CRITICAL INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORIES: APPLICATIONS TO THE RUSSIA TOPIC

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The high school debate topic for the 1998-1999 school year poses the question of how the United States should change its foreign policy toward Russia. Although debate about foreign policy has been relegated to a back-seat compared to domestic issues by the American public, the academic community in international relations (IR) has been energized by the end of the Cold War. The Russia topic will provide a challenging opportunity for debaters, coaches, and judges to analyze alternative theories of international relations. The two purposes of this article are to provide a brief introduction to Critical International Relations Theories (CT), and secondly, to suggest how debaters could incorporate this exciting, but controversial field of IR into pragmatic debates about US foreign policy.

A Survey of International Relations Theory

International relations theorists take what they know about the world and create theories that rationalize the phenomenon known as world politics. However, just as there is no one theory of the beginning of the universe or presidential popularity, there is no single theory of international relations. Political scientists, much like the scientists investigating the origins of the universe, must piece together theories that explain past and current events based on the data they can assemble. This is a daunting task since either there may not be a single answer to the questions they are asking, or the unambiguous evidence they need to provide a fruitful hypothesis may no longer exist, assuming that it ever did. Some of the questions posed by these political scientists are: why are democracies less prone to violent conflict; why can Latin America nations not follow the East Asian development strategy; when do states cooperate; and, how should the US change its foreign policy in the Post-Cold War world?

The primary mainstream International Relations theories are "Realism" and "Liberal institutionalism". Realists believe that states are situated in the anarchy of world politics where every state purely looks out for its own national interest. A concept re-ferred to as the "security dilemma" stems from the idea that all states are potential enemies and that enhancing the security of one state produces a relative loss of security for all others. Realists measure power according to material capabilities like military expenditures, troop levels and natural resources. Peace, Realists argue, is only sustainable through a balance of power among several states, as opposed to a bipolar, hegemonic world. The essential components of Realism are best summarized by Kenneth Waltz:

> states are involved in an unending struggle with each other, because that is the nature of states in an anarchic world; power is necessary to survive in it or to continue to fight; all states are potential enemies (Waltz, 30).

Liberal institutionalists believe that states can achieve security through construction of international regimes and structures. Examples of these structures include bilateral arms control agreements, like START I and START II, and multilateral economic institutions like the WTO. States can engage each other through these structures, learning norms of peaceful cooperation and developing a common interest in the status quo. Liberalism is most closely associated with the work of Immanuel Kant who argued that peace is achieved through international institutions and the spread of democracy. A prominent example of Liberalism in the American tradition is Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points during World War I. Scholars like Bruce Russett and Francis Fukuyama are prominent Liberals in the academic literature. A grand debate has taken place over the last several decades between advocates of Realism and Liberalism.

Critical International Relations Theories (CT) developed as alternatives challenging these dominant paradigms, primarily Realism. Precisely defining CT is a very difficult task, but roughly it is an interdisciplinary endeavor, combining political science, international relations, sociology, history, psychology and other fields to formulate different theories of world politics. There are many different theories under the rubric of CT, some examples include constructivism, identity politics, and post-structuralism. The main goal of the CT project is to provide an alternative to the Realist view of the world that more accurately explains world politics.

One Critical Theory known as "Constructivism" or "Identity Politics" is especially germane to the Russia topic. Identity Politics explores world politics from the viewpoint that IR can best be explained by analyzing a collection of identities, rather than states. Instead of taking the state as the given and only relevant unit of analysis, these theorists imagine the possibility of many different states, many distinct identities. It then follows that alternative kinds of states do not treat each other in similar manner. This approach has been used to explain many of the hard questions in international politics that Realism has difficulty answering.

For example, the notion that there is more than one "Russian state" is a prime concern of Identity Politics. Russia's behavior in international politics is an outgrowth of these identities. What are Russia's identities? Consider the vast number of adjectives used to describe Russia in our everyday discourse in journals and newspapers. Russia is an "ex-communist state", it is a "developing state", it is a "democratic state", it is an "Asian state", a "nuclear state", and so on. According to theories of Identity Politics, we can best understand Russian behavior by studying these particular identities and how policy choices influence these identities. So Identity Politics considers a dramatically different set of variables than does Realism.

