



Bridging Theory and Diplomatic Practice: A Survey of Diplomats on the Relevance of International Relations Theories

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Abstract. The relevance of International Relations (IR) theory to policymaking has been a subject of ongoing scholarly debate. A widespread yet problematic assumption persists in policy discourse that theories are purely abstract constructs, lacking practical applicability. Addressing this assumption, the article critically evaluates the extent to which IR theories hold practical value and significance for policymakers engaged in international politics.

To substantiate this analysis empirically, the authors conducted a field survey involving 50 active and retired diplomats representing 32 countries across five continents. The survey examined respondents' perceptions of the utility, applicability, and limitations of IR theories in the context of their diplomatic and policymaking practices. Complementing these primary findings, the article integrates scholarly discussions and case-based examples from international politics, thereby providing a comprehensive assessment of how IR theories serve as analytical tools for both practitioners and scholars.

The study identifies central arguments underpinning the perceived limitations of IR theories, while simultaneously emphasizing their practical strengths. According to survey results, the majority of diplomats affirmed the continuing relevance of IR theories, noting their utility in diagnosing international events, elucidating causal relationships, assessing impacts, and informing strategic analysis. Furthermore, the findings highlight the inherent international applicability of dominant IR paradigms, which broadly encompass contemporary global political developments.

Respondents advocated for stronger interaction between academia and policymakers, underscoring the necessity of making IR theories more accessible and comprehensible for diplomatic practitioners. Additionally, the diplomats suggested that IR theorists should pursue greater intellectual and ideological neutrality to enhance the practical value of their analytical frameworks.

In conclusion, the field survey and subsequent analysis demonstrate that characterizing IR theories as merely abstract constructs is inaccurate. On the contrary, IR theories constitute indispensable analytical instruments enabling policymakers to interpret, assess, and effectively navigate the complexities of contemporary international politics.

Keywords: International Relation theories, policy makers, eclectic approach, diplomats, global politics, theory and practice

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Theories of International Relations (IR) fundamentally aim to clarify the complex and multifaceted domain known as international politics (Weber, 2009). The discipline of international relations is inherently interdisciplinary. IR theories provide structured analytical frameworks that allow scholars and practitioners to interpret, explain, and anticipate complex international phenomena.

Nevertheless, there remains considerable debate surrounding the practical applicability of theoretical frameworks, frequently encapsulated by the widely cited notion: "In theory, theory and practice are the same. In practice, they are not." Although this statement has been attributed to various prominent figures such as Albert Einstein, Yogi Berra, and Richard P. Feynman¹, its exact origin remains unclear. Despite its anecdotal nature, the sentiment resonates within certain segments of the academic and policy-making communities, where theories are sometimes viewed as detached from or only partially relevant to practical decision-making.

Addressing this prevalent skepticism, the current article seeks to systematically examine the extent to which International Relations theories maintain relevance and applicability for contemporary policymakers. To strengthen empirical insight, the authors conducted a field survey of 50 serving and retired diplomats from 32 countries across five continents, exploring their perceptions of the utility and significance of IR theories within their professional practice.

In addition, the article integrates selected case examples and key theoretical debates from academic literature to illustrate the tangible value of IR theories for policymakers and scholars alike. The analysis concludes with a critical evaluation of arguments commonly presented against the practical applicability of IR theory, ultimately highlighting both the limitations and the significant contributions theoretical approaches offer in guiding the complex realities of international politics.

Essence of Theories

"No one sees the world just 'as it is'. All of us interpret the world through a veil of theories, presuppositions, and assumptions" (Heywood, 2011: 53). This statement underscores the idea that whenever we attempt to comprehend the workings of the international system, we inherently engage in the construction of meaning. Thus, theories are crucial for the understanding of international politics, as they provide "shape and structure to an otherwise shapeless and confusing reality" (Heywood, 2011: 53).

Theories serve as tools through which the fragmented and disorganized phenomena of political reality, both historical and contemporary, can be structured into systematic, coherent patterns. They offer frameworks for explanation and prediction,

¹ Garson O'T. 2018. In Theory There Is No Difference Between Theory and Practice, While In Practice There Is. *Quoteinvestigator*. URL: <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2018/04/14/theory/> (accessed 23.06.2025)

enabling us to conceptualize complex situations that might otherwise remain unclear. Most importantly, theories guide and direct our thinking processes². A theory, therefore, can be understood as a well-substantiated explanation, derived through rigorous scientific methods, observations, and repeated empirical testing. In fact, theories represent validated knowledge about how particular phenomena function, enabling predictions not only about existing conditions but also about future developments. A robust theory withstands rigorous scrutiny, thereby justifying placing theories and empirical facts on essentially the same epistemological plane³. Thus, in both the natural and social sciences—including International Politics—theory is not merely speculative; it is fundamentally intertwined with factual evidence and practical knowledge.

According to Baylis et al. (2011), "A theory is not simply some grand formal model with hypotheses and assumptions. Rather, a theory serves as a simplifying device that allows one to distinguish significant facts from irrelevant ones." Reinforcing this perspective, Dr. Thomas Boysen Anker emphasizes that without theory, generalizing and interpreting data or situations becomes particularly challenging. It is equally difficult to grasp the broader significance and implications of empirical findings without a coherent theoretical framework. A situation remains largely meaningless until it is examined through an appropriate conceptual lens⁴. Thus, theories provide precisely such lenses, clarifying our understanding of reality and revealing diverse perspectives through which phenomena can be analyzed.

