IR & Theory

This is the first in a series of articles in the International Relations 101 section about "understanding international relations and foreign policy decision making." These articles seek to make this complex, multi-dimensional arena accessible to people outside the halls of power. The series also pulls duty as a necessary backdrop for understanding the wisdom-based alternative approaches to the field that are being developed by The Wisdom Project.

International Relations and the Significance of Theory

by Charles Strohmer

Although we use theories all the time to help us cope with everyday life, people can be terrified by the word. But there's no need to be. And in the world of international relations, no one can be. For the many others who ?just can't be bothered,? the word probably just doesn't seem practical. It has come to have populist connotations of a life lived by ivory tower intellectuals who never had to deal with dirty diapers, flat tires, or flu shots for the kids. But even diapers, radials, and injections have theories behind them.

We seem to have lost sight of something, which would not have been so had we lived in the theatrical culture of ancient Greece, where their words for theater and theory meant very nearly the same thing. Theatron (our theater) meant ?the seeing place,? or the ?place for seeing? or ?viewing? the performing arts. (Similar meanings are found in the Latin and French for theater.) Theoria (our theory) meant ?looking at,? ?seeing,? ?viewing,? which for us today has come to indicate speculation or contemplation as opposed to action. So theoreticians are uninvolved. They live in their heads. They are life's disinterested spectators. Or so we think.

That's not how audiences streaming out of an Athens theatron, having witnesses the drama of a tragedy or a comedy, would have understood theoria. Certainly the word for them underlined the activity of the mind, in contrast to their word praxis (practice), but theoria included the idea of having some practical aim in mind, looking at a thing or an event with some practical purpose. We can begin to get a feel for this when we think of the physical effort alone that went into preparing for and then performing a Greek comedy or tragedy.

That there is more to ?theory? than just intellectual exercise hasn't completely slipped our minds today. ?The theory behind the Apollo spacecraft helped put the first man on moon.? ?A new medical theory may help doctors cure...? ?The police have a theory that...? And this one, which political actors today still use, ?the theater of war.?

The influence of theories

There is a sense in which theories bring together ideas and action, and for international relations and foreign policy decision making they include both conceptual and practical aspects. Theories help political leaders make sense of the world and shape to their foreign policies. International reality, then, is to some large degree created, shaped, sustained, guided, and reshaped by whatever conceptual model happens to be ascendent in the White House, or Downing Street, or the tents of al Qaeda when foreign policy decisions are being made. At least some adequate awareness of the most relied on background theories is therefore necessary for understanding international relations and foreign policy decision making.

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Each theoretical model catches and emphasizes important elements of international relations and, as Robert Jervis, professor of international affairs at Columbia University, notes, the arguments among scholars is usually not to pit one model against another but to discuss the ?relative importance of and interrelationships among various? different models. (Robert Jervis, ?Realism in the Study of World Politics,? in Katzenstein, Keohane, and Krasner, eds., Exploration and Contestation in the Study of World Politics, 1999, p. 332.)

That is the general approach I have taken in the series of articles on understanding international relations and foreign policy that will

appear on this site. These articles will outline the most influential theoretical models of the past several decades in the West. I have begun this process with articles on political realism and idealism, and on neoconservatism. These articles, however, do not just talk about these three -isms in the abstract. They includes contemporary examples that show why a particular leader and his advisors chose one policy over others that were on offer. It is as a preface to the following articles, which try to make accessible a complicated field, that I thought it might be useful, here, to start with some basics about the world of theory itself and its significance to international relations.

The game of bowls

The first thing is this. Theory influences how we interpret what comes to our senses, and we interpret any new information or situation in terms of what we already assume, believe, or know. Theory helps us make sense of what we are seeing or experiencing, and of course people have different ways of making sense of the same event. All of this, of course, is obvious. What I wat to underline, here, it that this is true even when we aren't conscious of what model is helping us to make sense of things. Which for most of us is most of the time.

This was humorously illustrated by a British friend who was explaining to me what occurred when his young son first saw the leisurely game of bowls being played. The game, as you may know, is usually played outdoors on a long, flat, well-cut lawn on which the bowlers compete with each other by taking turns rolling large, heavy black balls down the ?green? to see who can get closest to the ?jack,? a small solid white ball at the other end of the long green. So one day, during a drive through the park with his family, the youngest son was looking out the back window and suddenly shouted, ?Look, dad, cannonball races!? Surprised, the family looked and saw a game of bowls being played.

