For a Progressive Realism:
Australian Foreign Policy in the 21st Century

For a progressive realism

Over the past two decades, right-wing political movements have taken power in a number of states, from the United States to Turkey, Hungary to India, the Philippines to Brazil. These movements go by a range of names: populism, the New Right, the global right, and more.[1] Yet they tend to share an analysis of international dynamics: the inequities of 'globalism', the 'swamping' of 'local' populations by immigrants, the corrupt managerialism of cosmopolitan elites, and the usurping of sovereignty by international organisations. This vision of global politics serves as the basis for far-reaching policy programs, which set out to reinforce national sovereignty, strengthen borders and fortify domestic economies. The adhesive that binds these policies is an assertive strain of nationalism. The popularity of these movements indicates that this tying together of international symptoms with nationalist policy programs is a potent blend. In foreign policy terms, it points towards a strategy of 'militarist isolationism' in which a hostility to multilateral institutions is matched by a preference for increased military spending and the pursuit of militarised competition as an end in itself. In this way, the global right has articulated a foreign policy perspective based on elevating domestic self-interest and downgrading international cooperation.

[1] We adopt a broad rubric for these groups: 'the global right'. The global right is not a single movement with a uniform policy program – it ranges from Narendra Modi's linking of virulent Hindu nationalism and globalism to Jair Bolsonaro's racialised view of Brazilian nationalism, which is attached to a liberalising economic agenda. However, it is a recognisable movement inasmuch as it is held together by a shared diagnosis of contemporary ills and a broadly common set of ideas about what to do about them. This analysis is enabled by a supportive infrastructure of political parties, social movements, big capital, inter-personal networks, think-tanks and media organizations. In this sense of inhabiting a shared, if somewhat lumpy, ecology, the global right is comparable in character to liberal, progressive and environmental international movements. A useful guide to the global right can be found in Drolet and Williams (2021). For a discussion of the 'thick conservatism' that underpins the movement, see De Sá Guimarães and Dutra De Oliveira E Silva (2021).

The success of these movements has given new urgency to the need for progressive movements to articulate their own vision of world politics. Despite rarely mapping neatly onto foreign policy issues, the progressive-conservative divide still frames many political debates around the world, Australia included. For the progressive side of this divide, the absence of a clear vision of global order has become an Achilles heel.[2] Although all progressive movements require an analysis of world politics, this issue has become particularly pressing today, in part because of the success of the global right, in part because of widespread uncertainty about what exactly it means to be 'progressive' in the contemporary world, something that can be observed in declining levels of support for traditional left and centre-left parties globally, and in the diminishing political influence of labour movements. Yet there is no alternative – progressives must confront the big foreign policy questions of the day: What is the progressive position on the rise of China? How should the left mediate the tension between domestic jobs and the globalisation of production, services and finance? How should left-wing parties balance sovereignty claims between national, regional and multilateral institutions? What is the progressive position on borders and immigration?

This article outlines an approach that can mediate these tensions and challenge global right accounts of contemporary world politics. Rather than articulating a set of leftist principles, such as social justice, solidarity and internationalism, about which there is no consensus within progressive movements, we begin with a pragmatic assessment of the main dynamics that underpin contemporary world politics. This 'realist' starting point is rarely articulated in contemporary left-wing circles. But historically, both radical and reformist currents of progressive thought began their analysis of international relations with an uncompromising examination of the limits set by the world they inhabited and that leftist currents had to work

[2] We use the term 'progressive' as a synonym for 'left' and 'centre-left' in order to capture a wide range of leftist movements: democratic socialists, social democrats, green activists, labour groups, and some varieties of liberalism. Although there is much that differentiates these movements, what ties them together is a commitment to a more egalitarian, democratic and ecologically sustainable world order.

within.[3] This should be the case again today. Not only does the right not have a monopoly on a 'realistic' assessment of world politics, the foreign policy positions articulated by the global right are often far from realistic. Policies based on the denial (at worst) or minimising (at best) of the scientific consensus on human-induced climate change is not a realistic assessment of the world as it is. The same goes for the position of the global right on how the United States and its allies should respond to China's rise, which assumes that the containment of Chinese power through militarisation is both achievable and the only means of sustaining Western influence (Colby 2021). In contrast, we argue that a progressive foreign policy position should start from a diagnosis of our times that is rooted in existing conditions. This 'conjunctural analysis' surveys the specific characteristics, dynamics and instabilities of a social order at a particular moment in time (Eckersley 2021; Hall and Massey 2010). It is only through facing the realities of contemporary world politics – in which the distribution of power is shifting, global value chains are deeply embedded, and the limits of the Anthropocene are set to redefine societies – that governments can provide security, basic needs and sustainable development. In this way, practice and ethics go hand in hand. Without a prior assessment of doability, there is no possibility of realising progressive goals.

This realist starting point is followed by an explicitly progressive second step. Rather than acquiescing to the world-as-it-is, a progressive foreign policy seeks to *redistribute* existing power configurations. In recent years, progressive movements have tended to focus more on issues of recognition (identity) and representation (inclusion) than redistribution (equality) (Fraser 2008, 2013). We see this as a mistake. If progressive politics stands for anything, it is a more egalitarian distribution of wealth and life-chances. It is well-established that contemporary world politics is marked by multiple, intersecting forms of inequality (Milanovic 2016; Piketty 2013). Placing a redistributive logic at the heart of order-building activities recognises that any global order premised on unequal, unjust distributions of wealth, power and status will be neither stable nor sustainable. To date, many within the

[3] The landmark formulation in International Relations is the 'realistic utopia' envisioned by E.H. Carr (2001). For a sympathetic reading, see Lawson (2008); for a critique see Gabay (2020). For an appraisal of Carr's formulation to contemporary world politics, see Cunliffe (2020).

global right have been bolder than the left at identifying the supposed sources of global inequalities, blaming them on a potpourri of foreign powers, international organisations, immigrants and corrupt elites. The left must counter this narrative. A progressive approach to foreign policy requires the articulation of reformed global and regional orders as well as analysis of how national governments can help to create such orders. In this way, redistribution serves as a means of developing policies aimed at sustainable wealth creation, basic needs, fair representation and mechanisms of inclusion.

