Constructivism and foreign policy
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Chapter contents
Introduction 78
What is constructivism? 79
Applied constructivism 80
The essence of constructivism 81
Constructivism meets foreign policy 89
Conclusion 92

Reader's guide
This chapter is about one of the newer theories in international relations—constructivism. As a 'newcomer' constructivism has been viewed with scepticism from within the discipline and from foreign policy making circles alike, where many have questioned its utility and its ability to say anything about 'the real world of policy'. This chapter aims to show that although some of its concepts and propositions may seem unsettling at first, constructivism is a useful tool not only for understanding foreign policy, but also as a guide for prescribing foreign policy. The chapter starts out by discussing what constructivism is, outlining the constructivist view that anarchy exists in different forms with major implications for how agents act. The chapter then outlines some of the main propositions and conceptual tools of constructivism, especially its views on identity, social construction, rules, and practice. Although many of the propositions and concepts may appear a little abstract, the chapter uses examples from 'the real world' of European security, to show constructivism's alternative understandings of NATO's role after the end of the Cold War and in present-day European security. The chapter points out that theory matters in foreign policy making—including constructivism—because different theories imply different policies and may make alternative policy options visible which would otherwise easily have been overlooked.

Introduction

On 1 July 1991 the Warsaw Pact ceased to exist after its European members withdrew their support and military contributions to the organization, bringing an end to a 36-year-long foreign policy based on a military stand-off between the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact and the US-led NATO Alliance. The event immediately sparked off speculation about NATO's future and which policy options would be available in the new security environment. The general wisdom
in realist circles was that without a clear threat NATO had outlived its purpose, famously expressed by Kenneth Waltz, who proclaimed that although ‘NATO’s days were not numbered—its years were’.

This example raises the question of why students and practitioners of foreign policy should care about abstract theories that proclaim to be able to say something about foreign policy and even to prescribe the ‘right’ foreign policy option (Walt 1998:29). The answer might (partly) be that we need theories as a form of organizing principle to make sense of a complex world. Without theories, we would simply be overwhelmed by the masses of information that have to be processed in the making and understanding of foreign policy. Yet, as indicated by the example above, theories do more than organize data, they also imply different policy options and they contain different assumptions about how the world works.

Neither realists nor liberals were able to correctly predict the consequences of the demise of the Warsaw Pact for NATO, yet they have retained their dominant position in international relations, albeit now challenged by the constructivist perspective. At the time neither of the two dominant theories nor most foreign policy practitioners, were able to imagine a more, rather than a less, influential role for NATO, where the Alliance would be teaching the ‘new Europeans’ democratic norms and the appropriate behaviour for gaining membership in the ‘Western club’—and in the process changing identities and interests and deeply ingrained foreign policy practices. Curiously, although constructivism has arguably been able to best capture the finer nuances of NATO’s post-Cold War role, and has offered the most persuasive alternative interpretations of the momentous changes in international relations and their foreign policy implications, realist and liberal perspectives are still the ‘theories of choice’ among foreign policy makers and scholars of International Relations (IR). This suggests that scholars and foreign policy practitioners not only hold firm belief systems about substantial policy matters, but also that the assumptions of realism and liberalism might resonate more easily with a generation of academics and foreign policy makers, who are themselves schooled in realist and liberal theories, and to whom the constructivist perspective is an unknown entity and perhaps a bit too abstract.

If decision makers do hold on to their belief systems (as suggested in the original Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) research) the long-held preference for realist and liberal perspectives is not surprising as constructivism challenges both theories on a number of important points—especially deeply ingrained assumptions about how the world works. The constructivist conviction that ‘the world is of our making’ (Önuf 1989) challenges the realist view that we can do little to change things, as unpleasant as they might seem, and the liberal perspective of a particular route to human progress. This chapter aims to unpack the basic assumptions and policy relevance of constructivism so that it might increasingly be included in the conceptual toolbox used by students and (future) policy makers in their attempt to understand and do foreign policy. The chapter explores the nature of constructivism and its added value for explaining and understanding foreign policy using European security as an illustrative example.

What is constructivism?

The failure of the two mainstream theories to predict, and initially even to explain, the end of the Cold War is usually seen as having facilitated constructivism’s arrival in the IR discipline. It is true that the failure of realism in predicting the momentous events, its overall static nature,
and its initial insistence after the Cold War that essentially nothing had changed,² contributed to the rapid spread of constructivism into IR from the early 1990s onwards. However, the origins of constructivism in IR can actually be traced back to the early- to mid 1980s,³ where critical and post-modern theories suggested alternative readings of the very notions of reality, truth, and structure (Smith 1995: 25) and questioned widely accepted understandings of concepts of IR and subfields such as the study of foreign policy (see Chapter Five).

