

## A Study on Domestic Politics and International Relations

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### ABSTRACT

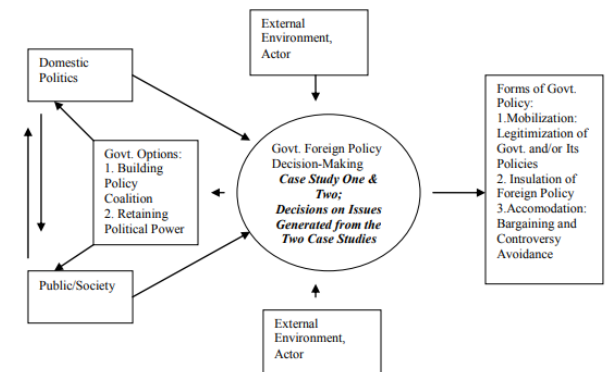
A significant and growing literature on international relations (IR) argues that domestic politics is typically an important part of the explanation for states' foreign policies, and seeks to understand its influence more precisely. I argue that what constitutes a "domestic-political" explanation of a state's foreign policy choices has not been clearly elaborated. What counts as a domestic-political explanation is defined by opposition to systemic or structural explanations. But these may be specified in several different ways—I spell out two—each of which implies a different concept of domestic political explanations. If a systemic IR theory pictures states as unitary, rational actors, then a domestic-political explanation is one in which domestic political interactions in at least one state yield a suboptimal foreign policy relative to some normative standard. Or, if a systemic IR theory pictures states as unitary, rational actors and also requires that attributes of particular states not enter the explanation, then a domestic-political explanation is any one that involves state characteristics other than relative power. Implications of each approach are developed, and examples from the literature are provided. I also address the question of whether there is a sharp distinction between a "systemic theory of international politics" and a "theory of foreign policy," arguing that there is an important and natural sense in which they are the same.

**Keywords--** International Relations (IR), Domestic-Political, Fear of Death, Rational Actors

### I. INTRODUCTION

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## II. INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS TO COMPARATIVE POLITICS

The field of international relations is steadily emerging from a dark period of little progress, helped along by the increasing realization that many, if not most, phenomena of interest cannot be understood without some understanding of the internal politics of nation-states. The founders of neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism treated state preferences as exogenous and, generally for reasons of convenience, black-boxed domestic politics. Over time, a second generation came to internalize what were originally intended only as simplifying assumptions. More appropriate would be a sophisticated understanding of politicians as both policy-seekers and office-seekers. Politicians simultaneously pursue both substantive goals and a desire to stay in power. Understanding politicians and parties as policy-seekers requires international relations scholars to pay attention to what they have for so long tried to avoid — foreign policy preferences. Andrew Moravcsik claims to have reformulated liberalism as a powerful alternative to realism on the principle of “taking preferences seriously,” but this is more an admonition than a substantive theory of what states want.

The recent international relations scholarship that incorporates domestic politics does the same, primarily by focusing almost exclusively on institutions — more specifically, regime type. Recent findings suggest that democracies have particular difficulties mobilizing for conflict and might be prone to under balancing, while late industrializers with fragile and undeveloped democratic institutions are susceptible to dangerous logrolls and overextension. The need to mobilize public opinion in democracies often results in an inflation of threat that undermines the delicate balancing act necessary for diplomacy. The transparency of democracies allows them to send more credible signals of resolve.

## III. THE GLOBALIZATION DEBATE

For its part, the utility of globalization as a theoretical concept has been much disputed: in typically robust fashion, Susan Strange has dismissed a number of 'vague and woolly words' used within the discipline, amongst which she rates globalization as the 'worst of them all'.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, there is a strong body of support behind it. It has, for instance, been asserted that 'globalization may be the concept of the 1990s, a key idea by which we understand the transition of human society into the third millennium',<sup>17</sup> and that it is 'the most significant development and theme in contemporary life and social theory'.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, it has also been claimed that, in the face of the scholarly challenges presented by the end of the Cold War, globalization 'survived . . . when many of our other ordering and explanatory concepts did

not'.<sup>19</sup> Others again have emphasized the utility of globalization in drawing attention to the continuities between the Cold War and post-Cold War eras, even if preoccupation with the Cold War framework obscured the fundamental and ongoing changes which were taking place.