I sometimes illustrate this in seminars by having a dozen volunteers put on different colored sunglasses I've collected ? red, blue, yellow, pink, black, green, whatever ? and then I ask each participant to describe how he or she sees the world around them. The room itself is has not changed, nor have the people in it, but both the room and the people in it sure look different through different lenses. Once the participants have got the knack of explaining how each sees the world, I then have them trade lenses, which, if nothing else, affords them some sympathy for others' views!

Different theories, different emphases

Another point is this. When encountering a new phenomenon, and this is particularly striking in dealing with a crisis, the questions that a political leader deems most urgently in need of answers will be largely determined by the conceptual model the leader relies on. Across the aisle, a politician who holds to a different model may be asking quite different questions, and that could lead not just to different but to conflicting interpretations of the same event.

Imagine with me for a minute a conversation between the English dad and his young son if they had pulled the car over to watch the game of bowls, and if the son begins asking questions about this new (to him) phenomenon based on his knowledge of cannonballs. But dad is providing answers based on the game of bowls.

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So father remarks to son about the skill of a player who rolled his ball just short of his opponent's ball and so got nearer the jack. Puzzled, son replies, ?What sort of a race is it where they only try to get even and not ahead?? Father then explains the game's principle ?of getting close? rather than ahead. Son rather dubiously accepts the idea, but suggests, ?Well, then, the players ought to start aiming better, because the cannonballs are going all over the place. One almost went round in a semi-circle.? Father then explains that these balls won't go in a straight line when they are bowled.

Completely frustrated by now, son explodes, ?Well, no self-respecting gunner would use ammunition that wouldn't go straight!? Father (fully assured and ever the expert!) then replies that the bias is deliberately built into the balls during their manufacture. Hearing this, son gives up and mutters, ?I can understand them using unbalanced ammunition if they have no choice, but actually making cannonballs like that, they must be mad!?

Two conflicting theories about the same phenomenon produced different interpretations, different questions, different answers, not to mention a failure of communication. But notice that the theories were at work non-consciously. (John Peck and Charles Strohmer,

Uncommon Sense: God's Wisdom for Our Complex and Changing World, 2001, pp. 71-72.)

Different theories, different policies

A third point is this. With different emphases come different policies for dealing with the same event or crisis. And may the best man win!

We may imagine what could be some rather grim ramifications of this if we extended the conversation between the dad and his son to include the parks and recreation authority. I will let you play around with this on your own. I'm thinking of the foolish outcome if the son convinced the local authority to call in the army to deal with that very threatening situation. After all, a few of those cannonballs might explode when they crashed into each other. But you may imagine your own silly policy.

Theory as a simplifying device for the complex

Moving from some basics about theory itself to international relations, theories provide conceptual backgrounds for how leaders and their advisors understand the world and make foreign policy decisions: a field where there is so much material to look at and so much phenomena to interpret that it is difficult to know which things matter and which don't. For international relations, then, ?theory? becomes a ?kind of simplifying device that allows you to decide which facts matter and which do not.? (Baylis, Smith, and Owens, "Introduction," in Baylis, Smith, and Owens, eds., The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations, 2008, pp. 3-4.)

The elite know the theories

Unlike my British friend's son, it is unquestionably true that national leaders and their foreign policy advisors, as well as scholars, academics, and analysts in the field, are quite conscious of their own theories and those of others. ?For over 2000 years,? writes Robert Keohane, professor of international affairs at Princeton University, ?thinkers have sought to understand, more or less systematically, the most basic questions of world politics: the sources of discord and of war and the conditions of cooperation and of peace.? (Keohane, ?Realism, Neorealism and the Study of Word Politics,? in Keohane, ed., Neorealism and Its Critics, 1986, p. 3.)

No one can cope with the complexities of world politics without the aid of a theory

The choice for practitioners, Keohane concludes, is not between being influenced by a theory or examining each case on its merits. Instead, it is ?between being aware of the theoretical basis for one's interpretation and actions, and being unaware of it.... No one can cope with the complexities of world politics without the aid of a theory or of implicit assumptions and propositions that substitute, however poorly, for a theory.? (Keohane, ?Realism, Neorealism," in Neorealism, p. 4.)

