Domestic Institutions and International Conflict

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Abstract

From the democratic peace to the current wave of research on political leaders, the study of the connection between domestic politics and international conflict has been one of the most dynamic areas of study in International Relations in the past 25 years. This essay takes stock of the past 25 years of research on how domestic politics underpins the dynamics of war and peace in the international arena. It reviews the foundational arguments envisioned by Kant in 1795 and later grounded in the scientific canon by Russett and Oneal. The essay then argues that research that evaluates how political leaders make decisions under different institutional arrangements is likely to be one of the most fruitful lines of research in International Relations in the years to come. It illustrates this claim with a review of two alternative perspectives on leaders and international conflict.

INTRODUCTION

The past 25 years have witnessed a major transformation in the study of international relations. Long regarded as an ancillary factor (Waltz, 1959), domestic politics has now become a major explanatory mechanism for world politics. We have reached a point whereby "Today almost every important dependent variable in the international arena is explored through the lens of domestic politics." (Bueno de Mesquita & Smith, 2012, p. 162).

As the policy agenda changed from containment to democracy enlargement at the end of the Cold War, scholars started to recognize that, while countries with all possible forms of domestic political institutions fought wars, a specific regime–democracy–defied the logic of anarchy and steered a peaceful course through the perilous waters of world politics (Maoz & Abdolali, 1989). This recognition sparked an enormous research agenda that sought to discover what made democracy special in the international arena (Schultz, 2013).

In this review, I take stock of the knowledge accumulated over 25 years of research on domestic politics and international conflict and identify

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emerging trends in the scholarly agenda. I argue that research that focuses on political leaders, their incentives and their characteristics, will emerge as a dynamic field in the study of international conflict.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

From the early propositions in Kant's (1983) philosophical project for a *Perpetual Peace* (Doyle, 1986), two major lines of investigation emerged to explain democracies' international behavior: explanations that emphasize the normative aspects of democratic polities and explanations that emphasize their institutional and decision-making features (Russett, 1993). The cultural and institutional explanations were presented as competing explanations in early studies (Maoz & Russett, 1993). However, attempts to disentangle them have been inconclusive (Morgan & Campbell, 1991; Dixon, 1993; Owen, 1997; Rousseau, 2005).

The findings by Mansfield and Snyder (2005), who have shown that democratizing countries are more likely to get embroiled in militarized disputes because fledgling democratic institutions are unable to restrain the articulation of nationalist and bellicose demands, give credence to the importance of norms over the domestic institutions of electoral democracy. While it is easier to establish formal institutions than the ethos that is embodied in those institutions (Veblen, 1915; Putnam, Leonardi, & Nanetti, 1993), as democracies consolidate, norms and institutions should go hand in hand. Moreover, this should be reflected in the way we account for democracies' international behavior.

Many challenges have been mounted to the logic and the empirical foundations of the democratic peace. However, even in the face of sharp criticism from a posse of seasoned skeptics, the democratic peace, and its ancillary propositions, have fared very well: the finding still stands, while those of the critics' have been found wanting (for arguments and counterarguments, see Brown, Lynn-Jones, & Miller, 1996; Reiter & Stam, 2002; Brown, Coté, Lynn-Jones, & Miller, 2011; Schneider & Gleditsch, 2013). "In a subject of study where reliable insights are rare," Dafoe, Oneal, and Russett (2013, p. 213) conclude, "the robust finding that democracies are more peaceful toward each other remains an important empirical regularity for future scholarship to build upon."

In the wake of the democratic peace *revolution*, war can no longer be seen as a permanent feature of international politics whose origin lies in cold wars brought about by the anarchic ordering of the international arena (Waltz, 1979). Rather, war becomes a possible outcome in a pattern of strategic interactions, which begins with a conflict of interest. Therefore, goals, perceptions, and decision-making processes in the domestic arena cannot be excluded

from the study of world politics. International constraints and opportunities, on the one hand, and domestic costs and benefits, on the other, enter into the decision calculus of political leaders who act in the name of the state on the world stage. As new theories emerge to explain world politics, this is likely to be the enduring legacy of the research pioneered by Babst (1964) and brought to maturity by Russett and Oneal (2001).

