DIRECTOR’S WELCOME

Setting the conversation on big policy issues facing the Asia-Pacific.

The Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs continues to set the conversation on the big policy issues facing not only Australia but the Asia-Pacific more broadly. In the beginning of April, in association with Hankuk University and Griffith Asia Institute, staff organised the “Korean Peninsula in Crisis: What Can Australia Do?” policy roundtable. Launched with a speech by Secretary of DFAT Frances Adamson, and a dinner speech by former Foreign Minister and current ANU Chancellor Gareth Evans, the event brought together academics from around the world with leading policy makers to assess the rapidly changing situation in Northeast Asia. You can read more about this in our recent Centre of Gravity policy paper.

Of course, workshops like the above are not the only way that Bell staff communicate their expertise to the wider world. I congratulate Dr Graeme Smith who, together with Louisa Lim, won the News and Current Affairs category of the Australian Podcast Awards for their work on the Little Red Podcast – exploring contemporary China ‘beyond the Beijing beltway’. I think it important we remember that teaching is also a crucial part of our impact on the wider world. For this reason, I am delighted that Dr Rebecca Gidley won the 2018 Vice-Chancellor’s Award for Excellence in Tutoring.

Two current initiatives that I want to draw attention to:

First, Shedden Professor Evelyn Goh has launched the Women in International Security (WIIS) seminar series. Consisting of research, career development, and policy dialogue seminars, this series showcases the work of prominent women in the field of international security. The upcoming seminar, ‘Making it in the Military’ will feature Lieutenant Colonel Clare O’Neill of the Royal Australian Engineers and Wing Commander Hannah Jude-Smith of the Royal Australian Airforce.

Second, Professor Emerita Lorraine Elliott will be hosting Professor Katharine Adeney, Director of the Institute of Asia and Pacific Studies at the University of Nottingham, UK. She will be presenting a public lecture, two masterclasses for PhD and Early Career Researchers, and a workshop for academics and Early Career Researchers.

Underpinning and enabling all our activities is a continued focus on research excellence. On the publications front new works by some of the newest members of our School have cast light on the nature and evolution of the thinking at the very heart of the discipline of International Relations, with articles in the leading journals International Studies Quarterly and European Journal of International Relations (congratulations to Dr Joseph MacKay for co-authoring the former, and Dr Alister Wedderburn for the latter). Further recognition of our research excellence comes from Dr Benjamin Zala’s appointment to a Fellowship at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at the Kennedy School of Government in Harvard.

Cover Image: On 18 Feb we launched Hybridity on the Ground in Peacebuilding and Development, an inter-departmental initiative within the Coral Bell School. Professor Wesley described Hybridity as “a way of looking at the world ... a way of building interdisciplinarity... strengthening hybridity is an ANU Strength”.

Above: Dr Rebecca Gidley (front row, fourth from left) received a Vice-Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Tutoring.
Feeding Crisis Diplomacy

PhD student Craig Robinson put food price crises on the agenda when he was selected to attend the Global Food Security Symposium in Washington DC.

In a crisis, diplomacy has typically been concerned with how to make or avoid war. But crises are diverse. Humanitarian crises like the flow of refugees from Syria's civil war, or economic ones like the Global Financial Crisis are testament to that. Craig Robinson was one of only 27 students selected as a ‘Next Generation Delegate’ to an international symposium in Washington DC. He was selected for his work which seeks to add an additional item to the crisis diplomacy agenda - food security. “Hunger is something that no person, in particular children, should have to suffer,” he says.

The second-year PhD student at the Asia-Pacific College of Diplomacy was chosen from more than 800 applicants to attend the Global Food Security Symposium in March. Discussions at the symposium largely revolved around the importance of agricultural product to meet 2050 food demand - undoubtedly a crucial concern. “But in one of the sessions I moderated, I emphasised that the international community still appears unprepared if another food price crisis emerges,” Robinson says. While food price shocks are relatively rare, they also appear to occur on a regular, cyclical basis.

Robinson was the only Australian representative at the event and makes the point that food insecurity could cause regional instability in the Asia-Pacific region if not addressed.

