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**Thomas Kuhn and international relations
theory: Realism in 'crisis'**

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Abstract

In 2012, the University of Chicago Press published a special fiftieth anniversary edition of Thomas Kuhn's influential book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn, who died of lung cancer in 1996, was a physicist trained at Harvard University and is best known for his work on the history and philosophy of science. His interpretation of the evolution of science and the concept of 'paradigm change' have had a major impact on our understanding of intellectual life, both in the physical sciences and in the social sciences. This paper briefly reviews Kuhn's approach, and then applies it to an analysis of the current state of International Relations theory in a critique of Realism. My argument is that Realism, as what Kuhn would call 'normal science' in International Relations theory, is in crisis because of its inability to explain a growing number of anomalies, which in turn can be better explained by a different paradigm, Cooperative Security.

Thomas Kuhn and international relations theory: Realism in ‘crisis’

PETER VAN NESS*

KUHN’S UNDERSTANDING

In his book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*,¹ Thomas Kuhn is principally concerned to explain how the sciences have evolved over the centuries, and his main criticism is directed at the idea that science has developed in a cumulative way, with each new discovery and insight built upon the shoulders of those which came before. Instead, he argued, the most important contributions to science have come through ‘revolutions’ provided by scientists who understood the same phenomenon, but from an entirely different intellectual perspective, a new ‘paradigm’.

His interpretation is built on several key concepts that I will briefly recount here one by one: normal science, puzzle-solving, paradigm, incommensurability, anomaly, crisis, and revolution.

My guess is that the main reason that Kuhn was denied tenure at Harvard University, and had to move to the University of California, Berkeley, to write his book, was because he described the work that his famous scientific colleagues at Harvard were doing as *only* ‘**normal science**’, that is, not imagining the ‘revolutions’ that make the real contributions. Normal science for Kuhn is the cumulative process of hypothesis testing and ‘**puzzle-solving**’ dictated by the existing ‘paradigm’ in any scientific field. This is the way that science is usually understood, and was understood in Kuhn’s time.

Critics have claimed that Kuhn used a number of different definitions of his key concept of ‘**paradigm**’, but what he meant is fairly straightforward.

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¹ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 50th anniversary edn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

A paradigm is a formal intellectual perspective on a given topic, which typically will include: a description of the phenomena under study; the assumptions on which the approach is constructed; the central questions to be asked about it; the likely explanations or hypotheses; and the methodology for evaluating those explanations. Kuhn emphasised that the relationship between competing paradigms in a given field was one of **'incommensurability'**, meaning that one could not eclectically cherry-pick two paradigms, attempting to combine the best parts of both, because they are built on entirely different logical systems.

In the history of science, Kuhn argues, the practice of normal science over time results in the accumulation of **'anomalies'**, or significant events that cannot be explained by the existing paradigm. For practitioners, anomalies of a certain order begin to constitute a **'crisis'** in the paradigm or a major failure of that particular mode of explanation. These circumstances, in turn, cause some scientists, especially bright younger ones, to consider alternative lines of explanation. A **'revolution'** occurs when one or more practitioners, who are already fully familiar with the existing paradigm, begin to imagine an alternative way to address their topic. Typically, they will address the more significant anomalies confronting the existing paradigm, and if they can explain that which the existing paradigm cannot, they begin to attract scientific converts to the new approach. Sadly, the major proponents and practitioners of the existing paradigm, Kuhn reports, rarely convert to the new one, even when confronted with overwhelming evidence that it can explain more.

Obviously, this is an over simplification of Kuhn's interpretation, but for the purposes of this paper it should suffice. Critics may be even more upset with how I simplify the classical Realist paradigm.

REALISM

One version or another of Realism is still the most popular form of explanation in academic International Relations, especially with respect to security policy. Policymakers in almost all of the major countries appear to be even more committed to the Realist paradigm.

One reason that this particular way of understanding the world has been so popular is because of its simplicity and clarity. The Realist approach is founded on four key assumptions: the world is anarchy; states are the principal actors in International Relations; they engage essentially in self-

help foreign policy strategies; and their objective is to maximise their power.

Academic revisionists have modified each of these assumptions when trying to reshape Realism into a useful paradigm for understanding today's world, but these are the foundational propositions on which their intellectual approach rests. Treating Realism as normal science in International Relations, I will address each of these four assumptions.

Technically the world is **anarchy**, in the sense that there is no world government that has the authority and power to rule the world. The classical Realist view of anarchy was of countries fighting to survive in a dog-eat-dog, survival-of-the-fittest Darwinian environment. That is not a good description of the international relations of 2014.

While it is obviously true that the United Nations does not have the capacity to establish a global authority over all the world's states and peoples, today's world is better described as an immense series of cooperative networks, linking North and South, East and West, in innumerable webs of transportation, trade, investment, and communication linkages. To characterise this world as anarchy misleads, both with respect to the realities of power and also with respect to the nature of our world's most serious problems.

