

Theories of International Relations

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For diplomatic historians to delve into the sub-field of Political Science that studies International Politics or Relations (terms I will use interchangeably) is to enter a world that is both familiar and different. Indeed, it is the similarities that make the differences so jarring. Just as Dean Acheson expressed his bemusement at discovering that International Relations (IR) scholars treated him as an “independent variable,” so do many historians find distasteful the notion of variables, especially ones labeled as independent (causes) and dependent (effects), studying historical events as “case studies,” seeking generalizations as wide-ranging as possible, valuing “theoretical parsimony,” with its emphasis on deploying as few independent variables as possible, and comparing cases that are dissimilar in many ways. But I believe that the very differences between the two fields make interaction potentially fruitful if historians are willing to (temporarily) suspend disbelief.

Obviously, the field of IR is too large to completely cover here, and my survey will be skewed toward international security rather than political economy, international organizations, and transnational trends and flows. In the course of this, I hope to make clear why a chapter on IR theory in some ways fits awkwardly with a book on approaches to the history of American foreign policy.

I will proceed by outlining two related ways of dividing the theoretical approaches to IR: the first between the orientations of Realism, Liberalism, and Social Constructivism, and the second sorting according to whether the main independent variables are located at the level of the individual, the state, or the international system, which lends itself to a discussion of how IR uses comparisons to try to pin down causation. I will concentrate on theories about relations among the most powerful states, which leaves out many important subjects but is most relevant to arguments about American foreign relations.

REALISM

The best known approach to IR is Realism, which comes in several flavors: classical, neoclassical, offensive, defensive, and structural. All share the common starting point that states are usually the main actors in international politics, that considerations of power and security are paramount, that states are (and should be) guided by the national interest as contrasted with sub-national or supra-national interests, and that the world is dangerous both because human nature is malign – or at least has a malign streak in it – and because this realm, unlike domestic society, lacks a higher authority that can protect states and enforce agreements. Any number of aphorisms can be adduced here, and a nice one is by George Washington: “It is a maxim founded on the universal experience of mankind that no nation is to be trusted farther than it is bounded by its interest.”¹ Part of the reason for the mistrust and conflict is circular, but the circularity exists in the world rather than in reasoning about it. One source of fear is the knowledge that because others cannot trust the actor’s own state, they may preventively move against it, and the understanding of this leads the state to act preventively itself.²

Three points of clarification are essential. First, Realists often differ among themselves in the details of how they explain policy and in the prescriptions they offer. Thus, Realists were to be found on both sides of the question of whether the war in Vietnam was necessary. They were united, however, in the way they analyzed the problem, looking at the national interest, the power stakes of the various countries involved, and the likely consequences for national security of various courses of action. They paid little attention to morality, world opinion, international institutions, or economic interests. Second, there is often a tension between Realism as description and explanation and Realism as prescription: Realism has difficulty explaining why states sometimes behave in foolish or self-defeating ways. Third, contrary to what critics often allege, Realism neither urges belligerent policies nor expects them. It fully understands the risks and costs of conflict, especially war, and stresses that the national interest includes a respect for other’s interests. Morgenthau’s classic *Power Among Nations* stresses the value of conciliation and diplomacy, and E. H. Carr’s foundational text *The Twenty Years’ Crisis* urged Britain to appease Nazi Germany because it lacked the military and economic power to resist what was seen as limited German expansion. Although it does not speak well for Carr that he excised these paragraphs when the book was reprinted in 1946, his initial stance was fully consistent with Realism. So it is not surprising that the bulk of the Realist community strongly opposed the war in Iraq, arguing that the United States was strong enough to protect itself and its allies against Iraq even if that country developed nuclear weapons, that there would be no conceivable interest that would lead Iraq to provide such weapons to terrorists, and that the post-war reconstruction would be difficult.

Five sub-schools can be located within Realism. Classical Realism starts with Thucydides and extends through Machiavelli, Carr, Morgenthau, and others such as Arnold Wolfers. Not being self-identified social scientists, they were less concerned with rigorous theorizing and the careful separation of variables than are current scholars. Easily derided as “wisdom literature,” one can argue that it often, in fact, was wise. By the late 1950s younger scholars were moving away from this form of Realism in the attempt to be more rigorous and systematic, but in recent years the approach has been resurrected in the form of neo-classical Realism.³ Sharing with the older version an openness to consider a wide range of causal factors, especially domestic politics, it is more modern in seeking analytic rigor and the careful examination of evidence.

