Identity in International Conflicts: A Case Study of the Cuban Missile Crisis

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Multiple IR theories have sought to understand international conflicts among states, and notably, the role of identity has gained momentum in theoretical debate (Berenskoetter, 2017). This essay compares poststructuralism, constructivism and neorealism and argues that, in understanding the role of identity in international conflicts, poststructuralism provides the most compelling account. Significantly, poststructuralism explores the constitution of a state's identity, how identity can "make possible" for foreign policies to carry out in international conflicts and the mutually constitutive effects between foreign policies and identity (Campbell, 2013). Neorealism lacks these components, and although constructivism discusses identity, its explorations are not as comprehensive as those of poststructuralism. This paper adopts the Cuban Missile Crisis to justify its argument, as this seminal event led to "the brink of nuclear war" (Allison, 1971: 39) and caused "a higher probability that more human lives would end suddenly than ever before in history" (Allison, 1969: 689). The essay first critically explores the three theories above and then examines my empirical case study.

Neorealism

Neorealism believes that an "anarchic system" traps states in an "iron cage" with "unremitting competition for power" (Mearsheimer, 2013: 78, 80). As such, states living in a "self-help world" with "ceaseless security competitions" are forced to focus on the balance of power (material capabilities) to achieve their "main goal"—survival (Mearsheimer, 2013: 79, 80). In this "competitive world", "all states are potential threats"; thus, "conflict is common" (Mearsheimer, 1990: 12). Root causes of conflicts, then, lie in the architecture of the international system rather than the nature of individual states (Mearsheimer, 1990: 12), as states are seen as "black boxes", "assumed to be alike" (Mearsheimer, 2013: 78) and considered to be in pursuit of power. Neorealist argue that factors that determine the likelihood of war include "polarity of the system", "power balance", "power shifts" and "distribution of powers" among states (Mearsheimer, 2013: 84–88). When there is peace, it is due to rational actors calculating the "cost and benefits" and finding the costs to be too high to enter the war (Mearsheimer, 1990: 13).

In assuming that all states are "self-interested" (Hopf, 1998: 175) and that material power is the most influential determinant of states' behaviour (Hopf, 1998: 177), however, neorealism is problematic. With neorealism's (neo) positivist epistemology, power is not only fixed and observed scientifically, but it is nothing more than material powers and the state's capability to carry them out (Brooks, 1997: 447). Any ideational factors are ignored. More crucially, neorealism holds that "[the] state is ontologically prior to the international system" (Ashely, 1984: 240), and states' interests and existence are "treated as given" (Ashely, 1984: 238), independent of any social institutions and social powers (Ashely, 1984: 243, 244). Neorealists assume that states are unitary actors with a "single eternal meaning" and "[the] same prior interests" (Hopf, 1998: 176) seeking their "intrinsic desires" (Ashely, 1984: 243). The role of identity is neglected, as all states are assumed to be self-help actors with the same purpose. Social processes are ignored (Roush, 2020) and states are taken for granted (Hansen, 2017: 167). Ashely claims that the "[p]roposition that states might be essentially problematic…is excluded from neorealist theory" (1984: 238) and in fact, "far from questioning commonsense appearance", the "neorealist orrery hypostasizes them" (Ashely, 1984: 237). Thus, neorealism clearly excludes the role of identity in international conflicts.

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Constructivism

Recognising the often-blurred boundary between critical constructivism and poststructuralism (both adapt a similar discursive epistemology, e.g. Weldes, 1999a), this essay follows Hansen (2006) in not dividing them; thus, "constructivism" in this essay refers to conventional constructivism. Constructivism and neorealism both aim to explain the causes of states' actions; however, constructivism recognises "the importance of identity" (Adler & Barnett, 1998: 12) and "concentrates on issues of identity in world politics" (Hopf, 1998: 172), as a world without an identity would be "chaos" (Hopf, 1998: 175). Unlike neorealism, constructivism appreciates "social forces" (Adler & Barnett, 1998: 4) and argues that "intersubjective meanings define social reality" (Adler, 1997: 327). Furthermore, while realising the "existence of the material world", they argue that actors act based on socially constituted "collective interpretations of the external world" (Adler, 1997: 330). Constructivism holds that identity is constituted by a cognitive understanding among actors (Adler, 1997: 332) whose identities are created on the "basis of knowledge that people have of themselves and others" (Adler & Barnett, 1998: 43). States gain identity through social learnings that help them understand themselves in relation to others (Adler & Barnett, 1998: 47; Zehfuss, 2001: 319); thus, identity is not given but made. Believing that social identities exist prior to conceptions of interest (Hall, 1993: 51), constructivism argues that states' interests and actions are identity-based (Adler & Barnett: 1998: 46; Price & Reus-Smit, 1998: 259; Hopf, 2002: 16; 1998: 175; Koslowski & Kratochwil, 1994: 223; Flockhart, 2016: 87; Barnett, 2017). Further, this relatively "fixed or constant" identity (Hopf, 1998:183) provides "stable expectations" towards others' actions (Adler & Barnett: 1998: 34). Thus, the "identification of friend or foe" (Adler & Barnett: 1998: 46) determines whether states enter conflicts.