This emphasis on redistribution, working within the hard limits set by existing power configurations, provides a marriage between a realist analysis of what is possible with a progressive analysis of how things might be otherwise. Taken together, these two building blocks provide the foundations for a 'progressive realism', one that can serve as the basis for a left-of-centre foreign policy agenda.[4] We use Australia as a testing ground of progressive realism for three reasons. First, Australia is at the frontline of the major changes taking place in world politics: questions over the durability of a 'rules-based' international order; a shift in global power from the North Atlantic to Asia; the emergence of a multipolar order, and more. Australia's liminal status, situated in-between a predominantly white West on the one hand, and a predominantly non-white Asia-Pacific on the other, provides an acute vantage point from which to survey a world on the move. Second, much of the history of Australian foreign policy has been mediated through a concern for realist pragmatism alongside a 'middle power' identity often underpinned by progressive ideals (Abbondanza 2021; Wesley 2009). This history provides a receptive foundation for progressive realism. Finally, contemporary Australian foreign policy serves as a potent example of the global right in action, from redefining the country's region as the 'Indo-Pacific' to elevating the role of former colonial powers in AUKUS. We use the concept of progressive realism as the basis for an alternative approach.

[4] As a term, 'progressive realism' has achieved some cache within liberal parts of the US commentariat, e.g. Nye (2006), Wright (2020). Our aim in this paper is to develop the concept beyond this context and excavate its core features.

Our argument unfolds in three sections. First, we develop the two building blocks of progressive realism: a realist diagnosis of the contemporary conjuncture allied to a progressive emphasis on redistribution. The second section applies these building blocks to four issue-areas: pandemic politics, aid and infrastructure in the Pacific, climate change, and a crisis in the Taiwan Straits. Debates over pandemics, regional politics, the environment and the rise of China are deeply bound up with Australian jobs, trade, health, education, energy, immigration, security, and more. The global right sees solutions to international problems as fundamentally about protecting the nation-state through tougher borders, heightened protectionism and intensified nationalism. Any progressive position needs to also accept that its *domestic* agenda is embedded within a set of ideas about *international* relations. It may be the case that most citizens think – and vote – domestic first and international second. But it is equally evident that domestic politics is, to a great extent, international politics. The third, concluding, section discusses the implications of this argument for progressive politics both within and beyond Australia.

Building blocks

Realism

We begin with a 'realist' analysis of the contemporary conjuncture. By 'realist', we do not mean an equivalence with the Realist tradition of International Relations (IR). On the one hand, our use of the term does overlap with elements of classical Realism: a hardnosed appraisal of the world as it is, an acceptance of the 'politics of the possible' given the limited space for manoeuvre in international affairs, an appreciation of the multifaceted nature of power, and a desire for policy makers to act through an 'ethic of responsibility' (Bell 2018). On the other hand, we see this analysis as the beginning rather than the end of foreign policy making. If Realist IR tends to limit its policy agenda to a diet of prudence in the face of existing power asymmetries (Mearsheimer and Walt 2016), we use a realist-inspired conjunctural analysis as the starting point for a progressive agenda oriented around redistribution.

In this way, our formulation of progressive realism resonates with the construct of 'realistic utopia' developed during the inter-war years by the British public intellectual E.H. Carr. Carr (2001/1939) married a realistic assessment of world politics with a concern for progressive

aims – his construct of 'realistic utopia' was rooted in progressive goals, but built from existing conditions.[5] Like us, Carr began with the reality of time, place, history and power – the world as it was rather than as it might be. And Carr stressed, as do we, existing constraints on political action. Carr's answer to this quandary was a constant conversation between realism and progressive politics ('utopia'), one that bears close similarity to our formulation of progressive realism. The order within which this dialectical interaction takes place is important – before progressive responses can be conceived and delivered, a realistic appraisal of challenges and opportunities must be undertaken. To use a medical analogy: the effectiveness of the treatment relies on the quality of the diagnosis.

We start, therefore, with a realist analysis of contemporary world politics. It is widely accepted that we are in the midst of a 'power shift' from 'West' to 'East'. However, there is less agreement about how best to characterise this shift: as marking the ascent of China to superpower status, a shift from bipolarity to multipolarity, the onset of a 'new Cold War', and more. What this analysis tends to miss is a deeper, structural change in the basic character of world politics. Over the past two centuries or so, the harnessing of new power resources, from industrial capitalism to nationalism, by a handful of Western states generated a deeply unequal international order (Buzan and Lawson 2015), one that was sustained in law (e.g. the 'standard of civilisation' that mediated the conduct of war between 'civilised', 'barbarian', and 'savage' peoples), global governance (e.g. the unequal status afforded to Western powers in forums of international administration), and symbolic schemas (e.g. discourses around levels of relative 'development'). Simultaneous with the emergence of this acute power gap between Western and non-Western states, the world became bound together by intensified infrastructures of capital accumulation, trade, improved transport and communication systems, and imperial dependencies of various kinds. As a consequence, levels of interdependence rose, making societies far more exposed to developments elsewhere.

[5] Although Carr is not easily characterised as a Realist, it is worth noting that there is a strain within the tradition that tends towards progressive outcomes, if not always by way of progressive means. On this, see Bell (2018).

World politics over the last two centuries, therefore, possessed a dual logic. On the one hand, the planet was united through an intensification of political, economic and cultural exchanges. On the other hand, it was pulled apart by major discrepancies in power and status. The result was the emergence, from the middle part of the 19th century, of a condition of 'centred globalism' – an international order that was global in scale, but centred in the West (Buzan and Lawson 2014). What lies behind contemporary global turbulence is the coming-to-an-end of the era of centred globalism. Most obviously, the power gap between Western and non-Western states has become much narrower, whether measured by GDP, military capabilities, life expectancy, levels of education, or a range of other indicators. The rise of China is the contemporary standard bearer for this process, but outside the West it was Japan that first made this leap. Japan's defeat of Russia in 1904-5 signalled for the first time in the modern era the rise of a non-white, non-Western state. Many other states subsequently followed suit. The 'core' of capitalist, modern states has become much bigger; the 'periphery' of states that lack, or that have been denied, access to these sources of power has been shrinking. As a result, the period of Western ascendancy is coming to an end. In its place is an order characterized by 'decentred globalism' (Buzan and Lawson 2014, 2015).

