

## **The State and International Relations**

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The state is central to the study of international relations and likely to remain so into the foreseeable future. State policy is the most common object of analysis. States decide to go to war. They erect trade barriers. They choose whether and at what level to establish environmental standards. States enter international agreements, or not, and choose whether to abide by their provisions. Even scholars who give prominence to non-state actors are typically concerned with understanding or changing state practice (for example, Keck and Sikkink 1998). International relations as a discipline is chiefly concerned with what states do and, in turn, how their actions affect other states.

Similarly, states are a common unit of analysis in theories of international relations. Many analysts focus on states and their interactions to explain observed patterns of world politics. The state is fundamental to neorealism (Waltz 1979) and neoliberal institutionalism (Keohane 1984). It is also key in many constructivist and English school theories (Bull 1977, Reus-Smit 1999, Wendt 1999). Even critical, post-modern, or feminist theories, which have arisen in opposition to existing forms of social power, often focus on problematizing states and state practice.

Both as objects and units of analysis, international relations is largely about states and their interactions. This essay first reviews the rationales behind state-centric theories of international relations. The second half examines criticisms and probes the limits of state-centric theories.

### **Why Study the State?**

All theories are based on simplifying assumptions intended to render a complex reality explicable. Theories are typically grouped into families or paradigms by their shared assumptions.<sup>1</sup> In making simplifying assumptions, analysts place a methodological “bet” on the most useful way to capture the essence of the phenomenon they wish to explain. These are bets because the assumptions must be made before the implications of the theory are fully worked out and tested.<sup>2</sup> Scholars can work for years or possibly generations building from a set of assumptions before they know whether their bet will pay off by providing a powerful explanation of the desired phenomenon.

State-centric theories of international relations assume that states are the primary actors in world politics. Theorists working in this tradition do not deny the existence of other political actors. As Kenneth Waltz (1979, 93-94) writes, “states are not and never have been the only international actors....The importance of nonstate actors and the extent of transnational activities are obvious.” Rather, the claim is that states, and especially great powers, are sufficiently important actors that any positive theory of international relation must place them at its core.

Scholars making this assumption are betting that a focus on states will yield parsimonious yet empirically powerful explanations of world politics. Central to this bet is a hunch that the parsimony or theoretical elegance derived from an emphasis on states will outweigh the loss in empirical richness that comes from including a broader range of actors. One’s evaluation of state-centric theory rests, in part, on how one assesses the inevitable tradeoff between empirical power and theoretical elegance. This is a subjective choice over which reasonable scholars can disagree.

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<sup>1</sup> On assumptions and paradigms, see Kuhn (1970). On paradigms in international relations, see Elman and Elman (2003).

<sup>2</sup> On methodological bets, see Lake and Powell (1999, 16-20).

In addition to parsimony, there are at least two additional reasons why some scholars expect state-centric theory to be a good bet. States may possess, or be plausibly understood to possess, a national interest in which society has relatively homogenous policy preferences. If so, analysts can safely abstract from the pushing and hauling of domestic politics and assume the state is a unitary entity interacting with other similarly unity entities.

In realist theories, the national interest is assumed to be state power (Morgenthau 1978) and in neorealist theories it is assumed to be state survival, at a minimum, or power, at a maximum (Waltz 1979). Survival is understood as a primordial goal that is necessary for the pursuit of all others political ends. The drive for power stems from human nature (Morgenthau 1978, 36-38) or the state of nature that characterizes the international system (Mearsheimer 2001, 32-36), but in either case it is instrumental for achieving other ends within the political arena. Since survival or power occurs at the level of the nation or society, these assumptions about the goals of politics lead to the further assumption that states are the appropriate unit of analysis in theories of world politics. Other theories posit more context-specific national interests. Nuclear deterrence theory, not implausibly, presumes that everyone wants to avoid nuclear annihilation. Likewise, we can posit that nearly everyone benefits from freedom of the seas or stopping terrorism. When it seems reasonable to posit that citizens possess relatively homogenous interests, it can then be a convenient analytic shortcut to treat the state as a unitary actor.

