

Blurring the Distinction Between “High” and “Low” Politics in International Relations Theory: Drifting Players in the Logic of Two-Level Games

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Since the beginning of international relations as a formal academic discipline in 1919, the realist paradigm has dominated academic debate, and consequently, major foreign policy decisions. This paradigm focuses on “politics” as the actions of so-called “high politics”; that is to say, primacy is given to actions between states over the actions that occur within states. This article will aim to demonstrate that the “low politics” of domestic policy should be considered to a further extent than it currently is in the field of international relations theory. In doing so, this article will focus on sub-unit level factors that have considerable impact on international relations; namely, political parties, terrorist organizations, and lobbying groups. However, it is recognised that proponents of neo-liberal theory, such as Keohane and Nye, and academics studying interest group theory, such as Kabashima and Sato, have done much work to further the idea of international relations theory as more than state-centric analysis. This article will act as an attempt to further this idea both through normative and conceptual analysis. The article uses Putnam’s concept of two-level games as a basic model of international-domestic relations, hoping to expand on the concept whilst retaining its integrity.

Keywords: sub-unit, non-state actors, Putnam

Introduction

This article aims to set out a thorough and compelling argument that, within the realm of international relations theory, the distinction between the “high” politics of inter-state relations and the “low” politics of sub-unit level relations is not unnecessary but rather, too rigid. That is to say, the studies of international politics and domestic politics are rightly separate, yet we should not neglect the impact sub-unit factors have on the international space. In arguing so, this article will build on the work of neo-liberal scholars such as Keohane and Nye (1974), as well as academics particularly focused on interest group theory such as Kabashima and Sato (1986). To make a compelling case, one must recognise the impact of political parties, terrorist organizations, and lobbying groups in the field of international relations. This article will do just that, using the examples of Ukip’s impact on the British government’s EU policy both before and during the Brexit process, the global fear of terrorism and the impact on national security policy, and finally, the role played by interest-specific lobbying groups in dictating foreign policy to those at the helm of the state’s leadership—for example, the impact of pro-Israel groups on U.S. foreign policy. These examples will be prefaced by theoretical rejections of state

actors as the “dominant” players in international relations, and followed by concluding thoughts on where international relations theory should go next. Many notable efforts have been produced by scholars to address the issue of the impact of non-state actors, and more generally the arena of domestic politics, has on relations between states. Thus, I would suggest that, in particular, Putnam’s (1988) work on international politics-domestic politics relations is a masterful analysis of its subject. Putnam’s scholarship has such a deep relevance to this article that I intend to use his basic model of state leaders playing two separate games—those of domestic and international politics—as the basis for my own model, which retains the two games but suggests that certain players—namely, non-state actors—can easily move from one game to the other, rather than having to play both games at the same time. In doing so, this model and furthermore, this article hopes to answer Knopf’s (1993) criticism that “the two-level game framework fails to give adequate attention to the differences among three logically separable forms of domestic-international interaction... transgovernmental, transnational, and cross-level” (Knopf, 1993. p. 599). As a result, this article will argue for a somewhat updated version of the “two-level game... [with] each national political leader appearing at both game boards” (Putnam, 1988. p. 434); rather, the groups consisting of domestic and international actors are not simply playing their own game at their own table, that is to say, non-state actors often interrupt both games, going from one to the other table.

A Flaw in the Realist Paradigm

The dominant paradigm within the field of international relations has long been, and currently is, that of realism, specifically neo-realism. Though liberalism and constructivism also play their parts as respected and important schools of thought in the realm of international relations theory, realism remains king. This is demonstrated in Vasquez’s (1998) work *The Power of Power Politics*, where he quantitatively states the case for realism as the dominant paradigm of international relations. The realist paradigm gives primacy to state actors within the international space, arguing that non-state actors have little to no impact on the relations between states. Yet this state-centric analysis of inter-state relations and specifically, the analysis of foreign policy in such states, leaves much to be desired. That is to say, the current state-centric view of international relations offers an incomplete picture of the explanations behind both current and past policies and events. Keohane and Nye (1974) recognise this, arguing for a reassessment of international relations theory which would involve greater significance being granted to sub-unit level factors whilst preserving the “organizational hierarchy” within the state (p. 44). This argument furthers my own thesis that the focus of analysis should not be completely transferred from the state to sub-state actors and organizations, but rather that the current position of imbalanced analysis should be addressed by a corrective move towards a more holistic approach analysing all actors (at unit level and below) which have an impact on relations between states.