Hence, theories constitute systematic explanations of natural or social behaviors, events, or phenomena. Bacharach (1989) formally defines a theory as "a system of constructs (concepts) and propositions (relationships among those constructs) that collectively offer a logical, systematic, and coherent explanation of a phenomenon of interest, given certain assumptions and boundary conditions."

It is important to emphasize that theories are neither ideologies nor beliefs; rather, they represent empirically validated frameworks of understanding. In other words, theories are not mere guesses or intuitive assumptions but constitute systematic and rigorous attempts to explain specific phenomena. Within scholarly disciplines, including the natural sciences and international relations, the term "theory" carries significant weight. As cell biologist Kenneth R. Miller succinctly stated, a theory "doesn't mean a hunch or a guess; it is a system of explanations that ties together a multitude of facts, explaining them and predicting outcomes that can be verified through further observations and experiments."⁵

² Kastanakis M.N. 2018. Why is Theory so Important. *Elsevier Journals*. March 20.

³ Hanson J. 2015. Fact vs. Theory vs. Hypothesis vs. Law... explained. October, 7. URL: <https://magazine.scienceconnected.org/2015/10/theory-vs-hypothesis-vs-law-explained/> (accessed 23.06.2025)

⁴ Anker T.B. 2018. Why is Theory so Important. *Elsevier Journals*. March 20.

⁵ Zimmer C. 2016. In Science, It's Never Just a Theory. *The New York Times*. April 09. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/09/science/in-science-its-never-just-a-theory.html> (accessed 23.06.2025)

In the field of International Politics, theory does not simply require deliberate application because systematic analysis of practical experiences and policy decisions itself generates theory. International events and relations are often influenced by propaganda, strategic considerations, and competing interests. Thus, a country's intentions or actions considered benign today might be viewed as malign tomorrow. To achieve a comprehensive understanding of international affairs, scholars and policymakers need to interpret events through the lens of major IR theories. This eclectic approach involves integrating diverse theoretical perspectives, seeking "more usable and comprehensive forms of knowledge."⁶

Indeed, IR theories allow us to construct coherent interpretations of the complex global landscape. Familiarity with prominent theories provides policymakers with a nuanced picture of contemporary events in international politics and equips them to choose the most appropriate course of action. Policymakers do not use theory as a manual offering ready-made solutions; rather, theory offers a foundational understanding that enhances their capacity for effective decision-making. Academic scholarship, based on rigorous research, debates, and theoretical narratives, provides policymakers with critical analytical tools that guide them toward informed decisions.

The primary value of IR theories lies in their capacity to enhance our comprehension of global realities. When properly internalized, a robust theory aligns closely with what might be described as informed common sense. Thus, when policymakers apply practical reasoning in decision-making, theoretical assumptions and frameworks implicitly guide their actions. Recognizing this implicit yet fundamental influence of theory in policy formulation underscores the necessity of critically examining the theory-practice relationship, leading to a more profound exploration of this enduring debate within academic discourse.

Literature Insights on the Theory–Practice Divide

The relationship between International Relations (IR) theory and policy practice has long been a prominent topic in scholarly debates. Alexander George's seminal work, *Bridging the Gap: Theory and Practice in Foreign Policy* (George, 1993), lays foundational ground in this discourse, highlighting both challenges and opportunities involved in rendering academic research relevant and applicable for policymakers. George emphasizes the significance of analytical frameworks capable of informing real-world decision-making, while acknowledging institutional and epistemological barriers that frequently obstruct effective theory-policy translation. Similarly,

⁶ Adiong N.M. 2011. Theoretical Eclectic Approach in the International Relations of the Middle East: An Introduction. URL: <https://nassef.info/2011/01/10/theoretical-eclectic-approach-in-the-international-relations-of-the-middle-east-an-introduction/> (accessed 23.06.2025).

in the edited volume *Beyond the Ivory Tower*, Lepgold and Nincic (2001) argue explicitly that IR scholars bear responsibility for active engagement in policy discussions, maintaining that such engagement strengthens both scholarly rigor and practical relevance.

This concern over the limited policy influence of IR theory is echoed by Jentleson (2002) in *International Studies*, who underscores the need for "good judgment" in balancing rigorous academic standards with policy relevance. According to Jentleson, scholars should aspire to produce research that is methodologically robust while remaining accessible and actionable for policy practitioners. Walt (2005), writing in the *Annual Review of Political Science*, critically evaluates the frequent disconnect between political science—particularly IR theory—and policy formulation. He attributes this gap to factors such as excessive methodological sophistication, disciplinary insularity, and insufficient active engagement with practical policy debates.

Joseph Nye (2008), in his work published in *Political Psychology*, adopts a more optimistic perspective, suggesting that academic theories do indeed inform policy, albeit often indirectly and implicitly. According to Nye, policymakers regularly utilize academic research to frame policy issues, clarify causal linkages, and evaluate strategic options, even if explicit citations or direct references to scholarly works remain infrequent. Jahn (2018), writing in *International Studies Quarterly*, further supports this position by demonstrating how norms and theoretical paradigms consistently shape the discourse and practices of international relations, even when policymakers remain unaware of their theoretical origins or explicitly avoid referencing academic sources.

