



The Fog of Foreign Policy: Why only 'least bad' options are available in Syria, Iraq and other global hotspots

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Executive Summary

Foreign policy is typically a blandly bipartisan affair in liberal democracies like Australia and the United States. Although different slogans are employed by left and right, major political parties support broadly liberal foreign policy goals. Both sides of politics want to preserve peace and national security, promote trade and economic development, and protect individual rights and freedoms abroad.

However, as the Syrian Civil War and war against Islamic State (IS) in Iraq make painfully plain, a massive gap exists between these settled foreign policy ends and the uncertain means by which to achieve them. Although these conflicts have morphed into one of this century's worst security and humanitarian crises, the world's leading liberal democracies remain bitterly divided over the appropriate response. After more than four years of brutal bloodshed in first Syria and now also Iraq, political leaders, foreign policy analysts and commentators continue to debate whether the international community should intervene more forcefully or leave Syria and Iraq to fend for themselves. As this debate grinds on without conclusion, these wars continue to radicalise the next generation of global jihadists, shatter Syria and Iraq's social fabric, kill and displace civilians *en masse*, and serve as the crucible for the genocidal and theocratic ambitions of IS and other radical Islamist movements.

The liberal vision of 'big picture' foreign policy priorities similarly fails to provide clear strategies for responding to a host of other global hotspots. From the spectacular collapse of the Libyan state and vicious religiously motivated violence in Nigeria, Yemen and beyond to violent Russian meddling in Ukraine and escalating Chinese territorial disputes, the liberal foreign policy consensus offers little guidance to policymakers charged with tackling acute international crises.

The disconnect between settled liberal foreign policy ends and the uncertain means by which to achieve them is a product of FA Hayek's 'knowledge problem'. Policymakers are confronted with the challenge of collecting and analysing "a sum of facts which in their totality cannot be known to the scientific observer". In other words, foreign policy is a heroic attempt to respond to a dizzying array of political, social and economic forces immensely more complex than policymakers can hope to fully understand. In Syria and Iraq, for example, policymakers seek to shape the course of a conflict involving: an authoritarian regime in Damascus with powerful backers in Moscow, Tehran and Beirut; an Iraqi government struggling with the legacy of chronic dysfunction and violent sectarianism; multiple mutually hostile Islamic sects and other religious and ethnic groups; hundreds of warring factions and militant organisations; millions of grief-torn families; and more than 10 million displaced persons. Not surprisingly, in Syria and Iraq — as in other global hotspots — the international community's best intentions struggle to overcome the 'fog of foreign policy'.

Fixed theories of state behaviour and the international system are regularly employed in an attempt to clear this foreign policy fog and provide quick and easy policy answers. However, by making bold assumptions about international relations and overlooking the localised political, social and economic forces driving the behaviour of particular states, these fixed theories actually compound the knowledge problem. To take just one case, liberal and realist theories of state behaviour and the international system each risk producing China policy dangerously out of step with the nuances of Beijing's behaviour. Realism struggles to account for China's peaceful, cautious and considered methods for achieving a multipolar world and an end to US primacy, while liberalism struggles to account for China's steadfast commitments to seizing disputed territory and surpassing the United States as the Asia-Pacific's greatest power.

This report offers five principles to better understand and navigate the fog of foreign policy:

1. The success of foreign policy initiatives depends on immensely complex and constantly evolving conditions that cannot be fully understood.

- The full details of the political, social and economic forces that will determine the success of a particular foreign policy initiative will often be beyond the reach of even the best-informed observers and analysts, while accurately predicting how these forces will evolve is exceedingly difficult.

2. The difficulty of knowing whether foreign policy initiatives will be successful is not an argument for foreign policy inaction.

- Rather than the false choice between foreign policy initiatives whose success cannot be guaranteed and inherently less risky foreign policy inaction, policymakers must decide between the relative risks of foreign policy action and inaction.

3. No foreign policy strategy should be pre-emptively ruled in or out.

- Pre-emptively advocating or advising against any particular strategy means foreign policy cannot be tailored to the specific conditions to which it is charged with responding.

4. Foreign policy initiatives should be subjected to a thorough cost-benefit analysis.

- A foreign policy initiative should only be adopted if it:
 - a. has likely benefits that outweigh its likely costs;
 - b. has likely outcomes that are preferable to the likely outcomes of unchanged policy settings;

- c. has likely outcomes that are preferable to the likely outcomes of alternative policy options; and
- d. can be designed to mitigate against possible high-cost deviations from its likely outcomes.

5. Foreign policymaking is the art of the imperfect.

- Even the best available foreign policy option can only be expected to yield the 'least bad' outcome.

The Syrian Civil War and the IS invasion of Iraq are especially grim reminders of the difficulties of navigating the fog of foreign policy. Not only has staggering material devastation and human suffering been inflicted on Syria and Iraq, but it is unclear how these inhospitable conditions on the ground will evolve or how any given policy response will shape this evolution. Nevertheless, these difficulties do not mean the international community should not exercise its foreign policy powers vis-à-vis Syria and Iraq. In light of the regional and global security threats emanating from these countries and the horrors of the atrocities committed by radical Sunni Islamists, the Assad regime, and Iranian-backed Shia militias alike, foreign policy inaction is strategically dangerous and morally unjustifiable. The constantly evolving and immensely intricate complexity of the wars in Syria and Iraq combined with the exceptionally high security and moral stakes involved means there are simply no good foreign policy options; only 'least bad' ones.

In addition to airstrikes in Syria and Iraq, military aid to the Iraqi army and Iraqi Kurdish forces, and training and equipment for select Syrian rebels, the US-led international coalition should impose no-fly zones in Syria and increase its military and financial assistance to non-radical Syrian rebels, including the Syrian Kurds. These policy initiatives would protect non-radical Syrian rebels and civilians from Assad regime airstrikes, while also supporting the emergence of a powerful non-radical fighting force that may eventually be able to defeat radical Islamists and the Assad regime — or at least force the Assad regime to sue for a negotiated conclusion to the Syrian Civil War. Such an outcome would mean the end of a conflict that has provided sanctuary to IS and other radical Islamist groups and exacted a colossal security and humanitarian toll on Syria and Iraq.

These policy initiatives may inadvertently assist radical Islamists like IS and Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) and facilitate Sunni revenge attacks against Syria's Shia. Radical Islamists might take advantage of the protection offered by coalition no-fly zones, while the defeat of the Shia-dominated Assad regime would leave Syria's Shia minority vulnerable to persecution at the hands of elements of the country's Sunni majority. However, letting the perfect get in the way of the 'least bad' is inadvisable when making foreign policy. Persisting with current policies for fear of regrettable side effects could see the slaughter in Syria and Iraq eviscerate these countries and fuel radical Islamist terrorism for years to come.



Introduction: Consensus and controversy

As we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say: we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns — the ones we don't know we don't know.

Donald Rumsfeld, then US Secretary of Defence, 12 February 2002¹

As the then three-year-old Syrian Civil War sucked Iraq deeper into its ferociously destructive orbit over the course of 2014, a high-stakes and divisive foreign policy debate erupted in Australia and around the globe. How should the international community respond to the Islamic State (IS) movement's murderous blitzkrieg across northern Iraq? Did IS war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocidal ambitions demand an international military response?² Or would international intervention only yield a derisory peace dividend and exact a massive cost in blood and treasure?

This debate made for unusual bedfellows. Interventionist liberal internationalists like former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans were joined by conservative commentators like Andrew Bolt in forcefully defending the US-led campaign of airstrikes against IS targets in Iraq and Syria.³ Meanwhile, socialist political parties like the Australian Greens found themselves alongside free marketeer libertarians like the Liberal Democrats in strongly opposing any international combat operations.⁴ This divided reaction to the IS invasion of Iraq sits in stark contrast to the usual calm foreign policy consensus.

Although different slogans are employed by different sides of politics, foreign policy is typically a blandly bipartisan affair in liberal democracies like Australia.

During the 2013 Australian federal election, the centre-right Liberal-National Coalition's mantras of "more Jakarta, less Geneva" and "economic diplomacy" contrasted with the centre-left Australian Labor Party's commitment to multilateralism and reinforcing "habits of consultation".⁵ Yet the Coalition and Labor both advocated essentially the same policy positions: simultaneously deepening security ties with the United States and economic and diplomatic relations with China and other Asian nations; pursuing global trade liberalisation with a combination of bilateral, regional and multilateral Free Trade Agreements (FTAs); and defending human rights and liberal democratic values around the globe.⁶

At the level of 'big picture' priorities, the conservative and progressive sides of politics in Australia share similar, if not identical, overarching liberal visions. The major parties of the left and right support the broadly liberal foreign policy goals of preserving peace and national security, promoting trade and economic development, and protecting individual rights and freedoms abroad. And to the extent voters are motivated by foreign policy issues, the Coalition and Labor's dominance of Australian politics suggests the bulk of the electorate also shares these broadly liberal goals.⁷ Moreover, this generally liberal foreign policy consensus in Australia is replicated in other leading liberal democracies like the United States, Japan, Germany, the United Kingdom and France.⁸

WHAT MAKES IT LIBERAL TO PRESERVE PEACE AND NATIONAL SECURITY, PROMOTE TRADE AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, AND PROTECT INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS ABROAD?

This trifecta of foreign policy priorities is not the only plausible way in which to translate liberal values into foreign policy. For example, it might be argued that the third goal of protecting individual rights and freedoms abroad is actually illiberal. By demanding that a predetermined set of individual rights and freedoms be globally protected, this goal risks undermining the freedom of traditional societies to live according to their own values.⁹ Moreover, this ambitious goal risks undermining individual freedom at home by consuming huge amounts of government resources and increasing the tax burden.¹⁰

Nevertheless, this trifecta of foreign policy priorities — preserving peace and national security, promoting trade and economic development, and protecting individual rights and freedoms abroad — is broadly liberal. In particular, these goals are consistent with the core liberal commitment to individual liberty.¹¹ As well as being justifiable on a host of instrumental grounds (e.g. the reduction of suffering and the creation of wealth), these goals serve the overarching liberal project of ensuring that individuals are free to live as they see fit, on the condition that they not harm others.¹²

Preserving peace and national security is a precondition for all individuals and their societies remaining sovereign over their own affairs and free from external aggression and interference.¹³ Promoting trade and economic development through freer flows of goods, services and capital reflects the commitment to individual liberty in the economic realm, which is a crucial element of freedom more broadly.¹⁴ Finally, protecting individual rights and freedoms abroad is consistent with the universal application of the liberal principle that individuals should be free to live as they see fit.¹⁵

Despite the broad foreign policy consensus across the political spectrum in liberal democracies like Australia, precisely how to pursue generally liberal foreign policy goals in particular cases remains a matter of controversy. In other words, foreign policy's desired ends might be the subject of general agreement, but the means to achieve them remain unclear.

Of course, the emotional baggage of the ill-fated 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq has made the debate about the appropriate response to the Syria Civil War and the

rise of IS especially fraught.¹⁶ Yet this bloodshed in the Middle East is just one of many complex international flashpoints that the bipartisan liberal foreign policy consensus is unable to untangle. From the spectacular collapse of the Libyan state and vicious religiously motivated violence in Nigeria, Yemen and beyond to violent Russian meddling in Ukraine and escalating Chinese territorial disputes, the trifecta of liberal foreign policy goals offers little guidance when attempting to determine precisely how to respond to the globe's most acute international crises.

The knowledge problem

No human mind can comprehend all the knowledge which guides the actions of society.

