

# *Theory Talks*

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## THEORY TALK #33

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### STEPHEN WALT ON THE ISRAEL LOBBY, THE 'SECURITY' IN SECURITY STUDIES, AND THE STRUCTURAL NATURE OF INTERSTATE COMPETITION

#### Theory Talks

is an interactive forum for discussion of debates in International Relations with an emphasis of the underlying theoretical issues. By frequently inviting cutting-edge specialists in the field to elucidate their work and to explain current developments both in IR theory and real-world politics, *Theory Talks* aims to offer both scholars and students a comprehensive view of the field and its most important protagonists.

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## STEPHEN WALT ON THE ISRAEL LOBBY, THE 'SECURITY' IN SECURITY STUDIES, AND THE STRUCTURAL NATURE OF INTERSTATE COMPETITION



*Theory Talks* proudly presents a comprehensive *Talk* with one of IR's most influential contemporary commentators. Ever since the publication of the book *The Israel Lobby*, Stephen Walt has been at the center of attention, both inside the IR community and in the public debate. In this *Talk*, he expands on a number of issues, ranging from Iran and the bomb to Europe as an autonomous actor; from the 'Security' in Security Studies to the Israel Lobby; and from Thucydides to Obama.

**What is, according to you, the biggest challenge or principal debate in current IR? What is your position or answer to this challenge or in this debate?**

I think that the biggest challenge to the field has three parts. The first part is that it has been a while since there has been a really big new theoretical breakthrough, the kind of idea that engages everyone in the field. My sense of the field is that for the last 10 or 15 years we have been in something of an intellectual cul-de-sac. Secondly, much of contemporary IR theory is simply not very relevant – it doesn't actually tell our students much about the real world we're grappling with; it doesn't give much guidance to policy makers or even concerned citizens who are trying to understand the contemporary world. Encouraging theorists to engage with real-world issues is something our field ought to do. And the third challenge I see is that of trying to integrate all of the different strands of theory that we already have. We have theories at the systemic level, theories that look at the characteristics of units, and so forth, but we have never been very good at putting those together in any kind of systematic way. Currently, we have lots of competing predictions stemming from those competing theories but we're still not very good at sorting out which of these might fit together or how you could try and use all of these different bodies of theories in some kind of synthetic way.

As far as the main debate: I think that the most fundamental debate is still the one between those who have an optimistic view of human progress—based largely on the spread of liberal principles--and those who don't. The former group believes that the international system is

gradually evolving in a peaceful direction, that major warfare is becoming increasingly unlikely, and that the spread of democracy, economic interdependence, international institutions, and the integration of information systems are gradually creating a world community in which large-scale warfare is not going to be a serious problem. The second group consists of those who in fact think that international relations basically hasn't changed much over time. For the latter, international politics is still mostly about competition between territorial units – in the modern world, states – and even if war is unlikely, preparations for war will continue and the familiar set of security concerns will remain central to IR. I'm in the latter group, obviously.

At present, I'm especially concerned by the second challenge I mentioned, the connection between IR theory and the real world. I try to engage issues that are actually happening out there—albeit in a scholarly way—and I wish more academics did too. International relations theory should not become a purely academic enterprise where scholars just write for a handful of other academics. If all we do is read each other's work without actually trying to speak to larger audiences, we are abdicating a very important social role. What's the point of having tenure if one never uses that freedom to engage in big, real-world debates? And I think our field has very much slipped into this rarified sort of scholarly autism.

In terms of the main debate, I clearly think the competitive nature of the system is not going to go away. People continually hope that war is becoming obsolete and that security competition will be eliminated by either liberal political forms or economic interdependence, but I just don't see something like that happening in my lifetime.

In terms of real-world challenges IR theory has to grapple with, I'll just mention one. Today we are beginning to explore the implications of a globally integrated information system, —of which the Internet is the most obvious manifestation—a world where ideas and information can traverse the globe in real-time and at very low cost. The degree of interconnectivity that now exists between different societies and the capacity to learn about them in real time is potentially very significant, but we still have to figure out what the political implications are. For example, it may become more difficult to demonize other countries or present biased information about them as a wide array of information sources become available. Again, the problem is that we don't quite know what it means. So that is example of a real-world phenomenon that requires theoretical analysis.

