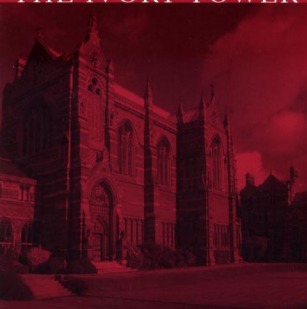


INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY  
AND THE ISSUE OF POLICY RELEVANCE

# BEYOND THE IVORY TOWER



*Joseph Lepgold and Miroslav Nincic*

The gap between academics and practitioners in international relations has widened in recent years, according to the authors of this book. Many international relations scholars no longer try to reach beyond the ivory tower and many policymakers disdain international relations scholarship as arcane and irrelevant. Joseph Lepgold and Miroslav Nincic demonstrate how good international relations theory can inform policy choices. Globalization, ethnic conflict, and ecological threats have created a new set of issues that challenge policymakers, and cutting-edge scholarship can contribute a great deal to the diagnosis and handling of potentially explosive situations.

"*Beyond the Ivory Tower* can be read with equal profit by scholars who want to improve the scientific status of international relations theory and by those alarmed by IR's drift away from relevance. Lepgold and Nincic show that the effort to apply theory to policy helps enrich theory, by bringing out its hidden assumptions. They also make a strong ethical case that IR scholars should not abandon their field's honorable tradition of advising statesmen. In doing so, they provide an illuminating overview of the field and intriguing insights into the forces that shape its development."

—Andrew J. Nathan, Class of 1919 Professor of Political Science, Columbia University

"Lepgold and Nincic show in detail how the academic study of international relations can contribute more powerfully to practical deliberations and debates. They make a compelling case that greater policy relevance can actually enhance the scientific value of scholarship. It is no coincidence that the founders of social science—Marx, Weber, and Durkheim—were all deeply imbued with a belief in the practical significance of the academic enterprise."

—Joak Snyder, Institute of War and Peace Studies and Department of Political Science, Columbia University

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Joseph Lepgold and Miroslav Nincic

C O L U M B I A   U N I V E R S I T Y   P R E S S      N E W   Y O R K



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*To Alexander L. George, with admiration and fondness*





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## Preface

This book stems from a sense of unease with the current state of theory and research in international relations. It is rooted in a conviction that knowledge in this area must be judged by two criteria: its scholarly soundness and its policy relevance. The conviction stems not so much from a sense of social obligation as from a feeling that the study of international relations and foreign policy implies, by its nature, relevant knowledge, and that scholarship explicitly seeking to be relevant is likely to be good (perhaps better) scholarship. This is not a fashionable position, but it is entirely defensible. A failure to see this, we believe, is grounded in an unacceptably emaciated conception of relevance, in an overly simplistic view of how relevant knowledge is produced and conveyed, and in a misconceived notion of the scholarly merits of relevant knowledge. We hope that this volume may lead to the revision of some flawed assumptions and encourage greater academic receptivity to work that is both useful and sound.

The project took shape in a panel at an annual meeting of the American Political Science Association. Since then, it has occupied much of our time and thinking. As is always the case with such projects, we have benefited from the interest and advice of a number of colleagues. We would like, in particular, to thank Alexander George, who recently rekindled the profession's interest in the issue of relevant scholarship. Bruce Jentleson, a fine example of professor-practitioner, has been a friend and source of advice to

both of us. Larry Berman, Emily Goldman, Donna Nincic, and George Shambaugh read and commented on several draft chapters.

Joseph Lepgold  
Miroslav Nincic  
May 2001

## Beyond the Ivory Tower



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# 1 The Theory-Practice Gap in International Relations

It is by action—in my terms, by the practice of politics—that theory . . . can be kept in touch with reality. . . . The two are inseparable; theory and practice being complementary, they constitute harmonic aspects of one whole.<sup>1</sup>

—Paul H. Nitze

It is natural to assume that, of all the institutions focusing on public policy, the free realm of the universities would have the most to offer in knowledge and insight. Challenges to conventional wisdom and provocative explorations of international issues not possible in the political world should be and are part of the domain of the scholar and teacher. . . . [Yet] much of today's scholarship is either irrelevant or inaccessible to policy makers. . . . much remains locked within the circle of esoteric scholarly discussion.<sup>2</sup>

—David D. Newsom

. . . the more [scholars] strain for policy relevance, even if only to justify our existence in the eyes of society at large, the more difficult it becomes to maintain intellectual integrity.<sup>3</sup>

—Christopher Hill

The first two observations, both from distinguished former U.S. officials, typify many policymakers' views about contemporary scholarship in international relations: while it *ought* to be useful to practitioners, little of it is. Much, they believe, is useless and arcane. These particular statements are striking because they do not reflect ignorance about the mission and culture of university scholars. The individual quoted in the first passage has written widely on foreign policy and helped to found the Johns

Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, one of America's premier professional schools of international affairs. The author of the second passage held a faculty position at the University of Virginia and was Acting Dean of Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. The book in which the second passage appeared was published by a university press and was addressed to a largely academic audience. Indeed, much of the chapter from which the second passage was taken betrays keen disappointment that scholarly writing on international affairs *does not* speak more clearly to the many uncertainties and daunting analytic tasks practitioners face. The author of the third passage, a professor at the London School of Economics, offers a view common among international relations scholars—that they will lose professional independence and credibility by trying to speak about practical issues.

