

A BRIEF EXPLORATION  
OF THEORY AND  
PRACTICE

# INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY AND THE REAL WORLD

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# **International Relations Theory and the Real World**

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## **International Relations Theory and the Real World**

There is a disconnect between international relations theory and real-world policymaking. Theorists focus on impressing one another with intellectual grandiosity instead of solving real problems, which leave policymakers to their own devices when attempting to solve real foreign policy problems. Competing theories have still proven themselves to be relevant to foreign policy, namely realism, liberalism, and constructivism with the occasional strategic analysis of game theory. However, all the aforementioned theories focus on states or mass consciousness and leave out one crucial aspect of analysis: the individual motives of world leaders who set policy. A theoretical synthesis approach focused on understanding and solving problems can help make IR theory less chaotic and more relevant to policymaking. The founders of the United States government understood the usefulness of synthesizing and applying theories and created a nation based on liberal values with a realist outlook within a social construct that has inspired intellectuals and practitioners for centuries.

### **Theory, Policy, and Synthesis**

The relationship of theory to policy in international relations (IR) is tenuous at best. IR theorists do not necessarily see policymakers as their target audience but rather one another as well as the academic community.<sup>1</sup> This is disappointing because the focus on intellectual grandiosity has led to policymakers not taking the academic community seriously enough for

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<sup>1</sup> Walt, Stephen M. "the Relationship between Theory and Policy in International Relations." *Annual Review of Political Science* 8, no. 1 (2005): 39.

theory to be applied in real time<sup>2</sup>, which would further legitimize the accuracy or impact of theory. In other words, IR theorists live in a bubble of intellectualism and limit their ability to make an impact on real time foreign policy, which should be the goal of theory.

Due to the nature of theory not being intended for a target audience that requires practical application prescriptions, there is no 1/1 correspondence between theories and events, which has its advantages and limitations. For example, the rise of Nazi Germany and World War II can be assessed from multiple perspectives. The conquest of France and Eastern Europe by Adolf Hitler's Germany shows the realist theory of state interest and acquisition of power over neighboring states as the driving factor. The war that ensued logically shows that under threat from growing powers, states will engage to protect their own interests and power. However, Hitler's rhetoric that spread the idea of the Germanic people belonging to a superior race above all others and the holocaust that ensued speaks to constructivism. The establishment of the United Nations (continuing the work of Woodrow Wilson's idealist League of Nations<sup>3</sup>) after the war with the purpose of preventing World War III and promoting economic security<sup>4</sup> in a nuclear era was a Liberal result. Though realism, constructivism, and liberalism can give context and explanation to how World War II played out and the post-war order that came from it, these theories are not pre-packaged tools that can individually prescribe a plan of action on how to

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 37

<sup>3</sup> Karns, Margaret P., and Karen A. Mingst. "Theoretical Foundations of Global Governance." In *International Organizations: The Politics and Processes of Global Governance*, 3rd ed., 45. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Pub, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Mingst, Karen A. "Historical Context of International Relations." In *Essentials of International Relations*, 8th ed., 42. New York: W. W. Norton, 2001.

apply lessons learned from the war or how to use institutions to engage various state or organizational threats.

Policymakers who operate from a particular theory of choice must be encouraged to see the value of theory synthesis in situational analysis. This is different from the current debate on theory synthesis in the IR community, which is centered around synthesizing different theories that have a centralized or “overarching” theme.<sup>5</sup> The theoretical synthesis that I propose utilizes multiple theories in order to achieve two goals: (1) to understand an issue or conflict and its actors and (2) to prescribe one or more viable solutions that achieve policy objectives. Returning to the Nazi Germany example, a synthesis of realist, liberal, and constructivist approaches can inform policymakers on what to expect when radical populist movements arise (war and conquest: realism), how populist movements spread (sharing ideas: constructivism), and the outcomes of great conflicts with populist movements that gain ground (institutions for peace, prosperity, and prevention: liberalism).

I would also go further to do an in-depth psychological analysis of the person leading the state as opposed to focusing solely on the state itself. Adolf Hitler was an embittered World War I vet and failed artist<sup>6</sup> who started a movement to reclaim the power and economic status of Germany<sup>7</sup> as well as himself. He renounced his family background and used his charisma to

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<sup>5</sup> Moravcsik, Andrew. “Theory Synthesis in International Relations: Real Not Metaphysical.” *International Studies Review* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 131–36. doi:10.1111/1521-9488.501019\_4.

<sup>6</sup> “The Dark Charisma of Adolf Hitler: Leading Millions into the Abyss.” 2012. <https://www.netflix.com/title/80212698>.

<sup>7</sup> Mingst, Karen A. “Historical Context of International Relations.” In *Essentials of International Relations*, 8th ed., 39. New York: W. W. Norton, 2001.



enchant the Germanic people to follow him to the ends of the earth by speaking to the plight of the populous and giving them an enemy to not only blame but also fight.<sup>8</sup> The constructivist understanding of social movements gives context to domestic politics and groups, but it alienates the individual power players acting on behalf of states, as do realism and liberalism.

