Interacting Variables: September 11 and the Role of Ideas and Domestic Politics

Peter Gourevitch

The events of September 11 can be taken as a good place to explore the interaction of variables in explaining events. We know that many variables are at play in most complex situations. Taking account of them all is impossible, and even investigating several is messy. One way to tackle this problem is to pay closer attention to the interaction of variables--not to look at all of them but to explore carefully where they intersect and to detect the mechanisms of their relationships. Many of the quarrels in our field arise out of a desire to assert aggressively the predominance of a particular, favored variable. Wearying of this sort of combat, some analysts have become more interested in examining the connections among variables, the ways in which one parameter acquires strength or signals causality because of its interaction with another.[1] The events of September 11 show the values of this approach. It will surely involve some loss of parsimony, but it may lead to important insights and research programs. To pursue it, we need models of causality that work with interactions.

One such model comes from psychology. Researchers who study cognition have used the phrase "interactive activation."[2] A reader sees a letter on a printed page, and the eye considers that it may be an *l*, an

1. See Fearon and Wendt 2001; Katzenstein and Hemmer, 2002; Katzenstein, Keohane and Krasner, 1998.
2. McClelland and Rumelhart 1981, 1982.

a, a *k,* or another letter having these shapes. The brain makes a first estimate of what it sees and then places that hypothesis in context: the neighboring letters, the meaning of the word. It rules out choices that do not fit in that language and then tries again. It continues this process of hypothesis formation, observation and testing, judgment, and finally decision. The letter is grasped in a context; its individuality is shaped by its placement in a system.

What happens is that the information--its hermeneutic meaning and its causal import--is altered by its context. The variables acquire importance because of their relationships to other variables. Something like this is at work when we try to understand how factors interact to shape outcomes. One variable influences the way its

neighbor works to produce a result. The challenge is to show a mechanism of interaction, not just co-variance. This way of thinking can help us understand two variables of the events of September 11: the role of ideas and the interaction of domestic politics among countries.

The Role of Ideas

Much of the discussion concerning September 11 deals with ideas: the doctrinal arguments of Osama Bin Laden, the Wahhabi sect, disagreements within Islam, the clash of civilizations (President Bush's use of the word *crusade*). It has also given us substantial information about nondoctrinal elements of ideas in politics: the funding of Wahhabi teachings by the Saudi government, the flow of money raised by Osama bin Laden, the interaction of the Taliban with him, the support of the Taliban by Pakistan and Sudan, ethnic issues inside Afghanistan, the strategic interests of other countries, and so on. Linking the ideational with the material elements is a challenge. In their study of the abolition of the slave trade, Chaim D. Kaufmann and Robert A. Pape provide information on ideas, organization, the sociology of support, and political power. We can suppose four dimensions to an ideational explanation of events:

What are the ideas, the content of the doctrine?
What actions do they induce; what are the behavioral "commandments" of the ideas?
Who adopts these ideas, who are their advocates, and what social, economic, or political characteristics do they possess--that is, what is the sociology of the ideas?
How do the ideas come to prevail--that is, what linkage do they have to the organization of political power, to law, coercion, bureaucracy, money, such that they, rather than a rival set of ideas, prevail as policy?[3]

Let us examine these dimensions in the context of September 11.

3. Kaufmann and Pape 1999.

Doctrine

The religious or doctrinal understanding of the quarrel is familiar and, indeed, is a common shorthand in explaining it.[4] Samuel P. Huntington's Clash *of Civilizations* comes immediately to mind as this kind of an argument, though it has been reported that he does not think it applies.[5] Osama bin Laden says the West, led by the United States, threatens Islam. Muslims around the world are being asked to see U.S. behavior in a variety of contexts as anti-Muslim, to see a deep clash between rival world religions. The United States and other Western governments try to redefine the quarrel as one of terrorism (and thus as a means of protest) rather than religion (doctrine). Both sides are being strategic in their appeals and seeking to define the quarrel in ways that produce the cleavage each thinks favors it the most. Bush quickly stopped using the word *crusade* when it was pointed out to him that it resonated with a conceptualization of Islam's being challenged by the West. And he has made efforts to show sympathy for Muslims within the United States.

Scholarship based on doctrine requires examining religious texts to see if they foment conflict or coexistence. It is quickly evident that different individuals and groups hold sharply different understandings of the meaning of the texts. Islam, like all the major religions, is divided into several currents, among the most well known being Shiite, Sunni, and Wahhabi. Doctrinal study can help us understand those divisions, but the more diverse the views, the greater the difficulty making generalizations about an Islamic view of the world or of East–West clashes.

