

Level of Analysis in International Relations

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Abstract: *International relations, or the relationships and interactions between different nations and ethnicities, is inherently complex, both in practice and as an academic discipline. Since the publication of Kenneth Waltz's Man, the State, and War in 1959, scholars and diplomats have found it useful to think about the numerous factors that shape international relations by breaking them into different levels of analysis-INDIVIDUAL, STATE and INTERNATIONAL or SYSTEMIC LEVELS. These different levels of analysis illuminate different reasons for why countries go to war, sign treaties or pursue alliances-- is it due to the personalities of individual leaders, the values of particular nations as a whole or the characteristics of the international system as a whole?*

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Thinking of different levels of analysis in IR means that the observer and analyst may choose to focus on the international system as whole, parts of the system in interaction with each other, or some of its parts in particular. What forms the parts or components of this system is again a matter of perspective.

In political science, level of analysis is generally divided into three categories – individual, state, and international system. However, newer discussions of globalization have led to a newer level of analysis to be considered.

The three (or four) levels of analysis cannot describe every effect and there is unlimited number of levels between the three primary ones, levels of analysis will help understand how one force in political power affects another. Generally, power is the concept that collects all the analysis together. For example, the struggle for power may be the cause of war, but the struggle for power may originate in the individual human being's lust for power. The lust for power is individual level of analysis, while the struggle for power is systemic level of analysis.

1) The International System as Level of Analysis

Beginning with the systemic level of analysis, we find in the total international system a partially familiar and highly promising point of focus. First of all, it is the most comprehensive of the levels available, encompassing the totality of interactions which take place within the system and its environment. By focusing on the system, we are enabled to study the patterns of interaction which the system reveals, and to generalize about such phenomena as the creation and dissolution of coalitions, the frequency and duration of specific power configurations, modifications in its stability, its responsiveness to changes in formal political institutions and the norms and folklore which it manifests as a societal system.

Secondly, this particular level of analysis almost inevitably requires that we postulate a high degree of uniformity in the foreign policy operational codes of our national actors.

If this single-minded behaviour be interpreted literally and narrowly, we have a simplistic image comparable to economic man or sexual man, and if it be defined broadly, we are no better off than the psychologist whose human model pursues "self-realization" or "maximization of gain";

all such gross models suffer from the same fatal weakness as the utilitarian's "pleasure-pain" principle. Just as individuals differ widely in what they deem to be pleasure and pain, or gain and loss, nations may differ widely in what they consider to be the national interest.

The international or systemic level of analysis argues that all foreign policy can be understood without even looking at the internal characteristics of nations or individuals. Rather, characteristics of the international system lead nations to behave in particular ways based upon how much power they hold. The most easily understood example of international level analysis is the Cold War, when there was a bipolar system where two nations--the United States and the USSR--both held substantial power. When two nations hold the majority of international power, there will inevitably be tensions between the two nations, and all their decisions will be based on maintaining their power among nations and preventing the other nation from gaining more power. As China gained power in the 1970s, a tripolar system emerged, and no one wanted to be the "odd man" out, with the other two nations allied against the third. The United States used this to its advantage by reopening relations with China and thus forcing the USSR's hand in diplomatic relations. A more modern example would be U. S. intervention in Iraq; supporters of international level analysis argue that the United States is the only power-- the superpower-- in a unipolar system, necessitating its military action to demonstrate and maintain its power.

2) The National State as Level of Analysis

The State level of analysis locates causes in the character of the domestic system of specific states. Thus, war is caused by aggressive or warlike states, not by evil, inept, or misguided people or the structure of power in the international system. The failure of domestic institutions may also cause war. In World War I, the internal collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, or the brittle coalition inside Germany of agricultural and industrial interest, such as rye and iron, are often cited as important causes. Domestic level cases may come from various characteristics of the domestic system. Capitalist and socialist economies generate different attitudes and behaviour.

The Muslim and Christian religions or democratic and non-democratic political ideologies do as well. Stable and failed institutions are domestic level factors affecting state

behaviour. A great worry today is the existence of failed states, meaning states whose domestic institutions have broken down, such as Somalia. Another worry here is existence of a rogue state, such as North Korea, which may pass nuclear weapons on to terrorists. Any type of state come from the domestic level of analysis, but a failed state usually means an institutional breakdown at domestic level of analysis, whereas a rogue state often implies evil intentions by individual – individual level of analysis.

In this view, it is important to note that the Cold War was not just a conflict between two superpowers but that one of the two powers was a democracy. Similarly, the economic systems of the two powers-- capitalist and communist-- are also significant. A state-level analyst could point to the collapse of the USSR's economy in the 1980s as one of the factors leading to the end of the Cold War. The U. S. intervention in Iraq could be explained by the U. S. cultural belief that its political and economic systems are "good" while other systems are "bad."

3) The Individual Level of Analysis

The individual level of analysis locates the cause of events in individual leaders or the immediate circle of decision makers within a particular country. It focuses on human actors on the world stage identifying the characteristics of human decision making. For example, the cause of World War I is from the particular leaders in power at that time. Kaiser Wilhelm II is considered to be the level from which the cause originated. It may have been his need for power to hide a sense of inferiority, or it may have been his inability to understand the intricacies of statecraft, the way Otto von Bismarck did. Or it may have been his idea about the monarchy and German destiny. All three possibilities are drawn from an individual level of analysis.

In this view, the very personalities of leaders shape foreign policy. Leaders are not simply mechanically responding to international or state systems, but taking an active role in determines international relations. Perhaps the most obvious example of a individual level analysis is explaining World War II through Adolf Hitler's leadership; another would be when scholars attribute the end of the Cold War to the relationship between President Reagan and Soviet leader Gorbachev. Once again using the Iraq War example, an individual level analysis would examine the character and ideology of George W. Bush, Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney and other key players in influencing the U. S. military action.

4) The Global Level of Analysis

Global level factors are much like Systemic level factors; however the core difference is that global factors are not necessarily created by states, whereas systemic factors are. Global factors *can* be the outcome of individuals, interest groups, states, non-state actors or even natural conditions – however they cannot be *traced* to the actions of any one state or even group of states. An example can be how the internet can shape how policy is formed, through social media or forums – where an idea is formed over time by a group of individuals, but the source is generally hard to

determine. An environmental natural example is how global warming can help shape how society views certain policies, or help shape new policies themselves. Droughts caused by rising temperatures can cause global actors to form alliances to help procure critical resources – and as writers such as Peter Gleik and Michael Klare have shown, the possibility of "Water Wars" in dry countries in Africa and the Middle East are very possible.

To sum up, it can say that when the international system is characterized by political conflict between two of its most powerful actors, there is a strong tendency for the system to bipolarize. This is a systemic oriented proposition. A sub-systemic proposition, dealing with the same general empirical referents, would state that when a powerful actor finds itself in political conflict with another of approximate parity, it will tend to exert pressure on its weaker neighbours to join its coalition.

To illustrate further, one could, at the systemic level, postulate that when the distribution of power in the international system is highly diffused, it is more stable than when the discernible clustering of well-defined coalitions occurs. And at the sub-systemic or national level, the same empirical phenomena would produce this sort of proposition: when a nation's decision-makers find it difficult to categorize other nations readily as friend or foe, they tend to behave toward all in a more uniform and moderate fashion.

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