
INTRODUCTION

Why do states do what they do? Who are the relevant nonstate actors in international relations, and why do *they* do what they do? What causes conflict and cooperation in the international system? These are the foundational questions that the discipline of international relations seeks to answer, and they are the questions that the readings collected in this volume address in one way or another. This is reflective of the fact that international relations (IR), like its parent discipline of political science, is fundamentally about asking and answering questions. The world is a complex, confusing, fascinating, and confounding place: political scientists ask questions and hope to find answers to the many puzzles that the political world presents them.

But can the study of politics really be considered “scientific”? In an age when nearly every man, woman, and child with a smartphone and a Twitter account can play the role of political pundit to their stable of followers, what differentiates people’s political opinions from the ideas that political scientists publish? Put differently, what is the difference between the ideas written in the editorial section of *The Washington Post* and those published in the *American Political Science Review*? On what grounds can we claim that the former is mere opinion but the latter is science?

We make such claims on the grounds of the scientific method, as adapted for application to the social sciences. “Science” is fundamentally about asking questions, following systematic and structured procedures for collecting data, conducting rigorous and critical analysis of that data, drawing appropriate conclusions from the analysis, and communicating the results of that analysis to others who would benefit from knowing what the researcher has learned. Transparency is also a critical component of the scientific method: when an author clearly describes the methods used and even makes the data publicly available, other scholars can replicate, validate, and critique a scientific study, thereby affirming (or contesting) the findings and adding to our collective knowledge. This is no less true of the political scientist who seeks to understand the causes of war than it is the biologist seeking to understand the causes of cancer.

While those in the physical sciences have the luxury of conducting their studies in carefully controlled environments provided by laboratory experiments or randomized control trials, social scientists can rarely isolate a variable of interest or apply a treatment while holding all other variables constant. As noted above, the world is a complicated, messy place where the causes of important political phenomena are not easy to isolate. But

just because it is hard to do social science does not mean that we cannot and should not approach social questions with rigorous methods of inquiry.

Armed with an intriguing question about a puzzling phenomenon, behavior, or event in international relations that we want to explain, where does a budding political scientist begin the process of social scientific inquiry? According to Mearsheimer and Walt (Reading 1.2), the concept of “theory” is fundamental to the study of international relations. In their account, theories are simplified pictures of a complex reality—much like maps—that provide a causal story about why something happens. In that sense, a complete theory (at minimum) should provide a cause (sometimes described as the independent variable), its effect or the outcome we seek to explain (the dependent variable), and the causal mechanism (or causal logic) that explains why and how a particular cause has the effect that it does. More sophisticated formulations of theory might enumerate theoretical assumptions, intervening variables, interactive effects, and the like, but at their core theories are statements of cause and effect, along with an explanation of why the cause has the observed effect.

But how do we know if a theory is a good theory? Theory must be well defined, logically consistent, and offer a complete elaboration of cause, effect, and causal logic. But a good theory should also provide an accurate explanation of the phenomena it seeks to explain. If an international relations theory predicts constant competition between great powers, does the observed world actually match the theory’s predictions? This is where hypothesis testing comes in. Though Mearsheimer and Walt criticize prioritization of thoughtless hypothesis testing over careful theory formulation, both are necessary parts of social scientific inquiry. If theories are statements of cause, effect, and causal logic, then hypotheses are the translation of theories into observable implications that we can see in the real world (often called “operationalization”). For example, balance of power theory predicts that states will balance against countries whose power is rising because they feel threatened. In this case, the theory’s independent variable is one state’s rising power, the dependent variable is “balancing behavior,” and the causal logic is fear or a feeling of being threatened. Operationalization into a testable hypothesis requires us looking for ways to observe or measure state power (perhaps size of military, defense spending, size of the economy, etc.), as well as manifestations of balancing behavior, such as states forming alliances to counter a rising power. Observing the causal logic is trickier but possible: perhaps leaders in the threatened states make statements sounding the alarm or suggesting fear of a rising adversary.

When one surveys the scholarly literature in international relations, it is no accident that many theories share noticeable commonalities: common assumptions, focus on common causes and mechanisms, common methods, and common outcomes to be explained. This is partly a reflection of the fact that good scholarship is usually built on the research of those who came before us, sometimes drawing inspiration from that work and sometimes written in critique of that work but nearly always influenced by the work of others in the discipline.

These commonalities allow us to categorize many (but not all) theories of international relations into one of several “traditions” (sometimes called “paradigms” or “lenses”) of IR. Theories within each tradition may seek to explain different outcomes with reference to different causes and mechanisms, but they tend to share common assumptions about how and why the world works the way it does—a common worldview about international

politics as it were. The three most influential traditions of international relations—realism, liberalism, and constructivism—are explored in Walt’s overview (Reading 1.1) which outlines some of the key debates, differences, and discussions among the “isms” and their neo-variants. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 of this text provide a much deeper dive into each tradition, with readings devoted to laying out the core ideas in each tradition, along with select examples of theories within the tradition. Chapter 5 presents alternative traditions in IR theory that question many of the foundations of the so-called “big three.” Though readings in chapters 6 through 8 of the book vary in the degree to which they explicitly situate themselves within a tradition, nearly all reflect the influence—whether as affirmation or opposition—of at least one of the theoretical traditions.

Thus, the theoretical traditions provide an important set of intellectual tools to aid in our attempts to understand the many puzzles of world politics. Despite the fact that much ink has been spilled in endless debates over which tradition is “better,” “right,” or offers a more “realistic” and “accurate” description of the world, this volume takes an agnostic approach that students ought to adopt as well. The reality is that no theory (or tradition) can explain everything equally well, suggesting that a single all-encompassing “General Theory of All of International Relations” is a fool’s errand. Realism offers compelling explanations for why competition and conflict are perennial characteristics of international politics yet struggles to explain many instances when states cooperate for mutual benefit. Liberalism is adept at explaining much of this cooperation, by contrast, yet fails to offer the parsimonious explanation for security competition that realism offers. Constructivism excels in areas where both realism and liberalism fail to offer compelling explanations, such as the role of ideas, identities, norms, and nonmaterial factors in influencing state behavior. Similarly, constructivism can account for the influence of nonstate actors in international politics in a way that liberalism and especially realism cannot. In the spirit of intellectual pluralism, the wise student of international relations will learn the strengths and weaknesses of each theoretical approach and understand when, where, and how to apply them most productively to answer important “why” questions about the world.

It is important to point out that this conception of theory as a tool for understanding the way the world actually works—an attempt to discover the “general laws” of the natural and social worlds—is what is known as “positivist theory.” Much of the discipline of international relations and the readings in this book take this positivist approach: our goal is to describe and explain political phenomena as they are. Other branches of political theory are labeled “normative,” theorizing about how the world *should* be based on particular normative positions. Most theories of morality and ethics in international relations fall into this category of normative theory. Interestingly, all of the major traditions in IR theory explored in chapters 2 through 5 of this book contain strands of normative theory. These normative and non-positivist approaches to theory are most pronounced in constructivist, feminist, and race-focused IR theory and are sometimes called critical or post-positivist theory.

Not only can many theories and readings in international relations be categorized by tradition, they can also be categorized by what political scientists refer to as “levels of analysis,” or what Waltz labels the three “images” in Reading 1.3. Such an approach asks at what level of generality we should focus our search for the causes of state behavior. Imagine a powerful state acting aggressively, threatening to take over a neighboring country by

force. Some theories may focus on variables related to human nature or characteristics of individual leaders to explain why states behave aggressively: maybe countries led by greedy, insecure, and paranoid leaders are more likely to start wars. Other theories may zoom out a bit and look not at individual-level variables but rather at the domestic characteristics of states, including regime type or national ideologies: maybe autocratic countries governed by militantly nationalist ideologies are more belligerent. Yet other theories might argue that it's not individual or even state-level characteristics that matter but rather the structure and nature of the international system as a whole that drives state behavior: maybe *all* powerful states have to behave aggressively in a dog-eat-dog world if they hope to survive.

In his classic work on how states make foreign policy decisions, Graham Allison (Reading 1.4) critiques explanations for state behavior that are based on strict assumptions of states as unitary rational actors that make optimum strategic decisions. Such analyses—including most realist and liberal explanations of state behavior—assume that if a state took a particular action, it must have done so with a deliberate purpose. Put another way, the state identified a problem it wished to solve and then selected the optimal policy to solve that problem. So why do states so often seem to adopt suboptimal policies that fail to solve the problems they were supposed to target? Realism, liberalism, and other variants of rational choice theory struggle to provide an answer; Allison suggests that the key to unlocking this puzzle of apparently “irrational” state behavior can be found at the domestic level.

Allison argues that by looking at how foreign policy is actually made it's possible to see why states often do things that don't always make sense or meet their strategic objectives. As such, Allison's alternative models for foreign policy making can be considered “second image” explanations, to use Waltz's terminology from Reading 1.3: they assert that if we are to understand “why states do what they do,” then we must look into the organizational and bureaucratic processes operating within the domestic political system.

One approach, the organizational process model, argues that foreign policies are not the result of an all-knowing rational state oracle calculating the best policy but rather are the output of multiple government organizations (departments, ministries, agencies, etc.) following their standard operating procedures (SOPs). As anyone who has spent any time around a large bureaucracy knows, SOPs are rarely suited to provide flexible and dynamic solutions to novel problems: “that's the way we've always done it,” after all. Additionally, foreign policy making is intensely political, even among the leading decision makers. In the Bureaucratic Politics Model, Allison reminds us that the members of a leader's cabinet are constantly jockeying for influence over policy, motivated by both personal and organizational interests. As a result, final policy decisions might not match what any rational actor (e.g., the state) would have selected on their own. Rather, they sometimes resemble Frankenstein-like political compromises that may or may not solve the problem at hand.

Readers of this book can analyze which level(s) of analysis or “image” a particular reading or theory best locates the theory's explanation for state behavior. Sometimes theories fit neatly into one bin, at other times straddling multiple levels. As with the traditions, theories at each level of analysis have strengths and weaknesses. An explanation of the Cold War rooted in a deep and richly detailed analysis of Joseph Stalin's psychology may offer a very

precise and particular explanation for Soviet foreign policy but would tell us little about the foreign policies of other leaders in other times and countries. Similarly, a domestic-level explanation focused on the ideological hostility between the authoritarian-communist USSR and the democratic-capitalist United States could explain competition between the Cold War adversaries but could not explain the bitter Sino-Soviet split between two communist dictatorships. Finally, a systemic or structural explanation might explain why the United States, USSR, and China would compete against each other regardless of their presiding leaders at a given time or domestic politics but could not explain why the liberal democracies of Western Europe would form an ever-tightening union that found common cause with America. So which level is right? It's hard to say.

The appropriate reaction to this conundrum is not to throw up our arms in exasperation and return to the beginning of this chapter where political opinions came from the gut, and one opinion is just as valid as the next because "there is no truth." Rather, the answer is to apply the social scientific method: construct theories, gather evidence, analyze the evidence, and draw conclusions about which theory or level of analysis best fits the events of the observable world. This reminds us that in the social sciences, we almost never "prove" anything beyond incontrovertible doubt; there will always be outliers, inconsistencies, and probabilistically surprising outcomes. Rather, we strive to use sound logic, thoughtful theory, and rigorous methods to dispassionately weigh the evidence of competing explanations, thereby making the world a little less puzzling than it was before.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Why should policymakers, practitioners, and citizens care about the academic study of international relations?
2. What is "theory" according to Mearsheimer and Walt (Reading 1.2)?
3. Why is it important to use theory in the study of international relations?
4. Can the study of politics really be considered "scientific"? What makes political science scientific?
5. What are some ways in which political scientists develop and test theories?
6. What are the main theoretical propositions of the IR traditions of realism, liberalism, and constructivism?
7. Waltz (Reading 1.3) argues that most IR theories of state behavior can be classified according to one of the three "images" (sometimes called level of analysis). What variables do first-image theories of IR focus on to explain state behavior? What variables explain state behavior under second- and third-image theories of IR?
8. Who or what are the key actors for each of the three decision-making models described by Allison (Reading 1.4)?

9. What are the key deficiencies in the Rational Policy Model (RPM) that necessitate the use of the Organizational Process Model (OPM) and the Bureaucratic Politics Model (BPM) to explain a state's foreign policy decisions?
10. Why, according to the OPM and the BPM, do governments sometimes take foreign policy actions that may be suboptimal solutions to the problem at hand?

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Reading 1.1

International Relations

ONE WORLD, MANY THEORIES

Stephen M. Walt

Why should policymakers and practitioners be about the scholarly study of international affairs? Those who conduct foreign policy often dismiss academic theorists (frequently, one must admit, with good reason), but there is an inescapable link between the abstract world of theory and the real world of policy. We need theories to make sense of the blizzard of information that bombards us daily. Even policymakers who are contemptuous of “theory” must rely on their own (often unstated) ideas about how the world works in order to decide what to do. It is hard to make good policy if one’s basic organizing principles are flawed; just as it is hard to construct good theories without knowing a lot about the real world. Everyone uses theories—whether he or she knows it or not—and disagreements about policy usually rest on more fundamental disagreements about the basic forces that shape international outcomes.

Take, for example, the current debate on how to respond to China. From one perspective, China’s ascent is the latest example of the tendency for rising powers to alter the global balance of power in potentially dangerous ways, especially as their growing influence makes them more ambitious. From another perspective, the key to China’s future

conduct is whether its behavior will be modified by its integration into world markets and by the (inevitable?) spread of democratic principles. From yet another viewpoint, relations between China and the rest of the world will be shaped by issues of culture and identity: Will China see itself (and be seen by others) as a normal member of the world community or a singular society that deserves special treatment?

In the same way, the debate over NATO expansion looks different depending on which theory one employs. From a “realist” perspective, NATO expansion is an effort to extend Western influence—well beyond the traditional sphere of U.S. vital interests—during a period of Russian weakness and is likely to provoke a harsh response from Moscow. From a liberal perspective, however, expansion will reinforce the nascent democracies of Central Europe and extend NATO’s conflict management mechanisms to a potentially turbulent region. A third view might stress the value of incorporating the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland within the Western security community, whose members share a common identity that has made war largely unthinkable.

No single approach can capture all the complexity of contemporary world politics. Therefore,

Source: Stephen Walt. “International Relations: One World, Many Theories.” *Foreign Policy*, Spring 1998. Person FIR, pages 5–19.

we are better off with a diverse array of competing ideas rather than a single theoretical orthodoxy. Competition between theories helps reveal their strengths and weaknesses and spurs subsequent refinements, while revealing flaws in conventional wisdom. Although we should take care to emphasize inventiveness over invective, we should welcome and encourage the heterogeneity of contemporary scholarship.

WHERE ARE WE COMING FROM?

The study of international affairs is best understood as a protracted competition between the realist, liberal, and radical traditions. Realism emphasizes the enduring propensity for conflict between states; liberalism identifies several ways to mitigate these conflictive tendencies; and the radical tradition describes how the entire system of state relations might be transformed. The boundaries between these traditions are somewhat fuzzy and a number of important works do not fit neatly into any of them, but debates within and among them have largely defined the discipline.

