Norms, Norm Violations, and IR Theory

Why do strong states that are heavily invested in the existing world order periodically go out of their way to break certain international norms, even as they remain invested in the maintenance of others? This article addresses the question of why great powers may violate norms, particularly in relation to the use of force, through the lens of International Relations (IR) theory. To this end, it begins with a short analysis of realism and liberalism in relation to norms and norm violations, including areas in which they struggle to engage fully with the problem, before continuing on to constructivist contributions on this topic. The article discusses norm development, shift, and violation in general terms, with particular reference to the United States (US) and the use of force through targeted killings. Of course, this is neither the only kind of norm that strong states can breach nor is the US the only great power actor that has the ability to willingly breach them, but the examples of the US and targeted killings nevertheless help to provide context to and illustration of the topic at hand.

Realism and Norm Breaking

Unipolarity implies unbalanced behavior, which holds that the US as a powerful state can operate without regard for what other states in the international system might say or how they might respond so long as that state is the greatest wielder of power. Realists assert that states are the primary actors in the international arena and that they are motivated by three core drivers: a determination to survive, fear that other states might act to destroy them, and the impetus to acquire power in order to forestall this eventuality (see Waltz, 2010). Realists do not necessarily embrace force as being a moral choice for states, but instead recognize it as the reality of how the world works and argue that actors who try to pursue other objectives unfavorable to their own ability to thrive in an anarchistic world.

Since 2007, the world has seen the rise of competing hegemonic powers to the US: the European Union (EU) (as a supranational entity), and the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), along with other potential power and great-power contenders. These states have become major players in the international system and, while they cannot yet directly challenge the US, they do have the ability to influence the US and how it operates. The rise of other challengers creating multipolarity, and the accompanying decline of unipolarity as the shape of the world order, may shift realist beliefs about how the US will utilize its power in order to threaten, coerce, and physically compel others to follow its wishes, so that it can best stay ahead of its competitors. This includes violating existing norms regarding the use of force through practices such as targeted killing.

The realist school of IR brushes aside the importance of norms and their use as ways of understanding why decisions are made in international politics. This is because a conventional theory like realism generally claims that the policies of a state are informed by the underlying military and economic distribution of capabilities of each and every state. The tradition essentially favors rationalist assumptions based merely on cost-benefit calculation at the expense of what can be learned through non-conventional theories that consider social benefits and losses. However, the prevailing realist perspective is quick to 'reject norms as rationalizations for self-interest and deny them explanatory power', and as a result, debates over the role of norms become little more than basic arguments that see material interests pitted against virtuous or moral principles (Klotz, 1995, 13).

Liberalism and Norm Breaking

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For liberals, the question as to why a liberal democratic state that stands for certain principles, such as the US, can willingly and repeatedly violate them poses a challenge. According to liberalism, a state should be open to implementing particular measures of cooperation with other states in order to promote recurrent collaboration. The assumption from a liberal point of view holds that a state representing a set of principles should be willing to act in accordance with them during both difficult and not-so-difficult times so as to maintain a political order embodying different forms of integration (see Deudney & Ikeberry, 2018). By promoting these values and cooperation then, the US will also benefit from existing within a system that operates in this way.

Within liberal theorizing, the implication is made that cooperation and non-military forms of interaction between states are more salient than before (Keohane & Nye, 1977). Liberal theorizing extends from normative theory, carrying forward inquiry and analysis about what should be or can be; yet, current interaction among states does not appear to be symptomatic of that process. As neoliberal institutionalism attempts to underscore the possibilities of cooperation even 'while adopting realist premises', a world in which an increasing number of international institutions exist fails to achieve this (Rathbun, 2010, 6-7). The relationship between a state and both the domestic and international society to which it is attached does not present itself as the 'critical causal factor' that conditions state behavior (Moravcsik, 2003, 161).