The non-experts usually do not

But quite like my British friend's son, most non-experts are relying on theories that they are not conscious of, for interpreting, for instance, U.S. ? Mideast relations. For most non-experts, one's theoretical understanding is chiefly hidden, or intuitive. It would be difficult to express consciously if one were put on the spot and asked to articulate it.

Usually this is because the model was picked up piecemeal, slowly and without much if any conscious thought about it over time. It wasn't something learned as a classroom subject. Much of it is simply absorbed in bits and bobs from childhood and adolescence ? from parents, grandparents, older brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, friends parents, religious figures, political leaders, and other significant others.

So an American adult who had been raised in hard-nosed fundamentalist Christian ethos in the Bible Belt would most likely say that any U.S. policy that promotes a two-state solution between Israel and the Palestinians is ?unbiblical.? But the passenger sitting near him on the plane who was raised in Chicago in a family of agnostics might endorse a two-state solution. If, however, the passenger sitting between them, being puzzled at the two conflicting views, asked her traveling companions what the bases of their views were, they might have a hard time articulating that in any methodical way. This is not to slight the two flyers. I'm sure they were both patriotic citizens. It is merely to note that their views derive from theoretical understandings that are in all likelihood hidden from them and never been consciously considered by them in any methodical way.

Theories, then, are essential not only for the foreign policy professional but for anyone seeking greater clarity about Western-Middle East relations. Without at least some knowledge of prominent international relations theories, we will find ourselves as baffled as the person trying to assemble a complicated 5,000-piece jigsaw puzzle without reference to the picture on the cover of the box.

But theories don't make choices

There are, of course, limits and downsides to conceptual understandings. For one thing, theories don't make decisions. People make decisions. And though people like to be consistent, sometimes they are not. A national leader and his administration may at times act inconsistent with their preferred political theory.

When he was President of the United States (1976-1980), Jimmy Carter leaned on a humanitarian model of international relations that gave primacy to human rights. This was quite a different approach than the realist foreign policy that President Richard Nixon and his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger had put together (1968-1974). When Carter's foreign policy was partnered with his evangelical faith ? a faith, by the way, that did not hinder Carter from seeking agreements based on common ground with leaders of states who held to different faiths ? it produced the kind of diplomacy that helped secure the remarkably durable peace treaty between Egypt and Israel (1978).

But it had its limits. Success was not guaranteed in every situation. Carter found himself frustrated by Soviet expansionism, but more than that, although his foreign policy model had proved its wisdom even through a geopolitical acid test (the final grueling stages of negotiating the Israel-Egypt peace treaty), it failed stunningly during the American hostage crisis with Iran (November 1979 ? January 1981). During that crisis, Carter implemented a policy against the grain of his humanitarian model. He risked starting a war with Iran by authorizing a perilous and long-shot rescue operation (it failed) to free the hostages from the American embassy in Tehran.

Leaders and experts may change their theories

Political leaders and even theorists themselves may change, or they may opt for a different model if, say, the theory they adhered to loses its street cred. One noteworthy example of this occurred with a small but consequential group of Cold War liberal Democrats who, by the late-1960s and early-1970s, had concluded that Washington's Democrat foreign policy was much too soft toward Soviet expansionism (see Realism and Idealism). For years they tried to reform it while calling for various kinds of military interventions against Soviet expansion. That failed, and by 1980 they had made a complete break with the Democrat party. Many became Republicans and drifted into President Ronald Reagan's camp, seeing in Reagan a leader they thought would bring U.S. policy around to their militaristic approach to the Soviets. That, of course, never happened, but in the process this small group became known as the neoconservatives. (See: John Ehrman, The Rise of Neoconservatism; Stefan Halper & Jonathan Clarke, America Alone; Murray Friedman, The Neoconservative Revolution.)