A second real-world issue for us to be thinking about is the balance between the power of the state and the power of the individual. Small groups of people have the potential to do more damage than at any time in history. All you have to do is think about terrorist organizations equipped with biological weapons or nuclear weapons; they could do extraordinary levels of damage, far more than any non-state actor could ever have done in the past. For some, it suggests that states are growing weaker. But at the same time, the capacity of state organizations to monitor what (individual) human beings are up to has also grown, and citizens in many countries seem to be willing to tolerate higher levels of surveillance than they would have accepted in the past. One of the major issues of politics more generally is how this sort of competition between state power and individual autonomy—which includes individuals interested in doing bad things—plays out over the next century. And this matters for not just the western world, but also in lots of other places.

**How did you arrive at where you currently are in IR?**

I think four main influences shaped my outlook on IR. First, going back to my childhood, my father was a physicist and also something of a military history buff. Growing up, I got interested in military history and general features of international politics at a relatively young age, and we used to argue a lot about foreign policy when I was in high school. I read a lot of books on war and collected airplane and warship models and things like that.

Secondly, when I was an undergraduate at Stanford I studied with [Alexander George](#) (1920-2006), and his interest in using theory to speak to policy issues clearly resonated with me. Also, his attempts to use history in a more systematic and structured way – the work he did on “structured, focused comparison as a type of qualitative methods – was very appealing. This was because I liked history, but I wanted to be able to integrate theory and history in a more rigorous way.

Needless to say, Kenneth Waltz had an enormous influence on me. He was my dissertation chairman, as well as something of a role model to many of my fellow graduate students. It wasn't just the ideas he had on international politics—though they were obviously very influential—but also the example he set. Waltz always asked big and fundamental questions – and he was more concerned with quality than quantity. One of the striking things about Waltz was that he didn't publish an enormous amount relative to his enormous reputation. He obviously had a very productive career and remains active today, but he didn't publish a huge number of books and articles. There are lots of less influential scholars who have much longer CVs. Instead, he tended to publish work that was always really, really good, and on central topics. One of the things I learned from that is that quality control really matters: it is better to write a smaller number of really important pieces than a huge number of not very interesting works. Waltz was also inspiring because he wasn't afraid to challenge fads or the conventional wisdom, and because he tried to state things clearly and simply, and I've tried to emulate those traits in my own work.

The final influence has been my colleagues and peers, going back to my graduate days at Berkeley. I was fortunate enough to go to graduate school with a terrific set of students and I subsequently met others during my years as a pre-doctoral fellow at Harvard. And I often tell graduate students that they'll learn as much from each other as they're going to learn from their professors, and that their fellow-graduate students are going to be their intellectual partners for a long time, so its important to forge lots of intellectual connections. I was lucky to have come along at a moment when some remarkably smart and dedicated peers were around and a lot of my own success is due to having smart people to learn from early on.

**What would a student need to become a specialist in IR or understand the world in a global way?**

I can think of three things here. One is that you do need a lot of knowledge of the real world and of the relevant history. It is hard to be very good at understanding the contemporary world politics if you don't know a lot of the substance of it. The value of any theory ultimately rests on its ability to explain what is actually occurring (or has occurred), and knowing a lot about substance helps us create theories that actually do fit the facts.

I might add that this means knowing a lot about global history. When people like me were trained in North America, courses in diplomatic history tended to be European history, or maybe transatlantic history. But unless you became a regional specialist, you simply didn't learn very much about the history of other parts of the world. Today, however, one needs to try and learn as much about what happened in South Asia or Latin America or East Asia or Africa as well, because history is both the primary data base for testing theories and because how we understand the past shapes a lot of behavior today. So the first point is this basic bedrock knowledge of the real world.

