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Christopher Gelpi: The Power of Legitimacy

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Normative Structures in International Politics

Over the past decade the structure of world politics has undergone a number of substantial changes. For the past half-century we have lived in an international system dominated by the bipolar rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. Although the Cold War system has dissolved as quickly as it emerged, it is still not clear what kind of international structure will take its place. For example, scholars have debated whether the world is moving toward multipolarity with the rise of Europe, Japan, and perhaps China, or whether American dominance is still sufficient to define the international system as unipolar.¹ But while these analysts have been charting trends in relative power to predict the emergence of new rivalries, others have begun to consider the construction of an entirely different kind of systemic structure. Departing from prevailing conceptions of the international system, these scholars have suggested that state leaders' understandings of their international environment may constitute an international structure that is as influential as the measures of relative power that are traditionally viewed as giving shape to world politics.

CAN OUR HISTORY EXPLAIN OUR THEORIES?

Perhaps it should not be surprising that changes in the structure of the international system have led us to reevaluate many of the theories we use to understand international relations. The bipolar system of the past half-century emerged from a long and bloody war that was almost immediately replaced by a tense military standoff between the victorious parties. Predictably, these events led scholars to argue that the international system is fundamentally shaped by the unbridled competition for power among the dominant states in the system. Since its inception in the 1950s, this "realist" vision of world politics has exploded into a whole family of theoretical approaches. This field has become so broad that some might question whether the label "realist" continues to have mean-

¹ John Mearsheimer (1990, 2001) typifies this kind of analysis in his discussion of the history of Great Power politics as well as international security following the end of the Cold War.

ing.² At its core, however, the “realist” approach to world politics asserts that two central realities permeate every aspect of world politics.³ First, the constant environment in which all of international politics takes place is one of anarchy. That is, no power stands above that of the nation-state. Second, the only variable that can shape this environment significantly is the relative distribution of power among the states in the system. Specifically, the prevalence of conflict and the ease of achieving cooperation may vary depending on whether one, two, or three or more states dominate the system. This approach tends to see conflict as a pervasive aspect of world politics, and argues that the only possible constraint on the outbreak of violence is a countervailing threat of violence. Through the maintenance of this so-called balance of power, violence can often be avoided, but these intermissions between disputes are not what one would normally consider a “peace.” Finally, realists assert that international agreement, institutions, and the like are of no consequence in reducing international conflict. What counts are the interests of states and their ability to achieve and maintain them by force.

The realist vision of the international system as rooted exclusively in power and national interests has had a profound influence on the development of theories of foreign policy behavior over the past several decades. Perhaps the single most prominent and popular theoretical approach to foreign policy to emerge during this period has been the rational theory of deterrence.⁴ Although scholars have produced many specific variants of deterrence theory, all of these arguments share several presumptions. Once again, deterrence theorists view conflict as a pervasive aspect of international politics. In addition, they argue that the best way for a state to prevent its enemies from starting a conflict or seizing its valued assets is to threaten to inflict such damage on them that they prefer complying with their opponent’s wishes to risking a conflict. Specifically, theories of deterrence present two necessary and sufficient conditions for preventing enemies from initiating a conflict: (1) demonstrate a capability to inflict severe damage on one’s opponent; and (2) demonstrate a willingness to use this capability if its opponent does not comply.

² For a critique of the realist paradigm as either theoretically incoherent or manifestly false, see Legro and Moravcsik (1999).

³ The list of major realist works is a very long one, but some of the most prominent and representative of this approach are Carr (1946) and Morgenthau (1985). Perhaps the central realist work in this regard is Waltz (1979). A more recent statement of the realist perspective on world politics can be found in Mearsheimer (2001).

⁴ Again, the list of prominent realist works on deterrence is extremely long, but some of the more significant ones are Schelling (1960, 1966); Russett (1967); Mearsheimer (1983); and Huth (1988).

These two foreign policy prescriptions epitomize the realist-inspired vision of international politics.