The difference in foreign policy approaches under American presidents is another example of the need to focus on individual state leaders. While it is generally understood that the United States has a realist foreign policy aimed at maintaining its global dominance and advancing its interests<sup>9</sup>, some presidents focus on the promotion of diplomatic institutions and the spread of democracy, and in recent times, have pulled back from the predominance agenda altogether. President Barack Obama inherited the war on Terror in Iraq and Afghanistan from the Bush administration and carried out a surgically strategic war against ISIS/ISIL while assisting the spread of democracy in the Middle East during the Arab Spring.<sup>10</sup> He also worked with China on a bilateral agreement to reduce carbon emissions to combat climate change, engaged in numerous trade agreements, including the Trans-Pacific Partnership and secured a nuclear agreement with Iran that led to Iran surrendering 97% of its enriched Uranium.<sup>11</sup> Obama's was

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<sup>8</sup> "The Dark Charisma of Adolf Hitler: Leading Millions into the Abyss." 2012.  
<https://www.netflix.com/title/80212698>.

<sup>9</sup> Walt, Stephen M. 1998. "International Relations: One World, Many Theories." *Foreign Policy*, no. 110 (Spring): 29. doi:10.2307/1149275.

<sup>10</sup> Nelson, Michael. "Barack Obama: Foreign Affairs." Miller Center. Last modified January 24, 2018.  
<https://millercenter.org/president/obama/foreign-affairs>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

clearly a liberal foreign policy approach, using cooperation and diplomacy to achieve objectives as well as encouraging the spread of Democracy.

In contrast, President Donald Trump has taken a far more realist approach, focusing on the military and economic power of the United States with his “America First” agenda, but he has also pulled back from the trend of American predominance and has moved toward isolationist policies<sup>12</sup>, used military force where necessary to send a message to threats in the Middle East,<sup>13</sup> and engaged in a trade war with China.<sup>14</sup> Trump’s is a foreign policy of realism and self-interest, even selfish interest, but his policies do not speak to a desire to continue spreading America’s “hand” in international affairs and promoting U.S. dominance. Understanding the personal motives of world leaders in addition to general policy patterns of the state and the nature of social movements helps policymakers make sense not only of the big picture but also the people they are dealing with, which leads to a more effective analysis and even prescriptions for diplomacy.

Practical application theories, such as game theory (a realist approach that assumes states/institutions/organizations are rational actors driven by self-interest<sup>15</sup>), offer tools for running simulations on policy options before acting. One well-known game model that is useful

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<sup>12</sup> Calmes, Jackie. "Donald Trump: Foreign Affairs." Miller Center. Last modified October 18, 2017. <https://millercenter.org/president/trump/foreign-affairs>.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> "US-China Trade War in 300 Words." BBC News. Last modified June 29, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-45899310>.

<sup>15</sup> Kapor, Predrag. *Game Theory Approach To Conflict And Cooperation In International Relations*. Varazdin: Varazdin Development and Entrepreneurship Agency (VADEA), 2016, <http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/docview/1854280467?accountid=12085>.



in realist and neoliberal theory<sup>16</sup> is the Prisoner's Dilemma. The Prisoner's Dilemma is a scenario where two prisoners are encouraged to cooperate under threat of a prison term.<sup>17</sup> If one prisoner confesses and the other does not, the confessor goes free and the silent party endures and extended prison term. If both confess, then both receive shorter prison terms.<sup>18</sup> The assumption is that one or both parties will "defect" or not cooperate with the interrogator.<sup>19</sup> The lack of scenario options and the presumption of outcomes is a common flaw in game theory that limits the capacity to effectively predict outcomes.<sup>20</sup> In short, a lack of imagination and too many restrictions on the game itself fail to re-create authentic IR scenarios to explore policy outcomes. However, with a broad imagination and a diverse team of players who have a contextual understanding of states and actors via theoretical and cultural context as well as information on the personalities involved in real-world scenarios, effective games can be played to determine which policy is most strategic to achieving desired outcomes and put multiple policy options in order of most likely to succeed.

As for the assessment of human nature, realism has the most practical assessment, as liberalism is inherently idealistic and can be blind to the unappealing realities of humanity. For

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<sup>16</sup> Karns, Margaret P., and Karen A. Mingst. "Theoretical Foundations of Global Governance." In *International Organizations: The Politics and Processes of Global Governance*, 3rd ed., 47. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Pub, 2004.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Kapor, Predrag. *Game Theory Approach To Conflict And Cooperation In International Relations*. Varazdin: Varazdin Development and Entrepreneurship Agency (VADEA), 2016, <http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/docview/1854280467?accountid=12085>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

example, Liberals believe that cooperation on a mass scale is possible and that the spread of Democracy is inevitable<sup>21</sup>, yet, the failure of the Arab Spring to spread Democracy in the Middle East has proven otherwise.<sup>22</sup> Constructivism is useful in assessing practical movements in human consciousness. As illustrated above, all theories have their place, which is why synthesis is important. Game Theory proves to be most pragmatic in nature and has the ability to serve as a tool for policymakers in strategizing from an understanding of human nature. However, game theory is limited by the rules and restrictions imposed as well as the limited imagination of those who create and play the game and even manipulate it to their position.<sup>23</sup> There is a clear disconnect between theory and policy, and this is largely due to a difference in objectives between theorists and practitioners, but with the aligned perspective and a synthetic approach, theory can be fine-tuned to become a practical tool for policy-makers.