Second is a capacity for simplification. Theory is all about figuring out what the essence of a particular phenomenon is; it's about abstraction, eliminating the superfluous elements and really getting at the essence of what is happening. And that involves imagination--the ability to conceive of things in simple terms rather than in complex terms and to strip away what is peripheral and grasp the essence of a social phenomenon. There is also the capacity to analogize, to take an idea from one realm and see that it applies in a totally different domain, while recognizing ways in which the analogy may not hold. So the second step consists in taking all that knowledge of the real world and stripping away the stuff that doesn't matter to really see what is going on. Some people are very good at this and others aren't. I think you can try and hone that capacity through graduate training, but often it is simply a mental quality that some people have and others don't.

And thirdly, everyone needs to get at least a certain basic training in methods of causal inference and research design. I don't necessarily mean the full arsenal of quantitative and qualitative methods, but the basic principles research design, and learning how to draw conclusions correctly from a pattern of evidence and the capacity to test ideas rigorously is fundamental. If you don't have that, you'll make elementary mistakes and get the wrong answer.

**In 1991, you published an article called *The Renaissance of Security Studies* (read [here](#), pdf), arguing against the widening of the concept of security into non-national realms such as human security, environmental security, etc. 'Wideners' have since gained momentum, not in the least because of events such as 9/11. How do you think about the definition of security now?**

There is no question that the concept of security has broadened from what it might have been in the 1950s or 1960s, when it did tend to be very state-centered. What I was arguing against in 1991 was making the term 'security' so inclusive that it included virtually anything that might affect human welfare. So people, for instance, wanted the field of security studies to include the study of global health, or the study of poverty, or of migration. And I felt first of all that this

“redefinition” was being used to try and take over the field in ways that I didn’t think were going to be helpful.

In particular, I felt the attempts to redefine were being made in order to marginalize the study of traditional forms of security affairs. Ultimately, I think the actual name of a field is kind of a secondary issue: it doesn’t really matter what we call these things. If you want to call more traditional security studies ‘strategic studies’ and call the study of human security ‘security studies’, I don’t have a big problem with that. What I was objecting to was the attempt to use nomenclature as a way of legitimizing a particular view of the field, so that traditional topics could be excluded and a whole set of unrelated topics could occupy it instead. In particular, people wanted to define “security studies” broadly so that academic positions and programs that had traditionally focused on conflict and war could be taken over by people studying the environment, public health, gender politics, or whatever, even when it had no particular connection to organized violence. I should emphasize that I think topic like global health or migration or human rights or transnational crime are all important subjects that deserve serious attention, and I certainly wasn’t suggesting that they shouldn’t be studied; I just thought that should be done openly, and not through a sort-of stealthy redefinition of an existing sub-field. And I wanted to retain a relatively focused conception of the subfield, so that it would retain some intellectual coherence and so that it wouldn’t suffer the same fate that military history had suffered in many academic history departments.

Of course, when I was writing that article in the early 1990s, there were a lot of people who believed that with the Cold War over, peace was going to break out everywhere and we were not going to need to study these things anymore. Indeed, a number of prominent scholars said some remarkably silly things about the obsolescence of security studies, in effect suggesting that people who were experts on war and security competition could be put out to pasture and replaced a new group of scholars who will study these other questions. Unfortunately, that initial post-Cold War optimism wasn’t borne out. We see now that competition between states has continued and that war is still a major challenge, even though it may take somewhat different forms. I don’t think there is a particularly heated debate any longer: we have discovered that there is room for a lot of different people studying a lot of different aspects of human competition in the field.

**In an [interview](#) with Harry Kreisler in 2005, you stated that IR theory is about ‘developing general propositions, valid across time and space, explaining the behavior of internationally consequential actors’ – and you’re quick to give some examples: states, international organizations, but also terrorist groups. Now this definition – supposedly timeless – would probably have looked different, say, 25 years ago. Does this mean (1) that international politics changes over time (and space), and (2) that the purpose of IR theory shifts over time?**

When I was in graduate school, there was a question on the UC Berkeley qualifying exam in IR that went something like this: “Has the fundamental nature of international politics changed in the past 400 years?” There is obviously no right or wrong answer to that question, which is why they liked to ask it, but it did force students to think carefully about different aspects of world

politics and to decide where we stood. There are obviously some aspects of international politics different now from how they were 500 years ago, or even 25 years ago, and there are also many features of international politics that haven't changed very much at all.

