

Strategic liberalism and Kiwi maximalism

Reuben Steff suggests a new paradigm as a basis for New Zealand foreign policy.

In 2001 Prime Minister Helen Clark declared that New Zealand was ‘the most strategically secure country in the world’.¹ Upon that basis, and hearkening back to the foreign policy approach of prior Labour administrations, she pursued an approach to international affairs known as liberal internationalism. This emphasised the promotion of human rights and democracy; support for international institutions; the encouragement of disarmament and the promotion of free trade. In fact, her foreign policy was arguably the most liberal internationalist of any New Zealand government ever.

The current National government has developed a less sanguine view of the security environment and the threats it poses to New Zealand. Instead, and true to its ideological heritage, it has sought to re-focus New Zealand’s foreign policy efforts upon core national interests, perceived to be trade and strengthening alliances. This approach to international affairs is captured by the foreign affairs theory of realism, which is less concerned with the promotion of ideals than liberalism.

Although every New Zealand foreign policy contains a mix of realist and liberal elements, these two paradigms have been engaged in a struggle over the general course of New Zealand foreign policy since the 1930s.² However, realism and liberalism, when theoretically and practically isolated from one another, operate akin to ideologies: they simplify the complexity of the world — thus systematically distorting it — and attract passionate adherents to their side, with practical consequences for foreign policy. In this article I contend that neither position is sufficient for an increasingly complex, integrated and multi-polarising world. Nor do they suit the defensive realist system that has emerged over the past decades.

Together, globalisation and defensive realism have created a new international structure. The norms, practices and incentives for co-operation of this system are ascendant but often go overlooked. New Zealand’s foreign policy strategy should take this new operative environment into account. If it does not, it could miss the unique co-operative opportunities inherent in the present international configuration. Therefore, the essential con-

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tion at the core of my argument is that it is strategic liberalism that should form the foundational underpinning of New Zealand’s foreign policy.³ This paradigm provides a wellspring for visionary objectives that could provide a major contribution to the common security of the Asia–Pacific region and could help transcend major regional security issues. These efforts would be strengthened by an approach we could dub ‘Kiwi maximalism’ — a conscious political decision to frame our objectives as more far-reaching than appears currently plausible.



Helen Clark

Contemporary system

‘Globalisation’ refers to the expansion of integrated economic structures, diffusion of communications and technology. Prior to 1991, ‘security’ was defined by the national struggle in Cold War parameters for power, whether military, economic or ideological. Since then, new security threats have emerged that threaten both national and international security. Additionally, the tighter the integrated components of the system become, the more likely destabilising events abroad will cause systemic reverberations throughout the system and affect geographically remote states, such as New Zealand.⁴

In this situation many threats can only be combated by a view of security that requires states to work together. Traditional realist ‘self-help’ notions of security become counter-productive — all states that seek security in the modern international environment are dependent on one another. Moreover, since New Zealand’s interests are bound up in the security of the international economic system, it has a stake in stabilising the system as a whole, and especially its wider region, the Asia–Pacific.

Alongside the deepening process of globalisation, realism has undergone its own transformation since the end of the Cold War. It has separated into ‘offensive’ and ‘defensive’ schools of thought. Offensive realists believe that states are greedy ‘power-maximisers’, whereby achieving hegemony over other states is the only means to guarantee a state’s security. Aggression and coercion become the inevitable recourse in an offensive realist world. In contrast, defensive realists hold that states are ‘security seekers’ and moderate their behaviour towards this end. Since security is indivisible in a globalised international system, states can only improve their security positions by working with one another.

In recent decades a new international structure has emerged, dramatically increasing the incentives for co-operation. New Zealand should capitalise on this by adopting a new foreign policy paradigm. It should consider a new approach — strategic liberalism — as the foundational underpinning of New Zealand’s foreign policy. Bonded to ‘Kiwi maximalism’, it would provide a wellspring for visionary objectives that New Zealand could adopt. It might aim to transcend major regional security issues through a reinvigorated push for disarmament across the Asia–Pacific region and by acting as a catalyst for improved United States–China relations.

