

# Do you agree that in the post-Cold War world 'low politics' have become 'high politics'?

Written by Piangtawan Phanprasit

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PIANGTAWAN PHANPRASIT, DEC 1 2010

The International Relations canon and policy-makers generally accept that, in the absence of the Cold War, the realm of international affairs has seen a transformation from economic issues constituting 'low politics' to becoming 'high politics'. This signifies the preponderance of economic considerations in the conduct of statecraft, which is defined as the art of conducting state affairs including foreign and domestic policy<sup>[1]</sup>, over its military counterpart. This view is plausible because the disappearance of the US-Soviet hostility has contributed to the decline in the probability of conventional interstate war and hence traditional security studies which focuses primarily on military-political aspects of statecraft is becoming inadequate in accounting for the changing international environment. Nevertheless, this essay will subject to critical review the conception of 'low' versus 'high' politics with regard to the formulation and implementation of foreign policy as well as the conceptualisation of national security agendas, and the causality of the shift from low to high politics in the conduct of state foreign policy. It accepts the canonical view that in the post-Cold War world economic considerations have reigned supreme in the changing international structure and position of US hegemony, but this was not the consequence of the end of the Cold War. Furthermore, it has by no means eclipsed military considerations and essentially despite its label of 'low politics' economic issues were, during the Cold War, at the forefront of international politics.

The reason that economic agendas were labeled as 'low politics' during the Cold War is most feasible due to strategic concerns over the development and proliferation of nuclear weapons, particularly during 1955-65. Stephen Walt (1991) has referred to the period as the 'golden age' of security studies and this is absolutely logical since policy-makers had to focus on more pressing issues of nuclear revolution and military instruments, thereby leaving the study of economic issues to economists.<sup>[2]</sup> The emergence of strategic studies as a sub-field of IR scholarship was hence preoccupied with nuclear deterrence and geopolitics between the two superpowers, each leading their own bloc. In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the integration of economic and military statecraft was conducted with the aim to achieve higher goals of national security for states. The international structure of bipolarity and the position of US hegemony in both international security and economic environment allowed the US to exercise structural and compulsory power through the establishment of the liberal paradigm.<sup>[3]</sup> The Bretton Woods system included the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (RBRB), and most significantly the Marshall Plan and Lend-Lease policy. The relationship between such power and foreign economic policy was most meaningful when placed under the context of the US-USSR rivalry which became apparent by the 1950s. In this vein, the relationship between economics and security operated such that economic instruments were employed to support security concerns. In the 1970s and 1980s economic and military modes of statecraft drifted apart,<sup>[4]</sup> due to Vietnam and oil crises. Although international economic policies became more politically salient, security concern prevailed over domestic pressures and international economic commitments of the US<sup>[5]</sup>, with greater emphasis over geopolitics and military capacity.

By contrast, in the post-Cold War period, the absence of the Soviet bloc's hostility has diminished the tendency of interstate war between the superpowers or between the two rival camps. Growing economic interdependence is

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changing the political landscape of the world,<sup>[6]</sup> and what is unique about the modern world is that the economic aspects of social life have become more differentiated from other aspects because of the rise of a market economy.<sup>[7]</sup> This means instead of serving other objectives than economic ones, foreign economic policies have become the instruments for, and sources of, power rather than those of military concerns. Whereas during the Cold War, free trade was advocated in order to stimulate peace and security and when military and economic statecrafts came into conflict the liberal principles had to be sacrificed for pragmatic concerns about alliance instability<sup>[8]</sup>, more friction has evolved after the Cold War era. Non-state actors, multinational corporations in particular, have emerged as key actors in the international economic sphere, creating a new global 'middle-class' and new awareness of needs and opportunities which will prompt them to attempt to block international economic reform unless their interests are taken into account.<sup>[9]</sup> Non-military issues such as international financial crisis and unemployment, for instance, are increasingly significant as they pose threats to individual, international as well as traditional national security, signaling a move away from initial concentration on military issues and focus on the state level.<sup>[10]</sup> The shift of economic issues from being low politics to high politics, thus, highlights the trend towards widening agenda of the concept of security which lies at the heart of the conduct of statecraft.

On the other hand, the end of the Cold War did not directly result in the transformation of economic statecraft from low to high politics in the aforementioned sense. The US position as economic hegemon has never changed from its position in the Cold War era when its economic power far exceeded that of the USSR. The change in the international structure of bipolarity to unipolarity merely crystallised the significance of economic issues, which had always been at the forefront of policy-making prior to the end of the Cold War. The categorisation of low and high politics was in fact a discourse in international affairs, one in which the US-Soviet rivalry was regarded as the most significant feature of the age, thereby rendering strategic considerations of geopolitics and military capability more pressing than economics. And yet, military statecraft during the Cold War could not be sustained in the absence of economic instruments. This significantly explained the collapse of the USSR when it failed to compete with the dynamic growth and modernisation of the Western capitalist countries.<sup>[11]</sup> The primacy of economic statecraft, hence, cannot be discounted. In the 1970s and 1980s economic stagnation fed political strife whereas political conflict exacerbated economic uncertainty.<sup>[12]</sup> This reflected the preponderance of economic considerations and as such the labelling of low versus high politics is challenged when the line between politicisation of the military and the economic is blurred.