Now if you go back 25 years and look at what was happening in the world, you'd discover that people were very worried about terrorism—it was a big issue for the Reagan Administration, for example—so it's not like terrorism has just emerged on the world stage. On the other hand, the relative importance of issues does shift over time, and we are a field that does get affected by real-world events. The oil shocks in the 1970s set part of the scholarly agenda in the field for a while; so did the emergence of a set of significant ethnic conflicts in the aftermath of the Cold War. But I think the basic focus of the IR field has changed less than we think: the set of international consequential actors, or the types of actors we look at, doesn't change as much as people often claim.

How would I sum it up? First, states have been the focus of the field and will remain so in the future. Second, international organizations are probably more important now than they were 150 years ago, but they weren't unknown then and they are mostly a manifestation of state power anyway. Third, there are transnational organizations now that play a somewhat more active role than they might have earlier but they aren't a completely new phenomenon either – the Roman Catholic church was one of the first transnational organizations and it's been around a very long time. And there have been plenty of other “non-state” actors of consequence, like the international socialist movement in the 19th and 20th centuries, and various terrorist organizations all over the world. So I tend to see the landscape of world politics as changing less than people think. We are a faddish business, but I tend to see more continuity than others do.

**For realists, when domestic issues start interfering with foreign policy, you have a problem – that was what *The Israel Lobby* was all about. So how about this financial crisis? I mean, the economy of the US, due to the status of the dollar, is inextricably bound up with that of, say, China. That hypothetically constrains what the US can say and do to China in terms of high-politics.**

Your question asks whether a high degree of economic interdependence between major powers can significantly constrain the level or intensity of security competition between them. From my perspective, I think the real question is whether domestic groups in either China or the United States would be able to influence the behavior of either country because they were concerned about preserving a particular set of economic relations. Specifically, will business interests in the US press Washington to tread lightly around China, because they were concerned with what might happen if China used its economic leverage? I think the answer is “yes,” but I don't think that will prevent the US and China from seeing each other as rivals and from engaging in various forms of security competition at the same time.

That said, I think there is no question the US and China will attempt to preserve mutually profitable economic relations over time. But if China continues to grow in terms of relative power and its strength increases relative to that of the US, the two states are going to compete in lots of other ways as well. And managing that competition is going to be difficult. That's not to

say the two states are inevitably going to go to war, but I will be surprised if we don't have a more and more competitive relationship with China as its power increases.

**Did the book *The Israel Lobby* have the impact you'd want it to be? Do you see any difference in the way it has been received in Europe and in the US?**

The answer to both questions is “yes.” With respect to mainstream commentary in the US, I was struck by how consistently how our arguments we were misunderstood or misrepresented, and by the fact that some critics appeared not to have actually read what we wrote. This isn't all that surprising, because almost all of the reviewers in mainstream outlets in the United States were people who had very strong views on this subject and who had previously taken positions at odds with ours. But instead of refuting our arguments with facts and logic, most of them simply misrepresented what we wrote. We made several points over and over in the book—in order to make sure that our position was crystal-clear—yet a lot of reviewers simply misread what we wrote or simply chose to attack a phony version of our argument as opposed to what we really said. For example, critics said we questioned Israel's legitimacy or complained that we were trying to disenfranchise American Jewry, when in fact we wrote the exact opposite. Others characterized it as an anti-Israel book, despite the fact that we went to considerable lengths to say that we thought that the policies advocated by groups like AIPAC were harmful to the United States and Israel alike. And of course we had to deal with a lot of unwarranted personal attacks as well.

As one might expect, the reaction in Europe was much more favorable—I think eight out of nine major reviews in the UK were quite positive—and we also got several very positive reviews in Israel itself, including a lengthy review in *Ha'aretz*.