Variants of liberalism appear to share an ability to account for their expected outcomes as defined in their common dependent variables. Republican liberalism's arguments that try to link democratic institutions with the emergence of a peaceful type of IR (even among liberal democracies) do not adequately support its claim. Democratic institutions are expected to embrace and embed liberal norms of nonviolence and nonviolent behavior or policies that, instead of inciting hostility or escalating conflict, actually resolve them (Maoz & Russet, 1993). Disruptive effects of war and conflict that are able to strain the economic success of states through mutual exchange are emphasized in the liberal strand of commercial liberalism. Fear of the devastating effects of violence and conflict on mutual economic benefit should impede upon a liberal democratic state's interest and willingness to cause violent conflict (Frieden and Rogowski, 1996; O'Neal & Russett, 1997). The effort of maintaining and even strengthening interdependence is greatly disrupted by policies that distance states from one another through war and less-destructive and smaller-scope hostilities and violent confrontation. This point is driven even further when considering the emphasis that military liberalism places on the 'decreasing gains from warfare either due to the increasing destructiveness of weaponry' and technologically sophisticated modes of military force, nuclear missiles, chemical and biological weapons (CBWs), and even conventional weaponry like landmines and armed drones, both of which have had a lethal impact in the world (Rathbun, 2010). Conflict is less of an incentive for economic prosperity because it renders the economic and military spoils of war valueless (Rosecrance, 1986; Jervis, 2001; Rathbun, 2010).

Recognizing a mutual benefit arising from technological progress, Functionalists, Neofunctionalists, and researchers of epistemic communities claim that individuals and groups will gain from the transcendence of national boundaries. While technological advances in military force have helped to deemphasize national boundaries, however, this has not typically been to the mutual benefit of transnationalism (Rathbun, 2010). Instead, gains have primarily reached those governments that able to achieve technological advantages and use them for their own advantages (Deutsch, 1953; Keohane, 1984; Haas, 1992; Doyle, 1997). This process has somehow set the US apart from the international system, allowing it to rise above other states and follow a universalist project using the superiority of military power to enforce a particular model, over other states (Buzan & Wæver, 2009, 264). The erosion of political borders and growing transnationalism has not, however, led to transnational solidarity due to increased interaction in the modern international system. The blending of privileged state positions owing to technocracies and increased transnationalism has, contrary to the expectations of sociological liberalism, led to a host of violence and conflict-based interventions or discreet military operations (DMOs), particularly by the US (Zenko, 2010). Deficiencies with regard to regimes and international organizations (IOs) (or public interest groups) playing a greater role in enabling cooperation highlighted by this process has led contrary to the expectations of regulative liberals: less order and stability in world politics (Keohane, 1984).

Liberal points of view extend further the understanding that interaction between states and non-state actors (NSAs) in the international system is not a single story; nor does it unfold according to liberal understandings based on the core pillars of liberalism (progress, cooperation, transformation through the spread of democracy, interdependence,

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and international institutions) (Mearsheimer, 1994-1995; Zacher & Matthew, 1995; Grieco, 1998; Thies, 2002). States and organizations are expected to and understand that they will have to interact with one another repeatedly in the future and that interaction is not taken as a single encounter.

Liberalism therefore has a strong focus upon how states both can and should pursue mutually beneficial policies. This makes it comparatively ill-equipped to tackle the puzzle of why the US increasingly utilizes a variety of tools that go against these principles, such as targeted killings, despite the existence of considerable liberalist opinion that the US would benefit more from entrenching more cooperative efforts and behavior in liberal institutional terms.

Constructivism and Norm Breaking

In terms of constructing identity in the international system, states should not logically want to have self-ascribed or have others ascribe them with an identity of being an international killer or violator of either human rights or of sovereignty by carrying out human rights violations. Nor should they accept being identified with engaging in practices that promote illicit violence, terror, fear, hatred, and heightened levels of insecurity. Why then does a state like the US choose to engage in norm breaking, including practices such as targeted killings, if it is damaging to its image and runs contra to its own self-interests?

Norms and Decision Making In a Social World

By many accounts within the field of IR, norms and norm diffusion subscribe to a constructivist description by which the affairs of a state are made understandable and elaborated in terms of their impact on the world and how they are in turn impacted and shaped. Emerging at the end of the 1980s, constructivist theorizing establishes pathways into explaining the way that agents construct and perceive their reality (Reus-Smit, 2001; Burchill, Linklater, True, Patterson and Devetak, 2001). These pathways stem from the system of shared norms, values, and beliefs collectively referred to as 'normative and ideational structures' (Checkel, 1998; Risse, 2002). They lead us to envision a social environment in which actors are defined as social entities with identities that act not in accordance with purely rational principles (Checkel, 1998; Risse, 2002). It does not accept any 'extra-discursive realm from which material, objective facts assert themselves'; instead, it assumes that facts become issues of security by first being successfully formulated vis-à-vis discourses of politics (Hansen, 2006, 34).