A world of decentred globalism remains intensely interdependent, yet with far more centres of power. It is also defined by no single vision for how states should be organized. This means that all states, including Australia, need to get used to a much more plural operating environment, one that is not concerned primarily with navigating *within* the narrow bandwidth of a liberal international order, but one in which liberalism is one amongst many ways of organising societies and polities. It is increasingly clear that the rise of authoritarian state capitalism, whether mild (as in the case of Singapore) or severe (as in the case of China), is not a passing trend. Illiberal forms of wealth creation have been key to the decentring of global order in recent decades; all signs point to this continuing. Indeed, there are now robust indicators that point to a global erosion of democracy. Whether measured by quantitative or qualitative indicators, levels of democracy are at their lowest levels in 30 years; two-thirds of the world's population now live in autocracies of one kind of another (V-Dem 2021). If anything, these figures underplay democratic decline. It is not just outside the West that democracy is being challenged; it is also under attack within its heartland, where

democratic institutions are being challenged and democratic practices eroded, not least because of the challenge from the global right. The 'endogenous' pull of democratic backsliding, allied to the 'exogeneous' push provided by the rise and apparent stability of authoritarian forms of governance, signal the advent of an international order that is considerably less liberal.

If this is the international context that Australia faces, what about its domestic context? Here, the Australian Labor Party (ALP) faces a similar challenge to many progressive parties around the world – generating a constituency in a context in which its base, organised labour, has fractured over the last half century, perhaps terminally. Rising inequality has been coupled with the demise of the system of industrial social relations that underpinned Australia's relatively settled two-party system, a demise that has accelerated in the period since the global financial crisis. The shift from industrial to knowledge economies leaves the ALP torn between middle-class culturally left-liberal constituencies on the one hand, and working-class often culturally conservative constituencies on the other. This general trend is worsened by particular circumstances, such as the perception, rightly or wrongly, that the hold of mining industry in key constituencies in parts of New South Wales and Queensland restricts ALP commitments to climate justice and green energy. As such, the party has not forged the kind of 'green new deal' policies, often allied to energetic anti-racist and anti-capitalist movements, which have begun to animate progressive politics in other parts of the world (Pettifor 2019). Both domestically and internationally, the left in Australia faces considerable challenges.

Redistribution

The news is not, however, uniformly grim. There is a pillar available to the left that has been, to date, underutilised in analysis of contemporary world politics: redistribution. As noted in the previous section, in recent years, the left has tended to elevate struggles for identity and inclusion over redistribution. In many ways, this is a further illustration of two trends: first, the decline of labour movements; and second, the success of the global right in targeting culture as a site of political contestation. But the ceding of the language of redistribution is a mistake. Progressive movements around the world may have moved away from advocating

control of the commanding heights of the economy, but a concern for redistribution goes much deeper than this. In a time of extraordinary inequality, whether measured by relative wealth, power or status, a focus on redistribution could generate major political dividends, particularly if extended beyond issues of political economy to life-chances more generally. In this sense, redistribution sits alongside concerns about recognition and representation, providing a shared, overlapping set of concerns around identity, inclusion and equality (Fraser 2008, 2013).

In the current political climate, one that has seen massive state interventions to counter the inequalities generated by neoliberalism and intensified by Covid-19, there is considerable space for a renewed politics of redistribution. Many publics, including in Australia, have become post-neoliberal even as left-wing parties remain trapped within it. In substantive foreign policy terms, this provides a remit for state intervention in many of the areas that we discuss below, from large-scale renewable energy financing to public health. It also requires a leading role for the state in the regulation of issue-areas that go well beyond national security concerns about foreign direct investment. At the level of global governance, a progressive realist approach recognises that a redistribution of power and status is both possible and desirable, not least because it recognises shifting global power configurations. The aim is not to perfect institutional design or generate a utopian egalitarianism – it is not possible, even if it were desirable, to eradicate all forms of global hierarchy. Rather, redistribution is a process, not a panacea.

The redistribution of power and status at the international level will not in itself produce progressive outcomes. To the contrary, in some cases, authoritarian states will wield more influence than they held before. But there is nothing progressive about refusing to recognise a changed material reality, most obviously the rise (or return) of authoritarian great powers. Nor is there any point grandstanding in ways that will be ineffective at best and harmful at worst. Wishful thinking, particularly in changing times, is a recipe for conflict, perhaps even war. Our discussion in the following section of a US-Sino crisis over Taiwan, one that would acutely effect Australia, illustrates the difficult trade-offs that a progressive realist approach must contend with. At times, this will require having to debate, and likely make, concessions

to illiberal powers without reverting to knee-jerk accusations of 'appeasement' (Ganesh 2021). The building blocks of progressive realism, therefore, only take you so far. How to enact them depends on circumstances. The next section illustrates how a progressive realist foreign policy can be implemented in a number of key issue areas.

Implementing a progressive realist foreign policy

This section contains four illustrations of how progressive realism can be put to work. Each links a realist diagnosis of the contemporary conjuncture to a progressive stance oriented around redistribution. The case studies are not intended to serve as definitive statements of what a progressive approach to each foreign policy issue-area should amount to. Rather they are attempts to stress-test a progressive realist agenda in a number of 'hard cases' (George and Bennett 2004), and to point to practical steps that can be derived from this core construct.

Pandemic politics

It is perhaps apt to start with a current scenario: a pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic has sparked social, economic and political upheaval, while illuminating deep-seated inequalities, both within and between states. In many ways, Covid-19 has tested many of the ideals typically associated with progressive internationalism, such as solidarity and multilateralism, and found them wanting. A progressive realist diagnosis to a future pandemic thus starts from a consideration of what Covid-19 has, or should have, taught us.

