

## **Some Reflections on the Assumptions of the Mainstream International Relations Theory**

**Masatsugu MATSUO**

**Institute for Peace Science, Hiroshima University**

### **SUMMARY**

The present paper first examines Stephen D. Krasner's analysis of state sovereignty and some criticisms raised against it. The examination shows that the issue of change versus continuity lies at the bottom of the opposition between Krasner and his critics. The opposition can be generalized into that between the mainstream international relations theorists and its critics, especially constructivism, because the former assumes that the international system is unchanged. The opposition boils down to the difference in the time span.

The mainstream theory also assumes that state, the unit of the international system is unitary, thus excluding important actors and factors of domestic politics from international relations. This assumption is again severely criticized. Helen V. Milner proposes an extension of the mainstream theory to include domestic politics, on the basis of the criticism of the limit of the theory. This paper examines her proposal as an example of the criticism. It shows that the necessity of the inclusion or exclusion of domestic actors or domestic politics depends upon the particular research objective which a researcher pursues, and that the debates about the inclusion of domestic politics

are reduced to the difference in the level of abstraction or aggregation which a theory aims at.

Thus the differences between the mainstream theorists and their critics amount to those in the time frame and the scope of variables. In other words, the difference in the level of abstraction or aggregation lies at the root of their differences.

To be sure, this paper ends up with a cliché, which tells us only that the appropriate level of abstraction or aggregation depends crucially on a particular theme or research agenda. But, it does tell us that, in an international relations theory, we must yet to decide which level of abstraction is suitable for what research purpose. A clear understanding of this will be much more fruitful than the mere exchange of criticisms and counter-criticisms.

## Introduction

1 Stephen D. Krasner's Analyses of State Sovereignty

2 Criticism by Steve Smith

3 Change vs. Continuity of Norms and Rules

4 Beyond State-centrism

Conclusion: Level of Abstraction

## Introduction

Modern international society is said to have originated in the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which ended the Thirty Years War, and it is essentially a society of sovereign states (Krasner 1996: 115).<sup>1</sup> Without the central authority regulating the relations among states, the norm of state sovereignty has been one of the key principle regulating the anarchical society of states. Taken for granted for a long time, it had received scant attention from international relations scholars. Recently, however, more and more international relations theorists have been casting doubt upon, and begun to critically reexamine, the concept of state sovereignty (Biersteker and Weber 1996:1). For example, special issues of such journals as *International Studies Review* (vol. 2, no. 1, summer, 2000) and *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* (Japan Association of International Relations) (vol.1, no. 2, 2001) also reflect the increased critical interest in the concept of state sovereignty. The recent increase (or should we say "vogue") is perhaps due to the alleged decline of the state sovereignty. There are many events which seem to indicate the decline of state sovereignty. Humanitarian interventions such as the Kosovo campaign seem to undermine the sovereignty of the state intervened. Many states, especially so-called failed states, seem to be unable to exercise their sovereignty within their own territories, due primarily to internal armed conflicts. The irresistible trend of globalization seems to sweep easily away the sovereignty of many weaker states. The member states of the European Union seem to have been voluntarily giving up part of their sovereignty. All these can be viewed as indicative of the decline of state sovereignty.<sup>2</sup>

There are, however, those who are not convinced of the decline of state

sovereignty. For example, Stephen D. Krasner seems to have been skeptical about the (arguments about) decline of state sovereignty. His stance toward the impact of globalization on state sovereignty is close to that of the “skeptics” (Smith 2001: 214). For example, in a joint article with Janice E. Thomson, Krasner criticizes the interdependence arguments that globalization, especially the dramatic increase of transborder flows of all kinds, that is, capital, information, goods, and people, has eroded the effective state control over them, and hence the state’s sovereignty. Thomson and Krasner counter the interdependence arguments of the decline of state sovereignty by pointing out that “[a]t least in part [the increase in international economic transactions] must be attributed to the *consolidation* of sovereignty,” because “the consolidation of sovereignty has facilitated the creation of stable property rights that is a necessary if not sufficient condition for a market-rational allocation of resources,” and thus, “the consolidation of the state system has facilitated, indeed made possible” globalization today (Thomson and Krasner 1989: 216, italics mine). Moreover, they argue, state control over the use of violence in the international system has become substantially greater (Thomson and Krasner 1989: 208).

The present paper does not aim to answer the question of whether state sovereignty has been declining or not. Nor does it attempt at the clarification or elaboration of the concept of state sovereignty. Instead, it aims to clarify the nature of certain assumptions in international relations theory, with Krasner’s recent analyses of state sovereignty as a starting point.

In the first section, we will examine Krasner’s understanding of the concept of sovereignty in some detail to lay a necessary foundation for the subsequent discussion. Though his book, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy*, should be the first material in such an attempt, we will base our discussion on several recent articles by Krasner himself and criticisms of them. In the next section, we will examine some of the (mainly constructivist) criticisms against Krasner’s analysis of state sovereignty, especially those raised by Steve Smith. The examination in the two sections will make clear that one important issue is whether international norms or rules are changing or not. Accordingly, the third section will be devoted to the examination of the issue of change versus continuity and its implication for international relations theory. The examination in this section will show that the continuity or unchangedness is a key assumption of the

mainstream international relations theory. The next section, the fourth section, will introduce another key assumption, “the state-centeredness” assumption, of the mainstream model of international relations, and examine Helen Milner’s proposal for the relaxation of the assumption. In conclusion, the last section will show that even critics of the mainstream model face the same dilemma as mainstream theorists whom they criticize, and that the real issue is a serious trade-off between theoretical parsimony and explanatory and historical richness.