Realism

Realism was the dominant theoretical tradition throughout the Cold War. It depicts international affairs as a struggle for power among self-interested states and is generally pessimistic about the prospects for eliminating conflict and war. Realism dominated in the Cold War years because it provided simple but powerful explanations for war, alliances, imperialism, obstacles to cooperation, and other international phenomena, and because its emphasis on competition was consistent with the central features of the American-Soviet rivalry.

Realism is not a single theory, of course, and realist thought evolved considerably throughout the Cold War. “Classical” realists such as Hans

Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr believed that states, like human beings, had an innate desire to dominate others, which led them to fight wars. Morgenthau also stressed the virtues of the classical, multipolar, balance-of-power system and saw the bipolar rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union as especially dangerous.

By contrast, the “neorealist” theory advanced by Kenneth Waltz ignored human nature and focused on the effects of the international system. For Waltz, the international system consisted of a number of great powers, each seeking to survive. Because the system is anarchic (i.e., there is no central authority to protect states from one another), each state has to survive on its own. Waltz argued that this condition would lead weaker states to balance against, rather than bandwagon with, more powerful rivals. And contrary to Morgenthau, he claimed that bipolarity was more stable than multipolarity.

An important refinement to realism was the addition of offense defense theory, as laid out by Robert Jervis, George Quester, and Stephen Van Evera. These scholars argued that war was more likely when states could conquer each other easily. When defense was easier than offense, however, security was more plentiful, incentives to expand declined, and cooperation could blossom. And if defense had the advantage, and states could distinguish between offensive and defensive weapons, then states could acquire the means to defend themselves without threatening others, thereby dampening the effects of anarchy.

For these “defensive” realists, states merely sought to survive and great powers could guarantee their security by forming balancing alliances and choosing defensive military postures (such as retaliatory nuclear forces). Not surprisingly, Waltz and most other neorealists believed that the United States was extremely secure for most of the Cold War. Their principle fear was that it might squander its favorable position by

adopting an overly aggressive foreign policy. Thus, by the end of the Cold War, realism had moved away from Morgenthau's dark brooding about human nature and taken on a slightly more optimistic tone.

Liberalism

The principal challenge to realism came from a broad family of liberal theories. One strand of liberal thought argued that economic interdependence would discourage states from using force against each other because warfare would threaten each side's prosperity. A second strand, often associated with President Woodrow Wilson, saw the spread of democracy as the key to world peace, based on the claim that democratic states were inherently more peaceful than authoritarian states. A third, more recent theory argued that international institutions such as the International Energy Agency and the International Monetary Fund could help overcome selfish state behavior, mainly by encouraging states to forgo immediate gains for the greater benefits of enduring cooperation.

Although some liberals flirted with the idea that new transnational actors, especially the multinational corporation, were gradually encroaching on the power of states, liberalism generally saw states as the central players in international affairs. All liberal theories implied that cooperation was more pervasive than even the defensive version of realism allowed, but each view offered a different recipe for promoting it.

Radical Approaches

Until the 1980s, marxism was the main alternative to the mainstream realist and liberal traditions. Where realism and liberalism took the state system for granted, marxism offered both a different explanation for international conflict and a blueprint for fundamentally transforming the existing international order.

Orthodox marxist theory saw capitalism as the central cause of international conflict. Capitalist states battled each other as a consequence of their incessant struggle for profits and battled socialist states because they saw in them the seeds of their own destruction. Neomarxist "dependency" theory, by contrast, focused on relations between advanced capitalist powers and less developed states and argued that the former—aided by an unholy alliance with the ruling classes of the developing world—had grown rich by exploiting the latter. The solution was to overthrow these parasitic elites and install a revolutionary government committed to autonomous development.

Both of these theories were largely discredited before the Cold War even ended. The extensive history of economic and military cooperation among the advanced industrial powers showed that capitalism did not inevitably lead to conflict. The bitter schisms that divided the communist world showed that socialism did not always promote harmony. Dependency theory suffered similar empirical setbacks as it became increasingly clear that, first, active participation in the world economy was a better route to prosperity than autonomous socialist development; and, second, many developing countries proved themselves quite capable of bargaining successfully with multinational corporations and other capitalist institutions.

As marxism succumbed to its various failings, its mantle was assumed by a group of theorists who borrowed heavily from the wave of postmodern writings in literary criticism and social theory. This "deconstructionist" approach was openly skeptical of the effort to devise general or universal theories such as realism or liberalism. Indeed, its proponents emphasized the importance of language and discourse in shaping social outcomes. However, because these scholars focused initially on criticizing the mainstream paradigms but did not offer positive alternatives to them, they remained

a self-consciously dissident minority for most of the 1980s.

Domestic Politics

Not all Cold War scholarship on international affairs fit neatly into the realist, liberal, or marxist paradigms. In particular, a number of important works focused on the characteristics of states, governmental organizations, or individual leaders. The democratic strand of liberal theory fits under this heading, as do the efforts of scholars such as Graham Allison and John Steinbruner to use organization theory and bureaucratic politics to explain foreign policy behavior and those of Jervis, Irving Janis, and others, which applied social and cognitive psychology. For the most part, these efforts did not seek to provide a general theory of international behavior but to identify other factors that might lead states to behave contrary to the predictions of the realist or liberal approaches. Thus, much of this literature should be regarded as a complement to the three main paradigms rather than as a rival approach for analysis of the international system as a whole.

NEW WRINKLES IN OLD PARADIGMS

Scholarship on international affairs has diversified significantly since the end of the Cold War. Non-American voices are more prominent, a wider range of methods and theories are seen as legitimate, and new issues such as ethnic conflict, the environment, and the future of the state have been placed on the agenda of scholars everywhere.

Yet the sense of *déjà vu* is equally striking. Instead of resolving the struggle between competing theoretical traditions, the end of the Cold War has merely launched a new series of debates. Ironically, even as many societies embrace similar ideals of democracy, free markets, and human rights, the

scholars who study these developments are more divided than ever.

Realism Redux

Although the end of the Cold War led a few writers to declare that realism was destined for the academic scrap heap, rumors of its demise have been largely exaggerated.

A recent contribution of realist theory is its attention to the problem of relative and absolute gains. Responding to the institutionalists' claim that international institutions would enable states to forgo short-term advantages for the sake of greater long-term gains, realists such as Joseph Grieco and Stephen Krasner point out that anarchy forces states to worry about both the absolute gains from cooperation and the way that gains are distributed among participants. The logic is straightforward: If one state reaps larger gains than its partners, it will gradually become stronger, and its partners will eventually become more vulnerable.

Realists have also been quick to explore a variety of new issues. Barry Posen offers a realist explanation for ethnic conflict, noting that the breakup of multiethnic states could place rival ethnic groups in an anarchic setting, thereby triggering intense fears and tempting each group to use force to improve its relative position. This problem would be particularly severe when each group's territory contained enclaves inhabited by their ethnic rivals—as in the former Yugoslavia—because each side would be tempted to “cleanse” (preemptively) these alien minorities and expand to incorporate any others from their ethnic group that lay outside their borders. Realists have also cautioned that NATO, absent a clear enemy, would likely face increasing strains and that expanding its presence eastward would jeopardize relations with Russia. Finally, scholars such as Michael Mastanduno have argued that U.S. foreign policy is generally consistent with realist principles, insofar as its actions are still designed to preserve U.S. predominance and to shape a postwar order that advances American interests.

Waiting for Mr. X

The post-Cold War world still awaits its “X” article. Although many have tried, no one has managed to pen the sort of compelling analysis that George Kennan provided for an earlier era, when he articulated the theory of containment. Instead of a single new vision, the most important development in post-Cold War writings on world affairs is the continuing clash between those who believe world politics has been (or is being) fundamentally transformed and those who believe that the future will look a lot like the past.

Scholars who see the end of the Cold War as a watershed fall into two distinct groups. Many experts still see the state as the main actor but believe that the agenda of states is shifting from military competition to economic competitiveness, domestic welfare, and environmental protection. Thus, President Bill Clinton has embraced the view that “enlightened self-interest [and] shared values . . . will compel us to cooperate in more constructive ways.” Some writers attribute this change to the spread of democracy, others to the nuclear stalemate, and still others to changes in international norms.

An even more radical perspective questions whether the state is still the most important

international actor. Jessica Mathews believes that “the absolutes of the Westphalian system [of] territorially fixed states . . . are all dissolving,” and John Ruggie argues that we do not even have a vocabulary that can adequately describe the new forces that (he believes) are transforming contemporary world politics. Although there is still no consensus on the causes of this trend, the view that states are of decreasing relevance is surprisingly common among academics, journalists, and policy wonks.

Prominent realists such as Christopher Layne and Kenneth Waltz continue to give the state pride of place and predict a return to familiar patterns of great power competition. Similarly, Robert Keohane and other institutionalists also emphasize the central role of the state and argue that institutions such as the European Union and NATO are important precisely because they provide continuity in the midst of dramatic political shifts. These authors all regard the end of the Cold War as a far-reaching shift in the global balance of power but do not see it as a qualitative transformation in the basic nature of world politics.

Who is right? Too soon to tell, but the debate bears watching in the years to come.

—S.W.

The most interesting conceptual development within the realist paradigm has been the emerging split between the “defensive” and “offensive” strands of thought. Defensive realists such as Waltz, Van Evera, and Jack Snyder assumed that states had little intrinsic interest in military conquest and argued that the costs of expansion generally outweighed the benefits. Accordingly, they maintained that great power wars occurred largely because domestic groups fostered exaggerated perceptions

of threat and an excessive faith in the efficacy of military force.

This view is now being challenged along several fronts. First, as Randall Schweller notes, the neorealist assumption that states merely seek to survive “stacked the deck” in favor of the status quo because it precluded the threat of predatory revisionist states—nations such as Adolf Hitler’s Germany or Napoleon Bonaparte’s France that “value what they covet far more than what they possess” and are

willing to risk annihilation to achieve their aims. Second, Peter Liberman, in his book *Does Conquest Pay?*, uses a number of historical cases—such as the Nazi occupation of Western Europe and Soviet hegemony over Eastern Europe—to show that the benefits of conquest often exceed the costs, thereby casting doubt on the claim that military expansion is no longer cost-effective. Third, offensive realists such as Eric Labs, John Mearsheimer, and Fareed Zakaria argue that anarchy encourages all states to try to maximize their relative strength simply because no state can ever be sure when a truly revisionist power might emerge.

These differences help explain why realists disagree over issues such as the future of Europe. For defensive realists such as Van Evera, war is rarely profitable and usually results from militarism, hypernationalism, or some other distorting domestic factor. Because Van Evera believes such forces are largely absent in post-Cold War Europe, he concludes that the region is “primed for peace.” By contrast, Mearsheimer and other offensive realists believe that anarchy forces great powers to compete irrespective of their internal characteristics and that security competition will return to Europe as soon as the U.S. pacifier is withdrawn.

New Life for Liberalism

The defeat of communism sparked a round of self-congratulation in the West, best exemplified by Francis Fukuyama’s infamous claim that humankind had now reached the “end of history.” History has paid little attention to this boast, but the triumph of the West did give a notable boost to all three strands of liberal thought.

By far the most interesting and important development has been the lively debate on the “democratic peace.” Although the most recent phase of this debate had begun even before the Soviet Union collapsed, it became more influential as the number of democracies began to increase and as evidence of this relationship began to accumulate.

Democratic peace theory is a refinement of the earlier claim that democracies were inherently more peaceful than autocratic states. It rests on the belief that although democracies seem to fight wars as often as other states, they rarely, if ever, fight one another. Scholars such as Michael Doyle, James Lee Ray, and Bruce Russett have offered a number of explanations for this tendency, the most popular being that democracies embrace norms of compromise that bar the use of force against groups espousing similar principles. It is hard to think of a more influential, recent academic debate, insofar as the belief that “democracies don’t fight each other” has been an important justification for the Clinton administration’s efforts to enlarge the sphere of democratic rule.

It is therefore ironic that faith in the “democratic peace” became the basis for U.S. policy just as additional research was beginning to identify several qualifiers to this theory. First, Snyder and Edward Mansfield pointed out that states may be more prone to war when they are in the midst of a democratic transition, which implies that efforts to export democracy might actually make things worse. Second, critics such as Joanne Gowa and David Spiro have argued that the apparent absence of war between democracies is due to the way that democracy has been defined and to the relative dearth of democratic states (especially before 1945). In addition, Christopher Layne has pointed out that when democracies have come close to war in the past, their decision to remain at peace ultimately had little to do with their shared democratic character. Third, clear-cut evidence that democracies do not fight each other is confined to the post-1945 era, and, as Gowa has emphasized, the absence of conflict in this period may be due more to their common interest in containing the Soviet Union than to shared democratic principles.

Liberal institutionalists likewise have continued to adapt their own theories. On the one hand, the core claims of institutionalist theory have become more modest over time. Institutions are now said to facilitate cooperation when it is in each state’s

COMPETING PARADIGMS	REALISM	LIBERALISM	CONSTRUCTIVISM
Main Theoretical Proposition	Self-interested states compete constantly for power or security	Concern for power overridden by economic, political considerations (desire for prosperity, commitment to liberal values)	State behavior shaped by elite beliefs, collective norms, and social identities
Main Units of Analysis	States	States	Individuals (especially elites)
Main Instruments	Economic and especially military power	Varies (international institutions, economic exchange, promotion of democracy)	Ideas and discourse
Modern Theorists	Hans Morgenthau, Kenneth Waltz	Michael Doyle, Robert Keohane	Alexander Wendt, John Ruggie
Representative Modern Works	Waltz, <i>Theory of International Politics</i> Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War" (<i>International Security</i> , 1990)	Keohane, <i>After Hegemony</i> Fukuyama, "The End of History?" (<i>National Interest</i> , 1989)	Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It" (<i>International Organization</i> , 1992); Kosłowski & Kratochwil, "Understanding Changes in International Politics" (<i>International Organization</i> , 1994)
Post-Cold War Prediction	Resurgence of overt great power competition	Increased cooperation as liberal values, free markets, and international institutions spread	Agnostic because it cannot predict the content of ideas
Main Limitation	Does not account for international change	Tends to ignore the role of power	Better at describing the past than anticipating the future

interest to do so, but it is widely agreed that they cannot force states to behave in ways that are contrary to the states' own selfish interests. On the other hand, institutionalists such as John Duffield and Robert McCalla have extended the theory into

new substantive areas, most notably the study of NATO. For these scholars, NATO's highly institutionalized character helps explain why it has been able to survive and adapt, despite the disappearance of its main adversary.

The economic strand of liberal theory is still influential as well. In particular, a number of scholars have recently suggested that the “globalization” of world markets, the rise of transnational networks and nongovernmental organizations, and the rapid spread of global communications technology are undermining the power of states and shifting attention away from military security toward economics and social welfare. The details are novel but the basic logic is familiar: As societies around the globe become enmeshed in a web of economic and social connections, the costs of disrupting these ties will effectively preclude unilateral state actions, especially the use of force.

This perspective implies that war will remain a remote possibility among the advanced industrial democracies. It also suggests that bringing China and Russia into the relentless embrace of world capitalism is the best way to promote both prosperity and peace, particularly if this process creates a strong middle class in these states and reinforces pressures to democratize. Get these societies hooked on prosperity and competition will be confined to the economic realm.