Owing to their assumptions, offensive and defensive realists have very different views of the 'security dilemma'. This dilemma refers to a situation whereby a state, intending to improve its security position by increasing its military strength or through an alliance, leads other states to respond in similar fashion, heightening tension and the chance of conflict between them even when neither state desires it; a net decrease in security occurs. For offensive realists, there is no dilemma since states are inherently greedy — it is a zero-sum situation. For defensive realists the dilemma is real and a tragic misunderstanding. Fortunately, as long as both sides recognise this, it can be overcome through programmatic steps to reassure one another and transform either state's view of the other's intention; peace and rapprochement are possible.

Transformed system

Shiping Tang has convincingly shown that the international system has transformed from one comprised primarily of offensive realist states to one comprised today chiefly of defensive realist states.⁵ In a defensive world, states that pursue offensive strategies are punished for their behaviour. The two most recent cases of powerful states pursuing their interests in an overtly offensive manner lends support to this position. The Bush administration in 2003 operated as an offensive state when it invaded Iraq, and more recently Russia acted offensively in Eastern Europe. Both operated out of step with the current defensive realist international environment and were, predictably, punished.



Shiping Tang

Because expansionism no longer pays, defensive/co-operative strategies become the norm. As a consequence, a majority of states today have been socialised into perceiving the use of military force to settle most disputes as illegitimate. Even though tensions do exist, this view is held by most states in the Asia-Pacific region, evident in the proliferation of state-to-state contacts and multilateral forums and in the fact that they all have a common interest in ensuring economic growth is not derailed. Tang's thesis is supported by the fact that general deterrence between states, rather than conflict, has become internalised, while nuclear weapons and economic inter-dependencies have reduced the possibility of great power wars breaking out. In contrast, offensive realism, which calls for a self-conscious effort to contain rising powers, will likely prove costly and create a self-fulfilling prophecy of confrontation in the region. My research and analysis elsewhere provides further support for defensive realism.⁶

Recognising that overall security is reduced when states take aggressive unilateral decisions in the realm of strategic-military affairs opens space for a new co-operative approach, one in which states can seek security without intentionally decreasing that of others. The current international structure makes it possible for strategic gains to be made by most states in the Asia-Pacific simultaneously and has provided room for efforts to transcend security dilemmas in the region, reducing the permutations of confrontation in the process. New Zealand could take advantage of this situation by explicitly adopting a new security paradigm — strategic liberalism — that will maximise security for all states

in the Asia-Pacific region.

New paradigm

The two words that comprise strategic liberalism as a paradigm — 'strategic' and 'liberalism' — are not oxymoronic. In fact, the paradigm unites realism's focus on national interests and liberalism in significant ways. Its prescriptions are strategic in that their pursuit is designed to improve the security position of the states involved in the endeavour, thus recognising their national interests, and liberal in that it requires and strengthens co-operation amongst them. The two proposals below represent a maximalist approach: they may be more far-reaching than appears currently plausible or possible. This 'Kiwi maximalism' is conscious and aligns naturally with the ethos and other principles that underpin strategic liberalism.

Taking a cue from the international relations approach known as constructivism, strategic liberalism asserts that our reality is socially constructed, and thus what we make of it. Although human nature will remain unchangeable for the foreseeable future, its energy can be directed towards its better self and concerned with the welfare of others. It also assumes that strategic futures are inherently indeterminate and that we need not repeat the tragic mistakes of the past. This approach also requires New Zealand to emphasise 'open polyliberalism': commitment to permanent partnerships in international affairs and open multilateral architectures that do not exclude other states. This consciously runs counter to the traditional realist notion that states only have interests, not permanent friends or allies. This is not an academic point: closed multilateral and security architectures generate feelings of insecurity amongst others, generating pressures to form countervailing alliances. This brings us back to the system-transcendent goals of strategic liberalism, which, initially, could be directed towards overcoming security dilemmas in the Asia-Pacific region.