### **1 Stephen D. Krasner’s Analyses of State Sovereignty**

One can be skeptical of the idea of the decline of state sovereignty in two ways at least. First, as Krasner often did, one can point to the fact that “there has been no golden age [of state sovereignty] in which Machiavelli’s Prince could take a nap secure in the knowledge that external and internal challenges have disappeared” (Thomson and Krasner 1989: 198). The Westphalian model of state sovereignty has never been more than a reference point or a convention, or an idealized system of political authority (Krasner 1996: 115). Then, how can one speak of the decline when something has never reached a sufficient height from which to decline? Those who assert or predict the decline or erosion of state sovereignty are only “creating an imaginary past” (Smith 2001: 211) of the golden age of sovereignty. Second, as Krasner sometimes did, one can point to the consolidation of state sovereignty in some issue areas at least, such as military and security areas, while it may decline in others. In the articles examined here, Krasner basically adopts the first way. Let us briefly trace the development of his thought.

In his 1996 article, Krasner states that “the Westphalian model has never been an accurate description of states and a system composed of them,” (Krasner 1996: 115) and the principle of sovereignty has been “frequently defeated” (Krasner 1996: 144). Moreover, its breaches have been an enduring characteristics of the international system (Krasner 1996: 115). Indeed, it seems to have been honored in the breach. This is the starting point of Krasner’s discussion of state sovereignty. He adduces numerous current and historical cases of compromise and violation of the state sovereignty principle with the typology of their modalities. Nevertheless, the Westphalian model, especially the

principle of state sovereignty, has persisted for a long time even up to now (Krasner 1996: 144). Violations of the principle, as well as the principle itself, have been enduring characteristics of international relations. Therefore, violations of the sovereignty principle cannot be understood as a reflection of a breakdown of the principle (Krasner 1996: 147). Now the problem is how to explain the violation and persistence of state sovereignty. Krasner hints at an explanation in the last pages of the 1996 article, arguing that “it would be more productive to stop thinking of the Westphalian model as some ideal or historical reality and to treat it as a reference point or convention *that is useful in some circumstances*” (Krasner 1996: 150, italics mine). His subsequent works are efforts to solve this puzzle of “weakness and persistence” (Krasner 1996: 144).

“Organized hypocrisy” is the answer Krasner gives to this puzzle. He argues that “more than any other setting, international environment is characterized by organized hypocrisy. *Actors violate rules in practice without at the same time challenging their legitimacy*” (Krasner 2001c: 173, italics mine). To show that organized hypocrisy was frequently resorted to, that is, to show that the principle of sovereignty was often violated while rhetorically embraced, Krasner first identified two kinds of logic which guide state behaviors: logic of consequences and logic of appropriateness. Logic of consequences sees political action and outcomes as the product of rational calculating behavior designed to maximize a given set of unexplained preferences. Logic of appropriateness understands political action as a product of rules, roles and identities. Identities specify appropriate behavior in given situations (Krasner 2001c: 175-176). In general, logic of consequences dictated behavior while logic of appropriateness was rhetorically embraced. Organized hypocrisy was rife (Krasner 2001c: 174). In other words, interests and material concerns dominate norms and rules (Inoguchi and Bacon 2001a: 168). This is one of the points criticized by Smith, whose criticism will be taken up in the next section.

In order to show that organized hypocrisy has been an enduring characteristic of the international system, Krasner then proceeds to “unbundle” (Krasner 2001a: 6) the concept of sovereignty into four main usages: interdependence sovereignty, domestic sovereignty, international legal sovereignty, and Westphalian sovereignty (Krasner 2001a: 2). Interdependence sovereignty refers to the ability of a government to regulate

the movement of goods, capital, people, and ideas across its borders. Domestic sovereignty refers both to the structure of authority within a state and to the state's effectiveness or control. International legal sovereignty refers to whether a state is recognized by others, the basic rule being that only juridically independent territorial entities are accorded recognition. Westphalian sovereignty, which actually has almost nothing to do with the Peace of Westphalia, refers to the autonomy of domestic authority structures – that is, the absence of authoritative external influence. A political entity can be formally independent but *de facto* deeply penetrated. And having one attribute of sovereignty does not necessarily mean having others (Krasner 2001a: 2, 6-7).

In his 1996 article, focusing on the last of these, that is, the Westphalian sovereignty, Krasner shows convincingly that the norms and rules of the Westphalian sovereignty were frequently violated or compromised. He makes similar efforts in his later works, but the emphasis seems to shift from organized hypocrisy and the dominance of the logic of consequences over the logic of appropriateness to a more nuanced view of the relationship between the two types of logic. While he still emphasizes the violation of the norms and rules of the Westphalian sovereignty, he also admits that “the rules associated with sovereignty appear to have powerfully constrained the options that are available to actors” (Krasner 2001a: 3). Indeed, now that he has established his thesis of organized hypocrisy and the dominance of the logic of consequences, Krasner embarks upon the exploration of the relationship of the two types of logic.

In explaining the relationship of the two kinds of logic, Krasner employs three variables, ideas, power and interests, each respectively representing constructivist, neorealist and neoliberalist schools of international relations. The variables roughly correspond to the three categories of outcomes which Krasner calls “defaults, coercion and voluntary commitment,” respectively (Krasner 2001b: 323-324).

First of all, unless other arrangements are viable, the conventional rules of sovereignty are a default. Ideas *do* matter and shape the conception that actors have of their own interests. But, in other cases, more powerful states may use coercion to impose an alternative institutional arrangement on weaker states if the more powerful decide that the benefits of coercion outweigh the costs. Even in these cases, ideas are

not irrelevant, but power determines outcomes. Thirdly, if rulers can make voluntary commitments, that is, create an equilibrium outcomes from which no critical player has an incentive to defect either through unilateral initiatives or by contracting with other states, then anything is possible. As the conventional understanding of sovereignty provided by international lawyers suggests, no contractual arrangements between states is illicit, and hence does not impinge upon state sovereignty. States are free to do whatever they choose. In these situations interests trump ideas (Krasner 2001b: 324).

