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## IS INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS A DISCIPLINE?

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IS INTERNATIONAL relations a distinctive discipline—different from sociology, for instance, in the same way in which sociology is distinctive from political science or economics? Can it be studied independently, or must it be studied as a sub-discipline of some other discipline such as political science? Is the subject matter of international relations susceptible to disciplinary study in some coherent fashion or is it a mere grab bag from which we pick and choose according to momentary interests and to which we can apply no coherent theory, sets of generalizations, or standardized methods?

That we are asked to discuss the topic “Is International Relations a Discipline?” is indicative of a state of unease in the profession. One would find it difficult to imagine similar questions asked of economics, sociology, or political science in general. The practitioners in these fields assume that they practice a discipline and turn their attention immediately to the important substantive and methodological questions raised by their subject matter. They may be concerned with the proper methods of conducting research but not with their title to conduct research. The difficulties that cause students of international relations to raise such a fundamental question must be sought, I believe, in the nature of the subject matter and the history of the discipline.

Before raising the problem in a more general way, I should like briefly and in an over-simplified fashion to mention one aspect of the history of international relations studies that is perhaps in part responsible for this state of affairs. When political science separated itself from historical or legal studies, it turned to factual studies of existing political institutions. Then it began to raise questions about comparative institutional differences and to study the inter-relationships between different kinds and levels of political organizations. When interdisciplinary political scientists came on the scene, they were able to apply their theories and insights to an established body of factual data and an established body of theory. Although in their time, they were controversial, they enriched both our factual knowledge and our theoretical understanding. They permitted us to de-

velop broader and more complex theories and to investigate new and interesting factual problems. The relationships between politics and boundary conditions, for example, political personality, elite structures, and voting behavior, could be explored systematically and scientifically for the first time. But however revolutionary these inter-disciplinary methods appeared at the time, they were related to the traditional problems of political science. They were concerned ultimately with institutional and organizational regularities of a political nature even where these problems were raised and studied in novel ways. And findings based on these new methods have been absorbed so successfully by the discipline that they are now even regarded by some as "old hat."

International relations broke away from its historical base at the time when interdisciplinary research in political science first began to develop. It inherited the new approach without having a traditional body of theory or factual data to apply it to (aside perhaps from some earlier and rather vague generalities about the "balance of power.") It could not use interdisciplinary data and theories to enrich and deepen our knowledge of international politics because that was still largely an unexplored subject. In addition, international relations broke loose as an independent discipline during a period in the 1920's when idealism was high and the urge to solve practical problems great. As a consequence, there were sometimes fantastic schemes for world government. The object was to produce international peace rather than disciplinary knowledge. Some scholars did recognize the need for theory and data if such objectives were to be achieved; although this led to an occasional monumental work, such as Quincy Wright's *The Study of War*, the international system as a complex social and political system still remained largely unexplored. This is not to deny that very useful knowledge was sometimes attained. Staley's *War and the Private Investor* added to our knowledge of imperialism and Lasswell's *World Politics and Personal Insecurity* was a major contribution to our knowledge of the psychodynamics of aggressive international behavior. There were of course other important pieces of research that could have been named in place of these examples. But, at least in my opinion, all these works, however valuable they may have been individually, did not add up to a discipline of international relations because there was no common disciplinary core to be enriched as there had been in the companion subject matter of political science.

In short, international relations, although a subject matter, had not become a discipline. Now, although this distinction is perhaps elementary, it might be useful to say a few words about it. Different abstract phases of the same concrete subject matter can be studied by different disciplines. For instance, the economic institutions of society can be studied by the economist, sociologist, psychologist, political scientist, and so forth. The economist studies the flow of resources and the allocative mechanisms; the psychologist may study the effects of different economic systems on personality; the sociologist may study the interrelationships of the economic subsystem with other sub-systems of the society; the political scientist may study the relationships between political and economic organization or the political aspects of economic organization. But only the study by the economist concerns economics.