Although constructivism is presented in this book as one of the mainstream theories, many would actually say that constructivism is an approach rather than a theory. This view is grounded in the understanding that constructivism has nothing substantial to say about who or what are the main actors, problems, or issues in international relations. Constructivism offers no solutions to specific problems in international relations, nor does it prescribe any particular policy directions. Indeed, constructivism can be seen as an empty vessel that merely specifies a social ontology without, however, specifying which social relationships it is concerned with. Moreover constructivism is ‘empty’ in the sense that it does not challenge the ideological convictions of either realism or liberalism, and it is neither optimistic nor pessimistic by design (Adler 1997: 323). Even so, constructivism does offer alternative understandings of some of the most central themes in international relations such as the meaning of anarchy and balance of power, the relationship between state identity and interest, and the prospects for change (Hopf 1998: 172). Moreover, with its roots in critical theory and post-modernism, constructivism has remained committed to problematizing that which is taken for granted and to ‘making strange’ what is commonly regarded to exist (Pouliot 2004: 323).

Applied constructivism

Strictly speaking, it is true to say that constructivism is not a theory in the sense that realism and liberalism provide visions of particular world orders. However, constructivism is perhaps closer to being a substantial theory than its critics suggest, and it certainly holds considerable potential as an applied framework for understanding foreign policy. This is especially clear in relation to European security, where arguably constructivism is closest to becoming a substantive theory, as constructivists are concerned with the specific question of how old practices of rivalry and war-making can be changed through institutionalization, which might over time change identities, interests, and practices. This form of constructivism could be called ‘applied constructivism’ and builds on the work of, amongst others, Karl Deutsch and his associates (Deutsch 1957) who theorized that changed interactions across borders might lead to new social relationships and eventually lead to the establishment of a ‘security community’.⁴ Since the publication of Security Communities (Adler and Barnett 1998), the concept of a ‘security community’ has experienced a revival in IR thinking. The security community literature has since produced convincing empirical evidence that the processes taking place in, for example, the enlargement of NATO and the European Union, or through some forms of democracy promotion, are aimed precisely at forging new relationships based on friendship and cooperation rather than rivalry or enmity, and that identities and interests have been fundamentally changed in the process.

The clearest constructivist statement on these processes is found in the influential article ‘Anarchy is What States Make of It’ by Alexander Wendt (1992). Wendt asked if it is really the
case that the absence of political authority in the international system forces states into the patterns of behaviour based on self-help, as suggested by realists. His answer was a clear 'no'. Self-help and power politics do not follow logically from anarchy, because self-help is not a structural feature, as suggested by Waltz, but an institution based on particular intersubjective understandings about self and other that are reinforced through agents' practice. The argument builds on one of the most central features of constructivism, which holds that people act towards objects (including other people) on the basis of the meanings the object (or person) has for them. This means that states act differently towards enemies than they do towards friends because enemies are threatening and friends are not (Wendt 1992: 396). Moreover, Wendt suggested the existence of three different 'cultures of anarchy' characterized by different institutions. The three cultures of anarchy could be conflictual and based on self-help as suggested by realists, competitive and based on rivalry as suggested by many liberals, or friendly and based on cooperation as suggested by, for example, Deutsch. The implication was that not only is anarchy what states make of it, but that cultures of anarchy can be changed.

The argument that anarchy is not necessarily based on conflict and self-help was a devastating blow to neorealism, but it was also a completely new conceptual tool for thinking about options for foreign policy making, as it opened up entirely new possibilities where the overarching question became how to change from one culture to another. If, as maintained by Wendt, the only reason why we might be in a self-help system is because practice made it that way (Wendt 1992: 407), then practice could also 'un-make' a conflictual culture. In the aftermath of the Cold War, constructivists argued that it was precisely in such 'un-makings' of past conflictual patterns that NATO and the EU could play important roles.

The big question here, of course, is how we move from one culture to another, because once a culture has become institutionalized, it is difficult to change. To answer this question, it is necessary to take a closer look at some of the essential parts of constructivism which provide a conceptual toolbox for understanding how agents' shared knowledge, identities, and interests are interlinked and may contribute to changing deeply embedded practices and structural conditions. Doing so, however, requires a fundamental break with some of the realist and liberal assumptions about how the world works. (See Box 4.1)

The essence of constructivism

Constructivism differs from realism and liberalism on a number of crucial points, some of which may appear a little unsettling to those who have been schooled in the so-called rationalist thought which underpins realism and liberalism. Moreover, all essential elements of constructivism are interconnected in ways that can also make it difficult to divide constructivism into 'bite-sized' pieces. In this section I will first present some of the essentials of constructivism divided into four core propositions, and in the next section I will illustrate how these core propositions of constructivism can be utilized to answer the question identified above—how foreign policy might be able to effect change from one form of anarchy to another.

