

Understanding US Foreign Policy Through the Lens of Theories of International Relations

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Introduction to USFP & IR Theory

- Let's begin with recent history by considering whether our understanding of international relations was changed by the events of 9/11.
- Here's the outline:
 - Critical Approaches to IR
 - Liberalism
 - Realism
 - The John Mearsheimer Thesis – Bandwagoning Effects
 - The Francis Fukuyama Thesis
 - Main Points & What to Think About for Next Week

Critical Approaches to IR

- Constructivists are likely to be kept busy thinking about how al-Qaida has become the new Soviet Union, and the implications of this social fact for the rest of international relations.
- Marxists have tended to interpret the rise of Radical Islam as **resistance** on the part of traditional societies and the disenfranchised to the sweeping dictates of **global capitalism**.
- Samuel Huntington is also sympathetic to this view.
- A variation on this thinking suggests the primary reason for the rise of Radical Islam and the terror attacks lies in the **demographic facts** of the developing world, where very large numbers of educated young men are unemployed with few prospects.

Critical Approaches (cont'd)

- Robert Cox and Stephen Gill have written of a more **intolerant, disciplinary form** of global hegemony.
- In this hegemony, **global riot control linked with quasi-military missions** become the primary role for the U.S. military.
- Postmodern thinkers have started to debate the idea that the reaction of the United States to the terror attacks represents the start of a new age of **empire**, although how this empire works is far from clear.

Liberalism

- The post-Cold War era was a time of triumph for Liberalism in IR Theory
- The Cold War was won by the liberal-capitalist-democratic alliance. Globalization offered a secular and materialist culture to all. Conflict no longer seemed inevitable. It seemed that everyone now wanted to embrace these values.
- Francis Fukuyama suggested history had ended with the triumph of liberal democracy.
- The rise of Radical Islam, and the involvement of Radical Islamists in the terror attacks of 9/11 and 7/7 suggest the optimism of Fukuyama's early 1990s formulation was misplaced.
- Although the sense of progress toward a better order has been challenged by the reality of the terror attacks, Liberal thinking embraces the **role of ideas** in shaping international relations. The non-state character of terror groups like *al-Qaida* can also be assimilated by Liberals.

Liberalism (cont'd)

- The Democratic Peace Thesis, which emerges from Liberal thinking, might be applied to explain the hostility between liberal and non-liberal states (Mr Bush's, "**axis of evil**").
- However, the Neo- synthesis versions of Liberalism that embrace **anarchy**, and therefore the centrality of states, are less suited to the analysis of the war on terror because they marginalize non-state groups like al-Qaida.

Realism

- Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in late 1989, Realism as the dominant IR theory was in crisis.
- Waltz asserted that unipolarity could not survive. Inevitably, alliances of opposing states would appear to challenge the United States.
- John Mearsheimer went further, suggesting we would soon miss the stability a binary balance of power gave us during the Cold War.
- When 9/11 occurred it was clear that Realists **had their war back**. The terror attacks reinforced Realists in their view that state survival is always an issue, and in the importance of security measures.
- But the attacks represent a **major challenge** for Realism and Neo-Realism because the threat, as it is understood, is primarily a **non-state** one.

Realism (cont'd)

- Realism/Neorealism, as you may know, says that it is the existence of a world of states, in a context of anarchy that sets the basic parameters of the system for all states. If 9/11 really matters, Realism seems to have an explanatory problem.
- Perhaps the strongest point Realists might contribute to the debate about the global war on terror and America's position in it, is the insight from their 1980s debate about the supposed decline of American hegemony.
- This debate, best captured in Paul Kennedy's *The Fall and Rise of the Great Powers (1988)*, suggested that the **costs of leadership**, especially when other states do not support the actions of the dominant state, can become a burden and sap the leadership ability of the hegemonic state.
- Kennedy suggested that **unilateral actions** by hegemonic states tend to **reduce their hegemonic capacity** in dealing with other great powers.
- The war on terror on Kennedy's logic might be a distraction from the development of future conflict with states like China, Russia and even the EU.

John Mearsheimer

- The invasion of Iraq was bitterly opposed by many prominent Realist thinkers.
- The Realists placed an advertisement in the *New York Times* on September 26, 2002 asserting that war with Iraq was not in the U.S. national interest.
- Mearsheimer has argued that the logic of regime change in Iraq must be that Saddam could not be deterred from using Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs).

Mearsheimer (cont'd)

- But Mearsheimer suggests that Saddam was not suicidal. His thirty year rule of Iraq demonstrated his longevity.
- While he had used WMDs against Iraqi citizens these people had no weapons to deter him.
- The US could deter a nuclear Iraq as it had deterred a nuclear USSR.
- He concludes that a “compelling strategic rationale is absent” in the calls for war.

Mearsheimer (cont'd)

- Since the invasion Mearsheimer has gone on to identify a power-based motivation.
- Preference for use of US military force allows for an independent or unilateral policy.
- Mearsheimer says this confidence in using US military power is based on view that “bandwagoning” logic underpins international relations.
- “Bandwagoning” suggests that states that might threaten a powerful state will throw in their lot with the powerful state rather than be defeated. They will jump aboard the American bandwagon.

Mearsheimer (cont'd)

- Bandwagoning logic assumes the US can quickly deploy small capable forces, as hypothesised in the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) supported by former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.
- Unfortunately, the importance of nationalism was ignored and bandwagoning did not work in Iraq.
- In an effort to overcome the insurgency that followed invasion the US has abandoned RMA with the 2007 military surge. The surge has effectively put paid to further unilateral US policy efforts at regime change.

Fukuyama

- Mearsheimer suggested that in addition to the power argument, the US administration also had idealist motivations. These are considered closely by Fukuyama.
- Francis Fukuyama's book on the Bush Administration and the invasion of Iraq suggests we have to take seriously what he calls **neoconservative** thinking in international relations.
- Fukuyama identifies four principles or themes in this neoconservative thought.
- The **first**, following philosopher Leo Strauss, is that the "internal character" of regimes matters (Fukuyama 2006; 48). The point is that the character of the regime matters for its' external behavior.
- The **second** principle is that American power should be used for moral purposes. The U.S, has a "special responsibility" in security (eg. WWII, Cold War).

Fukuyama (cont'd)

- **Third**, skepticism about social engineering, which perhaps explains hostility to Saddam's Baathist social policies and the lack of post-war planning for Iraq.
- **Last**, the view that international law and institutions are poor generators of peace and security.
- These principles underpin the assertion, suggests Fukuyama, of the right of the United States, in National Security Strategy 2002 (NSS 2006: 18), to take "anticipatory action."
- More specifically, to "act **preemptively** in exercising our inherent right of self-defense."

Fukuyama (cont'd)

- **Preemption** almost necessitates active United States participation in regime change.
- These unilateral ideas are breathtakingly ambitious.
- They are very much at odds with the prevailing Realist orthodoxy in IR.
- Missing in the Bush doctrine are the constraint of anarchy, the norm of sovereignty and respect for the power of deterrence and balance of power.