New Zealand's embrace of strategic liberal principles would be greatly facilitated if it was buttressed by dedicated institutional support. This could come in the form of a world-class think tank — let us call it the Centre for Asia-Pacific Strategic Co-operation — whose primary objective was research into and promotion of ambitious international security and peace initiatives. It would make an intellectual and material contribution towards this end. Leading conceptual collaboration with actors around the region would be paramount, as would be emphasising the need for avant garde ideas and dissimulation of best practices. Incentives would be needed to bring to New Zealand the best and brightest intellectuals from across the Asia-Pacific.

Strategic Liberalism – Core Principles and Assumptions

- Anti-determinism; strategic futures are indeterminate
- Global interest; common interest; human interest
- Polyliberalism; emphasise permanent partnerships
- Non-exclusionary; open and transparent activities
- Avant-garde; encouragement and utilisation of new thinking
- Best practice; dissimulation of expertise and knowledge
- System-transcendent; approaches that seek to overcome security dilemmas
- Maximalism; strive for ambitious goals that maximise common interests.

Advancing disarmament

As a maximalist objective New Zealand should work to forge an Asia–Pacific compact that pauses current military acquisition processes, prevents new acquisition programmes and eliminates existing stockpiles of conventional and non-conventional weapons.

This first vector of research and advocacy of New Zealand's strategic liberal portfolio would be a focus on contemporary disarmament issues and a re-invigorated push for conventional and non-conventional arms control. This would include arms control accords to curb research into new weaponry, which could destabilise political relations. After all, an arms race is driven not just by the need for greater quantities of weapons but by perpetual advances in weapons research in order to ensure a state's capabilities remain equal, if not superior, to the those of others. Once developed, pressures emerge from the military-industrial system to purchase and deploy new weaponry, creating a spiral of incentives that may not be driven by the needs of strategy or reflect the level of objective threat posed to the country. Furthermore, identifying cutting-edge technologies that may prove beneficial to the domestic economy but have dual-use military applications will also need to be taken into account (such as genetic weaponry, robotics, space-based weapons and artificial intelligence programmes).

Significant conceptual work is required on the link between conventional and non-conventional (nuclear) arms. New Zealand cannot just say the world would be safer in the absence of nuclear weapons because there is a case to be made that state-to-state conflict has been greatly restrained since the dawn of the nuclear age. Nor should we charge that nuclear arms are 'useless' since they have not been used since the end of the Second World War. This misses the strategic-functional utility that comes from holding nuclear weapons and how they have been utilised indirectly on numerous occasions. For example, during the Cold War nuclear weapons facilitated conventional power projection by the super-powers. It allowed either state to intervene with impunity within their 'sphere of influence' and throughout parts of the Third World, secure in the knowledge that the other side would not directly intervene against its conventional forces in the field. Nuclear forces thus underpinned either super-power's freedom of action. This was clearly understood by US officials. Former Secretary of Defense Harold Brown stated before Congress in 1980 that 'our strategic nuclear capabilities provide the foundation on which our security rests. With them, our other

forces become meaningful instruments of military and political power'.⁷ After the Cold War, an official 1995 document produced by the Policy Subcommittee of the Strategic Advisory Group of the US Strategic Command on the 'essentials' of post-Cold War deterrence explained that 'nuclear weapons always cast a shadow over any crisis or conflict in which the US is engaged'.⁸ As recently as 2009 Major-General Donald Alston, assistant chief of

Major-General Donald Alston



staff for strategic deterrence, stated that 'Nuclear deterrence underpins all of our freedom of movement everywhere.'⁹ For Russia's part, Vladimir Putin surely felt safe in the knowledge that US and NATO forces could not come to the aid of their partners in Georgia during Russia's invasion in 2008, and the same appears to apply vis-à-vis its activities in the east of Ukraine today. Indeed, in a recent documentary on Russian television called 'World Order', Putin said 'Russia will continue perfecting its [nuclear] weapons. The nuclear triad forms the basis of our security policy.'¹⁰ Russia has also not been beyond issuing veiled nuclear threats in recent years or preparing to put its nuclear arms on standby during times of crisis.

