

# The False Dichotomy of the Material-Ideational Debate in IR Theory

Written by Sulagna Basu

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## The False Dichotomy of the Material-Ideational Debate in IR Theory

<https://www.e-ir.info/2019/11/21/the-false-dichotomy-of-the-material-ideational-debate-in-ir-theory/>

SULAGNA BASU, NOV 21 2019

The quest to unravel the complexity of the political world has led to the emergence of a number of theories in the discipline of international relations. Each of these theories is driven by its own unique ontological and epistemological assumptions. The divergence of these assumptions has often led to fundamental debates within the discipline. One of the key debates has centered around the question of privileging ideational or material factors in these theoretical assumptions. In the context of international relations, ideational refers to the 'distribution of ideas and knowledge'<sup>[1]</sup> and material to the 'distribution of material capabilities'<sup>[2]</sup> among states, where the disputation is about which set of factors should foreground the study of world politics. In international relations theory, constructivism along with critical theories like poststructuralism are some of the primary proponents for a more ideational approach whereas 'rational'<sup>[3]</sup> theories like neorealism stress on the material and structural nature of the international system<sup>[4]</sup>.

However, it is necessary to mention that even within each of these theories, there is a wide range of theoretical standpoints and varying interpretations of the ideational and material factors at play and these characterizations are approximations at best. This further illustrates the entanglement of the material with the ideational and points to the analytical complexities implicit in this categorization. In this essay, I will argue that material and ideational forces are mutually constitutive and the focus for political analysis should be on the interplay between the two rather than on the identification of the lesser or greater force. The first section will elaborate on the significance of material factors through an analysis of the theories of international relations that privilege the material followed by a similar analysis of ideational factors and the theories that place a greater emphasis on the ideational. The second section will illustrate the relationship between ideas and material forces and empirically demonstrate the interaction of both in the analysis of the rise of China. The final section will recapitulate the arguments for the necessary consideration of the relationship between material and ideational factors and conclude that their ontological separation generates a false dichotomy that undermines the understanding of world politics.

### Material and Ideational Forces in International Relations

In the literature on the relationship of the materialist and the ideational, the materialist view places greater emphasis on material factors usually pertaining to the objective physical world including factors like the economy and technology. Although materialists do not necessarily preclude the influence of ideas, these are usually regarded as deterministically secondary. Interestingly in the wide scholarship of international relations, most materialist perspectives claim power and interests as strictly material forces and this is often challenged by ideational theorists who argue that attributing materialism to such concepts can only be justified if their effects are not constituted by ideas<sup>[5]</sup>. This can serve as an apposite starting point for the material ideational debate where idealists view the structure of society as fundamentally social, constituted primarily by ideas and shared knowledge rather than material forces<sup>[6]</sup>. The idealist perspective stresses the role of ideas and identity in giving meaning to material structures whereas materialists ascribe causal significance to material structures relegating ideas to an 'intervening variable' between material factors and their outcome<sup>[7]</sup>.

Of all the theories of international relations, neorealism and marxism (to some extent), privilege the significance of material factors in their understanding of world politics. Neorealist scholars such as John Mearsheimer, view the

# The False Dichotomy of the Material-Ideational Debate in IR Theory

Written by Sulagna Basu

material primarily as the structure of the international system and the distribution of material capabilities among states<sup>[8]</sup>. Accordingly, the material structure of the international system devoid of a central authority is anarchic and state behavior is inevitably shaped by their relative capabilities in a characteristically anarchic system. Marxism and more broadly historical materialism, on the other hand, while privileging the significance of the material practices required to reproduce the cycles of production over time also recognizes that the nature of these material practices need not necessarily be confined to purely economic aspects but can take on a multiplicity of characteristics that are often socially mediated<sup>[9]</sup>. Nevertheless, for these theories it is the material forces that determine the course of politics whether that is through the use of the military or through the means of production.