The social environment, choices exhibited within it, and practices that come about through human agency facilitate a withdrawal from the claim that actors act in accordance with binding and unalterable interests (Reus-Smit, 2001). An essential exchange between the practices of actors and the structures in which they operate, including the *historical*, *cultural*, *political*, and *social environments* in an arena that, when taking the constructivist point of departure for this research, allows for the treatment of this arena as a constitutive realm. This realm can in turn be treated as one in which the constructivist and rational 'projects are compatible, with the former explicating the identities and interests of actors, the latter explaining the strategic pursuits of such interests' (Klotz, 1995a, 1995b quoted in Price & Reus-Smit, 1998, 278; Reus-Smit, 1997).

The constructivist analysis has a fundamental importance for understanding why states act in ways that may be considered deviant, such as through the use of targeted killings. However, the constructivist use of norms lends the ability to constitute identity of an actor in the international system and ascribe that actor with an understanding of its interests. This includes both moral and contingent strands of norms. Following the approach in this way, the origin of particular norms and practices can be accounted for, and that in turn (i) influence the actor's behavior and policy choices, (ii) shows exactly how a norm impacts a state or NSA and its decisions or how it influences that unit, and (iii) determines the specific conditions by which a norm operates at a much different level – that of world politics (Price, 1997). It is by this constructivist account of norms in IR that provides the basis for examining the US practice of such activities as deploying violence alongside a norm or set of norms as standards of appropriate behavior and its identity (Risse, 2002).

The Logic of Appropriateness

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Given the prescriptive qualities of norms, certain traits of norms guide an actor to behave or exhibit actions considered appropriate by and for a given society or community within the international system. The 'logic of appropriateness' guides actors to do what is expected of them with social expectations being embedded in social norms exhibiting their constitutive effects. The actions that various actors take also possess the ability to pressure those same social structures in which they operate, with the result that the actor may be able to influence and potentially reform the existing structure. New norms can emerge as a result of this interaction or merely a revision or new interpretation of the substance of the norm(s) (Wendt, 1992; Checkel, 1998).

Norms are an empirical complement to, for instance, a state's identity within the international system, and part of a theoretical addition to scholarly understanding of state behavior (Wendt, 1992, 1999; Lapid & Kratochwil, 1996). If part of understanding a state's identity is to understand how a state sees itself within broader cultures and societies, then the need is found to move beyond an outcome-oriented logic of how states operate and why they make certain policy choices. One of the major points to consider when considering US cases of deviancy from what the international community generally views as acceptable is the importance of ideas and the how the ideational dimension is fruitful for explaining state behavior. When taking into consideration a number of cases involving US use of force, for example, it is possible to begin building on an understanding that the decision to do so may be influenced by ideational factors. The US does not always benefit in material terms from the use of force. The international norm proscribing excessive use of force is not always complemented by domestic norms prescribing interventions that may require the level of force that has been or is exercised.

According to the constructivist arguments of Finnemore (1996; 2003), realists lack the capacity to account for a changing normative context that has the ability to drive and direct the interests of actors like the US observed vis-à-vis the use of drones in the modern world system. When no geostrategic or material benefit exists for the US through the use of force, its actions or rationale for those actions can only really be understood through the explanatory abilities of norms. Given much of the political fallout and the material costs of the US to embark on significant campaigns involving drones, current areas in which the US operates drones provides instances by which the use of force in violation of international norms are undertaken with very limited strategic, economic, or even political importance for the US as the principle actor.

Regulative and Constitutive Norms

The impact of regulative and constitutive performance of norms that either prescribe or proscribe variations in the use of force and their degree are important for understanding the impact of ideas on the decision to employ it (Jepperson, Wendt & Katzenstein, 1996; Raymond, 1997; Checkel, 1997; Onuf, 1998; Crawford, 2002). This impact is very useful for raising important questions. How do we reconcile the US violation of certain international norms in some areas, such as proscribing the excessive use of force or assassination against one category of criminals such as terrorists, with US compliance with the enforcement those same norms against other categories such as drug-lords? How do we reconcile the US' violation of the international norm against assassination when such action is complemented by little or no material interests or benefit? A counter-argument could be that any president who discontinues with practices that strike high emotional chords domestically, such as the targeted killing program against real or potential terrorists, would pay a heavy domestic political price for not doing everything to prioritize the needs of the American public and, in this case, to 'protect' the American people from harm. This would suggest that faced with contrasting or opposing normative demands, US leaders make considered judgments as to the trade-offs between these norms.

