

## "Some Basic Concepts and Approaches in the Study of International Politics"

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The study, analysis and planning of strategy requires a basic familiarity with some essential concepts and approaches to the study of international relations. It is not so much the terms and the jargon that are important; rather, it is the conceptual understanding that they bring to the study that makes them useful. Using the precise terminology is less critical than grasping the essential, underlying foundations of nation-state behavior so crucial to explaining the interactions that interest us as strategic thinkers. The purpose of this essay is to introduce some of the basic concepts and approaches in a way that will make them accessible for future reference in our study of strategy.

Why do nation-states (and other significant actors in the international system) behave as they do? How can we explain this behavior and use those explanations to anticipate likely future behavior? What are the contemporary characteristics of the international system and how do they affect the actors in that system? What are the ongoing trends (political, economic, military, and technological) in the international system? How are those trends likely to affect the interactions among those actors? What are the implications for US national security strategy?

These are the kinds of questions we need to ask as strategic analysts. In order to answer them we must be familiar with some basic concepts and tools of analysis. We begin with a discussion of the actors, their interests, and the ways in which those interests help determine how an actor behaves. We then turn to one very common approach to the study of international relations, the "levels of analysis." Finally, we conclude with a brief discussion of the two most common sets of assumptions about the behavior of nation-states in the international system, realism and idealism.

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## THE ACTORS

### The Nation-State

We begin with the assertion that the nation-state is the central actor in the international system. Not everyone agrees with this premise, but we will leave that debate for subsequent lessons and discussions. Although there is growing evidence that substate and transnational actors and forces in the international system are increasing in importance, and in many cases challenging the cohesiveness and effectiveness of national governments, the nation-state appears unlikely to surrender its preeminent position in the international system anytime soon. Consequently, this essay (and indeed Course 2 generally) will devote considerable attention to those tools that help us understand nation-state behavior in the international system.

The concept of the *nation-state* provides a useful starting point. As the compound noun implies, there are two essential components to the nation-state. The state is generally defined as a group of human beings possessing territory and a government. The state represents the physical and political aspects of a country. *Sovereignty* refers to the ability of a country to exercise preeminent control over the people and the policies within its territorial boundaries. To the extent that a state is sovereign, it is free to exercise its own control over its people without undue interference from external forces such as other states. The *nation* represents the human aspect of a country, or the concept of nationality. It suggests that the people living within the state share a sense of distinctiveness as a people; this distinctiveness may be seen in language, religion, ethnicity, or a more general and amorphous sense that "we are one people."

The modern nation-state has its origins in the seventeenth century. The Treaty of Westphalia, signed in 1648, brought a formal end to the Thirty Years War in Europe. That bloody conflict is generally viewed as the catalyst for consolidating what we think of today as the "countries" of Europe. Consequently, you will frequently see references to the "Westphalian" system of states or nation-states. Although the nation-state was already forming before and during the Thirty Years War, historical shorthand has provided us with a birth date for the concept—1648. The powerful nation-states that emerged from that conflict could raise and fund large militaries, and they soon spread worldwide as the means of organizing people within a defined territory under a distinct government. In the early days of the nation-state, the government was most often a monarchy headed by a king or queen.

The American and French Revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century added two new dimensions to the modern state. The first was *nationalism*, as evidenced especially in the Napoleonic Wars in which the masses of people were mobilized to fight for the country. No longer were wars limited to a small group of elite warriors. Whole nations were mobilized and

fought against each other. The second dimension was *popular sovereignty*, the notion that the people were no longer simply subjects to be ruled but the very source of the government's right to rule. Among other things, this led directly to an increase in public participation in virtually all aspects of political affairs and to the emergence of a new form of government, democracy. During the next two centuries democracy took hold and evolved in countries such as the United States and Great Britain, while monarchies and authoritarianism continued to dominate in many other countries. Wars of national unification further consolidated the various nation-states, and great clashes among powerful states characterized both centuries, culminating in the two great world wars fought in the first half of the twentieth century. By the end of World War II the nation-state had been the central actor in international affairs for roughly three centuries, but the twentieth century was to witness the emergence of other actors.