A discipline implies a set of skills and techniques; a body of theory and of propositions; and a subject matter. This assertion is perhaps necessarily a bit vague and subject to judgmental discriminations, for the astrophysicist, the biophysicist, and the microphysicist share some skills and techniques, some matters of theory and of propositional import, and the common subject matter of physics only at an appropriate level of generalization. This vagueness at the boundary, however, need not distress us, for when we turn to international relations, as the subject matter involving transactions across national boundaries, it is immediately evident that these transactions come within the purview of many different recognized disciplines. For example, international trade comes within the purview of economics; international religious movements and cultural diffusion patterns may be studied by the sociologist; international tensions may come within the province of the psychologist; and wars, international political movements, and patterns of alliance fall within the realm of political science.

### *The Problem of a Discipline of International Relations*

The preceding discussion, discursive as it may have been raises at least two general questions worth some discussion and exploration. Are any international transactions properly to be studied by a discipline that is specifically international or do we merely apply an already existing discipline to some aspects of international transactions? If there is any such discipline, then it deserves to become

the focus of international relations research. If there is no such discipline, then there is no discipline of international relations although there may be disciplines of political science, economics, sociology, and so forth, that can be applied to the study of international relations. In this case, as political scientists, we would expect the student of political science to be concerned primarily with political aspects of international relations. And although as modern political scientists we would also expect him to have some knowledge of economics, sociology, and psychology, we would expect him to use this knowledge in structuring primarily political research problems. We might, however, recognize international politics as a sub-discipline of political science in the same sense in which astrophysics is a sub-discipline of physics.

I know of no convincing discussion that a specifically international relations discipline exists. But, before we can therefore assume that international politics can be studied as a sub-discipline of political science, we must ask whether the conditions appropriate for the existence of such a sub-discipline exist. There are at least three sets of circumstances which would suffice to contra-indicate this. If international events were epiphenomena of national events, that is, mere consequences of national events not requiring for their understanding study of the international matrix, we would deny the validity of a sub-discipline. If international events were to be studied primarily by non-political techniques, we would deny the existence of such a sub-discipline. And, if the subject matter of international politics were recalcitrant to systematic political exploration, we might be led to deny the feasibility of a sub-discipline of international politics. In this latter case, we might have to restrict ourselves to historical investigations.

I am under no illusions concerning my ability to settle definitively the question raised above, particularly within the limitations of the present paper. None the less some partial answers may be attempted. There is no doubt that some wars were caused in some important sense by intra-national considerations, by the need for markets, because of internal political crises, or even perhaps by the influence of a king's mistress. The last illustration is not intended in any sense as humorous, for in those cases where such an influence operated, the failure to take it into account would impoverish our understanding of the actual event. If and to the extent to which some intra-national factor played a systematic role in international events, the study of international relations would have to rely upon

the discipline or body of factual information that elucidated this matter and, if possible, would have to incorporate such findings into its own analysis. But it is difficult to believe that the differences between the Italian city state system, the national state politics of nineteenth century Europe, and the present bipolar system can be accounted for in all important senses without an analysis of the number of participating actors, their relationship to non-members of the system and to their environment, their capabilities and geographic relations, and their modes of political intercourse. And, to the extent that this is true, non-political or non-international analyses, although perhaps important and even essential supplements to the analysis of international political events, are not substitutes for such analysis.

Nor, do I think, can international relations be reduced to a discipline other than political science. Even if Lenin's theory of imperialism were correct—and the evidence is conclusively against it—the fact that the declining rate of profit inspired the drive for colonies and trade wars would only serve to provide a motivating factor for international politics and would no more eliminate the need for studying the specifically international political factors than would any of the intra-national factors mentioned in the paragraph above. Lenin's was perhaps the most sophisticated attempt that has been made to reduce international relations to a discipline other than politics, in this case economics. Other attempts have been made in the case of psychological factors. Harold Lasswell, pioneered in showing the relationship between personality and behavior within institutional settings. With particular reference to our subject, he explored the shadowland area in which personality has its effects upon aggressive and warlike behavior. Unfortunately, in the hands of psychologists and sociologists who lacked Lasswell's political knowledge and sophistication, Lasswell's theories were misused and attempts were made to reduce wars and arms races to personality maladjustments, as if rational or non-psychological factors never could account for such behavior. Such attempts, suffered from grave theoretical and factual faults. No account of international events which leaves out the political can provide satisfactory systematic knowledge.