FA Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*¹⁷

To understand the disconnect between settled liberal foreign policy ends and the uncertain means by which to achieve them, it is necessary to delve deeper into liberal theory. Arguably the core liberal precept is the conviction that individuals ought to be free to live as they see fit, on the condition they not harm others.¹⁸ Although a version of this fundamental liberal principle found expression in John Locke's and Voltaire's seventeenth and eighteenth century arguments for religious tolerance, it received its fullest defence in John Stuart Mill's classic *On Liberty*.¹⁹ Mill memorably argued:

The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant. He cannot rightfully be compelled to do or forbear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because, in the opinions of other, to do so would be wise, or even right.²⁰

The ground-breaking moral clarity of Mill's defence of individual liberty is with good reason widely celebrated. What is less regularly recognised, however, is that this liberal aversion to limits on individual liberty is not just premised on the moral argument that individuals *ought* to be free to live as they see fit. It is also motivated by the empirical observation that allowing individuals to live as they see fit is of public benefit as much as it serves private interests. To emphasise the social utility of individual liberty, Mill showed that to restrict the exercise of free speech would not just be a moral crime against the speaker, but would also disadvantage society at large. In Mill's words:

The peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error.²¹

The appropriate limits of freedom of expression remain the subject of ongoing and often heated debate in liberal democracies. Nevertheless, Mill provides a convincing defence of the general principle that in the realm of speech and ideas, the benefits of according individuals the freedom to live as they see fit and pursue their own individual ends accrue to society at large as well as the free individuals themselves.

But what of other arenas beyond the realm of speech and ideas? Using the conceptual device of the 'invisible hand', the classical liberal economist Adam Smith similarly argued that the free pursuit of individual interests serves the common good in the economic arena.²² Smith famously observed:

It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages.²³

In short, the free pursuit of the self-interest of butchers, brewers, bakers and other private actors provides society with great benefits. It is therefore not only morally dubious to restrict individual freedom when individuals are doing no harm to others, but the free pursuit of individual interests also furnishes society with many of its material wants and needs. As in Bernard Mandeville's wryly moralistic account of the gains society derives from the free pursuit of individual ends, "private vices" (e.g. the pursuit of individual profit) are turned into "public benefits" (e.g. the sale of essential and desired goods and services).²⁴

How is it that self-interested individuals are able to so effectively furnish society with so many of its wants and needs by pursuing their own private ends? The power of the market mechanism by which disaggregated and self-regarding individuals provide society with immense benefits becomes clearer when considered in light of the 'knowledge problem' faced by central planners.²⁵ Most comprehensively examined by the classical liberal economist FA Hayek, the knowledge problem is the idea that the overwhelming complexity of political, social, economic and other forces means that even the best-resourced central planning authority would be incapable of amassing the information necessary to effectively discharge its duties.²⁶

To unpack the knowledge problem and its implications, it is instructive to consider the information that a central planning authority would require to efficiently oversee the production and distribution of even a simple commodity like rice. Acquiring and processing all of the crucially

important localised data — about rainfall patterns, soil health, pest control, wage rates, dietary preferences, and so on — setting production targets, and distributing the commodity accordingly, would be a herculean task for any central planning authority. Indeed, it would amount to the task of, as Hayek observed, collecting and analysing “a sum of facts which in their totality cannot be known to the scientific observer, or to any other single brain”.²⁷

Central planning power combined with the inability of central planners to fully know the bewildering array of relevant political, social and economic forces unsurprisingly produces unintended results.²⁸ As the French classical liberal theorist Frédéric Bastiat emphasised, centralised government interference in the economy will often lead to a large number of negative unintended consequences in addition to or instead of the beneficial intended consequences.²⁹ Tellingly, the lessons of the knowledge problem are nowhere more clearly understood than in former communist countries that have tried — and failed miserably — to centrally plan the production and distribution of goods, services and capital.

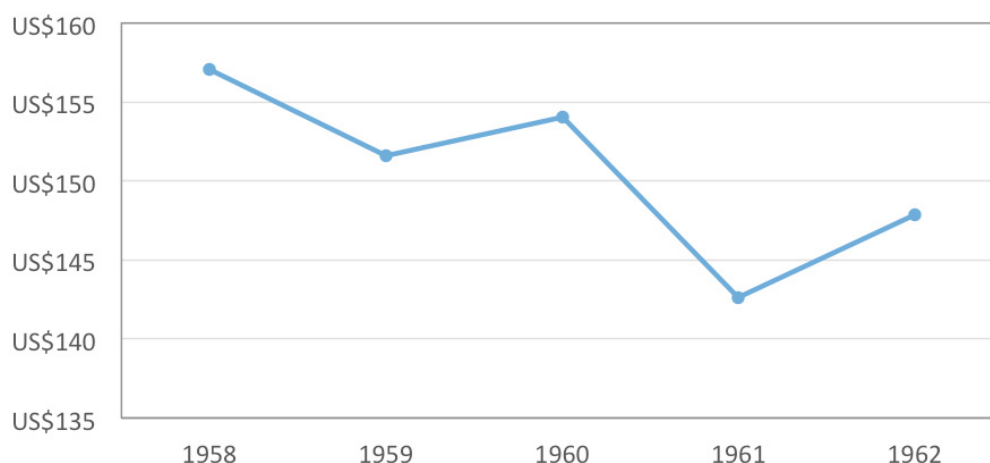
The goals of Mao Zedong’s disastrous centrally planned Great Leap Forward were simple and at least partially admirable: “a tremendous expansion of industrial and agricultural production”.³⁰ However, Mao’s conviction that China could be propelled to modernisation by setting agricultural and industrial quotas and creating a communal economic life had catastrophic consequences (see Figure 1). Instead of increasing agricultural production and supercharging the process

of industrialisation, the forced collectivisation of farming and the diversion of productive labour away from agriculture brought on food shortages and widespread famine. More than 45 million people were killed and the Chinese economy contracted sharply, including a decline in GDP by more than a staggering 25% in 1961 alone.³¹

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, agricultural production was de-collectivised and the freedom to privately farm was progressively reinstated.³² By allowing farmers to pursue their own individual interests and respond to the ever-changing localised conditions with which they were intimately acquainted, this initial liberalisation of agricultural production and distribution spurred a surge in productivity.³³ Economic decentralisation in the Chinese agricultural sector would in turn lay the foundations for China’s ongoing economic resurgence that has lifted more than 600 million individuals out of poverty in less than 40 years.³⁴

As with Smith’s butchers, brewers and bakers, disaggregated and relatively economically free Chinese farmers were able to overcome the knowledge problem in a way no central planning authority could: by acting in their individual interests and taking advantage of information dispersed throughout society.³⁵ The spectacular failure of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) central planning and the subsequent successes of China’s decentralised private farmers bear testament to the fact that, as Hayek famously put it, “there will always be infinitely more known to all the people together than can be known to the most competent authority”.³⁶

Figure 1: China’s GDP per capita at Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) and Mao’s Great Leap Forward (1958-62)



Source: Heston, A, Summers, R & Aten, B 2002, *Penn World Table Version 6.1*, Center for International Comparisons, viewed 24 March 2015, https://pwt.sas.upenn.edu/php_site/pwt61_form.php.

Practice trumps theory

Any relationship between what I studied as a student of international relations theory and what I did as a foreign policy practitioner was purely coincidental.

Ambassador Bilahari Kausikan, Ambassador-at-Large and Policy Adviser, Singaporean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 17 November 2014³⁷

The implications of the knowledge problem are well established in the field of economic policy. The appropriate balance between government interference in the economy and the degree of latitude accorded to market forces remains a subject of ongoing academic and popular debate. Yet there is a settled global consensus — spanning the left-right political divide in much of the world — that central planning leads to economic dysfunction.^{*38} A relatively high degree of economic decentralisation is therefore acknowledged to be a prerequisite for the efficient production and distribution of goods, services and capital.

What does the knowledge problem mean for foreign policy? The first consequence is that fixed theories of state behaviour and the international system should be abandoned and that foreign policy should instead be tailored to respond as comprehensively as possible to current conditions.³⁹ This might seem like foreign policy common sense, and yet it represents a departure from the orthodox schools of international relations theory that inform the views of many leading foreign policy analysts and commentators.

Foreign policy is, of course, distinct from international relations theory. Whereas foreign policy devises strategies for states to safeguard their national interests and achieve their international goals, international relations theory offers conceptual frameworks to analyse and understand state behaviour and the international system (see Figure 2).⁴⁰ Foreign policy strategising applies different policy tools in different contexts, whereas international relations theorising produces fixed theories of state behaviour and the international system that can — or so it is hoped — be uniformly applied.

Figure 2: The principal orthodox schools of international relations theory

	REALISM	LIBERALISM
Key claim	The anarchical international system compels states to compete for power to ensure their survival.	Shared values and economic interests override the rationale for zero-sum competition for power.
Key unit of analysis	States	States and international institutions

Source: Various.⁴¹

Although foreign policy strategising and international relations theorising are distinct enterprises, the latter often heavily influences the former. In particular, the strategies advocated by foreign policy analysts and commentators are often shaped by fixed theories of state behaviour and the international system. In the ongoing debate about how the international community should respond to violent Russian meddling in Ukraine, for example, leading foreign policy analysts and commentators have explicitly justified their policy prescriptions on the basis of realist and liberal international relations theories.

Noted realists like US academic John J. Mearsheimer and Australian commentator Tom Switzer have claimed that the European Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) should tolerate Moscow's aggressive interference in Ukraine because Russia — like all great powers — is compelled to defend its sphere of influence and vital interests in Eastern Europe with old-fashioned power politics.⁴² Meanwhile, liberals like US international relations theorist G. John Ikenberry and US Secretary of State John Kerry have argued that Russia does not represent a serious threat to the rules-based liberal world order and that Moscow's behaviour can be changed by emphasising the economic and diplomatic costs of its coercion of Ukraine.⁴³

* This settled global consensus does not, of course, extend to all of the core principles of economic liberalism. Although economic decentralisation is a crucial element of economic liberalism, the latter is much more far-reaching than the former. One could, for example, be fully committed to the decentralised production and distribution of industrial goods, and yet also hold that key companies should still be government-owned — as is the case in Chinese-style state capitalism.

Arguing that theories of state behaviour and the international system should be abandoned implies neither that international relations theorising is an unworthy intellectual pursuit nor that all schools of international relations theory are wrong.⁴⁴ Rather, the claim is that the rigid theoretical lenses through which the dominant orthodox schools of international relations theory view state behaviour and the international system compound the knowledge problem. The knowledge problem highlights that any given state's actions — as well as the nature of the international system in which it operates — will be contingent on a bewildering array of political, social and economic forces.⁴⁵ As such, strategising that relies on fixed theories of state behaviour and the international system will produce foreign policy dangerously out of step with the current conditions to which it is charged with responding.⁴⁶

To better understand what it means to abandon reliance on fixed theories of state behaviour and the international system, consider briefly the war between IS and the Syrian and Iraqi states. During the 2014 debate about international intervention in Syria and Iraq to stall the IS advance, many politicians, policymakers and commentators argued against airstrikes and other military measures on the grounds that they were “doomed to fail”.⁴⁷ These arguments assumed that international intervention would inevitably produce more harm than good. In the words of one commentator, international intervention will “always, almost without fail, prolong and deepen the problems”, and “always make a bad situation worse”.⁴⁸

Rather than judging in advance that any given international intervention should be opposed on the basis of a fixed theory of state behaviour and the

international system, decisions to intervene or refrain from intervening should be made on the basis of careful analysis of the particulars of the case.⁴⁹ Although it is not immediately clear that international interventions like the ongoing airstrikes in Syria and Iraq are advisable, deterministic thinking, such as the shibboleth that international interventions “always make a bad situation worse”, is certainly inadvisable.⁵⁰

One might have strong moral grounds on which to oppose international intervention, such as an unyielding commitment to the principle of inviolable state sovereignty. But such a moral judgement is distinct from the presumptuous — and, as the record of relatively successful international interventions in places like Kosovo, East Timor and the Solomon Islands shows, erroneous — empirical judgement that international interventions “always make a bad situation worse”.⁵¹

In fact, the moral judgement in and of itself provides no grounds whatsoever for thinking that the *effects* of any particular international intervention will be negative — beyond, of course, the apparently negative effect of violating the moral principle itself. Even if one rigidly adheres to the moral principle against all international interventions, drawing on fixed theories of state behaviour and the international system is still therefore woefully inadequate for assessing whether the US-led campaign of airstrikes against IS is “doomed to fail”.⁵² A tentative conclusion can only be reached by carefully considering as many of the variables of this particular case as possible, including the extent of IS support among disillusioned Sunnis in Syria and Iraq, the morale in the Iraqi army, and the determination of the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds to fight off IS.