Doctrinal studies may provide insight into the motives of specific individuals--their operational codes or cognitive maps[6]--but the connection between the texts and the worldview is not straightforward: individuals may construe different meanings from the same texts, so it is not the texts themselves that generate the cognitive map but an individual's interpretation of them. An understanding of the operational

4. Lupia and McCubbins 1998.
5. Huntington 1996.
6. See Leites 1950; and Jervis 1976.

code of the Politburo cannot be gained solely by reading Marx. Reading the Koran or the Bible may be vital to understanding how specific individuals or groups make use of them, but doing so is not sufficient for an understanding of how others interpret them.

Actions: The Behavioral Consequences of Ideas

The next step in such an argument is to show how cognitive maps shape behavior. To do that one needs to show that the behavior in question (such as joining a jihad army or planting a bomb) is caused by a set of ideas and not some other motivation. The rhetoric of religion may be a proxy for something else. Ethnic rivalry in Afghanistan shows this possibility: The Pashtuns provided core support for the Taliban, who in turn protected Al Qaeda; the Northern Alliance drew heavily on the Tajiks, Uzbecs, and Farsi speakers. The choice of doctrine was in part a strategic move influenced by ethnic struggle. Thus the religious dispute was influenced by its interaction with an ethnic one.

The behavioral meaning of the ideas is again rendered complex by the possibility of alternate understandings of the ideas themselves. Each major line of doctrine is read in ways that "command" different behaviors. Religious leaders and scholars differ in what they argue. Islamic clerics have issued proclamations in support of each position-- the attacks of September 11 are, or are not, compatible with Islamic teaching. As with the analysis of doctrine, we can link the behavior of specific actors to their particular understanding of the doctrine's guidelines for action, but the doctrine itself does not require the action and can only partially explain it.

Which view prevails? Here the organization of the religion as an institution matters. Catholicism has a formal hierarchy that proclaims orthodoxy. Islam, Judaism, and Protestantism do not (though particular branches within each may have hierarchies). A church's ability to enforce its orthodoxy is influenced by its relationship to the state.

The Sociology of Ideas

Who in society supports a particular doctrine and the behaviors it requires? For an idea to prevail it must have social support; it must have "idea-bearing classes," as Weber put it, whose social situations resonate (have an "elective affinity") with a set of ideas and are important enough to be listened to. The sociology of ideas may also provide information about the motivations for beliefs. If a believer in free trade suddenly starts demanding tariffs, and we notice a change in the person's economic position (such as stiff foreign competition), we conclude that the new belief is a consequence of the person's changed economic situation. If, alternatively, we find that people of quite different socioeconomic situations have similar beliefs and hold to them even if conditions change, we conclude that the beliefs have autonomous power.

A form of this argument in the September 11 situation has to do with the sociology of terrorists. It has long been assumed that people willing to commit suicide in a terrorist act are those who have few options: poor, uneducated, unemployed, single, young males. It appears that the leaders of the September 11 hijackings did not fit this profile--they were better educated, in some cases married, people with alternatives. The specialists now wonder what has happened to the evolution of ideas in this community that "mainstreams" suicide so that it becomes a possible line of action. James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin undertake a similar exploration of the interface among psychology, sociology, and political action in trying to understand who in the former Yugoslavia has been most prone to take up the idea of ethnic threat and engage in acts of revenge. They note that those living in the countryside are more likely to commit these acts than those in the cities, because urban dwellers have alternatives--economical, social, and cultural.[7]

Why does Islamic fundamentalism of various kinds (some in conflict with each other) strike a chord in the Middle East? It is hard to analyze that question without a theory of the alternative ideologies that could be available and why these have not gained stronger support. A variety of ideas have been in contention: secular nationalism, mod-

7. Fearon and Laitin 1996 and 2000.

ernization, constitutionalism, authoritarianism. As one approach fails politically, the others gain strength: when the Algerian military overturned an election in the early 1990s because it had been won by the fundamentalists, the appeal of democracy was set back. If rulers prohibit all forms of dissent but encourage religious expression, political life is likely to take religious form. Authoritarian regimes, failed modernization, and economic stagnation keep alternative ideas from emerging.[8] Ian S. Lustick argues that the West blocked an internal evolution of modernization in this region.[9] Authoritarian leaders need some kind of support to shore up their regimes. A populist ideology that lacks institutionalized participation in politics suits their needs well. Islamic fundamentalism puts individuals in a subordinate position to leaders (here mullahs) and does not challenge the authority structure of the authoritarian leaders. The two thus fuel each other. The Saudi monarchy needs the mullahs, and they in turn are financed by the monarchy. Moreover, in a weak state the social services network of religious groups is comparatively the most effective and provides additional incentives for its adherents.[10]

