

Victoria University
International Leadership Programme
4 April 2013

Interests and Values in International Relations
Terence O'Brien; Senior Fellow CSS: NZ

Foreign policy for all, or most, countries is shaped by interests and by values. Interests can usually be readily defined – security, prosperity and well being of the country and its people are the essential features. Values derive from history, tradition, myth, cultural/religious background and ethnic make-up. Values can influence the choice of partners that a country selects through foreign policy but interests play the material part.

What a country is and seeks to be determines foreign policy. For much of the 20th century as New Zealand emerged hesitantly into the international arena, our interests and values reflected our perceived situation as a small distant extension of an Atlantic-centred English speaking world, whose influences upon New Zealand were paramount. This Atlantic world view lay at the core of the so-called Western enlightenment where secularism, rational thought and scientific achievement were conceived as basic values for human improvement. They were matched by a conviction too that cultural differences are essentially a surface manifestation that would disappear as part of human progress driven by knowledge and technology.¹ Material gain would be a yardstick of progress towards a better world.

It is seriously questionable whether human progress is, or should be, conceived as a universal, shared, single experience. Despite so-called economic globalisation, the world continues after all to be shaped by measurably different traditions of culture. Diversity reigns as New Zealand knows from its own modern experience of seeking to fashion long term relations in Asia, where interests drive New Zealand foreign policy, but where our values derive traditionally from elsewhere. We witness at first hand for ourselves how technology, ideas and economic models are employed differently and successfully in Asian countries with their distinct values. Asian economic success is undoubtedly creating aspirations amongst increasing numbers of Asian people for material advantage that is commensurate with that

¹ Gray J. Al Qaeda and What It Means to be Modern. Faber & Faber. 2003 p.57

achieved in traditional western industrial economies. But the idea that prosperous Asians will then “grow more like us” is wishful thinking. Identity of values remains something beyond shared material gain. The reputable American political scientist Samuel Huntington wrote 20 years ago that “Western ideas of individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, and separation of church and state often have little resonance in Islamic, Confucian, Japanese, Hindu, Buddhist or Orthodox cultures”. Huntington was here trying to justify his controversial assertion that the world is heading inexorably towards a ‘clash of civilizations’.²

In the Atlantic/European world a particular sense of superior virtue prevailed according to which to be secular and enlightened is to be peaceful, and the rest of the world had only therefore to absorb Western knowledge and values to be enlightened and peaceful. But the 20th century produced two world wars of great savagery, a 40 year long Cold War based upon the grim threat of nuclear destruction and several cruel wars of decolonisation. These were ‘wars of other people’ into which distant New Zealand was drawn. They had their origins in rivalries and ambition amongst major countries of the Western Enlightenment. Such wars emphatically exploded the claim to superior virtue by the enlightenment powers. But as we begin this new century the idea that the spread of western values, and in particular the spread of democracy, will consolidate peace and goodwill globally persists in the capitals of powerful western nations, and amongst non-government agencies that are increasingly influential in the promotion of values internationally. Superior virtue now focuses on democratisation. We will come back to this.

Rise of Religion

The last 25 years or so have witnessed a resurgence of religion as a force in international affairs. Attempts by radical elements inside Islam to extend their control over the dominant religious and social belief system inside the Middle East, has had world-wide repercussions. A clash between conservative and progressive forces inside religion is not confined to Islam alone. Similar struggles within Christianity, the Jewish faith as well as Orthodox churches, are evident although levels of internal violence are much lower. Nonetheless the global resurgence of religion alongside the forces of globalisation challenges modern diplomacy, peacemaking and international security. Resolving such religious conflict requires something

² Huntington S. The Clash of Civilizations and Remaking of World Order. Simon & Schuster. 1996 .pp. 183-238 etc.

much more than traditional hard-nosed calculations of national interest based on power, made by politicians, diplomats and military commanders.³ Expertise for dealing with such conflict and instability does not now therefore reside with governments alone, if it ever did.

In the Middle East, the internal struggle within Islam is compounded by international politics and in particular longstanding interference by powerful outsiders with the aim of imposing their version of order on the region. Supervision of the world's main source of oil, the overthrow of uncongenial regional leaders, the protection of favoured clients and of military bases, the suppression of insurgencies or vexatious regional separatism have motivated a succession of western and other powers for over a century to interfere extensively in the Middle East. The US is the latest in a long line of intruders which have employed lethal military force to secure their aims. It is self delusion to deny that the sorry record of prolonged intrusion is not a motivating cause behind the internationalised version of modern terrorism with its gruesome and far reaching methods, which now with American persuasion shapes the global security agenda for many countries – even distant New Zealand.⁴

Human Rights

The 20th century was notable for many achievements. One of the most remarkable was the successful negotiation led by American energy and imagination at the United Nations, beginning mid-century, of a set of international conventions designed to elevate the dignity and rights of the human individual. These human rights provisions were intended to provide codes of government behaviour for recognising basic rights of their populations.