Although constructivism engages with the role of identity, its approach still has limitations. It argues that actors gain their social identities through interactions and states' interests and behaviours occur accordingly. This is problematic as it still requires us to have "imagined [actors] on their own" and "know" what actors are like before coming to be part of the context (Zehfuss, 2001: 332, 333). Constructivism "accepts the existence" and offers "no account" of identity's origins (Hopf, 1998: 184). It presents identity as "innocent" and "relatively free of prior assumptions" (Zehfuss, 2001: 336) and excludes the initial process of "constructing state identity" (Zehfuss, 2001: 335). Therefore, a particular identity is already in place before social interactions occur. Moreover, to recognise identity changes in interactions, constructivism must "identify the identity an actor 'has' at any given point" (327). In this logic, individual states are treated as a "unified entity" (Zehfuss, 2001: 337) "without [a] difference" (Zehfuss, 2001: 332). This "anthropomorphic" concept treats states as if they are "unitary actors with minds, desire and intentions" (Zehfuss, 2001: 335). It is "impossible to acknowledge the complexity" of this "seemingly natural narrative of identity", and the exclusion of the "process of construction of states as a bearer of identity" also ignores the power politics behind this articulation (Zehfuss, 2001:333, 335, 336). Constructivism's "ontological foundation… precludes investigation into power as constitutive of subjects" (Doty, 1993: 299) and thus fails to question how a state's specific identity comes into being. Furthermore, this view has led to constructivism posing "why questions" (why states behave this like this), which already presume this specific action "could happen"(Doty, 1993: 298). As such, constructivism presupposes an actor's ability to imagine these actions, and thus, their identity "must already be in place" (Doty, 1993: 298). In short, although constructivism engages with identity on a much larger scale than neorealism, it still fails to explore identity formation prior to the social interaction and views the state as a "unitary actor" with a single identity.

Poststructuralism

Poststructuralism, like constructivism, aims to denaturalise the social world (Hopf, 1998: 182) but goes deeper than constructivism. It questions the ontological assumptions we make about the world and how certain things that seem "natural" and "obvious" are problematic (Hansen, 2017: 171). It holds the non-foundationalist perspective that realities "have no ontological status" apart from the acts that constitute them (Campbell, 1998: 9). This is not to deny that objects exist externally to thought but that "objects could constitute themselves as objects outside any discursive condition of emergence" (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 108), as "we can never know [the existence of the world]" beyond discourse (Campbell, 1998: 6). Poststructuralism argues that "we must not imagine that the world turns toward us a legible face which we would only have to decipher" (Foucault, 1984: 127). With this "post-positivist epistemology", poststructuralism uses a discursive practices approach to unpack the "linguistic construction of reality" (Doty, 1993: 302). Thus, it denies the existence of an "objective yardstick" that can define realities, crises or identities (Hansen,

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2017: 159; Nabers, 2019: 2). For poststructuralism, "identity is an inescapable dimension of being", but it "is not fixed by nature" (Campbell, 1998: 9). Identity is not given (Derrida, 1998: 28) but is performatively constituted and depends on discourses (Weldes & Saco, 1996: 374; Doty, 1993: 304; Hansen, 2017: 164, 169; Campbell, 1998: 5, 9; 2013: 234; Zehfuss, 2001, 336). Accordingly, a state is understood as an "imagined political community" (Anderson, 1991) whose "identity" "is constituted in relation to difference" (Campbell, 1998: 9; 2013, 238). In poststructuralism, "[the] constitution of identity is achieved through the inscription of boundaries that serve to demarcate an 'inside' from an 'outside'" (Campbell, 1998: 9), "self" from "other" and "us" from "them". Moreover, this boundary is "secured by the representation of danger" (Campbell, 1998: 3). Poststructuralism thereby explores the construction of identity in a way that constructivism does not.

