

The Julius Silver, Roslyn S. Silver, and Enid Silver Winslow

DIALOGUES IN ARTS AND SCIENCE

THE STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVE: THE STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN 2003

Bruce Bueno de Mesquita

Silver Professor of Politics



NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

The Strategic Perspective: The Study of International Relations in 2003

The study of international conflict is undergoing a rapid and dramatic transformation. Some of the field's most venerable beliefs now confront fundamental challenges to their logic and to their consistency with the record of history. For example, the idea that a balance of power promotes peace and an imbalance, war can easily be traced back more than two millennia to Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War*. It is a belief that permeates the thinking of such influential statesmen as Henry Kissinger and Colin Powell and yet has been shown to bear no clear relationship to the likelihood or intensity of international conflict. In this essay I briefly touch upon some of the most important debates regarding our understanding of international affairs and the ways we go about studying conflict and peace.

International relations scholarship can loosely be divided into three perspectives: realism; liberalism; and the strategic perspective. Realism is dominated by the idea that uncertainty about the distribution of power and the reliability of commitments between states is essential to understanding how politics unfolds at the international level. For realists, the primary subject matter of international affairs is the balance of power and efforts by states to maximize their security. Realism's focus on states as the central actors in inter-

national politics leads to the view that what happens within states is irrelevant for understanding what happens between states.

Because of its focus on the state, realism dismisses the contention that domestic affairs are important for understanding major developments in international relations. Indeed, in its most influential form realism leads even to the claim that foreign policy and international politics are themselves entirely different, largely unrelated subjects.

Although there have always been those who argued against realist claims, the arguments in opposition generally depended on faith in the good intentions of governments or an interest in greater attention to cooperation than to conflict. Liberalism is grounded in the conviction that to achieve cooperation states must openly share information and reach agreement on international institutions designed to solve problems in the unregulated international environment. Liberalism shares with realism the assumption that states are the actors in international relations. In fact, the view of the state as the central player in the international arena is so strong that the English language does not provide a common word or phrase to describe *international* relations without invoking the *nation* as the key unit of analysis.

The state-centric view is and has been challenged for the past decade or more by those, myself included, who share the conviction that international politics is a product of the nominal pulls and tugs of domestic affairs. Viewed

THE STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVE:
THE STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN 2003

from the strategic perspective, leaders — not nations — make policy decisions. They do so to maximize their prospects of staying in office. Therefore, their decisions are strategic, taking into account expected responses by adversaries and supporters, and designed to maximize the leader's (not the state's) welfare. In the strategic perspective, the motivations, interests, and constraints imposed on individual decision makers are what shape how political leaders, acting in the name of their states, interact with one another.

Research that ties international politics, foreign policy, and domestic politics together leads to many implications that are incompatible with realism or liberalism's received wisdom. Such an approach, for instance, provides little basis for believing that the balance or imbalance of power is a crucial factor in understanding the likelihood, severity, or resolution of disputes. Such an approach gives scant attention to whether alliances are organized to create a bipolar or multi polar international environment. And such an approach dismisses the tenet that states seek to maximize power, security, or anything else. It also provides the logic and evidence to establish that the open exchange of information can — under specific circumstances — promote conflict rather than cooperation.

In place of a focus on states as decision makers seeking power or security, the strategic perspective draws our attention to the policy incentives created by different domestic governing institutions and to how those incentives shape critical variations in international politics. Let me briefly summarize the key ideas and then I will offer some examples of how these ideas work in elucidating policy issues related to waging war and to building nations.

Let us suppose that political leaders want to maximize their prospects of staying in power. They choose actions, therefore, that help advance that objective. If those actions happen also to be beneficial for the rest of the people in the society they lead, so much the better, but that which makes leaders better off need not also make their subjects better off. We can think of leaders as individuals or groups of people charged with the responsibility for raising revenues and spending those revenues in the name of the state. We consider, then, how different political arrangements — like democracy or autocracy — constrain how incumbents allocate those revenues. All leaders raise revenue through taxation and other means and then allocate revenues among three basic categories: public goods that benefit all members of society (e.g., national defense, rule of law, protection of civil liberties); private goods that benefit only those whose support is essential to keep the leader in office (e.g., the use of nepotism, privileged access to contracts, rent-seeking opportunities, favorable tax policies); and discretionary funds at the disposal of the incumbent leader (e.g., secret bank accounts, lavish lifestyles, political rainy-day funds). When leaders rely on a small group of generals or bureaucrats to keep them in office — as is true for autocrats, monarchs, and heads of juntas — then it proves most efficient for them to buy the support of the few backers they need by providing them with lots of private benefits in exchange for their loyalty. An autocrat who fails to ensure special benefits for core backers is unlikely to last in office. Autocrats face deposition if they try to implement good economic policies that divert benefits from the exclusive few whose support is needed, “dissipating” those resources on the many who have little say in ensuring political survival.

THE STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVE:
THE STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN 2003

When domestic political institutions compel a leader to require a broad base of support — as is true, to varying degrees, in democracies — then private rewards turn out to be an inefficient way to stay in power. Democratic leaders would have to spread the private rewards across so many people that each would receive too little for these benefits to influence recipients to remain loyal to the incumbent. In such a situation, it is more efficient for leaders to rely on public goods as their best means to retain office.

