

Hasenclever, et al – Theories of International Politics

Realist and neo-liberal regime theory share a set of rationalist assumptions. Rather than further theorizing the differences between these approaches, it is more fruitful to contextualize them – theorize how actors’ contexts elicit behaviors described by each of the theories. The authors posit that the role context varies on the potential for relative gains and the strength of regimes designed to “compensate” for an asymmetric distribution of the benefits of cooperation. Similarly, they see potential in combining rationalist theories and “weak cognitivism.” Weak cognitive explanations, especially arguments about the role of ideas within a largely rationalist framework, provide alternate explanations for the sources of actors’ preferences and as well as providing arguments about ideas as intervening variables or focal points.

The authors are not as optimistic about the potential for a synthesis of rationalism and “strong cognitivism.” The two approaches have distinct epistemology and very different sets of analytical tools. While both camps concede the importance of the other’s observations, there is no clear indication as to how to compare or synthesize the two. They suggest that varying explanations of “regime robustness” provide one possible avenue for productive comparison. Another way to compare the two approaches would be to test the importance of domestic politics in explaining outcomes.