

ROLE OF THEORY IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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The most striking feature of political map of the world is its division of the entire earth surface into over 200 clearly defined units called sovereign states. Borders are a relatively recent development. States are sovereign, self-governing, territorially delimited political communities. There are many ways of characterizing the overall structure and pattern of relations among states. At one extreme we imagine a struggle of all against all, in which war, conquest and the enslavement of the defeated constituted the sole form of contact between the communitiesⁱ. At the other end might be a world government in which the individual societies retained distinction based on the language, culture, or religionⁱⁱ; between these two extreme we find the many form of interaction that have emerged in different times and places throughout the world history. These ranges from empire, which can be loosely or tightly organized, more or less centralized, to international system organized on the basis of the independence or sovereignty of individual units. Contemporary international system comprises the individual states as actor; the relations among sovereign states are governed by norms, rules, established practices and institutions. Among these sovereign states there exist various kinds of relations like political, economical, cultural, and strategic, These relations among the states are known as international relations. The relations among the states have gone through various kinds of stages that had special characteristics regarding their form of interactions and cooperation or conflicts.

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Theories provide possible explanation for events in international relations. "Theoretical knowledge accumulates by a repeated cycle generalizing and then testing"ⁱⁱⁱ. It is not possible to gain theoretical knowledge just by analyzing an event, it is a mammoth task that involves the regular studying of the events through particular perspective and then analyze and explain them. From its inception as a separate field of study, international relation has been the site of major theoretical debates. Two of the foundational text in the field, E.H Carr's *Twenty Year Crisis* and Hans J. Morgenthau's *Politics among Nations* were the work of theory in three central respects. Each developed a broad framework of analysis which distilled the essence of international politics from disparate events; each sought to provide future analysts with the theoretical tools for understanding general patterns underlying seemingly unique episodes; and each reflected on the forms of political actions which are most appropriate in a realm where the struggle for power was pre-eminent^{iv}. International relations are full of events and changes. It is a dynamic discipline, where changes are constant. International relations profoundly affects the daily life of individuals, it is not a distant and abstract rituals conducted by a small group of people such as president, generals or diplomats. In fact it affects the life of individuals and gets affected by them. So it is necessary to understand the international relations, how decisions are taken by leaders at the world level, what are the factors which affect their decisions and how international structure influences the actors. Theory is the best way to explain these phenomena, which can generalize the events happening at the world level. Theories provide the explanations of the events^v. Theories offer accounts of why things happen and they offer a wide range of reasons for actions^{vi}. Different kind of theories provides different kind of explanations. Various theories are used to explain the events, because various kinds of events happen at the world level. The actions vary according to the time and situation. For a common person, it becomes very difficult to find a general pattern and to understand the reasons behind those actions taken by actors in the international politics. Sometimes states cooperate with each other and another time competition comes between them, so it becomes difficult to understand, what are the causes behind these actions. Now at this point, theory plays an important role that is to explain the actions and reason behind them.

Another main purpose of theory is assistance to the statesman^{vii}. Those who make decision for handling the foreign affairs of a state should have a guiding theory behind them, throwing light on both ends and means. There is a lot of data present in this field and lots of events took place at the same time. So it becomes difficult for the decision

makers what to look at and what to choose. Theories provide conceptual background for how leaders and their advisor understand the world politics and interpret the phenomena and choose the means to meet the ends. For international relations, then “theory becomes the kind of simplifying device that allows you to decide which things matter and which don’t”^{viii}. No one can cope with the complexities of the world politics without the aid of a theory. Sometimes, it seems like, actor doesn’t consider theory while making decisions, but consciously or unconsciously they have the basic assumptions of theory, which guide them in making their decisions^{ix}.

Thinkers have sought to understand, more or less systematically, the most questions of world politics: the sources of discord and of war and the conditions of peace and cooperation^x. International relations are full of conflicts, as well as, cooperation. There is nothing like permanent peace or conflict among the states. There can be various reasons behind the cooperation and conflict among the states. The unearthing of these causes of conflict and cooperation is done by the or Theory tells a lot about the history of international politics. “The ultimate test of a theory lies in how well it can explain the events in the events in real world”^{xi}. Instead of only telling about the history of international politics, theorist of international politics tries to predict about the politics. John J. Mearsheimer in his book “Tragedy of great power politics” tries to predict about the events that are likely to take place in near future, like what will happen if the bipolarity is replaced by the multipolarity or about the regional hegemon that are likely to grow up in international structure^{xii}. But this effort may strike some readers as foolhardy, because the study of international relations, like the other social sciences rest on a shakier theoretical foundations than that of natural sciences. Political phenomena are highly complex, hence precise political predictions is a tough task without theoretical tools that are superior to those we now possess. The test of natural sciences is in their capacity to predict and to control. In natural sciences one can say “under these conditions this will happen” or if one can say: “do this and this will occur” and the experiment works.

But in international politics, it is not possible to manipulate the conditions to test the hypothesis. It is not possible to formulate propositions by which one can predict with any great precision. The social sciences are subject to the feedback of human understanding and purposes, and the unanalyzed contingencies of time and place, that their assumptions must continually change. Human reactions are not susceptible to precise prediction, but some prediction of the tendency of things is possible. So one must try in making rough prediction of what is likely to happen and that’s international relations do.

Next utility of theory in international relations has been to stimulate the research^{xiii}. Theory help in criticizing novel theses, in ascertaining gaps in knowledge, in stimulating research to fill the gap and in detecting inconsistencies to be rectified^{xiv}.

References:

ⁱ David Armstrong, “The Evolution of International Society”, in John Baylis *et.al.* (eds.), **The Globalization of World Politics**, OUP, London, 2014, p.35.

Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Joshua S. Goldstein and Jon C. Pevehouse, **International Relations**, Pearson, New Delhi, p. 12.

^{iv} Andrew Linklater (ed.), **Theories of International Relations**, Palgrave MacMillan, New York, 2015, p. 2.

^v Quincy Wright, “Development of a General Theory of International Relations”, in Horrace v. Harrison (ed.), **The Role of Theory in International Relations**, D. Van Nostrand, New Jersey, 1964, p.18.

^{vi} Steve Smith *et.al.* (ed.), **International Relation Theories**, OUP, Oxford, 2013, p.3.

^{vii} Quincy Wright, no.5.

^{viii} Steve, Smith, no.6 .

^{ix} John, J. Mearsheimer, **Tragedy of great power politics**, W.W Norton, New York, 2014, p.4.

^x Robert O. Keohane (ed.) “Realism, Neorealism and the Study of World Politics” , **Neorealism and its Critics**, CUP, 1986, p.3.

^{xi} John J. Mearsheimer, no.9, p.4.

^{xii} Ibid.

^{xiii} Quincy Wright, no.5, p.20.

^{xiv} Ibid.