Introduction

Leadership and International Politics

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The study of leadership in international affairs presents us with two contradictory aspects, one practical and the other theoretical. For scholars engaged in historical or country-specific studies, the importance of leadership, and thus the need for its serious examination, is largely taken for granted. For academic scholars of international relations (IR), however, the question remains open and doubtful. Prominent IR theorist Robert Jervis, who recently wrote an article entitled “Do Leaders Matter and How Would We Know?” concluded that, because we cannot positively prove the causal agency of individual leaders, we must fall back on structural explanations, with the implication that leaders do not truly matter.1 If this is so, then we might wonder what help IR theory can be to people actually engaged in studying leaders and leadership in different contexts. In this essay, I will first consider the logic and limits of the IR case against leadership, and then pursue more promising avenues for gaining a theoretical grasp of the phenomenon.

Science versus Leadership in International Relations Theory

It was not always the case that leadership was neglected or devalued in IR writing. The so-called classical realists of the 1930s and 1940s—Reinhold Niebuhr and Hans Morgenthau, for example—assumed that the thoughts and actions of individual leaders and diplomats were central to the understanding of international affairs. Morgenthau argued that the political world was not amenable to “scientific” rationality, and stated, “Politics is an art and not a science, and what is required for its mastery is not the rationality of the engineer but the wisdom and moral strength of the statesman.”2 But the scientific aspirations of “neorealists” eventually won out, most specifically in Kenneth Waltz’s landmark book Man, State and War. In the late 1950s, Waltz argued that, of the three dominant explanations (or “images” as he called them) of the causes

of war—human nature (evidenced in individual motivation and behavior), internal regime politics, and the anarchical structure of international relations—only the last was persuasive. The genuine explanation for the causes of war was, in other words, a structural explanation based primarily on estimates of material power balances and imbalances.\(^3\)

Contesting schools of IR theory ever since then—neoclassical realism, constructivism, liberal internationalism, and even feminism—have tended to revolve endlessly and inconclusively around this pole.\(^4\) Whatever their disagreements with structural materialism, however, their own contributions seldom highlighted, and often obscured, the role of leadership. To be sure, there have been some who have sought to rectify this deficiency with, for example, a plea to “bring the statesman back in.”\(^5\) Byman and Pollack argued that the problem was that theorists were at once too modest and too arrogant in their treatment of leaders: modest for thinking they had nothing useful to say about them, yet arrogant in asserting that “impersonal forces” explained the vast majority of events.\(^6\)

But the real reason for preferring impersonal forces, as Waltz admitted in a later work, was the wish to generate an explanatory (and possibly predictive) general theory of international relations based on the model of the physical sciences.\(^7\) This was assumed to require models that were elegantly simple, rigorous, and parsimonious in their choice of variables. Individual leaders with their varying temperaments, experiences, and capacities could simply not be captured in such abstract, rigorous models and therefore had to be dismissed as causally irrelevant. Indeed, Waltz argued that “the state,” not the individual, provided the basic unit of analysis—a view that seemed to reduce leaders to virtually interchangeable “rational actors” bound to respond to the structural conditions they encountered in more or less identical ways. Leadership was thus viewed as a mere moment of a larger “structure,” wherein it was the “structure” that ultimately determined future actions and outcomes.

To be fair, the desire to uncover impersonal causal laws beneath the human surface of things had long been common to many of the social sciences, including economics, sociology, and political science. Historical studies had already gone a long way down this road by the end of the nineteenth century when Herbert Spencer rejected the “Great

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4 Something of an exception is the “English School”—represented by figures like Hedley Bull, Martin Wight, Tim Dunne and Barry Buzan—who largely accepted the anarchical nature of international society but claimed that it nevertheless precisely was a society, one that required the activities of diplomats for its maintenance; see for an overview Barry Buzan, *English School Theory and the Structure of Globalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
6 Ibid., 108-109.
Man theory” of heroic leadership. This “Great Man theory” portrayed history as essentially a product of the ideas and actions of exceptional individuals, an idea Spencer thought hopelessly unrealistic, childish, and unscientific. Historians who agreed with Spencer sought what they supposed to be the “real” drivers of historical development—class struggle, geographic or climatic determinism, economic and technological development, and so on. In the most sweeping historical interpretations, individuals appeared as the mere “carriers” of impersonal forces rather than as independent agents. Indeed, in theories such as Marxian historical materialism, the forces of “History-with-a-capital-H” seemed to march inexorably forward, regardless of the intentions and actions of particular individuals.