When political institutions compel any leader to depend on many supporters, each supporter knows that he or she also has excellent prospects of being consequential to the political success of a politician who challenges the incumbent for office. Conversely, when a leader only needs backing from a few people to stay in power, those few people are expected to be loyal both because they are getting well rewarded for their support and because they face a high risk of losing their privileges if another politician succeeds in toppling the incumbent regime. It follows that autocrats spend more resources on private goods than on public goods; they enjoy strong loyalty from their coalition; and this loyalty allows them to spend less on their backers than the total pot of revenue. What they do not spend to maintain the loyalty of their supporters remains as discretionary funds for their own use.

Democratic leaders, in contrast, emphasize public goods over private goods. Consequently their backers are more fickle, being perfectly prepared to “throw the rascals out” if someone else makes credible promises to provide a

better basket of public benefits. After all, since everyone benefits from public goods, there is only a small private goods advantage for backers in a democracy who remain loyal to the incumbent, an advantage easily offset by a challenger who is believed to be more competent at producing public benefits. Thus, democratic leaders must spend almost all the revenue they raise on offering good public policy; they are able to retain little for their own discretionary use; and they are easily turned out of office. So, autocrats can rule by theft and yet stay in office for a long time while democrats rule based on good public policy and are easily defeated by political rivals.

1. The Democratic Peace: A Strategic Perspective

With these basic ideas in mind, consider what this implies about the inclination to fight wars. State-centric theories, like realism or liberalism, lack a clear way to explain the generally accepted observation that democracies tend not to fight wars with one another even though they are not especially reluctant to fight with autocratic regimes. According to the strategic perspective, democratic leaders cannot afford to pursue overly risky foreign policies because they are judged primarily in terms of how good a job they do in providing public benefits. Defeat in war is always costly for society and for democratic leaders. Democrats, therefore, are only prepared to become involved in wars when they believe at the outset that their chance of victory is high or when all efforts at negotiation (as in the period 1938–1939) fail. Autocrats, in contrast, are not

THE STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVE:
THE STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN 2003

retained or deposed by their domestic supporters primarily because of the job they do in providing successful public policies. They are judged by their ability to deliver lots of private benefits to their cronies. Defeat in war is less costly politically for autocrats than it is for democrats. For autocrats, winning a war by spending on the war effort money they could have used to bribe cronies jeopardizes their hold on power because their cronies have no reason to remain loyal if they are deprived of their private rewards. As a result, autocrats do not try nearly as hard as democrats do to win wars or to find negotiated settlements of their disputes. Quite to the contrary, to survive in office, autocrats need to be sure that they can pay their essential supporters enough that they do not defect. For autocrats, extra money that goes into trying to win a war is money that would have been better spent by using it to buy the loyalty of cronies. For democrats, saving money to bribe backers is not nearly as politically beneficial as is spending money to assure policy success, including victory in war.

Because democrats are selective about the circumstances under which they are prepared to fight, they almost always win the wars they initiate. In fact, recent research shows that democracies win 93% of the wars they initiate while autocrats win only about 60% of the time. Allowing for the small advantage gained by striking first, autocrats basically have even odds of winning when they start a war while for democrats victory is practically certain. But if two democrats are at loggerheads, then war is unlikely. Each democratic leader has similar, institutionally-induced incentives, including an incentive to try hard if

war ensues. Each must provide policy success in order to be retained by his or her constituents. Each must believe that the probability of winning the war is a near certainty. The likelihood is practically naught that leaders of two rival democracies each believes at the same time about the same dispute that their prospects of victory are nearly certain. When democrats do not think they are nearly certain of victory they opt for negotiations over fighting. Thus leaders of two democracies are unlikely to find that the circumstances are right for them to gamble on war over negotiations. Autocrats do not face the same constraints. They do not try especially hard to win most of their wars; they are prepared to fight even when the chances of victory are not exceptionally good; and they are more likely to be overthrown if they spend the resources they need to bribe their cronies than if they lose the war. The exception to these conditions arise when at the outset an autocrat thinks that defeat means being deposed by the victor. For reasons explained below, this exception is unlikely to arise in a war with another autocracy, but is likely when the rival governs a democracy. To summarize, the logic of the strategic perspective explains why it is that we observe democracies fighting with autocracies; autocracies fighting with one another; democracies not fighting with each other; democracies winning most of the wars in which they get involved; and democracies showing greater eagerness than autocracies to resolve disputes through negotiations.

In the account of the so-called “democratic peace” provided by the strategic perspective, democratic leaders are not more civic minded; their actions

are not shaped by superior social norms or values; and they are not inherently better at fighting wars than other types of political leaders. Instead, their desire to stay in office and their dependence on a large constituency shapes their choices and makes them highly selective about escalating disputes to violence. Likewise, autocrats are not assumed to have different motivations than democrats; they just face different institutional constraints and incentives. State-centric approaches to international relations simply have no basis for explaining the pattern of behavior I just described and yet historical, case study, and statistical analyses all strongly support the implications of the explanation proffered by the strategic perspective.