As sovereign entities, states possess ultimate or final authority over delimited territories and their inhabitants. Once a policy is enacted, the decision is binding on all

citizens. If a state raises a tariff, all of its citizens are affected by the higher price for imports whether they support the tax or not. Just as states pass laws that bind their citizens at home, they also act authoritatively in ways that bind their own citizens in relations with other states. This is the analytic foundation of adage that “politics stops at the water’s edge.” Given their internal hierarchy, it is again reasonable to treat states as unitary actors when interacting with other similarly hierarchical states.

A key assumption of Westphalian sovereignty is that authority is indivisible and culminates in a single apex (Hinsley 1986, 26Krasner 1999, 11). Whether sovereignty is vested in a hereditary monarch or the people, there is an ultimate or final authority within each state. This is not to assert that states possess the ability to regulate all the possible behaviors of all citizens (see below), only that there is a single point where, in President Harry Truman’s classic phrase, “the buck stops.” States may, of course, differ in how they aggregate the interests of their citizens. In autocratic regimes, a small group of elites may set policy for all. In more democratic states, representative institutions incorporate the interests of voters into policy. But regardless of what type of regime exists, citizens are bound by the policies enacted by their governments.

It is this ability to act on behalf of their societies that make states virtually unique in international relations. However active a non-governmental organization may be, it can only claim to speak for its members and, perhaps, for universal principles such as justice or human rights: it cannot bind others through its actions, including its own members who join only in voluntary association. Because of their unique status as authoritative actors, and their ability to act on behalf of their citizens, it follows that states are central,

more important actors than others, and thus sometimes appropriate units of analysis in international politics.

### **The Limits of State-Centric Theory**

State-centric theories have been widely assailed. Critics have usefully identified the limits of state-centric theories, but equally several criticisms have missed their mark. In this section, I probe two valid criticisms of state-centric theories, assessing the limits they identify but also the limits of the criticisms themselves. Both point to the need for more contextualized theories of international relations and greater care in placing our methodological bets.

The first and perhaps most frequent criticism is that there is no such thing as the “national interest.” Over five decades ago, Arnold Wolfers (1952) famously recognized that it’s synonym, national security, was an ambiguous and possibly dangerous concept, more a rhetorical device used by those seeking support for particularistic policy than a real, concrete attribute of the nation as a whole. Rather than affecting everyone in similar ways, most policies are redistributive or have differential impacts on groups even in the same country. Even though global climate change, for instance, raises temperatures for everyone, and therefore might be thought of as the quintessential national interest, it will negatively affect those living in low lying coastal areas and already dry desert climates more than those in temperate regions, with farmers in higher latitudes perhaps even gaining from longer and warmer growing seasons. Likewise, policies aimed at mitigating global warming will depress returns in the oil and gas industries and raise costs in sectors that use energy intensively (e.g., transportation), but benefit alternative energy industries and less energy-intensive producers. Within each country there will be winners and losers

from climate change and from every possible policy to slow or reverse it. In redistributive politics, the concept of a national interest shared equally by everyone evaporates.

This critique is undoubtedly correct. Even though Stephen Krasner (1978) persuasively argued that states do appear to pursue long term interests that do not reflect the desires of particular groups or classes, even in the highly redistributive area of raw materials policy, many scholars today focus on domestic political interests and institutions to identify and explain more realistically what states want from international politics (Gourevitch 2002). Different issues create and mobilize different political cleavages within societies. Countries are riven by distinct religious, ethnic, class or language divides, and each cleavage will mobilize individuals differently in different contexts. Varying political institutions serve to aggregate alternative sets of domestic interests with different degrees of bias (Rogowski 1999). To understand what states want, this new research holds, analysts must pay focused attention to how typically competing and disparate groups are mobilized into the political process and how institutions then transform interests into policy.

Yet, this critique is itself limited in two ways. As above, as long as states are authoritative, their decisions are binding on all citizens. Regardless of the divisiveness of the issue, the policy, once enacted, is equally binding on all individuals. To debunk the myth of national interests is not to undercut the importance of state authority for treating states as units of analysis.

In addition, in many problems of international politics, domestic politics provides only an explanation of what states want, not what they do. That is, it might explain the preferences of a society on an international issue, but it cannot explain why that society

adopts the policy or gets the outcome that it does. Most interesting puzzles of international politics arise from the strategic interaction not only of groups within countries but also from the interactions of countries themselves (Morrow 1999).

