FOREIGN AFFAIRS

How to Put IR Theory Into Practice

American Strategists Should Think More Like Social Scientists

BY STACIE E. GODDARD AND JOSHUA D. KERTZER **October 31, 2025**

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America's grand strategy is in turmoil. Over the past decade, power shifts, territorial disputes, and the faltering of international institutions have fueled an increasingly heated debate about what geopolitical position the United States finds itself in and the necessary trajectory of U.S. foreign policy. Some Washington analysts and policymakers (such as former U.S. Deputy National Security Adviser for Strategy Nadia Schadlow and Undersecretary of Defense Elbridge Colby) believe that after several decades of U.S. hegemony, great-power competition has returned, and Washington must embrace a foreign policy designed to counter threats from Beijing and Moscow. Others, including former members of the Biden administration such as Rebecca Lissner and Mira Rapp-Hooper, counsel that although the liberal multilateralism that defined the post–World War II order is under threat, it will persist; U.S. leaders should hold firm to a grand strategy that

promotes strong institutions, democracy, and free trade. Still others—such as the former U.S. diplomat Michael McFaul and the writer Anne Applebaum—believe that the current moment is defined by a new degree of contestation of norms, in which revisionist states in particular feel increasingly empowered to flout rules that once hemmed in conflict, promoted human rights, and even protected sovereignty. These analysts advise that the United States must defend critical norms explicitly by promoting them abroad.

As different as these arguments may seem, they have a common foundation. They are each built on one of three paradigms that has dominated international relations theory since World War II: realism, liberalism, and constructivism. Realists see politics as rooted in anarchy, driving countries to compete for power and security. Liberals assume that individuals all strive for universally desired public goods, which are best delivered by democracy, open economies, and multilateral institutions. Constructivists believe that the adoption of political ideas and norms by large powers drives the trajectory of global affairs just as much as any state's will to power.

Practitioners sometimes dismiss international relations theory as immaterial to real-world policymaking. In 2010, for instance, the longtime U.S. diplomat David Newsom complained that it was "either irrelevant or inaccessible to policymakers" and remained "locked in a circle of esoteric scholarly discussion." The divide between theory and practice is problematic in normal times, and downright dangerous in turbulent ones. For many of the voices leading Washington's foreign policy debate, international relations paradigms lurk in the background, generating an array of strategic recommendations that cannot easily be debated or reconciled because they are built on fundamentally different assumptions about how international politics works. If realist assumptions about power and security are right, then

the United States needs to prepare for decades of great-power competition. But if liberal beliefs about the universality of individual desires are correct, U.S. policymakers should in fact be striving to rebuild and reinforce a liberal order. And if constructivist assumptions are correct, then any U.S. grand strategy must remain rooted in legitimate norms and values.

To cut through the chaos, Washington policymakers need to spend more time, not less, discussing the root philosophies that undergird their strategic recommendations. No single paradigm is likely to provide the right path forward. But unless policymakers and academics debate their preferred grand strategies while explicitly acknowledging their paradigmatic roots, they will continue to talk past each other.

Tragically, the Trump administration has sought to dismantle existing forums, such as the Pentagon's Office of Net Assessment, that exposed policymakers to—in the words of former Defense Secretary Robert Gates—"eggheads and ideas." Restoring venues in which scholars and strategists can grapple with competing paradigms is vital to craft a coherent grand strategy in an era of uncertainty.

TOP MODELS

According to a 2007 survey by the Teaching, Research, and International Policy project at William and Mary, almost 70 percent of U.S. introductory international relations syllabuses were oriented around the debate between realist, liberal, and constructivist paradigms. The word "paradigm," as opposed to "theory," is important. Paradigms are used to generate theories, but they are bigger: they provide not specific propositions but broad frameworks about who matters in international politics, the kinds of factors one must pay attention to in order to understand how geopolitics works, and whether political interactions tend to be harmonious or hostile.

Realists claim that their worldview is ancient, found in Thucydides, Sun Tzu, and Machiavelli. And in the years following World War II, realists dominated the academic discipline. In simple terms, realists believe that international politics is anarchic. All states are sovereign, but none is sovereign over them. This means that states necessarily live in a world of uncertainty in which leaders cannot trust one another's intentions. All they can do is maximize their power to remain secure.

