



Introductory Essay by Robert Jervis, Columbia University

Published on **2 January 2017** | issforum.org

A production of H-Diplo with the journals *Security Studies*, *International Security*, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, and the [International Studies Association's Security Studies Section](#) (ISSS).

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Web and Production Editor: **George Fujii**

Commissioned by Diane Labrosse

Shortlink: tiny.cc/PR-1-5B

Permalink: <http://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-5B-Jervis>

PDF URL: <http://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/Policy-Roundtable-1-5B.pdf>

“President Trump and IR Theory”

I never thought that I would write the phrase “President Trump,” let alone link it to IR theory. But the former is a great opportunity for the latter. Scholars of international politics bemoan the fact that our sub-field cannot draw on the experimental method. Well, now we can. Although Trump’s election was not a random event, nevertheless much about America’s external environment will remain the same after January 20, 2017 while the country will have a president who has espoused foreign policy views radically different from those of any of his predecessors. Once in office, will he really try to carry out such radically different policies? Or will domestic and international constraints prevail? We are about to run an experiment, and even if the results are not likely to be entirely unambiguous, they should provide us with real evidence. One (analytical) problem, however, is that Trump’s statements in the first weeks after his election indicate that his substantive views may be only weakly held, making any continuity that occurs only a weak confirmation of theories that stress constraints.

Perhaps the best way to think about this is to use the organizing scheme of levels-of-analysis that grew out of Kenneth Waltz’s classic *Man, the State and War*.¹ (Waltz actually used the term “images,” but J. David Singer’s review essay on Waltz’s book used the term “levels,” which has proved to be more popular.)² For

¹ Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State, and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954).

² J. David Singer, “The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations,” *World Politics* 14:1 (October 1961): 77-92.

Waltz and Singer the three levels are individuals, the nature of the state, and the international system, although I think at least brief mention of the level of bureaucracy is also in order.

Waltz's analysis of the individual level focuses on human nature, but most subsequent interpretations look at the extent to which the personality and political preferences of the leader affects the state's foreign policy.³ Of course each time a new leader comes to power we get to test this proposition, but Trump is more of an outlier than has been the case with past American presidents. Although many presidential campaigns in the post-World War II era were characterized by sharp differences in foreign policy views, retrospect reveals more continuity than one would have expected from campaign rhetoric. Dwight Eisenhower campaigned on 'rollback' as opposed to 'containment,' but once in office maintained the latter. Skipping ahead to our last transition, the contrast between the first four of five years of George W. Bush's foreign policies and those he followed in the remainder of his second term is greater than that between his final years and how Barack Obama behaved. The obvious argument is that the constraints imposed by domestic politics and the external environment are strong enough to limit the ability of any president to implement a vision that sharply breaks from the past.

When Obama was asked whether Trump could really carry out a radically different foreign policy he replied that "Once you're in the Oval Office, once you begin interacting with world leaders, once you see the complexities of the issues, that has a way of shaping your thinking."⁴ I cannot help but think that Obama's optimism on this score may be a reflection of his wistful memory of the foreign policy changes he tried to carry out only to find himself thwarted by a recalcitrant world.

In questioning the value of America's alliances, at least as presently structured, and in doubting the value of other multilateral institutions, Trump has articulated a narrower conception of the American national interest than that held by previous presidents. Relatedly, the centerpiece of his campaign was the claim that the U.S. was getting a raw deal in many of these arrangements and that he could renegotiate them, especially in the economic arena. Even more, he promised to change American immigration policy. In the security area he said he would subordinate other disputes and values to the struggle against Islamic terrorism and that he is undisturbed by Russian policies in Syria and Ukraine that the bulk of American foreign policy experts from both political parties see as menacing.

Raising the question of whether there will be radical change brings to the surface a tension in many forms of Realism between its descriptive and prescriptive aspects. That is, many Realist theories imply not only that states need to follow the imperatives of the international system, at least on issues concerning national security, but that they usually do so.

Of course people label themselves as Realists often differ in their policy preferences, and in recent years the realist community has vigorously debated the extent and type of international engagement that is most

³ My own discussion can be found in "Do Leaders Matter and How Do We Know," *Security Studies* 22:2 (May 2013): 153-179. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2013.786909>.

⁴ Avery Miller and Ali Rogin, "Obama Tells the World Not to Prejudge Trump's Policies Before He Takes Office," 20 November 2016. <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/obama-tells-world-prejudge-trumps-policies-takes-office/story?id=43677921>.

appropriate. Indeed Trump's apparent aversion to humanitarian intervention and democracy-building fit with the prescriptions of many Realists, as does his belief that bad relations with Russia are partly the fault of previous American policies that disregarded Russian interests. Nevertheless, a Trump foreign policy that followed his campaign statements would be hard to square with Realism, although it would be difficult to say what alternative theory, if any, it vindicated.

