

Which Theoretical School is Best? It Depends on How one Frames the Question

*Interview with William C. Wohlforth, the Daniel Webster Professor
at Dartmouth College*

William C. Wohlforth is a distinguished American political scientist, serving as a faculty member in the Government Department at Dartmouth College since 2000. He holds a degree in international relations from Beloit College and has experience working as a legislative aide in the U.S. House of Representatives. Dr. Wohlforth completed his graduate studies at Yale University, where he earned both an M.A. in international relations and a Ph.D. in political science. He has previously held academic positions at Princeton University and Georgetown University. Dr. Wohlforth's scholarly expertise encompasses international security and foreign policy. His most recent publications include *America Abroad: The United States' Global Role in the 21st Century* (Oxford University Press, 2018), co-authored with Stephen G. Brooks, and the forthcoming *A Measure Short of War: A Brief History of Great Power Subversion* (Oxford University Press, December 2024), co-authored with Jill Kastner.

*Interview conducted by Sergey Markedonov, Editor-in-Chief of the Journal
of International Analytics*

Sergey Markedonov: The academic study of International Relations (IR) encompasses a diverse array of theoretical schools and scholarly approaches, including realism, liberalism, constructivism, and Marxism, along with their various adaptations. My inquiry may appear provocative, yet it raises a crucial question: Can we conclude that certain theoretical approaches have failed to adequately explain the fundamental trends in international relations, and if so, why? Furthermore, can we assert that some theories are better suited to explaining specific dimensions of international relations? For instance, realism may be more effective in understanding military and security issues, while liberalism might offer a more robust framework for analyzing legal and institutional matters.

William Wohlforth: Your choice of the term “schools and scholarly approaches” is apt. Realism, liberalism and constructivism are not theories, but rather are schools of thought that contain many different theories. Realist thought has generated, for example, what I've called “subschoools” like offensive realism, defensive realism,

and neoclassical realism.¹ Within those sub schools one can find various theories, such as the theory of the security dilemma, offense-defense balance, balance of power theory, hegemonic theory. Similarly, within the broad school of liberal theory one can find the theory of institutional cooperation, theories of reputation and signaling, theories of international norms and regimes, democratic peace theory, commercial peace theory, and so on. It is those theories, rather than the overall school, that one applies to specific situations and some theories do better or worse at explaining overall trends in international relations. I am therefore very reluctant to try to claim that some larger school has done better or worse than others at accounting for larger trends in international relations.

That said, I also agree with the premise of your question that different schools tend to generate greater insights about different issue areas in international politics. Given my own focus on issues of war and peace, international security writ large, I generally find that realism yields theories and models that are particularly helpful for understanding those issues. However, those issues are not always the most important in every region and in every time. For many countries in many regions, issues of war and peace between states are simply not paramount. Someone attempting to understand the international politics of such regions or in such periods may want to reach well beyond realist thinking to understand what is going on.

Furthermore, you will notice that when analyzing security affairs, scholars who associate themselves with other schools of thought such as liberalism or constructivism, end up accepting some core insights from realism. They then go on to say that theories drawn from realism are incomplete, confront puzzles, do not account for nuance, or fail to consider certain important variables. Similarly, realists sometimes study things like the environment, international cooperation, or international law, claiming that while one can accept many insights from liberal and constructivist approaches, nonetheless realism helps explain this or that aspect of those areas. Hence you will see the strong influence of each school on the other as each accepts the other's premises and then goes on to use insights from within a given school to help explain anomalies still left on the table by others.

There are many examples. For instance, in the realm of security affairs one sees the creation of many institutions. Some institutions, such as NATO, go far beyond a simple alliance and are extremely elaborate. Realists try to explain this as direct responses to the problem of security under anarchy. However, these institutions help facilitate cooperation in ways identified by institutionalist theory within the liberal school of thought. At the same time, realists generally acknowledge that they don't have great explanations for some institutions, for example why states pay so much attention to international law even if they sometimes violate it. Constructivism and liberalism simply contain better models for understanding international law. But then your typical realist will turn around and note that the fundamental problem identified in that school of thought, namely insecurity under anarchy, helps to explain the larger question of why international law is as limited as it is. So, you have one theorist saying

1 Wohlforth, William C. "Realism and Foreign Policy." In *Foreign Policy: Theory, Actors, Cases*, edited by Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield, and Tim Dunne. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

“only my theory really can explain why states bother with international law at all.” And then you have another saying, “OK, but only my theory explains why international law is so limited, so weak compared to domestic law.”