For realists, then, the global order that appears to be emerging is a reversion to a familiar—and tragic—norm. The last few decades may have seemed ordered, but that was only because U.S. power was unusually unmatched. Even as Washington built institutions, promoted open trade, and imposed its liberal vision on the world in the 1990s, the end of the order it dominated was already in sight as China's economic power expanded. Indeed, realists such as John Mearsheimer now chide U.S. leaders for ever having thought differently. And although Russia may not match China's economic power, it has also proved increasingly willing to challenge American ambitions. As a declining hegemon, realists suggest, the United States must acknowledge that it will face serious conflicts with other great powers. Nuclear weapons may have decreased the chance of outright great-power war, but Russian President Vladimir Putin's aggression shows that they are not enough to prevent conflicts from escalating.

Liberalism also claims a venerable intellectual tradition rooted in the thought of Adam Smith, John Locke, and Immanuel Kant, among other theorists. Liberals believe that although U.S. power might have been essential in building the post–World War II global order, that order delivered unparalleled public goods worldwide, laying the foundations for robust global free trade, enabling the spread of democracy, and ushering in a more peaceful and cooperative world. Unlike realists, liberals believe that

democracies are far more trustworthy actors on the world stage than autocracies. A key liberal observation is that democracies do not go to war with each other. Liberals attribute this relative pacifism to a host of restraining mechanisms inherent in democratic society, including the influence of public opinion on leaders, a freer press, and more rational societal decision-making processes. They also believe that the benefits of open trade logically outweigh the benefits of seizing other countries' goods violently and that international institutions generally offer more to great powers than they take from them.

Relative to realism and liberalism, constructivism is a newer international relations paradigm, although it, too, draws on a lineage that stretches back centuries. Constructivists' major argument is that world politics is as much ideational as material and that relations among states depend on norms as much as on military or economic power. Over the past hundred years, they argue, states have increasingly come to share a particular set of norms that set the boundaries of legitimate behavior. War, once considered an entirely normal instrument of statecraft, came to be seen as illegal and to be deployed only in self-defense. Leaders were expected to recognize the basic human rights of their citizens. If they did not, an international community could hold them to those standards, which came to supersede the norm of sovereignty.

FIXED FOCUS

John Maynard Keynes famously wrote that "practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct" thinker. The same is true of contemporary U.S. politicians and political leaders, even if they do not identify themselves as adherents of an international relations paradigm. Not all paradigms exert equal influence on U.S. foreign policy. Although realists traditionally

dominate academic debates, they have been less influential in policy circles, a fact they attribute to an American aversion to power politics. But influential foreign policy elites such as George Kennan, Henry Kissinger, and James Baker were realists.

Liberals have recently been far more prominent. Indeed, from the 1990s, Washington has been dominated by a bipartisan consensus that free trade, multilateralism, and democracy promotion should guide U.S. foreign policy. Constructivism, too, has had a visible place: self-proclaimed idealists such as the former diplomat Samantha Power and neoconservatives such as Robert Kagan were both committed to the position that values and norms should form the basis of grand strategy.

These paradigmatic commitments guide foreign policy elites' diagnoses of other states' behavior and the strategic responses they prescribe. Take the foreign policy debates now roiling Washington about U.S. strategy toward Russia and Ukraine, which are rendered more chaotic and unproductive than they need to be because very different—and unacknowledged—paradigms anchor different arguments. For those who hold realist assumptions, the cause of the conflict between those two countries was NATO's expansion eastward, which threatened Russian security and had the predictable consequence of triggering Russian aggression. Those who approach Russia's invasion of Ukraine from a liberal perspective believe that it was not an effort at self-defense; rather, it was outright aggression born of the dysfunction of Russia's autocratic regime. The remedy is to double down on resourcing NATO, including by inviting Ukraine into it.

Policymakers with constructivist leanings, meanwhile, see the war in Ukraine as undermining essential norms that hold the international community together. As Applebaum contended in late 2024, Putin "wants

to show his own people that Ukraine's democratic aspirations are hopeless" and "to prove that a whole host of international laws and norms, including the United Nations Charter and the Geneva conventions, no longer matter." The consequences of allowing Russia to shift the bounds of legitimate behavior are dire. Not only does it put Ukraine and Europe at risk; it could also allow other powers, notably China, to pursue unbridled conflict and competition.

PINHOLE CAMERAS

Paradigms provide a means to interpret the past and the present, as well as to see into a chaotic future. But they can also limit strategic imagination, especially if policymakers are unaware of the worldviews steering their thinking. Of course, leaders' perspectives do not always fall neatly into paradigmatic boxes. But recognizing that one is using a lens—and which lens—makes it much easier to know when to set that lens aside.