But while the bipolar Cold War system was created and perpetuated through violence and the threat of violence, the system collapsed in a very different way. No great military conflict caused the disintegration of the USSR or its abandonment of its Eastern European empire. Rather than violence or a dramatic shift in power resources, the bipolar Cold War system ended because of changes in the foreign policy ideas held by important policy makers.⁵ Gorbachev's rise to power in 1985, for example, eventually sparked Soviet "new thinking" about their security policy.⁶ This new thinking included a reconceptualization both of legitimate Soviet security needs and of the most effective ways to meet those needs. Furthermore, the European velvet revolutions of 1989 were able to take place because of changes in leaders' beliefs—both in the USSR and in Eastern Europe—concerning the legitimacy of using force to impose pro-Soviet communist rule. There is no military or economic reason why the USSR and its Warsaw Pact allies could not have responded to the uprisings of 1989 just as they did to uprisings in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. Similarly, there is no good military or economic reason that the USSR could not have remained unified and therefore remained a superpower. The best explanation of the change in Soviet behavior both at home and abroad is that Soviet elites changed their understanding of Soviet interests and how best to achieve them.

Perhaps it was the ideological collapse of the Cold War that has led theorists to explore conceptions of a new international structure that might be based on the influence of ideas as much as on the distribution of power. The most prominent previous example of such an attempt was made by President Woodrow Wilson following World War I. More recently, however, scholars have begun to look at reinvigorating the United Nations or some other international institution into a global security community which could give a new and more peaceful structure to world politics.⁷ In the mid-1990s, Charles W. Kegley made a powerful call for

⁵ For a discussion of the end of the Cold War as rooted in changes in the norms held by decision makers, see Evangelista (1995); Koslowski and Kratochwil (1994); Mendelson (1993); and Checkel (1993). For complementary discussions of the role of ideas in structural change and the end of the Cold War, see Stein (1994); Risse-Kapen (1994); and Lebow (1994).

⁶ For discussions of Soviet "new thinking" as it began to diffuse the US-Soviet rivalry, see Gromyko and Hellman (1988); Meyer (1988); and Snyder (1987).

⁷ A number of volumes were published in the wake of the Cold War concerning normative international structures in general as well as the role of specific institutions such as the United Nations (UN) in creating such a structure. See, for example, Rochester (1993); Weiss (1993); Ruggie (1993); and Falk, Johansen, and Kim (1993).

the reexamination of Wilsonian ideas concerning the rule of law and international security. Citing a wide range of events occurring during the early 1990s that he believed to be incompatible with traditional realism, Kegley suggests that “the time has arrived to revise and reconstruct classical realism, and build a refashioned paradigm inspired by Wilsonian idealism.” (Kegley 1993, 143) Over the past several years, a number of scholars have begun to answer this challenge. In response to the ideological collapse of the Cold War, scholars such as Alex Wendt, Martha Finnemore, Kathryn Sikkink, and many other have begun to theorize about an international system in which ideas are as influential as material capabilities (Wendt 1992, 1999; Klotz 1995; Katzenstein 1996; Finnemore 1996; Keck and Sikkink 1998).

WHAT DO YOU MEAN, “IDEAS MATTER”?

We must be careful of what we mean, however, when we speak of “ideas” influencing systemic structures or foreign policy behavior. Even the most orthodox of realist approaches concedes the influence of ideas in the sense that national policy makers are human, and they have ideas about how they should behave and why they should behave that way. But there are at least two important differences between the role that realists allot to ideas in international relations and the role being considered by these new revisionists. First, realists argue that the ideas that influence policy are not complex. That is, they generally concern the link between means and ends, and they can be summed up in fairly brief “if . . . then” statements.

Second, and perhaps more important, realists insist that the ideas that policy makers hold are directly determined by other variables, such as relative power and national interests. Thus in the realist view, ideas do not have an independent causal effect on behavior, but are only cognitive intermediaries between environmental stimuli and policy makers’ responses. A theoretical approach to international relations that includes the influence of norms and institutions, however, allows for a more complex vision of the role of ideas in foreign policy. First, making normative assessments as to whether behaviors are “legitimate” or not involves more complex ideas than can be accounted for by realist theory. Conceptions of “right” and “wrong” are more abstract and complex than simple “if . . . then” beliefs about the nature of the world.⁸

Moreover, according to this approach, normative standards are *not* exclusively determined by power and interests and may have an indepen-

⁸ For a discussion of various ways in which ideas might “matter” in terms of explaining international behavior, see Goldstein and Keohane (1993).

dent causal impact of their own.⁹ These revisionists note that a variety of different normative structures may operate within any given power structure.¹⁰ Thus norms must develop in a manner that is in some ways independent of power and interests. If norms are not entirely determined by power and interests, then these ideas may have an independent influence on state behavior.