Yet it is instructive to note that Marx, contemplating the failure of the Paris Commune of 1871, put the blame on poor leadership. We should also recall his famous comment: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.” This position is essentially the same as that echoed by Spencer in his critique of the “Great Man theory,” the intention of which was not to dismiss the agency of notable individuals, but to qualify and contextualize it appropriately. Spencer argued, “[We] must admit that the genesis of a great man depends on the long series of complex influences which has produced the race in which he appears, and the social state into which that race has slowly grown.... Before he can remake his society, his society must make him.” But on this reading, the “Great Man” (or woman) can and sometimes does remake his or her society, and perhaps pushes history decisively in one direction rather than another.

This point is surely congruent with Machiavelli’s famous pairing of virtù (individual capacity, character, and force) with fortuna (luck or the opportunity for effective action), his point being that the two must meet if anything of political significance is to be accomplished. If we accept this, then it is time to move beyond the sterile, and seemingly interminable, “agency-structure debate” afflicting IR studies and admit that intelligent (not necessarily “rational”) human agents are both the producers and the

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8 The “Great Man” theory was most famously the theory of Scots writer Thomas Carlyle. See Thomas Carlyle, On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History (New York: Frederick A. Stokes & Brother, 1888).


12 Spencer, The Study of Sociology, 34.

13 It is an ironic fact that the Russian Revolution, far from illustrating the truth of historical materialism, was a perfect example of Machiavellian logic, with the virtù to seize the moment being supplied by Lenin and his Bolsheviks. See Niccolò Machiavelli, The Prince (East Bridgewater, MA: Signature Press, [1532] 2008).
products of human structures and institutions. Indeed, human beings are themselves "structured" by virtue of their genetic, social, and cultural inheritance; their individual psychology and character; their educational and personal experiences, and so on. But is there any theoretical work in IR literature that can transcend this false binary and potentially capture the dynamic relationship between leadership and context?

**Toward a General Model of Leadership**

In fact, there is a theoretical work that transcends this false binary. The school of “foreign policy analysis,” for one, placed individuals and their social environment at the heart of inquiry. Snyder et al. stated in a seminal work: “It is one of our basic methodological choices to define the state as its official decision-makers—those whose authoritative acts are, to all intents and purposes, the acts of the state. **State action is the action by those acting in the name of the state.** Hence, the state is its decision-makers.”

Leadership agency also received some concentrated attention from IR scholars working in the field of multilateral negotiations, as one might perhaps expect given that negotiations must be conducted by actual human beings with critical constraints and responsibilities. Such agency was also addressed by writers who emphasized the interaction of domestic politics and foreign policy. Of particular importance here was Robert Putnam’s influential 1988 essay analyzing the complexity of such interactions in “two-level” game-theoretic terms.

Putnam’s work gave policy elites situated at the nexus of the domestic and international realms a distinctive and privileged role as mediators of conjunctural forces, interpreters of possibilities, and formulators of foreign policy. The “statesman” is specified as the central strategic actor, crucially positioned to scan both domestic and international situations in order to discern constraints on and opportunities for creative statecraft. This work implied a rejection of the proposition that we must choose between Waltz’s “three images,” and instead intimated that a full explanatory account requires they be integrated and treated as simultaneously effectual. Although Putnam was principally

14 For a comprehensive examination see Colin Wight, *Agents, Structures and International Relations: Politics as Ontology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), who argues the agency-structure problem has been generated by a positivist account of science that mistakenly privileges epistemology (how we acquire knowledge of a world) over ontology (what we implicitly assume the world we are investigating to be like).


concerned with analyzing and investigating international negotiations, the model he developed is also useful for studying leadership in general.

Putnam’s work is, to be sure, couched in the language of game-theoretic modelling, which—because initial conditions must be sufficiently simple and the number of players strictly limited to generate plausible “solutions” to a game—has well-known limitations for understanding events in the real world.\textsuperscript{19} Yet, Putnam’s model has the virtue of suggesting the huge complexity of real world situations. He wrote:

\begin{quote}
[At] the national level, domestic groups pursue their interests by pressuring the government to adopt favorable policies, and politicians seek power by constructing coalitions among those groups. At the international level, national governments seek to maximize their own ability to satisfy domestic pressures, while minimizing the adverse consequences of foreign developments.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

It follows that political leaders in negotiations must simultaneously engage in two games. One, at “Level I,” with international interlocutors as they bargain for satisfactory outcomes (“satisfactory” being defined in terms of the alignment of possible “win-sets” for various players), and the other, at “Level II,” with domestic constituents and supporting coalitions who have their own interests and preferences and may fail to ratify particular agreements they deem unsatisfactory. Moreover, each side may have an interest in changing or distorting the other’s perceptions and even altering the rules of the game to its own advantage. This means that the game at Level I cannot be separated from or “solved” independently of that at Level II, for moves at either level may “reverberate” at the other, causing critical changes in perceptions.

