**Lesson**

**The Unit Level: Neo-classical Realism, Liberalism, and Culture**

**Unit Level Explanations**

         While *systemic level* explanations can go a long way in explaining *broad patterns* of behavior in the international system, they have significant limitations. For instance, while it may be interesting to understand which broad systemic forces will lead great powers to form alliances with one another, and while it may be interesting to understand the dynamics that lead to competition between great powers in the broadest sense, knowing that alliances will form periodically in the international system does not tell us much about the present, or about particular periods of time. For instance, systemic realist explanations suggest that great powers faced with rising new powers will be worried, and that such *shifts in the distribution* of capabilities bring with them increased risks of war in the international system (thus, for example, the rise of Germany prior to WW I led to a competition between itself and Britain, which eventually produced WW I), such theories cannot tell us exactly *how* dominant great powers will respond to the rise of challengers. In the late 19thcentury, for instance, Great Britain – the most powerful state in the system at the time – was confronted with two rising great powers, the United States and Germany. In the end, Britain decided to *balance* against Germany, by signing a treaty with France and Russia, and decided *not to balance* against the United States. What accounts for these choices? There can, of course, be multiple explanations to such choices, but one thing is obvious; systemic level explanations cannot explain Britain’s choices in this case. Systemic level explanations (i.e. the shift in the distribution of capabilities) can give us the broad outlines, they explain general incentives for particular policy-choices, and disincentives for others, but they cannot predict particular actions.

For more precise explanations for particular policy choices and strategic choices, we have to turn to *more complex* models. In other words, we need to look at lower levels of analysis, where we may need more variables to explain choice, but where our use of more variables will yield more precise explanations, and a better understanding of particular policy choices, or sets of policy choices by states.

 One possible factor that could explain differences in how states respond to international constraints and incentives is *state structure*. In other words, it could be that we can find differences at the *unit-level* that can offer predictable and enduring variations in how states operate in the international system. As we will see, the three main paradigms that we have been discussing thus far, focus on different *unit level* attributes to explain the behavior of states in the international environment.

**Realism at the Unit-level**

While many realists focus primarily on the systemic level of analysis (Neo-Realism, in particular, focuses almost exclusively on the system level), others argue that we should also look at the unit-level or state-level variables in order to understand how states interact with one another. At the unit-level, however, realists do not believe that one should pay too much attention to the political, social, or economic structure of states in order to account for their policy choices. Realists do not believe, therefore, that capitalist states are inherently better or behave differently from socialist states, or that Muslim states are different from states where Christianity is the dominant religion, and so forth. At the end of the day, after all, Realist theory believes that what drives state behavior, and what makes most states behave in similar ways, is the *structure of the international system*.

 Anarchy makes both good and bad states concerned about their security. It makes both democratic and autocratic states concerned about their peers and about relative gains. In other words, realists that use unit-level attributes to explain state behavior do not necessarily argue that one has to look too closely into the institutions that states adopt. What they have argued, instead, is that states differ considerably in their *ability to extract resources* from their societies. Since resources translate into power, and states have variable abilities to extract resources (that is, mobilize resources from their population and territories) we have to look at extractive capabilities in order to assess the power (i.e. capabilities ) of states. So when we see a state with a lot of latent or potential power fail to live up to its status as a great power, we can look at its domestic structure and explain the state’s lack of great power attributes by its inability to generate or extract enough power from its society. For instance, as Fareed Zakaria argues (see the review article by Gideon Rose) the United States has been a case in point. In the 19th century the US was rich, had a large population, and had lots of resources. However, realists argue that the state itself (i.e. the federal government) remained weak and was unable to harness its domestic resources behind its foreign policy.

Another unit-level factor that Realists examine is *state motivation*, they argue that some states are *revisionist* and other states are *status-quo* states.

Revisionist states are those who are seeking to change the international system, because the rules of the game in the system are not to their advantage. Status-quo states, on the other hand, are those states that *benefit*from the existing rules and norms that govern the international system. As a result, they are interested in preserving the existing order. In other words, they want to maintain the status quo. It is not surprising that status quo states and revisionist states will clash, as they have fundamentally different interests at heart. It is also not surprising that realists would focus on this particular unit-level factor, as being a status quo or a revisionist state has little to do with other characteristics. In other words, realists do not argue that democratic states are more or less likely to be supporters of the status quo, nor are the arguing that autocratic states are more likely to challenge the status quo. They argue that any state in the international system (and in particular the great powers) will become a revisionist state when the systemic rules and norms do not work in its favor. At the same time, they believe that all states that benefit from a particular system will be reluctant to accept demands for change. Variations in extractive capabilities, and in motivation, are only two of the unit-level variables that Realist scholars have used – in combination with system level factors, such as anarchy and the distribution of capabilities – to try and offer more accurate explanations for the *foreign policy choices* of states in the international system.

**Liberal theory and the unit level**

Liberal theory offers an alternative to the realist view of international relations. As we have discussed previously, Liberal theory posits that international institutions matter a lot at the *systemic level*, and that different levels of institutionalization, and different levels of interdependence in the international system can go a long way in explaining levels of cooperation and conflict among states. According to Neo-Liberal theory, moreover, these factors are, in particular, tied to levels of international war and peace. At the heart of Liberal theory lies that idea that *state structure* and *individuals*matter. While Realists argue that state structure (in terms of the choice of political and economic institutions) is not an important factor in understanding how states behave, and that individual preferences do not have an important effect on international relations, Liberal theorists beg do differ. In fact, they argue that a state’s political and economic institutions, and in particular the nature of participation in the political process by the population of states, has an important impact on the way in which states act in the international system. For Liberal theorists, there is a distinct difference in the interactions between *liberal democracies* and other states in the system, especially states that are ruled by *autocratic rulers*.

