

The State of Theory in International Politics

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This article discusses and examines the existence of a theory and/or theories of international politics. The discussion starts by defining the term theory and indicating the need for a theory. Furthermore, it will state if there is a lack of such a theory. However, in the beginning I would rather mention the relationship between approach¹ and theory.

With regard to the relationship between approach and theory in international politics one of the leading scholars in the field has contended:

"An approach to analysis is not a theory in any of the ordinary senses of that term. Epistemologically, however, approaches are antecedent to theory. That is, it is impossible to construct theoretical statements without employing an approach to analysis either explicitly or implicitly.²"

In another situation the same scholar argued that "the term theory is commonly and confusingly applied to a number of disparate intellectual operations in the social sciences."³

In fact "the term 'theory' has become so honorific that hypotheses, statements of fact, and intuitive guesses are often dressed up as theories".⁴ William Coplin argues that "sets of proposition and/or hypotheses that are logically related to each other are called theories".⁵ I would, in this regard, add that a theory is any refutable set of man-made propositions or statements. Therefore, the statement which says "the sun rises every day from the East," even though it is a man-made

statement, is not a theory, for it is now a fact. Also, the statement which says that "Islam is a universal religion" is not debatable from the Islamic point of view, and cannot be a theory, for it is not a man-made statement. To Raymond Aron, the term theory has two different meanings. He says:

"Theory as contemplative knowledge, drawn from ideas or from the basic order of the world, can be the equivalent of philosophy. In that case, theory differs not only from practice or action, but from knowledge animated by the will to 'know in order to predict and thus be able to act'. The less practical a study is, the less it suggests or permits the handling of its object, the more theoretical it is. At most, it changes the one who has conceived it and those who are enlightened by it through his findings.

The other line of thought leads to authentically scientific theories, with those of physical science offering the perfect model. In this sense, a theory is a hypothetical, deductive system consisting of a group of hypotheses whose terms are strictly defined and whose relationships between terms (or variables)

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1. For some discussion of different approaches see "Approaches to the Study of International Relations", by Ali M. Shembesh. *Dirasat*, Faculty of Economics, Vol. 10, No. 2, pp.
2. Oran Young, "A Systematic Approach to International Politics", Princeton University Center of International Studies, Monograph No. 33, (June 30, 1968), p. 57.
3. Oran Young, "Aaron and the Whale: A Johan in Theory", in *Contending Approaches to International Politics*. Klaus Knorr and James Rosenau, eds. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969, p. 130.
4. Morton Kaplan, "Problems of Theory Building and Theory Confirmation in International Politics", *World Politics*, Vol. 14 (1961-62), No. 1, p. 6.
5. William Coplin, *Introduction to International Politics: A Theoretical Overview*, Chicago: Markham Publishing Company, 1971, p. 9.

are most often given a mathematical form. The elaboration of this system starts with a conceptualization of perceived or observed reality; axioms or highly abstract relationships govern the system and allow the scientist to rediscover by deduction either appearances that are thereby fully explained, or facts that are perceptible through devices, if not through the senses, and that temporarily either confirm the theory or invalidate it. An invalidation necessitates a rectification; a confirmation never constitutes an absolute proof of the theory's truth."⁶

Thus, while the first meaning is value-judgement, the second is empirical. Feliks Gross thinks that 'our description of facts — especially in social sciences — are short of precision and perfection'.⁷

According to other scholars:

"Even though the theories in the 'exact sciences' are always developed and refined as more knowledge is discovered, the phenomena investigated are stable, enduring, and duplicable... Theorizing about interstate relation might be compared with theorizing about a small container in which several atoms are in motion. No two atoms are alike".⁸

"What characterizes contemporary theories of international relations is the attempt to use the tools of modern economic analysis in a modified form in order to understand international relation. Their mainstay is quantification".⁹ This preoccupation with quantification was criticized as an escape from reality. Stanley Hoffmann has contended that, "often the scientist includes in his model only the variables that can be measured.... Hence, far from explaining reality, many such models drive research into the

chase and measurement of shadows".¹⁰

Therefore, the nature of international relations, and the dissimilarities among the states make theorizing and even defining the term "theory" a very difficult task. So, one can conclude such a wide debate by stating that:

"While all social scientists can count, and a great many understand the process of statistically correlating dependent and independent variables, or of performing factor analysis, there is reason to believe that the basis of agreement on what is being counted or measured in the field of international relations is very narrow and precarious".¹¹

The purpose of a theoretical framework is a less debatable matter. According to George Modelski, theory "serves two main purposes: it aids observation and description and also it provides a scheme of analysis." Therefore, Modelski, correspondingly, distinguishes between a descriptive frame of reference and an analytical theory. While the former

may be defined as an organized system of ideas, composed of a limited number of abstract concepts whose purpose is to enable the student to select enough facts about a phenomenon to describe it adequately. Analytical theory, by contrast, explains the phenomenon thus described by facilitating the construction of generalizations and permitting casual explanation of occurrences.¹²

Still another scholar thinks that "theory in the study of international relations may serve a half dozen important functions".¹³ These functions are, more or less, condensed by K.J. Holsti who says:

6. Raymond Aaron, "What Is a Theory of International Relations?", *Journal of Conflict Resolutions*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (1967), p. 186.
7. Feliks Gross. *Foreign Policy Analysis*, New York.
8. J.E. Dougherty and R.L. Pfaltzgraff, Jr. *Contending Theories of International Relation*. New York: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1971, pp. 43-44.
9. Hans Morgenthau, "Common Sense and Theories of International Relations", *Journal of Conflict Resolutions*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (1967), p. 210.