Early Work on Leaders and International Conflict

A second line of analysis provides a foundation for the study of the connection between domestic politics and international conflict, the diversionary war proposition, which contends that domestically embattled leaders would resort to war to shore up their domestic support and remain in power (Hazelwood, 1975; James, 1987; Miller, 1995). Unlike the democratic peace literature, however, the diversionary war proposition is an embattled field of research that has generated an enormous amount of theoretical and empirical work, but little consensus. To this date, the scope conditions and the empirical manifestations of the theory are contested (Levy, 1989; Oakes, 2012).

Despite its shortcomings, however, the diversionary war literature has served as the springboard for a wave of research that explicitly seeks to connect the incentives of leaders, the institutions within which they rule their countries, and the patterns of war and peace. Both for the democratic peace and for the diversionary war propositions, a fruitful theoretical development has come from the scholars who built their theories on the conceptualization of democracy in Riker's (1982) political theory (Fearon, 1994; Bueno de Mesquita, Smith, Siverson, & Morrow, 2003; Debs & Goemans, 2010). In Riker's perspective, democratic institutions favor political accountability by allowing voters to replace the political leaders they do not like (anymore). Conversely, authoritarian institutions insulate leaders from political failure by raising the costs of replacing the incumbent leaders.

The implication of this conceptualization is that leaders would make choices on the international arena with the knowledge that they might pay a price if they fail. Therefore, scholars who study the connection between domestic politics and international conflict evaluate the impact of international political outcomes on leaders' chances of staying in power. Voters would reward or punish leaders on the basis of their past performance. Non democratic leaders, on the other hand, would need to make sure they would have enough resources to pay off supporters, should they suffer a political or military defeat (Goemans, 2000).

This logic underpins one of the most prominent arguments about domestic politics and international conflict, Fearon's (1994) audience cost theory. The theory argues that in political regimes where leaders can be easily removed from power, coercive threats are more credible. This occurs because leaders in

high audience costs regimes face punishment if they engage their countries in an international dispute and then back down. Thus, because of the attached cost of a failed escalation, leaders get involved in crises only when they are willing to stand firm and fight. This mechanism, therefore, yields credibility to the foreign policy messages that leaders in high audience cost countries use in crisis diplomacy. Consequently, states with high audience costs are able to conduct their affairs in the international arena effectively and peacefully.

Theoretically and empirically, audience cost theory raises many questions (Schultz, 2001; Snyder & Borghard, 2011; Trachtenberg, 2012). Why should the audience always punish leaders who back down in a crisis? As a strategic agent itself, the audience would assess alternatives: on the one hand, the audience could punish the leader who backed down but, in so doing, the audience would run the risk that "the dreaded communists" would come to power; on the other hand, the audience could forgive the leader who tarnished the national honor by backing down and, in so doing, keep "the dreaded communists" out of power. In other words, the conditions under which the punishment of leaders would be an equilibrium strategy in the subgame that occurs after the leader backed down in a crisis are undertheorized.

In its original formulation, the choices of the audience are outside the theoretical purview of Fearon's model. Building upon Fearon's logic, however, Smith (1998) demonstrates that voters who cast their votes on the basis of past performance and assess candidates only on the basis of their competence–that is, voters who do not consider partisan positions in foreign policy because foreign policy is seen as a public good – would always punish the leaders who back down after an escalation. In Smith's model, an escalation followed by a retreat is the behavior of incompetent leaders.

Empirically, the question becomes what political regimes impose higher audience costs on their leaders. Fearon (1994, p. 582) posited it as "a plausible working hypothesis" that it would be democracies. Indeed, the electoral mechanism makes it easier to replace leaders. However, few authoritarian leaders are so insulated from their supporters to be immune from audience costs (Weeks, 2008).