In recent years, significant empirical efforts have been undertaken to assess the practical impact of IR scholarship. Notably, the Teaching, Research, and International Policy (TRIP) project has conducted influential surveys on this subject. Maliniak, Peterson, and Tierney (2012), in their study, as well as in their comprehensive volume *Bridging the Theory-Practice Divide in International Relations* (Maliniak, Peterson & Tierney, 2015), examine perceptions among both IR scholars and policymakers regarding the practical utility of academic research. Their findings reveal a persistent gap in mutual understanding: scholars tend to underestimate policymakers' receptiveness to theoretical insights, while policymakers often perceive academic work as excessively abstract or insufficiently tailored to the practical demands of their profession.

Avey and Desch build upon this empirical investigation in their influential survey of U.S. national security decision-makers (Avey & Desch, 2014), published in *International Studies Quarterly*. Their findings suggest that while policymakers generally acknowledge the value of scholarly research, they typically prioritize its accessibility, clarity, and direct relevance to policy issues over methodological complexity or theoretical nuance. A subsequent study by Avey and colleagues (2022) provides further depth to these insights, demonstrating variations in policymakers' preferences across distinct policy domains such as national security, international trade, and development. Their work underscores the necessity of tailoring academic research outputs to meet the specific informational and analytical needs of various policy communities.

Addressing the theoretical critique within the discipline itself, the seminal article by Mearsheimer and Walt, "Leaving Theory Behind," published in *International Security* (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2013), provides an important intervention. The authors argue persuasively that International Relations scholarship has increasingly sidelined grand theory in favor of narrowly focused, data-driven studies. This shift, they contend, has weakened the explanatory power of the discipline and diminished its practical utility for policymakers. Mearsheimer and Walt advocate for renewed engagement with broader theoretical frameworks that directly address practical issues confronting policymakers and explain significant real-world phenomena.

The present article builds upon these theoretical and empirical foundations, contributing to the ongoing scholarly debate by offering a novel, empirically grounded analysis of the practical relevance of IR theories for policy practitioners. By including survey responses from diplomats representing five continents (excluding Australia and Antarctica), this research provides broader empirical evidence and nuanced insights. This global perspective not only enriches existing discussions but also highlights both the universal applicability and ongoing contestation regarding the relevance of IR theories in contemporary policy-making contexts. The specific details and findings from this field survey are presented in the following sections.

Analysis of Field Survey

In 2021, the author conducted a field survey aiming to capture diplomats' perceptions regarding the relevance of International Relations (IR) theories to policymaking and diplomatic practice. The survey, designed as an exploratory study, involved the distribution of 110 questionnaires to diplomats representing various countries. A total of 50 completed questionnaires were returned by diplomats from 32 countries⁷. Respondents were selected using a simple random sampling technique, ensuring representativeness and objectivity. The questionnaire comprised both closed-ended and open-ended questions to gather comprehensive and multidimensional insights into the diplomats' perspectives.

Of the 50 respondents, 10% were retired diplomats, while 90% were actively serving in diplomatic roles ranging from Ambassadors to Third Secretaries within their respective ministries of foreign affairs. At the time of the survey, most respondents were serving abroad in diplomatic missions, such as embassies, high commissions, and consulates. Gender distribution among respondents included 54% male and 46% female diplomats.

⁷ Considering research ethics and the secrecy behind the working of the policy makers, the name of the countries are not being revealed.

The age composition of respondents was as follows: 10% were above 60 years old, 14% belonged to the 40–60 years age bracket, 70% were between 25 and 40 years old, and 6% were below 25 years. Regarding diplomatic experience, 12% of respondents had over 20 years of service, 26% possessed 10–20 years of diplomatic experience, 30% had between 3 and 10 years, and 32% had less than 3 years of professional experience in foreign service.

Educational qualifications varied among respondents: 4% held doctoral degrees (PhD), 52% possessed postgraduate degrees, and 44% held undergraduate degrees. Furthermore, in terms of academic backgrounds, 68% graduated in humanities and social sciences, 12% in sciences, 4% in commerce, and the remaining 16% held degrees in other unspecified fields.

The initial five questions on the survey included both closed-ended and open-ended items. Closed-ended questions utilized a Likert scale, asking respondents to indicate their level of agreement with specific statements by selecting from five options: "strongly agree," "agree," "neutral," "disagree," or "strongly disagree." Responses to these questions were subsequently analyzed in detail to provide insights into diplomats' attitudes toward the practical applicability and relevance of International Relations theories.

Question 1: Whether International Relations (IR) theories are relevant for policy making?

When respondents were asked whether International Relations (IR) theories are relevant for policymaking, a majority provided affirmative responses: 26% strongly agreed, and 56% agreed. Of the remaining respondents, 16% indicated neutrality, and only 2% disagreed. The mean score for responses was 4.06⁸ on a five-point Likert scale, reflecting strong consensus among diplomats regarding the practical relevance of IR theories. Notably, the small percentage (2%) who disagreed consisted exclusively of respondents with less than three years of diplomatic experience.