10. Stanley Hoffman, "International Relation: The Long Road to Theory", *World Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (April, 1959), p. 359.
11. J.E. Dougherty and R.L. Pfaltzgraff, Jr., *op. cit.*, p. 44.
12. George Modelski, *A Theory of Foreign Policy*. New York: F. Preger, Inc., 1962, p. 2.
13. David Edwards. *International Politics Analysis*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1969, pp. 41-42.

"...its purpose is to help create understanding by ordering facts and concepts into some meaningful pattern. Gathering of facts or description of events creates understanding of those facts and events, but otherwise has little broader application. Only when these facts and events are fitted against some framework of concept can they be seen essentially as illustrations of general and recurring process in international politics".¹⁴

Morton Kaplan contends that:

"The theory of international politics normally cannot be expected to predict individual actions because the interaction problem is too complex, and because there are too many free parameters. It can be expected, however, to predict characteristic or model behavior within a particular kind of international system.... Moreover, theory should be able to predict the conditions under which the characteristic behavior or the international system will remain stable, the conditions under which it will be transformed, and the kind of transformation that will take place".¹⁵

To Hans Morgenthau "the use of theory is not limited to rational explanation and anticipation. A theory of politics also contains a normative element".¹⁶ Accordingly, he believes that theory presents an ideal for action.

The preceding discussion leads us to an important question; namely, does such a theory exist? Most, if not all, students of international politics agree that a theory in Quincy Wright's sense, i.e., "a comprehensive, comprehensible, coherent, and self-correcting body of knowledge contributing

to the understanding, the prediction, the evaluation, and the control of relations among states and of the conditions of the world",¹⁷ does not exist. To give some indication of such agreement, these cases are cited. For instance, according to J.W. Burton, "there is not yet any theory of International Relations that provides clear policy leads for national or international conduct of international affairs".¹⁸ Also K.J. Holsti believes that "any theory should have axioms, proposition, and formal hypotheses which can be verified both logically and empirically. This kind of theory has not yet developed in most of the social sciences, perhaps least of all in the field of international relations".¹⁹ Moreover, Donald Puchala says:

"There is presently no single method for ordering the subject matter of international politics that is wholly satisfactory, since no theory of international politics yet proposed, nor any particular approach to the study of the subject yet devised, adequately takes full account of the range and complexity of phenomena that occur in relations among other states".²⁰

Even though the lack of a comprehensive and coherent theory of foreign policy and international politics in general cannot be easily explained or justified, this incompleteness can be attributed to two main reasons. The first reason arises at the conceptualization level, that is, "the term 'theory' is used in a bewildering confusion with the looser concept of 'Conceptualization', 'Conceptual Framework', 'Analytical Approaches', 'Models', 'Pre-Theories', and many similar expressions".²¹ The second reason comes at the relationships level. That is, on one hand so-

K.J. Holsti. *International Politics: A Framework for Analysis*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc. 1967, p. 13.

Morton Kaplan, "System and Process in International Politics" in *Contemporary Theory in International Relations*, Stanley Hoffman, ed. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1960, p. 110.

Hans Morgenthau, "The Nature and Limits of a Theory of International Relations" in *Theoretical Aspects of International Relations*, William Fox, ed. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1959, p. 18.

17. Quincy Wright, "Development of a General Theory of International Relations" in *The Role of Theory*. Horace Harrison, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 20.

18. J.W. Burton. *International Relations: A General Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965, p. 15.

19. K.J. Holsti. *International Politics*, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

20. Donald J. Puchala. *International Politics Today*. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1971, p. 1.

21. Joseph Frankel, *Contemporary International Theory and the Behaviour of States*, London: Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 15.

me scholars have concentrated on one factor only. On the other hand, most analysts vary in their choice of factors. In short, there has been no general agreement among the students of international politics on the important factors which should be studied. Furthermore, there has been no agreement on a specific framework within which foreign policy and international politics can be analysed and/or predicted. However, the above discussion was not introduced to indicate that there has been no attempt on the part of the interested students of international poli-

tics to establish and develop a theory or theoretical frameworks. On the contrary, there have been several attempts which generated some types of theoretical frameworks. It might be more appropriate to call the outcome of these attempts partial theories. Among these partial theories are Hans Morgenthau's "Realist Theory", Morton Kaplan's "Systems Theory", "Balance of Power Theory", and "Decision Making Theory". Yet the road to a comprehensive and complete theory in international politics is still a long one.