



Book Reviews

Introductory Thoughts to the Theory of International Relations

A Review of the Volume

Murádin János Kristóf: *Nemzetközi Kapcsolatok Elmélete*
(*Theory of International Relations*).

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In our days, the theory of international relations is a widely accepted and taught subject. But it hasn't always been so. This subject was promoted to the rank of an independent field of study after World War I.

The young Transylvanian university teacher, János Kristóf Murádin in his book aims to present and explain each mainstream school of thought of international relations. These are realism, idealism or liberalism and geopolitics. According to the author, these were the three main waves that defined the 20th century. The book tries to analyze each one of these schools, explaining their origin, their impact on international politics and ultimately their current status.

But to fully understand these schools of thought, one must also learn about the history of international relations itself. This is why the author starts his book right with the basics, explaining the meaning of 'international relations'. While the classic approach to this definition is that international relation denotes the economic, cultural and political contacts between two or more countries, the author stresses the importance of international organizations in today's society. In what follows, he explains the origins of international relations. We may talk about international relations even in the case of the early

city-states of Mesopotamia or Greece, but in the modern sense, a viable and commonly accepted international system was only created in the middle of the 17th century. Closing the Thirty Years' War, the Peace of Westphalia created the bases for the first modern international system. By carefully explaining the decisions and the consequences of this peace, the author only stresses the fact that understanding it is the key requisite for analyzing the last century's and today's international system. The most important element to remember from this chapter is the nature of the international system. According to the author, the three main pillars of the new system, sovereignty, territoriality and legality – while defining the status of individual states – created an anarchic international system. The importance of this notion lies in the fact that it will influence the next centuries' international events.

After setting the bases and explaining each aspect that had a profound effect on the evolution of the current international sphere, the author sets out to present the main schools of thoughts. As mentioned, the first one is the Realist school. The origins of this theory can be found in the antiquity. The first modern representative of realism, as concerns international relations was Niccolo Machiavelli. He was the first modern European philosopher who declared that politics and governing in general should not be led by moral and ethics, but instead by necessity and interest. This clearly reflects the essence of realism, which is the rational evaluation of the facts at hand and the actions resulting from them. Modern international realism was developed in the early 20th century in the writings of Reinhold Niebuhr, Hans Joachim Morgenthau and Edward Hallett Carr. The realist international theory explains that human nature is also reflected in the international system. Humans tend to be aggressive, hungry for power and selfish, which also defines their way of governing states and shaping international decisions. These theoreticians stress that total peace is not attainable, instead, interpreting events in a rational and objective way and making decisions based on factual knowledge may limit the devastating effects of wars. The author mentions that this theory became less and less adopted in practice due to the significant technological advances in the second half of the twentieth century. As an adaptation to these changes several neorealist theories evolved. These theories are not focusing anymore on the interpretation and consequences of human nature. Instead, they put accent on the structural characteristics of the international system. This way they explain that the anarchic nature of the system is the cause of the conflicts and power imbalances in the world.

The second main wave which influenced the 20th century international relations was the Idealist or Liberal school of thought. The author points out the

fact that this theory is also deeply rooted in history. Yet, the main ideas of this wave can be traced back to the Enlightenment era. The 18-19th century liberalism is also regarded as one of the precursors of this theory. The liberal theory of international relations argues that human nature is good in essence and because of this, peace is attainable. Education is regarded as the main tool in shaping the future face of the world. Idealists stress the importance of demilitarization and international organizations. This was applied in practice by American president Woodrow Wilson, who by the creation of the League of Nations envisioned a new international system where a supranational organization would watch out for world peace and security. After World War II it became clear that the classical idealist theory was not applicable. As an answer, several new neoidealist or neoliberal theories saw the light of day. These theories, while not denying the anarchic nature of the international system, diminish its importance. Like classical idealist theories, these express the importance of global international organizations as defining elements of the system, but also accept the significance of sovereign states.

The third and last school of thought the author presents is geopolitics. According to this theory the actions of countries may be explained based on geographical, or rather geopolitical considerations. The shape of continents and the position, borders and resources of an individual country heavily determine the nature of international policies embraced. Geopolitics evolved in four different places of the world, which also denote the four separate branches, namely the American, British, German and French geopolitical school. The author states that due to the technological development and the rising importance of nuclear and aerial power, these theories lost from their importance in the second half of the 20th century.

The last chapter of the book describes the newer waves in the theory of international relations. Theories like constructivism, reflectivism, neo-functionalism, neo-Marxism, behaviourism and feminism are the newest in line trying to define the shape and essence of international relations. The author mentions that these globalist waves haven't yet completely manifested themselves as viable theories and defining them is still in progress.

Based on the above summary we may conclude that the book is a very good introductory reading into the theory of international relations. The book's target group is mainly students wishing to learn about the international system and its functioning. The structure of the book, by first explaining the notion, then the origins and history of international relations clearly follows these guidelines. Without knowing about the basics it is almost impossible to understand the complexity of international relations theory. It is obvious

that János Kristóf Murádin did a great job explaining all the basics of this subject. Presenting the three main theories, realism, idealism and geopolitics would not be possible without explaining notions like the balance of power, the Westphalian system or mentioning the teachings of ancient and medieval philosophers, who were precursors and source of inspiration to modern scholars and thinkers. The downside of this is visible in the fact that a considerable amount of space is spent on these chapters. But then again, as mentioned, this is a necessity and if left out, the book would lose from its comprehensibility and clearness. The presenting of the three major schools of thought is concise but clear. This is exactly what a beginning student of international relations needs. Relying on this knowledge and considering the further readings suggested in the book, students may deepen their exploration into this field. On the other hand, one thing that this book may seem to lack is the more in-depth presentation of newer and current waves. But if done, it would probably not serve the initially proposed purpose of introducing new students into the general theory of international relations.

Getting into more complex theories which are not even fully standardized yet may undermine the previous chapters. The old and the new theories can be put in two different categories, which would require separate and distinctly different approaches. While the chapters presenting the realist school, the idealist school and the geopolitical school are of a descriptive character, the new waves may possibly need a more interpretative or speculative attitude. But this point brings us exactly to the next issue which probably needs to be mentioned, namely the possible expansion of the subject in further books. I personally see two possible ways. The first one is a more in-depth elaboration of the three major schools of thoughts either in a single book or in three distinct ones. The second way is describing, presenting and interpreting the new thoughts mentioned in the final chapter of this book. Either way, as already mentioned, János Kristóf Murádin's present book serves its purpose well, and will certainly become a major and excellent tool for every student in the process of learning the basics of international relations theory.