More sharply focused are defensive and offensive Realism. Defensive Realists believe that although security concerns are never far from sight, world politics often is fairly benign. But dangers do exist and states must carefully examine the current and likely future international environment to determine whether other powerful states are or are likely to become adversaries. The problem is that others’ motives and intentions are hard to discern and, even if they are correctly judged to be presently benign, can change in the future. This does not mean that states do or should make the worst-case assumption and build up their arms and other sources of power as rapidly as possible, however. Not only is this expensive, but it can threaten others who are benign, triggering a security dilemma and leaving the state worse off.⁴ Security, not power, is to be maximized. Offensive Realists, on the other hand, believe that the international environment is so uncertain and, at least potentially, hostile that states have no choice but to engage in worst-case planning, to seek regional dominance even if the status quo is satisfactory, and to maximize power. This picture of the world indeed does resemble the stereotype of Realism as expecting and urging belligerence.⁵

Most prominent for the past thirty-five years is Neorealism or Structural Realism, brilliantly developed by Kenneth Waltz in *Theory of International Politics*,⁶ a title that is interestingly ambiguous as to whether this is a theory or the theory. Diverging from classical Realism in putting human nature aside, it is based entirely on an analysis on the international system. Starting from the assumption that its structure is anarchic and reasoning by (perhaps faulty) analogy to markets in the economy, Waltz proceeds deductively in a way that, to use his term, “abstracts from” all other considerations, producing a picture that to those that like it is clear and to those who do not is barren. Waltz would not disagree that his approach is very much a simplification, but he argues that this is the nature of theorizing, and that if his theory explains only a few aspects of international politics, they are central ones. Most importantly, he argues that world politics exists because even adversarial states will join together to stop any one of them from dominating and that, less obviously, bipolar systems are less prone to wars among the great powers than are multipolar ones. The basic reason is that for them security in a multipolar world requires what Waltz calls

“external balancing” – that is, relying on allies. This can lead to wars because small allies have sufficient bargaining leverage so that they can drag their partners into war (e.g., a stylized version of World War I) or, conversely, the desire to make allies carry the main burden of resisting the adversary (“buck-passing”) can inhibit the formation of a coalition that could block an aggressor, as was the case in the 1930s. Under bipolarity, on the other hand, the superpowers can and indeed must rely on their own resources and engage in what Waltz calls “internal balancing,” which avoids the war-inducing complications seen in the earlier part of the twentieth century.

This argument has been severely criticized on both empirical and theoretical grounds. Empirically, the role of institutions and common norms has been stressed, as I will discuss in this chapter. Other scholars, while largely staying within the Realist tradition, argue that the balance of power that Waltz sees as maintaining a system of independent states in fact is not universal but is contingent on domestic and international circumstances.⁷ In parallel, Waltz’s concept of structure and the role it plays has been called into question, with Alexander Wendt arguing that “anarchy is what states make of it,” and Jack Donnelly arguing that Waltz has fundamentally misconceived what structure means in international politics, that the absence of authority above the units does not automatically lead to conflict, and taking seriously the analogy between international politics and oligopoly points in the opposite direction as firms in this situation seek to cooperate.⁸

LIBERALISM

Some of these critiques are rooted in Liberalism, which argues that the national interest comes not from the state and the international system, but from the domestic interests and the way they are aggregated by institutions.⁹ Indeed, it is when leaders put the interests of the state rather than the people foremost that wars are most likely to occur. As long as the economic interests that benefit from trade and other forms of economic intercourse can guide state policy, peace is likely to prevail. There are exceptions, of course, but war is usually costly and absent overriding considerations of honor and ethnicity, peace and prosperity are normally joined.¹⁰ World War I is often held up as a counter-example, but the case is far from clear, as many decision-makers thought the war would be short and that economic disruption would be limited, the trading and financial sectors in the state had only limited political power, and the conflict began among the countries that were least economically interdependent.

