

# The Importance of Ideas in Foreign Policy

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MATTHEW BAMBER, OCT 11 2012

Different theories of IR consider various aspects of the international as more pertinent in explaining foreign policy. I will argue in this essay that 'ideas' are the most important consideration in foreign policy analysis. Initially, the essay will explore the true meaning and significance of 'ideas' and how they have been undervalued in international politics. A discussion of the West's foreign policy to Libya will be used to exemplify the weaknesses of other foreign policy approaches leaving out 'ideas' analysis, after which 'ideas' will be used to explain the policy.

Within mainstream IR, ideas have been misrepresented and subsequently devalued as a tool for foreign policy analysis. The majority of foreign policy approaches, if considering ideas at all, believe that 'international relations can be explained by what happens in peoples heads'<sup>[1]</sup>. That ideas are synonymous with beliefs and separate from interests, are idiosyncratic and able to be traded and manipulated as if commodities.<sup>[2]</sup>

Comparatively, this essay treats ideas as a social phenomena, a constituted practice that varies across time and space. Ideas are a set of shared form of practices, which through their capacities construct meaning about themselves. Thus, they are a form of power in themselves as through their capabilities they are able to produce representations.<sup>[3]</sup> This can be considered a form of productive power<sup>[4]</sup>, as through social discourse and practices, 'ideas' create meanings which constitute foreign policy.

One of the predominant explanations of foreign policy is the neo-realist view. Their belief is that the foreign policy of states is determined by the anarchic structure of the international. This leaves states in a 'permanent security dilemma', a continual search for security, which is achieved through self help and mutual distrust with other states. Hence to survive, states seek to maximise their relative material power at the expense of others. Foreign policy is believed to be determined by this, and through the number of great powers (poles) in the international system<sup>[5]</sup>. States are treated as rationalist actors who neutrally see the world, who can judge impartially the relative material power of other states, on which basis foreign policy is made<sup>[6]</sup>. Ideas are considered by neo-realists (if considered at all), as a mere justification for already materially given interests. Effectively, they are treated as another form of material power which actors use.<sup>[7]</sup>

This explanation of foreign policy is highly flawed and simplistic. As actors are believed to be rationalist observers of the world, without already pre-constituted given ideas or interests, this infers that states have acted and shall always act in a set way regardless of time and space. Furthermore, by only focussing on material resources it highly limits the explanatory powers of structural theories. No foreign policy can be explained purely by the structure of the international system. The theory's simplicity was perhaps what led Waltz to rule 'the subject [foreign policy] out of bounds due to its complexity'<sup>[8]</sup>.

Britain and France's relationship exemplifies this very well. France from a structural realist perspective would naturally be Britain's greatest enemy, as it is the geographically closest power with very similar if not greater relative material capabilities. Yet Britain and France are acting contrary to a neo-realist understanding, sharing many of their military resources and nuclear capabilities.<sup>[9]</sup> This is one of many examples of how structural theories fail to explain foreign policy.

Neo-classical realism which in its own words 'occupies a middle ground between structural theorists and

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constructivists<sup>[10]</sup>, tries to explain the 'anomalies' found in the structural realist approach to foreign policy by incorporating 'external and internal variables' into its foreign policy analysis<sup>[11]</sup>. Foreign policy is believed to be driven primarily by the anarchic international system and the consequences of this (explained previously). However, neo-classical realists also view the international system as 'murky' and accept that foreign policy is made by real leaders. Each of these leaders is considered to have a subjective 'perception' of the relative material power capability of states. This 'perception' is the variable which neo-classical realists use to explain why foreign policy does not always work to structuralist understanding.

However, these revisions still rest on assumptions that are fundamentally flawed. There is no such thing as an individual idea emerging of its own accord within a leader's head, acting as a filter to their rationalist view of material power capabilities. Ideas are social entities that are inherent in interests. Thus, the 'idea/perception' in the head of the leader has been constructed, through discourse and lived experience, not simply just emerging.

In regard to French-British relations, a neo-classical realist would retort that the failures of structural explanations are because of Cameron's and Sarkozy's idiosyncratic perceptions of each others relative material capacities. But how does this 'perception' enter into their heads? The idea that sharing material capabilities with each other did not just 'emerge' into the governments head, in defiance of structuralist assumptions. It is a construction that is specific to the time in which it was made.

The national interest changes as interests are constituted by socially constructed ideas<sup>[12]</sup>. The entente cordiale which secured peace between the two countries was only signed in 1904. Before this the social discourse constructed France as 'the enemy', who needed to be secured against. During WWII France was construed as the 'victim' of Nazi aggression and therefore deserving of British military assistance, and in the new century France and Britain are achieving greater material co-operation with the entente formidable<sup>[13]</sup>. There was no belied that was implanted in to the heads of the respective leaders, that destroyed the previously correct notions they had held of others relative material capabilities. Rather, the national interest has changed and continues to change as it is formed by social discourse which dictates foreign policy.