### Other Actors

Clearly, the nation-state is not the only actor in the contemporary international system. International governmental organizations (IGOs), such as the United Nations, are growing in number and importance. Regional organizations, such as the European Union, are in some cases assuming functions traditionally performed by the nation-state. Other functional organizations, especially in the areas of trade and economics, such as the North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA) and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) or the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), must certainly be considered in analyzing international relations in the late-twentieth century. Similarly, there has been an explosion in nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), private groups that play an important role in a variety of aspects of international affairs; groups such as the International Red Cross and Greenpeace come readily to mind. Some of the IGOs and NGOs are even visibly involved in military operations, as we have seen in Haiti, Somalia, and of course Bosnia. And hardly a day goes by that we don't see, read, or hear about the actions of terrorists, transnational organized criminal groups, or religious and ethnic groups. While all of these other actors can be very important in international affairs, much of their impact still lies in how they affect the behavior of nation-states. So it is this central actor—the nation-state—on which we focus our attention,

## INTERESTS

Most analysts begin with the notion that nation-states have basic, fundamental interests that underlie their behavior. They are most often referred to as *national interests*. Exactly what those interests are and how they are determined is a matter of considerable controversy, however. You will explore this concept and the complexities surrounding it in a separate

seminar. What we should recognize here is that all states have core or vital interests, and the most readily seen and agreed upon are the basic survival interests of the nation-state—its territory, its people, and its sovereignty. While all countries—large and powerful, small and weak—are affected by forces outside their own boundaries, a certain level of sovereignty is critical to the notion of national interests. A country that is unable to exercise effective control over its territory and its peoples, relatively free from the intrusion of other nation-states into its internal affairs, is lacking in this critical element of sovereignty. Historically, states and their peoples have been willing to risk much, including death and destruction, in order to protect and promote their sovereign rights.

The behavior of a nation-state is rooted in the pursuit, protection, and promotion of its interests. So if you can identify accurately the interests of a state, you should be able to understand much of its behavior vis-a-vis other states and actors in the international system.

### NATION-STATE BEHAVIOR

The key questions a strategist asks about the behavior of nation-states in the international system are really rather few. They are essentially generic and broad questions of which other questions are simply variations. For example: Why do nation-states go to war? Why does peace obtain? Why is there conflict? Why cooperation? Why does a state choose to use military force? Why does it choose diplomacy instead? In the end, answers to these and other questions are sought in the interplay between a nation's interests and the tools it has available to protect and promote them. To answer such questions we must look at the different factors that affect the behavior of nation-states.

### LEVELS OF ANALYSIS

One of the most common frameworks for analyzing international relations suggests that these factors can be organized according to three levels of analysis. Commonly associated with the work of Kenneth Waltz (Man, the State, and War: A Theory of International Relations), the three levels are the international system, the nation-state, and the individual. Over the years these levels have been discussed, refined, and expanded, but in essence they remain the same. The purpose of the framework is to demonstrate that we can explain the behavior of nation-states in the international system by looking at three different, general sets of factors. As we will see, the first level explains nation-state behavior largely on the basis of factors external to the country, while the other two levels emphasize internal factors.

#### The System Level

The first level (international system) suggests that nation-states behave the way they do because of certain fundamental characteristics of the system of which they are all a part. The idea is simply that the system itself exerts a kind of force on the states that compels them to behave and react in certain predictable ways. Theories such as the balance of power are based on this kind of analysis; for example, that if a single nation-state seeks to dominate the system (a hegemon), other states will join together to counter the power of that single state. Who possesses how much and what kinds of power (political, economic, military) at any given time are the critical variables. This leads to a basic focus on the distribution of power in the international system as a key explanation for system and hence nation-state behavior. The reasons for this are found in the characteristics of the international system.

