
Does globalisation reduce or exacerbate the zero-sum game of international relations?

Wing Commander Tony Hindmarsh, Australia – Air Force

Globalisation is not a novelty but a recurring phenomenon. In its present iteration, globalisation is a contingent and variable process that accelerates flows of resources, finances, information and people and influences the conception of state security. Periods of significant backlash, leading to global instability and heightened security concerns, have followed previous instances of advancing globalisation. The lessons of history suggest a definitive outcome from globalisation—to either reduce or exacerbate the zero-sum game of international relations (IR)—is, potentially, premature.

This paper will follow three steps, starting with a review of Realist theory to clarify the zero-sum concept. The second step will involve an assessment of the nature and aggregate impact of globalisation. Since truth is not an attribute of any one theory but of the dialogue between them, a discussion of the linkages between globalisation and other IR theories will then follow.

Review of Realist IR theory

Realist theory is a broad church but all ‘denominations’ subscribe to the tenets of statism, survival, and self-help (Baylis & Smith, 2001, 150). Statism is the state-centric assumption of Realism, advancing the sovereign state as the principle actor in international politics (Baylis & Smith, 2001, 143). This tenet of statism is further developed by the related principles of sovereignty and power.

Weber defined the state as the actor holding ‘the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory’, based on the state’s sovereign authority to make and enforce laws within this territorial space (Baylis & Smith, 2001, 150). The state as the sovereign authority pursues a security duality: the state aims to increase security by pursuing survival in the international system through self-help and relative power outcomes, and, as a by-product, also provides security for individuals within the state (Baylis & Smith, 2001, 153). Each state’s primary goal is the struggle for power in the anarchic international political system (Walt, 1998, 31). A balance of power is then expected to result, irrespective of the intentions of any particular state (Baylis & Smith, 2001, 153).

The balance of power is zero-sum because security is a finite resource. Increasing security for one state is expected to cause a mirrored, decreasing security for other states—either individually or in aggregate. This concept does not infer states act alone in shifting the power balance; Realist theory accommodates a degree of cooperation among states—to do otherwise would suggest the conflict of interest between states is total (Jervis, 1999, 44). However, ‘Offensive Realists’ see little reason for a large degree of cooperation because anarchy compels states to expand power in a quest for absolute security (Jervis, 1999, 51). In contrast, ‘Defensive Realists’ view instances of the security dilemma as offering states an opportunity to seek security by both preserving power through ‘cooperation under anarchy policies’ and changing preferences over strategies (Jervis, 1999, 52). Neither approach to cooperation alters the fundamental underpinning for Realist theory of a zero-sum game.

Impact of globalisation

Globalisation is not a new phenomenon but has developed over a number of centuries as the civilisation of the West has come to dominate the majority of the world (Shaw, 1997, 498). Nevertheless, the extent, depth, causes and consequences of globalisation on the current state of world politics should not be overstated (Baylis & Smith, 2001, 17). Globalisation is not ‘remorselessly progressing’ but offers states an evolving range of choices and consequences (Clark, 1998, 493).

In contrast with a previous emphasis on the interaction of states, more recent globalisation influences have fostered an interaction between domestic constituencies. This form of intensification differs from merely intensifying connections between states—defined as internationalisation (Baylis & Smith, 2001, 15). The intensification of relations across borders, through increasing interaction and interconnectedness within and across states involving economic, cultural, social, political and military processes, is a distinct recent phenomenon in globalisation (Jain, 2001, 89; Shaw, 1997, 498). To quote Scholte, contemporary globalisation ‘as a process is not about the crossing of borders but their transcendence’ (Clark, 1998, 484).

The resultant, increasing expectations of domestic societies and demands they place on each state are anticipated to challenge the political system internal to the state—not, necessarily, the continued existence of the state. By extension, globalisation not only affects both domestic and international matters but also the constitutive relationship between the two. Hence, the Realist focus on the state in the international system while ignoring influence from the domestic polity is now questionable. This view of globalisation informs the following assessment of interaction between globalisation and IR theories.