The four key constructivist propositions and some of the key constructivist concepts can be summarized as follows:
BOX 4.1 Ego and Alter on a desert island

Relations, whether conflictual, competitive, or friendly, are always a product of social interactions rather than just material capabilities. To illustrate this point, Wendt uses an example of two space avatars, Alter and Ego, who meet on a desert island for the first time. From their first encounter on the beach, their relationship will develop from their initial understanding of the situation and from the development of shared understandings through their interactions, which might lead to enmity, competition, or friendship, depending on their actions and reactions. The ‘material structure’ is the same in each situation where both have themselves and a knife and are on the same desert island. Think about which ‘culture of anarchy’ is likely to result from the three desert island situations outlined below.

situation 1 Ego notices Alter on the island. Ego judges the situation as potentially threatening and approaches Alter brandishing his knife.

situation 2 Ego notices Alter on the island. Ego considers that Alter will be a competitor for the known scarce resources on the island, but wonders if Alter knows of other resources. Ego approaches Alter with his knife in his belt, but his hand resting on it.

situation 3 Ego notices Alter on the island. Ego wonders if Alter might want to cooperate on digging a well (and whether he might like to play chess). Ego approaches Alter with his hand outstretched and the knife simply dangling from his belt.

How will Alter respond and what will be Ego’s interpretation of Alter’s response—which shared understandings and practices might develop?

1. A belief in the social construction of reality and the importance of social facts.
2. A focus on ideational as well as material structures and the importance of norms and rules.
3. A focus on the role of identity in shaping political action and the importance of ‘logics of action’.
4. A belief in the mutual constitutiveness of agents and structure, and a focus on practice and action.

Social construction and social facts

As the name ‘constructivism’ indicates, the major common proposition by constructivists is that reality, which we mostly take as given, is in fact a project under constant construction. Constructivists understand the world as coming into being rather than existing as a pre-given entity. Moreover, as argued in the seminal work The Social Construction of Reality (Berger and Luckmann 1966), our understanding of reality is derived from inter-subjective knowledge and the interpreted nature of social reality. The fact that constructivism is often called social constructivism is indicative of the considerable role attached to the social processes of interaction for the production of shared knowledge about the world. From this perspective, constructivists agree that although some aspects of reality clearly exist as ‘brute facts’ whose concrete existence is not contested, their meaning is. Ayer’s Rock, or Uluru, in Australia
clearly exists, but its significance and meaning varies greatly depending on whether it is regarded from a European or an Aboriginal perspective. Similarly, a North Korean nuclear warhead may look similar to a French nuclear warhead, and both have the same devastating consequences, but despite their similar material attributes, we attach different meanings to each. This is of relevance to the ‘cultures of anarchy’ because different meanings will also imply different practices and different foreign policy choices, as witnessed in the different American foreign policies vis-à-vis a nuclear-armed France and a nuclear-armed North Korea.

Apart from brute facts with different shared meanings, constructivists agree that there are portions of reality that are regarded as facts only through human agreement and which are made observable only through human practice. As suggested by Vincent Pouliot (2004: 320), all constructivists share a focus on those portions of the world that are treated as if they were real. Many of the most important concepts and understandings in international relations—even the state—are social facts rather than brute facts. Social facts exist only through human agreement and shared knowledge reinforced through practice. A common example of a social fact is money, which is clearly more than its material existence—what matters is the shared meanings we attach to money and the practices surrounding it. Without shared agreement that pieces of paper can be swapped for goods and services, money would no longer exist because it exists only through practice. International relations also consist of social facts that have no existence outside the meanings and practices associated with them. Over time social facts become reified through social relationships, rules, and routine practices so that they appear as an objective reality with an independent existence from those who constructed the social fact in the first place. Therefore key questions for constructivists are necessarily: How are social facts socially constructed and how do they affect global politics (Pouliot 2004: 320)? How can they be changed and even ‘un-constructed’? (See Box 4.2.)

**Box 4.2 NATO—a social fact?**

NATO clearly exists, and as seen in Libya, Afghanistan, the Balkans, and elsewhere is an important foreign policy actor. Yet who or what exactly is NATO? What do we mean when we say that NATO has bombed targets in Libya? In material terms NATO is an ageing headquarter building on the outskirts of Brussels, a home-page, and an international staff, and apart from a few AWACS reconnaissance planes, a command structure, and a few other very limited assets, NATO has no military forces of its own. Yet, despite the limited material manifestations of NATO, the organization clearly has a presence in international politics and security, and is commonly considered to be an objective reality with the ability to act (to have agency). Yet NATO only exists as a social fact constituted by social relationships, shared practice, and shared understandings.