China and theories of state behaviour

Ideas were the Cold War ... changing them by definition changed reality.

Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*⁵³

Realist and liberal international relations theorists offer contrasting accounts of China's international ambitions and likely behaviour based on their general theories of state behaviour and the international system. With an eye to the apparently anarchical nature of the international system and the irresistible logic that compels states to compete for power, realists warn of the likelihood of tension and conflict as China rises. Mearsheimer, for example, boldly maintains that "China cannot rise peacefully" and that the Middle Kingdom "will seek to dominate Asia".⁵⁴

By contrast, an emphasis on shared values and economic interests leads liberal international relations theorists to argue that mutually beneficial cooperation between China and other key regional powers will trump the rationale for zero-sum competition for power. This assessment is typified by Ikenberry's recent claims that China is not a "true revisionist" power and is actually a "geopolitical insider" in the liberal world order.⁵⁵

The case for abandoning fixed theories of state behaviour and the international system becomes particularly compelling in light of the serious explanatory limitations of realist and liberal international relations theories vis-à-vis China. China's resurgence on the world stage is likely to be much less conflict-prone than realists like Mearsheimer expect, while also representing a much more serious challenge to aspects of the international *status quo* than liberals like Ikenberry expect. In fact, China's past behaviour and the CCP's stated international ambitions suggest the Middle Kingdom's rise will be relatively peaceful, as liberals predict, but that China is equally intent on forcefully challenging the Asia-Pacific's territorial *status quo* and surpassing the United States as the region's greatest economic and military power, as realists predict.

In the Mao and Deng Xiaoping eras, China railed against what it lambasted as the "great-power chauvinism" and "superpower hegemony" of the United States and Soviet Union, and called for an international system more representative of the interests of a diverse range of nations.⁵⁶ Building on longstanding criticisms of the Cold War's bipolar international system and the subsequent unipolar US-led liberal world order, Beijing's

stated preference is for what a 2014 editorial in the nationalistic and government-owned *Global Times* called a "multipolar world".⁵⁷

However, China's rise is not a challenge to what Robert Kagan has labelled the US-designed liberal international economic order of free markets, free trade, and freedom of navigation.⁵⁸ In fact, as Beijing acknowledges, China has a deep vested interest in the preservation of this liberal economic system.⁵⁹ China became the world's largest trading nation measured by total exports and imports of goods in 2012, and according to the Heritage Foundation, has more than US\$870 billion worth of investment in a diverse range of industries across the globe.⁶⁰ China has also risen to become the world's second largest source of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) behind the United States, and receives the world's largest inflows of FDI.⁶¹ If for no other reason than to secure China's continued economic resurgence, Beijing will work to safeguard the largely unimpeded international flow of goods, services and capital.⁶²

As well as being content with key economic aspects of the US-led liberal world order, China is equally not seeking to aggressively challenge the United States' status as the pre-eminent Asia-Pacific power.⁶³ The CCP is certainly eager to engineer China's global resurgence, which will likely mean that China surpasses the United States economically and militarily before 2020 and 2050, respectively.⁶⁴ However, China's rapid rise means that contrary to Mearsheimer's dire warnings about a clash between the United States and China over who leads Asia, it is not necessary for Beijing to directly challenge US pre-eminence to bring it to an end. Indeed, beyond a slightly accelerated timetable, Beijing has little to gain from wresting leadership from Washington.⁶⁵

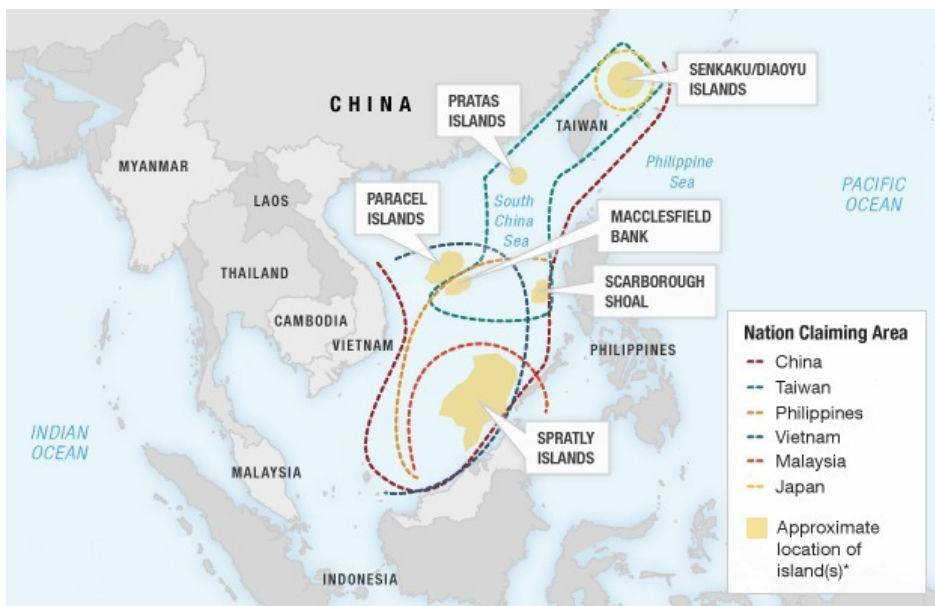
Despite denunciations from nationalistic publications like the *Global Times* and outspoken retired People's Liberation Army (PLA) officials, mainstream CCP thinking also seems resigned to deep and ongoing US security engagement in the Asia-Pacific. Consider, for example, the relatively muted response to recent US decisions to upgrade its troop presence in Australia in 2011 and the Philippines in 2014.⁶⁶ Even China's forceful criticisms of US President Barack Obama's insistence in April 2014 that Article V of the US-Japanese mutual defence treaty applies to the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands centred primarily on historical grievances rather than on the legitimacy of the enduring US-Japanese alliance.⁶⁷ With China's responses to the key military aspects of the US 'pivot' to Asia decidedly cautious, the CCP hawks may well be part of a flock of doves.

† Mearsheimer is a leading advocate of a strain of realist international relations theory called offensive realism. Offensive realists claim that "great powers ... are always searching for opportunities to gain power over their rivals, with hegemony as their final goal". See Mearsheimer, J 2004, 'Anarchy and the Struggle for Power', in KA Mingst & JL Snyder (eds), *Essential Readings in World Politics*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, p. 54.

Ironically, as Beijing appreciates, although it may have an ambivalent attitude towards certain international law and human rights norms, the US-led liberal world order secures the economic conditions that will see China peacefully surpass the United States economically and eventually militarily. Meanwhile, Beijing is already capable of undermining and challenging the aspects of the US-designed liberal world order to which it objects (e.g. democratic rights and freedoms and multilateral arbitration of territorial disputes) without needing to overthrow either the current world order *in toto* or violently challenge the US leadership that currently sustains it.⁶⁸

China might be content with the gradual decline of US global leadership and cautious challenges to aspects of the liberal world order, but Beijing is intent on upending the Asia-Pacific's territorial *status quo* (see Figure 3). China's combative tactics in the East and South China seas and on the Indian subcontinent, together with the stridency of Beijing's claims to sovereignty over Taiwan, suggest China will reject all resolutions of territorial disputes that undermine its prospects of regaining what it considers to be lost Chinese territory. Foreign Minister Wang Yi made this abundantly clear in March 2014: "There is no room for compromise in territorial and historical issues".⁶⁹

Figure 3: China's territorial revisionism



Source: Various.⁷⁰

Although Beijing is keen to seize control of disputed territory, China's territorial revisionism is nevertheless cautious and considered. In 1982, during an address to a delegation of Indian academics, then paramount leader Deng famously summarised China's approach to territorial disputes:

Even if the border question cannot be resolved for the time being, we can leave it as it is for a while. We still have many things to do in the fields of trade, the economy and culture and can still increase our exchanges so as to promote understanding and friendship between us.⁷¹

Of course, Deng's conciliatory stance contains a crucial caveat: Contentious territorial disputes will only be deferred for *a while*, meaning that eventually they will need to be resolved. Beijing's forceful rhetoric and tactics in territorial disputes also mean that when it comes time to conclude conflicts over territory, China will likely insist they be resolved in accordance with its territorially revisionist aspirations.

Even though Beijing is committed to territorial revisionism, it is willing for the revolution to be delayed and for its territorial claims to be advanced via piecemeal territorial reforms. In the case of Taiwan, China has shown remarkable patience in pursuing changes to the territorial *status quo*. Despite designating Taiwan a "renegade province", China is prepared to defer reunification with the "motherland" seemingly indefinitely, provided Taipei adopts conciliatory policies towards Beijing and does not formally declare independence.⁷²

China has been less patient in the East and South China seas and on the Indian subcontinent, but has equally not attempted to force an immediate overhaul of the territorial *status quo*. Notwithstanding the bitter history of Sino-Japanese relations and recurring naval and aerial brinkmanship, Beijing consistently stops short of escalating the East China Sea dispute to the point of armed conflict and seems content to slowly advance its claim to the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands by bolstering its case for *de facto* sovereignty through initiatives like the Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ).⁷³

In the South China Sea, Beijing continues to use sabotage, ship ramming, and the creation of new 'facts

on the water' (i.e. artificial islands) to expand its area of control, and yet has restricted its territorial revisionism to slow and steady 'salami-slicing' tactics aimed at incrementally increasing its control over disputed waters.⁷⁴ Meanwhile, despite well in excess of 600 transgressions of the more than 4,000km Line of Actual Control dividing India and China by the PLA since 2010, Chinese troops typically swiftly disengage and Beijing sometimes even offers rare admissions of error.⁷⁵

Overall, China's past conduct and stated international ambitions suggest it is a cautious and considered partially revisionist power. China's support for key economic aspects of the liberal world order, its willingness to wait out the era of unipolar US leadership, and its territorial revisionism by trial, indicate Beijing wants peaceful reform of the current international system and territorial *status quo* rather than violent revolution. As Cui Tiankai, China's ambassador to the United States, has said, the CCP is working towards integrating China into a modified version of the "existing global order":

We are ready to integrate ourselves into the global system, and we are ready to follow the international rules ... We stand for necessary reform of the international system, but we have no intention of overthrowing it or setting up an entirely new one.⁷⁶

Neither liberalism's nor realism's theories of state behaviour and the international system account for China's behaviour to date and likely future conduct. Although the push for a multipolar world suggests China is committed to an end to US primacy, Beijing's cautious and considered methods for achieving this goal indicate that this revisionism is much more moderate than Mearsheimer's offensive realism acknowledges. Meanwhile, despite China's support for key features of the US-led liberal world order and patient pursuit of greater international influence, Beijing's steadfast commitment to eventually reclaiming disputed territory suggests its intentions are much more revisionist than Ikenberry's liberalism acknowledges. In short, realism and liberalism offer striking accounts of China's rise, and yet neither theory does justice to the nuances of China's international actions.

Five foreign policy principles

We failed to recognise that in international affairs, as in other aspects of life, there may be problems for which there are no immediate solutions ... At times, we may have to live with an imperfect, untidy world.

Robert S. McNamara, former US Secretary of Defense, on US policy in the Vietnam War⁷⁷

Not relying on fixed theories of state behaviour and the international system avoids compounding the knowledge problem, but the fog of foreign policy cannot be entirely cleared. As the subsequent foreign policy principles suggest, strategies are available to better navigate the bewildering array of immensely complex and constantly evolving political, social and economic forces with which policymakers must contend. And yet foreign policymaking will remain the art of the imperfect.