The value that 'ideas' analysis can have is clear when considering the argument put by Walt and Mearsheimer in the controversial 'Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy'. In this essay they conclude that US foreign policy is determined by a materially rich Israeli lobby, who through the possession of such resources are able to influence the various arms of the state that make foreign policy.<sup>[14]</sup> Material power is important, but is not the sole reason for the continually friendly US policy towards Israel. If Palestine were given all the material resources that the Israel lobby has, it would not be nearly as effective. This is because Israel has been constructed throughout its inception as America's "most important strategic ally"<sup>[15]</sup>, consistently being praised as the 'only democracy in the Middle East'. Many people would disagree with this, but this is the 'idea' that has been constructed through social practices. So because of this 'idea' of Israel the US has to be generous in its policy towards Israel. Thus, the lobby and their material resources can possibly extend the level of generosity, but crucially the foreign policy direction has already been pre-constituted. This case outlines the need to take a plural approach when considering foreign policy analysis, to see how different forms of power interact.

I will now use the current foreign policy of the West to Libya, to exemplify and explain several points.

Firstly the Libyan case is a further rebuttal to the structural realist theory. Libya is a country with little relative material capability towards Western states. Additionally, it is a domestic conflict that (at the moment) does not seem to effect (adversely or otherwise) the international system or existing balances of power. According to structural realist theory, Libya should be left alone unless it effects the current balance of power.

A differing viewpoint comes from Chomsky who argues that foreign policy in capitalist states is dictated more by the considerations of business than anything else.<sup>[16]</sup> He considers the difference between the national interest and corporate interest as marginal. However, in Libya the pre-existing conditions (i.e. the Gaddafi regime) were highly beneficial for western energy companies.<sup>[17]</sup> Since the domestic troubles started, US policy has been to support the anti-Gaddafi opposition without committing to supplying or aiding the opposition; the worst outcome for the energy

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companies. If America supported the status quo then the profits and oil exploration by energy companies would have been maintained. Whilst, if there was an American invasion then the energy companies would have taken a temporary loss, but eventually would be most likely secure a greater share of the oil fields for less money, similar to the 2003 invasion of Iraq.<sup>[18]</sup> The current policy of supporting a rebel insurrection whose views towards Western business interference are still not yet known, against a leader who lets energy companies freely into their oil fields, goes completely against the interests of energy companies. As the conflict has continued oil production has almost completely ceased and oil companies have had to leave the country<sup>[19]</sup>. In this situation clearly the interests of states and business diverge.

The Liberal democratic peace theory is often seen as the best way to explain foreign policy. Liberal explanations of foreign policy state that liberal democratic states will seek good relations with other liberal democratic states, on the basis that they share mutual interests. However, a liberal democratic state is justified in going to war with an illiberal state, as they could threaten peace and stability.<sup>[20]</sup> Thus states base their foreign policy on the perception of whether a state is a liberal democracy or not and act accordingly. However, Libyan relations exemplify the many weaknesses of it's usefulness for explaining foreign policy.

Libya has never been a liberal democracy. Gaddafi assumed power in 1979, and since then has acted as a typical illiberal tyrant with no democracy, restrictions on freedom and by abetting acts of violence and war in both liberal and illiberal countries. Crucially, though liberal democracies have not responded to Libya as they should according to liberal internationalism, changing their foreign policies throughout Gaddafi's 32 years of power.

Reagan denounced Gaddafi as an 'evil man' and 'the mad dog of the Middle East'<sup>[21]</sup>, and the UN subsequently enforced an arms, trade and oil embargo on Libya. A policy throughly consistent with liberal foreign policy theories. However, during the Bush administration Libya was restored to full diplomatic rights with all embargoes lifted, and became a temporary member of the UN security council in 2009 and president of the General Assembly in 2010. Since the beginning of the uprising in 2011, sanctions have been reimposed by the UN, Gaddafi has been referred to the International Court tribunal and all assets have been frozen.<sup>[22]</sup> Throughout all of this time Libya has remained constantly an illiberal state, showing no signs of reticence or making moves or concessions towards liberal democracy. It is thus impossible to say that Liberal international theories can explain the change in US policy towards Libya.

The only explanation for this is that foreign policy has changed because of socially constructed ideas that constitute the national interest. In the period of Gaddafi's reign Libya has been constructed by ideas in various terms, which acts as a form of power, dictating the foreign policy that must be used according to the current construction of that country.

When Gaddafi was constructed through social discourse practices as an 'evil man', the policies described above had to reflect this construction. However, as explained above ideas change, they are not fixed. Following 9/11 ideas and social discourse presented prevention against 'terrorism' as the national interest<sup>[23]</sup>. Gaddafi was suddenly an 'ally' in the war against terror, which of course required a change in foreign policy. Since the election of Obama, the constructed ideas which form the national interest again have returned to liberal ideas such as 'human rights' and 'freedom' even going as far as to indict the US itself for failing in these areas.<sup>[24]</sup> Gaddafi (as he has always been) is an 'enemy' of this new constructed liberal national interest, so foreign policy had to reflect this new reality.

To conclude, this essay has shown the beneficial impact that 'ideas' analysis can add to the foreign policy literature. 'Ideas' analysis highlights the role of social discourse in constituting the national interest, and how this changes the national interest across time and space. Ideas have been shown to pre-constitute foreign policy decisions, as the discourse makes certain foreign policy approaches applicable and others not. This is the productive power of 'ideas' which classifies and categorises the world, allowing states to pursue the relevant foreign policy approach.

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<sup>[3]</sup> *ibid*

<sup>[4]</sup> M. Barnett and R. Duvall, 'Power in International Politics,' *International Organization*, 59(1), 2005, p.44

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<sup>[10]</sup> *ibid*, p.152

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