NATO was established in 1949 through the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty which committed its signatories to come to the help of any fellow NATO member in case of attack. Therefore NATO’s presence and existence as a foreign policy actor is based on the promise contained in a document that is more than sixty years old, and the shared meaning attached to that document, the shared identity and shared values of its members, and the many shared practices which have since been established. Moreover, NATO exists through its actions in concrete foreign and security policy, where during the Cold War it acted as the most important forum for foreign policy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, and where since the end of the Cold War it has been engaged in forging new social relationships with former enemies.
Ideational and material structures

The insistence that the world is socially constructed is linked to the second essential proposition of constructivism—that structure cannot be understood through reference only to material forces such as natural resources and military power, but that it consists of both material and ideational factors. Constructivists emphasize the importance of shared knowledge about material factors, rules, symbols, and language, which all shape how we interpret the world and the actions of others. Neither actions nor material forces have meaning outside shared forms of knowledge, and it is collective meanings along with material forces that constitute the structure, and which organize our actions. For constructivists it is simply impossible to get a grasp on reality by only looking at the material world. In this sense constructivism directly challenges the materialism of neorealism and neoliberalism, which see the most fundamental feature of society as the distribution of material forces. Constructivists argue that although structure consists partly of material facts, as the example above of the Korean and French nuclear warheads shows, material facts alone have no meaning without understanding the social context, the shared knowledge, and the practices surrounding it. In the case of nuclear weapons, one North Korean nuclear warhead matters more to the USA than many French or British nuclear warheads because the meaning of the latter is interpreted within a social context of friendship, where cooperation is the dominant practice, rather than being interpreted within a social context of enmity.

Structures are often codified in formal rules and norms, which agents are socialized into following (Wendt 1992: 399). The rules that are followed may be formal rules that exist in a written or spoken form, but they may also be a less formal form of rule conceptualized as norms, which are usually taken for granted, are unquestioned, and are associated with specific identities and belonging to a specific community or social group. Norms are collective understandings that make behavioural claims on those actors who (because of their identity) see the norm as salient. A norm will specify the appropriate behaviour for an agent with a given identity. In that sense norms are at once cognitive ‘maps’ for actors to determine what is appropriate and inappropriate behaviour, and are also a major constitutive influence on actor identities and interests. Constructivists agree that norms have a structural function, which is both constraining and constitutive, but only in so far as the norm is seen by the agents themselves as of relevance—norms in this sense can be thought of as ‘structures of relevance’.

Moreover, norms are important for constituting social relations because to become a member of a certain social group, such as NATO or the EU, applicant states have to follow the norms of the group to which membership is desired. The implied logic here is that structural change can be brought about by changing the norms of certain actors, especially if those actors seek membership of a new social group. The idea that norms could be changed in order to change identities and interests had already been used in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War in (West) Germany and Japan, but has since been adopted as a major foreign policy project in the aftermath of the Cold War as policy makers realized the eagerness of the Central and East European states to gain membership of the ‘Western club’. Within a short space of time, both the EU and NATO, together with other international actors, had engaged in a gigantic project to socialize the norms of the West based on liberal and democratic ideas to those Central and Eastern European states who wished to become members of
Constructivists believe that rules are a necessary element for all but the most elementary forms of interaction, and they contend that rules are often followed blindly—even in situations where we might think that no rules exist. For example, tourists in London very quickly find out about the unspoken rule on the Underground not to stare at fellow passengers seated opposite you. Instead, travellers on the Underground learn the practice of directing their gaze above their fellow passenger, a practice that is expertly exploited by advertisers with very detailed advertising boards.

Rules matter because they provide order and predictability and they provide guidance for how to behave. Rules are general imperative principles, which require or authorize certain behaviour (Bull 1977/1995: 52). Rules may have the status of formalized law, but they may also be morality, norms, custom or etiquette, or simply operating procedures or 'rules of the game'.

The importance of diplomatic rules was clearly visible at the Copenhagen Climate Summit in 2009. In a desperate bid to get a result from the complicated negotiations and a far too crowded agenda, the Danish hosts used unorthodox procedures and went against diplomatic etiquette and the UN principle of equality. The result was not only confusion among delegates, but also consternation and a slowdown in the proceedings as much energy was consumed in 'finding out what was going on'. The disappointing outcome can now be blamed on 'failure to follow diplomatic etiquette' rather than the political unwillingness of some states to agree to the terms of the proposed agreement.

NATO and the EU (Flockhart 2006). In the process, new identities and new social relationships were constructed, which changed the logic of anarchy in Europe (between East and West) from one characterized by enmity and self-help to one characterized by friendship and a practice of cooperation. (See Box 4.3.)

Identity, interests, and 'logics of action'

The third core feature of constructivism is its focus on identity. Identity is the agent's understanding of self, its place in the social world, and its relationships with others. An understanding of self is always dependent on an 'other' for its constitution and, although relatively stable, is a condition that is always in a process of reconstitution and is always supported by a narrative to ensure biographical continuity that makes any changes seem natural. Constructivists place a key importance on identity because it is believed that identities strongly imply a particular set of interests or preferences in respect of choice of action (Hopf 1998: 175). This view of identity as constitutive of interests and action stands in stark contrast to the realist and liberal assumption that actors in international politics have only one pre-existing identity—that of a self-interested state engaged in producing and reproducing a predictably stable world.