However, a closer examination of the material factors underpinning these theories reveal that the material cannot be reduced to brute physical materialities and is inextricably linked to the ideational. This is especially significant for the neorealist analysis of the material structure of the international system which it claims is a determinate force in the formation of state interests and power. However, the behavior of states in an anarchic system i.e. material structure, is an indirect reaction of the states to the structure where states are compelled to behave in certain ways in order to achieve the goals of survival and prosperity. Therefore, they are 'socially programmed' to react to the structure or the material capabilities of other states which lead to the formation of particular state identities<sup>[10]</sup>. Consequently, the formation of state interests and power cannot be reduced to pure physical material forces and an understanding of the interaction of states in the international system requires more than a description of the physical world. Several prominent scholars from the neorealist school have addressed this criticism by contesting the direction of causality of identity formation with power and interests and this further illustrates the mutually constitutive relationship between material and ideational factors<sup>[11]</sup>.

After the end of the Cold War, constructivism emerged as a theory of international relations that emphasized the impact of ideas. In response to the neorealist structural understanding of the international system, with anarchy as the organizing principle governing state behavior, constructivists challenged the taken for granted nature of the system and instead regarded the identities and beliefs of states as crucial to the understanding of state behavior, thereby claiming that the structures of the international system are social rather than material<sup>[12]</sup>. It is important to point out that constructivism constitutes a vast and diverse tradition of scholarship and for the purpose of my argument I will be primarily drawing on Alexander Wendt's systemic constructivism. Wendt, famously claimed, 'anarchy is what states make of it'<sup>[13]</sup> by which he encapsulated the essence of the constructivist approach where emphasis is placed on the social structure of the system and the logic of anarchy is driven by the shared ideas of states that in turn shape their behavior. For Wendt, anarchy is not a determinate material phenomenon but can vary across an 'anarchy of friends that differs from one of enemies, one of self-help from one of collective security, and these are all constituted by structures of shared knowledge'<sup>[14]</sup>. He further argues that the analysis of the social construction of world politics requires an analysis of the social conditions that 'produce and reproduce' social structures which in turn shape identities and interests.

However, the challenge of ideational driven analysis lies in the establishment of causal analysis of ideas especially with respect to foreign policy where state identity is often used as a 'catch-all term' and there remains a need to clarify how specific conditions give rise to particular identities as well as a clearer understanding of the consequent effects of specific identities on state action<sup>[15]</sup>. Furthermore, by neglecting the potential effects of material forces, ideational approaches are often accused of ignoring the fact that ideas and identities do not exist in a 'material vacuum', this is specifically evident in constructivist analyses that downplay the level of uncertainty in the international system. Materialist theories like neorealism articulate this as the 'material objection' to the constructivist ideational analysis where the material capabilities of states have inevitable behavioral effects through the inescapable element of deception<sup>[16]</sup> where states often misrepresent their intentions and interests. Consequently, despite emphasizing the complexity of the social construction of the international system, the ideational driven approach of constructivism falls short of elucidating the link between the material structure and its social construction.

## A Dialectical approach

The concept of ideas and material factors are inevitably bound together and mutually constitute each other. Although

