

Stephen D. Krasner*

Do We Learn Anything from Kirshner?

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Abstract: Kirshner may be right that domestic politics does matter, but he does not tell us how to understand domestic politics. How are we, for instance, to understand domestic cohesion? How are we to understand national purpose? More important, what is the impact of nuclear weapons? Do these weapons obliterate all past information about power? Are nuclear weapons all that matter? Is it possible to fight a limited nuclear war? Is North Korea as strong as the United States? Such questions have been around since the 1950s. Kirshner does not help us to answer them.

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I appreciated the opportunity to read Jonathan Kirshner's *An Unwritten Future* (Kirshner 2022). I am in agreement with most of what Kirshner has to say. By itself power does not tell us very much. It is important to look inside the state. National cohesion might matter. The national interest is thought of in different ways by different people and groups. Regime type matters. Diplomacy matters. History does matter; historical memory varies. Leadership matters. Not all Germans thought about the first world as Hitler did, but enough shared his views so that he could prevail once he had seized power. States may have different purposes at different times. Germany in 2024 is not Germany in 1938.

Uncertainty is always present. States cannot be sure what other states, or leaders, will do. Leaders can change. Different leaders can have different purposes. Different leaders can appeal to different constituencies. Internal politics do matter. Would the United States be the same country, if Trump had not been elected in 2020, or if he had not been elected in 2016? Even if Trump did not change views, he clearly legitimated some views that people already had. Was Liz Cheney an aberration? Could she have been typical of Republicans?

States do have different preferences. They will respond to the same situation in different ways. Would Iran under the Shah be the same as Iran under clerical rule?

The outcome of battles matter, and battles may be determined by unforeseeable events such as the weather or even earthquakes. What if the skies over Dunkirk had

*Corresponding author: Stephen D. Krasner, Department of Political Science, Stanford University, Stanford CA, USA, E-mail: skrasner@stanford.edu

always been clear? Would the BEF and a small number of French have escaped? If they had not escaped, would Churchill have lost office? Would Britain have sued for peace? Would the outcome of the second world war have been different?

Hubris is an ever present danger. Power can be squandered. There is always the danger that states will go too far.

Power matters, but Kirshner argues that other things matter too. If states have about the same amount of power, then domestic factors might also matter. Germany and France had about the same amount of power before the second world war, but Kirshner argues, France was doomed by social incoherence. Who could disagree with these arguments?

Yet power alone can tell us a lot. Is Mexico or Canada likely to attack the United States regardless of leadership or domestic regime? Certainly not on their own. But in alliance, who knows? The Zimmerman Affair did worry the United States during World War 1.

China was protected by oceans and deserts until the nineteenth century. What happened in Europe or North America did not matter. They were too far away. Then the industrial revolution happened in Europe. China was no longer protected. China was not prepared. What followed is what the Chinese call a century of humiliation. In the Opium Wars, Britain forced China to accept opium, because opium was the one thing that China would buy from the West. The Chinese were not able to resist.

I remember when Waltz's book, *Theory of International Relations*, first came out in 1979 (Waltz 1979). It was like a revelation. Waltz pointed out that much of what had passed as realism, rested on other factors. Most of these other factors were domestic. They included exactly the kinds of things that Kirshner emphasizes. In fact, Waltz was attacking what Kirshner calls classical realists such as Morgenthau. They were according to Waltz, not really realists. Their explanations rested primarily on domestic factors, not on power, which was an international factor. For classical realists, it is impossible to tell how much power a country had without knowing anything about its domestic politics.

Kirshner is right to argue that a lot of ink has been spilled since Waltz's book appeared. Little progress has been made. But little is not none. Democracies have options that might be denied to autocratic countries. Democratic leaders can generate audience costs. If they do not implement public statements they can be punished by voters. If opposition parties support a leader, he or she is not likely to be bluffing. Opposition parties get no benefit from supporting a bluff.

Autocratic regimes may not be able to convince opponents that they are telling the truth as opposed to bluffing. They cannot generate audience costs. They do not have oppositions.

Still, as Kirshner points out, there are many things that international relations scholars cannot say. They do not have anything to say about national cohesion, or

purpose, or military strategy. These things may be, as Kirshner points out, critical for assessing power.

The problem is that while Kirshner may be right, he does not help us. How can we know about national cohesion? Can we really interpret history, or its effects, accurately? What can we say about military strategy? What do we really know about national character? These are the kinds of problems addressed by comparativists, and they often get things wrong.

