

- Fearon, Domestic Politics, Foreign Policy, and Theories of International Relations

What exactly is a domestic political explanation of foreign policy? This depends on an implicit contrast to “systemic” or “structural” explanations. What we count as a domestic theory can vary depending on the way we conceive of systemic theories: (1) those that envision states as unitary and purposive actors that consider what other states will or might do, or (2) those that, in addition to this, do not consider characteristics of particular states as relevant to the explanation offered.

But is a systemic theory a theory of foreign policy? Yes: international political outcomes are the direct, even if sometimes unintended, result of individual states’ foreign policy choices; if the theory explains tendencies, it must help explain choices. For Waltz, then, systemic theories are not theories of foreign policy “by definition.”

A domestic theory would be one in (1) which at least one state is represented as nonunitary, and pursues a suboptimal foreign policy due to the interaction of the actors within the state, or (2) either include this or explain differences in foreign policies by referring to regime types or particular foreign policy goals.

If one adopts the broader (1) understanding of systemic theory, the scope for domestic politics to matter is greatly reduced. It is limited to cases where a state pursues a foreign policy that is suboptimal: think of Snyder. Systemic analysis itself incorporates domestic factors. Domestic theories of the (2) kind trace an individual foreign policy to facts about its political system rather than solely, or at all, to its international position.