Globalisation and IR theories

At one extreme, globalisation is claimed to have ended the period of the state system as the organising framework for international relations (Falk, 1997, 124). This outcome is premised on several influences, including a reduced territorial sovereignty (degrading the capacity of the state to retain domestic control); sharp constraint on state activities, in extent and depth (resulting from increasing interdependence across the international system); and, expanded influence of international non-government organisations in shaping the international system (Jain, 2001, 11; Falk, 1997, 125). The other extreme asserts the pre-eminence of each state in performing legal, social, political and security roles—even ascribing an increased importance in light of recent international terrorism and religious extremism (Jain, 2001, 11; Wolf, 2001, 189–190). A dialectical approach is useful for considering these two extremes. For example, if a state-based international system did not exist what actor(s) would possess the legitimacy to replace the state? Recent updates of other IR theories may substantiate a non-state basis for the international system.

Falk (1997, 124–136) proclaims globalisation has killed the state-based international system but his global society concept is not a coherent alternative. Liberalism, although downplaying the significance of state sovereignty and stressing interdependence between states, retains the state as the primary actor in the international system (Baylis & Smith, 2001, 5). Marxist theory has recently gained new currency but caution is required. Marxist theory forecasts globalisation to eradicate national sentiments and undermine sovereign states by fostering new, universalistic political arrangements that reflect the changing relations of production; however, evidence to align globalisation and class conflict is lacking (Burchill et al. 2001, 149). At best, the Marxist forecast of a transition from capitalism to socialism through class transformation remains latent; hence, class has yet to emerge as a replacement for the state in the international system.

The foregoing discussion confirms the continuing role of the state as the primary actor in the international system. The question to then emerge is whether globalisation has altered the nature of the state? Shaw (1997, 498) posits counterpositioning globalisation and the state is flawed. The globalisation effect is, more accurately, a transformation of state forms through a process of mutual adaptation between the forces of globalisation and the state, to shape and be shaped by (Shaw, 1997, 498; Clark, 1998, 479). This mutual adaptation concept contrasts starkly with the depiction of the state competing for survival against the forces of globalisation. The mutual adaptation concept is also crucial to countering any criticism that Realism is now an historical anachronism (Falk, 1997, 126).

The adaptive process enables the state to redefine itself in the changing environment of the international system, through a transformation in its role, and, thereby, avoids a potential for irrelevancy. Globalisation reshapes the tenets of statism, survival, and self-help through the potentially positive or negative effects from diverse factors in the international system, including economic, cultural, social, environmental, military and political. The conception of the state is altered by these globalisation factors but the state remains the primary actor in the international system.

Clark's (1998, 493) historical review of the interaction between states and globalisation portends a need to redefine the balance between the domestic and international in addressing the diverse factors. In setting a revised balance, mindful of increasing interaction across domestic constituencies fostered by globalisation, the state plays a pivotal role. In essence, the state has contemporaneous domestic and international roles. The crucial aspect is the interaction between these two roles over time.

From the perspective of the zero-sum game, the state, in determining an international position, must factor the domestic and vice versa. This revised role, described as states balancing the international and domestic to shift the overall balance of power in the states' favour, is evident in contemporary Australian policy development (Clark, 1998, 497; *Advancing the National Interest: Australia's Foreign and Trade Policy White Paper*, 2003, Chapter One, 9–13). Since globalisation exerts influence at both the international and domestic levels, the role of the state is more complicated than if the state need only consider the international system. The state remains the primary actor within the evolving but still anarchic international system in pursuit of power—a pursuit now more directly shaped by both domestic and international considerations. Hence, the zero-sum game remains central to IR but globalisation has transformed the state's role into the pivot point between international and domestic realms.

Conclusion

Globalisation has altered the relationship between domestic and international systems through intensified interaction across domestic constituencies. Reconstitution of the relationship between the domestic and international has prompted an adaptation of the state to act as the pivot point between these two systems while remaining the primary actor in the international system. Realist tenets of statism, survival and self-help remain but are also altered through this process of adaptation. Although globalisation has both caused this redefinition of the state role and reinforced the state's pre-eminence in the international system, it is premature to claim that globalisation has either reduced or exacerbated the zero-sum game of international relations—to date the effect remains indeterminate.

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