The characteristics of the system that are most important for us to recognize are relatively few. First, the system is largely anarchic. In other words there is no collective decision-making body or supreme authority to manage conflict among the competing states in the system. States compete with each other and "manage" their conflicts through their own use of power. Second, this means that the system basically relies on self-help by the individual states, so the states must be concerned about developing their power relative to other states in the system. The more power one has, the more that state is able to achieve its goals and objectives; the less power one has, the more that state may be subject to the whims of other states. These two characteristics mean that each state has a basic goal of survival and must be the guardian of its own security and independence. No other actor in the system will look out for the state, a role performed for the individual by government in most domestic political systems. (So, for example, if you are wronged by another individual, you have a legal system to use in order to right that wrong.)

To illustrate how the system level is used to explain nation-state behavior, such as the causes of war, let us use the example of World War II. According to this approach, Hitler's Germany was a classic hegemonic actor. Its objective was to amass power (political, military, and economic) in order to dominate the European and, perhaps, Asian continents, and eventually the world. It saw in the weakness of other states (Great Britain, France, Russia, and the United States) the opportunity to make its play for world domination. Yet the "inevitability" of system influences would ultimately frustrate German aspirations. For as Germany sought to dominate, other states in the system would eventually band together and "balance power with power." So the unlikely alliance (unlikely in the sense that they were not natural allies) among those four against Germany, Italy and Japan is seen as a nearly automatic occurrence that results from the necessity of balancing power: As Germany sought to dominate, other states in

the system naturally sought to balance it. Despite the roles played by individuals such as Hitler, Churchill, Stalin, and Roosevelt (a point to which we shall return in a moment), the decisions made by these countries were part of a broader pattern of system-determined behavior. The titanic clash that was WWII was destined to happen once Germany sought to dominate the system; natural system dynamics would see to that.

### The Nation-State Level

The second level of analysis is commonly referred to as the nation-state level, although recently the term actor level has been used. The latter usage reflects the fact that in contemporary international relations there is a growing number of actors in the international system that are not nation-states, as we discussed earlier. While we focus here primarily on the nation-state, we are reminded that non-state actors do play an increasingly important role. This second level of analysis argues that because states are the primary actors, it is the internal character of those states that matters most in determining overall patterns of behavior. Because states are sovereign entities, they act relatively independently; because they are part of the same system, the interaction of those independent decisions is what leads to war or peace, conflict or cooperation. One of the most common state-level approaches emphasizes the nature of the political system as a major determinant of state behavior. So for example, the premise that democracies behave differently than do authoritarian political regimes. This is precisely the notion that underlies the "Theory of the Democratic Peace", a central component of the current US national security strategy of engagement and enlargement. If democracies do not go to war with other democracies (so runs the "democratic peace" argument), then it is only natural for the US to want to promote more democracies in the world as a way of increasing peace and stability in the system.

The second level can also be used to explain the causes of WWII. In this case what is important is not the systemic influences of balance of power, but the specific character of the major actors. The totalitarian regimes in Germany, Japan, and Italy were compelled to undertake aggressive foreign policies in order to pacify the oppressed peoples living under them. If the leaders didn't create external enemies for the people to fight against, the people would soon focus on how oppressive their regimes were and they would eventually revolt. The democratic regimes of Great Britain and the United States were similarly compelled to oppose the totalitarian regimes' expansionist desires because that is what democracies do—they fight against the evils of totalitarianism and for the good of freedom. So in this view, WWII was fought to protect the freedom-loving democracies of the world, not simply to balance power against the expansionist desires of a potential hegemon. An alliance with Russia was a

"necessary evil" to be endured in the short-term in order to achieve the defeat of the immediate aggressor.