Breaking the Silence on Secrecy

The push for total transparency can stifle scholarship on secrecy, claims Professor Thierry Balzacq in an article published in the journal West European Politics.

Secrecy is an essential component of diplomacy. “As long as states continue to speak the language of interests for their people, of sovereignty, secrecy will remain an essential complement of their relations,” claims Professor Thierry Balzacq. The question then is how much secrecy?

Balzacq, a visiting fellow at the Asia-Pacific College of Diplomacy, recently published a co-authored article in the journal West European Politics on ‘the economy of secrecy’. Together with co-author Benjamin Puybareau, Balzacq sought to understand the broader spectrum of the role of secrecy in the contemporary world. To do so, they looked at why states have tended to react differently to different breaches of secrecy. Balzacq spotlighted three salient cases: Wikileaks, Edward Snowden and the extraordinary renditions – government-sponsored abductions – of the US. As a group, Europe and the US were mostly united in opposition to the Wikileaks revelation of state secrets. However, the leaks of Edward Snowden polarised states in their reactions by revealing the extent of US surveillance programs, causing some countries to feel played. “What used to be a very strong group actually fragmented,” Balzacq says.

Not least, he finds that public opinion also determines how states react to secrecy breaches. If the Snowden case hadn’t received so much public exposure would Germany and France have been so critical? Balzacq thinks maybe not – and that power imbalances have a lot to do with it.

In mapping out how secrecy works within diplomacy, Balzacq also pushes back against what he describes as normative arguments that secrecy is always bad. It’s arguments like those, he notes, that have stifled the study of secrecy within diplomacy. As he puts it, “public opinion should not be fighting for some kind of full transparency.” It’s a degree of openness that could ultimately be bad for states. That’s because states – like people – need privacy too. They need it in order to protect their interests, to protect themselves – with checks and balances to temper any overreach. It’s a hard argument to make when secrecy is seen as so taboo. But secrecy, to Balzacq, can be seen as so much more: as a field of power, as performance, or as a normative ground. More than enough reason to reconsider its role in modern diplomacy.
Nuclear Deterrence at Risk

Taking up a year-long research fellowship at Harvard University in August, Dr Ben Zala will be looking for cracks in US nuclear deterrence strategies.

US nuclear deterrence is at risk of being undermined, and Dr Ben Zala is headed to Harvard University to explore the cause. For Zala, the problem is the increasing importance of advanced conventional weapons, at first in US defence thinking but increasingly beyond Washington as well. The role of these missile defence systems, conventional strike missiles, offensive cyber capabilities, as well as anti-satellite and anti-submarine technologies greatly expanded during the Obama era. Their increased importance to the US defence posture can seriously impact the nuclear balance between states. As Zala argues, “these conventional weapons technologies can undermine the mutual vulnerability that underpins nuclear deterrence relationships.” In doing so, they can increase levels of risk and instability in the global system.

Zala is taking up a year-long research fellowship at Harvard’s Belfer Center, headed by Barack Obama’s former Defence Secretary Ash Carter. Building off recent research, his sole project will investigate the adoption of these advanced technologies further afield.

Specifically, that will mean looking to their spread and adoption beyond the US, to countries such as Russia, China and India. One challenge, Zala says, will be to “think through what effects we can anticipate this might have on deterrence relationships involving the US.”

While at Harvard, he will write an article based on his research, with his findings also feeding into a book project on advanced conventional weapons with co-author Dr Andrew Futter from the UK. “I’ll be exploring directly the different policy responses available to Washington as it faces the globalisation of advanced conventional weapons technologies,” Zala says.

As a key American ally, Australia has a strong interest in the effectiveness of US nuclear deterrence, too. When US President Donald Trump compared the size of his ‘nuclear button’ to that of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un on Twitter in January, even Australians shuddered. It was a farcical display of how easily deterrence could go wrong. To assist decision-makers in getting it right, the policy-relevant research of scholars like Ben Zala can go a long way.

