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The Relevance of Constructivism to Foreign Policy Analysis

By [Maysam Behraves](#) on July 17, 2011

This article endeavours to explore the relationship between constructivism as a prime International Relations (IR) theory and foreign policy analysis (FPA), and examine the key contributions the former can make to understanding and advancing the latter. For a long while, no logical connection was developed between the major IR theories and the study of foreign policy analysis, with some studying FPA within a liberal discourse of IR and others approaching it as a realist subject of inquiry, for which reasons Houghton calls FPA studies “a kind of free-floating enterprise,” arguing that for the FPA agenda to be revitalized and reinvigorated, “it must hitch its wagon to some of the critical substantive debates going on in IR theory today.”^[1] For Houghton, “the most logical base” from which FPA can be approached and on which it can feed and rebuild itself is provided by “social constructivism” that has a significant bearing particularly upon “the cognitive psychological approach to the study of foreign policy.”^[2]

The relationship might be investigated in three chief ways, that is, in terms of the role actors and bureaucracies play in shaping foreign policy, the process of decision-making, and the effect of international system or society on the conduct of foreign policy by states. Among the analytical similarities between constructivism, especially the conventional or American strand, and foreign policy analysis, particularly its cognitive branch, is their common concentration on the ways in which “various cognitive processes” impact upon foreign policy construction, as well as on agency and agents, either “state-based foreign policy elites” – stressed by FP analysts – or “non-state norm entrepreneurs” – highlighted by constructivists – that influence and orientate foreign policy practices.^[3] With respect to differences between constructivist and FPA examinations of foreign policy, one can point to the level of inquiry which is mostly “micro” in FPA, concerning individual policy-makers’ “learning and psychological biases,” and “macro” in conventional constructivist analyses, focusing on “broader social structural context” and investigating “the role of social learning” instead.^[4] Apart from this methodological distinction, they also differ in epistemological terms in that the bulk of FPA literature follow a “loosely positivist epistemology” whereas constructivism is deeply divided between positivist and interpretive perspectives.^[5]

To clarify the division, I should note that there are various strands of constructivism ranging from those that “reject scientific-style theorizing and stress the interpretive nature of social science and other sciences” to those that allow for the use of natural science-like and empirical theoretical insights in explaining international relations dynamics.^[6] Broadly speaking, as a widely discussed theory of IR, constructivism has appeared in two major varieties, North American and European, which differ principally in the questions they ask about international relations and foreign policy-making as well as the methods they use to answer them. The North American variant emphasizes the role of “social norms” and “identities” in constructing international politics and determining foreign policy outcomes and is dominated by “positivist” scholars who are interested in “uncovering top-down/deductive mechanisms and causal relationships between actors, norms, interests and identity.”^[7] In this camp, which prevails mostly in the United States and might be dubbed “conventional,” “standard” or “American” constructivism, are such theorists as Alexander Wendt, Emmanuel Adler, Nicholas Onuf, John Gerard Ruggie, Peter Katzenstein and Martha Finnemore.^[8] The European variant, on the other hand, pays attention largely to the role of “language,” “linguistic constructions” and “social discourses” in constructing social reality, and is dominated by post-positivist or interpretivist scholars who are interested not in explaining the causes and effects of (identity) change through deductive research methods, as conventional constructivists are, but in exploring the conditions of possibility for such change and the ways in which they are created in the first place, using “inductive (bottom up)” research strategies.^[9] Such theorists as Friedrich Kratochwil and Ted Hopf belong to the camp of “interpretive/interpretative constructivism.”^[10] Differences among constructivists notwithstanding, they are all common in giving “greater weight to the social – as opposed to the material – in world politics.”^[11]

From an alternative perspective, constructivism as evolved during the 1990s has also been categorized into three different forms: “systemic,” “unit-level,” and “holistic.”^[12] Systemic constructivism, which is exemplified by the influential writings of Alexander Wendt,^[13] follows the Waltzian neo-realist “third-image” level of analysis and thus concentrates particularly upon “interactions between unitary state actors” and what happens between them at the expense of what happens within them, that is, this type of constructivism is believed to have bracketed or de-emphasized states’ domestic politics and its role in constructing or transforming their identities and interests.^[14] Being the “inverse” of systemic constructivism, unit-level constructivist theory, which is well represented by the views of Peter Katzenstein, focuses on the states’ domestic political realm, or in the words of Reus-Smit, on “the relationship between domestic social and legal

norms and the identities and interests of states,” and thus their national security strategies.^[15] And finally, holistic constructivists stand at the intersection of unit-level and systemic constructivism and in fact strive to bridge the divide between the domestic and the international in explaining how state identities and interests are constituted. Epitomized by the writings of John G. Ruggie and Friedrich Kratochwil, holistic constructivism sets to integrate the domestically constituted corporate identities of states and their internationally driven social identities into “a unified analytical perspective that treats the domestic and the international as two faces of a single social and political order.”^[16]

