

The Limits of the Scientific Method in International Relations

Written by Arnaud Sobrero

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ARNAUD SOBRERO, JAN 27 2022

International relations (IR) is a dynamic domain of study. The academic field emerged following the disastrous First World War with the need to better understand and analyze international politics. Initially, as an extension of political science, the IR discipline was recognized as a stand-alone field in 1919.[1] The twenty-first century brought a new set of theories and approaches that had a profound impact on international politics not seen since the treaty of Westphalia in 1638.[2] This essay argues that while the scientific method underpinned by positivism has brought a sense of rigor and academic framework to study international politics, it obscures some crucial truths as positivism cannot fully encompass all the different nuances which characterize international politics demonstrated by the rise and threat of non-state actors and the impact of non-rational emotions by state actors. The first section of this essay will review the scientific method underpinned by positivist principles and how the method has evolved. The second section will have a critical approach to Realism by discussing how the emergence of non-state actors has disrupted international politics demonstrated by the events of 9/11. The last part endeavors to demonstrate that Nationalism in East Asia produces irrational behaviors significantly impacting diplomatic relations.

The scientific method in International Relations research has primarily been driven by positivist principles and provides useful lenses to analyze and study international politics. This essay uses the most conventional definition of IR as the study of the relations of states, understood primarily in diplomatic, military, and strategic terms.[3] Applying theory in IR remains at the cornerstone of academic research. Theories offer a framework, a lens on why things happened, and, depending on which lens you apply, you get answers related to the theoretical assumptions underpinning it.[4]

There is a key divide between IR scholars: on one side, there are the proponents of positivism who believe there are objective material facts in international politics. In contrast, some believe that reality is a social construct by our ideas and beliefs.[5] The latter group belongs to postpositivism, which includes Constructivism. To a large extent, positivist assumptions underpin how research in IR has been conducted since the twentieth century. At the core of this scientific method is positivism, which is 'the belief that the facts are out there to be discovered and that there is only one way to do this, only one form of reliable knowledge generated by methods based on the natural sciences.' [6] Thus, positivists do not engage with what reality should be like but with what reality is.

The IR discipline has evolved throughout the twentieth century through four distinct debates shaping the way we think about the discipline. Those debates have produced a lot of academic material and challenged the traditional orthodoxy of analyzing international politics. Triggered by the First World War horrors, the first debate refers to exchanges between realists and idealists. Realists such as E. H. Carr and Hans Morgenthau criticized the idealists' assumption as a value-driven approach instead of scientific thinking that posits that we can see the world objectively.[7] Underpinned by the behavioral revolution described as a pivotal moment in the history of political sciences, the second debate set up positivism's foundations, which posits that scientific knowledge is generated only through the collection of observable data.[8] The third debate, also known as the interparadigm debate, was instrumental in securing the academic consensus around positivist principles. The fourth debate has been shaped by the divide between a pro-science school of thought underpinned by the 'explaining,' positivist and rationalist views and the anti-science viewpoint held by proponents of the 'understanding,' postpositivist and reflectivist theories.

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Positivism has brought a sense of academic rigor, structure, and objectivity, making the study of international politics more tangible. It has also provided a set of rigorous guidelines that help to distinguish between scientific knowledge and belief. Quantitative data paves the way to further scientific research. In addition, due to the quantitative approach, future predictions can be made.[9] Positivism, in the way of Realism, helped to further our understanding of the state's behavior. For example, the Ukraine crisis and the annexation of Ukraine can be explained using a Realist lens as Ukraine was being pulled away from the Russian's sphere of influence.[10] Another benefit of positivism was the advent of game theory. In particular, Thomas Schelling helped deepen our understanding of nuclear deterrence when he theorized that nuclear bargaining was a variable sum game.[11]

However, while still important, positivism is no longer the only valid account of science, having been criticized by postpositivists and scientific realists.[12] New theories such as Constructivism and Feminism underpinned by postpositivist principles reject the scientific method as it hinders the ability to capture essential elements such as the meaning of identity, beliefs, and language in international politics.

Having discussed how important positivist principles are in IR, the next section will examine how the positivist theory of Realism has failed to assess the importance of non-state terrorist actors in international politics. As one of the most important international relations theories, Realism has proved to be ill-equipped to tackle some of the most important geopolitical challenges of the twenty-first century: the threat of non-state terrorist actors.

Due to its ontological nature, Realism adheres to the principles of positivism by arguing that academic research needs to focus on the most powerful actors in the international system, namely states. For a realist, the world is in a state of anarchy as there is no central authority. Second, for realists, the main international actor is the state, but not all states: realists emphasize that the most powerful states shape the fate of the entire system[13].

