Why Do States Obey Rules in International Cooperation?

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Social control, which is essential to all social relations, is at the center of international relations (IR). Despite anarchy in international society, there are orders and rules which make things run smoothly. Hurd (1999) defines three categories of social control in IR: coercion, self-interest, and legitimacy. They generate control and compliance through different mechanisms. Some are superior in certain spheres than others; coercion is more common in military domains and conflicts, while self-interest interprets economic affairs more effectively. Taking a realistic stance, I would argue that self-interest best explains why states obey rules, specifically in international cooperation.

Both neoliberals and neorealists agree that the objective of international cooperation is to achieve gains, regardless of disagreements on whether they should be absolute or relative. To facilitate successful cooperation, orders and rules are prerequisites. The problem then becomes how rules are established and why states obey them. To answer these questions, this essay will examine the three social control mechanisms in sequence.

Coercion can be eliminated from the list of explanations first. According to Claude (1966), politics is more than a struggle for power. Politicians and rulers also contest the rightness and authority of their positions. Motivated by fear and compulsion, coercion is exercised through punishment, sanctions, and threats, relying on both physical power and material capabilities. Therefore, it needs powerful institutions and enormous resources to enforce and monitor. Inefficient, costly, and undemocratic, however, coercion is not a feasible mechanism in the international context. Though many scholars draw analogies between international and domestic politics, they are actually two separate spheres with profound differences. Anarchy is based on the idea that there is no entity strong enough at the international level to act like state power does in the domestic realm. The powers of international institutions are based on states pooling together. International laws, rules, conventions, and so on, are no more than words before being ratified by states, while individual citizens can only be recipients of legislation in the domestic realm. In a word, coercion is a top-down approach, while international authorities and powers are primarily derived in a bottom-up way. The inconsistency between *ought* and *is* undermines the validity of coercion in international cooperation.

Based on the same utilitarianism logic of coercion, self-interest is the other side of the coin (Hurd, 1999). Self-interest is inspired internally by actors, while coercion is exerted by external restraints. With the egoistic and instrumental distinction between the self and others, Hurd distinguishes “self-interested” from “interested.” There is a shared principle between them that the decision to comply with norms is ultimately a cost-benefit analysis. Nonetheless, unlike a status quo orientation, the “self-interested” actors take nothing for granted and make continuous reassessments for every decision. Hence, they are essentially amoral in terms of attitude toward others and norms. Self-interest does not reject cooperation; rather, it can be a driver of it.

Increasingly accepted in civil societies, legitimacy fundamentally differs from self-interest in terms of what constitutes interests (Hurd, 1999). There are different working definitions of legitimacy. It is commonly accepted that legitimacy is a perception or belief of acceptance (Claude, 1966; Franck, 1988; Hurd, 1999). Thus, it is a relational and inter-subjective concept that “rule is legitimate when its subjects believe it to be so” (Clark, 2003:79). Normative legitimacy can only turn into operative power through the process of internalization, when actors psychologically re-conceive their interests according to rules. This power is best shown “when an actor complies with a legitimate rule

that goes against its interests" (Hurd, 1999:388). In addition, legitimacy is not a static and all-encompassing perception. It varies from time to time, and from context to context. Consensus on legitimacy is an essential characteristic of a political system or community. Nonetheless, collective legitimacy is not the same as that at the individual level. As Claude (1966) puts it, collective and political dimensions are the highlights of current international legitimacy. It goes beyond legal and moral aspects.

Self-interest is the most tangible and conceivable mechanism that introduces social controls in international cooperation. First, unlike generic "interested" individuals, states are abstract bodies without thinking and emotional ability. Though treated as a unitary rational actor, the state is actually a collective body with acting power in the hands of politicians. Keeping national identity in mind, states have an extremely clear boundary between themselves and others. They are more focused on self-interests and can thus easily ignore obligations towards others. Second, the self-help system endows states with national self-determination as the basis of legitimate statehood in modern international politics (Claude, 1966). It is difficult to reach a consensus on either the principles of legitimacy or the agency of legitimization. Contemporary international organizations, even the most legitimate one, the UN, have only contingent legitimacy (Keohane, 2006). Any loyalty toward international orders is subject to potential benefits. Therefore, there is no entity powerful and impartial enough to monitor and enforce cooperation among states. Third, any existing cooperation persists only when benefits, material, or ideology, are positive. What states value are interests, not the relationship itself. The widely accepted view that states have neither permanent friends nor permanent enemies, but only permanent interests in international relations, is a good illustration. Fourth, both calculation of self-interest and cooperation are motivated by the rational choice to reduce costs and pursue benefits. Reputation and credibility play a substantial role in international cooperation, such that states may compromise and give up some benefits in certain situations in order to maintain their renown. Nevertheless, states are not in search of them *per se*. The payout is a trade-off for more interests in the future or in other aspects, because international politics consists of repeated games.

It is true that coercion, self-interest, and legitimacy are not antithetical, but complementary, even in the international realm. Hurd believes that most social structures emerge from relations of coercion or individual self-interest, "but once established they may come to develop supporting and independent base of legitimacy" (1999: 389). The international community is still undergoing processes of formation. Certain examples of regional consensus do exist, as in the case of Europe, but a global consensus, however, remains far away. Self-interest will continue to be the main social control structure in IR into the foreseeable future. In terms of international cooperation, coercion plays a limited role in obliging obedience, but legitimacy is the way actors constrain each other when consensus and acceptance are present. Calculation of self-interest best explains actors' underlying incentives, and thus their willingness to comply with rules.

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