**Lesson**

**Explaining International Relations**

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| The study of international relations, as you may well know, involves the study of the interactions among the main actors in the international system. Mainstream international relations (IR) theory, usually focuses its attention on the interactions between nation-states, as the primary actors in the international system, but the study of IR really involves the study of the interactions of all the actors within the present-day international system, including states, international organizations (governmental and non-governmental), transnational actors, networks, and individuals. The purpose of IR theory has been to create systematic knowledge about this international system, the actors within it, and their mutual interactions. Without theory we are left with a string of facts.  For instance, take a look at this U.S-Russian Arms Control Interactive by the Council of Foreign Relations.  As you go through it note that it provides useful information, but without theory, no overarching way to understand the information.  <http://www.cfr.org/world/us-russia-arms-control/p21620> IR theorists have tackled many important questions about international relations. Chief among them, and historically the main focus of the study of international relations (and students of international relations), has been the question of the causes of war. Given the enormous costs associated with preparing for, and engaging in, warfare, why do states continue to engage in this practice? What are the conditions that are most conducive to the outbreak of war in the international system? A closely related question, but one that is equally important, is the conditions for peace? In other words, if war is a common phenomenon in the international system, when can we expect peace to rule?  Other questions that have occupied the minds of students of international relations throughout the years have focused on cooperation, or the lack thereof. In particular, scholars have tried to explain why states find it difficult to cooperate even when they can all benefit from cooperation. Most governments in the world, for example, agree that climate change is a significant problem, and that it can only be resolved through mutual cooperation. Yet, despite this agreement, governments cannot agree on the remedies and on how best to cooperate to reduce the effects of climate change. Scholars have also wondered about the obstacles to cooperation in the field of economic exchange. Scholars, for instance, have tried to understand why states that can benefit from the free exchange of goods, money, and services, often have found it difficult to reduce barriers to such exchanges. Not only that, scholars have also been interested in examining why some states seem to benefit disproportionally from economic exchange, while others appear to fall behind.   Scholars have also have tried to understand how cooperation between states can be improved and fostered and have tried to account for varying levels of cooperation between states. The cooperation between the members of the European Union, for example, has been a topic of study, as the transformation of Europe, from a hotbed of inter-state conflict and war, to a “zone of peace” has generated considerable attention.  In sum, there is no shortage of important questions that arise when looking at the modern international state system. To answer these kinds of questions (and others) in a *systematic fashion* has been the primary goal of the field of international relations. The primary way of creating systematic knowledge about international relations – and others issue areas as well – is through the *creation and the testing of theories*.  **Theory**.  Systematic explanations for social (and other) phenomena are known as *theories.* International relations theories consist of clear and concise *causal* statements about phenomena or patterns in international relations that *can be tested* with real-life evidence. Theories, in other words, consist of our efforts to explain *why* certain phenomena happen the way they do. Take, for example, one our observations from our survey of international history suggested that western Europe, which had been very tumultuous and violent prior to WW II, became quite peaceful after WW II (remember that between 1900 and 1945, Europe suffered two continent-wide great power wars. In the seven decades that have followed WW II, however, we have witnessed no great power wars at all among the Western European states. Why did this happen? What accounts for this long peace? One possible explanation – or, theory – is that this long peace can be explained by important changes in the domestic political and economic structures of the most powerful European states. More specifically, *democratic peace theory* claims that the long peace in Europe after WW II is the result of the fact that all the Western European states are mature liberal democracies (At a more general, the theory argues that liberal democracies do not fight one another).  Democratic peace theory, therefore, offers an explanation for *why* peace has reigned between western European states over the past six decades. That is, democracy has produced peace. The theory also offers an example for *how*democracy has produced this outcome (that is how is democracy related to international peace). It argues that there are certain features those democratic states shares, which make them less willing to engage in open warfare. In summary, a theory, therefore offers a general explanation for an observed pattern or phenomenon.           