This view has been challenged by scholars who argue that the actual scope of “globalization” is modest and that these various transactions still take place in environments that are shaped and regulated by states. Nonetheless, the belief that economic forces are superseding traditional great power politics enjoys widespread acceptance among scholars, pundits, and policymakers, and the role of the state is likely to be an important topic for future academic inquiry.

Constructivist Theories

Whereas realism and liberalism tend to focus on material factors such as power or trade, constructivist approaches emphasize the impact of ideas. Instead of taking the state for granted and assuming that it simply seeks to survive, constructivists regard the interests and identities of states as a highly malleable product of specific historical

processes. They pay close attention to the prevailing discourse(s) in society because discourse reflects and shapes beliefs and interests and establishes accepted norms of behavior. Consequently, constructivism is especially attentive to the sources of change, and this approach has largely replaced marxism as the preeminent radical perspective on international affairs.

The end of the Cold War played an important role in legitimating constructivist theories because realism and liberalism both failed to anticipate this event and had some trouble explaining it. Constructivists had an explanation: Specifically, former president Mikhail Gorbachev revolutionized Soviet foreign policy because he embraced new ideas such as “common security.”

Moreover, given that we live in an era where old norms are being challenged, once-clear boundaries are dissolving, and issues of identity are becoming more salient, it is hardly surprising that scholars have been drawn to approaches that place these issues front and center. From a constructivist perspective, in fact, the central issue in the post-Cold War world is how different groups conceive their identities and interests. Although power is not irrelevant, constructivism emphasizes how ideas and identities are created, how they evolve, and how they shape the way states understand and respond to their situation. Therefore, it matters whether Europeans define themselves primarily in national or continental terms, whether Germany and Japan redefine their pasts in ways that encourage their adopting more active international roles, and whether the United States embraces or rejects its identity as “global policeman.”

Constructivist theories are quite diverse and do not offer a unified set of predictions on any of these issues. At a purely conceptual level, Alexander Wendt has argued that the realist conception of anarchy does not adequately explain why conflict occurs between states. The real issue is how anarchy is understood—in Wendt’s words, “Anarchy is what states make of it.” Another strand of constructivist theory has focused on the future of the territorial

state, suggesting that transnational communication and shared civic values are undermining traditional national loyalties and creating radically new forms of political association. Other constructivists focus on the role of norms, arguing that international law and other normative principles have eroded earlier notions of sovereignty and altered the legitimate purposes for which state power may be employed. The common theme in each of these strands is the capacity of discourse to shape how political actors define themselves and their interests, and thus modify their behavior.

Domestic Politics Reconsidered

As in the Cold War, scholars continue to explore the impact of domestic politics on the behavior of states. Domestic politics are obviously central to the debate on the democratic peace, and scholars such as Snyder, Jeffrey Frieden, and Helen Milner have examined how domestic interest groups can distort the formation of state preferences and lead to suboptimal international behavior. George Downs, David Rocke, and others have also explored how domestic institutions can help states deal with the perennial problem of uncertainty, while students of psychology have applied prospect theory and other new tools to explain why decision makers fail to act in a rational fashion. [For further discussion about foreign policy decision making, please see the article by Margaret Hermann and Joe Hagan.]

The past decade has also witnessed an explosion of interest in the concept of culture, a development that overlaps with the constructivist emphasis on the importance of ideas and norms. Thus, Thomas Berger and Peter Katzenstein have used cultural variables to explain why Germany and Japan have thus far eschewed more self-reliant military policies; Elizabeth Kier has offered a cultural interpretation of British and French military doctrines in the interwar period; and Iain Johnston has traced continuities in Chinese foreign policy to a deeply rooted form of “cultural realism.” Samuel Huntington’s dire warnings about an imminent

“clash of civilizations” are symptomatic of this trend as well, insofar as his argument rests on the claim that broad cultural affinities are now supplanting national loyalties. Though these and other works define culture in widely varying ways and have yet to provide a full explanation of how it works or how enduring its effects might be, cultural perspectives have been very much in vogue during the past five years. This trend is partly a reflection of the broader interest in cultural issues in the academic world (and within the public debate as well) and partly a response to the upsurge in ethnic, nationalist, and cultural conflicts since the demise of the Soviet Union.

TOMORROW'S CONCEPTUAL TOOLBOX

While these debates reflect the diversity of contemporary scholarship on international affairs, there are also obvious signs of convergence. Most realists recognize that nationalism, militarism, ethnicity, and other domestic factors are important; liberals acknowledge that power is central to international behavior; and some constructivists admit that ideas will have greater impact when backed by powerful states and reinforced by enduring material forces. The boundaries of each paradigm are somewhat permeable, and there is ample opportunity for intellectual arbitrage.

Which of these broad perspectives sheds the most light on contemporary international affairs, and which should policymakers keep most firmly in mind when charting our course into the next century? Although many academics (and more than a few policymakers) are loath to admit it, realism remains the most compelling general frame, work for understanding international relations. States continue to pay close attention to the balance of power and to worry about the possibility of major conflict. Among other things, this enduring preoccupation with power and security explains why many Asians and Europeans are now eager

to preserve—and possibly expand—the U.S. military presence in their regions. As Czech president Vaclav Havel has warned, if NATO fails to expand, “we might be heading for a new global catastrophe . . . [which] could cost us all much more than the two world wars.” These are not the words of a man who believes that great power rivalry has been banished forever.

As for the United States, the past decade has shown how much it likes being “number one” and how determined it is to remain in a predominant position. The United States has taken advantage of its current superiority to impose its preferences wherever possible, even at the risk of irritating many of its long-standing allies. It has forced a series of one-sided arms control agreements on Russia, dominated the problematic peace effort in Bosnia, taken steps to expand NATO into Russia’s backyard, and become increasingly concerned about the rising power of China. It has called repeatedly for greater reliance on multilateralism and a larger role for international institutions but has treated agencies such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization with disdain whenever their actions did not conform to U.S. interests. It refused to join the rest of the world in outlawing the production of land mines and was politely uncooperative at the Kyoto environmental summit. Although U.S. leaders are adept at cloaking their actions in the lofty rhetoric of “world order,” naked self-interest lies behind most of them. Thus, the end of the Cold War did not bring the end of power politics, and realism is likely to remain the single most useful instrument in our intellectual toolbox.

Yet realism does not explain everything, and a wise leader would also keep insights from the rival paradigms in mind. Liberal theories identify the instruments that states can use to achieve shared interests, highlight the powerful economic forces with which states and societies must now contend, and help us understand why states may differ in their basic preferences. Paradoxically, because U.S. protection reduces the danger of regional rivalries

and reinforces the “liberal peace” that emerged after 1945, these factors may become relatively more important, as long as the United States continues to provide security and stability in many parts of the world.

Meanwhile, constructivist theories are best suited to the analysis of how identities and interests can change over time, thereby producing subtle shifts in the behavior of states and occasionally triggering far reaching but unexpected shifts in international affairs. It matters if political identity in Europe continues to shift from the nation-state to more local regions or to a broader sense of European identity, just as it matters if nationalism is gradually supplanted by the sort of “civilizational” affinities emphasized by Huntington. Realism has little to say about these prospects, and policymakers could be blind-sided by change if they ignore these possibilities entirely.

In short, each of these competing perspectives captures important aspects of world politics. Our understanding would be impoverished were our thinking confined to only one of them. The “complete diplomat” of the future should remain cognizant of realism’s emphasis on the inescapable role of power, keep liberalism’s awareness of domestic forces in mind, and occasionally reflect on constructivism’s vision of change.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

For a fair-minded survey of the realist, liberal, and marxist paradigms, see Michael Doyle’s *Ways of War and Peace* (New York, NY: Norton, 1997). A guide to some recent developments in international political thought is Doyle & G. John Ikenberry, eds., *New Thinking in International Relations Theory* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1997).

Those interested in realism should examine *The Perils of Anarchy: Contemporary Realism and International Security* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995) by Michael Brown, Sean Lynn-Jones, & Steven

Miller, eds.; “Offensive Realism and Why States Expand Their War Aims” (*Security Studies*, Summer 1997) by Eric Labs; and “Dueling Realisms” (*International Organization*, Summer 1997) by Stephen Brooks. For alternative realist assessments of contemporary world politics, see John Mearsheimer’s “Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War” (*International Security*, Summer 1990) and Robert Jervis’ “The Future of World Politics: Will It Resemble the Past?” (*International Security*, Winter 1991-92). A realist explanation of ethnic conflict is Barry Posen’s “The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict” (*Survival*, Spring 1993); an up-to-date survey of offense-defense theory can be found in “The Security Dilemma Revisited” by Charles Glaser (*World Politics*, October 1997); and recent U.S. foreign policy is explained in Michael Mastanduno’s “Preserving the Unipolar Moment: Realist Theories and U.S. Grand Strategy after the Cold War” (*International Security*, Spring 1997).

The liberal approach to international affairs is summarized in Andrew Moravcsik’s “Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics” (*International Organization*, Autumn 1997). Many of the leading contributors to the debate on the democratic peace can be found in Brown & Lynn-Jones, eds., *Debating the Democratic Peace* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996) and Miriam Elman, ed., *Paths to Peace: Is Democracy the Answer?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997). The contributions of institutionalist theory and the debate on relative gains are summarized in David Baldwin, ed., *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1993). An important critique of the institutionalist literature is Mearsheimer’s “The False Promise of International Institutions” (*International Security*, Winter 1994-95), but one should also examine the responses in the Summer 1995 issue. For applications of institutionalist theory to NATO, see John Duffield’s “NATO’s Functions after the Cold War” (*Political Science Quarterly*, Winter

1994-95) and Robert McCalla’s “NATO’s Persistence after the Cold War” (*International Organization*, Summer 1996).

Authors questioning the role of the state include Susan Strange in *The Retreat of the State: The Diffusion Power in the World Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and Jessica Mathews in “Power Shift” (*Foreign Affairs*, January/February 1997). The emergence of the state is analyzed by Hendrik Spruyt in *The Sovereign State and Its Competitors* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), and its continued importance is defended in *Globalization in Question: The International Economy and the Possibilities Governance* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996) by Paul Hirst and Grahame Thompson and *Governing the Global Economy: International Finance and the State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994) by Ethan Kapstein. Another defense (from a somewhat unlikely source) is “The World Economy: The Future of the State” (*The Economist*, September 20, 1997), and a more academic discussion of these issues is Peter Evans’ “The Eclipse of the State? Reflections on Stateness in an Era of Globalization” (*World Politics*, October 1997).

Readers interested in constructivist approaches should begin with Alexander Wendt’s “Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics” (*International Organization*, Spring 1992), while awaiting his *Social Theory International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). A diverse array of cultural and constructivist approaches may also be found in Peter Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture National Security* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1996) and Yosef Lapid & Friedrich Kratochwil, eds., *The Return of Culture and Identity in IR Theory* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1996).

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Reading 1.2

Leaving Theory Behind

WHY SIMPLISTIC HYPOTHESIS TESTING IS BAD FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt

INTRODUCTION

Theory is the lodestone in the field of International Relations (IR). Its theorists are the field's most famous and prestigious scholars. For example, the *TRIP Survey of International Relations Scholars* published in 2009 found that the three scholars “whose work has had the greatest influence on the field of IR in the past 20 years” were Robert Keohane, Kenneth Waltz, and Alexander Wendt. All three are major theorists whose reputations rest on ideas they have advanced rather than on their empirical work. Almost all of the other scholars on the list—including Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Barry Buzan, Martha Finnemore, Samuel Huntington, Robert Jervis, Peter Katzenstein, Stephen Krasner, and Susan Strange—are figures who developed ideas that have shaped the research agenda in IR and in some cases influenced policy debates (Jordan et al., 2009: 43, 45, 47).¹ Several of these individuals have done substantial empirical work to support their theories, but their core theoretical ideas account for their stature.

Moreover, virtually all of the classic IR books are theory-laden works like Hans Morgenthau's *Politics among Nations*, Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*, Thomas Schelling's *The*

Strategy of Conflict, Hedley Bull's *The Anarchical Society*, Robert Keohane's *After Hegemony*, and Alexander Wendt's *Social Theory of International Politics*, among others. The same is true regarding articles, where the landscape is dominated by well-known pieces like John Ruggie's 1982 article on “embedded liberalism” in *International Organization*, Michael Doyle's 1983 piece on “Kant, Liberal Legacies and Foreign Affairs” in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, and James Fearon's 1995 *International Organization* article on “Rationalist Explanations for War.”

Finally, a body of grand theories—or what are sometimes called the “isms”—has long shaped the study of international politics. The most prominent among them are constructivism, liberalism, Marxism, and realism. A recent article by several authors of the Teaching, Research, and International Policy (TRIP) surveys nicely summarizes the influence of these families of theory: “US graduate seminars are littered with readings that advance and critique the various “isms” in IR theory . . . Similarly, introductory IR courses and textbooks for undergraduates are often organized around these paradigms.” They add: “The view of the field as organized largely by paradigm is replicated in the classroom. . . . Together, realism and liberalism still

Source: John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt. “Leaving theory behind: why hypothesis testing has become bad for IR.” *European Journal of International Relations* 19, no. 3 (2013). Person FIR, pages 23–33.

comprise more than 40% of introductory IR course content at US universities and colleges today, according to the people who teach those classes” (Maliniak et al., 2011: 441, 444). In short, theory is paramount in the IR world.

Yet, paradoxically, the amount of serious attention IR scholars in the United States pay to theory is declining and seems likely to drop further in the years ahead. Specifically, the field is moving away from developing or carefully employing theories and instead emphasizing what we call simplistic hypothesis testing. Theory usually plays a minor role in this enterprise, with most of the effort devoted to collecting data and testing empirical hypotheses.²

This trend is reflected in the TRIP surveys. Although fewer than half of IR scholars primarily employ quantitative methods, “more articles published in the major journals employ quantitative methods than any other approach.” Indeed, “the percentage of articles using quantitative methods is vastly disproportional to the actual number of scholars who identify statistical techniques as their primary methodology.” Recent American Political Science Association (APSA) job postings in IR reveal a strong preference for candidates with methodological expertise and hardly any job postings for theorists. The TRIP survey authors suggest that a “strong bias” in favor of quantitative methods “may explain why junior scholars are increasingly trained to use statistics as their primary methodological approach” (Maliniak et al., 2011: 439, 453).

The growing emphasis on methods at the expense of theory is especially pronounced in the subfield of international political economy (IPE). Surveying its history over the past four decades, Benjamin Cohen (2010: 887) notes that “the character of what gets published in leading journals in the United States . . . has changed dramatically.” What now fills the pages of those journals is research that makes “use of the most rigorous and up-to-date statistical methodologies” (also see Oatley, 2011; Weaver et al., 2009). Theoretical debates, which once occupied such a prominent role in the IPE literature, have diminished in importance.

Indeed, some senior IR scholars now rail against the field’s grand theories. In his 2010 International Studies Association (ISA) presidential address, for example, David Lake described the “isms” as “sects” and “pathologies” that divert attention away from “studying things that matter” (Lake, 2011: 471). Thus, it is not surprising that “the percentage of non-paradigmatic research has steadily increased from 30% in 1980 to 50% in 2006” (Maliniak et al., 2011: 439). Of course, one could advocate for middle-range theories while disparaging grand theories, and indeed Lake does just that. The field is not moving in that direction, however. Nor is it paying more attention to formal or mathematically oriented theories (Bennett et al., 2003: 373–374). Instead, it is paying less attention to theories of all kinds and moving toward simplistic hypothesis testing.

