

The Knotted Gun: Practical Solutions to Conflict

Written by Daryl Morini

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DARYL MORINI, NOV 11 2013

Today, too many academic and journalistic publications on international relations are constrained to the basic function of commenting on world affairs. You might read such publications on the train, or over your morning coffee, in order to find intelligible explanations for the world's ills, rather than to find solutions to its problems. That is the natural role of academic enquiry – to observe the world and theorise from those observations. But that is not its *only* role. Indeed, this passive function of our trade can come into tension with the more practice-oriented purpose it was originally designed to serve.

As Paul Sharp writes, students of IR usually “seek to understand and, perhaps, explain the occurrence of significant phenomena in our field *with the intention of having what we have found out and what we think about it used, more or less directly, to make the world a better place for some or all its people*.”[1] Originally, IR was above all a practical calling. It should “never be forgotten”, as William Olson remarked, that the founding purpose of IR was “to prevent future wars”. [2] Richard Devetak added: “More than just the study of the causes and conditions of war and peace, the study of international relations was, from the outset, guided by a purpose: to develop theories aimed at preventing or eliminating war.”[3]

With the proliferation of IR graduates, academics and all manner of self-described experts and consultants – no doubt a healthy sign of our discipline's expansion and success – the time has come to reclaim our discipline's original promise. Over the cacophony of daily analyses of international relations, academics should be first among equals in lifting their heads from the purely theoretical, and engaging in the fiery arena of public debate. Above all, IR academics have a special responsibility to the world, as the inheritors of an enduring and all-important question:

How can we prevent future wars?

Long before Kant, philosophers were pondering and offering schemes of perpetual peace. However, what we need more than ever are not more scholastic schemes, philosophical systems or generic, conceptual slogans (i.e. a world state, democratisation, development, world government, equality, emancipation!). IR scholars need to join the fray of international policy deliberations, descending into the dark, messy weeds of specific conflicts. Academics interested in conflict prevention should spend less time pondering the ideal conditions to prevent *war* as a general phenomenon, and more time finding concrete solutions to the numerous, specific manifestations of political conflict at any one time around the world.

When large segments of the world are aflame with violent conflict, persecution, injustice and oppression, and an even greater segment thereof teetering on the brink, academic enquiry should not solely be confined – from the safe heights of academia – to purely speculative inquiry. Our salaries, for the most part, are subsidised by the tax-payer. We should therefore feel some moral, even if no formal, obligation to repay that debt somehow, by contributing to making their lives better in more concrete ways than publishing esoteric journal articles.

“Leave the academy alone!” the critic will say. “Policy is not part of our job descriptions.” This defensive reaction, though understandable, is wrong. Certainly, policy think tanks exist to cater to the audience of IR practitioners, but their work often lacks the academic rigour of their master discipline. Moreover, think tanks are not free from undue political influence, or that of special interests and wealthy donors. At the other end of the spectrum, journalistic

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publications on foreign affairs, for all their popularity, are basically IR tabloids. As an accessible scholarly publication, *e-IR* is well placed to contribute intelligent and academically-rigorous practical policy proposals on ongoing international issues. This would supplement our current academic function, rather than supplant it.

The Knotted Gun is an exciting and necessary new series of articles designed to tackle this issue. It is novel in that it invites academic experts and their policy colleagues to debate *practical solutions* to the world's numerous disputes, issues and potential violent conflicts. In terms of format, these pieces will be differentiated by the basic requirement that they begin with a *realistic, detailed* and *actionable* policy proposal in the first paragraph (a type of executive summary) and follow up with a more detailed body of analysis justifying this proposal, or a full-length proposal (i.e. a draft treaty). For example, rather than debating the relative merits of Japan's and China's historical claims to the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, contributors would be expected to debate feasible solutions to prevent the second, third (and potentially first) world economies from fighting a war over a couple of goat-inhabited, scraggly rocks.

The optimal length of each piece would be a succinct 1000-1500 words. The advantage of creating a new space to host these pieces is that a steady and structured stream of policy debate would be encouraged, in the form of formal rebuttals. Ideally, this would contribute to improving the quality and analytical potency of policy proposals to international policy-makers. The internet is awash with commentary, opinion and rehashed analyses on world affairs. *e-IR* will create value by offering a flagship series of articles in which readers and writers can debate specific *solutions* to existing foreign policy issues, rather than only focussing on the problems themselves. This original concept positions *e-IR* as net *contributor* to international security, rather than a consumer and magnifying glass of *insecurity*. Let's get started!

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Daryl Morini is an editor-at-large of *e-IR*. Read more from Daryl, and others, in *e-IR's The Knotted Gun* series of articles. If you can think of practical solutions to a specific dispute or issue in world affairs, please send your ideas via email to Daryl Morini.

[1] Sharp, Paul. *Diplomatic Theory of International Relations* (Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 4-5.

[2] Cited in Richard Devetak, *An Introduction to International Relations: The origins and changing agendas of a discipline*, edited by Richard Devetak, Anthony Burke and Jim George (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 11.

[3] *Ibid.*

About the author:

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