1. The success of foreign policy initiatives depends on immensely complex and constantly evolving conditions that cannot be fully understood.

Principle 1 highlights the great difficulties associated with attempting to shape the course of international affairs in the face of a bewildering array of political, social and economic forces. Not only will these forces be beyond the direct control of policymakers, but their number and complexity means it will be exceedingly difficult to fully understand them in advance, much less precisely predict their evolution.⁷⁸

The United States and its supporters are attempting to engineer the simultaneous collapse of IS and the al-Qaeda franchise Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) in Syria and Iraq, the ouster of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and the emergence of a liberal democratic Syrian state.⁷⁹ However, achieving these foreign policy goals will depend on a vast array of unpredictable political, social and economic forces, including: the depth of the resolve of the Assad regime to continue its fight against IS, JN and other opposition groups; the level and reliability of support offered to Damascus by Moscow, Tehran and Hezbollah; and the morale of the foreign fighters flowing into Syria and Iraq to fight for IS, JN and other radical Islamist groups.

The raw data about many of these political, social and economic forces shaping the wars in Syria and Iraq is beyond the reach of even the best-informed observers and analysts. To take just one case, the apparently straightforward question of how many

fighters IS commands is the subject of much debate. Even exceptionally well-resourced and globally powerful organisations like the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) are only able to offer rough and questionable estimates.⁸⁰ Moreover, many of the relevant political, social and economic forces are intangible and exceedingly difficult to quantify. The ideology, psychology and emotional commitment of fighters on all sides of the wars in Syria and Iraq are key determinants of battlefield results, the extent of civilian support for the competing sides, and ultimately the likely final outcome of these conflicts. Yet none of these crucially important forces can be measured in detail.⁸¹

To make matters worse, accurately predicting how the relevant political, social and economic forces will evolve is exceedingly difficult in particularly acute crises like the wars in Syria and Iraq. The inherent uncertainty of the future means it is difficult to even predict measurable and quantifiable factors like the number of fighters the competing forces in Syria and Iraq will command in the coming months and years. Turning to less tangible aspects of the relevant political, social and economic forces makes it even harder to determine how the conflict will evolve. Assessments of how Moscow's commitment to Damascus might wax and wane during the course of 2015 or how IS morale will be dented or bolstered by ongoing US-led airstrikes and an Iraqi ground offensive to retake Mosul will be of necessity highly speculative. In short, without prejudging whether international intervention is advisable in Syria and Iraq, Principle 1 highlights the massive information gaps that make it especially challenging to successfully implement foreign policy initiatives of any kind.

2. The difficulty of knowing whether foreign policy initiatives will be successful is not an argument for foreign policy inaction.

Given the difficulties associated with knowing whether foreign policy initiatives will be successful, it might be tempting to conclude that policymakers should err on the side of foreign policy inaction. More specifically, recognising that it is exceedingly difficult to either fully understand the bewildering array of relevant political, social and economic forces or precisely predict their evolution, it might be argued that policymakers should simply avoid exercising their foreign policy powers altogether. Principle 2 emphasises that given foreign policy inaction often incurs extremely high costs of its own, the difficulty of knowing whether foreign policy initiatives will be successful is not an argument for foreign policy inaction.

Although the US-led intervention in Syria and Iraq risks prompting reprisal attacks against coalition members and aggravating the Syrian Civil War by encouraging the non-radical Syrian rebels to continue their fight against the Assad regime, non-interventionist foreign policy is far from risk free. In fact, in the absence of coalition airstrikes in Syria and Iraq and military support for the Iraqi state, the Iraqi Kurds, and select non-radical Syrian rebels, the most morally noxious forces on the ground would likely become more powerful and the influence of illiberal and authoritarian outside powers would grow. IS would redouble its brutal military campaigns and ethnic cleansing in Syria and Iraq, the growing strength of IS and JN would in turn increase the incentives for the Assad regime to take the fight against the comparatively weak non-radical Syrian rebels with even more vim and vigour, and the relative influence of the amoral — and sometimes positively immoral — foreign policies of Moscow, Tehran and Hezbollah would rapidly rise.⁸² The likely results would include: more civilian and battlefield deaths; more refugees and internally displaced persons; and more genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes.⁸³

The success of foreign policy initiatives depends on immensely complex and constantly evolving conditions that cannot be fully understood, and yet that does not thereby make exercising foreign policy powers inadvisable. In fact, as the tragic case of the ongoing wars in Syria and Iraq makes painfully plain, policymakers risk increasing the influence of illiberal and authoritarian local and international forces to disastrous effect by choosing to not exercise their foreign policy powers. Consequently, the choice for policymakers is not between foreign policy initiatives whose success cannot be guaranteed and inherently less risky foreign policy inaction. Rather, the choice is between the relative risks of foreign policy action and inaction.

3. No foreign policy strategy should be pre-emptively ruled in or out.

The knowledge problem highlights that any given state's actions — as well as the nature of the international system itself — are contingent on a bewildering array of immensely complex and constantly evolving political, social and economic forces. Foreign policy strategising should therefore be tailored to respond to current conditions to the fullest extent possible. As such, pre-emptively advocating or advising against any particular strategies risks producing foreign policy that is ill-suited to the particular political, social and economic forces to which it is charged with responding.

A strategy of regime change in Syria in 2012 and 2013 may well have shortened the country's horrific civil war, headed off the rise of IS and JN, averted the IS invasion of Iraq, and laid the foundations for a peaceful, stable and perhaps even relatively liberal democratic Syria.⁸⁴ However, a policy of regime change in 2015 in Syria could prove disastrous. Directly attacking and ousting the Assad regime would make IS and JN the most strategically powerful actors in Syria, which would in turn dramatically undermine the position of the non-radical Syrian rebels, endanger ethnic and religious minorities, and increase the global threat of radical Islamism. Equally, although a strategy of non-intervention might have in retrospect been appropriate in Iraq in 2003, ruling out any military intervention in Syria and Iraq in 2014 would have had catastrophic consequences for ethnic and religious minorities, the viability of the Iraqi state, and non-radical Syrian rebels, while also giving the advantage to the Assad regime and radical Islamist groups like IS and JN in the Syrian Civil War.

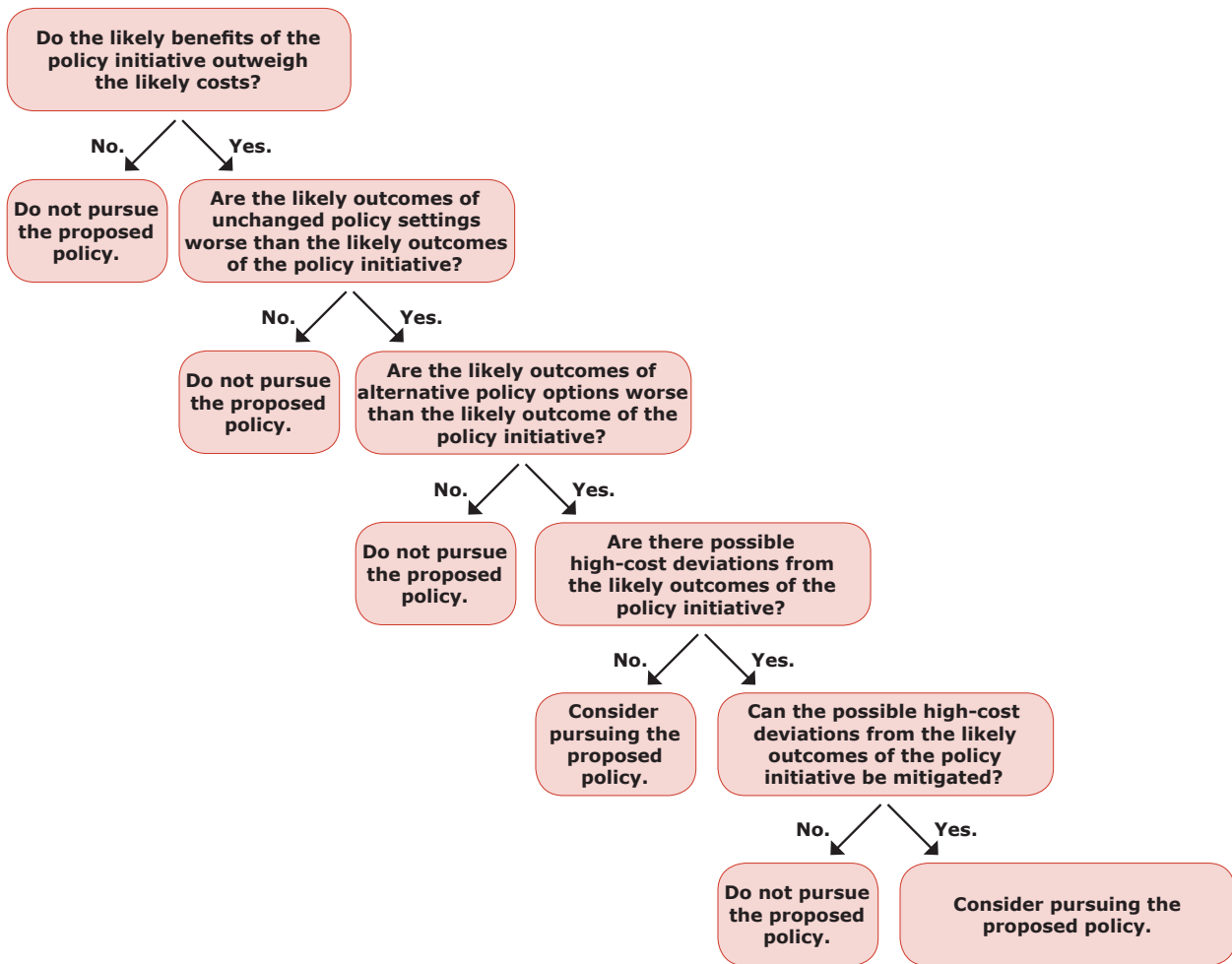
To ensure that foreign policy strategising yields initiatives that are best tailored to respond to immensely complex and constantly evolving political, social and economic forces, Principle 3 holds that no foreign policy strategy should be pre-emptively ruled in or out. This allows policymakers to choose from the full suite of available foreign policy strategies, and thereby opt for those policy options that are best suited to navigate current conditions.

4. Foreign policy initiatives should be subjected to a thorough cost-benefit analysis.

If no foreign policy strategy should be pre-emptively ruled in or out, how should policymakers assess competing policy options? Principle 4 holds that any foreign policy initiative must be subjected to a thorough cost-benefit analysis (see Figure 4). This foreign policy cost-benefit analysis only recommends a policy initiative that:

- a. has likely benefits that outweigh its likely costs;
- b. has likely outcomes that are preferable to the likely outcomes of unchanged policy settings;
- c. has likely outcomes that are preferable to the likely outcomes of alternative policy options; and
- d. can be designed to mitigate against high-cost deviations from its likely outcomes.

Figure 4: Foreign policy cost-benefit analysis



The cost-benefit analysis framework on its own is obviously not able to determine which foreign policy initiatives should be pursued. Although this framework calls on policymakers to pursue foreign policy initiatives that maximise benefits and minimise costs, it neither stipulates the relevant costs and benefits nor how much relative weight should be accorded to these costs and benefits. For example, the cost-benefit analysis framework neither pre-empts whether the financial cost per airstrike should factor into calculations about the appropriate foreign policy response to the wars in Syria and Iraq, nor how this financial cost should be weighted relative to the cost of civilian deaths at the hands of IS and JN.

Although the failure to stipulate the relevant costs and benefits, and how much relative weight should be accorded to them, might be a *prima facie* limitation, it actually increases the versatility and usefulness of the cost-benefit analysis framework. By not predetermining

costs and benefits and their relative weight, policymakers with differing policy priorities and political values can use this framework. By contrast, this analysis framework would inadvertently prejudge the foreign policy ends that policymakers should pursue if it prescribed particular costs and benefits and their relative weight.