National Bureaucratic Actors, Their Functions and Interests

The salience and significance of complex national bureaucracies, such as foreign offices, ministries of defence, national security councils and departments of trade and development, in making state foreign policies so as to protect and maximize national interest, go without saying. Allison’s “governmental politics model” which he applies to the Cuban missile crisis, suggests that in doing so, these organizational agents try to synchronize the national interest with their own organizational interest, which practice involves securing personal political and material benefits.^[17] It can be contended, however, that FPA fails to explore the origins of these elite interests and how they are pre-formed, a task constructivists seek to problematize as, in the words of Martha Finnemore, “much of foreign policy is about defining rather than defending national interests.”^[18] In the words of Checkel, therefore, “if traditional FPA is understood to exogenize interests – to take them as given – then a constructivist FPA would endogenize them: exploring how interests are constructed through a process of social interaction.”^[19]

The governmental politics model of FPA is also similar in part to the “adversary symbiosis” thesis and accordingly draws attention to the argument that in a Hobbesian culture of anarchy, as articulated by the conventional constructivist Alexander Wendt, certain domestic groups benefitting from growing spending on defence are created who help construct a state identity based on enmity with an Other.^[20] The Self’s projecting and portraying the Other as a grave threat to its existence and then taking relevant action to defuse it can encourage the Other to take on that very identity and act similarly towards the Self, promoting and perpetuating the mutual tension. Yet, broadly Wendt proceeds to explain the implications of representing the Other as enemy for a state’s foreign policy and behaviour in a Hobbesian “kill or be killed” culture of anarchy. First, in an environment so constructed states tend to act like “deep revisionists” in response to enemies, that is, they try to “destroy or conquer” them, even if their interests are better served by maintaining the status quo power order.^[21] Second, as decision-makers are deeply preoccupied with the worst-case conclusions about the enemy, negative “possibilities rather than probabilities will dominate” and decision-making will be based upon short-term plans for survival rather than long-term calculations for strategic gains.^[22] Third, “relative capabilities” will come to assume paramount importance since the prevailing assumption in the Hobbesian culture is that the enemy will attack as soon as he makes sure that he can win, and thus even the status-quo states will struggle for self-armament on “the principle of ‘if you want peace, prepare for war’.”^[23] And finally, according to Wendt, in the case of the outbreak of actual war, conflicting states’ violence towards each other will know no limits, since “that would create competitive disadvantage” for the self-restraining side, and similarly in the run-up to the imminent war, they will prepare themselves for pre-emptive action, “lest the enemy get a fatal advantage from a first strike.”^[24]

A constructivist student of foreign policy would thus be interested in analyzing not only the interest construction process of state-based actors and the impact of unit-level factors on it, but also the influence of supranational bureaucracies and transnational units, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and Multinational Corporations (MNCs) – Amnesty International and Microsoft Corporation, for example – on constituting the agential interests at the state-level foreign policy making. What drives these organizations to exert pressure on states and policy makers to act in a certain way, argue constructivist scholars, is the moral force of “commonly held values and norms” and their increasing exposure to a globalized “social environment” from which they learn a good deal about “ethically correct” ways of behaviour.^[25]

The Decision-Making Process

The traditional, either neo-realist or neo-liberal, view in foreign policy analysis holds that the decision-making processes, in which actors collectively participate, have “rational” dynamics. State actors and elites involved in decision-making are supposed by many to be “instrumentally rational,” seeking to maximize utility through such means and mechanisms as “bargaining” and concluding deals at different strategic and tactical levels. In contrast, it is equally widely argued that these agents are “boundedly rational,” which means they cannot exert perfect rationality in decision-making processes due to a number of agential and structural constraints. Yet, the competing approaches are common in the view that decision-makers are “asocial” as none allow any room for the effects of “meaningful interaction with the broader social environment” on how actors decide.^[26] Taking a distinctive point of departure, constructivist scholars of FPA, however, adopt a “communicative” view of rationality and claim that “communicatively rational agents” gravitate towards

argumentation and prefer persuasion of each other through dialogue rather than simply calculate costs and benefits or depend on their organizational environments for cues and guidelines.^[27] According to this understanding of decision-making process, reasoned argumentation supplements hard-headed bargaining as it also involves discovering and learning, and thus is believed to be significant component of both state-level and interstate-level decision-making around the world. As a complementary note, explains Checkel, whereas the conventional constructivists see “language as acts of arguing and persuasion that may cause a foreign policy decision maker to change his/her mind on an issue,” interpretive constructivists conceive of language as “structures of meaning – discourses – that make possible certain foreign policy actions.”^[28]