Poststructuralism also understands that it is "impossible [for states] to maintain a coherent identity" (Roush, 2020), as there exists no objective, stable reality, dichotomy nor primary identity (Hansen, 2017: 169; Campbell, 1998: 11). States are thus "always in [the] process of becoming" (Campbell, 1998: 12), which requires a "regulated process of repetition" (Butler, 1990: 136) of discursive practices to (re)produce this identity. States therefore need reproduction to "maintain" their identity's realness (Hansen, 2017: 169). Due to challenges against "obvious" and "objective" appearance; as poststructuralism argues, this "naturalness" is created and maintained by repeated articulations (Weldes, 1996: 285). States should not be treated as "unitary actors" with a single identity as they are in neorealism and constructivism.

This brings us to power politics. Power is "productive" (Doty, 1993; Hansen, 2017: 164). Through power discourse, specific knowledge is exercised and produced (Edkins, 2005: 4). This power/knowledge nexus prioritises specific knowledge that articulates meanings for objects while at the same time "marginalis[ing]" other "realities" and "identities" (Foucault, 2004: 7). This power discourse, while constituting seemingly "natural" realities (identities) (Hansen, 2017: 164), also exercises authority. It determines what "real" identity a state "has". Other possible "identities" are thus denied. If we accept that power discourse creates a single identity for states and thus benefits some groups at the expense of others (Roush, 2020), then the "why questions" posed by constructivism are problematic (Doty, 1993). Power discourse is often neglected in "why questions". Poststructuralism, however, asks "how questions", e.g. how reality is articulated and how particular foreign policies were legitimised and allowed to happen (Doty, 1993: 298, 305). Poststructuralism also views the relationship between identity and foreign policy as mutually constituted: "identity is simultaneously a product of and the justification for foreign policies" (Hansen, 2017: 169). Recognising that constituted identity needs constant (re)production and that it "allows" specific foreign policies to happen, poststructuralism argues that foreign policies and actions in conflicts and crises also (re)produce and (re)articulate states' identities (Hansen, 2017: 169). This exploration of the three theories reveals that poststructuralism provides the most compelling account of identity in conflicts, as it compensates for the limitations within neorealism and constructivism.

Case Study: The Cuban Missile Crisis

Having critically engaged with these three theories, we now move to an empirical case study on the Cuban Missile Crisis, one of the biggest "Cold War confrontations" between the US and Soviet Union that occurred in October 1962 (History, 2019). It began when a US U-2 spy plane discovered the Soviets' missile deployment in Cuba on 14 October. The US then urged the Soviets to remove the missiles. During the crisis, the US was "rapidly prepar[ing] [for] a substantial air attack and land invasion force" (Garthoff, 1992: 47) against Cuba while also enacting policies such as blockades. The crisis was heightened to the point where it almost led to a nuclear war between the US and the Soviets (Allison, 1971: 39).

Having introduced the background, neorealism's limitations are now examined through application to this case study. Within neorealism's theoretical model, the "cause" of conflicts and US aggression towards Cuba is regarded as the "competitive nature of bipolar politics" between the US and Soviet Union (Weldes & Saco, 1996: 365). Under the model, the Soviet Union's deployment of missiles in Cuba was threatening the US's survival; thus, the US had to counter the Soviets and force them to remove the missiles (Weldes & Saco, 1996:365). However, this explanation not only neglects the role of identity but is also incorrect. If bipolar superpower politics caused the conflicts, "then the end of the Cold War and Soviet threats should [have] signal[led] a decline" (Weldes & Saco, 1996: 365) in US

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hostility towards Cuba, but this antagonism has not changed immediately after the end of the Cold war (Weldes & Saco, 1996: 365). Moreover, then US Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara argued afterwards that the Soviet's missile deployment "made no difference", as it would not have seriously threatened the US: "Can anyone seriously tell me that [Soviet] having 340 [missiles] would have made any difference?" (Blight and Welch, 1990: 23). It is therefore clear that examining only the power balance offers a limited account of the crisis.

Having denied the usefulness of neorealism's theoretical approach, the following sections examine the role of identity to understand the case. To fully understand the role of identity in international conflicts, a compelling theory should explore the initial process of identity "construction". This section will denaturalises the "identity" of the state by examining numerous US discourses around the crisis period, and poststructuralism's superiority to constructivism will be evident as identity was constructed through discourses.

In US discourses, the Soviet Union has been articulated as an "other" that is in contrast with "self" and has been given a negative identity in contrast to the US. The Soviet missile deployment was often articulated as threatening in US discourses; for example, Dean Rusk, then the US Secretary of State stated that it was an "aggressive intervention" into the Western Hemisphere (Weldes, 1996: 290). Douglas Dillon similarly stated that missile deployment is a "military intrusion [from] a foreign country" (Dillon, 1964). "Others" with "intrusion" characteristics are established in this discourse. More significantly, in Kennedy's (1962) speech, the Soviet Union was connected with "secrecy and deception", with their missile deployments a "secret, swift and extraordinary" "rapid offensive buildup". Discourse represented these Soviet missiles as "clearly offensive" and seeking to "attack" "the Western Hemisphere"; thus, they were a "threat to the peace and security of all the Americas" (Kennedy, 1962). The Soviets' "clandestine decision" was depicted as a "provocative and unjustified" move, in opposition to the US's "justified" further action.

