

What is the point of international relations as a discipline? By artificially dividing politics between the international and domestic are we losing something?

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1. Introduction

International Relations first emerged as an academic discipline in 1919 in response to the horrors of World War I. The ‘point’ of the discipline was to avoid future warfare through analysing conflict and power on the international stage. Today, the discipline aims to explain, avoid or resolve many other forms of conflict, such as trade wars and border disputes. Whilst traditional theories of International Relations hold that domestic and international politics are two distinct subjects, the discipline has recently evolved to account for the ways in which international politics relies on domestic politics. Moreover, international politics also has a great impact on domestic politics because of trade, war, disease, and other issues. Therefore, by artificially dividing politics in this way, we forget to consider the significant influence each has on the other.

2. The Definition and Purpose of International Relations

Describing, explaining and predicting the behaviour of nations appears to be a key characteristic of International Relations. Before WWI, the Trustees of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace recognised that permanently eliminating war required a thorough knowledge of “the underlying forces which move nations, the development of their methods and motives of action, and the historical development of their relations” (quoted in Ransom, 1968). Great parallels exist between this description and the discipline of International Relations, giving greater weight to the idea that the purpose of International Relations is to eliminate war. More recently, however, the discipline has expanded to consider all forms of international conflict, such as trade wars, border disputes, and ideological clashes.

Over time, different attempts have been made at avoiding conflict through international relations; initially, diplomacy between individual nations was treated as the solution. For instance, in the 1920s and 30s, the great powers bypassed the League of Nations and negotiated separate treaties, such as the Kellogg-Briand Pact, where 60 nations agreed not to use war to solve disputes. Once these treaties failed and war became more devastating and horrific, the focus shifted to international law and organisations; after World War II, the United Nations was created as another attempt to maintain peace. However, this also proved largely ineffective. Recently, attention has turned to more fluid methods of resolving dispute, namely policy and politics. A modern example of this would be the U.S.-led economic sanctions on Iran to prevent the country acquiring nuclear weapons.

Because International Relations now focuses on policy and politics, it ought to be examined as a political discipline; questions of power, the typical domain of politics, can thus be considered. Following in the tradition of Harold Lasswell, International Relations could be defined as ‘who gets what, when, and how’ on an international level. This produces a second characteristic of International Relations: examining the distribution of power among nations.

Through combining these two descriptions, an overall definition of International Relations is formed: the analysis of conflict and power on the international stage. The ‘point’ of International Relations

remains the same, and is ultimately about explaining, avoiding or resolving conflict. Indeed, the combined considerations of conflict and power predate the 20th century, granting this definition a rich historical precedent. Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* is often considered to be the first major work in International Relations. It evaluates the cause of the Peloponnesian War to be "the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta" (Thucydides, ed. 1972), evidently alluding to the inextricable links between power, relations and conflict. Similar connections have appeared in the works of Polybius, Khaldun and Machiavelli, all considered to be seminal historical texts in the study of International Relations.

3. The Independence of International and Domestic Politics

Analysing international politics in terms of power implies that it is governed by a similar logic to domestic politics. This reflects the traditional view that "Domestic and International Politics are but two different manifestations of the same phenomenon, the struggle for power" (Morgenthau, 1948). Thus, the suggestion is that the only difference between the two disciplines is their subject: domestic politics deals with individuals whilst international politics deals with nations, and all agents act to secure greater power. The logic underlying each is thus the same: rational self-interest.

However, other, more extreme differences do exist because nations are not governed by a single state. As noted by Hobbes, nations can be described as existing in a 'state of nature' with no dominant, all-encompassing coercive power. Although powerful regional bodies do exist, such as the European Union, none have a monopoly over legitimate force. In contrast, individuals have progressed out of the state of nature, agreeing to form a government. As a result, individuals can be constrained and coerced whilst nations cannot.

The reasons for this make the divide more acute; on an individual level, there is "continual fear and danger of violent death" (Hobbes, 1651), necessitating the formation of a state. However, the natural weaknesses possessed by individuals do not exist on an international level. A nation's life is thus not "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" (*ibid.*), and a global state is not required. Hence, on the international stage there is no central coercive power or binding rule of law. There are also no inherent natural weaknesses that mean any state could be destroyed by any other, no matter their relative strength. As a result, rational nations behave differently to rational individuals, making international politics fundamentally different to domestic politics, requiring its own distinct logic.

4. The Dominance of Domestic Politics

The above conclusion faces a key weakness: it relies upon the independence of individual and national action. Traditional theories of International Relations treat each nation as an independent, rational system whose internal politics can be ignored. However, such internal politics are often crucial in describing, explaining or predicting the behaviour of nations. One of the first to recognise this was the historian Eckart Kehr, who held that any foreign policy has "not only an antagonist in front of it but a homeland behind it" and is "guided to a larger extent by the will and needs of the homeland" (Kehr, 1997). This suggests that the study of international politics is incomplete if domestic politics is ignored.