The above arguments need to be engaged squarely, especially as most of the nuclear powers are upgrading and transforming their arsenals today. Furthermore, the prospects for this objective will be greatly strengthened if they are pursued alongside an effort in the Asia–Pacific region to programmatically improve the overall tenor of relations between the United States and China.

Promoting rapprochement

New Zealand should, as another maximalist objective, play an instrumental role to ensure a security dilemma does not emerge between the United States and China in the Asia–Pacific region, and make it an explicit foreign policy objective to forge an alliance with China at the same time that it sustains and deepens its relationship with the United States.

There is no more urgent task for global diplomats and international relations scholars than creating the conditions for China's rise to take place peacefully. Applying strategic liberalism and 'Kiwi maximalism' opens up a horizon of far-sighted and ambitious strategic objectives regarding the US–China relationship and the role New Zealand could conceivably play in their promotion. New Zealand can utilise its unique geographic position, and excellent relations with both states, to promote co-operation and confidence-building between them in the Asia–Pacific region. New Zealand could act as a conduit, identifying trilateral and multilateral opportunities for joint military exercises, as well as related counter-transnational organised crime, counter-terror, humanitarian and disaster-relief exercises. In fact, military-to-military interaction has already taken place under New Zealand auspices. For example, in Christchurch in August 2013 the three countries conducted disaster response and humanitarian exercises together during Phoenix Spirit. During Operation Southern Katipo, held in the South Island in October–November 2015, New Zealand brought together nine countries. Although China did not formally join the exercise, it attended in an observer capacity.

New Zealand is deepening its defence relations with the United States and China simultaneously, a fact that will enhance our ability to pursue additional co-operative activities with them. Indeed, in November 2015 Defence Minister Gerry Brownlee gave a speech to China's National Defence University, where he complimented China for its role in disaster relief and humanitarian missions, describing it as 'having demonstrated its capacity as a responsible world actor', and called China a 'true Strategic Partner' for New Zealand. Brownlee also announced a new five-year engagement plan between the People's Liberation Army and the New Zealand Defence Force, the first between China and a Western military.¹¹ These are positive steps but a maximalist approach would take them further by framing them as steps on

the way towards forging an alliance with China, akin to the relationship New Zealand currently has with its Western partners and allies.

Track II forums and workshops would complement the above efforts. A strategic liberal framework would ensure an 'outside the box' and 'no issues off the table' conceptual approach. This is critical. Day to day, week to week, month to month and year to year, an inexorable change in the global — and regional — balance of power is taking place between China and the United States, and it is the thousands of small decisions and changes in interpretation of the other state's intentions that will determine the future stability of the Asia-Pacific region, and whether a co-operative mode of behaviour prevails. Therefore, conceptual alignment between the United States and China over the makeup of the future multilateral and institutional architecture in the Asia-Pacific is required, and it is currently lacking. Without this the on-going US 'rebalance', or 'pivot', to Asia will only encourage China to believe that Washington is pursuing a neo-containment strategy by bolstering domestic elements in China that view security relations in zero-sum terms, thereby generating an acute security dilemma.

New Zealand could construct an explicit reassurance programme to promote between the United States and China. It would involve incremental step-by-step efforts in the military and non-military realms, centred on reciprocal restraint, in an effort to build trust and create a cycle of co-operation. Initial signals act as feelers and require a corresponding reaction to induce further steps. The most significant signals involve a state opting to unilaterally decrease its forces and engage in joint arms control efforts to modify military postures and capabilities in a way that decreases the ability of states to challenge the status quo.¹² Ultimately, reciprocal concessions must reach a point that makes it clear that neither state is considering attack or aggression; in other words, to take steps that a greedy offensive realist state would never take.

