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## The Relevance of Structural Realism for Policymakers

| [More](#)<sup>[1]</sup>

| April 27, 2011

| [Justin Logan](#)<sup>[2]</sup>

Dan Drezner wrote [a post noting](#)<sup>[3]</sup> that lots of people were snarking about how when then-Senator Obama was trying “to get a deeper education” about foreign policy, he read books by Fareed Zakaria and Thomas “[Moustache of Understanding](#)<sup>[4]</sup>” Friedman. Drezner asked, “If not Thomas Friedman, Then Who?”

Brian Rathbun, who has been doing some very funny “[stuff](#)<sup>[5]</sup> [political scientists](#)<sup>[6]</sup> [like](#)<sup>[7]</sup>” blogging over at *Duck of Minerva*, [writes](#)<sup>[8]</sup> that the problem is not just that politicians aren’t sophisticated, but also

that practically every approach and research tradition I think of goes out of its way to minimize any role for agency in foreign affairs. We are telling them: you’re not important. My biggest complaint with the field is that there is so little politics in international relations.

About structural realism’s irrelevance, he writes that it is mostly worthless because the story is that

There’s nothing you can do. Ride the structural wave. Let it buffet you. You have no free will. No one will remember you anyhow.

I think this misses what structural realism could contribute. I agree that it wouldn’t tell leaders of a unipolar power much about what they should do, because [by definition there are few structural constraints on a unipolar power](#)<sup>[9]</sup>. But what structural realism may help you do is to think more clearly about why other countries are acting in the manner that they are.

A structural realist wouldn’t have a very hard time coming up with an answer why Iran might be seeking nuclear weapons, for instance. That understanding might help policymakers think more carefully about how they could (or couldn’t!) change the incentive structure to make nukes look less appealing to a country like Iran.

## More by

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