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Former neoconservative intellectual Francis Fukuyama is another example. The neoconservative argument for regime change in Iraq had become so well-honed during the 1990s that it was formally presented to the Clinton White House on January 26, 1998, where it was cooly received. By then, however, neoconservatives, having spent inordinate sums of money and political capital, had become a prominent ideology promoted in think tanks, journals, and in university classrooms. This paid off for them, big time, with the inclusion of neoconservative thinkers as top-level advisors in the George W. Bush administration. Their way of reasoning about the Middle East became an organizing principle governing the decision of the Bush White House to invade Iraq after 9/11.

However, after the U.S. success at removing Saddam Hussein from power (in 2003) turned into the counter-narrative of a worst-of-all-possible-worlds situation, Fukuyama, one of several neoconservatives who had signed the January 28 formal proposal to President Clinton, began seriously questioning neoconservatism. He eventually left the fold after being continually rebuffed by neoconservative hardliners for suggesting a wiser way ahead. As he explained to me in 2006, ?Even though I continue to agree with them on some issues, I don't feel like I'm in their camp any more? (personal correspondence, July 31, 2006; see also his book America at a Crossroads.)

Presidents, prime ministers, and their foreign policy advisors may also combine elements of different models, often for reasons of sheer pragmatism. I consider George W. Bush to be a significant example of having done this, which I will explain in the article Realism and Idealism.

Theories are inexact and limited

Political theories are an inexact science. ?International politics involves so many variables,? writes Joseph Nye, for there are ?so

many changes occurring at the same time that events are overdetermined ? there are too many causes.? (Nye, Understanding International Conflicts: An Introduction to Theory and History, 2007, p. 51.) Nye, an international relations theorist, is hinting at the fact that no theory is comprehensive enough to provide an exhaustive analysis, whether interpretive or predictive, of all that will play out in relations among the nations who are the subject of, or subject to, a particular foreign policy decision. In other words, theory is not life. Life can overwhelm theoretical models and show us their inadequacies. I suspect this was a reason why Fukuyama became disillusioned with his neoconservative colleagues.

Two other situations come quickly to mind, the collapse of the Soviet Empire and 9/11. Neither realists, nor idealists or neoconservatives had expected, let alone predicted, the collapse, which began in late-1989 and was completed in late-1991. Contingency planning for the end of the Soviet Empire, especially a peaceful end, was never a realistic enough issue, at least not during the 1980s. This meant that the first President Bush and his team of realist advisors had to make U.S. policy for it on the fly. The same is true with 9/11 and the second President Bush's policy responses to it.

Both surprise events deeply challenged perennial international relations theory and practice. Long-standing orientations of foreign policy were disoriented overnight, forcing leaders, analysts, and policy-makers long and necessary processes of reorientation. At all times, then, the difference should be kept in mind between international relations as they are and the ways we see them, our conceptual understandings of them.

Yet we need our abstractions

None of this is to suggest that we don't need our abstractions. We do. Indeed, it is part of what makes us human, and we would never want to be without the ability to think abstractly. Properly understood, however, theory making and its use is merely meant to be a tool for one's understanding, whether of a political or religious ideology, or a school of philosophy, psychology, or theology, and so on. In politics this is a necessary tool because a political party bases its platform on an ideology, which sets that party's agenda for education, health care, the economy, the environment, and so on, including its foreign policy.

Serious issues and problems arise, however, if not violence or war, when ideological interests are absolutized and acted on. When ideologies take on a life of their own, they can control leaders and dehumanize them. Policies may then be enacted that will crush the life out of the nonconformists. As political scientist David Koyzis puts it, when an ideology attempts ?to offer a total explanation for the world and its history,? it is ?a short step from ideology to totalitarianism,? which seeks to ?mold the world in accordance with its inexorable logic.? (Koyzis, Political Visions and illusions: A Survey & Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies, 2003, p. 20.)

When all is said and done, it is wisest to ensure that theory is kept in its proper place, as a tool for our thinking. As one wit has said, it is best to think of ideology in terms of strong liquor ? harmless in small amounts but dangerous in large.

Conclusion

Despite the above cautions, political theories remain pivotal in international relations and world politics. Theories give leaders of every nation conceptual environments and vocabularies necessary for meaningful discussions about the kind of policy that makes the most sense for a particular situation. I believe, however, that the misuse of political ideologies clouds the perception necessary for developing and applying wisdom-based approaches to foreign policy analysis and decision making.

Comment on the topic here