Of critical importance is Charles Kupchan's recognition that co-operation between democracies and non-democracies is possible. Kupchan holds that assuming otherwise not only reduces the chance for immediate collaboration but also 'discourages non-democracies from remaining open to mutual accommodation and the exchange of concessions — steps critical to advancing reconciliation and programmatic cooperation'.¹³ An approach to American-Chinese relations that emphasises ideological differences all but guarantees that deep forms of co-operation will remain out of reach.



Charles Kupchan

National approach

The Key government should not be discouraged from adopting a strategic liberal foreign policy. After all, a number of conservative statesmen, from Henry Kissinger to George H.W. Bush, are remembered for making visionary decisions that were more far-sighted than most realised at the time. Admittedly, the present

National government has inherited a functionalist approach to governance, which views governing as an end in itself, and virtue rests in stability, prudence and the management of state affairs. Speeches announcing ambitious foreign policy goals and outlining visionary regional proposals are not its cup of tea.

I can also attest from my time in government that policy-making and implementation is generally a conservative process that seeks to iteratively build upon past practice and apply/adjust it to new challenges, opportunities or crises. There are, inevitably, numerous compromises that occur throughout the process as multiple individuals, institutions and political actors inject themselves and moderate the final outcome. This process has a consistent result: risk-aversion. Operators in this context might readily dismiss the ideas outlined above as too ambitious and unrealistic as a basis for policy-making. But embracing the outlined approach would be a courageous political act in the truest sense of the word, as one that occurs when politicians make the seemingly impossible possible.

NOTES

1. Michael Richardson, 'Planned New Zealand Defence Cuts Worry Troubled Region', *International Herald Tribune News*, 17 Feb 2001.
2. See articles by David J. McCraw.
3. Gregory D. Foster used the term strategic idealism. While strategic liberalism has some similarities to Foster's concept, the content and intellectual case made for it in this article are tailored to New Zealand and the contemporary international system. See Gregory D. Foster, 'Transforming US National Security: A Call for Strategic Idealism', *Defense & Security Analysis*, vol 26, no 2 (2002), pp.129–42.
4. Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton, 1997).
5. Shipping Tang, 'Social Evolution of International Politics: From Mearsheimer to Jervis', *European Journal of International Relations*, vol 16, no 1 (2010), pp.31–55.
6. Reuben Steff, 'Cooperative Ballistic Missile Defence for America, China, and Russia', *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol 34, no 1 (2013), pp. 94–119.
7. US Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, *Annual Report: Fiscal Year 1980*, p.5 (file:///C:/Users/rsteff/Downloads/ADA082173.pdf).
8. 'Essentials of Post-Cold War Deterrence', Report prepared by the Policy Subcommittee of the Strategic Advisory Group of the US Strategic Command (1995).
9. Defence Talk, 'Air Force Strengthens Nuclear Deterrence Operations', 15 Sep 2009 (www.defencetalk.com/air-force-strengthens-nuclear-deterrence-operations-21921/).
10. Jeffrey Taylor, 'The World According to Putin,' 30 Dec 2015 (www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/12/russia-putin-miroporjadok/422196/).
11. Gerry Brownlee, 'New Zealand and Security in the Asia-Pacific Century', 28 Sep 2015 (www.beehive.govt.nz/speech/new-zealand-and-security-asia-pacific-century).
12. Evan Braden Montgomery, 'Breaking Out of the Security Dilemma Realism, Reassurance, and the Problem of Uncertainty', *International Security*, vol 31, no 2 (2006), pp.151–85.
13. Charles A. Kupchan, *How Enemies Become Friends: The Sources of Stable Peace* (Princeton, 2010), p.408. 