

Strategic Studies, the Question of Relevance, and the IR Trap
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Over the past 20-30 years international relations as an academic field has felt as if in a crisis of relevance to the real world. By contrast, the nominal subfield of IR—strategic studies—has not felt itself to be in crisis, despite endless predictions about the obsolescence of war. This paper explores the sources of the disparity in relevance experienced by the two fields and what lessons may be drawn from this disparity for the future of strategic studies. Fundamental to the inquiry is the issue of relevance itself, particularly key questions of relevance to *whom* and relevance *how*? The way IR and strategic studies as disciplines construct their own theories both reflects and influences implicit answers to these questions. This paper examines each of the fields, its theories, and theory construction, with particular reference to the “*whom* and *how*” questions of relevance. The ultimate conclusion is that, unlike strategic studies, IR has put itself into a trap; strategic studies should avoid suffering a similar self-inflicted crisis.

Theory in the strategic studies field is premised on the most fundamental assumption: it is meant to be relevant to strategic action. This has been strategic studies’ constant anchor even before it was an actual academic field. In principle this does not differ substantially from IR, notwithstanding the disparity in scope between strategic agency in war and all of international relations as such. Nonetheless, the forms of theory diverge substantially. Two strands of theory exist in strategic studies: classical (including neo-classical) and modern. The former encompasses the writings of theorists and practitioners from Sun Tzu to Jomini, Clausewitz, Ferdinand Foch, Basil Liddell Hart, together with neo-classical theorists such as Edward Luttwak, Colin Gray, and Hew Strachan. Modern strategic theory emerged with the nuclear age and dwindled after the arguable early-Cold War golden age.

Although these theoretical strands are similar, there are key differences. Classical strategic theory was written by practitioners for practitioners, from Sun Tzu to Foch and Liddell Hart. Hence strategic theory was associated with and written for a particular professional class: military practitioners, primarily of command rank. From the beginning strategic theory had a particular purpose: not merely explaining what to do but also how to do it. There was a sustained recognition that strategy was performed and did not happen automatically. Classical theory approached this question of performance by its most prominent advocates: Jominian theory and Clausewitzian theory. The former is prescriptive, whereas the latter is educative. From the outset modern strategic theory was different, in some ways attempting to abandon the anchoring concept of performance of war. However, it could never totally eschew performance, even relating narrowly to nuclear strategy, and neo-classical theorists of the next generation of academic strategists returned performance to the center of strategic theory in a distinctly Clausewitzian way.

By contrast, IR has no single body of theory and the field is riven by methodological, paradigmatic, and purposive differences, which result not merely in a variety of theories, but also in those theories taking on varying forms, purposes, and methods for study. This is unsurprising given the sheer breadth and variety of phenomena which IR encompasses as a field. Nonetheless, mainstream IR theory tends

to focus on higher levels of abstraction—such as Kenneth Waltz’s theory of neo-realism—which considers international relations as a general system without much substantive reference to the actual real world. Alongside this level of abstraction came ambitions to be scientific and to enable prediction of outcomes in international relations. Yet the desired level of prediction is incompatible with contingency in action, which in turn is at the heart of performance. Mainstream IR theory in particular entirely neglects performance.

The consequence of neglecting performance is that IR theory has no specific professional class to which it should be relevant, and simultaneously there is little incentive for any particular professions to be interested in IR theory because theory has nothing to say about any group’s core professional interests in performing well. This leaves IR theory with only a small group of people to which it could be usefully relevant: policymakers. Indeed, it has been notable in IR’s soul-searching over the course of its crisis that virtually only policymakers have ever even been mentioned. Simultaneously, because IR theory is not about performing well, it became about *deciding* well, about making the right policy choices, which in turn reinforced the emphasis on policymakers as the key demographic to which theory must be relevant.

To compare the relevance of strategic studies and IR to their respective fields, the *whom* and *how* questions are crucial. In both cases, strategic studies enjoys more inclusive and more concrete answers than IR, resulting in a much firmer basis for practical relevance. Strategic theory has a core professional, practitioner audience to which it must relate and it maintains that relevance by performance amid contingency. By contrast, IR answers both questions much more narrowly by focusing on policymakers and policy choices, and therefore feels that it is increasingly irrelevant to the actual practice of international relations. IR has theorized itself into a relevance trap, which strategic studies should avoid if it wishes to remain relevant.