

Theorizing Territorial Withdrawal: The Need to Think Strategically

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Abstract

This article examines what factors cause states to withdraw from foreign territorial interventions. Scholarly analyses of withdrawal are rare, whilst within the broader research area of territorial conflict, studies are often dichotomized into neorealist or constructivist-inspired works, emphasizing a select few variables and one level of analysis alone. We argue these excessive simplifications of international politics lack utility for understanding territorial withdrawal. Instead, we employ the principles of strategic theory informed by a Clausewitzian paradigm, and construct a framework of three “arenas of bargaining,” spanning multiple variable-types and levels of analysis, to explain territorial withdrawal. In so doing, the analysis delineates a comprehensible and novel theoretical framework for understanding an under-researched policy problem.

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“You have brought an army into the country. But how do you propose to take it out?” Afghan chieftain addressing a British official during the first British invasion of Afghanistan, 1839.¹

“Tell me how this ends” – General David Petraeus to a journalist at the beginning of the coalition invasion of Iraq, 2003.²

Though separated by time and space, the quotations above illustrate the same policy concern: once engaged, when should a given state exit from a foreign territorial intervention? The question of when to leave territory has long vexed decision-makers, affecting small states, including Israel and its withdrawals from the Gaza Strip and Lebanon, alongside superpowers such as the Soviet Union and its drawn-out exit from Afghanistan. Concurrently, the decision to withdraw is rarely an easy one. Britain declared its intent to leave Egypt over 120 times, but its “temporary” occupation lasted from 1882 until 1954.³ In an extreme case, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated in 1995, for merely considering withdrawal from parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank.⁴ Governments pledging support for withdrawal have sometimes failed to implement an exit, whilst hard-line administrations have occasionally carried out the withdrawals they once obstinately opposed.⁵

Territorial withdrawal is therefore an enduring political issue that spans multiple cases and has significant ramifications for global security. Foreign territorial interventions have been justified on the grounds of everything from humanitarian concerns, to liberal arguments for regime change and as an instrument to advance the national interest of the intervener.⁶ Despite the diverse underlying logic, most interventions see the intervener leaving, without achieving its objectives.⁷ As a result, withdrawal often leads to power vacuums, civil and ethnic strife and even the re-occupation of the territory.⁸

Though it constitutes a persistent policy problem, territorial withdrawal has rarely been the subject of academic analyses.⁹ The few existing studies are often irrevocably divided in their allocations of agency. Frequently, scholars reduce the decision to leave territory as representing *either* the product of rationalist calculations and “tangible” security concerns, *or* subjective and “intangible” perceptions and beliefs.¹⁰ The broader research area of territorial conflict, of which territorial withdrawal is a subdivision, is equally divided. Existing studies are partitioned into *either* structural explanations for territorial conflict that fixate on the international system, *or* unit-level focuses that scrutinize non-absolute variables emanating from within a given state.¹¹ Consequently, the most notable aspect of the scant existing research pertinent to territorial withdrawal is its polarizing tendency.

This essay frames the above dichotomy as resulting from deadlock between neorealist and constructivist theories of international relations. Whilst many theoretical approaches exist in the study of international relations, neorealism and constructivism dominate the study of territorial conflict. Though “neorealism” and “constructivism” are seas in which many scholars, theories and methodologies swim, both theoretical frameworks are guided by several core assumptions. Corresponding to the divides identified above, constructivists tend to emphasize unit-level domestic variables in determining the territorial policies of states, particularly the instrumental role of “intangible” values and perceptions. By contrast, neorealists focus on the system-level anarchic nature of global politics, whilst esteeming “tangible” quantifiable data, such as the “strategic” value of territory. Though recent literature has attempted to bridge the neorealism-constructivism divide, studies that advocate the complementary value of both these approaches remain notably absent from the research areas of territorial conflict and withdrawal.

The intention of this analysis is therefore to construct a theory of territorial withdrawal that is sufficiently pluralistic to incorporate the multiple causal paths stressed by neorealists and constructivists alike. This article argues that relying solely on either a narrow neorealist or constructivist theoretical framework obscures key variables that often exert critical influence in precipitating withdrawal, thereby undermining the original purpose of theory: to explain events by linking logic and evidence, in order to produce generalizable knowledge. In similar situations where International Relations (henceforth IR) scholars have deemed existing theories insufficient, concepts from other disciplines have been imported. The injection of economic theory into international relations, for example, promoted the rise of neorealism, whilst constructivism owes much to anthropology and sociology.¹²

Accordingly, we suggest that concepts and theories from within the sphere of strategic theory possess significant utility for creating a parsimonious, yet broad, framework of assumptions to deduce when states are likely to withdraw from territory. Recent works have employed a strategic perspective to explain states' decision-making, under the umbrella concept of "grand strategy."¹³ Even so, scholars of strategy have not offered noteworthy contributions to understanding territorial withdrawal. Specifically, this article introduces strategic theory in order to provide a non-case specific framework for understanding decision-making. We provide a theoretical explanation for why some states withdraw from foreign territorial interventions, whilst others do not. Concurrently, we make a contribution to debates that pervade IR theory, by looking beyond the confines of the conventional theoretical approaches that this discipline offers to explain territorial withdrawal.

The analysis will begin by illustrating how theory can illuminate the research problem of withdrawal. The fundamental assumptions of both neorealism and constructivism are then

elucidated and the zero-sum approach through which these theories compete for primacy will be critiqued. To unclog the theoretical deadlock, this article then details the origins and assumptions of strategic theory. We illustrate how strategic theory relates to territorial withdrawal, identifying three “arenas of bargaining,” which are based on the strategic theory framing of the interdependence of decisions. This essay concludes by briefly illustrating the applicability of this model to pertinent case studies. At no point in this essay do we argue that realism and constructivism possess no explanatory value. However, a persistent trend within IR theory advocates examining only a few variables or one level of analysis. This may help explore the relationship between several carefully selected inputs, but does not provide a useful framework for explaining policy challenges, such as withdrawal.

Why Does Territorial Withdrawal Need a Theory?

The Utility of Theory

How can theory help to inform when a state is likely to withdraw from a given territory? The answer to questions pertaining to why theory is useful can be found in the most significant theoretical texts of international relations, strategic studies and the philosophy of war. For example, Carl von Clausewitz holds that theory provides “an essential basis for criticism,”¹⁴ allowing the critic to produce “truly instructive” analysis of an event by tracing effects back to their causes.¹⁵ This captures one purpose of theory: as a tool to determine causation.

Neorealist scholar Stephen Walt goes further, defining theory as “a causal explanation — it identifies recurring relations between two or more phenomena and explains why that relationship occurs.”¹⁶ Theory, thereby, offers certain explanative and predictive capacities. Hans Morgenthau – one of the most seminal “classical” realist scholars – submits that theory permits “giving [facts] meaning through reason.”¹⁷ Here, the utility of theory lies in its

possibilities of advancing knowledge, through a framework of understanding. Somewhat divergent though these statements are, when taken together, they suggest “theory” represents a nexus of empiricism, logical extrapolation and case study analysis. In no given order, the theorist analyzes an instance or set of instances, blending evidence and logic to explore how and why these instances occurred, and in what ways they might possibly reoccur in similar forms, but in different circumstances.

Theory is, therefore, simultaneously limiting and generalizing. Theoretical generalization is limited as inference is restricted to defined, similar cases. Employing the same logic, theory provides a framework for the researcher to apply a system of reasoning to other, similar cases. Theory also allows the analyst to sort through case-specific information to determine what is important. Thus, Clausewitz argues: “the primary purpose of any theory is to clarify concepts and ideas that have become [...] confused.”¹⁸ Similarly, Allison and Zelikow assert that theories “direct the analyst to cast nets in select ponds, at certain depths, in order to catch the fish that he is after.”¹⁹ As such, theory influences what the analyst looks for, how a research question is formulated and which evidence is considered important.