Such sentiments, however, have become common only in the last few decades. As readers of Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Hobson appreciate, theory in the study of politics, including world politics, has traditionally been intended to guide practice. Diplomats of earlier generations would have found quite odd the notion that university scholars who studied international relations had little of interest to say to them. Important examples of such influence are not hard to find. Several generations of post-World War II U.S. officials had much of their general worldview formed or reinforced by exposure to Hans Morgenthau's stark Realpolitik in *Politics Among Nations*. During the 1970s, models that focused on the catalysts and implications of transnational economic forces had a comparable, if more limited, impact on official thinking. From the late 1950s onward, the important conceptual literature on arms control—work derived from theories focused on unintended conflict spirals—had an impact on key aspects of U.S. nuclear weapons deployments, investments in the command-and-control apparatus, and operational nuclear doctrines. Since this work focused on the interplay between military postures and the likelihood of inadvertent war, it gave policymakers a coherent way to diagnose an important problem as well as manipulable levers—tacit and formal measures to promote invulnerable nuclear forces—through which they could try to deal with it.<sup>4</sup>

For many reasons, connections between scholarly ideas and policymakers' thinking in international relations are less common today, and the gap may grow unless we rethink carefully our approach to policy relevance. Deep, often ritualized rivalry among theoretical schools makes it unlikely that future officials will leave their university training in this subject with a clear,



well-formed worldview. Such intellectual competition, of course, *could* be stimulating and useful, especially if it led officials to question their basic causal assumptions or consider rival explanations of the cases they face. More commonly, officials seem to remember the repetitive, often strident theoretical debates as unproductive and tiresome. Not only is much international relations scholarship tedious, in their view; it is often technically quite difficult. Partly for this reason, much of it is so substantively arid that even many scholarly specialists avoid trying to penetrate it. From a practitioner's perspective, it often seems as if university scholars are increasingly "withdrawing . . . behind a curtain of theory and models" that only insiders can penetrate.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, for many observers, the end of the cold war has made it harder to find models providing a compelling link between the international environment and manipulable policy instruments. One exception to this growing split between scholars of international relations and policymakers is the work on the inter-democratic peace, which we discuss in chapter 5. This work, as we will show, has deeply influenced many contemporary policymakers. But, for the most part, it remains the exception; the professional gap between academics and practitioners has widened in recent years. Many scholars no longer try to reach beyond the Ivory Tower, and officials seem increasingly content to ignore it.

According to much conventional wisdom, this situation is unsurprising. International relations scholars and practitioners have different professional priorities and reflect different cultures. Not only is it often assumed that good theory must sacrifice policy relevance; but also those seeking guidance in diagnosing policy situations and making policy choices, it is often thought, must look for help in places other than contemporary social science research.

This book challenges much of the conventional wisdom on these issues. It argues that IR theorists and foreign policy practitioners have important needs in common as well as needs that are different. Social science theory seeks to identify and explain the significant regularities in human affairs. Because people's ability to process information is limited, they must perceive the world selectively in order to operate effectively in it; constructing and using theories in a self-conscious way helps to inject some rigor into these processes.<sup>6</sup> For these reasons, both theorists and practitioners seek a clear and powerful understanding of cause and effect about policy issues, in order to help them diagnose situations, define the range of possibilities they confront, and evaluate the likely consequences of given courses of action. At

the same time, a deep and continuing concern for the substance and stakes involved in real-world issues can help prevent theorists' research agendas from becoming arid or trivial. This book therefore has two objectives: to elaborate and justify the reasoning that leads to these conclusions, and to illustrate how scholarship on international relations and foreign policy can be useful beyond the Ivory Tower.

Three issues should be clarified at the outset. One concerns the primary audience for this book. It is not a handbook for the conduct of foreign policy. We lack the detailed substantive and process knowledge needed to write such a book, not to mention the practical, accumulated experience that would make it credible. Our comparative advantage is in framing issues for our fellow academics to think about, and it is primarily to them that this work is directed. In arguing that IR scholars should embrace policy-relevant work, we clearly cannot guarantee that it *would* resonate widely outside the Ivory Tower. For that to happen the potential audience outside the scholarly community must be willing to listen, a matter over which academics have relatively little control. What they do control is their own agenda—one that we argue has become progressively and needlessly narrowed to issues that resonate *only within* the academy. This book argues that this agenda can be broadened in ways that would benefit both scholars and foreign-policymakers. In support of this position, the chapters that follow describe the various types of policy-relevant knowledge, how such knowledge is acquired and could be used, and illustrate these arguments with a variety of real-world examples. In doing this, we emphasize that relevant scholarship implies no necessary compromise of professional scholarly standards.