Specifying that the financial costs of foreign policy initiatives were not relevant costs or were insignificant costs would automatically increase the benefits of airstrikes in Syria and Iraq, while determining that civilian deaths at the hands of foreign entities were only moderately relevant costs would automatically increase the benefits of non-intervention. By neither stipulating the relevant costs and benefits, nor how much relative weight should be accorded to them, the cost-benefit analysis framework avoids prejudging the foreign policy ends that should be pursued, thereby making it feasible for policymakers with differing policy priorities and political values to employ this analytical tool.

5. Foreign policymaking is the art of the imperfect.

As Principle 1 emphasises, the success of foreign policy initiatives depends on immensely complex and constantly evolving conditions that are exceedingly difficult to fully understand. However, foreign policymaking is not just the art of the imperfect because of the constraints the knowledge problem places on policymakers. Even when the relevant political, social and economic forces are relatively well-understood and a cost-benefit analysis has been passed, foreign policy initiatives should still not be assessed against the benchmark of perfect peace and stability. Rather, the very nature of the conditions to which foreign policy is typically required to respond make foreign policymaking the art of the imperfect.

Foreign policy must regularly contend with high-stakes, messy and fast-moving cases like the wars in Syria and Iraq, violent Russian meddling in Ukraine, and the Libyan Civil War. Although the specific characteristics of these foreign policy challenges are vastly dissimilar, they are all examples of political, social and economic forces at their most challenging. Political institutions have collapsed, social fabric is in tatters, and core economic interests are clashing.

For example, the struggle in Syria has morphed into one of this century's worst security and humanitarian

catastrophes. The conflict served as the crucible for the genocidal terror group IS, which has since invaded Iraq, systematically raped and enslaved women, liquidated Shia, Christians and other minorities, and subjected Sunnis to totalitarian theoretic rule.⁸⁵ Along with other radical Islamist groups like JN, IS has also radicalised the next generation of thousands of global jihadists and transformed Syria and Iraq into what the United Nations has dubbed a "veritable international finishing school for extremists".⁸⁶

Meanwhile, more than 220,000 lives have been lost in Syria alone since March 2011, while more than 3 million Syrians have fled the country to seek refuge in the relative peace of neighbouring nations like Lebanon and Jordan, and more than 7 million Syrians have been forced from their homes and are now internally displaced (see Figure 5).⁸⁷ Moreover, Syria's multi-confessional social fabric has been violently torn: the bitter divide between Syria's Sunni majority and the Shia-dominated Assad regime has deepened, and Syrians have been forced to choose between the barbarism of the government in Damascus and its Iranian and Hezbollah backers and the barbarism of radical Sunni Islamists like IS and JN.⁸⁸ Syria's basic health and educational infrastructure, including hospitals and schools, has also been severely damaged, while power and water shortages are common across the country.⁸⁹

Figure 5: Syria's humanitarian catastrophe

Syria conflict death toll

Documented killings per month

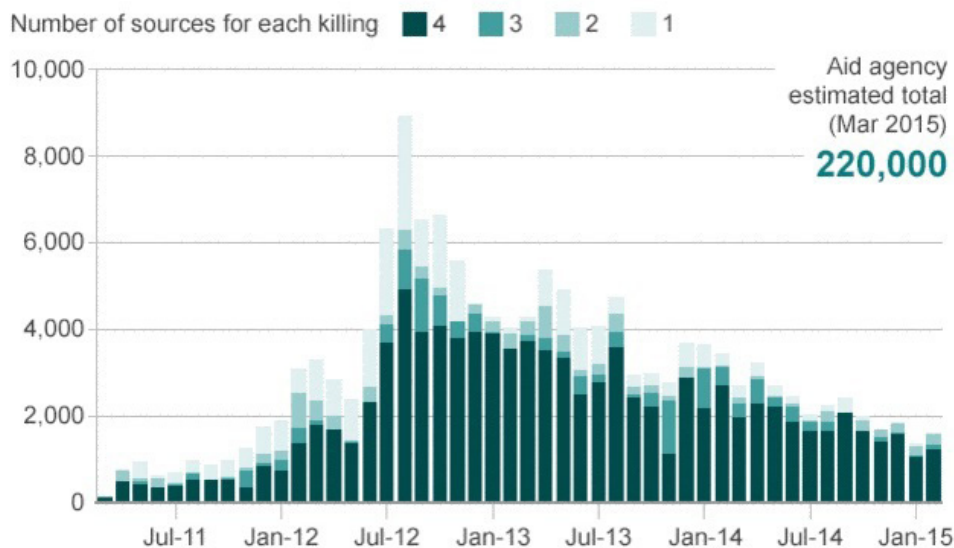
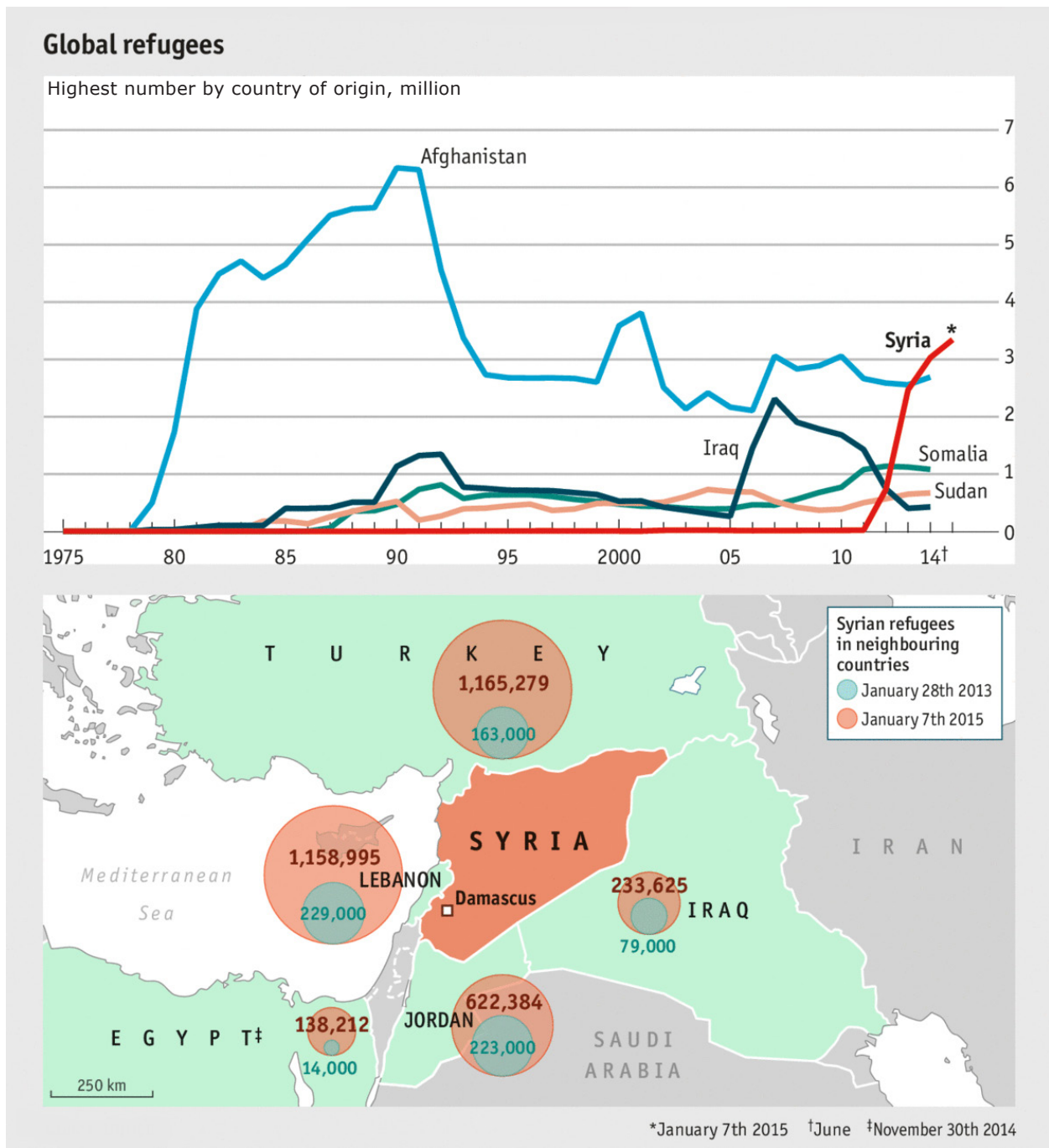


Figure 5: Syria's humanitarian catastrophe (continued)



Economist.com/graphicdetail

Source: Various.⁹⁰

In 1954, the then UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld remarked: "The UN was not created to bring us to heaven, but in order to save us from hell".⁹¹ Given the extremely challenging conditions with which foreign policymakers must often contend, an

approximation of Hammarskjöld's moderate ambitions for the UN is also an appropriate benchmark for assessing foreign policy initiatives. Rather than perfect peace and stability, even the best available foreign policy option can only be expected to yield the 'least bad' outcome.



'Least bad' foreign policy options in Syria and Iraq

"Either al-Assad or we burn the country".

Bebars al-Telawi, Syrian citizen journalist, 21 January 2014, on the bargain the Assad regime offers Syrian civilians⁹²

The more than four-year-old Syrian Civil War and the 2014 IS invasion of Iraq are grim reminders that foreign policymaking is the art of the imperfect. Not all of the available policy options in response to the wars in Syria and Iraq are comparably bad, and yet each policy option entails the significant risk of high strategic and moral costs. Nevertheless, in addition to airstrikes in Syria and Iraq, military aid to the Iraqi army and Iraqi Kurdish forces, and training and equipment for select non-radical Syrian rebels, the US-led international coalition should pursue the 'least bad' policy option of imposing no-fly zones in Syria and increasing military and financial assistance to non-radical Syrian rebels, including Syrian Kurds.

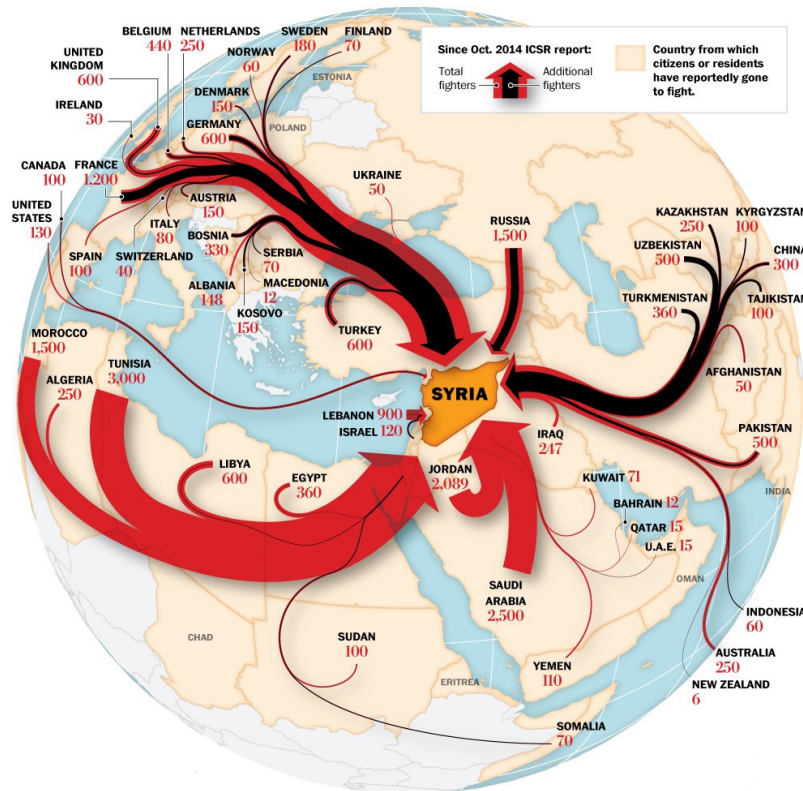
A light touch

Prominent light-touch policy options include no international military involvement whatsoever in Syria and Iraq and diplomatic lobbying to institute ceasefires and/or reach a political settlement in Syria.⁹³ The key

drawback of these light-touch policy options is that they do not resolve the root cause of the violence and instability in Syria and Iraq: the Syrian Civil War.⁹⁴ The three-way fight between the Assad regime, non-radical Syrian rebels, and radical Islamists fuels the ongoing slaughter in Syria, made possible the rise of IS and its subsequent invasion of Iraq, and saw the prospects of radical Islamists like the al-Qaeda franchise JN surge. The seemingly steadfast will of the key combatants in Syria to fight on indefinitely means that military non-intervention and diplomatic lobbying are extremely unlikely to end the Syrian Civil War.⁹⁵