Let me offer a few examples. What really happened to France in World War 2? Did it lose so badly because of a lack of national cohesion or because the Germans pursued a new and very effective military strategy? Did France lose so badly because it lacked national cohesion or because Germany used *blitzkrieg* and avoided the Maginot line?

Yes it is true that some people got Hitler right from the beginning, but many other people got Hitler wrong. Hitler justified his early policies in terms of the principles of the treaty of Versailles. Remilitarization, reoccupation of the Rhineland, the *Anschluss* with Austria, the takeover of the Sudetenland were all consistent with the principles of Versailles. The first thing that Hitler did that was inconsistent with the principles of Versailles was taking over all of Czechoslovakia. And when Hitler invaded Poland shortly thereafter, Britain and France did declare war. By then it was too late.

Some of Kirshner's heroes, such as Aron, might have acted earlier. But many opted for appeasement. Chamberlain was not alone. Could anyone have known with certainty what Hitler's intentions really were? The Holocaust was historically unprecedented. About half of Germany's Jews did escape, but half did not and they were murdered. Could we know more than they did? They did live in Germany. They did see everything that was going on, but they still stayed. Even if Kirshner is right, does he really provide us with any guidance?

Take a more contemporary example, the second Iraq War. In retrospect the US clearly failed. Iraq did not become a democracy. Iran has become stronger. Theocracy has survived in Iran. The only country in the Middle East that might have been called democratic, Lebanon, is no longer a democracy. The Middle East in general is still unstable. Despite the loss of men (and women) and treasure the United States got nothing.

Kirshner takes Iraq as an example of hubris, a cardinal sin for a classical realist. It was hubris, that according to Thucydides, led Athens to invade Sicily, a decision that led to the fall of Athens. For Kirshner this is the big takeaway from *The History of the Peloponnesian Wars*. I have no doubt that Kirshner opposed the Iraq war when it first took place.

However Bush's vision was not obviously wrong. Iraq was pretty rich. The country did have a relatively large middle class. Democracy theory would predict

that the United States would be successful. Democracy theory had been well researched. It was supported by an elaborate theory. It was well established. Iraq should have been ripe for democracy.

If Saddam Hussein had stayed in power, things did not look good for the United States. The Middle East was a mess and would remain a mess. A democratic Iraq offered a way out for the U.S.

If Iraq had become democratic it might have been a beacon for the Middle East. If the theocracy in Iran had been replaced by a democracy, the United States would have been better off. It would have been easier to see a path to a more stable Middle East. There would have been no proxies killing American troops. The U.S. might have won big.

Obviously none of this came to pass. Democracy failed in Iraq (and Afghanistan). The United States got nothing. The U.S. would have been better off if it had never gone into Iraq. Iran would still face a powerful neighbor to the north. If the U.S. had pursued limited objectives in Afghanistan, killing Ben Laden, leaving the Taliban in power, it would at least have saved lives and money. But this is not what happened.

Kirshner is right that without an enormous amount of power and no near rivals, the United States could not have acted. In retrospect at least Iraq (and big ambitions in Afghanistan) seem like a clear examples of hubris.

At the time, it was not so clear. The path followed by the U.S. was the only one that offered a stable outcome. If the United States had been more modest, it would clearly have been more of the same.

Let us take another even more contemporary example, China. Will China become rich and transition to democracy? Will China become rich and remain an autocracy? This would be unprecedented, but it would not be impossible. Will China stall out and remain autocratic? Will China fall apart? Something else?

Regardless of how China develops in the future would it accept an American led order? After all, traditionally the Chinese order treated states very differently. It was not based on sovereignty in which all states are in some ways equal. Traditionally, China was at the center. All other states were tributary states. There were no ambassadors, because this would imply equality. What Chinese emperors wanted above all else was deference, a recognition that China was at the top of the pile. Korea, all of Korea, was obviously a tributary state. The Japanese might have resisted China, but they did not challenge the sinocentric system. The Japanese had their own emperor not a king, but until the twentieth century they did not claim superiority.

The Chinese had traditionally absorbed foreign powers. They had turned foreign powers against each other, but they had not expanded. Would this still be the case? If the answer is yes, then the United States would have been right in supporting China's rise, by, for instance, supporting China's membership in the WTO. But

would China accept an international order in which South Korea and Japan looked to the U.S. rather than to China? These countries had traditionally been part of the sinocentric world, even if Japan had always resisted China. It is entirely unclear whether a risen China would accept the American led order (and America might cease to lead) or try to displace this order.

