



Liberalism and US-Iran Relations

Liberal international relations theory offers an even more diverse family of theories than does Realism. First, as with Realism, it is worth dispelling any notions of the theory implied by its name. Liberal IR theory should not be conflated with the domestic political (small-L) liberalism associated with the Democratic Party in the United States.

Generally speaking, there are three "variants" of Liberal IR theory. These three variants are not mutually-exclusive or competitive with one another; the 18th century German philosopher Immanuel Kant included all three in his vision of a peaceful world order. They respectively emphasize:

- international institutions
- trade and interdependence
- shared democratic norms

These three Liberal perspectives are more optimistic than Realism about the possibility of peace and cooperation between countries. In short, Liberal IR theorists believe that participation in international institutions, free trade and economic interdependence, and shared democratic norms and ideas greatly increase the prospects of peace. Some Liberal approaches share basic assumptions with Realism; others are based on fundamentally different assumptions. A fourth Liberal variant/approach emphasizes domestic politics; this is addressed toward the end of this primer.

International Institutions

Neoliberal Institutionalism starts with many of the same assumptions as Realism. For example, it acknowledges that anarchy, uncertainty, and security dilemmas are real problems facing states. It also agrees that material power and capabilities are the most important things to states (as opposed to values and ideology). Neoliberal Institutionalism says, however, that it is possible to overcome the challenges to which Realists fatalistically resign themselves. International institutions can ameliorate the security dilemma, reduce uncertainty, and provide some modicum of order to the international state system. They do this by creating forums in which states interact more transparently and agree upon rules that - though they fall short of world government - structure and enforce state behavior. International institutions can be formal organizations such as the United Nations or treaty regimes such as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

Take the NPT as an example. The NPT (loosely defined as an institution) establishes expectations that states will not acquire nuclear weapons. This reduces the uncertainty surrounding nuclear proliferation and prevents nuclear security dilemmas and arms races. It of course does not eliminate uncertainty or guarantee that states will not seek nuclear weapons. Yet it creates mechanisms that can make it difficult and costly for countries to do so. Such mechanisms include inspections and safeguards by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), punishment for violations such as sanctions, and political pressure applied by the larger community of NPT members who support the goals and sanctity of the institution/treaty regime. Other institutions that have a physical focal point, such as the United Nations Organization, provide not only rules that regulate and constrain behavior and make it more predictable, but an actual meeting place where diplomats can interact, exchange information, signal intentions, read one another, and generally reduce the dangers of uncertainty in an anarchic world. Robert Keohane is probably the most famous and influential theorist of international institutions. He has defined institutions as sets of implicit and explicit principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actor expectations converge (Keohane 1982).

Trade and Interdependence

This type of Liberal IR theory holds that it is in states' best interests to pursue free trade and economic interdependence; doing so increases levels of wealth and security. Norman Angell made the first definitive statement of this Liberal approach in his 1913 work The Great Illusion. The illusion to which Angell referred is that war-making is the best means to achieve power, wealth, and security. Among Angell's points were that you cannot destroy people and resources without destroying the wealth that you are trying to obtain, that internationalization and interdependence have made war unprofitable, and that regular and permanent gains from cooperation and trade more than offset the losses of foregoing empire, occupation, and war booty.

A more recent (1980s) statement of trade and interdependence theory argues that this view is even more appropriate now than in Angell's day. Richard Rosecrance (The Rise of the Trading State) reiterates Angell's assertion that the benefits of trade outweigh those of war and conquest. This is especially so post-1945. Technological and industrial developments - especially the advent of nuclear weapons - have made war more dangerous and destructive than ever before. Advances in technology and industry have simultaneously made free global trade and interdependence more profitable than ever before.

According to Rosecrance, the primary objective of nation-states is exchange and trade. A state does not need a large population, tract of land, or army to achieve this. States are wisest to pursue technological and commercial specialization that give them important, wealth-generating niches in an interdependent world.

Democratic Peace Theory

Democratic Peace Theory is perhaps the most widely-known Liberal theory of international relations. It holds that democracies do not go to war with one another, and that a more democratic world is therefore a more peaceful world. Democratic Peace Theory is the core idea underpinning national security policies of democracy promotion. Democratic Peace works in two ways. First and most simply, war is often considered to be inconsistent with Liberal-democratic values. Democracies do not fight one another because it is morally/ethically the wrong thing to do. Secondly, the structure of democratic governments makes it more difficult for leaders to wage war. Unlike dictators, democratic leaders face governmental checks and balances, require some level of public support, and worry about the electoral consequences of their actions. Democracies are believed to be more peaceful countries because of these constraints on leaders.