By conceptualizing agents in international politics as influenced by their identity, constructivists also acknowledge the importance of the historical, cultural, political, and social context of the agents in question, as these are (some of) the factors that would have contributed to the construction of identity in the first place. Constructivists maintain that a sole focus on material factors provides an incomplete basis for analysis. For example, in a materialist interest-based analysis Denmark and Sweden would be assumed to be 'like units' as
small states and therefore would be assumed to display similar patterns of action. Yet Sweden’s self-identity as a middle power rather than as a small state has had profound effects for Swedish policy choices, such as a long tradition of a policy of armed neutrality and an expectation of ‘being heard’ in international negotiations—a policy that stands in contrast to the seemingly similar state Denmark, whose self-understanding as a small state has produced a foreign policy based on protection through alliances and close military cooperation with trusted partners.

Constructivists attach such importance to identity because to have a particular identity also implies that actors will be following the norms that are associated with the identity, which suggests that some forms of action are more appropriate than others. As norms specify behaviour, it is clear that a normative structure will define certain forms of behaviour as appropriate and others as not. Therefore constructivism stands in contrast to realism and liberalism by assuming that people are not simply led by assumed interests based on rational cost-benefit calculations, but that they will consider options for action reflexively and consider whether the action is appropriate for their identity.

March and Olsen (1989) include both logics of action in their analysis of political institutions. They agree with realists and liberals who think that action is driven, in their words, by a ‘logic of consequences’. In this logic the assumption is that agents calculate the consequences of a particular course of action and will choose the action that offers them the most utility. However, they contend that actors may also act from a ‘logic of appropriateness’, where the assumption is that as agents are rule followers, they will try to follow rules that associate particular identities to particular situations (Risse 2003: 163), and they will consider which action is the most appropriate behaviour for them. The two logics are useful for understanding the kind of reflections that precede foreign policy action, but they should not be seen as exclusive to each other. Constructivists assume that agents will try to do the right thing in accordance with their identity, but they acknowledge that much will depend on the context of the situation, or indeed that some actions may simply be the result of habit. The point is that it cannot always be assumed that all agents only utilize the ‘logic of consequence’. (See Box 4.4.)

Agents, structure, and practice

The fourth key feature of constructivism is the claim that structures and agents are mutually constituted. This is a view that is based on the work known as structuration by Anthony Giddens, which holds that structures influence agents, but that agents are also able to influence structure through their practice. As has been shown in relation to all four core propositions of constructivism, constructivists place a great deal of importance on the role of routinized practice. It is through practice that social facts are externalized and habitualized, and thereby ensured an independent existence from the agents who first constructed the social fact, and it is through practice that institutions such as self-help or cooperation become embedded. However, once it is embedded as taken for granted day-to-day routines, practice will not only underpin the existence of social facts and institutions, but may also be constitutive of structure and identity (Adler 2008: 196). Moreover, it is through practice that a stable cognitive environment is ensured, which is itself what reinforces the individual’s identity and provides agents with confidence that their cognitive world will be reproduced. This is of relevance for the prospects for effecting change from one culture of anarchy to another.
The logic of structuration assumes a mutually constitutive relationship between agent and structure. Yet, as argued by Ted Hopf, constructivism effectively places a premium on structure, because although structuration logically implies the possibility of change through agents' practice, constructivists also assume that agents reproduce their own constraints through daily practice (Hopf 1998: 180). Therefore, from this perspective, constructivists conclude that although change is possible, it is difficult to bring about. This view is reiterated by Jeffrey Checkel, who contends that the causal arrows in constructivism mainly go one way—from structure to agent—because constructivists, despite their arguments about mutually constituting agents and structure, have focused on structure-centred approaches in their empirical work (Checkel 1998: 342). Indeed, constructivism has difficulty in explaining where the powerful structures (norms) come from and why and how they change over time (Checkel 1998: 339). Moreover, the mutual constitution, which clearly implies a causal flow from agents to structures, is precisely where foreign policy to effect change is located. This suggests that, for constructivism to be really useful as an analytical framework for foreign policy, more sustained attention to agency is needed. This is precisely why there is a need for 'actor-specific' complements to constructivism (as suggested by Valerie Hudson in Chapter One) such as psychological and cognitive influences on decision makers.
Foreign policy is by definition an agent-level activity, performed by various policy makers (agents) within both domestic and international environments and therefore responsive to the structures of both. The fact that foreign policy makers are subject to at least two sets of structural influences complicates the task of FPA significantly. Moreover, it is clear that the actions which foreign policy makers are engaged in, and which are the very focus of analysis in FPA, are often not routinized social practices for externalizing particular normative structures, but on the contrary non-routine actions designed to effect change. Yet, as we have seen, the power of social practices rests in their capacity to reproduce and thus to reify the inter-subjective meanings that constitute social structures and actors alike (Hofp, 1998: 178), and not in their power to effect change. In fact, some cognitive constructivists would point to the fact that actors will have a profound reluctance to change what is a reassuringly stable situation (Giddens 1991). It stands to reason that if humans aim to minimize uncertainty and anxiety and prefer always to confirm their existing beliefs about the social world, they also prefer stability to change. This is a finding that echoes the findings from FPA research on belief systems, which seemed to suggest highly unyielding beliefs among foreign policy makers.