Classical realists such as Hans Morgenthau maintains that states have a will to power.[14] Others like structural realists like Kenneth Waltz posits that states merely want to survive and are driven to maximize security.[15] While there are different strands of Realism, they all share the same characteristic of statism. Thus, realists have omitted a salient feature of IR research: the emergence of non-state actors. Indeed, non-state actors such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) often possess greater resources than some states attempting to regulate them.[16]

From a security perspective, the end of the twentieth century was characterized by the emergence of terrorist threats via organizations like Al-Qaeda. Statism prevented academic scholars and policymakers in the U.S. to comprehend the emergence and threat of non-state actors fully. Indeed, prior to September 11, the Bush administration had adopted a realist framework and greatly underestimated the critical role played by non-state actors in terrorism.[17] According to the 9/11 report, the US governmental institutions were 'ill-equipped' to address the challenges presented by Al Qaeda.[18] Furthermore, John Mearsheimer, a prominent structural offensive realist, concedes that Realism did not have 'a whole heck of a lot' to say about terrorism.[19] As such, the scientific method through the realist theoretical lens was unable to capture the rising threats of non-state terrorist actors that have disrupted international politics at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

In contrast, Constructivism, underpinning the postpositivist theories, seems to be a better lens to look at terrorism issues, and the constructivists stress the importance of values, beliefs, and identities in shaping foreign policies.[20] While Alexander Wendt, a key constructivist theorist, admits that some objective material element are out there, he posits that the actions of state actors and non-state actors are influenced by the epistemological concept of 'shared ideas' driven by endogenous factors as opposed to exogenous elements.[21] Indeed, for constructivists, terrorism is a social construction, and the nature of its implications is highly subjective. The old adage 'one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter' encapsulates that subjectivity.

Having discussed how the scientific method through Realism was ill-suited to address terrorism issues, the next section will examine the impact of non-rational emotions by state actors in international politics. The main theories in international relations in academic research, such as Realism and Liberalism, have largely favored the rationality of the state but have failed to comprehend the role emotions played in international politics.

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It is important to note that, for positivists, causal relationships exist in social sciences only if actors offer a rational behavior. This begs the question of objectivity while social and political action can be driven by human subjectivity and non-rational behaviors. It has been argued that the Napoleonic campaign to conquer Russia was less driven by strategic military imperatives than the need to satisfy the Frenchman's 'hubris-infected personality with an arrogant confidence about what great feats could be accomplished.' [22] Thus, emotions had an impact on international politics. Positivism alone cannot encompass all the facets of the state in IR. Indeed, context matters. States are greatly influenced by their environment, including historical heritage and identities. This is particularly true in nationalism, in which states can have non-rational behaviors driven by fear, prestige, and reputation.

Diplomatic relations between Japan and China have seriously deteriorated when the former nationalized in 2012 the Senkaku islands (known in China as Diaoyu). Those islands have little strategic value. However, they hold significant emotional value given the militaristic nature of the past relationships of the two countries. The resulting diplomatic crisis has elevated tensions that have 'exceeded any material or strategic advantage either side would gain from their outright possession.' [23]

Another example of non-rational emotions by state actors will be the 'comfort women issue' between South Korea and Japan. This issue symbolizes the issue of women forced into prostitution by the Japanese military during the Second World War. A 'comfort women' statue was installed in Germany to combat sexual abuse around the globe. [24] The statue issue itself is at the center of tense diplomatic relations between the two countries. Despite having no value from a realist/liberal standpoint, this statue is impacting the strategic partnership between the two neighbors at a crucial time when China is becoming more aggressive and more assertive in the region. Furthermore, South Korea and Japan should be natural allies as they both have a strong strategic alliance with the United States with significant military personnel and equipment present in each country. However, this is a significant emotional issue for both countries related to their identity and pride.

In both those examples, Constructivism and, for the 'comfort women' issue, Feminism as part of postpositivism are better suited IR theories to address the emotional components of state actors in the context of nationalism as national identities matter and have a strategic value. In addition, some scholars have argued for a revision of contemporary Realism into 'symbiotic realism,' more aligned with the twenty-first-century challenges, which would address emotional issues, gender issues as well as climate change centered on actors that 'operate at multiple levels both below and above the national level.' [25]

To conclude, the application of the scientific method in IR research has evolved significantly during the twentieth century from the idealism theory to the different strands of Realism and Liberalism. The scientific properties of those theories, such as quantitative data, paved the way for more structured research and findings in international politics. In addition, the scientific method underpinned by positivist principles brought a sense of rigor and academic framework to study international politics.

However, while positivism remains the main approach to study IR, it has obscured some important truths. Realism and liberalism failed to capture all the nuances in international politics with its traditional tenets of statism and rationality. The emergence of non-state actors such as Al-Qaeda typifies the issues related to Realism to study IR beyond the concept of states. As such, the 9/11 catastrophe was a total surprise and wake-up call for realists. In addition, positivism cannot comprehend the non-rational, emotional aspects of state actors such as nationalism. In East Asia, nationalism has led states to behave irrationally over events with little strategic importance. In contrast, modern theories like Constructivism underpinned by postpositivist principles are more equipped to deal with those truths in international politics.

Thus, the scientific method alone cannot fully encompass all the different nuances in international politics. A more comprehensive approach including both positivism and postpositivism tenets would better address all the intricacies of academic research in IR.

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