Overall, the book had precisely the impact we wanted it to have. Our main goal in writing the book was to foster a more open discussion of a subject that had become largely – not entirely, but largely – a taboo subject in the US. There was a very powerful set of interest groups defending the “special relationship” between the US and Israel, and these groups had a big impact on US Middle East policy. Everybody in Washington knows that, but it was a phenomenon that nobody was willing talk about and certainly not to criticize. We didn't think that situation was healthy, particularly given how badly America's position in the Middle East had become by the time we were writing the book. So our goal was to get the subject out in the open, so that people could start talking about it. And I think that if you look at what's been written and said since then, and at the nature of the current debate now in the US, we clearly succeeded. This is now a subject that people will talk about openly; there are far more critical conversations about the different influences on American Middle East policy, and even including popular commentators like Jon Stewart of [the Daily Show](#) – will now openly talk about this interest group, the Israel Lobby.

Opening up the discussion creates a space for new policy, and U.S. policy has clearly shifted somewhat under President Obama. I'm certainly not going to claim credit for that shift, but I do think that having a more open discussion has made it easier for policymakers, other concerned citizens, and even many strong supporters of Israel to start to rethink the current relationship,



and ask whether our policy of unconditional support has been good for either the United States or Israel.

**Does the EU have any influence in pressuring the two-state solution for the Middle East, or is US pressure the only one that matters here?**

The European Union has an enormous potential leverage, if it spoke as one and if it used its economic influence towards both the Palestinians and the Israelis. If the EU wanted to exercise influence, it would be taken quite seriously. It has not been willing to do that, however, partly because the United States has always leaned pretty hard on the EU not to put any pressure on Israel and to not play too active a role. If the US were willing to push the EU to take a different stance, or if the EU would be willing to do so independently, than it could have a quite considerable positive influence. But until recently the EU has done pretty much whatever Washington wanted it to do, and it has refused to do anything that the United States strongly opposed.

**One more question on the EU: there seem to be two groups of people thinking about its international influence and how that should evolve. On the one hand, there's the economic power/human security group as represented by, for instance, Mary Kaldor in [Theory Talk #30](#), and on the other there's the military power-group, as represented by for instance Antonio Marquina in [Theory Talk #25](#), calling for hard power in order to be able to attain 'soft' goals.**

In a sense, they're both right. If the Europeans want to exercise relatively little global influence and focus primarily on European affairs, economic issues, and the maintenance of current social welfare benefits, they can. Europe doesn't face any imminent and serious security problems, mostly because the US has been willing to shoulder a lot of the global burden, and seems willing to keep on doing that. In that sense, Mary Kaldor is right: the EU can probably go on for quite some time, doing relatively little in the hard power department.

But there is a price to pay for that: when things like the Balkan Wars happened, ultimately, the Europeans had to call on the Americans to solve the problem. I don't think this situation will last forever; the US shouldn't have to keep solving local European problems. Secondly, the current situation means that Europe will not have a particularly powerful voice on lots of other issues, whether it is Central Asia or the Middle East or Africa. So the European states face a choice: if they want to wield greater global influence, they will have to muster greater capabilities for doing so. On the other hand, if they're not interested in doing that anymore, they can pretty much continue as they are.

**We've been waiting for a new NATO Strategic Concept for a decade now. Why is it lagging and what do you think it will look like?**

I think nobody really knows what NATO's mission is now that the Cold War is over. Yet for various reasons, the alliance has held together. One reason is to maintain a certain stability in the immediate post-Cold War; another was the U.S. desire to retain influence in Europe, a third was the sheer "stickiness" of a heavily bureaucratized alliance structure. Lots of efforts have been made to re-organize NATO and to prepare it for out-of-area missions, that is, missions outside of the traditional European theater. You can tell there hasn't been enormous energy or enthusiasm behind those efforts, however, and the United States keeps doing most of the heavy lifting in places like Iraq or Afghanistan.