This trend represents the triumph of methods over theory. In recent decades, debates about how to study IR have focused primarily on the merits of qualitative versus quantitative approaches or on the virtues of new methodological techniques. Although not without value, these disputes have diverted attention from the critical role that theory should play in guiding empirical analysis.³ This focus on methods rather than theory is not the result of a conscious, collective decision by IR scholars but is instead an unintended consequence of important structural features of the academic world.

The Road to Ruin

We believe downgrading theory and elevating hypothesis testing is a mistake. This is not to say that generating and testing hypotheses is unimportant. Done properly, it is one of the core activities of social science. Nevertheless, the creation and refinement of theory is the most important activity in this enterprise. This is especially true in IR, due to the inherent complexity and diversity of the international system and the problematic nature of much of the available data. Scholars do not have to

invent their own theory, of course, or even refine an existing theory, although these endeavors are highly prized. It is necessary, however, that social scientists have a solid grasp of theory and use it intelligently to guide their research.

Christopher Achen, a prominent methodologist, summarizes what happens when political scientists shortchange theory in favor of what he calls “dreary hypothesis-testing.” “The present state of the field is troubling,” he writes, “for all our hard work, we have yet to give most of our new statistical procedures legitimate theoretical microfoundations, and we have had difficulty with the real task of quantitative work—the discovery of reliable empirical generalizations” (Achen, 2002: 424, 443; also Braumoeller and Sartori, 2004; Schrodt, 2006, 2010; Signorino, 1999).

Theory is invaluable for many reasons. Because the world is infinitely complex, we need mental maps to identify what is important in different domains of human activity. In particular, we need theories to identify the causal mechanisms that explain recurring behavior and how they relate to each other. Finally, well-crafted theories are essential for testing hypotheses properly; seemingly sophisticated tests that are not grounded in theory are likely to produce flawed results.

Our bottom line: de-emphasizing theory and privileging hypothesis testing is not the best way to gain new knowledge about international politics. Both activities are important to scholarly progress, but more attention should be devoted to theory development and hypothesis testing should be tied more closely to theory.

Caveats

This article does not compare the merits of qualitative versus quantitative methods, or argue that qualitative methods are better suited to studying IR. Rather, we argue that theory must play a central role in guiding the research process, regardless of how the theory is tested. We focus primarily on quantitative research because so much of the

work in the field now uses this approach. But our arguments apply with equal force to qualitative research and there are numerous examples of qualitative scholarship that devote insufficient attention to theory. Our main concern, in short, is the relationship between theory and empirical work, not the relative merits of quantitative or qualitative approaches.

Nor do we make the case here for any particular IR theory. Although we both work in the realist tradition, we think many kinds of theory—including middle-range theory—can be useful for helping us understand how international politics works. In our view, a diverse theoretical ecosystem is preferable to an intellectual monoculture.

We recognize that the existing body of IR theory contains significant defects, and we are far from nostalgic about some bygone “Golden Age” where brilliant theorists roamed the earth. There is much work to be done to clarify our existing stock of theories and develop better ones. Nonetheless, we believe progress in the field depends primarily on developing and using theory in sophisticated ways.

We have not read every recent article that tests hypotheses, of course; the current literature is too vast to permit such an exercise. We have read widely, however, and we asked experts who work in the hypothesis-testing tradition to direct us to the best works in this genre. We have also studied assessments of the field that have leveled criticisms similar to ours. The problems we identify are clearly no secret, and some efforts have been made to address them. Contemporary IR research continues to neglect theory, however, and this trend does not bode well for the future of the field.

Regarding epistemology, we focus on so-called positivist approaches to doing IR. Accordingly, we do not discuss critical theory, interpretivism, hermeneutics, and some versions of constructivism. This omission is due in part to space limitations, but also because our focus is on IR in America, where positivism predominates. As the authors of the TRIP surveys note, “IR in the United States is overwhelmingly positivist” (Maliniak et al., 2011: 439, 455).

There is more epistemological variety outside the United States, especially in Europe, and less emphasis on simplistic hypothesis testing.

In sum: this article is not a *cri de coeur* by two grumpy realists who are opposed to hypothesis testing in general and quantitative analysis in particular. To make our position perfectly clear: we regard hypothesis testing as a core component of good social science. Our point is that this activity must be guided by a sophisticated knowledge of theory and that contemporary IR scholarship is neglecting this requirement.

Our argument is organized as follows. We begin by describing what theories are, why they are essential, and how they should be tested. We also explore the important distinction between scientific realism and instrumentalism, which distinguishes our approach from that of many other positivists. Then we describe simplistic hypothesis testing and the problems that arise from its cursory attention to theory.

Next we consider why IR is moving in this direction despite the significant problems this approach encourages. In this discussion, we explore how the growing emphasis on hypothesis testing makes IR scholarship less relevant for debates in the policy world. Finally, we offer some suggestions on how IR scholars might be encouraged to place more emphasis on theory. It will be difficult to reverse present trends, however, unless the field proves more open to revision than we suspect is the case.

THEORY AND SOCIAL SCIENCE

What Is a Theory?

Theories are simplified pictures of reality. They explain how the world works in particular domains. In William James's famous phrase, the world around us is one of "blooming, buzzing confusion": infinitely complex and difficult to comprehend. To make sense of it we need theories, which is to say we need to decide which factors matter most. This

step requires us to leave many factors out because they are deemed less important for explaining the phenomena under study. By necessity, theories make the world comprehensible by zeroing in on the most important factors.

Theories, in other words, are like maps. Both aim to simplify a complex reality so we can grasp it better. A highway map of the United States, for example, might include major cities, roads, rivers, mountains, and lakes. But it would leave out many less prominent features, such as individual trees, buildings, or the rivets on the Golden Gate Bridge. Like a theory, a map is an abridged version of reality.

Unlike maps, however, theories provide a causal story. Specifically, a theory says that one or more factors can explain a particular phenomenon. Again, theories are built on simplifying assumptions about which factors matter the most for explaining how the world works. For example, realist theories generally hold that balance-of-power considerations can account for the outbreak of great-power wars and that domestic politics has less explanatory power. Many liberal theories, by contrast, argue the opposite.

The component parts of a theory are sometimes referred to as concepts or variables. A theory says how these key concepts are defined, which involves making assumptions about the key actors. Theories also identify how independent, intervening, and dependent variables fit together, which enables us to infer testable hypotheses (i.e., how the concepts are expected to covary). Most importantly, a theory *explains* why a particular hypothesis should be true, by identifying the causal mechanisms that produce the expected outcome(s). Those mechanisms—that are often unobservable—are supposed to reflect what is actually happening in the real world.

Theories provide general explanations, which means they apply across space and time. Social science theories are not universal, however; they apply only to particular realms of activity or to specific time periods. The scope of a theory can also vary significantly. Grand theories such as realism

or liberalism purport to explain broad patterns of state behavior, while so-called middle-range theories focus on more narrowly defined phenomena like economic sanctions, coercion, and deterrence.

No social science theory explains every relevant case. There will always be a few cases that contradict even our best theories. The reason is simple: a factor omitted from a theory because it normally has little impact occasionally turns out to have significant influence in a particular instance. When this happens, the theory's predictive power is reduced.

Theories vary enormously in their completeness and the care with which they are constructed. In a well-developed theory, the assumptions and key concepts are carefully defined, and clear and rigorous statements stipulate how those concepts relate to each other. The relevant causal mechanisms are well specified, as are the factors that are excluded from the theory. Well-developed theories are falsifiable and offer non-trivial explanations. Finally, such theories yield unambiguous predictions and specify their boundary conditions.

By contrast, casual or poorly developed theories, or what are sometimes called folk theories, are stated in a cursory way. Key concepts are not well defined and the relations between them—to include the causal mechanisms—are loosely specified. The domino theory, which was so influential during the Cold War, is a good example of a folk theory. In our view, much of the hypothesis testing that is done in IR today employs casual or incomplete theories.

Our conception of theory applies with equal force to formal theories, which employ the language of mathematics, and non-formal theories, which use ordinary language. Theories are ultimately acts of imagination and the language in which they are expressed—be it mathematical notation or words—matters less than whether the theory offers important insights into a particular realm of IR. The key criterion is whether the theory has explanatory power, not whether it is formal or non-formal.

On Epistemology: Scientific Realism Versus Instrumentalism

To make our views on theory crystal clear, some brief words about epistemology are in order. As some readers have probably recognized, our perspective is that of scientific realism.⁴ Theories, for us, comprise statements that accurately reflect how the world operates. They involve entities and processes that exist in the real world. Accordingly, the assumptions that underpin the theory must accurately reflect—or at least reasonably approximate—particular aspects of political life. Assumptions, we believe, can be shown to be right or wrong and theories should rest on realistic assumptions. They are not “useful fictions” that help generate interesting theories, as some social scientists claim. For scientific realists, a rational actor assumption makes sense only if the relevant agents in the real world behave strategically. Otherwise, the resulting theory will not have much explanatory power.

Furthermore, the causal story that underpins the theory must also reflect reality. In other words, the causal mechanisms that help produce the actual phenomenon being studied must operate in practice the way they are described in the theory. Of course, there will be unobservable as well as observable mechanisms at play in most theories. Just think about the importance of gravity, an unobservable mechanism that is central to our understanding of the universe. Or consider the role that insecurity plays in many international relations theories. We cannot measure insecurity directly, because it is a mental state we cannot observe. But scholars can often detect evidence of its presence in what leaders do and say. Scientific realists believe that those unobservables must accurately reflect reality for the theory to perform well. In short, not only must a theory's predictions be confirmed by empirical observation, but the observed results must also occur *for the right reasons*, i.e. via the causal logics that flow from the theory's realistic microfoundations.

The main alternative epistemology is instrumentalism. It maintains that a theory's assumptions do not have to conform to reality. Indeed, Milton Friedman (1953) famously asserted that the *less* a theory's assumptions reflect reality, the more powerful that theory is likely to be. In this view, assumptions are simply useful fictions that help generate theories. For example, instrumentalists do not care if actors are rational or not, so long as assuming rationality produces theories that generate accurate predictions. In other words, the utility of a theory's assumptions is determined solely by whether its predictions are confirmed.

Instrumentalists dismiss the idea that theories contain causal mechanisms that reflect what is actually happening in the real world. Their perspective is largely driven by the belief that nothing is gained by focusing on unobservable mechanisms, which are often at the center of the causal process (Chakravartty, 2011: 4). For instrumentalists, science is all about measuring observables, which in turn encourages hypothesis testing.

Instrumentalists recognize that theories should contain clearly defined concepts and be logically consistent. They care about a theory's causal logic insofar as they want to tell a coherent story. But they do not believe that the causal process depicted in a theory necessarily reflects reality.⁵ As Paul MacDonald (2003: 555) observes, "instrumentalists are simply treating theories as devices that generate hypotheses," where the value of the theory is determined solely by whether the hypotheses are confirmed.

We believe scientific realism is the more convincing epistemology. Instrumentalists ask us to believe that a theory can generate accurate predictions even if its assumptions and causal story are at odds with reality. As MacDonald (2003: 554) notes, "If a theoretical assumption is a fiction, it is unlikely to be empirically useful unless it generates hypotheses that are right for the wrong reasons." Or as Hilary Putnam famously says, unless it produces a "miracle" (1975: 73). By definition, theories exclude a vast number of factors and employ

simplifying assumptions about the relevant actors. But a good theory must still offer an accurate—albeit abstracted or simplified—portrayal of the real world. Maps by necessity simplify reality, but a roadmap that placed Chicago east of Boston would not be useful. Theories will produce sound hypotheses and useful explanations only if their components accurately reflect the real world.

How Are Theories Tested?

There are three ways to evaluate a theory. The first is to inspect its logical soundness. Logical consistency is a prized quality in any theory, even though some valuable theories had logical flaws that were resolved over time.⁶

The second method is covariation, which is where hypothesis testing comes in. Given a theory that says A causes B, the objective is to examine the available evidence to determine whether A and B covary. Correlation is not causation, however, which means that it is necessary to show that A is causing B and not the other way around. It is also necessary to show that some omitted factor C is not causing both A and B. To deal with these issues, researchers rely on various techniques of causal inference, which specify how to draw conclusions about cause and effect from the observed data. In essence, causal inference is correlational analysis, using careful research design and appropriate control variables to tease out the independent causal effects of A on B.⁷

The third way to test a theory is process tracing. Here the aim is to determine whether a theory's causal mechanisms are actually operating in the real world in the manner it depicts.⁸ In other words, if a theory maintains that A leads to B for a particular reason, then it should be possible to collect evidence to determine whether that is true. For example, some scholars maintain that democracies do not fight each other because they share a commitment to peaceful resolution of disputes; if so, there should be evidence that whenever two democracies were on the brink of war with each

other, they refrained from fighting for that reason (Layne, 1994). In essence, process tracing focuses on examining the accuracy of the explanations that underpin a theory's main predictions.

Process tracing is fundamentally different from the first method, which seeks to determine whether a theory is logically consistent. With process tracing, the aim is to examine the empirical performance of the theory's explanatory logic. In that regard, it is similar to hypothesis testing, which is also concerned with assessing empirical performance.

All three methods are valid ways of assessing theories; in fact, they complement each other. In a perfect world, one would employ all of them, but that approach is not always practical. The methods a scholar uses depend on the nature of the puzzle, the availability of relevant evidence, and his or her own comparative advantage.

In contrast to our view, instrumentalists do not believe that process tracing is a useful way to test theories. For them, making sure a theory is logical and testing its predictions are the only valid ways to assess its worth. It is therefore unsurprising that scholars who rely on statistics to evaluate hypotheses often embrace an instrumentalist epistemology, for what matters is simply whether the independent and dependent variables covary as predicted.

As noted above, no social science theory is 100% accurate. But if a theory is tested against a large number of cases and can account for most of them, our confidence in it increases. If a theory makes one false prediction but others hold up well, we still regard it as useful. Also, a weak theory can sometimes become more useful because conditions in the real world change. For example, the theory that economic interdependence discourages war may be more valid today than it was in the past because globalization has made it more costly for major powers to fight each other (Brooks, 2007).

Finally, how we think about any theory is ultimately a function of how it compares with its competitors. If we know a theory is flawed but do not have a better one, it makes sense to stick with

it despite its defects, because we cannot function without some sort of theory to guide us. A weak theory is better than no theory at all, and flawed theories often provide the point of departure for devising new and better ones.⁹

The Virtues of Theory

Theory is important for many reasons. First, theories provide overarching frameworks—the “big picture”—of what is happening in myriad realms of activity. There is simply no way to understand an infinitely complex world just by collecting facts. Carl von Clausewitz (1976: 145, 577–578) saw this clearly: “Anyone who thought it necessary or even useful to begin the education of a future general with a knowledge of all the details has always been scoffed at as a ridiculous pedant.” He goes on to say, “No activity of the human mind is possible without a certain stock of ideas.” In other words, we need theories.