The Need for a Theory of Withdrawal

The clarifying, focused and generalizable benefits of theory identified above are of particular utility to the research problem of withdrawal from foreign territorial interventions. According to Stirk, in military occupations, “the distinctions between the international and the domestic, between war and peace [...] become fluid and uncertain.”²⁰ Similarly, Chafer claims that an intervener’s decision to leave territory is affected by a variety of diverse inputs, spanning conditions “in the conflict zone and [...] wider macro considerations in the regional, international, and domestic home environment for the intervener.”²¹ Territorial withdrawal is

therefore inherently complex, whilst the question of what variables or actors facilitated individual exits are frequently disputed.

Furthermore, when states do leave territory, the actual timing of the departure rarely reflects the originally projected exit date. The United States, for instance, occupied Cuba in 1889 and left earlier than anticipated, in 1902.²² Likewise, Israel captured the Sinai Peninsula in the “Suez Crisis” of late 1956 and exhibited little willingness to withdraw, but left less than a year later, in March 1957.²³ Conversely, announcing the occupation of southern Lebanon in 1985, Prime Minister Shimon Peres claimed the Israeli presence would last for less than a year: in fact, Israel withdrew fifteen years later, in the year 2000.²⁴ These wide disparities of duration facilitate the question as to why some interventions are perpetuated, whilst others end in a swift withdrawal.

Yet, few scholars have examined territorial withdrawal. Fewer still have applied a theoretical prism. Instead, most studies of withdrawal have been produced by think tanks and lack a theoretical framework for understanding the problem in a more generalizable manner.²⁵ Interventions, occupations and withdrawals have of course received significant attention from historians.²⁶ However, mimicking the studies produced by think tanks, these works are case-specific and eschew attempts at theory building.²⁷ The handful of social science analyses that do address withdrawal have assessed operational questions pertaining to tactics and timing;²⁸ examined how states can transition from intervention to withdrawal;²⁹ or focused on how humanitarian interventions can combine withdrawal with state-building.³⁰ Overall, these diverse literature sets share two commonalities: they lack a theoretical component; and none specifically address what factors precipitate withdrawal from foreign territorial interventions.

In sum, territorial withdrawal has rarely been subjected to theory-driven research. Nonetheless, as demonstrated above, theory is a useful tool for understanding manifestations of complex phenomena in global politics. Theory can breathe life into events that occurred long ago, by transforming an event from an isolated causal chain into findings applicable to contemporary geopolitics. If decision-makers and scholars can learn from previous manifestations of territorial withdrawal and apply any lessons to contemporary challenges, it is theory that can provide this essential pathway for learning. Subsequently, in order to construct a theoretical explanation of territorial withdrawal, this analysis examines the pertinent assumptions of neorealism and constructivism. Alongside their dominance of the broader research area of territorial conflict, both these approaches have produced important and rare theoretically founded studies that attempt to explain the problem of withdrawal.

Power, Rationality and the International System: Neorealism

The Core Assumptions of Neorealism

Though neorealism has pervaded academic discourse since the 1970s, its origins can be traced to earlier epochs. Following the emergence of modern European nation-states after the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, the international system slowly crystalized into an order that understood each unitary state actor to be one that possessed and pursued its own national interests. From these principles of “realpolitik” emerged realism as a theory of international relations.³¹ Traditional, “classical” realist scholars such as Hans Morgenthau emphasized that state self-reliance in an anarchic world system is paramount.³² The over-arching objective of all states is therefore principally one of survival, rather than the upholding of universal, international laws or norms. Survival is achieved through the acquisition and defense of power: the collective sum of the latent and actualized assets of a state.

Neorealism differs from “classical” realism, but is the most salient, contemporary versification of realism within scholarly circles.³³ Whilst early realists shared general principles but did not represent a coherent theory, neorealism is less heterogeneous and more prescriptive.³⁴ Consequently, neorealism aspires to be “truly scientific” by identifying immutable characteristics in the international system that governs interstate behavior in a manner that yields predictability. Inspired heavily by the physical sciences, neorealism therefore seeks to isolate and examine certain variables that it considers exert particularly high levels of agency in foreign policy-making.³⁵

Neorealists invariably draw distinctions between domestic and foreign politics, perceiving them as different levels of analysis. According to Kenneth Waltz, one of the first and arguably most influential neorealists, domestic politics is “hierarchically ordered,” in that a clear framework of authority governs politics within a state. Thus, there are clear limits to intra-state antagonism, with each actor playing by the accepted “rules of the game.”³⁶ This framework of authority ensures that whilst competition for resources and power continues within states, order often prevails. Properly functioning polities within states, then, cannot be described as anarchic in their composition.

By contrast, in the international system, a state of anarchy ensures, where “none is entitled to command; none is required to obey.”³⁷ No state in the international system constitutes the ultimate source of authority and no actor can monopolize the use of force. This lack of a single global authority means that interstate competition can be intense and brutal, with actors displaying a disposition to war to address irresolvable clashes of national interests. The global balance of power may change from one that is unipolar, bipolar, or more diffuse. Nonetheless, for neorealists, anarchy remains a constant characteristic of international

relations. Regardless of which actor temporarily possesses more power, global politics is a tragic condition, where states are destined to compete against each other for all time.³⁸

Neorealists argue that each state constitutes a single, “unitary actor,” with the ruling administration presenting the interests of the state with one voice and working for the acquisition and retention of power as the supreme national interest.³⁹ For neorealists, “power” primarily constitutes quantifiable variables such as military strength and gross national product.⁴⁰ The quality and quantity of these assets defines a state’s relationships with its competitors, because power is the currency underpinning international relations. More power increases the influence and options of actors in the international system and raises the costs for rivals, should they choose to pursue hostile policies. Power also constitutes the capacity to influence and control others, providing the ability to coerce another actor to do what it would otherwise not have done, or deter it from doing what it would otherwise might have done.⁴¹ Consequently, the quantifiable sum of a state’s power serves as a barometer of where a state is located in the international pecking order.

The power-as-currency analogy illustrates the influence of rational choice economics in neorealist theories. Accordingly, neorealism is underlined by the central assumption that states are reasoning and interest optimizing actors. By definition, a rational actor weighs up the pros and cons of each option, choosing the policy that provides the highest return on investment. Often described as a “cost-benefit analysis,” a choice is utility-maximizing if that choice is expected to yield greater benefits to the actor than every other option not chosen.⁴² Therefore, neorealists claim that all policy-making involves a given state seeking to expend the minimum possible number of assets, in order to increase its cumulative assets.

Neorealism and Territorial Conflict

What neorealists believe to be important or irrelevant in determining foreign policy underlines their approach to territorial conflict. For realists of all stripes, a state's continued sovereignty is secured by its maintenance and acquisition of power, with values such as justice or righteousness largely discounted.⁴³ Correspondingly, the neorealist scholar John Mearsheimer claims that "conquering and controlling land" represents "the supreme political objective in a world of territorial states."⁴⁴ For neorealists, an increase in territory is often associated with an increase in power.⁴⁵ Thus, territorial conflict is an inescapable, and predictable, factor in the zero-sum quest for power: states defend their own sovereignty, whilst also sometimes violating the sovereignty of others.

Neorealists often explain territorial conflict by emphasizing the "strategic" importance of a particular territory.⁴⁶ Territory is labeled "strategic" if it contains assets that add to the cumulative power of a state. For instance, the control of territory containing valuable economic or material resources can cause a permanent shift in the international balance of power that favors the intervener.⁴⁷ Concurrently, a territory can possess "strategic" value if it is located near the state in question, if it can serve a geographical buffer against a rival, or if it possesses topographical characteristics that offer a military advantage.⁴⁸ The commonality between these various barometers of "strategic" value is that they are all quantifiable, non-relative characteristics of the territory itself.