In sum, absent voluntary action or coercion, sovereignty was the default (Krasner 2001a: 20-21, Krasner 2001b: 329). In other words, conventional rules of sovereignty are a default if leaders cannot voluntarily agree to, or use coercion to impose, alternatives. To note that conventional rules are a default acknowledges that they are constraining but does not imply that they are determinative. The rules of sovereignty, like the rules that have existed in any international environment, do matter, especially if political leaders cannot agree, or use coercion, to create alternatives. Prevailing rules make it easier to do some things and harder to do others. But they are not determinative (Krasner 2001b: 341-342).

Krasner's argument about state sovereignty can be summarized in two points. First, norms and rules of state sovereignty were a default when coercion or voluntary contractual commitment was not viable. But when coercion or voluntary commitment was available, the principle was honored in the breach. Secondly, therefore, it can be concluded that the logic of consequences dominates the logic of appropriateness as far as international practices of sovereignty was concerned or that interests surpass norms in international politics, contrary to the arguments of some constructivists. As we will see later, this is another point criticized by Smith.

## **2 Criticism by Steve Smith**

Steve Smith's constructivist criticism of Krasner's thesis can be summarized in two points. The first criticism is against Krasner's view that the logic of consequences dominates the logic of appropriateness. The second is against the view that the rules of sovereignty are unchanged. We will discuss them in this order.

Smith argues that norms and rules shape behavior in two ways; first by



constituting the identities of state actors, and secondly by constraining action due to the awareness of the existence of powerful global norms (Smith 2001: 209). Norms and rules, and practices both affect the identity of the actor, and constrain what is deemed possible (Smith 2001: 210-211). Thus, “the state, ... and sovereignty are best seen as constructed and reinforced by practices” (Smith 2001: 224). Generally speaking, we can all agree with this kind of constructivist argument. Smith seems to say that norms and rules shape the identity (and interests) of the state actor and constrains the behavior. Thus, the logic of appropriateness, which emphasizes rules and norms, is “a far better guide to the emerging patterns of governance and sovereignty than is the logic of consequences” (Smith 2001: 224). It is because the logic of appropriateness (rules and norms) shapes and constrains identities, interests and behavior of state actors.

To be sure, Smith does not provide any explanation or formulation about *how* norms and rules, especially those of state sovereignty, are *constructed*. It is also true of some constructivists when they assert, for example, that “practices of states and nonstate agents produce, reform, and redefine sovereignty” (Biersteker and Weber 1996: 11). Though this is an important issue, we will not discuss it here. Instead, we proceed to the two problems of Smith’s criticism. First, even if we agree with Smith upon the importance of norms and rules (and Krasner himself admits that they do matter, as we saw above), it does not mean that norms and rules are always more important than material interests, nor does it mean that norms and rules are more important in explaining or understanding state sovereignty practices. If, as he says, “the extent to which social practices are ideationally or materially based” or “the extent to which norms reflect interests or constitute identities” (Smith 2001: 207) is to be determined, it is a matter of empirical research in a particular context.

The second problem concerns the degree of latitude of norms and rules. Even if we admit that norms and rules shape and constrain behavior and action, they don’t completely determine behavior and action, as Smith himself admits that “[states may] stretch the norms and indeed push them in new directions” (Smith 2001: 210). Then the question is how much latitude norms and rules allow. There must be a threshold beyond which the norms and the rules in question should be regarded as changed, discarded or obsolete. How much or how often can states deviate from rules and norms? As we saw above, Krasner tries to answer this question, by giving two variables: interests and the

capability of voluntary agreement or coercion (Krasner 2001b: 341-342)., while Smith says nothing.

Thus, the first criticism by Smith does not offer any strong counter-argument against Krasner's thesis which we examined above. So, let us now examine the second criticism Smith raised against Krasner. The crux of Smith's argument is that while Krasner assumes that sovereignty (rule) is not changed, globalization has been transforming sovereignty. According to Smith, "[the] effects [of globalization] impact on governance to such an extent that they result in the construction of new constitutive rules and norms. These, in turn, alter both the identity of states, and constrain their behavior, thereby affecting their sovereignty..." (Smith 2001: 212). This argument is quite similar to those of so-called "transformationalists." For example, Susan Strange, whom Smith strangely enough classifies into "hyperglobalizers,"<sup>3</sup> that is, those who portray the state as being swept away by the rise of a single global market (Smith 2001: 212-213), also argues that structural changes brought about by globalization have been changing the role of states both within national societies and between them, and altering them very substantially (Strange 1994: 212-213). But the problem with these "transformationalists" is that they are not very clear about how, in which area(s) or function(s), and to what degree, globalization is transforming state or state sovereignty. Probably no one can deny that globalization has been affecting state sovereignty to some degree or in some respect. The issue here is, partially at least, whether or not we can or must call it change and transformation. We will, therefore, take up the issue of change and continuity in the next section.

### **3 Change vs. Continuity of Norms and Rules**

We have examined Krasner's analyses of state sovereignty and Smith's criticism against them in some detail. It was because, with Krasner and Smith as input, we want to raise two interesting but difficult issues. The first is the issue of change and continuity of the international system and of norms and rules. The second is the issue of the theoretical framework or paradigm within which sovereignty is to be discussed.

Whether Krasner is a so-called neorealist or neoliberalist is not important to us, but he is often regarded as a neorealist in the broader sense of the word and as a

representative of the North American mainstream of international relations.<sup>4</sup> The theoretical foundation of “neorealism” can be represented by Kenneth Waltz. As John Gerald Ruggie forcefully argues in his review of Waltz’s *Theory of International Politics*, Waltz’s model of international system lacks both the dimension of change, and the determinant of the change, of the international system, by “[exogenizing] the ultimate source of systemic change” (Ruggie 1983: 281, 285). As a result, Waltz’s theory contains only “a reproductive logic, but no transformational logic” (Ruggie 1983: 285). Accordingly, in Waltz’s model, continuity is a product of premise, even before it is hypothesized as an outcome (Ruggie 1983: 285). Susan Strange levels the same criticism against Krasner. “Krasner’s realist model seem to him, ... as it still does to Ken Waltz, no different than that of Machiavelli’s time” (Strange 1994: 210), as if the modern state system is “based on some timeless principle” (Biersteker and Weber 1996: 3), because Krasner starts “from the assumption that the basic structure of the international system does not change” (Strange 1994: 212). In the same way, Krasner’s discussion of state sovereignty seems to assume, though not explicitly, that norms and rules of state sovereignty have not been changed, when he says that the principle of state sovereignty *persisted* for a long time even up to now (Krasner 1996: 144) and violations and *persistence* of the principle of state sovereignty have been *enduring* characteristics of international relations (Krasner 1996: 147).