The most important distinction between such states is that liberal states are *aggregators of societal interests*. That means that states reflect the interests of their people, and that policymakers will be very reluctant to engage in behavior that does not fit in neatly with the preferences of their voters. Autocratic states, on the other hand, are governed by rulers who do not need to ask the permission of their populations to rule. They make policy decisions, including foreign policy decisions, without any regard for the interests and desires of their populations. As a result, Liberal theory suggests that autocratic states are *less predictable* (or less rational) than liberal states. Moreover, they are more prone to use violence in their interactions with other states, and less likely to consider the costs of international conflict when making their decisions. Policymakers in liberal democracies, on the other hand, have to consider the costs of their policy decisions on their populations, because they may get voted out of office if they blatantly disregard the material and other interests of the majority of their population. For instance, a democratically elected leader will think twice before he or she will go to war in the international system. Why, because wars are costly, and if they are deemed too costly by the voters, leaders may be voted out of office for engaging in costly foreign policy adventures.

Liberal states are less likely to be inclined towards conflict and warfare, moreover, because they tend to have a lot more ties to other states in the international system. Citizens of democratic states are more likely to have freedom of movement and action, and are more likely to have commercial ties across boundaries. Democratically elected leaders will be reluctant to sever those ties through their own policies. Autocratically governed states, by contrast, will have fewer of those sub-state cross-national ties, and will therefore have less compunction about severing such ties. Moreover, Liberal theory suggests that autocratic leaders may simply not be used to the process of *peaceful conflict resolution*. As they have been socialized to deal with political dissent by repression, they will be more likely to use coercion also in their interactions with other states in the international system, not just with their own populations.

Liberal theory, therefore, argues that there are fundamental differences in how liberal and non-liberal states interact in the international system. They also argue that such states distinguish between one another. In particular, Liberal theory argues that Liberal states *feel threatened* by autocratic states, and that they tend to want to change those states in order to make themselves saver. This may lead liberal states to adopt a *crusader mentality*, which leads them to efforts to remake the international system in their own image. While democratic states are therefore considered to be largely peaceful, and very responsive to the demands of their population, they are often aggressive when it comes to dealing with authoritarian/autocratic states that form a threat to their well-being.

In sum, just like Realist theory, Liberal IR theory offers a variety of arguments as to how unit-level variables affect the interactions of states in the international system. In contrast to Realist theory, however, Liberal theory focuses on the effects of *domestic political institutions* as they pertain to decisions about war and peace, and also about whether states will engage in free commerce with others.

**Constructivism at the Unit Level**

         As we discussed previously, Constructivism is based on the assumption that *socially constructed* norms, values, and identities play a key role in explaining how states behave in the international system. At the systemic level, for instance, Constructivists argue that anarchy is not an objective and immutable characteristic that necessarily has to produce mistrust and fear. It all depends, as Wendt argued, on what states make of it through their mutual interactions. Norms at the international level, for instance, can constrain and shape state behavior (including norms that support/reject the use of violence). Like their theoretical counterparts, moreover, Constructivists also identify a number of domestic level factors that they believe are the key to understanding how particular states behave in particular situations. Give the paradigm’s emphasis on socially constructed norms and values, it is not surprising that Constructivists identify *national identity* and *culture* as key components for any explanation of state behavior. In doing so, it is important to remember that Constructivists don’t identify a *particular* culture, or identity, but that they urge us to look for cues that national culture has something to do with how state behave. Kier’s article, on the effects of French military culture, is a case in point. Whereas rational strategy would have maybe called for different military responses to German threats, Kier argues that the French choice of military doctrine prior to WW II was driven by the organization culture of the French military. This military cultures, therefore, rather than an objective assessment of needs and requirements had more to do with the choice of French strategies than anything else. Constructivists, in other words, urge us to pay close attention to national identities and culture in trying to explain the behavior of particular state.

**Approaching the readings**

         The readings this week cover the main arguments about the effects of domestic variables at the unit-level on the foreign policy behavior of states. Gideon Rose’s article reviews a number of neoclassical Realist books that tried to refine Neo-Realism, by drawing attention to unit-level attributes in combination with system-level factors. Neo-Classical Realists, the last incarnation of the Realist paradigm, argues that we can best understand state actions by looking both at the system and at unit-level attributes. In reading the article, you should identify the various domestic level factors that Neo-Classical Realists employ to explain state behavior. Also, you should consider which, if any, of these approaches/variables is convincing, and why. Michael Doyle’s article is a seminal article in the field, and focuses on the effects of liberalism on international politics, and foreign policy. Kier’s article is a good example of how one can look at the effect of domestic culture on foreign policy. Finally, Robert Putnam’s article is not really affiliated with a theoretical paradigm, but urges us to look at how domestic politics and international politics intersect, as policymakers have to take into account pressures from both sides, while they also use these various factors in order to negotiate with both international counterparts and their domestic constituents. Putnam’s approach doesn’t make broad assumptions about the nature of the international system (like Realism and Liberalism do), and contrasts with Constructivism in that it relies explicitly on a rational choice model, in which policymakers make calculated policy decisions based on cost-benefit analyses.

**Sources**

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