The notion of an independent nation-state may have arisen because it was assumed that political leaders and/or the electorate would act according to what was best for their nation—similar to Rousseau's concept of the 'general will'. However, this is rarely the case for two reasons: individual rationality frequently diverges from group rationality, and irrational decision-making is commonplace. Through following their own self-interest, politicians may engage in corrupt activities against their nation's best

interests. Individual citizens acting in their own self-interest may also lead to suboptimal group outcomes. For instance, some argue that the Israel Lobby has consistently persuaded U.S. politicians to support Israel even though “an overwhelming majority” of academics regard this as against U.S. national interests (Newhouse, 2009).

The nature of war provides another example. If a nation were under threat from invasion, group rationality would dictate that the nation ought to go to war to defend itself. However, it is not in an individual’s self-interest to fight in this war due to the risk of injury and death, and one person choosing not to participate would almost certainly not change the outcome. As a result, no one would rationally volunteer to fight, and so a nation that does not conscript or offer other incentives faces defeat. Here, then, is another example where domestic politics must be accounted for in the study of International Relations.

The second main reason why international politics must consider domestic politics is the issue of irrationality. Often, “principles, or anger, or greed, or ethnic loyalties, may override any careful notion of rationality” (Lumsdaine, 1996). Although principally directing the actions of individuals, these motivations are also relevant when considering the actions of a state, because politicians are under more pressure to respond to these than in actually acting in the nation’s best interest. For instance, Britain’s decision to leave the European Union had adverse political and economic consequences, and was arguably motivated by irrational xenophobia (Ziady and Horowitz, 2020).

5. The Interdependence of International and Domestic Politics

These issues of rationality show that international and domestic politics are not two unrelated disciplines; international politics actually depends to a great extent upon domestic politics. Politicians do not solely pursue national interests but are instead guided to a larger part by the often irrational ‘will and needs of the homeland’. Taken to the extreme, this conclusion implies that International Relations is ultimately a worthless discipline as it necessarily collapses into considerations of domestic politics. There thus seems to be no ‘point’ in studying International Relations.

However, this view interprets the above issues of rationality as being of greater significance than they actually are; in reality, politicians do have partial independence to pursue the nation’s best interests for two reasons. First, an action that strengthens the position of a nation will tend to strengthen the position of many of the people within it. To cite an historical example, U.S. involvement in the Gulf War helped ensure that oil supply and prices remained steady, preventing an economic downturn. In cases such as these, individual rationality aligns with group rationality, so a nation will behave in its rational self-interest.

The second reason politicians are partially independent is because of certain special instances of irrationality. Nationalism and patriotism are both irrational phenomena but mean that individuals are often willing to forego benefits for themselves if it will benefit their nation. Although, as mentioned above, fighting in a war is irrational, many often volunteer because of a sense of loyalty to their country; during World War I, almost half of Britain’s soldiers joined voluntarily.

After accepting that nations may act relatively autonomously, the effect that international politics has on domestic politics also warrants consideration. International and supranational institutions often play a large role in determining domestic structures, as do global trends such as free trade, arms build-ups and ideology. The security and prosperity of individual nations are also greatly interdependent as the

concerns of war, migration, trade, disease and environment are all relevant both across and inside borders.

Numerous historical examples can be pointed to as a way of illustrating this: European colonialism forced many foreign powers into subservience; Communist rule in Russia led to famines in Eastern Europe; and outside involvement sparked and sustains civil war in the Middle East. To cite a contemporary example, the way in which different countries deal with Covid-19 has a direct impact on others through the risk of mutation and their capacity to allow free trade and movement. It is thus easy to see how international politics has an extraordinary impact on domestic politics. If the discipline of international relations can be even partly successful in determining the behaviour of nations, it thus ought to be included in studies of domestic politics as all of these external pressures have far-reaching internal consequences.

6. Conclusion

As we have seen, the 'point' of International Relations as a discipline is to avoid or resolve conflict through describing, explaining and predicting the behaviour of nations. Studying the distribution of power on the international stage remains key to this. However, by dividing politics between the international and domestic, we neglect to consider the significant influence each has on the other; domestic considerations are often vital in describing, explaining or predicting the behaviour of nations, and international politics shapes domestic politics to a similarly high degree through conflict, trade and other global issues. Through constructing this artificial divide, therefore, we lose the ability to truly understand how and why nations act, thus losing the key to eliminating war.

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