

Interview - Stephen Walt

Written by E-International Relations

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E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, OCT 11 2013

Professor Stephen M. Walt is one of the most publicly influential IR scholars in the world. He is the Robert and Renee Belfer Professor of International Affairs at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. Alongside his Foreign Policy blog, he presently serves on the editorial boards of *Foreign Policy*, *Security Studies*, *International Relations*, and *Journal of Cold War Studies*, and he also serves as Co-Editor of the *Cornell Studies in Security Affairs*, published by Cornell University Press.

Dr. Walt received his PhD in Political Science from the University of California, Berkley, where he studied with Kenneth Waltz. His book *The Origins of Alliances*, which received the 1988 Edgar S. Furniss National Security Book Award, developed the 'balance of threat' theory, which refined structural realism by defining balance of power in terms of threat. More recently, his book *The Israel Lobby*, co-authored with Professor John Mearsheimer became a *New York Times* bestseller. Dr. Walt also previously taught at Princeton University and the University of Chicago, where he served as Master of the Social Science Collegiate Division and Deputy Dean of Social Sciences. He has been a Resident Associate of the Carnegie Endowment for Peace and a Guest Scholar at the Brookings Institution, and he has also served as a consultant for the Institute of Defense Analyses, the Center for Naval Analyses, and the National Defense University.

Professor Stephen Walt discusses the role of the Israel lobby in the Syria crisis and the value of the "isms" in IR theory, and advises students to "work on subjects that genuinely fascinate you."

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Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in contemporary IR?

This is not the most exciting period in the history of the field, in my view. There are not a lot of exciting new *theoretical* developments at present, and new theories are always exciting because they provide new ways of seeing and understanding complex phenomena. Instead, what we see today are interesting debates addressing narrow empirical issues, such as the role of legal institutions in addressing human rights issues, or the vast literature on the causes and characteristics of civil wars.

What are the most important/interesting areas of IR theory that are underdeveloped today or under studied at the moment? Where is there most need and scope for new thinking?

I believe the entire phenomenon of globalization remains under-theorized. On the one hand, the number of nation-states keeps increasing, and great power competition seems to be re-emerging as U.S. primacy fades and China becomes more prominent. But these rather familiar developments are accompanied by dramatic increases in interconnectedness, in problems like climate change or migration, and in the simultaneous growth of both global identities (e.g., diasporas) and local identities (e.g., separatists movements). We all know this is happening, but no one has come up with a simple set of ideas to help us understand it.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

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I remain convinced that realism is the most useful way to understand the basic nature of world politics, and I still begin by assuming that states are more-or-less rational organizations seeking to improve their security and prosperity in an uncertain and anarchic world. But over time, I have acquired a greater appreciation for the role that avarice and folly play in world affairs: lots of countries do a lot of rather stupid things, and often for very selfish reasons.

Does the existence of the various discrete theoretical paradigms in IR (realism, liberalism, etc) help explain international politics today, or do they, by largely talking past one another, obscure more than they illuminate?

Given that no social science theory is really all that powerful, I think the emergence of different schools of thought is unavoidable. In fact, these different paradigms are very helpful, because they are an easy way to organize our thinking about different causes. Nor do I think we really “talk past each other” anymore: most IR scholars understand the various paradigms pretty well, and recognize that each has certain virtues and certain weaknesses. We tend to pick the ones that we think are most useful, but none of them are perfect and there will always be exceptions to any theory’s predictions.

What does your own brand of realism explain about international politics that other schools of thought cannot? What does it add to our understanding of IR?

My main contribution to realist thought was to emphasize that it was *threats* that drove state behavior, and not just the distribution of power. The distribution of power was important, of course, because the level of threat that a state could pose to others depended in part on its material capabilities. But I also argued that states would be more or less threatening depending on 1) how they mobilized their raw power, 2) where they were located, and 3) what their perceived intentions were. I think this helps explain why some powerful states do not provoke as much opposition as one might otherwise expect, and also why some weaker states have been easily isolated and/or contained by vastly more powerful coalitions. This theoretical revision also has practical policy implications: it says that states will be most secure when they are powerful, geographically distant from others, and perceived as relatively benign. Among other things, the theory helps us understand why America is in such a favorable geopolitical position.

In your book *The Israel Lobby* (coauthored with John Mearsheimer), you argue that US support for the state of Israel is largely due to the political power of domestic lobby groups. How do you reconcile this thesis with the realist contention that the state is a “black box” and that domestic politics have little impact on the international system?