One potential check on an idiosyncratic leader is the state's bureaucracy, even if this cannot be neatly fit into the traditional levels of analysis. What will be tested here is not the work on bureaucratic politics that elaborated on Miles' Law of "where you stand depends on where you sit," but rather the broader view that in modern societies it is the permanent government that rules, or at least has enormous influence. Presidents' frustration with the bureaucracy is well known and varies little from one administration to another. To take just one extreme example, would the CIA carry out orders to resume waterboarding? Less dramatically, but with broader impact, the bureaucracy provides most of the information and options that the president receives. It has been difficult to prove the impact of this influence in the past because the views of the president and of the permanent bureaucracy have been fairly closely aligned, even in the case of Richard Nixon who did not believe this. With Trump as a real outlier, we will have a test of the extent to which the bureaucracy can socialize--or trap--the president. Of course distinguishing its influence from that of the external environment would be difficult because they both point in the direction of policy continuity, but some events and processes might permit at least some discrimination between two explanations.

The second, or domestic, level of analysis may be the most interesting, and enters in two ways. First, if foreign policy does change drastically, causation may be best located not at the level of individual but in the domestic coalition that put him into power. For some of Trump's proposed policies, however, this is an implausible argument. His proposed rapprochement with Russia probably cost him votes and certainly was not a reason for his election. Similarly, although the desire to have allies take some of the economic burden off American shoulders is widely shared in the electorate, public support for the basic alliance structure remains strong. In fact, core national security policies of the type that were central to presidential campaigns during the Cold War were relatively unimportant in this election and any changes here would be more attributable to Trump's personal views than to domestic pressures.

This is not true, however, of his proposed policies on trade and immigration, where his stance tapped into the deep dissatisfaction and insecurity of many millions of Americans who felt left behind by the economic developments of the past thirty years. The perception that the economic, political, and social elites were gaining at their expense and lacked respect for them and their way of life was compounded by the feeling that immigrants and minorities were receiving undeserved benefits and attention. Trump's triumph and the strength of Senator Bernie Sanders's campaign showed how many people believed that their government had failed to shield them from an unrestrained global economy and were no longer willing to follow the admonitions of political and opinion leaders. Similar trends are clear in Europe as well.

Obviously we will be trying to understand these developments for year to come, but I just want to note the relevance of three classics in social science: Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation*, Samuel Huntington's

Political Order in Changing Societies, and Peter Gourevitch's "The Second Image Reversed."⁵ These are familiar enough to require only a brief recap. Polanyi discussed the political and social backlash against industrialization and the rising primacy of market forces that overwhelmed traditional forms of community, responsibility, and fairness. Huntington analyzed the changing balance between the mobilization of mass opinion and mass movements on the one hand and institutionalization that guided and channeled it on the other. Gourevitch, as his title explained, looked at the ways in which the external environment molded states' political and social systems. The increased exposure to world economic markets without adequate means for protecting, compensating, and rebuilding the losers has led to a mobilization of opinion and groups that reject the conventional wisdom of experts and the pleas of established leaders. The external environment then reshaped society and politics in a way that perhaps was predictable, but that few of us foresaw.⁶ Most IR theories, especially those that can be characterized as Realist or Neo-Liberal, imply that it should be possible to contain and limit the foreign policy consequences of these developments. The clear national interests and the obvious economic benefits to powerful and widespread economic interests should be able to maintain, if not deepen, the sorts of arrangements that have brought the U.S. and the West such peace and prosperity.⁷ We shall see.

On the level of the interaction among nations rather than one country's foreign policy, theories about the strong propensity of democracies to cooperate with each other are also challenged by the election of Trump and the rise of parallel movements in Europe. In a way, this should not be surprising: there is nothing incomputable between democracy and nationalism, and the latter is rarely propitious for cooperation.

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⁵ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), and Peter Gourevitch, "The Second Image Reversed: The International Sources of Domestic Politics," *International Organization* 32:4 (Autumn 1978): 881-912.

⁶ For an account that did, see Richard Rorty, *Achieving our Country* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

⁷ For a 2011 discussion of whether a domestic support for the liberal international order had eroded, see ISSF Forum 2-4, "Is Liberal Internationalism in Decline," (17 February 2011), <https://issforum.org/roundtables/2-4-is-liberal-internationalism-in-decline>