# The False Dichotomy of the Material-Ideational Debate in IR Theory

Written by Sulagna Basu

structural realism doesn't necessarily preclude the consideration of the ideational just as constructivism doesn't preclude the material, each deems the other set of conditions secondary or reductionist. This leads to a theoretical gap in the understanding of the relationship of the material with the ideational. Indeed, this relationship can be understood in dialectical terms as 'interactive and iterative'<sup>[17]</sup>. Here, ideas and material conditions are co-constitutive where ideas emerge in the context of certain material constraints and conditions and the material is altered by the emergence and development of ideas. The neo-Gramscian approaches, introduced to international relations most notably through the works of Robert Cox<sup>[18]</sup> <sup>[19]</sup>, serve as a useful bridging theory between the putatively materialist neorealism and ideational constructivism. Cox's conceptualization of the historical structure which include the interacting forces of ideas, material capabilities and institutions encapsulates the mutual constitution of the ideational with the material<sup>[20]</sup>. Here, the manifestation of structures in the objective material world through their existence in the intersubjective realm of ideas captures the interaction of objective material forces with subjective ideational forces. Through this grappling, neo-Gramscian approaches are able to extend the understanding of the interaction of the material and ideational by considering the 'material structure of ideology' and the 'necessary reciprocity' between ideas and material conditions<sup>[21]</sup>. By this dialectical understanding, ideas may be viewed as independent forces but only so far as they are based on 'material organization intended to maintain, defend and develop the theoretical or ideological "front"'<sup>[22]</sup>. Consequently, the neo-Gramscian perspective allows for a conceptualization of the material basis for ideas, combining the constructivist ideational and neorealist material understandings.

## Rise of China – Interplay of material and ideational factors

The benefits of a more nuanced understanding of the interaction of material and ideational factors is better demonstrated through the eclectic analysis of the rise of China. The rise of China has emerged as a prominent phenomenon in world politics. The increasing engagement of China in global and regional cooperation coupled with a growing economy and expanding military capabilities has led to a proliferation of debates and analysis on the issue within the international community. While some view China's growing dynamism in the international and regional arena as a bid to ultimately dominate the international order, others regard China's emerging prominence more equably and anticipate a peaceful rise. Nevertheless, this points to the need for a deeper examination and understanding of China's political strategy. In this section, I will outline the competing theoretical perspectives of the rise of China and demonstrate the significance of considering the relationship between material and ideational factors for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Structural realists like John Mearsheimer argue for the pessimistic view that a rising China will lead to inevitable conflict and confrontation. His arguments are premised on the offensive realist assumption that the structure of the international system compels states to compete for power and (specific to Mearsheimer's offensive realist view) states always seek to maximize their power<sup>[23]</sup>. This view is further corroborated by pointing to China's increasing military capability and growing defense budget. Scholars such as Bates Gill point to the dramatic rise in China's military budget in recent decades and surmise that the presence of the United States in East Asia pose direct challenges to China's trend of growing military power<sup>[24]</sup>. However, several scholars have argued for a more critical analysis of China's rising military budget. This perspective argues that the pace of economic development in China warrants a concomitant increase in military spending, a phenomenon observed in several other states that have undergone periods of rapid economic growth usually accompanied by greater military spending<sup>[25]</sup>. Indeed, when contrasted with the United States, China's percentage of GDP (Gross Domestic Product) allocated for military expenditure is significantly lower and only slightly higher than that of Japan, which is widely regarded as having a relatively modest defense budget considering its reliance on the United States for most defense expenditures<sup>[26]</sup>. This illustrates the insufficiency of privileging material conditions in the analysis of the rise of China.

Constructivist approaches that place greater emphasis on the ideational aspects stress the need to clarify the role of identity in China's rise. Scholars such as Rozman have emphasized the significance of China pursuing a 'great power identity'<sup>[27]</sup> which is largely influenced by the state's perceptions of other great powers and the current and historical interactions between them. Furthermore, the formation of national identity in China's case is uniquely complicated by a simultaneous pride in its civilization along with a sense of national shame and humiliation seeding from the concept of a 'century of humiliation' which refers to a period from the first Opium war in 1840 till the formation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, during which China was subject to the mercies of western

# The False Dichotomy of the Material-Ideational Debate in IR Theory

Written by Sulagna Basu

imperial powers<sup>[28]</sup>. Understood in this way, China's economic resurgence has significant implications for rehabilitating its national identity.