Domestic interests and institutions may produce in some countries an interest in reversing global warming, but for most states changing their own policies will have only a minimal effect on the global climate. Achieving consequential change requires the cooperation of other countries. Knowing this, each country has an incentive to free ride internationally on the efforts of others. The result is fewer efforts at mitigation and greater emissions of greenhouse gases than is collectively optimal or desired. The strategic interactions of states remains an important part of any explanation of world politics.

Increasingly, scholars of international relations accept a division of labor in which some focus on domestic politics with the ambition of explaining policy preferences and, in some cases, foreign policy choices and others, taking domestically generated interests as “given,” focus on developing theories of strategic interaction between states. In the latter, the state is assumed to be the unit of analysis not because it is natural, as in the national interest rationale, but because theorists expect that they will gain some explanatory purchase on the problem they are studying. Perhaps because economic policies have more clearly redistributive effects, international political economists tend to emphasize domestic politics on the belief that more of the explanatory “action” will lay in understanding policy preferences, whereas international security scholars tend to devote more attention to the strategic interactions of states because issues of bargaining, information, and credible commitment appear more central to peace and war. But like all theories, these are just methodological bets about where we are most likely to find

interesting and potentially important insights when we shine our spotlights on an otherwise dark landscape. Thus, even if we accept the validity of this first criticism that national interests seldom exist, state-centric theory may still be useful, especially when the strategic interaction of states is important to understanding how national preferences are translated into international political outcomes.

The second, more substantive critique of state-centric theory is that states have lost control over private (non-state) actors who can organize and move across national borders, be these cosmopolitan individuals, multinational corporations (MNCs), or transnational advocacy networks (TANs). This strikes to the heart of the third rationale above, implying that states no longer exert sovereign control over those they supposedly rule. To the extent that such transnational actors are important in world politics, state-centric theories will be less relevant and possess less explanatory power, undercutting the first rationale as well.

Transnational actors entered the study of international relations in the early 1970s (Keohane and Nye 1972, 1977). Although some transnational actors, like the Catholic Church, have been present since the birth of the modern states system, the rise of multinational corporations that threatened to put “sovereignty at bay” (Vernon 1971) and the parallel rise of TANs led many to question the continued utility of state-centric theory. The international political landscape is certainly more crowded with a greater variety of actors than ever before.

In the face of this criticism, some scholars simply reaffirmed their expectation that state-centric theory will retain its explanatory power (Waltz 1979, 93-97). Others argued that states remain sovereign and, rather than being challenged by non-state actors,

actually permit such actors to exist and exert influence on world politics. For these analysts, the question is why states acquiesce in and perhaps even encourage the growth of transnational actors (Gilpin 1972, 1975). Neither the explanatory power of state-centric theories nor the ability of states to control transnational actors, however, is likely to be constant. Rather, sovereignty and effective control have to be theorized and, in turn, explained. Doing so helps us understand when state-centric theories are likely to remain useful and relevant, and when they must be augmented or perhaps radically transformed.

Sovereignty is variable. In international relations, scholars tend to focus on the external face of sovereignty or the status of being recognized as a state by the community of states. Recent research shows that the meaning of sovereignty and its practice has varied over time (Krasner 1999). There is a second, “internal” face of sovereignty, however, that is more relevant to this discussion of transnational actors. Even within a particular external face, presumably similar for all states, the authority of states over their own citizens varies in important ways. “Failed states” retain their external sovereignty but lack authority within their own borders through the absence of a central government (e.g., Somalia) or a government whose writ does not extend to all regions of its territory (e.g., tribal areas of Pakistan).<sup>3</sup> Such states matter to the international community today because they may provide safe havens for violent extremist groups. But failed states are simply one end of a larger continuum. “Liberal states” by law or custom have highly constrained ranges of authority over their citizens. They have the right to regulate only certain practices by their constituents, mostly those that contribute to market failures. At the same time, they are restricted from regulating other practices -- such as speech, assembly, or the press -- except in extraordinary circumstances. The authority of such