For example, despite their significant differences, each of the dominant modern international relations paradigms treats sovereign states as history's primary actors. But individuals, not states, often drive global change. In an age of personalism, individual leaders' idiosyncrasies, dispositions, and emotions matter more than ever, yielding large policy swings when leaders change office. Neither realists, nor liberals, nor constructivists were equipped to see the changes Mikhail Gorbachev's 1985 ascent to lead the Soviet Union would bring to global politics. Nor were any of the dominant international relations paradigms capable of foreseeing that a small group of religious extremists could launch a devastating attack on the U.S. homeland.

This same blind spot plagues analyses of today's strongman politics. Attempts to shoehorn U.S. President Donald Trump into stock frameworks —particularly the effort to portray him as a realist—come up short. His

concept of the U.S. national interest often appears incoherent and subordinated to his personal interest. He ratchets up the United States' great-power competition with China while displaying an indifference to the alliance building required to win such a competition. He raises tariffs to reshore American manufacturing while attempting an immigration crackdown that shrinks the U.S. workforce. Putin's resistance to liberal institutions and norms against aggression, likewise, is inextricably linked with his unique understanding of Russia's history as a victimized power. Remove these leaders from the equation, and it becomes difficult to predict their countries' trajectories.

If political leaders and analysts were more explicit about the theoretical frameworks that guide them, they would better recognize these conceptual gaps. Rather than recognizing the influence of personalist politics, political leaders and analysts often find ways to shoehorn the evidence into existing paradigms. If Putin gives a speech professing to have invaded Ukraine because of a fear of American power and a concern for Russia's security, realists tend to accept that as proof of their paradigm. At the same time, liberals and constructivists seem ignorant of the fact that a Russian leader might perceive Western democratic advocacy groups as a threat.

Finally, when paradigms go unconsidered, they can become self-fulfilling prophecies, shaping geopolitics rather than merely describing it. In 1998, a NATO briefing team came to Yale to make the case for the Clinton administration's policy to expand the alliance eastward. During a question-and-answer session, the international relations scholar Bruce Russett asked if expanding NATO might unintentionally threaten Russia and, in the process, impede Russian President Boris Yeltsin's efforts at democratic reforms. As the historian John Lewis Gaddis describes it, there was a

moment of shocked silence. "Good God! We'd never thought of that!" one of the briefers replied, seemingly sincere in his surprise.

BRIDGE THE GAP

There is no way to eliminate paradigmatic thinking, nor should it be eliminated. But Washington strategists would do well to think more like social scientists. This means not only making their paradigmatic assumptions explicit but also striving to explain why the other sides are misguided. Realists serving in the Trump administration need to articulate why bolstering multilateral security institutions and democracy promotion should no longer be a U.S. foreign policy priority. Liberal and constructivist critics must clarify why U.S. strategy will falter without institutional and normative commitments rather than simply assume that it will.

Sound paradigmatic reasoning also requires policymakers to ask a simple question: What would prove a strategy wrong? Analysts whose arguments rest on unacknowledged paradigms can easily miss important facts or bend reality. Asking ahead of time which events would disprove their predictions can correct this bias. If China and the United States reach a trade deal, and if the Trump administration is willing to let other great powers claim "spheres of influence," that would seem inconsistent with realist theory. If democracies continue to backslide and protectionism rises, liberals must reevaluate whether there really are universally desired public goods.

Such conversations require forums to bring academics and policymakers together. Left to their own devices, as the political scientist Stephen Walt noted, policymakers focus too narrowly on "today's problems." And without chances to engage with real policymaking, academics can dwell on abstract, intradisciplinary debates. Since the 1990s, the National Intelligence Council has put academics and intelligence officers into conversation, publishing the

results in its *Global Trends* reports. The Pentagon's Office of Net Assessment prized working with academics on questions of defense and national security. None of these institutions explicitly sought to debate international relations paradigms, but by bringing together a wide variety of scholars to Washington, they encouraged contentious discussions about fundamental foreign affairs assumptions.

The Trump administration, however, is aggressively working to close these shops—just when Washington needs them. It shuttered the Office of Net Assessment in March, and in September, Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard announced the end of the *Global Trends* reports. These moves have occurred in an atmosphere of increased hostility toward higher education and theory more generally.

Eliminating these institutions and debating opportunities will not drive theory out of policy. It will simply obscure its role. And it will thus ensure that the paradigms become less a source of strategic illumination and even more a source of foreign policy blindness.