The neorealist emphasis on global (dis)order and "tangible" territorial characteristics has demonstrated utility for explaining conflict. Goertz and Diehl illustrate the importance of proximity, noting that the Soviet Union willingly occupied Afghanistan, but did not intervene when a friendly regime in distant Chile was overthrown.⁴⁹ Additionally, Huth finds that in

eighty-one per cent of interstate territorial disputes, contested territory could be classified as “strategic.”⁵⁰ Liberman argues that “conquest pays:” the acquisition of western European territorial assets by Germany in both the First and Second World War, for example, can be explained by a desire to exploit industrial resources and add to national power.⁵¹

Neorealism and Territorial Withdrawal

Whilst neorealists often demarcate why states acquire territory, little has been written on withdrawal. In one of the few realist-orientated studies of occupation, Edelstein contends that states intervene in foreign territory to enhance their national security. Withdrawal is therefore precipitated by the neutralisation of a threat, or results from the imposition of excessive costs by rivals, ensuring the policy is no longer utility maximizing.⁵² Taken together with the studies delineated above, this contention suggests that a neorealist framework for predicting withdrawal would emphasize the following variables:

- The quantifiable, tangible value of the territory and the resources within it.
- The “strategic” value of the territory as a security/military asset or risk.
- The international balance of power and relative power of the intervening state.
- The cumulative benefits earned through control of the territory.
- The cumulative costs generated as a result of territorial control.

Based on neorealist theory, then, several assumptions can be formed. First, states primarily intervene in foreign territory to enhance or protect their own power. Second, states perceive territory through the prism of its “strategic” or “tangible” value and are unlikely to withdraw unless the costs of intervention outweigh the quantifiable value of the territory. Third, withdrawal is the product of a universally applicable, rational cost/benefit decision, where the

tangible costs of controlling the strategic territory now outweigh the benefits.

Though few scholars argue that “tangible” inputs and global power politics exert no agency in global politics, it is the variables that neorealists ignore or downplay that have generated significant criticism. Firstly, neorealists often frame states as “indistinguishable billiard balls,”⁵³ differing only in the number of assets – and therefore power – they possess. Whether a state organizes internally as a representative democracy or authoritarian dictatorship plays no intervening role in territorial policy. Secondly, in terms of how the national interest is pursued, all states are identical and employ a universal cost-benefit analysis. Consequently, “the identity of the actor in question is a matter of no significance.”⁵⁴ As such, “intangible” variables such as norms, identities or beliefs, which often vary between actors, lack influence in decision-making.⁵⁵ Thirdly, neorealists attribute scant agency to the domestic level of analysis in affecting the foreign policies of states.⁵⁶ Though these assumptions dominated the discipline of territorial conflict for many decades, the late Twentieth Century saw neorealism challenged by a new theoretical approach: constructivism.

Beliefs, Perceptions and Ideas: The Constructivist Challenge to Realism

The Fundamental Principles of Constructivism

Emboldened by the end of the Cold War, which fundamentally disrupted the dominant understanding of geopolitics based on the assumptions of ceaseless superpower competition, critics of neorealism advanced radically different approaches to international relations. Scholars professed dissatisfaction at what they saw as the reductionism inherent in neorealism: global politics as merely a cold, calculating chess game between states.⁵⁷ As some analysts observed: “that the Soviet Union did not launch a last desperate attack to preserve its survival, as neorealist logic implied it should have done [...] confirmed the

redundancy of an analytical model that mechanistically asserted a uniform strategic calculus disconnected from cultural and social experience.”⁵⁸ If the purpose of theory is to explain why events occur, neorealism and its rationalist foundations appeared increasingly less representative of the reality it purported to simplify.

Consequently, a new theoretical outlook known as “constructivism” challenged the neorealist paradigm. Constructivists gained their moniker due to an assertion that interests are fluid and subjective. Whilst neorealists maintain that states differ only in the distribution of tangible assets, constructivists stress that national interests are social constructs that result from “identity,” itself an umbrella term for variables spanning culture, history and the dominant socio-political system within a state or the international order.⁵⁹ This amorphous concept of “identity” guides states’ preferences, strategies and interactions, as well as determining the beliefs and perceptions of the collective domestic audience that makes up a single state.⁶⁰ Thus, unlike neorealists, who focus on tangible, quantifiable variables, constructivists highlight the fundamental role of “intangible” concepts, such as beliefs, perceptions and identity in the structuring of international politics.⁶¹

The constructivist emphasis on “intangible,” subjective variables ensure that states are not assumed to be functionally indistinguishable. Instead, policy and decision-making is a product of unit-level experiences and values. Identity guides states’ preferences to socially construct their world in a way that certain assets are deemed powerful and certain policy paths desirable.⁶² Different states, with divergent cultures, history, norms, beliefs and identities, perceive the world differently. Beliefs, interests and identities are not fixed, but are “subject to continual change as a result of interactions with others.”⁶³ Hence, the historical sum of bilateral interactions determines how states perceive each other and interact in

contemporary geopolitics.⁶⁴ To constructivists, global politics is composed of more than just states and states are more than just the sum of their tangible and quantifiable assets.

Constructivists also frame states in the international system as constituting reflections of the interests and values of their domestic constituencies.⁶⁵ Global politics is composed of the interaction between these two levels of cultural systems. Domestic politics and regime type are therefore not passive, as neorealists might claim. Instead, they are explanatory variables that impact foreign policy.⁶⁶ Accordingly, by stressing identities, beliefs and values and placing emphasis on how processes inside a state affect its external relations, constructivists scrutinize the very same variables and levels of analysis that neorealists traditionally argued were unimportant in understanding international affairs.

Constructivist Understandings of Territorial Conflict

The diversity of constructivism ensures that this theoretical approach lacks a singular understanding of territorial conflict, though several commonalities underpin existing studies. Broadly, constructivists assert that territorial policies are affected by “intangible” variables, such as perceptions, beliefs and identities. For instance, states are unlikely to violate the sovereignty of a foreign territorial actor perceived as legitimate, whereas policy options vis-à-vis “illegitimate” states often entail territorial intervention and even long-term conquest.⁶⁷

Congruently, constructivists argue that divergences in how a certain territory is perceived explain variance in the territorial policies of states.⁶⁸ Ian Lustick, for example, asserts that territory can be perceived either as inseparable from the intervener, precluding withdrawal, or as a problematically occupied foreign land, which can eventually precipitate an exit.⁶⁹ These perceptions are themselves the product of hegemonic beliefs within the intervening state,

linked to history and culture.⁷⁰ Similarly, Toft argues that when an ethnic group believes a territory constitutes part of their collective identity, “control over territory means a secure identity.”⁷¹ Equally, Hassner affirms that beliefs and identity can interact to deem a particular territory “indivisible,” thereby causing states to preference anti-concessionary policies.⁷²

The constructivist emphasis on “intangible” variables has succeeded in explaining many territorial conflicts where neorealist approaches fell short. For instance, Hassner notes that Ethiopia and Eritrea fought a bloody war over the Badme region, which “is of no strategic importance and has no significant resources.” Instead, the conflict was driven by socially constructed perceptions of territorial worth, not an objective, material barometer of its value.⁷³ Similarly, Waxman argues that Israel has failed to withdraw from the West Bank due to the domestic salience of beliefs that prejudice against an exit from a territory considered central to Jewish history and identity.⁷⁴ Constructivists have also explained system-level trends, attributing the global decline in territorial conquest in the late Twentieth Century to the internationalization of beliefs prioritizing state sovereignty and self-determination.⁷⁵

Constructivism and Territorial Withdrawal

The plethora of new research following this theoretical paradigm illustrates the continued versatility of constructivist approaches to territorial conflict, as an alternative to neorealism.⁷⁶ Taken together, existing constructivist research suggests that the more a particular territory possesses “intangible” connections to the beliefs, history, culture and identity of a particular state, the more likely a state is to contest that territory and the less likely it is to withdraw. There is no clear constructivist order of preference as to whether the international system or domestic politics drive policy-making. The factors constructivists consider important in inducing or preventing territorial withdrawal can therefore be condensed into the following:

- The relational, subjective and “intangible” value of the territory.
- How the body politic of the intervener views and values the territory.
- How perceptions of the territory reflect and interact with domestic debates and power struggles within the intervener.
- The level of legitimacy afforded to the legal sovereign of the territory.
- Prevalent international or local norms that affect territorial policy.