### The Individual Level

Finally, the third level of analysis emphasizes the role played by individuals. Recently this level has been referred to as the decision-making level, which tends to point to factors more general than the idiosyncracies of individuals, and to the fact that decisions about war and peace, conflict and cooperation are made by individuals, organizations, and institutions within a society. But the primary emphasis remains the same: real people make decisions that determine the pattern of behavior among states in the international system. This level of analysis is frequently seen in "Great Man" historical explanations or in the philosophical analyses of human nature. The former emphasizes the critical role played by certain individuals who happen to be in the right place at the right time to exert fundamental influence on the unfolding events. The latter tends to hold, as did Hobbes and others before him, that there is a basic, aggressive tendency in human nature, and that tendency will emerge time and again no matter how much we wish to keep it suppressed. War occurs because individuals are inherently aggressive, and therefore war not peace is the natural state of affairs among groups of individuals interacting in the international system as nation-states. This is the basic view of human nature held by most analysts who consider themselves *realists*. Alternatively, but from the same focus on human nature, one can depart from the assumption that human nature is inherently peace-loving and perfectible, and that peace is therefore the natural state of affairs, and the abnormal departure from it is war and conflict. This is the basic view of human nature held by most analysts who consider themselves *idealists*. (We shall return to these two views in the final section of this essay.) This level also focuses our attention on the perceptions of key actors (how they see the world, how they see the motivations and goals of other actors in the system, and so on). It also stresses the types of decisions being made (different policies generate different kinds of decisions) and the processes with which they are made (whether public opinion plays a role, whether the process is open or closed, etc.). If you want to know why a nation-state behaves as it does, you need to ask questions such as: Who are the most important decision makers, what are their motivations and perceptions, and what are they trying to achieve? What is the type of decision being made? What kind of process is required to reach a decision?

One analysis employing a third-level approach offers a fairly straightforward explanation of the causes of WWII. Hitler, the embodiment of evil that exists in human nature, decided to pursue world domination and dragged the German people (afflicted by the same frailties of

human nature that affect us all) into his scheme. Churchill and Roosevelt, those altogether rare examples of good prevailing over evil, saw it as their calling to rally their democratic and freedom-loving peoples to the cause of eradicating evil from the system. According to this level of analysis, there was nothing inevitable about the causes or the outcomes of the war. Had Hitler not come on the scene, no power vacuum would have drawn Germany toward domination. Had Churchill and Roosevelt not been leaders of their countries, no necessities of balancing power or opposing evil would have ensured a set of foes who would in the end prevail over Hitler's Germany. The fact that we had these particular individuals on the scene at that particular point in time is what explains the causes and the outcomes of that second world war.

Elegant theories and models have been developed using these levels of analysis, most of which have focused on the system and the nation-state levels (elegant theories of idiosyncratic individual behavior are hard to come by, but psychological approaches come the closest). Trying to discern the compelling forces that drive nations to behave in certain ways is the goal. For the strategic analyst, however, elegant theories are less important than accurate assessments of current conditions and predictions of likely future courses of action. As a consequence, we will employ all three levels in our attempts to understand war, national policy, and strategy. You will see where theories drawn largely from the first level (such as balance of power) interact with variables drawn from the other two levels (such as the nature of the regime and the profiles of current leaders) to produce a strategic assessment and derivative policy recommendations. Ultimately our goal is to explain why nation-states might pursue certain courses of action, and what we should do to counter those actions that are detrimental to our interests or to encourage those actions we consider favorable. To do that requires that we be familiar with all three levels and the factors drawn from each that can help us toward a better strategic assessment. In most cases, that will require an understanding of some general system factors, characteristics of the actors in the system, and attributes of individual leaders.

## REALISM AND IDEALISM

No discussion of basic concepts and approaches would be complete without some treatment of the two most prominent sets of competing assumptions about behavior in the international system. Although adherents of these schools of thought often speak as though their views are statements of fact, it is important to realize that they are actually assumptions. They provide the underpinnings for explanations of nation-state behavior, but for the most part they cannot be proven. What one assumes about nation-state behavior is of course central for the explanations that derive from them. Therefore, we shall briefly outline the core assumptions

of the two approaches and compare and contrast them, particularly in terms of where they lead us in our strategic analyses.

### Realism

Realism, frequently identified with scholars such as Hans Morgenthau, Henry Kissinger, and more recently Kenneth Waltz, considers anarchy the primary characteristic of the international system; in other words, there is no central authority to settle disputes among the competing member states, as there is in domestic political systems. Given this lack of central authority, states compete with one another within a loose system that includes some rules, norms, and patterns of behavior, but which ultimately causes the individual nation-state to look out for its own interests (the system of "self-help" described earlier). The means for protecting, preserving, and promoting one's interests (the ends) is power, hence states will be preoccupied with their own power capabilities and how they relate to the capabilities of other states. Not surprisingly, realists tend to view the world in terms of competition and conflict, a recurring struggle for power and its management.