More generally, Liberals argue that who gains and who loses within a country by greater or lesser exposure to international trade and investment influences domestic alignments and institutions and, through them, foreign policy. Although economic theory indicates that the country as a whole will gain from increased trade, less competitive groups and sectors will not, and this

domestic conflict strongly influences the state's foreign economic policy and indeed its security policy as well.¹¹

The general argument that foreign policy reflects domestic interests has deep roots in American life. It is no accident that it was an American president who most eloquently argued that democracies are inherently peaceful and that the modern variant of this, Democratic Peace Theory (DPT), has caught on in the United States much more than in other countries. Woodrow Wilson's theory claimed that the foreign policies of democracies had certain characteristics, and so it is labeled monadic by IR theorists; most of the current theories are dyadic in making claims for how pairs or groups of democracies relate to each other (although some problems are created by the fact that upon examination some of the causal mechanisms are actually monadic). DPT exists in many variants, but most trace their roots to Immanuel Kant, resurrected in articles by Michael Doyle that caught the profession's attention.¹² The essence of the subsequent literature is that the interests, institutions, and norms of democracies inhibit armed conflict with each other, and their abilities to appraise their environments and send credible signals serve to avoid many common causes of wars. A central part of the argument goes back to Wilson: the bulk of the costs of a war are borne by the citizens, and in democracies they have great influence over the fate of the leaders. For a leader to enter a losing or costly war is to endanger his or her political future. Norms and common values provide further inhibitions. Democracies are characterized by compromise and avoidance of bloodshed in domestic politics and so are slower to resort to force abroad, especially against countries with similar norms. Democratic institutions produce additional checks on wars because, almost by definition, power is more diffused in them than in authoritarian regimes, and this provides greater opportunities for radical change to be blocked. Furthermore, democracies are more open to information about the world, and while of course this does not guarantee the accuracy of the resulting beliefs, it does mean that these regimes are less likely to suffer the gross distortions of reality that characterized dictatorships such as Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Soviet Union, and Saddam Hussein's Iraq. The other side of this coin is that democracies are relatively transparent, making it harder for them to bluff and making it less likely that their intentions will be misperceived.¹³

The lines of rebuttal are multiple: it may not be democracy but rather aspects of the social or economic system that produces peace; much of the evidence comes from the Cold War era when democracies had obvious realpolitik reasons to stick together; only long-established and mature liberal democracies may exhibit these benign characteristics.¹⁴ Realists, among others, may also be uncomfortable with a theory that seems to be so flattering to the country in which most of the theorists live, and it may be worth remembering that in gaining its independence the United States broke its commitment to the ally whose assistance (given out of self-interest, of course) permitted the revolution to succeed.

One offshoot of DPT is the claim that democracies are particularly likely to live up to their promises and threats because leaders who fail to do so will be punished by their electorates. Labeled the “audience cost theory,” this is a variant of Schelling’s classic argument that states can prevail in a confrontation by committing their reputations to standing firm.¹⁵ Although alluring, the logic is less than airtight. It assumes that the public is paying attention to the leader’s commitments, that it is willing to punish her for not living up to them even if doing so would not be in the national interest, and that other countries accept the argument and believe the commitments to be credible (in which case they will not be challenged and we will never see audience costs actually being incurred). The historical evidence, furthermore, is mixed at best.¹⁶

Liberal arguments have been extended in another direction as well, toward the role of international institutions in what is known as Neoliberal Institutionalism, which can be traced to Robert Keohane’s *After Hegemony*. Although the relatively open economic system in the West in the post-war era would not have been possible without American power, Keohane argued that the institutions that had been established and the interests that grew up around them were able to maintain the system in the face of eroding American power. Contrary to Realist thinking, institutions can facilitate cooperation by establishing regularized channels for communication and problem-solving (lowering the “transactions costs” of establishing and maintaining agreements, to use the language of economists), facilitating trade-offs among different issues, and increasing transparency and the salience of states’ reputations by making clear whether they had lived up to their commitments. As institutions develop and serve the needs of the members, the latter delegate more power and autonomy to them, allowing them to become independent actors in their own right instead of, or at least in addition to, being the instruments of state action.

Although the dispute between Neoliberal Institutionalism and Realism has often been put in stark form, the differences, especially with defensive Realism, should not be exaggerated.¹⁷ As Keohane and Lisa Martin have noted, their theorizing starts from the same basic assumptions as Realism and diverges from defensive Realism only when it posits that institutions can develop “a life of their own” and either diverge from or shape the preferences of the leading states.¹⁸ Furthermore, it is not surprising that institutionalism has been applied mainly to the economic sphere, and when it has moved into security it focuses on the institutions that are developed among allies. The ability of institutions to mitigate deep conflicts of interest, and the parallel ability of institutionalism to explain behavior in these situations, is much less clear.