Furthermore, whereas Realists measure solely the role of states in world politics, Critical Theories take a more expansive course, incorporating actors like NGOs, transnational corporations and factors like domestic politics into their explanation of world politics. CT appeals to a number of different non-quantitative ("post-positivist" is term in the literature) fields to analyze world politics, whereas Realists believe that the influence of religion, culture, history and other variables is subordinate to precise measurements of material capabilities.

Finally, critical theorists are very concerned with the inability of Realism to explain major events in world politics such as the end of the Cold War and the two world wars.

The Relevance of International Relations Theory In Debate Rounds

International Relations theory is in no way new to debate. Debaters have always implicitly relied on IR theory to make arguments even before the advent of "critiques". Confidence building measures, trade agreements such as GATT or the WTO, and climate treaties are all examples of policies based upon the rationale of Liberal institutionalism, in that these structures and institutions should encourage peaceful behavior. Typically arguments against these cooperative measures are based on a pessimistic, Realist view of the world.

Another common example of the use of International Relations theory in debate is the advocacy of disadvantages about geopolitics. These disadvantages normally state that the affirmative's plan exerts US influence in a particular region or over a particular issue, and in doing so reduces the influence of another actor, usually a country. Such arguments will be common on the Russia topic, focusing on Japan, China, and India. These disadvantages are rooted in Realism, a theory that places priority on the role of geopolitics, territory and material capabilities in determining security.

Critical IR Theories have commonly been used in debate as arguments referred to as "critiques." Negative teams arguing critiques depict the affirmative plan or case as a Realist explanation of world politics, and indict Realism using the work of Critical Theorists. CT has appeared in debate rounds under the auspices of critique arguments labeled Threat Construction, Orientalism, or even simply the title "Realism". Although Critical Theory can easily be used in this manner since the literature supports rejecting the Realist paradigms, this article takes no position on this particular framework. Rather, our goal is to introduce debaters to Critical IR Theory and to suggest ways in which CT can be argued in a traditional policy making paradigm.

One Critical Theory argument that will be especially prominent on the Russia topic is often termed "Threat Construction." Threat Construction is an argument grounded in identity politics which places an emphasis on identity, meaning and discourse in world politics. Advocates of the Threat Construction position indict the op-

position for "dreaming up scenarios for conflict" or for creating "self-fulfilling prophesies" through their policies. The evidence for this argument is derived from studies of linguistics, discourse, identity, and culture. Policies aimed at these constructed threats, and which seek to remedy them with deterrent or hard-line solutions are the target of this criticism. The policies of the affirmative are sometimes said to create "otherness" - in the words of the oft quoted scholar David Campbell. Examples of cases that are subject to this criticism are ones that warn of virulent Russian nationalism and its expansionist tendencies. A case that deters potential Russian aggression by stationing troops in neighboring states would be another example. A non-military example would be a case that uses economic sanctions to influence Russian behavior. One would argue that these plans created self-fulfilling prophesies or threats. Accordingly, if Russia is treated as an enemy or a rogue then Russia will "learn" to play that role. These arguments are supported by claims that identities are constantly changing and adapting, and are influenced by others or mutually constitutive. William Wohlforth, a fellow of international security studies at Yale University describes this process as it pertains to Russia."

> The contemporary discourse of Russia's new foreign policy elite resembles a laundry list of the 'myths of empire' excoriated by Western scholars (if not policy makers): belief in the prevalence of bandwagoning in world politics, the possibility of falling dominos, the vital importance of a reputation for power in order to maintain the country's status and internal and external security, and a strongly zero-sum conception of international security and economics. It is difficult to persuade these new Russian strategists that any person knowledgeable about world affairs could possibly believe such notions to be myths. Each and every one of these propositions, they believe, was so clearly demonstrated by Gorbachev and Kozyrev's experience on the world scene as to be beyond discussion" (Wohlforth, 13).

Some affirmative plans will depend greatly on the theory of Realism. For example, last year's college debate topic required the affirmative to provide security assistance to Southeast Asia. A plan that provides F-16s to the Philippines to deter China is very reliant on a balance of power

world view, an assumption of realpolitik rationality among Chinese leaders, an assumption that China is a revisionist state, and that China's material capabilities are equivalent to its intentions. These assumptions are clearly Realist. The affirmative case, rhetoric and evidence will reflect this quite clearly. The affirmative will claim that "war is inevitable", "China seeks power insatiably", "A US presence strikes a good balance in the region", "China would not be willing to fight the US if we show strong resolve." These statements clearly reflect a Realist framework. High school debaters will encounter similar affirmatives on the Russia topic.