Equally emphasized in some constructivist approaches is the construction of the 'rise of China' as a threat through the perceptions of China held by other states in the international community. Here, China's military or economic capabilities are secondary determinants and instead the strategies pursued by other states in their interactions with China play a greater role in the construction of a particular perception<sup>[29]</sup>. This line of analysis is comparable to Wendt's version of constructivism where 'Culture is a self-fulfilling prophecy and actors act on the basis of shared expectations, and this tends to reproduce those expectations,'<sup>[30]</sup>. In the analysis of the rise of China, the transformative potential of state identities, perceptions and shared interactions are particularly pertinent but fall short of providing adequate explanations for why these ideational factors should take precedence over material interests.

Consequently, each of these theoretical perspectives when considered in isolation, prove inadequate to gain a deeper understanding of the rise of China. The ontological isolation of material factors (power and interests) from ideational (culture and identity) forestalls a comprehensive examination of the issue. The material and ideational often merge and interact with each other in specific ways that give rise to different power quotients between China and the international community. At any given time, neither material nor ideational factors alone can illuminate the political strategies pursued by a state. For the case of China, an understanding of the relationship of the material with the ideational is critical as on the one hand China does exercise strategy based on its material interests, especially with regard to its position in the South China Sea and recent heightened engagement in Africa as well as its Belt and Road initiative. However, on the other hand one may also argue that these strategies are built upon a notion of China's 'imagined power'<sup>[31]</sup> where the external perceptions of China's anticipated power have dictated the terms of policies for both China itself, as well as other states. Certainly, the policies of states like the United States have been shaped by the anticipation of China's rise which in turn are based on assessments of China's military and economic capabilities. This further demonstrates the analytical complications of considering ideas as a factor independent of material reality and vice versa.

## Conclusion

The basis of the material ideational debate for world politics rests on the interrogation of the nature of the social world. In international relations, neorealism tends to hold the materialist view that maintains an objective view of the social world of politics, shaped primarily by the material structure of the international system. By contrast, the idealist view most notably supported by the constructivist theory of international relations, argues for a more subjective understanding where the social world is constituted by ideas, shared knowledge and identities. While the essay question presupposes the inclusion of both ideational and material in an analysis of world politics, it also tends to suggest an additive model where relative weights may be assigned to each set of factors and ultimately both ideational and material contribute to explanations of outcomes, albeit with an ordering of emphasis. By elaborating on the theoretical assumptions of the material neorealist and ideational constructivist approaches, I problematize the analytical purchase of theories that place greater emphasis on just one set of factors while not completely precluding the other. Instead, I argue for a more dialectical understanding of the relationship between ideational and material factors. By analyzing both the materialist and idealist claim, I demonstrate the mutually constitutive nature of both material forces and ideas and argue that the ontological biases of each of these claims renders them deficient in capturing the dynamic complexities of world politics. This is further evidenced through an analysis of the rise of China which reveals the complex interplay of material with ideational and the analytical imperative to contemplate the dialectical relationship of the material and ideational. Much of the literature and scholarship in international relations focuses on an either/or approach to the material ideational debate and further entrenches the ontological dichotomy prevalent in many of the theories for analysis. A dialectical approach could serve to bridge the various analytical schisms and ultimately contribute to a more nuanced understanding of world politics.

## References

Bieler, Andreas. "Questioning Cognitivism and Constructivism in IR Theory: Reflections on the Material Structure of Ideas." *Politics* 21, no. 2 (2001): 93-100. doi:10.1111/1467-9256.00140.