On the contrary, many others including Smith argue that norms and rules of state sovereignty have been changed and transformed, and still continue to be changed and transformed. For example, Biersteker and Weber see sovereignty as “constantly undergoing change and transformation” (Biersteker and Weber 1996: 11). In principle, the constructivist view presupposes that any social construct such as sovereignty can be changed, because they are constituted by social practice. Thus, the transformation of sovereignty is quite natural according to their assumption. Similarly, norms and rules of sovereignty can be changed over time. Not only globalization, but anything can cause it, in principle. At the same time, however, norms and rules, in whatever way they are formed and maintained, or changed and transformed, must be valid, or must be regarded as valid, for some time at least, as long as they are norms and rules at all. Norms and rules cannot be changed in a day or in a year. But how long should they be valid? Of course not permanently, because they can in principle be changed. Anyway, according

to constructivism, norms and rules change, or are “constantly undergoing change and transformation” (Biersteker and Weber 1996: 11), but remain valid for some time, that is, shape and constrain behavior for some length of time. How can we solve this dilemma between change and duration? Smith ignores this dilemma while Krasner proposes a solution by “organized hypocrisy.”

While admitting the enduring importance of sovereignty, Smith argues that it has been transformed. In other words, though it has been changing almost by its very nature as a social construct, its name and importance, sovereignty in this case, still remains. This argument of Smith reminds us of Murray Edelman’s argument about legal language. Edelman argues that, in American politics, the legal language is “in fact almost completely ambiguous in meaning,” that is, admits of almost any interpretation, and thus “administrators and judges do different and even contradictory things which ostensibly carrying out the same legal directive” (Edelman 1964: 139).

Both Krasner and Smith agree upon the enduring importance of state sovereignty. But, Krasner regards norms and rules rather unchanged though they are often stretched, extended, or simply ignored, while Smith regards them as ever changing, over a long time at least. Then, does the issue boil down to whether the norms and rules of state sovereignty are changing or they are observed in some cases and violated in others? Are they just trying to understand and explain the same phenomenon from different viewpoints? Or do we need a much more rigorous examination of the past and the present, as Stanley Hoffman suggests?

... we are tempted to exaggerate either continuity with a past that we know badly, or the radical originality of the present, depending on whether we are more stuck by the features we deem permanent, or with those we do not believe existed before. And yet a more rigorous examination of the past might reveal that what we sense as new really is not, and that some of the “traditional” features are far more complex than we think (Hoffmann 1977: 57).

Figure 1 is an illustrative attempt at answering this question. Actually, there are three figures. The first figure shows in terms of diamonds the facts or realities of the practices of the norms and rules of sovereignty. Needless to say, they are actually not facts, but perceptions, representations or interpretations of some action by state(s), but let us for the time being suppose that they are. The vertical axis indicates the degree to which the rules and norms of sovereignty are observed or violated. The horizontal axis

indicates the passage of time, say, since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. Now, suppose that the first figure represents the indisputable “facts.” Given these facts or realities shown in the first figure, there are at least two plausible interpretations possible. The first is represented by Krasner and the second by transformationalists and/or constructivists like Smith.

In the first interpretation given in the second figure, the principles of sovereignty are regarded as (or assumed to be) unchanged. They are held constant, despite frequent deviant practices. The horizontal dotted line stands for this assumption. To borrow Krasner’s words, the line stands for “a reference point” or “a convention” (Krasner 1996: 150). In this interpretation, each practice not faithfully observing the principles of sovereignty is considered to be a “variation” around the norm. Krasner’s frequent use of “variation” confirms this interpretation, and the term reminds us of the statistical “deviation,” which is the difference from the mean (average). As we saw, Krasner tries to explain these deviations in terms of “organized hypocrisy.”

In contrast, in the second interpretation illustrated in the third figure, the principles of sovereignty are seen as changing, perhaps as the distribution of actual practices show. Though we can employ a non-linear notation, suppose, for the sake of simplicity, that the oblique dotted line stands for the change. To repeat a statistical metaphor, a simple regression analysis may result in such a line, judging from the distribution of actual practices given in the figure. This interpretation seems closer to the facts. And it “would allow a richer analysis of the changing nature of sovereignty over time” (Biersteker and Weber 1996: 6).

Incidentally, it is on this ground that constructivists may throw the words of “hegemonic discourse” at Krasner’s interpretation, accusing him of perpetuating the status quo. But, as Nicholas Onuf suggests (Onuf 2001: 245), a hegemonic discourse will carry the day by definition, for some time at least .

Now, which of the two interpretations should we choose, Krasner’s or Smith’s? Or should we provide a third, more convincing one? We will try to answer this question below.

