

Making sense of International Relations Theory

The language and terminology of international relations (IR) are intended to clarify matters and distinguish between specific instances in international politics. To those familiar with the language and terminology, this is right and proper, but to the unfamiliar, the outcome appears to fall short of achieving the intent. Groups of people, over the centuries, have found all sorts of ways of employing language, but one of the near universal consequences is unintended: to create in groups and out groups. Something intended to clarify ends up becoming a barrier to comprehension and inquiry. This package is intended to address that issue with a succinct description of key concepts combined with some short readings to reinforce knowledge of, and the capacity to employ / apply / evaluate, select subsets of international relations.

There are a number of subsets of international relations theory that will be heretofore labelled as 'schools', such as the Realist school or Liberal school. This package will go into greater depth on those two schools as well as introduce two others: Constructivism and Critical Theories. Before going onto theories, there are two terms that appear frequently:

(1) 'Actor'. When IR scholars or students use this term, what is meant is any person, or group of people capable of taking an action in IR. This makes this term incredibly elastic - this could mean any single person on earth or any group of people. Those comfortable with math may have tried to start to calculate this based on the number of possible permutations, but it reaches close to infinite quickly. The only way to bring it down to something manageable is to think about types of 'actors'. By way of examples:

a. People. Most of the time in IR, this refers to leaders of countries (Heads of State and / or Heads of Countries and some of their Cabinet), institutions (Secretary-Generals of major Intergovernmental organizations (IGO - definition of this follows in a few sub-paragraphs), CEOs of multinational corporations, etc., Heads of faiths, thought leaders and even celebrities, but it could be any individual whose actions have an effect.

c. Countries. IR scholars tend to refer to these as States. There can be some confusion with the term 'Nation' due to the popular association of country and nation. The latter refers to groups of people that self-identify as group due to shared characteristics such as language, ethnicity, culture or faith. There are some nations that are also states, but there are a number of nations that do not have an associated state. Just ask the Kurds or Palestinians or Basques. Important point: Realist and Liberal scholars have different views about how to think about states that will be clarified later.

d. Intergovernmental institutions (IGOs). This includes any institutions where the members of the institution are states as opposed to individuals. This includes alliances, free trade agreements, associations, etc. It is the intellectual space of POE324. Here a few examples of institutions: the UN, NATO, the World Bank, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

e. Multinational Corporations. These are corporate entities that operate in more than one country. One country is normally the 'home', i.e. where it originated from and the location of its headquarters, and a range of others are 'hosts'.

f. Non-State Actors. This refers to the ability to people to form groups within a country capable of taking actions in IR. This range includes Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Political Parties, Corporations, terror groups, insurgencies, criminal organizations etc.

(2) 'Levels of Analysis'. This is a way to cut that nearly infinite range of potential permutations down to something one can examine and try to explain. The original idea came out of Waltz, *Man, the State and War*, where the author described three different ways to explain why wars happen:

The First Image: Wars occur because of human nature; people are selfish and aggressive.

The Second Image: Wars occur because of bad government; state leaders try to solve their own problems by externalizing them

The Third Image: Wars occur because international politics exist in a state of anarchy; there is no central authority to prevent them.

The insight here is that one can focus on one of the 'Images', namely the individual, the state, or the systemic, and exclude the others from examination. Here's how this works:

Level of Analysis	Types of Actors	EXAMPLE: The US behaves the way it does because . . .
Individual	Key leaders	the President.
Domestic	Executive / Legislative / Judiciary; Political Parties; Corporations; NGOs	the interplay between the President, Congress and domestic interests.
Interstate	Two states IGOs Multinational Corporations Non-state actors	the relationship between the US and the PRC.
Global	Multinational Corporations IGOs More than two States Non-state actors	the nature of the international arena

The two points to remember are that the level of analysis shapes both what actors to examine but also what types of explanation matches the level. Using one allows one to filter between what to examine and what to not to examine.

THEORIES

IR scholars employ theories for a number of reasons, but how they are used can vary from school to school. First, theories provide a model or thought pattern on how international politics are purported to work. This allows for the creation of explanations. Second, related to

the first, they represent a source of hypotheses against which one could test evidence or ideas about cause and effect. This allows for the testing of the models. Third, theories provide another filter by suggesting certain types of actors, levels of analysis and events are more important than others. Fourth, they provide alternatives to their competitors - you might think of them somewhat like competing brands of any given consumer product.