In response to a subsequent open-ended question seeking clarification on the nature of IR theories' relevance, participants provided extensive feedback. The majority of respondents emphasized that IR theories serve as conceptual frameworks that enable policymakers to navigate the complexities of international politics, even when theories are not explicitly referenced in policy discourse. According to respondents, theories—combined with historical experiences—guide decision-making, offering policymakers a systematic approach that enhances analytical clarity and strategic decision-making capabilities. Some diplomats underscored that familiarity with IR theories grants them an advantage in event analysis and in providing informed

⁸ In the 5 point Likert scale, the interpretation of mean scores of less than 2.33 are considered as low level, 2.33 to 3.67 are considered moderate level, and 3.68 and above are considered as high level (Landall 1997; Saari 2013; Alsari 2016; Nasidi et al. 2019).

recommendations to policymakers. They highlighted that IR theories are crucial for diagnosing international events, identifying underlying causes, and assessing policy impacts. Furthermore, theories facilitate the interpretation of past events, optimize current decision-making, and enable strategic foresight. According to Prof. Vijaylakshmi, theories offer policymakers working hypotheses, context, conditions, and simulations that enhance policy decisions.

Several respondents emphasized that IR theories typically arise from empirical observation and real-world evidence, reflecting diverse global perspectives and enabling analysts to apply abstract concepts concretely to real-life scenarios. One respondent noted, "It is always advantageous to possess multiple analytical frameworks when seeking to understand or explain complex issues; IR theories represent precisely such frameworks." Additional respondents pointed out that IR theories help policymakers comprehend fundamental features of international interactions, including asymmetries of knowledge, commitment problems, and collective action dilemmas, by establishing causal relationships among various elements of international politics. Moreover, respondents emphasized that IR theories foster a deeper understanding of historical processes that continue to shape contemporary international relations.

Question 2: Whether 'theories are just theories' and that they are not relevant in practice?

When respondents were asked to evaluate the statement "theories are just theories and not relevant in practice⁹," only a small minority agreed: 2% strongly agreed, and 4% agreed. In contrast, the majority of respondents disagreed with this assertion, with 56% disagreeing and an additional 26% strongly disagreeing. A smaller proportion (12%) chose a neutral stance. The mean response score was 2.0 on a five-point Likert scale, clearly indicating overall disagreement with the notion that theories are purely abstract and lack practical applicability. This reinforces the broader argument advanced by the respondents that the phrase "theories are just theories" constitutes a mischaracterization of their practical relevance.

When prompted to elaborate on their perspectives regarding the practical applicability of theories, respondents who supported the statement provided critical observations. Some argued that decisions in international politics are rarely influenced directly by theoretical frameworks; instead, they are shaped predominantly by situational contingencies, ministerial directives, personal intuitions, attitudes, and interests. One respondent remarked: "Political decision-making is largely intuitive, inductive, and interest-driven, and rarely informed explicitly by theories. Decisions emerge primarily from political orientations shaped by social circumstances or personal convictions, not academic theoretical constructs." Another respondent echoed this sentiment,

⁹ Question number 2 and Question number 3, finds certain resemblance with the first question. This was done on purpose to get a more accurate depiction and elaborate comments on the questions posed.

stating that "IR theories might provide analytical frameworks in an academic setting, but I have not observed serving officials relying explicitly on theoretical literature when making policy decisions or offering advice." Reinforcing this point, another diplomat asserted, "We never reached for theoretical texts when confronted with practical issues."

Conversely, those respondents advocating the relevance of International Relations theories argued that theories provide essential analytical lenses for interpreting global events. As one respondent succinctly noted, "We can never dismiss theories as merely theoretical, as they enable us to interpret events systematically. Policymakers who leverage professional insights informed by theoretical frameworks and supported by empirical evidence are more likely to make precise and effective decisions." Another respondent emphasized that IR theories offer a foundation for understanding global phenomena by supplying verifiable explanations that can be empirically tested and validated. Finally, underscoring the inherent practical value of theory, one respondent concluded, "I do not believe that any aspect of human experience—especially theory-informed insight—can ever be irrelevant."

Question 3: Whether IR theories are only partially relevant for policy makers?

When asked whether International Relations (IR) theories are only partially relevant for policymakers, responses were varied: 8% strongly agreed, 28% agreed, 24% remained neutral, while 22% disagreed and 9% strongly disagreed. The mean response score on a five-point Likert scale was 2.86, indicating overall ambivalence among respondents regarding the claim that IR theories possess only partial relevance for policymaking.

When invited to elaborate on their responses, respondents provided nuanced reflections. Those supporting the partial relevance view noted that political scenarios are continuously evolving, becoming increasingly complex, and thus IR theories might not always offer comprehensive solutions or explanations. Some respondents emphasized that context significantly shapes theory applicability: certain situations align well with existing theoretical frameworks, while others—particularly crisis events—often defy neat theoretical categorization or have no clear precedent in established theory.

Moreover, one respondent argued that policymakers utilize IR theories primarily in a general and passive manner, suggesting that theories typically describe rather than predict policy decisions and outcomes. This perspective underscores the idea that theory serves predominantly as a descriptive and interpretive tool, rather than offering precise predictive capacity.

Question 4: Whether the dominant IR theories lack international applicability (or 'internationalness')?