Lessons from Covid-19

First, failures in pandemic preparation and the hollowing out of state capacities means that states have resorted to borders as a key tool of foreign policy making (Jones and Hameiri 2021). While border closures were successful in buying time for states to implement measures that minimise community spread and limit demands on health systems, they have also locked citizens out of their home countries and halted the arrival of groups from tourists to asylum seekers. And these practices do not begin or end at borders – they extend both within and beyond them. States have limited, and even temporarily prohibited, trade in crucial equipment, such as personal protective equipment (PPE), ventilators and vaccines to

keep them for their domestic populations (Evenett 2020). Australian borders have also been extended (selectively) *within* other states, 'rescuing' some national citizens (although not their Chinese national partners or children) in the early stages of the pandemic (Campbell 2020). These practices are not new, but they draw a sharp contrast to the rhetoric of collective health security that has been commonplace over the past two decades (Ferhani and Rushton 2020, 458). Australian responses to Covid-19 have been rooted in a zero-sum policy agenda that is consistent with the global right's turn towards militarised isolationism in which borders become the primary point of defence.

This leads to a second lesson: the promise and problems of international cooperation. Early in the pandemic, information sharing was relatively successful, with the WHO becoming aware of the outbreak within a day of the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission's alerts and notifying all state governments by 5th January 2020 (IPPPR 2021, 22-3). Speedy messaging, however, did not lead to speedy action. The WHO was not permitted into Wuhan until two weeks later and did not declare a Public Health Emergency of International Concern until 30th January. Most states only enacted emergency measures in March. By this time, transmission was widespread. The following months saw supplies become scarce, production chains strained and prices for PPE rise sharply (UNICEF 2020, 2). There was little in the way of global infrastructure to respond to these dynamics, with regional efforts such as the African Union's Medical Supplies Platform and global mechanisms such as the United Nations Covid-19 Supply Chain System and the WHO's Access to Covid-19 Tools Accelerator (ACT-A) effectively established from scratch.

Existing global institutions tended to emphasise what measures *not* to implement rather than outline a coordinated global response. The International Health Regulations (IHR), for instance, stressed that outbreak responses should 'avoid unnecessary interference with international traffic and trade' (WHO 2005). The WHO thus consistently advised against travel and trade restrictions. States not only disregarded this advice, but many enacted these restrictions without notification or justification to the WHO (Ferhani and Rushton 2020, 468-9). While the merits of border closures and WHO advice can be debated, the lack of policy collaboration is striking. This lack of collaboration persists in vaccine distribution.

COVAX, which aims to ensure vaccine distribution, has been hindered by problems around funding and supply, with the latter hampered particularly by the bilateral deals made by wealthier states with pharmaceutical companies (Harman et al 2021). These deals protect the populations of affluent states, but also serve to deepen global inequalities. This underscores the importance of the redistributive logic that underpins a progressive realist approach, while exposing the global right's incapacity to mediate the tensions between private sector interests (in this case pharmaceutical company profits) and public goods.

A future pandemic

A progressive realist foreign policy towards pandemics starts with an acknowledgment that Australia's sway over global health governance is limited, but potentially influential. Australia should ensure it is engaged with the process of reform that follows Covid-19, particularly in discussions around a pandemic framework convention or treaty (IPPPR 2021). Yet it should do so not by echoing vague calls for 'WHO reform'. Instead, Australia should focus on the specific challenges and priorities revealed during the Covid-19 response. There need to be consistent IHR guidelines on border measures that, on the one hand, recognise them as viable practices, while on the other considering how vulnerable groups, citizens and the circulation of supplies can be protected. There also needs to be discussion about whether the WHO should have greater independence and authority. Is the Australian government willing to increase its assessed contributions to the WHO? Is it willing to allow the WHO unrestrained access to Australia should an outbreak occur here? Answers to these questions will not solve all the WHO's problems, many of which are long-term and internal to the organisation, but it will provide a foundation for some of the most important areas in need of an overhaul ahead of a future pandemic: the alert and verification system, and the coordination of early response (IPPPR 2021, 52).

Following the principle of redistribution means ensuring equitable global access to supplies and pharmaceuticals. Australia should resist the urge to 'go it alone' on production, and engage its international partners in building mechanisms that can be activated in times of crisis. This includes stockpiles, but also institutions to facilitate surge production and emergency transport (such as ACT-A), as well as binding obligations over exports. These

measures would enhance rather than reduce Australian supply capacities. This is even more important in relation to pharmaceuticals. Currently, the global model of vaccine distribution is one in which high-income states wield their purchasing power to secure access from companies that have a vested interest in maintaining a level of scarcity (thereby pushing up prices and profits), while low- and middle-income states are forced to rely on donations. This is neither equitable nor sustainable, as evidenced by shortfalls in funding and donations to COVAX (Harman et al 2021). Australia should contribute to reform on export controls and trade-related intellectual property rights (TRIPS), which prohibit states and other companies from producing vaccines. Again, while Australia's power to rectify these issues is limited, it can and should get behind efforts already underway to limit export restrictions and waive TRIPS during pandemics (WTO 2021). Mediating these tensions links a realistic assessment of what is doable to an explicitly redistributive agenda.

While Australia's capacity to directly influence structural problems on its own is limited, its actions will have force-multiplying effects if it works with international and regional partners. Domestic and regional health security are entwined – you cannot go it alone during a pandemic. Had Covid-19 emerged in a state unable to identify it as rapidly as China,[6] Australia is unlikely to have had sufficient time to either implement border closures or address shortfalls in medical stockpiles. Should recommendations regarding new pandemic preparedness targets from the IPPPR be adopted by the WHO and its member states, Australia should seek to not only meet its own targets, but also aid members of its region to do so through further investments in health infrastructure (IPPPR 2021, 50-1). Regional pandemic simulation exercises are key to ensuring that mechanisms and institutions are in place to coordinate responses. Australia should do regular outbreak simulations regardless, but engaging its neighbours will ensure that the government is aware of their capacities, including gaps that need to be rectified, and has mechanisms in place to coordinate constructively during future crises.

[6] China's information sharing, especially with the WHO, was problematic. Yet Chinese clinicians rapidly identified, reported and tested clusters of the novel coronavirus, resulting in its complete sequencing by 2nd January 2020. This stands in stark contrast to previous pandemics, which have often been identified months after their initial outbreaks.

Foreign Policy in the Pacific

If a progressive realist stance on pandemics is oriented around deepening regional relationships, the same is true of aid and infrastructure, where a more engaged regionalism is a force multiplier for Australian interests.