The Assad regime sees the war against non-radical rebels and radical Islamists alike as an existential fight that it cannot afford to lose, and it receives extensive support from Russia, Iran and Hezbollah to defend itself.⁹⁶ Drawing on a global pool of willing jihadists and receiving financial and other support from sympathetic Islamists in the Middle East, North Africa, Asia and elsewhere, radical Islamists like IS and JN will continue their messianic campaign to impose and extend their versions of Islamic rule (see Figure 6).⁹⁷ Meanwhile, non-radical Syrian rebels receive varying levels of financial and military assistance from the Gulf States, Turkey, the United States and beyond, and remain strongly committed to unseating the brutal Assad regime and pushing back radical Islamists.⁹⁸

Figure 6: Source and scale of foreign fighters entering Syria (as of January 2015)



Source: Thorp, G & Sharma, S 2015, 'Foreign fighters flow to Syria', *The Washington Post*, 27 January, viewed 26 March 2015, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/foreign-fighters-flow-to-syria/2015/01/27/7fa56b70-a631-11e4-a7c2-03d37af98440_graphic.html.

With light-touch policy options unable to dissuade the key combatants from fighting on, Syria’s humanitarian catastrophe — which has already taken more than 220,000 lives and displaced more than 11 million people — is likely to grind on for years.⁹⁹ Syria’s social fabric and infrastructure will continue to be shredded, and regional and sectarian rivalries between broadly Sunni supporters of the uprising and Shia backers of the Assad regime will deepen.¹⁰⁰ IS will also retain a Syrian home base from which it can attack Iraq, destabilise the Middle East and North Africa, propagate its militant Islamist ideology worldwide, and radicalise the next generation of global jihadists.¹⁰¹

A steady course

The US-led international coalition is already engaged in a campaign of regular airstrikes in Iraq and Syria to combat IS and JN, while also providing military aid to the Iraqi army and Iraqi Kurdish forces to fight IS in northern Iraq.¹⁰² Having already identified 1,200 fighters

as potential candidates for its program to train and equip “moderate” (i.e. non-radical Islamist) Syrian rebels, the United States also aims to send more than 5,000 US-trained and equipped fighters into the field each year for the next three years.¹⁰³ These policies are likely to leave IS and JN significantly degraded in Syria and restrict IS to an increasingly shaky foothold in northern Iraq.¹⁰⁴

The coalition air war will kill large numbers of IS and JN fighters in Syria and Iraq. By January 2015, the coalition air campaign had already reportedly killed more than 6,000 IS fighters and half the group’s top command.¹⁰⁵ Meanwhile, with IS already having lost 25% to 30% of its territory in Iraq as of April 2015, ongoing military support for the Iraqi army and Iraqi Kurdish forces will likely see IS slowly pushed backed in northern Iraq.¹⁰⁶ With a March-April 2015 offensive to retake Tikrit from IS successful, it is even possible that IS will be expelled from Mosul — Iraq’s second most populous city before the IS invasion and now a stronghold for the militant group — in the northern autumn of 2015.¹⁰⁷

Furthermore, notwithstanding Tehran's growing influence over Baghdad and atrocities meted out by Iraq's Iranian-backed Shia militias, there are positive signs that Iraq's new government understands the imperative to sooth Shia-Sunni antagonisms and thereby staunch Sunni support — whether active or tacit — for IS and other radical Islamist groups.¹⁰⁸ Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's apparent commitment to ending discriminatory anti-Sunni policies and granting more powers to majority-Sunni governorates is a healthy signal in this regard.¹⁰⁹

Despite positive trends in the Iraqi fight against IS, the role of Shia militias and their Iranian benefactors make peace and stability an unlikely medium to long-term prospect for Iraq.¹¹⁰ The Shia sectarianism of former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki fuelled the Sunni disillusionment that led many Sunnis to offer tacit and active support to IS.¹¹¹ The decisive role of Iranian-backed Shia militias in the campaign against IS and the penchant of these groups for committing atrocities and even ethnic cleansing against Sunnis mean the campaign against IS risks pushing Sunnis into the hands of militant Sunni Islamist groups.¹¹² Consequently, even if the combination of the Iraqi army, Iraqi Kurdish forces, US-led airstrikes, and Shia militias eventually yields a military victory over IS in northern Iraq, the Shia-dominated Iraqi government and military forces may lose the peace.¹¹³

The role of Iranian-backed Shia militias also means the fight against IS in Iraq is morally fraught for the US-led international coalition.¹¹⁴ Coalition airstrikes against IS in Iraq risk amounting to *de facto* support for Shia sectarianism and growing Iranian influence over Iraq.¹¹⁵ If the United States and its partners do not continue the air campaign against IS, they give succour to radical Islamists of the most brutal variety, and yet if they continue airstrikes, they give succour to what could arguably be construed as Iranian efforts to turn Iraq into a sectarian Shia vassal state.¹¹⁶ Even the apparently laudable goal of helping Iraq defend itself from IS aggression is therefore morally ambiguous.

In addition, although current policies are likely to progressively deny IS territory in Iraq and degrade IS and JN in Syria, they are unlikely to end the Syrian Civil War. The mobility of IS and JN forces means airstrikes alone cannot defeat these groups and end their assaults against the non-radical Syrian rebels and the Assad regime. Notwithstanding an apparently softer line on the Assad regime from US Secretary of State John Kerry in March 2015, the United States and its partners still insist that "Assad has lost all legitimacy and must go".¹¹⁷ Yet current policies will not provide the Assad regime or its backers in Russia, Iran and Lebanon with a compelling rationale for ending their wars against IS and JN and non-radical Syrian rebels alike.¹¹⁸

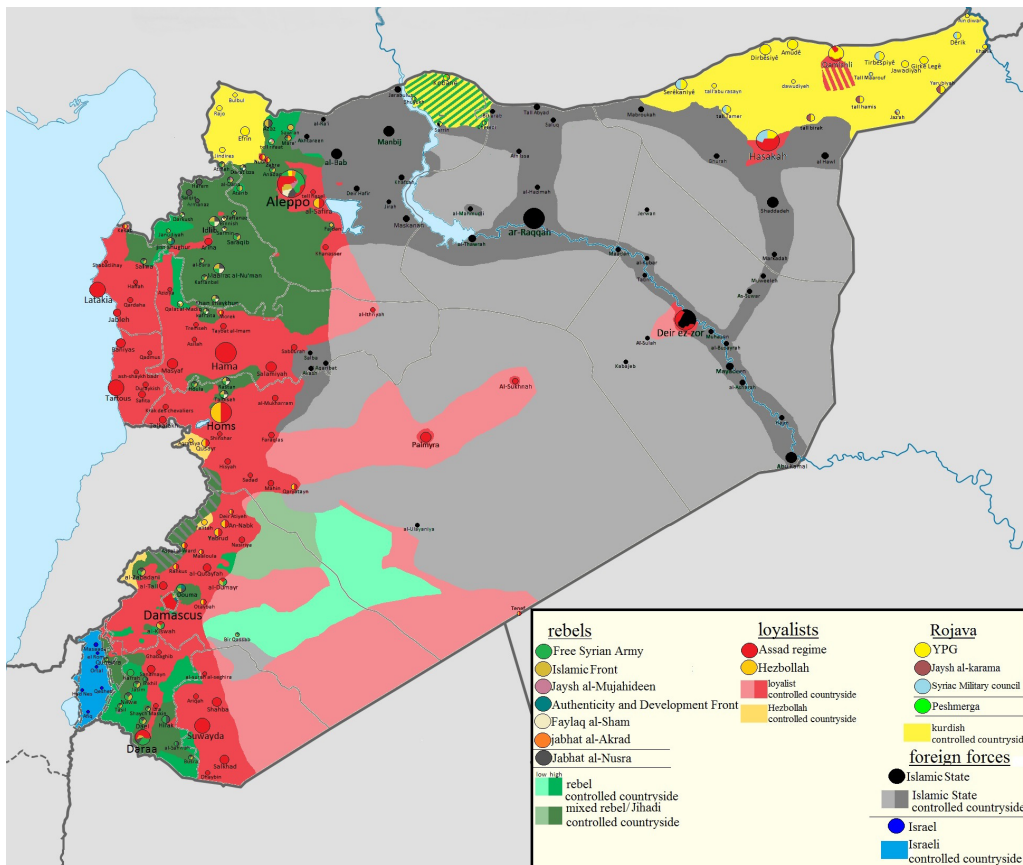
Moreover, the US-led train and equip program for non-radical Syrian rebels will be unable to roll back the Assad regime's forces or radical Islamists like IS and JN on the battlefield. The US-backed non-radical Syrian rebel contingent of 15,000 fighters over three years will be dwarfed by the combined forces fielded by the Assad regime, Shia militias, Hezbollah and Iran, which are likely to be at least as large as 150,000–220,000 battle-hardened soldiers.¹¹⁹ US-backed rebels will also be massively outnumbered by the total forces of radical Islamists like IS and JN, which may count more than 200,000 fighters in their ranks.¹²⁰ Notwithstanding US support for non-radical Syrian rebels, the Syrian Civil War will remain tipped in favour of the Assad regime and radical Islamists like IS and JN.

Strike from afar and proxy forces

In addition to the ongoing air campaign against IS and JN, conditional military aid for the Iraqi army and Iraqi Kurdish forces, and training and equipment for vetted non-radical Syrian rebels, the US-led international coalition could consider supplying large, established non-radical rebel groups, as well as the Syrian Kurds, with extensive military and financial assistance.¹²¹ This additional cash and arms — which might include funds to pay the wages of fighters and advanced military equipment like laser-guided man-portable air-defence systems (MANPADS), man-portable anti-tank systems (MANPATs), and a range of artillery — could be combined with no-fly zones over key corridors of non-radical Syrian rebel-held territory. Increased military and financial assistance to non-radical Syrian rebels might draw Sunni support away from IS and JN and thereby help build a powerful non-radical fighting force that may eventually be capable of either defeating the Assad regime or forcing it to sue for a negotiated end to the conflict. This military and financial assistance could in turn act as a fillip to the Iraqi government's efforts to defeat IS, while also reducing the threat of radical Islamists like IS and JN to the Middle East and North Africa and the world-at-large.

Meanwhile, by restricting the range of operation of the Assad regime's air power with the threat to shoot down military aircraft entering designated airspace, no-fly zones would allow non-radical Syrian rebel forces to regroup and gather strength, while also providing protection for civilians against the often indiscriminate bombing of the Syrian air force.¹²² Candidates for no-fly zones include areas of the Daraa and Quneitra governorates in Syria's southwest (see Figure 7). These are particularly attractive prospective locations given that these governorates are not only non-radical Syrian rebel strongholds, but also the location of some of the Assad regime's deadliest air attacks on civilian populations, including through the use of highly destructive and UN Security Council-proscribed barrel bombs.¹²³

Figure 7: Control of Syria, 1 May 2015



Source: 'Syria ~ Map Update dd May 1, 2015' 2015, pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com, 1 May, viewed 5 May 2015, <https://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2015/05/01/syria-map-update-dd-may-1-2015/>.