International Society, National States

Though the growing forces of globalization are increasingly blurring the distinction between domestic and international politics, the domestic-international divide is still a conceptual and theoretical concern of both IR and FPA scholars. As Peter Gourevitch notes, international relations theorists have developed “strong research traditions that hold either system or country constant,” contending, in contrast, that they have failed to formulate “very good theories to handle what happens when both are in play, when each influences the other.”^[29] In a similar vein, but looking from an FPA perspective, Walter Carlsnaes observes that such a rift is “highly questionable as a feasible foundational baseline for a sub-discipline that needs to problematize this boundary.”^[30] Constructivism has recently moved to tackle this problem by constructing “cross-level models”^[31] and emphasizing the interplay between agents, developments and structures at the national, regional and international levels. To offer an example, the human rights issue as a key aspect of state foreign policy has come under such constructivist scrutiny as it stands at the intersection of policies and measures adopted by “domestic human rights activists, international NGOs, state policy makers and regional organizations,” and is thus influenced by their “shared understandings of what counts as appropriate human rights policy.”^[32]

Following this analytical initiative by constructivists comes a theorization of those “mechanisms” that not only connect “the international system to national actors, institutions and policies,” but also impact upon “the very identities and interests” of state actors, shaping their foreign policy practices in a certain way.^[33] The European Union as a whole and its function in steering the foreign policies of member states has been propounded as a prime example in this regard; a social context where “the gap separating the international and domestic would seem to be vanishingly small.”^[34]

Broadly speaking in cultural terms, however, embeddedness in an “anarchical society” or a Westphalian system dominated by the Lockean “live and let live” culture of anarchy has, as Wendt argues, four implications for the state foreign policy.^[35] The most significant implication concerns the institution of sovereignty and requires that states not violate it, that is, “behave in a status quo fashion toward each other’s sovereignty.”^[36] The second implication relates to “the nature of rational behaviour”; as rivals, in contrast to enemies, are less worried about potential threats to their security and survival in virtue of the institution of sovereignty, they tend to formulate their foreign policies on the basis of long time horizons and probable future advantages of cooperation, and may prioritize “absolute gains” over “relative losses” largely feared by enemies who tend to make FP decisions on the basis of “high risk-aversion” and “short time horizons.”^[37] Third, though military power in the Lockean world still matters as a viable option to resort to for dispute settlement, it does not dominate “all decision-making,” as it does in the Hobbesian world, and thus “is less of a priority,” simply because, as Wendt puts it, “threats are not existential.”^[38] And finally, due to the high likelihood of disputes being resolved through non-violence and dialogic interaction, rivals will show self-restraint in the exercise of violence, a type of self-restraint which is usually articulated in the Westphalian system by just war theory and standard of civilization thesis.^[39] Lastly, in the words of Wendt, “[e]nemies and rivals may be equally prone to violence, but a small difference in roles makes a big difference in its degree.”^[40]

On the whole, it might be safe to argue that for constructivism, foreign policy practices of states are originally a product of discursive factors and socio-cultural constructions, in particular identities, “relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about self” which they “acquire” through engagement with and participation in collective “meaning structures.”^[41] This does not mean, at least for conventional constructivists, that the national interests and material objectives of state actors are totally overlooked in the interaction and policy-making process. Rather, “[i]dentities are the basis of interests. Actors do not have a “portfolio” of interests that they carry around independent of social context; instead they define their interests in the process of defining situations.”^[42] In other words, it is the states’ constructed identities, shared understandings and socio-political situation in the broader international system which to a large extent determines their interests and the foreign policy practices to secure them.

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Notes

[1]. David Houghton, "Reinvigorating the Study of Foreign Policy Decision Making: Toward a Constructivist Approach," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 3, no. 1 (2007): 24.

[2]. *Ibid.*

[3]. Jeffrey T. Checkel, "Constructivism and Foreign Policy," in *Foreign Policy: Theories. Actors. Cases*, ed. Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield and Tim Dunne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 73.

[4]. *Ibid.*, 74.