Today, **states** are still the most important actors, but global and regional international organisations, multinational corporations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and international citizen activities have constrained their role and compete with them for influence (for example, the annual sales of some multinational corporations are larger than the GDP of some countries; and NGOs like Amnesty International and the Red Cross have the capacity to shame governments by publishing the findings of their work on human rights abuse). An understanding of International Relations that focused solely on state behaviour would miss much of the most important activity in today's world.

It would be true, but incomplete, to say that governments today still engage in basically **self-help** strategies, attempting to advance their view of 'national interests'; but, once again, their range of alternative policies has become increasingly limited. For example, autarky or even self-reliance as an international economic policy for any government today would be suicidal. Modern economies require a global reach. All states are dependent

on their exports and imports, their capacity to attract foreign investment, and the sustained cooperation of their global commercial partners.

Probably every world government today would like to maximise its power; but to do that, it must operate in new ways. **Power maximising** in a classical Realist sense is based on a zero-sum view of the world: 'I can only benefit at someone else's expense'. Power balancing, military alliances, and concepts of 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend' are the most common strategies. For the less powerful states, 'hedging' and 'bandwagoning', or both at the same time, usually define their policy options.

But in our deeply interdependent world, governments are learning that sharing power is often a better way to achieve their objectives. Win-win or positive sum strategies, rather than zero-sum, have become more common, as governments seek to build solid cooperative structures to sustain their global reach.

TODAY'S WORLD

As I see it, the crisis in the Realist paradigm has been caused by the anomalies it confronts in today's world: our interdependency, governments choosing win-win rather than zero-sum strategies, and the apparent imperative to cooperate; but, most importantly, Realism's failure to provide viable answers to the world's most serious problems.

Take, for example, nuclear weapons. All of the world's most powerful states, except Germany and Japan, the nations defeated in the Second World War, have nuclear weapons. A major war among or between any of them is impossible from any rational perspective, because of the probability that it might escalate to a suicidal, worldwide nuclear exchange. This fact apparently only dawned on American and Soviet policymakers during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, when they hovered on the threshold of nuclear disaster. Thereafter, the two superpowers groped their way toward cooperative arms control arrangements designed to limit the danger of nuclear war.

The proposition that follows from the Cuban missile experience is that no conceivable definition of 'national interest' by any of the major nuclear powers (the US, Russia, and China) could justify a decision to make war between or among them. So, for example, the United States and China cannot go to war over Taiwan or the East China Sea island disputes. It would make no strategic sense, despite Realists on both sides spelling out

scenarios about how it might happen and their militaries making operational preparations. The inescapable conclusion is that Realist understandings of the world mislead us about the life-or-death problem of nuclear weapons.

If the major powers, particularly the US and China, cannot make war with each other to resolve their differences in the Realist way, then what are they to do, and how are they to make their way in our highly interdependent world? Again, Realism doesn't help. For example, you cannot build a successful free trade agreement or FTA on the basis of a zero-sum strategy because other countries will not join in. The incentive for participation has got to be win-win. Another example, this time with respect to self-help: the United States could not even begin to deal with the 2007-8 financial crisis on the basis of self-help. Washington had to get assistance from its OECD partners, and as much cooperation as it could muster from China, to try to avoid a global depression.

Yet competition among the major powers and changes in their relative power positions still occur in our globalised, interdependent world, but, importantly, without the need to fight wars. The competition is mainly economic: from the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 to the emergence of China as a superpower. The unexpected collapse of the Soviet Union, 1989-91, occurred after Moscow's failed intervention in Afghanistan, the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in 1986, the arms race with the United States, and Mikhail Gorbachev's attempted *glasnost* and *perestroika* reforms, which were principally economic. The Russian command economy simply could no longer sustain the commitments of the Soviet empire. Unlike the contests among global powers in the past, almost always determined by victory or defeat in war, the Cold War ended with the economic collapse of the Soviet Union.

The amazing rise of China is similar in that it is also a story about economics. Beginning with Deng Xiaoping's 'open policy' and his determination to impose market reforms on China's command economy, the Chinese Communist Party has built the most successful capitalist economy in history, achieving more than three decades of almost 10 per cent annual economic growth. China's new economic stature, especially after surpassing Japan to become the world's second largest economy, has reshaped global politics and ended America's brief 'unipolar moment' of global dominance.

These two events – the Soviet collapse and the rise of China – demonstrate in different ways just how, in our Atomic Age, the most powerful

countries can continue to rise and to fall, without having to go to war. Here, once again, Realist theory has not helped us to understand this phenomenon.

COOPERATIVE SECURITY

Yet is there an alternative paradigm of International Relations that can explain better than Realism, and help us to explain the world's most serious problems by looking at them in a different way? Can a Cooperative Security paradigm explain many of the anomalies confronting Realist analysts, such as climate change, nuclear proliferation, sustainable development, and global economic crisis management?