Forms of Power

For an idea to prevail, it must acquire power. An idea itself is a form of power, a cognitive map, an identity, and a self-understanding. But ideas have rivals, alternative ideas. To explain why one idea prevails over another requires an account. To dominate, to defeat its ideational rivals, an idea usually requires the support of other forms of power (such as money, arms, or institutions). This is most visible in the role of the Islamic Wahhabi sect in recent events. The sect's clerics teach a version of Islam that stresses exclusion and separateness from non-Islam influences, and they have been operating schools in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia. It appears that many elements of the Al Qaeda network came out of these schools. The clerics who run them receive substantial funding from the Saudi monarchy, money it

8. Richards 2001a,b.
9. Lustick 1997.
10. Wilson and Clark 1961.

earns from oil revenues. By supporting the Wahhabi clergy, the monarchy appears to be encouraging the enemies of its major military ally, the United States, as well as bin Laden, who seeks to destroy it. Why does it do so?

It is driven in this direction by its political strategy for domestic survival and its influence in the Muslim world. The Saudi monarchy rejects democratic and constitutional political forms; therefore, it needs some source of support that does not express itself democratically. It gets this from the Wahhabi clergy, who are uninterested in modern constitutionalism, and by claiming to be the defender of Islam's holiest sites, Medina and Mecca. Putting pressure on the Wahhabi clergy would thus compromise the monarchy's grip on power.

The struggle among various branches of Islam is thus connected to the ability of each to form alliances with power seekers and acquire other forms of power. The ethnic issues of Afghanistan have already been mentioned. Pakistan's support of the Taliban was connected to its concerns about the Pashtuns in Afghanistan and the ethnic brethren in Pakistan itself and the role its neighbors would have in Afghanistan if the Pashtuns were to lose power (Iran among the Farsi speakers, and so on). The grip of fundamentalism in Iran is now vitally connected to fundamentalists' control of Iran's formal institutions (the special councils), which have the authority to overrule the elected president and Parliament and to shut down newspapers.

Understanding the role of religion and ideas thus requires exploring the connections among a series of variables, each of which shapes its neighbors. The interpretation of religious texts, the sociology of the believers, the religious institutions, the relationships of the idea holders to various forms of power (money, arms, institutions) all interact. The examples given here all come from the case of Islam, but the same kind of reasoning could be extended to the other players. Within the United States specifically and the West generally there are ideational disagreements over how to analyze the conflict and how to chose a course of action. And the struggle for ideas is connected to other concerns: oil, the defense industry lobby, religion (Christian and Jewish attitudes toward Israel, Islam, and the Middle East), but the

questions are the same: what are the behavioral consequences of these ideas, who supports them, and how do those interpretations acquire political power? An account of the role of ideas in the events of September 11 would explore these connections.

A convincing case about the role of ideas in explaining outcomes needs to address all four steps (the content of the ideas, their guide to behavior, the sociology of belief, and the link to forms of power) in the mechanism of causality. All four are relevant to explaining how an idea acquires the power to shape an outcome. Researchers may find it impossible to address all four, but they can show awareness of them. They can, fruitfully, explore at least some of the connections that tie ideas to their supporters, or their supporters to other mechanisms of power. In this way we can learn more about interactions.

Domestic Politics: Interlocking Struggles and Civil Wars

This discussion of ideas points toward a second theme of interaction illustrated by the events of September 11: the interlocking character of domestic disagreements within each country, "the second image reversed."[11] We know there are two-level games at work[12]; that is, a politician is acting in two arenas, a domestic one and an international one. Many analysts refer to this double game, so the notion that international and domestic politics are not separate seems clearly accepted. Less well explored is the way in which the two interact, the way they are mutually constitutive, the way outcomes in one sphere shape those in the other. In fact, they are not separate games, but interacting ones, or a single game with multiple dimensions.