Putnam calls this two-level game a “metaphor” and notes that metaphors are not theories, though he expresses the hope that, as in other sciences, one may start with metaphor and end in algebra. However, he claims, “Deriving analytic solutions for two-level games will be a difficult challenge.”\textsuperscript{21} I would say instead “impossible” given that Putnam himself notes that the political complexities of two-level games are “staggering” given the “pervasive uncertainty” of international relations.\textsuperscript{22} As we know, even simple games with settled rules never have preordained outcomes, which is precisely why we enjoy watching and playing them. Puzzles may have solutions, but games typically have winners and losers produced by some combination of skill and luck. Moreover, Putnam observes that his two-levels are a simplification, and that the political reality is always a multi-level game whose outcomes, whatever they may be, must ever be marked by the utmost contingency.

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\item \textsuperscript{19} Russell W. Cooper, \textit{Coordination Games} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
\item \textsuperscript{20} Putnam, “Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games,” 434.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 435.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 434, 454-456.
\end{itemize}
The value of this kind of metaphor for leadership studies is not that it may generate game-theoretic solutions, but that it obliges us to focus on the interrelationships among the players and on what is at stake for each of them in their interactions. It thus provides an analytic tool that helps us to make some sense of complexity and to gain understanding of the choices, uncertainties, and dilemmas confronting the actors involved, making it akin to historians’ methods to retrieve the causal story from significant historical events. This is a valuable base on which to build a broader and appropriately political account of leadership—an account capable of transcending the limitations of familiar leadership tropes such as trait theory, functional theory, transactional versus transformational leadership, and so on.

Separate from IR theory, but similarly helpful, is other work on “agent-centered historical institutionalism” (ACHI). The issue of leadership has always been implicit in the work of historical institutionalists, yet seldom acknowledged because of their concentration on the abstract categories of “agency” and “structure.” An enduring problem for traditional institutionalism has been that, if institutional structures are taken as largely determinative of action (as they are generally designed to be), how are we to explain change over time? Stephen Bell’s account of ACHI presumes that agents are the “ultimate propellant of change,” but these agents must always operate within particular time-bound contexts of both institutions and wider influences (for example, structural economic factors, demographic factors, currently dominant ideas, and long-standing policy settings).

Although necessarily interpreted by agents, these structures exert real causal constraints on what they can or may do at any particular time. Importantly, however, institutions also empower agents, while wider contexts provide opportunities for action as well as constraints upon it. Bell’s account does not explicitly raise the issue of leadership but, like two-level game analysis, his account is eminently adaptable to a leadership dynamic that situates leadership within particular contexts whose constraints and opportunities the leader must understand and negotiate to forward goals. What emerges from both bodies of work is a view that locates the explanation of real world events in the dynamic and mutually-shaping interplay of agents, institutions, and their broader environment over time.

The value of both of these accounts lies in their discernment of a space for creative judgment and discretionary action—that is, for genuine leadership—at the nexus between outwardly-directed and inwardly-directed politics, thereby permitting a model that can be used to describe the structure of political leadership in general. The complex task of all political leadership lies in building and maintaining sufficient political

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25 As Putnam (1988, 434) observes: “On occasion … clever players will spot a move on one board that will trigger realignments on other boards, enabling them to achieve otherwise unattainable objectives.”
support over time to achieve broader goals believed necessary or desirable. Therefore, leaders must always be “Janus-faced” in that they must simultaneously attend to the constituency that sustains them—which is generally multi-layered, diverse in outlook and interest, and possibly fractious—while pursuing wider goals of political action. The logic of the political field in which the leader must lead—which is also a complex of conflicting or converging forces—is seldom wholly congruent with the logic of constituency maintenance. Taking constituency support for granted as one pursues wider goals risks forfeiting the leadership position; looking only after constituency matters, on the other hand, risks impotence or irrelevance in the larger arena (which can, ironically, endanger constituency support). It is easy to see why leaders may become obsessed with maintaining their hold on leadership to the detriment of any useful action in the world. This is often attributed to their megalomania and desire to retain leadership at any cost (someone once said of Yasser Arafat that he did not care whether he drove his people into a ditch so long as he himself was at the wheel.) But the structural necessity of maintaining a leadership position is the objective ground on which personal ambition is played out, and in complex and unsettled conditions this task may be very dominating. The majority of Machiavelli’s *Prince* is devoted to just this theme, and only in the last chapter does he suggest that leadership may actually be employed for any broader purpose (in this case, the political unification of Italy).