In contrast, the US, along with the "world community", positioned itself as being "opposed to war", claiming it consisted of "peaceful people" who hope "for a peaceful world" (ibid). The Soviets' "deceptive" and "secretive" characteristics were further contrasted with the US's "openness" in the US Department of State's (1962) discourses: "Our missiles abroad are established under open and announced agreements", whereas "Soviet missiles were placed in Cuba in secret without any public statements and without an alliance" (7–8). Through discourse, distinct identities are represented, as Robert Kennedy, then the US Attorney General's discourse clearly shows: "We (the US) had not been that kind of country [the Soviet Union]" (Weldes, 1999b: 41). These official discourses established a threatening, aggressive, secretive and duplicitous Soviet identity (Weldes, 1996: 290). Moreover, by establishing "others", the US was identified as a "peaceful", "justified" "global leader" (US National Security Council, 1950: 390) in these dichotomous discourses (Weldes, 1996: 282, 299).

Cuba's identity, too, was constituted by US Cold War discourse. Cuba was articulated as an "imprisoned island" (Kennedy, 1962), controlled and betrayed by the "Castro gang" (Weldes & Saco, 1996: 385). As showcased in Eisenhower's discourse earlier, Cuba is believed to be "serving Soviet purposes" (380). Later, this "Soviet serving role" was reproduced in *The New York Times* (1961): Cuba is described as "a new satellite" established by the Russians, "[governed] by Khrushchev's chief puppet" (10). In these discourses, the Castro government controlling Cuba is thus constructed as being the "Soviets' tool".

Hence, the US's identity is not pre-given; its identity conceptions rest upon discursive (re)production of a relationship of *difference* (Weldes, 1999b: 59). US discourses in "differentiating the US from the aggressive other [(Cuba controlled by Castro and Soviets)]… constituted a US identity" (Weldes, 1999b: 44). Thus, an identity is secured by transforming difference "into otherness, into evil or one of its numerous surrogates" (Connolly, 1991: 64). Rather than assuming the US has a peaceful, justified global leadership identity and the Soviet Union has a deceptive, dangerous communist identity when entering social interactions, like constructivism might, poststructuralism through discourse analysis unpacks identity construction.

Poststructuralism's compelling account also lies in that it investigates the effects of power politics behind discourse that (re)construct the US identity in a particular way. Poststructuralism argues that the state is not a "unitary actor" with a single identity and that identity is unstable and is more problematic than it seems to be (Zehfuss, 2001).

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Through these powerful (official, high-profile) discourses, the US came to be represented as a state that acquires a peaceful democratic identity against the evil Soviet Union. These power discourses have marginalised other discourses that articulate a different US identity. Power discourses have often articulated US foreign missile deployment in Turkey and Italy as "open" and "defensive" in contrast with the Soviets' "offensive" ones. This is obvious when examining Stevenson, then US politician's speech, where he argued that the US's foreign missiles are deployed "without concealment or deceit" and are "publicly declared" and placed "in the NATO area in response to the threat posed to NATO by Soviet missiles" (Stevenson, 1962: 729). This discourse constituted a "single identity" that is "defensive" and legitimate to the US. This effectively oppressed other possible representational discourses. In fact, during the Cold War, there were anti-nuclear protests in the US which included discourses like "No double standards, US bases are no different" (Estuary Press, n.d.) within the US. These marginalised discourses might have articulated a different US identity, one that might have articulated US as an imperialist power. Hence, states' identity is constituted through power discourse. Constructivism and neorealism both treats states as unitary actors with a single identity, thus they overlook the power politics behind discourse that constitute a particular identity at the expense of others. Thereby, poststructuralism provides an in-depth exploration on identity.