Thus, the seeming power, persuasiveness, or relevance of a given theoretical school depends very much on how one asks the question.

S.M.: Theories of international relations are often closely intertwined with the prevailing political agenda. Stanley Hoffmann, in his influential 1977 paper, famously asserted that international relations theory is essentially an American social science.¹ During the Soviet era, Vladimir Lenin’s concept of the “party principle in literature” was a foundational tenet of Soviet scholarly thought in the humanities.² This raises a critical question: How can we disentangle academic discussions of international trends from politically motivated explanatory models? At what point do scientific methodologies genuinely inform our understanding of global realities, and where does politicized propaganda overshadow substantive debate?

W.W.: That’s an extremely complicated question, but the reference to Lenin’s idea of party principles in literature and the whole Soviet experience focuses my thoughts on the relationship between scholarship and the state. This is quite relevant for scholars of international relations and foreign policy. I remember well the atmosphere in which Soviet scholars of international relations had to function. They managed to produce scholarship that questioned the USSR’s practices in international affairs, although they had to be careful. It took a practiced eye to discern, for example, that what looked on the surface like an extremely critical review of some recent Western work in international relations, excoriating it for failing to comport with fundamental insights of the Marxist Leninist approach to international relations, was actually praising the work.

When it comes to the setting I know best – the study of U.S. foreign and security policy – the fundamental disposition of most scholars is critical. Try to find a historian of U.S. Foreign Relations who is not excoriating America as a nefarious “empire.” Good luck! International relations scholars within political science who focus on U.S. foreign policy, especially those who describe themselves as realists, are in general very critical of U.S. foreign policy. The tone of condemnation maybe considerably more muted than it is among their colleagues in history, but they tend to see it as their job to point out the failings of the government’s approach to achieving U.S. interests. When is the last time you read a self-described U.S. realist commending and praising the foreign policy of his or her government? Overwhelmingly, their view of every president, especially every single post-Cold War president, is critical: Clinton, Bush, Obama, Trump, and definitely Biden.

The most famous international relations scholar in the United States is John Mearsheimer. He is famous not only here, but abroad. Indeed, he is quite popular in countries which the United States views as its rivals. And why not? His scholarship argues that the United States foreign policy ever since 1990 has been idiotic, stupid, self-defeating, etc.³ But he is hardly alone. My friend and colleague Stephen Walt has

1 Hoffmann, Stanley. “An American Social Science: International Relations.” *Daedalus* 106, no. 3 (1977): 41–60.

2 Lenin, Vladimir. “Party Organisation and Party Literature.” In *Lenin Collected Works*, Volume 10, 44–49. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965.

3 Mearsheimer, John. *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018.

been writing about U.S. foreign policy since the late 1980s. Occasionally he will praise this or that aspect. But the fundamental message is criticism.¹ And I'm old enough to have received my undergraduate and graduate training back in the Cold War. And I can attest to the fact that this is hardly a new phenomenon. Kenneth Waltz, perhaps the most influential realist of the 20th century, argued that almost all U.S. security policy after the early 1960s was completely wrong-headed and self-defeating. Hans Morgenthau, Stanley Hoffman, George Kennan – the list goes on. Rarely did you read these people saying things like “on balance, United States foreign policy has been a great success.”

