Editorial

International Politics Reviews (2014) 2, 49–50. doi:10.1057/ipr.2014.27

The summer of 2014 will go down in history as a summer of discontent. Across Europe, the Middle East and Asia the *status quo* was challenged, promising an uncertain future. From a revisionist Russia that redrew the map of Europe using military force – a move not seen since Hitler's annexation of the *Sudetenland* of Czechoslovakia in 1938 – to the emergence of the transnational 'Islamic State' movement in the Middle East a host of new challenges confront policymakers. Meanwhile, academics must grapple with the new realities these changes represent.

Since the early 1990s the logic of the west's Russia policy has been underwritten by a belief that engagement with Moscow, through neoliberal economic policies, would promote the growth of democracy and liberalism across the Russian Federation. The assumption was, to a certain extent, that western values were universal and that Russia shared the same ambition for a post-modern security space in Europe, a space where conflicts are settled through negotiation, not military force. These assumptions have been proven wrong and the west has been found wanting its response to the Russian leadership's craven geopolitical ambition. This presents a further challenge to academic (and real world) debate about the validity of 'universal' values, particularly in the realm of human rights. Since the inception of the UN's Universal Declaration on Human Rights in 1948 the idea of universal values has been a hot topic. Not in the least the full inclusion of women in society has been a difficult issue for many nations over the last 50 years.

Today, while women's rights remain very limited in many places, what has been called the new 'civil rights' struggle in the United States, the fight for equal treatment of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals, is perhaps the most visible struggle of the moment. While

much progress has been made in North America, Latin America and Western Europe, in many parts of the world sexual minorities have little representation and no protection under the law making them easy victims. From modern day Iraq, where gay men have their anuses glued shut and are force fed liquids and laxatives, to Uganda where they are strapped to a tire, set alight and rolled down the street, the claim to 'universal human rights' issued by the west seems dubious (McAllester, 2009; Al-Solaylee, 2012). In Russia, while the focus is currently on Ukraine, the LGBT community is also widely persecuted (Teeman, 2014). Reflecting on the utility of norms and values in international relations, Professor Markus Thiel of Florida International University looks at the debate surrounding LGBT equality issues globally. Outside of the academy, journalist Nicole Disser offers us an inside look at the daily struggle of Russia's LGBT community prompting us to really think 'what is the power of a norm in the real world?'

At a more strategic level Austin Knappe of the Ohio State University provides a timely review on the exercise of state power in the global system. Knappe investigates what he identifies in the literature as the 'paradoxes of power' puzzle. In particular, he finds that unipolarity's lack of structural constraints does as much to undermine preponderant power as to magnify it – a very real challenge for American hegemony. This literature and the issue areas the Knappe identifies for further research could go a long way in explaining why, at a time when the United States remains the dominant hegemon in what can still be called a unipolar world, the United States has such a hard time influencing contemporary foreign affairs. Washington's inability to deter Russian adventurism in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, as well as a failure to stabilize the Middle East, are both examples identified by contemporary

observers of the paradox of American power today. Figuring out how they overcome this challenge will keep members on the National Security Council awake many a night.

While strategic level issues keep senior advisors to presidents and prime ministers awake, it is the effectiveness of combat forces that preoccupies their generals, colonels and captains. In a lively review forum myself, along with Eyal Ben-Ari and Randall Collins engage with Professor Tony King's new tome 'The Combat Soldier'. Published by OUP, King offers a wealth of empirical and historical research that supports a compelling argument that today's smaller modern military forces are far superior to the massive militaries of days gone by – a serious rejoinder to those that argue that military downsizing is a bad idea (Scarborough, 2014). Looking at everything from social issues to combat training and deployment King's *The Combat Soldier* is sure to become a set text in the study of the armed forces and society.

Meanwhile, as Ebola runs rampant in parts of western Africa, with major infection scares in the United States and Southern Europe as well, *International Politics Reviews*' (IPR) assistant editor Josh Busby grapples with the challenges of global health issues in a review forum focused on

Jeremy Youde's 2012 comprehensive survey of the global health system, *Global Health Governance*. At a time when the failure of local and global institutions has been cited by sources such as the *New York Times*, as contributing to the most deadly outbreak Ebola in history, this discussion is a most welcome exploration of what needs to be done to ensure a more effective and joined up approach to global health issues such as HIV/AIDS, SARS, Avian Flu and Ebola to name but a few of the microscopic organisms that can wreak havoc with humanity.

Finally, we hope you enjoy the two new sections in IPR debuting this month: our 'shorts' section is designed to offer a series of shorter reviews of new contributions to the study of international relations. Field Notes, at the end of the journal, is a new regular contribution by a journalist or policymaker looking at the story behind the theory. It is our attempt to provide context and connection between thinking in the academy and the reality of contemporary global life.

The editorial team hopes you enjoy the autumn 2014 edition of IPR. As always your feedback and contributions are always welcome.

References

- Al-Solaylee, K. (2012) *Intolerable: Growing Up Gay in the Middle East*. New York: Harper Collins.
- McAllester, M. (2009) The hunted, *New York Magazine* 4 October.
- Scarborough, R. (2014) Obama military downsizing leaves US too weak to counter global threats, panel finds, *The Washington Times* 31 July.
- Teeman, T. (2014) The 'hunted' gays of Putin's Russia, *The Daily Beast* 6 October.

Michael John Williams
E-mail: mjwilliams@nyu.edu