

THEORIES OF INTERNATIONAL POLITICS  
AND THEORIES OF U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

I. 14 GENERAL THEORIES OR FAMILIES OF THEORIES RELEVANT TO US  
FOREIGN POLICY

A. Offense-defense theory. This theory has two variants:

1. Threat variant: "Security is the prime goal of states. When states are insecure they become more aggressive as they try to gain more defensible borders, to acquire resources that enhance their power, to cut their neighbors down to size, and to install more friendly regimes in neighboring states. The search for security causes wars, empires, interventions, and arms races."

Corollary: "War is more likely when conquest is easy, less likely when conquest is hard."

Two sub-variants: (a) "States fear conquest and aggress to avert it." (b) "States fear violence against their citizens and aggress to avert it."

Phenomena explained: why the US has been less imperialist than other powers, and has started fewer big wars than other powers (compare, e.g., to Germany).

Prescription: the US can keep peace in Europe, East Asia (Korea), elsewhere by guaranteeing the safety of states in these regions.

How could this theory be tested??

2. Opportunity variant: The more easily states can conquer, the more aggressive they become. "States seize what their power allows; empires grow and contract as the metropole's power rises and falls."

A related idea: the "security dilemma." "The means states use to increase their security decrease the security of others."

Key theorist: Robert Jervis.

Assigned reading: Van Evera, "Offense-Defense Theory"

B. Theories of Alliances.

1. "Balance of Threat": "States align against the most threatening state (i.e., the most powerful, aggressive, nearby state) in the neighborhood." Vs. "Bandwagoning": "States align with threatening states--intimidation wins friends." Some argue that this theory explains why the U.S. had far more allies than the Soviet Union during the Cold War (1947-89). The Soviets were more aggressive than the U.S., and were closer to more states, so they were more threatening to others, hence they scared others into America's arms.

Prescriptions: believers in bandwagoning will favor hawkish policies and bullying/belligerent tactics; believers in balancing will prefer dovish policies and policies of reassurance.

How can these hypotheses be tested?

Key theorists: Kenneth Waltz, Stephen Walt.

Assigned reading: Walt, Origins of Alliances.

2. "Birds of a Feather Fly Together" (vs. "Birds of a Feather Fly Apart"): "Common ideology --> alliance" vs. "Common ideology --> conflict for leadership of the brotherhood." Some argue that both U.S. and Soviet leaders put false faith in "Birds of a feather fly together" during the Cold War. The G.W. Bush administration made the opposite error in 2003 regarding Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden, wrongly dismissing the importance of their clashing ideologies.

Assigned reading: Walt, Origins of Alliances.

- C. Nationalism. "Nationalism makes imperialism very difficult; and nationalism is omnipresent and omnipotent; hence the age of empire is over." How to test this theory? Let's think of natural experiments.

Key theorists: Carleton Hayes, Louis Snyder.

Assigned reading: none.

- D. Collective goods: the "tragedy of the commons" and the "free rider" problem. "Collective goods (a.k.a. positive externalities) are under-provided; collective bads (a.k.a. negative externalities) are over-provided." Implication: we tend to trash the environment. The tragedy of the commons gives us an incentive to pollute, and impedes cooperation to clean up pollution.

Key theorists: Garret Hardin, Mancur Olson.

Assigned reading: none.

- E. Marxist theories:

1. Rosa Luxemburg: "Capitalist states seek empires to serve as markets for excess production, & thus cure depression." Explains U.S. entry into WWI?
2. Harry Magdoff: "Capitalist states intervene abroad to protect their multinational corporations." Explains the 1954 CIA-sponsored coup in Guatemala?

Assigned readings: none.

- F. Peaceful democracies: "Democracies seldom fight each other; hence a world of democracies would be peaceful."

Key theorists: Immanuel Kant, Michael Doyle.

Assigned reading: none.

And a related idea ...

- G. Wimpy democracies: "Selfish democratic publics won't pay to maintain adequate armed forces; liberal societies have no stomach for war's injuries to individual rights."

Key author: Jean Francois Revel.

Assigned reading: none.

- H. Democracies led astray by election-year antics. "During political campaigns U.S. politicians pander to U.S. voters by framing dangerous foreign policy positions that they cannot abandon once in office. The country is thereby led into folly."

Assigned reading: Michael Beschloss, "Foreign Policy's Big Moment."

Another variant: "Politicians out of power act to mess up incumbent presidents' foreign policies, as Nixon subverted Johnson's Vietnam peace effort in October 1968."

#### I. Organization theory.

1. "Organizations seek size, wealth, autonomy, and conservation of their 'essence' (i.e., no change in their mission)." Example: the Soviet military in the 1950s preserved its tank-army essence while leaving the USSR unprotected.

Key theorist: Morton Halperin.

Assigned reading: none.

2. "Organizations follow standard operating procedures." Example: Soviet missile installations in Cuba in 1962 were identical in shape to other Soviet installations, hence were easily detected by U.S. spy planes.

Key theorist: Graham Allison.

Assigned reading: none.

3. "Organizations cannot self-evaluate." An example: the "intelligence to please" syndrome--intelligence agencies don't evaluate, they kiss up to power, some argue.

Key theorist: Aaron Wildavsky.

Assigned reading: Kristof, "Save our Spooks."