#### **4 Beyond State-centrism**

The next issue we would like to take up is the issue of the state-centered assumption of

the mainstream international relations theory. By mainstream theory, I mean both neorealism and neoliberalism, because, as, for example, Grieco (1988: 494, 503) shows, they now share core assumptions which are state-centered. The mainstream model of international politics have been repeatedly accused of this “state-centeredness.” Here, I will examine Helen Milner’s proposal for the extension of the state-centered model, and explore the theoretical implications of such an extension of the model. As Grieco and Milner (and of course, many others) correctly point out, the mainstream model is doubly state-centered. First, the mainstream model assumes that states are unitary, as it were, monolithic, actors. The result is the neglect of domestic politics or the important domestic actors such as the executive, the legislature, the military, bureaucracies, political parties, interest groups and so on, which can seriously affect state behavior. It is not because (neo)realists deny that domestic politics influences external state behavior (Zakaria 1992: 190, 197), but because they assume that “the pressures of [external] competition weigh more heavily than ideological preferences or internal political pressures” (Waltz 1986: 329). Secondly, another central assumption of the mainstream is that states are the most important, if not the sole, actors of consequence in international politics. Thus, the mainstream model has ignored the roles of multinationals, international organizations and so on. For the better understanding of the major issues in international politics such as the likelihood of war, the possibility of cooperation and conflict among states, Milner argues for the relaxation of the two state-centric assumptions to include both domestic actors and transnational / supranational actors (Milner 1998: 759-761). It means the endogenization of domestic politics and international organizations, and a departure from blackboxing them (Milner 1998: 769). Frequently, critics of the mainstream theory either reverse its logic and assert the primacy of domestic politics in international relations, or attempt at the inclusion of domestic politics and end up with the same assertion (Zakaria 1992: 180, 192-193). Milner’s is, however, not a proposal for reversal, but for the inclusion of domestic politics.

The proposal can be schematically shown as in Figure 2. The horizontal axis shows the relaxation or broadening of the unitary actor assumption, while the vertical axis shows the relaxation or broadening of the major actor assumption. The shaded rectangle represents the area in which the two core assumptions of the mainstream

model, that is, major actor and unitary actor assumptions, hold. As we saw, Milner argues that the mainstream model be extended both in vertical and horizontal directions to include supranational / transnational actors and domestic actors. In terms of actors, Milner disaggregates state actors into domestic actors and aggregates preferences (or, goals, interests, etc) of domestic actors to national ones, that is, those of state actors. At the same time, she aggregates state actors to supranational (more precisely suprastate) actors and disaggregates preferences of suprastate actors into those of state actors. Though Milner makes no explicit mention, both processes are involved in the case of transnational or transstate actors. From this description, it may seem as if Milner placed the same emphasis on domestic actors and transnational / supranational actors. Actually, however, she places much greater emphasis upon the relaxation of the “state as an unitary actor” assumption, upon “[b]ringing domestic politics back in” (Milner 1998: 785) to the international relations studies.

The proposal of the inclusion of actors both internal and external to the state is not new. The assertions of the importance of domestic politics in international relations are rather commonplace (Rosecrance and Stein 1993: 4-5, Zakaria 1992: 177). But Milner goes one step further than that. She attempts to construct an international relations theory which explicitly contains both domestic and supranational/transnational actors, if not at “[combining] domestic and international politics in one theory” or at “[figuring] out a way to unite them” (Waltz 1986: 340). She tries to achieve this, by providing a mechanism of aggregation of preferences of actors (Milner 1998: 770). Unless we are equipped with some theory which can explain how diverse preferences of domestic actors are aggregated into a national one, or more generally how diverse preferences of individual actors are aggregated into a collective outcome, then we will be left only with hopelessly diverse actors in addition to states, in understanding international politics. As this is not the place to discuss the mechanism itself, we will not go into the details of Milner’s discussion in this respect.<sup>5</sup> Here let it suffice to conclude that Milner tries to establish a way of understanding the mechanism of aggregating individual preferences into a collective one.

### **Conclusion: Level of Abstraction**

So far, we have briefly sketched two different alternatives to the mainstream model: one in the form of a criticism and the other in the form of a proposal of theory extension. The alternatives seem to promise a richer and deeper understanding of realities of international politics than the mainstream model. Here, however, we should be aware of a serious trade-off between theoretical parsimony and descriptive or explanatory richness. Of course, parsimony should not be evaluated only by the simplicity of a theory but also by its explanatory power (Milner 1998: 770). We cannot naively say that the simpler, the better. As Waltz argues, a simple general theory never tells us “all that we want to know,” but it tells us instead “a small number of big and important things.” And “if we add more variables, the explanatory system becomes more complicated, ... theoretical acuity gives way to rich and dense description” (Waltz 1986: 329-330). Or following Keohane, “[the] larger the domain of a theory, the less accuracy of detail we expect” (Keohane 1986: 187). Simplicity or generality is often attained at the expense of descriptive richness. And the latter is often attained at the expense of the former. Generally speaking, if we add one variable or factor, we can attain a richer research result, as long as the selection of the variable or factor is appropriate. An addition of social construction would surely add to a richer analysis of state sovereignty, as Biersteker and Weber (1996: 6) advocates. And an addition of a domestic variable or two will contribute to a richer understanding of international relations.<sup>6</sup> But we lose some of the simplicity by the addition of a new variable or factor. On the other hand, the deletion of a variable or factor may result in greater simplicity or rigor at the expense of descriptive or explanatory power. Of course, we can knowingly say that both are needed by each other in a theory of international relations.<sup>7</sup> But, such an assertion does not tell us how to decide the balance between the two, theoretical parsimony and descriptive richness. How should we reconcile the two? Do we have any criterion for the balancing of the two?

Obviously, Keohane’s proposal for “stages” or “multidimensional” theoretical framework (Keohane 1985: 188, 190) will be much more fruitful than some kind of balance between, or unification of, theoretical parsimony and descriptive richness in a single theory. Keohane introduces the concept of “issue-areas,” and proposes that research should proceed from a general theory to more detailed studies of issue-areas:



The domain of theory is narrowed to achieve greater precision....We should seek parsimony first, then add complexity....To introduce greater complexity into an initially spare theoretical structure, the conception of issue-area, ..., is a useful device....Initial explanations should seek to account for the main feature of behavior at a high level of aggregation – such as the international system as a whole – while subsequent hypotheses are designed to apply only to certain issue-areas. (Keohane 1986: 188)

Keohane divides the international system into issue-areas. In the same way, we can divide the world into “postmodern, modern and premodern” states (Buzan 1998: 218, 221) because state relations are quite different both within the groups and between the groups. We can think of many such subsystem divisions as core, semiperiphery and periphery, or democracies and autocracies, or zone of peace and zone of conflict, and so on. These proposals can be seen as attempts at subsystemic theories of lesser abstraction or aggregation with narrow scopes, instead of the one imposing a single, global theory. On the contrary, Milner proposes a single theory which can deal with domestic politics, as we saw above. Keohane’s is a proposal of the division of the field, while Milner’s is a proposal of extension. But both involve the issue of the level of aggregation or abstraction. We will take it up shortly below.