Theories, in short, provide economical explanations for a wide array of phenomena. They help us interpret what we observe and tie different hypotheses together, making them more than just a piecemeal collection of findings. This is why economists group theories into schools of thought such as Keynesianism, monetarism, rational expectations, behavioral economics, etc. IR scholars array their theories as “isms” for much the same reason.

Although theory is necessary in every realm of life, the more complicated and diverse the realm, the more dependent we are on mental maps to help us navigate the terrain. IR should place a high value on theory, therefore, because it seeks to make sense of an especially large and complex universe. As David Lake (2011: 467) notes, “International studies deals with the largest and most complicated social system possible.” This complexity, he points out, accounts in part for “the diverse range of research traditions” in the field. Moreover, IR scholars cannot assume that findings obtained in one context will apply in a different one, unless they can invoke a theory that explains why seemingly

diverse contexts are sufficiently similar. For these reasons, IR is more dependent on theory than other fields in political science or the social sciences more generally.

Second, powerful theories can revolutionize our thinking. They transform our understanding of important issues and explain puzzles that made little sense before the theory was available. Consider Charles Darwin's impact on how people thought about the origins of the human species and countless other phenomena. Before Darwin published his seminal work on evolution, most people believed that God played the key role in creating humankind. Darwin's theory undermined that view and caused many people to change their thinking about God, religion, and the nature of life itself.

On a lesser scale, consider the phenomenon of free-riding, which plagues many types of collective action. This seemingly puzzling form of behavior was clarified when Mancur Olson (1965) and others explained why free-riding is perfectly rational in many circumstances. This new knowledge also alters subsequent behavior, for once people understand Olson's logic, their incentive to free-ride increases. A handful of separate and well-verified hypotheses would have had far less impact than a simple and powerful theory like Darwin's or Olson's.

Third, theory enables prediction, which is essential for the conduct of our daily lives, for policymaking, and for advancing social science. Each of us is constantly making decisions with future consequences and trying to determine the best strategy for achieving desired goals. Simply put, we are trying to predict the future. But because many aspects of the future are unknown, we must rely on theories to predict what is likely to happen if we choose one strategy over another.

Fourth, as should be clear from the previous discussion, theory is essential for diagnosing policy problems and making policy decisions. Government officials often claim that theory is an academic concern and irrelevant for policymaking, but this view is mistaken. In fact, policymakers have to rely on

theory because they are trying to shape the future, which means that they are making decisions they hope will lead to some desired outcome. In short, they are interested in cause and effect, which is what theory is all about. Policymakers cannot make decisions without at least some vague theory to tell them what results to expect. As Robert Dahl notes: "To be concerned with policy is to focus on the attempt to produce intended effects. Hence policy-thinking is and must be causality-thinking."¹⁰

Fifth, theory is crucial for effective policy evaluation (Chen, 1990). A good theory identifies indicators we can use to determine whether a particular initiative is working, because criteria for evaluation are embedded within it. For example, if one's theory of counterinsurgency suggests that the key to victory is killing large numbers of insurgents, body counts are an obvious benchmark for assessing progress. But if one's theory of victory identifies winning hearts and minds as the key to success, then reliable public opinion polls would be a better indicator. In short, effective policy evaluation depends on good theory.

Sixth, our stock of theories informs retrodiction: theory enables us to look at the past in different ways and better understand our history (Trachtenberg, 2006: ch. 2). For example, the democratic peace hypothesis was barely recognized before the early 1980s, but scholars have subsequently used it to account for periods of peace reaching far back into the past (Doyle, 1983; Weart, 1998). Similarly, the "cult of the offensive" interpretation of the origins of World War I (Lynn-Jones, 1995; Van Evera, 1984) did not exist before the creation of offense-defense theory in the mid-1970s. Of course, we can also test a new theory by asking what the historical record should show if it is correct. Lastly, new theories by definition provide alternative ways of explaining past events, and thus provide tools for critiquing existing historical accounts.

Seventh, theory is especially helpful when facts are sparse. In the absence of reliable information, we have little choice but to rely on theory to guide our analysis. As Jack Snyder (1984/1985) noted

during the Cold War, the dearth of reliable facts about the Soviet Union made it necessary to rely on theory to understand what was going on inside that closed society. There is always the danger, however, that one might apply a familiar theory to a situation for which it is not applicable. Yet, when reliable information is at a premium, we are forced to rely more heavily on theory.

Theory can be particularly valuable for understanding novel situations, where we have few historical precedents to guide our thinking. For example, the invention of nuclear weapons in 1945 created a new set of strategic problems that led to the invention of deterrence theory and other related ideas (Kaplan, 1983: ch. 6; Wohlstetter, 1959). Similarly, novel environmental challenges helped inspire Elinor Ostrom's Nobel Prize-winning work on managing natural resources more effectively (Ostrom, 1990). Lastly, the advent of unipolarity requires us to devise new theories to explain how this new configuration of power will affect world politics (Ikenberry et al., 2011; Monteiro, 2011/2012; Wohlforth, 1999).

Eighth, as discussed at greater length below, theory is critical for conducting valid empirical tests. Hypothesis testing depends on having a well-developed theory; otherwise, any tests we perform are likely to be of limited value. In particular, our stock of theories can suggest causal factors that scholars might not have recognized and thus omitted from their analyses. Furthermore, theories are essential for defining key concepts, operationalizing them, and constructing suitable data sets. One must have a clear understanding of the theory being tested in order to know whether the things being measured or counted accurately reflect the concepts of interest.¹¹

In sum, social science consists of developing and testing theory. Both activities are essential to the enterprise. There are two possible dangers, therefore: (1) theorizing that pays too little attention to testing; and (2) empirical tests that pay too little attention to theory. Because any discipline must perform both activities, the key issue is finding the optimal balance between them. As we will now show, the balance in IR has shifted away from theory and toward simplistic hypothesis testing, to the detriment of the field.

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NOTES

1. Four different TRIP surveys have asked IR scholars to identify the "best," "most interesting," or "most influential" work in the field. There is considerable

overlap in the responses and well-known theorists dominate the lists (see Maliniak et al., 2007: 17–19; 2012: 48–50; Peterson et al., 2005: 19–21).

2. The authors of the TRIP surveys note that there has been a “dramatic decline of atheoretic work from 47% in 1980 to 7% in 2006” (Maliniak et al., 2011: 445). This finding reflects the fact that almost all contemporary IR scholars pay some homage to theory in their work. Our point, however, is that theory usually plays a minor role.
3. This is sometimes true for scholars who favor qualitative methods as well (see Bennett and Elman, 2007; Moravcsik, 2010).
4. Despite similar names, scientific realism and the realist approach to international relations are wholly distinct. The former is a school of thought in epistemology; the latter is an approach to international politics. Thus, one could be a “scientific realist” and reject realism in IR, or vice versa. On the differences between scientific realism and instrumentalism, see MacDonald (2003: 551–565; also see Chakravartty, 2011; Clarke and Primo, 2007: 741–753; George and Bennett, 2004: ch. 7; Johnson, 2010).
5. Achen and Snidal (1989: 164) illustrate instrumentalism in their characterization of deterrence theory: “Rational deterrence theory is agnostic about the actual calculations decision makers undertake. It holds that they will act as if they solve certain mathematical problems whether or not they actually solve them. Just as Steffi Graf plays tennis as if she did rapid computations in Newtonian physics . . . so rational deterrence theory predicts that decision makers will decide whether to go to war as if they did expected utility calculations. But they need not actually perform them.”
6. Some scholars maintain that formal theory is especially well suited for producing logically consistent arguments (see Bueno de Mesquita and Morrow, 1999: 56–60). Yet they admit that non-formal theories can also be logically consistent and the use of mathematics does not prevent logical mistakes. Indeed, complicated mathematical proofs can be less accessible and more difficult to verify. As Melvyn Nathanson (2009: 9) observes: “the more elementary the proof, the easier it is to check and the more reliable is its verification.” And we would argue that creativity and originality are more important than mere logical consistency (see Walt, 1999: 116–118).
7. Although measuring covariation is usually identified with large-*N* research, it is also possible with qualitative research or case studies (see King et al., 1994).
8. On causal mechanisms, see George and Bennett (2004: ch. 10), Hedstrom and Ylikoski (2010), Johnson (2010), Mahoney (2001), Waldner (2007), and Van Evera (1997: 64–67).
9. For example, Thomas Schelling’s influential ideas about compellence do not fare well when tested empirically. Nonetheless, scholars such as Wallace J. Thies and Robert A. Pape began with Schelling’s ideas when fashioning their own theories of military coercion (see Pape, 1996; Schelling, 1966; Thies, 1980)
10. Quoted in Dessler (1991: 349).
11. Theory is not necessary for identifying puzzles that can lead scholars to invent new hypotheses. Sometimes, researchers observe something in the data that no theory can explain, so they try to come up with a story to account for it. Existing theories help scholars identify these anomalies, however, whenever what they are observing runs counter to their beliefs about how the world works. Scholars can also use hypothesis tests to determine which of two competing theories is most promising, even if the theories themselves are not well developed. A good example of this sort of work is Shapiro and Weidmann (2012).

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Reading 1.3

Man, the State, and War

A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

Kenneth N. Waltz

INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT AND HUMAN BEHAVIOR

The First Image

*There is deceit and cunning and from these
wars arise.*

—Confucius

According to the first image of international relations, the locus of the important causes of war is found in the nature and behavior of man. Wars result from selfishness, from misdirected aggressive impulses, from stupidity. Other causes are secondary and have to be interpreted in the light of these factors. If these are the primary causes of war, then the elimination of war must come through uplifting and enlightening men or securing their psychic-social readjustment. This estimate of causes and cures has been dominant in the writings of many serious students of human affairs from Confucius to present-day pacifists. It is the leitmotif of many modern behavioral scientists as well.¹

Prescriptions associated with first-image analyses need not be identical in content, as a few examples will indicate. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, moved to poetic expression by a visit to the arsenal at Springfield, set down the following thoughts:

Were half the power that fills the world with
terror,

Were half the wealth bestowed on camps and
courts,

Given to redeem the human mind from error,

There were no need of arsenals or forts.

Implicit in these lines is the idea that the people will insist that the right policies be adopted if only they know what the right policies are. Their instincts are good, though their present gullibility may prompt them to follow false leaders. By attributing present difficulties to a defect in knowledge, education becomes the remedy for war. The idea is widespread. . . . By others, increasing the chances of peace has been said to require not so much a change in “instincts” as a channeling of energies

Source: Kenneth N. Waltz. *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis*. Columbia University Press, 2001. Handler CCR, pages 29–32.

that are presently expended in the destructive folly of war. If there were something that men would rather do than fight, they would cease to fight altogether. Aristophanes saw the point. If the women of Athens would deny themselves to husbands and lovers, their men would have to choose between the pleasures of the couch and the exhilarating experiences of the battlefield. Aristophanes thought he knew the men, and women, of Athens well enough to make the outcome a foregone conclusion. William James was in the same tradition. War, in his view, is rooted in man's bellicose nature, which is the product of centuries-old tradition. His nature cannot be changed or his drives suppressed, but they can be diverted. . . .

The prescriptions vary, but common to them all is the thought that in order to achieve a more peaceful world men must be changed, whether in their moral-intellectual outlook or in their psychic-social behavior. One may, however, agree with the first-image analysis of causes without admitting the possibility of practicable prescriptions for their removal. Among those who accept a first-image explanation of war there are both optimists and pessimists, those who think the possibilities of progress so great that wars will end before the next generation is dead and those who think that wars will continue to occur though by them we may all die. . . .

The evilness of men, or their improper behavior, leads to war; individual goodness, if it could be universalized, would mean peace: this is a summary statement of the first image. For the pessimists peace is at once a goal and a utopian dream, but others have taken seriously the presumption that a reform of individuals sufficient to bring lasting peace to the world is possible. Men are good; therefore no social or political problems—is this a true statement? Would the reform of individuals, if realized, cure social and political ills? The difficulty obviously lies in the word "good." How is "good" to be defined? "Those

people are good who spontaneously act in perfect harmony with one another." This is a tautological definition but nevertheless a revealing one. What first-image analysts, optimists and pessimists alike, have done is: (1) to notice conflict, (2) to ask themselves why conflict occurs, and (3) to pin the blame on one or a small number of behavior traits. First-image optimists betray a naïveté in politics that vitiates their efforts to construct a new and better world. Their lack of success is directly related to a view of man that is simple and pleasing, but wrong. First-image pessimists have expertly dismantled the air castles of the optimists but have had less success in their endeavors to build the serviceable but necessarily uninspiring dwellings that must take their place. They have countered a theory of politics built on an optimistic definition of man's capabilities by pointing out that men are not what most pacifists and many liberals think them.

INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT AND THE INTERNAL STRUCTURE OF STATES

The Second Image

However conceived in an image of the world, foreign policy is a phase of domestic policy, an inescapable phase.

—Charles Beard, *A Foreign Policy for America*

The first image did not exclude the influence of the state, but the role of the state was introduced as a consideration less important than, and to be explained in terms of, human behavior. According to the first image, to say that the state acts is to speak metonymically. We say that the state acts when we mean that the people in it act, just as we say that the pot boils when we mean that the water in it boils. The preceding [section] concentrated on the contents rather than the container; the present

[section] alters the balance of emphasis in favor of the latter. To continue the figure: water running out of a faucet is chemically the same as water in a container, but once the water is in a container, it can be made to “behave” in different ways. It can be turned into steam and used to power an engine, or, if the water is sealed in and heated to extreme temperatures, it can become the instrument of a destructive explosion. Wars would not exist were human nature not what it is, but neither would Sunday schools and brothels, philanthropic organizations and criminal gangs. Since everything is related to human nature, to explain anything one must consider more than human nature. The events to be explained are so many and so varied that human nature cannot possibly be the single determinant. . . .

To understand war and peace, political analysis must be used to supplement and order the findings of psychology and sociology. What kind of political analysis is needed? For possible explanations of the occurrence or nonoccurrence of war, one can look to international politics (since war occurs among states), or one can look to the states themselves (since it is in the name of the state that the fighting is actually done). The former approach is postponed; according to the second image, the internal organization of states is the key to understanding war and peace.

One explanation of the second-image type is illustrated as follows. War most often promotes the internal unity of each state involved. The state plagued by internal strife may then, instead of waiting for the accidental attack, seek the war that will bring internal peace. Bodin saw this clearly, for he concludes that “the best way of preserving a state, and guaranteeing it against sedition, rebellion, and civil war is to keep the subjects in amity one with another, and to this end, to find an enemy against whom they can make common cause.” . . .

The use of internal defects to explain those external acts of the state that bring war can take many forms. Such explanation may be related to a type of government that is thought to be generically bad. For example, it is often thought that

the deprivations imposed by despots upon their subjects produce tensions that may find expression in foreign adventure. Or the explanation may be given in terms of defects in a government not itself considered bad. Thus it has been argued that the restrictions placed upon a government in order to protect the prescribed rights of its citizens act as impediments to the making and executing of foreign policy. These restrictions, laudable in original purpose, may have the unfortunate effect of making difficult or impossible the effective action of that government for the maintenance of peace in the world.² And, as a final example, explanation may be made in terms of geographic or economic deprivations or in terms of deprivations too vaguely defined to be labeled at all. Thus a nation may argue that it has not attained its “natural” frontiers, that such frontiers are necessary to its security, that war to extend the state to its deserved compass is justified or even necessary.³ The possible variations on this theme have been made familiar by the “have-not” arguments so popular in this century. Such arguments have been used both to explain why “deprived” countries undertake war and to urge the satiated to make the compensatory adjustments thought necessary if peace is to be perpetuated.⁴ . . .

INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT AND INTERNATIONAL ANARCHY

The Third Image

With many sovereign states, with no system of law enforceable among them, with each state judging its grievances and ambitions according to the dictates of its own reason or desire—conflict, sometimes leading to war, is bound to occur. To achieve a favorable outcome from such conflict a state has to rely on its own devices, the relative efficiency of which must be its constant concern. This, the idea of the third image, is to be examined in the present [section]. It is not an esoteric idea; it is not

a new idea. Thucydides implied it when he wrote that it was “the growth of the Athenian power, which terrified the Lacedaemonians and forced them into war.”⁵ John Adams implied it when he wrote to the citizens of Petersburg, Virginia, that “a war with France, if just and necessary, might wean us from fond and blind affections, which no Nation ought ever to feel towards another, as our experience in more than one instance abundantly testifies.”⁶ There is an obvious relation between the concern over relative power position expressed by Thucydides and the admonition of John Adams that love affairs between states are inappropriate and dangerous. This relation is made explicit in Frederick Dunn’s statement that “so long as the notion of self-help persists, the aim of maintaining the power position of the nation is paramount to all other considerations.”⁷

In anarchy there is no automatic harmony. The three preceding statements reflect this fact. A state will use force to attain its goals if, after assessing the prospects for success, it values those goals more than it values the pleasures of peace. Because each state is the final judge of its own cause, any state may at any time use force to implement its policies. Because any state may at any time use force, all states must constantly be ready either to counter force with force or to pay the cost of weakness. The requirements of state action are, in this view, imposed by the circumstances in which all states exist.

In a manner of speaking, all three images are a part of nature. So fundamental are man, the state, and the state system in any attempt to understand international relations that seldom does an analyst, however wedded to one image, entirely overlook the other two. Still, emphasis on one image may distort one’s interpretation of the others. It is, for example, not uncommon to find those inclined to see the world in terms of either the first or the second image countering the oft-made argument that arms breed not war but security, and possibly even peace, by pointing out that the argument is a

compound of dishonest myth—to cover the interests of politicians, armament makers, and others—and honest illusion entertained by patriots sincerely interested in the safety of their states. To dispel the illusion, Cobden, to recall one of the many who have argued this way, once pointed out that doubling armaments, if everyone does it, makes no state more secure and, similarly, that none would be endangered if all military establishments were simultaneously reduced by, say, 50 percent.⁸ Putting aside the thought that the arithmetic is not necessarily an accurate reflection of what the situation would be, this argument illustrates a supposedly practical application of the first and second images. Whether by educating citizens and leaders of the separate states or by improving the organization of each of them, a condition is sought in which the lesson here adumbrated becomes the basis for the policies of states. The result?—disarmament, and thus economy, together with peace, and thus security, for all states. If some states display a willingness to pare down their military establishments, other states will be able to pursue similar policies. In emphasizing the interdependence of the policies of all states, the argument pays heed to the third image. The optimism is, however, the result of ignoring some inherent difficulties. . . .

The present [section] provides a basic explanation of the third image of international relations. That there is still important ground to cover is made clear by two points. First, there is no obvious logical relation between the proposition that “in anarchy there is no automatic harmony” and the proposition that “among autonomous states *war* is inevitable,” both of which were put forth in this [reading]. Second, although it has by now become apparent that there is a considerable interdependence among the three images, we have not systematically considered the problem of interrelating them.

NOTES

1. They are discussed at length in ch. iii, below.
2. Cf. Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins*, pp. 67–68, 102, 126, 133–36, 272, and especially 931; and Secretary of State Hay's statement in Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*, p. 374. Note that in this case the fault is one that is thought to decrease the ability of a country to implement a peaceful policy. In the other examples, the defect is thought to increase the propensity of a country to go to war.
3. Cf. Bertrand Russell, who in 1917 wrote: "There can be no good international system until the boundaries of states coincide as nearly as possible with the boundaries of nations." *Political Ideals*, p. 146.
4. Cf. Simonds and Emeny, *The Great Powers in World Politics*, passim; Thompson, *Danger Spots in World Population*, especially Preface, chs. i, xiii.
5. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, tr. Jowett, Book I, par. 23.
6. Letter of John Adams to the citizens of the town of Petersburg, dated June 6, 1798, and reprinted in the program for the visit of William Howard Taft, Petersburg, Va., May 19, 1909.
7. Dunn, *Peaceful Change*, p. 13.
8. Cobden, especially his *Speeches on Peace, Financial Reform, Colonial Reform, and Other Subjects Delivered during 1849*, p. 135.

Reading 1.4

Conceptual Models and the Cuban Missile Crisis

Graham T. Allison

The Cuban Missile Crisis is a seminal event. For thirteen days of October 1962, there was a higher probability that more human lives would end suddenly than ever before in history.

Improved understanding of this crisis depends in part on more information and more probing analyses of available evidence. To contribute to these efforts is part of the purpose of this study. But here the missile crisis serves primarily as grist for a more general investigation.

This study proceeds from the premise that marked improvement in our understanding of such events depends critically on more self-consciousness about what observers bring to the analysis. What each analyst sees and judges to be important is a function not only of the evidence about what happened but also of the “conceptual lenses” through which he looks at the evidence. The principal purpose of this essay is to explore some of the fundamental assumptions and categories employed by analysts in thinking about problems of governmental behavior, especially in foreign and military affairs.

The general argument can be summarized in three propositions:

1. Analysts think about problems of foreign and military policy in terms of largely implicit conceptual models that have

significant consequences for the content of their thought.¹

2. Most analysts explain (and predict) the behavior of national governments in terms of various forms of one basic conceptual model, here titled the Rational Policy Model (Model I).²

In terms of this conceptual model, analysts attempt to understand happenings as the more or less purposive acts of unified national governments. For these analysts, the point of an explanation is to show how the nation or government could have chosen the action in question, given the strategic problem that it faced. For example, in confronting the problem posed by the Soviet installation of missiles in Cuba, Rational Policy Model analysts attempt to show how this was a reasonable act from the point of view of the Soviet Union, given Soviet strategic objectives.

¹ In attempting to understand problems of foreign affairs, analysts engage in a number of related, but logically separable enterprises: (a) description, (b) explanation, (c) prediction, (d) evaluation, and (e) recommendation. This essay focuses primarily on explanation (and by implication, prediction).

² Earlier drafts of this argument have aroused heated arguments concerning proper names for these models. To choose names from ordinary language is to court confusion, as well as familiarity. Perhaps it is best to think of these models as I, II, and III.

Source: Allison, Graham. “Conceptual Models and the Cuban Missile Crisis.” *American Political Science Review* Vol. 63, No. 3 (Sep., 1969) (selections).

3. Two “alternative” conceptual models, here labeled an Organizational Process Model (Model II) and a Bureaucratic Politics Model (Model III) provide a base for improved explanation and prediction.

Although the standard frame of reference has proved useful for many purposes, there is powerful evidence that it must be supplemented, if not supplanted, by frames of reference which focus upon the large organizations and political actors involved in the policy process. Model I's implication that important events have important causes, i.e., that monoliths perform large actions for big reasons, must be balanced by an appreciation of the facts (a) that monoliths are black boxes covering various gears and levers in a highly differentiated decision-making structure, and (b) that large acts are the consequences of innumerable and often conflicting smaller actions by individuals at various levels of bureaucratic organizations in the service of a variety of only partially compatible conceptions of national goals, organizational goals, and political objectives. Recent developments in the field of organization theory provide the foundation for the second model. According to this organizational process model, what Model I categorizes as “acts” and “choices” are instead *outputs* of large organizations functioning according to certain regular patterns of behavior. Faced with the problem of Soviet missiles in Cuba, a Model II analyst identifies the relevant organizations and displays the patterns of organizational behavior from which this action emerged. The third model focuses on the internal politics of a government. Happenings in foreign affairs are understood, according to the bureaucratic politics model, neither as choices nor as outputs. Instead, what happens is categorized as *outcomes* of various overlapping bargaining games among players arranged hierarchically in the national government. In confronting the problem posed by Soviet missiles in Cuba, a Model III analyst displays the perceptions, motivations, positions,

power, and maneuvers of principal players from which the outcome emerged.³

MODEL I: RATIONAL POLICY

Rational Policy Model Illustrated

How do analysts attempt to explain the Soviet emplacement of missiles in Cuba? The most widely cited explanation of this occurrence has been produced by two RAND Sovietologists, Arnold Horelick and Myron Rush.⁴ They conclude that “the introduction of strategic missiles into Cuba was motivated chiefly by the Soviet leaders’ desire to overcome . . . the existing large margin of U.S.

³ In strict terms, the “outcomes” which these three models attempt to explain are essentially actions of national governments, i.e., the sum of activities of all individuals employed by a government relevant to an issue. These models focus not on a state of affairs, i.e., a full description of the world, but upon national decision and implementation. This distinction is stated clearly by Harold and Margaret Sprout, “Environmental Factors on the Study of International Politics,” in James Rosenau (ed.), *International Politics and Foreign Policy* (Glencoe, IL, 1961), p. 116. This restriction excludes explanations offered principally in terms of international systems theories. Nevertheless, this restriction is not severe, since few interesting explanations of occurrences in foreign policy have been produced at that level of analysis. According to David Singer, “The nation state—our primary actor in international relations . . . is clearly the traditional focus among Western students and is the one which dominates all of the texts employed in English-speaking colleges and universities.” David Singer, “The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations,” Klaus Knorr and Sidney Verba (eds.), *The International System* (Princeton, 1961). Similarly, Richard Brody’s review of contemporary trends in the study of international relations finds that “scholars have come increasingly to focus on acts of nations. That is, they all focus on the behavior of nations in some respect. Having an interest in accounting for the behavior of nations in common, the prospects for a common frame of reference are enhanced.”

⁴ Arnold Horelick and Myron Rush, *Strategic Power and Soviet Foreign Policy* (Chicago, 1965). Based on A. Horelick, “The Cuban Missile Crisis: An Analysis of Soviet Calculations and Behavior,” *World Politics* (April, 1964).

strategic superiority.⁷⁵ How do they reach this conclusion? In Sherlock Holmes style, they seize several salient characteristics of this action and use these features as criteria against which to test alternative hypotheses about Soviet objectives. For example, the size of the Soviet deployment and the simultaneous emplacement of more expensive, more visible intermediate range missiles as well as medium range missiles, it is argued, exclude an explanation of the action in terms of Cuban defense—since that objective could have been secured with a much smaller number of medium-range missiles alone. Their explanation presents an argument for one objective that permits interpretation of the details of Soviet behavior as a value-maximizing choice.

What is striking about these examples from the literature of foreign policy and international relations are the similarities among analysts of various styles when they are called upon to produce explanations. Each assumes that what must be explained is an action, i.e., the realization of some purpose or intention. Each assumes that the actor is the national government. Each assumes that the action is chosen as a calculated response to a strategic problem. For each, explanation consists of showing what goal the government was pursuing in committing the act and how this action was a reasonable choice, given the nation's objectives. This set of assumptions characterizes the rational policy model.

Most contemporary analysts (as well as laymen) proceed predominantly—albeit most often implicitly—in terms of this model when attempting to explain happenings in foreign affairs. Indeed, that occurrences in foreign affairs are the *acts of nations* seems so fundamental to thinking about such problems that this underlying model has rarely been recognized: to explain an occurrence in foreign policy simply means to show how the government could have rationally chosen that action.⁶

⁵ Horelick and Rush, *Strategic Power and Soviet Foreign Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p. 154.

⁶ The larger study examines several exceptions to this generalization. Sidney Verba's excellent essay "Assumptions of Rationality and Non-Rationality in Models of the International

RATIONAL POLICY PARADIGM

I. Basic Unit of Analysis: Policy as National Choice

Happenings in foreign affairs are conceived as actions chosen by the nation or national government.⁷ Governments select the action that will maximize strategic goals and objectives. These "solutions" to strategic problems are the fundamental categories in terms of which the analyst perceives what is to be explained.

II. Organizing Concepts

- A. *National Actor.* The nation or government, conceived as a rational, unitary decisionmaker, is the agent. This actor has one set of specified goals (the equivalent of a consistent utility function), one set of perceived options, and a single estimate of the consequences that follow from each alternative.
- B. *The Problem.* Action is chosen in response to the strategic problem which the nation faces. Threats and opportunities arising in the "international strategic market place" move the nation to act.
- C. *Static Selection.* The sum of activity of representatives of the government relevant to a problem constitutes what the nation

System" is less an exception than it is an approach to a somewhat different problem. Verba focuses upon models of rationality and irrationality of individual statesmen: in Knorr and Verba, *The International System*.

⁷ Though a variant of this model could easily be stochastic, this paradigm is stated in non-probabilistic terms. In contemporary strategy, a stochastic version of this model is sometimes used for predictions; but it is almost impossible to find an explanation of an occurrence in foreign affairs that is consistently probabilistic. Analogies between Model I and the concept of explanation developed by R. G. Collingwood, William Dray, and other "revisionists" among philosophers concerned with the critical philosophy of history are not accidental. For a summary of the "revisionist position" see Maurice Mandelbaum, "Historical Explanation: The Problem of Covering Laws," *History and Theory* (1960).

has chosen as its “solution.” Thus the action is conceived as a steady-state choice among alternative outcomes (rather than, for example, a large number of partial choices in a dynamic stream).

D. *Action as Rational Choice.* The components include

1. *Goals and Objectives.* National security and national interests are the principal categories in which strategic goals are conceived. Nations seek security and a range of further objectives. (Analysts rarely translate strategic goals and objectives into an explicit utility function; nevertheless, analysts do focus on major goals and objectives and trade off side effects in an intuitive fashion.)
2. *Options.* Various courses of action relevant to a strategic problem provide the spectrum of options.
3. *Consequences.* Enactment of each alternative course of action will produce a series of consequences. The relevant consequences constitute benefits and costs in terms of strategic goals and objectives.
4. *Choice.* Rational choice is value maximizing. The rational agent selects the alternative whose consequences rank highest in terms of his goals and objectives.

III. Dominant Inference Pattern

This paradigm leads analysts to rely on the following pattern of inference: if a nation performed a particular action, that nation must have had ends toward which the action constituted an optimal means. The rational policy model’s explanatory power stems from this inference pattern. Puzzlement is relieved by revealing the purposive pattern within which the occurrence can be located as a value-maximizing means.

IV. General Propositions

The disgrace of political science is the infrequency with which propositions of any generality are formulated and tested. “Paradigmatic analysis” argues for explicitness about the terms in which analysis proceeds, and seriousness about the logic of explanation. Simply to illustrate the kind of propositions on which analysts who employ this model rely, the formulation includes several.