As can be seen from the above, constructivists place a great deal of importance on the role of routinized practice. It is through practice that social facts are externalized and habitualized, and thereby ensured an independent existence from the agents who first constructed the social fact. However, once practice is embedded as taken-for-granted day-to-day routines, it will not only underpin the existence of social facts, but may also be constitutive of structure and identity (Adler 2008: 196). Furthermore, it is through practice that a stable cognitive environment is ensured, which may also reinforce the individual's identity and provide agents with confidence that their cognitive world will be reproduced. This is of relevance for the prospects of effecting change from one culture of anarchy to another—a point that was acknowledged by Wendt as he pointed to the self-perpetuating quality and path dependency of institutions such as self-help, rivalry, or cooperation. Therefore although it is through practice that the mutually constitutive relationship between agency and structure is operationalized, and it is through practice that change is made possible, it is also because of the very same practices that change is difficult to achieve. Clearly these are dilemmas which have important implications for foreign policy and for the prospects of changing a culture of anarchy.

Two questions arise out of the above: how to understand foreign policy, and how to undertake intentional transformation. The first question is important because if foreign policy is a practice, then logically change through foreign policy will be an almost impossible undertaking for the reasons outlined above. On the other hand, foreign policy can also be understood as 'action', which is agent behaviour that is linked to intention and directed at a specific goal (Taylor 1964). Foreign policy clearly contains both pre-intentional practice based on taken-for-granted routines (Swidler 2001), but it also contains intentional action based on conscious decision making and reflexive processes designed to achieve a specific goal which may well be a change from the status quo. Therefore in order to be fully able to utilize constructivism for the analysis of foreign policy, it is necessary to distinguish between 'foreign policy as practice' and 'foreign policy as action'.

The second question is important because if both structures and agent-level practice imply a tendency for stability rather than change, it is necessary to ask under what conditions change through intentional foreign policy might take place. This is a complicated question, which all IR theories grapple with, and which can only be briefly touched on here. However,
BOX 4.5 Practice and action in foreign policy

It is useful to distinguish between practice-based foreign policy and action-based foreign policy. Practice-based foreign policy draws on practice seen as 'unconscious or automatic activities embedded in taken-for-granted routines' (Swidler 2001: 84) contributing towards stability rather than as a factor contributing towards change. Change will take place mainly as a result of disruptive events, but can also take place gradually through changes in agent practice or through persuasion and argument (Risse 2000; Crawford 2002). Practice-based foreign policy is performed mainly through diplomatic embedded practices and conventions where, for example, the rule of sovereign recognition is reproduced in every diplomatic dispatch and ambassadorial handshake (Dunne and Koivisto 2010). Action-based foreign policy, on the other hand, is behaviour that is intentional, reflexive, and related to a specific goal (Taylor 1964). Action-based foreign policy is performed mainly through foreign policy decisions intended to solve a problem or to introduce new thinking, such as the adoption by the UN Security Council of the Responsibility to Protect, a principle which is intended as a policy to change the established sovereignty-related practice of non-intervention. Therefore action-based foreign policy is sometimes an initial step towards changing practice. Both are crucial for understanding foreign policy, but they are not always easily separated.

The implication of the above analysis is that transformative change is most likely to follow a disruptive event, which has made existing structures and existing shared meanings seem inadequate for the new situation. Constructivists speak of a situation of cognitive inconsistency following a so-called 'critical juncture', meaning that agents' cognitive environment no longer makes sense to them and that existing rules and norms can no longer be used as a cognitive map for identifying appropriate behaviour. Even agents' sense of self and other may have become unclear. In such a situation new structures of knowledge and identity can be adopted, which in turn can open up a window of opportunity for intentional policy change through the adoption of new rules followed by changes in practice, identity formations, and the reconstitution of shared knowledge. In such cases the possibility exists for changing embedded institutions in one culture of anarchy to a different logic of anarchy. (See Box 4.5.)