The regulative function of a norm can be explained as that which can constrain or regulate the behavior of a certain agent through the imposition of certain consequences. A combination of social norms and rational action may occur to explain a particular action undertaken by a state. The result or outcome of the action is therefore brought about by a norm as well as rational self-interest. The outcome is the result of two different forces at play. Logically, it would be the policy preference of the US to defeat a threat (i.e., terrorism) to its national security or population. It does so by rationally pursuing a policy that is entirely outcome-oriented but still governed to an extent by norm-motivated constraints regarding the means or the type of force that the US is or would be allowed to use to achieve its goal. One norm in international politics, for example, is that the use (and even possession) of nuclear weapons, even tactical

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nuclear weapons is unacceptable and the resort of an 'uncivilized' society or state. Yet, this does not regulate the goals that a state like the US can pursue through the use of conventional weapons. The same can be said of other types of weapons, which thus distinguish drones from other non-legitimate forms of warfare (invasion, use of chemical/biological/radiological weapons), or forms of warfare that involve large levels of destruction or collateral damage (weapons of mass-destruction, WMDs).

Norm Motivation

Finnemore and Sikkink (1998, 895-896) theorize within the evolution and influence of norms the 'norm lifecycle', claiming that norms enter into a three-part patterned cycle (Norm Emergence, Norm Cascade, and Norm Internalization) with different behavior logics dominating each part of the cycle. Given the costs of appropriateness and the tools available for actors to use is part of their practice as actors, the question of motivation for 'norm entrepreneurs' is challenging but critical to explore. Explanations for this depends on the type of actor and the type of norm, however, reference is necessary to more than just this. The social norms of which political scientists are concerned, write Finnemore and Sikkink (1998, 898), require deeper reference to such things as 'empathy', 'altruism', and 'ideational commitment'.

An altruistic angle would suggest, in relation to the proposed research topic, that the US violates certain norms with the aim of benefiting other (states) in the international community, but at the expense of itself (Oliner & Oliner, 1988; Fogelman, 1994). This idea, however, is problematic given that a number of other ideas also lend themselves as possible motivations or drivers of US policy and action. Monroe (1996, 206), for example, presents the idea that a 'shared perception of common humanity' and the 'recognition that we all share certain characteristics and are entitled to certain rights, merely by virtue of our common humanity'. As constructivism draws out the importance of behavior, interests, and relationships as social formulations, relationships observed within international relations can change as well (Wendt, 1987; Kratochwil, 1989; Onuf, 1989; Katzenstein, 1996; Lapid & Kratochwil, 1996; Friedman & Starr, 1997; Ruggie, 1998). This non-deterministic system presents a reality supported by both ideational and material building blocks (Ruggie, 1998, 879).

Identity has become a main feature of constructivism and constructivist discourse and is complementary to the concepts of norms and culture. Identity is a part of every individual that brings with it discursive practices (Hopf, 2002, 1). Many reveal themselves through different aspects of social life. Some are situated in a variety of discourses while others are not. Constructivists argue that in order to understand political action and changes that take place the construction of identities and interests should also be understood (Wendt, 1992, 1994, 1999; Finnemore, 1996; Price & Reus-Smit, 1998; Reus-Smit, 2002, 2009). Societies in this system operate amid a social cognitive structure that also presents different sets of identities as well as discursive elements that take part in struggles in order to compete for dominance (Hopf, 2002). Campbell (1992), Wæver (1995), and Hansen (2006), link the concept of identity construction to that of 'national security' by arguing that it is:

[o]ne tied to the sovereign state and articulating a radical form of identity – and a distinct discursive force which bestows power as well as responsibility on those speaking within it'. 'An individual's identities', according to Hopf (2002, 1), 'contribute to the creation and recreation of discourse and social cognitive structure […] [and] those identities are constrained, shaped, and empowered' by their social creations.

Constructivism's state identity approaches present an alternative to many rational choice theories. State identity, like other non-materialist factors (culture, norms, ideas, and beliefs, among others), allows for the establishment of links to support arguments formulated within a constructivist theoretical framework. From the constructivist perspective, realism's materialist ontology hinders the social context in which identities and their impacts are found. It favors the idea that the distribution of capabilities forms the overarching structure that imposes the rules by which states act (Copeland, 2000).