Among the respondents, 4% strongly agreed and 12% agreed with the statement that dominant IR theories lack internationalness. Meanwhile, 34% remained neutral, 40% disagreed, and 10% strongly disagreed. The resulting mean score was 2.6 on a

five-point Likert scale, reflecting an overall perception among most respondents that dominant IR theories do maintain sufficient international applicability and inclusively cover global politics.

Respondents were also invited to elaborate on their positions regarding the perceived internationalness of dominant IR theories. Most argued that central elements of major IR theories, such as realism and liberalism, are consistently evident in the foreign policy behaviors of almost all states. Consequently, claims of inadequate international applicability are considered to underestimate the broad explanatory power of existing theoretical frameworks. Several respondents noted that while the changing dynamics of international politics might necessitate the adaptation and refinement of existing theories, there is currently no pressing need to develop entirely new theoretical paradigms.

In contrast, respondents who believed dominant IR theories do indeed lack international applicability argued primarily that existing IR theories remain heavily influenced by Western scholars and institutions. According to these critics, this "Western-centrism" results in a noticeable neglect of perspectives from countries of the Global South. One respondent emphasized, "Different countries and regions operate under distinct historical experiences, cultural contexts, governance structures, and developmental stages. Therefore, a genuinely comprehensive understanding of global politics must also incorporate perspectives from Third World countries." Another respondent similarly pointed out that dominant IR theories "were developed primarily through Western thinking, values, and interests," adding that countries in Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe often find themselves "chasing a moving train," compelled to conform to theoretical frameworks shaped by fundamentally different historical experiences and assumptions.

Question 5: The relevance of a working knowledge of major IR theories for policymaking

When respondents were asked whether a working knowledge of the major International Relations (IR) theories helps policymakers in practical decision-making, the majority provided strongly affirmative responses: 38% strongly agreed, and 44% agreed. Among other respondents, 12% indicated a neutral stance, and only 6% disagreed with the proposition. The mean score was 4.14 on a five-point Likert scale, clearly reflecting that an overwhelming majority consider familiarity with major IR theories beneficial for policymakers.

When invited to elaborate on their positions, respondents emphasized that policymakers who lack knowledge of major IR theories are at a distinct disadvantage. Without theoretical awareness, a policymaker remains detached from ongoing scholarly debates, narratives, and counternarratives that shape contemporary international discussions. Such policymakers often lack the conceptual vocabulary and analytical tools necessary for engaging meaningfully with policy advisors, scholars, and think-tanks worldwide. As articulated by respondents, major IR theories provide essential

frameworks for unpacking complex international problems and placing policy solutions within the broader context of world order dynamics. In this sense, theory is viewed as foundational to practice.

According to one respondent, "Theory remains essential for diagnosing international events, explaining their underlying causes, prescribing appropriate responses, and evaluating the implications and effectiveness of policy measures." Further reinforcing this perspective, another respondent argued that theoretical knowledge "helps policymakers understand the rationale behind the policies they must professionally address," providing depth to the formulation of policy strategies. For instance, a thorough grounding in realism enables policymakers to appreciate the significance of nation-states and the principle of self-help in international affairs, whereas familiarity with liberalism and constructivism emphasizes the role and importance of international organizations and ideational factors. Policymakers should therefore cultivate comprehensive theoretical literacy, allowing them to apply appropriate theoretical frameworks in accordance with specific situational demands.

Several respondents highlighted that IR theories constitute foundational knowledge essential for adopting a comprehensive, global approach toward addressing emerging and ongoing international issues. Such theories aid policymakers in comprehending the logic underpinning government decisions and provide the analytical baseline from which global policies are formulated and implemented. Additionally, respondents stressed that IR theories enable policymakers to anticipate possible outcomes of international events, thereby enhancing preparedness for future scenarios.

As one respondent succinctly expressed, "The world order is inherently chaotic; to make sense of events, policymakers must repeatedly revisit foundational concepts. IR theories are instrumental in providing essential insight and perspective—helping us understand why nation-states act as they do." Another respondent similarly concluded, "Knowledge is a powerful asset. The more comprehensively one understands IR theories, ideally supported by empirical facts and real-world contexts, the better equipped one becomes in policy formulation and practical tasks related to foreign affairs."

Question 6: Respondents' Level of Knowledge and Understanding of Major IR Theories

The sixth question aimed to gauge the respondents' level of familiarity with and understanding of key International Relations (IR) theories. The theories assessed included Realism, Neo-Realism, Liberalism, Democratic Peace Theory, Neo-Liberalism, Game Theory, Marxist approaches (Dependency and World Systems Theory), Feminist Approaches to IR, Constructivism, Postmodernism, and Post-Colonialism. Participants were asked to rate their understanding using a five-point Likert scale, choosing among the following categories: "In-depth Knowledge," "Working Knowledge," "Heard of It," "Not Sure," and "No Clue." The detailed results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Respondents level of knowledge or understanding of the major IR theories

