

CAN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS BE BEST UNDERSTOOD AS A ZERO-SUM GAME?

INTRODUCTION

A zero-sum game is one in which one actor's gain is another's loss (Scruton, 1996, p.592). In essence it describes a situation of pure conflict in which there is a winner and a loser (Evans & Newnham, 1998, p.589). A zero-sum game is a theoretical construct, based on certain assumptions about the actors such as complete rationality (Evans and Newnham, 1998, p.189), and thus can not serve as a perfect model for international relations.

The question that this essay addresses is whether zero-sum game theory is nevertheless the most useful lens through which to view international relations, both now and in the future. The focus is upon international interactions in the security realm, both as a tool for narrowing the analysis and because this is where zero-sum's greatest claim to relevance lies.

The essay commences with an analysis of the close association between zero-sum theory and realist theories of international relations, highlighting the limitations of both in understanding cooperative forms of international behaviour. It continues this critique of the explanatory power of zero-sum perspectives by briefly examining the way in which other international relations theories seek to understand international interactions. The essay concludes by applying these theories to current trends in the Post-Cold War international environment and examining the extent to which emerging forms of interaction may be best described as conflictual or cooperative.

REALIST UNDERPINNINGS OF ZERO-SUM

In its emphasis on conflict and on finite 'goods' for which actors are competing, the concept of a zero-sum game is closely associated with the realist paradigm. Realist theory is premised on an anarchical, and inherently conflict prone, international environment in which state interests are defined in terms of power. According to Hughes, 'realists perceive a relatively fixed amount of security in the system and view shifts in power and security on the part of one state as mirror images of shifts in power and security of other states' (Hughes, 2000, p. 47).

However, while zero-sum games and realist theory are both premised on actors' interest in maximising their gains at the expense of others, realists have some, albeit limited, capacity to explain cooperative forms of interaction. A cooperative situation, by definition, involves some gains to most, if not all players (without this there would be no incentive to cooperate) and thus can not be explained in zero-sum, 'winner takes all', terms. Realism does not, however, preclude the possibility of cooperation between states, although it views such interactions in essentially competitive terms and stresses the limitations to cooperative endeavours. Realists argue that states are not drawn to cooperative situations where only absolute gains are likely, that is gains that are less than those of other actors. Rather they seek to limit their cooperative behaviour to situations where relative gains may be obtained, namely gains that are at least as great as those obtained by other states (Hughes, 2000, p.48).

Zero-sum and realist theories are more closely aligned in their emphasis on distrust as an underlying motive for action. Actors in a zero-sum scenario can not afford to trust each other as the desire of the other player to defeat them and take all the spoils is an inherent

assumption. Realists acknowledge that states may seek to pursue greater security through purely defensive actions but cite the 'security dilemma' as an explanation for the structural imperative towards spiralling arms races. This dilemma dictates that actions taken by states to increase their own security, regardless of intent, will lead to rising insecurity for others as these other states can not afford to view even avowedly defensive actions as other than threatening (Baylis, 1997, p.197).

OTHER WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING INTERNATIONAL INTERACTIONS

Given these realist underpinnings of zero-sum analysis, it is possible to explore the limitations of zero-sum game theory in explaining cooperative international behaviour by examining some of the criticisms levied against realism in this regard. Some critics of realism's deficiencies in this area may even be found within the broader realist camp amongst so-called neo-realists. While some neo-realists, such as Waltz and Mearsheimer, share realists' pessimism about the prospects for cooperation between states, others argue that there is a wide range of conditions under which adversaries can best achieve their security goals through cooperative policies (Baylis, 1997, p.199). These neo-realists perceive the structure of the current international system as a 'mature anarchy' in which states increasingly accept that national securities are interdependent and that excessively self-referenced security policies are self-defeating (Baylis, 1997, p.200). The European Union is cited by such neo-realists as the pre-eminent example of a group of states which has renounced violent or coercive means for settlement of disputes between them. These neo-realists see scope for such types of cooperation to be extended to other regions (Baylis, 1997, p.200).

A liberal approach to international relations poses even greater challenges to the explanatory power of a zero-sum perspective. Liberals argue that states will pursue not only relative, but also absolute gains (Hughes, 2000, p.48). While viewing international institutions as the product of state interests, and thus constrained in what they can achieve when those interests conflict, liberals nevertheless believe that institutions can provide unprecedented opportunities for achieving greater international security through cooperative action (Baylis, 1997, p.201). By going beyond describing international relations and seeking to prescribe how states should interact, liberals have opened themselves to charges of idealism (Hughes, 2000, p.50). Through their focus on relative gains, they are nevertheless better able to explain the enduring nature of cooperative institutions such as NATO in the post-Cold War world, following the removal of the unifying common enemy, than realists who are concerned only with more narrow calculations of self interest (Baylis, 1997, p.201).