The issues of change versus continuity, inclusion versus exclusion of actors, and division into subsystems boil down to the issue of abstraction or aggregation in international relations theory. Accordingly, to assume, for the time at least, that states are unitary and major actors in international politics, by exogenizing important non-state actors, is a necessary step toward a theory of international politics at the most abstract level. In the same way, to treat interests and identities, or preferences, of states as externally given or constant is another. Or to keep the norms and rules, or the idea or concept, constant and invariant, or as “given, fixed, or immutable” (Biersteker and Weber 1996: 11), as Krasner does, is among similar necessary steps for a theory with a high level of abstraction. The mainstream theory abstracts away with such details as history or historical change and domestic politics for this purpose (Waltz 1986: 330, 340). True, as anyone admits, the mainstream model is quite defective and inadequate in this sense. It is surely worth the blame of “poverty.” It is because “[the model’s] attempt at laying the groundwork for theory is conceptually so rigorous as to leave out much of reality [Waltz] wants to account for ... [but] if it is so removed that what it “explains” has little relation to what occurs, what is the use?” (Hoffmann 1977: 52) It is also static, devoid of change, and hence ahistorical. Whether its current level of abstraction is both

necessary and sufficient is yet to be determined, but the mainstream model can (and perhaps should) be defended and justified only on this very ground.

On the contrary, those critical of the model are not entirely free from the criticisms of their own making. Let us first take up the unitary actor assumption. In Milner's argument, domestic actors are assumed to be unitary. In fact, however, many domestic actors are notoriously not unitary. It is well known that the military, political parties, bureaucracies have their own factions. Logically, therefore, further aggregation and disaggregation of domestic actors into their constituent actors such as army, navy, air force etc may seem in order. But, Milner will refuse to do so on the ground of the theme of international politics and in term of two criteria: generalizability and coherence of a collectivity or an actor (Milner 1998: 770). Similarly, constructivists also seem to assume that the identity or interest of a state is single or unitary at a particular occasion or time, in whatever way it is constituted, and no matter how much it changes over time. They never assert that a state in particular or an actor in general, has multiple identities or interests at a single moment. They don't explain why states cannot be a Janus or a Doppelgänger. It may be because they think it advisable to assume that the state is unitary in this sense for a reasonably short period of time. If so, the issue will be that of assumption about the level of abstraction, while they are not as explicit as Waltz (1986: 338-339). Milner seems more sensitive to this issue. Though not positively, she admits the possibility that state is unitary *ex post* (Milner 1998: 769).<sup>8</sup> But, Milner usually precludes the possibility that diverse preferences are aggregated, not into a single outcome, but into multiple outcomes at a state or national level. The frequent use of the singular "collective outcome" suggests this. Milner assumes that the aggregation of diverse preferences result in a *single* preference as an outcome, say, a single national interest. But she doesn't explain why the aggregation of preferences of domestic actors does not result in multiple preferences or outcomes. Probably Milner will defend her position on the ground that an actor should be coherent (Milner 1998: 770). Anyway, if the state can be viewed as unitary in this sense, why cannot we assume that the state is unitary for a certain length of time, for a longer time than critics of the mainstream theory implicitly assume? Can not we reduce the differences or debates to the difference in (the assumption of a) time frame? And, of course, if states are not seen as unitary at any time, they will not be appropriate units of analysis of international politics in the

first place.

The issue brings us (in a sense, back) to the second issue: the issue of change versus continuity. As we saw above, whether the international system or the norms and rules change or not depends upon the time frame among other things. The examination of the criticisms raised against the mainstream model has brought up the issue, but the critics themselves do not seem to be aware of this, and they do not offer any clear alternative time frame which can be substituted for that of the mainstream model. Moreover, the suitable time frame for a particular research varies depending on research agendas. Thus, we must yet to decide which time frame is suitable for what research purpose. Debates about this issue will be more fruitful than those about the change or continuity in an unspecified time frame. More importantly, the suitable (that is, necessary and sufficient) level of abstraction or aggregation for a particular research depends crucially on research agendas. We must yet to decide which level of abstraction is suitable for what research purpose. The issue should be at the core of the debates on the mainstream international theory.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Some argue that the Treaty only established a territorial state, but not a modern state, and hence not the modern state system (Litfin 2000: 121). Krasner argues that the explicit articulation of the principle of sovereignty had to wait until the late eighteenth century (Krasner 2001c: 177) Whether it was a real beginning or not, the Peace of Westphalia has been regarded as a convenient label standing for the beginning of the modern state system.
- <sup>2</sup> Today, everyone seems to speak of the decline of sovereignty in every thing he or she is interested in. For example, the legal or illegal proliferation of small arms is alleged to cause the decline of state sovereignty. Karp suggests that state sovereignty declined, since “[t]he small arms issues are motivated mostly by humanitarian considerations, considerations which often pit people against their governments. ... [and i]t represents a shift in global priorities, from Westphalian to post modern goals, from threats to states to dangers to individuals, from arms control measures intended to assure the security of states to measures intended to alleviate human sufferings” (Karp 2001: 122). But in other places Karp emphasizes the role of governments, because “there are no serious barriers ... to legal transfers [of small weapons] and hence “the biggest and most destabilizing flows of small arms often come straight from governments” (Karp 2001: 126). This is Karp’s answer to the question “Who are the Culprits?” (Karp 2001: 125). Of course, the decline of state sovereignty and the increased importance of state governments in small weapons transfers may not necessarily contradict with each other. But this example shows us that we should be very careful in following the current vogue of “the decline of sovereignty.”
- <sup>3</sup> Strange writes; “To argue, as I do, that structural change in production especially, but also in finance, is changing the nature of the relation between states, is not to say that states are obsolete, or that multinationals are replacing them” (Strange 1994: 212).
- <sup>4</sup> Richard Ashley, for example, includes Krasner among the proponents of “neorealism” together with Kenneth Waltz, Robert Keohane, Robert Gilpin and others, in his criticism of the North American mainstream (Ashley 1984: 227).