This situation reflects a more fundamental shift in world politics: Europe simply doesn't matter as much anymore in comparison to other parts of the world. If you look at where the strategic attention of the US is going to be over the next twenty or thirty years, it is going to be on the Middle East, Central Asia and East Asia. From 1945 to 1990, by contrast, Europe was really the main focus of the US's strategic attention, for all the obvious reasons. That's going to be less and less the case over time, and thus getting out a new Strategic Concept for NATO, simply isn't a top priority for Washington at this moment.

### **Is Obama a realist? And, if so, what kind of realist?**

I'm reasonably sure that Obama has never read Mearsheimer, Waltz, [Krasner](#) or Morgenthau, and he probably wouldn't describe himself in those terms, but I do think he is a realist in the sense that he is essentially a pragmatist – he's not wedded to a powerful ideological agenda. Like all American politicians, he invokes certain liberal values like liberty and democracy, but his foreign policy decisions don't seem to flow from a particularly ideological worldview. I don't think he is someone who believes in trying to spread democracy at the point of a gun the way neoconservatives in the Bush administration did.

Furthermore, Obama has emphasized the need to deal with both allies and adversaries—even if you have differences with the latter—and that is clearly consistent with a realist view of the world. Realists recognize that power is important but also a pretty crude instrument, and that there are inherent limits to what any state can try to do. You can't try and transform everything that you don't like about the world; indeed, most of the time states are just trying to advance their interests in the face of enormous constraints. In short, realists recognize that we mostly have to live with circumstances that aren't perfect, because we don't live in a perfect world.

**In one of your commentaries at *Foreign Policy*, you write that it is unlikely that Iran would drop nuclear ambitions – it seems to be a broadly shared consensus in the country. Maybe a naive question, but what would it matter if they would get it, not taking into account the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)? It is a big country pursuing realist politics on a regional scale and it simply wants the recognition of being so – it is furthermore surrounded by religiously differing Muslim countries (one might say a Shiite country in a Sunni world) and has nuclear powers all around it. Might the possession of the bomb not make it a more responsible regional power instead, if it feels less threatened?**

That's certainly a possibility. If Iran does get a nuclear bomb one day, I believe the consequences are going to be less significant than many people believe. That's certainly been the case in all the other examples of nuclear proliferation that we have seen to date. NSC-68 argued that Soviet acquisition of nuclear weapons would have far-reaching negative implications, but it really didn't change things very much. We were serious rivals before they got the bomb and we remained rivals afterwards, but it wasn't as if getting the bomb allowed the Soviet Union to do all sorts of things that it had been unable to do previously. Much the same is true of communist China: there was great fear in the US and the broader West when China was making moves towards a nuclear capability, mostly because people believed Mao was irrational and might be willing to use them. Of course, none of this turned out to be true.

Nuclear weapons turn out to be good only for one thing: deterring direct attacks on your own homeland and perhaps on close allies. If Iran gets nuclear weapons, it is not going to be able to blackmail its neighbors or to tell us what to do in the various parts of the world that we care about. Why? Because using a nuclear weapon against us or against Israel would invite devastating retaliation, and so an Iranian threat to use its weapons simply isn't credible. I don't think it would be a good thing for Iran to get nuclear weapons and I hope they can be persuaded not to, but I don't think the world would come to an end the day they acquire a nuclear capability.

**There seems to be this unstoppable build-up of tension evolving around Iran as an international policy issue – especially in parts of the US administration and in Israel. Is Iran going to drop off the agenda without any confrontation?**

There are no circumstances I can imagine in which Iran would drop off the agenda—it is a country of over 70 million people in a very important part of the world and it has considerable natural resources—so it's going to be a significant state irrespective of who is running Iran and what its policies are. There has been, I believe, a significant effort to demonize Iran in the eyes of many Americans, and to portray it as a group of deeply irrational and illogical fanatics who are irrevocably hostile to American interests. I think that's simply not the case: Iran is a country that is pursuing its own national interests, no less imperfectly than we do, I might add, and it is currently doing a variety of things that is clearly at odds with what we want. But I do not think U.S. and Iranian interests are irreconcilable over time. Improving relations is not going to be easy because there are groups in Iran who don't have much interest in that, and there are groups in the US and elsewhere that don't much care for that, either. But I hope that cooler heads will prevail so that in the next five or ten years we see a gradual relaxation of tensions between the two countries.