A second issue concerns the way in which the terms “international relations” and “international relations theory” are used in this book. International relations consist of the political, economic, military, social, and cultural exchanges that occur across the boundaries of sovereign states, in institutionalized as well as ad hoc contexts.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, the study of international relations has always enlisted participation from historians, lawyers, theologians, philosophers, psychologists, and economists in addition to political scientists. We thus need to distinguish between international relations as a set of real-world processes and the scholarship that analyzes these processes. We will designate the former as IR and the latter—academic scholarship in international relations—as SIR. Finally, despite the many dimensions of IR activity in the real world, the *theory* of IR in its modern

guise is largely, though certainly not entirely, the work of academic political scientists. For that reason, we take *IR theory* in its modern sense to mean efforts by social scientists, especially political scientists, to account for inter-state and trans-state processes, issues, and outcomes in general causal terms.

A third issue concerns an important type of policy relevance we do not discuss. In addition to the substantive knowledge that might help officials identify better options or better understand their environments, “process knowledge” might help them better organize their decisionmaking procedures. The assumption behind this claim is that improving the policy machinery, all else equal, will lead to better policy choices.<sup>8</sup> Sound decision processes are certainly preferable to poor ones, but those processes, no matter how well designed, can work only as well as their inputs—that is, the substantive questions, assumptions, and empirical generalizations that are brought to bear on the conduct of foreign policy. Much SIR addresses issues of *substance* rather than process, and we discuss why and how it could improve the substance of thinking on foreign policy.

The balance of this chapter serves four purposes. The first two sections explain why international relations has important, practical implications. Whatever their precise professional duties and roles, most observers of the subject care about these practical issues; for many, these interests bring them into the field in the first place. While traditional SIR was often narrowly focused on the concerns of a small handful of states and policy constituencies, much of it was solidly rooted in the real-world problems that preoccupied those actors. It spoke to thoughtful practitioners, much as the influential periodicals *Foreign Affairs* and *Foreign Policy* do today. In their efforts to create a rigorous science of politics, many of the scholars who championed the behavioral revolution in political science moved away from anything smacking of policy commentary. In so doing, they fostered a style of academic work that inevitably—in some cases deliberately—created the current theory-practice gap. Section three discusses these developments, highlighting the way in which notions of appropriate scholarly inquiry in international relations changed some four decades ago. The shift toward a more technically intricate style of research meant that whatever analytic guidance SIR could provide policymakers was increasingly placed out of the latter’s reach. Section four discusses those needs of policymakers that should be satisfied by scholarly guidance, laying the basis for a closer examination in chapters 3 and 4 of how explicitly relevant research and theorizing could improve both policymaking and scholarship. Section five discusses the

organization of the book and spells out a bit more about the content of the subsequent chapters.

### Scholarship's Practical Implications

Unlike literature, pure mathematics, or formal logic, the study of international relations may be valued largely for its practical implications and insights. SIR, like the major social-science disciplines, initially gained a firm foundation in academia on the assumption that it contributes to improved policy.<sup>9</sup> It is part of what August Comte believed would constitute a new, “positive” science of society, one that would supersede the older tradition of metaphysical speculation about humanity and the social world. Progress toward this end has been incomplete as well as uneven across the social sciences. But, in virtually all of these fields, it has been driven by more than just curiosity as an end in itself. Tightening our grip on key social processes via improved understanding has always been a major incentive for new knowledge in the social sciences, especially in the study of international relations.<sup>10</sup>

This broad purpose covers a lot of specific ground. Policymakers want to know what range of effective choice they have, the likely international and domestic consequences of various policy decisions, and perhaps whether, in terms of more general interests and values, contemplated policy objectives are really desirable, should they be achievable. But the practical implications of international issues hardly end there. How wars start and end, the causes and implications of economic interdependence, and what leverage individual states might have on trans-state problems greatly affects ordinary citizens’ physical safety, prosperity, and collective identity. Today, it is hard to think of any major public-policy issue that is *not* affected by a state’s or society’s relationships with other international actors.

Because the United States looms so large within the international system, its citizens are sometimes unaware of the range and impact of international events and processes on their condition. It may take an experience such as the long gas lines in the 1970s or the foreign-inspired terrorist bombings in the 1990s to remind them how powerfully the outside world now impinges upon them. As Karl Deutsch observed, even the smallest states can no longer effectively isolate themselves, and even the largest ones face limits on their ability to change others’ behavior or values.<sup>11</sup> In a broad sense, globalization