



Introduction to International Relations

Chapter Notes: Chapter 1

Ole J. Forsberg, Ph.D.

University of Tennessee

Chapter One:

Using the prisoner's dilemma to think about international relations

Chapter Overview

This chapter uses the prisoner's dilemma to launch students into an in-depth examination of the three perspectives. In its classic form, the prisoner's dilemma demonstrates fundamental realist concepts: anarchy, self-help, the security dilemma, zero-sum outcomes. These basic perceptions about international relations cause realists to stress issues of power, war, and polarity. Liberals, who believe that the prisoner's dilemma has been or could be modified, argue that things like technology and international institutions effectively minimize the costs of cooperation, allowing the prisoners—states—to act cooperatively. Finally, the identity perspective, which examines the ideas held by actors, also revises the prisoner's dilemma, allowing for situations in which the prisoners might cooperate if their identities are closely converging.

The prisoner's dilemma

- Two people are caught with drugs. If both remain silent, both go free; if only one remains silent, he gets 25 years in prison; if both squeal, both get 10 years in jail.
- It's rational to squeal, even though it eliminates the prisoners' best option.
- Why? Because one cannot trust the other.

Realism and the dilemma

- For realists, the prisoner's dilemma defines life in the international system.
- Outcomes are zero-sum, the world is anarchic, and self-help is necessary.
- States are trapped in a security dilemma, so they pursue power for self-protection.
- Power, for realists, is equated with material capabilities, like economic capacity, military strength, and population.
- States are often the actors that realists focus on most, because states command the greatest power.
- To maintain power, states must often balance the power of other states.

Liberalism and the dilemma

- Liberals believe that the prisoner's dilemma can be overcome.
- Three factors help surmount the dilemma: communications, common goals, and technological change.

- Communication: If the suspects interact, they won't need to squeal. Similarly, if states interact they gain the other's trust.
- Common goals: If both prisoners want to frustrate the warden, they will cooperate. Likewise for states with common goals.
- Technology: If the consequence of squealing is death, the prisoners will cooperate. Analogous to nuclear weapons.
- Liberalism more interested in problems of cooperation rather than problems of power.
- Focuses on societal aspects of international politics.
- States with high levels of interdependence and with participation in international institutions are more likely to cooperate with one another.

Identity and the dilemma

- Identity perspective also challenges realism's assumptions about the dilemma.
- If, for example, both prisoners were in the Mafia, they would cooperate.
- As a parallel, states with converging identities might cooperate.
- Identity perspective is more interested in the norms and values that guide power than in power itself.
- Ideas, values, and beliefs help constitute a nation's identity.
- The distribution of identities, not the distribution of power, determines whether states will cooperate or not.

Levels of analysis

- Levels of analysis can be combined with perspectives.
- The relative distribution of power, for example, is the realist perspective combined with the systemic structural level of analysis.

Thought Questions

1. List and discuss events in recent history that could be used as an example of the classic prisoner's dilemma.
2. Think of the liberal variants to the prisoner's dilemma. Do you think that one of the factors—striving for mutual goals, trust built by interaction, etc.—would be more effective at changing the outcome of the game than the others? Think of real-world examples in international affairs to support your claim.
3. Recall the “anarchy is what states make of it” argument. Do you support this notion? Why or why not? If so, do you think the world is becoming less anarchical? Give examples.
4. Clean air is usually listed as the archetypal collective good, but think of others. Are international institutions or mechanisms in place to protect or provide these collective goods?

5. This chapter mentions national identities. What do you think are the most important components of national identity, in general? What are the most important components of the United States' national identity? Has it evolved over time?