A **good theory**, moreover, is one that clearly specifies the *domain* to which it applies. In other words, it will specify what it tries to explain, and what cases/phenomena/patterns it purports to explain. In the case of our current example, democratic peace theory should apply to all democratic states, but it does not say much (if anything about non-democracies. For example, it does not state that non-democracies are inherently war-like. Its *domain* is limited to democracies and their propensity to get engaged in wars). Good  (scientific) theories are also *falsifiable*. That is, they are stated in a way that allows us to disconfirm them with empirical evidence. Theories that cannot be disconfirmed/falsified with empirical evidence are not only less satisfying in an intellectual sense, they *cannot be tested*. Without testing a theory, how could we know that it is useful in explaining the things that we want to explain? (The answer: we can’t)  To be falsifiable, a theory should clearly specify the *hypotheses* outlining the causes and the effects posited by the theory. An hypothesis, in other words, is a *proposed* explanation of how to phenomena are related. Hypotheses should also very clearly specify the*causal mechanism* by which cause and effect are connected. Thus, in our democratic peace theory example, the central hypothesis is that democratic states do not fight wars with one another. This statement is easily falsifiable, of course. If we find that democratic states do fight wars among themselves, then we can make the argument that peace in Europe has to be explained by something other than shared democracy. The *causal mechanism* by which democracy and peace are linked in the theory is through the pacifying effects of democratic institutions. Because publics do not like war, the theory argues, they will vote against policymakers that engage in war. Policymakers will take this sentiment into account, and they will try to avoid going to war. Thus, the causal argument that connects democracy to peace is by way of *public pressure on policy-makers.*  One of the *observable implications* of the democratic peace theory, therefore, has to do with public opposition to war. That is, one of the things that we need to see in real life, in order for us to accept the theory as one that is useful for explaining the absence of war, is evidence that publics in democratic states are, in fact, opposed to war. The theory also argues, of course, that public opposition will have an effect on policymakers, who will take this opposition into account and refrain from engaging in international war. That is a second *observable implication* of the theory. If democratic peace theory is correct, in other words, we should find evidence of the fact that policymakers heed public opinion. The clearer our hypotheses, and the more observable implications we develop that can be tested with empirical evidence, the more confidence we will have in the validity and utility of a theory.           After all this, you may ask yourselves: “*what is theory good for?*” The answer to this question is twofold. The development and testing of theories allows us to build new general knowledge about our environment, and it allows us to reject incorrect theories. A second important aspect of good theory-building and testing in international relations is that it can help inform *policy-debates.* Policymakers that need to make tough decisions about international relations often use implicit theories to develop their policy choices. For instance, the decision to invade Iraq appears to have been made in part based upon the theory that democracies are more peaceful than other states. Some neo-conservative policy-makers believed that the transformation of Iraq into a democracy would bring about more peace in the Middle East, because they believed that Iraq would no longer engage in wars. Given the importance of this theory for American policymaking, therefore, we would be wise to develop *and test* our theories so that they can inform effective policies. A final reason for the use of good theories in international relations is that it allows us to compare among *competing* explanations for similar phenomena. Since there are often multiple explanations for a particular pattern or phenomenon, the creation of clear and falsifiable theories allows us to reject some and accept others and to compare the relative utility (that is, how useful they are) of competing explanations.  **Assessing Theories**. Because international relations involve human and social interactions in a rapidly changing and unstable international environment, it is not surprising to find multiple competing explanations for similar phenomena. Thus, while democratic peace theory is one way of explaining the absence of war in Europe after WW II, others have argued that peace between European nations was the result of their common fear of the Soviet Union. Yet others have offered more general explanations involving deterrence and balance of power to explain the absence of wars between democratic states in Europe. These are obviously very different answers to the same question: “what explains the absence of war in Europe after WW II?” Which answer is correct? Comparing rival theories is obviously a good way to go about answering this second question, as it allows us to eliminate the incorrect ones and retain the correct one (or the one that is not yet falsified).  What we want to do, however, is to make sure that we compare explanations in an “apples to apples” fashion. That is we want to compare similar theories that can be easily compared because they are actually explaining the same things. How do we do this?           