The flourishing of institutions in the economic area not only reflects the basic Liberal argument that as economies develop, important interests will push for the lowering of the barriers to trade and that this can have important political implications, but is also linked to the next school of thought to be discussed,

Social Constructivism, because an open economic system was made possible by a fundamental change in ideas. Liberalism required the replacement of mercantilism, which saw international economic exchange as fundamentally zero-sum, with modern trade theory, which stresses the possibility of mutual gain through comparative advantage, a change that cannot be explained by either Liberalism or Realism.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM

Even more than the other approaches, Constructivism is not an it but a they, and so even more than previously I will have to overgeneralize. I will also put aside approaches that are non-positivist in the sense of denying that evidence or events could falsify their views.

We live in a world constructed by men – and for many constructivists, it matters a great deal that it has been males rather than females (whose roles are developed socially rather than being given by biology) who have had most power. Drawing on sociology, seeing beliefs and theories as creating our social world rather than, or at least in addition to, reflecting it, and focusing on the importance of the way people and collectivities think of themselves, this approach was synthesized by Hedley Bull, formulated in a particularly abstract and challenging way by Richard Ashley, and developed in a form that received increasing American attention by Alexander Wendt and Peter Katzenstein.¹⁹ International politics is not created by the imperatives of the international system or the objective economic interests within a country, but is socially constructed through the subjective understandings that are developed and shared through the interactions. Agents and structures do not exist independently, but form, reproduce, and change each other.

Central to these processes are the ideas that permeate society. Contrary to orthodox Marxism and the cynical Realist view of the world, these ideas are not mere superstructure or rationalization for material interests, but are the basis on which individuals and states see their interests. I just noted the crucial role of the rejection of mercantilism in favor of what now seems to be the self-evident truth that trade can be mutually advantageous. Absent this shift, it is hard to imagine significant and lasting cooperation among states. In the late nineteenth century, world politics was also transformed by the salience of the notion that colonialism was morally appropriate, economically advantageous, and a part of what it meant to be a great power. The equally powerful wave of decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s similarly did not merely reflect self-evident material interests. World War II and the Cold War were, to a large extent, rooted in competing ideologies; Realist notions of the national interest or Liberal conceptions of the contest between domestic interests do not take us very far here. Also striking is the fact that in the post-Cold War era almost all countries proclaim their dedication to democracy and human rights.

Ideas about international politics are part of it, not observations from the outside. Realism has been at least in part a self-fulfilling prophecy. States behave according to Realist precepts because that is what their leaders have been taught is the way to behave. For Constructivists, Realist theory is at least part of the cause of conflict and the inability of countries to solve common problems.

Two objections should be noted, however. First, the relationships between ideas and material interests can be reciprocal and complex. It is impossible to summarize the literature here, but I will just note that while the relevant chapter of Wendt's book makes a very strong claim with its title "Ideas all the Way Down," the analysis of changes over time points toward material factors. Second, the Constructivist claim that Realist thinking has led to Realist behavior sits uneasily alongside the claim that Realism cannot account for much of world politics.

Leaders, foreign policy professionals, and members of the interested public learn how the country should behave from formal instruction (although anyone who grades undergraduate papers may doubt how effective this mechanism is), reading the newspaper and related media, and hearing stories about current and past events. To take only the most obvious example, almost everyone in the United States knows the "lessons of Munich," and while the "lessons of Vietnam" are more contested, they have left a powerful imprint. This kind of socialization is vertical, as ideas and understandings are passed on from one generation to the next. Horizontal socialization occurs through the interaction of leaders and countries, as most states conform to the modes of thinking and behavior employed by their peers. Emulation, conscious and unconscious, is common; being out of synch with others can be dangerous. Like individuals, states not only adopt the habits of some others and seek to join desired in-groups, they simultaneously seek to differentiate themselves from those with low status or who they see as different from themselves.

Linked to the processes of socialization is the centrality of identity. National leaders and their countries think of themselves in certain ways that mold their outlooks on the world and how they behave. The United States sees itself as devoted to universal values and willing to make sacrifices for the greater good. Cynics see this as a mere cover for the expansion of American power, but Realists point to the myriad instances, Iraq being only the latest, in which this behavior generates great costs and few benefits. Identities are also linked to discourses that constitute and embody how issues and practices are framed, conceived, and articulated. Thus, a great deal of subsequent American policy followed from seeing and explaining the attacks of September 11, 2001, as an act of war, not a crime, and the appropriate response as a "War on Terror."