Several scholars have written about the Democratic Peace, yet perhaps some of the most important observations are provided by Professor John Owen of the University of Virginia. Owen's 1994 academic article "How Liberalism Produces Democratic Peace" offers the first concerted attempt to explain how the Democratic Peace actually works (or in more academic terms, the causal sequence of the Democratic Peace). In so doing, he challenges the common notion that democracies are automatically more peaceful. For Owen, Liberal ideas and values are the starting point. These ideas and values lead to Liberal-democratic political structures (such as democratic government) which produce foreign policies that are friendly toward other Liberal and democratic countries. While such ideas and values tend to preclude war between Liberal democracies, Owen finds that such ideas coupled with democratic decision-making procedures can encourage conflict between Liberal democracies and non-democracies. Liberal-democratic publics can be belligerent; voters, members of Congress, and even members of a President's cabinet can capture war fever. It is entirely possible that such forces may push a country toward rather than away from war, especially with a country that it views as violating its Liberal-democratic values.

Domestic Politics

None of the three types of Liberal IR theory discussed so far expressly rejects the notion that "The State" is the fundamental actor in international politics. Andrew Moravcsik does exactly that, however, in his influential 1997 academic article entitled "Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics." He states that private individuals and groups - not states - are the most important actors in world politics. Such individual and group actors are rational and risk-averse. They have policy preferences and interests that conflict with those of other actors in their own state and society. These diverse actors (influential individuals, political parties, interest groups, commercial or bureaucratic organizations, etc.) compete with one another in the domestic political arena. A state's foreign policy and behavior on the international stage reflects the preferences and interests of the winners of domestic political power struggles. From the

standpoint of Moravcsik's Liberal theory, one cannot make general statements about state interests. States do not automatically pursue power and security as Realist theorists suggest, nor do they necessarily pursue the economic wealth or ostensibly-shared societal norms and values that some other Liberal theorists suggest. Domestic political preferences can be of several types. They can range from ideological and normative to practical and material. The most important point is that in order to understand why a state behaves the way it does or predict how it might behave in the future, one must look at its internal political dynamics and struggles.

Criticisms of Liberal Theory

Like Realism, Liberal approaches have their strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, Liberal theories explain how states can cooperate amidst anarchy and uncertainty. After all, the world is not nearly as contentious as pure Realism would seem to suggest. Yet what about relative gains? For many scholars' tastes, Liberal IR theory has not provided a satisfactory answer to the question of when and why states will ignore relative gains in favor of absolute gains (see Realism article). This especially applies to Liberal theories emphasizing the benefits of trade and interdependence. Finally, how can we be certain that the Democratic Peace is not just a coincidence? After all, democracy is a relatively new phenomenon in world history.

Applying Liberalism to US-Iran Relations

How can Liberal international relations theory be applied to US-Iran relations? A person contemplating US-Iran relations might consider the following questions:

- Can international institutions and regimes help the U.S. and Iran improve relations by creating shared expectations, reducing uncertainty, and enhancing communication?
- Even if imperfect, are international institutions and regimes useful for realizing American objectives vis-à-vis Iran?
- Can international institutions help ameliorate Iran's concerns?
- Is open trade and interdependence between the U.S. and Iran in the best interests of either country?
- How costly would a war be between the U.S. and Iran? Are there better ways for each state to realize its objectives?
- Would the U.S. and Iran get along better if they were both democracies?
- Are Liberal-democratic ideas, values, and politics leading the U.S. to take a more confrontational approach to Iran than might otherwise be the case?
- Which domestic political actors in each country have greatest influence on their respective country's stance in the US-Iran relationship?
- Should the U.S. view Iran as Realists would - as a unified state with clear and coherent interests - or as a country composed of diverse actors beset by conflicting interests and views? In the same vein, how should Iran view the U.S.?

This is by no means an exhaustive list of questions, yet it offers a starting point for those who seek to structure their thinking of U.S.-Iran relations in a theoretical framework.

Now, here are some Liberal propositions/hypotheses regarding US-Iran relations. As with Realism, some may seem contradictory, again demonstrating that theory is a useful means to structure one's thinking - not a magic bullet that provides clear-cut answers. Once again, this is not an exhaustive list:

- US-Iran relations can be improved by engagement in international institutions that ameliorate anarchy, uncertainty, and the security dilemma.
- War between the US and Iran would be too costly for both countries - especially war involving nuclear weapons.
- Trade and interdependence is in the interests of both the U.S. and Iran.
- The U.S. and Iran both seek security and wealth.
- Neither the U.S. nor Iran has a coherent set of interests - either in general or in relation to one another. Each country's interests and activities depend on which individuals and groups win domestic political battles and are able to exert authority or exercise autonomy.
- The U.S. and Iran would not be in conflict with one another - and would certainly never go to war - if each was a Liberal democracy.
- The view that Iran does not share Americans' Liberal-democratic values may dispose the U.S. toward conflict with Iran.