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von Martin

in Security Culture,
Sicherheitskultur,
Theorie

Kommentare (0)

IR Theories of Future Past, Part 1

by *Martin Schmetz*

The discipline of International Relations has always been impacted by its historical political context. In fact, the way its theoretical genesis is often presented, critical points in history led to the advancement of new theories that could cope with them. The advent of ISIL in Syria and Iraq, the continued conflict in the South China Sea and all sorts of cyber-related security issues pose new challenges for the discipline, specifically with regard to interventions and multipolarity. How do these challenges affect the discipline and what will its reactions be?

Before we get to the actual challenges, it might make sense to look at the history behind how International Relations has dealt with historic challenges and it has evolved. It's going to be a bit of a tour de force and this post is very much an early thought piece, but walk with me. (You may then yell at me in the comments or in a reply on your blog. You can also wait for the second part of this post, which will look at whether it even makes sense to present the field's theoretical development that way.)

International Relations was, for the longest time, just a part of social science theory in general. When talking about states or state-like entities, how to rule them and how to expand their powers, questions of international relations popped up all over the place. When the international system solidified after the treaty of Westphalia in the way it was ordered (i.e. around a very specific concept of sovereign states), the questions started becoming more specific as well. The shock of World War I served as the nucleus for International Relations as a field of enquiry of its own: The world of states, at this point a historical and political fixture for several generations, had just inflicted untold horrors onto the Western world and this was not to happen again. It was up to social scientists in this new field to analyze what happened and to come up with answers that would inspire policies and institutions that would make sure a similar catastrophe would never happen again.

And come up with answers they did. The idealist and more positive approaches in between the World Wars were arguably the first dominant strain that also showed actual policy effects, right up until the point where all their optimism was proven wrong by World War II. The naysayers (i.e. realists), which had always criticized the idealist approach, were now riding high, although they gave way to the systemic abstraction of structural neorealism as the dominant paradigm, the right one for a stable bipolar world. Of course, the end of the Cold War was a bit of a bummer for the

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proponents of neorealism, as a unipolar world was a bit of challenge for their approach. It opened the window for an increased discussion on the epistemological foundations of the discipline itself and constructivist, critical and post-structuralist approaches started to gain traction to explain the changes that the established theories couldn't, at least not sufficiently. Yet, to this day, structuralist, rationalist approaches that are at least strongly influenced by neorealism permeate both the field of IR and the politics IR claims to analyze, although this varies substantially by region.

That is not to say that ideas and normative approaches didn't matter in IR's impact on foreign policy. They had substantial impact on the European idea and the way it played out. Other approaches gave birth to what would eventually form the Responsibility to Protect, and more generally the concept of **human security**. And a peculiar reading of the Democratic Peace theory, along with Kant and in some cases even Hegel arguably led to the ideas espoused by the Project for the New American Century, which gave us Iraq War II and subsequently the entire political mess that currently dominates the Middle East and is also the reason I'm writing this in the first place. In all cases, interventionism for whatever reason was the name of the game.

Certainly, stopping terrorist organizations from taking over a country was one of the many reasons to intervene, be it in Afghanistan post-9/11 or in Mali in more recent years. Terrorism, along with WMDs, also served as the justification for the Iraq war. Interventions were en vogue in politics, but also, even if they were justified in different ways, in IR – although they usually called for a more multilateral and less violent approach. These policies saw a lot of criticism, both in politics (more in so in Europe initially than in the US), and in IR from sides as diverse as post-colonialism to the old guard of neorealism and realism. Nevertheless, the concept of interventions kept on trucking.

Now, ISIL is attempting to take over the Levant and the West is curiously quiet about it. Given previous examples, a terrorist organization with that much momentum behind it, that also has access to plenty of money and oil, should at the very least warrant some Western attention in the form of drone strikes, along with calls for the protection of human rights. Yet, these are mostly absent. The US is mulling airstrikes, but nothing has been decided yet. Europe is busy being Europe and so far has not moved beyond being vaguely concerned by the entire thing. Though we have seen **quite a few** calls for intervention of some kind, already, suggesting that the idea does still have quite a lot of traction, nothing concrete has happened **and others disagree with the call** for intervention. There has been a flurry of posts on IR blogs on this subject, and quite a few of them seem to trot out parallels to previous conflicts, from **World War II** to **Vietnam**. Certainly, there seems to be a problem worth explaining that hasn't convincingly been explained just yet (of course it's also unfolding right now, so it might just be too early to look at it in its entirety). But will looking back at previous analyses help us find the answer to the puzzle or do we need to look toward new approaches?

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It's also not just the case of ISIS: The Western reaction to Russia's intervention in the Ukraine has been pretty tame as well. The West, especially the US, seems burnt out on the idea of intervening everywhere, and not just in the Middle East. Where does this leave the field of IR, with its burgeoning discussions on humanitarian interventions, the responsibility to protect or interventions as a mere power play, mainly by the West?

The field of IR currently seems propelled mostly by internal discussions, often of the theoretical kind (and often inspired by discourses in the broader social sciences), and by external political factors, usually big shocks. The end of Western interventionism could pose one of these factors and it is not clear how the discipline will respond to it. What we could be witnessing is multilateralism making a return as the buzzword du jour, that is: Both state and non-state actors are relevant (itself not a new idea), in different settings: Multipolar power contests between state actors in the South Chinese Sea are increasingly relevant, while actors such as ISIL prove that that non-state actors play an increasingly relevant role not just as actors that influence governments, but as actors that replace governments wholesale in entire large regions. The free zone in Western Sahara might harbor the next case study, but we shall see about that. Cyberspace meanwhile, a realm that previously saw a comparative lack of state involvement, seems increasingly dominated by state intervention (which, by the way, **is not exactly a new claim**, either). It's definitely too early to count the state out (as parts of IR have done before), but depending on the problems we are looking at, the state, along with the theories focusing on it, is facing new challenges. Of course, that is also a sentence one could have easily written at any other point during the existence of the field or IR, so there aren't any shocking news as such there, either – just new empirical challenges that warrant some new answers.

But IR theory has to rise to these empirical challenges: While there have been epistemological advances and a lot of useful critical approaches that helped the discipline understand itself and its weaknesses better, along with methodological advances such as the recent advent of big data in IR, the discipline's impact on other social sciences seems to diminish, all the while we crib ideas from other fields. Meanwhile, in world politics, neorealism and other rationalist approaches are still influential, and certainly more so than in the academic field of IR, while newer, more critical approaches don't seem to have the same policy relevance. All of this points towards one big challenge for the field of IR: Address these new challenges, and address them in a way that the rest of the world understands (preferably without becoming intellectually shallow or a monoculture), or risk irrelevance.

Of course, all of this might not play out the way I'm presenting it. It could be that the phenomena mentioned above don't end up toppling the Western-dominated status quo, with the possible of exception of an accommodation of the rise of China. That however isn't a new phenomenon, either, and has been discussed at length. It will not necessarily pose much of a challenge for established theories. Maybe, none of this presents a watershed moment for

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IR, or I've been wrong from outset – in which case, any input and correction is appreciated. As it is however, I feel that IR theory seems to face quite a few issues that deserve some thought, and more so from a theoretical perspective than from a public policy perspective.

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