**You seem to be one of the few scholars I have interviewed, who is not impressed by the [predicted growth of the BRICs](#). Why is that?**

First of all, I think the whole acronym 'BRICs' lumps together a set of states that is as different as they are similar. Brazil is a significant country, for example, but it is not going to be like China over the next fifty years. The same thing goes for Russia. Russia's economy is going to grow

modestly but its population is going to shrink, so it is going to be in many ways less significant as an international actor over time. China, by contrast is going to be much more significant in all sorts of ways over the same period. Again, the acronym suggests more similarities than is really warranted.

Secondly, the general claim that these countries are going to be somewhat more significant in the future than they were in the past is correct. But the problem is that we tend to overstate this change. In my view, a book like Fareed Zakaria's *The Post-American World* (read excerpt [here](#)) exaggerates the significance of this tendency. All you really need to do is look at the projections for what each countries' relative share of gross world product is going to be in say, twenty or thirty years. The US is still going to have about 25 to 30 percent; China will move up from about 6 or 7 percent today to 12 to 14 percent in about twenty to thirty years, which is a significant move upwards. However, it's still going to be half the size of the US in economic terms. But all of the other BRICs are going to stay in the low single digits, so the idea that the rise of the BRICs is creating a new multipolar world is simply exaggerating the significance of these countries. They are going to be more consequential (with the possible exception of Russia) than they were in the past, but it's not going to be a complete transformation of world politics or even a structural change in the polarity of the system.

**Ever since you wrote *The Origins of Alliances* (1987), it is commonly believed that you "built some bridges" between constructivism and realism (mainly through your refinement of Waltz's Balance of Power theory). What's your opinion on this? Doesn't this make you a Constructivist in some sort of way?**

I certainly never thought of myself as building a bridge between the two, in part because when I wrote it, constructivism was really just starting to get noticed in the field of international politics. The main reason people said I 'flirted' with constructivism was because I had brought perceptions of intent into the measurement of the perception of threat, and people pointed out that threat perception is at least to some degree socially constructed. I took one step away from traditional realism in the book by substituting the concept of the balance of power with that of the balance of threat as the principal reason for the building (or not) of alliances, but it wasn't a very big step.

I should add that I was quite critical of some of the earlier constructivist work because I thought it was very dismissive of other work but hadn't demonstrated a positive agenda of its own; constructivists and post-modernists tended to be attacking everything in the field without offering something in place of what they were attempting to destroy. Now, some twenty years later, I do think that constructivist approaches have added a lot to our understanding of the field, even though constructivism by its very nature is incapable of providing much in the way of prediction. These approaches alert us to the way in which attitudes, beliefs, identities and norms can evolve and change, but they're not very good at telling us how they're going to evolve and change.

**So, in the end, what do you think more important for determining policy? Threat perception or the ‘material’ basis of a threat?**

On the whole, the material dimension matters more. States are almost always sensitive to the material balance of power, even though we still have trouble measuring it. In some circumstances, however, intentions can be sufficiently malign to override material capabilities. So in general I am still a structuralist, but there are going to be cases where relatively weak states are seen as sufficiently nasty to get a lot of attention.

**Last question. Robert Gilpin is known for assigning the first chapter of Thucydides in his courses, and then asking his students: "Do you think you know more about IR than an Athenian student during the time of the Peloponnesian War?" Do we know more now?**

I think we do. First of all, we have a much richer and reliable evidentiary base for a lot of the claims we make about international politics. Second, there are various ideas that simply never occurred to Thucydides when he wrote about the things that can shape the behavior of states or other international actors. Having said that, you're not going to get me to criticize Thucydides, in part because it is a book that is rich in insights. He did grasp a number of enduring features of international politics, and it is all the more impressive because he didn't have a lot of earlier literature to guide him. Most notably, the book reminds us of a central realist insight: political competition is a structural fact of life in the international system. And that has been true for millennia.

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