Discourses, identities, and many ideas sustained through socialization become so deeply ingrained that they escape awareness. This will be familiar to many historians, who will immediately think of James Joll's argument about the role of unspoken assumptions in bringing about World War I.²⁰ For Constructivists, a central modern example would be the concept of

sovereignty, upon which so much of international politics rests. But Stephen Krasner has shown that sovereignty has actually been quite flexible and that very little about it has been taken for granted.²¹ Self-consciousness and manipulation may then play a greater role than Constructivists envision. Related, the stress on socialization entails a troublesome tension. On the one hand, this leads to the expectation that patterns will continue, and for Constructivists it is socialization rather than the anarchic nature of the system or the internal distribution of interests within the state that produces continuity. On the other hand, however, Constructivists stress the possibilities for change and alternative modes of behavior and interaction. If resocialization is fairly easy, however, then socialization must not be terribly powerful.²²

The ideas important to international politics are normative as well as instrumental. Realists deny the role of conceptions of right and wrong in the international arena; Liberals generally ignore it. For Constructivists, by contrast, normative ideas do not stop at the water's edge. The broad trends of international politics cannot be understood without the moral imperatives felt by individuals and leaders. Can we explain the end of the slave trade and then of slavery otherwise? Colonialism could hardly have taken place had most of European society not believed that it was a moral duty to civilize the rest of the world, and decolonization was similarly produced by more than a cost-benefit analysis. Indeed, the frequent Realist injunctions to statesmen to put aside considerations of morality and what would be best for the world as a whole make sense only if moral impulses are strong.

LEVELS OF ANALYSIS

I want to briefly outline another way of categorizing theories in order to connect with how conflicting arguments can be tested. In his first book, Waltz famously developed what he called three images of the causes of the war.²³ The first focused on human nature, the second on the nature of the state's regime, and the third on the international system. In a review article, J. David Singer noted that these could be extended to more general theories of international politics and labeled them as levels of analysis, a somewhat ill-fitting term that has stuck, and I will use the terms levels and images interchangeably.²⁴ The second and third levels parallel the historians' notions of *innenpolitik* and *aussenpolitik*.

INDIVIDUALS

In the 1950s, the conception of human nature as embodying the potential for evil was fundamental to thinking about politics, with Reinhold Niebuhr propounding a view based on religion and Hans Morgenthau a secular version. Falling into neglect soon thereafter, human nature returned to the spotlight with the rise of evolutionary psychology, which purported to explain why it was that most violence was committed by young men and also

changed the picture by arguing that humans are unique among primates in their propensity to cooperate. Another modern variant borrows from a different part of psychology to look at common cognitive biases that can affect foreign policies.²⁵ These are constants, however, and so have difficulty explaining the wide variety of policies that states follow. For this, more relevant are arguments about individual differences in values, preferences, beliefs, and images of others.

The fundamental claim here is that leaders vary on these dimensions and that constraints imposed by the other levels of analysis are not so severe as to produce uniformity of behavior. The leader's personality (in a broad sense of the term) matters, something that most lay observers take for granted. This view also underpins notions of democratic accountability for foreign policy, since much of the point of bringing in a new leader is to change the policy. But this does not mean that the argument is correct. To test it – and I am using the term “test” in a loose sense of looking at relevant evidence, not proving or disproving – we need to make comparisons, and the levels of analysis framework is useful because it points us in this direction. Do policies actually change when a leader with different views comes into power? Or, faced with the same circumstances as their predecessors, do they behave quite similarly? At a meeting of the National Security Council in December 1954 Secretary of State John Foster Dulles rejected the call by the Joint Chiefs of Staff for a more aggressive policy toward the Soviet Union by saying that: “he could not help but have some sympathy for [this] general view After all, during the course of the 1952 campaign he had himself called for a more dynamic U.S. policy vis-à-vis Communism. However, experience indicated that it was not easy to go very much beyond the point that this Administration had reached in translating a dynamic policy into courses of action.”²⁶