The basic assumption of value-maximizing behavior produces propositions central to most explanations. The general principle can be formulated as follows: the likelihood of any particular action results from a combination of the nation’s (1) relevant values and objectives, (2) perceived alternative courses of action, (3) estimates of various sets of consequences (which will follow from each alternative), and (4) net valuation of each set of consequences. This yields two propositions.

- A. An increase in the cost of an alternative, i.e., a reduction in the value of the set of consequences which will follow from that action, or a reduction in the probability of attaining fixed consequences, reduces the likelihood of that alternative being chosen.
- B. A decrease in the costs of an alternative, i.e., an increase in the value of the set of consequences which will follow from that alternative, or an increase in the probability of attaining fixed consequences, increases the likelihood of that action being chosen.

MODEL II: ORGANIZATIONAL PROCESS

For some purposes, governmental behavior can be usefully summarized as action chosen by a unitary, rational decisionmaker: centrally controlled, completely informed, and value maximizing. But this simplification must not be allowed to conceal the fact that a “government” consists of a conglomerate of semi-feudal, loosely allied organizations, each with a substantial life of its own. Government

leaders do sit formally, and to some extent in fact, on top of this conglomerate. But governments perceive problems through organizational sensors. Governments define alternatives and estimate consequences as organizations process information. Governments act as these organizations enact routines. Government behavior can therefore be understood according to a second conceptual model, less as deliberate choices of leaders and more as *outputs* of large organizations functioning according to standard patterns of behavior.

To be responsive to a broad spectrum of problems, governments consist of large organizations among which primary responsibility for particular areas is divided. Each organization attends to a special set of problems and acts in quasi-independence on these problems. But few important problems fall exclusively within the domain of a single organization. Thus government behavior relevant to any important problem reflects the independent output of several organizations, partially coordinated by government leaders. Government leaders can substantially disturb, but not substantially control, the behavior of these organizations.

To perform complex routines, the behavior of large numbers of individuals must be coordinated. Coordination requires standard operating procedures: rules according to which things are done. Assured capability for reliable performance of action that depends upon the behavior of hundreds of persons requires established “programs.” Indeed, if the eleven members of a football team are to perform adequately on any particular down, each player must not “do what he thinks needs to be done” or “do what the quarterback tells him to do.” Rather, each player must perform the maneuvers specified by a previously established play which the quarterback has simply called in this situation.

At any given time, a government consists of *existing* organizations, each with a *fixed* set of standard operating procedures and programs. The behavior of these organizations—and consequently of the government—relevant to an issue

in any particular instance is, therefore, determined primarily by routines established in these organizations prior to that instance. But organizations do change. Learning occurs gradually, over time. Dramatic organizational change occurs in response to major crises. Both learning and change are influenced by existing organizational capabilities.

The characterization of government action as organizational output differs distinctly from Model I. Attempts to understand problems of foreign affairs in terms of this frame of reference should produce quite different explanations.⁸

ORGANIZATIONAL PROCESS PARADIGM⁹

I. Basic Unit of Analysis: Policy as Organizational Output

The happenings of international politics are, in three critical senses, outputs of organizational

⁸The influence of organizational studies upon the present literature of foreign affairs is minimal. Specialists in international politics are not students of organization theory. Organization theory has only recently begun to study organizations as decisionmakers and has not yet produced behavioral studies of national security organizations from a decision-making perspective. It seems unlikely, however, that these gaps will remain unfilled much longer. Considerable progress has been made in the study of the business firm as an organization. Scholars have begun applying these insights to government organizations, and interest in an organizational perspective is spreading among institutions and individuals concerned with actual government operations. The “decision-making” approach represented by Richard Snyder, R. Bruck, and B. Sapin, *Foreign Policy Decision-Making* (Glencoe, Illinois, 1962), incorporates a number of insights from organization theory.

⁹The formulation of this paradigm is indebted both to the orientation and insights of Herbert Simon and to the behavioral model of the firm stated by Richard Cyert and James March, *A Behavioral Theory of the Firm* (Englewood Cliffs, 1963). Here, however, one is forced to grapple with the less routine, less quantified functions of the less differentiated elements in government organizations.

processes. First, the actual occurrences are organizational outputs.

Government leaders' decisions trigger organizational routines. Government leaders can trim the edges of this output and exercise some choice in combining outputs. But the mass of behavior is determined by previously established procedures. Second, existing organizational routines for employing present physical capabilities constitute the effective options open to government leaders confronted with any problem.

The fact that fixed programs (equipment, men, and routines which exist at the particular time) exhaust the range of buttons that leaders can push is not always perceived by these leaders. But in every case, it is critical for an understanding of what is actually done. Third, organizational outputs structure the situation within the narrow constraints of which leaders must contribute their "decision" concerning an issue. Outputs raise the problem, provide the information, and make the initial moves that color the face of the issue that is turned to the leaders. As Theodore Sorensen has observed, "Presidents rarely, if ever, make decisions—particularly in foreign affairs—in the sense of writing their conclusions on a clean slate . . . The basic decisions, which confine their choices, have all too often been previously made."¹⁰ If one understands the structure of the situation and the face of the issue—which are determined by the organizational outputs—the formal choice of the leaders is frequently anticlimactic.

II. Organizing Concepts

A. *Organizational Actors.* The actor is not a monolithic "nation" or "government" but rather a constellation of loosely allied organizations on top of which government leaders sit. This constellation acts only

¹⁰ Theodore Sorensen, "You Get to Walk to Work," *New York Times Magazine*, March 19, 1967.

as component organizations perform routines.¹¹

- B. *Factored Problems and Fractionated Power.* Surveillance of the multiple facets of foreign affairs requires that problems be cut up and parceled out to various organizations. To avoid paralysis, primary power must accompany primary responsibility. But if organizations are permitted to do anything, a large part of what they do will be determined within the organization. Thus each organization perceives problems, processes information, and performs a range of actions in quasi-independence (within broad guidelines of national policy).
- C. *Parochial Priorities, Perceptions, and Issues.* Primary responsibility for a narrow set of problems encourages organizational parochialism. These tendencies are enhanced by a number of additional factors: (1) selective information available to the organization, (2) recruitment of personnel into the organization, (3) tenure of individuals in the organization, (4) small group pressures within the organization, and (5) distribution of rewards by the organization. Thus organizations develop relatively stable propensities concerning operational priorities, perceptions, and issues.
- D. *Action as Organizational Output.* The preeminent feature of organizational activity is its programmed character: the extent to which behavior in any particular case is an enactment of preestablished

¹¹ Organizations are not monolithic. The proper level of disaggregation depends upon the objectives of a piece of analysis. This paradigm is formulated with reference to the major organizations that constitute the U.S. government. Generalization to the major components of each department and agency should be relatively straightforward.

routines. In producing outputs, the activity of each organization is characterized by

1. *Goals: Constraints Defining Acceptable Performance.* The operational goals of an organization are seldom revealed by formal mandates. Rather, each organization's operational goals emerge as a set of constraints defining acceptable performance. Central among these constraints is organizational health, defined usually in terms of bodies assigned and dollars appropriated. The set of constraints emerges from a mix of expectations and demands of other organizations in the government, statutory authority, demands from citizens and special interest groups, and bargaining within the organization.
2. *Sequential Attention to Goals.* The existence of conflict among operational constraints is resolved by the device of sequential attention. As a problem arises, the subunits of the organization most concerned with that problem deal with it in terms of the constraints they take to be most important. When the next problem arises, another cluster of subunits deals with it, focusing on a different set of constraints.
3. *Standard Operating Procedures.* Organizations perform their "higher" functions, such as attending to problem areas, monitoring information, and preparing relevant responses for likely contingencies, by doing "lower" tasks, for example, preparing budgets, producing reports, and developing hardware. Reliable performance of these tasks requires standard operating procedures (hereafter SOPs). Since procedures are "standard," they do not change quickly or easily. Without these standard procedures, it would not be possible to perform certain concerted tasks. But because of standard procedures, organizational behavior in particular instances often appears unduly formalized, sluggish, or inappropriate.
4. *Programs and Repertoires.* Organizations must be capable of performing actions in which the behavior of large numbers of individuals is carefully coordinated. Assured performance requires clusters of rehearsed SOPs for producing specific actions, fighting enemy units or answering an embassy's cable. Each cluster comprises a "program" (in the terms both of drama and computers), which the organization has available for dealing with a situation. The list of programs relevant to a type of activity, fighting, constitutes an organizational repertoire. The number of programs in a repertoire is always quite limited. When properly triggered, organizations execute programs; programs cannot be substantially changed in a particular situation. The more complex the action and the greater the number of individuals involved, the more important are programs and repertoires as determinants of organizational behavior.
5. *Uncertainty Avoidance.* Organizations do not attempt to estimate the probability distribution of future occurrences. Rather, organizations avoid uncertainty. By arranging a *negotiated environment*, organizations regularize the reactions of other actors with whom they have to deal. The primary environment, relations with other organizations that comprise the government, is stabilized by such

arrangements as agreed budgetary splits, accepted areas of responsibility, and established conventional practices.

6. *Problem-directed Search.* Where situations cannot be construed as standard, organizations engage in search. The style of search and the solution are largely determined by existing routines. Organizational search for alternative courses of action is problem oriented: it focuses on the atypical discomfort that must be avoided. It is simpleminded: the neighborhood of the symptom is searched first; then, the neighborhood of the current alternative. Patterns of search reveal biases which in turn reflect such factors as specialized training or experience and patterns of communication.
7. *Organizational Learning and Change.* The parameters of organizational behavior mostly persist. In response to nonstandard problems, organizations search and routines evolve, assimilating new situations. Thus learning and change follow in large part from existing procedures. But marked changes in organizations do sometimes occur. Conditions in which dramatic changes are more likely include (1) Periods of budgetary feast. Typically, organizations devour budgetary feasts by purchasing additional items on the existing shopping list. Nevertheless, if committed to change, leaders who control the budget can use extra funds to effect changes. (2) Periods of prolonged budgetary famine. Though a single year's famine typically results in few changes in organizational structure but a loss of effectiveness in performing some programs, prolonged famine forces major retrenchment.

(3) Dramatic performance failures. Dramatic change occurs (mostly) in response to major disasters. Confronted with an undeniable failure of procedures and repertoires, authorities outside the organization demand change, existing personnel are less resistant to change, and critical members of the organization are replaced by individuals committed to change.

- E. *Central Coordination and Control.* Action requires decentralization of responsibility and power. But problems lap over the jurisdictions of several organizations. Thus the necessity for decentralization runs headlong into the requirement for coordination. Both the necessity for coordination and the centrality of foreign policy to national welfare guarantee the involvement of government leaders in the procedures of the organizations among which problems are divided and power shared. Each organization's propensities and routines can be disturbed by government leaders' intervention. Central direction and persistent control of organizational activity, however, is not possible.
- F. *Decisions of Government Leaders.* Organizational persistence does not exclude shifts in governmental behavior. For government leaders sit atop the conglomerate of organizations. Many important issues of governmental action require that these leaders decide what organizations will play out which programs where.

III. Dominant Inference Pattern

If a nation performs an action of this type today, its organizational components must yesterday have been performing (or have had established routines

for performing) an action only marginally different from this action. At any specific point in time, a government consists of an established conglomerate of organizations, each with existing goals, programs, and repertoires. The characteristics of a government's action in any instance follows from those established routines, and from the choice of government leaders—on the basis of information and estimates provided by existing routines—among existing programs. The best explanation of an organization's behavior at t is $t - 1$; the prediction of $t + 1$ is t . Model II's explanatory power is achieved by uncovering the organizational routines and repertoires that produced the outputs that comprise the puzzling occurrence.

IV. General Propositions

A number of general propositions have been stated above. In order to illustrate clearly the type of proposition employed by Model II analysts, this section formulates several more precisely.

A. *Organizational Action.* Activity according to SOPs and programs does not constitute far-sighted, flexible adaptation to "the issue" (as it is conceived by the analyst). Detail and nuance of actions by organizations are determined predominantly by organizational routines, not government leaders' directions.

1. SOPs constitute routines for dealing with *standard* situations. Routines allow large numbers of ordinary individuals to deal with numerous instances, day after day, without considerable thought, by responding to basic stimuli. But this regularized capability for adequate performance is purchased at the price of standardization. If the SOPs are appropriate, average performance, i.e., performance averaged over the range of cases, is better than it would

be if each instance were approached individually (given fixed talent, timing, and resource constraints). But specific instances, particularly critical instances that typically do not have "standard" characteristics, are often handled sluggishly or inappropriately.

2. A program, i.e., a complex action chosen from a short list of programs in a repertoire, is rarely tailored to the specific situation in which it is executed. Rather, the program is (at best) the most appropriate of the programs in a previously developed repertoire.
3. Since repertoires are developed by parochial organizations for standard scenarios defined by that organization, programs available for dealing with a particular situation are often ill-suited.

B. *Limited Flexibility and Incremental Change.*

Major lines of organizational action are straight, i.e., behavior at one time is marginally different from that behavior at $t - 1$. Simpleminded predictions work best: Behavior at $t + 1$ will be marginally different from behavior at the present time.

C. *Administrative Feasibility.* Adequate explanation, analysis, and prediction must include administrative feasibility as a major dimension. A considerable gap separates what leaders choose (or might rationally have chosen) and what organizations implement.

1. Organizations are blunt instruments. Projects that require several organizations to act with high degrees of precision and coordination are not likely to succeed.
2. Projects that demand that existing organizational units depart from their accustomed functions and perform

previously unprogrammed tasks are rarely accomplished in their designed form.

3. Government leaders can expect that each organization will do its “part” in terms of what the organization knows how to do.
4. Government leaders can expect incomplete and distorted information from each organization concerning its part of the problem.
5. Where an assigned piece of a problem is contrary to the existing goals of an organization, resistance to implementation of that piece will be encountered.

MODEL III: BUREAUCRATIC POLITICS

The leaders who sit on top of organizations are not a monolithic group. Rather, each is, in his own right, a player in a central, competitive game. The name of the game is bureaucratic politics: bargaining along regularized channels among players positioned hierarchically within the government. Government behavior can thus be understood according to a third conceptual model not as organizational outputs but as outcomes of bargaining games. In contrast with Model I, the bureaucratic politics model sees no unitary actor but rather many actors as players, who focus not on a single strategic issue but on many diverse intranational problems as well, in terms of no consistent set of strategic objectives but rather according to various conceptions of national, organizational, and personal goals, making government decisions not by rational choice but by the pulling and hauling that is politics.

The apparatus of each national government constitutes a complex arena for the intranational game. Political leaders at the top of this apparatus plus the men who occupy positions on top of the critical organizations form the circle of central

players. Ascendancy to this circle assures some independent standing. The necessary decentralization of decisions required for action on the broad range of foreign policy problems guarantees that each player has considerable discretion. Thus power is shared.

The nature of problems of foreign policy permits fundamental disagreement among reasonable men concerning what ought to be done. Analyses yield conflicting recommendations. Separate responsibilities laid on the shoulders of individual personalities encourage differences in perceptions and priorities. But the issues are of first order importance. What the nation does really matters. A wrong choice could mean irreparable damage. Thus responsible men are obliged to fight for what they are convinced is right.