Writing Reaction into Theory

International Relations Theory has tended to overlook political reaction, prompting Dr Joseph MacKay to ask why, in a landmark journal article.

Dr Joseph MacKay was in New York on the night Donald Trump was elected president of the United States. As surprised as anyone, he remembers walking around town for a couple of days afterwards feeling the need to think or write up a response. As it happens, Trump’s election sparked a series of back and forths between MacKay and fellow IR scholar Christopher LaRoche, on the nature of political reaction. For MacKay, political reaction means a particular attitude towards history, a nostalgic appeal to a fondly-remembered past. From their conversations, the two scholars arrived at a pressing question: Why is there no reactionary international theory?

The question served as the title for an article published in the flagship IR journal International Studies Quarterly this year.

The argument they make is straightforward: Political reaction is a distinct and under-explored phenomenon in international relations. For contemporary examples of reactionary politics, think of Donald Trump’s promise to ‘make America great again’ or the underlying motivations of Brexit. MacKay notes that reactionaries are as nostalgic as they are transnational. “These movements network,” he says. “We get people affiliated with Trump hanging out with Marine Le Pen, or to a lesser extent, Victor Orban in Hungary or Erdogan in Turkey - folks who have a similar nostalgia.”

What’s more, a place for thinking about reaction is something that international relations theory has long been missing. Its absence has blinded the field of study from seeing reaction in action in practical politics, MacKay argues. Identifying the blind-spot, then, is about disciplinary relevance, and understanding the world as it is right now.

MacKay’s article went from pitch to publication so quickly that the journal’s editor quipped that the turnaround had been ‘opportunistic’. “People are rapidly turning to this,” MacKay explains. “The premise of the title wasn’t going to be accurate a year later.” In that sense, it’s almost reactive – if not quite reactionary – in its written response to the election of a most unlikely president.
**Do No Harm: Findings from PNG and the Solomon Islands**

Understanding the relationship between women’s economic empowerment and violence against women.

It has often been assumed that improving women’s access to income-generating activities would lead automatically to more general empowerment, the theory being that an increased income would improve women’s “bargaining power” within the household. Some researchers believed that this increase in bargaining power would reduce the risk of intimate partner violence, while others believed it would have the opposite effect. Those trying to promote gender equality through economic empowerment initiatives face the vexing issue that their efforts may have unintended consequences, improving one dimension of women’s lives but undermining others.

Department of Pacific Affairs Senior Fellow, Associate Professor Richard Eves, has recently completed research undertaken as part of the multi-year project, Do No Harm: Understanding the Relationship between Women’s Economic Empowerment and Violence against Women in Melanesia, funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade’s Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development. The project and was a collaboration between DPA and International Women’s Development Agency (IWDA).

In an effort to understand the realities women face as they attempt to overcome economic disadvantage, the research team led by Eves gathered detailed accounts from women, men and community leaders. Field research was undertaken in Solomon Islands and PNG, where 485 interviews were conducted. Eves remembers a particular case in the PNG highlands. A woman working at the market would have to come straight home after closing up shop to account for the income she had earned, unable to spend any of it, at the demand of her husband. Other cases in the highlands reveal how women were also subject to physical violence by their partners who thought they didn’t work hard enough at earning an income. “Women are subject to quite brutal forms of violence, quite unimaginable sorts of horrors,” Eves says.

During the fieldwork, it became clear that many men tend to have a zero-sum power notion. They think any gains from women are a loss to them and therefore they resist it,” Eves says. But Eves has worked in PNG for many years now and has noticed a groundswell of change. Violence is less tolerated by communities, he observes, and that is an important shift.

The project recently culminated with workshops and briefings conducted in Honiara, Buka, Port Moresby, Goroka, Canberra and Melbourne at which the research findings and guidance materials, developed by IWDA, have been presented and discussed. The research has contributed to a better understanding of how to improve women’s economic agency and the security of their livelihoods without compromising their safety.

**Podcasting the Pacific**

Dr Graeme Smith has joined the Department of Pacific Affairs, bringing his award-winning Little Red Podcast on ‘China beyond the Beijing beltway’ with him.