Governments were answerable in principle to the international community for the discharge of those obligations after signing up to the conventions which basically covered civil and political rights, economic and social rights and community rights. The conventions provided a solid international framework for the pursuit of values-driven foreign policy by individual governments.

But there were, and are, drawbacks. The United Nations (UN) human rights are discretionary not obligatory. They define the rights but do not guarantee them. The international system

³ Thomas S. Global Resurgence of Religion & Transformation of International Relations. Palgrave.2005 pp.173-196 etc.

⁴ Brzezinski Z. The Choice. Global Domination or Global Leadership. Basic Books. 2004 pp.31 etc.

lacks any means for enforcement in cases where duties or responsibilities are ignored by governments. Some governments are moreover selective in how far they accept some but disown other conventions. The US for example declines to sign up to the convention on economic and social rights, to the convention on the rights of the child, to that preventing discrimination against women as well as several others.⁵ Yet the US energetically champions human rights in its self-proclaimed role as a universal beacon for humanity.

The very existence of internationally recognised human rights conventions serves nonetheless to challenge the absolute character of national sovereignty – in other words, what a government does behind its sovereign borders is, or can be, a question of legitimate outside interest. Gross violations like genocide, mass persecution and heedless neglect of basic human needs pose therefore a question directly of how or when the international community should intervene. In a world where national sovereignty remains nonetheless the foundation for global order, this remains highly sensitive ground. The search for a way forward led to a Canadian inspired initiative as the new century began, to devise international principles that did not assert “the right to intervene” but rather proclaimed “the responsibility to protect”, on the part the world community, those populations under threat. This was an astute attempt to avoid declarations that seemed directly to dispute sovereign authority, and to emphasise instead community obligation to support intrinsic universal human values. Along with others, New Zealand endorsed this enlightened move but for many governments in the developing world sensitive about national sovereignty, support remains half hearted. It would be wrong to claim that the principle can now be rated as a robust part of accepted international values behaviour in an era where internal conflict remains a dominant feature of world insecurity. The indecision that now surrounds the murderous agony in Syria emphatically proves that point.

Humanitarianism

Yet these developments helped thrust the focus of international attention upon the value of ‘human security’ as distinct from, or in addition to ‘national security’ which is traditionally the central preoccupation of governments. That in turn led international aid policy to become more sharply directed to addressing basic causes of human insecurity – and in particular poverty. A brave new collective effort was launched as the new century began in the form of

⁵ Forsythe D. Human Rights in International Relations. Cambridge University Press.2000 p.46 etc.

a set of Millennium Goals accepted by heads of government at the UN - both aid donors and aid recipients - to tackle basic causes of poverty in terms of a set of agreed sectoral targets. After over 10 years of effort, progress globally has been disparate and uneven. Indeed there is accumulating evidence of a widening gap inside both developed and developing countries between rich and poor, with the attendant risks of deepening political and social tension. The enthusiastic claims by the champions of globalisation that an open world will yield prosperity, democracy and peace for everyone is proving still to be something of an exaggeration. The Millennium Goals provide nonetheless a yardstick for New Zealand to judge effectiveness of its own aid in the South Pacific which is the area of our greatest aid concentration, even as the focus of New Zealand assistance has consciously been directed away from poverty alleviation as such, to remunerative economic development.

Greater focus upon humanitarianism can produce particular difficulties in those regions and countries where outside military intervention has been judged necessary to restore stability, remove hostile forces, or suppress insurgency. In Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and elsewhere the very nature of the contest has seen military alliances, in particular NATO, become directly involved in the post-conflict business of political, economic and social reconstruction – tasks for which they are neither trained nor necessarily equipped. The danger here is that their handiwork becomes itself another direct target for military retribution by hostile insurgents. In the process the dedicated work of civilian humanitarian agencies is sidelined, compromised or also becomes a target for attack. In Afghanistan, where provincial reconstruction has involved the New Zealand Defence Force over a prolonged period, such dangers are directly relevant to the legacy that this country will leave. While paying due regard to New Zealand and other military professionalism, the lasting value of all outside involvement in Afghanistan over the last decade or longer, remain entirely an open question.