One way to categorize and compare theories is according to *levels of analysis*. The concept of levels of analysis suggests that there are three basic categories of explanations in the international relations literature. The broadest level of explanation (or analysis) is the*systemic level*. Explanations in this category force on the effects that system-wide factors have on the behavior of individual actors. Systemic factors are usually considered to be very broad, and offer fairly little insight into the behavior of each and every individual actor. They do, however, generate sets of constraints and incentives for behavior of individual states. Just like a fire in a building will lead most inhabitants to run for the exits, systemic-level explanation look at the equivalent of fires to explain the behavior of states in the international system. *Unit-level* explanations (the second level of analysis) focus on the internal political, social, and economic structures of states to explain their behavior. The democratic peace theory is an example of this. It focuses on political structures of members of the international system to explain variation and patterns in their behavior. The *individual level* of analysis focuses on the actual decision-makers in states, in order to explain the behavior of states. Not only do theories in this level of analysis focus on individual leaders, they also identify small groups, or bureaucratic actors as the chief movers and shakers in the policy process. In short, we often categorize theories according to where they identify the primary explanatory factor (the independent variable). In doing so, we can assess various theories on their own merit, we can evaluate and compare theories that are at the system-level with others that are located in the same level.           We can also compare theories according to what they seek to explain (the *dependent* variable).  For example, if we want to explain the absence of war, we can collect theories that focus just on that. This, of course, allows us to sift through competing explanations. A final way to do comparisons is by looking at theories within broad *paradigms*. A paradigm is not a specific theory, but rather a general theoretical approach that shares a set of shared assumptions, questions, and factors. The field of international relations, over the past century or so, has been dominated by three primary paradigms: Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism. Each paradigm, as mentioned earlier, has a few core assumptions about the most important actors and the most important factors that determine the relations between states. In the coming weeks we will examine theories at all levels of analysis, drawn from these paradigms, and others.  **Approaching the readings.**           This week’s readings were chosen for a couple of reasons. The three chapters from the textbook (Armstrong, Scott, and Cox), offer a broad overview of the development of the contemporary international system over the course of history. Reading these chapters should give you some historical (and current) background about the topics that we will be covering in this course. In reading Walt’s piece, I recommend that you focus on two main aspects. First, the reasons that theory are important to policymaking. Second, Walt’s arguments about what makes a good and testable international relations theory. Over the course of the next eight weeks we will be examining not only theories on their own merits, but also in comparison to others. Walt’s article offers some standards by which to measure whether a theory is any good. Closely related to this is the Christensen and Raynor article, which doesn’t only outline the criteria for good theory, but also offers an overview of the process through which solid theories are created and tested. The article by J. David Singer is a seminal article in the field of international relations, and it outlines one way of categorizing theories so that they can be easily and fruitfully compared. You don’t have to take his word as holy writ (in fact, you should always challenge all of the readings), but his discussion of the levels-of-analysis issue offers some good insights into how we should think about comparing and contrasting existing theories. While Scott Sagan’s article seems a bit out of place here, it was chosen with a purpose. The purpose is to show you a practical application of a comparison between various theories. Sagan outlines three potential theoretical explanations for why states pursue the bomb. Not only that, he identifies hypotheses and the observable implications of these hypotheses. He then examines the historical record to see whether we can find evidence to support the hypotheses. In short, regardless of the issue area, one can appreciate Sagan’s clear and concise methodology in trying to examine the veracity of three different theoretical claims.  **Sources:**  David Armstrong, “The Evolution of International Society, “ in John Baylis, Steve Smith & Patricia Owens (eds.), *The Globalization of World Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011): 34-50  Len Scott, “International history, 1900-90,” in John Baylis, Steve Smith & Patricia Owens (eds.), *The Globalization of World Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011): 50-66  Michael Cox, “From the Cold War to the World Economic Crisis,” in John Baylis, Steve Smith & Patricia Owens (eds.), *The Globalization of World Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011): 66-83  Stephen Walt, “The Relationship between Theory and Policy in International Relations,” *Annual Review of Political Science*, 2005. 8:23-48.  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