The Little Red Podcast began almost by accident in 2016. Dr Graeme Smith had been toying with the idea of a China politics podcast. So, when research on China’s falling gas emissions failed to get picked up in the media, Smith was keen to get the researchers on air during their visit to Melbourne. “The sound is terrible,” Smith says of the first recording. “You can hear me bumping the table with my foot throughout.” At the same time, he was put in touch with former BBC and NPR China correspondent Louisa Lim, who became the “heart and soul” of the podcast.

To the surprise of its hosts, their podcast won an Australian Podcast Award in the news and current affairs category in May. For Smith, even to be nominated was amazing for an “underfunded and nerdy” China podcast with its promise to introduce listeners to ‘China beyond the Beijing beltway.’ The win was so unexpected, Smith and Lim hadn’t even written acceptance speeches.

Smith joined the Department of Pacific Affairs (DPA) as a full-time research fellow in January, bringing the podcast with him. He has worked with DPA before, describing his return as “moving back home” and is hopeful that a Pacific-focused podcast might also spring up within the department.

Podcasting gives scholars the opportunity to “dig into things that are too out in the weeds” to get a run in the mainstream media. In that way, China and the Pacific stand to benefit from the spotlight a podcast can shine. “We need to understand China, and 30-second news grabs won’t get us there,” Smith notes. “There are serious issues in the Australia-China relationship, but sometimes they’re lost in the noise.”

It’s impressive, then, that the Little Red Podcast’s listenership is international – with people tuning in from the UK to Singapore. According to Smith, podcast feedback suggests Australians are boundlessly curious about China.

Chinese “sockpuppets,” however, are not fans of the show.
Green Turtle Dreaming

In her new chapter for a book on the Australia-Indonesia relationship, Professor Emerita Virginia Hooker chronicles the stories of women bridging cultures.

In her new book chapter on the Indonesian and Australian women bridging the divides between their cultures, Virginia Hooker devises a metaphor centred on the concept of the Green Turtle. Just as green turtles share the coasts of northern Australia and Indonesia, so too, the women of these countries inhabit a shared space between separate cultures. The Professor Emerita at the Department of Political & Social Change draws this comparison in the new book Strangers next door? Indonesia and Australia in the Asian Century.

Going to the origin of her metaphor, Professor Hooker cites the example of a community art project entitled ‘Green Turtle Dreaming’. The project identifies the endangered turtle as central to the traditions of Indonesia, East Timor and northern Australia. The Australian women who designed the project took the Green Turtle concept to communities along the coasts of the three states, in a travelling exhibition. They recorded their understandings of the turtle – in oral, art or dance forms. It is creative spaces like these, Hooker suggests, where the future of the bilateral relationship between Australian and Indonesian women will occur. “They have the confidence to step into the unknown and create new, shared areas that will form the basis for the future of the bilateral relationship,” she says.

According to Hooker, these creative spaces can be seen as “intercultural,” a view of culture that is dynamic and the product of the processes of interaction, not isolation. Professor Hooker’s chapter provides a cross-section of what could be an entire book on women’s contributions to improving the understanding between Australia and Indonesia. The chapter tells the stories of women contributing to the bilateral relationship in fields like diplomacy, human rights, economics, scientific research and interfaith dialogue, among others. “It proves that when women are motivated to assist and support each other, even across borders and despite a lack of funds, they persist until they find a way,” Professor Hooker says. It is in the final section of her chapter that she suggests artists and performers are often the first to recognise the interactive nature of collaboration on projects – like ‘Green Turtle Dreaming’. For Professor Hooker, building enough momentum from these relationships to influence policy can be tough, but it is also key.

Convening Sacred Stories

Every sacred site has a story, says Dr David Kim who convened the ANU Religion Conference in April this year.