2. Nation Building: A Strategic Account

When it comes to nation building, the strategic perspective offers an account that in its conclusions does not appear very different from the view of realists. In both cases, there would be little reason to be sanguine about nation building as an exercise oriented toward developing new democracies except under special circumstances. The strategic logic leading to policy implications about nation building, however, is radically different from that found in realism. To illustrate how the logic of the strategic perspective works when it comes to nation building, I consider the incentives American political leaders have to shape governments in other countries following a successful military intervention such as occurred in Iraq in the spring of 2003.

Any president of the United States acts as a self-interested (or political party interested) leader. As such, the president always has a strong policy motive as well as a strong welfare motive. This colors not only his decision of where and when to intervene but also of how to intervene. Note that the claim is that the president's incentives are self-interested; they are not inherently about improving national welfare or advancing the national interest, whatever that may be.

Democratic political leaders, such as the president of the United States, determine whether to intervene in the affairs of another state based on beliefs about the policies of the other state and the prospects of a successful intervention. The critical feature of another state's policies is whether they are perceived to be good or bad from the perspective of the president's core constituents. In cases where the policies are viewed as poor, the president is pulled by his re election motive toward changing the other state's leadership and possibly its governing institutions to be more in alignment with what American voters favor. When American voters view the policies in the target state favorably, US intervention is likely to be motivated by a desire to prop up the target government and ward off opposing forces. Since some percentage of those opposing forces are likely to have democratic aspirations, the "propping up" of such a government is likely to involve bolstering autocratic institutions. Contrary to what those who are boosters of democracy might think, the strategic perspective — and the evidence from history — supports the expectation that the effort to prop up failing friendly governments often produces a loss of civil liberties to help crush nascent

THE STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVE:
THE STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN 2003

anti-government movements, as was the case with failed American efforts to rescue the regime of Fulgencio Batista in Cuba in the late 1950s.

In the case of Iraq in 2003, because President Bush's core constituents were hostile to the policies followed by Saddam Hussein's government, American intervention was oriented toward deposing the existing government. Such an intervention has significant prospects of improving the material and social welfare of the ordinary Iraqi. But, America's intervention is unlikely to improve Iraqi political freedom substantially over the next several years. Interventions against hostile regimes are likely to end with those regimes being deposed and with the institutions of government being made only modestly more democratic after a "puppet" government is installed. The problem with erecting a true democracy arises if the policies desired by the citizens of the defeated state are incommensurate with the policies desired by the core constituents of the democratic intervener, whether it is the United States or some other democracy. The key is that a quasi-autocratic puppet government can be counted on to deliver the policies desired by the intervener's constituents because its leaders are not judged by a broad set of constituents in its own domestic environment. As long as the newly installed government requires support from only a few key individuals, the leadership can credibly promise to follow the policies desired by the intervener in exchange for the resources needed to keep cronies loyal.

If a democratic government were installed, say in Iraq, its leaders could not make such a commitment to policies American voters like because those

leaders would need to satisfy the policy wishes of their own Iraqi constituents to stay in office. Thus the strategic perspective leads to discouraging — but empirically accurate — expectations about nation building efforts by democratic interveners.

Autocrats differ from democrats when it comes to their motivation for foreign intervention. While democrats intervene to gain policy advantages, autocrats intervene primarily to locate new sources of revenues with which to generate private benefits for their supporters. Because they are driven by a quest for treasure rather than policy gains, autocrats are somewhat less likely to depose defeated foreign governments than are democratic victors. Autocrats prefer to avoid the expense of maintaining the post-intervention peace. They just take the valuables they were after and go home. Democrats are more likely to endure the costs of sustaining the post-intervention peace because for them success depends on sustained improvement in the policies followed by the vanquished state. Fending off threats to the political survival of an imposed puppet government is costly, but failing to achieve policy gains can be even costlier for the victorious democratic intervener.

4. Summary

The strategic perspective offers a significantly different explanation of international relations from that suggested by realism, liberalism, and other state-centric viewpoints. All of us should be cautious about dismissing received

THE STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVE:
THE STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN 2003

wisdom in favor of alternative accounts of history or alternative predictions about the future. Presumably there are reasons to believe state-centric views or they would not have so many adherents and such a long history. Yet, neither should we be so wedded to these older ideas that we refuse to confront their lapses in logic or their empirical failures. The logical lapses have been well documented for a long time. The empirical evidence is substantial — and growing — that the strategic perspective accounts for those aspects of received wisdom that are consistent with the record of history while also providing reliable explanations for facts that seem anomalous in the context of state-centric perspectives. The coming years of debate, testing and retesting will help reveal whether the strategic perspective supplants its older “rivals” or whether it falls by the wayside in the face of superior alternative explanations of key features of the struggle for international peace, justice, and cooperation.

THE STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVE:
THE STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN 2003

THE STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVE:
THE STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN 2003

essay is based on an article I published in 2010 (England 2010).

THE STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVE:
THE STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN 2003

THE STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVE:
THE STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN 2003