In trying to explain why power and struggles over it are the central feature of nation-state behavior, proponents of realism fall into two general groups. One group, perhaps best epitomized by Morgenthau, argues that human nature is the key explanation. In their view human nature is fixed and unchangeable, and it is inherently focused on the quest for ever more power. Consequently, conflict among people competing for power is inevitable. And since states are simply aggregations of individual humans, and statesmen are the leaders of those groups, nation-states will exhibit this same lust for power in their behavior with one another. No matter what one does, this lust for power anchored in human nature will make some conflict inevitable. The best we can hope for is to manage that conflict because it can never be eradicated.

The second group of realists, today most clearly associated with the writings of Waltz, finds the explanation for the centrality of power relations in the structure of the international system. This view, called *structural realism* or *neorealism*, is essentially what we have outlined in the first paragraph of this section and in our earlier discussion of the international system level of analysis. The primary characteristic of the international system is anarchy: the absence of a central authority to make and enforce rules, settle disputes, and generally regulate and manage the conflict that is inevitable in a system of individual, sovereign nation-states. All states possess some level of military power, and ultimately each state has the option of

threatening or actually using that power. To some extent, then, each state must be concerned with the power capabilities of other states. To the realist this creates a system in which all states to varying degrees will be distrustful of other states. The more one state increases its power capabilities, the more insecure other states will feel. This leads directly to the *security dilemma*: the actions undertaken by a state to increase its security (such as expanding its military capabilities) will lead to counteractions taken by other states, leading eventually to the paradoxical outcome that all states will in fact feel (or actually be) less secure. The classic example of this dilemma is an arms race.

This second school of realist thought is by far the largest, and its proponents generally reject any notion of human nature as an underlying explanation for the prominent role played by power in international relations. But regardless of their positions on this issue, the important fact is that all realists come to the same conclusion about power in the international system: the distribution of power is the most important variable explaining nation-state behavior, and the best way of managing conflict in the system is by balancing power with power. Various *balance of power* theories all assume that the only effective way to prevent war is to prepare for war; one must be willing to threaten and to use force in order to reduce the likelihood that such force will in fact be used. Hence the common dictum in international relations, "If you want peace, you must prepare for war." Whether through increasing individual state capabilities or multiplying those capabilities through a system of changing alliances, states must be constantly on guard against a shift in the overall balance of power that would tempt the momentarily strong to exploit their advantage over the weak. To the realist, a country has "no enduring allies, only enduring interests," and those interests can only be protected through its own vigilance and preparedness.

### Idealism

Idealists can trace their modern heritage to the tenets of Woodrow Wilson, although like realism its origins go much further back in history. Often referred to as Wilsonian liberalism, idealist thought frequently views human nature as a positive force. It is precisely the power politics of nation-state behavior that is the problem, so the cure is to find a way to reduce or eliminate altogether that particular form of interaction. To the idealist, there is a natural harmony of interests among nation-states, based on the inherent desire of most people to live in peace with one another. Only when the corrupting influences of great power politics, ideology, nationalism, evil leaders, and so on intervene do we see international politics degenerate into conflict and war. The task then is to prevent the rise and control of such corrupting influences. How is this to be accomplished? First and foremost it can be encouraged

through the growth of democracy as a form of government that gives maximum expression to the voice of the people. After all, if most people are inherently peace-loving, then governments that express the desires of the people will themselves be less warlike. A second means to the desired end is the use of international institutions to create forums in which nation-states can discuss their disagreements in ways that will reinforce the cooperative rather than the competitive dimensions of their relationships with one another. So the idealist finds great promise not only in institutions like the UN but also in the further development of international treaties and covenants, as well as common practice, as the bases for a system of international law. Such international institutions can be used to change the way states calculate their interests, hence they can encourage cooperation over conflict. At one extreme, some idealists believe that the creation of a world government is the answer; all we have to do is create the international equivalent of domestic government to regulate and manage the behavior of the actors in the system.