### **U.S. Government as Divine Synthesis**

The structure of the United States government as designed in the Constitution is a synthesis of realism, liberalism, and constructivism with the ongoing experiment proving to be a live game that has laid the groundwork for international relations as experienced today. The concept of a nation based on laissez-faire capitalism with limited government populated by a

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<sup>21</sup> Karns, Margaret P., and Karen A. Mingst. "Theoretical Foundations of Global Governance." In *International Organizations: The Politics and Processes of Global Governance*, 3rd ed., 47. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Pub, 2004.

<sup>22</sup> Jones, Seth G. "The Mirage of the Arab Spring: Deal With the Region You Have, Not the Region You Want." *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 1 (2013): 55-63. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41721004>.

<sup>23</sup> Kapor, Predrag. *Game Theory Approach To Conflict And Cooperation In International Relations*. Varazdin: Varazdin Development and Entrepreneurship Agency (VADEA), 2016, <http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/docview/1854280467?accountid=12085>.

democratic electorate is inherently liberal.<sup>24</sup> However, the three branches of government with a system of checks and balances is realist, as it protects the citizenry and government against personal motives for increased power. In *The Federalist No. 51*, James Madison addressed a need for security from the concentration of power as well as the need for “personal motives” and “constitutional means” to “resist encroachments”.<sup>25</sup> He concluded that “ambition must be made to counteract ambition” and that individual interests should be aligned with constitutional rights, as human nature necessitates such “devices” so as to “control the abuses of government.”<sup>26</sup>

American constructivism is embodied in its exceptional traits of religiosity (activism, utopian goals, and self-government), community life (civic engagement, neighborliness, and social trust), industriousness (self-reliance, hard work, and getting ahead), and egalitarianism (classless society, middle class identification, and equal human dignity).<sup>27</sup> This liberal, idealist society with realist infrastructure and a social construct that inspired politicians and philosophers around the world gave President Woodrow Wilson a vision to cultivate a League of Nations that could spread these ideals throughout the world. After World War II, this vision ultimately came to realization in the United Nations, which has a charter<sup>28</sup> and declaration of human rights<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Murray, Charles A. *American Exceptionalism: An Experiment in History*. Aei Press, 2013. 31.

<sup>25</sup> Hamilton, Alexander, James Madison, John Jay, and Clinton Rossiter. *The Federalist Papers*. London: Penguin, 2003. 319.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Murray, Charles A. *American Exceptionalism: An Experiment in History*. Aei Press, 2013. 18.

<sup>28</sup> "UN Charter (full Text)." Welcome to the United Nations. Last modified October 25, 2017. <https://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/un-charter-full-text/>.

<sup>29</sup> "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." Welcome to the United Nations. Last modified December 31, 2018. <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>.

likened to the United States Constitution and Bill of Rights intended to protect state sovereignty and individual rights at all levels of government – domestically and internationally.

### **Final Analysis**

Due to the nature of the academic community's obsession with intellectual engagement among direct peers in a microcosm, there is a significant gap between international relations theory and real-world policy. This discrepancy leads to policymakers being unable to make the connection between theory and policy in a practical manner, but this does not mean that theory is entirely useless. IR theories such as realism, liberalism, constructivism, and game theory as well as their offshoots provide valuable information to help theorists and foreign policy practitioners see the big picture of IR events in context. Realism provides the best assessment of human nature, self-interest, and the desire for power. Liberalism gives insight on how utopian ideals can move humanity forward through institutions, market economies, and democracy, especially after massive calamity. Constructivism paints the picture of what takes place within the consciousness of the citizenry and how those developments influence state actors. Game theory provides a series of exercises to test out theories and policy options to determine the outcome of strategy.

The major opportunity is to examine the motives and psyche of the representatives of states (i.e. world leaders, foreign ministers, etc.). Understanding the mindset and personal motives of the individuals setting agendas and making policy decisions on behalf of states is crucial in making theory relevant to policy makers, as this connection practically applies

classical or timeless theories to current events and helps to make game theory simulations more relevant.

The founders of the United States understood the need for theoretical synthesis and practical application thereof, as they set up an inherently liberal nation based on popular sovereignty and limited government with a realist government structure that has multiple layers of checks and balances to quell personal motives for power within a social construct that has inspired politicians, philosophers, and the international order as it is known today. With the great American experiment in mind, theoretical synthesis with the goals of understanding states and their personal actors and prescribing viable policy solutions will help bridge the gap between international relations theory and practical foreign policy.

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