Constructivist approaches to international relations go further still in questioning the explanatory power of zero-sum games in the international context. They argue that the identities and interests of international actors are not exogenously given, as assumed by realists and liberals. Rather identities, which in turn form the basis for interests, are socially constructed (Wendt, 1992, pp.79-80). Viewed from this perspective, there is no imperative in the international system that inevitably drives international actors towards zero-sum games (as a realist would claim) or which constrains the extent of cooperation possible (a liberal preoccupation). States may have acquired selfish identities and interests through a history of interactions of a particular type, and thus habitually distrust each other's intentions, but alternative forms of learning and interaction are possible (Wendt, 1992, p.81). The collective European identity amongst EU countries, which constructivists explain in terms of the transformative effect of four decades of cooperation, stands as an example of this (Wendt,

1992, p.88). Constructivists add, however, a note of caution to claims regarding the transformative powers of their theoretical approach. Identities and interests, once institutionalised, can be hard to change (Wendt, 1992, p.83). International actors schooled in a world of zero-sum games may find it hard to learn new games.

THE CURRENT INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

If zero-sum is to be regarded as a useful lens for understanding the current international environment, it is necessary to argue that the world should be viewed in primarily conflictual terms. It is clear that the end of the Cold War has not resulted in the end of conflict in the international system. Rather, super-power rivalry through a nuclear arms race and proxy wars has been replaced by a proliferation of smaller scale, regionally and ethnically based conflicts (Hocking & Smith, 1995, p.30); struggles often aimed at achieving nation-state status. At the same time, however, the extent of interaction and cooperation between international actors has increased (Hocking & Smith, 1995, p.42). The growing integration of EU countries, the expanding number of international regimes for dealing with transnational issues, and increasing linkages between actors at all levels in the international system stand as testimony to this. In short, the post-Cold War period has often been characterised in terms of contrary processes of fragmentation and integration (Hocking & Smith, 1995, p.42).

Achieving security in such an environment is a complex task. The conventional meaning of security has expanded from the simple absence of war to encompass protection from a wide range of non-military threats, including economic deprivation and environmental degradation (Alagappa, 1998, p.43). At the same time, the state's pre-eminent role as the unit of analysis has declined (Alagappa, 1998, pp.30-31). Security is no longer provided solely by states for their people against other states. Many other actors are crowding the international stage, state sovereignty is diminishing, and entities both smaller (communities & individuals) and larger (humanity) than the state are laying claim to the right to feel secure (Camilleri, 1994, pp.140-141).

CONCLUSION

Viewed against this background, it is apparent that international relations can not be characterised in either purely conflictual or purely cooperative terms. It is also apparent that security, as it has come to be defined in the post Cold-War period, can not be achieved solely through conflictual forms of interaction. Indeed, many of the new threats to security can only be ameliorated through cooperative endeavours. This has been a major imperative towards greater international cooperation across a broad range of issues. As alternatives to the predominant realist paradigm, liberal and constructivist theories of international relations both offer explanations for states' active pursuit of cooperative forms of interaction. Constructivist theory is particularly useful as it offers an explanation for how two basic tenets of international relations -identities and interests - that other theories accept as given, can be changed.

An international relations practitioner can not afford, however, to take actions informed solely by theories that are prescriptive (liberalism) or transformative (constructivism) in nature. The stakes involved in the 'game' of international relations are high and the costs of getting it wrong can be significant. Assuming a cooperative paradigm when other actors perceive the

world in conflictual terms can place a state in a seriously disadvantaged position¹. Domestic pressures for results can also motivate practitioners to focus on maximisation of short-term gains at the expense of greater future security². Realist theories of international relations and hence, to some extent, zero-sum perspectives therefore continue to possess some explanatory power. As the above analysis demonstrates, however, such perspectives do not, by any means, provide a comprehensive picture of international relations. In fact, their utility in the post-Cold War world is arguably diminishing. For anyone concerned with change in the international system, as liberals and constructivists are, this utility is particularly limited.

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¹ As Chamberlain discovered to his peril in the lead up to WWII.

² Such pressures underlie, for example, states' reluctance to accept the economic burden of reducing greenhouse gas emissions.