

International Relations

Truth be told, the world-changing theater of international relations and foreign policy is so complex, multi-dimensional, and at odds with itself that a fully adequate understanding is always beyond reach. It may seem as if presidents, prime ministers, or autocrats just sit around in air conditioned luxury understanding everything and flicking their fingers to make what they want to happen happen. On the world stage, however, that is far from what actually happens. Always the drama of the unforeseen, the intangible, or the abnormal arrives from the wings. Advisers, bureaucracies, and other actors play important roles. Even the most well-thought-out decisions always lead to the arrival of futures other than what was hoped-for in the corridors of power, not to mention what was sold to, and therefore expected by, their publics. Only novelists know the future.

The reason for so many known unknowns is because so many big and well-thought-out ideas are basic to the planning ? for the analysis, construction, maintenance, shaping, and reshaping of international relations ? and these big ideas ?outside the halls of power out in the world ? intermingle in foreign policy decision making and often act against each other even in the most equitable and dispassionate of bilateral relations, never mind in conflicted multilateral relations, such as Washington and the capitals of the Muslim world have with one another. The situation is similar to that long sentence I just wrote! It's understandable, but you might have to take some time with it to understand it. You might like it simplified. So that is what I have tried to do in this series of articles on international relations, hopefully without being simplistic about it.

It has been helpful to me to liken the big ideas of international relations and foreign policy decision making to a conceptual jigsaw puzzle, one that helps us picture the way our contemporary world looks internationally. That puzzle's largest ideas include, but are not limited to: the state; national interests; power and balance of power; anarchy; culture and society; identity; norms; actors and agency; democracy; globalization; human rights; international law; international institutions; non-government organizations (NGOs); economic progress; multinational corporations; and international society.

Interpreting the big ideas

Now all of these big ideas have to be interpreted. And they are interpreted according to the background theory being used for an interpretation. This is, in fact, the reason for the background theories. Each one provides an explanatory filter through which the state, power, anarchy, identity, society, etc. is understood. For many decades in the West, especially in Washington, the most prominent theories have been versions of political ideologies such as realism, idealism, and neoconservatism, although schools of thought such as IR constructivism and the English School (the latter chiefly in Britain) are making inroads (especially IR constructivism). These theories, or their derivatives, influence how national leaders, foreign policy advisers and their committees, think tanks, academics, and relevant others give meaning to the puzzle pieces, which in turn helps them to construct their view of the way the international world looks and functions, or should function. Leaders seeing through different filters will interpret issues and events somewhat differently, giving rise to different foreign policies.

A presidential administration, for example, may argue for a certain foreign policy regarding an issue and it may conflict with what many members of Congress want it to be. When this occurs, two different theories are at odds on the issue. The winning theory, so to speak, will be implicated in how the issue was analyzed and in what policy prescription(s) was implemented (illustrations of this are provided in these articles). In other words, different interpretive filters (theoretical understandings) stress relying on some conceptual puzzle pieces over others for analysis and decision making. One theory will underline the importance of the state and balance of power. Another theory might agree that the state and balance of power are important but it would stress norms or international law. Such deep differences will have a huge effect on the direction a particular policy takes. A neoconservative administration, for instance, would look at and respond to a major situation in the Middle East, such as the so-called Arab spring or Iran's nuclear program, quite unlike an administration whose filter was political idealism.

This is also relevant to the theater of the Muslim Middle East, where a variety of religious-political ideologies act as interpretive filters for leaders and their advisers and for the kind of policies will be enacted toward neighboring states and Western states. And because each Muslim Middle East state has a somewhat different filter, the United States cannot have the same foreign policy for each one. So it's quite a mix, especially when including Russia, China, India... Well, you get the picture.

The process of understanding

Having noted the hard fact of unpredictability inherent in foreign policy analyses and policy promises, it is nevertheless possible to

approximate the kind of thinking that goes on in the halls of power, and that is the purpose of this section of the site. This series of articles is not going to provide all the answers you may want, but they do offer a basic understanding of contemporary international relations and foreign policy decision making that may be unfamiliar even to many thoughtful people. And because of my current work, these articles focus on U.S. - Muslim Middle East relations.

I have chosen to start the process of understanding how international relations works with a short article on "IR theory" and longer articles on political realism and idealism and neoconservatism, to look at how various U.S. leaders have used these filters to analyze issues and events and shape U.S. foreign policy. The way leaders and their advisors really think about foreign policy decisions is largely unknown to the people who elect them. The material in the articles was adapted and developed exclusively for this site from chapters in [the new book](#) I'm writing on wisdom-based Christian ? Muslim and U.S. ? Mideast relations.

The articles also pull duty as important background for anyone wishing to understand why a wisdom-based alternative to international relations and foreign policy is being developed by The Wisdom Project. That is, if an alternative is on offer, it really has to be an alternative, and to know if it is, an adequate awareness of reigning paradigms is first necessary. As time permits, I will put more such articles on the site, such as about religious-political ideologies of the Middle East.

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