[5]. For more details on the epistemological distinction between FPA and constructivism see, David Houghton, "Reinvigorating the Study of Foreign Policy Decision Making: Toward a Constructivist Approach," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 3, no. 1 (2007): 24-45; and Walter Carlsnaes, "Foreign Policy," in *Handbook of International Relations*, ed. Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse and Beth A. Simmons (London: Sage, 2002), 331-49.

[6]. *Ibid.*, 69.

[7]. Jeffrey T. Checkel, "Constructivism and Foreign Policy," in *Foreign Policy: Theories. Actors. Cases*, ed. Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield and Tim Dunne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 72.

[8]. Fred Chernoff, *Theory and Metatheory in International Relations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008), 69.

[9]. Jeffrey T. Checkel, "Constructivism and Foreign Policy," in *Foreign Policy: Theories. Actors. Cases*, ed. Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield and Tim Dunne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 73.

[10]. *Ibid.*

[11]. *Ibid.*, 72.

[12]. Christian Reus-Smit, "Constructivism," in *Theories of International Relations*, 3rd ed. Scot Burchill and others (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), 199.

[13]. Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992); Alexander Wendt, "Collective Identity Formation and the International State," *American Political Science Review* 88 (1994); Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[14]. Christian Reus-Smit, "Constructivism," in *Theories of International Relations*, 3rd ed. Scot Burchill and others (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), 199.

[15]. *Ibid.*, 200.

[16]. *Ibid.*, 201.

[17]. Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), Cited in Jeffrey T. Checkel, "Constructivism and Foreign Policy," in *Foreign Policy: Theories. Actors. Cases*, ed. Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield and Tim Dunne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 74; For an abridged, edited and updated version, see Graham Allison, "The Cuban Missile Crisis," in *Foreign Policy: Theories. Actors. Cases*, ed. Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield and Tim Dunne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 207-228.

[18]. Martha Finnemore, *National Interests in International Society* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1996), Cited in Jeffrey T. Checkel, "Constructivism and Foreign Policy," in *Foreign Policy: Theories. Actors. Cases*, ed. Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield and Tim Dunne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 74.

[19]. Jeffrey T. Checkel, "Constructivism and Foreign Policy," in *Foreign Policy: Theories. Actors. Cases*, ed. Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield and Tim Dunne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 74.

[20]. Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 275.

[21]. *Ibid.*, 262.

[22]. *Ibid.*

[23]. *Ibid.*

[24]. *Ibid.*

[25]. Jeffrey T. Checkel, "Constructivism and Foreign Policy," in *Foreign Policy: Theories. Actors. Cases*, ed. Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield and Tim Dunne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 74-75.

[26]. *Ibid.* 76.

[27]. *Ibid.*

[28]. *Ibid.*, 76-77.

[29]. Peter Gourevitch, "Domestic Politics and International Relations," in *Handbook of International Relations*, ed. Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse and Beth A. Simmons (London: Sage, 2002), 321; Cited in Jeffrey T. Checkel, "Constructivism and Foreign Policy," in *Foreign Policy: Theories. Actors. Cases*, ed. Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield and Tim Dunne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 78.

[30]. Walter Carlsnaes, "Foreign Policy," in *Handbook of International Relations*, ed. Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse and Beth A. Simmons (London: Sage, 2002), 342; Cited in Jeffrey T. Checkel, "Constructivism and Foreign Policy," in *Foreign Policy: Theories. Actors. Cases*, ed. Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield and Tim Dunne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 78.

[31]. Jeffrey T. Checkel, "Constructivism and Foreign Policy," in *Foreign Policy: Theories. Actors. Cases*, ed. Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield and Tim Dunne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 78.

[32]. *Ibid.*

[33]. *Ibid.*

[34]. *Ibid.*

[35]. Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 282.

[36]. *Ibid.*

[37]. *Ibid.*

[38]. *Ibid.*

[39]. *Ibid.* For an extensive study of just war theory and the philosophical as well as historical arguments on it, see Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic Books, 1977); And for a more recent study, see Brian Orend, *Michael Walzer on War and Justice* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000); For an brief explanation on the "standard of civilization" argument, see Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 292-93.

[40]. Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 283.

[41]. Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992): 397; and Cynthia Weber, *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction*, 3rd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 63-9, especially p. 66.

[42]. Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992): 398. Also in the words of Cynthia Weber, "*what states do depends upon what states' identities and interests are, and identities and interests change.*" See Cynthia Weber, *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction*, 3rd ed. (London and New York: Routledge,

2010), 62. Emphasis is original.

Tags: [foreign policy analysis](#), [Social Constructivism](#)