# The False Dichotomy of the Material-Ideational Debate in IR Theory

Written by Sulagna Basu

- Bieler, Andreas, and Adam David Morton. "The Deficits of Discourse in IPE: Turning Base Metal into Gold?" *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (2008): 103-28. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2478.2007.00493.x.
- Breslin, Shaun. "The Soft Notion of China's 'Soft Power'." Chatham House. Accessed October 6, 2018. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/papers/view/109577>.
- Cox, Robert W. "Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 10, no. 2 (1981): 126-55. doi:10.1177/03058298810100020501.
- Cox, Robert W. "Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations : An Essay in Method." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 12, no. 2 (1983): 162-75. doi:10.1177/03058298830120020701.
- Edwards, Jason. "The Materialism of Historical Materialism." *New Materialisms*, 2010, 281-98. doi:10.1215/9780822392996-013.
- Finnemore, Martha, and Kathryn Sikkink. "Taking Stock: The Constructivist Research Program in International Relations and Comparative Politics." *Annual Review of Political Science* 4, no. 1 (2001): 391-416. doi:10.1146/annurev.polisci.4.1.391.
- Gill, Bates. *China's Evolving Regional Security Strategy*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.
- Glasius, Marlies. "Gramsci for the Twenty-first Century: Dialectics and Translatability." *International Studies Review* 14, no. 4 (2012): 666-86. doi:10.1111/misr.12011.
- Keohane, Robert O. "International Institutions: Two Approaches." *International Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (1988): 379-96. doi:10.2307/2600589.
- Liu, Q. (2010). *China's Rise and Regional Strategy: Power, Interdependence and Identity*. *Journal of Cambridge Studies*, 5 (4), 76. <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.1372>
- Marsh, David. "Keeping Ideas in Their Place: In Praise of Thin Constructivism." *Australian Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 4 (2009): 679-96. doi:10.1080/10361140903296578.
- Mearsheimer, John J. "A Realist Reply." *International Security* 20, no. 1 (1995): 82-93. doi:10.2307/2539218.
- Mearsheimer, John J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: Norton, 2001.
- Raudino, Simone, and Eunice Rendon. "Material Forces and the Force of Ideas: Interview with Robert Gilpin." *The International Spectator* 40, no. 1 (2005): 99-105. doi:10.1080/03932720508457114.
- Rozman, Gilbert. "Chinas Quest for Great Power Identity." *Orbis* 43, no. 3 (1999): 383-402. doi:10.1016/s0030-4387(99)80078-7.
- Sørensen, Georg. "The Case for Combining Material Forces and Ideas in the Study of IR." *European Journal of International Relations* 14, no. 1 (2008): 5-32. doi:10.1177/1354066107087768.
- Tiefeng, Xiao. "Misconceptions About China's Growth in Military Spending." Carnegie-Tsinghua Center. Accessed October 5, 2018. <https://carnegietsinghua.org/2013/05/28/misconceptions-about-china-s-growth-in-military-spending-pub-51924>.
- Wendt, Alexander. "Constructing International Politics." *International Security* 20, no. 1 (1995): 71. doi:10.2307/2539217.

# The False Dichotomy of the Material-Ideational Debate in IR Theory

Written by Sulagna Basu

Wendt, Alexander. "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics (1992)." *International Theory*, 1995, 129-77. doi:10.1007/978-1-349-23773-9\_7.

Wendt, Alexander. *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge: University Press, 1999.

Wendt, Alexander. "Social Theory of International Politics." 1999. doi:10.1017/cbo9780511612183.

## Notes

[1] Wendt, Alexander. *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge: University Press, 1999 p. 24

[2] Mearsheimer, John J. "A Realist Reply." *International Security* 20, no. 1, p. 91 (1995): 82-93. doi:10.2307/2539218.

[3] Keohane, Robert O. "International Institutions: Two Approaches." *International Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (1988): p. 381, doi:10.2307/2600589.

[4] Kenneth Waltz in his "Theory of International Politics" 1979, emphasized on the structural nature of the international system, however, even in the diverse literature of classical realism by various scholars, like Hans Morgenthau (*Politics Among Nations*, 1967 p. 27) and structural or neorealism, there has been a recognition of the influence of ideas on politics.

[5] Wendt, Alexander. *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge: University Press, 1999. p. 23

[6] *Ibid*, p. 24

[7] Wendt, Alexander. *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge: University Press, 1999. p. 34

[8] Mearsheimer, John J. "A Realist Reply." *International Security* 20, no. , p. 91 (1995): 82-93. doi:10.2307/2539218

[9] Edwards, Jason. "The Materialism of Historical Materialism." *New Materialisms*, 2010, p. 284 doi:10.1215/9780822392996-013.