Taiwan is even more of a problem despite an agreement that was very imaginative in which it was recognized by both the U.S. and China that there was only one China, but Taiwan still remained independent. The United States closed its embassy in Taipei and opened something called the American Institute in Taiwan. American State Department officials resign from the foreign service before going to Taiwan and then rejoin the foreign service. American officials could not meet their Taiwanese counterparts in the State Department building in Washington D.C. It was a clever solution to a vexing problem: how could the United States still honor a one China policy and still have full relations with a part of China that was *de facto* independent of Beijing?

Could any American president really accept a violent annexation of Taiwan by China, even though China would regard such an annexation as a domestic matter? Hence we do not know whether China will continue to rise and even if it does rise, we do know if China would challenge the U.S. Kirshner does not help us to answer these vital questions.

The sovereignty system grew up in Europe where it did make some sense. Large states such as France and Spain were able to defend themselves. Smaller states such as Belgium and the Netherlands were buffer states. Medieval legacies, such as Andorra, survived because they really did not matter. Other parts of the world adopted sovereignty because it had been used by colonial states, and because it was what was on offer but it hardly made sense. Brazil speaks Portuguese, the rest of South America speaks Spanish, because of a decision that was made by the Pope in the fifteenth century. Nigeria has different languages, different religions, and different ethnic groups but it was a single British colony. As a result, Nigeria is a single country and the most populous state in Africa even though by traditional measures of language and ethnicity its borders make no sense. Should India with more than a billion people have the same number of votes as Luxembourg (one) with less than a million in the General Assembly of the United Nations? What sense does that make? Under sovereignty it does make sense, under the traditional sinocentric system it would make no sense.

This is only to say that in defending classical realism, Kirshner is defending a system that grew up in a particular place (Europe) at a particular time (say the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries) and might not last forever. Historically, there have been other ways of organizing the international system. And there may be still others that we can not now imagine. Kirshner's analysis, classical realism in

general, is historically and geographically bound. Kirshner's analysis does not tell us whether it will last forever.

Finally Kirshner does not address the big question raised by the contemporary period: have nuclear weapons made measures of power irrelevant? The North Koreans could kill millions of people in South Korea, Japan, China, Russia, and perhaps the United States. But North Korea has only a fraction of the GNP of any of these countries. Do nuclear weapons make North Korea as powerful as any of its neighbors or even the U.S.? Would North Korea without nuclear weapons act differently? The answer is almost certainly yes. Would the United States, Japan, or South Korea be so cautious if North Korea did not have nuclear weapons? The U.S. has been very reluctant to start a war with the North. Millions of people could die in a war. Better to hope that North Korea will change even though it is not clear how such a change might come about.

If Iran got nuclear weapons would it be immune from attack? Is Israel, which almost certainly does have nuclear weapons, immune from attack? If Israel itself were destroyed, would Israelis still strike back? There might be no point, but opponents cannot be sure. Does this uncertainty protect Israel? Are Israel's enemies reluctant to engage in a war of annihilation because they are afraid of being annihilated themselves? Would anyone recommend that Israel give up its nuclear weapons or that Israel abandon its policy of calculated ambiguity? The Israelis almost certainly have nuclear weapons but the State of Israel has never officially admitted that it has such weapons.

Questions related to the impact of nuclear weapons have been debated since the 1950s. No clear answer has emerged. If a war could be fought without nuclear weapons or with only tactical nuclear weapons that would kill only a limited number of people, then power might still matter. Power could be measured as it has been measured in the past. None of these measures are perfect, but they all provide a rough ranking of power. By any measure a North Korea without nuclear weapons would rank below the United States. But would a North Korea with nuclear weapons rank below the U.S.? The answer to that question is not so clear. Could a war be limited? Would not the losing side escalate?

Kirshner does not help us to answer questions related to nuclear weapons. Kirshner hardly mentions nuclear weapons at all. But these questions are central to any kind of realism including classical realism. Ultimately realism rests on power and anarchy. How do we measure power in a world of nuclear weapons? Is anarchy permanent or merely an artifact of an international system, sovereignty, which arose in a specific place and time?

In the end I agree with Kirshner. But has he advanced our knowledge? Has he merely sent us back to a time before Waltz, before 1979. If critical factors are

domestic, national cohesion, national purpose, what is the point of studying international relations? We should all be studying comparative politics.

Kirshner is right that we have only made limited progress since 1979. His critique of Mearsheimer is devastating. But Kirshner does not help us with any of the big questions, and he does not help with the biggest question, the impact of nuclear weapons, even though this question has been around for more than seventy years.

References

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