Increased military and financial assistance to non-radical Syrian rebels and the imposition of no-fly zones would initially be a blow to the Assad regime and radical Islamist groups like IS and JN. However, such policies are likely to intensify the Syrian Civil War and risk further empowering Islamist groups of various stripes in the medium to long-term. With US-backed non-radical Syrian rebel groups like the Syrian Revolutionary Front and Harakat Hazzm collapsing under the weight of attacks from JN, the most promising candidates for increased military and financial assistance are coalitions like the secular, nationalist Southern Front in Daraa and Quneitra governorates.¹²⁴ Although the Southern Front could command as many as 38,000 fighters in total, it is massively outgunned by some 220,000 Assad regime-aligned forces and some 200,000 radical Islamist militants.¹²⁵ Rather than ending the Syrian Civil War's bloody stalemate, the immediate impact of a significant

influx of funds and arms to non-radical Syrian rebels could therefore be an uptick of violence as groups like the Southern Front come under renewed assault from the Assad regime forces and radical Islamists like IS and JN.

As well as potentially aggravating the violence in Syria, increased military and financial assistance to non-radical Syrian rebels like the Southern Front could eventually directly benefit radical Islamists like IS and JN. When the beleaguered US-backed Harakat Hazzm dissolved in early March 2015, hundreds of its fighters and their US-supplied arms were absorbed into expanding JN and IS units.¹²⁶ Given that even the secular Southern Front has previously joined with JN in tactical alliances, US-supplied arms could easily fall into the hands of radical Islamists like JN and IS if this grouping dissolves — which is a strong possibility given the fluid nature of rebel factions in the Syrian Civil War.¹²⁷

Moreover, with the fortunes of the genuinely secular rebels flagging, increased military and financial assistance to non-radical Syrian rebels will in practice often mean aiding Islamist groups — albeit relatively moderate ones that are fighting radical Islamists like IS.¹²⁸ Notwithstanding their relative moderation, these non-radical Islamists generally favour a form of Sunni Islamic rule, regularly align themselves with radical Islamists like JN out of shared opposition to the Assad regime, and have also been accused of human rights abuses.¹²⁹ This makes supporting the increasingly Islamist non-radical Syrian rebels morally ambiguous.

Finally, given that no-fly zones over non-radical Syrian rebel-held territory could be exploited by IS, JN and other radical Islamists, their imposition is also likely to be morally ambiguous. To avoid aiding radical Islamists, no-fly zones would be initially established over regions where IS and JN forces are absent. However, once no-fly zones are established, they may attract radical Islamist groups eager to avoid Assad regime air attacks. No-fly zones could therefore actually incentivise radical Islamists like IS and JN to attack non-radical Syrian rebel-held areas more aggressively so as to enjoy the protection of US-led coalition air power.

Army building and boots on the ground

Prominent hawkish policy options include as many as 25,000 foreign combat troops in Syria and Iraq to defeat IS, and billions of dollars to build a new Syrian opposition army capable of simultaneously defeating the Assad regime and radical Islamists like IS and JN.¹³⁰ The immediate problem faced by these hawkish policy options is the high risk of aggravating the already widespread and vicious violence plaguing Syria and Iraq. The Assad regime enjoys extensive military support from Iran and Hezbollah, while IS and JN draw on a global pool of jihadist recruits and financial and other support from sympathetic Islamists in the Middle East and North Africa, Asia and elsewhere. This level of external support, combined with the unwavering determination of the Assad regime and radical Islamists to fight on, means the Syrian Civil War is likely to significantly intensify if the international community bankrolls or directly engages in a large-scale ground war against either IS and JN or the Assad regime. In such a scenario, more radical Islamists can be expected to flock to Syria to fight foreign forces, and Iran and Hezbollah are likely to expand their military support for the Assad regime to prop up a key regional ally.

A further barrier to 'boots on the ground' plans for Syria and Iraq is that they entail the extremely high risk of

massive costs in blood and treasure for the international community, thereby making them politically untenable. With the United States still scarred from an almost nine-year-long Iraq campaign that killed nearly 4,500 US troops and could cost the United States as much as US\$2.2 trillion in total, the prospect of what could well be an even longer, costlier and bloodier campaign to defeat radical Islamists like IS and JN and orchestrate the end of the Assad regime is likely to be a nonstarter.¹³¹

A 'least bad' option?

Not only are Syria and Iraq in the grip of one of this century's worst security and humanitarian crises, but it is unclear how the inhospitable conditions on the ground will evolve or how any given foreign policy initiative will shape this evolution. This uncertainty combined with the exceptionally high security and moral stakes involved means there are simply no good policy options; only 'least bad' ones. In addition to airstrikes in Syria and Iraq, military aid to the Iraqi army and Iraqi Kurdish forces, and training and equipment for select non-radical Syrian rebels, the US-led international coalition should therefore pursue the 'least bad' policy option of imposing no-fly zones in Syria and increasing military and financial assistance to non-radical Syrian rebels, including Syrian Kurds.

Does the policy initiative have likely benefits that outweigh its likely costs?

The key likely benefit of no-fly zones in Syria and increased military and financial assistance to non-radical Syrian rebels is the chance of ending the Syrian Civil War, and thereby dramatically reducing the regional and global security threat posed by the radicalised Islamist groups fighting the Assad regime. Likely costs, including US-supplied arms falling into the hands of IS and JN, are outweighed by the possibility that these policies will protect non-radical Syrian rebels and civilians from Assad regime airstrikes and encourage the emergence of a powerful non-radical fighting force that may eventually be able to push back radical Islamists like IS and JN and either defeat the Assad regime or force it to sue for a negotiated end to the conflict. No-fly zones and increased military and financial assistance to non-radical Syrian rebels can obviously not guarantee these outcome, and yet the mere possibility of ending the Syrian Civil War arguably constitutes a great enough benefit to justify the large likely costs.

Does the policy initiative have likely outcomes that are preferable to the likely outcomes of unchanged policy settings?

The likely outcomes of unchanged policy settings are especially dire. Current policies will likely see the Syrian Civil War continue to terrorise the people of Syria, endanger regional peace and security, and pose a growing global jihadist threat. Supported by powerful foreign backers and local Shia and Sunni constituencies, respectively, the brutal Assad regime and totalitarian radical Islamists seem prepared to continue their existential struggle indefinitely. No-fly zones in Syria and increased military and financial assistance to non-radical Syrian rebels entail serious risks, and yet even the greatest likely costs of these policies — for example, military aid finding its way into the hands of radical Islamists — are arguably far less severe than the likely colossal humanitarian and strategic costs of unchanged policy settings.

Does the policy initiative have likely outcomes that are preferable to the likely outcomes of alternative policy options?

Less interventionist policy options are likely to leave the root cause of the humanitarian and security catastrophe of the wars in Syria and Iraq unresolved, while bankrolling or directly engaging in a large-scale ground war against the Assad regime and radical Islamists like IS and JN entails likely costs that may prove unbearable for the international community. By contrast, no-fly zones and increased military and financial assistance to non-radical Syrian rebels are arguably the best balance between the competing goals of ending the Syrian Civil War and avoiding exceptionally high costs in blood and treasure for the international community.

Can the policy initiative be designed to mitigate against possible high-cost deviations from its likely outcomes?

Although there is no guarantee that no-fly zones in Syria and increased military and financial assistance to non-radical Syria rebels will not, for example, facilitate violent Sunni persecution of Shia supporters of the Assad regime, strategies are available to mitigate against such disastrous outcomes. Making no-fly zones and military and financial assistance to non-radical Syrian rebels contingent on UN personnel monitoring non-radical Syrian rebel-held territory would be a particularly effective strategy. Conditionality of this kind would allow the international community to mitigate the risk of bloodletting and ethnic cleansing directed at Shia as the predominantly Sunni non-radical Syrian rebels gain ground.

As this brief cost-benefit analysis grimly highlights, foreign policymaking is the art of the imperfect. Even the apparently 'least bad' policy option of no-fly zones in Syria and increased military and financial assistance to non-radical Syrian rebels is in many respects deeply imperfect: It may inadvertently assist radical Islamists like IS and JN and facilitate Sunni revenge attacks against Syria's Shia. However, even with these flaws, these policies are likely still preferable to alternative policy options. Simply put, letting the perfect get in the way of the 'least bad' is inadvisable when making foreign policy.



Conclusion: In defence of flip-flop foreign policy

When the facts change, I change my mind.
What do you do, sir?

Apocryphal quotation attributed to John
Maynard Keynes¹³²

As the bloody and brutal Syrian Civil War intensified over the course of 2012 and 2013, experts and outspoken policymakers backed calls from the Free Syrian Army (FSA) to do more to support the uprising. With the international community's Responsibility to Protect (R2P) invoked, it was argued there was a moral obligation to defend the people of Syria against the murderous Assad regime by at least providing air cover to the rebellion in the form of no-fly zones.¹³³ When damning reports emerged of what appeared to be Damascus' use of chemical weapons to kill hundreds of its own citizens in the northern summer of 2013, it took stiff congressional, parliamentary and public opposition to stop Washington and London from launching airstrikes against the Assad regime.¹³⁴

Two years later, the Syrian Civil War continues to wreak havoc on the war-torn nation and destabilise Syria's nervous neighbours. More than three million Syrians have fled their country and more than seven million are internally displaced, while the bitter conflict has claimed more than 220,000 lives.¹³⁵ In the face of this ongoing suffering, high-profile former officials — including former US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta and former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton — have offered rueful admissions that the United States should have provided more military support to secular Syrian rebels in 2012 and 2013.¹³⁶ Although it remains uncertain whether such policies would have successfully averted Syria's ongoing

implosion, these senior foreign policy figures maintain that throwing large amounts of US arms, funding and airstrikes behind the secular rebels two to three years ago would have precipitated the defeat of the Assad regime, headed off the rise of IS and JN, and laid the foundations for a peaceful, stable and perhaps even relatively liberal democratic Syria.¹³⁷

Notwithstanding the apparently compelling strategic and humanitarian rationale for stronger support for the Syrian rebellion two years ago, the case for directing arms and other forms of assistance to the uprising is increasingly contentious. The most powerful opposition group is the savage IS, while many other key rebel groups are Islamists of various stripes, including the al-Qaeda subsidiary JN and a range of Saudi Arabian and Qatari-backed Salafists.¹³⁸ Moreover, there are numerous reports of once secular rebel groups joining radical Islamists like IS and JN as the fortunes of non-radical Islamist elements of the uprising go from bad to worse.¹³⁹

Given the dynamic dilemmas that foreign policymakers must contend with, general principles in favour of or against particular strategies like non-intervention and regime change are overly rigid. Indeed, the constantly evolving complexity of international crises like the wars in Syria and Iraq demand flip-flop foreign policy. Foreign policy strategies should be rubbery and capable of redesign to meet the ever-changing challenges presented by unpredictable and unforgiving international developments. The policy path to preserving peace and national security, promoting trade and economic development, and protecting individual rights and freedoms abroad must therefore regularly change course to respond to the shifting sands of international affairs.