[10] Sørensen, Georg. "The Case for Combining Material Forces and Ideas in the Study of IR." *European Journal of International Relations* 14, no. 1 (2008): p. 8 doi:10.1177/1354066107087768.

[11] Raudino, Simone, and Eunice Rendon. "Material Forces and the Force of Ideas: Interview with Robert Gilpin." *The International Spectator* 40, no. 1 (2005): p. 103 doi:10.1080/03932720508457114.

[12] Wendt, Alexander. "Constructing International Politics." *International Security* 20, no. 1 (1995): p. 71. doi:10.2307/2539217.

[13] Wendt, Alexander. "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics (1992)." *International Theory*, 1995, 129-77. doi:10.1007/978-1-349-23773-9\_7.

[14] Wendt, Alexander. "Constructing International Politics." *International Security* 20, no. 1 (1995): p. 75. doi:10.2307/2539217.

[15] Finnemore, Martha, and Kathryn Sikkink. "Taking Stock: The Constructivist Research Program in International Relations and Comparative Politics." *Annual Review of Political Science* 4, no. 1 (2001): p. 399 doi:10.1146/annurev.polisci.4.1.391.

[16] Sørensen, Georg. "The Case for Combining Material Forces and Ideas in the Study of IR." *European Journal of*

# The False Dichotomy of the Material-Ideational Debate in IR Theory

Written by Sulagna Basu

*International Relations* 14, no. 1 (2008): p. 11 doi:10.1177/1354066107087768.

[17] Marsh, David. "Keeping Ideas in Their Place: In Praise of Thin Constructivism." *Australian Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 4 (2009): p. 680 doi:10.1080/10361140903296578.

[18] Cox, Robert W. "Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 10, no. 2 (1981): 126-55. doi:10.1177/03058298810100020501.

[19] Cox, Robert W. "Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations : An Essay in Method." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 12, no. 2 (1983): 162-75. doi:10.1177/03058298830120020701.

[20] Glasius, Marlies. "Gramsci for the Twenty-first Century: Dialectics and Translatability." *International Studies Review* 14, no. 4 (2012): p. 669 doi:10.1111/misr.12011.

[21] Bieler, Andreas, and Adam David Morton. "The Deficits of Discourse in IPE: Turning Base Metal into Gold?" *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (2008): p. 121 doi:10.1111/j.1468-2478.2007.00493.x.

[22] Bieler, Andreas. "Questioning Cognitivism and Constructivism in IR Theory: Reflections on the Material Structure of Ideas." *Politics* 21, no. 2 (2001): p. 99 doi:10.1111/1467-9256.00140.

[23] Mearsheimer, John J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: Norton, 2001. p. 145

[24] Gill, Bates. *China's Evolving Regional Security Strategy*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

[25] Tiefeng, Xiao. "Misconceptions About China's Growth in Military Spending." Carnegie-Tsinghua Center. Accessed October 5, 2018. <https://carnegietsinghua.org/2013/05/28/misconceptions-about-china-s-growth-in-military-spending-pub-51924>.

[26] *Ibid.*

[27] Rozman, Gilbert. "Chinas Quest for Great Power Identity." *Orbis* 43, no. 3 (1999): p. 384 doi:10.1016/s0030-4387(99)80078-7.

[28] Liu, Q. (2010). China's Rise and Regional Strategy: Power, Interdependence and Identity. *Journal of Cambridge Studies*, 5 (4), 76. <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.1372>

[29] *Ibid* p. 87

[30] Wendt, Alexander. *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge: University Press, 1999. p. 42

[31] Breslin, Shaun. "The Soft Notion of China's 'Soft Power'." Chatham House. Accessed October 6, 2018. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/papers/view/109577>.

*Written by: Sulagna Basu*  
*Written at: University of Sydney*  
*Written for: Dr. Ken Fraser*  
*Date written: October 2018*