This begs the question of what they are and how to tell them apart. While not the simplest way to achieve this, it does allow us to think of these brands in terms of a broader classification scheme. The first distinction to be drawn is:

	Positivist	Post-Positivist
What this means . . .	- the idea that one can study the social world effectively using the methods from natural science	- the idea that one cannot study the social world effectively using the methods from natural science
So what?	- the subject of study is filled with phenomena that are Overt (we can detect and measure), Replicable (under the same conditions, the same things occur) and Testable (we can test hypotheses using what was measured) - we, the external observers, can be 100% objective, bias-free and value-neutral.	- Phenomena are not consistently Overt, Replicable and Testable. - Observers are people, and their perceptions and understanding are influenced by their experiences and identifies. - Observers are never 100% objective, and seldom if ever bias-free or neutral.
Which schools fit here?	Realism Liberalism Marxism (the exception in the Critical Theories)	Constructivism Critical theories

Here's a brief summary of the two post-positivist theories. Constructivism is a theory that emphasizes the study of non-material elements in IR, such as identity, culture, interests, roles and relationships. Its premise is that the social world is socially constituted, meaning that the actors are not handed scripts, but learn how the world works by interacting with others. Constructivists have proven themselves adept at exposing the flaws in the positivist theories' logic. In one famous example, the IR Scholar in question offered a thought experiment. In it, he pointed out the Realist scholars predicted that states ought to be more concerned states with larger nuclear arsenals than they would of states with small ones. If so, why might the US be more concerned about North Korea than the United Kingdom? The answer that likely leapt to your mind was either 'friend' or 'ally', words that describe relationships between states that groups of people accept as valid as opposed to assessments of relative power.

The Critical Theories are a group of theories that hold that the positivist theories (less Marxism) are an elaborate justification of the status quo and a product of a gross inequity and

injustice within international politics. Critical theorists attempt to highlight the hidden voices in IR and to encourage change. In addition to Marxism, other important critical theories include: A. Feminism - the idea that gender plays a role in IR. Depending on the specific variant, a Feminist scholar might argue that it should not or that it should or that gender identity has a much greater influence than one might think; B. Post-Colonialism. These scholars highlight the legacies of imperialism on the territories and peoples that were colonized as well as how former colonial relationships still have effects (overwhelmingly negative) to this day.

Going back to the two theories that, due to course selection merit more attention, it is important to compare and contrast some of their assumptions, or things that they hold to be true.

Difference # 1 - view of human nature

Realism: pessimistic - people are self-interested and selfish. All things equal, they will compete with one and other

Liberalism: optimistic - people can be self-interested, but are also reasonable as well as members of communities. All things being equal, they CAN cooperate and it is often in one's best interest to cooperate with others. [A misunderstanding some realism enthusiasts hold is that Liberals claim that cooperation is more or less automatic]

Difference # 2 - view of what to do about anarchy

First - the term 'anarchy', in IR, is used to describe the nature of international politics. The exact phrase IR scholars use is: "The international system is anarchic", but what is meant is that there is no central authority in international politics to settle disputes or prevent actors from behaving in unpleasant ways. It does not mean chaos or an advocacy of an absence of government. The two theories assume that the world operates differently as a result.

Realists assume that without a central authority, there is nothing to stop states from doing what they want . . . except other states. The only sure way for any state, according to realists, is to make sure that they are secure is to accrue power and be more powerful than other states. It is not that 'might makes right' but 'might' allows a state to survive in a competitive and conflict-ridden world populated by other states about whose motives the state is suspect. To Realists, competition and conflict are inevitable, and prescribe that states prepare themselves.

Liberals assume that the absence of central authority does not necessarily mean endless competition and conflict. The inhabitants of the international system can also develop customs, organizations, and rules that reduce the chances that competition descends into war. Competition can occur, but conflict is not inevitable. To Liberals, competition and conflict are a problem for all to solve as opposed to accepting, and their prescription is for actors in the international arena to develop solutions to the problems that arise that could lead to conflict.

Difference # 3 - view of interactions

Realists tend to assume that interactions are a zero-sum game, where the gains and losses are finite. In simplest terms, one party wins and the other loses.

Liberals tend to assume to interactions are a non-zero-sum game, where the potential gains can be greater through cooperation. In simplest terms, one can find win-win solutions and to borrow a phrase, 'the sum of the whole is greater than the sum of the parts'.

Similarity # 1 - Rational choice

Both theories, influenced by the idea of the 'rational person' from economics, view people as fundamentally rational. Like other terms, the popular use of the term differs from the IR use. In popular language, most interpret 'rational' as 'synonymous'. To IR scholars, rational choice is a theory of decision-making that holds that rational actors make decisions by comparing a range of potential courses of action against other by weighing their costs, benefits and likelihood of success. This model of decision-making is not perfect, but does allow for the modelling of their behaviour.

Difference # 4 - view of the state

Realists conceive of states as 'billiard balls', meaning that they are thought of as unitary (read as the government(s) and society act as one), purposive (read as pursue goals) and rational. One might call this a 'top down' view.

Liberals take the 'bottom up' view of states, arguing that states and their societies are not synonymous with one and other. States may be purposive, but so too can groups in societies, which means that states and societies seldom act in 100% unitary matters.

As a final point, you may want to think of realists as those that forecast competition leading to conflict. This, of course, begs the question of why Liberals forecast the opportunity for cooperation. They do this because in their view, if cooperation creates a surrogate for order, the problem of anarchy is addressed, which allows the world to be a safer place, which allows for redirection of effort to other things such as prosperity.