Critical Theory in a Traditional Policy Framework

The task of applying these complex arguments to a policy making paradigm is not difficult. In fact, much of the language and the "ivory tower" appearance of C. T. can be stripped away. Adapting these theories requires debaters to go beyond evidence to make strong and intelligent link arguments. We offer three suggestions for how to incorporate Critical Theories into mainstream strategies and how to facilitate their understanding in debate rounds.

First, the negative should to use the cross-examination extensively to set-up these arguments. Using the cross-examination period to establish the affirmative assumptions allows discussion to begin at a casual, conversational pace and therefore increases the understanding of the negative position. Affirmatives do not generally make their Realist arguments or assumptions explicit, therefore the cross-examination is essential to demonstrate how the arguments in the First Affirmative speech utilize Realist assumptions. In essence, the negative should ask how the authors in the First Affirmative speech know their claims to be true. Take for example an affirmative plan that stationed troops in near-by states to deter Russian aggression. The cross-examiner should tease out the reasons why the authors of the affirmative solvency evidence believe their approach would prevent conflict. The cross-examiner should ask why Russia would be deterred by the affirmative policy. If, as is likely, the answer is "Russia would not risk a war with the US" the cross-examiner should continue to develop a further understanding of why Russia would not risk conflict. The subsequent affirmative response will probably be "The costs would be too great, to their leader-

ship, economy and people". The cross-examiner should then ask if the affirmative plan prevents Russian aggression in a manner other than deterrence. The affirmative would likely respond that it was not necessary to transform Russia, one only needed to deter an attack to prevent conflict.

What would the negative have accomplished from such a cross-examination? They would have closely linked the affirmative to the assumptions of power politics and Realism. They would have demonstrated that the affirmative relies on deterrence and on pitting material capabilities against one another; that only troop levels, resources and territorial conquest matter to the states in question. The cross examination would have also established the affirmative assumption that policy makers can accurately predict Russia's response to the plan and furthermore, that aggression does not have to be eliminated at its root but can be contained or managed. At this point the negative is effectively prepared to advance the arguments of Critical International Relations Theory.

Second, the negative should present specific link analysis in the initial argument. An effective way to "demystify" the language of CT is for the negative to put into their own words an explanation of how the affirmative plan, case or evidence makes Realist assumptions and why Realism as a theory is inadequate or counterproductive. Drawing upon their accomplishments in cross-examination the negative should have no trouble indicating the specific links between the affirmative claims and the negative CT arguments.

Finally, the negative should demonstrate how their "case-specific" evidence and their "theoretical" evidence are mutually reinforcing. In the first instance, the negative can read evidence refuting the specific claims in the First Affirmative speech, such as reasoning why Russia will not go to war unless they feel encircled. On the second level, the negative can introduce their CT evidence that indicts the paradigm of power politics. For example, John Vasquez's The Power of Power Politics: A Critique makes the argument that statistically the outcome of foreign policies based upon state-centric, anarchical theories of power politics policies tends to be war, not peace (Vasquez, 200-1). In other words, when nations try to play power politics to balance against threats it is more likely they will cause war than preserve peace. Drawing connections between these two types

of proofs helps make evidence that seems abstract and theoretical support a highly relevant policy concern.

Critical Theory In A Stock Issues Framework

Critical Theory can be used very effectively by the negative to challenge the harm and solvency subpoints of the affirmative case. Many affirmative harm contentions will be based upon predictions of war or instability premised upon Realist notions. However, it can be argued that the historical record of Realism to predict conflict is fraught with substantial shortcoming. Critics of Realism point to the theory's inability to explain the two world wars as a major fault. Realist theory often assumes that states are hostile on the basis of static analysis of a nations military capability, without regard to analysis of that nation's intentions. Furthermore affirmative cases may be premised solely upon analysis of state-centered actors, ignoring the roles that subnational actors play in the process of preventing or causing conflict. These strong theoretical objections can undermine many of the fundamental assumptions of the affirmative harm contentions.