There is finally a third possibility, namely that the subject matter of international politics, although important, is recalcitrant to the kinds of studies that would have to be made if systematic

knowledge were to become available. It might be argued that there is only one international system (except perhaps in time) and that therefore comparative analysis could not be used. The changes that occur through time may occur in so many aspects of the action pattern that ascription of the change in international politics to a particular factor may not be capable of even imprecise empirical confirmation. These factors may include weapons technology, transportation and communication improvements, changes in national economic strength, changes in the number of significant nations, changes in the form of international organization, and formal governmental organization, and changes in national values and belief patterns, and so forth. In addition, in the international system, there are a smaller number of events than within the domestic arena; we cannot gamble on the general run, but usually must bank our fate on particular decisions. Thus one cannot necessarily expect the kind of generalized system of roles and role expectations one finds within national systems. This means more unpredictability for individual decisions and less in common between successive decisions. The "deviant" decision is less likely to wash out in the general average and a "deviant" actor has a greater potential for revolutionizing the system than within national systems.

One could multiply the reasons just given. They explain the preference of some for historical investigation or case study. But such investigation or studies are not and cannot be substitutes for political analysis of a systematic nature. A historical study represents an attempt to account for a particular historical sequence of events. In making his study, the historian may employ knowledge from economics, politics, psychology, sociology, technology, and so forth, in evaluating his data. The problem of how he engineers his data when considering the combined effects of events analyzed from the standpoint of many different disciplines is still largely unexplored in the methodological literature and is an art. This means the historian's results are limited by his intuitive ability and judgment in handling combinations of factors. To the extent that factors other than the international political influence the historic sequence of events, the historian is not embarrassed by the absence of a discipline of international politics. To the extent that events are influenced by international political factors—and in the discussion of the first two objections an attempt was made to show briefly that they will be in most important cases—he cannot make

his generalizations without employing the same methods which a discipline of international politics would employ. And if such a discipline is not possible, the generalization of the historian is not possible either.

Although this is obvious theoretically, it is not obvious practically for reasons that are easy to understand. The historian or the case study analyst, because he analyzes a concrete sequence of events and tries to take into account all factors influencing that event rather than the class of factors influencing the type of event as in scientific disciplinary studies, engages in a pseudo-re-creation of the event and, if he is able, employs the skill of a novelist to create an atmosphere of reality that is psychologically compelling. The nature of his generalizations are hidden by his inexplicit and unsystematic—at least from the standpoint of a generalized science—mode of analysis; and indeed his style of story telling is not conducive to making such analysis explicit or systematic. As a consequence he is usually unaware that his generalization does not follow from the concrete story but can only follow from an abstract argument which, if it is consistent, will be isomorphic with the model that a political scientist would employ.

There can be no quarrel with good historical studies. They do a job that has to be done and for which no other discipline is a substitute. If the historian is not always as sophisticated as he should be with respect to the ways in which he uses scientific theories, the social scientist is often neglectful of the complexity of historical life. And if the historian often fails to provide the social scientist with the data he requires, this is sometimes at least the fault of the social scientist for failing to state his theories in ways that encourage and facilitate related historical investigation. But, when all this is said, the historical investigation is not a substitute for the job a discipline of international politics would be required to perform.

Of course the fact that no substitute exists and that the task such a discipline would perform is quite important does not imply that such a discipline is possible. But the arguments against it are by no means definitive. Nor is it really clear that we are really so much worse off than the other social science disciplines that an effort in this direction would not be worthwhile.

*The Requirements of a Discipline of International Politics*

It seems to me that regardless of how advanced some of us may consider the techniques we employ, the primary focus of a discipline of international politics must be related to the traditional focus of political science in general. If we cannot escape the methodological advances that have been made in the last thirty years—and there is no reason why we should want to—it may still be important for us to direct these methods and techniques to the study of traditional political problems, at least as they are relevant to international politics. These core problems, so to speak, involve the institutional means by which political problems are solved and political values distributed within the international system.