Realist analyses typically focus on issues of what they call 'national security'. But what does national security actually mean for most countries today? For example, is the current crisis over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands more important for Japan's or China's national security than climate change or economic prosperity? Obviously not, but Realist policymakers and academic analysts behave as if it is. Constructive agreements on climate change or ways to solve the global economic crisis will have to involve both China and Japan, and such agreements require their cooperation, not their mutual recriminations and confrontation.

A Cooperative Security approach calls for countries to build mutually beneficial relationships with potential adversaries, rather than to invest in new military preparations to oppose them. A basic assumption underlying this alternative approach is that perceptions of threat have changed. Traditional concerns about military threats remain, but new kinds of threats to the national security of all countries have emerged that require a different kind of response.

Each of the most serious security threats today are quite different, and each requires a particular strategic approach; but what is common to many of the most serious of them, like the threat of nuclear proliferation, is that they appear to require a cooperative solution. For example, how can any one country by itself deal with the problems of global warming, climate change, and environmental degradation? Similarly, with respect to economic security, autarky is no longer, if it ever was, an option for any industrialised country in our increasingly interdependent world. Or take public health – how can one country alone adequately defend its citizens against pandemic diseases like bird flu H5N1 (or now H7N9)? Defence against terrorism is yet another example. The search for energy security

may lead to competition and even confrontation among states, but in many cases, governments have found that cooperation is more fruitful.

Moreover, as all states become increasingly interconnected and dependent on relations with other states for export markets, investment capital, and technological innovation, they become, day by day, more vulnerable to any disruption of those international ties, hence more likely to value strategic stability. Given the changing nature of these security threats, cooperation rather than confrontation appears to be the more realistic approach.

At the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2012, Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono presented a good example of what Cooperative Security means. Yudhoyono's theme was 'the geopolitics of cooperation'. Comparing the past history of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) ten member-countries with the present, he emphasised that:

There is no war in Southeast Asia and, in contrast with the past, ASEAN states are in charge of regional affairs. Trade barriers between ASEAN states are down, and connectivity is increasing. We have decisively moved on from a region of conflict and division, to a region of peace, progress and cooperation.

Yudhoyono urged his audience to '[c]ompare this with just a few decades ago, when we lived under the threat of nuclear holocaust, major wars, proxy wars, polarisation and conflict.' He recommended, as an example, Indonesia's 'a "million friends and zero enemies"' diplomatic strategy.

Arguing that '[f]or the first time in history, the relationships among the major powers are peaceful, stable and cooperative', Yudhoyono insisted that:

we have the opportunity to build a durable architecture for peace in our region. This architecture can be more durable, and more peaceful, than at any regional order in previous decades or centuries ... Both the US and China have an obligation not just to themselves, but to the rest of the region to develop peaceful cooperation ... the relations of major powers are not entirely up to them. Middle and smaller powers too can help lock the major powers into this durable architecture.

Yudhoyono pointed out that 'Asia is certainly big enough for all powers – established and emerging – and there is always room for new stakeholders, so long as they invest in common peace and progress.' But, '[a] win-win approach is not easy. It requires leadership, creativity and courage, especially on occasions when you need to break away from the

convention of the past', President Yudhoyono acknowledged. Yet 'the geopolitics of cooperation are open to every state' and 'the more we promote this geopolitics of cooperation, the closer we will inch to that durable architecture for peace for our region, and for our time.'²

CONCLUSION

Paradigm makes a difference. How we think about a problem determines what we will do about it. If we continue to think about International Relations in social Darwinian terms, we will eventually blow ourselves up. More and more countries are acquiring nuclear weapons, and at some point, due to accident, misunderstanding, or a purposeful assault, someone will start a suicidal nuclear war. This is our Realist future.

Times have changed. In even an unintended nuclear exchange between major powers, the 'fittest' would not survive. The lessons of the Cuban missile crisis would not have been learned. Conflicts among today's major powers cannot be resolved in the old way. Thucydides wrote about a different time and a different world. This is not the Peloponnesian War, nor is it the Second World War. If the powers attempt to have their way as they have in the past by making war with each other, at some point they will destroy the planet.

But the alternative paradigm suggests answers to our most pressing strategic problems. Sustained cooperation among states is imperative if we are to begin to deal with problems like climate change, energy security, and nuclear proliferation. Moreover, the current global web of trade, aid, and investment, which has been important for the growing prosperity of so many countries, is always vulnerable to disruption by Realist-inspired confrontation and conflict. But properly understood, these same economic ties provide an opportunity for nations to continue to compete: for the most competent to succeed, and for the confused and corrupt to fail. Cooperative Security shows the way to do it peacefully and without making war.

² President Yudhoyono, 'An Architecture for Durable Peace in the Asia-Pacific: Dr H Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono', keynote address to the Shangri-La Dialogue, the IISS Asia Security Summit, Singapore, 1 June 2012, www.iiss.org/conferences/the-shangri-la-dialogue/shangri-la-dialogue-2012/speeches/opening-remarks-and-keynote-address/keynote-address/

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