As an empirical matter, the impact of foreign policy outcomes on leaders' hold on power was a question with no clear answers in the literature in the mid-1990s. In a pioneering effort, Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson (1995) investigated how war outcomes affected leaders' time in office in both democratic and non democratic countries. Starting from the assumption that leaders only care about staying in power, the Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson (1995) study shows that democratic leaders that engage their countries in war subject themselves to an increased hazard of losing power. Thus, Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson (1995) find a linchpin that connects leaders'

personal motivation and the pursuit of policies that enhance the security of the state. Failure in the international arena is political ammunition for the domestic opposition. This was a major finding because it demonstrated that the joint assessment of both domestic and international conditions was central to any foreign-policy decision-making process. Even while they are involved in the high politics of the international arena, policy-makers always have an eye on the consequences their actions might have on their own domestic power positions.

CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

Where does the literature on domestic politics and international conflict stand now? I identify two strands in the literature that focus on the question of how forward looking, and politically motivated, agents make choices in the international arena. The first strand is a minimalist, Milton-Friedman-esque approach (Friedman, 1953; Stigler & Becker, 1977), that eschews the task of measuring leaders' preferences and evaluates the consequences of alternative institutional arrangements; the second strand seeks to measure leaders' policy preferences in a more descriptively detailed manner and, from that, to derive hypotheses on leaders' foreign policy choices.

The Minimalist Approach

The two most encompassing statements of how leaders provide a theoretically grounded microfoundation for the connection between domestic politics and international conflict are by Bueno de Mesquita *et al*. (2003) and Chiozza and Goemans (2011). Both theories share a minimalist approach to leaders' preferences, that is, they postulate a specific set of goals as a reasonable approximation for what motivates leaders in power. The theories differ in terms of their explanatory mechanisms: coalition building and the balance of private and public goods for Bueno de Mesquita *et al*. (2003); the effects of international conflict on the personal fate of leaders out of office for Chiozza and Goemans (2011).

Bueno de Mesquita *et al*. (2003) build a comprehensive theory of politics that explains not only the variation between war and peace but also economic prosperity and political freedom. Theirs is a *leaders* theory of politics, insofar as it posits leaders as the key decision-making agents. However, what explains politics are not leaders *per se*, but the institutions within which they rule. All that pertains to leaders is summarized in the assumption that they seek to remain in power. Leaders' choices are, therefore, instrumental to that goal.

The fundamental innovation in Bueno de Mesquita *et al.*'s (2003) theory is the claim that all leaders need to maintain the support of a winning coalition within the selectorate, that is, "the set of people with a say in choosing leaders and with a prospect of gaining access to special privileges doled out by leaders." (Bueno de Mesquita *et al.*, 2003, p. xi) Depending on the relative size of the winning coalition and the selectorate, leaders will find it more advantageous for their survival goals to provide different combinations of public goods, that is, goods that benefit all the members of the political community, and private goods, that is, goods that only benefit specific beneficiaries in the leaders' winning coalition.

From parsimonious premises, Bueno de Mesquita *et al.* (2003) derive an overall characterization of politics, whereby "Democratic politics in our theory is a competition in competence to produce public goods; autocratic politics centers on the purchase of the loyalty of key supporters." (Morrow, Bueno de Mesquita, Siverson, & Smith, 2008, p. 394) Specifically, for the study of international conflict, Bueno de Mesquita *et al.*'s (2003, p. 250) theory claims additional empirical content beyond the democratic peace propositions with respect to wars of imperial or colonial expansion, concession in negotiations, and levels of war effort. However, as it stands, the theory has received a major empirical challenge from Clarke and Stone (2008), who questioned the measurement and modeling of Bueno de Mesquita *et al.*'s key explanatory variable, the ratio between the winning coalition and the selectorate. In this respect, Bueno de Mesquita *et al.*'s theory is still awaiting for a more definitive test based on better measures, a task to which Morrow *et al.* (2008, p. 399) themselves are attending.