Sl. No.	IR Theories	In-depth Knowledge	Working Knowledge	Heard of It	Not Sure	No Clue	Mean
1	Realism	34%	54%	10%	2%	0	4.2
2	Neo-Realism	28%	46%	18%	6%	2%	3.92
3	Liberalism	38%	54%	6%	0	2%	4.26
4	Democratic Peace Theory	24%	34%	26%	10%	6%	3.6
5	Neo-Liberalism	34%	46%	16%	2%	2%	4.08
6	Game Theory	18%	36%	32%	4%	10%	3.48
7	Marxist theories (Dependency and World System Theory)	34%	44%	18%	2%	2%	4.06
8	Feminist Approaches to International Relations	18%	50%	28%	2%	2%	3.8
9	Constructivism	22%	34%	32%	4%	8%	3.58
10	Post-Modernism	22%	34%	34%	6%	4%	3.64
11	Post-Colonialism	30%	42%	24%	2%	2%	3.96

Source: Field Survey (2020–2021)

Table 1 illustrates the respondents' self-assessed knowledge and understanding of the specified IR theories. According to the survey results, the respondents demonstrated the strongest familiarity and understanding with classical Realism, Liberalism, Neo-Liberalism, and Marxist perspectives (Dependency and World Systems Theory). The next highest level of familiarity was noted for Post-Colonialism and Neo-Realism.

The respondents displayed moderate levels of understanding regarding Democratic Peace Theory and Postmodernism. In contrast, the respondents' familiarity with Constructivism and Game Theory appeared relatively lower in comparison to the aforementioned theories. Overall, these findings indicate varying levels of theoretical familiarity among diplomatic practitioners, with clear distinctions in respondents' perceived strengths and weaknesses across different theoretical traditions.

Question 7: IR Theories Deemed Relevant for Policymakers

When respondents were asked to subjectively list the International Relations (IR) theories they considered most relevant for policymakers, 34 respondents directly identified specific theories. Realism emerged as the most frequently cited, identified by 89.47% of respondents. Liberalism and Constructivism followed, each named by 52.63% of respondents. Marxist theories (Dependency and World Systems Theory) were highlighted by 44.73%. Further, Neo-Liberalism and Post-Colonialism were mentioned by 36.84% of the respondents, while Postmodernism was indicated by 31.57%. Game Theory and Feminist approaches to IR each were cited by 28.94% of respondents. Neo-Realism was selected by 26.31%, and Democratic Peace Theory was mentioned least frequently, by 18.42%.

Additionally, several respondents provided nuanced perspectives on the applicability of IR theories in policymaking. One senior retired ambassador emphasized the significance of historical experience and contemporary global issues over theoretical constructs, stating, “More than theories, practitioners like me are mindful of past historical events, alliance systems that led to World Wars, post-colonial and neo-imperial tendencies among global powers, new geopolitical rivalries such as the ‘Great Games’ in the Middle East, and contemporary challenges including racism, ultra-nationalism, and xenophobia.”

Another respondent highlighted the contextual nature of theory applicability, noting: “It greatly depends on the region or country in question. In regions marked by strained interstate relations, realist approaches often dominate policy frameworks, whereas in more cooperative environments like the European Union, there is greater receptivity to modern and liberal IR theories. Thus, the effectiveness of particular theories may vary significantly by context.”

Other respondents emphasized the general relevance of IR theories for practical policy-making. One respondent stated, “While states utilize a combination of theories in their decision-making, policymakers in the twenty-first century require an in-depth understanding of Realism, Neo-Liberalism, Marxist theories, and Game Theory.” Another respondent suggested that “all the mentioned theories have practical relevance, as each provides policymakers with unique analytical tools and theoretical perspectives.” Furthermore, a respondent noted, “IR theories generally assist in understanding, predicting, and evaluating international events, but Realism and Neo-realism remain most directly relevant for policymakers.”

Some respondents, however, pointed out the need to consider regional cultural, religious, and political systems, arguing that certain theories, such as Feminist IR approaches, may not be universally applied or studied due to specific cultural or regional contexts.

Finally, a subset of respondents stressed the importance of additional theoretical frameworks in policymaking, including Decision-Making Theory, theories of Foreign Policy Analysis, Power Transition Theory, trade and dispute settlement theories, as well as cultural, social, democratic, and incrementalist theories.

Question 8: Respondents suggestions to IR scholars and theorists

Respondents were asked to provide recommendations to scholars and theorists within the discipline of International Relations (IR) regarding the applicability and relevance of IR theories to policymaking.

Most respondents advocated greater engagement between academics and policymakers to facilitate reciprocal exchange. Such cooperation, they argued, would allow existing IR theories to be rigorously tested in practice, thereby enabling policymakers to benefit more directly from scholarly research. Simultaneously, stronger collaboration would ensure that IR scholars gain a deeper and more realistic understanding of the practical complexities involved in policy decisions—including unexpected “black

swan" events, geopolitical disparities, economic dynamics, negotiation strategies, and the compromises necessary in real-world diplomacy. According to respondents, such a two-way dialogue would help IR scholars appreciate why states behave as they do and realize the inherent asymmetries that shape international politics. Respondents also emphasized that closer interaction with practitioners could significantly reduce the gap between theory and practice, ensuring that theoretical formulations remain grounded in empirical realities, since, as one respondent put it, "only real-world events can truly validate theoretical assumptions."