Because constructivism is relatively fissiparous, there is no set prescription as to what variables constructivists should downplay. Indeed, due to its capacity to examine interactions between the domestic and external levels of analysis, constructivism appears to offer a more diverse research program than the one-way framework of neorealism. Rather than reject realist theory in its entirety, early constructivist pioneers such as Alexander Wendt sought to augment – rather than oppose – the neorealist emphasis on tangible variables, by adding a new layer of analysis that focused on the intangible and the subjective.⁷⁷ Resultantly, some scholars claim constructivism has succeeded “in broadening the theoretical contours of IR. By exploring issues of identity and interest [...] constructivists have demonstrated that their sociological approach leads to new and meaningful interpretations of international politics.”⁷⁸

Territorial Conflict: The Enduring Theoretical Divide

Puzzlingly, this conception of constructivism as a broad, multi-variable framework does not correlate with many constructivist approaches to territorial conflict. For instance, Gibler claims, “the characteristics of disputed territories are less important than what the territory represents to both sides.”⁷⁹ Mimicking this either/or binary, a study of Israel’s policy in the West Bank claims: “whatever security value these territories held for Israel [...] their ultimate

significance was symbolic, rather than strategic.”⁸⁰ Other constructivist scholars have demonstrated a clear preference for analysing the domestic level of analysis alone and the “intangible” variables within it.⁸¹ Thus, neorealist and constructivist theorists of territorial conflict remain irrevocably divided by divergent foci. Rather than reconcile these theoretical approaches, existing studies often fixate on either unit-level inputs, or on systemic factors.

Hence, though disagreeing with neorealists about agency, many constructivist scholars of territorial conflict have endorsed the zero-sum, minimalist approach that characterizes neorealism. Checkel notes the socialization of constructivism into hard theory, arguing that: “constructivists [...] find themselves in a predicament all too familiar to rational choice scholars: their ontology has led them to neglect key issues.”⁸² Similarly, Brooks and Wohlforth claim that constructivists stress the agency of values, whilst ignoring the agency of resources and power to shape their social environment.⁸³ Within the research area of territorial conflict, then, constructivism has largely failed to deliver more pluralistic and diverse methodological and theoretical frameworks than those offered by neorealists.

Competing Theories, Controlling Variables: The Problem with IR Theory

Why have constructivists, despite the methodological and theoretical pluralism exhibited by early theorists, imitated the neorealist tendency to highlight one set of variables, whilst discounting all others? Several scholars suggest that the problem lies in the oppositional attitudes held by many IR theorists, who promote a closed, inward attitude. Sterling-Folker notes that neorealists and constructivists are united in their “refusal to seriously engage in the concerns of the other.”⁸⁴ Gray likens IR theory to competing schools of religious belief, with fundamentalist adherents and esoteric “code” words.⁸⁵ Meanwhile, Wagner proclaims that although IR theories are “ostensibly in conflict with each other, they all actually give indirect

support to each other. A recognition that they all shared the same flaw would mean that they would all have to go out of business.”⁸⁶

In the aftermath of the Cold War, neorealism was critiqued for skewing study towards interstate relations, prioritizing “tangible” variables⁸⁷ and altogether restricting “useful” research by claiming to reveal what was “real, relevant and controllable.”⁸⁸ In this regard, neorealism appeared a monolithic discourse that suppressed different perspectives, largely by burying its own normative assumptions.⁸⁹ Neorealism was alleged to have ensured the “subjective process of theory construction” was “rendered mysterious” and “set beyond the scope of rational inquiry.”⁹⁰ As a result, Kolodziej argued, neorealism was a theory enforced by “conceptual fiat rather than the product of observation.” Through this process, he maintained, “the delicate causal and sequential relation between theory and observation was subtly transformed,” whereby “theory validated observation rather than the reverse.”⁹¹

Despite promising a more meaningful theory with greater explanatory power, constructivism was rapidly socialized into the existing vortex of contending methodological preferences. Instead of individual theories being used as an analytical toolkit to illustrate aspects of a problem, theoretical preferences are often linked to self-identification: scholars identify as either a constructivist or a neorealist, maneuvering themselves to oppose the corresponding theoretical predilection.⁹² This exclusionary trend encourages researchers to scrutinize one level of analysis and a few, select variables alone, whilst rejecting all other explanations and downplaying the utility of a more pluralistic approach.⁹³

Nonetheless, a number of researchers have sought to reconcile the existing competing theoretical paradigms. For example, Barkin advocates “realist constructivism:” returning

realism to its “classical” foundations and rejecting neorealist “hard theory,” whilst also scrutinizing subjective ideas and perceptions.⁹⁴ Moreover, a diverse group of academics have promoted a “realist-constructivist dialogue,”⁹⁵ demonstrating recognition that both theoretical frameworks hold merit. Other scholars, such as Putnam, have pioneered a research agenda that advocates extending scrutiny beyond one chosen level of analysis alone.⁹⁶ Similarly, more contemporary permutations of realism, such as neoclassical realists, have broadened their focus to include both the international and domestic levels of analysis.⁹⁷ Within the research area of territorial conflict, scholars such as Paul Huth have also begun to tentatively reject the neorealist and constructivist dichotomy of competing levels of analysis.⁹⁸

These efforts notwithstanding, two trends are endemic throughout IR theory: (i) the doctrine of what we term “illumination by exclusion,” which involves examining a few chosen variables, within one level of analysis alone; and (ii) a competing, zero-sum divide between constructivists and neorealists. The unpacking of constructivist and neorealist accounts of territorial conflict above illustrate that illumination by exclusion fails to reflect the reality it purports to explain, obscuring causal factors and blunting relevance to contemporary events. Consequently, a dissonance exists between the founding purpose of constructivism and the propagation of neorealist-inspired, austere approaches. Because these approaches permeate neorealist and constructivist explanations of territorial conflict and withdrawal, this article now looks outside the discipline, to the study of strategy, a research area that has long interacted with IR theory, whilst retaining its own distinct flavor. Rather than attempt to augment or amend existing IR theoretical approaches, we delineate a different theoretical approach – strategic theory – that consolidates constructivism and realist claims into a supportive, non-oppositional framework for understanding territorial withdrawal.

Breaking the Competitive Deadlock: Introducing Strategic Theory

The Evolution of Strategic Theory

Strategic theory originates from the age-old discipline of military science; the word “strategy” itself is derived from the Greek “strategos,” meaning “the general,” or “military leader.”⁹⁹ Although not called as such at the time, Carl von Clausewitz best expressed strategic theory *avant la lettre* in his posthumously published 1832 work, *On War*, where he constructed a theory of war that acknowledges its manifest complexities. Though Clausewitzian thought shaped the contemporary discipline of strategic studies, modern strategic theory has also been employed to illuminate global economic, military, social, political, and international interactions throughout the international system.¹⁰⁰

In its modern forms, strategic theory has consistently rejected binaries between levels of analysis or tools of statecraft, as well as linear ideas of causality. Throughout *On War*, Clausewitz stresses the reflectivity and complexity of decision-making, whilst Thomas Schelling – a scholar whose pivotal work in the 1960s significantly contributed to the evolution of strategic theory – frames decision-making as “interdependent.”¹⁰¹ Similarly, with his oft-repeated quote that “war is the pursuit of policy by other means,”¹⁰² Clausewitz refuted the false dichotomy between war and peace. In short, strategic theory assumes that no decision is taken in a vacuum. This method of theory building infers that in order to fully comprehend the causal inputs that produce policy, the “illumination by exclusion” approach that characterizes IR theory possess limited explanatory value.