Nowhere is Australia's foreign policy more important than in the Pacific Islands region. A former coloniser of the region's biggest country, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Australia had been the Pacific's primary aid donor, investor and trading partner for decades. Since 2006, however, Chinese engagement has expanded substantially, generating concerns that Australia's position is threatened. Australia remains the region's biggest donor by some margin, while China's aid disbursements have declined since peaking in 2016. In 2019, Australia contributed A$864m to China's A$232m (ABC 2021). However, excepting PNG, the region's two-way trade with China now eclipses trade with Australia. Additionally, Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) are capitalising on China's aid program to grow their regional footprint. In 2017, Chinese construction activity, almost exclusively carried out by SOEs, was worth US$958m, around six times China's aid spending (Pryke 2020). Chinese diplomatic efforts have also intensified. Between 2006-2016, China sent 42 ministerial (or above) delegations to the Pacific. In 2014, Xi Jinping paid the first-ever visit by a Chinese President to the region (Zhang 2020, 81). In 2018, he attended the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Port Moresby and held meetings with the eight Pacific leaders then recognising the People's Republic of China (PRC). In 2019, Solomon Islands and Kiribati switched their diplomatic relations from Taiwan to China, extending China's influence to 10 of the region's 16 independent states (Zhang 2020, 78).

Australian foreign policy in the Pacific

China's growing Pacific engagement has begun to transform Australia's relations with Pacific Island Countries (PICs). After the Cold War, Australia's approach to the region became predominantly concerned with managing the externalities of state fragility to prevent 'non-traditional' security problems, like crime and terrorism, from reaching Australia. This underpinned a more interventionist foreign policy, including military and police-led

missions, and efforts to harness the regular aid program towards transforming PICs' domestic institutions (Hameiri 2015).

Although PICs need Australian aid, their governments often resent what they see as Australia's patronising, heavy-handed engagements. Some governments have proven adept, however, at exploiting Canberra's concerns about emerging geopolitical competition with China to grow their space to manoeuvre vis-à-vis Australia. Fiji, for example, was expelled from the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) under Australian pressure following its 2006 military coup. By 2012, however, Australia had normalised diplomatic relations and Fiji returned to the PIF. The main reason for this about-turn was a sense that China was capitalising on Fiji's isolation, perceptions that were primarily crafted by Fiji's government (Hameiri 2015).

For Australia, state fragility is now seen as rendering PICs vulnerable to Chinese influence. Yet, China's growing presence has meant that Australia can no longer intervene as forcefully to support its security objectives. Nor can it insist that PICs adopt its preferred domestic arrangements as a pre-condition for delivering aid. Rather, Australia has begun to adopt a more pragmatic stance, changing the balance in its engagement with PICs from more 'stick' to more 'carrot'. This should not be confused with a progressive turn in this aspect of Australian foreign policy. Rather, the aim is in line with zero-sum global right calculations: to draw PICs back into Australia's orbit at China's expense. The greater influence of an Asian power rather than that of Australia or one of its extra-regional allies is widely viewed as an unambiguous strategic defeat for Australia.

The so-called 'Pacific Step-Up' (PSU), which originated in the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, is the clearest manifestation of this approach. Since geopolitical anxiety is the main driver of Australian engagement, traditional security partnerships between Australia and PICs are central to the PSU, including efforts to deepen and enhance military, policing and cybersecurity cooperation, restricting China's access to the region's security agencies (Newton-Cain 2019, 39, 42). The PSU also provides new mechanisms for directly competing with China, including a $2bn infrastructure partnerships fund with Japan and the US, as well as a $1bn fund to support Australian exports to the region. In late 2021, the Australian

government financed Telstra's takeover of the Pacific's biggest telecommunications provider, Digicel, ending decades of hands-off relations between government and firms in Australian foreign policy (Hameiri 2021). Australian policymakers have also attempted to create goodwill in the region by dramatically increasing their diplomatic engagements, opening five new embassies, giving Australia representation in every PIC, and extending the size of Australia's Pacific Labour Scheme (Newton-Cain 2019, 40-41; Zhang 2020, 79).

Notwithstanding this flurry of activity, Australia continues to neglect the issue that many in the region perceive to be its greatest security challenge, which is not China, but climate change (Newton-Cain 2019, 43-44; Morgan 2021). Several PICs are highly vulnerable to climate change and have been at the forefront of international action to set more ambitious climate targets. They have also often demanded financial assistance from developed countries, including Australia, to support climate adaptation. This contrasts with Australia's lacklustre approach to the subject (a point we return to below) and the Australian government's obvious disapproval of the region's climate activism, manifesting in attempts to sabotage regional statements and initiatives. This, in turn, weakens Australian claims to regional leadership (Morgan 2021).

A progressive realist alternative

A progressive realist foreign policy in the Pacific must, first, recognise that China is not going anywhere, not least because many PIC governments are keen to dilute Australian dominance. Having experienced years of intrusion in their domestic affairs, they appreciate acutely that China's presence not only provides opportunities for trade, investment, tourism and aid, but also that it has changed Australia's engagement in ways that, from their perspective, are net gains for the region. At the same time, the infrastructure needs of PIC states are tremendous: uneven access to electricity, inadequate airports and ports, limited and costly transportation options outside major urban centres, potholes along major arteries, and expensive and slow internet services. All of these are exacerbated by the absence of economies of scale (Rajasingham 2017). This makes Chinese infrastructure financing extremely welcome. Also welcome is the impetus this has generated for Australia to boost its infrastructure financing.