Influence of US

What emerges from all of this so far is that values-driven and interests-driven foreign relations are not in fact alternative pathways for conducting world affairs. There are essential connections. Values-driven relations aim, after all, to transform political and social behaviour of others and such changes, if accomplished, can affect how interests are best served. In all of this, US influence and policy are paramount. Washington believes as an article of faith that the political character of other states directly affects America's own security and economic interests. This means that the US promotion of values in international relations becomes

therefore not just an exercise of morality but an act of national security. The fear of insecurity professed by successive American governments over many years is perplexing to many outsiders given that US is, and has been for a considerable period, the most powerful nation in world history. Since 9/11 it has mobilized itself into a 'garrison state' with extensive domestic surveillance that even imperils civil liberties.⁶ It is a sense that is mirrored domestically as well in America's deluded gun laws, which likewise perplex outsiders.

This brings us back to the issue of superior virtue. Contemporary American attitudes are strongly influenced by the so-called 'democratic peace theory' according to which, it is claimed, democracies do not fight one another. The spread of democracy as a supreme value becomes therefore a vital part of ensuring a peaceful and stable world. Democracy is not defined strictly speaking as a human right by the UN Human Rights Conventions although the entitlements spelt out for basic civil and political rights (freedom of speech etc..) point clearly to democracy as the system most likely to guarantee such rights. But the 'democratic peace theory' needs qualification. The historical record shows the pathway to democracy can often be violent and destabilising as for example when it unleashes forces of radical nationalism;⁷ that democracy cannot be imposed from outside especially by force of arms – it is basically a home-grown product which takes time to mature; that ideal democracy is anyway a never ending quest; and that while democracies may be more peaceable they remain capable of belligerence which is itself destabilising. Take for example the American strategic policy precept that "all options remain on the table for the US President" as leader of the world's pre-eminent democracy, whenever he addresses security crisis in the world. That formula, stripped to bare essentials, amounts in effect to a threat of war, if that is judged to serve interests. At the bottom line 'the theory' implies as well that those countries which are non-democratic pose a generic threat to peace and well being by the very fact of their existence. That is manifestly a dangerous fallacy.

Relativism & Soft Power

The way in which human rights have, over past decades, been variously blended with democracy, with good governance, with free market economics, and promoted internationally as a sort of package for human improvement, tends to dilute rather than strengthen the cause

⁶ Lieven A. & Hulsman J. Ethical Realism. A Vision for America's Role in the World. Vintage Books. 2006. p.90

⁷ Snyder J. From Voting to Violence. Norton & Company. 2000. p.15 etc.

of values-driven relations. Likewise, inconsistent advocacy of human rights creates a double standard - criticism of Iran, for example, over human rights failures, while at the same time equivalent or even greater shortcomings in Saudi Arabia are ignored because of the geopolitical priorities of major powers, is an obvious case of relativism which undermines credibility. Even handedness is a virtue that smaller countries, like New Zealand, may be more capable of applying than larger more powerful countries with extensive ambition and interests. But absolute consistency for large and small countries alike is an illusion.

This brings us to another dimension of values driven foreign policy – so-called ‘soft power’. This notion was invented over the last decade of the old century in the US, to explain that American powers of persuasion, as the unchallenged global leader, do not rely solely upon unrivalled military or economic power, but also upon the attraction which America’s manifold accomplishments hold for others in the world – her inventiveness, self belief, resourcefulness, powers of recuperation and the like. American taste, fashion, culture and ideas have world wide influence. Such soft power co-opts rather than coerces other countries to support American objectives and preferences. It is something more than image, public relations, or ephemeral publicity although these do play a role. At the bottom line soft power helps define international reputation and reputation requires constant care and attention by governments, large and small.⁸

The very nature of the US muscular response to internationalised terrorism (the Global War on Terror - GWOT), and the part that negligent supervision by Washington of the US financial sector played in the global financial crisis (GFC) have both served in varying degrees, to debilitate US soft power. Pre-emptive military strikes, use of drones, torture, rendition, clandestine intrusion and targeted assassination in states with which the US is not formally at war, all serve to denigrate the US reputation. At the same time American credentials for global or even regional economic leadership have been compromised after the GFC. Successful Asian economies are hesitant for their part now to follow American policy prescriptions - the majority so far have, for example, declined involvement in US-led negotiations for a Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP). In the normal course, leadership is either asserted or it is bestowed. Bestowal of leadership by others legitimises that leadership.