Human or Non-Traditional Security and the Norm Cycle

Not all schools of thought, however, would lend sympathy to different actions by states and actors. The concept of

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human security provides a useful case in point given that it exists amid agent-oriented processes and is also underscored by the existence of non-state agents as well as divergent values. As constructivism draws out the importance of behavior, interests, and relationships as social formulations, relationships observed within international relations can change as well (Wendt, 1987; Kratochwil, 1989; Onuf, 1989; Katzenstein, 1996; Lapid & Kratochwil, 1996; Friedman & Starr, 1997; Ruggie, 1998). This non-deterministic system presents a reality supported by both ideational and material building blocks (Ruggie, 1998, 879). The meanings of reality teased out by constructivism in the context of international relations and norms.

Coming back to the point of human security, there is a tension here that rests on the idea of motivations, benefits, and effectiveness. Human security is not inevitable or something that demands a common human essence in order to be realized; nor would all actors share the conviction that humans should all be secure. Human *in*security, on the other hand, also serves or benefits some actors and its existence it might be argued is the direct result of 'existing [or even deliberate] structures of power that determine who enjoys the entitlement to security and who does not' (Thomas & Wilkin, 1999, 3; Newman, 2001). Issues of human security and humanitarian intervention are therefore divisive element of the notion of a shared human essence, and are shown to be acted on not simply because, or sometimes not at all, of material benefit. Some scholars have argued that distinct types of human security may be better defined as 'non-traditional security' (epidemiology [i.e., HIV/AIDS], drugs, poverty, refugees, migration, domestic and international terrorism, small arms proliferation, cyberwar, human trafficking, and slavery), with an emerging challenge of non-state and non-military factors coming into play even though the state remains the referent (Newman, 2001, 243).

Any subsequent emerging interpretations of this form of non-traditional security and their prioritization serve as the basis of tension, especially given that the maintenance of freedoms connected to modern democratic societies factor in as concerns (Ullman, 1983; Handelman, 1994; Williams & Black, 1994; Williams, 1995; Matthew & Shambaugh, 1998). In short, there are costs and benefits attached to each and every issue that a state actor may face; but those same costs and benefits are also held against different types of state behavior within any type of system (Wendt, 1992, 399) A further contradiction of US behavior is highlighted in this case with the perception being that the US is acting in order to benefit a common humanity that supposedly shares and is entitled to the same rights. As a norm entrepreneur, the US might be seen as acting in accordance with a redefined understanding or interpretation of its own interests, which may have changed over time or as a result of certain critical points in its history; thus, the US is not acting against its interests at all or even of others in the international system. The case may be that actors have yet to act in a manner that is appropriate to their redefining interests. Looking at a norm entrepreneur who seeks to limit or make conditional, an existing norm such as targeted killings, provides an interesting research avenue. Typically, constructivist research looks at the construction, or the scope enlargement, of 'good' or 'positive' norms.

During the first stage of Finnemore and Sikkink's (1998) describe the norm cycle, the emergence of norms is the result of a program on the part of the norm entrepreneur (Haas, 1992) – a kind of effort of inducement whereby an actor or group of actors retain strong convictions regarding the type of behavior that other actors are expected to adhere to and by which to conduct themselves within society or social communities. A primary goal of the norm entrepreneur is to define and/or establish specific standards of behavior with the expectation that other actors within the community follow them (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, 896-897). They might also try to replace an old standard of behavior with a new one. Little explanation is offered for the path pursued by actors that attempt to replace old standards of norms with new ones but without legitimizing that same standard of practice for all other actors within a community. Other states and even NSAs like organizations and institutions can become followers of the norms established by norm entrepreneurs. This stage of norm cascading describes the internalization of norms by actors as a result of their scattering across a community or system of actors. When the norm becomes internalized behavior resulting from the norm is no longer questioned (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, 896-897).

Conclusion

This article began by asking why great power states sometimes violate long-standing norms, which in some cases they helped to create or maintain. To address this question, the article examined realist, liberal, and constructivist approaches toward the development, shifting, and breaching of norms, especially in relation to the targeted killings

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by the US, including the challenges and limitations encountered by these three core branches of IR theory in regards to explaining these issues. With the world today facing the prospects of a major shift from a unipolar world dominated by the US to a multipolar one, understanding the interactions between strong powers such as the US and norms, norm violations, and norm shifts is becoming increasingly important.

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