We are interested in patterns of actions, not with particular cases. Just as we might be interested in a particular cabinet dispute for the light it sheds on the means by which cabinet disputes might be settled in Great Britain or on the range of solution formulas and the constraining factors that predispose toward a particular type of solution, so a study of international conflict or problem settlement would be concerned primarily not with elucidating the particular case but with elucidating the general mode of settlement or the range of settlement and the relevant constraining factors. Even though these institutional patterns may be informal rather than formal, we are concerned with human behavior as it manifests itself in institutions with respect to political matters. That these problems look somewhat different substantively from the problems we are normally used to in political science stems from the fact that the institutional setting of international politics is somewhat different from that of national politics. And, to the extent that this is the case, the sub-discipline of international politics may differ from that of political science in general as much as that of astrophysics differs from microphysics.

The differences between international politics and national politics are fairly obvious. They can be exaggerated and many of these differences may fail to apply to unstable national systems. But the statement of the major differences still should help to clarify the situation. The state as we know it is in some sense the ultimate seat of political authority within which political decisions are made and political values allocated. It attempts to maintain its jurisdiction at the expense of any external or putatively superior authority. The

quest for control of the state gives rise to the traditional problems of the form of government, the authority and scope of jurisdiction of officials, the rights of citizens, problems of responsibility and accountability, and so forth. International politics, on the other hand, is the arena in which these ultimately authoritative states, almost like Leibnizian monads, have to come into contact with each other and settle their conflicts without the supravention of any external political authority or master monad. Standardized rules of behavior, if they develop at all, must occur as a consequence of coordination rather than of imposition.

Within national political systems, political organization is formal and durable. Its maintenance does not require explanation although its working processes require study. The organizational forms of international politics, at least those of central importance, like the alliance or bloc, are more often than not of an informal nature, if not with respect to their own organization then at least with respect to relations among them. The memberships of such alignments may be shifting and, although alliances may be a recurrent feature of a particular kind of international system, particular alliances may come into and pass out of existence with relative rapidity. The maintenance of a particular kind of alliance system through changes in actual alliances may indeed require explanation and hence different techniques of investigation from those applied to formal governmental organizations operating within nation states.

Within most national systems, decisions normally are made by voting, whether for candidates for office or on legislative matters. The character of the voting may depend on the kind of electoral or on legislative system; surely votes in the American Congress, the British House of Commons, and the Supreme Soviet are of a different order. But, even where decisions do not occur as a consequence of voting, there are formally determined methods for making the decisions. And in all cases political scientists have developed techniques for studying these processes. In international politics, decisions are made as a consequence of formal or informal bargaining, inexplicit coordination of policy, or the application of force. Techniques for studying these procedures have not been well developed in political science, although the economist has paid considerable attention to bargaining problems that may be considered similar.

Political scientists have paid careful attention to the pressure group in their study of decision processes in national politics. Cer-

tainly the pressure group has played an important role in the making of international decisions. The Southern cotton lobby played a role in the revocation of the Aswan Dam offer by John Foster Dulles, the oil lobby plays a role in the current coddling of the Arab states, and the sugar lobby influences American relations with Cuba and the Philippines. Yet, when this is admitted, it remains true that foreign policy is oriented more toward problems produced by the international environment than toward demands of self-interested domestic pressure groups. This is not to say that foreign policy is not responsive to domestic pressures. Unfortunately the ill-advised interwar neutrality legislation was in large part a response to such pressures. But these pressures were based more upon a conception of what American interests were than upon a consideration of what a particular group gained from the legislation. Although their differences are not absolute, it is possible that at least somewhat different methods may be required in investigating the two fields of legislation.

Within the nation state there are millions of voters and still additional millions of citizens. There are parties, labor unions, industrial organizations, religious groups, and so on. They participate in a web of social relations by means of cross-cutting social roles. In the international system, the primary actor is the nation state. In the nineteenth century the number of the most important actors could have been counted on the fingers of one's hands. In the present bipolar system, the United States and the Soviet Union are the most important actors, there is a small number in the second rank, and a total of over one hundred nations. With such small numbers, the statistical averaging out that can occur in domestic social and political processes is not to be expected. This point, however, was made earlier, and need not be expanded here.