## IV. IN WHAT SENSE IS A SYSTEMIC THEORY A THEORY OF FOREIGN POLICY?

Before we can address the central question of what a domestic-politics explanation of foreign policy is, we must deal with a prior puzzle. As noted, in arguing that domestic politics matters in the explanation of states' foreign policies, the recent literature understands itself as going against neo- or structural realism. Structural realism is said to hold that one can understand the important features of states' foreign policies without looking at domestic politics. However, the major exponent of neorealism, Waltz, claims forcefully that a systemic (and neorealist) theory of international politics is not and cannot be a theory of foreign policy, that it is an “error...to mistake a theory of international politics for a theory of foreign policy” (Waltz 1979, p. 121). More recently, in a reply to Elman (1996), Waltz has reasserted this position. Never one to mince words, Waltz titled the reply “International Politics Is Not Foreign Policy.”

What is going on here? If we take this claim at face value—if there is no reasonable sense in which a systemic IR theory can be a theory of foreign policy—then the whole framing of the “domestic politics explains foreign policy” literature is misconceived. A preliminary task, then, is to figure out in what sense, if any, systemic and particularly neorealist theory is a theory of foreign policy.

## V. THE STANCE OF DOMESTIC POLITICS AND THE PUBLIC

Realism and liberalism differ at considering the importance of domestic politics in foreign policy. As noted previously, the former tends to downplay the significance of domestic politics because its proponents focus on the power politics, the accumulation and protection of power, states' status in the international system, and consider state as a rational unitary actor. The realist approach argues that domestic structures of states play modest role in foreign policy. It does not consider state's actions are being determined by domestic factors such as ideology, culture, and religion. Instead, realist sees state's actions are being based on its interests in the power it perceives it needs to survive (Haque 2003, 135-155). The concept of real-politic is the basis for the realist argument because it emphasises that foreign policy is self-interested, aimed at preparing for war and calculating the relative balances of power. Moreover, national

interest is the only main guideline to the state's formation of foreign policy, and therefore the national interest is the accumulation of power (Doyle 1997, 18-19). In short, it is the international system and not domestic politics causing it to adopt certain foreign policy and act in a particular way.

Partly in recognition to the complexity of the recent relations among states and mainly responding to the propensity of systemic theories of international relations continuing to undermine the societal (public) influence on foreign policy formulation, Skidmore and Hudson (1993, 1-22) identifies three possible models of approaches explaining state-society relations in the process of foreign policy decision-making. Although each model embodies different assumptions about the structure of state-society (public) relations and how the three relate to the decision-making of foreign policy, together the three models place the importance of society (public) in foreign policy making.

The first is statist model that closely relates to realist theory. It assumes that in formulating foreign policy, decision makers are functioning largely autonomously from the influence of society. The government is much stronger than the society, thereby resulting in the neglecting of the role and influence of society in foreign policy. In other words, states have full authority in managing foreign relations and tend to neglect the role of society in the foreign policy decision-making.

The second model is the societal approach. Contrary to the first model, this approach assumes that societal groups within state are in fact playing a dominant and continuing role in foreign policy. This societal approach consists of two models namely pluralist and social blocs. Pluralist model comes from the assumption that for the requirement of both maintaining and maximising influence and effectiveness in foreign policy decisions, political leaders will care most about maintaining a high level of domestic political support. Social blocs model involves variants of alternative to pluralism such as elite, Marxist, corporatist and sectoral blocs of society. This model emphasises the role of mass media, non-government organisations, and other forms of pressure groups in society, which controls or even directs the issues and contents of foreign policy decision-making.

The third model is a trans-national approach emphasising the global society. It is based on the assumption that similarities of interests and objectives in societal groups can form political coalition surpassing national boundaries. It is the network of cooperation coming out of this process that in turn can provide issues that foreign policy actors should take into consideration in formulating foreign policy decisions. In addition, the objectives of trans-national society varies ranging from regimes transformation, mediating and settling international conflict, bringing new issues becoming global agenda, and changing global values, standards and norms (Skidmore and Hudson 1993, 7-15).

## VI. CONCLUSION

While many theories of international relations are fiercely contested, it is usually inappropriate to see them as rivals over some universal truth about world politics. Rather, each rests on certain assumptions and epistemologies, is constrained within certain specified conditions, and pursues its own analytic goal. While various theories may lead to more or less compelling conclusions about international relations, none is definitively 'right' or 'wrong'. Rather, each possesses some tools that can be of use to students of international politics in examining and analyzing rich, multi-causal phenomena.

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