⁸ Nye J. Soft Power. The Means to Success in World Politics. Public Affairs. 2004. pp73-98

Leadership that relies however substantively upon robust assertion lacks essential value in today's interdependent and globalising world.

The inventors of the "soft power" concept initially conceived it to be an exclusive American attribute alongside unrivalled US military power, and economic primacy. Later reiterations of the concept acknowledge that others including middle level states, likewise aspire to or possess, 'soft power'. The idea that small states may also be similarly endowed was, however, perhaps a step too far for the original authors. Yet New Zealand's place as a small, mature, modern, unthreatening democracy with capacity for impartiality and even-handedness, with reconciliation established through the Waitangi process as a core principle of its democracy, and a record of various ground breaking economic, social and political changes over a century or longer, possesses sufficient pedigree for 'soft power'. Indeed, looking back to when New Zealand first introduced its non-nuclear policy which the US for its own national security interests strongly opposed, and sought to punish what it saw as New Zealand obduracy, the utility of New Zealand soft power as a protection was evident. Retribution was duly meted out to New Zealand but the hand was stayed of those in Washington (mainly the Pentagon) who wished to impose the severest penalties. The spectacle of the world's strongest power intentionally debilitating a small modern democracy with a reputable international standing for an act of democratic choice was not, in the end, considered wise lest it boomerang on the US.

New Zealand Exposure to Diversity and the Importance of Multilateralism

Diversity is indeed one of humanity's greatest strengths. New Zealand exposure to diversity in foreign relations began effectively in the mid-20th century when its traditional export markets in those industrialised countries with which it shared values, and alongside whom it had fought in two world wars, were increasingly distorted by intransigent trade protectionism on the part of those self same countries. Diversification became, for New Zealand, absolutely vital. New markets were pursued in the Soviet Union, in Iran, Iraq, Cuba and a range of other countries with which New Zealand had had few dealings, and shared few values, and whose international reputation was sometimes mediocre. But all of this had the effect of broadening New Zealand foreign policy horizons swiftly and extensively, and of nourishing a less ideological and pragmatic New Zealand external relations attitude. There was no missionary zeal on New Zealand's part to change the values of new acquaintances and this tradition of

operation stands New Zealand in good stead in Asia, the South Pacific and elsewhere. What New Zealand is and seeks to be, provides sufficient advertisement of our values rather than any public practice of extensive moralising.

The diversification experience nonetheless reinforced at the same time a conviction that rules-based international economic behaviour was indispensable to New Zealand success. The rules and the management of the system that applied those rules had in the New Zealand view to be fairly and equitably administered. This was not simply an expression of pious virtue. The international trade system developed as from the middle of the last century (under GATT, - now the World Trade Organisation (WTO)) was purposefully skewed in favour of the larger Northern Hemisphere industrialised economies, nowhere more evident than in the indulgent loophole extended to the farm economies of Europe, North America and Japan with their continued protection from fair unsubsidised New Zealand competition.

The vital importance New Zealand attaches to the value of equitable multilateralism endures today, although shades of emphasis are shifting as change to the centre of gravity of the world economy gathers pace. It is crucial now that the successful newly emergent economies of Asia, Latin America and elsewhere upon which the global economy vitally depends, accept to operate themselves from within the rules-based system from which they have so conspicuously benefited. For that to happen it is necessary, however, that they be extended equivalent opportunity in the management and agenda setting of the multilateral institutions (International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and WTO). Such opportunity has been traditionally monopolised by major industrialised Western powers to further their advantage. It is in New Zealand's vital interest, however, that the necessary space now be created for a more even handed system notwithstanding our traditional values connexion with those major powers who are reluctant to concede their monopolies.

Important changes to the international order already agreed add extra dimension to the extent of New Zealand interests in the value of fair minded multilateralism. The creation as from 2008 of the G20 Head of Government (HOG) summit as a regularised feature on the global landscape involving leaders from the top 20 economies of the world, was a move led by the US ostensibly to share global political/economic management more equitably in the future. For New Zealand and for the great majority of states in the world which are outside G20, this

new top table cannot be a substitute for existing institutions (the UN, WTO, etc.) where the vital principles of universality of membership and of sovereign equality, are enshrined.