- <sup>5</sup> Milner proposes a “rationalist institutionalist” approach as a framework to explain the aggregation of preferences into a collective outcome, that is, a collective preference like national interest. Milner starts from the characterization of domestic and international politics as polyarchy. Anarchy and hierarchy are the opposite ends of a continuum showing the possible distributions of power among actors. Polyarchy lies in between the poles of anarchy and hierarchy. In hierarchy, power is centralized and monopolized by one actor while in anarchy power is shared completely equally among actors as in the free market. In polyarchy, power is shared unequally among actors. (Milner 1998: 774). In this situation of polyarchy similar to that of oligopolitic market, interaction between actors should necessarily be *strategic*, in the sense that an actor’s optimal strategy depends upon what others do, as in games (Milner 1998: 771). In addition, institutions act to aggregate diverse preferences into a collective outcome, and every institution has such aggregating mechanisms (Milner 1998: 780). Thus, the rationalist institutionalist model can provide a way to understand how diverse preferences are formed into a collective outcome (Milner 1998: 780). Milner adds that “this understanding should be combined with a similar understanding on the international level” (Milner 1998: 785) and that “rational institutionalism can be useful at the international level” (Milner 1998: 778).
- <sup>6</sup> Of course, in each of these cases, we should ask how much is explained by the addition, say, of domestic variables as opposed to systemic ones which are already included (Zakaria 1992: 184, 198). And, in asking such a question, we may have to distinguish between the intentions or attempts of state actors and the international outcomes of their behavior, as Zakaria (1992: 185) suggests.
- <sup>7</sup> Here, we are not referring to research agendas of individuals or groups of scholars, but adequate components of a theory. For individuals or groups of scholars, “it is hard to be on both at once” (Hoffmann 1977: 53).
- <sup>8</sup> Actually, Milner is criticizing the mainstream model for assuming that states are unitary *ex post*.

## References

- Ashley, Richard K. (1984), “The Poverty of Neorealism,” *International Organization*, 38(2), 225-286
- Biersteker, Thomas J. and Cynthia Weber (1996), “The Social Construction of State Sovereignty,” Thomas J. Biersteker and Cynthia Weber (eds.) (1996), *State Sovereignty as Social Construct*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1-21
- Buzan, Barry (1998), “Conclusions: System versus Units in Theorizing about the Third World,” Stephen G. Neuman (ed.) (1998), *International Relations Theory and the Third World*, London: Macmillan, 213-234
- Edelman, Murray (1964), *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press
- Grieco, Joseph M. (1988), “Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Institutionalism,” *International Organization*, 42(3), 485-507
- Hoffmann, Stanley (1977), “An American Social Science: International Relations,” *Daedalus*, 106(3), 41-60
- Inoguchi, Takashi and Paul Bacon (2001a), “Organized Hypocrisy and Transforming Sovereignty,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 1(2), 167-172
- Karp, Aaron (2001), “Review Essay: Illicit Arms and the Decline of Sovereignty,” *Contemporary Security Policy*, 22(2), 121-129
- Keohane, Robert O. (1983, 1986), “Theory of World Politics: Structural Realism and Beyond,” Keohane (ed.) (1986), 158-203
- Keohane, Robert O. (ed.) (1986), *Neorealism and Its Critics*, New York: Columbia University Press
- Krasner, Stephen D. (1996), “Compromising Westphalia,” *International Security*, 20(3), 115-151
- Krasner, Stephen D. (2001a), “Problematic Sovereignty,” Krasner (ed.) (2001), 1-23

- Krasner, Stephen D. (2001b), "Evaluating Variation: Defaults, Coercion, Commitments," Krasner (ed.) (2001), 323-343
- Krasner, Stephen D. (2001c), "Organized Hypocrisy in Nineteenth Century East Asia," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 1(2), 173-197
- Krasner, Stephen D. (ed.) (2001), *Problematic Sovereignty: Contested Rules and Political Possibilities*, New York: Columbia University Press
- Litfin, Karen T. (2000), "Environment, Wealth, and Authority: Global Climate Change and Emerging Modes of Legitimation," *International Studies Review*, 2(2), 119-148
- Milner, Helen V. (1998), "Rationalizing Politics: The Emerging Synthesis among International Politics and American and Comparative Politics," *International Organization*, 52(4), 759-786
- Onuf, Nicholas G. (2001), "The Politics of Constructivism," Karin M. Fierke and Knud E. Jørgensen (eds.) (2001), *Constructing International Relations: The Next Generation*, Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 236-254
- Rosecrance, Richard and Arthur A. Stein (1993), "Beyond Realism: The Study of Grand Strategy," Richard Rosecrance and Arthur A. Stein (eds.) (1993), *The Domestic Bases of Grand Strategy*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 3-21
- Ruggie, John Gerald (1983), "Continuity and Transformation in the World Polity: Toward a Neorealist Synthesis," *World Politics*, 35(2), 261-285
- Smith, Steve (2001), "Globalization and the Governance of Space: A Critique of Krasner on Sovereignty," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 1(2), 199-226
- Strange, Susan (1994), "Wake Up, Krasner! The World Has Changed," *Review of International Political Economy*, 1(2), 209-219
- Thomson, Janice E. and Stephen D. Krasner (1989), "Global Transactions and the Consolidation of Sovereignty," Ernst-Otto Czempiel and James N. Rosenau (eds.) (1989), *Global Changes and Theoretical Challenges: Approaches to World Politics for the 1990s*, Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 195-219
- Waltz, Kenneth N. (1986), "Reflections on Theory of International Politics: A Response to My Critics," Keohane (ed.), 322-345
- Zakaria, Fareed (1992), "Realism and Domestic Politics: A Review Essay," *International Security*, 17(1), 177-198