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<sup>3</sup> On the inability to sub-Saharan states to “broadcast” their power, see Herbst (2000).

states is continually contested, at least at the margin, as suggested by the current debate over the rights of terror suspects in the United States. “Strong states” may be no more or less autonomous than their liberal counterparts, but they possess greater authority over a greater range of behaviors, typically including some direct controls over the commanding heights of the economy.<sup>4</sup> In totalitarian systems, at the other end of the continuum, states claim the right and aim to regulate all forms of social behavior. This extreme is seldom realized in practice, but even so the state’s authority is considerably broader than in its liberal or even strong cousins. Even though states may be sovereign relative to one another, they possess clearly different authorities over their own societies.

It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that transnational relations appear most fully developed and most consequential in liberal states (Keohane and Nye 1977, Risse-Kappen 1995) -- or at least until failed states exploded onto the world stage in the 1990s. This has less to do with interdependence, which is a by-product, and far more to do with the larger private spheres of action in liberal democracies. In these countries, it is less useful to think of private actors as escaping the authority of their states than it is to see them as enjoying a constitutionally protected sphere of autonomous action. Yet, this understanding severely qualifies the claim that states could if they wanted reassert control over private actors. Sovereignty abroad, which implies the authority to regulate transborder flows, is different than sovereignty at home, which is negotiated between the state and society. To claim new authority over, say, corporations requires renegotiating the constitutional compact that makes liberal states liberal. In determining the autonomy

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<sup>4</sup> This is a reformulation of earlier arguments about state strength; see Katzenstein (1978) and Lake (1999, 42-48).

of transnational actors, external sovereignty is less important than the state's internal sovereignty.

Technology is also a variable with consequences for the scope of transnational relations. It is generally assumed that new communication and transportation technologies have favored transnational groups and permit them to escape state control. Even though states might have the right to regulate their behavior, this suggests, transnational actors can exploit technology to gain even greater autonomy. Thus, new technologies permit MNCs to develop global networks that undermine the ability of states to regulate or tax production. Likewise, TANs use communications technologies to bring information to light on human rights, environmental, and other practices that governments would prefer to keep secret.

Yet, states are not without counter-strategies in the face of technological change. Given the design of the internet which requires traffic to move through particular "choke points" and the willingness of firms to cooperation with governments to preserve their market access, states have been able to impose restrictions on the content available to their citizens (Deibert and Rohozinski 2007). Similarly, the United States government has greatly extended its authority and ability after 9/11 to monitor phone calls, internet traffic, and financial flows anywhere around the globe. Generating an ability to sift through the large number of communications they intercept each day, governments have been exploiting technology to reimpose control over transnational groups and activists. Technology goes both ways. On balance, new technologies have most likely favored transnational actors, but the balance will ebb and flow over time.

The greater the autonomy of transnational actors, the more consequential they will be for international politics, and the less useful state-centric theories will be. This does not imply that state-centric theories are obsolete. Rather, theorists must now be more attuned to when non-state actors are likely to be important for the outcomes they wish to explain and when it is reasonable to focus only on the actions and interactions of states. The answer is likely to vary by issue, by time, and by country. The old methodological bets of state-centric theory may not produce the same returns.

### **Conclusion**

To develop or use state-centric theory is not to take an ethical position on the state as a form of political organization. State-centric theorists do not necessarily endorse the state as a social institution. Rather, state-centric theorists merely attempt to leverage the central role of states to explain the patterns and trends of world politics, including when violence is more or less likely, when economic interdependence will rise or fall, and whether societies will be able to address collectively threats to their common future. The question is not whether states are good or bad, but whether by focusing on states and their actions we can explain critical problems of international relations.

States have been and are likely to remain central actors in world politics. As such, they are necessary to any explanation of international relations. Yet, given the evident importance of domestic politics in many issues and the continuing growth of transnational actors, the role and, therefore, likely explanatory importance of states are increasingly qualified. State-centric theories can be quite powerful, but they can also be misleading when domestic interests are highly divided and their internal sovereignty is highly constrained. Scholars must be increasingly careful in specifying when states are

likely to be important rather than assuming that their role in the real world and in our theories is constant.

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