Easily. First, no theory explains every case: there will always be some instances where other factors override the theory’s predictions. As we made clear in the book, the impact of the Israel lobby is an obvious exception to basic realist logic. Second, realist theory also implies that really powerful states like the United States can sometimes afford to do things for other reasons, without jeopardizing their core security. If the US were weaker or if it faced a true peer competitor, it would have to be more careful about giving Israel such lavish support. Finally, realist theory also predicts that when states do ignore their broader interests and indulge domestic interest groups, they are likely to pay a price. And that is of course what has happened here: the “special relationship” with Israel has been increasingly costly for the United States, especially in terms of our relations with most countries in the Middle East.

How is the influence of the Israel lobby being exercised in US decision-making around the Syria crisis?

It was really quite striking: AIPAC and other prominent groups in the Israel lobby were among the loudest and most persistent voices calling for U.S. military intervention in Syria a few weeks ago. There was little support for action in the US military, the intelligence community, or American society more broadly. Among other things, this shows that while the lobby has great influence—especially in terms of guaranteeing US aid and diplomatic support for Israel—it is not all-powerful and doesn’t control every aspect of US Middle East policy. We made this point repeatedly in our book, by the way, although many of our critics don’t seem to have noticed that.

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You have argued on your Foreign Policy blog that the United States should not intervene militarily in Syria because there are no vital national interests at stake (amongst other reasons). Can you foresee any circumstances in which the United States might launch a military intervention in the future (anywhere in the world) on humanitarian grounds that would actually be in US strategic interests?

The US could easily use military force when doing so would be in our strategic interests as well as desirable from a humanitarian point of view. Our intervention to topple the Taliban after 9/11 would be a good example, and I would argue that the US rarely intervenes *solely* for humanitarian reasons. The key questions to ask in any potential intervention are these: 1) Will intervening make US citizens safer at home? 2) Will it contribute to U.S. economic prosperity, and 3) if our motivation is strictly humanitarian, can we protect the lives of others at relatively low cost and do we have a promising strategy for solving the political problems that created the humanitarian problem in the first place? In my view, there are many cases that meet these criteria.

What are the chances for the most recent round of negotiations between Israel and Palestine? Is a two state solution still possible (or was it ever possible)?

I am not optimistic about the latest round of negotiations, because regional circumstances are not propitious and the Israeli government is committed to controlling the West Bank forever and has no intention of allowing the Palestinians to have a viable state of their own. I believe it would have been possible to achieve a two-state solution in the 1990s, but that opportunity was squandered by inept diplomacy (much of it by the United States). Although I still think a two-state solution would be preferable, I no longer think it is possible and I fear we will end up with semi-permanent *apartheid*. Needless to say, this is not in Israel's long-term interest, certainly no good for the Palestinians, and not good for the United States either.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of IR?

Clausewitz said that everything in war is simple, but the simplest things are very difficult. Being an IR scholar is a bit like that: obvious things can be very difficult. In particular, it is obvious that younger scholars should ask interesting questions and propose creative and well-supported answers to them. It is obvious that scholars should publish cutting-edge research that helps set the agenda for the field. Scholars should also strive to be good teachers—that's an important part of our job—and be willing to tackle controversial and important subjects. These criteria are all obvious, but actually doing them can be very difficult.

That said, the most important advice I would give is to work on subjects that genuinely fascinate you. There are many ways to make a living these days, but the unique joy of a scholarly career is the freedom to work on the topics that interest you. And if you are working on a topic that you are passionately curious about, it is much easier to get up every morning and grind away at it. If scholars aren't genuinely engaged by what they are doing, they are probably in the wrong line of work.

I also believe a knowledge of history is essential to being a good IR scholar; it is the evidentiary base from which we draw our data and knowing a lot of history can both inspire creative theorizing and provide a useful "plausibility check" as we explore different ideas.

Finally, learn to write. Most of the great scholars in the field were good writers who could express even complicated and challenging ideas in clear and straightforward prose. It may be harder to disprove your work if you camouflage it with a lot of turgid and prolix language, but scholarship that is hard to understand is also easy for others to ignore. If you want to have an impact, making it easy for others to understand what you are saying is the obvious way to go.

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This interview was conducted by Alex Stark. Alex is Features Editor of the website and a director of e-IR's editorial board. She is a PhD student in International Relations at Georgetown University.

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