Case Studies: Britain and America

It is of great importance to show that sub-unit level factors are not only theoretically relevant, but essential to understanding foreign policy decisions in Britain, America, and across the world. For the purposes of this article, I will remain within the geographical area which I have greater knowledge of—namely, the United Kingdom and the United States. One example of a political party, not in government or even acting as the primary opposition, having a significant impact on foreign policy is the United Kingdom Independence Party’s influence on Britain’s European policy both before and during the Brexit process. As Balfour et al. (2016)

suggest of the current political climate, “changing societies are shaping and constraining political choices through the emergence of new actors who often contest established norms and practices” (p. 16). In this instance, Britain’s largest insurgent political party—the United Kingdom Independence Party (Ukip)—have had an incontestable effect on government policy towards the European Union; thus, it follows that Ukip have had a considerable impact on Britain’s relationships with other states. Ukip’s impact on the British, and furthermore the European political landscape was perhaps most visible in the speech David Cameron made at Bloomberg, when he outlined his desire for a referendum on British membership of the EU as well as a passion to reform it. Without the persistent worry of Ukip winning over Euro-sceptic conservative voters, it is possible that the Bloomberg speech setting out a reforming agenda and ultimately the EU referendum would never have been proposed by the Prime Minister, and thus, that Britain’s future would remain in the European Union. This, as Balfour et al. (2016) state, shows that, “while internal politics and foreign policy each maintain their distinctiveness, the international and domestic realms become ever more closely intertwined and thus harder to define and circumscribe” (p. 16).

The role of political parties, politicians, and the electorate has driven a considerable amount of foreign policy in the past and will continue to do so, and not only in parliamentary systems like the United Kingdom. Kabashima and Sato (1986) come to a similar conclusion regarding the actions of US congressmen when it came to foreign policy regarding Japan, arguing that “as far as most congressmen are considered, whatever impact their actions may have... in [a] foreign country may be only a secondary consideration” (p. 313). It must be noted then, that the non-state actors who hover around the games tables of Putnam’s analogy had, in the political action mentioned above, blinded the players of domestic politics to the concerns of the international game completely.

Political parties are not, however, the only sub-unit level actors who have a significant impact on foreign policy and international relations. Terrorist groups, such as Al-Qaeda and Da’esh, have had a vast impact on such areas of policy; this is manifest in the use of airstrikes in Iraq and Syria. Concrete examples of policy designed to counter Da’esh, and thus greatly influenced by Da’esh’s own military strategy, can be found not only in United Nations Security Council Resolutions (namely 2170, 2178 and 2199) but also in U.S. foreign policy such as Operation Inherent Resolve (McInnis, 2016). Savun and Phillips (2009) support this point, arguing that terrorism can drive foreign policy to the same extent that foreign policy decisions can increase terrorism. The issue of terrorism is one of only a few sub-fields within the realist paradigm of international relations that focus on non-state actors rather than solely state actors. We must remember, after all, that the so-called Islamic State is no such state but rather, it is a terrorist network operating at a sub-unit level yet influencing the foreign policy of several states—namely, the US, the UK, and of course, Iraq and Syria. Academic debate on the subject of terrorism has produced some of the most forward-thinking literature when it comes to the issue of sub-unit level factors. One such example is Chenoweth’s (2010) scholarship regarding terrorist groups within the state and their relationships with other non-state actors, such as political parties. This work demonstrates the importance of intra-state relationships between sub-unit level factors and how such relationships ultimately affect the foreign policy of the state in which these factors are present. Furthermore, not only does the study of terrorism emphasise “group-level analyses” (Chenoweth, 2010) but it offers a more accurate description of the state and the impact of terrorist groups on it; that is to say, both terrorist groups and the images of them fostered by government should be considered when analysing the driving forces behind

foreign policy. As Halperin and Clapp (2007) argue, “the set of shared images guiding policy is likely to be held by a relatively small number of individuals whose concerns society as a whole is hardly aware of” (p. 9).

Another sub-unit level group type that has a considerable impact on foreign policy is interest-specific lobbying groups. These particular organisations raise issues within the study of international relations and the subject of political science as a whole. This is primarily because these groups provide a challenge to one’s definition of the state and whether an external group closely linked to the bureaucratic establishment meets the criteria determining what is and isn’t part of the state infrastructure. However, it must be recognised that—as the title of this article indicates—the distinction between high and low politics should be blurred not erased. Consequently, we are obliged to define lobbying groups as non-state actors rather than a tangential arm of government. The definition of said groups which will act as the given in this article was originally formulated by Presthus (1974), who describes lobbying groups as “such groups... [that] synthesise, express and provide technical and ideological support for collective social demands which provide critical inputs into the political subsystem” (p. 44); Presthus goes on to note that, as this article has already suggested, “interest groups are often regarded as both normatively and operationally marginal”. Though, in my view, this is a gross misestimate of how much influence interest groups actually have. Without delay, having provided a concrete definition of lobbying groups, we shall return to what Walt (1998) identifies as the task of “how domestic interest groups can distort the formation of state preferences and lead to suboptimal state behaviour” (p. 42).