Endnotes

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- 6 As above.
- 7 For more information on voter support for broadly liberal foreign policy goals, see Oliver, A 2014, *The Lowy Institute Poll 2014*, Lowy Institute for International Policy, Sydney.
- 8 Recent US polling data reflects a comparable hierarchy of foreign policy goals of preserving peace and security, promoting economic growth, and protecting human rights and democracy abroad. See Stokes, B 2013, 'Americans' foreign policy priorities for 2014', *Pew Research Center*, 31 December, viewed 7 March 2015, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/12/31/americans-foreign-policy-priorities-for-2014/>. Like the 2013 Australian federal election, the 2012 US presidential election featured bipartisan agreement on liberal foreign policy goals. Republican Mitt Romney and Democrat Barack Obama pledged to maintain US security guarantees across the globe, safeguard the US-led rules-based liberal world order, and defend democracy and human rights. See, for example, Hirsh, M 2012, 'Obama, Romney: No Major Differences in Foreign-Policy Debate', *National Journal*, 22 October, viewed 7 March 2015, <http://www.nationaljournal.com/politics/obama-romney-no-major-differences-in-foreign-policy-debate-20121022>. The broadly liberal foreign policy goals of preserving peace and national security, promoting trade and economic development, and protecting individual rights and freedoms abroad are similarly supported by other leading liberal democracies like Japan, Germany, the United Kingdom and France. See, for example, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Foreign Policy*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, viewed 28 January 2014, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/index.html>; German Missions in the United States, *German Foreign Policy*, German Missions in the United States, viewed 28 January 2014, http://www.germany.info/Vertretung/usa/en/06_Foreign_Policy_State/02_Foreign_Policy/00_Foreign_Policy.html; Raines, T 2015, 'Internationalism or Isolationism? The Chatham House-YouGov Survey', *Chatham House*, 30 January, viewed 3 February 2015, <http://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/internationalism-or-isolationism-chatham-house-yougov-survey>; French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development 2015, *French foreign policy*, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development, viewed 28 January 2014, <http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy-1/>.
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- 10 Consider, for example, the costs of the coalition campaign against IS. See Griffiths, E 2014, 'Iraq crisis: Australian actions in Iraq to cost \$500 million each year, Prime Minister Abbott says', *ABC News*, 17 September, viewed on 29 January 2015, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-09-16/australian-actions-in-iraq-to-cost-500-million-per-year/5746964>.
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- 12 Mill, JS 1998, 'On Liberty', in J Gray (ed.), *On Liberty and Other Essays*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 14. By way of compelling economic evidence of the benefits of states giving up their powers to restrict and manage trade flows, see, for example, Productivity Commission 2010, *Bilateral and Regional Trade Agreements*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2011, *The Impact of Trade Liberalisation on Jobs and Growth: Technical Note*, OECD Publishing, Paris.
- 13 Koh, TTB 1998, 'Can Any Country Afford a Moral Foreign Policy?', in A Acharya (ed.), *The Quest for World Order: Perspectives of a Pragmatic Idealist*, Times Academic Press, Singapore, p. 7.
- 14 Friedman, M 2002, *Capitalism and Freedom*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, pp. 8-9, 15-16. With the exception of cases like foreign ownership of assets that are sensitive from a national security perspective, trade policy is typically a policy arena in which state involvement is unnecessary and detrimental.
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- 19 See, for example, Locke, J 1983, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, JH Tully (ed.), Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis; Voltaire, *Traité Sur La Tolérance À L'Occasion De La Mort De Jean Calas (1763)*, J Heuvel (ed.), Éditions Gallimard, Paris; Mill, as above.
- 20 Mill, as above, p. 14.
- 21 As above, p. 21.
- 22 Smith, A 2008, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, K Sutherland (ed.), Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 292.
- 23 As above, p. 22. See also Smith, A 2002, 'The Theory of Moral Sentiments', in SM Cahn (ed.), *Classics of Political and Moral Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, New York, p. 62.
- 24 Mandeville, B 1988, *The Fable of the Bees: Or Private Vices, Publick Benefits*, Liberty Fund, Indianapolis. See, in particular, as above, p. 7.
- 25 See, for example, Hayek, FA 1945, 'The Use of Knowledge In Society', *The American Economic Review*, vol. 35, no. 4; Hayek, FA 1974, 'The Pretence of Knowledge,' *The Nobel Foundation*, viewed 7 March 2015, http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/economic-sciences/laureates/1974/hayek-lecture.html; Duncan, TK & Coyne, CJ 2015, 'The Political Economy of Foreign Intervention', in PJ Boettke & CJ Coyne (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Austrian Economics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- 26 See, for example, Hayek, 1945, as above; Hayek, 1974, as above.
- 27 Hayek, 1974, as above. See also Hayek, FA 1994, 'The Theory of Complex Phenomena', in M Martin & LC McIntyre (eds), *Readings in the Philosophy of Social Science*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, p. 62.
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- 29 Bastiat, as above, pp. 3-7.
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- 31 Keay, J 2009, *China: A History*, HaperPress, London, pp. 524-525; Dikötter, F 2010, 'Mao's Great Leap to Famine', *The International Herald Tribune*, 15 December, viewed 7 March 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/16/opinion/16iht-eddikotter16.html?_r=1&; World Bank 2015, *Data*, World Bank, viewed 7 March 2015, <http://data.worldbank.org/>.
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- 34 As above.
- 35 Hayek, 2011, as above, p. 50.
- 36 Hayek, FA 1944, 'Scientism and the Study of Society: Part III', *Economica*, vol. 11, no. 41, p. 37. See also Hayek, 1994, as above, p. 62.
- 37 Bilahari Kausikan's personal reflection at the second Huai-Hai Forum on Sino-Japanese-US relations, Shanghai Academy of Social Science, Shanghai, 17-18 November 2014.
- 38 The economically liberal agenda of the G20 — an international organisation representing twenty of the world's largest economies, which account for more than 80% of global GDP and world trade — and the worldwide movement towards greater trade liberalisation via a combination of unilateral tariff cuts and multilateral, regional and bi-lateral FTAs are symptomatic of the near-universal embrace of economic liberalism. See G20 2014, *Policy Note: A G20 agenda for growth and resilience in 2014*, G20, viewed 7 March 2015, <https://g20.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Policy%20Note%20-%20Growth%20and%20Resilience.pdf>. Despite a stalled Doha round of World Trade Organisation (WTO) negotiations, which since its beginning in 2001 has only yielded a precarious agreement on trade facilitation (i.e. reducing trade costs via

- reform to red tape and customs), comprehensive global trade liberalisation remains the goal of the more than 150 WTO member states. See World Trade Organization 2015, *Doha Round: what are they negotiating?*, World Trade Organization, viewed 7 March 2015, https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/dda_e/update_e.htm; 'Doha delivers' 2013, *The Economist*, 9 December, viewed 7 March 2015, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/freexchange/2013/12/world-trade-organisation>.
- 39 The libertarian response might be that the knowledge problem is actually an argument in favour of radically reducing the state's foreign policy making powers. If centrally planned foreign policy cannot possibly hope to effectively respond to the bewildering array of political, social and economic forces, then does it not make sense to simply limit the state's foreign policy powers altogether? See, for example, Adams, JQ 2013, "'She Goes Not Abroad in Search of Monsters to Destroy'", *The American Conservative*, 4 July, viewed 7 March 2015, <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/repository/she-goes-not-abroad-in-search-of-monsters-to-destroy/>. Notwithstanding the value of probing this libertarian position further, this report is aimed at improving the exercise of foreign policy powers rather than exploring the first-principles question of whether foreign policy powers should be exercised at all. Moreover, quite aside from the scope and purpose of this report, there is a severe *prima facie* problem with the libertarian position. Liberal policymakers may not be able to morally afford to disavow their foreign policy making powers in a world in which information-poor liberal foreign policy is often the 'least bad' option. As the brutal oppression of the Assad regime, the horrific puritanical violence of IS and Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), the *Realpolitik* of Russia, and the pitiless sectarian foreign policies of Tehran, Riyadh and other regional powers demonstrate in the case of Syria and Iraq, the alternative to information-poor liberal foreign policy is often intolerable brutality and nakedly amoral power politics. If, for example, US policymakers had disavowed their own albeit imperfect powers to centrally plan foreign policy in August 2014, the result would likely have been more mass killings, forced conversions, and enslavement of members of Iraq's Yazidi minority. See 'Iraq: ISIS massacres 500 Yazidis, US strikes on' 2014, *Hindustan Times*, 10 August, viewed 7 March 2015, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/iraqonthebrink/isis-kills-at-least-500-from-iraq-s-yazidi-minority/article1-1250384.aspx>; 'The U.S. strategy leaves Yazidis exposed to the Islamic State' 2014, *The Washington Post*, 5 November, viewed 7 March 2015, http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-us-strategy-leaves-yazidis-exposed/2014/11/05/46582a6c-6462-11e4-bb14-4cfea1e742d5_story.html; Paraszczuk, J 2015, 'IS Militants "Killed Any Yazidi They Were Unhappy With"', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 19 January, viewed 7 March 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/content/islamic-state-yazidis-released-iraq/26802249.html>. Going abroad "in search of monsters to destroy" is, as former US President and Secretary of State John Quincy Adams emphasised, a dangerous and morally ambiguous business, and yet the alternative to such forward-leaning foreign policy may well be genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. See Adams, as above; Nebehay, as above; Bohlander, as above; Parkinson, Albayrak & Mavin, as above.
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- 41 Adapted from Slaughter, AM 2011, 'International Relations, Principal Theories', in R Wolfrum (ed.), *Max Planck Encyclopedia of Public International Law*, Oxford University Press, Oxford; Walt, SM 2014, 'International Relations: One World, Many Theories', in KA Mingst & JL Snyder (eds), *Essential Readings in World Politics*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York.
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- 44 In fact, the case for abandoning fixed theories of state behaviour and the international system actually lends itself to a defence of constructivism. See Wendt, A 1999, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 377; Gewirth, A 1954, 'Can Men Change Laws of Social Science?', *Philosophy of Science*, vol. 21, no. 3, p. 230. Unlike the dominant variants of realist and liberal international relations theory that postulate fixed patterns of state behaviour, constructivism holds that state behaviour and the very nature of the international system are shaped by the shared beliefs, norms and identities of individuals. See Wendt, 1999, as above, p. 377; Wendt, A 1992, 'Anarchy is What States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics', *International Organization*, vol. 46, no. 2, p. 424. Consequently, as Anne-Marie Slaughter observes: "Constructivism is not a theory, but rather an ontology: A set of assumptions about the world and human motivation and agency. Its counterpart is not Realism, Institutionalism, or Liberalism, but rather Rationalism. By challenging the rationalist framework that undergirds many theories of international relations, Constructivists create constructivist alternatives in each of these families of theories". See Slaughter, as above.

- Constructivism is therefore by its nature sensitive to current conditions because it substitutes fixed theories of state behaviour and the international system for a focus on the specificities of the beliefs, norms and identities of the relevant individuals who determine state behaviour.
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 - 50 Black, as above.
 - 51 As above. Even a cursory consideration of the track record of international interventions reveals that they do not always make a bad situation worse. It suffices to consider the examples of NATO's Operation Allied Force in Kosovo in 1999, and the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) and the United Nations (UN) mandated International Force East Timor of the late 1990s and early 2000s to see that some international interventions significantly improve conditions on the ground. These international interventions averted a humanitarian crisis in Kosovo and restored law and order and put an end to chronic civil unrest and violence in Solomon Islands and East Timor. See Solana, J 1999, 'NATO's Success in Kosovo', *Foreign Affairs*, November/December, viewed 10 March 2015, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/55610/javier-solana/natos-success-in-kosovo>; Hayward-Jones, J 2014, *Australia's costly investment in Solomon Islands: The lessons of RAMSI*, Lowy Institute for International Policy, Sydney; 'Aussie rules' 2013, *The Economist*, 20 July, viewed 7 March 2015, <http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21582045-modestly-successful-decade-intervention-aussie-rules>; Kelly, J 2009, 'A tough job done in East Timor', *The Australian*, 29 August, viewed 7 March 2015, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/features/a-tough-job-done-in-east-timor/story-e6frg6z6-1225767196640>.
 - 52 Black, as above.
 - 53 Wendt, 1999, as above, p. 375. See, for example, Carr, B 2014, *Diary of a Foreign Minister*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, p. 34.
 - 54 Mearsheimer, JJ 2014, 'Can China Rise Peacefully?', *The National Interest*, 8 April, viewed 7 March 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/can-china-rise-peacefully-10204>.
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