It is in any event simply unrealistic to believe that G20 could ever assume directly the responsibilities and authority of the multiple existing organizations variously established across a vast spectrum of international activity over the past 65 years. It is feasible however that G20 could act as the strategic supervisor, somewhat overseeing existing institutions, but, as suggested already, this depends vitally on those institutions themselves being reformed to reflect modern reality. G20 itself must establish robust effective lines of communication that allow for input from outside G20 ranks, New Zealand included. G20 is a creation that recognizes the new realities of the distribution of international economic power. Its key responsibility, however, is not to dictate policy programmes to non-G20 members, but rather to integrate domestic economic policies of its own select membership so as to navigate a way out for everyone from global economic crisis.⁹ Collective G20 commitments to disavow trade protectionism, to ensure investment flows, to improve effective financial management, to avoid competitive exchange rate adjustments and to collectively diminish corruption all help send authoritative signals to the international community, even while they are unsurprisingly disparaged by unrepentant critics as proverbial rhetoric.

The Future Context

The successful pursuit of New Zealand interests over the century ahead will obviously be conditioned by trends in the wider world over which New Zealand has negligible influence, and which are not necessarily easy to predict. The global landscape appears somewhat brittle. Right now one sees a Europe deeply consumed by its own survival as a Union - financially, economically and politically. Britain is once again perversely agonizing about its future place. Europe's vital role in the world, which is valuable to New Zealand, seems inevitably debilitated as the result.

On the other hand, the US confronts massive insolvency and stalled growth. Its decision-taking is paralysed by special interest politics so that the American system of governance grows dysfunctional, even while the US recommits itself to absolute global leadership and the traditional burdens of primacy involving sumptuous military spending that seems

⁹ Lowy Institute – (Callaghan, Grenville, Sharman, Thirlwell) G20; Rebutting Some Misconceptions. March 2013.pp4-30

financially insupportable. There is in fact sufficient room for cuts that would not seriously imperil US primacy. At the same time onerous social and psychological costs of almost continuous war fighting for more than 20 years, is taking a toll in the US. Optimists place much faith in the famous US powers of ingenuity and ultimate recuperation but America's relative standing and influence in the world seems set to decline.

East Asia is sustaining economic performance despite the GFC and the economic, social and environmental stress caused by the sheer rate of modernisation. China has become the essential pivot for the regional and indeed global economy. But China confronts the ongoing need to reassure neighbours of its peaceable intentions at a time when various maritime sovereignty disputes are resurfacing. In addition, the perverse, obstinate, unpredictable behaviour of North Korea afflicts regional stability. As convenor of the G6 countries with principal interests in the Korean Peninsula, China's responsibilities are substantial. For their part, China's neighbours, conscious of their shared and extensive economic connexions with China, must reassure Beijing that in return for its peaceable assurances, they will not be party to any strategy 'to contain' China, which does not itself seek to usurp America's global role with all the burdens that are entailed, nor to change the world in China's own image; but it does seek regional parity and US respect.

All this suggests that power in the world and in the Asia Pacific region, is becoming more diffuse. A more hybrid international and regional order is in prospect. As far as East Asia is concerned the actual form and extent of institutional cooperation will be driven first and foremost by East Asian governments themselves. New Zealand has over 20 years and longer, sought to fashion foreign policy which recognises and accepts that. The US has, however, now recommitted itself to asserting regional economic leadership and strengthening, as well as its military presence. Along with most other regional governments New Zealand wants to avoid awkward choices but some may lie ahead if China and the US fail to compose their regional relationship and accept the realities of a changing context. Indeed the sheer range and extent of global and regional challenges will test the ingenuity, adaptability, discernment and professionalism in small-country diplomacy. The need, moreover, to diversify risk must continue to guide the pursuit of New Zealand interests by extending our foreign policy interests and therefore economic opportunity, in Latin America, Africa and other places.

The revolution in communications technology is empowering non-government influence in international affairs. No single government, however powerful and supreme, or group of governments, is capable alone of resolving the crucial and evermore closely connected problems of global access to food, energy and water on a planet where resources are under stress from an increasing global population and where urbanisation, migration within and between countries, multinational crime and the like, are expanding relentlessly.

A mix of old and new security concerns also confront this more hybrid world – extremism, nuclear proliferation, cyber security and corruption. The task of summoning the collective will globally, or even regionally, to manage and eliminate these scourges and to surmount the socio-economic challenges, and to do so in ways that now share the burdens and responsibilities equitably, will be an immense test over the century ahead. Strains in the relationship between a country's values and interests will not become any easier.