Idealism is too often, and generally inaccurately, portrayed as a "fuzzy-headed liberal notion" of peace and cooperation, in part because there are some idealists who do espouse what sound very much like "utopian" aspirations. Yet the contemporary counterpoint to realism is most accurately referred to as "liberal institutionalism", which emphasizes the role played by states' interests (the liberalism of the 19th century that comprised the core argument for conservative economic theory like that of Adam Smith) and international institutions. The more states can be shown that their interests are effectively pursued within international institutions, and that all states can benefit from such interaction, the more they can be induced to behave cooperatively rather than competitively. Much of the post-WWII international trade and economics regimes (Bretton Woods, GATT, and so on) are based precisely on this "idealist" approach.

Yet both schools of thought have some shortcomings when we look carefully at the assumptions and their implications. For example, while realists place great emphasis on the fundamental influence of national interests on nation-state behavior, not all realists can agree on what those interests are. For example, Morgenthau was an early and outspoken critic of US involvement in Vietnam, arguing that there was no vital national interest being threatened. At virtually the same time no less prominent a realist than Henry Kissinger was arguing that it was precisely US vital interests that were threatened by the possible communist takeover of that Southeast Asian country. How did realism help decide who was correct? And in a later attempt to justify the covert US role in the overthrow of the leftist Allende regime in Chile, Kissinger was quoted as saying that Chile "was a dagger pointed at the heart of Antarctica," which to many

observers (including many realists) sounded like a politician bending over backwards to produce a realist-sounding defense for a rather silly policy decision. On the idealist side, we can return to our earlier historical examples. The hope that the voice of the people would establish more reason and peace in international relations seems a bit Pollyannaish when we consider that it was precisely the vengeance sought by the publics in France and Great Britain that helped produce the fatally flawed Treaty of Versailles in 1919. The punishment meted out to Germany in that peace agreement almost certainly paved the way for the eventual rise of Hitler and the subsequent explosion of the continent in World War II. And the same publics so weary and fearful of war based on their experiences in World War I helped produce the climate of appeasement in the 1930s that rendered any meaningful "balance of power" approach impossible to implement.

Because it is virtually impossible to prove the accuracy of the underlying and competing assumptions in these two approaches, the arguments between realists and idealists will certainly continue, especially in times of tremendous and profound change in the international system such as we are now experiencing in the most recent period of transition following the end of the Cold War. What we need to recognize, however, is the nature of the assumptions we are making and the implications they have for our analysis of nation-state behavior. In general, the differences between the realist and idealist schools of thought show up in the relative weight they give to the levels of analysis discussed earlier, and to the significance of the roles played by non-state actors, especially international institutions, in the regulation and management of interstate conflict. Not surprisingly, most realists give primary emphasis to the system-level of analysis. In fact, some realists continue to discount completely the influence of all domestic factors, such as the nature of the regime or the individuals who occupy leadership positions. To them, nation-states are rational, unified actors who make decisions based on their interests and pursue them consistently over time regardless of who leads them. To many idealists this is a great weakness of realist thought, because they see the interests of nation-states growing out of a much more amorphous domestic competition among differing views about just what those interests are, let alone how best to pursue them. To the realist, the nation-state is all that really matters, and attempts to create supranational institutions (such as the United Nations) to help manage state behavior are doomed to fail. To the liberal institutionalist, it is precisely such institutions that can bring more orderly and less conflictual patterns of behavior to the international system.

Theorists will continue to debate which level (or levels) is most important, so the basic dialogue between realism and liberalism will go on. But for the strategic analyst concerned with

current policy, the focus must be on the interactions across levels. While changes in the international system will create situations and circumstances to which nation-states can respond, how they perceive those changes and what they do in response will be in part shaped by domestic characteristics and conditions, including individual leadership. This ability to integrate the levels of analysis and to understand the assumptions underlying different views of what is important in international political behavior is essential to strategic thinking and analysis.