Another frequent recommendation highlighted the importance of simplifying and clearly communicating IR theories to policymakers. Respondents noted that diplomatic personnel often originate from diverse academic backgrounds, including natural sciences and engineering, thus making overly complex theoretical articulations difficult to comprehend. Several respondents expressed concern that IR scholars tend to prioritize theoretical sophistication over practical applicability, creating overly abstract constructs that can seem disconnected from the practical needs of policy practitioners. One respondent vividly compared this issue to "a chef who, originally tasked with cooking for people, has become so engrossed in creating dazzling but ultimately inedible dishes, losing sight of the essential purpose of their work." This perspective aligns closely with C. Wright Mills' critique of "Grand Theory," in which theoretical abstraction supersedes practical understanding of social realities (Mills, 1959).

Furthermore, some respondents criticized the tendency of IR scholars to emphasize a particular theoretical perspective aligned with their personal specialization, often overlooking alternative theories. Such an approach, respondents argued, can result in narrow judgment and limited analytical capacity. Instead, respondents advocated a balanced and comprehensive approach, considering multiple theoretical perspectives simultaneously. One diplomat specifically stated, "Actual policymaking involves a complex combination of different theoretical perspectives; therefore, developing hybrid theoretical frameworks can provide more effective analytical tools." Another respondent recommended further scholarship on the intersections of psychology and international relations, highlighting this area as potentially enhancing the practical applicability of IR theories.

Additionally, respondents emphasized the importance of intellectual neutrality among IR scholars to ensure that theoretical work remains relevant and appealing to policymakers. Ideologically-driven theories, according to respondents, are often limited in their practical utility.

Finally, most respondents expressed appreciation for IR scholars, emphasizing that continued rigorous research and scholarship remain vital for informed policymaking. As summarized by one respondent, "IR scholars should remain committed to their areas of interest and continue their research and analyses, as the practical world of policymakers greatly depends upon their work, which indeed holds significant value."

Key Findings

The survey has yielded several significant findings. Primarily, respondents strongly affirmed the relevance of International Relations (IR) theories for policymakers. According to respondents, IR theories are essential analytical tools for diagnosing international events, elucidating underlying causes, and assessing the impacts of policy decisions. They enable policymakers to effectively analyze historical precedents, respond optimally to current events, and prepare strategically for future challenges, thereby simplifying complex global dynamics into comprehensible frameworks.

Importantly, the survey findings strongly contest the notion that theories are merely theoretical or abstract constructs. Instead, IR theories provide policymakers with explanatory frameworks and empirically verifiable propositions that enhance understanding and inform decision-making processes. In the words of one respondent, "human experience can never be irrelevant," underscoring that theories, rooted in practical experience, retain meaningful practical applicability.

Respondents expressed skepticism regarding the proposition that IR theories are only partially relevant to policy practitioners. According to the participants, theories are not consulted merely to obtain ready-made solutions; rather, their primary value lies in offering a comprehensive understanding of international affairs, which helps policymakers approach distinct situations thoughtfully and strategically.

The survey also revealed that respondents broadly viewed dominant IR theories as inherently international in scope. While acknowledging the global applicability of these theories, several respondents emphasized the necessity of incorporating perspectives from the Global South to achieve a truly comprehensive understanding of international politics.

Another central finding was that a working knowledge of major IR theories significantly aids policy formulation. Respondents argued that policymakers lacking theoretical grounding risk becoming detached from critical academic debates, historical narratives, and contemporary counter-narratives, thereby reducing their effectiveness in meaningful policy discussions with academics, policy advisors, and global think tanks.

Diplomats participating in the survey demonstrated substantial familiarity with major IR theories, notably Realism, Liberalism, Neo-Liberalism, and Marxist approaches (Dependency and World Systems Theory). Among these, Realism was identified as the most practically relevant IR theory, closely followed by Liberalism and Constructivism.

Respondents offered several key recommendations for enhancing the practical relevance of IR theories to policymaking:

- Encouraging more frequent and productive engagement between academics and policymakers, allowing for empirical testing of existing theories and enabling policymakers to gain practical insights.

- Simplifying theoretical concepts and improving their clarity, making them accessible to policymakers who often come from diverse educational and professional backgrounds.
- Exploring hybrid theoretical approaches, recognizing that policymaking often integrates insights from multiple theoretical frameworks simultaneously.
- Promoting intellectual and ideological neutrality among IR scholars to enhance the acceptability and applicability of IR theories in policy contexts, as ideologically driven theories can become limited or problematic from the perspective of practitioners.

In summary, the survey findings highlight the importance of ongoing dialogue between academics and policy practitioners. It is essential, especially for policymakers and students of international relations, to engage actively with academic discourses on IR theories and their practical relevance. In the following section, the article will delve deeper into major IR theories, providing illustrative examples of their real-world applicability to events and phenomena in international politics.

* * *

Several scholarly articles suggest a more nuanced and critical view regarding the practical relevance of International Relations (IR) theories for policymakers. There is broad acknowledgment of inherent complexities, primarily arising from the differing professional incentives, operational environments, time constraints, and ways in which scholars and policymakers frame questions and seek answers. As Lepgold (1998) points out, the academic and policy-making communities typically differ in their approaches, interests, and the type of knowledge they pursue. Despite these inherent challenges, this article underscores that a thorough understanding of major IR theories remains instrumental in enabling policymakers to formulate robust, well-informed foreign policy decisions by providing systematic analytical frameworks and guidance for critical thinking.

