

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY

SUMMARY



1. Theory and 'Theory Synthesis'

What is the purpose of theory? Is theory useful?

- Theories can be descriptive, explanatory, normative and predictive
- No theory captures the entire complexity of real world events so all theories are objectively 'wrong.' However, we use theory and assumptions to simplify complex world events.
- Theories do not exist in the abstract and the strengths of a theory can be tested against real-world events. A useful theory can explain a different range of events over periods of space and time.
- **Moravscik** defines theory as 'a **simplification of reality** highlighting **causal processes or mechanisms** that explains how and why a certain type of behaviour generally occurs. Theorised causal processes help identify one or more key variables that explain patterns in political behaviour given **certain constant assumptions and background conditions** (if X then Y under conditions C). Theories help us understand **under what conditions specific behaviour takes place**. They should be empirically testable.'

Causal Logic

- A statement about how an independent variable exerts causal effect on a dependent variable.
- Most theories contain causal explanations (i.e. x causes y). Causal claims in IR are probabilistic and counterfactual statements can help to ascertain the strength of causal claims.
 - Most causal explanations in IR are tied to the assumptions underpinning the theory

Moravscik and 'Theory Synthesis': Moravscik argues that synthesis of different theoretical perspectives in IR theory is to be both problem and theory driven. Given the complexity of contemporary events there can be no uni-causal explanations but theory assists in finding the most important causal explanations and discerning patterns.

- E.g. **Keohane** combines both realist and liberal institutionalist (regime theory) perspectives in order to explain why states cooperate under conditions of anarchy.
- **Snyder** argues that because no theory of IR is perfect at explaining change, we need to incorporate the insights of each of the three major theoretical traditions as a check on the 'irrational exuberance' of the others.

Why do we need assumptions in a theory?

- We need to make assumptions in order to be able to make predictions about future events. Assumptions act as a constant from which independent variables (state behaviour) can be tested.

2. Theory and International Relations

Puzzles and Questions (Zinnes)

- In IR scholarship, we begin by asking questions and then move on to resolve puzzles because not all “puzzles are questions, but not every question is a puzzle” (Zinnes).
 - Puzzlement occurs when ‘something does not fit something else’ (Zinnes).
 - Puzzles challenge our theoretical assumptions and arise because there is a clash of evidence
 - Puzzlement provides a way for IR scholars to think theoretically by forcing students to ask ‘why is it that y occurred here but not in this relatively similar context here?’

Assumptions and Levels of Analysis (Jervis)

- **Jervis** addresses the ‘levels of analysis problem’ and argues there are four levels of analysis (as opposed to the traditional three levels);
 - **(1) systemic (2) domestic (3) bureaucratic and (4) individual**
 - There can be *complex interactions* between these levels of analysis and particular levels will be more illuminating in different situations.
 - We need a *bureaucratic level of analysis* because normal human behaviour is rarely rational. Individuals, as well as organisations, fail to coordinate their actions and to develop carefully designed strategies. People must also make decision in the face of burdens of multiple goals and highly ambiguous information which makes policies contradictory and incoherent.
- At the **systemic level**, the analysis assumes that states are unitary actors which respond to external stimuli in a similar way.
 - **Anarchical system and the distribution of capabilities** are key variables
 - Explains **balance of power** and **security dilemmas**
- At the **domestic level**, the analysis assumes that international actions are driven by domestic policies;
 - Two-level games (Putnam)
 - The desire of national leaders to maintain power influences foreign policy
- At the **bureaucratic level**, it is assumed that foreign policy is determined by bureaucratic structures;
 - Decisions are made in the interests of bureaucrats engaged in organisational competition rather than in the national interest.
 - Where one stands is determined by where one sits.
- At the **individual level**, decision-makers can change foreign policy outcomes;
 - E.g. Kennedy’s role in the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962)

Syria Conflict

- At the **system level**, can be explained through the dynamics of the Arab Spring and democratisation
- At the **domestic level**, can be explained via the competing interests of the rebel groups, oppression of civil liberties by the Assad regime (Alawite minority in power)
- At the **bureaucratic level**, the military has sought to sustain the old regime

- At the **individual level** we can see the impacts of leaders such as Obama, Putin and Assad

3. Realism

Classical Realism

- Classical realism focusses on explanations of human nature to argue that international relations are anarchical and that states must pursue power to ensure their survival.
 - Seminal theorists such as **Thucydides** wrote in his treatise on the Peloponnesian War that “**the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.**”
 - There is no morality to international relations, as “morality can only be created by power” (**E H Carr**).
 - Classical realism claims to be a theory rooted in the study of history as objective and unchanging (**Morgenthau**).
 - *A response to the historical period* in which these authors were writing e.g. the Peloponnesian War, the Warring States period, instability in Renaissance Italy (Machiavelli), the failure of the League of Nations, WWI and WWII

Structural Realism (Waltz)

- **Kenneth Waltz** sought to reformulate and adopt a more scientific approach to realism by proposing a systemic theory that would specify how the structure of the international system shapes state behaviour.
 - Waltz adopts an analogy from microeconomic theory to explain structural realism; States in the international system are like firms operating in a competitive market, buffeted by forces beyond their individual control.
 - IR is a zero-sum game. Cooperation is inhibited by **relative gains concerns**.
 - States are **rational actors** which seek to maximise their power.
 - Under conditions of **anarchy**, the logic of ‘self-help’ and cycles of competition causes states to engage in **balancing behaviour**.
 - The **balance of power** (distribution of material capabilities) determines the stability of the system.
- *Critiques;*
 - Waltz’s theory does not explain change well, it is a static conception of IR.
 - Gilpin (1981) responded to this criticism and argued that while the distribution of capabilities changes quickly, the system itself changes slowly.
 - Structural realism has little policy relevance because it is only focussed on the system level.
 - State’s choices are not as constrained as structural realists assume.
- *Structural realism is not rooted in conceptions of human nature like classical realism*

Core Assumptions of Realism

1. **Anarchy** (rational and unitary actors, self-help and survival)
2. **Nature of State Interests** (realists assume that interests are fixed and always zero-sum)
3. **Power matters above all else and the distribution of power determines outcomes**