Difference # 5 - view of international politics

Realists view this as the quest for power by states, leading to a competitive and conflict-ridden world, due to a lack of central authority. Liberals view this as an opportunity for states and other actors to develop solutions to this problem of no central authority. Liberals, more so than Realists, pay greater heed to the customs and expectations actors hold of one and other, and note that even in competition, these customs and expectations still apply. Hedley Bull, in his book *The Anarchical Society*, argued that states interact with one and other much like people do in a society. Every society or community has rules and norms (defined as expected standards of behaviour in international relations) and breaking a rule or a norm comes with a cost. Realists acknowledge these exist, but argue if a state is sufficiently powerful, they can absorb or ignore costs associated with breaking the rules or norms. Liberals suggest violations come with greater costs that might appear; if a state consistently violates norms or rules, their reputation as a member of society suffers over time. Those with poor reputations tend to be more isolated and less prosperous as a result. The key point here is time - Liberals tend to view actions by states as part of a series; Realists have shown a tendency to view actions as discrete, immediate and singular.

This begs a question - where do rules and norms come from? At the risk of oversimplification, there are two general sources: custom (states exhibit patterns of behaviour over time) and agreements between states that either formalize customs or set rules. One example is the Vienna Convention (<https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/unts/volume%201155/volume-1155-i-18232-english.pdf>), an agreement on the establishment of multilateral agreements. Norms differ in that they are based on expectations of what behaviours are considered appropriate or not in international relations. There is the concept that they have a life cycle, consisting of emergence (the new idea is presented, but not widely accepted), cascade (the new idea gains increasing levels of acceptance), and internationalization (the new idea is adopted and accepted by so many states that it takes on the quality of being for granted). The example I would use is the ban of anti-personnel land mines. At first, it was championed by a small number of activists and governments, but the majority of states opposed it on the grounds that a ban would threaten national security. During the cascade, the efforts of those activists and governments to persuade states that while there were practices that were considered the responsible use (marking and recording locations of emplacement during conflict), the issue was one of their indiscriminate nature, low cost and relative lack of responsible use. The cascade occurred due to the ability to connect irresponsible use with a human cost, as well as an increasing groundswell of support. The internationalization occurred with the effort to create a formal treaty that the majority of the international community signed and ratified.

Similarity # 2 - Interests

Both Liberals and Realists subscribe to the idea that states have long-term interests (think of goals or objectives) that transcend the day to day partisan politics. By way of example, all states wish to be prosperous, but they may differ on how prosperity is defined and what is most likely to achieve that. The idea of 'interest' is used in two ways, either as a means of seeking public support for particular initiatives, policies or actions, or as a means to analyze a states' foreign policy. Realists, in particular, lay claim to the latter, but that suggests that only Realists think about interests, which is flawed. Donald Nuechterlein, in his series of books examining the U.S., created a framework that one can apply to the concept of interests that encompasses the types of interests advocated by Realists as well as Liberals. It has four broad categories:

'Defence of the Homeland' - the 'homeland' is an elastic term. To some states, it includes the territory within the state's boundaries. To others, it includes the states or territory around the state or the approaches to the state. This is about the physical security necessary for survival.

'Economic Well-Being' - this is about material wealth.

'Maintenance of World Order' - Realists would view this as the state's position of power relative to other states; Liberals would view this as the sum of the IGOs, norms, and rules as well as the distribution of power.

'Promotion of Values' - Realists view this as dangerous and wasteful; Liberals view this differently - getting others to share one's values is a means of reducing the chances of conflict and addressing problems.

There are four readings associated with this package:

Walt and Snyder discuss the schools as well as theory in general.

REALISM - https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/realism-intl-relations/?utm_source=AOL&utm_medium=readMore&utm_campaign=partner.

This is an online summary of the theory and some of the major works associated with this school. What is most relevant here are Sections 1.1.1, 2.2, 3 as well 3.1, and 4. In POE317, we will take a deeper dive into the realist school.

LIBERALISM - Moravcsik's article offers his views on liberal theory and he is one of the prominent Liberal scholars. By way of a comment, Liberalism, as a school, has a lot of theories within it and depending on the language used, they might appear to overlap. This confuses many. Moravcsik does the readers a colossal favour by focusing on the most important types:

Theories that use the 'second image' to explain behaviour, such as Republican liberalism and its offshoot, Democratic Peace Theory (the theory that democracies do not fight other democracies; to be clear, it's about democracies finding ways to resolve matters peacefully with other democracies when there are issues. It doesn't mean democracies are more peaceful).

Theories that use commerce or trade to explain behaviour, such as Commercial liberalism. An example of this theory would hold that trading partners tend not to fight one and other because the costs become prohibitive.

Theories that highlight the role of IGOs and other institutions in addressing international problems. Joining an IGO, some would argue, allows for the exchange of short term pain (adjusting the state to fit the terms and conditions of membership and the costs of membership) for long-term gain (all the benefits that come with membership)

Conclusion

This is but a brief introduction to theory and some associated concepts; there is much more and some of the ideas described herein continue to be debated.

- Dr J.R. McKay, 27 August 2020