Although perhaps overemphasized in earlier writings, nations are characterized by a certain amount of consensus and many of the cross-cutting social roles within them are solidary, that is, based on diffuse affective support or loyalty, rather than of an instrumental character. The relations of individuals and groups toward the nation are themselves solidary; loyal support is expected and those from whom it is expected themselves expect to give it. In general the relations of nations toward each other or toward the international system tend to be instrumental, that is, to be based on considerations of immediate advantage rather than of loyalty, duty, and so forth.

In domestic politics, strategic analysis is not central to investigation. Although the techniques for pushing bills through the legislature may involve a number of strategic elements, the character of the political system is not at stake and the general content of most domestic legislation is oriented toward the broad middle spectrum of opinion in democratic countries or toward the objectives of a dominant party or dictatorship. Ultimate strategic considerations govern domestic politics primarily in transitional periods, for example, the Chinese Civil War, and the periods in Soviet party politics after the deaths of Lenin and Stalin. In the first case, the form of the governmental system was at stake; in the latter, the specification of the winning dictator. It is normally the case in international politics that the major decisions involve the existence of the parties to the decision and the nature of the international political system. And for this reason the decisions are of a highly strategic character. In a general sense the participants in the international political process are engaged in a game or struggle involving honor, fortune, and life. The fact that there are only a small number of them and hence that the system is subsystem dominant, that is, that the patterns of behavior are not parametric givens for the actors but may be influenced by the actions of the actors, reinforces the strategic nature of the decision process, and requires a strategic focus to the analysis of these matters.

If the preceding factors are taken not as absolutes but merely as indications of important differences between national and international politics, they may help to indicate some respects in which the problems of international politics may differ from those of national politics—even though in both cases, we are concerned with institutional patterns of political behavior—and the ways in which somewhat different techniques of analysis profitably may be employed. In general in the international system the most important organizational forms and patterns are the informal rather than the formal. As far as governmental features of the international system are concerned, formally organized systems like the League of Nations and the United Nations, at least so far as past history is concerned, have been peripheral rather than central. The absence of a formal political system in the international arena does not imply the absence of the political management of problems. This political management, with its informal organizational forms, should be regarded as the central focus of the discipline of international politics.

The primary techniques of international government are bargaining and conflict. Bargaining may involve not merely the withholding of the item offered in exchange but the implicit or explicit threat of the use of force. An important instrument in the imposition of goals and goal patterns is the coalition, alignment, bloc, or concert. These are the means by which particular objectives are attained or which may be used to maintain norms of conduct. The criteria for admission to membership, the duration of membership, the types of goals pursued by given kinds of organized international groupings, the limits placed upon these goals, and the factors that constrain all the preceding subjects are among the most important items of the subject matter of the discipline of international politics.

But it is not enough merely to name these features; they must be studied as part of a coherent system of international political relations. The political scientist studying the American legislative system can understand it only as part of a presidential system of government and a federal system of political relationships, for these other aspects of the American political system constrain and qualify the legislative system. In the same way alliance patterns, with respect to durability of specific memberships and goal patterning, depend upon the kinds of national actors who participate, the number of national actors in the entire international system, their relative capabilities, the state of military technology and economic growth, scales of capabilities, the existence or non-existence of supranational types of political organization, and the political organization and goal systems of the participating national actors. The shifting membership and limited goal pattern of most eighteenth and nineteenth century international politics and the rigid membership patterns and relatively unlimited objectives of late nineteenth and early twentieth century international politics must have some relationship to specifiable differences in the international system if there is to be a discipline of international politics. This holds also for present-day bipolar developments.