The face a country shows to the world, its foreign policy, turns, as we know, in part on who rules domestically. For most situations, more than one policy response is possible--a key issue in arguments over the importance of domestic politics. If there is only one possible response, domestic politics is irrelevant; if there is more than one possibility, domestic politics becomes part of any explanation. It is hard to

11. Gourevitch 1978.
12. Putnam 1988.

imagine a situation in a country that can be understood in only one way. Different understandings lead to different actions. Thus how the country actually behaves turns on who is in charge at home, that is, on whose understanding prevails as national policy. The resources that come into the country from the outside influence who rules at home. Therefore, a change in an external situation, such as a regime or policy change in another country, has ripple effect domestically. Furthermore, who rules domestically influences who rules elsewhere, the "second image reversed." This is the logic of endogenous tariff theory--my strategy for national foreign economic policy turns not only on my place in the national economy but also on my place in the world economy. In evaluating strategy, actors internalize the interaction of their situation with those of others. The idea can be generalized to noneconomic situations. The fortunes of Islamic fundamentalists' in Afghanistan rise and fall with the external support they have and this is closely connected to the internal politics of other countries. Bring down the Saudi government, and a variety of groups would loose access to resources.

Regimes "need" each other. If one collapses, so does the other--the collapse of the satellite regimes of east Europe following the collapse of the Soviet Union is one example. Conversely, external support sustains regimes--for example, the assistance the United States gave to democratic, market regimes in Western Europe after World War II. A change of regime can lead to a change in policy, which is what the United States expects from its deposing the Taliban and is its goal in Iraq. And it was the logic of the policies pursued toward Germany and Japan after World War II.

In this way, international relations contains within it a series of interlocking and interacting "civil wars," domestic struggles for primacy and place whose outcomes shape foreign policy and are in turn influenced by similar struggles elsewhere. In its reliance on U.S. support, the Saudi monarchy relies on a particular power balance within the United States. Suppose U.S. domestic policy turned in ways that sharply reduced its dependence on foreign oil imports: greater conservation, aggressive tax policy on energy companies and overseas cor-

porations, stronger environmental rules, increased mass-transit infrastructure. With less concern over oil, U.S. policy could shift and consequently influence the balance of power in Saudi Arabia. Conversely, suppose a fundamentalist uprising changed the Saudi regime and thus its policies toward oil, the Middle East, and the United States; that could bring about a shift in U.S. politics that would lead to further policy changes. The balance of power in Saudi Arabia, and its foreign policy, is influenced by U.S. domestic politics. U.S. political struggles are only in part about foreign policy (the inclination to use force, the importance of multilateral support), and they are influenced by a range of issues that may have little to do with foreign policy: abortion, stem cell research, health insurance, and the like. Thus the fate of the Saudi kingdom could turn on such issues in the United States as the environment or stem cell research.

The domestic forces within countries are thus interactive. The stability of those in Saudi Arabia's turn on the stability of policy relationships in the United States, and these, in turn, are influenced by what happens in Saudi Arabia. If the Saudis drive up the price of oil to seek more revenue to buy support within or from nearby countries or activists, the United States' sympathy for the regime may wane.

Pakistan provides another good example from the September 11 events. India supported the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan, while Pakistan supported the Pashtun-based Taliban. As was the case with Saudi Arabia, the dominant political view in the United States was that Pakistan's stance was unacceptable. Pakistan's ability to change turned on its domestic power balance. Musharraf has so far proven able to contain the opposition, but there are many historical examples where this was not the case: the Shah of Iran is a notable one, and the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan another.

The interaction of domestic politics among countries therefore needs to be integrated into our accounts. We understand that international and domestic politics are not wholly autonomous spheres, but we can extend the implications of this further. A single game, having multiple strategic interactions, is at work. Modeling this will surely be messy, but looking at some of the mechanisms of that interaction is one way

to make it manageable. Helen V. Milner takes us a step down that road, modeling a single game with an executive, a legislature, and a foreign country.[13] This approach can be extended to include more variables on each side: the institutional variables (executive–legislative relations, electoral laws and party systems, bureaucracies), the structure of interest groups (unions, business associations, corporate governance and ownership patterns, agricultural associations), and ideologies and their institutionalization. A full specification would provide a better understanding of the incentives actors have and the ways these derive from the strategic interaction of a single game that integrates country political systems across international borders. It would be complicated, certainly, and hard to do.[14] But it would take us further down the road toward an integrated understanding of the interaction of domestic and international relations.

Conclusion

The events of September 11 showed the capacity of small groups from poor countries to wreak substantial damage on large, militarily powerful ones. The U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan showed the capacity of the militarily powerful to strike back. Sorting out the many forces at work is so daunting that we are all inclined to work on the variables and causal logics we know best, the ones we were working on before September 11. This is understandable. We do not have limitless time for work, and we can contribute by drawing on our previous expertise.