THE STATE AND DOMESTIC POLITICS

Waltz's second image was the nature of the state as the source of its foreign policy. For Wilsonians this means whether it is democratic or not, and for Marxists whether it is capitalist or socialist. Obviously, Marxism and Wilsonianism, including the modern versions discussed earlier, are very different in substance but are similar in arguing that neither of the other two images explains most of what is going on. The leaders that rise to the top are socialized into ways of thinking that characterize the kind of state they are in and are constrained by the state's domestic forces. External factors of course matter, but by themselves cannot explain the state's policies, which vary according to the type of state it is. The other side of this coin is that states of the same type will behave similarly, and significant continuities of behavior will characterize states whose regimes remain constant. I will return to this expectation below, and here note that this and the related claims for the domestic level point to the kinds of comparisons we should make to judge their validity.

THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

The third level is the international system and the state's external environment. The system here means anarchy, which is a constant, and polarity, which varies. Waltz's argument for the claim that the major powers are much more prone to go to war under multipolarity than under bipolarity is underpinned not only by the fact that the Cold War did not lead to a superpower war, but also by the decreased power of allies during the Cold War. In 1914, Germany could not afford to see Austria-Hungary weakened or leave the alliance, and Great Britain similarly could not abandon France and Russia. By contrast, in 1956 the United States could bring its two leading allies to heel in the Suez crisis, and it tolerated the later French defection from the military arrangements of NATO with only slight complaints. The argument that internal balancing dwarfed external balancing under bipolarity then points to the relevant historical comparisons that could support or cast doubt on the theory.

The external situation refers to the more detailed aspects of the situation the state is in. Wolfers refers to this as the "billiard ball model" because the argument is that state behavior is essentially a reaction to what others are doing.²⁷ Discussions of arms races usually endorse this perspective and explain the behavior of each state by what the other is doing, not by the views and characteristics of the leaders or the nature of the state. More broadly, proponents of this view would argue that in many respects the foreign policies of the United States and USSR were strikingly similar during the Cold War.

THE BUSH DOCTRINE AND THE INVASION OF IRAQ AS AN EXAMPLE

It is not too artificial to sort explanations for the invasion of Iraq and the broader Bush doctrine embodied in the 2002 National Security Strategy Doctrine by levels of analysis.²⁸ Both critics and admirers of the president argue that they bear the stamp of his outlook and personality. For admirers, he and his policies were bold and went to the heart of the problem. To critics, they were superficial, reckless, and misunderstood the problems that the United States was facing and the efficacy of the range of foreign policy instruments that might be deployed. But to both groups, Bush was acting in a highly unusual way. However, these judgments were reached without comparisons, at least explicit ones, and the causal logic that most other leaders would have behaved differently was left untested. Of course, we cannot re-run history with different leadership, but at the very least the implicit counterfactual should be probed, and the only careful attempt to do so makes a good argument that Gore in fact would have behaved very much as Bush did.²⁹

Obviously, proof is impossible, but the point is that thinking in terms of counterfactuals and comparisons should make us hesitate before jumping to the conclusion that a first image explanation is correct. Some who question whether so much causal responsibility lies with the identity of the president

urge comparisons, not to a hypothetical president, but to American history. John Lewis Gaddis argues that while many were shocked by the idea of a preventive war, they should not have been because the United States has acted preventively throughout its history. Much of the impulse that led to the expansion of the United States from the original thirteen states to its current contours was to prevent foreign threats, and the entrance into both world wars as well as the decisions to fight in Korea and Vietnam were largely preventive.³⁰ In a similar vein, Stephen Sestanovich has argued that US foreign policy after 1945 has been characterized by reacting to setbacks and challenges by redoubling efforts and taking on larger objectives.³¹ More critical observers, often from abroad, comment that Bush's second image view that equated Saddam's horrific domestic regime with an aggressive foreign policy and his counterpart belief that democracy would spring up naturally after the removal of the tyrant were typically American (although to some extent shared by the British).³² Bush may then have been a reflection of his country's political culture.

Or perhaps of its political economy. Marxists argue that the driving American motive in the Cold War was to keep the world open for American capitalist penetration, and so governments like Mosadeq's in Iran and Arbenz's in Guatemala had to be replaced by ones that were more amenable to the American economic system. Realists generally dismissed these arguments, endorsing the view that security concerns were central to the United States even if some of the fears were exaggerated and the resulting policies were misguided. But the American policy after the Cold War, and especially after September 11, 2001, fits more closely with Marxist than with Realist expectations because despite the drastic decrease in the threat from the external environment there has been significant continuity of behavior, pointing toward internal forces as driving.