I am a huge fan of the scholars I've just named, who are far more influential than I'll ever be. And I enjoy reading, discussing and debating them. However, I am something of a contrarian, and find myself skeptical of their skepticism. Indeed, their relentless criticism of U.S. foreign policy creates a puzzle for their own theory, which posits rational behavior as a core assumption. The only way they can explain the foreign policy pursued for many decades by the most powerful country in the world is by breaking out of their theory and making arguments about domestic politics or ideas. I find this unpersuasive. There's no question that the United States government frequently makes mistakes. However, I have not been presented with good evidence that the U.S. propensity for flawed foreign policy is any greater than that of any other major power. It's typical in the tough world of international politics, shrouded in deep uncertainty, that occasionally you're going to make a mistake.

In sum, there is no question that political passions and commitments influence scholarship. A critical attitude to the accepted official wisdom of the day is a proper stance for a scholar. I think it's a good idea if scholars viewed the pronouncements of authorities in government with great skepticism and subject them to intense scrutiny. It might even be a good idea if overall the community of scholars of international relations lean in the direction of skepticism regarding governmental leadership's claims about foreign policy. This certainly seems to be the stance taken by many in my own small world of the study of international security and U.S. foreign policy. To be clear, I disagree with many of these critiques and think they contradict many of the critics' own theories. However, it is a very healthy stance to have in general.

S.M.: Continuing from the previous discussion, the issue of Non-Western theories of international relations has gained significant attention, particularly in Russia. This topic has become increasingly prominent in academic circles. How should we evaluate the academic potential of these Non-Western theories? Perhaps the more pertinent question is not their geographical origin but rather their scientific rigor and accuracy.

W.W.: I believe in decoupling the artist from the art, and the scholar from the scholarship. I don't care who you are, or where you're from. I care whether I can learn from the scholarship you produce. For most of my life, Russia and the United States have been geopolitical rivals. I have assiduously and carefully read Russian thinkers about international politics, and I have learned a great deal from them. And throughout my life I have met Russians who have benefited intellectually from assiduously and carefully reading American thinkers.

1 Walt, Stephen M. *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy*. New York, 2018.

S.M.: In your renowned book *International Relations Theory and the Consequences of Unipolarity*, you and your co-authors argued that the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR led to the emergence of a new unipolar international system. In your view, this shift introduced significant changes and challenges to international relations theory. Today, we are witnessing the erosion of unipolarity and the emergence of a multipolar world. What changes and challenges do you foresee for IR theory as this multipolar world takes shape?

W.W.: The unipolar distribution of capabilities that emerged from the dissolution of the Soviet Union was the first such international structure in modern history. The shift away from that to what comes next will also be a historical first. That presents a challenge. Lacking in historical precedents, people do need theory to help make sense of developments.

Any good theory needs precision in its fundamental terms and concepts, and in the ways it operationalizes those concepts to apply to the world. The concept of polarity was developed by realist thinkers in the middle of the last century. They defined polarity in terms of the distribution of material capabilities among states. A great power or “pole” was a country with a disproportionately large share of world power resources. From the 17th century onward, the top two to five countries possessed roughly in the realm of 60 to 75% of all the power resources in the international system. For most of that period, the system was multipolar. After the Second World War laid waste to most of the other great powers, the United States and the Soviet Union emerged as the two poles in a bipolar system. When the USSR collapsed, one pole was left standing, and a unipolar system emerged.

So, the last two shifts in polarity were occasioned by dramatic events: it was a World War that helped usher in bipolarity, and the collapse of the world's largest, and second most powerful state that ushered in unipolarity. Absent major war or state collapse, the changes that are moving the world away from unipolarity are subtler, and take longer to eventuate.

If anything, that puts an even greater premium on precision in your use of theoretical terms. If we define polarity as the theoreticians who developed the concept defined it, then the world is not, as your question suggests, moving towards multipolarity. Together, China and the United States account for something like 42% of global GDP measured in nominal terms. The next largest is Japan, at something like 4%. Now I know that GDP is a poor measure of state capabilities. Still, someone needs to supply a concept of polarity in which 4% is of a kind with 25%. To be fair, some people have supplied such definitions, which would classify the United States, China, Russia, Japan, India, Iran, and many other states as “poles”. That gets you to a multipolar world. But it also means every other world that's ever existed has also been multipolar, including what we're calling unipolarity and bipolarity. I am still waiting for the heralds of multipolarity to provide a definition of it that also distinguishes the other polar types, namely bi- and unipolarity.