A further way in which poststructuralism allows us to better understand the role of identity in conflicts is that they examine "how" a certain "identity" enables specific foreign policies and conflicts. Importantly, only through discussing how power discourse marginalises other possible constituted "identit[ies]" can one understand why "why questions" are problematic (Doty, 1993). Through the construction of an aggressive identity of the Soviet Union and Cuba, discourse allows for the "possib[le] conditions for the existence of phenomena" (Majeski & Sylvan, 1991: 8)—that is, US foreign policies. These "hostile and aggressive [US] foreign policies" (Weldes & Saco, 1996: 378) were made possible through discourses that articulated the US as a global leader who needs to "protect" the Western Hemisphere and Cuba as an aggressive puppet for the Soviet Union. These "threatening" and "offensive" characteristics associated with Soviet and Cuban identity made the US's policies appear not only "sensible" but even "seemingly unavoidable" (Weldes & Saco, 1996: 378). After all, unlike the Soviet Union or Castro's Cuba, "[the US] stands for freedom" (Kennedy, 1961 in Weldes, 1999b: 42), and its missiles defend the Western Hemisphere against threats to "world peace" (Kennedy, 1962). With these contrasts, it seems reasonable (indeed, inevitable and desirable) that "the latest Soviet threat must and will be met by [the US through] whatever action is needed" (Kennedy, 1962). Moreover, the Castro government's framing as "puppets and agent[s]" under an "international conspiracy" and the US "shar[ing] [Cuban populations'] aspirations for liberty and justice" further allows the US to invade Cuba to "save" the people from Soviet domination (Kennedy, 1962). Accordingly, it "seems" reasonable for a "peaceful, legitimate global leader" such as the US to enforce foreign policies, requiring the Soviets to remove missiles in Cuba and even their missile deployments in Turkey and Italy.

Once we recognise how US identity was constituted through power discourse, we can then realise that these policies are not as unproblematic as they seem to be. Foreign policies were made possible by this constituted US identity during the Cold War, without which none of these foreign policies would be justified or allowed. By asking why the US engaged in conflict with the Soviets, constructivism assumes a unitary objective US identity. They might argue that the Soviets were posing a threat to the US, as they have acquired a "totalitarian communist identity", and that the US understands itself as a "democratic global leader" that must engage in conflicts. However, this constructivist understanding is limited in that it fails to question how the entire conflict was made possible. The Cuban Missile Crisis was made possible by a power discourse constituted US identity. Poststructuralism successfully provides a comprehensive account of the role of identity in the conflicts; through its epistemology, identity can be denaturalised and the makings of the Cuban Missile Crisis can be understood.

Rather than looking at a one way causal link between identity and foreign polices, poststructuralism expands our understanding by exploring their mutual constitutional relationship. US identity not only allows foreign policies to happen but is itself a result of foreign policies. US missile deployment in Turkey and Italy significantly (re)constituted US identity as a protector of the West. Policies against Cuba such as "direct[ing] the Armed Forces to prepare for any eventualities" (Kennedy, 1962) and blockading illustrate the same effects. These discursive acts create the image that the Soviets' missile deployment in Cuba was offensive and that the US is a global leader that will respond to this threat with determination. This identity was also being rearticulated through the US's "continued and increased close surveillance of Cuba and its military buildup" (Kennedy, 1962). This surveillance serves to construct

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the Soviets as a threat that needs to be closely monitored and the US as a leader taking up this responsibility. More significantly, by eventually "forcing the removal of the Soviet missiles", the US identity as a hemispheric leader "in defence of freedom" was again (re)articulated (Weldes, 1999b: 55). The Cuban Missile Crisis and US foreign policies are mutually constituted with US identity. The crisis was "not only enabled by a particular representation of the US but simultaneously made it possible for that identity itself actively to be (re)produced" (Weldes, 1999b: 53). Constructivism narrowly focuses on how a particular identity "causes" certain practices or conflicts, while poststructuralism recognises that these foreign policies and conflicts are also (re)producing state's identity.

Thus, the exploration of these three theories and their application to the Cuban Missile Crisis reveal that poststructuralism provides the most compelling account of identity's role in international conflicts. Its strengths lie in its close attention to the initial construction of identity, while neorealism completely neglects it and constructivism, though it recognises identity, does not examine the identity a state "has" prior to social interactions. Poststructuralism also recognises the power politics behind specific articulations and problematises the seemingly "obvious" state identity, while both neorealism and constructivism treat states as a unitary actor with a single identity. Poststructuralism also questions how international conflicts and foreign policies are made possible, while the others do not. Additionally, only poststructuralism explores the mutual establishing effects between foreign policies and identity. To fully understand identity's role in international conflicts, we must explore "identity" itself and not treat it as given or natural. The US did not enter social interactions with a given peaceful, democratic and global leader identity—it was established through power discourses. Had other less powerful discourses not been marginalised, the US's identity might be understood differently. Without this positive identity, its foreign policies may have been blocked, and the crisis likely would have had a different outcome. Therefore, this essay concludes that of neorealism, constructivism and poststructuralism, only the latter can provide a comprehensive understanding of identity's role in international conflicts.

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