The ANU Religion Conference convenes every two years, bringing together people of different faiths and academic disciplines united around a central theme with a mind to the divine. This April that theme was ‘sacred sites and sacred stories’, seeking to explore the intersection of religion, economics and politics from a global perspective. It drew scholars from 17 different countries, keen to glean insights at panels and presentations on topics from ancient Greece to new age Korean religion, from pilgrimage to tourism. Co-sponsored by the Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs and the School of Culture, History and Language among others, this year’s conference keynote speaker was renowned scholar of cults, Eileen Barker.

For conference convenor Dr David Kim, a visiting fellow at the Department of Political & Social Change, the religious theme is a research area of “great potential” that he wants to grow. Attracting more scholars and students as well as increasing research and publications are aims of the conference, setting down foundational roots to perhaps one day design specific courses. These efforts all begin with the genuine religious scholars and practitioners that the conference brings in, but as Dr Kim notes, it’s less about doctrine and more about the sociology of religion.

“We’re trying to bring interdisciplinary scholarship on the same topic from different angles, targeting different kinds of people,” he says. It all hinges on the importance of religion to the lives of millions of people in Southeast Asia.

Dr Kim’s own research focuses on the intermingling of religion and politics, in places like Korea and China. “Religious organisations, especially religious leaders, have unspoken power,” he explains. Kim cites Nepal and Bhutan as examples of countries where not only politics but also economics is inextricably linked to religion – where pilgrimage can be a major revenue stream. Each conference has published a book, containing a handful of its best academic papers. This year, Dr Kim will have to whittle 50 such papers down to the final 12 to be included. Sacred sites always have a story, Dr Kim quips, and by holding the biennial conference, scholars of religion in Asia are offered a platform to share some of their own.
YOLO: Insights from Thailand

How do the religious worldviews of senior officials shape the strategic thinking of Thailand’s up-and-coming leaders? Professor John Blaxland combs the data from a years-long project on religion and Thai politics for insights.

Religious worldviews can shape the thinking of senior officials in profound ways - take YOLO, for instance. ‘You only live once’ is an expression encouraging a life lived on the edge. Canadian rapper Drake coined the phrase in 2011, and High School Musical star Zac Efron has the acronym tattooed on his hand. For Professor John Blaxland, it’s a useful anecdote to illustrate the influence of religion in strategic thinking.

“It’s premised on the Judaeo-Christian or post-Christian worldview, which is you either go to heaven, go to hell or go to nothingness,” he says. But for Theravada Buddhists in Thailand, where Blaxland recently concluded three years of surveying officials, to think that you only live once is nonsensical - because of the belief in reincarnation.

“That shapes a lot of how you behave and how you view the world, how you think about the world, how you rate your place in the world and then interact with others,” Blaxland says. “It’s a factor that’s overlooked in the rationalist, western and secular view of great power relations.” As he and his colleague, Greg Raymond, go through three years of data from about 1800 survey responses, the question of a Buddhist worldview is one Blaxland would still like to answer.

A Korean Season of Summits

As one of the chief investigators at an Australia-Korea Foundation policy roundtable, Dr Brendan Taylor explains the risks of conflict in Korea.

It is the season of summits on the Korean peninsula. North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has met with Xi Jinping in Beijing, as well as Moon Jae-in at an inter-Korean summit in the lead up to a possible meeting with US President Donald Trump. Japan wants in too, and all this talk on the Korean peninsula has raised hopes that North Korea could move towards denuclearisation, and potential peace with its southern neighbour.

It could all go one of two ways, according to Dr Brendan Taylor, one of the chief investigators at a recent Australia-Korea Foundation policy roundtable hosted by ANU in March. “One possibility is that this doesn’t really amount to much and the Korean peninsula remains in a stalemate, a very uneasy standoff,” he says. “Another possibility is that we’re at one of those really important historical moments, a key inflection point, around the geopolitics of the Korean peninsula.”

The stakes are high for Australia, as Taylor and his co-authors explore in a Centre of Gravity paper revealing the roundtable’s outcomes. The Korean peninsula is in Northeast Asia, where three out of four of Australia’s largest trading partners are located. It is a region any Australian government would like to see remain stable. “If there was any major disruption in that part of the world it could potentially trigger an economic recession here, a long economic recession,” Taylor says.
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