The study of strategy constitutes the analysis of approaches (ways): how and why actors allocate certain resources (means) to achieve specific goals (ends).¹⁰³ Alongside its influences from military science and modern strategic studies, strategic theory borrows from public

choice economics to understand how actors apply this triumvirate.¹⁰⁴ In consequence, Clausewitzian thought and strategic theory have often interacted with theories and approaches drawn from the contemporary study of international relations. Thus, though not, in itself, a derivative of IR theory, modern strategic theory exhibits significant commonalities with both realism and constructivism in its assumptions and claims about global politics.

Strategic Theory and Realism

Though the strategic theorist's emphasis on the plurality of inputs in the decision-making process differs significantly to neorealism, both theoretical approaches share roots in more "classical" realist assumptions. Drawing inspiration from early realists, strategic theorists perceive states, and indeed every socio-political entity, as rational, unitary actors, consciously pursuing and securing their self-given interests.¹⁰⁵ Also mimicking realist orthodoxies, strategic theorists perceive the social world as defined by "power politics."¹⁰⁶ Power is critical, because strategy constitutes "the application of the power inherent in the natural and societal resources of the state toward policy ends."¹⁰⁷ Power is both an attribute and an asset: the accumulation of resources increases cumulative power, which determines the ability of the actor to advance interests, acquire further resources and influence others.¹⁰⁸

Like realists, strategic theorists also understand the international system as anarchic, populated by states pursuing policies calculated to enhance, uphold, defend and advance national interests. Accordingly, all actors in the international system seek to accumulate power, relative to other actors. War is therefore a rational instrument of statecraft, representing the actualization of latent power into a direct expression of armed force to maintain or increase cumulative power, advancing the national interests and value systems of

the actor.¹⁰⁹ In sum, strategic theorists embrace realist concepts and emphases, without practicing the exclusionary “hard theory” of neorealism.

Strategic Theory and Constructivism

Strategic theorists combine traditional realist concepts such as “power” “rationality” and “the national interest,” with constructivist claims concerning the socially constructed nature of interests and values. Whilst strategic theorists see rational decision-making as universal, the subjective value systems and perceptions of a given actor determine how many and which assets to deploy in pursuit of which political goals.¹¹⁰ Though accepting that actors make cost-benefit calculations, “winning” is not intrinsically a zero-sum game, or even a manifestly observable reality, but instead constitutes “gaining relative to one’s own value system.”¹¹¹ This concept of a “bounded rationality” provides a “personified” view of states, as entities whose perceptive filters and formulation of policy differ according to history, geography, beliefs and values.¹¹² Though all actors make a rational choice of calculated utility maximization following the means/ways/ends framework, this does not mean that they all play by the same rules, or would make the same decisions.

Because of these assumptions, strategic theory can be linked closely to the fundamental ideas underpinning constructivism.¹¹³ However, its relatively pluralistic framework and rejection of “illumination by exclusion” suggest that strategic theory may be truer to the original intentions of constructivism than contemporary permutations of this approach. Strategic theorists acknowledge the complex interplay of variables and levels of analysis and recognize that these inputs interact differently, on a case-by-case basis.

Strategic Theory as a Distinct Approach

Unlike realist and constructivist approaches to territorial conflict, strategic theory lacks an inbuilt preference for either “tangible” or “intangible” variables or one level of analysis. Instead, strategic theorists are concerned with discovering how and why policy is made and implemented. Policy represents the operationalized manifestation of strategy on the political stage: the articulation of desired ends “and its guidance regarding resources, limitations on actions, or similar considerations.”¹¹⁴ Because strategic theorists understand an actor’s policy preferences by examining their value system, “intangible” variables require scrutiny. Concurrently, strategic theorists acknowledge that the external environment influences an actor’s perceptions and choices, necessitating an examination of “tangible” variables.¹¹⁵ Strategic theorists also accept that, rather than constitute two non-interacting, isolated spheres, governments are restrained or encouraged to pursue power-enhancing policies in the international arena by domestic political circumstances and vice versa.

Whereas other theoretical frameworks often simplify away the chaotic social world, strategic theorists employ the means/ways/ends framework to sift through the multivariate nature of policy-making and determine causality. Strategic theory is influenced by chaos theory, which suggests that “all complex systems are inherently nonlinear [...] the effect of one action may depend on or conflict with the status of another variable, and the net effect may change the conditions that affect other or all variables.”¹¹⁶ Thus, the formation of unitary policy is the end product of intensive and ever-changing competition for agency among variables.

Above all else, strategic theory is a theory of bargaining. The emphasis that strategic theory places on the reflexivity among variables also extends to inter-actor relations within each distinct level of analysis. In a conflict-as-bargaining model, each actor watches their

adversary, whilst aware that their own actions are being anticipated and interpreted.¹¹⁷ Strategic theorists accept that international politics is competitive and tragic, whilst simultaneously rejecting the binary framing of geopolitics as a contest where actors win or lose. Instead, international politics short of open war is akin to two individuals haggling over a resource and eventually closing a deal after an exhausting back-and-forth. Both actors walk away with something, but one has gained more relative to their rival, by securing a deal more aligned with their interests, whilst exerting fewer resources.¹¹⁸

An ideal strategy should be tailored to secure favorable bargaining positions and outcomes, by advancing desired ends. Successfully navigating the necessary cost/benefit calculations ensures actors can deploy an acceptable level of resources, to achieve political objectives. In the conception of politics as bargaining, competing actors minimize their own costs, whilst maximizing the costs of rivals. Conversely, actors can be compelled to change their behavior by the imposition of costs upon them. Imposing costs leads to changed perceptions of the national interest, potentially garnering a change in policy.¹¹⁹ In this way, states seek to influence each other without themselves being influenced, altering the perceptions of others to correspond to the power-enhancing goals of the influencer.

The Innovative Potential of Strategic Theory

By fusing concepts employed by neorealists and constructivists alike, strategic theory overcomes the zero-sum nature that characterizes much IR theorizing. Though emphasizing rational decision-making and power politics, the strategic theorist's embrace of the subjectivity and the reflectivity of the social world bridges the competitive paralysis that divides neorealists and constructivists. Strategic theorists analyse multiple levels of analysis,

without falling into the exclusionary trap of becoming locked into an artificial binary that stresses the agency of *either* “tangible” or “intangible” variables.

Because of this pluralistic approach, critics could argue that strategic theory barely qualifies as theory, because it fails to isolate chosen variables and sufficiently simplify the complex social world. Indeed, strategic theory has been described as “less of a set of hard and fast rules, and more of a series of purposive assumptions [...] that guide analysis.”¹²⁰ For strategic theorists, however, flexibility is a methodological strength precisely because it avoids self-generating problems. As Clausewitz argues, excessively controlling variables would “conflict with reality to such an extent that for this reason alone it would be totally useless,”¹²¹ obscuring causal chains that should be examined. Illumination by exclusion – prevalent throughout both constructivist and neorealist studies of territorial conflict – is thus avoided.