**Leadership in Asia**

It is obvious that, whatever valid comparisons may be made across space and time, individual leaders can be properly understood only within their own distinctive historical and institutional locations. Even across similar regimes, say liberal democratic ones, the constraints and opportunities confronting leaders are very different due to important institutional and historical differences. An American president, for example, faces different and usually more severe constraints than a prime minister in a Westminster system, and a prime minister of Britain confronts different freedoms and constraints than one in, for example, Canada, Australia, or Israel. One can multiply these differences by comparing liberal democratic regimes with transitional democracies or with authoritarian and semi-authoritarian systems.

The dynamic, structurally and institutionally situated model of leadership sketched

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above, though it will hardly be productive of general laws, is surely well suited to the task of scholars seeking to trace the interplay of individual character and political environment in particular cases. This is precisely the task for contributors to the present volume, which studies leaders and leadership in a range of Asian countries. Certainly, Asia presents an interesting array of regime types for investigating the multiple and varied challenges presented to leaders or leadership cohorts—not just within their own domains, but also in their international relationships. The Policy Forum contributors’ task is to perform a concentrated study both of significant individuals and their entire social, historical, and institutional context—and the opportunities and obstacles that such contexts present—to determine exactly how and why they have acted and with what effect. This is in the first place a thoroughly empirical task and in the second a thoroughly interpretive one, as good historians have always understood.

Even a cursory glance at the modern history of Asia reveals how important leaders have been to the founding and development of their countries. To try to tell the story of Singapore without Lee Kuan Yew, or Vietnam without Ho Chi Minh, or Taiwan without Li Teng-hui, or contemporary South Korea without Kim Dae-Jung, or China without Mao Zedong and later Deng Xiaoping, would surely be akin to trying to enact *Hamlet* without the prince. Even in a country like Japan whose political system long suppressed strong leadership by politicians (at least until the advent of Junichiro Koizumi and perhaps Shinzo Abe), interesting questions must be asked about the nature of the bureaucratic leadership that operated behind the political facade.\(^29\)

Leadership is centrally about judgment regarding what, collectively, needs to be done (or not done), and what actions (or strategic inactions) should follow from such judgment. But judgments can be good, bad, or indifferent and their consequences either happy or disastrous. Leadership, in other words, may not always be good leadership. Indeed, strong leadership can itself be a problem. Mao Zedong’s political skills, ideological appeal, and charismatic authority enabled him to lead the Chinese Communist Party to found Communist China, but the congealment of that authority into idolatry allowed him to instigate and oversee the disastrous political experiments of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. By 1976, Mao’s leadership had become an impediment to re-founding China on an alternate, modern basis, an impediment that Deng Xiaoping—whose leadership was based on perceived competency and openness to reform rather than political inspiration—had most carefully to negotiate both before and after Mao’s death.\(^30\)

My point is that the scholar must avoid the undue valorizing of leadership. A common

\(^{29}\) Shigeru Yoshida left an imprint on Japanese politics beyond his time in office, but did so prior to the founding of the so-called 1955 LDP regime, which ruled for forty-odd years, and whose ministers and prime ministers (with some notable exceptions) were factional choices in what Inoguchi and Jain (1997) called ‘karaoke democracy’ (meaning everyone got a turn).

response to many intractable political problems is to call for politicians to show more “leadership,” but genuine leadership may create or exacerbate problems as much as ameliorate them. Leadership is a phenomenon that scholars must always seriously address as it is always active in the world (if not necessarily always highly visible). But scrupulous scholars of leadership are inevitably required to judge the judgments of leaders, first to understand them and second to assess their quality. This is usually done through retrospective analysis, but to make sense of any particular judgment scholars must, in their research, project themselves mentally into the world as it presented itself to the decision-maker even while keeping the intellectual distance necessary for assessing the quality of the judgment. This is a challenging and important task in which descriptive and normative elements are necessarily closely enmeshed. It is the task that has been taken up by the contributors to this Policy Forum whose work provides a broad perspective on contemporary leadership in Asia.

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