We must also recognize that the construction of a normative framework for world politics should not eliminate international conflict any more than the passage of a law should eliminate crime. Nor would such a framework imply that military power will become irrelevant to state behavior. Rather we should expect the development of commonly understood norms to help international policy makers take incremental steps toward reducing the incidence of violent conflict and stabilizing peaceful relationships. Conflicts should become less frequent as states' expectations about their relations converge, and the conflicts that do emerge should be more easily resolved in compliance with the accepted normative standards. Specifically, as I will discuss in chapter 3, we should expect the accession to behavioral norms to ease the enforcement of these standards for at least two reasons. First, norms define which acts are illegitimate and demand punishment by other states. Second, punishments should be more likely to result in compliance because the trespassers recognize the standards of behavior that they have violated as legitimate. In this manner, norms can help states to reestablish cooperative relations and minimize the long-term effects of disputes.

LEGITIMATE AGREEMENTS: THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF NORMATIVE STRUCTURE

Theories of an international structure based on ideas leads us inevitably to the consideration of theories of foreign policy behavior that incorporate the influence of norms. If norms and ideas are to have any impact at the systemic level, that influence must be exerted on individual decisions and actions by nation-states. Most of the evidence collected thus far concerning the influence of norms on foreign policy has been done in the

⁹ For a discussion of the distinction between norms as independent causal variables and spurious correlates of cooperative interests, see Krasner, "Structural Causes and Regime Consequences," in Krasner (1983); and Krasner, "Regimes and the Limits of Realism: Regimes as Autonomous Variables," in Krasner (1983).

¹⁰ Alexander Wendt's (1992, 1999) work is perhaps the central statement of this perspective. His contention is aptly summarized by the title of his 1992 article, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It." That is, Wendt argues that international anarchy and the material distribution of power do not—by themselves—predict anything about state behavior. Instead, Wendt argues that states must construct shared meanings for these material facts. These constructed understandings, in turn, influence behavior.

area of international political economy.¹¹ Work in this area is important and obviously represents a significant step toward establishing the independent role of ideas in international relations. But if norms are to become the foundation of more general approaches to international relations, then we must establish that these ideas can have an independent influence on military conflicts as well. One obvious reason for emphasizing the importance of military conflicts is that most structural changes in world politics have been a result of military conflict of one kind or another, and so militarized disputes would represent one of the most significant challenges to a normative international structure. Moreover, while realism represents a general approach to the study of world politics, its proponents have always held that its explanatory power is greatest when it comes to understanding security-related disputes. Consequently, if a normative approach to international relations is to subsume or supplant realism, it must be able to demonstrate the impact of norms on military conflicts.

The central aim of this work is to test the proposition that the construction of normative standards of behavior can influence state actions in security-related disputes. I hope to demonstrate that international security norms can and have helped to stabilize peace and cooperation even between states that represent substantial security risks to one another. Looking at the historical record, we find relatively few examples of formal regional—much less global—security organizations. There have been many fewer international security organizations, for example, than organizations that have existed to facilitate international trade. Nonetheless, the fact that security norms have not been as formalized as their economic counterparts does not imply that they cannot or have not affected behavior. I will examine the construction of security norms of a more decentralized nature. Specifically, I will examine the bilateral establishment of norms as settlements for security-related disputes and the way in which such bilateral settlements affect subsequent interactions over the same disputed issue. The finding that such bilateral norms affect security behavior would have several significant implications. First, such a finding would be important information for current national policy makers because it would provide them with another foreign policy tool. If security norms can stabilize cooperation, then leaders can move beyond deterrence toward a more constructive strategy for maintaining their security.

¹¹ The most prominent works in this area concern the construction of what are known as international regimes. See, for example, Krasner (1983) and Keohane (1984). I will elaborate further on my discussion of international regimes in chapter 2. Other more recent work has focused more explicitly on the development of international norms. See, for example, Keck and Sikkink (1998) and Klotz (1995). In general this work also has not focused on security affairs. Some exceptions are Price and Tannenwald (1996); Price (1995); Legro (1995); and Tannenwald (1999). A partial exception is Finnemore (1996).