Neorealism pursues generalizability by making the social world more scientific: rather than recognize that it is composed of a plethora of constantly changing and interacting variables and actors, geopolitics is simplified to follow a universally applicable, linear framework. However, this logic is confounded by the fact that ideal laboratory conditions, where stage-managed interaction between two variables can be neatly measured, remain elusive in a world of context-dependent complexity. Concurrently, the socialization of constructivism into this framework made this once novel approach no more reflective or profound than neorealism. Arguably, strategic theory out-performs constructivism in its original purpose: providing a dependable, yet critical perspective on realism that emphasizes the variables many neorealists ignore. Having illustrated how strategic theory can resolve the binary divide prevalent in IR theorizing, we seek to apply this claim to the research area of territorial conflict, delineating the strategic theorist’s approach to the problem of withdrawal.

Strategic Theory and Territorial Withdrawal

By employing the broader claims of strategic theory, a theory of territorial withdrawal can be formulated. Whereas IR theories stress which variables to examine, strategic theory can instead make a series of relevant assumptions pertaining to the question of withdrawal:

- States are unitary, rational actors, seeking to protect or preserve power.
- Territorial intervention is a means to a political end for the intervening state.
- Multiple levels of analysis and types of variables determine both the decision to intervene and the decision to withdraw.
- The value of a given territory is important, but this is subjective and influenced by values, beliefs and perceptions within the intervening state.
- All politics is a game of bargaining, where each actor formulates policy to influence and avoid being influenced by others.

In this regard, foreign territorial intervention results from the perception that intervention constitutes the appropriate distribution of resources to achieve defined political ends. Subsequently, exit results from the external imposition of renewed costs, and/or the promise of increased benefits from withdrawal, which skew the cost/benefit calculations of the intervener. Intervention is, therefore, no longer perceived as the utility-maximizing choice. In short, both intervention and withdrawal are the products of interactions between the intervener and other actors in the international system and within the intervening state itself. Because international politics is a game of bargaining, scholars must examine how the intervening state perceives itself, its rivals and the territory in question.

However, a degree of categorization and simplification is required to navigate the unruly

interaction of multiple inputs. Clausewitz held that success in war is a product of the harmonization of three interrelated levels of analysis: the people, the army and the government.¹²² Each “tendency” is critical, necessitating a theoretical model that balances the agency of each one, “like an object suspended between three magnets.”¹²³ Correspondingly, we can observe the processes involved in territorial withdrawal operating across three “arenas of bargaining,” similar to the levels of analysis discussed in IR theory. The concept of arenas of bargaining also bears similarities to Clausewitz’s “tendencies” in that each arena is a macro-system, composed of multiple variables. The terminology of “arenas of bargaining” emphasizes that, within each one, a complex game of interaction and competition takes place among variables and actors. Each arena of bargaining contains both “tangible” and “intangible” variables, the agency of which can vary according to the case.

Indubitably, this framework simplifies reality. Actors and variables may operate primarily in one arena, but their actions frequently impact others. Likewise, the lines between each arena are often blurred. Nonetheless, this simplification avoids “illumination by exclusion,” by highlighting a broad variety of variables. The arenas of bargaining, in no preference order, constitute: a) the bilateral arena; b) the international arena, and; c) the domestic arena.

Intervener and Intervened: The Bilateral Arena

The first arena of bargaining concerns the relationship between the intervening state and the population within the given territory and/or the other actor(s) claiming sovereignty over the territory. Bargaining in this arena can involve the mutual use of organized violence, by the intervener, the local population and the displaced sovereign state alike. Occupiers and interveners exercise authority, often forcefully; the local population can also challenge this authority, through equally forceful methods. Rational choice theorists argue that violence can

compel a rival to act in a way they would otherwise not have done.¹²⁴ Correspondingly, violence can skew the cost/benefit calculation of the intervener, increasing the costs of continued territorial control. Thus, territory goes from being a valuable asset to an unsustainable drain on resources, no longer providing a positive return on investment.

Because strategic theorists see war as an instrument of politics, this arena of bargaining can involve multiple forms of violent and non-violent bargaining, spanning negotiations to all-out-war. The bilateral arena also concerns the “tangible” value of a given territory, due to the critical role of these variables in affecting the relative bargaining position of an actor. Tangible factors affecting territorial worth can include natural resources, the employment of the territory as a buffer zone, or a history of hostile violence emanating from the territory.

Bargaining from Within: The Domestic Arena

The second arena of bargaining looks within the intervening state, at its domestic politics. Within a strategic theory framework: “the domestic environment consists of internal physical realities and the internal actors, constituencies, institutions, and organizational roles at play.”¹²⁵ Here, key variables comprise “tangible” potential inputs, such as the regime type and internal delineation of authority. Because nations possess shared beliefs, identity and perceptions, differentiating themselves from other organized groups,¹²⁶ equally important are the prevalent “intangible” variables, within the intervening state.

This arena of bargaining examines how the internal distribution of power and permeation of ideas within a state affects foreign policy; in this case the decision to withdraw (or not to withdraw) from a given territory. Potential inputs can emerge from civil society, public opinion, elite decision-makers within the government and other influential constellations,

such as the political opposition or the bureaucracies of a state. Frequently, war aims are affected by public opinion and domestic intolerance of casualties that are perceived as excessive, particularly in democratic states.¹²⁷ Consequently, opposing actors from within the bilateral arena can influence public opinion within the intervening state, employing both violence and non-violence for this end. The domestic arena, therefore, frequently interacts with actors and variables operating primarily within the international and bilateral arenas.

Global Norms and Third Parties: The International Arena

The final arena of bargaining examines the relations between the intervener and other actors in the international system, excluding those exercising a claim to the territory in question. Interveners can only achieve their goals if permitted freedom of action by the international community.¹²⁸ For strategic theorists, actors possessing the greatest number of resources are likely to exert more power in the international system than those that do not. Conversely, regardless of raw, quantifiable power, the cost/benefit calculations of actors are often constrained to certain practices that are “acceptable within the international environment.”¹²⁹ This arena of bargaining, therefore, concerns “tangible” variables that affect policy, such as sanctions or economic inducements from external actors, alongside the influence of “intangible” variables, such as globally prominent norms, beliefs and perceptions.

Diplomacy between actors in the international system constitutes a form of bargaining.¹³⁰ Actors employ diplomacy to project national interests, which are also guided by national and domestic values and norms. The question of relations between the intervening state and global hegemony pervades this arena of bargaining, alongside the question of how the historical foreign relations of the intervener affect the bargaining power of external actors to induce or prevent withdrawal. All actors involved in an intervention can be influenced by and

can influence the alignment of variables in the international arena. The international arena spans the entire spectrum of bilateral and multilateral diplomacy: from positive incentives to withdraw, in the form of aid packages or improved relations, to the employment of “coercive diplomacy,” such as sanctions, threats and pressure.

Applying Strategic Theory to Case Studies of Withdrawal

Existing case-specific studies of individual withdrawals and interventions demonstrate that territorial policy is influenced by diverse inputs, across multiple levels of analysis. For instance, domestic pressure has cut short multiple interventions.¹³¹ Consequently, an intervention can be affected by the imposition of resolve-sapping costs, such as sustained campaigns of violence or civil disorder, launched by local actors.¹³² Additionally, states not involved in an intervention have sometimes cajoled the intervener to exit and in other times pressured them to remain.¹³³ Finally, the territorial policies of states have been influenced by “tangible” security concerns, zero-sum power politics and “intangible” beliefs, norms and perceptions alike.¹³⁴ Thus, an exclusionary neorealist or constructivist framework that emphasizes a select few variables and/or one level of analysis alone could not account for all the inputs that drive territorial withdrawal. By contrast, the three arenas of bargaining delineated above provide a sufficiently broad toolbox to scrutinize all of these posited contributory factors, within the generalizing framework of theory.