A progressive realist approach to regional infrastructure financing would take seriously PIC preferences and needs, and recognise that cooperation with China in this area increases benefits to them. Australia, therefore, should develop clear parameters for identifying the kinds of infrastructure projects that, should China construct them, would jeopardise Australian security, and only step in to replace Chinese financing in those instances. An example is the underwater internet cable between Australia, PNG and Solomon Islands, which Australia financed to prevent Huawei from delivering the project (Clark 2021). In other instances, Australia must ensure that its financing is complementary to China's, rather than displacing it, while collaborating with China to secure PIC debt sustainability. Australia could also support Pacific governments and civil society's capacity to analyse debt sustainability and increase the transparency of Chinese-financed projects. This realist assessment should extend to other areas of bilateral and multilateral engagement. In a more fractured regional and global landscape, Australia must become cognisant of the limitations of its power and adjust its foreign policy goals accordingly. Here redistribution could play a key role. In its bilateral engagements, Australia should avoid the temptation of appealing to elite, sectional interests. Rather, it should implement policies, such as temporary labour migration schemes, which acknowledge the region's limited options for economic development and widen its potential sources of income. At the regional level, most notably in the PIF, Australia should empower PICs and support their capacity to shape policy agendas. To continue to use the PIF simply to drive through Australia's security and trade agendas only heightens regional resentments. The short-termism of the right's agenda should be replaced by a long-term commitment to partnership.

A second plank of a progressive realist foreign policy in the Pacific is based on a shift in Australia's climate change stance. If Australia took climate action more seriously, this alone would strengthen Australia's claims to regional leadership. It could be bolstered further by allocating substantial financial resources to supporting PIC climate adaptation, which should become the focus of Australia's financing facility for the region. This redistributive approach recognises the immediacy of the timelines that PICs face in ensuring their own resilience, even survival, in a climate transformed future. It also recognises collective responsibilities – Australia has contributed far more to global CO2 emissions than the Pacific region combined.

With this in mind, the Australian government could develop financing policies that grow industrial capacities in innovative green industries. If implemented well, the result would be to combine a progressive commitment to redistribution with a hardnosed agenda of maintaining Australia's influence in the region.

Climate change

Shifting Australia's stance on climate change will require significant repair work. Since the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, Australia has maintained a reputation as a climate laggard. In November 2021, the Morrison government's diplomacy at COP26 – the UN climate conference in Glasgow – took this to a new low. Despite concerted international pressure, Australia emerged from COP26 as the only developed country to resist raising its 2030 emissions reduction target. Although Australia increased its climate financing to countries in the Pacific and Southeast Asia, it remains the only developed country (aside from the US during the Trump administration) to have ceased contributions to the Green Climate Fund, the main mechanism for disbursing mitigation and adaptation finance to developing countries. The Morrison Coalition government has also made clear that it will continue to support fossil fuel production and export, including through subsidies.

The final agreement that emerged from COP26 – the Glasgow Climate Pact – puts further pressure on Australia. The Pact urges those parties that had not enhanced their 2030 nationally determined contributions by the end of COP26 to do so before COP27. Developed countries are being urged to meet their climate finance promises to developing countries, and talks have begun on a new, more ambitious climate finance goal for 2025. However, the most significant diplomatic breakthrough at Glasgow was the agreement, for the first time, to accelerate efforts to phase-out 'inefficient' fossil fuel subsidies, phase-down unabated coal power, accelerate the transition to green energy, and pursue this transition in a just manner. Given that the writing is on the wall for the Australian fossil fuel industry, how might a progressive realist approach repair Australia's damaged international reputation in the post-COP26 landscape?

A progressive realist response

As with our other case studies, a progressive realist alternative starts with a realistic assessment of the current conjuncture. Australia's national climate politics has been plagued by deep political polarisation between the major parties. Yet behind these divisions lies a broad consensus between the Coalition and Labor on national energy policy, which is to maintain Australia's fossil fuel industry. Mildenberger (2020) calls this 'the logic of double representation', whereby major fossil fuel industries have close ties with parties on both the right (via industry resisting decarbonisation) and left (via industrial unions seeking job protection). However, the contradictions in this consensus are now on full display. The Morrison government's continued support for coal and gas defies the increasing competitiveness of renewable energy and battery storage over fossil fuels in electricity generation. Labor is also defending fossil fuels, but leaving it to technological change and 'market forces' to bring forward the retirement of uncompetitive coal-power plants. These 'forces' have made considerable headway (Christoff 2022).

If the status-quo is unrealistic, then one alternative is a Realist position based on an expanded conception of the national interest, which includes 'system preservation' in response to catastrophic climate change (Symons 2019). This approach, based on a consequentialist ethic, is oriented around feasibility constraints and the process of transition. It has much in common with a progressive realist approach, bar one key difference. A classical Realist ethic prioritises mitigation over distributive justice if trade-offs cannot be avoided. Our approach, in contrast, sees international and national redistribution as necessary to achieving mitigation ambitions. This is not only ethically desirable, but also politically necessary to reduce social and economic dislocation, avoid political backlash and enable national cooperation.

The good news is that subnational governments are already helping to drive this agenda. Four of Australia's eight states and territories have enacted framework climate legislation without significant political rancour and with considerably stronger 2030 emissions reduction targets than exist at federal level. These developments smooth the path for the enactment of national framework climate legislation that requires the ratcheting up of targets and action over time to signal an ongoing commitment to decarbonisation. The

question of how targets are pursued need not be included in the legislation; an aggressive national renewable energy strategy can do most of the work. This would require phasing out fossil fuel subsidies, introducing strong national renewable energy targets and ramping up investment in new infrastructure (such as smart grids and EV charging stations) to enable the rapid 'electrification of everything', based on renewable energy. It will also require planning for a just, orderly phase-out of fossil fuel production alongside regional development strategies. Anticipating and managing such a phase-out will cause far less economic and social dislocation for coal dependent communities than having change inflicted on them by trading partners. It will also build a strong base for Australia's future economic prosperity.

Australia is especially well situated to pursue this kind of energy transition given its abundant supplies of sun and wind, its high reserves of critical minerals (such as lithium, cobalt and copper), and its wealth of Rare Earth elements used in the manufacture of electric vehicles, solar photovoltaic, wind turbines and smart grids. These resources also provide the basis for new jobs in advanced critical minerals processing and green manufacturing. These energy sector reforms would enable Australia to commit to an enhanced 2030 target of at least 50% by the COP27 meeting in Egypt in 2022. This would signal Australia's commitment to the Glasgow Climate Pact, especially if combined with enhanced bilateral aid to the Pacific region for adaptation and a reinstatement of contributions to the Green Climate Fund. The result would be a significant boost in the country's international reputation.