However, certain limitations remain notable. First, a significant issue stems from the nature and training of policymakers themselves. IR theories typically do not account for individual factors such as incompetence or personal ego, which inevitably influence decision-making. Additionally, within systems where recruitment for diplomatic and civil service positions is based primarily on general rather than specialized criteria, many diplomats enter service with limited or no knowledge of IR theories, directly impacting their policy formulation capabilities. A striking example emerged from this study's fieldwork, wherein one senior retired diplomat, when approached to participate in the survey, responded that IR theory was outside their area of expertise. Furthermore, nepotism, corruption, and internal bureaucratic dynamics within certain Foreign Service structures further limit professional specialization, rendering decision-making processes less predictable and rational. Dominant IR theories generally do not engage explicitly with these practical deficiencies within diplomatic systems,

complicating the prediction of rational behavior in international relations. This partly explains historical instances of poor decision-making that have negatively impacted diplomatic relationships for generations.

Second, the intentional manipulation of variables by policymakers within the international system creates significant challenges for micro-level analyses conducted by IR theorists. Such manipulations can undermine foundational assumptions of prominent IR theories. While policymakers often manipulate diplomatic circumstances strategically, theoretical frameworks frequently remain silent on such intentional maneuvering, preferring instead broader explanatory models that overlook detailed bargaining processes. Policymakers frequently argue that most scholars lack direct access to behind-the-scenes diplomatic negotiations, resulting in analyses or theoretical formulations that policymakers deem incomplete or insufficiently practical. Nonetheless, certain scholars, though relatively few in number, do gain direct governmental exposure, enabling more nuanced insights into the complexities of policy formation.

Third, unresolved theoretical disputes among academics further complicate the use of IR scholarship by policymakers. The existence of multiple competing theoretical perspectives, as well as ongoing academic debates about how to understand the international system, exemplifies these divergences. However, viewed constructively, such scholarly pluralism actually enriches our comprehensive understanding of international politics by offering multiple lenses through which to interpret complex phenomena.

Considering these limitations, Alexander George's assessment is particularly relevant: "scholars may not be in a good position to advise policymakers how best to deal with a specific instance of a general problem that requires urgent and timely action", but "they can often provide a useful, broader discussion of how to think about and understand that general problem ..." (George 1993: xix, xxiv; Nye 2008). Following this logic, it can be convincingly argued that an eclectic understanding of major IR theories significantly enhances the analytical capabilities of policymakers and all those involved in the study or practice of international relations. Ultimately, the findings from this field survey offer important clarification regarding misconceptions about IR theories, particularly from the perspective of those most directly engaged in policy-making and diplomatic practice.

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Преодоление разрыва между теорией и дипломатической практикой: опрос дипломатов о значимости теорий международных отношений



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В международной политике продолжаются дебаты об актуальности теорий международных отношений для политиков и лиц, принимающих внешнеполитические решения. В этой связи существует распространённое представление о том, что теория – это «просто теория», и она абсолютно не применима в реальной политике. Размышляя над этим заблуждением и исходя из потенциально высокой практической значимости теорий, автор предпринимает попытку найти ответ на вопрос, имеют ли теории международных отношений какое-либо реальное практическое значение для политиков, и в чём оно может заключаться. Для достижения этой задачи было организовано анкетирование, в ходе которого были опрошены 50 дипломатов, как действующих, так и в отставке, из 32 стран с пяти разных континентов. На основе полученных ответов автором были сделаны выводы относительно применимости теорий международных отношений в дипломатической деятельности. Выводы сделаны на основе сопоставления аргументов относительно как применимости теорий международных отношений к современным реалиям, так и их ограничений. В исследовании подчёркивается, что теории международных отношений остаются актуальными для большинства политиков, которые в большинстве своём рассматривают теории в качестве важного инструмента для анализа событий, объяснения их причин, оценки их взаимовлияния и прогнозирования. Проведённый опрос показал, что большинство дипломатов признаёт значимость теорий МО как важного аналитического инструмента, способного объяснять причины и последствия международных событий, оценивать внешнеполитические решения и прогнозировать развитие международной обстановки. По мнению дипломатов, доминирующие теории МО в достаточной мере охватывают различные аспекты мировой политики и являются универсальными в глобальном контексте. Тем не менее, подчёркивается необходимость более активного включения в теоретические дискуссии незападных подходов и концепций.

Респонденты рекомендуют усилить взаимодействие между академическим сообществом и практикующими дипломатами. Они считают необходимым упрощать и адаптировать теоретический аппарат МО, чтобы сделать его более доступным и понятным для дипломатов, имеющих разное образование и профессиональный опыт. Отдельно указывается на важность интеллектуальной и идеологической нейтральности авторов теоретических исследований для повышения их практической востребованности.

Таким образом, проведённое исследование демонстрирует, что утверждение о том, будто «теории — это всего лишь теории», не соответствует действительности. Теории международных отношений обладают несомненной практической ценностью для

дипломатической работы, предоставляя дипломатам проверенные и практически применимые знания, необходимые для глубокого понимания международной политики и принятия эффективных внешнеполитических решений.

Ключевые слова: теории международных отношений, политика, эклектичный подход, дипломатия, мировая политика, теория и практика

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