Strategic theory has already been applied to two contentious cases of withdrawal: Israel’s exits from southern Lebanon and the Gaza Strip, in 2000 and 2005 respectively. Existing constructivist-dominated literature downplays the role of violent and non-violent bargaining between Israel and other actors in generating each withdrawal. Instead, scholars have emphasized the agency of domestic processes and perceptions within Israel. For instance, Kaye’s study of Israel’s withdrawal from southern Lebanon dismisses “external strategic-

military considerations” and argues “to understand why Israel withdrew, one has to look at other explanations,” such as how the territory was perceived by Israel’s domestic political actors.¹³⁵ Similarly, commentators have argued that Israel left the Gaza Strip “without external pressure,” receiving “nothing in return.”¹³⁶ Concurrently, both these withdrawals continue to be labeled as “unilateral,” suggesting that Israel left territory without negotiating and coordinating with other state-level adversaries or allies.¹³⁷

Yet, a strategic theory framing uncovers new or underemphasized causal paths. For instance, in contrast to the claims within much of the theoretically founded case literature, violent bargaining in the bilateral arena between Israel and non-state opponents, particularly Hezbollah and Hamas, played a key role in precipitating each withdrawal.¹³⁸ Israel’s decision-makers perceived that the occupations had lost strategic utility, in that they both increasingly generated costs, without advancing their stated goal: security. Both withdrawals were also preceded by resource-sapping increases in enemy violence that made Israel’s domestic arena question the utility of the status quo. Simultaneously, withdrawal sought to induce behavioral changes within hostile actors by undermining their ability and legitimacy to attack Israeli targets and reducing friction between the occupier and the occupied.¹³⁹

Concomitantly, scrutinizing Israel’s interactions within the international arena illustrates that neither withdrawal was strictly “unilateral.” The geographical contours of the withdrawal from Gaza were negotiated with the U.S., who also granted Israeli political concessions in exchange for leaving territory.¹⁴⁰ A similar strategy underlined the exit from southern Lebanon, which was negotiated with the UN, who subsequently acknowledged and legitimized Israel’s withdrawal.¹⁴¹ In both cases, then, Israel withdrew as part of a bargaining equation with third parties in the international arena. The focus on these often ignored causal

paths illustrates that strategic theory proves a more versatile framework for explaining the Israeli withdrawals than the constructivist, domestic-focused framing that characterizes existing literature. Both instances of territorial withdrawal resulted from a complex process of interaction and bargaining, involving actors and inputs within all three levels of analysis.¹⁴²

Nevertheless, Israel's often-divided domestic political actors remain united in their continued perception of both withdrawals as unilateral, whilst being bitterly divided over the utility of "unilateralism."¹⁴³ Supporters now seek to apply a similar methodology in the West Bank, arguing that Israel should unilaterally extricate itself from a decades-long occupation, without waiting for a Palestinian partner to emerge.¹⁴⁴ Hard-liners, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, have condemned and employed the supposedly unilateral nature of the previous withdrawals to argue against a similar policy of surrendering territory in the West Bank without corresponding concessions.¹⁴⁵ However, the strategic theory and arenas of bargaining framework illustrates that both factions have failed to internalize that no withdrawal is, or can be, truly unilateral. Whether Israel remains in or leaves the West Bank constitutes a pressing policy issue, but whether Israel should or should not exit "unilaterally" represents a myopic misrepresentation of previous praxis.

Alongside its relevance for Israeli case studies and contemporary politics, strategic theory has significant utility for US policy-makers considering the problem of withdrawal. Since the early 1990s, American policy-makers have vociferously debated "exit strategies" from multiple interventions.¹⁴⁶ This debate was reignited following the US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, which precipitated claims that the "premature" exit precipitated the rise of new security threats, such as the Islamic State.¹⁴⁷ At the time of writing, the Trump administration is wrestling with the geopolitical consequences of a proposed withdrawal of all U.S. troops

from Syria. Disagreements within the administration over the withdrawal have precipitated the resignation of Secretary of State for Defence, James Mattis,¹⁴⁸ whilst the policy has been criticized as a “hasty withdrawal,” despite not yet having been implemented.¹⁴⁹

Corresponding to these debates, this essay has illustrated how strategic theory can explain why states have withdrawn in the past, whilst shedding light on when they should withdraw in the contemporary era. Critics of the proposed Syria withdrawal argue the policy will “embolden Iran and Hezbollah.”¹⁵⁰ Similarly, Stein believes there is a lack of “a clear-eyed assessment of the interests of the other actors involved.”¹⁵¹ Both these analyses suggest decision-makers should avoid the pitfalls of IR theorizing that make the mistake of seeking illumination by exclusion: making myopic decisions based on narrow interpretations of the status quo. Instead, policy-makers must take the full spectrum of bargaining equations into account and avoid focusing solely on whether the Islamic State is defeated. For this task, the arenas of bargaining and the ways/means/ends framework is of significant utility. This framework could assist policy-makers in making a reasoned assessment as to whether the costs of intervention outweigh the benefits, whilst projecting how intervention and withdrawal affect US bargaining positions vis-à-vis Russia, Israel, Turkey and the Assad regime, amongst a plethora of other actors.

Conclusions

The perception that existing IR theories provide little value for understanding contemporary international security issues has significantly exacerbated the growing “gap” between policy-makers and academics.¹⁵² For instance, George claims “policy-makers’ eyes would glaze as soon as I used the word ‘theory,’”¹⁵³ whilst multiple IR scholars admit that “the walls surrounding the ivory tower never seemed so high”.¹⁵⁴ From within the “ivory tower” itself,

Wallace derides IR theory as “scholastic word games,”¹⁵⁵ while Walt argues it constitutes a “cult of irrelevance,” which privileges “narrow and trivial problems that may impress colleagues but are of little practical value.”¹⁵⁶ These perspectives suggest that theory may be of little use for understanding territorial withdrawal.

By contrast, this article illustrated that theory remains a powerful tool for comprehending withdrawal from foreign territorial interventions. Nonetheless, neorealism and constructivism, when employed in the narrow oppositional framework that pervades studies of territorial conflict, contribute to a perception that theory lacks applicable policy relevance. Similarly, we have deduced that – despite their dominance of studies of territorial conflict – both neorealism and constructivism are too prescriptive and excessively simplifying. The result is that both these approaches lack utility for understanding why states withdraw from foreign territorial interventions.

However, instead of categorically rejecting neorealism or constructivism, we sought to reconcile the non-exclusionary claims of these approaches through strategic theory. This essay joins a growing literature rejecting the artificial binary that realism and constructivism perpetuate by attributing sole agency to the “tangible” or “intangible” variables and the international or domestic level of analysis respectively. Whereas scholars sharing our pluralistic approach such as Putnam characterize foreign policy-making as a “two level game” involving both domestic and international actors,¹⁵⁷ our model advocates a “three level game” that is tailored specifically to the pertinent policy problem of withdrawal. The three arenas of bargaining detailed above provide a program through which to apply strategic theory to both explain and predict territorial withdrawal.

The goal of this article is not to demonstrate the universal applicability of strategic theory, but we hope to encourage innovative approaches that reject binary frameworks based on mutual exclusivity. Reduced to their non-exclusionary cores, both realism and constructivism provide explanatory value. Realist analyses of concepts such as power, the national interest and the degree by which states' policies are shaped by the international system provide insight into the interface between individual states and the global (dis)order. However, that constructivism continues to prove so popular typifies the failure of neorealism to provide full explanatory utility through its neglect of "intangible," factors, such as the ability of norms and values to influence institutions. Conversely, the socialization of constructivism into a competing, zero-sum approach has blunted the utility of this theoretical framework. Fueled by opposition to neorealism, yet paradoxically wedded to the neorealist-inspired methodology of illumination by exclusion, constructivist studies of territorial withdrawal frequently restrict their investigations to one level of analysis alone.