Constructivism meets foreign policy

The chapter started out by pointing to realism's and liberalism's limited expectations for NATO in the post Cold War security environment. The limited role envisaged for NATO is puzzling because NATO has always been more than just a defence alliance, with its role defined by NATO's first Secretary General, Lord Ismay, as 'keeping the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down'. Formulated a little more diplomatically and using constructivist terminology we might say that NATO's post Cold War roles could be defined as (1) still keeping member states safe from threats to their security, (2) still maintaining a common identity, shared knowledge, and shared understandings among all its members, and (3) still engaging in transforming relationships and practices between NATO members and former adversaries through the socialization of appropriate behaviour for NATO membership. In other words, NATO's roles after the end of the Cold War remained pretty much the same, but with different conceptions of self and other and with more states becoming acquainted with the rules and norms of the Alliance and learning appropriate behaviour.
Keeping NATO members safe

NATO came out of the Cold War with a major identity crisis and a deep sense of cognitive inconsistency as it was clear that its established practices and shared knowledge about the world no longer provided the necessary cognitive map as a guide for appropriate behaviour. From a constructivist perspective, NATO was faced with an existential crisis (a critical juncture) which, although experienced as unpleasant, could facilitate transformative change to be undertaken. The depth of the crisis must have concentrated the mind because within a relatively short timespan NATO had redefined itself as a more political alliance and the threat was reformulated as political instability and uncertainty. Not only was this an example of reconstitution of NATO’s own identity and its understanding of ‘the other’, but it also turned out to be a very precise prediction, vindicated by the Yugoslavian tragedy that unfolded on the European continent throughout the 1990s. As suggested by Shea (2010), amidst the tragedy of the situation ‘the Balkans were good for NATO’ because the conflicts allowed NATO to undertake foreign policy action, which reinforced its new identity as a European security and foreign policy actor, and which allowed it to establish new security practices based on the new structural environment such as the ability to ‘go out of area’.

Although NATO’s foreign policy actions since the Balkans have been less successful, especially in its operation in Afghanistan, it has now fundamentally altered its identity from an old-fashioned static defence alliance to a modern expeditionary security organization and has altered its policy making from a practice-based to an action-based foreign policy vis-à-vis a growing number of external security challenges. This has necessitated internal processes to establish new shared knowledge and interpretations of NATO’s founding document, the North Atlantic Treaty, where NATO’s role is now defined as protecting members’ security rather than members’ territory. Therefore if NATO members’ security is challenged through events in, for example, Afghanistan, Libya, or the Gulf of Aden, the new shared understanding of the founding treaty and of NATO’s identity and role suggests a foreign and security policy role for the Alliances in such places.

Maintaining shared understandings

NATO has always been overtly concerned with maintaining Alliance cohesion—especially between the European and North American components. Without such cohesion the nuclear guarantee would not be credible and NATO’s major commitment that ‘a threat against one member is a threat against all’ would simply not be credible. Therefore, to be able to show unity, NATO has engaged in a practice of intensive negotiation prior to all decisions, which all had to be agreed in unity. The extensive practical cooperation has reinforced a ‘culture of anarchy’ among the member states based on friendship and shared values and shared understandings of what constitutes appropriate action.

This is a process that can best be conceptualized as an internal process of socialization of Western norms and shared values and appropriate behaviour for member states. The process has been ongoing throughout NATO’s history, starting with the enlargements to include Greece and Turkey in 1952, West Germany in 1955, Spain in 1982, and twelve further enlargements after the Cold War. All new members have entered the Alliance with considerable ‘baggage’, without a fully constituted democratic norm set, and with issues relating to being able or willing
to follow a ‘logic of appropriateness’ for a NATO member. These internal processes of socialization have been highly successful as new members have acquired the new norm set reasonably fast, and (generally speaking) have behaved appropriately within the context of NATO membership and engaged in extensive cooperation resulting in fundamentally altered security and foreign policy practices—not just within NATO, but individually as well. It seems fair to say that these internal processes of socialization are perhaps NATO’s most important foreign policy achievements, albeit that they are often overlooked as examples of foreign policy.

Reconstitution of new social relationships

Just as NATO has always been engaged in the construction of shared knowledge and maintaining a unified identity, early in its history it became involved in the task of establishing new relationships and new practices for interaction and appropriate behaviour. Therefore NATO was as much a forum for establishing and cementing peaceful relations and new social relationships with new practices among the European member states, as it was a defence alliance designed ‘to keep the Soviets out’.

From a constructivist perspective, the end of the Cold War was a critical juncture which presented NATO with new opportunities as a socializing agent for establishing new social relationships and changed practices. Much like the situation with Ego and Alter on the beach (Box 4.1), NATO was in a situation where different ‘futures’ were possible depending on its actions and the response of the Soviet Union and former Warsaw Pact members. The action chosen by NATO in June 1990 was to ‘stretch out the hand of friendship’ to the countries in Central and Eastern Europe. This chosen role was subsequently followed up with practice and action with the establishment in December 1991 of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) in which all former adversaries participated, followed in 1994 with the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme, and culminating in 1999 with membership for the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary, as well as the establishment of the Membership Action Plan (MAP) which was a consultation programme for prospective members. The point here is that all these initiatives can be seen as examples of a NATO foreign policy designed to effect change through the socialization of states that were not members of NATO, and which might never become members of NATO (Gheciu 2005). The process has been one of mutual constitution as NATO has presented a number of options and expectations, and the prospective members have then defined their relationship with NATO through their actions and engagement. Although a dozen countries have already joined NATO, the process is by no means finished.