Analytically, we can also use this event as a way to explore the interaction of our specific expertise with that of others. The dimensions of ideas and domestic politics are two such examples--important ones because they have attracted substantial attention in the study of international relations. Each has something to contribute to the other and to other lines of work. From constructivists we can take the idea of "mutually constitutive" and apply it to issues of political economy

13. Milner 1997.
14. Tarar 2001.

and interests, material or other. Interests are influenced by other actors' articulating theirs--they are strategic, in that sense, but the confidence or trust building that leads to agreements contains discursive elements.[15] From political economists, constructivists can learn ways of thinking about the politics of the use of ideas--who is using them, for what political purpose, and with what political resources; that is, the way political economy analyzes tariffs can be used to analyze ideas. And tariffs can be studied from the standpoint of mutually constitutive constructions of a domain of interest.

Together these help us think about domestic politics in international affairs. Domestic politics, like tariff and ideas, is not a separate sphere, a constant worked out and then projected outward. It internalizes the behaviors of domestic politics in other countries. Each country can project, from the domestic forces within it, a variety of faces to the world. A country's internalization of the events occurring in other countries drives which faces emerge. The variables thus become contextual, strategic, and interactive. The effects of ideas, interests, and institutions vary with circumstances, according to the influence of one upon another. This does not mean the rejection of nomothetic exploration, the search for patterns. It means that interactions among variables need to be part of the exploration.

References

Fearon, James D., and David D. Laitin. 1996. Explaining Interethnic Cooperation. *American Political Science Review* 90 (4715–35.

Fearon, James D., and David D. Laitin. 2000. Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity. *International Organization* 54 (4):845–77.

Fearon, James D., and Alexander Wendt. 2002. Rationalism vs. Constructivism: A Skeptical View. In *Handbook of International Relations*, edited by Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse, and Beth Simmons. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.

Huntington, Samuel P. 1996. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Jervis, Robert. 1976. *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Gourevitch, Peter A.1978. The Second Image Reversed: The International Sources of Domestic Politics. *International Organization* 32 (4):881---912.

15. Levi, Cook, and Hardin 2001.

Katzenstein , Peter J., and Christopher Hemmer. Forthcoming. Why Is There No NATO in Asia? Collective Identity, Regionalism, and the Origin of Multilateralism. *International Organization*. Katzenstein, Peter J., Robert O. Keohane, and Stephen J. Krasner. 1998. International Organization and the Study of World Politics. *International Organization* 52 (4):645---85.

Kaufmann, Chaim D., and Robert A. Pape. 1999. Explaining Costly International Moral Action: Britain's Sixty-Year Campaign Against the Atlantic Slave Trade. *International Organization* 53(4):631–68.

Leites, Nathan. 1950. *Operational Code of the Politburo*. Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand.

Levi, Margaret, Margaret Cook, and Russell Hardin. 2001. Trust in Transition. Unpublished manuscript. Seattle: University of Washington.

Lupia, Arthur, and Mathew D. McCubbins. 1998. *The Democratic Dilemma: Can Citizens Learn What They Need to Know?* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Lustick, Ian S. 1997. The Absence of Middle Eastern Great Powers: Political "Backwardness" in Historical Perspective. *International Organization* 51 (4):653–83.

McClelland, James. L., and David. E. Rumelhart. 1981. An Interactive Activation Model of Context Effects in Letter Perception: Part 1, An Account of Basic Findings. *Psychological Review* 88 (5):375–407.

McClelland, James. L., and David. E. Rumelhart . 1982. An Interactive Activation Model of Context Effects in Letter Perception. Part 11: The Contextual Enhancement Effect and Some Tests and Extensions of the Model. *Psychological Review*. 89 (1):60–94

Milner, Helen V. 1997. *Interests, Institutions, and Information: Domestic Politics and International Relations*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Putnam, Robert D. 1988. Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games. *International Organization*. 42 (3):427–60.

Richards, Alan. 2001a. At War with Utopian Fanatics. *Middle East Policy* 8(4):5–9.

_____. 2001b. The Political Economy of Economic Reform in the Middle East: The Challenge to Governance. Working paper. Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand.

Tarar, Ahmer. 2001. International Bargaining With Two-Sided Domestic Constraints. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 45 (3):320–40.

Wilson, James Q., and Peter Clark. 1961. Incentive Systems: A Theory of Organizations. *Administrative Sciences Quarterly*. 6 (2):129–66.