Until they do, then the conversation is about a shift from unipolarity to something like bipolarity. And that is indeed where much of the debate is. In a recent article in *Foreign Affairs* my colleague Stephen Brooks and I argued that China has a long way to go before it becomes a pure polar peer of the United States, and it may never

get there.¹ However, that appears to be a minority view, and the predominant one appears to see the world headed towards bipolarity.

Of course, calling it “bipolar” doesn’t make it like the U.S.–Soviet bipolarity. That’s the thing about international relations – it’s a complex system where no two situations are precisely the same. There’s a useful debate to be had about whether the many crucial differences – far too many to list here – between any potential U.S.–China bipolarity and the one that existed in the last century between the United States and the Soviet Union render the term bipolarity more misleading than helpful. But one thing is clear: the key features of the multipolar worlds that existed from the 17th until the middle of the 20th century are not coming back to 21st century international politics, again barring some massive war, upheaval, or state collapse.

S.M.: The scrutiny of the intricate relationship between theoretical frameworks and empirical applications is a central issue in international relations scholarship. In Western academia, establishing a solid theoretical foundation is often the top priority, whereas Russian scholars tend to favor empirically-based methods, such as in-depth interviews and field studies. How do you envision achieving the ideal balance between these two approaches?

W.W.: I have not seen a recent survey of IR faculty in which they were asked what proportion of their work was theoretical as opposed to empirical. However, my impression does not align with the premise of your question: that theory somehow dominates empirical work in the West. Perhaps in Europe? Certainly in the United States, there’s a heavy emphasis on valid empirical work. The top journals are dominated by quantitative empirical studies, often “multimethod,” featuring some combination of qualitative case studies, textual analysis via the use of AI – especially large language models – other computational methods, ultra-sophisticated statistical analysis of quantitative data, and, most prominently, experimental methods, usually using online surveys. International Relations in the United States is part of political science, and political science, as a discipline, has followed economics and other social science disciplines in something of a “causal influence revolution.” Simple “dumb” regression models will no longer do. We must identify a causal effect by deploying methods that get the researcher as close as possible to a randomized controlled trial. This focus on causal inference has accompanied a dramatic increase in the availability of certain kinds of data, the canonical example being social media data. With modern AI tools, all text becomes data. So, new tools plus new data add up to new, and much higher, standards for defending a claim about causality.

In the view of many scholars, this obsession with valid empirical testing of propositions has pushed the field away from theory, certainly from “grand” or macro theory. If there’s a strong theoretical element in modern U.S. international relations, it’s microfoundational, it’s based in hypothesis drawn from cognitive and social psychology. These scholars trying to get at the fundamentals of how human beings think about problems relevant to international relations. Or they’re seeking absolutely bulletproof, totally defensible, claims about causal effects at a very very micro level.

1 Brooks, Stephen G., and William C. Wohlforth. “The Myth of Multipolarity: American Power’s Staying Power.” *Foreign Affairs* 102, no. 3 (May/June 2023): 76–91.

I admire a great deal of this work and have learned from it. However my own sentiments are closer to those of John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, who some years lamented that were "leaving theory behind."¹ The pendulum may have swung a bit too far towards an obsession with empirics and away from careful theoretical thinking.

For citation

Wohlforth, William C. "Which Theoretical School is Best? It Depends on How one Frames the Question."
Journal of International Analytics 15, no. 2 (2024): 11–17.

Цитирование

Уолфорт, У.К. Какая из теорий МО лучшая? Все зависит от поставленной задачи // Международная аналитика. 2024. Том 15. № 2. С. 11–17.

1 Mearsheimer, John J., and Stephen M. Walt. "Leaving Theory Behind: Why Simplistic Hypothesis Testing Is Bad for International Relations." *European Journal of International Relations* 19, no. 3 (2013): 427–457.