Australia is also well positioned to play a constructive role in addressing the challenge of just transition in major emerging economies. Even if all developed countries were to enhance their 2030 mitigation targets in the 50-60% range by COP27, this would still not be enough to hold global heating to 1.5 degrees Celsius, which is the threshold for survival for the 1.2 billion people living in the 48 countries that belong to the Climate Vulnerable Forum. The reason is that the bulk of future growth in emissions will come from developing countries, especially China (the largest aggregate emitter), India (the third largest), Indonesia and Brazil. China and India argue that developed countries should decarbonise first, by 2050, given their greater historical responsibility for climate change. They also argue that

developing countries need more time to ensure that their development needs are not sacrificed: China is aiming for net zero by 2060, India by 2070. China has also committed to ending the financing of coal projects abroad and starting a 'phase-down' of coal power from 2025. India has not committed to a coal exit. Yet to hold warming to 1.5 degrees, thermal coal must be phased out by 2030 in developed countries and by 2040 in developing countries at the latest (Climate Analytics 2019). The International Energy Agency (IEA 2021) has warned that if the world is to reach a net zero energy system by 2050, there can be no new investment in coal, gas and oil.

Addressing this challenge requires just transition measures based on an ethic and practice of redistribution. One pertinent precedent is the Just Energy Transition Partnership between South Africa and the EU, France, Germany, the UK and the US. South Africa is dependent on coal for 80% of its power, the coal industry is a major employer, and its aging coal fleet is plagued by blackouts. The first phase of this partnership will mobilise $8.5 billion to enable South Africa to shift from coal to renewable energy. Australia could use this model, and its own energy transition experience, to work with other donors, such as Japan and the US, to develop similar redistributive partnerships with states in the region. For example, India and Indonesia are both heavily dependent on coal for energy and employment, have high aggregate emissions, low levels of electrification and high poverty. Two looming issues that are likely to prolong the phase-out of coal are, first, supply constraints and, second, the price volatility of critical minerals needed for the energy transition. These could be met through a critical minerals partnership with India and Indonesia, serving as the basis for a long-term just-transition redistributive partnership that would hasten their coal-phase out and inspire similar partnerships elsewhere.

In this way, a progressive realist assessment of a key global challenge provides the basis for a policy platform that is in sharp contrast to a radical right agenda based on pandering to vested interests, an agenda that is self-defeating both in terms of Australian interests and its global reputation. It also stands in contrast to a Realist stance that priorities mitigation over distributive justice. Instead, a progressive realist stance points to constructive partnerships, based on redistributive logics, as a force multiplier for Australia's national interests.

China-Taiwan

The final scenario concerns the rise of China and the potential for conflict over Taiwan. While a military conflict over Taiwan has been a possibility since the formation of the PRC in 1949, its likelihood has recently increased (Taylor 2019). Planning for a Taiwan 'contingency' is a critical case for a progressive realist foreign policy. It is the most likely site of geopolitical conflict between the US and China, one that includes the potential for Australian involvement. It is also an issue that has been framed by the right in characteristically stark terms, describing Taiwan as 'a key pillar of freedom in the Indo-Pacific' that must be defended at all costs (Kroenig and Cimmino 2020, 55).

Defend at all costs?

Taiwan's independence is formally recognized by few states, with most UN members adopting the ambiguities of a 'one China' policy. For several decades, the PRC's position has been informed by the belief that unification was inevitable over the long run due to favourable power asymmetries. Xi Jinping's (2020) declaration that the Taiwan issue will not be left to other generations to resolve, and the reaffirming of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) commitment to what it calls 'reunification', have shortened this timeframe. Chinese forces have intensified military activities near the island with a major set of exercises held around the PRC's national day of 1st October 2021 (Layton 2021). Some have argued that China's military capabilities and the current dispensation of US forces have significantly lowered the perceived costs and risks of a Chinese invasion (e.g. Mastro 2021). Equally, successful annexation would provide domestic political advantages to the CCP, which has fixed its internal legitimation strategy on achieving 'national' unity.

The ways in which a progressive realist foreign policy would navigate a Chinese attack on Taiwan depends on the circumstances of the attack. One scenario entails the PRC inviting Taiwan into a multi-decade process of 'reintegration'. If this invitation was rebuffed, the PRC might interfere with Taiwanese critical infrastructure and mobilise hundreds of Chinese fishing vessels to cross the median line, supported by Chinese Coast Guard vessels that engage non-PRC vessels under the auspices of protecting Chinese 'sovereign waters'. This

kind of 'grey zone' coercion (Morris et al 2019), up to and including the mobilisation of the armed forces in and around the Taiwan Strait, could prompt Taiwanese forces to attempt to reassert control of their coastal waters. Subsequent clashes, perhaps including missile attacks on Taiwanese military and civilian targets, could escalate and result in the US entering the conflict. This scenario presents a dilemma for a progressive realist stance in that it involves a context in which one superpower (the US), to which Australia has alliance commitments, faces off against another (China), in a part of the world in which Australia has key interests. How to respond to this escalation by the PRC against a non-member of the UN with which Australia does not have formal diplomatic relations heightens the challenge. The worst approach, articulated by some on the right, is to see the issue in binary terms: Taiwan must be defended at all costs or regional hegemony has been ceded to China. Positions short of this are labelled as 'appeasement' in order to render them unethical, self-defeating, or both (Coorey 2021). This is the view taken by the Morrison government, with Defence Minister Dutton declaring that it was 'inconceivable' that Australia would not join in the defence of Taiwan (Reuters 2021).

A progressive realist approach

A progressive realist approach starts from recognising that Australia's long-term strategic interests lie in a stable balance of power in Asia, something Australia cannot achieve on its own. With the exception of a brief period in the 1940s, a favourable regional distribution of power has been provided by states with which Australia shares strong economic, political and cultural ties: Britain and the United States. A world of decentred globalism has fundamentally altered this position. Consequently, a sober assessment of Taiwan's place within the regional order is needed. Were the island to fall under PRC control, it would not significantly advance PRC military capacities; the leaps it is making in naval, missile and air capabilities have already shifted the regional balance (Porter and Mazarr 2021). Taiwan's circumstances are not the *particular* tipping point that would lead to a *general* shift in the regional balance of power towards Chinese hegemony. A successful invasion would signal the end of US primacy in Asia and it would likely be dismal for 23 million Taiwanese. But it is not clear that maintaining the island's de facto independence would ensure a favourable balance of power.