#### J. Psychological theories.

1. "Attribution theory"--states tend to attribute their own behavior to their circumstances, while attributing others' behavior to their innate character. (Hence states see their own nasty conduct as excused by necessity, while others' nasty conduct is unprovoked and unjustified.)

2. A related syndrome: states tend to ascribe others' good behavior to their own efforts to make the other behave well; and to blame others' bad conduct on the other's innate character. Hence they underestimate their own role in causing others' hostility; hence they exaggerate the immutability of that hostility.

3. Belief perseverance--states are slow to absorb new facts and realities that clash with their elite's existing beliefs.

4. States tend to exaggerate the shared character of information, hence they are often unaware when others' perceptions diverge from their own.

5. States tend to exaggerate the centralized, disciplined, and coordinated character of others' behavior.

Key theorist for hypotheses J1-J5: Robert Jervis.

Assigned reading: none.

6. "Groupthink"--internal dissent and policy evaluation are suppressed to maintain small-group cohesion.

Key theorist: Irving Janis. Assigned reading: none.

7. Identity theory, ingroup-outgroup theory: "Humans are groupish. They readily sort themselves into competing groups. Hence nationalism is powerful, and demagogues have the advantage in public discourse."

Key theorists: Sherif and Sherif.

Assigned readings: none.

- K. "Spiral Model" vs. "Deterrence."
1. Spiral model: "Wars arise when states punish others expecting compliance; but punishment only provokes retaliation, sparking a conflict-spiral."
  2. Deterrence: "Wars arise when states appease aggressors; this leads the aggressor to expect further appeasement, and to ignore warnings when appeasement ends."  
Key theorist: Robert Jervis.  
Assigned readings: Jervis, Daniel Gilbert, and SVE handout.
- L. Gender theories: "Men are more aggressive than women; foreign policies made by men reflect male attributes."  
Key author: Joshua Goldstein  
Assigned reading: none.
- M. Credibility theory ("deterrence theory"--Thomas Schelling):  
"The credibility of commitments is interconnected; the abandonment of one commitment destroys the credibility of others."  
Key authors: Thomas Schelling, Daryl Press.  
Assigned reading: none.
- N. Domino theory: "An aggressor's conquest of one state eases its conquest of nearby states."  
Key author: Jerome Slater. Assigned reading: none.

## II. THEORIES/THEORY FAMILIES SPECIFIC TO AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY (& DERIVED EXPLANATIONS)

Theories specific to United States foreign policy:

- A. Elite Culture: the role of:
1. Prep school/big business culture in foreign policy making--Princeton grads run US foreign policy --> USFP favors US business, is cool toward democracy overseas (note clash with hypothesis II B6).  
Assigned readings: Isaacson and Thomas, Hersh.
  2. The national security establishment and the role of military worldviews. Some argue that professional militaries are prone to exaggerate the hostility of other states and the effectiveness of using force when they communicate to civilians. Some claim that the U.S. military does this. Others counter that the U.S. military has often been more dovish than U.S. civilian leaders since about 1980.  
Assigned reading: none.
  3. Elite ignorance of world affairs, 1900-1970. The USA as innocent abroad.  
Assigned reading: Cohen, "Great Caesar's Ghost."
- B. Public Opinion, Popular Culture, Ideology:
1. Policy overselling --> policies develop lives of their own.  
Key theorist: Theodore Lowi. Assigned reading: none.
  2. Public ignorance --> policy blunders vs. Free marketplace

- of ideas --> public enlightenment --> wise policies.  
Which is true? Is the public ignorant or enlightened?  
Assigned reading: Cohen.
3. Academic irresponsibility, the cult of irrelevance prevalent in academe --> public is ignorant. American academe as cause of public ignorance.
  4. The absent calamity: Unlike most nations, Americans have never suffered epic death and destruction that stemmed from their own foreign policy blunders. This fosters blithe U.S. indifference toward studying world politics. Blunders result.  
Assigned reading: Cohen.
  5. A manipulated or incompetent press.
    - i. U.S. government domination of the press --> tough questions aren't asked, key facts omitted --> public is ignorant. Official dominion of press coverage as cause of public ignorance.  
Assigned readings: Just & Rosenstiel.
    - ii. Foreign dictators' can intimidate the press --> dictators decide how the press covers them.  
Assigned reading: Jordan, "News We Kept To Ourselves."
    - iii. The U.S press has deteriorated in recent years with the rise of "infotainment" culture in mainstream media, propagandistic cable TV news, and talk radio. Plus the rise of the internet has eroded the revenue base of the mainstream news media, so its newsgathering has shrunk. A weak press makes an ignorant public.  
Assigned reading: none.
  6. US "liberal tradition" --> US exports democracy (note clash with hypothesis II A1).  
Key theorist: Louis Hartz. Assigned reading: none.
  7. Racism --> US policies (from Hiroshima to Vietnam).  
Assigned reading: Hersh.
- C. Lobbies, interests groups: foreign lobbies--the British lobby 1914-17 and 1938-41, the China lobby of the 1940s-50s, and the Taiwan, Israel (or Likud), Cuban, Polish, Armenian, Georgian, and Greek lobbies of today--drive US foreign policy.  
Assigned readings: Newhouse, Massing, Guttman.

MIT OpenCourseWare  
<https://ocw.mit.edu>

17.40 American Foreign Policy: Past, Present, Future  
Fall 2017

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <https://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.