The demand for a re-conceptualisation of security agendas, furthermore, also questions the narrow scope of concentration on military-political issues. E. H. Carr famously posits that power is indivisible, and military and economic weapons are merely different instruments of power.<sup>[13]</sup> This is a viable argument because the military and the economic are distinct fields but their motives are deeply intertwined.<sup>[14]</sup> Widening security agendas, therefore, is not to reject the subject matter of traditional military considerations but to build upon it<sup>[15]</sup> in order to account for dynamics in the international structure. The implication of the interrelationship between military and economic statecraft also leads to the definition and dichotomy of war and warfare. Whilst the Cold War has introduced warfare whereby there was no actual fighting between the superpowers but proxy states, economic warfare was alive and well due to its existential nature. The creation of the capitalist and communist blocs and the COMECON on the basis of how to maximise national wealth and prosperity perpetuated the sense of rivalry in the economic sphere. Yet again the distinction between politicised economic and military issues is not clear-cut. Disagreement between multiple authorities in a political economy may threaten the structure of security of the state,<sup>[16]</sup> and similarly on the 'bloc scale' this has led to the collapse of the Soviet command economies. In the post-Cold War era, the current much-debated currency warfare between the US dollar and Chinese Renminbi is reminiscent of its Cold War counterpart. Also, since the debate over the disenchantment of war is yet open to discussion, even though it is argued that asymmetrical warfare between states and regimes or non-state actors is alive and well, this serves only to strengthen the argument over the reciprocal dynamic between economic and military agenda, similar to the Cold War period. In this respect there has been no dramatic shift of low politics becoming high politics at all.

In conclusion, the assertion that economic issues have now become high politics cannot be rejected, because the preponderance of economic considerations in the internationalised world markets cannot be discounted in the conduct of foreign policy in general. As long as the traditional concept of high politics holds, the statement in question remains valid. Yet it is arguable that the categorisation of low and high politics constitutes a discourse during the Cold War period in which the superpowers claimed that national security was the overriding objective. The

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popularised concept of national security was the survival of the state in the restricted sense of the concentration on the politico-military aspect. The collapse of the rival Soviet bloc, hence, lends itself to the claim that economic statecraft now reins over military statecraft. Nevertheless, the politicisation of international economic policies has been a long-term consequence of its own dynamic rather than of the absence of the nuclear threat from the Soviet Union. The latter only served to highlight the former. When security is re-conceptualised to encompass the intermingling between the economic and military factors, it is clear that the international arena sees a decline of conventional inter-state warfare. Economic warfare, however, has always been politicised ever since the Cold War era and in the final analysis it should have been labelled high politics even prior to the establishment of the Cold War.

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<sup>[1]</sup> D. A. Baldwin, *Economic Statecraft*, (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1985), p.8.

<sup>[2]</sup> M. Mastanduno, 'Economics and Security in Statecraft and Scholarship', *International Organization* 52(4), 1998, p.836.

<sup>[3]</sup> M. Barnett and R. Duvall, 'Power in International Politics', *International Organization* 59(1), 2005, p.49-54.

<sup>[4]</sup> M. Mastanduno, *op. cit.*, p.826.

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<sup>[5]</sup> Ibid, p.842-43.

<sup>[6]</sup> J. Grieco and G. J. Ikenberry, *State Power and World Markets*, (New York, W. W. Norton, 2003), p.1.

<sup>[7]</sup> R. Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981), p.68.

<sup>[8]</sup> R. Maddock, 'The Global Political Economy', in J. Baylis and N. J. Rengger, eds., *Dilemmas of World Politics: International Issues in a Changing World*, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992), p.110-112.

<sup>[9]</sup> C. F. Bergsten, R. Keohane and J. Nye, 'International Economics and International Politics, in C. F. Bergsten and L. B. Krause, eds., *World Politics and International Economics*, (Ann Arbor: Michigan, UMI, 1975), p.10-11.

<sup>[10]</sup> B. Buzan and L. Hansen, *The Evolution of International Security Studies*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.258.

<sup>[11]</sup> J. Grieco and G. J. Ikenberry, op. cit., p.1.

<sup>[12]</sup> J. A. Frieden and D. A. Lake, 'Introduction: International Politics and International Economics', in *International Political Economy*, (London, Routledge, 2000), p.4.

<sup>[13]</sup> E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), p.117-120.

<sup>[14]</sup> C. F. Bergsten and L. B. Krause, op. cit., p.4.

<sup>[15]</sup> B. Buzan, O. Waever and J. de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, (Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 1998), p.197.

<sup>[16]</sup> S. Strange, *States and Markets*, 2nd edition, (London, Pinter, 1988), p.48.

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