The question of the costs and benefits of international conflict for office seeking leaders was also taken up by Chiozza and Goemans (2003, 2004) who asked how, compared to staying at peace, conflict involvement and conflict outcomes would affect leaders' hold on power. In so doing, Chiozza and Goemans (2003, 2004) engaged the findings in Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson (1995) and started to place the survival implications of international conflict behavior on a firmer foundation. Specifically, Chiozza and Goemans (2004) showed that, in the case of democratic leaders, conflict outcomes do not significantly affect the risk of losing office, while, in the case of authoritarian leaders, a defeat in either an international crisis or a war significantly increases the hazard of office removal. The findings in Chiozza and Goemans (2004) support the idea that war is not necessarily costly for leaders, contrary to the foundational proposition in Fearon (1995). However, at the same time, it raised the question of how leaders would then respond to the potential benefits of international conflict. Why would authoritarian leaders start a war if that implies higher risks of losing office? Why would leaders start a war

when they are more secure in office if involvement in a crisis as a challenger reduces the risk of removal from office?

Chiozza and Goemans (2011) answer these questions by considering two components in leaders' utility functions. They posit that leaders not only care about staying in power, but they also worry about their fates when *out of office*. They then distinguish two alternative ways through which leaders can be deposed from power: through regular, constitutional, means or through forcible, violent, means. Leaders who lose power through regular means rarely suffer personal punishment in the form of exile, imprisonment or death, while leaders who lose power through forcible means almost always suffer personal punishment. With a simple innovation in the specification of leaders' objectives, Chiozza and Goemans (2011) are able to derive novel propositions about why and when leaders would initiate international conflict. Specifically, Chiozza and Goemans (2011) show that leaders who rule in countries where the mechanisms of leadership replacement are institutionalized and peaceful have much to lose and not much to gain from international conflict. As a consequence, they would initiate conflict when they are secure in power. Conversely, for leaders who face the prospect of a forcible removal, and the attendant consequences on their lives and freedoms, international conflict offers the opportunity to disrupt the conspirators' plots against their rule. Such leaders, therefore, would be more likely to initiate international conflict. Such leaders, in other words, would be fighting for their survival. Empirically, Chiozza and Goemans (2011) find ample support for their argument by using a multi-method approach that combines statistical modeling and a detailed historical examination of Central American leaders between 1840 and 1918.

Leaders as Individuals

A second strand in the literature takes a closer look at leaders, their ideas, preferences, beliefs, experiences, cognitive styles, and proclivities. This approach, which harks back to the pioneering work on leaders in world politics by Hermann (1977, 1980), and to the work on leadership in political psychology (Post, 2005), claims that leaders, as the key decision makers in a country, can steer the course of history in different directions. As a consequence, leaders can potentially become the major explanatory force behind the dynamics of war and peace.

Chiozza and Goemans's (2011, p. 201) hierarchical model of international conflict shows that about one third of the empirical variation between peace and international conflict can be attributed to the characteristics of the leaders in power. However, how to capture that variation in a systematic and theoretically grounded manner has remained a vexing problem. Careful process tracing has provided insightful explanations in specific cases, such

as the ideas of the new leaders that came to power in the Soviet Union in the mid-1980s (Breslauer, 2002), the psychological orientation of leaders who pursue nuclear weapons (Hymans, 2006), and US military interventions (Saunders, 2011). However, is it all idiosyncratic, or is there any systematic pattern that connects the features of leaders to international conflict?

Three major data collection efforts are currently under way aimed at answering this question. The first, by Horowitz and Stam (2011), codes the military, educational, occupational, and family characteristics of leaders; the second, by Leeds and Mattes, codes the partisan sources of support for the leaders in power (Carroll, Leeds, & Mattes, 2012); the third, by Colgan (2013), codes whether the incumbent leader acquired power through revolutionary means. A fourth line of investigation assesses the extent to which the presence of women in decision-making positions affects conflict dynamics (Regan & Paskeviciute, 2003; Hudson, Ballif-Spanvill, Caprioli, & Emmett, 2012). In all these instances, the underlying hypothesis is that leaders with different backgrounds and with different sources of partisan support have systematically different preferences on matters of foreign policy.