Academics such as Lake and Powell (1999) argue that “substate actors undoubtedly have conflicting interests and goals that play out in the domestic arena” (p. 14), yet that said interests merely “aggregate into a state’s preferences and beliefs”. However, this denies agency to powerful lobbying groups who have far-reaching influence on policy whilst overestimating smaller groups who have little to no impact on policy. Rather, it should be that lobbying organisations and their influence on policy is analysed on a case-by-case basis, or at least on a specific issue basis. For example, the Israel lobby in America has much greater influence on foreign policy regarding Israel than say, anti-nuclear groups in America do on the issue of the size of the US’s nuclear weapons stockpile. Mearsheimer and Walt (2006), in their seminal article “The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy”, further this point as they argue that,

The overall thrust of U.S. policy in the region [the Middle East] is due primarily to U.S. domestic politics and especially to the activities of the “Israel lobby”. Other special-interest groups have managed to skew U.S. foreign policy in directions they favoured, but no lobby has managed to divert U.S. foreign policy as far from what the American national interest would otherwise suggest. (p. 30)

The Israel lobby has, as a consequence of its influence, been subject to much debate amongst scholars of international relations (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2006). Not only have such debates occurred but Israel, in terms of foreign policy, “has been the largest annual recipient of direct economic and military assistance since 1976... [and since World War Two has received] over \$140 billion dollars” (McCormick, 2012. p. 89). Although the Israel lobby has strong links with the current Trump administration, and with most if not all previous administrations going as far back as President Truman—the first President of the United States to recognise the state of Israel subsequent to its formation in 1948—the lobby has maintained a relationship between themselves and policy-makers for a long time, we must view such a lobbying group as a highly influential non-state actor rather than as part of the state. This is not, as Krasner (1978) describes it, to “see the state as the handmaiden of particular powerful private actors” (p. 6); rather, it is to acknowledge the influence of interest groups and

lobbying organisations on foreign policy, whilst recognising that the state still makes the final decision on issues of international relations. Again, it is important to emphasise that this article challenges the extent of separation between the “high politics” of inter-state relations and the “low politics” of intra-state relations, not the principle of separation itself.

Reflecting Policy in International Relations Theory

It has thus far been shown that sub-unit level actors, such as political parties, terrorist organizations, and lobbying groups have a significant influence on foreign policy decisions and consequently, on the nature of international relations itself. Therefore, international relations theory should recognise and reflect this. Consequently, this means that international relations scholarship should use the neoliberal thought of Keohane and Nye as a starting point for sub-unit level analysis, and subsequently build on this work. Such analysis should not only focus on political parties, terrorist organizations, and lobbying groups, but also involve oft-ignored non-state actors such as media organisations and religious organisations. This paper has queried a certain element of the realist paradigm as a launchpad for further sub-unit level analysis; yet, this is not to say that realism is an irredeemable theory of international relations. Rather, the realist paradigm would face fewer issues—such as the potential conflict between state-centric analysis of international relations and the study of terrorism—if they wholly acknowledged the role of non-state actors. The realist paradigm would still be able to argue that a state’s self-interest is at the top of its theoretical hierarchy, even after conceding the relative significance of sub-unit level factors. The recognition of a significant sub-unit level, non-state actor as an influence on the national interest does not necessarily subtract importance from said nation’s self-interest; rather it simply serves as another factor to consider when analysing the reasoning behind empirical changes in a state’s foreign policy. Liberalism and neo-liberalism already somewhat recognise the role of non-state actors, yet in a constantly fragmenting international space, perhaps liberal scholars would do better to shift their attention from their primary focus on international cooperation to analysis of intra-state affairs and their impact on international relations. After all, the study and promotion of cooperation and interdependency would seem to jar with a world in which self-interested, realist thought drives prominent world leaders such as Trump, May, Erdogan, and Xi. Therefore, if the liberal internationalist alternative to the realist paradigm was to give more attention to non-state actors, it would be of greater relevance to empirical studies and current events than it has been since the interventionist era of the 1990s. Finally, we must not ignore constructivist scholarship on the construction of state identity and more widely speaking, the construction of key concepts in the academic arena of international relations. This article itself is evidence of the impact constructivism can have on a scholar’s work, and more importantly, of further scholarship derived from a realist-constructivist amalgam which aims to challenge important ideas in international relations theory without tearing said ideas down from their rightful place in academic debate and analysis. As perhaps the most open-minded school of thought in the canon of international relations, constructivist insights do a great deal to improve academic work and challenge dominant perceptions of current events.

Conclusion

It is clear that sub-unit level factors have a role to play in international relations, and this article has set out to show that more focus should be applied to sub-unit level factors and the impact they have on both domestic and international politics. One must do this, however, without completely shifting attention away from the state.

The crucial conclusion we should take from this line of thinking is that we must blur the distinction between “high” and “low” politics if we are to construct a more complete analysis of issues within the field of international relations. In Putnam-esque terms, this can be understood as the players of both domestic politics-games and international politics-games often managing to successfully play one game or the other with the ability to switch games at any point.

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