Third image arguments, including but not limited to Realism, are not out of the game, however. The problem with the arguments just discussed is that while they fault first image arguments by looking at how the United States has behaved under other circumstances and other presidents, they fail to take the next comparative step of looking at how other great powers behave. The essential claim here is that doing so indicates that this kind of intervention and expansion is typical of great powers that find themselves without adversaries strong enough to check them. States' definitions of their interests tend to expand as their power does, and states in particularly advantageous positions are likely to seek what Wolfers called "milieu goals" that involve spreading their values abroad.³³ Fears grow as well, for reasons that are both objective and subjective. Objectively, the leading power becomes the target for all those who oppose the status quo; subjectively, as old threats disappear ones of lesser magnitude seem to grow in size. For all the claims for American exceptionalism made by critics and defenders of its policies, the United States in fact may be a pretty normal state.

Although not all IR scholars would agree with this argument, for many of them the way to study American foreign relations, or at least the place to start, is with an understanding of how most countries usually behave, not the characteristics of individual leaders or the particulars of the American domestic system. To perhaps overstate the case, there is no separate field of the history of American foreign relations.

A CLOSING NOTE ON CAUSATION AND METHODS

As the previous discussion has shown, IR scholars are deeply concerned with pinning down causation. In closing, I want to note two problems and two cautions. The two problems have similar names, adding to the confusion. The first is the admonition not to select on the dependent variable. All too often social scientists try to explain a phenomenon by looking only at instances in which it occurs. This seems to make sense; what can be learned about the causes of something by looking at instances where it is absent? In fact, a great deal. Without doing so it is impossible to say whether the factors that the scholar believes are playing an important role are also present when the phenomenon of interest does not occur. For example, if we want to know why some crises lead to war, we cannot examine only those that do because what we are interested in are the factors that are not only present in those cases, but absent in cases that end peacefully. At best, searching on the dependent variable can yield necessary conditions, not sufficient ones. (Another problem, of course, is that there can be multiple sufficient causation – i.e., several quite different factors and processes can lead to the same outcome.)

The second problem is selection effects. Here it is the world rather than the scholar that is doing the selecting. To take an example to clarify what this means, in order to show that peacekeeping forces are effective in preventing the resumption of violence in civil wars, it is not enough to demonstrate that peace is likely to be maintained in cases where they are deployed. We also have to undertake the harder task of ruling out the possibility that they are more likely to be dispatched to the less malign conflicts.³⁴ Strategic interaction and the fact that each side usually tries to anticipate what the other will do, knowing the other is doing likewise, makes causation particularly hard to pin down through standard comparative methods. We are theorizing about actors who have their own ideas about the cause-and-effect relations in the world (and others' beliefs about them, which can be different), and this means that we cannot determine the different impact of two kinds of policy by comparing the outcomes that we see when each is applied because the actor has taken into account the expected results when deciding how to behave.

Two additional factors provide cautionary notes. First, IR scholars usually compare events looking for causal factors, but this loses sight of the possible impact of the passage of time and the possibility that the first event has influenced subsequent ones. Of course, this is exactly what historians focus

on. Second, and more broadly, the idea of comparing cases while holding constant all factors except the one of interest does not make sense when we are dealing with an interconnected system.³⁵ Straightforward notions of causation are called into question here in a way that is more troublesome for political scientists than for historians. The former's quest for precision may be defeated by the nature of the subject matter.

NOTES

1. Edmund Morgan, *The Genius of George Washington* (New York, 1977), p.16.
2. Much of this dynamic goes under the heading of the security dilemma: for excellent surveys, see Ken Booth and Nicholas Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation and Trust in World Politics* (New York, 2008), and Shiping Tang, *A Theory of Security Strategy for Our Time: Defensive Realism* (New York, 2010).
3. Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics* 51 (October 1998): 144–72; Steven Lobell, Norrin Ripsman, and Jeffrey Taliaferro, *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (New York, 2009).
4. Fareed Zakaria, "Realism and Domestic Politics," *International Security* 17 (Summer, 1992): 177–98; Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30 (January 1978): 167–214; Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, 1991); Steven Van Evera, *The Causes of War* (Ithaca, 1999).
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