of multilateralism because a middle power knows that it cannot act alone but can certainly influence and impact international relations through the working of international institutions such as UN.

Apart from these major frameworks, there are several secondary tier concepts which have also been used in studying AFP like 'Bureaucratic Politics' approach, game theory, inter-dependence, and 'realism'.

2.9 EXERCISES

- 1) Describe the 'Principal Power' approach to the study of Australia's foreign policy.
- 2) What were the main constraints to Australia's foreign policy behaviour highlighted by the Satellite-or Dependency framework?

- 3) Why is the Middle-Power framework to the study of Australia's foreign policy considered to be more durable than other frameworks? Explain.
- 4) Make a brief assessment of the various approaches to Australia's foreign policy.

2.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

Abdul Nafey, "Is Australia a Middle Power in the Emerging World Order?", D. Gopal, ed., *Australia in the Emerging Global Order* (New Delhi: Shipra, 2002), Pp. 267-279.

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