Critical Theories are also very fertile ground for attacking the solvency contentions of affirmative cases. Affirmatives may base their solvency upon assumptions of the viability of deterrence, power politics or balance of power. If the affirmative relies on such Realist justifications for their policy they must explain why similar policies have failed in the past. Theoretical evidence can be used to strengthen plan-specific solvency arguments.

For example, CT indicts the "problem-solution" approach of Realism. Under this approach the Realist takes "the world as it finds it... as the given framework for action. The general aim of problem-solving is to make these relationships and institutions work smoothly by dealing effectively with particular sources of trouble" (Cox, 128). The First Affirmative speech typically presents a classic problem-solution framework. The speech could pose, for example, the problem that Russia is selling arms to Iran, and offer the solution of targeting American economic sanctions at Russia for conducting these sales. The First Affirmative speech implicitly takes the structures of the world as given and works within them. Jim George indicts this approach and cites the recent conflict in Bosnia as an example of its failure, arguing that the problem-solu-

tion framework led to an inadequate US policy which he likened to an anaesthetized patient fading in and out of consciousness (George, 199). It is argued that Realist policies solve one security dilemma by creating another, never truly accomplishing a lasting peace. The negative can depict case and plan as an incomplete snapshot of world politics that acts on a temporary problem with an incomplete solution.

Critical Theory in a Comparative Advantage Framework

Critical Theories can also be used in disadvantage and counterplan formats to demonstrate that the affirmative plan does not offer a comparative advantage over the negative policy. Critical Theories can be used as disadvantages in several ways. The negative can argue that policy makers are gradually shifting the way they look at the world, away from a Realist paradigm, to a more inclusive view. The negative would then argue that the affirmative policy, by implementing Realist reasoning and solutions throws American foreign policy backward, toward the failure and harmful consequences of Realism. The critical element for the negative to successfully implement this strategy is proving that the status quo is not already locked in a Realist mindset. Such evidence can commonly be found in articles discussing the influence of CT on policy makers.

Critical Theory can also be used as a disadvantage in a more specific manner, by demonstrating the affirmative plan is counterproductive because it is based upon inferior theoretical assumptions. The "self-fulfilling prophesy" argument is an example of this type of disadvantage. The negative can argue that the affirmative policy causes Russia to become an aggressive rogue state by treating it as a nation that must be contained instead of engaged. Such a position is made stronger by the incorporation of both specific and theoretical evidence.

Finally, the negative may be able to exploit Critical Theory with the use of a counterplan. The negative can present a counterplan that offers an alternative to the affirmative Realist solution, one that competes with the plan through a test of net benefits. Such a strategy must be considered very carefully, however as previously explained, one of the difficulties in using CT as a disadvantage without a counterplan is that there may be no escape from Realism or state-centrism by voting negative. Some negatives respond to this "uniqueness"

problem by counterplanning with adoption of a "Critical" world view as their plan. For example, they could counterplan with adopting all policies supported by a certain critical theorist author, or counterplan by banning all state-centered foreign policy. The difficulty with this approach is that the best policy will likely be the combination of the affirmative and the negative ("doing both"), in which case the negative would have failed to meet their burden of response.

A more narrowly tailored counterplan strategy would be to incorporate CT into a very specific alternative. For example, suppose the affirmative plan provided humanitarian AIDS assistance to the Russian government, claiming that AIDS is rampant in Russia, and that assistance would solve the problem. The negative could counterplan by offering the same AIDS assistance to Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Russia, avoiding a state-centered approach to the problem. If the negative can demonstrate that the state is part of the problem in AIDS policy in Russia, perhaps the government is unpopular in certain subpopulations where the risk of AIDS spread is above average, a counterplan that cuts out the government as an actor might be preferable. The negative could bolster their counterplan by reading CT evidence that state actors are too inflexible, too reactionary or just incompetent.

Conclusion

Reading, debating and understanding Critical International Relations Theory can be intimidating at first. Debaters who take the time to learn about these theories will be well placed to take advantage of what is a highly relevant and powerful analytical paradigm for the upcoming Russia topic. Debaters will find CT useful in many situations, but they must be careful about how those arguments are developed and explained to ensure their effectiveness.

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