Men share power. Men differ concerning what must be done. The differences matter. This milieu necessitates that policy be resolved by politics. What the nation does is sometimes the result of the triumph of one group over others. More often, however, different groups pulling in different directions yield a resultant distinct from what anyone intended. What moves the chess pieces is not simply the reasons which support a course of action, or the routines of organizations which enact an alternative, but the power and skill of proponents and opponents of the action in question.

This characterization captures the thrust of the bureaucratic politics orientation. If problems of foreign policy arose as discreet issues, and decisions were determined one game at a time, this account would suffice. But most “issues,” e.g., Vietnam or the proliferation of nuclear weapons, emerge piecemeal, over time, one lump in one context, a second in another. Hundreds of issues compete for players’ attention every day. Each player is forced to fix upon his issues for that day, fight them on their own terms, and rush on to the next. Thus the character of emerging issues and the pace at which the game is played converge to yield government “decisions” and “actions” as collages. Choices by one player, outcomes of minor games, outcomes of

central games, and foul-ups—these pieces, when stuck to the same canvas, constitute government behavior relevant to an issue.

BUREAUCRATIC POLITICS PARADIGM¹²

I. Basic Unit of Analysis: Policy as Political Outcome

The decisions and actions of governments are essentially intranational political outcomes: outcomes in the sense that what happens is not chosen as a solution to a problem but rather results from compromise, coalition, competition, and confusion among government officials who see different faces of an issue; political in the sense that the activity from which the outcomes emerge is best characterized as bargaining. Following Wittgenstein's use of the concept of a "game," national behavior in international affairs can be conceived as outcomes of intricate and subtle, simultaneous, overlapping games among players located in positions, the hierarchical arrangement of which constitutes

¹² This paradigm relies upon the small group of analysts who have begun to fill the gap. My primary source is the model implicit in the work of Richard E. Neustadt, though his concentration on presidential action has been generalized to a concern with policy as the outcome of political bargaining among a number of independent players, the President amounting to no more than a "superpower" among many lesser but considerable powers. As Warner Schilling argues, the substantive problems are of such inordinate difficulty that uncertainties and differences with regard to goals, alternatives, and consequences are inevitable. This necessitates what Roger Hilsman describes as the process of conflict and consensus building. The techniques employed in this process often resemble those used in legislative assemblies, though Samuel Huntington's characterization of the process as "legislative" overemphasizes the equality of participants as opposed to the hierarchy which structures the game. Moreover, whereas for Huntington, foreign policy (in contrast to military policy) is set by the executive, this paradigm maintains that the activities which he describes as legislative are characteristic of the process by which foreign policy is made.

the government.¹³ These games proceed neither at random nor at leisure. Regular channels structure the game. Deadlines force issues to the attention of busy players. The moves in the chess game are thus to be explained in terms of the bargaining among players with separate and unequal power over particular pieces and with separable objectives in distinguishable subgames.

II. Organizing Concepts

A. *Players in Positions.* The actor is neither a unitary nation nor a conglomerate of organizations but rather a number of individual players. Groups of these players constitute the agent for particular government decisions and actions. Players are men in jobs.

Individuals become players in the national security policy game by occupying a critical position in an administration. For example, in the U.S. government the players include "Chiefs": the President, Secretaries of State, Defense, and Treasury, Director of the CIA, Joint Chiefs of Staff, and, since 1961, the Special Assistant for National

¹³ The theatrical metaphor of stage, roles, and actors is more common than this metaphor of games, positions, and players. Nevertheless, the rigidity connoted by the concept of "role" both in the theatrical sense of actors reciting fixed lines and in the sociological sense of fixed responses to specified social situations makes the concept of games, positions, and players more useful for this analysis of active participants in the determination of national policy. Objections to the terminology on the grounds that "game" connotes non-serious play overlook the concept's application to most serious problems both in Wittgenstein's philosophy and in contemporary game theory. Game theory typically treats more precisely structured games, but Wittgenstein's examination of the "language game" wherein men use words to communicate is quite analogous to this analysis of the less specified game of bureaucratic politics. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, and Thomas Schelling, "What is Game Theory?" in James Charlesworth, *Contemporary Political Analysis*.

Security Affairs;¹⁴ “Staffers”: the immediate staff of each Chief; “Indians”: the political appointees and permanent government officials within each of the departments and agencies; and “*Ad Hoc* Players”: actors in the wider government game (especially “Congressional Influentials”), members of the press, spokesmen for important interest groups (especially the “bipartisan foreign policy establishment” in and out of Congress), and surrogates for each of these groups. Other members of the Congress, press, interest groups, and public form concentric circles around the central arena—circles which demarcate the permissive limits within which the game is played.

Positions define what players both may and must do. The advantages and handicaps with which each player can enter and play in various games stems from his position. So does a cluster of obligations for the performance of certain tasks. The two sides of this coin are illustrated by the position of the modern Secretary of State. First, in form and usually in fact, he is the primary repository of political judgment on the political-military issues that are the stuff of contemporary foreign policy; consequently, he is a senior personal advisor to the President. Second, he is the colleague of the President’s other senior advisors on the problems of foreign policy, the Secretaries of Defense and Treasury, and the Special Assistant for National Security Affairs. Third, he is the ranking U.S. diplomat for serious negotiation. Fourth, he serves as an Administration voice to Congress, the country, and the world. Finally, he is “Mr. State Department” or “Mr. Foreign Office,” “leader of officials, spokesman for their causes, guardian of their interests,

¹⁴ Inclusion of the President’s Special Assistant for National Security Affairs in the tier of “Chiefs” rather than among the “Staffers” involves a debatable choice. In fact he is both super-staffer and near-chief. His position has no statutory authority. He is especially dependent upon good relations with the President and the Secretaries of Defense and State. Nevertheless, he stands astride a genuine action-channel. The decision to include this position among the Chiefs reflects my judgment that the Bundy function is becoming institutionalized.

judge of their disputes, superintendent of their work, master of their careers.”¹⁵ But he is not first one, and then the other. All of these obligations are his simultaneously. His performance in one affects his credit and power in the others. The perspective stemming from the daily work which he must oversee—the cable traffic by which his department maintains relations with other foreign offices—conflicts with the President’s requirement that he serve as a generalist and coordinator of contrasting perspectives. The necessity that he be close to the President restricts the extent to which, and the force with which, he can front for his department. When he defers to the Secretary of Defense rather than fighting for his department’s position—as he often must—he strains the loyalty of his officialdom. The Secretary’s resolution of these conflicts depends not only upon the position but also upon the player who occupies the position.

For players are also people. Men’s metabolisms differ. The core of the bureaucratic politics mix is personality. How each man manages to stand the heat in his kitchen, each player’s basic operating style, and the complementarity or contradiction among personalities and styles in the inner circles are irreducible pieces of the policy blend. Moreover, each person comes to his position with baggage in tow, including sensitivities to certain issues, commitments to various programs, and personal standing and debts with groups in the society.

B. *Parochial Priorities, Perceptions, and Issues.* Answers to the questions “What is the issue?” and “What must be done?” are colored by the position from which the questions are considered. For the factors which encourage organizational parochialism also influence the players who occupy positions on top of (or within) these organizations. To motivate members

¹⁵ Richard E. Neustadt, Testimony, United States Senate, Committee on Government Operations, Subcommittee on National Security Staffing, Administration of National Security, March 26, 1963, pp. 82–83.

of his organization, a player must be sensitive to the organization's orientation.

- C. *Interests, Stakes, and Power.* Games are played to determine outcomes. But outcomes advance and impede each player's conception of the national interest, specific programs to which he is committed, the welfare of his friends, and his personal interests. These overlapping interests constitute the stakes for which games are played. Each player's ability to play successfully depends upon his power. Power, i.e., effective influence on policy outcomes, is an elusive blend of at least three elements: bargaining advantages (drawn from formal authority and obligations, institutional backing, constituents, expertise, and status), skill and will in using bargaining advantages, and other players' perceptions of the first two ingredients. Power wisely invested yields an enhanced reputation for effectiveness. Unsuccessful investment depletes both the stock of capital and the reputation. Thus each player must pick the issues on which he can play with a reasonable probability of success. But no player's power is sufficient to guarantee satisfactory outcomes. Each player's needs and fears run to many other players. What ensues is the most intricate and subtle of games known to man.
- D. *The Problem and the Problems.* "Solutions" to strategic problems are not derived by detached analysts focusing coolly on *the* problem. Instead, deadlines and events raise issues in games and demand decisions of busy players in contexts that influence the face the issue wears. The problems for the players are both narrower and broader than *the* strategic problem. For each player focuses not on the total strategic problem but rather on

the decision that must be made now. But each decision has critical consequences not only for the strategic problem but for each player's organizational, reputational, and personal stakes. Thus the gap between the problems the player was solving and the problem upon which the analyst focuses is often very wide.

- E. *Action-Channels.* Bargaining games do not proceed randomly. Action-channels, i.e., regularized ways of producing action concerning types of issues, structure the game by preselecting the major players, determining their points of entrance into the game, and distributing particular advantages and disadvantages for each game. Most critically, channels determine "who's got the action," that is, which department's Indians actually do whatever is chosen. Weapon procurement decisions are made within the annual budgeting process; embassies' demands for action cables are answered according to routines of consultation and clearance from State to Defense and White House; requests for instructions from military groups (concerning assistance all the time, concerning operations during war) are composed by the military in consultation with the Office of the Secretary of Defense, State, and White House; crisis responses are debated among White House, State, Defense, CIA, and Ad Hoc players; major political speeches, especially by the President but also by other Chiefs, are cleared through established channels.
- F. *Action as Politics.* Government decisions are made and government actions emerge neither as the calculated choice of a unified group nor as a formal summary of leaders' preferences. Rather the context of shared power but separate judgments concerning important choices determines

that politics is the mechanism of choice. Thus, most players come to fight to “make the government do what is right.” The strategies and tactics employed are quite similar to those formalized by theorists of international relations.

- G. *Streams of Outcomes*. Important government decisions or actions emerge as collages composed of individual acts, outcomes of minor and major games, and foul-ups. Outcomes which could never have been chosen by an actor and would never have emerged from bargaining in a single game over the issue are fabricated piece by piece. Understanding of the outcome requires that it be disaggregated.

III. Dominant Inference Pattern

If a nation performed an action, that action was the *outcome* of bargaining among individuals and groups within the government. That outcome included *results* achieved by groups committed to a decision or action, *resultants* which emerged from bargaining among groups with quite different positions and *foul-ups*. Model III's explanatory power is achieved by revealing the pulling and hauling of various players, with different perceptions and priorities, focusing on separate problems, which yielded the outcomes that constitute the action in question.

IV. General Propositions

1. *Action and Intention*. Action does not presuppose intention. The sum of behavior of representatives of a government relevant to an issue was rarely intended by any individual or group. Rather separate individuals with different intentions contributed pieces which compose an outcome distinct from what anyone would have chosen.

2. *Where you stand depends on where you sit*.¹⁶ Horizontally, the diverse demands upon each player shape his priorities, perceptions, and issues. For large classes of issues, e.g., budgets and procurement decisions, the stance of a particular player can be predicted with high reliability from information concerning his seat.
3. *Chiefs and Indians*. The aphorism “where you stand depends on where you sit” has vertical as well as horizontal application. Vertically, the demands upon the President, Chiefs, Staffers, and Indians are quite distinct.

The foreign policy issues with which the President can deal are limited primarily by his crowded schedule: the necessity of dealing first with what comes next. His problem is to probe the special face worn by issues that come to his attention, to preserve his leeway until time has clarified the uncertainties, and to assess the relevant risks.

Foreign policy Chiefs deal most often with the hottest issue de jour, though they can get the attention of the President and other members of the government for other issues which they judge important. What they cannot guarantee is that “the President will pay the price” or that “the others will get on board.” They must build a coalition of the relevant powers that be. They must “give the President confidence” in the right course of action.

Most problems are framed, alternatives specified, and proposals pushed, however, by Indians. Indians fight with Indians of other departments; for example, struggles between International Security Affairs of the Department of Defense and Political-Military of the State Department are a microcosm of the action at higher levels. But the Indian's major problem is how to get the *attention* of Chiefs, how to get an issue decided, how to get the government “to do what is right.”

¹⁶ This aphorism was stated first, I think, by Don K. Price.

In policymaking then, the issue looking *down* is options: how to preserve my leeway until time clarifies uncertainties. The issue looking *sideways* is commitment: how to get others committed to my coalition. The issue looking *upward* is confidence: how to give the boss confidence in doing what must be done.

CONCLUSION

This essay has obviously bitten off more than it has chewed. In spite of the limits of space, however, it would be inappropriate to stop without spelling out several implications of the argument and addressing the question of relations among the models and extensions of them to activity beyond explanation.

At a minimum, the intended implications of the argument presented here are three. First, formulation of alternative frames of reference and demonstration that different analysts, relying predominantly on different models, produce quite different explanations should encourage the analyst's self-consciousness about the nets he employs.

Second, the preliminary, partial paradigms presented here provide a basis for serious reexamination of many problems of foreign and military policy. Model II and Model III cut at problems typically treated in Model I terms can permit significant improvements in explanation and prediction.¹⁷ Full Model II and III analyses require large amounts of information. But even in cases where the information base is severely limited, improvements are possible.

Third, the present formulation of paradigms is simply an initial step. As such it leaves a long list of critical questions unanswered. Given any action, an imaginative analyst should always be able to construct some rationale for the government's choice. By imposing, and relaxing, constraints on the parameters of rational choice (as in variants of Model I)

analysts can construct a large number of accounts of any act as a rational choice. But does a statement of reasons why a rational actor would choose an action constitute an explanation of the *occurrence* of that action? How can Model I analysis be forced to make more systematic contributions to the question of the determinants of occurrences? Model II's explanation of *t* in terms of *t - 1* is explanation. The world is contiguous. But governments sometimes make sharp departures. Can an organizational process model be modified to suggest where change is likely? Attention to organizational change should afford greater understanding of why particular programs and SOPs are maintained by identifiable types of organizations and also how a manager can improve organizational performance. Model III tells a fascinating "story." But its complexity is enormous, the information requirements are often overwhelming, and many of the details of the bargaining may be superfluous. How can such a model be made parsimonious? The three models are obviously not exclusive alternatives. Indeed, the paradigms highlight the partial emphasis of the framework—what each emphasizes and what it leaves out. Each concentrates on one class of variables, in effect, relegating other important factors to a *ceteris para-bus* clause. Model I concentrates on "market factors": pressures and incentives created by the "international strategic marketplace." Models II and III focus on the internal mechanism of the government that chooses in this environment. But can these relations be more fully specified? Adequate synthesis would require a typology of decisions and actions, some of which are more amenable to treatment in terms of one model and some to another. Government behavior is but one cluster of factors relevant to occurrences in foreign affairs. Most students of foreign policy adopt this focus (at least when explaining and predicting). Nevertheless, the dimensions of the chess board, the character of the pieces, and the rules of the game—factors considered by international systems theorists—constitute the context in which the pieces are moved. Can the major variables in the full function of determinants of foreign policy outcomes be identified?

¹⁷ A number of problems are now being examined in these terms both in the Bureaucracy Study Group on Bureaucracy and Policy of the Institute of Politics at Harvard University and at the Rand Corporation.