There are three major policy options for responding to the threat of the use of force over Taiwan: negotiation, deterrence and conflict. Negotiation and deterrence are compatible with a progressive realist approach; conflict is not. The first option is to negotiate some kind of bargain in which the PRC achieves its ambitions while making concessions of its own, such as stepping back from its claims in the East and South China Seas and accepting a regional balance of power that retains a significant US presence (Glaser 2015). There is a strong long-term rationale for making such a concession in that it could significantly reduce the risks of war and create a potentially stable foundation for regional order. It is not, though, without costs for a progressive realist foreign policy agenda, most obviously in the elimination of a regional democracy and handing a major victory to an authoritarian power. The second response is to focus on maintaining the status quo through the application of American deterrence. This has been at the heart of US strategy in Asia for decades. Yet the credibility of US commitments has decreased and China's growing capabilities makes following this strategy both harder and riskier over time. A progressive realist approach must recognise both increasing pressures on deterrence and the security dilemma dynamics that make a 'goldilocks approach' – actions that are pitched just right to deter Beijing from moving first – difficult to achieve (Rosecrance 1995). A progressive realist posture on deterrence would entail signalling that Australia would not be part of a military response, which would only be of symbolic importance in any event, but that it supports deterrence through non-military measures: intelligence, cyber, financial, logistical. The third option is to respond with force. This has become, rhetorically at least, a more visible part of the right's approach to China, but is by some margin the least advisable position. Taiwan is not crucial to the strategic balance and it is not a litmus test of PRC regional hegemony. Nor would it sign the death knell for democracy in a region of mixed political forms. Indeed, if managed with diplomatic acumen, responding to Chinese militarisation without conflict could generate a more robust political foundation for regional order than a binary 'fight or flight' response that divides the region by forcing states, including many with close ties to the PRC, to choose sides.

A progressive realist policy for Australia, therefore, combines negotiation and deterrence based on a clear-eyed assessment of Taiwan's importance for Australian interests in a stable

regional balance of power. This does not mean supporting the US vacating the region, but it does mean ending Australian attempts to maintain an anachronistic regional order. Asia has changed and China is now a great power (Office of the Secretary of Defense 2021); it has prerogatives other states do not have. The failure to acknowledge these prerogatives and provide some acceptance of China's standing is to invite instability and, potentially, conflict. China may be authoritarian and it may often act like a bully, but wishful thinking and playground posturing will not make things otherwise. A logic of redistribution requires giving China a bit more space and the US a little less. In doing so, the risks of conflict go down.

Australia should also work with its partners to embed Chinese power within regional institutions, seeking to maximise the special responsibilities that go with special rights: driving meaningful responses to the climate crisis, increasing the economic welfare of the hundreds of millions in the region who live in poverty, improving collective responses to pandemics and other health crises, and more. In place of the unrealistic bravado of the right, progressive realism provides the means for a long-term vision focused on maximising Australian influence over a range of strategic issues. Central to this approach will be ensuring that Canberra uses its leverage in Washington to advance its goals. In the early 1980s, the Hawke government skilfully navigated the intensification of Cold War rivalry. This period saw Australia at odds with its treaty ally over a range of high politics issues, including missile defence and the operation of joint military facilities. Yet Canberra engaged with Washington constructively, encouraging it to adopt a less conflictual posture (Camilleri 1987, 124-8). Discussion of Australian sovereignty extended to progressive realist ideas without descending into chauvinism and parochialism (e.g. Ball 1980). Given the tensions associated with China's rise, including a possible conflict over Taiwan, similarly skilful manoeuvring will be needed in the contemporary world.

The debate to come

We have argued that a progressive realist foreign policy stance is both doable and desirable. It is also urgent. In the face of an ascendant global right, it is imperative that the left formulates new ideas and policy proposals. As global right movements continue to use foreign policy issues to consolidate their positions, the urgency will grow for progressives to

articulate a platform of their own (Carr 2017; Wong 2021). The Australian version of the global right position commits Australia to armed confrontation with China, reduces Canberra's position on the changing distribution of power in Asia to a quixotic attempt to reinvigorate the status of former colonial powers, confines the country to global pariah status on climate change, leaves Australia appearing as a self-interested bully in the Pacific, and robs it of anything more substantive than border controls in preparation for the next pandemic. In an increasingly open, plural, competitive environment, there must be a wider debate about the direction of Australian foreign policy. For progressive thinkers, activists and policy makers looking to generate a coherent approach to foreign policy issues, much work will be needed in the years ahead.

We have outlined the ways in which progressive realism can help with this task by applying its two-step analysis – realist appraisal followed by redistributive logic – to issues that are central to Australian foreign policy making. A progressive realist agenda could be extended to other issue-areas and other parts of the world. For example, the global nuclear order is currently undergoing a series of important challenges, both diplomatic and technological (Futter and Zala 2021). In the past, Australia has recognised its ambiguous position as a champion of nuclear disarmament, while simultaneously sheltering under the American 'nuclear umbrella'. Initiatives like the Canberra Commission were steeped in a realistic assessment of the difficulties of nuclear politics and the need for direct engagement with, rather than condemnation of, nuclear-armed states (Hanson and Ungerer 1999). The current moment is ripe for the revival of such an approach. When it comes to other parts of the world, Australian progressive realism should join movements challenging authoritarianism, inequality and racism, and support those advocating climate justice, First Nations rights, and more. Yet doing so must be preceded by a clear-eyed picture of world politics, weaving this assessment into redistributive policy responses.

Primarily, we are concerned with stimulating debate. What is not happening sufficiently at the moment, perhaps particularly in Australia, is a wide-ranging discussion of the make-up and pay-off of a foreign policy agenda that can challenge the global right. This is where our intervention is pitched. Without a close reading of where we are internationally, there can

be little assessment of what a progressive platform looks like domestically – contemporary politics is simultaneously international and domestic. Given this, a conversation in Australia – one that involves academics, practitioners, commentators and publics – about the contours of a progressive realist foreign policy could help to ignite a global debate, one that stands at the heart of a progressive challenge to the global right.

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