Second, empirical support for the role of security norms would remind international relations theorists that we must not restrict our attention to conventional realist hypotheses concerning power, interests, and resources. Moreover, it would specifically suggest that we must give more careful consideration to the independent role that ideas may play in the conduct of world politics. Finally, the finding that norms can affect the resolution of security conflict would provide some encouragement for those who hope to build more elaborate security structures based on common normative standards of behavior.

I will test the proposition that norms affect the resolution of security-related disputes against the central competing realist paradigm for understanding military conflict: rational coercion theory.¹² This is perhaps the most appropriate competing explanation to consider in my analysis because of its powerful influence as a vision of foreign policy making throughout the Cold War. Moreover, it exemplifies the realist, power-based notions of international relations that deny any independent role for ideas in shaping foreign policy. Briefly, my findings indicate that these settlements *do* shape state leaders' responses to crisis-bargaining behavior in ways that cannot be explained by a purely realist framework. These results indicate that international security norms can and have helped to stabilize peace and cooperation, even between states that represent substantial security risks to one another. At the same time, however, traditionally realist variables—such as coercion and reputation for toughness—are central to my explanation of crisis outcomes. Thus my argument represents an important step toward integrating normative approaches with the prevailing—yet incomplete—realist approach to crisis bargaining.

My analysis proceeds as follows. In chapter 2 I will review the normative and realist literatures that relate most directly to my investigation of norms in security conflicts. In doing so, I hope to place my research in its proper perspective and define more precisely its contribution to our understanding of security policy. I will also outline some of the various theoretical and methodological pitfalls involved in the study of norms that I hope to circumvent in this work. In chapter 3 I will carefully outline normative and realist theoretical frameworks. Following the discussion of each theoretical model, I will develop specific testable hypotheses from each approach concerning militarized conflict behavior. In chapter 4 I will turn my attention to constructing a research design for testing

¹² As I will discuss and demonstrate in chapter 3, rational theories of deterrence and coercion are, in fact, identical in every significant respect. Their only difference is in the specific task to which deterrent and coercive threats are put. Deterrence concerns the prevention of an action before it begins, while coercion concerns the reversal of an action that has already been taken. I choose to phrase my discussion in terms of a theory of coercion because it is more appropriate to the bargaining behavior that I will examine.

these hypotheses. Specifically, I will identify the proper population of cases for my analysis, discuss the data set that I have created, and present the operational measures for the conceptual variables that I have outlined in chapter 3.

In chapter 5 I begin presenting my empirical analyses. These analyses sequentially address three related but distinct questions about international norms. I begin by asking *whether* norms influence behavior in security-related crises. Second, I investigate *how* they exert this influence. And finally I turn to the question of *when* such international norms will be effective. In chapter 5 I will present the results of my statistical tests of the realist and institutionalist models of crisis bargaining. As I described earlier, I find strong support for the hypothesis that states *can and do* construct normative standards that guide their behavior in militarized disputes.

In chapter 6 I shift my attention from an aggregate statistical analysis of dispute behavior to the execution of more detailed case studies from my data set. While the aggregate analysis in chapter 5 addresses the question of *whether* international norms matter, these case studies are better suited to illustrating *how* normative standards of behavior influence international conflict. Specifically, I examine two crises that illustrate the statistical findings in chapter 5, and demonstrate that the causal arguments presented in chapter 3 continue to make sense when we examine individual crises in detail.

In chapter 7 I turn my attention to the question of when international norms will shape security crises. While the analysis in chapter 5 demonstrates that norms do have an impact on military conflict, it also indicates that norms are not *always* effective. In this chapter I show that my theory about the impact of norms can also help us understand *when* norms will be influential. Finally, in chapter 8 I conclude by discussing the implications of my research for broader theorizing about international relations. In addition, I will draw attention to issues and topics that require further research and to the policy-making implications of my work.

I am keenly aware that this work will not represent the final word in our understanding of international norms. I begin my analysis with a broad discussion of the conceptualization of international norms, and proceed to examine these broad concepts through the lens of several extremely specific—and in some sense narrow—empirical tests. However, I am convinced that we can best advance our understanding of broad theoretical concepts through testing them in carefully crafted and concrete circumstances. Taken in this spirit, I believe that my results advance our understanding of the impact of international norms. At the same time, however, I recognize that the findings of my work may raise more new research questions than they answer.