This strand in the literature, therefore, has taken seriously Moravcsik's (1997) plea to take preferences seriously. However, while it is plausible to attribute to leaders different foreign policy preferences on the basis of their backgrounds, this approach faces a major modeling challenge. As we have known since the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, leaders do not make choices as they please, but they make them under specific historical conditions (Marx, 1926). If we translate Marx's argument in the language of experimental research, leaders with different preferences are not distributed randomly over time and across countries. They emerge for specific reasons, which would need to be modeled *ex-ante* to make valid causal inferences about how preferences explain the variation between war and peace.

In other words, why would a leader with military experience or a woman gain power at a specific time in the history of a country? Pinker (2011, pp. 685–686) makes this point with respect to gender: "To be sure, a shift from male to female influence in decision-making may not be completely exogenous. In a society in which rapacious invaders may swoop in at any moment, the costs of defeat to both sexes can be catastrophic, and anything short of the most truculent martial values may be suicidal. A female-tilted value system may be a luxury enjoyed by a society that is already safe from predatory invasion." As the scholars grapple with this methodological challenge through clever research design (Dafoe & Caughey, 2011), the fact remains that domestic politics, and its institutional context, would continue to underpin the analysis of the determinants of world politics.

GOING FORWARD

For 25 years, the study of domestic politics and international conflict has been a dynamic research agenda in International Relations. As we have taken stock of the main lines of research, we may wonder how it is going to progress. If we proceed inductively, we might note how some scholars are seeking to provide better specifications, and better measures, of the institutional arrangements of authoritarian leaders (Svolik, 2012; Weeks, 2012). Other scholars are seeking to evaluate the trade-offs between military and welfare spending and the concomitant costs of military mobilization under different institutional arrangements (Carter, 2014). Still others focus on the consequences of leadership change for intrawar dynamics (Croco, 2011). In other words, there is more "out there" we do not know than there is in our theories and empirical findings that we know to be true.

Even more provocatively, the study of international conflict from the perspective of leaders might provide a new way to engage the logic of the dominant model in the study of war: the bargaining model (Wagner, 2000; Reiter, 2003). Originally sketched by Clausewitz (1976), popularized by Blainey (1988), and formalized by Fearon (1995), the bargaining model of war posits that three, and only three, mechanisms explain why rational agents are unable to solve a conflict of interests in a mutually satisfactory manner that would avoid the costs of war: asymmetric information, commitment problems, and issue indivisibility. Not only can each of these mechanisms be (re)-assessed from the point of view of leaders, as is the case in Goemans's (2000) theory of war termination or in Wolford (2012) strategic models of leadership turnover and crisis bargaining. But also, if war is not *negative sum*, as assumed in the bargaining model, and leaders can reap private benefits (Chiozza & Goemans, 2004), the field opens up for new theories of war and peace.

If a bet needs to be made, research that explores the connection between leaders and international outcomes in different institutional settings, which we may call leader-centric research, is going to be a rewarding endeavor for practical and intellectual reasons. Practically, the availability of systematic data on leaders (Goemans, Gleditsch, & Chiozza, 2009) allows scholars to test alternative leader-centric theories of international conflict. Intellectually, by placing leaders at the center of the analysis, leader-centric research makes politics, and the struggle for power and control, the central focus of analysis. Leader-centric research is, therefore, doable and relevant.

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FURTHER READING

Readers interested in pursuing the study of domestic politics and international conflict will benefit from reading Kant's treatise on the Perpetual Peace. In a nutshell, Kant elaborated the key arguments for why institutions that are responsive to the public will create the conditions for peace in the international arena. All modern treatments of the connection between domestic politics and international conflict owe a huge intellectual debt to Kant. *Triangulating Peace*, the book by Russett & Oneal published in 2001, is the modern pinnacle of the line of analysis triggered by Kant and also an exemplar manifesto of the scientific study of politics. From such a vantage point, readers can then explore models of strategic interaction such as Fearon's theory of the audience costs and the more recent treatments by Bueno de Mesquita *et al*. (2003) and Chiozza & Goemans (2011). To keep things into perspective, readers will also benefit from reading the foremost statement of the skeptics, namely Waltz's 1959 treatise, *Man, the State, and War*.

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Giacomo Chiozza is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Vanderbilt University. He earned his undergraduate degree at the Università degli Studi

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