# Figure 1 Fact or Interpretation?

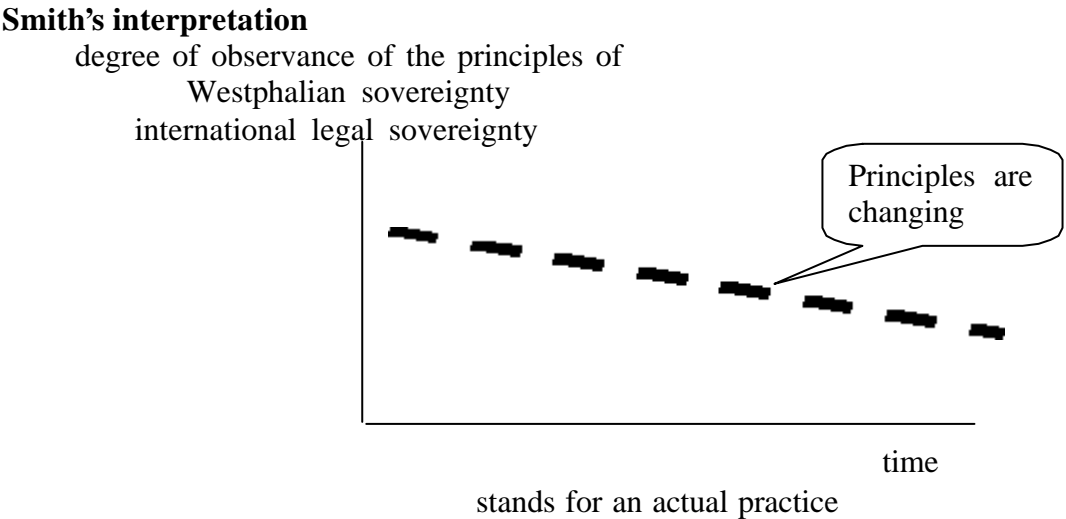
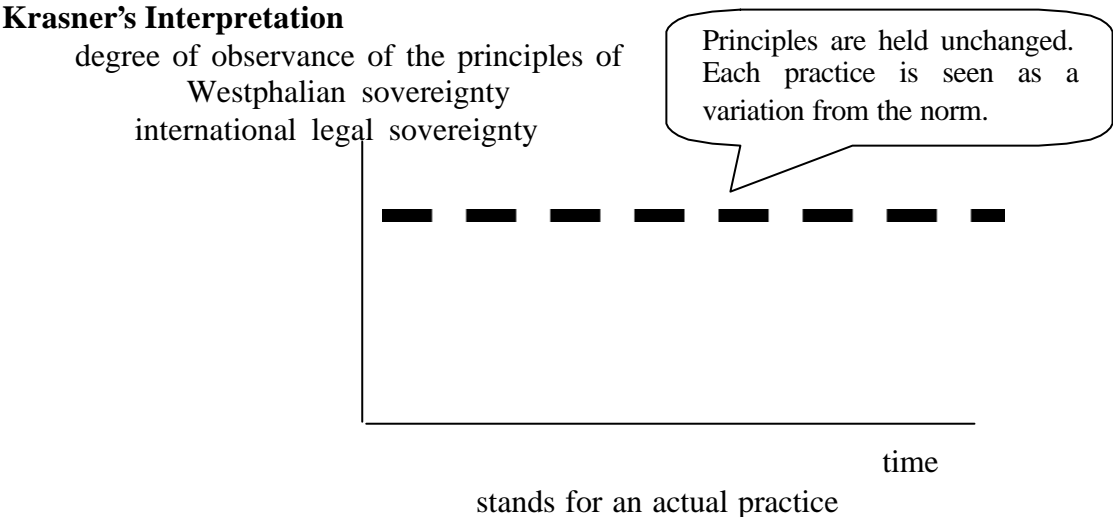
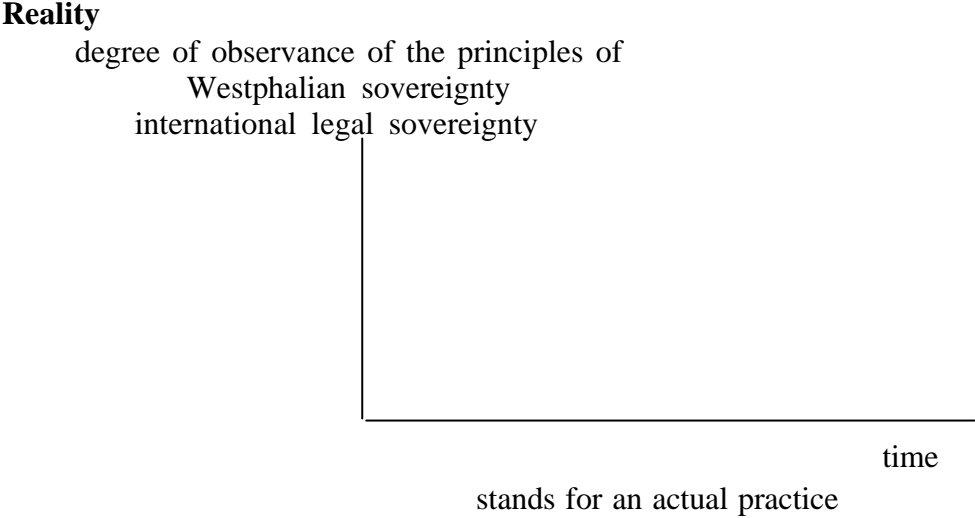


Figure 2 Helen Milner's Proposal for the Extension of the Mainstream Model of International Politics