By contrast, strategic theory allows for generalization through the ordered means/ways/ends approach, whilst acknowledging the agency of variables may differ across individual cases. This framework combines the subjective, in-depth case study approach of historical analysis with the tracing of cross-case concepts prevalent within social science, freeing IR theory from applying unrealistic reductionisms to the complex social world. American diplomat George Kennan railed against the "persistent urge to seek universal formulae," claiming that excessively simplifying the complex process that encapsulates policymaking: "confuses public understanding of international issues more than it clarifies."¹⁵⁸

Similarly, Clausewitz voiced frustration at "the impermissible use of certain narrow systems as formal bodies of laws" that reduced warfare "to a few mathematical formulas."¹⁵⁹

Accordingly, this essay illustrates that theory need not employ illumination by exclusion to deny the multifaceted nature of decision-making. Instead, strategic theory constitutes one option in an ever-growing toolbox for scholars who reject the artificial and unnecessary divide that permeates contemporary theoretical understandings of global politics.

Notes

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² Tom Engelhardt, “‘Tell Me How This Ends?’ David Petraeus Finally Answers His Own Question,” *Common Dreams*, October 17, 2017, <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2017/10/17/tell-me-how-ends-david-petraeus-finally-answers-his-own-question> (accessed 19 March 2019).

³ David Edelstein, *Occupational Hazards: Success and Failure in Military Occupation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 3.

⁴ Mordechai Kremnitzer, “The Meaning and Significance of the Rabin Assassination,” *The Israel Democracy Institute*, November 4, 2015, <https://en.idi.org.il/articles/3917> (accessed 18 March 2019).

⁵ French Prime Minister Guy Mollet took office in 1956 pledging to retrench French colonial possessions, but subsequently sought to block Algerian independence; see Christopher Harrison, “French Attitudes to Empire and the Algerian War,” *African Affairs* 82, no. 326 (1983): 75-95. By contrast, the Israeli administration of Ariel Sharon was re-elected in 2003 pledging to refuse any withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, but subsequently withdrew from the entire territory; see Rob Geist Pinfold, “Territorial Withdrawal as Multilateral Bargaining: Revisiting Israel’s ‘Unilateral’ Withdrawals from Gaza and Southern Lebanon,” *The Journal of Strategic Studies* (advance online publication), doi: 10.1080/01402390.2019.1570146.

⁶ Edelstein, *Occupational Hazards*.

⁷ Edelstein, *Occupational Hazards*; Paul D. Miller, *Armed State Building: Confronting State Failure, 1898-2012* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

⁸ Edelstein, *Occupational Hazards*, 7.

⁹ For two exceptions see *Exit Strategies and State Building*, ed. Richard Caplan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Johnson and Clack, *At the End of Military Intervention*.

¹⁰ For a study of withdrawal that emphasizes “tangible” security inputs, see Edelstein, *Occupational Hazards*. For a constructivist approach emphasizing beliefs, perceptions and the domestic level of analysis, see Ian Lustick, *Unsettled States, Disputed Lands: Britain and Ireland, France and Algeria, Israel and the West Bank-Gaza* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).

¹¹ For instance, see John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001), 83-137; Manekin, Grossman and Mitts, “Contested Ground: Disentangling Material and Symbolic Attachment to Disputed Territory,” *Political Science Research and Methods* (advance online publication), doi: 10.1017/psrm.2018.22.

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¹³ Nina Silove, “Beyond the Buzzword: The Three Meanings of ‘Grand Strategy,’” *Security Studies* 27, no. 1 (2018): 27-57.

¹⁴ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and eds. Michael Howard, and Peter Paret (New York: Knopf, 1993), 108.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 106.

¹⁶ Stephen Walt, “The Relationship Between Theory and Policy in International Relations,” *The Annual Review of Political Science* 8 (2005): 23.

¹⁷ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (Boston, USA: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 4.

¹⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, 79.

¹⁹ Graham Allison and Phillip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Longman, 1999), 4.

²⁰ Peter M. R. Stirk, *A History of Occupation: From 1792 to 1914* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press,

2016), 10.

²¹ Tony Chafer, "Senegal," in Caplan, *Exit Strategies*, 54.

²² Edelstein, *Occupational Hazards*, 90.

²³ Rob Geist Pinfeld, "It's the 'Special Relationship' Stupid: Examining Israel-US Relations Through the Prism of Israeli Territorial Withdrawals," *Strife Journal*, Special Issue I (2015): 48-57.

²⁴ Geist Pinfeld, "Territorial Withdrawal as Multilateral Bargaining," 4.

²⁵ Edelstein, *Occupational Hazards*, 16.

²⁶ See Stirk, *A History of Occupation*; and Elizabeth A. Muenger, *The British Military Dilemma in Ireland: Occupation Politics 1886-1914* (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 1991).

²⁷ Edelstein, *Occupational Hazards*, 16

²⁸ Joshua Gleis, *Withdrawing Under Fire: Lessons Learned from Islamist Insurgencies* (Virginia: Potomac Books, 2011).

²⁹ Johnson and Clack, *At the End of Military Intervention*.

³⁰ Caplan, *Exit Strategies*.

³¹ David Martin Jones and M.L.R. Smith, "Return to Reason: Reviving Political Realism in Western Foreign Policy," *International Affairs* 91, no. 5 (2015): 933-952.

³² Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*.

³³ Brown and Ainley, *Understanding International Relations*, 45.

³⁴ Hartmut Behr and Amelia Heath, "Misreading in IR Theory and Ideology Critique: Morgenthau, Waltz and Neorealism," *Review of International Studies* 35, no. 2 (2009): 327-349.

³⁵ Richard K. Ashley, "The Poverty of Neorealism," *International Organization* 38, No. 2 (1984): 227.

³⁶ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1979), 88.

³⁷ *Ibid.*.

³⁸ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁴¹ Brown and Ainley, *Understanding International Relations*, 93.

⁴² Brown and Ainley, *Understanding International Relations*, 23.

⁴³ Lawrence Freedman, *The Transformation of Strategic Affairs* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 27-29.

⁴⁴ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 86.

⁴⁵ Branislav L. Slantchev, "Territory and Commitment: The Concert of Europe as Self-Enforcing Equilibrium," *Security Studies* 14, no. 4 (2005): 565-606.

⁴⁶ Gary Goertz and Paul Diehl, *Territorial Changes and International Conflict* (London, UK: Routledge, 1992).

⁴⁷ Peter Lieberman, *Does Conquest Pay: The Exploitation of Occupied Industrial Societies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

⁴⁸ Manekin, Grossman and Mitts, "Contested Ground."

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⁵⁰ Paul Huth, *Standing Your Ground: Territorial Disputes and International Conflict* (Ann Arbor, MA: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 50-52.

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⁵² Edelstein, *Occupational Hazards*.

⁵³ Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 31.

⁵⁴ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 96.

⁵⁵ Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 99.

⁵⁶ Brown and Ainley, *Understanding International Relations*, 490.

⁵⁷ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁵⁸ David Martin Jones and M.L.R. Smith, "Noise but No Signal: Strategy, Culture, and the Poverty of Constructivism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 24, no. 6 (2001), 487.

⁵⁹ Ted Hopf, "The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory," *International Security* 23, no. 1 (1998): 171-200.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

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⁶² Tanisha M. Fazal, *State Death: The Politics and Geography of Conquest, Occupation and Annexation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 4.

⁶³ Brown and Ainley, *Understanding International Relations*, 50.

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- ⁶⁵ William R. Keylor, "The Problems and Prospects of Diplomatic/International History," *H-Diplo*, April 10, 2015, <http://tiny.cc/E126> (accessed March 20, 2019): 9.
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- ⁶⁷ Fazal, *State Death*.
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- ⁶⁹ Lustick, *Unsettled States, Disputed Lands*.
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