NATO recently also opened up for enhanced cooperation with Russia on missile defence and other defence-related issues, whilst at the same time announcing that it will develop a missile defence system. The situation bears a close resemblance to the example in Box 4.1 with Ego and Alter on the beach. An announcement that NATO was adopting a missile defence within a social context of enmity would almost certainly have been detrimental to NATO–Russia relations. However, within a social context of planned cooperation and shared understandings about the missile defence, a situation of (limited) cooperation may be facilitated. It is hoped that this important foreign policy initiative will result in a radically changed relationship with Russia, by changing the relationship from one based on rivalry to one based on cooperation in policy areas where both are believed to have shared interests and shared security concerns. Should the initiative turn out to be successful (which is far from certain), it
may have the potential not only for fundamentally changing security practices between NATO and Russia, but also for effecting important structural change.

Conclusion

From a constructivist perspective, it is clear that over the past two decades NATO has followed a constructivist foreign policy by continuing its efforts to establish a culture of anarchy based on friendship and cooperation among its members and a growing number of partners, whilst at the same time maintaining its role identity as a defence alliance. In focusing only on this latter role, realism saw NATO’s years as numbered, because it is precisely within this role that NATO was most challenged by the end of the Cold War, and where it has had to undertake significant change in its conceptions of self and other and work hardest on establishing new shared knowledge and redefining appropriate behaviour. The statist nature of realism lacked the conceptual tools for seeing such change as possible. The two traditionally dominant theories also lacked a conceptual toolbox enabling NATO’s foreign policy to be understood as being not only about material capabilities and interest-based cooperation, but also about the continuous reconstitution of identities and shared knowledge, reinforced through security practices that facilitate a culture of anarchy based on friendship and cooperation rather than on rivalry or enmity.

Constructivism has come a long way in the last couple of decades, and even foreign policy practitioners have since acknowledged the role of NATO, and similar international organizations, as agents for effecting change—not through force but through normative power and the ability to change long-held identities and embedded practices. Therefore the answer to the question posed by Stephen Walt—about why students and practitioners of foreign policy should care about abstract theories such as constructivism—is that they have considerable explanatory power in relation to the durability of institutions. At the same time, to ignore constructivism as a guide to foreign policy practice is to overlook policy alternatives to the standard claim that there is no alternative to the rational pursuit of the national interest.

Key points

- Constructivism offers different understandings of some of the most central themes in foreign policy making, and implies different policy options from the two mainstream theories.
- Constructivists ask how old practices of rivalry and war making can be changed through institutionalization, which might over time change identities, interests, and practices.
- Constructivism asks where interests come from and assumes that different identities will have different interests, which will lead to different foreign policies.
- One of the central features of constructivism holds that people act towards objects (including other people) on the basis of the meanings that the object (or person) has for them.
- Constructivists see structure as material and ideational, where ideational structures are codified in formal rules and norms which agents are socialized into following.
- Constructivism assumes a mutually constitutive relationship between agent and structure, although the influence of structures on agents has been in the forefront of constructivist theorizing.
Constructivists reject the assumption that agents always calculate the consequences of their actions, but argue that they will also consider which action is the most appropriate for their identity, even if such action may have costly consequences.

Questions

1. Why should students and practitioners take note of constructivism?
2. Why is constructivism sometimes called an approach rather than a theory?
3. Why does self-help not necessarily follow logically from anarchy?
4. What are social facts?
5. Why is shared knowledge so important to constructivists?
6. Why is identity such an important concept in constructivism?
7. Why are rules and norms so important to constructivists?
8. What is meant by the phrase 'The social construction of reality'?
9. What is the role of 'practice' in constructivist theorizing and how should it be distinguished from 'action'?
10. What is the relationship between structures (ideas, norms, material facts) and agents (people, states, international organizations) in constructivist thinking?

Further reading


Adler provides a very detailed and in-depth overview and introduction to constructivism. It is quite a difficult text, but well worth reading.


This article applies a constructivist and practice theory approach to NATO in the post Cold War period.


Although a review article of three constructivist books, the article gives an excellent outline of constructivism and draws attention to constructivism's lack of focus on agents.


An excellent article which clearly outlines the difference between conventional and post-modern constructivisms.


This is the article that most clearly sets out anarchy as practice, and which gives a full account of the three cultures of anarchy.

Visit the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book for more information:
www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/smith_foreign/