The study of the discipline of international politics probably will make use of many of the same kinds of institutional analysis as does the discipline of political science in general. But the strategic nature of the activity in the international system indicates that considerable insights may possibly be gained from strategic theory. The absence of durable formal organization, the small number of important or essential actors, and the strategic character of decision

making indicate that normative models may be useful to explore the subject matter. The fact that the international system is subsystem dominant and the consequent influence of the decisions of the particular actor upon the state of equilibrium of the system—a situation quite different from that of national politics—tend to reinforce this conclusion. A normative model employs motivational assumptions (in this sense there is a similarity to economic theory) and permits us to study abstractly the relations between a few selected variables of the system. This may be an aid to analysis for, although a change in formal organizational patternings requires explanation in the study of national political systems, it is the maintenance of the informal organizational patterns of international politics that requires explanation. The coordination of independent nation states on particular patterns of alignment and on certain kinds of goal limitations for reasonably long periods of time is not at all easy to understand. A normative model possibly may help to explain how independently chosen strategies converge toward a particular equilibrium—an equilibrium with respect to types of alignment patterns, types and limits of goal objectives, and norms and normative patterns.

There is an important difference, however between the situation facing the economist and that encountered by the student of international politics. Most economic analysis deals with systems in which irrational behavior by an entrepreneur has the effect only of driving him out of business. If the market is perfect—in our terms, system dominant—this affects only the individual entrepreneur and not the nature of the market. If the market is oligopolistic—subsystem dominant—then individual irrationality may drive the economic system toward a more monopolistic situation. But the irrational entrepreneur does not weaken the position of any of his competitors by collapsing unless his collapse, for specific reasons, favors a particular one of his competitors. Moreover, the economist tends not to analyze these situations because he is more interested in types of markets than in changes from one form of market to another; and present day economies provide him with an abundance of types.

In the international arena, there is only one market so to speak, rather than many markets co-existing within an economic system. That market is the market of nation states. A change in the configuration of the market is usually a change once and for all. And

therefore dynamic aspects of the international system are of the greatest importance. In addition, an irrational strategy in a situation like that of international politics may have a direct effect on the viability of the other actors. Although cartels are known in economics, they do not play the same vital role as alliances, for instance, in the "balance of power" system. Irrationality here of one nation may make ineffective the protective devices normally employed by other nations to maintain the system.

For these reasons the student of international politics cannot assume parametric or environmental conditions in the same way that the economist assumes, for instance, economic rationality. He must be cognizant of all the boundary factors that may produce a dynamic change in the nature of the international system. Although his discipline focuses on the inter-relationships of nations, he does not reify the nation and recognizes that under the skin of the nation, individuals, groups, elites, various kinds of processes, factors, and so forth, may produce novel kinds of international behavior that have the profoundest effect upon the pattern of international politics. And although the discipline of international politics generally assumes the primacy of international factors in its analysis, it is necessary to recognize that occasionally other factors may play a dominant role. The nationalism and anti-Westernism of many of the new nations presents a case in point.

As a consequence the student of international politics will be sensitive to related disciplines that enable him to understand these boundary conditions. Such collateral disciplines include, among others, military science, comparative politics, administrative science and organization theory, economics and studies of economic capabilities, geography, decision-making theory and strategic theory, sociology and related cultural science, and law. No attempt will be made here to specify the role they play in enriching the discipline of international politics other than to assert that they do have a role to play.

I realize that I have merely indicated what the subject matter and methods of the discipline of international politics might look like. I have not established that research in this area can be as successful as in political science generally. But although our methods may have to differ from general political science, we will probably have to turn toward our own version of the traditional problems of politics if we are to succeed in strengthening the discipline. It is not

necessary to argue over how fast we should proceed theoretically or formally. Some of the reasons advanced earlier with respect to the need for normative models would seem to indicate at least some effort in a theoretical and at least semi-formal direction. But different political scientists may bring different insights and skills into play in conducting their research. Some research problems may seem to demand more or less theory. And it would seem more fruitful to see what speed turns out best for particular kinds of tasks by applying our insights to these problems than to engage in a methodological debate, which in practice may produce only verbal acrobatics. The discipline should have enough "give" to accommodate different insights, methods, theories, and skills. We have too often seen rejected methods gain new vigor at a new stage of development of a discipline. None of us has achieved such success with his methods that he should be prepared to read others out of court.